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Produced and published by: The Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development (AFPPD)

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Copies of this publication may be obtained from
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The Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development (AFPPD) is a network of parliamentarians, established in 1981 to promote parliamentarians’ involvement in addressing population issues in the Asia and the Pacific region. AFPPD envisions a world where all women and girls have access to sexual and reproductive health information, education and services and can decide whether, when and how many to have children; a world where women and girls have equal rights and opportunities and can enjoy a safe, healthy and dignified life throughout their life cycle; and a world where demographic changes and population issues are taken into account in planning for sustainable development.

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AFPPD consists of 29 National Committees that deal with population and development issues. These committees are supported by the parliamentary or committee secretariat or an NGO outside the parliament.
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Introduction

Child marriage is the practice of marriage where at least one of the spouses is below the age of 18. Although national legislation almost universally bans the practice of child marriage, up to one-third of girls in developing countries will be married before they turn 18. Marriage at such a young age brings with it many challenges for the young brides, including health risks associated with early childbearing, developmental difficulties associated with social isolation and dropping out of school, and increased risks of being the victims of domestic violence.

About half of the approximately 67 million girls worldwide who are married before age 18 live in Asia. And while the drivers of early marriage do vary widely among different countries and communities, some of the common conditions creating high rates of early marriage include poverty, lack of access to education for girls, lack of economic opportunities for women outside the home, gender inequality, entrenched and conservative gender roles, and extreme interpretations of conservative religious mandates.

In light of these risks and conditions, governments, international development agencies, and community service organizations (CSOs) have undertaken significant efforts over the past 15 years to end child marriage. These efforts have had a positive effect in reducing child marriage rates, and the rates of marriage for girls under 15 have been declining significantly in recent years. However, present trends suggest a steady increase in the rates of marriage for girls between 15 and 17 years old. UNFPA predicts that, starting in the year 2021, up to 15.1 million girls from ages 15 to 17 will marry each year.

This project aims to assess a variety of programmatic and policy approaches to the problem of child marriage, with a particular focus on measurable, proven results. Along with actual rates of child marriage, other major indicators assessed in these programs include school enrollment rates and other gender equality and empowerment indicators. While many successful programs were evaluated through the course of this research, additional priority was given to presenting a wide range of solutions targeting various groups and populations, including families, community leaders, and adolescent girls and boys, among others, in a variety of social and cultural contexts.
Berhane Hewan Project
ETHIOPIA

Introduction

Although by law the minimum age for marriage in Ethiopia is 18 for both boys and girls, about 40% of Ethiopian girls are already married by the time they turn 18. The Amhara region of Ethiopia has the highest rates of early marriage in the country, where around 40% of girls are married by age 15, and around 63% are married by age 18. The practice of early marriage correlates to low education rates, and among adolescent girls in the Amhara region, 50% have never been to school while just one-third have completed four years of school or more.

Project objectives

The Berhane Hewan project aimed to reduce the prevalence of child marriage in the Amhara region of Ethiopia by (1) creating safe social spaces and social support for girls at risk of early marriage, (2) increasing their access to education, and (3) increasing their knowledge about reproductive health and other health issues.

Implementation

Berhane Hewan was implemented in Ethiopia by the Population Council in collaboration with the Ministry of Youth & Sport and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), with additional financial support from the United Nations Foundation and the Nike Foundation. The project worked through 4 supervisors and 12 mentors in each district where it was implemented. Other direct costs were to fund the provision of livestock to families, support for participant’ school materials, and building wells in participating communities.

The project began with a research/baseline phase to identify the factors influencing the practice of early marriage in the Amhara region. This research revealed that communities actually valued the practice of early marriage, that families found economic incentives in arranging to marry their girls early, that girls were socially isolated, and that girls at risk of early marriage had very low levels of education. Multiple interventions were then developed to target each of these factors through the program.

In order to influence community beliefs around early marriage, an intervention called “Community Conversations” (or “CCs”) was utilized. The CCs technique has been used in other projects in Ethiopia with positive results. Groups of approximately 70 community members were invited to participate and were selected to ensure diversity of age and gender, as well as standing to influence stakeholders and key demographic segments of the community. CCs were held twice a month for two hours each, and focused on issues identified by participants themselves, including early marriage, harmful traditional practices, HIV/AIDS, gender issues, and family planning. Members were then led by group mentors through a process of developing and implementing an action plan to target those issues within their communities and to disseminate information about their activities in the community.

In addressing the issue of low education among girls who are at risk of early marriage, the project assisted girls who had never been to school by providing non-formal education with a goal of preparing them to enter formal education. Girls who were already in school received support to stay there. Through a partnership with the Ministry of Education, girls received textbooks and basic school supplies. When a girl was registered for school, she and her guardians signed a form agreeing (1) to allow her to continue with schooling, (2) to give her sufficient time to commit to her studies, and (3) to not marry her during the program.

In order to offset the other economic incentives of marrying girls off at an early age, a conditional cash transfer in the form of a sheep was offered to the families of girls who did not arrange a marriage for them and instead kept them enrolled in school during the first two-year pilot. Later forms of the project included variations on the economic incentive component, tied closely to offsetting the costs of school enrollment and attendance for the girls in the program.

In order to address the social isolation of girls in the community, participants were formed into small groups led by female mentors. All girls (ages 10 to 19), regardless of marital status, were targeted, and then formed into separate groups based on marital status. In addition to these meetings, mentors also conducted home visits, particularly to check on girls who had been absent from meetings or from school. At the meetings, girls engaged in basic socialization with other girls in their peer group, as well as received training on issues such as reproductive health, early marriage, HIV/AIDS, and gender norms. The married girls received additional life skills training, such as basic agriculture and home economics training.

In the second phase of the project, husbands’ clubs were formed to engage and support husbands of the married girls who were involved in the program in order to ease their suspicions about the program and provide them with additional information about their wives’ and children’s health. In husbands’ clubs, the same topics about reproductive health,
harmful traditional practices, and gender issues, were discussed, providing common topics for the spouses to discuss with one another, as well as providing relevant information to husbands so that they could also promote the health and development of their wives and children.

Results

A total of 10,466 girls participated in the program, 647 during the pilot phase and 9,819 during the expansion.

The project yielded results in its education objectives, and girls in the project area were three times as likely to be in school as were girls in the control area. Girls aged 10 to 14 were especially likely to still be in school when they had participated in the program. At the beginning of the project, only 70% of girls were in school, and by the end of the project, 96% were in school.

The project had impacts on early marriage too. Among 10- to-14 year-olds in the program, frequency of marriage dropped from 10% to 2% during the project period, whereas in the control group the frequency of marriage went up from 14% to 22%. The project did not have the same measurable effect on marriage age for 15-to-19 year-old girls, and may have only delayed marriages of girls in the 10-to-14 age group until the period of later adolescence rather than into adulthood.

Lessons learned

Providing girls at risk of early marriage with a holistic program of growth, comprising social inclusion, formal and non-formal education, and health and basic rights training, was critical to the program's success in reducing child marriage in the project area. Engaging the entire community in the process of ending the practice, as well as providing girls with new access to a whole network of rights, information and social relationships propelled the project forward.

While this project was particularly targeting girls at risk of early marriage by enhancing their knowledge about their health, rights, and access to education, it also reached the whole community, shifting harmful but deeply held practices and beliefs. After the pilot phase, the project also expanded to reach out to husbands of the girls who had been married young, providing the same critical health and rights information, as well as providing transparency and inclusiveness for men in these discussions of otherwise taboo but critically important topics affecting their wives’ and children’s health.

The two-year pilot period of the project was rigorously evaluated with a careful baseline study of both the project beneficiaries, and a control group from another village who had not been exposed to the project. This evaluation led to targeted, effective interventions and the scaling up of the project to cover more regions of Ethiopia. The project was also granted first prize for Adolescent and Youth Programming in the 2013 UNFPA Good Practices Awards, for its relevance, impact, innovation, and ‘reproducibility’. One of the challenging outcomes of the project was the fact that marriage among 15-to-19 year-old girls actually increased after the pilot phase. This was likely due to the fact that marriages in the 10-to-14 age group decreased significantly, so perhaps what would have been marriages in girls under 15 had been pushed back into the later years of adolescence. The lesson to be learned with this challenging statistic is that project interventions did have an impact on delaying marriage, but perhaps the different motivations influence marriage in early adolescence and later adolescence, so differing approaches for these two groups of girls must be developed.

Furthermore, the independent effect of providing a sheep to families who kept their girls in school and delayed marriage, at least until the end of the project, was difficult to measure. In fact, in the scale-up phase of the project, economic incentives were not individualized, but rather granted at a community level (e.g., providing wells), and did not seem to significantly change project results. Nonetheless, similar projects that were expanded to dozens of communities across Ethiopia have included economic incentives tied to school attendance, conditional upon delayed marriage.

Conclusion

The impact of this project has been felt all across the country, having been expanded from the first pilot district to over 30 districts across the region. In 2013, UNFPA was able to hand the project over to government partners, who would continue working in collaboration with other donors and development partners to further scale up the project and implement it across the country.

