



COUNTRY SUMMARY

BANGLADESH

2023 Annual Results and Phase II (2020-2023) Report

UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage

**end
child
marriage**

A voice. A chance. A future.



The UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage is generously funded by the Governments of Belgium, Canada, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, the European Union through the Spotlight Initiative, and Zonta International.

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August 2024

Situation of adolescent girls and child marriage

Bangladesh has the highest prevalence of child marriage in South Asia and is among the 10 countries worldwide with the highest levels. There are 41.6 million child brides in Bangladesh, 22.3 million of whom were married before the age of 15.¹ Currently, the prevalence of child marriage among girls (marriage before the age of 18) stands at 51 per cent. However, the practice is in decline from previous generations: the prevalence was over 90 per cent around 1970.

These achievements, while commendable, mask the persistent intricate and pressing challenges in addressing child marriage in Bangladesh. The impacts of megatrends—such as political instability, ongoing humanitarian crises, and the escalating effects of climate change-induced natural disasters—have exacerbated the risks faced by adolescent girls who marry early.


Additionally, these trends have hindered the effective implementation of child marriage prevention programmes in the country.


The Rohingya refugee crisis has become a long-term crisis, with over 1.3 million refugees in camps. The Bangladesh government is worried about the growing refugee numbers and the decreasing global support, leading to less food, fewer jobs, and more vulnerability for the refugees and local communities. This has caused more tension, lower wages, higher prices, and increased security issues like harassment and violence, and causing child marriage to rise among the refugee communities.

Even with economic growth and less extreme poverty, Bangladesh still has big wealth and income gaps and these factors have an impact on the rate of child marriage. A 2023 inequality analysis study by the Global Programme showed a 25 per cent difference in child marriage rates between girls from poor and rich families. Reducing these gaps is key to more equal progress and fewer child marriages in poorer areas.

2023 KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS


 Reached more than **378,200** girls with life skills and comprehensive sexuality education.


 Leveraged technology to reach over **30.5 million** people, empowering **36.7 million** adolescents with knowledge and skills, and reaching **92.10 million** people with interventions to create an enabling environment for adolescents.

 Engaged over **2.3 million** community members in dialogue and consensus-building on gender equality and alternatives to child marriage.

 Engaged over **28,031** local gatekeepers, including traditional, religious and community leaders, in dialogues and consensus-building to end child marriage.

 Supported **313** service delivery points to provide quality health, education, and protection services for girls

 Strengthening of mechanisms through community hubs and capacity development of public institutions for the Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA).

 Developed an integrated parenting education package children aged 0–18 and implemented national multimedia interventions for child marriage prevention and adolescent empowerment, reaching over 77 million people

¹ Child Marriage Data Portal, Bangladesh country profile, <https://childmarriagedata.org/country-profiles/bangladesh/>

The Global Programme's Phase II (2020–2023) vision is for adolescent girls, especially the most marginalized, to fully enjoy their childhood free from the risk of child marriage, and experience healthier, safer, and more empowered life transitions, including making choices about their education, sexuality, relationships, marriage, and childbearing. The Global Programme supports governments and civil society partners, including women- and youth-led organizations and feminist movements, to accelerate action to end child marriage. At the heart of the theory of change is an adolescent

girl-centred approach that empowers individual adolescent girls to make decisions about if, when and whom to marry, within a web of support that involves her family, the community (including boys and men), service providers, society and public structures, institutions, systems and services, laws, and policies.

Phase II was implemented guided by programme principles, core approaches and key strategies as follows:

Principles and approaches

- ⌵ Human rights-based approach.
- ⌵ Gender transformation and the rights of women and girls.
- ⌵ Leave no one behind and an intersectional approach.
- ⌵ Adolescent girl-centred approach to development, empowerment, and protection.
- ⌵ Systems strengthening and community mobilization.

Aims from Phase II programme document

- ⌵ Use the demonstration and catalytic power of (i) strengthened systems; (ii) mobilized communities; and (iii) empowered girls to further accelerate progress at significantly large scale.
- ⌵ Scale up interventions and strengthen systems to reach more girls, locations and countries.
- ⌵ Increase political and social support to end child marriage.
- ⌵ Engage more governments, donors and actors.
- ⌵ Finance and implement budgeted plans.
- ⌵ Achieve demonstrable change in some significant locations of considerable size.

