

Addressing Child Marriage Through Comprehensive Gender-Transformative Program: Evidence from UMANG



Context

In India, as in most parts of the world, the practice of child marriage is closely related to many social, economic, and cultural factors. Child marriage is a violation of children's rights and has lasting effects on growth and well-being. The effects of child marriage are also seen at the societal level, perpetuating the negative effects of poverty, gender discrimination, illiteracy, and malnutrition. Child marriage rates in India steeply declined from 47% in NFHS-3 to 27% in NFHS-4 but declined slowly to 23% in NFHS-5. However, eight states in India have higher than national average child marriage rates, hence requiring continued program interventions. These states are namely West Bengal (42%), Bihar (41%), Tripura (40%), Jharkhand (32%), Assam (32%), Andhra Pradesh (29%), Rajasthan (25%) and Telangana (24%) (UNFPA, UNICEF, 2022; Gausman et al 2023).

A child marriage intervention program review conducted by ICRW (2011) found that the strategies adolescent programs prioritize are empowering girls with information, skills, and support networks; educating and mobilizing parents and community

members; enhancing the accessibility and quality of formal schooling for girls; offering economic support and incentives for girls and their families and to a less extent focus on fostering an enabling legal and policy framework. There is also evidence that the prevalence of child marriage has linkages to a lack of autonomy and decision-making among girls (UNFPA-UNICEF, 2021); however, the family has less incentive for child marriage if the daughter gets employed (Malhotra and Elnakib, 2021). Social norms regulate the order of marriage among sisters, where daughters are often married before sons of a similar age (Roest, 2016). This suggests that rather than focusing solely on a single level, such as the community or individual, interventions aimed at reducing the prevalence of child marriage should attempt to address the drivers of child marriage at multiple levels, using multiple approaches and understanding how processes at each level reinforce each other (Rasmussen et al. 2021, Achyut et al. 2020, Nanda et al., 2015).

UMANG adolescent program

To reduce the prevalence of child marriage, ICRW conceptualized a comprehensive multi-layered girls' empowerment program called UMANG in the four blocks of Godda and Jamtara districts over a period of five years starting in 2018. Defining any intervention as comprehensive is not an easy task. However, we believe that the Umang intervention is as comprehensive an initiative as it could. This is because it not only focuses on changing individuals' attitudes but also takes steps to create an enabling environment. The program works alongside parents, community

