
ENDING CHILD & EARLY AGE MARRIAGES

LESSONS OF THE HUMSATHI INTERVENTION STUDY

A POLICY BRIEF

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Pakistan is a State Party to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which defines a child as anyone under the age of 18. Of concern is that more than one fifth (21%) of girls in Pakistan are married before 18; 3 percent before they are 15 years old¹ and that Pakistan is 6th on a list of 20 countries with the highest absolute numbers of child marriages (1.9 million).²

In 2015, Shirkat Gah embarked upon the *Humsathi* project with support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The 3-year interventional study aimed to develop a transformative model to reduce child and under-age or early-age marriages (CEAM). **This policy brief highlights project insights into what drives CEAM but also what enables change, and ends with a set of recommended actions.**

The study explored socio-cultural drivers of CEAM and factors enabling or obstructing resistance to such practices in selected districts of all provinces: Shahdaskot in Sindh, Jaffarabad in Balochistan, Muzaffargarh in Punjab, and Swat in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. To stimulate a community-owned transformative model, the project: (1) built the capacity of girls to be their own advocates and of male peers to be allies, (2) promoted local champions amongst adults who are the decision-makers. To empower adolescent girls to be their own change agents, the project enhanced their knowledge base, 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.³ 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.

SECTION 1

WHAT DRIVES CHILD & EARLY-AGE MARRIAGES: PROJECT INSIGHTS

Baseline research found that people across all districts have some idea of the harmful impact of child and early-age marriages, but accept this as a cultural norm practiced for generations. Male youth noted the economic and psychological burden CEAM puts on them, but said this is a part of their culture, implying that change was not possible. Yet, suggesting a desire for change, there was **a difference in what communities consider the ideal age at marriage for girls and boys vs. the actual younger age at which marriages occur.** The widest gap emerged in the responses of girls and smallest (sometimes non-existent) in the responses of older men, clearly least inclined to see CEAM as a problem.

The *Humsathi* research brought to light the complex intermeshing of factors that contribute to a social environment conducive for child and early-age marriages, as well as specific triggers and drivers. **Drivers** are factors, conditions, or actors that directly promote the occurrence of CEAM; **triggers** are factors that precipitate such marriages, but do not constitute the underlying reasons.

Is poverty a driver? While literature often suggests that child/early-age marriages are driven by poverty, the *Humsathi* project found **no direct correlation between poverty and CEAM.** Poverty is a constant for many and people complain about being poor, but only in exceptional cases was a direct

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

² Women aged 20 to 24 years old at the time of the survey who were married before they were 18.

³ AFS were accepted more easily as these spaces previously functioned as Shirkat Gah's Women Friendly Spaces.

causal relationship between poverty and early-age marriage evident. Nor is there any evidence that poorer families marry off their daughters at a younger age than better-off families. Indeed, in Swat marrying daughters young is a matter of prestige amongst some families because it proves they do not need time to gather the requisite financial resources for the dowry and other marriage expenses. In these cases, child/early-age marriage is a public signifier of wealth.

“Girls here are seen as cattle. The rope is untethered from one place and handed over to someone else. And she leaves with her head down.”

FGD with Mothers, Muzaffargarh

Rather than poverty, **specific socio-cultural norms and values emerged as the primary drivers** or causal factors underlying the practice of CEAM. These norms deny offspring the right to decide their marriages that are used to cement or forge ties, and sometimes to gain economic advantages. Girls in particular are denied any agency and as some mothers said, treated as “cattle” passed from one owner to another.

LACK OF PROOF OF AGE

The lack of birth certificates in general and of girls in particular constitutes a major problem. Duty-bearers lack sufficient knowledge of marriage laws, and both *nikahkhwans* (those performing the marriage) and *nikah* registrars (government officials authorised to register marriages who may also conduct the marriage) fail to verify ages of the bride and groom through legal documents. Instead, they rely on the word of the parents or other relatives to ascertain the age of the bride and groom. This underscores the urgency of ensuring the birth registration of all children, a demand also articulated by adolescents themselves. It is crucial to build the capacity of *nikah* registrars on the law and their duty to verify the accuracy of ages conveyed by parents. In Sindh, where the minimum legal age of marriage for girls as well as boys is now 18 years, this can be verified by checking the Computerised National Identity Card (CNIC).

“The parents give the [girl’s] age at the time of marriage. I only solemnize nikahs of close friends and family members who I have known for many years and trust.”

