

# THE POWER OF CHOICE: HOW EARLY AND DELAYED MARRIAGE IMPACT DECISION-MAKING IN IBADAN, NIGERIA

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## BACKGROUND

One way to think about power is in the ability to make choices. Agency and the availability of resources both play a role in decision-making. In Sub-Saharan Africa, as in many places around the world, women continue to face socio-economic challenges and limited reproductive freedoms, which diminishes their ability to exercise agency and choice in their lives and their environment. Child marriage, a practice prohibited by international law<sup>1</sup>, perpetuates gender inequalities and hampers women's agency to advocate for their rights.

This research study was carried out in Ibadan, Nigeria from June through December 2017. The study was conducted by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), in collaboration with the University of Ibadan. In this brief, we examine and compare marital relationships of child brides and non-child brides with regards to power dynamics, decision-making patterns and contraceptive use.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a cross-sectional research design using qualitative methods. Study participants included twenty-one couples (42 individuals) in which the woman was between 18 to 35 years of age, with representation from couples in which the female partner was either 18 to 25 years old or 26 to 35 years old and living in peri-urban Ibadan. The couples were purposively selected to attain variation in socioeconomic, educational and religious backgrounds. To be eligible, couples had to have been married or cohabiting for at least one year prior to the interview.

Trained local researchers conducted individual in-depth interviews with 21 female and 21 male participants. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and where applicable, translated verbatim into English. Interview transcripts were coded using Nvivo 11.0 and analyzed thematically. Ethical clearance was obtained from ICRW's Institutional Review Board and the Oyo State Ministry of Health Ethical Review Committee.

## RESULTS

### *Participant Characteristics*

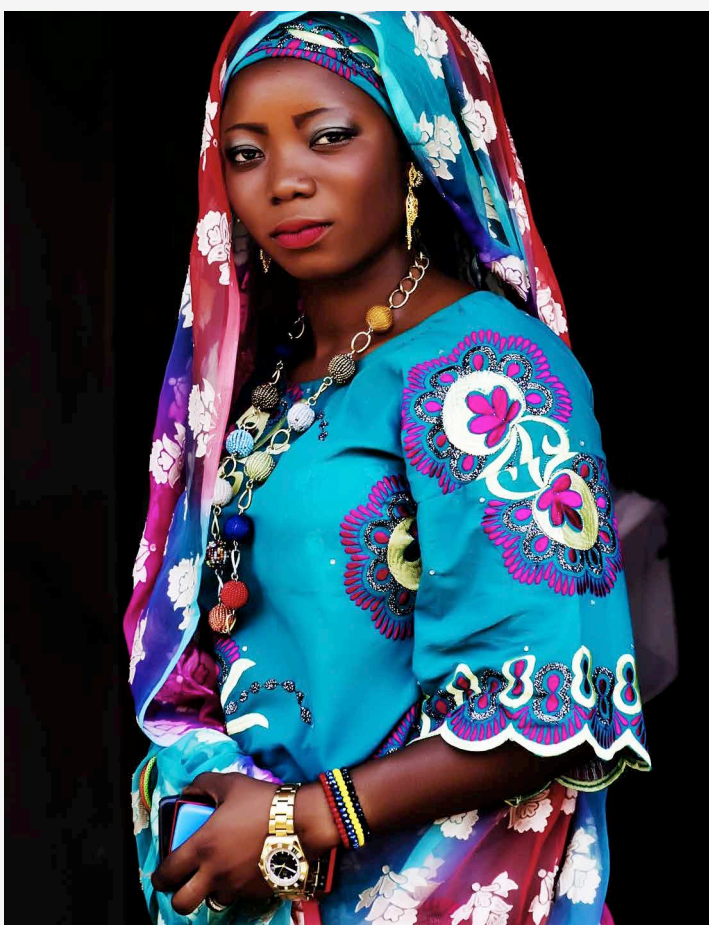
The characteristics of female participants are summarized in Table 1. Out of the 21 couples, eight women married before age 18 (*child brides*), while 13 were married after age 18 (*non-child brides*). The mean age of child brides was 23.6 years, while the average age for non-child brides was 27.3 years. The proportion of child bride couples with low socioeconomic status was higher compared to their non-child bride counterparts. The majority of participants in both groups were employed. Women in child bride unions reported lower rates of contraceptive use (37.5%) than women in non-child bride marriages (53.8%).



