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Empowering adolescents: a new dawn through the UHS “Piyari Beti Portal”

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The youth of any nation are its greatest asset, and by empowering them, especially adolescents, we lay the foundation for progress and meaningful transformation in any nation. In Pakistan, where a large segment of the population comprises of young people, investing in their health, education, and well-being is not just important, it is essential.

Recognizing this, numerous universities, forums, and organizations across the country are actively working to educate and support adolescent girls in reproductive health-related challenges. These initiatives address critical gaps in awareness, access, and education.

One such example is Aga Khan University (AKU)¹, Karachi, that successfully runs community-based programs focusing on adolescent reproductive health, including menstrual hygiene, family planning, and sexual health. Along with support from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), AKU trains peer educators in rural Sindh and urban slum areas for empowerment and education of young girls in vulnerable settings. Similarly recognizable efforts have been done by other universities like

Fatima Jinnah Medical University, Lahore, and Lahore College for Women University, in collaboration with NGO Rahnuma-FPAP (Family Planning Association of Pakistan), is conducting awareness campaigns on adolescent reproductive health. On the governmental level, Population Council of Pakistan leads research and educational programmes on adolescent sexual and reproductive health, including innovative digital literacy initiatives². These collective efforts aim to empower young girls with accurate knowledge, reduce health risks, and encourage informed decision-making. In continuation

with these efforts, a significant stride in this direction has been taken by the launch of the “Piyari Beti Portal” by the University of Health Sciences (UHS), Lahore which is the first of its kind by any public medical university in Pakistan. This pioneering digital platform is a unique, accessible, and informative resource designed to guide young girls as they navigate adolescence with confidence and clarity. Introduced with the objective of providing a comprehensive support system for young girls, the Piyari Beti Portal aims to address a range of issues that directly affect the health of adolescent girls.

The idea behind this initiative was conceived by Prof. Ahsan Waheed Rathore, the Vice Chancellor, UHS, Lahore who is also a renowned pediatrician. In the launch seminar organized by the Department of Public Health, UHS Lahore on Friday, November 22, 2024 at UHS Lahore Campus, more than 200 orphan girls aged 9 to 15 from different institutions such as *Dar-ul Shafqat*, *Kashana*, and *SOS Villages* in Lahore participated. The University emphasized on the importance of this initiative in raising awareness about physical, mental, and personal hygiene-related challenges faced by adolescent girls during their puberty while offering authentic and confidential guidance through a one-step resource. Free and 24/7 access to this portal shall help in bridging the gap created by society where most of the parents have to follow the cultural norms; the portal guides and encourages young girls to feel free to consult elders in their families as a first step while reaching out to the team of interdisciplinary experts at Piyari Beti Portal through an easy-to-understand and confidentiality-driven information and referral as and when required.

Understanding the Piyari Beti Portal

One of the standout features of the portal is its focus on *awareness* and *self-empowerment*. The information is available on the platform (guidelines in Urdu and English Languages) that covers a wide array of topics from reproductive health knowledge to careful sharing of personal information and how to keep your physical health optimal in order to cope with societal and day-to-day challenges.

Fostering Confidence and Independence

The portal's role extends far beyond just providing information - it aims to foster confidence and independence among adolescent girls. Adolescence is a time of immense physical, emotional, and social transformation and most of the young girls, especially from humble settings, face challenges such as societal expectations, gender biases, and a lack of support for their aspirations. The "Piyari Beti Portal" acknowledges these challenges and provides a platform for girls to explore their interests, make informed choices, and access opportunities that empower them to shape their own future.

Addressing Societal Barriers

Another crucial aspect of the portal is its role in challenging and addressing societal barriers. Gender inequality and discrimination continue to be major hurdles for adolescent girls, particularly in rural and underserved areas across the country. Through the portal, girls gain access to resources that allow them to challenge these stereotypes, push for equal opportunities, and assert their rights.

Accessibility and Privacy

The portal is accessible 24/7 online on the UHS website, while a dedicated helpline (042-99232088) and email pyaribeti@uhs.edu.pk will allow girls to consult health experts and seek advice or report issues in complete privacy and confidentiality. The portal, helpline, and email services are staffed by dedicated female professionals who prioritize confidentiality and provide a safe and supportive channel for innocent girls to feel safe and supported while navigating some of the more sensitive issues in their lives.

A Collective Responsibility

While initiatives like the "Piyari Beti Portal" represent significant steps toward empowering adolescents, it is essential to remember that the success of such efforts is not just the responsibility of the government or the platform creators. Empowering adolescent girls is a collective responsibility%one that involves families, communities, schools, and society as a whole. As a society, we must work

together to remove the barriers that hinder the growth and development of adolescent girls.

Some of the standout initiatives include the Kamyab Jawan³ program, launched by the United Nations Development Programme in 2018, which supports youth in conflict-affected areas by promoting constitutional recognition, social protection, and equal opportunities for active participation. Aahung⁴, a Karachi-based NGO founded in 1994, promotes sexual and reproductive health through its Life Skills Based Education program. Initiatives like the *Meri Kahani* Project empower young girls to openly discuss puberty, mental well-being, and abuse, fostering awareness and resilience from early schooling years. Menstrual Hygiene Management Program⁵, supported by the Government of Pakistan and NGOs like WaterAid and Aahung, is a nationwide initiative that promotes menstrual hygiene education through school programs, workshops, and product distribution in underserved areas. The campaign also launched *Aao Baat Karein*, Pakistan's first animated film on menstrual hygiene, to break taboos in an engaging way.

In conclusion, the Piyari Beti Portal stands as a testament to UHS Lahore's commitment to empowering young girls by providing access to vital information, resources, and support. It not only helps them navigate their adolescent years with confidence but also prepares them for the challenges of tomorrow. Furthermore, the University also plans to expand this concept through a comprehensive research project on needs assessment and subsequent health education while introducing adolescent reproductive health as a part of the medical and allied health curricula across the Punjab.

Empowering adolescent girls through this platform is not just an investment in their futures - it is an investment in the future of the nation itself.

List of abbreviations

AKU	Aga Khan University
UHS	University of Health Sciences
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations

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FA, ZIE: Both authors conceived the idea, provided critical intellectual input, drafted the manuscript, and take full responsibility of the final version of the manuscript to be published.

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