



TIPPING POINT - BANGLADESH

PHASE 1 EVALUATION FINDINGS



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PHASE 1 OF CARE'S TIPPING POINT PROJECT addressed child marriage through a dynamic process of innovation, insight, and influence in 90 communities of Sunamganj, Bangladesh, in partnership with Action for Social Development (ASD) and Jaintia Shinnomul Songstha (JASHIS). In this first phase, the project promoted girls' rights and choices around marriage through focused engagement with collectives of girls, boys, and parents, who received skills trainings and conducted advocacy events to promote gender-equitable social norms. The project also engaged allies and potential champions for girls' rights, including government and civil society, to help drive social change and direct more resources towards girls' empowerment in project communities.



At the conclusion of Phase 1, an external evaluation team visited a sample of project sites to conduct data collection with girls, boys, parents, and community members. Based on the evaluators' findings, Tipping Point's iterative and adaptive strategies have proven to be effective in supporting social norms that promote gender equity. Among the results:

Girls gained psychosocial skills, knowledge of their rights, social capital, and increased confidence. Safe spaces established by the project brought adolescent girls together, and life skills education raised their awareness of their rights and their abilities to effectively advocate for themselves. The evaluation found that girls had a thorough understanding of how gendered social norms affected their lives and were speaking up to defend themselves against harassment and express their opinions. Through activities like football and drama troupes, girls discovered their power to win new, although limited, freedoms to be active and visible in public despite some negative reactions in the communities. Girls still lacked agency in many areas of their lives, but there was significant evidence of girls reaching out to adult allies in the community for support negotiating with parents to stay in school, delay marriage, participate in project activities, or address safety concerns. The dreams and aspirations of girls became more focused on meaningful careers and equitable relationships in a future marriage. With new knowledge in menstrual management, nutrition, and livelihoods, adolescent girls in project groups were well respected, and many of them were successful advocating for resources and support from local government authorities.

Girls' mobility and visibility increased significantly. Through project activities, girls spent more time outside their homes and gained greater freedom of movement. Platforms created by girls' football and project community events raised the profile of girls in their villages, and beyond, as teams traveled to compete, drama groups toured, and the project facilitated participation in outside conventions and trainings. Girls' greater visibility faced some backlash from community members and religious figures, but adolescents grew more resilient and determined in the face of such sanctions. The possibility of relationships with boys and elopements continued to animate parents' fears of losing family honor; at the same time, it became socially acceptable for girls and boys to mingle in the project's meeting spaces.

Parent-adolescent relationships improved, and parents were less concerned with family honor. Tipping Point fostered better communication between parents and children through dialogues and special events. Parents reported enjoying their adolescent children more, and girls spoke of greater trust and openness in their relationships. Perhaps because parents, mothers especially, became better listeners and valued girls' voices more, parents who had daughters participating in Tipping Point were less concerned with family honor, which is closely linked to girls' behavior, than other parents in the communities. These mothers also seemed to play a more balanced role in decision making with fathers about daughters' lives, and parents of girls who joined Tipping Point groups displayed some non-normative behavior, such as better chore-sharing between men and women in the home.

Key norms loosened for some groups. Dowry was considered less acceptable among individuals who had been exposed to Tipping Point's messages, and it became a point of pride for girls in project groups to speak out against dowry. The education of girls, following a trend that pre-existed the project, became more normal, and there was less concern about girls being overly educated. Some respondents even said that the idea of a "good" girl had transformed to include that girls advocate for themselves and share their knowledge. Boys who joined Tipping Point groups began challenging norms of male dominance in the home and were more likely to take on household work normally done by their sisters or



mothers. They also showed some change in their hopes for marriage and stressed equitable decision making between spouses.

Strong allies for girls emerged in project villages. By the end of Phase 1, girls came to know that they could rely on members of Ending Violence Against Women (EVAW) Forums, local volunteer groups that met regularly with adolescent cohorts. EVAW Forums advocated for girls both collectively with local government, services, and religious leaders, and individually, intervening with a girl's family, school, or perpetrators of harassment to solve barriers to staying in school, delay or cancel a planned marriage, or guard girls' bodily autonomy. Several allies for girls also emerged from among religious clerics who authorize marriages and government officials managing budgets or overseeing schools, although support from these groups was less consistent.

