



YOUTH EMPOWERMENT AND JOINT ACTION

AS PERCEIVED BY YOUTH IN PAKISTAN

A study on the impact of the Marriage, No Child's Play project

MARCH 2021

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The More than Brides Alliance (MTBA) empowers young people to access information relating to life skills and rights and to pursue alternative life paths (to child marriage) in an enabling environment. The Alliance implemented the ‘Marriage, No Child’s Play’ (MNCP) project (2016-2020) in five countries, including Pakistan. As the MNCP project concluded in December 2020, it was felt necessary to explore and understand its effects on the youth who were part of it, and how they experienced change in themselves and around them. This study sets out to understand **a) how the youth involved in MNCP project activities in Pakistan experienced empowerment, and b) how they engaged in joint action.**

The study was envisioned as an activity where youth would lead their own reflection process, while helping us to understand if and how they feel empowered. To enable such an interactive yet in-depth understanding of the personal and social dynamics surrounding empowerment and joint action, the study adopted a qualitative approach, wherein **40 in-depth peer interviews were conducted with a total of 80 young people**, all of whom were engaged in the MNCP project. The interviews involved a facilitated conversation between two young people – of the same gender and with a similar socio-economic background – and were conducted in the **four MNCP project districts in Pakistan**, namely Muzaffargarh and Lodhran in Punjab, and Larkana and Shikarpur in Sindh.

The findings of the study are categorised into four broad sections: the meaning of empowerment; changes observed at the personal level; changes observed at the relational level; and changes observed in the environment. Some of the key take-aways under each of these four sections are as follows.

During the young people’s discussions on the meaning of empowerment, **decision-making** (on decisions about their own lives) emerged as the most common theme. The decisions could be about education, marriage, mobility or employment. The young women and men stated that an empowered person is able to make such decisions because of factors such as **confidence in themselves, educational status and their financial/employment status.**

When discussing changes at the personal level, most participants talked about how they **feel empowered and confident because they see themselves as more knowledgeable, skilled and competent** than they were before (i.e. before the MNCP project). Specifically, enhanced awareness about girls’ and women’s rights and status, desire to make a change within their community, and desire to continue their education were stated as key sources of personal empowerment. Participants also talked about how they have become **more active in their personal affairs**, take their own decisions, and feel more independent. Specifically, the ability and capacity to **take decisions regarding their education, the freedom to participate in trainings and activities, the ability to work and earn, and freedom of movement** were cited by the young people as key reasons as to why they felt empowered.

The changes observed at the relational (i.e. interpersonal) level included the ability of a group to **find common ground and build collective strength** and changes in how youth **negotiated complex power relations and took decisive actions.** Almost all participants

mentioned being **active in the community through trainings, awareness-raising activities, information sharing, door-to-door campaigns** and so on. It was evident that the participants derived a sense of power and achievement from being part of such activities. Here, participants also related several instances where they had been part of collective action – for example, preventing an early marriage, enabling education or helping community members on other issues. Other common themes regarding change at the relational level were **participation in household decision-making and contribution to household expenses**.

A **perceptible increase in the awareness levels** of community members on education, early marriage, women's rights and life skills was also noted by the participants. Several of them described how more and more parents and households were **sending their children, especially girls, to school**. With respect to the status of women and girls, participants observed a **rise in awareness on women's rights and women's role in the household and the wider society**. Despite these changes, however, participants reported that there continues to be **significant resistance to girls and women pursuing education, participating in public activities and generally asserting their rights**.

While acknowledging the changes in the lives of the young people, the need to **continue awareness-raising activities** within the community was cited as a critical need and challenge. Youth participants, partner organisations and MNCP project staff alike stated that **traditional beliefs take time to change** and that myths, doubts and misinformation tend to find a way of coming back. The focus going forward, therefore, should be on **ensuring sustainable change**. Apart from continuing the current activities in the communities, MNCP project staff felt that new ways of engaging with the community should be tested and deployed. Enhanced engagement with youth on economic development and skill enhancement were also cited as effective initiatives to create the desired impact, i.e. to enable and empower young people to make informed choices about their lives.

1. INTRODUCTION

The More Than Brides Alliance (MTBA) between Save the Children, Oxfam Novib, Simavi, the Population Council and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands. The Alliance implemented a project called ‘Marriage, No Child’s Play’ (MNCP) from 2016 until the end of 2020 in five countries. Oxfam Novib was involved in the project implementation in three of those countries: Mali, Niger and Pakistan. The overall objective of the MNCP project was: *young people are able to decide if, when and whom to marry, and have sufficient and accurate information on their rights and necessary life skills in a supportive environment*. The project aimed to inform and empower young people, and to increase access to formal education, economic opportunities and child protection systems for girls at risk of and affected by child marriage.

MNCP project activities were implemented by partner organisations Bedari and Baahn Belli in two provinces of Pakistan – Punjab and Sindh. As part of the holistic MNCP project, Oxfam and partners applied several engagement strategies to build young people’s capacities to build life skills and become aware of their rights. These included the Gender Action Learning System (GALS) methodology, which aims to create sustainable change by engaging groups of young women and men (aged 15-24) to jointly work towards their personal and economic development and the expansion of such groups. Representatives of these groups were trained on Life Skills Based Education, and peer education approaches and facilitation skills to enable information sharing.

In both provinces, groups of girls and boys across the communities were part of project engagement strategies that aimed to support them to determine their own future. Young people took part in GALS training as an integral part of a youth peer-support group. Some of these young people became ‘champions’ of the MNCP project, positioning themselves as young leaders and coming up with new ideas and solutions for empowering young people and shifting social norms about early marriage in their communities. They were actively engaged in changing the views of families and the broader community on early marriage, and the different kinds of social, cultural, and economic barriers and restrictions placed on girls and women.

As part of the endline evaluation, the project team wanted to understand the impact of the MNCP project and how the young people had experienced change, both in themselves and around them. One of **two key aspects the study** focused on was **how the young people experienced empowerment**. Here, we wanted to understand how the MNCP project champions understand empowerment, and also to encourage them to acknowledge and appreciate their own process of becoming empowered. In effect, the emphasis of the study was both on the meaning(s) and action(s) that young people associate with empowerment.

The **second key aspect** of the study was to understand **how the young people engaged in joint action**. As the MNCP project involved young people coming up with their own ideas and solutions, and designing and executing campaigns and activities themselves, we were keen to **explore how project champions imagined and undertook joint action** (or ‘collective action’) to shift the norms and beliefs in their own communities and beyond.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study aims to learn from the reflections and experiences of the young women and men that developed themselves as champions of the MNCP project (i.e. GALS champions and peer educators). Our intention was **to have them lead their own reflection process**, while helping us to understand if and how youth feel empowered, and what empowerment means to them. The study adopted a qualitative approach, wherein 40 in-depth peer interviews were conducted with a total of 80 young women and men. Peer interviewing was chosen as the methodology to allow for a nuanced understanding of whether and how the youth who were part of the project understood and experienced the process of empowerment.

The interviews entailed a session in which **two young people jointly reflected – in a safe and enabling space – on their own realities and experiences in relation to empowerment and joint action**. As a conversation starter, youth were instructed to bring a picture, drawing or statement that reflected their understanding of empowerment and joint action. The format – two young people (males and females separately) engaged in a conversation – aimed to make them feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and posing their questions. The enumerators were present solely to observe, monitor and document the conversation; they intervened only to make sure that the participants stayed on topic.

In order to implement the study, we worked together with a **local study team**, consisting of a coordinator and qualitative enumerators. The enumerators who facilitated the interviews have previously worked on similar projects as part of MNCP's learning agenda, and therefore were familiar with the project activities and realities on the ground. Detailed trainings were conducted for enumerators on how to monitor, document, record and transcribe peer-to-peer interviews. The trainings expressly focused on facilitating a conversation and not leading the participants or their discussion.

Each interview involved a conversation between two young people, who were paired on the basis of similar characteristics (see Table 1, below). The interviews were conducted in the four MNCP project districts, namely **Muzaffargarh and Lodhran in Punjab, and Larkana and Shikarpur in Sindh**.

2.1 SAMPLING

The sample for this study was limited to GALS champions and peer educators. The idea behind the limiting the sample was to get in-depth insight into the changes among the youth as a result of GALS. Therefore, the study focused on youth who were the most involved and active in the GALS processes. It is this set of youth - the frontrunners – who could best relate and elaborate on how GALS activities and tools helped them and what changes they saw in themselves and among their peers. Given the focus on the champions, this study recognizes and accepts the limitation of getting a rosier picture than it is.

The study took a multi-staged sampling approach. First, a list of champions was created based on purposeful sampling. The external consultant then drew a random sample from this list. At the time of the study, there were more than 500 youth champions spread over the two MNCP districts in Punjab and around 600 young people trained in GALS in Sindh. The MNCP partner

organisations formulated the list of young people for random sampling, based on the broad criteria outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Sampling criteria

Gender	Geography	(Socio-economic) background	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
40 young women	Spread across four districts	Age group – 18-24 years	MNCP peer educator	Champions not involved in MNCP project
40 young men	Diverse set of communities in the two provinces	Married and unmarried Spread across different education, socio-economic, religious (Shia/Sunni Muslim) and ethnic backgrounds	MNCP GALS champion Willingness to participate	Younger than 18 or older than 24 years Covid-19 symptoms or not willing to follow safety measures

In each of the four districts, 10 young women and 10 young men were randomly selected to take part in the interviews by the external consultant who executed the data collection. This created the study sample, constituting a total of 10 peer interviews per district.

