

“Now I Have the Courage”—Empowering Girls to Raise Their Voices and Advocate for Their Rights: Preliminary Qualitative Results from the Girls First Resilience Trial

RESEARCH BRIEF

Introduction

Gender inequality is a global phenomenon that has been the focus of many development programs, such as the Millennium Development Goals and the more recent Sustainable Development Goals¹. Disparities among girls and boys begin right from birth, as evidenced in skewed sex ratios, discrepancies in school enrollment, access to health and discrimination in the work force.

Leading economists believe that female education could be “the highest return investment available to the developing world”² given its impact on lowering fertility rates and child mortality. Additionally, an increase of just one percentage point in the share of women with secondary education in a country is estimated to raise per capita income by 0.3 percentage points.³

Ensuring that girls stay in school, become capable of attending to their wellbeing, and learn to advocate for their own rights can contribute to improving the status of girls and the development of a country as a whole. Building resilience is an emerging strategy to help girls to achieve these goals.

This brief reports findings from the qualitative component of a mixed methods study that examined the effects of a combined resilience-based psychosocial and health intervention against each of these components alone. *Girls First – Bihar* was a randomized controlled trial conducted among over 3,000 adolescent girls in Standards VII-VIII (equivalent

to US 7th-8th grades) in 76 government schools in Bihar, India.⁴

The purpose of the full trial was to assess the emotional, social, physical, and educational effects of two different curricula: the Girls First Resilience Curriculum and the Girls First Health Curriculum. The study included a quantitative component, the results of which have been reported elsewhere,⁵ as well as a qualitative component, which included interviews and focus group discussions with girl participants and program facilitators.

This brief focuses on girls’ qualitative interview and focus group data, presenting girls’ voices about how *Girls First* enabled girls and young women to navigate and confront gender discrimination and violence, in a cultural setting that is highly discriminatory against females.

Methods

We conducted a total of 37 semi-structured interviews and 13 focus group discussions (FGDs) over the approximately 18 months of the trial. Eight to nine girls participated in each FGD. Girls were purposively selected from schools within each arm based on their ability to describe their experiences in detail. Additionally, using critical case sampling, some girls were targeted on the basis of having faced difficult challenges during the period of the study. All interviews/focus groups were conducted in Hindi (the local language) and recorded. The interviews were transcribed verbatim into Hindi, and translated into English. We conducted thematic analysis with the final translated data.

Results

Challenges

Adolescent girls face myriad challenges in Bihar linked to gender bias. Girls reported being at risk for dropping out of school, subject to early marriage, required to maintain a “good image,” and being targets of harassment, both within the home and in the greater community. At the family level, gender bias is perceived in a number of ways. Family expectations that girls help their mothers and sisters with household work while managing their studies can make girls feel overburdened. At times the result is school abandonment. Family members also are reluctant to encourage girls to stay in school due to the belief that going out into the community brings the potential for “disgrace,” either through becoming romantically involved (and the accompanying risk of pregnancy) or through becoming a victim of harassment, molestation or even rape. If a girl is late in getting home, *“Even if she hasn’t done anything wrong...she is made to hear so many taunts. If this happens repeatedly the girl loses her self-confidence and even loses interest in her studies.”*

Girls’ reports of violence within the family often had tragic consequences. Girls reported learning of dowry deaths or the murder of girls suspected of having a boyfriend. The repercussions of this family abuse led one girl to relate her sister’s story. *“[Her in-laws] used to threaten that they will throw her out. They used to give her electric shocks. She never told this to [our] mother. She tried to commit suicide 2-3 times.”*

Skill-building

As girls participated in the *Girls First* sessions, however, they began to find their voices and tools to combat this gender bias. They realized that they had the courage and strength within them to confront difficult situations: *“[We] should definitely have that courage...We should never feel weak,”* and *“earlier I used to be very scared about whether I should tell my mother or not. Then I thought that having self-confidence is very much necessary.”* They began to recognize their feelings and to believe that their feelings

mattered. *“I learned in CorStone that we should not suppress our feelings and if we share our problems with someone else, it will not increase [the problems]”.*

Girls then began to move from simply recognizing their feelings to starting to take action. One girl was able to stand up to her family and the entire village to fight to stay in school, *“The entire village and its families got together to force me to leave my studies, but I was standing straight. My mother was behind us. I am full of strength.”* The girls learned to use resources in their community to ensure their wellbeing and obtain justice for gender-related offenses: *“I can seek help from people around me because molesting a girl is a legal offense. I can get help for this.”*

Girls who participated in the resilience curriculum also developed longer-term perspectives and began to consider how they would like to shape their lives and set goals for themselves. One girl related how she started to hope for herself: *“Earlier I was not aware of my strengths. I did not get a chance to think about my life, future and marriage. But now after this program studying, I have decided that I will not marry until I achieve my goals.”*

Not only did they set goals, but they were also able to define a road map to achieve these goals and develop the internal strength and discipline needed to achieve them. *“Earlier I wasted a lot of time... Now I think that if I study I will be able to fulfill my ambition [of being a social worker].”* The girls reported wanting a different life for themselves and their future families beyond that which was traditionally expected in their communities: *“If I have a daughter...if she wants to be a doctor, scientist, police personnel or a dancer or singer, I will make sure that she is good in that.”*

Finally, the girls applied the skills gained through the resilience curriculum, such as assertive communication, not only to strengthen their own autonomy, but also to benefit the community as a whole. Girls became able to recognize and draw on their strengths to overcome challenges, to reflect on similar difficulties faced by other girls, and to work to support one another. Upon learning that her brother was to marry a girl of her own age, one girl spoke to her father about the negative

effects of young marriage: “I told my father that my elder sister was 17 years old. You married her too and she suffered miscarriage twice. That’s why she is so weak now. I tried to make him understand.... Then my father understood the same and asked the girl’s side to wait for some time.”

Conclusions

The girls in this study were extremely vocal about the issues of gender and violence and how their experiences in *Girls First* had helped them learn to face these challenges. Gender discrimination loomed so large that it became a lens through which nearly every other portion of these girls’ lives was understood. Throughout the interviews and focus groups, they clearly – and often quite eloquently – detailed what it was like to live as a girl in Bihar, and the ways in which the program had helped them.

The improvements in the girls’ abilities to advocate for their rights and to address gender issues as a result of *Girls First* has far-reaching implications. Clear links can be made from this outcome to nearly any other aspect of wellbeing for girls in Bihar. How a girl navigates gender discrimination can be an indicator of her social and emotional well-being (in terms of her sense of self-efficacy, life satisfaction, and her ability to create and maintain fulfilling social relationships), as well as her physical well-being (through her ability to advocate for adequate health care, her right to use contraception, or to avoid domestic violence), and her educational well-being (her ability to go against the status quo and finish her education to the level she wishes). Building resilience is thus a critical part of development programs and has far-reaching benefits.

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