Programme Summary
BALIKA, Bangladesh

Programme at a glance

The Bangladeshi Association for Life Skills, Income, and Knowledge for Adolescents (BALIKA) programme (2012-2016) aimed to generate evidence on what works to delay marriage among girls aged 12-18 in rural communities in Bangladesh. The programme implemented three separate interventions - educational support, gender-rights awareness training, and livelihood training – with the goal to empower girls and delay marriage in Bangladesh. A randomised controlled trial (RCT) found that girls in BALIKA communities were one-third less likely to be married than girls in non-BALIKA communities. Girls in BALIKA communities were also more likely to have improved education, health and well-being outcomes, and were more supportive of gender equality. **BALIKA demonstrates that child marriage can be reduced in a relatively short programme cycle of 18 months, even in areas where child marriage rates are at their highest.**

Background

Despite progress towards gender equality in Bangladesh over the past two decades, especially in the areas of health and education, child marriage remains pervasive. Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world,[1] with consequences for girls' sexual and reproductive health (SRH), access to education and employment, and well-being. Beyond putting girls at immediate risk of violence and abuse, global research shows that child marriage increases women's risk of experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) throughout their life compared to women who marry as adults.[2]

BALIKA was designed to generate evidence on how marriage can be delayed, and opportunities expanded for girls in rural Bangladesh. It was developed by the Population Council, Population Services and Training Center (PSTC), Centre for International Development Issues Nijmegen, and mPower – with PSTC as the implementing partner.

Since 2017, BALIKA is being scaled-up in partnership with UNFPA, UNICEF, and the Bangladesh Ministry of Women and Children Affairs in three new districts.

Programme context

Adolescent girls in Bangladesh face a high risk of child marriage: 22% of girls are married by age 15, and 59% by age 18.[3] Child marriage is driven by multiple challenges such as gender inequality, patriarchal norms and attitudes and poverty.[4] Girls who have not completed primary school, who live in the poorest households and in rural areas are at highest risk of child marriage.[5] Married adolescent girls experience high rates of IPV. In 2015, 38% of ever-married adolescent girls age 15-19 reported lifetime physical IPV and 22% reported lifetime sexual IPV.[6]

BALIKA was implemented in the three districts of Satkhira, Khulna and Narail in southwestern Bangladesh. Baseline data from the programme areas found that:

- In total, 19% of girls aged 12-19 were married. Rates of child marriage increased with age: 36% of girls aged 16-18 and 70% of 19-year olds were married.
- Girls' mobility became restricted once they married, and their time spent on domestic chores increased considerably.
- Girls who were not in school reported that the main reason for this was marriage.
- Among married adolescents aged 12-19, 50% had already had at least one child.
- About 50% of all girls agreed with statements that justified violence against women.
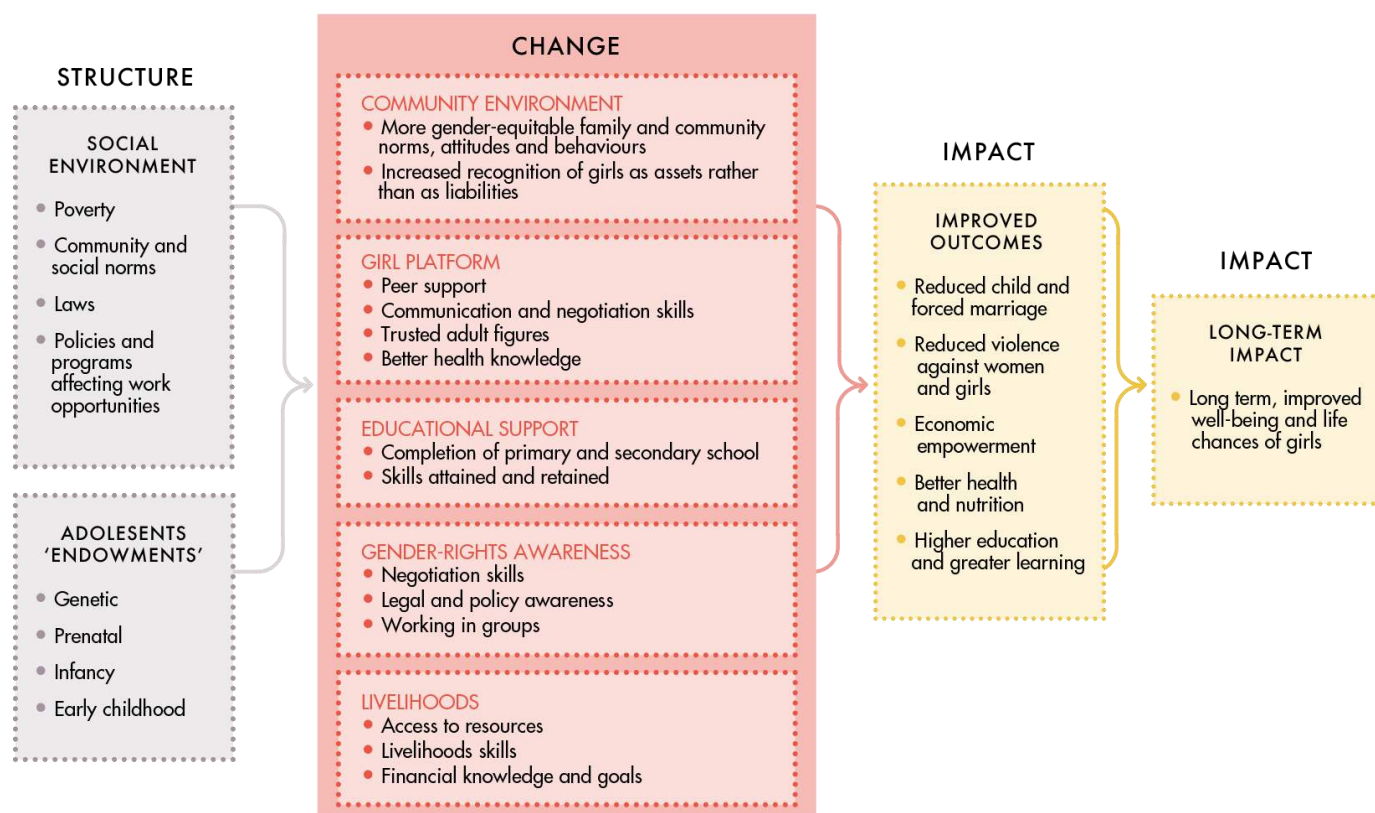
PROGRAMME SUMMARY

