



# **INFLUENCES, CONSIDERATIONS AND ATTITUDES HELPING TRANSFORM SOCIAL NORMS AROUND CHILD MARRIAGE IN SELECTED DISTRICTS IN PUNJAB AND SINDH, PAKISTAN**

**A QUALITATIVE STUDY EXPLORING CASES OF POSITIVE DEVIANCE**

A study linked to the More Than Brides Alliance (MTBA) programme

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Building on previous study efforts led by Oxfam and partners in Pakistan, this study explores cases of positive deviance in child marriage – that is, families who chose to deviate from social norms in a positive way, by delaying the marriage of their daughters. We conducted in-depth interviews with 48 individuals in four districts: Muzaffargarh and Lodhran in Punjab, and Larkana and Shikarpur in Sindh. Half were mothers, fathers and daughters from eight families that decided not to engage in child marriage. The others were reference persons – individuals selected by each family member as having been instrumental in their decision. Initial results were discussed with implementing partners in online reflection workshops to identify important learnings and construct programmatic responses.

The study found that multiple factors work together to change parents' attitudes and impact their decision-making process against child marriage and in favour of their daughters' well-being. This includes interventions, individuals, increased knowledge, lived experiences and existing legal frameworks. Our findings show that various social norms and pressures contribute to the incidence of child marriages, but point to concrete changes in understandings, behaviour and practices which are helping to deconstruct traditional religious and societal beliefs.

Our findings show that social norms around family honour contribute to child marriages to some extent, but so do other factors such as unmarried daughters being seen as a burden on their parents, and the family's economic and educational circumstances. There is also the belief that education – and particularly travelling outside the community to pursue an education – may lead girls to behave in ways that bring shame to their families. However, change is happening all four districts, with residents becoming aware of the consequences of child marriage through the work of interventions and personal knowledge of cases in their communities in which girls have been harmed by being married at a young age.

Our research explores **drivers of positive deviance**. We analysed individual family cases, looking into **the personal attitudes and key experiences** of those involved in the decision-making process as well as **the individuals and interventions** that may have influenced them against child marriage. We found that all eight families had initially considered and in some cases accepted a marriage proposal before changing their minds once they understood the risks to their daughters, particularly to their health and education.

Several of the girls demanded to have their voices heard, and many of their parents took a supportive attitude. Knowledge of the new law in Pakistan against child marriage contributed to parents' decisions to delay their daughters' marriage. Individuals – including staff of local organizations, friends and family members – played a role, as did interventions of local organizations such as awareness-raising sessions and educational movie screenings. Some parents passed on their new knowledge to other families.

Our research further sought to unpack the **factors, issues and considerations which influenced positive deviance**. Our analysis points to the importance of girls getting an education before getting married; health considerations, mainly physical health; and the difficulties young wives may face keeping up with household demands. Delayed marriage is also considered when daughters are supporting their parents financially or in the household. Although there is overall agreement that girls should be educated and mature before getting married, our results show different understandings of these concepts: some think of education as being about individual empowerment, others value it for improving girls' marriageability; maturity can be seen as a matter of age, physical development or personal development.

We explored the impact of **legal frameworks on child marriage**, with a new law in Pakistan setting the legal minimum age for marriage at 18. Our analysis showed that some people understand and respect the law, some do not know about it, and others know about it but choose to ignore it. There are limitations in implementation and enforcement, despite efforts by local organizations to disseminate information and promote accountability.

We looked at **social sanctions and/or benefits** experienced by positive deviant families. No benefits at all were reported. Some families experienced no negative reactions to their decision to delay their daughter's marriage, but others faced community backlash such as teasing or harassment. Likewise, some were confronted by disagreeing relatives, while others were supported by their wider families. A common experience is being gossiped about, although many families said they do not care about this.

Virtual reflection workshops translated these findings into programmatic recommendations, designed collectively with implementing partners in Pakistan. These include the importance of investing in strategies for awareness raising, knowledge dissemination and sensitization; lobbying and advocacy; promoting girls' empowerment and education; and strengthening the legal environment around child marriage. It was emphasized that planning and implementing approaches must ensure meaningful youth participation, gender mainstreaming and representation of districts and populations.

The results of the study are limited, reflecting only the experiences of a small number of families, but they are encouraging. They point to room for the transformation of deep-rooted social norms, which were previously thought unbendable, in select districts of Sindh and Punjab in Pakistan. We hope this study will inform the future work of partner organizations, actors linked to the MTBA alliance, and other development organizations fighting to reduce child marriage and its adverse effects on young women and girls in Pakistan and beyond.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

The More Than Brides Alliance (MTBA)<sup>1</sup> aims to combat child marriage and amplify young people's rights and power for informed and participatory decision-making. The Alliance implements the Marriage No Child's Play (MNCP) program (2016-2020) in five countries, including Pakistan. A key strategic objective is to contribute to changing social norms that perpetuate child marriage practices by encouraging a shift in behaviours and attitudes that can pave the way to social action against child marriage. We do so through the implementation of awareness-raising strategies, community dialogue, social mobilization, and collective action, strategies which are guided by formative studies (More Than Brides Alliance, 2020). Changing social norms is at the heart of the MNCP learning agenda, a focus identified jointly by the partner organizations and Oxfam in Pakistan.

The current study builds on a formative study on the prevalence of social norms in MNCP communities (2017) and the program's baseline and midline surveys (2016/18). During our previous learning and study exercise, we identified norms surrounding child marriage and initial indications of flexibility in those norms. This qualitative study responds to a programmatic interest in diving deeper into understanding the fluidity of norms and positive deviance – that is, what are the experiences of families that do things differently?

The study focuses on the stories of girls, families and reference persons who deviated from the social norm that 'respectable girls are married as soon as they are mature, to protect family honour' – that is, girls who were not married at what is commonly seen as the 'appropriate age' in their communities. We were interested in exploring the reasons behind delaying marriage, the influencing factors and personal attitudes that supported positive deviance, and the alternative pathways taken and possible sanctions suffered by those involved in the decision-making process. These research questions guided the study:

*Are there exceptions to the social norm that 'respectable girls are married as soon as they are mature, to protect family honour'? If so, what are they?*

On individual cases of positive deviance:

*From the perspective of the daughter, father, and mother, which personal attitudes, key moments and life experiences, and which other individuals beyond the household influenced the decision for the daughter to marry at a later age?*

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<sup>1</sup> Operating with funding from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, MTBA consists of four organizations, including Oxfam Novib, Save the Children Netherlands, Population Council, and Simavi. Oxfam Novib is the only MTBA member actively working in Pakistan, along with its local partners.

On social norms regarding positive deviance:<sup>2</sup>

*From the perspective of the daughter, father, mother and their reference persons, which social norms, if any, influenced the decision for the daughter to marry at a later age?*

- *In what ways were parents and daughters influenced by common behaviour in their community regarding marriage and specifically marriage at a later age?*
- *In what ways were parents and daughters influenced by the appropriate marriage age of girls?*
- *Were social sanctions or benefits experienced by the household as a result of their daughter's later marriage? In the case of sanctions, how were they dealt with or overcome?*

### WHAT ARE SOCIAL NORMS?

Social norms can be defined as a set of behavioural rules that people in a group conform to because they believe others in the same group follow them (i.e. typical behaviour) and/or expect them to (i.e. appropriate behaviour) (Alexander-Scott et. al, 2016). Social norms are typically self-enforcing at the group level, causing people to want to adhere to them if they expect that others in the group will do the same. While laws are designed, norms evolve through a process of trial and error, experimentation, and adaptation, helping to shape a social order that is based on people's interactions (van Veen et. al., 2016).

According to Young (2014), multiple mechanisms sustain social norms: they may be driven by a desire to coordinate, fear of being sanctioned, a need to signal membership of a group, or simply an impulse to follow the lead of others. Social norms are often formed in the realm of religious and traditional customs. For instance, traditional practices – such as early and child marriage – can both shape social norms and be sustained by them when people in a group share the belief that the practice is typical and appropriate, and expect those in the group to adhere to it.

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<sup>2</sup> In fact we found it difficult to identify social norms specifically regarding positive deviance, so we focused on exploring factors, issues, and considerations that influence families to challenge social norms around child marriage and encourage alternative pathways for their daughters.



## 2 METHODOLOGY

As part of the MNCP learning agenda, this study aims to inform program strategies and interventions in child marriage prevention with a focus on changing social norms. Co-creation and local ownership are essential parts of this: the study design was finalized with partners, Oxfam in Pakistan and the local field research team (led by an independent research consultant). The findings were jointly interpreted and placed into a local context, followed by the formulation of programmatic responses.

### 2.1 DATA COLLECTION

Applying a qualitative methodology, the study aimed to explore cases of positive deviance through the experiences, opinions, feelings, and understandings of those who either lived through such a case, watched it closely, or influenced it. In-depth interviews were carried out with individuals from eight families across four districts of Pakistan (Muzzafargarh and Lodhran in Punjab and Larkana and Shikarpur in Sindh). A purposeful sampling strategy – in which interviewees are selected based on their knowledge of the phenomenon to be investigated – was used to select families to take part in the study; that is, families were known to implementing organizations as positive deviant cases and had participated in child marriage-related interventions implemented in the field. We applied these participant selection criteria:

- Preference for families who decided jointly on delayed marriage (parents along with daughter).
- Families should be from different socio-economic backgrounds and live in different communities (i.e. Islamic, Hindu, mixed).
- Daughters should be unmarried and have a level of maturity that is perceived by the community as marriageable.