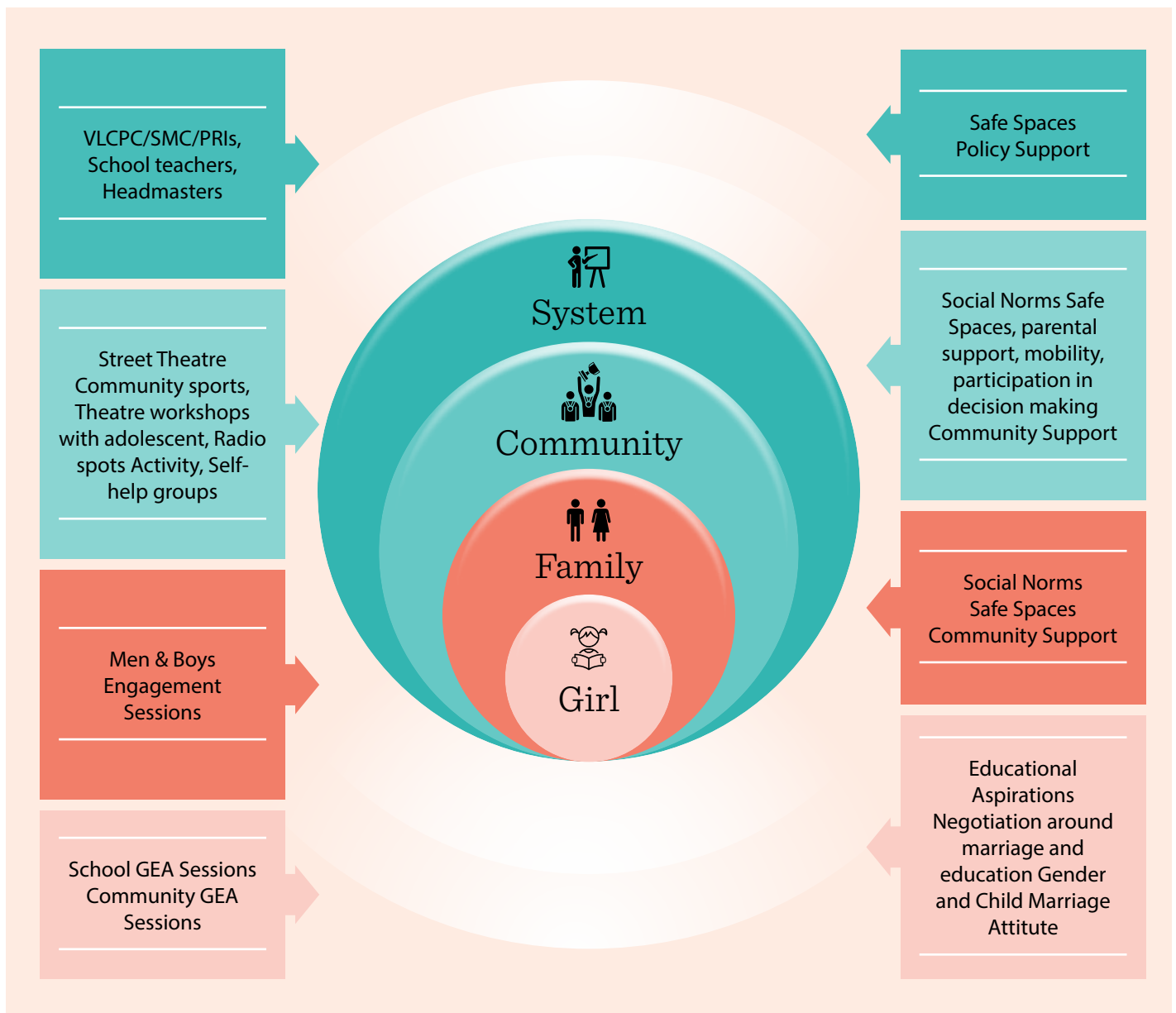
elders, men and boys, and strategic institutions such as education and community-based institutions like panchayat to change their practices, perceptions, and beliefs. These practices, perceptions, and beliefs can directly or indirectly support conventional gender norms, which place girls and women in a secondary and protected status without agency or voice. The program aims to transform these norms and empower girls and women in these communities by working together.

The main objective of UMANG program was to accelerate the decline in the prevalence of child marriage in some of the most resistant, high prevalent districts in Jharkhand and to empower adolescent girls. The four expected outcomes of the UMANG

program were enhancing agency and aspiration of girls to negotiate/delay marriage; girls would pursue higher education and economic empowerment; shifting regressive norms and attitudes related to child marriage in the community and enhancing the value of girls among parents, men and boys and community and strengthening the system related to adolescent issues and making it responsive.

The program was implemented by ICRW in partnership with SATHEE Foundation, Badlao Foundation, and Project Concern International (PCI), in close association with the Government of Jharkhand, and funded by the IKEA Foundation from 2018 to 2024. The program reached around 200,000 adolescent girls, men and boys, and community members through UMANG, which used a socio-ecological framework and gender-transformative approaches. It involved interventions at the individual (adolescent girls),

family (parents, siblings/husbands), community (men and boys, women, and other community members), and system level levels. At the system level, the program worked with structures and institutions such as schools and local governance structures at Panchayat levels, including child protection mechanisms and health departments, to create a coordinated and larger response. The key activities were school and community GEA sessions with girls, male engagement activities with men and boys, street theatres, sports, and VLCPC engagement. The socio-ecological approach ensures that while adolescent girls are placed at the program's centre, a broader enabling environment for their empowerment is created through engagement across their families, communities, schools, child protection systems, and health.



