

Nigeria and Niger: Qualitative Insights from Hausa Communities on Girls' Education and Child Marriage

Part 1 – Parents

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Why does child marriage remain so widespread and why do girls drop out of school in Hausa communities in Nigeria and in similar communities in Niger? This two-part brief provides tentative answers. It is adapted in part from previous work by the authors (Perlman et al., 2018) that combined quantitative and qualitative analysis on factors leading to low educational attainment for girls and child marriage in Hausa communities. The focus in the brief is on the qualitative component of the analysis. Part 1 considers the perspective of parents on child marriage and girls' education, while part 2 (separate brief) considers the perspective of the girls. The analysis is based on ethnographic research, using relatively unobtrusive participatory research methods that can be more effective than focus groups or rapid interviews to gather sensitive information in contexts of power differentials. The analysis is based on qualitative insights from Hausa communities in both Nigeria (section on factors leading to child marriage) and Niger (section on factors leading girls to drop out of school).



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 qualitative ethnographic data from Hausa communities in both Nigeria and Niger, this brief provides an analysis first of factors leading girls to drop out of school, and next of parental perceptions related to girls' education and child marriage.

- The pressure to marry early is high for both girls and their parents. Forced marriage happens, but more often for parents, finding a suitable husband for their daughters is a responsibility that they take very seriously, especially when viable alternatives to a marriage are scarce.
- Parents also want to avoid the risk of a pregnancy out of marriage because this can bring significant hardship and social exclusion to their daughter. Signs of readiness for marriage for parents include the development of secondary sexual characteristics combined with an independent attitude, idleness, and potential interest of boys.
- The best antidote for a girl to delay marriage is to remain in school, but even parents wishing to keep their daughter in school face a range of obstacles to do so.
- Parents wishing to educate their daughters face many barriers, including poor learning outcomes and cost, failure at primary school completion exams, lack of nearby secondary schools, forced withdrawal of married adolescents, a risk for some daughters of never enrolling in school or enrolling late, the influence of relatives, and demands on daughters.

Child marriage is often the result of a lack of viable alternatives

The pressure to marry early is high for both girls and their parents. Forced marriage happens, but the world of adolescent girls in rural communities is built around the prospects for marriage, so many girls may also aspire to marry. As for parents, finding a suitable husband for their daughters is a responsibility that they take very seriously. Viable alternatives to an early marriage are scarce, so for parents, ensuring that their daughters marry well is of high importance.

What are the underlying causes of child marriage in Hausa communities? The primary rationale for parents seems to be the desire to keep their daughters safe and ensure that they can find a suitable husband for her. Getting a daughter settled in her new home is a moral duty for parents and marriage is considered the primary avenue to secure her future. It is also admittedly an opportunity for families to forge strategic alliances that could offer socio-economic benefits, but those benefits are often not the primary motivation for marrying a girl early.

A commonly held belief drawn from the communities' experience is that the window of opportunity for a girl to obtain a suitable husband is limited. There is an element of control in marrying girls early as parents fear that the older their daughter is, the more assertive she will be, and therefore possibly beyond the control of a husband. But parents also aim to avoid for their daughter the risk of not finding a husband, of being sexually harassed, or even of being assaulted.

Parents also want to avoid the risk of a pregnancy out of marriage because this can bring significant hardship and social exclusion to their daughter. If a girl becomes pregnant before marriage, the social cost to her and her family can be tremendous. The girl may be kept secluded or may be sent to live with kin in another village until she delivers. She may lose her freedom and may not be sent to sell goods on markets (hawking), resulting in a serious loss of revenue. Her marriage options may be limited and she may be grateful for a man who will have her and *"wipe away her father's tears."* Her wedding, a moment for which she may have worked for years by selling goods in order for her mother to build her bride wealth, may be modest. These are risks that parents prefer to avoid for their daughter and reasons why, in consultation with the extended family (especially paternal uncles) they feel responsible for determining when their daughter is ready to marry.

Signs of readiness for marriage for parents include the development of secondary sexual characteristics combined with an independent attitude, idleness, and

the interest of boys. Parents see age as an arbitrary criterion for determining readiness for marriage. *"One girl can be ready for marriage at 14 and another might not be ready until 18"*. Parents however keep close watch of their daughters' bodily development, looking for signs of puberty. They say that these changes, usually first noticed by the mother, attract male attention. *"The boys are not to be trusted,"* said one father. *"When a girl has physically matured, we assume her to be ready for marriage in order not to lose her to the more rugged boys in the community."*

If the development of secondary sexual characteristics is accompanied by an increasingly independent attitude and behavior, some parents believe that it is time for the girl to be married. *"A girl's conduct tells you if she's ready. If she becomes rude and disrespectful, even without asking her you know,"* said one father. Some parents see this independence as linked with the girl becoming closer to her friends and the boys she meets when selling goods on markets (what we refer to as hawking). This feeds into their fears of premarital sex and the consequences it would bring to the girl and the family.

