

# UNPACKING CONCEPTS OF MATURITY, MOBILITY, AND FAMILY HONOUR IN RELATION TO CHILD MARRIAGE IN PAKISTAN:

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

In the past four years, Oxfam and partners of the Marriage No Child's Play (MNCP) project in Pakistan have worked together studying maturity, mobility and family honour: what do they mean for child marriage? How can we unpack these concepts when working to delay child marriage?

This learning product, which is part of a series, weaves together data from four studies:

- A baseline study conducted in 2016 analysing six outcomes<sup>2</sup>: from the MNCP project, with a focus on social norms around child marriage: 1,200 respondents included 600 heads of household, both male and female, and 600 girls (aged 11-24), both married and unmarried.
- A midline study conducted in 2018 analysing five outcomes<sup>2</sup> from the project, also with a focus on social norms: 2,000 respondents included 1,000 head of households, both male and female, and 1,000 girls aged (11-24), some at risk of or affected by child marriage and others not.<sup>3</sup>
- A 2018 qualitative study on decision-making processes and social norms around early marriage in Sindh and Punjab, in Pakistan: 40 in-depth interviewees included fathers, mothers, and married boys and girls (aged 16-25) from different households.
- A 2020 qualitative study exploring cases of positive deviance to early marriage in Sindh and Punjab: 48 in-depth interviewees included the father, mother and unmarried daughter (aged 15-17) from eight families and a reference person selected by each as having influenced their thinking.

All studies were conducted in collaboration with partner organizations [Bedari](#), the [Indus Resource Centre](#) (IRC) and [Baanhn Beli](#). The partners also participated in reflection workshops to collectively formulate learnings from findings, conclusions, recommendations, and programmatic responses. These workshops also featured respondents from the project districts of Larkana and Shirkarpur in Sindh and Muzaffargarh and Lodhran in Punjab.

# MATURITY

Maturity relates to ideas and perceptions about when a girl is 'ready' to marry – sexually, physically, mentally and emotionally. While it does not necessarily relate to age, respondents in the various studies often had ideas about the age at which a girl is to be considered mature enough to marry.

In the baseline study, for example, the majority of girls reported seeing 18 (in Punjab) or 20 (in Sindh) as the best age to marry, for reasons including a girl being mentally and physically prepared, and able to do household work and manage a family. In practice, however, a majority of girls got married before 18. Household respondents in the baseline study also mostly considered 18 or older to be the most appropriate age for a girl to marry. When asked why it might be not good to get married at a younger age, the most common answers were that the girl would be too immature, and not able to run a household. However, a significant minority of respondents – 20% in Punjab and 40% in Sindh – thought that marrying before 18 does not cause any physical or mental harm to a girl.

In the midline study, most respondents again perceived 18 or 20 as an appropriate age to marry, with only a small percentage (15% in Punjab, 7% in Sindh) answering with an age below 18. Most also thought that marriage after 18 was the most common practice in their community. While in fact, early marriage was still widely prevalent, the midline did conclude that there seemed to be a shift in social norms, with marriage before age 18 becoming less common.

One problem with asking about age in relation to maturity is that many of the participating girls did not have their births registered, and their families do not know their age. Respondents more often related maturity to other factors. The midline study in particular asked about what makes a girl mature. Aside from age, most male household members in Punjab indicated the capability to run a household, while female household heads also mentioned being able to raise children. Education in Islamic beliefs also featured prominently. In Sindh, both men and women prioritized capability to run a household.



In the social norms study, not many respondents indicated at what age they think girls become mature. One said that early marriage did not happen in their village because girls married only when they were mature, but later indicated that girls aged 12 to 14 years were considered mature. Some respondents made a distinction between the marriage ceremony (Nikah) and the consummation of marriage: they stated that in early marriage, the girl will be married but will not yet live with the groom or have a sexual relationship. Others did not, saying girls need to be mature enough to consummate the marriage.

Many respondents made the religious argument that it is a sin to keep menstruating girls at home: in the local culture, this can damage family honour. In relation to raising children, maturity was related not only to the capacity to perform care tasks such as feeding and dressing, but also to moral concerns about raising children in Pakistani traditions.

The positive deviance study found different understandings of what maturity means in connection to physical, mental and personal development. Respondents variously connected maturity with girls beginning to menstruate; being able to safely carry, deliver and nurse a child; being sufficiently responsible and capable to care for and manage a household; or being older than 18. Most family members and reference persons believed girls should get married between the ages of 20 and 26, with daughters providing some of the highest numbers.

## MOBILITY

Mobility refers to girls' perceived ability to undertake activities and travel to places on their own, without safety concerns or social sanctions from community members.

In the baseline study, about half of girls felt the community did not support women going to meetings, the doctor or the market without a male escort or male permission, even though the overwhelming majority said that men do not give them negative attention and they feel safe. Two-thirds of surveyed community members did not support daughters working outside the home after they have children. Respondents were also asked about what other community members think is appropriate: over 40% said they would expect low support for these types of behaviour, while over 30% expect high support.



The midline study looked at girls' mobility specifically regarding education, notably the perceived safety of the school environment itself and the road to school. Safety in this context generally means whether girls could be harassed by men. Factors mentioned as contributing to a safe school environment include separate toilets for girls and walls around the school. Project participants in Sindh were more likely than baseline study respondents to say they feel safe at school.

Respondents in the positive deviance study reported that unmarried girls who have a degree of freedom to travel alone, go to school and meet boys are seen as a threat to family honour. This is partly as they may be targeted by boys – a couple of the girls interviewed mentioned experiencing this – and partly as educated girls are perceived as more likely to demand to marry who they choose. Sending daughters to school may lead to families being gossiped about and criticized by the community and their own relatives. On the other hand, education was also seen as making a girl more marriageable.

# FAMILY HONOUR

As explored above, considerations about both maturity and mobility relate to family honour – the idea that the behaviour of family members reflects on the way the family perceives itself and is perceived by others, especially within the community.

In the social norms research, many respondents noted that unmarried ‘mature’ girls are seen as promiscuous, and parents feared that their unmarried daughters would have relationships. Some respondents mentioned the influence of television and movies. Marrying a girl off is seen as securing family honour, as married girls are more protected from harassment. In the positive deviance study, respondents mentioned low levels of education as a factor in families believing their honour demands marrying off their daughters at a young age.



## CONCLUSIONS AND PROGRAMMATIC-RELEVANT LEARNINGS

Perceptions around the concepts of maturity, mobility and family honour interrelate strongly and all contribute to decisions on child marriage. Based on the study comparison, four learnings can inform future programmatic interventions:

1. Ideas around girls’ maturity and capability to fulfil their responsibilities as wives can influence marriage decisions more than age.
2. Training or awareness-raising interventions should aim to change social norms about when a girl is mature enough to marry.
3. Awareness-raising interventions should tackle beliefs about gender equality that result in low mobility for girls.
4. Interventions should invest in educational opportunities for girls inside their communities, to minimize the perceived risks of travelling outside the community to get an education.

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

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

<sup>3</sup> 40,5% of baseline survey respondents also participated in the midline survey.

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