

Drivers of Child Marriage in Pakistan: A qualitative study



Note: This is a shortened version of the Full Report. The shortened version doesn't include annexes, frequency tables, and has considerably less graphic and narrative information than the full version. The full version is available at UNICEF website.

This UNICEF report is a policy and programme-oriented output based on analyses of the study data. The study team is also preparing related academic manuscripts, intended for submission to peer-reviewed journals, which will engage with relevant scholarly literature and address complementary research questions.

UNICEF RESEARCH STUDY

Drivers of Child Marriage in Pakistan: A qualitative study by Child Frontiers
January 2026

Authors: Dr Beniamino Cislighi, Dahye Yim, Humera Malik, Duaa Rao, Dr Gillian Mann, Emma de Vise Lewis, Dr Karima Manji; Child Frontiers

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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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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.

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 reparation 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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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.

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?
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?
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?
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?

Methodology

To design targeted and contextually relevant interventions, further research was needed to understand how communities in Pakistan perceive child marriage—its meanings, functions, drivers, and the opportunities for prevention rooted in local realities. This qualitative study applied a gender- and norm-sensitive lens to examine how families, elders, religious leaders, and institutions understand, justify, or challenge child marriage. Fieldwork was carried out in Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan using individual interviews, focus group discussions, participatory workshops with children, and power and network mapping with key informants. Research took place in districts with both high and low prevalence of child marriage (according to recent UNICEF data). Data collection methods included individual interviews, focus groups, and key informant interviews with: Younger women (18–34); Older women (35–60); Younger men (18–34); Older men (35–60); and Key informants (religious authorities, local health providers, local politicians, NGO workers, Child Protection Officers, Police Officers) Workshops were also conducted with girls and boys aged 15–18, who were either close to marriage or had recently married. These workshops used creative but rigorous tools to sustain engagement while facilitating meaningful discussion.

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

Note on quote identifiers

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).

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

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

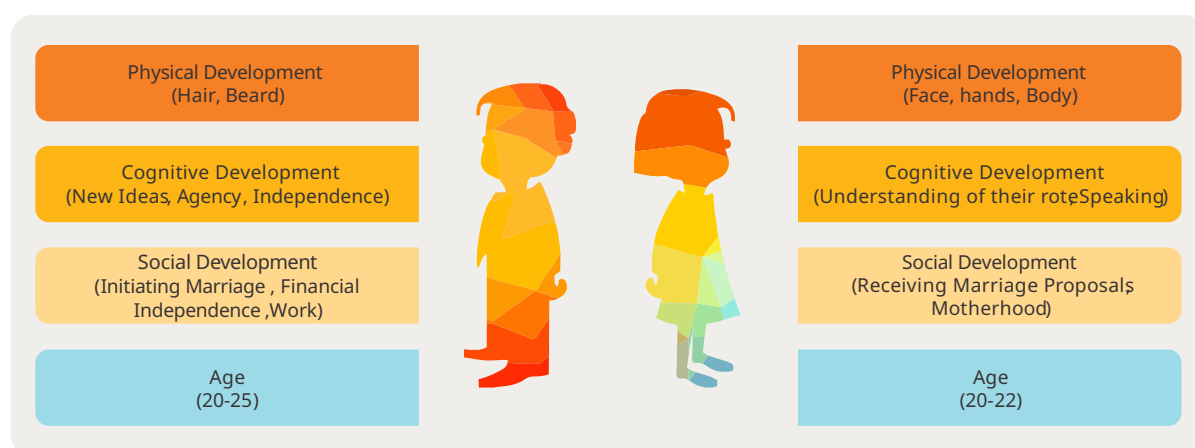
Relevant Research Questions:

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
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 examines communities' beliefs on the threshold between childhood and adulthood. The aim of this research question was to understand community perceptions of the markers that signal the shift from girlhood to womanhood and from boyhood to manhood. Understanding these beliefs is essential to implement purposeful child marriage interventions: 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 in ways that make marriage and childhood contradictory (no married person is, by virtue of their marriage, a child anymore). 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?

1.1.1 Physical Development

Participants identified visible body cues to distinguish girls from women. These cues were mostly signs of biological physical development: changes in face, body, voice, gait, and clothing. As one man said, “A girl is generally younger, her mind and body are not fully developed yet” (M, FG, O, S). Several participants described changes in facial appearance as critical markers: “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). Signs of labour, visible especially on women’s hands, were also mentioned: “A woman’s hands often show signs of labour” (W, FG, Y, B). Participants also mentioned voice and gait. One woman stated: “The tone of voice is also a key factor” (W, FG, Y, B); and another man said: “A girl’s voice is a little soft... a woman’s voice is a bit thicker” (M, FG, Y, B).

1.1.2 Cognitive Development

Across the dataset, participants frequently associated girls’ maturity with observable signs of cognitive development. They described girls as naïve or carefree and women as serious and capable of thoughtful decisions. As one young man said, “If she acts like a naïve girl... If she does more mature things, then she is a woman” (M, FG, Y, B). Many emphasised speech and behaviour: “Her speech, thoughts, and mannerisms help in identifying her” (W, FG, Y, B). Participants also interpreted girls’ greater wisdom and skills as signs of having achieved adulthood. One woman said girls were “still in the learning phase,” becoming women as they gained experience (W, FG, O, S).

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... she’s considered a woman” (M, FG, O, B); and “If she gets married... she is seen as a woman” (M, FG, O, B). Beyond marriage, few participants highlighted social markers such as managing household work or childcare with womanhood; “An older woman ... she performs household tasks better, whereas a younger girl doesn’t understand these things well” (W, FG, O, S). However, when mentioned, menstruation was treated as a precursor to marriage and responsibility; “When a girl becomes an adult at 14, marriage is considered obligatory” (M, II, Y, K). One woman challenged this narrative: “Mental maturity is necessary. Age or marriage alone is not enough” (W, FG, O, S).

1.1.4 Age

Age was seldom treated as a decisive marker of the transition from girlhood to womanhood. Some participants referred to age generally—“We recognize [women] by their age” (M, FG, O, K)—or gave approximate thresholds, such as around 20–22 years (M, FG, Y, K; W, FG, O, K). However, age mattered mainly when combined with marriage, experience, or responsibility.

1.1.5 Religion

Religious markers appeared mainly in Balochistan and KP, with a focus in modesty, veiling, and fasting as indicators of maturity for girls; “Girls wear a scarf... a grown woman wears a full chadar/dupatta” (M, FG, Y, B). Others mentioned the niqab: “If she wears a niqab (face veil), it’s clear she is a woman” (M, FG, Y, B). In KP, fasting was the prominent marker: “When she starts fasting, it means she has become an adult” (M, FG, Y, K).

1.2 Who is a Boy?

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. Participants consistently highlighted beards and moustaches: “If he has a beard, he is a man. If he doesn’t... he is a boy” (M, FG, Y, B). Strength also mattered: “The man is strong... the boy isn’t that strong” (M, FG, Y, P).

1.2.2 Cognitive Development

A smaller set of participants highlighted mental maturity—seriousness, foresight, and responsibility as 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. One woman noted that “speech, thoughts, and mannerisms” reveal maturity (W, FG, Y, B), while another stated 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 man’s thinking is mature... A youth doesn’t worry” (M, FG, Y, K). Finally, another dimension of cognitive maturity was decision-making and composure: “A grown man makes decisions carefully...” (M, FG, O, S). Boys were associated with impulsive behaviours such as firing weapons (M, FG, O, K).

1.2.3 Social Development

While age or physical changes could signal maturity, 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: “If he is married, he is called a big man” (M, FG, Y, B), “Only after marriage... does he become a man” (M, FG, O, B). Marriage was a critical marker as it provided evidence to the community of that man’s capacity to carry responsibilities for others: “Married men... take on more responsibilities” (W, FG, Y, B). Participants also tied adulthood to the ability to provide for others: “He can take care of the family” (M, FG, O, S); “A man... buys things for his children. A boy takes no responsibility for anything; he only buys things for himself” (M, FG, Y, P). In KP, dependence on parents and financial reliance was a marker of boyhood: “Boys don’t worry about money; they just ask for it” (W, FG, Y, K). Participants across provinces also linked the transition from boyhood to manhood to independence and agency: “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). 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). 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 mainly in Balochistan and Sindh. Some described adulthood around 18–20 years or upon marriage (M, FG, O, B), “When a boy turns 18... he can be physically, mentally, and socially mature” (M, FG, O, S). No references to age were recorded in KP or Punjab, where participants emphasized social roles and responsibilities instead.

1.2.5 Religion

Appropriate religious in boys' behaviour signalled discipline and responsibility that would be expected of men. Boys were portrayed as wayward and neglectful, while men were recognized as disciplined and morally accountable. A young man in KP explained that boys needed prompting to fast or pray, while men complied independently: "When a boy has to be forced to fast, we think he is a child" (M, FG, Y, K). Women in KP also believed that men spontaneously knew and adopted correct religious behaviour: "A boy ... has no concern for prayers" (W, FG, O, K).

