

USAID SUCCESS STORIES - BANGLADESH

SCHOOLMASTERS IN BANGLADESH PROVING TO BE STRONG ALLIES IN THE FIGHT TO KEEP GIRLS IN SCHOOL

Women and Girls Lead Global *Best Schools for Girls* Campaign challenges schools to make girls a priority

“Your girl was too young to be married. But do not worry, get the divorce and I will admit her in my school. To have a better life there is no alternate way except education.”

March 2015 –While many of the world’s girls are still joyfully playing house or pretending to be brides, many others are being forced into very real marriages that are anything but joyful. Zakia was one such girl, when at 13, her little-girl world was radically transformed into a frightening marriage to an abusive older man. According to a 2014 [UNICEF](#) report on child marriage, more than one in three married women in the world today were married before the age of 15. South Asia is home to almost half of child brides worldwide, and in Bangladesh, the rate of marriages before the age of 18 is a staggering 74%.

With global efforts in high gear, the rate is coming down, but with population increasing, this progress needs to be accelerated and sustained in order to make a meaningful difference in the lives of girls. There is little doubt over the link between girls delaying marriage and staying in school with leading more productive and fulfilling lives. [Women and Girls Lead Global \(WGLG\) Bangladesh](#) has been at the forefront of that effort with their *Best Schools for Girls* campaign. Launched in 2013 among 175 secondary schools in 10 “Upazillas,” (sub-districts) of Bangladesh, it has grown to 300 partner schools that have taken on the challenge to merit the coveted “Best Schools” certification.

WGLG’s Country Engagement Coordinator Mahmud Hasan explains that the Best Schools campaign is based on an *Institutional Model* of change. “It incentivizes schools to meet 5 key criteria developed by WGLG through multiple expert consultations and review of best practices with organizations such as BRAC, Plan International, Save the Children and CARE.”

So far, 25 schools have made the grade, but it is the effort that is making the difference. These five criteria are used as indicators for the “Best School for Girls Award,” given to schools as a special certification if they meet all of the criteria:

1) Increased attendance and improved academic performance of girls

Which means: School has improved environment so that girls and boys are equally attending their classes and incidences of girls drop-out is reduced by various affirmative actions by schools and their teachers. School is treating boys and girls equally so that girls are performing better in class and public exams.

2) Unleashing girls' leadership skills

Which means: Schools are taking actions to unleash leadership skills of boys and girls. They are organizing cultural events regularly, forming various students clubs, and arranging games & sports with girls' participation.

3) Enabling environment for girls at school

Which means: Schools ensure an enabling environment so girls can stay comfortably for long periods of time at school. (This includes separate toilets, important for feminine hygiene.)

4) Social security and child protection policy and practice

Which means: Schools ensure a safe and secure environment so girls may attend without fear.

5) Active engagement of parents, teachers and school management

Which means: Teachers, parents and school management are working together to follow-up actions taken for girls and are ensuring their maximum effort to promote girls' success.

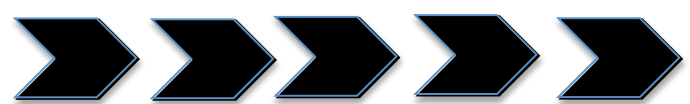
Luckily for young Zakia, her school participated in the *Best Schools* campaign, and School Superintendent Alhaz Abdus Sobhan was sensitized and informed on the issue. When Zakia's father confided to him his grave mistake, Sobhan knew what to do. "Your girl was too young to be married," he said. "But do not worry, get the divorce and I will admit her in my school. To have a better life, there is no alternate way except education."

The first step in WGLG's unique change process includes community screenings of [Women of the World](#) documentary films that present poignant solutions to analogous problems. Films like [Revolutionary Optimists](#) can have a profound effect on those who are not willing to accept the status quo, and are receptive to new ideas. "I saw in the film how Priyanka [film's character] suffered after her marriage." Sobhan said. Witnessing that powerful story helped lead Sobhan to encourage Zakia's father to arrange a divorce and permit Zakia to return to school. Other films like [I Was Worth 50 Sheep](#) present the issue of the dowry, and the problems that arise when a girls' contract in marriage is exchanged for money or livestock. When a family is poor and struggling to make ends meet, sometimes marrying their daughter in exchange for a handsome sum is too tempting to resist. Rabena, a student at Hingazia High School in the northeastern district of Moulvibazar, was just 14 when her parents contracted her marriage. One day when she didn't show up at school, her friends learned that she was to be married the next day. When Headmaster Sorbindu Vottacharjo got the news from the students, he spoke to the *Best Schools* Management Committee and they all agreed to intervene. On the eve of the wedding, as preparations were being finalized, the wedding was stopped. Vottacharjo convinced Rabena's parents to let her return to school. Although Rabena's mother and Aunt are not yet convinced that this is the best thing for Rabena, Rabena has no doubts. "I want to study more. I want to be a doctor," she says emphatically.

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[Women and Girls Lead Global -Bangladesh](#) - is a USAID - funded initiative that uses documentary film to inspire and catalyze community action on important global issues affecting women and girls. Participating countries include: Bangladesh, Kenya, India, Jordan and Peru. Partner funders: ITVS, Ford Foundation, and CARE. www.wglg.org

OPTIONAL SIDEBAR

 WGLG REPORT CARD	
Change Model	<i>Institutional</i>
Issue	<i>Girls Education and Child Marriage Prevention</i>
Films that lit the Spark	<i>Revolutionary Optimists I Was Worth 50 Sheep</i>
Visible Change	<i>Partner schools: 60% drop in child marriage rate; 78% drop-outs have returned to school</i>
Scale Up	<i>Planned Ministry of Education Partnership could mean scaling up to 30K schools in 3 years!</i>



Girls at the X school in the X province of Bangladesh, a "Best School" winner.



Malia Kavich speaks on behalf of her class at the award winning x school in Bangladesh.