

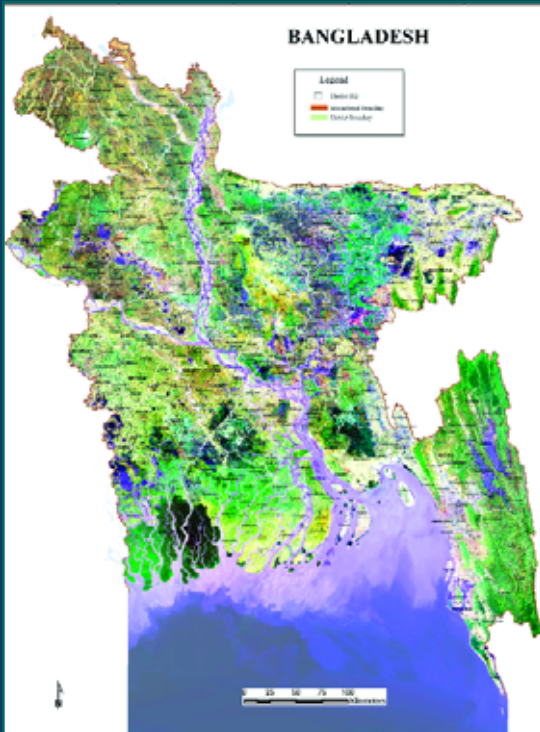
PATHFINDER INTERNATIONAL

Raising the Age of Marriage for Young Girls in Bangladesh



Pathfinder in Bangladesh

Pathfinder has contributed to the Reproductive Health and Family Planning (RH/FP) movement in Bangladesh since the early 1950s. After nascent support in founding the Family Planning Association, substantial support began in 1972 and in 1978 Pathfinder opened its office in Dhaka. From the start, Pathfinder paved the way for government recognition and response to the need for family planning policy and programs to address the country's rapid population growth.



The recommendations of a Pathfinder-supported seminar in 1972 formed the basis of the first National Family Planning Program Five-Year Plan and the nation's population policy.

In the 1970s and 1980s Pathfinder was a pioneer in implementing community-based distribution programs that provided RH/FP services and commodities door-to-door in both urban and rural areas.

Pathfinder was one of the first organizations to address the RH/FP needs of adolescents and young newlywed couples by working with their families and religious leaders to gain access to this traditionally hard-to-reach group. These efforts have evolved to more

comprehensive programs that address the needs of youth, such as the Raising the Age of Marriage for Young Girls in Bangladesh project.

Pathfinder has also supported the institutional development of medical colleges and hospitals through technical assistance and monetary support. Several Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) in Bangladesh began providing family planning services with seed money from Pathfinder. Pathfinder currently supports 317 high-quality clinics through the USAID-funded NGO Service Delivery Program (NSDP).

Pathfinder International believes that reproductive health is a basic human right. When parents can choose the timing of pregnancies and the size of their families, women's lives are improved and children grow up healthier.

For 50 years Pathfinder has worked to improve access to and knowledge of reproductive health and family planning services around the world. Many of Pathfinder's projects work with adolescents and youth. By providing them information on reproductive health and family planning, Pathfinder helps young people safeguard their health and plan their futures. Pathfinder works to prevent HIV/AIDS, provide care to women suffering from the complications of unsafe abortion, reach adolescents with services tailored to their needs, and advocate for sound reproductive health policies in the U.S. and abroad.

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Executive Summary

Compelled by financial struggles and cultural norms, girls in Bangladesh often enter into marriage well before their eighteenth birthday, sometimes when they are barely teenagers. When a girl enters marriage without the psychological maturity necessary to manage her relationship with her husband and in-laws, or the physical maturity necessary to cope with pregnancy, it puts her at a disadvantage for life. She is less able to negotiate crucial aspects of her life, such as the use of contraception, with her husband. Pregnancy can have devastating affects for both the mother and child when the mother's body is not yet mature.

To address the problem of early marriage and the issues surrounding it, Pathfinder International/Bangladesh designed the model program, Raising the Age of Marriage for Young Girls in Bangladesh. The three-year project was launched in July 2003 with support from an anonymous donor, and closed at the end of June 2006. Through education, the project empowers girls to take control of their futures. The three aspects of the program — primary and secondary school support, advocacy, and vocational training — combine to help girls overcome the hurdles that prevent them from finishing school, finding employment, and delaying marriage until they are ready. The project targeted the neediest girls within five upazilas (subdistricts) of Kishoreganj, one of the poorest areas of Bangladesh.

Stipends for School Girls

Though Bangladesh has had great success in recent years raising the rate of primary school attendance among girls, the rate of secondary school enrollment is still below 50 percent. Many girls are not able to afford the initial fee for admission into secondary school. To help transition girls from primary to secondary school Pathfinder supported 4,092 girls in the last three years of primary and the first year of secondary school, transitioning a total of 2,859 girls into secondary school. Overall enrollment has increased in the project area—government statistics show a 14.3 percent increase in primary school enrollment between 2004 and 2006 in the five upazilas. This represents an additional 14,023 students.

Advocacy

With help from Swanimvar, a Bangladeshi nongovernmental organization, Pathfinder held advocacy meetings throughout the project area. These meetings informed the girls about the benefits of education and delaying marriage and inspired hope for their futures. In a culture where more than half of girls marry before age 15, education about the dangers of early pregnancy is essential for protecting their health. An informal study conducted by Swanimvar found that the rate of early marriage had dropped from 50 percent as reported in *The Daily Ittefaq*, a prominent Bangladeshi newspaper, in 2004 to 42 percent in 2006. Swanimvar collected the information from schools and marriage registration offices during field visits.

Paramedic Training

Pathfinder supported three classes of 20 girls at the AITAM Welfare Organization in Dhaka, a paramedic training institute. Two classes have graduated and a third will graduate in July 2006. The year-long paramedic training course prepares the girls to work in both clinic and community settings. They are trained in maternal and child health care, family planning, and other basic health services.

