

# YES I DO. BASELINE STUDY IN PAKISTAN

## Gaining insight into child marriage and teenage pregnancy

In Pakistan, the Sindh government recently passed a law raising the legal age of marriage to 18 and also made provision for Hindu marriage registrations at the provincial and national level. However, child marriage still has widespread societal acceptance.

The YES I DO programme (2016-2020) aims to enhance young women's decision making space regarding whether, when and whom to marry as well as on whether, when and with whom to have children. The research component of the programme explores the interlinkages between child marriage and teenage pregnancy and aims to provide context specific evidence to support programming and advocacy for the Yes I Do Alliance.



Map of Pakistan -Sindh province

The baseline study gives insights into the inter-play of causes and consequences of child marriage and teenage pregnancy in selected areas of Sanghar and Umerkot districts in the Sindh province of Pakistan. It highlights the voices and experiences of young people with respect to how they claim and exercise their sexual and reproductive health and rights, while at the same time it gives insight into how stakeholders in the community influence this process. The study provides recommendations on how young people in particular, alongside community members, can be engaged in the YES I DO programme.

## Methodology

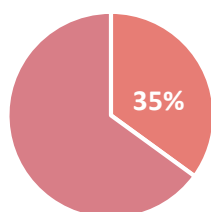
### Mixed methods study in Sanghar and Umerkot

By using a mixed methods research design, quantitative and qualitative data were collected in two districts of the YES I DO programme: Sanghar and Umerkot. The methods used included surveys, focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews and key informant interviews. The analysis included a thematic content analysis as well descriptive statistics.

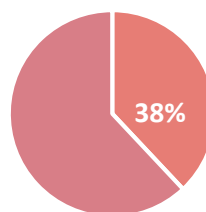
- Household questionnaires with 1,602 female and male respondents aged 15-24; 51% in Umerkot and 49% in Sanghar, 72.5% females and 27.5% males
- 8 semi-structured interviews and 3 key informant interviews: 2 community leaders, 1 religious leader, 3 district officers, 3 teachers, 1 medical officer and 1 lady health visitor
- 10 focus group discussions with young women, young men, and parents or guardians

## Results

The baseline data indicate that child marriage was widely prevalent, at 40% in Umerkot and 30% in Sanghar. Among males, a higher proportion in Sanghar (25%) reported to be married before the age of 18 as compared to 13% in Umerkot. This suggests that child marriage affects females disproportionately more than males, and more so in Umerkot than in Sanghar. Moreover, child marriage was reported by both Hindus and Muslims. When looking at the age difference between partners, married women reported to be about 4.6 years younger than their spouses.



CHILD MARRIAGE RATE  
AMONG FEMALE RESPONDENTS  
(18-24 years)



TEENAGE PREGNANCY RATE  
AMONG FEMALE RESPONDENTS  
(20-24 years)

Teenage pregnancy was almost equally prevalent as child marriage and occurred under the social sanction of child marriage. Among female respondents between 20 and 24 years, about 38% had experienced a teenage pregnancy. However, among male respondents in the same age group, only 12% i.e. 27 males had become fathers under the age of 20.

Participants highlighted various reasons for the practice of child marriage. While it was considered a cultural tradition, it was also seen as a religious practice both by Hindus and Muslims. Furthermore, young people were expected to obey and honour the decisions of elders in their family and community, often leading to child marriage. In the context of high poverty, girls were considered an economic burden and marrying them off could alleviate financial insecurity. A lack of educational and meaningful job opportunities for both young men and women played a role in perpetuating child marriage. Overall, the baseline study shows a general acceptance of the practice of child marriage in Sanghar and Umerkot.

### Role of elders: the question of honour and choice

Social norms played an influential role; such that young people were expected to obey and honour the opinions of elders in their family and community. These elders occupied important roles in the decision-making processes for young people. The data suggest that young people, particularly females, embody family honour and that families exert a strong influence and are an authority on decision-making for them. This was reflected in the results where young people largely agreed that they should honour their family decisions even if they are unwilling to marry. Moreover, a majority of young people also agreed that family honour/reputation is protected by marrying girls young and a little less than half the sample agreed that marrying girls young may resolve family disputes. Furthermore, in an environment of high poverty, it appears that families perceived girls to be an economic liability and were hence married off early.

*“If our elders are happy, we are also happy. There is no custom to get the opinion of boys and girls regarding their marriages.”<sup>1</sup>*

Considering this limited space for decision-making, the data also shed some light on the choice perceived and exercised by young people regarding marriage. Thirty-seven percent (37%) of married young women reported that it was *not* their choice to marry, while very few married male respondents reported the same. Zooming in on those who had experienced child marriage, most young women did not feel that it was an appropriate age to have married nor that it was their choice. Young unmarried people expressed that the age they desired to marry was higher than 18, which was also regarded as the ideal age for a girl/boy to marry when generally asked to all respondents. Lastly, young people also expressed that the low level of literacy among elders in the community influenced the elderly’s norms and beliefs on child marriage.