Project staff transformed their assumptions about men, women, work, and how to lead change. Because local staff were the faces of Tipping Point, the ones who sparked change, the project prioritized fostering their own internal conscientization on gender and other topics. Through workshops and personal reflections, staff became aware of the role of gender in shaping their lives and discovered new capabilities in leading personal and social change. The topics of sexuality and bodily autonomy were especially valued by staff, most of whom had never talked about such things before. Because community members witnessed the personal growth of project staff and their fortitude in withstanding criticism from villagers for their work, staff came to be seen as role models.

In just a few years, Tipping Point made significant progress in mobilizing advocates for girls' rights and in shifting social norms related to child marriage in Bangladesh. It was difficult to measure the impact of Tipping Point on the practice of child marriage itself, but there were many stories of marriages averted through the intervention of parents, boys, and girls involved with the project or in conjunction with EVAW Forums.

The successes of Tipping Point to date have not overcome the many barriers girls continue to face in realizing their potential and achieving agency in key life decisions. But they are successes that hold promise for the approach the project takes to social norm change and girls' empowerment because they demonstrate that activities that rupture traditional social norms in safe, public environments are effective in shifting attitudes and giving people permission to think and behave differently. In addition, the project piloted new ways of operationalizing social norm change work, with programming according to a set of principles that include focusing on positive messages about girls rather than the negative outcomes of child marriage.¹ Tipping Point also deployed innovative measures of social norms and normative change that can inform academic and program design thinking, such as the SNAP tool.

A key challenge for Tipping Point in its second phase will be to engage a broader range of community members and to engage parents and boys more intensively in collective action activities. Fathers and boys were more difficult to mobilize and need creative approaches to their participation. The strength of girls' groups can be expanded with networking activities between villages. Legal and quasi-legal structures such as arbitration bodies present platforms of intervention in individual girls' cases, and involvement with them seems a logical extension of the role that EVAW Forums have played to date. Additionally, religious leaders have great influence in project sites and should not be assumed to be homogeneous opponents of change.

¹ See the Social Norms Programming Principles in the Innovation Briefs at <https://caretippingpoint.org/innovation/>.



PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GIRLS' EMPOWERMENT AND SOCIAL NORMS PROGRAMMING

BUILD GIRLS' SKILLS IN NEGOTIATING ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUAL ACTIVITY

It is expected that there would be community resistance to adding more explicit content to skill sessions with adolescent girls' groups. As an alternative, look for creative ways to incorporate transferable skills that could be applied to romantic or sexual relationships, such as consent, refusal, decision-making, and safety planning. Parents may also be more willing to allow comprehensive sexuality education if they are exposed to it themselves.

INVOLVE MORE GIRLS IN FUN CENTER ACTIVITIES

If capacity is an issue, consider adding circles of membership, so that additional adolescents can participate at some level. For example, a wider group could join in planning and organizing community events, or core members could facilitate peer groups.

FIND CREATIVE WAYS TO ENGAGE FATHERS AND MEN

Build on activities that men found interesting and that built their relationships with their daughters. Consider giving more fathers specific roles at Fun Centers, even minor roles, so that they feel their participation is important.

ADDRESS SOCIAL MEDIA SKILLS AND MOBILE PHONE TECHNOLOGY

As users of internet technology, youth need skills in recognizing unfamiliar threats and knowing how to protect themselves online. If boys are the primary users in project areas, they should be aware that their behavior online can have impacts on others in the real world.

EXPAND FINANCIAL LITERACY AND LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

Girls who earn income and contribute to their families may be more successful at delaying marriage. Tipping Point connected many girls to livelihood skills trainings and may consider building adolescents' skills in financial literacy, savings, and banking more directly.

INTENSIFY COMMUNITY DIALOGUE EVENTS

Events like the community talk show, drama performances, and cooking competitions drew in large crowds. More frequent activities like these will expand the project's reach and deepen the impact on observers, especially when dialogues are well facilitated. The project may wish to tailor events to certain audiences, such as fathers or elders.

BUILD GIRLS' NETWORKS OUTSIDE THEIR VILLAGES

The football tournament gave girls exposure to other villages and other peers. Work with family members and community leaders to create safe, acceptable reasons for girls to travel and socialize with each other, so that their social networks and sense of solidarity grow.

