



How girls are realizing their potentials: Opportunities and challenges

UNFPA Bangladesh and CARE Bangladesh in association with The Daily Star organized a roundtable titled “How girls are realizing their potentials: Opportunities and challenges” on January 5, 2023. Here we publish a summary of the discussion.



Golam Mortoza,
*Editor (Bangla),
The Daily Star*

The saying goes, “if creating opportunities isn’t possible, remove the roadblocks so they can create their own.” Unfortunately, there is a prevalent mindset to restrict, particularly girls, from exploring their potential. We must recognize girls’ potential and work to remove the barriers that prevent them from realizing it.

While we have yet to fully address this issue, it’s important to conduct discussions like this, notify policymakers, and engage in grassroots work simultaneously. The progress that has been made thus far is a result of this grassroots work.



Sakina Sultana,
*Team Leader,
CARE Bangladesh*

Adolescent girls often face child marriage, interruptions in education and employment, and difficulties in accessing their rights, including sexual and reproductive health services, due to stereotypical mindsets and negative social norms. We aim to transform this negativity into positivity, empowering adolescent girls to reach their full potential and succeed in life.

CARE Bangladesh is currently implementing a project funded by UNFPA Bangladesh called “Accelerating Action to End Child Marriage” which is working in six districts to empower adolescent girls with a set of life skills, including knowledge and skills related to sexual and reproductive health, communication, negotiation, and decision-making. This enables them to self-reflect through education.



2017). These systemic dropouts result in diverse consequences in realizing and achieving life aspirations, including education and employment. The direct consequence observed in labor force engagement is that female youth comprise 26% of the labor force compared to their male counterpart, which comprises 54.5% (BBS, 2018). Also impacts crucial stages of life, such as child marriage, unfortunately, results in early childbearing. Bangladesh is home to 38 million child brides, and 50% gave birth to their first child before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2020).

Considering the situation, CARE Bangladesh conducted a study in 2022 that tried to see how the donors and government are investing and working to bring forward the potential of adolescent girls, stopping child marriage and availing gender equality.

Our study revealed that adolescent girls have a variety of aspirations and priorities, including gaining access to capacity building and skill development opportunities that specifically cater to their needs.

The study also identified a significant barrier of gendered norms that restrict community mobilization for adolescent girls. This makes it difficult for them to take collective action. Additionally, the legal and policy framework in place does not adequately support the rights and needs of both married and unmarried adolescent girls. Furthermore, the support for mental health and psychosocial well-being for adolescent girls is often overlooked and neglected.

We found that the government of Bangladesh has demonstrated its commitment to advancing the rights and well-being of adolescent girls by being a signatory to various international laws and declarations. As a result, several laws and policies have been enacted in the past two decades specifically aimed at addressing the needs of adolescent girls. The government is implementing various initiatives to improve the education and health outcomes of adolescent girls, and the private sector is providing opportunities for adolescent girls in nontraditional career fields. We also observed investments in families and other stakeholders who play a critical role in shaping expectations for adolescent girls.

We collected recommendations from adolescent girls, civil society organizations, and government stakeholders on how to address the gaps identified in our study. These recommendations include providing opportunities for adolescent girls to participate in meaningful dialogue and share their thoughts, ending the stigmatization of girls, taking steps to prevent child marriage, addressing societal controls on girls’ sexuality, creating safe spaces for girls to discuss important issues, and empowering girls to connect with various forums and platforms at the grassroots level.



Sigma Ainul,
Program Manager and Senior Program Officer, Population Council

Globally, only 15% of girls take STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) disciplines, and the numbers are lower in Bangladesh. This makes it difficult to provide women access to modern workplace skills-building subjects.

Three main things that would help

girls-centered programs in Bangladesh. Firstly, we need to ensure that girls are given the right skills, including digital literacy and knowledge of information technology, as well as involvement in STEM subjects so that they can participate equally in the economy and society.

Secondly, we need to focus on soft skills, such as negotiation, self-esteem, problem-solving, and financial literacy, which are required in all occupations. We should also ensure that girls have access to accurate information regarding their reproductive life span and the choices and options available to them.

Thirdly, girls should be given a public space where they can gather and have access to relatable and inspirational mentors.



M A Akher,
Director (Planning), Deputy Secretary, Department of Youth Development

We are partnering with the World Bank to work with NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) individuals, who make up one-third of the population.

We have found that 80% of NEET individuals are those who have married before the age of 18. To reach this group the project includes a component to provide skill ladders for dropouts and married individuals in 250 Upazilas, allowing them to pursue vocational or formal education through open universities. In partnership with the ILO, we will also be implementing a Tk 165 crore project to train NEET individuals to become self-employed.

The UNFPA has helped us develop a youth index platform, and the government has also established a youth council.



Reefat Bin Sattar, *Director of Program Development and Quality, Save the Children Bangladesh*

There are several factors that enable girls to reach their potential. One approach is to focus on the girls as the center and consider the four circles that impact their lives: family, society, law, and policy. By examining opportunities and challenges within each circle, it becomes easier to identify recommendations for change.

In addition to economic empowerment, two other important forms of empowerment are political and social empowerment. Political empowerment involves creating opportunities for girls to participate and providing leadership, soft skills, livelihood skills, employability skills, and entrepreneurship skills. Social empowerment is also crucial, but it can also be a barrier to women’s empowerment.

While there has been a decrease in the number of early marriages from 80% to 51%, in certain areas such as char areas, urban slums, and haor regions, the percentage may be higher. It is important to collect data at the division level to address these pockets of high risk. To make accurate and effective decisions, it’s important to have accurate data that is included in the government information repository.

In addition to a Department for Women Affairs within the Ministry of Women and Children, a separate

department for children is needed to ensure that female children are not excluded from attention.