Programme description

BALIKA designed three distinct interventions, focused on different aspects of **skills-building** and **empowerment of girls**. All interventions were delivered through girl-only platforms, so called 'safe spaces'. The programme design included an RCT to examine the effectiveness and impact of the different interventions, with a control-arm of 24 communities that did not receive any intervention.

| **1** EDUCATION (24 CLUSTERS) | **2** GENDER-RIGHTS AWARENESS TRAINING (24 CLUSTERS) | **3** LIVELIHOODS SKILLS TRAINING (24 CLUSTERS) | CONTROL (24 CLUSTERS) |

ALL GROUPS RECEIVED:
Basic life-skills training
ICT support
Community-awareness training

The three interventions were implemented in 72 communities, reaching more than 9000 girls over a period of 18 months. All girls in the communities who were 12-18 years old, in- and out-of-school, unmarried and married, were invited to participate in BALIKA. 32% of the girls in the implementation communities enrolled in the programme.

Theory of Change

BALIKA's theory of change (ToC) was developed based on baseline findings and an extensive literature review of efforts to reduce child marriage globally and in Bangladesh. The ToC recognises the significant role of social norms, economic drivers, and the institutional context that influences child marriage. The ToC illustrates the envisaged change process which puts emphasis on **community engagement, girls-centred approaches,** and **building girls' knowledge and skills**.

STRUCTURE

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT
- Poverty
- Community and social norms
- Laws
- Policies and programs affecting work opportunities

ADOLESENTS 'ENDOWMENTS'
- Genetic
- Prenatal
- Infancy
- Early childhood

CHANGE

COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENT
- More gender-equitable family and community norms, attitudes and behaviours
- Increased recognition of girls as assets rather than as liabilities

GIRL PLATFORM
- Peer support
- Communication and negotiation skills
- Trusted adult figures
- Better health knowledge

EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT
- Completion of primary and secondary school
- Skills attained and retained

GENDER-RIGHTS AWARENESS
- Negotiation skills
- Legal and policy awareness
- Working in groups

LIVELIHOODS
- Access to resources
- Livelihoods skills
- Financial knowledge and goals

IMPACT

IMPROVED OUTCOMES
- Reduced child and forced marriage
- Reduced violence against women and girls
- Economic empowerment
- Better health and nutrition
- Higher education and greater learning

IMPACT

LONG-TERM IMPACT
- Long term, improved well-being and life chances of girls

Adolescent 'endowments' refers to characteristics that are acquired prior to reaching adolescence such as genetically inherited traits, or traits acquired in the utero or during infancy (through nutrition, care, nurturing during infancy and childhood) and through early life experiences.

