

## SHOUHARDO III - CARE Bangladesh

### Capturing the changes and impacts of reformed Community Groups

Report on qualitative assessment of adult female, adult male and adolescent community groups of SHOUHARDO III



Photos taken during data collection in Gaibandha (adult female) and Netrokona (adult male) ©CARE 2021

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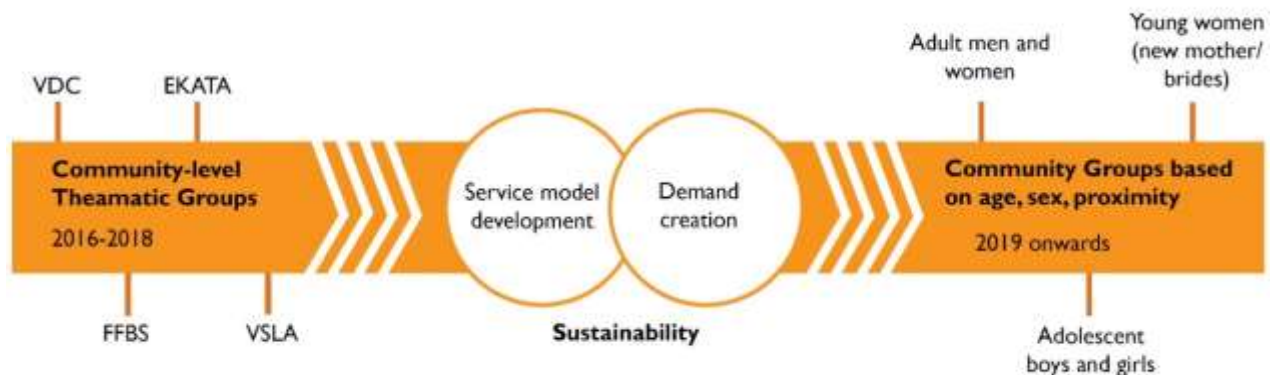
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## Acronyms

BDT	Bangladeshi Taka
CC	Community Clinics
CG	Community Groups
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
EMI	Equated Monthly Installment
FGD	Focused Group Discussions
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GoB	Government of Bangladesh
IDI	In-depth Interviews
LSP	Local Service Provider
MFI	Micro Finance Institutions
NGO	Non-government Organization
PEP	Poor and Extreme Poor
PNGO	Partner NGO
UHC	Upazila Health Complex
UP	Union Parishad
USD	United States Dollar
VAW	Violence against women
VSLA	Village Savings and Loan Association
WE	Women's empowerment
WHO	World Health Organization

## Background

The Resilience Rapid Learning Brief published in January 2021 (Lichtenheld, Inks, Tankora, and Morrison, 2021) describes social capital and social cohesion to be significantly important to build community and household resilience to shocks and stresses. “Social capital contributes to resilience by enabling households to rely on individuals within their network during times of hardship and facilitating local collective action to address shared challenges. Additional evidence suggests that bridging social capital between groups is an important factor for building intergroup social cohesion, which in turn can strengthen household and community resilience to risks such as flooding and conflict.” Strengthening Household Ability to Respond to Development Opportunities (SHOUHARDO) III, implemented by CARE, is a Resilience Food Security Activity (RFSA) of USAID designed to address food security and nutrition challenges for Poor and Extreme Poor (PEP) communities in Northern Bangladesh.



The 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). After the midterm evaluation in 2018 that provided recommendations on putting in place a sustainability strategy, SHOUHARDO III modified its role in the community groups and other stakeholders by reducing from direct and ongoing support to one-off monitoring and occasional remedial support. As a result, these groups were reformed into gender and age-specific groups and bringing on all the other aspects of the program to ensure continuity, for instance the proximity of the members within one community. The reformed Community Groups (CGs) are (see Annex for details) –

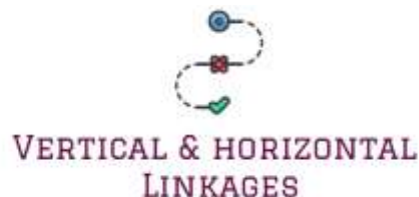
1. Adult females (18+ years)
2. Adult males (18+ years)
3. Adolescent girls (12-18 years)
4. Adolescent boys (12-18 years)
5. New Bride and Young Mothers (NBYM)

Each group is comprised of 20-25 members, who are all living in the same *para* (small fragment of villages in close proximity a.k.a. communities) or village. To assure homogeneity of interests, the program engaged communities that preferred gender, and age disaggregated groupings. It was intended that the communities could freely engage with peers who faced similar shocks, stresses, and situations. The Village Development Committees (VDC) played a key role in narrowing down the communities based on proximity and selecting members for designated CGs. From the inception of SHOUHARDO III, it facilitated the

communities to form the VDCs in each of the program villages consisting of a minimum of 11 members. The primary role of the VDC is to identify and solve the village based common issues with support from the Union Parishad and Nation Building Departments (NBDs) such as agriculture, livestock, health, and family planning etc. To make the VDCs more inclusive the program ensures inclusion of representatives from different thematic leaders e.g. on-farm, non-farm, Health & Nutrition, WASH, DRR, WE and youth. In April 2019 after mid-term evaluation, the program further mobilized the communities to form self-selected Community Groups (CGs) considering the proximity, age and gender. Major objectives of forming CGs are to develop group a) cohesion, b) problem solving capacity and c) linkage building with horizontal and vertical actors.

There is clear distinction between VDCs and CGs considering their 'role' in the communities. The role of VDC is to support communities (particular villagers) and Community Groups within the village in solving village-level common issues which are not possible to solve independently by the Community Groups. On the other hand, the role of Community Group is to identify and solve the issues of that respective group.

The program has engaged the communities who have preferred self-selected, gender and age disaggregated groups to ensure homogeneity of issues; people are facing similar issues and can engage freely with one another in one *para*. All groups have primarily focused on both social (health, disaster risk reduction, gender, collective action for services and markets) and economic (savings, farm, and non-farm income options) improvements. The VDCs are continuing to this day beside and independent of the CGs.



CGs are an important platform that allows the community to come together in the meetings, discuss and resolve issues collectively, intended for improved and sustainable community cohesion. The CGs improve negotiation skills through the sessions which in turn help improve engagement with public and private authorities and entities for business opportunities and infrastructure improvement (such as establishing hygienic latrines).

The program previously carried out a quantitative assessment on the CGs through the GCAT (Group Capacity Assessment) tool in December 2019 to measure their capacities based on group cohesion, problem-solving and linkage building (See ANNEX) – the three areas which SHOUHARDO III is using to rate their readiness for graduation from certain poverty levels. That time, the program facilitated GCAT in all 5,876 community groups in the char and haor region, which is considered the baseline performance for the community groups. The GCAT data revealed that all CGs obtained a less than 50% score out of 80<sup>1</sup>. A qualitative assessment is required to explore the in-depth reasons behind these GCAT scores. This document illustrates the overall reformed CG strategy along with community perspectives, individual experiences, positive impacts, and challenges of the reformed CGs from four villages.

## 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.

<sup>1</sup> See Annex: Report on Group Capacity Assessment- SHOUHARDO III Program



## Methodology

This qualitative assessment included a sample size of 84 respondents (details in Table 1). The program conducted **six FGDs** and **32 in-depth interviews (IDI)** with the CG members from the char and haor areas (See Table 2). The study selected two strong villages and two behind villages from both regions (equal representation from char and haor) based on the village grading score<sup>2</sup> from the GCAT.

	Adult female	Adult male	Adolescents
IDI	12	12	8
FGD	20	16	16
Total (84)	32	28	24

Among the 6,406 Community Groups (CG), the number of Adolescent Boys' groups and Adolescent Girls' groups (only 452 groups in total, including mixed adolescent groups) is less in number compared to the Adult Female groups (4,183) and Adult Male groups (1,652). As a result, purposive sampling was adopted to have an equal representation of all CG groups from the selected villages. Initially, the assessment planned to conduct one FGD with the adolescent girls' group and one FGD with the adolescent boys' group. From the learnings of GCAT sampling (see Annex), it was anticipated that the assessment would face difficulties finding adolescent and NBYM respondents and groups. In some areas, the Program also formed a few mixed adolescent boys and girls CGs due to the unavailability of adolescent boys or girls in the community. Hence this qualitative assessment explored mixed adolescent groups in this study for FGDs.

