A NEW BEGINNING
IMPROVING ADOLESCENT LIVES IN PAKISTAN
“Young people should be at the forefront of global change and innovation. Empowered, they can be key agents for development and peace.”

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The Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN) provided me with the opportunity to work on Improving Adolescent Lives in Pakistan (IALP). I would like to express my special thanks to my supervisor Mr. Khaleel Ahmed Tetlay, Chief Operating Officer (CEO) RSPN, who provided me this excellent opportunity to work on IALP project. I would also want to thank Ms. Foha Raza, Programme Officer Communications RSPN who has been great a mentor and has guided me constantly from field visits to developing this booklet. I would also want to thank all my RSPN and Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO) colleagues for their continuous support. The experience of working on this project has been professionally and personally very rewarding, as it has given me an exposure to hardships of rural areas and ways to overcome it. I also want to acknowledge and recognise the IALP team who implemented the project and supported our team during the case studies preparation.

Lastly, these studies are devoted to those families who are determined to come out of the miseries of their lives by taking extraordinary steps towards a progressive future. I would like to extend my deep appreciations to the community members and special thanks to the ten community members who participated in the interviews and shared their life experiences, pains, joys and hopes during the fieldwork.
PREFACE

Despite constituting a major chunk of Pakistan's population, its youth is struggling in many areas. The major problems of youth include lack of education, poverty, increasing crime rate, malnourishment, identity crisis, and lack of self-confidence. Furthermore, the needs of adolescents are often overlooked. Fortunately, the Improving Adolescent Lives in Pakistan (IALP) project funded by UNICEF and IKEA Foundation under the umbrella of the Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN) was implemented by the Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO). The project, implemented in two districts of rural Sindh, Ghotki and Khairpur, aimed to support the socio-economically deprived adolescents in these districts.

This document contains ten case studies that inform the reader about adolescents and their families in rural Sindh, by illuminating upon their challenges and their unparalleled strive to improve their own self-confidence and lives. The case studies also illuminate the role of adolescents in the community as change agents, the steps adolescents took to improve their access to education, and overall awareness about their wellbeing and the role of IALP project in improving their lives.
## ACRONYMS

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ABOUT RSPN

The Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN) represents nine member Rural Support Programmes (RSPS) that advocate a common approach to community driven approach to reduce poverty, improve quality of life and wellbeing of the deprived and needy people living in the rural areas of the country. The common approach espoused by RSPN and its member RSPs is social mobilisation. Social mobilisation revolves around the belief that underprivileged and needy people have an innate potential for economic and social empowerment with their limited resources if they are organised and are provided technical and financial support. The main objective of RSPN/RSPs is to promote social mobilisation, rooted in the community driven development (CDD) approach. CDD is solely based on the three-tiered social mobilisation approach. At the first tier, rural households consisting of 15/20 households at the neighbourhood level are organised into Community Organisations (COs). At the second tier, the COs are federated at the village level into Village Organisations (VOs). At the third tier, VOs federate at the Union Council (UC) level to form a Local Support Organisation (LSO).

Established in 2000 by RSPs, today RSPN is the largest civil society development network of Pakistan, with a current presence of RSPs in 149 districts, serving as a strategic and national platform for RSPs by supporting them in capacity building and provide assistance in policy advocacy and donor linkages. RSPs have presence in 4,401 rural Union Councils of Pakistan, 496,352 COs are formed by mobilising over 8.4 million households, of which 53 percent are women only COs. It has nurtured 2,184 LSOs at the union council level out of which 953 are women-led, with some LSOs forming networks at tehsil and district levels. Further information about RSPN/RSPs is available at www.rspn.org.
THREE-TIERED SOCIAL MOBILISATION

Local Support Organisation - LSO
All VOs represented in LSO

2,184
(953 women only LSOs)

Village Organisation - VO
All COs represented in VO

28,174
(66% women only VOs)

Community Organisations - CO
All neighbourhood households (15 – 25) represented in CO

496,352
(53% women only COs)

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According to the United Nation Development Programme (UNDP) reports, currently 64 percent of the Pakistan's population is younger than the age of 30 and 29 percent of Pakistan's population is between the ages of 15 and 29. The report also shows that it is estimated that the youth population of the country will continue to increase until at least 2050.

