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Nigeria: Basic Profile of Early Childbearing

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In Nigeria, many girls give birth as children (before the age of 18), at a time when they may not yet be physically and emotionally ready to do so. Most child mothers are child bribes. By giving birth so early, they are at greater risk of experiencing poor health outcomes, dropping out of school, earning less in adulthood, and living in poverty. They are also at higher risk of intimate partner violence, and they may lack decision-making ability. Apart from affecting girls, early childbearing also affects their household, their community, society at large, but especially their children, including through higher risks for them of dying by age five or being stunted. This brief provides a profile of early childbearing in Nigeria using the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) for 2013 and 2018 (data from the planned 2023 DHS should be available in 2024).

One in five women in Nigeria still give birth as children

Table 1 provides statistics on the age at first childbirth for women ages 18 to 22 in the last two DHS. This is the youngest age group that can be used to measure early childbearing, defined as having a first child before the age of 18. A substantial share of girls have children before the age of 18, and some do so before 15. There are however some differences between the two surveys suggesting that early childbearing has decreased slightly over time. The share of women ages 18 to 22 who had their first child before the age of 18 decreased from 28.0 percent in 2013 to 25.6 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 early childbearing in Nigeria.

- One in four women in Nigeria still has her first child before the age of 18. The share of women ages 18 to 22 who had their first child before age 18 decreased slightly from 28.0 percent in 2013 to 25.6 percent in 2018.
- Higher order measures of early childbearing suggest a similar trend, namely a slight decline over time in the depth and severity of early childbearing.
- Girls in rural areas and in the north are more at risk of early childbearing, as are girls in households with lower levels of wealth (and higher levels of poverty).
- Early childbearing is associated with worse educational outcomes, including lower educational attainment and literacy.
- The relationship between early childbearing 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.

Table 1: Age at First Childbirth for Women, Age 18 to 22 (%)

	2013	2018
No childbirth	51.1	53.6
18 or above	20.9	20.8
12	0.5	0.4
13	1.5	0.9
14	3.1	2.7
15	5.4	5.0
16	7.7	8.0
17	9.7	8.7
Share with childbirth before 18	28.0	25.6
Total	100.0	100.0
Mean age at first delivery (if early childbearing)	17.1	17.2

Source: Authors' estimation using 2013 and 2018 DHS.

Other measures of early childbearing are also useful

The negative impact of early childbearing for a girl's health, education, and well-being is often larger when the girl has a child very early. A pregnancy at a young age is known to involve health risks for the girls and her child. Early childbearing is also known to have a negative impact on school enrollment and attainment. This will limit her employment and earnings potential for the rest of her life, and it will also have other negative consequences.

Most studies on early childbearing report the incidence of early childbearing - the share of girls who have a birth early (before the age of 18). Sometimes the share of girls who have a child very early, before the age of 15, is also reported. Such statistics are useful, but they do not capture the "depth" and "severity" of early childbearing well. Measures of early childbearing can be adopted from the poverty literature, as done by Nguyen and Wodon (2012) for child marriage. Three such measures are used here: the incidence of early childbearing or headcount index, the early childbearing gap, and the squared early childbearing gap. Definitions of these measures are provided in an annex in brief 2023-4 in this series. The measures are estimated for early childbearing and very early childbearing defined as having a child before age 15.

The early childbearing gap represents the "depth" of early childbearing. It accounts not only for the share of girls who have a child early, but also for the number of years that separates the event from a threshold that would typically be set at 18 years of age. When using the early childbearing gap for the evaluation of programs or policies, instead of simply looking at the share of the girls who have a child early, more weight is placed on the girls who have a child at a very young age. While the early childbearing gap takes into account the average number of years that separates a first birth for a mother from the threshold of 18 years of age, the squared gap takes into account the square value of that number, thereby putting even more emphasis on girls who have children at a very young age, essentially taking into account inequality in the age of mothers at first childbirth.

