

ADVANCING GENDER TRANSFORMATIVE PROGRAMS IN BANGLADESH

How social norms approaches are improving the lives of women and girls

This document provides a comprehensive impact analysis of three development projects in Bangladesh, namely Joint Action for Nutrition Outcome (JANO), TIPPING POINT (TPP and TPP+), and IMAGINE. Of the projects analyzed two of them are closed and one is still ongoing. This brief aims to analyze the outcomes and learning questions developed by CARE Bangladesh while evaluating social norms and gender transformative impacts.

Social norms are the perceived informal, mostly unwritten, rules that are made and shared by a given group or community and define acceptable, appropriate, and obligatory actions within the group.

Headline stats

JANO	IMAGINE	Tipping Point+
In JANO, 3 private sector partners ensured better access to quality inputs and extension services, promoted knowledge on climate-smart agricultural practices and dairy management practices, and engaged with women entrepreneurs.	353 couples participated in couples counseling which resulted in young wives and husbands reporting an increased capacity to communicate with each other, creating a united front against societal pressures to have children soon after marriage.	The TIPPING POINT+ intervention reduced the hazard of child marriage by 63% among girls who received 36-40 sessions. The magnitude of the impact is quite high and has yet to be achieved by any previous intervention in the country or elsewhere.

Methodology

CARE aims to lead the sector in delivering gender equal impact across all programs. The GoDeeper Initiative was developed as a learning process to determine if there is evidence that CARE's projects influence social norms change and lead to gender transformative impact.

The collaboration between CARE and the Global Capstone program of The George Washington University consisted of analyzing data from programs conducted in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Malawi, and Uganda. Country offices in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Malawi, and Uganda expressed interest in the learning process and volunteered to participate in the research. The country offices selected programs that aligned with the Strategic Initiative and formulated key learning questions. The goal was to identify key findings and cross-cutting information across gender transformative and social norms approaches.

To achieve our objectives, the process that was divided into three distinct parts:

- 1. Harvesting Gender Transformative Evidence:** The initial focus was on conducting an extensive desk review of various project documents, reports, evaluations, theory of change, and gender markers. This allowed us to gather valuable gender transformative evidence that would serve as a foundation for our analysis and recommendations.
- 2. Sense-Making Process:** Following the evidence-gathering phase, a sense-making process was employed utilizing the Miro board. This visual platform facilitated the identification of similarities and differences between projects and countries. Projects were categorized based on their impact groups, while retaining their country labels. For each project, the team extracted key information encompassing impact statistics, social norms that hinder progress for women and girls, the social norms approach employed, and the resulting impacts. Additionally, the Miro board included dedicated sections for each country and impact group, providing a space for evaluators to document observed gaps, challenges, opportunities, and recommendations. The goal was to swiftly synthesize information within each grouping.
- 3. Briefing with Key Findings and Recommendations:** Having completed the sense-making process, the final step of the methodology consisted of briefly presenting the results for each country office and technical teams involved. For this purpose, a concise document and a presentation highlighting the key findings and recommendations was delivered. This final output will effectively communicate the insights gained from the analysis, enabling stakeholders to understand the critical aspects and suggested actions for advancing gender transformative practices.

Limitations

Throughout the data collection process for this brief, there were several limitations including not having access to the full scope of project data and evaluation documents such as Gender Marker Forms. Another limitation is a possible misinterpretation of social norms and the analysis of the effects of those norms.

Country Snapshot

Who are we working with in Bangladesh?

Small-scale producers are women and girls living in rural areas or in households (HH) where agriculture is a core source of income. This impact group typically does not have the power to grow adequate and nutritious sources of food. CARE aims to address the systematic exclusion of women in decision-making, leadership, and education— which includes increasing access and education of financial and entrepreneurial tools, nutrition, leadership, and farming practices.

Underbanked and unbanked women and girls lack equitable access, control, and agency over economic resources and income generating opportunities. CARE aims to address discriminatory legal and political structures, entrenched social norms, and exclusionary market systems. Their focus on women's economic justice includes promoting women's agency, supporting women's voice and leadership, supporting women's collectives and movements, male engagement, and social norm transformation.

