GIRLS' EDUCATION AND CHILD
MARRIAGE IN WEST AND
CENTRAL AFRICA

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# UNDERSTANDING AND ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE: INSIGHTS FROM HAUSA COMMUNITIES

DANIEL PERLMAN, FATIMA ADAMU, AND QUENTIN WODON
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## BACKGROUND

Despite substantial progress over the last two decades, girls still have on average lower levels of educational attainment than boys in West and Central Africa. This is in part because every day, close to 6,000 girls in the region (2.1 million girls annually) are married while still children, often before they may be physically and emotionally ready to become wives and mothers. Girls' educational attainment and child marriage are closely linked. Ending child marriage would improve girls' educational attainment, and conversely, improving girls' educational attainment would help reduce child marriage. This is why enabling adolescent girls to remain in school at the secondary level is one of the best ways to end child marriage, and ending child marriage is similarly essential to enable girls to remain in secondary school.

Low educational attainment and child marriage both affect girls' life trajectories in profound ways. Girls marrying or dropping out of school early are more likely to experience poor health, have children at younger ages and more children over their lifetime, and earn less in adulthood. This makes it more likely that their household will live in poverty. Other risks for women associated with a lack of educational attainment and child marriage

include intimate partner violence and lack of decision-making ability within the household. Fundamentally, girls marrying or dropping out of school early are disempowered in ways that deprive them of their basic rights. This affects not only the girls themselves, but also their children. For example, children of very young mothers face higher risks of dying by age five, being malnourished, and doing poorly in school. Overall, the economic and social costs of girls marrying and dropping out of school early are large for individuals and at the level of communities and societies.

To catalyze attention and investments in West and Central Africa towards promoting girls' education and ending child marriage, this note is part of a series that documents trends in girls' educational attainment and child marriage in the region, the factors that lead girls to marry or drop out of school early, and the associated impacts on a wide range of development outcomes. Selected economic costs resulting from girls marrying and dropping out of school early are also estimated. Finally, policies and programs that could help end child marriage and improve girls' educational attainment are discussed.

## KEY RESULTS

This note summarizes results from a combined quantitative and qualitative analysis of factors leading to girls dropping out of school and marrying early in rural Hausa communities in Niger and Nigeria, and the role that education programs can play in improving outcomes for girls. Key results are as follows:

> Rural Hausa communities have very high rates of child marriage in both Niger and Nigeria. In those communities, at least three in four girls in those communities marry before the age of 18.

> Parents want to avoid the risk of a pregnancy out of marriage. If a girl becomes pregnant before marriage, the social cost to her and her family can be tremendous.

> Most parents care about the well-being of their daughters. But in communities where the prevalence of child marriage is high, schools are weak or even inexistent, and the risks for girls not to marry are real, there are few viable alternatives to having their daughter marry young.

> There is near consensus among parents that daughters need to be consulted during the marriage decision-making process. This does not mean that there is no pressure to marry and silence on the part of daughters is too often taken by parents as consent to marry.

> Girls drop out of school due to poor learning outcomes and cost, failure at primary completion exams, lack of secondary schools, forced withdrawal of married adolescents, never enrolling in school or enrolling too late, the influence of relatives, and demands on first daughters.

> 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

> Lessons can be learned from successful interventions. An evaluation of the Center for Girls' Education in Nigeria suggests that the program keeps girls in school and delays marriage.

## CHILD MARRIAGE IN CONSTRAINED ENVIRONMENTS

Child marriage remains one of the leading causes of the gender gap in educational attainment in many developing countries. The factors that lead to child marriage differ from one country to the next, and indeed often from one community to the next. To end child marriage – a target under the Sustainable Development Goals, we must first understand why the practice remains so prevalent in many countries and communities. Interventions based on a limited understating of the factors that lead to child marriage are less likely to be successful than those based on in-depth analysis of the reasons why so many girls still marry before the age of 18. This is why in-depth ethnographic work aimed at understanding the mechanisms leading to the perpetuation of child marriage is so important.

