



Reaching new heights:

An unprecedented study measuring women's empowerment

A CARE program demonstrates how the empowerment of women and girls directly helps children in the poorest regions of Bangladesh grow taller than ever before.



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Foreword

Women's empowerment has long been known to be a crucial factor in achieving sustainable outcomes for communities living in poverty. For more than 65 years CARE has defended the dignity of the world's poorest people and helped them to pursue their goals and improve their lives.

By placing women's empowerment at the heart of our programming, CARE has witnessed firsthand the tremendous impact women and girls can have on fighting poverty - the SHOUHARDO project in Bangladesh is great evidence of this.

Before this project that mixed women's empowerment with health, education and other interventions, we knew that malnutrition and stunting went hand in hand. Today, we know that women's empowerment and a reduction in stunting do too.

Following six years of rigorous data collection since the project's start in 2004, CARE established a direct link between women's empowerment and rapid reductions in stunting and malnutrition in their children.

The evidence was in thousands of children who grew healthier and taller while their mothers flourished as active and enterprising community members. This was women's empowerment that could be measured with precision, centimetre by centimetre.

These important findings published by the Institute of Development Studies are a testament to the effectiveness of smart foreign aid and underscore why CARE believes greater gender equality is the key to fighting poverty, hunger and injustice in the world.

This report demonstrates the need for more evidence in the growing movement to empower women and girls worldwide and the unprecedented progress made to quantify empowerment.

On International Women's Day 2012, we celebrate this progress and encourage greater global commitment to gender equality to ensure every girl, boy, woman and man can prosper in dignity and security. With an unwavering commitment to women's empowerment, we can overcome extreme poverty around the world. Please join us in this commitment.



Julia Newton-Howes
Chief Executive
CARE Australia



Reaching new heights

The word SHOUHARDO means 'friendship' in Bangla and represents the Strengthening Household Ability to Respond to Development Opportunities program implemented by CARE in partnership with the Government of Bangladesh.

At inception in 2004 SHOUHARDO's promise was twofold: Given the tools, women will elevate their own status in society, and their children, as a consequence, will grow healthier and taller.

The \$126 million program, funded by the US Government, has worked with more than two million of the poorest people from the most disadvantaged areas of Bangladesh: the north and mid Char, the Haor region and the Coastal region.

Focusing on maternal and child health, nutrition, sanitation, homestead food production, income generation, village savings and loans groups, institutional strengthening and climate change adaptation, the program set out to ensure that more than 400,000 of the poorest households in Bangladesh have sufficient and sustained food sources so their children can grow up healthy.

At the project's completion in 2010 significant gains had been made to reduce food insecurity, yet the most powerful and unprecedented impact was found on stunting in children under two years of age.

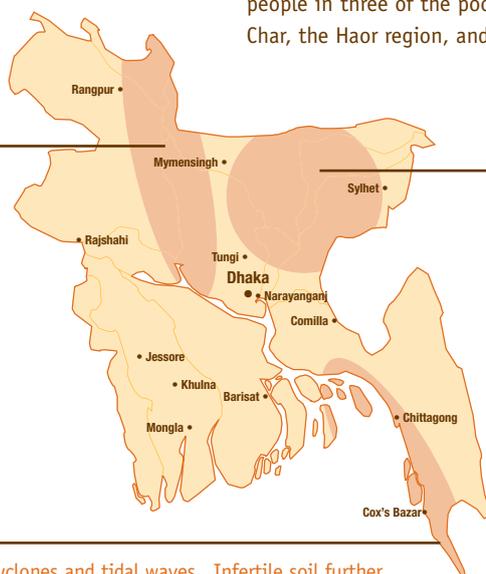
In February 2006, some 56.1 per cent of children were stunted and in four years the stunting rate had fallen by 28 per cent. Upon analysis of the program, no single intervention reduced child stunting more than women's empowerment.

SHOUHARDO SITES

SHOUHARDO (which stands for Strengthening Household Ability to Respond to Development Opportunities) reached more than 2 million people in three of the poorest parts of Bangladesh: the north and mid Char, the Haor region, and the Coastal region.

