

Nigeria: Pathways to Choice – A Program to Educate Girls and Delay Marriage

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March 2023

What can be done to delay the age at first marriage in rural Hausa communities and ensure that adolescent girls remain in school? Lessons can be learned from an innovative program implemented by the Center for Girls' Education (CGE)—a girls' education training, practice, and research center located in northwestern Nigeria. CGE has worked since 2008 to delay the age of marriage in rural communities by reducing social and economic barriers to schooling and providing group-based mentoring and support. This brief explains the approach originally used by CGE to build its programs (this is discussed in the next section, based on Perlman et al., 2018) and the results of recent evaluations of some of the impacts components of the program (in the following section, based in part on Cohen et al., 2023).

CGE's approach to educate girls and delay marriage is anchored in the community

CGE's main intervention has been an afterschool educational enrichment programs for rural and low-income urban girls. The design of the program was based on findings of the ethnographic baseline research. The center piloted and evaluated a range of interventions and combined the most promising into programs that complemented government secondary schooling. Mentored safe space clubs were the heart of CGE's programming. CGE adapted the safe space methodology to address the parents and girls' requests for strengthened core academic competencies (especially literacy and numeracy) and mentored support



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.

as they face the challenges encountered in underfunded and understaffed rural schools. The clubs were led by female teachers from the girls' own schools who received ongoing training in accelerated literacy instruction, group facilitation, and student-centered teaching methods. Participation provided the girls with opportunities to gain crucial life skills not offered in secondary school. The girls discussed their reproductive health concerns, visited local health services, developed relationships of trust, and built social networks. Through ongoing engagement of parents and religious and traditional leaders, CGE worked to increase community-level support for girls' education.

In practice, CGE dedicated its founding year to conducting a baseline survey and exploratory ethnographic research in the rural communities that it planned to serve. The survey found the mean age of marriage to be 14.9 years and that 45 percent of adolescents aged 15-19 had begun childbearing. Only 8 percent of women ages 18-24 had completed primary school and just 5 percent had completed secondary school. In contrast, more than twice as many men of this age range had completed primary school (17 percent) and secondary school (14 percent). The ethnographic component of the research found education to be one of the few socially appropriate alternatives to early marriage. However, given the low quality of public education most parents said they were reluctant to make the sacrifices required to send their daughters to school. *"My first daughter graduated from primary school and can't read a word. I won't send my second daughter,"* said one mother. When asked what it would take under these circumstances to permit girls to transition from primary to secondary school, parent after parent said, *"a reduction of secondary school registration fees and an opportunity for our daughters to learn to read, write, and do basic math."*

A preliminary evaluation of the CGE program by Perlman et al. (2016) suggested that the program was achieving large gains. The 2007 baseline found that less than 25 percent of girls graduating from primary school in participating communities made the transition to junior secondary and only four percent graduated from senior secondary. Of the first 800 girls to go through the CGE program, 97 percent progressed from primary to secondary school and 82 percent graduated from secondary school. The data also suggested that participation in the program was associated with a delay in the age at first marriage. This was not a randomized control trial, and some of the gains may have reflected regional trends towards later marriage. Yet the gains apparently achieved through the program were larger than the gains achieved regionally. Part of the program's success could have been due to parents seeing that their daughters were learning: *"You could say the girls*

are being re-educated in the fundamentals that they were taught in school but never learned" said one mother.

Qualitative feedback from participants and their families also suggested that the program was making other differences in the girls' lives. *"The girls that attend the mentored girls' clubs are different than other girls,"* said one mother. *"They are composed and can speak up for themselves. My daughter reads at home and helps the younger ones with their homework. She has learned to cook, to cut her nails, and take a bath more often. She taught all the women in the compound to make a sugar, water, and salt drink for diarrhea and how to store food and wash our hands to avoid cholera and dysentery."* Girls practiced negotiation skills in group sessions. This helped them argue their case with family members. Mentors leading sessions on life skills reported that some girls had been able to use their newly acquired expression skills to persuade their parents to delay their marriage, so that they could complete their education. Others convinced in-laws to let them remain in school after marriage, even if such commitments were not always honored. As a mother said: *"The girls speak up for themselves. They might not get what they want, but they express themselves well, and people appreciate that."*

Evaluations of CHE's programs confirm large positive impacts

An evaluation of the core CGE program for adolescent girls was carried in 18 communities with 1,171 girls aged 12 to 18. Results confirm large positive impacts (Perlman et al., 2016). Participants' rate of graduation from secondary school increased from 4 percent in the control group to 82 percent in the treatment group. Their age of marriage increased by 2.5 years. Findings from a rural preschool component of the program for the most marginal girls were equally remarkable as 98 percent of participants transitioning to primary school.

A separate evaluation of a new CGE Second Chance program preparing out-of-school girls to re-enroll in school was also conducted (Cohen et al., 2023). It found that after three years, participants were 83 percent less likely to have married than girls in control communities. The program increased school enrolment seven-fold and this increase was highest among the poorest girls. Participants were far more likely to report that they felt listened to, considered, trusted, important, and able to make a positive impact on their communities. They also scored significantly higher on an index of self-advocacy measures related to decision making about marriage and schooling. Full functional literacy increased from 10 percent at baseline to 87 percent at the end of the accelerated academic bridge training.

