

CASE STUDY: UPTAKE AND IMPACT OF LIFE SKILLS AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT CURRICULUM ON GIRLS

Background

Despite the global support to MDG 3: **Promote gender equality and empower women** particularly reducing disparity in primary and secondary education, more than 60 million girls below the age of 18 are married each year at the cost of personal development and education. Child marriages, many to men twice or thrice their age, are most common in developing countries. The lifelong adverse effects of early age marriages are reflected by high fertility and maternal deaths, low female literacy and inadequate representation of girls/women in employment, economic assets and or participation in government.

Pakistani Context

In Pakistan, 37% of girls are married below the age of 18, mostly from the poorest and marginalized communities with little out-cry. Furthermore, socio-cultural norms and traditions endorse social and institutional exclusions that discriminate and restrict girls from personal development, critical healthcare services, education, and making informed choices that affects their lives. Not surprisingly, primary enrollment for girls stagnates at 60% and drops to 29% for secondary education.

The Intervention

In 2007, Rutgers WPF with funding from David and Lucile Packard Foundation initiated a 3 year project known as '**Aagahi se Aagay**' (Empowering Girls-Transforming Communities) to empower girls and their communities by providing life skills education, economic/social empowerment skills and information on SRH issues. **The main purpose of the project was to educate and transform communities to delay early age marriage through increasing school enrollment, leadership development, life skills education, SRH information and learning's on economic and social empowerment.**

The case study examines the uptake of life skills and economic education on school going girls and their communities. Using qualitative interviews with girls, parents, teachers and school principals including community leaders, we specifically aimed to understand what drives social transformation in two traditionally conservative communities (Sanghar and Gujranwala).

Change via Girls- Very confidently, girls both in Sanghar and Gujranwala mentioned that there are many challenges regarding education - resistance from the family and community, lack of transport (or safe transport) and household level inequities compared to boys. **Within their households even though all of these girls are going to school, there seems to be**

some level of parental reluctance on the benefit of education for girls. For almost all the girls, marriage is accepted as a critical necessity of life.

Girls in Sanghar and Gujranwala gave numerous examples, of early age marriage as a common practice in their communities and families. While the respondents cited anecdotes of how their views had *now been changed* about the risks of early marriages through learning by the project, **there remained a gap between realization and the freedom to delay marriages.**

Continuity via Teachers/Principal - As part of the project implementation, Rutgers WPF in collaboration with its local implementing partners trained 2-3 teachers in each school for teaching the LSE and economic empowerment curriculum. Most teachers showed enthusiasm and actively participated in learning the curriculum and teaching to students. Interviews with the implementing partners revealed that **young teachers were more receptive to the idea than older teachers.**

Enlisting Parents - Overall parents were "satisfied" that their girls were receiving LSE and economic empowerment skills. From the parents perspective they noticed a positive change among their girls in terms of confidence, capacities to handle problems and seek solutions, and more willingness (and ability) to have discussions with their mothers. There were a few encouraging examples, where the girls served as "advocates" for supporting their mothers or other female household members in making decisions. **What we did also see is that poverty and ignorance are the biggest driver for sustaining early age marriages – as an economically viable option for impoverished parents.**

Community Education Officials - From our discussions both public and private education officials were receptive to the idea of supporting (incorporating) i.e "institutionalization" of the LSE and the economic empowerment curriculum to be embedded within their routine teaching. The "bureaucratic" challenges were markedly more for public officials compared to private sector.

Uptake for Girls and Teachers - Our FGDs with girls highlighted several major individual level accomplishments of the LSE such as confidence to address issues, improved communication skills and self-esteem to initiate in amicable terms difficult discussions within their households (i.e with mothers, fathers, and brothers), and to rebuke harassment outside of their homes.

Girls and teachers alike vastly praised this GEE (Girls Economic Empowerment) curriculum and its benefits. Most important was the practical and convenience of the workbook and toolkit and the relevance of the topics. For example, many girls referred to seeing themselves as the depicted character “Fatima”. Teachers who participated were positive about the outcomes of this initiative and stated that their own learning and awareness also improved through teaching the course. They reported improvements in their own confidence levels, and communication skills during the course of teaching the curriculum to young girls.

Acceptability of SRH Information - With regards to information on SRHR some teachers were cautiously supportive, while some maintained personal ambivalence (even though they were involved in teaching their students) about how it would be perceived in the long term as the community became more aware of the teaching.

Effect of Economic Empowerment - Implementing partners in Sanghar and Gujranwala report many instances where girls have started their own initiatives to generate income. One of the girls has been able to sell embroidered cloth and also involved her mother and sisters to do the same and generate more income. Such instances indicate the success of the curriculum into translating learning into action. However, this is only an preliminary step and additional financial and business literacy to seek markets, resources, and viable networks is needed.

Changes on Early Age Marriage - Early marriages have been and are a common practice in Gujranwala and Sanghar, and continue to happen. According to our respondents, poverty and divesting of parental responsibility earlier are the main motivators for these practices. Data collected from stakeholders (girls more so than their parents) show that they “condemn” early child marriages and promote education. However, upon further probing, this “condemnation” is still superficial and not an internalized norm.

Sustainability and Institutional Changes - Discussions with both implementing partners, Bargad and SAFWCO showed that the Aagahi se Agay project improved staff technical know-how and motivation to mobilize communities to openly accept LSE/social rights and economic skills for girls. Principals (private schools) and education department officials were both hopeful that they would advocate for “institutional” incorporation of this learning into school curriculum. They were however; less optimistic about the tedious processes of textbook or curriculum additions/revisions, and mechanisms for seeking approvals of provincial and at times numerous textbook boards and officials. For private schools the immediate uptake may be easier, but in the long term it would be tremendously beneficial Rutgers WPF can assist both the private and public sector schools to “advocate” (i.e obtain) formal

Government of Punjab and Sindh Education Board endorsed revisions.

Policy and Advocacy Challenges - The area where there is the greatest need for “dialogue and advocacy” to truly impact early age marriages and education for girls is policy level.

- **Most often policies are deliberately absent or vague**, or poorly enforced so as to make little difference on negative socio-cultural norms.
- **Civil society and NGOs can push for policies that advance the rights and opportunities** for girls/women – in **education, economic skills and health**.
- For decades Pakistan has undertaken numerous adolescent advancement initiatives, some successful others not so, **yet seldom do the lessons get translated into policy or programmatic interventions** owned by Government.

Recommendations - The project “Aagahi se Aagay” has been a much needed and innovative intervention in the communities **in initiating the process** of social and economic empowerment amongst girls and acceptance in the community. However, social transformation is a slow process and for lasting impact the project will require a longer duration and scaling up of the scope. Then only will we start seeing lasting change across communities in Pakistan.

The project initiative with school going girls has worked to improve the personal growth of girls and the next step is to more specifically **enable the social environment** – connect in the minds of parents the benefits of economic opportunities to educational attainment, regardless of the gender of their child. Evidence from across the world suggests that systematic change in societies is only successful when interventions are aimed at the broader society and when communities themselves realize and accept the gains.

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