

Kishori Abhijan: A Pilot Project to Empower Adolescent Girls

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Kishori Abhijan (“Adolescent Girls’ Adventure”), a pilot project conducted in rural Bangladesh between 2001 and 2004, offered several programs to empower adolescent girls. The project was grounded in a perspective that attributes women’s subordination to their social isolation and to their exclusion, beginning at a young age, from opportunities to pursue remunerative livelihoods. Kishori Abhijan was initiated by UNICEF, and the programs were implemented by two nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with extensive experience in the development field: the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) and the Centre for Mass Education in Science (CMES). The Population Council, in collaboration with the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, conducted a two-and-a-half-year investigation to document the project’s implementation and evaluate its success. Survey data were collected in 2001 and 2003. In addition, qualitative data in the form of detailed case studies were collected from selected respondents throughout the period of investigation.

Objective of Kishori Abhijan

The objective of Kishori Abhijan was to promote a gender-equitable environment in which girls could widen their choice of activities, participate in empowering social and



A program leader rides a bicycle to visit Kishori Abhijan participants in farflung villages.

economic endeavors, and realize their potential as agents for social change within the local community. Specific goals included raising the age at which girls marry, increasing their independent economic activity, and lowering school dropout rates. Empowerment was envisioned in terms of girls’ gaining greater control over decisions that will shape their adult lives.



Girls participating in Kishori Abhijan met weekly to learn valuable lifeskills and receive livelihood training.

The project, which supported groups of adolescent girls in 14 rural districts of Bangladesh, had three components. 1) The groups were to be mentored by NGOs with demonstrated experience in working with adolescent girls, providing them with opportunities to develop their self-esteem and leadership skills. 2) In the process, girls would learn about gender roles and discrimination, health and nutrition (including hygiene, reproductive health, and HIV/AIDS), and legislation and legal rights regarding early marriage and girls' and women's rights. 3) In addition,

girls would be given opportunities to acquire livelihood skills. The initial plan called for training, after which girls would be linked with existing facilities for establishing savings accounts and obtaining microcredit. This third component would also encourage internship opportunities and entrepreneurship in local communities. Groups met weekly in locations provided by community leaders.

Analyzing program impact

Delayed marriage

While many evaluations estimate the impact of a particular project by comparing participants to nonparticipants, Population Council researchers studying Kishori Abhijan took a different approach. After comparing project participants with adolescent girls who did not participate, they realized that these two groups differed in substantial ways: participants were usually younger and less likely to be married and had spent more time in school. To overcome these differences, researchers matched program participants to nonparticipants who had identical or very similar characteristics. Of the 445 participants included in the survey, 360 were matched to other adolescents in the same districts (Amin and Suran 2005).

Although project participants on the whole delayed marriage longer than their matched counterparts who did not participate, these findings were not statistically significant and there were no statistically significant differences between BRAC and CMES participants. However, this result changed when researchers distinguished between matched and unmatched participants. While matched par-

Goals of Kishori Abhijan

The leaders of Kishori Abhijan set out several goals (Amin, Mahmud, and Huq 2002):

- to increase by at least two years the median age at marriage of girls involved in the project;
- to increase by at least 30 percent the independent economic activity of girls aged 15–18 years;
- to increase by at least 30 percent girls' rates of enrollment and retention in primary and secondary schools;
- to increase by 20 percent the primary-school completion rate of adolescent girls; and
- to increase the visibility of adolescent girls as a special interest group in the media and in national programs and policies.

ticipants did not delay marriage, unmatched participants waited significantly longer before marriage. Figure 1 shows the relative odds of marriage calculated from hazard ratios obtained after modeling the duration to marriage. Compared with matched nonparticipants, only unmatched participants exhibited decreased odds of marriage. The unmatched participants were relatively young girls attending school at grade levels appropriate for their age and living in the poorest district in the sample.

Delayed marriage...at a price?

Analysis of the data also showed that respondents (both participants and nonparticipants) who married at later ages often paid higher dowries to their husband's family. Figure 2 shows the mean dowry paid by respondents who married in the interim between the two surveys. Dowries increased in tandem with age at marriage. Other projects aiming to delay marriage in areas where dowries are paid should take into account the relationship between marriage payments and girls' age, especially among girls from poorer families: with fewer economic resources, such girls are less able to afford the increased dowry payments that accompany delayed marriage.