Region	District	Upazilla	Union	Village	FGD	CG Type	IDI	Respondent type	Total
<b>Haor</b>	Kishoreganj	Austagram	Kalma	Chandipur	2	Adult female + Adolescent mixed	8	3 male + 3 female + 1 adolescent girl + 1 adolescent boy	2 FGDs, 8 IDIs
	Netrokona	Kalmakanda	Lengura	Jigatola	1	Adult male	8	3 male + 3 female + 1 adolescent girl + 1 adolescent boy	1 FGD, 8 IDIs
<b>Char</b>	Kurigram	Nageshwari	Bhitarband	Digdari	2	Adult male + Adolescent mixed	8	3 male + 3 female + 1 adolescent girl + 1 adolescent boy	2 FGDs, 8 IDIs
	Gaibandha	Shaghata	Haldia	Nalchia	1	Adult female	8	3 male + 3 female + 1 adolescent girl + 1 adolescent boy	1 FGD, 8 IDIs
<b>Total</b>					<b>6 FGDs</b>		<b>32 IDIs</b>		

## Findings

Previous Community-level Thematic Groups (pre-2019) were based on a particular theme and had result-oriented target and outcome, for instance, IGA/FFBS<sup>3</sup> CG focused on the business aspect with a mixed crowd of both male and female members. That groups' sole purpose was to enhance the member's business capacity and was not focused on one community, rather had members coming from multiple communities. The year of 2019 was a turning point for SHOUHARDO III's CGs. The CGs later reformed into the gender and community based homogenous CGs, with a greater agenda to improve the cohesion of the communities in collective decision-making, problem-solving and negotiation abilities beyond the program's timeline. This section describes the mechanism of reformed CGs, their positive impact,

<sup>2</sup> In 2019, CARE's SHOUHARDO III conducted a Village Grading exercise in 947 villages. The activity was done whereby the communities assessed their performance and rated their villages' vis-à-vis the program interventions they received. The villages were categorized into three groups based on their obtained scores and thus performance level: (a) Strong – 80% and above, (b) Moderate – 60% to 79%, and (c) Behind – below 60%. Village grading scores are compared with different factors like village vulnerability and remoteness of villages.

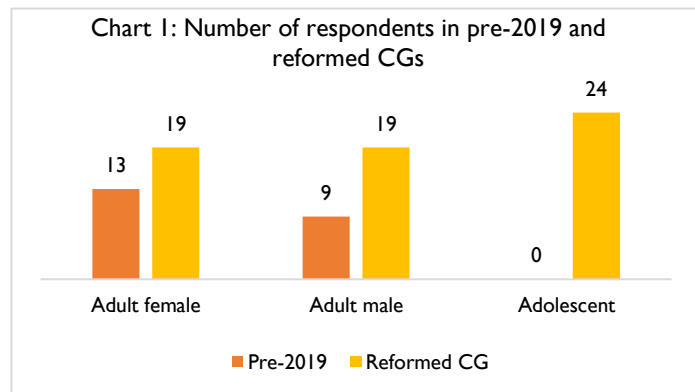
<sup>3</sup> Income-generating Activities. Farmers' Field Business School

challenges, and way forward towards sustainability, highlighting the perspective of the members from the selected villages.

## I. Community Group (CG) Members, Structure, and Meetings

During the FGD, the CG members shared that they were not part of any other groups apart from SHOUHARDO III's. Only one respondent from adult male's FGD in Netrokona shared that he was part of a VDC formed by another NGO<sup>4</sup> which was not functioning anymore due to the pandemic.

**CG membership:** A small number of the adult male and female members of the reformed CGs were members of the pre-2019 groups; a few of the ones who were only part of the reformed CGs were only participants of SHOUHARDO III and not any CGs. Hence the duration of membership varies between two to six years for adult members. Out of 32 adult female respondents, 13 were associated with the pre-2019 groups (for example, EKATA<sup>5</sup>, mothers' group) since 2016. On the other hand, nine out of 28 adult male respondents were part of the pre-2019 era groups (for instance, FFBS, VDC). The remaining respondents were included in the reformed CGs only. The adolescents were only part of the newly formed CGs, as they were counted as children during the pre-2019 era group formation and were not included.



**CG structure:** The adult CGs follow a group structure comprised of a group leader, two assistant group leaders, and members. Sometimes they select a need-based treasurer if there is any money involved during the pandemic or flood-related relief distribution. The group members elect a group leader every year through unanimous voting system who led organizing meetings, coordinating members, and facilitating sessions; one or two assistant leaders are also elected to assist the group leader.

Barendra Chandra (58) from Chandipur, Kalma, Austagram, Kishoreganj is an assistant leader of his adult male CG. He assists SHOUHARDO III staff, as well as their CG leader to arrange all of the meetings that took place in past one year- *"I invite the members whenever there is a meeting. I also organize the place of the meeting, sitting arrangements, write attendance list, and ensure participations for the meetings. So far, we have conducted 25 meetings in our village since we formed the group."*

Both adolescent CGs have one leader and an assistant leader. They also elect their leaders through voting; however, the leaders for the first year of the CGs were chosen by the Field Trainers, the program's staff based in the respective villages to ease the formation of the adolescent CGs with a trusted peer and to observe their acceptance in the community. Mukta (16), the CG leader of Nalchia, Haldia, Saghata, Gaibandha, shared her experience of her CG formation and experience in the past two years. She has been leading the group since the beginning, as they could not arrange to vote during the lockdowns of the pandemic and deemed it beneficial to have one CG leader throughout. Mukta stated that their adolescent girls' CG was formed at the end of 2019 by SHOUHARDO III. The program staff frequently visited their village to continue with the adult groups' meetings and formation and one day reached out to her regarding forming a girls' group. Mukta enthusiastically helped by talking to her neighborhood peers and forming a small mobilization team of eight members. These eight members along with Mukta later went to their

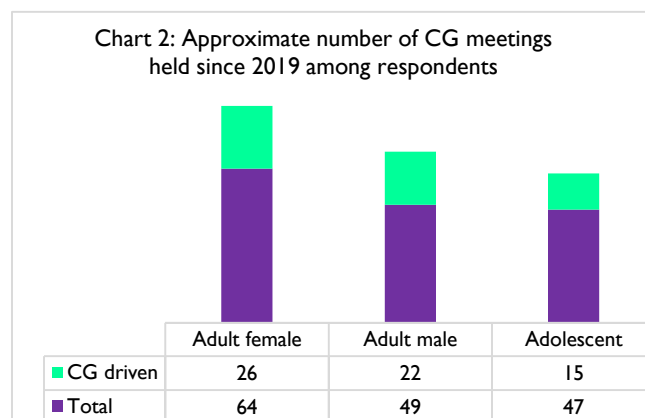
<sup>4</sup> World Vision

<sup>5</sup> Women solidarity group EKATA (Empowerment, Knowledge and Transformative Knowledge) has improved women's agency in decision-making in the household. Women leaders in the EKATA group are also empowered to maintain liaisons with government service providers.

nearby peers' houses to include three more members to form an adolescent girls' CG. Mukta's leadership capability later made her the official CG leader of the group. Mukta shared, *"At the beginning, children under the age of 12 years also came to join but they were not recruited as this is strictly an adolescent girls' CG. We also had to let the married adolescent girls go as they were not our target participants. We had our first meeting with eight girls, later we recruited three more friends around the village. Those three girls' parents had to be convinced separately. If the mother agreed, father might not have agreed because of the patriarchal social structure of not allowing the girls to have or learn agency, and/or out of safety concerns. But since they trusted SHOUHARDO III, they agreed eventually."*

Another adolescent CG leader, Jhorna (20<sup>6</sup>) from Ranihala, Maghan, Madan, Netrakona, mentioned that she took the leading role after being contacted by SHOUHARDO III staff in forming her community's adolescent girls' CG by convincing parents, recruiting members, inviting them to sit for a meeting, and informing the program staff to facilitate the meetings. They initially had nine members. However, she lamented, *"Three of the girls in our group got married within a year from the first meeting. We were back to six members. Then two other members went to the city (Netrokona) to work. We now have four members in our group."* Jhorna also mentioned that the girls who were married off were all above 18 years of age, and she is extremely strict on reporting child marriage to their respective Union Parishad (UP) chairman.

**CG meetings:** The durations of the CG meetings varied based on the needs and members' availability in different communities. The adult CGs mostly arranged meetings on a monthly or two-monthly basis, whereas some adolescent CG meetings were also held weekly and/or fortnightly besides being held monthly. The exact number of meetings could not be obtained, rather an estimate was shared by the respondents. Upon probing on the number of CG meetings were held by the program staff and by the CGs own initiative since 2019, approximately 39% (63 out of an approximate total of 160) on average of all meetings held were held by CG leaders and members without SHOUHARDO III's help. The adults planned most of the CG-led meetings during the lockdown, sometimes with the help of Program staff over the phone who encouraged members to conduct meetings independently. However, they had fewer members present due to the social distancing protocols. The adolescents shared that they did not have any CG meetings during the lockdowns both in 2020 and 2021.



