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Adolescent Girl Power Groups: Building Resilience During COVID-19

Summary Report

Deeply entrenched gender norms in Bangladesh result in discriminatory attitudes and practices that affect every aspect of a girl's future, including her ability to fulfill her right to health, education and protection from violence.¹ Patriarchal values and gender norms also weaken the participation of girls in family and community decision-making, often denying them voice or agency over their lives. Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to age and gender-based risks including early marriage and childbearing, changing nutritional needs, and gender-based violence (GBV) and exploitation. Lack of access to accurate and age appropriate health, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and nutrition information, and few avenues to express their views or needs leaves girls vulnerable to poor health and psychosocial outcomes. In addition, harmful traditional practices such as Child Early and Forced Marriage (CEFM) and dowry, which are commonplace in Bangladesh, pose an immediate and urgent threat to the health and lives of adolescent girls.

The Enhancing Nutrition Services to Improve Maternal and Child Health (ENRICH) project's Gender Analysis, which was conducted in March 2018, revealed pervasive gender inequalities that contribute significantly to poor nutrition and health outcomes among adolescent girls and pregnant and lactating women and their children in Thakurgaon district, Rangpur division, Bangladesh. To address the particular health risks and vulnerabilities facing girls during adolescence and to harness their potential as community mobilizers, ENRICH created Adolescent Girl Power Groups (AGPGs) in 2017 in five sub-districts of Thakurgaon as a space to build girl's voice, agency and status, and to enable them to claim their health and protection rights. All AGPGs embody the belief that sustainable nutritional and health gains for women and girls requires a gender transformative approach with young women at the centre of these transformation efforts. The focus of the AGPGs is on maternal, adolescent and child micronutrient supplementation; gender-equal food production, consumption and feeding practices; menstrual hygiene management; greater involvement of men in domestic chores; the eradication of early marriages, dowry and GBV; girls' economic empowerment; and greater participation of women and girls in decision-making related to their health and well-being. All the AGPG members are involved in income generating activities such as poultry rearing, tailoring, homestead gardening, etc. Through this approach, the goal of the AGPGs is to provide both life skills and livelihood skills to



make a meaningful and on-going contribution to the health and nutrition of women and girls in Thakurgaon. The work that is happening in the AGPGs is rooted in the understanding that gender inequality is the driving force behind poor nutritional and SRHR outcomes for women and girls in Thakurgaon, and that the objectives of the ENRICH project could not be equitably and sustainably achieved without strategically tackling gender injustice and promoting gender equality in every aspect of the ENRICH project.

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When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in early 2020, all of Bangladesh, including the project area of Thakurgaon district, was placed under a government imposed two-month lockdown from March 24th to May 31st, 2020. With the pandemic coinciding with the final months of the ENRICH project, project staff identified a critical opportunity to take stock of the progress AGPGs have made to date, while also attempting to understand and mitigate the impact of the virus on AGPG goals and the gains made to date. Field research was carried out in Thakurgaon district between September 21st and September 28th, 2020 and consisted of a survey, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and In-depth Interviews (IDIs) with adolescent girl AGPG members, their parents and AGPG facilitators.

An analysis of survey results and FGDs, KII and IDI responses suggest that participation in the AGPGs over the past two to three years has contributed to girls' confidence, self-worth, social networks, mobility, and health knowledge, while elevating their status and decision-making power within their families and communities. The AGPGs have achieved this success by empowering adolescent girls through increased knowledge and confidence, which has in turn enabled them to challenge and transform some gender norms and unequal power relations at both the household and community level, affording them greater agency in the decisions that impact their lives. This is reflected in one AGPG member's words:

We are now much more confident than before. We can talk face to face with others freely and with confidence. Before joining the group we were not able to do that. We feel ourselves valued and empowered when we talk with people and peers about these issues.

Another added, "We now have a strength, we can protest against wrong decisions. We can now express ourselves well and discuss our future choices with our parents and community."

The AGPGs have given the girls a safe and supportive space where they can reflect on their thoughts and feelings and set goals for the things they would like to achieve in their lives. AGPG girls have developed new aspirations, which for some girls has led to a renewed commitment to continue with their studies, work hard and get married later. All of the girls surveyed stated that participation in the AGPGs had improved their self-confidence and made them feel more optimistic about being a girl and about their future.

Beyond increased power and agency at the individual level, AGPGs have proven to be a source of collective agency, challenging discriminatory gender norms and promoting gender-responsive health, nutrition and hygiene practices as a group. AGPG community facilitators attribute some of the progress the groups have achieved to the existing relationships, rapport and trust between World Vision and the families and communities already involved with the ENRICH project. The AGPG's connection to World Vision, and the ENRICH project adds legitimacy and credibility to the information shared with their parents and contributes to AGPG visibility and status within the community. An additional success factor acknowledged by AGPG facilitators is the girls' pre-existing feelings about the need for greater gender equality in their families and communities. For many, this motivation and desire to learn more and engage with their peers and community for the sake of creating change was what prompted them to join the group with their parent's permission.

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Study results of the effect of COVID-19 on the AGPGs suggests that the impact of the government imposed COVID-19 lockdown on the functioning of the AGPGs was temporary, with most groups resuming activities after the lockdown, while adhering to public health standards and protocols. While government restrictions prevented the AGPGs from meeting in-person during the two-month lockdown period in most cases, lines of communication and support remained open between AGPG members and their peers and facilitators via mobile phone. Survey responses from the girls suggest that friendships and a new sense of optimism were a factor in the resiliency they have demonstrated in the face of the pandemic. In addition, facilitators provided psychological support and provided evidence-based infection prevention advice for the girls to pass on to family and community at a safe social distance.



50%

of girls surveyed felt less safe than they did before the pandemic.

Although AGPG activities, trainings and school sessions were paused only temporarily, the impact of the pandemic on other aspects of the girls' lives including education, mental health, purchasing power, and health care was significant. With all schools closed, none of the 320 AGPG members were able to continue with their studies. The survey captured the significant mental health impact of COVID-19 on AGPG members. For example, more than 90% of girls reported feeling some degree of stress or depression from being confined to their homes during lockdown. Approximately half of girls reported feeling depressed or anxious due to the pandemic. From a personal safety perspective, more than half of the girls reported feeling less safe than they did before the pandemic. The girls and their families experienced restricted access to health services and reduced capacity of service offerings, including SRHR and GBV supports, as well as security and police services, potentially impeding access to time-sensitive health, nutrition, protection and SRHR services.



90%

of girls reported feeling some degree of stress or depression from being confined to their homes during lockdown. And approximately half of girls reported feeling depressed or anxious due to the pandemic.

Despite the widespread implications of the pandemic for the health, psychosocial and economic well-being of the AGPG girls and their families, the research revealed a high level of resilience and adoption of healthy coping strategies among the girls. Also, the AGPGs managed to function, adapt and remain a force for good during the lockdown when restrictions meant that they could not operate as before. The focus of the AGPGs shifted seamlessly to public health promotion, raising community awareness to help contain the spread of the virus. This serves as a testament to the model's flexibility and versatility under unforeseen circumstances.

The research also suggests that the AGPGs were instrumental in laying the foundation for more equitable and harmonious interactions and decision-making inside households before the pandemic hit. Girls and parents spoke about the important groundwork that AGPGs have laid over the past two to three years whereby daughters were knowledgeable and comfortable advocating for themselves, and parents had become more responsive to their daughters' opinions and suggestions and, for the most part, opposed to harmful practices such as CEFM, dowry and GBV. Parents said they noticed a sharp increase in their daughters' ability to speak up and add their voice to family discussions about food, education, early marriage and health issues since joining the AGPG, as well as their own willingness to listen to their daughters. These attitudinal shifts generated by daughters' participation in the AGPGs may have prevented families from resorting to discriminatory coping strategies that threaten the health and rights of girls.

The AGPGs have served as effective platforms for girls to both individually and collectively challenge the discriminatory social norms that perpetuate gender inequality and advocate for their health rights, resulting in more gender-responsive attitudes and practices in their families and communities. The groups have allowed girls to re-imagine their lives beyond marriage and childbearing, and build a brighter, fairer future for themselves.

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AGPG Leader Sompa Rani Roy: *“A Fearless Mind and a Bright Future”*

Sompa Rani Roy is an energetic and courageous 18-year-old girl who lives with her mother, father and 20-year-old brother in Kastor village, Doulotpur Union, in the sub-district of Pirganj. Her father is a farmer, and her mother a housewife. Sompa is a first-year honours student at Pirganj Government College. In 2017, Sompa joined her local Adolescent Girl Power Group (AGPG), known as the Akota Kishori Group, becoming a group leader soon after.

Sompa says she was motivated to join her local AGPG by her desire to learn about important issues that impact her health and her future, and by the opportunity to work with other girls like her to shift attitudes and practices towards greater gender equality. Sompa explains that her involvement in the AGPG has given her new knowledge about topics that impact her life such as proper nutrition, menstrual hygiene, sexual and reproductive health and early marriage prevention. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Sompa and her AGPG team began to use their AGPG platform to increase community awareness about the virus, and the measures that are necessary to reduce its spread. “All these learnings are helping me in leading my AGPG team, sensitizing my peers in the community and changing myself in mindset and practice,” Sompa explains.

Sompa recalls that the AGPGs encountered resistance from some community members in the initial stages of their community sensitization work. She says that some people felt threatened when the girls began to challenge long-standing beliefs about gender roles and traditional practices such as early marriage and

dowry. Even the girls themselves, she says, didn’t always fall into their new roles as change agents smoothly or comfortably. Some girls felt great embarrassment discussing issues like sexual and reproductive health and menstruation with their parents and community. However, over time, those in the community who were once skeptical began to see the value of the AGPGs and experience the health and economic benefits that are possible when girls contribute to family decision-making and assert their rights. With time, the girls too began to feel more at ease sharing their views and discussing sensitive topics with family members.

When asked what her favourite part of the AGPG is, Sompa says she loves to see the changes that are happening around her, knowing that she and her peers helped to make these changes a reality. She talks about the positive decisions people are making as a result of the information her AGPG has shared with them. She provides the example of community members who have started to wash their hands more often, wear masks and respect social distancing protocols in response to the COVID-19 information they have received through the AGPG. She’s also inspired by the adolescent girls who are now maintaining menstrual hygiene, and contributing to family decisions about health, nutrition and education. She says that what makes her happiest is that she has finally found her voice and is using it to help other girls like her achieve their dreams. Sompa hopes to live in a world one day where “all children will grow up nourished and in good health” and that they will “go to school with a fearless mind and a bright future.”

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