> Most parents care deeply about the well-being of their daughters. But in communities where the prevalence of child marriage is high, schools are weak or even inexistent, and the risks for girls not to marry are real, families may be in situations where there are few viable alternatives to having their daughter marry at a young age.

It seems to be a fair assumption that most parents care deeply about the well-being of their daughters. But in communities where the prevalence of child marriage is high, schools are weak or even inexistent, and the risks for girls not to marry are real, families may be in situations where there are few viable alternatives to having their daughter marry at a young age. Families and communities often lack social agency, the ability to change practices in communities in order to improve the welfare of all.

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| Age group for women | Child Marriage | | | Early childbearing | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Share married before 18 | Share married before 15 | Average age at first marriage | Share with first birth before 18 | Share with first birth before 15 | Average age at first birth |
| **Niger – Maradi** | | | | | | |
| 18-22 years | 84.9 | 19.2 | 15.5 | 48.9 | 16.0 | 16.3 |
| 23-30 years | 83.3 | 24.4 | 15.7 | 47.6 | 17.4 | 17.6 |
| 31-40 years | 84.4 | 19.5 | 15.8 | 39.5 | 14.6 | 19.3 |
| 41-49 years | 82.8 | 29.3 | 15.9 | 43.0 | 20.7 | 19.8 |
| All (18-49) | 83.9 | 22.2 | 15.7 | 44.9 | 16.5 | 18.2 |
| **Nigeria – Hausa** | | | | | | |
| 18-22 years | 73.6 | 31.5 | 15.2 | 43.9 | 8.5 | 16.8 |
| 23-30 years | 81.5 | 45.6 | 15.2 | 54.3 | 12.6 | 17.5 |
| 31-40 years | 83.2 | 47.5 | 15.3 | 50.6 | 12.3 | 18.2 |
| 41-49 years | 81.8 | 51.9 | 15.5 | 53.1 | 14.7 | 18.1 |
| All (18-49) | 80.1 | 43.7 | 15.3 | 50.7 | 11.9 | 17.7 |

Source: Estimates from the 2015 ENISED survey for Niger (statistics for Maradi region) and the 2013 DHS survey for Nigeria (statistics for Hausa households living in northern states with large Hausa populations, specifically Sokoto, Zamfara, Katsina, Jigawa, Kano, Kaduna, Kebbi, Gombe, and Bauchi).

In order to better understand why child marriage remains so widespread in some communities, this note summarizes results from ethnographic work —participant-observation, in-depth interviews, and informal conversations—conducted in Hausa communities, while also providing a few simple data table from a recent nationally representative survey. The focus is on Niger and Nigeria. Hausa communities have a rich heritage. Estimates suggest that some 25 million people may use Hausa as their first language, and another 50 million as their secondary language. They live primarily in northern Nigeria and southeastern Niger, but with significant groups scattered throughout West Africa. Hausa communities started to adopt Islam in the 11th century, and Hausa people remain very devout.

tIn Niger, the analysis is based in part on ethnographic work carried in the Maradi region, which is predominantly Hausa. In Nigeria, the work was conducted among Hausa communities in northeast Nigeria in the context of a successful intervention to empower girls and delay the age at first marriage. In addition to findings from the ethnographic work, we also provide a few simple data tables from recent nationally representative surveys in order to convey orders of magnitude in terms of the topics being discussed, including the prevalence of child marriage and the reasons why girls drop out of school.

Rural areas in which Hausa communities predominate tend to have very high rates of child marriage. Niger has the world's highest rates of child marriage with three in four girls marrying before 18, and many marrying before 15. In the Maradi region which is predominantly Hausa and where the ethnographic work reported in this note was carried, rates are even higher. While child marriage has declined in other parts of the world, including in many African countries, the prevalence of child marriage in the Maradi region has not changed much over the last three decades. As shown in table 1, the prevalence of child marriage is essentially as high today among women aged 18 to 22 as it is among older age groups, even if there has been a slight decline in the share of girls marrying very early, before age 15. Similarly, there has been little change in the share of girls having their first child before age 18, even if there has been a slight decline for childbearing before age 15. In Nigeria as a whole, 42.1 percent of girls still marry before 18 today. Rates are however much higher in Hausa communities in the northern part of the country, as shown in table 1. There has been a decrease in child marriage rates in these Hausa communities in recent years (a decrease of eight percentage points in the share of women married as children between women ages 18-22 and those ages 23-30), but the rates remain very high

> Rural areas in which Hausa communities predominate tend to have very high rates of child marriage. This is the case in both Niger and Nigeria, where at least three in four girls in those communities marry before the age of 18.

