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COUNTRY PROFILE 2021: UNFPA-UNICEF GLOBAL PROGRAMME TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

BANGLADESH

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child
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Child marriage context

There are 34.5 million child brides in Bangladesh, 13.4 million of whom were married before the age of 15. Currently, the prevalence of child marriage among girls (marriage before the age of 18) stands at 51 per cent, putting the country among the top 10 countries in the world in terms of child marriage.¹ However, the practice is in decline from previous generations: the prevalence was over 90 per cent around 1970. In order to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) target to end child marriage by 2030, or the national target to end child marriage by 2041, the rate of progress must be 17 times faster or 8 times faster respectively, than what has been observed in the last decade.

Programming context

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected the everyday lives of girls for a second year in 2021, including their physical and mental health, education and the economic circumstances of their families and communities. Globally, up to 10 million more girls are estimated to become child brides by 2030 as a result of the pandemic.²

UNFPA and UNICEF Evaluation Offices conducted a joint assessment of Global Programme adaptations to the COVID-19 crisis in 2021.³ The COVID-19 assessment aimed to:

- Assess relevant contingency planning and implementation and alternative delivery and management arrangements for the Global Programme

1 UNICEF, 2022, Child marriage country profiles: Bangladesh, <https://data.unicef.org/resources/child-marriage-country-profiles/>

2 UNICEF, 2021, COVID-19: A threat to progress against child marriage, <https://data.unicef.org/resources/covid-19-a-threat-to-progress-against-child-marriage/>

3 UNFPA and UNICEF, 2021, Joint assessment of adaptations to the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage in light of COVID-19, www.unicef.org/documents/joint-assessment-adaptations-unfpa-unicef-global-programme-end-child-marriage-light-covid

due to the COVID-19 pandemic, taking into account the views of vulnerable adolescent girls, their families, communities and key implementing partners.

- Make recommendations for the immediate to mid-term improvement of the Global Programme response to COVID-19, identify ongoing programme changes and recommending any additional support required to implement those programme changes and shifting priorities.
- Make any recommendations required to adjust the Global Programme Phase II to the new context, including its theory of change and the targets established before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is critical to keep the focus and efforts in reaching the most vulnerable and marginalized adolescents, including those in remote areas.

- Lessons could be taken from experiences using multi-channel and two-way communication approaches, while also being attentive to the digital divide.
- Vulnerable adolescents must continue to have access to education (especially if provided remotely), health and social welfare services.
- It is key to overcome drivers of poverty by leveraging existing social protection schemes.
- Ensuring the use of evidence led programming is important and so too is advocating with governments to keep child marriage prevention and responses on national agendas while continuing to develop legal and operational frameworks to help accelerate the end of child marriage.

The results of the assessment indicate that:

- It is critical to keep the focus and efforts in reaching the most vulnerable and marginalized adolescents, including those in remote areas.

These results will inform future adjustments and refinements to the programme. They will help continue delivering in changing contexts and accelerating the pace, during the Decade of Action, of eliminating child marriage to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

TABLE. Conclusions and recommendations from the COVID-19 assessment

CONCLUSION	RECOMMENDATION
Programme advocacy and engagement efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic kept child marriage on national agendas	Advocate with governments to continue developing legal and operational frameworks contributing to ending child marriage with a rights-based and multisectoral focus
The COVID-19 crisis underscored the vulnerability of adolescent girls in rural and remote areas	Reinforce efforts to reach the most vulnerable and marginalized adolescent girls, boys and their families
Adoption of digital and mass media approaches demonstrated a high potential for sustaining engagement of adolescent girls at scale, although the digital divide should be considered	Develop complementary multi-channel approaches to reach target populations, ensuring that they foster two-way communication
COVID-19 restrictions limited adolescent girls' access to health and social welfare services	Continue technical support and explore the most effective approaches to ensure adolescent girls have access to essential services
The programme theory of change remains valid but poverty and economic drivers need to be stressed further in operational strategies	Further articulate the strategy to leverage social protection schemes such as cash transfers and income generation opportunities for adolescent girls and their families
COVID-19 programme adjustments created a high demand on data and evidence for adopted approaches	Continue adjusting monitoring, data generation and analysis in order to reinforce evidence-based programming

