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# MARRIAGE DECISION-MAKING: A FAMILY AFFAIR

INSIGHT INTO MARRIAGE DECISION-MAKING  
PROCESSES AND SOCIAL NORMS AROUND CHILD  
MARRIAGE IN LARKANA AND SHIPARPUR IN SINDH AND  
LODHRAN AND MUZAFFARGARH IN PUNJAB, PAKISTAN

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A key aim of the Marriage, No Child's Play programme is to change social norms that perpetuate early and forced marriage practices. To increase understanding of the role that social norms currently play in the communities where the Marriage, No Child's Play programme operates, Oxfam and partners conducted exploratory qualitative research, which will provide a basis for programme implementation and follow-up research.

The research consisted of in-depth interviews with 40 respondents: young and married men (n=10) and women (n=10), and mothers (n=10) and fathers (n=10). They were sampled from communities in the four districts of the Marriage No Child's Play's programme in Pakistan: Larkana and Shikarpur in Sindh, and Lodhran and Muzaffargarh in South Punjab. Partner staff supported the field research team in selecting respondents. The interview design combined the use of questions with a vignette – a hypothetical story related to early marriage. Oxfam and partners analysed and interpreted the results in a workshop.

The research found four social norms that are important in marriage decision-making processes:

- Respectable mothers leave the formal marriage decision-making to men but take responsibility for ensuring that a suitable proposal is accepted.
- Respectable girls agree to the marriage decisions taken by their parents.
- Marriageable girls need to be able to contribute to their husband's household in moral, intellectual and practical ways, including household chores and satisfying her husband's urges.
- Respectable girls are married as soon as they are mature, to protect the family honour.

In terms of relevance to Marriage, No Child's Play's programmatic responses, five conclusions were drawn:

- There are opportunities to work with mothers as influencers to delay the age of marriage – although not all mothers want to delay marriage. Awareness raising on the adverse effects of early marriage may be a first necessary step.
- Discussions on the concept of maturity could gradually change the ideas of mothers and fathers on the capabilities girls need to enter married life.
- Empowering youth may help, as there is a small opening for young people to delay their marriage, but they often are not able to voice their needs.
- Education can be an important protective factor to delay early marriage – but there needs to be more emphasis on safe and affordable secondary education and showing the potential financial benefit of an educated girl to the family.
- In all programme activities we need to be respectful towards the notion of family honour, which underlies the social norms that perpetuate early marriage.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

The Marriage, No Child's Play programme (2016-2020) aims to reduce the practice of child marriage and its adverse effects on young women and girls in Pakistan. The programme is implemented using a comprehensive, holistic approach to address child marriage, with a focus on prevention and providing alternatives.

A key strategy is to empower young women and men by changing the social norms (see Box 1) that perpetuate early and forced marriage practices. Child marriage is a violation of child rights, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979). The Marriage, No Child's Play's programme wants to encourage alternative pathways in marriage decision-making by raising communities' awareness on the harmful effects of child marriage, challenging unequal gender norms and supporting social action against child marriage and in favour of young people's rights.

To support our work, the Marriage, No Child's Play's programme has identified the need to increase our understanding of the role that social norms play in early marriage practices in the communities in Pakistan in which Oxfam and partners operate. The programme acknowledges the complexity of the various factors – including traditional, cultural, religious and economic – that influence child marriage practices. It is not a simple matter of belief that there is a right age for marriage – parents can also be motivated to marry off their children young to protect them or to escape poverty.

An initial desk review (2016) showed the important role of social norms and traditional customs related to age of marriage and decision-making processes. Around a third of parent respondents to the programme's baseline survey (2017) did not acknowledge child marriage as an important impediment to adolescent well-being (More Than Brides Alliance (MTBA) - Learning note, 2017). The survey indicated that parents are the main decision-makers in marriage processes: although a significant proportion of girls indicated that they were consulted at some point, in effect they have little or no say in when and whom to marry (baseline study report, 2017).

## 1.1 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

To build on the above insights, the Learning Agenda for the Marriage, No Child's Play's programme in Pakistan included a focus on assessing social norms on early marriage and marriage decision-making processes. Oxfam, in collaboration with partner organizations Bedari and Indus Resource Centre (IRC), implemented a qualitative research study as part of the learning and impact measurement strategy to inform programme implementation and further quantitative research.

**This research aims to unravel the social norms surrounding early marriage practices and the decision-making processes around marriage in Larkana and Shikarpur in Sindh, and Lodhran and Muzaffargarh in South Punjab, Pakistan<sup>1</sup>, to inform programme activities influencing early marriage practices in Pakistani communities.** The research is limited in scale: it is an exploratory study to increase our understanding of the role played by social norms and provide the basis for follow-up (quantitative) research.

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<sup>1</sup> For the ease of reading we will refer in the rest of this paper to Sindh and Punjab when disaggregated data is presented. However, our findings are not representable for the full provinces.

### **Box 1: The Marriage, No Child's Play's programme's understanding of social norms**

A social norm is a behavioural rule that people in a group conform to because they believe that most others in the group conform to it and that others in the group think they ought to conform to it – in other words, that the behaviour is both typical and appropriate (Alexander-Scott, Bell, Holden, 2016). Researchers use the term 'reference group' or 'reference persons' to refer to the people whose opinions matter (Alexander-Scott, Bell and Holden 2016: 8). A person's reference group can consist of individuals in their own lives and public figures.

Social norms are typically self-reinforcing at the group level, as people want to adhere to a norm if they expect that others will also adhere to it. However, social norms are not static: they are constantly re-negotiated (Mackie et al. 2012). They evolve through a process of trial and error, experimentation and adaptation. The social order they create is not designed but based on people's interactions.

Social norms are often formed in the realm of religious and traditional customs. Traditional practices such as early marriage can both shape and be held in place by social norms. More specifically, norms surrounding early and forced marriage can allow people to coordinate the marriage 'market' such that it adheres to religious and traditional customs.

