

Drivers of Child Marriage in Pakistan: A qualitative study



Acknowledgment

UNICEF Pakistan extends its sincere appreciation to all individuals and institutions who contributed to this qualitative study on child marriage in Pakistan. We are especially grateful to the children, adolescents, parents, caregivers, community elders, religious leaders, service providers, and key informants across Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan who generously shared their experiences and perspectives throughout the research process.

UNICEF Pakistan also expresses its deep appreciation to Child Frontiers and the research team, including Dr Beniamino Cislighi, Dahye Yim, Humera Malik, Duaa Rao, Dr Gillian Mann, Emma de Vise Lewis, and Dr Karima Manji, as well as to government counterparts, local partners, facilitators, and field teams whose collaboration, technical expertise, and commitment were essential to the successful implementation of this research and to ensuring that the study reflected the lived realities of children and communities with dignity and care.

UNICEF Pakistan further extends its sincere gratitude to the Government of the United Kingdom for their support through the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) for their continued partnership and generous support in making this research possible, especially for the research for Sindh. Their commitment has been instrumental in strengthening efforts to address child marriage in Pakistan.

UNICEF Pakistan hopes that the findings and insights presented in this report will contribute to stronger policies, advocacy, and programming efforts to prevent child marriage and better protect children and adolescents across the country. UNICEF remains committed to utilizing this research to strengthen evidence-based child marriage prevention and response efforts, while continuing to work with government, communities, and partners to advance meaningful and sustainable change for children in Pakistan.

Executive Summary

This qualitative descriptive study on child marriage in Pakistan explores how communities understand childhood, the wellbeing of girls and boys, the meanings attached to child marriage, and the social, economic, and institutional factors that sustain or challenge it. Conducted across Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan, the research combined individual interviews, focus group discussions, workshops with children, social network analysis, and power mapping with more than 400 men, women, boys, girls, and key informants from diverse contexts.

Across all provinces, participants described child marriage as a protective practice, rooted within existing social norms, patriarchal power dynamics, financial constraints, and existing ideas of honour and religious order. For many families, marrying a daughter is thought as shielding her from harassment, gossip, and reputational harm, while marrying a son is a way to confirm his transition into responsible adulthood. Legal frameworks play a limited role when social definitions of maturity and honour override statutory age requirements.

At the same time, the study found strong opportunities for and naturally occurring opportunities for change. All participants valued education as an important pathway to a better life for their children, both boys and girls. Many, mostly women and children, but some men as well, said they would prefer to delay marriage until children's education is completed. While participants recognised some of their hopes for children's lives as inconsistent with child marriage (e.g. their health and happiness), they found connection between other hopes and the continuation of practice (e.g. having a family, becoming responsible adults). The study also mapped key threats to children's lives. For girls, in addition to child marriage, participants were worried about school dropout, sexual harassment, household workload, and economic dependency. For boys, they pointed to drugs, unemployment, lack of education, and exposure to physical violence. In many cases, they believed child marriage to protect children from these threats.

Findings on the child marriage drivers highlight the interplay of social norms, traditional power relations, gender dynamics, and material factors (such as poverty and distance from schools). Parents and girls (and, to a lesser extent, boys) are under enormous social and financial pressure to celebrate a marriage soon after the child reaches puberty. These social norms are upheld through networks of parents, elders, religious leaders, and extended family members. Among these drivers, digital technology has become a new arena of both risk and transformation: families fear their "moral dangers" in ways that support child marriage (because children see on social media adolescents having premarital romantic relationships), but also recognize its potential for information, learning, and positive role-modelling. The 2022–23 floods further exposed the fragility of families' coping mechanisms—delaying some marriages due to economic hardship but accelerating others as a form of protection from the aftermaths of the disaster. The power analysis in this study also found that parents are willing to increase children's engagement in marriage-related decisions. Most children instead – especially boys – said to be happy with a status quo where parents make these decisions, as in this system parents will offer support when problems in marriage arise but won't do so if children decide their partners.

Overall, this study shows that preventing child marriage requires addressing factors affecting child marriage across the ecological sphere of children's lives: improving access to quality education, safe transport, and livelihoods while also transforming norms around honour, gender, and maturity. It calls for integrated, gender-responsive, and shock-resilient programming that treats girls and boys not only as beneficiaries of protection but as agents of their own wellbeing.

These findings point to the following programmatic recommendations: 1) Reframe childhood through life events, not age; 2) Design intervention materials that acknowledge parents' fears and hopes; 3) Engage with the protective logic of marriage, not against it; 4) Delay by design: turn protection into preparation through education, livelihoods, and community consent; 5) Leverage the influence of grandmothers and help families recognise and coalesce their own power for positive change; 6) Turn the digital threat into a digital trust space; 7) Support community-led reflections to transform marriage norms from within; 8) Foster shared decision-making in marriage choices through cooperative power; 9) Grow children's voice through family-led consultations; 10) Build a coordinated, cross-sectorial strategy to address the interconnected and intersectional ecological drivers of child marriage; and 11) Integrate child protection strategies in climate emergency responses through dual-track action.

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Two methodological notes to facilitate the reading of this report

Note on tables visualizing factor consensus

In several places in this report, we include a visual factor analysis of the results providing information on the frequency of a given theme among participants of different gender and location. See, for example, the example below. The blue color of the cell indicates its frequency with four possible variations of blue. The darker the color of the cell, the more frequent the theme is within a certain group of participants.

Table 0. Example of a Consensus Frequency Table

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Balochistan		KP		Punjab		Sindh	
		Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Physical	Face and Hands								
	Voice								
	Walk								
Mental	Cognitive Development								
Social	Marriage								
	Household responsibilities								
Age									
Religion									

No mention

Less Frequent

More frequent

Note on the participants' citation identifier

For each quote provided by community members, we indicated: gender, data collection method, age group and location. For example, a quote from a young (19-35) woman from a Focus Group in Punjab will be indicated by: (W, FG, Y, P), and a quote from an older (35+) man interviewed individually in KP would be: (M, II, O, K). Participatory workshops for boys and girls are indicated as PW (for instance, for a boy in Sindh: B, PW, S). Finally, key informant citations are indicated by including the key informant category. For example, a quote from a male religious leader in Sindh will be indicated by: (M, KI, LR, S).

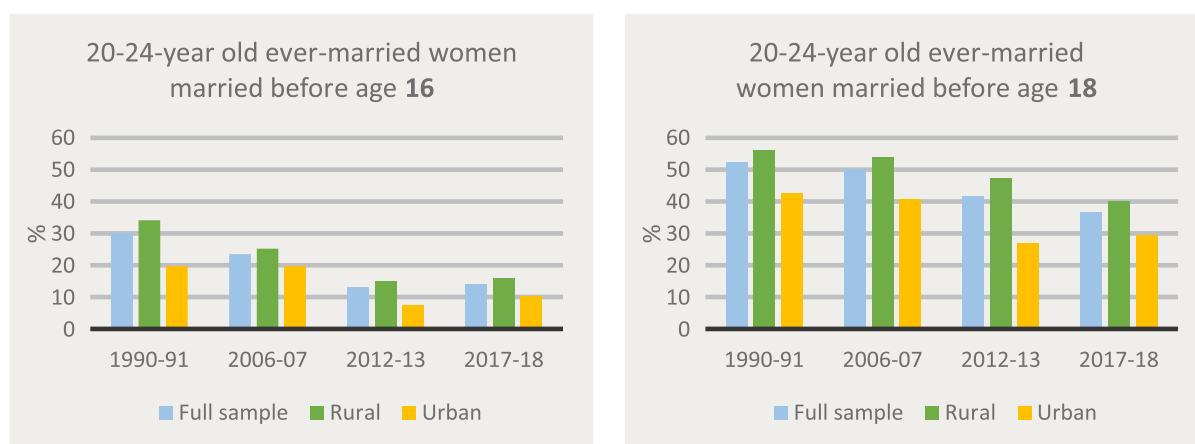
Introduction

Child marriage remains a significant child rights and gender equality concern in Pakistan. Despite global and national commitments to end the practice, it continues to affect a considerable proportion of the country's population, with girls disproportionately impacted. While overall trends indicate gradual progress, the pace of change remains slow, particularly in rural and underserved areas where poverty, limited education opportunities, and entrenched social norms converge to sustain the practice.

The legal and policy landscape reflects both progress and persistent challenges. Pakistan's 2025 Child Marriage Restraint Acts establish minimum legal age as 18, but each province has its own legislation. Weak coordination among statutory, religious, and customary authorities, combined with limited birth registration, continues to undermine implementation. Ongoing debates around provincial legislation underscore the tension between legal reform and social acceptability, with some stakeholders framing child marriage as a cultural or religious issue rather than a violation of rights.

DHS information on Child Marriage in Pakistan

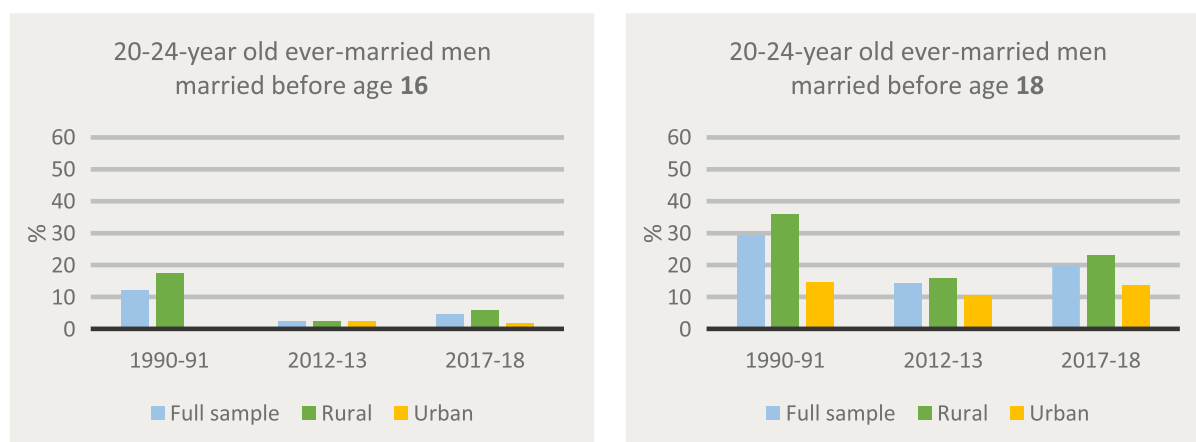
As part of this study, we conducted a secondary data analysis of DHS data. Specifically, to examine changes in child marriage over time, we employed DHS data from 1990-91, 2006-07, 2012-13, and 2017-18.¹



The overall prevalence of ever married 20-24-year-olds who were married prior to 16 or prior to 18 has fallen substantially over the period from 1990 to 2018. During this time, the percentage of ever married 20-24-year-olds who were married before 16 declined from 30.1% to 16.1%; the prevalence for those married before age 18 fell from 52.2% to 36.5%. However, while the trend in child marriage fell steadily from 1990 to 2013, a plateau is observed between 2012 and 2018. Child marriage among women is higher in rural than urban areas in every wave of data collection. Child marriage for boys

¹ The nationally representative sample in the 1990-91, 2006-07, and 2012-13 DHS surveys includes Punjab, Sindh, KPK, Balochistan, and ICT; the nationally representative sample in 2017-18 DHS includes Punjab, Sindh, KPK, Balochistan, ICT, and FATA. More recent data (2024) now exist for Punjab (not available at time of data analysis) that show further reduction of child marriage in the province.

fell between 1990 and 2012,² but increased slightly in 2017-18. For example, at the national level, ever married 20–24-year-old men married before 18 shifted from 29.3% in 1990-91, to 14.4% in 2012-13, to 19.9% in 2017-18.



Similar to child marriage among girls, child marriage among boys was higher in rural areas than in urban areas in all waves of data collection. Child marriage among boys was significantly and substantially lower than child marriage for girls at all time points.

A clear gradient in the prevalence of child marriage is observed across wealth quintiles. For example, in 1990, child marriage prior to age 16 was observed to be 42.3%, 35.2%, 21.6%, 21.9% and 17.6% across the five wealth quintiles, from poorest to richest. In 2017, the same quintile-based figures were 30.8%, 17.2%, 11.8%, 5.7% and 6.6%. As to geographical differences, In Fata, 32.4% and 59.3% of 20–24-year-old ever-married women were married by the time they were 16 and 18, respectively. Punjab and ICT had the lowest levels of child marriage for both definitions (married before 16 and before 18). Unlike child marriage for girls, child marriage for boys is highest in Sindh and Balochistan. In 2017-18, 7.7% and 16.8% of ever married 20-24-year-old men were married before 16 in Sindh and Balochistan, respectively; these figures were 33.4% and 29.8% for those married before 18. Child marriage before 18 among 20–24-year-old ever-married men was lowest in Fata, ICT, and Punjab.³ The full DHS Analysis is Presented in Annex 3.

Research questions

This is a qualitative descriptive study. As such, it does not intend to provide statistically representative results of the Pakistani population. Rather, it provides an understanding of the collective dynamics and beliefs surrounding local conceptions of Child Marriage. To this purpose, it integrated the following research questions:

1. What emotional, cognitive, biological and social characteristics do participants believe are typical of children compared to adults?
2. What, according to participants, factors contribute to the well-being of the child?
3. What do participants believe are the biggest threats to children's well-being?

² Data were not collected from men in the 2006-2007 DHS.

³ DHS sample sizes for the men are smaller and may not be fully powered to accurately estimate child marriage.

Questions 1-3 provided essential background information to contextualize local understandings of childhood that may influence how participants understand child marriage, for example, by assuming that adults and children (whatever that term means to them) may have different power and capacity to refuse sexual offers in situations where power differentials exist.

4. What meanings and values do participants assign to child marriage?
5. What social function is child marriage serving in the participating communities?
6. What alternatives can participants envision to serve those functions other than child marriage?

Questions 4-6 provided a framework to explore the extent to which participants believe child marriage practices represent a solution to existing collective social dilemmas that they are experiencing in their locality. These questions also invited participants to reflect on other possible strategies to address those dilemmas and challenges.

7. What are the individual and interpersonal dynamics that contribute to child marriage?
8. How are digital technologies (especially social media) affecting children's marriage-related choices and actions?
9. How do social norms affect child marriage practices in the participating communities?
10. How do gender and power relations affect child marriage patterns in the participating communities?
11. How do other institutional, material, individual and social factors affect child marriage practices in the participating communities?

Questions 7-11 guided the investigation of the system of ecological factors sustaining (or potentially limiting) child marriage in participants' socio-cultural niches. These might include, for instance, personal and religious beliefs, material challenges, institutional policies and laws, as well as the role of the formal services and the extent to which participants believe they are helpful and accessible.

12. What do participants believe to be the effect of the floods that took place in 2022, and the related internal displacements, on child vulnerability?

Questions 12, finally, allowed the exploration of how the recent climate change-related events and participants' resiliency to them are affecting child marriage practices and, more at large, the needs of younger children and adolescents.

Methodology

To design targeted and contextually relevant interventions, further research was needed to understand how communities in Pakistan perceive child marriage—its meanings, functions, and underlying drivers—and to identify opportunities for prevention grounded in local realities.

This qualitative study applied a gender- and norm-sensitive lens to analyse how different actors—families, elders, religious leaders, and institutions—understand, justify, or challenge child marriage. Fieldwork was conducted across four provinces—Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan—using a combination of individual interviews, focus group discussions, participatory workshops with children, and power and network mapping with key community informants.

The research was conducted across four provinces, sampling districts with both high and low prevalence of child marriage (according to recent UNICEF data). The main report was written using

the information from the high-prevalence district, and, in annex, evidence from low-prevalence districts was compared for integration. As part of the study methodology, we used individual interviews, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews with:

1. **Younger women** (18-34 years old)
2. **Older women** (35-60 years old)
3. **Younger men** (18-34 years old)
4. **Older men** (35-60 years old)
5. **Key informants** (religious authorities, local health providers, local politicians, NGO workers, Child Protection Officers, Police Officers)

We also carried out participatory workshops with girls and boys aged 15-18, who were likely to soon marry or have been married recently. These workshops used a series of creative yet rigorous methods to keep participants' attention while engaging them in meaningful conversations.

We used reasoned sampling to study how community members view child marriage. Reasoned sampling is a non-probability sampling technique that involves selecting participants based on a specific research goal or objective (Patton, 2015). It is commonly used in qualitative research, where the objective is to gain a thorough understanding of a particular phenomenon or experience (Palinkas et al., 2015). In reasoned sampling, the researcher deliberately selects individuals or groups who may have relevant information or experience on the research question. This may involve selecting participants based on certain characteristics, such as age, gender, occupation or experience with a particular problem (Guest et al., 2012). Our sampling also considered gender differences (by selecting men and women) as well as intersectional differences related to the power that participants have in the community (by interviewing community members in key positions). The table below reports the final sampling included in our data analysis.

Ethical approval

This research was approved by the NATIONAL COMMITTEE OF ETHICS FOR HEALTH AND LIFE SCIENCES (CNESS) - Decision no. 2023_ 0.1/MSDS-CNES of 4 SEPT 2023

Limitations

This qualitative research does not include a representative sample of the Pakistani population as a whole. As such, it includes a broad understanding of the themes related to Child Marriage that were meaningful to participants. The thematic factor consensus analysis (presented at the end of each section) provides insight into the likelihood of others in the country having similar beliefs but is not a statistical indication of the transferability of research results. The research was also designed to cover a wide range of investigations, so there might be specific questions that would require further and more focused study to explore the matter and provide a possible answer.

Table 1. Study Sample

Method	Participants	Punjab 1	Punjab 2	KP 1	KP 2	Balochistan 1	Balochistan 2	Sindh 1	Sindh 2	Total
Individual Interviews	Women 18-34	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	48
	Women 35-60	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	48
	Men 18-34	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	48
	Men 35-60	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	48
Focus Groups	Women 18-34	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	16
	Women 35-60	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	16
	Men 18-34	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	16
	Men 35-60	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	16
Participatory Workshop	Girls 15-18	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	16
	Boys 15-18	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	16
Social Network Analysis	Young women recently married in childhood	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8
	Young men recently married in childhood	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8
Key Informant Interviews	Religious leaders	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	16
	Health workers	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	16
	NGO worker	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8
	UNICEF Staff	1		1		1		1		4
	Government Representative	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8
	Child Protection Officer	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	8
Total		46	46	46	46	46	46	46	46	368

Section 1. Who is a Girl? Who is a Boy?

When a girl becomes an adult at 14, marriage is considered obligatory.
(M, IDI, Y, K)

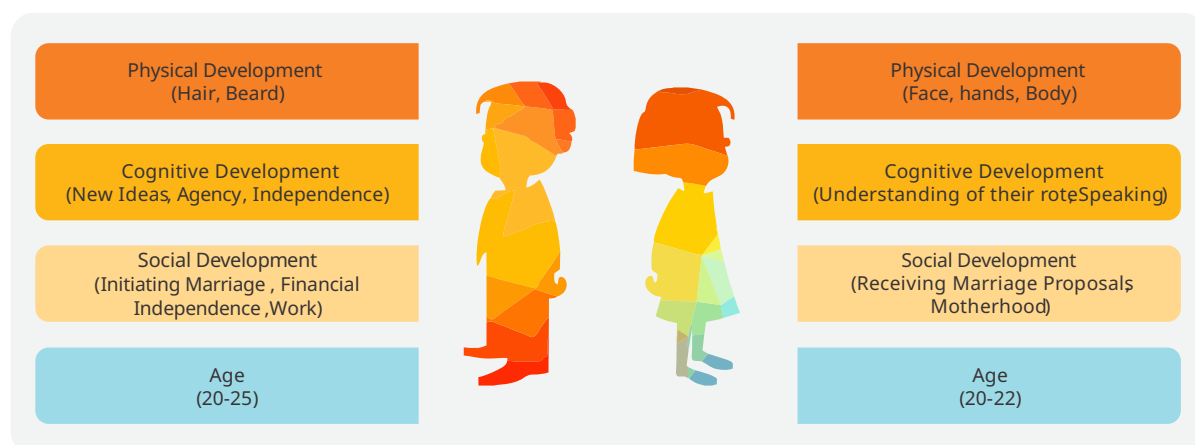
Relevant Research Questions:

1. What are the emotional, cognitive, biological and social characteristics that, according to participants, are typical of children compared to adults?

Key Findings:

1. Participants believe physical markers to be critical for both girls and boys to define adulthood
2. Participants consider marriage as a very important social marker that gives status to both girls and boys
2. 3. Age is generally not mentioned as a marker of adulthood
4. Boys are described having more agency and ideas than girls
5. Girls are mentioned receiving marriage proposals as a key marker of adulthood.

Figure 1.1 Visual summary of key identifiers for boys and girls across the four provinces.



Note: age brackets in the visual above present average age at which participants believe transition to adulthood occurs for boys and girls

1.0 Introduction

This section explores how participants in the focus groups defined the boundary between childhood and adulthood by answering the question: "Who is a girl? Who is a boy?" To maximise time during individual interviews, focussing on other key aspects of the research, this theme was explored exclusively through focus group discussions (FGDs) with younger (18–34) and older (35–60) men and women across the four provinces of Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Punjab, and Sindh. The aim was to capture community perceptions of the transition from girlhood to womanhood, and from boyhood to manhood, and to examine the physical, cognitive, social, age-related, and religious markers that were used to distinguish these categories.

Understanding these perceptions is critical in the context of child marriage. If communities recognize marriage itself as the moment when a girl becomes a woman, then the very concept of child marriage becomes contradictory at the local level, since marrying a girl is simultaneously treated as reclassifying her as a woman. Similarly, for boys, the emphasis on independence, responsibility, and agency provides a contrasting lens on how adulthood is constructed and socially recognized. The sections that follow first examine the markers of adulthood identified for girls and then those for boys, before turning to a comparative analysis and implications for interventions.

1.1 Who is a Girl?

Table 1.1 Consensus summary of critical maturity markers for women

		Balochistan		KP		Punjab		Sindh	
		Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Physical	Face and Hands								
	Voice								
	Walk								
Mental	Cognitive Development								
Social	Marriage								
	Household responsibilities								
Age									
Religion									

Notes: Colours indicate frequency of consensus. The darker the colour, the more participants mentioned the theme in question (see the colour scheme below).

No mention	Less Frequent	More frequent
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1.1.1 Physical Development

Across provinces, participants distinguished girls from women through visible cues. These cues were mostly signs of biological physical development: voice and tone, face and physique, gait, clothing/appearance. We were conditioned by previous experience in other contexts to expect that many participants would bring up reproductive capacity and puberty as critical markers of womanhood. We were instead surprised by the fact that only three participants in the whole set mentioned the onset of menstruations as a sign of passage to adulthood for girls (possibly because of the cultural sensitivity making body development hard to discuss). Something on which we reflect further in the final considerations.

Participants frequently referred to body development in general terms as a discriminating factor between girls and women. As one man put it, “A girl is generally younger, her mind and body are not fully developed yet” (M, FG, O, S). Several participants described changes in a girl’s face as a critical marker of adulthood. Take, for instance what a man and a woman from Punjab said: “A girl’s face is clean, soft and tender” (M, FG, Y, P); “You can tell by the face if someone is younger or older” (W, FG, O, P). Other participants more explicitly pointed to the signs of physical labour that could be seen on

women's hands: "A woman's hands often show signs of labour—whether from household work, childcare, or even professional responsibilities" (W, FG, Y, B). Some, very few, mentioned pregnancy as a visible sign of a girl becoming a woman; a female participant from Balochistan was one of these few: "We know from her stomach, when she is pregnant" (W, FG, O, B).

Participants also said they would use voice as a marker of adulthood. One, for instance, said that "A girl's voice is a little soft... a woman's voice is a bit thicker" (M, FG, Y, B); and two women, also in Balochistan, remarked: "[You can tell she is a girl] by [looking at] her body. And by the way she walks" (W, FG, O, B); "The tone of voice is also a key factor. Women tend to have a more mature and serious tone, while girls may have a lighter, more carefree way of speaking" (W, FG, Y, B). Participants further mentioned the way women walk as a tell sign. For example, two participants in KP, a woman and a man, respectively said: "You can tell by their walk whether they are a girl or an older woman... [a] girl's steps are slow and cautious... small, delicate steps" (W, FG, Y, K); and: "A woman's steps are firm, but a girl's are not; she walks quickly" (M, FG, O, K). As we said at the beginning, only two men from KP and one woman in Sindh linked the onset of menstruation to becoming a woman, but most references to physical development focused on observable features (yet, indirectly connected to puberty), rather than biological processes.

1.1.2 Cognitive Development

Across the dataset, participants frequently associated girls' maturity with observable signs of cognitive development. They repeatedly described girls as naïve, carefree, or innocent, while they said women were recognized by their seriousness, understanding, and ability to make thoughtful decisions. As one young man explained, "If she acts like a naïve girl, it's known she is a girl. If she does more mature things, then she is a woman" (M, FG, Y, B). Key markers of this shift towards greater maturity included the way women talked and behaved. One woman in Balochistan, for instance, said: "You can only tell whether she is a girl or a woman after meeting her and talking to her. Her speech, thoughts, and mannerisms help in identifying her" (W, FG, Y, B). A man in Sindh echoed the belief that women speak differently when he said: "Small girls do not talk sensibly, but women are smart and their conversation shows they are grown up" (M, FG, O, K). Similarly, in Punjab, another said she would understand whether she the person in front of her is a girl or a woman from "the way she talks, if she is older, she will talk differently... If she is unmarried, she will talk differently" (W, FG, Y, P). Note how instinctively, possibly unconsciously, this younger woman connected maturity with talking, then talking with marriage – indirectly suggesting an association between marriage and maturity (as discussed in the next section on social development).

Participants also interpreted girls' greater wisdom and skills as signs of having achieved adulthood. In Sindh, for instance, one woman explained: "A girl is still in the learning phase... when she grows up and gains experience, she is called a woman" (W, FG, O, S). And an older man, as another example, suggested: "A woman is older, her mind is wiser, and she can understand family responsibilities" (M, FG, O, S). The remark that cognitive development is demonstrated by taking family responsibilities is important and connected to the markers of social development discussed in the next section. Not all participants believed that cognitive development was shown through the uptake of family responsibilities. Some considered having a job a way of demonstrating cognitive maturity, as an older man from Balochistan said: "Mental and emotional maturity play a role too. If she is educated, holds a job, and takes on adult responsibilities, then she could be considered a woman, even if she's young" (M, FG, O, B).

1.1.3 Social Development

Marriage was the most frequently mentioned social marker of adulthood for girls across all provinces. In Balochistan, two older men explained, “Once she’s married and stays at home, she’s considered a woman in our culture” (M, FG, O, B); and “If she gets married, regardless of age, she is seen as a woman” (M, FG, O, B). A younger woman from Sindh spontaneously connected marriage and womanhood when she said: “Unmarried girls wear more makeup, while married women [don’t as they] are often busy with children and household chores” (W, FG, Y, S). And another woman in Sindh explained how – after menarche – followed marriage and household responsibilities, when she said: “Menstruation is a physical sign that a girl has become mature. Before that, she is a child, but when menstruation starts, it is considered a step toward becoming a woman. Then marriage, patience, health, responsibilities—all these become connected with her” (W, FG, O, S). Men in Sindh also agreed that marriage was important and frequently connected it (as the woman above) to household responsibilities. One older man, for instance, said: “A woman is usually married and has more experience” (M, FG, O, S). And two women from Punjab, finally, commented: “A girl has not yet been married” (W, FG, Y, P); and “A woman is married, while a girl is not” (W, FG, O, P). Two men in KP also remarked that “When a girl... gets engaged, we call her an adult. When she marries, we call her a woman” (M, FG, O, K); and that “We think a married girl is a woman” (M, FG, Y, K). And, as a final example, consider what this younger man from KP shared in a direct and honest way: “When a girl becomes an adult at 14, marriage is considered obligatory” (M, II, Y, K). Not all participants believed marriage to be the most essential trait for girls to become women. One woman from Sindh was the only exception, as she actively disregarded the link when she said: “For a girl to become a woman, mental maturity is necessary. Age or marriage alone is not enough” (W, FG, O, S). Beyond marriage, a few participants highlighted other social markers associated with womanhood. These included mostly taking on household work and caring for children. “An older woman ... she performs household tasks better, whereas a younger girl doesn’t understand these things well” (W, FG, O, S).

1.1.4 Age

References to specific ages as a marker of the transition from girlhood to womanhood were rare. Across the four provinces, participants did make general references to age, as the man in KP who said: “We recognize [women] by their age” (M, FG, O, K), and the one in Sindh who believed that “The first difference [between a girl and a woman] is age” (M, FG, O, S). Some other participants did provide specific ages for the transition. In KP, a man suggested that at “Around 20–22 years old, she is a woman” (M, FG, Y, K); and a woman agreed that “We call those above 20 years ‘women’ and below that ‘girls’” (W, FG, O, K). As we mentioned, reference to age was scarce. Womanhood was almost always tied to other markers—puberty, engagement, marriage, health, or experience—suggesting that for communities, age signals transition only when accompanied by visible responsibilities or social status.

1.1.5 Religion

Religion appeared only in Balochistan and KP (almost exclusively mentioned by men), with a focus on modesty, veiling, and fasting as indicators of maturity for girls. In Balochistan, participants dressing modesty as critical for a woman. One explained, “She wears a dupatta... sometimes around the neck, sometimes covering more” (M, FG, Y, B). And, similarly, another one said: “Often in our village, girls wear a scarf. A grown woman doesn’t always wear a scarf but a full chadar/dupatta to cover herself completely” (M, FG, Y, B). A third one specifically mentioned the niqab as a sign of womanhood: “If a woman goes out, she wears a niqab (face veil). If she wears a niqab, it’s clear she is a woman” (M, FG, Y, B). In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, participants mostly mentioned fasting as the key religious threshold to adulthood for girls: “When she ... starts fasting, it means she has become an adult” (M, FG, Y, K), and “When a girl becomes an adult [she] starts fasting” (M, FG, O, K). Said a younger and older man,

respectively. One man mentioned that women knew religious modesty; a woman would “Cover herself and stays under a veil” (M, FG, O, K) and that, a woman added, she would “observe purdah (the practice of screening women from men)” (W, FG, O, K).

1.2 Who is a Boy?

Table 1.2 Consensus summary of critical maturity markers for men

		Balochistan		KP		Punjab		Sindh	
		Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Physical	Facial Hair								
	Posture								
	Grooming								
Mental	Cognitive Development								
Social	Marriage								
	Independence								
	Provide for others								
Age									
Religion									

Notes: Colours indicate frequency of consensus. The darker the colour, the more participants mentioned the theme in question (see the colour scheme below).

No mention Less Frequent More frequent

1.2.1 Physical Development

Across the four provinces, participants most often distinguished boys from men through visible biological changes. Biological markers were, by far, the critical observable change they used to distinguish a boy from a man, rivalled only by (as seen later) markers of social development. Among biological changes, the ones that participants most frequently mentioned were the growth of facial hair, bodily strength, and their overall physical appearance. Beards and moustaches were consistently treated as decisive markers: “A boy is recognized by his beard. If he has a beard, he is a man. If he doesn’t have a beard, he is a boy” (M, FG, Y, B). Men were also said to show strength through their physique and capacity for hard work, while boys were described as more delicate or not yet physically capable: “The man is strong, does proper hard work, and the boy isn’t that strong, his body is delicate” (M, FG, Y, P).

While most participants frequently highlighted hair growth and strength as key physical markers of adulthood, a few female participants emphasized appearance, posture, and grooming habits. Some women, for instance, explained that speech, tone, and the way a man carried himself signalled maturity. One from Balochistan said: “The way he walks, his posture ... all these aspects indicate whether he is a boy or a man” (W, FG, Y, B). And, as another example, two women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa reflected on boys’ appearance as a reflection of their status of children: “Boys follow fashion, wear pants and shirts, comb their hair, and put on creams” (W, FG, Y, K), the first said; and

the second echoed: “Those boys... wash their face again and again, apply perfume” (W, FG, O, K). Boys were portrayed as preoccupied with colourful clothes, styled hair, and cosmetics, in contrast to men’s simplicity.

Although participants across all provinces volunteered physical markers as key traits of maturity, there were two provincial variations: in Balochistan participants stressed more than other boys’ posture, tone, and demeanour, while Participants in Punjab emphasised men’s focus on labour and responsibility. Taken together, physical development was seen as the first visible marker of manhood. Not the same, as described below, emerged from the data with regard to cognitive development.

1.2.2 Cognitive Development

A few participants across all provinces identified mental maturity and responsibility as the key markers distinguishing boys from men. Boys were portrayed as impulsive, carefree, and focused on themselves, while men were expected to demonstrate foresight, accountability, and seriousness, particularly in relation to marriage and family. Two women provide good examples of participants responses. The first, from Balochistan, suggested that a boy’s “speech, thoughts, and mannerisms help in identifying him” (W, FG, Y, B), while the second bluntly said that boys had “small brains” and “no thoughts” (W, FG, O, K).

A recurring theme was men’s ability to think ahead and show prudence, especially in financial matters. A young man from KP explained that while boys were careless about their money, men exercised restraint: “A man’s thinking is mature. He thinks if he spends all his money today and something happens tomorrow, like illness or a wedding, what will he do? A youth doesn’t worry about such things” (M, FG, Y, K). This difference in how boys and men managed their financial resources, was often linked directly to the responsibilities that men have once they are married and have a family (as seen in the next section)

Another dimension of cognitive maturity was decision-making and composure. Respondents contrasted men’s careful and thoughtful choices with boys’ impulsiveness and recklessness. As one older man observed, “A grown man makes decisions carefully and thoughtfully, while a boy might act impulsively” (M, FG, O, S). Others used more everyday examples, noting that boys were the ones who engaged in risky or careless behaviours: “When there is firing or weapons, boys do the firing. They are more impulsive” (M, FG, O, K).

1.2.3 Social Development

Across the four provinces of our study, participants identified marriage as one of the (if not the) most decisive marker in the transition from boyhood to manhood. While age or physical changes could signal maturity, it was marriage that consistently marked full transition to manhood. A younger man and a younger woman from Balochistan, respectively explained how: “A small boy is not married. If he is married, he is called a big man” (M, FG, Y, B), and: “Married men usually take on more responsibilities, such as providing for their family. Boys, on the other hand, do not have as many responsibilities” (W, FG, Y, B). Marriage was a critical marker as it provided evidence to the community of that man’s capacity to carry responsibilities for others. An older man from Balochistan and a younger one from KP were typical in their statements when they said, respectively: “Only after marriage, when he starts taking on responsibilities, does he become a man in our eyes” (M, FG, O, B), and: “A youth says, ‘I am grown up now,’ and asks his parents to arrange his marriage. He says he can handle responsibilities” (M, FG, Y, K).

Although not directly linking it to marriage participants both in Punjab and Sindh also linked adulthood to the capacity of taking care of others. One older man in Sindh said: “When a boy turns

18, he can be physically, mentally, and socially mature. His thinking becomes mature, his ability to work increases, and he can take care of the family" (M, FG, O, S), and a younger one in Punjab echoed: "A man ... buys things for his children. A boy takes no responsibility for anything; he only buys things for himself" (M, FG, Y, P). And, finally, a woman from KP suggested that, while men were working hard for their families, a boy: "Just comes home, changes clothes, keeps making TikTok, and stays angry at his mobile" (W, FG, O, K).

Participants across provinces also linked the transition from boyhood to manhood to independence and agency. In Balochistan, older men stressed that a boy could not be considered a man until he was self-reliant: "Until a boy stands on his own feet, takes care of his family, and fulfils his duties, we wouldn't consider him a man" (M, FG, O, B). They added that even if a youth continued studying into his twenties, "until they become independent ... they are still considered boys" (M, FG, O, B). In KP, the same idea was framed through decision-making power within the family: "A boy is under his father's control, while a man is independent and makes all his own decisions" (M, FG, O, K). Women did not directly describe independence in these terms, but they did underline its flip side — boys' dependence. For instance, younger women in KP explained that "Boys don't worry about money; they just ask for it and go out" (W, FG, Y, K), highlighting financial reliance on parents as a marker of boyhood. Across the data, then, agency was treated as a defining feature of manhood, distinguishing boys' dependence from men's autonomy.

1.2.4 Age

References to specific ages as markers of the boundary between boyhood and manhood were rare, appearing only in Balochistan and Sindh. In Balochistan, participants suggested that a boy remained irresponsible until around 18 or 20, or until he married: "A boy is typically under 18... but once he reaches the age of 18 or 20, or when he gets married, he starts taking on more responsibility and is seen as a man" (M, FG, O, B). Women also pointed to age as a basic criterion, often alongside health or physique: "Age is the first thing" (W, FG, O, B). In Sindh, older men provided the most explicit threshold, explaining that "When a boy turns 18, he can be physically, mentally, and socially mature. His thinking becomes mature, his ability to work increases, and he can take care of the family" (M, FG, O, S). No references to age were recorded in KP or Punjab, where participants emphasized social roles and responsibilities instead. Taken together, participants viewed 18 years as a symbolic marker, but stressed that age alone was insufficient without maturity, independence, and marriage.

1.2.5 Religion

Religion emerged as a marker of adult discipline and responsibility. A younger man in KP explained how men have the maturity to comply with religion on their own when he said: "When a boy has to be forced to fast, we think he is a child" (M, FG, Y, K). Similarly, an older man and an older woman from the same province suggested that men don't miss prayers, when they said, respectively: "A boy ... sometimes comes to prayers, sometimes doesn't" (M, FG, O, K), And "A boy ... has no concern for prayers" (W, FG, O, K). Women in KP also believed that men spontaneously knew and adopted correct religious behaviour. One colourfully remarked: "The father keeps forbidding the boy: 'Don't make designs in beard, this is against our Sunnah⁴'" (W, FG, O, K); In Sindh, participants expressed very similar sentiments. A man, for instance, said: "A boy acts impulsively; older people understand religion, Sharia⁵, and social issues better" (M, FG, O, S). Religion was not mentioned in Balochistan,

⁴ Sunnah refers to the traditions, practices, and approvals of the Islamic prophet Muhammad, serving as the second source of Islamic law after the Qur'an.

⁵ Sharia, or

[Islamic law](#), is a comprehensive code of conduct derived from the [Quran](#) and the teachings ([Hadith](#)) of Prophet Muhammad,

and in Punjab it surfaced only indirectly, with marriage itself treated as the religiously sanctioned marker of adulthood (M, FG, O, P). Overall, while not a central theme, references to fasting, prayer, Sunnah, and Sharia added nuance to other markers: boys were portrayed as wayward and neglectful, while men were recognized as disciplined and morally accountable.

1.3 Final Considerations

The data reveal gender differences in how adulthood is defined for girls and boys. For girls, marriage emerged as the single most decisive marker of womanhood across provinces. While age, menstruation, or physical maturity were occasionally mentioned, these were almost always subordinated to marriage (and, to a lesser extent, household responsibilities) as the ultimate reclassification point. For boys, by contrast, marriage was important but not sufficient. Instead, participants emphasized their independence, agency, and responsibility as defining traits of manhood. A boy became a man when he could provide for a family, make decisions independently, and carry household responsibilities. Girls' transition was often framed in terms of modesty, restraint, and domesticity: they were expected to adopt modest dress, take on household work, and care for children. Boys' transition was instead framed around agency and autonomy: moving from dependence on their fathers to becoming providers and decision-makers.

When age was mentioned, the threshold most often cited for both boys and girls was around 18–20 years. In practice, however, numeric age was rarely treated as decisive. Instead, it became meaningful only when paired with other markers—marriage for girls, and independence or responsibility for boys. This means that, socially, the same numeric age can carry different expectations depending on gender and circumstances.

These findings have direct implications for efforts to reduce child marriage in Pakistan. If marriage itself is considered the act that transforms a girl into a woman, then the practice of child marriage becomes self-legitimizing: marrying off a girl erases her childhood status in community terms. This highlights the importance of interventions that challenge the assumption that marriage is the sole pathway to womanhood and broaden community understandings of maturity to include education, skills, and non-marital forms of responsibility. For boys, the strong link between manhood and independence suggests opportunities for programming that fosters safe and gradual transitions to responsibility—through education, livelihoods, and financial literacy—without tying adulthood exclusively to child marriage.

Section 2. What is good and bad for girls and boys?

Marriage should happen at the right time, not when girls are too young to understand life
(M, II, Y, K)

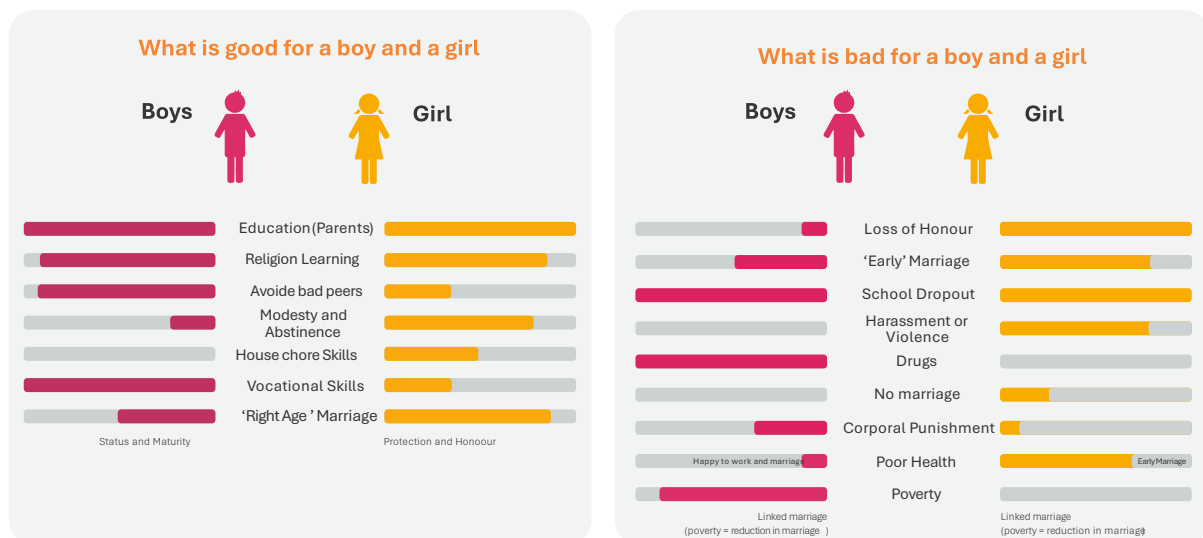
Relevant Research Questions:

2. What according to participants are the factors contributing to well-being of the child?
3. What are the greatest threats that can negatively affect the lives of boys and girls?

Key Findings:

1. Education was unanimously described as critical but with different meanings: economic empowerment for boys, moral and marital value for girls.
2. For girls to live good life, they should learn how to be polite, obedient, and responsible.
3. Girls' safety is of the highest priority for both protection of the girl and preservation of family honour.
4. Boys' safety is mostly related to engagement in risky behaviours (such as substance abuse or smoking).
5. Economic responsibility and pressure to earn are harmful for boys. Adults admired hardworking boys, but this expectation often leads to early entry into workforce and school dropout.
6. Emotional wellbeing and mutual respect matter for both girls and boys. Children from all provinces emphasized happiness, peace at home, and love from parents as essential for a good life.

Figure 2.1 Visual summary of what participants believed to be good and bad for boys and girls



Note: the statements at bottom of the two images refer to, specifically:

1. Age at marriage for boys is 'right' when it can contribute to their status and maturity, for girls when it ensures their protection from sexual assault and upholds family honour
2. Poverty is a threat that is linked to marriage. For boys, poverty reduces their capacity to make marriage proposals. For girls, poverty increases the need to accept marriage proposals.

2.0 Introduction

This section explores how participants understand what constitutes a “good life” for girls and boys. Across all provinces, education, morality, and family support were repeatedly identified as the foundations of a good life, though the meanings attached to these ideals vary sharply by gender.

For girls, wellbeing was most often described in terms of safety, modesty, and moral integrity, alongside growing recognition of the importance of education, health, and delayed marriage. These priorities reflect both protective intentions and restrictive social norms that continue to define girls’ roles through the lens of honour and family reputation. Women—particularly younger and more educated respondents—expressed increasing advocacy for girls’ schooling and livelihood skills, seeing these as essential for empowerment and independence. For boys, wellbeing was linked to education, work, and moral discipline, underpinned by expectations of future responsibility and economic provision. Boys were seen as protectors and earners whose success depends on access to education, guidance, and opportunities for decent work. At the same time, concerns about drug use, peer influence, and unemployment reveal the social vulnerabilities that accompany these expectations.

Taken together, the findings in this section show that gender continues to shape not only what is considered “good” for children, but also how families and communities define protection, maturity, and social value. While adults emphasize morality, safety, and social respectability, children themselves describe wellbeing through more relational and emotional terms—being cared for, having opportunities to learn and play, and feeling safe and valued.

2.1 What is good for girls

Education, modesty, and a safe environment are seen as the main requirements for girls’ well-being, with marriage, health and good values also mentioned. Women across all provinces are the strongest advocates for girls’ schooling, safety and livelihood skills; older men often couch these priorities within moral/religious frameworks.

Table 2.1. Consensus frequency table for what participants believed to be good for girls

	Balochistan		KP		Punjab		Sindh	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Education								
Modesty								
Safety								
Marriage at the right age								
Health & Nutrition								
Good values								

Notes: Colours indicate frequency of consensus. The darker the colour, the more participants mentioned the theme in question (see the colour scheme below).

No mention	Less Frequent	More frequent
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2.1.1 Education

Across all the research settings, education was universally recognized as the cornerstone of a prosperous, safe, and respected life for girls. Men, women, and children repeatedly identified schooling as a means of empowerment, protection, and personal dignity. In Punjab and Sindh, education was viewed as a pathway to independence and self-respect, allowing girls to earn and contribute meaningfully to family life. “Education is very important... educated girls can be independent” (W, IDI, O, S). A woman from Sindh explained that when girls are educated, they can ‘protect themselves, live a good life, and become independent’ (W, IDI, Y, S). In KP, older women linked schooling with discipline and safety, noting that when “our daughters go to school, they stay away from bad company and keep their minds clean” (W, FG, O, KP). Participants linked girls’ schooling to improved health decisions, later marriage, safety, better choices, the ability to earn, and better upbringing of the next generation: “If a girl is educated, she will understand and make better decisions” (W, IDI, Y, B). Women, young or older most vocally argued for girls’ education as a path to independence while older men also supported education but often positioned it relative to preserving morals.

For children themselves, the desire for education was personal and aspirational. Children repeatedly emphasized that schooling is the most important thing for girls, not only because it allows them to “learn” but because it gives them a chance to grow, gain confidence, and help their families. A 13-year-old girl from Punjab said she wished to study and “become a teacher so that other girls in the village can also learn” (G, PW, P). Adolescent boys especially reinforced this, often linking girls’ education to respect and future independence. One teenage boy from Punjab explained very simply that “educated people are listened to” (B, PW, P) a statement he applied to both boys and girls. Children understood that education shapes the way girls are treated, the opportunities they receive, and their ability to avoid negative influences.

Education was also seen as a pathway to economic activities, independence, and income. Although economic contribution was framed as enhancing girls’ status and resilience, home-based livelihoods such as sewing, embroidery, and small home businesses were perceived as acceptable ways for girls to earn while respecting local norms. Older women and young men suggested vocational skills, while younger women emphasized part-time and home-based work. Punjab and KP respondents spoke more about sewing and embroidery, while Sindh respondents mentioned small business opportunities and the importance of income for better life quality. “If a girl can earn income while staying at home (sewing/tailoring), she will feel financially secure” (M, FG, O, K).

2.1.2 Modesty

Across all provinces, the idea of honour (izzat) and modesty (Haya, purdah) emerged as a defining element of what communities consider good for a girl. For many families, a girl’s wellbeing is closely tied to how she presents herself in public, the spaces she is allowed to occupy, and the behaviours expected from her both inside and outside the home. Honor is not perceived as an individual quality alone, it is deeply social and collective, representing the moral standing of the entire family.

Women in Sindh, especially older mothers, repeatedly stressed that a proper covering and modest behaviour are not only moral expectations but protective mechanisms. One woman in her late fifties explained that “It can be dangerous for girls to go outside without proper covering. They should stay within the bounds of modesty and decency. The environment should be such that the girls are mindful of the family’s honour, and no one should look at them inappropriately” (W, FG, O, S). In her view, modesty helps girls navigate public spaces safely while preserving the respect of the family in the community. Men also linked honour to safety and moral protection. A father in Sindh emphasized that parents must guard their daughters carefully because, in his words, “Ignorant people cast evil

glances at girls. If a girl is beautiful, this danger increases further. Parents should protect their children” (M, FG, O, S). He believed that education also plays a crucial role in enabling girls to protect themselves: “If girls get an education, they can protect themselves from evil eyes” (M, FG, O, S). In his perspective, modest behaviour, parental protection, and education work together to safeguard honour.

Younger women also described modesty as a form of emotional and physical safeguarding. One woman explained that she restricts her daughter’s movement because “bad company doesn’t stop at just smoking—it can lead to worse habits, like alcohol and other harmful addictions” (W, FG, Y, P). For her, ensuring that her daughter maintains modest behaviour and avoids risky environments is part of a broader protective strategy to secure both wellbeing and respectability. Taken together, these views reflect a deeply rooted social logic: a girl’s honour is synonymous with family honour, and maintaining that honour through modesty, controlled mobility, and careful behaviour is framed as an essential part of what is “good” for her.

Children clearly understood honour and modesty as central to what makes a girl “good” in the eyes of the community. Although children did not always use the word “honour,” their explanations closely mirrored adult expectations: a good girl behaves modestly, avoids unnecessary interaction with boys, protects her reputation, and stays close to trusted adults. Their voices show that the concept of honour is learned early, deeply shaping how girls understand themselves and how boys view their responsibilities toward them. Both girls and boys described how a girl’s behaviour, dress, and movement outside the home shape her reputation and her family’s respect. In Sindh, girls shared that “if girls go out too much, people start saying things” (G, PW, S), showing how early they internalize community scrutiny. Boys in Punjab similarly explained that girls “should not go far alone” because “people watch them” (B, PW, P), reflecting shared expectations about how a girl preserves honour. Children also linked modesty with safety. In KP, girls said they feel “more respected” and “safer” when covered properly because “people can speak badly if a girl is not covered” (G, PW, K). A girl in Balochistan explained that girls must be “careful outside because anything can happen” (G, PW, B), indicating that modesty is taught as both a moral value and a protective measure in unsafe environments.

2.1.3 Girls Safety and Family Support

Safety and protection were viewed as central to perceptions of girls’ well-being. Parents emphasized secure environments, both inside and outside the home: “A girl should have full protection, my family should take care of me, and I should have a safe home to live in” (W, FG, Y, P). In Sindh, women explained that a “Good life for girls means they feel protected, have family care, and live in a safe home” (W, IDI, Y, S). In Balochistan and KP, safety was often discussed in relation to modesty and boundaries, girls were encouraged to observe purdah and avoid unsafe spaces as a way to protect themselves and their reputations: “It can be dangerous for girls to go outside without proper covering” (W, IDI, Y, B), thus linking protection to social norms. In Punjab, participants highlighted emotional security, noting that “When parents listen and support their daughters, they feel safe from within” (M, FG, O, P). Supportive families and parental encouragement for education were repeatedly described as essential. Most of the women participants stressed family support, while men on the other hand referred to family reputation and the role of elders. Respondents from all provinces highlighted parental encouragement and support an important factor enabling girls to go to major cities for education. They wanted their daughters to be able to safely access schooling and move safely in the public sphere. In KP, while talking about safety, young women and young man stressed the need for neighbourhood vigilance, whereas Sindh and Balochistan participants stressed the need for safe access to schools and need for female friendly transport. Similarly, Punjab respondents both men and women mentioned household security and traditional safeguards extremely important for

girls' safety. Children were deeply aware of risks outside the home, especially in rural settings. Boys described how girls often avoid leaving their homes because going out exposes them to danger from strangers, traffic, animals, and unsafe environments.

2.1.4 Marriage at the 'right' age

Marriage was widely seen as an important milestone in a girl's life, but with regional variations in emphasis. In Sindh and Punjab, respondents agreed that marriage provides social respect and protection when it occurs at a suitable age. 'A girl should be married when mature, not too young,' said a man from Sindh (M, II, O, S), underscoring the need to avoid child marriages. In Balochistan, where social norms are more conservative, respondents linked marriage to moral safeguarding, believing it helps girls avoid social stigma. However, across provinces, there was a growing recognition that education and maturity should come before marriage. "Girls should be married at an age when she feels ready" (W, IDI, Y, S). One young woman from Punjab stated, "First, we should study, then think about marriage" (W, FG, Y, P). In Sindh, several women stated that girls themselves ask why marriage is discussed so early when they "want to play and study" (W, FG, Y, S).

Family support throughout this transition, before and after marriage, was viewed as vital for a girl's confidence, stability, and happiness. Marriage is framed as a source of security but also as a potential risk if it happens too early "People think child marriage protects girls, but it destroys them" (M, IDI, O, P). In almost all provinces, it was frequently discussed that marriage is a social necessity, however participants simultaneously stressed the need to delay marriage until girls completed their education and should have health. Traditional pressure for child marriage was more evident in KP and Balochistan while Sindh and Punjab tilted towards marrying after some education.

Children's voices also surfaced indirectly in discussions around marriage. Girls stressed the need to complete education before marriage as an important factor for their wellbeing and quality life "I want to finish school before becoming someone's wife" (G, PW, K). Adults reported that girls often expressed a desire to finish school, learn skills, and enjoy their childhood, similar views echoed by adolescents also who stated clearly that "she is still a child" (B, PW, P) and not ready for marriage. Children understood intuitively that marriage requires maturity, and that forcing it too early destroys childhood and opportunities.

2.1.5 Health and Nutrition

Good nutrition and maternal healthcare were considered necessary for girls' well-being and to reduce risks from early childbearing. Parents across all provinces emphasized that food security is both a physical and emotional need "If girls get proper nutrition and care, their growth and future will be better" (W, IDI, Y, S). Sindh and Balochistan repeatedly raised and linked poor health with lack of local facilities and clean water due to poverty and limited services. In Sindh, a middle-aged man stressed that "girls should eat nutritious food and avoid child marriage, both are important for a good life" (M, II, O, S). In Punjab, mothers often linked food with parental care, saying that providing enough food and attention ensured girls felt loved and protected. In Balochistan, where poverty was more pronounced, women expressed concern that lack of food affected both health and morale, "How can a girl smile when her stomach is empty" said a woman (W, II, O, B). Across provinces, participants linked nutrition to future reproductive health, which is deeply embedded in cultural expectations of a girl's life trajectory.

Though children did not speak directly about nutrition, their statements about school, play, and the ability to "grow" reveal that they link wellbeing to health and physical strength. The adult reflections about children's priorities show a clear theme, children value good food, a peaceful home, and parents who protect them kindly.

2.1.6 Good Values

Across all provinces, morality upbringing and respect featured strongly as qualities that make a girl “good girl,” closely tied to protection, reputation, and family honor. In Balochistan, morality was described through expectations that girls should avoid bad company and remain guided by religious teaching. Respondents emphasized madrasa learning alongside formal schooling, seeing both as essential for shaping respectful, disciplined girls. A man in Balochistan stated that “a good girl learns both Quran and school knowledge, both make her respectful and strong,” (M, II, O, B) and another added that “a girl who knows the Quran and studies in school is strong in both faith and life” (M, II, Y, B). In KP, religious education was similarly viewed as a safeguard against immorality and a foundation for modest conduct. In Punjab and Sindh, morality was framed through good manners, obedience, and knowing right from wrong, qualities seen as signs of proper upbringing.

Although many women spoke more about safety than morality as a separate concept, the underlying idea was consistent, moral guidance protects girls from social harm. One element linked with good values was explained by a woman as “when girls enter harmful environments, it can negatively affect their health and life” (W, IDI, Y, B), linking morality directly to physical wellbeing. Mothers in Sindh further elaborated that morality is lived through everyday practices such as modest behaviour, appropriate dress, and self-restraint in public spaces. One woman stated that girls must “stay within the bounds of modesty and decency, the environment should be such that the girls are mindful of the family’s honour, and no one should look at them inappropriately” (W, FG, O, S).

In all participatory workshops, children consistently described morality and good values as essential qualities that shape what a “good girl” should be in their communities. Both girls and boys spoke about this attribute with surprising maturity, showing how deeply social expectations have been absorbed even at a young age. Children explained that a good girl is someone who shows respect to parents, behaves politely, listens to elders, and maintains a calm and gentle attitude at home and outside. As one group of girls expressed, a good girl is someone who “talks nicely, helps her mother, and never misbehaves with elders” (G, PW, P). Boys echoed similar ideas, saying that a good girl is girl who “keeps good manners, speaks with respect, and follows the rules of the house” (B, PW, K).

2.2 What is Good for Boys

For boys, education, followed by work, and delayed marriage leading to family stability are considered as most important for their well-being. Overlaying these, are persistent concerns about health, drugs and the need for moral/religious guidance. Men across age groups tended to stress job and marriage timing; women stressed protective environment, nutrition and schooling.

Table 2.2. Consensus frequency table for what participants believed to be good for boys

	Balochistan		KP		Punjab		Sindh	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Education								
Economic stability								
Marriage at the right age								
Family support & good company								
Morality								
Health								

Notes: Colours indicate frequency of consensus. The darker the colour, the more participants mentioned the theme in question (see the colour scheme below).

No mention	Less Frequent	More frequent
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2.2.1 Education

Education consistently emerged as the cornerstone of a good life for boys in all provinces. “The most important thing is education then job and property” (M, FG, O, B). Communities saw schooling as more than an academic pursuit, it was described as a moral, social, and economic investment that shapes boys into responsible and respected men. In Punjab and Sindh, parents emphasized that education equips boys with livelihood skills and the dignity of self-reliance. They viewed schooling as a way to lift the family’s status and help boys avoid idleness and frustration. Education was also seen as providing the ability to delay marriage until economically ready, this has been highlighted by both men and women, however men often framed education in instrumental terms, jobs, avoiding drugs, while women emphasized education’s protective and moral benefits. Fathers in Sindh spoke about how “education teaches boys how to live,” (M, II, O, S) explaining that an educated son can find work, support his family, and live with honour. KP and Balochistan strongly linked education to preventing drug use and anti-social behaviour. “If they go to school, they will be disciplined and stay away from drugs” (M, IDI, Y, K).

Children saw education as the only pathway to dignity, direction, and future stability. They repeatedly said that studying is the most important thing for boys. A teenage boy from Punjab explained “I want to study so I can help my family and become a teacher one day” (B, PW, P). “Everyone listens to educated people” (B, PW, P). In Balochistan, adolescent boys also stressed how schooling keeps boys away from trouble “Going to school, avoiding smoking, and making good friends are the key things” (B, PW, B).

2.2.2 Economic Stability and Livelihood

Across all provinces, the idea of earning through honest work was closely tied to manhood and responsibility. “If there were more job opportunities, people would have something to do and they wouldn’t remain idle” (M, IDI, O, K). Parents shared that a good boy should learn a skill or trade early in life to support his parents and household. In Sindh and Punjab, men spoke about education leading to employment and stability, while in Balochistan and KP, respondents stressed the dignity of labour itself. As one father from Balochistan explained, “A boy who earns with his own hands, eats with respect” (M, IDI, O, B).

Boys themselves aspired to be self-reliant, and some wanted to open small shops or become mechanics, expressing pride in being able to be financially independent. For many children participants, productive work symbolized maturity, discipline, and the fulfilment of a son's duty toward his parents. In KP and Balochistan boys emphasized lack of jobs as a driver to negative outcomes "idle youth leading to drugs" (B, PW, K).

2.2.3 Marriage at the 'right' age

Across all four provinces, participants consistently described marriage as an important indicator of a boy's emotional growth, social standing, and transition into responsible adulthood. While marriage itself was viewed positively, communities repeatedly emphasized that it becomes beneficial only when boys are mature; financially, mentally, and emotionally. Marriage 'too soon', by contrast, was framed as risky, disruptive, and unfair to both the boy and his future wife.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, discussions were particularly nuanced, with both men and women specifying that the ideal age falls roughly between 20 to 30 years. This range, they explained, allows boys to complete their education, secure income, and develop the "sense and patience" needed to manage a household. As one older man mentioned that "Marriage at the right time—when he is mature and can provide—keeps him away from bad habits" (M, FG, O, K). Women echoed this, explaining that boys should "first learn responsibility before taking charge of a family" (W, FG, O, K). In Punjab also, respondents placed stronger emphasis on financial stability before marriage. A common concern was that boys who marry too early, without income or life experience, face frustration, conflict, and pressure. Mothers often linked readiness to the completion of education, saying a boy should "stand on his own feet first" (W, FG, O, P). One older woman stated clearly, "If he marries without work or sense, his life and the girl's life both suffer" (W, II, O, P). In Sindh, emotional readiness featured prominently. Participants described marriage as a fulfilling milestone for boys, but only when they have developed emotional maturity. As one younger man explained, "A boy feels complete after marriage, only when he is ready in mind and earnings" (M, II, Y, S). Women added that immature boys "cannot control anger" (W, II, O, S) and may struggle to manage the pressures of married life, making delayed marriage a protective factor for both families. In Balochistan, respondents stressed that marriage brings stability only when boys possess "sense, patience, and earning" Men described child marriage as harmful because immature boys "do not understand rights and responsibilities" (M, FG, O, B). Women voiced similar concerns, "If he is not mentally grown, he will not take care of his wife, Marriage becomes a fight, not a blessing" (W, II, O, B). Taken together, the perspectives from all provinces reveal a strong consensus; appropriate-age marriage is viewed as a safeguard for boys—protecting their education, strengthening their character, and enabling them to enter adulthood with dignity, stability, and purpose.

2.2.4 Health and nutrition

Nutrition and access to healthcare were widely recognized as essential for boys to grow into productive and capable adults. Across all provinces, families consistently described good health and adequate nutrition as the very foundation of a boy's strength, happiness, and future prospects. As one participant mentioned, "Education, good health and clean environment are essential for their development" (M, FG, O, B). Although boys are often perceived as naturally strong, parents stressed that they also require care, protection, and proper nourishment to mature into responsible young men. In Sindh and Punjab, mothers frequently associated good food with calmer behaviour, better focus, and greater emotional stability, while elder man emphasized that balanced nutrition builds confidence and keeps boys committed to school and away from risky behaviours. In Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, health was understood not only as physical well-being but also as a protective factor shielding boys from drugs, street influences, and harmful peer groups. While children did not

speak extensively about nutrition directly, their reflections about boys needing to “grow strong,” “avoid illness,” and stay physically safe show an intuitive understanding that health is foundational to wellbeing.

2.2.5 Family support, environment & good company

A stable home environment, parental guidance and being kept away from bad company are repeatedly cited as protective factors for boys. “If parents guide them and keep them away from wrong company they won’t go astray” (M, II, O, K). Parents emphasized the need to protect boys from harmful influences. Respondents in KP and Punjab particularly warned against drug use, peer pressure, and street violence. As one mother said that “If our sons go to school, they don’t fall into bad company” (W, FG, O, K). In Balochistan, families mentioned the importance of safe schools and community spaces, while in Sindh, respondents talked about emotional protection, ensuring boys do not feel neglected or unloved. A recurrent worry was mobile phone addiction (see Section 6 for more information on digital technologies, especially phones), idleness, and drugs as major threats. Young male participants often raised phones and drugs as present age dangers and older women flagged drugs as a community problem. Safety was understood in a broad sense, encompassing physical, moral, and emotional protection. Parents saw safeguarding boys as a collective responsibility shared by the family, school, and community, all working together to guide them toward a responsible and respectful adulthood. Women across both age groups young and old emphasized the role of strong family support, while older men highlighted the importance of close monitoring and consistent religious and moral guidance.

Children also recognized that boys need guidance from parents, especially fathers. Field data from several provinces show that children believed boys thrive when families encourage education, protect them from harmful peers and provide guidance and emotional support.

2.2.6 Morality and Values

Moral upbringing was widely viewed as the cornerstone of a boy’s character, shaping not only how he behaves but the kind of man he becomes. Across all provinces, communities emphasized that obedience, respect for elders, and fear of Allah form the moral foundation of a good life. In Sindh, mothers explained that a boy must “listen to his parents and show them respect,” (W, FG, O, S), whereas men in KP and Punjab linked moral behaviour closely with both schooling and religious practice. As one participant from Punjab stated that, “Religious education will guide him to avoid bad behaviour” (M, II, O, P). In Balochistan, respondents highlighted the importance of balancing worldly learning with faith, stating that “A good boy is one who follows religion and behaves well with others” (M, FG, O, B). Boys who prayed regularly, avoided drugs, respected elders, and maintained discipline were consistently described as bringing honour and stability to their families.

Across gender and regions, parents stressed that without moral grounding, even education or material success could not secure a meaningful life. This shared understanding reflects a national moral consensus, that a boy’s worth is measured not only by what he accomplishes but by his conduct, manners, and integrity. This view was strongly echoed by men and equally emphasized by women, particularly in KP and rural Balochistan, where religious schooling (madrasa) was seen as essential for guiding boys toward righteous behaviour.