The best antidote for a girl to delay marriage is to remain in school. Once a girl has passed puberty, if she is not in school, parents would rather see her married than have her at home idle. They *"don't want to see a full grown girl at home doing nothing"* because such a girl can be easily distracted. A father explained that, *"Girls who are not in school are married earlier. If a girl is not in school her idleness makes her more vulnerable to bad influences. You can't watch over your adolescent girl all the time. Even if you don't let her go out at night, she goes out in the day to hawk and might get involved with all sorts of dangers a parent may not be aware of."*

Interest of boys in a daughter, or interest on the part of the daughter in boys, is also a sign of readiness for marriage for parents. *"We judge a girl's readiness for marriage by her interaction with boys,"* said one father. *"If a mother sees her daughter with two different boys on two different days she'll inform her husband. The husband will ask if any of the boys is suitable for marriage and if he will take care of her needs."* The presence of boys is interpreted to mean not only that the girl is interested, but also that there is a risk that she will bring shame to herself and her family. Parents who are committed to their daughter's education will sometimes advise her to avoid boys' attention. *"But if she continues receiving boyfriends or suitors her father will tell her to choose one and she will be married,"* said a father.

These perceptions of readiness for marriage are shared by most: girls, fathers, mothers, uncles, extended family and religious leaders. Together, they put strong pressure on parents to marry their daughters. Few families purposely delay the marriage of their daughter until the age of 18

unless a girl is still in school. Even if a family differs with this understanding of readiness, it faces social pressure to act on these signs. Some Islamic scholars in the region believe that if it is feared that a girl will engage in sexual behavior outside of marriage, the father, or even the community leader can rightfully arrange for her marriage. Due to the high moral standard expected of every Muslim, public morality and family and community integrity take priority over the daughter's personal rights.

Schooling is an alternative to marriage, but multiple factors lead girls to drop out of school

The most common trajectories for girls in rural Hausa communities in Niger and Nigeria lead to child marriage. The exceptions tend to be girls who have passed their exams and remain in school and actively avoid male attention. There are unfortunately few girls in this category. There is a consensus in communities that access to quality primary and secondary education is the most effective way to delay marriage. *"If a girl is getting a quality education her mind will be occupied with school and she won't have time to spend with boys,"* said one mother. Parents know that schooling can lead to highly valued employment as teachers and government employees. They say that children who have attended school are more composed and that one can immediately tell that they are educated. Why then do so few girls complete secondary school? Multiple factors lead to girls dropping out of school.

Poor learning outcomes and cost. Rural government schools are so poor in quality and resources that many children graduate from primary school without learning to read. Schools may not charge tuition, but parents complain that the investment in uniforms, guard fees, transport, lunches and the opportunity costs of losing their daughters' labor are hardly worth the poor learning outcomes they see. Some girls in the later years of primary school or junior secondary have stellar penmanship, and yet cannot not read a single word of what they are so elegantly writing. *"A school girl lives in the house where I stay,"* writes one of the qualitative fieldwork researchers. *"Her aunt told me that she would be removed from school. 'She's in secondary school and can't read a word,' she said. She said they don't teach them in school and women in the house have little education and are unable to help. They themselves would like to attend adult education classes and learn to read and write."*

Failure at primary school completion exams. Another barrier to girls' education is failure at examinations. Many parents say that when their daughters fail examinations, they feel that they have little choice but to begin looking for a suitable suitor. One father admitted that if his

male children fail the examinations, he would consider struggling to find the money to send them to a private school. He won't do that for his daughters because *"once they have admirers, regardless of the amount spent on them, they will become disinterested in school and will want to get married."* One remarkable farmer went as far sending his daughters to a private school to prepare for their second sitting. They failed their second try at the examination. He lost heart and brought them home.

Lack of nearby secondary schools. Some communities do not have their own secondary school and there may not be government boarding schools either. Parents must then send their children to nearby towns and cover the costs of transportation and room and board. Students stay with relatives or contacts and parents are reluctant to leave their daughters without what they consider proper oversight. In some cases the children don't want to stay away. *"The children are anxious to return home,"* said one father. *"Some don't even wait until weekend before coming back because they are hungry and otherwise not well taken care of. If you have a daughter you also have to worry about what kind of men are in the house there. It's better to marry her off so that she won't bring shame on us."* Parents say that if their daughters are to complete secondary school, the government must either build schools closer to the communities or create boarding schools for girls. The experience of the one study community would support their perspective. While the construction of the secondary school in the community was no panacea, enrollment did rise considerably after the school was built.