Key highlights

- 95,592 adolescent girls and 35,513 adolescent boys benefited from life skills training and comprehensive sexuality education using the Standardized Adolescent Empowerment Package (SAEP) in 900 adolescent clubs and 4,883 *Kishor Kishori* clubs. Among the adolescent girls empowered, 6,294 (6.6 per cent) are living with disabilities.
- Over 5.2 million individuals (boys, girls, women and men) participated in group education/ dialogue sessions on consequences of and alternatives to child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls and gender equality.
- 480 girls and boys (half of them girls) were trained as child journalists and produced 51 videos, together viewed 120 million times, and wrote over 100 news reports on child marriage, published on the BDnews24 website, which has 60,000 monthly visits.
- Season two of the adolescent-focused entertainment-education drama-series *Icchedana (On the wings of wishes)*, which addresses issues adolescents face across their life cycle, was re-broadcasted on two TV channels and social media platforms, reaching over 160 million and engaging around 52 million people in conversations around the content.
- The #Raisethebeat4ECM campaign fostering public resistance to child marriage continued through mass and social media during the year, reaching over 164 million people through mass media and engaging over 87 million people on social media.



Programme performance

TABLE. Summary of output indicator performance (2021)

INDICATOR	TARGET	RESULT
Indicator 1111: Number of adolescent girls (aged 10-19) who actively participated in life skills or comprehensive sexuality education interventions in programme areas	80,720	96,592
Indicator 1121: Number of girls (aged 10-19) supported by the programme to enrol and/or remain in primary or secondary school	NA	NA
Indicator 1211: Number of boys and men actively participating in group education/dialogues that address harmful masculinities and gender norms	64,964	23,177
Indicator 1221: Number of individuals (boys, girls, women and men) who participate in group education/dialogue sessions on consequences of and alternatives to child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls and gender equality	5,700,000	5,203,668
Indicator 1222: Number of individuals (boys, girls, women and men) reached by mass media (traditional and social media) messaging on child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls and gender equality	10,602,720	10,004,148
Indicator 1223: Number of local actors (e.g., traditional, religious and community leaders) with meaningful participation in dialogues and consensus-building to end child marriage	35,000	23,409
Indicator 1231: Number of civil society organizations newly mobilized in support of challenging social norms and promoting gender equality by the Global Programme	17	26
Indicator 2121: Number of primary/secondary/non-formal schools in programme areas providing quality gender-friendly education that meets minimum standards	200	144
Indicator 2131: Number of service delivery points in programme areas providing quality adolescent-responsive services (health, child protection/ gender-based violence) that meet minimum standards	2522	3574
Indicator 2211: Number of partnerships (both formal and informal) established to deliver adolescent-responsive social protection, poverty reduction, and economic empowerment programmes and services	1	1
Indicator 3111: Number of policies or legal instruments addressing child marriage drafted, proposed or adopted at national and subnational level with Global Programme support	1	1
Indicator 3211: Number of generated evidence and knowledge that focus on what works to end child marriage	4	5
Indicator 3212: Number of generated evidence and knowledge that apply a gender analysis	4	5
Indicator 3221: Number of South-to-South cooperation (conferences, expert visits, peer consultations, study tours, communities of practice) supported	0	0

NA = Not applicable (the country programme does not work on or report on this indicator)

Safe spaces allow children to play while learning of the benefits of education and dangers of child marriage

At age 21, Sultana could easily be married and already a mother, with her educational prospects long behind her. Instead, she is studying to be an accountant while looking after her elderly parents and a young niece and teaching at the Kurmitola *Kishor-Kishori* club, run by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs with support from UNICEF, in Dhaka, Bangladesh's bustling capital.