IDI with Nikahkhan, Jaffarabad. 2016.

1 DRIVERS OF CHILD & EARLY-AGE MARRIAGES

1.1 PATRIARCHAL SOCIO-CULTURAL NORMS

Research found an entrenchment of regressive socio-cultural norms and rigid gender roles in which boys/sons are valued as breadwinners; girls/daughters confined to the house and constricted roles of domestic and reproductive work. Girls’ needs are considered less important and the primary, if not sole, parental responsibility towards girls is seen to be ensuring their marriage. Girls are commonly perceived as a moral and economic burden that parents are eager to divest themselves of as early as possible. In many ways this perception of girls being an economic burden is a self-fulfilling prophecy since girls (and women) are prevented from engaging in the monetised labour force while their house and fieldwork is not recognised as economically productive. This is a major factor driving CEAM of girls. The lesser value attached to the lives of girls/daughters can have even more sinister outcomes such as being viewed as a commodity to be traded or sold, as testified to by two abominable examples reported in the field: one man reportedly exchanged his daughter for a motorcycle⁴ another father gave away his daughter to settle a gambling debt.⁵

1.2 THE TYRANNY OF EMBODYING FAMILY HONOUR

An important factor driving CEAM, surfacing across all districts, is the concept of girls (and women) embodying a fragile family honour that must be safeguarded at all costs. Parents marry girls off at the earliest possible to avoid any incident that could tarnish the reputation/‘honour’ of the family, tribe, or specific community, such as girls running off to marry a man not chosen by family elders. CEAM is also driven by community pressure to conform to normative rules that insist, for example, that it is dishonourable for a young girl to live in her natal home for too long - or at all -after menarche. Parents succumb to community taunts and criticism for allowing ‘grown’ daughters to sit at home (*ghar baiithi*) or enter public spaces.⁶ In Muzaffargarh and Swat, parents also worry about their girls’ safety,

⁴Focus Group Discussion with Girls, Jaffarabad. 2016.

⁵Focus Group Discussion with Mothers, Jaffarabad. 2016.

⁶Focus Group Discussion with Girls, Shahdadkot. 2016.

fearing sexual harassment and violence. Getting girls married is considered a means of protection, or at least transferring the responsibility for preserving honour to the husband and his family.

1.3 HARMFUL CULTURAL PRACTICES & TRADITIONS

Deeply embedded within societal structures, harmful cultural practices are key drivers of CEAM. This includes traditions such as *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.

“When girls go outside their homes, people start saying this family’s daughter is not good because she roams around outside.”

FGD with Mothers, Shahdadkot. 2018.

The pressure for early-age marriages intensifies when betrothals have been agreed upon prior to or during pregnancy, at birth or in infancy.⁷ Evidence from *Humsathi* reveals that such marriages are the most difficult to call off or delay since upsetting such *rishtas* (engagements) risks severing communal/family ties, disrupting social and kinship networks. It can also trigger social censure. Because such agreements usually take place within the family, or close community, knowledge of menarche is difficult to hide and the pressure mounted by prospective in-laws to carry out the marriage upon menarche can be immense. Promises of marriages intended to end enmities or settle scores, are equally difficult to break off. The involvement of family or community elders in these cases renders it more difficult for parents to resist.

1.4 RELIGIOUS IDIOM TO SUPPORT COMMUNITY PRECEPTS

Research did not find any case of a child being married young specifically for religious reasons, but cultural notions expressed as religious precepts, are pervasive everywhere and used to justify early-age marriages. Examples include a belief that any food cooked by a girl who is “*baligh*” (read: post-menarche) is *haram* (forbidden);⁹ that it is a sin for a girl’s second period to occur in her natal home; that parents failing to marry off their daughters prior to the second menstrual cycle will be obliged to drink her menstrual blood on Judgment Day; that parents with unwed daughters cannot perform *umrah* or *hajj* (religious pilgrimages). Hence, one woman said she had arranged her daughters’ marriages immediately after menarche because “it is a sin to keep them at home. This is the saying of Allah and his Prophet, we have to fulfil it”.¹⁰

Local clerics, who hold sway over the community and are perceived to be more educated and religiously knowledgeable,¹¹ may influence decisions as found in other Shirkat Gah studies.¹²

2. TRIGGERING FACTORS

2.1 ONSET OF PUBERTY

The principle trigger for CEAM is puberty. Although girls may be catapulted out of childhood at very young ages, menarche, indicating reproductive ability, signals the beginning of adulthood for girls in these communities. Even when marriage is not immediate, menarche brings added restrictions and social controls: even less mobility; orders to observe the veil; prohibitions on visiting relatives or neighbours; being confined to homes to avoid social censure.¹⁴

“My childhood ended at age 6-7; my father passed away and my older brother... told me I was now grown up and should not go outside. He told me to play and eat at home... I had only lost one tooth but wasn’t allowed to play outside. I used to cry as I watched other girls play outside.”

