

Investing in girls: how social protection can help break the cycle of malnutrition

With one of the world's youngest populations, Pakistan has an estimated 45 million adolescents, representing just under a quarter of the total population. This large cohort represents both a unique opportunity and a challenge for the country.

Adolescence is a time of significant neurological, physical, and emotional change, when young people have increased nutritional needs, while facing a range of health risks. Good nutrition enhances girls' physical and mental well-being, enabling them to participate in education, employment, and leadership roles. Investing in adolescent nutrition is consequently crucial for Pakistan's overall economic growth and social stability.

However, studies show that too many girls in Pakistan continue to lack the required nutrients for a healthy adolescence, with more than half (57 percent) suffering from iron-deficiency anaemia. A shocking 20 percent of adolescent girls are stunted (low height for age) and more than a third do not eat a sufficiently diverse diet for their optimal growth and development (NNS 2018).

Risk factors for girls' nutrition

In Pakistan, inequitable gender and cultural norms serve to limit girls' access to nutritious food, as well as to healthcare and schooling. Poverty and food insecurity,



Girls as agents of change for better nutrition

In Pakistan, gender inequalities, cultural norms, and a lack of dedicated resources for girls, limit their access to healthcare and education, and to a healthy, well-balanced diet. Malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies remain critical public health challenges, particularly for adolescent girls.

The Leveraging Pakistan's Social Protection Programmes for Adolescent Girls' Nutrition (SOPRAN) initiative focuses on the role of girls as change agents. Empowered, informed and well-nourished girls can play a vital role in sharing knowledge on nutrition and promoting healthy dietary and lifestyle practices among their peers, families and wider communities. In this way, SOPRAN aims to break the cycle of intergenerational malnutrition.

particularly in rural areas, and girls' limited knowledge about nutrition, are also important drivers of malnutrition among girls. Staple foods are not sufficiently nutrient-rich, but may be the only food available to girls residing in poorer households.

Leveraging social protection systems for better nutrition

The Leveraging Pakistan's Social Protection Programmes for Adolescent Girls' Nutrition (SOPRAN) initiative is working to address these critical issues, with funding by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the Gates foundation. Nutrition is a global priority for BMZ and, in line with Sustainable Development Goals 2 (zero hunger) and 3 (good health), BMZ recognises the fundamental role of good nutrition for promoting better health and education, and economic productivity.

SOPRAN is led by the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), under the Ministry of Poverty Alleviation and Social Safety, and implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), GmbH.

Launched in September 2024, SOPRAN is strengthening access to healthy, safe, and affordable food for adolescent girls, and enhancing nutritional knowledge among girls as well as their parents and teachers, health workers and community leaders. It is being implemented in seven districts of Pakistan: ICT, Faisalabad, Kotli, Quetta, Shaheed Benazirabad, Skardu, and Swat.

Malnutrition is a multisectoral responsibility

Ensuring good nutrition is a multisectoral responsibility. Aligned with Pakistan's National Nutrition Strategy 2018, SOPRAN engages with key stakeholders in the health, education, and social protection sectors, as well as provincial and local food departments. SOPRAN has helped set up multisectoral steering committees at national, provincial and local levels, bringing representatives from these groups around the table in order to build national ownership of the initiative and to embed a multisectoral approach to combating malnutrition among adolescent girls.

Exploring pathways to tackle malnutrition

SOPRAN is exploring different approaches to improving under- and malnutrition among adolescent girls in specific contexts, by leveraging Pakistan's social assistance programmes. A robust evaluation framework will generate evidence for what works and the initiative will build consensus for scaling up successful approaches.

The initiative is using school-based platforms to deliver iron and folic acid supplements to 100,000 girls aged 10 – 19 years to prevent iron-deficiency anaemia. It will also build their knowledge on nutrition, and enable the girls to advocate effectively for the importance of healthy and nutritious diets among their peers and in their communities.

Raising awareness and building capacities

Complementing these efforts, the initiative is building awareness of the importance of girls' nutrition and developing capacities among gatekeepers and key stakeholders in the nutrition delivery chain. Training is provided for the girls' teachers, as well as for health workers, and social marketing and behaviour change communication campaigns around good nutrition aim to shift perceptions on the importance of girls' nutrition. Examples include awareness raising activities with religious leaders and other community gatekeepers and with Chakkis operators (small scale flour mills).

Selected highlights

- ❖ Governance structures have been strengthened through the establishment of a Project Management Unit and multisectoral steering committees at all levels.
- ❖ Procurement of supplements, flour and milk have been strengthened and Chakkis have been strengthened in all seven districts.
- ❖ Training materials have been developed for teachers and health workers, and training delivered for Food Authority and Food Department staff in Islamabad, Kotli, Faisalabad and Quetta.
- ❖ An e-voucher was developed in cooperation with the World Food Programme (WFP) to provide subsidised access to fortified flour for vulnerable families.

Girls are at the centre of the initiative's theory of change. SOPRAN is equipping adolescent girls with the knowledge and skills to promote healthier eating habits, raise awareness about anaemia prevention, and highlight the value of a balanced diet among their families and communities. In this way, adolescent girls can promote better health and nutritional practices for future generations.