



LEARNING NOTE ON INCLUSION OF EARLY-MARRIED GIRLS (EMGS) THROUGH TRADITIONAL GAMES FOR PROTECTION (TG4P)

Project: Sports for Protection, Resilience and Transformation (SPiRiT)

Geographic Focus: Dhaka, Kurigram and Satkhira

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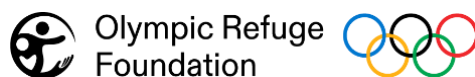


Table of Content

Learning summary	2
1. Setting the Stage: The spirit Approach.....	2
1.1 Beyond physical play	2
1.2 One project, three realities	2
1.3 The vulnerability of early married girls and a theoretical shift.....	3
2. The journey of inclusion: key learning insights.....	4
2.1 Barriers and enablers to participate	4
2.2 Restoring childhood: joy, relief and behavioral shifts	6
2.3 Creating a big family: bridging social gaps and stigma	8
2.4 The architects of change: the strategic role of community facilitators	9
2.5 Environmental reality: economic hardship as constant pressure	11
3. Reflection: Successes and Systemic Hurdles.....	12
3.1 What helped the process: tg4p intervention learnings and bright spots.....	12
3.2 Systemic challenges: poverty, norms, and service gaps	13
3.3 Implications for practice: strategic workstreams for spirit	13
3.3.1 Data-driven design and assessment	13
3.3.2 Enhancing program quality and capacity	14
3.3.3 Strengthening social inclusion and resilience	14
3.3.4 Ensuring sustainability and climate adaptation	14
Annex 1: Detailed TG4P game descriptions and facilitation mechanics	16
Annex 2: Measuring impact methodology.....	19
Annex 3: Case stories on the journey of inclusion.....	23

Learning summary

The primary goal of this learning note is to capture and document practical evidence on how Traditional Games for Protection (TG4P) sessions meaningfully involve Early Married Girls (EMGs) and contribute to their agency creation in climate-vulnerable areas of Bangladesh, including Dhaka, Kurigram, and Satkhira to enhance their psychosocial wellbeing and empowerment. To achieve this, the documentation focuses on identifying specific techniques that facilitate community buy-in and maintain safe spaces for participation while examining the tangible shifts in individuals' confidence, social connections and general well-being.

Furthermore, the note determines existing obstacles and community risk perceptions alongside best practices and enablers from a gender and protection standpoint regarding program facilitation. A key finding is that while economic survival drives early marriage in Kurigram and Satkhira, parental fear for a girl's honor and physical safety is the primary driver in Dhaka slums. Ultimately, these insights serve to offer practical suggestions for expanding inclusive TG4P techniques to other project locations, ensuring a scalable and long-term impact on the most marginalized youth.

1. Setting the Stage: The spirit Approach

1.1 Beyond physical play

The Sports for Protection, Resilience, and Transformation (SPiRiT) project of Terre des hommes (Tdh) Foundation implemented in partnership with Solidarity and Breaking the Silence (BTS) funded by the Olympic Refugee Foundation (ORF) and Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC) represents a specialized intervention designed for climate-vulnerable and displaced children and youth in Bangladesh. The project is built upon a three-part framework that integrates safe spaces, Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) and sports-based interventions to foster social inclusion, cohesion and psychosocial recovery.

1.2 One project, three realities

Kurigram: the riverine char & erosion context

In the Chilmari and Ulipur upazilas, the environment is defined by the relentless erosion of the Brahmaputra and Dharla rivers. Families living on the *chars* (river islands) experience a state of perpetual displacement, often moving multiple times a year. This creates a situation where assets are lost overnight and the sense of stability is nonexistent. In such extreme poverty, families often view their daughters as economic liabilities.



Consequently, early marriage is weaponized as a survival strategy to save household costs by transferring the burden of a daughter's sustenance to another family¹.

Satkhira: the salinity & disaster risk context

In contrast to the riverine north, the southwestern coastal district of Satkhira is plagued by increasing salinity and frequent cyclones. The intrusion of saltwater has decimated traditional agriculture and freshwater fisheries- the primary sources of livelihood. This climate-induced economic collapse forces families into negative coping mechanisms. Adolescents here face a lack of opportunities as their parents migrate to work or marry off their daughters to cope with the insolvency and religious issues triggered by the changing environment².

Dhaka: the urban slum & social toxicity context

In the slums of Bauniabadh and Beguntla, the threats are social and infrastructural. These are overcrowded settlements where families live in high-density, makeshift housing. The lack of open spaces means children often play in narrow, crime-prone alleys. Parents in these slums live in constant anxiety regarding sexual harassment and drug abuse. This parental fear is the primary driver for early marriage in the urban context; marriage is seen as a protective shield for a girl's honor and physical safety in a predatory environment³.

1.3 The vulnerability of early married girls and a theoretical shift

Bangladesh holds a staggering national child marriage rate of approximately 51% for girls before the age of 18³ and climate shocks serve as a direct catalyst for this prevalence. Initially designed to address vulnerable children and youth broadly, the project evolved into a focused approach. This shift was necessitated by the realization that married girls are the most isolated and invisible group, often barred from public activities by their in-laws or heavy domestic burdens. To effectively reach this demographic, the project adopted the Traditional Games for Protection (TG4P) curriculum. The implementation strategy focuses on:

- *Inclusion and Accessibility:* Unlike football or handball, which require large fields and public exposure factors that often lead to the exclusion of married girls, traditional games (like *Kanamachi* or *Haribhanga*) can be played in private courtyards or smaller community spaces.
- *Reasonable Accommodation:* Rather than reinforcing restricted mobility, the project provides reasonable accommodation by selecting venues that consider the specific safety concerns and access requirements of EMGs. This creates an enabling environment where participants feel secure enough to engage without the pressure of public exposure that might otherwise lead to their exclusion.

¹ Annex-2_Union Profiles and Ranking: In-depth Situation Analysis of SPIRiT, p. 68

² Biannual Review Reflection and Learning Workshop Report June 2025, p. 2

³ Annex-3_Literature Review: In-depth Situation Analysis of SPIRiT, p. 1

- *Active Participation (Lundy's Model):* This approach aligns with the Lundy's Model of Child Participation. By creating a specific *space* for married girls and giving them a *voice* through traditional play and MHPSS circles, the SPIRiT project ensures that even the most marginalized are not just beneficiaries but active participants in their own resilience and social reintegration.

2. The journey of inclusion: key learning insights

2.1 Barriers and enablers to participate

The Reality of Domestic Confinement: Before joining TG4P, most of the early married girls across all three regions (Satkhira, Kurigram, and Dhaka) felt trapped in their homes and cut off from the world. This isolation happened suddenly after marriage and affected every part of their lives. The transition into marriage for young girls in these regions often results in a sudden and profound loss of autonomy. Evidence across the project sites illustrates a state of domestic confinement that affects every facet of their lives-

- In Satkhira Sadar, married girls are often prohibited from speaking with neighbors or even crossing the physical boundaries of their homes.
- In Debhata (Satkhira), this isolation extends to nearby relatives, with social contact strictly monitored or forbidden.
- In Dalodolia (Kurigram), girls are often strictly confined to the household and are barred from meeting any outsiders.

Participants described their lives as *ghorbondi* (confined to the house), characterized by an endless cycle of cooking, cleaning, childcare, and serving in-laws. One 19-year-old participant from Debhata shared that her life was "*the same routine again the next day*" with "*always a kind of pressure and loneliness*" (Female Participant, 19, Debhata, Satkhira). Girls like her had no opportunity to go anywhere or do anything separately for themselves. This endless cycle of household work created not just physical tiredness but deep emotional pain from being alone all day.

