

Child marriage, Adolescent pregnancy and Family formation in West and Central Africa

Patterns, trends and drivers of change

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The UNICEF West and Central Africa Regional Office (WCARO) contracted this study in order to contribute to the evidence base on child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in West and Central Africa that is currently rather weak.

The analysis and recommendations of this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations Children's Fund.

While making the study available to partners, UNICEF is examining how the findings of the study can serve to strengthen programming efforts by UNICEF in support to governments and civil society partners to improve the situation of children, especially adolescent girls.

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Child marriage, Adolescent pregnancy and Family formation in West and Central Africa

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Executive summary

Of the 15 countries where the rate of child marriage is over 30 percent, nine are in West and Central Africa, with Niger having the highest rates in the world. The West and Central Africa region also has the highest adolescent birth rates in the world, at close to 200 births per 1,000 girls. Accompanying these patterns are high levels of poverty among adolescents, high levels of school dropout, particularly among girls, and low use of reproductive health services.

Recent data do show a decline in both child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in some countries in the region, with a rise in women's age at first marriage as a principal indicator of demographic change. The changes vary across the countries of the region. The literature relies heavily on the availability of data from national household surveys (especially DHS and MICS)¹ and generally explains this change through the increase in girls' education and women's participation in the labor force. It further suggests that contraception use may also lead to delaying marriage. The data suggest changes in the timing and structure of family formation behavior, a process traditionally starting with marriage at very young ages throughout the region.

The reasons behind the differences in changes of the rates of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy across countries, the core drivers of these changes and their relation to other demographic and socioeconomic factors, remain an important question for researchers, programmers and policy-makers. This study aims to address this gap by examining two core questions:

1. To identify core drivers of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in West and Central Africa;
2. To assess the levels, trends and relationships between child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in the region.

Methodology and methods

The report begins with an in-depth literature review presenting a general understanding of the institution and the process of marriage– and family formation in West and Central Africa through the lens of the family. It documents contemporary trends of marriage and the global processes affecting traditional marriage patterns. It is then followed by a quantitative analysis using DHS and MICS data to describe trends in child marriage, adolescent sexual intercourse and pregnancy at the national and regional levels. The empirical relationships among these behaviors and their drivers and consequences are also examined.

Following international convention, we define child marriage as marriage which takes place before age 18, and apply a similar definition to both early childbearing (births taking place before the mother turns 18) and adolescent sexual activity (first sexual intercourse taking place before age 18). While this study is primarily interested in child marriage and adolescent pregnancy, we focus on early childbearing and sexual intercourse rather than pregnancy as there are currently no cross-national household surveys which directly track adolescent pregnancies. Together, using these indicators allows a broader discussion around adolescent pregnancy and family formation and its linkages to child marriage than prior research focused solely on marriage or childbearing, while also allowing for the identification of key patterns of change, including where these behaviors have become less common.

1. Demographic and Health Surveys and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys

Key Findings

- The median ages of child marriage have increased in West and Central Africa as a whole, although this has been uneven. Many countries have also experienced either a “stall” in the speed of change or even a reversal towards higher rates of marriage and child bearing among adolescents. There is considerable variation of patterns and trends in the three key processes examined: marriage, childbearing, and sexual activity.
- Median age at first birth has fallen in the majority of countries in the region, particularly in West Africa, meaning more women are having children at younger ages. In those countries where it has increased over time, much of that is due to changes taking place among the oldest cohorts, with generally less change observed between younger cohorts.
- Median age at first sexual intercourse has either decreased or remained approximately the same in roughly half of the countries in the region, but has increased in the remainder. As with marriage and childbearing, most of the increases in the ages at which women first experienced sexual intercourse took place well in the past, affecting older women more than younger women.”
- Compared to other regions, particularly South Asia, adolescent sexual activity (as measured by first sexual intercourse) in West and Central Africa is less closely coupled with marriage. A large proportion of sexual activity in the region takes place prior to marriage, particularly in West Africa.
- Overall, there were more countries where the median age at first birth decreased than where the median age of child marriage decreased, suggesting either a contraction in the interval between marriage and first birth or an increase in extramarital childbearing, or both, depending on the context.
- For both marriage and childbearing the highest prevalence countries are situated on the northern end of the region. This suggests common factors such as ethnic make-up, religious identification, or poverty related to geographic considerations.
- Young women 20-24 in nearly all countries are more likely to have sex, birth and marriage before 18 if they have no education, live in a rural area and are poorer.
- However, the strength of the associations with no education, rural residence and poverty is weaker for adolescent sexual activity and childbearing than for child marriage.
- The study confirms that child marriage is strongly associated with longer term behaviors that may adversely affect the health of girls and women – specifically, being a child bride in the region is associated with lower use of modern contraception, higher fertility, and a greater likelihood of being in a polygamous union.
- Two suggested family formation typologies emerge from the data: in the first, girls’ marriage and first sexual activity are closely linked, with the median ages for each being within 13 months of each other (broadly close enough in terms of time to be regarded as being part of the same process). In the second they are not, with sexual activity taking place over a year before marriage.
- Girls experience sexual intercourse for the first time around the same age, irrespective of typology. However, on average, girls in type 1 countries marry almost two years earlier and give birth more than six months earlier than their counterparts in type 2 countries.

- Those countries where sexual activity and marriage are closely tied (type 1 countries) have higher child marriage rates than countries where this linkage is weaker, and the rates of change in marriage age in type 1 countries are, on average, slower than those for type 2 countries. By implication, it is likely that efforts to raise girls' age at marriage will also increase the age at which they first have intercourse in type 1 countries while this would not be the case for type 2 countries.

Implications for research and programming on child marriage

- Child marriage should be approached as part of a broader and dynamic process of family formation that is affected by deep demographic, economic, and sociocultural changes. The quantitative data captures this complexity by stressing the nuanced relationship between economic insecurity, education, the timing of marriage, and how they affect family relationships differently in a rural and urban setting. Researchers should therefore focus on developing a clearer understanding of the complex social interactions between these factors to understand better the ways that these relationships play out in different contexts and what the implications are for programs and policies.
- These nuanced findings, coupled with the identification of two distinct 'types' of family formation patterns in the region stress the importance of context and of developing locally contextualized interventions that build both on an understanding of family formation and on how the latter is being affected by social change in that particular setting. Specifically, the findings suggest that the linkage between marriage and sexual behavior is in flux throughout the region. Interventions designed to address the needs of adolescents in this region, including those designed to delay marriage and childbearing, should 'meet them where they are' in terms of their situation and needs.
- Future research should seek to explore the differences in the situations of adolescents in the two types of countries more specifically to understand better how predictive these typologies are and what types of interventions are likely to be effective at meeting these needs.
- Further research is needed to understand the geographical distribution of child marriage in the region and how this is linked to broader socio-cultural determinants, including ethnicity and religion.
- More research is also needed to better understand how child marriage is linked to economic aspects beyond poverty, such as migration abroad, the use of remittances from immigrants for education, or the impact of fast economic growth in some countries on gender roles, .
- These findings also highlight the need to develop more contextualized conceptual frameworks for this type of analyses. To date, research on child marriage has heavily relied on theoretical models developed in the context of marriage practices in South Asia. The findings from the current study, however, suggest that this model may not be as applicable to an African context, specifically in certain regional/local contexts. The emphasis should be given to investigating in detail the layers that have the most direct influence in shaping behavior and that apply to the settings in which the research is being conducted and accounts for the social and economic change on family structure and relationships specific to that setting.

- These analyses also highlight the challenge of clearly assigning a causal relationship between family formation patterns and key causes and consequences. One way to address it is through in-depth qualitative research across the region, preferably including countries that fall into either of the two typologies identified, as this approach allows for a more nuanced assessment of causality than is typically possible relying solely on quantitative data. This approach could be particularly effective if combined with a purposive selection of 'comparison' sites that differ primarily in terms of key theorized determinants of child marriage, such as education, while remaining similar in other aspects such as rural/urban status. There is also a clear need for longitudinal data, both quantitative and qualitative, that follows individuals or communities over a significant period, thus allowing a clearer assessment of causality than is possible using cross sectional data of the type used in this study.
- This research stresses the need to examine child marriage within a gendered context that focuses on the relational aspect of the process of family formation, particularly in terms of the significant differentials there are between men and women in terms of decision-making power around marriage, sexual activity and childbearing.

Introducing the research



1. About the research

Child marriage is a fundamental violation of human rights that can have numerous adverse effects on girls' social, mental and physical health and wellbeing (CFR 2013; UNFPA 2012a; Walker J. A. 2012; ICRW 2007). It is also not a singular violation. Having free and full consent to marry is connected to the right to life, the right to health, the right to education, the right to safety and security. In addition to denying girls their right to make their own choices for their lives, it also puts them at greater risk of early pregnancy, domestic violence and sexually transmitted infections, while reducing their opportunities for education and employment (UNFPA 2012a; Godha et al. 2012; WHO 2011; Bledsoe et al. 1993).

