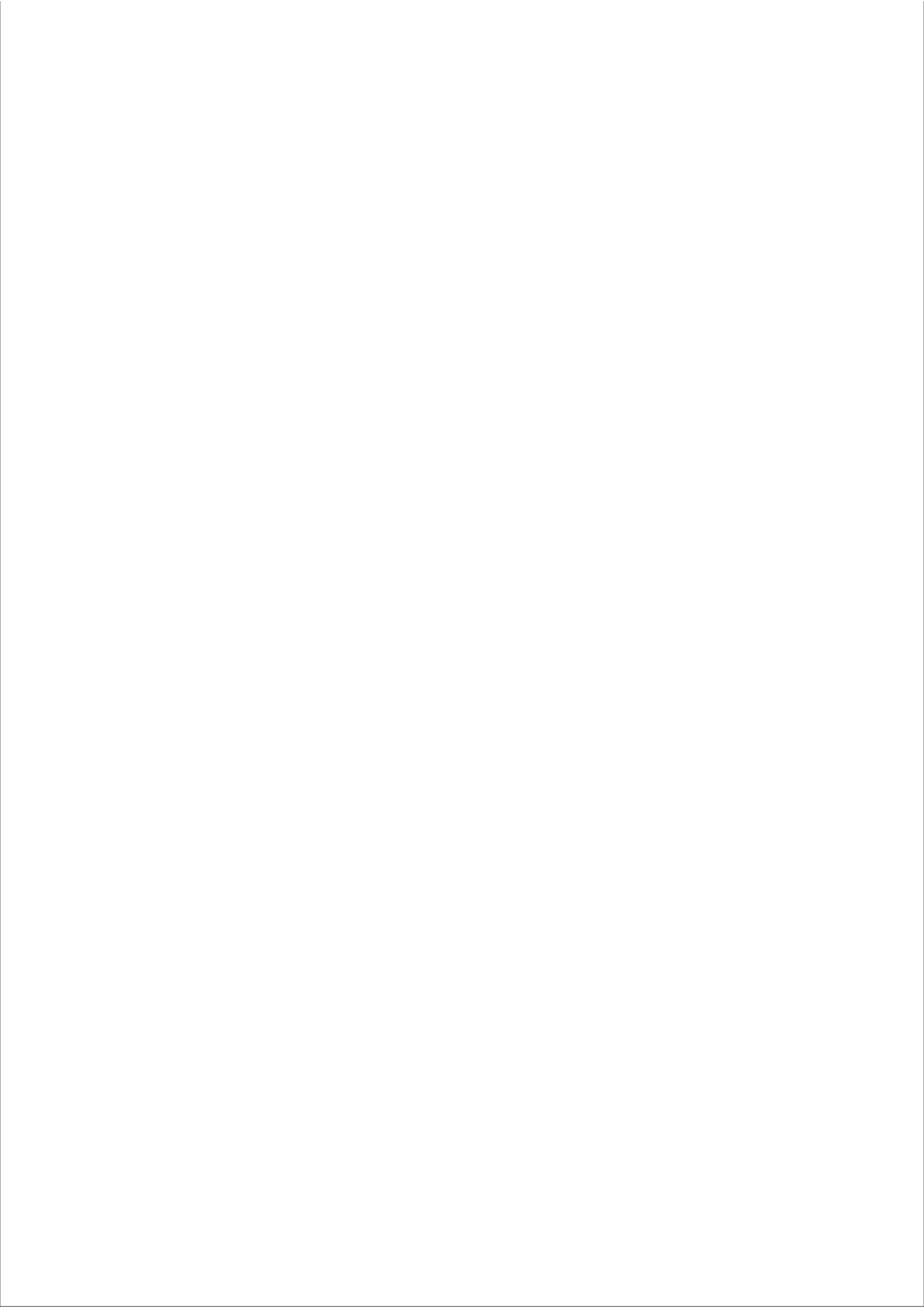




Center for
Communication
Programs
Pakistan

Involving Religious Scholars on Sensitive Issues

**A Step-by-Step Practical Toolkit for
Development Workers**



INVOLVING RELIGIOUS SCHOLARS ON SENSITIVE ISSUES

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Development Workers**

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For: Oxfam Novib Pakistan

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Abbreviations

Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS).

Council of Islamic Ideology (CII)

Faith-based organisations (FBOs)

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)

Information, Education and Communication (IEC)

John Hopkins University Centre for Communication Programs (JHUCCP).

Khyber Pakthoon Kha (KPK)

Life Skills Based Education (LSBE) Programmes

MoUs (memorandum of understandings)

Sexual National Education Management Information System (NEMIS)

National Institute of Population Studies (NIPS)

Pakistan Ulema Council (PUC)

Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)

Women Empowerment Group (WEG)

World Population Foundation (WPF)