<sup>1</sup>UN General Assembly (1989). Convention on the Rights of the Child. United Nations, Treaty Series. Vol. 1577, 3.

**Table 1: Background Characteristics of Female Respondents**

Characteristics	Child brides (n=8)	Non-Child Brides (n=13)
Mean Age (years)	23.6	27.3
Number of children		
0	12.5%	15.4%
1-2	75.0%	61.5%
3 or more	12.5%	23.1%
Employment Status		
Working	75.0%	61.5%
Unemployed	25.0%	38.5%
Socio-economic status		
Mid/High	12.5%	38.5%
Low	87.5%	61.5%
Religion		
Christian	25.0%	53.8%
Muslim	75.0%	46.2%
Contraceptive user		
Yes	37.5%	53.8%
No	62.5%	46.2%
Mean spousal age difference (years)	4.9	5.8



## KEY FINDINGS

Overall, the majority of the study participants stated that they entered their marriages on their own volition and did not describe their marriages as ‘forced’ or ‘arranged’. Most participants revealed that arranged marriages are no longer common in the study setting. However, the findings demonstrated interesting differences in the marriages between the child bride and non-child bride couples with regards to decision-making processes pertaining to household care-burden, finances and reproductive matters, including contraceptive use.

## HOUSEHOLD AND FINANCIAL DECISION-MAKING

Both child bride and non-child bride couples tended to adhere to traditional gender roles and asserted that men have greater decision-making authority in household and financial matters. There were some differences, however, between the two groups. Because males are regarded as the primary breadwinner, child brides had less control over household income, tended not to feel empowered to participate in discussions around household purchases and agreed with their husbands’ decisions without any opposition or minimal input. Furthermore, the child brides indicated that they were satisfied with their limited involvement and the final outcomes.

**Interviewer:** “Who had the final say about the decision?”

**Female Respondent:** “My husband. Because he is the head of the household. Yes, I am satisfied. He is the one paying the fees.” (Female/ Child bride)

In contrast, non-child brides were more involved in the decision-making process and often expressed their opinions, as well as their preferences, and did not shy away from bargaining. Even in cases where there was disagreement on household purchases between non-child brides and their husbands, the non-child brides did not acquiesce and engaged in lengthy conversations.



## REPRODUCTIVE DECISION-MAKING AND CONTRACEPTIVE USE

In general, child brides and non-child brides agreed that the husband has the final say regarding reproductive matters. Nevertheless, the child brides were less likely to negotiate, while the non-child brides displayed greater bargaining power and thus were successful achieving their desired fertility outcome. Moreover, the decision-making process around family size and adoption of family planning methods was more collaborative among the non-child bride couples. Child brides had limited participation and occupied a more passive role in the reproductive decision-making arena.

**Male respondent:** *"She wanted two and I wanted four, so after much discussion, not like it was a fight, we agreed to reach a compromise of three." (Married to non-child bride)*

## DIVISION OF LABOR

Although there were no stark differences in the rate of employment between child brides and non-child brides, there was a difference in the range of types of employment. Whereas the majority of men and women in the child bride sample worked as shopkeepers or tailors, types of employment for both men and women in the non-child bride sample ranged from tailoring and teaching to working within civil society.

Women across both samples did most of the house chores, but there was a stark contrast between child brides and non-child brides in how they navigated asking for assistance from their husbands. Many child brides expressed that their husbands did not participate in household chores at all, and those that did only did so if explicitly asked or if their wives were seen to be busy or tired.

**Interviewer:** *"Okay, alright, okay. Now I want to ask, how is your husband's level of participation in all these household chores?"*

**Female Respondent:** *"Ha... his participation?"*

**Interviewer:** *"Yes."*

**Female Respondent:** *"He doesn't have any participation than to wake up, have his bath and go to shop." (Child bride)*

## CONCLUSION

Our findings show that child brides had limited agency and lower bargaining power, while the non-child brides were more likely to exercise power in decision-making processes and negotiate to achieve their goals. Our results suggest that exploiting the variation in age at marriage can be useful for expanding understanding of the power dynamics in decision-making relationships.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Photo credits: Etinosa Yvonne, Nigeria & Gregory Akinlotan, Nigeria

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

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