

AUTHOR ACCEPTED MANUSCRIPT

FINAL PUBLICATION INFORMATION

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Trends, Impacts, Costs, and Solutions

The definitive version of the text was subsequently published in

Forum for Social Economics, 47(2), 2018-04-26

Published by Taylor and Francis and found at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07360932.2018.1451771>

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Girls' Education and Child Marriage in West and Central Africa: Trends, Impacts, Costs, and Solutions

Chata Male and Quentin Wodon¹

chata.male@gmail.com
qwodon@worldbank.org

Revised February 25, 2018

Abstract

Within the context of women's lack of empowerment, the issues of child marriage and low educational attainment for girls are prominent, especially in West and Central Africa. Using survey data for 21 of the 25 countries in West and Central Africa, this article analyzes trends over time in educational attainment for girls and child marriage. Over the last two and a half decades, not accounting for differences in population sizes between countries, according to the latest DHS and MICS surveys available in each country, completion rates increased on average by 24 points, 14 points, and 8 points at the primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary levels, respectively. The prevalence of child marriage decreased by about 8 points over that period. Clearly, progress at the secondary level has been weaker than at the primary level, probably in part due to the persistence of high rates of child marriage in many countries. The article suggests that ending child marriage should improve girls' educational attainment, and conversely, improving girls' educational attainment should help reduce child marriage. This, in turn, could have major impacts towards contributing to empowering women more broadly. A review of impact evaluations for pilot interventions suggests how ending child marriage and improving educational attainment for girls could be done, with potentially large economic benefits not only for girls and their future household, but also for the region as a whole.

Keywords: Girls' education, child marriage, West and Central Africa.

¹ This paper is part of a research project at the World Bank on Girls' Education and Child Marriage. Funding was provided by the Children's Investment Fund Foundation and the Global Partnership for Education. Findings, interpretations and conclusions in this paper are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the World Bank and its affiliated organizations, or to members of its Board of Executive Directors and the countries they represent.

1. Introduction

In much of the developing world, child marriage and low educational attainment for girls profoundly affect women's empowerment or, more precisely, their capacity for choice. As suggested by Kabeer (2008), capacity for choice requires not only agency (the ability to define goals and act on them), but also resources (whether these are material, human, or social) and past achievements (since the past is the foundation on which an individual's vision for her future is built). Child marriage and low educational attainment for girls clearly affect all three dimensions.

Child marriage is often imposed on young girls – clearly violating their rights and capacity for choice. Together with low educational attainment, child marriage affects the resources available to girls later in life, in part because dropping out of school early limits the type of jobs that women can have access to in adulthood and thereby their earnings. Child marriage and a lack of education also affect achievements, since they tend to confine women's past and future achievements to their roles as wife and mothers. Finally, they also affect agency, among others through the reduction in decision-making ability within the household that child marriage and a lack of education are associated to. Recent empirical work has demonstrated those multiple relationships (for a synthesis, see Wodon et al., 2017).

These issues are especially crucial in West and Central Africa where the prevalence of child marriage remains high and few girls manage today to complete their secondary education (i.e. complete the full secondary cycle). Indeed, despite progress towards education for all over the last two decades, girls still have on average lower levels of educational attainment than boys at the secondary level (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2017). This is in part because many girls in the region continue to be married while still children (UNICEF, 2017; Le Nestour et al., 2018), often before they may be physically and emotionally ready to become wives and mothers.

What are the trends in the region in girls' educational attainment and child marriage, defined as a formal or informal union before the age of 18? How closely linked are girls' educational attainment and child marriage? Is it correct to assume that ending child marriage would improve girls' educational attainment, and that conversely, improving girls' educational attainment would help reduce child marriage? What are some of the negative impacts of marrying early and low educational attainment for girls? What are the economic costs associated with some of those impacts? Finally, what can be done to improve educational opportunities for girls and end child marriage in the region? Based in part on research and a series of notes prepared at the World Bank for a high-level meeting on ending child marriage in West and Central Africa organized in Dakar in October 2017, this short article considers these questions.