Why does child marriage remain so widespread in Hausa communities in Niger and Nigeria, and what could be done to empower girls and families to delay the age at first marriage? Using ethnographic research, this note provides tentative answers to this question. We explore factors leading to child marriage through the eyes of rural adolescent girls, their parents, and community leaders. Ethnographic research relies on relatively unobtrusive participatory research methods that can at times be more effective than traditional focus groups or rapid interviews when gathering sensitive information and encountering power differentials such as those associated with gender. The research approach allows for spontaneity and the adaptation of study questions to complex situations and feedback. As such, the approach may provide insights into why child marriage persists and the types of interventions that could help end the practice.

> Ethnographic methods whereby researchers live in communities for weeks or months at a time have advantages over focus groups and in-depth but short-lived interviews. They often lead to a deeper understanding of the underlying causes of social practices.

## EARLY MARRIAGE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PARENTS

The pressure to marry early is very high for both girls and their parents in Hausa communities. Forced marriage does happen, as illustrated by the story of Huraira in Nigeria (see box). At the same time, the world of adolescent girls in rural communities is built around the prospects for marriage, so many girls may also aspire to marry, sometimes as soon as they can. 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 in Niger and Nigeria? Our work suggests that the primary rationale for early marriage on the part of parents is the desire to keep their daughters safe and ensure that they find a suitable husband. Getting a daughter settled in her new home is a moral duty of 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.

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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.

> **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 ensuring that their daughters marry well is of high importance.**

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

The signs of readiness for marriage from the point of view of parents include the development of secondary sexual characteristics combined with an independent attitude, idleness, and 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 and the development of secondary sexual characteristics.

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.*" While the development of secondary sexual characteristics is seen as requisite for marriage, other factors are also taken into account, such as idleness, attitude, the interest of boys, and community sentiments.

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.

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The best antidote for a girl to delay marriage is to remain in school. Once a girl has passed puberty and has developed secondary sexual characteristics, 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.*"
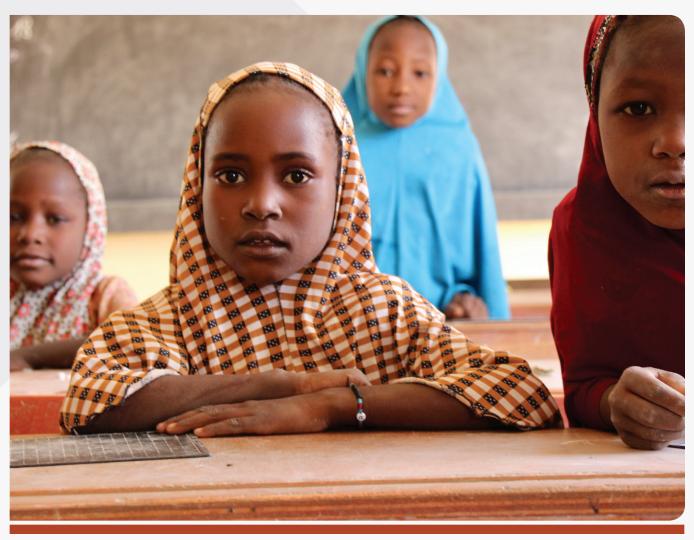
Finally, interest of boys in a daughter, or interest on the part of the daughter in boys, is also a key sign of readiness for marriage for parents. "*We judge a girl's readiness for marriage by her interaction with boys,*" said one father. "*If a mother sees her daughter with two different boys on two 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 almost all that were interviewed: 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

> **"**
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> **"**

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.