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, overshadowing age, menstruation, physical maturity and (to a lesser extent) 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. In contrast, for boys, 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 moves from dependence on their fathers to becoming providers for their family, make decisions independently, and carry household responsibilities. Although age thresholds around 18–20 years were sometimes mentioned, age alone rarely determined adulthood; it became meaningful only when paired with other markers—marriage for girls, and independence or responsibility for boys. 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)

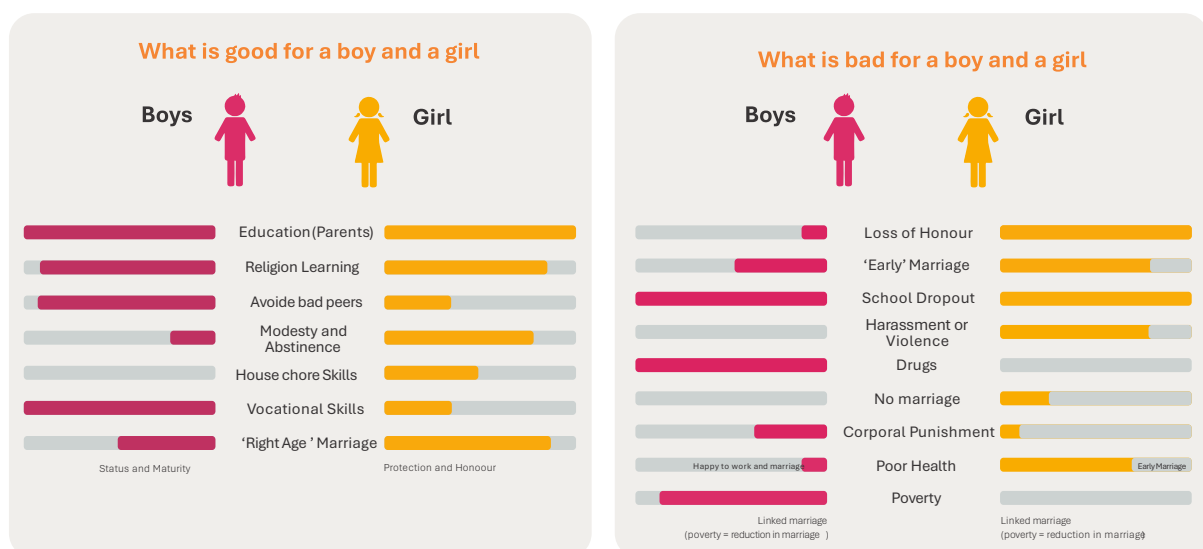
Relevant Research Questions:

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 for every one of the highest priorities both for protection of the girl and to preserve family honour.
4. Boys' safety was considered less of a concern, although participants were worried about boys engaging in risky behaviours, particularly substance abuse, smoking, and participation in gang-related activities.
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



2.0 Introduction

This section explores how participants understand what constitutes a “good life” for girls and boys. 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

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. For children themselves, the desire for education was personal and aspirational.

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.

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, II, Y, S). Children were deeply aware of risks outside the home, especially in rural settings. Boys and girls both described how girls often avoid leaving their homes because going out exposes them to danger.

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. 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, II, Y, S). One young woman from Punjab stated, “First, we should study, then think about marriage” (W, FG, Y, P). 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).

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, II, Y, S).

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. Participants emphasized madrasa learning alongside formal schooling, seeing both as essential for shaping respectful, disciplined girls.

2.2 What is Good for Boys

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. 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.

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, II, O, K). Parents shared that a good boy should learn a skill or trade early in life to support his parents and household. 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.

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. In Punjab also, respondents placed stronger emphasis on financial stability before marriage. In Sindh, emotional readiness featured prominently. Participants described marriage as a fulfilling milestone for boys, but only when they have developed emotional maturity. In Balochistan, respondents stressed that marriage brings stability only when boys possess “sense, patience, and earning.”

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.

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). 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. Across gender and regions, parents stressed that without moral grounding, even education or material success could not secure a meaningful life.

2.3 Threats to girls’ wellbeing

2.3.1 School 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).

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 girl’s shoulder most of the household labour. A boy said, “Girls work all day; they get tired” (B, PW, K).

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. 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). 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. 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. 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).

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.

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).

2.4 Threats to Boys’ Wellbeing

2.4.1 Bad Company

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). 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.

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). 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.

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, II, 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). 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. Children also identified lack of education as one of the most serious threats to boys’ future wellbeing. 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. 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.

2.4.6 Child Marriage

Participants 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.

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, II, O, S).

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. In the participatory exercises children repeatedly described physical safety as one of the most important aspects of boys’ lives. 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.

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.

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.

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

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

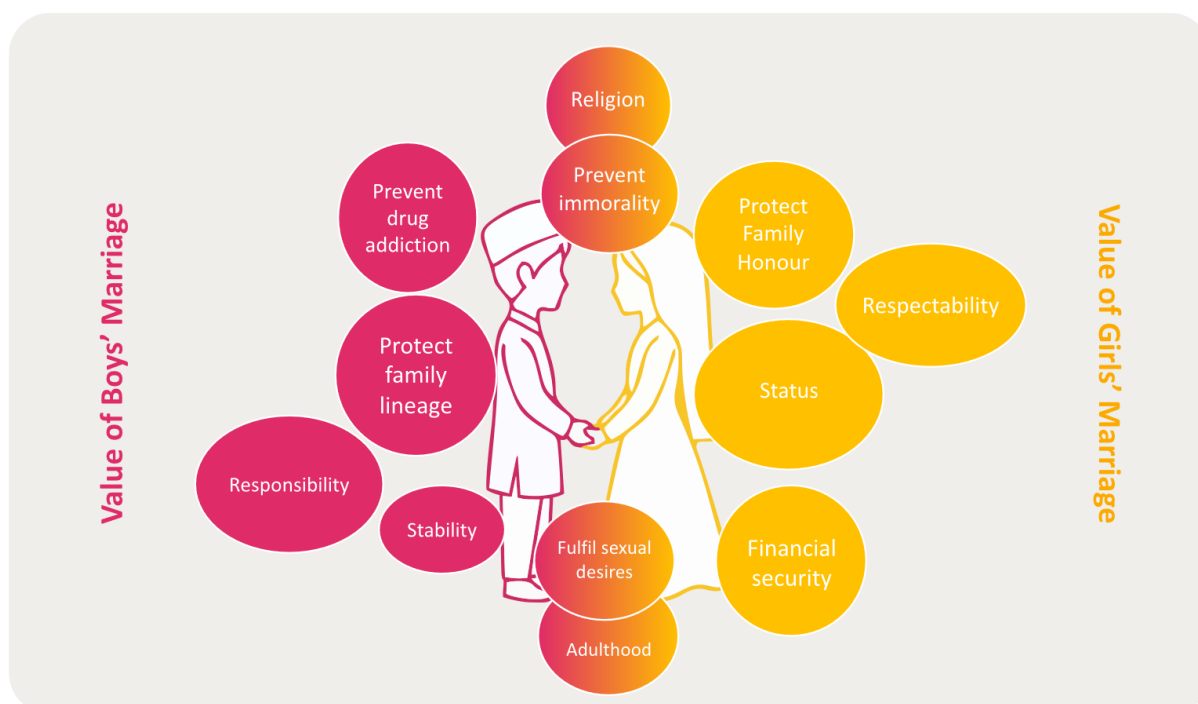
Relevant Research Question:

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.

3.1 Marriage as a Protection Mechanism

3.1.1 Safeguarding a girl's dignity and family honour

Participants widely linked timely marriage to a girl's dignity and the family's honour. Men in Sindh noted 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). Women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa echoed this: "marriage is necessary because she goes to her home with honour and modesty, avoiding bad reputation and disgrace" (W, FG, Y, K). Overall, a girl's marital status is perceived as a direct reflection of family respectability, motivating early marriage to avoid judgment and social disgrace.

3.1.2 Securing a girl's financial future

Participants often identified financial protection as a central driver of child marriage. Women in Balochistan described how poverty shapes decisions: "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). A few participants across provinces also described child marriage as financial relief for parents, noting that "In our community, child marriages are still common, especially among poor families who see marriage as a financial relief" (W, II, O, K) and that the practice persists due to "financial instability and social pressures" (W, FG, O, B).3.1.3 Protecting patrilineal succession. Boys' marriage was commonly seen to protect family lineage.

3.1.4 Protection from immoral and socially deviant behaviour

Marriage was widely perceived as a mechanism of moral and religious regulation, serving to protect both boys and girls from engaging in socially deviant behavior. A man in Punjab stated that marriage is "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). Marriage was also described as a way to prevent boys from becoming involved in what participants called "negative activities," especially drug use. A man in KP for instance shared that because he did not arrange his son's marriage, the son now "wanders around, has gotten into drugs, smokes, and spends time on Facebook and mobile, watching inappropriate things and doing wrong things" (M, II, O, K).

3.2 Marriage as a marker of adulthood

3.2.1 Marriage as part of existing gender roles

Participants described marriage as central to the performance of gendered roles. A young woman from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa explained that men expect "a household of their own, children to be born, and for their home to run properly," wanting "someone to manage the house while they go out and

work" (W, II, Y, K). Women, in turn, were seen as fulfilling responsibilities related to homemaking and motherhood. Marriage was also associated with women's social respect and standing. In Balochistan, women explained that "People make fun of unmarried girls. A married woman, on the other hand, is considered settled and respectable" (W, FG, O, B). A woman in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa added that an unmarried girl "doesn't receive the same respect in society" (W, II, O, K). For boys, marriage was widely viewed as a step into responsibility and adulthood. A woman in Sindh stated that marriage allows men to offer "emotional and financial stability" and fulfil expectations to "support and protect" their wives (W, II, Y, S).

3.2.2 Importance of Timing of Marriage

Participants described the ideal age for marriage not as a number but as the moment when boys and girls are seen as capable of fulfilling expected gender roles. Delaying marriage was valued when it allowed greater maturity and stability. For boys, readiness was tied to providing for a household. A young woman in Sindh explained that "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 will be able to take care of himself, support his parents, and provide a stable life for his family after marriage" (W, II, Y, S). Girls' readiness was tied to domestic capability. Women in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa explained that parents may delay marriage if a daughter "is not mature enough to manage a household and cannot manage a new home or responsibilities" (W, FG, Y, K).

While many participants referred to 18 as the ideal age due to legal awareness, they also described social pressures that push girls into marrying earlier. Health concerns were frequently cited, including that "As a girl ages, the chances of her having children decrease" (W, II, O, B) and that "If she is over age, she will face difficulties in delivering babies" (W, II, O, P). Delaying boys' marriages was seen as less socially problematic but still potentially challenging. Concerns also included declining physical capacity, with women noting that if a man marries late he "may become physically weak and won't be able to properly fulfil his family responsibilities" (W, II, Y, S). In contrast to girls, delayed marriage for boys carried few reputational risks. As one woman explained, "For a boy, there is no difference. A boy can marry at 40 or 45, and society will accept it" (W, II, Y, B).