Pakistan's youth can be harnessed as a factor that strengthens the country on a global scale, provided ample investment in the form of employment, healthcare and quality education is made in this segment of the population.

Realising the potential of youth in transforming Pakistan's future, Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN) collaborated with UNICEF to launch the project, “Improving Adolescents Lives in Pakistan” funded by the IKEA Foundation. The project started on November 01, 2016 and ended on December 31, 2019. The project is implemented by the Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO) in two districts of Sindh (Ghotki and Khairpur) covering 44 union councils (17 in Ghotki and 27 in Khairpur) comprising 191 villages (84 in Ghotki and 107 in Khairpur).

The project's overall goal is to improve adolescent's wellbeing by involving them in a range of activities that ensure their increased access and abilities. The project's activities are designed to increase adolescent's information about their rights to health and education, enhancing their confidence, and broadening the avenues to form and
express their opinions. Parents and community are also sensitised on safeguarding adolescents' rights, mental wellbeing and access to community-based structures that strengthen the environment around them.

The primary objectives of the project are:

a) Adolescents being able to connect with each other and decision-makers through the implementation of participatory communication platforms which give them the opportunity to be agents of positive change in their communities.

b) Community members, families and influencers mobilised to protect adolescent girls and boys from abuse, exploitation and other violations of their basic rights
Tahira is an eighteen years-old adolescent, who belongs to a remote village by the name of Purana Sarhad in Union Council Umer Dharo, district Gotki. Due to abject poverty, cultural norms and religious conservatism, Tahira faced an immense amount of pressure from her parents to discontinue her education when she was in 8th grade. Her father, a government employee, was the breadwinner of the household.

Tahira recalls, “I was always determined to pursue higher education, but my parents always discouraged me, as girls in my village got married at an early age and barely attended school. Nevertheless, I was an ambitious child and was well aware of benefits of education, I knew that only education could help me learn basic skills and become financially independent”.

Tahira did not give up on her dreams easily. She continued to go to school.
Later, with the support of the IKEA Foundation and UNICEF supported project “Improving Adolescents Lives in Pakistan” (IALP) implemented by Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO) and the Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN), an enormous shift came into her life when she was introduced to numerous training sessions under this project. She attended training session on “Life Skills Based Education” as per the content of UNICEF toolkit, and “Reproductive Health Rights (RHS) and Birth Spacing” designed to raise self-awareness and reproductive health awareness. Through these sessions, she learned about her basic rights to education, the right to make decisions for herself and stand up for others. Moreover, Tahira learned about her own abilities, strengths and problems associated with early marriages. She also took part in “Sectoral Workshops” that included topics on photography and artwork.

Tahira elaborated upon the benefits of IALP sessions, saying, “These sessions boosted my confidence and provided me with exposure to techniques and skills that helped me improve my life and contributed to my community’s well-being. Previously, I was unable to even introduce myself or talk in front of my elders. Now, I am a 10th grade student with enough confidence to work as an enumerator with the Peoples' Poverty Reduction Programme (PPRP) of SRSO. I have also managed to convince my father to send my siblings to a government school. My eldest sister, beside her studies, does embroidery and contributes to household income”.

Tahira represents an embodiment of change. After attending training sessions, she has not only made a difference in her own life, but has also managed to impart her knowledge to others in the community. As part of her quest for raising awareness, Tahira saved young girls from her community from falling victim to early marriages.

Tahira reminisces, “My cousin Laila, only 16 years-old, was being forced to get married due to religious and social pressures in the village. In my village,
child-marriage is commonly practiced because girls are not valued as much as boys and it has happened for generations. I saved my cousin by convincing my parents to accompany me to her house and persuaded Laila’s parents to stop her wedding. I explained to them that early childhood marriage is a violation of children's human rights and it is illegal for a girl to get married before the age of 18 in our country. Furthermore, motherhood is hard and child marriage can lead to physically handicapped childbirth.”