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## HURAIRA
## (RURAL NORTHERN NIGERIA)
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Huraira is a mother of two. She was sixteen at the time of the wedding three years ago. 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 for her 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 this 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 continue if they get 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."*

## EARLY MARRIAGE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF GIRLS

Many of the married adolescents we interviewed said that they felt they were ready for marriage when they were able to attract male attention. This is in part because 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 all girls as well as their mothers 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 viable alternatives to child marriage and childbearing.

> There is near consensus among parents that daughters need to be consulted during the marriage decision-making process. 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.

Given this context, it is understandable that the majority of the earliest marriages (at age of 14 or 15) were initiated by the girls themselves and their suitors in the Nigerien communities that served as the field site for the ethnographic work. There was also 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 majority of the girls when asked their opinion by their father or uncle simply looked down and either say nothing or reply in monosyllables. When 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 often 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 our 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 say on the timing of their marriage.

The story of Zainab in (see box) is representative of a common scenario for marriage narratives in Hausa communities, namely the girl or her suitor initiates 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 in this process than the father, she often has the power to veto a marriage she does not agree with. Extended family members also exercised decision-making power.

> Silence is too often taken by parents as consent to marry: "If she is quiet it means she is saying yes because she is too shy to respond with words."

Negotiations for marriage 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. We found 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

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> **Marriages of the youngest girls are becoming less common, but are still widespread. These girls tend to be from very poor families. They have little and tend to be married to older and relatively wealthy men as their second or third wife.**

what the daughters 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 as shown in table 1. 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.



## ZAINAB
## (RURAL MARADI, NIGER)

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"I was married eight years ago at the age of 14. My husband is a farmer. I'm his third wife. We have three children, a girl who is 8 years old, and two boys ages 5 and 2. I love my husband and children so much and they love me too. I was good in school but failed my primary school completion exam twice. We were having financial problems the first time I sat for the exam and I didn't really concentrate. But the second time I was sure I did well. I knew all the answers to the questions. I didn't know what to think when the results were announced and I found out I failed. The girls who I used to tutor in my class were passed and I was pushed out. My mother sent me out hawking. I would go to the motor park or hawk around the community. I gave whatever I earned to my mother. Hawking wasn't always easy. Boys harass you, cheat you, and sometimes won't even pay for what they eat. I had two friends who were raped on their way back from hawking by some boys from the motor park."

"I was hawking when I met my husband. He became a regular customer and would tease me sometimes. He'd try to hold my hand but I was shy. This went on and on until one day he told me he wanted to marry me. I was happy about this but was equally scared that my parents may not like the idea. My elder sister got married and divorced three times and my family had been struggling with this issue so I was afraid to mention that I had found someone. He came to my house with two of his brothers. They brought gifts and asked for my hand in marriage. To my surprise my parents welcomed him without hesitation though my father told him that he had to discuss the issue with me and my uncle, my father's elder brother, who makes the final decisions in our family."

"Two days later my father sent for me. It was a hot evening and he was sitting under the tree in a wicker chair. I joined and sat on a mat laid on the ground by him. I looked down at my hands as he told me about the visit. He asked me if I knew the man. I said yes in a shaky voice. He had me tell the story of how we met and asked me several questions, especially if I was sure I wanted this marriage and if I was sure that this is the man I truly wanted to marry. I said yes in almost a whisper. He smiled and told me to go and call my mother. He asked her opinion. She said she was worried that I would have the same problem as my sister and at long last no one will want to marry anyone from our family. My father advised that we pray strongly and said that he believed that I wouldn't have the same challenges and she said that she would support the marriage. My father discussed the issue with my uncle who accepted without hesitation."

I asked Zainab how she knew that she was ready for marriage. "Well I was 14 years old and girls I knew who were as young as twelve were married so I knew I was of age. I was even worried for a time that I had waited too long. I was already seeing my period and my breasts were growing." She laughed, then bit her lip thoughtfully, and said, "This was a sign that I was fully matured and ready for marriage. Bridewealth of 200,000 CFA was paid to my father by my in-laws. My father used part of the money to buy my bed and mattress and gave my mother the remaining money to add to what she had already saved for the wedding and for the things for my room."