Beyond the sampling criteria, the study coordinator and partner organisations were asked to ensure that the peers interviewing each other were of the same sex and marital status, paired according to their age and ideally with similar levels of education. They were to also asked to make sure that paired interviewees were not close friends or relatives, or the ‘usual suspects’, i.e. the most vocal and confident of the project champions.

Figure 1 below shows the characteristics of the sample (the participants in this study). Owing to a sampling error, a small number of participants younger than 18 years of age were selected. In all these cases, express approval from their parents/guardians was obtained by the project staff.

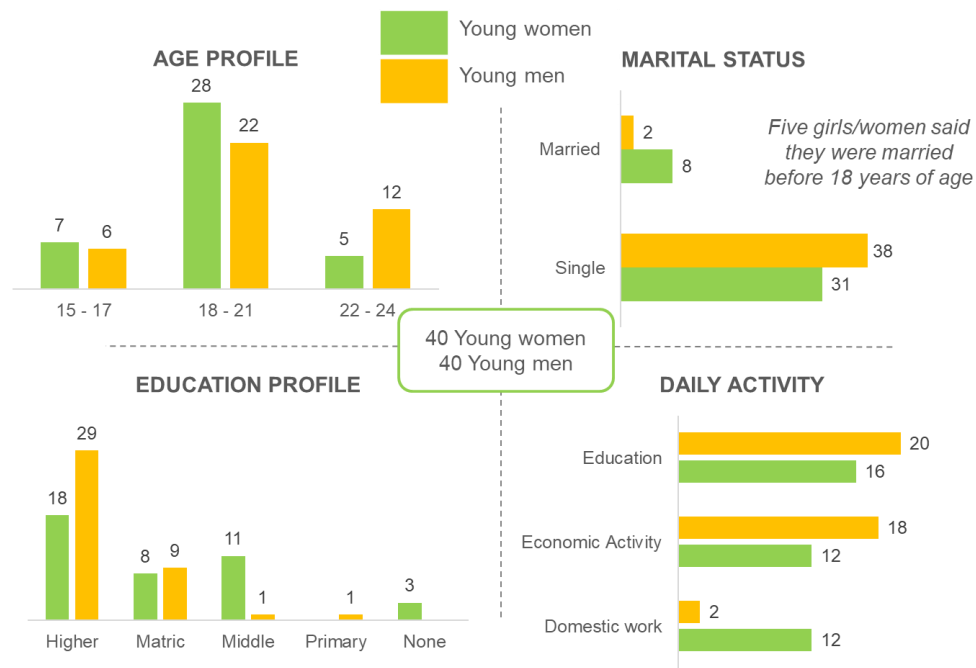


Figure 1: Sample characteristics – peer-to-peer interviews

ABOUT THE SAMPLE

While most of the participants stated that they were not married, five girls/women stated that they were married before they were 18 years old. Three of these participants were from Punjab, and two from Sindh. It is to be noted that the minimum age of marriage for girls/women in Punjab is 16 years, while in Sindh it is 18 years.

With respect to the education profile of participants, the majority – among both young women and men – stated that they had studied beyond ‘matric’ level (as per Pakistan’s education system; matric exams – short for matriculation - are usually taken by students between ages 14 and 16). Only three participants – all of them young women – stated that they were uneducated or illiterate. During the reflection workshop, the project partners mentioned that the ‘higher’ category is likely to include those studying in high school as well as those studying for a (bachelors/masters degree) in college/university. They also stated that the girls are very likely to drop out after high school.

Therefore, the ‘higher’ group in the education profile includes both those who are currently studying and those who have dropped out. This is evident from the findings under ‘daily activity’, which show relatively few young women and men stating education as their daily activity. More young women were involved in economic activities and domestic work compared to young men.

It is critical to note that this study focuses on the ‘champions’ – the youth who were most engaged in the MNCP project. The sample for this study, therefore, is not representative of the majority of girls targeted by the project.

2.2 STUDY PROCESS

Once the study design was finalised, **Oxfam organised a design workshop with the MNCP project staff, partner organisations and the study team** to familiarise them with the study objectives and questions, methodology and expected outcomes. Following the workshop, partner staff selected potential participants based on the sampling plan and criteria described above.

The interview process was broadly as follows:

1. **Obtaining informed consent:** A detailed consent form (see appendix) that explained the aims of the study was shared with each of the participants. Verbal consent on their participation in the study was sought at the beginning and end of each interview.
2. **Explaining to the youth participants what a peer-to-peer interview is, and what was expected from them:** The young people were informed that the interview would take place in the form of a conversation between peers, and that the conversation would be recorded. It was made clear that the young people would drive the conversation; the enumerator present could only monitor the conversation and probe on issues that needed

clarification or further information. As a conversation starter, youth were instructed to bring a picture, drawing or statement that reflected their understanding of empowerment and joint action.

3. **Monitoring (and guiding) the conversation:** In each interview, the enumerator supported two young women or two young men to interview each other, while capturing the results of their conversation. The participants were free to ask each other their own questions. The objective was not to have them formally interview each other, but rather to ask each other similar questions in a flowing conversation.

The safety of participants, project staff and enumerators was established as an issue of utmost importance. Accordingly, probable risks and issues – relating to Covid-19, interruptions from the government or community members, safety of enumerators and travel – and the actions to take in such circumstances, were communicated to the study team.

2.3 DATA ANALYSIS

The interviews were **transcribed verbatim and translated into English** by the study team, before going through a round of quality control with the study coordinator and Oxfam staff. The data was then entered, organised and analysed with the help of MS Excel. The analysis was conducted **inductively and deductively** to align with the objectives of the study and the information derived from the conversations. The coding, themes and sub-themes were defined by an analysis framework that was informed by literature and Oxfam's view of empowerment as a multi-dimensional concept (Oxfam, 2017).

According to VeneKlasen and Miller (2002), **empowerment is a process whereby people's lives are transformed from a situation where they have limited power to one where their power is enhanced**. The empowerment framework they describe (Figure 2) recognizes three levels at which change can take place: **personal, relational and environmental**. The authors also elaborate on four different types of power as evidence of empowerment: 'power with', 'power to', 'power within' and 'power over'. The analysis framework used in this study follows VeneKlasen and Miller's definition of empowerment, the levels at which changes take place and the different kinds of power that can be seen as evidence of empowerment.

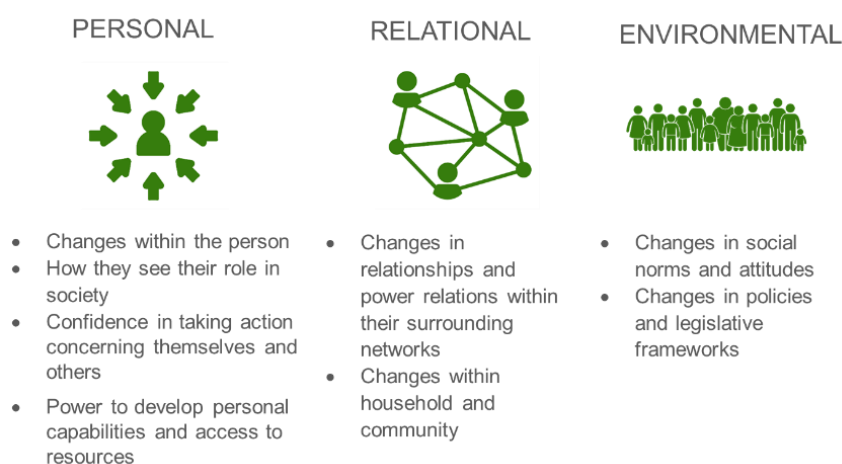


Figure 2: Three levels at which empowerment can be analysed

Adapted from: L. VeneKlasen and V. Miller, (2002).
A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation.

EMPOWERMENT AND EVIDENCE OF POWER (L. VENEKLASEN AND V. MILLER, (2002)

Changes at the **personal level** take place within an individual. This refers to changes in how a person sees themselves, how they consider their role in society and that of others, how they see their economic role, and their confidence in making decisions and taking actions on issues that concern them and others. Changes at the **relational level** take place in the relationships and power dynamics within a person's surrounding network. This includes changes both within the household and the community, and encompasses markets, local authorities and decision makers. Finally, changes at the **environmental level** take place in the broader context. These can be informal changes, such as in social norms and attitudes and the beliefs of wider society, or they can be formal changes in the political and legislative framework.

Power within has to do with a person's sense of self-worth and self-confidence. It includes the capacity to imagine and have hope, and affirms the common human search for dignity and fulfilment. **Power to** refers to the unique potential of every person to shape his or her life and world through their individual agency, i.e. their capability to decide on actions and carry them out. When based on mutual support, it opens up the possibility of joint action, or power with. **Power with** is about finding common ground among people with different interests, and building collective strength. **Power over** is described by indicators defining the power relationships between an individual and others (within their household, community or groups).

