Nigeria: Basic Profile of Child Marriage

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Keeping girls in schools helps in delaying marriage. Conversely, child marriage contributes to lower educational attainment for girls. In Nigeria, many girls are still married as children (before the age of 18), before they may be physically and emotionally ready to become wives and mothers. Child brides are at greater risk of experiencing poor health outcomes, having children at a younger age, having more children over their lifetime, dropping out of school, earning less in adulthood, and living in poverty. They are also at higher risk of intimate partner violence and may lack decision-making ability. Apart from affecting girls, child marriage also affects their children, households, communities, and societies. This brief provides a profile of child marriage in Nigeria using the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) for 2013 and 2018 (data from the planned 2023 DHS should be available in 2024).

Four in ten women in Nigeria still marry as children

Table 1 provides statistics on the age at first marriage for women ages 18 to 22 in the last two DHS. This is the youngest age group that can be used to measure child marriage, defined as a formal or informal union before the age of 18. A substantial share of girls still marry before the age of 18, and many do so before 15, but there are differences between the two surveys suggesting that child marriage has decreased slightly over time. The share of women ages 18 to 22 who were married before the age of 18 decreased from 42.1 percent in 2013 to 39.8 percent in 2018.

Background: This brief was prepared for a KIX Africa 19 Hub national policy dialogue in Nigeria with a focus on data and achieving gender equality in and through education. KIX (Knowledge and Innovation Exchange) Africa 19 contributes to education systems strengthening in African anglophone countries by bridging the gap between research and policy making. With support from the Global Partnership for Education and Canada's International Development Research Center, KIX Africa 19 is managed by UNESCO IICBA.

Key findings: Using data from the last two Demographic and Health Surveys for 2013 and 2018, this brief provides a basic profile of child marriage in Nigeria.

- Four in ten women in Nigeria still marry early. The share of women ages 18 to 22 who were married before the age of 18 decreased slightly from 42.1 percent in 2013 to 39.8 percent in 2018.

- Higher order measures of child marriage suggest a similar trend, namely a slight decline over time in the depth and severity of child marriage.

- Girls in rural areas and in the north are more at risk of child marriage, as are girls in households with lower levels of wealth (and higher levels of poverty).

- Child marriage is associated with worse educational outcomes, including lower educational attainment and literacy.

- The relationship between child marriage and labor force participation, as well as the type of work held when working is more complex.

- These associations are correlations, not necessarily causal effects, but other briefs in this series look at these issues in more details.

Education 2030

Table 1: Age at First Marriage for Women, Age 18-22 (%)

	2013	2018
Not Married	43.0	47.1
18 or above	14.8	13.1
Below 12	1.5	1.0
12	2.1	1.5
13	4.6	3.7
14	8.0	7.9
15	10.0	9.8
16	8.6	8.3
17	7.4	7.6
Share married before 18	42.1	39.8
Total	100.0	100.0
Mean age at first marriage (if married)	15.9	16.0

Source: Authors' estimation using 2013 and 2018 DHS.

Other measures of child marriage are also useful

The negative impact of child marriage for a girl's health, education, and well-being is often larger when the girl marries very early. For example, child marriage is known to have a negative impact on school enrollment and attainment. The earlier a girl marries, the more likely it is that she will drop out of school early and thereby have a low level of educational attainment. This will not only limit her employment and earnings potential for the rest of her life, but it will also have other negative consequences for her as well as for her children.

Most studies on child marriage report the incidence of child marriage - the share of girls who marry early (before the age of 18), sometimes also with the share of girls who marry very early, before the age of 15. Such statistics are useful, but they do not capture the "depth" and "severity" of child marriage well. Measures of child marriage can be adopted from the poverty literature (Nguyen and Wodon, 2012). Three such measures are used here: the incidence of child marriage or headcount index, the child marriage gap, and the squared child marriage gap. Definitions of these measures is provided in an annex. The measures are estimated for child marriage and very early marriage defined as marrying before age 15.

