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Contextual Factors of Early Marriage among Adolescent Girls Aged 12 to Under 18 in the Dosso and Maradi Regions of Niger

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Abstract

This article examines the contextual factors associated with early marriage among adolescent girls aged 12 to under 18 years in the regions of Dosso and Maradi, Niger. The study draws on quantitative data collected in 2023 from 943 households, complemented by qualitative interviews conducted in 2024. The analysis combines bivariate tests with a linear probability regression model to identify factors associated with marriage before the age of 18. The findings reveal significant associations with both region and place of residence, with adolescent girls in the Maradi region and rural areas exhibiting a higher likelihood of early marriage than their counterparts in Dosso and urban settings. Although poverty is associated with early marriage at the bivariate level, its effect loses statistical significance in the multivariate analysis, as does educational attainment. In contrast, normative factors emerge as particularly influential: the importance attached to female virginity and acceptance of imposing a marital partner on a daughter significantly increase the likelihood of early marriage. Mothers' attitudes appear to be more influential than those of fathers. The study concludes that early marriage in the study areas is shaped predominantly by social norms, parental attitudes, and intra-household dynamics, rather than by economic constraints alone.

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Niger, early marriage, adolescent girls, social norms, family dynamics

Introduction

The definition of marriage varies depending on the theoretical perspective adopted; however, the definition generally accepted is that proposed by G. Ferréol (2009). According to Ferréol, marriage is simultaneously a civil or religious ceremony, a symbolic act, and a social institution. With regard to child or early marriage, it has long been, and continues to be, a major global concern. According to the United Nations, child marriage constitutes a violation of human rights. It is defined as a union involving a child or adolescent, whether a girl or a boy, who is under 18 years of age (UNICEF, 2001). The magnitude of this issue varies from one country to another depending on the prevailing sociocultural and economic context. International organizations working in the fields of development and human rights have been particularly instrumental in highlighting the alarming scale of this phenomenon. An UNICEF report (2001) on the global situation of child marriage indicates that, in industrialized countries, women rarely marry before the age of 18 (4% in the United States and 1% in Germany), with the exception of certain economically vulnerable Eastern European countries, such as Albania and Macedonia, and certain communities, including Roma communities.

In contrast, the same source reports that child marriage remains a common practice in certain regions of Africa and South Asia. In Rajasthan, India, for example,

children as young as two or three years old are sometimes betrothed by their parents. This practice is also prevalent in certain African cultures, where girls are given in marriage at a very young age.

Child marriage is essentially a cultural practice, and its underlying motivations can be understood through the norms and values prevailing within each cultural context. These motivations are primarily associated with strengthening social ties within and between communities, as well as with the desire to protect girls from out-of-wedlock pregnancies, which are morally condemned according to local social norms (J.-P. Olivier de Sardan, 2023). Furthermore, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA, 2013) estimates that 14.2 million girls are married each year worldwide, equivalent to approximately 39,000 girls every day. Thus, although child marriage is a centuries-old practice, it remains a complex and deeply entrenched social problem. It is particularly widespread in rural and impoverished areas, where opportunities available to girls are limited. In many cases, these marriages are arranged by parents without the girls having any meaningful opportunity to express their consent or preferences.

With regard to Niger, Fanteaneau and Huyse (2014) note that the country has one of the highest rates of early marriage in the world. Niger has nevertheless publicly expressed its position in international forums, notably during the Commission on the Status of Women in March 2013, by condemning harmful practices against women. However, at the national level, public debate on this issue remains highly sensitive, and no major policy reform has yet been implemented specifically to address child marriage.

More recently, data from the National Institute of Statistics (INS, 2022) confirm the persistence of this phenomenon. The study reports that the median age at first marriage among women aged 25–49 years is 16.6 years. This means that slightly more than one in three women were already married by the age of 15, while nearly two-thirds (65%) had married before reaching the age of 18. Consequently, the present study aims to analyze the contextual factors associated with early marriage among girls aged 12 to under 18 years in the regions of Dosso and Maradi, Niger.