Despite all the obstacles, Tahira promises to become a role model for other girls in her community. Tahira dreams to complete a BSc degree and encourage other girls to pursue education too. She also aspires to become an agent of change in society by helping every girl in her community to pursue higher education and raise awareness amongst girls regarding their basic human rights. Tahira is also planning on convincing and motivating the decision-makers in community to make education a top priority. She is content with her success thus far and thankful to SRSO for bolstering confidence in herself.

Whilst paying gratitude to SRSO and RSPN, Tahira said “I am absolutely delighted because of the positive change in my life and others around me. I want to thank the IALP team for enabling me.”
CASE STUDY 2
PLAYING TO STRENGTHS

According to UNICEF reports¹, Pakistan is one of three remaining polio-endemic countries in the world, along with Afghanistan and Nigeria. As long as the virus continues to circulate in Pakistan, no child in Pakistan is completely safe.

Yasmin, 19 years-old, was born in Purana Sarhad village, Union Council Umer Dharo, district Gotki, Sindh. Yasmin has 4 brothers and 3 sisters. Unfortunately, her father died when she was only 9 years old. Apart from being a fatherless daughter, she also became a polio victim.

Whilst explaining hardships, due to her physical impairment, Yasmin recalls, “I dropped out of school in Grade 4 as it was impossible for me to walk from home to school and I was not competent enough to keep up with my classmates in physical activities. After dropping out of school, I stayed at home and felt hopeless most of the time.”

¹https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/polio
Yasmin’s life began to change when she attended training sessions under the IKEA Foundation and UNICEF supported project “Improving Adolescents Lives in Pakistan” (IALP) implemented by Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO) and the Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN). She attended various sessions such as “Life Skills Based Education” as per the content of the UNICEF toolkit and vocational skill training. These training sessions (under the IALP project) helped Yasmin identify her strengths and boosted her self-confidence. She also learned new skills such as stitching and artwork.

“Now I am earning PKR 4,000 per month by stitching clothes for women in my village. In order to attract more customers, I try to make new designs every day.” Yasmin said.

Yasmin continued with her life story, “Training sessions gave me new aspirations and goals. Now, I am more focused on my strengths rather than my physical disability. I have regained my interest in recommencing my education.

Now, I go to a school nearby in the evening, where I learn English, Sindhi and Math. Apart from academics, I am also doing a beautician course part-time.”

Under the IALP project, Yasmin also had an opportunity to attend “The Experience Sharing Workshop” held in Karachi city. Through this workshop adolescents had a chance to come forward and showcase their talents and skills. It helped them enhance different skills such as public speaking, networking, and critical thinking.

Yasmin reminisces about her visit, “Karachi is beautiful, I had never seen a big city in my life before and never had an opportunity to stay at a hotel. I enjoyed and learned a lot at the event as it gave me an opportunity to share my success story in front so many people!”

Delighted on the positive change in her life Yasmin said “I am very grateful to SRSO and RSPN for all their support and encouragement”.

Kainaat, a 19 years-old adolescent, resides in village Purana Sarhad in Union Council Umer Dharo, district Gotki of Sindh. Kainaat lives with her parents and four siblings. Her mother, Sherzaadi, is a Lady Health Worker (LHW) and her father sells home decorations.

Most girls in Kainaat’s neighborhood are restricted to household chores and farm-related activities only. However, owing to her family’s progressive mindset, she has had the good fortune of being enrolled in a BSc (Bachelor of Science) degree in a nearby college.

Despite having limited resources, she has always been an ambitious and goal-oriented girl who aspires to help women in her community acquire education in a bid to create social equality and economic independence.

“Paying no heed to the conservative mindset of our community, my parents CASE STUDY 3 A CATALYST FOR CHANGE A NEW BEGINNING: IMPROVING ADOLESCENT LIVES IN PAKISTAN
CASE STUDY 3

A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

Kainaat, a 19 years-old adolescent, resides in village Purana Sarhad in Union Council Umer Dharo, district Gotki of Sindh. Kainaat lives with her parents and four siblings. Her mother, Sherzaadi, is a Lady Health Worker (LHW) and her father sells home decorations.

