

# WOMEN AND GIRLS: MAKING A LASTING DIFFERENCE IN SOUTH ASIA

## ABOUT THE BRITISH COUNCIL

The British Council is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. We create friendly knowledge and understanding between the people of the UK and other countries. We do this by making a positive contribution to the UK and the countries we work with – changing lives by creating opportunities, building connections and engendering trust.

We work with over 100 countries across the world in the fields of arts and culture, English language, education and civil society. Each year we reach over 20 million people face-to-face and more than 500 million people online, via broadcasts and publications. Founded in 1934, we are a UK charity governed by Royal Charter and a UK public body.

## ABOUT THIS CASE STUDY

This brief is part of a wider study undertaken by ODI that reflects on the work of the British Council in relation to the empowerment of women and girls between 2010 and 2015, generating recommendations on ways to improve on the existing offer through the identification of strengths, gaps and opportunities in this area. An important dimension of the analysis relates to the British Council's use of its cultural relations approach in its work on gender equality – that is, how much it shows a deep understanding of the context, promotes trust, works in partnership and fosters participation.

The study analyses impact with respect to five outcome areas for women and girls' empowerment to tackle gender inequality:

- (i) increased awareness and agency
- (ii) fairer access to opportunities and resources
- (iii) dialogue, collaboration and collective action
- (iv) supportive policy and institutional reform
- (v) changes in attitudes, beliefs, practices and discriminatory social norms

The focus of this brief is on how British Council programmes in South Asia have contributed to achieving results for women and girls across some of those five outcome areas.



# BRITISH COUNCIL’S WORK ON WOMEN AND GIRLS’ EMPOWERMENT IN SOUTH ASIA

The British Council has been supporting sustainable change and helping to improve people’s lives in South Asia for over 60 years. Its experience in this region has led to long-lasting and powerful relationships on the ground, valuable high-level networks and a deep understanding of local contexts. A significant proportion of the British Council’s work in the region focuses on Bangladesh and Pakistan, though it also operates in Afghanistan, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Iran.

Most programmes within the British Council’s portfolio in South Asia consider gender equality as a cross-cutting issue and aim to reach both men and women, especially the youth, without targeting one gender specifically. However, there have been a number of projects that specifically target women and girls to improve their access to resources and support their rights. Based on both global and regional priorities, each country in the region decides what specific projects they implement and sets their objectives depending on the country’s context, as well as on resources and funding opportunities available. While there has been increasing attention to programming to support women and girls in the recent years, most of the countries in the region would be required to take additional, focused measures to make it a priority area, particularly as the patriarchal context faced by women and girls in South Asia is particularly challenging. The British Council’s work on women and girls’ in the region is illustrated here through four interesting projects from two of the countries in the region visited for in-depth research for this study: Pakistan and Bangladesh. These illustrate relevant work across the four empowerment outcome areas aimed to tackle gender inequality undertaken by the British Council in the region.

## DOSTI, PAKISTAN (2015–PRESENT)

**DOSTI<sup>1</sup> aims to create a difference by breaking social barriers and promoting community cohesion by making sports an integral part of the social life of youth in Karachi. It works in eight centres in Karachi and recently won an International Peace Award.<sup>2</sup> DOSTI did not target girls specifically. In fact, the participation of girls was unanticipated, according to an external evaluation that reported that coaches and youth workers did not expect many girls would get involved in the groups.**

The promotion of sports for both young men and young women resulted in important positive changes in the participants. One young female participant explained, ‘We are brought up not to open up but this has changed.’ Another said, ‘Now I am confident to speak to anyone.’ Another mentioned, ‘DOSTI has taught us we can trust each other.’ Activities that involve games to swap gender roles were also highlighted as changing their perspectives on what women can or cannot do: one girl said, ‘If men can cook, then women can also drive and go out like men.’

The girls participating in the discussion in Karachi highlighted that one of the main problems they faced in their community was the fact that girls did not have freedom, and they benefited from less opportunities than boys and were less valued than them. When asked how this could change, they agreed the DOSTI programme was one way to address this but also that parents must be targeted with awareness-raising trainings. One girl said, ‘Our minds have changed but our parents need to understand what we are going through. Something needs to be done for parents.’

Although the DOSTI programme had not been targeting girls specifically and while the impact of the initiative on empowerment outcomes for girls is limited in scope, it is a good illustration of a programme that attracted girls’ involvement because they see it as a safe space to broaden their freedoms and promote their equality with boys. In this way, DOSTI contributes to strengthening their individual empowerment and agency.