**Topics discussed in CG meetings:** The adult groups (both male and female) discussed many topics to improve the collective approach towards the development of the communities. Key topics include-

- Pregnancy care
- Childcare, nutrition

<sup>6</sup> She was recruited in the adolescent CG when she was 18 years old. After 2 years and due to lack of initiatives during the pandemic, she still continues to be a part of adolescent CG.



- Hygiene
- Income options
- Loan-taking from MFIs
- Shared responsibilities if anyone was ill
- Vaccination
- Livestock rearing
- Communicating with UP for community development (road & bridge construction, old-age/poor/widow allowance, receive house gifted by Hon. Prime Minister)
- Building linkage with private companies to improve income/business, access to market
- Women's involvement in IGA
- Prevention of gender-based violence
- Decreasing rows between families
- Flood preparedness and rescue.

Lovely (43) from Nalcchia, Haldia, Saghata, Gaibandha shared, “We discuss a variety of community issues and family problems. We continued group sessions during COVID too, although in a smaller group of 3 to 5 people. We attempted to raise awareness during the crisis by disseminating COVID advisories.”

The adolescent mostly discussed reproductive health, menstrual health, nutrition, Iron & Folic Acid (IFA) supplement (tablets, when to take them and where to get them), the demerits of child marriage, importance of education and IGA. The girls go to the nearby community clinics to receive the free-of-charge IFA supplement which they were introduced to in their CG by the program staff. They were also given the phone numbers and address of nearby community healthcare providers (CHCP) or *Shashthyo Apa* (health sisters/fieldworkers) to reach them in times of any health issues. The program also shared the SHARA platform number in both the adult and adolescents CGs with an aim to disseminate telemedicine service numbers; however, only two adult respondents and one adolescent respondent shared that they called on SHARA's number. COVID-19 related awareness messages and advisories were discussed in both the adult and adolescents CGs. A few of the CGs demonstrated handwashing during the lockdowns.



Adolescent boys' CG from Mohammadpur, Goaler Char, Jamalpur demonstrating handwashing in a CG-led meeting during the first lockdown in July 2020. Photo: Arifun Nahar, posted in SHOUHARDO III Facebook group. ©CARE 2021

## 2. Comparison between pre-2019 groups and reformed CGs

Both the pre-2019 groups and reformed CGs are beneficial to the participants in different ways. The key difference of the two is that the previous groups before 2019 (for instance, FFBS, EKATA, mothers' group) focused on their designated thematic areas for discussions (such as business plan, market access, healthcare, nutrition, GBV issues); and the reformed CGs offer the space and platform to discuss any and all sorts of matters within the homogenous member structure of the group.

The homogenous member structure allows the members to discuss and share their experiences beyond meeting topics, such as their individual and family matters, incidents of GBV, financial struggle, seeking medical help and other sensitive topics. This in turn has been gradually improving the community cohesion, interaction with neighbors, increased empathy, improved collective problem-solving and decision-making skills, and other soft skills required to build a stronger community. The CGs are acting like **small representative communities** where members of similar ages and gender are actively participating

towards the development of their respective larger communities. The reformed CGs also offer members increased privacy and the convenience of sharing their opinions without the fear of getting stigmatized or judged. Asma (48), from Digdari, Bhitari, Nageshwari, Kurigram, shared, “*The previous group (FFBS) had both male and female members. We were not **comfortable** discussing many issues with male members around. We now have separate groups (for male and female) which make it easier to plan meetings as the new groups encompass smaller territories.*”

A few of the other comparisons shared by the respondents-

- The reformed CGs have their own elected CG leaders, whereas pre-2019 groups did not. The groups were mostly led by program staff who also arranged the meetings and facilitations. The reformed CG meetings are arranged by both the program staff and CG leaders. The members are more engaged in choosing their representatives as leaders in the reformed CGs.
- Some of the pre-2019 group members received cash support for their business or IGA from the program, whereas the reformed CG members have not received such cash grants. A few of the program participant families received cash support last year due to the pandemic, but that was independently given by the program and not because they were CG members.
- The number of members in the reformed CGs is less than the pre-2019 groups. Hence the level of internal understanding increased and now it is easier to arrange group meetings with a smaller number of members.
- The perceived improvement is that the reformed CGs have increased community-based and led activities, such as road repairing, bamboo bridge construction, mound wall construction, preventing child marriage, and seeking government allowances through UP.
- According to the findings from this study, the communication with local public offices, such as UP, union digital center, Public Health, Community Clinics, agriculture office, disaster preparedness and relief, women's and child's affairs have increased due to reformed CGs. The pre-2019 groups had thematic area-wise linkage, but the reformed CGs have all necessary community members in one group so it is easier to coordinate and mobilize to communicate with respective government/public offices.

The comparison of pre-2019 groups and reformed CGs show that the reformed CGs have increased social cohesion and the members are more dependent on each other while seeking communal issues, rather than Program staff. The community issues do not only include the challenges or required improvements in the community but also within their families and households as well. This holistic approach of community mobilization to self-solve challenges and to seek improvements is what SHOUHARDO III was aiming to develop which is also expected to continue beyond the timeframe of the program.

### 3. Positive impacts of CG reformation

The adult CG members praised the reformed CGs and shared multifaceted positive impacts of CG on their individual and community lives. The adolescent members were happy to be a part of the program groups; there were only Youth groups pre-2019 and no adolescent groups. The respondents shared a positive impact span over both at the community and individual (personal and family) levels. Due to the reformed CGs, many community development initiatives were sought, as well as the families and the members feel more empowered and connected within their communities.

**In the case of women and girls:** While discussing the positive impacts of CGs, the adult female group members emphasized on the power of numbers (more than one individual), their enhanced social network and a place of comfort. They shared that CG meetings are a safe space where they can share their happiness, distress and lighten the psychological load of being a rural woman taking care of her family and

not being able to seek new friendships within the social constraints. The rural socio-cultural norm described by them is that when women get married off and have children, their sole purpose is to take care of her family. The CG meetings are a respite to them. The adult female respondents also shared that, they believe the CGs are a place where they can also lean back, look for advice and support when facing any health-related, financial, or other types of domestic issues (such as violence). Sumita Chakrabarty (55) from Chandipur, Kalma, Austagram, Kishoreganj expressed, *“We are like friends in our group. We received different kinds of support when in need (cash, health information, etc.) including support from SHOUHARDO. I strongly believe if we can continue this bond in future, we can do something for the society and bring positive changes in our own lives.”* The adolescent girls CG members shared similar thoughts. Spending time with peers is helping the adolescent girls to share their feelings, discomfort, sadness, and other emotions with their peers. It has become a good place to mingle with peers and is helping the girls to spend time outside their homes. They wait passionately for the next meeting to meet their peers. Sometimes the meeting place is not near the members’ house, so the walk to and from the meeting place is also a way for them to release some family and isolation stress.

Movement of women in public spaces such as markets, neighborhood areas, clinics and many other places have increased due to the continued motivation from the CGs they receive. This is not only a positive impact of the adult female CGs but also the reformed adult male CGs as well. The discussion in adult male CGs also include women empowerment and how men can assist the women in their lives to take a more active role in IGAs and other responsibilities. Abdul Mannan (65) from Zigatola, Lengura, Kalmakanda, Netrakona shared, *“I used to think negatively when women used to go and roam outside their homes...why would they leave their homes? But my thoughts have changed...the group discusses how women can also help lessen the burden of men with additional income and taking on responsibilities that involve out of home engagement. Now I don’t mind if the women go to the bazar (market) wearing a Borkha (full veil)”*.