The principal objective is to understand household and parental behaviors and attitudes toward the marriage of adolescent girls under 18 years of age. The study examines the contextual factors underlying child marriage, which is considered a form of violence against girls and an impediment to the exercise of several of their fundamental rights.

More specifically, this research seeks to:

1. Identify the environmental factors that facilitate child marriage;
2. Analyze the parental characteristics that expose adolescent girls to early marriage.

Within this framework, the following research question is posed: *What drives families to marry off their daughters at an early age?*

To address this question, the following hypothesis is formulated: early marriage among girls is explained by contextual factors specific to households. In other words, it is associated with the socioeconomic characteristics of families and parental perceptions regarding marriage.

Methodology

This study constitutes a secondary analysis of data from a quantitative survey conducted as part of an action-research project funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Niger, with a particular focus on the regions of Dosso and Maradi. To deepen the analysis, a complementary qualitative survey was conducted through semi-structured qualitative interviews at selected intervention sites of the project.
The quantitative survey was conducted from 5 to 15 June 2023 among 943 households, 1,120 parents, 366 boys, and 508 girls aged 10–19 years. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in two phases during 2024. The first phase was carried out in the Maradi region, while the second phase took place in the Dosso region.
The quantitative data analysis focused on households and the parents of adolescent girls. Households that had married off girls under the age of 18 constituted the outcome category of interest. Specifically, households were asked whether, during the two years preceding the survey, any adolescent girls had been given in marriage and, if so, at what age. In parallel, a specific questionnaire was administered to both parents—that is, the household head and his or her spouse—to establish their sociodemographic profiles and assess their perceptions regarding the marriage of adolescent girls under 18 years of age.

Since both parents responded in some households, whereas only one parent responded in others, parental

characteristics were incorporated into the analysis by considering the sex of the responding parent.

Two types of analyses were applied to the data. First, a bivariate analysis was conducted by cross-tabulating each independent variable with the dependent variable and calculating the chi-square (χ^2) statistic to assess the degree of association or interdependence between the variables.

Second, a multivariate analysis was performed to estimate the probability that a household would marry off a girl under the age of 18, conditional on the selected explanatory variables. This estimation was conducted using the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) method.

Since the dependent variable (Y) is binary, we directly estimate:

[
E(Y|X)=P(Y=1|X)
]

where (X) represents the set of independent variables (X_1, X_2, X_3,) etc. In other words, the conditional expectation can be interpreted simply as a conditional probability. This probability is modeled as a linear function of the independent (explanatory) variables:

[
E(Y|X)=\beta_1X_1+\beta_2X_2+\cdots+\beta_KX_K
]

Thus, the multivariate analysis makes it possible to assess the extent to which household and parental characteristics are associated with the likelihood of a girl under 18 being married, while accounting simultaneously for the other explanatory variables included in the model.

Study Results

Bivariate Analysis of Factors Associated with Early Marriage among Adolescent Girls

The results presented in the table indicate that the region and place of residence of the household are significantly associated with early marriage among adolescent girls. In other words, adolescent girls living in households located in the Maradi region and in rural areas are more likely to be married before reaching their 18th birthday. A statistically significant association is also observed between the household poverty quintile and early marriage among adolescent girls. Thus, at the bivariate level, the region and place of residence, together with the household's standard of living, emerge as factors that help explain household behavior regarding child marriage.

Table 2 examines the relationship between parental profiles and early marriage among adolescent girls. These profiles are characterized by educational attainment, economic activity, and several other variables reflecting parents' attitudes toward marriage and the reproductive health of adolescent girls under 18 years of age.

The analysis of the associations between parental characteristics and the occurrence of child marriage at the household level is not particularly conclusive among male parents. Among men, only the opinion that a parent may impose a partner on their daughter is associated with early marriage at the bivariate level, and this association is statistically significant at the 10% threshold.