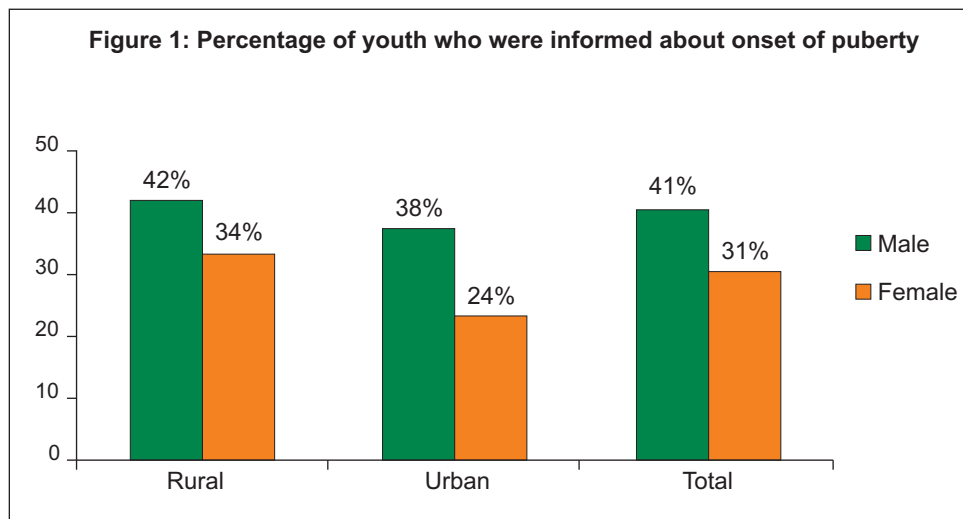
Introduction

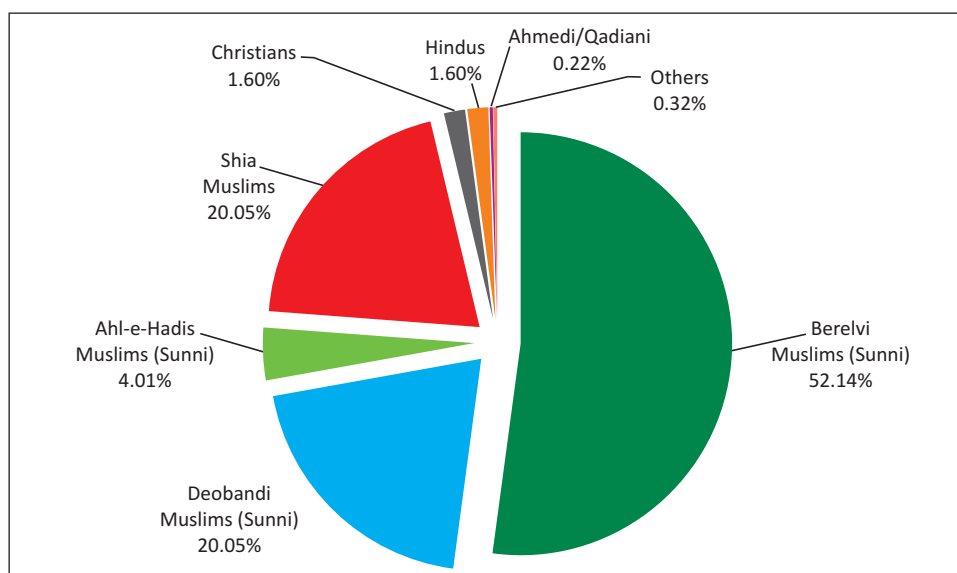
Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) are often viewed with suspicion and discomfort in Pakistani community. Sexuality education, in particular, is viewed as a product of the west and efforts to have meaningful discussion on the subject as a foreign agenda. As a result, sexuality education is considered not ‘our’ problem and falls into subject matters generally avoided and better left not talked about. Yet, the Country cannot afford to ignore the importance of SRHR considering its extremely youthful population. Twenty per cent of the 180 million people of Pakistan are within the age bracket of 15-24 years. The young people in Pakistan seriously lack access to reliable and trustworthy information on sexual and reproductive health. On the contrary, there are multitudes of sources that impart wrong or misinformation on SRHR issues to youth.

Not surprisingly, correct knowledge about basic sexual and reproductive health information among Pakistani youth is limited. According to a national survey of 15-24 year olds, only a third (31%) of girls and one in four (41%) boys knew about the physical changes that associated with puberty (Sathar et al. 2003). Figure 1, from the same survey, provides a breakdown of puberty knowledge by location and gender. In another study, conducted by Ali et al (2006) in Karachi, about two thirds were able to identify names of reproductive organs and around the same proportion defined menstruation as the regular monthly bleeding. In this study, about half the girls reported first menstrual experience as shocking and around the same proportion were able to mention the names of various sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). In another study (also conducted in Karachi), which specifically measured knowledge about HIV/AIDS, the researchers found “serious gaps in knowledge and awareness among young Pakistanis, regarding the modes of spread and ways of preventing the further transmission of the HIV/AIDS virus.”

The study found that four in ten of the youth did not know about HIV. The study recommended that schools should impart life skills education to ameliorate the gap (Farid-ul-Hasnain 2009).

It is widely recognised that, in this day and age of booming Internet and other media outlets, youth and children cannot be stopped from accessing information on SRHR issues and left to make judgments as per their limited understanding. In this context, it is even more important and urgent to develop SRHR education for the young people, which is not only scientific but also appropriate for our culture and religion. In a baseline study, conducted by Hayat/Lifeline in nine districts of Pakistan, it was found that only around a





quarter girls and boys heard about their reproductive health rights. The study also points out “knowledge about contraceptive practices, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), emotional aspects of growing up, gender-based violence is low” (Hayat/Lifeline). One in four knew about physical changes of puberty and some form of gender based violence (Hayat/Lifeline).

Given the experience of various organisations working to promote SRHR, it is evident that including this particular subject into mainstream curriculum is not a viable option in our socio-religious environment.^{1,2} However, it has been noted (in interviews with staff from Women Empowerment Group) that such information and skills on how to exert rights can be imparted through Life Skills Based Education (LSBE) Programmes, as long as they are within the acceptable domain of our social setup. LSBE enables and empowers young people to learn about their rights and physical and psychological changes that they go through; and also provides skills on how to resist peer pressure make decisions and communicate with people in more effective manner.

It is important to note that Life Skills Based Education is part of two government policies of Pakistan³. Pakistan is a signatory to Education for All, which mandates LSBE to be part of policy. But it was not until 2009 that LSBE became part of the National Education Policy. LSBE is also part of the National Youth Policy of 2008. Though not LSBE, but imparting reproductive health education is also part of two population and health policies of the government. These policy imperatives came in the backdrop of several research studies conducted by various donors and civil society organisations on the topics of SRHR and/or Life Skills where it emerged that such education should be part of the curricula and schools were identified as the best platform to impart such education. Before designing any development sector project, especially dealing with sensitive issues it is important to note the socio-cultural and religious milieu of Pakistan. Majority of the 180 million inhabitants of the country follow Islam (96 per cent). However, the country is not religiously homogenous so the practitioners of development sector have to keep in mind the various Islamic thoughts that are followed here. Most of the Pakistani Muslims follow the *Ahl-e-Sunnat* sect.⁴

Followers of *Ahl-e-Sunnat* sect are further sub-divided into *Barelvi* and *Deobandi* schools-of-thought or sub-sects. There is a significant number of Shia population (about 20 per cent) in Pakistan as well, mostly followers of the Twelvers (*Fiqah-e-Jaafria*) school-of-thought.

There is around 4 per cent of population belonging to *Ahl-e-Hadis* school-of-thought. A breakdown of the religious landscape of Pakistan is provided in figure 2. The minorities include Christians, Hindus, Ahmedi, Sikh, Parsi, and Zikri (see footnote 4 for reference).

Project Summary

The overall objective of the *Hayat/Lifeline* project is to contribute towards reducing maternal and newborn mortality and morbidity - by facilitating young Pakistani boys' and girls' access to comprehensive Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) education. In order to create an enabling environment to carry the project to its ultimate goal of school curriculum, religious leaders were identified at the top of the hierarchy of decision makers. The government and media both are weary of backlash from *Ulema* in engaging in any sensitive issues. Therefore the *Ulema* from various sects (*Deobandi, Barelvi* and *Shia*) who are of the highest stature were approached to be part of the project. After rigorous meetings religious scholars of prestigious religious institutes were taken on-board and briefed about project's objectives and planned activities.

Women Empowerment Group (WEG) selected eight topics on SRHR, which includes puberty, gender base violence, emotional aspects of growing up, peer relations, family planning, reproductive system, various STIs including HIV/AIDS, and intimacy. The selected *Ulema* were requested to write review papers on these topics by providing references from *Quran* and *Sunnah*. These papers were then converted into sermons and guidebooks.

The project was launched in nine districts including the federal capital, four provincial capitals and four less developed areas from the provinces. The selected districts are: Islamabad, Lahore, Lodhraan, Karachi Jamshoro, Peshawar, Abbottabad, Quetta, and Pishin.

It is important to note that LSBE is not a new concept in Pakistan. World Population Foundation has launched the first LSBE project in 2004. Since then several donors, and international and local organisations have worked on implementing LSBE programs at various scales with both school-going and out-of-school youth.

However, in terms of government commitment to incorporate LSBE as part of curricula on national level, the WEG programme is the first in Pakistan.