The child marriage gap represents the "depth" of child marriage. It accounts not only for the share of girls who marry early, but also the number of years of early marriage. When using the child marriage gap for the evaluation of programs or policies, instead of simply looking at the share of the girls who marry early, more weight is placed on the girls who marry at a very young age. While the child marriage gap takes into account the average number of years of early marriage for girls who marry early, the squared gap takes into account the square value of that number, thereby putting even more emphasis on girls who marry very early and taking into account inequality in the age of marriage among girls marrying early.

Table 2 provides trends over time in these measures of child marriage inspired by the poverty literature. Consider first the age group 18-22. In that age group, as already mentioned, about four in ten girls marry before the age of 18 (42.1 percent in 2013 and 39.8 percent in 2018). The child marriage gap (CMG) drops from 7.4 percent in 2013 to 6.7 percent in 2018 among women ages 18 to 22. The squared gap (SG) drops from 1.6 percent for that group to 1.4 percent. This suggests that apart from the fact that slightly fewer girls marry before the age of 18 in 2018 versus 2013, the age at first marriage is increasing slightly, as shown in Table 1. By estimating the same measures on older groups, Table 2 provides an implicit trend in child marriage over time. There has been some progress in reducing child marriage, but progress has remained limited. Note that all estimates have standard errors which are not shown in Table 2 to save space. Some differences over time or between age groups may not be statistically significant. Importantly, it could also be that the impact of the recent COVID-19 pandemic has made matters worse.

Table 2: Trends in Child and Very Early Marriage (%)

	18 years			15 years		
	H	CMG	SG	H	CMG	SG
2013						
All 18-49 years	46.8	8.9	2.1	21.5	2.8	0.5
Age group						
18-22 years	42.1	7.4	1.6	16.1	2.0	0.3
23-30 years	47.0	9.1	2.2	22.0	2.9	0.5
31-40 years	47.8	9.2	2.2	22.7	3.0	0.5
41-49 years	51.0	10.2	2.5	26.0	3.5	0.6
2018						
All 18-49 years	42.1	7.7	1.8	17.3	2.3	0.4
Age group						
18-22 years	39.8	6.7	1.4	14.1	1.6	0.3
23-30 years	43.9	8.1	1.9	18.1	2.5	0.5
31-40 years	40.7	7.5	1.7	16.9	2.2	0.4
41-49 years	44.4	8.5	2.1	20.3	2.7	0.5

Source: Authors' estimation.

Girls in rural areas and in the north are more at risk

As shown in Table 3, child marriage is more prevalent in rural than in urban areas. There are also large differences between zones, with the lowest measures observed in the South East zone and the highest measures observed in the

North West and North East zones. At the same time, some zones with a higher prevalence of child marriage had a larger reduction in the prevalence of the practice between 2013 and 2018 (again, standard errors are not shown in the Table to save space – some differences may not be statistically significant).

Table 3: Child Marriage by Geographic Location, Age 18-22 (%)

	18 years			15 years		
	H	CMG	SG	H	CMG	SG
2013						
All 18-22 years	42.1	7.4	1.6	16.1	2.0	0.3
Zone						
North Central	33.5	5.3	1.2	9.7	1.4	0.3
North East	60.2	10.6	2.4	23.5	3.0	0.5
North West	70.4	13.1	3.0	30.7	3.7	0.6
South East	9.2	1.1	0.2	1.5	0.2	-
South South	15.1	2.1	0.4	3.0	0.3	0.1
South West	13.7	1.9	0.4	3.4	0.4	0.1
Residence						
Urban	20.3	3.1	0.6	5.7	0.7	0.1
Rural	56.9	10.3	2.3	23.2	2.9	0.5
2018						
All 18-22 years	39.8	6.7	1.4	14.1	1.6	0.3
Zone						
North Central	34.3	5.0	1.0	9.2	1.0	0.1
North East	52.9	9.3	2.0	21.4	2.3	0.3
North West	63.5	11.2	2.5	24.2	2.8	0.5
South East	11.0	1.5	0.3	2.3	0.3	0.1
South South	14.6	2.1	0.4	3.8	0.5	0.1
South West	10.5	1.4	0.3	1.8	0.3	0.1
Residence						
Urban	19.9	3.2	0.7	6.7	0.8	0.1
Rural	55.0	9.4	2.0	19.8	2.3	0.4