Work for cash

Kishori Abhijan increased both the number of girls working for cash and the amount of income they earned. These outcomes were most pronounced in programs that included microcredit. Despite concerns about conflicts between work and schooling, cash work did not lead to school dropout. However, girls who reported working for cash usually spent fewer hours on school work outside the classroom. This result may well be attributable to the fact that decisions about school and work are made simultaneously. If girls work only during days of the week when school is not in session, then there may be no discernible impact of work on schooling.

Schooling

Girls in rural Bangladesh usually continue secondary schooling until they marry, and their participation in Kishori Abhijan had no significant impact on school dropout rates. Rates of dropout from the project were more closely tied to marriage than to education. Although the project did not specifically exclude married girls, most girls were unable to continue to participate after marriage because marriage usually entails migration to the husband's village and it places increased restrictions on girls' mobility.

Figure 1. Relative odds of marriage among participants and their matched counterparts

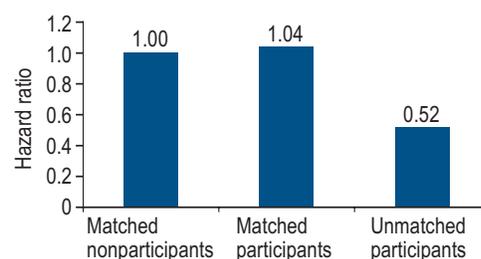
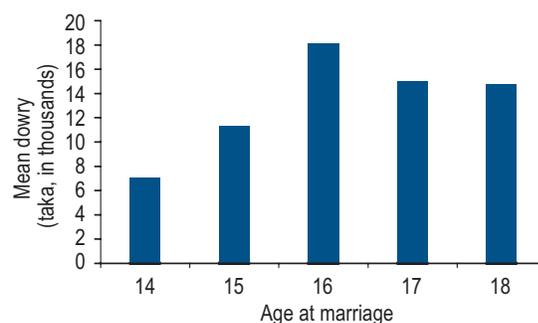


Figure 2. Mean dowry payment by age at marriage among respondents married between 2001 and 2003



Note: To ensure that the number of respondents in each category exceeded 30, the age at marriage is shown for girls between 14 and 18 years of age only.

Increased health knowledge

Population Council investigators documented substantive improvements in specific knowledge about health and disease among project participants relative to nonparticipants. The former were more likely to give accurate answers to questions about transmission of HIV and about aspects of female reproductive biology.

Reduced social isolation

Researchers also found that Kishori Abhijan participants had formed a stronger sense of self-worth and connectedness. Participants were more likely to report having friends in the same village and more likely to have traveled outside the village, attended the cinema, visited friends in the village, listened to the radio, watched television, and read the newspaper. Many of these behaviors also changed for nonparticipants, and differences between the two groups of adolescents were not statistically significant. Thus, Kishori Abhijan's effectiveness in reducing social isolation among both participants and nonparticipants may be one way in which the project's impact diffused widely throughout the rural districts.

Lessons learned

Council investigators found no substantial differences between the programs run by the two NGOs—BRAC and CMES—despite their different management styles. No doubt a primary reason was that the NGOs shared a common approach in forming groups that met weekly and offered a combination of lifeskills and livelihood training.

Kishori Abhijan was largely successful in putting the needs of adolescent girls on the social policy agenda for Bangladesh. Several related initiatives have since focused on alternative approaches to empowering adolescents. The Population Council, for example, is collaborating with BRAC in conducting a national survey of adolescents aged 10–24 to identify the most obvious differences in the quality of their lives as they mature. The objective of the survey is to examine the characteristics of the most vulnerable adolescents.

Targeting vulnerable groups

Kishori Abhijan was open to all adolescent girls regardless of their socioeconomic status. The results suggest that the project's impact might have been even greater had it been targeted to younger adolescents (aged 12–14) in the poorest families and districts of rural Bangladesh. All of the unmatched participants, the group that appears to have gained the most from Kishori Abhijan, lived in the district of Sherpur, the poorest area included in the survey.

Moreover, not only were they younger than most of the other participants, they were also better educated. Future programs should pay greater attention to targeting particular age and socioeconomic groups so as to achieve the greatest effectiveness. ■

References

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