The practice of child marriage is widespread across least developed countries and its rates remain dramatically high. According to the latest estimates, 45% of women age 20-24 were married before they were 18 years old, and 15% before they were 15 years old (UNICEF, 2014a). The rate of child marriage is higher in West and Central Africa than in any other part of the world: six of the ten countries with the highest rates of child marriage are located in the region (UNICEF 2014b).

There is substantial evidence that child marriage is a key driver of early sexual activity and early pregnancy. Most recent estimates indicate that almost one in five women age 20 to 24 (19 per cent) had a live birth by their 18th birthday; that is, 7.3 million births to girls under 18 each year, of whom 2 million occur to girls under age 15 (UNFPA 2012a). Of the 15 countries where the figure is over 30 per cent, 14 are in sub-Saharan Africa (and nine are in West and Central Africa), with the highest global rates observed in Niger.

Child marriage and pregnancies are major factors underpinning high maternal and child mortality rates in the region. West and Central African countries have the highest adolescent birth rates in the world, at close to 200 births per 1,000 girls. Use of reproductive health services is generally low in the region and even lower among adolescents, married or unmarried. Child marriage also leads to school drop-out, lower levels of education among girls and the inter-generational transmission of poverty (Walker 2012).

Although child marriage and adolescent pregnancy remain pervasive across the developing world, some promising evidence of decreasing rates has emerged. Recent data indicate a slow decline in child marriage prevalence in some countries and regions, particularly among younger girls in West and Central Africa. Declines in child marriage by 10 per cent or more between two MICS or DHS surveys have occurred in a handful of countries: in Ghana, Liberia, Mauritania and Sierra Leone; in urban areas of Togo, Benin and Cameroon; and in the rural areas of Congo (UNFPA 2012a; Walker 2012). Adolescent pregnancy rates are also trending downward in parts of the region, including in Ghana, Senegal and Liberia.

While these data reveal much about the pervasiveness of child marriage and pregnancy as well as the need for programmatic action to end both, they provide limited information on reasons for the variations within and across regions. In West Africa, for example, Walker (2013) reports great differences in levels of change over time, with significant improvement in age at marriage in Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Senegal but a negative trend toward earlier marriage age in Cape Verde, Togo, Burkina Faso, Benin, and Mauritania. Reasons for these differences remain unclear.

Even less clear are the core drivers of these changes and their relation to other demographic behaviors and broader socioeconomic factors. Achieving a better understanding of these relationships across the full West and Central Africa region is critical to developing more effective programs to address child marriage and adolescent childbearing.

This study aimed to address this gap by using region-specific research as a platform from which to understand the factors that lead to decreases in child marriage and adolescent pregnancy. In contrast to much of the prior research conducted in the region, this study places these specific events within the context of the broader family formation process, viewing marriage and childbearing as related events linked by broader social norms and behavioral patterns that govern how and when young men and women form families. The study therefore has two main objectives: to review in depth the literature describing the core drivers of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in the region, and to assess the levels, trends and relationships between child marriage and adolescent pregnancy.

2. Defining child marriage and adolescent pregnancy

Child marriage includes any legal or customary union involving a boy or girl below the age of 18, or any marriage without the free and full consent of both intended spouses. This definition is based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which defines a child as any human being below the age of 18 years. Child marriage can be considered forced marriage, as anyone below the age of 18 cannot give free and full consent.

Child marriage is, unequivocally, a violation of human rights, one that is addressed in multiple human rights declarations and conventions.

- According to the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, Article 16: “Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.”
- The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Article 16, ratified by all but seven countries in the world, states:
 - o “States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations and in particular shall ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women... The same right freely to choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent.”
 - o And: “The betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age of marriage and to make the registration of marriages in an official registry compulsory.”
- The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child states (Art. 21): “Government should do what they can to stop harmful social and cultural practices, such as child marriage, that affect the welfare and dignity of children.”
- The Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights, Article 6, states: “The minimum age of marriage for women shall be 18 years,” and the full and free

2. UNFPA. (2012a). *Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage*, New York: UNFPA.

consent of both parties is required.

- Article 17(3) of the Inter-American Convention on Human Rights requires full consent of both spouses to marry.
- The CEDAW and CRC Committees have also commented extensively on child marriage in their own review processes.

Child marriage is also addressed in many national laws. According to UNFPA, 158 countries reported in 2010 that 18 years was the minimum legal age for marriage for women without parental consent or approval by a pertinent authority. However, in 146 of those countries, state or customary law allows girls under 18 to marry with the consent of parents or authorities. In 52 countries, girls under 15 can marry with parental consent². There is often a contradiction between national law and customary or religious law, under which many marriages are conducted. Many national constitutions provide exceptions for personal or family law. This of course creates many other avenues for child marriages to be practiced.

The definition we use for adolescent pregnancy and childbearing builds on that used for child marriage. Rather than focus exclusively on pregnancy, which may have more problems in terms of respondents accurately recalling their relevant age, the quantitative analysis focuses on childbearing, which has a number of direct consequences for girls that may not immediately manifest themselves for pregnancies alone. In order to remain consistent with the definition of child marriage, we focus on childbearing before the age of 18 and, where required, the age of 15. As with child marriage, this measure uses an 'exact age' approach, where a birth is counted as an adolescent birth if it takes place at any point before the girl turns 18.

3. Structure of the report

This report is composed of six parts. Part One introduces the research's objectives and definitions, Part Two presents a literature review on child marriage in the context of the traditional family system and the broader cultural forces in Africa. Part Three describes the conceptual framework used and how it influenced our methodology. It then explores in detail the methodology used to explore the research questions, with an in-depth look at the quantitative approach used to identify the relationship between child marriage, adolescent childbearing, and sexual activity. Part Four utilizes nationally representative quantitative data for each of the countries in the region to explore the levels, trends and interrelationships between child marriage, adolescent childbearing, and adolescent sexual activity. Part Five includes three case-study countries for which sub-national data is used to explore regional variations in marriage, childbearing and sexual activity, namely, Senegal, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Finally, Part Six concludes the report by reflecting on the findings and suggesting some general recommendations for programmers and policy makers and more specific recommendations for further research on understanding the drivers of child marriage and the social norms that promote or prevent the practice.



Contextualizing child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in the family system: Cultural norms and traditions in West and Central Africa

1. Region profile: The West and Central African (WCA) context³

MAP 1: Map of West and Central Africa



West and Central Africa covers 24 countries with many languages and myriads of dialects and is represented by very diverse ethnic groups. The countries are: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Congo, the Central African Republic, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo. The region could be divided in Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone and Hispanophone countries and covers complex cultural and religious beliefs, making it

3. Since this report is concerned more generally with marriage among adolescents, this section narrows down the information to the young population of West and Central Africa.

impossible to talk of one type of religion as being uniquely West and Central African. However, it is safe to say that the region has many basic similarities in the religious systems, with a concept of God (called by different names); a concept of divinities and/or spirits as well as beliefs in the ancestral cult – generally referred to as the ‘traditional’ (or indigenous) African beliefs, also labelled as ‘animist’⁵. In addition, Islam and Christianity were introduced in many parts of the region in the past centuries.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM)⁶, the region is also characterized by a long history of intraregional, interregional, and international migration flows, with a variety of forms of migration, including among others, contract workers, labor migrants, skilled professionals, refugees, internally displaced persons, and migration due to environment and climate change. The risk of medium-and large-scale emergencies in West and Central Africa are an important feature of the region, with the highest number of countries in fragile situations. According to UNICEF (2013), West and Central African countries are undergoing three major transformations that have progressed towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and will continue to frame their development trajectories in the foreseeable future: (a) a delayed demographic transition resulting in the most rapid population growth in the world associated with rapid urbanization; (b) a delayed structural transformation of the economy marked by deepening vulnerabilities to climate change and other economic shocks affecting the livelihoods of millions every year, especially in the Sahel region; (c) a contested political and social transition with fragile states in the region further weakened by the resurgence of armed conflicts led by non-state actors and spilling across borders.

The region faces volatile political and socio-economic situations, particularly in Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Nigeria. In addition, the region continues to confront malnutrition in Sahel countries and recurrent emergencies, such as high food prices, floods and cholera epidemics, and unpredictable shocks like the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) epidemic in 2014-15. This fragile situation is particularly alarming for children as it increases their vulnerability to risks of violence, forced participation in armed forces, forced marriage, displacement, exploitation, abuse, and involuntary migration (UNICEF 2009).