The impact on adolescent girls at risk of early marriage has been profound, with significant, measurable reductions in rates of early marriage that are directly tied to project interventions. Furthermore, rates of school enrollment have gone up for girls involved in the program.

This project is an example of a good practice for combating child marriage because of its emphasis on evidence-based intervention and the continuous and rigorous evaluation of impacts and results.

Through this evidence-based approach, girls were able to delay marriage through improved school attendance and social inclusion, and with the help of some economic incentives to their families and communities.

This project is also an example of a good practice for ending child marriage because of its holistic approach, reaching out to girls, husbands, and the broader community. This approach aimed not only to empower girls to protect themselves from early marriages, but also to shift deeply held cultural beliefs that perpetuate the practice.

Recommendations

The Berhane Hewan project is an example of how positive laws designed to protect women and children are not always enough. Deeply ingrained cultural practices like
early marriage, compounded by the taboo nature of discussions about women’s health and the prohibitive costs to poor families of keeping children in school, have made laws on their own ineffective at ending the practice of early marriage in Ethiopia.

In replicating the success of this project, parliamentarians should consider how to incorporate targeted research and evidence-based interventions into programs to end child marriage. Programming must begin with research in order to understand the root causes of early marriage in specific communities and country contexts. Programs should be designed to include a pilot phase and parliamentarians should plan to commission a thorough baseline study and rigorously evaluate the project after the pilot and at subsequent phases wherever possible. Although this focus on research and evaluation may result in what seems to be higher up-front costs, it will facilitate scalability and ensure effectiveness of projects.

Furthermore, the project’s holistic approach to ending child marriage should be an important consideration for parliamentarians looking to implement similar projects in their own countries. The project’s expanded focus on community groups comprised of stakeholders and influential community leaders was a key aspect of the project’s success. To a lesser degree, but also importantly, parents and husbands of the girls were also engaged in the program. Shifting community norms, providing girls with access to safe, social spaces to meet with other girls and female mentors, and providing girls with access to critical information about health and rights were at the core of the success of Berhane Hewan, and should form the basis for program design in other countries and contexts as well.

References


Introduction

Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, and the highest in Asia. Approximately two of every three girls in Bangladesh will be married by the time they are 18. Factors such as access to education, living in a rural area, and being from a poor household also significantly increase a girl’s likelihood of being married early. Despite the fact that the legal age for marriage is 18 for girls and 21 for boys, predictions are that child marriage rates will continue to increase in Bangladesh until at least the year 2020.

Project objectives

The Kishori Abhijan project was implemented in 28 districts in Bangladesh to reduce rates of child marriage by empowering adolescent girls to participate in the decisions that affect their lives, to become more active participants in their households, and to become agents for social change in their communities. The project aimed to achieve these objectives through increasing girls’ economic activities, their school enrollment, and their standing in the political and social life of their communities, with a particular emphasis on enhancing their income-generating opportunities.

Implementation

Kishori Abhijan was implemented over 3 years in 14 rural districts in Bangladesh as a joint project of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), under the supervision of the Ministry of Women’s and Children’s Affairs. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and the Centre for Mass Education in Science (CMES) implemented the project, and the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) evaluated the project with the Population Council. The resource commitments required were human resources to mentor and monitor the groups. Furthermore, the investment of capital in the loan component of the project was also required for the areas in which loans were offered.

Although the program was holistic in the nature of its interventions, the focus was specifically on increasing girls’ livelihood skills and income-generating opportunities in order to reduce their risk of being married early. The main activities of the program were implemented through accountability peer groups of 30 girls each, which would meet for one hour each week. In these sessions, the girls would receive different life-skills training courses focusing on leadership and self-esteem building, and basic training and education related to gender roles, health and nutrition, and legal rights. Throughout the course of the project, the life-skills curriculum was delivered with the aim of transferring to the girls 25 specific livelihood skills, including poultry care, sewing, and teacher training, as well as facilitating linkages to outside financial institutions to generate opportunities for increasing access to savings accounts and microcredit. Some groups received direct access to microcredit through the program to support income-generating activities.

Results

Among the participants in Kishori Abhijan, girls from the youngest segment of participants who were still enrolled in school did exhibit statistically significant reduced chances of being married early.

Higher rates of school enrollment and delayed marriage were measurably shown to be a result of program interventions in the poorest district in the program among participants aged 12 to 14 years. Rates of marriage among older adolescent girls who participated in the program were not significantly reduced.

The program greatly increased the prevalence of girls engaged in income-producing activities, including self-employment and part-time employment. The rates were even higher where a microcredit component was included in the project. Significantly, engaging in this income-generating work had no measurable effect on school dropout rates among participants. While it may have decreased the amount of time participants could devote to their studies outside of the classroom, they did tend to stay in school. Dropping out of school was highly correlated to marriage age, but a causal effect or independent effect of program participation on this correlation was not measurable.

Participants also gained critical basic knowledge about women’s health and reproductive health through their participation in the project. They also showed increased understanding of basic nutrition, family planning, and causes of disease. Their enhanced knowledge was measurable at the project evaluation. The project evaluation also measured an increase in social connectedness, independence, and social and community engagement among project participants. While it is unclear which specific aspects of participants’ development in this area were due to project interventions, or which had an impact on marriage age, these areas can have a diffuse impact, even among members of the community who did not directly participate in the project.

Lessons learned

The model of accountability groups for improving access to and use of financial services is a well-established practice in Bangladesh (especially in the context of pioneering and long-lasting microcredit programs). Utilizing this model and adapting it to the aim of reducing child marriage is a strong example of using evidence-based programming and innovation to address the practice in a specific cultural context. However, although the accountability group model has been applied to enhance economic opportunity among impoverished communities in other countries and regions as well, the reproducibility of Kishori Abhijan could be less robust in contexts that lack the long-standing, established practice of accountability groups as a channel to improve access to financial services or to promote other social practices.

The focus on income-generation as a project intervention to delay marriage may also be significant given the prevalence and importance of the dowry tradition in many communities in rural Bangladesh. Because the amount of a girl’s dowry tends to increase as her age increases, providing the girl with additional income-generating opportunities and skills will be crucial for offsetting the increased financial burden her delayed marriage may place on her family. Furthermore, the culturally ingrained practice of dowry, especially in conservative, rural communities, means that the project is likely to be most effective when targeting groups of younger adolescent girls who still have some time to participate in the program, generate income, and develop life-skills before the dowry would become prohibitively expensive.

Conclusion

The Kishori Abhijan project illustrates the complexities of the problem of child marriage, and the necessity of planning and properly evaluating holistic, long-term programs targeting child marriage that include an evidence-based understanding of the root causes of the problem in particular communities. In fact, the life-skills component of the Kishori Abhijan project was evaluated as so successful that it was scaled up to 58 districts, reaching 250,000 girls nationwide. A separate program implemented and funded by BRAC targeted 400,000 girls for access to microcredit. In 2008, UNICEF recognized the Kishori Abhijan project as the third best project globally that year for its rigor in evidence collection and evaluation techniques.

While Kishori Abhijan does not seem to have been completely wide-sweeping in reducing child marriage, due to the rigorous nature of evidence gathering and ongoing practices of project evaluation implemented continuously throughout the project, its implementers and evaluators were able to draw useful conclusions from the data and were able to adapt interventions to be more effective. For example, because dowry was operating as such a compelling force to drive down the age of marriage, project interventions were aimed at the poorest villages, where dowry expectations were lower, and they also targeted girls between 12 and 14 years old, who were already drawing lower dowries than were their older counterparts.

This project is thus an example of good practice in ending child marriage because of its emphasis on rigorous evaluation and documentation of evidence, as well as its uniquely adapted series of interventions specifically tailored to the context and experience in Bangladesh. Like many other successful programs, Kishori Abhijan takes a holistic approach to addressing the practice, engaging girls in enhanced social activities, as well as in life and vocational skills, to improve their income-generating opportunities. However, it does so in a way that compliments other projects targeting different goals through similar, proven interventions. Furthermore, due to the careful and rigorous collection of relevant data and evidence both at the baseline and throughout the program, project implementers and partners were able to isolate and understand the various factors influencing early marriage, and adapt future forms of the project to better target the root causes.

Overall, the project’s design may have over-estimated the linkages between the income-generating capacity of girls and their age of marriage. However, this link does exist, and it is proven by the reduction in likelihood of marriage among young adolescent girls who participated in the program: these girls were half as likely as their older counterparts and non-participating girls to be married. Enhanced understanding of the additional factors influencing early marriage for other populations of girls, in addition to incorporating broader intervention techniques that go beyond income-generation, would likely enhance program effectiveness in the future and yield results among additional segments of girls in the target population.

Recommendations

In replicating Kishori Abhijan and its approach, parliamentarians should implement projects that include rigorous research on the root causes of early marriage in their own country’s cultural and historical context. They should encourage researchers to critically consider and test theories about the impact of poverty and income-generating capacity of girls at risk of early marriage in designing interventions to end the practice.