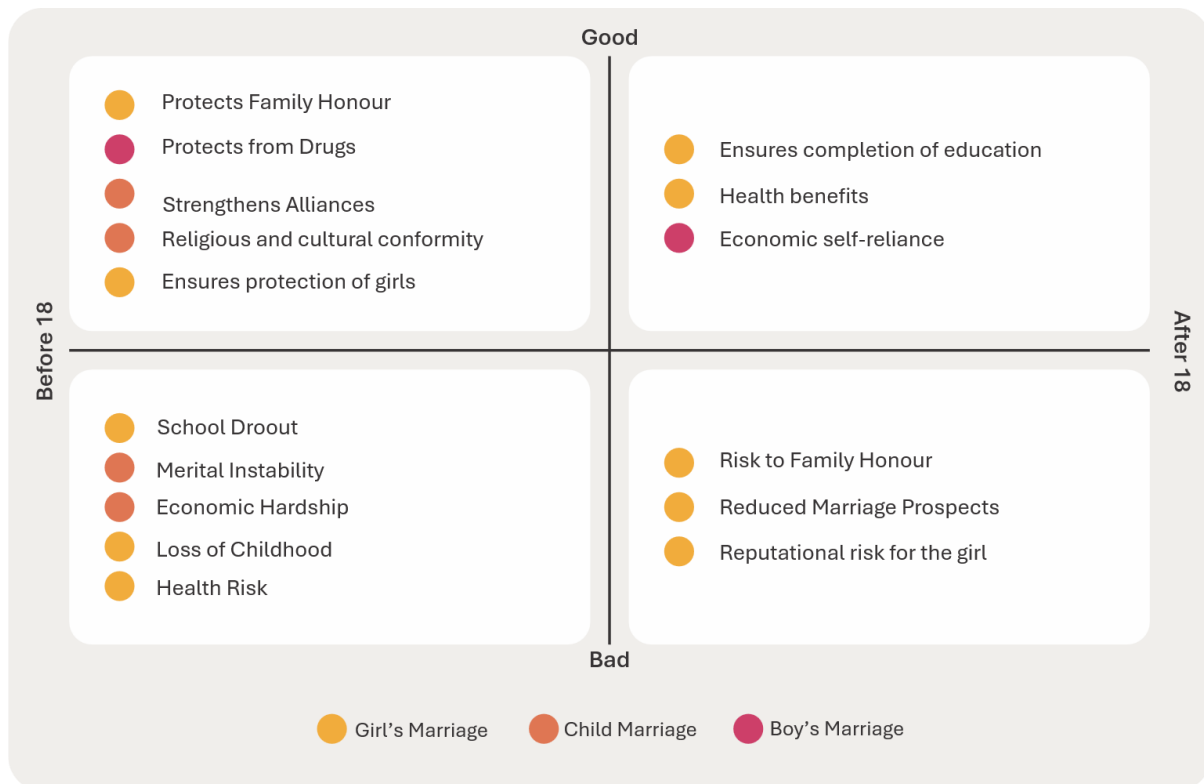
3.3 Final considerations

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.

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



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)*

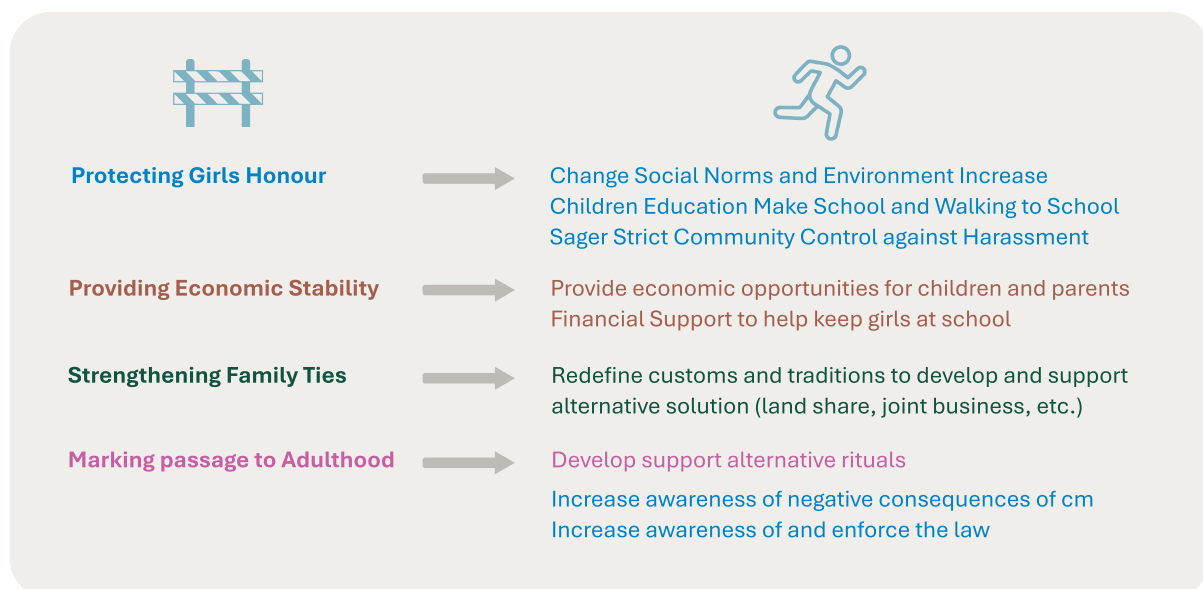
Relevant Research Question:

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

Across the four provinces participants identified strikingly similar alternatives. Education consistently emerged as the most important solution, widely seen as a protective factor. Freedom of decision for young people and shifting community views on child marriage were also frequently highlighted, reflecting a growing emphasis on agency and mindset change. Customs and traditions, together with the broader enabling environment, were mentioned as areas requiring transformation, indicating the need to shift entrenched norms and strengthen community support. Awareness efforts, legal

measures, and economic opportunities were raised as relevant in all provinces, with economic opportunities considered less central for girls but still useful as complementary strategies.

4.1 Increase Children's Access to Education

Across all provinces, education was identified as the strongest alternative to child marriage. Participants described schooling as a source of maturity and awareness that reduces the perceived need for early marriage. As one man in Balochistan stated, "If boys and girls study, they will understand life better. Then there's no need to marry them early" (M, FG, O, B). Girls' education was especially linked to empowerment; a young girl in Punjab noted that "When girls study, they start asking questions" (W, FG, Y, P). Education was also viewed as a catalyst for shifting norms, with women in Sindh explaining that "If girls become teachers, others in the village follow them" (W, FG, Y, S).

4.2 Provide Economic Opportunities

Participants across provinces frequently identified poverty as a major driver of child marriage and described economic empowerment as a key alternative. A father in Balochistan stated, "Our poverty forces child marriages, if there are opportunities to earn, families will wait" (M, FG, O, B). Girls' employment was also seen as transformative. A young woman in Sindh explained that "Girls with jobs are seen as pride, not a burden" (W, FG, Y, S).

4.3 Increase Awareness of the Harm of Child Marriage

Participants widely identified awareness as a crucial entry point for changing community attitudes toward child marriage. Older men and younger women especially stressed the need for information on its harms. As one man explained, "People don't know how child marriage harms health and education; awareness is needed in every village" (M, II, O, P). Many suggested mosque sermons, school campaigns, and community gatherings, with a young woman noting that "If religious leaders and teachers speak, the community will support change" (W, FG, Y, B).

4.4 Foster Children's Agency

Across provinces, many participants saw confidence, self-awareness, and decision-making skills as transformative alternatives to child marriage. They emphasised that when children are heard and guided, they begin imagining broader futures. As one young man explained, "Once a boy or girl starts thinking about their goals, marriage becomes one of many choices, not the only one" (M, II, Y, B). Younger respondents linked this agency to exposure, mentorship, and open dialogue, while older participants tended to view decision-making as an elder's responsibility, saying, "Children are too young to decide; elders know what is right" (M, FG, O, B). Girls' agency was highlighted as particularly influential. A young woman in Punjab noted, "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).

4.5 Redefine Customs and Traditions

Participants stressed that changing traditional practices is essential to addressing the root causes of child marriage. Customs such as linking honour to early marriage, valuing dowry, or arranging cousin marriages were seen as major contributors. A woman explained, "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). Some participants noted progress where families delay engagements or redefine honour. As one young woman said, "Our elders should stop linking family respect with child marriage" (W, FG, Y, K). Suggestions included rejecting dowry to reduce pressure for early marriage.

4.6 Enforce Legal Measures

Across provinces, participants acknowledged the importance of laws setting a minimum age for marriage but widely doubted the capacity of institutions to enforce them. Many stressed that laws alone are ineffective without local ownership and visible implementation. A young man in Balochistan said, "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). Participants highlighted that enforcement by trusted figures sends a strong message. A woman in KP said, "When the *maulvi* or *nikah* registrar refuses to perform child marriage, it sends a strong message" (W, FG, O, K).

4.7 Enabling Environment

Participants described a supportive environment (safe infrastructure, access to facilities, and collective community backing) as essential for delaying child marriage. Families are more willing to invest in children's education when the external environment offers security and opportunity. Improved roads, electricity, and local development were repeatedly cited as factors that reduce pressure for early marriage. Better access to schools and services can help change people's actions: "Where there are no schools or hospitals, parents marry early to protect their girls, when facilities come, minds change" (M, II, Y, B). Community support—through elders, youth groups, or NGOs—was also seen as crucial. A woman explained, "When the community comes together and supports girls going to school it gives confidence to parents" (W, FG, O, K).