2.4 REFLECTION WORKSHOPS

In December 2020, after the transcribed peer-to-peer interviews were shared with the Oxfam team, **an online reflection workshop** was conducted to contextualise the study findings and ensure their ownership by the project partners. The workshop was conducted online due to travel restrictions imposed as a result of Covid-19. The main objectives of this workshop were **to reflect on each finding in light of the local context, record feedback and missing areas of investigation, co-formulate the main learnings and recommendations, and brainstorm possible programmatic responses**. The workshop ensured that the findings are grounded in local culture, practice and existing strategies. Feedback and insights from the workshops are featured in the results and conclusions below.

2.5 STUDY LIMITATIONS

As mentioned Section 2.1, the sampling criteria were set at the beginning of the study – participants would include GALS champions and peer educators. We did not consider the duration of the champions' involvement in the project. However, during the analysis we discovered that **some of the participants** in Muzaffargarh, Punjab had only joined the project quite recently, having been **trained by earlier champions of the project**. This means that there is some variation in the level of project involvement among sampled champions. Furthermore, it is critical to keep in mind that the sample for this study **is not representative**

of the majority of young people (mostly girls) targeted by the MNCP project, as this study solely focuses on the champions and hence, the most active and engaged of the MNCP project participants.

According to the study coordinator and the enumerators, some of the **youth participants found it difficult to understand the interview technique**. The enumerators reported that some participants tended to miss questions because the conversations went off-track, and some of the young people were shy or hesitant. As a result, in some interviews, **the enumerators ended up probing a lot more** than originally expected. Enumerators also felt that instead of starting the interview process right away, it would have been better to begin the process with an informal chat or discussion.

It is also important to keep in mind that the **terms ‘empowerment’ and ‘joint action’ mean different things to different people**. Both terms, when translated into the local language or dialect, could mean something slightly different to how they are generally understood in English. It is evident from the translations, and also from the discussions during the reflection workshops, that the enumerators often found it difficult to explain the terms to the participants. This difference in meaning and perceptions must be kept in mind when looking at the findings presented below. For future purposes, it could be beneficial to arrive at a common understanding – among all stakeholders – of the important terms and terminologies to be used in a study. It is also critical to ensure that these terms are translated into the local language(s) without losing the intended meaning in translation.

3 STUDY FINDINGS

This chapter is divided into **four sections**. The first focuses on how youth participants define empowerment. In the second section, we present the findings relating to how they perceived empowerment and changes at the personal level, i.e. power with and power to. The third section sheds light on how participants perceived empowerment at the relational level, i.e. power with and power over, and includes their reflections on joint action. The fourth section focuses on the environmental level – changes in the status of women and girls in the wider society, youth participation in the community, and the challenges that remain.

3.1 MEANING OF EMPOWERMENT

Before beginning the peer-to-peer discussion, participants were asked to start on a slightly lighter note and **draw or write something about their own experience and understanding of empowerment**. This illustrative or descriptive output was used as a conversation starter for the discussion between each pair of young people around empowerment and joint action.

The majority of participants (26) – interestingly, all of them from Sindh – chose to **draw or write about people they consider to be their role models** and who represent empowerment to them. Most of these role models were public figures from Pakistan, such as the education activist **Malala Yousufzai**, current **Prime Minister Imran Khan**, and **former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto**. Eight participants drew or wrote about a **family member (mostly their father)**.

These youth participants tended to focus on the struggles and achievements of their role model. In the case of influential public figures, for example, admiration appeared to stem from the perception that **despite their struggles, they went on to make their mark and work for a cause**. Those who mentioned their family members as role models – all of them males, such as fathers and uncles – talked about the struggles they had encountered, how they had beaten the odds, and how they ensured the wellbeing of their families.

The second most common theme observed in the drawing/writings was **education**. Here, participants drew an image of a book or an educational institution such as a school, college or library. Most of these participants talked about how girls in their communities have historically been denied education, and how this mindset has changed considerably since the MNCP project activities started. **The ability to pursue education – especially in the case of girls – was seen as a sign of empowerment.**

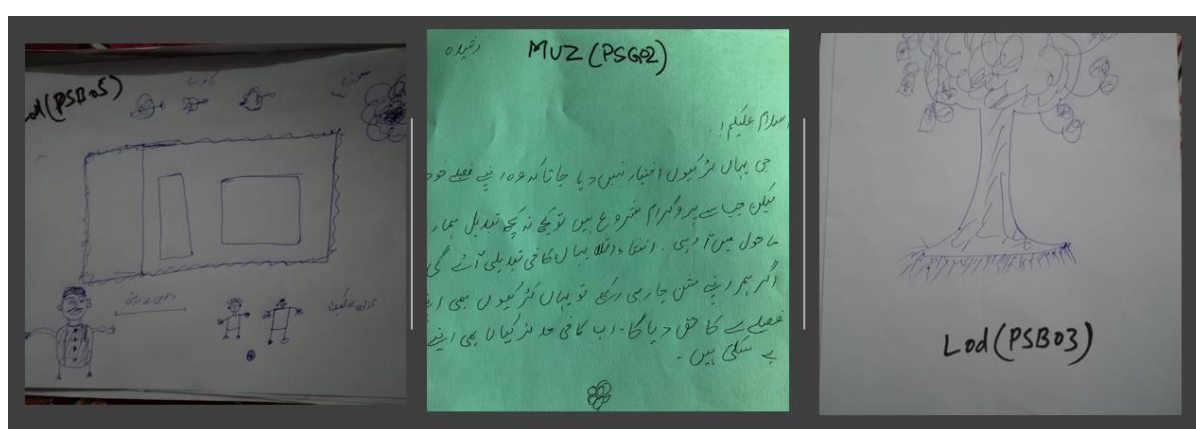


Figure 3: Drawings and writings on empowerment by youth participants

Some participants expressed gratitude for the project partners and their work with them and within the community. A few others drew the **'gender equality tree'** that had been used by project partners in their awareness and GALS training sessions. Interestingly, three young women drew or wrote about birds, and mused about how they would like to be like one. They expressed that **a bird is not controlled by or answerable to anyone**, and that they wish to be free and independent, like a bird.

Some participants chose to write about what the terms 'empowerment' and 'joint action' mean to them. The majority of these participants **associated empowerment with decision-making**. This was also observed when the peers discussed empowerment in detail, as the conversation progressed. When writing about joint action, participants emphasised the need to work together to address societal issues. Their more elaborate reflections on joint action are discussed in detail later in this report.

Role models – their struggles and achievements	<p><i>I am very impressed with Malala Yousufzai's struggle. She worked for education and girls. She is a very brave girl and won the Nobel Peace Prize. Male, 19, Sindh</i></p> <p><i>Imran [Khan] was a cricketer; he struggled a lot, but now he is the Prime Minister of Pakistan. Male, 23, Sindh</i></p>
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	<i>My father is my ideal [role model], as from childhood I observed him as an empowered person looking after all his family, especially me... trusting me... providing me with a smartphone and caring about my needs, etc. I also follow in his footsteps as I move ahead in my life. Female, 19, Sindh</i>
Education	<i>I am empowered by this book because most community members did not take education seriously, but most parents have provided education to girls since girls started to participate in [the activities implemented by] Bedari [project partner]. Female, 17, Punjab</i> <i>In our village, parents did not allow their daughters to have an education... every girl has the right to an education. It's my aim to open a girls' school in my village. Male, 20, Sindh</i>
Freedom	<i>The chakor [partridge] is empowered because this bird knows how to defend itself... this bird is free and can do whatever it wants. Female, 17, Sindh</i>

The varied meanings and perceptions attributed to the term empowerment, as observed in the interview transcripts, reveal that understanding of the term is highly subjective. Based on the responses, it is evident that **empowerment was understood as a combination of several themes and ideas**. For some participants it related to personal characteristics, while for others it related to how they act. For some, it was defined by their environment and for others, by how they feel. Some saw empowerment as a cause, while others saw it as an outcome.

About 37 participants stated that empowerment means having the ability and freedom to make one's own decisions, for example, about education, marriage, mobility or employment. The majority of participants who responded in this way were young women, and from Punjab. However, decision-making as an act or an ability was not viewed in isolation. Participants stated that an empowered person is able to make the right decisions because of various other factors: confidence in themselves (17), educational status (8), financial or employment status (7), marital status (4) and position in the household (elder versus young) (3). . (Interestingly, 'freedom and independence' – understood as not the same, but grouped together for this analysis – was mentioned by about nine participants, seven of whom were young women.)

Of those who mentioned **confidence as the meaning of empowerment** or as something that contributed significantly to an individual's empowerment, the majority were young men. Regarding marital or household status, while the number of participants who mentioned these factors were few, the gender demarcation was clear – young women associated empowerment with marriage, and young men saw empowerment as a result of one's status in the household.

Among the young women who associated empowerment with marriage, most stated that they felt empowered because their husbands and in-laws have *permitted* them to study and/or work. It could be said that these young women were able to negotiate with their families to be allowed to work and study, and that this successful negotiation is perceived as empowerment. When responding to this finding during the reflection workshop, the project staff stated that marriage is seen as a very important stage in life by women in general – a stage that signifies that an individual is *able* to take the responsibilities that come with marriage. Therefore, another facet of empowerment, as perceived by the young women, is the ability to understand the challenges better and make more informed choices.