In each family, the father, mother, and daughter were interviewed, as well as one reference person indicated by each family member (a total of 48 people, as shown in annex 1). Reference persons should be individuals who exercised direct or indirect influence in the family's decision for a delayed marriage. Timeline drawing techniques<sup>3</sup> were used during interviews – mainly with girls – to encourage participants to recollect, visualize, and reflect on key persons, moments, and experiences that influenced their decision.

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<sup>3</sup> Timeline drawing combines a factual approach towards events and experiences with room for reflection, interpretation and sensemaking. People are encouraged to explore their recollections of key moments and experiences in their life. As a graphic technique, timeline drawing can draw out ideas that would be difficult to elicit solely through verbal transactions, trigger richer conversations, and build rapport. It allows people to form a holistic view of the topic being explored (Adriansen, 2012; Kolar et.al, 2015).

A team of local consultants was hired to conduct these interviews, supported by partner organizations Bedari and IRC. The team was instructed to use an interview protocol designed by the IMK team and probing techniques to get participants to discuss their experiences. Most interviews took place in December 2019. The team's work was overseen by Bedari, IRC and Oxfam staff in Pakistan, with the support and guidance of IMK staff.

## 2.2 DATA ANALYSIS

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English by the consultant team, going through a round of quality control with Oxfam Novib staff. The data was then entered and organized in the qualitative software MaxQDA. Analysis was conducted inductively through open coding; the rich information derived from the interviews shaped the building of 71 sub-codes or labels of meaning. In total, we coded 2,135 passages distributed among the emerging themes and sub-themes. Interviews with daughters, fathers, mothers, and reference persons were arranged separately, allowing us to analyse responses either by participant group or collectively.

## 2.3 REFLECTION WORKSHOPS

In May 2020 we conducted three online reflection workshops to contextualize the study findings and ensure their ownership by implementing partners in the field. The workshops were conducted online due to travel restrictions imposed as a result of Covid-19. Each session had between 14 and 20 participants, comprising staff from partner organizations Bedari and Baanhn Beli<sup>4</sup> – including community mobilizers, who brought an important perspective on local perceptions – and staff from Oxfam. The main objectives 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 workshops ensured that findings are grounded in local culture, practice, and existing strategies. Feedback and insights from the workshops are featured in the conclusions.

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<sup>4</sup> In February 2020, the organization IRC was replaced by Baanhn Beli in the project.

## 3. FINDINGS

### 3.1 CONTEXTUALIZING CHILD MARRIAGE: SOCIAL NORMS AND GENERAL PRACTICES IN THE COMMUNITY

This section contextualizes child marriage in the districts where interviews were conducted and addresses the role of laws in curbing its incidence. Sub-section 3.1.1 discusses observed social norms around child marriage at the community level and what could be done to change them; 3.1.2 dives into common behaviours and practices contributing to child marriage, with interviewees sharing stories of community members; 3.1.3 talks about how communities engage with laws against child marriage, and their impact.

#### 3.1.1 'GIRLS DO NOT BELONG TO THEIR PARENTS': SOCIAL NORMS ON CHILD MARRIAGE

To explore cases of positive deviance from traditional social norms, those norms must first be understood. The issue most cited by participants (27 out of 48), particularly family members, was family honour – which appeared strongly in previous studies as an important social norm on child marriage, and is central to the learning question guiding this study. That said, most of the respondents reflected on it in response to probing rather than on their own initiative.

Family honour is linked to girls' behaviour and social exposure – for example, getting an education, travelling alone, meeting boys, and developing freedom. Two girls shared how they were on the receiving end of gossip and harassment when travelling to pursue their education:

*When I was going to vocational school, I had to travel locally. And you know people here make an issue out of girls travelling alone or going out of the house alone. I used to travel by rickshaw. One day my uncle came to our home and told my father that he saw me with a random guy on a motorbike. When my father told me this, I felt very bad about this accusation... I asked him to ignore everything that my uncle said and that he should trust me. I promised him that he would never hear anything bad from my side which could hurt his honour. People have an issue with everything, even the girls who don't go out of the house, people still gossip about them (Lodhran, girl).*

*People here think that the daughter's marriage is an issue of family honour and it is an insult for a family if they delay their daughter's marriage... as the unfortunate incident happened with me [she was being followed by a boy on her way to school], everyone thought it is my fault and my parents should marry me immediately, but my parents supported me and delayed my marriage (Muzzafargarh, girl).*

Several people mentioned that marrying off their daughters at the right age is seen a matter of respect. Other issues mentioned associating child marriage with family honour include parents' egos, pressure from family and society, and low education. A small number of people noted that families are beginning to see honour in a different light. Only two interviewees (reference persons) mentioned the issue of honour killing, and that was in passing and as something that belongs to the past.

*It was the honour concept of people that girls may not go outside or talk to a boy. Now the situation has changed (LARKANA, reference).*

*When boys go out, they can do whatever they want and no one bothers. But when girls go out, people start saying bad things to them and about them (Lodhran, mother).*

*Our relatives said, first they decided their daughter's marriage and now they are delaying it, it is an insult to their family and they should be ashamed of making this decision. But my parents said she is our daughter and we can decide what we think is best for her (Muzzafargarh, girl).*

*It was in the past [relating marriage with family honour], now we have never seen or observed that. It happens when a girl and a boy are both young and ready for marriage. In this case, if girl does not agree then parents say: look, daughter, it's a matter of our respect and commitment. Now please take care of our respect. They just take care of their own respect, they do not consider the future of their daughter (Muzzafargarh, reference).*

The second most cited issue (18 out of 48 participants) shaping social norms on child marriage is girls being perceived by families as a 'burden'. Drivers of such thinking include parents having to incur expenses for unmarried girls' food and education, which some cannot afford; parents wishing to get rid of their responsibility for the daughter; the domestic needs of other families that want a girl for marriage to perform basic domestic chores; and the understanding that girls ultimately do not belong to their own parents, as they are expected to marry into a new family someday. These quotes are from fathers and reference persons:

*Girls are other's properties, so she should reach there and get married on time. Girls do not belong to parents; ultimately, she has to go to the other people, so better to marry her early rather than to have that burden (Larkana, father).*

*When girls become adult you have to fix marriage and lift the burden from your shoulders. But it has many aspects. People think that five years is waiting a long time and there are high expenses of house, so don't delay marriage. But they don't think about what is wrong or right. Sir, usually villagers think like that. Even though girls are blessings of Allah... because of the unavailability of education, they think that daughter will marry someday and serve others instead of them. Then why spend expenses and waste time on her? (Larkana, father).*

*Actually, villagers think about increasing family members for household chores. However, they forget that for increasing a family member they are marrying a young child. Villager usually thinks there is a need for another worker at the crop field or people think that 'our mother is being very old then we have to bring another girl to take care of the cattle' (Larkana, reference).*

*Basically, the issue is that girls say that they want to study but parents want them to get married. parents say they can't afford transport, so when we give them a solution they let them study, but when they see that the girl is sitting at home doing nothing then they feel she is a burden and that they should marry her off (Muzzafargarh, reference).*

Fifteen of the 48 participants mentioned financial difficulties leading to child marriage. Parents may decide to marry their daughters at an early age due to limited economic resources – a factor linked to thinking of girls as a burden. As two reference persons note, families facing poverty are often limited in their capacity to choose any differently, for example by investing in their daughter's education instead:

*I think poverty is a big reason for early age marriages. People marry their daughters in early age because they cannot provide them food and other necessities of life. Mothers say: 'you know, that man is asking for my daughter and he is ready to pay for the dowry, why shouldn't I accept the proposal?' (Muzzafargarh, reference).*

*Look, people who are poor, have low income, they say we have nothing to do with her choice, we have to look at our own circumstances then we will pay heed to others. Some, who are financially good, they say no, we should give good education to our daughter, we will make her a good citizen, but others who are living hand to mouth, they do not focus on education (Lodhran, reference).*

Fifteen participants – mostly reference persons – also mentioned the perception that families with lower levels of education tend to engage more in child marriage. It was noted that communities normally have people at both ends of the spectrum: those who are well informed and prioritize their daughter's education, and those who do not value it. A girl explains:

*There are two types of communities living in my surroundings. One of them is qualified and they think I made the right decision for myself because they don't support early age marriages and are aware of its damages. Another community is illiterate and they don't think education is a necessity for girls. They think daughters should get married in early age so they didn't like my decision. According to them, my parents made a mistake of delaying my marriage [Muzzafargarh, girl].*

Other issues mentioned by fewer participants include:

- The existence of dowry practices, which can work against or for child marriage – it can be a source of funding for families or a burden for those who need to bear the costs, serving to delay marriage (13 out of 48 respondents);
- Fathers and other men in the family (e.g. brothers, cousins, uncles) deciding on child marriage rather than girls themselves (10);
- The impact of child marriage on girls not being taken into account by parents and families when making the decision for them (9);
- Issues of age gap when marrying older men (8);
- Young men having more power to choose about child marriage and having their needs considered (7) but also bearing most of the financial pressure, such as the need to have a good job to provide for his wife (6);
- Difficulties marrying off older girls as families prefer younger ones (6);
- The impact of religious beliefs on child marriage, with people interpreting Islamic principles as being in favour (6).