FGD with Girls, Jaffarabad. 2016

To delay imminent marriage, some women hide their daughter’s menarche from the father.¹⁵ Puberty triggers parental panic about any actions that can be construed as sexual misconduct. Marriage is seen as preventing pre-marital relationships for both girls and boys. Averting any possibility of “immoral” behaviour is a major driver of CEAM. Hence, mobile phones are frowned upon because the general perception is that girls use these to interact with boys. For pubescent boys, burgeoning sexual desire can trigger a desire to marry as soon as possible. Boys are also married young by parents to prevent them from engaging in substance abuse, seen as being sparked by puberty.

⁷ Focus Group with Mothers, Jaffarabad. 2018.

⁸ Focus Group Discussion with Boys, Jaffarabad, 2018.

⁹ Focus Group Discussion with Mothers, Jaffarabad. 2016.

¹⁰ Focus Group Discussion with Mothers, Muzaffargarh. 2016.

2.2 ECONOMIC & SOCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

While the project found no causal relationship between poverty and early marriage, it did find that the commodification of girls gives parents and family elders a means of earning money: marrying girls off to receive a large dowry or amount advanced by the groom's family for the dowry and marriage expenses. Focus group discussions with women and adolescent girls revealed that in some poor households, parents keep a portion of the dowry or money advanced by groom (e.g. in Sindh) for their own use; and spend only a (sometimes relatively small) portion on their daughter's dowry. In one case financial precariousness became a trigger when a widow who had no sons or male relatives to help her, married off her still young eldest daughter to have one less mouth to feed.

In other instances, CEAM may be triggered by the need for a female to look after the household. In one tragic case,¹⁷ the trigger was the death of the mother/prospective mother-in-law. Soon after her death, the family started insisting that the 12-13 year old child promised in marriage be handed over. The girl's family initially resisted due to her young age, but then gave in to intense pressure on the condition that the marriage would not be consummated until later. This condition was violated; the girl had to be hospitalised due to severe injuries resulting from sexual violence, and died.

3. THE DISEMPOWERMENT OF GIRLS & BOYS

Aiming to empower adolescent girls and boys, the project sought first to identify possible sources of power youth may possess, but research revealed a distinctly disempowered youth, with little ability to assert rights, or voice their needs. Hence, the project focused on addressing the sources of disempowerment in order to strengthen girls and boys as community and family change agents.

3.1 CULTURES OF SILENCE & LACK OF DECISION-MAKING

From an early age, girls and boys are socialised into accepting the inevitability of a marriage arranged for them. The onset of menarche precipitates matters for girls, often triggering immediate and therefore under-age marriages. Childhood comes to an abrupt end as do recreational activities and further education. Cut off from sources of information, girls are taught domestic skills deemed useful in future lives as stay-at-home wives/daughters-in-law and mothers.¹⁸

“There is no tradition of getting a girl's consent [for marriage]...the girl follows the decisions made by her parents and stays silent”

IDI with Young Girl, Shahdadkot. 2018.

It is difficult for adolescents to resist an arranged marriage and its timing, not least because marriage and reproductive health are encased in a culture of profound silence. Across all districts, girls and boys concur that they cannot rely on any sympathetic family member with whom to share their problems. Girls are denied decision-making about their own lives: their mobility, right to education and health along with marriage are all subject to decisions made by parents or other family elders. Girls, in particular, are told not to speak of or interfere in matters of marriage, reproductive health, or land.¹⁹ Strictures are such that when girls broach reproductive health issues with their mothers

“Mostly, the father decides; the brother can also make the decision. The girl cannot make the decision at all. This is because of old traditions that are still strong in our area”

Focus Group Discussion with Boys, Jaffarabad. 2016.

they are scolded and told it is shameful for unmarried girls to speak of such matters. As a result, girls remain ignorant about their own bodies, suffer sometimes easily resolvable health issues, and cannot express their needs even within their family on matters of health or marriage. Counter-intuitively, but reflecting the impact of deeply embedded patriarchal norms, prior to interventions boys articulated the restrictions imposed on girls and reasons for these better than girls themselves.

