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Can Words Bridge Gaps?

Exploring the Effects of a Communication Intervention Between Parents and Adolescents on Child Marriage

BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD)
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Introduction

The Context

Rajia, an adolescent girl from Bagmara, Rajshahi, faced the prospect of marriage just before her Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examinations. Although she was allowed to take her exams, her chances for further education were uncertain. Rajia implored her mother to delay the marriage until her results were published, vowing to acquiesce if her performance was unsatisfactory.

In Bangladesh, early marriage is often seen as a means to secure a girl's social and economic future, especially among impoverished families (Amin et al., 2016; Amin & Huq, 2008; Chowdhury, 2008; Greene & Stiefvater, 2019; Lahiri-Dutt & Samanta,

2014)"properties";{"formattedCitation":'(Amin et al., 2016; Amin & Huq, 2008; Dutt & Samanta, 2014; Greene & Stiefvater, 2019; Jahan Chowdhury, 2008. Discussions about marriage or intimate relationships between adolescents and their parents are typically limited, as both parties generally consider these topics sensitive and embarrassing (Bhan et al., 2019; Greene & Stiefvater, 2019; Parvin et al., 2020). Adolescent girls are often hesitant to voice their aspirations for education or employment, knowing that these decisions depend on parental approval and the possibility of delaying marriage (Amin & Huq, 2008; Parvin et al., 2020). Parents play a pivotal role in determining marriage decisions for their daughters (Bhan et al., 2019; McDougal et al., 2018)but little quantitative work in this area has been conducted.

This study assesses the effects of the parent-child relationship in early adolescence (aged 12 years, and their active involvement can significantly influence the reinforcement or challenge of societal norms regarding early marriage and gender equity. To investigate how improved parent-adolescent relationships might affect decision-making, the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), in collaboration with the Center for Global Development (CGD), implemented a pilot intervention aimed at fostering open dialogue between parents and adolescents. The focus was on gender norms, technology use, marriage preferences, and educational aspirations. Simultaneously, BIGD conducted a pilot study to explore parent-adolescent dynamics and assess the implementation of the intervention within their social context, ultimately refining the program's design.

The Intervention

The curriculum for the intervention, designed for both parents and adolescents, was developed in collaboration with experts in child psychology and adolescent health. The program consisted of eight sessions, each lasting between 60 and 90 minutes. Each session followed a similar structure: an introductory segment, a core segment where key topics were discussed, and a concluding segment summarizing the main points. Participants were also given home activities to reinforce the session's content. Except for the first session, each subsequent session began with a brief recap of the previous session along with an update on the assigned home tasks. To keep the sessions engaging, icebreakers and role-playing activities were frequently incorporated.

The pilot intervention was implemented in two districts: Bagmara, Rajshahi, and Pirojpur, Barishal. Two trainers were assigned to each district to facilitate the sessions. The entire intervention was completed within 56 days.

While it was ideal for both parents/caregivers to participate, we recognized that fathers' work obligations might limit their availability. Consequently, mothers were required to attend all eight sessions,

whereas fathers were required to attend only three sessions (Sessions 1, 5, and 8). The concluding session required the participation of both parents and their adolescent children.

Although positive parenting principles have proven successful in other contexts (Juffer et al., 2008), we sought to ensure that the curriculum was suitable for rural Bangladeshi settings. After developing a draft version of the curriculum, we field-tested the content to gauge the understanding of rural participants, identify logistical challenges, and assess the respondents' perceptions of the relevance and coherence of the material. The insights gained from this field test informed necessary revisions to the curriculum.

The Pilot Study

A total of 92 households, each with an adolescent daughter aged between 11 and 17, were selected from the intervention sites and divided into eight groups of approximately 10 households each. Four of these groups were randomly assigned to receive the counselling intervention, while the remaining four served as control groups. The qualitative component of the research employed a case study approach, focusing on 24 families as collective cases, equally divided between intervention and control groups. Data were collected through in-depth interviews (IDIs) with parents and adolescents, focus group discussions (FGDs), and participant observations.

