



# BANGLADESH CASE STUDY






Review of Technology-Based Interventions  
to Address Child Marriage and Female  
Genital Mutilation

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# BANGLADESH

## BANGLADESH OVERVIEW

	<b>Child marriage prevalence<sup>1</sup></b> (girls married before the age of 18 years, as a proportion of all girls)	51%
	<b>FGM prevalence<sup>2</sup></b>	-
	<b>Internet users<sup>3</sup></b> (proportions of the adult male and female populations)	76% of men 66% of women
	<b>Mobile phone ownership<sup>4</sup></b> (proportions of the adult male and female populations)	97% of men 79% of women
	<b>Level of government support for digital literacy<sup>5</sup></b> (scale 0–3) <sup>6</sup>	Medium: 2

## THE CONTEXT OF CHILD MARRIAGE AND FGM IN THE COUNTRY

There is currently no data available on the practice of FGM in Bangladesh. The lack of data evidencing the prevalence of FGM in Bangladesh can be attributed to the lack of attention from national governments and the international community as to how this practice occurs in countries in the Asia-Pacific region, considering that much of the work related to advocacy and prevention efforts are focused on countries of high prevalence in Africa and diaspora in Europe.<sup>7</sup> Currently, only two of more than 13 countries in the Asia-Pacific region report national data on the prevalence of FGM (specifically, Indonesia and the Maldives). Yet, it is important to highlight that FGM still occurs in the country, and it is mainly associated with beliefs and customs of Muslim communities, who still maintain that the practice should be continued due to the “medical benefits” associated with female circumcision.<sup>8</sup>

The available data on child marriage is much more extensive. According to the latest Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey in 2019, although the prevalence of child marriage has declined

by 2.1 per cent in the past 10 years, more than half of Bangladeshi women aged 20 to 24 years (51 per cent), were first married or in union before the age of 18, ranking the country as that with the highest prevalence of child marriage in the Asian region. Bangladesh is home to over 41 million child brides (girls and women married before the age of 18),<sup>9</sup> in a country of around 85 million females.<sup>10</sup> Although the country prohibits child marriage by setting a minimum age for legal union, the legal age of marriage for women in Bangladesh is three years below that for men, at ages 18 and 21 years, respectively. As observed in other cases, the high rate of child marriage impacts the lives of these girls in considerable ways, especially when looking at data related to their sexual and reproductive health, as well as empowerment and autonomy. For instance, more than 60 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 years who were married before the age of 18 belong to the poorest quintiles of the country, and 30 per cent of women belonging to this same group believe intimate partner violence (wife-beating) is justified.<sup>11</sup>

## NEWS ABOUT HARMFUL PRACTICES: WORD CLOUD MAPS AND NUMBERS OF REPORTS

A GDELT word cloud and figures on reports for child marriage and FGM are not available for Bangladesh. After filtering the database for a comprehensive pool of keywords related to FGM and child marriage and technology, there were no results returned for associated reports pertaining to child marriage

and/or FGM in the country. Consequently, a country word cloud map representing the most common words portrayed in the reports is also unavailable.

## THE TECHNOLOGY ENVIRONMENT IN BANGLADESH

Considering that most technological tools and interventions require a robust technology environment, it is crucial to understand the general state of digital and technological development in the country to adequately grasp the scope, reach and potential impact of the interventions mapped. Although Bangladesh has experienced a considerable decrease in its gross domestic product (GDP) between the years 2016 and 2022 (from 7.1 per cent in 2016 to 6.9 per cent in 2021),<sup>12</sup> most likely impacted by the economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic and also experienced by other countries, the total number of telephone subscribers (i.e., subscriptions to a mobile telephone service) during this period follows the opposite trend, with 105 subscriptions per 100 inhabitants as of 2020.<sup>13</sup> While the number of male subscribers was 86 per cent of the total population in 2017, the figure reached 97 per cent in 2022, and the percentage of female subscribers rose from 77 per cent to 79 per cent during the same period.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, access to electricity showed a tremendous upturn between 2007 and 2020, with the percentage of the connected population growing from 46.5 per cent of the total population to 96.2 per cent.<sup>15</sup> With more access to electricity, the percentage of individuals using the internet (measured by the amount of individuals who have used the internet (from any location) in the last three months) also increased from 7 per cent of the total population in 2013 to 33 per cent in 2020.<sup>16</sup> In terms of infrastructure, it is worth noting that nearly all the country's population is covered by at least a 3G and/or 4G mobile network (97.8 per cent in both cases).<sup>17</sup>