Loss of identity and education: Girls from Kurigram described their early married life similarly to those in Satkhira, but they offered additional insights into the emotional toll of their transition. Beyond the loss of autonomy, they suffered from the experience of leaving their own families and adjusting to strange, new environments among people they did not know. One girl reflected, "*It was very painful to leave my parents*" (Female Participant, 20, Ranigonj, Kurigram). Another explained, "*The first few months after marriage were incredibly difficult. I was in a new house with strangers, constantly worrying about how I would survive*" (Female Participant, 19, Mogholbasa, Kurigram). These girls found themselves not only confined to their homes but also stripped of their education and social connections. In Satkhira, one girl shared how she had to abandon school and other childhood activities at age 16 when she married. She recalled, "*The games I used to play in childhood, chatting with friends, going to school all of that stopped after marriage*" (Female Participant, 17, Satkhira Sadar, Satkhira). The rigidity of these new household rules was further evidenced by the respondent's account of her mother-in-law's intervention. When the girl attempted to continue her education, she was told firmly that leaving the house for such purposes was no longer permitted. This restriction was framed not as a suggestion, but as an absolute mandate- it was stated by her mother-in-law that she could not leave the household to go and study in that manner. For

these girls, these restrictions represent a non-negotiable reality where their previous identities as students and friends are replaced entirely by domestic obligations.

Navigating family gatekeepers: Girls could not decide for themselves whether to join the TG4P sessions. Instead, their mothers-in-law, fathers-in-law and husbands were the ultimate decision-makers. However, the concerns of these guardians varied by region. In Satkhira, fathers-in-law were often the most controlling figures. One girl explained, *"The main barrier was my father-in-law. He always wanted me to stay inside the house and not go anywhere outside. For many days, I would not even step down from the veranda"* (Female Participant, 22, Satkhira Sadar, Satkhira). It was frequently questioned by fathers-in-law whether there was any actual necessity for the girls to go outside at all, with blunt rejections often being centered on that sentiment.

In contrast, in Kurigram, mothers-in-law wielded more influence and their concerns were different. They worried primarily about honor, veiling (purdah) and ensuring the girls remained focused on household duties. In Satkhira, fathers-in-law imposed strict purdah restrictions, confining daughters-in-law indoors and viewing any outing as a stain on the family's honor. These attitudes only began to shift through the Facilitators' persistent home visits, where they explained the benefits of girls-only safe spaces. It was not just the content of the sessions that built buy-in; it was the Facilitators' roles as trusted locals, combined with the in-laws witnessing the girls' joy firsthand. Along with the Facilitators, the mothers-in-law and spouses also played a vital role in convincing the fathers-in-law to reconsider their strict stance.

A key turning point was the emergence of shared household responsibilities, as mothers-in-law began to take over chores or childcare. A participant from Satkhira noted, *"My mother-in-law takes care of my child, so I can join"* (Female Participant, 19, Kaligonj, Satkhira). In other cases, the spouse or mother-in-law completed the daily chores while the participant attended the sessions. A spouse from Satkhira confirmed this shift: *"My mother completes the household work while my wife goes to sessions and sometimes, I also do the work"* (Spouse, 32, Kaligonj, Satkhira). This redistribution of labor was often a collaborative effort. One husband from Dhaka explained how his wife managed her schedule to participate: *"She finishes the afternoon cooking early, completing it by lunchtime so she can go to the evening sessions. As a result, there's no difficulty, the work still gets done properly."* He also acknowledged his own contribution, adding, *"For my part, I have helped too, like bringing the clothes in from the roof in the afternoon so she doesn't have to worry about these things"* (Spouse, Dhaka). Mothers-in-law also played a vital role beyond just chores as one described her involvement: *"I help my daughter-in-law with the cooking, and I also used to keep my granddaughter at home. I would take her along to the game. My daughter-in-law would play, and I would sit nearby, chewing betel nuts and looking after my granddaughter"* (Mother-in-law, Bauniabadh, Dhaka).

Regional support dynamics: The urban setting of Dhaka presented a mixed picture. While some families resisted, others were prepared to support the girls' participation more readily. Some families had mothers-in-law who were supportive from the outset. One girl shared, *"My mother-in-law was always supportive. She even takes care of my child and encourages me to go and join the session"* (Female Participant, 24, Dhaka). Across all three regions, household decision-makers shared common anxieties regarding the

completion of chores and the maintenance of the veil. However, the most effective strategy for overcoming this reluctance was the community Facilitator's repeated, personal home visits. In these interactions, a trusted local person took the time to explain that TG4P sessions were safe, strict for girls and beneficial for their wellbeing.

In Kurigram, staff and participants described how *"the Facilitator visited all of our homes personally"* (Female Participant, 25, Hatiya, Kurigram), which led to a much smoother process: *"We didn't face many hurdles"* (Project Staff, 33, Kurigram). These visits were not just invitations; they were essential for defining the safe space and explaining that the sessions were culturally familiar, girls-only environments. In one instance, a mother-in-law went to the field herself to observe a session, showing how direct observation transformed doubt into trust.

In Satkhira, home visits were reinforced by the girls' own narratives. When they returned from their first session, they would describe the familiar nature of the games: *"They blindfolded us and we played blind man's buff, the game we used to play in our childhood"* (Female Participant, 21, Debhata, Satkhira). This motivated in-laws to realize, *"This is women's play, childhood games; this is not anything outside"* (Female Participant, 18, Budhata, Satkhira). Guardian meetings further deepened this trust, as girls reported that *"the Community Facilitator explained that only girls would be there, no outsiders would come in, and that good things would be taught through games"* (Female Participant, 20, Shayamnagar, Satkhira). Once the guardians saw with their own eyes that the environment was safe and private, they created fewer obstacles.

Across Satkhira, Kurigram and Dhaka, a consistent pattern emerged- community resistance was not insurmountable but required a deliberate and localized strategy to overcome. The transition from restriction to permission was driven by several key factors:

- The Community Facilitators were successful largely because they were local and known faces within the neighborhood. This existing familiarity reduced the stranger's fear often felt by conservative households.
- Trust was further solidified through repeated home visits specifically aimed at convincing parents and guardians first. By prioritizing the concerns of the gatekeepers, the facilitators created a foundation for safety.
- By clearly communicating the safety of the girls-only space, involving respected local leaders and allowing families to witness the positive experiences firsthand, the initial skepticism began to fade.

Families moved from questioning the necessity of the program—with one mother-in-law in Doldolia, Kurigram, initially asking, *"You will not go, what is the need?"*—to eventually permitting and, in some instances, actively facilitating the girls' participation.

2.2 Restoring childhood: joy, relief and behavioral shifts

Reclaiming the right to play: Participation in TG4P activities has shown a significant positive impact on the psychosocial well-being and behavioral development of the girls. This shift is not limited to the TG4P participants alone; it has also brought about many positive changes in the attitudes and behaviors of male

participants in football for protection (F4P) sessions. The impact extends beyond emotional well-being, clearly reflected in the girls' self-expression, self-confidence, communication skills and their increasing participation in family decision-making.

In all regions, girls have almost uniformly emerged from long-standing isolation, stress and oppressive environments to experience joy, relief and mental peace within a safe space. Forgetting the burdens of daily household chores, they are enjoying the simple joys of childhood while simultaneously learning essential life skills. Participants from Satkhira, Kurigram and Dhaka shared a common sentiment: *"At home, it's just work and more work... coming here feels like I've returned to my childhood (Shoishob). I don't stay dejected like I used to"* (Female Participant, 21, Assasuni, Satkhira). Regarding this, husbands and mothers-in-law have noted that the daughters-in-law of the house are now much more cheerful than before. Echoing this, F4P male participants reported that the girls in their area are not only changing themselves but also raising awareness among everyone around them, resulting in a significant reduction in domestic discord.

Post-TG4P, the confinement of endless chores from dawn evolved into shared duties. As daughters-in-law applied emotional regulation skills learned from games like *Trust Walk*, it prompted husbands and mothers-in-law to assist. This was exemplified by one mother-in-law noting, *"Now she adores the child; we live in peace"* (Mother-in-law, 42, Ranigonj, Kurigram). Another husband observed the newfound confidence in his wife, sharing, *"Now she shares her opinions on family matters, and we discuss things together before making decisions"* (Spouse, Bauniabadh, Dhaka). Facilitators modeled equity through Marble Spoon Race activities, a game where participants with extra challenges (hand tied or blindfolded) needed only to reach the finish line, while others ran back and forth. This tangible demonstration of 'fair support' sparked practical conversations at home and over time, repeated sessions normalized negotiation and responsibility-sharing between family members.