NORTH AND MID CHAR

Chars are land masses that form along river banks and sandbars from sediment carried in the water. They are inherently unstable and susceptible to erosion because of their very nature, existing in floodplains.



HAOR

This low-lying land includes communities that live on elevated earthen mounds. The areas are submerged in water for half the year, and the extreme climate is a challenge to the women and men who live there. During the dry season residents can farm; however, during monsoon season they retreat to small mounds of land that sit above temporary inland oceans.

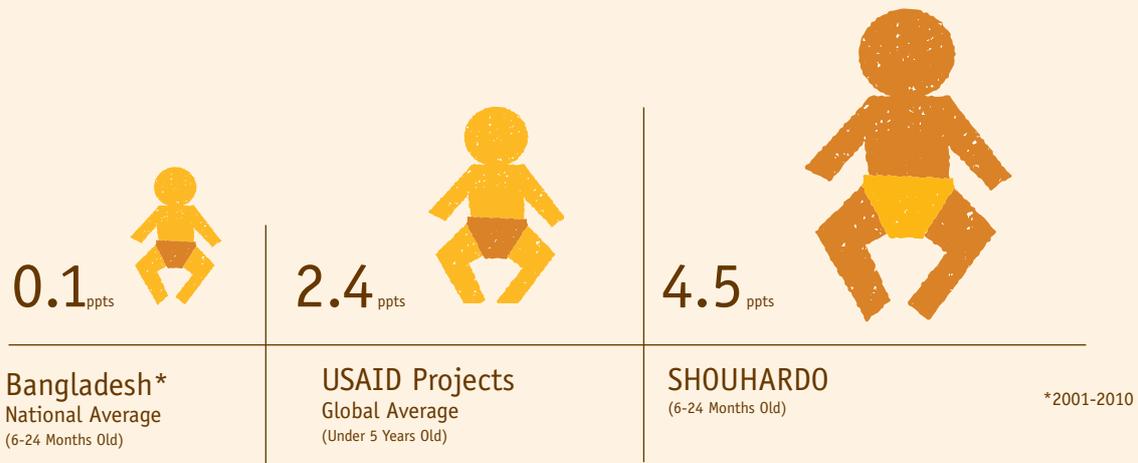
COASTAL

This region experiences regular storms, cyclones and tidal waves. Infertile soil further limits agriculture. Though fertile areas exist, they are owned by wealthy individuals. Productive land is only available to impoverished people through the practice of sharecropping, where farm labor is paid with a share of the crop yield.



ANNUAL DECREASE IN THE PREVALENCE OF STUNTING AMONG CHILDREN

The SHOUHARDO project resulted in unusually large reductions in “stunting,” a measure of malnutrition in children, between February 2006 and November 2009. SHOUHARDO’s annual stunting reduction of 4.5 percentage points dwarfed the national average during that period (0.1 percentage points) and was nearly double the average USAID project of its kind (2.4 percentage points).



WHAT IS STUNTING?

Stunting is a measure of the shortfall in a child’s growth due to malnutrition.

Development experts have found it extremely difficult to reduce child stunting in places mired in severe poverty. In Bangladesh malnutrition is a chronic condition with two or more generations malnourished — in essence families are trapped in a cycle of hunger where malnourished mothers tend to give birth to malnourished children.

Malnutrition during pregnancy and a child’s first two years of life has a lasting impact that hinders children not only physically, but also hampers their future health and development.

Children deprived of good nutrition during their first 1,000 days of life often have stunted growth, poor cognitive development and low immunity to diseases.



Empowerment explained

CARE defines empowerment as the sum total of changes needed for a woman to realise her full human rights: the combined effect of changes in her own aspirations and capabilities, the environment that influences or dictate her choices, and the interactions she engages in each day.

CARE seeks to influence three key dimensions of empowerment:

Individual: The skills, knowledge, confidence and aspirations of women.

Structural: The societal structures where women live, such as laws, culture, traditions, faith and hierarchies based on social class, caste, ethnicity and gender.