This paper presents the results of the research. Chapter 2 gives an overview of the methodological approach. Chapter 3 highlights the findings: the contextual background of respondents, the reference group involved in marriage decision-making practices, and the social norms around early marriage and marriage decision-making. Chapter 4 draws conclusions and outlines the Marriage, No Child's Play's programme's response.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

The research assesses the main social norms around early marriage, reference persons and factors that influence marriage decision-making practices. Through in-depth interviews with 40 respondents, we aimed to identify potential entry points for discussions in the community and with duty bearers to shift existing norms that appear to have strong influence on early marriage practices. In this way, the research informs Oxfam and partners' work in Pakistan to create social action against early marriage practices and a supportive environment for empowered young women and men.

### **2.1 VIGNETTE RESEARCH**

Cislaghi and Heise (2016) suggest vignettes as a good methodology to investigate social norms when there is evidence that they sustain practices that violate women's rights. Vignettes help to shed light on the dynamics of a norm by allowing for sensitive issues to be explored in a less personal or threatening way than interview questions alone (Barter & Renold 1999). We combined the use of interview questions with a vignette describing a hypothetical situation in which a mother is approached by her cousin with a marriage proposal for her 14-year-old daughter. Interview questions based on this story aimed to distinguish respondents' empirical and normative expectations as well as their personal attitudes. Twists in the narrative of the story were used to elicit answers on topics such as non-compliance with norms, the role of religion, financial arguments and Pakistani marriage practices. The vignette was structured according to the vignettes in CARE's SNAP tool, as described by Cislaghi and Heise (2016), with content based on literature about the context of Pakistan and the experiential knowledge of Oxfam and partners. A complete overview of the story used can be found in the Appendix.

## 2.2 A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH FROM DESIGN TO ANALYSIS

The research was a collaboration between Oxfam and partners. Field activities were conducted by researchers from the Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad. The research proceeded over six months (October 2017 to March 2018) in the steps detailed below.

### 2.2.1 SCAN TO GET INSIGHTS FROM EARLIER RESEARCH IN THE PROGRAMME

Initial insight into possible norms involved in early marriage and marriage decision-making processes came from the desk review at the inception of the programme, the baseline survey (2017) and partners' experiential knowledge. To verify the focus, the researchers conducted a literature scan in academic and Oxfam resource databases. The literature scan confirmed the focus on social norms in relation to marriage decision-making, since there is no information available in scientific literature on this topic. The information on the marriage decision-making practices, that are described in literature, the desk review verified by experiential knowledge from the partners, formed the basis for the research design: the vignette, interview questions and sampling.

### 2.2.2 RESEARCH DESIGN WORKSHOP AND ENUMERATOR TRAINING IN PAKISTAN

The research design was validated and tested in a workshop in October 2017 with the participation of Oxfam in Pakistan, IRC, Bedari and the Quaid-i-Azam University research coordinator. During the workshop, Oxfam and partners reflected on possible social norms underpinning early marriage in the four districts in which the Marriage, No Child's Play programme is implemented in Pakistan. The partners' expertise in the local realities in these communities helped to fine-tune the interview guide and minimize the risk of the research activities doing harm. The vignette that formed the basis for the interview guide was contextualized through discussions and exercises.

To ensure good quality data, the field research team from Quaid-i-Azam University was trained on interview techniques, sampling approaches and the ethical guidelines of the World Health Organization for research on violence against women and girls (Ellsberg and Heise 2005). Oxfam partners coordinated with the field research team: partner staff accompanied researchers in the communities, ensuring their safety and supporting them in the selection of research respondents.

### 2.2.3 COLLECTING THE DATA

Individual interviews were conducted with ten boys, ten girls, ten fathers and ten mothers, making a total of 40 respondents. Table 1 gives further details. The respondents came from communities in the four districts of the Marriage, No Child's Play's programme: Larkana and Shikarpur districts in Sindh, and Lodhran and Muzaffargarh districts in South Punjab. In these districts, six villages were selected to provide a mixture of ethnicities, religion, village size and geographical spread.

The sampling aimed to represent a variety of viewpoints within some criteria for inclusion and exclusion. The purpose of the research is explorative, so the findings cannot be generalized to the whole population. The respondents were sampled to reflect a balance of education levels. Each group had specific requirements: mothers and fathers needed to have children aged between 10 and 20; boys and girls needed to be married and aged between 16 and 25. To prevent bias, the researchers excluded social activists against violence against women and girls and early marriage and individuals with whom Oxfam and partners have worked extensively. Within these criteria a convenience sample was taken. Partner staff supported the field research team with a list of 160 potential respondents, from whom the field research coordinator selected 40. All came from different households.

Respondents' consent was verbally requested at the beginning and end of the interview and recorded. All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and translated into English, saved anonymously, and where relevant accompanied by a document detailing any specifics of the context in which the interview took place. These measures were taken, following guidance from Ellsberg et al (2001), to ensure that the enumerators respected the respondents and no harm came to respondents or research staff.

When researching sensitive issues such as violence against women and girls, there is a risk that respondents may give answers they consider to be socially desirable rather than reflecting their true beliefs. The authors took precautions to limit this possible source of bias: enumerators were originally from the same areas as the respondents and conducted the interviews in the local language; and interviews focused mainly on the perceptions of others, which is less sensitive to comment on.

Respondents	# interviews	Mean age	Age range	Marital status	Mean age of marriage	Education
Girls	5 in Sindh 5 in Punjab	22	18-25	10 married	19	Varied
Boys	5 in Sindh 5 in Punjab	21	18-25	9 married 1 divorced	19	Varied
Mothers	5 in Sindh 5 in Punjab	44	30-49	9 married 1 widow	18	Varied
Fathers	5 in Sindh 5 in Punjab	42	29-60	10 married	21	Varied

Table 1: Final sample of respondents

### 2.2.4 ANALYSING THE DATA

The interview transcripts were analysed using a combination of inductive and deductive approaches, with data coded according to an analysis framework based on a literature review, the interview guide, and experience from similar research in Tunisia<sup>2</sup> and Nigeria.<sup>3</sup> The analysis was conducted by the authors and checked with key actors in the programme.