To assess the job placement rate of the graduates, Pathfinder sent a questionnaire to each girl's home. Thirty-two of the 40 graduates have responded and 30 of the 32 have found jobs. They are making an average of 4,989 Taka (about \$73) per month. This is higher than a primary school teacher's salary and is comparable to that of a secondary school teacher. Not only did this training provide the girls with marketable skills, but because they return to remote villages to begin their careers, they are providing much-needed health care in rural areas.

The benefits of the Raising the Age of Marriage for Young Girls in Bangladesh project reach beyond the girls who received the scholarships. With an education, women are better able to provide medical care and education for their children and nutritious food for their families. Their children will grow up healthy and educated and the benefits will ripple to the whole community.

Introduction

Compelled by financial struggles and cultural norms, girls in Bangladesh often enter into marriage well before their eighteenth birthday, sometimes when they are barely teenagers. When a girl enters marriage without the psychological maturity necessary to manage her relationship with her husband and in-laws, or the physical maturity necessary to cope with pregnancy, it puts her at a disadvantage for life. She is less able to negotiate crucial aspects of her life, such as the use of contraception, with her husband. Pregnancy can have devastating affects for both the mother and child when the mother's body is not yet mature.



Changing cultural values takes time. Though the program was largely successful in preventing early marriage in the areas it worked, a small number of girls dropped out to get married. Farzana Akhter was just 15 and was being supported by the Pathfinder scholarship when she married her husband, Al Amin. She is continuing her education with her husband's support.

To address the problem of early marriage and the issues surrounding it, Pathfinder International/Bangladesh designed a model program, Raising the Age of Marriage for Young Girls in Bangladesh. The three-year project was launched in July 2003 with support from an anonymous donor, and closed at the end of June 2006. The three aspects of the program—primary and secondary school support, advocacy, and vocational training—combine to help girls overcome the hurdles that prevent them from finishing school, finding employment, and delaying marriage until they are ready. The Raising the Age of Marriage project targeted the most needy girls within five upazilas (subdistricts) of Kishoreganj, one of the poorest areas of Bangladesh.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 guarantees the right to “free and full” consent to marriage for both parties. Pressuring girls to marry before they have developed the maturity necessary to give consent is a violation of their human rights that holds consequences for the entire community.

The legal age of marriage in Bangladesh is 18, but because there is no birth registration system, compliance with the law is negligible. The median age of marriage for women currently 20-49 years old in Bangladesh is 14.8 years.¹

Early marriage is more common among the poorest girls in Bangladesh than girls from wealthy families. The median age at first marriage among women 20-24 years old in the lowest wealth quintile is 14.6; girls in the highest quintile marry at a median age of 18.3.²

Parents often feel pressured by cultural values to marry their girls at a young age when they can no longer afford the cost associated with girls' schooling. This puts these girls at a double disadvantage; not only do they enter into marriage as children, they are uneducated too. Women without formal education have little say in family decisions both because they have no income of their own and because they lack the skills, confidence, and knowledge necessary to negotiate with their husbands and in-laws. But if girls are able to stay in school through the secondary level, they are often able to delay their marriage until they are adults.

Newlywed couples are often under pressure from families to prove their fertility soon after their union. Forty-six percent of married girls aged 10-14 and 33 percent of married girls aged 15-19 have never used contraception. Of those that do use contraception 22.8 percent of the 15-19 year olds began using it only after the birth of their first child.³ The birth interval for adolescent mothers (27 months) is also significantly shorter compared to all women (39 months). More than a third of adolescent births occur within an interval of less than 24 months.⁴ Both early pregnancy and closely-spaced births can have serious negative affects on both the mother and child's health.

¹ National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT), Mitra and Associates, and ORC Macro. 2005. *Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2004*. Dhaka, Bangladesh and Calverton, Maryland [USA]: National Institute of Population Research and Training, Mitra and Associates, and ORC Macro, 94

² National Institute of Population Research and Training, 95

³ National Institute of Population Research and Training, 72

⁴ National Institute of Population Research and Training, 57

The Program

Support for School Girls

Though 86 percent of girls attend primary school in Bangladesh, only 47 percent attend secondary school.⁵ Many girls drop out after class five because secondary school requires an admission fee. To help girls transition from primary to secondary school, Pathfinder provided admission fees, uniforms, notebooks, sandals, and supplies to 4,092 female students in the last three classes of primary school (classes three through five) and the first class of secondary school (class six) in five upazilas (subdistricts) of Kishoreganj, a rural district in Bangladesh. Swanirvar Bangladesh, a national Nongovernmental Organization (NGO), implemented the program at the field level.

By supporting girls from impoverished families in their last years of primary school, paying the fees for entrance into secondary school, and supporting them in their first year of secondary school, Pathfinder is working to bridge the gap between primary and secondary education for girls. It is believed that by helping families overcome the initial financial obstacles between primary and secondary school, many will be able to support their daughters' educations through completion of secondary school.

The five project upazilas are among the poorest in Bangladesh. Although they have received some NGO support, their remote location—most are accessible only by boat—has led to an inadequate response in comparison to the great needs of the area. The upazilas are all in low-lying areas, parts below sea level, and experience severe flooding



These students at Abdul Wadud High School in Austagram are in classes 6-10.

⁵ UNESCO Institute for Statistics, "Statistics in Brief." <http://www.uis.unesco.org/profiles/EN/EDU/500.html> (19 April 2006)



Kulsum was being supported by the Pathfinder scholarship when she dropped out of school.

Kulsum's father has abandoned her family and her mother is very ill. That leaves 12 year-old Kulsum responsible for feeding her mother and her six year-old sister. Her two younger brothers have been sent to an orphanage because the family was unable to care for all four children.

Kulsum's day begins with cooking breakfast for her mother and sister. Once they are fed and the dishes have been washed, she heads to the river where she either fishes or collects seaweed all morning. At noon she heads to the market where she sells the fish and seaweed. Any money she makes she uses to buy rice or other necessities for her family. In the evening she cooks again and manages other household chores like washing the family's clothing.