Relationships: The relationships in a woman's life, including those with spouses, children, siblings, parents and neighbours, as well as institutions and authorities such as governments and religions.

When women advance in all three realms, lasting change becomes possible.

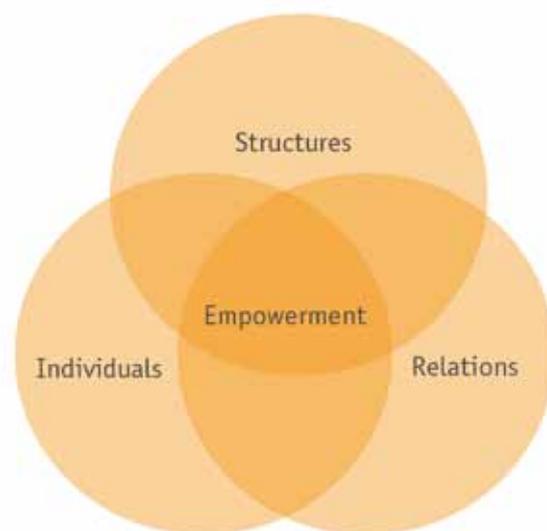
The empowerment strategies through SHOUHARDO ranged from promotion of female entrepreneurship to self-help groups where women and girls could discuss taboo subjects like early marriage, dowry and violence against women.

Researchers found that once reluctant to leave their homes because of harassment in the streets, the women and girls of SHOUHARDO started travelling to markets to buy and sell goods, they began challenging men who harassed women and girls in the streets and they played a larger role in traditional village courts¹, driving decisions like never before.

Inside many of the women, confidence was rising. Their opinions and skills were reshaping their homes, the streets outside and community institutions such as schools and village councils.

'A great indicator of a household's well-being is whether the woman has at least an equal say.'

Faheem Khan, Head of SHOUHARDO.



- Changes here only are easily reversed and/or have unintended consequences
- Changes are stronger but incomplete
- Changes here are most likely to lead to durable empowerment



Women and children stand taller

CARE used a rights-based, livelihoods approach to reducing malnutrition in Bangladesh. That means instead of solely handing out food and livestock or explaining how to better grow vegetables, SHOUHARDO drilled deeper to strike at the roots of poverty in 2,342 villages and urban slums.

SHOUHARDO was about giving poor women and men the tools to sow the seeds of change in their lives. This meant tackling causes such as poor sanitation, recurrent natural disasters and, most notably, deeply entrenched inequalities between women and men.

The key focus of empowerment within SHOUHARDO was the formation of EKATA groups. EKATA stands for Empowerment, Knowledge and Transformative Action and means 'unity' in Bangla. These groups of 20 women and 10 teenage girls met to discuss their own circumstances and generate solutions to the problems they faced such as violence against women, early marriage and the lack of education. Girls learned from the women's life experience and the women committed to protecting the girls from violence and abuse. In some villages, EKATA groups sought legal action when men beat their wives, sending a strong signal in the community that the violence had to stop. They were even able to reduce the number of child brides in their villages.

Of the 2,342 villages and slums in the SHOUHARDO program, 408 had EKATA groups allowing researchers to track how effective they were. They found a direct correlation between participation in an EKATA group and indicators of women's empowerment, including women's decision-making power, freedom of movement, freedom from patriarchal beliefs and women's likelihood of earning cash income.ⁱⁱ

Data collected through surveys conducted at the beginning and toward the end of the project showed impressive results with decision-making power within the household increasing by 23 per cent.

It was the strength of the EKATA groups that led to reaching the overarching project goal; reducing malnutrition.

