Child Marriage

Bangladesh Action Research Group 12

June 2024

Theme: Child marriage

Country: Bangladesh

Project: Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and
                South-Eastern Asia (CLARISSA)

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1. About the Action Research Group

Table 1.1: Key details

Action Research Group (ARG) name	ARG-12
Theme of ARG (issue being worked on)	Child marriage
Start date	21 March 2022
End date	19 September 2023
Starting participants (N=total)	Males = 6 Females = 7 Children with disabilities = 1 Children who were working = 8
Ending participants (N=total)	Males = 6 Females = 6 Children with disabilities = 1 Children who are currently working = 6

Source: Author's own.

1.1 Background/introduction

The Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia (CLARISSA) programme uses Action Research (AR) to understand the dynamics which drive the worst forms of child labour (WFCL), and to generate participatory innovations which help to shift these underlying dynamics and mitigate their worst effects.

Through 13 Action Research Groups (ARGs) in Bangladesh and 12 groups in Nepal, the programme is generating a rich understanding – particularly through children's lived experiences – of the complex underlying drivers of harmful work and working children and their employers are themselves defining, piloting and evaluating their own innovative actions that aim to increase children's options to avoid the WFCL.

2. The story of the ARG

Figure 2.1: River of life
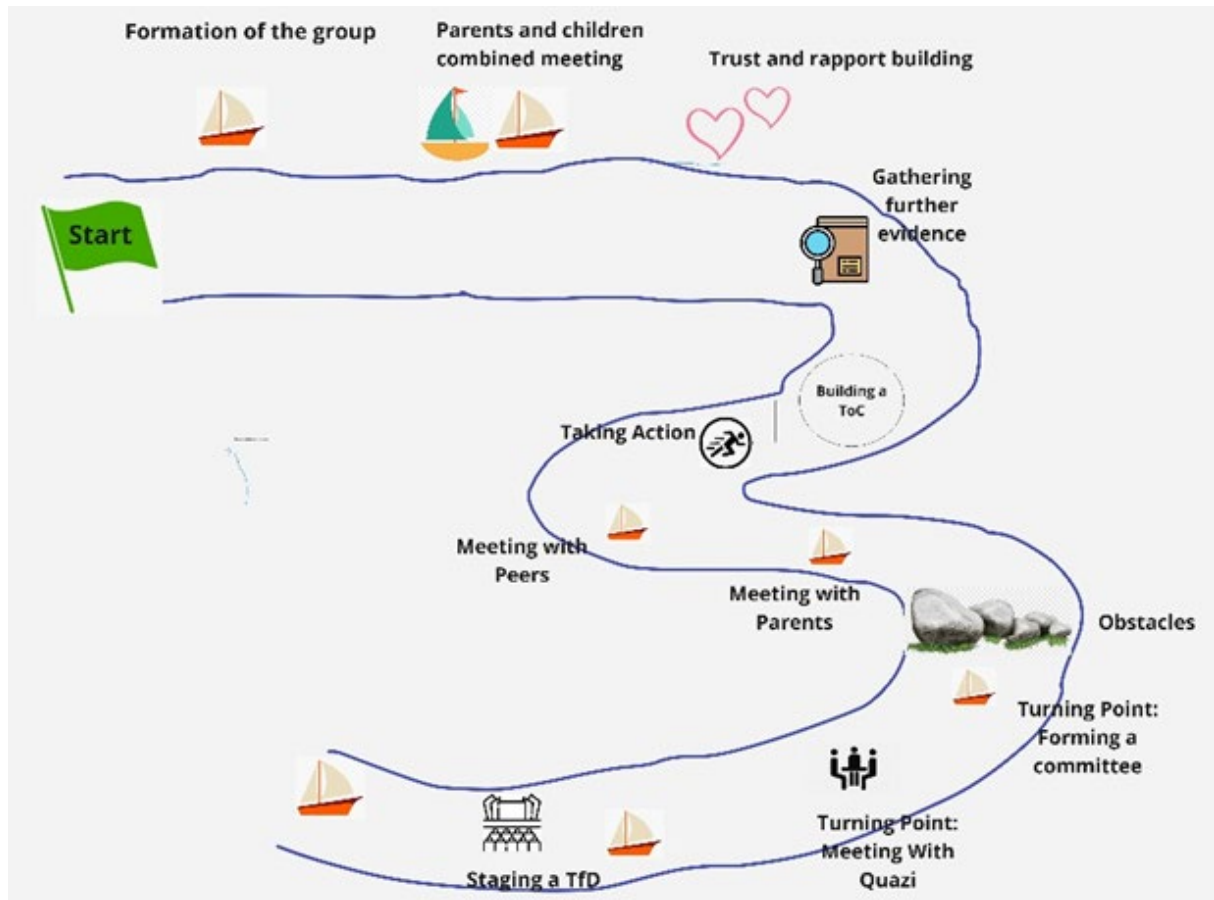
Source: Author's own.