Source: Authors' estimation. Values rounding to 0.0 not shown.

Girls in poverty are also more at risk

Household welfare can be measured through a wealth index with households categorized in five quintiles from the poorest to the richest. For most women the level of wealth observed is that of the household in which they married, not their household or origin, but it is likely that many women marry with men who have similar socio-economic profiles, in which case the quintile of wealth after marriage may not be very different from the quintile before, although it should be noted that for younger women, assets and wealth may be lower than for older women. Measures of child marriage differ by quintile. Only in the top quintiles of wealth, and especially in the top quintile, is the prevalence of child marriage much lower.

Table 4: Child Marriage by Quintile, Age 18-22 (%)

	18 years			15 years		
	H	CMG	SG	H	CMG	SG
2013						
All 18-22 years	42.1	7.4	1.6	16.1	2.0	0.3
Wealth quintiles						
Poorest	80.5	15.9	3.8	39.5	5.0	0.8
Poorer	63.4	11.2	2.5	24.5	3.0	0.5
Middle	36.3	5.8	1.2	11.7	1.3	0.2
Richer	25.3	3.8	0.8	6.4	0.8	0.2
Richest	10.4	1.4	0.3	2.2	0.2	-
2018						
All 18-22 years	39.8	6.7	1.4	14.1	1.6	0.3
Wealth quintiles						
Poorest	72.5	13.2	3.0	29.4	3.5	0.6
Poorer	59.5	10.1	2.1	21.3	2.4	0.4
Middle	40.8	6.8	1.5	14.4	1.7	0.3
Richer	20.8	2.9	0.6	5.2	0.6	0.1
Richest	8.4	1.2	0.2	2.1	0.2	0.0

Source: Authors' estimation. Values rounding to 0.0 not shown.

Table 5: Child Marriage by Education Level and Literacy Status, Age 18-22 (%)

	18 years			15 years		
	H	CMG	SG	H	CMG	SG
2013						
All 18-22 years	42.1	7.4	1.6	16.1	2.0	0.3
Education						
No education	81.3	15.4	3.6	36.5	4.5	0.8
Primary, some	63.6	10.5	2.4	18.8	2.9	0.6
Primary, completed	52.4	8.6	1.8	17.7	2.0	0.3
Secondary, some	19.3	2.7	0.5	4.4	0.5	0.1
Secondary, completed	12.4	1.6	0.3	2.1	0.2	-
Higher	3.2	0.4	0.1	0.4	-	-
Literacy						
Cannot read	77.3	14.4	3.3	33.5	4.2	0.7
Limited ability	54.9	9.0	2.0	16.3	2.2	0.4
Full sentence	14.8	2.0	0.4	3.0	0.3	-
2018						
All 18-22 years	39.8	6.7	1.4	14.1	1.6	0.3
Education						
No education	80.2	14.4	3.2	32.4	3.7	0.6
Incomplete primary	66.7	11.5	2.5	25.1	2.9	0.5
Complete primary	52.8	8.7	1.9	16.2	2.1	0.4
Incomplete secondary	28.6	4.1	0.8	7.1	0.9	0.1
Complete secondary	11.9	1.6	0.3	2.7	0.3	-
Higher	2.2	0.3	-	0.4	-	-
Literacy						
Cannot read at all	73.0	12.8	2.8	28.5	3.3	0.5
Limited ability	31.5	4.8	1.0	8.5	1.1	0.2
Full sentence	10.3	1.4	0.3	2.2	0.2	-

Source: Authors' estimation. Values rounding to 0.0 not shown.