Her family is looking for a husband for her, but she says she will refuse to marry before she is 18 because she hopes to be able to return to school. She also wants to be able to send her future children to school, but she doesn't know how she will make that happen. "I can't act, I can only think," she says.

Kulsum's story is not unique. Another girl who left the program, Ripa, who is just 9 years old, tells a similar story of working all day to support her mother and three siblings. Like Kulsum, her desire to go to school is still strong. They both agree that they would have to receive financial support in addition to the school fees, dresses, and supplies to be able to attend school.

about six months a year. Farmers harvest only one crop per year and some families migrate during the rainy season to look for work.

Swanirvar and Pathfinder worked together with the headmasters of over 274 schools to identify girls who were at risk of dropping out because of extreme poverty.

Of the girls selected to receive assistance from the project, 42.4 percent of the fathers were farmers. The rest were wage laborers, fishermen, or petty businessmen. Ten percent of the girls' fathers had died—a factor that greatly increases the chance of school drop out and early marriage for girls. Most mothers (96.9 percent) had no job and 1.5 percent had died.

Eighteen of the families supported by the project were homeless. Most lived in homes made of corrugated tin (75.2 percent) and the rest were made of mud, bamboo, or straw. Only 14.3 percent of participating families have a sanitary latrine, 13.8 percent have none, and the rest have a makeshift latrine. Just 16 percent of the girls have electricity in their homes.

When parents are struggling to feed their families three meals a day, the costs associated with sending children to school are often impossible to meet. Girls are particularly susceptible to early marriage during times of financial difficulty when parents can no longer afford to send their daughters to school (the costs include not just admission and examination fees, but uniforms, supplies, books, and other necessities). Furthermore, once a girl is married her husband must care for her, thus relieving her parents of the expense of feeding her too. By eliminating the cost of educating their daughters, Pathfinder is helping parents avoid making the difficult choice to marry their daughters early.

The literacy rate of the total population of Kishoreganj, 21.9 percent,⁶ is about half the national rate of 43.1 percent.⁷ The rate in both Nikli and Tarail is 12.6 percent,⁸ among the lowest in the country. Of the families supported by the project, 45.2 percent of mothers and 42 percent of the fathers had no formal education. Only 0.1 percent of mothers and 1.8 percent of fathers had received their secondary school certificate. Both poverty and parents who did not attend school are risk factors for early marriage.

Parents who have not received a formal education not only struggle to pay their children's school costs, but they are unable to help with homework. This poses a significant

⁶ Banglapedia "Kishoreganj District." http://www.banglapedia.org/HT/K_0270.HTM (20 April 2006)

⁷ CIA World Fact Book "Bangladesh" <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/bg.html> (12 June 2006)

⁸ Banglapedia "Kishoreganj District." http://www.banglapedia.org/HT/K_0270.HTM (20 April 2006)

problem in Bangladesh where schools are overcrowded, teachers are often underqualified, and without adequate teaching the exams that determine graduation from one class to another are exceedingly difficult. Private tutors are common, but also expensive. Parents often feel that it is pointless to send their children to school if they cannot afford a tutor because their children will not be able to advance grades without the extra help.

Why secondary education?

Girls who finish secondary school marry considerably later than those with less education. Women currently aged 25-29 who completed a minimum of secondary school married at a median age of 21.1 years. The median age of girls who did not complete primary school is 14.2 years. Even an incomplete secondary education improves the median age of marriage to 15.9 years.⁹

In addition to the social and financial reasons for early marriage, the tradition of dowry payment is also a factor in when girls marry. Traditionally, younger girls require a smaller dowry payment than their older sisters.

In 2001 the average dowry payment for a 13-15 year-old girl was 6,417 Taka; for a 16-18 year old it was 10,484 Taka, and for a 19-22 year-old woman it was an average of 26,405 Taka.¹⁰ (At the time of publication one dollar is equal to about 68 Taka.)



*Students at Itna Girls' High School
Being able to wear the same uniform as the rest of
their classmates improves the self esteem of girls from
poor families. This in turn helps them in their studies.*

⁹ National Institute of Population Research and Training, 95

¹⁰ Sajeeda Amin, Nasheeba Selim, and Nashid Kamal Waiz. *Causes and Consequences of Early Marriage in Bangladesh*. (Population Council, Dhaka Bangladesh, 2006), 15

Table 1.
National data on maternal health indicators by level of mother's education¹¹

	Age at first birth (currently ages 25-29)	% girls ages 15-19 pregnant or already mothers	% who receive antenatal care	% who receive postnatal care	% who give birth with qualified attendant
No education	16.8	46.5	37.6	6.7	4.4
Primary incomplete	17.2	45.8	52.9	13.4	8.7
Secondary incomplete	18.3	27.2	72.5	26.8	20.7
Secondary complete or more	23.4	15.5	93.6	56.9	55.2

Table 2.
National data on childhood health indicators by level of mother's education¹²

	% of infants who receive postnatal care	% of children who receive all required vaccinations	% of children under 5 with acute respiratory infection in last 2 weeks	% of children with acute respiratory infection taken to health facility	% of children under 5 with fever in last 2 weeks	% of children with fever taken to health facility
No education	6.4	60.3	21.0	12.5	40.3	12.0
Primary incomplete	13.0	72.5	25.2	21.6	40.1	17.6
Secondary incomplete	26.0	82.2	19.6	27.4	41.1	25.9
Secondary complete or more	57.8	92.2	12.5	43.9	33.8	35.9

These figures change when girls go to school. With her secondary education completed, and eligible for a job with a good salary, a groom's family is less likely to demand a large dowry because she can contribute to the family financially.

Women who have completed their secondary education are more likely to delay pregnancy, receive prenatal and postnatal care, and have their births attended by qualified medical practitioners. (See table 1.) Children born to these women are more likely to receive all the necessary childhood vaccinations, stay healthier than children born to women without formal education, and be taken to health care facilities when they are sick. (See table 2.)

