Empowering Adolescents in Rural Sindh
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**Introduction:**

Pakistan, currently, has been recorded to have the largest youth population ever in its history with two-thirds of Pakistanis under the age of 30. Youth accounts for all the population between the ages of fifteen and twenty nine. Pakistan’s future depends upon this youth and how its potential can be built and subsequently utilized. Providing quality education, employment opportunities and awareness among youth can make an exponential difference resulting in far-reaching and long-lasting impacts.

Realizing the need for sensitisation of communities to these issues, Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN) along with its implementing partner, Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO), has adopted a Life Skills-based Education (LSBE) Programme for Adolescents under its IKEA Foundation and UNICEF funded ‘Improving Lives of Adolescents in Pakistan-IALP’ project.

This project targets 44 Union Councils in two districts of Sindh – 17 in Ghotki and 27 in Khairpur. The project aims to ensure that adolescents have increased access to and use of information along with improved avenues to form and express their opinions. Thereby safeguarding their rights and encouraging parents and communities to help build a secure environment for adolescents. Therefore, contribution of adults in aiding such initiatives is imperative for the socio-economic uplift of adolescents to help prevent any violations of their rights.

The primary objectives of this project are:

a. Adolescents are able to connect with each other and other members of the community through the implementation of participatory communication platforms and have the opportunity to be agents of change in their communities.

b. Community members, families and influencers are mobilised to protect adolescent girls and boys from abuse, exploitation and other rights violations.
About the case studies
IALP project activities have resulted in transformational change in their targeted communities. Young men and women are exhibiting positive change by altering the prejudicial mind-sets of people related to child rights, early marriages, and birth spacing. Adolescents along with Key Community Influencers (KCI), Adolescent Champions (AC) and Local Support Organisation (LSO) representatives have joined hands to work together for the well-being of all adolescents in their respective areas. It is praise-worthy to see how Zulfiqar, a KCI, was able to provide education to the children of his village in minimal resources and Rasheeda, an illiterate KCI, created awareness in her village regarding child rights. Adolescent Champions on the other hand, became the young advocates to their fellow peers for protecting their rights. The contributions by LSO representatives developed a creative environment for adolescents by the including their parents and inspiring sustainable behavioural changes in the adults. Whereas, married adolescents after knowing their options for birth spacing and understanding the demerits of early marriages, were in position to make healthy decisions regarding their own future and the future of their children.

These nine distinctive case studies exhibit stories of the brave individuals of Ghotki and Khairpur, who worked relentlessly to change the prejudicial mind-set of people in their community regarding health, education and rights of adolescents. It can be gathered that the awareness paved way for a better and more prosperous future for the adolescents.
1. **The Creative Impact of two**

   In a tiny poverty stricken village, Tahir Gadani of Union Council Wahi Ghoto, resides a young couple both seventeen years old. Sadam and Fazeelah with their four-month old baby girl. Belonging to an area with a rather conservative mind-set, they had become victims of early marriage and child birth. Unfortunately for them, their daughter now suffers from a critical heart condition where a valve of her heart is blocked. With the hope of seeing their daughter in good health, they take a long journey to the city of Multan every month for a medical check-up under the burden of financial insecurity.

   Despite realising the difficulty of their situation, they probably would have continued in the same direction had it not been for RSPN and SRSO who initiated awareness sessions on family planning and birth spacing. They were lucky enough to attend an hour long session and came out with a completely changed perspective on how to plan their future. While the illness of their child is out of their control, they were satisfied with the knowledge they had gained from the session on reproductive health and rights. This exposure would not only help them make better decisions but also empower them to help others in their community. “It feels extremely empowering to know about our reproductive health and rights,” said a hopeful Sadam. They are now working together to put an end to child marriages in their community. They have managed to save many from the atrocities of child marriages which is still prevalent in the area.

   The champions were grateful to SRSO and RSPN for providing them a platform where they feel enabled enough to bring a positive and needed change in their community. Fazeelah hopes that these initiatives will scale up and spread across to more remote areas that need the same attention and exposure. By fostering linkages between community members, SRSO strives to inculcate the spirit of social responsibility amongst the youth so that they are able to encourage social uplift of the community.
2. A Fearless Champion

The *wadera* system of village Haji Gawaar Malik which has been practised for decades now, has diminished the socioeconomic development of its people. Except for farm work, women are not allowed to go outside their houses, let alone pursue their education. Amidst all the restrictions on women’s mobility, the youth seems to have started challenging the norm. Shaida, a nineteen year old woman, is one of those champions.

“My uncles were against my education, so I would sneak out of my home to go to school while telling them that I have gone for farm work. My parents knew and I confided in them,” says Shaida. “I came to know about my rights through a training conducted by SRSO and I was one of the participants identified as champion”, she adds.