Objective of this Toolkit

The successful launch and completion of the SRHR project by WEG prompted the Oxfam staff to document the process. Oxfam hired a third party to explore the factors for success of the project and document the best practices.⁵ The second objective was to list strategies and activities that did not work and point out key lessons learned during the course of the implementation of the project. The target audiences for the toolkit are Oxfam- Novib and its partner organisations, other INGOs, public policy practitioners and those interested in SRHR initiatives across the globe, mainly in Islamic countries.

This guide attempts to demonstrate the importance of involving religious scholars in development practice. This exercise will show how involving religious leaders in a project on sensitive topic in Pakistan proved to be highly effective. The toolkit will outline the process of engaging *Ulema*, starting from strategy development, to first contact to the ultimate success of the project, which came with signing of nine MoUs (memorandum of understandings) with different federal and provincial departments. In addition to developing an analytical framework, the kit will also include best practices, lessons learned, power-analysis of *Ulema* and risk assessment for sensitive development sector topics. This will also document the process, highlight the successes, and provide a framework so that other organisations aspiring to engage in similar exercise in Pakistan (or other Muslim dominated countries) can also use the WEG/Hayat model as an example and a tool.

Moreover, the dissemination of the toolkit will inform readers of key *Ulema* of the country who are sensitised and understand the importance of such issues.

Methodology

Since the 1990s, faith-based organisations (FBOs) have risen to prominence on the agendas of donors, policy makers and activists, and featured more saliently in the scholarly literature on development and civil society (Tadros 2010).

The focus of this guide is to document the process of how to involve religious scholars from various sects and sub-sects in Pakistan and outline the steps. This exercise will show how developing partnerships with the *Ulema* (in our local context), pays off for a project. Though the Hayat/Lifeline project involved multiple strategies and had various stakeholders, however for this particular toolkit, the focus is primarily on the involvement of *Ulema*, hence the research design is also around this main theme.

In doing so, best practices and lessons learned are documented for each key step of the project (in relation to *Ulema* only). Power-analysis of *Ulema* and risk assessment for sensitive development sector topics is kept as a crosscutting theme in the data collection.

The methodology involved in-depth interviews; review of existing project reports and information, education and communication (IEC) materials; and literature review on similar projects. Through the interviews the various steps that were involved in the *Ulema* engagement were identified. In addition to that another fundamental question explored in this exercise was about the *acceptance of SRHR* in Pakistan in general discourse. The premise for this research was on the understanding that invoking such a topic would create suspicion and in some cases strong backlash from conservative segments of society. Or has enough social change occurred in society and topics like SRHR are considered the need of our time, and therefore it is a problem that exists in our society and we have to resolve it ourselves. Also explored were the reasons for motivation of the *Ulema* to join a campaign as sensitive as sexual and reproductive health rights in Pakistan. Was there any monetary incentive, personal connections or something else behind their engagement?

Among the basic research questions was also investigation into the reasons how/why this (Hayat/Lifeline) strategy worked and the government of Pakistan agreed to make it part of the curriculum. Or in other words, why did WEG succeed, while these kinds of programs have been in existence in Pakistan for more than a decade. To undertake this exercise, it was important to talk to the key players of the project, namely WEG staff and *Ulema* who were involved. Since it was not possible to contact all the 12 supreme *Ulema* and 36 *khateeb*s of the mosques, it was decided to choose a sample. For WEG, only the key staff members involved with the implementation of the project were interviewed.

To get an overview of the project, in-depth interviews with religious leaders (2 from each sect) were conducted. For this, one supreme *Aalim* and one religious leader at grassroots level, i.e., *Khateeb/Imam* from each of the three sects were selected. The selection of religious leaders considered the geographic spread of the project.

The head of Hayat Lifeline project Mr. Omar Aftab and key staff of WEG who implemented the project were also interviewed (see table 1).

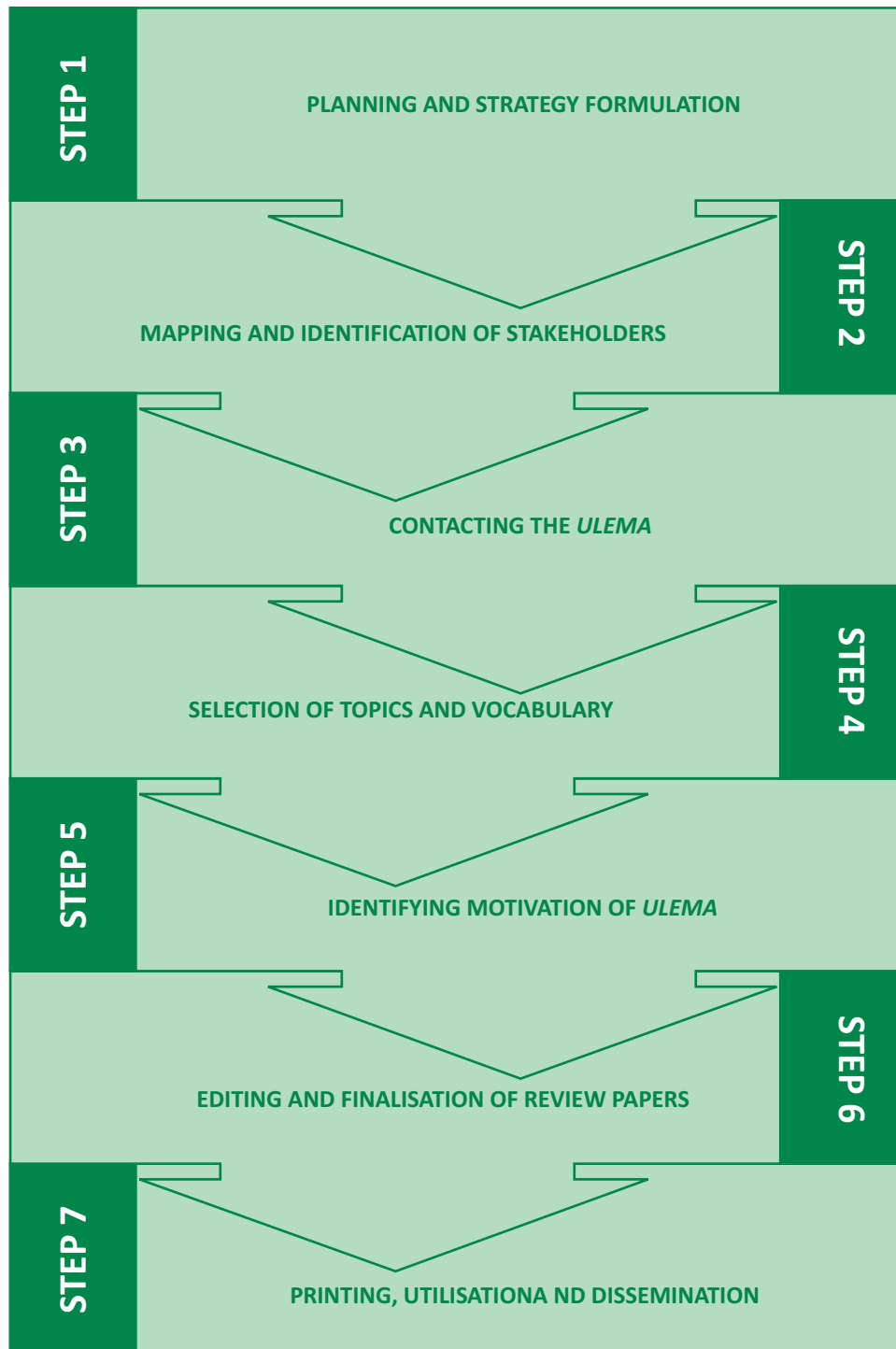
In addition, existing materials including guidebooks prepared by the religious scholars, pamphlets and video testimonials were also reviewed. Similarly, project proposal documents and quarterly reports were also analysed.