Children emphasized that boys should be “good human beings,” respectful and responsible. Their views echoed adult expectations but were framed more simply “listen to parents, avoid wrongdoing, be respectful, pray and study” (B, PW, B). In KP, young respondents highlighted the importance of morals embedded within schooling and religious learning, “Education keeps their mind clean” (G, PW, K).

2.3 Threats to girls' wellbeing

With regard to threats for girls, the responses reveal a persistent tension between protection and control — many adults perceive restriction as a way to safeguard girls, while others recognize that these same restrictions limit their potential and well-being. Across all four provinces, participants expressed deep concern about the social, moral, and physical threats faced by girls. These threats revolve around restricted education, harassment, child marriage, lack of mobility, and loss of family honour. Respondents said that social norms and fear of gossip turn even minor harassment into a reason to restrict girls' movement and schooling. New technologies, like mobile phones and social media, have deepened these fears about reputation and risk that further tighten control over girls' lives (See Section 6).

Table 2.3. Consensus frequency table for what participants believed to be threats to girls' wellbeing

	Balochistan		KP		Punjab		Sindh	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Early dropout								
Workload at home								
Health & safety risk								
Child & forced marriage								
Harassment								
Family honour								
Lack of income-generating activities								

Notes: Colours indicate frequency of consensus. The darker the colour, the more participants mentioned the theme in question (see the colour scheme below).

No mention	Less Frequent	More frequent
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2.3.1 Early Dropout

Many respondents particularly women lamented that poverty, social fear, and family priorities force girls to leave school early. While both men and women acknowledged the problem, men tended to justify it on economic grounds (arguing that they couldn't afford sending girls to school), whereas women criticized it as a denial of girls' potential (believing that school dropout reduced girls' opportunities to find work in the future). In Balochistan and KP, school dropout was linked to lack of nearby schools and mobility restrictions. Families repeatedly shared that girls drop out early, either because schools are too far, unsafe, or poorly staffed, or because social fears and community norms keep them home. Parents often frame this withdrawal as "protection," not discrimination, reflecting deep concerns about harassment, gossip, and honour. In Sindh and Balochistan, families explained that even minor risks on the way to school such as traffic, harassment, or a rumour can permanently end a girl's education. Dropout was seen to trigger a ripple effect; eroding girls' confidence, increasing their social isolation, and ultimately pushing them toward child marriage. "People still think it is a waste to spend on girls' education because she will go to another house" (M, II, O, S). When girls are kept home, communities quickly perceive them as "ready," and marriage becomes the only acceptable path. Participants recognized that uneducated girls remain dependent and vulnerable,

unable to make decisions or defend their rights. “When girls leave school early, they forget everything and become dependent” (W, FG, O, P).

Where adults spoke about limited school access or dropout as risks, children offered lived examples of how these disruptions unfold. Girls explained that many families keep daughters at home for safety or household work, even when boys in the same family are allowed to continue schooling. One girl said, “Sometimes girls cannot go to school because they have to help at home” (G, PW, P). Boys, too, recognized this inequality. A boy from Sindh stated, “Girls stop school early... people say it is not safe for them outside” (B, PW, S). Children directly linked safety fears, harassment, and domestic workload to why girls lose access to learning.

2.3.2 Household workload & unequal responsibilities

Adults identified heavy domestic labour as a threat, and children confirmed this reality with clear examples. Girls spoke about the long list of chores they must complete each day — cooking, cleaning, washing dishes, caring for siblings — often with no time left for schoolwork or rest. In one activity, a girl said, “We do so much work at home... there is no time to rest” (G, PW, P). Boys also noted this imbalance, acknowledging that girls shoulder most of the household labour. A boy said, “Girls work all day; they get tired” (B, PW, K). Children’s statements show that this “normal” workload is not only physically demanding but also limits girls’ time for education, play, and social interaction — making it a significant threat to their well-being. During participatory workshops across provinces, children consistently pointed out that girls spend far more time inside the home than boys—a pattern they explained through expectations of household duties and family responsibilities. Their observations show that girls’ time is more controlled and more connected to supporting the household, whereas boys’ time is more flexible and activity based.

2.3.3 Health and Safety Risks

Health-related risks were also described as severe across the provinces. In KP, young women reported frequent pregnancy complications and caesarean deliveries among very young brides, explaining that repeated early pregnancies weaken girls’ bodies and sometimes lead to long-term illness or death. Balochistan respondents linked inadequate nutrition, lack of toilets, and poor sanitation to chronic health problems affecting girls’ daily lives. Punjab women added that limited access to clean water and basic healthcare further compounds girls’ vulnerability and undermines their overall well-being.

Health emergencies amplified these challenges. Girls shared that when they fall sick, they sometimes “wait for hours” before help arrives because families struggle to arrange safe transport, especially at night” (G, PW, P). This delay made many girls feel more at risk than boys, who they said move more freely and are allowed to seek help on their own.

2.3.4 Child Marriage

Across all four provinces, child marriage emerged as one of the most serious threats to girls’ wellbeing, shaping their health, education, emotional development, and long-term life chances. Participants consistently described it as a practice driven by poverty, social pressure, and rigid norms around honor.

In Balochistan, several respondents explained how “girls are “engaged at birth” and pushed into marriage early, long before they understand its responsibilities” (W, FG, O, B). One man stated plainly, “Girls under 17 or 18 are too young... their emotional and intellectual development is still in progress” (M, II, Y, B). Another added that child marriages often lead to instability because “they do not have

the maturity to handle marital responsibilities.” (M, II, Y, B). They linked child marriage directly to long-term harm, noting that pressure to marry young, cuts short a girl’s education and deepens her dependence on others. One woman described it as a form of both social and physical risk, “They are expected to marry young and take on responsibilities at an early age” (W, II, O, B).

The emotional and physical consequences were described vividly in Sindh. Older women explained that a girl who marries too young is “destroyed physically, mentally, and emotionally” (W, FG, O, S), stressing that she is still a child who is neither physically nor psychologically prepared for marriage. Younger men and women agreed that child marriage forces girls to leave school and exposes them to health complications, household burdens, and emotional stress. In KP and Punjab, respondents connected child marriage with school dropout, poor maternal health, and social isolation. Families described marriage not as a choice, but an obligation tied to honor and reputation. A KP man highlighted the emotional dimension, noting that “Marriage should happen at the right time, not when girls are too young to understand life” (M, II, Y, K).

The threat of child marriage surfaced strongly in children’s discussions, mirroring adult concerns but with deeper emotional expressions. Girls described seeing older sisters or cousins pulled out of school and “disappearing” from childhood responsibilities overnight. One girl from Balochistan explained, “If a girl is married early, she cannot study or play anymore” (G, PW, B). Boys also associated child marriage with sadness, acknowledging the emotional pressure girls face. A boy in Punjab commented, “When girls are married early, they become tired and look unhappy” (B, PW, P).

2.3.5 Harassment and Insecurity in Public Spaces

Across the dataset the narrative is clear that harassment is not only a direct safety threat but also a trigger for restrictive protective practices that curtail girls’ education and autonomy. “When a girl goes out, men tease her; families then stop her from going to school” (W, FG, Y, K).

In every province, participants described harassment in public spaces (particularly on the way to school or work) as a core reason why girls’ movements are restricted. In Punjab women shared that “Boys or men following or taking photographs and then threatening to expose girls; this fear of reputational damage leads families to stop girls from going to school or work” (W, FG, Y, P). Participants in Sindh, both men and women, also shared similar views. “If a girl goes out alone, she can be harassed” (W, FG, O, S), and this fear is routinely cited as justification for marrying daughters early or limiting their movement. In Balochistan, women narrated that hostile men approaching girls in the street are frequent risks as a result girls are often accompanied or kept at home. “Our streets are not safe; this is why parents prefer girls to stay home” (W, FG, Y, B). Punjab respondents described situations where boys’ harassment escalated into fights or physical danger for girls.

Even when adults described safety and harassment as major threats, children echoed these concerns with vivid examples from their daily lives. Girls repeatedly mentioned “how simply walking outside exposes them to teasing, staring, and unwanted comments from boys” (G, PW, P). In one participatory session, a girl explained quietly, “When we go outside, boys tease us... that is why some girls stop going to school” (G, PW, K). Boys, too, acknowledged this behaviour, showing awareness of how unsafe spaces restricts girls to avail opportunities. A boy in a discussion admitted, “People on the streets say bad things to girls; they get scared to walk alone” (B, PW, K). Children across provinces also talked about kidnappings or being followed. A girl in KP said, “We cannot go far; someone can take us” (G, PW, K). These fears shape how girls themselves often accept limited mobility as inevitable.

2.3.6 Loss of Reputation and Family Honor

The fear of community gossip emerged as a strong social control mechanism across all provinces: “People talk if a girl is seen outside too much — it becomes shameful for the family” (M, FG, O, P). Girls’ behaviour and movement are tightly monitored, and any deviation is seen as damaging to family respect. The fear of reputational damage recurs in most responses as a social mechanism that constrains girls. In Sindh and Punjab women young and old explained that even minor interactions between girls and boys can spark gossip that ruins marriage prospects, families therefore tightly control girls’ behaviour and movement. “Girls should not roam around; it invites problems” (M, FG, O, K). KP women respondents reported the same logic, worry about “what people will say” pushes parents to marry daughters early or withdraw them from public life” (W, FG, O, K). Balochistan participants described elders’ authority and conservative village norms that prioritize controlling girls to preserve family honour. “Strict control at home makes girls afraid of everyone” (M, IDI, O, B). The honour code that is deep rooted in patriarchal norms was found strongest in rural KP and Balochistan, though traces exist everywhere. Younger women participants linked it directly to psychological stress and silence among girls and a direct contributor to reducing girls’ freedom however, older women participants viewed them as necessary protection of family honour.

2.3.7 Lack of Revenue Generating Opportunities

Girls’ limited access to skills training and economic opportunities was cited as a major threat to her wellbeing, particularly by younger participants. Across all provinces, communities described how girls face lifelong disadvantages rooted in unequal access to education, mobility, and economic opportunity. “If a girl could work, she would help her parents, but they don’t allow her” (M, II, Y, K). Participants emphasized the lack of safe, home-based or local income options for girls as a major threat. In KP and Balochistan women said that when no economic alternatives exist, parents see marriage as the only route to a daughter’s security. Punjab and Sindh respondents also pointed out that without the possibility for vocational training or paid work, families deprioritize girls’ education and keep them restricted to domestic roles. The lack of livelihood opportunities traps girls into dependency and increases the risk of child marriage or exploitation.

Although economic discrimination was discussed more extensively by adults, children understood its consequences through what they observe at home. Girls described how families invest more in boys because boys are seen as future earners. One girl shared, “Money is spent on boys first... girls stay home” (G, PW, P). Boys also reflected this belief, explaining that girls rarely get opportunities for earning or training. A child in Punjab said, “Boys can work outside; girls are not allowed” (B, PW, P). Children’s voices show that economic discrimination, even when not articulated with adult vocabulary is deeply internalized and shapes expectations around girls’ futures.

2.4 Threats to Boys’ Wellbeing

Across all four provinces, participants identified drugs, bad company, unemployment, lack of education, and the negative influence of mobile and social media as major threats to boys. While Balochistan and KP emphasized drugs and limited opportunities, Punjab focused on peer influence, drugs, and reputation, and Sindh highlighted physical risks and weak protective systems. Men, women, and children echoed similar concerns but with different emphases: women linked risks to idleness and household strain, men to public safety and peers, and children to mobiles and boredom.

Table 2.4. Consensus frequency table for what participants believed to be threats to boys' wellbeing

	Balochistan		KP		Punjab		Sindh	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Bad company								
Substance abuse& addition								
Mobile phones								
Lack of education								
Poverty &lack of employment								
Child Marriage								
Violence								
Physical safety								
Sexual harassment								

Notes: Colours indicate frequency of consensus. The darker the colour, the more participants mentioned the theme in question (see the colour scheme below).

No mention	Less Frequent	More frequent
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2.4.1 Bad Company (in the eyes of the parents)

Across Pakistan, communities agree that the greatest danger to boys comes not from external forces alone, but from the company they keep. “The biggest risk for boys is that they might fall into bad company, make the wrong friends, or develop harmful habits” (W, II, Y, S). Parents and elders from every province spoke with deep concern about how easily young boys, when left idle or unsupervised, fall under the influence of peers who lead them astray. In Punjab, an elderly man explained that a boy’s future “depends on who he sits with,” (M, II, O, P) emphasizing that bad company draws boys toward theft, fights, and gambling. “When boys roam freely without any purpose, they easily get involved in wrong groups” (M, FG, O, P). Women in Sindh shared similar fears, describing how their sons “spend all their time on mobiles,” forming friendships online or in places where “bad things are common” (W, FG, O, S). They linked these habits to stealing or neglecting studies. In Balochistan, younger men echoed that avoiding bad company is just as important as attending school, since “a single wrong friend can destroy a child’s path” (M, II, Y, B). Communities see strong parental supervision, good friends, and meaningful engagement as essential protections against this threat.

Children across provinces echoed adults’ concerns that boys are especially vulnerable to negative peer influence. While they did not use terms like “bad company” explicitly, the risks they described, smoking, fighting, risky games, and following older boys, mirrored adult perspectives clearly. In several workshops, boys admitted that some boys “copy older friends,” especially when no adult supervises them” (B, PW, K). Girls also noticed these changes, observing that “boys follow other boys who smoke or engage in unsafe behaviour” (G, PW, K). Although children’s quotes on this topic were brief, they consistently highlighted how boys get pulled into risky groups simply because they spend more time outside the home than girls.

2.4.2 Substance Abuse and Addiction

Many respondents across all provinces highlighted the creeping danger of drug use amongst boys, as a major threat; “the biggest problem for boys in our community is drug addiction, many young boys fall into drug use because they do not have proper guidance or education” (M, II, O, K). In Balochistan, mothers lamented that “many boys are ruined by intoxication and bad influences” (W, FG, O, B), describing addiction as both a health and moral crisis. In Punjab too, community elders linked drug use with hopelessness and unemployment, “When they have nothing to do, they find comfort in smoke,” (M, FG, Y, P). Parents described smoking, hashish, and other intoxicants as the first visible step toward social decline. “Drug addiction has become a major issue here, substances like hashish, crystal meth (ice) and other narcotics are widely available, posing a serious threat to boys’ lives” (M, FG, O, K).

Even though children in the participatory workshops did not explicitly mention smoking, drugs, or addiction, their discussions reveal a clear understanding that boys face different kinds of risks because they spend much more time outside the home. In Sindh, during discussion, boys pointed out that many dangers exist in the places where boys usually gather like streets, fields, markets, and canal banks. Although they did not name drug use directly, they associated these spaces with “wrong people, and “dangerous boys,” (B. PW, S), indicating an awareness that boys are more exposed to risky behaviour and exposed to substance abuse and addiction outside.

3.1.3 Mobile Phones and Digital Exposure

Across four provinces, mobile phones are now seen as a double-edged sword. “Mobiles show them the wrong world before they are ready” (M, IDI, O, K). In both urban and rural areas, adults described mobile phones as an invisible threat consuming boys’ time and attention. In Punjab, middle-aged men called social media “the biggest danger,” lamenting how “it ruins their minds” (M, II, Y, P). Women in Sindh observed that “even small boys are glued to phones,” warning that this obsession leads them toward theft or “the wrong path” (W, FG, O, S). In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, mothers spoke passionately about how mobile addiction has introduced inappropriate relationships and exposure to harmful content. One woman explained that “mobiles are teaching boys what they should never see,” expressing helplessness in controlling digital behaviour (W, FG, O, K). In Balochistan, educated young men noted that social media could be positive or negative, but agreed that most boys “spend excessive time on it instead of focusing on studies” (M, FG, Y, B). The phone, in these communities, has become a metaphor for lost control, an object that connects boys to the world but disconnects them from family, education, and moral guidance.

Across all provinces, the children’s narratives share the same core insight that mobile phones are not “bad” in themselves, but the absence of guidance and limits creates risks. They explained that excessive phone use distracts boys from studies, disrupts routines, and pushes them to wander outside in search of Wi-Fi or places to play games, areas children themselves identified as unsafe. In Punjab, children noted that boys with early access to phones stop listening to elders and imitate inappropriate behaviour. They pointed out that boys sometimes watch things “children should not watch” (B. PW, P). KP children described strong peer pressure to own better phones or download certain apps, as well as boys frequently leaving home to charge devices or find stronger signals, increasing exposure to risky public spaces. In Balochistan, children highlighted the addictive nature of games, saying “time just goes,” and drew boys sitting alone with phones instead of studying or playing, reflecting growing isolation. Together, these perspectives show that children clearly understand digital exposure as a powerful force shaping boys’ behaviour good or bad depending upon supervision and monitoring by the elders. More information on the role of digital technologies and mobile phones is offered in Section 6.

2.4.4 Lack of Education

All four provinces link the absence or poor quality of education directly to the risks boys face. Education, as people repeatedly said, is the key that keeps boys safe. Yet schools are often distant, under-resourced, or poorly managed. In Sindh, a young father lamented that “teachers don’t come on time, and studies have stopped,” leaving children idle and vulnerable” (M, II, Y, S). In Balochistan, respondents described that many boys live in poverty and without schools, which pushes them into work or street life. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, older men worried that “the literacy rate is barely two percent,” saying ignorance feeds every other danger—from addiction to child marriage” (M, IDI, O, K). Similarly, Punjab’s elders noted that when there are no opportunities or facilities, boys drift toward urban centres or into unproductive company. Education, in this narrative, is more than schooling, it represents discipline, parents’ protective behaviour, and hope for better life. Its absence leaves boys without structure or ambition, making them easy prey to destructive forces. “If a boy stops studying and starts earning too soon, he loses direction” (M, II, O, S). In all provinces, a recurring but often understated threat to boys’ well-being is the absence of a reliable protective system both at home and in the wider community. “When fathers don’t talk to their sons, they learn from the streets” (M, IDI, O, B). Boys are expected to navigate public spaces independently from an early age. This freedom, however, comes without the safeguards they need and exposes them to a wide range of risks such as violence, exploitation, physical injury and harmful social influences.” Parents think boys can take care of themselves, but this freedom ruins many lives” (W, FG, Y, P).

Across all provinces, children participating in the workshops consistently identified lack of education as one of the most serious threats to boys’ future wellbeing. Their discussions, conducted during participatory workshops revealed a strong awareness that boys who do not attend school, or who drop out early, face limited pathways in life. Children observed that when boys are outside school, they are more likely to roam around, waste time, or get into trouble with peers. In Punjab, children noted that some boys skip school or stop attending because “there is no one to check them” or “their parents are busy,” suggesting that lack of supervision leads to disengagement from learning” (B, PW, P). Children saw this absenteeism not just as a missed academic opportunity but as a pathway to trouble, emphasizing that boys who do not study do not get a good future. In Balochistan, children expressed that boys without education have very few choices. They described those boys doing small jobs, or simply passing time with friends, a pattern they associated with a lack of direction and increased vulnerability to risks around them.

2.4.5 Unemployment and Poverty

Across all provinces, participants described unemployment and poverty as the most immediate threats to boys’ wellbeing, shaping not only their choices but their entire sense of identity. Families and communities linked joblessness with idleness, frustration, and exposure to bad company, drugs, and petty crime. Poverty forces boys to shoulder adult responsibilities early, pushing them into unsafe or exploitative work while depriving them of education and stability. “Poor boys are forced to work young; they see life’s hardness too early” (W, FG, O, B). In flood-affected and impoverished areas, boys were described as wandering in search of income, often finding only danger and despair. Parents noted how lack of opportunities erodes boys’ confidence and morality, leaving them vulnerable to manipulation by criminal or political actors. Across regions, unemployment was seen not just as an economic issue but a social crisis, one that fuels risky behaviour, weakens family structures, and endangers community stability. As many concluded that when boys have no opportunities, the whole community suffers. Parents described unemployment as both a cause and consequence of social risk. In Punjab, men argued that “if there is no work, there will be no purpose,” (M, II, Y, P) connecting idleness to crime and frustration. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a young man said that “if boys had jobs, they wouldn’t wander or get into trouble,” (M, IDI, Y, K) pointing to joblessness

as the root of all instability. Balochistan's respondents spoke of poverty and social isolation pushing boys into unhealthy behaviours, while Sindh's women recalled that poor boys "go outside and get into fights or are kidnapped," (W, FG, Y, S) showing how poverty forces exposure to unsafe environments. For many families, economic insecurity not only threatens survival but undermines parental authority. When fathers cannot provide, boys lose respect for elders and begin asserting independence too soon. In this sense, unemployment is not merely financial, it is deeply social and psychological, breaking the very fabric of family life.

During participatory workshops across all four provinces, children consistently highlighted poverty and lack of income as major threats shaping the lives of boys. Even though they did not use formal terms like unemployment, children repeatedly described situations where boys are forced to work, leave school early, or take on responsibilities far beyond their age because their families do not have enough money. In Punjab, children talked about boys who have to earn instead of going to school, explaining that when fathers struggle to find work, boys are expected to support the family, sometimes through labour in markets, workshops, or farms.

2.4.6 Child Marriage

Communities across all provinces consistently described child marriage as an overlooked risk for boys "boys too are pushed into marriage before they are emotionally or financially ready" (W, FG, Y, P). In Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, men agreed that marrying young boys or girls creates tension and unhealthy marital relationship "when the boy has no livelihood source, he cannot support a family-this ended in an unhappy relationship" (M, FG, Y, P). In Balochistan, participants, while talking about child marriage and its drawbacks stated that "some boys marry early or engage in romantic relationships before they can earn, often leads to domestic conflict or abandonment by the families" (M, FG, O, B). Sindh's women respondents also included child marriage among general threats to children including boys, saying it "destroys them physically, mentally, and emotionally," (W, FG, O, S). Across the regions, child marriage for boys is understood as a burden that cuts short education, limits mobility, and locks them into adult responsibilities they are unprepared to bear. It transforms them from children into men overnight but without the maturity or means to sustain that transition.

Children rarely spoke directly about child marriage for boys however, in the few instances where they referenced marriage, they viewed it as something boys should not be pushed into early, especially when they are not ready or still studying. While talking about child marriage of boys, they said that child marriage limits boys' freedom, education, and emotional maturity.

2.4.7 Violence, Retaliation, and Insecurity

Many communities described violence as both a cause and consequence of male risk behaviour. "A boy's anger can become his danger; if provoked, he fights and gets into trouble" (M, IDI, O, S). While talking about insecurities for boys, a man from Punjab, shared his views that in our culture marriage of one's own choice is not acceptable thing so sometimes when a boys involve in love affairs "they can't move freely" because families of the girls might seek revenge and kill both girl and boy" (M, II, Y, P). In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, women narrated stories of mothers "who live in fear for their sons" after family disputes, noting that revenge killings are still a social reality (W, FG, Y, K). Similar views were shared by women from Balochistan, "hostility and fights" as common dangers for our boys", (W, FG, O, B).

2.4.8 Physical Safety

Across provinces, participants agreed that boys face serious threats to their physical safety due to their constant mobility, travelling to school, working, or playing in unsafe environments with little

supervision. Women in Sindh spoke at length about the environmental risks boys face, especially in rural areas where boys spend more time away from home. One woman explained, “The village boys go out of the house to play, and when they bathe in the canals, there is always a risk of drowning” (W, IDI, Y, S). Another older woman described the unpredictability of outdoor movement, noting that “Poor boys go outside—sometimes they get into fights, or if a child gets kidnapped, that’s also a risk. If they cross the road, there could be an accident” (W, FG, O, S). Men echoed this concern, highlighting the dangers boys face even on the way to school. As one father said, “If there is danger on the way to school, like traffic or vehicles, then that is definitely a risk” (M, IDI, Y, S). This reflects a clear recognition that boys’ daily mobility is considered normal and expected however exposes them to preventable harm.

In the participatory exercises conducted in Punjab, Sindh, KP, and Balochistan, children repeatedly described physical safety as one of the most important aspects of boys’ lives. Although adults often assume that boys “can handle themselves,” the children’s discussions reveal a very different reality. Children consistently pointed out that boys face multiple physical dangers precisely because they spend more time outside the home, travel alone, and engage in physically demanding or risky activities. Children described frequent dangers such as drowning, traffic accidents, fights, and animal attack, while adults echoed concerns about boys bathing in canals, crossing busy roads, or wandering unsupervised.

2.4.9 Sexual Harassment and Exploitation

Though often discussed in relation to girls, several respondents acknowledged that boys too face harassment and exploitation, particularly in workplaces or public spaces. In Punjab, a woman admitted, “We talk about girls, but boys also face this,” (W, II, Y, P) referring to abuse at workshops or markets. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, participants noted that mobile phones have opened boys to “inappropriate exposure” that leads to moral and physical vulnerability that has increased threat of sexual harassment and exploitation for young boys. In Balochistan, there were veiled references to “exploitation by others,”. This emerging awareness shows a gradual shift recognizing boys not only as potential perpetrators but as vulnerable youth in their own right, exposed to manipulation, coercion, as well as emotional and physical harm.

Compared with girls, children mentioned sexual harassment of boys only minimally in the workshops. However, a few provincial-level discussions acknowledged that boys may also face danger from predatory adults or strangers when they roam freely outside the home. While there were no direct children’s quotes on this topic, their broader fears such as being taken away and sexually assaulted, getting lost, or encountering dangerous strangers suggest that children perceive the possibility of exploitation even though they struggle to articulate it.

2.5 Final Considerations

Across Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, adults spoke overwhelmingly about the importance of education, morality, health and appropriate-age marriage for both boys and girls, yet their expectations diverged sharply along gendered lines. Adults described boys mostly as future earners whose wellbeing depends on education, livelihood opportunities, and the avoidance of substance abuse and bad company. Meanwhile, these adult participants saw girls’ social role in terms of modesty, family honour, safety, and compliance with moral and social expectations. This pattern reflects not only a gendered division of roles but also a protective impulse driven by pervasive threats that differentially affect boys and girls. Children’s perspectives deepen and complicate this picture. Girls described wellbeing as a blend of dignity, safety, emotional kindness, and being treated fairly

within the household. Boys, on the other hand, emphasized play, friendship, education, physical safety, and the right to be free from overwork and dangerous environments. Their voices reveal that while adults often interpret wellbeing through moral or economic frameworks, children articulate it through relational, emotional and day-to-day experiences. In many cases, children's narratives expose gaps where adult-defined expectations fail to align with children's actual realities. For instance, children clearly linked poverty and unemployment to stress, school dropout and unsafe work for boys, a connection adults acknowledged but rarely explored through the lens of boys' emotional wellbeing. Likewise, girls spoke of household workload and movement restrictions as threats, framing them as burdens rather than safeguards challenging the adult narrative that such restrictions exist solely for protection.

Taken together, the perspectives of both adults and children point to a common conclusion: wellbeing for girls and boys in Pakistan cannot be reduced to single attributes but must be understood as an interconnected system of support, protection and opportunity. While adults tend to emphasize moral formation, education and appropriate-age marriage as anchors of wellbeing, children remind us of that emotional safety, freedom from stress, meaningful play, and equitable treatment are equally indispensable. The gender differences present in adult narratives also call for reflection. Girls are often valued for modesty, safety and honour, while boys are valued for earning potential and responsible behaviour. These expectations shape children's experiences long before adulthood, influencing their confidence, aspirations, and sense of self-worth. The study underscores that a holistic and rights-based approach, one that listens to and validates children's own interpretations of their wellbeing is essential for designing effective interventions aimed at preventing child marriage, strengthening protective systems and creating conditions in which all children can thrive.

Section 3. Meaning, Values, and Social Functions of Child Marriage

*Marriage is very important because, with marriage, her safety increases
(M, FG, O, P)*

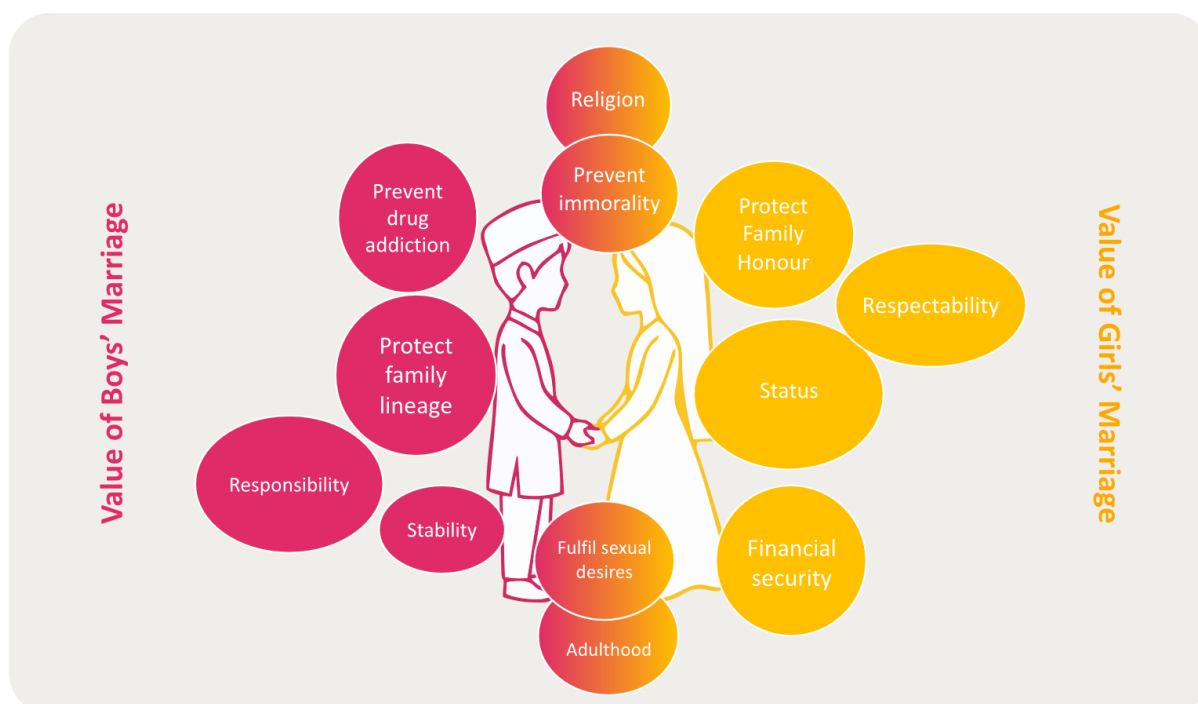
Relevant Research Question:

4. What meanings and values do participants assign to child marriage?
5. What social function is child marriage serving in the participating communities?

Key Findings:

1. Participants saw marriage as a central marker of adulthood
2. Participants saw marriage as a source of financial relief for families
3. Participants believed marriage conferred women respect and social standing
4. Participants described marriage as a mechanism of moral and religious regulation, protecting both boys and girls from engaging in socially deviant behaviour
5. Participants' ideal age for marriage is not based on a specific age, but rather the ability of boys and girls to fulfil the roles traditionally expected within a marriage
6. Participants said marriage prompts women to fulfil their roles as homemakers and child bearers
7. Marriage prompts men to seek employment and provide for their households
8. Participants connected a girl's marriage to her dignity and the family's honour
9. Girls are exposed to public scrutiny and reputational harm when postponing marriages
10. Boys are not exposed to reputational harm when postponing marriages, consequences are pragmatic

Figure 3.1 Visual summary of what the meanings participants assigned to the marriage of boys and girls



3.0 Introduction

This section explores the meanings, values, and social function of child marriage as described by participants. The findings are presented according to two overarching themes that developed from the data: 1) child marriage as a system of protection and 2) child marriage as a marker of adulthood and performance of ascribed roles. Each theme is discussed in detail below, highlighting participants' perspectives and the social contexts that shape these understandings.

Table 3.1. Consensus summary of meanings participants assigned to a girl's marriage

	Balochistan		KP		Punjab		Sindh	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Protect Family Honor								
Financial Relief								
Marker of Adulthood								
Protection from Deviant Behaviour								

Notes: Colours indicate frequency of consensus. The darker the colour, the more participants mentioned the theme in question (see the colour scheme below).

No mention	Less Frequent	More frequent
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Table 3.2. Consensus summary of meanings participants assigned to a boy's marriage

	Balochistan		KP		Punjab		Sindh	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Protect Patrilineal Succession								
Protection from Drugs								
Marker of Adulthood								
Protection from Deviant Behaviour								

Notes: Colours indicate frequency of consensus. The darker the colour, the more participants mentioned the theme in question (see the colour scheme below).

No mention	Less Frequent	More frequent
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3.1 Marriage as a Protection Mechanism

Across the dataset, participants consistently described child marriage as a protective system. The following subsections explore the various dimensions of this "system of protection", including how marriage safeguards a girl's dignity and family honour, secures her financial future, preserves patrilineal succession, and protects both boys and girls from perceived immoral or socially deviant behaviour.

3.1.1 Safeguarding a girl's dignity and family honour

Participants frequently emphasised that a girl's marriage choices are closely tied to her dignity and the family's honour. Men in Sindh explained that: "it is a matter of honour and dignity that the girl marries on time, [...] this protects the family's honour and secures the girl's future because if any problem arises later, people say it happened due to delay" (M, FG, O, S). Similarly, women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa described marriage as a safeguard of family honour: "marriage is necessary because she goes to her home with honour and modesty, avoiding bad reputation and disgrace" (W, FG, Y, K). In Balochistan, the association between a girl's marriage and family honour was also salient, with younger men underscoring the significance of paternal honour: "This [girl's marriage] is a question of the honour of the family. The honour of the family is the honour of the father" (M, FG, Y, B). These sentiments were echoed by a woman from Punjab, who explained that: "in our community, if a girl remains unmarried [...] people question why no one has proposed to her yet. They make up stories, saying things like, look, she is still unmarried while others have settled down" [and the parents say] why don't you get married? You are ruining our family's honour" (W, II, Y, P). Overall, a girl's marital status is perceived as a direct reflection of her family's respectability, compelling parents to arrange timely marriages to protect their reputation and avoid gossip, judgment, or social disgrace.

3.1.2 Securing a girl's financial future

Participants also commonly expressed concerns regarding girls' financial protection and widely agreed that child marriage is the only viable means of securing a girl's future. In Punjab, both men and women articulated this sentiment: "It is very important because with marriage her safety increases" (M, FG, O, P); "[...] marriage provides [a girl] security" (W, II, Y, P). Similarly, women in Balochistan reflected on the relationship between child marriage and financial security in the context of family poverty: "In our society, if a man has five daughters and limited resources, he wants them to marry quickly [...] marriage provides security—it ensures that a woman has someone to support her emotionally and financially [...] child marriage is still common due to financial instability" (W, FG, O, B). Participants in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh echoed these views, linking child marriage to economic hardship and the lack of educational and employment opportunities for girls. As one man from Sindh explained, "Marriage is very important. In our village, girls are married off early because there are no job opportunities. If they don't get married, what will they do? That's why we believe they should settle into their own homes early. Poverty is a big issue, so families want their daughters to have security through marriage" (M, II, O, S). A woman from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa added, "In our area, girls are often married at a younger age. Our people are poor, so they can't afford to wait. They feel burdened by the responsibility and want to marry their daughters off early [...] there has been some change, but the practice of marrying girls at a young age continues. However, some families are now more aware and are waiting for the right age, especially in the more educated and wealthier communities" (W, II, O, K).

Child marriage was also perceived as a source of financial relief for families. As participants observed: "in our community, child marriages are still common, especially among poor families who see marriage as a financial relief" (W, II, O, K); and "The reason why child marriage is still common is due to financial instability and social pressures" (W, FG, O, B). Families thus often regard marriage as a strategy to reduce the economic burden of raising daughters.

3.1.3 Protecting patrilineal succession

Boys' marriage was commonly seen to protect the family lineage. As explained by men in Punjab: "a son carries forward our family lineage [...] a man should get married because it fulfils his physical needs and continues his lineage" (M, FG, O, P). A woman in Sindh agreed with this view: "parents encourage child marriage to continue the family lineage (W, II, O, B)". Her counterparts in a group

discussion in Sindh explained that delaying a boy's marriage can have implications for patrilineal succession: "It won't be beneficial for him [...] there may be obstacles in continuing the lineage" (W, II, O, S). Men and women in Balochistan elaborated on the importance of patrilineal succession: "If men don't get married, they will have no one to take care of them in old age. Their lineage will not continue, and they will have no family to remember them after they are gone. Marriage [...] ensures that they [parents] have a support system" (M, II, Y, B); "many believe child marriage increases the number of children, which helps in fieldwork and family income (W, FG, O, B). Having children, especially boys who can support family livelihoods and care for ageing parents is therefore seen as valuable because it also protects the interests of parents.

3.1.4 Protection from immoral and socially deviant behaviour

Marriage is widely perceived as a mechanism of moral and religious regulation, serving to protect both boys and girls from engaging in socially deviant behavior. Participants repeatedly highlighted concerns around premarital sex. As a man from Punjab noted: "[Marriage] is also the best way to avoid sexual misconduct. Every human desire [sex]. If no one got married, the world would become a hell and immorality would become widespread" (M, II, O, P). Other men expressed similar views, as captured across Sindh, Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab, respectively: "In our community, a girl's marriage is considered very important [...]. Marriage saves girls from wrongdoing [...]; without marriage she might go astray [...] and engage in bad deeds that harm herself and others" (M, II, O, S); "The benefit [of child marriage] is that she is safe at her husband's house and free to fulfil her needs with her husband" (M, II, Y, B); "It [marriage] helps protect girls from all kinds of wrongdoings and immoral activities" (M, II, O, K); and: "marriage is necessary—not only to fulfil his sexual needs but also to continue his family lineage and stay away from negative activities" (M, II, O, P).

Marriage thus provides a socially and religiously sanctioned framework for sexual relations between men and women given that premarital intimacy is heavily stigmatised. Moreover, the social costs of deviating from this framework—especially the stigma attached to unmarried girls and the resulting risks—underscore the moral and normative weight marriage carries within these communities.

Furthermore, young men were perceived to be at particular risk of engaging in "negative activities," with drug abuse being a central concern. Marriage was described as a turning point that encourages young men to assume responsibility at a critical stage in life, potentially steering them away from substance use and other destructive behaviours. A man from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa shared his personal experience to illustrate this point: "I say this because I did not marry my son, and now I am facing problems. My son wanders around, has gotten into drugs, smokes, and spends time on Facebook and [his] mobile, watching inappropriate things and doing wrong things" (M, II, O, K).

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, in particular, participants frequently emphasised marriage as a means of preventing drug addiction. Another man explained: "the biggest benefit [of marriage] is that he does not indulge in addiction, has his own business, takes responsibility, works for his wife and children, and thinks about the future of his children" (M, FG, Y, K). Similar views were expressed in other regions. A woman in Balochistan noted: "If a boy gets married at a young age, he stays with his family and avoids bad habits like drug addiction" (W, FG, Y, B), while a young man in Sindh added: "if a boy doesn't marry on time, he may become misguided, go out and fall into bad company, or get into trouble, which can also become a risk for the family" (M, II, Y, S).

3.2 Marriage as a marker of adulthood

Marriage is perceived as a pivotal milestone. As explained in section one, both boys and girls transition into adulthood at the onset of marriage, with the meaning and timing being highly gendered.

3.2.1 Marriage as part of existing gender roles

Within marriage, men and women are ascribed distinct roles and responsibilities. A young woman from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa highlighted this gendered division, contrasting men's and women's expected roles: "Men say they need a household of their own, children to be born, and for their home to run properly. They want someone to manage the house while they go out and work, so they don't have to worry about household matters" (W, II, Y, K).

Marriage was widely viewed as prompting women to fulfil their roles as homemakers and child bearers. As one participant explained: "[Marriage] provides support, someone to take care of household chores, wash clothes, cook, and manage things. It is essential" (W, II, Y, P). Similarly, a man in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa emphasised that: "Marriage is very important because it is a good thing. Through marriage, girls can have their own families, their own homes, and a secure future and protection from the outside world" (M, II, O, K). A woman in Sindh echoed this view: "In society, marriage is seen as a way for a woman to have a secure future and a family of her own. Through marriage, a woman gains a life partner who supports her, and together they build a family. It also gives her a recognised status in society" (W, II, Y, S).

The belief that marriage confers women respect and social standing was also prevalent. In Balochistan, women discussed the stigma surrounding unmarried girls: "People make fun of unmarried girls. A married woman, on the other hand, is considered settled and respectable" (W, FG, O, B). In Punjab, a man similarly noted the social value attached to marriage: "Marriage grants her [a girl] social respect. She gains respect from her parents, husband, children, and future generations. By the time she reaches 50 or 60 years, she will be recognised as the matriarch of a family, earning her status and honour" (M, II, O, P). This sentiment was echoed in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where a woman explained: "If a girl doesn't get married and stays at home, she doesn't receive the same respect in society" (W, II, O, K).

Boys' marriage was consistently associated with the development of a sense of duty, prompting men to seek employment and provide for their households. As men and women across Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan respectively explained: "Marriage is seen as a way [for men] to provide emotional and financial stability. A husband is expected to support and protect his wife, ensuring that she has a secure life" (W, II, Y, S); "When he marries at a good age, he can find a job, establish a business, and take care of his wife and family. If he does not have a job, how can he support his family? (M, II, O, K); "a boy has to run a household and continue the family lineage. He is considered responsible for providing and taking care of his parents" (W, II, O, B). This notion of a responsible married son as a stabilising force within the household was commonly expressed by participants. Parents were seen to benefit from this arrangement, as marriage prompted sons to assume responsibility for their aging parents and contribute to the family's well-being.

Marriage thus serves as a catalyst for the transition from youth to adulthood and reinforces traditional gender roles, positioning women as homemakers, child bearers and caretakers, and men as providers and heads of the household.

3.2.2 Importance of Timing of Marriage

Almost all participant views on the opportune or ideal age for marriage were not based on a specific age but rather on the ability of boys and girls to fulfil gender-specific roles traditionally expected within a marriage. Any justification for delaying the onset of marriage was regarded a way to ensure greater maturity and stability to perform these roles optimally.

Boys were considered too young to marry if they lacked the maturity and stability to manage the responsibilities that come with marriage. As explained by this young woman in Sindh: “if a boy marries at a very young age, he won’t be able to make wise decisions and will lack maturity. If he is older, he will be capable of managing his household and responsibilities. He would have completed his education, secured a job or business [...] he will be able to take care of himself, support his parents, and provide a stable life for his family after marriage. Financial stability will allow him to raise his children better” (W, II, Y, S). A man from Balochistan echoed his view of the advantages of delaying a boy’s marriage: “he is more mature and capable of handling responsibilities effectively. He is also likely to have better financial stability and emotional readiness to support his family.” (M, II, Y, B). The opportune age for a boy’s marriage was repeatedly linked to his ability to fulfil the role of the family provider: “when he marries at a good age, he can find a job, establish a business, and take care of his wife and family” (W, II, O, K); “look, when he marries at the right age—mature and sensible—he can manage his household. First, if he’s educated, he can live a better life. An educated, employed man can care for his in-laws, parents, wife, and children” (M, FG, Y, P).

Whereas a boy’s readiness for marriage was tied to his ability to provide and protect the family, a girl’s readiness was linked to her ability to manage her domestic and childrearing duties. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa women explained that: “parents are told their daughter is not mature enough to manage a household, [they] themselves realise their daughter is young and cannot manage a new home or responsibilities, so they do not marry her off early” (W, FG, Y, K). This view was echoed by a man in Sindh: “if marriage happens later, the girl becomes mature, understands life better, and fulfils her marital duties well” (M, II, Y, S). In Balochistan, a woman described how: “a girl who marries young is still a child herself and cannot properly take care of her own children” (W, FG, O, B). In Punjab, younger men discussed the ideal age of marriage, alluding to the legal age of 18 years: “20 years is too old- that’s not good. Too young is also not good. Child marriage shouldn’t happen -the girl shouldn’t be under 18 because then the girl doesn’t understand anything - she can’t manage her husband or children” (M, FG, Y, P).

When participants were asked about the ideal age for marriage, most responses aligned with the legal minimum age set in the Federal legislature (18), reflecting growing awareness of legal standards and a shift in contemporary attitudes, while providing evidence of the inconsistency between what they would prefer (delayed marriage) and what the social contexts pushes them to comply with (child marriage). Participants also demonstrated awareness of the health risks associated with child marriage, particularly those related to pregnancy and childbirth. Despite this awareness, strong boundaries remained regarding the appropriate timing of marriage, especially for girls. Across the dataset, participants emphasised that a girl’s timely marriage was essential to prevent negative social repercussions such as reputational harm and loss of family honour (as discussed earlier and elaborated further in Section 9). Moreover, older women expressed concerns that delaying marriage could lead to reproductive challenges, including infertility and complications during childbirth: “as a girl ages, the chances of her having children decrease—she may not be able to become a mother” (W, II, O, B); “delayed marriage can result in late childbirth, which can sometimes be a concern for the family” (W, II, O, S); and “if she is over age, she will face difficulties in delivering babies” (W, II, O, P).

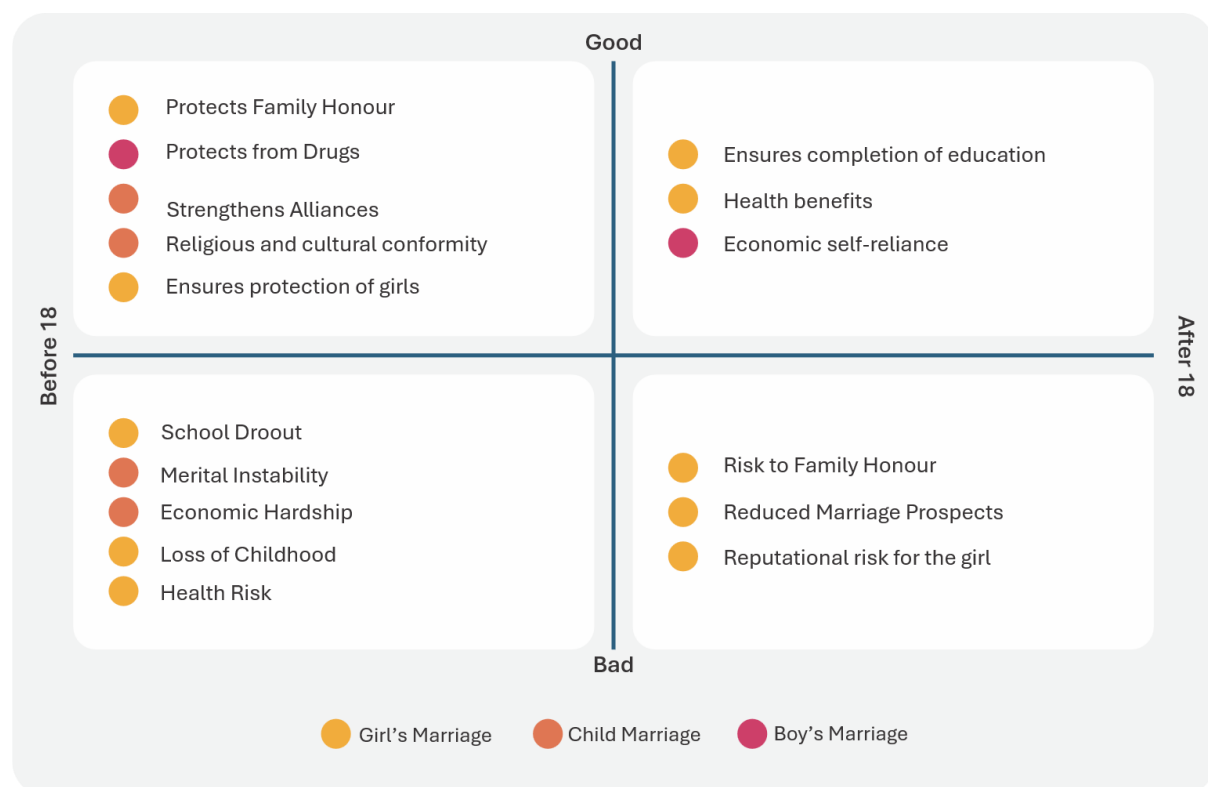
Participants described delayed marriages among boys as resulting in challenges such as diminished physical capacity, strained family relationships, and difficulties in meeting marital and household

responsibilities: “if he marries too late, after twenty-seven or beyond, he may struggle to meet his wife’s needs and responsibilities. This can create issues in the marriage” (M, II, O, P); “if someone gets married at 25, they experience unity in the family, and the overall atmosphere at home remains good. But if someone marries later, the relationship dynamics change, and it’s harder for the family to bond. At 25-26, the energy and mutual understanding in a marriage are better. Later, it can become more challenging to keep the relationship alive. Age plays a significant role in the dynamics of marriage.” (M, FG, O, B); if a man marries at a very old age, he may become physically weak and won’t be able to properly fulfil his family responsibilities. With age, physical capabilities start declining, which can create difficulties in handling post-marriage responsibilities” (W, II, Y, S).

Importantly and in contrast to girls, the perceived negative consequences of postponing marriage for boys were primarily personal and pragmatic, including (as mentioned earlier) concerns about family lineage and the potential risk of drug addiction. These effects tended to impact the individual and his family rather than exposing the boy to public scrutiny and reputational harm. As one participant explained: “for a boy, there is no difference. A boy can marry at 40 or 45, and society will accept it. People believe that a boy can do anything at any age. The mindset is different for boys and girls” (W, II, Y, B). Women in the group discussions echoed this sentiment, noting that: “for boys, marriage is not as much of an issue. If a boy does not marry, it does not create the same problems as it does for a girl. Boys marry because they need a wife to take care of the household work and manage daily chores” (W, FG, Y, B).

3.3 Final considerations

Figure 3.2 Visual Representation of what participants believed to be advantages and disadvantages of child and adult marriage.



Overall, participants framed child marriage as a deeply embedded social institution serving multiple protective functions. It was widely viewed as a mechanism to safeguard girls’ dignity and family

honour, ensure their financial and social security, and uphold patrilineal succession. Both boys' and girls' child marriages were also perceived as moral safeguards against behaviours considered socially or religiously inappropriate, such as premarital relationships and, for boys, substance abuse. These perspectives reflect how marriage is used to regulate sexuality, social order, and family reputation within communities, particularly under conditions of poverty and limited educational or economic opportunities.

At the same time, marriage was described as a central marker of adulthood and a means through which individuals begin to perform socially ascribed gender roles. For girls, marriage represented the transition into womanhood, respectability, and the responsibilities of homemaking, childbearing and caretaking. For boys, it signified readiness to assume economic and familial responsibilities as providers and heads of households. While participants increasingly recognised the benefits of delaying marriage for reasons of maturity, health, and stability, strong social pressures to marry "on time" persisted, especially for girls, whose unmarried status was closely tied to notions of honour and propriety. Together, these findings illustrate that child marriage is sustained not only by economic and structural factors but also by powerful expectations surrounding protection, morality, and gendered adulthood.

Section 4. Alternatives and Solutions to Child Marriage

Some of our customs are old, people follow them blindly; we should change those that harm our children.
(M, FG, O, B)

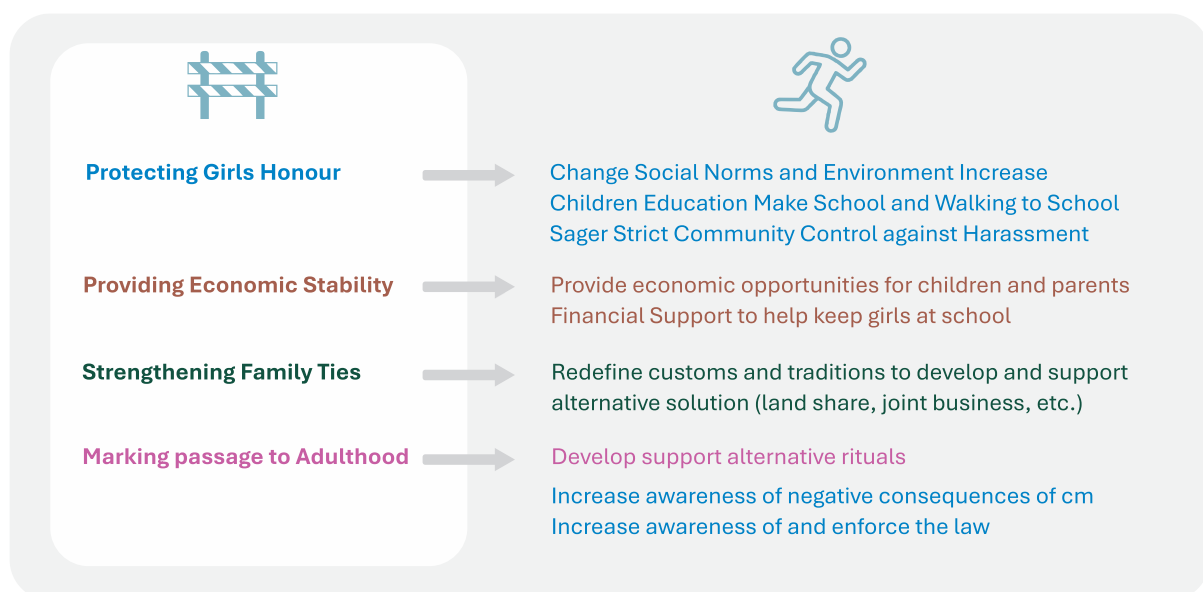
Relevant Research Question:

6. What alternatives can Participants envision to child marriage?

Key Findings:

1. Education is the most powerful safeguard against child marriage.
2. Economic opportunities and financial independence reduce child marriage.
3. Changing customs and traditions can challenge child marriage
4. Awareness and legal measures strengthen alternatives

Figure 4.1 Visual summary of Alternatives participants envision (right) to achieve the functions currently covered by child marriage (left). *Note:* in dark blue are included alternatives not related to existing functions.



4.0 Introduction

This section addresses the research question: What alternatives can Participants envision to serve those functions other than child marriage? This question was asked in individual interviews as well as in FGDs to groups divided by gender and age. The facilitator invited participants to imagine a future where girls and boys in their community now marry at 18 or older and to reflect on what changes might have made this possible. Participants were asked to think broadly about potential transformations ranging from new infrastructure, better education, and improved economic conditions to shifts in community attitudes, leadership influence, or family decisions. They were encouraged to describe any kind of change, social, cultural, or material that could contribute to delaying marriage, with follow-up questions exploring why these changes would make a difference.

Respondents across Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa identified similar alternatives to child marriage. Education consistently emerged as the most emphasized solution in all provinces, reflecting strong recognition of schooling as a protective factor. Freedom of decision for young people and changing views on child marriage were also commonly highlighted across regions, suggesting a growing awareness of agency and mindset change. Customs and traditions, along with the enabling environment, appeared moderately across provinces, underlining the importance of shifting entrenched social norms and providing community support. Awareness programs, legal measures, and economic opportunities were mentioned across provinces for both girls and boys with little variation for girls as far as economic opportunities are concerned however acknowledged as necessary complementary strategies.

From the gender perspective, the findings show that both women and men highlighted education as the strongest alternative to child marriage, followed by freedom of decision. Women more often emphasized harmful customs and traditions, while men more frequently linked alternatives to broader structural change such as enabling environments and economic stability.

Table 4.1 Consensus Frequency of Alternatives to Child Marriage

		Balochistan		KP		Punjab		Sindh	
		Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Increase access to education	For Boys								
	For Girls								
Provide economic opportunities	For Boys								
	For Girls								
Enhance Awareness of negative effects of CM	For Boys								
	For Girls								
Foster children's agency	For Boys								
	For Girls								
Redefine customs and Traditions	For Boys								
	For Girls								
Enforce legal measures	For Boys								
	For Girls								
Change Enabling Environment and norms	For Boys								
	For Girls								

Notes: Colours indicate frequency of consensus. The darker the colour, the more participants mentioned the theme in question (see the colour scheme below).

No mention	Less Frequent	More frequent
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4.1 Increase Children's Access to Education

Across the data set we find that education is emphasized as the strongest alternative for delaying marriage for both boys and girls. Communities highlighted formal schooling and higher education as sources of maturity, awareness of rights, and opportunities for future stability. "If boys and girls study, they will understand life better. Then there's no need to marry them early" (M, FG, O, B).

Younger women see education as awakening critical thinking and challenging unquestioned traditions. A young girl in Punjab said “when girls study, they start asking questions. Earlier, no one asked why we marry early – now even mother say, let her finish school first” (W, FG, Y, P).

Similarly, a woman in KP said, “When a boy is well-educated and skilled, people look up to him, his success becomes a source of inspiration, and it encourages others to better themselves” (W, II, Y, K). Voicing a similar sentiment, a young woman in Sind said “if girls become teachers, others in the village follow them. Slowly, the old ways of child marriage are ending” (W, FG, Y, S). This quote underscores the role model effect of success, showing how an educated and skilled boy becomes a source of community pride and motivation, inspiring others to pursue self-improvement.

Younger women emphasized girls’ education most strongly, often linking it to empowerment and delayed marriage, while older women and younger men also voiced support for education but framed it more as a path to family respect or better matches. “If our daughters are educated, they will know their rights and avoid child marriage” (W, FG, O, B). Men also shared similar views, “Education is light, without it we keep following old ways” (M, FG, Y, B). Older men did recognize its importance but sometimes viewed it as secondary to social reputation or local customs. “Education breaks wrong customs, we used to say a girl’s honour is in marriage, now we say it is in her degree” (M, II, O, P).

Participants also emphasized the importance of skills training and vocational education, which could help both boys and girls achieve economic independence before entering marriage. Parents linked daughters’ schooling with increased respect, employability, and improved decision-making power. “Girls who study bring respect. They help their families too” (W, FG, O, B). A teacher from the community said, “when girls have a trade they are respected – people say she is helping her family, not a burden” (M, II, Y, P). This opinion was also expressed by an older man in Sindh who said that “Parents delay their daughters’ marriage when they see she can earn. They start thinking differently” (M, FG, O, S). It is apparent that skills change parental attitudes linking economic contribution to delayed marriage.

4.2 Provide Economic Opportunities

Poverty was repeatedly cited by both men and women as a driver of child marriage, and economic empowerment was proposed as a solution. Women discussed economic opportunities less frequently, though some mentioned microfinance or livelihood schemes. A father said, “Our poverty forces child marriages, if there are opportunities to earn, families will wait” (M, FG, O, B). Another respondent said, “If boys have work, they won’t think about marrying early” (M, II, Y, B). Men discussed this alternative more than women, with younger men prioritizing economic opportunities and linking poverty and unemployment to child marriage pressures. Older men recognized economic hardship as the main driver of child marriage – linking livelihoods and economic opportunities to a change in perceptions and thinking. An older man in KP said “poverty is the real reason parents marry children early. When boys and girls have jobs, the whole thinking of the family changes” (M, II, O, K). Similarly, a young woman in Sind states that “Girls with jobs are seen as pride, not a burden. Families wait for their good match instead of marrying them early” (W, FG, Y, S). It is apparent from these quotes that employment can change the value and timing of family traditions.

Respondents emphasized skills training, small business support, and opportunities for migration as ways to give families alternatives. Overseas migration for boys, exposure to urban areas, and changing aspirations were linked to reduced acceptance of child marriage. “Their lives can improve if employment opportunities are available for them, various types of work can be accessible, such as

sewing and stitching clothes or working in a beauty parlour” (W, II, O, K). Many stressed that when girls can earn, they gain both independence and respect. By perceiving girls as potential earners rather than financial liabilities, families are more willing to delay marriage. “If our daughters earn, we will not see them as a burden. Marriage can wait” (M, II, O, S). Echoing a similar sentiment, another respondent said, “When families are poor, they marry girls early to reduce burden. If women earn, it helps delay marriage” (W, FG, Y, S).

4.3 Enhance Awareness of the Negative Consequences of Child Marriage

Awareness was seen by most participants as a crucial tool and entry point to reshape community attitudes. It was the second most frequently cited alternative, especially among older men and younger women. “People don’t know how child marriage harms health and education; awareness is needed in every village” (M, II, O P.). Respondents suggested mosque sermons, school campaigns, and local gatherings to spread knowledge about the harms of child marriage and the benefits of delaying it. A young women said that “If religious leaders and teachers speak, the community will support change” (W, FG, Y, B).

Awareness programs are also seen as providing legitimacy for families to resist social pressure and help create collective support for alternatives to child marriage, “If people know the harm, they will think twice. Awareness can change minds, just as polio campaigns did” (M, FG, O, K). However, the effectiveness of such programs depends heavily on who delivers the message and how it is delivered. “When maulvis talk about child marriage being risky, people listen” (M, II, O, B). Some participants linked awareness with improved decision-making for both parents and youth “If women know the consequences, they can convince their husbands and elders” (W, II, O, B). The gendered impact of child marriage was recognized by some women, especially older ones, reflecting a growing recognition among women that child marriage disproportionately harms girls in terms of health, education, and personal agency. “After awareness sessions, we understood that girls suffer most from child marriage” (W, FG, Y, B).

4.4 Foster Children’s Agency

Encouraging children, especially girls, to develop confidence, decision-making ability, and self-awareness was often seen as a transformative alternative to child marriage in all provinces. Participants emphasized that when children are heard, guided, and trusted, they are more likely to challenge restrictive norms and make informed life choices. “Once a boy or girl starts thinking about their goals, marriage becomes one of many choices, not the only one, that is the real change” (M, II, Y, B). Children’s agency was not only linked to formal education but also to exposure, mentorship, and dialogue within families and communities. This theme appears mainly among younger participants both men and women, suggesting generational change. Older men and women mention it less, indicating that decision-making for children is still viewed as a family prerogative in older people. “Children are too young to decide; elders know what is right” (M, FG, O, B).

Younger respondents noted that parents who discuss life options with their children or allow them to express preferences are helping them resist child marriage pressures. “When girls are taught that they have a say in their future, they start believing they can study more or work instead of marrying early” (W, II, Y, P). A young woman said, “I told my parents I want to study before marrying and they agreed” (W, II, Y, B). Some participants argued that personal consent is essential to ensuring stability

and happiness in marital life. While some framed this as a radical idea, others stressed it as a basic right, linking it to fairness and equality between sons and daughters. “Let the children decide when they are ready, parents shouldn’t force them” (M, FG, Y, B). Similarly, another young woman said, “Girls should be asked what they want, not just married off suddenly” (W, II, Y, B). “Marriage should be the choice of both. If a girl or boy is forced, they will never be happy, and the family will suffer too” (M, FG, Y, S). An older woman in Balochistan expressed similar views, “Parents think they know better, but sometimes girls suffer because no one asks them” (W, FG, O, B).

The idea of freedom of decision reflects a growing awareness of individual rights and the recognition that child marriage undermines both marital stability and well-being. If this shift in thinking becomes more widespread, it would challenge established hierarchies of authority and entrenched norms of patriarchy, gradually shifting decision-making power from parents and elders to the children themselves.

4.5 Redefine Customs and Traditions

Participants highlighted that reshaping traditional practices is essential for addressing the root causes of child marriage. Many customs—such as linking family honour with child marriage, valuing dowry, or arranging cousin marriages continue to sustain the practice. “In our family, cousin marriages happen because elders decide it early sometimes, even when children are small, later when they grow, they have no choice. It ruins their happiness” (W, II, O, P). “Cousin marriages are done to avoid dowry and keep wealth inside, but they bring problems – sometimes genetic, sometimes social, still people don’t stop because it is a tradition” (M, FG, O, B).

Some participants noted a visible shift in areas where families now delay engagements, prioritize girls’ education, and redefine honour as protecting rather than restricting daughters, “Our elders should stop linking family respect with child marriage” (W, FG, Y, K). Many participants highlighted the need to reform harmful customs that sustain child marriage, “In our community, honour stops us from changing quickly, but we know some customs need to change” (W, FG, O, B). “In our jirga we talk about ending Swara and early nikah⁶” (M, II, O, K). Suggestions included rejecting dowry and bride price, reducing the burden of marriage expenses, and replacing traditional measures of female purity and honour with education and skills, “If dowry is refused, then people will not rush to marry their daughters, parents will have time to educate them” (W, II, O, P). Women felt more constrained by social norms and expressed caution due to fear of gossip or concerns about honour. They expressed that while individual families may wish to change, fear of gossip or dis-honour often prevents them from acting alone. A progressive opinion was expressed by a woman: “Purity is not proven by marrying young, purity is proven by teaching good values” (W, FG, O, B).

It became apparent from the research that collective awareness campaigns and community consensus could help to reframe harmful customs and make alternative practices more acceptable. Religious and community leaders also play a growing role in reshaping norms by emphasizing dignity, education, and maturity over age or dowry. Reshaping traditions, therefore, is not about rejecting culture – rather, it is about transforming it from within, keeping community identity intact while freeing children from harmful expectations. The same cultural frameworks that encourage child marriage can also become vehicles for positive change when communities reinterpret them through

⁶ A Jirga in Pakistan is a traditional council of elders. Swara is a custom where girls, often minors, are given in marriage or servitude to an aggrieved family as compensation. Nikah is the formal, legally binding Islamic marriage contract and ceremony.

dialogue, awareness, and example. As rightly stated by a young man “Our culture should grow with time” (M, II, Y, B).