2.1 Creation of the ARG

The CLARISSA Bangladesh team collected a total of 405 life stories from children engaged in different forms of child labour.

199 stories were collected from children working in WFCL in the leather sector and 205 stories were collected from children working in sectors other than leather. Of the 405 stories, 245 stories were collected by Terre des hommes (Tdh) (staff and children combined) and 160 stories were collected by Grambangla Unnayan Committee (GUC) (staff and children combined).

The 205 life stories from children in WFCL in the broader neighbourhood were analysed by 25 children. They participated in a number of small map analysis workshops and a 'map narrative analysis' workshop to identify the causal linkages and factors associated with the WFCL. Following the analysis process, 15 children identified seven themes or issues that they considered to be priorities for AR processes to focus on.

Before forming ARGs, a validation workshop was conducted using the results from the big map system map process. In this workshop the issues were streamlined and reduced to five.

Seven children expressed an interest in working on child marriage prevention and as such Tdh set up a group for this issue, despite the initial requirement being a minimum of 12 members for each ARG. After conducting a validation workshop, Tdh team proceeded to the field to expand the ARG size.

In searching for new members for the group, the Social Protection (SP) team's Community Mobilisers (CMs)[1] provided valuable assistance, leveraging their strong connections with children in the CLARISSA project's operational areas. These CMs along with an ARG facilitator and documenter held informal meetings with the children at their community and addressed them, drawing from a pre-existing list of storytellers in the North Gojmohol area.

Following this, Tdh organised informal gatherings with the interested children to introduce them to CLARISSA's mission and the scope of their involvement in the AR process.

2.1.1 Initial meetings to introduce children and their parents to the ARG processes

After a consultation meeting with the children, Tdh organised the first meeting of the ARG combining both children and their parents. The team shared comprehensive information about CLARISSA's goals, the functioning of the ARG and the benefits that both children and the community could derive from ARG participation. Consent was also taken from parents at the same meeting.

The team explained to the parents and children how the issue of child marriage had emerged from life story analysis. They showcased the big system map displayed on the community space wall, providing background information on children initially analysed the small system maps and big system map. It was important for the team to acknowledge the involvement and contribution of children to date in understanding and interpreting the broader context depicted on the map.

At this meeting, the team also highlighted how child marriage is a matter of utmost significance within the community, as revealed in the life stories.

Subsequently, the team conducted two additional sets of meetings with the ARG to familiarise the children with their roles and responsibilities, determine how the ARG would function, outline essential guidelines, and address safeguarding matters. The team motivated the children to actively participate and engage in reflection. In addition to discussing the ARG process, the team engaged in conversations with the children about the frequency of meetings, the time commitment required for specific sessions, and the most convenient meeting times based on the children's availability.

2.1.2 Rapport- and trust-building

As a part of the rapport- and trust-building process during the ARG meetings, the team led ice-breaking activities and engaged in interactive games to create a friendly atmosphere. They encouraged the children to open up and share information about themselves with the group. Additionally, children who had been involved with CLARISSA for an extended period (e.g., since 2020) shared their previous experience with the newcomers, including details of the CLARISSA story collection process and the development of both small and large maps. To enhance understanding and foster companionship, the team facilitated a question-and-answer session between the new and old participants.