In contrast, the characteristics of female parents appear to be more influential. In particular, women's knowledge of the risks and problems associated with pregnancy before the age of 18 is strongly associated with early marriage. Among households in which women are better informed about these risks, the prevalence of early marriage remains lower than among households whose female parents have less knowledge.

Furthermore, in households where women express a favorable attitude toward marriage before the age of 18, there is also a significant tendency for children to be married early. A similar pattern is observed when women agree that a partner may be imposed on their daughters. It is therefore evident that when both parents, or at least one of them, accept the idea that imposing marriage on an adolescent girl is normal or acceptable, adolescent girls remain particularly vulnerable to early marriage.

Beyond women's attitudes and perceptions, their economic activity and occupational status also need to be considered when explaining child marriage. This is reflected in the statistically significant association observed between women's occupation and early marriage among adolescent girls. Relatively high proportions of households marry off their daughters when the women are engaged in agriculture or commerce.

In light of these findings, the subsequent multivariate analysis focuses specifically on households in which female parents responded to the questionnaire, taking into account both their individual characteristics and the characteristics of their respective households.

Multivariate Analysis of Early Marriage among Adolescent Girls

At the explanatory level, a linear probability regression model was applied, incorporating variables related to households and the mothers of adolescent girls. These variables represent the contextual factors considered in the analysis of child marriage.

The model is statistically significant and explains 19.29% of the variation in the phenomenon under study. The results indicate that the region of residence is statistically significant. Specifically, households located in the Maradi region have a 4.4% higher probability of marrying off a daughter before the age of 18 compared with households located in the Dosso region. This finding suggests that, all other factors being equal, the sociocultural context of Maradi substantially facilitates child marriage.

One factor contributing to this context is the importance attached to female virginity, with strong expectations that a girl should preserve her virginity until marriage. Accordingly, statistically significant proportions of households are found to marry adolescent girls before the age of 18 when women report that preserving a girl's virginity is important. Such an attitude is associated with a 5.3% increase in the probability of marrying off a daughter at an early age.

Similarly, when a woman considers that a girl should not be married before at least the age of 18, the probability that her household will marry off a daughter before the age of 18 decreases by 7%, compared with households in which the woman considers an age below 15 to be an acceptable threshold for marriage.

Furthermore, consistent with the findings from the bivariate analysis, the multivariate results confirm the important influence of parental attitudes concerning the choice of a partner for their daughter. Specifically, when a woman agrees that a partner may be imposed on her daughter, the probability that the household will marry off a daughter before the age of 18 increases by 23%, compared with households in which the woman strongly disagrees with the imposition of a partner.

Overall, the multivariate findings demonstrate that household context, regional sociocultural norms, perceptions concerning female virginity, attitudes toward the appropriate age of marriage, and parental views regarding the choice of a daughter's spouse are important factors associated with the likelihood of early marriage among adolescent girls.

Discussion of the Results

The analysis of the contextual factors associated with early marriage in the regions of Dosso and Maradi contributes to a broader scientific debate structured around two major explanatory perspectives: the economic-structural approach and the normative approach, which focuses on gender relations and community norms. The findings of this study invite a critical examination of the respective explanatory power of these two perspectives.

The first perspective, widely supported by UNICEF (2001, 2023) and UNFPA (2013), views early marriage as a direct consequence of poverty, household economic vulnerability, and limited access to education. This approach is grounded in empirical research demonstrating a strong correlation between limited economic resources and a higher likelihood of marriage before the age of 18. Petroni, Steinhaus et al. (2017), drawing on comparative data, demonstrate that poverty increases households' exposure to early marriage strategies. Nour (2009) likewise highlights the interrelationship between early marriage, school dropout, and the intergenerational reproduction of poverty.