The research has limitations. It was not intended to be exhaustive – that is, we would expect new information to come up if more interviews were conducted – and it is difficult to disaggregate data by gender or region. We do, however, see patterns emerge across the whole group of respondents.

### 2.2.5 REFLECTION WORKSHOP

The main observations from the analysis were presented and discussed with partner organizations Bedari and IRC during a participatory reflection workshop in March 2018. Their observations based on their expertise and knowledge of local context – including a reflection on the contextual differences between Punjab and Sindh – are presented alongside the research findings in Chapter 3. The workshop also formulated the main conclusions and programmatic response presented in Chapter 4.

## 3 FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of the research. It first gives an overview of the context of the respondents, including their reference persons, personal attitudes towards early marriage and knowledge of legislation, then presents three of the clusters of social norms that emerged from the research.

### 3.1 THE CONTEXT OF THE RESPONDENTS<sup>4</sup>

Marriage in Pakistan is a union of the families of the groom and bride, rather than of two individuals. Most marriages are arranged: a member of the family, close friend or third party help bring together the groom and bride, who have often never met before. A substantial number of arranged marriages in Pakistan are either forced or at an early age.

<sup>2</sup> <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/young-couples-in-good-times-and-in-bad-social-norms-that-perpetuate-violence-ag-620344>

<sup>3</sup> <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/breaking-a-culture-of-silence-social-norms-that-perpetuate-violence-against-wom-620458>

<sup>4</sup> This section is mainly based on insights of Bedari and IRC, Oxfam's partners in the More Than Brides Alliance (MTBA) with ample experience in Sindh and Punjab.



The formal marriage ceremony is called 'Nikah', which literally means 'to collect and bind together'. All marriages must be performed by an imam, mufti or mullah licensed by the Government. In Islamic jurisprudence Nikah is the most common form of marriage, although the marriage contract need not be in writing – it may be oral, especially amongst people who are illiterate. While intended to be a permanent state, a Nikah can be terminated by the husband by engaging in a 'Talaq' process or the wife filing a suit for dissolution of marriage, which is called 'Khula'.

There are some differences between marriage processes in Punjab and Sindh, according to insights from Bedari and IRC, Oxfam's partners in the Marriage, No Child's Play programme.

In Sindh, a girl usually moves to her husband's house after the Nikah ceremony. In Punjab, in the experience of Bedari, Nikah does not necessarily mean that the girl moves in with her family-in-law right away – and the consummation of the marriage is generally delayed until this happens, which can reduce the risk of early pregnancy. Culturally, it is perceived as the parent's responsibility to protect their daughter until she moves to the groom's house: it risks the family's honour if a girl still living with her parents becomes pregnant, even after Nikah.

The transfer of money or goods as part of a marriage is often linked to family honour. In Punjab, dowry is generally practiced: the bride's family provides the groom's family with money or goods. In Sindh, bride price practices are more typical: these involve an investment from both families, but often result in financial gain by the family of the bride. Whether financial cost or gain is associated with a girl's marriage can influence families' decision-making on when, whom and how to engage in a marriage.

Two traditional marriage practices deserve attention to understand the marriage decision-making process. Watta Satta, bride exchange between two families, is common in both provinces: it accounts for 66-78% of marriages in Sindh and 44-47% in Punjab, according to a large-scale survey in 2017 (Baseline report: Marriage no Childs Play Pakistan, 2017). Vani, marrying off a girl as dispute resolution between families, is a factor in 5-17% of marriages in Sindh but only 0-4% in Punjab, the lowest incidence in Pakistan (Rehan and Qayyum 2017).

We asked the respondents about their experience with these practices, and found many different interpretations. In some communities, for example, Watta Satta is practiced only within extended families, while in others it carries the stigma of being associated with poor families who want to evade giving dowry or bride price. In some communities Watta Satta is planned at birth, while in others it comes up as an option at the usual age of marriage. Some respondents stated that Watta Satta is done to accommodate the preference of sons in marriage:

*"She will marry off her daughter [if there is a Watta Satta proposal] for the sake of her son's happiness. Because sons are more dear and near to mothers than daughters."*

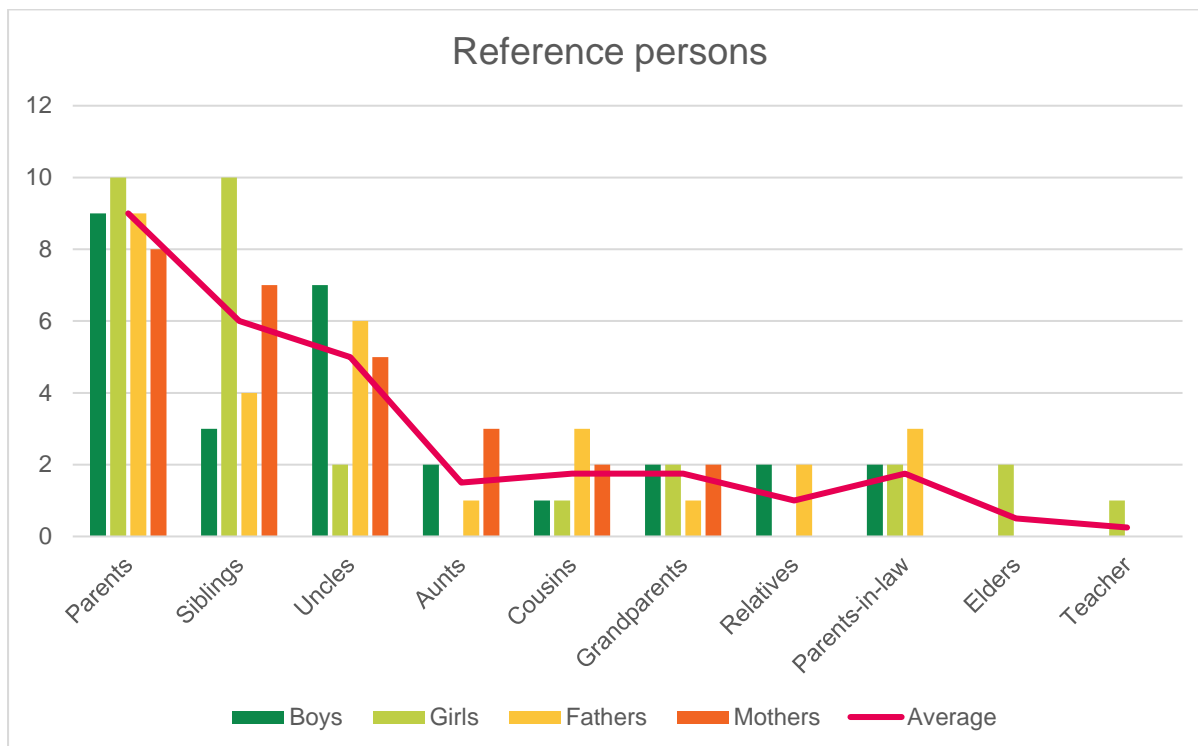
(female respondent from Sindh, 24 years old)