Table 1: The Breakdown of Interviews

Sample	Total
Supreme <i>Ulema</i>	3
<i>Ulema</i> (grass root level from each of the sects)	3
WEG staff	4
Total Interviews	10

A literature review of existing life skills based education programs implemented by various institutions and agencies in Pakistan; and involving *Ulema* in development sector was also carried out.

Figure 3: Steps Taken in Involving Religious Leaders



Power Analysis

Pakistani Muslims follow various sects and schools of thought. These groups may not agree on everything but all agree on the basics of SRHR.

As noted before, majority of Pakistanis are Muslim. However, they follow various sects and sub-sects. The followers of one sect (or a school-of-thought) follow only the scholar/cleric of their school-of-thought, i.e. the *Shia* population would follow decrees issued by a *Shia Aalim* only. Hence, it was necessary to involve *Ulema* from each of the sects and sub-sects that are dominant in Pakistan.

All schools of thought stand together in terms of basic beliefs and are of one voice on many social issues, for example *Hudood* Ordinance, laws related to sexual harassment, domestic violence etc. However, they do compete for dominance in the religious marketplace.

The hostility between the sects, especially between *Deobandi* and *Shia* and *Ahl-e-Hadis* and other sects is well documented - the on-going sectarian violence in the country speaks volume about this (for statistics of violence refer to Riaz 2008, 113). However, this friction is not evident at the highest level of hierarchy and *Ulema* are willing to come forward and work together on important issues like SRHR for youth.

Power analysis of religious leaders in Pakistan shows the internal and sectarian hierarchies and dynamics of various sects. For example, one of the ways of asserting power in the community is through their extensive *madrassas* in the country. Though there are around ten thousand *madrassas* in the country but the ones with highest degree (*Mukhassis*) conferring status are only a few hundred (Riaz 2008; Noor 2008; Bano 2012).⁶ Even among those there are a handful that enjoys the highest level of prestige and power. Similar to secular institutions, these elite *madrassas* are located in urban areas and have enrolment from all walks of life. Another important facet of *madrassa* that intrigues many is the number of *madrassas* by sect is not proportional to the population.

For example, *Deobandi*, who are estimated to be around 20 per cent of the population run majority of the *Madaris* in the country.

However, the *Ulema* acquire power not only through the extensive network of the Islamic seminaries registered with them, but also through the prayer leaders in the mosques and their followers in the general population.^{7,8} Another source of power for these various schools of thoughts are their affiliation with a political party representing their ideology.

Aside from the mosque and *madrassa*, the *Ulema* also use other mechanism to apply their authority. Certain national level groups like Pakistan *Ulema* Council (PUC), Council of Islamic Ideology (CII), *Roet-e-Hilal* Committee are important to note in this regard.¹⁰ The Pakistan *Ulema* Council is an umbrella organisation of religious scholars and clerics of Islam belonging to various schools-of-thought. The CII is an advisory body that advises in legislative matters if a law or practice in discussion is against Islam. For example, the advisory body on many occasions prescribed the limits of medical technology.¹¹ Given the clout of these organisations and power they exercise, any project related to a sensitive topic such as SRHR has to make sure that they do not go in their opposition. It is not necessary to involve the organisation, the method employed by Hayat/Lifeline was to engage *Ulema* of the highest stature who are either part of these organisations or have influence over them

In this context, it is understood and accepted that religious scholars and clerics both are one of the major stakeholders and gatekeepers for social change, especially when the change is of a sensitive nature. Success of a project that deals with working with young people to impart information on sexual and reproductive health would not be possible without their support.

Pakistanis are deeply devout to Islam and sensitive issues such as SRHR are directly linked with religion. NGOs are generally disputed for not being in touch with the ground realities, at least in terms of norms and ethos of society. Especially whenever it comes to working with youth they are seen with suspicion from various scions of the society as promoters of Western agenda. Similarly NGOs view religious leaders with lack of trust. Hence, there exist disconnect between the development sector and religious leaders. However, a big impact can be brought if both NGOs and *Ulema* work together.

In the next few sections, we will discuss the steps employed by Hayat/Lifeline staff to involve religious scholars in the SRHR project.

STEP 1

Planning and Strategy Development

Selection of implementing partner with experience and key staff are critical for success of such projects.

Selection of the executing agency is vital for a project that involves working with *Ulema* for sensitive issues like SRHR (JHUCCP 2010; WPF). It is important that the implementing partner has past experience or has demonstrated their linkages with *Ulema* either on organisational level or at individual level of key staff.

The reasons explained for selection of WEG, as the key implementing partner, is their expertise in women empowerment in advocacy and campaign launching. Before this project they were already working on a project on promoting breast cancer awareness and reducing violence against women in Pakistan.¹² However, this was the first time that they worked with religious leaders.

It is also crucial to carefully select the staff working on the project i.e. staff that is aware of the socio-cultural and religious norms of the country. In some cases it is imperative to have a male for one-on-one meetings with *Ulema* or visiting religious institutions, seminaries and mosques. The sect or *Maslak* of the person making frequent contacts is also an important criterion.

WEG was also involved in developing the strategy of the program and one of the key reasons for success of the program is the fact the organisation that was involved with strategy development was the same that implemented the project.

To initiate the project WEG staff worked on a comprehensive strategy through extensive literature review and meetings with organisations and individuals with expertise in the field. In particular other LSBE (and SRHR/RH) programs were evaluated for their methodology to identify what works what does not. In addition to that they also undertook three extensive studies. These studies included a situation analysis for SRHR-E for adolescents and youth, a research study on learning need assessment among adolescents in Pakistan, and a review of existing SRHR curriculum in Pakistan.