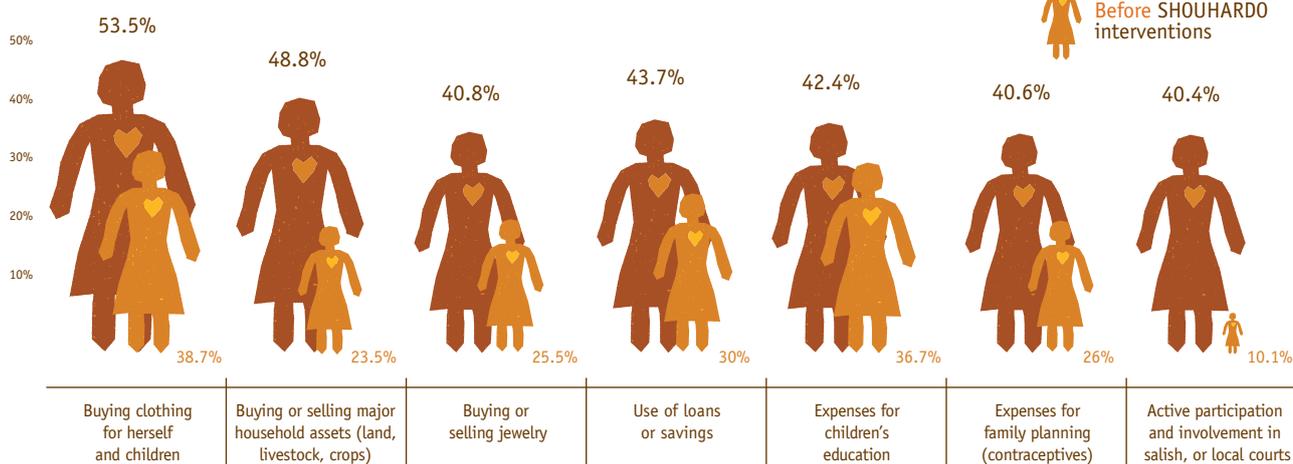
In less than four years, the stunting rate among children aged 6-24 months in the target population had fallen from 56.1 per cent to 40.4 per centⁱⁱⁱ.

These figures reflect an annual stunting reduction of 4.5 percentage points, dwarfing the 0.1 percentage point decline in Bangladesh as a whole and the 2.4 percentage point annual decline seen in the average USAID food security program.^{iv}

These findings show that women's empowerment was the single biggest contributor to reducing child stunting when compared to the project's other interventions, even those that include the direct provision of food to mothers.

BIG GAINS IN WOMEN'S DECISION-MAKING POWER

The percentage of women reporting that they participate in various types of decisions rose sharply in several categories during the course of SHOUHARDO.



Life changing impacts

The data showed that the women’s empowerment interventions led to greater reductions in stunting than other interventions, such as those that improved sanitation and hygiene and those aimed at boosting a family’s agricultural production.^v

Also significant were the synergies between interventions. Women who participated in both the empowerment activities and the direct interventions related to maternal and child nutrition saw a greater reduction in the stunting of their children than those who participated in only one of these.

Many women said that before SHOUHARDO started they had trouble providing their families two or three meals a day. In fact, they often had to watch their children go to bed hungry during times of drought, flooding or other external shocks when their husbands could not earn a living. Today these women report that they can afford fish or meat at least once a month, new clothes and their children’s education.

Many women started small businesses such as grocery stores, tree sapling nurseries or tailor shops. Through 2,320 established savings groups, they collected small

amounts of money and took loans from the group to establish their enterprises^{vi}. Yet the women earned more than just money. They earned the respect of their husbands, their neighbours and their village.

For the first time, many women were able to make decisions on the family budget, the data showed. They could decide together with their husbands where to invest the family’s money.