The CGs have improved confidence in women and adolescent girls in many ways. The women who were completely home bound before are visiting their neighbors and markets more than before. This gradually happened as a result of the constant motivation and counselling of the adult female as well as adult male CGs by the SHOUHARDO III field staff’s active engagement and discussion in every meeting. The benefits of women’s involvement in income-generating activities and the movement that comes with it are the discussion topics in adult and adolescent CG meetings. Women like Lovely Begum (43) have the confidence to talk to people outside their villages as well. She thinks community groups and meetings are quite important for the women in her neighborhood. *“We can learn new things and apply them in our life through CGs...sometimes without realizing it. Women like me have become more confident, and they can talk to new people for business or income, help each other (CG members) in crisis. Previously, I was really shy to talk to people outside my family. Now I can confidently talk and move around in my community. For instance, I am talking to you (a stranger) right now, I would not be able to do that if I was not a part of the women’s group. We even approached the UP chairmen to help the poor, and I used to think they were someone we were not allowed to interact with. They would never talk to people like us, and then I realized that I was wrong! He listened to us and helped the destitute.”*

The CGs have helped women to improve voicing their demands in the community and respective public offices while improving their leadership qualities to represent CGs. Within the family, the adult female CG members shared that their opinions are valued more now than before because they attend the CG meetings regularly and took part in community development activities. Sharmin Begum (26), Nalchia, Jemmerbari, Saghata, Gaibandha shared, *“Working together has increased the acceptability of women’s opinion in the society. We can contribute to the infrastructural development of the village. Now we can stop violence against women as a group (e.g., preventing child marriage) and communicate with the service providers (e.g., livestock officer). Our needs during natural disasters have been addressed. We have helped the flood-affected families to get relief and reach the shelters.”*

The adolescent girls' CG members praised the benefit of getting information through the CGs. The information ranges from Iron and Folic Acid (IFA) supplements, menstrual health, prevention of child marriage, hygiene, safety in the community, contact information of responsible people to prevent GBV (program staff, UP chairman, 109) to nutritious food during menstruation days. Mukta (16) from Nalchia, Haldia, Saghata, Gaibandha shared, *"Our adolescent girl's group has been key to inform us about taking iron tablets during our menstruation and to visit the nearby community clinics to receive them for free. We did not know about this before."* The girls previously used a piece of fabric during their menstruation, which later changed to using sanitary pads due to the intervention of the CGs. During the pandemic lockdown in 2020, some girls listened to the advice from the CGs, and bought and stocked up on the sanitary pads to last for 3-4 months.

**Linking with public and private entities and accessing services/facilities:** The adult CG members mentioned that the unity and bonding improved among the CG members as they attended multiple meetings within one CG since 2019. In turn, in the course of past two years, the adult CG members together participated in different community development initiatives, developed new personal and professional connections, and improved communications with the local government offices. The UP and other public offices came to recognize the faces of the CG members as they try to reach out to them regarding various Social Safety Nets such as student bursary, old age allowance, widow allowance, disaster relief and other necessary funding related to community infrastructure development. The power of collective approach from the CGs has helped the community in many ways. Mosiful Begum (32) from Nalchia, Haldia, Saghata, Gaibandha shared, *"Going alone does not work in the UP or any other government offices...they do not listen to us. After the flood, we proposed to the chairman's office to construct a road in our village. We went to UP office and requested in groups."* Mosiful's CG also managed the old age allowance for five women in their village by reaching out to the UP. Similarly, Kobad Ali (55) from Digdari CG of Bhitbarband, Nageshwari, Kurigram received old age allowance with the help of his CG. Nuru Mia (37) from the same CG as Kobad Ali received a latrine ring slab set from UP with the group's help.

The reformed CGs also helped both the adult and adolescent groups to access healthcare information and better healthcare facilities through information on immunization of children and pregnant women, telemedicine services (SHARA, CHCP, clinic and hospital's phone number), especially during the pandemic. Lockdowns were tough in the rural areas of Bangladesh with strict movement restriction both in 2020 and 2021. The phone number of doctors from different platforms gave the CG members hope that their health problems were not a burden and advice can be sought through phone without taking the hassle of commute. The CGs also arranged information on the veterinaries and disseminated among their members. The CG members learned about local agricultural services, improved their in-house agricultural techniques (for instance quality seed, paste, and fertilizer usage), and mobile-based apps for those who have smartphones (such as Maya apa, Krishoker Janala).

With initiatives taken from the CGs, around six adult respondents received small cash-grants (BDT 450-1,000; USD 5.2-11.6) from UP offices during the pandemic.

**Enhanced business/income earning opportunities:** The CGs help the members to start or promote their businesses among the members and with market access by building linkage with appropriate channels through the CGs and with the program's help. Kader (52) from Digdari, Bhitbarband, Nageshwari, Kurigram shared, *"I have been a member of CGs since 2016 (FFBS in pre-2019 and later adult male). From the previous (Community Based Thematic) group, I learned about business management as well as received cash support from program to start my dried fish business. I am still continuing the business and thanks to the new group, I have gained more access to the market and more people continue to know me...which is good for business. I was worried that the previous group might not have continued, which might have been bad for my business."* The adolescent members who were involved in day labor jobs or tailoring expressed that being a part of the CGs have helped them through promoting their skills to others to obtain more orders/work.



Much technical information regarding various business and income opportunities are discussed in the CGs. This helps the members to enrich their knowledge on their choice of business topics such as livestock and poultry rearing, their vaccination, seed quality, farming process, handicrafts among other business topics and opportunities. Hakima (25) from Jigatola, Lengura, Kalmakanda, Netrokona is a homestead vegetable gardener. She shared, “After the farming related discussion in our group, we are able to identify quality seeds, trade our agricultural productions (such as vegetables, dairy products). We also learned livestock rearing, vaccination schedule, and who to call if we face any livestock health issues.” Apart from the technical information, the CGs also share contact information of relevant service providers in their area, for instance family welfare assistance (FWA), Sub-assistant agriculture officer (SAAO) among others.

**Awareness and early preparedness:** The CGs assisted their members in raising community-wide awareness of arsenic poisoning, Open Defecation Free (ODF) village, hygiene practices, and early-preparedness for floods; during the pandemic, COVID-19 related advisories and information (such as social distancing, handwashing for 20 seconds, wearing masks, vaccination) were disseminated in the CGs. Abdur Rahim (59) from Jigatola, Lengura, Kalmakanda, Netrokona shared, “I am a DRR leader in my village. My reputation has increased among the community as I disseminate early warning messages and preparedness information for the imminent natural disasters. I engage my CG members to disseminated DRR messages in our village as well.” The

*“Our adolescent girl’s CG helped out one of the neighbours during the 2020’s flood. As her house was about to be engulfed by the river, the girls went to her house and helped her with moving her belonging on a three-wheeler van to be taken to the nearest public shelter. It was an emergency hence and she needed a lot of helping hands to move the things quickly; the river bank erosion was coming closer by the minute. We believed in the power of being more in numbers to help out during disaster.”*

- Mukta (16) from Nalchia, Haldia, Saghata, Gaibandha shared her CGs experience during a flood rescue

adolescent groups help their communities in getting weather information by dialing the 1090 hotline number, disseminating early warning messages, and assisting their neighbors to move to a safer place during floods.

The CGs also helped disseminate COVID-19 advisories and precautionary measures in their villages through campaigning, announcing through megaphones, and counselling door-to-door especially on vaccination. Shabana (25), from Gaibandha FGD shared that, “Our group leader apa is very active and well connected in our village. She informed us that the corona vaccine was available in our upazila hospital. All of our members went to the hospital and completed two doses of vaccines. We have also encouraged our family members to take the vaccines too. Many of our family members have also taken the vaccine after seeing us.”

Both the adult and adolescent CG members received information on mitigating the negative impact of natural disasters through attending sessions and rehabilitation initiatives in their CGs. They were informed to seek early warning messages by dialing the GoB hotline number 1090. The CGs later informed their neighborhood of the upcoming natural disaster by megaphone announcements and assisted the families to quickly relocate to the shelters with their assets and livestock. The adult CG members also sought help from the local elites, community leaders, NGOs and UP offices to assist the poor and vulnerable with cash and other humanitarian relief.

**Community solidarity:** Being a part of the same CG since 2019, the members knew each other well and could sympathize better with their peers. Mosiful Begum (32) from Nalchia, Haldia, Saghata, Gaibandha, shared, “We knew whose children were sick, who needed medicine, who had problems with their husbands, and which pregnant and breastfeeding women needed particular care.” Kader (52) from Digdari, Bhitambar, Nageshwari, Kurigram shared, “My CG (adult male) helped me with cash during my daughter’s marriage. The CG members also assisted me in taking my wife to the hospital during the lockdown and gave me money for her treatment when I was devastated.” Osman (48) from Digdari, Bhitambar, Nageshwari, Kurigram shared, “The CG members from my and my wife’s groups helped us reduce fighting with each other.”



*We used to have a lot of disagreements. After sharing it with the CGs, they help us resolve them quickly. Gradually our fights have somewhat decreased.”*

The CGs are a platform where members are inspired by each other to adopt a positive activity to improve their lives and livelihoods, such as joining a village loans and savings association (VSLA) group in their locality, taking COVID-19 vaccines, using telemedicine numbers among other activities.

The CGs from the four villages all shared that they prevented at least one child marriage with the help of the CGs and community. Even the adolescent CGs are aware of the demerits of child marriage and who to contact in case one takes place.

