

Involving Religious Leaders in Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Education and Communication in Pakistan for Social Norms Change

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Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) are often viewed with suspicion and discomfort in Pakistani community. Discussion on sexuality education is often perceived to be a foreign agenda, and better left not talked about. 60% of the total population of Pakistan is youth and seriously lack access to reliable SRHR information. There are multitudes of sources on the internet and other media that impart wrong or misinformation on SRHR. In this context, it was important to develop SRHR education for youth that is not only scientific but also appropriate for the Pakistani culture and religion. Religious leaders (Ulema) were identified at the top of the hierarchy of decision makers on how SRHR is framed and are important norm setters, and were therefore made part of the project. The project was launched in 9 districts and included progressive Ulemas from various sects (Deobandi, Barelvi and Shia) who were at the highest stature. They were approached, extensively briefed and made part of the project. Eight SRHR topics were selected: puberty, gender based violence, emotional aspects of growing up, peer relations, family planning, reproductive system, STIs and intimacy. The selected Ulema were requested to write review papers on the topics by providing strong linkages through Quran and Sunnah. These papers were then reviewed and converted into sermon books and guidebooks which were later used by other religious leaders in Friday prayer sermons. The research methodology adopted included in-depth interviews of Ulema and project staff, desk review of project reports and IEC materials developed based on Ulemas input. Reasons for motivation of the Ulema to join a sensitive project on SRHR were explored. The research found that successful integration of Ulema that are usually seen as blocker instead of enabler - in a sensitive project can greatly help in achieving development goals. The project shows that Ulema have a broader world view and are willing to work along with civil society, as long as the projects are within Islamic teachings. As Ulema are one of the most important stakeholders for SRHR, their involvement has proved imperative for the success of the project. The project built on learning for the experience of other organisations of involving religious scholars, including those who have consistently been working on implementing such sensitive Projects. The research shows that the role of Ulema as communicators and educators in their respective communities can be effectively used for promoting positive behaviours and shedding any prevailing misperceptions. Their participation made it more acceptable to talk about these issues in public. They paved the way to bring a sensitive topic like SRHR into the realm of public discourse, and as such can contribute to social norms change. The presentation reflects on the importance of involving religious scholars in development practice, and will show how involving them on sensitive topics in Pakistan proved to be highly effective. We will share the process of engaging Ulema, discuss best practices, lessons learned and will provide a framework for other organisations who want to engage in similar exercises in Muslim dominated countries.