BALIKA*

EMPOWERING GIRLS TO DELAY CHILD MARRIAGE IN BANGLADESH

*BA-LEE-KA ("young girl" in Bengali)

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

The Bangladeshi Association for Life Skills, Income, and Knowledge for Adolescents (BALIKA) project provides important insights into what works to delay child marriage.

New evidence shows that programs that educate girls, build their skills for modern livelihoods and engage their communities can delay child marriage and produce better health, educational and social outcomes for girls.

Two out of three girls in Bangladesh are married before the legal age of 18. Most of them become mothers while they themselves are still children.

Early marriage forces girls into sexual relationships for which they are not physically or emotionally prepared. It can cause them to drop out of school and it limits their opportunities for community participation, including employment. 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, happy, 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.

Programs that elevate girls' visibility and status in their families and communities, and build their skills and knowledge, have been shown to delay child marriage in different parts of the world. However, in Bangladesh, where efforts to prevent early marriage have focused on the enforcement of laws and policies, little research exists on what approaches work best to delay child marriage and why.

To help fill this evidence gap, in 2012 the Population Council and partners embarked on a four-year study to understand whether skills-building approaches to empower girls can delay early marriage in Bangladesh communities where child marriage rates are highest.

BALIKA AT A GLANCE

- Randomized controlled trial to evaluate approaches to prevent child marriage and improve life opportunities for girls

- Reached: Approximately 9,000 girls aged 12–18 living in 72 communities

- Locations: Khulna, Satkhira, Narail, Bangladesh

- Duration: Nov. 2012–Feb. 2016

- Girl-centered approach: Used safe spaces within primary schools for girls to meet regularly

- Interventions: Girls received 44 hours of life-skills training plus 100 hours of either education, gender-rights awareness, and/or livelihoods training in weekly sessions over 18 months

- Donor: The Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands

Photographer: Lachmin, BALIKA participant from Naldi, Narail

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Kingdom of the Netherlands · PSTC · CIDIN · mPower · POPULATION COUNCIL · Ideas. Evidence. Impact.

ABOUT THE BALIKA PROJECT

BALIKA is a randomized controlled trial involving more than 9,000 girls aged 12–18 in 72 communities (located in primary schools) within three districts of Bangladesh to determine what works to delay child marriage. This is the first rigorously evaluated study to provide evidence on approaches to delay child marriage in Bangladesh.

Communities were assigned to receive one of three intervention strategies in the trial for 18 months.

- **EDUCATION:** Girls received tutoring in mathematics and English (in-school girls), and computing or financial training (out-of-school girls).

- **GENDER-RIGHTS AWARENESS TRAINING:** Girls received lifeskills training on gender rights and negotiation, critical thinking, and decision making.

- **LIVELIHOODS SKILLS TRAINING:** Girls received training in computers, entrepreneurship, mobile phone servicing, photography and basic first aid.

Another 24 communities served as the control group of the study: no services were provided in those communities. This group is necessary to determine whether girls receiving services had a benefit compared with girls who received no services.

To measure the impact of each intervention strategy in relation to the others and to the control group, a baseline survey was conducted before the project was implemented, and an endline survey was conducted after the project had been in place for 18 months.

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 used these skills within their communities, which helped build confidence, demonstrate their achievements, and elevate their profiles.

RESULTS

BALIKA results show that programs that educate girls, build their skills for modern livelihoods and engage their communities can reduce the likelihood of child marriage by one-third and produce better health, educational and social outcomes for girls.

Reduced child marriage

Girls living in BALIKA communities were nearly one-third less likely to be married as children (0.69–0.77 relative odds adjusted for age, religion, and family wealth status) than girls living in communities not reached by the BALIKA project.

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 repair, 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

In addition to delaying child marriage, BALIKA studied the impact of its three intervention approaches on a range of other indicators that affect education, health, and social outcomes later in life. All three interventions had similarly successful outcomes. Compared to girls outside BALIKA communities, the study 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.

BALIKA: Empowering girls and building assets

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

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EDUCATION	GENDER-RIGHTS AWARENESS	LIVELIHOODS SKILLS

FEWER GIRLS MARRIED AS CHILDREN

REDUCTION OF:

	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

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.

- **Differentiate by schooling status:** Girls who are in school are fundamentally different from girls who are not in school. The program was careful to differentiate the different needs and demands of girls and offered skills specific to age, schooling and marital status.

"I learned from BALIKA that I can say "no" to a marriage proposal. I learned that if a marriage proposal comes and I am too young to marry, I am able to express my opinion to convince my parents. If I couldn't convince them, then I would seek out someone in the family who would understand me or else I would consult with my friends."

— BALIKA participant from Pankhali, Dacope

"I have learned computer browsing. I liked the most that I got to learn about mobile phone servicing and operation, and now I will be able to fix by myself if my own or my neighbor's mobile malfunctions. I have also learned to use a computer tablet, a laptop, and a digital camera from the BALIKA center."

— BALIKA participant from Kalia, Narail

PARTNERS

BALIKA is a unique collaboration between communities in rural Bangladesh, international NGOs and the Dutch government.

- **The Population Council** (www.popcouncil.org) confronts critical health and development issues—from stopping the spread of HIV to improving reproductive health and ensuring that young people lead full and productive lives. Through biomedical, social science, and public health research in 50 countries, the Council works with partners to deliver solutions that lead to more effective policies, programs, and technologies that improve lives around the world. The Population Council conducts the world's largest body of research on programs to improve the lives of adolescent girls in the developing world.

- **Population Services and Training Center (PSTC)** (http://infosysbd.com/demo/pstc_final/index.php/our-projects) is a national nongovernmental and not-for-profit organization working for the improvement of life status of poor and socially disadvantaged people by undertaking various programs and projects for the last 34 years in Bangladesh at the grassroots level. PSTC has extensive experience in the areas of health service delivery, child, adolescent and youth development, governance and rights, and poverty reduction and livelihoods.

- **The Centre for International Development Issues Nijmegen (CIDIN)** (www.ru.nl/cidin/) is a Netherlands-based interdisciplinary academic research institute that focuses on inequality, poverty, development, and empowerment. It is embedded in the Faculty of Social Sciences of the Radboud University Nijmegen. In addition to teaching programs, the organization conducts research on a range of issues including migration, water management, gender and sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR). The PopDev programme on the impact of reproductive health services in sub-Saharan Africa and the "On Track with Gender" trajectory is a collaboration with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Dutch development NGOs. CIDIN has built up considerable expertise on impact evaluation, covering development interventions implemented by both governmental and nongovernmental actors.

- **mPower** (www.mpower-social.com) is a global social enterprise, headquartered in Bangladesh, harnessing the power of information and leveraging ICTs (mobile technologies in particular) to revolutionize the impact of development programs through optimal use of limited resources. With experience in creating technology supported data collection and decision support systems for development projects, mPower tracks progress, activities, and outcomes in real time.