

EXPLORING PROTECTIVE MECHANISMS TO CHILD MARRIAGE IN PAKISTAN:

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

What new insights and lessons on protective mechanisms can be identified by reflecting on existing applied research? How can these mechanisms contribute to delaying child marriage in Pakistan? As part of our Comparative Learning Series, Oxfam and partners explored protective measures through triangulating research findings from different studies and experiential knowledge as part of the Marriage No Child's Play (MNCP) project, which aims to amplify the voices of young girls and empower them to decide whom and when to marry.

Factors with the potential to be protective mechanisms against child marriage include education, knowledge about the harmful effects of child marriage, girls' contributions to the household, and personal attitudes and limited social sanctions.

All the studies were conducted in collaboration with partner organizations [Bedari](#), the [Indus Resource Centre](#) (IRC) and [Baanhn Beli](#). Partners also participated in reflection workshops to collectively formulate lessons from findings, conclusions, recommendations, and programmatic responses. These workshops featured respondents from the project's implementation districts: Larkana and Shirkarpur in Sindh province, and Muzzafargarh and Lodhran in Punjab province.

The four studies that have been implemented by Oxfam and partners are:

- A 2017 baseline study analysed six outcomes from the MNCP project¹ in Punjab and Sindh, Pakistan: 1,200 respondents included 600 heads of the household, both male and female, and 600 girls (aged 11-24), both married and unmarried.
- A [2018 qualitative study](#) on decision-making processes and social norms around early marriage: 40 in-depth interviewees included fathers, mothers, and married boys and girls (aged 16-25) from different households.
- A 2019 midline study analyzing six outcomes² from the project: 2,000 respondents included 1,000 head of households, both male and female, and 1,000 girls (aged 11-24), some at risk of or affected by child marriage and others not.³
- A [2020 qualitative study](#) exploring cases of positive deviance to early marriage: 48 in-depth interviewees included the father, mother, and unmarried daughter (aged 15-17) from eight families and a reference person selected by each as having influenced their thinking on child marriage.

EDUCATION

In the two qualitative studies, education was perceived as a strong protective mechanism against child marriage. Three-quarters of respondents in the social norms study, for example, indicated that investing in a girl's education is an acceptable reason for postponing her marriage. However, the study also found that parents may not consider the financial investment worthwhile, as the immediate benefits will be limited by the daughter moving to her husband's household. It was suggested that programmatic responses should maximize parents' knowledge of the financial return of investing in their daughters' education, though without downplaying its intrinsic value.

In the positive deviance study, the financial burden of delaying marriage was also mentioned: facing expenses for food and education, parents wish to transfer their responsibility for their daughters to their husbands. Parents often perceive it as their duty to make sure their daughter gets married, as a matter of family honour – and the older a girl gets, the greater the risk of being unable to marry her off. Nonetheless, education was seen as an alternative pathway to child marriage: most participants shared the views that it is essential for girls to possess a certain level of education before they are married, and that girls who do not marry at an early age have more opportunities to gain new skills.



Despite this, interviewees had different notions about the fundamental value of education and why it should precede married life. Some highlighted the individual empowerment of gaining knowledge and skills. Others focused on the importance of education for marriageability, as educated girls make better wives: rather than being seen as an intrinsic right, education was perceived as an instrument to make girls more desirable, with families and boys preferring educated brides. In both qualitative studies, education was discussed less as a motivator against child marriage and more as a means to secure proposals. This is particularly true for Islamic education, which is often valued more than academic education.

The studies found that whether or not a girl can go to school depends heavily on financial limitations, the presence of nearby schools and the safety of travelling to school, as parents worry about the dangers to which girls are exposed especially when travelling outside of the local area. This points to the need for more affordable school environments at the local level.

The baseline survey found similar education levels among girls affected or unaffected by child marriage: roughly 65% and 62%, respectively, had no formal education. The midline study found the project had positively impacted educational attendance: girls who participated in the project were 35% more likely than the control group to be enrolled in school, 36% more likely to complete primary school, and 43% more likely to complete middle school. Girls affected by child marriage were the least educated and those unaffected were the most educated, with 36% of married girls who were not enrolled in school citing their marriage as their main reason for dropping out.

KNOWLEDGE OF THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF CHILD/EARLY MARRIAGE

Child marriage can be curbed by awareness of the many negative effects it can have on girls' lives. For instance, the midline survey showed that girls affected by child marriage had less knowledge of its harmful effects than unaffected or at-risk girls, particularly on health-related risks such as postpartum complications impacting both the mother and child. Still, the midline survey found more knowledge on this area even among this group than among all participants from the baseline survey.