Child marriage is associated with worse educational outcomes

Table 5 provides data on child marriage by level of education and literacy. Child marriage affects educational attainment negatively as girls often drop out of school when they marry. The causality goes the other way as well, as pursuing one's education may delay marriage. These relationships are apparent in the data: measures of child marriage are higher among women with lower levels of education, and the same is observed for literacy. Marrying between the ages of 15 and 17 may not affect the completion of primary education but marrying earlier can prevent girls from completing their primary education.

Child marriage may not affect labor force participation as much

Table 6 provides data on labor force participation. In some countries child marriage may reduce labor force participation, for example through higher fertility. In others, if child marriage is associated with poverty, women may have little choice but to work. Other effects could be at work. In Nigeria, in 2018, labor force participation is similar for women who married before or after 18 (the result is different in 2013). In both years, the type of work associated most with child marriage is work with cash earnings. As for other statistics in this brief, these basic statistics however do not imply causality.

Table 6: Child Marriage by Labor Force Participation Status, Age 18-22 (%)

	18 years			15 years		
	H	CMG	SG	H	CMG	SG
2013						
All 18-22 years	42.1	7.4	1.6	16.1	2.0	0.3
Working						
No	36.6	6.4	1.4	14	1.7	0.3
Yes	49.3	8.7	2.0	18.9	2.4	0.4
Type of work						
Not paid	26.7	4.5	1.0	9.6	1.3	0.2
Cash only	54.4	9.7	2.2	21.2	2.7	0.5
Cash and in-kind	47.7	7.8	1.7	16.2	2.1	0.4
In-kind only	15.6	3	0.8	7.4	1.3	0.2
2018						
All 18-22 years	39.8	6.7	1.4	14.1	1.6	0.3
Working						
No	39.5	6.7	1.4	14.3	1.6	0.3
Yes	40.1	6.7	1.4	14.0	1.7	0.3
Type of work						
Not paid	28.1	4.4	0.9	8.3	1.0	0.2
Cash only	45.0	7.6	1.6	16.3	1.8	0.3
Cash and in-kind	48.1	8.6	2.1	16.8	2.6	0.7
In-kind only	18.1	2.7	0.5	5.9	0.6	0.1

Source: Authors' estimation.

Takeaways

This brief has provided a basic profile of child marriage in Nigeria. Measures of child marriage are high. The share of women ages 18-22 who married as children is at 39.8 percent in the 2018 survey, which is only slightly below the estimate of 42.1 percent in 2013. Child marriage is (not surprisingly) associated with lower wealth, lower education levels, and lower literacy. The relationship with labor force participation is more complex. These are correlations, not necessarily causal effects. Other briefs in this series look at these issues in more details.

References

Foster, J., J. Greer, and E. Thorbecke, 1984, A Class of Decomposable Poverty Measures, *Econometrica* 52: 761–776.

Nguyen, M. C., and Q. Wodon, 2012, Measuring Child Marriage, *Economics Bulletin* 32(1): 398-411.

Annex: Methodological Note

The headcount index, child marriage gap, and squared child marriage gap are the first three measures of the FGT class (Foster et al., 1984). Denote by q the number of girls who marry early and by n the number of girls in the overall population. Denote by y_i the age of marriage of girl i and by z the age threshold defining child marriage (18 years of age, but a lower age threshold can also be used to measure very early marriage). The general formula for the FGT class of measures depends on a parameter α which takes a value of zero for the headcount, one for the child marriage gap, and two for the squared child marriage gap as follows:

$$P\alpha = \frac{1}{n}\sum_{i=1}^{q}\left[\frac{z-y_i}{z}\right]^{\alpha}$$