



Phase 2 | Baseline Brief

UNDERSTANDING THE ROOT CAUSES OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN BANGLADESH:

Baseline Findings from the Bangladesh Tipping Point Evaluation¹

Introduction

Prevention of child marriage (CM) has been a global agenda and one of the major Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Despite recognition of numerous adverse consequences of CM on girls' and their subsequent generations' development, health and well-being, worldwide an estimated 14 million girls aged under 18 are married every year with little or no say in the matter. Bangladesh contributes largely to this pool of CM. About 59% of married women aged 20–24 years report being married before the age of 18 in Bangladesh. Rapid changes in the socioeconomic fabric of Bangladesh over the last several decades have had little impact on reduction of CM. Thus, over two decades from 1993–4 to 2017, the median age at first marriage in this country has risen from 14.1 to 16.0 only. Although the need to change pro-CM social norms is widely recognized, lack of understanding of social norms and how to change them effectively impedes development of effective and sustainable CM prevention programs. It is against this background that CARE has developed Tipping Point (TP), an integrated social norms intervention to address CM, which icddr is evaluating using a cluster randomized controlled trial (CRCT). This factsheet presents the main findings from the TP baseline study conducted between February and March, 2019 in Pirgacha upazila under Rangpur district of Bangladesh.

The Tipping Point Initiative

Tipping Point focuses on addressing the root causes of child, early and forced marriage (CEFM), by promoting the rights of adolescent girls through community level programming and evidence generation. Tipping Point's approach uses synchronized engagement with different participant groups (e.g. girls, boys, parents, community leaders), around key programmatic topics, and creates public spaces for all community members to be part of the dialogue. Tipping Point's approach is rooted in challenging social expectations and repressive norms, and promoting girl-driven movement building and activism. These components are designed to help adolescent girls find and collectively step into spaces to reflect on and tackle inequality. Phase 1 (2013–2017) of this three-phase initiative used participatory feminist and developmental evaluation approaches to engage in research, which informed social norms perpetuating child marriage.

Study design and methods

The study employs a 3-arm CRCT design with a qualitative component. The arms include - i) Arm 1: Full TP intervention including emphasized social norms change; ii) Arm 2: Light TP intervention without emphasized social norms change; and iii) Arm 3: Control.

The study covers 51 villages (clusters or primary sampling units), in *Pirgacha upazila* (sub-district) from Rangpur district, known for one of the highest rates of CM in Bangladesh. The villages were selected through a two-stage approach: 1) identification of clusters, and 2) randomization to study arms. First, a village was selected at random from the list of all villages within *Pirgacha upazila*. All villages sharing borders with the first selected village were considered as 'buffers' for preventing contamination. For selecting the next village we started from the north-western point of the first village and moved anti-clock wise. We selected the second village avoiding: 1) the buffer villages; 2) villages having less than 150 households; and 3) flood prone villages and villages on *char* land (i.e., river island). Small villages were not included for ensuring that the cluster has enough number of adolescent girls and boys required for forming TP intervention groups and the flood affected and *char* areas were excluded for avoiding difficulties in program implementation. This procedure was repeated until the required number of clusters (51) was achieved. Second, each selected village was randomly assigned to one of the three study arms – full TP, light TP and control, constituting 17 clusters per arm. Eligibility was established through household enumeration in each study village during January – February, 2019. For the quantitative survey, required number of girls and community males and females were then randomly drawn.

Twenty-five unmarried adolescent girls aged 12–<16yrs were randomly selected from each cluster for the Girl Survey making the sample 1,275. Six adult men and 6 adult women aged ≥25yrs were similarly selected for the Community Survey making the total community sample 540. Qualitative data were collected in two purposively selected villages from each intervention arm using In-depth Interviews (IDIs) with 20 girls and 10 boys; four Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) each with adolescent girls and boys, and adult females and males; and, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with four adult men and four adult women.

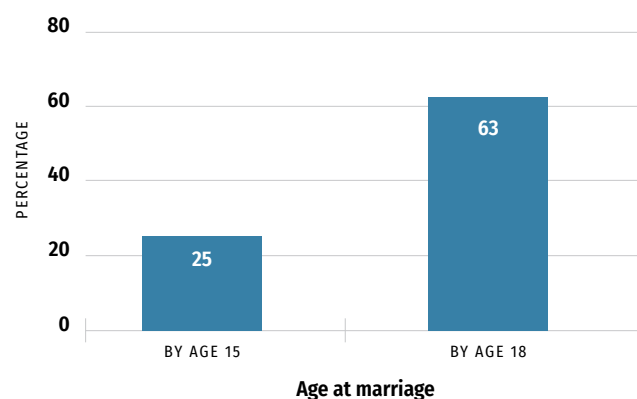
Results and Discussion

Rates of child marriage

Extremely high rates of CM were reported by women aged 20 to 24 in the study sites (63%). Moreover, 25% of them were married before reaching 15 years (Figure 1)

FIGURE 1.