Evaluation Design, Sample and Methods

ICRW designed a quantitative impact evaluation study using a quasi-experimental approach. A baseline survey was conducted in both program intervention and control areas in 2019, followed by an endline survey from December 2022 to March 2023. The survey was implemented in four intervention blocks, namely Godda, Mahagama, Nala, and Jamtara, across two intervention districts – Godda and Jamtara and also in the two control blocks in Sahibganj, namely Barhait and Barharwa. The eligible respondents for the survey were girls aged 15-18 years. Face-to-face

quantitative interviews were carried out with eligible respondents who consented to participate in the survey using a structured quantitative tool. Difference-in-difference (DID) analysis was conducted for key indicators estimates measured at the girl's level using linear regression for continuous outcomes and logistic regression for dichotomous outcomes. DID effect was measured by the interaction coefficient of survey time, namely baseline and endline, and geographical area, namely intervention blocks and control blocks if positive denotes positive program impact, and negative implies negative effects. The cross-sectional survey gives estimates at the block level. The sample covered for girls 15-18 years was 2023 at baseline and 2078 at endline.

Results

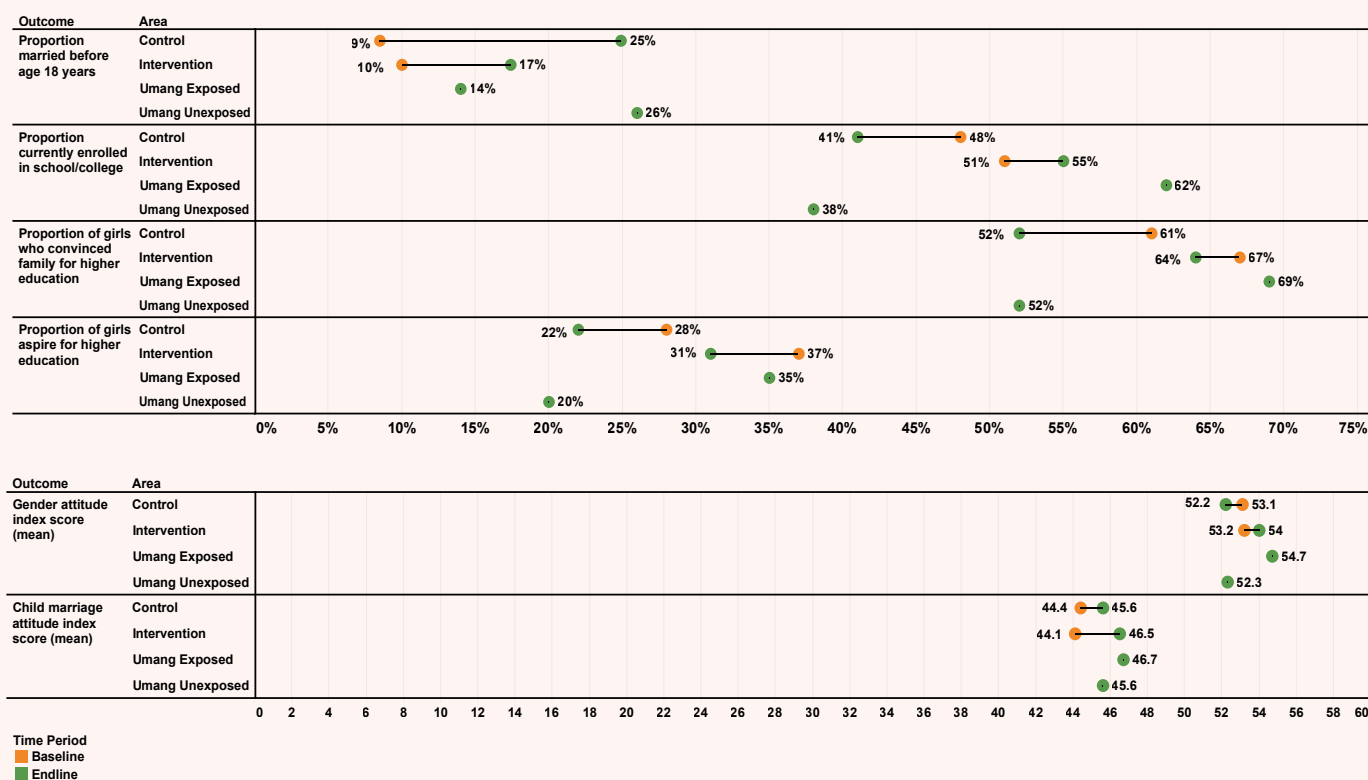
The proportion of girls married before the age of 18 years increased from 10.0% to 17.4% in intervention areas and from 8.5% to 24.9% in control areas. However, the increase was much greater in the control area (16.4 percentage points) than in the intervention area (7.4 percentage points). Also, it is important to note that within the intervention areas, there was a lower prevalence of child marriage (14%) among those who were exposed to UMANG activities compared to a higher prevalence (26%) among those not exposed to UMANG activities. After adjusting for other confounders in the DID regression model, girls residing in intervention areas showed a significant impact of UMANG program compared to controls.

