

Child Marriage in Niger: New Insights on Mental, Psychological and Other Indicators

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Abstract

This research paper discusses one of the most prevalent issue of Child Marriage in Niger and concretely analyses if there were any societal norms and expectations associated with child marriage. It further examines the various forms of violence in domestic spaces across different regions of Niger and most importantly, provides a detailed study of the impact of mental health on child marriage. These aspects were studied by using quantitative and qualitative measures mostly using an interview method and secondary sources. The secondary sources included various files, documents, articles and previous research done on certain aspects of child marriage. It was found in the research that the societal norms played a crucial role in early marriage, they strongly believed in the ideals of upholding family honor and securing an honorable position in the society. Further, sexual and economic violence secured the highest rates of abuse and it was associated with lack of awareness and poor economic status in the society respectively. When analyzed about mental health, it was seen that anxiety, depression and a poor psychological well being had a positive correlation with the age of marriage. To conclude, despite certain limitations that this paper poses, it calls for effective working and implementation of policies and programmes by international organizations - calling for an end to early marriage in Niger.

Keywords: Mental Health, Family Honor, Poor Economic Status, Awareness, Policies, Abuse

1. Background

According to UNICEF, early marriage or most commonly known as child marriage is a human rights violation referring to any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child. Though many attempts have been made by international organizations around the world to combat this problem, it still remains a prevalent issue especially in the Sub Saharan regions of Africa, Central Asian Republic, Mali, Mozambique, South Sudan etc. (as of 2022).

This now illegal practice not only robs children from their joyful childhood but also threatens their well-being. Many children around the world are isolated from their families and peers, profoundly impacting their mental health. One of the major factors contributing to early marriage includes financial burden or poor socio-economic conditions of the family. Others include deeply rooted customs that prioritize early marriage as means of ensuring family honor and controlling female sexuality. Many countries that face humanitarian crisis such as flood, earthquake and other catastrophic encounters find child marriage plausible to cope with increased food insecurity and financial status.

Early marriage has a devastating impact on a girl's life. Naturally, it buries her childhood, depriving her of her basic rights to health and education. They are at a greater risk of experiencing complications in terms of both mental and reproductive health. In Africa, for instance, HIV/AIDS is a major contributor

to the death of adolescents aged 10-19 on the continent and more than one in 10 children aged under 14 have contracted the virus as of 2016. In low income countries, babies born to mothers under the age of 20 are prone to low birth weight, preterm delivery and severe neonatal conditions (abnormal function of a newborn).

1.1 Nigerien Context

Niger, a landlocked country in West Africa, ratified Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, which sets a minimum age of marriage to 18. However 76 percent of the girls are married before their 18th birthday and 28 percent are married before the age of 15. It is more prevalent in Maradi (where 89 percent of women are married before the age of 18), Zinder (87 percent), Diffa (82 percent) and Tahoua (76 percent). The rampant growth of child marriage in Niger can be partially attributed to ineffective legislation where the civil code sets the minimum age of marriage at 18 years for boys and 15 for girls. Such customs allow the practice of child marriage to be widely accepted in the society.

Despite the knowledge of widespread prevalence of child marriage and its consequences, we find very little evidence of the dynamics and its impact in a country like Niger. An in depth study of these dynamics will help foster effective implementation and thereby reduce these rates by informing the programmes assisting child brides and their implications. Moreover, Plan International Niger and UNICEF are the two key organisations working to eradicate child marriage and promote gender equality by supporting 3 Million Nigerien girls to become leaders of socio-economic changes. A recent study done by Equipundo in collaboration with The OASIS Initiative, a project of University of California at Berkeley and Venture Strategies for Health and Development, and the Center on Gender Equity and Health at the University of California, San Diego revealed new insights. It gathered data from 2,400 married adolescent girls aged 13 to 19 and their husbands aged 15 to 53 in the Dosso and Maradi regions of Niger. The study not only provides insights on a wide range of topics (from sexual and reproductive health to intimate partner violence) but also suggests certain policy measures to improve sexual and reproductive health for adolescent girls.

