



Situation Assessment of
Adolescents for Life Skills
and **HIV Prevention**
in selected districts of Pakistan



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1 Executive Summary

Adolescence is a critical period during which dramatic physical, physiological, emotional and behavioral changes take place quite suddenly. These changes coupled with the absence of authentic information to know, understand and appreciate them, cause anxiety among adolescents who may be pushed into courses of actions without having a chance to think fully of consequences¹.

Pakistan currently has the largest cohort of young people in its history and subsequent cohorts are expected to be even larger. Young people face a number of critical life decisions that relate to series of transitions to adulthood : school leaving, employment and greater responsibility for oneself and family². Many researches in Pakistan have shown that the adolescents, due to their relative youth, lack of decision-making power, and incomplete personal development, are especially ill equipped to handle the reproductive health burden they face³. The links between these decisions, their sequencing and young people's agency in each sphere varies widely across and within the country.

Life skills are abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life⁴.

In Pakistan, there is a dearth of information on situation of adolescents and, thus, there is little evidence on which to build policies and programmes. Recognizing the need for generating this type of information, National AIDS Control Program (NACP) and UNICEF sponsored the instant study with the following **objectives**:

- ➔ To construct a profile of adolescents between the ages of 13 and 19
- ➔ To evaluate their existing life skills
- ➔ To assess adolescents' knowledge and sources of information about personal health with specific detail of leisure time activities and media habits.
- ➔ To evaluate adolescents' practices of health promoting behaviors and health seeking practices.
- ➔ To understand prevalent risk behaviors and factors contributing towards them

The study area included all four provinces of Pakistan, consisting of 14 districts of UNICEF and Global fund. The districts are: Lahore, Rawalpindi, Multan, Faisalabad, Bahawalpur, Sialkot, Gujranwala, Quetta, Karachi, Hyderabad, Larkana, Sukkur, Peshawar and Abbottabad

1 M.K.Hassan, M. Jayaswal and P.Hassan. Reproductive Health Awareness In Rural Tribal Female adolescents

2. Population Council (2002). Adolescent and Youth in Pakistan 2001-2002.

3 Research report no.11, Adolescents and Reproductive Health in Pakistan: A literature review

4. WHO

The overall study design involved both quantitative and qualitative components keeping in view the need for representative results, without undermining more subtle and textured information that qualitative methods can provide.

A total of 3869 respondents were interviewed during the study. Highest percentage of respondents was of 13 year olds (18%) and lowest percentage was 17 year olds (12%). More than half (53%) were female and 48% were going to school. Majority of these adolescent (67%) belong to low middle class. The proportion of youth out of school increased with age and more girls were out of school (63%) than boys (41%).

Self Awareness, Creative Thinking

Self awareness and creative thinking in an adolescent determine the level of confidence and the ability to set goals. Career planning is an important milestone of self awareness. Among school going respondents, 25% wanted to be doctors, followed by teaching (22%), Engineering (11%) and Armed Forces (9%). The traditional trend of career planning was observed in some professional preferences. Almost equal number of boys and girls wanted to join medicine but among those, who wanted to be teachers, 68% were girls and 89% of those, who opted for engineering were boys.

Only 25% of the adolescents had a private bedroom. Among those, who had private bedrooms, 63% were boys. Gender discrimination is evident from the fact that more girls than boys have to share their bedroom with someone else even though more girls than boys who were interviewed had reached puberty. A feeling of discrimination is evident from the fact that only half of the female respondents (48%) were happy with nature's choice of gender for them, the rest were either not happy (15%) or not sure (32%).

The issue of how aware they were regarding risk of getting infected with HIV and hepatitis, the usual response during discussions was that they were safe because they were leading a pious life and stayed away from sin. Most of the respondents were aware of the dangers of sharing needles and untested blood transfusions. Reliance on God's will and helplessness in this matter was also mentioned.

Problem Solving, Decision Making & Critical Thinking

Life skills like decision-making, problem-solving and critical thinking were looked through important life decisions like marriage and dropping out of school.

Only 8% of the respondents were married. Out of them, 82% were females. The acceptance of traditional practices of arranged marriages was prominent; 72% adolescents endorsing arranged marriages. Only 8% thought that the couple should decide about marriage.