4.6 Enforce Legal Measures

While communities across provinces acknowledged the role of laws to set minimum age for marriage or impose fines, they doubted the capacity of institutions to implement them, and many added that they are ineffective. They said that laws alone are not enough—their consistent enforcement and local ownership are key to real change. In many cases, participants expressed frustration over the gap between the existence of laws and their actual implementation, “Government should make it mandatory to check CNICs before nikah. If the law is implemented properly, people will stop marrying underage girls” (M, II, Y, B).

An older man in Balochistan said: “Laws exist, but no one enforces them, officials should take strict action, law exists but no one applies it in the villages” (M, FG, O, B.) “When the maulvi or nikah registrar refuses to perform child marriage - it sends a strong message – that’s where the law should start” (W, FG, O, K). Older men emphasized legal measures more, while women generally saw laws as ineffective without community support “We need local community to report child marriages immediately” (W, FG, O, P). Lack of trust on the implementation of laws was expressed widely by the participants, “Even if there is a law, without police and local support it won’t work” (W, II, O, B). It was observed that women in some cases were not even aware of the laws preventing child marriage therefore as an alternative, emphasis was given on widespread awareness. A mother explained, “We never knew the law. If awareness reaches every village, fewer girls will be married as child” (W, II, O, B). Thus, while legal measures are given importance, especially visible enforcement, they are not trusted as a standalone solution. The respondents rightly believed that for laws to work as an effective alternative, they must be supported by enforcement mechanisms and community acceptance.

Respondents highlighted that legal measures could protect children, delay marriage, and empower families to make informed choices when backed by community awareness and strong institutional support. Enforcement of laws was therefore viewed not as punishment, but as a protective and enabling alternative—a mechanism that gives weight to awareness and helps shift community behaviour from informal traditions to formal systems of accountability and protection.

4.7 Enabling Environment

Under enabling environment, respondents spoke about infrastructure as well as community support. Participants across all provinces emphasized that a supportive environment, one that ensures physical safety, access to facilities and collective community support, plays an important role in delaying child marriage. Families are more likely to invest in their children’s education and in personal growth when the external environment is secure and hopeful.

Improved infrastructure, better access to schools and markets, and local economic development were all cited as conditions that could reduce reliance on child marriage. Infrastructure builds trust in the future and community security delaying the pressure for marriage, “When there are roads, electricity and security, families don’t think of marrying early, they see a future for their children” (M, II, O, S). Another respondent said, “When roads came, girls started going to school, before, there was no option except marriage” (M, FG, O, K). Improved mobility and connectivity are directly linked to girls staying in education longer and to a change in social behaviour, “where there are no schools or hospitals, parents marry early to protect their girls, when facilities come, minds change” (M, II, Y, B).

An older woman voiced a similar thinking, “We want schools nearby, so girls don’t have to leave studies after primary” (W, FG, O, B).

An enabling environment was also framed as community cooperation, supportive leaders, or NGO programs against child marriage, “NGOs and elders should work together, then people will listen” (M, II, O, B). Community support strengthens collective change, for instance, neighbourhood watch, village elders’ involvement or women’s groups reinforces new norms, “Youth groups help us express our opinion, earlier no one listened” (W, FG, Y, S). When communities collectively value girls’ education and mobility, individual families feel supported to resist child marriage pressures, “When the community comes together and supports girls going to school it gives confidence to parents, they don’t feel alone in their decision to wait” (W, FG, O, K). A young man while talking about role of communities stated that, “When communities stand with families who delay marriage, everyone learns that respect comes from education, not from marrying early” (M, II, Y, B).

The research findings substantiate that infrastructure, safety and support create empowered choices and a strong enabling environment where parents see a future for children to thrive without marriage. This enabling environment shifts perception from protection through marriage to protection through opportunities.

4.8 Final Considerations

Participants across gender and age groups emphasized that preventing child marriage requires simultaneous attention to both boys’ and girls’ circumstances. Both men and women recognized that poverty, social norms, and lack of awareness are root causes of child marriage but propose gender-specific pathways to delay it.

For boys, participants highlighted the need to extend educational opportunities and create opportunities for decent employment so that they can attain financial independence before marriage. Many noted that poverty and joblessness often push families to marry off sons early or accept underage unions to secure economic alliances. Legal enforcement, community awareness, and moral guidance were also mentioned as ways to instil a stronger sense of responsibility among young men and delay marriage until they are emotionally and financially prepared.

For girls, participants emphasized education as the most powerful deterrent to child marriage, along with awareness among parents about the health, social, and economic consequences of child marriage. Several participants called for creating safe, enabling environments where girls can pursue schooling without social stigma, supported by community elders and religious leaders. They also stressed that livelihood training and employment opportunities for girls would make families more confident in allowing daughters to study longer and marry later.

Participants recognized that preventing child marriage cannot rely on one intervention alone. It requires improving education access, strengthening law enforcement, supporting families economically, and reshaping social norms and harmful customs. Participants suggested that empowerment and responsibility must go hand in hand—boys should be taught to value consent and education, while girls should be encouraged and empowered to see themselves as capable decision-makers. Together, these measures can help communities gradually redefine the concept of marriage and replace it with aspirations rooted in maturity and stability.

The data set reveals that child marriage remains deeply embedded across provinces, sustained by multiple intersecting drivers. Families frame child marriage as a means of protecting girls, particularly in relation to honour and safety. In the current context, the spread of digital technology and social

media has introduced new anxieties about reputation, reinforcing pressure to marry daughters early (as discussed more extensively in Section 6). Structural inequalities, conservative social attitudes, and patriarchal norms normalize women's subordination and limit their agency. Poverty and economic hardship further push families toward child marriage as a coping strategy, while entrenched customs, traditions, and misinterpretations of religion lend the practice continued legitimacy. Finally, environmental shocks, such as floods, exacerbate household vulnerabilities and prompt marriage to be used as a survival mechanism.

It is noteworthy and encouraging that changing norms around honour and gossip were offered as a solution. Some participants argued that community conversations, role models, and collective shifts could reduce the stigma around girls staying unmarried into their late teens or twenties. Collective refusal or legal action to end these practices was also offered as a solution. Significantly, men's role within households was repeatedly emphasized as being decisive (which is considered normal in patriarchal societies like Pakistan). Participants suggested that when fathers and brothers support girls' education and delay of marriage, it becomes a crucial lever for change and creates wider acceptance.

The collective wisdom from communities across Pakistan highlights that alternatives to child marriage must be holistic, gender responsive and locally grounded. The research highlights both barriers and pathways to change. Communities are aware of the harms of child marriage yet remain bound by norms of honour, poverty, and patriarchal control. At the same time, education, economic opportunity, mobility, and legal enforcement are creating cracks in the system. Recognizing and amplifying these positive drivers offers a practical route toward reducing child marriage across Pakistan. While overlapping fears of dishonour, patriarchal traditions, and economic constraints, create pressures, they are also opening pathways for change. Economic necessity, infrastructural development, migration, and youth empowerment are creating space for families to reimagine alternatives to child marriage. Recognizing and amplifying these positive drivers offers a practical route to reducing child marriage.

Section 5. The Role of Children's Social Network

*Many families are poor and cannot afford to take care of their daughters. They believe that marrying them off early will reduce their financial burden
(F, IDI, Y, B).*

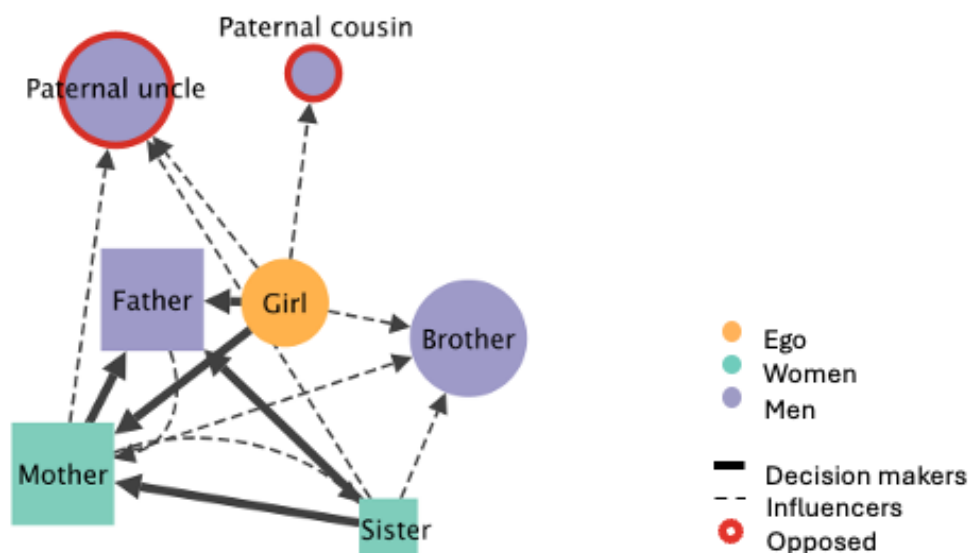
Relevant Research Question:

7. What are the individual's and their interpersonal dynamics that contribute to child marriage?

Key Findings:

1. Male elders are often at the centre the decision network
2. mothers operationalize arrangements, while grandmothers occasionally exercise symbolic authority that others then enact.
3. Children's marriage networks are kin-dense, and most decision-makers are close relatives
4. Girls' voices are largely absent; boys' voices are limited.
5. Marriage initiation can come from different nodes, but final decision-making power flows back to men.
6. Early engagement functions as a binding device, breaking it risks compromising family honour.

Figure 5.1 An example of a social network with contrasting power dynamics and balances



5.0 Introduction

While the focus groups and key informant interviews offered us some insights into the social norms sustaining child marriage, as well as the cultural worldviews related to children's marriages, we conducted qualitative social network analysis to get a detailed understanding of who, in the child's networks, influences decisions related to the child's marriage. The social network data collection process involved identifying one girl and one boy per village who had recently been married before the age of 18. We asked each child detailed questions about their social network, people to whom they turned for various types of support (that we call alters), and those people who specifically played a key role (as deciders or influencers) in their marriage process (we call these people marriage-alterers). We then interviewed 4-5 marriage-alterers identified by the child. We asked them a similar set of questions, including who they also thought had made key decisions on the child's marriage.

Table 5.1 Overview of marriage networks for each girl and boy in the study

Province	Gender	Age at marriage	Religion	Ethnicity	# of marriage alters	Size of marriage network
Balochistan	Girl	12	Muslim	Sindhi	3	8
	Boy	17	Muslim	Sindhi	4	6
Punjab	Girl	16	Muslim	Lashari	3	5
	Boy	16	Muslim	Lashari	5	9
KP	Girl	14	Muslim	Malik Kehl	5	6
	Boy	15	Muslim	Daub Kehl	5	9
Sindh	Girl	15	Muslim	Sindhi	6	6
	Boy	17	Muslim	Sindhi	4	7

Table 5.1. provides an overview of the girls and boys we interviewed. Age at marriage ranged from 12-17. All of the participants were Muslim. Most of them were between 15-17 at the time of the interviews, and two were over 18 years old. Number (#) of alters refers to the number of people overall that a child identified as important in their life, while "Number of alters marriage" refers to those who they identified as being specifically important in the process of marriage. "Size of full marriage network" includes: 1) the marriage alters the child identified, and 2) the people identified as important in the marriage decision-making process by the marriage-alterers (let us call these second-alterers) (See the box below).

Box 5.1. Marriage network analysis definitions

Marriage-alterers	People identified by the child as having played a key role in their marriage
Second-alterers	People identified by marriage-alterers as having play a key role in the child's marriage
Size of full marriage network	Number of marriage-alterers + number of second-alterers

Table 5.2. Breakdown of relationship type and level of influence of alters across the eight marriage networks

Province	Gender	Parental friend	Aunt	Brother	Father	Father-in-law	Husband	Self	Mother	Mother-in-law	Sister	Uncle	Grandmother	Cousin
Balochistan	Girl													
	Boy													
Punjab	Girl													
	Boy													
KP	Girl													
	Boy													
Sindh	Girl													
	Boy													

No nomination

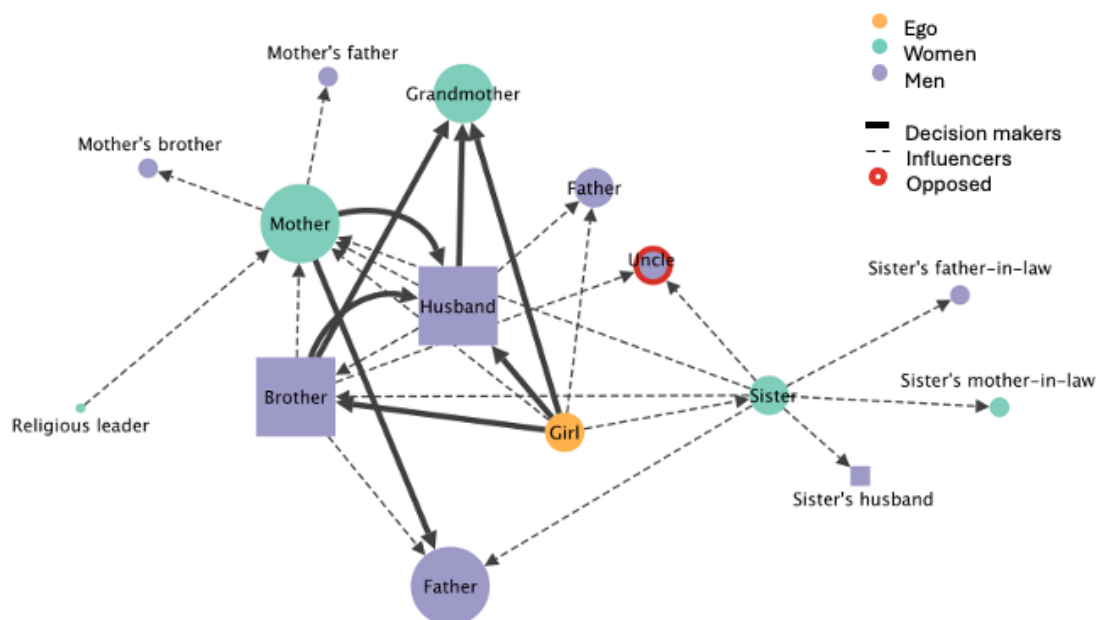
Influencer

Decision maker

The top two rows show who children from Balochistan nominated as influencers and decision-makers (or, in some cases, did not nominate at all). The second two rows show the same for the two children from Punjab; the third two rows for those from KP; and the bottom two rows for those from Sindh. Across provinces, it is notable that, except for the mother, the male family members are nominated by the children as key influencers and decision-makers in their marriage process. The following sections explore each case in greater depth, uncovering the complex interpersonal dynamics that are internalised in the apparent dominance of male decision-makers. While fathers, brothers, and uncles are often positioned as the most visible authorities, the detailed narratives reveal more complex layers of influence—where women, kinship obligations, and situational pressures also shape how marriage decisions unfold and become legitimised within families.

5.1 Balochistan girl: A keen husband convincing an opposing family

Figure 5.2. The marriage network of a girl living in Balochistan.



Note: Square nodes are people who also nominated themselves, and the node size reflects how frequently the person was nominated as a marriage-alter.

The girl in Balochistan, who is Sindhi, was married at the age of 12, stating that her marriage arrangement had been decided when she was two years old. Her marriage network involved her extended family, as she and her husband were relatives sharing the same grandmother. Interviews with her and her marriage network revealed a process primarily controlled by male kin and elders, with her husband playing the most decisive role. She recalled, "My husband was very adamant. He wanted to marry me, and he pressured my family. My family didn't agree at first. They wanted me to grow up first" (G, SNA, B). Her husband confirmed his dominant role in initiating the marriage by saying, "Yes, I forced her [to marry me]" (B, SNA, B). The girl described having no agency in these decisions: "I didn't [agree]. They didn't ask me. I said yes because of the proposal" (G, SNA, B). Reflecting on her experience, she expressed regret that she had not been able to delay her marriage: "If I had gotten married later, I wouldn't have been burdened with so much household responsibility [...] I would have been more prepared to do housework when I was older. I would have played, spent time with my family, and done good things in life" (G, SNA, B).

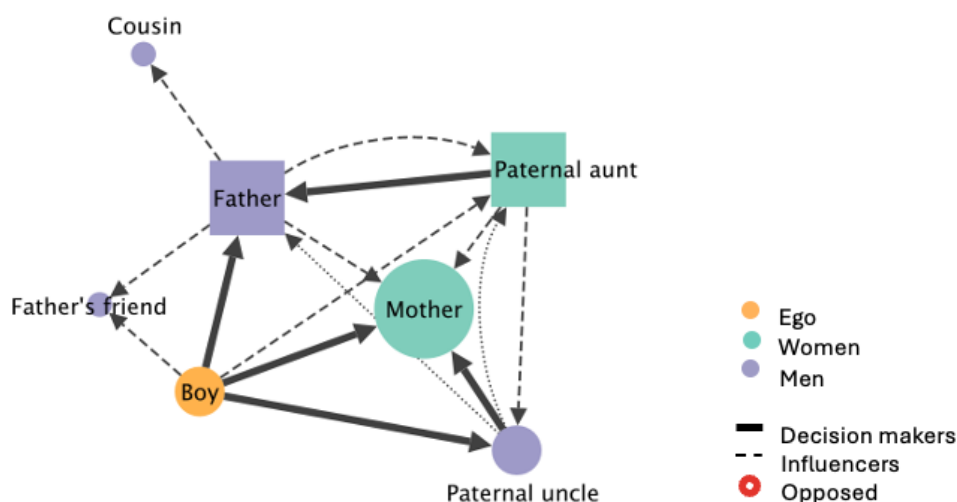
Her paternal grandmother was the key influencer in arranging the marriage within the extended family: "My grandmother got me married. She said: 'this is my daughter's daughter. Get married here. It's better than marrying outside' " (B, SNA, B). Although fathers usually have a decisive role in the marriage process (see Section 9), the network revealed a more complex dynamic in which other family members held greater authority depending on the situation. In this case, the husband and the girl's elder brother played dominant roles. Even though the grandmother was only nominated by her husband and elder brother, she had a critical influence on the overall marriage process, largely because both were the most dominant figures in the decision-making network and deferred to her

authority. Her husband echoed her authority, mentioning, even if he did not know the girl before marriage: "She is my grandmother. That's why I did not ask why she wanted me to marry my wife. She wanted me to marry someone from the family" (B, SNA, B). After their grandmother's initiation, the husband began to push for the marriage by persuading the key decision-makers such as the girl's elder brother: "My brother had the most authority in making the decision about my marriage. My husband was in a hurry. He pressured my brother to go ahead with the marriage" (G, SNA, B). Her brother explained that this marriage was considered the best option for his sister, confirming that he viewed the groom as an ideal husband: "We got the best proposal for her, as he is a good boy. He is my best friend, so I suggested to my parents that he would take care of my sister" (M, SNA, B). He confirmed that the marriage was "the best choice for her", adding that "we want the girl to get married at an early age because we want them to settle down in their family" (M, SNA, B). Many participants expressed that the marriage was finalised with the proposal from the husband's family. The girl recalled that her husband expressed anger at his father, which made the wedding happen quickly. The husband's father, who was the one to send the proposal on behalf of the family, supported the agency of the husband: "My father said, 'If you like her, we'll send the proposal.' My father sent the proposal, and then the girl's family came and we got married" (B, SNA, B).

Some of the girl's family members were concerned about her marriage being arranged so quickly: "My family didn't agree at first. They wanted me to grow up first" (G, SNA, B). However, those who opposed the marriage had little decision-making power within the household. The mother shared similar concerns: "At the beginning, I had my doubts. I wasn't completely supportive because I felt she wasn't very sure herself" (W, SNA, B). Yet, she added that she ultimately supported the marriage, explaining that such decisions are collectively made by elders: "But after elders from both families got involved and the proposal seemed respectable, I gave my support for the sake of harmony. [...] In our tradition, such decisions are made by elders, not by the girl alone" (W, SNA, B). The girl's uncle was the only family member to explicitly oppose her marriage: "My uncle was against it. He used to argue and say, 'Why are you marrying her off so young?' But his objections were dismissed by the family; as the girl explained: "he didn't have decision-making power" (G, SNA, B). Notably, her husband and her brother – identified as the key decision makers- both recalled "no objections" to the marriage, adding that the marriage was "mutually decided and everyone was happy" (M, SNA, B).

5.2 Balochistan boy: A marriage celebrated to fulfil a mother's last wish

Figure 5.3 The marriage network of a boy living in Balochistan



The boy from Balochistan, aged 17, had a smaller marriage network than the girl in the same province. This Sindhi boy was married through a process led by his father and paternal relatives, fulfilling the wish of his late mother, who had chosen his bride before her death: "The decision about my marriage was made by my father and my uncle. However, it was mainly my father's choice [...] It was also my mother's choice that I marry someone from her side of the family, so I followed her wishes as well" (B, SNA, B). Across interviews with the boy and his marriage network, the mother's final wish remained a symbolic source of authority: "It was my mother who chose her [bride] before she passed away. The decision had already been made by her when she was alive" (B, SNA, B). Her wish for him to marry his maternal cousin – her sister's daughter – became a guiding principle for the family, including the boy himself: "I felt strongly about fulfilling what she wanted" (B, SNA, B). The father similarly reflected on the weight of his wife's wish: "The primary reason he was married at that time was because the girl had already been chosen by his late mother. Before she passed away, she expressed her wish for him to marry this particular girl" (M, SNA, B).

While the mother's role determined who the boy would marry, the final decision to proceed rested with the father, who sought advice from his siblings, kin, and close friends: "Although I was the main decision-maker, the influence of these individuals, especially my late wife, greatly shaped the decisions I ultimately made regarding who the boy married and when" (M, SNA, B). When the boy expressed interest in fulfilling his mother's wish, his father immediately acted: "When I told my father that I wanted to marry the girl my mother had chosen for me. My father, along with some of our relatives, went to their house to ask for the marriage proposal. They agreed without any hesitation because it had already been discussed and planned within the family" (B, SNA, B). The father's siblings—the paternal uncle and aunt—confirmed that the mother's earlier decision guided all subsequent actions. The uncle recalled, "The most influential person in his marriage decision was his mother. Even though she was not alive at the time of the marriage, her decision influenced everything we did" (M, SNA, B). The aunt similarly explained, "Actually, it was decided earlier by his mother. That's why everyone followed the same decision" (W, SNA, B). This collective commitment reduced others'

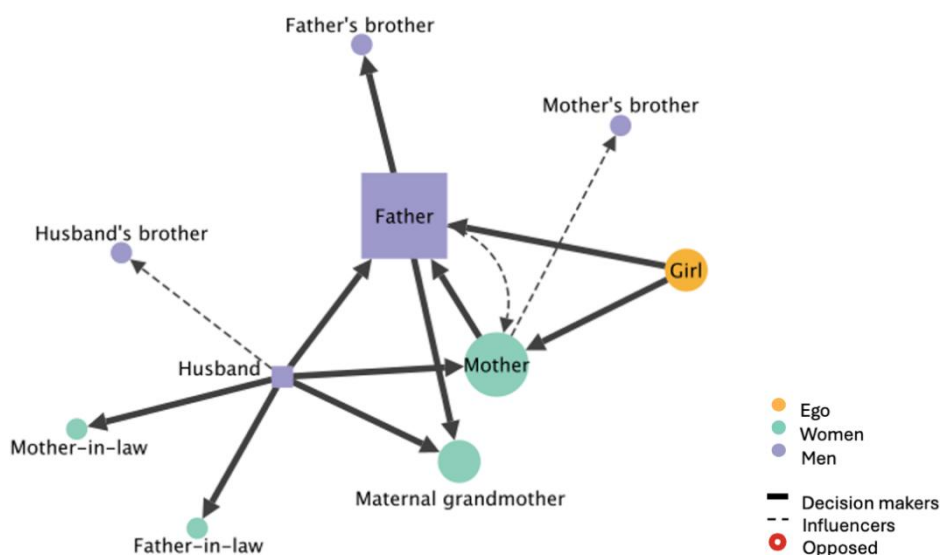
decision-making roles. The uncle described the process as “more about keeping the family legacy intact and honouring her [the mother’s] decision” (M, SNA, B).

The aunt, who was often nominated as a key facilitator, helped the family act upon the late mother’s wish: “Other than her [mother], maybe some elder relatives, like the aunt, gave suggestions, but it was mostly about carrying out what had already been planned. We didn’t question it much—it was about honouring her intentions and making sure everything happened the way she would have wanted” (W, SNA, B). The father’s trust in her reflected her proximity and influence: “She has always been close to the family and has good judgment. I value her opinions, especially when it comes to family matters” (M, SNA, B). Her encouragement also affected the timing of the marriage: “My sister [aunt] played a big role in encouraging me to go ahead, reminding me that we should fulfil my wife’s wishes” (M, SNA, B). She explained her reasoning: “I just suggested that the boy is now able to manage and should start his life. There was no reason to wait. At this age, he will help and be responsible for the home” (W, SNA, B).

Although the boy felt that his opinion was heard, his role remained secondary: “I did have some say in these decisions, but not as much as I might have liked [...] the opinions of the elders were more important. They would make the final call” (B, SNA, B). Reflecting the authority of elders, he added: “We are poor people living in a village, we follow the guidance of our elders. There isn’t much room for personal choice when it comes to big decisions like marriage” (B, SNA, B). The uncle echoed this norm: “In our culture, when elders decide something before passing, we treat it like a responsibility to fulfil” (M, SNA, B). For the boy, the decision was not only about tradition – taking his mother’s wish – but also practicality: “There was no one at home to look after my daily needs—like preparing food, washing clothes, and taking care of the home. So getting married was also a practical decision, not just emotional” (B, SNA, B). He reflected that the marriage made daily life more manageable: “Honestly, if I hadn’t married then, it would have been difficult for me to manage my daily life. It would’ve made life much harder, especially since I was still young and living in a village where these responsibilities are usually shared within the family” (B, SNA, B).

5.3 Punjab girl: The symbolic power of a grandmother

Figure 5.4 The marriage network of a girl living in Punjab



Note: The husband was not nominated by the girl as an alter.

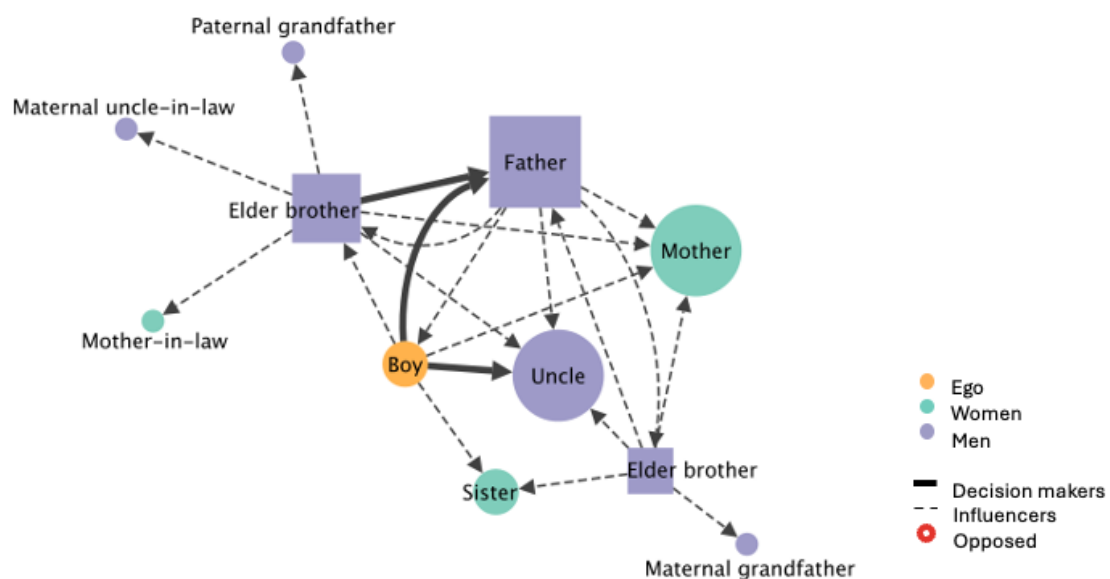
The Lashari girl from Punjab, married at the age of 16, had a small marriage network composed mainly of close family members, all of whom described the process positively and without disagreement. Her marriage was arranged entirely by her parents and extended kin, leaving her with no decision-making power. She recalled, "All of them were made by my parents. I made no decision" (G, SNA, P). Reflecting on this lack of agency, she said, "It makes me sad and angry. My parents will get angry if I try to give my opinion. They said I cannot go against their decisions" (G, SNA, P). The sense of fear and submission she described reflected the strength of parental authority: "I was scared of my parents; I had to follow their decisions" (G, SNA, P). Her family justified the marriage as necessary to protect family honour. The girl recalled that her parents warned her that rejecting marriage would bring shame: "My parents said people may accuse me of bad character if I refuse to get married" (G, SNA, P). Her father confirmed this belief: "She is not allowed to go out anywhere [before marriage]" (M, SNA, P). This fear of social accusation was deeply internalised; she believed that not marrying would invite gossip and damage her reputation: "[If I were not married], I would be at home and my parents would be looking for a proposal for me. Maybe I would have been accused of bad character" (G, SNA, P).

Both parents described the marriage as a collective family decision, yet the father identified the maternal grandmother as the key initiator who first proposed and decided the marriage timing. He explained, "The grandmother was the reason; she is the one who started this," recalling that she had also decided the date of the wedding before she passed away. The grandmother was nominated less than the father as a key figure in the marriage process, however, her symbolic authority played an important role in deciding the important factors in marriage. For the parents from both families, fulfilling the grandmother's will became a way of maintaining familial continuity and honour. The husband, who is the girl's mother's sister's son, also echoed the grandmother's central role, describing that he had been engaged without even understanding the process: "Grandma said that she [bride] would be my daughter-in-law. I was very young; I did not understand it" (B, SNA, P). The early engagement she arranged created an obligation that both families accepted as fixed, leaving

little space for later discussion or refusal. For him, marriage was not a personal or emotional choice but an inherited family agreement — something already settled by elders whose word carried unquestioned authority. “We would have married someone else if we didn’t get married to each other”, he reflected, implying that the act of marriage itself was viewed as a customary ritual that preserved family ties and fulfilled generational expectations rather than an individual choice.

5.4 Punjab boy: Father and uncle using their power to arrange a marriage

Figure 5.5 The marriage network of a boy living in Punjab



Note: The elder brother was not nominated by the girl as an alter.

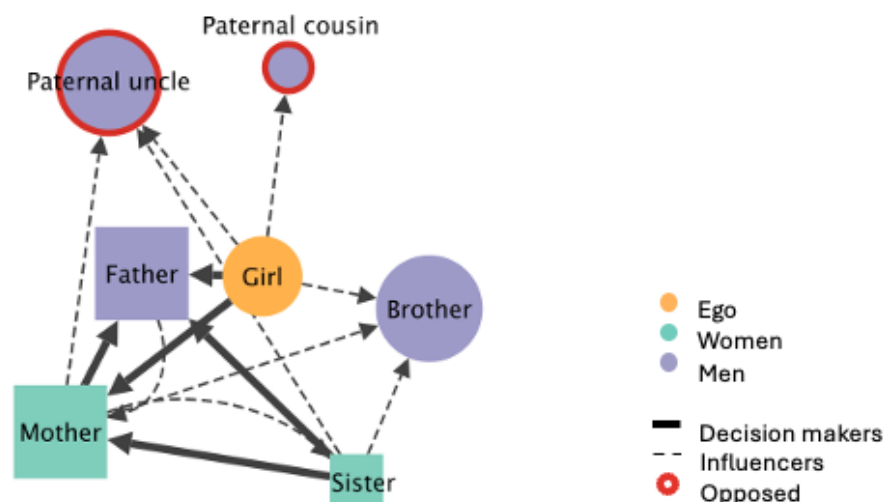
The Punjab boy, aged 17, belonged to a large, interlinked family network in which key marriage decisions were concentrated among male elders. His marriage was arranged within the extended family — to his paternal uncle’s daughter—in a process led primarily by his father and paternal uncle: “My father and my uncle decided my marriage” (B, SNA, P). The father and uncle were frequently nominated as decision-makers because they were perceived as the heads of the household. The father described how several elders took part in discussions, representing each family: “Apart from me, my brothers, my family members participated in the decision of the boy’s marriage” (M, SNA, P). The paternal uncle, as the father of the bride, shared this authority, reinforcing the sense that marriage was an internal family matter where choices were determined long before the young couple could express a view.

The decision was grounded in family obligation and kinship continuity, where other family members and relatives, such as the boy’s mother, elder brother, and grandparents, acted as supporters rather than decision-makers. The mother was informed of the process but did not intervene; her role was described as providing approval once the arrangements had been made. The elder brother mentioned that influencers had “equal involvement” in the process, while he was clear about the uncle and father making the final decisions. It was notable that the marriage date was decided by the paternal grandfather, even if he was not often nominated to have much authority in the overall process. He also offered advice to the brother related to the marriage timing based on practical reasons: “Dada [grandfather] told me to get him married as soon as possible. Because of the inflation,

the situation will get worse. [...] We decided to get Muzammil married as soon as possible so that he would realise his responsibility and be safe from inflation" (M, SNA, P). The boy reported that his authority was considered throughout the process; his words conveyed the weight of conformity to authority: "My parents told me to get married to my uncle's daughter. [...] It was decided by the will of my parents" (B, SNA, P). Like others in his family, he viewed the process as natural and expected—a continuation of family custom rather than an individual choice.

5.5 KP girl: A marriage accelerated to protect family honour

Figure 5.6 The marriage network of a girl living in KP



The girl from KP was married at the age of 14 to her mother's maternal uncle's son. This girl had a small marriage network, reflecting a preference for keeping ties within familiar relations. Her father's illness and growing anxiety about his daughters' future became the central driver of the decision to marry off the girl early. With limited resources and several unmarried daughters, he wanted to secure their marriages while he was still alive: "He wanted to make sure that his daughters got married during his lifetime because he was worried that if he passed away, his brothers or nephews might mistreat them" (G, SNA, K).

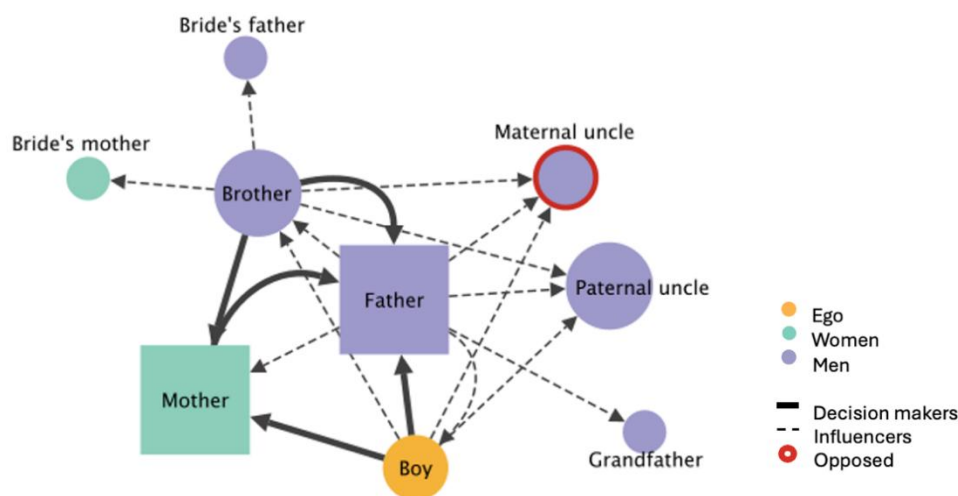
Marriage decisions were primarily made by her parents, with some involvement from her brother and sister. The father initiated the process, believing that girls should be married as soon as they reached adolescence: "When a girl becomes over 14 and reaches adulthood, we arrange her marriage" (M, SNA, P). He also expressed his sense of fulfilling his obligation: "I arranged her marriage according to my own will; I married her off with my own hands" (M, SNA, P). The mother, however, played a distinct role: she chose the groom, who was from her own maternal side, and expressed confidence in her authority: "The groom was my maternal uncle's son, so naturally, I had full authority [to choose the groom], and I was happy about it" (W, SNA, P). Despite this, she acknowledged that the father held greater overall authority: "Her father had more authority, mine was less" (W, SNA, P). The division of roles illustrates that while the father controlled the timing and approval of the marriage, the mother managed the selection of the groom. They made the final decision together, but the father's position ultimately carried greater weight. As the girl described, her father was the one "pushing through" the marriage despite her young age: "My father gave me two days to decide

when my engagement was fixed. I was very young, so I don't even remember much about how it all happened" (G, SNA, K). The siblings were mentioned as part of the discussions, but played supportive roles rather than making decisions.

The motivation behind the marriage stemmed from fear of social stigma and concern for family honour. The father's deteriorating health, coupled with potential rumours, made the family feel vulnerable: "My uncle threatened us, saying he would run away with her and marry her off to someone else" (W, SNA, K). The uncle not only threatened the family, but also strongly opposed the marriage because he was angry that the family did not marry the girl to his son: "He said, 'Why did the marriage happen here? We wanted her for our sons'" (W, SNA, K). The parents acted quickly to prevent gossip and possible dishonour by marrying the girl off to an ideal husband: "He was a good boy, didn't smoke or do drugs, came from a good family" (G, SNA, K). Throughout the marriage process, motivated by these fears and family pressures, the girl herself was excluded from decision-making: "I had no control over it. Everything was in the hands of my parents" (G, SNA, K). She expressed sadness about marrying at such a young age, but recognised that refusal would have brought anger and shame upon her: "If I had refused, my parents and brother would have been upset" (G, SNA, K). For her, marriage symbolised compliance rather than choice—an arrangement shaped entirely by the concerns and authority of others.

5.6 KP boy: The absolute power of a father

Figure 5.7 The marriage network of a boy living in KP



The boy from KP was married at the age of around 15 within his extended family to a relative chosen by his parents. His marriage network was small and centred on close kin, reflecting a strong preference for maintaining trust and relationships within the family. The match was arranged through routine social visits between families, and the boy described the process as natural and customary: "She was our relative, and we used to interact with them regularly, meeting and socialising" (B, SNA, K).

Marriage decisions were concentrated within the immediate family, led primarily by the father, who exercised absolute authority over both the timing and approval of the marriage. The father described himself as the one who "made the decision" and "took the lead", while emphasising that others, such as his brothers, the boy's grandfather, and uncles, were only consulted. He explained that once a child reaches adolescence, "the authority is fully with us", reinforcing the idea that parents have

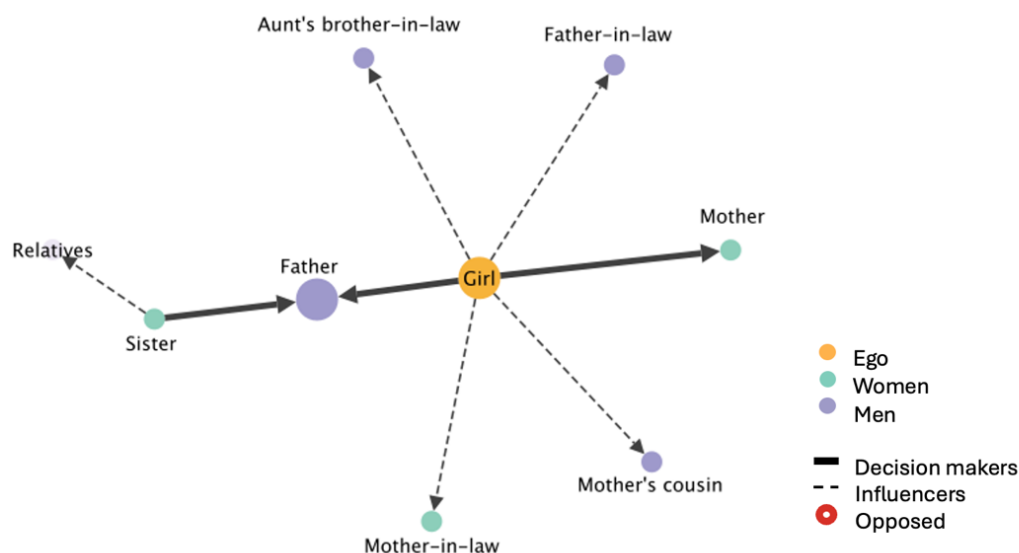
complete control once sons or daughters are of marriageable age. The mother confirmed this hierarchy but described her distinct role in the process: she was responsible for identifying the bride, whom she referred to as “a good girl from a respectable family”. The father initiated the proposal, saying, “I like this girl”, and the mother followed through by arranging the engagement. The brother’s account echoed this power dynamic: “The decision was entirely theirs; even if others said something, our parents wouldn’t have agreed without their own approval”.

Within this structure, the boy’s agency was minimal. He recognised his parents’ authority as rightful and unquestionable: “Our relationships are decided by our parents. Once the marriage is settled, the parents make the right decisions. They have the authority over all decisions, and the boy is not involved” (B, SNA, K). His acceptance reflected an internalised obedience to parental authority—an understanding that elders’ decisions were both morally and socially correct. The brother similarly noted that their parents’ decisions were final and that questioning them was unthinkable.

The underlying motivation for this early marriage was to prevent the boy from falling into bad habits. The father believed that early marriage protects young men from addiction or irresponsibility: “We wanted to avoid him going down the wrong path” (M, SNA, K). The mother and brother shared this reasoning, explaining that marriage would keep him “away from bad company” and make him more responsible. For the family, marrying early was an act of moral guardianship, fulfilling the father’s duty to marry off his son before he reached adulthood.

5.7 Sindh girl: Parents alone arranging a girl’s marriage

Figure 5.8 The marriage network of a girl living in Sindh



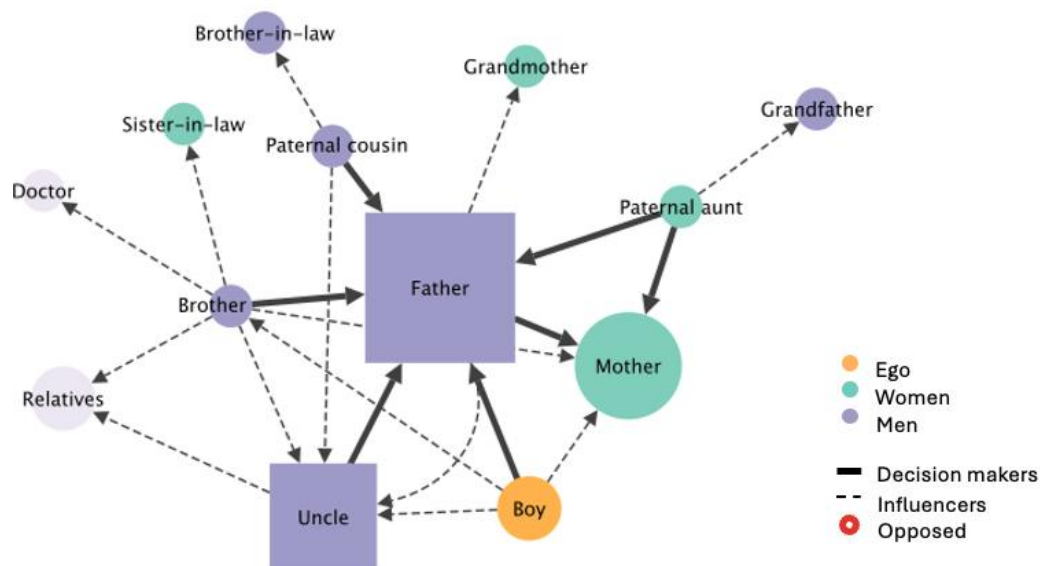
Note: The sister was not nominated by the girl as an alter.

The girl from Sindh was married at around the age of 15 to her mother’s cousin’s son within her extended family. The girl reported that the decision-making authority was shared between her parents, though not equally: “It was both parents’ decision — 70% from my father and 30% from my mother” (G, SNA, S). Her sister echoed the imbalance of power between their parents: “Most of the decision was made by the father; his opinion carried more weight”. The girl’s marriage was decided exclusively by her parents and unilaterally communicated to her: “My parents discussed it at night and said, ‘It’s time to marry off our daughter. This house seems fine. She’ll be happy there’” (G, SNA, S).

Marriage arrangements were mainly discussed among close relatives and in-laws. The father led the process, consulting the mother and extended family, while the aunt's brother-in-law played a key role in encouraging the match, as he wanted the marriage to remain within the family. The proposal came from the groom's family, and her future in-laws reinforced the arrangement by assuring her parents that their home would provide stability and happiness. Once the father approved, the mother arranged the engagement ceremony herself. Throughout the process, the girl was excluded from decision-making: "I had no choice. It was the elders' decision. Whatever my parents decided, I accepted it" (G, SNA, S). The sister described similar norms: "In our society, her [the girl's] opinion is not given much importance" (W, SNA, S). Yet, she expressed her trust in the parents' decisions: "They always try to make decisions that are in the best interest of their daughter" (W, SNA, S).

5.8 Sindh boy: Male family members deciding for a marriage

Figure 5.9 The marriage network of a girl living in Sindh



Note: The paternal aunt and paternal cousin were not nominated by the boy as an alter.

The boy from Sindh, who is 35 years old, was married when he was 17 years old (He will be referred to as the boy in this section to maintain consistency across cases). His marriage was arranged within his extended family, to a relative chosen by his father. The network surrounding his marriage was centred on the father and male-dominated, reflecting a strong emphasis on kinship trust and patriarchal authority in decision-making. The arrangement followed family custom, where elders, particularly men, were regarded as those who should make important decisions about marriage: "Yes, the decision was usually made by the father, [...] Ultimately, the men made the final decision" (M, SNA, S).

Marriage decisions were made through male consultation but led primarily by the father, whose authority guided the process from start to finish. The boy recalled that while several men were consulted, including his elder brother and uncle, his father's opinion was decisive: "My father had the most influence in decisions, and after him, my uncle first said, then mother and brother said" (B, SNA, S). The brother confirmed this pattern: "In our family, most of the decisions were made by Baba

(father). In marriage-related decisions, Baba, my uncle, and a few close elders were involved" (M, SNA, S). Although the father referred to the process as mutual: "It was a mutual decision, but primarily it was made by us, the parents" (M, SNA, S), other accounts suggested that consultation with relatives was largely a formality and did not influence the outcome. One male cousin explained: "Sometimes opinions are asked just to listen, but they are not acted upon" (M, SNA, S). Female relatives, such as the aunt, echoed this hierarchy: "The decision was his parents'; we were just informed that we're accepting this proposal" (W, SNA, S).

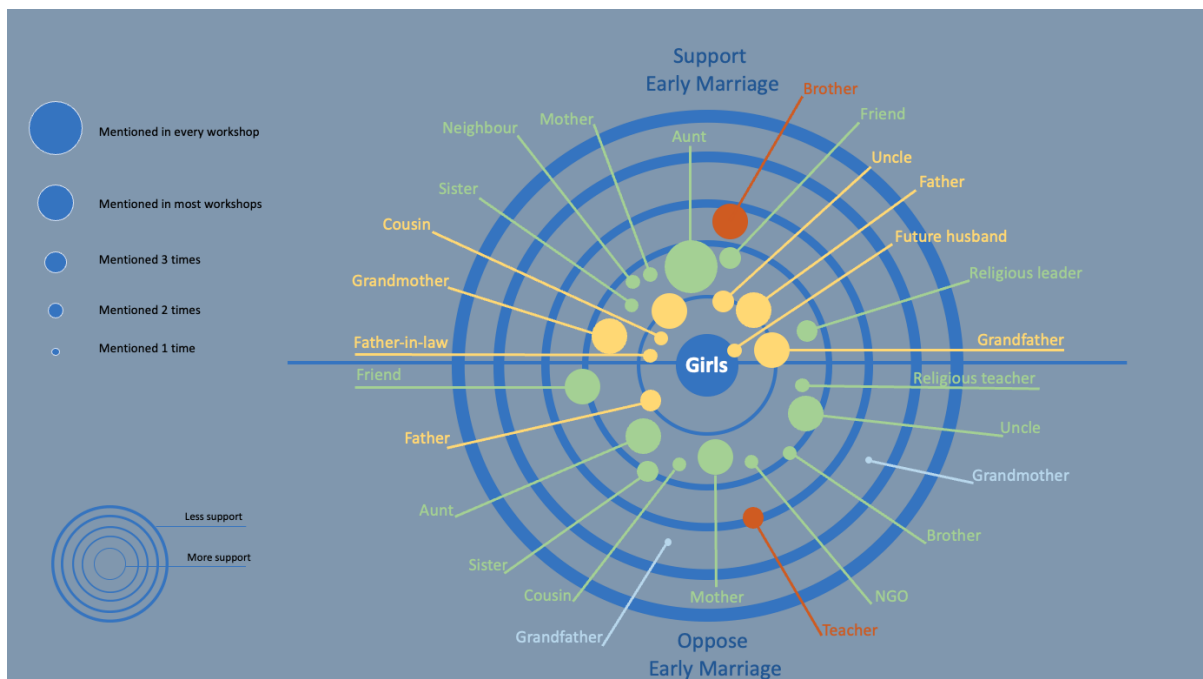
The boy had almost no agency in the marriage process; in his words, he said he had "only 10% authority" in the decision, reflecting a family culture in which parental choices were considered final and unquestionable. His brother similarly noted that young people were rarely asked for consent: "If the girl or boy strongly refused, then they might be heard a little. In some cases, marriages were arranged without asking their consent". The marriage was arranged not only to preserve family ties but also to ensure the boy's responsibility and discipline. The father described arranging the marriage to prevent the boy from "roaming around freely" or falling into "bad company." For the family, early marriage was both a corrective measure and a moral safeguard — a way to ensure that the son's behaviour aligned with social expectations and that family reputation remained intact.

5.9 Circles of Support: Who can children rely on?

The Circles of Support activity was conducted with children during the participatory workshops to understand who, within their social environment, supports or opposes their marriage. Each participant was asked to draw two concentric halves of a circle: on the top half, they listed people who would support or encourage their marriage; on the bottom half, those who would oppose or try to prevent it. They then positioned each person closer to or farther from the centre depending on how influential they were perceived to be in that decision. This simple visual tool allowed children to express, often for the first time, the balance of support and opposition surrounding them, revealing both the pressures they face and the potential allies who might protect their interests. This activity expands and complements the social network analysis. While in this section, we present findings from the national data, we report all graphs (both by province and gender) in Annex 3. The figure below shows the results of all the workshops, summarised in a single graph for girls and boys. In the figure, we increased the point size when the same person (or people) was mentioned in several workshops.

5.9.1 Who supports and opposes girls delaying marriage?

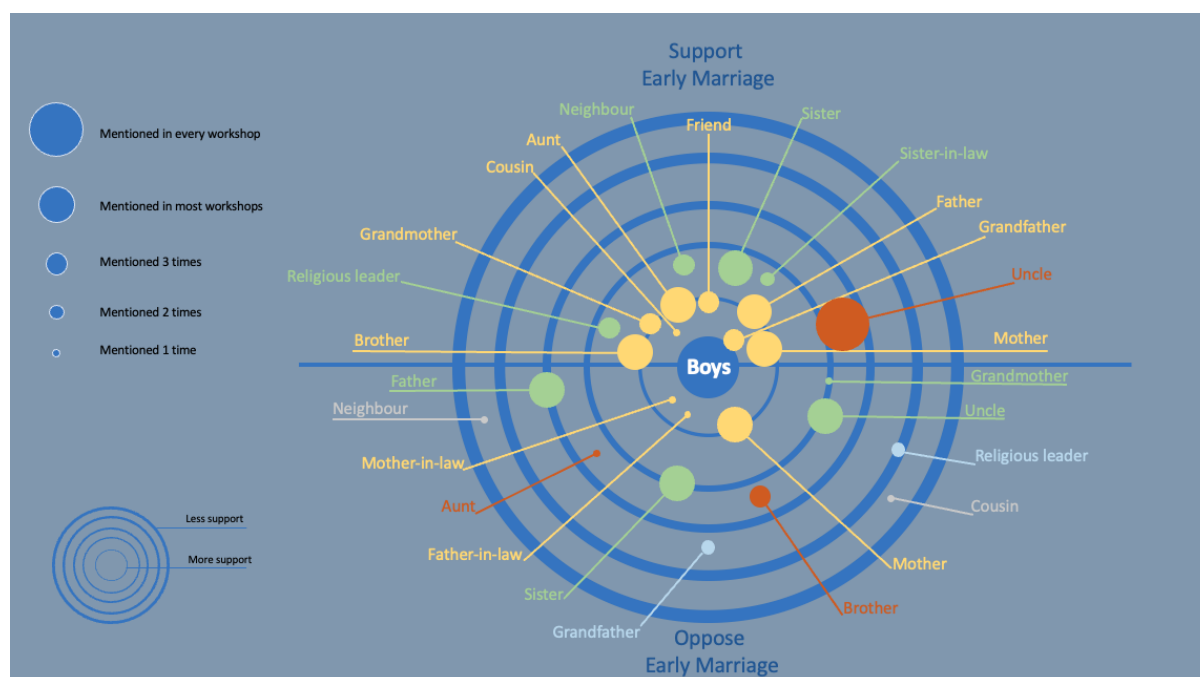
Figure 5.11. Graphical summary of the circles of support drawn by girls



The circles of support drawn by girls confirmed that the same family members who hold the strongest authority in marriage decisions, such as fathers, uncles, and grandparents, are often both the primary supporters of marriage and the strongest sources of pressure for it. Mothers and sisters were positioned more ambiguously: some supported early marriage “so the girl can settle before people start gossiping” (G, PW, K), while others preferred that daughters “should go to school at this age” (G, PW, P). However, their authority is limited within the household, which silenced their support: “Sometimes mothers support us, but they can’t say much in front of fathers” (G, PW, K). Grandparents and uncles were often cited as reinforcing early marriage to maintain family respectability or “see their grandchildren” (B, PW, B). In contrast, teachers and friends were most consistently placed closer to the centre of the upper side of the circle, described as encouraging education and independence: “Our teachers say girls should learn before marrying” (G, PW, S); “Friends say wait until we are older and responsible” (B, PW, K). Religious teachers were also mentioned as advising against early marriage, stressing that girls should learn first: “Madrassa teachers also say that the girl’s marriage should not happen early” (G, PW, S). Children across all workshops noted that although NGOs sometimes visit schools to advise against early marriage, their impact remains limited because they do not engage the elders who control marriage decisions. A girl from Balochistan highlighted a critical point that awareness programmes from NGOs cannot change the deeply rooted cultural norms: “We see NGO people in schools; they say girls should be 18, but they can’t change our elders’ minds” (G, PW, B).

5.9.2. Who supports and opposes boys delaying marriage?

Figure 5.11 Graphical summary of the circles of support drawn by boys



Similar to what girls reported, boys also identified fathers, uncles, and grandparents as the central figures insisting early marriage. Participants expressed that male family members were both the strongest drivers of early marriage and the main sources of guidance about when boys should marry. Fathers were most frequently positioned at the centre of influence, described as “the one who makes the final decision” (B, PW, K), while uncles and grandfathers were often mentioned as reinforcing the father’s authority: “Our uncle tells our father, ‘It’s time now, get the boy married’” (B, PW, S). However, mothers and brothers also appeared in supportive positions in most workshops, reflecting their mixed roles in boys’ marriage networks: while some advised waiting, others supported early marriage alongside fathers and uncles. Friends were also occasionally described as supporting delay: “Our friends say wait until you can earn for your family” (B, PW, S). Religious teachers were placed on the uppers side of the circle, whereas religious leaders appeared on the opposing side in several workshops. However, this pattern varied across regions; in Balochistan, for example, boys reported maulvis saying that marrying early “keeps boys away from sin” (B, PW, B). In most discussions, boys explained that while they understood the value of waiting, authority rested with their fathers and uncles, leaving little space for individual choice. In most discussions, boys mentioned NGOs when discussing who might help prevent early marriage, but they did not place them within the circles of support or opposition; NGOs were seen as distant actors with limited influence on the decisions made by fathers and uncles.

5.10 Final considerations

The findings from this section show that children's marriages are shaped within dense, kin-centred networks where authority is highly concentrated among senior male relatives and where children have little space to express their wishes. Across both the SNA case studies and the Circles of Support, fathers, uncles, and grandfathers consistently appeared as the most influential decision-makers, while women in the family—mothers, grandmothers, aunts—were positioned in more constrained roles, often responsible for operationalising arrangements rather than shaping them. At the same time, children identified teachers, friends, and sometimes siblings as the few actors who encouraged them to delay marriage, yet these figures were situated at the periphery of their circles, with limited ability to challenge the authority of elders. Children also emphasised that NGOs and government remain distant from the actual decision space; although they deliver messages in schools, they do not engage the elders who “cannot be convinced” by such outreach. These patterns highlight that interpersonal dynamics around marriage involve multiple layers of influence—hierarchy, symbolic authority, longstanding obligations, and moral framings linked to honour and protection. They also reveal several points where support could be strengthened: expanding the authority of those who already encourage delay, reducing the pressure exerted by those at the centre of decision-making, and ensuring that external actors engage meaningfully with families rather than only with children. Together, these insights underscore the need for interventions that recognise how decisions are collectively produced and that work across, rather than outside, children's relational worlds.

Section 6. Digital technologies and Child Marriage

*Our main problem is mobile phones.
(M, FG, O, K)*

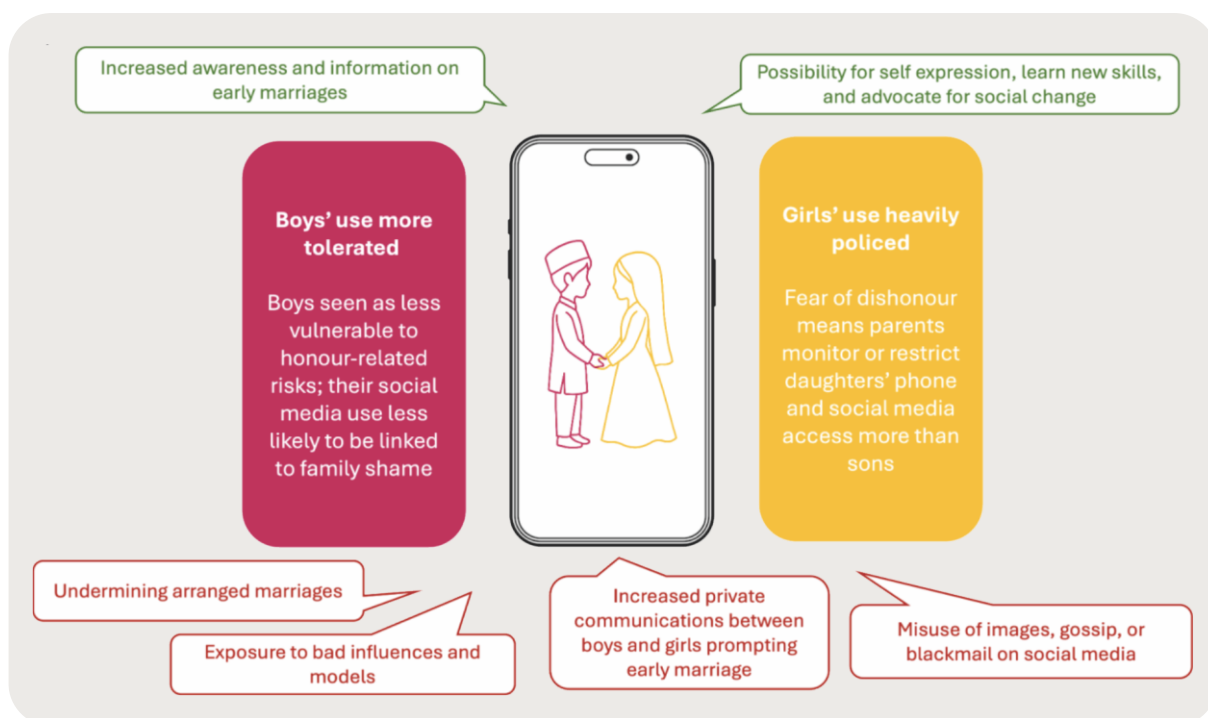
Relevant Research Question:

8. How are digital technologies (especially social media) affecting children's marriage related choices and actions?

Key Findings:

1. Social media and mobile phones create both opportunities for learning and self-expression and risks of family conflict, coercion, and child marriage.
2. Girls' phone use is tightly controlled and stigmatized, while boys' use is largely accepted as normal.
3. Discovering a girl's digital relationship can lead families to hasten or force her marriage to protect honour.
4. Online interactions have weakened parental control over marriage decisions and increased generational tension.
5. Misuse of images and gossip on social media can trigger honour-based violence or punishment.

Figure 6.1 Visual summary of the effect of digital technologies on girls' and boys' lives and marriages



6.0 Introduction

The rapid spread of digital technologies is fundamentally reshaping the ways in which children and young people interact, form relationships and make decisions in the four study districts. Once mediated almost exclusively through family and community networks, relationships are now increasingly initiated and maintained in via mobile phones, using private digital spaces, such as social media apps and online communication platforms like TikTok, WhatsApp and Facebook. This shift is particularly consequential for children and young women and men navigating traditions of arranged marriage, strong family oversight, and cultural expectations around honour and modesty.

This chapter explores how digital technologies influence romantic relationships, marriage decisions, and the persistence or transformation of child marriage practices. The findings highlight a complex picture: digital tools simultaneously create opportunities for connection and self-expression, while also generating anxiety among parents, family conflict, honour-based violence, and in some cases, the acceleration of forced or unwanted marriages.

Table 6.1 Consensus Frequency of effects of Digital Technologies

	Balochistan		KP		Punjab		Sindh	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Social media are changing relationship formations								
Use of technology is unacceptable for girls								
Use of technology is acceptable for boys								
Technology disrupts how marriages are formed								
Girls who use technology are married sooner								
Technology can help increase children's agency								

Notes: Colours indicate frequency of consensus. The darker the colour, the more participants mentioned the theme in question (see the colour scheme below).

6.1 Changing social dynamics and relationship formation

Across all four provinces, participants described a fundamental change in how boys and girls communicate. Social media and messaging apps were said to have made interaction easy, immediate and often clandestine. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, respondents observed that boys and girls commonly exchange numbers, communicate secretly, and sometimes meet in person, leading to suspicion and community gossip. One woman explained that these interactions have “ruined lives,” as young couples may elope, leaving behind broken families and dishonour. In Sindh, where phone ownership and internet use are more common, this dynamic was even more pronounced. Social media was described as making it “easy for people to talk without barriers,” (Health worker, Sindh), enabling girls and boys to exchange pictures, voice notes and videos. These interactions created emotional bonds that bypassed parental oversight and authority and sometimes led to “hasty, thoughtless decisions—like marriage” (Health worker, Sindh). In Punjab and Balochistan, respondents described how videos

on platforms such as TikTok and Facebook were creating “unrealistic expectations”, shaping romantic ideals that clash with traditional arranged systems (Female, 18–34, Punjab). Importantly, these influences are not uniform across and within study sites: while some children and young people embrace new freedoms, others remain constrained by family and community norms and oversight, and girls in particular face suspicion for even modest online interactions.

6.2 Gendered disparities in acceptance of technology use

A recurring theme across the four provinces is the stark gender disparity in how technology use is judged and controlled. While boys’ use of phones is often tolerated or overlooked, girls’ use is tightly monitored and frequently stigmatised. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, respondents described phone ownership by girls as a moral threat. One respondent explained that “when a girl talks to someone on the phone, people in the community start gossiping, and her reputation—and the family’s honour—are ruined,” while “boys are expected to do these things; it is not taken as seriously” (M, II, Y, K). The data from Balochistan are particularly striking for how explicitly girls’ phone use is controlled. Respondents repeatedly described restrictions, punishment, and unequal expectations: one woman explained that “if a girl is found with a phone, families may trace her calls and force her into marriage with the boy she was contacting, often without her consent” (W, FG, O, B). Another reported that “many boys have run away from home because of mobile phones—they talk with girls, and both run away—but only the girl is blamed” (W, FG, O, Balochistan).

This contrasting pattern, where girls’ access to technology is linked to moral decline, while boys’ use is accepted as a normal part of modern life, was also evident in Sindh, where the double standard was especially pronounced. A young man described his own use of social media as “normal,” explaining, “We watch videos, we talk to friends; it is part of life now.” Meanwhile, the same families “don’t allow their daughters to use phones” (M, FG, Y, S). A woman respondent also highlighted these unequal expectations: “When a boy uses a phone, it is nothing. When a girl does, they say she has no shame” (W, FG, Y, S).

Punjab respondents described similar contradictions. Young women spoke of using phones for education or communication but being accused of immorality or impropriety, while boys’ use was overlooked: “Even if a girl uses her phone for studying or talking with other girls, people say she is talking to boys. Parents get suspicious, and fights start,” explained one young woman (W, II, Y, P). In contrast, male respondents acknowledged using TikTok, Facebook, and WhatsApp freely, without family interference: “We can watch videos and message friends—it’s just entertainment. But for girls, the same thing becomes a scandal” (M, FG, Y, P). These examples show not only how girls’ digital activity is moralised and seen to require greater scrutiny but also the disproportionate consequences they face, including marriage as a disciplinary response.