Parliamentarians can also consider using the accountability group model for enhancing girls’ economic opportunities while also providing important information and training to girls about delaying marriage. While girls are encouraged to continue attending the meetings for the advice, training, and resources they receive for pursuing income-generating activities, these group meetings can also be a forum for girls to receive important training on other life skills, including information about their legal rights, gender roles, child marriage, and reproductive health and nutrition.

The project’s secondary aims of increasing girls’ social cohesiveness, independence, and self-confidence are also important aspects for parliamentarians to consider in designing a successful project that has a long-term impact on the prevalence of early marriage in a community. These long-range project outcomes can have impacts on the status of girls in their communities, and upon the social
acceptability of the practice of early marriage. The aims of increasing girls’ independence and status in their communities can have broader, more cross-cutting policy implications, and can form an important part of other government programs and policies, producing complementary results on critical issues including child marriage and other similar concerns.

References


Introduction

Forty percent of the world’s child marriages occur in India and up to 47% of girls in India marry before they turn 18. Many of these girls come from the most impoverished families in the country, where they are not expected to, or even allowed to, work outside of their homes. Furthermore, the practice of paying dowry often means that the older a girl gets, the more costly her dowry will be. Often this means that for poor families, once a girl reaches secondary school age and would have to travel to another village to attend school, she will instead drop out of school and her parents will begin to look for a spouse for her. In order to address poverty and costly dowries as a driving force for parents marrying their children early, the government of India has implemented a number of conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs over the past 15 years.

Project objectives

Beginning in 1994, the Apni Beti Apna Dhan (ABAD) CCT program was undertaken in Haryana, India to address the economic motivations of early marriage. The objectives of the ABAD CCT program included delaying the age of marriage and reducing the economic pressures families face when the girl reaches culturally marriageable age. The program also aimed to increase the value of girls in the society and improve their educational attainment by providing additional cash to families while their daughters remained unmarried.

Implementation

The ABAD CCT program was implemented by the Haryana State government directly. From 1994 to 1998, Haryana State offered a cash disbursement of 500 Indian rupees (approximately $8) to families who gave birth to a daughter within 15 days of the birth. At the same time, the families were given a savings bond of 25,000 rupees (expected to be worth approximately $380), which would be redeemable when the girl turned 18, as long as she was not yet married.

This was one of the first programs of its type to target early marriage: the only precondition for the cash benefit was that girls remain unmarried. The cash benefit was not accompanied by any additional program activities. By 2012, the girls enrolled in the program began to turn 18, so results of the program could be measured and the specific impacts of the cash transfer could be isolated and studied.

Results

Overall, the age of marriage did rise in Haryana after the ABAD program was implemented there. By 1993, about 57% of girls were marrying before age 18, and by 2006, only 41% of girls were marrying before 18. While the age for marriage was increasing throughout India during this period, the increase in Haryana was at a greater rate than other areas. When the ages of marriage for girls enrolled in the program and not enrolled in the program were compared once the enrolled girls turned 18, the data showed that enrollment in the program did not significantly affect a girl’s probability of being married before the age of 18. Furthermore, girls enrolled in the program had a 43% higher probability of being married by age 19 than non-enrolled girls. When viewed alongside qualitative data collected from the girls and their parents, this finding suggests that parents who desired to marry their girls early did so immediately upon receiving the cash disbursement, viewing it as government support to defray the costs of the marriage. This was confirmed by a finding that 53% of girls reported intending to use the cash disbursement for marriage expenses, whereas only 32% reported intending to use it for education costs. In fact, about 75% of girls actually used the disbursement for marriage expenses, including dowry and associated costs.

Regarding the program’s objective of increasing girls’ educational attainment, the probability of enrolled girls attaining an 8th-grade education was 12% higher than non-enrolled girls. Furthermore, participation in the program significantly affected girls’ desire to attain further education as well. However, enrollment in the program had no effect on whether girls continued on to the 12th grade. The dropout rate after 8th grade may be due to the fact that primary schools are geographically accessible to almost all villages, whereas secondary schools require students to travel farther distances. Families of all classes and castes noted their fears for their girls’ safety and chastity having to travel long distances to go to school.

Lessons learned

A CCT program can play an important part of a larger project to delay marriage, offsetting financial burdens that could drive families to marry their daughters early, and allowing families to keep their girls in school longer. However, as the experience in the ABAD program shows, CCTs should be a part of a series of interventions aimed at increasing the value of girls in their communities, and increasing the value of educating girls.
The ABAD program also shows the importance of understanding the drivers of early marriage in each cultural and country context. In contexts where high dowry payments are a significant economic motivation to marry girls early, the cash transfer, without other programmatic interventions, may be seen as government support for marriage expenses, or may even become an incentive to marry girls right at age 18 when the payment becomes available.

**Conclusion**

The ABAD CCT program had a positive impact on the educational attainment of girls enrolled in the program. Due to the additional assurance that parents had of receiving cash when the girl turned 18, and also the commitment they had made to keep the girl unmarried, schooling did take a greater priority in these girls' lives than that for non-beneficiary girls. Without additional programmatic support, however, the CCT had the unintended effect of actually increasing the probability of participating girls' marriage at age 18.

This project is an example of a good practice for ending child marriage because it is innovative and straightforward in its approach, aiming to isolate the commonly-cited economic motivation for marrying girls early. It also linked the delay in marriage and the provision of economic support to positive increases in school enrollment, which can have broader positive and long-lasting effects on the lives of participating girls, as well as the value of girls in the society as a whole.

Furthermore, this project was rigorously evaluated through the collection of qualitative and quantitative data from the participants, and from non-enrolled girls in the same region of India. Including the experimental and control groups in the evaluation allowed useful comparisons to be made about the effects of the project on girls' experiences. The evaluation framework would have been significantly improved had broader baseline information been taken and incorporated into the project and evaluation design.

**Recommendations**

The ABAD CCT program can be an example to parliamentarians about the importance of rigorous empirical research to inform program design for projects aiming to increase the age of marriage. It also shows parliamentarians the importance of incorporating a number of project interventions to support girls and increase their value in their communities alongside economic incentives that could be provided to families for delaying marriage.

ABAD is also an example to parliamentarians of some of the ways that governments in particular can intervene and create programming to delay marriage. With the help of independent research and evaluation, these program interventions can be designed to appropriately address the root causes of early marriage in a given country context, and governments can be either program implementers or coordinators of large-scale efforts to end the practice.

**References**


Introduction

School enrollment rates in Egypt have skyrocketed in recent years. However, for girls, rates of school dropout and of never even enrolling in school are still as high as 26%. Because of conservative cultural norms, girls often must be closely supervised by family members until they are married. This means that when girls are not in school, they are even more likely to be married at earlier ages. In fact, rates of child marriage nationwide are above 20%, and nearer to 40% in rural areas in Upper Egypt.

Project objectives

The Ishraq program sought to reach out-of-school girls in rural Upper Egypt to address all aspects of their development, in turn delaying their marriage ages. It worked to enhance development of participating girls through changing gender norms and perceptions about girls’ roles in the community. Ishraq also sought to create safe spaces for girls to meet, play, and learn together, in order to enhance their self-confidence and basic life skills. These activities helped enhance girls’ plans for their own futures and aimed to facilitate the achievement of their life goals by educating and in forming boys, parents, community leaders, and program mentors (called “promoters”), who had an influence over the girls’ success and futures.

The emotional and skills development aspects of the program specifically aimed to:

- Increase girls’ literacy and educational aspirations;
- Improve girls’ knowledge of key health and rights issues;
- Increase girls’ life skills, civic engagement, and livelihood skills;
- Expand girls’ peer networks;
- Provide safe space for girls to learn and play;
- Increase girls’ financial literacy;
- Provide nutritional support;
- Influence attitudes of parents and boys toward girls and their capabilities; and
- Improve local and national policymakers’ support for girl-friendly measures and policies.

It was hoped that these project interventions would address the factors causing early marriage in these communities. Implementation

Ishraq was piloted by four NGOs operating in Egypt: Caritas, the Center for Development and Population Activities (CEPDA), the Population Council, and Save the Children. These NGO partners also collaborated with the Ministry of Youth and the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood. The program was subsequently scaled up nationwide by the National Council of Youth (NCY) with local and international NGO partners.

The program brought together out-of-school girls ages 12 to 15 in order to learn, socialize, and play together. In “safe spaces” settings, these girls received life skills training, literacy courses, and also engaged in sports and physical activity. Project officials worked with local leaders to dedicate the meeting spaces as girls-only space, where the girls could meet with the acceptance and support of their families and communities.