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"Paying no heed to the conservative mindset of our community, my parents..."
decided to send me to school. As content as I was with receiving the education of my dreams, there was always something inside me that wanted the same for other girls in my community. However, a sense of hopelessness always surrounded me as I lacked knowledge about adolescent rights. I never knew I could be an agent of change. I needed more confidence and knowledge to convince the people in my village” Kainaat said.

Kainaat’s dreams began to shape reality when one day, a team from IKEA Foundation and UNICEF’s project “Improving Adolescents Lives in Pakistan” (IALP) implemented by Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO) and the Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN) visited their village and met members of the Local Support Organisation (LSO) Gulaab Gul. LSO nominated Kainaat for participation in the IALP project activities. She attended various sessions (under the IALP project) such as “Reproductive Health Rights” (RHS) and Birth Spacing”, “Sectoral Workshops” on journalism, arts, photography and Life Skills Based Education (LSBE) as per full content of UNICEF toolkit.

Talking about her learnings from LSBE sessions, Kainaat said, “Being poor and with a life full of challenges, I had low self-esteem, low self-confidence, and lack of faith in my own abilities. I never had enough courage to think of even appearing in an exam like Central Superior Services (CSS) but now, after attending self-awareness sessions, I am considering appearing in this exam and I am confident that I will pass it. Overall, the trainings gave me hope, courage, and self-determination”.

Kainaat was pleasantly surprised with her new learnings from the session on reproductive health rights. She said, “In our village, early marriages for both boys and girls is common practice. However, I learnt that this can have devastating effects on a girl’s health. All the adolescents who attended this training, including me, learnt that early marriage is
associated with numerous problems such as death during childbirth, increased risk for premature birth and death in infants. We were not aware of these risks before. After attending this particular session, I felt that this knowledge should be disseminated across my entire village. And so, I started raising awareness among girls and their families about child marriages and their adverse effects”.

Currently, Kainaat holds weekly sessions in her community for raising awareness about risks associated with child marriages and the importance of girls' education. She stated that IALP project has strengthened her with more knowledge and confidence that allows her to work for her community. She demanded with a smile “I request SRSO and RSPN to implement more projects like IALP in our district, as this project proved to be an immense source of support for me and my community. These projects bring dynamic change to our community's well-being”.
CASE STUDY 4

THE PASSIONATE ARTIST

Wajahat Ali, 19 years-old adolescent, belongs to Gaino Kalharo village in union council Mehar Ali, district Khairpur Sindh. He is deeply passionate about art which has been, and continues to serve, as his primary inspiration in life. However, due to lack of resources and access to art-based forums, the scope of artwork remained limited to a hobby.

“I have always been enthusiastic about art but due to lack of exposure, I was only practicing and learning it at home and never had an opportunity to disseminate my art knowledge, exhibit it and become a source of inspiration for others”, Wajahat said.

Wajahat aspired to be an art teacher and his ambition had probably remained just a dream due to the lack of guidance and proper counseling. However, one day a team from Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN) and Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO) under the project 'Improving Adolescent's Lives in Pakistan'
funded by IKEA/UNICEF came as a blessing in Wajahat's life.

Wajahat took part in training sessions (under the IALP project) designed to train adolescent boys and girls on key child rights and Life Skills Based Education (LSBE) as per the full content of the UNICEF toolkit. These trainings assisted him in learning about his rights and abilities, and helped him gain knowledge about risks and harms attached to early child marriages and early childbirth. He also took part in a “Sectoral Workshop” that include workshops on photography and artwork.

“These trainings helped me understand the concept of adolescent rights, first eight sessions were based on pictorial messages. As an artist, it was thrilling to learn new concepts through art”, Wajahat recalls.

Wajahat continues to elaborate on benefits of the training sessions “Before linking to RSPN and SRSAO, I use to do to artwork at home only. However, now my work is displayed at different forums. Many organisations and schools recognised and appreciated my artwork and offered me job opportunities. Recently, I taught art at a school nearby and earned a salary of PKR 5,000. I gained more confidence, as my students performed well and liked me as their teacher”.