The adolescent club in a deprived area of Dhaka is one of over 7,000 clubs in the country providing children and teenagers with a safe space where they can learn and play. Many of them have had a tough life, growing up in poverty or living on the streets. Not only do the clubs give them the opportunity to be children again, but they also help spread the word about the dangers of child marriage and the benefits of education.

Since joining in 2011, the *Kishor-Kishori* (which means youth or adolescence) club has transformed Sultana's life and aspirations for herself. Now she passes on the lessons she learnt to others. A peer leader since 2018, Sultana teaches classes in the club twice a week to about 30 teenagers on a range of topics – from health, food and nutrition to information and communication technology. She also gets her peers motivated and excited by running activities such as karate, cricket, and dancing.

Though she comes from a sizeable family – with two sisters and three brothers – much of the responsibility falls on Sultana's young shoulders as the main provider for her parents and niece. To make ends meet, she also works as a tailor and a tutor, helping children with their studies.

When she was still a child, her sisters, who were both married at a young age, would urge her to get married too.



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But with the teachings of the club still ringing in her ears, Sultana would tell her mother:

"My brothers are not looking after you. I will not marry an uneducated man like your other daughters and return home divorced. I will study at my own expense, get a job and then marry a good man so that I can take care of you."

In Bangladesh, more than 50 per cent of women aged between 20 and 24 were married before the age of 18. The country has the highest prevalence of child marriage in South Asia.

Sultana admits she has not always been this strong. Some years ago, she had her heart broken by a boy she fell in love with, who promised to marry her but then left her. She cried a lot and felt depressed at the time, she says.

But things started looking better after she turned to a counsellor in the *Kishor-Kishori* club where she is now a peer leader. "Sister, I wish to get a bank job, and I need your guidance," Sultana said, adding that she also wanted to care for her aging parents and help others through the club.

With the counsellor's guidance, Sultana started charting her own path. She was determined to be independent, have a career, be strong support for her parents, and role model for her niece Pihu, one of her sisters' daughter, who remarried after divorcing her first husband, leaving Pihu in Sultana's care.

It has not always been easy, and Sultana gets teased to this day by family and neighbours for "still" not being married at 21.

But she shrugs off such remarks. To prevent Pihu from being forced into child marriage and missing out on an education, Sultana enrolled her in school and is helping her with her studies.



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Providing intensive support to marginalized girls

In Bangladesh, UNFPA and UNICEF have shifted towards a systems approach that integrates life skills programming into formal education and non-formal education settings that are regularly assessed and have strong participatory involvement of different stakeholders. UNFPA and UNICEF are working within the programme framework of the 4,883 *Kishor-Kishori* clubs (adolescent clubs) established by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs to scale up the reach of life skills training, empowerment sessions and comprehensive sexuality education for adolescent girls. UNFPA and UNICEF are ensuring that no adolescent girl is left behind through a blended modality that utilizes both *Kishor-Kishori* clubs, which are being established in every union and municipality in Bangladesh, as well as courtyard meetings held in selected villages to specifically reach married girls with restricted mobility.

In 2021, a total of 96,592 adolescent girls, including married adolescent girls and girls living with disabilities, were engaged by the Global Programme through gender-transformative sexual and reproductive health and rights-focused life skills education. Even though schools remained closed until early September 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the adolescent clubs remained operational. They maintained physical distancing with activities conducted outside and with smaller groups where required. It is important to mention that the adolescent clubs in urban slums were specifically established within the slum communities, meaning closures were not a barrier for them. For example, adolescent clubs for girls are set up in the Geneva camp in Dhaka, which is the largest Bihari camp in the capital. The Geneva camp is home to 5,000 Bihari families, who have limited access to education and other basic services and who are separated from the mainstream population because of extreme poverty and hostile local perceptions. Girls generally do not have the ability to go outside the camps and experience regular life. As such, the adolescent girls' clubs are a lifeline to them by providing much needed sexual and reproductive health and rights knowledge and skills.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