Boys enjoy greater mobility and, as breadwinners have a comparatively greater say in decisions as they can threaten to leave the home. Power is limited, however, and boys cannot always overturn decisions about their marriage. In some districts, boys who challenge or disobey

¹¹ Focus Group Discussion with Boys, Jaffarabad. 2016.

¹² *Conveyor Belts to Extremism? Otherisation & Poor Governance in Pakistan*, Shirkat Gah. 2016.

¹³ Focus Group Discussion with Unmarried Girls, Shahdadkot. 2016.

¹⁴ Focus Group Discussion with Unmarried Girls, Shahdadkot. 2016.

fathers risk being publicly beaten, and fear of such public humiliation keeps them silent. Boys have no accurate source of information about the hormonal changes they experience and fear being censured by their fathers²⁰ for asking questions. Consequently, most seek advice from their peers, who are usually as poorly informed, or seek information on the Internet. In economically challenged communities, boys are burdened with the role of breadwinner at an early age. Early marriages add to this burden because, as explained by one group, young/girl-brides are prone to pregnancy-related complications and/or unable to run a household well.²¹

“My maternal aunt was married through pait-likhi but gave her daughter in marriage to my brother instead of my mamun’s son, so I was given to him [instead] when I was 16 years old. My maternal grandfather had pait-likhi over me, so he told my mamun that he should receive 1 lac [100,000] rupees, since he did not arrange my marriage”

Case Study Fauzia 2018.

The project engaged girls and mothers in storytelling, including an exercise called “**Stories of Silence**” (*Chup Ki Kahani*) to enable discussions around reproductive health that adolescents may hesitate to share otherwise. An **unexpected result was a breaking of the silence about sexual harassment**, especially amongst girls; boys were far more reluctant to speak up.

3.2 NO KNOWLEDGE OF REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH MATTERS OR LEGAL PROVISIONS

A vital early finding was the paucity of knowledge about reproductive health matters. Community elders have no understanding of what puberty is, beyond menarche marking a transition to adulthood for girls and burgeoning sexual desire in boys.²² Girls and boys have no knowledge at all. Though this had no causal linkage with the practice of early marriages per se, the lack of knowledge and access to information emerged as an **important source of disempowerment of youth**. Demystifying reproductive health under a parallel Shirkat Gah project in these sites,²³ enabled girls to better understand their own bodies, boosted their self-confidence and self-esteem. In turn, this unlocked girls’ voices and agency contributing to the *Humsathi* objective of building the capacity of girls to be their own advocates, as well as for others.

Similarly, there was little to **no awareness regarding laws on minimum legal age(s) of marriage or mechanisms for redress and a great reluctance to approach officials for family matters** as taking internal family matters to public officials shames the family.

3.3 LACK OF SAFE SPACES, RECREATIONAL & EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

The absence of safe spaces to share experiences or seek information was felt profoundly by already homebound girls. Girls are unable to talk openly with anyone, including girlfriends as there is much suspicion attached to girls sitting and talking together.²⁴ Boys too expressed the need for appropriate sources of accurate information to deal with hormonal changes as well as opportunities and spaces for recreational activities, such as parks or gyms. The lack of social outlets²⁵ leaves boys at greater risk of drug addiction and alcohol abuse across all districts. Preventing such behaviour was given as one reason for their early marriages.

Girls desire recreational spaces as well, especially safe parks, but a far more pressing issue for girls is their ardent but thwarted desire for post-primary education. The distance to post-primary educational facilities, lack of safe government transport, unwillingness of parents to pay for girls’ private transport, and fear of harassment in traversing public spaces to access schools combine into a formidable barrier. **A major ask of girls is that the government overcome barriers to their further education**. This is indeed crucial as the study confirms that furthering education is a pivotal means for delaying marriages. (Box 2)

¹⁵ Case Study with Rehana, Muzaffargarh. 2018.

¹⁶ Focus Group Discussion with Unmarried Boys, Muzaffargarh. 2016.

¹⁷ Monthly Meeting in Jaffarabad with Male Youth Cohort. 2017.

¹⁸ Focus Group Discussion with Girls, Shahdadkot. 2016.

¹⁹ Focus Group Discussion with Girls, Jaffarabad. 2016.