Though more than half of the women in Bangladesh aged 20-49 were married by age 15, only 17 percent of men marry before age 20.¹³ This age difference contributes to the power imbalance in many Bangladeshi marriages that leaves women unable to make decisions for themselves and their children and leaves them more vulnerable to abuse. The median age of marriage for men between the ages of 25-29 is 24.4, much closer to the median age of first marriage for girls who finish secondary school than their less educated peers.¹⁴

When girls are educated they are more likely to educate their children. They have fewer children and greater control of the household budget and can therefore invest more money and time into each child.

¹¹ National Institute of Population Research and Training, 60-61, 136, 143, 146

¹² National Institute of Population Research and Training, 146, 152, 156-159

¹³ National Institute of Population Research and Training, 94

¹⁴ National Institute of Population Research and Training, 96

Advocacy

To convince families of the problems associated with early marriage and the importance of education, and to engender support for the project, Pathfinder and Swanirvar conducted numerous local community advocacy meetings throughout the length of the project. At these meetings school uniforms and supplies were distributed and officials such as the upazila nibrahi (executive) officers, the education officers, the upazila health and family planning officer, headmasters, teachers, parents, and religious leaders spoke about the risks of early marriage and the importance of keeping girls in school. Attendance and participation by these local officials gave great credibility to the message for the students and parents in attendance and underscored the value of girls' education. The meetings garnered much local media attention, further spreading the message for girls to delay marriage and stay in school.



Jhuna Rani Saha, a 10 year-old class six student, gives a speech at an advocacy meeting in Itna, April 13, 2006.

Advocacy meetings praised the opportunities a secondary education can provide, including a more financially secure future. The health risks of pregnancy for young girls and the importance of family planning and spacing births were explained in detail.

These meetings are important because though school enrollment has increased over the past decade, early marriage has recently seen resurgence. From 1975 to 2000, the percent of girls between 10 and 14 who had never been married rose from 91.2 percent to 92.7 percent. But in the 2004 Demographic and Health Survey that figure dropped to 88.6 percent.¹⁵ The advocacy meetings help parents understand that education is important, but it is not enough to ensure a healthy future for their daughters, they must also protect them from early marriage.

Paramedic Training

Between 2003 and 2006 the project provided scholarships for 60 secondary school graduates (20 per year) to attend a paramedic training course at AITAM Welfare Organization, a local nonprofit paramedic training center. The year-long training course prepares the girls to work in both clinic and community settings. They are trained in maternal and child health care, family planning, and other basic health services.

Upon graduation most of these girls have found employment in rural clinics, including the Smiling Sun clinics run by Pathfinder's NGO Service Delivery Program (NSDP). These girls provide both essential health care services to underserved populations and inspiration to the girls in the villages where they work.

Why paramedic training?

A secondary school certificate qualifies girls to work in a number of capacities, including as primary school teachers and in government jobs. But those jobs are not always readily available, especially in rural villages. A girl who has finished secondary school and has no job prospects or ability to further her education is sure to be married, even though students can finish class 10 as young as 15 years-old. By providing training that will ensure future employment, Pathfinder is giving these girls a chance to further delay their marriage and improve their future family's standard of living. And by training these girls as paramedics, Pathfinder is helping provide much-needed medical care in rural areas.

Though the training is only one year long, girls who graduate and find jobs are able to further delay marriage because they have money and therefore higher status and more bargaining power in their families. This higher status may also allow them more choice in who they marry.

¹⁵ National Institute of Population Research and Training, 93

Program Successes

Support for School Girls

The Raising the Age of Marriage Project reached 4,092 girls in classes three through six in 274 schools between 2003 and 2006. In the first year of the project, Pathfinder supported 3000 girls in classes three through five, the last three years of primary school. At the end of that year Pathfinder and Swanirvar realized that they could afford to support more students than originally estimated and selected 1,092 more girls. Nine-hundred girls from the first class five enrolled in class six in 2004. In the second year 930 girls graduated from primary to secondary school and 1,029 girls enrolled in class six in 2006. (See table 3.)

But the project reached much further than the girls who received scholarships. Overall enrollment has increased in the project area as well. Government statistics show a 14.3 percent increase in primary school enrollment between

Asaduzzaman Salim is head of the Singpur Government Primary School, 15 kilometers from the center of Nikli. Because the area is so remote, the literacy rate is even lower than the upazilla average of 12.6 percent.

Inspired by the Raising the Age of Marriage program and advocacy sessions, Salim began making house calls to families in his area that were not sending their children to school, and he encourages his teachers to do the same. During these home visits he explains to parents that enrolling their children in school is not enough; students must attend classes every day and therefore parents cannot expect their children to work in the fields or at home during school hours. His advocacy efforts have led to parents enrolling children as old as 10-14 years in class one for the first time. The older students are doing well and have continued on to higher grades.

He is exceedingly proud that none of the girls from his school have gotten married before the age of 18 in the three years since the project began. He goes so far as to tell parents, "If you pursue early marriage, I will pursue legal recourse."

Salim also reports that the girls in his school are continuing even after the scholarship ends, though they are dropping out in huge numbers in other schools. "The difference," he says, "is in the motivation of the teachers and the home visits to families."

He does this work because he says, "Education helps girls' relationships within their families." When they go to school they bring that knowledge back to the family, and he has seen how this improves the lives of all family members. One of his students in class nine is married. Her husband was illiterate but she encouraged him to learn to read and now he attends an NGO informal education school. She also convinced her in-laws to send the rest of their children to school.

2004 and 2006 in the five upazilas. This represents an additional 14,023 students. (See table 4.) Though data wasn't available for all the secondary school classes (many secondary schools are privately run and therefore don't report their enrollment figures to the government), class six enrollment as reported by the upazila education officers has increased by a total of 15.9 percent in four of the upazilas. (See table 5.) Data for Nikli was unavailable. All of the headmasters interviewed also report decreasing dropout rates among all students in primary and secondary school, not just those supported by the scholarship.