Besides having prominent progress in his art skills, Wajahat also gained good knowledge about risks associated with child marriage in a training session named “Reproductive Health Rights (RHS) and Birth Spacing”. Through this session, he gained knowledge about biological growth, child marriages, early childbirth and the importance of girls' education.

Wajahat said, “During one session, participants were asked to show the adverse effects of child marriages through pictures. I drew a picture of a little pregnant girl, riding on a donkey with her husband. This drawing was to show a poor young girl, who is married to an old and financially unstable man.”

In the end, Wajahat shared his learnings from “The Experience Sharing Workshop” held at Karachi. “I pay my heartiest gratitude to SRSAO and RSPN for organising an event like this. Through this event, I had an opportunity to see the city of Karachi and present my artwork to different people. It was heartening to see so many people appreciate my work. Thanks, SRSAO and RSPN!”
CASE STUDY 5

EDUCATION IS THE KEY TO SUCCESS

Pakistani youth are facing multiple challenges such as lack of quality education, lack of access to educational institutions, health facilities, unemployment, and poverty. Despite having a plethora of problems, some youth begin to start overcoming these hurdles. Majid Waseem, an eighteen-year-old, living in village named Gul Muhammad Soomro in Union Council Bapo, district Khairpur, and is one of those adolescents who overcame the unbearable challenges in his circumstance pertaining to financial, educational and health adversities.

Majid lives with his three sisters and two brothers. His father is a small farmer. Due to lack of resources and extreme poverty, Majid was forced to discontinue his education after completing grade 12.
“I had always dreamed to attend university after completing my FSc, but due to lack of resources, I stayed at home and helped my father in farm-related activities” Majid recalled.

One day, a team from Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN) and Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO) visited Majid’s village. They asked adolescents to gather at one place and form groups. When Majid found out that this was regarding life skills, the importance of education, child rights and life-skill trainings, he happily took part in all sessions conducted under the IKEA/UNICEF supporte project “Improving Adolescents’ Lives in Pakistan” (IALP).

The trainings (under the IALP project) has had a remarkable effect on Majid’s life, he has acquired many benefits from it. The Life Skills Based Education training session as per the full content of the UNICEF toolkit provoked his inner drive to have a better future as this module is designed to increase self-awareness, stress management, communication and social skills among target beneficiaries. Majid also shared his learnings from the vocational training that he received.

“I wanted to become a solar energy mechanic as I saw a potential. I had no prior knowledge about solar energy but now after completing my training, I am able to connect various devices to solar energy panels. There is demand for my services as more people want to install solar panels. After a slow start, I am now earning about PKR 8,000 per month. I have also enrolled at a university and can now fully pay my fees. My future goal is to do Masters in Pakistan studies,” Wajahat said.

Majid thanked the IALP team and said “I am very happy now, my dream of studying in a university came true”.

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Avoiding all sorts of social situations. I had no way to instill confidence in myself,” Haseeb recalled.

Haseeb’s life began to change when he participated in different sessions conducted by the IKEA Foundation and UNICEF supported project "Improving Adolescents Lives in Pakistan" (IALP) implemented by Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO) and the Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN). One of the modules was on "Life Skills Based Education" as per the content of the UNICEF toolkit. Through this session, Haseeb was able to get to know himself and screen his inward world that incorporates his emotions and considerations. Getting to know himself built a framework for his personality and the progress for his future.

"These sessions helped me in overcoming shyness and nervousness, I had an opportunity to meet so many people and I had finally stepped out of my comfort zone. Now, I can easily talk to my family about my ambitions. Thanks to these sessions, I have also been able to give sessions to twenty other adolescents on self-awareness,” Haseeb told.

Haseeb also attended sessions designed to increase awareness about "Reproductive Health Rights (RHS) and Birth Spacing". Through this session, he gained new knowledge about risks associated with early marriages, child rights and the importance of education.

During his visit to Karachi city for "The Experience Sharing Workshop: organised by SRSO and RSPN, he took part in a tableau, which was directed to increase awareness about the adverse consequences of child marriage.

"After knowing the importance of education, I helped an underprivileged young boy with his education, I convinced his parents to send him to school and also paid his school fee,” Haseeb said.