The percentage of girls currently enrolled in school/college rose in intervention regions from 51.0% to 55.0% and dropped in control areas from 48% to 41%. Also, there was a substantial difference within the intervention areas between UMANG-exposed girls and those not exposed to the UMNG program: girls who stated that they were exposed to UMANG program activity (62%) showed higher enrollment compared to girls not exposed to such activity (38%) at the endline. After adjusting for other confounders in the DID regression model, girls residing in intervention areas showed significant UMANG program impact compared to controls.

The gender attitude index score increased in the positive direction in the intervention area (53.2 to 54) but moved in the negative direction in the control areas (53.1 to 52.2) between baseline and end line, demonstrating the pathways of the program impact which was highly significant. The Child Marriage attitude index score increased both in the intervention area (44.1 to 46.5) as well as control area (44.4 to 45.6) between baseline and endline with slightly greater increase in score in intervention area. Girls residing in intervention areas showed significant UMANG program impact in terms of their attitude to child marriages.

Aspirations for higher education by girls decreased from baseline to endline both in intervention (37% to 31%) and control areas (28% to 22%). Similarly, convincing parents for higher education ability by girls decreased from baseline to endline both in intervention (67% to 64%) and control areas (61% to 52%) however, the drop was much more in control areas, and intervention areas did better.

Program Impact



Lessons learnt and implications for future adolescent programs

UMANG was developed as a multilevel program engaging girls at schools and in the community through group sessions and participation in sports activities, men and boys of the community through group sessions, the community in general through street theatre and community radio, and activation of village child protection committees. UMANG girls performed better and were relatively better off than non-UMANG girls in education enrollment, which is a critical mediating factor in reducing the incidence of child marriage. Therefore, child marriages were lower among UMANG girls and also both gender-equitable attitude and attitude towards child marriage was comparatively better.

In designing forthcoming adolescent programs, it is imperative to draw pivotal insights from the evaluation

of existing initiatives like UMANG and others targeted at adolescent girls and their eco-system. Primarily, these programs should prioritize cultivating girls' agency and aspirations, enabling them to negotiate and delay marriage while actively pursuing higher education and economic opportunities. This focus on individual empowerment is fundamental to breaking the cycle of child marriage and fostering the active participation of adolescent girls in shaping their own destinies.

While many programs work on individual girl level, only a few work to shift social and gender norms and create an enabling environment for girls. UMANG program worked with the formal eco-system (school/ VLCPC/ PRI) and at the community level through street theatre/ workshops/ wall paintings/ men and boys groups. Additionally, a central emphasis must be placed on reshaping societal norms and attitudes toward child marriage. The programs should implement strategic initiatives that challenge prevailing cultural norms, involving communities, parents, and stakeholders in efforts to alter deeply ingrained beliefs and perceptions surrounding early

marriage. Simultaneously, there is a critical need to elevate the value of girls within families and communities, challenging traditional gender roles and emphasizing the multifaceted contributions girls can make to society.

Furthermore, an essential facet of new programs should involve a meticulous evaluation of the efficiency and responsiveness of existing government apparatus in addressing child marriage and

adolescent issues. Identifying and addressing gaps in the government's mechanisms will inform the development of more effective strategies and policies. By streamlining communication channels, ensuring timely interventions, and enhancing overall responsiveness, these programs can contribute significantly to the empowerment and holistic development of adolescent girls, ultimately working towards eradicating child marriage and promoting their overall well-being.