It was interesting to see that eight participants were of the opinion that **empowerment could be damaging or could lead to negative outcomes** if one was not careful. These participants appeared to associate empowerment with over-confidence or being disobedient. They believed that young people have to be responsible and should keep in mind the feelings of their families when making an important decision. They seemed to suggest that empowerment – or empowered decision-making – could lead to damaging the individual’s relationship with their family or community if care is not taken to avoid this.

Decision-making and confidence	<p><i>Empowerment means taking your own decisions for yourself... we don't have to depend on others, and we should not let others make our decisions. Female, 19, Punjab</i></p> <p><i>Empowerment actually means making your own decisions... whether it's about education or about your personal life. And a man should be self-confident because a man has to live life on his own. Male, 20, Sindh</i></p> <p><i>Without self-confidence, a person cannot do anything. As long as none of us have the self-confidence to work, nothing can be done. Male, 20, Sindh</i></p>
Independence	<p><i>Empowerment means not seeking permission from anyone, it's as simple as that... neither from the mother nor from the father. Youth should not fear random community members either. They can manage their own activities, such as eating and sleeping, according to their own wishes. Female, 18, Sindh</i></p>
Marital status/status in the household	<p><i>I am empowered because, after my father, I will manage these [family] matters... those who earn can run the expenses of the home, and those who do not earn cannot do anything; that is why they are not empowered. Male, 18, Punjab</i></p> <p><i>Empowerment means one should have power! Correct me if I am wrong! For example, if a woman gets married... she needs support and deserves support from him [her husband], and her husband is powerful enough! If he supports her, then the wife can do everything. Female, 24, Sindh</i></p>
The need to be mindful	<p><i>I want to define empowerment in two ways. The first is to get and ensure rights: I allow myself to face and overcome all the hurdles in my way. Second, empowerment is somehow about becoming a rebel, which is not a good thing. Male, 21, Punjab</i></p> <p><i>For me, being empowered means making your decisions yourself... people should also think about where they are using their right to make a decision, and not hurt their parents. Parents want to give their children everything that is in their means, so we should also be mindful of what we ask of them. Female, 20, Punjab</i></p>

3.2 EMPOWERMENT – CHANGE AT THE PERSONAL LEVEL

During the peer-to-peer interviews, participants spoke at length about their experiences with the project and the **changes they have observed at the personal, i.e. individual, level**. Based on the methodological framework of empowerment (Figure 3), these changes have been **analysed from two lenses – power within and power to**. The former broadly refers to a **person's sense of self-worth and self-confidence, and their capacity to imagine and hope**. Power to, on the other hand, refers to an **individual's agency to shape his or her life and world** (their capability to decide actions and carry them out). General indicators of what constitute power within and power to are presented in Figure 3.

Power Within	Power To
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-confidence • Individual knowledge (empowerment and joint action) • Knowledge on where to go and what to do • Opinions, attitude and beliefs on empowerment, joint action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual capability (apply knowledge) • Personal autonomy • Access to resources / support system

Adapted from: L. VeneKlasen and V. Miller, (2002). *A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*.

Figure 4: Indicators of change at the personal level

3.2.1 POWER WITHIN

The conversation around how the participants feel empowered usually began on a general note. Many participants (34) **spoke in general terms about how they feel empowered and confident** because they see themselves as **more knowledgeable, skilled and competent than they were before** (i.e. before the MNCP project began in their communities). As the discussions progressed, some specific themes emerged.

Enhanced awareness about girls' and women's rights and status within the household and the community was mentioned by 27 participants. Among these, notably, 17 were young women. They talked about how they were previously **unaware of the extent of and reasons for gender discrimination and inequality**. Some spoke at length about the critical need to raise awareness about girls' and women's rights and to ensure that these rights are not violated. About 25 participants specifically mentioned increased awareness and knowledge about the ill-effects of early marriage on the household in general, and on girls and women in particular.

The **desire to make a change within their community and in the wider society** was mentioned by about 25 participants. In general, they talked about how taking part in the trainings conducted by the project partners and being part of the group and community activities had made them keenly aware of the transformations required in their communities. These included: reducing the prevalence of early marriage; improving access to education – especially for girls; increasing awareness on the need for equal opportunities for boys and girls and for men and women; engaging with boys and men on the rights of girls and women; and enhancing employment opportunities for youth. Interestingly, 13 participants – most of them young men, and from Punjab – talked about how they **see themselves as empowered because of their activism** and the work they do in their respective communities.

The importance of education and the desire to continue their education was mentioned by 22 participants. Notably, these responses were evenly distributed between young women and men. Discussions on this subject primarily focused on how education is key to a better society and is synonymous with progress. Young women who were unable to pursue or

continue their education wanted other girls in their families and communities not to ignore the value of education. Along similar lines, about 13 participants stated that **they have a vision for themselves** and expressed a keen desire to ‘move ahead’ in life. They expressed commitment to having a better future, improving their household’s financial status and working hard to fulfil their dreams (of becoming a doctor, lawyer, teacher and so on).

Some participants considered themselves to be **empowered because of their ability to speak confidently, engage with others and find solutions to problems**. They talked about how the trainings and activities conducted by the project partners gave them a platform to express themselves freely and exchange knowledge and information. A few participants (14) talked specifically about how they see themselves as significantly more confident and assertive than they were before the project. Interestingly, six participants – five of them young women – stated that they no longer pay heed to what others say or think.

While the majority of conversations on the subject of ‘power within’ were about the positive changes young people have observed within themselves, there were also a few solemn reflections. Ten participants – the majority of them young men (8) – spoke about **areas and situations in their lives where they feel disempowered and where they lack power**. The inability to be financially independent, their elders being responsible for the important decisions in their families, and lack of education were all given as reasons behind their perceived lack of power to think, decide or act. In general, household dynamics and who gets to decide on what are governed by the prevailing customs and norms. Traditional beliefs and practices thus have a significant bearing on the young people’s ability to exercise their power.

<p>General sense of empowerment and confidence</p>	<p><i>First of all I take my own case. Mostly I was at home. I talked less. Since I became the part of this project, I now talk effectively, I can convey a message in a good way. I learned a lot of things and I want other girls to learn these things too. Female, 17, Punjab</i></p> <p><i>Yes, we feel empowered... We consider ourselves empowered because we have such ability and we have been taught a lot by NGOs. In that sense, we consider ourselves empowered. Male, 22, Sindh</i></p>
<p>Awareness on girls’/women’s rights</p>	<p><i>Before these sessions, I had no information about gender and discrimination. I got to understand that we women have to strengthen our roots, our foundation, because if the foundation is not solid then the branches will never grow... thanks to [names of trainers and project staff], they gave us awareness and we spread that awareness further in our villages. Female, 19, Sindh</i></p> <p><i>[Early marriage] has so many consequences... the very first is that if a child marries at an early age and does not know about herself and about their rights, then how can they take care of their partner’s rights? If a girl marries early, she herself is a child – [so] how can she bring up her child? Male, 24, Punjab</i></p>
<p>Desire to make a change in the community</p>	<p><i>I can explain this with a short story of ‘King Butcher’ – he got defeated in a war, and after getting defeated he went to a cave and there he saw an ant who was struggling to get herself on the roof. At that moment he realised that he can also win after being defeated, like this ant. I learned</i></p>

	<i>from that story that I must spread awareness, and since that moment I mobilised myself and I felt empowered. Male, 24, Punjab</i>
Interest in education	<p><i>I want to get higher education. I want to be a doctor. For me, doctors are the symbols of empowerment... because I truly want to be a doctor, I have discussed my wishes with my parents. Female, 18, Sindh</i></p> <p><i>Since I came [to be involved] with Bedari [project partner], they gave me motivation. Now I have to speak with my family regarding my education... [to tell them] that we have to continue the education of our choice. I consider myself empowered because of these sessions. Male, 21, Punjab</i></p>
Sense of confidence	<p><i>When people see me working, they say, “Yes, she has a skill, she can do it.” So when I talk in my neighbourhood, I talk with confidence. I talk as a skillful person. Female, 18, Punjab</i></p> <p><i>As you know, people talk... and [in response] to that we have to be blind, deaf and dumb, like we hear nothing, otherwise we will never achieve our goals. Female, 17, Sindh</i></p>
Still lacking a sense of empowerment	<i>The area in which I am not empowered is [in relation to] the different customs of my family. I have been educated, and [with] the maturity that has come to me from getting an education... I can say that the education of girls has an important role in society. But I am not empowered to ensure education for my sisters and the daughters of my home and family, because of my family customs. Male, 21, Sindh</i>

3.2.2 POWER TO

This section sheds light on **participants’ reflections on their own potential, capabilities and agency**. It is important to note here that in most cases, the focus of the discussions was on **how the young people feel about themselves and what they can do**, and not necessarily on what they have been able to do and achieve so far. While some discussions involved participants giving concrete examples of how they have been able to exercise their power within, in most cases the conversation centred around **how they interpreted their power to decide and act**.

Many participants began by reflecting on their ability to think and decide in general terms. They talked about how they are **more active in their personal affairs, how they take their own decisions, how they do not feel the need to ask for their parents’ permission on most matters**, and how they feel completely independent. In some cases, the peers did not probe their counterparts, or the conversation veered towards other topics. In other cases, when probed by their peers, the participants elaborated on their responses. It was among these discussions that we saw specific themes and ideas emerge.