During March-August 2021, the deterioration of the COVID-19 situation in the country slowed down the programme significantly. The main lesson learned throughout the pandemic is the importance of investing in digital learning platforms to allow for continued engagement even in a context where face-to-face activities are restricted. Hence, in 2021, there continued to be a strong need for supporting innovative learning and education approaches to ensure ongoing interaction with children and adolescents. Multi-sectoral collaboration has produced good results in the launch and continuation of approaches, such as radio programmes for adolescents, caregivers and teachers. The programme has also supported the government and the Directorate of Primary Education in distributing COVID-19 supplies to schools and education centres in Rohingya camps.

A challenge with the utilization of digital platforms continues to be poor internet connectivity in hard-to-reach areas. This led to the interruption of regular online life skills-based education sessions and meetings by child rights facilitators. Digital platforms also continue to be challenging for children and adolescents living with disabilities to access and use. In addition, many of the adolescent girls do not have their own phones and therefore connected via their family's or a neighbour's mobile phone. This resulted in delays in conducting programmes and engaging with the girls. Getting already married girls to enrol in virtual, online platforms was also a challenge that was exacerbated during the pandemic.

Enhancing the family and community environment

UNFPA and UNICEF focused on increasing knowledge and changing attitudes through group counselling on positive gender norms and motivating people to adopt positive practices. Activities with fathers' groups, community leaders and religious actors mostly focused on male caregivers changing their attitudes and acting as overseers around their community. An evaluation found that men as fathers and gatekeepers and as leaders in community dialogues helped to create a more supportive environment

for adolescent girls to exercise their rights and to challenge gender norms and stereotypes. The evaluation also found that the involvement of women as mothers and gatekeepers and participants in courtyard community meetings have both been critical towards shifting social and gender norms and have been integrated into many community-level approaches.

To ensure comprehensive social and behavioural change programming UNICEF supported the implementation of community engagement interventions in 17 *upazilas* (boroughs) in eight districts and six city corporations with high rates of child marriage and other harmful practices. These activities engaged over 5.2 million individuals, including adolescents, parents, community members and local leaders and stimulated open dialogues to address cross-sectoral behavioural issues that resulted in 36 *upazilas* declaring their community free from child marriage. Although face-to-face communication slowed down during the COVID-19 lockdown, community-based radio interactive programmes and mobile-based communication continued as alternative modalities.

Despite the COVID-19 restrictions, the Global Programme supported the orientation and sensitization of 22,609 local leaders and 800 faith-based influencers as community advocates to uphold child rights with a focus on prevention of child marriage and wellbeing of adolescents. UNFPA and UNICEF also used a systems approach that included the recruitment of boys into adolescent clubs (about 30 per cent per club) and integrated specific sessions on positive masculinities within the SAEP for scaling up life skills education delivered through adolescent clubs and schools. The 2021 evaluation of UNICEF's work for accelerating action towards ending child marriage in Bangladesh found that the incorporation of boys in adolescent clubs and the increased engagement of fathers and mothers were positive actions to encourage a shift in power relations between girls and boys and men and women. However, due to the physical distancing requirements imposed

during COVID-19, only 20,639 boys and 2,538 fathers were reached through community engagement activities in 2021.

A total of 10 million individuals in Global Programme targeted areas were reached through social media with key messaging on issues related to gender equality and child marriage. The nationwide multimedia campaign, #Raisethebeat4ECM, is focused on fostering public resistance to child marriage and reached over 164 million people using public service announcements. In total, over 87 million people were engaged on social media. Season two of the adolescent-focused educational drama-series *Ichchedana* (On the wings of wishes) also reached over 160 million people and engaged around 52 million in discussions around the topics covered in the series. In addition, platforms such as U-Report and community media were used to interact and engage with adolescents and their communities.