6.3 Disruptions to marriage decision-making and family control

A recurring theme across regions is the way digital interactions disrupt traditional ways of arranging and deciding marriages, often leading to family tension and conflict. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, several respondents explained that if parents discover a girl’s relationship through mobile communication, they may accelerate her marriage—either to the boy involved or to another man chosen by the family—to protect honour. One young woman explained, “If parents find out about a girl’s relationship, they force her to marry either the same boy or another man so that people don’t talk”

(W, FG, Y, K). Engagements are sometimes broken when pre-marital contact comes to light, and girls have been forced into marriages against their wishes.

In Sindh, digital technology appears to have subtly shifted the balance of power in marriage decisions. Young people increasingly express preferences for marital partners online and sometimes initiate relationships that challenge parental authority. A health worker recounted a case of “a 16-year-old girl who secretly married a tea seller she met online, abandoning her studies” (W, H, KII, S). It appears that being online is common enough among children and young people that some families reportedly investigate potential grooms’ social media activity as part of the marriage vetting process. Doing so reflects a shift in which digital presence influences family decisions, but it also creates tension when daughters form preferences online that contradict parental choices and undermine family authority. A religious leader in Sindh lamented that ‘mobile phones have led to girls falling in love and rejecting arranged matches, causing stress and disruption’ (M, RL, KII, S).

In Punjab, exposure to online content was reported to sometimes delay marriage. Some young people reported learning through social media about the harms of child marriage, which encouraged them to prioritise education before marriage. One young woman noted, “with mobile phones and television, people are learning that delaying marriage leads to a better future” (W, FG, Y, P). Yet the same access has heightened parental suspicion; when families suspect digital relationships, they sometimes hasten marriages to re-assert control. Paradoxically, parents may also marry off daughters quickly when they suspect relationships are forming online, reflecting the tension between protection and control.

In Balochistan, interviewees pointed to both voluntary and coerced outcomes. A male participant observed that “social media allows boys and girls to meet online, and if the intention is good, it can lead to marriage—but if it is not, it creates problems” (M, FG, O, B).

6.4 Honour, stigma and the risk of violence

Across the study sites, the notion of honour (*izzat*) emerged as a central lens through which families and communities interpret the digital lives of children and young people. The discovery of a relationship through mobile phones can trigger serious consequences, particularly for girls. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, respondents linked digital communication directly to honour-based violence and forced marriage. A male respondent in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa explained that “As soon as they suspect a girl is talking to someone, they fix her marriage immediately to protect the family’s name” (M, FG, O, K). One woman recalled that “Some families had to leave their villages, while others faced killings in the name of honour” after relationships formed online were exposed (W, FG, Y, K). Boys, too, were implicated, sometimes abandoning wives or fiancées for new digital relationships.

In Balochistan, suspicion around phone ownership was particularly strong. A woman explained that “If a girl is found with a phone, families may trace her calls and force her into marriage with the boy she was contacting, often without her consent” (W, FG, O, B). Likewise, in Sindh, adult men reported that parents who discover their daughter’s phone use may feel compelled to act swiftly to prevent dishonour, sometimes by arranging child marriages. Such practices underscore how technology intensifies the risks young women face, as moral panic over digital behaviour can quickly lead to coercion or violence.

Several respondents across the research districts referred to the misuse of images, gossip, or blackmail on social media. In Sindh and Punjab, some participants mentioned cases where photos

were shared without consent, leading to harassment or family punishment. Such incidents illustrate how digital spaces can extend control and violence into new forms.

6.5 Gendered agency and empowerment

While respondents across all sites emphasised their risks, digital technologies were also revealed to provide young people, especially girls, with new forms of visibility and learning and new avenues for agency and empowerment. For example, in Sindh, several respondents, including young women, noted that social media expands girls' "Possibilities to express themselves, learn new skills, and even advocate for social change" (M, FG, Y, S). However, the empowerment that derived from expanded horizons is often precarious because new freedoms can also lead to increased surveillance or restrictions by families. In Punjab and Balochistan, this ambivalence was clear. One young woman described social media as a "double-edged sword." (W, FG, Y, P). On the one hand, it educates girls about their rights and provides examples of independent women; on the other, it creates tension within families, where phone ownership is equated with immorality and responded to with suspicion and parental control. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, such narratives were less commonly expressed. Most respondents focused on the moral corruption and risks incurred through the use of digital technologies. Even in this context, however, young people sometimes saw phones as a tool for exploring relationships on their own terms and giving them a small measure of choice in whom they talk to and how they imagine their futures.

6.6 Final Considerations

The impact of digital technology on child marriage in the four research districts is complex and often contradictory, simultaneously reinforcing and challenging existing social norms. In every context, mobile phones and social media have expanded young people's capacity to communicate privately, develop romantic relationships, and make independent choices, which in turn has unsettled long-standing patterns of parental control and community surveillance. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, where honour remains tightly bound to female behaviour, these changes have intensified family anxiety and sometimes prompted earlier or forced marriages as parents act pre-emptively to preserve reputation. In Sindh, where access to technology is greater, digital spaces have become both arenas of empowerment—enabling young women to learn, connect, and advocate—and sources of moral panic that trigger restrictive or coercive responses. In Punjab, exposure to social media and global content has increased awareness of the harms of child marriage and encouraged some young people to delay marriage in favour of education, even as romantic expectations and parental mistrust continue to cause tension. Across all regions, digital technologies have become deeply entangled with the social logics that shape marriage, acting as both catalyst and constraint: a means of expanding agency and voice for some young people, while, for others, deepening vulnerability to control, conflict, and child marriage.

Section 7. Social norms affecting child marriage

*After a certain age, people say the girl is not good or something is wrong with her
(W, FG, O, B)*

Relevant Research Question:

9. How do social norms affect child marriage practices in the participating communities?

Key Findings:

1. Across provinces, most girls accept marriage decisions made by elders because refusal is both uncommon and socially disapproved.
2. Obedience is framed as virtue and good upbringing, while refusal or delay is seen as shameful and a source of family dishonour.
3. Mothers play a mediating but not decision-making role, while fathers' authority is reinforced by communal expectations and gossip.
4. Sanctions for girls who resist range from emotional pressure and social isolation to, in extreme cases, honour-related violence.
5. Education and urban exposure offer small openings for change, as some families begin to consider girls' opinions or delay marriage for schooling.
6. Sustainable change requires interventions that work within existing moral frameworks—reframing family honour to include girls' consent, dialogue, and education as signs of respect and responsibility.

Figure 7.1 Visual summary of sanctions that girls would experience if they refuse a marriage proposal



7.0 Introduction

This section examines the social norms that shape whether, when, and how girls (and to a lesser extent boys) marry in the participating communities. Because boys generally enjoy more room to negotiate or delay marriage (see Section 10), our vignettes and analysis centre primarily on girls' experiences of constrained choice and obedience to elders. One line on concepts: descriptive norms are what people believe most others actually do (e.g., "girls usually accept the proposal"), whereas injunctive norms are what people believe others approve or disapprove of (e.g., "a 'good' daughter should accept and will be blamed if she refuses").

We used two vignettes, the protagonist of the first being *Maheen* (15, her father announces her marriage) and the second's *Ayesha* (22, she refuses a parental proposal), to separate "what happens" from "what is expected." Across provinces, the descriptive picture is that most girls comply quietly, with refusal seen as rare and typically mediated indirectly (through mothers or trusted relatives). The injunctive picture is even tighter: obedience is morally praised as modesty and good upbringing, while refusal, speaking up, delaying beyond ~18, or any premarital relationship attracts disapproval, gossip, and sanctions that range from scolding and social isolation to, in some places, threats and violence framed as "honour." Although small openings exist—linked to education, urban exposure, and some more consultative families—community enforcement (especially gossip, reputational damage, and fears of lost future proposals) keeps most girls aligned with prevailing expectations.

7.1 Descriptive norms

7.1.1 Norm 1: Accepting Marriage Proposal

Participants gave a wide variety of answers when asked how girls like Maheen, a 15-year-old whose father announces her marriage without asking her consent, would respond in such a situation. For each category, they provided justifications, which are described in the following sub-sections. The general impression across provinces was that most participants thought girls in Maheen's position would accept their father's decision, while refusal was mentioned less frequently and described as rare. In Balochistan, women said it would be "a miracle" if a girl refused, with one young woman estimating "maybe one out of a hundred girls say no" (W, FG, Y, B). In Punjab and Sindh, some male and female participants acknowledged that refusal happens occasionally, but they stressed it was still unusual compared with acceptance (M, II, O, P; W, II, Y, S). In KP, this point was not mentioned directly.

7.1.1.1 Most girls would accept the marriage proposal

The largest response that participants gave was that they believe it was common for girls to accept their father's decision to marry them off at the age of 15. Girls were generally described as remaining silent and complying with the decision. Participants frequently stressed that this was not because daughters actively agreed but because refusal was not recognised as an option. Many participants explained that fathers' decisions were considered final and unquestionable. A young woman in Balochistan said, "The father has already decided, and that's final" (W, FG, Y, B). Another added, "She doesn't even know that she has the right to ask questions" (W, FG, Y, B). In Sindh, an older man similarly explained that girls from poor or uneducated households "do not know they can refuse" (M, II, O, S). Male participants in KP echoed this view, stressing that a girl "will not refuse in front of her father. The father knows that his daughter cannot refuse him" (M, FG, O, K). In Punjab, some women also noted that daughters "cannot say no when their elders decide for them" (W, FG, O, P).

Participants often explained that this silence begins early in life, as girls are socialised to obey and to see men's authority as absolute. Women in Balochistan described how "even a 20-year-old girl has to obey an 8-year-old brother's orders" (W, FG, Y, B), while men added that "when elders make a decision, the children remain silent. They are helpless in front of them" (M, II, Y, B). Several women in KP echoed that daughters "cannot say anything to their father or brothers, because they are older" (W, FG, Y, K), and in Punjab others said girls "cannot say no when their elders decide for them" (W, FG, O, P).

Because obedience was described as expected of women more broadly, participants also linked girls' behaviour to wider cultural expectations. In Punjab, an older woman explained, "A married woman cannot refuse her husband's decision, so how can a girl refuse her father?" (W, FG, O, P). In Sindh, an older man said, "Whether young or old, women do not have the courage to say no to men" (M, II, O, S), while a younger woman added, "Even if she is older, she cannot go against her father's words" (W, II, Y, S). These accounts suggested that what is common for girls reflects the same patterns of deference found among adult women. Mothers were frequently mentioned in these discussions but were not described as decision-makers. Instead, their role was to prepare for the wedding or encourage daughters to accept. In KP, a younger woman explained that mothers would typically tell their daughters, "Wherever your father has fixed your marriage, you should marry there" (W, FG, Y, K). Men in Punjab made similar observations, saying that mothers generally urged daughters to respect the father's wishes (M, II, O, P).

7.1.1.2 Most girls would refuse the marriage proposal

Only some participants mentioned that girls would refuse their fathers' decision to marry them off at a young age, and even these accounts described refusal as rare or exceptional. When it was discussed, participants tended to associate refusal with specific conditions such as education, maturity, or access to information. Many participants who raised this possibility said refusal was more likely among educated girls, who were thought to have greater awareness and confidence to express disagreement. A younger man in Balochistan noted, "If she is educated, she might speak up. But if she is uneducated, she will remain helpless" (M, II, Y, B). In Sindh, some participants echoed this view, explaining that education gave some girls "the courage to discuss and delay" (M, II, O, S). Women in Punjab added that schooling and exposure to media had made some girls "less afraid to say no" (W, FG, Y, P). However, participants emphasised that these cases were exceptions rather than the norm. A smaller number of respondents described refusal as more common among girls who were older or more mature, especially those approaching adulthood. In KP, women explained that "a grown-up girl might say she is not ready, but a small girl will keep quiet" (W, FG, Y, K). Similarly, in Punjab, one man observed that "some girls around 18 or 19 can tell their parents they want to study first, but younger ones cannot" (M, FG, O, P).

Most participants who discussed refusal said it would usually happen indirectly, through mothers or trusted relatives rather than directly confronting fathers. In KP, women said, "She will tell her mother, not her father, because she is afraid of him" (W, FG, Y, K). In Sindh, a man described how a girl "might tell her friend she doesn't like the match and ask her mother to talk to the father" (M, II, O, S). Some women in Punjab and Balochistan confirmed that "even if a girl disagrees, she cannot say it herself; someone else will speak for her" (W, II, Y, B; W, FG, O, P).

Although refusal was generally portrayed as rare, a few participants—mostly younger men and women in Sindh and Punjab—believed that refusals are becoming slightly more common than in the past, attributing this to urbanisation and changing family dynamics. One man in Sindh said, "Nowadays girls are more aware; they sometimes refuse if they don't like the proposal" (M, II, O, S). However, even these participants underlined that such behaviour remains limited to a minority of families and is not typical in rural areas.

7.1.1.3 Some girls would accept, and some would refuse the proposal

Some participants described mixed patterns in their communities, explaining that both acceptance and refusal occur depending on circumstances. These respondents emphasised that behaviour is not uniform but shaped by factors such as education, family environment, exposure to urban life, and parents' openness to listening to their daughters.

Many participants said that the likelihood of refusal increases with education and awareness, while compliance remains the norm in families with limited schooling or resources. In Balochistan, one man explained, "Yes, they can say no if they are well educated, but mostly people do not take their daughter's opinion" (M, II, Y, B). In Sindh, women said that "girls who study can sometimes convince their parents, but uneducated ones agree immediately" (W, II, Y, S). Participants in Punjab also mentioned that educated girls "now discuss with their parents and sometimes say no" (W, FG, Y, P), though such discussions were still seen as rare. Some participants, particularly women, associated this variation with family attitudes and parental flexibility. A few respondents said that some families allow daughters to express disagreement without punishment or shame, especially when they live in towns or have higher income levels. In Sindh, an older woman noted that "in the city, parents may listen if the girl does not like the boy, but in the village, she has no choice" (W, II, O, S). Similarly, in Punjab, a young man explained that "educated parents ask their daughters if they are ready, but most do not" (M, FG, Y, P).

A smaller number of participants described variation within the same community, saying that while some girls accept, others resist quietly or delay marriage through excuses such as continuing their studies. In KP, a woman said, "It depends on the girl; some say yes, some say they are not ready" (W, FG, Y, K). In Balochistan, a few participants similarly observed that "both things happen—some accept, some try to delay by saying they are still young" (W, II, Y, B). Despite acknowledging that both outcomes occur, participants still viewed acceptance as more typical. Refusal, when it happened, was portrayed as limited to certain households or as a behaviour that was increasing slowly with education and social change, but not yet common.

7.2 Injunctive Norms

7.2.1 Norm 1: Acceptance of Marriage Proposals

This section draws on the vignettes of *Maheen*, a 15-year-old whose father announces her marriage without her consent, and *Ayesha*, a 22-year-old who refuses a proposal arranged by her parents. Participants were asked girls would think about being in such situations, and how families and communities would view their actions. Their responses reveal the injunctive norms that shape expectations around marriage—what is considered proper or improper behaviour, and the moral judgments attached to compliance or refusal. Across all four provinces, most participants said that girls *should accept* marriage decisions made by their fathers, describing obedience as a marker of respect, modesty, and good upbringing. Refusal was almost universally framed as *disobedience* or *shameful*, with parents fearing gossip, dishonour, or the loss of family reputation. Only a few younger and more educated respondents, particularly in urban Sindh and Punjab, suggested that girls *should have a say* in whether and when they marry. The following sub-sections present these findings in detail, highlighting how expectations differ by gender, generation, and province.

7.2.1.1 Girls believe they would be disapproved of when they refuse marriage proposals

Almost all participants generally agreed that girls who refuse a marriage arranged by their fathers would face strong disapproval from family members and the wider community. Refusal was widely described as disrespectful and improper behaviour for a girl, contradicting norms of obedience and

modesty. Participants in Balochistan and KP frequently emphasised that refusal is viewed as rebellion against parental authority. A young woman in Balochistan said, “If a girl says no, people call her disobedient” (W, FG, Y, B), while a man explained, “They think she has been spoiled and does not respect her father” (M, II, O, B). In KP, male participants repeatedly stressed that “a girl who refuses her father’s decision is seen as ill-mannered” (M, FG, O, K), and women said, “people say her parents failed to teach her respect” (W, FG, Y, K). In Punjab and Sindh, many participants said that refusal provokes gossip and moral criticism. In Punjab, women described that people would call such girls “stubborn” or “spoiled by education” (W, FG, O, P). A male respondent added that refusal “makes others think she is arrogant or too modern” (M, II, O, P). In Sindh, participants frequently mentioned that refusing a proposal is interpreted as evidence of moral weakness or improper behaviour: “People will say she must like someone else,” explained a man (M, II, O, S), while a young woman said, “They think she has become shameless” (W, FG, Y, S).

Only a few participants, mostly younger and educated women from urban Punjab and Sindh, suggested that girls might have a legitimate reason to refuse. However, even these participants acknowledged that others would still judge them negatively. One woman in Sindh explained, “Even if she has a reason, people say she has too much freedom” (W, FG, Y, S). A young woman in Punjab added, “People would still call her disrespectful even if she says no politely” (W, FG, Y, P).

7.2.1.2 Girls believe they would be disapproved of for expressing their opinions on marriage

Participants across all provinces repeatedly said that when girls express their opinions about marriage (whether questioning a proposal, asking to delay marriage, or sharing their preferences) they face disapproval and criticism from family and community members. Speaking about marriage was described as inappropriate behaviour for girls and a sign of disrespect toward fathers and elders. Participants in Balochistan and KP most frequently mentioned that girls are expected to stay silent during marriage discussions. In Balochistan, several women said that “if a girl gives her opinion, people will call her disobedient” (W, FG, Y, B), while male participants explained that “girls should not talk about marriage because these matters are decided by elders” (M, II, O, B). In KP, participants repeatedly stated that girls who express opinions are considered ill-mannered. A male participant said that “people would say she has no respect for her elders” (M, FG, O, K), and a woman added that “people would blame her parents for not teaching her manners” (W, FG, Y, K). In Punjab and Sindh, many participants also described how girls who express opinions are seen as arrogant or behaving like those influenced by city culture. In Punjab, women said that “if a girl speaks about marriage, elders will take it as arrogance” (W, FG, O, P). Men similarly mentioned that “a girl who talks about marriage decisions would be viewed as having no shame” (M, II, O, P). In Sindh, participants said that “people would say such girls have become too bold or modern.” One woman explained that “when a girl says what she wants, people think she has been influenced by new ideas” (W, FG, Y, S). A few participants, mostly younger women from Sindh and Punjab, said that “it is becoming slightly more common for girls to share opinions if they do so respectfully.” A woman in Sindh explained that “in some urban areas, parents now listen when a girl says she is not ready to marry, but others still criticise her” (W, FG, Y, S). A respondent in Punjab similarly said that “in some families, especially in towns, parents ask girls about their readiness, but in most places, people still think she should stay quiet” (W, FG, Y, P).

7.2.1.3 Parents believe their family would be ashamed if girls refuse to marry

Most participants said that parents fear their families would be shamed or blamed if a daughter refused to marry. Refusal was described as an act that dishonours the household and damages its reputation in the community. Parents were said to worry that others would question their authority or assume they had failed to raise their daughters properly. Participants in Balochistan and KP most frequently associated refusal with family disgrace. A woman in Balochistan said that “if a girl refuses, everyone will talk about her parents and say they have no control” (W, FG, Y, B). Another participant

added that “people will say the father has lost respect because his daughter disobeyed him” (M, II, O, B). In KP, both men and women said that “when a girl says no, the whole family becomes ashamed” (M, FG, O, KP; W, FG, Y, K). Women in KP further explained that refusal is viewed as “bringing embarrassment to the parents in front of relatives” (W, FG, Y, K). In Punjab and Sindh, many participants also spoke of the fear of gossip and moral judgment. In Punjab, one man explained that “people would say the parents did not teach their daughter manners” (M, II, O, P). Women in Punjab noted that “relatives would blame the mother, saying she gave too much freedom to her daughter” (W, FG, O, P). In Sindh, participants said that “people will laugh at the family and say they cannot control their girls” (W, FG, Y, S). Some participants mentioned that refusal can lower the family’s standing in the eyes of others, who may question their respectability or religious values (M, II, O, S).

A few participants, mostly younger respondents from Sindh and Punjab, said that some parents now worry less about community opinion if they understand their daughter’s reasons. One young woman in Sindh said, “Some parents understand now, but still others fear what people will say” (W, FG, Y, S). However, such views were limited, and most participants continued to describe refusal as a behaviour that brings moral blame to the family. Male participants more frequently than female participants stressed that fathers would feel personally dishonoured if their daughters refused, while women often said that mothers would be held responsible for failing to raise an obedient daughter.

7.2.2 Norm 2: Marriage before 18

7.2.2.1 Girls believe they would be disapproved of when they get married after 18

Participants overwhelmingly repeated that people in their communities disapprove when girls remain unmarried after the age of 18. Marriage at a young age was commonly viewed as a sign of modesty and good upbringing, while delaying marriage was seen as inappropriate and contrary to local expectations. Participants said that girls who marry later are often described as being “too independent” or “not pure,” and that parents of unmarried daughters are criticised for failing to arrange marriage on time.

Participants in Balochistan and KP most frequently mentioned that delaying marriage brings embarrassment to the family. In Balochistan, both men and women said that “people start talking if a girl is not married by 18” (W, FG, Y, B; M, II, O, B). One man explained that “after a certain age, people say the girl is not good or something is wrong with her” (M, II, O, B). In KP, participants similarly noted that “a girl who is not married young becomes a topic of gossip” (W, FG, Y, K), and “people say her parents are careless or waiting too long” (M, FG, O, K). In Punjab and Sindh, many participants also described negative social perceptions of late marriage. In Punjab, women said that “if a girl is not married by 18 or 19, people ask what is wrong with her” (W, FG, O, P), and a male respondent noted that “elders think the family is taking a risk with her reputation” (M, II, O, P). In Sindh, participants said that “people say she has grown old or must like someone” (W, FG, Y, S; M, II, O, S). Some added that delaying marriage is often blamed on mothers, with relatives saying that “the mother is too proud or not serious about her daughter’s future” (W, FG, Y, S).

Only a few participants, mostly from urban Sindh and Punjab, said that views are slowly changing. One young woman in Sindh mentioned that “now people in cities accept girls marrying later if they are studying,” but others added that “in villages, people still say it is shameful” (W, FG, Y, S). Similarly, a respondent in Punjab said that “some families now let girls wait if they want to finish school, but most people still criticise” (W, FG, Y, P). Men more frequently associated child marriage with respectability, while female participants often described the pressure as rooted in fear of gossip and judgment. Many women said that even if they personally support later marriage, they believe the community would still disapprove.

7.3 Norm 3: Exclusively Postmarital Sexual Activity

7.3.1 Girls believe they would be disapproved of for engaging in relationships before marriage

Almost all participants said that girls who engage in relationships before marriage would face strong disapproval from both families and communities. Romantic or premarital relationships were described as completely unacceptable and against local cultural and religious norms. Participants said that people consider such behaviour shameful and believe it brings dishonour to the girl and her family. Participants in Balochistan and KP most frequently referred to the moral unacceptability of such relationships. In Balochistan, both men and women said that “a girl seen talking to a boy would be called shameless” (W, FG, Y, B; M, II, O, B). Another woman explained that “people would say she has no respect and her parents have failed” (W, FG, Y, B). In KP, participants said that “no one would tolerate a girl having a relationship” (M, FG, O, K) and that “people would talk badly about her for the rest of her life” (W, FG, Y, K). In Punjab and Sindh, many participants also said that premarital relationships are viewed as dishonourable and bring criticism to the girl’s entire family. In Punjab, one woman said that “people would say she is of bad character and no one will marry her” (W, FG, O, P), and a man added that “everyone would blame her parents for not controlling her” (M, II, O, P). In Sindh, participants frequently mentioned that “people say she has become modern and lost her values” (W, FG, Y, S). One male respondent said that “people would say she has ruined her family’s name” (M, II, O, S). A few participants, mostly from urban Sindh, said that relationships before marriage are becoming more visible but still strongly disapproved. One young woman explained that “some people in the city ignore it now, but in villages, it is still considered shameful” (W, FG, Y, S). Another added that “even if it happens, people pretend not to know, because everyone agrees it is wrong” (W, FG, Y, S). Men more frequently described such relationships as immoral and damaging to family honour, while female participants spoke about the fear of judgment and gossip. Participants agreed that social disapproval is severe and that a girl’s reputation would be permanently affected.

7.4 Sanctions

This section presents the sanctions that girls and their families face when they act against prevailing marriage norms—such as refusing a proposal, expressing disagreement, or engaging in behaviour considered inappropriate. Across provinces, participants described a wide range of sanctions, from verbal scolding and emotional pressure to physical punishment, gossip, and reputational damage. These responses were typically enforced within the family or through community networks and were widely recognised as mechanisms for maintaining social conformity. Although the intensity and form of sanctions varied, most participants agreed that fear of such reactions strongly discourages girls from expressing their opinions or rejecting arranged marriages.

7.4.1 Family pressure, punishment and honour-related responses

Most participants said that families play the main role in enforcing marriage norms and punishing girls who refuse or question arranged marriages. Sanctions most commonly begin with verbal pressure and emotional coercion from parents and can, in some cases, escalate to physical violence or threats justified as protection of family honour. In Balochistan, participants most frequently described scolding, shouting, and emotional pressure as the first response to refusal. Women said that “if a girl says she doesn’t want to get married, her mother might slap her or tell her it’s not her decision” (W, FG, Y, B). Men and women explained that fathers usually act as the final authority, while mothers encourage compliance “to protect the family’s respect” (M, FG, O, B). Refusal or hesitation was often met with repeated attempts to convince the girl, described by participants as “forcing her to agree through words or anger” (W, II, Y, B). Similar accounts were given in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where many participants said that “parents would scold her and remind her that girls cannot choose

for themselves" (W, FG, Y, K). Some men added that "if she still refuses, the father will beat her or stop her from leaving the house" (M, FG, O, K). Several women in KP said that this behaviour was justified by families as discipline, "to make sure she does not bring shame" (W, FG, Y, K). In Punjab and Sindh, many participants also described verbal and emotional punishment as common. In Punjab, women said that "parents would shout at the girl and say she is destroying their name" (W, FG, O, P). Men confirmed that "fathers become angry and stop talking to their daughters until they agree" (M, II, O, P). In Sindh, participants said that "mothers scold their daughters and tell them they have brought shame on the family" (W, FG, Y, S). Some men mentioned that "if she keeps refusing, the father might threaten her or marry her off quickly" (M, II, O, S).

A few women described physical punishment, and, in rare but severe cases, violence justified in the name of honour. In Balochistan, participants said that "if the girl refuses, her father could even kill her" (W, FG, Y, B). One woman added that "her friend would tell her to agree because if she doesn't, her parents might kill her" (W, II, O, B). Similar accounts appeared in KP, where women mentioned that "some fathers, feeling dishonoured, beat their daughters severely" (W, FG, Y, K). While these statements were not common, participants consistently linked such violence to the idea of preserving family honour. Male participants more frequently than female participants described these sanctions as necessary to maintain discipline and reputation, while women often expressed concern or empathy, saying that "girls accept because they fear anger and punishment at home" (W, FG, Y, B).

7.4.2 Community gossip, reputational damage and blame on parents

Across all provinces, participants said that one of the most powerful forms of community-level sanction is gossip. When a girl refuses or delays marriage, news spreads quickly, and people in the community begin to talk about her and her family. Most participants said that gossip damages both the girl's and the parents' reputation, creating pressure to comply with marriage decisions. Women and men explained that people often link refusal with immorality, saying that "she must like someone else" or "her parents cannot control her." Participants said that such talk spreads rapidly in villages, where "everyone knows each other and news travels fast." Several respondents said that gossip makes it difficult for families to maintain respect, because "people say bad things about both the girl and her mother." Many participants also said that relatives and neighbours blame the parents for the girl's behaviour, particularly the mother. They explained that "people blame the mother, saying she gave too much freedom to her daughter" or that "the parents did not raise her properly." Men frequently noted that fathers lose respect in the community and that others "laugh at the family and say the daughter has become too bold."

Participants described these forms of gossip and blame as deeply harmful, explaining that once a family's reputation is questioned, they become socially isolated. Families described as "unable to control their daughters" are avoided, and their other children may be seen as undesirable marriage partners. While the content of gossip was similar across provinces, some participants in urban Sindh and Punjab mentioned that these views are slowly changing in cities, where refusal or delay is more common and less likely to attract attention. However, in rural areas and in Balochistan and KP, gossip and public criticism remained a central mechanism for enforcing compliance with marriage norms. Across regions, men more frequently than women spoke about gossip as a way communities maintain moral boundaries, while women highlighted its emotional effects and the humiliation families experience when they become a topic of discussion.

7.4.3 Loss of marriage prospect

Across all provinces, most participants said that refusal of a marriage proposal almost always leads to the loss of future marriage opportunities. This was one of the most frequently mentioned

sanctions, with many describing it as the reason why girls and their parents rarely say no. Participants said that once a proposal is refused, the girl's reputation is damaged, and other families assume she is disobedient, already interested in someone else, or otherwise unsuitable for marriage.

In many discussions, participants explained that refusal is remembered for years and that "people do not forget when a girl rejects someone." They said that once such a label is attached to her, "no one brings another proposal," because families fear being associated with a girl who was previously unwilling. Several women said that after refusal, "others think she is stubborn or proud," while men said that "people start to say there must be a reason why she said no." These rumours quickly turn into gossip that limits the girl's prospects. Participants also described how the fear of losing future marriage opportunities pressures both girls and parents to accept early or unsuitable matches. Mothers in several discussions said they advise their daughters to agree because "if you refuse once, people will not come again." Men similarly explained that fathers feel compelled to accept the first proposal that comes to "avoid embarrassment and save the family's name." Many women said that even when a better proposal appears later, "people warn the new family that she once refused someone," which discourages them from proceeding.

This concern was common across all four provinces and mentioned by both men and women. In Balochistan and KP, it was described as particularly strong in rural areas, where marriage options are limited and gossip spreads quickly. In Punjab and Sindh, participants said the same fears exist, although some noted that in larger towns, families are beginning to care less about past refusals. A few participants mentioned that among some families, especially those living in cities, there is a growing understanding that "a girl should agree only if she feels ready," but these examples were far less frequent than those describing social disapproval. Across all provinces, men more often described the loss of marriage prospects as a predictable social rule, while women portrayed it as an unfair consequence that forces girls into unwanted or child marriages.

7.4.4 Harmful honour-related responses

Across provinces, a smaller but significant number of participants referred to harsh or violent punishments justified as protecting family honour. These responses were described as the most severe end of the sanction spectrum and were mentioned most frequently in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Participants explained that when a girl refuses a marriage or is suspected of having contact with a boy, families may feel publicly shamed and respond with anger or violence. Women in several discussions said that "if a girl refuses, her father might beat her badly" (W, FG, Y, B) or that "her mother would tell her to agree, because if she doesn't, her parents might kill her" (W, II, O, B). Men also acknowledged that "some fathers would rather kill their daughters than face the community's taunts" (M, FG, O, B). These accounts, while not frequent, were described as believable within the cultural context of protecting family respect.

Similar examples were reported in KP, where participants said that "fathers get angry and beat their daughters to show they are in control" (W, FG, Y, K). Some women said that even when violence does not occur, "families threaten the girl by saying she will be locked inside the house or never allowed to go out again" (W, FG, Y, K). A few participants in Sindh and Punjab also mentioned cases where families forced girls to marry quickly after rumours spread about their refusal or contact with a boy, saying that this was done "to clean the family's name" (W, FG, Y, S). Across all regions, participants linked such extreme responses to strong social expectations around family honour and control over women's behaviour. Women explained that "parents act out of fear of what people will say," and that anger and violence are seen as ways to defend their standing in the community. While these incidents were described as less common than verbal or emotional punishment, participants emphasised that the possibility of violence is widely recognised and feared by girls. Men more frequently described

honour-related responses as expressions of anger or loss of control, while women viewed them as the result of social pressure and fear of shame.

7.5 Final considerations

The findings from this section show that child marriage in the study areas is sustained not only by what families do, but by what they believe they should do. Across provinces, girls' silence and obedience are treated as signs of respect and good upbringing, while refusal or even hesitation is seen as defiance that brings shame to parents. These expectations create a powerful cycle in which both descriptive and injunctive norms reinforce one another: most girls accept the decision because that is what others do, and because doing otherwise would invite gossip, punishment, or the loss of marriage prospects. Even when families acknowledge that education gives girls confidence to speak, this awareness rarely translates into social approval. Mothers, though sympathetic, are rarely decision-makers; fathers and elders remain the final authority, their control legitimized by community consensus and moral reasoning around family honour. Yet, subtle shifts are emerging. Some younger and more educated participants described families beginning to listen to girls' opinions or allowing them to finish school before marrying. These are small but important openings. They suggest that change can take root not through confrontation with existing hierarchies, but by reframing obedience, honour, and parental care in ways that make room for girls' voices. Interventions can build on these openings by working within the moral logic of families rather than against it, showing that seeking a girl's consent, delaying marriage, or supporting her education can strengthen rather than undermine family honour. Programmes that create safe spaces for dialogue between parents and daughters, encourage fathers and religious leaders to publicly value girls' agency, and showcase examples of families who prosper through later, consensual marriages can gradually shift what is seen as normal and right. Real change will come not from rejecting cultural values, but from transforming them from the inside, so that the respectability once tied to early marriage becomes associated with care, consent, and the shared well-being of the whole family.

Section 8. Gendered power dynamics

A father would tell his daughter: If you do not agree [to marry], I will kill you.
(M, FG, O, B)

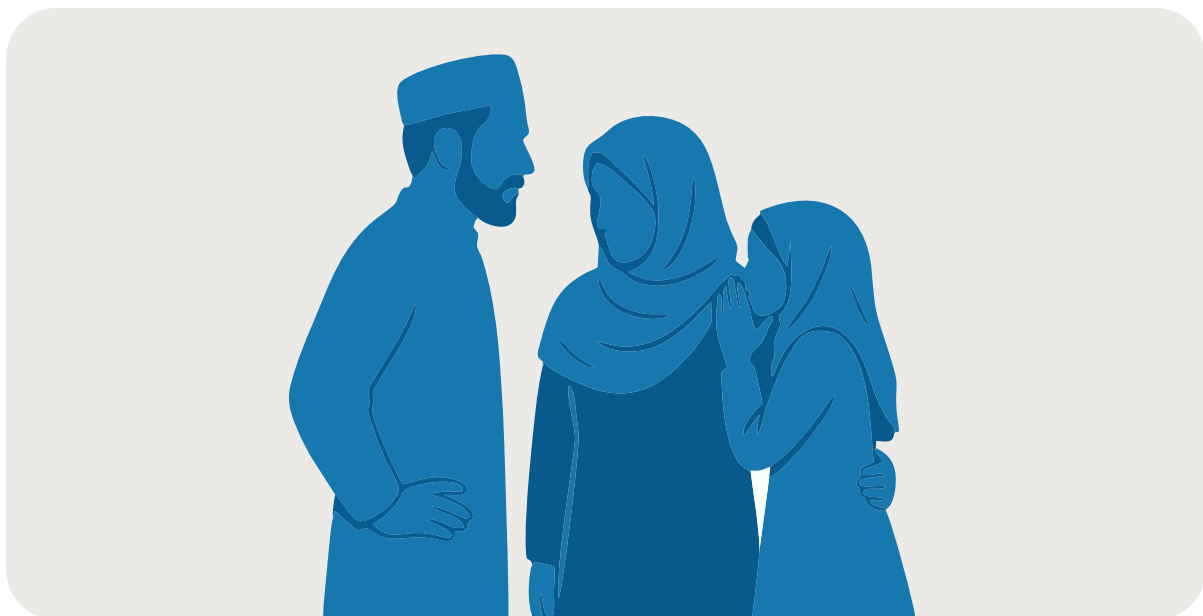
Relevant Research Question:

10. How do gender and power relations affect child marriage patterns in the participating communities?

Key Findings:

1. Fathers are key decision makers; their power is connected to their role of financial providers
2. Mothers play roles of mediators: For girls, their roles are to convince them to get married (or, at times, try to persuade the father to change opinion); for boys, their role is to tell the father that the boy has found someone he wants to marry.
4. Boys are reported to have more agency than girls, modelling patriarchal power distribution.
5. Interpretation of Islam as giving girls' rights is a potential entry point for intervention.

Figure 8.1 Visual summary of key family roles, the father as the decision-maker and the mother as a mediator.



8.0 Introduction

Across Pakistan, marriage decisions continue to reflect deep gendered inequalities in power and autonomy. The study reveals that boys and girls experience markedly different degrees of choice, voice, and negotiation within this process. While boys are generally perceived as active decision-makers who can express preferences, delay commitments, or refuse proposals, girls are expected to comply with family arrangements and uphold collective interests over personal desires. These dynamics are rooted in broader social structures that define masculinity through authority and independence, and femininity through obedience and modesty.

As shown in the previous sections, prevailing social norms around honour, protection, and respectability constrain not only children's agency but also that of parents, who must navigate powerful community expectations when making marriage-related decisions. Families often act within narrow boundaries of social approval, balancing their children's wellbeing with fears of gossip, dishonour, or moral judgement. In this section, we look more closely at how these norms operate through gendered dynamics of power within families and communities—shaping who has a voice, whose choices are respected, and how decisions about marriage reflect wider hierarchies of age, gender, and authority.

The findings presented below show that these hierarchies are reinforced through everyday socialization and moral instruction, in which children learn early that obedience is a virtue for girls and decision-making a responsibility for boys. Parents, in turn, internalize expectations of maintaining control and protecting family honour, leaving little space for open dialogue about children's aspirations. In many communities, even when parents wish to prioritize their children's preferences, collective pressures and reputational fears override individual intentions. Understanding these layered power relations—between men and women, adults and children, and families and communities—is therefore essential to designing interventions that can expand meaningful choice and transform the social conditions that sustain child marriage.

8.1 Gendered power relations in a girl's marriage

Generally speaking, across all provinces participants were adamant that girls had no decision-making power when it came to their marriage. This belief was in stark contrast with what they had said at the beginning of their interviews – when they mentioned girls would only be married after 18. The inconsistency shows evidence of a deep desirability bias, potentially fuelled by the news (that spread at the time of data collection) that two parents in Sindh had been incarcerated for organising the marriage of their daughter.

Table 8.1 Consensus Frequency on gendered power relations in a girl's marriage

		Balochistan		KP		Punjab		Sindh	
		Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Father	Decide alone								
	Pays for wedding								
	Expects compliance								
Mother	Pressures girl to accept								
	Mediates Refusal								
Others	Peers								
	Formal Institutions								
Girl	Cannot Refuse								
	Can Refuse								

Notes: Colours indicate frequency of consensus. The darker the colour, the more participants mentioned the theme in question (see the colour scheme below).

8.1.1 The father as key decision-maker

Across provinces, participants consistently positioned fathers as the primary—often final—decision-makers over girls' marriages. This authority was framed as both customary and socially enforced. As an older man in Balochistan put it, "It's mostly the father who decides ...In our society, the father's decision is often final" (M, FG, O, B). In Punjab and KP, an older man and an older woman, respectively, echoed: "The father has the authority" (M, FG, O, P), and "The father decides all this" (M, FG, Y, K). A younger woman from Balochistan further emphasised men's power, suggesting that it goes well beyond deciding when a girl gets married, when she said: "There is a strict rule in our village that only men make decisions. Even if a woman wants to speak up, no one listens to her" (W, FG, Y, B). Participants described men's authority as final, without need to consult others as, for instance, the girl's mother. As a younger woman from Balochistan said: "There won't be any discussion [with the mother]. The father has already decided, and that's final" (W, FG, Y, B). As seen in greater detail in Section 11, overwhelmingly, during the power mapping exercise, participants repeatedly said the father makes most decisions on a girl's marriage. As an older woman from Punjab summarised what others said repeatedly: "In reality, the father decides" (W, FG, O, P).

As for the reasons for which the father should be in charge, participants – especially in KP –explained that the father is the one to pay for the wedding, so it would be natural that he's in charge. Take, for instance, what a participant from KP said: "this authority lies with the father because he has to bear all the expenses" (M, FG, Y, K). Participants further explained that the father's authority is socially appropriate: people in the community approve of fathers who make decisions (as discussed in greater detail in Section 9): "In our area people praise such decisions. They feel it's the father's right to make that call. They would think he's being responsible. Choosing a husband while the girl is still young is seen as a good thing" (W, FG, O, B). Another participant in KP connected the father's capacity to take care for the family as the source of his power, when he said: "The father should decide... If the father decides, there will be peace... the father works hard and should have this authority" (M, FG, O, K).

The expectation of acquiescence of all family member with the father's decision was explicit for most participants. The following statement from a man in Balochistan is exemplary: "If a father decides, he usually expects his daughter to go along with it" (M, FG, O, B). Where disagreement surfaces, participants anticipated paternal anger and reputational stakes. Our data show a pattern of enforcement of patriarchal power. A Balochistan participant noted, "If a girl refuses, it is seen as dishonouring the family. Fathers usually do not agree... and in many cases, they force them to marry regardless of their wishes" (W, IDI, O, B). Another described likely escalation: "Initially, he would hide it... Eventually, he might resort to threats, saying, 'If you do not agree, I will kill you'" (W, IDI, O, B). Young men in Balochistan similarly linked refusal to punishment and male solidarity: "if I refuse, the father can even beat me" (M, FG, Y, B); "his friends might taunt him... He would feel embarrassed... there is often an expectation that a father should control such matters" (M, IDI, Y, B). Even when consultation was endorsed, it was instrumental and bounded. A man in KP clearly stated: "Yes, we ask and consult, but the final decision is ours" (M, FG, O, K). Women in the same province agreed: "The father decides... The father should go and set the date, then come home and announce, 'I've made this decision'" (W, FG, O, K). A few participants also described how male authority is learned and reproduced. Young men in Balochistan reflected on gender socialization: "The girl's mind is shaped by this idea that a boy is a boy, and a girl is a girl... The boy learns to be the leader... the girl learns to be subservient and obedient to men," reinforced by observing fathers "making all the major decisions" (M, FG, Y, B).

Not all participants believed the power of the father to be final and uncontested. Their decisions were sometimes described as shared ones. Primarily, among other people involved in the decisions, participants placed mothers. The health provider in Sindh, for instance, said: The mother and father should decide together. Other women or elders in the house may give their opinions, but ultimately,

the parents' decision matters most" (W, KI, HP, S). In the next section, we specifically look at the role of mothers in the decision of a girl's marriage. In summary, participants' testimonies provide strong evidence that the father's authority in marriage decisions goes mostly uncontested across provinces—anchored in gender relations and roles, transmitted through daily socialisation. Yet, discussed later, subtle cracks and possible sources of resistance are visible.

8.1.2 The mother as a possible mediator

While fathers' power was described as direct, visible, and uncontested, mothers were said to play a more subtle role. Participants described them as being more emotionally close to their daughters but – mostly, not always – without a true saying in marriage decisions.

Participants explained that, while mothers might care about their daughters' education or well-being, they couldn't oppose the father's decision. One man in Balochistan, for example, said: "In many villages, the father has the final say... the mother, even if she might understand the girl's feelings, would probably side with the father due to respect for the family structure" (M, FG, O, B). Another woman, also from Balochistan, asked whether a mother would respect a daughter's decision not to marry, said: "Most [mothers] will say, 'This is your father's decision, I can't go against him'" (W, FG, O, B). Two women in Sindh explained, similarly, how: "When the father makes a decision, the mother cannot oppose it much" (W, II, O, S); and: "Obviously, she [the mother] would tell her that her father is the one making the decision, so try not to upset him and don't refuse" (M, IDI, O, S). A younger man and a younger woman in Punjab, respectively, echoed: "The mother will definitely say that you should listen to your father [to a girl not wanting to get married (M, IDI, Y, P), and "A mother will think that refusing marriage at 15 goes against their family's customs. and she will likely remain silent in front of her husband because she does not want any conflict in the household" (W, II, Y, P). And, finally, an older woman in KP added: "The mother ... will try to convince her not to refuse the marriage" (W, FG, O, K). As to the means in which mothers will try to achieve their daughter's compliance, participants offered a range of options. The following quote from Balochistan summarises them well: "Her mother will scare her a little, threaten her a little and, somehow, she will be satisfied. She will explain to her daughter that her father has respect" (M, FG, Y, B).

When they did have influence, mother's power was often described as one of mediation. That mediation could go either way, trying to convince the daughter, or trying to convince the father. One older woman in Balochistan, for instance, said the mother would try to soften the father's position by talking to her daughter, she could tell her something like: "Try to understand your father's pressure" (W, FG, O, B). An older woman in KP explained that "The mother will explain to her daughter [that the father has already taken the decision] so that the daughter agrees happily" (W, FG, O, P). But another older woman, from Punjab, suggested the opposite could happen; a girl might communicate her wish not to get married through her mother: "They usually tell their mother, "No, I don't want to marry this person." You can inform my father" (W, FG, O, P).

Importantly, mothers' agreement with the father's decision was twofold: most participants said these mothers genuinely believed fathers knew best and were convinced it would be a good thing for their daughters to follow his decision. Others, and less frequently, participants described mothers' actions as a survival strategy within a patriarchal system of power. A little group of participants empathized with them, noting that mothers may recognize the injustice but cannot intervene. An older woman from Balochistan described this tension vividly: "The mother tries to comfort Maheen but also advises her to obey her father's wishes. Many mothers tell their daughters, "It's your fate, and you must accept it."" (W, II, Y, O).

Despite a clear power hierarchy between fathers and mothers, a few participants—mostly in Balochistan and Sindh—hinted at potential spaces for mothers’ agency. Consider the following exchange in a focus group among younger men in Balochistan, where one participant said: “When a mother hears such a decision, she would likely oppose it. A mother cares about her child’s education and health, so she would probably not be happy about this decision being made without her input”. Yet, another one immediately reacted: “Yes, but in our village environment, a mother doesn’t always have the right to make such decisions. It’s mostly the father who decides.” This exchange suggests that there is a nascent space for contestation – younger men seem to be opened to the possibility of women having greater decision in marriage proposals, although they recognise a system that traditionally attribute power to men. This nascent space of power for mothers was underscored by another participant in Balochistan, who suggested: “If the mother is educated, she might try to oppose it” (M, IDI, Y, B). Taken together, participants’ narratives illustrate mothers’ ambivalent position: emotionally invested but having little direct power in marriage decisions. Their authority is relational: derived from their persuasion exercised in private space, and directed at the daughter (more commonly), the father, or both.

8.1.3 Other people in the community: bystanders and compliers

Across settings, participants described a wider circle of actors—fathers’ male peers, extended kin, and girls’ own networks—who shape, transmit, or enforce marriage decisions. These “others” rarely overrule a father; rather, they validate his authority, carry messages, or intensify pressure.

Participants mapped a network of relatives who share and support each other’s preferences or decisions. A young man noted that fathers “Consult... relatives and his wife as well” (M, FG, Y, K), while older men explained that if a father is absent “the elder brother will consult with him” (M, FG, O, K), and that “the girl’s father and the boy’s father decide together after consultation” (M, FG, O, K). Women detailed how messages move through kin: “Maybe an uncle or maternal uncle is asked” (W, FG, Y, K) and “Through intermediaries—elder brothers, cousins, or uncles convey these messages” (W, FG, O, K). In Balochistan, one older woman similarly described a chorus of male relatives rallying around the father: “Only the father doesn’t make the decision. Then his uncle, brother, and uncle come. Everyone says that the father’s decision is right” (W, IDI, O, B). Similarly, a younger man suggested that male peers and elders would come to support the father in the decision: “Around eight to ten men are sitting together, making a decision regarding a girl’s marriage. Women are not consulted” (M, IDI, Y, B). Peers rarely offered girls leverage in these narratives; instead, they often normalized child marriage or lacked standing to intervene. Participants anticipated that the friend would align with local practice: “A girl’s friend will think that this is normal... Since other girls in the village get married at a young age, she will assume that this is how things are supposed to be” (M, FG, Y, B).

References to formal or institutional actors—such as religious leaders, health professionals, or authorities—were largely absent from participants’ narratives, underscoring how child marriage decisions remain primarily governed by family and community structures rather than by state or institutional oversight. Only occasional mentions of religious justification appeared, often reinforcing paternal authority. In KP, an older man explained that “He has the right according to Shariah to decide” (M, FG, O, K), framing the father’s role as divinely sanctioned. Yet a small minority used Islam to defend a girl’s consent. A Baloch man insisted: “Islam gives the girl the right to choose her spouse, so if she doesn’t agree, no one can force her” (M, IDI, O, B). Beyond religion, institutional actors such as health providers, police, or child protection officers were not mentioned by participants as sources of advice or intervention. Even a health provider in Sindh confirmed that marriage decisions are made within the household: “The mother and father should decide together. Other women or elders in the house may give their opinions, but ultimately, the parents’ decision matters most” (W, KI, HP, S). The

absence of references to external mediation suggests that participants see child marriage as a private matter, outside the reach of formal systems. Our findings from the power mapping exercise (presented later in this section) confirm this view.

8.1.4 Girl's power to refuse

Generally speaking, across all provinces, participants suggested that a girl doesn't really have power to refuse. A girl might formally be asked whether she wants to marry someone, but in practice, as one woman said: "A daughter cannot easily say 'no' to her father... the girl has no say" (W, IDI, Y, S). Another participant, a woman, from JP also agreed: ". A girl can't refuse in front of her parents" (W, FG, O, K). One male interviewee captured the everyday instruction given to girls: "her father is the one making the decision, so try not to upset him and don't refuse" (M, IDI, O, S). Another was unequivocal when asked if a girl could refuse: "No, she cannot refuse... Because parents have agreed, so their decision must be accepted" (M, IDI, Y, S). The health provider in the same province said that, in general, asking girl's opinion is not advisable, since "A marriage based on the father's preference is considered better" (W, KII, HP, S). Participants in Punjab presented the same hierarchy in plain terms: An older man clarified how: "the elders decide marriages, and the children accept their decisions" (M, IDI, O, P). Fathers expect daughters "will understand his point of view and agree with him" (M, IDI, O, P). A younger man in Balochistan explained in more nuanced terms how girls grow up seeing other girls accepting their father's will, when he said "The society she grew up in won't allow her refusal. Even if she wants to refuse, it's 99% certain she will stay silent" (FG, Y, M, B).

When asked, participants said they didn't have memory of any girls refusing a marriage. A younger man from KP, for instance, was asked: "Can you tell any story where a girl refused marriage?" by our interviewer. His answer was categorical: "No, there is no such story in our village" (M, Y, FG, K). Others went further, saying that she won't be in a position to refuse because, in most situations, the girl won't even be considered in the decision. A younger man from Balochistan, for instance, said: "She will not be asked. She will simply be told that she is getting married on a certain date" (YMFGB). And another two from the same focus group continued: "Girls do not even realize they have a choice... Girls in these communities are never asked for their opinions on marriage. (YMFGB)

Girls' compliance was ensured through threats of violence and pressure. "If she asks, she will be scolded... If she says no, no one will listen to her" one younger woman said. And another one, older, continued "If a girl refuses, it is seen as dishonouring the family... in many cases, they force them to marry regardless of their wishes" (W, IDI, O, B). In an extreme scenario, a participant added the father could tell his daughters "If you do not agree, I will kill you" (W, IDI, O, B). From Sindh, a man captured the everyday instruction: "Her father is the one making the decision, so try not to upset him and don't refuse" (M, IDI, O, S).

Participants named a few conditions that can help a girl resist a marriage proposal. Education was one of the most frequently cited: "Sometimes, if the girl is educated, she might be able to speak out" (M, FG, O, B). A young man added a potential recourse to institutions via the mother: "These days, the father is very powerful... But I think the mother should go to the government before marriage to save her daughter" (M, IDI, Y, B). Some participants mentioned that following religion correctly would give a girl the right to choose: "Islam gives the girl the right to choose her spouse, so if she doesn't agree, no one can force her" (M, IDI, O, B). Finally, at this historic moment there seems to be gradual change happening, as suggested by a man from Balochistan: "That's true, the father usually has the final say, but I think times are changing, and daughters are starting to have more of a voice in the matter" (M, FG, O, B).

Exceptions to girls' lack of power and voice were reported and mostly came from participants in Punjab. Here, a few believed that girls could refuse the marriage. Younger women, for example, said that "Girls want to marry only when they can take responsibility for the new home, serve their in-laws, and manage household work. If they cannot, they refuse" (W, FG, Y, P). One man further explained that girls would be difficult to convince, when he said: "If the daughter has already refused, and the mother insists on marriage, the daughter will likely remain firm in her decision not to marry" (M, II, Y, P). And a younger woman even gave a statistical probability of a girl refusing a marriage in Punjab: "It is about sixty percent possible. Because today's girls are more aware. They know whether they want to marry at this time or not, or if they want to marry this person or not" (W, II, Y, P). This is not to say that everyone in Punjab agreed with the fact that girls could refuse a marriage. Take, for instance, the answer given by an older woman: "In your community can a girl refuse a marriage proposal? No not at all" (W, FG, O, P). As a final example of existing exceptions and crack in the power order surrounding girls' marriages, consider the closing words of an older woman from Sindh, who said that, despite the fact that girls are pressured and punished if they refuse, some still manage to do so: "People say the girl should ... just obey her father. But some girls refuse, which people consider wrong" (W, FG, O, S).

8.2 Gendered power relations in a boy's marriage

Generally speaking, participants in KP were much more eloquent and descriptive than participants in other provinces when it came to discuss boys' marriages. The narratives that follow give priority to their words because, in the balance of the data, their voice featured more prominently. This provincial imbalance is probably, at least in part, explained by the fact that in KP boys are more likely to experience child marriage than in the other three provinces.

Table 8.2 Consensus Frequency on gendered power relations in a boy's marriage

		Balochistan		KP		Punjab		Sindh	
		Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Father	Decide alone								
	Pays for wedding								
Mother	Mediates intention								
Others	Peers								
	Formal Institutions								
Boy	Cannot Refuse								
	Can Refuse								

Notes: Colours indicate frequency of consensus. The darker the colour, the more participants mentioned the theme in question (see the colour scheme below).

No mention	Less Frequent	More frequent
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8.2.1 The father as key decision-maker, although mentioned less

Similar to what they said for girls' marriages, participants described fathers' role in boy's marriage as key. Whether the discussions focused on choosing a bride, fixing the date, or deciding the type of ceremony, participants agreed that paternal authority was socially endorsed: "The boy cannot decide

on his own; obviously, the final decision is the father's" (M, FG, O, K). "They discuss among themselves, don't involve the boy, and decide themselves—after all, they raised him" (M, FG, O, K). Even when the son expressed interest in a particular girl, participants said the father "will still make the decision" (M, FG, O, K). In one of the rare statements on boys' marriage in Balochistan, an older man said: "In our village, the father usually has the final say... he decides the timing and gives his approval" (M, FG, O, B). A younger man in Sindh told his personal story, when he said: "Yes, my father made the decision. It was my father's wish, and I married according to his wishes" (M, FG, Y, S).

Participants linked fathers' power not only to gender hierarchy but also to a wider moral economy of respectability. Many suggested that a father's reputation depends on his ability to control family decisions, including his son's marriage. In Balochistan, one man explained that "if a father openly admits that his son refused to marry, it could lead to gossip or a loss of dignity" (M, IDI, O, B). A few respondents in KP echoed that a father's decisive control ensures family honour, stating that "if the father decides, there will be peace," while hesitation could be interpreted as weakness (M, FG, O, K).

In many accounts, marriage decisions for sons were not individual choices but family strategies: fathers were trusted to select "an educated, religious, modest [bride] who knows household work" (M, FG, O, K). Only a few participants explicitly challenged this hierarchy. One younger man from Balochistan called it "completely wrong" that fathers decide without asking, arguing that "a father should always ask for his son's opinion before making such a big decision" (M, IDI, Y, B). Yet such dissenting views were rare and often linked to education or exposure to urban norms. Taken together, these findings show that across provinces, the father's role in boys' marriages mirrors his dominance in girls', though the rationale differs.

8.2.2 Mothers as intermediaries to disclose boys' intentions

Similar to what said for girls, mother acted as intermediaries in boys' marriages. However, there was a critical difference based on the sex of their child. While mothers played the role of convincing girls to accept the proposal (or, in rare cases, to say no to it), boys' mothers were the ones to communicate to fathers a boy's intention to marry. Their role was not to pressure the boy into compliance. Rather, mothers facilitated boys' agency in the marriage process. As mentioned above, most mentions of the role mothers played came from KP. In several accounts, participants portrayed the mother's role as consultative — yet bounded by the father's final word. As one participant explained, "When the boy likes a girl, he expresses his preference to his sister, mother, or sister-in-law. He does not directly tell his father" (M, FG, O, K). Mothers were thus framed as the first point of contact for sons who wished to express their own marriage preferences, serving as mediators between the boy's desires and the father's authority. Another participant clarified that "The mother will consult. If the father does not, the sister or sister-in-law will consult directly" (M, FG, O, K).

Women described similar dynamics from their perspective: "[In a boy's marriage] First, the father decides, then the mother" (W, FG, O, K). This sequencing—where the mother is consulted after the father—highlights how maternal input is acknowledged but hierarchically constrained. Another woman echoed this when explaining that "The father should go [to the girl's family] and set the date, then come home and announce, 'I've made this decision and set this date'" (W, FG, O, K). In such accounts, the mother's involvement follows the decision, underscoring her supportive rather than directive role. These portrayals suggest that mothers occupy an ambiguous position — neither powerless nor authoritative, but rather relational actors operating within existing decision-making constraints.

8.2.3 Other people in the community

Discussions in KP about boys' marriages revealed that, while fathers were seen as the primary decision-makers, other family and community members also played structured, though secondary, roles. Several participants described the influence of other male family members, especially when the father was absent or required support. "If someone's father is not alive, then the elder brother will consult with him" (M, FG, O, K). This quote captures how male authority over a boy's marriage is never voided—it is transferred laterally within the family's male lineage. Similarly, a woman explained, "Maybe an uncle or maternal uncle is asked" (W, FG, O, K). The collaboration between families was also seen as integral to the process, particularly between the fathers of the bride and groom. "The girl's father and the boy's father decide together after consultation" (M, FG, O, K). Another man explained, "The boy and his father decide the timing according to their convenience, and the girl's father decides according to his convenience" (M, FG, O, K). No accounts mentioned direct involvement of religious leaders, health workers, or officials in influencing boys' marriage decisions—reflecting both the normalization of family-led arrangements and the absence of external checks on boy child marriages.

8.2.4 Boys' Agency in marriage

Across all provinces, participants described boys as enjoying greater room to express disagreement with their parents' marriage choices than girls—but this autonomy remained conditional, bounded by deference to elders and family reputation. The act of refusal was generally viewed as socially inappropriate, particularly when it challenged paternal authority. As one older man explained, "A son cannot easily say no to his father. If he refuses, it becomes a matter of shame for the father before the community" (M, IDI, O, B). A younger participant from the same province expanded, "In our area, if a boy refuses, it is seen as disrespecting his father. He can be scolded or even beaten for saying no" (M, FG, Y, B).

This expectation of obedience was widespread. In Punjab, participants noted that while boys might negotiate or delay, they ultimately yielded to their fathers' authority. One young man said, "If the father says marry this girl, the son may try to say no, but in the end, he must listen. Parents think they are more experienced" (M, FG, Y, P). Similarly, an older woman explained, "Boys have some say, but not complete. Sometimes they agree because they don't want conflict with the father" (W, FG, O, P). In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, participants echoed this logic of conditional autonomy. As one older man put it, "If a boy refuses, people will say he disrespected his elders. Parents think they know better, and the boy should obey" (M, FG, O, K). Yet others acknowledged that social changes were expanding boys' capacity to express preference: "A boy can refuse, but it depends on the family. In strict families, it's almost impossible. In others, they may listen if he speaks respectfully" said a younger participant (M, FG, Y, K). A woman in the same province observed, "Boys can sometimes delay marriage, saying they want to study or work first. But if the father insists, they usually agree" (W, FG, O, K).

The notion of choice with boundaries also surfaced in Balochistan. Several participants noted that even when sons enjoyed relatively greater voice, their agency was limited by their father's social commitments. A woman observed, "Even boys don't always have full freedom. If the father has made a promise to another family, the boy must accept it. Refusing brings dishonour" (W, FG, O, B). Similarly, a younger man explained, "Sometimes, if the father really likes the girl's family, the boy has no choice. It's considered his duty to obey" (M, FG, Y, B). Another participant added that reputational concerns shape behaviour: "Men have more choice than women, but still, they have to think about the family's reputation. A boy can't just refuse because he likes someone else" (W, FG, Y, B).

By contrast, Sindh participants emphasized a visible double standard favouring boys. While paternal authority remained important, refusal by boys was not stigmatized. As one older woman remarked

bluntly, “Because he is a man. He is not questioned. A man has the right to refuse according to his will, but a woman does not” (F, IDI, O, S). A younger woman agreed: “Yes, boys can easily tell their parents no. They can be straightforward with them, unlike girls” (F, IDI, Y, S). For many, this difference reflected gendered upbringing and parental bias. One respondent explained, “Boys are usually more pampered by their parents, so they feel more empowered to speak their minds. Girls, however, are expected to be patient ... and suffer in silence” (F, IDI, Y, S). Some Sindh participants also linked this relative freedom to shifting norms and education. “Nowadays boys prefer to follow their own wishes and often ignore their parents’ choices. It is generally easier for them to say no,” said an older man (M, IDI, O, S). Others noted that parents themselves exerted less pressure on sons than on daughters: “Most parents don’t pressure boys as much as they do girls for marriage. If the boy refuses, usually parents are not very strict” (M, IDI, O, S).

8.3 Key gender differences in children’s agency

Table 8.3 Consensus Frequency on comparison of boys’ and girls’ agency

		Balochistan		KP		Punjab		Sindh	
		Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Ability to Refuse	Boys: Possible								
	Girls: Limited								
Social Meaning of Refusal	Boys: Confidence								
	Girls: Shame								
Response to Refusal	Boys: Negotiation								
	Girls: Coercion								
Explanation for Refusal	Boys: Agency								
	Girls: Stubbornness								
Change Trajectory	Boys: Expanding Agency								
	Girls: Little Change								

Notes: Colours indicate frequency of consensus. The darker the colour, the more participants mentioned the theme in question (see the colour scheme below).

No mention	Less Frequent	More frequent
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Across all provinces, participants described stark contrasts in how agency is distributed between boys and girls in marriage decisions. The prevailing narrative was that while boys can express, negotiate, or even refuse, girls are expected to accept. This difference was seen not simply as a product of individual temperament, but as the outcome of gendered upbringing, social expectations, and family hierarchies that collectively train boys for leadership and girls for submission. As a woman from Sindh summarized, “The basic difference is that it is difficult for a girl to express her preference and opinion, while a boy can speak openly” (F, IDI, Y, S). Another added, “Socially, boys feel more freedom, while girls have to face many restrictions” (F, IDI, Y, S). Men across age groups reinforced this view, often justifying the asymmetry as natural. In KP, a man explained, “The boy’s refusal is more accepted, while

girls' refusal is taken seriously" (M, IDI, O, K). In contrast, "If a girl refuses, she is called stubborn or disobedient, whereas a boy can refuse easily" (F, IDI, O, S).

This gendered gap was described as deeply ingrained in cultural and familial expectations. In Balochistan, men observed that both sons and daughters "learn" their roles by watching their parents: "The girl sees her mother's life shaped by her father or brothers, and she knows her life will be controlled in the same way. The boy, however, learns from his father that he holds the power in the family" (M, FG, Y, B). A similar account from Punjab highlighted that "children accept their parents' decisions because they have been taught that elders always know better" (M, IDI, O, P).

Participants often explained the discrepancy through appeals to honour and responsibility. Girls' silence was interpreted as modesty and obedience, while boys' assertion was read as confidence. One older woman in Sindh captured this moral double standard: "Because he is a man. He is not questioned. A man has the right to refuse according to his will, but a woman does not" (F, IDI, O, S). A younger respondent from Balochistan observed that such norms are transmitted through everyday interactions: "Boys see their fathers making all the major decisions, and they learn that. Their wishes are prioritized, and they learn their opinions have more weight" (M, FG, Y, B). Education and exposure to urban environments were occasionally mentioned as softening these boundaries, though unevenly. In Sindh, an older man remarked, "Nowadays boys prefer to follow their own wishes and often ignore their parents' choices. It is generally easier for them to say no," whereas "For girls, refusing marriage is extremely difficult" (M, IDI, O, S). In contrast, a woman in KP explained, "Even if the girl is educated, she will be told to obey her father. People say, 'you are not supposed to decide such matters'" (W, FG, O, K).

Parents' expectations further reinforced this gender divide. Fathers' authority remained largely unquestioned for both sons and daughters, yet the consequences of defiance differed dramatically. As a Balochistan man noted, "If a girl refuses, it brings dishonour to the family. If a boy refuses, they say he is just not ready" (M, IDI, O, B). Similarly, in Sindh, one participant stated, "For men, marriage is important, but they have more time. If they don't marry young, it doesn't affect them as much as it does women" (M, IDI, O, S).

