

Patterns, trends, differentials and determinants of early marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

Despite the legal arsenal for child protection, early marriage remains a scourge for which research is especially limited in developing countries. This paper aims to provide a global picture of early marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa. Using data on age of entry into union and marital status, the study shows that the phenomenon is alarming and persistent, but of varying intensity across 34 sub-Saharan African countries. Among women who cohabit or have cohabited with a man, the vast majority were dragged into this practice when they were just children. child marriage is not just a generational problem. In some countries, the phenomenon is so widespread that it seems to be the norm. Before reaching the age of 18, the vast majority of girls in Niger see their well-being or future darkened by early marriage.

Background and objectives

The marriage is a major event in people's lives, with far-reaching social, psychological and economic consequences. The age at which this transition occurs may influence the well-being of children and parents (e.g. health, education). It is also related to the demographic dynamic (Bongaarts and Blanc, 2015), and to the timing of other life events with which it interacts.

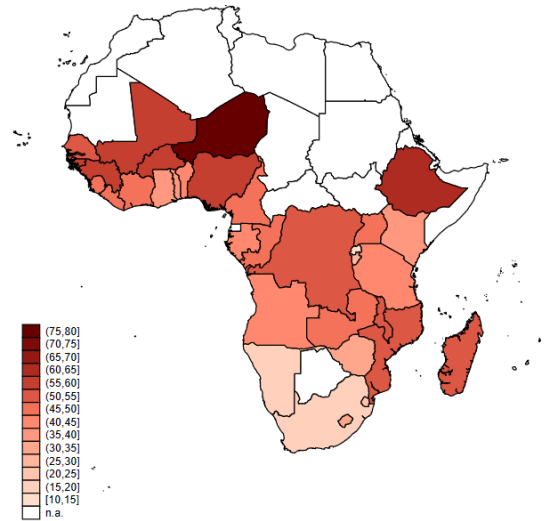
Early marriage has serious consequences not only for a girl's life, but also for her community and country. It stops a girl going to school. It exposes her to health risks and to the risk of early and abundant fertility, coupled with an increased risk of maternal mortality. As health and education are the foundations of human capital, which in turn is an important factor in economic development, early marriage can be said to have an indirect negative impact on a country's human capital and economic development. It often leads to sexual violence and abuse on the part of the husband, and sexual relations are often forced. Despite the fact that many countries in sub-Saharan Africa have an extensive legal arsenal at their disposal, and have ratified child protection treaties and political will to banish the scourge of early marriage, the phenomenon of early marriage persists in developing countries without any in-depth knowledge of its levels, trends or deterrents.

The objective of this paper is to provide a global picture of of early marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa using data from Demographic and Health Surveys. We address two broad questions: (1) What is the intensity of early marriage in sub-Saharan African countries, and to what extent does this vary across countries; (2). To what early marriage varies by place of residence and level education. In other words, is there some heterogeneity within countries, and has this heterogeneity changed over time?

Summary results

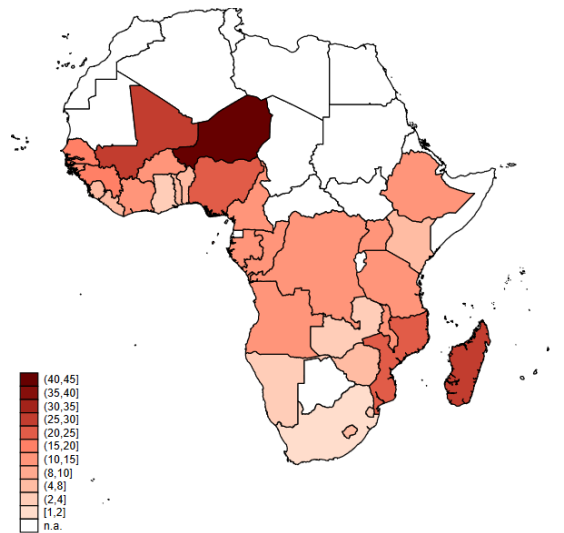
Early marriage is a scourge plaguing sub-Saharan society. Among women who cohabit or have cohabited with a man, the vast majority were dragged into this practice when they were just

children. In countries like Niger, where legislation is lax in this area, nearly 75% of women who have entered into a union have done so before their 18th birthday. In most countries in the sub-region, this type of union is lived by more than one woman in two.



Patterns of early union among women who have been in union at least once in 34 sub-Saharan African countries

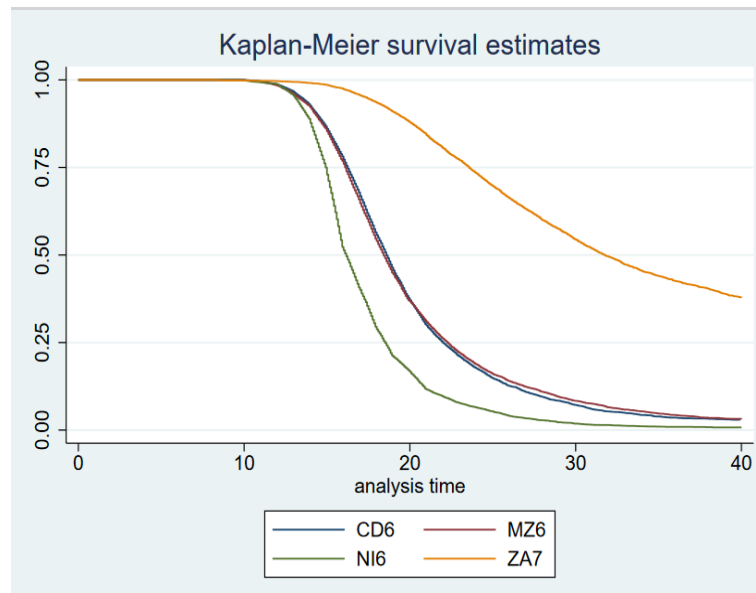
In sub-Saharan Africa, child marriage is not just a generational problem. In some countries, the phenomenon is so widespread that it seems to be the norm. In Niger, for example, almost half of all girls (45%) are already in union when they should be at school, as they have not yet reached the age of 18. While the phenomenon is tending to disappear in some countries, it is still rife in many of the sub-region's countries.



Les filles de moins de 18 ans qui vivent déjà en union dans 34 pays de l'Afrique subsaharienne

In terms of intensity, dynamics and timing, the situation of early marriage differs from country to country in the region. Before reaching the age of 18, the vast majority of girls in Niger see their well-being or future darkened by early marriage. In South Africa, on the other hand, the

phenomenon is less significant than in the DR Congo or Mozambique, where almost 25% of unions take place before girls reach the age of legal majority.



Probability of surviving early marriage in four sub-Saharan African countries

The differences observed at continental level and between countries are also observed between regions or between individuals within the same country. We will focus on the DR Congo, where almost 50% of women in union entered before the age of 18, and where currently 10% of under-age children are married or already cohabiting with a man or partner as if they were married. We will analyse in greater depth the determinants of early marriage among adolescent girls.