Witnessing this development has triggered a fundamental shift in the mindset of the local boys. Previously, the prevailing perception was that girls should be confined to housework, speak in a low voice and expect to live submissively. However, observing the tangible skills and confidence of the participants has successfully challenged those long-held beliefs. As one participant from the F4P boys' group in Kurigram shared, *"When I see a girl from our own society helping to make decisions for her family, I realize that girls also need education so that there can be more improvement in the family."* (Male Participant, 18, Chilmari, Kurigram). Beyond these individual shifts, community leaders from all three districts have reported that the collective outlook of most families in their areas has undergone a positive transformation, making a clear departure from traditional expectations.

Application of life skills at home: Facilitators feel most accomplished when participants apply the skills they have learned in their real lives. In all three districts, it was observed that participants are now using the skills learned in the sessions for family relationships, emotional regulation, maintaining a positive attitude, mental well-being and conflict resolution. In Satkhira, one participant suffered severe abuse from her husband and mother-in-law. At one point, unable to bear the torture, she contemplated self-harm. However, after joining TG4P, she regained her self-confidence. Moving away from negative thoughts, she decided to lead her life positively and succeeded. She stated, *"I have to do something good for my children;*

I have to make my husband and mother-in-law understand" (Female Participant, 22, Shyamnagar, Satkhira). After her sessions, she would share the skills she learned with her mother-in-law and gradually, a positive change emerged in both her husband and mother-in-law.

Participants learned problem-solving through the *Snake & Ladder* game and transmitted these skills to their children by teaching simple emotional check-ins during play, saying, *"I share games with my child like the sessions taught"* (Female Participant, 23, Debhata, Satkhira). The process unfolded through the daily modeling of these skills in the home, with the shift triggered when the grandmother (mother-in-law) observed calmer home dynamics and began joining informally, promoting intergenerational knowledge flow.

Facilitators in Kurigram reported that previously, there was chaos and constant quarreling over small matters in most families. But after the daughters-in-law participated in the sessions, they learned to regulate their emotions. Not only have the daughters-in-law learned emotional regulation, but their entire families have also benefited, resulting in a more harmonious living environment. One mother-in-law shared, *"Previously, my daughter-in-law wouldn't listen to me; she would argue back and beat the small child, but now she adores the child, and we live together in peace"* (Mother-in-law, 45, Chilmari, Kurigram). This pattern is identical in Dhaka and Satkhira. A husband from Bauniabadh reflected on his relationship: *"We have benefited somewhat. For example, after working all day, she used to have no one to talk to. When I returned from work, there would be all kinds of complaints and attempts to quarrel. Now, I see that by talking about the games and activities, her mind finds joy"* (Spouse, Bauniabadh, Dhaka). Even within a patriarchal social structure, girls are now getting the opportunity to express their opinions in the family and family members are increasingly giving importance to those opinions.

2.3 Creating a big family: bridging social gaps and stigma

Bridging the gap between peers: Building a bridge between early married girls (EMGs) and unmarried girls was a challenging task. In various areas of Kurigram and Satkhira, it was observed that an invisible wall existed between these two groups at the start. Unmarried girls could not consider married girls as their equals; instead, a kind of social inertia or 'stigma' persisted. One unmarried F4P participant stated, *"Why should we play with married girls? They are women"* (19, Dhaka). This statement clearly shows that in our society, married girls are categorized as 'women' or 'adults' at a very young age, which isolates them from their peers. However, the Facilitators addressed this stigma with intentional icebreaking techniques such as the name game, Kanamachi game, Pillow passing game that created shared laughter and emotional openness. As sessions progressed, the invisible wall between married and unmarried girls gradually dissolved. As one participant added *"But as we played together, that wall broke down"* (Female Participant, Football for Protection, 18, Bauniabadh, Dhaka).

Satkhira provides an excellent example of this change, where a sister spoke about the closing of the distance in her relationship with her own elder sister. After marriage, she did not mingle with her sister as before, but by participating in TG4P, she has rebuilt that relationship. These sessions have created such deep dependency among the participants that they now help each other with childcare in addition to discussing family or personal matters. As one participant from Kurigram said, *"Everyone accepted each*

other very easily and we have now become like one big family" (Female Participant, 24, Ranigonj, Kurigram). Initial stigma was bridged by Facilitators' icebreakers (Pillow Passing) and mutual childcare, evolving into a 'big family' that reduced isolation. This feeling of becoming a big family proves that they no longer avoid each other but have started sharing unspoken thoughts or secret stories.

Changing community perspectives: Another major success was changing the perspectives of the 'gatekeepers' or religious and local leaders. In areas like Kurigram and Satkhira, it was once thought that the job of daughters-in-law was only to stay inside the house. When community leaders saw the girls participating in various social activities, their long-standing misconceptions began to break. Initially, many said that this was spoiling the village environment, but after discussions with the Facilitators and local leaders, they realized that nothing bad was occurring. Now, husbands bring their wives to the sessions on bicycles, and mothers-in-law stand by and watch the games with pride.

In Dhaka, the dynamic was slightly different; the in-laws were often supportive from the beginning. One mother-in-law from Bauniabadh recalled, *"I used to see other girls going and it looked good. They would come here and say they played sports, did this and that, played ball, or played traditional games. Hearing that made me happy."* For her, the main issue was not within the family but the surrounding community. *"They said, Why are you letting your daughter-in-law play? She will become even more restless (disobedient)"*, she explained. Despite this external pressure, the visibility of the program proved transformative. As a participant from Dhaka noted, *"My mother-in-law comes to watch the sessions and after going home we talk about these, which has improved our relationship"* (Female Participant, 25, Dhaka). This visibility proves that if the daughters-in-law of the house are not kept confined to the inner quarters and are given the opportunity to come out, it can change gender norms or traditional social rules.

Finally, the wave of this change has also touched the hearts of the F4P male participants of Satkhira and Kurigram. They now realize that everyone has a responsibility to respect girls and create a safe environment free from eve-teasing or any type of harassment. The girls of Kurigram no longer consider themselves as people who only manage the household. They state, *"Before, it felt like our only work was to manage the household; now it feels like the 15 of us (a group of girls) can also do something for the village"* (Female Participant, 22, Hatiya, Kurigram). This self-confidence and the shift in the male perspective are key achievements. Taking training in cleaning drains or disaster management, they have now taken an oath to stand together against any problem in the village.

2.4 The architects of change: the strategic role of community facilitators

Strategic trust building: The role of the Community Facilitators in implementing TG4P sessions is immense. In a patriarchal society, bringing marginalized groups out of their homes and convincing their families would not have been possible solely through the initiative of the sessions. To implement this learning-through-play process, community acceptance was needed, which the Community Facilitators achieved through their skills. In all three regions, the Community Facilitators repeatedly conducted home visits to include early married girls and established a relationship of trust with their families. A Community Facilitator from Satkhira stated, *"I went to their houses repeatedly, spoke over the phone regularly, and also met them in person"* (Community Facilitator, 29, Satkhira Sadar, Satkhira). Similarly, while working to include the girls in Kurigram, the Community Facilitators mentioned that husbands or senior family

members occasionally resisted the girls' attendance. In those cases, the Community Facilitators spent more time talking to those family members to help them understand. A Community Facilitator from Dhaka added, *"Some in-laws were worried the 'housewife' shouldn't go to the field. We invited them to watch and after seeing what we actually do at the session, they didn't create problems anymore"* (Community Facilitator, 28, Dhaka). Another Community Facilitator noted, *"I adjusted the timings and clearly explained the rules and supervision of the sessions to reassure them (mother in-law and husband)"* (Community Facilitator, 32, Mogholbasa, Kurigram).



A religious leader from Chilmari shared, *"Initially, I couldn't accept from my heart that these girls would go to the field to play sports. According to Islam, it is believed that girls should not play sports after the age of 12. But gradually, when I saw the improvement in those girls and that their play area was safe, I didn't say anything more"* (Religious Leader, 43, Chilmari, Kurigram). This shift occurred as Community Facilitators persisted with three home visits, demonstrating girls-only *Haribhanga* games that aligned with Islamic values of community bonds.

