

# CONSEQUENCES OF POSITIVE DEVIANCE AND THE BREAKING OF SOCIAL NORMS IN PAKISTAN:

## COMPARATIVE LEARNINGS FROM THE MARRIAGE, NO CHILD'S PLAY PROJECT

In this learning product, as part of the Comparative Learning Series, **we explore the social sanctions that families face or expect to face when they deviate from the social norm of marrying off their daughters at a young age.** Social sanctions and benefits are the means by which socially approved standards are enforced: actions aligned with social norms are rewarded through social benefits, while social sanctions are triggered by failure to conform.

We weave together data from three studies, conducted by Oxfam and partners in the past four years as part of the MNCP project in Pakistan, which explored social sanctions when marriage is delayed. Generally, the studies found that these sanctions fall into two categories: damage to family honour, and gossip among the community.

The three studies are:<sup>1</sup>

- A midline study conducted in 2018 analysing six outcomes from the MNCP project, including social norms around child marriage: 2,000 respondents included 1,000 heads of households, both male and female, and 1,000 girls aged 11-24 who may have been at risk of or affected by child marriage.
- A 2018 qualitative study<sup>2</sup> on decision-making processes and social norms around early marriage in Sindh and Punjab: 40 in-depth interviewees included fathers, mothers, and married boys and girls aged 16-25.
- A 2020 qualitative study<sup>3</sup> exploring cases of positive deviance from the norm of early marriage in Sindh and Punjab: 48 in-depth interviewees included the father, mother and unmarried daughter (aged 15-17) from eight families and their selected reference persons.

All studies were conducted in collaboration with representatives of partner organizations [Bedari](#), the [Indus Resource Centre](#) (IRC) and [Baanhn Beli](#). They participated in reflection workshops to collectively formulate learnings, recommendations and programmatic responses, along with respondents from the districts of Larkana and Shikarpur in Sindh and Muzaffargarh and Lodhran in Punjab.

# DAMAGE TO FAMILY HONOUR

As mentioned in previous learning products, the concept of family honour is central to the decision to marry off girls. The behaviour and reputation of family members – including girls – affects how the family perceives itself and is perceived by others in the community. Deviating from social norms around family honour can cause social sanctions, and damage to family honour – resulting in a changed status in the community – is also a social sanction in itself.

In the midline study, 16% of respondents saw damage to family honour as a possible consequence of delaying marriage. The social norms research found three drivers of early marriage linked to family honour.

First, many respondents noted that unmarried ‘mature’ girls are seen as promiscuous; maturity relates not to a specific age, but for example whether a girl has had her first menstruation, or can help in the household and read the Quran. Parents are afraid that their unmarried daughters will fall in love, have an affair or elope, damaging family honour. To prevent this, parents marry off a girl as soon as she is considered mature enough.

Second, there is a cultural and religious belief that it is a sin to keep menstruating girls at home, so not marrying off a menstruating girl is seen as damaging family honour. As one respondent phrased it: ‘The number of days a girl who is menstruating is at home, her blood is on her parents’ heads. It is a bleeding – a shame over parents.’

Third, respondents noted that it is seen as the parents’ social and religious duty to make sure that daughters are married at some point. Both parents and girls can be afraid that if they refuse a proposal, they will not get any others. The parents would be seen as having failed in their duty towards their daughter, bringing shame to the family.



## GOSSIP

The social sanction most often expected was gossiping by members of the community, mentioned by 48% of respondents in the midline study. Gossip is one of the ways in which families can experience their family honour being damaged: community members saying negative things, such as that a girl’s father is weak, lazy or a coward; spreading rumours about a girl having affairs; or speculating on reasons for a girl being unmarried, such as the family having received no proposal, or the parents wanting to keep the daughter for themselves.

While most respondents said they do not care what others say, some girls reported feeling down because of comments they received, or being kept at home by their parents so as to not provoke more gossip. Some parents reported feeling stressed and angry, and experienced

strain in their relationships with community members and relatives who favour child marriage.

Respondents to our studies reported that in their experience social sanctions were largely limited to gossip and usually do not extend to more active interventions such as physical violence. Nonetheless, physical violence does happen to girls in Pakistan.<sup>4</sup>

## WHO IS AFFECTED BY SOCIAL SANCTIONS

According to heads of household surveyed for the midline survey, the father (54%) is most affected by social sanctions, followed by the entire family (37%) and the mother (4%). In Punjab, most men answered that the father as most affected while most women answered the entire household. In Sindh, both men and women indicated the father as most affected, followed by the entire household.

The respondents did not focus on the consequences for girls, though in the positive deviance study girls described being teased or harassed by neighbours for not yet being married. Program workers in Pakistan reflected that fathers and daughters experience social sanctions differently: fathers focus on damage to their honour or reputation, while the consequences for girls include more restrictions from their families such as not being allowed to go out.

## CONCLUSIONS AND PROGRAMMATIC LEARNINGS

Three learnings can be used to inform future programmatic interventions:

1. Focus on trying to shift social norms away from seeing unmarried girls as damaging family honour, and towards seeing educated or employed girls as benefiting family honour.
2. Empower girls and families to learn how to deal with negative comments, and sensitize community members on the negative effects of gossip on parents and girls.
3. Build the confidence of families to make their own decisions on delaying marriage, given that the risks will most likely not extend to physical harm.

<sup>1</sup> This series of learning products also included a 2016 baseline study, but it did not address social sanctions.

<sup>2</sup> A link to this report can be found [here](#).

<sup>3</sup> A link to this report can be found [here](#).

<sup>4</sup> See for example: [Country Policy and Information Note Pakistan: Women fearing gender-based violence](#)

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