Pakistan's commitment to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on Achieving Gender Equality includes ending child and forced marriage under Target 5.3. Pakistan also has legal obligations under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which defines a child as anyone under the age of 18 and Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Pakistan has the sixth highest number of absolute child brides in the world (1.9 million). With the legal age of marriage for girls being 16 except in Sindh (where it is 18), child marriages remain alarmingly high; one fifth of girls are married before 18 and at least 3 percent before they are 15.

It is estimated that by ending Child and Early Age marriage (CEAM) the country could potentially save 77 million dollars by 2030, lead to a 6229 million dollar rise in earnings and productivity and reduce multi-dimensional poverty level - a number 1 government priority.

In 2015 Shirkat Gah (SG) piloted Humsathi, an interventional study in 4 districts, with support from the International Development Research Centre. The study developed a successful transformative model to reduce CEAM, empowering girls to become their own advocates with support from mothers and male allies, effectuating sustainable community-owned changes and a socio-cultural environment conducive for Target 5.3; Some 78 percent of project-involved girls, women and male youth attempted to delay early-age marriages with an amazing 90 percent success rate.

This Brief Highlights How To Enable Sustainable Changes To Achieve SDG Target 5.3 Based On The Successes Of The Model.

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4Girls Not Brides - Country Data.
5Shahdadkot (Sindh), Jaffarabad (Balochistan) Muzaffargarh (Punjab), and Swat (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa).
What Drives Child & Early-Age Marriages?

Drivers directly perpetuate the practice of CEAM; these factors are complexly linked to one another and further complemented by maintainers, enablers, and triggers (Chart 1) – conditions that help keep the practice in place or allow it to persist. **Socio-cultural norms** strongly rooted within the family and community lead to CEAM. Girls are considered a *bojh* or burden - the urgency of ridding one of this is triggered by the onset of puberty that links girls’ sexual maturity to notions of family honour. Facing pressure from family and community to marry young girls, parents fear social consequences of breaking with generational traditions and rush to arrange marriages of young girls, and often boys as well. These norms further dictate that girls are unproductive members of natal household; therefore investing in them is seen wasteful, undermining girls’ access to education, healthcare, and employment. Usually prohibited from earning, girls’ principle value in natal homes is their betrothal with family elders capitalising this to forge, cement or expands social capital within kinship and community. Such arrangements do not take into account age and are near impossible to break off, because doing so would rupture family and community ties, leading to a wide array of commonplace harmful cultural practices and traditions such as *watta-satta*, *pait-likhi* and *swara*.

Poorer households face significantly greater pressure and risk of social censure. Contrary to common belief, a causal link between income-based poverty and CEAM did not emerge; rather cases of CEAM in richer households were noted. Multidimensional poverty and pressures of class lead to a weaker ability of the poor to resist the real drivers of CEAM. Education, mostly available to richer households, emerged as a preventative mechanism.

**Religious actors encourage** the practice of CEAM by preaching the importance of marrying girls as early as possible. **Cultural beliefs perpetrated as religious obligations** enable the practice and are vehemently propagated by religious actors, and community elders alike. Across all provinces it is commonly said that it is *haram* or religiously forbidden, to eat any food an unmarried girl cooks post-menarche, amongst other myths that are not rooted in religious instruction. Inadequate laws and poor implementation maintain and enable CEAM. Poorly informed untrained marriage registrars lack legal knowledge and perform marriage ceremonies and register marriages without verifying the bride and groom’s age, relying on the word of parents and elders. Moreover,
some clerics promote the idea of shara’i nikah, where a cleric solemnises a marriage verbally, which therefore has no legal status but is socially accepted and allows marriage under the legal age. Low birth registrations, particularly of girls, further enables the practice as there is no means of verifying age at marriage.

**Findings**

Humsathi demonstrates that change in practices and attitudes are possible. Project interventions included:

- Provision of Adolescent Friendly Spaces (AFS), as safe spaces for girls (and later mothers) to gather, gain knowledge and skills and discuss problems without fear of social censure;
- Creating female and male youth cohorts and a mothers’ cohort strengthened to act;
- Capacity-building to enhance self-confidence and leadership, knowledge base, and skills for communication, leadership, and advocacy;
- Opportunities to practice and exercise leadership.

All participants became change makers, widely sharing information. Women largely shared information with immediate female relatives; only a few shared information with their husbands and with in-laws, indicating a possible lack of influence in such relationships. Some women shared information with neighbours, far less so with friends, underscoring restrictions on women’s social capital. Female youth cohorts’ spheres of influence, too, were limited to family, but extended to school friends. Comparatively, male youth cohorts have a more diverse universe of influence, including friends from schools, jobs, neighbourhood, and social media.

The end of project impact-evaluation triangulated multiple data sources, including a quantitative mini-survey, focus groups discussions, interviews and case studies⁶, and revealed that **78 percent participants had acted to stop CEAM**⁷ with an impressive success rate of 90 percent. Clearly, with the right interventions, age-old norms and traditions can be overturned. Sixty percent of actions sought to delay or stop early-marriages within immediate families. Significantly, 28 percent of actions by girls sought to delay their own marriages, a momentous change since at the start of the project girls were unable to express themselves and unable to communicate even with mothers. Particularly for girls, mothers and coordinators of the Adolescent Friendly Spaces (AFS) were vital allies for change. Case studies confirm that mothers were key sources of support and have acted as both interlocutors and buffers with fathers, in a few cases even threatening legal action. Family elders, especially grandfathers and fathers were the largest obstacle to changes in family customs.