More concretely, the paper examines the following research question: To what extent does Child marriage impact the societal norms and well-being of adolescent girls and how efficient are these (UNICEF, Plan International Niger) organisations in their work towards eradicating this practice? Firstly, we tried to find whether there was an existing relationship between societal norms and child marriage and if it holds true in this setting. Secondly, we tried to understand the various outcomes of child marriage that are directly and indirectly affecting adolescent girls and providing potential solutions for the same. Finally, examining the work of the programmes and organisations associated with this cause.

Furthermore, we assessed the crucial aspect of child marriage: Mental health of adolescent girls, an aspect that is so often overlooked and not commonly examined in recent studies.

According to the study conducted by Society for Nutrition, Education and Health action, child brides often find themselves struggling to cope with anxiety and depression and find little support in their marital home. They are also victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence.

Henceforth, we hypothesise that Child marriage could lead to lower standard of living of adolescent girls, poorer mental and physical wellbeing and worse reproductive outcomes including increased child mortality and miscarriages. We further hypothesized that an efficient policy implementation and the persistent efforts of various organizations could in turn help eradicate this problem in Niger.

2. Literature Review

Previous studies done on the violations of children's right to mental health, gender based discriminatory practices also play a key role in child marriage in Niger. These gender norms not only portray women as being inferior to men but also being subjected and under the control of men. One of the major reasons for this gender inequality is due to the long rooted history of patriarchy - a system which sees men as dominant and portrays men as the head of the family. Further, a girl's virginity is often tied with family honour and their socio-cultural context. Premarital sex is considered dishonourable and therefore families try to marry off their daughters early to prevent such incidents from occurring. But what about the cases when premarital sex has already occurred? In such circumstances, families try to 'cover up' their dishonorable status by marrying off their daughters to rapists to achieve an honorable status in the society. As a result, the abuse continues. Research fails to provide evidence of the growth in the rates of child marriage in Niger over the years. Despite the work performed by international organisations, a true picture of its working and impact on child marriage rates is yet to be concretely examined.

3. Methodology

This study is performed by using both qualitative and quantitative measures. The qualitative findings are performed by a survey conducted in the Maradi region of Niger by examining a community's opinions on child marriage. Whereas the quantitative findings are measured among various regions of Niger typically Dosso and Maradi by taking a sample size of more than 100 members in a community to gather evidence of violence among partners usually through an interview as any other quantitative measure would be misleading. Majority of the research conducted in this paper is done by studying various articles, documents and research files on child marriage rates in Niger and carefully linking research gaps to provide an in depth study of this prevalent issue.

4. Results

The qualitative findings conducted by Equipundo in collaboration with The OASIS Initiative suggest that though the financial power is now shifting from parents to the men in the Maradi region is a result of economic migration and financial independence. Therefore, as men are becoming more financially independent they have now got the authority to choose whom to marry and when to marry - although parental opinion still appears to be considered in the marriage process. Despite this change, community members feel that girls should be married before the age of 14-15.

The study further generated the first large-scale quantitative data on experiences of intimate partner violence as reported by adolescent wives in Dosso and Maradi regions of Niger. The results show only 12 percent of girls self-reporting this violence. However, high percentages of husbands heard their male friends engaging in spousal physical violence. This gap could be perhaps due to the perception of sexual violence being a part of marital relations; under-reporting, nevertheless, could also be a contributing factor.

Six in ten Nigerien women (59.6%) find it justified for a man to beat his wife, according to the Niger Demographic and Health Survey. One such incident can be noted during the COVID-19 crisis. Zaynab recalled, "He slapped me and beat me up. When I felt blood run down my face, I begged him to stop. I ran into the bedroom, picked up my sleeping baby, and left the house to go to my aunt's house. I didn't think about the curfew, I was just afraid to stay in the house with him." While others recount their desires of going to school and getting educated before getting married. Azima, 15, arrived in Niger in

2019 after fleeing violence in her birth country, Nigeria.” I'm not ready to get married yet. I'm interested in the idea and I even have a suitor. But first I prefer to dedicate myself to my future and my dreams of owning my own business. I want to open a boutique where women can buy textiles and clothes.”