Though school enrollment is expected to rise over time because of population growth, the teachers and headmasters interviewed in Itna, Nikli, and Austagram, believe that the Raising the Age of Marriage program contributed to the increase in enrollment in their upazilas. "I have seen other families begin sending their daughters to school because they have seen how education benefits the whole community," said Majlishpur, assistant headmaster of Shah Smriti High School.

The majority of the girls who were supported by the project through class six are continuing their education after

Table 3.
Girls supported in each class by calendar year

Grade	Calendar year				Total student-years of the project
	2003	2004	2005	2006	
Class III	1,458	192	--	--	1,650
Class IV	955	1,850	620	106	3,531
Class V	587	1,150	1,642	1,127	4,506
Class VI	--	900	930	1,029	2,859
Total	3,000	4,092	3,192	2,262	12,546

Table 4.
Percent change in primary school enrollment

	Total primary school enrollment in all five upazillas by year		
	2004	2006	Percent change
Class 1	32,335	35,457	9.7
Class 2	22,464	26,496	18
Class 3	18,860	21,909	16.2
Class 4	14,041	16,402	16.8
Class 5	10,587	12,046	13.8
Total	98,287	112,310	14.3

Table 5.
Percent change in class six enrollment

	Class six enrollment by year		
	2004	2006	Percent change
Karimgonj	3,200	3,912	22.3
Tarail	1,566	1,639	4.7
Austagram	699	928	32.8
Itna	1,182	1,225	3.6
Total	6,647	7,704	15.9

the Pathfinder support has ended. Eighty-four percent of Pathfinder-supported class-six girls who passed their December 2004 examinations enrolled in class seven in 2005. Of that same group of girls, 85 percent who passed their December 2005 examinations enrolled in class eight in 2006. (See table 6.) Table 6 also shows that the percent of girls continuing to class seven increased from 2004 to 2005, and the percent of girls who continue to class eight is even higher.

Teachers and headmasters attribute the improved enrollment to parents' improved understanding of the importance of education for girls as well as boys. Diliara Haque, a teacher at Abdul Wadud High School says parents used to think, "Why educate girls? They leave the family." But she believes that the advocacy meetings have helped change this perspective. Teachers also believe that parents are seeing the benefits of education for themselves. "The literacy rate in the area is very low. But families are encouraged by the improvement they have seen in the girls who are going to school, so they are sending their girls to school too," says Basanti Rani, headmistress of Dambara Primary School.

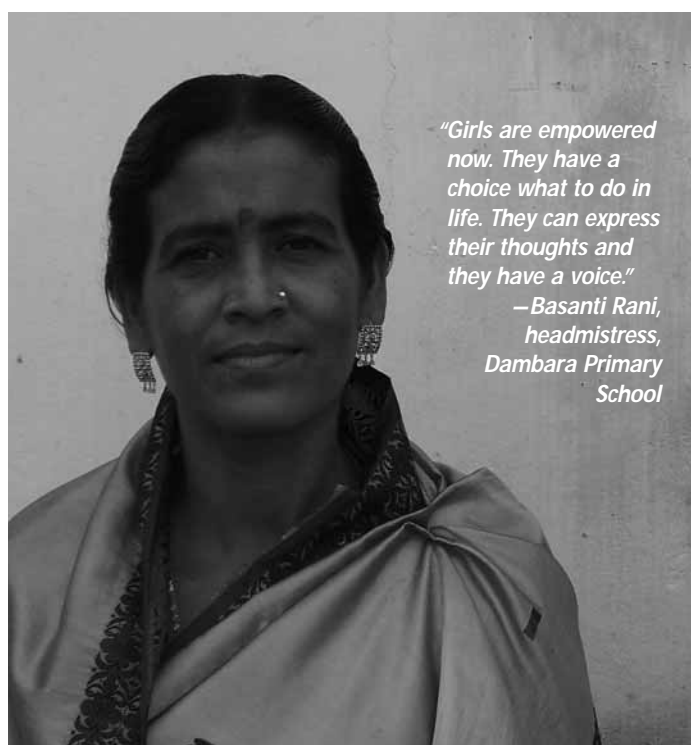


Table 6.
Examination results and continuation rate of girls no longer receiving the scholarship

		No. in class	No. passed	% passed	No. continued	%	%
					to next grade	of those who passed the exam continued to next grade	continued to next grade
2004	Class VI	900	653	73	545	83	60
2005	Class VI	930	709	76	617	87	66
	Class VII	545	451	83	385	85	71



Rahima Akter was only a few months old when her father died. Her mother, Tahera Banu, was left alone with four daughters and obliged to obey Rahima's grandfather. Rahima was just 12 years old when her grandfather decided that since she was now in class seven and no longer receiving the Pathfinder scholarship, it was time for her to marry.

Rahima knew that getting married at such a young age would mean a lifetime of hard labor and suffering like her mother's. She wants to finish school and be able to provide a better life for herself and her mother. She says, "Sometimes now I have no breakfast and I have to go to school hungry. But if I finish school I will be able to get a job and earn enough money to provide my family three meals a day." Rahima is a good student and very enthusiastic about wanting to be a doctor some day. But she could not refuse the marriage on her own so she contacted Swarnivar to ask them for help.

Swarnivar intervened on her behalf and explained to her grandfather that not only was requiring his granddaughter to marry before the age of 18 illegal, it was not in her or his best interest. They explained that if Rahima stays in school, she will grow up and get a job, become self-sufficient and be able to help her family. Her grandfather relented and Rahima is still in school.

Her mother was proud of Rahima's choice to delay marriage and for her drive to finish her education. Her biggest dream for her daughter is that someday she will have a job and be self-reliant. But Tahera feels powerless to help her because she has no authority in the family or income to help pay the school expenses.

Rahima fears that her grandfather will try to arrange marriage for her again soon, but she is confident that this time, she will not need Swarnivar's help, and she will be able to refuse on her own.

