

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

Part 2 – Adolescent Girls

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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. While Part 1 considered the perspective of parents on child marriage and girls' education, Part 2 in this brief considers the perspective of 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 data from Nigeria as well as neighboring Niger.



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 of girls' perceptions related to marriage.

- Although this contradicts a common perception that most girls are forced to marry early, many adolescents feel ready for marriage, probably due to the fact that being a successful wife and mother is a life path to which many aspire. A lack of meaningful alternatives makes it difficult not only for families, but also for girls to envision alternatives to an early marriage and childbearing.
- There was near consensus among parents that daughters need to be consulted during the marriage decision-making process. Yet the fact that girls are consulted when a marriage is considered does not mean they have sufficient voice in the matter.
- Negotiations for a marriage include the amount of bridewealth to be paid. The transaction is often referred to as a "bride price" in the literature, but this is unfortunate as parents are typically not the beneficiaries: the bridewealth is used to add to the bride's possessions, including what the daughter will have in her room when married (the 'things for the room' which denote status).
- Marriage and schooling as seen as the only viable opportunities for adolescent girls, but they do not go hand in hand. Quite a few girls would like to study longer, but even parents wishing to educate their daughters face a wide range of economic, social and institutional barriers to do so.

In Hausa communities, many girls may be interested in marrying early

Although this contradicts a common perception that most girls are forced to marry early, many of the married adolescents interviewed for this research said that they felt they were ready for marriage. This is probably due to the fact that adolescent girls have few viable choices outside of marriage and child rearing. Being a successful wife and mother is a life path to which almost the girls and their mothers may aspire. *"If all of my children do well, and I can provide all the things my daughters need for their marriage, I will have succeeded and I will be proud,"* said one mother. The lack of meaningful social and economic alternatives makes it difficult not only for families, but also for girls to envision alternatives to an early marriage and childbearing.

In such a context, it is understandable that the majority of the earliest marriages (at age of 14 or 15) were initiated by the girls and their suitors in the communities for the ethnographic work. There was near consensus among parents that daughters need to be consulted during the marriage decision-making process. The girls do recognize this consultation: *"My parents gave us a listening ear when it came to our marriages,"* said one married adolescent. *"My father always said that girls who are forced to marry men they didn't like either get divorced or run away from their communities."* This does not mean that there is no pressure to marry: some girls reported feeling pressured to marry even when they did like the suitor.

The fact that girls are consulted when a marriage is being considered does not mean that they have sufficient voice in the matter. When asked their opinion by their father or uncle, a majority of girls simply look down and either say nothing or reply in monosyllables. While this is viewed as a sign of respect and consent, it may lead to an unwanted marriage. At the same time, many girls believe that their parents are able to make the best decision for them. Others say that if their parents make the choice, they will be more likely to help out if the marriage runs into problems. While in most marriage narratives developed for the study the girl was interested in the suitor, there were cases where a girl did not want to marry and her silence was taken by parents as consent: *"If she is quiet it means she is saying yes because she is too shy to respond with words,"* explained one father. Several married adolescents said that since they were not enrolled in school, they understood they had unfortunately no choice but to get married, and they were vocal about the suitor as this was a decision over which they had some influence. In only a few of the marriage narratives did girls have no influence

over whom they married. They had far less to say on the timing of their marriage.

Negotiations for a marriage involve the mother, the father, and other family members

Although a girl or her suitor may initiate the marriage process, the mother is virtually always consulted. It is believed that *"the mother knows the heart of the girl,"* and though she has less decision-making power than the father, she often has the power to veto a marriage she does not agree with. Extended family members, especially paternal uncles, also exercise decision-making power. Negotiations include the amount of bridewealth to be paid and the wedding date. The transaction is often referred to as a "bride price" in the literature, but this may be unfortunate as there is little evidence that parents marry their daughters for bridewealth, even at times of economic stress. Bridewealth establishes the transfer of authority from the father to the new husband and is spent on purchases for the bride and to offset wedding costs. The mother uses the money to add to her daughter's possessions, including what the daughter will have in her room when married (the *'things for the room'* which denote status), as well as gifts for exchange, and livestock for her to breed. If her father lacks funds to purchase a bed and mattress, which is his responsibility, he may use part of the money to buy them.

Not all child marriages include some (even highly imperfect) form of consent from girls. Marriages of the youngest girls are becoming less common but are still widespread. When they do take place, the girls tend to be from very poor families. They have little say in the decision making, and they tend to be married to older and relatively wealthy men as their second or third wife. Poverty is a factor that can lead to marriage at a very early age. In addition, girls who are orphans are also at higher risk. When a girl's parents are absent or deceased the process of arranging her marriage can differ distinctly from that of her peers. This includes variances in how readiness is established, marriage negotiations, and age at marriage. Family members are expected to share each other's burden and the extended family system provides security for orphaned children and those from a broken marriage. Thus, children from the poorest households, or orphaned and abandoned children, are often taken in by relatives. However, such children are likely to receive less affection, care, and support and are less likely to be in school than the other children in their adoptive household. The same can be true of girls from poor families who are fostered by women who do not have daughters to sell on markets for them. In both cases these girls are at the greatest risk of being forced into child marriage at an especially early age.

Box 1: While many girls have a say in their marriage, this is not always the case.