Underbanked and unbanked women and girls	<p>IMAGINE (Closed 2016 - 2022): IMAGINE, which stands for “Inspiring Married Adolescent Girls to Imagine New Empowered Futures”, aimed to build the capacity and agency of married girls' to make decisions about their life, address social and structural barriers, and presented alternative economic opportunities for girls. The goal of the project was to develop and test a package of interventions that could, potentially, support married adolescent girls to plan for and execute the healthy timing of their first pregnancy.</p> <p>TIPPING POINT (Closed 2017 - 2020): Tipping Point aimed to reduce early, childhood marriage. In addition, TPP targeted groups of women and girls who were in a forced marriage.</p>
Small-scale producers	<p>JANO (Ongoing 2019 - present): JANO, which stands for “Joint Action for Nutrition Outcome”, was tasked to contribute to the end of malnutrition in children under five-years of age, while also addressing the nutritional needs of pregnant and lactating women and adolescent girls.</p>

What social norms in Bangladesh are holding women and girls back?

There are several social norms that impact gender equality in Bangladesh. The Social Norms Learning Collaborative has worked to create a social norms atlas that names and describes social norms across sectors. They define meta norms as those norms that are particularly influential because they are deeply rooted, operate at a more profound level of society and influence multiple behaviors. Gender ideology norms were the most prevalent and influential for the projects in Bangladesh. Gender ideology norms relate to the appropriate roles, rights, and responsibilities of women and men in society.

Child, Early and Forced marriage are quite prevalent in the country. Girls in Bangladesh are pressured to get married at a young age, typically before 17 or 18 years of age, because it is believed their physical appearance degrades after the 18th birthday. For rural communities, money and education are not believed to be enough to attract a spouse for a girl over 18 years old. Young girls from rural and economically marginalized families face higher rates of early marriage due to the family's resource constraints and expected dowries. Young girls are pressured to accept marriage offers because community members judge girls and their families by believing that the girl is in a romantic relationship with another man, which is seen as shameful. Tipping Point worked to reduce child marriage by focusing on changing these beliefs and social expectations. In addition, young girls are expected to get pregnant shortly after getting married and are highly discouraged from using birth control— birth control is commonly believed to lead to infertility. This idea is particularly present within older generations and groups of people who received little to no education. Community members will also label a girl as promiscuous for taking contraceptives, which causes shame to the family. Marriage and childbearing at a young age have greatly discouraged and prevented girls from continuing their education or participating in income-generating activities. IMAGINE aimed to increase acceptance for delaying birth by building married girls' capacity and increasing awareness of the benefits of doing so.

Furthermore, girls face restrictions on their mobility. For instance, girls reaching puberty are discouraged from riding bikes except to go to the market or for school related activities, therefore limiting girls from traveling outside of their home. If a girl travels a longer distance or for other reasons, a male family member is expected to accompany them. Additionally, girls are restricted from talking to boys. These norms stem from the fear of bringing shame upon the family. This fear motivates girls to conform to social norms and pressures from family members and the wider community.

