

New evidence shows what works to delay child marriage in Bangladesh

March 23 2016

BALIKA: Empowering girls and building assets

The Bangladeshi Association for Life Skills, Income, and Knowledge for Adolescents (BALIKA) project provides important insights into what works to delay child marriage and why. New evidence shows that programs that provide girls with knowledge and skills and elevate their profiles within their community while keeping them safe can significantly reduce the incidence of child marriage.



BALIKA
Bangladeshi Association for Life Skills,
Income, and Knowledge for Adolescents

Statistically significant findings from the three intervention strategies, relative to the comparison group, are presented below.

1 **EDUCATION** 2 **GENDER-RIGHTS AWARENESS** 3 **LIVELIHOODS SKILLS**

FEWER GIRLS MARRIED AS CHILDREN



REDUCTION OF:

EDUC. GENDER LIVELI.

	EDUC.	GENDER	LIVELI.
Girls married at the end of the study	23%	24%	22%
Ever married before 18	31%	31%	23%

IMPROVED EDUCATION, WELL-BEING, AND HEALTH

INCREASE OF:

EDUC.	GENDER	LIVELI.	
19%	20%	22%	Currently in school
20%	23%	nss	Excelled on mathematics test
nss	31%	35%	Currently earning an income
57%	28%	70%	Listened to radio
43%	17%	47%	Watched television
97%	27%	119%	Read newspaper in the last week
54%	nss	192%	Played outdoors
27%	25%	29%	Disagrees that a woman should tolerate violence against women
49%	18%	61%	Agrees that girls can say no to arranged marriage
65%	33%	42%	Knows about FP methods
69%	89%	56%	Knows how HIV is transmitted
122%	76%	76%	Received treatment for reproductive health problem
67%	200%	123%	Knows about menstruation
nss	36%	36%	Uses menstrual hygiene products

nss = not statistically significant



New research presented by the Population Council shows that programs that

educate girls, teach them about their rights and build skills for modern livelihoods can reduce the likelihood of child marriage by up to one-third in Bangladesh. Credit: Population Council

New research presented by the Population Council shows that programs that educate girls, teach them about their rights and build skills for modern livelihoods can reduce the likelihood of child marriage by up to one-third in Bangladesh. This is the first rigorously evaluated study to provide evidence on approaches to delay child marriage in a region where two out of three girls is married before the legal age of 18.

When girls are married early, they are more likely to drop out of school, be unemployed and experience violence and harassment. Even as adults, women who marry early are often at a disadvantage - they are more socially isolated, poorer and less educated. A delayed marriage greatly improves a girl's chances for a healthy and productive life. And the benefits of a later marriage go beyond the girl: her children, family, community and country experience better health, economic and social outcomes.

Population Council findings released today are from the "[Bangladeshi Association for Life Skills, Income, and Knowledge for Adolescents](#)" (BALIKA) project, a [randomized controlled trial](#) to evaluate whether three skills-building approaches to empower girls can effectively delay the age at marriage among girls aged 12-18 in parts of Bangladesh where [child marriage](#) rates are at their highest. The project is funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

The trial found that three approaches: 1.) providing education support, 2.) gender rights awareness, or 3.) livelihoods skills, were successful in reducing child marriage and producing better health, educational,

economic and social outcomes for girls.

More than 9,000 girls in 72 communities participated in the BALIKA project. Communities were assigned to one of three arms in which girls received either 1.) education support through tutoring in math and English; 2.) lifeskills training on gender rights and negotiation, critical thinking, and decision making; or 3.) livelihoods training in entrepreneurship, mobile phone servicing, photography and basic first aid. Another 24 communities served as the control arm of this study: no services were provided in those communities.

All girls participating in the BALIKA project met weekly with mentors and peers in safe, girl-only locations, called BALIKA centers, which helped girls develop friendships, receive training on new technologies, borrow books and acquire the skills they need to navigate the transition from girlhood to adulthood. Girls would use these skills within their communities, helping to build their confidence, demonstrate their achievements, and elevate their profiles.