“I was selected as a champion by Village Organisation Gawar Malik. In the beginning my parents were reluctant to send me for the training, but they finally agreed. The local elders became quite inquisitive seeing me leave the village in a vehicle for the training, it did not sit well with them. They threatened my parents with consequences, but my parents resisted and allowed me to attend”, recounts Shaida.

“The training helped me learn about my rights, my abilities, problems that arise from early marriages, importance of education and equality of education for both girls and boys. Realisation of my potential gave me the confidence to empower myself and the people in my village”, says Shaida. As a champion, she taught all that she had learned from the training to her group of eighteen girls, aged ten to nineteen. Girls took active part throughout the sessions. Shaida expresses her gratitude to SRSO for bringing awareness to the youth of her area.

“I want to break the stereotypes dictating that the only role for women is that of a housewife.” she exclaimed with joy. After witnessing the change in Shaida through trainings, her uncle and elders of village, who were at first against Shaida’s education, willingly enrolled their daughters in schools.

Whilst expressing her gratitude Shaida said “SRSO has done an incredible job by creating awareness and knowledge among the youth of the area”. The trainings turned out to be a life changing experience for Shaida which encouraged her to empower women and adolescents through education.
3. A Dream Fulfilled

The classroom resonated with harmonious echoes as the students read aloud “A for apple, B for ball...” written on the black chalk board by their teacher, Zulfiqar Ali at Mubarak Lakhan School. For what seemed like a far-fetched dream to become a teacher, he believed it to be a miracle for delivering lessons to these little angels. “Seeing the children working in fields and wasting time, I yearned to do something beneficial for them” he says. Zulfiqar was already a key community influencer of his poverty stricken village and Union Council Qadirpur Taluka Ghotki. As a social activist he realised the dilemma of poverty and its implications. It gave him great pain to see children being forced to seek employment to earn a livelihood at an age where they should have been studying instead. Along with being poor, the children were also deprived of a proper school facility where they could attain quality education.

The depriving state of the area would have probably remained unchanged had it not been for SRSO that arrived there with training sessions under the project of IKEA/UNICEF ‘Improving Adolescent’s Lives in Pakistan’. These sessions gave Zulfiqar a new hope to fulfil his dreams. “During the course of a three-day training session, I learned about the rights of adolescents and services that I can render in my capacity for the well-being of adolescents.” This gave Zulfiqar’s enthusiasm a boost to teach the children of his village. The 39-years old Key Community Influencer happened to fulfil the selection criteria of teaching adolescents through Accelerated Learning Program as advertised by Indus Resource Centre. The chairperson of VO, generously allotted him a spare room for holding the classes. It has been successful 8 months since Zulfiqar devoted himself to teaching.

“Had it not been for SRSO, I would not have known the ways I could help provide education to children”, said Zulfiqar.” If given proper directive, people like Zulfiqar have exponential capacity to influence the lives of others. SRSO played a catalytic role in coalescing the community welfare and the well-being of individuals.
4. Making a Difference

Abdul Qadir, a seventeen-year-old adolescent champion, belongs to Takyo Muhammad Pana, a village in Union Council Daharki district Khairpur. From what seemed like a motivated and driven young boy, it was hard to believe that he left schooling after sixth grade. His father Ghulam Rasool worked as a gate keeper and was the only breadwinner of the household. “I was not interested in pursuing studies and spent two years wandering around, I used to be heedless back then with no ambition or goal. Thinking back to it, and I reminisce of how mundane my life used to be,” says Qadir pensively.

This massive shift in his life came about when he was identified by his local Village Organisation and reported back to the SRSO team to become a part of their training sessions under the IKEA/UNICEF project implemented by SRSO: “Improving Adolescents’ Lives in Pakistan”. He willingly accepted this invitation and took rigorous training where he learned a great deal about the rights of adolescents and how they can be better informed about the process of growing up. These trainings gave him confidence about himself and created self-awareness that triggered his inner drive to create a better future for himself. He now found himself having new aspirations and goals where he met a purpose and regained his interest in pursuing education. Another factor that motivated him was his father’s retirement due to his deteriorating health.

Qadir had to make some difficult choices in order to make ends meet. Fortunately, through a friend’s recommendation he found a part-time job at a restaurant as a waiter. Being a hardworking boy, he studied during the day and worked during the night. With passing time and improved literacy he was able to get even better jobs. He then developed an interest in editing pictures and graphic designing, for which he took a training in Adobe Photoshop and refined his skills through online tutorials. His hard work paid off when his skills improved beyond his expectations and landed him with working opportunities online. He now aspires to get a fulltime job where he can showcase his skills to the best of his abilities. “Becoming a full-time employee would surely be a moment of pride for me and my family” said Qadir as he talked about his future ambitions.