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◆ About ICRW

The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) is a global research institute with regional hubs in Washington D.C., United States; New Delhi, India; Kampala, Uganda; and Nairobi, Kenya. Established in 1976, ICRW conducts research to identify practical, actionable solutions to advance the economic and social status of women and girls around the world. ICRW Asia's thematic focal areas include access to education and livelihoods, adolescent empowerment, gender-based violence, masculinities, gender inequitable attitudes, HIV prevention, and violence against women and girls.

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Annexures

Table 1	Intervention - Godda block				Control- Sahibganj (Barhait/ Baharwa)		Adjusted DID Coefficient	
	BL	EL	EL UMANG exposed	EL UMANG unexposed	BL	EL	All girls in intervention area	Among girls exposed in intervention area
Primary outcome: Proportion married before age 18 years	14.0%	23.3%	20.4%	29.9%	8.5%	24.9%	-0.488	-0.645**
Secondary outcomes: Proportion currently enrolled in school/college	64.3%	54.5%	60.8%	39.8%	48.1%	40.6%	-0.112	0.067
Gender attitude index score (mean)	53.1	54.8	55.1	53.9	53.1	52.3	2.573**	2.863***
Child marriage attitude index score (mean)	43.7	47.7	48.2	46.2	44.4	45.6	3.084***	3.624***
Proportion of girls who convinced family for higher education	73.6%	68.5%	72.3%	59.5%	61.5%	51.7%	0.189	0.285
Proportion of girls aspire for higher education	36.7%	31.9%	35.4%	24.1%	28.3%	21.6%	0.049	0.155
<i>Adjusted for: girl age, religion, caste, wealth index, mother education, marital status</i>								

Key block-level findings:

- Program exposure was 69.9%
- Proportion married before 18 increased from baseline to endline both in intervention and control areas
- Relative increase in child marriage was lower among UMANG exposed girls
- Significant increase in gender equitable attitude and child marriage attitude for UMANG girls in Godda block

Table 2	Intervention - Mahagama block				Control-Sahibganj (Barhait/Baharwa)		Adjusted DID Coefficient	
Outcomes	BL	EL	EL UMANG exposed	EL UMANG unexposed	BL	EL	All girls in intervention area	Among girls exposed in intervention area
Primary outcome: Proportion married before age 18 years	9.6%	16.6%	13.3%	26.5%	8.5%	24.9%	-0.367	-0.511
Secondary outcomes: Proportion currently enrolled in school/college	45.5%	52.0%	58.9%	32.3%	48.1%	40.6%	0.483***	0.629**
Gender attitude index score (mean)	52.3	53.3	53.5	52.7	53.1	52.3	1.762**	1.787**
Child marriage attitude index score (mean)	44.0	46.2	46.2	46.5	44.4	45.6	1.375**	1.217*
Proportion of girls who convinced family for higher education	60.2%	63.9%	67.5%	53.7%	61.5%	51.7%	0.522**	0.571**
Proportion of girls aspire for higher education	33.9%	24.9%	28.9%	13.5%	28.3%	21.6%	-0.134	-0.030
<i>Adjusted for: girl age, religion, caste, wealth index, mother education, marital status</i>								

Key block-level findings:

- Program exposure was 74.4%
- Proportion married before 18 increased from baseline to endline both in intervention and control areas
- Relative increase in child marriage was lower among UMANG exposed girls
- Significant increase in gender equitable attitude, child marriage attitude, currently studying, family support for education for UMANG girls in Mahagama block