MAKE INROADS IN FORMAL PROCESSES OF ARBITRATION

Seek collaboration with the officials and religious authorities that conduct arbitration. EAW Forum members would be well placed to liaise with them to create a role in arbitration processes for a girl's advocate.

REVISIT THE INVOLVEMENT OF MARRIED ADOLESCENTS

Because they face the greatest restrictions, adolescent girls who have already married are likely to miss out on activities that are not designed and targeted expressly to them. Their particular points of view, needs, and wishes are not well represented in the evaluation data and therefore it is difficult to understand the



project's relationship to them as a group. Tipping Point could support married girls more in continuing their education, negotiating within their households, and by working with husbands and in-laws to promote married girls' rights.

FIND RELIGIOUS LEADERS OPEN TO SUPPORTING GIRLS' RIGHTS

Religious leaders can be challenging to work with, yet they make impactful allies in socially conservative communities. Find the leaders that have at least some stances in common with the project and build on those relationships. If there are progressive Muslim or Hindu organizations active in Bangladesh, consider ways to link local leaders to them.

FOLLOW GIRLS' INTERESTS

Ask girls to identify what activity they would like to start doing and be ready to support it in the same way that the project and its allies supported girls' football. For example, some girls expressed interest in music and singing, although they are frowned on for girls. The project could lend its credibility to new activities to expand what is seen as acceptable behavior for girls.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

CLARIFY 'SPECIAL CIRCUMSTANCES' FOR MARRIAGE UNDER 18 TO ENSURE GIRLS' CHOICES ARE RESPECTED

The provision of the Child Marriage Restraint Act (2017) allowing a girl or boy to get married before 18 under “special circumstances” has the potential to be abused and to undermine ongoing efforts to address child marriage. The government should put in place administrative rules or measures that clarify the circumstances under which the exemption applies, as well as develop clear procedural/legal measures to uphold girls’ choice and consent in marriage decisions.

ENSURE GIRLS' RIGHTS ARE PROTECTED IN COMMUNITY ARBITRATION PROCESSES

The evaluation found that families often turn to legal or quasi-legal arbitration processes to address potentially shameful situations involving girls, including rape, domestic violence, consensual extramarital relationships, and marriage dissolution. To ensure good outcomes for girls, the government should mandate safeguards within arbitration processes aimed at protecting girls' rights and autonomy within these processes.

INVEST IN FORMAL EDUCATION AND SKILLS TRAINING FOR GIRLS AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES TO EXPAND CHOICES AND CREATE ALTERNATIVES TO CHILD MARRIAGE

The government should expand and promote girls' access to both formal and non-formal education, training and livelihood opportunities. Girls who earn income and contribute to their families may be more successful at delaying marriage. Skills training strategies should include diverse ways to connect young people from remote and marginalized communities to vocational, livelihoods, and employment opportunities and markets and supporting infrastructure and access to services and programs that can transform the geographic isolation of communities.

IMPROVE SERVICES FOR MARRIED GIRLS

The government should target already married adolescent girls with increased access and opportunities for education, health services, livelihood opportunities, and financial resources. Married adolescent girls are among the most vulnerable members of society, and dedicated efforts to reach them are necessary to guarantee their rights are fulfilled.

IMPROVE ACCESS TO SERVICES THROUGH INFRASTRUCTURE SOLUTIONS

The government should invest in infrastructure that improves mobility and access for adolescents, especially girls, in isolated communities. Communities in the haor region are subject to cyclical flooding that exacerbates their geographical isolation and disrupts girls' educations. Government-supported solutions to infrastructure limitations will enable greater access of girls and their families to essential services.

INTEGRATE AND SCALE UP STRATEGIES TO CHANGE DISCRIMINATORY NORMS AS PART OF GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS

The findings of the evaluation show the promise of approaches aimed at shifting discriminatory norms and expanding community perceptions of the potential roles and contributions of girls to their communities beyond household duties. Civil society organizations need support to scale up community-based efforts to shift norms through the promising approaches and strategies highlighted by the evaluation. This includes engagement of religious leaders and other influential stakeholders.



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