
ENDING CHILD & EARLY AGE MARRIAGES

LESSONS OF THE HUMSATHI INTERVENTION STUDY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF A POLICY BRIEF

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Pakistan is a State Party, defines a child as anyone under the age of 18. Yet more than one fifth (21%) of girls in Pakistan are married before 18; 3 per cent before they are 15 years old. Pakistan has the 6th highest absolute numbers of child marriages (1.9 million).¹

The *Humsathi* project started in 2015 with support from the International Development Research Centre, to understand and reduce child and early age marriages (CEAM). **The policy brief highlights insights into drivers of CEAM, what enables change, and ends with recommendations.**

Carried out in Shahdadt (Sindh), Jaffarabad (Balochistan), Muzaffargarh (Punjab), and Swat (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), *Humsathi* aimed to achieve a community-owned transformation model by: (1) building girls' capacity to be their own advocates and male peers as allies, (2) promoting local adult champions. To catalyse change, the project enhanced knowledge bases, strengthened leadership skills, and provided a safe space to congregate. In Adolescent Friendly Spaces (AFS), girls shared concerns and raised questions, gained knowledge on laws governing marriages, the negative impact of early marriages on reproductive health, and communication and leadership skills.² Adolescent boys from the same community, sometimes the same families, were brought together for similar activities albeit without a dedicated physical space. These female and male youth cohorts met monthly. In parallel, because adolescents, especially girls, rarely have decision-making powers, *Humsathi* engaged with parents, particularly mothers, and other actors so as to effectuate sustainable change and an enabling environment.

DRIVERS, TRIGGERS & ENABLERS OF CHILD & EARLY AGE MARRIAGES

Baseline research found that communities across all districts have some notion of the harmful impact of child and early age marriages, but accept CEAM as a cultural norm practiced by families and communities for generations. Yet, **the ideal age at marriage for girls and boys is higher than the actual younger age at which marriage occurs.** The widest gap was expressed by girls; the smallest by older men.

Literature often suggests that CEAM are driven by poverty, but **the project found no direct correlation with poverty.** A direct causal relationship between poverty and CEAM was exceptional; poorer families do not marry off daughters at a younger age than better-off ones. For some families in Swat, marrying daughters young is a public signifier of wealth indicating that the family already has the requisite finances for the dowry and other expenses.

Socio-cultural norms and values are the primary drivers of CEAM. Denying offspring the right to decide, marriages are used to cement or forge ties, and for financial gain. Girls in particular are denied agency: their mobility, right to education and health along with marriage are all subject to decisions made by parents or other family elders. Treated as 'cattle' passed from one owner to another, in the words of one mother, girls are perceived as a moral and economic burden that parents are eager to divest themselves of as early as possible. The lesser value attached to girls and their commodification can have sinister outcomes: one man reportedly exchanged his daughter for a motorcycle; another gave away his daughter to settle a gambling debt.

¹ UNICEF, The State of the World's Children, 2017. See also <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/where-does-it-happen/>

² AFS were accepted more easily as these spaces previously functioned as Shirkat Gah's Women Friendly Spaces.

Across communities the **idea that girls embody a fragile family honour** pushes parents to marry them off at the earliest to avoid anything, including unverified allegations, that could tarnish their reputation.

Deeply embedded **harmful cultural practices** driving CEAM include *watta-satta* (exchange marriages), *pait-likhi* (literally ‘writing of the belly’ meaning committing a girl or boy to be married to - or by - a specific person before birth), *swara* (marrying off a girl or woman to settle a feud or grievance), dowry and bride price. Early betrothals are the most difficult to overturn as they disrupt social and kinship networks and trigger social censure; or to delay, as it is difficult to hide menarche in close social circles. The same applies when marriages are intended to settle grievances.

Cultural notions expressed as religious precepts justify CEAM: food cooked by a girl who is “*baligh*” (read post menarche) is *haram*; it is a sin for a girl’s second period to occur in her natal home; parents of unwed daughters cannot perform *umrah* or *hajj* (religious pilgrimages), etc.

