BALIKA STUDY DESIGN

BALIKA
Bangladeshi Association for Life Skills,
Income, and Knowledge for Adolescents

The Bangladeshi Association for Life Skills, Income, and Knowledge for Adolescents (BALIKA) project provides important insights into what works to delay child marriage and why. New evidence shows that programs that provide girls with knowledge and skills and elevate their profiles within the community while keeping them safe can significantly reduce the incidence of child marriage.

RESEARCH STRATEGY: RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED TRIAL

BALIKA is a randomized controlled trial to evaluate what works to delay child marriage in Bangladesh and why. BALIKA examined three intervention strategies to delay the age at marriage among adolescent girls in parts of Bangladesh where child marriage rates are at their highest. Girls received one of three intervention packages: education support through tutoring in math and English; awareness training on gender rights and negotiation, critical thinking, and decision making; or livelihoods training in mobile phone servicing, photography, or basic first aid.
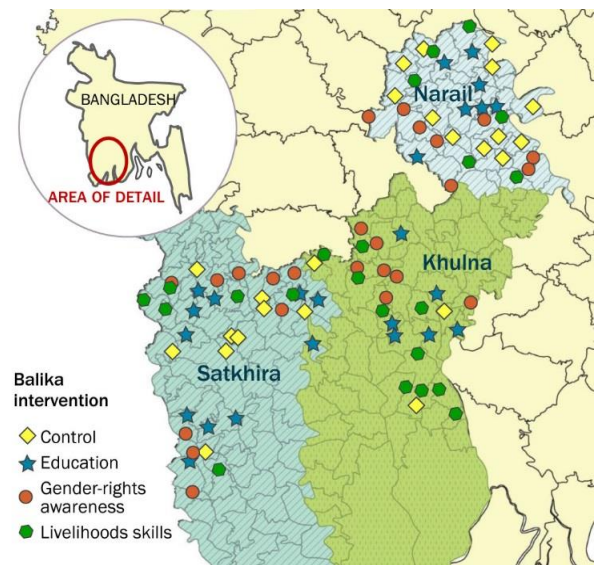
Communities were chosen to ensure sufficient distance between one another to minimize the risk of contiguity contaminating results. Primary schools were selected to serve as BALIKA centers to ensure girls' safety and well-being.

All adolescent girls aged 12–18, married and unmarried, in and out of school, who were living in the communities surrounding the 72 BALIKA centers were invited to participate. Twenty-four communities served as the control arm of this study. More than 9,000 girls participated in the BALIKA project--the overall participation rate was 42 percent among in-school girls and 22 percent among out-of-school girls. There were no significant differences in the participation rate across the three intervention strategies of the project. Communities were assigned to one of three arms in which girls received either 100 hours of 1) education support through tutoring in math and English; 2) lifeskills training on gender rights and negotiation, critical thinking, and decision making; or 3) livelihoods training in entrepreneurship, mobile phone servicing, photography and basic first aid.

AT A GLANCE

- Randomized controlled trial of three skills-based intervention strategies

- Qualitative and quantitative research on a program involving 9,000 girls over 18 months

- Baseline community assessment in 2013: 11,609 girls aged 12–18

- Endline community assessment in 2015: 9,982 girls from baseline

- Those who migrated were interviewed by a specialized tracking unit

- Randomization ensured all interventions were similar and balance in interventions was achieved in most indicators

- Significant differences observed in religious composition and wealth

MAP OF VILLAGE LOCATIONS

Balika intervention
◇ Control
★ Education
● Gender-rights awareness
● Livelihoods skills

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BALIKA provided all girls with 44 hours of basic life-skills education. And all girls met weekly with mentors and peers in safe, girl-only locations, called BALIKA centers, which helped girls develop friendships, receive training on new technologies, borrow books and acquire the skills they need to navigate the transition from girlhood to adulthood. Girls would use these skills within their communities, helping to build their confidence, demonstrate their achievements, and elevate their profiles.

QUANTITATIVE DATA

To assess the program impact, researchers gathered quantitative data. They conducted surveys of randomly selected girls living in the communities at baseline and endline over 18 months. In 2013, over a 5-month period, 11,609 girls were interviewed before the program began; they were contacted for a reinterview in 2015 at endline. At endline, 9,982 interviews were successfully completed, yielding a success rate of 86 percent.

A separate and specialized tracking team identified, located, and interviewed respondents who migrated. More than 1,400 girls migrated because of marriage, significantly fewer migrated for school (231) or simply left the country (41) and (239) were not traceable because the entire family moved or were otherwise not identifiable at endline.

QUALITATIVE DATA

Researchers used in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, group discussions and a community assessment survey to gather qualitative data.

Interviews were conducted at baseline in 6 of the 96 study villages (72 received intervention, 24 served as the control), 2 per district. In-depth Interviews were conducted both at baseline and endline.

Twenty-four girls who were in- and out-of-school girls and who were married and unmarried were interviewed before the program began to explore their individual life experiences. At endline, researchers sought to interview the same girls to assess the change or transition of their previous life experiences.

In total, 18 group discussions with adolescent girls and young men, fathers, and mothers were conducted at baseline to assess perceptions of factors affecting marriage, girls' security, and mobility.

Thirty key informant interviews with marriage registers, community leaders, local NGO staff, schoolteachers, and health workers were conducted at baseline to understand community norms, attitudes, and practices regarding girls' marriage, the involvement in income-generation activities, gender roles and norms, and related factors.

A community assessment survey was also conducted in the 96 communities both at baseline and endline to identify community characteristics, norms, practices, facilities, environment, etc. An assessment of the community was conducted at endline to determine changes during the study period. The survey included observation and short interviews with local community members to measure the indicators. Factors such as marriage to migrant workers, women's livelihoods, private tutoring, social-life issues, harassment, and environmental degradation/climate change were observed.

BALANCE IN INTERVENTIONS

Randomization was successful in ensuring balance across interventions for most indicators, such as average age of girls, percent married, mean age at marriage, percent of girls attending school, and educational attainment of parents. There were small differences in birth registration and average number of siblings. There were substantial differences in religion (proportion non-Muslim) and wealth (proportion of households in the poorest quintile).

TABLE 1 Baseline socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of survey respondents, by intervention strategy

Variable	EDUCATION	GENDER AWARENESS	LIVELIHOODS SKILLS	COMPARISON
Age (mean)	15.0	15.0	14.9*	15.0
Married (%)	19.7	20.5	17.5	18.5
Age at marriage (mean)	15.1	15.2	15.3	15.3
Schooling status				
Out of school (%)	23.6*	22.2	21.1	21.3
Mean number of years in school				
Respondent	7.2	7.2	7.1	7.2
Father	4.2	4.2	4.3	4.2
Mother	3.5	3.6	3.7	3.6
Has birth registration card (%)	92.5	90.3***	94.0	93.8
Is non-Muslim (%)	24.8***	19.1	32.7***	18.1
Total number of siblings (mean)	2.3***	2.4**	2.3***	2.6
In poorest quintile (%)	22.3**	16.7	24.3**	16.8
(N)	(2950)	(2886)	(2885)	(2888)

Significantly different from control group at *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.