2.2 Theme introduction and going through existing evidence

To enhance the children's understanding of the theme (issue), the ARG facilitator showed a child marriage related video to them. This was followed by open discussions aimed at achieving clarity on the issue and understanding the overall causes and consequences of child marriage. The process of introducing the issue started with open discussions centred on the children's personal experiences related to child marriage. New members of the group were initiated into the issues through interactions with the existing members. As the children reviewed CLARISSA generated issue-related small maps

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[1] The CLARISSA programme involved a social protection pilot in North Gojmohol (Hazaribagh, Dhaka) where the whole neighbourhood received unconditional cash transfers and were involved in case management and community mobilisation groups. Community mobilisers were key members of this team and were responsible for case management and facilitating the community mobilisation groups. The spent most of their time on the ground and therefore had a good connection with the community

(existing evidence), they collaboratively constructed a mind map that outlined the causes and consequences of child marriage.

2.2.1 Key decision on gathering further evidence

The group recognised that their understanding of child marriage was primarily based on children's personal experiences and the information gathered in the CLARISSA small maps. They decided to delve deeper and gather more evidence from their community to explore whether there were hidden dynamics specific to child marriage in the North Gojmohol area.

To do this, the group members devised a set of questions to interview children in their community. They created two sets of questions: one for children under 18 years who were unmarried and another for those who were also under 18 but married. Each group member was tasked with interviewing four children from the community – two married and two unmarried – using their prepared questionnaire (a total of 8 interviews).

Here are some key findings from their one-to-one interviews with community children regarding child marriage:

- Relatives and neighbours often play a significant role in pressuring parents to marry off their daughters at an early age, typically around 13 or 14, by suggesting that the child is growing older and should be wed.

- In some cases, if a boy or girl is seen talking to someone in the street, the community members may spread rumours or accusations about them. To safeguard the family's honour, parents may quickly arrange a marriage for their child.

- Elopement is a major issue leading to child marriage in the North Gojmohol area. If a boy and a girl form a relationship and run away from home, upon their return after a few days their parents often feel compelled to marry them off regardless of their age.

- Limited access to education and entertainment opportunities also contribute significantly to child marriage.

- Some parents resort to using falsified documents to marry their children off, as marrying before the legal age (21 for males and 18 for females) is prohibited by law. Quazis (marriage registrars) play a role in this by accepting bribes and by neglecting to carefully verify documents during the marriage registration process.

- Early marriage has profound physical and mental health implications for children. Their health deteriorates, and their freedom as children is curtailed. Child marriage can also lead to child labour. Based on the data collected from the community, children found that some girls who were married before their legal age of marriage were trapped in poverty due to their husbands' limited income. Additionally, since these girls had chosen to marry without their parents' support, their parents did not assume any responsibilities for them. Consequently, these girls were compelled to seek employment, even though they were still children.

Taking into account their collected evidence and prior analysis of the small maps, the group members constructed a Theory of Change (ToC) with the assumption that their actions would ultimately contribute to a reduction in child labour.

2.2.2 Key decision on specific issues to tackle (building ToC and specific issues the group's actions are going to tackle)

After numerous discussions within the group, members formalised their thoughts and pinpointed the specific issues they would focus on.

The children identified a total of 11 key causes behind child marriage. From these, they selected seven causes to address (through a voting process):

1. Children eloping after becoming involved in a romantic relationship.

2. Families facing economic hardship.

3. Limited access to educational opportunities for children

4. Limited access to recreational opportunities for children

5. Pressure exerted by neighbours to 'marry off' children

6. Parents' concerns about their daughters' advancing age.

7. Holding Quazis and Imams (those who officiate and register marriages) accountable.

Following further discussion, the group decided that addressing economic hardship, limited access to education and limited recreational opportunities would be challenging as these would require long-term processes. Consequently, they considered what they could realistically achieve as children and decided to focus on issues which might be addressed by raising awareness. They developed their ToC as below:

> *If we can make our friends, parents and neighbours understand the adverse impact of child marriage through discussions, meetings and dramas in our community and workplaces and have some likeminded people with us, then the children who were thinking of eloping after involving into a relationship at an early age and the parents who were being pressurised to marry their children off, will understand the importance of not marrying before appropriate age, therefore, the tendency of child marriage will be less in the community and as a result the children won't have to join worst form of child labour.*

2.2.3 Key decision on actions the group took (describing the actions that took place)

The final four issues that the group members decided to work on were:

1. Children eloping after becoming involved in a romantic relationship.

2. Pressure exerted by neighbours to 'marry off' children.

3. Parents' concerns about their daughters' advancing age.

4. Holding Quazis and Imams (those who officiate and register marriages) accountable.

Children eloping after becoming involved in a romantic relationship

The group members decided to make this issue their biggest priority. One of the children said:

> *I think we can start working on the issue of children eloping from house and getting married. We can make them understand about the adverse impact of marriage at an early age. Maybe we won't be able to make them stop having relations with one another, but we can certainly persuade them to not get married before appropriate age.*

To tackle this issue, they took up the following actions:

- Holding one-to-one meetings with their peers;

- Holding a yard meeting with assorted children in their community;

- Holding meetings with their co-workers in their various workplaces.

The group's primary objective was to help the community comprehend the needs of children under the age of 18, aiming to prevent them from eloping and getting married prematurely. Their goal was to cultivate like-minded individuals within their community who would join them in their efforts to combat child marriage. To achieve this, they initiated a process of compiling a list of children residing in various households within the community. Subsequently, they divided these households among themselves.

They then held meetings with the children in these households, during which they sought to comprehend the children's perspectives on child marriage. The group members raised the adverse consequences of child marriage with the participants of these meetings. Additionally, the group identified children at high risk of eloping and marrying prematurely and made personal efforts to motivate and dissuade them from engaging in such activities.

Reflecting on their activities, one of the group members remarked:

> We felt that the participants in our meetings were sufficiently motivated, with some of them pledging not to marry before the appropriate age and vowing to support our mission to eradicate child marriage in the area.

Parents' concerns about their daughters' advancing age

The group aimed to address both of these issues simultaneously. It was a recurring issue in their discussions (that parents were consistently worried about their daughters' advancing age, a significant driver of child marriage). Additionally, they observed that neighbours often played a role in convincing parents to marry their children off at an early age. According to the group members, neighbours would make comments such as, '*Who will marry your daughter when she's older?*' and '*I saw your daughter talking to a boy on the streets. If you want to protect your family's honour, you should marry her off soon.*' Such conversations placed stress on parents, ultimately leading them to arrange early marriages for their daughters.

To raise awareness among the adult members of the community, the children adopted a similar approach. They divided households between them and engaged in open discussions with adults living in those households. During these meetings, parents explained the pressures they felt that sometimes compelled them to arrange early marriages for their children. The group members also highlighted the emotional and physical toll that early marriage imposed on children.

However, when reflecting on their efforts to raise awareness among adults later, one of the children expressed:

> I don't believe we were very successful in this regard. During the meetings, there were moments when it seemed like the parents didn't take us seriously because we were children. Some even questioned why we should be concerned if they chose to marry their children off according to their own wishes.

Holding Quazis and Imams more accountable

Children had discovered that parents sometimes resort to using counterfeit documents to conceal their children's true ages. While it is relatively straightforward for those officiating marriages to verify the authenticity of these documents, they often exhibit reluctance in doing so. Furthermore, parents sometimes bribe marriage registrars to officiate marriages involving underage children. In response, the children in this group expressed a desire to engage in a discussion with the Quazis and Imams in the area.

Five marriage officiators from the community attended a meeting with the children. The marriage officiators acknowledged that sometimes individuals accepted bribes from parents, but they emphatically stated that they had never participated in such activities and pledged that they would never engage in such practices in the future. Furthermore, they committed to assisting the group members in any way necessary to combat child marriage in the area.

2.2.4 Other activities

The group members decided to stage a drama and establish a child marriage prevention committee.