4.8 Final Considerations

Participants across gender and age groups emphasized that preventing child marriage requires addressing both boys' and girls' circumstances. For girls, education was consistently identified as the strongest deterrent, supported by parental awareness of the health and social harms of child marriage. Across provinces, participants agreed that no single intervention can prevent child marriage. Effective change requires strengthening education, law enforcement, community support, and economic security while transforming harmful customs and norms. They also called for empowering girls as decision-makers and teaching boys to value consent and maturity, reframing marriage as a choice rooted in readiness. The broader data show that child marriage remains deeply embedded, driven by honour concerns, patriarchal norms, digital-age anxieties about reputation, economic hardship, and environmental shocks. Yet communities also identified emerging pathways for change, including shifts in how honour is defined, role-model effects, collective conversations, and the influential role of fathers and brothers. Education, mobility, livelihood opportunities, and visible enforcement were repeatedly cited as positive drivers. Together, these insights show that holistic, gender-responsive, locally grounded strategies offer realistic avenues for reducing child marriage across Pakistan.

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, II, 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.

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-alter). We then interviewed 4-5 marriage-alter 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.

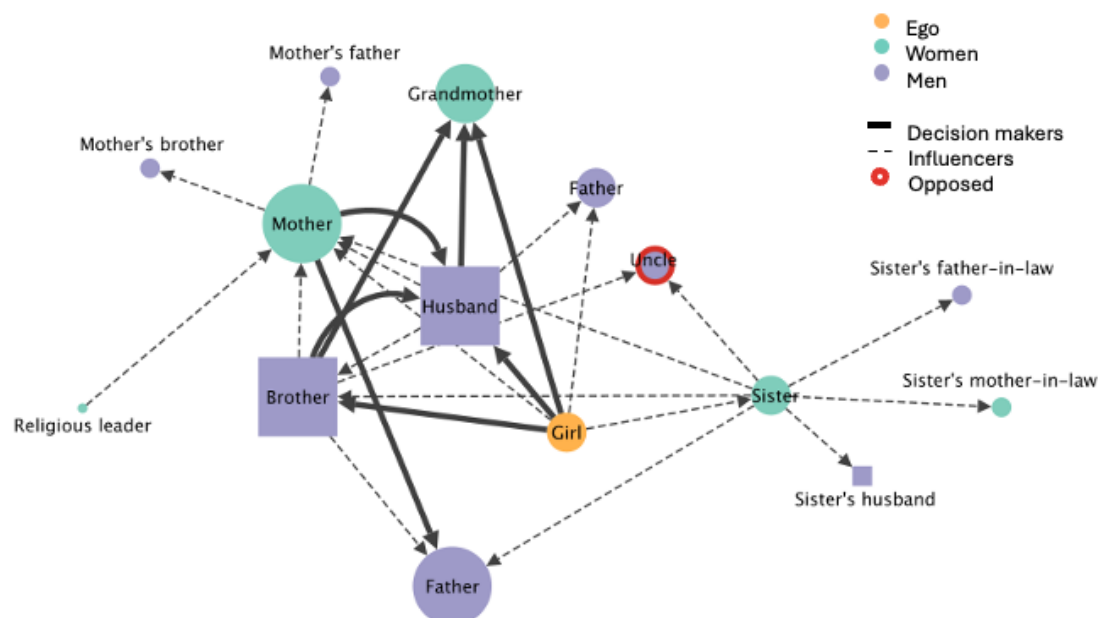
Box 5.1. Marriage network analysis definitions

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

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

5.1 Balochistan girl: A keen husband convincing an opposing family

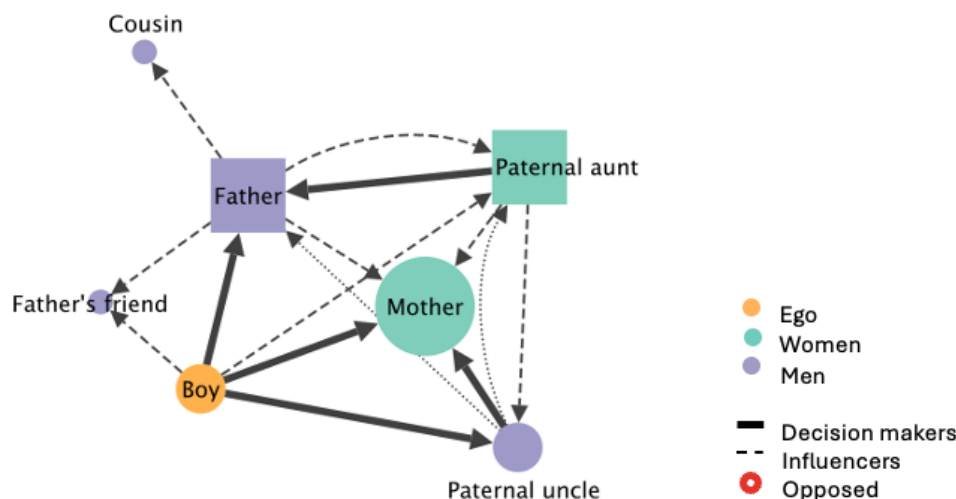
Figure 5.1. The marriage network of a girl living in Balochistan.



The girl from Balochistan was married at 12, with her marriage arrangement decided when she was two. Her marriage took place within her extended family, and interviews showed that decisions were controlled mainly by male relatives 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” (G, SNA, B). He confirmed, “Yes, I forced her” (B, SNA, B). The girl described having no agency: “I didn’t [agree]. They didn’t ask me” (G, SNA, B). She regretted the timing, saying she would have preferred to “play, spend time with my family, and do good things in life” (G, SNA, B). Her paternal grandmother was the key influencer, urging a marriage within the family: “My grandmother got me married. She said: ‘This is my daughter’s daughter. Get married here’ ” (B, SNA, B). Although fathers typically hold authority (as discussed in Section 9), this case showed a more complex network in which the grandmother, the husband, and the girl’s elder brother dominated decisions. The husband said he accepted the marriage because “She is my grandmother. That’s why I did not ask why she wanted me to marry my wife” (B, SNA, B). After her initiation, he pressured the girl’s elder brother, who described the groom as “a good boy” and “the best choice for her” (M, SNA, B). Some family members, including the mother and uncle, expressed concern about her young age. The mother said she “wasn’t completely supportive” (W, SNA, B), while the uncle asked, “Why are you marrying her off so young?” (G, SNA, B). However, both lacked decision-making power. Meanwhile, the key decision-makers—her husband and brother—recalled “no objections” and described the marriage as “mutually decided” (M, SNA, B).

5.2 Balochistan boy: Fulfilling a mother's last wish

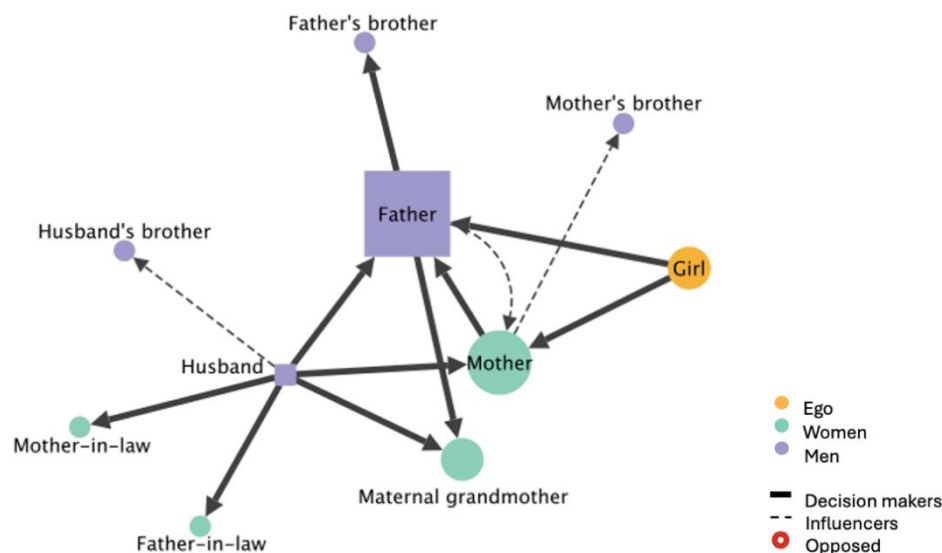
Figure 5.3 The marriage network of a boy living in Balochistan



The 17-year-old Sindhi boy from Balochistan had a smaller marriage network than the girl in the previous case. His marriage was arranged primarily by his father and paternal relatives, fulfilling the wish of his late mother, who had chosen his bride before her death. He explained, “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” (B, SNA, B). Her earlier decision carried symbolic authority: “It was my mother who chose her before she passed away” (B, SNA, B). The boy strongly internalised this obligation, saying, “I felt strongly about fulfilling what she wanted” (B, SNA, B). His father echoed that the timing rested on honouring her wish: “The primary reason he was married at that time was because the girl had already been chosen by his late mother” (M, SNA, B). While the father was the final decision-maker, he consulted siblings and relatives whose views aligned with carrying out the mother’s choice. Once the boy expressed willingness, the father acted immediately: relatives visited the girl’s family, who “agreed without any hesitation because it had already been discussed and planned within the family” (B, SNA, B). Both the paternal uncle and aunt confirmed that the mother’s earlier decision shaped everything. The uncle said, “Even though she was not alive at the time of the marriage, her decision influenced everything we did” (M, SNA, B). The aunt added that this guidance reduced others’ roles, since “everyone followed the same decision” (W, SNA, B). Although the boy felt partially consulted, elders ultimately made the final call: “The opinions of the elders were more important. They would make the final call” (B, SNA, B). He described this deference as cultural: “We follow the guidance of our elders. There isn’t much room for personal choice” (B, SNA, B). Alongside honouring his mother’s wish, the marriage was also practical. As he explained, “There was no one at home to look after my daily needs...So getting married was also a practical decision” (B, SNA, B). He concluded that without marriage, “it would have been difficult for me to manage my daily life” (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.