The program was managed at local levels by promoters, who were secondary school graduates from the communities. The promoters became the link between the girls, their families, and the broader program activities. They were able to serve as role models for the girls, and also teach life skills and literacy courses. The pilot phase ran from 2001 to 2003 in 4 villages in Minya governate, over 30 months, where girls met 4 times a week for 4 hours each time. This culminated in the girls sitting for the General Authority for Literacy and Adult Education (GALAE) government literacy exam, facilitating their entry into formal education. The project was subsequently expanded, between 2004 and 2007, into 5 additional villages in Minya and 5 other villages in Beni-Suef governate, and shortened to 24 months (and then eventually to 20 months) to facilitate girls taking the GALAE exam and enrolling in school. At the expansion phase, a formal 6-month program for boys was also instituted, where 13- to 17-year-old boys would meet 4 times a week to discuss topics such as gender equality, human rights, and family and community responsibilities.

In 2008, the program was scaled up to 30 more villages, at which phase financial literacy and nutrition components of the program were added. The financial literacy component corresponded with project officials facilitating program participants and promoters opening up savings accounts, giving participants $15 of seed money for their savings accounts and engaging parents in the process of enhancing girls’ capacity to save for the future. From 2011 to 2013, the program expanded to include a ‘graduates’ phase, to support program graduates who had entered into formal education. Because government regulations required that individuals who passed the literacy exam study from home for one year before entering formal schooling, the program supported these girls with tutoring five days per week while they prepared to enter formal schooling. The graduates phase also included further training on legal rights and financial literacy, especially for the girls who had been involved in Ishraq.
in its pilot and early phases. A business skills curriculum was also implemented for the graduates, in order to train them in small-business skills they may need to support themselves in the future.

Results

In its 10 years of implementation, Ishraq reached 3,321 girls, 1,775 boys, and 5,000 parents and community leaders in 54 villages throughout Egypt. During the scale-up phase, 2,119 girls were enrolled in the program, and 1,815 regularly attended program classes and activities (86% participation). Of participating girls, 1,645 of them sat for the GALAE exam, and of those, 1,443 passed (88% passage rate). Over 50% of those girls who passed the exam enrolled in school, and less than 2% of girls in the program dropped out to get married, compared with 30 to 40% of their peers, who would marry before age 18.

Participant girls also showed high levels of writing, reading comprehension, and math skills when compared to girls in the control groups who had not participated in the program. When measured on indicators such as self-esteem and decision-making, participant girls showed much higher rates than non-participant girls. Participant girls were also much more likely to want to delay marriage, bear fewer children, and reject female genital mutilation as an acceptable practice. Participants also reported high levels of confidence in their ability to start their own business, and by the end of the project, 15% of participants had already started their own businesses, compared with only 5% of girls in the control group.

Lessons learned

In extremely socially conservative contexts, the involvement of the local communities in dedicating safe spaces for girls will be critical for program success. Not only does this provide program staff with a physical space to hold meetings and other activities, but it also provides the community with the support of the local community.

The continual evaluation of the program and its activities also contributed to its effectiveness. Evaluation made expansion of the program possible because the effectiveness of individual project components could be measured and understood. This included adjusting the length of the program, and incorporating a specific component targeting boys. Evaluation also facilitated sustainability of the project through buy-in from national government entities and local organizations.

Conclusion

The Ishraq program, recognized for its success and rigorous evaluation approach, was able to reach thousands of girls and community members over more than a decade of activities. The model used is compelling in that it focused on education and getting girls back into formal education, but nonetheless had a major impact on the girls’ chances of entering into early marriages by incorporating programmatic linkages between education and the root causes of early marriage.

This project is an example of a good practice for ending child marriage because it addresses a critical barrier to girls’ education and empowerment in the specific country context, including the strict, religiously influenced practices in rural Upper Egypt. By focusing on creating safe spaces for girls, made available by the communities themselves, the project was able to provide a physical space for participants to come for education and training, including literacy training, and also to expand their social networks and have the opportunity for play and sport. These are critical aspects of empowerment of these girls, who would otherwise face years of social isolation.

Furthermore, this project was rigorously evaluated for the duration, leading to the growth and expansion of business training and financial literacy as the participating girls moved through their schooling and began to start their own business and support their families. The Ishraq approach was so successful that it was adopted by national government entities as well, sustaining the effectiveness of the program and expanding its reach into the future.

Recommendations

Ishraq furnishes an example to parliamentarians of the importance of research for program design, and for understanding and evaluating the cultural and contextual factors leading to early marriage and low levels of school enrollment in a given community or country. It is also an example of how to begin to reach girls in extremely isolating cultural contexts by first working with communities to create safe spaces, or girls-only spaces, where program activities can be carried out with the support of the local community.

It is also an example of a multi-stakeholder approach for sustainable change. The program relied on strong partnerships with national government agencies in order to facilitate girls’ re-entry into formal education, as well as strong ties with local government structures in order to ensure the program activities were supported by the community. This type of careful partnership development can have long-lasting results, where communities participate in decision-making and take ownership of programs to generate change.

Ishraq is unique in that it involves men and boys in programming, which can have the effect of not only supporting girls’ participation in program activities, but of promoting larger-scale attitude and behavior changes related to gender equality and child marriage. Parliamentarians can consider incorporating boys and men into programming in order to target gender equality outcomes, which can have the effect of reducing child marriage rates. They can also consider how to engage men who are already in decision-making roles to consider how to incorporate gender equality concerns into community life, creating sustainable societal change.
Ishraq is also an example to parliamentarians of how a long-term, adaptable program can serve girls throughout their participation in the program, into adulthood. Whereas girls initially needed opportunities to prepare them to enroll in school, after many of them had reached that milestone, the program was able to adapt and incorporate financial literacy and business skills training modules to prepare them for the next phases of their development and empowerment.

References


Introduction

Forty percent of the world’s child marriages occur in India, and almost half of all Indian women report being married before they turn 18. In Bihar State in Northern India, over 60% of women report being married before 18. Girls who marry this early are also likely to give birth to children early and at short intervals, dramatically affecting maternal and infant health and mortality.

Project objectives

In 2001, Pathfinder International implemented a program to promote changes in reproductive behavior among adolescents and young women in Bihar State, called Promoting Change in Reproductive Behavior (“PRACHAR”). The long-range objective of PRACHAR was to improve the health and welfare of young mothers and their children by changing beliefs, attitudes, and behavior of adolescents and young married couples, and also parents and influential community members. Specifically, the project aimed to delay a girl’s first childbirth to the age of 21, and to space the first and second birth at least 3 years apart. It also sought to delay marriage until at least the age of 18 by sensitizing both girls and their parents to the serious health consequences of early childbearing.

Implementation

The PRACHAR Program was implemented by Pathfinder pursuant to a grant from the David and Lucille Packard Foundation. It ran from 2001 to 2005 (Phase 1) and 2006 to 2009 (Phase 2). Increasingly integrated partnership with government was pursued throughout the project, and subsequent phases will be jointly implemented by government and NGO partners.

Beginning in 2002, activities commenced in 3 districts in Bihar State, covering 452 villages and targeting approximately 96,000 adolescents and young couples. Interventions began with a large ceremony to welcome new brides to their new families and communities, and to celebrate recent marriages. This ceremony facilitated bringing young couples out in public, rather than hiding them from the public eye, which had been culturally practiced. At this event, they were also taught about resisting pressure to bear children immediately, and received training on contraception, as well as being given some contraceptive tools such as condoms and birth control pills. Young couples also received subsequent home visits from project staff to train on contraceptive use and follow up on the training they had received at the ceremony. A similar program was designed for young married couples with one child in order to encourage them to delay their next child.

The program also focused on training girls aged 12 to 15 on menstrual and reproductive health. While some of these girls were already technically married, not all of them had begun to live with their spouses. Furthermore, girls and boys between the ages of 15 and 19 were trained on sexual health and preventing sexually transmitted disease. These groups also received extensive training about gender equality, sexual harassment, and early marriage. Cultural teams performed plays and dramas in villages throughout the implementation period, teaching about the dangers of early marriage and early childbearing. After some months of implementation, older community members affirmatively requested their own training on delaying marriage and childbearing as well, and programs were designed for older men and women on these topics.

Results

Rigorous evaluations were conducted on the program at the end of Phase 1 and Phase 2, as well as 4 years after the conclusion of Phase 2 (“post-Phase 2 study”) to determine the long-term effects on participants.

At the evaluation of Phase 2, the median age of marriage for project participants was 2.6 years higher than for non-participants. In the post-Phase 2 study, 62% of girls in the project areas had delayed marriage until age 18, whereas only 49% of girls in non-project areas had done the same. Furthermore, girls who had only been indirectly exposed to project activities in project areas also tended to delay marriage at similar rates as participants (61%), suggesting community-wide cultural and behavior change due to project interventions.

At the evaluation of Phase 2, the median age of marriage for project participants was 2.6 years higher than for non-participants. In the post-Phase 2 study, 62% of girls in the project areas had delayed marriage until age 18, whereas only 49% of girls in non-project areas had done the same. Furthermore, girls who had only been indirectly exposed to project activities in project areas also tended to delay marriage at similar rates as participants (61%), suggesting community-wide cultural and behavior change due to project interventions.