During the year, UNICEF equipped 480 child journalists (240 girls) with the capacity to generate video content on child marriage, girls' empowerment, gender inequality and other gender issues that was disseminated on the first-ever children's online news platform⁴ linked to Bangladesh's first internet newspaper⁵. In addition to this, the child journalists also made news reports on child marriage and participated in multiple events and global advocacy movements linked to issues related to gender equality. Furthermore, their mobile journalism included conducting virtual roundtables, expert interviews and vlogging focusing on COVID-19 prevention, children's mental health, reopening of schools, etc. One of the child journalists also participated in the real-life video series *Coping with COVID-19*, which launched its second season in 2021, featuring the lives of girls around the world who stand up against the pandemic and other social injustices in their communities.⁶ Going forward, the child journalism project will be retained in order to nurture an eloquent pool of child journalists who will amplify issues related to child marriage and gender equality across various platforms.

4 The news platform can be found here: <https://hello.bdnews24.com/>

5 The home page of Bangladesh's first online news outlet can be found here: www.bangla.bdnews24.com

6 Episodes of the show can be found here: www.unicef.org/coronavirus/coping-with-covid-19#season-2

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The nationwide COVID-19 related lockdown hampered the implementation of the national and subnational level social and behavioural change interventions. Community engagement through face-to-face dialogues and discussions, meetings with local leaders and peer dialogues were not possible. Alternative measures, such as small group dialogues following necessary COVID-19 precautionary protocols, meeting through virtual and mobile-based platforms and community radio programmes were utilized instead. The capacity enhancement initiative of religious and community leaders was also expedited after the COVID-19 lockdown in the third quarter of 2021.

Other challenges included how the partnership with civil society organizations was phased out due to the transition phase of the country programme, which hampered the implementation of community engagement activities and of reaching marginalized individuals, particularly in remote areas. The strategic shift of partnership modalities of UNICEF with government counterparts from a project-based approach to a scalable approach also slowed down community-based activities.

A key lesson learned was that social and behaviour change as part of an integrated multi-sectoral programme enables better results for adolescents and adults, as it is critical in addressing underlying issues to child marriage. Local-level advocacy and partnerships enlisted the responsiveness of local leaders and community action in preventing child marriage and referral linkages to services. Support to national and local-level partners is essential for building bridges and improving capacities for listening to the voices of adolescents. Innovative social and behaviour change approaches that facilitate reaching and gathering feedback from adolescents and their communities, such as U-Report, need to be scaled up.

Alternative planning and work modalities to deliver results were necessary during the COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure consistent implementation, physical communication

activities such as round tables, events and videography were transformed into virtual activations such as Zoom-based live streams and mobile-based filming. The training of child journalists was also changed into a webinar format. Additionally, social media communication was strategically refocused on girls' digital skills and girl leaders in their communities in light of its relevance during the pandemic. Multimedia and other media also proved to be quite a useful communication channels during the prolonged impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and although new content production was constrained, existing content could be re-broadcasted.

Strengthening systems

In 2021, 108,925 adolescents, including 76,248 adolescent girls, received services from adolescent-friendly health service points in districts targeted by the Global Programme. Accreditation guidelines and tools were developed with UNFPA supporting the establishment of 70 new service delivery points to provide quality adolescent-responsive services. In the Bhola district, a partnership was forged with a local group to overcome challenges created by the pandemic and to support the existing government health system for restoring services. UNICEF also organized a meeting with the government to ensure better coordination among the health and education sectors to respond to issues of gender equality and health among adolescents. A workshop was also held on developing depression assessment tools to ensure the monitoring of mental health wellness of adolescents.