A small number of respondents did identify cases where girls' voices were considered, but these were framed as rare exceptions. A woman in KP explained, "They definitely ask the girl. The mother asks, the sister asks, but if the girl does not like the proposal, then the marriage does not happen" (W, FG, O, K). Yet, such examples were exceptional precisely because they deviated from established gender hierarchies. Across the dataset, participants described a continuum of agency—limited for boys, almost absent for girls—anchored in family structures that prize obedience, honour, and paternal control. Boys' limited right to refuse was framed as pragmatic (to avoid conflict), whereas girls' silence was described as moral (to preserve respect). As one respondent in Sindh concluded, "A boy finds it easier to refuse because he is confident he will have another opportunity. A girl refuses with fear" (M, IDI, Y, S).

8.4 Final Considerations

The findings from this section highlight that marriage decisions in Pakistan are rarely made in isolation by children or parents. Rather, they emerge from a collective process shaped by strong social norms about gender, protection, and family honour. Parents often act out of genuine concern, believing that early or arranged marriage is in their children's best interests—ensuring security,

moral respectability, and social acceptance within their communities. However, these well-intentioned decisions are often constrained by the limited options available and by powerful expectations of what constitutes a “good” daughter or a “responsible” son. Across all provinces, the data show that boys and girls experience profoundly unequal levels of agency in these decisions. Boys are typically granted room to express preferences, delay commitments, or refuse proposals, whereas girls are expected to comply silently with family choices. Refusal, when it occurs, is considered disobedience or shameful. While there are rare instances in which girls do express dissent or manage to delay or refuse marriage—often supported by an educated parent or a sympathetic elder—such cases remain exceptional and frequently provoke conflict or social backlash. These patterns suggest that interventions must address both the intentions and the constraints shaping parental and children’s decisions. Parents’ desire to act in their children’s interest can be an entry point for change if paired with support that broadens their sense of what is truly protective. Engaging parents, religious leaders, and elders in dialogue about the long-term benefits of education, delayed marriage, and girls’ participation in decision-making can help realign community values around children’s rights.

Section 9. Powr distribution maps

The mother will be told that the daughter is getting married... the daughter will simply watch everything happen around her, silently.

(W, FG, Y, B)

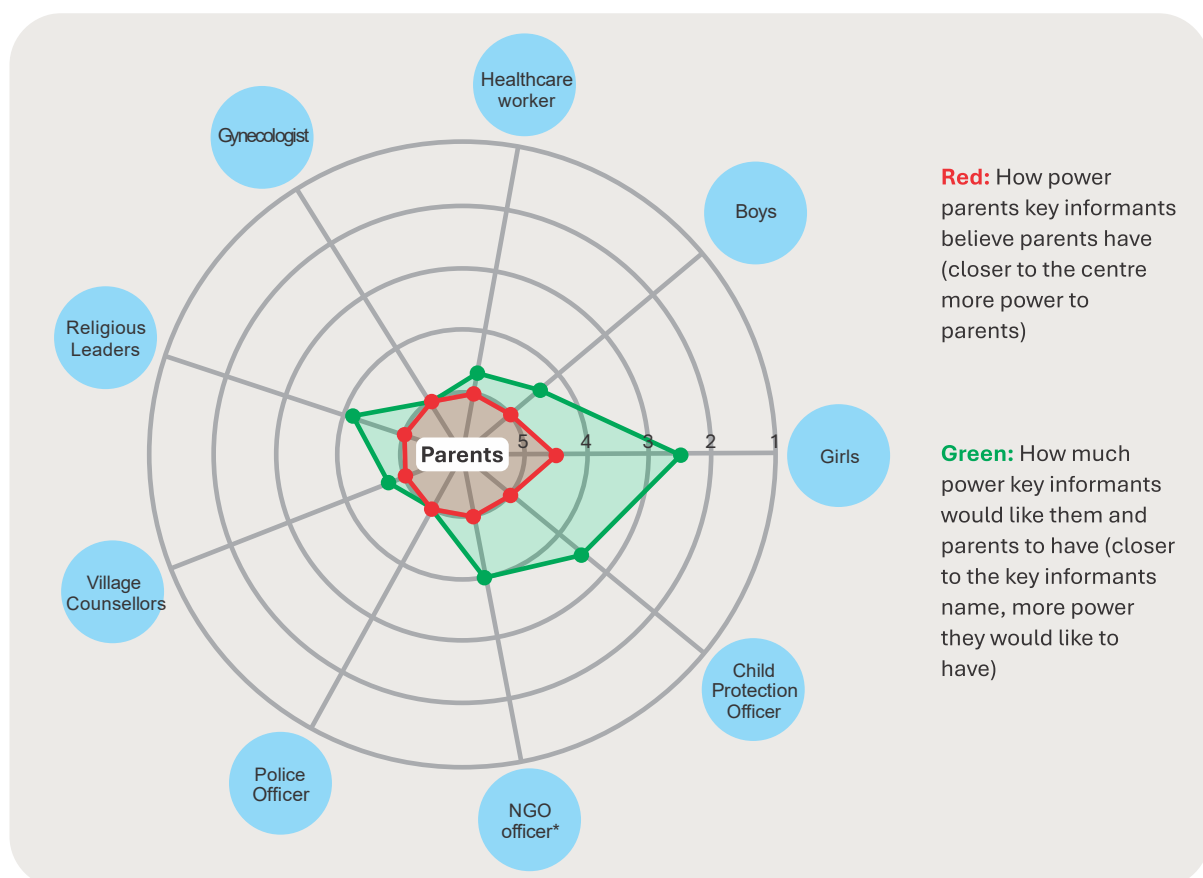
Relevant Research Question:

11. How do gender and power relations affect child marriage patterns in the participating communities?

Key Findings:

1. Parents have almost complete decision-making power over marriage decisions
2. Many (although not all) children are happy for their parents to choose for them.
3. Girls want more agency than what boys said they themselves want.
4. Boys are reported to have more agency than girls, but their agency is not complete, they still need to obey parents
5. Girls are alone, with no allies who can help them say no to marriage proposals.
6. Extending duration of engagement is a potentially promising entry point for intervention.

Figure 9.1 National Averages for the question: Who decides and should decide when a child gets married?



9.0 Introduction

The Power Mapping exercise was designed to explore how children and adults describe and negotiate decision-making power regarding marriage-related choices. The activity was implemented in all four provinces with separate groups of girls and boys (12–17 years), as well as women and men (both younger, 18–34, and older, 35–60 years). Each group was asked to discuss five core decisions related to marriage. Specifically, they were asked (through the method specified just below) to share their opinion of who decides:

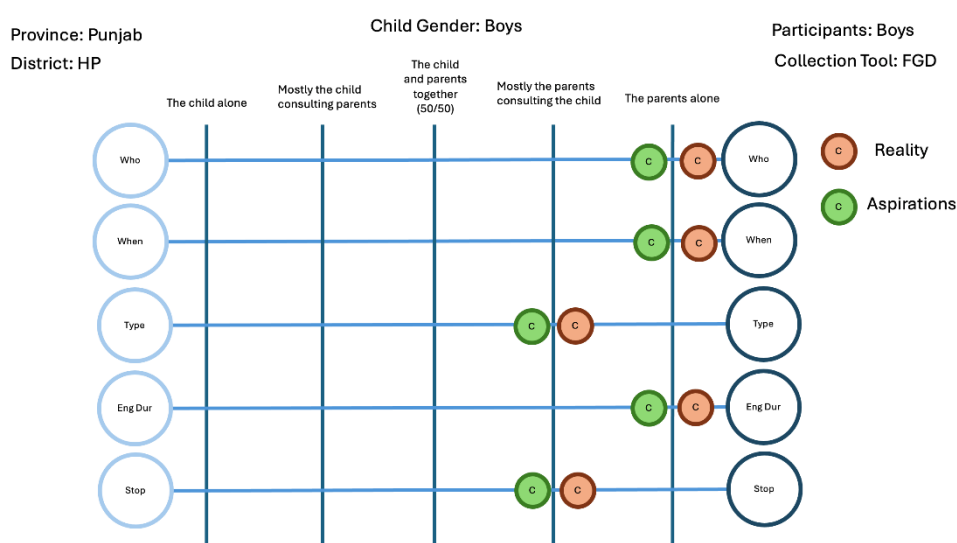
1. Whom a child should marry;
2. When the marriage should happen;
3. The type of wedding to celebrate;
4. The duration of the engagement; and
5. Whether the marriage should continue or end in case of problems.

They were invited to describe who made decisions (reality) and who they would like made decisions (aspirations) for each of the five above could choose. To this purpose, children and parents (Separately) were asked to choose one of the following five options:

- The child alone
- Mostly the child, consulting the parents
- The child and parents together equally (50/50)
- Mostly the parents, consulting the child
- The parents alone

Group participants first selected their option individually, then discussed and agreed on a collective choice. The exercise with parents was done twice (one for boys, one for girls). The exercise with children was only done for children of their gender (boys were asked about boy marriage, girls were asked about girl marriage). For each decision, participants were further asked: 1) Current realities (how decisions are made now); 2) Aspirations (how participants believe decisions should be made); 3) Explanations for the gap (reasons why change has not occurred); 4) Obstacles to and opportunities for change (material, social, or moral barriers); and 5) Perceived benefits of the status quo (rationalizations for maintaining current practices).

Figure 9.2 Example of completed power mapping analysis grid for children and parents.



The result of this mapping is similar to what shown in the figure above. As the reader can see, there are both red dots (Reality) and green dots (Aspirations). In this case, the dots have a light shade of red and green with a “C” in the middle. As the reader will see later on, parents’ realities and aspirations are slightly darker shades of green and red and have a “P” at the centre of the circle (see the legend below).

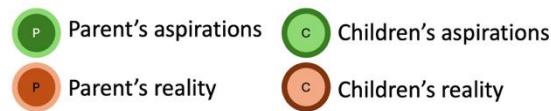
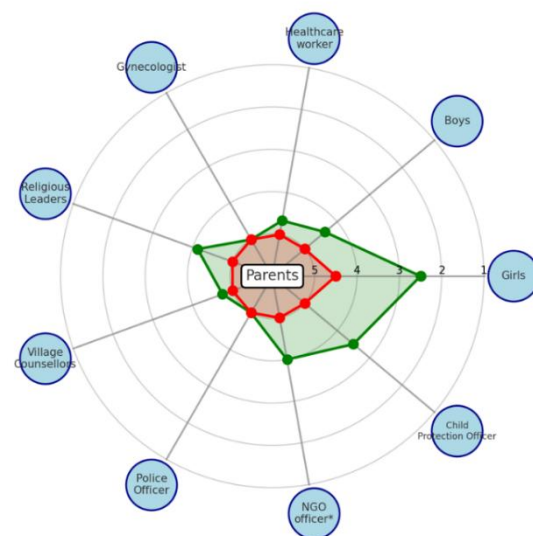


Figure 9.3 Example of a completed power map.

This process helped capture both power distribution and perceived legitimacy of different decision-making arrangements. The results were recorded visually in group charts and discussed collectively to unpack the reasons behind each placement. The transcripts from these discussions were later coded thematically. These data were then used to reconstruct the logic of power, agency, and gendered authority within families. The analysis highlights both the continuity of patriarchal norms and the emergence of small openings for change — particularly among younger participants who imagine consultation, dialogue, and education as legitimate ways to balance respect for elders with children’s rights.



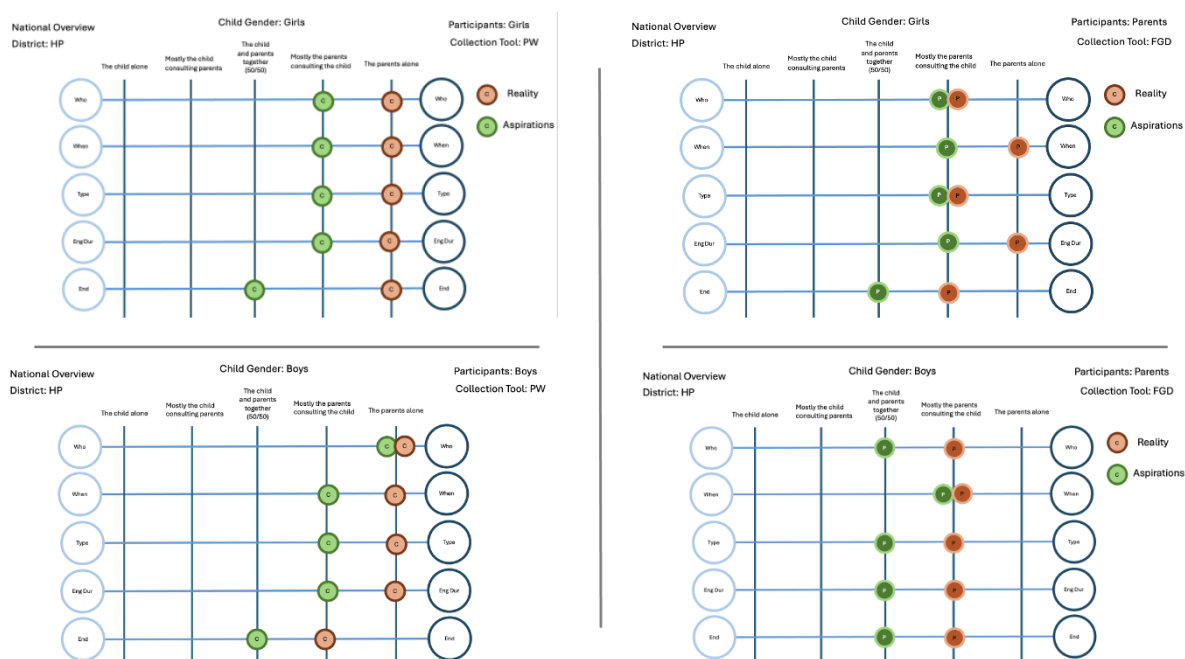
In the radar diagram, as the one presented here, the reader can find a visual representation of what each key informant said in relation to how much power they/parents have (in red) and how much power they would like themselves/parents to have (in green). In other words, each red point in the diagram is the reality reported by that key informant, and in green the aspiration of that key informant. In the diagram above, for instance, the NGO officer reported parents to have all the power (red dot) but said they aspired to have at least some influence (green dot on the line connecting NGO Officer and parents).

In this section, we provide quotes and reflections on the data presented at national level. In Annex 1, the reader can find all visuals disaggregated at provincial level.

9.1 Overview

As Figure 9.4 shows, on average, participants wanted children to be more involved in the decision-making process around their marriages. However, again on average, there was no intention (either on parents’ or children’s sides) to delegate to children the decision as a whole. Provincial differences however help understand the different pictures in greater detail. In this section, we first present data for girls, then the same data for boys. We collected an impressive amount of data, and it would be impossible to include all of it here while presenting them in a concise and meaningful manner. Annex X includes all the visuals by province, where the reader can find further detailed information.

Figure 9.4 National Overviews of Children's and Parents Average Responses



9.2 Bi-dimensional Power Mapping: Girls' marriage.

The table below reports averages of participants' reported reality and aspirations across all provinces. In this section, we report on what participants said across the five relevant decisions for the marriage of their girls. To interpret the table, remember that we used a scale from 1 to 5. In the table, the lower the digit, the greater the decision-making participants observed or wanted for children; conversely, the higher the digit, the greater the power of the parents (either reported or desired).

Table 9.1. Average aspirations and reality for girls' marriages

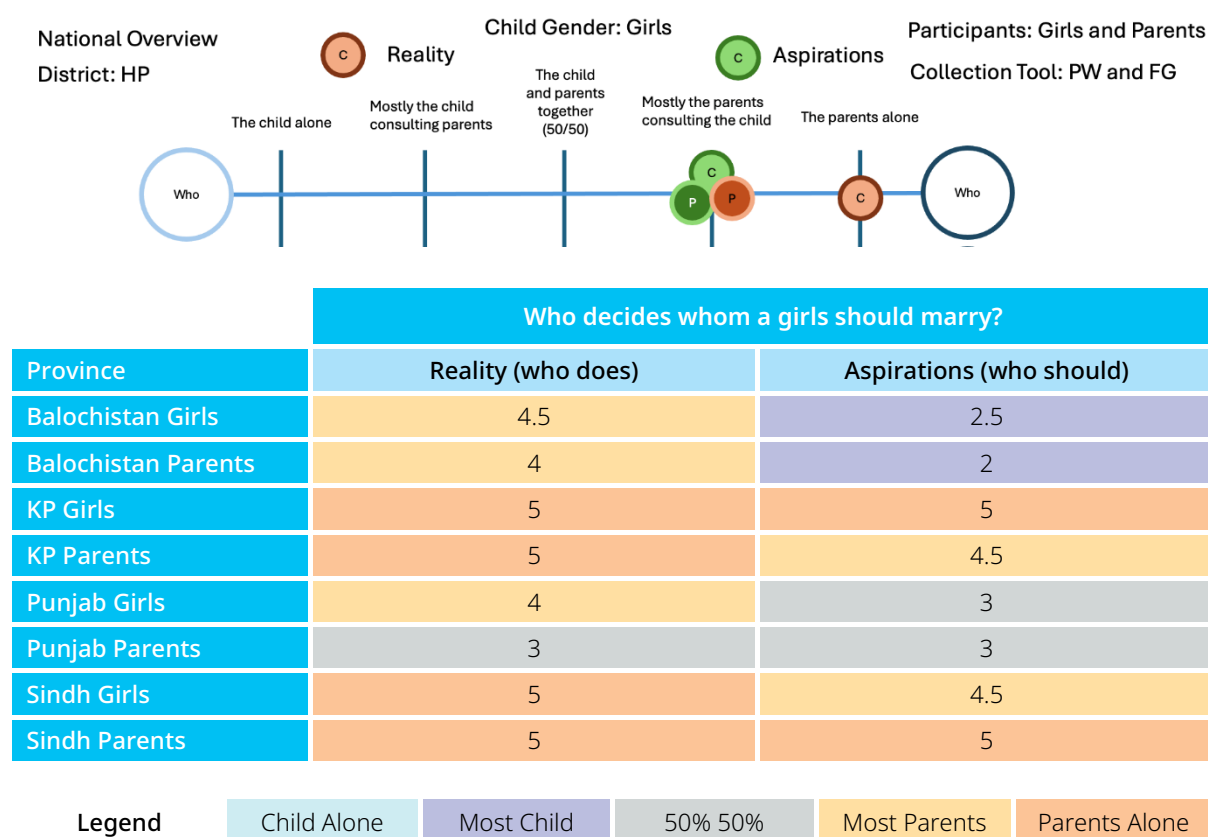
Province	Who		When		Type		Engage		End	
	Real	Asp	Real	Asp	Real	Asp	Real	Asp	Real	Asp
Balochistan Girls	4.5	2.5	5	2.5	5	4	4	2	4	2
Balochistan Parents	4	2	5	3	4	3	5	3	5	3
KP Girls	5	5	5	5	5	4	5	4	5	3
KP Parents	5	4.5	5	5	5	5	5	5	3	2
Punjab Girls	4	3	4.5	3	4	2.5	5	4.5	4.5	2
Punjab Parents	3	3	4.5	3.5	4	3.5	5	3	4.5	3
Sindh Girls	5	4.5	5	4	5	4	5	4	5	3
Sindh Parents	5	5	5	4	5	4	5	5	5	3

Legend

Child Alone Most Child 50% 50% Most Parents Parents Alone

As the table above shows, girls' agency and autonomy in KP and Sindh was extremely limited, with little aspirations, both from parents and girls' sides, to change the status quo. Girls and parents in Balochistan and Punjab had some aspirations for change, but the qualitative data show clear blockages and obstacles.

9.3.1 Who decides whom a girl should a marry?



Reality

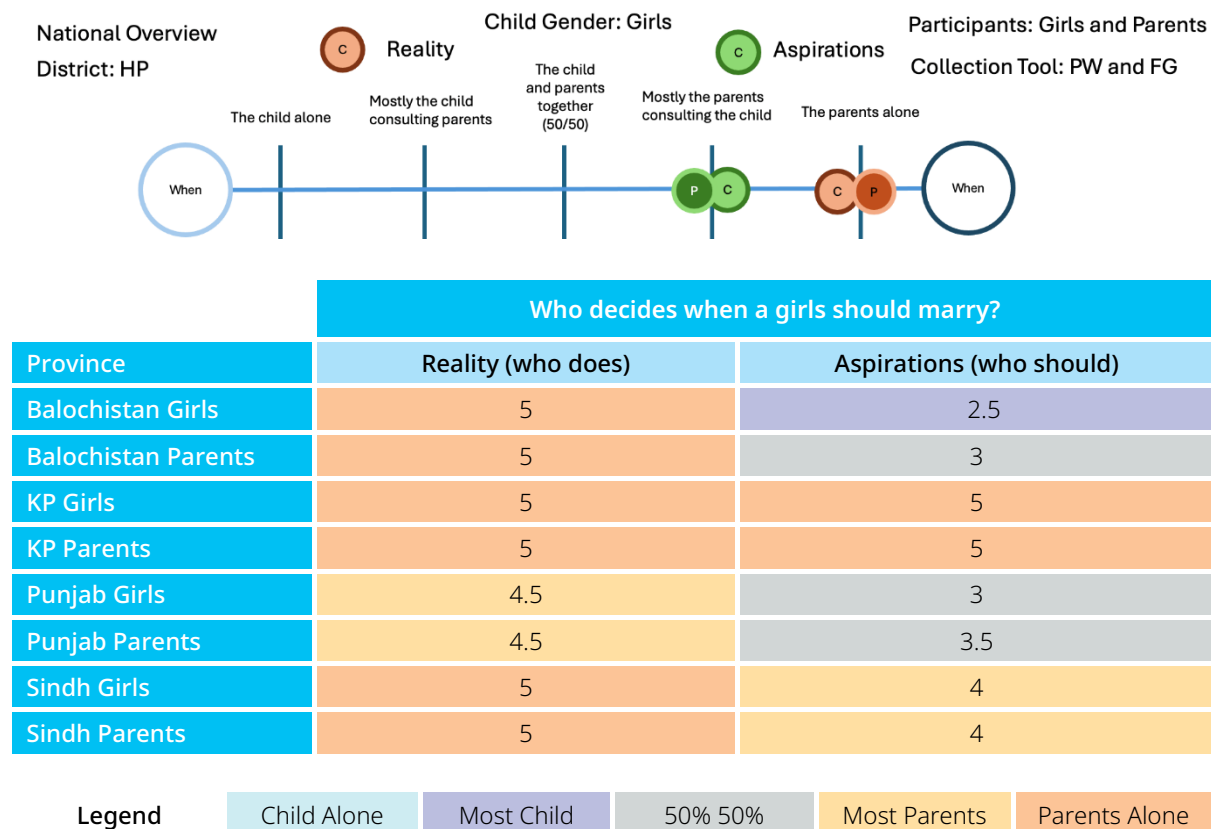
Across all provinces, father's authority was undisputed. In Balochistan, one girl said: "It's mostly the father who makes this decision" (W, FG, Y, B), and a younger woman remarked: "The entire family is involved, but not the girl" (W, FG, Y, B). Similarly, in Punjab a woman said: "Here, all decisions are made by the elders; they do not give children the authority to decide" (W, FG, Y, P). And in Sindh, one girl observed: "Parents make the decision. The girl is usually not asked. They just say, "This match is fixed" (G, PW, S). One younger woman in KP explained that girls cannot make good choices because: "Girls are less mature...they only look at fashion and beauty and cannot distinguish good from bad" (W, FG, Y, K). There also existed a risk of isolation for a girl who didn't listen to her parents: "If the girl chooses and it goes wrong, parents say "you chose this," and do not support her" (G, PW, B), and a man in Sindh continued: "It's important to balance family and societal expectations" (M, FG, Y, S).

Aspirations

Girls and parents in Sindh and KP wanted parents to choose husbands: "Whatever the elders and men decide ... is our collective decision" (W, FG, Y, K). Note how this woman equated the decision of the elders and men as if it was her own, possibly suggesting that she wasn't used to having a voice in the shared decision-making in her village. Exceptions existed. One girl in Sindh wished for "The girl herself to decide" (G, PW, S). In Balochistan, and, less, in Punjab, many participants called for greater involvement of girls. This call was not unanimous, ranging from the girl who wanted to "Talk to our

parents and decide together” (G, PW, B), to one older woman who believed that “The girl should decide. It is her life, and she knows when she is ready for marriage” (W, FG, O, B). To offer a contradictory example, a woman in Punjab explained why she didn’t want things to change when she said: “Just as our elders made decisions before, it still happens the same way [parents deciding for girls]. We do not want to change it. Whatever the elders have done, whatever the parents have done before, that will continue” (W, FG, Y, P).

9.3.2 Who decides when a girl should a marry?



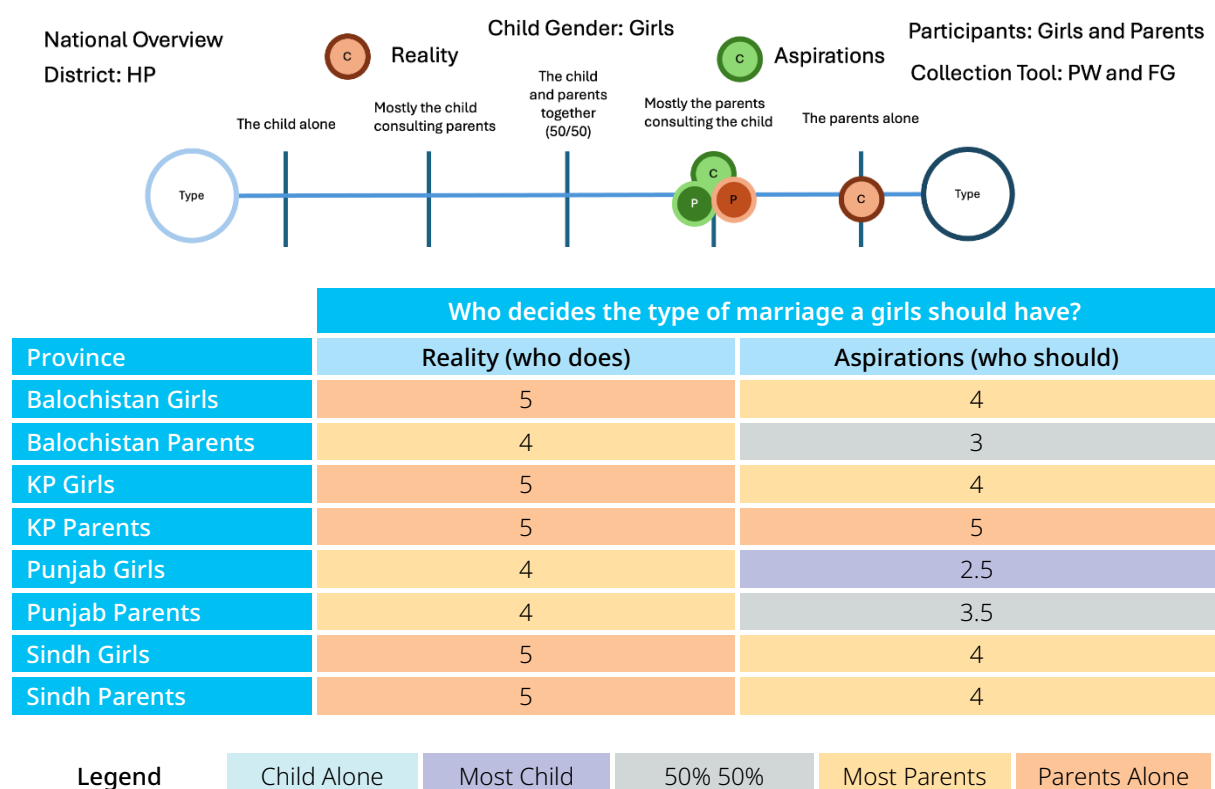
Reality

While there was some leeway in the previous question, with some participants suggesting girls had some choice in their partners, when it came to the decision on the time of marriage, there was no doubt across all provinces: parents were the sole decision-makers. The data have an overwhelming number of accounts like what this woman in Balochistan said: “In our village, girls are often expected to marry early, and their families don’t give them a choice” (M, FG, O, B). This was true across all provinces and participant types (parents and girls). Take, as examples, what participants also said in KP: “Parents decide everything, they should decide this too because they want what is best for us ” (G, PW, K); Punjab: and Sindh: As for the reasons the system worked this way, a woman in KP was adamant: “Look, we decided this because children are immature; they cannot make their own decisions. We adults have wisdom and understanding, so we can make a good decision” (W, FG, O, K). As to the reasons why parents held the power, participants were clear: “Parents are scared of what others will say. They don’t want to feel ashamed in society. That’s why they push for child marriage” (G, PW, B).

Aspirations

Participants in KP and Sindh did not aspire to change the existing system. Girls in KP trusted their parents to do the best decision for them, as the one who said: “Parents decide what is best for the children, so they should decide” (G, PW, K). Girls in Sindh wanted to have at least some voice; a few echoed the one who said: “The girl should also have the right to say yes or no” (G, PW, S) – but everyone else was of the opposite opinion, at most believing that: “The marriage decision should be made by the parents with the girl’s consent” (W, FG, O, S). Girls in one workshop in Balochistan fiercely advocated for their agency: “The decision should be 100% the girl’s” (G, PW, B) and found some (although not many) parents agreeing with them, as the younger woman who said: “It is her life, and she knows when she is ready for marriage” (W, FG, Y, B).

9.3.3 Who decides the type of marriage to be celebrated for a girl?



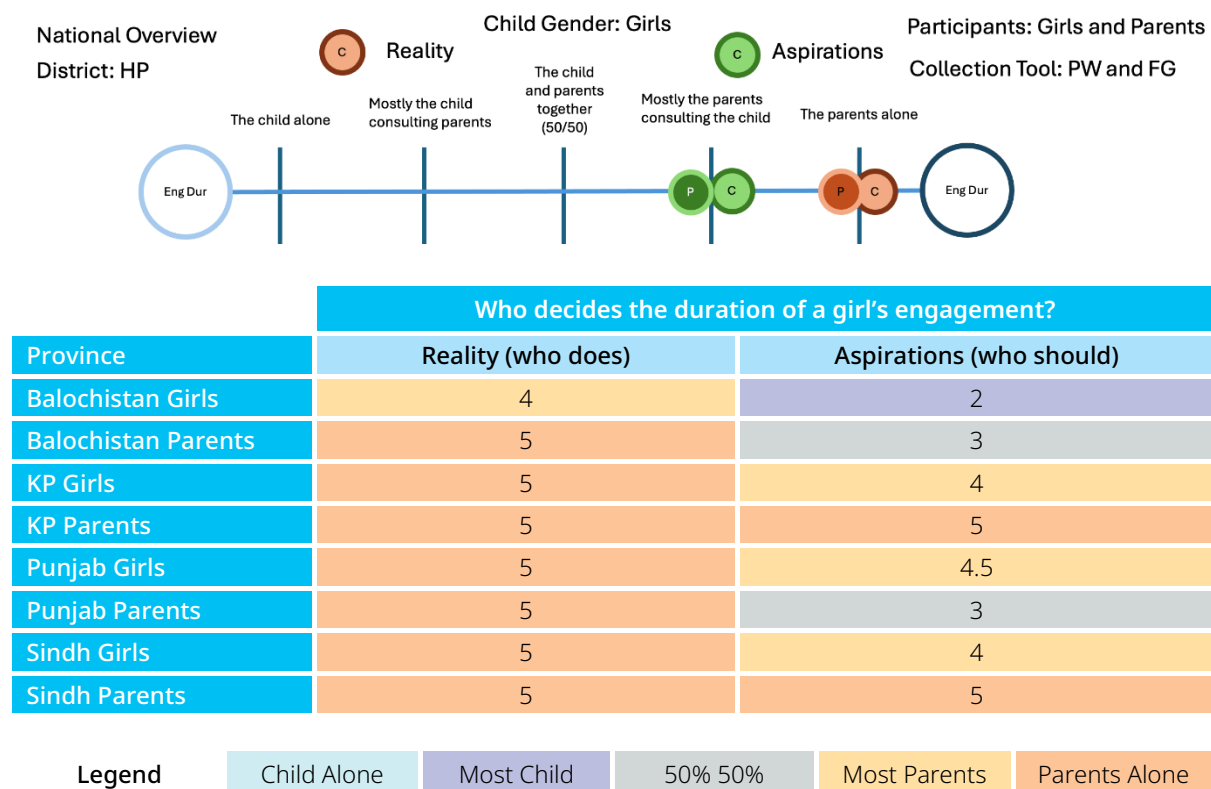
Reality

Once again, the reality across all provinces was that parents decide the type of marriage girls should have. Participants understood the question in two ways: some interpreted this question on how grand the wedding should be, while on whether it should be a love marriage or an arranged marriage. The general narrative was that parents are financially paying for the wedding, so it would make sense that they decided how expensive it should be: “The father often makes that decision, especially when it comes to financial considerations” (M, FG, O, B). Participants had mixed opinions on whether a marriage should be arranged or a love marriage. Some believe love marriage would “Gives both partners the chance to understand each other before committing” (M, FG, Y, S), while others believed in arranged marriages – as long the parents decided – because they “Are meant to ensure that the marriage is successful in the future” (M, FG, Y, P).

Aspirations

Balochistan parents wanted girls to have a say in the type of marriage to be celebrated. A younger man in Balochistan, for instance, believed that “The person getting married should decide. It’s their marriage, after all” (M, FG, Y, B), yet reported that children weren’t allowed to decide. Punjab girls also thought the decision should be taken by “the kids” (G, PW, P). Around the other provinces, participants were adamant that parents should decide the type of wedding to be celebrated: “My wish is that my daughter’s wedding ... be according to my will and done very well: (W, FGC, Y, K), one younger woman in KP said. All other participants disagreed, as the girls in KP who said: “It is the parents’ right to decide what kind of marriage they want...Because they are elders and have full right to decide for us” (G, PW, K). Generally, although not explicitly stated, participants saw in the grandiosity of the wedding a reason for status. That is important, because at times of financial difficulties, the impossibility of celebrating such a wedding might delay the marriage of their children.

9.3.4 Who decides duration of a girl’s engagement?



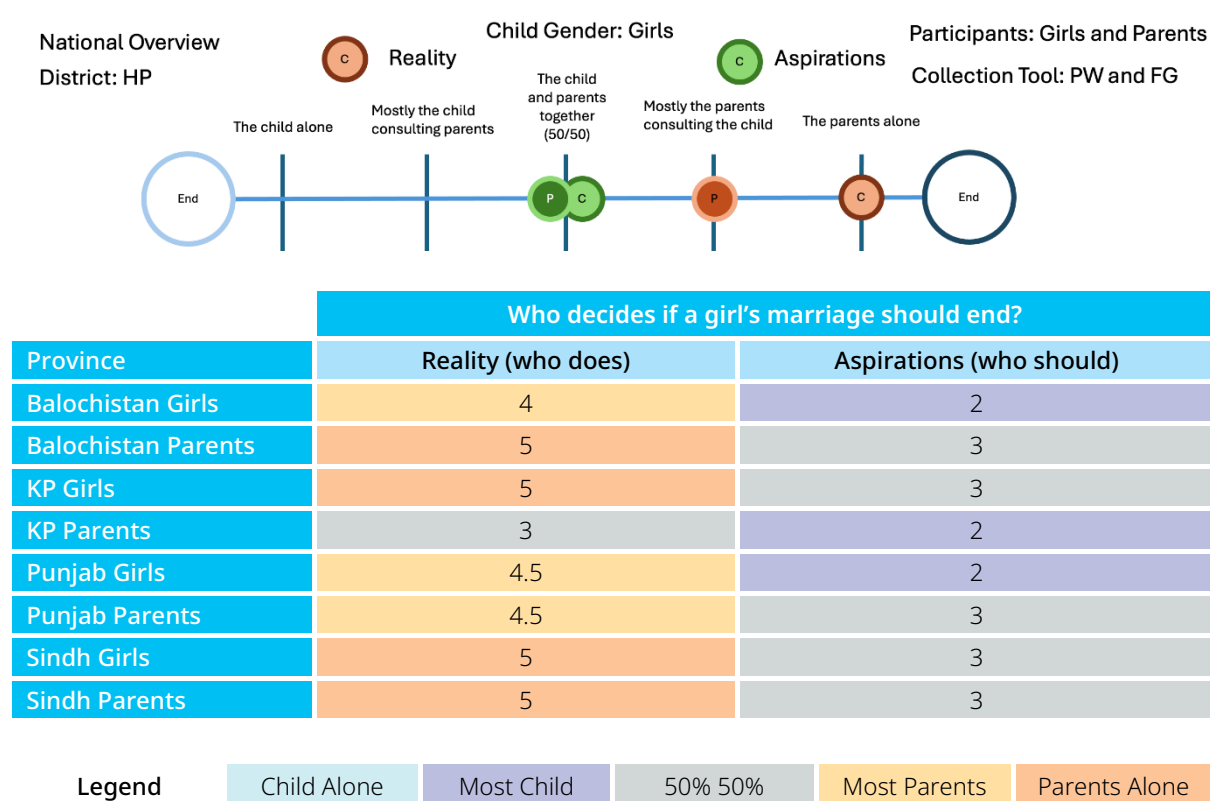
Reality

Engagement for girls were in general very short, ranging from a couple of weeks to a few months at most. In KP, engagement usually lasted “two or three months,” but sometimes “it has to be done quickly” (W, FG, O, K). Participants in Balochistan said longer engagements were ideal, since: “6 months to a year should be enough to give both families time to prepare” (M, FG, Y, B). With overwhelming consistency, participants said parents were the sole decision-makers for the duration of the engagement. Across all provinces they believed that “Girls are not consulted in this matter.... the parents decide the time frame” (W, FG, O, B) mostly due to financial reasons: “If he [the father] is wealthy, he can marry his daughter quickly. If not, he asks for more time” (M, FG, O, K).

Aspirations

While participants said that, in practice, parents were the sole decision makers for the duration of a girl's engagement, almost all of them wanted girls to have, to some extent, some agency. Balochi girls expressed desire for most control, as the one who said: "That I need time. I want to get married after 10 years" (G, PW, B); and their parents agreed: "Ideally, the girl's voice should be heard, even in more traditional setups" (M, FG, O, B). One woman in Sindh provided a clear explanation of why change is not possible in their reality when she said: ". It's her life, so the decision should also be hers. [but] What we desire goes against society's traditions" (W, FG, Y, S). Other participants provided a stronger opinion, in line with the existing system. One man and one woman from KP, for instance, spoke with a collective voice when they said, respectively: "It's our collective wish that the father should make this decision" (M, FG, O, K), and: "The wish is that the parents go and fix the time and date" (W, FG, Y, K).

9.3.5 Who decides if a girl's marriage should end in case of problems?



Reality

The discussion on who should decide whether a girl's marriage should continue or stop in case of problems shows the greatest disparity between the existing reality and participants' Aspirations. Among the dataset, participants overwhelmingly suggested that "The parents make the decision, or sometimes a religious leader is brought in" (W, FG, Y, K), because "They have more life experience and can be more objective when it comes to tough decisions like that" (M, FG, Y, B). Sometimes, one girl commented, "The girl wants out but parents stop her... The child is thinking, "I can't live like this," but parents are thinking long-term" (G, PW, B). One girl in KP suggested that minor matters would be solved between spouses while more serious decisions would be out of their control: "When the issues are small, they resolve them themselves. But if the matter escalates ... then the elders make the decision" (G, PW, K), as confirmed by a parent: "When husband and wife fight, they should reconcile on their own, but if the problem worsens...parents should intervene" (W, FG, O, K) because,

a younger woman explained: “Girls ... get upset over small things and start fights, but parents understand a lot” (W, FG, Y, K).

Aspirations

Most participant group desired for girls to decide (either on their own or with their parents) whether their marriage should stop in case of problems. Balochistan girls, for instance, were adamant that: “The girl should decide if she wants to continue or end it...It’s her life’ (G, PW, B).

9.3 Bi-dimensional Power Mapping: Boys.

The table below reports the averages of participants’ reported reality and aspirations across all provinces. In this section, we report participants’ responses across the five relevant decisions regarding their sons’ marriages. To interpret the table, remember that we used a scale from 1 to 5. In the table, the lower the digit, the greater the decision-making participants observed or wanted for children; conversely, the higher the digit, the greater the power of the parents (either reported or desired).

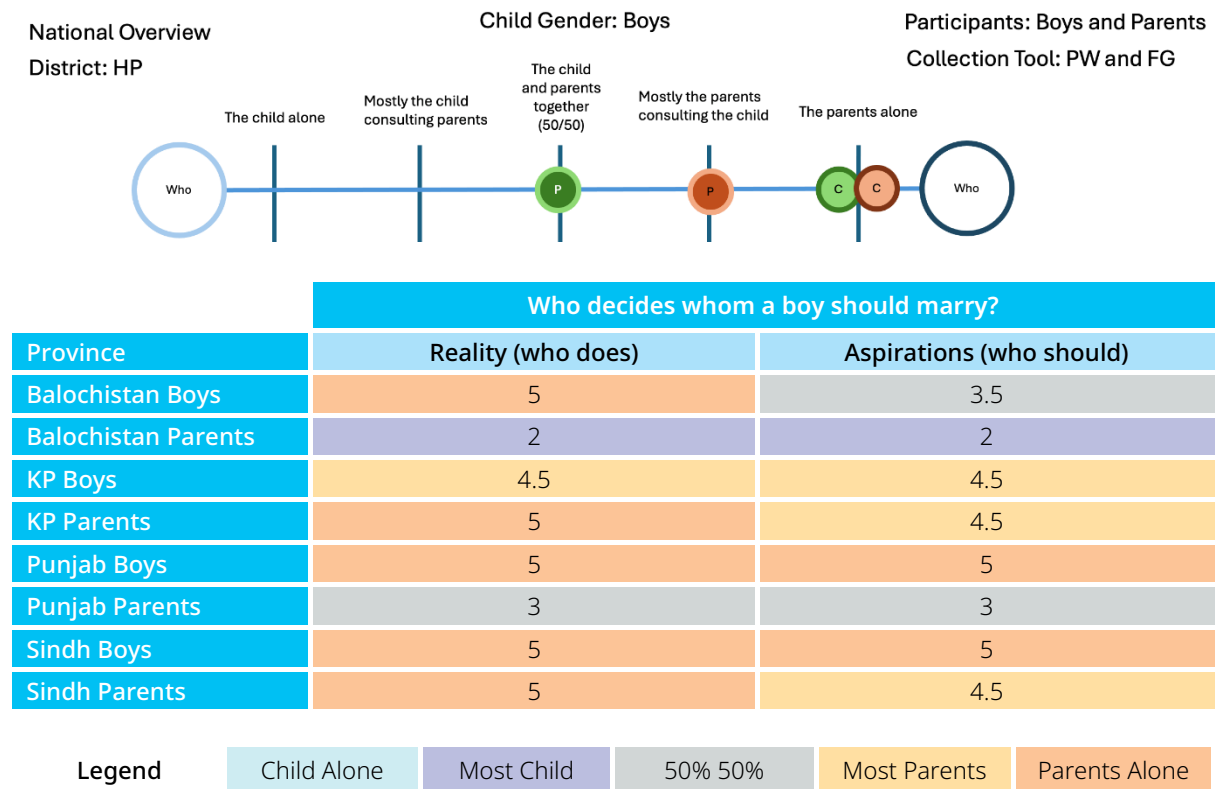
Table 9.2 Average aspirations and reality for boys’ marriages

Province	Who		When		Type		Engage		End	
	Real	Asp	Real	Asp	Real	Asp	Real	Asp	Real	Asp
Balochistan Boys	5	3.5	5	4	5	1.5	5	3	4.5	2
Balochistan Parents	2	2	4	3	4	2	2	2	3	3
KP Boys	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5	5	5	5	5	2	2
KP Parents	5	4.5	4.5	4.5	4	4	5	5	3	2
Punjab Boys	5	5	5	5	4	3	5	5	4.5	4.5
Punjab Parents	3	3	4.5	3	4	3	4	3	4	3
Sindh Boys	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	4	4.5	4.5
Sindh Parents	5	4.5	4	4.5	5	4	5	4	4.5	3.5

Legend	Child Alone	Most Child	50% 50%	Most Parents	Parents Alone
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As the table above shows, boys’ agency and autonomy for marriage decisions was limited in all four provinces. There were little aspirations, both from parents and the boys’ sides, in KP and Sindh, to change the status quo. However, boys and parents in Balochistan and Punjab expressed some desire for change.

9.3.1 Who decides whom a boy should marry?



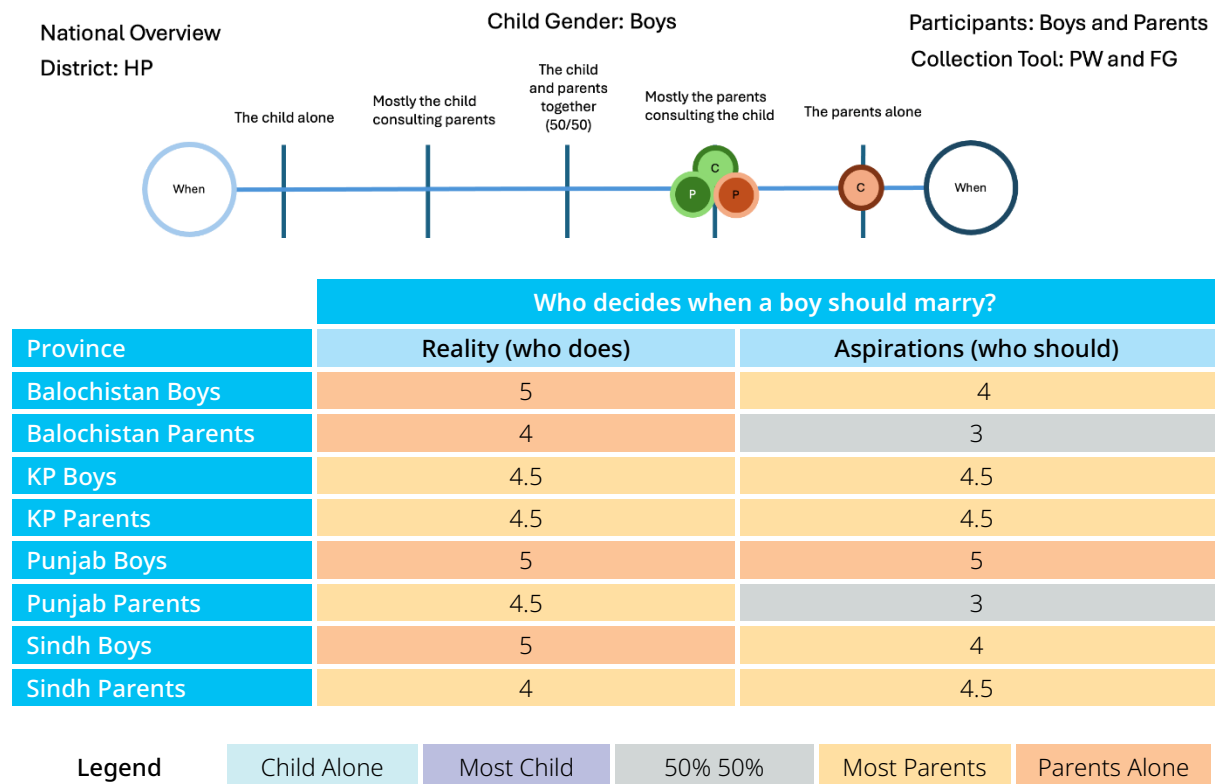
Reality

Consistent with patterns observed for girls, parents were identified as the primary decision-makers regarding boys' marriages across all provinces. Paternal authority remained unchallenged. "In our village environment, a mother doesn't always have the right to make such decisions. It's mostly the father who decides" (M, FG, O, B). In KP, one male participant stated, "There is no need for consultation; the father should decide" (M, FG, Y, K). Similarly, an older woman from Punjab noted, "This decision is made by parents; they do not ask the child. Here, when a child is born, the relationship is decided" (W, FG, O, P). Numerous women in Punjab further justified parental control over marital decisions by emphasizing the perceived immaturity of boys: "Children are immature; parents won't let them make wrong decisions. Parents are wise and will make the right decision" (W, FG, O, P).

Aspirations

In KP and Sindh, both boys and parents expressed little to no interest in allowing boys to participate in decisions regarding their own marriages, preferring that this authority remain with the parents. A woman from KP remarked, "The wish is that parents decide, the rest is fate" (W, FG, O, P). Similarly, a woman from Sindh stated, "Marriages should happen according to parents' will. Because parents are experienced, the household runs smoothly." Participants further emphasized that granting boys the freedom to choose their partners could result in domestic conflict and unstable relationships. As one young man from Sindh noted, "Such relationships break quickly because they lack experience and elders' blessings. Boys misunderstand love and don't sustain it" (M, FG, Y, S). On the contrary, in Balochistan and to a lesser extent in Punjab, boys and parents desired to involve boys more in marital decisions, while keeping a balance between boys' and parents' wishes. "The child should have the final say, but parents' input is important" (M, FG, O, B).

9.3.2 Who decides when a boy should marry?



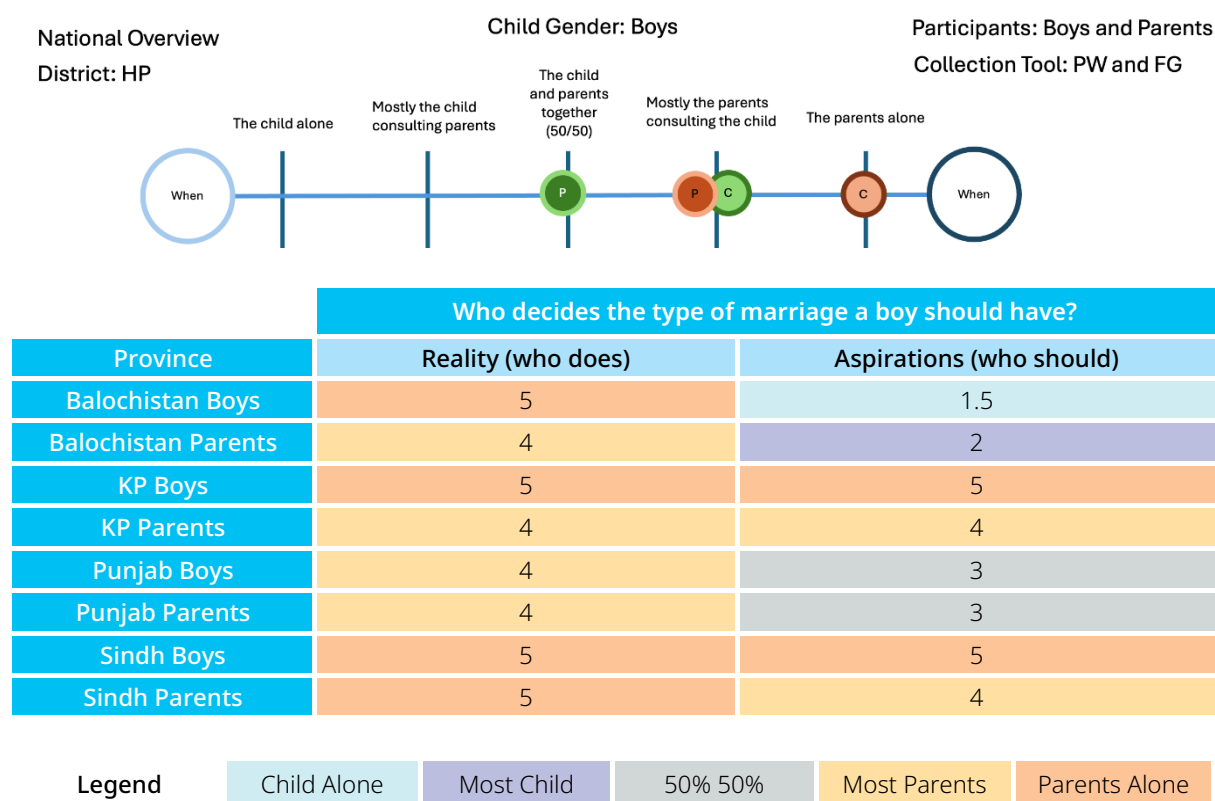
Reality

Across all four provinces, both boys and parents reported that decisions regarding when a boy should marry were made solely by the parents, with fathers holding unquestioned authority. As one participant from KP stated, "Father has this authority. He has the right according to Shariah to decide" (M, FG, O, K). Similarly, a man from Balochistan noted, "If someone's father is not alive, then the elder brother will decide" (M, FG, O, B). These accounts illustrate the dominance of male family members in marital decision-making. Participants from KP and Sindh further explained that since fathers are typically the family's primary earners and bear the financial responsibility for their children's weddings, they are viewed as having full authority over the timing of marriage. As one woman from Sindh expressed, "Because parents and mostly fathers bear all expenses, so they should have the authority" (W, FG, O, S).

Aspirations

In KP and Sindh, both boys and parents showed limited interest in involving boys in decisions about when to marry, preferring that this authority remain primarily with the parents. As one man from KP stated, "Our wish is the final decision should rest with parents and children should only be consulted" (M, FG, O, K). In contrast, parents from Balochistan and Punjab generally supported a more collaborative approach, suggesting that such decisions should be made jointly by boys and their parents. A young woman from Balochistan expressed this view, saying, "I think society needs to move toward a more open dialogue where both the parents and the child communicate openly about their expectations. It can't just be about one side making all the decisions" (W, FG, Y, B).

9.3.3 Who decides the type of marriage to be celebrated for a boy?



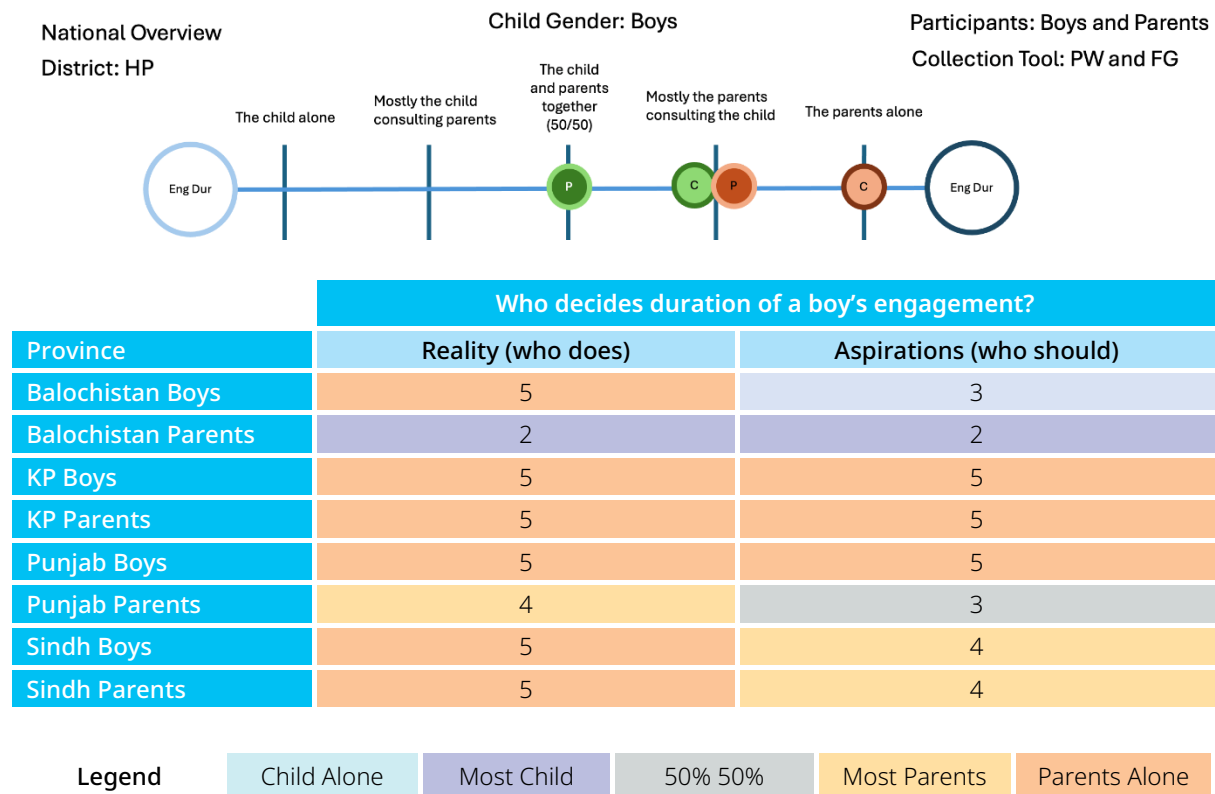
Reality

Once again, across all provinces, it was evident that parents held the authority to determine the type of marriage a boy would have. The “type of wedding” referred to aspects such as the scale of the celebrations, the selection of the wedding date and venue, and the overall nature of the preparations. While mothers were often consulted in these matters, fathers typically held the final decision-making power. As one father from KP explained, “If my son says he wants to marry, but where, how, and who will bear the expenses, all that is my responsibility as a father” (M, FG, O, K). Most parents expressed a preference for hosting grand weddings for their sons but acknowledged that the extent of the celebration ultimately depended on their financial means. As one participant from Punjab noted, “It is the parents who decide child’s wedding should be grand and festive, depending upon their financial ability” (F, FG, O, P).

Aspirations

Boys and parents from Sindh and KP did not express much desire to involve boys in deciding the type of weddings. As one man from Sindh said, “We cannot let them decide everything; they will become too independent” (M, IDI, O S). In contrast, participants from Punjab expressed a desire for shared decision-making between boys and parents regarding wedding arrangements. As one young woman noted, “If children decide, they will be happy on their wedding day” (F, FG, Y, P). In Balochistan, however, both boys and parents favoured granting boys’ greater authority in making decisions about wedding festivities.

9.3.4 Who decides the duration of a boy's engagement?



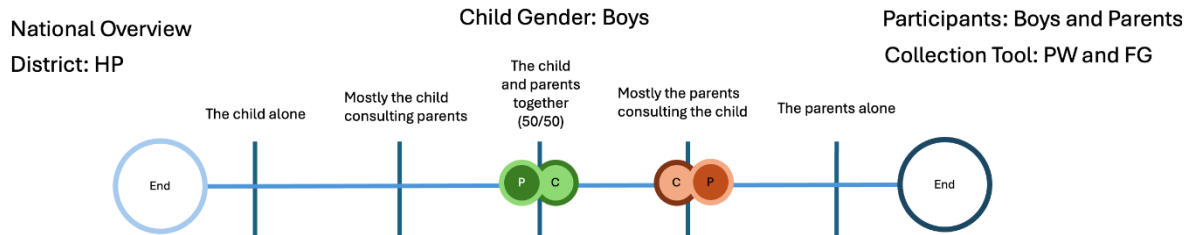
Reality

The length of a boy's engagement was primarily determined by parents across all provinces, with the exception of Balochistan, where parents reported that boys generally made this decision themselves. Most participants emphasized the importance of consulting the girl's parents on this matter. As one young man from KP explained, "There is also consultation with the girl's parents because they also have to prepare for it, so the decision about the time between engagement and marriage is made together" (M, FG, Y, K).

Aspirations

While boys and parents in KP and Sindh showed little interest in involving boys in decisions about the duration of the engagement, most participants from Balochistan and, to a lesser extent, from Punjab favoured a more collaborative approach, suggesting that such decisions should be made jointly by boys and their parents.

9.3.5 Who decides if a boy's marriage should end in case of problems?



Who decides if a boy's marriage should end?		
Province	Reality (who does)	Aspirations (who should)
Balochistan Boys	4.5	2
Balochistan Parents	3	3
KP Boys	2	2
KP Parents	3	2
Punjab Boys	4.5	4.5
Punjab Parents	4	3
Sindh Boys	4.5	4.5
Sindh Parents	4.5	3.5

Reality

Similar to the case of girls, the discussion on who should decide whether a boy's marriage should continue or end in the face of marital difficulties highlighted the greatest divergence between participants' aspirations and the existing reality. An older woman from Sindh explained, "It is the matter of honour and family respect, and because of that, parents decide such critical matters" (W, IDI, O, S). Many participants emphasized that parents intervene in such situations, arguing that children often lack the maturity to navigate the complexities of long-term relationships. As one woman from KP noted, "Parents should intervene when a son argues with his wife" (W, FG, O, K). Similarly, a man from Sindh stated, "Children cannot take such big decisions on their own; they need guidance" (M, FG, Y, S).

Aspirations

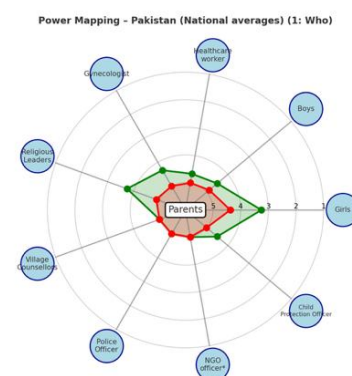
Across all provinces, particularly in Balochistan and KP, most participants emphasized the need for boys to have a greater role and voice in deciding whether to continue or end their marriage. As an older woman from Punjab explained, "The boy himself should decide because he is the main character" (W, FD, O, P).

9.4 Multi-dimensional Power Mapping

In addition to talking to children and their parents, we conducted a quick version of the power mapping with selected key informants. We asked them to evaluate what role they would like to play in the decision of marrying off a child. Most said that, across all the decisions, they believed the parents should be the ones to lead. These opinions were expressed across the sample, including by NGO workers and police officers. Rarely, some KIIs suggested the possibility of playing an advisory role, as mentioned below.

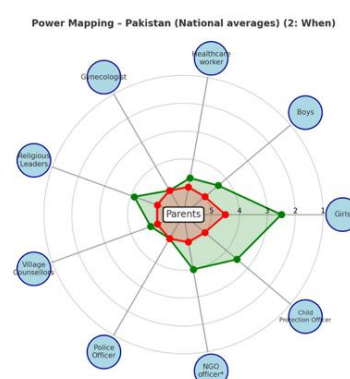
9.4.1 Who should decide whom a child should marry?

Across the provinces, key informants mentioned having little to no power to influence who a child should marry. Some, however, suggested they should have more influence. The religious leader in Balochistan, for instance, believed that “parents must consult the religious leaders in the choice of a spouse for a child” (M, KI, RL, B); and, similarly, the one from KP said “they should definitely consult religious leaders, but the greater authority remains with parents” (M, KI, RL, K). Most key informants agreed with the ngo worker from Punjab who believe that “100% the parents should decide” (M, KI, NGO, P). Not everyone agreed, and other key informants hope to have at least a consulting role. The health provider in Balochistan, for instance, expressed the following aspiration: “My aspiration is that it should be decided with some medical input” (W, KI, HP, B).



9.4.2 Who should decide when a child should marry?

Key informants agreed that parents decided when a child should marry. Most mentioned that the status quo was right as it was. The police officer from Balochistan for instance was adamant that “The parents should decide, not the police” (M, KI, PO, B). Child Protection officers had diverging opinions. The one in Punjab believe that parents should be the ones to make the decision: “The biggest benefit of the parents is that they think that their responsibility has shifted to the other person” (M, KI, CP, P). In Sindh, instead, the Child Protection officer wanted to be able to intervene to protect a child’s right to marry later: “A child protection officer or a trusted institution might need to intervene to ensure the right decision is made and the child’s protection is guaranteed” (M, KI, CP, S). The health provider in Sindh believed that she could play an advisory role and that even though the parents should be the ultimate decision-makers, she could “Guide them towards family planning so there’s no immediate pregnancy and harm can be avoided” (W, KI, HP, S). Note how this health provider believes her role to begin to avoid early pregnancies (a health-related issue) but with less responsibility to intervene in case of a child marriage. The NGO officer in Sindh believe that there were benefits for the decision to be taken by parents: “If children are given freedom to make their own marriage decisions, a problem may arise where some children make choices according to their preferences that may contradict community and parental expectations. This could potentially lead to opposition within the family and strain in relationships” (W, KI, NGO, S). And the NGO worker in KP also was happy to delegate the decision to parents: “The authority should lie with the parents because they know their children best. They can

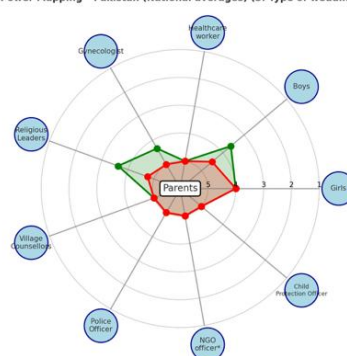


think more carefully about their children's future and should prevent early marriages so that their children's lives are not ruined" (W, KI, NGO, K). The health provider in Balochistan expressed similar opinion although more succinctly: "The parents should decide" (W, KI, HP, B).

9.4.3 Who should decide the type of a marriage a child should celebrate?

Overwhelmingly, key informants said that they had absolutely no say in the decision around the type of marriage that should be celebrated. A few (and certainly, not all) religious leaders, however, offered the most significant exceptions, as they saw their role as advising parents towards a religious marriage (that they would then celebrate). But even then, they suggested that parents' decisions should be respected, or major social consequences (beyond the life of the child alone) would be faced by all. The religious leader in Punjab explained well: "The biggest loss for the community is the destruction of society. This happens when parents are not respected, when parents fight with their children, and the social fabric breaks down" (M, KI, RL, P). The religious leader in Sindh, however, suggested that religious leaders should have a strong voice in similar decisions, since "They can provide guidance according to religion, and in a sensitive matter like marriage, it's important to consider the Islamic perspective" (M, KI, RL, S).