The region has the highest population growth rates in the world with the majority of countries having annual population growth rates above 2%, implying a population ‘doubling time’ of 20 to 30 years. Since 1990, population has increased by 177 million inhabitants to reach 430 million in 2010 and is set to increase by a further 350 million by 2035. With young people making up 50-60 % of the population, Niger, Mali, Nigeria and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are among the top 10 countries in Africa with the largest absolute and percentage increases in children and adolescents from 2015-2050. Urbanization has increased at an even faster pace with the urban tipping point predicated to be reached by 2020 when ~50% of the population will live in urban areas (UNICEF, 2013).

There are both opportunities and risks that may result from the large numbers of youth growing up in West and Central Africa. Provided that fertility rate is lower than previous years, greater investment in young people could favour a productive economy. However, a large youth share of the adult population may also indicate a source of strain on limited resources such as access to education and jobs, particularly when facing an economic crisis (Larsen 2009). In West and Central Africa, there has been some progress in increasing primary school enrolment ratios over the last few years, but there is still a significant gap towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of universal primary education for all. Despite substantial gains

5. Discussing the details of religion is beyond the scope of this study. For details on religious systems, please see Koffi Charles-Hector Yao-Kouamé. (2012). On Religion and Beliefs in Pre-Colonial sub-Saharan West Africa – Maryse Condé’s approach in “SEGU,” UNC Charlotte. For classic references, please see J.O. Awolalu. (1976). What Is African Traditional religion? *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 10 (2). Also see J.S. Mbiti. (1969). *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinman.

6. International Organization for Migration. Regional Strategy for West and Central Africa 2014-2016. <https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/country/docs/IOM-Regional-Strategy-West-and-Central-Africa-2014-2016-EN.pdf>

PART 2. Contextualizing child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in the family system

in school enrolment over the past 15 years, UNICEF analysis (2014) shows that the majority of countries in the region have missed the goal of universal primary education by 2015 and that there has been slow progress in reducing the rate and number of out of school children since 2007, particularly in the face of rapid growth in the school-age population. Severe inefficiencies and inequities in the education system continue to exclude the majority of children from quality education. Primary completion rates remain below 75% in all but three countries (from 35% in Chad to 74% in Togo) in the West and Central Africa region. According to the Global Initiative on Out-of-School Children, on average 27.1% of primary school-age children remain out of school. At the secondary school level, the proportion of out-of-school adolescents of secondary school age declined from 46% to 40% over the last 15 years, but increased in absolute numbers from 11 to 12.5 million, the only region in the world to show such a trend.

The region is also set to fail to reach the goal of gender parity in primary education: the average gross parity index (girls vs boys) in primary school for the region currently stands at 0.93 (0.75 in CAR to 1.10 in Congo); with important disparities not only between countries, but also within countries geographic regions. Gender, wealth and geographic disparities intersect to leave girls from the poorest households living in rural areas with a 30% probability of completing primary school only. Gender disparities worsen beyond primary school, with the gender parity index decreasing to 0.82 at lower secondary level, and further down to 0.73 at upper secondary level (UNICEF, 2014).

A UNICEF 2009 report further shows that a large proportion of primary school graduates does not make the transition to post-primary education. In most countries in West and Central Africa, girls and young women continue to have lower levels of secondary educational attainment than young men. This observable trend is a challenge for the young people who may not be able to compete in the global labour market. Related to this observation is the high unemployment for the West and Central Africa region. In Niger, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Benin, Ghana, the only countries in the region with recent unemployment data in the ILO's Labour Statistics (LABORSTA) that is disaggregated by age and gender (Larsen 2009), the total unemployment rate (males and females combined) is well above the sub-Saharan regional youth unemployment rate of 11.5 per cent. For example, for Senegal alone, the unemployment rate in 2008 was 21.9 for young men and 20.1 for young women. While the importance of the informal economy throughout the West and Central Africa region means these statistics do not fully capture the employment picture for youth, they do suggest that youth in the region face significant challenges establishing economic stability and independence.

2. The institutional dimension of the family and marriage in the region

Understanding child marriage in the region requires a description of the essential characteristics of historical family patterns and an explanation of ways that these patterns affect and are affected by global processes. It is important to explore the interplay between cultural norms in West and Central Africa and global processes from the perspective of the family. Although the region covers many countries with a variety of cultures, languages, and dialects, this section is particularly concerned with prevailing patterns of family and marriage that gather many basic similarities in their systems and that are here referred to as "traditional": those that have survived in the face of social change, and those that have been reinforced in the process. It is important to stress that this does not assume that these patterns are fixed or static. Many studies demonstrate the effects of globalization, urbanization and migration on African cultural arrangements in

general, contributing to the understanding that the region's culture should be viewed as a dynamic process involving continuous construction and transformation. However, these transformations do not necessarily shift cultural norms enough to erase all particularities of family and marriage patterns. Some have been retained, producing contradictory rearrangements of family relationships and organization, as described in many studies (Therborn 2006; Bledsoe 2005). In some of the West and Central African societies, the tradition of marrying off children continues to hold a significant place. Despite observable trends towards later marriage, child marriage persists and has even increased in some parts of the region.

What are the reasons for this persistence? This section addresses that question by providing a general overview of the historical, social and organizational dimension of marriage in West and Central Africa and some possible explanations for such persistence, with a focus on social and cultural factors. Here, marriage should be understood from the perspective of the family which, in this region, rests heavily on religious and traditional principles.

2.1. Family patterns in West and Central Africa⁷

One of the main features of a traditional household in the West and Central Africa region is its strong collectivistic nature. In the region, individuals have multiple relationships that are mutually interdependent, positioned within a complex network of relations. Typically, family demands dominate individual choice and the social group to which individuals belong, either ethnic or religious, often shapes a common understanding to achieve individuals' goals. Other common characteristics found in West and Central Africa are its strong patriarchal traditions, intergenerational and gender hierarchy, and large-scale polygyny and exogamous marriage rules, with high importance placed on fertility and lineage (Therborn 2006; Makinwa-Adebusoye 2001).

Gender and social role demarcation through hierarchical and patriarchal values typically structure the organization of the family and relationships among its members, and one's life course in general, with strong obligations and responsibilities to kin. While there are a number of notable exceptions, the traditional West and Central African family is based on a patriarchal structure – the power of elders and male supremacy over women. As a result, women are particularly likely to lack individual agency in terms of a range of decision-making processes, even within a broader context of collective decision-making processes.

Respect for seniority is central to African family and social systems more generally. Lineages and age groups are core features of the social structure; deference to elders is not only the social norm but is also enshrined in some legal norms. For example, Article 29 (1) of the African Charter for Human and Peoples Rights stipulates that every individual shall have the duty to "respect his parents at all times and to maintain them in case of need" (Therborn 2006)⁸. A great respect for age, elders and ancestors, including rites of passage into adulthood, means that age groups are at the basis of rights and solidarity. The importance of elders is reflected in the proverb used by Malian ethnologist and writer Amadou Hampâté Bâ during one of his speeches, "En Afrique, quand un vieillard meurt, c'est une bibliothèque qui brûle" (In Africa, when an old person dies, it is a library burning down) (1960, UNESCO).

7. Because this section is concerned with traditional aspects of family and marriage patterns in West and Central Africa, it may at times speak of "West and Central African marriage or culture," inevitably generalizing the discussion and sidelining many exceptions and nuances such as the existence of both patrilocal and matrilocal systems of family in the region. The reader should therefore bear in mind the many cultures found in West and Central Africa with their particularities. In the interest of brevity, only the most salient cultural patterns found across the region are considered; the focus rests on basic similarities in family and marriage patterns. Other important factors such as religion and ethnicity differences will not be discussed as they are beyond the scope of this report.

8. The African Charter for Human and Peoples Rights is accessible at: <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instree/z1afchar.htm>

PART 2. Contextualizing child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in the family system

In West and Central Africa, the family is traditionally organized around gendered social roles, which in many parts of the region are characterized by male super-ordination and female subordination. While a man traditionally has power of decision-making and controls economic and public affairs, an African woman's role (in many cases, but not exclusively) includes that of maintaining the domestic sphere and taking care of children. She is referred to by her relationship to male family members, her identity and that of her mother having secondary importance. In her role as a spouse and a mother, a woman is first and foremost valued only after a child is born (Familusi 2012). However, scholars are cautious in interpreting gender subordination, emphasizing women's agency in how they operate skillfully around normative barriers that control their mobility, autonomy, and decision-making. As such, women's strategies vary depending on the circumstances and on their social position (Adjamagbo, A. and P. A. Koné. 2013).