Sometimes the service providers, especially those who want to reach the community, contact the CGs seeking help. This shows the positive acceptance of the CGs in public offices. Sahidul (52) from Digdari, Bhitambar, Nageshwari, Kurigram stated, *“A few days ago, the Health Assistant called our group leader to help him disseminate messages in the community through our CG and to arrange common place for children’s immunization.”*

Bulbul Kabir (55) from Nalchia, Jummerbari. Saghata, Gaibandha shared his thoughts about improvement of the community through CGs- *“We discuss various health issues, including during pregnancy. We (CG members) planted trees with the help of the community. The VSLAs are very popular in our village. CG members have constructed roads themselves with the help of UP. They have made a banana orchard which is benefiting everyone in the village. We have learned to work as a group which empowered us as a community.”*

**Community Group-led (CG-led) Initiatives:** The reformed CGs had an increased access to UP with the help of program staff initially. This later was taken up by the CG leaders who could communicate directly with the UP office by themselves because of improved conversation and negotiations skills and linkage with the assistance of program staff. This approach added the sustainability traction in CG activities as the group members were reaching out and seeking assistance from the local government authorities without SHOUHARDO III’s help. Enamul Haque (46) from Nalchhia, Haldia, Saghata, Gaibandha, who was also a member of pre-2019 FFBS, shared, *“Last year the flood came on top of the pandemic. The only road connecting our village to the other areas was damaged. It was extremely difficult for us because we had no money on hand due to the lockdowns and desperately needed to go look for work outside our village. Our CG leader called us in a meeting and discussed going to the UP office together to request funds to repair the road. We took help from the SHOUAHRDO bhai (brother) to write an application letter, went to the UP office, spoke to the chairman and submitted it. Later we received a small fund to purchase equipment to repair the road.”*



Adult women’s CG from Islampur, Singpur, Nikli, Kishoreganj constructing earthen road sponsored by the UP in February 2020, one month before the first lockdown of COVID-19. Photo: Razu Ahmed, posted in SHOUHARDO III Facebook group. ©CARE 2021

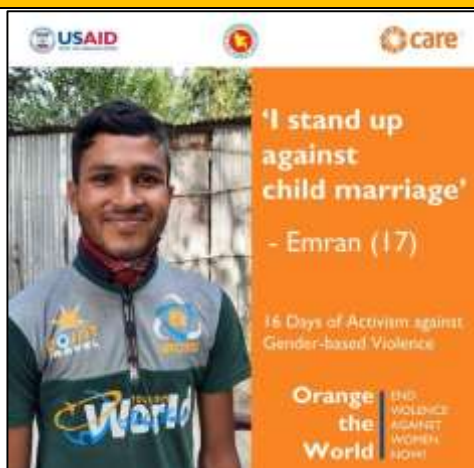
The Adult female CG members were also taking initiatives with the help of program staff until the pandemic spiraled in Bangladesh. As a result of their community cohesion through increased communication and regular meetings before pandemic, they took some proactive measures regarding seeking social safety nets (such as old age allowance, widow allowance) for disadvantaged communities from UP, disaster preparedness and prevention of child marriage. They also approached the UP with various community development agendas, such as road construction, building sanitary latrines, tube wells, and bamboo bridges. Mosiful Begum (32) from Nalchia, Haldia, Saghata, Gaibandha shared, “As a group, we went to the UP office with multiple objectives, such as road repairing and document signing for children’s education. During floods, we assisted our neighbors in relocating their cattle and assets to raised plinth households. We helped a woman with our group savings (not VSLA savings) for her Cesarean delivery expenses.”

While the female groups supported and worked for their community development, they also recognized that preventing GBV was critical. The respondents shared that they discuss prevention of child marriages, dowry, and domestic violence in their CGs and are actively trying to advocate with their families and neighbours to avoid them. Lovely Begum (43) from Nalchia, Haldia, Saghata, Gaibandha shared their story of preventing a child marriage in their village (involving one of the CG members’ daughters) before the pandemic, “We (CG members) told the mother, ‘What will other people learn if you marry off your adolescent girl as a member of the community group?’ As a member of the CG, you should act as a role model for others rather than being a bad example.’ We were able to persuade her to recognize the problem, she realized her mistake and cancelled the wedding of her under-aged daughter.”

#### Communities fought together to stop child marriage

“In our village, we prevented a 14-year-old girl’s marriage. We formed a group with 4/5 members from the adult female group and 2/3 members from the adult male group when one of our group members heard about the potential incidence of child marriage. Then we went to the victim’s house and sat with the household head (father of the girl child). We discussed the risks of child marriage and advised the parents not to marry off their adolescent daughter. We also warned them that if they went forward with the child marriage, we (group members) would report them to the police and UP. Finally, the family decided to postpone the wedding, and the adolescent girl is now studying in a Madrasha (religious school).”

- Nasima (23) is an adult female CG member from Jigatola, Lengura, Kalmakanda, Netrokona



“A girl studying in class six in our neighborhood was forced to get married. She did not want to be married off at such an early age and wanted to continue her studies. But her parents did not understand any of it. So my CG peers and I approached her parents. At first, they were not happy to see us and refused to listen to us. Later we convinced other adults in our community to talk to the parents and make them understand that child marriage is harmful to the girl and the community. Finally, we were able to make them understand, and they backed off from the marriage. The girl is now studying, and she is grateful to us.”

- Emran (17) is an adolescent boys’ CG member from Nalchhia, Haldia, Shagata, Gaibandha. Emran and his CG’s initiative to stop child marriage was also featured in CARE Bangladesh’s 16 days of activism against GBV in 2021. ©CARE 2021

#### 4. Challenges of CG reformation and way forward

The major challenge for CGs in general during the 2020 to 2021 has been to arrange the meetings during the lockdowns and floods. The majority of the CG meetings did not take place due to the dual crisis appearing multiple times during the past year and a half. Although a few CG meetings took place during the lockdown following health and safety protocols, but they had much smaller number of members.

The key challenge for the adult women and adolescent girls' CG was to convince their family members initially to 'allow' them to participate in CG meetings. The women and girls overcame this challenge by seeking help from the program staff to convince their family members to put their trust on SHOUHARDO III as the program has helped the community since 2016. At the beginning, a few family members came to check what discussions took place in the CG meetings, however, eventually had no problems letting the women and girls in their families to be a part of the CGs. On the other hand, the key challenge for adult men and adolescent boys' CG was that they found it hard to find time to attend the meetings regularly as many were day laborers and needed to work daily to meet the basic needs of their families. Apart from these, other challenges include-

- A few of the adult women and adolescent girls could not regularly attend their CG meeting as they could not find time out of their daily domestic chores and caregiving responsibilities.
- Men being less interested than women to attend the CG meetings because of not getting benefitted much like the women.
- Day laborers sometimes missed their work opportunities because they attended the CG meetings, rendering a loss of income.
- Members losing interest in attending the adult male CG meetings because there are no monetary or other tangible benefits received from the CGs.
- Migratory workers leaving their villages resulting in a loss of CG members.
- Adolescents who were recruited back in 2019 may have become adults of 20 years old by now. The homogeneity of the CGs is hampered due to this.
- Adolescent girls getting married off resulting in reduced CG members.
- Adolescent boys not attending meeting as they are busy playing or chatting.
- Many participants want to continue their CGs and pass on their knowledge to new CGs, however, they have a lack of understanding on how to continue the existing CGs or to form new groups when the program phases out.

**Silver lining among these challenges of adult male CGs:** Many of the adult male CG members wish to open a savings option in their CGs (similar to VSLAs). This is an opportunity to promote collective savings as the program is focusing on developing adult male VSLAs in their villages.

## Discussion

### I. The Community Group-led collective initiatives

The CG-led initiatives emerging from the findings of this study are a reflection on SHOUHARDO III's sustainability agenda. The CG-led initiatives are positive examples of the CGs coming together to improve their lives and livelihood with little to no help from the Program- this gives the program the confidence that it will continue even after the program phases out. To strengthen the findings even further, the research team collected secondary field data from the villages selected in this study (see Table 4 below). The data reveals the types of CG-led initiatives taken since the formation of new CGs in 2019.