In relation to the drama, they aimed to depict the detrimental consequences of child marriage on children's lives. The group members took on the roles of scriptwriters and actors, crafting the drama themselves. Following the play, a question-and-answer session was held with the audience. The spectators thoroughly enjoyed the performance and provided insightful responses to the children's questions.

While engaging in their other activities, the group members had discovered that it was relatively easy for them to approach their peers and motivate them against child marriage. However, sensitising adults proved to be more challenging. Adults were not receptive to their messages, and the children also realised that preventing child marriages without the assistance of adults would be difficult. Consequently, the children decided to establish a 'child marriage prevention committee' comprising adults who would assist in their efforts to prevent child marriages in the area.

To create this committee, the children held discussions with another CLARISSA group, the Nonviolent Communication (NVC) practitioners group, which was an adult group affiliated with the CLARISSA social protection component. Over the course of two meetings between the two groups it was agreed that if the child group members became aware of any impending child marriage, they would promptly inform a member of the adult group. Subsequently, the adult members, in collaboration, if necessary, with local law enforcement personnel, would take steps to prevent the marriage from occurring. The adult group members also pledged their support to the children, solidifying the formation of the child marriage prevention committee, which now consisted of both groups.

2.2.5 Group's learnings and results from actions

From the actions that the children took, they learned the following:

- The significance of raising awareness among both children and adults, as a key strategy in preventing child marriage. Awareness served as a foundation for initiating change.

- The group's ultimate goal was to cultivate like-minded individuals within the community who would join their efforts. This demonstrated the importance of community ownership and mobilising community members to address the issue collectively. The group did this in a two-fold way. They motivated their same age peers and also, while forming the committee, they had insightful discussions with the adults.

- Addressing child marriage often involves engaging with influential figures, such as Quazis and Imams. Holding these individuals accountable for their roles in preventing child marriage is crucial. When the children were able to talk with marriage officiators and openly express their views about child marriage in the area, it was a new experience for them. It really helped them to build their confidence.

- The use of theatre and drama as tools for redefining community's perspective on child marriage can be highly effective in capturing attention and interest. It was helpful for the children to get close to their community and present the group's message in an interactive way.

- From their activities, the children of the group also learned that adults and children working together made navigation of power dynamics within the community smoother.

When assessing efforts to combat child marriage in the North Gojmohol area, it's essential to recognise that the PAR group operates within a community where child marriage is deeply ingrained as a social norm. Consequently, it's reasonable to expect that transforming the community's mindset and eradicating child marriage entirely will be a lengthy process. However the group members expressed that their initiatives have led to a reduction in child marriage rates within the community.

They have also felt that their peers, whose parents are inclined to arrange marriages for them, now approach them seeking advice on how to prevent these marriages. While we may not observe immediate and tangible changes in the community's stance on child marriage, it is evident that the children firmly believe and perceive their efforts will exert a substantial and positive influence on the community.

2.2.6 Transitioning beyond CLARISSA

The group members made a collective decision to collaborate with adults in their ongoing efforts to reduce the incidence of child marriage within their community. They have established a regular meeting schedule for their newly formed committee, convening twice a month, to assess and address the current state of child marriage in their community. In the periods between these meetings, if any instances of child marriage are identified nearby, they have pledged to take immediate action to prevent such marriages with the support of their adult committee members.

Additionally, the group have committed to sustaining their efforts in motivating their peers to refrain from entering into early marriages. Recognising the importance of community-wide awareness, they have also resolved to conduct informative sessions for the community every three months. This multifaceted approach underscores their dedication to combating child marriage and promoting positive change within their community.

3. Reflections from the facilitator/documenter

In the early stages of this AR group, it was observed that new children were shy and interacted less than the children who had been previously involved in CLARISSA. The latter children initially sought to assert their dominance over the newly joined members. However, the introduction of interactive games proved to be an effective strategy in involving everyone. This approach ultimately facilitated the establishment of rapport and the development of trust among all participants, including building a strong relationship between children and the facilitator and the documenter. While discussing any issues in the group, the facilitator gave equal importance to every child's opinion. The children said numerous times that they consider the ARG to be a space in which they can speak and share thoughts freely, as well as being a rare chance to mixing with other children in their community.