About 25 participants, almost half and half young women and men, spoke about how they have the **ability and capacity to take decisions regarding their education**. In general, they stated that they faced little to no opposition from their family or the wider community regarding their decision to pursue education.

About 18 participants stated that they have the freedom to participate in trainings and activities organised by the MNCP project partners. The distribution of this set of responses skewed towards young women: **more young women stated that they consider themselves**

empowered because they are able to participate in the trainings/activities and enhance their knowledge and skills.

Some participants (15) emphasised **their ability to work and earn** as the reason they feel powerful. Remarkably, 12 of them were young women. While some among this group were already working and earning, or applying for jobs, others stated that they were confident about being able to pursue their chosen vocation once they finish their education. It was also interesting to observe that **freedom of movement** was cited by about 13 participants, 12 of whom were young women. Further, 11 of these young women were from Sindh. They talked about how, unlike many other young women in their communities, they had the freedom to go wherever they wish. They spoke of how they **had confidence in themselves and their parents trusted them fully** when it comes to mobility, although in some cases this trust had taken time to build.

Here too, there were some less positive reflections by participants on their power to decide and act. About seven participants were of the opinion that they still lacked the power to think, decide and act. Although the reasons for not having this power were not mentioned explicitly, in the context it is likely that they stem from a combination of lack of power within the young people themselves and the continued influence of family in both the small and big decisions in their lives. Most of these participants stated that although they were not completely restricted, there were still areas or decisions over which they did not have full control.

<p>General sense of power within</p>	<p><i>We are more active in our personal affairs. And Allah will make it happen that what we have left [to do] will be completed, and we are trying to achieve more. Male, 22, Sindh</i></p> <p><i>I came to know that I can take my personal decisions myself. I realised that I am authorised to take my own decisions, so I aimed to decide personally about my life. Female, 16, Punjab</i></p>
<p>Power to take decisions about education</p>	<p><i>The boys used to say me that I would not be able to qualify [for a course] because I worked all day and there was not much time left for study, but by the grace of Allah I studied at night. The other thing is that there were many tests for the jobs which I applied for... the opinion of my friends was that "You can't qualify, your education is not that much"... [but I] worked in the daytime and studied at night and... I got the reward. Male, 20, Sindh</i></p> <p><i>Yes, I am empowered. I am empowered regarding my education. I can apply for admission to any university or college, wherever I feel is best for me. I am also free to decide about my subjects. Female, 18, Punjab</i></p>
<p>Power to work, earn and be financially independent</p>	<p><i>I have the liberty of taking decisions myself; I opened a silai [sewing] centre where I started teaching others how to sew as well. This made me very empowered. I have the power to study or work and do anything I want. Female, 22, Punjab</i></p> <p><i>I became empowered in the sense that I got to know about a vacancy for a teacher in a private school through the internet, so I told my mother that I wanted to do this job. She said, "Send your resumé if you want, it's totally up to you." ... I applied for a job through the agency, and now I am waiting for the interview call. Female, 23, Sindh</i></p>

Still lacking power

We get up early in the morning for school... After returning home, we have to do some home chores and the rest of the decisions, like marriage, are taken by our parents... we are not empowered yet. Male, 18, Punjab

3.3 EMPOWERMENT – CHANGE AT THE RELATIONAL LEVEL

In this section, **perceptions of empowerment at the relational level** and associated changes that participants have observed in themselves are **analysed from two lenses – power with and power over**. The former broadly refers to a person's inclination and ability to find common ground among people with different interests and build collective strength. For power over, we tried to understand how the participants have been able to handle difficult situations and navigate complicated power relationships, especially within their own households. General indicators of what constitute power with and power over are presented in Figure 5.

Power With	Power Over
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social capital • Participation in community groups • Level of support provided by groups to pursue own initiatives • Participation in public events • Contribution to community social 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involvement in household decision making • Contribution to household income • Power in markets • Control over decisions concerning oneself

Adapted from: L. VeneKlasen and V. Miller. (2002). *A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation*.

Figure 5: Indicators of change at the relational level

3.3.1 POWER WITH

The conversations **around coming together and acting collectively** – ‘power with’ for the purpose of this report – usually began with general observations and opinions. Almost all participants mentioned **being active in the community through trainings, awareness-raising activities, information sharing, door-to-door campaigns** and so on. When the peers probed each other on how the MNCP project helped them become active, several participants (38) spoke at length about the trainings they received from the project partners and how they went on to train other groups of young women and men in their respective villages. It was evident that the participants **derived a sense of power and achievement** not only from being part of the training sessions, but also from the fact that they were able to spread the knowledge and awareness in their communities.

According to participants, **before** the project partners started working in their villages, they and other members of the community had **very little knowledge about issues such as early marriage, rights of girls and women, and the importance of education**. Young women specifically mentioned how they were particularly **uninformed about the menstrual cycle and the related hygiene dos and don'ts**. It was as part of these activities that youth in a village or community were able to **socialise, exchange information and personal stories**, discuss the issues in their households and community, and decide on individual or collective action, as necessary. As the project activities expanded in scope and reach, so did the interest among the young women and men in the target communities.

Perhaps the most impactful among the activities and trainings, based on the discussions, was the **life skills trainings conducted by the project partners**. According to the participants, these trainings helped them **think of a vision for themselves and for their lives** and enabled them to create a roadmap for achieving their goals. The trainings also helped them to think

about the kind of problems and barriers they (particularly girls and women) are likely to encounter on the way, and how they can manage and overcome these.

Numerous instances of the participants either **initiating or being part of collective action** in the communities were discussed in detail. Many of the young people recounting these experiences had been part of several joint actions: 24 participants talked about how they had **collectively stopped an early marriage** from taking place in their village; 23 participants mentioned that they – together with other young women and men – **enabled education** for those who had either dropped out of school voluntarily or were not permitted by their parents to pursue education.

It was interesting to observe that some participants (15) had gone **beyond the issues of girls and women's rights and access to education** – the key themes of the MNCP project – and had been involved in collective action on other matters that they thought were important. The majority of these participants were young men, and from Sindh. Participants recalled instances of helping others to get emergency medical care, mobilising funds and food deliveries for people whose livelihoods were affected by Covid-19, and approaching influential community members with requests for better services, such as roads and water, in their villages.

Several other examples of collective action, which do not necessarily fall under the common themes described above, were also discussed during the conversations. These included participants regularly engaging with others in more informal and casual settings (such as with cousins and family members during weddings, or with their friends while socialising) and talking about early marriage, education, etc.; coming up with unique ideas to get together; and seeking the support of the project partners to help them with issues they faced with their families.

Benefits of MNCP project activities	<p><i>I saw in myself at the time the biggest change in my life... [Before] I didn't mix with people so much, I was quite shy and I didn't enjoy being with people... But now I have attended a lot of programs and met a lot of different people, met people with different views... [the project] not only increased our cooperation and collaboration, but also increased our involvement in the community. Male, 20, Sindh</i></p> <p><i>Yes, I find myself more active, I was nothing before; we had no guts before, but after [name of the project staff] came, I became more active! We attended trainings, jointly arranged meetings and gathered people from the community to attend the sessions. Female, 18, Sindh</i></p>
Enhanced life skills	<p><i>In 2017, I attended the GALS training. We were told a lot of things in the GALS. We learned about our rights or how to move our life forward ... they told us to make a dream for our life and after making it, how to achieve it. How to achieve it and what are the difficulties in achieving it? How to deal with these difficulties? How should we deal with domestic problems? And if there are social or external issues, how do we face these? Male, 22, Sindh</i></p> <p><i>If I have an issue, I discuss it with my friend and cousin. In our area, if I go to my friend's house too often, her parents will get suspicious. So I thought of a plan. I told my friend we would bake a cake together, so we arranged the ingredients and we baked a cake. In this way, we got to spend time together without any suspicion, so we discussed our problems and their solutions. Female, 21, Punjab</i></p>

Enhanced knowledge	<p><i>Before these [project] sessions, girls were not aware... they had no idea about adolescence, and what changes arise from becoming an adult! Initially they used pieces of cloth [during menstruation]... We made them aware in my sessions about proper health and hygiene, and advised them on the use of pads, as cloth pieces cause infections. So many girls are scared when they have their first period, but those who know about the body changes better understand how to deal with it... this happens with everyone, so don't be scared! Female, 20, Sindh</i></p>
Collective action	<p><i>[In the case of] my classmate, her parents decided to marry her at an early age. There are nine girls in our class, we study together. All of us wanted a good future for her, so we made combined efforts for her betterment. We discussed it with our teacher and arranged a meeting, and in that meeting we decided a day to go to her parents and talk to them. On that day we went there and with the help of Allah almighty, we succeeded in our goal. Female, 20, Punjab</i></p> <p><i>Recently, there were some girls in our village who were under 18 years old and their relatives were getting them married. We informed them that the girls are not 18 years old and are not adults yet, so they should not be married for a few years and should be educated further. We went to them and explained this to them, and they listened to us. They delayed the marriage of their daughters for a few years and also gave them an education. Male, 20, Sindh</i></p>
Collective action beyond early marriage and education	<p><i>There were some people in our village who were labourers and could not earn [due to Covid-19]... there was a long lockdown and a lot of poor people suffered. They couldn't go to their work. They were hungry all day... we helped some of the eight or ten people in our village who were the poorest. We gave them a bag of flour and some rations, so that they could eat. We helped them as much as we could. Male, 20, Sindh</i></p>

REFLECTIONS ON JOINT ACTION

For most of the participants, joint action simply meant ‘working together’. Some believed that intervening in matters like early marriage, education and the rights of girls and women, cannot be done in an individual capacity. According to them, these issues are outcomes of entrenched systemic beliefs. **A lone voice talking about these subjects, according to the participants, will not be heard, whereas the voices of a group of people are difficult to ignore.** Awareness creation, therefore, has to involve bringing people together and enabling the exchange of information and knowledge. Bringing about a change at community level on such critical issues requires people to raise their voices and act together.