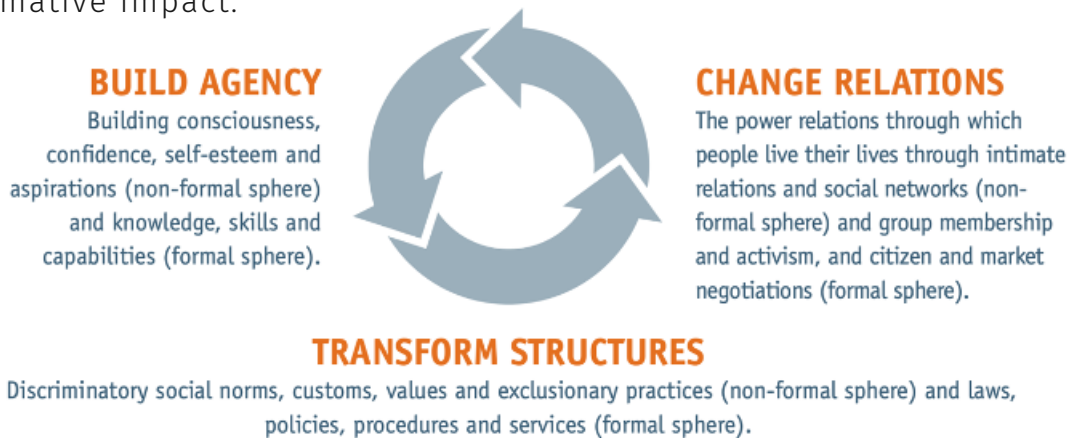


Women and girls also face an inequitable distribution of nutritional foods as compared to men. Patriarchal societies throughout Bangladesh have resulted in men and boys being prioritized in many aspects of life, such as food and nutrition intake. Thus, adolescent girls and women show extremely low levels of participation in any aspect of nutrition-related planning and service provision. On top of this, there is a presence of inadequate access to services and social protection measures like cash transfers and/or other safety net support for women and adolescent girls. JANO addressed this norm by promoting the nutritional needs of children and mothers.

How social norms programming is addressing the root causes of gender inequality in Bangladesh

What's effective in Bangladesh?

CARE's Gender Equality Framework (GEF) Theory of Change, represented below, aims to **build agency** of people of all genders and life stages, **change relations** between them, and **transform structures** so that they realize their full potential in their public and private lives and can contribute equally to and benefit equally from social, political and economic development. The findings presented in this brief are organized around these three pillars to determine if there is evidence that CARE's projects influence social norms change and lead to gender transformative impact.



JANO incorporated gender dialogues in a variety of the project's activities— such as Community Support Group (CSG) sessions and the Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS). For example, an overarching activity was an annual sports day in schools using special gender bender and nutrition games to highlight how norms change could look in the community. Also, CSGs and school volunteers conducted household visits for counseling sessions and held community meetings to increase male championship, promote engagement and awareness of equal opportunities, and increase women's position in the decision-making process. JANO also held business meetings between women entrepreneurs and private sector supply chains to increase women's agency and participation in income-generating activities.

IMAGINE used gender dialogues, girls' collectives, and couples counseling to create change in agency and relations. Girls' collectives followed a participatory curriculum designed to increase girls' knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy related to topics such as sexual and reproductive health, decision-making and communication, and gender and social norms. Girls' collectives were also used as an entry point for training in business and entrepreneurship skills, served as a foundation for income-generating activities, and connected girls to village savings and loans associations. Couples counseling provided private, personalized counseling to newly married adolescent girls and their husbands. Sessions combined sexual and reproductive health topics with financial planning to empower couples with the ability to set a joint vision for their family. Some sessions included extended family members, such as mother-in-laws, to reduce potential backlash and engage them in the couple's journey.

TIPPING POINT was rooted in community-level social norms shifting, shaped by girl-centered movement building and activism, and supported by the engagement of formal and informal structures to become gender-equitable allies for girls' rights. Tipping Point consisted of two intervention packages, TPP and TPP+. TPP included sessions on topics like child rights, power and privilege, gender division of labor, child early and forced marriage, and sexual and reproductive health and rights. Additionally, there were 6 intergroup (gender) dialogues. These sessions and intergroup dialogues took place with girls, boys, and their parents. Girls also gained access to financial literacy training and VSLA membership. TPP+ included all the components of TPP with the addition of other prominent community members such as religious leaders and local government officials. TPP+ also included activist training for select champion boys, fathers, mothers, and girl leaders.