Strategies from Phase II theory of change

- ⌵ Create and expand opportunities for the empowerment of adolescent girls.
- ⌵ Promote a supportive and gender equal family and community environment.
- ⌵ Strengthen governance to prevent child marriage.
- ⌵ Enhance sustainability and impact of child marriage programmes.
- ⌵ Build partnerships and leverage additional resources and co-investments.

OVERALL PROGRAMME PERFORMANCE

Table 1: Summary of output indicator performance for 2023 and Phase II (2020–2023)

| Indicator | 2023 | | PHASE II (2020-2023) | |
|---|------------|------------|----------------------|-------------|
| | Targets | Results | Targets | Results |
| 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 | 378,237 | 451,246 | 588,992 |
| 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 | 27,000 | 330,181 | 378,983 | 400,902 |
| 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 | 4,800,000 | 2,347,882 | 15,594,037 | 19,621,947 |
| 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 | 11,202,720 | 77,228,913 | 46,108,160 | 175,446,984 |
| 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 | 28,031 | 131,722 | 79,986 |
| Indicator 1231: Number of civil society organizations newly mobilized in support of challenging social norms and promoting gender equality by the Global Programme (cumulative) | 35 | 35 | 77 | 91 |
| Indicator 2121: Number of primary/secondary/non-formal schools in programme areas providing quality gender-friendly education that meets minimum standards | 200 | - | 650 | 288 |
| 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 | 4472 | 243 | 9,906 | 7,592 |
| Indicator 2211: Number of partnerships (both formal and informal) established to deliver adolescent-responsive social protection, poverty reduction, and economic empowerment programmes and services | 17 | 253 | 9,988 | 7,814 |
| Indicator 3111: Number of policies or legal instruments addressing child marriage drafted, proposed or adopted at national and subnational level with Global Programme support (cumulative) | 5 | - | 23 | 280 |
| Indicator 3121: Number of subnational plans with evidence informed interventions to address child marriage | 3 | - | 14 | 5 |
| Indicator 3211: Number of generated evidence and knowledge that focus on what works to end child marriage (cumulative) | 12 | 12 | 10 | 20 |
| Indicator 3212: Number of generated evidence and knowledge that apply a gender analysis (cumulative) | 12 | 12 | 41 | 36 |
| Indicator 3221: Number of South-to-South cooperation (conferences, expert visits, peer consultations, study tours, communities of practice) supported | 1 | - | 41 | 36 |

Providing intensive support to marginalized girls

The Global Programme has effectively empowered girls to make informed decisions about marriage and their sexual and reproductive health, thereby transforming their knowledge, context, and environment. The 2023 Phase II independent evaluation concluded that the Global Programme increased the knowledge and skills of targeted adolescent girls at risk of, and affected by, child marriage, equipping them to make informed decisions and choices regarding marriage, education, and sexual and reproductive health. The Global Programme facilitated access to comprehensive sexuality education and life skills education for both in- and out-of-school girls. In some cases, this was combined with economic empowerment interventions designed to mitigate poverty drivers of child marriage.

In 2023, the Global Programme empowered 378,237 adolescent girls, focusing on those in vulnerable situations, with life skills and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) training through community safe spaces,

adolescent clubs, and Kishori resource centres. It specifically addressed the disparities faced by girls in slums and rural areas, providing life skills and SRHR training to 11,640 girls, including 5,040 who were married, through evening courtyard meetings. The curriculum, designed to meet the unique needs of married girls, emphasized assertive communication, gender equality, and family planning.

A specialized Alternative Learning Programme was devised for marginalized adolescents and young women, including survivors of child marriage, widows, divorcees, and those who are separated. This programme, integrating skill development and employment opportunities, was launched at the community level through informal apprenticeship and entrepreneurship initiatives. It empowers these individuals, offering a route to economic self-sufficiency. In 2023, 775 learners completed the programme and continue to receive mentorship for job placement and future skill enhancement opportunities. The storytelling session “Her Story, My Choice” has inspired girls to chase their dreams; 83 per cent attended all the sessions, resulting in improved skills, knowledge, and school retention rates.