Table 2 provides trends over time in these measures of early childbearing inspired by the poverty literature. Consider first the age group 18-22. In that age group, as already mentioned, about one in four girls have their first child before the age of 18 (28.0 percent in 2013 and 25.6 percent in 2018). The early childbearing gap (CMG) drops from 3.6 percent in 2013 to 3.2 percent in 2018 among women ages 18 to 22. The squared gap (SG) drops from 0.6 percent for that group to 0.5 percent. This suggests that apart from the fact that slightly fewer girls have their first child before the age of 18 in 2018 versus 2013, the age at first birth is increasing very slightly, as shown in Table 1. By estimating the same measures on older groups, Table 2 provides an implicit trend in early childbearing over time. There has been some progress in reducing early childbearing, 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. Finally, it is worth pointing out that measures of early childbearing are systematically lower than measures of child marriage (as discussed in a separate brief in this series). This is because most cases of early childbearing appear to be due to child marriage (girls are married as children first, and then have their first child, , too often before the age of 18).

Table 2: Trends in Early Childbearing and Very Early Childbearing (%)

	18 years			15 years		
	H	CMG	SG	H	CMG	SG
			2013			
All 18-49 years	31.3	4.4	0.8	7.1	0.7	0.1
Age group						
18-22 years	28.0	3.6	0.6	5.1	0.5	0.1
23-30 years	32.1	4.5	0.8	7.3	0.8	0.1
31-40 years	31.1	4.5	0.8	7.6	0.8	0.1
41-49 years	34.4	5.0	0.9	8.5	0.9	0.1
			2018			
All 18-49 years	29.2	3.9	0.7	5.7	0.6	0.1
Age group						
18-22 years	25.6	3.2	0.5	3.9	0.4	-
23-30 years	29.4	3.9	0.7	5.5	0.6	0.1
31-40 years	29.2	4.1	0.7	6.4	0.7	0.1
41-49 years	33.2	4.7	0.8	7.3	0.8	0.1

Source: Authors' estimation.

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

As shown in Table 3, early childbearing 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 and South West zones (depending on the year) and the highest measures observed in the North West and North East zones. Some zones with a higher prevalence of early childbearing had a larger reduction 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: Early Childbearing by Geographic Location, Age 18-22 (%)

	18 years			15 years		
	H	CMG	SG	H	CMG	SG
			2013			
All 18-22 years	28.0	3.6	0.6	5.1	0.5	0.1
Zone						
North Central	24.0	3.0	0.5	4.3	0.4	0.1
North East	39.0	5.1	0.9	7.6	0.8	0.1
North West	43.0	5.5	0.9	8.0	0.8	0.1
South East	7.4	0.9	0.1	1.0	0.1	-
South South	15.4	1.9	0.3	2.2	0.2	-
South West	11.0	1.3	0.2	1.7	0.2	-
Residence						
Urban	13.5	1.6	0.3	2.2	0.2	-
Rural	37.8	4.9	0.8	7.0	0.7	0.1
			2018			
All 18-22 years	25.6	3.2	0.5	3.9	0.4	-
Zone						
North Central	22.4	2.8	0.4	3.8	0.3	-
North East	35.5	4.6	0.7	6.0	0.5	0.1
North West	37.2	4.6	0.7	5.2	0.5	0.1
South East	10.0	1.3	0.2	1.5	0.2	-
South South	13.9	1.7	0.3	2.7	0.2	-
South West	7.8	0.8	0.1	0.8	0.1	-
Residence						
Urban	13.0	1.6	0.3	2.1	0.2	-
Rural	35.2	4.4	0.7	5.3	0.5	0.1

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 (or childbearing) 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 early childbearing differ by quintile. In the top quintiles of wealth, the prevalence of early childbearing is much lower.

Table 4: Early Childbearing by Quintile of Wealth, Age 18-22 (%)

	18 years			15 years		
	H	CMG	SG	H	CMG	SG
			2013			
All 18-22 years	28.0	3.6	0.6	5.1	0.5	0.1
Wealth quintiles						
Poorest	54.1	7.2	1.3	11.3	1.1	0.1
Poorer	40.1	5.3	0.9	7.7	0.8	0.1
Middle	26.0	3.2	0.5	4.1	0.4	-
Richer	15.6	1.9	0.3	2.3	0.2	-
Richest	7.4	0.8	0.1	0.8	0.1	-
			2018			
All 18-22 years	25.6	3.2	0.5	3.9	0.4	-
Wealth quintiles						
Poorest	47.9	6.0	1.0	7.5	0.7	0.1
Poorer	35.9	4.4	0.7	4.9	0.5	0.1
Middle	27.9	3.4	0.5	4.6	0.4	-
Richer	13.1	1.6	0.3	2.0	0.2	-
Richest	5.3	0.6	0.1	0.9	0.1	-