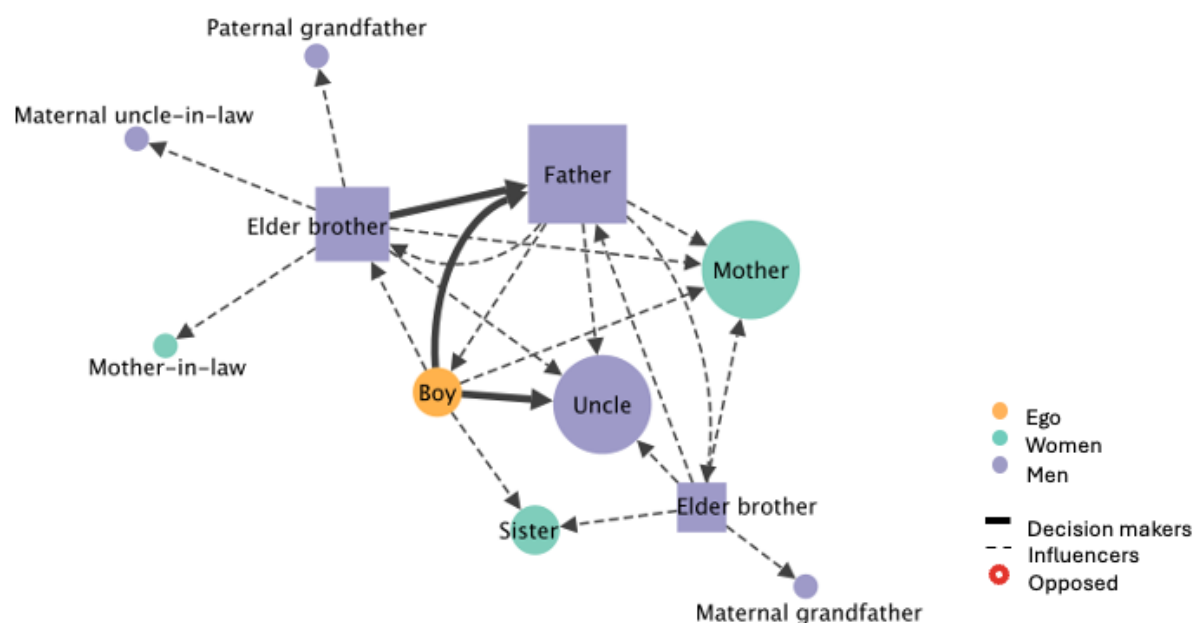
The Lashari girl from Punjab, married at 16, had a small marriage network composed mainly of close relatives, all of whom described the marriage positively and without disagreement. She had no involvement in the decision-making process, recalling, “All of them were made by my parents. I made no decision” (G, SNA, P). She expressed sadness and anger at her lack of agency, saying, “My parents will get angry if I try to give my opinion. They said I cannot go against their decisions” (G, SNA, P). Her descriptions reflected fear and deep submission to parental authority: “I was scared of my parents; I had to follow their decisions” (G, SNA, P). The family justified the marriage as necessary to protect honour, warning her that rejecting a proposal could lead to accusations of bad character (G, SNA, P). She internalised this belief, stating that remaining unmarried might expose her to gossip and reputational harm.

Although both parents portrayed the marriage as a family decision, the father identified the maternal grandmother as the key initiator who first proposed the match and even set the wedding date before she passed away. Her symbolic authority shaped the marriage process, and fulfilling her wishes was described as a matter of honour and continuity for both families. The husband, the girl’s maternal cousin, similarly emphasised the grandmother’s decisive role, recalling, “Grandma said that she would be my daughter-in-law. I was very young; I did not understand it” (B, SNA, P). The early engagement she arranged created a binding obligation that neither family questioned later.

For the husband, the marriage was less a matter of personal preference and more an inherited agreement. He reflected that the marriage fulfilled expectations set long ago by elders whose authority was unquestioned, suggesting that the match was shaped more by custom and family hierarchy than by the wishes of either spouse.

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



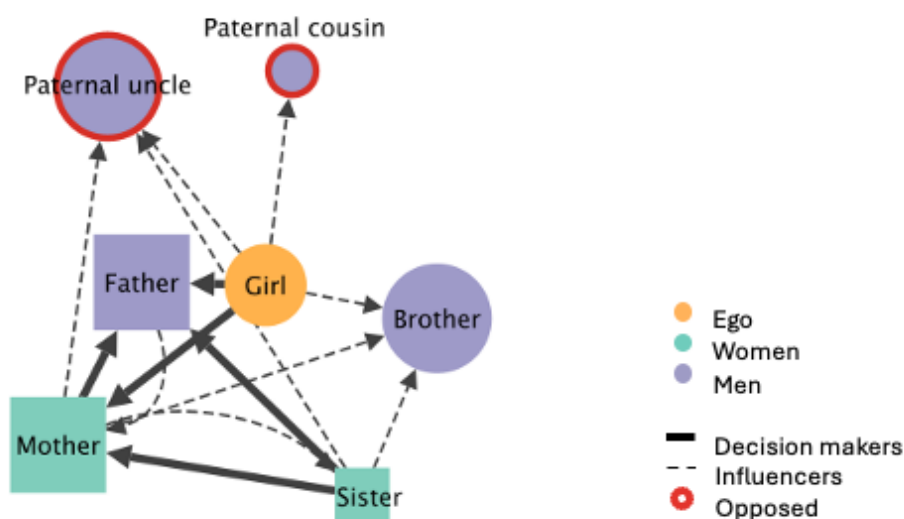
Note: The elder brother was not nominated by the girl as an alter.

The 17-year-old Punjab boy belonged to a large, interconnected family in which marriage decisions were concentrated among male elders. His marriage to his paternal uncle's daughter was arranged within the extended family, led primarily by his father and paternal uncle: "My father and my uncle decided my marriage" (B, SNA, P). Both were repeatedly nominated as key decision-makers, described as heads of the household. The father explained that several elders took part in discussions, representing both families: "Apart from me, my brothers, my family members participated in the decision of the boy's marriage" (M, SNA, P). The paternal uncle shared this authority, reinforcing that the marriage was understood as a family obligation agreed long before the couple could express any preference.

Other relatives, including the boy's mother, elder brother, and grandparents, acted mainly as supporters rather than decision-makers. The mother was informed but did not intervene, offering approval once arrangements were settled. The brother noted that elders had "equal involvement," but confirmed that the uncle and father made final decisions. The wedding date, however, was set by the paternal grandfather, who advised urgent timing due to economic concerns: "Dada told me to get him married as soon as possible. Because of the inflation, the situation will get worse" (M, SNA, P). The boy reported that his opinion was considered only within the limits of obedience: "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 customary arrangements 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



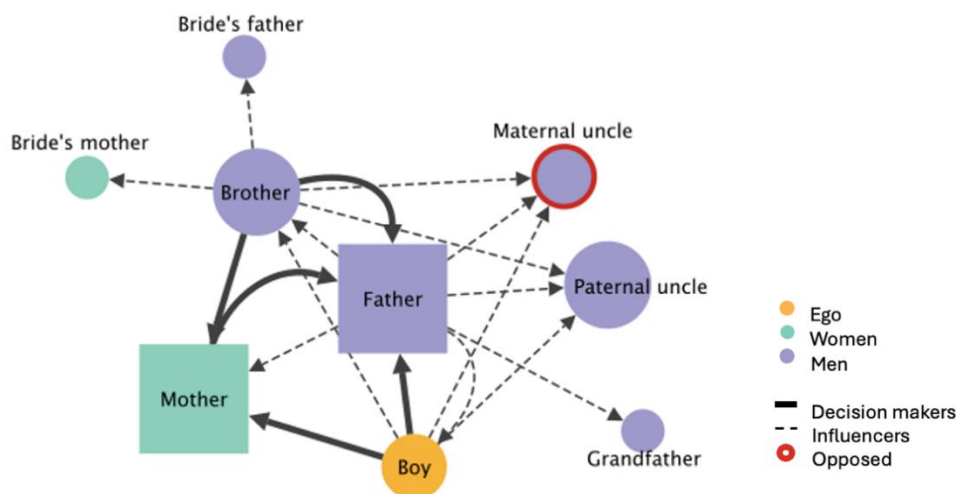
The girl from KP, married at 14 to her mother's maternal uncle's son, had a small marriage network reflecting her family's preference for marrying within close relations. Her father's illness and fear for his daughters' future were central drivers of the marriage. As she recalled, "He wanted to make 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 made mainly by her parents. The father initiated the process, believing girls should marry once they reached adolescence: "When a girl becomes over 14 and reaches adulthood, we arrange her marriage" (M, SNA, P). He described fulfilling his duty: "I arranged her marriage according to my own will; I married her off with my own hands" (M, SNA, P). The mother selected the groom from her maternal side and asserted, "I had full authority [to choose the groom], and I was happy about it" (W, SNA, P), though she acknowledged the father held greater authority overall. The girl described having no power in these decisions: "My father gave me two days to decide... I don't even remember much about how it all happened" (G, SNA, K).

Family honour and fear of gossip intensified the pressure to marry quickly. The mother reported threats from a relative who wanted the girl to marry into his own family: "My uncle threatened us, saying he would run away with her" (W, SNA, K). The parents married her to someone they considered respectable: "He was a good boy, didn't smoke or do drugs, came from a good family" (G, SNA, K). Throughout the process the girl was excluded: "I had no control over it. Everything was in the hands of my parents" (G, SNA, K). She felt sadness at marrying young but believed refusal would have brought anger and shame: "If I had refused, my parents and brother would have been upset" (G, SNA, K).