PROGRAMME SUMMARY

Core components

The **education**, **gender** and **livelihoods interventions** focused on building different skills for girls. However, they followed the same delivery approach and preparatory stages.

Training of local mentors: All activities were run by locally recruited, female mentors. The mentors were aged 22-28, had a college education, and were unmarried. All mentors attended a four-day training that focused on their role as mentors, facilitation skills, basic life skills and usage of technology. Depending on which intervention they would lead, some mentors also attended a three-day training on gender issues and or/ livelihoods training. A **refresher training** was conducted one year into the programme. Ongoing support was provided in the form of "mock demonstration sessions", where 7-8 mentors in neighbouring sub-districts and their supervisor met weekly to practice facilitating the upcoming week's session.

Establishing BALIKA centres: The interventions were delivered through girl-only safe spaces, called 'BALIKA centres'. These were established in primary schools in participating communities. One teacher assisted the mentors to run activities after school hours. Beyond providing a conducive environment for skills-building activities, the BALIKA centres provided a platform for girls to form friendships, use technology, and borrow books from a small library that was established in each centre. The BALIKA centres were equipped with laptops, tablets, a modem and speakers. These were used by mentors to deliver the various curricula, as well as to build girls' skills in using technology.

Community mobilisation: Community activities were conducted with community members, local leaders and government representatives, parents, and teachers. These aimed to raise awareness on the risks of child marriage and the importance of girls' education, and generate support towards the intervention. It also aimed to build sustainability of the intervention by working with communities to explore whether and how they could use locally generated resources or funds to continue the BALIKA centre activities in the longer term.

In the early stages of BALIKA, **courtyard meetings** were conducted with parents and guardians of adolescent girls to learn about the programme objectives and build support towards the intervention.

About 20 parents attended each session, which was led by mentors and project managers. The meetings encouraged community discussions around child marriage. The community mobilisation included the establishment of **local support groups** consisting of 13 community members (e.g. community and religious leaders, elected leaders, parents, matchmakers and marriage registrars) as well as adolescent girls. The group met bimonthly to review the activities and discuss how they could support the programme.

Other community-level activities included **local events** such as cultural activities and rallies organised by mentors and girls, and **advocacy meetings** to gather the communities to discuss issues related to child marriage and the responsibilities of individuals as well as local representatives and government officials in preventing child marriage.
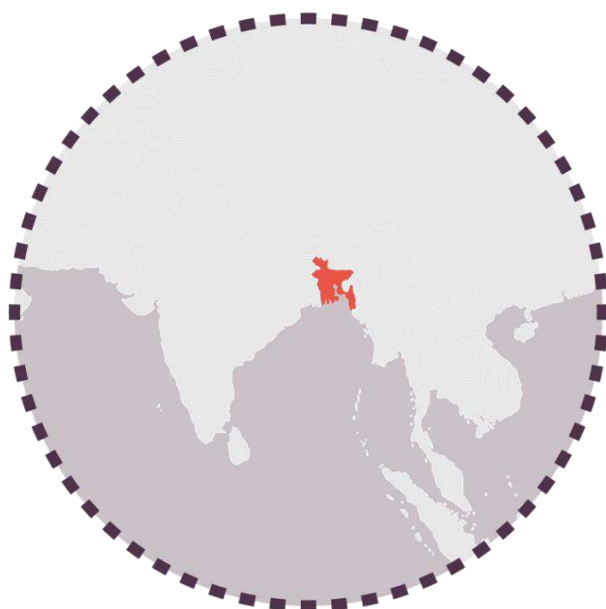
PROGRAMME SUMMARY

THE THREE INTERVENTIONS

Each intervention entailed weekly sessions where girls met with their peers and mentor in the local BALIKA centre. All interventions provided 44 hours of life skills training and 100 hours of either education support, gender awareness training, or livelihoods training – all delivered over 18 months.