Regarding the resistance from fathers-in-law, it was frequently questioned whether there was any actual necessity for the girls to go outside, with blunt rejections often centered on that sentiment. However, not just session content alone but the Community Facilitators' roles as trusted locals, plus the leaders witnessing stress-relief firsthand, turned opposition into silent support.

Creative solutions for attendance: Community Facilitators also demonstrated strategic intelligence to ensure regular participation. In some cases, the participants could not attend as family members (mostly

mothers-in-law) were preventing them. When regular communication didn't work, the Community Facilitators provided a strategic solution. One Community Facilitator shared, *"I told them to give the snacks provided in the sessions to their mother-in-law"* (Community Facilitator, 34, Mogholbasa, Kurigram). Consequently, from then on, the participants attended regularly without any issues.

Making the sessions enjoyable was also key. All Community Facilitators skillfully simplified the rules of the games so everyone could understand them easily-

- Facilitators used a layered communication approach. They would first share the messages and guidelines for a specific drill with the participant who demonstrated the quickest understanding. That participant would then help disseminate the rules to their peers, ensuring the language remains accessible and relatable.
- Community Facilitators provided specific individual accommodation to ensure no one felt overwhelmed. One participant shared, *"Due to fear and hesitation, I didn't want to play at all at first; then the Community Facilitator showed me the rules of the game several times"* (Female Participant, 21, Ranigonj, Kurigram).
- Occasionally, the Community Facilitators noticed that participants were absent. In such cases, the Community Facilitators contacted the absent participants to learn the reason for their absence and separately explained the missing topics. At times, participants themselves contacted the Community Facilitators to learn about the missed sessions. A participant from Kurigram said, *"I missed a session due to illness but later learned about that session in detail from my Community Facilitator"* (Female Participant, 20, Doldolia, Kurigram).

2.5 Environmental reality: economic hardship as constant pressure

The climate and economic catalyst: While the previous sections focused on gender norms and family decision-making, the deeper reality in all three regions is climate vulnerability and economic hardship. These factors both caused early marriage in the first place and created barriers to continuing TG4P participation for the married girls.

Economic shock directly contributed to early marriage. In Satkhira, one girl's story showed how the economic crisis led to this: *"When my father lost one eye in an accident, it became almost impossible to continue the education of my brother and mine, so the family decided to marry me off"* (Female Participant, 19, Assasuni, Satkhira). Kurigram's flood-prone setting and economic vulnerability aren't just the cause of early marriage; they are ongoing pressure that disrupts participation. Economic pressure continued even after the girl joined TG4P. In that area, almost everyone is involved with fish farms and fish-cutting work. Earning money quickly draws girls in. On top of that comes TikTok and mobile addiction; a Community Facilitator informed that *"Almost 95% of the women spend day and night on TikTok."* Altogether, marriage and a 'life of their own choice' become more attractive than studying and joining group sessions.

In Dhaka, while climate shocks are less visible, Community Facilitators noted: *"The main reason for most of the married participants dropping out was that they had little children. When their children were sick, they could not leave them behind to come to the sessions"* (Community Facilitator, 30, Dhaka). The staff explained that while they didn't see many girls 'dropping out' permanently, these childcare emergencies

and household duties (like cooking or helping with home-based shops) were the primary causes of absence. To solve this, the project eventually implemented 'child corners' at the venues and adjusted session timings to accommodate the girls' domestic schedules.

Livelihood pressures on participation: Across all regions, economic hardship and livelihood pressures actively disrupt girls' participation. Facilitators reported dropouts due to family migration for work, the urgent need to contribute to household income, and family emergencies. Urban economies, factory work, and daily wages create attendance barriers similar to the agricultural pressures in rural areas.

3. Reflection: Successes and Systemic Hurdles

3.1 What helped the process: tg4p intervention learnings and bright spots

The core learning from the project is that TG4P shifts attitudes through a clear, systematic process- trust-building is established via repeated Facilitator visits, followed by skill demonstrations in sessions which then creates a family-level ripple effect. This is anchored by a strong emphasis on household responsibility sharing, as daughters-in-law learn to negotiate chores using the emotional regulation skills they acquired during the sessions.

- *Community-Based Coaching Model:* Facilitators' repeated home visits were instrumental in building family trust, sparking childhood joy through cultural games held in girls-only courtyard spaces which successfully circumvented *parda* barriers. The SPIRiT project's decision to hire and train 50 local community Facilitators in child protection, psychosocial wellbeing and inclusive facilitation rendered the program cost-effective, culturally suitable and highly trustworthy. Post-assessment data indicates that 45% of youth participants felt significantly encouraged by their Facilitators. This model possesses the potential to scale nationally via Upazila Sports Committees and local NGO volunteer programs.
- *Gender-Responsive Facility and Safe Spaces:* Practical skills, such as *trust walks* for better resolving and managing family disputes, were demonstrated in safe and secured courtyard sessions and led to normalized shared duties at home. Working in tandem with School Management Committees, SPIRiT upgraded school playgrounds for community use by adding changing rooms, gender-neutral restrooms and dedicated seating. These efforts boosted safe access to sports from 16% to 81% during the first phase. Strong community ownership ensured that local leaders and instructors were able to sustain this access even during project slowdowns.
- *How the shift was triggered:* Families observed the positive transformation as cheerful EMGs returned home with new skills. Peer stories spread throughout the community and the process of repeated sessions relying on observation and practice drove lasting attitude change far more effectively than the public football which often failed the *parda* test due to the level of public being sceptical on open fields.
- *Youth-Led Initiatives (YLI) as Change Agents:* The ENGAGE toolkit empowers youth to proactively tackle health and protection issues, including early marriage, substance abuse and the need for better sports infrastructure. These efforts successfully built confidence, responsibility and

leadership. Communities increasingly began to view youth as capable partners and in several instances, these initiatives persisted independently even after project support concluded.

3.2 Systemic challenges: poverty, norms, and service gaps

Despite these successes, systemic hurdles continue to impact the sustainability and reach of the intervention:

- *Gendered Resistance to Play and Public Presence:* Even though the project was open to all, deep-seated gender stereotypes often presented obstacles. Regressive comments, such as "*girls should stay home and learn housework,*" were common. Families often perceive sports as a distraction from a married girl's domestic duties or a risk to her honor. In one youth group in Chilmari, the number of participants decreased from 22 to just a few following their marriage. SPiRiT countered this by emphasizing that TG4P is a tool for psychosocial resilience, not just recreation and by moving sessions to culturally accepted spaces.
- *Economic Vulnerability vs. Session Attendance:* For EMGs, free time is a luxury. Unlike their unmarried peers (H4P participants), their attendance in TG4P is often viewed by in-laws as lost time for household labor or income-generating activities (like sewing or poultry rearing). The lack of integrated livelihood support remains a gap; without demonstrating that participation in TG4P can coexist with or support their economic survival, the most financially desperate families continue to restrict the girls' attendance.
- *Gaps in Specialized Protection and MHPSS Referrals:* While Community Facilitators use traditional games to identify signs of trauma or anxiety among EMGs, the referral pathway for severe protection issues (such as domestic violence or reproductive health crises) remains limited. Because professional mental health providers are scarce in Kurigram and Satkhira, girls who disclose deep trauma during TG4P circles often have to rely on informal support groups, which may lack the expertise required for complex protection cases.
- *Sustainability of Safe Spaces for EMGs:* The success of TG4P for married girls relies heavily on the dedicated Community Facilitators who act as trusted intermediaries with the in-laws. However, the institutional anchoring of these safe spaces is fragile. Without formal integration into local government sports committees or community health structures, there is a risk that these specialized, culturally safe environments for EMGs will disappear once external facilitator support ends, leaving these girls once again in domestic isolation.

3.3 Implications for practice: strategic workstreams for spirit

To address these challenges, the following strategic workstreams are recommended:

3.3.1 Data-driven design and assessment

- *Updating Assessment Tools for Regional Hazards:* Based on feedback from both facilitators and participants, the selection tool (Vulnerability Assessment Tool) must be updated to capture unique regional hazards. This includes ecological grief and anxiety over cyclones in Satkhira; displacement trauma and loss of identity in Kurigram; and heat stress irritability or flooding PTSD in Dhaka.