While most of the reflections on joint action were focused on enabling societal change, a few participants also talked about how joint action helps the individuals involved. According to them, working together creates an environment in which people get to learn from each other. Individual members are able to provide and receive support and build strong relationships. **Joint action makes the community better and, in the process, relationships within the community become stronger.**

Nearly all participants stated that the MNCP project partners and their staff were key enablers of joint action. They recalled how the field staff came to their villages and engaged with community members through trainings and awareness programs. The curious in the communities attended these trainings and found the information and knowledge useful. Others were suspicious of the project’s intentions and activities, and refrained from participating. However, with time, and through the ‘snowball effect’, more and more community members became part of the project, directly or indirectly.

The meaning of joint action

When one person talks, no one understands [so] they don’t have any authority. One plus one becomes 11; likewise, when people work together or try to persuade someone together, they can do it easily compared to one person. Female, 18, Punjab

The meaning of joint action is to work together. When we work together, we come to know about the ideology of others, what they think and how they act. Second, we facilitate and support [each other] in doing work. When we work together, it becomes the source of good relationships. Male, 20, Sindh

3.3.2 POWER OVER

This section focuses on **individual actions – but in a relational capacity** – and on how the participants **negotiated power relations** within their immediate networks. The emphasis here is on **decisive actions**, as opposed to feelings and abilities (which were covered in the power within and power to sections, respectively) and joint action (as covered under power with). Here, it is useful to remember that the information on how a participant took decisive action within their families and communities very much depended on the depth of the conversations between the peers, and how well they (and the enumerator) were able to probe. Therefore, even though the number of responses is relatively few in this section, this doesn't necessarily mean that participants who did not mention decisive actions were lacking 'power over'.

The most common themes emerging from the participants' responses were **participation in household decision-making and contribution to household expenses**. With regards to the former, 14 participants stated that they were consulted by their family members on important household decisions. They attributed this to a variety of reasons: **their educational status, employment status, marital status and position within the family**. Among those participants (14) who said that they considered themselves empowered because of their ability to earn an income, the majority **credited the skill development activities** undertaken by the MNCP project partners in their villages for enabling them to earn. They believed that their contribution to household expenses made their family members respect their views and opinions, which was not the case when they were not working.

Nine participants talked about how they had **individually engaged with other community members** – neighbours, friends' parents, religious leaders, teachers etc. – on matters such as preventing child marriage and enabling education and awareness. A few participants (8) spoke about how they had **decisively engaged** – in some cases even argued and fought – with family members over their **decision to pursue education**.

Six participants – five of them young women – said that they had taken a stand and **refused to marry early when their family suggested it**. Some had sought the support of their relatives, project staff and friends to convince their family. Five participants related their experience of personally engaging with family or community members and playing a key role in stopping the early marriages of others.

Differences in the GALS champions/peer educators' capacity to act and that of the participants who received training later as part of the 'trickle down' become noticeable here. Ten participants – all from Punjab – talked about how their **power to act** on matters concerning themselves, within their households in particular, **were rather limited**. According to most of them, important decisions are or should be taken by the elders within a family. They felt that while young people may have the right to present their opinion, they do not have the final say. This lack of power, according to these participants, could be attributed to factors that have appeared previously in this report – employment status, marital status, educational status etc. It is highly likely that these participants, being part of the 'trickle down' phase of the project, did not display the same level of awareness, enthusiasm and confidence as their counterparts who had been trained directly by the project and had been involved in the activities for longer.

Contribution to household expenses	<i>Before the project, I made my own set-up in my home and just sat there doing nothing! But after [getting involved in the project], I was anxious to earn. I started to make pala [pieces of embroidered clothes which are used to cover</i>
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	<p><i>the food items]. I encouraged myself, and now I am finically contributing alongside my father, like a son. Female, 19, Sindh</i></p> <p><i>I also feel empowered. Previously I was not earning, so my family did not accept my decisions. But since I began earning, my family trust my choices and they believe that I will decide well. Now they accept my decisions. Male, 18, Punjab</i></p>
Individual engagement on important matters	<p><i>In our neighbourhood, there is this man who beats his wife. My mother used to go there every day and used to stop them. They say whatever a mother does, the daughter follows. One day my mother was in hospital, and the same thing happened. [I] went and told him that he could get in trouble with the police if we gave an application against him, and that it is wrong, and he should stop. Female, 21, Punjab</i></p>
Decisive action in their own lives	<p><i>My parents wanted to marry me off at a very young age. And I didn't want to [marry], so I spoke to my cousins and my aunt, and they all jointly convinced my parents to let me continue my studies. So I think it makes a difference when people gather and raise their voice for something. Female, 22, Punjab</i></p> <p><i>I prevented my cousin's marriage. [Her uncle] said, "Who the hell are you to command me to prevent the marriage. I am older than you." My paternal uncles are narrow-minded. One of my uncles married off his two daughters and both are now mothers of four children – they are ill and suffering from anaemia, and unable to give proper attention to their children. So I said, "See, these are the consequences of child marriage I am talking about." Female, 20, Sindh</i></p>
Still lacking power	<p><i>Yes, they involve us, but we can only share our opinion... It is not that they follow our decisions. They just tell us what they are going to do [and then ask], "What is your opinion?" The idea is that we can only give opinions; the rest [the decision] is not down to us. Female, 17, Punjab</i></p>

3.4 ENVIRONMENT

The interviews between peers also included conversations about **how they see the world around them**. The idea was to understand what kind of **changes the participants have observed in their households and communities** since the start of the MNCP project activities. Participants also reflected on the **status of girls and women**, and on how active the youth are, in their respective communities.

3.4.1 CHANGES IN THE ENVIRONMENT

According to the participants, there has been a **perceptible increase in the general awareness levels** of people in their communities, whether on education, early marriage, women's rights, life skillsetc. **Increased awareness on the importance of education, especially girls' education**, emerged as the most common theme in terms of the changes participants have observed in their immediate surroundings. According to 26 participants, more and more parents and households were **sending their children, especially girls, to school**. The participants attributed this increased awareness of and interest in education to the **awareness and training activities undertaken by the MNCP project partners** in their respective villages. Participants often went back to relating (as mentioned in the sections above) how they had engaged with parents in their villages and coaxed and cajoled them to

send their children to school. Moreover, owing to the activism of the youth and the project's activities in their community, many girls who had dropped out of school (or were on the verge of dropping out) were back in school.

The second most common theme – or critical change in the community, as seen by the participants – was a **steady decline in the incidence of child marriage** in their communities. According to these participants, households and communities were now **aware of the ill-effects of child marriage, not only on girls' and women's health, but also on the overall welfare of the household**. Here too, participants recalled several examples of how they had individually, collectively among themselves or with the help of the MNCP project partners, been able to stop several early marriages. The activism on their part, as well as dedicated awareness activities conducted by the young people and project partners, has had a significant impact on perceptions towards early marriage in households and communities.

Some participants (10) spoke at length about how, over the years, they have **observed a significant change in the way the communities perceive the activities** undertaken by the MNCP project partners. At the beginning of the project, the project activities, its staff and by extension, the young people involved with the project, **were viewed with suspicion by community members**. While some were curious about the trainings and awareness campaigns, others believed that the information being shared was useless, or deemed it to be against their traditions and customs. However, as engagement with the communities increased, these **barriers and misgivings gradually dissipated** – to a large extent.

<p>Awareness of importance of education – especially girls' education</p>	<p><i>Before this project, there were some people who were educating their daughters, but since the project there are a lot of people educating their daughters. What they [young women and girls] heard in sessions, they are now applying in their lives, and they're getting education or learning some skills. Now their parents are either educating them or letting them learn some skills. Female, 20, Punjab</i></p> <p><i>In terms of education... in the past, the girls' school was closed here, meaning no girl went to school. Now the school is open... it was built before, but no one went. Now all the little girls are studying up to at least class five. This was not the case before. Male, 20, Sindh</i></p>
<p>Decline in instances of early marriage</p>	<p><i>Yes, Mashallah [as God has willed], we have benefited a lot... in the past, parents were forcing girls to marry without knowing their wishes, but now it's not like that. Previously, the marriage age of girls and boys was 13 or 14 years, but now it is 17 or 18 years. Now parents consider the boys' and girls' choices. Male, 21, Punjab</i></p>
<p>Change in attitude towards project activities</p>	<p><i>[Name of project staff] started taking sessions in our village, where she used to make us aware about GALS champions. Whenever we went to attend the session, people [in the community] used to be sarcastic... [they would say] that they [the project staff] will kidnap you, they are foul. But we resisted and said no, we have to go, and we did. Now those same people are on our side and they ask us to make them part of this project as well. Male, 20, Sindh</i></p>

3.4.2 STATUS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

Apart from the increase in awareness of the importance of girls' education, described above, the most common theme in relation to the status of women and girls was a **rise in awareness on women's rights and their role in the household and in the wider society**. Many

participants (24), particularly women and girls, spoke enthusiastically about the fact that the traditional assumption that young women should stay at home and take care of children and the household is being questioned, especially by young people. The same number of participants (24) stated that this rise in awareness was also because **young women in their communities have started to assert themselves** and are asking to be included in decisions concerning their lives.