The principle CEAM trigger is puberty. Girls and boys have no knowledge about reproductive health matters at all. For parents, menarche signals adulthood, sparking panic. To delay marriages, some women hide daughters’ menarche from the father. In boys, sexual awakening can trigger a desire for early marriage. Other reasons include: marrying girls off to receive a large dowry or amount advanced by the groom’s family; the need for a female to look after the household; and in one case the financial precariousness of a single mother.

The lack of birth certificates, especially of girls is a major problem as marriage registrars rely on parents for the age of the bride and groom. Girls demanding birth certificates to be mandatory for school admissions indicate they are aware that parents may lie about their age at the time of marriage. Youth are socialised into accepting the inevitability of marriages arranged for them. Forbidden from speaking about marriage, reproductive health as well as sex, girls remain ignorant about their bodies and suffer sometimes easily resolvable health issues. Boys who can threaten to leave home, have a greater say but cannot always overturn decisions about their marriage. They, too, are censured by their fathers for inquiring about hormonal changes and have no accurate source of information.

DISRUPTING CHILD & EARLY AGE MARRIAGES: WHAT WORKS

Today, numerous actions are being taken to delay CEAM in the *Humsathi* project sites. **Girls have emerged as their own advocates with mothers and boys as allies.** Youth and women have shared their new knowledge with others, cultivating greater awareness and community-owned changes. They have successfully advocated for girls’ right to education and delayed marriages; the success testifies to the changed thinking of men, too. **What works is:**

Including mothers and expanding their knowledge base on law and ill-effects of CEAM: more easily motivated to safeguard daughters from the problems they suffered from early marriages, women are strong allies for girls capable of overturning the normative rules of their communities.

Involving and educating men and especially boys about the harmful impact of CEAM on girls’ health, catalyses empathy, leading to change.

Dispelling misconceptions about reproductive health and the law: A better understanding of their bodies boosts girls’ self-confidence and self-esteem, unlocking their voices to be advocates for themselves and others. It gives adolescent boys an understanding of their own bodies and empathy for girls.

Spreading awareness about the minimum legal age(s) of marriage: This is an essential advocacy tool for resisting illegal child marriages in families reluctant to approach officials for family matters.

Overcome obstacles to girls’ further education is pivotal means for delaying marriages.

EMPOWERING GIRLS & BOYS THROUGH:

- **Safe spaces** in which groups can meet regularly to share experiences, gain accurate knowledge on reproductive health, marriage laws, and leadership skills and strategise. These create a peer group from which youth draws support and courage. Adolescent Friendly Spaces were crucial for instituting change amongst girls and mothers.

- Multiplying access to **infotainment videos** on the negative impact of CEAM on reproductive health, and other key issues for youth, that they can use to initiate discussions with family decision-makers, without directly challenging the authority of elders.
- **Opportunities and spaces for recreational activities** as the lack of social outlets leave boys at greater risk of drug addiction and alcohol abuse.
- **Safe spaces in schools** to learn of reproductive health and sexual harassment and abuse.

EMPOWERED GIRLS CHANGING SOCIETY

Attending AFS sessions changed the life of Sharifan, the youngest of 10 siblings in Swat.

I was engaged to my maternal cousin (mamu's son) as a child. When I grew up I didn't like my fiancé, I like someone else. When the Taliban took over Swat, my fiancé joined them and was caught by the army. It's been 8 years but there is no news about him. Mother always said, "Wait for your fiancé". So I waited...

Then I started coming to the AFS. I learn about girls' health, the negative impact of young age marriages and laws on minimum age of marriage. I discovered that I have a right to decide who to marry. First I told my elder sister that I like so-and-so and want to marry him; I can't wait any longer for my fiancé. When mother found out, she started fighting with me. My brothers stopped talking to me and said if something happens to mother [like] a heart attack, we'll fix you. Only my elder sister still supported me.

Mother stopped buying clothes, shoes and things for me; she even gave away the trousseau she had accumulated for me to relatives or reserved these for my sisters. But I refused to be defeated, endlessly repeating, 'I want to marry of my free will'.