Interviewees reflected on what could be done to change social norms around child marriage in their communities. Several (17 out of 48) called for initiatives to spread awareness about the consequences of child marriage, such as community lectures, meetings, and movie showings to educate people and spark discussion. Such events should be attended by fathers and young men as well as girls and mothers, given that they hold decision-making power, with incentives for attendance such as lunch or

small monetary support. Several participants wanted the government to do more to inform the public about the law on the minimum age for marriage<sup>5</sup> in Pakistan (discussed later in this section) through media and local strategies, and more effectively monitor and punish non-compliance in villages and communities.

*The law is not reaching people... in the villages, not everyone watches TV or reads the newspaper. So, programs should be held so every person is aware of the law; after that, it will be implemented (Larkana, father).*

*We can teach them [people]... like telling them problems and consequences to child and mother and also about complications in pregnancy... not only the mother and daughter need [this] but, in my opinion, the male needs more. As most of you know, in villages, women are not empowered and are also not involved in decision making. Males are dominant because males don't listen to women. In villages, there is a problem of honour; they feel insulted to follow the women's decisions. In my opinion, young boys and men need awareness and education. If they change their way of thinking, then they can easily protect women (Larkana, reference).*

Finally, several people highlighted the need to have more schools and training centres available for girls in villages, as many parents are more worried about girls travelling to educational or economic activities than the activities themselves.

*I think there should be more skill centres in every village so girls can learn skills from there and can earn from that skill. If a girl is not a burden to her family and is learning some skill, which can benefit her in her future, her parents would delay her marriage... maybe if we have proper skill centres, girls will be more independent and will be busy rather than sitting at home (Muzzafargarh, reference).*

### KEY TAKEAWAYS (3.1.1)

- Early marriage can be seen as a matter of respect, and not marrying daughters off early as an insult to family honour – which can be further impacted by girls travelling alone to get an education outside of the community, gaining some independence.
- Parents may perceive their daughters as a burden, or a responsibility which eventually needs to be passed on to others; unmarried girls can be seen as expensive for parents to keep, while families of prospective suitors may want them for domestic work.
- Parents who face economic difficulties and have low levels of education may be more willing to marry their daughters at a young age, or perceive that they have no choice.
- More community-level initiatives are needed to change social norms around child marriage by spreading awareness about its consequences, as are measures to inform people about and enforce the law on the minimum age for marriage.

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<sup>5</sup> References to the law are mainly to a bill passed by the Pakistani Senate in 2019 that increased the minimum age for marriage to 18, as discussed in section 3.1.3 below. However, participants could also be speaking about other frameworks such as a similar bill passed in 2014 in Sindh.

- Locating more schools and training centres – beyond primary level – in communities could delay marriages by enabling girls to engage in productive activities without having to travel outside the village, which risks exposing them to danger.

### 3.1.2 “WE USE TO CARRY THIS PRACTICE FOR SO LONG, BUT NOW TIMES HAVE CHANGED”: COMMON BEHAVIOURS AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL

Fathers, mothers, daughters and reference persons shared rich information and insights about common behaviours and practices in their local community concerning child marriage. These stories are essential in helping us understand and contextualize the findings. While we understand that regional cultural differences may impact each community differently (Lodhran and Muzaffargarh in Punjab, and Shikarpur and Larkana in Sindh), this study does not explore similarities and differences but speaks more generally about community-level practices.

That said, participants from districts in both provinces raised similar issues on general practices of child marriage (discussed by 39 out of 48 participants). Participants who affirmed that child marriages are still taking place in their community only slightly outnumbered those who said that child marriages have not happened in a while and girls are married only at age 18, pointing to a change in practices. Awareness-raising programs, increased education, and the law on the minimum age for marriage were all mentioned as preventive mechanisms. Interviewees pointed out that child marriage is more common in rural villages, where there is still much societal pressure, and that different castes, minority groups, and religions have different approaches.

*[In our village] when a girl is underage they marry her off, after first menstruation cycle (Larkana, mother).*

*Girls usually get married at the age of 18 here. Previously people were marrying their daughters before they turn to 18 but when Bedari teams visited here and gave them the required knowledge, now they marry their daughters when they turn 18 (Muzaffargarh, girl).*

*Usually, people marry their daughters during or after the age of 18. This is because of the law made by the government of Pakistan (Lodhran, father).*

*People in rural areas follow social norms. If their daughter got engaged in their childhood, they would marry her as soon as she becomes an adult (Lodhran, reference).*

Family members and reference persons from both provinces (28 out of 48) shared stories about girls in their family or community who were harmed by getting married at a young age. Some reference persons also reflected on cases they know about which happened in other villages. Examples were given of girls dying during childbirth (at least 15 people spoke about this), suffering poor health after delivering a child, experiencing frequent miscarriages, or facing social discrimination after getting a divorce. One mother talked about how a classmate of her daughter was married at an early age and suffered frequent beatings by her husband – she killed herself after leaving her husband but finding she could not cope with the criticism of her in-laws and the rejection of her parents, who refused to take her back in. Others stories included:

*Once, a friend of mine married her daughter when she was underage; after that, his daughter died during the delivery of her child due to an unsuccessful operation (Larkana, father).*

*[My sister in law's daughter] had to face miscarriages for five or six times because of her young age. She is fifteen years old now. Her husband was quite older than her. Now she has cervical glands of the uterus and got divorced after seven years of her marriage because her husband wanted a son and now she was not medically fit to become a mother again. All of it happened because of her young age (Muzzafargarh, mother).*

*[My relative's daughter] died giving birth to her child... my neighbour's daughter, when she got married in early age, she also died during childbirth process (Lodhran, father).*

*[In his neighbourhood] there was a case of delivery... the girl was 17 years old hardly; they were looking for a lady health worker, but she wasn't ok and started to bleed excessively... at last, both the mother and the child died. Similarly, we have another case where we work, that girl was also 15-17 years old, when her delivery day was near, she did not realize it... she got pain but she did not share that and due to that pain she died (Muzzafargarh, reference).*

Many participants (27 out of 48) shared their perception that, although still performed, practices around child marriage are changing in their communities. Reasons include awareness work by organizations such as Bedari, Baanhn Beli and IRC at the local level, parents' increased understanding about the harmful consequences of child marriage and benefits of allowing daughters to pursue an education, and, to a lesser extent, a different understanding of what it means for a girl to be mature and the law on the minimum age for marriage.

*Many women used to think that underage marriage is best practice and we used to carry this practice for so long, but now times have changed and we are marrying off our daughters in mature age because parents are the ones who are going to face the consequences if they marry off their daughter so early (Larkana, mother).*

*We had no information and awareness, later different organizations like IRC came and they made people aware; before that, they didn't know what to do, as the girl got a little older they married her off because of no awareness, but now they have information (Larkana, reference).*

*They were marrying their daughters in very young age previously. Early age marriages are still happening here, but it has decreased compared to before. Now with Bedari teams and meetings spreading awareness about it, people are becoming aware of the damages of early age marriages. Now out of 20 people, only 10 do it (Muzzafargarh, mother).*

Many interviewees (26 out of 48) spoke about the roots of the aforementioned belief that it is wrong to educate girls rather than marrying them off. According to participants, the perception is that girls who are educated will bring shame to their families by misbehaving and demanding to marry who they chose. Mobility adds to the perceived danger: parents worry that girls who go out of the community to pursue their education may be targeted by boys, which some girl interviewees have experienced. Families who send their daughters to school may therefore be criticized and gossiped about by community members, including their own relatives.

*Society does not want girls to be educated. People make a mockery of the parents of those girls and make gossips (Lodhran, reference).*

*[There is a thinking that] if allowed to get an education, our daughters will go astray; they will marry on their will. Thus, girls are not permitted and are not given the right... otherwise, the majority thinks that girls*



*do not need education; if girls are given education, people will criticize. Education will corrupt a girl socially... she will marry on her own choice... she will make friends and will be independent (Larkana, girl).*

*Because of the environment of the village, they say it is not necessary for girls to seek education. They think if girls study, then they will be independent and run away with people of their own choice and marry them too. There are a lot of negative minds (Larkana, reference).*

*[If a girl becomes an adult and parents haven't married her off yet] people will ask how come she is an adult and not yet married... like she will feed negative thinking in her parents' minds... like she is studying and tomorrow she will run away with someone or she may be involved in bad activities in future. Many people think like that, but it's not true (Larkana, reference).*

Interviewees from both provinces also talked about girls and women not being involved in decision-making processes about child marriage (19 out of 48), and educated or informed families refraining from marrying off their daughters at an early age (14). Other themes mentioned were inter-family marriage, mostly among cousins (10).