The midline survey found that over a quarter of heads of households believed marrying a girl under the age of 18 presented no risk to her mental (26.5%) or physical health (27.5%). Of those who did acknowledge risks, around 80% mentioned early childbearing but only around 30% referred to serious risks such as the death of the mother or the child. The main negative effects associated with child marriage were poverty (mentioned by all heads of household), teen pregnancy (46%), illiteracy (43.5%) and school dropout (27%). Education-related concerns appeared more prominently in the midline study than the baseline. The midline study demonstrated that interventions to raise awareness about the negative consequences of early marriage could make parents more willing to delay their daughter's marriage.



The qualitative study on positive deviance looked at this question in more depth. It found that awareness of the negative consequences of child marriage – particularly related to potential health complications and limited education – led to a change in mindset, with families deciding to delay their daughter's marriage in defiance of traditional social norms.

GIRLS CONTRIBUTION TO THE HOUSEHOLD

Daughters who contribute to their parents' household – whether in monetary terms or support with chores – are less at risk of child marriage, according to the positive deviance study. The social norms study also indicated that girls who earn their own money may enjoy more protection from child marriage, as their financial independence can change the financial equation around dowry practices and bride prices – though this is unusual, applying primarily to the relatively few girls who have university-level education.

PERSONAL ATTITUDES AND LIMITED SOCIAL SANCTIONS

Changing personal attitudes of family members and girls themselves can lay the foundations for a change in child marriage practices. Parents in the positive deviance study said their attitudes towards child marriage were shaped by the factors mentioned above, as well as legal regulations on the minimum age for marriage, and the wishes of their daughter: some girls in the study demanded the space to participate in the decision about their marriage, emphasizing their right to choose. Several girls mentioned that partner organizations such as Bedari and IRC helped them find the strength and knowledge to stand up for themselves.

These factors combined to shape an attitude among the parents of 'putting their daughters first' by delaying their marriage. Although this meant going against the local culture and family traditions, the parents said the social sanctions they faced for doing so were limited: there would be gossip, which could damage their family honour, but no physical violence.

All eight families studied had accepted marriage proposals for their daughters before changing their minds, and three had previously married off another daughter at an early age. This demonstrates that personal attitudes can change, but it does not happen overnight. It can also take time for attitudes to translate into action: in the baseline and midline studies, a significant share of heads of households agreed that men should marry girls only at age 18 or older (75% and 47% respectively), but 78% of households had been impacted by child marriage, and no evidence was found of the heads of households taking action against child marriage. When social sanctions are limited, this could make parents more willing to translate their attitudes into action.



CONCLUSIONS

Based on the four studies, we have identified six lessons to inform future projects and programmatic interventions.

EDUCATION

1. Programmes already aim to maximize parents' knowledge of the financial return of investing in their daughters' education, though they should not ignore the intrinsic value of education to girls as individuals. However, there are challenges: girls have limited opportunities to generate significant income unless they pursue education to college or university level, which is too expensive for many families, and they also need permission from household members to take jobs outside the home.

2. Programmes are supporting policies to expand educational opportunities for girls at the local level and make school environments more affordable and safe, as well as investing in research to learn more about the linkages between girls' education, mobility and parents' safety concerns. More lobbying is needed at provincial and national levels, where budgets are allocated that shape decisions about education at the local level.

AWARENESS OF HARMFUL EFFECTS

3. Programmes are already raising general awareness in communities on the negative effects of child marriage. They should be combined with awareness-raising about cases of positive deviance.

CONTRIBUTION TO HOUSEHOLD

4. Programmes should continue to promote girls' financial independence – first and foremost for their own personal development and empowerment, but also because girls' financial contributions to a household can encourage parents to delay their marriage.

PERSONAL ATTITUDES

5. To empower girls to raise their voices and make their wishes known, programmes should continue to invest in interventions that support girls to develop the strength, skills, and knowledge to stand up for themselves. This includes leadership skills, negotiation skills, and knowledge of legal rights.

6. Programmes should also develop interventions that expose communities to alternative pathways to child marriage over an extended period.

These protective mechanisms have been identified by a sensemaking exercise, triangulating data from four different studies. Future research is needed to further explore the potential of each mechanism.

¹ The six MNCP project outcomes surveyed in the baseline are: Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) knowledge, education, economic empowerment, child protection, SRHR services and social action.

² The five MNCP project outcomes surveyed in the midline are: life skills knowledge, youth-friendly health services, education, economic empowerment and enabling environment.

³ 40,5% of baseline survey respondents also participated in the midline survey.

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