



Hello, I Am

Using a positive deviance approach to end child marriage in Bangladesh

Introduction

The *Hello, I Am* (HIA) programme (2017 - 2020) aimed to end child marriage, adolescent pregnancy, and school drop-out in Bangladesh. Using a multi-pronged approach that included **positive role modelling**, **intergenerational dialogue**, and **edutainment**, the programme empowered young men and women to take action against child marriage and encouraged parents and community leaders to become more supportive of girls' aspirations. The programme reached nearly 80,000 people through community-based activities and more than seven million people through media efforts. It enabled young people across *six upazilas* (districts) to break harmful social norms and have more say in decisions about their future.

Key takeaways

- This brief highlights one of three strategies used in the *Hello, I Am* (HIA) programme: the positive deviance approach (PDA).
- The PDA is the concept that, in every community, there are some individuals whose uncommon but successful behaviours and strategies enable them to solve problems better than their neighbours who have the same challenges, barriers, and resources.
- HIA used the PDA to explore factors that encouraged and enabled people in the target communities to resist societal pressure for young women to marry before the age of 18.
- Most successfully, the programme identified positive deviants (PD) and promoted them as community role models. Evidence showed that role models were inspiring and motivational for young people and parents, with community members recognizing that "someone just like me" can get results and make an impact.
- It is recommended that future programmes using the PDA (1) develop a shared understanding of PDA and how it fits within the programme's theory of change and (2) use a participatory model, without imposing a one-size-fits-all approach.

Approach

HIA used the positive deviance approach (PDA) to encourage social and behaviour change. The PDA supports sustainable behavioural and social change by focusing on solutions that already exist in a community, rather than creating new ones. It was developed on the basis that, in every community, there are some individuals whose uncommon but successful behaviours and strategies enable them to solve problems better than their neighbours who have the same challenges, barriers, and resources. A positive deviant (PD) is an individual who demonstrates uncommon behaviours that enable them to overcome a problem without special resources. They act differently to, or deviate from, the usual behaviour of their society with a positive result.¹

HIA used the PDA to explore factors that encouraged and enabled people in the target communities to resist societal pressure for young women to marry before the age of 18. The programme identified parents, young people, and community leaders who actively resisted child marriage as a PD because they are deviating from the social and cultural norms. For example, a PD could be a parent who prevented their child from being married, a young person who advocated against child marriage, or a community leader who supported parents to resist child marriage.

200 fathers publicly pledged

- not to marry their daughters before the age of 18
- to protect their daughters right to stay in school
- to let their daughters choose when and whom to marry

By highlighting these people within the community, the programme encouraged more people to protect girls and young women from early marriage.

Activities

The programme piloted a formal PDA inquiry² in Gazipur Sadar, less than 40 kilometres away from the capital Dhaka. The inquiry began with a community consultation and led to the formation of a community resource team to lead the project's next steps. The team interviewed 16 positive deviants in the community and created a community action plan to replicate positive behaviour.

Programme staff in all upazilas were trained on the PDA. Full implementation of the approach was scheduled to start in 2020, but due to COVID-19 full roll out was unfortunately not realised. However, following the pilot in Gazipur Sadar, other districts adapted the basic principles of the approach informally to devise a range of ways to showcase positive deviants and incentivize and publicly reward community members whose actions led to positive change.

Role models: Most successfully, the programme identified PDs and promoted them as community role models. Evidence showed that role models were motivational, with adolescents mentioning older siblings who stayed in school, had a job, or postponed marriage as inspirational to them. It was important for community members to recognize that “someone just like me” can get results and make an impact. People were also proud to serve as role models and be recognized by HIA.

Best Father Campaign: The Best Father Campaign started after community members realized that fathers were often not available to attend HIA sessions due to their work schedules. To enhance engagement, the implementing partners created a nomination process for fathers who showed commitment to their daughters' right to stay in school and to choose when and whom to marry. The campaign encouraged fathers to make public pledges not to marry their daughters before the age of 18. Fathers were publicly commended, which applied peer and community pressure to uphold their commitments. Each upazila awarded up to 10 fathers

1 See <https://positivedeviance.org/> for more information.

2 An inquiry refers to the stage in the approach when the community seeks to discover demonstrably successful behaviours and strategies among its members.



for their positive deviance in annual ceremonies.