Cultural and traditional belief systems shape childhood, which can take many forms. The meaning of a child – girl and boy – in traditional West and Central Africa contrasts with the perception of childhood as a period of dependence and innocence, rooted in Western theories of child development. In the region, social rather than physical maturity, determines one's entry to adulthood, usually marked by marriage, perceived as a rite of passage through which every man or boy and in this case – girl – achieves adult responsibilities. As such, a common feature of many marriages in the West and Central Africa region is the young age at which people get married and have children. Depending on tradition and religion, girls can be promised in marriage to older men before they are born (Accilien 2008). Furthermore, several anthropological scholars have argued that in some cases, younger girls are seen as increasing the potential of better reproductive outcomes, with the anticipation that they will reproduce again and again (Bledsoe 2003; Caldwell and Caldwell 1987)⁹.

The way a child, and particularly child marriage is perceived by many West and Central African communities ought to be considered in relation to this specific cultural and normative context, one that is also being affected by social changes. To understand the persistence of child marriage, it is important to consider that in certain contexts it may be as Bicchieri et al. put it, "a social norm, a collective practice supported by community pressure to conform" (Bicchieri, Jiang, and Lindemans 2013). Adding this perspective can have important implications for research and programming because it can strengthen the analysis of the social dynamics that contribute to a person and/or family's decision to marry at a very young age and thereby contribute to the development of effective strategies to prevent child marriage.

2.2. Key aspects of the process of a traditional marriage in West and Central Africa¹⁰

In West and Central Africa, the diversity of marriage forms and the complexity of the marriage process make it difficult to assess marriage as a monolithic institution. However, marriage remains one of the most respected institutions in West and Central African culture because of its implications for a variety of cultural and social processes including, establishment of alliances, wealth transfers between patrilineal families, social security to husbands, relatives, and families, [and] legitimacy of children, among other things.

9. It is important to note, however, that recent data show a trend towards apparent declines in fertility rates, making the argument less relevant than it was thirty years ago.

10. There is considerable regional, ethnic, and religious diversity in the marriage process across West and Central Africa, even within a single country and it would be inaccurate to argue that all West and Central Africa societies have the same conception of marriage practices. Nonetheless, similar trends in the structure of marriage are found across the region. For the purpose of the discussion, only these common trends are explored in detail.

The literature on African marriage practices suggests one common feature across the West and Central region – its system of payment or bride wealth. Bride price or bride wealth is defined as the money or wealth transfer given by or on behalf of the groom to the bride and her family upon the marriage of the couple (Dodo 2014; Mbaye and Wagner 2013; Kyalo 2012)¹¹. This is in contrast to the practice in South Asia, where dowry – wealth transfer by the bride’s family to the bride at the time of her marriage – is more common.

Bride price or bride wealth

One way to describe the West and Central African system of marriage is through Lévi-Strauss’ theory of marriage as a gift exchange – an exchange of women between social groups¹². Lévi-Strauss’ seminal and controversial contribution argues that traditional societies are maintained by a system of reciprocal gifts between individuals, families, and clans that is facilitated and reinforced by marriage and is essential to the elaboration and maintenance of social order. Accilien’s related work (2008) in rethinking marriage in Francophone West Africa, presents many instances in which women are exchanged as a commodity to represent symbolically economic privileges (Accilien 2008). Similarly in some parts of rural West and Central Africa, Birech (2013) notes that a girl may be a source of wealth, social status, and prestige when she is given in exchange for livestock such as cattle, goats, and sheep (Birech 2013: 98).

Explanations for this system of payment have typically focused on the historically low population density of sub-Saharan Africa (Luke and Shanti 2003; Goody 1971; Goode 1970). Because of the short supply of labor, women and particularly girls were valued for both their productive and reproductive capabilities (Luke and Munshi 2003; Goody 1971; Goode 1970). In this context, payment of bride wealth functions as a way to secure rights over the woman to the man and his family with respect to her household labor, sexual, and reproductive rights (Fuseini and Dodo 2012). The payment of a bride price was and is still often practiced in some parts of contemporary West and Central Africa¹³.

More recent studies in West and Central Africa have shown the implications such systems of payment have on intra-household bargaining power and gender empowerment (Mbaye and Wagner 2013; Frost and Dodo 2010; Nukunya 1999). In the specific case of Senegal, for example, Mbaye and Wagner (2013) describe how the value of the bride price is negotiated between the two families. The bargaining process that takes place before a marriage involves the couple and both families. Again in the case of Senegal, the bride price may range from 3,000 CFA¹⁴ to 18,000 CFA on a marriage certificate but as noted above, the price is negotiated between the families and can quickly become an opportunity for much negotiation between the two parties, depending on the context (Bledsoe 2005; Comaroff 1980, cited in Bledsoe 2005). In some cases, a girl’s parents may acknowledge that the money given by a man at one point is a marriage payment. But they may try to recast it later as a gift instead, unrelated to the marriage, or as payment for a previous debt, especially in the event that marriage plans dissolve (Bledsoe 2005: 81). Negotiations over the right of children are also enabled by the system of payment. For example, scholars have shown that in

11. Bride price and/or bride wealth are used interchangeably here. The following section discusses in detail some of the stakes involved with marriage and young girls

12. Lévi-Strauss’ gift-exchange framework has aroused controversy, particularly among feminists. We do not embrace Lévi-Strauss’ theory as the only way to understand African marriage, nor do we support or reject his conceptualization of African marriage and women’s position. It is used here as a basis for understanding the anthropological literature.

13. Although widely practiced across West and Central Africa, bride wealth is not always a system of payment that involves money or expensive goods. For example, some couples may have ‘free’ celebrations through the exchange of food such as noix de cola (nuts).

14. The CFA Franc is the currency of Communauté Financière Africaine (BCEAO). In December 2014, one CFA was about 0.0019 US dollars; that is about US \$5 (3,000 CFA) to about US \$32 (18,000 CFA).

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some parts of West and Central Africa, partial payment of a bride wealth or failure to pay it gives the bride's and/or family the opportunity to claim the right to the children, as opposed to most patrilineal societies in which men have the right to the children (Fuseini and Dodoo 2013; Frost and Dodoo 2010; Nukunya 1999).

Polygyny

Polygyny or polygamy¹⁵ – the right of a man to have more than one wife – is a feature of much of rural West and Central Africa, where the world's highest rates of polygamous marriages are found (Therborn 2006). As shown in Part Four, polygamy continues to be common even among younger women. The main influence is Islamic law, which allows a man to have more than one wife. The literature typically explains the high prevalence of polygamy as related to women's labor and procreation capabilities that in turn, ensure labor and old-age social security for parents, and levirate – the possibility of inheriting the wives of deceased brothers (Pison et al. 1995). However, reasons behind the practice of polygamy are complex and range from economic (i.e. income inequality across males), demographic (i.e. skewed sex ratios from higher male mortality rates due to risky labor force, political (i.e. warfare) to cultural (i.e. religious taboos or reflecting a man's social and economic status) (Dalton and Leung 2011; Gould, Moav, and Simon 2008; Jacoby 1995; Fainzang 1991).

Endogamy/Exogamy

Rules around a traditional marriage vary tremendously depending on the ethnic group's tradition in West and Central Africa. While some societies may follow endogamous principles (requiring a person to select a mate within one's own group), others may rely on exogamous rules (requiring marriage outside one's own group). Not surprisingly, the involvement of both (bride's and groom's) families or clans creates pressure on the bride and her spouse, with a clear division of roles and expectations. The involvement of the family and community in decision-making also functions as "marital insurance": should a marital crisis arise, the families will intervene in an effort to save the marriage.

As discussed above, marriage has historically marked the union of two families or lineages, making parents' involvement a central and essential feature of the marriage process in West and Central Africa. Although traditional marriages are still widely practiced across West and Central Africa, there have been remarkable changes in the process of marriage, particularly in urban centers. The most distinctive features of these changes include self-selection of spouses, love marriages, sexual autonomy and pre-marital sexual activity, cohabitation, and greater independence from parents and kin. Although the subsequent sections will discuss some of these changes in detail, it is worth noting that the most distinctive characteristic of contemporary marriage in West and Central Africa may be that of the transition from kin- to self-selection of spouses. Young people increasingly take an active role in choosing their own partner, making parents less of a central figure in the marriage process and marriage itself less of a function by which to engrave family within a lineage system, as traditionally expected.

15. The terms polygyny and polygamy are used here interchangeably. However, in the literature polygyny refers to situations where one man has multiple wives, while polygamy is defined as the practice of having more than one spouse.

3. Child marriage in West and Central Africa

Beyond the historical and cultural dimension of marriage, a combination of economic and social experiences, including gender roles and relations, social obligations and expectations perpetuate the practice of child marriage in the region (Plan 2014; CFR 2013; Walker 2013). Because rural West and Central Africa is characterized by high poverty rates, girls perceive very few alternatives to marriage within the community and quickly become the subject of transactional negotiations between families. Women, and girls in particular, are often viewed as an economic burden, as their low status prevents them from being viable wage earners. The many economic reasons for a poor family to decide to marry off a daughter include avoiding education costs, easing the financial load of a child, getting rid of debts and supplementing household income (CFR 2013; ICRW 2011).