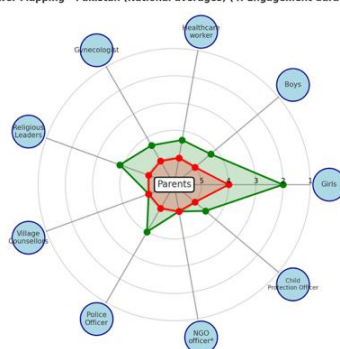
Power Mapping - Pakistan (National averages) (3: Type of wedding)



9.4.4 Who should decide the duration of engagement for a child?

Once again, most key informants were adamant that the duration of the engagement should be a decision made by the parents. The Child Protection Officer in Sindh, for instance, suggested that parents would be more trustworthy because of their higher level of maturity when he said: "Children do not have enough understanding at a young age, and because of this, they are unable to make better decisions" (M, KI, CP, S). A few key informants suggested they could play an advisory role, with health providers pointing to the negative consequences of early pregnancy, and child protection officers pointing to the existence of the law, and how their role would be to make sure the law exists and is well known, but not make parents respect it. Some police officers, in this case, had the opposing opinion. The police officer in Balochistan, for instance, suggested that "Engagements should not be long. Ideally, it should be a shared decision — 50/50 between parents and police in complex situations" (M, KI, PO, B).

Power Mapping - Pakistan (National averages) (4: Engagement duration)



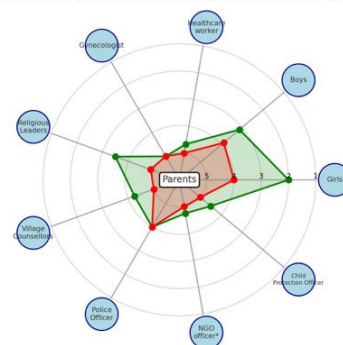
*NGO Remits: Women empowerment (Balochistan); Women's Health (KP); Chi

9.4.5 Who should decide whether a child's marriage should continue or end?

For this final point, once again, key informants believe that parents were better positioned than themselves (or even the children) to make an appropriate decision. In explaining the reasons behind her opinion, the local health provider in Sindh explained: "The family's role is very important because marriage isn't just a matter between two individuals - the entire family is connected to it," later continuing to explain that: "If children marry of their own will, the danger is that they may not be able to make important decisions without parental guidance. Additionally, without parents' support, children face difficulties" (W, KI, HP, S). The local NGO worker in KP (with a remit on gender-based

violence), when asked who should decide whether a marriage should continue or stop in case of problems arising (including violence) still believed the decision should not be made by the child: “Parents can make the best decisions. They know their children better than anyone else, including NGOs, and are in the best position to make the right choices for them” (M, KI, NGO, K). One exception to delegating to parents the authority to decide whether a marriage should end was found in the Police officer in Balochistan, who believed that, in case of violence, “The police officer should take the lead, especially if the issue is serious” (M, KI, PO, B).

Power Mapping - Pakistan (National averages) (5: End of marriage/divorce)



9.5 Final Considerations

Table 9.3 Comparison of Reality and Aspirations for Girls’ and Boys’ involvement in decision related to when a child should get married.

Province	When should a child get married?			
	Boys		Girls	
	Reality	Aspirations	Reality	Aspiration
Balochistan Children	5	4	5	2.5
Balochistan Parents	4	3	5	3
KP Children	4.5	4.5	5	5
KP Parents	4.5	4.5	5	5
Punjab Children	5	5	4.5	3
Punjab Parents	4.5	3	4.5	3.5
Sindh Children	5	4	5	4
Sindh Parents	4	4.5	5	4
Average Parents	4.25	3.75	4.9	3.9
Average Children	4.9	4.4	4.9	3.6
Average	4.6	4	4.9	3.75

The bi-dimensional maps leave little ambiguity about where power sits: across decisions and provinces, dots crowd the outer rings of the parental axis. The lived reality for both girls and boys clusters near 5, signalling that marriage remains a parental prerogative rather than a youth decision. Yet within that broad continuity, the maps also surface a telling asymmetry, both in how much agency girls and boys actually exercise, and in how much agency they say they would like to have. For girls, the picture is stark. Reality scores are consistently at the parental end. What shifts is not the present but the horizon: girls’ aspirational dots pull markedly toward the child side, especially on the most consequential decisions—partner choice, timing, and the right to end a marriage if things go wrong. That pull is not uniform across provinces, but the direction is clear. Where the present is dominated by parental fiat, girls imagine something closer to shared or even self-determined decision-making. In other words, the largest gaps on the maps—between red (reality) and green (aspiration)—belong to girls. Boys inhabit a different tension. Their realities also congregate near parental control, but the maps reveal pockets where they already exercise more voice, most visibly around whether a marriage

should continue in case of problems, and in a few contexts the length of the engagement or the style of the wedding. Their aspirations, however, do not surge as far as girls' do. Often boys' green dots inch inward rather than leap; they signal a preference for consultation, not wholesale transfer of authority. Put simply: boys are granted limited discretion that feels thinkable within the current order, and many seem to wish for a bit more of that same space rather than a reimagining of the decision architecture. By contrast, girls, who sit further from the decision in practice, reach further toward it in their imagination.

This comparison matters because it reveals not only different starting points but different trajectories. For girls, the status quo is one of near-exclusion coupled with a clear appetite for change; for boys, it is constrained participation coupled with an appetite for refinement. The normative soil supporting both remains similar—respect for elders, the moral weight of parental responsibility, the reputational economy of honour—but the burden of that soil falls unequally. Where boys can sometimes negotiate within the rules, girls more often confront the rules themselves: who decides, when, and with what consequences. The one place where the system seems most pliable across genders is the duration of engagement. There, even parental aspirations bend toward discussion, hinting at a pragmatic valve the system is willing to open—an adjustable timeline that preserves parental primacy while creating procedural room. It is a small hinge, but it moves.

Against this gendered backdrop, the quick mapping with key informants adds a final, sobering contour: the solitude of children. Health providers, child-protection officers, police, religious leaders, and NGO staff largely articulate their roles as deferential to parents. A few describe advisory functions; fewer still claim the mandate to intervene except in acute harm. The effect of that institutional posture is to fold the child back into the private sphere from which she or he is trying to emerge. For a girl who wishes to delay, to choose, or to leave a harmful marriage, there are very few reliable hands to reach for. Even when aspirations for change surface inside the household, the wider ecology echoes parental primacy and quiets dissent. In practice, the child stands mostly alone.

The power maps do not describe a system that is immovable; they describe one that is coherent. It coheres because parental authority is morally framed as protection, because institutions hesitate to countermand that protection, and because the pathways for children to claim a voice are narrow and discontinuous. Where the coherence is most elastic, it should be used strategically to widen time, widen options, and widen the circle of adults who see themselves as responsible for listening. The task ahead is to turn the girls' larger aspirational leaps into socially acceptable steps, preserve and formalize the limited discretion boys already practice, and—most importantly—to ensure that children are no longer required to want change in isolation.

Section 10. Ecology of factors affecting child marriage

Many families are poor and cannot afford to take care of their daughters. They believe that marrying them off early will reduce their financial burden.

(F, IDI, Y, B)

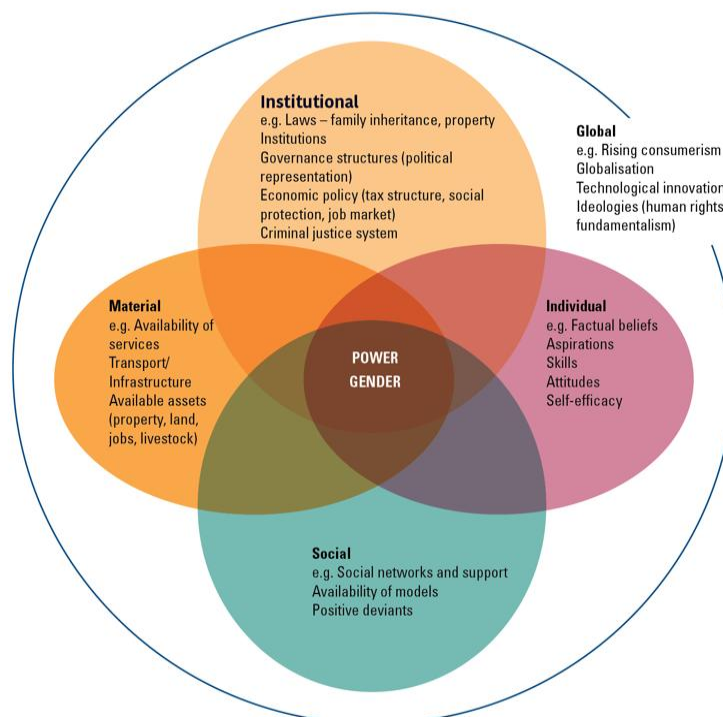
Relevant Research Question:

12. How do other social, material, individual, and institutional factors affect child marriage?

Key Findings:

1. Child marriage is sustained by intersecting social, material, individual, and institutional factors, rather than by any single cause—each level reinforces the others.
2. Cultural/ traditional customs and patriarchal authority continue to position marriage as a family duty and a marker of honour, leaving girls with little agency and normalising child marriage as socially acceptable.
3. Economic hardship and dowry practices make marriage an economic strategy for families, while for boys, marriage timing depends on financial readiness and household labour needs.
4. Limited education and awareness constrain girls' alternatives and autonomy, with schooling often replaced by marriage as a perceived form of protection and respectability.
5. Weak law enforcement and documentation gaps—including unregistered marriages and age falsification—allow families and religious leaders to bypass statutory protections with minimal consequence.
6. Religious and civil systems coexist without clear authority, enabling child marriage to be justified through cultural or faith-based reasoning even when it contradicts the law.

Figure 6.1 Visual Reminder of the conceptual framework used to analyse ecological factors



10.0 Introduction

This section examines how multiple layers of the socioecological environment—social, material, individual, and institutional—interact to shape marriage decisions for girls and boys. Drawing on perspectives from across regions, it explores how cultural and traditional customs, poverty, and limited education operate within broader systems of authority and enforcement. Together, these findings reveal that child marriage in Pakistan is sustained not by a single cause but by the interplay between household financial challenges, patriarchal control, cultural and religious expectations, and weak institutional accountability. Understanding these interconnections provides critical insight into how child marriage is normalised, justified, and reproduced within everyday life for girls and boys.

Table 10.1 Consensus Frequency on factors affecting child marriage

		Balochistan		KP		Punjab		Sindh	
		Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Social	Cultural/traditional customs								
	Patriarchal authority and family honour								
	Religion								
Material	Poverty and economic hardship								
	Dowry, bride price								
	Watta Satta								
Individual	Lack of education								
Institutional	Weak law enforcement								

Note: Colours indicate frequency of consensus. The darker the colour, the more participants mentioned the theme in question (see the colour scheme below).

No mention	Less Frequent	More frequent
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10.1. Social factors

Across provinces, participants described social and cultural expectations as central to shaping marriage decisions. Marriage was rarely viewed as an individual choice but rather as a collective act tied to family honour, community reputation, and adherence to long-standing customs. These dynamics exerted particularly strong pressure on girls, whose marriages were often arranged early to preserve social respectability and align with tradition. For boys, similar norms existed but carried weaker sanctions, allowing greater flexibility to delay or negotiate marriage. Together, these accounts highlight how social structures and expectations reinforce gendered patterns in the timing and nature of marriage.

10.1.1. Cultural and traditional customs

Child marriage for girls was consistently described as rooted in cultural and traditional customs: “in our society, there is a trend of child marriage” (M, IDI, O, P); “They would think that according to the tradition in our society, she will be married at a young age” (M, FG, O, P). Age was an important factor for conforming to these customs, as “society values young brides, and as she grows older, proposals become less frequent” (F, IDI, O, B). An older man from Balochistan explained that marriage was not

considered an individual decision but rather a social responsibility of the family, guided by custom, reputation, and community norms: “It’s because of cultural and traditional beliefs. In our village, girls are often expected to marry early, and their families don’t give them a choice” (M, FG, O, B). An older man from KP echoed how cultural expectations override personal choice: “This [child marriage] reflects the cultural belief in our region that girls must marry as soon as they become of age, often without considering their personal readiness or desires” (M, IDI, O, K). Several participants linked these customs with community pressure: “In our culture, there’s a lot of pressure to get married early, and social expectations play a huge role” (M, IDI, O, B). An older woman from Punjab reinforced this view, describing persistent societal pressure for child marriage: “Society still plays a major role. People often feel pressured to marry at a certain age, especially in rural areas” (F, IDI, O, P).

While similar cultural norms influenced boys’ marriages, the pressure was described as less frequent and considerably weaker. Boys were seen as having greater social flexibility to delay marriage without facing the same consequences. A young man from Balochistan highlighted this contrast: “His father’s friends might not pressure him in the same way they would pressure a girl. Haidar would have more opportunities to delay marriage without facing criticism from the community” (IDI, Y, B). Still, cultural conformity remained a shared value: “He usually hopes that his son agrees to marriage and follows family traditions” (F, IDI, O, P). Compared to girls, the influence of custom on boys’ marriage timing appeared less coercive and more symbolic, serving primarily to uphold family image rather than to enforce child marriage.

10.1.2 Patriarchal authority and family honour

Families’ efforts to conform to cultural expectations were largely shaped by the authority of elders—most often men—whose decisions reinforced the legitimacy of child marriage for girls: “In such families, decisions about marriage are often taken by male members, sometimes resulting in child marriages for girls” (M, IDI, Y, B). Such decisions rarely considered the daughter’s own interests or aspirations, reflecting a broader expectation that parents—especially fathers—knew what was best for their children. As an older woman from Balochistan explained, “The father believes he is making the right decision for his daughter. He might not consider her feelings or future aspirations. To him, it’s a matter of tradition and ensuring that his daughter is married early” (F, IDI, O, B). Beyond tradition, many participants noted that concerns about family honour and reputation also reinforced child marriage, as parents sought to protect the family’s image and avoid gossip or social criticism: “Additionally, concerns about family honour and security push parents to marry daughters early to avoid perceived risks to their reputation. Traditional and religious beliefs also reinforce the idea that child marriage protects girls from moral corruption” (F, IDI, O, S). A younger man from Punjab echoed this connection between honour and parental authority: “I told her that this is a matter of your father’s respect. You will have to get married” (M, IDI, Y, P). Community approval further strengthened this dynamic, as child marriage was widely viewed as a responsible act by parents fulfilling their social duty: “Yes, in our area people praise such decisions. They feel it’s the father’s right to make that call” (F, FG, O, B). Many participants reported that decisions were rarely contested, as “When elders are sitting together like this, they often discuss important matters, including marriage decisions. It has always been like this in our culture [...] The decision is made for them” (M, IDI, Y, K).

Among boys, patriarchal authority and social conformity also influenced marriage decisions but were described as more flexible and negotiable. In Punjab, several participants still emphasised obedience and parental control: “It was mostly the father’s wish, as he wanted his daughter to get married quickly... The boy did not refuse because he couldn’t go against his father’s decision” (F, IDI, O, P); “The boy will accept the decision of the father” (F, IDI, O, P); and “He will expect his son to comply with his wishes” (F, IDI, O, P). However, some participants also acknowledged gendered differences in social expectations: “Yes, definitely. There’s a lot more pressure on girls to conform to marriage

traditions, while boys have more freedom to refuse" (M, IDI, Y, B). A younger woman from Punjab similarly observed, "But when a boy does the same, they say, 'Okay, if he doesn't like her, then it's fine. Let him marry someone of his choice'" (F, IDI, Y, P). Compared to girls, patriarchal authority remained influential in shaping boys' marriages, but the consequences of resistance were less severe, and boys retained comparatively greater autonomy to negotiate or postpone marriage.

10.1.3. Religion

Religious interpretations also played an important role in legitimising child marriage for girls, often reinforcing rather than challenging traditional expectations. Some participants explained that religious leaders and community interpretations of Islam present child marriage as a moral or even obligatory act. As a young woman from Balochistan described, "First, religious leaders play a significant role. They promote child marriage in their teachings, making it seem like a duty" (F, IDI, Y, B). Others linked these messages to social attitudes that portray daughters as burdens, as a young woman from Balochistan noted, "They [religious leaders] encourage child marriage and say that having a daughter is a burden" (F, IDI, Y, B). A young man from Balochistan echoed this observation, explaining that "Some religious interpretations or community norms might encourage child marriage, believing it to be in line with religious teachings or cultural expectations" (M, IDI, Y, B). These accounts illustrate how religious endorsement strengthens the social acceptability of marrying young, allowing child marriage to persist as both a moral safeguard and a culturally approved practice. However, a few participants expressed counterviews, emphasising that misinterpretations of Islam perpetuate this practice: "Because they don't know Islam. They don't know religious teachings. In my opinion, Islam gives the right to ask the girl" (F, FG, O, B).

Religion was mentioned only occasionally in relation to boys' marriage decisions. One older woman in Balochistan stated, "He is bound by Islam, and he is bound to get married soon" (F, IDI, O, B), while another younger man explained, "Islam allows choice in marriage, but cultural norms often restrict this" (M, IDI, Y, B). Compared to girls, religious reasoning appeared less frequent and carried less moral weight, suggesting that faith-based justifications played a relatively minor role in shaping expectations for boys' marriages.

10.2. Material factors

Across provinces, participants described how economic conditions shaped marriage decisions, often determining when and why marriages occurred. Poverty, livelihood insecurity, and the financial expectations surrounding marriage emerged as major influences. For girls, child marriage was frequently viewed as a practical response to economic hardship, reducing household expenses and transferring responsibility to the groom's family. For boys, however, material considerations operated differently—marriage was tied to expanding household labour or was postponed until they achieved financial stability. Alongside these household-level pressures, marriage-related financial exchanges such as dowry, bride price, and Watta Satta further influenced the timing and feasibility of marriage, with notable regional variations in how these practices were experienced.

10.2.1. Poverty and economic hardship

Across provinces, participants described poverty and economic hardship as major factors driving girls' child marriage. Families struggling with limited resources often viewed marriage as an immediate strategy to reduce their financial burden. As one young woman in Balochistan explained, "Many families are poor and cannot afford to take care of their daughters. They believe that marrying them off early will reduce their financial burden" (F, IDI, Y, B). Another participant echoed this view,

stating, “Some families believe they have no choice due to financial struggles” (M, FG, Y, B). Marrying a daughter early could therefore ease daily expenses and relieve parents of the economic responsibility of her care. As one woman from Balochistan summarised, “Some poor families struggle to afford to keep their daughters at home, so they marry them off early” (F, IDI, Y, B). In Sindh, participants also linked child marriage to a perception of economic security: “Along with that, poverty is also a major reason because poor families consider their daughters financially secure through marriage” (F, IDI, Y, S). The urgency of marriage was often tied to how quickly a family could achieve such relief—the earlier the marriage, the sooner these perceived financial benefits were realised.

Similarly, for boys, material motivations were also linked to the household’s economic conditions, but the rationale differed. While child marriage among girls was associated with reducing household expenses, child marriage for boys was often perceived as a way to expand household labour and strengthen family livelihood. As one young man from Balochistan explained, “The reason for child marriage is that the family wants to bring a daughter-in-law into the house so she can contribute to the household and increase the workforce” (M, IDI, Y, B). Another younger man added, “His family benefits because they gain an additional household member who can contribute financially and help with responsibilities” (M, IDI, Y, B). In Punjab, participants made similar observations about the household-level economic value of marriage: “The family increases in population, and if there are more men or women, they can be made to work. This is just poverty” (M, IDI, O, P). These accounts illustrate that, for boys, marriage could bring indirect economic gain by introducing a working daughter-in-law and by securing reciprocal alliances that support family labour and productivity.

At the same time, participants highlighted that financial instability often delayed marriage for boys, showing an opposite trend to girls. A young man from Balochistan said, “Earlier, boys got married at a younger age. But now, due to financial problems, it gets delayed” (M, IDI, Y, B). Some young men described how aspirations for economic security clashed with family pressure, as one participant reflected, “Many boys now prefer to delay marriage to focus on their careers and financial stability. However, cultural and family pressures still push some into child marriages” (M, IDI, Y, B).

10.2.2. Financial exchanges: Dowry, bride price, and Watta Satta

Across most provinces, dowry practices placed additional strain on families, influencing both the timing and feasibility of marriage. A young woman from Punjab explained, “If they cannot provide the dowry, it’s obvious that they [groom’s family] won’t get married” (F, IDI, Y, P). In some cases, dowry expectations delayed marriage, particularly among families already struggling with poverty: “There are many people in our area who want to get married, but they don’t have enough money at that time because the groom’s side demands so much—land, cars, gold, clothes, utensils, and so on” (F, IDI, Y, P). For these families, the inability to meet financial demands limited their daughters’ marriage prospects and added to their sense of economic insecurity.

For families unable to afford dowry, exchange marriages (Watta Satta) provided a practical alternative to manage costs. Participants explained that “As some families see marriage as a way to reduce financial burdens, sometimes even exchanging daughters in Watta Satta deals or for property [is an option]” (F, IDI, O, S). These arrangements were most commonly described in Sindh and Punjab, where reciprocity between households reduced or replaced monetary transactions. Through such exchanges, marriage functioned as an economic balancing mechanism, allowing families to maintain social obligations while avoiding large dowry expenditures.

In Balochistan, however, participants described a contrasting pattern in which the direction of financial exchange was often reversed. Whereas in Punjab and Sindh the bride’s family bore the economic burden, in Balochistan the groom’s side typically provided money or goods to the bride’s

family. Child marriage was therefore sometimes perceived as financially advantageous, offering immediate relief to households facing poverty. As one young woman explained, “Some families see benefits in child marriage because they receive dowry and money from the groom’s family. They use part of this money for the girl’s dowry, while the rest is spent on their other children” (F, IDI, Y, B). Another participant added, “Families who rely on dowry may feel financial pressure” (F, IDI, Y, B), while a young man observed, “People believe that by arranging a girl’s marriage, they will receive financial benefits, gifts, or material goods in return” (M, IDI, Y, B). These practices highlight how, in Balochistan, child marriage could serve as a source of income rather than a financial liability, with families using proceeds from one marriage to offset or finance another. This cycle of reciprocal transactions reinforced the role of marriage as both an economic strategy and a means of redistributing financial resources within and between households.

10.3. Individual factors

Across provinces, participants identified lack of education and awareness as key individual factors shaping the timing of marriage. Limited schooling reduced girls’ access to information and alternatives, reinforcing child marriage as the only recognised life pathway. Families often withdrew daughters from education to protect their reputation or because schooling was perceived as unsafe or of little practical value. For boys, the relationship between education and marriage operated differently: low educational attainment restricted employment prospects and delayed marriage until financial stability could be achieved. Together, these accounts highlight how educational opportunity and awareness intersect with gendered expectations, producing distinct pathways to marriage for girls and boys.

10.3.1. Lack of education and awareness

Across provinces, participants linked individual circumstances—particularly education—to the timing of marriage. Lack of education and awareness were consistently described as direct factors reducing the age of marriage for girls, operating alongside household poverty and social norms. An older man from Punjab, when asked why marriage age had not increased, responded: “Lack of education, lack of awareness, and mainly poverty” (M, FG, O, P). Limited education restricted both awareness of alternatives and access to livelihoods, reinforcing the perception that child marriage was inevitable. A young woman from Balochistan explained, “The biggest challenges for girls are lack of education, poverty, and community norms. Education is the most important thing, but after that, the way people think is the biggest obstacle” (F, IDI, Y, B). Similar sentiments were echoed in Sindh, where participants described how “lack of education further contributes, as some parents do not value girls’ schooling, believing their ultimate place is in their husband’s home” (F, IDI, O, S).

Building on this, participants also noted that the absence of education limited girls’ confidence and decision-making power regarding marriage. Several described how lack of education restricted awareness of alternatives: “Girls here don’t know what choices they have. No one tells them they can do something other than marry” (F, IDI, O, K). In Punjab, a younger man explained that dependence on parents was reinforced by the absence of schooling: “Girls are not educated in our society, and independent thought is not encouraged; therefore, I think she will agree to her father’s decision [to child marriage]” (M, FG, Y, P). Even when girls expressed aspirations for education or employment, these were often subordinated to family priorities. As one young woman from Sindh reflected, “I wanted to study further, but my parents said there is no use. They said a girl’s future is in her husband’s house” (F, IDI, Y, S).

Across regions, families often viewed schooling and safety as competing priorities. Marriage was described as replacing education as a perceived form of protection, particularly where families feared reputational harm or harassment. In KP, men repeatedly highlighted how “girls face harassment, which prevents them from going out and getting an education” (M, IDI, O, K). A young woman from KP added that parents withdrew daughters from school once they reached puberty: “In our village, parents don’t allow girls to go to school. They say, ‘No, you will grow up,’ and that’s why they don’t permit them” (F, FG, Y, K). Here, the phrase “you will grow up” referred to parents’ concerns about girls reaching puberty and becoming visible in public spaces, reflecting fears that continued schooling could expose them to risk. Early withdrawal was therefore understood as an act of parental caution rather than neglect, reflecting fears that prolonged schooling might invite gossip or compromise family honour.

For boys, education shaped marriage decisions less directly but still influenced their readiness to earn an income and support a family. Participants described how limited schooling restricted boys’ opportunities for stable employment, which in turn affected when they could marry. In Punjab, several men linked early or delayed marriage to educational attainment and its connection with livelihood prospects: “It is all due to poverty... the children just seem a burden to them... it is also due to lack of education” (M, FGD, Y, P). An older man in KP explained that incomplete education limited both earning capacity and independence: “Due to a lack of education, they face further difficulties and fall into poverty [...] They cannot become independent due to incomplete education” (M, IDI, O, K). In the absence of viable employment options, marriage was sometimes viewed as a practical alternative to establish social respectability. As one older man noted, “There are educated boys sitting at home without work. They end up agreeing to marriage because at least that brings some respect” (M, IDI, O, S). These accounts suggest that, for boys, restricted educational and economic opportunities limited personal agency and reinforced the perception that marriage offered social standing in place of personal achievement.

10.4. Institutional factors

Across all study provinces, participants emphasised that weak legal enforcement and documentation continued to enable child marriage despite existing protective laws. In practice, formal legislation setting a minimum age of marriage was undermined by inadequate documentation systems, limited oversight, and deference to local religious leaders or parents.

10.4.1. Weak law enforcement and documentation

Across provinces, participants highlighted persistent institutional weaknesses that allowed child marriage to continue despite the existence of formal legal safeguards. Laws setting a minimum age of marriage were not consistently enforced and were often bypassed through informal arrangements. A religious leader from Balochistan reported: “I think the law is not being followed. Yes, the laws exist, but people don’t follow them. Cultural norms override them” (M, KII, RL, B). Similar concerns were raised in Sindh, where underage marriages were considered “legally objectionable” but rarely annulled in practice because “if the marriage has already taken place, we can’t always have it annulled” (KII, CPO, S).

Some participants highlighted documentation barriers that undermined enforcement. As one NGO worker explained, “Even though the government says that once you’re 18 and have a valid ID, you’re allowed to marry, most marriages here don’t have proper marriage certificates. They are often arranged by religious leaders and not legally registered until much later” (F, KII, NGO, B). A child protection officer from Punjab added, “The biggest issue after child marriage is birth registration.

When they don't have basic identification, we can't legally challenge that" (M, KII, CPO, P). In KP, another religious leader revealed how families manipulated official records to avoid detection: "Many people come to us saying, 'Increase the age in the documents so the government won't object and will accept the Nakahama'" (M, KII, RL, K). Together, these accounts demonstrate how missing documentation and age falsification enabled families to bypass statutory protections with little consequence.

Religious interpretations further complicated enforcement by blurring the line between socially perceived maturity and legal adulthood. Several religious leaders referred to puberty as the determining criterion for marriage under Sharia: "If a girl or boy has reached puberty, then marriage is permissible" (KII, RL, S). This flexible interpretation allowed child marriage to be justified on religious grounds even when it contradicted civil law. Others described how deference to parental authority legitimised such practices: "If they are not of marriageable age, and they have their parents' mutual consent, we call the parents and confirm" (M, KII, RL, B). The coexistence of religious and civil systems thus created overlapping lines of authority, allowing religious leaders and families to validate underage marriages while circumventing legal boundaries.

10.5. Final consideration

Across provinces, the findings reveal that child marriage persists through a convergence of social, material, individual, and institutional factors that collectively sustain gender inequality. For girls, restrictive social expectations, economic hardship, and lack of education intersect to narrow life choices, making child marriage appear both inevitable and protective. For boys, poverty and limited livelihood opportunities create opposite pressures—often delaying marriage until financial stability is achieved. These gendered pathways demonstrate how structural constraints and cultural norms work in tandem: child marriage becomes a socially sanctioned response to insecurity rather than an individual decision.

At the institutional level, weak documentation, inconsistent enforcement of marriage laws, and the coexistence of religious and civil systems further entrench these dynamics, allowing families to legitimise child marriages through informal or faith-based authority. The result is a cycle in which material need, moral reasoning, and institutional weakness reinforce one another, keeping child marriage embedded within community life.

Taken together, these insights underscore the need for integrated responses that address not only poverty and education but also the gendered power relations and institutional fragilities that sustain child marriage. Strengthening legal implementation, expanding girls' access to safe education, and engaging local leaders to reinterpret norms around maturity and protection are all essential to shifting the social ecology that continues to normalise child marriage in Pakistan.

Section 11. Impact of flooding

If the government could arrange marriages for girls in a proper, safe manner—providing them with financial support, a house, or essential items—it would reduce the burden on families
(W, II, Y, S)

Relevant Research Question:

13. What do participants believe to be the effect of the recent floods, and the related internal displacements, on child vulnerability?

Key Findings:

1. The destruction of schools and livelihoods forced many children, especially boys, to drop out of school to support their families.
2. Loss of shelter and overcrowded camps created unsafe conditions that increased girls' exposure to harassment and exploitation.
3. Flooding altered marriage patterns in two ways: delaying marriages where poverty made weddings unaffordable and accelerating them where families sought financial or social relief.
4. Some families married daughters early to reduce economic pressure or to protect them from perceived risks in displacement camps.
5. Parents' requests for government assistance with dowries highlight how normalized child marriage remains as a social expectation.
6. Limited and unequal recovery assistance deepened frustration and left many of the poorest families without adequate support.
7. Communities identified housing, livelihoods, health care, and education as the most urgent recovery priorities for children's wellbeing.

Note: A visual for this section was not provided, to avoid demeaning and/or simplifying the tragic experiences that children and their families faced during and after the floods.

11.0 Introduction

In recent years, floods have had devastating and long-lasting effects on children and families in the research sites in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh, Punjab and Balochistan. Participants of all ages across provinces described the floods in dramatic terms, as catastrophic events that “swept away everything” – homes, schools, roads, health clinics, livestock, livelihoods and community stability. Families lost not only their possessions but also their sense of security and belonging. Many were displaced to temporary camps, or to the homes of relatives, where overcrowding and unsafe conditions brought on new stresses.

Table 11.1 Consensus Frequency on the impact of the 2022 on children's lives and child marriage

	Balochistan		KP		Punjab		Sindh	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Poor Child Health								
Schooling Disruption								
Loss of Shelter								
Reduced Child Marriage								
Increased Child Marriage								

Note: Colours indicate frequency of consensus. The darker the colour, the more participants mentioned the theme in question (see the colour scheme below).

No mention	Less Frequent	More frequent
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11.1 Physical health

In all settings, across multiple focus groups and interviews, it was widely agreed that children were among the most affected. Participants described the impacts on girls and boys of widespread hunger, malnutrition, and disease: "Children suffered greatly; their stomachs were upset, they vomited, there were no roads or doctors, and we could not take them to hospitals." (W, FG, Y, K); "Many children fell sick due to unhygienic conditions. Education was disrupted because schools were damaged." (W, II, Y, S); "We lost our ancestral lands, our homes—everything was destroyed. There was no food, no supplies. Everything was ruined. Even small children suffered." (M, FG, Y, P). In Balochistan, flooding left entire communities without shelter or water, and many people were displaced into makeshift camps: "After the devastating flood in Nasirabad in 2022, many of us lost everything—our homes, possessions, and sources of income." (M, II, Y, B). Parents described malnutrition and ill-health among children as ongoing problems long after the initial floods.

11.2 Disrupted schooling

In all sites, children's education had been significantly disrupted by flooding. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, community members of all ages reported widespread destruction of schools and long-term disruption to children's education: "Schools were washed away, education was affected, and many children fell behind" (M, FG, O, K); "The biggest problem was that schools were closed, and many children couldn't continue their education. Some lost their books and uniforms in the flood" (M, II, Y, K). These impacts were also reported in Sindh: "The biggest challenge was in terms of education. We were studying in our village, but after moving to the city, we faced many problems continuing our education" (M, II, Y, S). A young man pointed out that "Their education was completely disrupted... Parents were so busy restoring their lives that they couldn't focus on their children's education" (M, II, Y, S).

Similar findings were reported in Punjab and Balochistan, where parents reported that poverty forced children, particularly boys, to leave school to earn an income to help their families: "Boys start working with their fathers at a young age... Many boys from our village leave for work in cities by the age of 10 to 12." (M, II, Y, K) These experiences were echoed in Balochistan, where children's schooling was interrupted by the destruction of infrastructure and migration: "Our schools were also closed. Our children did not get education. Apart from this, a lot of damage has been done" (M, FG, O, B).

11.3 Loss of shelter

The loss of shelter during the floods had profound effects on children's safety, wellbeing, and dignity. Without stable housing, families were forced to live in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions that exposed children to health risks, insecurity, and emotional distress. Across all four provinces, many families lost their homes entirely. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), people described living in tents or temporary shelters without bathrooms, electricity, or clean water: "We stayed in tents in the shelter village. We had no home or shelter" (W, FG, Y, K). In Sindh, similar experiences were reported: "When the major flood came, our children had to take shelter in other people's houses or camps. Many people had to go without food for two or three days. When someone is forced to live in another person's home, they become dependent on their kindness. This situation can sometimes lead to exploitation, harassment, or unwanted relationships" (M, II, O, S). Girls were especially vulnerable in these circumstances, facing serious challenges to their safety and dignity: "Girls face more difficulties than boys... Boys could go anywhere to relieve themselves, but where would the girls go? Where would they bathe? This was a serious issue" (W, II, O, S). Respondents in Balochistan also described fears of harassment in crowded shelters and the struggle to maintain family privacy and girls' wellbeing under conditions of displacement. Thus, the widespread loss of housing not only disrupted children's sense of stability and security but also deepened existing gender inequalities and protection risks. Together, these impacts illustrate how environmental disasters can cascade into multiple, intersecting forms of deprivation for children and their families.

11.4 Impact of flooding on marriage

Across all four provinces, flooding profoundly altered marriage patterns, especially for adolescent girls. Devastation, pervasive poverty, debt and loss of assets had two main, and contrasting impacts on marriage.

The first effect was a short-term reduction in child marriage. The destruction of livelihoods and loss of dowry items made weddings financially impossible for many families, leading them to delay or cancel planned marriages. For instance, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: "Weddings were put on hold." (M, II, Y, K); "We had no houses—we were living in other people's houses—and everything we had was taken away by the flood. So, we had nothing left to hold weddings for our children" (W, FG, Y, K). Similar narratives were reported in Sindh: "Many families postponed weddings because they didn't have the money to arrange them... Even when weddings took place, they were much simpler than before" (W, II, Y, S). One young woman noted, "The dowry was washed away" (W, FG, Y, S).

In Punjab, financial loss also caused delays: "Many families postponed weddings because they didn't have the money to arrange them... Some people went into debt trying to recover, so weddings were the last thing on their minds" (W, FG, Y, P). Parents expressed distress over dowries lost in the floods and the inability to meet social expectations around marriage ceremonies. "When floods come, animals drown... In our area, girls' marriages depend on having animals. They sell them to prepare dowries. When the animals die, they cannot afford to marry off their daughters until they recover financially" (W, II, Y, P). In Balochistan, the pattern was similar: "Marriages couldn't happen because houses were flooded, lands were destroyed, and people had to take shelter in schools. The financial damage was so severe people couldn't afford marriage expenses" (M, II, Y, B).

The wreckage of the floods also induced a second, distinctly different, effect on child marriage patterns and rates. Many respondents reported feeling pressured to arrange early or hurried marriages as a means of seeking relief from financial burdens. A young woman in Sindh explained: "Many families were homeless and had nothing, not even food. So, they wanted to marry off their

daughters quickly to secure their future” (W, II, Y, S) In Punjab and Balochistan, marriages of girls at an earlier age than is typical in non-crisis times, were sometimes arranged as a financial coping mechanism, especially among families with elderly parents: “Because of poverty, there is nothing to eat, no place to live, nothing to wear. So, they arranged marriages as if it was a burden they were trying to get rid of” (M, FG, Y, P). This acceleration in child marriages was further fuelled by parents’ desire to protect their daughters’ safety in displacement camps. “When we take our children, especially the young girls, to the camps, it becomes tough to protect their dignity. So, before that, families say, ‘Let’s get them married off early to avoid shame” (W, II, Y, S). This dual effect of the floods on reducing child marriage on the one hand, and increasing it on the other, was reported in all four provinces and closely linked to poverty, displacement and the collapse of protective community structures.

11.5 Support needs and community expectations

Across the research sites, community members expressed deep frustration at the limited and uneven nature of post-flood assistance. Participants described government aid as inadequate, delayed, or diverted to elites, leaving those most affected to rebuild on their own. “The government did nothing for us. Whatever aid was given, it went to the big landlords. The poor people who suffered the most were left helpless” (M, FG, Y, K). This perception of neglect was shared in Sindh, Punjab, and Balochistan, where many said that only the well-connected benefited from relief efforts.

Despite this frustration, participants were clear about the support and services that they needed most. Priorities were common across contexts: reconstruction of homes, restoration of livelihoods, clean water, education, and accessible health care. “Aid should be provided for the reconstruction of destroyed homes. Water, electricity, and other basic facilities should be restored.” (M, II, O, K). Participants in all sites also stressed the importance of monetary assistance, employment creation, and food aid, describing these as essential for regaining stability “and ensuring that people can continue their lives with dignity” (M, II, Y, B).

Younger and older adult respondents linked the lack of recovery assistance directly to children’s continuing vulnerability. Adults explained that without stable housing, safe drinking water, and schools, children’s health and education would continue to deteriorate. “Schools should be restored for children so that their education is not affected. Medical camps should be set up for sick people” (M, II, Y, K). Others emphasised that better educational access, particularly for girls, was essential for preventing child marriage and protecting children from exploitation: “Schools should be free. If girls are in school, they will not get married young” (W, FG, Y, S).

In Sindh and Balochistan, older adult male and female participants requested specific programs to assist with marriage-related expenses for poor families, arguing that financial insecurity had worsened child marriage risks. “If the government could arrange marriages for girls in a proper, safe manner—providing them with financial support, a house, or essential items—it would reduce the burden on families” (W, II, Y, S). Similar views were voiced in KP: “The government can cover marriage expenses for boys and girls.” (W, FG, Y, K). Note how these statements reveal the extent to which child marriage is considered by participants an ordinary part of life; they believed that the government should provide dowries, without realizing that the practice is illegal, so the Government is not in a position of supporting it.

Many older and younger participants also proposed practical measures to prevent future disasters, including construction of river embankments, stronger roads, and early warning systems. “The government can build walls to redirect the river so that water does not come our way, and they

should build higher and stronger roads” (W, II, Y, K). Taken together, the range of needs articulated calls for a comprehensive recovery strategy, one that rebuilds physical infrastructure while addressing the social and economic inequalities that leave families vulnerable. Above all, respondents emphasised dignity, fairness, and inclusion, urging authorities to design relief and reconstruction programmes that reach the poorest households, empower women, and protect children from long-term harm.

11.6 Final Considerations

The findings from this section illustrate that the 2022–2023 floods had devastating and multidimensional impacts on children’s lives across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh, Punjab, and Balochistan. Families lost homes, livelihoods, and community networks, leading to widespread deprivation that continues to affect children’s physical health, emotional well-being, and access to education. Parents repeatedly described a prolonged sense of loss—of security, dignity, and belonging—that persists well beyond the immediate emergency period. Children’s malnutrition, illness, and disrupted schooling have compounded existing inequalities and deepened cycles of poverty and vulnerability.

The floods also had complex social effects, altering family dynamics and reshaping marriage practices in ways that reveal both resilience and risk. In some cases, extreme financial hardship led families to postpone weddings, resulting in a temporary reduction of child marriage. However, the same conditions also pushed other families toward early or forced marriages, either to alleviate economic strain or to protect girls’ safety and honour in the uncertain conditions of displacement camps. These contrasting responses demonstrate how crises can simultaneously suppress and intensify harmful practices, depending on families’ resources, social standing, and access to support.

Participants’ narratives highlight that limited and inequitable recovery assistance has prolonged distress and eroded trust in institutions. Many families perceive relief as captured by local elites, leaving those most affected without meaningful help. The resulting frustration reinforces feelings of abandonment and fuels coping mechanisms—including child marriage—that families perceive as necessary for survival. Parents’ requests for government-supported dowries further reveal how normalized the practice of child marriage remains.

Programmatic Recommendations

Recommendation 1. Reframe Childhood Through Life Events, Not Age

Findings from this study reveal that the concept of “childhood” as defined in legal or policy terms does not resonate strongly with community members across Pakistan. Age is rarely mentioned as a marker of maturity; instead, life events such as menstruation, marriage, or the ability to contribute economically are what reclassify a person as an adult in social terms. For girls, marriage itself is widely understood as the act that transforms them into women, while for boys, adulthood is associated with independence and the capacity to provide for others. In this context, advocacy efforts that rely solely on chronological age to define child marriage or promote child rights risk being misunderstood or dismissed as culturally irrelevant.

To strengthen community ownership of child protection goals, advocacy and programming should focus on life events and transitions that communities already recognize as meaningful. Campaigns could highlight the importance of allowing girls and boys to complete secondary education before marriage, building skills for livelihoods, or ensuring emotional and physical readiness for adult responsibilities. Framing messages around these tangible milestones—rather than abstract legal ages—can foster greater empathy, reduce resistance, and align protective action with values communities already hold. Child protection interventions should therefore reframe communication strategies to translate the idea of “childhood” into terms that emphasize growth, learning, and preparedness. While these interventions cannot ignore the age limits set in the CRC, it seems important to frame those age boundaries not in terms of biological ages, but with the physical and social markers associated with them (e.g. finishing secondary school education). By promoting education and capability as the real markers of maturity, programmes can help reshape local definitions of adulthood, making the protection of children both culturally resonant and socially legitimate. As an example, media campaigns should focus on promoting worldviews where girls are not adult until they finish secondary education, since then they will be prepared to engage in the many responsibilities that adult life will demand of them.

Recommendation 2. Design Intervention Materials that Acknowledge Parents’ Fears and Hopes

Interventions to prevent child marriage in Pakistan will be most effective when they begin from an empathetic understanding of parents’ realities—their fears, their hopes, and the social pressures that shape their decisions. Across provinces, parents repeatedly described their actions as protective, not harmful: child marriage, restrictions on girls’ movement, or boys’ early entry into work were seen as ways to safeguard family honour, ensure safety, and prepare children for adulthood. Many parents fear harassment, gossip, and moral decline for their daughters, while also worrying that idleness, drugs, or unemployment will lead their sons astray. At the same time, they aspire for dignity, social respect, and the emotional and economic stability that marriage and education can provide.

Communication and training materials designed to reduce child marriage should then speak directly to both these fears and these aspirations, using language that feels familiar and respectful rather than prescriptive. Messages should validate parents’ intentions to protect their children while gently introducing alternative ways to achieve the same goals. For instance, a focus on “protection without

restriction” can help families see that ensuring girls’ safety does not require withdrawing them from school, but rather improving safe transport, community awareness and vigilance, and complaint mechanisms. Similarly, materials could reframe readiness for marriage in terms of education, health, and emotional maturity—emphasizing that a respected family is one that allows daughters to complete their schooling and sons to be economically and emotionally prepared before taking on adult responsibilities.

Intervention materials should include relatable narratives, stories, and testimonies from parents, teachers, and religious figures who have chosen to delay marriage and seen the benefits. They should also illustrate practical solutions to common triggers of child marriage—such as fear of harassment, poverty, or rumours—showing that there are socially acceptable ways to protect honour while giving children time to grow. By framing messages around shared parental goals—safety, respect, dignity, and family stability—programs can create empathy rather than resistance, helping communities see that delaying marriage and supporting education are not foreign ideas, but stronger, more sustainable forms of care.

Recommendation 3. Engage with the Protective Logic of Marriage, Not Against It

While the previous recommendations underline the importance of acknowledging parents’ fears for what can threaten the life of their children, this recommendation suggests, specifically, to take into account parents’ views of child marriage as a protective practice. The study shows that for most families, marriage is not seen primarily as a harmful practice but as a necessary safeguard: a way to protect girls from harassment and reputational harm, to ensure their financial and social security, and to guide boys away from drugs, idleness, or immoral behaviour. It also serves as a marker of adulthood, confirming that children have fulfilled the social roles expected of them—girls as respectable homemakers, boys as responsible providers.

Child protection interventions in Pakistan should work within this cultural logic to gradually transform it. Communication campaigns and community dialogues should begin by recognizing the intentions behind child marriage—care, protection, and family honour—before offering credible alternatives to achieve these same aims without harm. Instead of framing child marriage solely as a violation of rights or law, programs should reframe “protection” and “readiness” in terms of education, health, and maturity. For instance, delaying marriage can be presented as a way to secure a girl’s honour and her family’s respect, since educated, skilled, and healthy daughters strengthen family status and long-term wellbeing. To this purpose, it is important to elevate and spotlight positive ‘deviant’ examples of families (and especially fathers) ensuring delayed marriage for their children.

Similarly, interventions should help families see that boys’ responsibility and girls’ safety can be achieved through education, vocational training, and safe social environments rather than child marriage. Religious and community leaders can play a central role in communicating that true adulthood, as valued in faith and culture, is achieved through moral strength, responsibility, and self-control—not through child marriage. Ultimately, child protection actors’ engagement should aim to expand—not confront—the meanings attached to marriage and adulthood. By considering parents’ moral and protective motivations while offering viable social, educational, and economic alternatives, UNICEF can help communities preserve the values they cherish—honour, safety, respect—while transforming the practices that harm children.

Recommendation 4. Delay by Design: turn protection into preparation through education, livelihoods, and community consent

Child-marriage prevention strategies should be offered by government and institutions in a practical package that communities themselves already recognise as the alternative: keep girls and boys in school, make it possible for them to earn later, and help families feel proud—not exposed—when marriage is delayed. Programmatically, this means fostering a government-led “Delay by Design” offer that schools, village committees, and religious leaders can co-own: guaranteed progression from lower-secondary to upper-secondary for girls and boys; safe transport and school-adjacent hostels where distance is a barrier; female teachers and girl-friendly WASH; and a school-to-skills bridge (short vocational tracks, apprenticeships, and recognised certificates) that reassures parents—especially fathers—that delay leads to dignity, income, and better matches, not to reputational risk. Pair these with small, predictable transfers or fee waivers tied to completion milestones (Grade 9, Grade 10, Grade 12), and with starter-kits for girls’ home-compatible income (e.g., tailoring, digital micro-tasks, parlour work where acceptable), so families see the economic value of waiting.

Because the study shows that “freedom of decision” is rising as a community value, child protection actors should institutionalise youth voice without isolating parents: train schools and madrasa partners to run guided family dialogues where adolescents articulate study and work goals, and where parents publicly affirm a “readiness” standard for marriage—health, education completion, basic skills, and mutual consent—rather than age alone. Equip imams, nikah registrars, and elders with sermon notes and nikah-readiness checklists that translate religious and customary concerns into protective steps short of child marriage; couple this with practical enforcement supports (CNIC/age verification at nikah, registrar hotlines, village mediation) so law is experienced as community protection, not outside punishment.

Finally, invest in the enabling environment that communities themselves said makes delay possible: safer routes to school, lighting, and predictable transport; youth clubs that replace idle time (a driver of child marriage for boys) with tutoring, sports, and skill labs; and public recognition of “role-model families” who delayed and benefitted. Throughout, tailor messages to parental hopes and fears identified in the research: honour is better protected by a graduate daughter than a rushed marriage; a son proves manhood by finishing school, holding a job, and choosing wisely—then marrying. By converting the protective logic behind child marriage into a preparation logic communities can trust, UNICEF and other child protection actors can make “waiting” the most respected, least risky choice in practice.

Recommendation 5: Leverage the influence of grandmothers/grandfathers and elders and decision makers in the family to help families recognise and coalesce their own power for positive change

The social network analysis reveals that while formal decision-making power around marriage rests with fathers and male elders, grandmothers and older women often hold latent moral authority—their words can legitimise or even initiate marriage arrangements that others then formalise. This influence, though seldom recognised, makes them powerful potential allies for transforming harmful

norms. Programmes should therefore intentionally engage grandmothers and senior women as catalysts for reflection and collective change. By acknowledging their respected role as custodians of family harmony, interventions can help them champion messages around later marriage, girls' wellbeing, and the shared benefits of dialogue within families. At the same time, the mapping shows that many family members—including mothers, uncles, and even siblings—feel they have little agency, seeing marriage decisions as immutable or belonging to “others.” Interventions can build on this insight by helping families see that they already possess power collectively, even if they experience it as fragmented. Participatory tools—such as family mapping, collective storytelling, or intergenerational discussion circles—can make visible the web of influence within households and enable members to recognise where they already agree. Encouraging families to coalesce around their shared wish to protect and care for their children, rather than deferring to rigid hierarchies, can transform authority into collaboration. Harnessing the quiet power of grandmothers and the latent influence within families may prove one of the most culturally resonant paths to reduce child marriage from within.

Recommendation 6. Turn the Digital Threat into a Digital Trust Space

Child marriage prevention strategies should build on community concerns about technology by contributing towards transforming the digital sphere from a source of moral panic into a shared space of trust, safety, and opportunity. The use of digital technology, within the safe boundaries that adult supervision can offer, can provide children with the skills that (especially girls) need to achieve financial empowerment. The research shows that phones and social media now shape how young people form relationships, make life decisions, and imagine their futures—but they also trigger fear, gossip, and honour-based control. Parents often respond to daughters' phone use with restriction or child marriage, while boys' online behaviour is tolerated as harmless exploration. At the same time, many children—especially girls—use digital platforms to learn, communicate, and aspire to a different life. UNICEF should promote digital literacy and trust-building interventions jointly with children and parents, ensuring that both sides understand not only the risks but also the possibilities of the online world. These programmes should help parents establish open, non-punitive conversations about internet use, learning how to guide rather than police their children's digital lives. Training should include practical skills—privacy settings, safe messaging, recognizing manipulation or blackmail—and relational skills, such as listening, respect, and boundary-setting. This dual focus can transform digital education into an opportunity for mutual trust rather than suspicion or punishment.

In parallel, UNICEF should partner with local youth groups, schools, and community organisations to create safe online spaces where adolescents—especially girls—can access age-appropriate information, educational content, and moderated peer forums. These platforms can serve as protective buffers, reducing exposure to harassment and honour-related risks while promoting positive social norms around gender, respect, and consent. Digital campaigns, short videos, and role-model stories of girls and boys using technology for learning and self-expression can further normalise safe use and delay marriage. By reframing digital literacy as a shared family value rather than a threat to honour, and by equipping communities with the tools to navigate the digital world safely, UNICEF can help transform phones from instruments of anxiety into instruments of connection, confidence, and protection—turning the digital realm into a new ally in preventing child marriage.

Recommendation 7. Support Community-Led Reflection to Transform Marriage Norms from Within

Child protection actors in Pakistan should reinforce and prioritise community-led initiatives that enable reflection and dialogue from within the social fabric itself, over external awareness campaigns. The findings reveal that girls' silence and compliance are sustained by powerful collective expectations—what people believe “good daughters” should do and what “respectable families” are praised for. These norms cannot be shifted through information alone; they must be reinterpreted and reconstructed through shared conversation, trust, and the gradual renegotiation of collective values.

Interventions should therefore invest in long-term, participatory processes that help communities analyse their own norms, understand their origins, and decide how to evolve them. Through inclusive community sessions—bringing together elders, parents, youth, religious figures, and local leaders—participants can openly discuss stories like Maheen's (presented in the vignettes used for this study) and reflect on what drives obedience, honour, and fear. When space is created for genuine dialogue, people begin to articulate their own aspirations for dignity, education, and fairness, and recognise that these values can coexist with tradition. Over time, such locally guided reflection allows communities to redefine what “good parenting” and “honourable behaviour” mean in practice.

UNICEF and child protection actors should also ensure that these processes are facilitated, not directed—building on community strengths, language, and values. In each setting, facilitators should guide groups to examine how norms serve the community's wellbeing and whether they still do so today. This approach helps people realise that change does not mean abandoning culture but renewing it in line with their shared aspirations. Supporting communities to make collective public declarations—through local councils, mosques, and village gatherings—can further reinforce new expectations: that daughters should be consulted in marriage decisions, that education brings respect, and that honour lies in fairness, not control. By investing in similar community-led norm reflection, child protection actors and stakeholders can help societies transform the logic of child marriage from the inside out—turning the same social values that once upheld child marriage into drivers of collective change, rooted in dignity, compassion, and mutual respect. In communities where the engagement of women and girls is minimum, these intervention strategies should integrate transformative dialogues that, over time, help participants identify existing problems in the current distribution of decision-making power and help them reframe them together, through collaborative and conciliatory processes.

Recommendation 8. Foster Shared Decision-Making in Marriage Choices Through Cooperative Power

Child marriage interventions should work within existing family hierarchies, recognising that both boys' and girls' marriages are shaped by the same value framework of respect, duty, and family reputation—yet unfold under very different conditions of agency. While boys are typically encouraged to voice opinions and demonstrate readiness for marriage, girls are expected to comply and preserve honour. Interventions should therefore not aim to invert these power dynamics abruptly, but rather to expand the space of decision-making so that fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters can participate collaboratively without loss of dignity or authority.

Programmes should begin by reframing authority as guidance rather than control, emphasising that when fathers, as heads of households, make decisions that take into account their children's wishes

and futures, they reinforce—not weaken—their leadership. Dialogue-based sessions and community workshops can help fathers recognise that listening to a daughter’s or son’s perspective reflects wisdom and care, not defiance. In this framing, a good father does not lose power when he consults; he gains respect by demonstrating fairness, compassion, and foresight—values already central to local ideals of masculinity. Mothers can be supported to play their culturally recognised role as mediators and harmonisers in these conversations. Interventions should equip them with skills to communicate their children’s preferences in ways that protect family unity and respect existing hierarchies, turning mediation into an act of family stewardship. Supporting mothers as trusted negotiators helps to balance power within the household without creating conflict or opposition between spouses.

For boys, interventions can use their relatively greater freedom to cultivate responsible agency—helping them understand that adulthood and leadership entail listening, respect, and shared responsibility. When boys learn to include their families in their decisions and to recognise the equal right of girls to have a say, they model a positive, generative form of masculinity that strengthens the whole household. At the community level, collective reflection and peer learning can enable families to identify ways of maintaining harmony while gradually widening the circle of consultation in marriage decisions. These forums should highlight examples of families who have balanced respect for elders with children’s voices, showing that such cooperation leads to stronger family relationships, fewer conflicts, and more stable unions. By promoting a non-zero-sum understanding of power, child protection actors in Pakistan can help communities reimagine marriage decision-making as a cooperative process where authority, care, and voice coexist. In this model, everyone gains, fathers retain respect, mothers exercise influence with dignity, boys mature into responsible men, and girls grow into valued contributors to family wellbeing. This is not about redistributing power but about transforming it into shared responsibility—a foundation for more harmonious families and equitable futures.

Recommendation 9. Grow Children’s Voice Through Family-Led Consultation

Child marriage interventions in Pakistan should foster shared decision-making in marriage choices by working with, rather than against, existing family hierarchies. Across provinces, parents and children alike express a desire for more voice for children, yet this aspiration is constrained by powerful obligations to honour, reputation, perceived maturity, and the practical realities of cost and timing. Programmes should therefore focus on expanding the space for dialogue between parents and children without asking families to abandon deeply held structures of authority. Participation should be framed as good parenting: when fathers and mothers take the time to listen to and weigh their children’s preferences, they are not surrendering control but exercising wise, protective leadership that strengthens family dignity and reduces rushed, premature or nonconsensual matches.

However, the evidence also shows that simply increasing children’s agency does not automatically lead to later or safer marriages. Some children, especially those socialised to see marriage as a marker of adulthood, respectability, or escape, actively wish to marry early. Expanding agency, therefore, must go hand in hand with deepening understanding. Child protection actors should help families make joint decisions that are informed decisions: parents and children should be supported to consider together the health, educational, social, and legal implications of marrying before 18. By grounding choice in information rather than impulse, programmes can turn agency into capacity—enabling families to navigate pressures not through coercion or rebellion, but through shared awareness and reasoned care.

This shift is most credible when enacted through everyday routines. Facilitated “family decision” conversations (for instance, fostered through the government’s social work or school teachers) can create safe spaces where children share their aspirations for school or work, parents explain financial or social constraints, and both sides explore possible options for “who,” “when,” or “where” direct change is too sensitive and the duration of engagement. Engagement length is a particularly promising entry point; it is culturally acceptable, allows time for education or savings, and gives families practical experience in co-decision-making. Mothers can be empowered as trusted mediators, skilled in carrying a child’s view to fathers while preserving harmony, while fathers can be invited to see consultation as a mark of wisdom and authority rather than loss of control.

With boys, programmes can leverage their comparatively greater freedom to promote a model of responsible agency, one that includes listening to parents and respecting sisters’ and peers’ voices. With girls, interventions should create safe, socially legitimate channels—often through mothers or aunts, through which preferences can be expressed as prudence and foresight, not defiance. Change at the household level must also be reinforced by community-level dialogue. Small groups of fathers, mothers, and youth can reflect together on positive examples of families who consulted and found peace, stability, and better outcomes. As such stories circulate, families that engage in shared decision-making will face less gossip risk and greater social validation.

Practical supports can strengthen this shift: tools for aligning schooling and marriage timelines, guidance on the health and legal consequences of early marriage, and short messages for religious or community figures emphasising that consent and consultation are compatible with moral and religious values. Quiet mediation and counselling services should also be accessible for families facing conflict. Ultimately, child marriage interventions should integrate strategies to positive parenting skills. These skills could include non-violent communication with children and implementing participatory decision making transforming the way parental power is practised.

Recommendation 10. Build a Coordinated, Cross-Sectorial Strategy to Address the Interconnected and Intersectional Ecological Drivers of Child Marriage

Adopt an integrated, cross-sector strategy that aligns education, health, child protection, social policy, and emergency response efforts to tackle the multiple, interdependent forces sustaining child marriage. The findings show that child marriage is not the result of a single influence—such as poverty or tradition—but of overlapping social, economic, and institutional conditions that reinforce one another. To respond effectively, programming must break the silos between sectors and ensure that families experience a coherent set of supports that make delaying marriage both possible and desirable.

This approach calls for coordination across units so that interventions at each level of the child’s environment reinforce the others. Education initiatives should ensure girls’ access to safe, affordable schooling, while health teams provide information on the physical and emotional risks of child marriage. Social protection and livelihood programmes can relieve the economic pressures that make child marriage appear necessary, and child protection systems can strengthen registration and enforcement to prevent under-age unions. Collaboration with other sectors and emergency teams is also crucial to reduce the vulnerabilities that increase marriage risks during displacement, floods, or economic crisis.

At the community level, integrated programmes should create spaces for families, teachers, health workers, and religious or traditional leaders to discuss the broader implications of marriage timing—on wellbeing, schooling and safety—so that decisions are informed by a full picture of the child's life. This shared information helps parents and children make choices that are both socially respected and developmentally sound.

By linking efforts across sectors and grounding them in the everyday realities of families, the inter-agency child marriage network in Pakistan can agree on and design a unified strategy that addresses both immediate needs and the structural factors that sustain child marriage. A coordinated ecosystem of support—spanning learning, health, livelihoods, and protection—offers the best chance to shift norms, reduce economic and moral pressures, and enable girls and boys to transition into adulthood safely, with dignity and choice.

Recommendation 11. Integrate Child Protection Strategies in Climate Emergency Responses through Dual-Track Action

The findings show that climate-related disasters such as the 2022–2023 floods reconfigure the social and economic pressures that sustain child marriage. In some communities, floods delayed weddings because families lacked the means to celebrate them; in others, they accelerated marriages as a coping mechanism to reduce financial burdens or safeguard girls' dignity in crowded shelters. Addressing these complex dynamics requires a dual-track strategy: immediate, life-saving protection during crises, and sustained, recovery-based investments that reduce vulnerability over time.

In the short term, emergency preparedness and response frameworks should include basic protective triggers for children's wellbeing. To this purpose, every sector involved in emergency response could integrate (at least partially) child marriage prevention strategies, such as: maintaining temporary schooling in displacement camps; providing private, safe sanitation spaces for women and girls; and incorporating child-protection briefings into cash and food distribution systems so that families under stress understand the health, legal, and emotional risks of child marriage. A short-term opportunity is to build capacity within emergency and climate-resilience programmes to detect and respond to marriage risks. Training frontline staff will ensure that displacement camps and temporary shelters are socially protective environments where children's dignity and security are upheld.

In the medium to long term, recovery could be used as an entry point for resilience building. Rather than treating floods as isolated events, programming should support communities to rebuild livelihoods, housing, and education in ways that lessen future reliance on marriage as a survival strategy. Linking livelihood assistance for parents with re-enrolment programmes for children, supporting adolescent-friendly learning and health services, and fostering community dialogue on dignity, security, and future planning can all help families envision stability without resorting to child marriage.

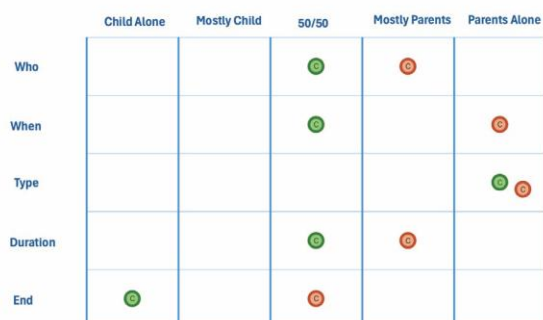
There is also a need to pilot child marriage prevention initiatives that test what works in high-risk areas. These could include psychosocial support for families in temporary housing and partnerships with local NGOs to track emerging risks of child marriage after displacement. Over time, these lessons can inform national disaster-risk reduction frameworks and preparedness plans, embedding child-protection principles across government and community response systems.