The Government of Bangladesh has been committed to digitizing the country and empowering the population through the access and use of ICT, which explains the impressive results evidenced above. In 2008, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina launched 'Digital Bangladesh', an initiative "to boost people's social and economic development" by injecting information technology in key areas of service provision, including education, health care, governance and manufacturing, among others.<sup>18</sup> The goal was to provide ICT policy and its implementation in general at all levels. Moreover, the government implemented two additional initiatives with the

goal of empowering vulnerable and marginalized communities in the country (specifically, women and youth located in rural areas) by increasing the delivery of services through mobile phones and personal computers: the Access to Information Programme, in partnership with the UNDP Bangladesh country office (launched in 2007 and considered the pioneer forerunner of the government's public service innovation agenda<sup>19</sup>) and the Enhancing Digital Government and Economy Project, in partnership with the World Bank ("to improve the efficiency and cybersecurity of digital government, and increase digitally enabled employment and raise revenues of IT industry firms supported by the initiative"<sup>20</sup>). Finally, in 2020 the government released the country's National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence, which aims to leverage artificial intelligence to achieve an ICT driven knowledge-based society where everyone gets easy access to information and services online.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the government's steady efforts, Bangladesh still ranks among the lowest of the Asian countries in the Economist Impact in the Inclusive Internet Index 2022 across all four categories of analysis (i.e., availability, affordability, relevance and readiness). Specifically, only 36.4 per





cent of all households have access to the internet, and the gender gap in mobile phone access widened considerably between 2017 and 2022, from 10.5 per cent to 18.6 per cent respectively.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, phone ownership is nearly 30 per cent higher among boys in Bangladesh than girls.<sup>23</sup> While 39 per cent of adult men own a smartphone device that allows access to mobile internet and other applications, the same is true for only 21 per cent of adult women in the country (42 per cent of

women own basic or feature phones with limited or no access to internet and applications).<sup>24</sup> Finally, the gender gap in digital literacy has been one of the greatest challenges to the achievement of the ambitious outcomes listed above. For instance, although the government has an active plan or strategy to promote internet access and e-inclusion for females, such plans are impeded from being implemented because the gender gap in internet access is still above 10 per cent.<sup>25</sup>

## MAPPING OF TECH INTERVENTIONS

The interventions mapped in this section stem from an initial landscape exercise conducted jointly by UNFPA and UNICEF, followed by a systematic review of publicly available data and information on technology-driven and technology-enabled interventions addressing child marriage and/or FGM in Bangladesh. The compiled information was curated and complemented with insights emerging from key informant interviews conducted with local stakeholders.

### CODING TYPE OF INTERVENTION

[☉] Technology-driven intervention/solution (tech is a core element)

[⦿] Technology-enabled intervention/solution (tech is secondary to the intervention, there are other non-tech components)

## ♀ FEMINIST LENSES

The seventh column of the interventions table below identifies how organizations have included feminist lenses into the design and implementation of the interventions by highlighting four key aspects:

1	Consultation with experts and/or community leaders	Consultations with gender or thematic experts and/or local leaders were conducted during the development, implementation, and/or monitoring and evaluation of the interventions.
2	Consultations with target group(s)	The interventions incorporated, at any stage, consultations with the populations targeted, especially girls and women of different ethnicities, ages, sexual orientations, classes, and other social markers.
3	Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) instruments	Monitoring and evaluation activities were carried out to measure the intervention's progress and sustainability, and/or to generate disaggregated information, gender-sensitive/responsive indicators, and/or gender analysis frameworks.
4	Women and/or girl-led organization(s)	The intervention was designed and/or implemented, partly or completely, by a women and/or girl-led organization(s).