Table 3	Intervention - Jamtara block				Control-Sahibganj (Barhait/Baharwa)		Adjusted DID Coefficient	
Outcomes	BL	EL	EL UMANG exposed	EL UMANG unexposed	BL	EL	All girls in intervention area	Among girls exposed in intervention area
Primary outcome: Proportion married before age 18 years	10.3%	13.1%	7.4%	23.5%	8.5%	24.9%	-0.982**	-1.578***
Secondary outcomes: Proportion currently enrolled in school/college	45.3%	58.2%	64.6%	46.6%	48.1%	40.6%	0.614**	0.746**
Gender attitude index score (mean)	53.2	53.3	54.9	50.2	53.1	52.3	0.826	2.290**
Child marriage attitude index score (mean)	44.4	46.6	47.5	44.4	44.4	45.6	1.052	1.809**
Proportion of girls who convinced family for higher education	72.3%	59.2%	66.4%	46.2%	61.5%	51.7%	-0.401*	-0.213
Proportion of girls aspire for higher education	41.6%	31.9%	37.2%	22.3%	28.3%	21.6%	-0.104	-0.224
<i>Adjusted for: girl age, religion, caste, wealth index, mother education, marital status</i>								

Key block-level findings:

- Program exposure was 64.6%
- Proportion married before 18 increased from baseline to endline both in intervention and control areas
- Relative increase in child marriage was lower among UMANG exposed girls
- Significant increase in gender equitable attitude, child marriage attitude, currently studying for UMANG girls in Jamtara block

Table 4	Intervention – Nala block				Control-Sahibganj (Barhait/Baharwa)		Adjusted DID Coefficient	
Outcomes	BL	EL	EL UMANG exposed	EL UMANG unexposed	BL	EL	All girls in intervention area	Among girls exposed in intervention area
Primary outcome: Proportion married before age 18 years	6.0%	16.7%	14.6%	22.3%	8.5%	24.9%	-0.146	-0.228
Secondary outcomes: Proportion currently enrolled in school/college	48.4%	55.1%	63.4%	31.9%	48.1%	40.6%	0.761**	1.031***
Gender attitude index score (mean)	54.2	54.8	55.4	52.8	53.1	52.3	0.515	0.860
Child marriage attitude index score (mean)	44.1	45.5	45.3	45.9	44.4	45.6	0.333	0.101
Proportion of girls who convinced family for higher education	61.0%	65.9%	71.6%	49.9%	61.5%	51.7%	0.686**	0.819***
Proportion of girls aspire for higher education	36.9%	33.4%	38.4%	19.3%	28.3%	21.6%	0.210	0.352
<i>Adjusted for: girl age, religion, caste, wealth index, mother education, marital status</i>								

Key block-level findings:

- Program exposure was 73.7%
- Proportion married before 18 increased from baseline to endline both in intervention and control areas
- Relative increase in child marriage was lower among UMANG exposed girls
- Significant increase in currently studying and family support for education for UMANG girls in Nala block

Table 5	Control: Barhait/Barhawa block	
Outcomes	BL	EL
Primary outcome: Proportion married before age 18 years	8.5%	24.9%
Secondary outcomes: Proportion currently enrolled in school/college	48.1%	40.6%
Gender attitude index score (mean)	53.1	52.3
Child marriage attitude index score (mean)	44.4	45.6
Proportion of girls who convinced family for higher education	61.5%	51.7%
Proportion of girls aspire for higher education	28.3%	21.6%

Table 6	Intervention – Overall four blocks				Control-Sahibganj (Barhait/Baharwa)		Adjusted DID Coefficient	
Outcomes	BL	EL	EL UMANG exposed	EL UMANG unexposed	BL	EL	All girls in intervention area	Among girls exposed in inter- vention area
Primary outcome: Proportion married before age 18 years	10.0%	17.4%	14%	26%	8.5%	24.9%	-0.561**	-0.773**
Secondary outcome: Proportion currently enrolled in school/college	51%	55%	62%	38%	48%	41%	0.475**	0.695***
Gender attitude index score (mean)	53.2	54.0	54.7	52.3	53.1	52.2	1.487**	2.049**
Child marriage attitude index score (mean)	44.1	46.5	46.7	45.6	44.4	45.6	1.391**	1.605**
Proportion of girls who convinced family for higher education	67%	64%	69%	52%	61%	52%	0.287*	0.466**
Proportion of girls aspire for higher education	37%	31%	35%	20%	28%	22%	0.0382	0.180

Adjusted for: girl age, religion, caste, wealth index, mother education, marital status



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