5.6 KP boy: The absolute power of a father

Figure 5.7 The marriage network of a boy living in KP

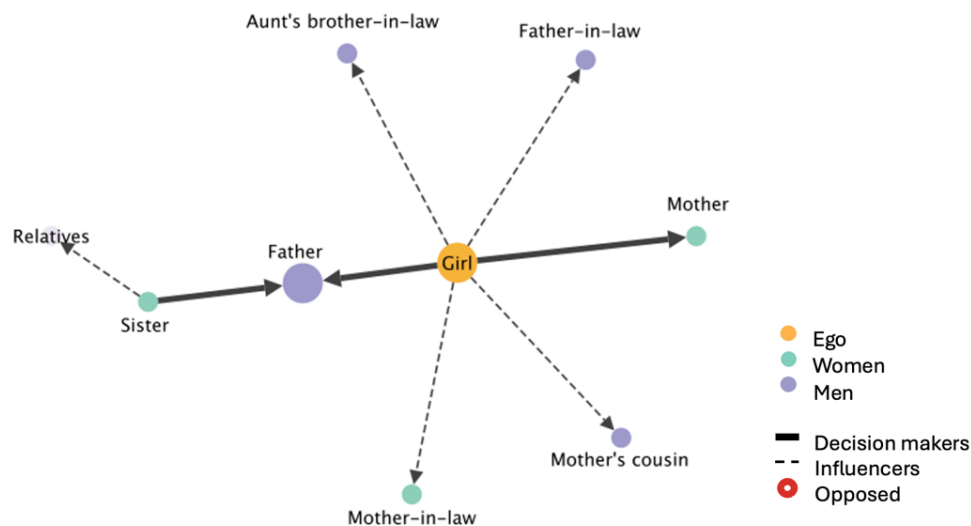


The boy from KP, married at around 15 to a relative chosen by his parents, had a small marriage network centred almost entirely on close kin, reflecting a strong preference for maintaining trust, predictability, and long-standing ties within the family. The match emerged through routine social interactions between households, which made the decision feel natural and largely unquestioned. As he explained, “She was our relative, and we used to interact with them regularly, meeting and socialising” (B, SNA, K). These everyday exchanges helped establish familiarity and eased the process of marriage arrangement. Marriage decisions were concentrated within the immediate family, led primarily by the father, who exercised full authority over the timing, approval, and rationale for the marriage. He consistently described himself as the one who “made the decision” and “took the lead”, while emphasising that brothers, the boy’s grandfather, and uncles were consulted only in supportive or advisory roles. For him, once a child reached adolescence, “the authority is fully with us”, reinforcing a belief that parents hold rightful control over their children’s marital futures. The mother confirmed this hierarchy while describing her own distinct role in identifying the bride, whom she described as “a good girl from a respectable family”. After the father expressed his preference — “I like this girl” (M, SNA, K) — she arranged the engagement and ensured that the match aligned with family expectations. The brother echoed the same structure, recalling that “The decision was entirely theirs”.

Within this arrangement, the boy's agency remained minimal. He accepted his parents' authority as both natural and appropriate: "They have the authority over all decisions, and the boy is not involved" (B, SNA, K). The underlying motivation for arranging the marriage at this age was to prevent him from falling into "bad company" or acquiring harmful habits. The father stated that the aim was to keep him "away from the wrong path" (M, SNA, K), a view shared by both the mother and the brother.

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

Figure 5.8 The marriage network of a girl living in Sindh



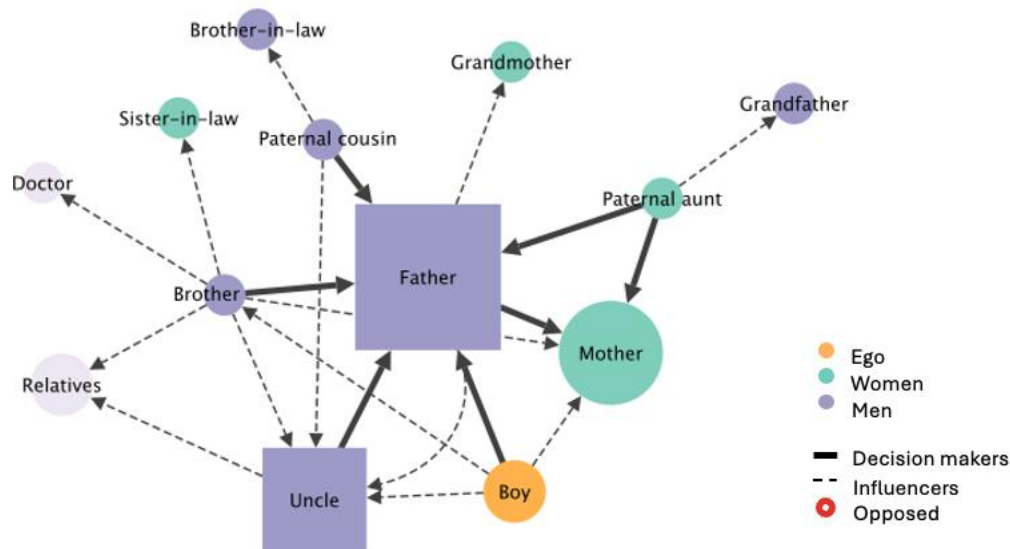
Note: The sister was not nominated by the girl as an alter.

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.

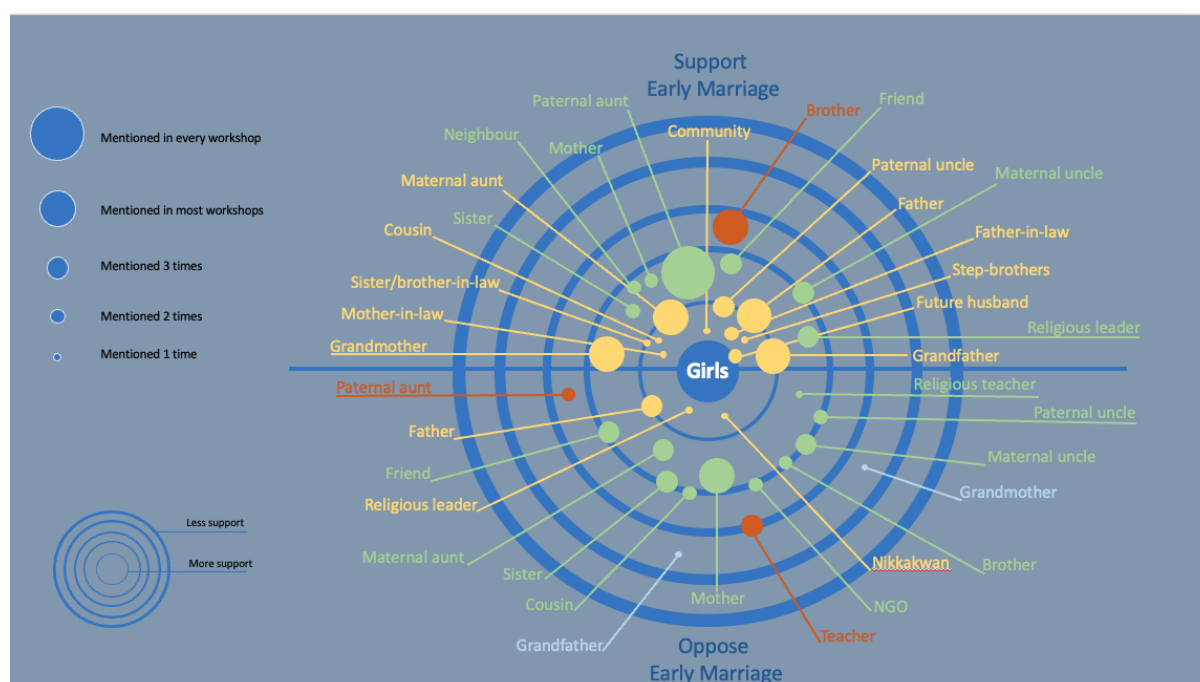
The man from Sindh, who was at the time of the interview 35 years old, was married when he was 17 years old. His marriage was arranged within his extended family, to a relative chosen by his father. The network surrounding his marriage was centred on the father and male-dominated, reflecting a strong 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.

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.

5.9.1 Who supports and opposes girls delaying marriage?

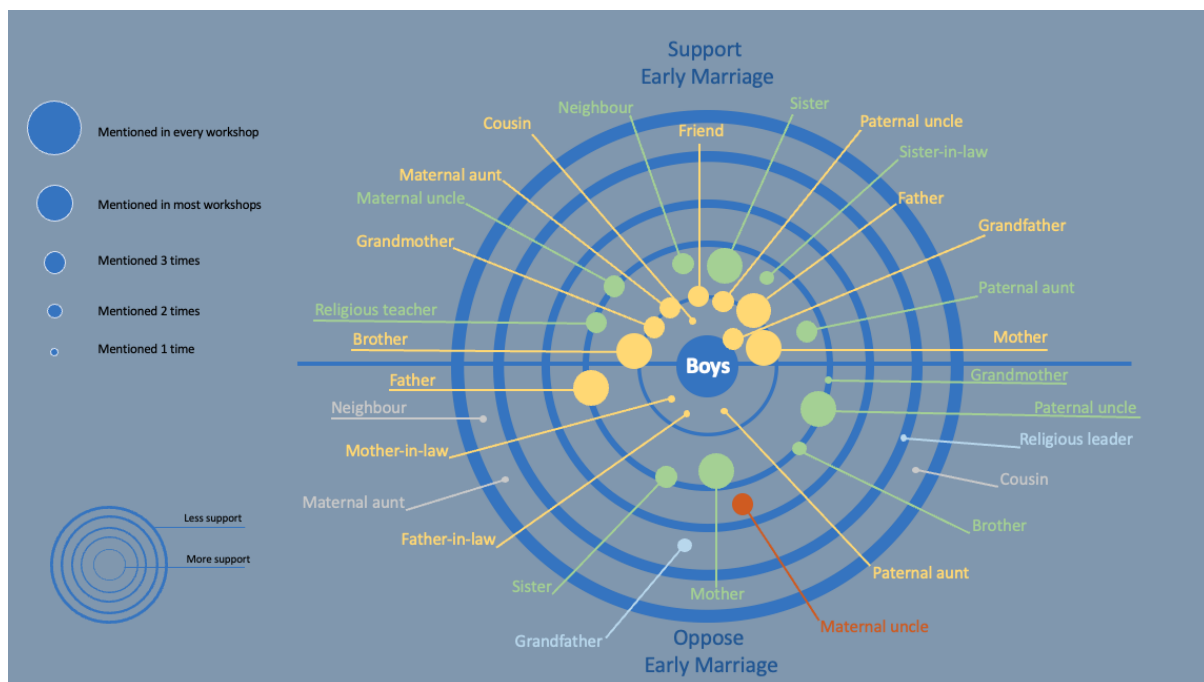
Figure 5.11. Graphical summary of the circles of support drawn by girls



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). 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 lower 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: “Madrasa 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; as one girl put it: “they (NGOs) 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). A smaller group of figures-particularly mothers, sisters, and teachers- were placed closer to the opposing side, encouraging boys to “study first and learn responsibility” (B, PW, K). 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 upper 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 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.