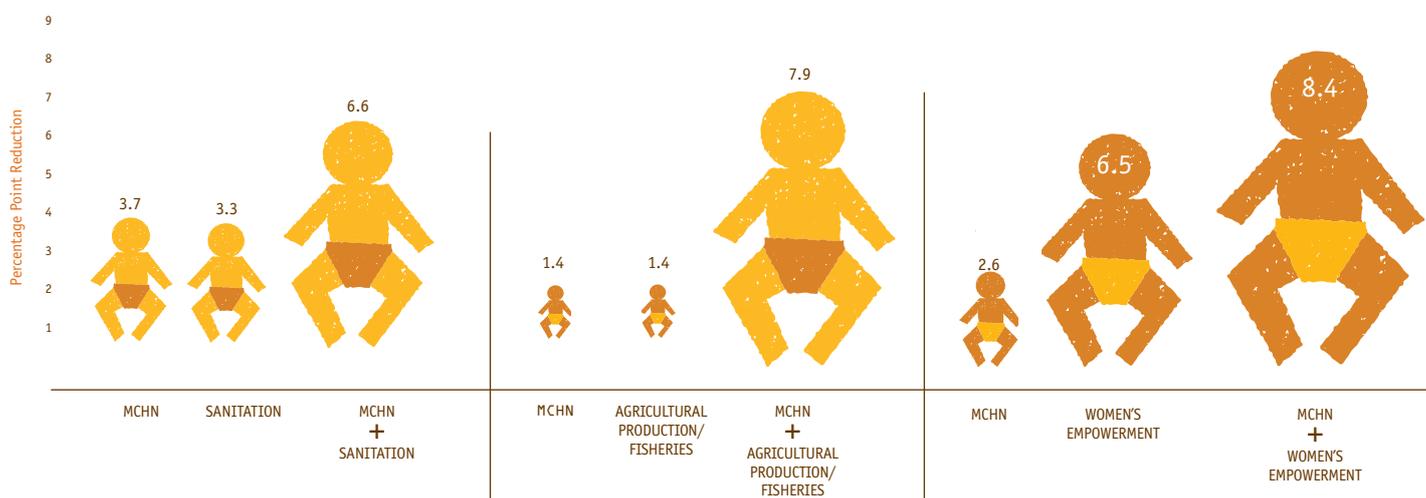
The proportion of households with three square meals a day skyrocketed from 32 per cent to 74 per cent over the life of the project.

‘At the beginning of the project, less than a quarter of women had a say in decisions about buying or selling household assets such as land, livestock and crops. By the end, nearly half of the women did. There also was a 46 per cent increase in the proportion of women who participated in decisions about the use of loans and savings.^{vii} Their priorities, which often included nutritious foods and school supplies for their children, were no longer being brushed aside.’ Faheem Khan, head of SHOUHARDO.

WHAT CAUSED THE REDUCTION IN STUNTING?

Impact of Interventions on their Own and Together

SHOUHARDO researchers found that combining other interventions with efforts to improve maternal and child health and nutrition (MCHN) produced big results. And no single intervention reduced child stunting more than women’s empowerment.



Rina's story

The boundaries of Rina Begum's independence were clearly defined. She could go anywhere - inside the four thatched walls of her home. Like millions of other poor Bangladeshi women, Rina was not allowed to walk the streets of her village without a male escort. Even inside her home, she was rarely in control.

For many in Bangladesh this isolation starts early in life, under local interpretations of purdah, a tradition that forbids a woman from making basic decisions on how to spend her own time.

Five years ago Rina and other women in her community discovered they already had something that could break the cycle of seclusion: each other. Through SHOUHARDO, together they joined an EKATA group. There they shared their experiences, gained literacy skills, discovered livelihood opportunities and prospered.

In Rina's group the score for women's decision-making power increased by far the most (41 per cent) for the North Char region, where EKATA meeting attendance was highest.

Today, Rina heads her EKATA group. She serves on three school management committees and is a member of the executive committee of the People's Organization Convention, an annual meeting that brings together more than 400 community organizations. She has travelled across Bangladesh, representing both women and men in their struggle against poverty.

Rina is more than a story. She's a statistic and one of the two million people the SHOUHARDO project reached. The data tells us her experience of greater empowerment, higher income and a family that eats three healthy meals a day is a story of thousands, not one.