## ENGLISH AND DIGITAL FOR GIRLS’ EDUCATION (EDGE), BANGLADESH (2012–PRESENT)

**The British Council and BRAC implement EDGE<sup>3</sup> to stimulate the educational possibilities and needs of young girls in Bangladesh. It builds on the English and ICT for Adolescents (EITA) project, which won the Manthan Award (e-Women and Empowerment Winner in 2013). This initiative offers English and digital education for adolescents through non-formal after school clubs. It targets girls and promotes their opportunities to develop and strengthen skills in English and the use of technology, which are typically more limited than those of boys and men, which ultimately restricts their access to the labour market.**

Since the project began, over 6573 girls have been reached directly through approximately 264 clubs within the network of BRAC. This project is one example of girls explicitly being targeted as beneficiaries through English programmes and of an equity approach being followed to provide girls and adolescents with opportunities and resources.

According to the programme’s monitoring and evaluation framework, the project’s overall impact is that ‘adolescent girls from marginalised communities can make more informed and independent life choices, as is their right, in order to contribute more fully to the family, the economy and society’. To achieve this, the EDGE theory of change highlights four main objectives: (i) development of skills and knowledge; (ii) awareness of choices and rights; (iii); (iv) self-confidence and belief in ability to learn; and (iv) enhanced status.



1 <https://www.britishcouncil.pk/programmes/society/dosti>

2 <https://www.gov.uk/government/world-location-news/british-council-dosti-project-wins-international-peace-award>

3 <http://www.britishcouncil.org.bd/en/partnerships/work-development/track-record/english-ict-adolescents>



The needs analysis for EDGE underscores some evidence that EDGE contributes to students completing the formal education cycle, which has positive societal impacts, including strengthening participants' likelihood of finding formal employment and raising the age of marriage. These impacts are positively linked with two of the empowerment outcome areas: increasing access to opportunities and resources and contributing to changing social norms (which in this context perpetuate early marriage). This point was also mentioned by the BRAC education manager, who explained that EDGE contributes to tackling the rate of girls dropping out of schools: 'Often girls fail in English and Maths so they drop out and then they get married, so we should help them in their education through linking teaching with the club sessions and linking the project with market opportunities.'

However, the needs analysis also flags that 'these gender driven societal impacts are generally not given prominence in stakeholder's perception of the areas in which the project is positively influencing. The predominant perception is that EDGE, through improving the participants English and IT skills, positively affects the beneficiaries' livelihood opportunities. Prevention of early marriage is far more problematic to demonstrate as a direct result of EDGE and could be largely attributed to other components of the ADP programme [the Adolescent Development Programme implemented by BRAC]' (British Council, 2015d). The BRAC manager also highlighted that girls enrolled and retained in secondary education still face risks of early marriage, when from poor families, and of sexual harassment, which lead parents to remove their daughters from school.

**ACTIVE CITIZENS BANGLADESH  
(2009–PRESENT)**

**Active Citizens promotes intercultural dialogue, community-led social development and social responsibility, working to build empowerment through the promotion of social change in communities led by volunteers from within the communities themselves. The programme provides opportunities and resources such as new techniques to study communities and solve problems within the community, supporting a change at the individual level but also in terms of collective power through Social Action Projects (SAPs) that seek to make positive changes in their communities. Some SAPs attempt to address gender inequality through various approaches, such as addressing gender based-violence or stimulating public debate on gender norms. Here we present two examples. In Bangladesh, the programme has trained more than 16,000 youth leaders in nearly 300 communities in 44 districts.**

One of the project's SAPs implemented by active citizens from Jahangirnagar University in Dhaka focuses on young adolescents. They organise campaigns in secondary schools to raise awareness among adolescents and teachers about health (e.g. menstruation, sexual and reproductive health) and social issues that young people face when they go through adolescence. One of the SAP leaders noted that:

*When adolescents have problems and they can't share it with their parents, their friends or their teachers, it creates anxiety and loneliness. There are a lot of cases of suicide among young people. ... We wanted to create a situation where society is more open to interpersonal relations and sharing of problems.*

Hence their SAP aims to create discussions with young adolescents and break down social taboos.

Some of the young adolescent boys who had been targeted by the campaign shared some examples of the changes that had occurred in their school as a result. For example, one of the books they includes a chapter on adolescent girls' health but they never studied it because their teacher was uncomfortable discussing this topic. Since the campaign, however, both pupils and teachers have discussed it more openly. They also explained how boys in their school had reduced the practice of verbally harassing girls since their 'elder brothers' from Active Citizens had come to discuss this and showed them videos denouncing this practice.