A webinar was organized on psychosocial counselling related to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and child marriage with the participation of adolescent boys and girls nationwide. A website⁷ and accompanying app on adolescent health were introduced to 100 adolescents, who will further disseminate the website and app to their peers. These resources aim to help adolescents learn more about SRHR, gender, mental health and nutrition. Analysis of data from the website shows that over 180,000 adolescent girls have received adolescent-friendly health

7 Further information from the website can be found here: <http://stage-adolescent-health.dnet.org.bd/bn>

services, 19,362 married adolescent girls and 55,686 unmarried girls received sanitary napkins, and 41,275 girls received treatment for urinary tract infections, including sexually transmitted infections.

The Global Programme supported the development of a national menstrual health management strategy, and 144 secondary schools were supported to raise awareness and sensitize adolescents on girl-friendly toilets in support of the implementation of the strategy. Though the COVID-19 pandemic slowed down programme activities, a total of 1,288 meetings with 2,254 members of anti-sexual harassment committees were conducted, reviewing complaints received from 277 secondary schools and 45 *madrasas* (religious schools). Further, UNICEF enhanced the capacity of 3,504 child marriage prevention committees to implement the 2017 child marriage restraint act and the national action plan to end child marriage at a subdistrict level.

CHALLENGES, LESSONS LEARNED AND NEXT STEPS

Access to adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights information is still a challenge in Bangladesh and needs further exploration of innovative ways to disseminate information. The education system needs to integrate comprehensive sexuality education in the curriculum and mental health and gender-based violence service platforms need to be strengthened and linked with other ministries.

Formal education activities were hugely hampered as all educational institutions remained closed from the onset of the pandemic in mid-March 2020 through to mid-September 2021. Anecdotal evidence suggests that child marriage increased due to the impact of the pandemic on education and economic activities. Since the keeping girls in school programme (*see page 16 for more details*) and anti-sexual harassment committees are exclusively school-based activities, it was difficult to continue these activities during the year. However, a phone-based initiative was established immediately at the onset of the pandemic and implemented until September 2021, with approximately 60

per cent of the girls in Global Programme targeted areas reached through mobile phones to keep them motivated and for them to continue learning.

Engaging with local-level authorities and civil society partners was critical in improving access for marginalized children in remote-based learning. Moreover, the ability of the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education and other developing partners to quickly adapt to the pandemic was useful in terms of seizing opportunities. As a result challenges of learning through remote modalities and ensuring learning continuity despite the physical closure of schools were focused on. Support by UN systems to the government for the production and dissemination of key evidence was important for high-level advocacy, resulting in the safe reopening of schools in September.

Equipping key child protection service providers digitally for providing remote services to children during the lockdown also helped with the continuation of child protection services. A key learning point is that child protection system strengthening interventions must be targeted at the individual, family, community and societal level. The sustainability of building a strong child protection system in Bangladesh significantly depends on multi-sectoral coordination and the presence of a strong social service workforce. The positiveness and proactiveness of the government should be capitalized on in the shift from a project-based focus to more upstream/system-building workflow. Capacity development of key actors focusing on the diversion and non-custodial measures and accreditation needs to be accelerated.

There is an important need for engaging students and all teachers in sexual harassment prevention interventions in schools. Students in all grades need to be aware of services available to them for reporting and seeking justice for sexual harassment in and around school premises and hence, extensive school campaigns and student engagement activities have been planned for 2022. Moreover, anti-sexual harassment committee members have identified that stronger referral information and/or systems are required to address sexual harassment and

other forms of gender-based violence that fall beyond the committees' jurisdiction. UNFPA has developed a gender-based violence referral guideline, which includes guidance for the referral of sexual harassment cases to be shared with all committees. Committee members will also be oriented and trained on these guidelines in the future.