ANNEXTURES

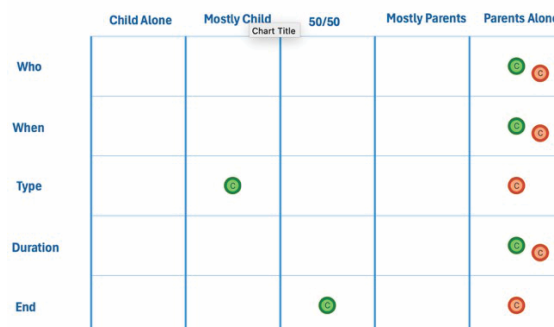
Annex 1. Bi-dimensional Power Maps

A1.1 Balochistan Power Maps

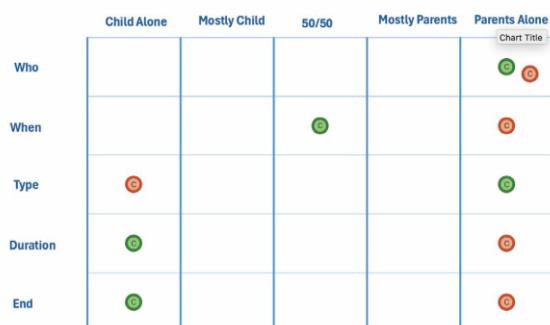
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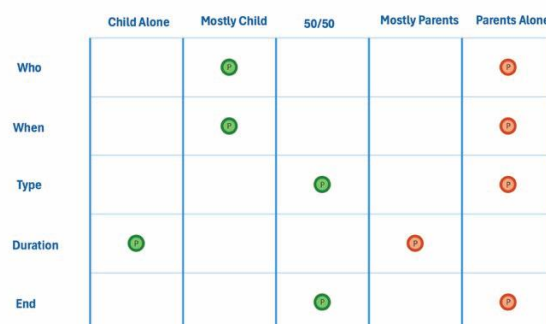
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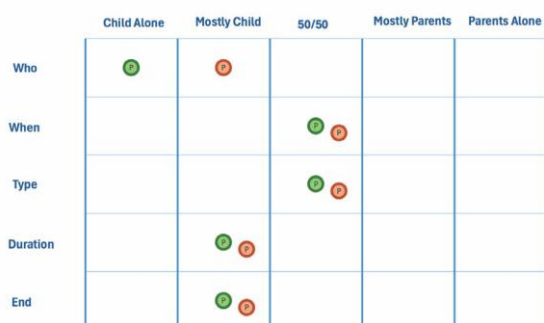
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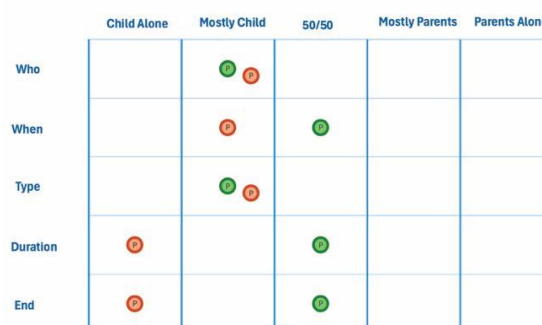
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Province: Baluchistan | Child gender: Boy | Participants: Older Women



Province: Baluchistan | Child gender: Boy | Participants: Younger Women



Province: Baluchistan | Child gender: Girl | Participants: Younger Women

	Child Alone	Mostly Child	50/50	Mostly Parents	Parents Alone
Who					
When					
Type					
Duration					
End					

Province: Baluchistan | Child gender: Girl | Participants: Older Men

	Child Alone	Mostly Child	50/50	Mostly Parents	Parents Alone
Who	 				
When					
Type					
Duration					
End					 

Province: Baluchistan | Child gender: Boy | Participants: Older Men

	Child Alone	Mostly Child	50/50	Mostly Parents	Parents Alone
Who					
When					  
Type					
Duration	 				
End					

Province: Baluchistan | Child gender: Girl | Participants: Younger Men

	Child Alone	Mostly Child	50/50	Mostly Parents	Parents Alone
Who					
When					 
Type					
Duration					 
End					

Province: Baluchistan | Child gender: Boy | Participants: Younger Men

	Child Alone	Mostly Child	50/50	Mostly Parents	Parents Alone
Who					
When					
Type					
Duration					
End					 

Province: Baluchistan | Child gender: Both | Participants: Police Officer

	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholders	Stakeholders Alone
Who					 
When					 
Type					 
Duration					
End			 		

Province: Baluchistan | Child gender: Both | Participants: NGO staff

	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholders	Stakeholders Alone
Who					 
When					 
Type					 
Duration					 
End					 

Province: Baluchistan | Child gender: Both | Participants: CPO

	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholders	Stakeholders Alone
Who					
When					
Type					 
Duration					
End					

Province: Baluchistan | Child gender: Both | Participant: Gynecologist

	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholders	Stakeholders Alone
Who		Series "Collabell" Point 2 (2, 0.5)			10 20
When					10 20
Type					10 20
Duration					10 20
End					10 20

Province: Baluchistan | Child gender: Both | Participants: Health Worker

	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholders	Stakeholders Alone
Who				10	20
When				10	20
Type					10 20
Duration			10		20
End				10	20

Province: Baluchistan | Child gender: Both | Participants: Religious Leader 1

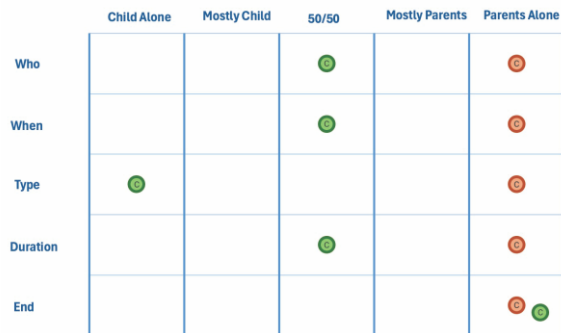
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Who		10			20
When				10	20
Type			10		20
Duration				10	20
End		10		20	

Province: Baluchistan | Child gender: Both | Participant: Religious Leader 2

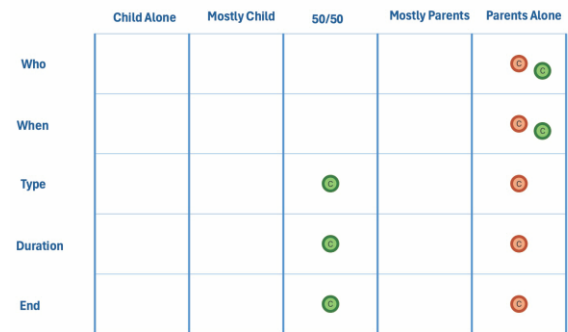
	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholders	Stakeholders Alone
Who		10		20	
When				10	20
Type			20	10	
Duration					10 20
End		10			20

A1.2 KP Power Maps

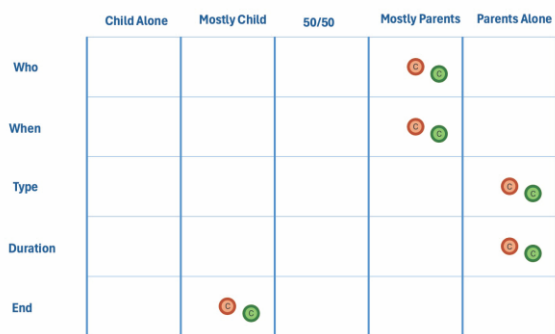
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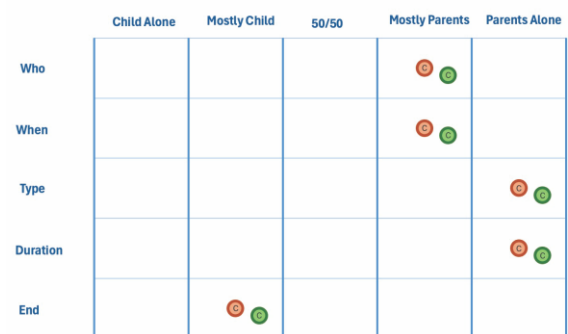
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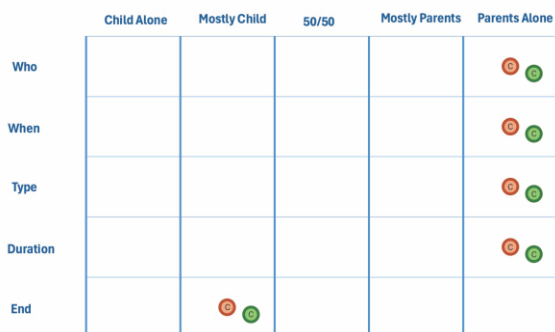
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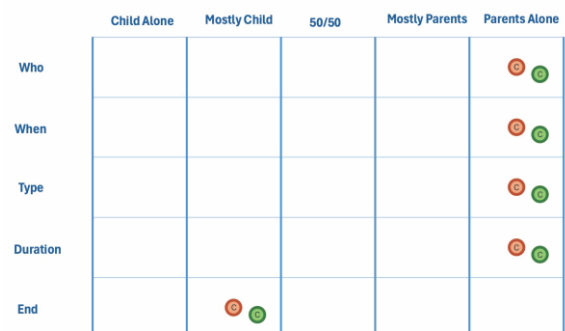
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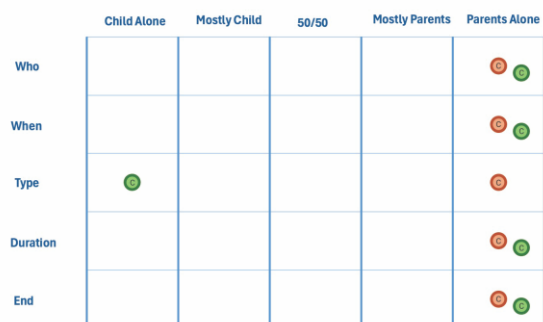
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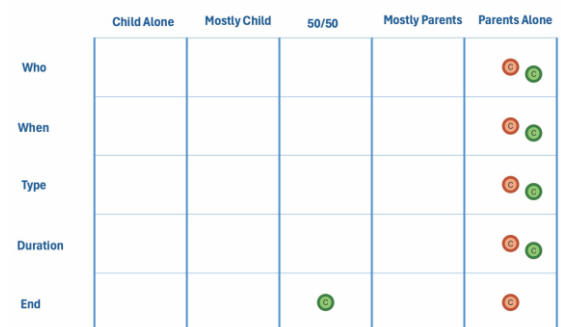
Province: KP | Child gender: Boy | Participants: Boys



Province: KP | Child gender: Boy | Participants: Girls



Province: KP | Child gender: Girl | Participants: Girls



Province: KP | Child gender: Boy | Participants: Older Men

	Child Alone	Mostly Child	50/50	Mostly Parents	Parents Alone
Who					P G
When				P G	
Type		P G			
Duration					P G
End		P G			

Province: KP | Child gender: Girl | Participants: Older Men

	Child Alone	Mostly Child	50/50	Mostly Parents	Parents Alone
Who					P G
When					P G
Type					P G
Duration					P G
End		P G			

Province: KP | Child gender: Boy | Participants: Older Women

	Child Alone	Mostly Child	50/50	Mostly Parents	Parents Alone
Who					P G
When					P G
Type					P G
Duration					P G
End					P G

Province: KP | Child gender: Girl | Participants: Older Women

	Child Alone	Mostly Child	50/50	Mostly Parents	Parents Alone
Who			G		P
When					P G
Type					P G
Duration					P G
End	G				P

Province: KP | Child gender: Boy | Participants: Younger Men

	Child Alone	Mostly Child	50/50	Mostly Parents	Parents Alone
Who				P G	
When				P G	
Type					P G
Duration					P G
End	P G				

Province: KP | Child gender: Girl | Participants: Younger Men

	Child Alone	Mostly Child	50/50	Mostly Parents	Parents Alone
Who					P G
When					P G
Type					P G
Duration					P G
End		P G			

Province: KP | Child gender: Boy | Participants: Younger Women

	Child Alone	Mostly Child	50/50	Mostly Parents	Parents Alone
Who				G	P
When					P G
Type					P G
Duration					P G
End	G				P

Province: KP | Child gender: Girl | Participants: Younger Women

	Child Alone	Mostly Child	50/50	Mostly Parents	Parents Alone
Who					P G
When					P G
Type					P G
Duration					P G
End		P G			

Province: KP | Child gender: n/a | Participants: CPO

	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholder	Stakeholder Alone
Who					 
When					
Type					 
Duration					 
End					 

Province: KP | Child gender: n/a | Participants: Healthcare Worker 1

	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholder	Stakeholder Alone
Who					 
When					 
Type					 
Duration					 
End					 

Province: KP | Child gender: n/a | Participants: Healthcare Worker 2

	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholder	Stakeholder Alone
Who					
When					 
Type					
Duration					 
End					 

Province: KP | Child gender: n/a | Participants: NGO

	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholder	Stakeholder Alone
Who					 
When					 
Type					 
Duration					 
End					 

Province: KP | Child gender: n/a | Participants: Religious Leader 1

	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholder	Stakeholder Alone
Who					
When					
Type					
Duration					 
End					

Province: KP | Child gender: Child | Participants: Religious Leader 2

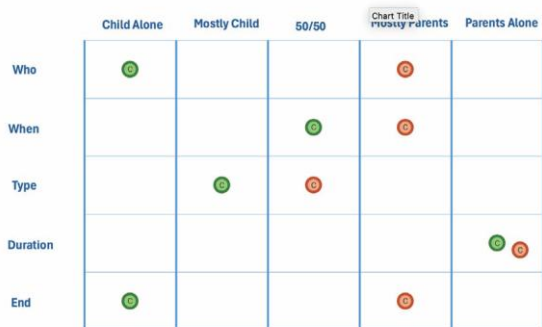
	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholder	Stakeholder Alone
Who					
When					
Type					
Duration					 
End					

Province: KP | Child gender: n/a | Participants: Village counsellor

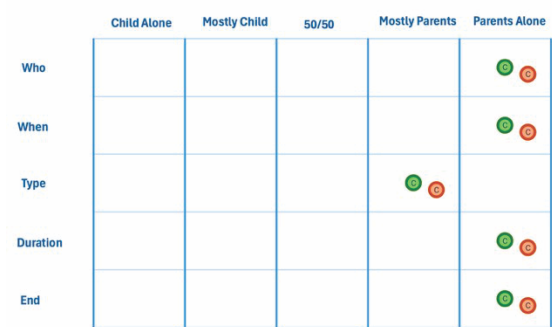
	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholder	Stakeholder Alone
Who					 
When					
Type					 
Duration					 
End					

A1.3 Punjab Power Maps

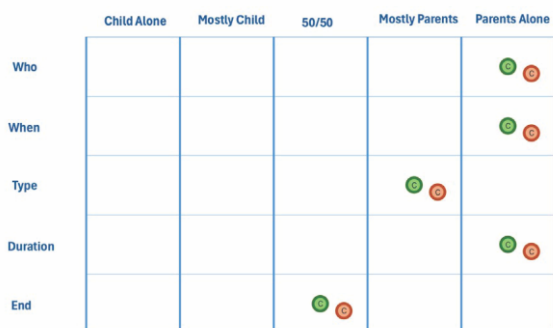
Province: Punjab | Child gender: Girl | Participants: Girls



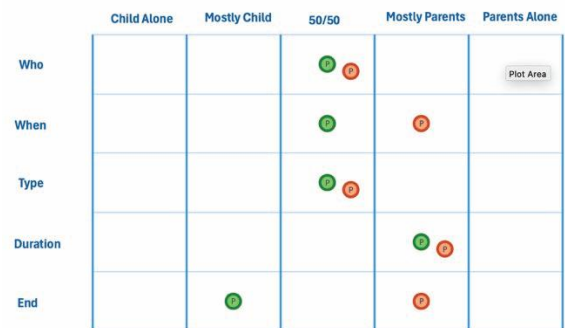
Province: Punjab | Child gender: Boy | Participants: Boys



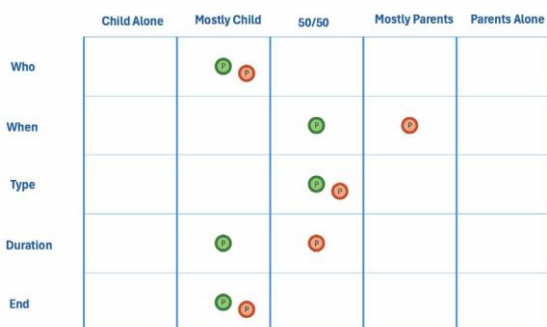
Province: Punjab | Child gender: Boy | Participants: Boys



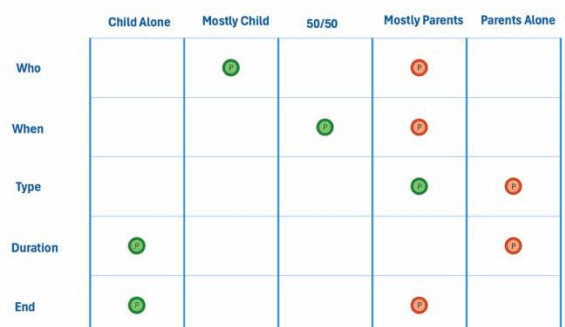
Province: Punjab | Child gender: Girl | Participants: Older Women



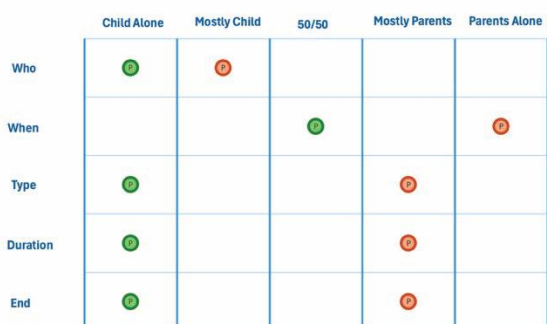
Province: Punjab | Child gender: Boy | Participants: Older Women



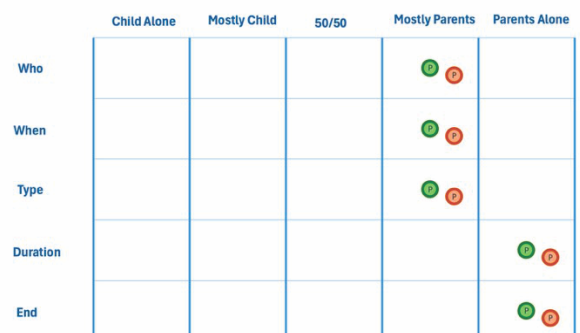
Province: Punjab | Child gender: Girl | Participants: Younger Women



Province: Punjab | Child gender: Boy | Participants: Younger Women



Province: Punjab | Child gender: Girl | Participants: Older Men



Province: Punjab | Child gender: Boy | Participants: Older Men

	Child Alone	Mostly Child	50/50	Mostly Parents	Parents Alone
Who		 			
When					
Type		 			
Duration					
End					 

Province: Punjab | Child gender: Girl | Participants: Younger Men

	CI Chart Title 1	Mostly Child	50/50	Mostly Parents	Parents Alone
Who					 
When					 
Type					 
Duration					 
End					 

Province: Punjab | Child gender: Boy | Participants: Younger Men

	Child Alone	Mostly Child	50/50	Mostly Parents	Parents Alone
Who					
When					
Type					
Duration					 
End					

Province: Punjab | Child gender: Child | Participants: CPO (Kills)

	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholder	Stakeholder Alone
Who					 
When					 
Type					 
Duration					 
End					 

Province: Punjab | Child gender: Child | Participants: CPO (Kills)

	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholder	Stakeholder Alone
Who					 
When					 
Type					 
Duration					 
End					 

Province: Punjab | Child gender: Child | Participants: Religious Leader 1

	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholder	Stakeholder Alone
Who					 
When					 
Type					 
Duration					 
End					 

Province: Punjab | Child gender: Child | Participants: Religious Leader 2

	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholder	Stakeholder Alone
Who					 
When					 
Type					 
Duration					 
End					 

Province: Punjab | Child gender: Child | Participants: Village counsellor 1

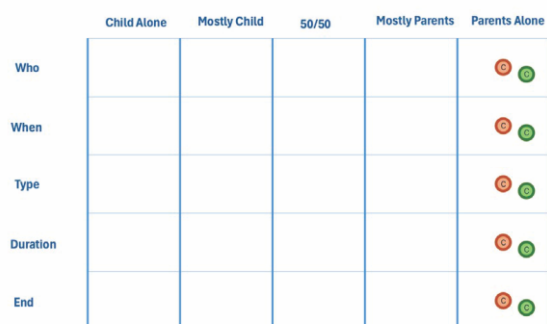
	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholder	Stakeholder Alone
Who					 
When					 
Type					 
Duration					 
End					 

Province: Punjab | Child gender: Child | Participants: Village counsellor 2

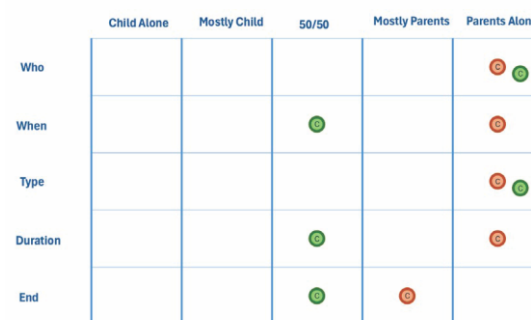
	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholder	Stakeholder Alone
Who					
When					
Type					
Duration					
End					

A1.4 Sindh Power Maps

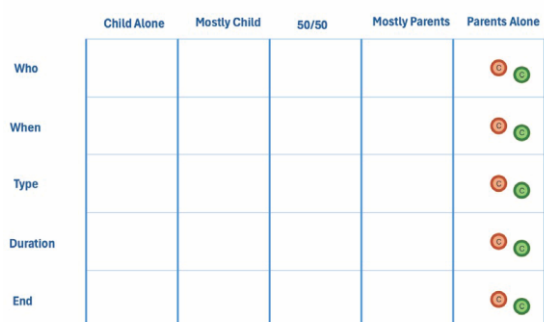
Province: Sindh | Child gender: Boy | Participants: Boys



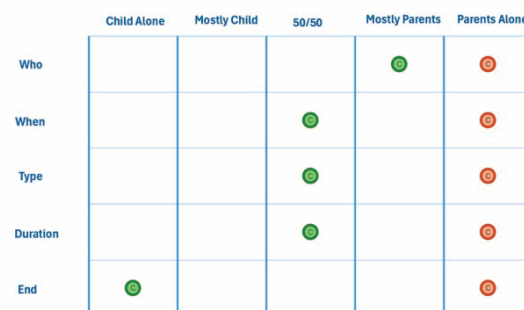
Province: Sindh | Child gender: Boy | Participants: Boys



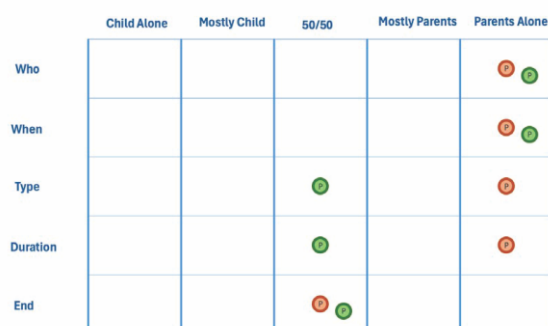
Province: Sindh | Child gender: Girl | Participants: Girls



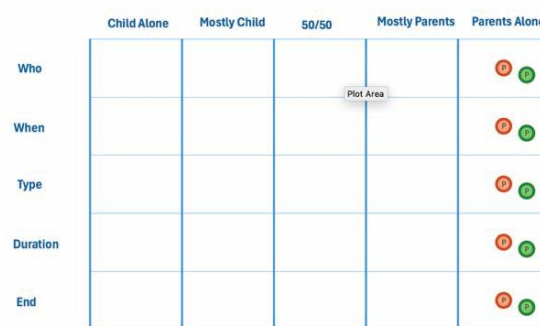
Province: Sindh | Child gender: Girl | Participants: Girls



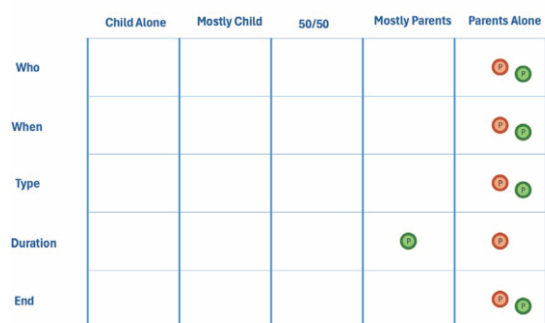
Province: Sindh | Child gender: Boy | Participants: Older Men



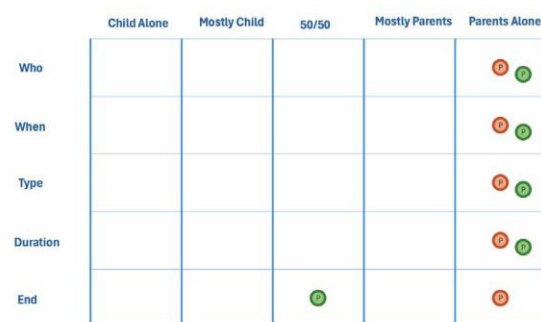
Province: Sindh | Child gender: Girl | Participants: Older Men



Province: Sindh | Child gender: Boy | Participants: Older Women



Province: Sindh | Child gender: Girl | Participants: Older Women



Province: Sindh | Child gender: Boy | Participants: Younger Men

	Child Alone	Mostly Child	50/50	Mostly Parents	Parents Alone
Who					 
When					 
Type					 
Duration					 
End					 

Province: Sindh | Child gender: Boy | Participants: Younger Women

	Child Alone	Mostly Child	50/50	Mostly Parents	Parents Alone
Who					
When					
Type					
Duration					
End					

Province: Sindh | Child gender: Girl | Participants: Younger Women

	Child Alone	Mostly Child	50/50	Mostly Parents	Parents Alone
Who					 
When					
Type					
Duration					 
End					

Province: Sindh | Child gender: Girl | Participants: Younger Men

	Child Alone	Mostly Child	50/50	Mostly Parents	Parents Alone
Who					 
When					 
Type				 	
Duration					 
End				 	

Province: Sindh | Child gender: Child | Participants: CPO

	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholder	Stakeholder Alone
Who					 
When					 
Type					 
Duration					 
End					 

Province: Sindh | Child gender: Child | Participants: Healthcare Worker

	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholder	Stakeholder Alone
Who					 
When					 
Type					 
Duration					 
End					 

Province: Sindh | Child gender: Child | Participants: Healthcare Worker 2

	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholder	Stakeholder Alone
Who					 
When					 
Type					 
Duration					 
End					 

Province: Sindh | Child gender: Child | Participants: NGO

	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholder	Stakeholder Alone
Who					 
When					 
Type					 
Duration					
End					 

Province: Sindh | Child gender: Child | Participants: Police

	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholder	Stakeholder Alone
Who					2 2
When					2 2
Type					2 2
Duration					2 2
End					2 2

Province: Sindh | Child gender: Child | Participants: Religious Leader

	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholder	Stakeholder Alone
Who			2		2
When			2		2
Type			2		2
Duration			2		2
End			2		2

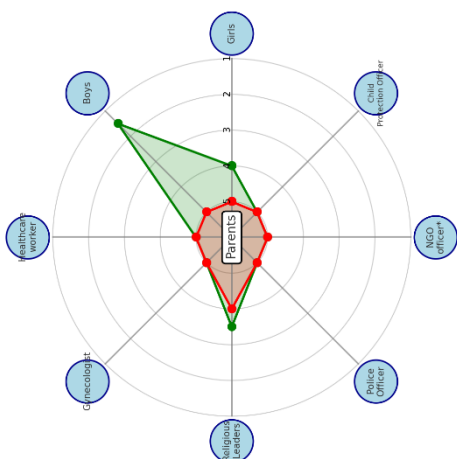
Province: Sindh | Child gender: Child | Participants: Religious Leader

	KII Alone	Mostly KII	50/50	Mostly Stakeholder	Stakeholder Alone
Who					2 2
When					2 2
Type			2		2
Duration					2 2
End					2 2

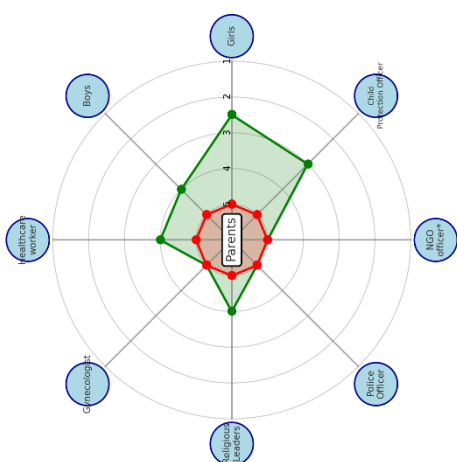
Annex 2. Multidimensional Power Maps

A2.1 Balochistan

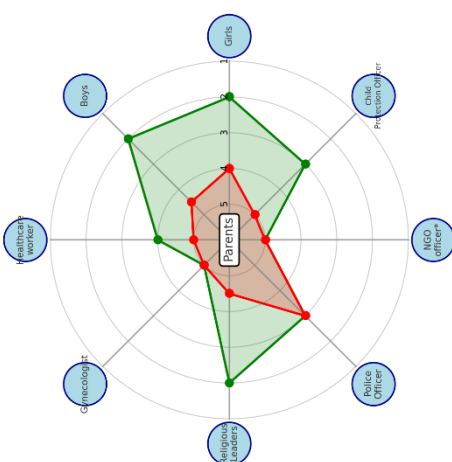
Power Mapping - Girls - Balochistan (3: Type of marriage)



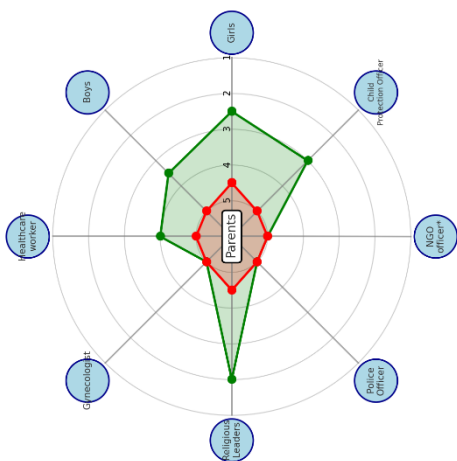
Power Mapping - Girls - Balochistan (2: When)



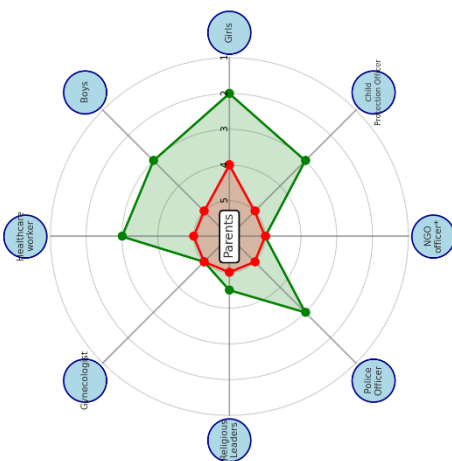
Power Mapping - Girls - Balochistan (5: End of marriage/divorce)



Power Mapping - Girls - Balochistan (1: Who)

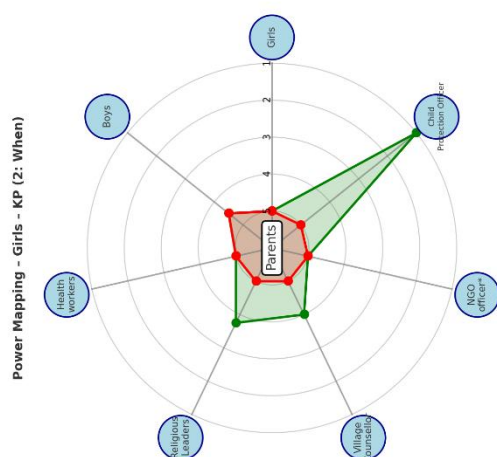
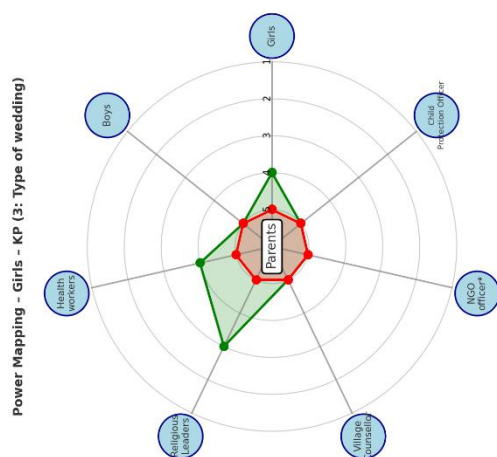


Power Mapping - Girls - Balochistan (4: Engagement duration)

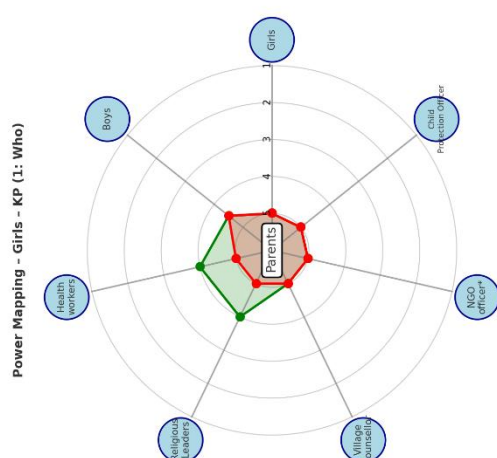
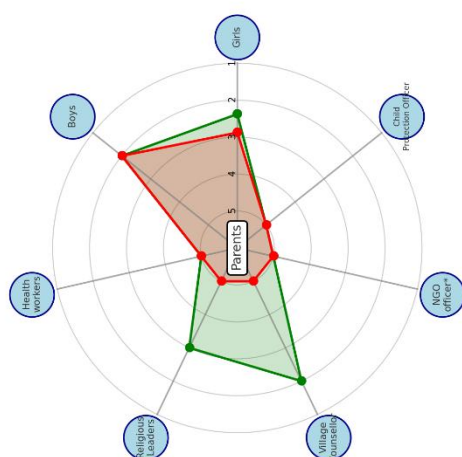


*NGO Remit: Women empowerment

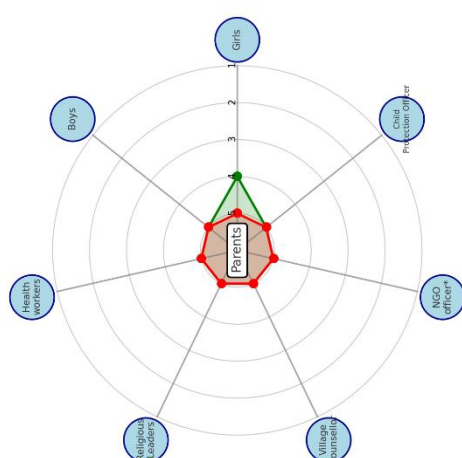
A2.2 KP



Power Mapping – Girls – KP (5: End of marriage/divorce)



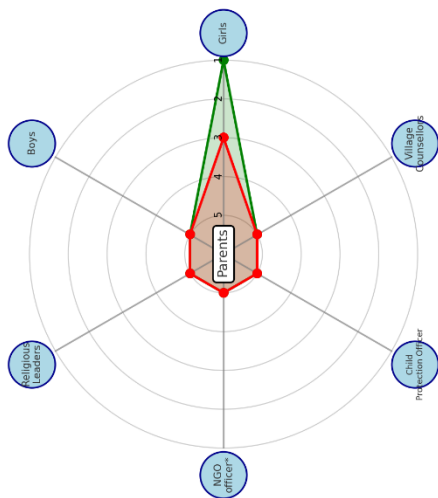
Power Mapping – Girls – KP (4: Engagement duration)



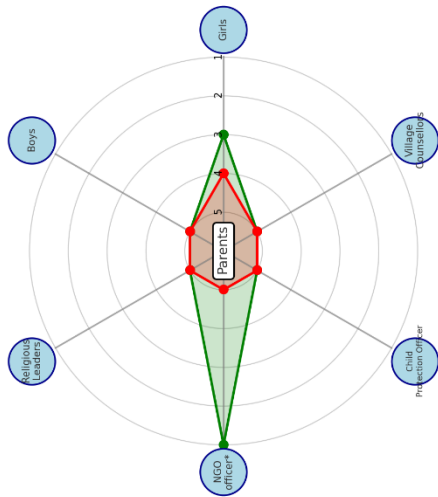
*NGO Remit: Women empowerment

A2.3 Punjab

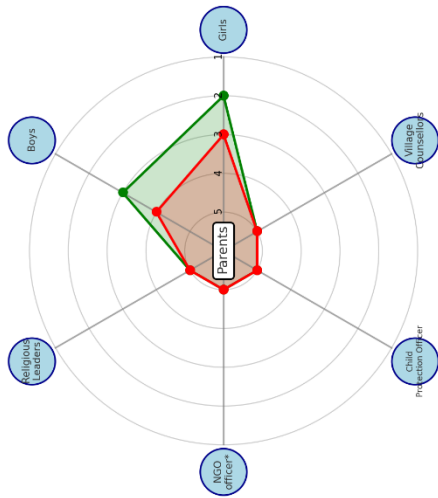
Power Mapping - Girls - KP (1: Who)



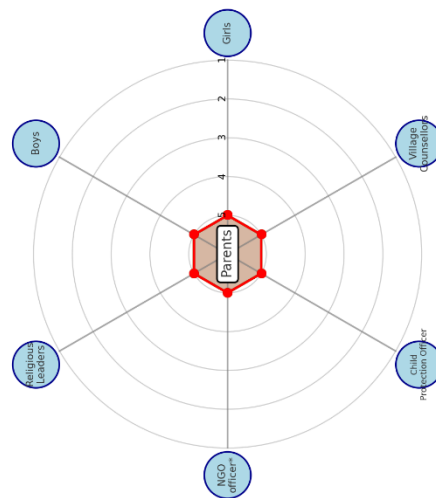
Power Mapping - Girls - KP (2: When)



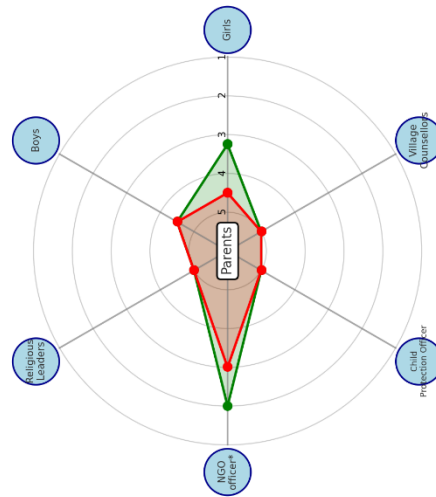
Power Mapping - Girls - KP (3: Type of wedding)



Power Mapping - Girls - KP (4: Engagement duration)

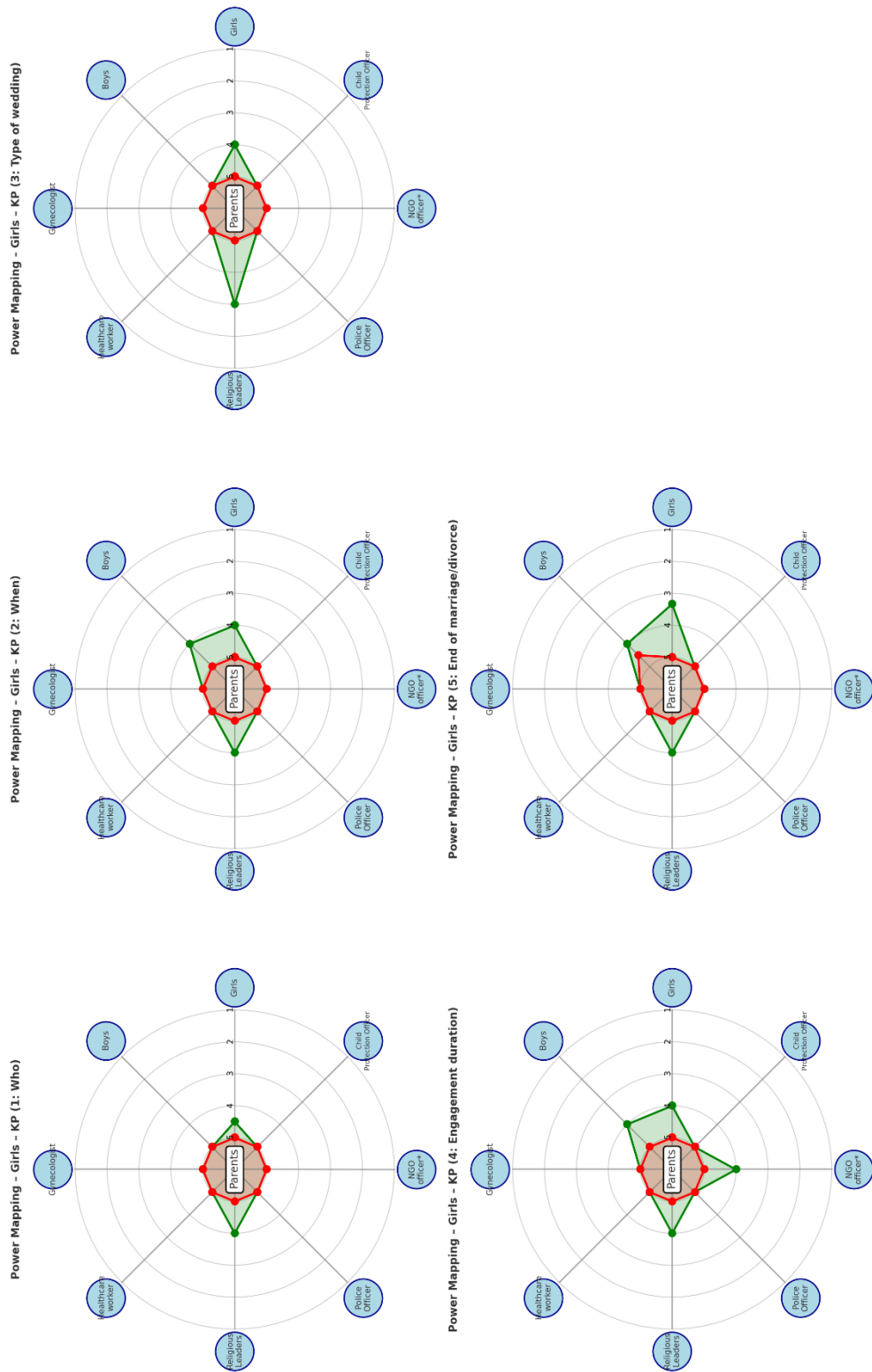


Power Mapping - Girls - KP (5: End of marriage/divorce)



*NGO Remit: Gender-based violence

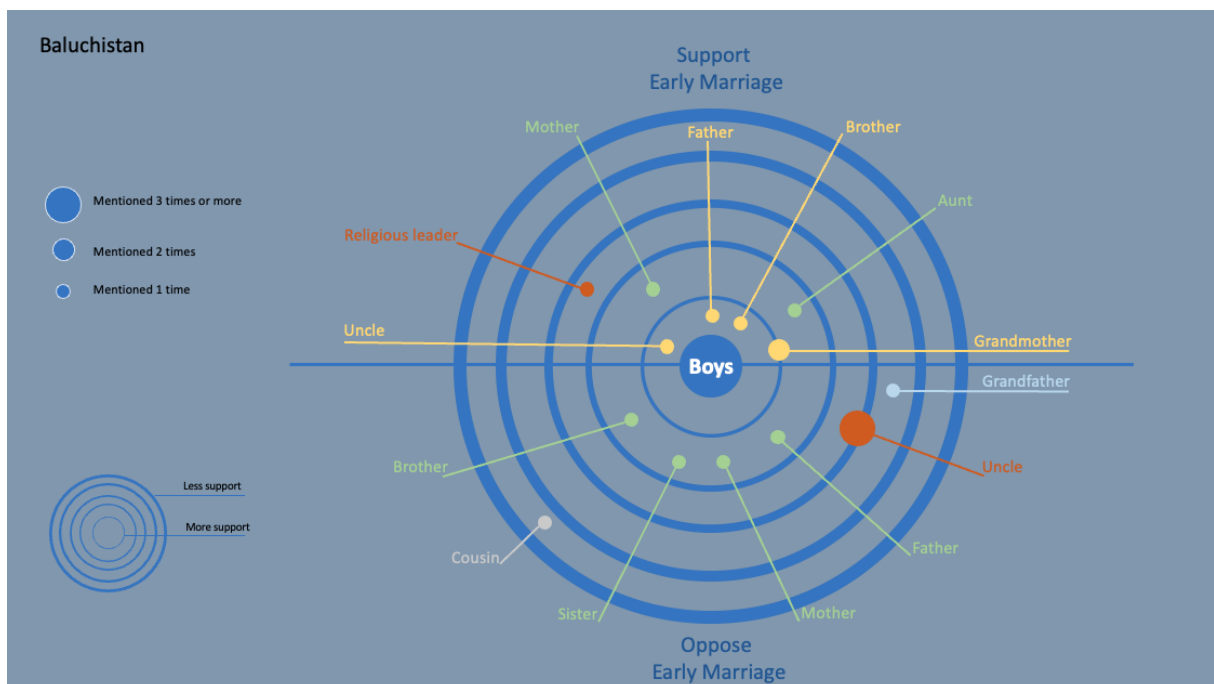
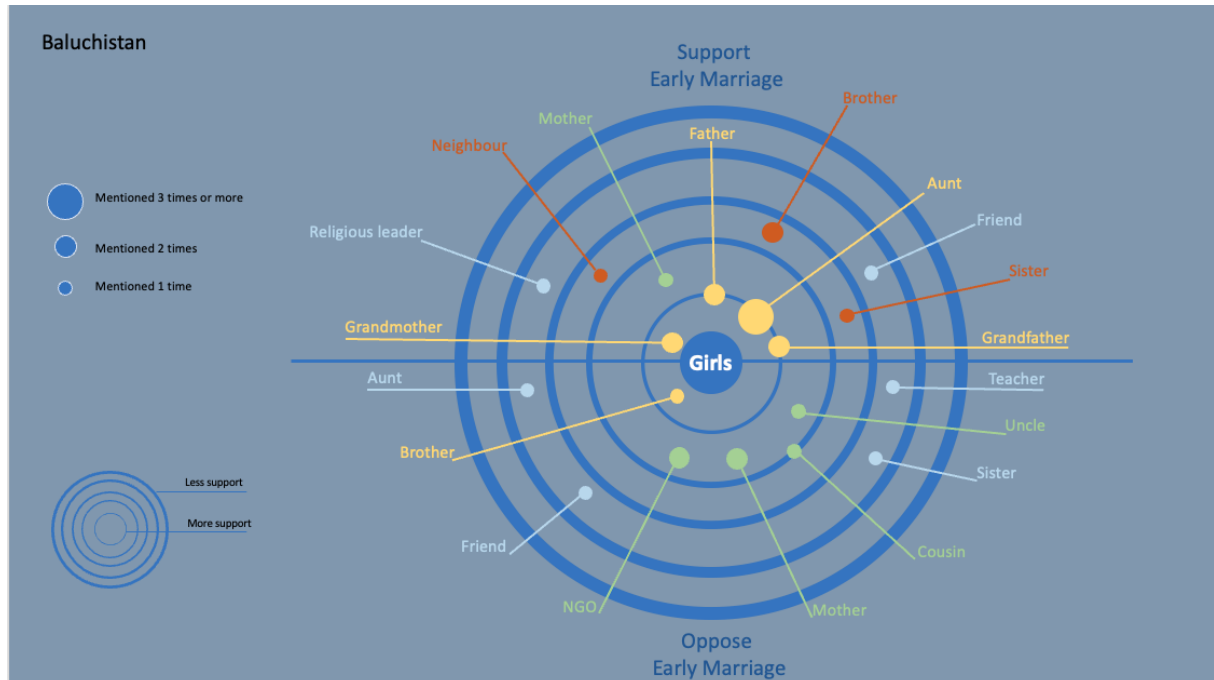
A2.4 Sindh



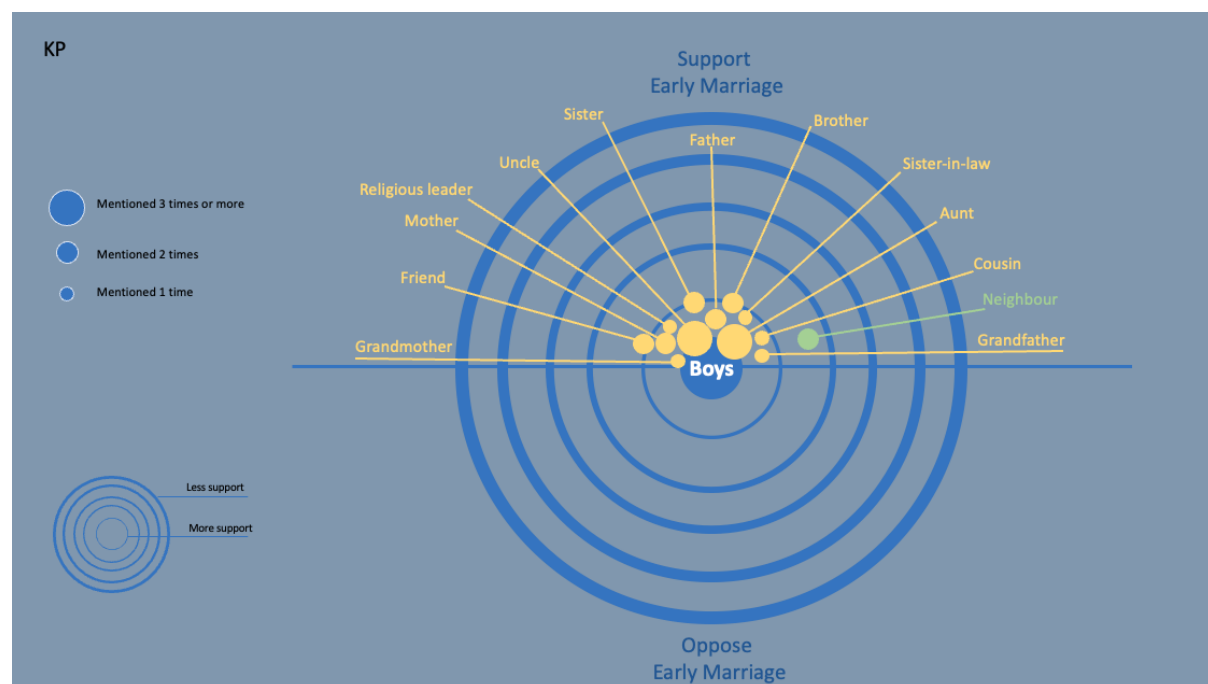
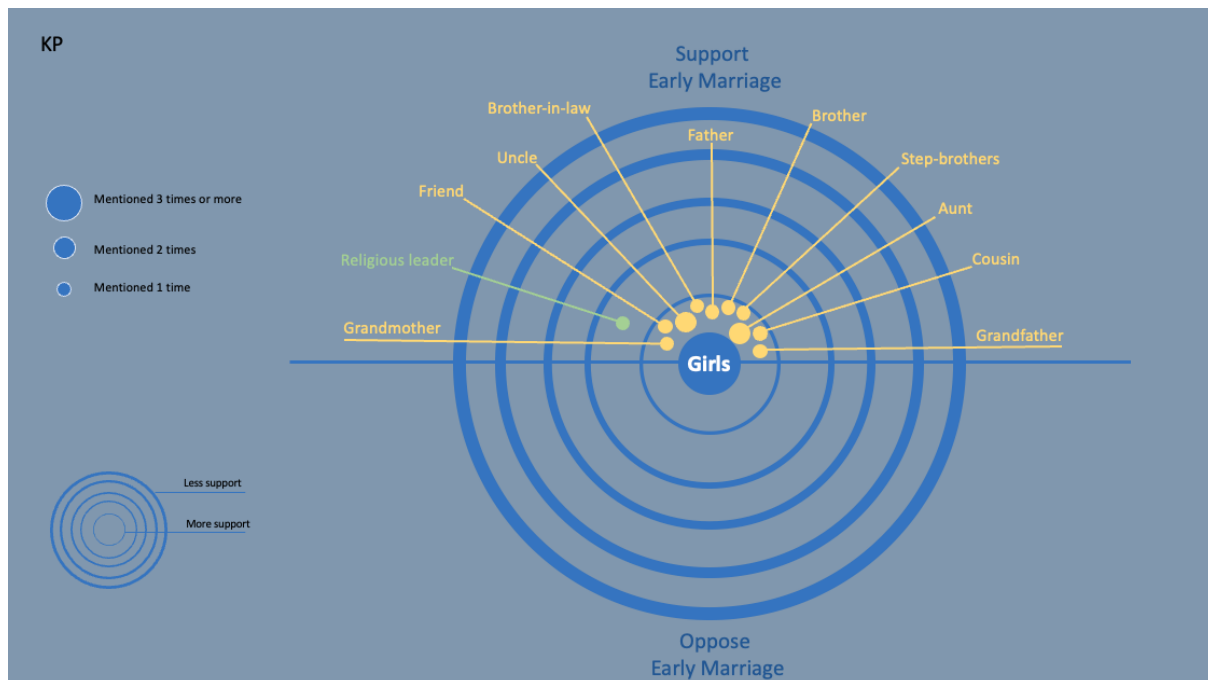
*NGO Remit: Child protection

Annex 3. Circle of Supports Visuals

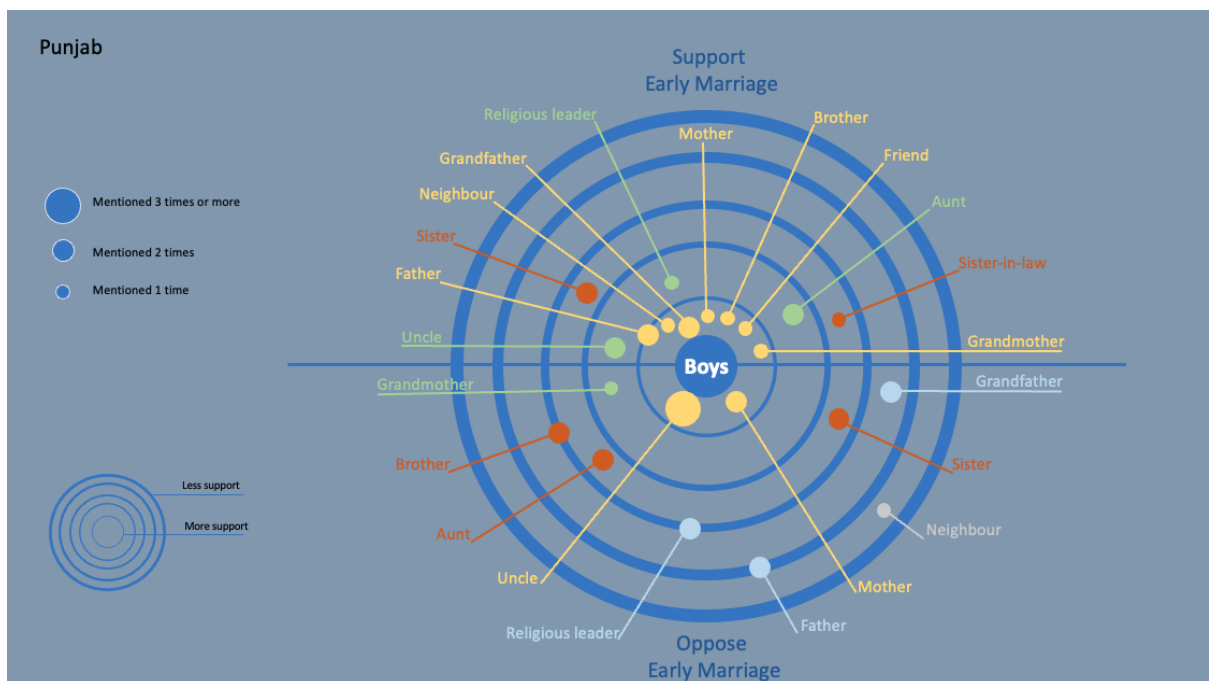
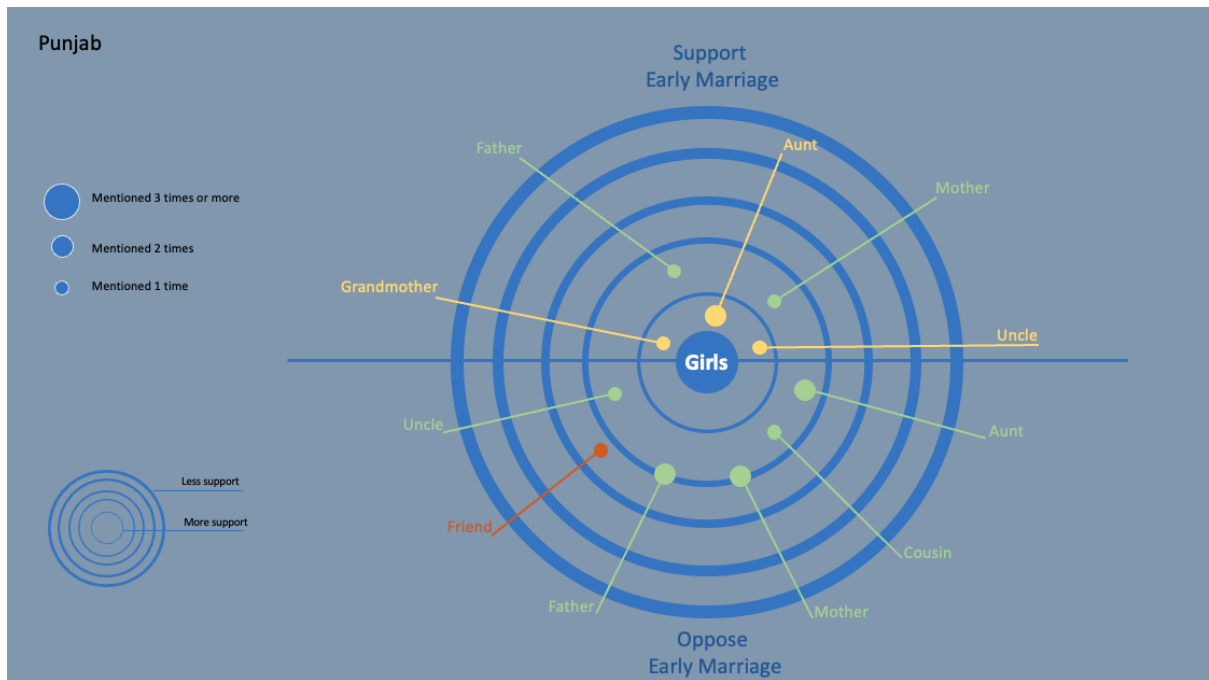
A3.1 Balochistan



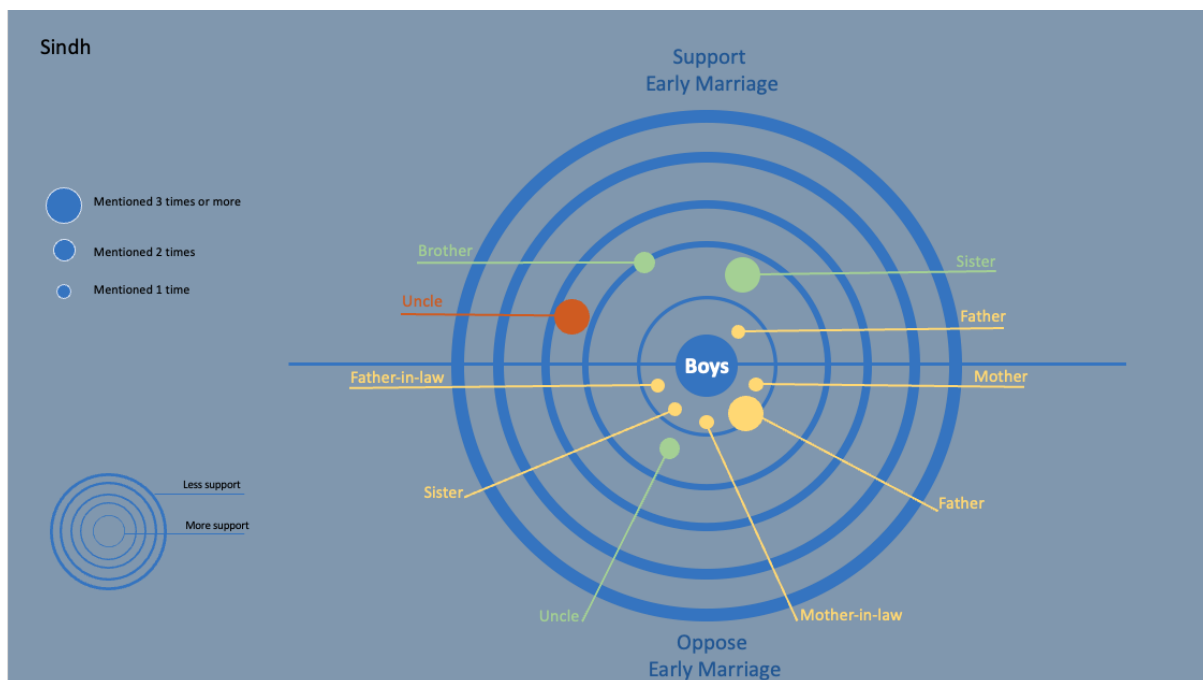
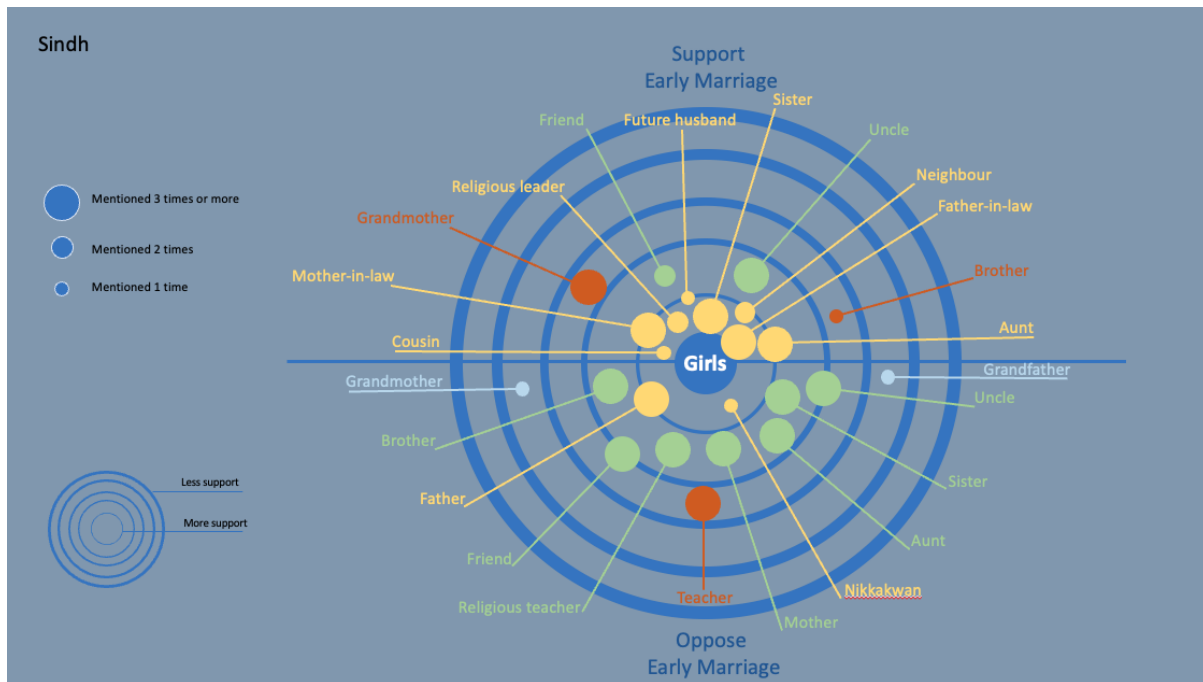
A3.2 KP



A3.3 Punjab



A3.4 Sindh



Annex 4. Methodology

A4.1 Overview

The research leveraged the extensive experience of the team in delivering high-quality research and analysis, covering all stages from conceptualisation of research questions, development of methodologies, design of data collection tools, data analysis, report writing, and dissemination. A collaborative approach was adopted, with multiple consultations with UNICEF concerned Staff.

Key stages included preliminary research, primary qualitative data collection, and development of the behavior and social change roadmap. Positive relationships were established with government duty-bearers wherever it was possible and stakeholders responsible for child welfare and protection, including members of the Advisory Committee and individuals involved in primary qualitative data collection.

A4.2 Methodology and Process

The research was conducted in four key phases:

Phases	Time line	Description
Inception	Q3-2024	Finalisation of study design, establishment of Advisory Committee, and alignment with UNICEF priorities.
Preliminary	Q3-Q42024	Literature review and DHS analysis to inform qualitative research and roadmap.
Qualitative Research	Q1-Q2-2025	Development of data collection tools guide, ethical approval, field data collection using interviews, focus groups, key informants, and participatory workshops.
Behavior & social change road map	Q4-2025	Final report based on field research, development and presentation of final roadmap based on integrated findings & communication & advocacy strategy.

A4.3 Phase 1: Inception Phase

During the inception phase, Child Frontiers and UNICEF team conducted a series of meetings to finalize the research process and content decisions. Key activities included:

- Establishing ad-hoc consultation mechanisms for timely decision-making.
- Selecting Advisory Committee members.
- Conducting regular presentations of plans and findings to UNICEF and the Advisory Committee.

Advisory Committee Engagement (ACE)

The Advisory Committee provided guidance on qualitative data collection, field research area, interpretation of findings, and alignment with UNICEF and government priorities. Detailed TORs for the ACE were as described below:

- Participate in ad-hoc consultations and contribute to general discussions about the project as appropriate;
- Provide high-level guidance at strategic time points during the project;
- Review relevant documents and provide timely input as necessary;
- Review findings from the preliminary research (DHS analysis and literature review) and provide input for designing the subsequent qualitative research;
- Review findings from the qualitative research and contribute to their interpretation; and
- Provide input to the first draft of the social and behavior change roadmap.

Consultations occurred on the following timeline:

Consultation Topics	Dates
Review and validation of study framework	19 August 2024
Validation of DHS and literature review findings; input into qualitative data collection methods	10-14 October 2024
Validation of qualitative Research findings	13 August 2025
Sharing final report with qualitative findings	8 December 2025

A4.4 Phase 2: Preliminary Research

Phase 2 included a literature review and DHS data analysis to inform subsequent qualitative research and roadmap development. It began in the third quarter of 2024.

