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## Not Raised ‘To Make Big Decisions’: Young People’s Agency and Livelihoods in Rural Pakistan

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**ABSTRACT** We examine young people’s testimonies about their capacity to make important decisions and their livelihood experiences from agricultural communities that span Pakistan’s countryside. Our analysis is guided by theories of agency that focus on how a young person’s capacity to identify and act on goals is mediated by their local opportunity structure – shaping their household relations, livelihood choices, and prevailing social norms. We apply comparative and contextual qualitative analysis methods to our dataset of 12 village cases, which include 24 sex-specific youth focus groups. We also present a secondary survey analysis. We find high rural employment levels among young men in recent years, and a decline in rural young women’s employment from already low levels. The young study participants mainly observe limited capacity to make important decisions. They repeatedly attribute this to expectations of strict deference to elders and other norms about their gender, young age, junior household position, marital status, and socio-economic standing. They also report negotiating and resisting confining norms; however, young women’s agency appears especially constrained by norms that discourage their physical mobility and visible economic roles. We examine two villages where some youth express healthier levels of agency and more desirable economic opportunities than others, and the significance of kinship relations and fluid norms in this environment. We call for models of young people’s agency that register more effectively the importance of household relations, the gatekeeper role of elders, and the contextual and fluid properties of norms, as these dynamics both constrain and enable young people’s agency.

**Keywords:** Youth; agency; social norms; gender; agriculture; Pakistan; qualitative research

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. *Study context and rationale*

Pakistan currently ranks as the world's fifth most populous country, of which nearly two-thirds is rural (World Bank, 2019, p. 44). Sixty per cent of the country's rural population is under age of 24 [National Institute of Population Studies (NIPS) and ICF, 2019, p. 23]. Agriculture continues to serve as the backbone of the country's economy, contributing 19.2 per cent to GDP and employing 38.5 per cent of the labour force (Finance Division, 2021, p. 17). Agriculture is thus vital for young people's livelihoods, but the sector has seen only marginal improvements in productivity over the past three decades (World Bank, 2019).

Wheat is the country's largest crop, with a share of 1.8 per cent of GDP (Finance Division, 2021, p. 13). There is both great need and scope for improving crop yields and food security (Kirby et al., 2017). Access to food is uneven and malnutrition widespread; 38 per cent of children under age five are stunted nationally, and this rises to 47 and 50 per cent in the Balochistan and Sindh provinces, respectively (NIPS and ICF, 2019, pp. 211–212). Only 54 per cent of rural children attend school at the primary level; this falls to 32 per cent for middle and secondary school (NIPS and ICF, 2019: 16).

Pakistan's sizeable rural youth population potentially presents an opportunity for the country to achieve a more inclusive and prosperous development trajectory, but this will require that these young women and men muster the agency to overcome many barriers. Our article explores normative influences on young people's capacities to make important decisions and strengthen their livelihoods. We explore expressions of these norms in testimonies gathered from 24 sex-specific focus groups on their decision-making and economic experiences. This evidence is part of the dataset for 12 agricultural community case studies in four provinces of Pakistan, which, in turn, form part of the 137 cases in 26 countries prepared for the GENNOVATE qualitative comparative field study on gender norms, agency, and capacities for agricultural innovation (Badstue et al., 2018).

Our article builds on and contributes to youth studies from rural regions of the Global South that conceive of young people's agency and trajectories as socially embedded processes conditioned by their local opportunity structure. For our analysis, important dimensions of the local opportunity structure include the social relations within and among smallholder and landless household institutions, the vibrancy and inclusiveness of the local economy, and the local social norms which influence gender and generational status differences and underpin 'negotiated and constrained interdependencies within and across the generations' (Punch, 2015, p. 263; see also Elias et al., 2018; Kabeer, 2000; Leavy and Hossain, 2014; Morarji, 2014; Rietveld et al., 2020; Robson et al., 2007; Srinivasan, 2014; Sumberg et al., 2020; White, 2015, 2019).

Our article draws on this relational theory to provide a comparative perspective on young people's perceptions of their decision-making capacity and livelihood

experiences. Next, we review this theory including empirical examples from rural Pakistan. We then present the study sample and methods. In the empirical section, we explore regularities as well as differences in how young women and men perceive their agency and livelihoods; and we present two contexts that appear to provide more supportive opportunity structures for some of their youth relative to others. We then discuss our findings, including the unevenness of young people's agency, the gendered nature by which local economic opportunities appear to change, and the contribution of gender and generational norms to these dynamics. We conclude with reflections on the implications of our findings for research and for agricultural and development strategies aiming to reach rural youth.

### **1.2. Theoretical and empirical literatures informing analytic approach**

Our analytic approach draws from contributions by Naila Kabeer (1999, 2000). With a focus on the foundational importance of household relations in all societies, Kabeer puts forth the notion of 'intergenerational contract' to improve understanding of normative status expectations attached to a person's gender, household position, and age. These social rules give rise to complex power relations among household members due to their differentiated and ever-changing roles, obligations, and claims on resources over the life course of the household (Kabeer, 2000). Under conditions where household enterprise remains crucial for family welfare and old age security, as in the case of the multigenerational households which are common to rural Pakistan, investments in children (and especially girls) will be constrained (Kabeer, 2000). On questions of agency – or the 'ability to define one's goals and act upon them' – Kabeer argues for interpretations informed by the local opportunity structure – encompassing not only the resources and choice sets available to an individual, but also the social rules that condition access to resources and how choices are conceived and furthered (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438).<sup>1</sup> In short, processes of exercising agency and pursuing livelihoods, and whether such processes are perceived to be empowering, are mediated by the various roles and behaviour expected of women and men in their social setting.

The South Asia region is well known for the potent norms governing household roles and relations. These social expectations vary in the region but generally include preferences for women to bear sons, family wealth transfers that privilege sons, obligations on brides' families to provide dowry and send daughters to reside

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1 Kabeer employs the term resources rather than opportunity structure and defines resources to include both conventional economic resources as well as 'human and social resources' such as the 'rules and norms that govern distribution and exchange in different institutions arenas' and 'give certain actors power over others' (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437). This aligns with Lane's (2001, p. 297) notion of opportunity structure: '[R]ules that shape social actions and the resources that furnish agents with the power that makes it possible (to varying extents) for them to act'.

with in-laws, subordination to in-laws for young married women, and expectations for sons to support elders (Bhanbhro, 2021; Critelli, 2010; Hafeez and Quintana-Domeque, 2018). The marked status distinctions that govern household relations are rooted in ‘a strong ideology that links family honour to female virtue’ and to associated practices of *purdah* which restrict women to the household and call for their accompaniment in public (Critelli, 2010, p. 238; Bhanbhro, 2021). The durability of these norms in Pakistan is, in part, a product of the country’s struggles for independence (gained in 1947), which gave prominence to ‘a gendered Islamic discourse’ centred on women and family life (Dunne et al., 2017; Feldman, 2006, p. 17). This literature reveals, nevertheless, many dimensions, aside from religion, to be important for understanding the persistence of gender and generational hierarchies, including longstanding ethnic, caste and socio-economic divisions (Bhanbhro, 2021; Critelli, 2010).

At the household level, the senior male generally serves as the main authority, and all men are expected to contribute to sustaining the family economically. Young men are customarily subordinate to older male siblings as well as their fathers and other older kin. From a young age, boys are encouraged to ‘socialise with other men’ and limit time spent with their mother, sisters, and (eventually) their wife (Bhanbhro, 2021; Mumtaz and Salway, 2009, p. 11).

Men are also the dominant actors throughout the agriculture sector, although many women contribute actively to agriculture. A review of women’s agricultural roles in Punjab and Sindh, provinces – which account for 90 per cent of the rural population – finds crop production and agricultural markets to be men’s domain, with women supporting men, for example, by managing livestock from the homestead, as this enables them to observe *purdah* (Drucza and Peveri, 2018). A qualitative study of six wheat-farming villages in Punjab and Sindh documents women’s engagement in harvests and other activities, typically under men’s supervision, on family farms, or for others (Zaidi et al., 2018, pp. 3–4). While many rural women are economically active, normative restrictions on their physical mobility and income generation are recurring themes in the literature. Risk of social sanctions typically works to keep norms in place. Half of rural men and women in Pakistan agree that wife-beating is justified under at least one these conditions: when she argues with her husband, goes out without telling him, or neglects in-laws (NIPS and ICF, 2019, p. 276).

The literature also shows factors such as location, socio-economic status, age, household position, education, and ethnicity to intersect with gender and influence related social norms. In rural Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), women’s work is largely unpaid, and those who do generate income do so mainly through livestock and artisanal activities performed at their homesteads (Samee et al., 2015). Practices associated with women’s seclusion are often less strict for poor women who must work (Drucza and Peveri, 2018). A survey of 3,000 rural women reports greater empowerment (measured as control over important decisions) among women who hold senior positions in their household, and among women who reside in Punjab and Sindh rather than KP; however, women with more education or in better-off families do not

necessarily report more empowerment than less educated or poorer women (Ahmad et al., 2016).

Youth studies set in rural contexts of the Global South highlight the agency and diverse trajectories of young people as they negotiate family expectations and pursue education and work opportunities that move them in and out of agriculture, and to-and-fro their villages (e.g. Elias et al., 2018; Punch, 2015; Rietveld et al., 2020). Through these experiences, young people gain know-how with negotiating and asserting their interests (e.g. Srinivasan, 2014). While norms obligate young men to provide for their households, some resist or negotiate their provider role by shirking ‘shameful’ and onerous farm work, or, if educated, taking additional classes or non-farm jobs even at lower pay (e.g. Jeffrey et al., 2005; Morarji, 2014; White, 2019). In rural KP, unemployed young men with advanced degrees endure harsh stigma and isolate themselves from kin, neighbours, and friends (Shah et al., 2020, p. 551).

In their mixed-methods study in rural Punjab, Mumtaz and Salway (2009) argue for interpretations of agency that account more fully for kinship relations. They find young women’s access to healthcare information and services to hinge on whether they have close ties with their mother-in-law and other senior women in their spouse’s kinship network. They further surmise that mothers persuaded sons of the benefits of fewer children. While they conclude that young women’s gains in health do not appear to have affected their agency or household gender relations, their study reveals the highly local social processes spurring change in childbearing norms through rather than independent of young people’s household relations.

## 2. Methods and materials

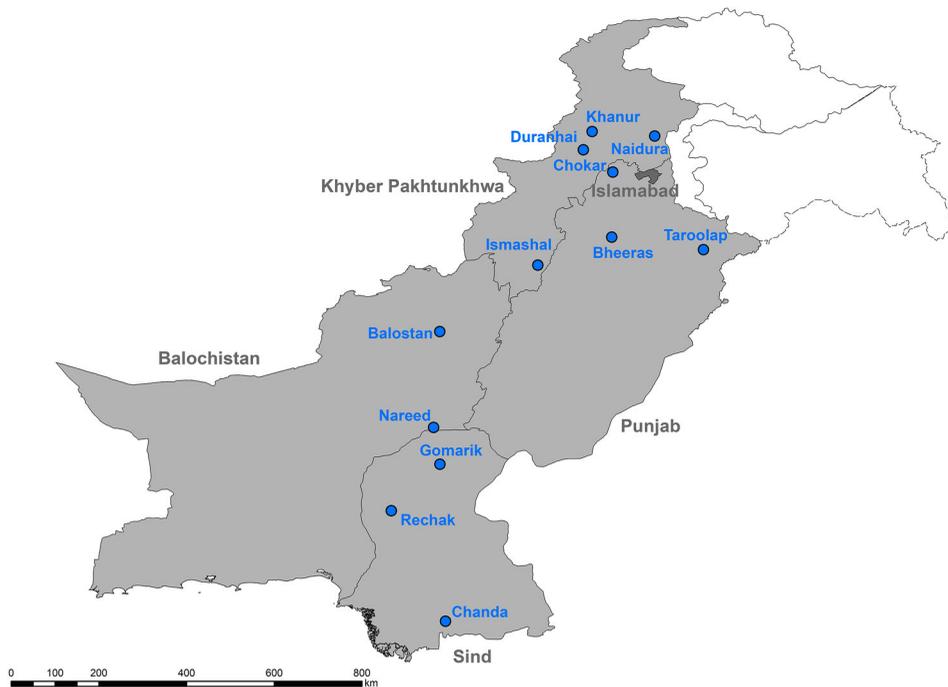
Our findings draw mainly from focus group discussions conducted separately with young women and young men in 12 farming communities of the Balochistan, KP, Punjab, and Sindh provinces in 2015 and 2016. The discussions stemmed from the GENNOVATE (Enabling Gender Equality in Agricultural and Environmental Innovation) research initiative.<sup>2</sup>

### 2.1. Sample and data collection methods

The study communities were selected based on maximum diversity sampling, which called for variance along two dimensions: *economic dynamism*, derived from information on infrastructure development, employment opportunities, and agricultural

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<sup>2</sup> See Petesch, Badstue, and Prain (2018) for the GENNOVATE methodology. Petesch, Badstue, Camfield, et al. (2018) discuss and reflect critically on the study’s sampling, data collection and analysis methods. For further information on and publications from the study (including more than 20 journal papers), see [gennovate.org](http://gennovate.org).

**Figure 1: Map of study villages in Pakistan.**

Note: This map does not imply the expression of any opinions of the authors concerning the boundaries.

practices and technology adoption; and *gender gap*, which was derived from data on literacy, educational attainment, and women's participation in elected office (Figure 1).

Wheat-based farming systems characterize all 12 villages. Most farmers are small-scale and engage in diverse crop and livestock activities both for markets and household use. Development conditions are more favourable in the plains of Punjab and Sindh compared to the poorer villages and rugged terrains of Balochistan and KP. Irrigation and electricity are widely available, and pipe-born water is present in seven study villages. The appendix provides additional information on each case study.

The selection criteria for focus group members called for young men and women aged 16–24, and for a significant share (at least six members) to have some experience in agriculture. The sample includes roughly 200 youth, with three-quarters of both sexes reporting agriculture to be their primary occupation (Table 1).<sup>3</sup> The men average 22 years of age, with 40 per cent married. The women average 19 years of age, with a quarter married. More than half the men and a third of the women attended at least some secondary school.

<sup>3</sup> Among the roughly 200 focus group members (one young men's focus group roster was unfortunately lost in the field), 18 were older, and two younger than the ages 16–24 which were recommended. Mostly they were outside of the age range by a year or two.

Province	Village <sup>a</sup>	FGD members		Married		Some secondary education or higher		Agriculture is primary occupation	
		Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Balochistan	Balostan	9	8	0%	13%	67%	25%	33% <sup>b</sup>	75%
	Nareed	8	9	13%	44%	0%	11%	50%	78%
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Khanur	8	8	50%	25%	13%	100%	100%	0% <sup>b</sup>
	Ismashal <sup>c</sup>	7	n/a	29%	n/a	57%	n/a	100%	n/a
	Naidura	7	8	14%	100%	14%	n/a	100%	100%
	Duranhai	7	8	57%	38%	0%	88%	100%	100%
Punjab	Chokar	10	7	0%	0%	100%	86%	50%	0% <sup>b</sup>
	Taroolap	10	7	10%	0%	90%	100%	100%	86%
	Bheeras	8	9	25%	0%	13%	100%	25%	100%
Sindh	Rechak	10	12	0%	42%	20%	25%	90%	75%
	Chanda	10	7	50%	57%	0%	86%	50%	100%
	Gomarik	8	10	88%	100%	0%	40%	88%	100%

**Table 1: Youth focus group characteristics.**

<sup>a</sup>All village names are pseudonyms.

<sup>b</sup>Six or more FGD members identify 'student' as primary occupation.

<sup>c</sup>Young men's roster data was lost.

We also draw on data collected from four other sex-specific focus groups in each village: two with low-income women and men (ages 30–55) and two with middle-income women and men (ages 25–55). Additionally, the dataset includes a community profile of each case, gathered from local key informants (at least one man and woman). This provides economic, demographic, social, and political background on the locality. The field teams received an intensive one-week field-based training.

All data collection activities were conducted in the principal language of the village with one facilitator and one notetaker of the same sex as the study participants. With advance coordination and support from a hired community organizer, most teams completed the fieldwork for one case in one week. The team subsequently translated the fieldnotes into English and produced community synthesis reports. Prior to each data collection activity, informed consent procedures required facilitators to read aloud slowly and discuss a prepared statement explaining the study purpose and confidentiality assurances. Field teams alerted study participants of their right not to answer questions and to end their participation in the study at any time.

One of the ways we examined young people's agency came with the Ladder of Power and Freedom exercise at the opening of the focus group.<sup>4</sup> Showing a picture of a simple five-step ladder, the facilitator asked the young men (or women) whether a majority of the men (women) in their village have the capacity to make their own decisions about important affairs in their life. Facilitators also provided examples of important decisions, such as about whether or where to work, or whether to start or end a relationship with a person of the opposite sex. Step one indicates little power and freedom to make important decisions, and step five represents great power and freedom. Participants note the step on small slips of paper, which are then posted (anonymously) on the ladder and discussed. The findings also draw on the groups' discussions of what local young men and women typically do after completing their studies, and their experiences with agriculture and other livelihood activities. The youth focus group required about two hours.

## **2.2. Data analysis methods**

The data were analysed through qualitative comparative methods that require working iteratively with two approaches (Miles et al., 2014). The first employs variable-oriented techniques that draw on systematic content analysis methods and GENNOVATE's coded dataset (in QSR NVivo, a social science software) to identify recurring themes.<sup>5</sup> For example, we ran queries with the coded dataset to assess the frequencies

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4 For guidance on applying the Ladder tool in the field and analysing this data, see Petesch and Bullock (2018). For examples of other analyses with GENNOVATE's Ladder data, see Lawless et al. (2019) and Petesch, Bullock, et al. (2018).

5 Petesch Badstue, Camfield, et al. (2018) discuss the development and application of the coding framework and provide a list of the principal codes.

of, and analyse, text passages pertaining to a ladder step (or level of agency), *and* to another topic (or coding node), such as parents/elders, marriage practices, physical mobility, education, poverty, type of livelihood, and so forth. The dataset also contains an Excel file with responses to pre-coded questions in each instrument. The appendix features examples of this evidence. The second approach is a contextual case-oriented analysis, and examples of this appear in the two village case studies discussed below. Together, the ‘wide’ and ‘deep’ analysis protocols provide many opportunities for identifying, crosschecking and nuancing patterns in the evidence. For example, young women’s responses to a pre-coded question on the extent of local women’s physical mobility can be compared with the (frequent) discussions of this topic by other focus groups in this community and in others.

The design and analysis of the Ladder of Power and Freedom exercise stemmed from Kabeer’s (1999) arguments for indicators of agency and empowerment that capture consequential (rather than everyday) decisions shaping one’s life path, such as marriage or occupation. A capacity to influence these types of decisions in rural Pakistan requires a young man or woman to exert a significant level of agency because they must often press against prevailing norms. In so doing, these dynamics hold ‘potential for challenging and destabilizing social inequalities’ (Kabeer, 1999, p. 461; cf. Sen, 2000, pp. 194–195). Yet, an indicator such as holding a job cannot be assumed to be empowering. Norms, opportunities, and other dimensions which shape a young person’s goals and capacity to benefit from economic participation vary on the ground; and meaningful assessments of agency require contextualized research strategies (Kabeer, 1999; Punch, 2015).

Due to peer pressures and other factors, we concur with White (2019) that focus group data may reveal more about norms than the study participants’ actual practices and intentions for their lives. By framing the initial question in the ladder exercise around the decision-making of ‘the majority’ of the local young women or men, one of our goals (in addition to learning about agency) was to depersonalize a potentially sensitive and normative question to study participants from very different contexts. The discussion of the ratings and other topics illustrated some of the local norms that are typical and appropriate for young people in that context, and study participants often volunteered examples from their own lives.

To better situate and crosscheck our findings on young people’s economic participation, we analysed labour market data from the two rounds of the PDHS (2012–2013 and 2017–2018) that preceded and followed the qualitative fieldwork in 2015–2016. Some caution needs to be exercised with these findings. As the focus of the PDHS is on the health of families, the sample focuses on those who have been married and overrepresents women, which results in a small sample of rural young men. Also, underestimating of women’s economic activities is a common issue in surveys (Zaidi et al., 2018), as discussed below.

### 3. Findings

The young women and men who joined our focus groups mostly indicate a limited capacity to make important decisions in their lives and frequently attribute this to norms that require their strict deference to elders and other customs of their villages. Young peoples' circumstances and interests, moreover, can make it challenging for them to adhere to their local norms. Despite expectations that men should be the providers and farmers, some young women engage in farm work and other livelihoods to generate income, and some young men would rather not work if the only jobs available are physically taxing, low status, and poorly paid. Much like rural young people in numerous other countries (e.g. Elias et al., 2018; Leavy and Hossain, 2014), most young study participants express discouragement with their agricultural and other opportunities to make a living. Young women appear especially marginalized by norms that limit their physical mobility and discourage their economic participation.

Although perceiving their own opportunities as limited, both young women and men mostly report increasing productivity and profits for the farmers of their villages due to growing use of machinery, improved seed technologies, and innovations in soil management practices, irrigation, and livestock rearing. At the same time, young people experience these developments in gender-differentiated ways. In the villages of Khanur in KP, Nareed of Balochistan, and Chokar of Punjab, young women indicate that, compared to their mothers, they engage much less or not at all, in farming activities due to the arrival of the wheat reaper, harvester, and other labour-saving machines. One young woman, from Khanur of KP, reports that her parents manage all household and daily chores, including the livestock, and 'I do my studies'. Many young men, meanwhile, say that they are always in search of better work beyond their villages because, among other reasons, other family members can manage the farm and livestock without them.

The PDHS (2012–2013 and 2017–2018) survey findings corroborate the focus group's testimonies of high young men's employment but large declines in young women's from already low levels. Nearly all (more than 90 per cent) ever-married rural men between ages 15 and 24 report working in both survey rounds, with a small rise to about a quarter of these workers in agriculture in the second round. For ever-married rural women in this age group, their employment dropped from 20.8 to 11.8 per cent, and from 9.2 to 4.5 per cent in agriculture. Zaidi et al. (2018, p. 26) caution that most surveys in Pakistan underestimate women's economic activities because much of women's work is informal and perceived to be household duties and thus 'not considered to be work by survey respondents'. Status also attaches to men who are sole providers and to women who can focus on the reproductive needs of the household. At the same time, we show below how these norms are negotiated and married women of different generations in our focus groups testify to carrying out diverse agricultural activities. Most focus groups report that

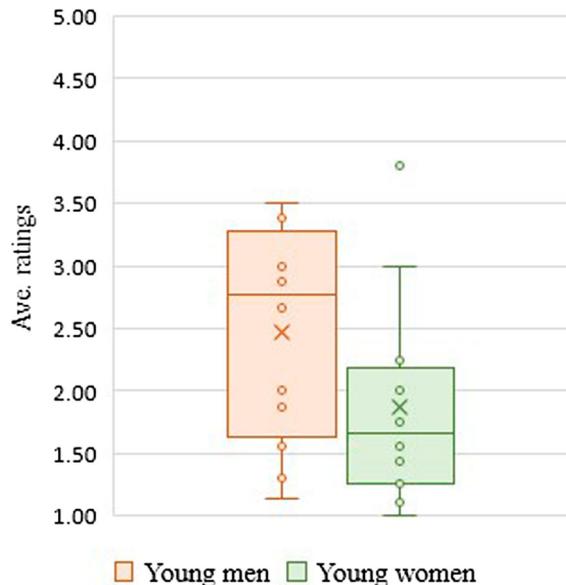
some norms soften for women as they become older, their children grow up, and they gain more status in their households. Of further note, approximately a quarter of women work in agriculture without pay, while nearly all men are paid (NIPS and ICF, 2019, p. 37).

**3.1. Perceived agency constrained by young age, gender, and family position and obligations**

Based on employment trends, one might anticipate that the young men who joined our focus groups would express much greater agency than the young women. In fact, young women and men mostly position themselves on steps one or two, indicating limited capacity to make important decisions in their lives (Figure 2). Among other factors, they stress that local customs call for a household’s elders to make all consequential decisions, including about the education, working life, and marriages of young family members. Nevertheless, two young women’s and five young men’s groups average on step three, indicating perceptions of agency.

Ratings from seven young women’s groups averaged on the ladder’s bottom, and most powerless rung. Their explanations refer to norms that require submission to elders, brothers, and husbands, that curtail mobility and education, and that render them unable to make any decisions other than perhaps small ones over their clothing or chores. ‘It is a sign of honour for men to be considered as the decision-maker and head of the household and community’, explains a 24-year-old farmer and mother of

**Figure 2: Distribution and mean (x in box) of young women’s and men’s focus group average ratings on five-step Ladder of Power and Freedom (24 youth focus groups). Note: Averages of individual ratings from members of each focus group.**



two from Nareed, Balochistan. Although some had attained secondary and higher levels of education and were married, these women's testimonies did not differ from those still single or with little or no education. Nor did those closer to age 24 express greater agency than younger participants. Women in the study often convey the early years of marriage to be very difficult because they must demonstrate obedience to their new family and assume many housework and care responsibilities.

In Naidura, a large village near an urban centre of KP province, the young women mainly rank themselves at step one, and a 16-year-old echoes many other young women's testimonies: 'We don't have the freedom to make any decision. We can't even go outside alone and are always accompanied by males'. A 20-year-old mother with some university education adds: '... even I have no freedom to make any decision regarding myself or my child'. She explains, 'After marriage, you are in the husband's home, and you only do the house chores and take care of the in-laws ...' The young women in Bheeras, a small farming village in Punjab, are among the few to discuss their economic roles, but these young women still mostly position themselves on step one and explain that they work as labourers with their brothers. They are paid and this helps to 'fulfil our needs, but we cannot make decisions for ourselves' (17-year-old).

Young men's ratings are more varied than young women's, but no matter the step, their testimonies often speak to their junior household position and expectations to respect elders. If on steps one or two, men stress their younger status among their household's men. For consequential decisions regarding work or marriage, 'Usually, the eldest male member of the family has this right', remarks a single 25-year-old farmer from Taroolap in Punjab. They report that having older brothers further limits their power. In Gomarik, in Sindh, young men explain that because all young people in their village live with their parents, they have no choice but to follow directions. In a few cases, young men say they 'must oblige elders' because they are poor. The many young men's testimonies about their limited power and freedom suggest that this perception is typical.

For the young men's groups that averaged step three, some express greater agency due to being married, a marker of adulthood. The Naidura group of KP was comprised entirely of married men, and a 22-year old father of two reports that 'our parents give us authority to take decisions because we have our own family now', while another who is 25 and also a father of two cautions that even married men 'still consult' parents. Most young men in our sample are like young women in that few mention education or livelihoods as factors that increase their power and freedom; however, we present exceptions to these findings before concluding the empirical section.

### **3.2. *Rural livelihoods, family, and gender***

As with testimonies about their limited decision-making capacity, young women testify to diverse confining norms when discussing their livelihood experiences.

Many young men, too, observe discouraging conditions for making a living, in part due to expectations to follow in their father's footsteps or to pursue jobs away from the village. Whether out of need or their own drive, we also present evidence of norms bending as young people negotiate and resist their expected roles and conducts.

### 3.2.1. *Young women*

Young women across the focus groups indicate that, once they no longer attend school, they become busy with housework and family care duties. Despite various norms that discourage their economic participation, our data indicate that many rural young women engage in small-scale income generation activities from their homes, such as caring for livestock, sewing, and embroidery. As we show, some report labouring in crop fields beyond their homesteads.

While both focus group and PDHS findings signal declines in young women's employment in agriculture, testimonies in five villages indicate that some young women, both single and married, are assisting with crop or livestock activities: '[Women] bring grass. They bring water. They bring wood ... [and] also work in farming like sowing, weeding, and cotton picking. They also help with sprays and fertilizing land', observes a 19-year-old woman from Chanda of Sindh Province. Yet, many testify to norms that provide for only men to be farmers and depict women in limited 'helping' roles. According to a 22-year-old single woman of Punjab who holds a college degree, 'Women of this village depend on men in all matters. They don't go for farming. They just help men in harvesting of wheat. They don't have any opportunities'.

The scope for young women's physical mobility and economic roles varies across the cases. Young women's focus groups estimate on average that fewer than three women in every ten move freely in their own villages, but in about a third of the villages estimates rise to seven or more village women. Both young men and women testify that middle-aged or older women 'like our mothers and grandmothers' can visit other women or a relative in the village. The relaxation of some norms for older women can also be seen in the low-income women's focus groups, who report it to be common for *older married* women and *widows* to work for pay in seven of the villages, while this falls to five villages for *young married* women, and to three villages in the case of *young single* women. In none of the villages would a woman of any age be welcome as a trader in her village market – though women do sell produce, prepared foods, and other goods from their homesteads or enlist men in the family to market their goods.

Testimonies reveal the contested nature of women's economic roles, especially if the women are young. 'Girls don't go to the fields', exclaims one member of the Rechak young women's group in Sindh; and another counters, 'Girls pick the cotton, cut crops, weed, learn to apply fertilizer, sow wheat. All of this work is learned at an early age'. Still, another adds, 'Young girls are not allowed to go out,

only older women work in the field'. Similarly, in Khanur of KP, some in the group indicate that women are only involved in activities 'inside the home and men are responsible for outdoor activity', while others, such as a married 18-year-old and mother who lives with her in-laws, exclaims, 'I work from dawn to dusk within and outside home till bedtime'. Yet, later in this focus group, the same young woman notes, 'Young ladies work at home and women of older ages work at plots'. Meanwhile, a young man of Khanur reports in his group that women in his village spray and weed the crops when their husband 'is out in the city'.

While, in practice, villagers seek to negotiate normative expectations in order to move forward with their diverse needs and interests, these processes appear to have limited effects on prevailing norms. Ongoing pressures to (at least appear to) comply with local norms should not be underestimated given the importance of women's behaviour for family honour and the widespread acceptability of violent sanctions for women who flout norms (NIPS and ICF, 2019). A young man of Nareed in Balochistan warns that women can be beaten if they try to grow and sell their own produce, and another shows his agreement by adding, 'It's not their work'. A member of the group then qualifies these views by sharing that the village women do exercise some influence over what they produce, as men who sell women's produce 'must seek her consent, and if she disagrees, he cannot sell her products. Other family members will speak out against this, and the family elders will intervene'.

The data suggest that many young rural women are economically active, albeit in ways that mostly remain hidden and thus maintaining the appearance of conforming with norms.

### **3.2.2. *Young men***

In contrast to young women, rural young men are expected to work and provide for their families. They convey their job options to be largely determined by their family's circumstances, and most express resignation to labouring under their elders or in low-status and poorly paying jobs. In addition to helping their fathers on the farm or in a shop, they work in daily wage farm or construction jobs, sell vegetables in the local market, run small enterprises, and engage in labour migration. 'I am working with my father in the field', declares a 24-year-old from Khanur, and a 19-year-old then shares, 'I also assist my parents and bring fodder for our cattle'. If not from a better-off family that can provide work, young men of Khanur say they take daily wage jobs.

In all but one village, young men indicate labour migration as common. Most testimonies suggest that they leave or are pushed out of their village because local jobs are undesirable or scarce, or opportunities on their families' farm are limited. In Isma-shal of KP, young men say that they are continuously seeking 'suitable employment' beyond the village 'because they want to get rid of farming work because it requires hard work ...'

In four groups, concerns emerge for young men who neither study nor have jobs, but ‘just sit idle’, ‘do work at home without income’, or ‘play games’. In Naidura of KP, a 24-year-old farmer and father of one indicates that most young men in his village ‘do nothing, just wasting their time in useless activities’. ‘They farm or work as labourers’, adds a 22-year-old farmer, and seemingly implying these jobs to be useless as well.<sup>6</sup> The young men report that educational opportunities have improved in Naidura, but the world is moving fast, and they are ‘lagging behind’ because a master’s degree is now necessary to obtain good jobs. In such ways, some men resist expectations to provide when their only job opportunities confer low status and diminish their agency, take a heavy physical toll, and provide meagre returns (Jackson, 1999).

### 3.3. *Case studies: contexts that nurture some young people’s agency*

Here we explore conditions in the two cases where young people observed the highest power and freedom ratings. These cases elucidate the gendered and generational processes by which agency and livelihood roles are perceived and experienced, including in more dynamic local opportunity structures. Neither village, however, offers a context that encourages both young men’s and women’s agency. In the first case, a village in Balochistan, only young men report a relatively healthy level of power and freedom. In the second case, in Punjab, the young women report this power. To provide a broader perspective of this unevenness, we conclude each case study with observations from focus groups of older generations.

#### 3.3.1. *Balostan’s young men*

Balostan is home to diverse ethnic groups, with the largest group, at half the village population, comprised of a comparatively well-off and politically influential Pashtun subtribe (also see appendix). Only two of the eight young men in the Balostan focus group reached secondary school (one some post-secondary education); and none report that they are still studying. All are single but for one, and all report farming occupations, though more than half also work in businesses such as shops and hotels in a nearby town.

In the Ladder of Power and Freedom exercise, the young men on average pick step 3.5, the highest among the young men’s groups. They explain that times have changed, and young men now have more influence because ‘Elders listen to them’ when deciding on their education, business ventures, or marriage. Balostan’s young men also show a remarkable enthusiasm for farming compared to their peers in other study communities. They share details of various improved wheat varieties, including some that produce twice the yields of local varieties. They speak of machinery, ‘doing soil and

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6 Jeffrey et al. (2005) similarly report young men in a village of Uttar Pradesh, India, to express perceptions of ‘uselessness’ and ‘waiting’ although engaged in paid work.

water tests', applying specific chemical inputs, cultivating several types of vegetables for growing markets, and receiving helpful guidance from extension services, NGOs, and international donors such as UNDP. 'We are always learning from experience', observes a 23-year-old in the group.

By contrast, the young women position themselves at step two, explaining that 'We here in the village have no freedom in our lives', and 'We can only decide on our clothing'. Nor do they perceive any growing opportunities. Rather, the young women detail how only their brothers attend high schools and universities as far away as Lahore. 'My brother didn't even allow me to go to this primary girls' school', laments an 18-year-old. Another confides that she has some interest in farming, 'but I don't do it because this is considered as men's work here'.

The differences between young men's and women's perceptions of their agency and opportunities repeat themselves in the low- and middle-income focus groups with the older adults. The two men's groups speak of benefitting from roads and mobile phones, becoming 'hard working' and more knowledgeable about farming, and earning more due to 'very good' wheat and vegetable crops. The men also report a rise in government and private sector jobs. The women's low-income group, however, speaks of fewer work opportunities for the village women compared to a decade ago, and attribute this to 'gender differences', 'cultural practices', 'societal pressure', and their lack of education. Middle-income women paint a mixed picture about their agency. Most chose step three and convey that men are now more open to 'taking suggestions from them' about household matters (55-year-old widow with 8 children), which are common dimensions of women's agency as they advance in their life cycle. Other women express having more freedom in the past when 'women could go outside the home and worked with men, but now they aren't allowed' (42-year-old, married with six children). Current processes of agricultural development in this village, as in most others in our sample, appear to be marginalizing most types of women from economic opportunities.

### 3.3.2. *Chokar's young women*

Next, we turn to the village of Chokar in Punjab, which is principally comprised of Khattar landowning households. Villagers testify to a flowering of opportunities both on and off their farms over the past decade. The ten young women in this focus group are all single and completed at least middle school with most achieving more. All the young women report working as teachers, labourers, farmers, or engaged in service jobs or dairy activities, and two combine work and school. Educational and economic opportunities help to shed light on these young women's average rating of step 3.8, the highest of all 24 youth focus groups (and the outlier green dot in [Figure 2](#)).

A 24-year-old teacher in the young women's group credits their education as the main driver of the group's high ladder ratings. Others speak of parents supporting

the educational and economic pursuits of all their children, with the teacher explaining that young women and men alike 'have permission to go anywhere for doing a job or getting education', including to the district headquarters to attend university. As in other cases, contradictory testimonies emerge about women's agricultural roles. Across the Chokar dataset, villagers testify that the local women no longer work in agriculture. Yet, several participants in each of the three women's focus groups indicate farming and dairy as their occupations. 'Yes, women are involved in cattle farming, only in the cowshed ... in the boundary wall of the house', declares a 16-year-old in the young women's group after one member states that local women no longer work in agriculture. Earlier, this 16-year-old reports most villagers to 'belong with farming and labour'.

Meanwhile, young men of Chokar position themselves on step two. Much like most other young men's focus groups, they speak of their poverty and going for 'daily work' (18-year-old single student and farmer), and how they are not raised 'to make big decisions about their life' (16-year-old single student and farmer). Testimonies later in this group refer to idle young men and parents who are prioritizing their daughters' schooling over sons because they believe the girls show more promise in succeeding at school and obtaining good jobs.

As further background, members of Chokar's focus group with low-income women mainly testify to greater opportunities compared to the past. 'Agricultural activities, factory jobs, and construction works are increasing day by day, so there is sufficient space available for women to get involved in different sectors', explains a 45-year-old labourer and mother of six. While some in this group wax less sanguine about the changes underway, others acknowledge that, unlike the past, village women now work as teachers, in healthcare, and for government. A 55-year-old mother of eight observes that 'our girls are studying from primary to higher education' and 'people are getting and using loans for small businesses, agriculture, and for livelihoods'. Meanwhile, ratings from the middle-income women's group of Chokar also average at nearly step four on their ladder; and a 25-year-old Lady Health Worker explains that the village men 'listen to their women and fulfil all of their demands. They are not strict with women'. Others in this group report that local women now 'know more about their surroundings' and participate in important decisions about their children.

Indeed, Chokar's adult men's groups acknowledge the major change in women's roles, and how village women now have 'professional' jobs and 'work confidently on salary'. In study villages beyond Chokar, we rarely hear views depicting growing gender equity in household relations and productive roles. Moreover, the rising status of women in Chokar appears to be accompanied by reasonably supportive conditions for the men's livelihoods. The middle-income men ranked themselves only on step two of the ladder, but they nevertheless testify to improving conditions for farming due to machinery, improved seeds, and irrigation. In the low-income men's group, the members indicate their job options to have improved and local poverty to have declined by nearly a quarter over the past decade.

#### 4. Discussion: challenges for young people as changemakers

Most of the young people who joined our study from Pakistan's countryside express little ability to control their life path, little hope that agricultural work can improve their lives, and little capacity to obtain desirable nonfarm jobs. These dynamics are unpromising for the drive and talent needed for this large generation to negotiate and shift the discouraging norms of their villages and access the resources and opportunities necessary to strengthen their local economies. Nor does it appear to be promising for most rural youth who joined the study to acquire stable work in fast-paced urban labour markets.

Kabeer's (1999, 2000) theories of 'intergenerational contract' and empowerment – which spotlight the importance of household relations in shaping access to opportunities – offer useful framings for interpreting young people's perceptions of their agency. The young study participants repeatedly stress how responsibilities for making important decisions rest with their elders. Their sense of agency is mediated by social rules attached to their gender, young age, junior household position, marital status, socio-economic standing, and more. The Ladder of Power and Freedom evidence as well as other data from our cases nonetheless express diverse interactions between the prevailing norms of a village and young women's and men's sense of agency and opportunities.<sup>7</sup>

##### 4.1. *Negotiating norms where opportunities mostly appear scarce*

We presented many quotes to illuminate young people's experiences with upholding, negotiating and withdrawing from gender and generational norms as they carry out their daily lives. For instance, some young men testify to resisting their duties to provide when their only options are 'useless' farm work and other daily wage manual jobs. Meanwhile, some young single and married women openly report their engagement in agriculture, even as these activities risk stigma for women and their household. Except for Balostan, current processes of mechanization and other technological advances in farming do not appear to be attracting young men to the sector, while they are further limiting young women to reproductive roles and home-based livelihoods (also see Mohiuddin et al., 2020). Investment in university and advanced degrees, moreover, is proving to be a 'contradictory resource', as it is seen to provide springboards mainly for those with resources and connections, while ambitions to study and have a good job distance young women and men from their 'local forms of cultural and economic capital' (Jeffrey et al., 2005; Morarji, 2014, p. 186; Shah et al., 2020).

Interactions between agency and opportunity structure are deeply complex, and neither education nor employment can be assumed to fuel a young person's agency.

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<sup>7</sup> Petesch, Bullock, et al. (2018) also find diverse interactions between agency and norms in a dataset of 24 sub-Saharan village cases from GENNOVATE; and they introduce the concept of local normative climate, 'or the prevailing set of gender norms in a community' (p. 116) to account for the contextual and fluid properties of gender norms.

A recent survey of 480 rural women in KP province found them engaged in diverse livelihood activities mainly from their homesteads, but fewer than one in four considered their income earning to strengthen their decision-making capacity (Jabeen et al., 2020, p. 13).

#### **4.2. *Negotiating norms where opportunities appear to be expanding***

We showcase Balostan and Chokar to reveal possibilities of opportunity structures that can benefit certain local youth. Both Balostan and Chokar appear to have growing and diversifying economies, yet so do other cases in our sample. What is more distinctive about these two communities is that the young people's elders are not only participating in their expanding economy but opening these doors to their youth – albeit in ways that manifest as highly gendered. In the first case, young men participate actively in the agricultural innovation processes of their village, while in the second case young women refer to their educational and nonfarm opportunities and supportive parents.

Balostan's young men say that 'times have changed', they 'are more empowered', and can influence their elders' decisions. These young men displayed detailed knowledge about agricultural innovations and external partners, while this type of know-how is usually only heard from men of older generations in this dataset. Meanwhile, Chokar presents an opportunity structure where women along with men are accessing diverse types of jobs and there is a relaxation of the set of intersecting norms that pertain to young women's education, livelihoods, and physical mobility. Their mothers appear to be vital to paving the way; but both the low- and middle-income men's testimonies demonstrate that men too have been supportive of and benefited from women's economic participation. Chokar's testimonies also suggest that household relations have become more equitable. Unfortunately, the marginalization of women from visible agricultural roles still persists even in relatively supportive conditions for women's economic participation.

Taken together, our findings from the 12 cases signal that many stifling norms tend to accompany young people who work in agriculture – deterring them from imagining a promising future for themselves in the very sector that dominates their local economy. Yet, our sample also illuminates the unevenness of agency and opportunity structure interactions across and within the cases, and the possibilities as well as barriers that this variability presents. In their everyday lives, some of Chokar's young women and Balostan's young men challenge the roles and conducts expected of them. Some openly express pride in their livelihoods in the focus groups, which appears to inspire others. The complex interdependencies in the social life of households and villages mean that as opportunities expand for young people, these processes potentially have ripple effects on loosening some of the gender and generational norms in a local context. Again, the other youth groups in these same two villages do not express much agency, suggesting that spill-over effects never can be assumed, and some rural population groups may be disadvantaged by their changing agricultural economies. The young women across most cases appear especially vulnerable.

## 5. Reflections on research and development implications

Our findings point to a need for research and development models that do not engage with young people as a separate group to be targeted specifically, but rather as vital members of households and other complex networks of social relations in which gender, generational, and other diverse norms figure prominently (cf. Sumberg et al., 2020<sup>8</sup>). Research and development approaches to support Pakistan's growing population of rural young people need to account more effectively for household relations and the diversity of ways in which agency and opportunity structure interact on the ground.

Expanding rural educational opportunities requires urgent attention. Some research indicates greater returns for educational investments by targeting poorer hamlets, in part due to limited safety for girls travelling to-and-from schools as well as norms that compel low-income families to withdraw children from schools in better-off hamlets where they face extensive discrimination, including from teachers (Jacoby and Mansuri, 2011). To improve girls' opportunities, a World Bank report on Pakistan (2019, p. 71) proposes a school-based programme with agency and norms objectives and design elements that include strengthening life skills of adolescent girls and providing them with safe spaces and peer networks. Yet, to foster transformative change in these girls' lives, changes are also needed in the status and treatment of both boys and girls by their families and more widely in their village. Pairing the programme with a community-based learning initiative to expand opportunities for all local youth – that, for instance, includes educators, leaders, parents, and students, and invests in ongoing follow-up – sends an important signal and could potentially nurture wider safe spaces for village girls to thrive along with boys.

Given the importance of household agricultural enterprise and agri-food value chains in the economy, further research is needed of the conditions that expand young people's participation in these opportunities (also see Flynn and Sumberg, 2017; White, 2019). Unlocking strategies that improve especially women's capacity to benefit from agricultural research and development, such as through training and credit initiatives that enable women themselves to access and manage farm plots and use agricultural machines, could enhance their asset base and status (Farnworth et al., 2018; Mohiuddin et al., 2020). This, in turn, holds potential for strengthening food security and accelerating development of wheat-based systems and livelihoods. Additional understanding is needed of negotiations over resources across productive and reproductive needs among the (changing) members of extended households of smallholder farmers and rural labourers (Kabeer, 2000; Quisumbing et al., 2014). This includes social norms shaping young men's and women's access to cropland, intergenerational resources transfers, and other assets. Further study of gender and generational barriers to young people's migration for education and work could also open pathways for change (Punch, 2015).

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8 Although addressing youth employment in Africa, our findings appear to support conclusions from Sumberg et al. (2020) that there is not much evidence to support targeting youth.

The research design enabled us to explore agency with a diverse mix of focus groups and contexts. Being able to compare the Ladder of Power and Freedom rankings and discourse across genders and generations is revealing. We also suggest (slower) ethnographic methods, such as participant observation and interviewing the same respondent multiple times (also see White, 2019). There would be much to gain from revisiting cases with methods that provide more time than rapid approaches for researchers to build relationships and facilitate more collaborative forms of learning with community members. There is also potential for innovation with building young people's own capacities to assess agency in ways that enable them to reflect critically and move forward on their own notions of power and freedom and desirable livelihoods. Rather than a ladder, Robson et al. (2007) argue for a horizontal construct and improved capturing of diverse forms of agency (such as hidden forms, or with a supportive parent or local network).

Finally, learning partnerships and online platforms now support a growing body of work on social norms in international development policies and programmes.<sup>9</sup> These approaches are often informed by community-based mobilization and education models that were developed in the public health sector, as this sector has the most experience with and evidence for effective interventions to reduce discriminatory norms associated with violence against women, female employment, and other leading development concerns (e.g. Heise et al., 2019). In the field of agricultural research and development, collaborative learning models are emerging that engage men and women producers with development practitioners and researchers in reflecting critically on gender roles and relations and in identifying opportunities for inclusive agricultural innovation processes (Badstue et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2019). With young women and men as both participants and leaders in some of the learning initiatives on social norms, these collaborations are strategically nurturing youth agency and more inclusive development processes.

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<sup>9</sup> These websites offer many helpful resources on gender norms, including lessons from international public health and development interventions: Prevention collaborative ([prevention-collaborative.org](http://prevention-collaborative.org)) and Align: Advancing Learning and Innovation on Gender Norms ([alignplatform.org](http://alignplatform.org)).

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**APPENDIX. Overview of village cases.**

Province	Community	Population	Principal social groups	Qualified doctor visits regularly?	% In public secondary school	# Every 10 women who move freely in public <sup>a</sup>	% Women working for pay <sup>b</sup>	Dynamism of local agri. market Frequency of visits by traders and middlemen from distant markets Principal crops/livestock
Balochistan	Balostan	1700	50% Uthmankhail, 11% Sulemankhail, 10% Babozai, 10% Shamalzai	No	Girls: 5%	2.7		Active daily market 7 km away
					Boys: 25%	1%	Occasionally visit Almond, apricot, apple, wheat, vegetables (cauliflower, tomato, and lettuce), livestock, poultry	
	Nareed	1000	50% Lehri, 12.5% Ambi, 12.5% Machi, 10% Aeri	No	Girls: 25%	2.3		Active daily market 6 km away
					Boys: 25%	50%	N.A. Vegetables, chickpeas, wheat, rice, fish farming	
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Duranhai	14000	25% Badrakhe, 20% Miangan, 15% Kakar, 10% Malakan, 10% Peeran	Yes	Girls: 50%	2.1		Daily market with average activity
					Boys: 50%	8%	Rarely visit Wheat, maize, vegetables, livestock, and strawberries	
	Ismashal	7000	25% Khar, 35% Thathal, 10% Khawar:	Yes	Girls: $\approx 0$	2.7		Daily market with average activity
					Boys: 25%	5%		Regularly visit

Khanur	3000	50% Mareezi, 20% Gujar, 15% Utman khel, 10% Chichyan	No	Girls: $\approx 0$	7.0	Wheat, maize, and rice, cattle, buffaloes, goats, poultry Daily market with average activity
				Boys: 25%	8%	Rarely visit
Naidura	6000	55% Awan, 35%Tanoli	No	Girls: 75%	3.0	Wheat, maize, and tomatoes, cattle, buffaloes, goats, poultry Weak weekly market
				Boys: 75%	15%	Rarely visit
						Wheat, maize, and vegetables, cows, sheep, goats, poultry

Overview of cases (continued)

Province	Community	Population	Principal social groups	Qualified doctor visits regularly?	% In public school	# Every 10 women who move freely in public <sup>a</sup>	% Women working for pay <sup>b</sup>	Dynamism of local agri. market Frequency of visits by traders and middlemen from distant markets Main crops/livestock
Punjab	Bheeras	5000	72% Awan, 6% Maachhi, 5% Mochi	No	Girls: $\approx 0$	2.0	Very active daily market	
					Boys: $\approx 0$	70%	Rarely visit Wheat, potato, vegetable, maize, sorghum	

(Continued)

(Continued).

Province	Community	Population	Principal social groups	Qualified doctor visits regularly?	% In public school	# Every 10 women who move freely in public <sup>a</sup>	% Women working for pay <sup>b</sup>	Dynamism of local agri. market Frequency of visits by traders and middlemen from distant markets Main crops/livestock
	Chokar	1200	90% Khattar, 7% Awan,	No	Girls: 50% Boys: 30%	6.8 30%		Market of average activity, 13 km away Regularly visit Wheat, peanuts, canola and soya beans, lentils, livestock, poultry
	Taroolap	12000	40% Cheema, 30% Bhandar, 10% Awan, 10% Salahri	Yes	Girls: Almost all Boys: Almost all	2.6 2%		Very active daily market Regularly visit Wheat, rice, vegetables, livestock
Sindh	Chanda	4500	99% Chand	No	Girls: ≈ 0 Boys: ≈ 0	3.5 8%		Very active daily market Rarely visit Wheat, rice cotton, chili, cattle and other livestock
	Gomarik	700	88% Goopang, 5% Jatoi, 5% Shaikh	No	Girls: ≈ 0 Boys: ≈ 0	7 Nearly all		Very active daily market Rarely visit Wheat, cotton, sugarcane, sorghum

(Continued)

*(Continued).*

Province	Community	Population	Principal social groups	Qualified doctor visits regularly?	% In public school	# Every 10 women who move freely in public <sup>a</sup>	% Women working for pay <sup>b</sup>	Dynamism of local agri. market Frequency of visits by traders and middlemen from distant markets Main crops/livestock
	Rechak	3000	44% Chandio, 12% Panhwar, 10% Lashari	No	Girls: $\approx 0$ Boys: $\approx 0$	3 Nearly all		Active daily market  Regularly visit Wheat, chilies, sorghum, onions, fennel, vegetables, rice, livestock

Note: All data pertain to village population.

<sup>a</sup>Young women's focus group members (average ratings). Other data from local key informants.

<sup>b</sup>'Working for pay' includes payment with money or goods or services, such as meals, housing or education fees.