In this article, we present key findings from our pilot intervention, including participants' responses to the program.



Findings

Program Reception

One of the key insights from the pilot study was the importance of the facilitator's gender in the delivery of these sessions. Participant observations revealed that both adolescents and mothers were more comfortable when sessions were conducted by female trainers rather than male trainers. The inclusion of games and activities in each session was also beneficial for fostering active participation. Given the length of the sessions, which lasted around 1 to 1.5 hours each, we included role-plays and games to maintain engagement. Participant observations indicated active engagement from both mothers and adolescents, characterized by enthusiasm and curiosity towards both the content and the trainers. Notably, fathers were entirely absent from these sessions, resulting in a lack of data on their specific reactions and experiences.

Participants' Feedback

Feedback from participants suggests that the knowledge gained from the sessions was integrated

into their communication and parenting strategies. For instance, some mothers reported that they now regularly praised their children for desired behaviour, a practice they had not followed before. Several mothers also noted a shift in their approach to discipline, choosing to resolve conflicts through assertive communication rather than physical punishment.

Similarly, we observed positive shifts in some aspects of the adolescents' behaviour and perceptions. For example, one adolescent shared that she had developed a deeper appreciation for her mother's efforts in raising her. The session on gender roles, which involved adolescent girls swapping traditionally gendered tasks with their brothers (or other male siblings), appeared to influence perceptions of gender roles among both adolescents and parents. Many girls reported taking on activities typically associated with males, such as grocery shopping or fixing appliances, while some successfully encouraged their brothers to engage in traditionally feminine tasks like washing dishes or cleaning the house. FGD findings suggest that this task swap also influenced mothers'

perceptions of gender equality, particularly concerning domestic responsibilities. One mother reflected on her experience with child marriage and reconsidered its potential impact on her daughter's future.

Deep-Rooted Gender Norms

Parents, both mothers and fathers, place a high value on the “purity” of their daughters, which is considered crucial for securing a desirable marriage proposal—a quality that can be tarnished for seemingly minor reasons. These reasons may include something as simple as being seen conversing with a male in the community or even being the victim of harassment. To secure a respectable groom, parents often go to great lengths to ensure their daughters maintain a pristine reputation within the local community. This frequently results in restricting their daughters' mobility outside the home, including limiting their access to and use of mobile phones. These measures are seen as essential to preserving their daughters' reputations until marriage. Interestingly, despite such strict measures, parents did not report any restrictions on their daughters' schooling, indicating an acknowledgement of the value of education, though the motivation for educating girls differs from that for boys, as discussed later.

“ But there are bad boys on the streets. Bad boys will approach her when she goes out. If anyone sees that my girl is talking to a boy, it will ruin her reputation. Therefore, it's better to stay at home than to go outside. Because if you are on the streets, 10 people will see you, but if you are at home, no one sees you. Such a girl has a higher demand in the marriage market. A girl is considered good if she only goes to school and is not seen messing around on the streets. This is the best.

—A mother discussing her daughter

Who Are They Closer To? Fathers or Mothers?

Fathers, often the primary earners in the household, view their role as providers as the ultimate expression of their commitment and affection towards their children. They believe that fulfilling their children's material needs is the most effective way to fulfil their parental duties. While some fathers may wish to be more involved in their daughters' lives, their absence due to work limits their opportunities to connect and build a stronger bond.

“ If I had money, I would have spent more time with them. I would have time to sit and eat with them, ask about their well-being, and inquire about their daily activities. God did not give me that opportunity.

—A father discussing his daughter

“ Baba cannot stay at home much. After working the whole day, Baba feels a little irritable. Therefore, I cannot share everything with him all the time.

—An adolescent girl discussing her father

Mothers, on the other hand, reported encouraging open communication with their daughters about relationships; yet, they harboured concerns about the possibility of their daughters becoming romantically involved. To safeguard their daughters, parents often restrict access to mobile phones, which they perceive as a potential gateway for engaging with the opposite gender. However, these restrictions and the mixed messages they send may inadvertently hinder the very communication they wish to foster with their adolescents.