### KEY TAKEAWAYS (3.1.2)

- Child marriages still take place across the four districts in both Punjab and Sindh, particularly in rural villages, but change is noticeable thanks to awareness-raising initiatives, increased education, and the new law on the minimum age for marriage.
- Cases are known of girls harmed by getting married at a young age: dying in childbirth, having multiple miscarriages, or facing social discrimination after divorce.
- Especially educated parents are increasingly choosing to delay their daughters' marriage, focusing more on their education and maturity level.
- Local beliefs persist that it is dangerous to allow girls to pursue an education as they will bring shame to their families by misbehaving or eloping.

### 3.1.3 “IT CAN BRING POSITIVE CHANGE AND BREAK THE CHAIN OF ANACHRONISTIC SOCIAL NORMS”: PERSPECTIVES ON THE ROLE OF LAW IN CURBING CHILD MARRIAGE

In 2019, Pakistani legislators passed a bill setting the minimum age for marriage at 18 in the country. This built on previous provincial legislation, notably in 2014 in Sindh. The new law stipulates punishments of fines or imprisonment of up to three years. However, there is much opposition to the law in various parts of the country where the traditional age for marriage is lower. This section explores interviewees' perceptions of people's knowledge of the law, its effectiveness, and its potential influence in delaying child marriages in their communities.

Most study participants (38 out of 48), particularly reference persons, reported knowing about the law and associated punishments for non-compliance. Around 20 perceived that people in their community respect the law, and 15 said they knew of cases in which it had influenced people to delay their daughter's marriage. The fact that Nikah registrars, who officially register marriages, are required to

check the girl's age before officialising the union is also mentioned as an incentive to comply with the law.

However, about the same number of interviewees perceived that people in their community are still not informed about the law, or choose to ignore it. Information is reaching people through platforms including TV, radio, newspapers and awareness-raising activities of local organizations such as Bedari and IRC, such as community meetings, screening of documentaries, and training for professionals such as Nikah registrars, police officers and teachers.

*Before people didn't bother but now I think they are considering it because they are afraid of punishment and penalty. But there are people who still don't consider it because they think it's only their right to decide their daughter's marriage and the government should not interfere (Muzzafargarh, reference).*

*Usually, people marry their daughters during or after the age of 18. This is because of the law made by the government of Pakistan. Nikah Khagan is trained now by the government. When he comes to register the marriage he asks about the age of the girl. If someone says that the age of the bride is 16 or 17 years old, then she cannot get married, her nikhah cannot be registered... so it affects a lot (Lodhran, father).*

*People do not know about the laws. I have told them I heard from FM, they become frightened. Initially, they argued... but they agreed at last. I have told them that I am an elder, so people need to listen to me (Muzzafargarh, father).*

*Because of Bedari, people are familiar with the law. Nikah registrars are also guided strictly to verify the age of girls from the birth certificate. If the Nikah registrar will not follow that law then he, along with the groom, his parents and witnesses, will be fined and punished. Yes people are now following that law because they have the fear that if someone complains against then police will come and it is against their dignity (Muzzafargarh, reference).*

*Most people do not know what the law is. When we share this with them they get surprised... others argue with the implementation of the law, they say that the government has not done this and that. But after much effort, they come around. But with the passage of time, slowly and steadily, we do convince them (Lodhran, reference).*

Several reference persons pointed out that local organizations are involved in strategies to ensure compliance with the law, such as keeping the police informed about potential cases. A few said the government should do more to ensure that people know about, such as door-to-door awareness programs or community meetings.

Enforcement and compliance were discussed by 22 out of 48 interviewees, the majority reference persons. Many felt the law is not properly implemented, being present on paper but making slow progress in practice. In part this is due to lack of awareness, but several participants mentioned that some people know about the law but choose to ignore it. Reference persons called for the government to create mechanisms at the local level such as prevention programs and stricter punishments for those who try to circumvent the law.

*The government has made the law but I didn't see any implementation of that law here... [for example] a girl got married very young and then died because of that... I think the government just has made a law but nobody is following it yet (Lodhran, reference).*

*In my opinion, less than 1% of the people are following the government. The laws are not implemented. Government laws are made for the rich and powerful people. I mean for those people who can impose things. In this regard, government policies do not have a role. If parents or children are educated and they listen or read about the government policy somewhere, then they may follow it. Otherwise, the government should try to impose it. It is true that the government introduce those laws but there is no implementation policy for that (Lodhran, reference).*

*I think this is a good initiative from the government, but because most of the people don't know about it yet, there is no visible change happening yet; but, if more people would know about it, I think it can bring positive change and break the chain of anachronistic social norms (Lodhran, reference).*

A small number of people mentioned in passing that corruption in the police and government may prevent the full application of the law – for example, police taking bribes to look the other way.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS (3.1.3)

- Most interviewees understand the law on child marriage, particularly reference persons, but their view of other people's understanding is mixed: some respect the law, some do not know about it, some know about it but choose to ignore it.
- Local organizations such as Bedari and IRC have played an important role in spreading awareness about the law and are involved in strategies to ensure compliance.
- Progress on implementation is slow in practice, calling for more government involvement in creating mechanisms to inform people and enforce compliance.

## 3.2 DRIVERS OF POSITIVE DEVIANCE: EXPLORING INDIVIDUAL FAMILY CASES ON DELAYED MARRIAGE

This section addresses attitudes, key experiences, influencing individuals and social sanctions: subsection 3.2.1 looks into the attitudes displayed by parents and daughters when delaying marriage; 3.2.2 dives into key moments and experiences that shaped people's attitudes; 3.2.3 discusses the main factors behind families' decisions to delay marriage and the negative consequences they considered; 3.2.4 talks about the role of individuals and interventions in helping change peoples' minds about child marriage; and 3.2.5. explores potential social benefits and sanctions experienced by those who chose to go against local customs and traditions.

### 3.2.1 "SHE WANTS TO STUDY, SO WE ARE LETTING HER DO IT": PERSONAL ATTITUDES

Attitudes are individuals' predispositions or tendencies to respond positively or negatively to certain situations, peoples, and ideas, impacting how they act. Attitudes both determine and are influenced by existing social norms.

The attitudes of interviewees who delayed a daughter's marriage were most strongly related to previous experiences of arranging another daughter's marriage: at least three of the families interviewed had previously married off one of their daughters at an early age. All eight families reported having received marriage proposals for the daughter who they decided not to marry off at an early age, and most having

accepted a proposal before changing their minds. Reasons for agreeing to child marriage ranged from good proposals to financial needs and arrangements made with family members:

*My daughter's marriage was fixed with my brother's son, so they made haste and said to me to arrange the marriage ceremony, which is common in our village; we were facing difficulties, so I wished for it (Larkana, father).*

*The proposal was really good so we thought we should. He had a job, they said, but we didn't marry her off (Lodhran, mother).*

There were accounts of marriages having been set up when the girl was still in her mother's womb. Some parents reported having initially preferred a child marriage – particularly mothers, who were then persuaded otherwise by their husbands and/or other family members. A mother and a daughter share examples:

*I felt wrong when [my daughter's] marriage was stopped, but may Allah bless her in the future, always. On the other hand, I realized it was wrong I was marrying her off in early age (Larkana, mother).*

*I told [my mother] that I don't want to get married yet because I'm young and not ready for marriage. My mother told me that everyone in my family would be offended by this decision of mine and also my father would not approve it (Lodhran, girl).*

Parents' attitudes were shaped by considering the safety and needs of the daughter, with all fathers from participant families and several mothers saying they chose to “put their daughters first.” In particular they considered health risks, education needs, the law, the will of the girl, and increased responsibilities post-marriage:

*My daughter is so weak, I considered her health, might be she has some fearful thoughts or, Masha Allah she is very good in learning, that was also on my mind (Muzzafargarh, father).*

*We, parents, wanted to get our daughter married but our daughter is still studying and also doing a nursing course. She wants to study so we are letting her do it (Muzzafargarh, mother).*

*My daughter is nearly 15 years old. When I was thinking about her marriage, I was concerned about her marriage that, if I will do this my daughter will face difficulties and it's against the law. So we delayed my daughter's marriage (Shirkarpur, father).*

Most girls expressed their contentment, and at times relief, about the decision to delay their marriage. At least half of the parents also displayed positive feelings and a sense of personal satisfaction.