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

Early childbearing is associated with worse educational outcomes

Table 5 provides data on early childbearing by level of education and literacy. Early childbearing affects educational attainment negatively as girls often drop out of school when they become pregnant (if they did not already drop out previously when they married). The causality goes the other way as well, as pursuing one's education may delay childbearing. These relationships are apparent in the data: measures of early childbearing are higher among women with lower levels of education, and the same is observed for literacy. Having a child just before the age of 18 may not affect the completion of primary education, but having a child earlier can prevent girls from completing their primary education.

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

	18 years			15 years		
	H	CMG	SG	H	CMG	SG
			2013			
All 18-22 years	28.0	3.6	0.6	5.1	0.5	0.1
Education						
No education	53.7	7.1	1.2	10.5	1.0	0.1
Primary, some	40.4	5.1	0.9	8.6	0.9	0.1
Primary, completed	34.9	4.6	0.8	6.6	0.6	0.1
Secondary, some	14.8	1.6	0.2	1.6	0.2	-
Secondary, completed	7.2	0.8	0.1	1.0	0.1	-
Higher	1.7	0.2	-	0.2	-	-
Literacy						
Cannot read	51.5	6.8	1.2	10.0	1.0	0.1
Limited ability	32.3	4.2	0.7	6.3	0.6	0.1
Full sentence	10.0	1.1	0.2	1.2	0.1	-
			2018			
All 18-22 years	25.6	3.2	0.5	3.9	0.4	-
Education						
No education	49.2	6.1	1.0	7.2	0.7	0.1
Incomplete primary	47.1	6.2	1.0	7.8	0.8	0.1
Complete primary	38.0	4.8	0.8	6.4	0.7	0.1
Incomplete secondary	20.2	2.5	0.4	3.9	0.4	-
Complete secondary	7.7	0.8	0.1	0.9	0.1	-
Higher	1.3	0.1	-	-	-	-
Literacy						
Cannot read at all	46.3	5.9	0.9	7.2	0.7	0.1
Limited ability	20.7	2.5	0.4	3.6	0.3	-
Full sentence	7.0	0.8	0.1	0.7	0.1	-

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

Early childbearing may not affect labor force participation as much

Table 6 provides data on labor force participation. In some countries early childbearing may reduce labor force participation, for example through higher fertility. In others, if early childbearing 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 had an early childbirth and those who did not (the result is different in 2013). In both years, the type of work associated most with early childbearing is work with cash earnings. As for other statistics in this brief, these basic statistics however do not imply causality.

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

	18 years			15 years		
	H	CMG	SG	H	CMG	SG
			2013			
All 18-22 years	28.0	3.6	0.6	5.1	0.5	0.1
Working						
No	23.4	3.0	0.5	4.3	0.4	0.1
Yes	33.8	4.3	0.7	6.0	0.6	0.1
Type of work						
Not paid	18.6	2.5	0.4	4.2	0.5	0.1
Cash only	36.8	4.6	0.8	6.5	0.6	0.1
Cash and in-kind	36.3	4.4	0.7	5.7	0.6	0.1
In-kind only	7.5	1.3	0.3	3.5	0.3	-
			2018			
All 18-22 years	25.6	3.2	0.5	3.9	0.4	-
Working						
No	24.5	3.0	0.5	3.4	0.3	-
Yes	26.6	3.4	0.5	4.4	0.4	-
Type of work						
Not paid	19.1	2.3	0.4	3.2	0.3	-
Cash only	30.3	3.9	0.6	5.0	0.5	0.1
Cash and in-kind	28.4	3.8	0.6	5.4	0.5	0.1
In-kind only	11.4	1.2	0.2	0.6	-	-

Source: Authors' estimation.

Takeaways

This brief has provided a basic profile of early childbearing in Nigeria. Measures of early childbearing are high. The share of women ages 18-22 who had their first child before the age of 18 is at 25.6 percent in the 2018 survey, which is only slightly below the estimate of 28.0 percent in 2013. Early childbearing 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

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