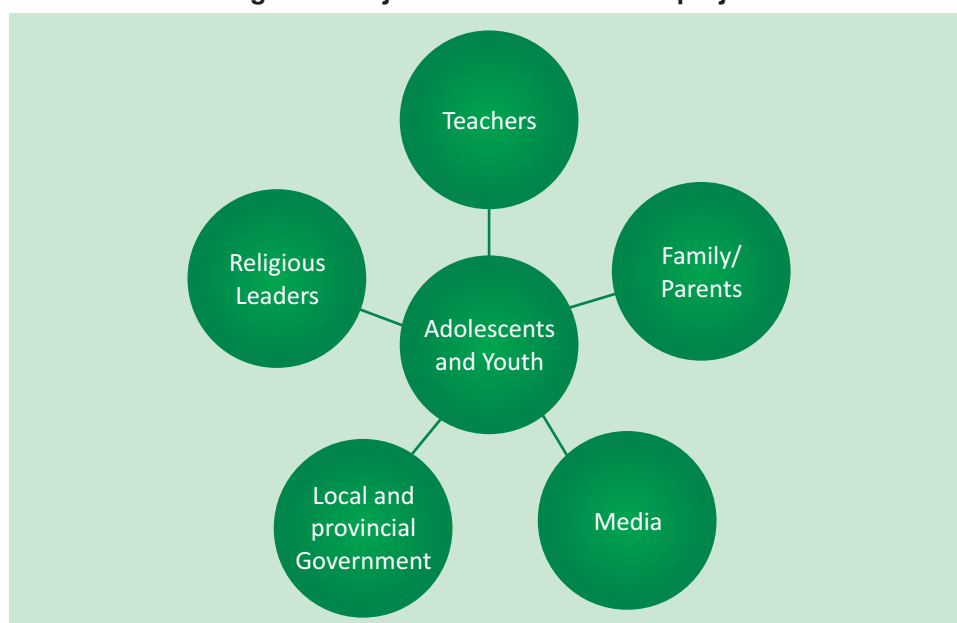
One of the reasons noted by WEG management successful strategy development was review of existing projects, their reports and other materials, and also meeting with personnel involved in such projects. WPF-Pakistan, has been involved with LSBE programs for about a decade, in their assessment of their programs, one of the recommendations they provided was;

“Due to the sensitivity of the subject matter, especially the SRHR content, LSBE curriculum should be approved and endorsed by a panel of religious scholars and include their reference in the foreword. Similarly, inclusion of a few religious/Qur’an references in the text would increase community’s acceptance to even higher levels.” (WPF 2010)

Mapping and Identification of Stakeholders

While the youth were the main target of the project, there are other important players and gatekeepers in our society that hold power in reaching to this particular segment of the population. Religious leaders, media and government officials were identified among the main stakeholders for this project (See figure 4).

Figure 4: Major stakeholders of the project



It was understood that convincing them to be part of the project would be time consuming and challenging but there was recognition of the importance of their involvement that could help paving the way. Once stakeholder analysis was completed, a comprehensive mapping exercise for religious leaders and schools was carried out for Pakistan and the supreme leaders from three main schools of Islamic jurisprudence were identified. It was decided to involve the top most *Ulema* at the early stage of the project, especially to create a favourable environment for SRHR. Even though it to change the media and public opinion on SRHR topics. This would also help bringing the government on-board by lessening perceived criticism to make such changes into the curricula.

A sustainable program can be built only where there is partnership between the program's implementing partner and *Ulema* and the two parties are working together for a common cause. Engaging *Ulema* from all the major sects was necessary to gain trust of all communities of Muslims.

Having religious scholars and leaders speak out on SRHR is crucial in breaking the silence on the topic of SRHR and making this a subject that is no longer a taboo.

Instead of starting from grassroots, Hayat/Lifeline decided to work with the top *Ulema* of Pakistan (top-down approach). Through the supreme religious leaders, they reached the *Aalim* and *Molvis*

Ulema can be the communicators to bridge the gap between the community and the state. As educators, Ulema can advance knowledge in their respective communities and can also filter for useful information for consumption of general public.

Engaging Ulema at an early stage of the project helps creating their ownership of the project and also in fostering a favourable environment in society for such issues.

Since the Ulema wrote the review papers, they believed in the project and its importance. Ulema, on several occasions, helped WEG staff in winning trust of and positively engaging media and government.

“Government officials were reluctant to sign MOUs due to sensitivity of the curriculum especially in Quetta and Peshawar. Fear of media and religious leaders lobbying against them is high. Initially, media was hesitant; however, after viewing the religious testimonials, their queries on SRHR issues were clarified.”

In our socio-cultural setting people link sensitive issues like SRHR directly to religion. There are widespread myths about what our religion permits and what it does not.

In the Baseline Study, conducted by WEG, it was found that most stakeholders (youth, parents, politicians, teachers, journalists and religious leaders) support the idea of teaching SRH in schools. However at the same time a large number also believes that such information is against religion. Hence it became clear that it would be critical to engage Ulema in this project.

“Ulema involvement was crucial, and some of them are considered controversial. So we had to make sure to reach the most respected Ulema. However, it was difficult to convince them. Initially it seemed challenging that people of this level will not work with us on this topic” (WEG Staff).

Several NGOs objected to this approach. They cautioned about Ulema involvement because that would allow them to define what should be the SRHR agenda of government, and hence giving them undue power. They also suggested that WEG should use rights based approach since the topic was essentially about rights.

However, WEG management decided that “Pakistan is a religious country and for these kind of topics, religion is very important.” And, at the end of the project, it is evident that the decision to involve religious leaders was the best way to proceed. For this project, initially 60 religious leaders were selected from all over Pakistan. From that list, 12 were made part of the project (See box 1 for details).

Box 1: Ulama who prepared review papers on SRHR issues.^{13,14}

1. Maulana Mufti Muneeb ur Rehman, Rais Dar-ul-Fata Dar-ul-Aloom Naeemia, Karachi
2. Maulana Faqeer Abu Saleh Mufti Muhammad Bukhash, Markzi Dar-ul-Aloom Jamia Rizvia Mazhar Islam, Faisalabad
3. Maulana Subahan Allah Jan, Jamia Darwaish Masjid, Peshawar
4. Maulana Ragab Hussain Naeemi, Nazim Jamia Naeemia, Lahore
5. Dr.Qari Abdul Rasheed, Member Markazi Ruaat Halal Committee Pakistan and Master Trainer Hajaj Balochistan Wazarat-e- Mazhbi Amoor
6. Mufti Zia Ullah Batgrami, Al Mukhtsaish fl Fiqa Jamia Dar-ul-Aloom Haqania, Akora Khatak, District Nowshera
7. Maulana Ghulam Rasool, Administrator Jamia Banoria Almia, Karachi
8. Dr. Maulana Abdul Mateen Akhwanzada, Provincial office Ban ul Mazahab Ulema Council Balochistan, Jamai Mateen ul Madaras, Quetta
9. Allama Raja Tajamul Hussain Gohar, Chairman Bab-ul-ilm Council, Attock.
10. Maulana Qurban Ali Toseli, Sultan ul Fazal MA Islamiat
11. Maulana Sayed Jawad Haddi, Ex- Senator & Principal Jamia-ul-Shaheed Arif-ul-Hussaini al Arif-ul-Islamia, Peshawar
12. Maulana Aftab Hussain al Jawadi, Dean Facility of Sharyia, Mulam Hadees Wasool-e-Hadees, Jamia-ul-Kossar Islamic University, Islamabad

STEP 3

Since the objective of the project was protection of youth from wrong deeds, empowering them with the right information as per our religion and ultimately saving mothers and newborns lives, it did not take too long to convince the supreme leaders.

Contacting the Ulema

The *Ulema* were one of the key stakeholders of the project. Making them part of the project from early on was vital--even before getting involvement from the media and government.

The *Ulema* created a favourable environment for the project, while the media was utilised to raise information and awareness on the project and the need for such initiatives.

Once the major schools-of-thought were identified, linkages were built influential scholars within these schools. This was the most critical stage. The *Ulema* wanted to clarify if the funding is from trusted donor. Some of them precisely asked about the particular donor; however they were fine with any other funding agency.