The facilitator and documenter felt that over time, the children exhibited mutual respect and valued the opinions of each other and the CLARISSA team.

Engaging with children involved in the Worst Forms of Child Labour (WFCL) within the AR process was a transformative journey for both the facilitator and the documenter. This experience had a positive impact on their personal and professional growth, extending far beyond the realms of research and facilitation. Upon further reflection on the profound experience of this work the adult facilitators said that they had found it necessary to challenge their own unconscious biases regarding the children's capacity.

Despite their previous experiences working with children, they initially harboured doubts about their ability to perform these tasks. The most significant catalyst for altering their beliefs was witnessing firsthand the children's competence in action.

They also found that the quality of a participatory process is not solely reliant on the utilisation of different kinds of tools. Instead, it thrives when an enabling environment is cultivated, promoting effectiveness in interactions with children. An enabling environment is one in which children find it comfortable to openly share their thoughts and opinions. The team placed significant emphasis on engagement approaches, prioritising respect, transparency, patience, and empathy in their listening efforts. Furthermore, they remained mindful of the existing inter-generational power dynamics at play.

3.1 Challenges faced and their mitigation strategies

At the group's inception, none of the children were attending school because educational institutions were closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of the group members were employed as child labourers, but managed to allocate time for group meetings. However, when schools eventually reopened, attendance at the meetings began to decline. Consequently, the pace of group activities decelerated. To address this challenge, the children decided to adapt by conducting their group work, including evidence collection and meetings, during weekends or in the evenings after school.

The team encountered difficulties in efficiently managing their time, with some participants consistently arriving late, which led to frustration among those who were punctual. Additionally, conflicts arising from exams and other competing priorities added complexity to the scheduling of meetings. This was mitigated by motivation from the facilitator and open discussion among the group members.

The children within the group perceived a lack of respect from the adults in the community while they were gathering data and conducting meetings. The adults' unwillingness to attentively listen to the children made it challenging for the youngsters to effectively communicate their perspectives. However, this challenge has been gradually alleviated following the establishment of the child marriage prevention committee, which includes influential adults from the community.

3.2 Some proud moments during operationalising the ARG

The drama was entirely scripted and rehearsed by the children themselves. Their exceptional performance effectively addressed the crucial issues of child marriage. When they saw the reception that they got from the community audiences, they were overwhelmed with joy.

The children's adept negotiation with marriage registrars and adults in the community to establish a prevention committee was a source of immense pride, both for the children and for the facilitator and documenter. Their ability to eloquently present their case, maintain a clear focus, and consistently exhibit respect toward their counterparts was truly commendable. Consequently, these meetings proved to be highly effective and successful.

Lastly, the children in this group are now recognised as catalysts for change within the community. Their peers, who are at risk of early marriage, are increasingly turning to them for guidance and recommendations.

3.2 Some proud moments during operationalising the ARG

4. Reflections from the children

The final learning and reflection workshop with the group was held with the aim of a comprehensive reflection on the group members' journey through the process and gathering insights into their group's development in terms of trust, ownership, and turning points. In this session, members openly discussed their perceptions of the challenges they faced, their growing sense of empowerment, their interactions with decision makers, their ownership and equitable participation in the process, and the group's capacity to drive positive changes.

4.1 Trust tool

A trust tool exercise was completed twice with the group. Once, after six months and the other was at the final learning and reflection workshop. In the first exercise, the children said that they were level 3 of the trust tool but during the last workshop, they believed that they were level 4.

Members noted that they experienced a strong support system within the group. They felt comfortable sharing their personal thoughts and concerns with the group and the Clarissa team. In relation to why they hadn't reached level 5, some of the children mentioned that while they worked cohesively as a team during meetings and activities, there was still room for more interaction outside of their regular gatherings, which they had somewhat neglected. Consequently, they had developed strong working relationships but not as strong individual-level connections. One girl child also pointed out that this situation was primarily a result of societal norms. She elaborated by saying that girls tended to form connections with other girls, while boys connected primarily with other boys.