Facilitating supportive laws and policies

In 2021, an evaluation of UNICEF Bangladesh's child marriage programme was finalized, giving actionable recommendations to refine activities and partnerships. A mapping of the end child marriage programmes resulted in plans to form a technical advisory group for developing a training module on the Child Marriage Restraint Act from 2017 and its corresponding rules from 2018. Currently, a comprehensive capacity development module on the act and the rules for relevant ministries and stakeholders has been developed and approved by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. The Global Programme, the module being rolled out and 23 child marriage prevention committees at the subdistrict level. Members have been oriented on their roles and responsibilities and their knowledge and skills related to the laws strengthened, including the mechanisms of implementing the national action plan to end child marriage.

The Global Programme also leveraged the existing partnership with parliament and advocated for translating government commitments into action while supporting increased and effective public sector budget allocation. A technical report was developed on public sector budgetary planning, allocation and monitoring systems and ways to increase fund allocation to ensure effective implementation of the national action plan to end child marriage. The technical report aims to provide clear and convincing justifications by in-depth analysis of the national budgets and related expenditure of relevant government ministries for further advocacy for effective budget allocation.

Furthermore, guided by a multi-sectoral technical steering committee, led by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and supported by UNFPA and UNICEF, the

government approved the national adolescent strategy developed in November 2021. The national adolescent strategy follows the national adolescent health strategy for 2017-2030 and looks beyond health to consider outcomes across a wider range of domains in line with the country's Vision 2041 that seeks to eliminate extreme poverty. The goal of the national adolescent strategy is to empower all adolescents – irrespective of gender, age, class, ethnicity, disability and sexual identity – so they can participate in the developmental process of the country as active agents of change.

CHALLENGES, LESSONS LEARNED AND NEXT STEPS

Weak coordination among relevant ministries and a lack of understanding of child protection issues are still major challenges for the implementation of laws and policies in Bangladesh. The Global Programme support towards the development of a capacity development module on the Child Marriage Restraint Act from 2017 and the rules from 2018 is aimed at promoting an understanding of the laws and the implementation of the national action plan to end child marriage.

A key lesson from the year, especially related to the capacity building of the child marriage prevention committees, is the importance of direct engagement between the Global Programme implementing partners with the government. Importantly, from the beginning of the development of the capacity development modules and entrusting the government to lead the process, as this has enhanced ownership and quick implementation at the ground level.

Going forward, support will be provided by the Global Programme towards:

- Developing a monitoring and evaluation framework and costing the national action plan to end child marriage in Bangladesh
- Advocating with ministries and parliamentarians for budget inclusion at the national and district levels to implement the national action plan

- Rolling out a menstrual health management strategy
- Collaborating with government, and relevant stakeholders, to finalize the Rule of Children Act
- Increasing capacity development of duty bearers/ committee members at the subnational level
- Developing sexual harassment prevention guidelines for secondary schools to disseminate nationally.

Generating and applying data and evidence

UNICEF implemented an intervention research study to test a life skills and tutoring support model to keep girls in school and reduce child marriage in 2021. The Keeping girls in schools project to reduce child marriage in rural Bangladesh is part of both Education for Adolescents as well as the Global Programme initiatives. A study found that girls were more likely to be married in areas where no action was taken compared to areas where there was. Similarly, school dropout as a result of marriage and learning loss in analytical skills were significantly greater in control areas.

The Global Programme also raised critical awareness skills and girls in areas where the Global Programme was involved were significantly more likely to be able to list the adverse effects of child marriage. Significantly, the study found that girls were more likely to initiate the use of a modern contraception methods before a first birth. It was also found that girls noted increased confidence and trust from parents in terms of their mobility, which included girls being able to go home after sunset and visit friends alone.

UNICEF also conducted a mapping and assessment of child marriage programmes in Bangladesh to consolidate efforts at the strategic level and serve as a basis for knowledge sharing. This was done improve child marriage results, strengthen collaboration/coherence, reduce duplication of efforts and identify promising scalable practices. It also served as a basis for knowledge sharing about ending of child marriage programmes while linking efforts adopted to address COVID-19's impact on child marriage.