“ Till date, I trust my daughter. No one knows what will happen in the future because people are unpredictable. I trust my daughter not to bring dishonour upon the family, but let's see; people change.

—A mother discussing her daughter

“ My son has a mobile phone. My elder daughter, who is married, has a mobile phone to stay connected with her husband. But my youngest daughter is still unmarried. There is no way I am giving her a mobile phone. If I do, she will be out of control.

—A father discussing his daughters

Education: For Jobs or Marriage?

Parents generally believe that educating girls enhances their marriage prospects and equips them to raise their own children, considering secondary or higher secondary education sufficient for this purpose. They often perceive that investing in their daughters' higher education would not yield substantial returns due to the limited career opportunities available to women. This outlook can dampen their daughters' educational ambitions, even though many aspire to attend university. These ingrained perceptions, coupled with the financial strain of extended schooling, make early marriage a more viable option for some families.

“ No one gives up hope. I have hopes of my daughter studying, getting good grades, and eventually working. [At the same time,] I also don't have hope because money is more essential than education for securing a job, and I cannot afford her education costs. If she completes her SSC and gets married, she can at least teach her children. She can even tutor and earn some money, but a full-time job? How can we expect that from her?

—A mother discussing her daughter

“ After five days, Reena will have to be married off. I can't keep Reena at home anymore. I can keep Sajib, my son. No matter whether I send her today or after five years, I must send her away. She must get married.

—A father discussing his daughter



Negotiations in Decisions: Who Plays a Bigger Role in Sealing the Deal?

Traditional Bangladeshi families typically operate within a patriarchal decision-making structure, where the father holds ultimate authority and has the final say in major household decisions. Female household members often report that they are not consulted, or that their opinions are dismissed during the decision-making process, underscoring their limited influence within the family.

“ My father sometimes chooses not to let my mother know about decisions he makes. Even if it is something as simple as buying clothes, which my mother excels at because she understands the quality better than my father, my father will not consult her. If my mother is dissatisfied with his choice of clothing, he responds with: ‘Why should women be involved so much in everything? Why should I take her opinion on everything?’ ”

—A daughter discussing her father

This brings us back to the case of Rajia, where both she and her mother were beneficiaries of the program. In this instance, Rajia’s mother chose to resist the pressure for marriage, recognizing the negative consequences of a forced marriage on her daughter’s mental health. While the program has shown some success in influencing mothers’ attitudes, it is crucial to note that its effectiveness may be limited by the lack of involvement of male household members. Rajia’s father’s absence from the sessions prevents us from directly observing his role in decision-making, raising questions about how these discussions might have evolved with his participation. Moreover, the program’s impact in empowering Rajia’s mother to resist potential pressures from her husband or other family members to arrange Rajia’s marriage remains unclear.

Conclusion

Open communication between parents and adolescents has clear benefits for improving their relationships, as evidenced by this study. It may also enhance female adolescents’ marital and educational outcomes. However, further research is necessary to understand the complex factors that shape these processes within families, including the roles played by different individuals and the influence they wield in this dynamic.

In the context of rural Bangladesh, where chastity is considered the most important quality for girls in the marriage market and decision-making power primarily resides with male family members, interventions focusing solely on improving communication may have only a marginal impact.

For many parents, higher education does not necessarily increase girls’ desirability in the marriage market (Buchmann et al., 2023). As girls get older and have greater exposure to the outside world, their chastity is perceived to be at risk. Furthermore, the prevailing social perception of a “good match,” which emphasizes a subservient wife, remains a significant motivator for child marriage and a barrier to women’s higher education (Fattah & Camellia, 2020). Coupled with limited job opportunities for women with higher education, the rate of child marriage remains persistently high in Bangladesh.

In this context, creating concrete employment opportunities for educated women can have a more substantial, [sustainable impact on adolescent girls’ educational and marital outcomes](#). There is strong evidence that desired shifts in gender norms often follow concrete economic opportunities, rather than precede them.

A successful intervention in promoting open communication should therefore consider these broader economic and societal factors that influence parents’ decisions about their daughters’ futures.

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