However, the multivariate findings from the regions examined in this study provide a more nuanced interpretation. Although an association emerges at the bivariate level between the household wealth quintile and early marriage, this relationship disappears when normative and regional variables are incorporated into the explanatory model. This finding suggests that poverty does not constitute an independent determinant once social representations and territorial contexts are taken into account. This observation is consistent with the conclusions of Field and Ambrus (2008), who argue that economic constraints alone are insufficient to explain the persistence of early marriage when deeply entrenched social norms strongly shape household behavior.

A second theoretical perspective places particular emphasis on the role of social norms. Bicchieri, Jiang, and Lindemans (2014) define norms as rules of conduct sustained by shared social expectations. From this perspective, the decision to marry a girl before the age of 18 is not solely the outcome of an economic calculation; rather, it is embedded within a system of collective

expectations concerning honor, respectability, and female sexuality.

The findings concerning the importance attached to virginity and the perceived legitimacy of imposing a partner on a daughter support this perspective. Adherence to these norms significantly increases the probability of early marriage, indicating that social representations play a structuring role in household decision-making.

The scientific debate also concerns the distribution of decision-making power within the household. The literature frequently associates early marriage with male dominance. However, Lee-Rife, Malhotra, Warner, and Glinski (2012), in their systematic review of interventions, demonstrate that mothers occupy a central position in the transmission and reproduction of marriage-related norms. The findings from the regions of Dosso and Maradi confirm this dimension: variables associated with mothers appear to have greater explanatory power than those relating to fathers.

This pattern indicates that the reproduction of marital norms is embedded in complex intra-household dynamics and cannot be reduced to unilateral male authority. Rather, both women's and men's attitudes and perceptions may contribute to the perpetuation of practices that expose adolescent girls to early marriage.

The role of education constitutes another important area of discussion. International evidence generally emphasizes the protective effect of educational attainment against early marriage (UNICEF, 2023; Petroni et al., 2017). However, in the multivariate model presented in this study, maternal educational attainment is not statistically significant.

The absence of a statistically significant effect may be explained by limited variation in educational attainment within the sample or by the possibility that formal education, when access to and duration of schooling remain limited, does not necessarily transform deeply entrenched gender norms. The conclusions of Lee-Rife et al. (2012) likewise indicate that interventions focused exclusively on schooling tend to have limited effects in the absence of broader normative change.

The territorial dimension also provides important insights into the phenomenon. Data from the National Institute of Statistics (INS, 2022) highlight significant regional disparities in Niger with regard to age at first marriage. The findings of the present study show that the Maradi region has a higher probability of early marriage than the Dosso region, all other factors being equal. This subnational differentiation confirms that early marriage must be analyzed within localized sociocultural contexts rather than through a homogenizing interpretation of the country as a whole.

Table 1. Household Profiles and Early Marriage among Adolescent Girls

Variables and Categories		Early Marriage			
		No		Yes	
		Frequency (n)	%	Frequency (n)	%
Region of Residence*	Dosso	438	92,8	34	7,2
	Maradi	421	89,6	49	10,4
Place of Residence**	Urban	253	94,4	15	5,6
	Rural	606	89,9	68	10,1
Sex of the Household Head (HH)	Male	751	91,4	71	8,6
	Female	108	90,0	12	10,0
Household Wealth Quintile*	Poorest	160	89,4	19	10,6
	Poor	172	91,5	16	8,5
	Middle	162	92,0	14	8,0
	Rich	170	87,6	24	12,4
	Richest	195	95,1	10	4,9
Total		**859**	**91,2**	**83**	**8,8**

Source : Secondary analysis of data from the IDRC survey, Niger, 2023.
*Significance levels: *** p < 0.01; ** p < 0.05; * p < 0.10.*