*I think this decision is best for me because I wanted to study and not get married yet, so I'm happy with this decision (Lodhran, girl).*

*It's quite surprising that my marriage was restrained; obviously, this was in our favour, if early child marriage is restrained, so that we can get more education, become independent, and understand what marriage actually is, and what sort of responsibilities come up with it (Larkana, girl).*

*I want to say that, according to me, I made the right choice, and others should do it too because early age marriages are very dangerous for young girls and is costing them their lives, so we should all prevent it from happening (Muzzafargarh, mother).*

Half of the parents interviewed said they went against the local culture and family tradition in their decision to delay their daughter's marriage so they could continue with their education, and this led to some family conflict and gossip in the community. By resisting the pressure and standing their ground, they helped change mindsets:

*I have tried to get my children an education so that they may not be dependent on others in the future... my community insisted that I should get my daughter married to someone, but I said I won't do that, she should get an education, she is doing a course of medicine, she will treat people, she will give medicine to them, people will pray for her (Muzzafargarh, father).*

*When my daughter started going for technical education, most of the people started gossiping against us. Here, every society member is not with the same mindset. People are treated differently. I delayed the marriage, arranged convince for her, faced many difficulties, but now, with the grace of God, she is doing tailoring work at home and earning. Now the people who were opposing us that time are now appreciating us (Lodhran, father).*

The third strongest influence on attitudes emerging from our study was daughters demanding to have their voices heard and/or parents allowing them a say. At least half of the families interviewed mentioned discussing the issue as a family, with girls having the opportunity to make their wishes known. Only two girls reported feeling like they had no say at all. A father and a daughter put it simply:

*We consulted with her [daughter] because we didn't feel shy to know about her wish (Larkana, father).*

*First of all, I wanted to study so I told my parents I don't want to get married yet and want to study. My parents have decided on my marriage because of some personal reasons but I told them I don't want to get married yet (Muzzafargarh, girl).*

When parents did not initially give the space to participate in decision-making, some girls demanded it, arguing that child marriage wasn't in their best interest and emphasizing their right to choose, as this girl notes:

*Sometimes I get offended because it's my life and I should be allowed to spend it as I want. I should have the required freedom to make my decision (Lodhran, girl).*

There was also mention of organizations such as Bedari helping girls to find the strength and knowledge to stand up for themselves:

*They taught me to fight for my rights. When I was attending the Bedari meetings, [a staff member] told me that young girls can't handle everything properly, so they shouldn't marry at a young age (Lodhran, girl).*

### KEY TAKEAWAYS (3.2.1)

- All families had received marriage proposals for the daughter whose marriage they chose to delay, and most had accepted a proposal before changing their minds.
- Parents' attitudes were influenced by health risks associated with child marriage, and considering their daughter's right to choose and to pursue an education.

- Many parents went against the local culture and family tradition when deciding not to marry off their daughters at an early age. Though this led to some conflict and gossip, they stood their ground and feel satisfied with their decision.
- Many daughters demanded to have their voice heard in the decision about their marriage.

### 3.2.2 “SUCH KIND OF INCIDENTS IS THE SOURCE OF FEAR THAT THIS CAN ALSO HAPPEN TO US”: KEY MOMENTS AND EXPERIENCES

We sought to identify key moments and experiences that may have contributed to families’ decision not to marry off their daughters at an early age. These could be singular points in time or extended situations, personal experiences or external events, that influenced someone’s life and decision-making, sparking or contributing to change.

All participant families had their mindsets changed by acquiring knowledge on the consequences of child marriage. Parents (12 out of 16) described seeing the issue of child marriage with new eyes once they understood the dangers, including potential health complications and limiting education. The law was also mentioned as a factor, though to a lesser extent. Daughters (6 out of 8) reflected on how access to new knowledge transformed their own perspectives, and the process of change they saw their parents undergo.

Disseminating this new knowledge were organizations (mainly Bedari but also IRC) and individuals close to the family, including, relatives, neighbours and a family doctor (the influencing role of interventions is further explored in 3.2.4). The below quotes illustrate how Bedari staff members helped families gain awareness:

*First, they [Bedari team] gave me courage to face the situation. Then they made me understand that marriage is not the only solution for this situation. They visited our house many times. They told me about the risks of early age marriages and the importance of education for girls. They told me about the health risks of early age marriage, like that a girl could die during childbirth if they are young to be a mother. My daughter wanted to study so I continued her education after their efforts of making me delay her marriage (Muzzafargarh, mother).*

*The people from Bedari also came there. They supported my daughter. Then [another person] came to me and explained the problems of child marriage. Everything happens with God’s order... after that, I agreed and decided that my daughter will get an education. I did not accept the pressure of my relatives (Lodhran, father).*

*When I was young I had no knowledge of damages of early age marriage, we didn’t know if it was okay for us to get married at a young age or at a later age; at that time we didn’t know anything, we had no awareness. Then, I met with Bedari team and came to know about all these issues. After that, I took a stand for myself and started condemning early age marriages (Lodhran, girl).*

Six families shared examples of how key events contributed to changing their mindset, whether experienced first-hand, within their own families or accounts they heard about from members of their community. These included problems faced by daughters or cousins after marrying early, from health complications to conflicts with the husband and in-laws. Two mothers who married at an early age also

talked about how their personal experiences shaped their understanding of the dangers of child marriage.

*Six or seven years ago, one of my relatives married her daughter with another relative's son in early age. After getting married she became weak. She gave birth to a child and she died due to weakness (Lodhran, father).*

*My elder sister got married at an early age during her studies and she suffered health issues after marriage. After seeing her condition I decided not to get married at early age. I saw what happened to her so I got scared (Lodhran, girl).*

*As my brother in law made her daughter marry at a young age and she died giving birth to her child. I got scared after this experience and took this decision (Muzzafargarh, mother).*

At least three families also shared examples of events that took place in their neighbourhoods:

*Talking about moments, here in our neighbourhood, a man married her daughter in early age, she conceived pregnancy. She was pregnant with twins. During delivery, that girl died. One of the babies also died and one survived. Such kind of incidents is the source of fear that this can also happen to us (Muzzafargarh, father).*

### KEY TAKEAWAYS (3.2.2)

- New knowledge on the consequences of child marriage sparked a change in the mindset of parents, strengthened by the new law on the minimum age for marriage.
- Parents were influenced by experiencing first-hand or hearing about key events such as girls having health complications post-marriage.

### 3.2.3 “THERE ARE MANY LOSSES IF WE GET MARRIED, ESPECIALLY IN EDUCATION”: INFLUENCING FACTORS AND CONSIDERATIONS

We delved more deeply into some of the issues identified above when asking interviewees to reflect on the factors and considerations that influence people's decisions not to engage in child marriage. Rather than attempting to identify social norms on positive deviance, we aimed to build a picture of the issues people think about in the process of changing their minds, to better understand the thoughts, behaviours, and practices which are helping shift traditional social norms around child marriage in Pakistan.

Most participants discussed the importance of education – 18 out of 24 family members and all 24 reference persons – though this could be a probing effect, as respondents were stimulated to reflect on it. Most shared the view that it is essential that girls have a certain level of education before marriage, but they differed in their understandings of the intrinsic purpose of education and why it needs to precede married life.

Only a few responses mention education in a broad sense. The majority of participants who discussed the matter (27 out of 42) pointed to the individual benefits of education, including self-growth, personal empowerment, increased awareness, cultivation of one's intelligence, learning of a new skill, deepening understanding of the world, and a platform for independence:

*I want to study and I want to be something, therefore, I have no intention regarding marriage... I want to complete my studies and get a job, to be independent and stand on my own feet... I want to become a teacher here in school (Larkana, girl).*

*I think education gives you the right confidence. Education teaches you how to behave properly. Education gives you knowledge about your basic rights. Education makes you understand society more (Muzzafargarh, girl).*

*With education, a human gets awareness and can spend a good life. Allah said in Quran that 'an educated person and an uneducated person cannot be the same as like day and night cannot be the same'... education leads towards respect and dignity. Education makes a man a complete human. People without an education do not know anything about religion and the world (Muzzafargarh, father).*

*Education is necessary, without education a human is like an animal... when we acquire education, we get to know about things... educated persons have knowledge about local and international affairs... they can read the newspaper (Shirkarpur, father).*

*There are many losses if we get married, especially in education, which is the only thing left for humans in society; without education, humans are blind (Larkana, reference).*

A couple of people discussed the need to extend education beyond the primary level to provide girls with better chances to raise their voice and stand up for their rights:

*Girls are getting confidence as they are studying more and they are becoming aware of their situations and rights more clearly than before. If a girl gets only primary education it doesn't change anything because primary education is a very basic education... but with the higher education, girls are taking stands and raising voice for their rights because now they have become mature enough to understand the situation and also have mature friends to discuss their situation with them and take guidance from them. Now they have the confidence to decide for themselves (Lodhran, reference).*

Fifteen respondents focused on the benefits of education for a girl's marriageability and future offspring – that is, education for appropriate behaviour with her future husband and in-laws, knowledge of how to run a household, and ability to take proper care of her children:

*A woman without an education knows nothing about anything. If she does not know about her own health then how will she care for their children? How can she take care of her husband and in-laws? (Muzzafargarh, father).*

*[Person from intervention] informed all the community members about the better education of the young girls as they can participate better in domestic chores, behave with manners, and also help others (Shikarpur, girl).*

*Educated girls are best for housekeeping. When guests come to our home they just watch the behaviour of our daughters; those who are educated share the right words... If a girl is educated, she can handle her home wisely and nicely (Larkana, reference).*

*Education means how to behave and respect others, exposure of looking after household affairs, how to talk with her husband. As after marriage she has to move with a new family and have to run her system. Then, she will have children; she will have to flourish and guide them (Lodhran, reference).*

*I think education is very important because they [girls] have to run a household after marriage and it is a very big responsibility, so they should get an education (Muzzafargarh, reference).*



Mothers expanded least on the benefits of education, while reference persons discussed it most widely. Fathers and girls were more likely to discuss the individual benefits of education rather than its contributions to the household or children. There was some overlap, with at least eight individuals discussing the importance of education both for the girl as an individual and her future household.