Only a few respondents had ever witnessed Vani, though almost all agreed that a girl would be married off if necessary to prioritize her brother's future.

## 3.2 PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AROUND MARRIAGE

### 3.2.1 THE REFERENCE GROUP

At the beginning of the interview, respondents were asked to think about a moment in their life when they were involved in a situation regarding marriage, and list five people they shared their experience with, asked for advice, and/or were inspired by. These were not necessarily actual decision-makers or people who could influence the decisions. We assume that the people mentioned here can be taken to represent the respondents' reference group. However, this will not be an exhaustive list, since there was no further probing on the influence people may have by setting the norms, besides advising individual cases.



**Graph 1 – Reference persons of respondents**

As depicted in Graph 1, respondents predominantly reported close family members – such as parents, siblings, and uncles – as their reference persons in decision-making processes around marriage. While parents were important for all groups of respondents, siblings were more important for girls and mothers than for boys and fathers. Uncles were more important for boys, mothers and fathers than for girls. Peers and friends were not mentioned as a separate group, but it is suggested by the research team that these are mostly cousins and siblings since families in Pakistan live in close relationship with their extended family.

Interestingly, respondents did not mention community or religious leaders – but we know from literature and experience that they do influence social norms on marriage decision-making processes. This may be because we asked only for the top five people, rather than an exhaustive list, or it may indicate that the norm-setting influence of community and religious leaders is more indirect, and they are not typically asked for direct advice in individual cases.

### 3.2.2 PERSONAL ATTITUDES OF RESPONDENTS REGARDING EARLY MARRIAGE

When asked about their personal attitude regarding early marriage, 16 respondents said they were in favour and 22 against. The split was similar across all groups: parents and children, men and women, from Sindh and Punjab.

At the end of the interviews, we asked respondents if they knew about any legislation prohibiting early marriage (the marriageable age for girls as 18 in Sindh and 16 in Punjab), and, if so, if it was implemented in their community. As shown in Table 2, most respondents knew about legislation and reported that it was not implemented.

Answer	# of respondents from Sindh	# of respondents from Punjab	Total # of respondents
Yes, I know of legislation and it is implemented	1	3	4
Yes, I know of legislation but it is not implemented	12	11	23
No, there is no legislation/ I don't know if there is legislation	7	6	13

**Table 1 – Respondents' knowledge of legislation prohibiting early marriage**

### 3.3 SOCIAL NORMS SURROUNDING EARLY MARRIAGE IN PAKISTAN

This section presents the data that led our analysis to identify four social norms that influence marriage decision-making processes and early marriage:

- Respectable mothers leave the formal marriage decision-making to men but take responsibility for ensuring that a suitable proposal is accepted.
- Respectable girls agree to the marriage decisions taken by their parents.
- Marriageable girls need to be able to contribute to their husband’s household in moral, intellectual and practical ways, including household chores and satisfying her husband’s urges.
- Respectable girls are married as soon as they are mature, to protect the family honour.

#### 3.3.1 MOTHERS’ AND GIRLS’ ROLES IN MARRIAGE DECISION-MAKING

We asked respondents to reflect on their own role and the roles of others in the marriage decision-making process. We found that the process is complex, with formal and informal roles and responsibilities for mothers, fathers, girls and boys. We cannot distinguish a clear pattern of differences in responses according to the respondents’ gender, age or regional background. The views presented in this paragraph are from mothers and fathers, daughters and sons, reflecting on their own role and the role of others in marriage decision-making processes.

Role of mothers	Role of fathers
Check if their daughter is mature enough to marry or not (12 respondents)	Check if their daughter is mature enough to marry or not (1 respondent)
Check if a proposal is good (e.g good character groom, decent house) (12 respondents)	Check if a proposal is good (e.g. good character groom, decent house) (19 respondents)
Ask consent of their daughter (11 respondents)	Ask consent of their daughter (2 respondents)
Discuss marriage proposals with their husband (16 respondents)	
Take decisions around marriage for their daughters independently (10 respondents)	Take decisions for their daughters on their own (9 respondents)
Take decisions in consultation with their husbands (16 respondents)	
Opinion will not be heard if elders or men are involved (5 respondents)	
Can give excuses to delay marriage (5 respondents)	Want daughters to get married as early as possible (3 respondents)

**Table 2 – Roles of mothers and fathers in marriage decision-making**

All respondents agreed that parents are the main decision-makers, although opinions differed on the relative influence of mothers and fathers, as summarized in Table 3. Mothers appear to have influence before the decision is made – for example, holding off marriage proposals until the daughter is mature enough, and checking if a proposal is suitable, although proposals often come from community members who already know each other. Some respondents say fathers have little influence, with mothers determining the decision, while others say fathers take the decision on their own. A more nuanced view of the data suggests that mothers often have strong influence even if fathers have the final authority to make the decision. As one respondent put it:

*“If mother is willing for that proposal, then she will try to convince her husband to become willing too. If not, then she will torture her husband and he will be compelled to accept this. Even then,*

*if he is not getting convinced, she will get a senior of the tribe or a saint to convince him.”* (Male respondent from Punjab, 23 years old)

Bedari and IRC note that making the formal decision about his daughter’s marriage is often linked to a father’s honour – public announcements tend to state that the father has agreed to the marriage. The two partners recognize that the mother often manages relationships between families around arranged marriages, but both were surprised at the relative weight respondents gave to the role of the mother in the decision-making process, given the patriarchal context of the four districts.