Integrating these specific indicators will allow the TG4P intervention to better support the unique psychosocial needs of early married girls facing the climate crisis.

- *Integrating Psychological Climate Metrics into TG4P:* The project should integrate specific psychological metrics such as displacement-linked trauma, climate-induced family stress and post-disaster anxiety directly into the TG4P monitoring framework. This is not a separate study but a necessary tool for facilitators to tailor game-based MHPSS sessions to the unique emotional burdens of EMGs and to identify when specialized protection referrals are required.

3.3.2 Enhancing program quality and capacity

- *Strengthening MHPSS Capacity for Facilitators:* Many participants experience mental distress that may be difficult for non-specialist Facilitators to identify. Facilitators should receive formal training in MHPSS to recognize early signs of distress and provide basic psychosocial support during sessions.
- *Deepening Training Impact and Resources:* Current activity monitoring is limited and participants often struggle to document their learning. Providing sufficient notebooks and pens, extending session durations and implementing rigorous monitoring will ensure that key lessons are effectively recorded.
- *Establishing Formal Referral Pathways:* While Facilitators provide foundational support, they lack formal professional links for medical or psychological care. Establishing partnerships with Upazila Health Complexes and mental health professionals is essential for ensuring professional support.

3.3.3 Strengthening social inclusion and resilience

- *Implementing Child Corners and Nutrition Support:* To prevent dropout, 'Child Corners' equipped with toys, age-appropriate sports equipment and separate snacks can be arranged. This allows mothers to participate fully without the distraction or nutritional stress caused by childcare responsibilities.
- *Linking Sports Activities to Livelihood Skills:* Participants often face economic pressures that necessitate withdrawal from the program. Linking sports club activities with income-generating skills training or micro-enterprise opportunities will help support long-term self-reliance.
- *Sustaining Morale through Large-Scale Events:* Regular sessions alone may not be sufficient to maintain long-term engagement. Organizing large-scale tournaments or community sports events will keep participants motivated and active.

3.3.4 Ensuring sustainability and climate adaptation

- *Ensuring Sustainability through Local Co-ownership:* To prevent activities from fading when formal project support ends, Union Parishads and local leadership should be included as co-owners in all decision-making, ensuring these activities are integrated into annual planning and budgets.
- *Anchoring Activities in Government Infrastructure:* Sustainability is threatened when activities remain isolated from state systems. TG4P activities should be integrated
- with government sports infrastructure through the Upazila Sports Committees, strengthening institutional links with the Upazila administration.

- *Forming Multi-Stakeholder Advisory Committees:* Social acceptance requires diverse community perspectives. Advisory committees comprising chairmen, members, imams and teachers should be formed in each union to regularly monitor progress and increase social acceptance.
- *Adapting Schedules to Seasonal Disruptions:* Field activities are frequently disrupted during the monsoon. Activities should be scheduled to start before the rainy season, with flexible design allowing for temporary suspension and immediate resumption as soon as fields become usable.
- *Building Volunteer Teams and Mentorship:* Ongoing community ownership requires local, hands-on leadership. Forming local volunteer teams, supported by master Facilitator mentorship, will ensure that the project remains a community-led endeavor.



Annex 1: Detailed TG4P game descriptions and facilitation mechanics

The mechanics of play: The core goal of Traditional Games for Protection (TG4P) is to improve mental and physical well-being through play. These games are used in a structured way to support Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) and child protection. The activities include familiar local games such as *Kanamachi* (Blind Man's Bluff), *Gollachut*, Marble-Spoon Race, *Haribhanga* and *Bou-chi*. These games have been adapted to directly contribute to the protection of girls. The program is designed based on 6 life skills and 5 core pillars: safety, relationships, identity, rights and hope.

1. Rebuilding trust: the trust walk

How it is played: Participants pair up; one person is blindfolded while the partner guides them using only their voice through an obstacle course (made of paper cups acting as 'landmines'). The blindfolded person must cross without stepping on any obstacles and then they switch roles.

Psychosocial objective: To build *Safety, Security, and Stability* (Pillar 1) by creating trust in a safe environment. It helps improve physical balance and awareness while teaching participants to rely on their friends and peer networks (Relationships & Connections, Pillar 2).

Protection outcome: It helps young married girls (EMGs) overcome the loneliness they feel after marriage by teaching them to trust others outside their home. Facilitators in Satkhira and Kurigram reported the exact same thing: *"Earlier, the girls were afraid to even speak in front of their mothers-in-law; now they go home and share what they learned"* (Facilitator, 31, Satkhira Sadar, Satkhira). This exercise makes it normal to ask for help, which is a vital skill when facing domestic pressure or difficult situations.

2. Navigating barriers: the marble spoon race for equity

How it is played: Each participant holds a spoon in their mouth with a marble balance on it and runs to a finish line. To show the need for equity (fair support), some participants have extra challenges: three runs with their hands tied behind their backs and three run blindfolded. Those with these extra challenges only need to reach the finish line to complete the task while others must run to the line and back.

Psychosocial objective: This game teaches the difference between equality (treating everyone the same) and equity (giving different support based on a person's specific needs). It builds awareness about justice and strengthens peer support (Pillar 2: Relationships and Pillar 4: Justice & Rights). Participants learn that when they support each other's unique needs, the whole group becomes stronger.

Protection outcome: The game highlights that married girls (EMGs) face different barriers than unmarried girls, such as household chores, childcare, or family restrictions. Young married girls from Satkhira, Kurigram and Dhaka shared, *"Our mothers-in-law used to help us with morning household chores so that we could regularly participate in the sessions"* (Female Participant, 20, Shyamnagar, Satkhira).

By using the principle of equity, Facilitators provide flexible help like home visits to talk to family members or changing session times. As one Facilitator shared, *"At first there was hesitation, but later parents started calling me and asking me to take their daughters to the session"* (Facilitator, 34, Debhata, Satkhira).

3. Communicating through crisis: Haribhanga

How it is played: Participants are divided into two teams and stand in two lines. Each team has a leader. Except for the leader, all other participants are blindfolded. The two leaders stay at the back of their lines and everyone stands in a row like a train, placing their hands on the shoulders of the person in front. Without speaking, the leader at the back gives signals only by touching the shoulder of the person in front to show which direction to go. This signal is passed from one person to another until they move toward the mud pot (the target).

Psychosocial objective: It strengthens Pillar 1 (Safety & Stability) and Pillar 2 (Relationships & Connections). It teaches how to trust someone else in difficult situations and develops communication skills using gestures or touch.

Protection outcome: Many problems occur due to climate change (floods, droughts, natural disasters). During these times, most families break down mentally. This game teaches how to rely on neighbors or other family members. At the same time, it becomes a way to find solutions by understanding others' messages and using them positively in future planning. In other words, a path to problem-solving is found through communication. A young married girl from Kurigram said, *"My husband became jobless after the flood, but the sister-in-law (Bhabhi) from the house next door always gave me courage and made me understand what to do. Because of that communication, I was saved from danger"* (Female Participant, 19, Mogholbasa, Kurigram).

4. Expressing the Unspoken: Pillow Passing and Emotional Safety

How it is played: 6 cards are placed in a circle where different incomplete sentences are written. (For example: "I feel...", "I believe that...", "I enjoy...", "I hope..."). Participants keep passing a pillow to each other to the beat of the music. When the music stops, the person holding the pillow picks up the card near them and completes the incomplete sentence.

Psychosocial objective: This strengthens Pillar 1 (Safety) and Pillar 3 (Roles & Identity). Here, one can recognize their own emotions and self-awareness increases. This game creates a safe environment for expressing emotions.

Protection outcome: In the pillow passing game, married girls express their feelings that they cannot express at home. A girl from Satkhira said, *"Earlier, I used to feel very bad because my husband was not at home; I used to stay alone. Now, after coming to the sessions, I can talk with many people, I feel a bit lighter, and my mind stays much better"* (Female Participant, 23, Budhata, Satkhira). If one can express their emotions, mental pressure is mostly reduced. A participant from Dhaka shared *"At home, there is no space to cheer the mind. On the field, under the open sky, with friends and chatting-it felt like I escaped from a state of imprisonment (Bondidasha). My mind became refreshed and I felt like I had returned to my childhood"* (Participant, 23, Bauniabadh, Dhaka). Few other participants also echoed the sentiment.