Project staff also held up others, such as marriage registrars and matchmakers, who agreed to do their part to end child marriage as exemplary community members. Additionally, community volunteers who led project activities were PDs and acted as role models.

PD booklet: The programme also encouraged positive behaviour by showcasing true stories. A PD booklet featured case studies that highlight acts of resistance to child marriage and negative health outcomes caused by early childbirth following child marriage. The booklet was produced in Bangla and English and distributed in the community. Along with sensitizing and educating parents, adolescents, and community leaders, the booklet aimed to inspire and empower readers to be PDs by preventing child marriage in their communities.

The PDA was also used in the programme's edutainment efforts (see edutainment brief). Real life stories of how young people broke norms helped others to recognize their own potential. Stories where girls acted differently to the societal norm made adolescents, particularly boys, change their perception of what girls were capable of and realize that girls could achieve the same goals as boys.

Impact

Role models: HIA led to a range of positive changes amongst its participants including changes in attitudes about child marriage, increased action to prevent child marriages and improved communication in families. The role modelling of attitudes and behaviours was identified as one of the key factors influencing these changes.

Best Father Campaign: The Best Father Campaign was a success across all upazilas. It resulted in 200 fathers taking an oath not to allow their adolescent daughters to marry before the age of 18 and to be responsible and accountable for protecting their daughters' rights. Local government officers expressed appreciation of the project's success in involving men in child marriage prevention efforts and played an important role in adding prestige to the campaign's award ceremonies.

PD booklet: Five hundred copies of the PD booklet were printed and distributed to community members and government stakeholders. Due to COVID-19, copies were only shared locally.

"I've never heard of any one of these girls getting married off early after their fathers were at [The Best Father Campaign]."

- Community volunteer



Lessons learnt

Make concept approachable: Imposing an academic and formal approach on the community during the pilot in Gazipur did not work. The concept was challenging for community members to understand. The paradoxical structure of the term itself, with a positive ("positive") and negative ("deviance") word, did not translate well into Bangla so programme staff used a Bengali proverb about blossoms in the dust to explain it.

Choose an appropriate location: Gazipur has a mix of urban and rural areas. Along with some residential areas, it is an industrial centre where migrants from across Bangladesh come to work in factories. It is a heterogeneous community

with fewer social interactions and relationships between community members than in other districts, making it challenging to select PDs who were representative of and had influence in the community.

Manage data collection: While adult members gave the community resource team more credibility and community acceptance, the work and school schedules of team members and interviewees led to delays in data collection. Regular, informal meetings to discuss and reflect on the process and activities worked better than the traditional approach of conducting interviews and writing up notes.

Recommendations

Involve stakeholders: A shared understanding of the PDA, the programme's theory of change and how they fit together is crucial to the successful implementation of the PDA. It is recommended that this is developed between all stakeholders before the design stage of a project and includes what changes the programme expects. This can include a baseline study with community members to determine realistic outcomes. Document the processes that lead PDs or role models to change their attitudes and behaviours to better understand the risks and benefits associated with those changes.

Stay flexible: HIA remained flexible and allowed staff to take a more informal approach to implementing the PDA. Adapting the PDA for different upazilas gave community members the opportunity to define who was a PD and led to the development of activities like the Best Father Campaign. The initiative was a valuable way to engage men, who were often hard to reach, and was replicated in other districts. This versatility made the programme more community driven. It is recommended that future programmes use a participatory model, and not impose a one-size-fits-all approach.



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HIA built upon the **Unite for Body Rights** programme that had been operating in Bangladesh since 2010. Rutgers led on grant management, technical advice, operational research, and evaluations. **BBC Media Action** Bangladesh developed educational media content and created communications training materials. Implementation partners **Population Services and Training Center** (PSTC), **RHSTEP**, and **Dushta Shasthya Kendra** (DSK) delivered community-facing interventions. The programme was funded by the **IKEA Foundation**.