Table 1: Child Marriage Rates in Various Regions of Niger

Region	Percentage (%)
Agadez	39.7
Diffa	81.7
Dosso	77.1
Maradi	88.2
Tahoua	79.4
Tillaberi	78
Zinder	86.2
Niamey	31.8

Source: IJFMR Women Field data (2018)

Table 2: Rates of Various form of Violence in Domestic Space

Domestic space	Percentage
Physical Violence	61.4
Sexual Violence	91.9
Psychological Violence	67.6
Economic Violence	95.1
Spotlight Programme Niger 2021	

Table 1 clearly examines the percentage of child marriage in various regions of Niger. It can be observed that Maradi has the highest percentage of child marriages (88.2) followed by Zinder (86.2), Diffa (81.7), Tahoua (79.4), Tillaberi (78), Dosso (77.1), Agadez (39.1) and at last the Capital City Niamey with 31.8 percent. Table 2 we further examine the various outcomes related to early marriage in Niger. Specifically we have examined the various forms of domestic spaces that have been intervened with. 95.1 percent of adolescent girls suffer from economic violence. This reason perhaps could be because of Niger being one of the poorest countries in the world with frequent droughts and harsh natural environment. Therefore, families insist on marrying off their daughters to men of wealth to survive and cope with financial losses. Further, since many adolescent girls below the age of 15 and 18 are not educated about reproductive health and saying ‘No’ to sexual acts, 91.9 percent suffer from sexual violence. The physical and psychological violence faced by adolescent girls is 61.4 and 67.6 percent respectively.

Results in table 3 focus more on the mental well-being of adolescent girls, married at different ages. The overall psychological well-being is 71.02 percent. However adolescent girls suffering from anxiety and depression are 76.59 and 75.62 percent. Henceforth the data suggests a monotonic relationship between child marriage and psychological well-being with psychological well-being increasing steadily as age at marriage increases.

Table 3 : Sub Scale Domain Scores By Age at Marriage In Niger

(<https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-019-7314-z/tables/2>)

Age at Marriage (in years)	≤ 12	13 Yrs.	14 Yrs.	15 Yrs.	16 Yrs.	17 Yrs.	≥ 18
Niger (n = 2463)							
Overall Psychological Well-being	66.20 (23.22)	67.96 (22.09)	70.25 (21.94)	71.24 (21.62)	72.29 (22.09)	71.16 (23.46)	71.61 (21.62)
Anxiety (ANX)	71.10 (26.82)	73.19 (27.06)	76.36 (25.05)	77.80 (24.48)	76.79 (25.41)	76.44 (26.64)	77.03 (24.59)
Depression (DEP)	70.59 (28.03)	72.44 (28.50)	75.28 (27.62)	76.42 (26.48)	76.70 (27.22)	75.29 (29.49)	75.61 (27.04)
Self-Control (SC)	70.57 (24.19)	70.13 (25.82)	72.17 (24.68)	71.77 (24.09)	74.16 (23.19)	72.31 (24.73)	73.90 (23.47)
Vitality (VT)	63.49 (26.49)	64.59 (26.78)	66.09 (26.90)	66.53 (26.41)	65.87 (26.69)	65.87 (26.92)	65.57 (25.92)
Positive Well-being (PWB)	59.03 (20.35)	61.54 (19.39)	62.66 (20.00)	62.81 (20.50)	66.95 (20.11)	65.17 (21.44)	64.55 (4.58)
General Health (GH)	63.57 (29.72)	64.83 (29.62)	68.42 (28.31)	69.72 (27.98)	70.31 (27.48)	69.2 (29.42)	70.43 (28.15)

After looking at the various aspects of child marriage, we looked upon the various indicators and the working of primarily UNICEF towards achieving its goal of eradicating child marriage (Figure 1). Though, in 2020, it has achieved its target(9940) of increasing the participation of educating adolescents girls (10-19) in terms of life skills and sexuality education interventions in programme areas, it is still working towards the enrollment rates of adolescent girls, participation in addressing gender norms, gender equality and their rights.