Overview of Approaches Used

		JANO	IMAGINE	TPP
AGENCY	Sexual and Reproductive Education	X	X	X
	VSLA (Village Savings and Loan Association)		X	X
	Income Generating Activity (IGA)	X	X	
	Business Training	X	X	
	Financial Literacy			X
RELATIONS	Community & Gender Dialogues	X	X	X
	Couples Counseling		X	
	Engaging Men and Boys	X	X	X
STRUCTURE <i>(formal & informal)</i>	Girl-Centered Movement Building			X
	Gender Mainstreaming in Schools, Healthcare, and Financial Institutions	X		
	Social Action and Analysis	X	X	X

*Not an exhaustive list. Only key approaches and approaches that were seen across multiple projects were included.

All three projects analyzed used dialogue approaches that showed results in building trust, facilitating dialogues within households and the community, and reinforcing the importance of social engagement when building awareness and changing gender and social norms. Furthermore, all of the projects reviewed also used specific approaches for male engagement resulting in not only their active involvement in gender and social norms changes but participation in community awareness.

How have impacts been better/more sustained because of SN approaches?

After analyzing the three programs implemented in Bangladesh, it is evident that social norms approaches have had a positive impact on various aspects of women's lives. This includes women's increased participation in financial activities, heightened community awareness regarding child marriage and support for delayed birth, and increased access to and satisfaction with sexual and reproductive health services.

It is important to note that it is difficult to directly link one social norm approach to one outcome or impact. Most of the approaches were part of an intervention package where many approaches and activities were being implemented together. However, it was found that social norm approaches create a bigger impact when they are combined with other approaches. For example, Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) are a standalone tool for economic empowerment but can be combined with Social Action and Analysis (SAA) to make a greater impact.

JANO increased women's agency through training on climate-smart agricultural practices and dairy management practices, and engagement with other women entrepreneurs. Furthermore, three private sector partners ensured better access to quality inputs and extension services, creating formal structural change by bridging the gap between women and the market.

JANO also trained teachers across 330 primary and secondary schools on topics related to gender equity in relation to resilient health, hygiene and nutrition. In conjunction, JANO facilitated community meetings with male groups that built support for better nutritional practices within the household and emphasized the importance of women's participation in the decision-making processes of their family. These efforts resulted in women of reproductive age increasing their minimum dietary diversity by 18.7% and 287,420 adolescents (65% girls) gained nutrition-related knowledge.

In addition, information and communication technology platforms were established at the local level to connect relevant government departments and increase awareness in the community on nutrition interventions. Women and adolescent girls were then able to access services and make choices regarding their own health and nutrition. The midterm evaluation found an increase of 22.2% in meaningful participation of women and girls in the nutrition action plan development and implementation processes in government forums.

Note: JANO is an on-going project, therefore the impacts have been measured to date and may change as the project continues.



Photo: CARE Bangladesh

I M A G I N E

The combination of gender dialogues, couples counseling, and girls' collectives in IMAGINE contributed to girls' increased agency and improvement in relations between husbands and adolescent wives. Girls' collectives ensured support and access to information on the benefits of delaying childbirth for 1,573 adolescent girls. These collectives encouraged and empowered girls to start planning for their own futures, exercising their agency, and pursuing their aspirations. At the end of the project, girls were able to articulate vibrant visions of their futures and delaying childbirth featured prominently in those imagined futures. Additionally, over 300 married couples participated in couples counseling resulting in increased capacity to communicate with one another and create a united front against the family and societal pressures to have children soon after marriage.

The girls' collectives also acted as an entry point for girls to be trained in business and entrepreneurial skills and facilitated market linkage opportunities for married adolescent girls. IMAGINE trained 600 girls participating in girls' collectives on non-traditional livelihoods, giving them the relevant skills to engage in market activities and earn income. The combination of the approaches has started creating a change in the community: girls are engaging in income generating activities with increasing support. In fact, the primary factor for delaying childbirth is the additional financial security that delay offers. This has also created a secondary impact. For the most part, those who support delaying birth among married girls also encourage the use of contraceptive methods to do so. Girls and their husbands described being able to access contraceptive methods and were satisfied with the services they received.

The impact evaluation of Tipping Point found that the TPP+ intervention significantly reduced the risk of child marriage by 63% among girls who attended 36-40 sessions. The magnitude of this impact is quite high and has yet to be achieved by any previous intervention in the country or elsewhere.

