

# "MORE INVESTMENT IN SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS"

Organised by  Save the Children

ON 18 December 2014, Save the Children International hosted an event to discuss how to invest more resources in social protection for adolescent girls. The meeting, which was in part roundtable and in part workshop with group work, aimed to engage relevant stakeholders and build civil society consensus on the relevant issues. In particular, the potential aims and policy approaches for improving existing social protection programmes or devising new schemes for adolescent girls.

**Ubaidur Rob, Country Director, Population Council**  
For the last 15 years, approximately 2.8 to 3 million children were born in Bangladesh every year. This trend will continue in the coming 10-15 years. Death trend will be 2.2 million to 2.4 million per year, which means our demography will be in a stable situation. Today's discussion is on adolescent girls. If we take the age from 10 to 19, the approximate number of adolescent girls will be 28 million and if we take from 10 to 24 it will add another 10-12 millions girls.

**Hagar Russ, Director, Child Rights Governance (CRG), Save the Children & Suralini Fernando, CRG Officer, Save the Children and key note speaker**  
Social protection is a very topical issue in Bangladesh right now. We have the draft National Social Security Strategy (NSSS). It talks about, among other things, adopting a life-cycle approach as well as collaboration with NGOs and development partners. So this event is part of exploring how we can support the aims and implementation of this strategy. Adolescent girls are a target group that is under addressed both in the current safety net programmes and the proposed strategy. We would also like to discuss some of the issues around this policy gap. Another objective of today's event is to identify existing barriers and some solutions to these challenges.

Apart from the secondary school scholarship, which is the main national social protection programme for unmarried adolescent girls, there is no national programme for supporting adolescent girls in this stage of their life cycle. Many local and international organizations such as Brac, Save the Children, Plan have been effectively providing social protection for adolescent girls, for example through income generation activity and life skills training programmes, but these are not national programmes.

The reason for targeting adolescents is that it is a very particular stage of life cycle when they can absorb information and be guided to change their behaviour. They are young enough to change and old enough to learn.

So what could be a potential response? Social protection can be understood as a set of accountable public policies and programmes that aim to address poverty, vulnerability, and exclusion, and provide the means to cope with major risks throughout the life cycle. Currently around 2% of GDP goes to social protection but the majority of this amount is spent on small programmes with low coverage and high costs, and government pensions. Many critics thus argue that there is very little value for money in the current system.

Increasing investment in social protection may help to identify and implement new strategies to tackle some persistent problems that adolescent girls face, such as child marriage. There is evidence that social protection programmes, when designed and delivered well, can improve children and adolescents' wellbeing. We are not saying this is a silver bullet that can act as a cure for everything but we are proposing that we should explore how to make social protection benefit adolescent girls better, which will require more resources.

The government of Bangladesh has already invested significantly in social protection. For example, the primary and secondary school scholarships have contributed significantly to improve enrolment and attendances rates, and the VGD scheme has helped to lift many women out of poverty and stand on their feet a bit better. But the NSSS also says that "Impact on poverty reduction from the amount of money spent is much less than is possible with a better social security system".

So the main question we want to discuss today is what should social protection aim to do for adolescent girls in Bangladesh? Identifying an explicit aim helps to identify and build an evidence base, target advocacy efforts, better collaborate with and contribute to other civil society efforts in this area and do better cost/benefit analysis in order to have a strong advocacy position. We also note that just because you have one or two explicit aims does not mean other areas will not be strengthened. For example, the secondary school scholarship aimed to improve school enrolment, retention and delay child marriage while VGD aimed to improve food security and reduce extreme poverty. These initiatives have arguably had other impacts, too, such as empowerment of women, better nutrition and health status and so on.

In addition to the aims, there are some related questions. How to identify the target age group? Whether to include adolescent boys? What are the challenges and sensitivities?

We have identified some proposed policy approaches. These are: (1) strengthening educational outcomes; (2) delaying child marriage; (3) reducing poverty and vulnerability and (4) improving health and nutrition.

Regarding strengthening educational outcomes, if we look at the current situation we will see that the secondary school scholarship is not a pro-poor program. Its eligibility depends on attendance and other criteria which may exclude many of the poorest. Despite the success of this programme there are some persistent challenges viz. families spend less money on girls' education than boys, girls encounter discrimination and harassment while pursuing education, fewer girls go to university and so on. Under the NSSS there will be no distinction between primary and secondary school stipend programme. There will also be no distinction by gender. Now, our concern here is how can we encourage families to spend that stipend for their children's education equitably?

We need to also look at the quality of secondary education, which is often reported as being of a low standard. The purpose of the secondary education is not just to get a certificate but to be a competent adult so that people can contribute to their communities.