In 48% cases, the decision to drop out of the school was respondent's own decision. Among those, who were working for pay, 55% said that they give all their income to the parents, 25% were giving part of the income to the parents, while 10% were keeping all their income to themselves.

Communication and Interpersonal Relationships

Healthy interpersonal relationships build on effective communication. When adolescents are willing and able to express themselves and share their thoughts and events, misunderstandings melt away.

Sexual maturity is a milestone in the life of every adolescent. This is the stage, when they need somebody to answer their queries and guide them properly. Few adolescents said that they had discussed their sexual events and problems with anyone. Among those, who had reached puberty and had been informed about it, the person who informed them was mother (59%) for girls and a friend (60%) for boys. Only in 19% cases, the fathers had discussed this issue with their sons.

Some females said that it was shameful and it was very difficult to discuss such matters with anyone. However others mostly mentioned mothers and sisters with whom they had discussed such matters. Among the males, friends were the group with which they could talk about sexual issues. Talking about type of friends or contacts who could place a person at risk of HIV infection, mostly respondents said that people like smokers, drug addicts, people who drink and commercial sex workers were the type of people who should be avoided.

Empathy

Generally the respondents expressed sympathy for patients of AIDS. The perception was that the family with a person suffering from AIDS would have social and economic problems. There was also a danger of disease transmission to the other members of the family. The view of respondents to give special treatment to such patients was shared by majority.

The respondents said that such patients should be treated with care and sympathy as it is possible they got the disease due to ignorance and not due to some ill act. They are already suffering and we should do everything we can to help them however it is important to be careful so that the disease is not transmitted.

Coping with Stress and Emotions

Coping with stress and emotions is probably the most difficult area, which an adolescent has to go through during his/her transition from child hood to adulthood.

While feeling depressed, 28% respondents discussed it with their friends, 2% smoked while 28% mentioned a number of things which they do like watching TV, listening to music or going out with friends to eat or to the cinema. Some were of the view that the best way to beat depression is by praying, offering namaz and reading the holy Quran. None of the respondents admitted to any adverse solutions like smoking, taking drugs or drinking.

Exposure of working children including domestic servants to sexual advances by their employers was mentioned by the respondents. A very small proportion (3%) of respondents had been touched sexually by someone and the same proportion (3%) were not sure if such an incidence had every happened. The majority of responses (36%) for

person who had touched them sexually were from family or relatives. Friends were mentioned in 28% cases and teachers in 15% cases. There were incidences where these advances had been made by a stranger (13%). Among the others family friends or strangers were mentioned.

Risk Behavior

There were very few unmarried adolescents who were sexually active. Only 0.5% respondents admitted having sex with a commercial sex worker, 0.5% with a man and 1% with a woman. Forty five (1.2%) respondents admitted having taken drugs and 0.4% had ever taken alcohol.

Very few respondents were in favour of premarital sex. Only 9% said that pre marital sex was justified when both partners agreed, 6% each said that it was justified when they were in love or when they were engaged and 3% said it was alright to have premarital sex if they were mature. Nearly all the respondents who had opted for the others option (76%) said that they did not agree with premarital sex under any circumstances and sex should be avoided until marriage.

During face to face interview administered by an interviewer, very few unmarried adolescents both boys (3%) and girls (1%) said that they had sex with someone. However during the anonymous interview which was self administered by the respondent the percentage rose for boys to 5% and for girls it rose to 3%.

The proportion of respondents who mentioned the danger of HIV infection through sex with multiple partners was very low. Majority's concern was that it was a sin and if caught it would be shameful or it was illegal and you could get arrested. A high percentage said that they did not know about condoms. Majority of the ones who knew about them said that their use was for prevention of pregnancy and birth spacing.

During focus group discussions it was seen that knowledge of HIV / AIDS was confined to hearing about it and that it was a deadly disease but there was not much clarity about its mode of spread.

Leisure and Media Habits

Exposure to media during leisure time amongst adolescents mostly included television and internet. Majority of the respondents said that they had not seen pornographic material or any program related to sex.

During focus group discussions respondents mentioned internet cafes and video games shops as being places where the youth could be exploited sexually. It is perceived that in some of these places young boys and girls are targeted for sexual exploitation for small sums of money.