One female active citizen explained how the programme had also changed her perspective:

*I got a sense of social responsibility and I am proud of it. I have also gained skills in advocacy, communication and leadership so I can access resources around me. Before, I did not know I could access those resources. ... In our society, girls want to do so many social activities but they don't have a platform. The Active Citizens programme provides this platform.*

These examples illustrate how, even at the small scale in which SAPs work, the programme can make useful contributions to changing the environment to be more supportive of girls and young women, and can help increase girls' awareness and agency.





**WOMEN IN THE WORLD FESTIVAL (WOW), PAKISTAN (MAY 2016)**

**The British Council Pakistan collaborated with the Southbank Centre in London to host WOW- Women of the World festival in Karachi, Pakistan in May 2016. WOW celebrates the achievements of women and girls, and also looks at the obstacles women face across the globe.**

This is the first time that the British Council in Pakistan has an arts initiative with an explicit objective to focus on women's empowerment. To plan the festival, a Think-in session was organised in which women from all walks of life took part and shared their thoughts on how WOW Karachi should be designed. Prominent women leaders from the region took part in the festival's planning. WOW Karachi was a one-day event which consisted of musical performances, dramatic readings, panel discussions, inspirational talks and a market place, showcasing the incredible achievements of women and girls and highlighting the particular challenges facing the women of Pakistan. Topics covered include gender equality, violence against women, the future of the workplace, division of domestic labour and how to raise young Pakistani girls as empowered individuals. The festival aimed to create a space for the discussion of important issues for women and girls that can help bring down discriminatory social norms.

*The examples presented in this case study illustrate the British Council's work with women and girls through targeted programmes across its three operational areas: English, Arts and Education and Society. They make positive contributions to the five empowerment outcome areas that frame this analysis. While the study did not identify programmes that directly support policy and institutional reforms to support the empowerment of women and girls in this region, the British Council could draw on its experience and strong networks in the region to use the evidence generated through its programmes such as Active Citizen and EDGE in order to influence the design of national education programmes.*

*While there have been considerable achievements by the British Council in South Asia, more time and human resources need to be allocated to programming to address some of the gender barriers identified on the ground, such as restricted mobility of girls, by engaging more with their parents and with men in general; working more systematically on social norms through the cultural relations approach that the British Council successfully follows in the region; or developing more research to better understand the profile of young women's needs and therefore better inform the design of proposals. As such, there is a lot of scope for the British Council's continued work on women and girls' empowerment in the region, to draw from some of their positive achievements.*

*In the case of targeted projects, the British Council can add value based on its global experience, by addressing contextually important issues such as violence against women and girls, or youth unemployment. For example, the British Council's social enterprise programme that is currently operating in 24 countries - one of which is Bangladesh - provides social entrepreneurs with skills training, mentoring and access to UK expertise; or Pakistan's Skills for Employability programme that addresses the demand for skills in a global economy so that national educational and training systems are better equipped to respond to labour market demands and learner needs. Both of these programmes could ensure a stronger involvement of adolescent girls and young*

*women by understanding and addressing obstacles they face to actively participate. The British Council would need to work from the community level upward, drawing on its cultural relations approach to sensitise parents and other community members about the enormous gains to be achieved through the participation of women and girls.*

*What is certain is that if women and girls' empowerment is to be endorsed as a global priority by the British Council, it is necessary for it to invest time and human resources in ensuring that its programmes can help women and girls overcome the barriers they face to entry and actively participate.*

*The development of a regional strategy to address women and girls' empowerment placed within a global framework can be the first step in that direction. Adopting a regional perspective is not detrimental to achieve a deep understanding of the countries' contexts. On the contrary, providing a regional strategy on women and girls' empowerment, offering guidance and stimulating synergies among country offices across programmes has the potential to enhance the impact of the organisation at the country and regional levels while strengthening the British Council's track record on women and girls' empowerment in country and region consistently. The organisation is well positioned to develop its view and tools to achieve women and girls' empowerment based on global, regional and local trends and research.*

*The British Council should ensure that projects are designed and financed consistently in a way to reflect a deep understanding of the local and regional contexts as well as of the mission of the organisation which has been developing significantly in the past few years. Resources should be used efficiently and in a way to avoid one-time projects whose impact is hard to assess and to become long lasting. Placing projects within a country, regional and global strategy on women and girls' empowerment would help to avoid these shortcomings and enhance the profile of the organisation as a key player within the gender field.*





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