This points to the appeal of education as a 'win-win' situation: educating daughters will not only allow them to develop themselves, but will also help achieve a successful future marriage. This is especially true given that respondents noted that boys prefer to marry educated girls, so girls who are educated get better proposals. Two girls and 12 reference persons reported on this:

*Seeking education is a must because nowadays people come with proposals and ask about a girl's education first (Larkana, reference).*

*These days, the more educated a girl is, the better proposals she gets; good families, educated nice boys, just the way the girl is educated, her proposals are like that too even if her age is increasing, it's fine, it's not a big issue. They get proposals according to that (Lodhran, reference).*

Dangers to girls' health were discussed by all reference persons and nearly all family members, though again often in response to probing questions. Issues around childbirth were most often mentioned, by 21 reference persons and 18 family members, including deaths of the mother and/or child as a result of complicated deliveries and the need for caesarean sections; young girls experiencing miscarriages or not having enough milk to feed the child; newborns being sick or weak; girls lacking understanding of children's nutritional needs; and blood shortage for both mothers and their babies. Several participants highlighted that if a girl has serious health issues after marriage, the responsibility to care for her may fall back onto her parents.

*Because of the child marriage, their [girls'] deliveries are complicated, their vaginal openings are small to deliver the baby. If marriage is done after 20 years [of age] then it is in the Hand of Allah Almighty. However, now there is no normal delivery only C-sections are being performed (Larkana, mother).*

*There are a lot of physical issues when you marry girls off at an early age. There are complications in delivery (childbirth), also the girls get weak, they can't provide sufficient milk for the infant. Something happens to the child or something happens to the girl (Lodhran, mother).*

*There is a village near to our village where a delivery case occurred; that girl was 13 or 14 years old. So she died due to delivery. The doctor said that she was a child, that her body could not survive and food was not delivered to her child (Larkana, reference).*

*When a [young girl] is delivering a baby, there are chances that the baby will have medical complications and this will also create health vulnerabilities for the girl as well. In these situations, parents will have the burden of medical treatment, so they consider the matter of child marriage wisely. Parents neither want to put themselves in trouble nor their daughters (Larkana, reference).*

While fathers and mothers mostly spoke about physical health, potential harm to a girl's mental and emotional state was more likely to be mentioned by daughters (4 out of 8) and reference persons (15 out of 24).

*In our area, people are considering physical health is an issue but they don't know about mental or emotional health. Barely one or two present people [in workshops] think about it... physically, they can*

*see whether the girl is weak or not, but they don't really bother about mental health. They don't consider the mental pressure a girl goes through (Muzzafargarh, reference).*

Maturity was mentioned 36 out of 48 participants when discussing the appropriate age for girls to get married. Although everyone agreed that girls need to be mature before marriage, interviewees had different understandings of what maturity means in connection to physical, mental and personal development. For example, some connected maturity with girls starting their periods, or being able to safely carry, deliver and nurse a child; others associated it with responsibility and the capacity to properly care for and manage the household; some linked it to age, which was often older than 18. Most respondents said the most appropriate age for marriage was 20-26, with daughters providing some of the highest numbers.

Reference persons, daughters, and mothers (35 out of 48 participants) were particularly likely to mention the difficulties a young girl may encounter in keeping up with the responsibilities of marriage and the demands of the husband and in-laws. This includes managing the household (25 mentions), washing, cooking, meeting the husband's sexual needs, behaving respectfully towards the husband and in-laws, caring for herself and maintaining hygiene. Several people emphasized that girls need an education to be able to perform these roles:

*A young girl doesn't understand her duties of married life, so she cannot fulfil them properly and in the end, she has to suffer from a troubled atmosphere of life. She doesn't know how to behave; she doesn't even know what a marriage is (Lodhran, girl).*

*Those girls who married in an early age, they think and act according to their approach (immature). They don't know how to look after the home, what to do. They think this is their mother's home and they behave there same. Till that she realized the responsibilities problems increases for her (Larkana, reference).*

*Young aged girls don't know anything, how to make sexual contact with husbands, how to treat in-laws, or even how to look after herself, such as her personal and menstrual hygiene (Shirkarpur, mother).*

*There are huge responsibilities of the household like house chores, care of husband, father in law, mother in law and sisters in law, so I think that I can't handle these responsibilities (Shirkarpur, girl).*

*[A young girl] doesn't have complete self-information about herself, her mind is still thinking like a child who wishes to play the whole day and watch TV. She won't have an interest in house chores and if she suddenly gets married and gets responsibilities, then how will she handle or manage these responsibilities? (Larkana, reference).*

Other factors and considerations mentioned as contributing to the decision to delay marriage include:

- The daughter supporting the family, financially or with household chores (22 out of 48 respondents);
- Understanding that girls should have a say (20);
- Wanting to delay until a suitable proposal is made (17);
- The need for girls to pursue independence before marriage (16);
- Divorce and/or separation following child marriages (13);

- Child marriage as a source of family conflict (13);
- Family's need to save money for dowry expenses (13);
- Financial difficulties after child marriage (8);
- Child marriage as limiting life opportunities for the girl (6).

Questions about sexual violence and marital rape could not be discussed openly due to contextual barriers and cultural limitations. It is essential for future program interventions to increase understanding of these issues.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS (3.2.3)

- Interviewees agree that pursuing education before marriage is important, but have different notions as to why: some stress benefits to the individual benefits, others focus on the benefits of education to the marriageability of the girl.
- Physical health complications due to child marriage, notably complications in childbirth, weigh heavily in decisions to delay marriage. Consequences to mental health are less thought through.
- Interviewees agree that girls should be mature enough to marry. Some link maturity to age, others to having their first menstrual cycle, and others to personal development and the capacity to properly take care of household responsibilities.
- Mothers and daughters especially consider the difficulties a girl may encounter in keeping up with household demands when marrying at a young age.
- Other factors considered by some families include the support girls provide to parents (financially or in the household), and their right to choose.

### 3.2.4 “AWARENESS HAS CHANGED PEOPLE’S MINDS“: INFLUENCING INDIVIDUALS AND INTERVENTIONS

Our study sought out the reference persons identified by fathers, mothers, and daughters as having influenced (directly or indirectly) their decision not to engage in child marriage. This section explores the role of these reference person, and interventions that played a key part in shaping positive deviance.

Many participants (32 out of 48) about the role of interventions by organizations in bringing awareness. Staff members of these organizations were often mentioned by family members as their reference persons (19; mainly Bedari, but also IRC), as were family members (14; siblings, cousins, aunts/uncles, in-laws) along with neighbours, friends, and professionals close to the family such as teachers and doctors (6). Participants often explicitly attributed their change in mindset regarding child marriage to these individuals or to particular interventions.

The awareness spread by individuals and interventions was mainly on issues explored above, notably education and health risks. Interventions include awareness-raising and information-sharing sessions, training, movie screenings, and individual advice and support. Several interviewees stressed how much

they learned and how much change these interventions brought to their lives and those of others in their communities.

*There are positive effects. Because of Bedari's intervention, they [people] are thinking differently. As Bedari staff visits door to door, they preach to people and do meetings with people. They have been coming here and doing things for many years... they visit communities and explain to parents and mothers about the problems of child marriage and the benefits of education. Bedari meetings have positive effects on us as they explain to us and our wives about the issues related to child marriages (Lodhran, father).*

*They gathered some women or sometimes trained us individually... they called us there. Training also took place there; mothers are trained and so are the children. I have had training and so has my daughter. Then, they told us that marriage at a very young age creates problems for both girls and boys, but girls are embattled more (Lodhran, mother).*

*There are a number of private and public organizations that are working on these issues [child marriage]. One of the examples is Bedari. They are working here for the past four years. They conduct meetings every month and try to bring awareness to people. They make us aware about the problem regarding the early age marriages and also about the bad effects of not educating the children. These sessions became the source of spreading awareness. Suppose previously if the ration of early age marriages was 100% now because of Bedari its 90%. Now it's happening in a very small number (Muzzafargarh, father).*

A few people gave the example of a video screened by IRC in which a young mother – who was illiterate because her parents did not approve of educating her – gives the wrong medication to her baby, leading to his death. Such simple but highly accessible educational materials can help bring awareness and spark discussion about complex issues.