At the Phase 2 evaluation, girls participating in the project had delayed childbearing by approximately 1.6 years compared with girls who had not been exposed to project activities. At the post-Phase 2 evaluation, girls who had been directly exposed to the project activities delayed their first childbirth until approximately age 20.4, whereas girls in the control group had their first child at age 19.6. This smaller margin could be due in part to the fact that girls exposed to
project interventions had so successfully delayed marriage that delaying childbirth was not as feasible or as desirable.

Lessons learned

The PRACHAR Program’s use of reproductive health and maternal and infant health as an entry point to raise community awareness about the dangers of early childbirth and early marriage proved to be successful. While the program did not exclusively target early marriage, it was able to achieve the outcome of raising the age of marriage by bringing the community critical information about the health of their women and children, which was directly linked to the age of marriage and first childbirth.

Community members also showed great interest in this life-saving and health-improving information provided to young girls and young spouses, actually requesting their own trainings on the same topics. This experience shows that communities are ripe for mobilization on issues of maternal and child health. When activities are carefully designed to address cultural sensitivities such as same-gender groups and age-appropriate content, communities could be anxious to participate in program activities of such relevance to their lives and health.

Conclusion

PRACHAR mobilized girls, young couples, and parents and communities around the cause of improving maternal health and lessening infant mortality. Through rigorous and continual project evaluation, including the later post-Phase 2 study, the proven and long-term effects of project interventions were measured, showing a lasting effect on community attitudes and the health of young girls and their children, as well as increasing the age of marriage.

This project is an example of a good practice for ending child marriage because it effectively targets socially acceptable issues—maternal health and infant mortality—rather than directly targeting the culturally sensitive practice of child marriage. By taking this practical, health-based approach, the project interventions were able to succeed in raising the age of marriage through changing attitudes and perceptions about early childbearing.

Recommendations

PRACHAR is an example to parliamentarians of employing innovative and practical program design to raise the age of marriage, especially in contexts where a direct project objective and activities aimed at child marriage may be ineffective. Parliamentarians should consider how to implement health-centered programming aimed at raising awareness about the dangers of early childbirth in order to reach girls who are at risk of early marriage. Through mobilizing the community around the cause of raising the age of childbirth, they can also be effective partners in protecting girls from early marriage as well.

Furthermore, parliamentarians should consider incorporating health education components targeting community members in general, not just adolescents at risk of early marriage. Mobilizing communities to protect the health of their young mothers and children can be an effective way to address the practice as well.

References


**Introduction**

Forty percent of the world’s child marriages occur in India and almost half of all Indian women report being married before they turn 18. A community-based survey conducted in 1998 and 1999 in rural Maharashtra found that the average age for marriage among young girls was just 14.5 years. A common practice in the region is to stop girls from attending school when their schools are outside of their villages, so links have also been made between school enrollment and early marriage.

**Project objectives**

The Institute of Health Management implemented a life skills program to determine whether engaging girls in life skills education could reduce the incidence of early marriage. The project objectives included reducing maternal mortality and other health risks associated with early marriage and early childbearing. The project sought to achieve its objectives by:

1. Improving the social status of adolescent girls by helping them to develop skills related to gender equality, legal literacy, and team-building;
2. Improving adolescent girls’ health status by increasing their knowledge and practical skills in health and nutrition; and
3. Promoting self-development and increasing self-confidence and self-esteem through involvement in a community project.

In its design, the project aimed not only to delay marriage, but also to specifically measure the effect of a life skills program on the age of marriage.

**Implementation**

The Maharashtra Life Skills program was implemented by the Institute of Health Management in Pachod, India, with the support of the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). Because the program aimed to test the specific effect of a life skills program on the age of marriage, a study measuring its effects was designed to include experimental and control villages.

The program’s main activities were daily one-hour meetings held in the evenings, which were taught by trained, local women with a minimum 7th grade education. These meetings targeted unmarried girls between the ages of 12 and 18, primarily those who were already out of school or working.

The five major topics covered in these meetings were (1) social issues & institutions, (2) local government bodies, (3) life skills, (4) child health and nutrition, and (5) health. In total, girls were given 225 one-hour sessions covering 22 modules under these five topics. Specific module topics included sexual and reproductive health, household nutrition, literacy, and numeracy, among others.

The project also had a strong community involvement focus. The topics of the study modules were selected and designed through a participatory process involving unmarried adolescent girls and their mothers. Parents had input in the final form and delivery of the modules, ensuring buy-in and willingness to allow their girls to attend the meetings. Communities were also involved in hiring the teachers who headed the groups.

**Results**

The first program intake reached 700 girls, and the second intake reached 2,450 girls. Among those girls who fully attended the program, only 9% were married before the age of 18. Among those who partially completed the program, 22.6% were married before 18. For girls who never attended the program, over 29% were married before the age of 18.

When the control group (girls in villages not included in the program) is compared with the group who attended the program, the success of the program is evident. Among girls aged 11 to 17, 80.7% of them were married in 1997, before the project was implemented. After project implementation, in 2001, only 61.8% were married. During that same time period, no change in the rates of marriage for girls 11 to 17 years was observed in the control area. During this same time period, the median age of marriage for girls in the program rose from 16 to 17, and did not change at all in the control group. Girls who did not participate in the program were four times as likely to be married before the age of 18 than were girls in the project area. These results actually measure the impact of the program village-wide, including girls who did not actually enroll in the program in villages where it was implemented, as well as program participants.

The program was evaluated as successful and recognized by ICRW as a model for delaying marriage. It was also scaled up, and the life skills curriculum was used by other similar programs in other areas.
Lessons learned

The Maharashtra Life Skills Program was a successful intervention that aimed to address the precise factors influencing girls’ vulnerability to early marriage in the Maharashtra region. The development of a research-based approach to the program meant that the results were easy to identify. The inclusion of a control group in the evaluation meant that these results could be proven to be linked to the program interventions.

The Life Skills Program also shows how a program to delay marriage must be tailored to the root causes of early marriage in a particular community. In this case, a problem of girls’ social isolation due to lost educational opportunities was identified as a major factor. The program design was then tailored to some of the gaps in girls’ education, including practical life skills such as nutrition, reproductive health, and basic literacy and numeracy.

Conclusion

The Life Skills Program addressed the problem of early marriage directly, through an evidence-based, comprehensive intervention. From the outset, the project was designed around the need to test the effectiveness of the specific intervention (a life skills course) in delaying marriage. Through the collection of evidence in control areas as well as the project area, among both girls who attended the program and those who did not, the effects of the program in delaying marriage were measurable.

This project is an example of a good practice in ending child marriage because it identifies and addresses the root causes of early marriage in a specific community. This led to the development of a tailored life skills curriculum to empower out-of-school and working adolescent girls. This addressed the needs of out-of-school girls for both social inclusion and continued training and education in basic life skills. Through aiming to increase girls’ life skills and social inclusion, the project also addressed the empowerment needs and gaps that create the conditions for early marriage.

This program is also an example of a good practice for ending child marriage because it was designed from its outset to measure the impact of the particular interventions by tracking the age of marriage in both the program area and a control area. This monitoring and evaluation of effectiveness started with a baseline study on the age of marriage in the region. It then continued on to the identification of control and program villages, and at the end of the first year of intervention, the ages of marriage in control and program villages were compared with existing data on child marriage in India. The results in both the control and program areas were also measured four years after the original intervention to determine if the trends were sustainable and lasting.

Recommendations

The Maharashtra Life Skills program is an example for parliamentarians of how to design effective programs to combat early marriage by first studying and understanding the root causes of the practice in particular communities. This requires research and careful analysis of evidence, but when done properly, can yield overwhelming results.

The program is also an example to parliamentarians of how interventions do not have to be broad-sweeping and time-consuming in order to be effective as long as they are carefully planned and tailored to the root causes of early marriage in a particular community. It was based on a model of meeting with girls just one hour per day, and through those meetings and the carefully-selected training topics covered, as well as through the community participation in the program design, the program achieved the empowerment of these girls in such a way to delay marriage by an entire year when compared to control villages.

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Introduction

Although Sri Lanka has only recently emerged from protracted conflict, it has been recognized as a model country for ending child marriage. Through strong legislative frameworks that set a minimum age for marriage, and definitive policy actions toward enforcing those frameworks, Sri Lanka has advanced to having the lowest rate of child marriage in the region, at around 11 to 12%, whereas other South Asian countries are measured at between 25 and 66%. Sri Lanka in fact reports an even lower rate than Thailand (19.6%) and Cambodia (18.4%), countries where the child marriage problem is not as widely reported. While many countries in South Asia have legal standards setting the minimum age for marriage and requiring marriage registration, no others have attained the low rates of child marriage that Sri Lanka has. In addition to the government’s commitment to eradicating the practice of child marriage, the country’s universal education policy has also contributed to the delay in marriage age.

Project objectives

In 1995, the minimum age for marriage for both men and women in Sri Lanka was set by law at 18 years. Marriage registration has also been compulsory since the period of colonial rule, and includes the requirement that the marriage be entered into by mutual consent of the spouses. Marriages that involve a child under the age of 18 are subject to annulment.