Enhancing the family and community environment

The 2023 Phase II independent evaluation found that the Global Programme mobilized community stakeholders to contribute to changing the social and gender norms that perpetuate harmful practices. This has included the engagement of traditional and religious leaders – and increasingly, parents and caregivers – as agents of change. An important priority of the Global Programme in Phase II was the engagement of boys and men to promote healthy relationships, positive masculinities and gender equality, and countries designed and initiated interventions accordingly. Engagement with extended families has however been more limited, despite their important role in decisions related to child marriage in many contexts.

In 2023, the Global Programme facilitated dialogues among families, community leaders, and influencers, engaging over 2.3 million people. Intergroup dialogues involving adolescent girls, boys, and their parents played a critical role in cultivating adolescents' aspirations and creating a supportive environment for them. The community engagement and adolescent participation interventions facilitated open dialogues, courtyard meetings and group meetings, addressing about 700,000 people from eight districts.

The Shahana Cartoon Series III and other media platforms contributed to consensus-building on alternatives to child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls, and gender equality. Collectively, over 77 million people were reached through media platforms. The collaboration with the child journalists generated nearly 133 news reports and 94 new videos uploaded to the hello.bdnews24.com site on the issue of child marriage, gaining 75,000 hits a month on the website.

In 2023, the Global Programme sensitized 28,031 community and religious leaders, fostering consensus against child marriage and adolescent pregnancy. The Global Programme provided crucial support to these groups, strengthening their capacity to respond effectively in times of child marriage or sexual harassment.

Enhancing sustainability of interventions by building resilient systems

The 2023 Phase II independent evaluation found that, by design, the Global Programme embeds ownership and sustainability elements through four of its outcomes aimed at strengthening government systems and community structures. This approach is delivering positive signs, particularly in countries with strong commitment and leadership from national and subnational government and local structures. With some increased capacity from the sectoral systems, Global Programme interventions are delivering in the areas of education, health, gender-based violence (GBV), child protection and, to a lesser extent, social protection services.

The Global Programme undertook a study on the detrimental gender norms impacting adolescent health. This research delved into aspects of sexuality, puberty, mobility, and fertility, and scrutinized the perceptions of gender bias among health service providers. The findings revealed that a significant number of adolescents feel they cannot decline sexual intercourse if their husband insists, and a majority expressed a desire for lessons related to SRHR in facilities.

In response to these findings, the Global Programme has partnered with health departments to bolster the Adolescent Health Program, ensuring it provides gender-responsive adolescent-friendly health services. This collaboration led to notable improvements in the Nilphamari and Bhola Districts. A total of 282 health facilities across 14 districts were enhanced, benefiting 616,708 individuals and providing treatment for sexual and reproductive tract infections to 215,847 adolescents.

In 2023, the Global Programme provided gender-transformative, SRHR-focused life skills training to 11,640 adolescent girls. The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) established 22 special hubs for street children and those near brothels, providing basic services and protection from violence. Around 840 children received services from Child Protection Community Hubs (CPCH) under MoWCA for three months. To prevent child marriage, 1074 community facilitators and 1052 peer leaders received training from MoWCA.



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GBV interventions led to the establishment of sexual harassment prevention committees in 210 schools across 6 districts. These committees reached 23,268 individuals through various campaigns in 2023. DSHE-approved guidelines for GBV prevention and referral have been developed.

In 2023, 5,339 service providers were trained to enhance adolescent health services. Youth-led campaigns and the Adolescent App raised awareness about adolescent health issues, reaching 22,302 adolescents. 121 secondary schools were engaged in this awareness drive.

Expanding partnerships

The 2023 Phase II evaluation highlighted the Global Programme's success in catalysing efforts at all levels to end child marriage. This was achieved through joint programming, partnerships, advocacy, and knowledge-sharing. The Global Programme worked with other initiatives, expanding reach, coverage, and funding. It used evidence and tools to raise awareness and inform advocacy and programming. The Global Programme capitalized

on the momentum of the SDG agenda which prioritizes the elimination of harmful practices, including child marriage. Since 2015, ending child marriage has been prioritized by United Nations agencies' country programmes. The Global Programme fostered partnerships with civil society organizations (CSOs), aiding their national expansion. All countries established strong partnerships with governments and CSOs, and to a lesser extent, feminist organizations and the private sector. However, mobilizing new CSOs was a challenge, and this was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic which forced many CSOs to downsize or shut down.