1. Educational support: This intervention provided educational support through tutoring in Maths and English (for in-school girls) and conversational English and financial skills training (for out-of-school girls). This aimed to increase girls' attainment in school, as girls who do not perform well in school are at higher risk of drop-out and early marriage. The sessions were provided after regular school hours by a schoolteacher, supported by the mentor. The sessions used interactive video tutorials and digital learning materials, test examinations and online games. The financial skills curriculum focused on building practical skills such as budgeting and planning.
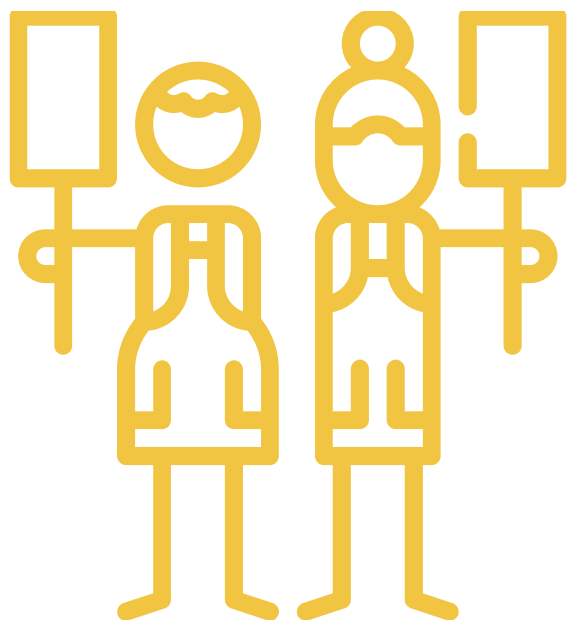
2. Gender-rights awareness training: This intervention provided life skills training focusing on girls' rights, SRH, gender-based-violence, and building girls' skills in negotiation, critical thinking, and communication. The sessions followed a curriculum based on Population Council's "It's All One Curriculum: Guidelines and Activities for a Unified Approach to Sexuality, Gender, HIV and Human Rights", which was adapted to the local context and translated into Bangla. The adapted curriculum entailed a stronger focus on issues related to child marriage, such as the practice of dowry.

The curriculum contains a set of 54 engaging activities that allow girls to explore concepts such as gender, rights, diversity and tolerance, and promote critical thinking by discussing gender roles, family power dynamics, and the gendered division of labour.

The sessions use videos, animations, and digital books to illustrate examples of what is being discussed. The curriculum links skills to various challenges commonly faced by girls, such as how communication skills can be used to navigate discussions about marriage and dowry with parents.

3. The livelihood training: This intervention focused on building girls' skills in entrepreneurship (15 hours), using computers (25 hours), mobile phone servicing (13 hours), photography (30 hours) and basic first aid (17 hours). Girls were also exposed to different income-generating activities and sectors, focusing on local employment opportunities and non-traditional occupations for females. This intervention aimed to equip girls with practical skills useful for a variety of work opportunities and careers, as well as change their perceptions about which jobs and careers girls can pursue.

P R O G R A M M E   S U M M A R Y

Monitoring and evaluation

BALIKA programme supervisors used mobile phones to monitor activities and record progress, and participants were given ID-cards that were scanned to register attendance of individual girls. The programme supervisors regularly visited the BALIKA communities to ensure the functionality of the technology as well as to monitor mentors' performance.

An RCT was used to evaluate the impact of the three interventions compared to a control arm. Quantitative data was collected from 11,609 adolescent girls at baseline, who were contacted again when the interventions had ended. 9,982 girls were successfully reached at endline. A community assessment was conducted in each community to capture changes that may have affected adolescent girls or presented challenges to implementation. In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with 24 girls who were unmarried at baseline and 18 focus group discussions carried out. At endline, the girls were interviewed again to explore changes in their life since the start of the programme.

Key findings from the RCT include:

- **Girls living in BALIKA communities were one-third less likely to be married** as children compared to girls in control communities (measured among all girls in the community).

- Significantly more girls agreed that girls can say no to arranged marriage at endline than baseline. Findings suggest that girls became more confident to voice their opinion regarding timing and choice of partner for marriage. Girls were also more likely to reject violence against women.

- Girls in the gender awareness intervention reported a statistically significant reduction of harassment/ violence in public and in school at endline. The other interventions did not see any reductions in violence. The pathway between the gender awareness intervention and reductions in harassment/ violence was not clear.

- BALIKA had a positive impact on several secondary outcomes, including on school enrolment (19-22% increase), and girls in the livelihoods and gender awareness interventions were one-third more likely than girls in control communities to be earning money.

Lessons for programming

The BALIKA programme provides important insights into how child marriage can be delayed by empowering girls through a safe-space, skills-building approach – providing learnings for programmes that seek to prevent child marriage and expand adolescent girls' opportunities in life.