5. Solving real-world problems: Snake and Ladder (Ludu)



How it is played: There is a Ludu dice, and participants change their positions on the board according to the points they roll. Each square on the board has a real-life challenge or problem written on it. All participants roll their dice and stand on the corresponding square. They must find a way to solve the problem mentioned there through creative thinking.

Psychosocial objective: This strengthens Pillar 3 (Roles & Identity) and Pillar 5 (Hope). It develops participants' critical thinking, decision-making ability under pressure and the skill to find ways to solve problems.

Protection outcome: This game prepares married girls (EMGs) to handle complex family problems and the shocks of climate change. A teacher from Kurigram shared, *"The participating schoolgirls are now able to solve small problems on their own"* (Teacher,35, Chilmari, Kurigram). Girls have used this skill to convince their families. One girl said, *"When I explained to them that if I go to the sessions, I will learn to take on some responsibilities of the family, they then gave me permission to go"* (Female Participant,22, Mogholbasa, Kurigram). This session moves protection from the individual to the community level. Participants in Beguntila used these skills to organize waste management, clean drains and advocate for the environment, showing their families and neighbors that married girls have valuable roles in society. *"We are working with waste management, cleaning the drains, we all took responsibility together. From*

the session, I learned about climate change, now I am even against cutting trees even if it's my own problem" (Participant, 22, Beguntilla, Dhaka).

6. Claiming leadership: Bowchi and collective accountability

How it is played: There are two teams in this game. Two separate areas (courts) are marked for the two teams. The team that gets the first turn to play must select one person as the 'Bride'. Between the two courts, one court is larger and the 'Bride' must reach that specific court. The place where the 'bride' stays is called the 'bride's house' (*Bow-Ghor*). The team strategizes to rescue the 'Bride' from the '*Bow-Ghor*,' while the defending team tries to catch her to prevent her from being rescued. Every player has a specific role (such as attacker, defender or decoy). Success is ensured only when everyone performs their respective responsibilities correctly.

Psychosocial objective: This strengthens Pillar 3 (Roles & Identity) and Pillar 5 (Hope). It reinforces everyone's role, responsibility, and collective accountability while creating hope through shared success.

Protection outcome: This game is much like social protection, where everyone in society has a specific role in preventing violence or harm. The male participants from 'Football for Protection' (F4P) shared their feelings: *"We must stand by the girls; only then will they find the courage to move forward."* (Male Participant, 20, Shyamnagar, Satkhira) This game teaches married girls (EMGs) that they are not just dependent on others' decisions; they too, can take significant roles. *"When I see a girl from our own society helping to make decisions for her family, then I feel girls also need education so that there can be more improvement in the family."* F4P Male participants (18), Bauniabadh, Dhaka.

Annex 2: Measuring impact methodology

This learning note used two methodological approaches:

1. Desk review of internal and external documents
2. Primary data collection using qualitative methods in Satkhira, Kurigram and Dhaka.

1. Bridging theory and practice: desk review insights

The primary methodology for learning notes involved a comprehensive desk review to synthesize project data and existing research. This process was essential to bridge the gap between the project's theoretical design and its practical impact on the ground.

1.1. Purpose of the desk review synthesis

- ✓ To analyze whether the project's strategic goals, specifically improving inclusion, resilience and psychosocial well-being for early married girls (EMGs) were successfully met through its sports-based interventions.
- ✓ To synthesize how the SPiRiT model stands compared to other regional programs and national research, highlighting its unique strengths and innovations.

- ✓ To identify implementation gaps and lessons learned from phase one, ensuring the next phase is more effective and sustainable.

1.2. Scope of analysis

- ✓ The core project documents including the original proposal, in-depth situation analysis report, the Vulnerability Assessment Tool (VAT), learning workshop reports, implementation assessment reports and end evaluations report have been reviewed and synthesized.
- ✓ The analysis focused on key metrics such as safe sports access, psychosocial well-being (MHPSS), Facilitator capacity and the empowerment of marginalized groups.
- ✓ 10 peer-reviewed studies on child marriage and climate vulnerability in Bangladesh have been integrated to provide a broader context for our results.

While this desk review provided a systematic synthesis of documented progress, it is recognized that paperwork alone cannot fully capture the lived experiences of the participants. To ensure the findings were not just theoretical, the synthesis results were further validated through primary data collection.

2. Hearing the lived experience: primary data collection

Primary data were collected from three field locations- Satkhira, Kurigram and Dhaka through participatory, mixed method approaches using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). A total of 21 FGDs and 28 KIIs were conducted across the three regions.

2.1. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Early married girls: To explore their daily struggles and see how TG4P sessions help them feel more confident and connected to others.

F4P boys: To see if their views on ‘what boys and girls can do’ are changing and how they feel about girls joining in sports.

F4P girls: To understand how they feel about playing alongside married girls and identify any social barriers that make it difficult for them to mix.

Mixed groups: To watch how non-TG4P participant girls and unmarried girls talk about the EMG TG4P participants and the peer relationship among them and to capture the change in the relationship among them.

2.2. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

Spouses: To confirm if they have noticed the girls becoming more confident and active in making household decisions.

Mothers-in-law: To understand why they give permission for the girls to play and how much freedom the girls actually have.

Religious leaders: To learn about local religious views on girls' sports and child marriage, to see where they might support or resist the project.

Community representatives: To hear about general changes in the neighborhood and see if the community is ready to take the lead on these activities.

School teachers: To check if students are showing better confidence, communication and attendance in their classes.

Project staff/facilitators: To learn from their on-the-ground successes and challenges to find the best ways to include everyone.

Local government representatives: To see if the project matches government goals and find out if it can be expanded to other areas.

3. Evidence-based observation: field insights from Dhaka, Satkhira and Kurigram

Along with desk review and primary data collection, the methodology incorporated structured field observations of the TG4P sessions. Observing sessions in Satkhira, Kurigram and Dhaka helped evaluate the safety of the environment, the inclusivity of the play spaces and the non-verbal interactions between Facilitators and participants. This allowed for the capture of nuances such as how Facilitators manage external disturbances or how community members support participants with childcare.

Why is it conducted?

- ✓ Assessing whether spaces are secure, private and resilient to weather.
- ✓ Observing how Facilitators adapt games to teach coping skills and teamwork while managing the practical needs of mothers.
- ✓ Identifying the level of integration between married and unmarried girls to ensure no visible segregation exists within the group.
- ✓ Noting the role of local homeowners and neighbors in protecting the safe space for the girls.

Table 3.1: Sample Distribution of Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews

Method	Participant Category	Satkhira	Dhaka	Kurigram	Total
Focus Group Discussion	Early Married Girls	3	3	3	9
	F4P Boys Group	3	1	1	5
	F4P Girls Group	-	2	1	3
	Mixed Group	1	-	-	1
	Facilitator	1	1	1	3
	Total	8	7	6	21
Key Informant Interview	Spouse	2	2	2	6
	Mother-in-Law	2	2	2	6
	Religious Leader	1	1	1	3

	Community Representative	1	1	1	3
	School Teacher	2	1	1	4
	Project Staff	1	1	1	3
	Local Govt. Representative	1	1	1	3
	Total	10	9	9	28
Observation	-	1	1	1	3

4. Safety and respect: upholding ethical standards

The study protected all participants, especially vulnerable girls and adolescents, through strict ethical measures. Everyone gave informed consent and could leave anytime. Child safeguarding protocols were followed with trained facilitators and referral services. All information was kept private and anonymous. Meeting times and places were flexible to suit participants' schedules and safety, especially for the early married girls with limited mobility. Facilitators could stop discussions if anyone felt uncomfortable, and psychosocial support information was given to all participants.