The Global Programme in Bangladesh implemented a comprehensive approach to engage and support local grass-roots organizations for effective advocacy and interventions. The initiative has promoted girls' rights and gender equality by leveraging 30 community-based organizations, reaching approximately 7,906 community members across six districts. The programme has fostered a girl-led movement, empowering girls to advocate for their rights, implement actions, monitor progress, and evaluate efforts. A two-day training programme for 150 girls was designed to empower them to lead year-long campaigns and activities.

Youth-led organizations were engaged to improve uptake of services, achieving 2.5 times higher reach compared to 2020. Collaborations with ministries were expanded to promote age-appropriate sexual health and reproductive rights information. A website on adolescent health attracted over 10 million visitors.

The Global Programme collaborated and advocated with women's rights organizations and networks to stimulate mass awareness and build the capacity of grass-roots organizations. The programme leveraged campaigns on violence against women and International Women's Day with 16 days of activism. A collaboration with Naripokkhko, a national women's rights platform, expanded the programme's outreach for campaigning focus on equal rights of guardianship for women and information technology security for women and girls.

Addressing poverty

Poverty and lack of economic opportunities are key drivers of child marriage. The 2023 Phase II evaluation found that Global Programme countries have linked with social protection and economic empowerment interventions to tackle poverty-driven child marriage. Yet, in most countries, and especially in polycrisis contexts, these linkages remain limited, despite economic insecurity being a significant driver of child marriage. The Global Programme has shown some successful examples of partnerships with government-led programmes, but social protection or economic empowerment opportunities that could benefit girls and mitigate poverty-driven child marriage have not been fully explored. Successes include school subsidies, incentives, vocational training, and start-up funds. However, these interventions often have a limited focus on economic empowerment and income-generating activities and have little connection to social protection schemes.

The Global Programme has collaborated with Robi Axiata Limited, the country's second-largest mobile network operator, to foster income-generating opportunities for adolescent girls. This partnership leverages Robi's successful women retailers project, which includes mobile repair, financial services, and social media safety, to offer viable alternatives to child marriage.

The Global Programme has also established strategic partnerships with government committees, such as the Child Marriage Prevention Committee and the MoWCA, to address social and gender norms and improve adolescent well-being. These efforts are complemented by alliances with media outlets and networks such as BD News, Radio Shadhin, Girls Not Brides, and Naripokkhko, enhancing advocacy and social behavioural change interventions to empower communities and end child marriage.

Facilitating supportive laws and policies

The 2023 Phase II evaluation revealed that the Global Programme's partnerships and advocacy played a key role in renewing commitments to combat child marriage globally, regionally, and nationally. The Programme aided governments in formulating laws, policies, strategies, and costed action plans. However, the adoption of these measures has been slow, and government funding for these plans remains limited. Moreover, in some countries, enforcing age-limit laws for marriage can unintentionally heighten the vulnerability of adolescent girls and their families.

In 2023, over 3,000 government officials were trained to implement and monitor the Child Marriage Restraint Act (CRMA) 2017, the National Action Plan on Ending Child Marriage (NAP-ECM), and other policies/guidelines, enhancing the NAP-ECM roll out and implementation.

A cost plan for the NAP-ECM was proposed, with identified costs based on priorities, resources, and gaps. A draft monitoring and evaluation framework was developed to track the NAP-ECM implementation.

Several strategies were strengthened during Phase II, including the National Adolescent Strategy, National Menstrual Hygiene Management Strategy, and the Costed National Plan of Action for Adolescent Health Strategy 2020–2030.

The Global Programme in Bangladesh helped MoWCA develop a capacity development module on the CMRA and the Rules 2017 and provided capacity-building support to child marriage protection committees.

The revised water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) standard for schools will guide the government on required services. Advocacy efforts for the NAP-ECM implementation have been strengthened, and a monitoring and evaluation framework was developed.

Building a new generation of data and evidence

The 2023 Phase II evaluation revealed that the Global Programme has produced significant evidence on effective strategies to end child marriage, especially during COVID-19. This evidence has informed understanding, advocacy, policy, and strategic direction. The Global Programme has boosted investment in research partnerships at global and regional levels to identify and fill evidence gaps, produce new evidence, and build research capacity at the country level. Despite these advancements, there are still country-level gaps in the evidence that indicate a need for continued investment.

