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The Role of Social Norms in Early Marriage in Niger: A Look at Adolescent Wives and their Communities

This study used data from a sample of adolescent wives and their husbands in rural Niger to examine the relationship between early marriage, girls’ role in deciding whom to marry, and community norms surrounding marital age and choice. The study found that village-level norms about a girl’s choice in when and who to marry, particularly norms reported by male community members, were a key factor influencing age at marriage. Younger age at marriage for girls was linked to lower likelihood of being engaged in the decision to marry. These findings suggest that interventions focused on changing community norms related to both age at marriage and choice in marriage may be important in addressing child marriage.

BACKGROUND

Girls who are married at a young age are more vulnerable to adverse outcomes, from lower educational attainment and fewer economic opportunities to increased risk of unintended pregnancy and maternal mortality.¹⁻³ Researchers are beginning to examine how **social norms**—the informal rules in societies that dictate acceptable behavior⁴—may reinforce and contribute to the practice of child marriage.^{5,6} This study provided a unique opportunity to quantitatively assess the relationship between community norms about whether and when girls should marry, and the link to girls’ age of marriage and involvement in marital decision-making. Data were drawn from a sample of adolescent wives and their husbands (N=581) in the Dossa Region of Niger that were included in an evaluation of a family planning intervention.

Niger has the highest prevalence of girl child marriage in the world:⁷

Nearly 3 in 10 girls are married by age 15



and over 7 in 10 girls are married by age 18.⁸



Defining Social Norms:

Social Norms: The informal rules or expectations in a community or society of what behaviors are typical (descriptive norms) and thought to be appropriate (injunctive norms).⁴

Injunctive Norms: Individual’s perceptions of what others in the community approve of.^{9,10}

Descriptive Norms: Prevalence of behaviors —this serves as an indication of what is generally acceptable.¹⁰

Individual attitudes about *marital age* were captured by asking the participants their perceptions of the optimal age for girl’s marriage. **Injunctive social norms** were captured for *marital age* by asking the wives and husbands what age people in the village believe is ideal for girls to get married and for *marital choice* by asking whether or not they agree with the statement, “people in my village expect that girls decide when and who to marry.” **Descriptive social norms** were measured for *marital age* and *marital choice* using village-level aggregates of the wife’s age at marriage, and wives’ and husbands’ responses to whether the wife was engaged in marital decision-making.

Regression analyses adjusted for sociodemographic variables such as age, education, household wealth, food insecurity, women’s work participation, as well as visits from community health workers.

FINDINGS

- Women in the study sample were married young (at age 14 on average), and husbands were markedly older than their wives (by an average of nearly 9 years).
- Adolescent girls **married at older ages** in those villages where a larger proportion of girls reported being involved in the decision to marry (a descriptive social norm) and where a larger proportion of husbands believed that their communities were supportive of girls’ involvement in marital choice (an injunctive social norm). Girls who married at younger ages were less likely to have been involved in marital decision-making.
- Adolescent wives were more likely to report that they had **marital choice** in communities in which more wives believed the community was supportive of older ages at marriage and in which more husbands believed that the community supported girls’ involvement in marital choice (injunctive social norms). Thus, norms related to both marital age and marital choice were associated with adolescent wives’ engagement in marital choice.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING

Age at marriage and involvement in marital decision-making (marital choice) are highly interrelated and influenced by community level norms—both descriptive (what behaviors occur) and injunctive (what behaviors are perceived to be appropriate).

➤ **Interventions to address child marriage should assess community-level norms (both real and perceived) regarding marital age and choice. Efforts to shift norms must include consideration of potential backlash against those who fail to conform to social norms.**

Men's and women's social norms had differential associations with marital age and marital choice, which may be reflective of men vs. women's differing roles in the community and assessed outcomes.

➤ **Separately capturing norms reported by men vs. women is key to understanding the nuanced roles that men and women in the community play in early marriage decision-making.**

Far more women reported that they were engaged in the decision to marry (82%) than men reported that their wife was engaged in the decision to marry (32%), suggesting divergent views on what it means to have marital choice in these communities.

➤ **Future studies that examine marital choice should pay close attention to objectively measuring this construct, and include consideration of differential perspectives.**

Men's perceptions of whether the community supported girls' marital choice was significantly associated with both girls' age at marriage and girls' involvement in the decision of who to marry.

➤ **There is a role for engaging with men in interventions focused on shifting norms around early marriage. However, this must be done cautiously so as not to reinforce patriarchal practices of men's control over women's marital choice and age at marriage.**

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