Country: Bangladesh, funded by Canada

Project Name: Addressing the barriers to economic empowerment for young women in Bangladesh

Project Reach: Sub-National

Project Time Period: 2014 - 2017

Project Impact areas: Gender policies with impact on ECD; Women’s Economic Empowerment

Project Funding: Global partnerships

Project Website: [https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/empowering-girls-rural-bangladesh](https://www.povertyactionlab.org/evaluation/empowering-girls-rural-bangladesh)


Project Description:

In line with the G20’s reaffirmation that all children should be allowed to develop and thrive in a secure and safe environment that is free of condemnation, hostility, exploitation, abuse, neglect, conflict and stress, this project helps in eliminating the harmful practice of child, early and forced marriage. It also supports Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy in empowering women and girls.

Evidence across South Asia, including Bangladesh, indicates that the prevalence of child marriage remains high. Young girls who marry early are likely to face higher incidences of intimate partner violence, lower levels of education attainment, and overall lower health outcomes. The literature shows that changes in the law have been difficult to enforce, and young girls who are not in school remain the most vulnerable to early marriage. In contexts such as Bangladesh, where dowry increases with age, financial incentives geared to allow young girls to complete school, could be particularly effective.

In 2007, in a randomized control trial, the effectiveness of various interventions in delaying child marriage, were tested in rural Bangladesh. These included a low cost stipend and empowerment training. Through the Growth and Economic Opportunities (GrOW) multi-donor program implemented by IDRC, the research team was able to test the impact of this financial incentive in a second phase to follow the cohort over 10 years.

While the initial findings indicated that the financial incentive provided to families was cost-effective in increasing school completion among girls, the GrOW research focused on assessing whether these changes have led to significant differences in both economic outcomes and agency for the target group of girls (who were either in or out of school and under 18 years of age at the start of the first phase of the project), a decade after the intervention began.

Program Evaluation:

This project was itself a randomized control trial, looking at a program that was implemented by Save the Children. The point was to evaluate the program in the first phase, and to follow up with the same cohort of girls years later to understand the long term impact of the program.

The first test group received an empowerment program for girls (both in and out of school, and under 18 years of age). Communities in the empowerment group identified meeting places (called “Safe Spaces”) where girls could meet five to six days a week to socialize and receive educational support and social competency training. The social competency training included training on life skills and nutritional and
reproductive health knowledge. In half of the empowerment communities, the program also included financial literacy training. Each Safe Space targeted twenty girls for a six-month cycle of the program, repeating again with a new group of girls each cycle until the entire community had been reached.

The second test group received a stipend of roughly $16 USD worth of cooking oil per year for families whose female daughters were kept unmarried under 18 years of age.

The third test group received both the empowerment program and the stipend.

The control group received no intervention.

Lessons Learned:

Main Research finding:
The main research finding has been that the modest financial incentive (oil) has been very effective at delaying marriage. It reduces the potential uncertainty of marriage prospects that parents of young girls face and offsets the increased dowry they have to pay for older girls. This reduced uncertainty then allows parents and communities to be more supportive of the immediate costs of girls staying in school, as well as more willing to bear the risk of not getting a ‘suitable’ match at a later stage for their daughters.

Additional Research findings:
Data from 15,739 girls from the project census show that girls eligible for the incentive for at least two years were 25% less likely to be married under 18 years of age, 16% less likely to have given birth under 20 years of age, and 24% more likely to be in school at 22 years of age. Data also shows insignificantly different effects for girls in and out of school at the baseline.

In contrast, the empowerment program did not decrease child marriage or teenage childbearing. However, girls eligible for the empowerment program were 10% more likely to be in school.

An interesting additional finding was that girls who remained in school until 18 years of age were more likely to still be in school at 23 years of age, implying an important hump that girls must get over in their teen years to be able to commit to their education. Delaying marriage therefore allows girls to stay in school well past the legal marriage age. Furthermore, data showed improvements in health and empowerment indices among girls eligible for the incentive program, as well as large and significant improvements in income-generating activities among girls who were older when starting the program (15 to 17 years of age).

Beyond the project itself, the implication for ECD is that early marriage is correlated with detrimental long-term outcomes for girls through several channels: education, health risks and health-seeking behaviors, lower intra-household decision-making power, and intergenerational effects, among others.

Resources:

Cost-benefit analysis of strategies to reduce child marriage in Bangladesh

Working paper - Power vs Money: Alternative Approaches to Reducing Child Marriage in Bangladesh, a Randomized Control Trial

Economic Empowerment of Young Women in Bangladesh: Barriers and Strategies
Briefs:
1. Empowering Girls in Rural Bangladesh
2. Reducing child marriage and increasing girls’ schooling in Bangladesh: policy brief

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