Gender imbalance is manifested in a number of ways, including favoring boys over girls in educational investment, restricting the mobility of girls, and restricting expectations on the roles that girls and women may play in society. Of particular importance are the social norms around sexuality and reproduction, with women and girls occupying roles restricted to motherhood and the household. One expression of this ideology is the high value placed on girls' virginity, which puts tremendous pressure on girls to conform to restrictive social norms and patterns of behavior and also on her parents to avoid situations that might compromise their status and honor. That means the stakes for a girl's parents in her marriage can be very high.

As noted earlier, marriage in West and Central Africa plays an important role in reinforcing and maintaining social ties among families and communities throughout the region. In some parts of West and Central Africa, betrothal of children is valued as a means not just of cementing relations between families but also for sealing deals over land or other property (Boungang Mfoungungu 2012; IPPF 2006). Ties between families may be further reinforced by a girl's youth; the younger she is, the more value she brings to the groom's family (Jaffré et al. 2003). Bride price is associated with this tradition.

Religious beliefs and practices can perpetuate child marriage, as noted above, although no single religious affiliation is associated with child marriage across countries worldwide. The practice is prevalent in areas with populations that are predominantly Christian (e.g., Brazil and Guatemala), Muslim (e.g., Senegal and Mali), Hindu (e.g., India), or Buddhist (e.g., Sri Lanka). Within countries or regions, religion can be as significant a factor in perpetuating child marriage as it is insignificant in others. For example, in a 2007 analysis, ICRW found religion to be a significant factor in some countries, including Chad, Malawi, Cameroon and Nigeria, while it was not a determining factor in the high rates of child marriage in India and Bangladesh. Significant intra-country, regional and urban/rural disparities also characterize child marriage rates among ethnic groups. For example, in Niger, child marriage is more common among the Hausa, while the Tuareg report lower rates. Similar patterns are observed in Senegal, where rates are higher among the Wolof (30.7% of 20-24 year olds married by age 18) and Poular (49.9%) and much lower among the Diola group (28.7%) (author's calculations based on 2010-2011 DHS).

The vagaries of political and ecological instability, such as wars, displacement/migration and natural disasters, further interact to perpetuate child marriage and adolescent pregnancy. For example, ensuring daughters' safety from conflict-related sexual violence is another motivation for marrying them off early (CFR 2013).

Although child marriage remains common throughout West and Central Africa, pronounced delays in age at marriage, along with a transition to lower fertility rates, are apparent in many parts of the region. The following section reviews some of these observed trends and also highlights the extent to which they affect family relationships.

4. New trends in marriage practices and adolescent pregnancy: the interplay between economics and cultural tradition

Family as a social institution is not static. It responds to changes in the society at large either by resisting or contributing to societal changes through the decisions and actions of individuals and family units. In many societies, the standard trajectory of family formation has been socially recognized as the establishments of family units marked by marriage which, depending on the sociocultural milieu, has varying implications for assigning social roles (i.e. legitimizing sexuality and reproduction, licensing parenthood, crystalizing gender division of labor, etc.).

In West and Central Africa, changes around family formation norms are taking place in the wake of a broader process of social transformations related to the increase in women's education (Marcoux and Antoine 2014; Foley and Drame 2013; Golaz 2014). Family formation is here understood as a culturally and historically evolved process in which a socially recognized and sanctioned form of union between conjugal couples constitutes a 'family'. Marriage is in many societies a critical part of this process, typically marking the start of socially 'legitimate' sexual behavior and reproduction, both of which also serve as important steps in forming new family units (or, in contexts where the 'family' represents a larger and more disperse groups, sub-units within the family). Social norms relating to marriage, sexual intercourse, childbearing, and kinship mediate the timing of family formation. As a result, changes in the pathways through which couples are brought together, including who makes decisions about spousal selection, the character of the relationship formed between family units (including the gender roles within relationships), and access to independent housing represent a significant challenge to social structures and norms. These socioeconomic changes have allowed for some renegotiations of social roles that have progressively led to a more individualized marriage process than traditionally practiced, characterized by delays in marriage, prolongation of men's and women's singlehood, cohabitation, pre-marital sexuality and childbearing, and divorce (Adjamagbo, Aguessy and Diallo 2014).

A growing body of evidence highlights some trends over the past 20 years toward delay in the onset of marriage and pregnancy, as well as the emergence of new forms of union in the sub-Saharan region (Shapiro and Gebreselassie 2014; Antoine 2006; Garenne 2004). For example, Shapiro and Gebreselassie (2014) studied more than two dozen countries in sub-Saharan Africa, including some countries in West and Central Africa using recent DHS data and found increases in age at first marriage and changes over time in types of unions, such as "married" vs. "living together" (Shapiro and Gebreselassie 2014). Associated with these trends are fertility declines that have also been observed in similar places (Shapiro 2012; Gurmu and Mace 2008; Soler-Hampejsek et al. 2009; Antoine 2008; Westoff 2003). Confirming this hypothesis, several studies reported in Macoux and Antoine's *Le Mariage en Afrique: Pluralite de Modeles Matrimoniaux* (2014) note an increase in the proportion of women aged 20-24 years old who are single or in consensual union (never married). Burkina Faso and especially Benin have experienced the highest increases in the proportions of women who have never married – through an increase in singlehood as well as through a rise in consensual unions (Antoine and Marcoux 2014: 5).

Research using the World Fertility Surveys (WFS) and DHS reveals conclusively that despite variations in rate and timing, most African countries had declined on average about 25 per cent (the equivalent of about two children) of their original 1975 fertility levels by 1995 (Garenne and Joseph 2002; Murthi 2002). These

trends were seen in comparative studies of childbearing women between age 20-24 and 45-49, suggesting that while most African women still marry young, the proportion of women marrying before age 20 has declined rapidly in some African countries (Garenne and Joseph 2002; Price 2001). Countries in West and Central Africa that experienced more rapid fertility decline include Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Ghana and Senegal. Cape Verde experienced the largest decline in fertility and enjoys the lowest fertility rate in the region (2.8 births per woman) (Ngo 2011). Van de Walle cautions, however, that a rise in age at marriage does not systematically cause a decline in fertility (van de Walle 1993, cited in Shapiro and Gebreselassie 2014). For example, Soler-Hampejsek et al. (2009) demonstrate that delays in marriage often come with increases in premarital sex (Soler-Hampejsek 2003, cited in Shapiro and Gebreselassie 2014).

Studies looking at these new trends have shown that delaying marriage has a positive outcome on women's social development: it allows women to complete their education, build labor force skills and develop professional interests that compete with childbearing within marriage by motivating women to limit family size and/or widen the spacing of their children (Palamuleni 2011; Jensen and Thornton 2003). The following sections provide some insights into some of the factors that may drive changes in marriage behavior.

Economic hardship

The relationship between economic insecurity and marriage as a transaction-based practice is complex, with contradictory outcomes on the timing of family formation. So far, the literature on child marriage has pointed to poverty as one of the main drivers of child marriage and this is borne out by analyses at the more aggregate (i.e. national or regional) level. However, in explaining the increase in women's age at first marriage, recent literature also points to urban economic insecurity as one factor explaining these delays. In their study conducted in Senegal, for example, Delaunay et al. (2006) note that limits on financial resources coupled with persisting traditions of marriage-based financial transactions make marriage and starting a family increasingly arduous for young men (Delaunay, Adjamagbo, and Lalou 2006). Indeed, several studies attribute some of the rise in age at marriage to man's economic hardship (due to prolonged unemployment in major urban centers of West and Central African cities), making it increasingly difficult to pay a bride wealth and find suitable lodging for his new family (Antoine and Marcoux 2014; Shapiro and Gebreselassie 2014; Antoine 2006; Antoine 2002; Kuépié 2002; Mensch et al. 1999). For example, Antoine's (2006) analysis of delays in entry to union in Dakar, Lomé, Yaoundé, and Antananarivo found that "increasing economic hardships occurring over the past thirty years in Africa are thought to have led to important delays in age at first marriage [...] The results confirm the delays in marriage, which are partly caused by worsening employment conditions" (Antoine 2006). In another study based in Dakar, Antoine (2002) demonstrates that periods of unemployment play a major role in slowing down entry into unions and in accelerating divorces (Antoine 2002). Related to this observation is the emerging research suggesting that in hot spot zones where child marriage is at its highest such as in northern Nigeria, Niger, and Chad, economic hardship is influencing men to defer marriage. As a result, men are unable to marry at all. States in Northern Nigeria are responding to this situation by arranging mass marriages of hundreds of brides and grooms, contributing to the transformation of the family system (Walker forthcoming¹⁶). Associated with men's increasingly economic precariousness is the "marriage squeeze" hypothesis, referring to the difficulty a girl and her family encounter in finding desirable and eligible men¹⁷.