The findings fortify the multidimensionality of programmes to end child marriage and reiterates that multisectoral action is aligned to the wider preventive and responsive measures that are needed to end child marriage. Interactions with key stakeholders helped amply evidence recognition and understanding of what works and what investments are required. The study recommendations are focused on increased advocacy efforts at both national and subnational levels, capacity building of government stakeholders, particularly judges, magistrates and parliamentarians, cross-sectoral collaboration of government departments and further knowledge sharing and documentation efforts of what works and can be scaled and shared among stakeholders contributing to efforts to end child marriage.

Some of the key findings include:

- Ending child marriage is not always a targeted area of intervention for organizations but is often mainstreamed as a part of their wider gender equality and equity promotion goal
- Among international non-governmental organizations and United Nations agencies, programmes were found to be focused on education, capacity development of government stakeholders and promoting youth-led advocacy
- A limited number of programmes were engaged with the issues of birth and marriage registry, while only one programme was found to engage with judges and law enforcement
- Stakeholder consultations revealed the need to scale up programmes that engage with married adolescent girls to develop safe pathways for them to fulfil their potential
- Experiences from COVID-19 and other emergencies suggest that girls and women, particularly the poorest and socially marginalized, will be disproportionately affected.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

COVID-19 restrictions continued to delay critical evidence-generation, including the recently completed implementation research. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the research methodology for a planned study among

adolescent girls was modified from face-to-face to mobile-based interviews in some parts of the country. Though the study was conducted with a beneficiary group from the most marginalized girls among whom the majority do not have access to digital devices, at least 60 per cent of the targeted sample was interviewed using mobile phones.

Lessons and recommendations from the evaluation of UNICEF's work in accelerating action towards ending child marriage in Bangladesh

- Incentives and conditional cash transfers seem to have worked well in some parts. This needs to be examined more closely, including lessons on effective approaches to complement cash and in-kind transfers from large scale interventions in countries such as India, Ethiopia and Bangladesh.** In case it is found to make a positive impact, a solution to this may be found to provide incentives to girls, perhaps by helping the government to design a suitable scheme.
- UNICEF should work towards providing social protection for vulnerable children and their families for overall poverty reduction.** As per the UNICEF definition, "social protection covers the range of policies and programmes needed to reduce the lifelong consequences of poverty and exclusion." Therefore, future interventions should ensure that essential services are provided to all vulnerable families to reduce inequality, poverty and vulnerability. This would require working together with other organizations with similar mandates of poverty alleviation, as well incorporating lessons from the evidence on cash plus programmes. This requires complementary interventions e.g., UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti's work on GRASSP being included.⁸
- The existing monitoring system within UNICEF is not designed to collect relevant data on child marriage.** The mismatch in monitoring programmes makes collation of relevant data collection very challenging and there is a likelihood of missing out on information that may provide evidence for planning and guiding implementation.
- There is a need for a more robust and user-friendly surveillance system and research to analyse the impact of interventions** and to collate information related to an area effectively. It is also important to collect disaggregated data for disadvantaged groups to analyse the impact on vulnerable groups, while complementing quantitative data with qualitative data that capture nuances e.g., shifts in gender transformative change, including perceptions of service providers and staff.
- UNICEF should limit the number of interventions it carries out to address child marriage.** Research has shown that programmes with fewer, more strategic interventions reach a larger population and show better sustainability. Therefore, **UNICEF may consider focusing on fewer interventions where it has achieved better results** and aim at scaling up these pilots.
- UNICEF should limit their focus on skills development programmes** because there are organizations that can be more effective in implementing programmes related to skill development. However, UNICEF can extend technical support to identify vulnerable adolescents and develop programmes for soft skills training.

⁸ GRASSP Think Piece Series, 2020, *Think Pieces*, www.unicef-irc.org/publications/1073-grassp-think-piece-series.html

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