**Table 4: Summary of community group-led initiatives<sup>7</sup>**

SI	Community group-led initiatives	Nalchia, Haldia, Saghata, Gaibandha	Digbari, Bhitbarband, Nageshwari, Kurigram	Chandipur, Kalma, Austagram, Kishoreganj	Jigatola, Lengura, Kalmakanda, Netrokona
1	Road construction/ repair	Yes	Sanctioned one kilometer road maintenance		Repaired two roads
2	Relocation support during river erosion	Yes			
3	Accessing Social Safety Net Program (VGD, VGF card, old age, widow allowance) and other benefits from the UP	Yes	Old age allowance (5 recipients), widow allowance (8 women recipients), VGF support (10 kilogram rice) for 300 program PEP beneficiaries	Disable allowance (3 recipients, maternity allowance (1 woman), widow allowance (4 women), old age allowance (1 recipient), VGD (6 recipients), VGF (3 recipients), and 1 tube well	
4	Stopped child marriage	Yes	Stopped two child marriages		Yes
5	COVID-19 advisory and awareness-raising	Yes			
6	Accessing services from the Department of Livestock (DoL) and Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE)	Yes	Seed support for five farmers by the Sub-Assistant Agriculture Officer (SAAO)		
7	Made/ repaired bamboo bridge during floods	Yes			Repaired one bamboo bridge with GoB's aid
8	COVID-19 vaccination awareness	Yes			
9	Informed about early warning hotline 1090	Yes			
10	Disseminated early warning messages during floods	Yes			
11	Relocated vulnerable communities (children, disabled, women) during floods	Yes			
12	Livestock and poultry vaccination camp		Four vaccination camps – 435 goats, 180 cows, and 1,050 poultry vaccinated		
13	Tree plantation initiative		125 fruit trees and wooden saplings for 25 HH from the UP		
14	Accessing COVID assistance from the UP		Relief supports (10 kg rice & dry food) for 25 participants		
15	Reducing domestic violence		Mitigated family conflicts		
16	Relief goods for poor communities		Blankets for eight people from the UP		
17	Disseminated agricultural knowledge and practices				Quality seeds, compost usage, goat rearing techniques

<sup>7</sup> Not all field data in numbers are available



## **2. Status-quo and factors influencing the CGs' performances**

### **A. Adult Female CGs**

From the findings of this study, it is observed that the adult female CGs were performing better than the adult male CGs in terms of number of meetings arranged, number of members and their attendance, members' knowledge on CG discussion topics and objective, positive impacts such as increase and/or improvement in group cohesion, problem-solving, social network and capital, IGA, mobility, negotiation skills, and communication and linkage with public offices, especially with the UP and community clinics. Several factors influenced the successfully performing adult female CGs; the key factor being the motivation and counselling regarding CGs playing a role to improve the women's lives despite the challenges they face every day. This was initially done by the program field staff, which was gradually taken over by the CG leaders of the adult female CGs. The conviction that CGs are important for women as a social being was banked on improving their income, mobility, decision-making, health, knowledge on service providers (such as, local GoB offices –agriculture, UP, health; market-based help), approach toward placing concerns/demands to the UPs and in other relevant areas. The improvements not only involve women's lives outside their homes but also their place inside their families. Women who are contributing financially in their families have shared that they have increased involvement in key decision-making of the family matters, for instance what food to buy, what to feed the children, purchasing/selling livestock and poultry, purchasing wholesale items for grocery shop, initiating homebased IGA, visiting healthcare professionals without the husband's help, improved relationship with in-law's family members and letting children (especially girls) to continue their studies. There are still scopes of improvement regarding decision-making on the reproductive health plans for the women, and the child marriage scenario for the adolescent daughters in the family. Another factor was the attendance rate and attentiveness of the women in the adult female CGs as the study found that they could recollect the topics discussed and their impact on their lives. Once the CGs have proven to be beneficial for the women through various program and CG-led initiatives, they started treating the CGs as an integral platform to share their concerns regarding family, income and other communal problems to seek solutions in the open forum. Their connectedness through the CGs improved their social network and capital for the women. They expressed that they know the happenings and whereabouts of other CG members' families and could come forward when anyone needed help. This strengthens the support system for women compared to pre-2019 groups when they were feeling left alone and struggled to find a solution to the problems that are now getting solved by the adult female CGs. This practice later converted into raising concerns/demands to the respective UPs for relevant allowances, infrastructure development (such as road construction or repair), and emergency relief among other communal issues.

### **B. Adult Male CGs**

The adult male CGs were found to be struggling to attend the meetings and recollect the discussion topic or their impacts. This was mainly due to the men being day-laborers and found it difficult to attend CGs by skipping work that day or those hours. Since they are paid by the day, they have to work for a full day to receive the daily wages. It was also challenging for them to attend the CGs as day-labor work opportunities were scarce during the lockdown. The pandemic impacted the work sector to have a reduced capability of the recruiters to hire like pre-pandemic era; hence even if there was daily work available, it was quickly taken by other competing day-laborers in the same village. A few of the adult male CG members lamented that by attending a CG meeting they missed the opportunity for that day hence missed earning as well. Another difficulty for the adult male CGs not performing as actively as the adult female CGs is that the men did not find the CGs useful for their lives like the women did. Rural men in Bangladesh usually have the privilege of getting involved in a variety of IGA, have less to no restriction on mobility outside home and can migrate easily outside their villages. This gives them the opportunity to



expand their options of income, social network and capital within and beyond their villages--something the adult female CGs are practicing to achieve through CG meetings and collaborations. Convincing the men to be an active part of the CGs was challenging hence their performance is also low compared to the adult female CGs.

### C. Adolescent CGs (Girls and Boys)

The research team faced the most challenges in probing the adolescent CG members. It has been observed through field data and in the GCAT report that the adolescent CG members are difficult to find in the villages as the number of CGs are much less than the adult ones, and because either the adolescents were married off (mostly girls) or migrated to other villages with families (both girls and boys) or looking for work (mostly boys). In comparison, the adolescent girls CGs were functioning better than the adolescent boys CGs in terms of attendance, members' involvement, and number of meetings. The adolescent girls were treating the CGs as a platform to spend time with their peer groups, sharing their happiness and troubles of being at home. The respondent girls expressed that the CG platform acted as a mental health support group for them; where they can talk about menstrual health, parents, family issues, emotions, and impact of the prolonged isolation due to the pandemic. In rural Bangladesh, the mobility, agency and decision-making skills of the adolescent girls are highly suppressed due to patriarchal norms; the CGs are a way out for them to express their emotions and cope with them collectively. On the other hand, the adolescent boys CG members were scarcely found for the study interviews. Those able to give an interview were involved in day-labor jobs and were not interested in regular attendance. Although one adolescent boy CG members shared that, they took an initiative to prevent a child marriage of a girl in Gaibandha that was the only positive example coming from the adolescent boys CG.

Additional lockdowns in 2022 posed an overall challenge for the CGs to perform in the remaining months of the program. The approach taken in the previous lockdowns during 2020 and 2021 negatively affected the CG activities.

### 3. The contribution of reformed CG's in the SHOUHARDO III's Women's Empowerment (WE) Agenda

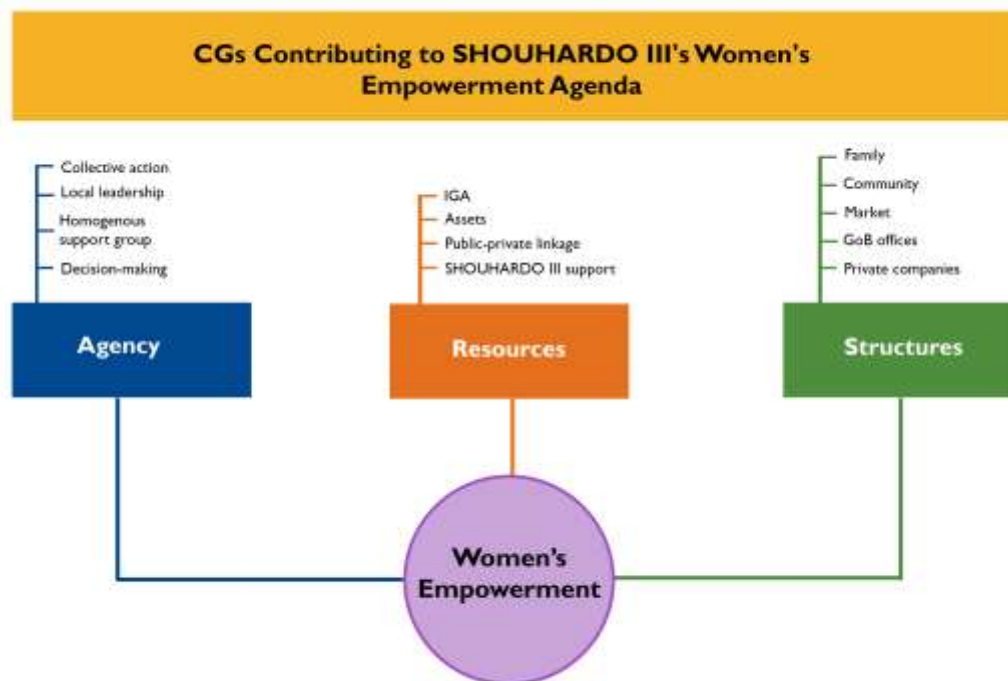
According to The World Bank (2018), it is crucial for developing countries like Bangladesh to have strong social networks, especially in the case of girls and women, as the market situation, mobility, accessibility, resources, institutions and structures are rather weak to cater to their needs. An economist from the same feature story by The World Bank expressed that, *"Social networks are a key and underappreciated component of the process of economic and human development. Social networks are a source of informal credit, insurance, and information about things like jobs, rights, as well as health services and technology, such as those related to fertility and family planning."* The highlight is on social networking, which is the key element in the CGs by SHOUHARDO III. The female and girl's CGs point out the gap in having a social network without the CGs presence. A common platform and space like the CG meetings enhance the social networking through improving women's **agency** through free and collective discussions and decision-making, strengthening local **resources**, such as linkage with local GoB offices, and making space for women in the **structural** entities (such as family, community, markets, public and private companies).