How did you feel after the wedding? "Well, I was sad. I was taken away from my family and friends to my husband's house. They were not far away. But the thought that I now had to take permission from him and state the reason if I wanted to step out of the house made me cry. Well I got used to it and adapted to my new life."

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> **Although marriage is tremendously socially desirable and most girls grow up aspiring to become a wife and mother, few girls are emotionally prepared for marriage.**

Although marriage is tremendously socially desirable and most girls grow up aspiring to become a wife and mother, few of the girls interviewed in our study 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. Thus, once the 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.

> **One of the drivers of early marriage is the fact that schools are of low quality. 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.**

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. One of the drivers of early marriage is the fact that schools are of low quality. With such 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 our research sites, according to our interviews. These interviews with girls as well as parents suggest that access to quality primary and secondary education is probably the most effective way to delay marriage. Unfortunately, parents wishing to educate their daughters face an array of economic, social and institutional barriers. The next section discusses these issues.

# EARLY MARRIAGE AND THE EDUCATION OF GIRLS

The most common trajectories for girls in rural Hausa communities in Niger and Nigeria all lead to child marriage. The exceptions tend to be girls who have reached puberty, developed secondary physical characteristics, but pass their exams and remain in school and actively avoid male attention. There were unfortunately very few girls in this category living in many of the study communities.

> **The vast majority of people say that access to quality primary and secondary education is without doubt the most effective way to delay marriage, but conversely marriage is a key reason mentioned for girls to drop out of school.**

The vast majority of people interviewed said that access to quality primary and secondary education is without doubt 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 school 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? Parents wishing to educate their daughters face an array of economic, social and institutional barriers.

A simple way to assess the role that various factors, including child marriage, play in leading girls to drop out of school consists of looking at responses to questions asked in household surveys as to why girls dropped out or did not pursue their education beyond a certain point. This approach is not perfect, since it is based on the subjective perceptions of parents as opposed to the view of the adolescent girls themselves (the household head or spouse typically answers this type of questions in surveys). It also does not rely on more detailed analysis that could potentially reveal causal effects. Finally, parental answers may depend on how questions are asked, with a risk of bias. For example, parents may declare that their daughter was not interested in pursuing her education, which could in fact reveal a desire on the part of the daughter, or pressure from parents, to get

married. Still, these data provide insights about the factors that may lead girls to drop out of school, and thereby be at much higher risk of early marriage.

Table 2 provides data for Niger on parental perceptions about the reasons for dropping out for girls ages 14-25 in Maradi who completed their primary education. Eighteen potential reasons for dropping out are included in the questionnaire. Failing an examination is the main reason for dropping out, as illustrated in the story of Zainab earlier, but marriage comes next. This holds true whether one considers girls/women who completed their primary education or not. Marriage is mentioned by one in five girls (for girls who did not completed their primary education, marriage is mentioned less often).

### Table 2: Reasons for Dropping Out of School, Girls Ages 15-24 with Completed Primary, Maradi (%)

| Reason | Share (%) | Reason | Share (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Too old or too young | 11.57 | Pregnancy | 0.92 |
| [Enough] schooling completed | 8.03 | Marriage | 22.55 |
| No school or too far away | 0.99 | Schooling not adapted | 3.05 |
| Family did not want more schooling | 6.88 | Not useful/no interest | 2.46 |
| Cost too high | 1.31 | Illness or handicap | 0.50 |
| Preference to work | 3.07 | Failure at exam | 35.90 |
| Agricultural work | 0.41 | No employment prospect from schooling | 0.18 |
| Domestic work | 1.29 | Schooling not adapted | 3.05 |

Source: Estimation from 2015 ENISED survey. All reasons sum up to 100 percent.

Table 3 provides similar data for Hausa communities in northern Nigeria on parental perceptions on the reasons for why children are not in school. The statistics combine children who dropped out of school as well as children who may never have enrolled. Economic reasons and costs (including opportunity costs) are one of the main factors leading girls to drop out, but other issues matter as well. Many girls seem to be awaiting admission in secondary school. As for the issue of marital obligations, it is cited as the main reason to drop out for 11 percent of girls in the country

as a whole. In the Northwest and Northeast, the proportion is higher as expected, at 17 percent. As mentioned earlier, these estimates may underestimate the role of marriage in leading girls to drop out given that lack of interest to study further, whether on the child or parents' side, may well mask a desire to marry or have a daughter get married. Note that early pregnancies are not included as a modality for responses, which tends to underestimate the role of child marriage and early childbirths.