Box 1

STORIES OF RESISTANCE & CHANGE: USING THE LAW

Farhana is a 9th grade student from Shahdadkot. In her community, girls are married at the age of 14-15. Farhana's engagement was arranged with her maternal uncle's (*mamun*) son through *pait-likhi*, when she was 16. Both mother and daughter attended sessions at the AFS, and therefore knew about the harmful impact of early marriages, and the legal age of marriage in Sindh. Farhana told her mother that she didn't want to get married before 18 and her mother promised she would not let this happen. Farhana's father was displeased, but her mother threatened him with legal recourse. Since Farhana's prospective mother-in-law, her maternal aunt-in-law (*mumani*), also attends AFS sessions, she and her husband agreed to delay the marriage.

SECTION 2

WHAT CAN OVERTURN CEAM: LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Humsathi interventions have led to numerous actions to delay child and early-age marriages in these project sites communities, as evidenced in the boxes (also boxes in the Executive Summary). Girls have emerged as their own advocates delaying marriages, rejecting suitors and pursuing education. They have spread awareness and raised issues of unequal treatment at home, e.g. parents paying for boys' education and allowing them to travel considerable distances for this, but denying the same to girls. Boys have become allies: sharing their new knowledge with other boys and men. Some have successfully advocated for family girls' right to education, supported sisters to continue studying, delayed their marriages. Mothers have emerged as key allies and mobilised others. The sharing of new knowledge with others is helping to cultivate community awareness of girls' rights, leading to community-owned change patterns. If most actions resisting CEAM have been taken or supported by mothers and other female relatives of girls at risk, their success testifies to the changed thinking of family men, which bodes well for sustained changes in community behaviour.

4.1 INVOLVING & EDUCATING MOTHERS TO BE EFFECTIVE ALLIES

Initial research identified mothers as key potential allies for girls. Consistently including mothers of project-engaged youth in awareness-raising sessions and campaigns created strong allies. Inclusion has helped to break through the wall of silence impeding mother-daughter communication. Thanks to interventions, today many girls report an ability to share problems with their mothers or older sisters. Girls discuss reproductive health issues with mothers who no longer censure or silence them, or exclude them from the discussions of older women. Communication has created enough trust that girls can express their concerns and wishes with mothers, including on marriage; a number of mothers now actively consider daughters' wishes in arranging marriages.

Motivated by a desire to safeguard their daughters' welfare, many project-engaged mothers now aver they will not subject their daughters to the numerous problems they suffered as a result of being married too early. A wider knowledge base and deeper understanding has enabled women to defy centuries old customs and to break through the normative rules of their communities. A number of case studies also illustrate the complex and complicated nature of social relations entailed in marriages.

Box 2:

STORIES OF RESISTANCE & CHANGE: ACTING TOGETHER

14 year old girl Kiran is from Muzaffargarh. Her father married a second wife. The second wife never got along with Kiran's mother or siblings; often hurling false accusations on the girls' characters. Fearing for his honour, the father married his older daughter Rabia, then only 14, to his brother's 17 year old son. Rabia has been very unhappy in her marriage as her husband does not provide for her or her child.

When Rabia's in laws proposed that Kiran marry their younger son, her father and second wife were keen to do so.

²⁰ Focus Group Discussion with Boys, Jaffarabad. 2016.

²¹ Focus Group Discussion with Boys, Muzaffargarh. 2016.

²² Focus Group Discussion with Unmarried Boys, Shahdadkot. 2016.

²³ The "Sakhi, Mein Sukhi" project interventions were centred on reproductive health and menstrual health management, and increasing

The knowledge gained from attending sessions at the Adolescent Friendly Space (AFS) gave Kiran the confidence to stand up for herself. Kiran didn't want to get married and resisted despite physical abuse and threats of confinement by her stepmother and (older) stepbrother. She mobilised the support of her sister and sister-in-law who regularly attend AFS sessions.

Kiran's AFS friends and staff as well as her sister and sister-in-law met the stepmother and father, enlightened them about the adverse impact on health of early age marriage and the legal age of marriage, saying and that the father could go to jail for breaking the law. . Kiran's father relented and promised to wait for her to come of age before marriage and let her complete her studies.