A study conducted in the South India also explored the self-help women's groups outside the microcredit scheme, and observed that in terms of contribution to the overall women's empowerment agenda, women in the self-help groups (SHG) started acknowledging their identities while collectively working toward the development of their villages, especially while participating in the *Panchayat* (village-level informal judiciary team). By being a part of the collective decision-making and using the available resources and structures, these women found a place to practice their agencies as they engaged in various community and social activities, even beyond their locality. Similarly, in SHOUHARDO III, the CGs were reformed by the

selection of the participants by themselves; which act as a platform and space to connect the women and girls living in close proximity to utilize their available resources and structures to effectively instill agency in their everyday life, despite the gendered challenges. The adult female CG members visit the local government offices to place their concerns and demands, which indirectly is affecting the overall wellbeing of the communities. The SHGs have become an effective and dominant measure of empowering women around the developing world in terms of becoming a participating citizen by preventing being marginalized and isolated, and through strengthening partnerships, linkage and networks. By taking these small steps within the groups, women and girls are contributing to the overall community development, in-line with the greater women's empowerment agenda of SDGs. (Tesoriero, 2005)

Another study conducted in Tamil Nadu, India, discussed that the SHGs were encouraging collective actions led by the groups, which in turn was catalyzing the change of personal power and social positions that the women perceived they achieved within their families and communities. The changes observed by women themselves was not only within the groups, but exceeded beyond within their families and communities. The adult female and girls' CG leaders of SHOUHARDO III are the ones who are responsible for maintaining and strengthening the space women and girls are claiming in their communities- another contribution of women's leadership and agency in the rural areas of Bangladesh. (Finnis, 2017)

In a nutshell, the diagram below conceptualizes the contribution of adult female and adolescent girls' CGs in the overall Women's Empowerment agenda of SHOUHARDO III.



#### 4. Key actors toward sustainability of the Community Groups

In terms of sustainability, this study observed that the adult female and adolescent girl's CGs have a better chance to continue regardless of SHOUHARDO III's presence. The study attempted to explore the government and non-government stakeholders and the type of support they could offer to sustain the CG model when the program phases out. The CG members believed that the local NGOs working at the community level (with similar CG type activities such as BRAC) could contribute the most to sustain the

CGs. One of the adult female CG members, Lovely from Gaibandha, stated, “*The NGOs are more efficient and effective for our advancement, and they operate for our betterment. The government does not provide sufficient assistance. Their representatives do not approach us in the same way that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) do.*” The female members indicated that the NGOs might assist with various awareness-raising initiatives (such as health, hygiene, DRR) and credit facilities programs through the CG sessions.

Second to NGOs, the CGs think the local government offices, respectable community leaders, and Village Development Committees (VDC) are good candidates to continue the CG model beyond the timeframe of the Program. The groups perceived that the local government (Union Parishad) could support them with the Social Safety Net Programs (for instance, VGD, VGF, Old age allowance) and structural developments (such as plinth-raising, school, road, and bridge construction), Community Clinic services, early-warning, and disaster preparedness. They indicated that while greater links with government and non-government organizations might be sources of assistance, the VDCs can actively enhance the CG members’ networking capacity. Additionally, they suggested that digital platforms such as the UP digital information center, *Krishoker Janala* App, SHARA platform, and toll-free hotline numbers (109, 999, 1090) may significantly assist communities and continue the CG-led successful initiatives beyond the Program’s timeframe.

The LSPs (local service providers) and CLFs (community level facilitators) developed by SHOUHARDO III can also play a significant role apart from the local NGOs and local GoB offices to help continue the CG activities. Currently, SHOUHARDO III is focused on improving and strengthening the LSP/CLF model, that has been functioning since 2019, to sustain the locally-led activities longer than the program timeframe; connecting CGs with the LSP/CLFs’ scope of work will be fruitful for the future of the SHOUHARDO III communities. With the joint effort from local NGOs, GoB offices and LSP/CLF, CGs can be expected to thrive in the absence of the program.

## Concluding Remarks

The reformed CGs were transitioned from the previous 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. The positive impact of the CGs can be seen in the families of members, as well as in the community through increase in income, improvement in neighborhood solidarity, linkage with public and private entities, market access, disaster preparedness, using technology to gather information (weather, health, agriculture), and infrastructure development (road and bridge construction, mound wall).

The adult female CG respondents were found to be the most benefitted who utilized the CG meetings as a space to bond with other women in the community, improve confidence, engage in income-generating activities, access local government offices to raise concerns/demands, learn technical components of business (farming, livestock, poultry, handicrafts) and health related information, especially during COVID-19. Although a lot of positive impacts can be seen with the adult female and adolescent girls’ CGs, adult men and adolescent boys’ CGs are still struggling. The men and boys in Bangladesh have better mobility, accessibility to services, social capital and networking, and decision-making roles in their families and communities. 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 despite their everyday gendered challenges.

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## Annex

### I. Details of CGs as of Oct-Dec 2021

Group Information	Total Group	Group Member		
		Female	Male	Total
Number of Community Group (CG)	6406	103326	39181	142507
18+ Adult Female	4183	98945		98945
18+ Adult Male	1652		36533	36533
Adolescent Girls	238	2994		2994
Adolescent Boys	170		2299	2299
Mixed Adolescent Boys and Girls	44	294	349	643
Young Mothers + New Brides (18 - 25 Years)	119	1093		1093

### 2. What does the program facilitate for the self-selected Community Groups?

Community groups allow communities to sit together and resolve own development challenges and engage with service providers and markets with a stronger negotiating power as they have the strength in numbers. These groups are also opportunities to learn for members and provide social networks needed for emergency and other times of need. The program has engaged with communities who have preferred self-selected, gender and age disaggregated groups to ensure homogeneity of issues and that people are facing similar issues and can engage freely with one another. All groups have both social (health, DRR, gender, collective action for services and markets) and economic focus (Savings, Farm and non-farm income options)

Sl.	Types of the Community Groups, Size and Age range	Points to facilitate the Self-Selected Community Groups
1	<b>Adult Female Group</b> <b>Age: 18+ Years</b>  <b>Size: 25-30 Persons</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitate development of necessary life skills, including communication, negotiation, decision making, problem solving, leadership, group management, financial planning and literacy, group solidarity, and need-based skills of participants to build their inner capacity and confidence so that they can achieve their intended vision.</li> <li>The program will monitor community groups' performance based on specific indicators aimed at measuring group cohesion, problem solving capacity, collective action capacity, and linkages, identifying gaps for further support.</li> </ul>
2	<b>Adult Male Group</b> <b>Age: 18+ Years</b>  <b>Size: 25-30 Persons</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Facilitate development of necessary life skills, including communication, negotiation, decision making, problem solving, leadership, group management, financial planning and literacy, group solidarity, and need-based skills of participants to build their inner capacity and confidence so that they can perform the expected action and behavior.</li> <li>The program will monitor community groups' performance based on specific indicators aimed at measuring group cohesion, problem solving capacity, collective action capacity, and linkages, identifying gaps for further support.</li> </ul>