The article is structured as follows. The next two sections of the article document trends in girls' educational attainment and child marriage, as well as the relationship between them. The analysis is based on household surveys, especially Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) as well as Multiple Indicators Cluster Surveys (MICS) when a DHS is not available for documenting trends. In addition, other types of surveys are also used to briefly look at some of the reasons declared by parents as to why their daughters dropped out of school. The analysis suggests that child marriage and educational attainment for girls are closely linked. The following section then reviews some of the impacts of child marriage and a lack of education for girls, as well as some of the economic costs associated with those impacts. A discussion of potential solutions that could be considered to end child marriage and improve educational opportunities for girls is also provided. A brief conclusion follows.

2. Trends in Girls' Education and Child Marriage

To measure trends in child marriage and educational attainment for girls, we use the most recent and publicly available Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), and look at educational attainment and age at first union for women by age group². When a recent DHS is not available, we rely instead on Multiple Indicators Cluster Surveys (MICS). This enables us to provide estimates for 21 of the 25 countries of the region. The list of the countries, surveys, and years of data collection is provided in Table 1. Mauritania is included in the Table to indicate that a DHS is available for the year 2000, but the country is not included in the analysis because the survey is too old to approximate current conditions. For all other countries, data collection took place after 2010 and as recently as 2016 for Senegal. This means that when looking at trends by age group, we are considering slightly different periods for the countries. No publicly available DHS or MICS is however available for Cape Verde, Saint Helena, and Equatorial Guinea³.

Table 2 provides trends in the shares of girls who complete various levels of education. The first age group for primary education is women aged 15-18. This is an older age group than the normal age for primary completion (typically 12 years) to account for the possibility of girls completing their primary education late because they started school late or repeated grades. Similarly, the first age group for analyzing lower secondary education is women aged 18-20. At the upper secondary level, the first age group for the analysis is women aged 21-24.

Thanks in part to the Education for All initiative, there has been major progress at the primary level. In Benin for example, while 19.9 percent of women aged 41-49 completed their primary education, the share is 54.3 percent for women aged 15-18 in the latest available survey. For the 21 countries taken together, not accounting for differences in population sizes, the average increase in the primary completion rate between older and younger women is 24.0 points, from 29.3 percent for women aged 41-49 to 53.3 percent for girls aged 15-18.

There has also been progress at the lower secondary level, where for the 21 countries taken together, without population weights, the average increase in lower secondary completion is 14 percentage points, from 16.1 percent for women aged 41-49 to 29.7 percent for girls aged 18-20. Note that the average completion rate at the lower secondary level is slightly higher among girls aged 21-24 than for those aged 18-21, suggesting substantial age for grade gaps.

At the upper secondary level, for the 21 countries without population weights, completion increased from 5.6 percent for women aged 41-49 to 13.9 percent for women aged 21-24. Gains at the upper secondary level are smaller in absolute terms than at the primary level probably in part because the time difference between age groups is smaller, but also because Education for All targeted lower levels of schooling, and because child marriages play a role at that level.

Table 3 provides trends in child marriage. Among girls aged 18-22, the prevalence of child marriage ranges from 17.2 percent in Ghana to 76.8 percent in Niger. In most countries, reductions have been observed, but only slowly. For the 21 countries, again without weights for population sizes, prevalence decreased by 8.0 points in two and a half decades (difference in prevalence for women aged 18-22 and 41-49). In two countries affected by conflict, the Central

² For an alternative way to estimate trends using cohort analysis from multiple surveys and projections for recent years when data are not available, see Le Nestour et al. (2018).

³ Many countries have fielded more recent household surveys with information on educational attainment. Administrative data are also available from education management information systems on recent trends in educational attainment for girls. But these data sources typically do not have information on the age at first (formal or informal) union for girls. Therefore, for consistency in the analysis across countries, and for comparison of data on girls' education and child marriage, we rely for the estimation of trends only on DHS and MICS surveys.

African Republic for some time and Mali more recently, there appears to have been an increase in the practice over the two and a half decades preceding the latest available survey.

3. Relationships Between Girls' Education and Child Marriage

Progress towards improving educational attainment for girls at the secondary level and reducing child marriage has been limited. The issues of secondary education for girls and child marriage are linked. In many settings, when girls drop out of school, they are often married early.