Universally, girls want to stay in school. They recount their dreams of becoming doctors, teachers, lawyers, judges, NGO workers, and naval officers. Each one explained that she aspires to work in her chosen field because she wants to help the people in her village. The girls say they will spend their money on education for their siblings and future children. "I will spend it honestly," said Sharmin Akhter, a class six student in Nikli, meaning that she will care for the poor and provide food and medicine to those who need it. They will buy nutritious food for their families and enjoy three meals a day, something that is rare for some of the girls. The girls plan to live in modern homes, but do not wish to leave the villages.

They want the freedom that an education can offer them. They see how their mothers work all day to feed and care for their families and that they never have time to rest or take care of their own needs. The girls believe that with an education and a job—and limiting their family size to no more than one or two children—they will be able to spend more time caring for themselves and enjoying life. A group of class four girls in Itna told of their dreams to visit Kishoreganj, a larger town in the district. After further discussion they agreed that they would like to visit Dhaka and the beach at Cox's Bazar in southern Bangladesh. They even dream of visiting America. When asked what she hoped to see in America, Parvin Akhter replied with wide eyes, "Everything."

Part of the motivation for these girls to earn an education is their desire to gain higher status in society than their mothers. "Without school I will not be a first class citizen in Bangladesh," said Beauty Akhter, a class six student at Abdul Wadud High School in Austagram. Education will help the girls earn respect both in their families and in the village. They will have more negotiating power on life's big decisions, such as who and when to marry, and whether or not to send their children to school.

An informal study conducted by Swarnivar found that the rate of early marriage had dropped from 50 percent as reported in *The Daily Ittefaq*, a prominent Bangladeshi newspaper, in 2004 to 42 percent in 2006. Swarnivar collected the information from schools and marriage registration offices during field visits.

The girls explained that they learned about the risks of early marriage from the advocacy meetings and most say they want to wait until they are 20 to marry. None wish to get married before they are 18 years old. "If my parents

want to marry me and I am not ready I will refuse,” said Popy Rani Dev, a class seven student at Itna Girls’ High School. She says she wants to, “know the meaning of life,” and be established before she gets married.

Many girls shared the sentiment of wanting to finish school, find a job, and create a place for themselves in society before marriage. They speak of wanting to save and retain control over money—they would use it for health care, taking care of their parents or siblings, or for educating their children. Marriage, they believe, will compromise their ability to control their income.

Though the project has been successful in transitioning girls from primary to secondary school, the reality for many of them is that their parents will not be able to pay for them to finish secondary school and may begin looking for husbands if the girls drop out.

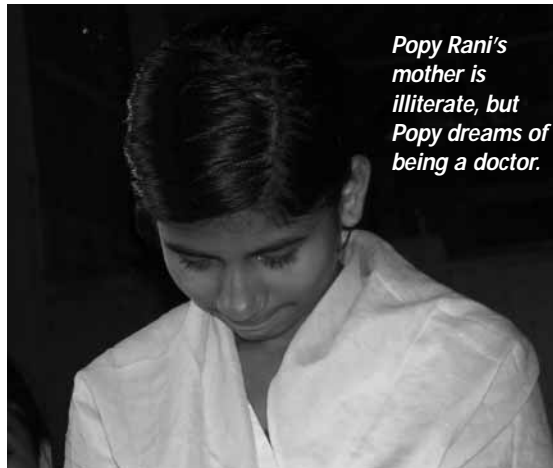
“With a good education I will have power and can make decisions,” said Popy Rani, a class seven student at Abdul Wadud High School. But she began to cry when she explained that she didn’t think her parents could afford to send her to school any longer. She is afraid that her parents will pressure her to marry soon. She will have no say in whom she marries, and is afraid she will have no ability to make decisions in the relationship.

But many of the girls plan to fight this fate as best as they can. They tell of their plans to sew dresses or sell vegetables to earn money to support their education.

Farzana Akhter, a 10 year-old class five student at Austagram Primary School, is particularly enthusiastic about her plan to raise funds for her education. She says while she is in school she is learning to sew dresses, so she will make a little money as a seamstress. With the money she earns from that she will buy a chicken and sell its eggs, a more profitable venture. She is adamant about staying in school because she says, “Nobody can prosper in life without an education.” She is ranked first in her class and wants to be a doctor.

Though parents in Kishoreganj are coming to understand the dangers of early marriage and are doing their best to keep their daughters in school, many are still financially unable to send their daughters to school. “I’m a poor man. I can’t even feed them [my children] three times a day,” said the father of a girl in class six at Austagram Zuni Girl’s School. Akkas Ali, a father of a class eight girl in Nikli, says he is proud of his daughter’s education and wants her to finish secondary school so that she will be independent and he can find a good husband for her. But he is just a day laborer and does not know if he will have the money to continue her education.

Teachers, headmasters, and government officials are all doing what they can to keep the girls in Kishoreganj in school. They make house visits and hold meetings with the girls and parents to talk about women’s empowerment, human rights, and how educating girls benefits the whole



Popy Rani’s mother is illiterate, but Popy dreams of being a doctor.



Farzana Akhter (left) with classmates Rona Akhter and Rekha Akhter. “If I get an education people will honor me and my parents will be proud.” – Farzana