4.2 Ownership tool

The reflection workshop was the first time the group used the ownership tool.

As the facilitator read out examples of the ownership scale, the initial consensus among group members leaned toward a rating of 2. However, as the discussion progressed, they collectively moved up the scale, settling at a level 4. During this process, some of the girls offered opinions without deeply contemplating the statements, while the boys engaged more actively, seeking a thorough understanding of each statement with guidance from the facilitator.

One child shared her perspective, highlighting how the facilitator and documenter carefully weighed the pros and cons before providing their opinions to guide the group's work. Another child elaborated on the group's decision-making process, explaining that they collectively analysed situations and shared their opinions before arriving at a final decision.

During their conversations one child praised another one for his willingness to accommodate others' opinions, even if he didn't contribute as vocally. A child expressed a sense of inclusion within the group, indicating that she now felt like a valued member.

Another member felt particularly special within the group and emphasised the importance of each member's presence. They recalled that when someone was absent from a meeting, their absence was keenly felt, and their input was missed.

One of the children noted that the group had garnered support from influential community figures like commissioners and councillors. He believed they could take actions to prevent child marriage with the backing of these influential individuals. The children were hopeful that they could continue to take meaningful steps against child marriage.

4.3 Turning points

At the final reflection workshop, group members identified the most important turning points as:

4.3.1 Meeting with the adult NVC group and forming a child marriage prevention committee

Prior to the formation of a committee comprising adults, the children found themselves in a rather disheartening situation. Their efforts to address the issue of child marriage within the community were met with resistance from the adult population. Despite their strong intentions to make a difference, they lacked the necessary support from the adults in their community. This lack of support manifested as an inability to effectively prevent any instances of child marriage, leaving them feeling powerless and frustrated.

However, when the children successfully established a committee aimed at preventing child marriage, it marked a significant turning point. It was as though a ray of hope had pierced through the clouds of despair. The involvement and support of influential adults from their community breathed new life into their mission. This newfound partnership with influential adults instilled a renewed sense of determination within the children.

With this support network in place, the children were more resolute than ever in their commitment to combat child marriage in North Gojmhol. They recognised that together with the adults they had a stronger foundation to bring about the positive change they aspired to achieve. The formation of this committee represented not only a shift in the dynamics of their efforts but also a beacon of hope for a brighter future where child marriage could be effectively prevented in their community.

4.3.2 Meeting with marriage registrars in the community

This experience held particular significance for the girls in the group, given the social and religious norms prevalent in Bangladesh. In the context of Bangladesh, it is customary for women not to engage in direct conversations with religious leaders. This practice has been deeply ingrained in their society for a considerable period. As a result, for the girls this marked a momentous occasion as it was their first direct interaction with religious leaders.

The significance of this encounter was underscored by the fact that these girls were typically marginalised in conversations with religious leaders and other influential figures. The prevailing norms often relegate their voices to the background, and they rarely have the opportunity to express their thoughts and concerns directly. This new connection between young girls and marriage officiators was particularly noteworthy because girls are disproportionately affected by child marriage within their community.

The positive outcome of this interaction was that the marriage officiators, who played a significant role in officiating marriages within the community, demonstrated a genuine willingness to engage with the girl members of the group. This was a significant shift from traditional norms. The fact that the marriage officiators took them seriously and communicated with them on equal footing made the girls feel empowered and underscored the importance of amplifying the concerns and perspectives of those most affected by child marriage –girls. This newfound avenue of communication holds potential to bring about positive changes in the community's approach to child marriage and to ensure that the voices of these young girls are heard and respected.

4.3.3 Challenges while motivating the peers

Group members initially believed that motivating their peers to understand the issue of child marriage would be straightforward. However, they encountered unexpected challenges. Their peers initially dismissed their efforts, often responding with laughter when the topic of child marriage was raised. Despite these discouraging reactions, the group members remained persistent and patient. Through continuous and patient discussions, they gradually succeeded in motivating their peers to take the issue seriously and engage in meaningful conversations about child marriage.