Various approaches can be used to assess the relationship between girls' education and child marriage. Analysis can first be conducted at the individual level using household surveys. In Bangladesh, Field and Ambrus (2009) found a negative impact of child marriage on educational attainment and literacy. Similar findings are found by Nguyen and Wodon (2017) for sub-Saharan Africa. In some surveys, parents or sometimes school principals are asked why girls dropped out of school (Lloyd and Mensch, 2008). In many settings, 10 to 30 percent of school dropouts are due to an early marriage or a pregnancy, with early marriages playing a larger role than pregnancies. In Uganda, this was confirmed by data from school principals apart from parents (Wodon et al., 2016). These estimates may be on the low side because other responses, such as a lack of interest among girls to remain in school or a lack of support from parents to do so may mask the role of child marriage. Once a girl marries or becomes pregnant, it is often extremely difficult for her to return to school even if this is in principle allowed by schools.

In this article, given that we provide estimates of both educational attainment and child marriage for girls for 21 of the 25 countries in the region, we can illustrate visually in a simple way the relationship between both variables. Figure 1 plots the completion rate for lower secondary school on the horizontal axis and the prevalence of child marriage on the vertical axis. The logarithmic trend line through the scatter plot accounts for almost 60 percent of the variance in the prevalence of child marriage between countries. The Figure also suggests that as secondary schooling rates become higher, the relationship between educational attainment and child marriage may become weaker. This could potentially be because it is often more difficult to reach the last mile (ending vs. reducing child marriage) in this area as in many others.

4. Impacts, Costs, and Solutions

Low educational attainment and child marriage both affect girls' life trajectories in profound ways (UNFPA, 2012; UNICEF, 2014; Klugman et al., 2014; Wodon et al., 2017). Girls marrying or dropping out of school early are more likely to experience poor health, have children early and more children over their lifetime, and earn less in adulthood. This makes it more likely that they will live in poverty. Other risks associated with low educational attainment and child marriage include intimate partner violence and lack of decision-making 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 (Wodon, 2016). 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. Estimates suggest that in West and Central Africa, if child marriage had been ended in 2015, the benefits related to lower population growth, lower health risks for young children, and higher earnings for women could be well above \$60 billion in purchasing power parity by 2030 (Wodon et al., 2017).

What can be done to promote girls' education and end child marriage? There is an extensive literature on ways to improve educational attainment for girls (see for example

Unterhalter et al., 2014). This literature and the role of cash transfers for example need not be reviewed here. But a key point of the latest World Development Report on education (World Bank, 2017) is worth emphasizing: many countries are experiencing a learning crisis, which contributes to drop-outs when children are not learning in school. Improving the quality of the education provided to children should be a key component of any effort to boost attainment.

In the case of programs to end child marriage, Botea et al. (2017) provide a review of recent impact evaluations for interventions aiming to improve young women's sexual and reproductive health (SRH) and delay marriage and childbearing. Three types of interventions are reviewed: (1) programs providing life skills and reproductive health knowledge to adolescent girls; (2) programs expanding economic opportunities through livelihood skills training or financial literacy and inclusion; and (3) programs keeping girls in school or enabling them to return to school, or in some cases focusing directly on delaying marriage through incentives.

The review suggests that safe space programs empowering girls through life skills training, better knowledge of SRH, and the delivery of other skills and assets have achieved important benefits for participating girls. Yet, without additional livelihood opportunities or incentives for schooling, it is not clear that safe spaces, while valuable for other reasons, are sufficient to delay the age at marriage and childbearing. Interventions that combine an emphasis on empowering girls, often through safe spaces, with a focus on providing income-generation skills or other livelihood support often have some success in increasing earnings for participants, employment, and/or savings. In some cases, they may also improve reproductive health outcomes and delay marriage or childbearing, but not systematically so. Interventions to promote education, including by reducing the opportunity and out-of-pocket cost of schooling, are among the most likely to help delay the age at marriage and childbearing, with a similar finding for programs providing financial incentives to delay marriage. Similar findings are suggested by Kalamar et al (2016) in a separate review.