Additional descriptive information about the feminist lenses and potential intersectional approach (i.e., addressing ethnicity, language, class or other aspects of the target group's identity) is provided within the table, following the general description of each intervention, which can be identified by the use of this symbol [♀]. This analysis is based on information collected during semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders and/or publicly available information.

## RADIO POLLIKONTHO 99.2 FM / 2012 – ONGOING / Ⓞ

SUPPORTING ORGANIZATION(S)	IMPLEMENTING ORGANIZATION(S)	HARMFUL PRACTICE(S)	LOCATION(S)	IMPACT AREA	TYPES OF TECHNOLOGY USED	FEMINIST LENSES
N/A	BRAC Community Empowerment Programme	Child marriage	Moulvibazar	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Individual level empowerment</li> <li>2. Family and community engagement</li> </ol>	Radio	N/A <sup>26</sup>

In 2012, BRAC formally inaugurated its community radio, named “Radio Pollikontho 99.2 FM”. The initiative aims to provide reliable and up-to-date information to empower local communities, with the ultimate goal of improving the socioeconomic condition of the poorest and most disadvantaged groups in Bangladesh. For this purpose, the programmes are primarily broadcasted in the local dialect, with focus on women and children’s issues and development, including child marriage. According to estimates, more than 1 million people are reached each year with social awareness messages by Radio Pollikontho.<sup>27</sup> Among the topics covered by Radio Pollikontho are information on sustainable agriculture practices, education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, environment and disaster management, women and children’s rights, market price, resources and services from government and NGOs, among others. BRAC’s Radio Pollikontho is being broadcast from Chadnighat union in Moulvibazar within a radius of 17 km from the station. The radio formally went on air on 5 January 2012, and is being broadcast twice a day from 9:00–11:00 am, and from 3:00–5:00 pm. Listeners’ clubs have also been formed in order to assess the effectiveness of the programmes. So far, 769 listeners clubs have been formed. The initiative is also part of Digital Bangladesh strategy to increase people’s social and economic development by injecting information technology in key areas of service provision. Moreover, during the COVID-19 pandemic, 748,679 students continued learning through at-home learning platforms facilitated by BRAC, including mobile phones, television and community radio, and 214,860 pre-primary students from government primary schools were reached through radio schools.<sup>28</sup>



## ALAPON HELPLINE / 2014 – ONGOING / ○

SUPPORTING ORGANIZATION(S)	IMPLEMENTING ORGANIZATION(S)	HARMFUL PRACTICE(S)	LOCATION(S)	IMPACT AREA	TYPES OF TECHNOLOGY USED	FEMINIST LENSES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>UNFPA</li> <li>Ministry of Education</li> </ul>	Concerned Women for Family Development (CWFD)	Child marriage & FGM	Key urban districts (i.e., Dhaka, Barguna, and Satkhira) and Rohingya communities in Cox's Bazar	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Individual level empowerment</li> <li>Family and community engagement</li> <li>Service development and strengthening</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mobile technology (Helpline)</li> <li>Web and social media (Facebook)</li> </ul>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consultation with experts and/or community leaders</li> <li>Consultations with target group(s)</li> <li>Women-led organization</li> </ol>