WEG Staff had to contact and meet with selected Ulema several times to assuage misconceptions and mistrust they had

The WEG staff met with the *Ulema* on many occasions and shared the objectives of the project.

Even after getting initial consent of the *Ulema*, WEG staff kept constant communication with them, so they were aware of the progress of the project and did not feel that they are not part of the process.

In some cases WEG staff had to use existing social network to mobilize the *Ulema*. The staff contacts with the Sufi networks came in handy at times to develop some connections.

Moreover, once a few top *Ulema* were involved they also become biggest advocate for the project and roped in other religious scholars.

Dispelling misconceptions and doubts of Ulema

Ulema, at first, are cautious of extending their support to nongovernmental organisations fearing that they might be promoting vested agendas of the West and especially if the project has foreign (Western) donors. However, the religious scholars (who were contacted) are cognizant of the fact that foreign money is involved in so many aspects of our life including running of our government, which we cannot stop, then why not use the funds for welfare and betterment of society. One Aalim said,

"I think if Ulema get those funds, they will also agree to work. But I am working only for the benefit of society. Our government is also taking funds from foreign donors. Why don't we object them? But if madrassa takes money from USA, do people object to that? If there is funding for health and education, we should not deny that."

Differences between the sects

Though there are four different schools of religious thought, the *Ulema* agree on the basics. They all have similar views on the selected topics (evident in the review papers and in their interviews). There are, however, differences if one goes into detail and different aspects of the identified issue. The research found that religious leaders of each sect should convey

the message to their own sect. For example, there are differences in the age of puberty among the sects.

They also differ on at what stage the foetus gets ensoulment and whether abortion is allowed or not. Similarly, all schools of Islamic thought in Pakistan agree on the use of family planning methods however they differ on the kinds of contraceptive permissible in Islam and the conditions under which they are allowed to use.

Selection of Topics and Vocabulary

Using terminologies and language that is more acceptable in Pakistan was another factor that was at the core of success of this project.

Topics and program models for SRHR that are developed in other countries had not worked in the past were discarded and the program was flexible enough to accommodate changes.

Hence, modifying the SRHR paradigm to fit into our social, cultural and religious norms were important. For example, Hayat Lifeline decided to not include Homosexuality and Abortion Right in the list of selected topics.

Branding, i.e., using a term “Hayat/Lifeline” instead of using the name of the organisation or any slogan in English, appears to have a positive impact on the project.

Local Context, Local Needs

It is understood that for success of any project local context and needs should be taken in consideration.

As one religious scholar noted:

“FP cannot be a law in our country. Each family has to decide on their own that how many children they want. How they can raise their children in a better way. You cannot do it like China. I am against such law. Each person, each couple has to decide on their own. That is my stance.”

It was stressed from early stages of the project that in the context of our culture, any information and education shared under this initiative is age and gender specific. As noted by a scholar, “There should be education according to age. For example, 9 year old should know about self-protection and private body parts, so that no one can exploit him, and if so how he should protect. A 12-year old should know about peer pressure, bad company, rights and 15-year old would need puberty information. What it means to be baligh. Social and religious responsibilities and life changes that the child should take on.”

However Ulema do agree that such education should be imparted from early age. “Education that is imparted at an early age makes the strongest mark on character and it is hard to change behaviour after a certain age. Hence, another Aalim noted that this kind of education should be provided at an early age, starting from age 9.”

The project personnel heeded this advice carefully and hence designed the curricula according to age and gender. In the past, one of the strong criticisms on such projects was on neglecting such aspects.

Identifying Motivation of Ulema

One of the strongest reasons for the success of this project (and Ulema involvement) was restraining from promoting certain controversial issues like homosexuality,¹⁵ abortion and explicit sex education topics for unmarried youth. In spite of this it was initially difficult to convince Ulema but as one Aalim noted,

“Our society does not share information about puberty with youth therefore they remain ignorant. They do not know about what religion says about this. There are taboos. They think it is in religion to have the taboos. We have to separate the two. It is a need of the society.”

Another reason for getting commitment from Ulema was their own understanding of societal needs and being well versed in religious as well as worldly affairs. Ulema, as found by the WEG staff, are not dogmatic and can be convinced with logic and facts and figures.

From the interviews it emerged that Ulema felt this project will strength the instituion of family .One of the Ulema, provided written testimonial noting that:

“The issues of puberty are different in boys and girls. One of the reasons for societal decay is that neither parents nor teachers provide any guidance to children in this context. The children will form a closer bond with their parents should they provide proper guidance to them on these psychological and sexual changes.”

Another concern that was shared was use of incentives to involve the Ulema. The supreme Ulema were paid to write the review papers. But, money was not a factor for their agreement:

“We were paid 50,000. But I did not do it to get a name for myself. I did it for guidance. People think that the Ulema are behind the taboos. I wanted to break this misconception that Ulema want to talk about these topics, people do not want to listen.”(Religious Scholar).

Some of the religious leaders, especially those who are followers of the supreme Ulema felt more confident, once they saw their own leader is supporter of the project. One of the Imam noted;

“Initially, I had questions about the funding of the project. I used to think this project might be promoting agenda of the West in our country. But after meeting with project team and reading review papers, I came to realize that if something is done for well being / betterment of a society then whosoever provides funds should not be a concern of ours.”

The Ulema who had reservations about the project were appeased by other Ulema who understood the importance and urgency. The engaged Ulema also dispelled myths and misconceptions for those who shunned these topics.

Concerns and Barriers from Ulema

It was identified that it is hard to convince older religious leaders. Because old aged Ulema belong to old school of thought. They think working on these topics is foreign agenda. Some of them believe that things like family planning is creating barrier in natural reproduction.

For example, a scholar who identified this problem told us, how he tackled such old school thinking.

“One Aalim mentioned that ‘How is it possible that a father would tell about family planning to his son and daughter?’ I told him that there are lot of things, not just this topic [family planning]. You can talk about this in a different way. Father can guide while mother can share more detailed information.”

The same Aalim noted that *“in some cases we might not be able change people’s thinking but we cannot leave such people aside, we have to take them along.”*

Editing and Finalisation of Review Papers

Once the WEG staff received the review papers from the Ulema, it was decided to publish them after sect-wise compilation. Hence, instead of eight review papers, three booklets based on different sects were compiled. Each booklet contained point of view of four leading Ulema of the sect and contained extracts from the papers. In order to make sure that no errors are made in the process, Aalim, Maulana Ludhianwi, a leading educationist was involved at this stage. He was deeply involved with the editing of the booklets as well as at the stage of formatting and composition. He himself reflected on this process:

“While editing and doing proof reading of the review papers, I summarised these without compromising the central idea or main theme of the papers.”

Involving Professor Ludhianwi served the function of a review also. He was initially critical and had suspicions because of the topics of SRHR but once he saw the review papers, he agreed to be part of the project:

“The project team brought to me the review papers already written by Ulema of three sects including Barelvi, Deobandi, and Ahl-e-Tashee. All of them wrote on the same eight subjects. My first impression [from the text] was that the project was all about how to live a healthy life in accordance with the Islamic teachings.”