Section 6. Digital technologies and Child Marriage

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

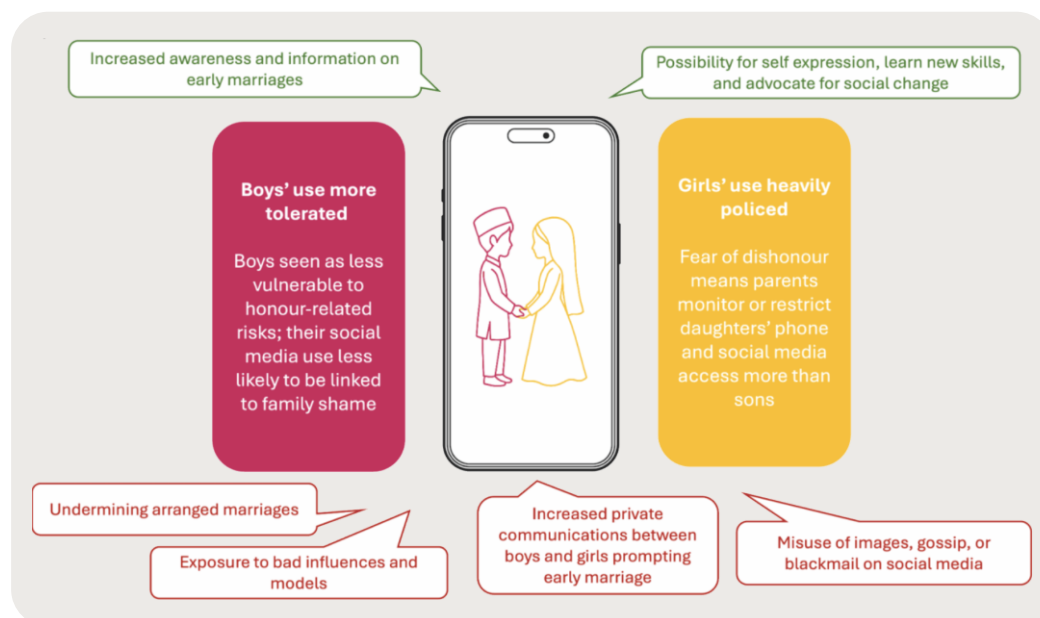
Relevant Research Question:

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

This chapter explores how digital technologies influence romantic relationships, marriage decisions, and the persistence or transformation of child marriage practices.

6.1 Changing social dynamics and relationship formation

Across all four provinces, participants described a fundamental change in how boys and girls communicate. In KP it was 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.

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.

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. Some families reportedly investigate potential grooms’ social media activity as part of the marriage vetting process. Conversely, exposure to online content was reported to sometimes delay marriage: “people are learning that delaying marriage leads to a better future” (W, FG, Y, P).

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. 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).

6.5 Gendered agency and empowerment

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: “Possibilities to express themselves, learn new skills, and even advocate for social change” (M, FG, Y, S).

6.6 Final Considerations

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 areas where honour remains tightly bound to female behaviour, these changes have intensified family anxiety and prompted earlier or forced marriages as parents act pre-emptively to preserve reputation. Where access to technology is greater, digital spaces have enabled young women to learn, connect, and advocate also become a source of moral panic that trigger restrictive or coercive responses.

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."

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. 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.

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.

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. 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.)

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.

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.

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).

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.

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).

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. Only a few participants, mostly from urban Sindh and Punjab, said that views are slowly changing.

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.

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.

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). 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). 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).

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.” Many participants also said that relatives and neighbours blame the parents for the girl’s behaviour, particularly the mother.

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.

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.

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)

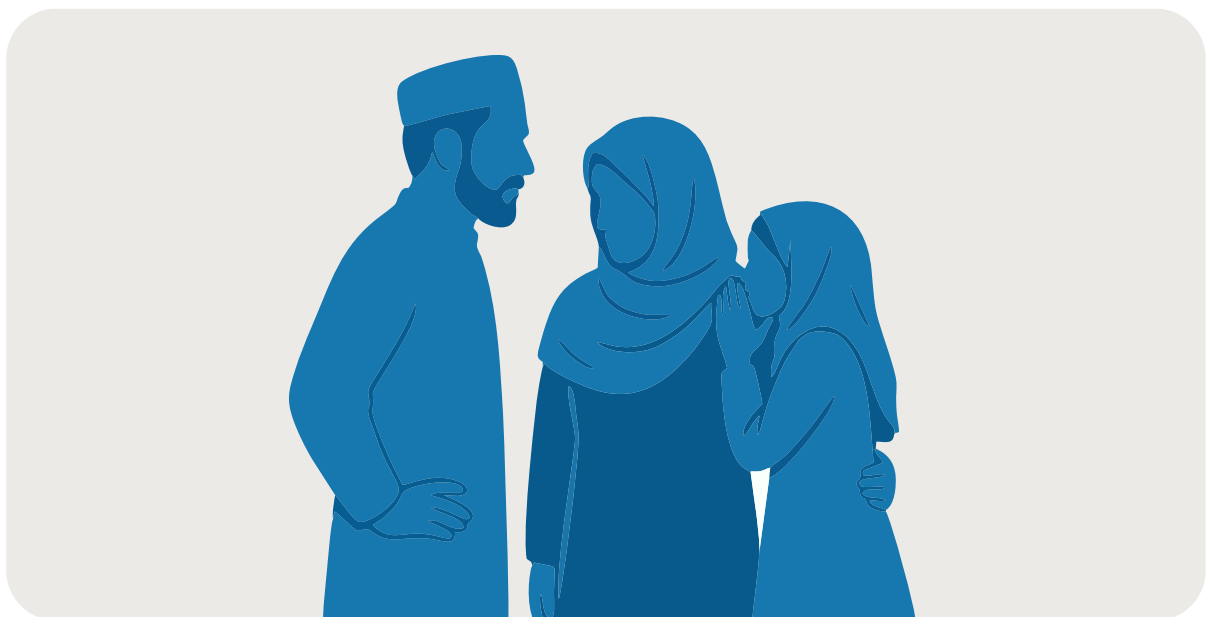
Relevant Research Question:

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.

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.

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). 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). 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.

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. 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). 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.

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). Peers rarely offered girls leverage in these narratives; instead, they often normalized child marriage or lacked standing to intervene.

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, II, Y, S). 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. Exceptions to girls’ lack of power and voice were reported and mostly came from participants in Punjab.

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.

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). “

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.

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).

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, II, O, B).

8.3 Key gender differences in children’s agency

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, II, 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, II, O, K). In contrast, “If a girl refuses, she is called stubborn or disobedient, whereas a boy can refuse easily” (F, II, O, 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. Power 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)

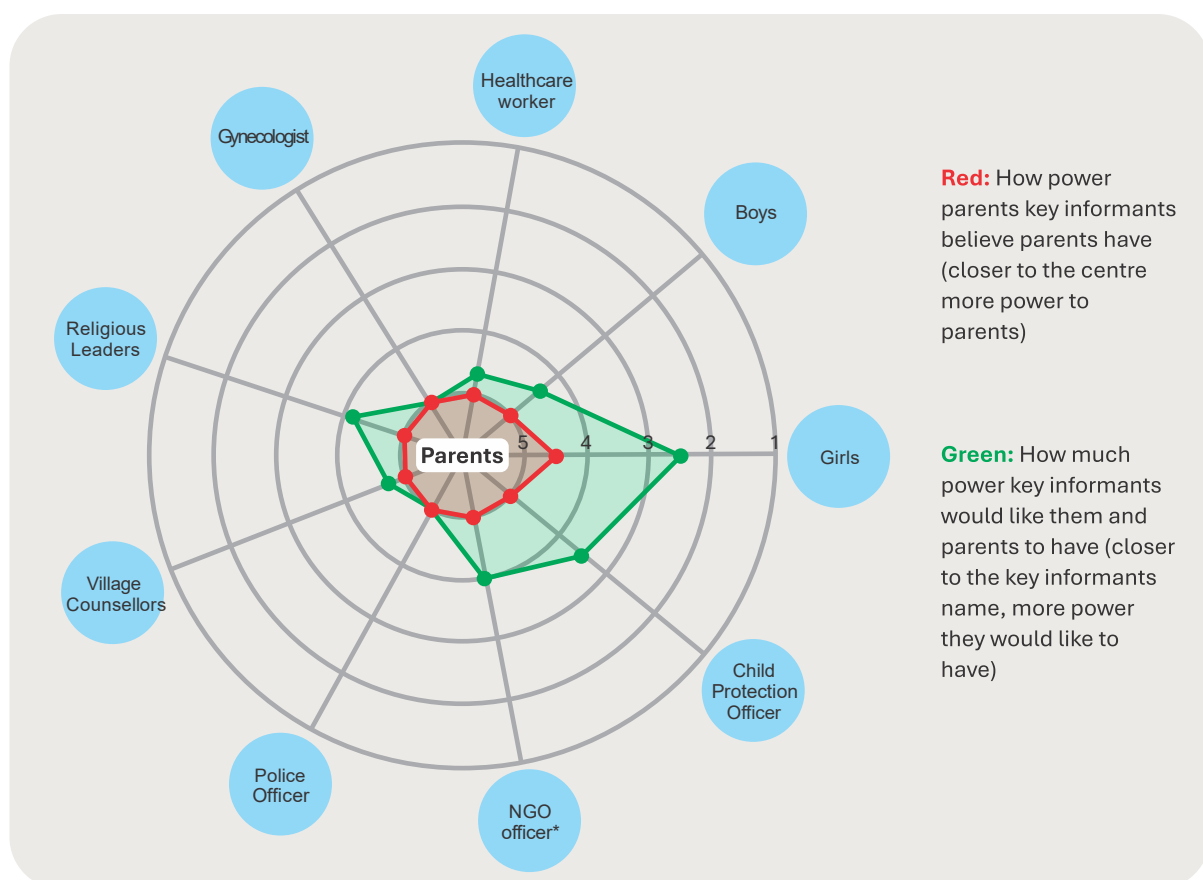
Relevant Research Question:

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. A description of the activity is included in the full report (Section 9).