1997 was declared the “Year of Education Reforms” in Sri Lanka, with two broad, overarching objectives:

1. To provide a system of education which would empower students with the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to make them productive citizens; and
2. To create a future generation with correct values, compassion, and care toward fellow citizens to live with tolerance toward each other.

With the aim of enforcing marriage laws and promoting universal education, this set of reforms created an enabling legal and policy environment to raise the age of marriage for girls and promote their empowerment, narrowing the gender gap.

Implementation

The Government of Sri Lanka has introduced a number of progressive education reforms, beginning from the time of its independence, in 1948. Government primary and secondary schools are free and accessible to all citizens. Tuition in state universities is also free if students are able to qualify for admission with high marks and exam scores. Other related initiatives to increase primary and secondary school enrollment, aside from the free tuition, include free lunches, free school uniforms, and free textbooks. The government has also reformed the education system multiple times since independence and has undertaken standardization of curriculum, increased the reach of government schools, and also continually enhanced and developed teacher training and teacher education programs. Government school curricula also include sexual and reproductive health lessons relevant to adolescent health and women’s health. These advances in education were brought about through significant collaboration between government, NGOs, and donors, incorporating non-formal education into the range of programs to reach out-of-school children.

In addition to these progressive reforms in education, Sri Lanka adopted legislation in the mid-1990s that created an enabling legal environment for the eradication of child marriage, including raising the minimum age for marriage, requiring (and enforcing) registration of marriages, and providing for annulment of marriages in which either spouse was under 18 at the time of the marriage. In successfully implementing the marriage registration law, additional legislation making birth registration mandatory was also necessary so that the ages of the spouses could be proven before a marriage was granted.

Results

Sri Lanka has been widely recognized as a model country for the elimination of child marriage. Only 2% of women aged 20 to 24 report being married before age 15, and only 12% of those women report being married by age 18. In the rest of the South Asia region, the numbers are much higher—for girls married before they were 18, the percentages are up to 47% in India, up to 66% in Bangladesh, and up to 40% in Nepal. Sri Lanka has the highest average age of marriage in the region, at 25 years.

Primary education enrollment is also extremely high at 97%. Only 3.7% of junior secondary school students remain out of school. Disadvantaged and rural schools in the conflict-affected northern and eastern provinces of the country suffer school enrollment deficits and education quality issues, along with slightly higher rates of child marriage.

In implementing the law creating the minimum age for marriage, the government facilitated the creation of systems to keep records at the national level in order to minimize
misapplication of the laws and abuse of discretion at local levels. In 2010, the National Child Protection Authority (NCPA) followed through on a legislative mandate allowing it to annul 300 marriages in which one spouse was under the age of 18 at the time of the marriage.

**Lessons learned**

Sri Lanka’s commitment to eradicate child marriage is demonstrated by government enactment of a number of legal reforms and support for a number of important policies that created the conditions to raise the minimum age of marriage. This included a gender-neutral minimum age of marriage, a marriage registration law, and a strong commitment to universal, free education for both boys and girls.

One of the challenges to eradicating child marriage in Sri Lanka has been the conflict of interest between the northern and eastern regions of the country. Some families in these regions reportedly opted for early marriages in order to prevent their children from being recruited as child soldiers. However, as the conflict has subsided, a re-commitment to the existing national laws and policy frameworks in these regions should be successful in protecting girls in these regions from early marriages as well.

Another challenge to eradicating early marriage in Sri Lanka is the concurrence of different religious practices that are protected by law but that provide different rights for young girls in respect of marriage. For example, a separate legal regime exists for marriage under Muslim personal and civil status laws than for non-Muslim girls. Although strict minimum ages for marriage often prove to be untenable in some predominantly Muslim communities, sensitizing these communities to the health benefits and economic benefits of delaying marriage and continuing girls’ education can be a successful approach to reach these groups.

Although Sri Lanka’s success in eradicating child marriage is clear, no studies or evaluations of these reforms are available to prove the effectiveness of these specific initiatives in fighting the practice. Carefully considered research and evaluation of the implementation of laws and policies related to marriage and education could contribute to enhanced reproducibility and a better understanding of the effect of various legal instruments and policies in eradicating child marriage for similar projects in the future.

**Conclusion**

Sri Lanka introduced a series of gender-neutral policy reforms in the areas of marriage law and education policy that had the effect of protecting girls from early marriage. The emphasis on Sri Lanka’s universal, free education program is also significant because it has the effect of empowering girls, inviting them into safe social spaces, getting them out of seclusion, and equipping them with the necessary skills to succeed in life and even pursue higher education. These reforms had the effect of making Sri Lanka the model in the region for low child marriage rates, where girls have the freedom to choose education rather than marriage throughout their adolescence.

Sri Lanka’s legal and policy reforms are an example of a good practice for fighting child marriage because they show an education policy approach that has a strong correlation with delayed marriage. Increasing school enrollment for girls creates an environment where girls are empowered throughout society. Waiving school fees means that girls face no additional economic barriers to continuing their education. Furthermore, communities learn to accept that education for both boys and girls is a compulsory and natural part of growing up.

Sri Lanka’s reforms are also an example of government getting behind efforts, and provide a model for the enabling legal and policy framework needed to make substantial steps toward ending child marriage. Part of the success of these reforms is due to the fact that the two legislative agendas (minimum age of marriage, universal education) were both implemented. In this way, the minimum age legislation set the norm for a lawful and acceptable age for marriage, and the education policies set the norm that girls should have free and equal access to education, and families should prioritize sending girls to school rather than arranging to marry them.

**Recommendations**

Sri Lanka’s policy reforms create a roadmap for parliamentarians of the package of legislation necessary to create the conditions for eradication of child marriage, including (1) a minimum age for marriage law, (2) mandatory marriage registration (along with mandatory birth registration and provision for the annulment of child marriages), and (3) universal, free education. Along with this enabling legal and policy environment, the government’s strong commitment to effectively enforce and implement these laws and policies will contribute to delayed marriage.

These policy reforms are an example to parliamentarians of considering child marriage as a form of violence against women and as a crosscutting issue that should be addressed in multiple legal instruments, policy documents, and programs. The experience of Sri Lanka in eradicating child marriage is also an example of how child marriage can be addressed by government in its policies, and does not require total reliance on NGO partners to develop programmatic solutions.

**References**


Introduction

Malawi has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, with 50% of girls married by the age of 18, and 12% of girls married by the age of 15. In 2015, UNICEF ranked Malawi ninth highest in the world for child marriage. Furthermore, 15-to-24 year-olds in Malawi are at the highest risk for new HIV infection, and girls are at significantly higher risk than are boys. In Malawi, where over 50% of the population live below the poverty line and the GNI per capita is only $250, addressing economic motivations is likely to have a positive impact on increasing the age of marriage.

Project objectives

The Zomba Cash Transfer Project aimed to reduce the prevalence of early marriage by determining the linkages between school enrollment and child marriage, and between financial stability and child marriage. It also aimed to increase school enrollment, keep girls in school, increase girls’ knowledge of sexual and reproductive health issues, and in particular decrease HIV infections among adolescents.

The project also aimed to measure the different effects of different types of cash transfers on child marriage rates. The two types included in the study were (1) a conditional cash transfer (CCT) where the transfer was dependent on the girl’s school enrollment status, and (2) an unconditional cash transfer (UCT) where the girl’s family received the transfer without regard to her school attendance.

Implementation

The Zomba Cash Transfer Project was implemented by the World Bank from 2007 to 2009 in the Zomba region of southern Malawi. The program’s two distinct cash transfer components were: (1) a CCT designed to be conditional on a girl’s school attendance; and (2) a UCT given to girls regardless of their school attendance. Girls involved in the project either received the CCT or the UCT. A control group of girls who received neither type of transfer was also included to measure program impacts.

Girls in the CCT program received approximately $1 to $5 per month, in addition to the payment of their school fees directly to their schools, during the program. These transfers were conditional upon the individual girls maintaining school attendance rates of 80% or above. Girls in the UCT program received a similar amount of cash, including what would have been paid as school fees, directly and without the condition of school attendance.

Results

The effects on school enrollment in both the CCT and UCT components were positive when compared with girls in the control group, who had not received any form of cash transfer. School dropout was actually slightly more common among girls in the CCT program than in the UCT program. When measuring the regularity of attendance for those girls who remained in school, girls in either of the programs were more likely to be regularly attending school than were those in the control areas. For regularity of school attendance, among girls in the CCT program who did not drop out of school, they were more likely to attend school regularly than were girls in the UCT program.

The effects of the two types of cash transfers upon marriage age were also measured. In the control group who did not receive any cash transfers, 18% of participants were married within one year of the end of the program. For girls in the control group who had dropped out of school, 38% had gotten married within that year, tending to show a strong linkage between school enrollment and marriage in Malawi. Girls in the control group married at a rate of 4.8% and girls in the conditional group had very similar rates of marriage. Girls in the unconditional group (with no requirement to attend school in order to receive the monthly funds) had 56% lower probability of being married. These differences are particularly shown in girls aged 16 years and older, as the legal age for marriage in Malawi is 16 for girls.