Haseeb continued elaborating the benefits on training sessions "I am pleasantly surprised that I was able to act in a tableau in-front of so many people in a city so far away. Yet, there was a time, when I was even unable to talk to an elder family member. IALP project has contributed to changing my attitude”.

Low self-esteem and low standard of living often peak in a deprived adolescent’s life, making them feel inadequate. They often fail to adjust to changes in their lives following adolescence. This may result in a lack of confidence, stress, and isolation. Subsequently, young teens often fail to communicate their goals and ambitions to their families. Abdul Haseeb belonging from a village named Haji Jaan Muhammad in Union Council Kumb, district Khairpur, was one of those adolescents. Having a great passion for cricket, Haseeb was reluctant to share his aspirations with his family. His household consists of five members, his parents and two siblings: one brother and one sister. He is currently studying in grade 10.

“My lack of confidence and low self-esteem reflected in how I behaved in public, I had lack of confidence in my body language, such as the inability to make eye contact, inability to talk to my elders, holding back in my classroom and
avoiding all sorts of social situations. I had no way to instill confidence in myself,” Haseeb recalled.

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Girls in rural areas of Pakistan have shown an enormous desire for education yet their dreams continue to be crushed due to significant gender disparities and a low priority for girls' education. Not so long ago, education was a distant dream for Wakeela, a young girl from village Korro, Union Council Khanpur, district Khairpur. She faced an immense pressure from her father and brothers to discontinue her education. With a broken heart, Wakeela had to withdraw from school while in grade four.

Currently, Wakeela's father is jobless and unable to meet the daily expenses of the family. Her family's only source of income is zakat (charity).

“My family is very poor; we live hand to mouth. My brothers forced me to discontinue my education and ask me to
help my mother in household chores. They believe investing in girls' education is a huge waste of time and money”, Wakeela said.

Nevertheless, Wakeela, a young, energetic and passionate individual remained persistent and resilient towards her education in the face of abject poverty. She managed to convince her mother to support her decision to resume education. Now, she is enrolled as a grade 7 student. Yet, after rejoining school, she continued to face numerous obstacles.

Wakeela reminisces her challenges in pursuing her education, “While going to school, young boys from the neighbourhood would mock me and call me names. Moreover, I always lacked basic school necessities such as school bag and books, notebooks, and uniforms. I could not share these problems with my mother because I knew she would ask me to stop going to school. Nonetheless, I was still very keen and devoted to learning at school”.

Transformation of this young girl’s life began when she took part in rigorous training sessions under the project “Improving Adolescent Lives in Pakistan” (IALP).

As per the UNICEF toolkit, Wakeela learned about her right to do things herself, to stand up for herself and to be autonomous. These training sessions were implemented by Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO) and the Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN).

“Learnings from life skill training workshops helped in building my confidence. Now, I can openly talk to my brothers about my right to education. I also shared my problems with mother and convinced her to take me to the marketplace for buying some of my basic necessities,” Wakeela said with a smile.

Wakeela took another session on “Reproductive Health Rights (RHS) and Birth Spacing”. Through this session, she was able to gain new knowledge about adolescent rights such as the right to education and risks and harms associated with early child marriage. With her additional knowledge, she promises to strive for the betterment of herself, community and especially girls.

Wakeela, whilst beaming with joy and paying gratitude to RSPN and SRSO said “The IALP project made the impossible possible for me and I am forever thankful for it”. 

RURAL SUPPORT PROGRAMMES NETWORK
Khiar-un-Nisa, a 16-year-old girl, resides in village Muhammad Baksh in Union Council Bhapo with her parents, two brothers and two sisters. Her father, a government employee pays for Nisa and her siblings’ education from his limited income stream. Nisa is lucky to have a father who does not discriminate between male and female children. According to Nisa, “My parents never discriminate between me and my brothers, I was allowed to go to school. Yet, I was unable to identify my strengths and choose what I want to do in the future”.