3	<b>Young Mother &amp; New Brides</b> <i>(Married and not yet received any capacity building or input support from the program)</i>  <b>Age: 18-25 Years (Indicative)</b> <b>Size: 10+ Persons</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The program started facilitating this group because they are usually left with limited opportunities (e.g. livelihood), no/poor decision making/negotiation capacity and mobility. Their empowerment would mean more income for the household, more space for women and girls, and reduced violence against women.</li> <li>• Enhance their leadership in the family (Decision making participation, negotiation, lead the family health nutrition and hygiene issue)</li> <li>• Build financial literacy and accumulate capital for future investment through VSLA</li> <li>• Build knowledge skills and necessary potential connections to engage with income earning successful transition into the community group</li> </ul>
4	<b>Adolescent Girls</b> <i>(School Dropped out and Unmarried)</i> <b>Size: 10 + Persons</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitate better preparedness to be a successful future income earner,</li> <li>• Facilitate to equipped them with necessary knowledge, awareness and skills to live a healthy and standard life</li> <li>• Facilitate to build the leadership capacity to their effective participation in leading the family and in the society.</li> </ul>
5	<b>Adolescent Boys</b> <i>(School Dropped out and Unmarried)</i>  <b>Size: 10+ Persons</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitate better preparedness to be a successful future income earner,</li> <li>• Facilitate to equipped them with necessary knowledge, awareness, and skills to live a healthy and standard life</li> <li>• Facilitate to build as a future effective leader to their better contribution in the society.</li> </ul>

### 3. Report on Group Capacity Assessment (GCAT)- SHOUHARDO III Program

#### Introduction

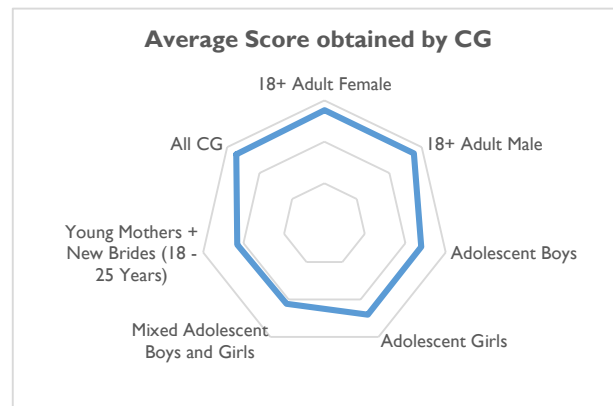
As part of revised strategy, there are five types (18+ Adult Male, 18+ Adult Female, Adolescent boys, Adolescent girls and New bridge) of community groups are functioning at SHOUHARDO III villages from September 2019. In some areas few mixed adolescent boys and girls groups are formed due to the unavailability of a sufficient number of adolescent boys or girls in the community.

In December 2019, SHOUHARDO III initiated the Group Capacity Assessment of the community groups in order to measure capacity based on group cohesion, problem solving and linkage building. This is a participatory process where group members assess their group's capacity through an interactive discussion, where respective Field Trainers (FT) facilitated the session. The objective of the assessment is to measure progress of group capacity and identify areas for future improvement to make the group sustainable.

It is expected that the assessment will continue in each quarter by the community group members in upcoming assessments. In December 2019, GCAT facilitated in all 5876 community groups in Char and Haor region which consider as baseline performance for the community groups.

### Observation based on Average Score:

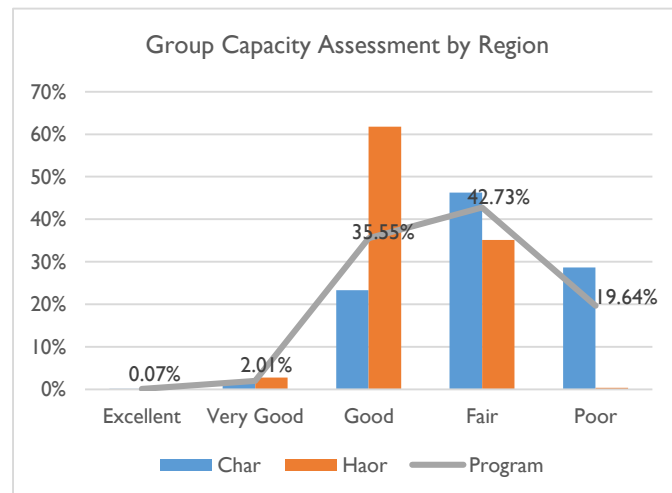
The GCAT data reveals that an average score of 27.2 obtained per group out of total score 80. Community groups of Char and Haor region obtained average scores, 24 and 34 respectively. Among the PNGOs, POPI obtained the highest average score of 36.8; and on the contrary NDP obtained the lowest average score 16. Among the community group types, 18+ Adult Female and 18+ Adult Male groups obtained almost similar score which are 27.59 and 27.54 respectively. Mixed Adolescent Boys and Girls obtained the lowest score 21.17.



### Observation based on Categories:

#### Community Group:

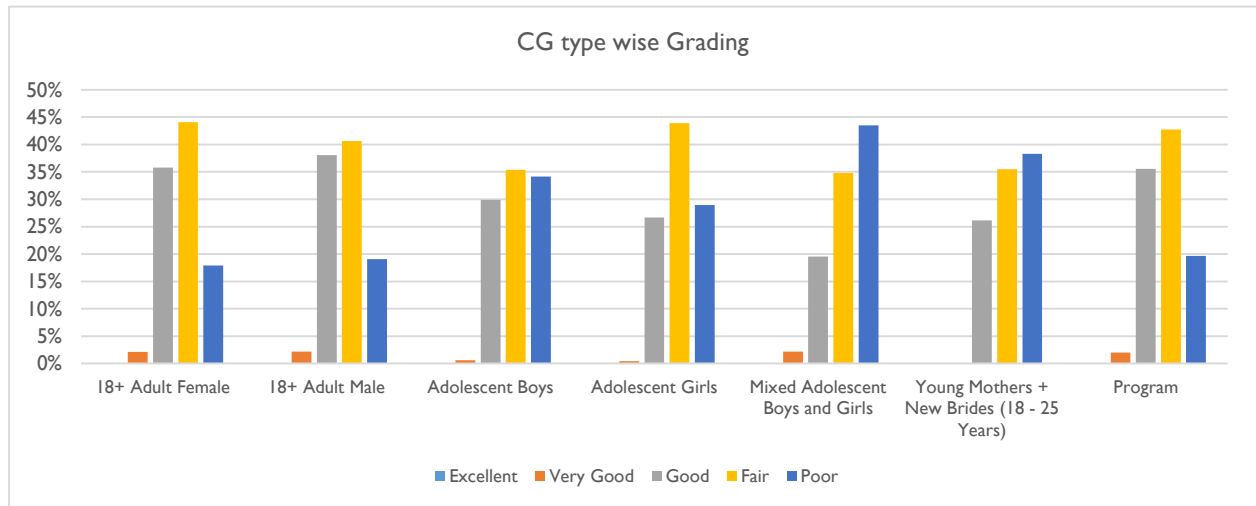
Villages are classified in five categories i.e. poor, fair, good, very good and excellent based on their obtained score. It is observed that a minimum percent i.e. 0.07% (4 out of 5876) of community groups obtained the excellent category across the SHOUHARDO III program. The excellent groups are observed in MJSKS and SKS in Char region which are .25% and .15% of their total groups. The group capacity assessment also shows that highest 42% community groups across the program obtained the “Fair” category. In Char region highest percent of community groups obtained the “Fair” category where ESDO reported the highest 58%. On the contrary second highest percent i.e. 36% of community group obtained the “Good” category across the program area. Most of the community groups (62%, 1154 out of 1869) in Haor region obtained “good” category where almost one fourth of community groups (23%, 935 out of 4007) obtained “good” in char region. Among the PNGOs, highest 77% community groups of POPI obtained category “good”. 19% of community groups in the Program area are in poor category where a minimum (.37%) of community groups obtained the poor category in Haor region.



#### Group Types:

Considering the community group types overall, a few (.1%) “18+ Adult Female” groups obtained only the “excellent” category and almost 2% of 18+ Adult Male, 18+ Adult Female and Mixed Adolescent Boys and Girls obtained the “very good” category. Irrespective of group type, highest 44% of the 18+ Adult Female groups obtained “Fair” category and on the contrary 2<sup>nd</sup> highest 43% of Mixed Adolescent Boys and Girls group obtained poor category. Compared to poor category, it is assumed that 18+ Adult Female groups slightly better than 18+ Adult Male groups where other groups are far behind.

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### Group Capacity:

The community groups are classified according to capacity based on sustainability parameters i.e. cohesion, problem solving and linkage building. Among the three parameters, cohesion is little bit advanced than problem solving and linkage building. In cohesion capacity around 10% community groups obtained excellent and good category whereas only 2% in problem solving and linkage building capacities. On the other hand, almost double community groups obtained good cohesion capacity compared to problem solving and linkage building capacities. Almost 42% of community groups obtained good in cohesion where 23% and 25% obtained in problem solving and linkage building respectively. Among the three capacity areas highest 36.7% of poor category obtained in linkage building where lowest 13.9% in cohesion.

