



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

PAKISTAN

SUCCESS STORY

Measured Marriage

**For one teenager,
a chance to finish
childhood from USAID**



Photo: Wasif Rashid \ FALAH

Bakhtawar will be able to finish school and growing up before she is married.

“Because we are very poor, my parents wanted me to get married as early as possible, but I was not ready,” said Bakhtawar, a 15-year-old girl who avoided early marriage with the help of a USAID education program.

Telling Our Story
U.S. Agency for International Development
Washington, DC 20523-1000
<http://stories.usaid.gov>

Bakhtawar was a good student in the fifth grade at a small school located in a Southern Pakistan village. She enjoyed learning, laughing with her friends, and spending time with her family. But one evening, as she sat nervously in a chair beside her parents at the local meeting hall, she knew that everything about her childhood was coming to an end. No more school, no more girlfriends, no more fun. At 15, Bakhtawar was about to become engaged to be married.

In traditional agrarian communities in Pakistan, a woman’s primary role in life is to be a mother. To assure the maximum number of her fertile years, poor fathers often marry their daughters off straight after puberty.

Just as Bakhtawar’s betrothal ceremony was about to begin, a prominent man in the village walked into the hall followed by his wife. The room quieted down as the man approached Bakhtawar and her parents. He stopped in front of them and spoke.

“This girl is not mentally or physically ready for marriage and motherhood,” he told the wide-eyed parents. “You must wait for three years, until she is eighteen, before she gets married.”

The man, Muhammad Asif Soomro, was a member of the local Village Council and an influential member of the community. Bakhtawar’s parents and the villagers in attendance all listened intently as Soomro explained the negative impact that early motherhood would have on the girl’s health and well-being for the rest of her life. The guests were completely unaware of the dangers Soomro described, but ultimately were convinced that the marriage, and others involving such young brides, should be postponed.

Before Soomro was exposed to training through a USAID program that taught about the damage done by early pregnancies and marriage, he may not have taken issue with the betrothal at all. Soomro had recently returned from a training session in a neighboring town encouraging volunteers to spread important messages such as the severe, long-term health risks of early teenage pregnancy.

“We did not realize the consequences of early-age pregnancies,” Bakhtawar’s father, Abdullah, said. “We do not want our daughter to face any complications having a child too young, so we have decided to postpone the marriage.”

The impacts of early marriage are substantial not just for young women, but their children as well: Infants born to mothers younger than 20 years old face a higher risk of death shortly from after birth up to age five than those born to older mothers.

Soomro said that the decisive reaction to his advice has inspired him to deliver other messages he learned at the training, such as the importance of pre-natal care, birth attendants for all mothers, and proper birth spacing.