In effect, the cash transfer made without any condition that the girl also remain enrolled in school actually yielded significantly lower rates of child marriage among this group of girls than in the control group or the group that received a transfer with the condition of regularly attending school. These somewhat surprising results could be explained by the fact that the UCT specifically reached out to many girls who were not enrolled in school at the time of the program and would have been at an exceptionally high risk for early marriage. Other explanations for these unexpected results could include (1) the relatively low age for marriage in Malawi, conflicting with regular years of school enrollment, (2) inclusion of girls in the program with already weak social ties to their nuclear families, putting them at a significantly high risk for early marriage whether or not they are enrolled in school, and (3) the relatively short duration of the program for participant girls (one to two years), reducing the likelihood that participation in the program would influence the family’s decision to marry the girl.
Lessons learned

The Zomba Cash Transfer Program shows the importance of understanding the legal-cultural framework for child marriage in a specific program area before designing an intervention. Although school enrollment did increase for girls in both transfer groups, the addition of the condition that the girls attend school to receive the conditional transfer did not actually have a measurable effect on the girls’ school enrollment, and had less of an effect than the unconditional transfer on child marriage rates. This suggests that economic drivers alone do not fully explain early marriage and school dropout.

The experience with the Zomba Cash Transfer Program also shows that, although school enrollment and child marriage rates are undoubtedly linked, their mutual cause and effect are influenced by the legal and cultural context in each country and region independently. This program shows that it is probably not accurate to assume that dropping out of school is actually a cause of early marriage in each case. The two issues are highly correlated, but the causation is affected by other factors specific to each country context.

Furthermore, this program shows the importance of continual monitoring and evaluation of program results in cash transfer projects, in order to assess the independent effects of conditions, school enrollment, and amounts of cash transferred in various forms, in order to appropriately address child marriage through cash transfers. Scientific studies of program results are critical for understanding the impact of cash transfers on child marriage rates.

Conclusion

The Zomba Cash Transfer Program was carefully designed and studied through rigorous scientific methods to test the effect of cash transfers, whether conditioned or not, on school enrollment and early marriage. The study design also revealed linkages between school enrollment and early marriage in the regional context of Zomba, Malawi. Because of the study design and analysis of the program interventions, comparing conditional and unconditional transfers with control groups, future programming to combat early marriage in Malawi can build upon the lessons learned from the Zomba program as well.

This program is an example of a good practice in ending child marriage because it tested independent effects of cash transfer as well as cash transfer with the condition of school attendance. Because some cash transfer programs have had ambiguous results, the testing of simultaneous conditional and unconditional transfers is a major contribution to child marriage understanding and programming. By identifying various influences on the girls’ likelihood of being married and attending school, the research on these programs actually tested the effect of the conditions themselves, as well as the delivery of cash, by comparing outcomes in the program groups and a control group.

Recommendations

In replicating the impact of the Zomba Cash Transfer Program, parliamentarians should take note of the study design elements and consider how to enhance their understanding of the root causes of child marriage in their own countries. This involves designing interventions that include substantial baseline studies and that provide for measuring impacts at the end of the project, which can not only assess the effectiveness of the interventions but also provide lessons learned for future programs.

Parliamentarians should also consider the effect of simply providing additional cash to households as one way of combating early marriage. In the Zomba project, this extra household income provided through the cash transfers did allow girls to stay in school, or to enroll in school, and to avoid early marriages even when the cash transfer did not specifically call for girls to attend school.

References


Security for Girls through Land ("Girls Project")

Introduction

Over 40% of Indian girls are married before they turn 18 and less than 50% of Indian girls continue their studies through to secondary school. Many successful programs targeting school dropouts and early marriage focus on teaching girls life skills, through which they can gain income-generating skills, and also learn critical reproductive health and women’s health information that will empower them to advocate for themselves in the face of early marriage. Recently, the Government of India introduced a state-run life skills program, called the Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (commonly known as “SABLA”), to address the empowerment of girls, enhance their access to education, and delay their marriage.

Project objectives

As part of the SABLA program, the NGO Landesa aimed to develop additional components for the SABLA program, in a pilot project called “Security for Girls through Land” (“Girls Project”). Landesa focuses on increasing access to land and securing land rights for the poor, and designed a land rights training component to be incorporated into the classic empowerment curriculum of SABLA. Landesa’s land rights training was tested as part of the implementation of SABLA in rural West Bengal.

The objectives of the project include:

- Improving girls’ long-term economic and social prospects by enhancing their attainment of secure rights to land, enabling them to reduce vulnerabilities they face, including child marriage and lack of education;
- Increasing awareness and understanding among both girls and their communities about girls’ rights to land;
- Training girls to use their rights to land to increase their assets and demonstrate their value; and
- Sensitizing boys and communities to vulnerabilities faced by girls and girls’ rights and benefits in respect to land.

Implementation

This project was implemented beginning in 2010 by Landesa, in partnership with the West Bengal Department of Women and Child Development. The SABLA program was simultaneously being implemented in West Bengal and many other states across India while the “Girls Project” was being piloted. In addition to a practical nutrition component, the SABLA program offered training to girls on health, family nutrition, and life skills. The project also incorporated land-related training into the existing SABLA training scheme in the pilot areas. After the initial pilot period and conclusion of an agreement with state government for enhanced cooperation, the project launched a second phase in additional villages in 2013.

The main project activities included reaching out to girls through their “girls groups”, which also met regularly as part of the larger SABLA program. The project activities facilitated discussions and training for girls on their land rights, including equal inheritance rights. These groups were also a forum to practice land-based livelihood skills, and to access government resources for securing their rights to land. Girls in these groups were also trained on kitchen gardens, where they learned to cultivate produce that could be consumed by their families or sold for income.

In addition to these project activities specifically targeting girls, the project also targeted boys and whole communities to be sensitized to the nature of girls’ land rights, and the benefits of respecting those rights. These activities were conducted through curricula for boys and community members, which were presented at community meetings and in schools. Community members were also engaged in “community conversations”, which were facilitated discussions for community members to discuss issues of girls’ access to land rights and girls’ empowerment.

Results

Since its inception in 2010, the “Girls Project” has reached over 40,000 girls in 1,000 villages in Cooch Behar District in West Bengal. At the time the project was evaluated in 2013, girls who had been through the program were 24% more likely to inherit land and to be earning their own income. They were also 15% more likely to have a financial asset like a savings account or a life insurance policy. These girls were also 13% less likely to drop out of school in their transition to secondary school than were their peers in the control group. These participating girls were also 18% more likely to participate in the family’s cultivation at home, and among those in project areas helping with cultivation at home; they were 26% more likely than their peers in the control group to be able to keep some of that income from cultivation as their own. Significantly, through participation in the program and through realizing these other rights and benefits, participating girls were marrying later than were their peers in the control group. Participating girls were marrying one-and-a-half years later than if they had not participated in the program, at an average age of 21.5. The data also showed that every additional year of education reduced the girl’s likelihood of
marriage during the project period, and increased her age of marriage. Participants also showed increased knowledge about the legal age for marriage, and their parents were likely to pay lower dowry amounts once they did get married. Participating girls’ parents were also more likely to make a specific bequest to the girl at the time of her marriage.

Lessons learned

This project shows the links between early marriage, girls’ access to land, understanding of their rights to land, and how to put land to productive use. While life skills and livelihood training are common features of empowerment and early marriage programming, the emphasis on land seen in this project was a new innovation, and proved to be a successful one.

Landesa documented the critical importance of well-trained, engaged peer leaders for its participants to the overall success of the program, as well as support from parents for their girls’ participation in activities. Awards and incentives were offered to high-performing peer leaders to compel them to improve their performance and ability to motivate participating girls.

In program activities designed to sensitize boys to girls’ land rights and vulnerabilities, project staff noted barriers, such as time conflicts for boys, and also the ineffectiveness of regular, sit-down discussions. Through these assessments, program staff tried new approaches, including interactive dramas and theater productions, and less frequent meetings. The program components for boys were also channeled through their schools in order to address problems with finding times when the boys were available to participate in project activities. Building strong relationships with school administrators and teachers proved critical for the implementation and success of these activities.

In sensitizing communities through “community conversations”, project implementers noted the difficulty of facilitating these discussions as well as a need for highly trained and skilled staff to facilitate them. These community conversations, if not carefully facilitated, could actually be detrimental to program objectives and girls’ empowerment. Community meetings could be instituted as a less open and slightly less participant-driven model, where critical information could still be shared with community members in support of project objectives without the risk of outspoken members pushing the discussion in gender-discriminatory directions.