Percentage of females aged 20–24 yrs. first married by exact age, N=5,430

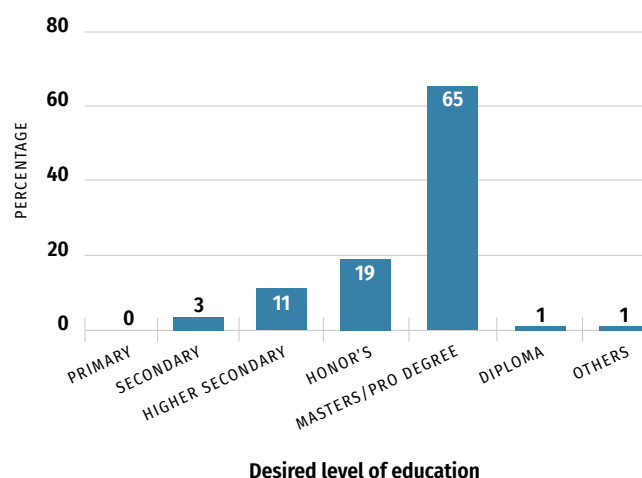


Girls' aspirations regarding timing of marriage is at odds with the reality

Although the rate of child marriage is high, almost no girls in the study sites wished to marry before 18. Majority (between 41% and 44%) of the girls wished to marry between 18 and 24. The girls reported high aspiration for education with 86% aspiring to study beyond Grade 12 (Figure 2), which is consistent with aspired age at marriage.

FIGURE 2.

Aspiration of adolescent girls aged 12. <16 for education, N=1,275



Our baseline findings indicate that a number of attitudes and social norms facilitate perpetuation of CM even though majority of girls choose education over marriage.

Attitudes regarding gender roles, control of adolescent girls by family members and justification of girl beating

A higher proportion of girls had highly inequitable gender attitudes (39-47%) than low gender-inequitable attitudes (25%). Majority of the girls (65-69%) accepted control by family regarding mobility, dress code and who she can talk to. Acceptance and support of girl-beating was also quite high among girls although it was lower than the rate among community men. Such attitudes favored submission to the decisions made by parents, including arranged CM.

Social norm around participation of a girl in decision making regarding own marriage

The data indicate the girls rarely negotiate marriage timing with their family as the community members consider a girl doing so as 'shameless' and 'impudent' and criticize them. Such negotiation is also likely to elicit negative reactions from the family (e.g., anger and rebuke). The informants suggested if a girl is still vocal about the timing of her marriage, her opinion is usually disregarded by the family. Otherwise, the family is criticized by the villagers. According to the data, marriage timing negotiation by a girl is commonly interpreted by the family and villagers as an indication of her romantic involvement. This gives rise to gossip, the girl is labeled as 'bad', and her marriage gets sped up. As the informants reported, some girls who actually have a relationship or those who are desperate to delay marriage in the interest of higher studies may try to negotiate marriage timing despite this non-conducive environment. In the first case, the outcomes of such negotiations depend on whether the boyfriend is approved by the family. In the latter case, a positive outcome depends on whether the parents are also invested in daughter's education and believe in her potential to successfully pursue higher education instead of getting involved in a romantic relationship.

Social norm restricting adolescent girls' mobility and sexuality

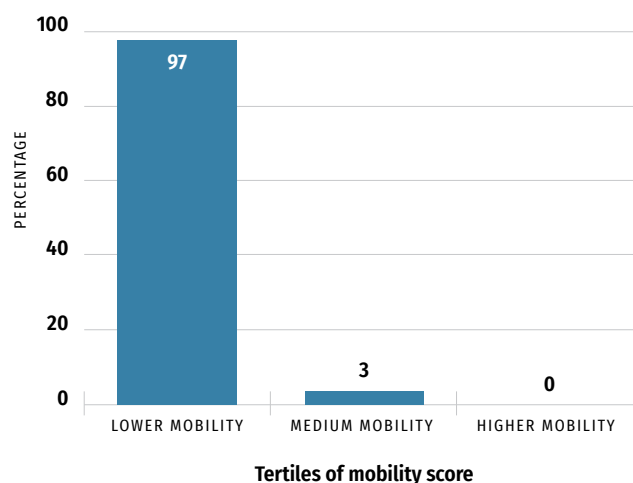
Formative research conducted in the previous Phase of TP intervention in Bangladesh identified certain norms which controlled girls' mobility and sexuality to maintain family honor and reputation. Girls' resistance or deviance to these norms often lead to the family and/or reacting by pushing a girl into child marriage. Current findings on these factors perpetuating child marriage are presented below:

i) Social norm around mobility of girls

A high proportion of the girls (70%) reported that they can visit friends or relatives in another village or town. However, about 73% of the girls who could visit a friend or relative, required permission during the last visit and 83% of them were accompanied by an adult. Three in five girls can visit the market with permission and with an adult chaperon. In terms of visiting a health facility/provider or fair/park, three in five girls reported that although they were able to visit those places, majority of them required permission during the last visit and were accompanied by an adult. Overall, 97% of the girls had low agency in relation to mobility and none had high agency (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3.