The next potential policy approach is to improve social protection to eradicate child marriage. Given that this remains a persistent challenge with flow-on consequences for individuals and families as well as Bangladesh as a country, we need to think about new ways and strategies



## SPEAKERS



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to tackle this issue. The issue of child marriage could be addressed through innovative approaches under the social protection programmes.

A third policy approach is to improve social protection to reduce the vulnerability and poverty faced by adolescent girls. There is a challenge here in that we do not have any conclusive data on how many adolescent girls belong to extreme poor households. We do know that poverty affects the adolescent girls more than most.

Girls from the poorest 20% of households are almost twice as likely to be married or in union before reaching 18 years than girls from the richest 20% of households. In the next cycle of the VGD scheme, the age criterion is 20 years. In Bangladesh, the average age of marriage is 16 years. If after marriage, the husband leaves or divorces her or she wants to leave him what safety net would be available for her? So far, there are none – at least until she reaches 20 years.

In any event, the VGD is not something that adolescent girls should aspire to. It is a curative poverty alleviation mechanism. This means that it reaches beneficiaries when they are already 'extreme poor'. Social protection opportunity and potential to prevent poverty, too. By targeting adolescents, it can be more preventative than curative.

The fourth policy approach is to improve health and nutrition status of adolescent girls through social protection. In Bangladesh, a large number of adolescent girls are under-nourished. This is a violation of the child's right to healthy development, and it also undermines the girl's physical and psychological readiness for future pregnancy and childbirth.

Evidence shows that babies born to adolescent mothers are worse off. There are a few social protection programmes targeting mothers in place at the moment but they do not have high coverage. Also, such programmes target adolescent girls when they are already pregnant mothers and/or lactating. By the age of 20, if an older adolescent girl has two babies and is pregnant with another, social protection programmes can only be curative, not preventative or transformational. So we have to find ways to make social protection improve the opportunities and potential of girls before the motherhood stage of the life cycle.

There are some challenges and sensitivities in our journey towards this goal. Firstly, there may be socio-political resistance. It is very difficult, for example, to engage some communities, especially those in remote and hard-to-reach areas. Another major challenge is how to meaningfully include adolescent boys, fathers, community leaders, officials and people with influence and power in girls' lives in this initiative. We also need to think about the reality for poor families where girls are seen as an economic burden. How can address this in an ethical way? Many programmes provide adolescent girls with income generation activity training so that they can contribute to the household income and thus better input into decisions affecting their lives, such as marriage. We need good data and research on the impacts of existing social protection programmes so that we can find out effective intervention methods.

In sum, as a single strategy, social protection is not very effective. It needs to be complemented by a range of other initiatives. We need to keep in mind that it is not just 'protection' but social protection, because people live in

communities, with families, friends, neighbours and so on. In the case of adolescent girls, we need to meaningfully engage these people so that everyone can benefit from increasing investment in new or improved social protection schemes in Bangladesh.

### Tariqul Islam, Secretary, MOWCA

The Bangladesh government has somewhat neglected adolescent girls, as we do not have any targeted social protection programmes for adolescent girls – most programmes are for women. Recently we have taken a programme with the help of UNICEF that is called Enabling Environment for Child Rights where we are doing cash transfers to adolescent girls in a 24-month cycle. In the programme there are some conditions like no child marriage, no drop out and no involvement in hazardous work. We have already given one-time scholarship to 15,000 to 16,000 adolescent girls who are out of school. The ministry is also providing some training to adolescent girls. We will extend these facilities.

Now we are thinking that there should be a social protection programme particularly for adolescent girls. Several organizations have urged us to include adolescent girls in the VGD programme and there has been some movement on this front. We are thinking of giving 1% of the VGD fund to adolescent girls and we will bring this before the minister.

We should have been concerned with adolescent girls earlier – thank you to Save the Children for this interaction as it will help us in our policy formulation. The Government of Bangladesh is sincerely trying to improve the lives of adolescent girls.

### Ashish Bajracharaya, Population Council

In response to the question 'what should social protection aim to do for adolescent girls?', our group chose to focus on eradicating child marriage as a potential policy approach because it is not a stand-alone issue. It is related to educational attainments, gender dynamics, intergenerational poverty, poverty reduction and vulnerabilities, reproductive and maternal health, nutrition, social norms, etc. It can also change behaviours significantly by changing mindsets and addressing social norms issues. We can also address the issue of economic empowerment by addressing the issue of child marriage.

Our next point is to find out innovative ways to address this issue of child marriage. Attaching soft conditionalities and tying them to social protection programmes to achieve delayed marriage outcomes, sensitizing the community about child marriage, and involving community leaders are some ideas propped up from the group. The group also emphasized that strong political commitment is required to tackle the problem of child marriage.

One of the biggest challenges is that laws against child marriage are not enforced. Another challenge is how to involve religious leaders who might oppose very broad social changes. There are some programmes involving Qazis which have shown promises.

In terms of solution there needs to be a policy dialogue with all the key stakeholders, including adolescent girls and boys. We need to enable and capacitate local government bodies so that they can properly implement child

marriage related laws and regulations. We have also discussed that coordination among NGOs who are working with adolescent girls and child marriage is very important.

### Poverty Group

**Dr. Md. Muzaffar Ahmed, Save the Children**  
In response to the above-mentioned question about aims, our group talked about both extreme and moderate poverty. We feel the need to redefine poverty. We have seen that there are gaps in socio-economic, political and government initiatives for reducing poverty among adolescent girls. Investment in adolescent girls is inadequate. Lack of justice, lack of adolescent friendly educational institutions and work place, inaccessibility and inequity are other major issues behind suffering of adolescent girls.

Our first recommendation is that there should be conditional cash transfer by redefining VGD. Our second recommendation is to implement relevant laws and regulations that protect all children, especially adolescent girls. To do that, we need to invest more in existing programmes. We also need new innovations, such as a speedy justice system, door step legal services and protection for adolescent girl victims. We need targeting mechanisms taking into consideration contextual and cross sectoral multiple vulnerabilities, for example adolescent girls in coastal and northern monga areas are particularly prone to poverty and violence.

### Education Group

**Nazrana Islam, ECPAT**

Regarding the potential aims of social protection for adolescent girls, our group began by noting that there are adolescent discussion groups at the community level where the adolescents can discuss their problems and find out innovative solutions. This is an effective intervention. We recommend replicating this model all over the country.

Our group has also discussed the issue of adolescent girls' access to college education. The problem is that girls are not continuing education beyond SSC level due to lack of access to college level education at the local level. So the government should build adequate structures at the local level so that a girl can continue education staying at her home. Another issue is affordability. Families often consider boys for higher education because they do not have adequate financial back up to support both boy and girl. That's why we propose that the stipend facility for girls should be extended up to college level.

Another important issue is security for adolescent girls in the educational institutions. We know many girls become victim of sexual harassment in educational institutions. There should be special legislation against sexual harassment in educational institutions. The government should immediately adopt such legislation and ensure such legislation is properly implemented and enforced.

### Health and Nutrition Group

**Akhter Ahmed, IFPRI**

We have chosen human development as a potential policy approach for increasing investment in social protection for adolescent girls. This approach includes both nutrition and education.

We are talking about social protection which is broader than the concept of social safety net. Social protection involves social risk management which includes risk reeducation, risk mitigation and risk scoping. In 2012, IFPRI conducted the first ever national survey on household food consumption at the national level which shows that among all age groups in a household, consumption of micronutrients particularly iron consumption is the least among the adolescent girls. 68% of adolescent girls have inadequate consumption of iron.

Our group thinks that we need to have some platforms for targeting adolescent girls. A school-based approach for addressing nutrition can be an effective platform. Bangladesh has a school feeding programme, but it is only for primary school children. If we can introduce this programme at the secondary level, it will be easy for targeting adolescent girls because in most of the cases there are separate secondary schools for adolescent girls. Examples of various countries shows that school feeding programme at the secondary level can be an effective intervention for providing adequate micronutrients to adolescent girls. Another effective intervention can be a micronutrient-fortified feeding programme in the readymade garments sector.

Now, what are the barriers? First one is lack of evidence based policy mechanism. For that we need to create evidence through rigorous research. In our research we have found that combination of nutrition BCC with cash transfer has maximum impact on reduction of under-nutrition. So we need to include nutrition and behaviour change programme in our social protection programmes.

### Closing comments from the Chair, Ubaidur Rob

Investment in education is happening all over the country. In one of the Population Council's recent surveys conducted in Khulna, Satkhira and Narail, we found that 80% girls are getting private tutoring. So, the poorest of poor do spend some money for education of their girl children. In the tea garden areas, we also found that parents are paying weekly 10 taka per subject for private tutoring.

Poverty mapping shows that Sylhet is the most deprived division compared to other divisions. But the average age of marriage in Sylhet is 18 plus which is higher than Khulna and Rajshahi divisions. So, different types of interventions are happening all over the country.

We are talking about child marriage but do we know how many marriages are occurring in the country? Roughly 400,000 child marriages are happening in the country every year. Out of this large number of child marriage many are giving birth at an early age. It means a baby is giving birth to another baby. And a large number of infant and neonatal mortality is happening in this particular group. The same is true for maternal mortality. We have to take these things into consideration when we talk about social protection programmes.

Besides MOWCA, we also have to engage other ministries particularly social welfare ministry and education ministry.

The country is going through a transformation. Now, a majority of our population live in urban areas. But we do not have public schools and health facilities for urban people. So, like rural development strategy we need an urban development strategy.

We need to share our findings through a common platform. It will help us find out effective interventions.