Alapon Helpline provides youth in Bangladesh with psychosocial support and information on sexual and reproductive health and other issues relevant to adolescents, to fight and prevent not only child marriage, but also gender-based violence and other harmful practices. As informed by UNFPA Bangladesh, since 2014 Alapon Helpline has been implemented with the ultimate goal of reaching young people in need, and it initially started as part of the 'Generation Breakthrough' project (a flagship initiative led by UNFPA Bangladesh, which equips young people with life skills and knowledge by using innovative approaches, to positively shift attitudes and behaviours around gender roles, gender-based violence, and sexual and reproductive health). The helpline is available 7 days a week, 12 hours a day and can be called by youth and adolescents between the ages of 10 and 24, as well as their parents. Considering the anonymous nature of the calls ensured by Alapon (i.e., that there is no need to disclose personal information), it encourages young people to discuss and bring up subjects they would otherwise not be comfortable discussing, particularly issues seen as taboo that are related to sexual and reproductive health and rights, including menstruation, sex, and masturbation, among others. According to data from UNFPA, although the majority of the calls to the helpline were from male adolescents, the number of female callers dramatically increased in August 2021 "as flashcards with information on the 'Alapon' helpline were included in Menstrual Hygiene Management kits that were distributed to adolescent girls affected by Cyclone Amphan."<sup>29</sup>

UNFPA also established a partnership with Aspire to Innovate, a multinational digital transformation catalyst from the Government of Bangladesh and started to host weekly Facebook live sessions in which Alapon counsellors informed viewers on issues relevant to adolescents. Any person with a Facebook account can join the sessions free of charge and submit their questions to the counsellors. Despite being an initiative that is proving to be an essential success in the country, barriers that prevent national adoption of Alapon Helpline are the still low number of counsellors available to attend to the adolescent population, the gender gap in access to mobile phones (where girls still lag far behind), and the fact that calls are not toll-free (only the helpline in Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar is).

♀ This intervention integrates two key aspects of an intersectional feminist approach. First, the organization implementing and coordinating Alapon Helpline is a women-led civil society organization. CWFD is a non-political, non-profit voluntary organization run by women of Bangladesh, and provides community-based health care initiatives to empower women and girls, as well as overall communities to exercise their rights to eliminate social injustice, create economic opportunities, and equip underprivileged youth of urban and rural population with social and educational skills to develop human resources for a positive social change. Second, during the design and piloting phases of Alapon Helpline, UNFPA, CWFD and other involved stakeholders carried out several consultations with experts in sexual and reproductive health as well as psychosocial services, to ensure that adolescent counselling services were not only relevant and accessible by the target audience, but also handled and developed following key ethical principles. According to UNFPA Bangladesh, a memorandum of understanding was established with Dhaka University, to guarantee and ensure that the contributions of experts in psychosocial services were integrated into the design of the initiative.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (2019), as cited in UNICEF (2022a)
- 2 Statistical data not available
- 3 Economist Impact (2022)
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 The score on government support for digital literacy, on a scale from 0–3 (low to high), reflects a government plan or strategy to address digital literacy for students and/or teachers – through the design and development of courses in ICT skills, computer science, programming or other classes for students; and through ICT capacity-building courses for teachers. A zero score indicates that the government does not have such a plan/strategy, neither for students and nor for teachers; a score of 1 reflects a plan for student digital literacy but without including teacher capacity-building; a medium score of 2 indicates a current plan for both; and the highest score of 3 reflects a plan addressing both students and teachers, and with the courses and capacity-building starting at the primary school level.
- 7 Dawson et al. (2020)
- 8 Asia Network to End FGM/C (n.d.)
- 9 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (2019), as cited in UNICEF (2022a)
- 10 United Nations Population Division, as cited in the World Bank (2021a)
- 11 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (2019), as cited in UNICEF (2022a)
- 12 World Bank (2021b)
- 13 World Bank (2020t)
- 14 Economist Impact (2022)
- 15 World Bank (2020a)
- 16 World Bank (2020b)
- 17 Economist Impact (2022)
- 18 Sear (2021)
- 19 UNDP (2019)
- 20 World Bank (2022c)
- 21 Information and Communication Technology Division (2020)
- 22 Economist Impact (2022)
- 23 UNICEF (2021b)
- 24 GSMA (2022a)
- 25 Economist Impact (2022)
- 26 Organization/intervention not interviewed
- 27 BRAC (n.d.)
- 28 BRAC (2020)
- 29 UNFPA (2021a)

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TO ADDRESS CHILD MARRIAGE AND  
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