A few participants (15) were of the opinion that the general rise in awareness among the community, and specifically the increased awareness about the ill effects of early marriages (14), had directly and indirectly contributed to the improved status of women and girls in their communities. Some participants (12) stated that **the skill enhancement activities – both employment skills and life skills** – conducted by the project partners were **helping young women to become independent, contribute to household incomes and assert their identity**. A small number of participants (10) believed that women are slowly starting to enjoy freedom of movement – primarily as a result of more young women going to school, attending trainings and awareness activities conducted by the project partners, and generally being more visible in the community.

During the reflection workshop, a representative of one of the project partners stated that in the first five years of their work in Sindh, they could only work with boys and men – women and girls were not allowed to participate. This, however, changed later: more girls became active, started attending school, and began speaking up within their families and communities.

Beyond the discussions on the heartening changes in the status of girls and women, there were also some solemn reflections **and assertions** during the conversations. According to about 19 participants, there **continues to be significant resistance to girls and women pursuing education, participating in public activities and generally asserting their rights**. Age-old customs, traditions and beliefs were holding back many members of their communities and slowing progress in the status of women and girls. These community members held especially regressive opinions on the impact of awareness-raising activities on young women. The dominant belief among them was that educated and aware young women are disobedient, ill-mannered, out of control, and likely to bring shame and dishonour to their families – and that therefore, their movements and ambitions should be controlled.

Awareness of women's rights	<p><i>After the project implementation, women in general have become more aware with regard to their daughters' personal matters... they don't want to repeat the same mistakes and injustices of past that they faced due to lack of education and facilities. Female, 17, Sindh</i></p> <p><i>Before [the project], the girls were sitting at home, they didn't know how to talk. After becoming the part of the project, we can talk, we can fight for our rights, we can do what we want. Girls weren't allowed to get education or do anything independently. I told them and convinced them that they can do more than house chores. They can get an education or learn any skill and do something for themselves. Female, 17, Punjab</i></p>
Overall status of women improved of young	<p><i>[Through] GALS and our life skills education... women were told about themselves, about life, about life skills, about the way of life and about their rights and early marriage. When they found out about the harms and the causes [of early marriage], then they united and started making decisions for their own good and for the good of the community. Because education is knowledge, knowledge is awareness and awareness is light,</i></p>

	<p><i>and with the help of awareness every difficult problem becomes easy.</i> Male, 24, Sindh</p>
<p>Continued resistance to women's education/liberation</p>	<p><i>They say just study till matric and then sit at home till you get married, because girls are expected to clean and cook and take care of the household; there is no thought that they will get a job and work. They say after matric, just learn silai karhai [sewing and embroidery]. Because it is believed that, after all, we are just going to get married and go to our in-laws. Female, 19, Punjab</i></p> <p><i>In our area, if a girl is getting an education or doing something by herself, other people don't like it and make negative assumptions about her. People in our area think that getting educated is a bad thing, and if a girl is getting an education she will become bold and will not obey her parents, and also not follow the teachings of Islam. Female, 18, Punjab</i></p> <p><i>It [women going to college or university] is not allowed because of the things that have happened in our area. You know, as I mentioned before, a few girls went to university and never came back. People are scared to send their daughter to college and university as they think girls will run away, and that would bring shame on the family. Female, 19, Punjab</i></p>

3.4.3 TRADITIONAL SOCIAL NORMS

When discussing the challenges that persist and which slow down progress that could be imagined and realised in their communities, the most common theme that emerged was the **circumstances of households, and the belief systems practiced by individuals at household level.**

According to some participants, the economic status of a household had a bearing on the ability and inclination of the parents to invest in their children's education and general wellbeing. Participants shared examples of how they had tried to engage with parents from poor households to encourage them to send their out-of-school children back to school. They related how the parents had expressed **their inability to bear their children's education expenses and said that their children helped them with work** and contributed to the household income. Such parents often married their girl children off at an early age to avoid paying a higher dowry later, or to reduce their 'burden'. Participants were of the opinion that in such cases, a more concrete approach was required to get children to school and to combat early marriage.

From the discussions, it was observed that the **educational status of the household also had an influence** on how its members responded to project activities and, in general, their attitude towards early marriage and children's education. Households where either or both parents were educated tended to have more receptive attitudes to education and delayed marriage, whereas in households where either or both parents were uneducated, the status of their children's education and empowerment – especially that of girl children – depended on the strength and depth of the parents' commitment to age-old traditions and beliefs.

... those who are not educated are not active, because they do not have education. Therefore, they cannot be active in these programs... those who are poor and work on the land... [they told us] there is poverty and if we don't earn, if we come here [to the project activities], our children will starve.
Male, 23, Sindh

One, there is lack of education [among those who are resistant to women and girls' education/liberation]. Then there are the centuries-old traditions that have been sitting in people's minds... when we first went to the area, they had some poison (doubt) in their minds that what we were saying to their children would make their children rebel. There were different perspectives.

Male, 24, Punjab

4 CONCLUSION AND PROJECT IMPLICATIONS

The objective of this study was to understand how youth associated with the MNCP project in Pakistan perceive empowerment and joint action. However, it is our sincere belief that the study has been able to achieve more than was intended. The findings also offer a glimpse into the hearts and minds of the young people and how they navigate complicated power relationships, age-old customs and beliefs, and their own ideas and opinions, to imagine a better future for themselves and their communities.

Not all the views and opinions expressed by the youth on certain issues will resonate with readers. 'Is this empowerment?' is a disconcerting question that some readers will inevitably grapple with. And rightly so. However, as one of the project staff pointed out during the reflection workshop, while the changes observed and perceived by the young people may not be revolutionary, they can be considered somewhat transformative in the context. According to the staff, the MNCP interventions revolved around knowledge, attitudes and practices. It was indeed observed that enhanced knowledge can bring about a change in attitudes and practices. In Sindh and Punjab, according to project staff, empowerment in terms of individual power will take many years to realise. However, reaching a point where young women can go to school, delay their marriage and in some cases, travel for work, is a huge leap forward.

The results show that the young men and women together understand empowerment as a multi-faceted concept. In their personal reflections, individuals often referred to a specific aspect of empowerment. Some young people also said that they don't feel sufficiently empowered yet. The project staff, recalling their experience of working in the communities in the early stages of the project, pointed out that they were the first organisations to work with the youth on empowerment. In Sindh, for example, women and girls were not allowed to participate in any of the project activities at the beginning. Over the years, as the project expanded, women and girls became an integral part of the activities in both Sindh and Punjab. Slowly but surely, the project partners, GALS champions and peer educators were able to win the confidence of community members. It is important to keep these changes in mind while we reflect on the findings of the study.

The changes the young people reported in their lives as a result of the project were acknowledged and appreciated consistently throughout the study process. What was also acknowledged was the fact that the empowerment transition is incomplete; indeed, it has just begun. Therefore, we would like to emphasise the need to continue awareness-generation and capacity-building activities within the community, as well as larger policy dialogues, in order to improve the status of women and children, eradicate early marriage and enhance the educational status of children. Youth participants, like the project staff, believed that even though the pace is slow, change is indeed taking place. Around 63% of Pakistan's population comprises youth aged 15-33 (UN Population Fund Report 2017). Needless to say, behavioural change is likely to take generations. A similar sentiment was echoed by the project partners

during the reflection workshop with regards to ensuring sustainability of the changes within the community. According to one member of the field staff, traditional beliefs take time to change and myths, doubts and misinformation tend to find a way of coming back.

Apart from continuing the current activities in the communities, project staff were of the opinion that 'edutainment' should be pursued more intensively as a means to engage with the community. During the reflection workshop, radio and street theatre were proposed as the most effective ways to disseminate information and knowledge. Any other mode, such as social media or television, may not have as much impact, as the target communities have limited access to these media.

Enhanced engagement with youth in the communities came up as another important channel to achieve the desired impact. Here, two broad themes were discussed. The first was the need to engage more with men and boys. Although this study found the transformation among young men to be on a par with that of young women and girls, young men do have the upper hand in shaping household beliefs and decisions. Further, according to the project staff, it is vital to go beyond involving men and boys in general discussions. More focused engagement of men and boys will enable an increased sense of togetherness. In the absence of this, there could be a sense of resentment that activities are designed to involve and benefit women and girls only. Involving more men and boys could lead to a more perceptible change both at the household and community levels.