Reference persons in particular talked about information about the risks of child marriage is spreading and slowly leading more people to choose to delay their daughter's marriage. In this sense, education – via formal and informal platforms, from schools to interventions and media – can be seen as a tool not only for personal development, but also to inspire change in collective mentality and social norms:

*Awareness is happening. Previously people used to do Watta-Satta [a custom involving the giving and taking of wives, or bride exchange]; now, because of the implementation of laws, education is trending among people because of seminars and sessions. In the past, people were not interested in education... but now, even the villagers are struggling a lot for education, especially for the education of their daughters. They are sending them to middle and high schools. Because of that education, awareness is coming amongst people, and it is also a factor behind the delay in marriages (Muzzafargarh, reference).*

*Now communities and NGOs are working in our area. A few years back, this system did not exist. Like, people were not aware of concepts like breastfeeding, cleanliness, early child marriages, etc. People got awareness with NGOs' lectures. There was a little backward area where people were not getting familiarity with these things, but now, with education and awareness, people are getting these things (Lodhran, reference).*

*Previously, people didn't have information. Commonly, when a girl got a little older, parents used to marry her off. But now, they are aware and getting information day by day. If a girl is not an adolescent then how will she look after the home, her husband and his parents? Tomorrow she will be a mother, how she will take care of the child? And there are a lot of responsibilities on her shoulders. Earlier, girls were married off in early age, but not now because people got aware (Larkana, reference).*

*Awareness has changed people's minds. [For example] adolescent girls have been given instruction books where it has been written how to keep cleanliness and other matters related to child marriages. Now they are aware through radio, newspapers or TV. TV has a vital role because many advertisements and programs are best for awareness. That's why people are active and talking about the issue (Larkana, reference).*

Some study participants (18 out of 48, mainly reference persons) gave examples of how they advocated or personally took action against child marriage in their community – for example, stopping weddings by talking to local leaders and authorities, or meeting with families to ask them to consider delaying the marriage. In several cases, this is part of their daily jobs as a staff member in a local organization. But some parents also reported acting on behalf of others once they had changed their own mindsets.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS (3.2.4)

- Individuals who played a role in influencing parents' decision to delay their daughter's marriage included staff from organizations such as Bedari and IRC, family members, neighbours, and friends.
- Interventions by local organizations including awareness-raising and information-sharing sessions, training, movie screenings, and individual talks with families were instrumental in bringing knowledge and changing minds.
- Education – via formal and informal platforms, from schools to interventions and media – is important for sharing of information that can change social norms.
- Reference persons and parents have been personally involved in advocating or intervening against child marriage, expanding the reach of their own education.

### 3.2.5 “INSTEAD OF PAYING ATTENTION TO PEOPLE, I PAID THE FEE FOR MY DAUGHTER'S EDUCATION”: SOCIAL SANCTIONS AND BENEFITS

Finally, our study sought to understand the social sanctions and/or benefits experienced by families who decided against child marriage, and coping mechanisms in the case of sanctions. Social sanctions and benefits are the means by which socially-approved standards or social norms are enforced: that is, actions aligned with social norms are often rewarded through social benefits, while social sanctions are triggered by failure to conform to social norms.

We found no reported examples of social benefits, in the sense of families enjoying praise or increased respect for delaying marriage. (Of course, families still enjoy intrinsic benefits, such as girls having more opportunities for education and economic generation activities).

On social sanctions, our findings are mixed. Participants overwhelmingly felt that while others in the community may disagree with families who delay their daughter's marriage, they do not intervene. They do, however, gossip (mentioned by 31 out of 48 participants). This includes community members saying negative things behind the family's back, criticizing the decision and speculating on reasons, such as the family having received no proposal, or the parents wanting to keep the daughter for themselves.

Most family members said they do not care and focus on the well-being of their families instead of on what other people say. Reference persons say the same about families they know.

*I never reacted because people have the habit to gossip. One should not take what others say seriously. One should have trust in his own decision and have trust on their children. We should pay attention to the good future of our children and provide them opportunities for a good education (Muzzafargarh, father).*

*Instead of paying attention to people, I paid the fee for my daughter's education... people gossip about everyone. If someone is good or bad, they talk about them, but obviously, not in front of them. Thanks to Allah I am educating my daughters (Lodhran, father).*

*[Parents say] 'this is our decision.' Usually, parents do not care about other people (Muzzafargarh, reference).*

*So many people are calling those fathers who delay their daughter's marriage weak, lazy, or a coward (Larkana, reference).*

*[People] do not have the courage to ask me anything directly. But internally they do gossip... they used to say, 'he is trying to educate his daughters'...but I don't care; I follow my own decision and thinking which is to provide education to my daughter (Lodhran, father).*

*[Villagers] use abusive language, but my father ignores them and says that if we listen to them then we can't move ahead (Muzzafargarh, girl).*

*People criticize such families [who delay marriage], especially those who are not letting their daughters study and doing early age marriages of their daughters, so they don't want anyone else to let their daughter study and delay their marriage (Lodhran, reference)*

Gossiping could be perceived as a form of social sanction. When asked, people were roughly equally split between reporting that things remained as they were before they decided for delayed marriage, and reporting that they did experience a backlash. For example, girls were teased or harassed, felt down about people's comments, or were kept at home so not to provoke more gossip. Parents felt stressed about being mocked and made fun of, and experienced a change in their relationships with some other community members.

*Sometimes [when people criticize] we say nothing and listen quietly, and sometimes we get aggressive and stop talking with them for months. We feel bad... We think that we decided on what is good for our children, but others don't accept it and criticize us for that (Muzzafargarh, mother).*

*Our neighbours and relatives boycotted us for a short while but we did not care (Muzzafargarh, mother).*

*[People] try to discover the reasons for not getting married and they also assume the affairs of the girls with boys and this is increasing day by day... [they react to me] in person, they use to taunt me asking 'why don't you marry? Do you have another friend?' (Shirkarpur, girl).*

*If a girl goes to school then people keep very bad feelings for her father. They say he is stupid. Why? Because five class is enough for a girl. Eventually, parents feel embarrassment... people backbite against parents and their daughter... people look badly (with evil eyes) at the girl (Shirkarpur, reference).*

Families who delayed their daughter's marriage also experienced mixed responses from relatives. About half (21 out of 48) reported that they were supported by family members, particularly in cases

where the father is the oldest man in the family. Others expressed that relatives hold strong opinions in favour of child marriage, which strained the relationship – especially if the daughter was promised to a relative. These families discussed needing to convince others about their decision, explaining their reasoning and passing on their knowledge about the dangers of child marriage. This led to agreement in some instances.

*In my family, every one supported me as I am eldest among my brothers and sisters and educated. My family does have trust in my decision... they think that kaka's (big brother) decisions will be best. So they supported me and respected my decision (Larkana, father).*

*Their reaction [family] was good which made me feel good, they supported me and are supporting me now as well. They are saying that your decision was good for you and us. So I am very happy with that (Lodhran, girl).*

*No one in my family [passed negative comments]. I am the most senior, if they have to fix marriages they come to me for advice, or some other matters like in elections for votes. The community stands behind me. I am an elder [Muzzafargarh, father].*

*My brother in law made it more difficult for us as he was blaming our daughter and pressurizing my husband to marry our daughter as soon as possible (Muzzafargarh, mother).*

*The worst behaviour we faced was of my sister in law. She asked for my daughter's hand for her son. We refused it because our daughter is still studying, so she is against us now... she doesn't like that we are letting our daughter study, so she says negative things about us (Muzzafargarh, mother).*

### KEY TAKEAWAYS (3.2.5)

- Community members generally gossip about families who delayed their daughter's marriage, but do not intervene. Many families report not caring about the gossip.
- Some families faced no serious social sanctions, while others reported facing consequences such as being teased and harassed and feeling stressed. There were no reports of social benefits.
- There was a roughly equal split between parents who were supported by their families in their decision to delay their daughter's marriage and those whose relatives disagreed and needed to be convinced. Fathers who are the oldest in the family are more likely to face no opposition.

# 4. CONCLUSIONS

## 4.1 KEY FINDINGS AND LEARNINGS

This study delved into the lived experiences of eight families in four districts of Sindh and Punjab (Lodhran, Muzaa, Larkana, and Shirkarapur) who decided to delay their daughter's marriages, challenging local practices and traditions. We explored the reasons behind their decisions, with a particular focus on social norms around family honour, as well as the consequences of their decisions. The goal was to understand to what extent social norms are flexible in this context and what leads families to choose differently.

We applied a qualitative methodological approach and a timeline method for data collection centred around people's experiences, opinions, feelings, and understandings. In total 48 individuals (fathers, mothers, daughters, and reference persons) were interviewed. We found that social norms beyond family honour also drive child marriages, and that multiple factors – including individuals, legal frameworks, key experiences, and organizations' interventions – are instrumental in parents' decision to delay their daughters' marriage.

Despite sampling limitations (described in the section below), the findings are encouraging. They point to room for transformation of longstanding social norms around child marriage in Pakistan, which are often thought to be set in stone. Our findings demonstrate that parents exposed to different influencing factors can change their attitudes and resist societal pressure for child marriage. Nonetheless, much work needs to be done to ensure that girls can wait to marry at an age when they feel ready and once they have had the opportunity to grow, learn and invest in themselves – which may take longer than their 18th birthday.

The strong role of local NGOs' interventions in changing families' attitudes is another positive finding, which implementing partners found to be especially encouraging. Not only do these interventions increase knowledge about the implications of child marriage (particularly risks to girls' physical health) and legal considerations (such as the minimum age for marriage), they have the power to influence parents to act differently and confront deeply-rooted social norms. Many of the individuals selected by families as reference persons, meaning they played a role in the family's decision, are staff from local organizations.

NGO interventions do not necessarily have to be complex to be effective. Several participants mentioned visual tools, such as movie screenings, that stuck with them – an important learning for implementing partners. Fear that their daughters may be physically harmed emerged as a strong incentive for parents to delay marriage, though other important ramifications are potentially overlooked – such as impact on mental health, life conditions, personal development and future aspirations.

The appeal of education as an alternative to child marriage is another key finding on which implementing partners need to reflect. The focus on education as giving girls more opportunities for personal



development and gaining new skills can serve as a protective measure against child marriage. Yet the fact that education can be perceived as a vehicle for “making good brides” works against equality efforts by feeding into the gender-normative idea that women should be mainly concerned about preparing themselves to become good and obeying wives. This finding calls for girls’ education to be promoted as an intrinsic right.

