

# Learning Brief

## Community Women and Girls Enjoy the Benefits of Reformed Community Groups

Strengthening Household Abilities to Respond to Development Opportunities (SHOUHARDO) III is a multi-sectoral and integrated program implemented by CARE Bangladesh in eight northern districts of Bangladesh of the char and haor regions. The program is funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Government of Bangladesh (GoB). The objective of the program is to improve the lives and livelihoods of poor and extreme poor (PEP) communities in the program areas.

### Background

SHOUHARDO III program established the Community-level Thematic Groups since the inception year of the program in 2016 to facilitate the large-scale program interventions on Agriculture and Livelihoods (Farmers' Field Business School/FFBS), Health and Nutrition (Maternal Child Health and Nutrition/MCHN groups and Mother Groups), Women's Empowerment (Empowerment Knowledge and Transformative Action/EKATA), and Governance (Village Development Committees) with additional components represented by the youth groups and Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLA). These groups were reformed into gender and age-specific Community Groups (CG) following the midterm evaluation in 2018 that provided recommendations on putting in place a sustainability strategy.

The reformed Community Groups are:

-  Adult females (18+ years)
-  Adult males (18+ years)
-  Adolescent girls (12-18 years)
-  Adolescent boys (12-18 years)



### Qualitative Study on Reformed Community Groups

Study Timeline: **November 2021**  
Methodology: **Qualitative assessment**

- 4** Program Villages (2 from char and 2 from haor region)
- 84** Respondents
  - **6** Focus Group Discussions (FGD)
  - **32** In-depth interviews (IDI)



### Study Objective

To explore the impact, perspective, and experience of reformed Community Groups from an individual and community standpoint of SHOUHARDO III participants

To look into strategies from participants' perspectives for improving and sustaining CG operations after the program ends

## How are the Community Groups helping the communities?

### Women's Agency

The CGs became a common platform for adult women and adolescent girls to share ideas and talk freely to share their psychological load with their peers.

### Community Solidarity

The CGs are places for the communities to connect with and inspire each other. The CG members also utilize this space to promote their own businesses and share business-related information and advices.

### Locally-led Interventions

CGs are enhancing locally-led interventions such as road/infrastructure construction/repair, livestock and poultry vaccination campaigns, and relocation support during river erosion/flood, and many others.

### Linking with Public and Private Entities and Accessing Services

Local government and public offices now recognize the faces of the CG leaders and members and reach out to the groups for ensuring public services.



## Key Reflections

**Among all the Community Groups present in the program, the adult female and adolescent girls' Community Groups are functioning the most efficiently**

Adult female CGs are performing better than the adult male CGs.

- They are organizing more meetings with more members
- Members possess a better knowledge of CG discussion topics and objectives
- They have increased group cohesion, problem-solving skills, social network and capital, mobility, negotiation skills, and communication and linkage with public offices



## Leading factors behind adult female and adolescent girls' buy-in with their designated Community Groups



The homogenous gender-specific membership structure allows adult women to lean back and look for advice and support when facing health-related, financial, or other domestic issues (such as violence). They also consider CG meetings as a relief from being only home-bound. The improvements involve not only women's lives outside their homes but also their position inside their families. Women who are contributing financially to their families have shared that they have increased involvement in key decision-making of family matters and improved relationships with their spouses and in-laws. The benefits of being part of CGs have inspired members to take ownership of the groups. In addition, the catalyst behind the effectiveness of adolescent girls' CGs is similar to that of adult female CGs. They consider CGs as a platform to spend time with their peer groups, sharing their thoughts, happiness, and troubles. The CG platform acted as mental health support for adolescent girls. They can talk about menstrual health, parents, family issues, and emotional wellbeing. In rural Bangladesh, the mobility, agency, and decision-making skills of adolescent girls are highly suppressed due to patriarchal norms; the CGs are a space for them to express their emotions and cope with them collectively.

## Adult male and adolescent boys have limited buy-in towards their respective Community Groups

A positive impact that came out of adult male CGs is that there were more discussions on women empowerment and ways for men to assist the women in their lives to take a more active role in income-generating activities and other responsibilities.



Adult male and adolescent boys' CGs are performing less efficiently compared to the female and adolescent girls' CGs

- The adult male CGs were found to be struggling to attend the meetings and recollecting the discussion topics due to lack of attention and time
- Most members were day laborers and found it difficult to participate in CGs by skipping work that day or those hours



# Factors hindering adult male and adolescent boys' engagement in Community Groups

Adult men and adolescent boys did not find the CGs useful for their lives like the women and girls did. Rural men in Bangladesh usually have the privilege of getting involved in various income-generating activities (IGA), have less to no restriction on mobility outside the home, and can migrate easily outside their villages. The adolescent boys preferred to spend their leisure hours playing or chatting with friends than attending CG meetings. Some adolescent boys migrate to cities for education or to look for work and some to other villages with their parents. For these reasons, adult male and adolescent boys have less buy-in towards their respective community groups than female groups.



## Why do women and girls' Community Groups have a higher potential to be sustainable?

- 1 CGs play a crucial role in improving women's lives despite the persisting challenges they face every day
- 2 The homogeneity of the CGs is a key factor behind their social bonding
- 3 Women consider CGs as an essential platform to seek and engage in problem-solving due to the proximity of members beyond the timing of the meetings
- 4 The improvements involve not only women's lives outside their homes but also in their positions inside their families
- 5 Women consider CGs as an integral platform to share their concerns regarding family, income, and other communal problems to seek solutions in the open forum
- 6 The women's connectedness through the CGs improved their social network and capital for the women. This, in turn, straightened the support system for women compared to pre-2018 groups. This practice later converted into raising concerns or demands to the respective local government units for availing relevant allowances and facilities

## Conclusion

The reformed CGs were transitioned from the pre-2018 Community-level Thematic Groups with an aim to improve the community sustainably; to develop local linkage, solidarity, resources, and skills that will continue with the CG members when the program phases out. Although a lot of positive impacts can be seen with the adult female and adolescent girls' CGs, adult male and adolescent boys' CGs are still struggling. The adult female and adolescent girls' CGs are trying to achieve a little toward equitable rights similar to the men and the boys in their communities. The adult female and adolescent girls' CGs are expected to continue to thrive beyond the program timeframe as the CGs are seen to be a platform where women and girls are supporting each other to succeed in life.



*"This document is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The Contents are the responsibility of CARE Bangladesh and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States."*

Contact **SHOUHARDO III**  
+8801306907327  
+(880) 2-55058377-83  
bgd.shouhardoinfo@care.org  
<https://shouhar.do.carebangladesh.org>

Written by: Sairana Ahsan  
Edited by: Tasfia Natasha Kalam  
Reviewed by: Zinat Ara Afroze

Designed by: Apel Pavel  
Published On: June 2022,  
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