The second theme arising on enhanced youth engagement was the need to focus on economic empowerment. Both the project staff and the study participants suggested that youth need to be provided with skills development and employment opportunities to be able to become truly empowered. In remote, conservative, deprived areas, such as those where the project has been active, there is a need to support young people to become resilient to changing circumstances, such as the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Youth will be more receptive and better able to adapt to change in their social environment if they experience a change in their economic circumstances. Although the MNCP project activities did include skill building and connecting with other organisations with similar mandates, the impact is likely to be greater if the skills and the opportunities are localised.

In conclusion, we can say that young people have experienced empowerment and joint action as a result of their participation in the MNCP project, in different ways. Some reported big changes in their lives, while others were more modest and maybe more realistic when reflecting on the social and cultural norms in their surroundings, which take time to shift. But with the help of the project and through their own commitment, together they have come up with their own narrative of empowerment and joint action. This process has not been easy or fast. Here, the hare and tortoise fable comes to mind. Traditional norms and customs have had the lead so far. But the change envisioned, like the tortoise, is slow. For change to come out as the winner, it needs to be steady as well. And that is what we should all aim for as we go forward.

REFERENCES

A 'How To' Guide to Measuring Women's Empowerment: Sharing experience from Oxfam's impact evaluations. Simone Lombardini, Kimberly Bowman and Rosa Garwood. Oxfam GB. May 2017.

L. VeneKlasen and V. Miller. (2002). A New Weave of Power, People & Politics: The Action Guide for Advocacy and Citizen Participation.

Around 63% of Pakistan's population comprises youth aged 15-33 (UN Population Fund Report 2017).

APPENDIX

Informed consent form

I, acting on behalf of organisation Baanh Belli / Bedari, would like to invite you to join a peer-to-peer interview about how you experienced empowerment and joint action as a peer educator / GALs champion as part of the MNCP project in Pakistan.

We hope to use the information collected from your peer-to-peer interview for a number of purposes including:

- to learn from your ideas and to make improvements to our work;
- to let other people know about your experience, to inform their work in relation to your needs;
- to inform and support our other study activities that we have already done and are planning to do.

We will share parts of your story (never as a whole) only when you give permission for it at the end of this interview. Though we always will make sure to use information **anonymously**. If you don't feel comfortable discussing a certain topic, it is not a problem and we can skip ahead in the peer interview. You are free to end this peer interview at any time.

There is no particular direct benefit to you for your contribution to this peer interview.

During this peer interview, you and your peer can share your experiences from your perspective. Furthermore, we will make use of the pictures you have made beforehand to make the subject more alive. You can together reflect on the pictures you have made – but you don't need to find similarities in each other's experiences. We really value your own experiences, so we encourage you to share them openly.

Informed consent:

Yes ☐ No ☐

Are you willing to discuss with your peer about empowerment and joint action and can I write down your answers?

You are always free not to answer certain questions from your peer or from the enumerator. At the end of the interview, I will check again for your consent and you can always point out parts that you don't want to share.

Consent for recording:

 Yes ☐ No ☐

I would like to ask your permission to record our conversation. This is for the purpose of reporting. In the report, we will directly code your personal information anonymously. After reporting the recording will be deleted.

Consent for potential follow-up in the future:

 Yes ☐ No ☐

In the future, we might want to sit down with you again and ask you for more information. Would you be open to being approached again?

Basic demographic information

District

Family composition:

	Age	Gender 1=female 2=male	Marital status 1=single 2=engaged 3=married 4=widow/widower 5=divorced 6= Nikkahfied*	Age of marriage	Level of education finished 1=none 2=primary 3=middle 4=matric 5=higher	Daily activity 1=school/college 2=domestic work 3=economic activity
Respondent Name:						
Role in the MNCP project in Pakistan						

*The Nikkah (marriage) has been fixed but the girl has not moved in with her husband and in-laws i.e they haven't started cohabitation.

Ethics, safeguarding and data security

Ethics

Basic Ethical Research Principles

These basic principles apply to all forms of VAWG/GBV data collection, management, and use:

1. **Informed and voluntary consent** is required from all participants.
2. **Confidentiality** should be maintained at all times (with some possible legal exceptions).
3. Participants have the **right to refuse** to answer a question or terminate participation at any time.
4. **Do no Harm** – Ensure the safety of all participants and staff.
5. **Respond immediately** and appropriately to distress, disclosure, or requests for assistance.
6. **Research Integrity** – Ensure the quality, accuracy, and beneficence of the research.

Safeguarding

At Oxfam, we are committed to zero tolerance of sexual harassment, exploitation and abuse in our organisation. This means that we will do everything in our power to prevent these from happening, and rigorously address it each and every time it happens.

Safeguarding in a study means ensuring the safety of respondents, interviewers, partner staff and Oxfam staff alike. We identified the following risks and actions (but please take in mind that other risks may also occur that are important to take action upon and share with the responsible actors):

Risk	Action	Responsibility
Coronavirus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Keep up to date with government regulations - Covid-19 protocol of Oxfam 	All parties involved
Interruptions from government side	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Permissions related to evaluation of the MTBA programme - Act on behalf of MTBA, Bedari, Baahn Belli - Refer to Bedari or Bahn Belli in case of questions - Do not use terms like 'research' 	Bedari and Baahn Beli are in the lead
Safety of enumerators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Work in daylight hours - Stay connected - Follow instructions of partners around safety 	Maryam and team

Foggy season (smog) makes it difficult to travel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ensure safety when traveling - Keep contact with social mobilisers so they can inform respondents when we are on our way 	Social mobilisers and partners to be available for support
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Covid-19 safety protocol

WHAT CAN YOU DO FOR YOURSELF?

1. Treat people around you as if they carry Covid-19 without symptoms. Be aware that you may be carrying the virus yourself without showing any symptoms. When you or one of the respondents has symptoms – postpone / cancel the interview.
2. Always keep physical distance between people, preferably 2 meters.
3. Wash your hands regularly, and encourage respondents as well to wash their hands before and after the interview. Wash your hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds using soap and running water. If soap and water aren't available, sanitise your hands using an alcohol-based sanitiser with at least 70% alcohol.
4. Wear a mask or face cover. Keep the following in mind when wearing one:
 - Make sure that this mask meets government guidelines.
 - Inspect all sides of the mask to make sure there are no faults.
 - It should cover your mouth and nose and should fit snugly but comfortably.
 - Wash your hands before putting on the mask and avoid touching your face and readjusting the mask.
 - Replace the mask with a new one when it is damp.
 - Do not re-use single-use masks.
 - Remove the mask from behind (do not touch the front of the mask), and discard it immediately in a closed bin.
 - Wash your hands after removing the mask.
5. Keep the following in mind when you cough or sneeze:
 - Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze.
 - Dispose of a used tissue in a closed dustbin immediately and wash or sanitise your hands.
 - If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your bent elbow, never your hands.
 - Do not use a cloth handkerchief, as it can become a breeding ground for bacteria and viruses.
6. Keep the following in mind when you travel:
 - Use your own transport whenever possible.
 - Wear a mask or face cover.
 - Sanitise your hands frequently.
 - Check your temperature; if it is high, stay home. Also stay home if you have any symptoms.
 - If you use your own car, frequently disinfect surfaces like the steering wheel, handles and seats.
 - When using public transport, sanitise your hands after touching any surfaces. When possible, keep windows open.

WHAT CAN WE DO DURING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STUDY?

1. Educate teams and communities about Covid-19

- Clearly communicate to youth respondents and enumerators that our aim is to protect both them and surrounding communities.
- Ensure a safe environment where youth respondents and enumerators can share their concerns related to Covid-19. If they feel worried or unsafe, we need to respond to their concerns.
- Stay connected to the community, relevant stakeholders and youth respondents. If any (mis)information or rumors about the illness spreading are going around, you need to know this as well. Build this into debriefing and reporting to ensure we are maintaining community trust.

2. Account for sanitary supplies

- We need to hand out soap, hand sanitiser gel, and protective masks to youth respondents and enumerators. Sanitiser should contain at least 70% alcohol.
- Try to include this into the budget of the workshop materials, research materials or communication materials. It should not cost a lot, but we should provide youth researchers with these things.

3. Adjust transportation and interview procedures

- We will avoid asking youth respondents and enumerators to use public transport.
- Enumerators should not interview people who are sick (including cough).
- Try to maintain a distance of 2m between all involved – when this is not possible, wear a mask.
- When possible, enumerators should call ahead to assess the situation before visiting a home for an interview.

4. During the peer-to-peer interview

- Ensure the location of the interview has open windows, so air can circulate.
- Ensure all present stay 2m from each other.
- If the enumerator or youth respondent does not feel well, they will have to stay home.
- During the interview, the enumerators will use their own material, such as cups, pens, etc. to try to keep distance.
- Ensure soap and hand sanitiser is available during the interview.

Data protection

As we have to comply with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the research team will have to keep the following practical rules in mind:

- ✓ We have to keep the transcript of the interviewee and the socio-demographic data of the interviewee separate.
- ✓ Never use names of interviewees in interview transcripts or in socio-demographic data.
- ✓ These two documents (transcripts and socio-demographic data) will both be shared with Oxfam in separate, password-protected Box folders.
- ✓ We will use a key document that links interviewee number and family ID.
- ✓ We will only share data through a password-secured Box link.
- ✓ Interviewees have to provide informed consent at the start of the interview, which the interviewer needs to properly register (see previous section).