Ahle-Hadees maslak was not part of the project. They were left out because they are only 4% of the population. This could have been detrimental because their opposition could have harmed the project. However, project personnel of Hayat lifeline realised that and one of their top Aalim, Maulana Ludhianwi was involved with the project for editing of the 12 review papers. Our research found that their involvement would have further strengthened project, whereas not making them part of the process might make give the impression that Ahle Ahdees were against the SRHR, which was not the case.

Printing, Utilisation and Dissemination of Booklets

The government officials in KP agreed to be part of the project if the Wafaq ul Madaris endorsed the project.

Once the guidebooks were finalised, three sermon booklets were developed from them. Before printing, these sermon booklets were pre-tested with 118 stakeholders of the project including religious scholars, government officials, teachers, parents, youth groups, media and NGO representatives from eight districts.

The pretesting showed an overwhelming majority endorsed the messages of the booklets. After the pretesting, 1,500 sermon booklets were printed. Moreover, 5,000 booklets Quran study reports (review papers) were also printed. The guidebooks were also distributed through the 12 Ulema and 36 khateebis of the selected mosques of the nine districts for Friday Sermons and through the district committees as well as youth networks.

The booklets and sermon dissemination has mostly generated positive feedback from the participants. WEG staff monitors sermons and the Imams of all the selected mosques send regular report about their activities and engagements. So far there has not been any hostile response to the sermons. Many people, who attend the sermon, are willing to talk to the project staff after prayer and record their endorsement of the program on the caemra. The research team also found that:

The Ulema are greatly appreciative of resource material based on the teachings of Quran and Sunnah. One scholar mentioned that Khatibs are always looking for new topics to talk about during the Friday prayer and would perhaps not be so confident to bring SRHR on their own. However, when they received the printed review papers by their own supreme scholar, they get the confidence.

Another scholar noted that:

“Ulema always talk about basic principles of Islam and religious ritual and controversial sectarian issues but they do not generally focus on social issues and problems being faced by our society. Hayat Lifeline made Ulema realise how important it is to guide people on issues such as SRHR.”

In one of the interviews an Aalim expressed similar thoughts that he is using the review book in his classes and wanted to modify the book for classroom setting. Another scholar shared that he gave these review papers to all of his family members including grandsons and daughters.

The three booklets (for three different sects) are very useful for usage at mosque and madrasa level. But the Ulema recommended that for general dissemination, a combined book of all the three points of view should be prepared. Moreover, a preface or endorsement on the combined booklet from Ahle Hadis Aalim would be useful to show their involvement. Aside from the booklets and review papers, the contacts that were

developed with the Ulema were also useful for other aspects of the project. The Ulema not only wrote the papers but many of them were willing to record video testimonials to support various topics of SRHR which were later used by WEG staff during their press conferences with journalists. Those testimonials were instrumental in dispelling concerns of media personnel and journalists. Similarly, these Ulema went alongside the WEG staff (on few occasions) to meet with government officials who were not willing to forge any alliance.

The mosque prayer leaders (Imam or Khatib) received an honorarium for the delivery of khutbah on the eight selected topics based on the sermon booklets. This amount was paid to them to defray their administrative costs. However, it is questionable that how long the topics will remain part of the khutba once the project activities are closed.

Challenges & Implementation

The project was criticised for not using a Rights Based Approach and relying on engaging Ulema and work through their recommendations. However, after the success of the project (signing of MoUs), organisations, which were critical of this initiative, acknowledged the efficacy of the approach.

- The project took time in reaching out to the religious leaders. It took a while before they came on-board. Most of the project activities took place in the last nine months.
- Engaging the Ulema did not come about in one meeting or through one letter. The staff had to continuously follow up in form of regular meetings to convince Ulema on the project's objectives.
- The devolution plan through the 18th Amendment of 2010 to the Constitution of Pakistan has brought fundamental changes for how NGOs are to engage with the government for policy change. Due to that the ministries of Youth, Education, Health, and Population Welfare were devolved and came under the purview of the provinces. Hence instead of a single MoU with Federal government, five separate MoUs are needed to implement the same program.
- From the very beginning of the project the senior Ulema were involved, and made part of the formal decision making structure.
- The project was flexible to change and strategy was adapted according to feedback from the field.
- The peer-to-peer strategy was quite effective in engaging Ulema.
- The election campaign of 2013 hindered the project progress seriously, because of engagement of the Ulema in political activities.
- The three intelligence agencies of Pakistan (Military Intelligence, Intelligence Bureau and Federal Investigation Agency) also got indication of the project and used to attend press conferences related to the project.
- The security concerns in Pishin and Quetta made it difficult to work with the community, especially youth. Similarly, after the operation in Abbottabad by US forces to capture Osama bin Laden, NGO activities were protracted and required clearance from the government.

Conclusions

The findings of this research firmly establish that successful integration of Ulema in a sensitive programme can greatly help in achieving development goals. Various development sector practitioners see Ulema as blocker rather than enabler. There are misconceptions in our society about the Mullah and the Aalim. Many conflate the two, whereas the project shows that Ulema have a broader worldview and are willing to work alongside the civil society, as long as the projects are within the teachings of Islam. The success of this project testifies to the premise of the project design, that Ulema are one of the most important stakeholders for SRHR and one cannot succeed without their involvement. It should be noted that success of Hayat/Lifeline project in a turf where others were unable to reach their goal, could not have come without learning from the experiences of other organisations. Especially the organisations, which have been consistently working in implementing SRHR through LSBE on pilot basis or at the district-level, paved the path for discourse. The best practices and missteps from those organisations guided the Hayat/Lifeline campaign.

The project shows that the role of Ulema as communicators and educators in their respective communities can be effectively used for promoting positive misperceptions. Of course, the Ulema did not bring any behaviour change directly, but 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.

- Messages delivered by respected Ulema were well-received, considered helpful, and reinforced promoting healthy behaviours.
- For similar interventions, the key point to stress is that the intervention should not be in opposition to Islamic teachings.

As one scholar pointed out,

“For similar interventions in the future, the only way is to mobilize Ulema and convince them that the proposed subject is not opposed to Islam and sensitize them about the particular need of the proposed subject.”

- To the question of SRHR as a concept that can be discussed widely and openly, the opinion is mixed. It is true that the environment to talk about SRHR has considerably changed, at least at the top level, in the last ten years.
- For high-level government officials and supreme Ulema, one does not have to use innuendos and sugar coating to talk about sexual and reproductive rights health rights and information needs of adolescents of Pakistan. However, for public consumption one still has to use “life skills based education” without referring to sexual and reproductive health. For example, the title of the guidebook is “Life Skills Education (in the light of Quran and Sunnah” or “Zindagi Guazarni Ke Rehnuma Asool (Quran o Sunnat ki roshni main).” The Preface of the booklets does highlight that this contains information about reproductive and sexual health.
- In the concluding part of the project, one of the religious leaders noted that there is less hesitance and fear about SRHR and now many ask about these things.
- The Ulema were motivated to be part of the project because they were treated as equal partners, rather than obstructers. They were asked to provide their input to the selected topics without compelling them to follow any existing literature on the topics.