Although economic hardship may delay marriage in specific circumstances, research does not establish a causal relationship between men's need to postpone marriage as a result of financial constraints and an increase in girls' age at marriage. Further research is needed to determine whether men marrying later in life are continuing to marry far younger girls or choosing older marriage partners. In addition, Shapiro

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and Gebreselassie (2014) argue that increases in economic hardship result in parents arranging for their daughters to be married sooner, rather than later, and thus, “the consequences for the frequency of marriage of these two changes [men marrying later and pressures for girls to marry sooner as a result of economic hardship] are indeterminate” (Shapiro and Gebreselassie 2014).

Education

Since the 1990’s, in Africa and other parts of the world, girls’ enrolment in formal education has achieved remarkable increase and, in some countries, parity with male enrolment. This rise in female education is often seen as one of the major factors explaining delays in the age at first marriage, and thereby reducing child marriage (Adjamagbo, Aguessy, and Diallo 2014; Walker 2013, 2012; Ikamari 2005; Mathur, Greene, and Malhotra 2003; Agyei Biritwum, Ashitey and Hill 2000). Numerous hypotheses have been proposed to explain the link between increase in girls’ education and marriage delay. For some scholars, being enrolled in school or college makes it unfeasible for students to marry because of the disruption to their education and their lack of financial resources for marriage expenses. As such, each year spent in school is more likely to delay marriage. In addition, being at school creates new ways of experiencing the domestic environment for girls, removing them from their daily domestic chores and exposing them to new ideas and values that compete with traditional norms (Dommaraju 2005, cited in Adjamagbo, Aguessy, and Diallo 2014; Ikamari 2005). Other researchers, such as Mensch et al. 2005 went further to explain these delays, suggesting that it is not school per se but the autonomy that girls acquire while at school that delay entry into a marriage (Mensch et al. 2005). Girls often realize the existence of viable alternatives to early marriage, and may seek to postpone marriage to pursue other avenues to personal fulfillment and career development. In the same line, Westoff (2003) demonstrated that higher education delays marriage and postpones childbearing among women in sub-Saharan Africa (Westoff 2003). Similarly, Garenne (2004) saw the level of education and income as the main factors in the recent increase in age of marriage in sub-Saharan Africa (Garenne 2004).

Education potentially enhances the opportunities of all young adults by increasing their potential wages. Girls and boys alike may then be seen as future contributors to the household economy, and delaying marriage for the sake of education may thereby become a more profitable option for households than marriage (Garenne 2004). Other studies see the link between education and contraception as a factor in delaying marriage. They suggest that by increasing access to modern contraception information, education leads to effective use of contraceptives, thereby avoiding unwanted pregnancies and associated early marriages (Ikamari 2005). Caldwell and Caldwell (1987) argue that a woman gained status in traditional societies through early marriage and childbearing, but education may change perceptions of ways to achieve a high social position, because educated women are respected and enjoy high status. Women may also see school as an avenue for future salaried employment and financial independence from men, making early marriage a less desirable option and leading to its postponement (Ikamari 2005).

Studies elsewhere, however, found that although educational attainment increases women’s opportunities, it may at the same time be seen by some as having an opportunity cost, as educated women will likely be seen as less submissive and thus less attractive as marriage partners (Antoine 2006). Related to this

16. This observation is based on a recent communication with Judith-Ann Walker whose forthcoming study explores the role of the Northern Nigerian states in arranging mass marriages (12/15/14).

17. This hypothesis is based on several exchanges with Michel Garenne, demographer and specialist in the West African region on marriage and fertility, who attributes recent changes in the age of marriage in the Fatick region of Senegal to the difficulty of women in finding suitable husbands.

observation is a recent paper by Behaghel and Lambert (2011), who note that in Senegal, educated women in polygamous unions are often second (less favored) spouses, suggesting that education may have an impact on women's marital status. However, the authors do not argue for a causal relationship and call for more research on the relationship between these two phenomena (Behaghel and Lambert, 2011).

Migration, urbanization, and women's participation in the labor force

Both rural and urban areas of West and Central Africa have gone through important social and economic transformations over the past two decades that have forced the rural populations to seek jobs elsewhere. Rural-to-urban migration – either through permanent or seasonal migration – has become an integral part of the economic system of rural households. While this has had some clear advantages, this process has also proven challenging to established social and cultural systems predicated on greater stability, including those related to family formation. Delaunay et al. (2006), in their study on demographic changes in Senegal, attribute migration and growing rates of urbanization to difficult economic conditions and environmental degradation in rural Senegal in the late 1960s, which contributed to migration toward Dakar, where it was possible to earn a living (Delaunay, Adjmagbo, and Lalou 2006).

Demographers have argued that the economic pressures and tensions associated with massive urban-to-rural migration in some West and Central African countries are modifying traditional gender dynamics which, in turn, are affecting systems of marriage and reproduction with contradictory outcomes (Mondain, Delaunay, and Legrand 2014). Based on a qualitative study in the Fatick region of Senegal, Mondain et al. (2014) found that the influence of girls' seasonal migration is perceived by communities as the main factor driving young girls to marry later but having pregnancies "out-of-wedlock" (Mondain, Delaunay, and Legrand 2014: 46). Urban living typically implies modern arrangements with new social expectations related to marriage and fertility. In particular, it offers exposure to more varied and more liberal views of emotional and sexual intimate relationships, as well as physical separation from older generations who were primarily responsible for making and enforcing marriage arrangements. Youth migrants have thus more financial independence and increased autonomy in decisions about marriage and family, all of which may act towards delaying marriage (Mfoungue 2012; Hertrich 2007; Delaunay, Adjmagbo and Lalou 2006), but also a perceived increase in premarital pregnancies (Mondain, Delaunay, and Legrand 2014).

At the same time, once removed from agricultural environments in which families depend upon large numbers of children as a source of labor, urban residents may find it more economically strategic to marry later and have fewer children. Women who build labor force skills and develop career interests may, in turn, be motivated to limit family size and/or widen the spacing between their children (Palamuleni 2011; Jensen and Thornton 2003). Delaunay et al. (2006) note the extent to which urban centers stand in contrast to rural villages where maintaining high fertility is still perceived as a way to ensure assistance with agricultural labor and to create potential migrants who will send home remittances (Delaunay, Adjmagbo, and Lalou 2006).

Garenne (2004) argues that women's increasing participation in the labor force and rising education levels serve as opportunity costs for early marriage and have an effect on individual girls' and parents' decision-making about marriage and family (Garenne 2004). Women's greater economic independence may make marriage less of a requirement for them, while educated women may be less inclined to get married, particularly to men in rural areas.

Changes in marriage and fertility patterns

Socioeconomic and political changes undoubtedly alter the structure of the family away from traditional patterns to new ways of experiencing marriage, childbearing and sexuality. Traditionally, the high value placed on early marriage ensured early and continued childbearing until late in the reproductive life span.