### Table 3: Reasons for Girls Not being in School, Ages 14-17 in Selected Northern States, Nigeria (%)

| Reason | Share (%) | Reason | Share (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Too old or too young | 11.57 | Pregnancy | 0.92 |
| [Enough] schooling completed | 8.03 | Marriage | 22.55 |
| No school or too far away | 0.99 | Schooling not adapted | 3.05 |
| Family did not want more schooling | 6.88 | Not useful/no interest | 2.46 |
| Cost too high | 1.31 | Illness or handicap | 0.50 |

Source: Estimation from 2010/11 General Household Panel Survey. All reasons sum up to 100 percent.
Note: Selection of states based on high percentage of Hausa populations as in table 1.

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The qualitative data helps in better understanding the obstacles faced by girls. At least seven obstacles are at play: 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.

> **Seven main factors lead girls to drop out of school: 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.**

**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. Nigerien schools do 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. On a number of occasions our research team observed girls in the later years of primary school or junior secondary whose penmanship was stellar but who could not read a single word of what they were so elegantly writing. *"A school girl lives in the house where I stay,"* writes one researcher in her fieldnotes. *"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 in rural Niger is the rule that students can only take the primary school completion exam twice. If they fail twice they are ineligible to continue in public education. As is clear from table 2, failing an exam is one of the main reasons why girls do not continue their education. Many parents said that after their daughters failed their exams both times they felt they had little choice but to begin

looking for a suitable suitor. One father admitted that if his male children fail the examinations twice 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 in Maradi to prepare for their second sitting. They failed their second try at the exam. He lost heart and brought them back home.

**Lack of nearby secondary schools:** Few rural communities have their own secondary school and there are no government boarding schools serving the study communities. Parents must 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 is likely to be expelled from many government secondary schools. The few husbands we spoke to who showed interest in supporting their adolescent wives' education were told that they would have to enroll her in a private school. This is an expense that none said they could 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."*

> **"**
> *I dropped out of school because one of my teachers beat me. After staying at home and doing nothing I wanted to go back. 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.*
> **"**

**Never enrolling in school or enrolling too late:** Some families never enrolled any of their girls in school. This does not necessarily mean that boys are preferred over girls. Often the parents have not had educational opportunities themselves. *"I asked the girl if her family gives any preference to educating boys,"* wrote one researcher in her field notes. *"She said no, her parents don't show any preference—they don't send any of their children to school because they never went themselves."* Yet in some cases it may be the result of 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, in rural Maradi 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 returned from living in Maradi and made me see that*

*I needed to send my younger ones to school."* Interestingly, in some families the parents send some of their children to the government school and others to Islamic school. *"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 field notes. *"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. Class schedules are adapted to the daily and seasonal cycles of village life.

**Demands on first daughters:** Schooling decisions may not be taken for each child independently, but 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 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

> **The demands on the first daughter are generally higher. She not only helps with the household chores, cares for her siblings and hawks [sells on markets], but also is often held to a higher standard of discipline than her younger brothers and sisters.**

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 survey suggesting that very few girls do so. The ethnographic work echoes this finding from surveys. This difficulty to continue

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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.*"

## LESSONS FROM A SUCCESSFUL INTERVENTION

What can be done to delay the age at first marriage in rural Hausa communities in Niger and Nigeria? Lessons can be learned from the experience of the Center for Girls' Education (CGE)—a girls' education training, practice and research center northwestern Nigeria—that 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. CGE dedicated its founding year to 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.*"

CGE's innovative afterschool educational enrichment programs for rural and low-income urban girls were based on the findings of the ethnographic baseline research. The center has piloted and evaluated a range of interventions and combined the most promising into programs that complement government secondary schooling. Mentored safe space clubs are 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 as they face the challenges encountered in underfunded and understaffed rural schools. The clubs are led by female teachers from the girls' own schools who receive ongoing training in accelerated literacy instruction, group facilitation, and student-centered teaching methods. Participation provides the girls with opportunities to gain crucial life skills not offered in secondary school. The girls discuss their reproductive health concerns, visit local health services, develop relationships of trust, and build social networks. Through ongoing engagement of parents and religious and traditional leaders, CGE works to increase community-level support for girls' education.