Moreover, enough evidence with statistics was shared with them to show how important it is to impart sexual and reproductive health information among youth (married or unmarried). The supreme Ulema did receive honorarium for their write-ups but money was not a motivation.

Way Forward

At this juncture of the project, when several MoUs have been signed with multiple ministries, both at the federal and provincial levels to incorporate SRHR in high school curricula, there are other avenues and frontiers the project is looking into.

- The first challenge would be figuring out the modalities of including the LSBE curricula in the existing school curricula. It has not been decided yet whether the topics would be taught as a separate subject or incorporated in existing courses considered relevant to the subject.
- Another immediate decision would be to decide on the sustainability and scaling up of religious sermons. The project entailed delivery of sermons in 36 selected mosques from the nine districts where Hayat Lifeline has been working. The sermons have proven to be extremely successful and effective method to reach out to the masses to deliver reproductive and sexual health messages (albeit only to the males).
- A few times, the project has been challenged on the needs of out-of-school children and youth. In Pakistan, gross primary enrolment is universal; however the retention rates are not encouraging. About a third of the youth drops out after primary schooling and about the same proportion drops out after middle school (NEMIS et al. 2011, Table 2.7). School dropout rates for girls are higher than for boys. By the eighth grade (middle school) female students are equivalent to only about two thirds of male students (NEMIS et al. 2011, Table 2.6). Research has shown that female adolescents (especially out of school) have very limited mobility (Sathar et al. 2003). Out of school adolescent males are mostly engaged in economic activities. Developing a programme tailored for out-of-school youth or other socially excluded and isolated children and adolescents (i.e., homeless children) would be another challenge, if the SRHR program were to expand.
- The programme team was also advised to involve women religious scholars who constitute a significant part of the religious setting of our country. Madrassas are segregated by gender and female religious scholars madrassas run by female semianries (known as Aalima). 16 Females can also train to be Muftia (one who can issue religious edicts or Fatwa) or Hadees experts. The popularity of Umme-Hassan and Dr. Farhat Hashmi, two charismatic and very conservative religious scholars of the country, show their potential for social and political change.
- The religious scholars understand the project aims to bring SRHR topics to government schooling system through life skills education. However, they suggest that this kind of education is important for all adolescents, including those who attend madrassas.¹⁷

A religious leader suggested that, "The religious institutes, Madaris, must be reached out because students of these institutes need SRHR information more than those of government and private schools."

- The project is also going to work more on greater involvement of religious leaders with the media by bringing Ulema on television talk shows (instead of just video recordings).
- Another avenue to explore would be the needs of non-Muslim adolescents. If the education on SRHR is provided in the light of Islamic teachings, they might not be effective for non-Muslims.
- It was also suggested to involve smaller cities and villages instead of focusing on main urban centres only.

The services of Ulema should be further utilised through bringing them to electronic media for raising awareness on SRHR.

Appendix

Guideline for In-depth Interview with Religious Leaders

Start with Introduction and sharing of objectives of the meeting (signing of consent form)

1. What are your views and understanding of the Hayat /Lifeline project
 - a. Prompts: duration of the project, objective of the project, achievements etc.
2. Do you think it is appropriate to provide adolescent boys and girls with reproductive and sexual health and rights information?
 - a. If yes, why? If no, why not.
 - b. Is there any restriction in our religion? (Prompt: cultural barrier)
3. How were you approached and by whom to be part of the Lifeline project.
 - a. What was your role in the project
 - i. How did contribute to the project (prompts: booklet, sermon, videos, media appearance etc.)
 - ii. Involving government
 - b. What was your motivation for involvement
 - i. Prompt: any direct benefit?
 - c. Did you face any problems/blocks
 - i. If yes, from whom (i.e., other religious groups, hierarchy within the sect, parents of young people, media etc.)
 - ii. How did you tackle the problems
4. How would you want to improve the process in involving the Ulema in similar projects
 - a. What would be a better way to engage Ulema if we want to implement a similar project on sensitive issues
 - i. What kind of activities/IEC materials are most helpful for such activities (best practices)
 - ii. Are there any topics that Ulema would not support
 - iii. Anything to avoid
5. Is there an internal hierarchy that you follow in your sect?
6. Are there any differences of opinion between the various sects and sub-sects on this issue of SRHR?
 - a. Why?
7. What sect or sub-sect has more influence in changing public opinion about sensitive issues like SRHR for young people?
8. What sect or sub-sect has more influence in changing government policies about SRHR for young people
 - a. Any comments on how can we incorporate SRHR in curriculum

Do you have any questions from us?

Thank you very much for your time and support.

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End Notes

¹ For example see Shaukat (2013) that discusses the recent controversy of introduction of sex education and comparative religion at Lahore Grammar School; or Farooq (2011) report on WPF's curriculum controversy.

² "Last year in October, the NGO Bargad had to shelve its campaign to educate schoolgirls about reproductive health in Gujranwala after locals complained and filed a petition in the Lahore High Court, asking it to hold the organisation accountable for putting 'objectionable material' – on topics such as contraceptives and relationships.

³ The education and youth policies.

⁴ The breakdown of the Muslim population by sects is based on estimates derived from various studies. In Pakistan, neither the Census nor any other national survey or government agency inquires about sect.

⁵ Faith based organisations; Ulema and clerics have been part of various reproductive and sexual health projects in various Muslim countries (SRHR Alliance Unite for Body Rights 2012). However, Pakistan is the first Muslim country to get MoUs from government to bring curriculum change for inclusion of SRHR.

⁶ Equivalent to PhD or MPhil degrees.

⁷ Some estimates show that there equal number of non-registered Madaris in the country (Noor 2008).

⁸ For example, the Beralvi madrassas certainly are not in proportion to their population, how ever, their religious landscape is dominant in Pakistan especially in Sindh and Punjab where shrine visitations, and following of Pir (religious guide) is common.

⁹ For example, the SSP (Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan), allied with Deobandi school of thought have been banned by the government, but has revitalised under the umbrella of ASWJ (Ah lus Sunnah wal Jamaah) (Ali 2013).

¹⁰ This committee deals with the sighting of moon, thus ascertaining the exact date of beginning of a new Islamic moth.

¹¹ In this context the famous case is the denial of use of DNA as the sole evidence in cases of rape. They also recently declared IVF as permissible (but donor eggs and sperm are not allowed). In the same announcement, they declared cloning and sex change as unlawful.

¹² The projects were known as Pink and white ribbon campaigns.

¹³ Other than them, Hafiz Tahir Asharfi, Chairman of Ulema Council Pakistan and Maulana Muhammad Hanif Jalandhri, Gneral Secretary of Wifaqul Madaris were also strong supporters of the project. Prof Abdur Rehman Ludhanvi (representing Ahle-Hadees) was actively involved with editing and proofreading of the guidebooks.

¹⁴ In the early stages of the project Khanum Syeda Tayyaba Bukhari, scholar of Shia sect and one of the few renowned female Islamic scholars of Pakistan was also contacted. However she was too busy to commit her time to the project.

¹⁵ According to a PEW survey only 2 per cent of Pakistanis believed that “society should accept homosexuality.”

¹⁶ About a third of the madrassas are for females.

¹⁷ World Population Foundation (WPF) is working on as LSBE education programme for religious seminaries.





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