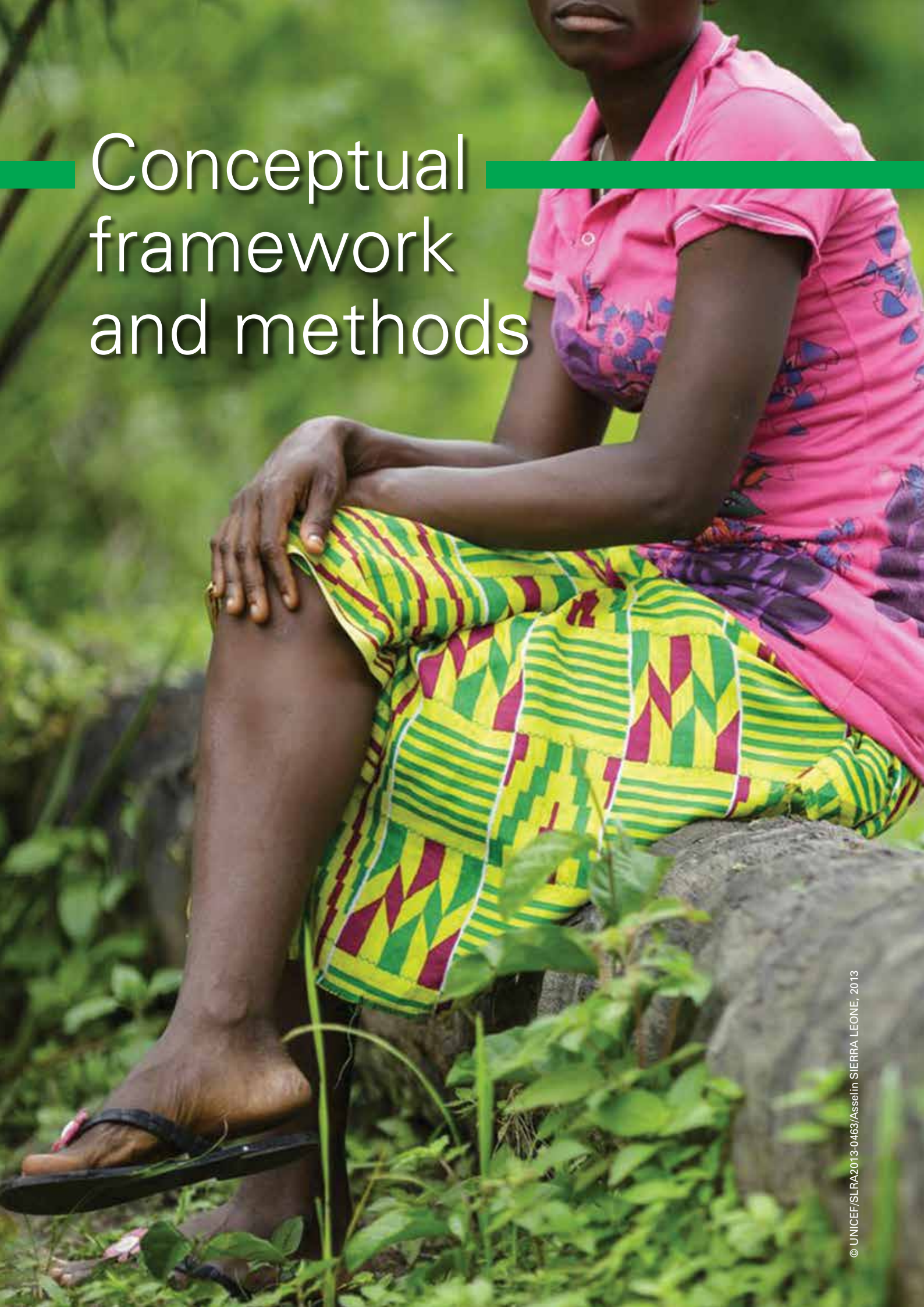
As discussed earlier, evidence shows an apparent shift in these traditional patterns in West and Central Africa. Age at marriage appears to have risen while fertility, in some West and Central African countries, seems to have declined, as data suggested earlier (Ngo 2011). In addition, although polygyny survives, largely in rural areas, partly due to the rigid sexual division of labor that marks agriculture, signs of decline are becoming more and more common in urban areas, particularly among younger generations. Bigombe and Khadiagala (2003) found that in some countries in West and Central Africa, such as Cameroon, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, monogamous households have taken a greater hold on society. Furthermore, studies elsewhere show that out-of-wedlock pregnancies are increasing at the same time that the average age of marriage is rising (Delaunay, Adjamagbo, and Lalou 2006)

In addition, it is important to note that despite a shift towards later marriages in some contexts, in certain countries the age at first marriage has decreased, such as in Cape Verde, Togo, Burkina Faso, Benin, and Mauritania, while patterns remained virtually unchanged in Ghana, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire, and Mali (Walker 2013). A few scholars have attempted to address the links between religion, polygyny and age of marriage and pregnancy, suggesting their importance in perpetuating traditional practices. Through his study in sub-Saharan Africa, Garenne (2004) does observe a correlation between certain religious faiths and increased ages of marriage, as well as less child marriage and adolescent pregnancy within non-polygamous communities (Garenne 2004).

These changes, as well as persistence in the structure of African families and marital patterns, reflect the enduring tensions between traditional and modern values (Bigombe and Khadiagala 2003). One goal in this study is to delve into these complex transformations of marriage and family organizations in West and Central Africa and identify some of the possible drivers of change as well as the factors influencing them.

Conclusion

This section presented a general understanding of the institution and the process of marriage in Africa through a family perspective, with a particular focus on West and Central Africa. To avoid taking an essentialist view of African marriage patterns, the section documented contemporary trends of marriage, contributing to the understanding that global processes are affecting traditional marriage patterns without necessarily making them disappear. However, delays in age at first marriage are in fact apparent, and an attempt was made to offer possible explanations of these trends as available in the literature.

A woman is sitting on a large, grey rock in a lush green field. She is wearing a bright pink short-sleeved shirt with a floral pattern and a colorful, patterned skirt with green, yellow, and purple stripes and geometric shapes. She is wearing black flip-flops. The background is a soft-focus green field. The text 'Conceptual framework and methods' is overlaid on the left side of the image, with a green horizontal bar behind it.

Conceptual framework and methods

As highlighted earlier, West and Central Africa are undergoing fundamental change in the family formation process, where existing norms and practices are being challenged by broader social and economic transformations. While the main focus of the study is on child marriage and adolescent pregnancy, the close linkages between pregnancy and childbearing in the region suggest that examining both together is merited. Childbearing represents the actual consequence of becoming pregnant, so in some ways is more appropriate when examining outcomes at the aggregate level. For these reasons, the quantitative analyses, which is entirely focused on the national or regional level, focuses on child marriage, sexual intercourse and childbearing.

1. The quantitative methodology

The quantitative data analyses focuses primarily on trends in child marriage and adolescent childbearing at the national and regional levels, the empirical relationships among these behaviors and their drivers and consequences. As noted above, the focus on childbearing rather than pregnancy is appropriate given the regional and national level of the analyses and the clearer linkage between childbearing and consequences for the lives of girls and women. The macro-level focus allows for the identification of key patterns of change, particularly where child marriage and childbearing have become less common, and their association with the drivers and consequences theorized in the literature.

The analytical approach used is primarily descriptive, reflecting the challenges of using more sophisticated empirical techniques that would rely on a clearer understanding of the causal relationships involved than we now have. In research on child marriage and childbearing, causal relationships to social outcomes such as schooling or wealth are complex and, potentially at least, bi-directional. (For example, lower educational attainment may both cause and result from child marriage.) In the absence of high-quality longitudinal data, a descriptive approach is more appropriate, especially given the relative lack of extensive research on these processes in the region.

Quantitative analyses extend prior research in a number of ways:

- 1) This report includes the full region of West and Central Africa (as opposed to West Africa alone or individual countries), and updates existing work by including all countries with Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) data from the past five years (for a full listing of the data sources used, see Appendix 1).
- 2) As described above, in the absence of detailed national household survey data on adolescent pregnancy, the quantitative analysis focuses on early childbearing, which we define as the births before age 18, and early sexual activity, defined as first sexual intercourse before age 18, in addition to child marriage, again defined as marriage taking place before age 18. This allows for a more comprehensive assessment of how families are formed, and how this has changed, than research focusing on each component individually.

- 3) In contrast to prior research at the regional level, which has examined changes in proportions of births or marriages taking place before age 18 between two rounds of survey data, this study utilizes the most recent round of data available, relying on changes across different age cohorts (groups of the same general age) of women to understand the levels of change at the country level.
- 4) The exploration of relationships between child marriage and adolescent childbearing begins by examining the aggregate timing of the three core processes linking these outcomes: age at first marriage, age at first sex, and age at first birth and/or pregnancy.

Our analytical approach here is guided by four questions:

1. What are the trends and patterns of child marriage and adolescent childbearing across the entire West and Central Africa region?
2. What factors are associated with child marriage and adolescent childbearing, either as causes or consequences, across the region, focusing on education, rural/urban status, and relative wealth?
3. What is the relationship between child marriage and adolescent childbearing? Has sexual and reproductive behavior among adolescents become more or less closely tied to marriage in terms of the timing of first sex, first birth and first marriage? How is this related to changes in child marriage/childbearing?
4. Are there clear typologies in the timing of these life events (i.e. are there countries where all three take place within a short age range, or where age at first sex is significantly different than age at marriage)? How are these related to potential outcomes of child marriage, specifically use of modern contraception, and whether the woman is in a polygamous relationship.

To address these questions, this analysis drew on the DHS and MICS. Both collect nationally representative data throughout the region at regular intervals, with standardized questions asked in all surveys. As a result, together they provide an ideal platform for cross-national and regional comparisons. As our goal was to develop comparable figures across the region, the DHS was selected as the primary data source, with the MICS used in countries where DHS data is not available or outdated¹⁸ This decision was based primarily on the broader range of recent DHS surveys available in the region, particularly within the past three years, and its general greater depth of regional coverage. As the focus of the study was on identifying recent trends, only datasets collected since 2008 and that were publically available in October 2014 were considered for inclusion. As a result, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Mauritania, Togo and Benin are not included. The data for Cape Verde and Equatorial Guinea were not publically available and therefore those countries are also not included. In total, the analyses include 17 countries.