Before concluding this section, especially for a heterodox journal such as *Forum*, one should note that a tension may remain between research on what works based on impact evaluations that assess the effectiveness of individual incentives to delay marriage and promote schooling, and insights emerging from alternative community-based perspectives about development. A peer reviewer for this article pointed us to an interesting quote from Cornwall and Anyidoho (2010) about the risk of perversion of the concept of empowerment.

For many feminists, 'women's empowerment' represents a sorry but not unfamiliar tale of how a once-radical concept was stolen by the high priests of neo-liberalism only to be foisted onto women in the global south as their putative salvation. Like a pernicious disease, it is associated with having come from somewhere else, its origins most often attributed by its critics to the international financial institution famed for its linguistic kleptomania. In contrast to indigenous notions of empowerment that promised transformation through mobilization and collective action, this alien 'empowerment' is individualist, instrumental, neo-liberal. It peddles in gender myths that sustain an image of the 'good woman' as the deserving object of development assistance.

As authors working for an international financial institution, the quote is especially interesting to us. We can certainly understand why a tension may remain between an approach to ending child marriage based in part on individual economic incentives and a vision of women's empowerment and transformation through mobilization and collective action. Without denying

that such a tension may indeed remain, it is worth noting that individual incentives and collective action are not necessarily mutually exclusive. When economic incentives move the needle for enough families in a community to delay marriage for their daughters and keep them in school, this may lead to new collective dynamics. As more girls avoid child marriage in the community, the pressure for parents to marry their own daughters early is relieved. The local marriage market is altered for the better. This is perhaps why Brown (2012) called for education interventions to reach “tipping points” at the level of communities to accelerate progress to end child marriage. In other words, economic incentives for individuals may lead facilitate or event be the trigger for collective mobilization. This need not always be the case, but it is a possibility.

5. Conclusion

The issues of child marriage and low educational attainment for girls contribute to women’s lack of empowerment and capacity for choice in the developing world. This is especially the case in West and Central Africa where few girls complete their secondary education in part because the prevalence of child marriage remains high. To document this assertion, this article has provided new data on trends over time in educational attainment for girls and child marriage for 21 of the 25 countries of West and Central Africa. The analysis is based on comparable and recent DHS data for most countries and MICS data when a recent DHS is not available. Comparisons are made between older and younger women in the samples.

Over a period of roughly 25 years, not accounting for differences in population sizes between countries, completion rates increased in the region by 24.0 percentage points at the primary level, versus 13.8 points for lower secondary education and 8.3 points for upper secondary education according to the data available in the latest available survey for each country. The prevalence of child marriage decreased by 8.0 points on average over the same period. Clearly, progress made at the primary level has been much stronger than at the secondary level. Part of the challenge in boosting secondary education for girls lies in high prevalence rates of child marriage in many countries. The data suggest a strong negative relationship between secondary schooling and child marriage. Ending child marriage would improve girls’ educational attainment, while improving girls’ educational attainment would help reduce child marriage.

A review of the available evidence from impact evaluations suggests that enabling adolescent girls to remain in school is probably one of the best ways to end child marriage. The evidence on the impact of such interventions towards delaying marriage and early childbearing is stronger than for safe space programs empowering girls through life skills and SRH knowledge. Schooling interventions also tend to have a better track record towards delaying marriage than interventions increasing earnings, employment, and/or savings, even though these interventions are needed for girls who cannot return to school. Importantly, individual incentives to delay marriage and keep girls in school need not necessarily be mutually exclusive with collective action and mobilization to empower women. When individual incentives enable more girls to avoid child marriage and stay in school, the local pressure for parents to marry their daughters early is relieved as the fundamentals of the marriage market are altered. This can lead to tipping points that in turn facilitate collective action and mobilization towards ending child marriage and, more generally, ensuring that girls and women have a capacity for choice in their own live.