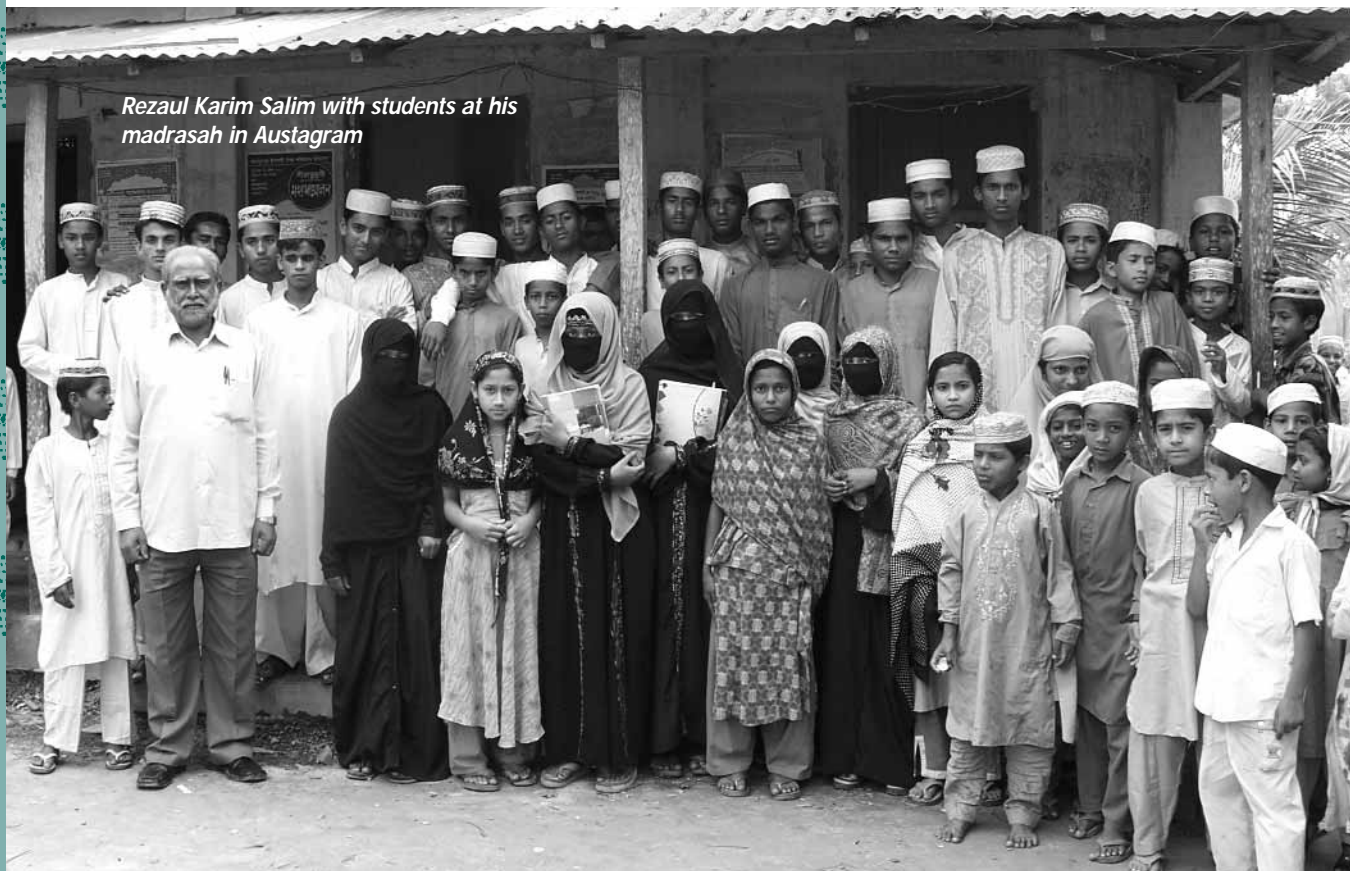
community. Joyнал Abedin, assistant education officer in Nikli, tells parents, “Like food, education is a necessity.” Teachers encourage girls to stay in school and use themselves as examples of what they can achieve if they work hard. Tahmina Begum, headmistress of Shahid Swarani Girls High School has been working at the school for 31 years. She tells girls about one of her former students who sold cucumbers in the market to pay her tuition. That student is now one of their teachers. Begum’s students say they are inspired by her and admire her education and her caring nature.

The upazila nirbahi officer in Austagram, Pronab Kumar Roy, plans to address the issue of the quality of local education in a meeting with the headmasters, teachers, local elites, parents, and students to discuss the problem and develop solutions. He complains that some teachers do not come to school regularly and do not stay the whole day and many headmasters don’t enforce the rules. He will address this in the meeting. He held a similar meeting in the upazila where he was previously stationed and saw results within two months. Both teachers and students were attending school more regularly, and parents were being more attentive.

Religious leaders are incorporating messages about the dangers of early marriage in their madrasah classes and in their prayer services and weekly meetings at the mosque. “This project is important for the whole community because, with an education, girls can help in the development of the economy,” said Rezaul Karim Salim, head of a madrasah (Muslim school) in Austagram. He talks to parents about the importance of keeping their daughters in school and says the ones who can afford it, do.

Though attitudes toward girls’ education are changing and enrollment rates are up, the need for financial assistance is still acute. Every student, parent, teacher, headmaster, religious leader, and government official interviewed requested that the scholarship program be continued and extended through class ten. Students and parents alike are enthusiastic about the opportunities that a secondary education provides, but they have limited means to achieve them.

Some headmasters seek scholarships for their students from other NGOs. Md. Yusuf Ali, headmaster of the Noyahati Mollapara Primary School, has contacted organizations such as BRAC, the largest Bangladeshi development organization in the country, to ask for more scholarships for his students. He has not yet been successful, but will keep trying. Other headmasters have sought similar funding, but say that because they are in such remote areas they receive very little NGO support and the Raising the Age of Marriage program has been the only one of its kind to serve their upazilas.



(From left) AITAM trainees, Rita Rani Karmaker, Rina Akhter, Ayesha Akhter, and Jasmin Khatun with their nurse trainer (second from right) at Kumuduni Hospital, Tangail.