This leads us to formulate the following social norm: **respectable mothers leave the formal marriage decision-making to men but take responsibility for ensuring that a suitable proposal is accepted.**

How meaningfully girls can participate in the decision-making process is unclear, as suggested by the responses in Table 4. The most common sentiment is that even if they are asked, they simply cannot refuse. The Marriage, No Child’s Play’s Baseline Report (2017) also found that girls have little to no say in when and whom to marry, even though a significant proportion indicated that they were consulted. However, some respondents do see more potential for influence – they say girls can refuse a proposal if they want to continue their education, or they can ask their parents to be married to a certain boy. Parents were more likely than young people to say that girls can influence the decision, which may indicate that young people do not think they can claim the influence their parents say they are willing to afford.

Based on the research in combination with the MBTA Baseline Survey, we assume the following social norm: **respectable girls agree to the marriage decisions taken by their parents.**

Statement	# of respondents
Girls have no role in marriage decision-making <i>“No, there is no role of girls, just the father will decide.”</i> (Male respondent from Sindh, 36 years old)	2
Girls can only agree/give their consent to decisions of their parents <i>“In our community or in the surroundings, if our father and mother are agreed regarding our marriage or engagement, then we should follow them. Because they do not want to see their girl face a hard time or be in a congested environment, where we [daughters] cannot live our life safely and happily. Whatever they do, they will do best for us. We do not ask them for our preference or our choice. They will always think better for us.”</i> (Female respondent from Sindh, 20 years old)	20
Girls’ opinions will be heard only if their family is educated <i>“Since 8 to 10 years, parents are considering girls’ choices. It is because of education. Because of education, the mind of people is getting changed.”</i> (Male respondent from Sindh, 29 years old)	2
Girls may refuse a marriage proposal to study more <i>“If she [girl] is studying and wants to complete her education, she would refuse to get married now.”</i> (Female respondent from Punjab, 19 years old)	15
Girls ask their parents to be married to a certain boy <i>“The scenario is different in our community [...]; the girls themselves say to their parents that they want to get married. Their mother and father do</i>	4

<p><i>not pay attention that their daughter is all grown up and they should get her married. They [girls] by their own self say that 'I like this boy and want to marry him'.</i>" (Female respondent from Sindh, 25 years old)</p>	
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**Table 3 – Roles of girls in decision-making of their marriage**

One-third of all respondents – and over half the male respondents – thought there is no difference at all between the role of boys and girls. However, while only a tenth of respondents said that girls can ask to be married to a certain boy, more than a third of respondents said that boys can ask to be married to a certain girl. In general, the data point to girls having less power in consent than boys, although different views were expressed:

*"There is no such big difference among the marriage decisions of girls and boys. Nowadays, it's like that girls are discussing things with their mothers. They tell their mothers that, we like that guy... If a boy likes someone then he asks his father that 'I want to marry that particular girl'. Nowadays, parents are not agreeing with such kind of decisions from boys. They are accepting the girls' choices but not of boys. The reason behind that is the environment."* (Male respondent from Sindh, 21 years old)

When factors that influence early marriage were discussed, respondents did not speak in terms of refusing a proposal but only delaying when a marriage takes place.

### 3.3.2 CAPACITIES NECESSARY FOR MARRIAGE

One factor that influences the age of marriage, identified by many respondents, is that the groom's family is looking for a girl who can contribute to their household. Three capacities were mentioned often: a girl needs to be able to do household chores, have an education, and be mature.

The ability to do household chores is especially important for the groom's family. Respondents mentioned chores such as cooking, cleaning and taking care of children, which are linked to traditional gender roles. As a respondent explains:

*"Here, a boy's parents take a girl who can do work and can cook food. If a girl is not educated and cannot do work, then what will be her benefit?"* (Male respondent from Sindh, 21 years old)

However, the need for this capacity will not protect girls from early marriage: IRC and Bedari state that girls are often expected to contribute extensively to household chores and other related care work from the age of around 11 and 12: so at that moment they are capable of the tasks of marriage. Only when a household is very overburdened, for example through illness of the mother or a big herd that needs to be taken care of, the capabilities of doing household chores may protect girls from early marriage.

Education was brought up as a potential protective factor by about three-quarters of the respondents: the groom's family tends to prefer an educated girl, and continuing studies seems to be an accepted reason for a family to postpone marriage. However, this must be weighed against the willingness of a girl's own family to bear the financial burden of investing in the education of someone who will leave the household eventually anyway. At the same time, the girl is considered a financial burden by living in her parent's house, which may prevent the girl's parents from investing in her education. So, decisions about delaying marriage for the education of a girl may be influenced by family decisions about the relations they want to build with other families and their willingness to invest in that. Education can thus be a protective factor, but drivers of early marriage may be stronger. As one girl respondent notes:

*"People will gossip about Noor, that why she is getting education. Ultimately, she has to cook for another family in future. So, she should be married as a proposal is offered."* (Female respondent from Punjab, 24 years old)

IRC and Bedari note that continuing education tends to be a protective factor only until a girl has graduated primary school – for most girls, secondary education is out of reach as it is too costly to access and involves risks to safety when traveling to school. They add that 'educated' could also refer to education in the Quran. Education has most potential as a protective factor when it enables a girl to earn money, as this changes the financial equation around dowry or bride price – but this situation is unusual, as it tends to occur only when a girl has secondary education.