Finally, I told my paternal aunt and elder sister that if my marriage is arranged to someone else, I'll run away. So rather than [suffering] shame and a ruined reputation, it's better to let me marry who I want. That's when mother finally arranged my marriage to who I wanted.

She still doesn't talk to me much and refuses to make me a trousseau. But who cares? I'm getting married soon.

17 YEAR OLD GUL BANO

A CLASS 10 STUDENT IN JAFFARABAD TAKES ON HER GRANDFATHER

I'm from a very poor family. We lead a very simple life....I'm keen on learning and sharing new knowledge with others, but had no opportunities until the AFS staff visited us. They told our family about their work, the detriments of child marriage, the negative impact on health and about the law. They invited my mother and me to attend sessions in the AFS that is a safe space for girls and women. I joined and soon became a leader...sharing what I learnt with others.

I heard my grandfather was engaging his 15 year son and 12 year old daughter to another set of siblings (watta satta). Child marriage is common in our family and community. So I asked my parents to take me to his house so that I could talk to my grandfather and stop him from this wrongdoing. I begged grandfather to listen to me, telling him everything I had learnt.

My mother convinced her brother of what a grave mistake it would be to marry so young and not pursue education or his dreams. He then told his father he would not get engaged till he finished his education and found a job, and also would not let his sisters be engaged till they were 18-20 years old and had completed their education.

My grandfather relented; he came to our house the very next day and thanked me for showing him the light and stopping him from destroying his children's lives saying, 'Please take my daughter to the AFS with you, so that she can learn and become wise too'.

RECOMMENDATIONS

On the basis of the study findings, relevant authorities of the provincial and federal government should take the following actions to eliminate the serious problem of child and early age marriages plaguing the country:

LEGAL MEASURES & RELATED MATTERS

- Ensure laws establishing the minimum age of marriage for girls and boys extend to all citizens and all territories;
- Mass education campaigns to promote knowledge about the legal age of marriage, legal remedies and the rights of girls and women for all demographic groups: unmarried and married youth, parents, and the community at large;
- All provinces and territories should consider standardising the minimum age of marriage for girls at 18 years, in keeping with the Child Rights Convention. This has the added advantage of using the CNIC to verify ages;
- Take all appropriate measures to eliminate cultural practices like *pait-likhi*, *swara* and exchange marriages and improve the implementation of laws, particularly in disadvantaged areas where knowledge of the law is virtually non-existent;
- Conduct mass birth registration campaigns and, especially in Sindh, CNIC drives to enable age verification at the time of marriage; and make birth certificates mandatory for school admissions, where this is not already a rule.

DEMYSTIFY REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH & NEGATIVE IMPACT OF CHILD & EARLY AGE MARRIAGES:

- Design and carry out education campaigns around the negative impact of early marriage on a child's life down to the village level, using a variety of modalities;
- Use infotainment to promote awareness about the benefits of delayed age of marriage;
- Initiate programmes for all citizens, including men and male youth to increase knowledge around on reproductive health;
- Proactively carry out mass education campaigns to overturn misconceptions, including those purporting to be based on religion.

YOUTH FOCUSED MEASURES:

- Make all-out efforts to enrol and retain girls in schools beyond primary level to delay their marriages and enhance their voice and capabilities;
- Introduce Life Skills Based Education in all public and private schools to enhance capacity for better life decisions, including modules on CEAM and health impacts, and ensure that teachers receive the necessary training to implement these modules;
- Provide male and female youth with opportunities and spaces for recreational activities, so as to provide healthy and secure social outlets as a deterrent against early marriage.

ROLE OF DUTY-BEARERS

- Ensure regular trainings on family laws for marriage registrars, and institute greater monitoring mechanisms to ensure that they follow the relevant procedures when registering or solemnising marriages;
- Provide training on family laws to police officers and Union Council Secretaries, outlining their roles and responsibilities;
- Expand the role of extension workers of the Health Department (Lady Health Workers) and the Population Welfare Department (Female Welfare Workers) to raising awareness in communities of the negative health impact of CEAM especially reaching adolescent girls; ensure appropriate training for this.