Despite the support from her parents, Nisa faced difficulties in making the right career choices that suit her interest and abilities. She needed assistance in accessing career-related information and resources, which are mostly located in distant centres and inaccessible to most rural communities.
One day a team from the IKEA Foundation and UNICEF supported project “Improving Adolescents Lives in Pakistan” (IALP) implemented by Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO) and the Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN) visited Nisa’s village. The project aimed to help young people make better career choices by providing key information. Nisa is one of the project beneficiaries and she expressed, “I see unlimited potential in myself. I have decided to become a lawyer in the future because now I know that nothing in life is unachievable”.

Under the IALP project, training sessions on “Life Skills Based Education” (LSBE) as per the UNICEF toolkit were provided. Through participating in these sessions, Nisa was able to identify parts of her personality, developed better relationships with her community and amplified her confidence and self-assurance.

With new hope for the future and sparkle in her eyes, Nisa continued to share her learnings from another training session on “Reproductive Health Rights (RHS) and Birth Spacing” designed to raise awareness about the reproductive health of adolescents and dangers of child marriages. “I had no prior knowledge about the risks associated with early child marriages. Now, I know that early marriage is associated with the death of young mothers, miscarriage and retarded growth of the baby (offspring)”, said Nisa.

Nisa felt proud of her fresh knowledge gained from the training sessions that she had attended under the IALP project, and said that she wants to see similar changes in the thinking process of her fellow adolescents, and pledges to disseminate this knowledge in her community.

“I hope to continue to strive for the betterment of my community as well as to achieve my own aims” said a joyful Nisa.
Noshaba, a 14-year-old girl, grew up in the fertile lands of the village Kooro, Union Council Khanpur of district Khairpur, Sindh. Growing up in a remote village, Noshaba was among the lucky few who were able to get an education. Every morning, she starts her day with recitation from the Holy Quran, goes to school with enthusiasm and then, spends the rest of the day doing household chores. On her way to school, she saw girls of her own age longing to join school but suppressing their dream of getting an education and accepting their fate of becoming a wife at an early age, that too without consent. However, being unable to do something about it, Noshaba felt very disappointed.

“There was nothing more disappointing than to see girls suppressing their dreams, and realising that these girls were forced to get married at an early age,” says Noshaba with a sad face and tears falling off her face.
Noshaba wanted to do something for the young girls who were otherwise destined to get into early marriage. However, she did not know what to do. One day a team from the IKEA Foundation and UNICEF supported project “Improving Adolescents Lives in Pakistan” (IALP) implemented by Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO) and the Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN) visited her village.

Noshaba is one of the project beneficiaries who acquired a skill set and knowledge on adolescent rights. One of the components of the project “Reproductive Health Rights (RHS) and Birth Spacing” focuses on creating awareness about risks associated with child marriage among target beneficiaries. She understood that that those young brides neither are physically nor emotionally ready to become wives and mothers. They face more risks of suffering dangerous complications in pregnancy and childbirth and suffering domestic violence. With little access to education and economic opportunities, they themselves and their families are more likely to live in poverty.

“One of my cousins was being forced into child-marriage. In this situation, my mother and I, went to their house and convinced her parents to send her to school instead of marrying her off at an early age,” Noshaba recalls.

Noshaba intends to work for the betterment of her community by empowering adolescents in achieving a better future for themselves. With a glint of joy in her eyes, Noshaba said, “Had it not been for the IALP project, I would not have known the ways I could help adolescents in my village”. 

“Humble Beginnings

A NEW BEGINNING: IMPROVING ADOLESCENT LIVES IN PAKISTAN

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It is a sad reality that girls find it hard to get an education in rural areas. Somina, a 16 years old girl, who has been a rare example and role model for her village Hamid Bhutto in Union Council Adil Shah, district Khairpur. Her eyes glitter with hope, confidence, passion and excitement to become successful in the future. She belongs to a relatively progressive family. Her father is a taxi driver. Upon asking her what she wants to become in the future, she was overjoyed and excited to express her dream of becoming a pilot. She has two brothers and one sister. Both the brothers go to school and sister is still an infant.

Somina confidently shared her experience of the trainings conducted by Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN) and Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO)
partnered project on “Improving Adolescent Lives in Pakistan” (IALP). She mentioned the Life Skills Based Education (LSBE) training workshop as per full content of the UNICEF toolkit was critical in understanding her rights as a human being, relationships, community and responsibilities of each individual of the community.