Some participants alluded to widespread belief that it is dangerous to allow girls to travel outside the community to get an education. This emphasizes the need to invest in further education platforms inside communities, but also illustrates the extent to which their social interactions are controlled and limitations put on their right to come and go.

Implementing partners were motivated by results showing girls standing up for themselves, fighting for their interests, and demanding their voices to be heard in marriage decisions. A few girls linked this to NGO interventions to promote girls’ empowerment and life skills such as negotiation and leadership. The fact that some parents showed willingness to listen illustrates the possibility for shared decision-making. Nonetheless, the fact that all families had been open to proposals before they decided to delay their daughter’s marriage indicates that the willingness to give daughters a say in their marriage may emerge only once fathers had decided themselves that delaying the marriage was a possibility.

On the impact of the law on the minimum age for marriage, study results were mixed, though there appears to be a slow improvement in people’s knowledge of and compliance with the law. Awareness of the existence of legal frameworks can help to back up the decision of parents who engage in positive deviance. The study did not provide information on how religious beliefs may be used as justification to bend the law, but we did find that implementation is still weak. Much work still needs to be done on awareness-raising, monitoring and accountability. Implementing partners were encouraged that local organizations are helping tackle some of these needs.

During our reflection workshop, implementing partners shared the study findings they found most surprising. For instance, the role of religion in child marriage seldom appeared, even though it has an important role in shaping social norms in communities following more traditional interpretations of Islam. Another surprising finding was that families who reported being gossiped about said that they did not care, as their priority was to do what was best for their families. This was unexpected as urban Pakistani families tend to be concerned about how others see them and strive to maintain a good image in the community.

It was also pointed out that study findings contrast with some conclusions from previous studies on child marriage in Pakistan. In particular, the role of family honour and the ability to perform household chores as a determinant of a girls’ eligibility to marry at an early age appear less strongly in this study than in others.

## 4.2 STUDY LIMITATIONS

The study was limited by its low sample size, with the involvement of only eight families. Although we heard from 48 individuals, half of them came the selected families and the other half from reference persons known to the families. This makes it hard to generalize.

Similarly, interviewees were selected based on where they stand in the child marriage debate, often through having been influenced by the interventions of partner organizations involved in the study. This was necessary given that the goal of the study was to learn about positive deviant cases, but it means that we miss the ‘other side of the story’ – that is, the experiences of families who did not engage in positive deviance. It also raises the risk that participants could have answered questions based on what they thought the interviewers wanted to hear. On the other hand, it is central to qualitative studies to take the voices of interviewees as they come.

The probing nature of questions is another limitation. Particularly for discussions on family honour, health, education and social sanctions, questions were asked repeatedly, stimulating participants to discuss these themes over introducing themes of their own. This means that the large incidence of comments on education and health could reflect more on the interview design than the leading considerations for interviewees.

## 4.3 DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

During the reflection workshop, implementing partners suggested various potential avenues for future study efforts of the MTBA alliance and others working on child marriage.

As noted earlier, the impact of religion in child marriages did not appear strongly in this study. Our implementing partners would like to understand this issue further, particularly the role of local religious leaders in pressuring parents to marry off their daughters at an early age despite the law against it. Implementing partners would also like to learn more about the role of other male figures in the family, beyond fathers; in some families, brothers, uncles, and cousins may hold much decision-making power, particularly if the father is not present.

Future studies could tackle economic issues in child marriage, such as the extent to which financial needs drive parents’ decisions; secret financial dealings among families; and how well-off, influential men may be able to secure unions with young girls. They could explore the role of legal documentation – for example, a girl’s age being displayed incorrectly on their birth certificate – and the impact of local customs on exchanged child marriages.

Implementing partners would like to see more on sexual and reproductive health and rights in relation to child marriage, and evaluation of the impact of edutainment activities on social norms. The need to gain a better understanding of the rates of infant and maternal mortality in Pakistan – and the linkages between the age of mothers and child marriage – was also raised. Finally, partners would like to understand more about concerns raised by our study participants over the mobility of young girls when they travel outside their communities to pursue an education.

## 4.4 PROGRAMMATIC RESPONSES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Implementing partners stressed that this study was encouraging for their work on the ground, indicating that it is having an impact and they are moving in the right direction. At the workshop they presented several ideas on how to strengthen their programmatic responses, through increased focus on current interventions or the introduction of new actions.

For instance, implementing partners discussed the importance of investing more in awareness-raising strategies such as the use of creative visual tools, mass media and door-to-door campaigns; lobbying and advocacy efforts, including capacity building of staff; work on girls' empowerment (economic, educational, life skills) so they can voice their wants and needs to their parents and become active agents of change; and gender sensitization efforts – which should also engage boys and men as much as possible to challenge and transform toxic masculinity ideas and practices that perpetuate child marriage.

Implementing partners talked about the need to expand their work to more districts and people; invest in programs that strengthen the legal environment around child marriage at the local level, including monitoring and accountability mechanisms; and create channels to highlight positive stories of delayed marriages – such as the cases presented in this report – in the hope of transforming outlooks and inspiring others.

More broadly, implementing partners recommended that development organizations invest more in girls' empowerment and leadership skills; encourage meaningful youth involvement in strategies, including planning; expand advocacy work to promote education, taking into account mobility issues girls face; further embed the gender element in all aspects of development work; and invest in interventions at the household level, such as whole-family reflection exercises. A continuous push is needed for work to be done in this area, given funding volatility. Platforms are also needed to present results to society, promoting awareness.

We can draw two main policy recommendations from the study. First, strengthen implementation of the existing law on child marriage in Pakistan. Second, expand public investments in education, particularly at the village level, to ensure girls' safety so they can enjoy more opportunities to invest in their personal development.

These are concrete, context-sensitive recommendations to strengthen the development landscape on child marriage in Pakistan and push forward the efforts, reach and impact local organizations to benefit of young girls and families across the country.

# ANNEXES

**Annex 1.** Basic characteristics of interview participants

Interviewee	District	Sex	Age	Marital status	Educational level
Girl	Larkana	Female	18	Unmarried	Matric / 9th grade
Father	Larkana	Male	56	Married	Primary education
Mother	Larkana	Female	45	Married	Nil / no formal education
Reference person 1	Larkana	Female	39	Married	University graduate
Reference person 2	Larkana	Male	-	Married	Matric / 9th grade
Reference person 3	Larkana	Male	22	Married	Primary education
Girl	Larkana	Female	18	Unmarried	Matric
Father	Larkana	Male	48	Married	10th grade
Mother	Larkana	Female	45	Married	Nil / no formal education
Reference person 1	Larkana	Female	17	Unmarried	-
Reference person 2	Larkana	Male	-	-	-
Reference person 3	Larkana	Female	25	Unmarried	-
Girl	Lodhran	Female	17	Unmarried	Matric
Father	Lodhran	Male	58	Married	No formal education
Mother	Lodhran	Female	50	Married	No formal education
Reference person 1	Lodhran	Female	25	Unmarried	University graduate
Reference person 2	Lodhran	Female	28	Unmarried	University graduate
Reference person 3	Lodhran	Male	40	Married	FA/dispenser diploma
Girl	Lodhran	Female	16	Unmarried	11th grade

Father	Lodhran	Male	38	Married	2nd grade
Mother	Lodhran	Female	56	Married	Uneducated
Reference person 1	Lodhran	Male	26	Unmarried	Graduation
Reference person 2	Lodhran	Male	25	Unmarried	Graduation
Reference person 3	Lodhran	Female	25	Unmarried	Masters
Girl	Muzzafargarh	Female	17	Unmarried	Intermediate
Father	Muzzafargarh	Male	51	Married	Uneducated
Mother	Muzzafargarh	Female	50	Married	Uneducated
Reference person 1	Muzzafargarh	Female	32	Unmarried	University graduate
Reference person 2	Muzzafargarh	Male	24	Unmarried	Graduation
Reference person 3	Muzzafargarh	Male	32	Married	Masters
Girl	Muzzafargarh	Female	15	Unmarried	6th grade
Father	Muzzafargarh	Male	45	Married	Primary education
Mother	Muzzafargarh	Female	57	Married	Uneducated
Reference person 1	Muzzafargarh	Female	55	Unmarried	Uneducated
Reference person 2	Muzzafargarh	Male	36	Married	FA
Reference person 3	Muzzafargarh	Male	50	Married	Literate
Girl	Shikarpur	Female	17	Unmarried	6th grade
Father	Shikarpur	Male	46	Married	12th grade
Mother	Shikarpur	Female	18	Married	Metric
Reference person 1	Shikarpur	Female	45	Married	-
Reference person 2	Shikarpur	Male	-	Married	-
Reference person 3	Shikarpur	Male	-	-	-

Girl	Shikarpur	Female	17	Unmarried	5th grade
Father	Shikarpur	Male	45	Married	University graduate
Mother	Shikarpur	Female	35	Married	Nil
Reference person 1	Shikarpur	Female	23	Married	-
Reference person 2	Shikarpur	Female	50	Married	-
Reference person 3	Shikarpur	Male	-	Married	-

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