An evaluation by Perlman et al. (2016) suggests that the program is achieving substantial 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 program, 97 percent progressed from primary to secondary school and 82 percent graduated from secondary school. The data also suggests that participation in the program is associated with a delay in the age at first

marriage of 2.5 years. This was not a randomized control trial evaluation (such evaluations are in process, but results are not yet available), and some of the gains may reflect recent regional trends towards later marriage, as noted in table 1. Yet the gains apparently achieved through the program are much larger than the gains achieved regionally. Part of the program's success is that parents see that their daughters are 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 suggests that the program is making other differences in the girls' life. "*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 practice negotiation skills in group sessions. This helps them argue their case with family members. Mentors leading sessions on life skills report that some girls have 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 have been able to convince in-laws to let them remain in school after marriage, even if such commitments are not always honored as Huraira's story shows. 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.*"

CGE's programming has evolved over ten years of careful ethnographic and implementation research with rural girls, their mothers, fathers, community members and religious leaders. It now works with in-school and out-of-school girls of all ages and is partnering with UNFPA to provide training, support and sub-awards to civil society organizations in two states to reach close to 10.000 more girls. Community norms are changing as the number of girls in secondary

school in the communities grows from five to 75 to 350 per rural community, and increasing numbers of adolescent girls are seen in school uniforms.

The CGE program builds 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 and expand the potential of other girls in their region to redefine and expand the social limits of what is seen as possible. As a father with a daughter enrolled 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 some- one. Now even the liman [the head of religious leaders in the community] has two of his daughters in the program.*"

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# CONCLUSION

Child marriage can have dramatic consequences for the girls marrying early and their children. The broader study to which this note contributed demonstrates these negative impacts. The crucial question then is to think about policies and programs that could help delay the age at first marriage. In order to think of such programs, a good understanding of the factors leading to early marriage is needed.

The research on which this note is based aims to provide such an understanding in the case of 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 a bit more complex. In many cases, girls are looking forward to marriage, probably in large part because this is the norm, and parents have at heart to find a suitable husband for the benefit of their daughters.

The problem is that the economic, cultural, and social environment does not provide viable alternatives to marriage for adolescent girls. 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 way 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. Literacy, numeracy, and life skills training can help in all of those areas.

The Nigeria program documented in this note shows that positive impact can be achieved by tapping in the desire of parents and indeed communities to have girls learn. It has taken ten years to develop and expand this program in close partnership with local communities. This program, and other programs like it, appears to be working. By contrast, experience suggests that direct advocacy in the form of lecturing by organizations external to the communities in order to delay marriage may not work in many communities. For example, simply conveying to communities that child marriage may lead to dramatic consequences for girls and their future children, for example in matters of health, may in fact lead to resistance and even resentment when these efforts are perceived as an interference in local traditions and values.

> “
> 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.
> ”

The program has been successful in building on the promise that education represents. 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 probably the only way, or at least the best way to have sustainable impact. Part of the success of the program has stemmed from the fact that it focuses on literacy and numeracy as well as on

life skills, thereby complementing – or rather enabling better learning among girls in the school system. This has led parents to appreciate the program as they can quickly see the difference it makes. The program also motivates the girls to continue to go to school, because they are able to 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.*”

The program may not have worked 10 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 program described in

this note 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 the communities.

To conclude, child marriage is a practice that must be ended. It is a practice that remains prevalent in many communities in large part because of the constraints faced by adolescent girls and their families. In the communities where our researchers lived, the main driver of child marriage is that viable alternatives to are not available. Interventions creating or strengthening viable alternatives to early marriage in those communities should be a core part of the focus of programs and policies.

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