Conclusion

Working closely with the Indian government, Landesa used land as a vehicle through which to promote empowerment of girls, enhance girls’ economic opportunities, and also increase the age of marriage. By providing girls with training about their land rights and also providing them necessary life skills to generate income and create assets through the productive use of land, the project was successful not only in economically empowering girls, but also in delaying age at marriage. While the program also aimed to enhance the support of boys and communities for girls’ access to land and rights to land, those outcomes had not yet been measured at the time of the latest project evaluation.

This program is an example of a good practice in ending child marriage because it addresses land as a specific income-producing asset in order to empower girls and to enhance their income production and economic contribution to their families. Because land is an asset that many girls would already have access to through inheritance laws, increasing girls’ access to land and use of land is a way to enhance their economic production capacities without additional program interventions such as micro-loans or other resource-intensive activities.

The Girls Project was also implemented as a component of an existing government initiative to empower girls and delay marriage throughout the country. As part of a multi-faceted, government-led effort, this specific program to enhance girls’ realization of their rights to land was measurably successful and sustainable.

Recommendations

Based on the success of the project, parliamentarians should consider ways to incorporate land rights training into existing programs to empower girls and teach them life skills. Not only should girls be trained on their legal rights in relation to marriage, and on the minimum legal age for marriage, but they should also learn in detail about their rights to land and how to access those rights through the government institutions charged with protecting them. Furthermore, in designing life skills training programs as part of empowerment projects aimed at delaying marriage, parliamentarians should also include land-based activities and land-based asset creation in addition to training on other methods of income generation. In countries where girls do have equal rights to inherit and own property, land could be seen as an existing asset for girls and training them from an early age on ways to put that asset to good and productive use can be a significant factor in delaying age at marriage.

References


Introduction

Approximately 40% of the population in Nepal are married before they reach age 18. Gender stereotypes, inequity and unfair treatment, and inequalities in resource and service access perpetuate these high rates of child marriage; Nepal ranks among the lowest countries on the UNDP Gender Inequality Index, at 145th out of 188 countries. Beliefs about traditional gender roles, stereotypes, and discrimination are often formed in adolescence. Reaching out to both girls and boys in their early adolescence by modeling alternative behaviors to the traditionally rigid roles of masculinity and femininity modeled in their communities, can effect changes in the deep-seated beliefs, especially among boys and young men, that perpetuate the “demand” side of child marriage.

Project objectives

Save the Children’s “Choices” program aimed to reach young adolescent boys and girls by transforming their thinking about gender roles and what is thought of as appropriate behavior for both. Given the link between gender inequity and child marriage, the project aimed to encourage behaviors that would decrease the gender gap and ensure equal opportunities in the future for both boys and girls. It did so by aiming to encourage children to pursue more positive expressions of gender roles both at home and in their wider communities.

Implementation

The Choices project was piloted by Save the Children in 2010 in the Siraha district of Nepal. The project received support from USAID, and was evaluated by the Institute for Reproductive Health in 2011. In 2013, a comprehensive evaluative article on the program was published in the journal, Gender and Development.

The main activity in the Choices project was the delivery of a curriculum that addressed:
- Gender inequity and power;
- Respect for boys who treat girls as equals;
- Allowing boys and girls to express emotions and realize their hopes and dreams; and
- Boys and girls empowering girls to achieve their dreams.

This curriculum was delivered to boys and girls age 10 to 14 through existing children’s clubs throughout the project area, in a once-per-week, two-hour session for three months. The curriculum was administered by a team of facilitators, one female and one male for each club. The facilitators were chosen from among former child club members age 18 to 24 in their home areas.

The curriculum consisted of a series of activities, including age-appropriate games and discussions, to model principles of equality and non-discrimination for the children. For example, in one activity, called “Green versus Blue”, children were arbitrarily assigned to either the Blue group or the Green group and told that one group was better than the other. Afterward, they discussed their feelings about being put into their respective groups, and came to better understand gender inequity. In other activities, they participated in simulated scenarios where either boys or girls face challenges in overcoming gender inequality, and discussed strategies to address those challenges.

Throughout the project period, facilitators documented the children’s experiences in their clubs. They documented various emotional responses from the children provoked by different activities, as well as the children’s experiences with gender discrimination, and some of their hopes for a more equal future.

Results

The 2011 evaluation of the project measured implementation of the pilot, which reached 309 children (148 girls and 161 boys) between the ages of 10 and 14 in 12 different villages. The evaluation compared the experience of these children with 298 children (135 girls, 159 boys) in control “clubs” that did not receive the Choices curriculum.

When compared to the control group, the children in the program area showed significantly increased understanding in all evaluated areas, including important issues influencing child marriage, such as gender discrimination, control and dominance, and girls’ access to education. Children who received the Choices curriculum also came to believe that women and girls could perform a wide range of tasks and activities, shifting their notions about traditional gender roles.

Boys who received the curriculum enhanced their participation in household chores at much higher rates than boys in the control group who did not receive the curriculum, supporting the finding that boys were changing their views

about gender roles based on their participation in the program. These changes were compared with very little or no change noted in the control group on most of the measured outcomes, even though these children were still participating in children’s clubs, but were not receiving the Choices curriculum. The evaluations did not measure other specific child marriage outcomes or rates of child marriage among program participants. The evidence that participating children came to support girls continuing their education does suggest they would prioritize education over early marriage.

Lessons learned

Early adolescence is a critical and fruitful time for interventions focused on shifting beliefs about gender roles. Although the pilot lasted only three months, it was successful in all measured outcomes in changing attitudes, and in cases where it was possible to measure, behavior of children toward gender equality. This program also showed the impact of young adolescents learning through creative, participatory activities and games that allowed them to have an experience and then share their feelings about that experience. In particular, many of the activities included in the curriculum required the children to put themselves in another person’s place and see situations from new perspectives. This proved to be successful in shifting children’s attitudes about gender roles and gender inequality.

Although this project has been evaluated positively and has been replicated, because it did not include specific child marriage outcomes or indicators, it is difficult to know the impact this intervention had on attitudes and behaviors related to child marriage. While marriage for girls under 15 is rare, and thus measuring marriage rates of participants during the project would not have been as helpful, enough time has now elapsed that a follow-up study could be conducted to determine whether rates of marriage among Choices participants are any different than that for their counterparts in control areas once they enter later adolescence.

Conclusion

The Choices curriculum was an innovative approach to engaging boys in ending child marriage. Through a focus on attitudes and behaviors of boys, in particular in their views about gender roles, gender equality, and equal access to education, the curriculum aimed to shift the demand side of child marriage, enlisting boys who could later be pressured into early marriages with young girls in speaking out against child marriage.

This program is an example of a good practice in fighting child marriage because it targets a key demographic, young adolescent boys, who are often not included in child marriage programming. Not only does this project seek to shift the attitudes of boys, but it does so at a specific point in their intellectual and emotional development, when they have the capacity to understand these complex concepts, while at the same time shifting and refining their attitudes through effective teaching.

The Choices program is also an example of a good practice in combatting child marriage because it focuses on some of the root causes of child marriage in the project’s specific communities—gender inequity, traditionalized gender roles, and inequality of access to rights and services. Although this made the project’s specific impacts on child marriage more difficult to measure, the overwhelmingly positive results shown in shifting the attitudes of both boys and girls about gender equality and gender roles suggest that positive effects on delaying marriage will also occur.

Recommendations

In line with the success of the Choices curriculum, parliamentarians should consider ways to incorporate training and teaching for young boys, in particular about gender roles and gender equality, into programs to delay marriage. Addressing these issues directly through age-appropriate activities can have quick and measurable effects on boys’ beliefs about traditional gender roles and girls’ access to education.

Furthermore, in implementing programs to shift the attitudes of young boys about gender equality and gender roles, parliamentarians should ensure that child marriage indicators and activities are included in monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Because of the proven openness of boys in this age group to re-consider gender roles and gender equality, targeted activities and interventions related to child marriage and delaying marriage should also be specifically included in the curriculum.

References


Conclusion

While many successful approaches to combating child marriage have been presented and assessed here, the major lesson learned through these good practices is that child marriage must be addressed with a view to the specific social, historical, and cultural context of each country and community. Projects that are the most successful at reducing rates of child marriage are those that are based on sound research on the root causes of child marriage in the target communities. When sound research is combined with a robust monitoring and evaluation framework, results can be proven, approaches tailored and improved, and activities expanded, as shown in the most effective projects reported on here.

The incorporation of gender-sensitive programming, including specially tailored programming to reach out to boys and men, is also a specific innovation reflected in this report that deserves particular recognition. Programming to change attitudes of boys and men about gender equality and child marriage can create long-lasting attitudinal shifts, affecting the “demand side” of child marriage for the better. Furthermore, applying proven models of community empowerment and multi-stakeholder engagement to child marriage programming can also facilitate the long-lasting change needed to develop communities that protect their own girls from early marriage.

The included good practices here provide examples of programming in a wide variety of countries and cultural contexts, and can provide parliamentarians with a toolkit for child marriage programming. However, parliamentarians must take up the responsibility to design programs and policies that incorporate sound research and evaluation models in order to ensure the effectiveness of these critical initiatives and protect their girls from the dangers of child marriage.