

EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF A FAMILY EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM IN TRIBAL COMMUNITIES OF NORTH BENGAL

PROMITA MAJUMDAR, MSW

Research Scholar, Department of Social Work, Visva Bharati University
Project Lead, Tomorrow's Foundation
Email: promita.majumdar@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study explores the effectiveness of a family empowerment intervention implemented by a non-profit organization in the tea garden communities of North Bengal. Rooted in the belief that strong family relationships protect adolescents from social risks, the 10-week program engaged 45 parents and 45 adolescents through interactive sessions focused on communication, emotional awareness, and understanding social challenges.

Using qualitative methods—focus group discussions with adolescents and parents, and in-depth interviews with fathers—the study found that adolescents gained emotional regulation skills, improved study habits, and greater awareness of social risks such as early marriage and substance use. Parents, especially mothers, reported increased empathy, better communication with their children, and more structured household routines.

However, limited engagement by fathers pointed to persistent gendered barriers and the need for targeted male-focused strategies.

The findings highlight the potential of culturally adapted, family-centered interventions to build safer, more supportive home environments in marginalized communities. Future efforts must address gender dynamics, offer ongoing learning, and integrate livelihood and career support for sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Family dynamics are crucial to adolescent development, especially in marginalized and tribal communities facing poverty, limited education, and social challenges. In the tea garden areas of North Bengal, strained parent-child relationships increase adolescents' vulnerability to risks such as school dropout, substance use, and exploitation. This study evaluates a family empowerment program implemented by a grassroots NGO in West Bengal. The intervention engaged 45 parents and 45 adolescents in 10 weekly interactive sessions aimed at strengthening family bonding, improving communication, and addressing social and emotional challenges. Sessions were led by trained local facilitators and supported by home visits. The research explores changes in family relationships and adolescent well-being resulting from this community-based approach.

RATIONALE FOR THE PROGRAM

High rates of child neglect emerged during our initial assessment, many parents, due to work demands or migration, were absent or uninvolved in their children's lives. Even when present, parents often lacked awareness of their children's daily activities, leading to school dropouts and increased risks like trafficking, substance abuse, and unsafe labor. The program was designed to bring parents and adolescents together in a shared learning space to rebuild communication, strengthen relationships, and create a more supportive home environment. This helps adolescents make safer life choices while empowering parents to actively support their development.

OBJECTIVE

- Strengthening family bonding
- Enhancing parent-adolescent communication
- Addressing social and behavioral challenges
- Promoting emotional well-being and adolescent development

METHODOLOGY

Study Design: Qualitative

Sample: 14 adolescents and 14 mothers; 5 fathers who attended at least one session

Sampling method: Purposive

Data Collection: Two Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted — one with mothers and one with adolescents who completed at least seven sessions and Five In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) were held with fathers to explore their perspectives, especially since male participation was low and many fathers eventually dropped out.

ANALYSIS

The data collected through FGDs and IDIs, and field observations were analyzed using thematic analysis. A guiding framework was developed to steer the discussions and interviews, ensuring consistency across sessions. Themes were generated by grouping similar ideas, behaviors, and experiences across different participants, enabling the identification of commonalities and contrasts between adolescents and parents.



RESULTS/FINDINGS

RAdolescents' Outcomes

- Better emotional regulation: Teens learned to identify and manage emotions using breathing exercises, group sharing, and role-play.
- Improved routines: Study charts helped them plan their day and reduce mobile use.
- Stronger relationships: Joint activities improved bonding with both peers and parents.
- Money habits: Adolescents began saving and understood budgeting through practical examples.
- Awareness of risks: Youth showed greater understanding of school dropout, early marriage, and substance abuse.
- Career guidance need: Many teens requested structured sessions on future career and skill pathways.

Parents' Outcomes

- Increased empathy: Parents, especially mothers, began understanding adolescent behavior as developmental, not defiant.
- Improved routines at home: Routine charts reduced conflict and improved household time management.
- Better parenting strategies: Mothers reported more open conversations and stronger emotional bonds with their children.
- Peer support: Group sessions helped reduce isolation and validated parenting struggles.
- Ongoing interest: Parents requested follow-up sessions on mental health, technology use, and career planning.

Fathers' Perspectives

- Low participation: Fathers attended fewer sessions due to work, discomfort in mixed groups, and gender norms.
- Value of early intervention: Many wished they had parenting knowledge earlier to handle teen challenges better.
- Gendered roles: Fathers saw caregiving as a mother's role but acknowledged the content was relevant.
- Recommendations: Suggest male-only sessions led by male facilitators to improve engagement and comfort.

CONCLUSION

The program brought together 45 parents and 45 adolescents from tea garden communities of North Bengal in a 10-week shared learning model. The findings included improved emotional awareness among adolescents, stronger parent-child bonds, however, low father engagement due to gender barriers.

Implications:

Family-based, community-rooted programs can build resilience and reduce adolescent risks. Tailored strategies are needed for greater father inclusion. Ongoing learning and support spaces were requested by many parents, suggesting strong potential for long-term community engagement.

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