The phenomenal impact laid by the trainings has reaped benefits for Qadir and his entire family. SRSO provided him training that enabled him to nurture and carve an ambition for himself. This example truly glorifies SRSO’s vision to empower community and enable them to make the required changes for themselves and create a better future.
5. An Avid Doer

Residing in a rugged and remote village of Union Council Qadirpur district Ghotki is an LSO member Shehnaz, a determined agent of change in her community. Even though she had been brought up in a conservative atmosphere, there were many things she had been exposed to during her work with LSO Dharti Amar. However, it still came as a shock to her when she found out that girls under the age of eighteen are considered children globally.

She was introduced to these fresh concepts when her LSO graciously accepted to take forward the IKEA/UNICEF project “Improving Adolescents Lives in Pakistan” in their district. During the training sessions of this project she came to know about the risks and harms attached with early child marriages and early child birth. The comprehensive trainings helped her understand the concept of adolescent rights thoroughly and also helped her in making more informed decisions in her personal life. Being a mother of a young girl whom she had planned to marry off at an early age according to the prevalent norm of her community, she was convinced to not make her daughter go through this ordeal. She then pledged to instil this awareness among the rest of her community so no one else would make the mistake of tormenting the future of their children. With the help of her LSO chairman, she conducted many awareness raising sessions on adolescent rights. She was rewarded with positive results with the selection of huge number of adolescent champions. These recruitment of champions proved that people are willing to accept this change. They are open to receiving knowledge about the process of growing up, child marriages, child births and other biological changes in young boys and girls. This shift in the mind-set was the success story of 33-years old Shehnaz.

“I will continue to work for the youth of my village as I want to see them successful and enjoy privileges that I could not,” says a satisfied Shehnaz. The impact created by the trainings has been the hallmark of the efforts that she and her team continued to put in. Working under the project gave her a hope to see the youth of her village prosper. Behind the brave efforts of Shehnaz, lies the lifelong commitment of SRSO in catalysing changes and uplifting communities.
6. A Relentless Leader

Shagufta Sulangi, a veteran agent of change has been tirelessly serving for the welfare of her community for the past nine years as the president of LSO Wada Machoon. She belongs to the village Gagri of Union Council Wada Machoon, district Khairpur where her unprecedented contribution and credibility is evident. While her range of work has been diverse and dynamic, awareness about adolescence rights still posed a challenge. It had not been heard of before and to convince the community members to send their young children for awareness sessions was not an easy task for Shagufta. However, nothing could come in her way and she managed to persuade all the parents through her consistent efforts.

“Improving Adolescents’ Lives in Pakistan” is a project funded by IKEA/UNICEF and implemented by RSPN/SRSO where they raise awareness among the youth about their rights, biological growth, child marriages, early child birth and girl’s education among other issues. These sessions paved a new way towards prosperity for the community members as it was empowering the youth responsible for a better future of the area. This change helped the adolescents become aware of their surroundings which subsequently helped them with self-confidence and gave them a clarity on their ambitions. It aided them to become more responsible which was also satisfying for their parents. Seeing the parents’ content with the changes in their children gave Shagufta’s morale a boost. Educating girls was becoming less taboo as the enrolment of both the genders started to increase in schools along with engagement in extracurricular activities contributing further to the mental and physical well-being of the adolescent champions.

A new spark has been ignited within the adolescents of Gagri village. It is evident that prejudices can be reduced by creating awareness; new opportunities can be realized by involving local key stakeholders. SRSO contributed to social change in partnership with LSO.
7. Battling the Odds

Rasheeda, a 35-years old Key Community Influencer has been an active member of LSO Dharti Ammar. Being aware of the inadequacies of her village Mubarak Lakhan of Union Council Qadirpur district Ghotki, Rasheeda has rendered numerous services for the well-being of her people. The religious conservatism, poverty and lack of awareness, had been great obstacles in the way of the development of the village.

The four days training by SRSO “Improving Adolescents Lives in Pakistan” provided Rasheeda with knowledge that gave her exposure. Learning about adolescent rights had been illuminating for Rasheeda. Being an active social worker, it granted her an opportunity to raise the awareness amongst her co-villagers. “Due to poverty, parents married off adolescent girls because of their economically passive and burdening role in the household,” Rasheeda explained. Through skills refining training, Rasheeda interacted with parents and convinced them to stop adolescent marriages.

During the trainings, a 14-year-old girl in the village got abducted by nomads. The trainings had enabled Rasheeda to approach and take assistance from the Government’s Child Protection Unit. “By the time we tracked the girl with the help of CPU, she had been sold to a family in Peshawar.” CPU finally managed to trace the girl and rescued her.

