



Doing More, Doing Better: Social Protection for Adolescent Girls

Adolescent girls in Bangladesh

There are around 13.7 million adolescent girls in Bangladesh, out of around 28 million adolescents in total (people who are aged between 10–19 years old according to the World Health Organisation). Adolescents in Bangladesh face a range of risks and vulnerabilities: unsafe migration, hazardous labour, poor quality of education, lack of training opportunities, and exclusion from decision making processes that affect their lives. However, adolescent girls encounter more pervasive and persistent challenges than their male counterparts, such as child marriage, sexual harassment and discrimination, and limited tertiary education and employment opportunities.

Social protection advocacy

There are many civil society organisations, local and international NGOs and development partners who target adolescent girls' 'empowerment'. Their projects for adolescent girls revolve around provision of cash or assets, and technical and soft skills training. Applying a broad definition, these transfers are social protection initiatives and often share at least one common goal: to prevent child marriage. While such efforts are much needed given that child marriage remains one of the biggest rights violations facing adolescent girls in Bangladesh, they are almost always project-based, time-bound and geographically confined. Through evidence-based, targeted and strategic advocacy, Save the Children has tried to better link up with the social protection systems and structures already in place in order to improve social protection for adolescent girls in Bangladesh. This is based on the understanding that this will yield more benefits, more sustainably, and amplify organizational efforts in service delivery. Moreover, when it comes to coverage and scale there is no rival for the existing social protection infrastructure of the Government of Bangladesh, especially in its long-standing programmes.



Photo by The Daily Star

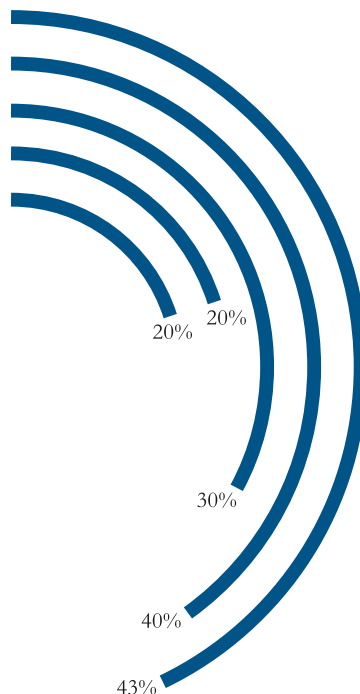
“It is not possible to work on social protection without government engagement, and it is only Save the Children who is engaging [with us].”

— A senior advisor at a development partner



Photo by Ken Hermann

43% of the adolescent girls are underweight
 40% of the enrolled students in tertiary education are girls
 33% of the adolescent girls are malnourished
 Girls from the poorest 20% of households
 are twice as likely to be married under 18
 20% of the total population of Bangladesh are adolescents



*At the NSSS launching:
 Photo by Saralini Fernando*

The process

In late 2014, Save the Children conducted research into how to better include adolescent girls in the existing social protection framework, as well as under the proposed National Social Security Strategy. It also led a sharing session with civil society representatives, development partners and other local and international NGOs. The highlight of this session was agreement that this was certainly a policy gap – adolescent girls *are* under-served by the existing and future social protection framework.

Through a collaborative, consensus-building approach, Save the Children then took its policy platform to the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs (MoWCA), who administers the largest social protection programme in the country, the Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) scheme. Upon hearing the key messages, Mr Tariq Ul Islam, then Secretary at the MoWCA, agreed to commit 1% of the current VGD benefits to adolescent girls.

In 2015, Save the Children also worked with the General Economics Division at the Ministry of Planning on the National Social Security Strategy (Strategy). It led a strategic and targeted advocacy campaign to make the Strategy more 'adolescent' and especially more 'adolescent girl sensitive'. This involved conducting policy analysis, identifying gaps, and developing a policy platform. Save the

Children also consulted with peers and government officials to establish the best tactics to get its proposed changes made. Due to this strong and effective advocacy effort, 'adolescents' and 'adolescent girls' are now better referenced in this key government paper. The Strategy was launched in November 2015 and contains changes proposed by the Save the Children.

Save the Children is presently continuing its advocacy efforts to increase and improve social protection for adolescent girls through its collaboration with the World Food Programme (WFP), who supports the MoWCA in administering the VGD. Save the Children and WFP agreed to work jointly on finding a way to accommodate an adolescent girl focus within the new VGD approach of the "Income Component of the Vulnerable Group Development" (ICVGD) scheme, an enhanced version of the VGD. Save the Children achieved a strong advocacy result when it made the case and convinced WFP to list "having an adolescent girl in the household" as a priority criterion for ICVGD participant selection. Among the 2,000 households selected for the first pilot, 53% have at least one adolescent girl. Additionally, Save the Children and WFP are working together to jointly develop a nutrition behavior change communications package that has a component targeting adolescent girls. They are also exploring the possibility of incorporating child-sensitive norms in the next stage of the pilot ICVGD programme.