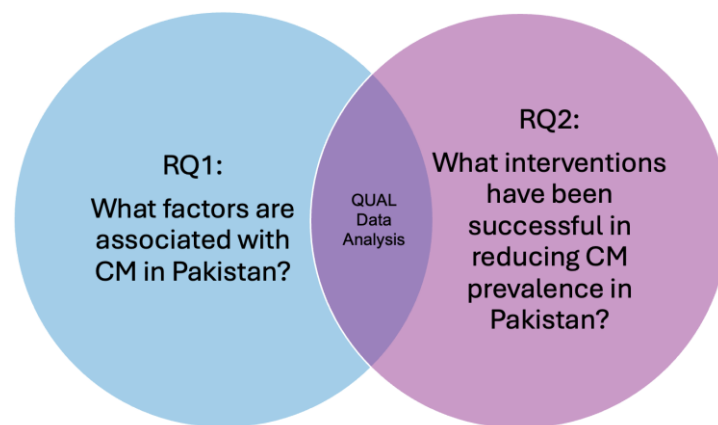
A4.4.1 Literature Review

A 2022 systematic review had shown a significant lack of academic evidence on the factors associated with child marriage in Pakistan. Much remained to be understood about what had worked and could work in the Pakistani context. For this purpose, UNICEF and Child Frontiers agreed to conduct a review of both grey and academic literature with two key aims:

1. To identify factors that were associated with child marriage in Pakistan; and
2. To illuminate the most effective and promising programmatic approaches and interventions that had been applied to reduce child marriage in Pakistan.

To achieve these aims, academic and grey literature was harvested from selected databases using a framework with defined inclusion criteria and review processes, which had been refined during consultation meetings between Child Frontiers and UNICEF. The review resulted in a literature summary which, together with findings from the DHS data analysis, informed the qualitative data collection.

A systematic review was conducted to identify:



Sources included academic databases (Medline, Embase, Global Health, SCOPUS, Google Scholar) and grey literature from organizational reports. The review covered publications from 2000–2024 and followed a three-phase approach:

1. Literature retrieval using pre-defined search terms
2. Selection based on title, abstract, and full text
3. Extraction and organisation of information in a literature summary

The review mapped factors and interventions across the domains of the Flower Framework, (Figure 1) guiding qualitative study design and analysis.

A4.4.2 DHS Data Analysis

Four rounds of Pakistan DHS data (1990–91, 2006–07, 2012–13, 2017–18) were analysed to assess child marriage prevalence and correlates among ever-married women and men aged 20–24.

Analysis Methods:

- Trend Analysis: Examined child marriage prevalence across locations, provinces, and wealth quintiles.
- Bivariate Analysis: Logistic regressions assessed associations with demographic, household, attitudinal, and economic empowerment variables.
- Multi-level Modelling: Intraclass correlation coefficients identified clustering of social norms; group-level aggregates were incorporated into multi-level logistic regression models.

Analyses were conducted in Stata16 with weighted observations and design adjustments (see Annex 6).

A4.5 Phase 3: Qualitative Research

Qualitative participatory research was conducted to deepen understanding of the results from the literature review and DHS data analysis. The objective was to capture perceptions and interpretations of diverse social behaviours, norms, and cultural practices influencing child marriage in Pakistan. This phase enabled the team to document emerging trends affecting child marriage, including the influence of social and digital media, as well as the effects of rapid climate change—particularly natural disasters, economic instability, and internal migration.

A4.5.1 Sample and Research Locations

The Child Frontiers team finalised sampling and selected research locations in consultation with the Advisory Committee and UNICEF team. These decisions were informed by the DHS analysis, literature review findings, and UNICEF's strategic priorities.

Research locations were selected, representing a mix of districts having Highest child marriage rates:

Provinces	Highest Child Marriage Rate District
Balochistan	Naseerabad
Punjab	Muzaffargarh
Sindh	Jacobabad
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Swat

The diversity of locations supported an examination of how contextual differences shaped child marriage norms, decision-making, and vulnerabilities. Villages were selected in consultation with local administration. Phase 3 used participatory qualitative methods to contextualise DHS and literature findings and explore factors influencing child marriage.

A4.5.2 Ethical approval

Throughout the study, the safety and well-being of all participants were prioritised, particularly those who were interviewed or provided testimonials. The research team worked closely with relevant stakeholders to establish a clear safeguarding plan to address any issues that might have arisen during the assessment process.

UNICEF and Child Frontiers discussed submitting the research protocol to RAD (Research and Development Solutions that had previously collaborated with UNICEF. The Ethical Committee independently reviewed the proposed approach to verify its cultural validity and relevance. A tailored protocol was developed for this process and was shared with UNICEF and government counterparts during the launch mission.

The following ethical principles guided the research:

1. Informed consent was explained to and obtained from all potential respondents. For younger children who were unable to provide formal consent, their parents or guardians provided consent on their behalf.
2. All participants, regardless of age, were given the choice to participate or decline. Any refusal to participate was fully respected without question.
3. Recognising that interviewing families, boys, and girls could expose them to risks, Child Frontiers conducted preliminary interviews with key informants to assess the sensitivity of each context and to identify appropriate and safe data collection methods.
4. Respondents' rights to protection from emotional harm, pain, or discomfort were safeguarded throughout the assessment. Arrangements were made to ensure that girls were interviewed by female researchers and boys by male researchers. Because discussions with survivors could evoke negative physical or psychological reactions, the research team received training to handle sensitive topics with care.
5. Child Frontiers established a referral protocol to respond appropriately to any disclosure of abuse, violence, or exploitation.

6. Confidentiality and data protection were treated as top priorities. This included careful management of data processing, anonymisation of all respondents, and ensuring that no identifiable information was disclosed in any reports or presentations.
7. All team members were trained in procedures ensuring that respondents were able to give informed consent and that their participation was voluntary at all times.

A4.6 Phase 4: Behaviour and Social Change Roadmap

Findings from Phases 2 and 3 were synthesised to develop a behaviour and social change roadmap. This roadmap outlined actionable strategies to prevent child marriage and strengthen child protection, tailored to contextual variations across sites and communities.

The final phase of the research translated the findings from the literature review, the DHS analysis, and the qualitative data collection into a roadmap outlining promising actions to address child marriage in Pakistan.

A4.6.1 Roadmap Creation

Potential strategies for communication and advocacy campaigns reflected the suggestions given by the participants across all provinces.

Key steps in the creation of the roadmap included:

1. Interpretation of findings with the Advisory Committee:
The final findings from the DHS analysis and the literature review (initially shared in preliminary form during Phase 2), together with the qualitative findings and the input from participants, were summarised and presented to the Advisory Committee for interpretation and refinement.
2. Draft Roadmap
Feedback from the Advisory Committee was incorporated into the creation of a strategic roadmap. It was agreed that this concise roadmap would include:
 - a. An introduction summarising the purpose of the roadmap and its link to the study;
 - b. A brief overview of child marriage in Pakistan (prevalence and context);
 - c. A summary of the study's findings;
 - d. A set of promising actions for the Government, UNICEF Country Office, and UNICEF partners, with possible timelines;
 - e. Indicators to track shifts in social norms.

Feedback and finalisation

The draft roadmap was presented to UNICEF for review. UNICEF provided feedback, and the Child Frontiers team revised the document accordingly.

Annex 5. Data Collection Tools

A5.1 Overview

Precise sampling details were finalised at the start of Phase 2, following alignment of objectives and expectations with UNICEF. Detailed data collection tool guide was finalised in consultation with the Child frontier team and UNICEF feedback.

Data collection tools were designed to generate a comprehensive understanding of the norms, attitudes, behaviours, and decision-making processes that shape children's lives. They were applied across diverse respondent groups, including adolescent girls and boys, adult women and men, community members, key service providers, and local institutional actors. Collectively, the tools supported a multi-layered inquiry into the drivers of child marriage and the broader social environment influencing children's protection and development.

The research utilised a combination of individual interviews, focus group discussions, participatory workshops with children, and key informant interviews. Individual interviews enabled respondents to share personal experiences and perspectives related to child well-being, marriage practices, threats faced by children, and the evolving influence of digital technologies. These interviews included structured activities such as social norms vignettes, card-based ranking exercises, community visioning, and discussions on the impact of recent floods on marriage practices.

Focus group discussions were conducted with gender- and age-specific groups to explore collective norms and shared understandings within communities. Two formats of FGDs were implemented, covering themes related to child well-being, marriage expectations, social norms, and local power structures. Participatory workshops were conducted separately with children to ensure their meaningful and safe engagement using creative, age-appropriate methods such as drawing, circles of support, card games, and power mapping exercises.

To complement community-level data, the study included key informant interviews with professionals and influential local actors such as child protection officers, health providers, police officers, NGO staff, religious leaders, and UNICEF field personnel. These interviews provided insights into institutional roles, service delivery challenges, and the broader enabling environment for child protection, as well as perspectives on the role of digital technologies in children's lives.

The methodology also incorporated a structured Social Network Analysis (SNA) to capture the relational dynamics that influence decisions around child marriage. Separate SNA tools were administered with children (egos) and with their identified decision-makers and influencers (alters). These tools facilitated the mapping of household and community networks, highlighted patterns of influence, and documented the actors who shape choices related to marriage.

Together, the tools presented in this document form a coherent and comprehensive framework for gathering high-quality qualitative evidence. Their combined use supports a nuanced understanding of the social, cultural, and institutional factors affecting child marriage and child well-being, in alignment with UNICEF's commitment to evidence-based programming and child-centred research. Given below are the details of participants (age and gender specific) included in the study:

A5.2 Data collection methods

A5.2.1 Individual interviews

The team conducted individual interviews with the following groups:

1. Younger women (18–35 years, 6 per site)
 - Included due to the likelihood that they had experienced, or knew someone who had experienced, child marriage.
 - Whenever possible, women with children were prioritized to gather insights on child protection and parenting perspectives.
2. Older women (35–60 years, 6 per site)
 - Included to understand generational shifts in women's experiences and views regarding marriage, authority figures, and child protection.
3. Younger men (18–35 years, 6 per site)
 - Interviewed to capture perceptions of recent cases of child marriage in their communities.
 - Men with children were prioritized where possible.
4. Older men (35–60 years, 6 per site)
 - Included to understand generational differences in male authority, decision-making, and priorities for protecting children.

A5.2.2 Focus Group Discussions (FGD)

In addition to individual interviews, Focus Group Discussions were conducted to explore shared beliefs and social norms. While the strategy remained flexible and was refined with UNICEF, the following FGDs were carried out:

1. Women (18–49 years, 5–9 participants)
 - These FGDs explored women's collective interpretations of challenges related to their children's marriages and their roles in decision-making, negotiations, and preparations.
2. Men (18–49 years, 5–9 participants)
 - Explored collective male views on marriage-related responsibilities, challenges, and community pressures.
3. Local NGO workers (5–9 participants)
 - Discussed contextual challenges, service gaps, cultural norms, and barriers to the prevention and response to child marriage.
 - These FGDs also supported envisioning elements of the strategic intervention roadmap.

A5.2.3 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

A selected number of KIIs were conducted in each location (approximately six per site). Key informants included:

- Religious leaders
- Local nurses and health workers
- Traditional authorities (e.g., village chiefs)
- UNICEF provincial staff
- Local government representatives

These interviews were critical for understanding community power structures, institutional responses, and the rationale behind decisions related to child marriage.

A5.2.4 Participatory Workshops

Participatory workshops were carried out with girls & boys aged 12–16 who were at risk of early marriage or had been recently married. These workshops used creative and rigorous methods to sustain engagement and support meaningful participation. Activities included visual tools, scenario-based discussions, and mapping exercises to enable girls & boys to express experiences that might not emerge through direct questioning.

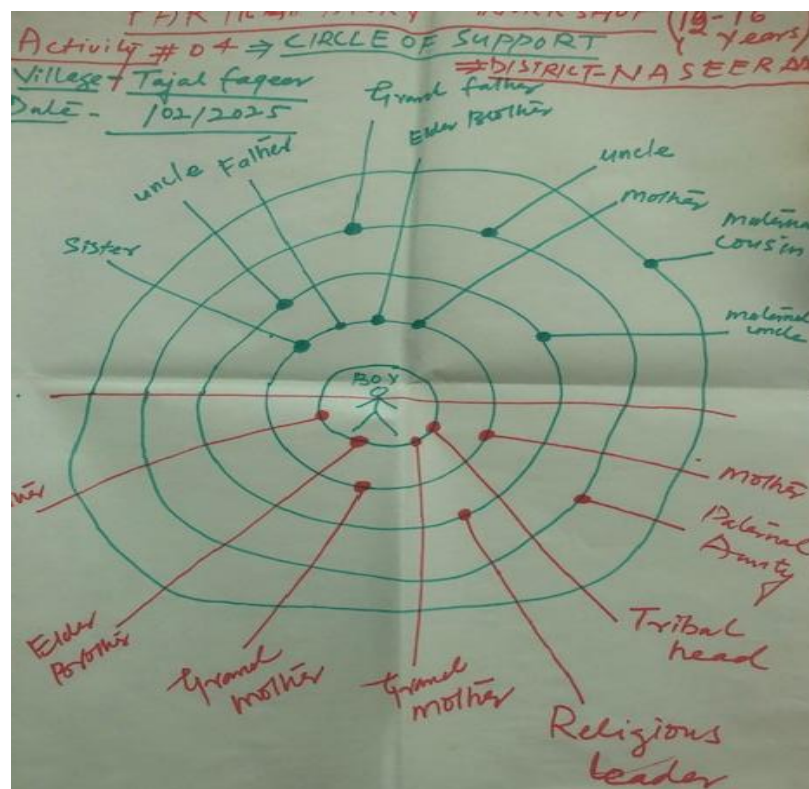
A5.2.5 Circle of Supports

The “Circles of Support” tool was used during participatory workshop with children. This tool is also known by several other names, including the “power ball” helped explore the individuals a girl/boy could turn to for support if she/he did not want to get married, as well as those who were least helpful or who exerted pressure on her/him to marry.

During the exercise, a series of concentric circles were drawn on a sheet of paper, with the girl /boy represented at the centre. A horizontal line divided the circles into upper and lower sections. Participants were asked to place a dot in the upper half for each person they believed a girl/boy could reach out to for support. Dots were placed closer to or farther from the centre depending on the perceived level of support.

In the same way, participants placed dots in the lower half for individuals they believed would pressure or insist that the girl/boy should get married. Again, the proximity of the dot to the girl/boy represented the strength of that person’s influence.

This tool provided a visual and participatory way to map supportive and pressuring relationships around girls/boys, helping the research team better understand social networks, sources of protection, and drivers of child marriage (see photo below).



A5.2.6 Social Network Analysis (SNA)

Social network analysis was used to measure and understand the connections between individuals and the ways in which attitudes, behaviours, and beliefs were shared or clustered within socially connected groups. This approach enabled the team to examine how social norms spread through interpersonal interactions and how they were maintained within reference groups. Because individuals look to specific social groups for behavioural expectations, identifying these groups and understanding their dynamics was essential to the study's exploration of social norms around child marriage.

Social network analysis can involve complex quantitative methods or qualitative techniques to map relationships and understand the nature of social ties. In this study, a qualitative social network analysis approach was adopted to deepen understanding of the reference groups influencing norms related to child marriage.

Recognising the limitations of behaviour change models focused solely on individuals, the research team drew on relational models that emphasise social interactions and collective influences. Social norms, understood as unwritten rules about what is acceptable within a social group (Cislaghi and Heise, 2019), were examined through this relational lens.

To study these norms effectively, the team developed a detailed understanding of membership in the salient reference groups whose approval individuals anticipated. These reference groups included both people with whom participants had close daily interactions and individuals to whom they were more distantly connected.

Qualitative social network analysis proved to be a powerful tool for identifying these key social referents. It provided critical information about social interactions that influenced the formation, reinforcement, and potential transformation of social norms. This information supported the design of targeted, network-level strategies to strengthen behaviour change efforts.

A5.2.7 Power Mapping

The Power Mapping exercise was designed to explore how children and adults describe and negotiate decision-making power regarding marriage-related choices. The activity was implemented in all four provinces with separate groups of girls and boys (12–17 years), as well as women and men (both younger, 18–34, and older, 35–60 years). Each group was asked to discuss five core decisions related to marriage. Specifically, they were asked (through the method specified just below) to share their opinion of who decides:

6. Whom a child should marry;
7. When the marriage should happen;
8. The type of wedding to celebrate;
9. The duration of the engagement; and
10. Whether the marriage should continue or end in case of problems.

They were invited to describe who made decisions (reality) and who they would like made decisions (aspirations) for each of the five above could choose. To this purpose, children and parents (Separately) were asked to choose one of the following five options:

- The child alone
- Mostly the child, consulting the parents
- The child and parents together equally (50/50)
- Mostly the parents, consulting the child

- The parents alone

Group participants first selected their option individually, then discussed and agreed on a collective choice. The exercise with parents was done twice (one for boys, one for girls). The exercise with children was only done for children of their gender (boys were asked about boy marriage, girls were asked about girl marriage). For each decision, participants were further asked: 1) Current realities (how decisions are made now); 2) Aspirations (how participants believe decisions should be made); 3) Explanations for the gap (reasons why change has not occurred); 4) Obstacles to and opportunities for change (material, social, or moral barriers); and 5) Perceived benefits of the status quo (rationalisations for maintaining current practices).

Annex 6. Secondary DHS Analysis

Secondary analysis of DHS data on factors associated with child marriage in Pakistan

Participatory Research on Child Marriage in Pakistan

UNICEF Pakistan

September 2024

This data report was produced by Dr Ilana Seff, Moumita Mukherjee, and Dr Ben Cislighi, for UNICEF Pakistan in September 2024. The opinions and statements presented here do not necessarily represent those of the Government of Pakistan or UNICEF.

Child Frontiers Ltd
Suite A 15/F, Hillier Commercial Building
65-67 Bonham Strand East
Sheung Wan, Hong Kong
Child Frontiers is a registered company (No. 1275515)

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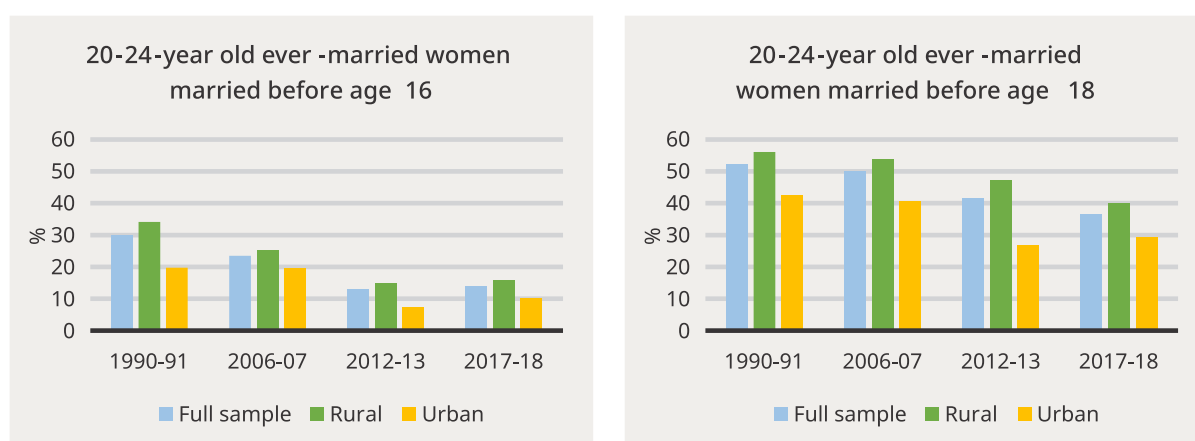
1. Introduction

To map a broad understanding of child marriage in Pakistan, we conducted quantitative analysis using the Demographic Health Survey (DHS) data. Although the primary methods in this study are qualitative, these quantitative analyses serve as a useful approach for identifying trends in child marriage, provinces and groups in which child marriage is most prevalent, key individual and household characteristics associated with child marriage, and the extent to which gender inequitable norms influence child marriage. For the purposes of this study, two definitions of child marriage are explored: 20-24-year-old ever-married women married before age 16 and before age 18.

2. Trends

2.1 How has the prevalence of girl child marriage changed over time?

To examine changes in child marriage over time, we employed DHS data from 1990-91, 2006-07, 2012-13, and 2017-18.⁷



The overall prevalence of ever married 20-24-year-olds who were married prior to 16 or prior to 18 has fallen substantially over the period from 1990 to 2018.

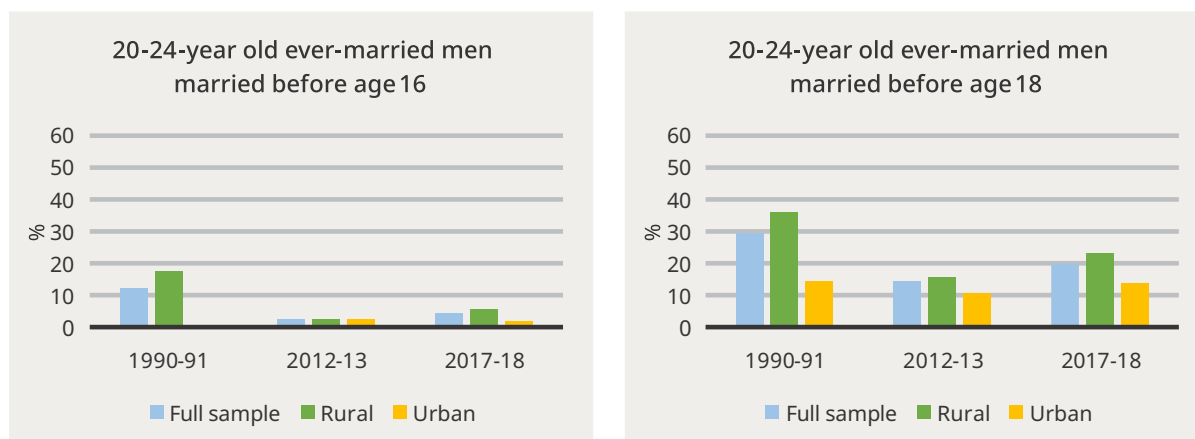
During this time, the percentage of ever married 20-24-year-olds who were married before 16 declined from 30.1% to 16.1%; the prevalence for those married before 18 fell from 52.2% to 36.5%. However, while the trend in child marriage fell steadily from 1990 to 2013, a plateau is observed between 2012 and 2018.

Child marriage among women is higher in rural than urban areas in every wave of data collection.

⁷ The nationally representative sample in the 1990-91, 2006-07, and 2012-13 DHS surveys includes Punjab, Sindh, KPK, Balochistan, and ICT; the nationally representative sample in 2017-18 DHS includes Punjab, Sindh, KPK, Balochistan, ICT, and FATA.

2.2 How has the prevalence of boy child marriage changed over time?

Child marriage for boys fell between 1990 and 2012,⁸ but increased slightly in 2017-18. For example, at the national level, ever married 20–24-year-old men married before 18 shifted from 29.3% in 1990-91, to 14.4% in 2012-13, to 19.9% in 2017-18.

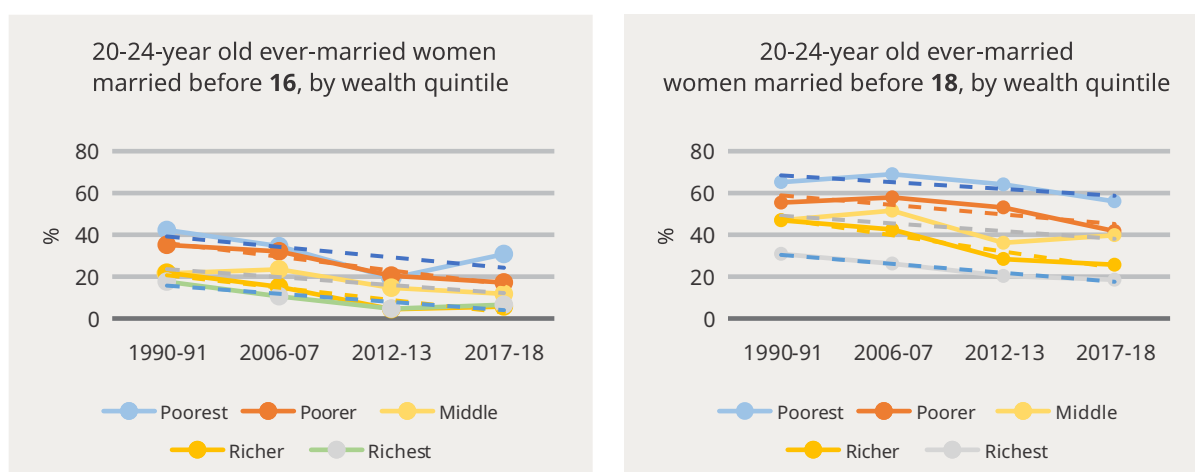


Similar to child marriage among girls, child marriage among boys was higher in rural areas than in urban areas in all waves of data collection.

Child marriage among boys was significantly and substantially lower than child marriage for girls at all time points.

2.3 For whom is child marriage decreasing the most?

A clear gradient in the prevalence of child marriage is observed across wealth quintiles. For example, in 1990, child marriage prior to age 16 was observed to be 42.3%, 35.2%, 21.6%, 21.9% and 17.6% across the five wealth quintiles, from poorest to richest. In 2017, the same quintile-based figures were 30.8%, 17.2%, 11.8%, 5.7% and 6.6%.



⁸ Data were not collected from men in the 2006-2007 DHS.

Assuming a linear relationship in prevalence over time, child marriage before 18 fell most steeply in the 4th wealth quintile (“richer”); the rate of decline in the other four quintiles was approximately equal.

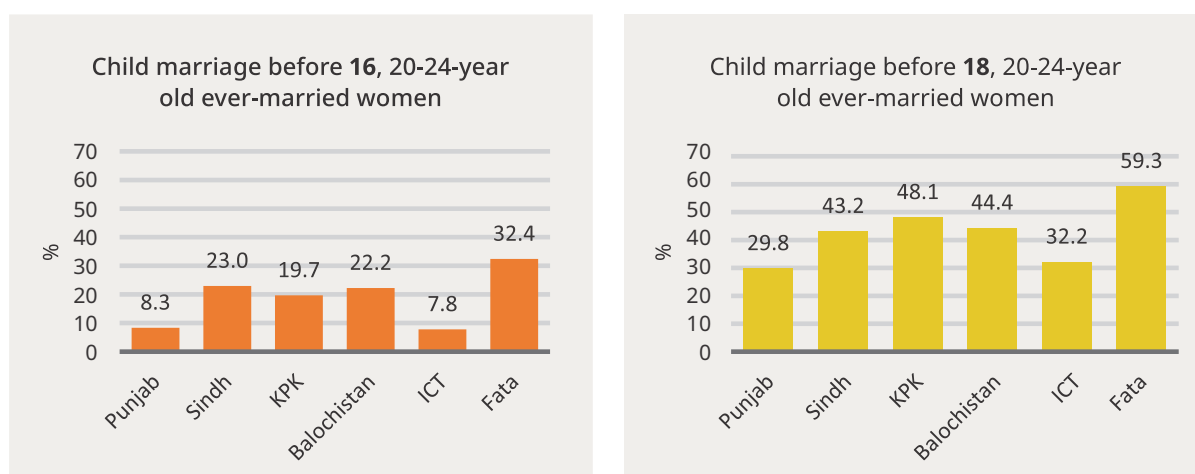
2.4 Approximately when will girl child marriage end at the current rate of decline?

Assuming a basic linear relationship between time and child marriage, informed by the linear trend observed from 1990 to 2018, Pakistan will end girl child marriage before 16 and 18 in approximately 2038 and 2086, respectively.⁹

3. Geography

3.1 Where in Pakistan do we find the highest prevalence of girl child marriage?

In Fata, 32.4% and 59.3% of 20–24-year-old ever-married women were married by the time they were 16 and 18, respectively.

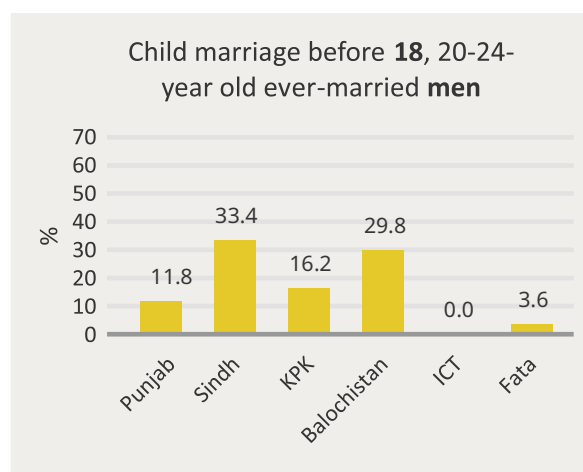
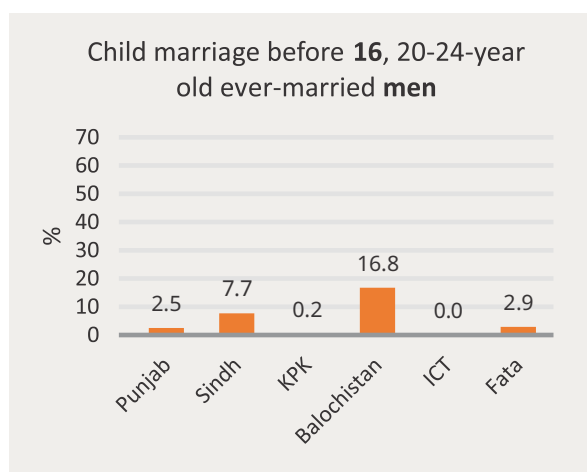


Punjab and ICT had the lowest levels of child marriage for both definitions (married before 16 and before 18).

3.2 Where in Pakistan do we find the highest prevalence of boy child marriage?

Unlike child marriage for girls, child marriage for boys is highest in Sindh and Balochistan. In 2017–18, 7.7% and 16.8% of ever married 20–24-year-old men were married before 16 in Sindh and Balochistan, respectively; these figures were 33.4% and 29.8% for those married before 18.

⁹ However, it is important to note that no decline in child marriage before 16 was observed between the last two waves of data collection (2012–13 and 2017–18) and so assumptions of a linear decline over time are liberal.



Child marriage before 18 among 20-24-year-old ever-married men was lowest in Fata, ICT, and Punjab.¹⁰

Child marriage for men is substantially and significantly lower in all provinces as compared to women.

4. Characteristics associated with child marriage

This section examines characteristics found to be associated with girl child marriage using the most recent DHS survey, conducted in 2017-18.¹¹

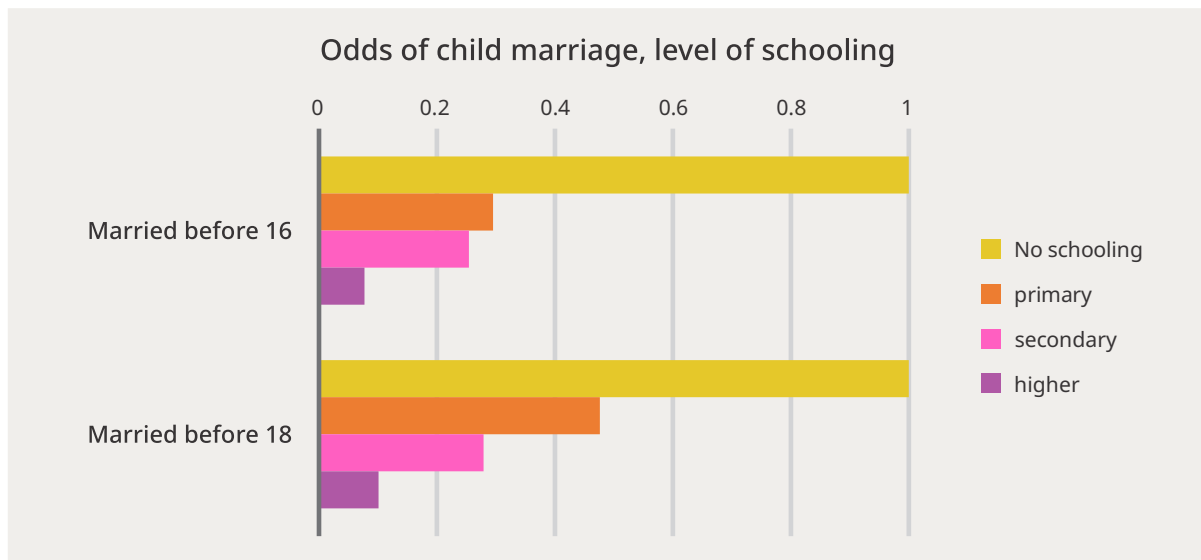
What is an odds ratio?

Some of the findings in this section and the next section are presented as odds ratios (ORs). An odds ratio is a statistical measure that compares the likelihood of an event occurring in a group exposed to one characteristic to the likelihood of it occurring in a group that was not exposed. In the case of the analysis presented here, the “event” is being married before age 16 or 18. Odds ratios greater than 1 mean the likelihood of being married as a child is greater and odds ratio below 1 mean the likelihood of being married as a child is lower. Odds ratios were calculated using bivariate logistic regressions.

¹⁰ DHS sample sizes for the men are smaller and may not be fully powered to accurately estimate child marriage.

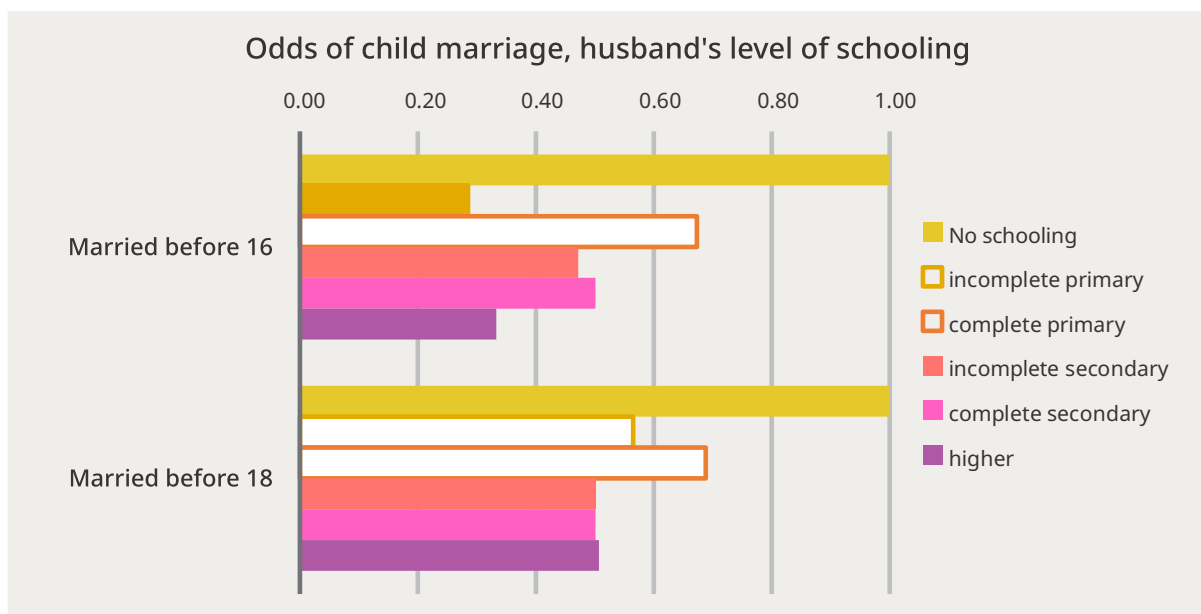
¹¹ Sample sizes for boy child marriage are too small to confidently estimate associations.

4.1 How is schooling related to child marriage?



Schooling is found to be highly protective for both definitions of child marriage. Compared to those with no schooling, for example, girls who have even completed just primary school have 0.295 and 0.476 lower odds of being married before 16 or 18, respectively. Girls who have completed secondary school have an even lower likelihood of being married as a child.

4.2 How is a girl's husband's schooling related to child marriage?



A girl's likelihood of being married as a child is not as strongly associated with her husband's schooling as it is with her own schooling. While the odds of being married before 18 are lower for a

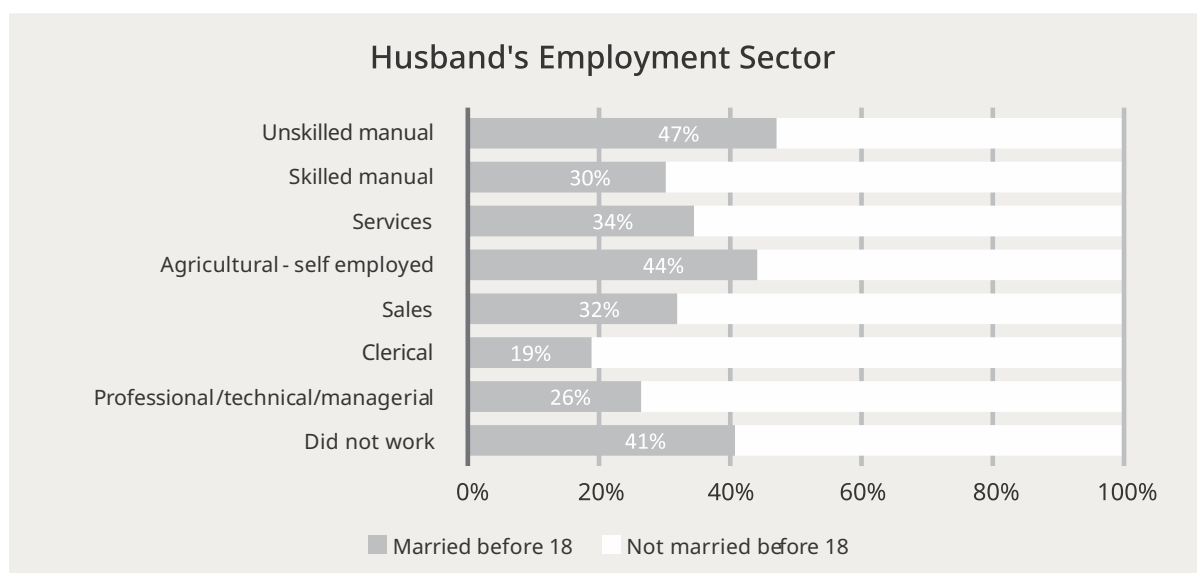
girl whose husband has at least some primary education or has completed primary school, the difference is not statistically significant.¹²

Compared to girls whose husbands have no education, only those whose husbands have at least some secondary education, have completed secondary school, or have higher education are statistically less likely to be married before age 16 and age 18 (though these effect sizes are medium).

4.3 How is employment related to child marriage?

Only 12% of women ages 20-24-years old reported working at the time of the survey. Those who were married before age 16 and before age 18 had 1.71 and 1.64 greater odds (LOW effect size), respectively, of reporting working.

Almost all husbands (97%) of 20-24-year-old women reported working in the last 12 months, and there were no differences in this statistic observed based on whether a woman was married before or after 16 or 18.

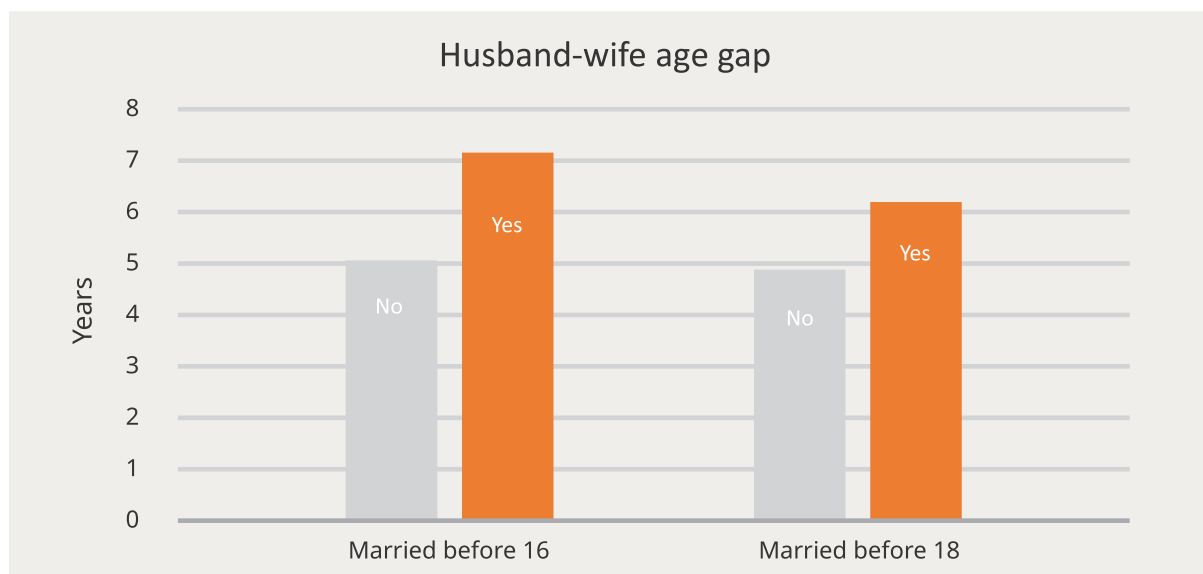


However, certain sectors of husbands' employment were associated with child marriage. Women 20-24 years of age whose husbands worked in unskilled manual labour, were self-employed in the agricultural sector, or did not currently work were most likely to have been married prior to age 18 (47%, 44%, and 41%, respectively).

The lowest prevalence of marriage before age 18 for 20-24-year-old women was observed for those whose husbands worked in the clerical sector; only 18% of women whose husbands worked in this sector were married before 18.

¹² Bars in the figure that are white represent odds ratios that are not statistically significant.

4.4 How are girls' and husbands' respective ages related to child marriage?

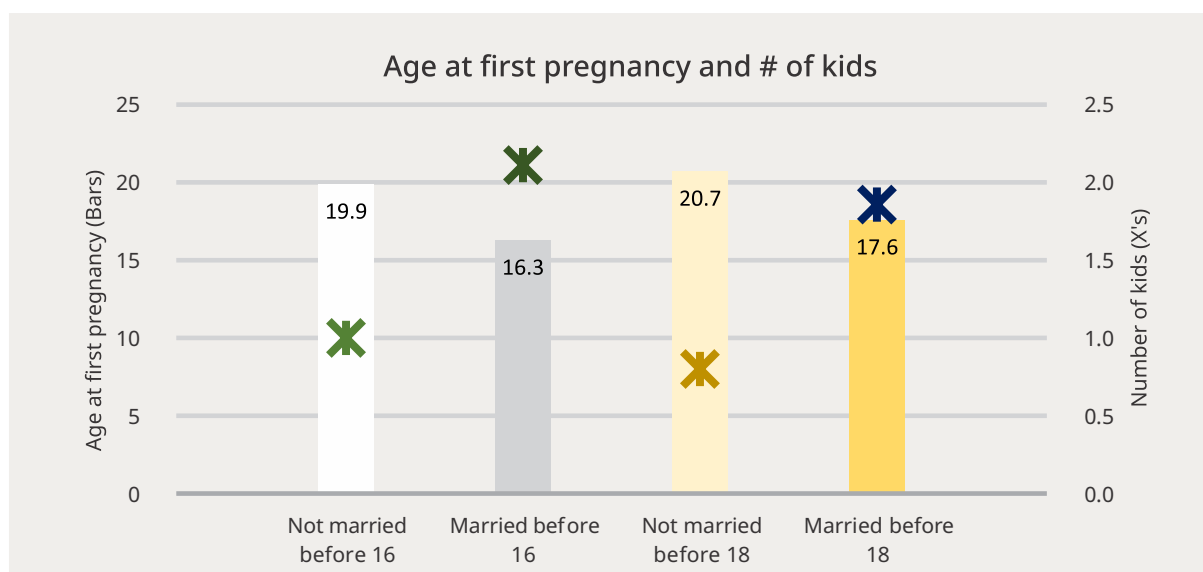


On average, 20-24-year-old ever married women who were married as children have larger gaps between their age and their husband's age.

For example, while the average husband-wife age gap for those married before 16 is 7.2 years, the average gap for those married after 16 is only 5.1 years. Similarly, the husband-wife age gap for those married before and after age 18 is 6.2 and 4.9, respectively.

5. Outcomes associated with child marriage

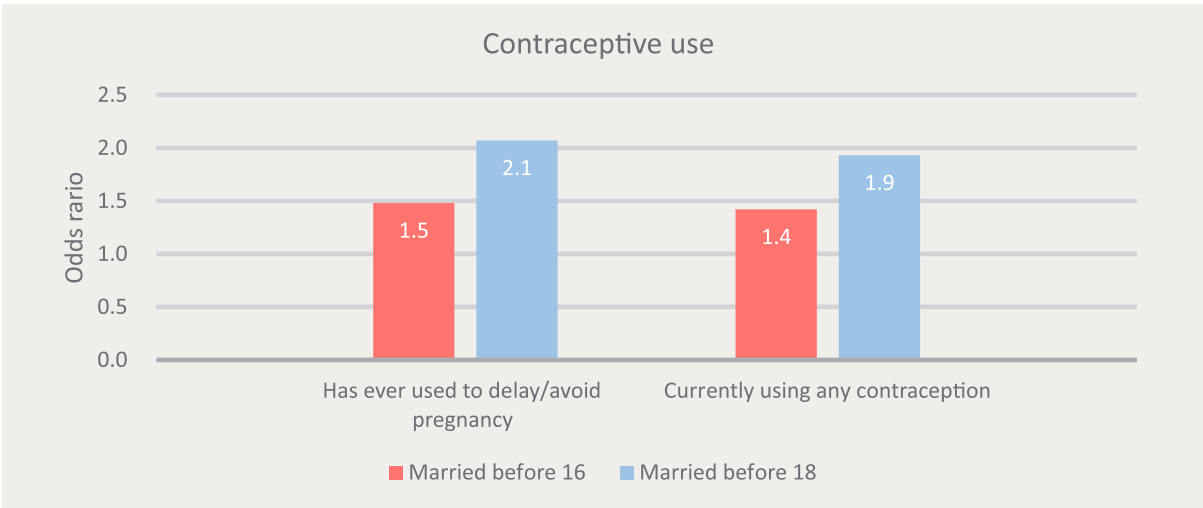
5.1 How does child marriage impact reproductive outcomes?



Unsurprisingly, child marriage is associated with becoming pregnant earlier in life and with having a greater number of children.

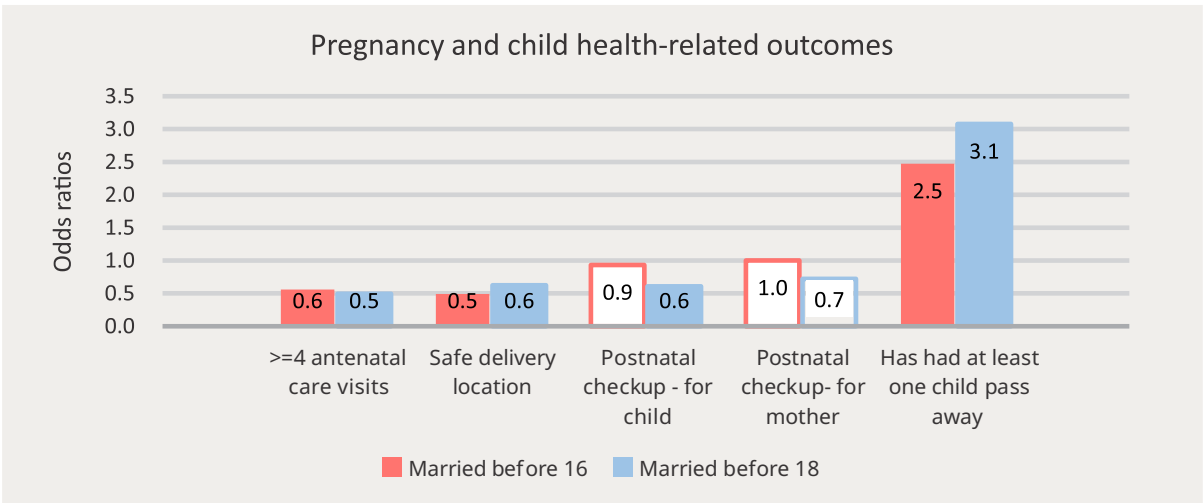
For example, on average, girls married before 16 have their first pregnancy at age 16.3, compared to age 19.9 for girls married after 16. Similarly, girls married before 18 have their first pregnancy at age 17.6, compared to age 20.7 for girls married after 18.

Similarly, 20-24-year-old ever married women who were married before and after age 16 have 2.1 and 1.0 kids, respectively; for those married before and after age 18, women have 1.9 and 0.8 kids, respectively.



Despite the findings above, those women who were married as children were more likely to have ever used or to currently use contraception.

For example, 20-24-year-old ever married women who married before 18 had 2.1 greater odds of having ever used contraceptives to delay or avoid pregnancy and 1.9 greater odds of currently using contraception.



20-24-year-old ever married women who were married before age 16 or 18 exhibited worse outcomes related to pregnancy and child mortality as compared to those were married as adults.

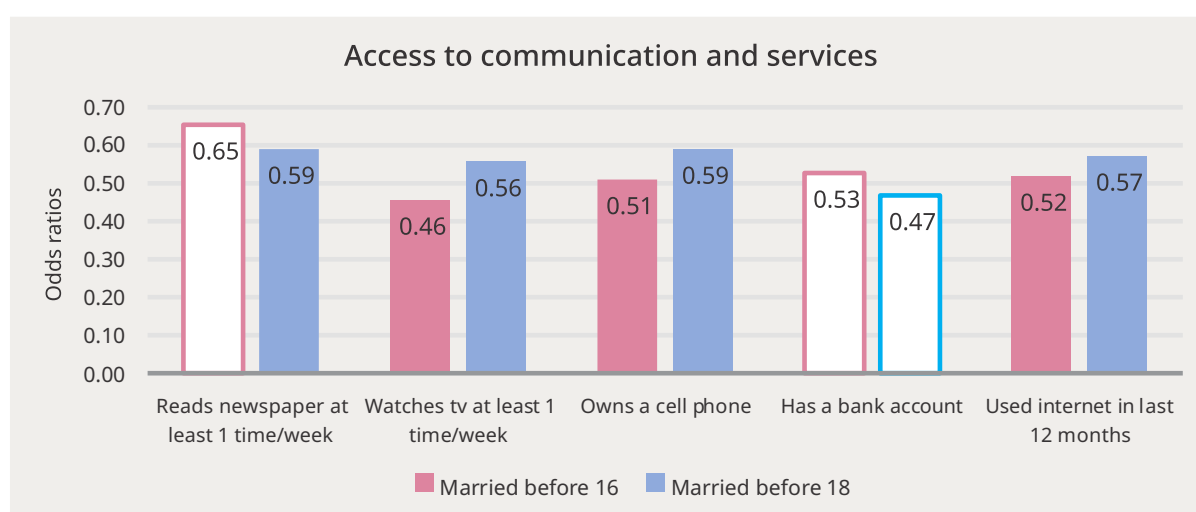
Those married before 16 and before 18 had 0.6 and 0.5 reduced odds, respectively, of receiving at least four antenatal care visits during their pregnancy.

Ever-married, 20-24-year-old women married before 16 and before 18 had 0.5 and 0.6 reduced odds of delivering their most recent baby in a safe health facility.

While the odds of having a woman having a postnatal checkup for her most recent pregnancy were not associated with being married before 16 or 18, women who were married before 18 had reduced odds (OR=0.6) of having a postnatal checkup for their baby.

Finally, women married before 16 and before 18 had 2.5 and 3.1 greater odds of having had at least one child pass away. **This reflects a substantial correlation between child marriage and next-generation child mortality.**

5.2 How does child marriage relate to access to communication and services?



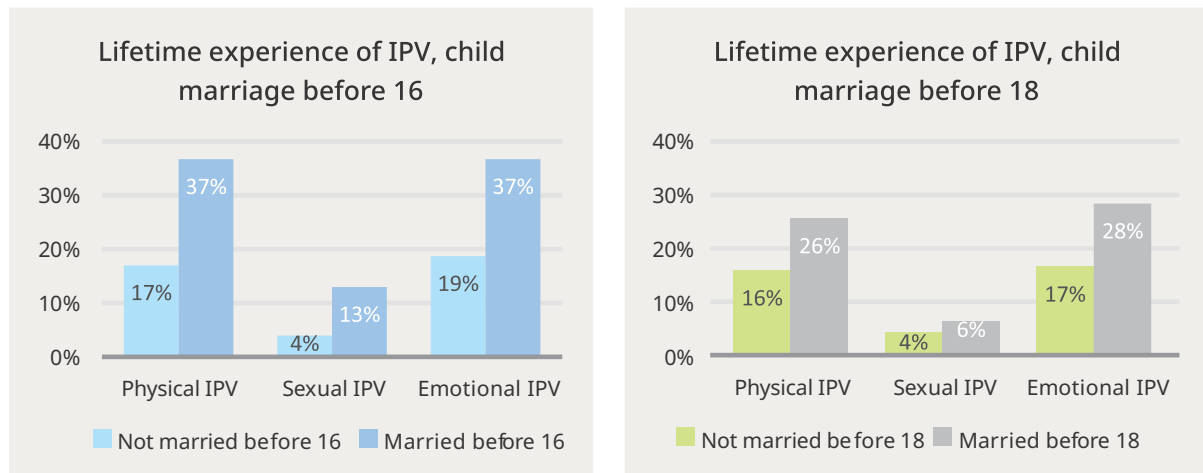
In general, child marriage is associated with reduced access to communication and services.

Ever married, 20-24-year-old women who were married before 16 had statistically lower odds of watching TV at least once a week (OR=0.46), owning a cell phone (OR=0.51), and using internet in the last 12 months (OR=0.52) as compared to women who were married after 16. Women married before 16 also exhibited lower odds of reading a newspaper in the last week and having a bank account, but these differences were not statistically significant.

Ever married, 20-24-year-old women who were married before 18 had statistically lower odds of reading a newspaper at least once in the last week (OR=0.59), watching TV at least once a week (OR=0.45), owning a cell phone (OR=0.519, and using internet in the last 12 months (OR=0.57) as compared to women who were married after 18. Women married before 18 also exhibited lower odds of having a bank account, but this difference was not statistically significant.

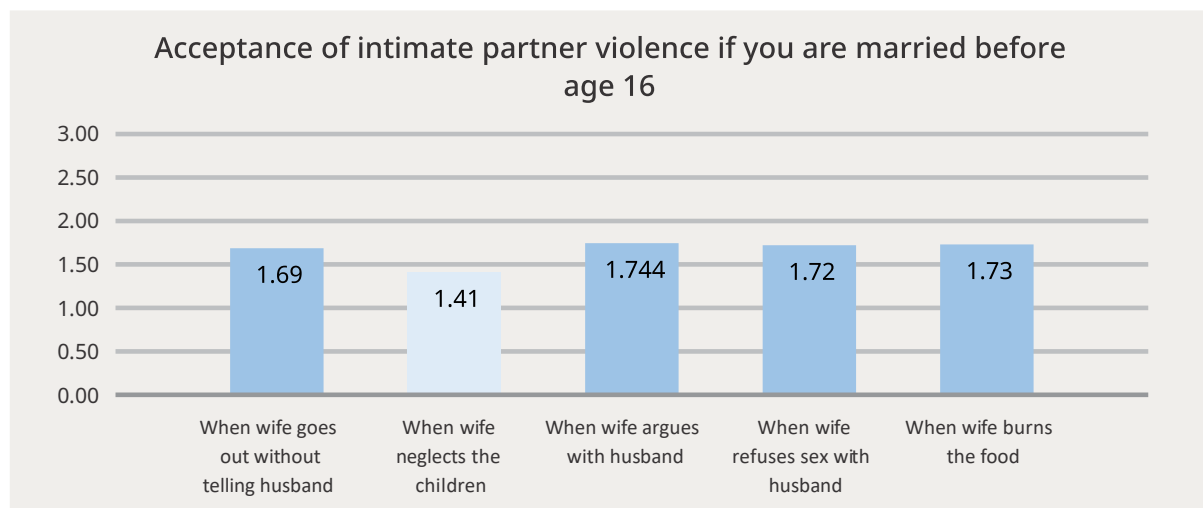
5.4 How does child marriage relate to intimate partner violence?

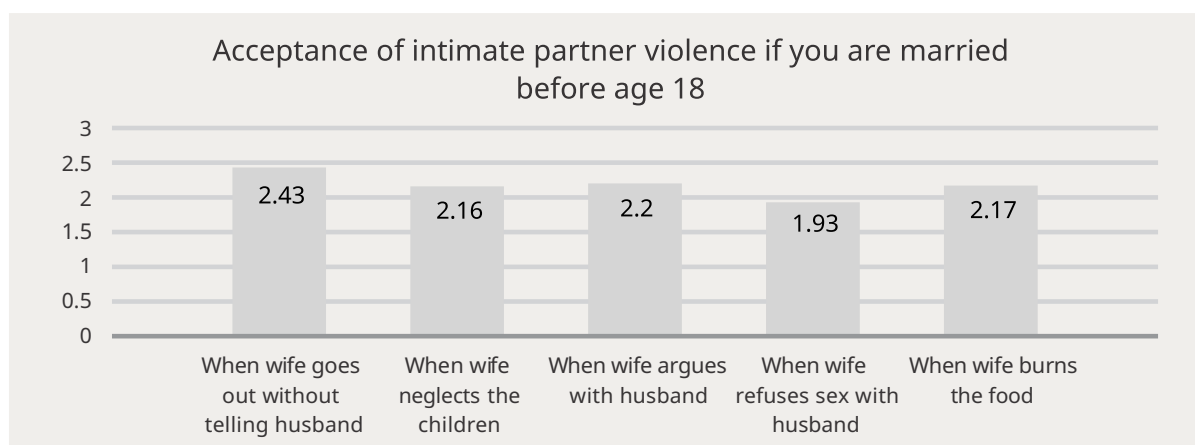
An additional module on lifetime experience of domestic violence/intimate partner violence (IPV) was administered to a subset of women in the 2017-18 DHS.



Importantly, high levels of lifetime physical and emotional IPV are observed for those married before the age of 16, and 18 and high levels of sexual IPV are observed for those married before 18. For example, 37% of ever-married, 20-24-year-old women married before 16 have experienced physical IPV, 13% have experienced sexual IPV, and 37% have experienced emotional IPV. For those married before 18, these same figures are 26%, 6%, and 28%.

Further, an overall relationship is observed between child marriage and lifetime experience of IPV. However, the relationship between child marriage IPV is stronger and more significant for those married before 16, as compared to those married before 18





Child marriage was also found to be associated with attitudes that are more accepting of IPV.

Girls who were married before age 16 had significantly greater odds of agreeing that it was acceptable for a man to beat his wife if she goes out without telling the husband (odds ratio (OR) = 1.69), if she argues with her husband (OR=1.74), if the wife refuses sex (OR=1.72), and if she burns the food (1.73). While girls married before age 16 were more likely to believe a man's use of violence was an acceptable response to his wife neglecting the children, this increased odd was not statistically significant (indicated by lighter green bar).

Being married before the age of 18 was statistically significantly associated with believing it was acceptable for a husband to beat his wife in all five scenarios (and the magnitude of these increased odds was greater as compared to those observed for those married before 16).

Women who were married before age 18 were the most likely to believe it was acceptable for a man to beat his wife if she goes out without telling him (OR=2.43).

6. Social norms

6.1 Proxying for social gender norms in the DHS

Several variables included in the DHS capture information related to gender inequity, patriarchal norms, and women's empowerment, including intrahousehold gender equity, attitudinal acceptance of IPV, women's access to information and financial services through various mediums, and land ownership. These variables are summarized in Table 1 for ever-married 15–49-year-old women.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for underlying norms variables, full sample (15-49 years old)	
	% or mean
Attitudinal acceptance of IPV	
When wife goes out without telling husband	32.2%
When wife neglects the children	28.4%
When wife argues with husband	32.3%
When wife refuses sex with husband	28.3%
When wife burns the food	18.7%
Count of justified reasons	1.37
Agency	
Reads newspaper	14.2%
Listens to the radio	8.2%
Watches tv	62.3%
Owns a cell phone	39.2%
Has a bank account	6.0%
Used internet in last 12 months	12.0%
Inherited land	2.7%
Count of items	1.45
Husband control of decision-making	
Regarding healthcare	37.2%
Regarding household purchases	35.4%
Regarding wife's visits with friends and family	34.4%
Regarding use of contraception	10.0%
Count of decision made by husband only	1.17

Note: All observations are weighted to be representative of ever-married women ages 15-49 years old at the national level (excluding Fata and PAK).

Women were asked whether they thought wife beating was acceptable in five scenarios: if the wife goes out without telling her husband, if the wife neglects the children, if the wife argues with her husband, if the wife refuses sex with her husband, and if the wife burns the food. Approximately 32%, 28%, 32%, 28%, and 18% of women in the full 15-49-year-old sample believed wife beating was acceptable in each of these scenarios, respectively. On average, women agreed wife-beating was acceptable in 1.37 scenarios. Women were also asked about their engagement with technology and communication, which can provide important signal about a woman's access to information and social networks. Approximately 14%, 8%, and 62% of women reported reading a newspaper, listening to the radio, or watching tv, respectively, at least once in the last week. A little over 39% of women reported owning a cell phone and 6% reported having a bank account. Internet usage was low, with only 12% of women reporting using the internet in the last 12 months. Only 2.7% of women reported inheriting land. On average, women reported a positive outcome for 1.45 of the above items.

Respondents were also asked to indicate who in the household had the final say on key decisions. 37%, 35%, 24%, and 10% of women ages 15-49 years old reported that their husband alone made the final decisions on healthcare, household purchases, whether the wife could visit her family and friends, and the use of contraception, respectively.

6.2 Assessing clustering for norms-related variables

The relationship between these various outcomes and child marriage at the individual level among 20–24-year-olds was explored in the previous section. However, it is also important to understand how social norms related to these constructs—acceptance of IPV, women’s agency, and gender inequity—influence young girls’ risk of child marriage. A common analytical approach for assessing social norms involves creating a group-level average of such outcomes to proxy for a norm within each group. While this is a useful technique for proxying for social norms, it is important to first assess whether the attitudinal or other variables of interest (such as agency or intrahousehold gender inequity) are clustered with these groups, an important criterium for considering an attitude to be a *norm*.

To assess the level of clustering for these variables within groups, as compared to across groups, we employ the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC). The higher the ICC, the greater the within-group clustering. Two primary group configurations were assessed using the ICC: communities (identified using the primary sampling units (PSUs)) and groups defined by one’s language and education level. The rationale for the latter group configuration is that individuals tend to interact with others who speak the same language and have the same level of education, presenting an opportunity for normative influence to operate within these groups.

Table 2 presents the ICCs for the norm proxies of interest: attitudinal acceptance of IPV, which proxies for subjective norms around the use of IPV; agency, which proxies for a descriptive norm around women’s agency; and husband’s decision-making power, which proxies for descriptive norms around intrahousehold gender inequitable decision making. ICCs are also calculated for child marriage before 18 for both group configurations.

Table 2. ICCs for norm proxies				
	ICC	Number of groups	Avg. obs/group	Minimum obs/group
Communities				
Attitudinal acceptance of IPV	0.305	561	26.9	7
Agency	0.410	561	26.9	7
Husband decision-making	0.183	561	25.8	5
Child marriage	0.095	530	4.2	1
Education and language groups				
Attitudinal acceptance of IPV	0.112	28	441.6	43
Agency	0.444	28	441.6	43
Husband decision-making	0.061	28	425.0	40
Child marriage	0.143	28	79.3	8

Attitudinal acceptance of IPV among women ages 15–49 years is found to be more clustered within communities (PSUs) than within one’s education and language group (ICC=0.305 v. ICC=0.112). The ICCs for women’s agency are comparable for both configurations (ICC=0.41 for PSUs and ICC=0.444 for education/language groups). Similar to attitudinal acceptance of IPV, households where husbands oversee key decisions are more clustered within communities than within education/language groups (ICC=0.18 v. ICC=0.061). Finally, while the ICC for child marriage is lower for communities than for education/language groups (suggesting less clustering in communities), these estimates are derived from smaller within-group sample sizes; the average sample size of 20–

24-year-old ever-married women in each community is 4.2, compared to 79 women in each education/language group.

6.3 Examining the relationship between gender norms and child marriage

As a final step, we examine the relationship between the average attitude, agency, and decision-making scores in a respondent's community or education/language group and her risk of being married prior to age 18.

Table 3. OLS binary regressions predicting child marriage before 18	
	Child marriage before 18 Beta [95% CI]
Subjective norms around acceptance of IPV	
Community-level	0.107***
	[0.074,0.140]
Education/language level	0.139***
	[0.115,0.164]
Descriptive norms around women's agency	
Community -level	-0.144***
	[0.182, -0.106]
Education/language level	-0.166***
	0.191, -0.141]
Descriptive norms around husband's decision-making power	
Community -level	0.068***
	[0.034,0.103]
Education/language level	0.120***
	[0.097,0.143]

Significant associations were found between all gender norm proxies and child marriage before 18 for ever married 20–24-year-olds, regardless of the reference group employed. For ease of interpretation, this means that a woman's likelihood of having been married before age 18 is **greater** if:

- Women in her community are generally more accepting of IPV
- The husbands of women in her community make household decisions on their own

AND

- Women in her same language/education-level group are generally more accepting of IPV
- The husbands of women in *her same language/education-level* group make household decisions on their own

Additionally, a woman's likelihood of having been married before age is **lower** if:

- Women in her community have greater agency
- Women in her same language/education-level group have more agency

Importantly, the largest effect size is observed for norms related to women's agency; that is, living in a community where it is more normative for women to have access to communication and services is the most protective for child marriage.



Published by: UNICEF Pakistan
Street 5, Diplomatic Enclave, Sector G-5,
Islamabad, 44050, Pakistan

Contact: +92-51-2097700

Website: www.unicef.org/pakistan

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