Rina Begum, January 2012

Measuring women's empowerment

When it comes to work, women and girls often have fewer choices than men and boys, giving them less opportunity to earn an income and participate fully in their communities. Their work, including valuable housework and childcare, often goes unpaid and their workload tends to be disproportionately larger than that of their male peers.^{viii}

Women systematically earn lower wages and, in poor and marginalised communities, have fewer opportunities for formal education.^{ix} An uneducated girl faces a tough road. She is more likely to become a child bride, lose her life or her baby during childbirth, or suffer discrimination, abuse and exploitation.^x

Sizing up these sobering realities is important, yet we should not put the measuring tape away as we work to reverse these trends. How will we know what investments best protect a girl from hardship and benefit her entire community? Or what interventions help an educated woman earn a higher income, make more informed family planning decisions, be healthier, and pass along her knowledge and values to her children?

Building that evidence base requires a sound foundation including statistical information and survey results broken down by sex.

At CARE we know dedicating our efforts to support women and girls is the best investment we can make to help communities overcome poverty – and now we have the bottom-line analysis to prove it. The SHOUHARDO project took the concept of empowerment and measured it scientifically with findings proving children were growing taller as their mother's voices were growing stronger.

While we may never be able to develop a way to capture all facets of empowerment, we should continue to measure, in new and innovative ways, how well women and girls are able to navigate their worlds, what helps them along the way and how quickly they are able to have equal chances and choices.

It is with this evidence base that CARE will be able to push for a greater global commitment to gender equality to ensure every girl, boy, woman and man lives in dignity and security.

“There's an old saying: ‘What gets measured, gets noticed.’ So that means we must collect data so we are constantly focused on how better to integrate women into our economies and, using this evidence, build gender-inclusive development policies that work.”

Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State.



CARE's commitment to measurement and evaluation

Last year, CARE worked in 84 countries and reached 122 million people around the world. It would be challenging and perhaps wasteful to research the added value of improvements in gender equality in each project. The same goes for evaluating efforts to empower women and girls. But CARE has picked some strategic areas to invest in evaluation measurement that goes well beyond the normal requirements for a project. A few are highlighted below.

Assessing women's economic and social empowerment in Malawi, Tanzania and Ethiopia

Funded by AusAID, CARE's WE-RISE program aims to improve food security, income and resilience of chronically food insecure rural women through their social and economic empowerment. The program started in July 2010 and will run for five years. CARE is engaging a research partner to carry out impact research across the life of the program on women's economic and social empowerment and linkages to food security. In each country, WE-RISE is implemented in areas experiencing chronic food insecurity resulting from changing and erratic weather patterns, limited agricultural resources and inputs, and where institutions, practices and norms disadvantage and limit the participation and opportunities of women, especially single and widowed women. The impact research will help us understand the key drivers for positive social change – within households and within communities – and add to our knowledge of how to measure and attribute change.

Measuring the Benefits of Economic Empowerment in Africa

CARE is conducting a rigorous evaluation of its Access Africa microsavings program. Access Africa brings people in extremely poor communities with no access to formal financial services into member-directed savings groups called Village Savings & Loan Associations (VSLAs). Most of the participants in the VSLAs are women. Once well established, the program then links the individuals and their groups to existing financial institutions so they can open savings accounts and access credit and insurance. The nearly completed analysis covers villages in Malawi, Rwanda and Uganda, comparing a control group to randomly chosen people in those villages who are not participating. Included in the analysis is a poverty score card approach to classify savings groups by poverty level before and after the intervention. Indicators include changes in household relationships, women's leadership, decision-making, health and education. Access Africa will extend the findings of this assessment to all 26 countries where it operates.

Assessing Best Methods of Supporting Girls' Attainment in School

With funding from the Patsy Collins Trust Fund Initiative, CARE is researching four innovative complementary education projects aimed at reaching marginalised girls and improving their educational attainment in Cambodia, Honduras, Mali and Tanzania. Through operational research, each of the sites has gathered extensive situational, baseline and monitoring data on girls' educational attainment. A partnership with the University of Minnesota fostered development of common indicators (applied with the use of common tools) to be compared across these four contexts. The 10-year initiative is in its seventh year^{xi}.

