

Improving Adolescents' Lives in Pakistan

Empowering Adolescents through Freedom of Expression and Participation

By Fatima Shahryar

"We had never imagined our lives could change so much – allowing us to play, enjoy and learn about our rights as adolescents," says Memoona Naz (17), a young girl living in village Arab Machi, Khairpur district, Sindh. "For us, life has always been about what we can and cannot do, as decided by our elders - even if it meant marrying at an early age and to someone we don't even know." she adds.

Memoona Naz (17) is a UNICEF Adolescent Champion in her village Arab Machi, Khairpur District, Sindh. © UNICEF/Pakistan/Fatima Shahryar



Although Pakistan is a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child and committed to provide its children the rights to freedom of expression and participation, as well as other rights, adolescents in Pakistan, especially girls, continue to face a range of difficulties and challenges, including lack of access to basic life resources, low levels of participation and protection.

In 2016, UNICEF conducted a survey to assess the extent of freedom of expression and participation of adolescents at household and community levels, particularly with regard to their level of involvement in important decisions directly affecting their lives. The survey conducted in three districts of Sindh - Karachi, Ghotki and Khairpur and in Punjab - Lahore, Rahim Yar Khan and Bahawalpur, revealed low levels of adolescent freedom of expression and participation in matters pertaining to their everyday lives.

According to the survey findings from Khairpur District, only 14.5 per cent of adolescents discuss their issues with friends and family; whereas participation in activities such as sports, youth groups etc. stands at 17 per cent.

UNICEF, with funding from the IKEA Foundation, initiated a project on improving adolescents' lives in Pakistan. Under this intervention, UNICEF's implementing partners - Rural Support Programmes Network and Sindh Rural Support Organization, selected

1,029 adolescents aged from 10 to 19 years of age to deliver peer-to-peer life-skills training over a course of four days. Memoona was one of them.



Memoona leads a training session for adolescent girls in her community.

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"I was a different person before getting involved in this project. I lacked confidence and was very shy. However, the four days of training changed me completely," says Memoona, while sharing her experience. "Now, every time my grandmother tells me that I am a grown-up girl and should help with household chores – I tell her, I am still a child and I also have the right to play."

Arab machi is a small village of approximately 50 households and is located at the outskirts of Khairpur District. Memoona and other boys and girls of her age who participated in the adolescent life-skills training, are now further training adolescents in their respective communities. Memoona has so far conducted eight successful training sessions for girls in Arab Machi. She has also established a girls' cricket team in her community and they often play friendly matches in a field nearby.

Bringing change to her life through small steps, Memoona is continuing her studies, with a resolve to seek higher education as she grows up. She is now a 12th grade student at a girls' school in a neighboring village. In December 2017, Memoona also represented Pakistan at a South Asian regional event in Colombo, Sri Lanka, where the - 'Power of Sports to Shape the Future of Adolescents' – campaign organized by UNICEF, was launched in collaboration with the International Cricket Council. The event included youth representation from South Asian countries, including Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan. Memoona also signed a cricket bat at the event alongside Indian Cricketer Yuvraj Singh, who was the guest of honor.

"Initially, we faced a lot of criticism and resentment from our family for letting Memoona attend the training and then the trip to Sri Lanka. It was hard, but we stood our ground. My daughter is very special to me – and now seeing her flourish; our friends and family have started supporting their daughters too. We are united to provide a better future for our children," shares Memoona's father Abdul Haleem.



Memoona Naz (17) takes a run during a cricket match with her friends in her village Arab Machi, Khairpur District.