Additionally, the impact evaluation showed girls' agency increased significantly through positive change in secondary outcomes like- self-efficacy, knowledge on sexual and reproductive health, mobility, engaging in collective actions, and attitude change in perception of gender roles. For example, norms around decision-making about marriage have shifted and now allow girls to express their opinion about the groom and timing of marriage in conversation with their parents. The evaluation also found that engaging men & boys in fostering community-level change was instrumental in initiating activism at the community level. Government, school, and religious leaders also play a central role in norm shifting as they become active voices for gender equality and substantively support girls' aspirations and needs by backing inclusive procedures and services.

T P P

CASE STUDY

IMAGINE

Girls' collectives were a key entry platform for all interventions that were implemented within IMAGINE. These collectives were run by trained field facilitators, who ensured married and unmarried adolescent girls had the necessary social support and access to information. Each collective was made up of around 15 to 25 girls, ages 15 to 19 years olds from one village.



Photo: CARE Bangladesh

Sixteen-year-old Jahanara— a member and Peer Leader of Girls Collective Clubs— said, **“At some point, I used to think child-rearing, taking care of family members, and doing household chores are the prime responsibility of a married girl. Now I believe my perceptions were wrong. Given a chance, girls can do many things considered impossible. They can conquer life.”**

As a result of IMAGINE, Jahanara was able to transform her goals and entire philosophy on life. She stated that she is determined “not to bow [her] head as a girl, instead [she will be an example] by living with head high.”



Photo: CARE Bangladesh

Tipping Point

Anannya lives in a small village of Pargacha. Like any other adolescent girl, she desires to change her community. Her wish was to participate in outdoor sports, but in her community, playing outdoor games was beyond imagination.

“The gendered social norms are a great problem in our areas,” clarifies Anannya. **“Girls wanted to play sports but were not allowed to participate in outdoor games. Tipping Point organized activities like meeting with parents where we asked to justify the reasons for not letting girls participate in games and ever since then, things have looked better for us as we now participate in cricket, football, and other local games.”**

-Anannya Rani Barman, 16 years old
Narayanpur, Rangpur.

Recommendations

Program-Level

1. **Programs should work to reduce factors that can negatively impact the participation of men, extended family members (mothers-in-law, grandparents, etc.), and other influential community members.** Programs should be mindful of factors that can reduce attendance at activities, such as peak growing seasons. These stakeholders are highly influential and hold immense decision-making power so increasing incentives and attendance is essential for success. For example, Bangladesh's Tipping Point was not successful until multiple community stakeholders such as religious leaders and politicians participated in the programs.
2. **Further research into integrating gender transformative approaches in schools could be beneficial for instilling positive norms during formative ages.** One project began training teachers on gender equality in health and nutrition and concluded that including youth at an earlier age might help the next generations alter patterns of thinking around social norms.
3. **Increase efforts to collaborate with formal financial institutions and policymakers to address structural barriers, expanding beyond informal financial institutions.** Programs should go further to help women and girls connect to formal financial institutions and policymakers to reduce structural barriers related to finance. VSLAs worked to provide access to informal financial institutions but there needs to be a bigger effort made to partner with formal financial institutions and policy makers to reduce structural barriers.

Organizational-level

1. **To ensure the continuation of social norms changes, projects should include sustainability measures.** This can be achieved by strengthening the involvement and preparedness of local actors and emphasizing their ability to independently sustain change. For example, in IMAGINE, girls' collectives were run by CARE staff and volunteers for the first couple of years of the program. During the last couple of years of the program, the girl's collectives transitioned to a local peer-led model to facilitate the sustainability of the collectives after the project closed and give girls the opportunity to enhance their leadership skills.
2. **All projects across CARE should collect data that corresponds to the GEF indicators.** Requiring all CARE projects to collect data that corresponds to the GEF Indicators allows CARE to evaluate the effectiveness of approaches in a standardized assessment.

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