Table 2. Parent Profiles and Early Marriage among Adolescent Girls

Variables and Categories	Early Marriage: No	Early Marriage: Yes
Male Parents	**Frequency (n) %**	**Frequency (n) %**
Perceived Loss of Virginity among Girls in the Community		
Rarely or not at all	105	92.1
Often	97	89.0
Perceived Importance of Girls' Virginity in the Community		
Of little or no importance	22	84.6
Very important	180	91.4
Male Parents' Knowledge of Problems Related to Pregnancy before Age 18		
No	29	90.6
Yes	173	90.6
Male Parents' Opinion on Marriage of Girls before Age 18		
No	123	92.5
Yes	79	87.8
Male Parents' Knowledge of Risks Related to Adolescent Pregnancy before Age 18		
No	69	92.0
Yes	133	89.9
Male Parents' Television Viewing		
No	168	89.4
Yes	34	97.1
Educational Level of Male Parent		
None	107	89.9
Primary	59	92.2
Secondary and above	36	90.0
Occupation of Male Parent		
No economic activity	22	91.7
Farmer	118	91.5
Commerce	27	90.0
Other activities	35	87.5
Age below Which a Girl Should Not Be Married, According to Male Parents		
Under 15 years	39	88.6
15–17 years	47	82.5
18–25 years	20	90.9
Before the onset of menstruation and breast development	69	97.2
Other / No opinion	27	93.1
Parents' Opinion on Whether a Parent Can Impose a Partner on a Girl*		
Disagree	169	90.4
Agree / No fixed opinion	33	91.7
Parents' Opinion on Whether a Parent Can Propose a Partner to a Girl		
Agree	55	91.7
It depends	56	91.8

Variables and Categories	Early Marriage: No	Early Marriage: Yes
	Frequency (n) %	**Frequency (n) %**
Parents of Female Sex		
Perceived Loss of Virginity among Girls in the Community According to Female Parents		
Rarely or not at all	304	89.9
Often	353	92.7
Importance of Girls' Virginity in the Community According to Female Parents		
Of little or no importance	89	89.9
Very important	568	91.6
Female Parents' Knowledge of Problems Related to Pregnancy before Age 18 **		
No	99	86.1
Yes	558	92.4
Female Parents' Opinion on Marriage of Girls before Age 18 ***		
No	399	94.3
Yes	258	87.2
Female Parents' Knowledge of Risks Related to Adolescent Pregnancy before Age 18		
No	200	90.9
Yes	457	91.6
Female Parents' Television Viewing		
No	549	91.0
Yes	108	93.1
Educational Level of Female Parent		
None	472	90.6
Primary	108	91.5
Secondary and above	77	96.3
Occupation of Female Parent **		
No economic activity	414	93.0
Farmer	47	85.5
Commerce	154	87.5
Other activities	42	97.7
Age at Which a Girl Should Not Be Given in Marriage According to Female Parents		
Under 15 years	164	91.6
15–17 years	117	90.0
18–25 years	55	96.5
Before the onset of menstruation and breast development	214	88.8
Other and no opinion	107	95.5
Parents' Opinion on Whether a Parent Can Impose a Partner on a Girl *		
Disagree	527	92.3
Agree and no fixed opinion	130	87.8
Parents' Opinion on Whether a Parent Can Propose a Partner to a Girl		
Agree	147	92.5
It depends	183	92.0
Disagree	327	90.6
Total	**657**	**91.4**

*Source: Secondary analysis of data from the CRDI survey, Niger, 2023; Significance thresholds: *** 1%; ** 5%; * 10%.*