- **Design programmes based on deep contextual understanding:** BALIKA was designed to address drivers of child marriage in Bangladesh, which include poverty and concerns about girls' reputation and safety. As drivers of child marriage vary across contexts, programmes need to be based on a contextual analysis.

- **Centring the programme around a girls-centred activity:** BALIKA recognised that changing community perceptions about girls would be a key driver for change, however, that raising community awareness is not sufficient on its own. Therefore, BALIKA was designed with the skills-building component for girls at the centre of the programme. The use of technology and girls' acquisition of technology skills attracted great interest from the community, which is believed to have contributed towards changing community perceptions of what girls can do – elevating girls' status.

- **Importance of strong local presence:** BALIKA was implemented by a national NGO with extensive experience working with adolescents, and deep understanding of the context. The evaluation highlights that PSTC's expertise in community-based programming, and strong presence in the communities where BALIKA was implemented, were key to the success.

PROGRAMME SUMMARY

- **Recruiting local mentors and providing ongoing support:** Recruiting mentors from the local area ensured deep contextual awareness and built trust with the communities. Mentors received extensive training before starting to deliver sessions. The training and the practical mock-sessions allowed the mentors to practice real-work scenarios, and were seen to greatly improve the mentors' facilitation skills. Weekly mentor meetings also provided a space for mentors to provide valuable peer-support.

- **Use of technology:** BALIKA's introduction of technology generated great interest and helped girls maintain their motivation to attend sessions. Girls gained important skills in using technology, and the fact that girls became the leaders in using the technology was seen as innovative in their communities and helped to improve their status.

- **Tailor activities to diverse groups of girls:** BALIKA held separate sessions for girls who were in-and out-of-school. The evaluation found that BALIKA was most effective in delaying marriage among school-going girls below age 16. They had a higher average attendance of sessions (across all interventions) than out-of-school girls, many of whom were married, from poorer households, and some were mothers. They were often more restricted in their mobility and many would bring infants with them. BALIKA tried to accommodate these needs by moving the sessions closer to the homes of these girls. However, how to effectively reach out-of-school girls remains an area for further exploration.

- **Contributing to sustainable and locally owned change:** BALIKA did not provide any monetary incentives although other programmes in Bangladesh have effectively used incentives to prevent child marriage. BALIKA aimed to build sustainability and local ownership – changing how girls are valued because of their rights and skills, rather than because of monetary incentives.

- **How to engage families must be better understood:** BALIKA demonstrates the potential of empowering girls through skills-building to delay marriage. However, given the significant role family members play in deciding about girls' marriages, more evidence is needed around how this approach influenced families' thinking and reasoning around child marriage.

Source documents

From Evidence to Action: Results from the 2013 Baseline Survey for the BALIKA Project, Amin, S., Ainul., S., Akter, F., Alam, M. M., Hossain, MD. I., Ahmed, J. and Rob, U., Population Council, 2014

Delaying Child Marriage through Community-based Skills-development Programmes for Girls: Results from a Randomized Controlled Study in Rural Bangladesh, Amin, S., Ahmed, J., Saha, J., Hossain, MD. I. and Haque, E. F. Population Council, 2016

Skills-building Programs to Reduce Child Marriage in Bangladesh: A Randomised Controlled Trial, Amin, S., Saha, J. S. and Ahmed, J. A., *Journal of Adolescent Health 63,* 2018

BALIKA: Empowering Girls to Delay Child Marriage in Bangladesh, Endline Results Brief, Population Council, 2016

Making the Most of Mentors: Recruitment, Training, and Support of Mentors for Adolescent Girl Programming, Population Council, 2019

Links to further resources

For an overview of BALIKA, see Population Council's website which contains links to academic articles, research publications, factsheets, and news about BALIKA.

Endnotes

[1] Girls not Brides (2020) Bangladesh
[2] Girls not Brides (2020) Violence against Girls, also see: Kidman, R. (2016) Child Marriage and Intimate Partner Violence: A Comparative Study of 34 Countries, *International Journal of Epidemiology, 2017, 46 (2)*
[3] Girls not Brides (2020) Bangladesh
[4] Ibid.
[5] National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT), and CF (2019) Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2017-18: Key Indicators
[6] Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2015) Violence against Women (VAW) Survey 2015

This document is part of the RESPECT Framework Implementation Guide*, commissioned by UN Women and developed by Social Development Direct, which can be found here.*

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