The final factor, 'maturity' refers to sexual, physical, mental and emotional maturity, not specifically to age: indeed, many respondents in this research did not know their own age. Often respondents referred to maturity as the age at which girls should marry, but not many indicated at what age they think girls become mature. One said that early marriage did not happen in their village because girls were mature when they married – but later indicated the age of maturity as 12 to 14 years old.

In some interviews, respondents made a distinction between the marriage ceremony (Nikah) and the consummation of marriage: they stated that in early marriage, the girl will be married but will not have a sexual relationship yet. Other respondents did not make this distinction, and said girls need to be mature enough to have sex before getting married:

*“Only girls can understand the after marriage consequences of early age, she will have kids. Children are a blessing but before having children what happens first? This thing [intercourse] we will have to do.”* (Female respondent from Sindh, 25 years old).

In relation to raising children, maturity was related not only to the capacity to perform care tasks such as feeding and dressing, but also to moral concerns related to raising children in Pakistani traditions.

From these protective factors, we can formulate the following social norm: **marriageable girls need to be able to contribute to their husband's household in moral, intellectual and practical ways, including household chores and satisfying her husband's urges.**

### 3.3.3 THE ROLE OF FAMILY HONOUR, TRADITION AND RELIGION IN EARLY MARRIAGE

The research found three drivers of early marriage linked to family honour. First, many respondents noted that unmarried 'mature' girls are seen as promiscuous. Parents are afraid their daughters will have 'affairs' and 'commit mistakes' if they remain unmarried. Some respondents link this to television and movies:

*“The sexual desperation caused as a result of modern day films can also be dealt with by early marriages”.* (Male respondent from Punjab, 60 years old)

Marrying girls secures the family honour, as it is then expected of them to have sex and bear children. Bedari recognized the fear of promiscuity more strongly from experience in Punjab than did IRC in Sindh, though respondents there also emphasized this as a driver for early marriage:

*“As the parents think that she [daughter] may harm their respect or can be the reason of their defame. Therefore, they will prefer to do early marriage. She can escape, or she can love with someone else. If the people came to know about such a thing happening, then this would be spoiling of the respect and a loss. Resultant, people will talk bad about her [daughter] and about her family. Therefore, in order to stop girls from doing bad things, it's better to marry them early.”* (Male respondent from Sindh, 25 years old)

Second, many respondents noted the religious or cultural argument that it is a sin to keep menstruating girls at home:

*“In our community, normally people think that when a girl is grown up she must get married as soon as possible. Because the number of days a girl who is menstruating is at home, her blood is on her parent's heads. It is a bleeding – a shame over parents”.* (Male respondent from Sindh, 49 years old)

Third, some respondents noted that it is seen as the parents' duty to make sure that their daughters are married during their lifetime. Both parents and girls can be afraid that if they refuse a marriage proposal or delay marriage, they will not get any other or better proposals:

*“It happens too that proposals are rejected and the daughter becomes overaged by the time, some parents accept proposals at the earliest fearing the overage factor.”* (Male respondent from Punjab, 60 years old)

This final finding is derived from a smaller base of responses than the others.

From these findings, we assume the following social norm plays a role in influencing the age of marriage: **respectable girls are married as soon as they are mature, to protect the family honour.**

## 4 CONCLUSION AND PROGRAMMATIC RESPONSE

The norms identified in the research are all important, but some are more interesting than others for the purposes of the Marriage, No Child's Play programme. During a joint reflection workshop with Bedari and IRC, we explored which findings are already sufficiently addressed in the programmatic response and identified five areas which require further thought. These areas are relevant for both Bedari and IRC, apart from that the partners also took their lessons fitting their own context in Punjab and Sindh.

First, the role of mothers in marriage decision-making was considered a key finding: while a respectable wife ensures that the husband is seen to make decisions on marrying off a daughter, mothers can exert strong influence in the background by subtly managing family relations. The workshop identified opportunities for the Marriage, No Child's Play programme to work with mothers as influencers to delay the age of marriage of girls, including through the identified potential protective factors of education, maturity and ability to engage in household chores. However, as not all mothers want to delay marriage, raising awareness of the adverse effects of early marriage for their daughters is a necessary first step. Sensitizing male community members on the role of women in decision-making could also help to empower mothers.

Second, the findings around the capacities of girls to contribute to their husband's households in practical, intellectual, and moral ways may present starting points for the Marriage, No Child's Play programme. Discussions on the subject of maturity could gradually change mothers' and fathers' ideas about the capabilities girls need to enter married life and promote a greater inclination to wait.

Third, empowering young people could help: we found that there is a small opening for daughters and sons to delay their marriage, but they often feel not heard or not able to voice their needs.

Fourth, while access to education for girls is already an integral part of the Marriage, No Child's Play programme's theory of change, the research prompted IRC and Bedari to reflect that it is often only protective to a certain age. More emphasis on safe and affordable secondary education and showing the potential financial benefit of an educated girl to the family, may change perspectives and convince parents to allow girls to go to school rather than get married.

Finally, the research showed how important it is for all programme activities to be respectful towards the notion of family honour. Empowerment and sensitization efforts need to address the impacts on family well-being and status of delaying marriage.

As well as sharpening the focus of Oxfam and partners activities, this exploratory research has informed plans for further research – notably a randomized controlled trial to be conducted by the University of Oxford from March to December 2018. The Marriage, No Child's Play programme's midline- and end line impact evaluation, planned for the end of 2018 and beginning of 2020 respectively, will further dive into the mechanisms around the norms mentioned above with the hope that changes will be observed.

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# 7 APPENDIX – VIGNETTE STORY

## TEMPLATE

### Mapping the reference network of the respondent

Before we start with the stories, I would like to ask you some general questions about yourself and people who are of influence in your life. This is to define your peers in relation to marriage decision-making. You may answer with specific names of people and explain their roles in your life, or only mention their roles (*e.g. mother, father, religious leader, best friend*).

Think about a moment in your life when you were involved in a situation regarding marriage. Describe the moment briefly and reflect on the people you shared your experience with, asked for advice or got inspired by. List the five people [or roles] whose opinion you most valued in that particular case or that you would value most in similar (new) cases (1 being most important). Again, these people can be anyone – for example, they can be living or deceased, and they can be people you know personally or do not know personally.

### Stories on marriage practices

Thank you for giving insight into the people who influence you in decision-making around marriage processes. We will now start the fictional story, though inspired by real experiences. Maybe you will also recognize things from your own life or the lives of others in your surroundings. However, we won't ask you to reflect on them from your own personal experience.

We would like you to reflect on them from your own opinion towards the story and how you think other people would think about the story (*explanation if needed: e.g. think about the people in the story and whom they would ask for advice. What would these people think about the story?*).

So, we will ask you to step into the shoes of the people that matter to the persons in the story and tell me how they would respond to the situation and how you think they would think about the people involved and their actions...

	<i>Aim of the question</i>	Literal instructions to the respondent
Narrative: Setting the background	<i>Respondents are introduced to the scenario: the main character is faced with a situation when a social norm would come into play, and he/she needs to decide whether or not to comply</i>	I will tell you a story of a mother I will call Fatima. Fatima lives in a community like you. She ..., .., .... ( <i>name some things in the surrounding of the respondent that also can be true for Fatima. For example, think about housing situation, daily labour, family setting, level of poverty etc.</i> )  One day Amina, Fatima's cousin, comes over to visit Fatima's family.

		<p>They both have daughters of 14 years old. Amina announces that her daughter, Zainab, is engaged and getting married in a month's time. Amina states she believes that Fatima's daughter, Noor, should also get married as she is becoming a woman.</p> <p>Amina reveals that she also knows a family from her village who are interested in marrying their son to Fatima's daughter, Noor.</p>
Questions	<i>Personal attitude towards this situation</i>	<p><u>Main questions:</u></p> <p>Do you recognize this story from practices in your community? <i>Please ask for an explanation about similarities and differences.</i></p> <p>Who are generally involved in the decision-making processes around marriage?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> </ol> <p><u>Probing questions:</u></p> <p>What are the different explicit and implicit roles for the people involved in marriage decision-making?</p> <p>What are the differences for boys and girls when they are about to get married?</p>
	<i>Empirical expectation: this focuses on what the respondents think mothers generally do in these situations</i>	<p><u>Main questions:</u></p> <p>What would most mothers like Fatima do in this situation?</p>
	<i>Normative expectation: this focuses on what the respondents think the community would expect mothers to do in these situations</i>	<p><u>Main questions:</u></p> <p>What would Amina and most other mothers expect Fatima to do in this situation?</p>

<p>Narrative: Noncompliance of the main character</p>	<p><i>Respondents are presented with a twist in the narrative: the main character does not comply with the (potential) norm</i></p>	<p>But Fatima doesn't want to marry off her daughter Noor so young. She first wants Noor to finish her secondary school and study.</p> <p>Fatima announces to her own family and to the visitors that she does not want her daughter Noor to marry at this age.</p>
<p>Questions</p>	<p><i>Personal attitude towards this situation</i></p>	<p><u>Main questions:</u></p> <p>What happens generally if people disagree in the decision-making process?</p> <p>What is the role of mothers, like Fatima, in decision-making regarding marriage of their daughters?</p> <p>When do you think that the father should become involved? What do you think the father would decide?</p> <p><i>Probing questions:</i></p> <p>What is your opinion about mothers who speak out like this in your community? What is the role of Noor herself?</p>
	<p><i>Possible sanctions: what happens when the social norm is not followed</i></p>	<p><u>Main question:</u></p> <p>How would people around Fatima react towards her decision? <i>(focus on social sanctions)</i></p> <p><i>Probing questions (only if the respondent doesn't talk about these people themselves):</i></p> <p>What would Amina and most other mothers say about Fatima's decision?</p> <p>What would Fatima's husband say about her decision?</p> <p>What would be the reaction of Noor to her mother's decision?</p> <p>What would be the reaction of uncles, or other extended family members to Fatima's decision?</p>

		<p>What would the parents of the potential groom, and the extended family say about Fatima's decision?</p>
		<p><u>Main question:</u></p> <p>If this becomes known in the wider community, what would people say about Fatima, and who would become involved in the discussion? (e.g. community influentials such as elders or religious leaders).</p> <p>What would people say about Fatima's daughter Noor?</p>
	<p><i>Respondents are asked: If the character incurs sanctions for noncompliance, would she change her mind?</i></p>	<p><u>Main question:</u></p> <p>In what circumstances would the reactions of people around Fatima make her change her mind?</p> <p><u>Probing questions:</u></p> <p>Would the opinions and reactions of her peers make Fatima change her mind about refusing the marriage of her daughter Noor?</p> <p>Would the opinions and reactions of her (extended) family make Fatima change her mind about refusing the marriage of her daughter Noor?</p> <p>Would the opinions and reactions of her community members make Fatima change her mind about refusing the marriage of her daughter Noor?</p>
	<p><i>Exceptions: respondents are asked under what circumstances it would be okay for the non-complying character to break the norm.</i></p>	<p><u>Main question:</u></p> <p>Are there any circumstances where it would be considered more or less acceptable for Noor not to get married at her age?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> <li>4.</li> </ol> <p><u>Probing question:</u></p>

		<p>Would Fatima's level of agency, confidence or respectability in the community give her opportunities to influence marriage decision-making?</p> <p>Would the attitude of Fatima's husband give her opportunities to influence marriage decision-making?</p> <p><u>Main questions:</u></p> <p>What would be different if the discussion was about marrying off a son?</p> <p>What would be different if the discussion was between a man and a woman, for example Fatima and her uncle?</p> <p>Do you expect that Noor's own opinion on whether to marry will be taken into account?</p>
Narrative	<i>Role of religion in early marriage</i>	What if the father emphasized the importance of religious teachings and scholars endorsing early marriage?
Questions	<i>Empirical expectation</i>	What would people in general in the community think of this argument?
	<i>Normative expectation</i>	What would people in general think about Fatima's rejection in light of this religious argument?
Narrative	<i>Respondents are presented with a twist in the narrative: a financial burden is threatening the family</i>	I will give you some more information about the family situation. Namely, the husband of Fatima has leased a small plot of land and he is depending on the harvest. This story takes place in the lean season, and the father is worried that the harvest may not be good this year.
Question		<u>Main questions:</u>

	<p><i>Role of financial factors in this story</i></p>	<p>How would this situation change the reaction of the husband towards Fatima's choice? (e.g. does the prospect of a dowry change decision-making?)</p> <p>To what extent would the reaction of the husband towards Fatima's choice be influenced by the amount of dowry involved?</p> <p>To what extent would it make a difference if an influential or wealthy family shows interest in their son marrying Fatima's daughter? (e.g. the father may see Fatima as an opportunity to get a share of a rich man's assets).</p> <p>To what extent would it make a difference if Fatima and/or Noor contribute(s) financially to the family, for example through work outside the house as a dress-maker or hair dresser?</p> <p>What would people in the community say about Fatima and her husband if they turn down an offer in such a situation?</p>
<p>Narrative</p>	<p><i>Respondents are presented with a twist in the narrative: access to reproductive health services</i></p>	<p>I will now give you some more details on the conversation between Fatima and Amina.</p> <p>Amina explained to Fatima that she took her daughter, Zainab, to a Lady Health Worker (LHW) as she experienced some pain in her belly. However, Amina was not satisfied with the support of the LHW, as she provided only local remedies. Amina asks Fatima if she can suggest a better LHW, dispenser or doctor as Noor is of the same age as Zainab.</p>
<p>Question</p>	<p><i>Role of reproductive health in the story</i></p>	<p><u>Main questions:</u></p> <p>Do you expect that Fatima has experience with taking Noor to see a LHW, dispenser or doctor? Please explain your answer.</p> <p>To what extent do you think Fatima is able to provide Amina with advice on what she should do (as Noor is not married yet)?</p>

Narrative	<i>Respondents are presented with a twist in the narrative: access to reproductive health services</i>	Amina further explains that the LHW stated that the pain Zainab experienced is natural and that she has reached puberty. The LHW advised that Zainab should get married. Amina shares this advice with Fatima to marry off Noor as she is of the same age.
Question	<i>Role of reproductive health in the story</i>	<p><u>Main questions:</u></p> <p>What role do LHWs, dispensers or doctors play in decision-making around marriage of girls at the start of their puberty? Would Fatima change her mind about marrying off Noor on the advice of the LHW?</p> <p>What do you think most mothers like Amina would expect Fatima to do with the advice of the LHW?</p>
Narrative	<i>Respondents are presented with a twist in the narrative: the marriage is a Watta Satta exchange</i>	<p>I will now change the story around Amina's proposal to Fatima to marry off Noor.</p> <p>Imagine that Noor has one elder brother. He is interested in marrying a girl in a nearby village. Amina's proposal to Fatima was in response to Noor's brother wish to marry the girl that he is interested in.</p> <p>The family of this girl is only willing to marry off their daughter to Noor's brother as part of Watta Satta. They demand that Noor should marry their son if Noor's brother is to marry their daughter.</p>
Question	<i>Role of different types of forced marriage – Watta Satta</i>	<p><u>Main question:</u></p> <p>Is Watta Satta a common practice in your community? Please explain under what circumstances it happens.</p>
	<i>Empirical expectation</i>	What would mothers like Fatima in general do in this situation?
	<i>Normative expectation</i>	<p>What would Amina and most other mothers find an appropriate reaction of Fatima in a case of Watta Satta?</p> <p>Who would become involved in a case of Watta Satta?</p>



	<i>Potential sanctions</i>	<p><u>Probing questions:</u></p> <p>When would the father become involved? What do you think the father would decide?</p> <p>Are there others in the community who would have an opinion on Fatima's decision?</p> <p>If Fatima decides not to marry off Noor, would the consequences be different now that it is a case of Watta Satta?</p>
Narrative	<i>Respondents are presented with a twist in the narrative: the marriage is to settle a dispute (Vani)</i>	<p>We will now change the story once more. Imagine that Noor's elder brother has been accused of having a friendship with a girl of a different community. Noor's father is highly concerned about the reaction of Jirga influentials.<sup>5</sup> He is concerned that Noor's brother could face Karo Kari.<sup>6</sup></p> <p>Imagine that Amina's proposal to Fatima was aiming to prevent this risk, by giving Noor as Vani/compensation to the family that accuses Noor's brother.</p>
Question	<i>Role of different types of forced marriage – Vani</i>	<p>Would Fatima's decision to marry off Noor be different if the proposed marriage was to settle this dispute between Fatima's family and another family (Vani)? <i>Please ask for an explanation of the answer.</i></p> <p>How would it affect the marriage decision-making process to marry off Noor?</p> <p>Who else would become involved in the discussion? (e.g. uncles, community influentials, Jirga influentials, etc.)</p>
Closing question	<i>Personal attitude: recognition of early marriage as violence</i>	<p>If you now look back at this whole interview and the story, what do you think about the marriage decision practices that mean young girls, like Noor, are married off at the age of 14?</p>

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<sup>5</sup> Jirga is an assembly of leaders to settle disputes.

<sup>6</sup> Karo Kari means premeditated honour killing.

		<p>What are the drivers for young girls, like Noor, to be married off by her family?</p> <p>Are there actions Fatima or Noor could take to influence the decision-making process around marriage?</p>
	<i>Social norm: recognition of early marriage as violence</i>	<p>What do your influencers, who you pointed out in the first question, think about the marriage decision practice that mean young girls, like Noor, are married off at the age of 14?</p>
	<i>Awareness of legislation</i>	<p>Do you know if there is any legislation to protect girls from marrying at a young age?</p> <p>If yes, how is this implemented in your community?</p> <p>Beyond laws, is there any social penalty in your community in reaction to girls marrying at a young age?</p>

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