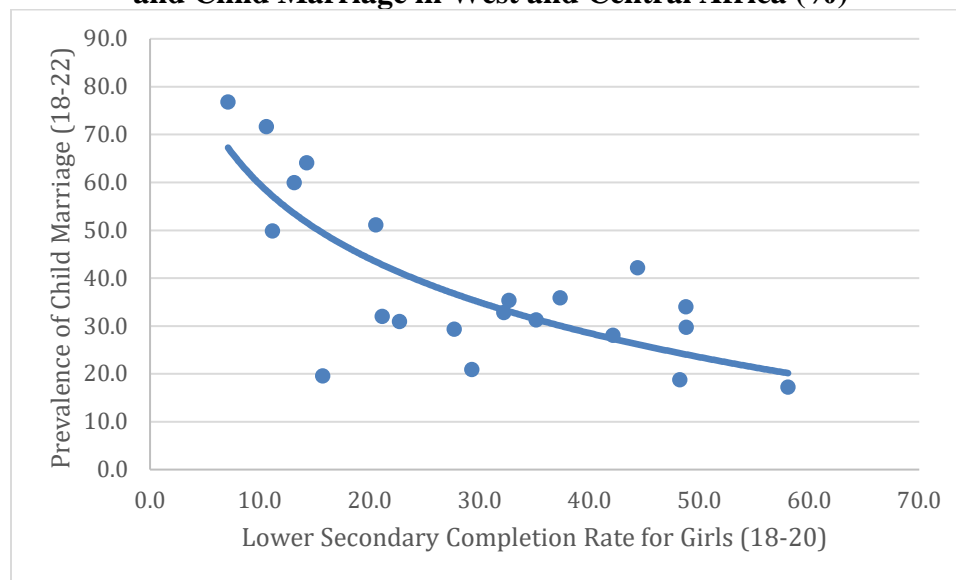
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Figure 1: Relationship between Educational Attainment and Child Marriage in West and Central Africa (%)



Source: Authors.

Table 1: List of Surveys and Year of Implementation

Country	Survey	Year	Country	Survey	Year
Benin	DHS	2012	Guinea-Bissau	MICS	2014
Burkina Faso	DHS	2010	Liberia	DHS	2013
Cameroon	MICS	2014	Mali	DHS	2012
Central Afr. Rep.	MICS	2010	Mauritania (*)	DHS	2000
Chad	DHS	2015	Niger	DHS	2012
Côte d'Ivoire	DHS	2012	Nigeria	DHS	2013
DR Congo	DHS	2013	Rep. of Congo	DHS	2011
Gabon	DHS	2012	Senegal	DHS	2016
Gambia	DHS	2013	ST&P	MICS	2014
Ghana	DHS	2014	Sierra Leone	DHS	2013
Guinea	DHS	2012	Togo	DHS	2014

Source: DHS and MICS surveys.

Note: (*) Mauritania is not included in the analysis because the publicly available survey is dated.

**Table 2: Trends in the Share of Women Completing Various Levels of Schooling by Age Group
Latest Publicly Available DHS or MICS (%)**