Figure 1 : UNICEF's Output Indicator Performance (2020)

Summary of output indicator performance (2020)

Indicator	Target	Result
Indicator 1111: Number of adolescent girls (aged 10-19) who actively participated in life-skills or comprehensive sexuality education interventions in programme areas	9,940	12,471
Indicator 1121: Number of girls (aged 10-19) supported by the programme to enrol and/or remain in primary or secondary school	4,500	276
Indicator 1211: Number of boys and men actively participating in group education/dialogues that address harmful masculinities and gender norms	8,940	6,296
Indicator 1221: Number of individuals (boys, girls, women and men) who participated in group education/dialogue sessions on consequences of and alternatives to child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls, and gender equality	66,680	17,852
Indicator 1222: Number of individuals (boys, girls, women and men) reached by mass media (traditional and social media) messaging on child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls, and gender equality	204,687	36,369
Indicator 1223: Number of local actors (e.g., traditional, religious and community leaders) with meaningful participation in dialogues and consensus-building to end child marriage	215	734
Indicator 1231: Number of civil society organizations newly mobilized in support of challenging social norms and promoting gender equality by the Global Programme	85	1

5. Discussion

In this research paper, through quantitative and qualitative measures, we found new insights into certain aspects of child marriage focused in Dosso and Maradi regions of Niger. As previously noted, financial burden and harsh environmental conditions in Niger is one of the major causes of child marriage as it supports families financially by marrying off their daughter to a man of wealth. However, we found that in recent times, men are becoming financially independent as a result of economic migrations, yet community members believe that girls should be married by 14 years of age. Perhaps, one of the major reasons for this belief could be to uphold their family honor by preventing pregnancy outside marriage, which is considered a shame for the family. Henceforth, family honor and societal norms is another important dimension behind this cause.

Child marriage was associated with violence in various domestic spaces including Economic, sexual, physical and psychological. It was found that many adolescent girls do not report any sort of abuse, as they perceive it to be a part of marital relations. This perception is usually drawn due to the lack of education on reproductive and physical health. Therefore, the lack of education leads to the lack of awareness in the society leading to unhealthy outcomes including unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases and illegal abortions.

Then we examined one of the crucial dimensions of child marriage namely: Mental health. We find that an increase in overall psychological well-being has a positive correlation with the age of marriage, as the age of marriage increases, the overall psychological well-being also increases and one is more aware of themselves. We also find that depression and anxiety are the two major mental health issues faced by adolescent girls. It is found that one of the major reasons for these two to be the primary outcomes of child marriage include the various forms of abuse experienced by adolescent girls, specifically economic

and sexual abuse. Though are study might contradict with the existing research on mental health, we are not aware of subsequent association of child marriage to other mental health issues.

As with any research, there are certain limitations to this paper: It specifically focuses on certain aspects relating to child marriage. It only provides an extensive study on the potential impact of mental health and forms violence in domestic space. There could be certain unobserved factors impacting the situation including poor health relating to poverty. Our study provides a generalised view of the situation in the country as a whole rather than being specific to certain geographical locations which could potentially overlook the broader picture of the association between child marriage and its related outcomes. Our findings of child marriage rates in various regions of Niger can help organisations to focus their goals more effectively and efficiently in some areas than the others. Thus our findings can help provide a broad understanding of child marriage in Niger that can be further analysed through extensive studies.

While this paper has concretely demonstrated certain crucial aspects of child marriage, there is very little information on the growth of child marriage rates over the years which fails to provide a complete picture of the work put in by organisations at large. There have been continued efforts made by organisations such as Plan International Niger, UNICEF and Save the Children to eradicate child marriage.

Recently, efforts have been made to set up mental health organizations to improve mental healthcare services in Niger and treat people with mental health issues. As the lead of the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Working Group in Niger, Italian NGO Cooperation International (COOPI), organized various awareness-raising activities in Niamey, with IOM's support, in the framework of the Migrant Resource and Response Mechanism funded by the European Union. While such initiatives are and advocacy by international leaders is a crucial step towards ending this cause, more research and help is needed in Niger on its effective implementation of its policies and programmes.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the association between child marriage and mental health of adolescent girls, child marriage in various regions across Niger and child marriage and its association with societal norms and its role in upholding family honour. In this study we found out that economic and sexual violence is most common with depression and poor psychological well-being positively correlating with age of marriage. Further, societal norms and family honour has significance in the society of Niger. Henceforth, future research should include studies on the reasons for child marriage rates being high in certain areas than others and the information of policies implemented by initiatives and its growth over the years by providing appropriate evidence.

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