



## Original article

Skills-Building Programs to Reduce Child Marriage in Bangladesh:  
A Randomized Controlled TrialSajeda Amin<sup>a,\*</sup>, J.S. Saha<sup>b</sup>, and J.A. Ahmed<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Population Council, New York, New York<sup>b</sup> Population Council, Dhaka, Bangladesh

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## A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** Child marriage is the norm in Bangladesh, leading to lifelong negative consequences. Evidence on sustainable child marriage programs is scant. Our study aimed to evaluate the impact of three community-based skills-building programs to delay child marriage among adolescent girls in rural Bangladesh.

**Methods:** The study used a cluster randomized controlled trial design with four arms—ARM1 offered educational support, ARM2 promoted gender rights awareness, ARM3 offered livelihoods training, and ARM4 was a control area. All adolescent girls were offered 144 hours of skills training in village centers over 18 months. Among 11,609 baseline survey respondents, 91% were successfully included in the end-line analysis. Program impact was assessed using discrete time hazard models.

**Results:** The program reduced child marriages (<18) significantly in all arms relative to control—(adjusted hazard ratio [AHR]: .75; 95% confidence interval [CI]: .60–.92) for the education arm, (AHR: .72; 95% CI: .59–.88) for the gender arm, and (AHR: .70; 95% CI: .56–.87) for the livelihoods arm. Program participants were younger and more likely to be in school and faced lower risk of marriage relative to nonparticipants. In the gender and livelihoods arm, nonparticipants had lower risk of child marriage relative to the control group significant at the 10% level.

**Conclusions:** The study demonstrates it is possible to reduce the prevalence of child marriage in a relatively short period of time by working with communities to implement holistic programs to build skills among girls. The program had similarly large impact and did not depend on the type of skills offered.

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IMPLICATIONS AND  
CONTRIBUTION

A rigorous evaluation of the Bangladeshi Association for Life skills, Income, and Knowledge for Adolescents (BALIKA) program demonstrated that empowering girls with skills can significantly reduce the risk of child marriage in the community. The community-based program provided safe spaces for girls to meet, access to mentors, and skills training opportunities.

Bangladesh has the highest rates of under-18 marriage in Asia with 59% of women marrying before age 18. For under-15 marriage, Bangladesh ranks highest in the world [1,2]. Child marriage persists despite laws discouraging the practice since 1929 [3]. Noting that prohibiting marriages under 18 may not be universally beneficial, the laws were amended in 2016 to

allow marriage over 16 under some exceptional circumstances. However, the Government of Bangladesh has committed to eradicating marriages under the age of 15 by 2021 and all child marriage by 2041 [4].

The persistence of child marriages is a puzzle. Bangladesh has achieved significant progress in many other social indicators—primary schooling is nearly universal, and there have been significant gains in fertility and health [2]. Child marriage effectively puts an end to schooling and marks the beginning of childbearing [5] with implications for the health and well-being of the mother and her children.

While there is ample correlational evidence that girls who are married early are also disadvantaged in other ways [6–10], this evidence also suggests selectivity that creates an impression that

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child marriage is harmful when in fact girls who marry early are disadvantaged because they tend to come from relative disadvantage in the first place. Poor families may be motivated by insecurity and to save on dowry. One study suggests that disasters exacerbate these drivers [11]. Insecurity motivates families to marry off girls at early ages to shift the burden of ensuring their safety to another, often more powerful family [12,13].

The current study explores whether expanding alternatives and choices for girls can change the choices that families make with regard to their marriage. There is little evidence to date on whether and how programs to build girls' skills can influence the timing of marriage in ways that improve girls' well-being. The approach tested is similar to that of a growing body of programs that foster positive youth development approaches by building skills, fostering healthy relationships, and engaging youth as active partners to improve well-being [14].

Two reviews of child marriage programs globally suggest that offering incentives can be effective nudges in preventing child marriage [15,16]. No skills program met their inclusion criteria of rigorous evaluation except "Kishori Abhijan" that was considered to have weak impact as it reduced marriage age only for younger girls living in the poorest communities [17]. A study in rural India found providing information about job opportunities can be transformative. Young women in treatment villages that received information about available jobs nearly were significantly less likely to get married [18]. "Berhane Hewan," a project in Ethiopia that combines community sensitization and incentives resulted in significant marriage delays and increased school enrollment [19]. Thus, the existing programmatic evidence does not allow us to identify whether and what type of skills development matters most for child marriage prevention.