5. Seeking the truth: multi-stakeholder cross-verification and triangulation

Claims made by early married girls during FGDs were systematically cross verified with multiple sources. Husbands confirmed or contextualized changes in wives' confidence and communication skills. Mothers-in-law provided observations on behavioral changes and family dynamics. Project staff confirmed participation patterns and skill development. Community representatives and religious leaders offered broader perspectives on community-level changes and acceptance of the interventions.

This multi-stakeholder triangulation strengthened the learning note by providing multiple perspectives on the same phenomena, reducing single-source bias and showing differences in how stakeholders understand or view change.

Annex 3: Case stories on the journey of inclusion

Story one: Jammy's journey to self-confidence and agency, a girl can take her own decision

Jammy Akter, a 23-year-old young woman from Mogalbasa, lives with her husband and parents-in-law. Coming from a family struggling with poverty, her parents believed early marriage would reduce financial pressure and married her off at a very early age of 13. Her life, full of childhood activities and fun, surrounded by friends changed overnight. Household responsibilities were placed entirely on her shoulders, leaving no room for rest or joy. Watching other girls laugh and play while she worked inside the house often made her cry. She kept her pain to herself, unable to share her feelings with anyone. Frequent disagreements with her mother-in-law became part of daily life, and peace in the family felt impossible. Despite being a good student, her dream of completing her studies also faded as her husband didn't allow her to continue her study after Secondary School Certificate (SSC).

Jammy's life began to change when she heard about the Traditional Games for Protection (TG4P) sessions from a friend in her community. Out of curiosity, she asked what was happening there and learned that participants were taught important life skills through sports. When Jammy expressed her interest in joining, she was told to seek permission from her mother-in-law. At first, her request was rejected. *"A woman of the household should stay at home; the family has a reputation,"* her mother-in-law said firmly. Determined, Jammy did not give up. She brought her friend to explain the program, and slowly, her mother-in-law began to understand.

Eventually, Jammy was allowed to attend TG4P sessions on the condition that all household chores were completed beforehand. Over time, her mother-in-law even began visiting the sessions to observe. Gradually, Jammy noticed changes not only within herself but also in her family. The frequent arguments disappeared, her anger reduced, and she no longer felt overwhelmed with sadness. *"Before, I didn't even understand myself,"* she reflected. *"Now I know what is good for me."* Through TG4P, Jammy became more aware of her own health and well-being. She started to understand the importance of using sanitary napkins to better manage menstrual hygiene and began spreading awareness among other women in her community as well.

The shift in Jammy's confidence also changed how her family treated her. Where her opinions were once ignored, her husband and mother-in-law now listen to her and value her thoughts. She shared what she learned every day, which strengthened her bond with her mother-in-law. Mutual respect replaced conflict, and peace returned to the household. *"Now, I don't feel sad anymore,"* Jammy said with relief.

TG4P played a crucial role in helping Jammy grow into a more confident and aware individual. She learned how to communicate effectively, make decisions, think creatively, and prioritize her own well-being. Today, Jammy dreams of passing this knowledge to others so that more girls can benefit as she did. She is determined to speak out against child marriage and ensure that no other girl must endure what she went through. Jammy now stands firm in her belief and wants the world to hear her message: *"We girls can take our own decisions."*

Story two: Arfina's journey toward self-confidence and social engagement

Arfina Begum Reshma, a 21-year-old young woman from Bozra, was married while she was studying in class eight, as her parents thought that the times were unsafe, and that early marriage would protect her. Arfina was very quiet and shy. Though her family didn't restrict her, the social environment affected her confidence, and the early marriage added another layer on top as she felt like a burden to her family. An already quiet and shy girl with almost no friends became lonelier after marriage. Though Arfina found her husband and in-laws to be kind, there were still restrictions. She was not allowed to go outside or mix with community people freely. She remained silent, fearing that speaking up could lead to punishment. She felt restless and lonely despite being surrounded by people.

The Traditional Games for Protection (TG4P) program brought a real change in her life that she never expected. She decided to enroll after hearing about it from the Community Facilitator. While her mother-in-law had no objection, her husband was hesitant at first. With encouragement from her mother-in-law, he later agreed. As the sessions were held at noon, Arfina was able to attend without affecting household responsibilities. She completed all 12 sessions and regularly shared what she could learn with her husband. Her mother-in-law also visited the sessions a few times to observe.

After joining TG4P, Arfina noticed clear changes in herself. Her fear and hesitation gradually reduced. She became more confident in going outside and communicating with others. She learned how to express her opinions and speak up when something felt wrong. Her self-confidence and sense of responsibility increased. Arfina began applying her learning in her family life. She now discusses family matters with her husband and mother-in-law and takes part in decision-making. Alongside household work, she learned tailoring and started earning a small income. She also became aware of her own well-being and began creating awareness among others. *"I used to think negatively about what people would say on the street, but now I have learned to protest. I've learned to take responsibility, and my self-confidence has increased significantly."* Using her knowledge, she helped prevent the early marriage of a neighbor's daughter by explaining the negative effects of child marriage to the family.

Arfina is now determined to stand against child marriage so that no other girl has to face what she did. Her journey shows how life skills and supportive family engagement through TG4P can help young women build confidence, exercise agency, and contribute positively to their families and communities. Her mother-in-law shared, *"My daughter-in-law works much better than before. Her anger has reduced, and she now discusses everything with me. She is conscious about her health and wants to raise awareness in society. I personally watched the TG4P sessions two to three times, and they teach many good things."*

Story three: Economic and social empowerment through tg4p: story of Sharmin Akter

Mst. Sharmin Akter, a 21-year-old woman from Ranigonj, Chilmari, was married at the age of 13 while she was still a student. At the time, she did not understand married life or its responsibilities, but she entered marriage with one strong condition: she wanted to continue her education. Despite financial hardship, she has remained committed to her studies and is still continuing her education today. Sharmin's husband earns a living through multiple activities, including farming, shopkeeping, and driving an auto-rickshaw. Sharmin actively supports these efforts by managing the grocery shop in the afternoons. Over the years, they have built their livelihood together. With savings and a small loan, they started rearing crossbred cows, which produced significant amounts of milk. The income later helped them establish a small shop at home, which has now been running successfully for several years.

Sharmin became a mother at a young age and even sat for examinations while pregnant. Although leaving her child behind was difficult, her mother-in-law and other family members supported her by caring for the child. Her in-laws never restricted her education and treated her with kindness. Her father, however, later regretted arranging her marriage so early, recognizing the challenges she faced.

Before joining the TG4P sessions under the SPiRiT Project, Sharmin's life felt disorganized. While she possessed skills like tailoring, she lacked the direction or confidence to utilize them effectively. *"I did not know what was good or bad for me,"* she recalls. Everything changed when she joined the group. During one session, she was encouraged to speak in front of the group. When she received applause, she realized her own potential. *"That moment changed how I see myself,"* she says.

Through TG4P, Sharmin became more self-aware and confident in decision-making. She learned to plan, manage resources, and think ahead. With conditional financial support of 6,000 BDT from a local NGO, she purchased a goat, which later produced offspring. During a local religious gathering, she set up a tea and sweet-paan stall and earned nearly 20,000 BDT. She repaid the support amount on time, stating, *"I wanted to prove that I can be trusted."*

Sharmin has also become an advocate against child marriage. When her younger sister's marriage was being discussed, she repeatedly spoke with her father and successfully convinced him to delay it. Her sister is now studying in class ten. Sharmin's message to other girls is clear: *"This is your life. Study well, speak up, and stand on your own feet before getting married."*

Story Four: Monjuyara's Journey to Confidence and Self-Reliance

Monjuyara, a young woman from a close-knit family, remembers her childhood as a time of care and love.

In 2017, while still studying in class ten, she was married at the age of 16. The sudden transition into married life left her feeling lost and overwhelmed. She often felt lonely and burdened by household responsibilities, with no friends to share her thoughts or feelings. Her challenges deepened during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, when financial hardship forced her to pause her education. At the same time, her husband fell victim to a broker while attempting to go abroad, causing the family to lose money and creating ongoing conflict in the household. Between 2020 and 2024,



Monjuyara working at her home

Monjuyara faced repeated emotional and financial stress, struggling to find stability in her married life.