Economic Empowerment and Sexual Reproductive Health: Impact on Child Brides in Ethiopia

This three year development and research project funded by the Nike Foundation is designed to reach 5,000 "evermarried" girls under the age of 19 in the Amhara region of Ethiopia. Ever-married is a local term used to describe girls currently married, widowed, or divorced. Ever-married girls experience barriers to gender equality due to limited economic opportunities, harassment, violence and threats to sexual and reproductive health. CARE's objective is to help the participating girls strengthen their economic and reproductive health rights and their ability to make financial decisions for themselves and their families. The program is in its early stages, but focus-group research shows participants are having success challenging social norms, such as early and forced marriage and ending a girl's education once she is married.

Take action:

Learn about issues that affect girls and women

Overseas Aid

The Australian Government's aid program represents less than 1.3 per cent of the annual Australian federal budget but provides an enormous return on investment - not just overseas but here at home. A strong, smart foreign aid program can reduce poverty, improve political stability, alleviate chronic health problems, create new markets, address climate change and promote goodwill towards Australia.

In 2011–12, Australia will provide \$4.8 billion worth of official development assistance. The Australian Government continues to increase aid in line with a bipartisan commitment to provide 0.5% of Gross National Income as overseas aid by 2015–16. Australia should continue to strengthen and refine its commitment to overseas aid and ensure that it is clearly targeted to helping poor women and men overcome poverty. While we see that changes to people's knowledge or material lives can occur relatively quickly, durable changes to structures, like laws and cultural traditions, require more time. Donors must be willing to sustain their investment over time, and to welcome flexibility, learning and innovation as women explore their own possibilities.

All governments and donors should invest more in women's empowerment. This must include investments in helping women and men change perceptions of their role in society and challenging traditions, norms and attitudes that limit their lives. The engagement of men and boys is critical to creating more equitable societies. Empowering women also requires mutually respectful and non-violent relationships between women and men, girls and boys.

Aid Effectiveness and Measurement

As you've seen in this report, measuring and objectively analysing an aid program's effectiveness is critical. It's important to focus resources and energy on programs we know work. Donors demand it. And program participants deserve it. CARE is committed to growing the evidence base. We call on our peer organisations, donors and governments around the world to invest more in evidence-gathering and reporting. The challenge is to develop measures that are: simple enough to use effectively; capable of capturing important aspects of change and progress; and useful in differentiating progress to meeting the rights of women and girls compared with men and boys. There is also a need to gather gender-sensitive data, through initiatives such as the Evidence and Data for Gender Equality initiative (EDGE) led by the United Nations Statistics Division and UN Women.

Send a modern day CARE Package

CARE created the CARE Package® in 1946 to deliver food and supplies to war-ravaged Europe. But now, instead of delivering food in boxes to individuals, CARE fights poverty at its roots by empowering women and girls. CAREgifts is a modern day CARE Package that reflects this decades-old transformation. When you send a CAREgift, you're sending long-term solutions to poverty; solutions like girls' education, maternal health and microfinance.

Visit <http://www.caregifts.org.au>

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- i "SHOUHARDO Final Evaluation Report," 97.
 - ii "SHOUHARDO Final Evaluation Report," 158.
 - iii Smith, Khan, Frankenberger, Wadud, 8
 - iv (1) Lisa C. Smith, Faheem Khan, Timothy R. Frankenberger and Abdul Wadud, "Admissible Evidence in the Court of Development Evaluation?: The Impact of CARE's SHOUHARDO Project on Child Stunting in Bangladesh," Institute of Development Studies Working Paper, Volume 2011 No. 376 (October 2011): 8.
 - v Smith, Khan, Frankenberger, Wadud, 31.
 - vi "SHOUHARDO Final Evaluation Report," 59-60.
 - vii "SHOUHARDO Final Evaluation Report," Technical Assistance for N.G.Os, (December 2009): 98-99.
 - viii "World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development," World Bank, (2012): 153-155.
 - ix World Development Report 2012, 13-16.
 - x Ruth Levine, Cynthia Lloyd, Margaret Greene, Caren Grown, "Girls Count: A global investment and action agenda," Center for Global Development, (2008), 1-2.
 - xi "Insights in Innovation: Education Findings from the Patsy Collins Trust Fund Initiative," (CARE, Feb. 2009), 13.



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