### *Marriage in Bangladesh*

According to the 2014 Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey, the median age at first marriage among women 20–49 in Bangladesh is 16.1 years [2]. The survey also reports premarital sex is low and likely underreported. Women aged 20–24 have 7.9 years of schooling on average and 25% completed secondary school. A 2006 national gender survey documents some important marriage and workforce characteristics—arranged marriages are the norm and living arrangements patrilineal. Polygamy is allowed for Muslims but not widely practiced. Dowry paid by the bride's family to the groom is illegal but widely practiced. Early marriage is associated with less dowry. Few women engage in paid work in Bangladesh but there is evidence of growing opportunity in the education, health sectors in rural areas, as well as in garment production and electronic sectors [20]. A quasi-experimental study compared villages near factories employing women to villages farther away and found being near factories significantly lowered the risk of child marriage [21].

### *A community-based program to delay girls' marriage*

The BALIKA program offered three distinct types of skills training to girls aged 12–18 living in districts with some of the highest child marriage rates in Bangladesh. In addition to child marriage prevalence, district selection considered presence of other child marriage programs to avoid contamination of intervention design, as well as outmigration rates to minimize attrition risk. Three southern districts—Narail, Khulna, and Satkhira—were selected based on these criteria. The program was implemented over an

18-month period from February 2014 to August 2015, by Population Services and Training Center and mPower Social with technical support from the Population Council. A total of 9,689 adolescent girls were enrolled at 72 BALIKA centers. The program was inclusive by design. All adolescent girls living in the centers' vicinity, married and unmarried, and in- and out-of-school, were eligible and invited to enroll in the program. Households located within easy walking distance of 2 km from the 96 schools designated as potential sites for centers were assumed to be within the program's catchment area.

The program offered 144 hours of training sessions where participants attended once weekly after regular school hours. Centers were equipped with computers, books, and other learning equipment and supported by a locally recruited female mentor and a part-time schoolteacher. In all intervention arms, mentors conducted 44 hours of life-skills lessons and 100 hours of arm-specific training as follows:

*Arm 1:* In the education arm, school-going girls received tutoring support in mathematics and English to promote success in mandatory examinations, and out-of-school girls received practical lessons in financial skills and communicative English. Sessions were conducted by a schoolteacher. The program sought to make learning attractive by offering access to online learning materials such as practice tests for national examinations and digital games. The financial-skills development curriculum included lessons on practical skills such as budgeting, planning, and basic financial concepts. The communicative English materials were developed to teach English as a second language for population with low literacy.

*Arm 2:* The gender rights arm focused on negotiation, critical thinking, and decision-making skills. The lessons promoted awareness by discussing gender roles, family power dynamics, and gender-based division of labor. Group activities and games encouraged discussion to promote critical thinking about key concepts such as gender rights, diversity, and tolerance. The curriculum included videos, dramas, animation, and digital books, and examples helped girls to see links with their own experiences and feelings. The training emphasized communication skills with parents and guardians about sensitive issues such as marriage and dowry.

*Arm 3:* The livelihoods arm was designed to raise professional aspirations by providing information on locally available and non-traditional female occupations. Lessons included 25 hours on computing, 13 hours on mobile phone applications, 30 hours on photography, 17 hours on health screening, and 15 hours on entrepreneurship. Computer training included web-search capabilities, word processing, spreadsheet applications, email, and Skype. Mobile phone applications included mobile banking, talk-time recharge, and downloading and using mobile apps. Photography included the art and science of digital photography and editing. The health curriculum taught the use of digital monitors to measure blood pressure and temperature, and lessons on first aid, nutrition, and maternal health. Entrepreneurship training taught principles of running a small business, such as assessing markets, pricing products, and conducting cost-benefit analysis.

In addition to working at the learning centers, the mentors were engaged in intensive community outreach activities. Mentors were locally recruited unmarried women, 22–28 years of age, with college education. They were trained to be accessible and supportive and to serve as role models by example.

Project activities were monitored intensively to ensure fidelity to program design and quality of program implementation. Although offered 144 hours of skills training, we estimate the

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