The Global Programme significantly improved the data and knowledge base on child marriage. Key initiatives included the publication of the report on “Ending Child Marriage: A profile of progress in Bangladesh” that influenced MoWCA to revise national targets for ending child marriage for the eighth Bangladesh Five-Year Plan.

Implementation research was conducted on keeping girls in school to reduce child marriage in rural Bangladesh, testing interventions and adapting to COVID-19 that led to adaptive measures of reaching out to girls through mobile phones and customizing lesson plans.

The Global Programme partnered with the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) to analyse existing data on child marriage, highlighting regional variance of decline rates, plateauing pace of decline, and characteristics of inequalities. The study emphasized the need for deeper microlevel contextual analysis.

The Global Programme strengthened the capacity of organizations to generate and apply data and evidence, improving the monitoring & evaluation (M&E) framework and leading to costed action plans. A systematic approach in Phase III will enhance the government’s capacity for policy development and budget allocation.

Child marriage-focused studies have led to the uptake of existing data and improved understanding of the drivers and factors associated with child marriage. The Global Programme’s ‘Analysis of Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) data for child marriage’ provided insights into strategies to end child marriage. An internal exercise identified specific drivers and districts where young girls were most vulnerable to child marriage. A country profile was drafted to help policymakers make use of data.



Programme challenges

- Inadequate investment in human resources and staff capacity development has been a significant barrier, particularly underinvestment in the child marriage programme by MoWCA.
 - Adolescent girls' mobility restrictions and household responsibilities, especially among those who are married, created a challenging environment for regular attendance at life skills education and SRHR sessions.
 - Many implementing partner personnel lacked an understanding of crucial concepts such as gender dynamics, facilitation techniques, and the 'do no harm' approach. Despite the Global Programme's online orientation programme and periodic refreshers, more capacity-building work is still needed.
 - Building long-term relationships with under-resourced organizations is a major challenge and yet long-term planning and commitment to engagement are essential for meaningful collaboration on ECM.
 - Enhancing the MoWCA leadership, capacity, and commitment to ending child marriage is crucial for scaling up through the government and essential if the programme is to reach a larger beneficiary base.
 - Securing commitments from community leaders to ensure a safe and gender-equitable community for girls was challenging.
 - Conducting effective meetings and organizing capacity-building workshops with Child Marriage Prevention Committees was challenging because government officials and political leaders have very busy schedules.
 - Backlash and negative responses from audiences posed challenges, particularly on issues related to gender equality and girls' empowerment.
 - Aligning the aspirations of adolescent girls and the offerings of partner organizations was often challenging.
- The scarcity of well-organized and reliable data, the time-consuming process of onboarding consult

Lessons learned

- The Global Programme in Bangladesh underscored the importance of creating safe spaces for girls and women. It faced challenges when adolescent clubs were phased out due to government delays in starting new clubs. To address this, mapping adolescent girls in localities before club selection is crucial.
- The Global Programme successfully established a community ecosystem around schools. Sensitizing the Union Child Marriage Prevention Committee improved campaign organization in schools and created adolescent-friendly environments.
- Strategic partnerships with women-led and youth-led organizations and collaboration with government and non-government agencies are essential for influencing societal mindsets.
- Early engagement in partnerships, understanding stakeholder needs, and ensuring there are mutual benefits are all key lessons learned. The consultative process is critical for achieving partnership outcomes within set timelines.
- Government ownership in the research agenda is crucial when research for advocacy is being planned. This ensures that the findings influence policy decisions and align with the government's priorities.
- Advocacy for coordinated action on the implementation of the NAP-ECM, supported by adequate budgets, is vital for alignment and progress towards ending child marriage.

Priorities for the way forward

- The Global Programme will focus on strengthening the social movement to end child marriage by convening a platform of CSOs for strategic knowledge-sharing and capacity-building. The aim is to empower CSOs that are women-led and youth-led to effectively combat child marriage.
- It is essential to build capacities and secure resources for the Global Programme that serve as a knowledge conduit on child marriage. This includes enhancing the skills and knowledge of programme participants and ensuring they have the resources they need.



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