Young girls have gained confidence to speak up and advocate for themselves and others. They initiated discussions, questioning harmful practices within families and communities, including before fathers and brothers and in public gatherings overcoming substantial opposition. Girls have started sharing information and issues with more responsive mothers, elder siblings and cousins, as well as with Youth Cohort peers. Female Youth Cohorts have started using break times in school to share information with girls who do not visit the AFS about the harmful effects of CEAM and its illegality; right to choose their spouse; continue education; access to reproductive health information and services; and even sexual harassment. Findings indicate that girls are proactively carving spaces for their voices and succeeding.

Attitudes and perceptions have been transformed. A striking difference is a narrowing of the previous substantial gender gap in what is considered an ideal age for getting married, particularly amongst older men who, earlier, were most inclined to favour early-age marriages for girls. Changes in attitudes regarding CEAM were reported within project-engaged individuals and families - mothers in

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⁶A quantitative mini-survey was developed to establish correspondence with insights from the qualitative tools used in the endline assessment (FGDs, and IDIs) to measure impact. The survey was administered to 166 project participants including male and female youth cohorts, and groups of mothers/elder women.

⁷During the project cycle, 179 early-aged marriages have been successfully stopped or delayed by project participants.
particular have overturned personal beliefs regarding CEAM and vowed to disallow the practice within their houses. Parents are supporting asking for consent before arranging marriages and prioritising completion of girls’ education. Mobility of girls has also increased - earlier they had to either secretly come to the AFS or be escorted by male family members, however, female youth cohorts now report ease of coming to and from the AFS by themselves.

**The Humsathi Model – How Target 5.3 Can Be Achieved**

**Adolescent Friendly Spaces** were set up in central locations, easily accessible by girls and women, to provide a safe space to gather and ally with their peers; AFS coordinators who were local resource persons curated these spaces. Coordinators helped to surmount initial difficulties young girls faced to get permission to visit AFS, by consistently lobbying with family members, particularly mothers, and invited them to attend sessions to see what the space had to offer. Encouragement and opportunities to voice their thoughts and opinions overcame girls’ initial hesitation in speaking up for fear they would be silenced. Women and girls took ownership of the AFS, promoting its usefulness within families and social circles. The AFS has been pivotal in increasing girls’ confidence and AFS Coordinators unanimously cited as crucial sources of support for actions to stop CEAM and encouraging other rights-seeking behaviour. Of all interventions, the AFS were rated the highest by female youth cohorts, followed by mothers’ cohorts, and male youth cohorts, underscoring the vitality of a physical space for women and girls.

Forming and fostering **peer network groups** of girls and boys/young men as youth cohorts enabled a sense of solidarity and facilitated collective advocacy (although the male youth cohort did not have a unique space for meeting, it did provide important social solidarity of peers.) Youth Cohorts collectively approached elders to stop/delay early-age marriages, as a means of increasing influence and bargaining power. Youth Cohorts also functioned as networks of information and support system for young girls and boys to discuss issues pertaining to reproductive health.

**Working with members from same families and communities** helped create space for girls’ voices within households. Additionally, it allowed family members to collectively lobby for change in immediate and extended families. **Engaging with mothers** especially helped break down the walls of silence impeding mother-daughter communication and led to mothers emerging as key allies and change-makers. **Inclusion of men and boys** helped to reduce resistance to changing practices and norms and increased empathy and support. Other community members such as teachers and Lady Health Workers (LHW) were important allies in spreading key messages to girls and other community members. **Public and private schools emerged as receptive spaces** for peer learning groups on reproductive health and conversations on sexual harassment.

**Knowledge** regarding the legal age of marriage, negative health consequences of CEAM and dispelling myths and fears regarding reproductive health unlocked agency in girls, mothers and male youth, catalysing right-seeking behaviour. An expanded knowledge base and deeper understanding enabled participants to defy centuries old customs and challenge the normative rules in their communities. People’s **knowledge of existing laws was vital for negotiating change within families** and provided girls and their mothers an effective advocacy tool to resist illegal child marriages. Access to information coupled with **capacity building** of leadership, communication, and advocacy skills and opportunities to exercise leadership and engage with decision-makers enhanced self-awareness and confidence of girls. It allowed youth to advocate for their rights and those of others. All groups from all sites reported Shirkat Gah trainings as the principle source of courage in taking action to prevent CEAM.

**Infotainment and creative means of expression** such as short animated video clips (for instance UNICEF’s *Meena ki kahani* series), theatre performances, open mics, and storytelling sessions were crucial and effective means of spreading awareness regarding CEAM ensuring higher retention rates. These were also effective means to start conversations with adults and decision-makers without directly questioning their authority. Interactive modalities helped break the ice and encouraged intergenerational discussions. Theatre performances on CEAM have been cited as sources of inspiration for action.
The combination of safe spaces, capacity building and innovative communication engaging multiple community members will allow Pakistan to achieve SDG Target 5.3. The state must systematically commit to renouncing early age marriage, emphasising on the importance of education, healthcare, agency, and economic independence of young girls.

"I have dreams too.
Let me live a little, become something...then I’ll marry"

18 year old girl, Muzaffargarh
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