4.2 INVOLVING MEN & MALE YOUTH

Similar sessions rolled out with men and boys increased their knowledge about the harmful impact of early-age marriages on girls' health. Starting to understand the many issues women never openly discuss increased male empathy, especially amongst youth. Men and especially male youth now profess a better understanding of the realities girls and women confront in their day-to-day life, especially empathising with the burden of domestic work. Some boys have started resisting early-age marriages for peers or others in the family. For example, one boy advocated the delay of his friend's early-age marriage. Although he failed to convince his friend's father, he did convince the boy's paternal uncle (*chacha*) not marry to his son at a young age. In Shahdadt, a landowner's son advocated with his father to resist early-age marriages in their own family.

4.3 DEMYSTIFYING REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Sessions on reproductive health dispelled taboos and misconceptions around menstrual health. Combined with leadership training, the resultant enhanced self-awareness and sense of self dramatically increased girls' voices and agency. Not only have they started advocating for their own rights, they are speaking up for other girls and women too. In Swat, for example, a girl in the youth cohort helped delay her cousin's marriage by speaking to her cousin's mother. (See Box 3) Another helped a pregnant woman in her community gain access to reproductive health services, convincing the woman's mother-in-law of the importance of getting her medical treatment.

For adolescent boys, learning about the CEAM impact on the reproductive health of young brides, helped them develop empathy, leading to actions to stop early-age marriages of their sisters. Although a few spoke of the negative health outcomes on girls of CEAM in the baseline research, they had done so from the perspective of the economic burden this placed on them as prospective husbands, rather than the perspective of girls. This has changed.

Sessions on the negative impact of early-age/child marriages on girls' reproductive health were run with mothers and fathers. Mothers developed a deeper understanding as they attended the more detailed sessions on reproductive health run for girls under a parallel Shirkat Gah project.²⁸ For fathers, learning about the impact of CEAM on reproductive health, instilled empathy for their daughters; visible in a greater openness to listen to wives advocating the delayed marriages of daughters and the reduced opposition to girls exercising agency.

Box 3:

STORIES OF RESISTANCE & CHANGE: ALTERING FAMILY NORMS

Jannat is a 7th grade student in Guligram, Swat. Having attended AFS sessions for a year, she has been sharing the harmful impact of CEAM with her family, including her mother and aunt.

Jannat discovered that her *mamun* (maternal uncle) was arranging his 13-year-old daughter's marriage. She immediately spoke with his wife (*mumani*) telling her that early marriage is against the law and about the impact early marriage has on female health. Her *mumani* shared this information with her husband who agreed not to arrange his daughter's marriage at such a young age.

access to health services for adolescent girls so as to decrease early age/child marriages.

²⁴ Focus Group Discussion with Girls, Jaffarabad. 2016.

²⁵ Focus Group Discussion with Boys, Muzaffargarh. 2016.

²⁶ All names in the boxes have been changed to protect identities.

4.4 KNOWLEDGE OF THE LAW

People's **knowledge of existing laws is vital for negotiating change within the family** even if do not want to approach officials for family matters. New knowledge on family laws has provided girls and their mothers an effective advocacy tool to resist illegal child marriages, underscoring the need to ensure that all citizens are aware of the laws governing marriage. Imparting legal knowledge was important in all sites, but had the greatest impact in Shahdadkot where the 2013 Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act redefines the legal age of marriage as 18 years for girls as well as boys. This also enables age verification through the CNIC. In multiple cases, women have used new legal knowledge to successfully delay underage/illegal child marriages, including by threatening legal recourse. (Boxes 1 & 5) In Swat, despite the 1961 Muslim Family Laws Ordinance (MFLO) not being applicable,²⁹ at least one girl used legal knowledge to successfully delay her cousin's marriage. (Box 3)

To ensure the legal age of marriage is implemented, girls themselves emphasise the need to register births, demanding that the birth certificate be mandatory for school admissions as a way of accurately recording their ages. The unspoken sub-text here is that girls are aware that parents may lie about their age at the time of marriage.

4.5 SAFE SPACES & SUPPORT GROUPS FOR ADOLESCENTS

For both girls and boys, bringing together the same cohorts every month for some activity or sharing concerns and problems has created a collective group of solidarity from which they draw courage and inspiration.

Adolescent friendly spaces for girls were pivotal in instituting change amongst girls as well as mothers. They have unlocked girls' agency catalysing resistance to CEAM, postponing marriages and demanding the right to education. Several girls, being pressured to marry at an early age, successfully delayed marriages to continue education.³⁰

Boys were not provided with a physical safe space, but the guided interactions and monthly sessions functioned as a safe space, allowing boys to open up about the problems they confront both regarding marriage and sexuality. Interventions included discussions using infotainment videos regarding the impact of early marriage on female reproductive health.

Box 4:

STORIES OF RESISTANCE & CHANGE: SISTERHOOD

18-years-old Rehana was married at the age of 15, when she was powerless to resist, and since then has endured life-threatening repercussions. She and her younger sister, a ninth grade student, attend sessions at the AFS and have learnt of the harmful impact of CEAM.

Though she could not stand up for herself, Rehana was determined not to let history repeat itself with her sister. She pressed her parents to delay her younger sister's marriage and protect her from the suffering she herself endured because of an early marriage. Her advocacy paid off: her parents have agreed not to arrange her sister's marriage until she is older.

4.6 INSTILLING LEADERSHIP QUALITIES & SKILLS

Concurrently to other activities, **leadership and advocacy trainings** built the capacity of youth to be community change agents, to advocate for themselves and for others with respect to CEAM and other matters. Combined with expanded knowledge, this has catalysed girls' ability to speak up for their own rights as well as take actions for their sisters and cousins. Increased self-confidence and awareness of rights enabled youth to begin asserting rights within their families. Change has been easier because of sessions with adult community members.

4.7 BREAKING THE SILENCE ON ERSTWHILE TABOO SUBJECTS IN SCHOOLS

An important breakthrough is the initiative of girls in the cohorts to share their new knowledge on reproductive health with others in schools first in Swat and then in other provinces. The supportiveness of teachers led the *Humsathi* project to pilot awareness sessions in schools involving teachers, using the *Chup ki Kahani* exercises. School sessions used the videos on early-age marriages of the UNICEF

²⁷ Focus Group Discussion with Boys, Jaffarabad. 2018.

²⁸ Supra note 20.

²⁹ The Muslim Family Laws Ordinance was only extended to Swat in January 2018, but has not yet come into force.

³⁰ Case Study of Kiran, Muzaffargarh. 2018.

Meena Ki Kahani series, as well as *Khamoshi Ko Torein* (Let's Break the Silence) video on child sexual abuse produced by a civil society organisation.³¹ Girls spoke up about the sexual harassment they confront, particularly in school. In Shahdadkot, where teachers and principals both attended, these had the most impact. Upon learning of the harassment girls face in school after management has left the premises, they committed to taking action to protect girls' security; they spoke with boys, making it clear that this behaviour was unacceptable.

In Gokdara, Swat, 16-years-old Raziya's mother often spoke of how young girls should not live with their parents for too long, and marry as soon as possible because of the bad environment. Raziya kept silent until AFS sessions gave her the courage to stand up for herself. When her mother received a marriage proposal for her, Raziya told her she didn't like the boy, saying, "It's my life and I don't want to marry this boy." Her mother agreed and did not pressure her to marry.

The session was replicated with mothers. In one community, when their daughters shared the harassment they confront, mothers identified a young man in their community harassing girls; women banded together to confront **him and put an end to his harassment**. This was a project highlight as it shows women listening to girls and engaging in collective advocacy.

4.8 INNOVATIVE WAYS FOR YOUTH TO ADDRESS DECISION-MAKING FAMILY ELDERS

The cultural norms of silence coupled with normative rules forbidding the challenging of adults/ elders impede children from directly questioning - let alone rejecting - the decisions elders make on their behalf. Interactive theatre was a safe modality for breaking the ice and encouraging intergenerational discussions. Recognising youth as community leaders at these events gave girls and boys the courage to confront parents at home. An innovation used first by a few boys with smart phones and then, facilitated by the project, adopted by girls and the rest of the male cohorts is **the use of short infotainment video clips around child marriages and gender discrimination** (e.g. *Meena ki Kahani*) to initiate a discussion with the key decision-makers, that is, parents. This has a dual advantage: (1) the children are not seen to be directly challenging their elders, and so avoid the censure of being rude and insubordinate and (2) video clips enable a certain degree of "outside" authority to support the argument of the adolescents: "We're not saying this; other more well informed people are."

4.9 ENGAGING HEALTH PRACTITIONERS

Finally, the unexpected catalytic impact of improved reproductive health knowledge on the ability to resist child and early-age marriages raised the question of how to expand the sources of accurate information on reproductive health for girls (and women). An encouraging outcome of engaging health service providers under a parallel project³² is the willingness of Lady Health Workers (LHWs) to deliver awareness-raising sessions on the negative impact of early-age marriages on reproductive health in their communities. In order to do so, however, they requested training, as this is not part of the LHW curricula. This represents an important opportunity, deserving appropriate action.