"In Bangladesh, limited evidence exists on what works to delay child marriage," said Ann Blanc, vice president of the Population Council and director of the Poverty, Gender, and Youth Program. "These results are a major leap forward. For the first time, we have high-quality, very rigorous evidence demonstrating the significant impact of programs on delaying age at marriage. I am confident that they will build an important foundation to inform policies and shape the way programs are designed and implemented in the years to come."

Results:

Reduced Child Marriage

Results show that girls in BALIKA communities were nearly one-third

less likely to be married as children than girls living in communities not reached by the BALIKA project (0.69-0.77 relative odds adjusted for age, religion and family wealth status). And by the end of the study, girls who were not married at baseline, were one-fourth less likely to be married (0.76-0.78 relative odds adjusted for age, religion and family wealth status). Each intervention showed that it was possible to significantly delay child marriage:

- In BALIKA communities where girls received educational support, girls were 31% less likely to be married as children at endline than girls in the control communities.
- In communities where girls received lifeskills training on gender rights and negotiation, critical thinking, and decision making, girls were 31% less likely to be married as children at endline than girls in the control communities.
- In communities where girls received livelihoods training in entrepreneurship, mobile phone servicing, photography and basic first aid, girls were 23% less likely to be married as children at endline than girls in the control communities.

Improved Education and Well-Being

Compared to girls outside BALIKA communities, the study also found that girls participating in the project were:

- 18% more likely to be attending school.
- 20% more likely to have improved mathematical skills if they received education support and gender rights awareness training.
- One-third more likely to be earning an income if they received gender rights awareness or livelihoods skills training.

These results are from an intent-to-treat analysis, in which the impact of each intervention strategy on child marriage is measured among all girls

who live in the community, not just those girls who participated in the BALIKA program.

"Now we have not one, but three approaches that are proven to work," said Sajeda Amin, Population Council senior associate and lead researcher on this study. "The BALIKA results show that programs which build girls' skills and knowledge and elevate their visibility and status in their families and communities while keeping them safe can significantly reduce the average child marriage rate in the community. If we want to effectively reduce child marriage in Bangladesh, we must employ new approaches that empower girls, engage her family and her community so she is seen as an asset, not as a liability."

Recommendations:

Building on these results, the BALIKA project makes recommendations on the best approaches to delay child marriage in Bangladesh for policymakers, donors and program implementers, which include:

- Design programs based on context analysis: The drivers of child marriage vary greatly around the world. In Bangladesh, the dominance of arranged marriages, dowry, concerns about the reputation and safety of daughters, and a strong sense of duty among parents to marry their daughters drives decisions about early marriage.
- Reach girls at an early age and while they are in school: BALIKA was most successful in delaying marriage among girls who were under 16 years of age and who were in school.
- Provide girls with the skills they need to succeed: All girls received basic life skills training to help develop critical thinking and personal and interpersonal competencies needed to lead fuller, healthier lives.
- Create girl-centered platforms: Safe spaces were established for

girls to come together and forge a common identity helped improve self-confidence, health and well-being.

- Engage the community: When the community is engaged in conversations around girls' vulnerabilities and approaches to ensure their health and well-being, interventions are more successful.
- Use technology: Girls received access to digital learning material and training on new technologies - skills that help traverse the digital divide. These skills helped build confidence, elevate their profiles within the community and enable girls to communicate with the world around them.

The BALIKA project is continuing in many [communities](#) where it was first established. BALIKA centers are being run by the teachers, mentors and community leaders who participated in the project. These centers will help empower thousands more girls by continuing to offer skills, provide education support and build confidence so [girls](#) have a reason to look toward the future.

Provided by Population Council

Citation: New evidence shows what works to delay child marriage in Bangladesh (2016, March 23) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-03-evidence-child-marriage-bangladesh.html>

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