Mobility of adolescent girls N=1,275



Mobility for the purposes of education is a dramatic exception to otherwise strict control on girls' movements. Girls are allowed to attend school and/or coaching in group or alone, inside or outside the village. Returning from coaching classes in the evening with a chaperon is largely accepted now. While a girl going to the village shop or market alone was something unheard of previously, the majority of informants reported it is now accepted to allow the girls to obtain school supplies from small shops in the village. The girls' options to attend public gatherings have also widened. Approximately 61% of the girls attend such gatherings with a chaperon. There are still many areas for improvement. For instance, mobility without any concrete purpose or for pleasure without a chaperon is still strictly denied to a girl.

ii) Social norm around bicycle riding and playing by girls

Engagement in sports and riding bi-cycle boosts self-confidence, which is essential for mobilizing girls, building collectives and movement. Unfortunately, most adolescent girls do not ride a bicycle and do not play games that are considered appropriate only for boys (e.g., football and cricket) as most of the villagers do not endorse these. Sanctions against these activities of the girls include gossip, criticism, etc. These sanctions are imposed mostly by the elders, family members, and adolescent boys. Riding bicycle by a girl is a relatively new phenomenon in Bangladesh. Social norm against adolescent girls riding bi-cycle has been relaxed in some villages. A main reason for such relaxation is to allow the girls to access secondary school located in another village. The girls riding bi-cycle clearly demonstrate the benefits of time saving, which holds the potential to mobilize other parents to adopt such new behavior.

While the current norm is against allowing 14-16 year old girls or girls who had menarche to play, they are sometimes allowed to play for a short time in the yard or in the school playground. They are essentially forbidden to play in an open place. As reported the government's education policy allows female students up to Grade 6 (ages 12-13) to play. Some fathers expressed their readiness to accept engagement of adolescent girls aged 14-16 in games usually played by boys inside the school compound if the government makes it mandatory.

"If they allow women-folk to play in the field, how can that be? If you let them, men will see."

—FGD-Fathers-4_village B

iii) Social norm around restricting a girl's interaction with boys

A girl's interaction with boys is regarded by the family and the community members with suspicion of romantic relationship, which is perceived to compromise *maan-shomman* (ie., honor) of the girl and her family. Both the family and community members are vigilant about girls' interaction with boys. Sanctions are imposed by the family, community members, and peers. The sanctions by community members include, gossiping, criticizing, rebuking, stigmatizing the girl and the family, putting pressure on the family to discipline the girl and to get her married, damaging her marriage prospect by informing the potential groom's family of her "bad behavior". Sanctions by the family members include scolding

and beating the girl, increasing vigilance and restrictions on her, and **marrying her off quickly** for protecting family honor. Thus, such interaction is approved only under specific circumstances and with certain categories of boys. Most adolescent girls do interact with boys, usually keeping within the boundaries set by the community. The girls are allowed to interact with male relatives, male classmates, and other schoolmates. Interaction with the two latter categories is permissible only if it relates to academics. Interaction with boys cannot be frequent, lengthy or in private.

Father 1: During adolescence if girls spend much time with boys they may develop romantic relationship. A family's honor is damaged in such case.

Father 2: There are people around us who spread gossips about these girls (who spend much time with boys) and say that their parents are not good guardians. It affects the parents when people say bad things about them.

Father 1: Yes, they make bad comments.

Father 2: ... Restriction is imposed on their [girls'] movement and they are kept under constant vigilance.

—FGD-Fathers-2_village D

How to challenge the social norms contributing to child marriage?

TP believes that girl-led movement building is required in order to challenge norms that hold CM practices in place. Therefore, social norm existing around collective efficacy of girls was assessed. In the survey and an overwhelmingly high proportion of girls reported high efficacy in undertaking collective action for accessing their rights. However, qualitative data do not support these findings. Indeed, an overwhelming majority of qualitative informants had neither seen girls taking collective action, nor perceive it to be common/typical behavior. Only two instances of collective action by adolescent girls were reported from one village. One of these actions, aimed at preventing early marriage of an adolescent girl, failed- discouraging the girls to undertake any more initiatives. According to adolescent girls, support from adults and influential community members is necessary for making collective action effective.



Recommendations for policy and practices

- Girls' movement needs to be built for collective action in favor of girls' rights. It is important to sensitize the community, parents and adolescent boys regarding girls' rights and agency and get the boys and parents involved in such actions.
- Campaigns using champions in female education and employment by delaying marriage may be effective for convincing the communities, parents and the girls of the benefits of delayed marriage.
- Government circular declaring mandatory participation of female secondary school students in all kinds of sports will help to positively change the existing social norm.
- Demonstration of benefits to girls of riding bicycle may encourage parents to allow their daughters to ride bi-cycle.

ENDNOTES

1 Findings based on the Bangladesh Tipping Point Program Baseline Report (https://caretippingpoint.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/TP-BGD-Baseline-report_FINAL_Jan-6.pdf)

THIS INITIATIVE IS FUNDED BY:

