

## Contesting Social Norms: The Transformation of Elopement Perception in Chitral

Rishma Karim<sup>1</sup> and Hazir Ullah<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>M.phil Scholar in Sociology at Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad Pakistan

<sup>2</sup>Professor of Sociology at Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad Pakistan

Corresponding Author: rishmakarim23@gmail.com

### Abstract

Elopement has traditionally been regarded as a violation of family honor and social norms in many conservative societies, including Chitral, Pakistan. However, recent social and cultural transformations have challenged these long-standing perceptions, particularly among younger generations. This study explores the changing community perceptions of elopement in Upper Chitral and identifies the factors contributing to its growing acceptance. A descriptive qualitative research design was employed, with data collected through three gender-inclusive focus group discussions involving 17 purposively selected community elders aged 50 years and above. The discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis framework. The findings reveal four interrelated themes. The study demonstrates that elopement is increasingly viewed by younger generations as an expression of personal autonomy and romantic choice rather than a source of social disgrace. The study concludes that Chitral is undergoing a gradual but uneven transformation in marital norms, reflecting broader tensions between collective cultural traditions and individual autonomy. These findings contribute to sociological debates on changing family institutions, gender relations, and the impact of modernization in culturally conservative communities, while offering insights for future research on marriage practices and social change in similar contexts.

**Keywords:** Elopement; Community Perception; Marriage; Cultural Change; Gender Dynamics; Social Media; Chitral; Pakistan.

## Introduction

Elopement refers to a marital arrangement in which a couple, usually without the consent or knowledge of their families, leaves home to marry secretly, thereby bypassing the customary process of parental approval and arranged marriage (Bates, Conant, & Kudat, 1974). This study examines how the meaning attached to this practice is being renegotiated in Chitral, a mountainous district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in northern Pakistan, where marriage has traditionally been treated as a family rather than an individual decision (Walter, 2021).

Marriage and families are so significant to humanity that they are universal but variable. Every human group establishes norms to govern who marries whom (See Henslin 1997). Thus, marriage is a group-approved mating arrangement with culturally defined rituals. Sociologically speaking, marriage is a socially accepted and legitimate sexual union between a female and male, based either on love or family arrangement, for the satisfaction of sexual needs and perpetuation of human society (Batool and Anwar, 2025). Sometimes, a man and a woman run away and marry secretly without family approval; the act is conceptualized as elopement. The act of elopement in the sub-continent in general and Pakistan in particular has been historically considered social deviance and an unacceptable practice, particularly in the context of rural communities where marriage is viewed as a collective family decision rather than an individual choice (see Irshad & Yasmin, 2022). It was once viewed as a rebellious act and a social scandal, but has begun to shift in perception in many parts of the world. The recent rise in elopement, particularly among the young generation, challenges these longstanding views on marriage and relationships (Nawaz & Bhutta, 2024). In a society where family consent and arranged marriages are central, the decision to elope disrupts these traditional values and cultural norms (Khan et al., 2025). Understanding the evolving perception of girl's elopement in modern society is crucial, as it reflects broader societal changes, such as the influence of contemporary education, social media, and globalized cultural practices (Asim et al., 2024). The growing frequency of the acceptance of eloped couples in northern Pakistan, especially in upper Chitral, calls for a closer examination of how communities face these changes and the social, cultural, and familial pressures involved.

Previous studies have identified numerous factors behind elopement, including social, psychological, and cultural factors (Chamberlain, 2025; Hull, 2010; Hussin, 2023; Bates, Conant, & Kudat, 1974). One major cause is the influence of modern societal norms, which emphasize individualism and personal freedom over traditional family expectations (Reynolds & Walther, 2020; Barber, 2004; Harun et al., 2024; Gangmei et al., 2024). Familial issues regarding marriage, such as parental pressure, further reinforce couples to engage in elopement (Schutte, 2014; Sussman, Steinmetz, & Peterson, 2013; Muhammad, 2024). Additionally, emotional dissatisfaction within familial relationships plays a crucial role, as individuals seek autonomy in their romantic decisions (Hafeez, Loona, & Nawaz, 2025; Salayani et al., 2024; Ganguli, 2024; Matutes, 2025; Srinivasan, 2024). Psychological factors such as rebelliousness and a desire for emotional independence have also been found to contribute significantly to the decision to elope (Hall, 2023; Devi Chandra, 2024; Gurung, 2021; Marsden, 2007). Moreover, the

increasing accessibility to online platforms has provided young people with opportunities to meet potential partners outside of their immediate social circles, which influences their decision to elope (Afolaranmi, 2020; Noor, Djaba, & Enomoto, 2016; Najib, 2023). Research indicates that marriage in rural communities is deeply connected to family expectations, religious values, and local customs (Reynolds & Walther, 2020). However, little has been done to understand the gradual shift in how elopement is perceived, especially as it becomes more frequent and visible in the media. It is important to mention it here that younger generations are increasingly questioning traditional marriage structures, and the exact factors driving this shift remain underexplored.

This study aims to explore the evolving perception of elopement in Chitral, focusing on the factors that influence its increasing acceptance. The key research question guiding this study is: What are the main factors that influence shaping the changing community perceptions of elopement in Chitral? By investigating these factors, this study seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of how elopement is being reframed in modern societies and what it reveals about broader cultural shifts within this culturally traditional region.

### **Research Design**

The study adopted a descriptive qualitative research design, which is well-suited for exploring the evolving perceptions of elopement in the study locale. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of community people's experiences, beliefs, and the meanings they assign to events like elopement, which may not be fully captured through quantitative measures (Creswell & Creswell, 2014). By adopting a qualitative approach, we aimed to describe how societal views on elopement are evolving, without attempting to manipulate or control variables, making it appropriate for understanding social phenomena in a cultural context (Denzin, 2018).

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews using an interview guide consisting of 13 questions in Upper Chitral, Pakistan. These questions are designed under four main themes: (a) Traditional views on marriage and elopement, (b) factors influencing changing perceptions, (c) Gender roles in marriage and elopement, and (d) impact of modern influences. The interviews were conducted by one researcher and recorded on a single mobile phone for accuracy and convenience. This approach enabled us to capture the responses verbatim, ensuring that the data collected was authentic and rich in detail, which is crucial in qualitative research (Silverman, 2016).

### **Sampling and Participant Recruitment**

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who were specifically knowledgeable about the subject matter and whose views were crucial for understanding the changes in community perceptions of elopement. We focused on elders, both males, and females, aged 50 and above, as they were considered to have an in-depth understanding of the customs, traditions, and cultural shifts in the community. Three co-

focused group discussions were conducted. The first group consisted of five participants (3 males & 2 females), the second group of six participants (3 males & 3 females), and the third group of six participants (4 males & 2 females). This group size allowed for deep discussions while ensuring a range of opinions and perspectives were gathered. We reached the thematic data saturation point after conducting three focus group discussions. The inclusion criteria for the participants were (a) aged 50 years and above, (b) permanent resident of Upper Chitral, (c) willingness to participate in the study, and recording. The exclusion criteria for the study were age below 50 years, not a permanent resident of the study locale, and not willing to participate in the study and recordings.

### ***Data Analysis***

The collected data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through the thematic data analysis technique, as it provides a flexible and accessible method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clark, 2006). This method is suitable for a qualitative research approach to uncover the world of human experiences.

The six steps of thematic data analysis were systematically followed as outlined by Braun and Clark (2006). They include (a) familiarization with the data, where we thoroughly review the transcribed data to gain an in-depth understanding of the data, (b) initial coding, where codes were assigned by identifying significant statements related to the research question (c) searching for themes, the initial codes were grouped into a broader themes, (d) reviewing themes, the identified themes were reviewed for coherence and relevance, ensuring that they accurately reflected the data, (e) defining and naming themes, when the themes were refined, names were assigned based on the content that emerged from the data, and (f) report writing, the reviewed themes were narratively presented concerning the research question. This approach ensured that the analysis was systematic, transparent, and grounded in the participant responses, allowing for a thorough understanding of the evolving perceptions of elopement in Chitral.

### **Findings**

The data analysis indicates a variety of factors that influence the perception of the community people regarding elopement in Chitral. There are four main themes developed from the data, which centered around the community perceptions and elopement, covering the largest amount of the data.

1. Cultural shifts in attitude toward elopement
2. The role of education and social media in shaping perceptions
3. Generational differences in views on elopement
4. Gender dynamics and elopement in Chitral

#### ***Theme 1: Cultural Shifts in Attitude Toward Elopement***

Our study participants noted that the perceptions towards elopement have significantly shifted, with growing acceptance, especially among younger generations. As a local farmer

shared, “*Elopement is not as taboo as it once was. Mostly people in the community now see it more as a personal choice rather than a scandal*”. This statement highlights the shift in viewing elopement as a scandal to considering it a personal, independent decision with fewer social consequences.

Several participants emphasized the influence of urbanization on this shift. A college teacher stated, “*In urban areas of Chitral, people have become more open to the idea of elopement and don’t consider it an issue*”. In contrast, a retired govt employee noted, “*In the rural areas of Chitral, it still carries a heavy stigma. People take it seriously as compared to the urban areas*”.

This difference in perceptions between rural and urban settings reflects the ongoing cultural divide and how city life is gradually reshaping traditional views on marriage and relationships.

A female schoolteacher expressed, “*I think the younger generation is becoming more modern in terms of relationships, where they accept and encourage elopement. They prefer their own choices instead of accepting parents’ decisions*”. Another female housewife shared, “*previously in our times, when someone elopes, there would be gossip and it was considered bad, especially in female circles of the village, but nowadays there is no such gossip and stigmatization*”. These statements indicate the gradual change in the perception of elopement, especially among females of the study locale.

Many participants expressed that elopement has become less stigmatized in our society in recent years. An extract from their responses.

*Elopement was considered taboo in our society; people cut off relations with the families of the couple, and sometimes they were deported from their villages. But in contemporary times, the community people don’t take it seriously and accept the couple after some time.*

In line with this, a carpenter shared, “*I know of two girls who eloped in my village. At first, it was scandalous, but now, some people are saying they admire the courage it took to make that decision.*” These quotes illustrate that while elopement is still viewed negatively in some circles, it is beginning to be seen as an act of courage rather than rebellion. A female housewife shared her opinion, “*We had a discussion in our family about a cousin who eloped. The elders were upset, but the younger ones defended her, saying that it was her choice.*”

The above presented data suggest that there is a gradual but steady change in the perception of community people regarding elopement, once it was seen as a rebellious act, now becoming normal with each passing day.

### ***Theme 2: The role of Education and social media in shaping perceptions***

The study participants highlighted the significant role that education and social media play in changing perceptions of elopement in Chitral. A school headmaster explained, “*Education is changing how people think about elopement. Young people today have different views, especially because they’re exposed to more diverse perspectives.*” This shows how exposure to new ideas, particularly through education, has shaped more accepting views toward elopement.

A female school principal stated, “*Social media has a huge influence. I’ve seen so many posts of couples getting married against their family’s wishes. It’s no longer seen as something shameful.*” A retired schoolteacher shared a similar view, “*social media made me see that elopement is happening everywhere, not just in the cities. It’s more common now, and people are*

*less likely to judge.*” This emphasizes how platforms like Instagram and Facebook have helped normalize elopement by showcasing real-life stories of couples who chose to elope, shifting the narrative from scandal to acceptance.

Some participants explained that educational institutes like universities help individuals question societal norms. An extract of their views,

*In universities, there are discussions about relationships, marriage, and society’s expectations. This has made the young generation more open-minded about elopement. The university’s culture enables the youth towards personal freedom and choices.*

A carpenter stated, *“I didn’t think much about elopement until my nephew showed me a documentary. It showed the reasons behind it, and I realized that it’s not just rebellion, but a choice made by people in love.”* This illustrates how documentaries and visual content available through media channels can provide more depth and understand about issues like elopement, helping to shift perceptions.

A government employee noted,

*Social media has increased our awareness of different cultures and their perspectives on elopement. For instance, I saw a couple from India who eloped, and the positive comments they received online made me realize that elopement can be a valid choice, even in traditional societies.*

This underscores the role of social media in breaking down cultural barriers and fostering a more global, accepting perspective toward elopement.

### ***Theme 3: Generational Differences in Views on Elopement***

Our study participants highlighted significant differences in how various generations perceive elopement. A farmer shared, *“The younger generation is more accepting of elopement. They think that it’s about individual choice, not just what society expects from them”*. In contrast, a female housewife remarked, *“When I was young, if someone eloped, it was considered a huge shame. We never even thought of doing something like that.”* This statement reflects the deep-rooted traditional values held by older generations, for whom elopement is still seen as a violation of social norms and family honor.

Several participants shared their observations on how younger generations view the concept of marriage. A sixty-two-year-old elder noted, *“In the past, families arranged marriages, and no one dared to question it. Now, young people feel like they have the right to choose their partner, even if it means eloping.”* This reflects the evolving attitudes toward marriage, with younger generations viewing elopement as a legitimate choice rather than a rebellious act.

A female participant explained, *“In my time if a girl ran away with a boy, it was considered disgraceful. Now, I hear young people talk about it as if it’s no big deal. It’s hard for us to accept.”* This shows how deeply ingrained traditional views still shape the attitudes of older generations, who find it difficult to accept changing social norms. A

school headmaster remarked, *“The younger generation sees elopement as a personal choice, but older generations still view it as something dishonorable.”* This statement reinforces the idea that older generations continue to link elopement with shame, while younger people are more likely to view it as an empowered, personal decision.

Some participants observed that societal pressures also play a role in how different generations perceive elopement. An elder shared, *“I always talk about the importance of family reputation to my grandsons and daughters. For them, it’s not about that anymore. It’s about love and happiness.”* This shows how the younger generation is more focused on personal fulfillment, while older generations prioritize family reputation. The data shows that the older generation still sees elopement as an act of shame and stigma, but the younger generation has changed, and they link elopement with personal choice and freedom.

#### ***Theme 4: Gender Dynamics and Elopement in Chitral***

The impact of gender dynamics on elopement was a key theme in our study, especially in the context of Chitral, where traditional gender roles continue to influence perceptions and decisions surrounding marriage. A female housewife explained, *“The idea of elopement is very different for men and women. If a man elopes, it’s seen as an act of courage. But if a woman does, she’s seen as dishonoring her family.”* This highlights the gendered expectations that shape the perception of elopement, where men are often given more freedom, while women face stricter societal norms.

Another female participant shared, *“If a girl runs away with a man, people immediately assume she’s been forced or manipulated. They don’t think of her as making an independent choice.”* This statement reveals the gender bias that women face, where their autonomy in making decisions about marriage is often overlooked, and their actions are viewed through a lens of suspicion.

A college teacher explained, *“A man in our community can elope, and people might even admire him for it. But a woman is expected to follow the rules and stay within the confines of family and community approval.”* This reflects the double standards in place, where men are often celebrated for making independent choices, while women are expected to conform to traditional gender roles.

A female participant offered a more critical viewpoint: *“I think gender roles are a big reason why women are judged so harshly for eloping. Men are free to make choices, but women are supposed to uphold family honor and tradition.”* This statement highlights how deeply ingrained gender expectations restrict women’s autonomy and influence their actions, particularly in a conservative society like Chitral.

A school principal shared, *“If a woman elopes, it’s considered as if she’s disobeying her parents, breaking all the family’s rules. But when men do it, it’s just seen as them following their heart.”* This quote emphasizes the differing expectations for men and women, where the same action, elopement, carries very different meanings depending on gender.

A retired government employee observed, *“I think men are given more freedom when it comes to relationships and marriage. If a man wants to marry someone on his*

*own, people don't question him much. But a woman's choice is always scrutinized.*" This highlights the unequal treatment of men and women in marriage decisions, where women's actions are often judged more harshly than men's.

A female participant noted, *"In our culture, men can elope without facing much consequence. But women who do so are often hated, and their families face shame. It's the same action, but the impact is very different for men and women."* This underscores the gendered disparity in how elopement is perceived and the consequences that women often face.

One participant shared how gender norms are shifting, *"I've noticed that in some of the younger generations, both boys and girls are more supportive of each other when it comes to choosing their partners. It's still hard for girls, but it's changing slowly."* This comment suggests that while traditional gender roles still play a significant role, there is a shift happening in younger generations toward more equal views on marriage and relationships.

## Discussion

This study explores the evolving perceptions of girls' elopement in Chitral, focusing on cultural shifts, the role of education and social media, generational differences, and gender dynamics. The findings reveal a complex interaction between traditional norms and modern influences, particularly among younger generations, that shape community perceptions of elopement.

The findings of this study suggest that cultural attitudes toward elopement have shifted gradually and are becoming increasingly accepted. This finding is consistent with the research Ikhlaq et al., (2022), who identified similar cultural transitions in Pakistan, with urban centers displaying more progressive views on personal autonomy and relationships. Our study emphasizes the significant role of education and social media in shaping perceptions of elopement. Participants noted that exposure to diverse ideas through educational institutions and social media platforms has made younger individuals more accepting of elopement as a legitimate choice. This supports the findings of Ramlah Ramlah et al., (2024), which demonstrate that education and media are powerful tools in altering societal norms. Social media, in particular, has played a key role in normalizing elopement by showcasing stories of individuals who eloped for love, thereby challenging the stigma traditionally attached to it. As Zeb et al., (2021) note, media platforms have increasingly become spaces for discussing once-taboo topics, promoting a shift in societal attitudes toward marriage and relationships. A clear generational divide emerged in this study, with older participants maintaining traditional views of marriage, which often tied elopement to disgrace, while younger generation viewed it as an empowered choice. This divide reflects broader societal trends where younger generations are more likely to embrace individualism and reject the traditional concept of arranged marriage (Udalagama, 2024). The generational conflict observed in this study aligns with Shah et al., (2025) work, which notes that younger generations in Pakistan are increasingly challenging their parent's values around marriage and relationships, favoring personal

freedom over familial or societal expectations.

Gender dynamics play a significant role in shaping the perception of elopement in Chitral. Our findings show that men are generally given more freedom to elope without facing significant societal backlash, whereas women are expected to conform to societal expectations of marriage. This supports Sathar's (2025) research on gender roles in rural Pakistan, which found that traditional gender expectations often restrict women's autonomy, particularly in matters of marriage. Women's elopement is still seen as a challenge to traditional gender roles, while men's actions are often viewed as expressions of personal agency. This disparity highlights the need for a more gender-inclusive understanding of marriage choices.

### ***Implications and Future Research***

The findings of this study have significant implications in the fields of Sociology and Gender Studies. The study provides key insights into the evolving perceptions of elopement in Chitral, highlighting that traditional cultural norms are gradually shifting, particularly among younger generations. The findings suggest that while family honor and societal expectations still significantly influence perceptions of elopement, education and social media are playing key roles in challenging these norms. Future research should further investigate how these changing perceptions impact social behavior and decision-making, especially in rural areas like Upper Chitral, where traditional values remain deeply entrenched. Moreover, exploring the intersection of gender, socioeconomic factors, and religious beliefs in shaping views on elopement could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the social dynamics in Chitral and similar rural contexts.

### ***Limitations***

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the sample size was relatively small, consisting of only 17 participants from three focus group discussions, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the study focused solely on Upper Chitral, and perceptions of elopement may vary significantly in other regions of Pakistan or urban settings. Furthermore, the study did not explore the perspectives of key stakeholders, such as religious leaders or policymakers, which could provide a more holistic understanding of the issue.

### **Conclusion**

This study highlights the evolving perceptions of elopement in Chitral, showing a gradual shift from viewing it as a scandal and a breach of family honor to viewing it, especially among younger generations, as a legitimate expression of personal choice. This shift is driven largely by generational change, exposure to education, and the normalizing influence of social media, which together have weakened the absolute authority that family and community once held over marriage decisions. Whether this change should be read as a positive or a negative development depends on what is driving it. If growing tolerance of elopement reflects a genuine loosening of family control over who marries

whom allowing couples, and women in particular, to express romantic choice openly rather than through secrecy and risk then this is a positive development for individual autonomy. In this reading, elopement may gradually become less necessary not because choice is being suppressed again, but because love-based and self-chosen marriages no longer require flight and concealment to be accepted.

However, the gender dynamics identified in this study complicate an entirely positive reading. Participants consistently described elopement as carrying different meanings for men and women: a man's decision to elope is framed as courage or agency, while a woman's identical decision is framed as dishonor, or is reinterpreted as coercion rather than choice. This double standard suggests that even as overall tolerance of elopement increases, the underlying expectation that women's choices require family or community sanction has not disappeared it has simply taken a softer, less openly punitive form. A decline in stigmatized elopement is therefore only meaningfully liberating for women if it is accompanied by an equal recognition of their right to choose, rather than a continued requirement that their choices be explained, excused, or doubted.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Chitral is undergoing a meaningful but uneven transition in marital norms. For this transition to translate into genuine liberation for women rather than a more socially comfortable version of the same control it will need to be accompanied by a shift in how women's autonomy is narrated and judged, not only by how tolerant communities have become of the act of elopement itself.\*\*\*

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