Box 1: Keeping girls in schools works to delay marriage and childbearing

CGE's core program has been successful in keeping girls in school and delaying marriage. The program has adopted and adapted features of other programs that worked. A review of the evidence by Botea et al. (2017) on how to delay marriage and childbearing categorized promising interventions into three groups: (1) programs providing life skills and knowledge of reproductive health; (2) programs expanding economic opportunities; and especially (3) programs keeping girls in school or enabling them to return to school. The three programs have different theories of change, but they all have benefits. To keep girls in school, CGE improved learning through safe spaced and provided economic incentives (scholarships). It implicitly adopted several aspects of the theories of change of the three types of programs.

Life skills and sexual reproductive health (SRH) knowledge: By increasing knowledge and awareness, life skills can increase young women's perceived risk of becoming pregnant at an early age and the desire to avoid early pregnancies (through family planning). Through these channels, life skills may lead to better health outcomes for the girls and their children. By increasing girls' confidence and self-esteem, life skills may also increase girls' aspirations. With increased aspirations, girls may have a greater desire to delay marriage and childbearing. Finally, life skills can increase young women's communication and decision-making skills, leading to increased abilities to negotiate their preferences for delayed marriage and childbearing. At the same time, while life skills and SRH knowledge may empower girls, they may not be sufficient to delay marriage and childbearing if social norms curtailing agency for girls are not also addressed at the same time.

Life skills together with economic opportunities: Programs increasing earnings potential for young women may increase their ability to plan marriage and childbearing decisions in three ways. First, the ability to make an economic contribution expands the role of women beyond that of sex and reproduction. This can increase their desire to limit or space childbearing. The transformation of girls from economic liabilities into assets in the eyes of their societies and families can also alleviate external pressures on girls to marry or have children early. Second, the loss in earnings associated with childbearing is an opportunity cost that may increase women's desire to limit or space births and exercise reproductive control. Third, a young woman's increased earnings may improve her bargaining power within the household and allow her to effectively exercise reproductive control by negotiating delays in sexual initiation or marriage, while negotiating the terms of sex, including the use of contraceptives. Creating income-generating opportunities for women can therefore contribute to female empowerment beyond the economic realm by widening personal choice and control over SRH outcomes.

Incentives for schooling or delayed marriage: In many communities, the economic, cultural, and social environment does not provide viable alternatives to marriage for adolescent girls. Once girls drop out of school, possibly because of poor quality or high cost, it may be difficult for parents to refrain from getting their daughters married. In those communities, improving the provision of quality and affordable primary and secondary education may be one of the best ways to delay marriage and childbearing as parents often see schooling as a viable alternative to marriage for their daughters. Incentives and programs to keep girls in school may also lead to tipping points in communities whereby more and more girls remain in school and are able to delay marriage. A few interventions have also aimed to delay marriage through financial incentives conditional on not marrying early, with additional schooling often as an additional benefit.

Source: The description of these theories of change is from Botea et al. (2017).

In addition, the OASIS Initiative conducted a focused evaluation of 256 participants from the safe spaces for married adolescents. The evaluation found that participants' visits to health facilities increased fourfold and their contraception use increased from 3 percent to 64 percent. The share of participants who reported talking to their husbands about reproductive health and family planning increased from 4 percent to 94 percent.

Finally, CGE's Girls Campaign for Quality Education trained three cohorts of girls to conduct an advocacy and media campaign to end senior secondary school fees for girls in Kaduna State. The campaign targeted the State Governor and First Lady, the state legislature, a range of government offices and ministries, traditional and religious institutions, and collaborating community support organizations. An assessment commissioned by the Malala Fund (2019) found that the Campaign "provided an effective platform to leverage existing political will and the Governor's commitment to eliminate senior secondary school fees." The report quotes an official as saying, "The government initially considered the fee eliminations, and then doubted because of the costs, but in the end the Centre for Girls Education's advocacy helped in pushing it through."

Takeaways

CGE's experience shows that positive impact can be achieved by tapping in the desire of parents and communities to have girls learn. It has taken 15 years to develop and expand CGE's programs in close partnership with local communities, but the program has been successful in responding to aspirations of the girls, their parents, and the communities. Community engagement to build support for the programs has not been easy, but this approach is the best way to have sustainable impact. Part of the success of the core component of the program has stemmed from the fact that it focuses on literacy and numeracy as well as on life skills, thereby enabling better learning among girls in the school system. This has led parents to appreciate the program as they can see the difference it makes. The program also motivates the girls to continue to go to school, because they learn better. As one father noted: "We are seeing remarkable changes in the girls. They now know the importance of going to school and they attend school daily without anyone prompting."

Programs such as CGE's may not have worked 20 years ago, when support for such initiatives was probably weaker in communities. But today, there is much more support for change. In some communities, child marriage is finally declining, albeit slowly, after decades without much movement. Girls' schooling is on the rise. Expanding

initiatives such as the CGE program could lead to "tipping points" in communities whereby more and more girls remain in school and are able to delay marriage, with major benefits not only for them, their families, and their children, but also for their communities and society as a whole.

CGE programs build on the aspirations of girls and their families. As the girls participating today in the program become themselves mentors, teachers, and health workers, they will be able to serve as role models, expanding the limits of what is seen as possible. As a father with a daughter in the program explained it: "Some people saw me as someone who didn't know what he was doing. They thought that I should marry my daughter off rather than keeping her in school. They said the program is not religiously acceptable. But our religion isn't like that. Islam does not disallow a child from getting an education. I insisted, because it is my right to allow her to go to school and become someone. Now even the liman [the head of religious leaders in the community] has two of his daughters in the program."

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