Forced withdrawal of married adolescents. Once a girl is married, she may be expelled from her school. The few husbands who show an interest in supporting their adolescent wives' education may be told to enroll her in a private school. This is an expense that they may not be able to afford. Conversely, the fear of not being allowed to withdraw their daughters from school at the time of marriage is a complaint of some parents. *"After the government built the new secondary school in the community a school inspector came and announced that whoever enrolls their girl in school must not for any reason remove her for marriage,"* said one father. *"I was worried about not being able to withdraw my daughters when I feel the time is right, so I haven't enrolled them."*

Never enrolling in school or enrolling too late. Some families never enrolled any of their girls in school. Often the parents have not had educational opportunities themselves. In many cases, there may be a gender bias. One mother told us that her husband's father, the family patriarch, doesn't believe in girls' education. Even though her husband would like to send their daughter to school his father has the final say, and he is insistent that Western education corrupts a child. She said that the man is old

and that when he dies they will be at liberty to send their daughters to school, but so long as he is living, no girl from the household will be permitted to enroll. In other cases, teachers refuse to enroll children that are over considered too old, eight years of age. One girl explained, *"I dropped out of school after a few months because one of my teachers beat me. After staying at home and doing nothing but hawking I wanted to go back to school. My teacher told me it was too late. He said that at ten I was too old to enroll. It hurts when I see my classmates going to school every day and I am home going nowhere."*

Influence of relatives. Extended family members can also influence parents on the value of girls' education. Several parents said that they began their children's education after relatives from the city convinced them of its importance. *"I didn't educate my older daughters,"* said one father, *"but my sister made me see that I needed to send my younger ones to school."* Interestingly, in some families parents send some of their children to the government school and others to Islamic schools. *"A man told me that if all his children are in school then the house chores will be left undone,"* one researcher wrote in her fieldnotes. *"He said that Islamic school doesn't stop a girl from helping her mother. His oldest two girls are in Islamic school and the younger ones are in the government primary school. 'If my daughters in Islamic school don't become prominent and help us when we get old, I'm hoping that the ones in Western school will do so.'* Many Islamic schools in Niger and Nigeria offer classes on both religious and secular topics. Unlike government schooling, class schedules are adapted to the daily and seasonal cycles of village life.

Demands on first daughters. Schooling decisions may depend on household composition and the activities of the other children. Being the first daughter may lessen a girl's chances of going to school. Some young girls (ages seven to nine) attend adult education classes. When asked why they were not enrolled in primary school they explained that as the oldest daughter they were needed at home during the day to help their mothers with house chores, care for their younger siblings, and to go out hawking. They said their younger siblings went to school. The demands on the first daughter are generally higher. She not only helps with the household chores, cares for her siblings and hawks, but also is often held to a higher standard of discipline than her younger brothers and sisters. With the exception of foster daughters, girls hawk for their biological mothers. If a man has two or more wives there might be multiple first daughters in the family.

Can girls remain in school after they have married? This is unlikely, with statistics from household surveys suggesting that very few girls do so. The ethnographic work echoes

this finding from surveys. This difficulty to continue schooling after marriage is related to the fact that girls have limited agency and decision-making power in rural Hausa communities in those areas. This is true both before and after marriage. Once married, girls are under the power of their husband and often their mother-in-law. As one father said, *"The only thing that could get in the way of my daughter's schooling is marriage... It will be discussed with her suitor and I hope that he will be someone who will favor education. But if her husband doesn't permit her to continue her education, there is not a lot I can do about it."* The girl's mother added, *"It isn't easy for a young woman to look after her children, cater to her husband, and see to the running of her home and still be in school at the same time."*

Takeaways

The pressure to marry early is high in Hausa communities for both girls and their parents. Forced marriage happens, but more often for parents, finding a suitable husband for their daughters is a responsibility that they take very seriously, especially when viable alternatives to a marriage are scarce. Parents also want to avoid the risk of a pregnancy out of marriage because this can bring significant hardship and social exclusion to their daughter. The best antidote to an early marriage is to remain in school, but parents wishing to keep their daughter in school face an array of economic, social, and institutional barriers, including poor learning outcomes and cost, failure at primary school completion exams, lack of nearby secondary schools, forced withdrawal of married adolescents, never enrolling in school, or enrolling too late, influence of relatives, and demands on first daughters. Finding solutions to these constraints is key to keeping girls in schools and delay marriage.

Reference

Perlman, D., F. Adamu, and Q. Wodon, 2018. Why Do Adolescent Girls Drop Out of School in Niger? A Combined Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis, *Marchés et Organisations*, 32(2): 179-194.

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