Huraira is a mother of two. She was sixteen at the time of her wedding. She did not want to marry yet as she wanted to continue to go to school. Her father was supportive of her. Social pressure however was too strong, and she had to marry at the same time as other girls in the extended family. Before the wedding, Huraira's husband agreed that he would let her continue to go to school. But just before the wedding, he refused. It was too late to cancel the wedding without shame, so she had to marry, and she dropped out of school. Below are excerpts of interviews with Huraira [the name has been changed], her father, and her mother that tell elements of the story of her wedding.

Huraira: *"I was in school before the wedding. My husband had come earlier to ask for my hand in marriage, but my parents told him he would have to wait that I was still too young... When I got to secondary school, my husband came and said he wanted to marry me, we were four who were going to be married off at the time and we had not finished school, we were all in JSS2 (second year of junior secondary school). I then met my father and wrote him a letter because I could not face him to tell him I wanted to wait till I finish school. I put the letter under his pillow. He saw it and read it. He then told me not to be angry and to just go on with it. He said he is sure I have heard what my mother said. She said she would not agree for me not to marry since there were other girls getting married and she wanted us to get married at the same time. She said there was nothing like finishing school before marriage. She insisted we would do the marriage once and for all."*

Huraira's father: *"The whole wedding thing happened because I live in a large family house and they agreed they were going to marry all the girls at the same time on the same day. At that time, I didn't have a choice because I have elder brothers around who are responsible for making those decisions. They only come to tell me that so and so decisions have been taken. When they came to meet me, I told them that honestly, I want my daughter to further her education and the groom should be told. At the dying minute when it was three days to the wedding, I asked the groom about my daughter's education and he replied that there is no education in the marriage and that if I insist that she would have to further her education, then he would rather cancel the wedding. I was very angry but since the groom and I live in the same household, I had to let it go. If I had cancelled the wedding, people would have thought I was a useless man and so I had to forfeit. My daughter wept and wept but I pleaded with her and persuaded her to please bear with me because that is what God wants. I have told them however that after this one, I will no longer allow my daughters get married until they have reached the level I want them to reach before I marry them out"*

Huraira's mother: *"From the time she was going to primary school when she was about the age of this girl [she pointed at a girl who was about eight years old], he [Huraira's husband] kept saying that he really likes her and would love to marry her if she would be given to him. I told him she was still too small. He said he did not mind and would wait for her as long as she would be given to him eventually because he really likes her. As she grew older, some other suitors came forward asking for her hand in marriage, and so he also came again to say he wants to marry her. I told him it was okay but she was still in school. I asked if he could wait for her to finish school and he said he said he could wait. I told him her father has said he would pay her school fees and all he had to do was to allow her to continue if they got married. We kept discussing and discussing and it was concluded that he would be the one who the girl would be given to and he agreed. We asked her if she liked him and she said she did. She kept going to school until it was almost time for the wedding. When it was a few days to the wedding, we reminded him about her education and at that time he said he knows nothing about that topic."*

Although marriage is socially desirable and most girls grow up aspiring to become a wife and mother, few of the girls interviewed in the study informing this brief appeared to be emotionally prepared for marriage. Failure from either side (the husband's or the wife's) in a marriage can be grounds for divorce. Divorce carries little stigma and both men and women are expected to re-marry. However, a major problem with divorce for a woman is the limitation placed on her access to her children. Children are believed to belong to the husband's family. Once children are deemed old enough to live without their mother, they usually return to their father's house. Women prefer to be the first wife at the time of their first marriage. They also no longer have this expectation of a marriage following a divorce.

Finally, the issues of child marriage and girls' ability to pursue their education are closely linked. Marriage and schooling as seen as the only viable opportunities for adolescent girls, but they often do not go hand in hand. As explained in the first part of this brief, one of the drivers of early marriage is the fact that schools are of low quality. With poor learning outcomes and few family connections with employers, there is no guarantee that a good job will be available for girls who complete their secondary education. When girls do not learn much in school, it is difficult for parents to make the monetary and other sacrifices that are needed to enable them to remain in school. Some girls themselves may not want to pursue their education if they are not learning. However, quite a few girls would like to study longer in the Hausa communities that served as research sites. Interviews with girls and parents suggest that access to quality primary and secondary education is probably the most effective way to delay marriage. Unfortunately, as discussed in the first part of this brief, parents wishing to educate their daughters face economic, social and institutional barriers.

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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Takeaways

Low educational attainment and child marriage can have negative consequences for girls and their children. Thinking about policies and programs to improve outcomes for girls requires a good understanding of context. Qualitative research can help, and this two-part brief reported on findings from such work in rural Hausa communities in Niger and Nigeria. The research does not suggest that parents (or relatives) are systematically forcing marriages to take place against the will of their daughters. The reality is more complex. In many cases, girls are looking forward to marriage, probably in large part because this is the norm, with the economic, cultural, and social environment not providing viable alternatives.

Once girls drop out of school, which often happens because of poor quality in the education provided, it is difficult for parents not to get their daughter married. Improving the provision of quality and affordable primary and secondary education is one of the best ways to delay marriage. Improving formal education opportunities available to girls is essential. But non-formal education programs may be able to help as well. They may strengthen literacy and numeracy skills for participating girls and provide them with life skills through safe spaces where they can express themselves with appropriate mentors. Girls need a range of competencies to overcome the multiple disadvantages they face and achieve successful transitions to adulthood. Most schools are still based on rote learning with limited opportunities for girls to develop critical thinking, problem solving, communication, or leadership skills. Better literacy, numeracy, and life skills can help, as discussed in the next brief in this series devoted to an innovative program implemented in northern Nigeria.