Her life began to change when a community facilitator from the SPiRiT project visited her home for a survey and invited her to join their project activities. At her Curiosity, she participated and was immediately drawn to the opportunity. *"I never even imagined that I would again get such a beautiful opportunity to play games like I used to in my childhood,"* she recalled. Through these sessions, she started building confidence and courage. Previously reserved, Monjuyara learned to express herself clearly and communicate with her family and community. *"In the past, I could not even talk properly with my own family members, but now I can speak very well with everyone,"* she said.



Monjuyara is taking care of the birds at her home

The project's focus on creative thinking inspired Monjuyara to start a small poultry farm at home. Initially hesitant, she pushed herself to try, and after selling her first batch of chickens, her confidence grew. She later invested in a hatching machine, which further expanded her income. Today, she reports that her family is doing much better financially and emotionally, and she attributes this progress to SPIRiT: *"All of this has been possible because of the SPIRiT project."* Her in-laws now seek out her views on family matters, often asking her, 'What do you think we should do?' - a sign of the respect and trust she has earned in the household.

They acknowledge her increased capability in managing household responsibilities and contributing to family income. Her husband also notes the change, saying, *"Monjuyara has changed a lot compared to before, and now she can make her own decisions and do many things for the wellbeing of our family."*

Monjuyara now feels secure and respected within her household. Reflecting on her journey, she shares, *"Alhamdulillah. I once had no voice in my home, but now I can actively participate in decisions and contribute to improving our family's income and wellbeing."* Her story is a testament to how targeted support through SPIRiT can empower young women to regain confidence, take initiative, and transform their lives.

Story five: Tamanna Parvin's journey to confidence and empowerment

Tamanna Parvin, a young woman from Debhata, Satkhira, grew up in a conservative Muslim family as the youngest of three children. Known for her lively and restless nature, her world narrowed dramatically

when she was married at 16, right in the middle of her SSC exams. Transitioning to her in-laws' home was challenging. Although her husband and in-laws were supportive, early marriage quickly took a toll. Within 18 months, she had two children, leaving her physically exhausted and often ill.



Tamanna is busy feeding her cattle at her home

Before joining the SPiRiT project, Tamanna's life was confined to her home. She rarely stepped outside and depended entirely on her family for daily needs. *"Aside from my own room, I never even went outside to the courtyard, not even if I needed something. My father-in-law, mother-in-law, and husband brought everything to me,"* she recalled.

Her transformation began when she joined the SPiRiT program. For the first time since marriage, she participated in activities outside her home. *"Going to the sessions broke the shyness I had inside me. Now I can talk to people, and if there is any necessary work outside the house, I go out and handle it myself,"* Tamanna explained. The sessions became a safe space where she built confidence, developed communication skills, and found a social circle. Through the SPiRiT sessions, Tamanna started thinking differently and she started a nutritional garden at home to do something on her own. *"From the TG4P sessions, as a result of creative thinking, I took the initiative to start a nutritional garden at home to meet my family's nutritional needs,"* she said. Today, the garden not only feeds her family but also generates income. She has expanded her work to include vermicompost production and employs four other women from the village, creating both livelihood and community engagement.

Tamanna's growth is recognized and appreciated by her family. Her mother-in-law shared, *"My daughter-in-law used to stay in her room all day and didn't do much housework. Now, she helps me with the chores as much as she can."* Her grandmother-in-law noted that Tamanna has become an active and helpful household member.

Today, Tamanna stands as a symbol of empowerment in her community. She has moved from being a withdrawn teenager to a confident young woman who contributes to her family, manages her business, and engages with local leaders. *"My life wasn't bad before, but these sessions have organized my life and made it more beautiful. I feel much more confident, I receive a lot of importance from everyone at home, and I have been able to achieve a very happy life,"* she shared.

Tamanna's journey demonstrates how targeted support through the SPIRiT project can help young women overcome isolation, build confidence, and actively contribute to their families and communities.



Tamanna is working at her vegetable garden

Story six: Supriya Rani's journey from violence to self-respect

Supriya Rani, the eldest of three sisters from Munshigonj in Shyamnagar, Satkhira, faced trauma early in life. At just 13, a period of family instability led her to a short but difficult separation from her home. Upon her return, Supriya experienced ongoing tension at home. Her father's anger and violence and her mother's struggle to support her deepened her feelings of guilt and isolation.



Supriya binds a crab before taking it to the local market to sell.

In an effort to ease the crisis, Supriya's family accepted a marriage proposal from the boy involved in her earlier incident. Yet, her struggles continued in her in-laws' household. She faced persistent verbal and physical abuse from her father-in-law, mother-in-law, and younger brother-in-law. Her mother-in-law repeatedly insulted her, calling her with derogatory names, while even minor interactions, like speaking on the phone, invited humiliation. The continuous abuse drove Supriya to attempt suicide, leaving her mentally and emotionally exhausted.

Her life began to change when she started participating in the SPiRiT's sports for protection sessions and met a community facilitator, Sonia, whom she affectionately calls "Didi." Sonia became a trusted mentor and friend, providing critical support and guidance. *"If you die, who will take responsibility for your child? If not for yourself, can you not at least think of your little son? If you want, you can definitely do something good, and I am always by your side,"* Sonia told her. These words reignited Supriya's hope and motivated her to rebuild her life.



Supriya is feeding her chickens at her home

Through traditional games for protection sessions, Supriya developed confidence, learned to assert herself, and gained skills to handle conflicts with logic and firmness. She explains, *“I have regained the joy of life that I had before my marriage.”* Today, her in-laws have adjusted their behaviour, physical violence has stopped, and they support her initiatives.

Supriya has also started rearing chickens at home, generating income and contributing to household expenses. This economic independence has strengthened her role in family decision-making and reinforced her self-respect. *“The SPiRiT programme has brought back joy into my life and given me a true best friend,”* she says. Supriya Rani’s journey demonstrates how psychosocial support, safe spaces, and economic opportunities can empower young women to overcome violence and stigma, regain confidence, and actively contribute to their families and communities.

Story seven: Reclaiming her voice: Suborna's journey to confidence

Suborna's childhood was full of peace and joy at her father's home, where she spent her days studying, playing, and enjoying a normal life. While she was in class nine, her father arranged her marriage. Before the wedding, her husband promised that she could continue her education. However, after marriage, he changed his stance, and her in-laws pressured her to stop studying. *"There is a lot of work at home, and my parents are sick, so you have to take care of them; now it will not be possible for you to continue your education,"* her husband said. This conflict became the first source of tension in the household. Over time, the pressure escalated, and the situation led to divorce. Suborna stayed at her father's home for six to seven months before the divorce was finalized. The period following her divorce was extremely difficult. Suborna fell into deep depression, avoided talking to anyone, and lost interest in daily life and her studies. *"At that time, I did not enjoy doing anything, I could not concentrate on my studies, I did not talk to anyone at home, and I would just lie in bed all day,"* she recalls.

Her life began to change when Rubina Apa, a Community Facilitator from the SPiRiT program, introduced her to TG4P sessions. On her first day, Suborna felt the joy of playing after a long time. *"I cannot even explain how good I felt on the first day,"* she shared. Through the TG4P games, Suborna not only regained joy but also developed critical life skills. Playing "Harivanga" taught her to support others, while Ludo helped her learn how to cope with challenges. *"Apa has taught us many things in every session very nicely through games, which will be useful in real life,"* she said. The sessions helped her overcome depression and build self-confidence.

With renewed focus, Suborna resumed her studies with enthusiasm. Once struggling to pass exams, she recently ranked third in her class. She has also gained communication skills and courage, confidently speaking to community leaders, delivering speeches during events, and even winning her school's debate competition. *"My life was going through such a period of depression that I had become completely silent, and now by attending these sessions I have found a new meaning of living,"* she said.

Suborna now dreams of becoming a lawyer. Her mother reflects, *"My daughter has gone through such a difficult time, and the way she has been able to come out of it is truly Alhamdulillah; without these games she might never have returned to a healthy life."* Neighbors also notice the change: *"Suborna has changed a lot compared to before; the girl who once never stepped out of the house now goes to different competitions and brings back prizes."*