	Primary Completed					Lower Secondary Completed					Upper Secondary Completed			
	15-18	19-22	23-30	31-40	41-49	18-20	21-24	25-30	31-40	41-49	21-24	25-30	31-40	41-49
Benin	54.3	37.8	21.3	15.1	19.9	27.7	24.4	11.6	7.4	12.0	8.9	4.8	2.3	3.2
Burkina Faso	28.6	20.1	14.7	9.7	6.5	11.1	12.5	7.4	5.7	4.0	2.3	2.0	1.5	1.3
Cameroon	71.9	68.6	59.8	55.0	55.3	48.8	45.0	37.8	30.2	28.5	20.0	18.6	11.8	10.3
Central Afr. Rep.	34.3	30.8	30.6	29.2	24.8	10.6	12.6	9.1	8.4	7.7	6.7	5.7	4.8	3.2
Chad	30.0	29.7	17.5	10.8	6.4	14.3	16.2	7.3	5.2	2.9	5.9	3.0	2.4	1.0
Côte d'Ivoire	39.9	34.6	28.8	25.6	26.6	21.1	23.2	15.9	12.5	9.9	10.8	8.0	5.1	3.1
DR Congo	66.8	65.0	52.7	51.9	43.9	37.3	40.3	28.8	25.9	22.0	22.2	16.0	12.3	9.4
Gabon	84.9	86.6	81.3	75.8	68.1	48.2	61.6	55.7	46.6	39.8	14.7	21.6	13.8	10.8
Gambia	58.4	63.3	45.1	28.1	20.0	42.1	50.3	31.5	20.3	12.7	27.6	18.7	11.7	5.6
Ghana	78.0	81.7	72.1	62.7	52.0	58.1	62.9	57.4	49.0	37.5	34.6	28.5	14.5	4.7
Guinea	33.8	35.0	21.1	10.4	9.3	20.6	26.5	13.7	6.2	4.1	11.0	7.4	3.0	1.4
Guinea-Bissau	33.3	45.5	36.7	22.5	15.4	15.7	24.9	21.6	14.5	8.9	5.7	8.9	5.5	3.4
Liberia	37.7	54.0	44.5	32.5	24.2	22.7	28.8	27.7	19.9	15.0	11.3	18.6	12.0	10.1
Mali	34.7	25.8	13.1	8.8	9.9	13.1	13.7	6.1	4.3	4.6	4.6	2.6	1.8	1.5
Niger	22.3	13.7	7.2	7.1	5.8	7.1	7.9	3.3	4.1	3.2	1.4	1.0	1.0	1.0
Nigeria	64.6	62.0	56.8	55.2	49.3	44.4	55.9	38.9	35.6	28.9	43.6	32.6	29.7	22.3
Rep. of Congo	79.7	81.1	76.9	75.0	72.8	48.8	50.6	46.2	46.9	47.6	14.6	13.0	11.4	7.6
Senegal	86.7	76.0	52.4	46.3	36.5	35.1	22.1	18.6	14.7	9.7	7.6	5.2	5.8	2.4
Sao Tome & Principe	51.9	44.9	26.2	15.7	16.0	32.2	29.3	17.0	11.8	11.7	6.2	6.4	5.6	5.4
Sierra Leone	67.3	55.3	26.1	15.5	18.1	32.7	33.9	12.9	8.1	10.6	17.2	7.6	3.9	5.6
Togo	62.2	59.0	44.5	28.5	24.5	29.3	36.3	20.0	12.8	9.8	10.5	5.6	3.1	2.0
Average not weighted	53.3	51.6	40.4	33.3	29.3	29.7	32.7	23.8	19.1	15.9	13.9	11.6	8.0	5.6

Source: Authors.

Note: The regional average is not weighted by the countries' population sizes.

Table 3: Trends in the Prevalence of Child Marriage, Women by Age Group (%)
Latest Publicly Available DHS or MICS

	All	Aged 18-22	Aged 23-30	Aged 31-40	Aged 41-49
Benin	33.8	29.3	37.8	33.1	31.7
Burkina Faso	51.8	49.8	52.0	53.5	51.0
Cameroon	35.3	29.7	35.0	38.4	39.7
Central Afr. Rep.	61.1	71.7	60.1	53.8	56.4
Chad	68.0	64.1	69.7	68.5	68.8
Côte d'Ivoire	35.1	32.0	32.9	36.5	42.7
DR Congo	40.7	35.9	40.3	42.0	47.9
Gabon	23.8	18.7	24.0	22.4	33.1
Gambia	39.1	28.0	35.8	47.5	54.9
Ghana	26.2	17.2	24.1	28.7	34.2
Guinea	56.7	51.1	56.5	60.1	60.1
Guinea-Bissau	34.7	19.5	33.9	41.8	49.9
Liberia	39.1	30.9	36.8	44.5	45.3
Mali	52.7	59.9	56.3	46.9	42.8
Niger	76.9	76.8	76.1	76.6	80.1
Nigeria	46.8	42.1	47.0	47.8	51.0
Rep. of Congo	34.4	34.0	33.2	33.2	39.6
Senegal	33.2	31.2	33.7	33.2	35.4
ST&P	31.8	32.8	32.9	29.7	32.0
Sierra Leone	46.0	35.3	48.0	51.1	48.6
Togo	29.0	20.8	29.8	31.2	33.6
Average not weighted	42.7	38.6	42.7	43.8	46.6

Source: Authors.