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.

While the full report presents results for all five questions, this shorter version reports on timing of marriage (who decides when a girl, or a boy, should get married)

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).

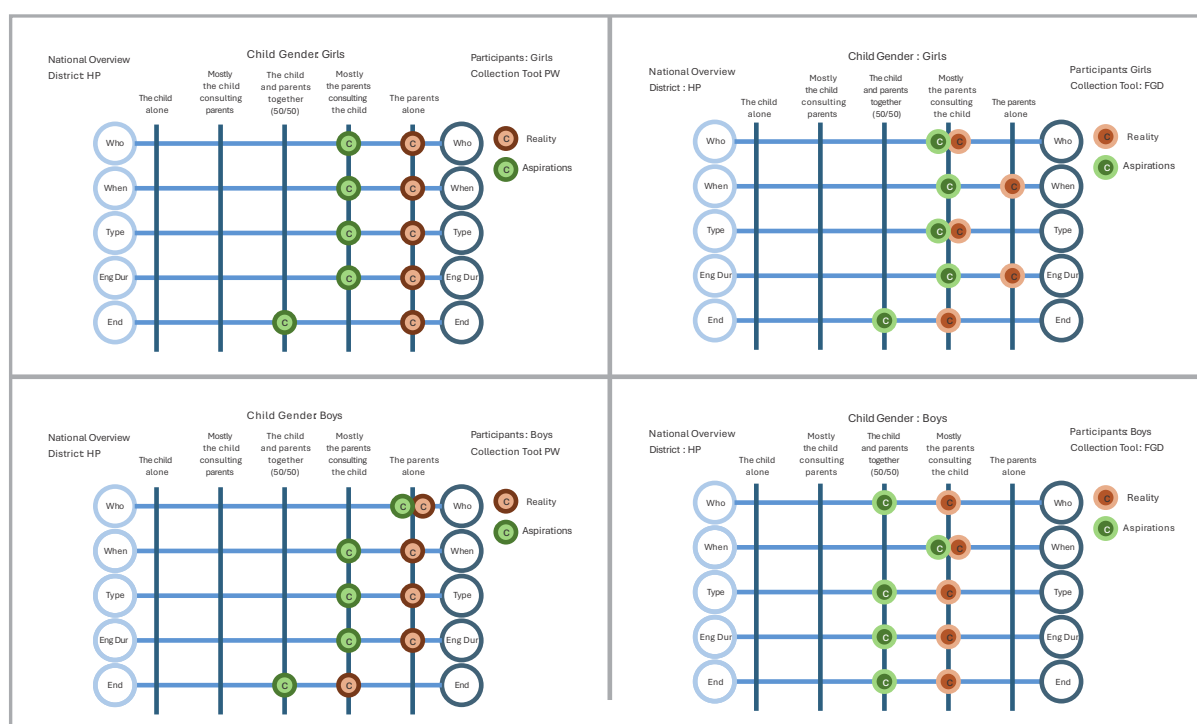
Table 9.1. Average aspirations and reality for girls' marriages

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

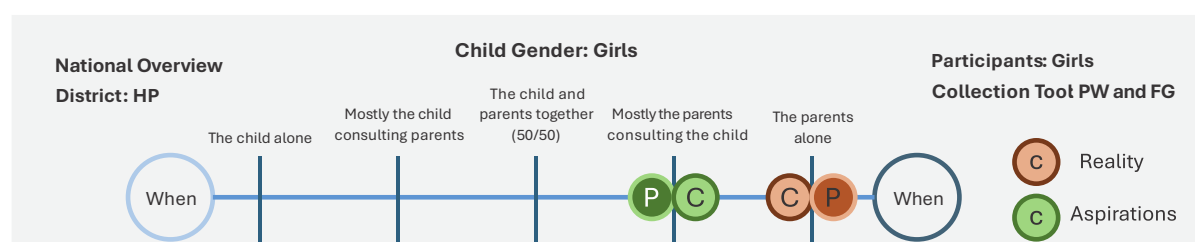
Legend

Child Alone	Most Child	50% 50%	Most Parents	Parents Alone
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Figure 9.4 National Overviews of Children's and Parents Average Responses



9.3.1 Who decides when a girl should a marry?



Who decides when a girls should marry?		
Province	Reality (who does)	Aspirations (who should)
Balochistan Girls	5	2.5
Balochistan Parents	5	3
KP Girls	5	5
KP Parents	5	5
Punjab Girls	4.5	3
Punjab Parents	4.5	3.5
Sindh Girls	5	4
Sindh Parents	5	4

Legend



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).

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 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

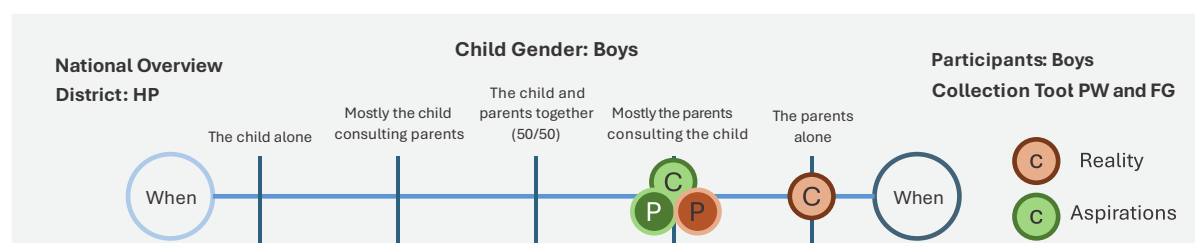
Province	Who		When		Type		Engage		End	
	Real	Asp	Real	Asp	Real	Asp	Real	Asp	Real	Asp
Balochistan Boys	5	3.5	5	4	5	1.5	5	3	4.5	2
Balochistan Parents	2	2	4	3	4	2	2	2	3	3
KP Boys	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.5	5	5	5	5	2	2
KP Parents	5	4.5	4.5	4.5	4	4	5	5	3	2
Punjab Boys	5	5	5	5	4	3	5	5	4.5	4.5
Punjab Parents	3	3	4.5	3	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 when a boy should marry?



	Who decides when a boy should marry?	
Province	Reality (who does)	Aspirations (who should)
Balochistan Boys	5	4
Balochistan Parents	4	3
KP Boys	4.5	4.5
KP Parents	4.5	4.5
Punjab Boys	5	5
Punjab Parents	4.5	3
Sindh Boys	5	4
Sindh Parents	4	4.5

Legend

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

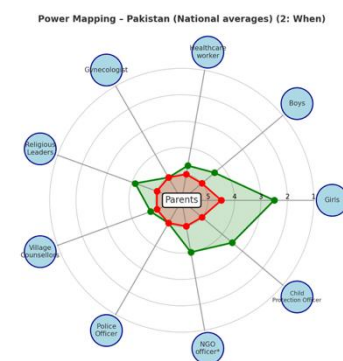
In KP and Sindh, both boys and parents showed limited interest in involving boys in decisions about when to marry, preferring that this authority remain primarily with the parents. As one man from KP stated, "Our wish is the final decision should rest with parents and children should only be consulted" (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.

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 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). 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).



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

Legend

Child Alone

Most Child

50% 50%

Most Parents

Parents Alone

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. 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, II, Y, B)

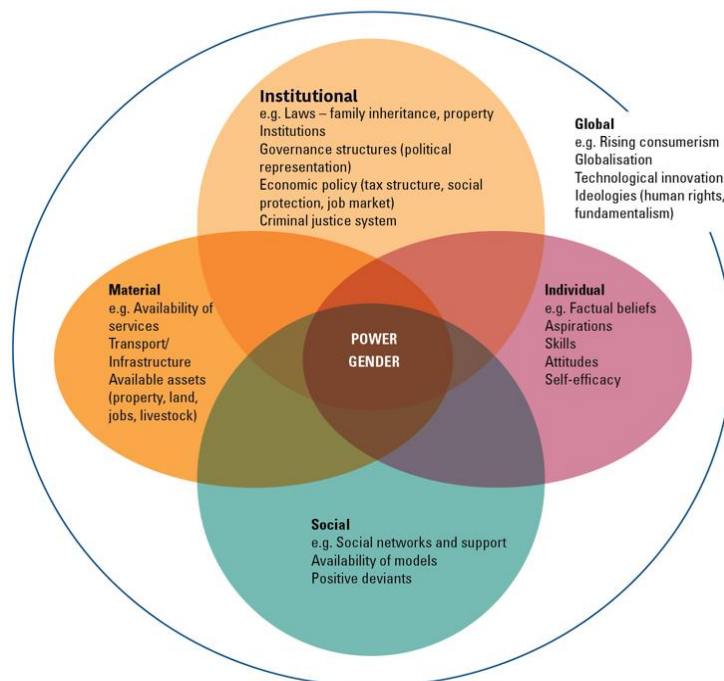
Relevant Research Question:

11. 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.

10.1. Social factors

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, II, 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, II, O, B).

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, II, Y, 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.

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. Religion was mentioned only occasionally in relation to boys’ marriage decisions.

10.2. Material factors

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, II, Y, B). Similarly, for boys, material motivations were also linked to the household’s economic conditions, but the rationale differed.

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, II, Y, P).

10.3. Individual factors

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.

10.4. Institutional factors

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. Some participants highlighted documentation barriers that undermined enforcement. 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).

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.

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:

12. 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.

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).

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). 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)

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.

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). 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).

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).

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).

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).

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.

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.

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 importance to elevate and spotlight positive ‘deviant’ examples of families (and especially fathers) ensuring delayed marriage for their 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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. 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.



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Street 5, Diplomatic Enclave, Sector G-5,
Islamabad, 44050, Pakistan

Contact: +92-51-2097700

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