

New research from the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) shows that marrying early, particularly at very young ages, is associated with lower household food security in Niger.

Niger has the highest rates of child marriage globally. According to the latest Demographic and Health Survey, over three fourths (76.3 percent) of women aged 20-24 in Niger married by age 18, a figure that has remained steady in the past two decades, even as rates in other countries have declined (Institut National de la Statistique - INS/Niger & ICF International, 2013). Additionally, according to the **World Food Program**, in 2017 more than 1.5 million people in Niger were affected by food insecurity; lacking consistent access to enough food for active and healthy lives. Another 1.5 million were estimated to be chronically food insecure.

Most of the literature to date on the relationship between child marriage and food insecurity focuses on food insecurity as a driver of child marriage. Recent research by ICRW seeks to explore the reverse relationship: whether and how child marriage affects the food security of households.

Conceptually, there are several reasons why child marriage may increase a household's food insecurity. First, child marriage may reduce the availability and accessibility of food in households through its negative impact on women's agency. Research shows that this limited bargaining and decision-making power can negatively impact availability of food in households, as it produces **significant gender gaps in control over and efficient use of agricultural**

resources such as land and labor (Peterman, Behrman, and Quisumbing 2014). It produces significant gender gaps in control over and efficient use of agricultural resources including land, labor and other inputs (Peterman, Behrman, and Quisumbing 2014). Women may also be limited in their ability to influence whether the crops produced by the household are consumed or sold, who within the household gets to eat certain food and in what order household members eat (World Bank, FAO, and IFAD 2008; World Bank 2008).

Secondly, child marriage is known to reduce women's educational attainment, increase fertility and as a result care responsibilities, and reduce social networks, all of which have been linked to gaps between women's and men's agricultural productivity and in turn food availability (O'Sullivan, Rao, Banerjee, Gulati, & Vinez, 2014).

At the same time, we hypothesized that there may be situations where child marriage could potentially improve household food security. In rural, agrarian societies, where child marriage disproportionately occurs, many households rely on subsistence agriculture. In such contexts, a young woman's marriage into the household and high fertility could add to the unpaid household labor that contributes to food production.

METHODOLOGY

In 2016, ICRW undertook a nationally-representative survey of adult women and their households in Niger, collecting data on the women's demographic background, health history, relationships with their husbands, experiences of intimate partner violence and the household's socioeconomic status, land holdings, and food security. The survey was designed to gather robust data that could be used to assess the impact of child marriage on different domains of a woman's life, including the number of children she may have, her health, her educational attainment, her employment and earnings and her decision-making power, as well as the impact of child marriage on her household, including the household's food security. In total, questionnaires were completed by 2,764 women in Niger. The analysis tested two measures of household food

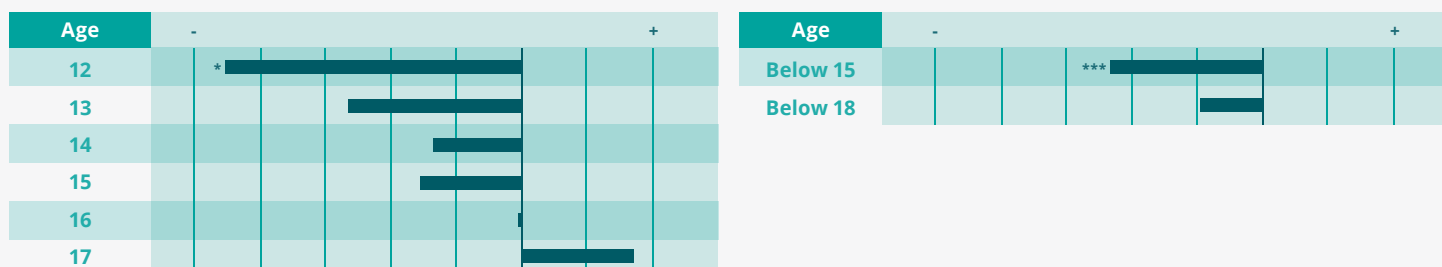
security: a count of the number of categories of foods consumed by the household over the previous seven days, and a yes/no response to the question "In the past seven days, did you worry that your household would not have enough food?".

Three variables designed to capture a woman's age at marriage were also tested: her exact age at marriage, whether or not she married at or below the age of 15 and whether or not she married before the age of 18.

The analyses explored the impact of child marriage on food security in a household, controlling for a number of individual, household and community characteristics, such as the women's age and education, spousal age difference, dowry, polygamy, socioeconomic status, whether the household was situated in an urban or rural area and the average number of crops grown in the community.

Figure 1. Association Between Age of Marriage and Food Security

Dietary Diversity



NOTE: Significance levels: * $p < .10$; ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

FINDINGS

The findings from the analyses strongly suggest child marriage, particularly if it takes place very early in a young girl's life, will significantly decrease her household's food security. Specifically, when accounting for other individual, household and community characteristics that might affect a household's food security, households where the woman married at age 12 (if testing women's exact age at marriage) or at age 15 or below (if comparing women married at 15 or below to all other women) had significantly less diverse diets than households where the woman did not marry at a very young age. Marriage at an early age also had a significant impact on women's subjective food insecurity. Women who were married at age 12 were more likely to report being food insecure.

- ◆ Four out of five women sampled in this study were married before age 18 and more than half married at or before age 15.
- ◆ On average, in the seven days prior to the survey, households had consumed about six out of ten possible categories of food and about one in three had worried that their household would not have enough food.

Additionally, households where the woman being interviewed had completed primary, secondary or post-secondary education had significantly higher household dietary diversity. Due to the well-documented association between child marriage and school dropout, this may point to another indirect pathway by which child marriage decreases household food security through reduced educational attainment.

CONCLUSION

Nearly 20 percent of the population of Niger cannot meet their food needs because of factors such as inadequate agricultural production, security constraints and high demographic growth. Women and children are impacted disproportionately. Three quarters of women in Niger marry before the age of 18, cutting short their education and reducing their ability to control household resources. Together, these factors create a dire picture. Eliminating child marriage can play a critical role in affecting households' food security and long-term health and well-being.



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RECOMMENDED CITATION

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