Box 5 STORIES OF RESISTANCE & CHANGE: MOTHERS AS ALLIES

Aleena, now 18, is a ninth grade student in Shahdadkot. Her family follows the custom of *pait-likhi*, in which grandfathers can decide who their granddaughters marry, but girls are married at 18-19 years. Aleena's engagement to her maternal aunt's (*khala*) son was arranged so early she doesn't remember it, "But this is the *ravaaj* [custom] here," she says, "so what can you do? This is why girls cannot say anything to their parents."

Aleena was happy because she liked the boy, but it was an exchange marriage when and the other engagement fell through, her father wanted to break off her marriage too. Her mother, who also attends AFS sessions and knew about the law and harmful impact of CEAM, stood up for Aleena, telling her father that he could not sacrifice his daughter's happiness just to please his sister. She also threatened to take legal action against her husband in support of her daughter.

Due to constant fighting, Aleena's father left his family and went to Karachi. Aleena's mother had a friend whose husband was also friends with Aleena's father. She told her friend about the situation with Aleena who shared this information with her own husband and they spoke to Aleena's father. Due to their coaxing, but also seeing different behaviour in Karachi Aleena's father finally returned home, and agreed to not end Aleena's engagement.

³¹ The video has been produced by Rozan, a civil society group focused on a violence-free Pakistan.

³² Supra Note 20.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To eliminate the serious problem of Child and Early-Age Marriages plaguing the country, the *Humsathi* intervention research suggests the following actions to be undertaken by relevant authorities of the provincial and federal government.

LEGAL MEASURES & RELATED MATTERS

- Ensure laws establishing the minimum age of marriage for girls and boys extend to all citizens and all territories;
- Initiate mass education campaigns promoting knowledge about the legal age of marriage, legal remedies as well as 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 legal age of marriage for girls at 18 years, in keeping with the Child Rights Convention. This has the added advantage of verifying the age through the CNIC;
- 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 provide means of verifying age at the time of marriage.
- 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 community 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 (LSBE) 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;
- In girls' schools, to overcome monthly absences of menstruating girls, make sanitary pads available in school and ensure hygienic and functional bathrooms;
- Provide male and female youth with opportunities and secure spaces for recreational activities as healthy social outlets.

ROLE OF DUTY-BEARERS

- Ensure regular trainings on family laws for *nikah* registrars, and institute stronger monitoring mechanisms to verify that registrars 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 early marriages, with special efforts to ensure programmes reach adolescent girls; and ensure appropriate training for this.

Box 6

STORIES OF RESISTANCE & CHANGE: EMPOWERED GIRLS

Fatima, now a 10th grade student in Muzzafargarh, who successfully delayed her marriage, relates her story:

Leadership training taught me I have rights; rights no one can take away...the same right to decide my life as my brothers. So when I found out they were arranging my marriage I made a lot of noise.

Before I was very scared of father and couldn't even think of speaking up in front of him. Coming to the [AFS] gave me courage and taught me that if I do not speak up for myself, then no one will and I'll suffer the consequences for the rest of my life...

I first spoke to my mother who I am closest to, saying 'Look, since childhood it's been my dream to become a pilot...so let me study and fulfill my dream'. She countered, 'Good marriage proposals don't come every day. What will you do with so much study anyway? You'll have to be a housewife'. I insisted I wanted to study and make a career. I have dreams too, let me live a little, become something; then I'll marry. I told her about the huge negative impact of early marriages; that end life, endanger the health and life of mother and child, etc. and that our law doesn't allow child marriages, and fines you for this.

I finally convinced my mother who then asked 'How to convince your father?' Us girls were in awe of my father... So I said you speak to him first then we'll speak together... After she softened him up [by telling him all I told her] I too spoke to him He was very angry at first but when I told him of the negative health impact, and especially stressed the law prohibits marriage of anyone under 16, and I'm only 15, he was slowly convinced. I also told them not to worry about finding a good match; we can get engaged now but marry later.

I'm so happy now. I can't believe I postponed my marriage! As [the AFS Coordinator] said If you don't raise your voice then no one will help you.

“ I have dreams too.
Let me live a little, become something...
then I'll marry. ”

18 year old girl, Muzaffargarh



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