Kamrun Nahar,
Assistant Director (AQAU), Planning and Development Wing, Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE)

Adolescent girls in remote areas such as char, haor, coastal, and hilly regions face numerous challenges due to a lack of information. Parents in these areas also have concerns about their daughters’ safety, which can contribute to early marriages.

Despite the decrease in the dropout rate due to scholarships, in backward regions, the number of dropouts increased to 60 lakhs after the SSC examinations according to a 2018 report. There is a need for more accurate data in these areas.

To help children get career-related information, CARE and UNFPA’s booklet called “Amar Shwopno, Amar Golpo” can be distributed in educational institutes after review by the education department. Additionally, the digital version of the booklet can also be uploaded to an app.

Another significant challenge is sexual harassment, and educational institutions should ensure preventive measures and response mechanism.



Natasha Kader,
Acting Head of Women Banking, Eastern Bank Ltd

Our goal is to create a comprehensive, one-stop service for women and girls where they can access financial support and banking services without any hassle. To accomplish this, we offer preferential schemes for our female customers, including access to financial education and support.

We understand that many girls and women do not have access to digital platforms, which is why we prioritize providing network and information access as a means of empowering them.

Additionally, we strive to create a welcoming and inclusive environment in our banks, where girls and women feel comfortable and valued.



Nadeea Khandker, *Focal Person, Media Communication & Sustainability, Robi*

We believe that providing financial and mental support at the secondary education level, where the dropout rate is high, is crucial for the future of girls. It’s important to extend our help to keep their imagination alive and empower them to reach their full potential.



Md. Shawkat Hossain, *Member Secretary-NEARS and Consultant, Mariestopes Bangladesh*

Reproductive health education is essential for adolescent girls, but in Bangladesh, access to reproductive services is limited to those who are married. This presents a significant problem for unmarried girls. While there are no official documents prohibiting

services for unmarried individuals, government officials have not yet taken action to change this traditional attitude. Removing the requirement for marriage status would be a simple solution.

Frontline health workers (Family Welfare Visitors) should be well trained to ensure adolescent-friendly SRHR services.

The government should implement a mandatory reservation system for girls in all skills development programs to address these issues.



Sadia Karim,
Adolescents-Youth and Gender Specialist, Educo Bangladesh

To empower women, we must work to promote the idea that household tasks are the responsibility of all members of the household, not just women. Until this happens, it will be difficult for women to fully develop as individuals, regardless of how many skills they acquire.

Moreover, females in Bangladesh have only 4% of land rights, according to a 2014 report by the International Land Coalition. This is a significant concern, as lack of access to resources can further marginalize and vulnerable women.

Women also lack leadership skills due to societal belittlement, which limits their ability to access and participate in public spaces.

While it is important for women to have self-defense skills, it is also important to promote mutual respect between genders.



Ram Chandra Das, *Former Director General, Department of Women Affairs*

Generally, we do not let our girls be aware of their potential. The parents and guardians should be made aware before creating any scopes for girls’ possibilities and development.

I recommend a common toll-free number for every mobile operator to be established. This will enable easy access to the helpline, similar to the dedicated number 109 provided by the Department of Women Affairs, which is available 24/7 throughout the year.

Additionally, a directorate should be established to specifically address issues related to adolescent girls and boys. This will ensure that their unique needs are being met and that the resources and support are directed to where they are most needed.



Dr. Muhammad Munir Hussain, *Program Analyst-A&Y, UNFPA Bangladesh*

To achieve gender equality and empower women and girls, it is

essential to educate our male children on mutual respect for the opposite gender.

The new curriculum core committee has been working for the last four years under the leadership of NCTB. The grade six curriculum added a table about menstruation and ejaculation. More crucial sexual and reproductive health information will be added in grades 8 and 9 this year.

We are trying to build a platform in the Ministry of Education where NGOs and other organizations work on SRHR.



Tanjim Ferdous, *In-Charge, NGOs & Foreign Missions section of the Business Development team, The Daily Star & Moderator of the session*

In Bangladesh, both in rural and urban settings, the full potential of adolescent girls remains untapped. To ensure their participation in economic activities, we need a mechanism where all stakeholders including civil society organizations, corporations, NGOs, and government agencies will work together under one umbrella. Only through active collaboration and participation from all stakeholders can we bring about effective change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- We must support both girls and their families to achieve their aspirations and provide opportunities for adolescent girls to participate in meaningful dialogue to express their thoughts.
- Provide girls with the necessary skills, including soft skills, digital literacy, financial literacy, and accurate information on sexual and reproductive health.
- Educate families on the importance of allowing girls to continue their education.
- Make skill development programs easily accessible and provide relevant information to girls and their families at all levels.
- Include girls in income-generating activities to promote financial independence and decision-making abilities.
- Boys should be taught to respect the opposite gender from a young age.
- Challenge the stereotype that women have limited career choices.
- Establish a sectoral risk and divisional database to inform decision-making and integrate it into the government system.

We must break the stereotype that women are only suitable for certain professions, such as teaching or handicrafts. Many women have proven themselves in traditionally male-dominated professions such as piloting and sports, helping to change societal attitudes towards women in these fields. As a result, new opportunities are opening up for women in various sectors. However, are our adolescent girls ready to seize these opportunities? To guide them towards this path, stakeholders must work to fill gaps and enhance their activities, so adolescent girls can unlock and utilize their potential and fulfill their dreams.



Mahmudur Rahman Khan,
Technical Coordinator Research, M&E, CARE Bangladesh, (Keynote speaker)

The enrollment rate in secondary education decreased to 62% compared to 98% in primary education (UNESCO, 2018). The scenario worsens in tertiary education with 13% gross enrolment (BANBEIS,