Paramedic Training

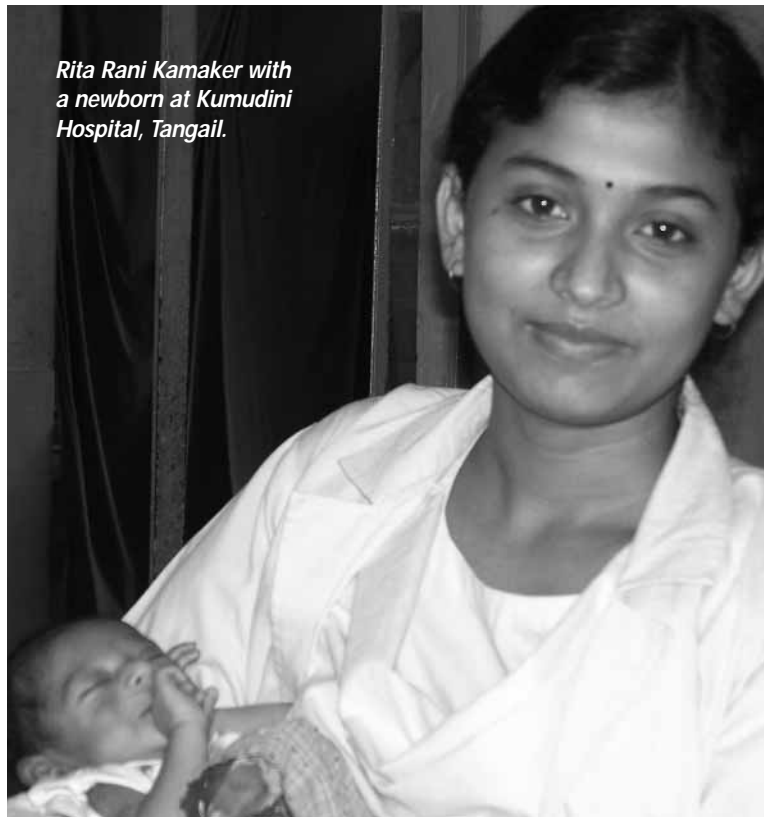
Pathfinder supported three classes of 20 paramedic students at the AITAM Welfare Organization in Dhaka. Two classes have graduated and a third will graduate in July 2006. To assess the job placement rate of the graduates, Pathfinder sent a questionnaire to each girl's home. Thirty-two of the 40 graduates have responded and 30 of the 32 have found jobs. They are making an average of 4,989 Taka (about \$73) per month. This is higher than a primary school teacher's salary and is comparable to that of a secondary school teacher.

Dr. Zahed Masud, AITAM's executive director, says that when the Pathfinder-supported girls first come to the institute they are shy and tired because they are malnourished. But, he says, "They change quickly . . . By the time a month has passed and they are eating well, they are happy, confident, and energetic."

Dr. Masud provides remedial education for the girls because they come from schools with poor curricula and poorly-trained teachers. He says he can't tell them, "You have to push the injection at a right angle because they don't know what a right angle is." He works with them on skills as basic as handwriting, among others, to ensure they are able to carry themselves like professional women.

The AITAM curriculum prepares students to work in either a clinic or community-based setting. It includes the government curriculum for paramedics

Rita Rani Kamaker with a newborn at Kumudini Hospital, Tangail.



plus the World Health Organization's maternal and child health curriculum. His students also spend time training at the maternity hospital, the children's hospital, and at a large general-medicine hospital. Masud says this vast exposure helps his students learn to recognize the symptoms of serious diseases, and though they cannot treat these illnesses, they will know when to refer their patients to the regional hospitals.

When meeting the AITAM students it is clear that they are grateful for the training and enthusiastic about their futures. They say there is a wide gap between their knowledge and dreams now as compared to what they were before the training. The girls are proud to announce that they will wait to marry until they are ready. They will not allow their parents to pressure them into marriage, and they know that they will have the power to help choose the groom. One girl said that if her mother tried to marry her before she was ready she would bargain with her and offer to pay for her younger sister's education.

Of the 10 girls interviewed, 8 said they want 2 children and 2 girls said they want only 1 child. They did not think about family planning before the AITAM training. They will try to pay for their children's educations through college or university and will not marry their daughters before they are 25 years old.

The girls' confidence is apparent in their demeanor and in their eagerness to answer questions about their education and their futures. This confidence will help them enjoy more equitable marriages. "In our family our father dictated everything. But I will share power in my family. If my husband wants five children I will teach him about family planning," said Keyamun Nahar Keya.

Dr. Masud said he does not counsel the students on matters such as delaying marriage or family planning because he says, "My basic principle is that knowledge comes first . . . Their ability to negotiate starts when they see their life might be different." He says the trainers provide the information and the girls create their ideas about marriage and family planning on their own.

Masud plans to look for organizations to sponsor girls because he sees how their lives are changed. He is proud of his students and says, "With this training they can stand on their own two feet."



Sanjida Sharmin graduated in the first class of Pathfinder-supported AITAM paramedics and now works at the NSDP Smiling Sun Clinic in Itna. She is thrilled to be working at the clinic, especially because she grew up in Itna.

Sanjida has seven sisters and one brother. Her father is retired and could no longer pay for her or her two younger sisters' educations. Before they heard about the Pathfinder scholarship her father was trying to arrange her marriage though Sanjida did not feel she was ready to be married. It was only because of the AITAM course that she was able to refuse marriage. Though she is 22 years-old now she wants to wait another seven or eight years before she marries. Sanjida is supporting her younger sisters' education and wants to make sure they finish university before she marries.

Sanjida enjoys her work, especially the field visits. "When my clients are happy, I am happy!" she adds with a smile.

Part of Sanjida's job at the clinic is to hold counseling sessions with groups of girls on subjects such as menstruation, nutrition, sexually transmitted infections, reproductive tract infections, and delaying marriage until they are ready. She uses herself as an example of what they can do if they stay in school and says, "The girls look up to me very much." She is supposed to hold the counseling sessions twice a month but she usually holds three or four each month because demand is so high.

"Without this training I had no hope," says Sanjida. But now she is happy and confident about her future and does her best to encourage young girls to follow her lead.

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This was an unusual project for Pathfinder because it did not involve providing women with family planning and productive health services, but rather invested in our future mothers and their community. Pathfinder Senior Vice President, John Dumm, enthusiastically welcomed the idea and supported this project. We in the Dhaka office thank him and wish that he would explore many more similar projects.

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Photo credits: Mary K. Burket



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