Table 3. Linear Probability Regression of Early Marriage among Adolescent Girls

Variables et modalités		Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P>|t|
Region of residence	Dosso	*Réf*			
	Maradi	0,044	0,019	2,19	0,029
Sex of the household head	Male	*Réf*			
	Female	0,039	0,0288	1,37	0,172
Household wealth quintiles	Very poor	*Réf*			
	Poor	-0,040	0,0367	-1,09	0,275
	Middle / Average	0,039	0,038	1,04	0,297
	Rich	-0,029	0,041	-0,74	0,460
	Very rich	-0,036	0,039	-0,90	0,368
Parent's educational level	None / No education	*Réf*			
	Primary education	-0,028	0,028	-1,02	0,310
	Secondary education and above	-0,045	0,037	-1,22	0,223
Parent's occupation	No economic activity	*Réf*			
	Farmer	0,059	0,053	1,12	0,261
	Business / Trading	0,018	0,028	0,63	0,527
	Other activities	-0,021	0,045	-0,46	0,648
Parents' perception of loss of virginity among girls in the community **Parents' perception of the importance of girls' virginity in the community**	Rarely or not at all	*Réf*			
	Often	0,023	0,02	1,08	0,280
Parents' knowledge of problems associated with pregnancy before the age of 18 **Parents' opinion on marriage of girls before the age of 18**	Little or not important	*Réf*			
	Very important	0,053	0,031	1,71	0,088
Parents' knowledge of the risks associated with adolescent pregnancy before the age of 18 **Parents' perception of loss of virginity among girls in the community**	No	*Réf*			
	Yes	-0,009	0,034	-0,28	0,779
Parents' perception of the importance of girls' virginity in the community **Parents' knowledge of problems associated with pregnancy before the age of 18**	Disagree	*Réf*			
	Agree	0,015	0,023	0,63	0,527
Parents' opinion on marriage of girls before the age of 18	No	*Réf*			
	Yes	0,034	0,022	1,50	0,134
Parents who watch television	No	*Réf*			
	Yes	0,005	0,033	0,16	0,873
Age below which, according to parents, a girl should not be married	Less than 15 years	*Réf*			
	15–17 years	-0,006	0,033	-0,19	0,852
	18–25 years	-0,071	0,038	-1,88	0,061
	Before the onset	-0,041	0,029	-1,43	0,153

	of menstruation and breast development				
	Other responses and no opinion	0,007	0,031	0,22	0,825
Parents' opinions on whether a parent can impose a partner on their daughter	Disagree	*Réf*			
	Agree	0,231	0,030	7,60	0,000
Parents' opinions on whether a parent can propose a partner to their daughter	Agree	*Réf*			
	Disagree	0,017	0,029	0,61	0,540
	It depends	0,017	0,028	0,61	0,541
F(12, 625)= 6,18					
Prob > F= 0,0000					
Adj R-squared = 0,1929					

Source : exploitation secondaire des données de l'enquête CRDI, Niger 2023 ; Seuils de significativité : ***1% ; **5% ; *10%.

Conclusion

Overall, the analysis of the contextual factors associated with early marriage among adolescent girls aged 12 to under 18 years in the regions of Dosso and Maradi highlights the multidimensional and complex nature of the phenomenon. The findings demonstrate that early marriage cannot be explained solely by poverty or low educational attainment, although these factors may constitute important dimensions of vulnerability.

Significant regional disparities are observed, with girls in the Maradi region having a higher probability of marrying before the age of 18 than those in Dosso. Nevertheless, social norms emerge as the most influential explanatory factors. In particular, attitudes concerning female virginity, the socially accepted age of marriage, and the legitimacy of imposing a marital partner on a daughter appear to play a decisive role in shaping household decisions regarding early marriage.

These findings therefore suggest that efforts to prevent early marriage should extend beyond economic assistance and educational interventions to include context-specific strategies aimed at transforming harmful gender norms, reshaping parental attitudes, strengthening girls' decision-making autonomy, and engaging both women and men in broader processes of social and normative change.

The importance attached to female virginity, perceptions regarding the appropriate age at marriage, and acceptance of imposing a marital partner on a daughter are strongly associated with early marriage. The study also highlights the central role of mothers in the reproduction and perpetuation of marital norms, with their attitudes appearing to be more influential than those of fathers. Early marriage therefore emerges as a phenomenon that is deeply structured by social and cultural factors. Efforts to address and prevent early marriage should consequently combine improvements in household socioeconomic conditions with sustained and context-sensitive interventions aimed at transforming harmful social norms and addressing family dynamics.

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