“I would have never been able to discover some of the learnings about mental, psychological and physical nourishment of adolescents if I had not taken part in training sessions organised by RSPN”, Somina said.

One of the most significant and thought-provoking discovery was the ability to identify supportive relatives. Somina mentioned that some of the relatives are supportive of her education and future goals and some are not. It was hard to draw a line between these relationships prior to these training sessions. These training sessions help built a holistic and well-rounded approach to her life.

She was pleased and delighted with “The Experience Sharing Workshop” held in Karachi organised by RSPN and SRSO where she had the rare opportunity to be master of the ceremony. She expressed gratification to the guest speakers who shared very valuable information on improving the lives of the rural adolescents.

Somina, after her confidence-boosting participation in the project, is now giving back to her community by imparting her newly acquired knowledge, through the training sessions, to almost twenty girls in the community. Girls in her community are now motivated to pursue education beyond grade 10.

Somina said, “Through the IALP project I not only gained skills and confidence, I also met with other local adolescents. The success of the project that there is now growing recognition of the needs and potentials of adolescents, both boys and girls. The bodes well for our community”.

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KEY LEARNINGS

✧ The presence of a very powerful cultural and traditional social system attached to child marriage and early pregnancies creates hurdles for adolescents and youth to access to sexual and reproductive education especially girls. In these scenarios, SRSO fostered community institutions play a vital role in providing access to sexual and reproductive education to these adolescents.

✧ The dissemination of sensitive information related to early child marriage and reproductive health was efficiently done by key community influencers (KCI).

✧ The existing ground realities concerning conservative mind-sets and traditional practices indicate that creating separate groups for both young girls and boys proved to be effective. Thus, adolescents feel more comfortable and confident in sharing their views and experiences discreetly.

✧ The “Life Skills Based Education Toolkit” proved to be very helpful in bolstering confidence and led to better decision making of adolescents in their everyday life as stated by UNICEF. However, monthly refreshers are more effective than one-time training for gaining full benefit from the life-skill training sessions.

✧ The experience-sharing workshop held in Karachi proved to be very beneficial in enhancing exposure of adolescents. It had helped in boosting their self-confidence as they were given a platform to share their hardships, achievements and future plans.

✧ As illiteracy is the mother of all evils, once eradicated, it can solve many issues. Education is the key to preventing child marriages. The government of Sindh should take quick policy decisions regarding out of school adolescents, and support rollout of IALP-type initiatives.
Many talented adolescents cannot afford their school fee, but they are very keen on pursuing their education. These adolescents should be given part-time vocational skill training that can help them find employment and finance their education.

In order to gain sustainable benefits from the project, “Life-Skill” training should be made an essential part of the school curriculum.
CONCLUSION

The case studies are an evidence-base proof of concept that through empowering youth as agents of change, tangible social transformation can be achieved. The diligent work done by Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN) and its supporting partner, Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO) proved to show a positive impact on adolescent lives reflected in these case studies.

The underprivileged and destitute youngsters were given rigorous awareness sessions that informed them about their right to free and quality education and their overall well-being. Also, these trainings made them realise the significance of education and the long-term benefits that come with it. Through trainings such as life-skill trainings, adolescents became aware of their rights that enabled them to demand for them and bring a positive change in their communities with limited resources.

RSPN and its partner SRSO has given hope to the youth of interior Sindh. A hope that they are not neglected and can strive to achieve any dream they set their sights on. RSPN and SRSO has given them courage and confidence by making youth realise its own potential. They now understand that the key to bringing a positive change in a society is to change the mind-set of that society. This was done through awareness sessions about risks and harms attached to early childhood marriage and the importance of education in transforming the lives of families.

The change in mind-set and behaviour of adolescents is only made possible through RSPN and SRSO’S effort in mobilising communities and equipping them to author their own change and to design their solutions. This approach enables self-sustainability, as it has enabled adolescents to function with or without intervention of the external organisation.
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A NEW BEGINNING:
IMPROVING ADOLESCENT LIVES IN PAKISTAN

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