Rasheeda has extended her heartiest gratitude to SRSO who had been a source of support to her village. It can be recognized from Rasheeda’s story that it only takes a courageous person to make a difference. A key role of SRSO’s staff is to identify and capacitate local activists like Rasheeda.
8. A Bud in the Mud

Somina, 14-years old, is an adolescent champion of village Farid Abad, Union Council Hadil Shah and Taluka Kingri. Growing up she had witnessed the patriarchal system in her community first hand. Belonging from a comparatively educated family, she aspires to be a pilot one day. Her selection as an adolescent champion by Village Organisation Farid Abad gave her a reason to lead and to incorporate the same spirit within other girls of her area.

“The four days training sessions made me aware of my rights, which earlier seemed non-existent”. She appeared enthusiastic in learning about her mental, psychological, and physical nourishment as an adolescent. “I could not wait to tell more people about what I had learned” said an excited Somina. It was hard at first for her to gather a group of girls but with the help of the Key Community Influencer she managed to gather eighteen girls in her group. Her session initially faced reluctance and confusion by the participants but through consistency and determination she remained successful in her quest. Trainings filled a confidence in Somina to tutor adolescent girls who needed help with their studies. “I tutor five girls between the ages twelve and thirteen without any fee at my home,” explains Somina. Tutoring is an honest attempt by Somina to fulfil her dream of seeing girls of her village gain education. She herself is almost at the concluding stage of tenth grade and will continue her studies to fulfil her dreams.

“Trainings nurtured me and made me passionate towards working for the girls of my community,” Somina says. As Somina continues to create awareness and fulfil her ambition, she will wake many from their slumber and empower adolescents in moulding a better future for themselves which is in line with the vision of SRSO.
9. Honing a mother’s voice

Shafique and Hira are a young dynamic couple settled in village Khanpur of Union Council Khanpur district Khairpur. At the age of seventeen, Hira is a mother to a one-year-old baby girl for whom they anticipate a bright future with everything that they could not attain for themselves. Living in a community where early marriage is social norm for females, Hira and others of her village were completely unaware of the risks that come with it. She herself faced a lot of physical and psychological illnesses because of not being old enough for child birth. Having first-hand experience of all the problems that a girl faces during early age pregnancy and birth, Hira felt it was essential for her to do something about this social norm. She did not want anyone else to go through the same situation and was aching to make a change. Her desire to do this seemed possible when SRSO in partnership with RSPN introduced training sessions on “reproductive health and rights” in her village. She was pleasantly surprised with all the fresh knowledge she was exposed to which would help her make better decisions regarding family planning and birth spacing in the future. She felt that this information needs to be widespread in her village for which she started to raise awareness among her community members including her in-laws. Her attempts in doing this were taken well from the community and she was able to gradually bring about a shift in the mind-set of her people. With a supportive husband and mutual consent, she was also able to take precautions necessary for birth spacing. Being self-aware, Hira had been confident and vocal about her perspective on life. She went as far as to say that legal age of marriage should be 25 years rather than eighteen years.

Hira has requested SRSO to spread awareness in masses and other villages on reproductive health and rights of women. “Women need to be uplifted from their existing deplorable conditions; they need to evolve with the changing times”, she said with determination. Her conviction shows how SRSO works for the impact which not merely touches the life of an individual but the entire community, and thus strengthens society as a whole.
Conclusion

These nine case studies illustrate that the rural adolescents can be given awareness about their rights, and that they can play a critical role in spreading this awareness amongst their peers themselves. Just as could be seen in Qadir’s case who, because of his peers, realized the need to strive for his future. This tells us the significance of peer-to-peer learning approach which adolescents tend to respond well towards. It has been proven to be more effective as peers have similar mind-sets and experiences which keeps them in a better position to understand one another, whilst ensuring efficiency in addressing their issues.

The involvement of the community institutions creates local enabling environment that brings on board local key influencers and community leaders and their backing gives the Adolescent Champions full confidence to work in their designated areas. Apart from Adolescent Champions, other community agents of change are also playing a key role in raising awareness about the rights of adolescent boys and girls.

The training Programme of the ‘Improving Adolescents Lives in Pakistan’ under the IKEA/UNICEF project implemented by RSPN and SRSO was well appreciated by the participants. All of them highlighted that their work was catalysed by participating in this training programme. Several participants mentioned that there was a need to spread this training programme to other parts of the Ghotki and Khairpur districts.

The local government is fully aware about the IALP activities and provides support when needed, as shown in the case of the Child Protection Unit rescuing a kidnapped girl. It is important that the Local Support Organisations and Adolescent Champions maintain excellent contacts with local authorities.

Finally, more efforts should be made to capture, document and communicate the excellent work that is happening under the IALP project in two districts of Ghotki and Khairpur. More analysis will also provide opportunities for more learning in order to further improve such projects in the future.

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i According to Human Development Report of 2018
ii According to the definition of Youth provided by the Report
iii https://blog.continu.co/peer-to-peer-learning/