When asked about the major consequences of child marriage, early childbearing was highlighted most by participants. In fact, many married respondents including those who experienced child marriage reported using no contraceptive method at all. Participants of interviews, including key informants, showed mixed attitudes regarding the effects of teenage pregnancy. On the one hand, some believed that young women’s bodies are stronger to have babies. On the other hand, several participants advocated against early childbearing because of its adverse health consequences, having witnessed birthing complications in their communities.

A few participants highlighted the adverse psychological effects of child marriage on young women. Although they are still young, they are expected to take on adult responsibilities and adjust to a new family environment. Lastly, although lack of education was mentioned as a cause of child marriage, it was also stated as a consequence, but mainly for girls. In fact, the findings from the baseline suggest that the effects for young men who experience child marriage are unclear within and to the community.

## Religious leaders: key actors and but sometimes unlikely allies

Religious leaders were considered important persons to advocate against child marriage, particularly when it came to suggesting important stakeholders to fight against the practice. This was evident for both Muslim and Hindu religious leaders. Moreover, 40% of the respondents across both districts felt that child marriage was a religious practice, also highlighting the strong role religion can play in influencing social norms and perceptions regarding child marriage. However, it was reported that that some religious leaders are involved in solemnizations involving youth under the age of 18.

*“Religious leaders, who solemnize marriage must be made responsible and punishable, if they solemnize any child marriage.”- KI, District Health Officer, Sanghar*

## Urgent need to transform social and gender norms

The perception of child marriage being a religious and cultural custom went along with harmful gender-specific attitudes about young people in Sanghar and Umerkot. An illustration was the belief that

---

<sup>1</sup> Focus group discussion, Females, 20-24 years, Umerkot

marrying young means that brides are more obedient and respectful to their husbands; and that wives must be subservient to their husband. These beliefs were shared by both young women and men themselves. Male respondents also believed that men should be the household heads and that even if young men are unwilling to marry a partner, they must do so for family honour. Thus, the findings suggest that alongside engaging women in the YES I DO programme, it is crucial to draw support from men and boys in the community as well.



To sum up, in Sanghar and Umerkot, child marriage and teenage pregnancy were common and influenced by social norms and cultural traditions. Honouring the decisions of elders and maintaining the family reputation were some of the key reasons for child marriage, combined with religious beliefs and the stronghold of patriarchal norms that govern the behaviour of both young women and men. Secure forms of employment are scarce, educational opportunities are low and poverty is high, which also contributes to child marriage. Awareness about sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) is limited and contraception use among married young people is low.

## Recommendations

### Recommendations for the YES I DO intervention strategies

- Invite and engage both Hindu and Muslim religious leaders to share and reconcile differing opinions on child marriage to create a joint strategy on raising awareness and accountability
- Target specific influencers in the community to create allies such as specific elders who can support young people's and their family's decision if they choose to deviate from social norms
- Design and promote both intra- and inter-generational dialogues that are sex segregated and preferably also between sexes. These would target both interactions between older women, between older men, and between elders and young people
- Engage both male and female role models in leadership positions within the community for career counselling for young people in the programme
- Expand the basket of choices that young people have with respect to jobs by exposing young people to field visits to different enterprises
- Strengthen civil marriage registration processes, particularly for Hindus and promote adherence to the Sindh Hindu Marriages Act 2016 & Hindu Marriages Bill 2017
- Create a network of female community health volunteers that raise SRHR-related awareness and promote contraception use
- Train 'Kirans<sup>2</sup>' on communication and negotiation skills to help them better handle adverse opinions or backlash from community members; and encourage collaboration between them and champions such as religious leaders

---

<sup>2</sup> 'Kirans' are a cadre of young women and men selected and trained by Rutgers in Pakistan, who spread and advocate positive SRHR messages in the community and address the topic of child marriage.

- Share information on child marriage and teenage pregnancy that includes health, religious, social and psychological, consequences, with specific attention to rights and bodily integrity of young people
- Focus on decision-making not only regarding child marriage but also pregnancy, contraception use and birth spacing – particularly for those young people who are already married
- Engage boys and young men in programming efforts to transform attitudes regarding masculinity and femininity to strengthen the fight against child marriage

## Recommendations for further research

- Explore the barriers and opportunities for inter-generational communication around SRHR
- Explore young women and men's preferences around marriage and family formation: child agency versus family pressure. At the same time, also explore intra-household dynamics when it comes to marriage and childbearing-related decisions
- Explore the agency of Kirans on how they resist and negotiate their own position in their family and community when they face backlash on their work against child marriage