Regional analyses were achieved through comparison of country-level patterns rather than through pooling the data of all countries. This allowed for clear identification of both regional patterns and situations where countries differ from the norm in ways that help us address the core research questions.

18. While the DHS and MICS are broadly comparable in the types of data collected and the rigor of their sampling approaches, minor differences in definitions of key concepts and measures make one preferable to the other in comparing a large number of countries.

In contrast to much prior research that focused on child marriage and adolescent childbearing in isolation or, more rarely, together, we viewed these as imbedded in a broader process of family formation and sexuality. As a result, we also examined changes in sexual activity among adolescents, focusing on the timing of first sexual intercourse, first birth and first marriage. This allowed a much more detailed assessment of the broader process of family formation while retaining a broad regional and comparative perspective.

The analyses focused primarily on women age 20-24, as in most countries in the region the majority of women in this age group have already experienced first sex, marriage, and birth. They are therefore an ideal group for comparing child brides and mothers with those who married and/or gave birth at later ages¹⁹. Finally, rather than assessing change at the country level by comparing two consecutive waves of data collection, as prior research in the region had done, we relied on differences between different age cohorts, comparing women's median ages at first marriage, sex and birth across different age groups. This approach had a number of advantages, particularly in allowing for a longer-term assessment of change than is typically possible using multiple waves of data (for example, women aged 20-24 can be compared with women more than twenty years their senior), while still makes full use of the most recent data available. This approach is especially beneficial if a substantial gap occurred between surveys and in the context of substantial recent change.

The analysis was conducted in three steps. We began by assessing levels of child marriage and adolescent childbearing across the region to find broad patterns and trends. The key indicators examined during this phase were:

- Proportion of currently married adolescents (age 15-19)
- Proportion of adolescents (age 15-19) who had ever had a birth
- Median age at first marriage (including cohabitation) for women age 20-24
- Median age at first birth for women age 20-24 and 25-29
- Median age at first sexual intercourse for women age 20-24 and 25-29

We then examined patterns of change across the region for a subgroup of these same variables, focusing on identifying countries where child marriage and childbearing had declined.

We first asked whether median age at first birth was markedly lower for younger women (25-29) than older women (45-49), and assessed the strength of any trend by comparing these to another age group (e.g. 35-39). This allowed us both to identify broad patterns of change and to assess whether it has become faster or slower over time. For example, a country may see significant differences between the age 45-49 and 35-39 cohorts but minimal difference between the 35-39 and 25-29 cohorts, which would suggest that while the trend is consistently in one direction, the speed of change has slowed.

As with pattern analyses, data used and presented may be for individual countries but the intent was to identify broader regional trends, especially settings where change has taken place at a faster rate. Particular attention was paid to potential drivers of these processes at the regional level, such as rural residence or ethnicity.

19. The focus of the analyses was on women age 20-24, but patterns of marriage, childbearing and sexual activity were examined for current adolescent girls (i.e., age 15-19). In cases where the median age of first sex, birth or marriage was above 24, we used the 25-29-year-old cohort.

The second part of the quantitative analysis focused on assessing the relationships between child marriage and adolescent childbearing and their core drivers and consequences, including sexual activity and its correlates. As with the first part, these analyses were primarily descriptive in nature, with the goal of identifying broad themes and patterns. As described above, this approach is appropriate given the challenges in establishing causal relationships between these processes and specific outcomes. This part focused on the following factors, exploring each individually for its influence on child marriage, adolescent childbearing and adolescent sexual activity²⁰:

- Educational attainment
- Rural/urban residence
- Household wealth

The third part focused more specifically on the inter-relationships between child marriage and adolescent pregnancy, building on the commonalities in drivers and consequences identified in the second part. As with the prior parts, the approach was at the aggregate level and primarily descriptive, focusing on the timing of first sex, first marriage and first birth.

Of particular interest was the degree to which sexual activity and childbearing precede or follow marriage and how this is related to the patterns of change identified in Part Two. Two general patterns were anticipated: one where sexual activity and pregnancy precedes marriage for the majority of the population of interest (i.e. the median age at first sex is markedly lower than at first marriage), which would suggest either loose links between the two processes or that pregnancy may cause early marriage; and a second pattern where marriage and initiation of sexual activity are closely linked, with birth following marriage in one to two years. This would suggest that marriage patterns drive patterns of pregnancy and birth. It is worth noting that even in Type 1 countries, where age at marriage and first sex are relatively close, the median age at first sex is consistently earlier than first marriage (though this difference is often small), suggesting that some level of premarital sexual activity is also a feature in these countries.

Based on the patterns identified, countries were organized into broad “typologies” – for example, those where marriage and sexual activity are closely linked and those with a significant gap in the timing of these events. These broad hypotheses were then examined across the region. We then examine the differences between women aged 25-29 who were and were not married before age 18 in terms of modern contraceptive use, number of times they had given birth, and their likelihood of being in a polygamous union for each of these typologies.

Finally, each of these issues was explored in more detail in the form of three case studies of individual countries. The countries included are Senegal, Niger, and Burkina Faso, representing a diversity of experiences with child marriage (Senegal has seen recent declines in child marriage and adolescent childbearing, while both Niger and Burkina Faso have persistent, and very high rates of child marriage and adolescent childbearing). The analyses in these countries were broadly similar to those in the first part but focused on regional differences in patterns of child marriage, childbearing and sexual activity, in addition to national-level links among these and socio-economic factors. These included, where data permit, an assessment of variations in child marriage by ethnicity.

20. Religion and ethnicity are both additional interesting factors that we chose not to investigate in depth for this study. This decision is based on the wide variety of ethnic groups and religious identification both across the full region and within countries. Nonetheless, both these factors should be explored further in future research.

Some limits to the quantitative approach

While this approach effectively addressed the broader question of patterns and trends across the region, it did have some limitations. In examining determinants of change, the use of cross-sectional data made disentangling the causal relationships impossible for the key outcomes of interest to this study. A longitudinal approach, either at the individual or national level, could be of assistance here, but the limited number of countries and the duration of potential “panels” of data made this impracticable.

Ideally, quantitative assessment would be paired with a region-wide assessment of changes in the “macro”-level environment – legal frameworks, economic changes, migration patterns and their gender composition, etc. The analyses were also limited by a regional focus, which makes a deeper, more contextualized analysis impossible.

A woman in a white top and patterned skirt is covering her face with her hand, standing in a room with hanging clothes. The background is dimly lit, showing various items hanging on a wall. The overall mood is somber or distressed.

Contemporary trends and patterns in age at first marriage and childbearing in West and Central Africa: Some evidence of change

The West and Central African (WCA) region includes seven of the ten countries with the highest rates of child marriage globally, with Niger considered to have the highest rates in the world (UNFPA, 2012a). These high rates of child marriage are accompanied by high rates of adolescent pregnancy and childbearing. While prior research provides some insight into the process of change in child marriage and adolescent pregnancy/childbearing in the region (in particular, see Walker 2013 and Plan International, 2014), important questions remain unanswered: what are the region-wide patterns of child marriage and adolescent childbearing; to what extent have these changed in and across the region and within countries; how rapidly have these changes occurred; has the speed of change accelerated or decelerated; and what can they tell programmers about the relationship between child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in this context?

In this section, we use data from the most recent rounds of the DHS and MICS to explore these questions, focusing particularly on regional and national-level changes and patterns, how these are related to important socioeconomic outcomes across the region²¹, and how the processes of marriage, childbearing and sexual activity are interrelated across the region. While the specific approach is described in detail in Part Three, we begin by describing in general terms the trends and patterns of child marriage in West and Central Africa, then those related to adolescent childbearing, and finally those related to adolescent sexual activity. We then turn to the interrelationship between these three processes, focusing particularly on the timing of each relative to the other. This extends the existing literature on these issues in West and Central Africa in a number of ways and focus on a broader range of family formation events than prior research.

1. Child marriage in West and Central Africa: Patterns and Trends

1.1. Patterns

In thinking about the patterns of child marriage in the West and Central Africa region, it is important to distinguish between the patterns of child marriage, which we define as any marriage or cohabitation prior to age 18, and very early marriage, which we define as any marriage or cohabitation prior to age 15. While all forms of child marriage are harmful to adolescent girls, very early marriage is particularly so and can be a particularly powerful indicator of the strength of the sociocultural environment influencing child marriage. Furthermore, distinguishing between those married at very young ages and those married later in their adolescence provides key information on when child marriage takes place and allows programmers to more effectively target their interventions. As Table 1 shows, very significant proportions of girls in the region marry before the age of 15, with the average percentage of young women aged 20-24 married before age 15 being 14.8. The lowest levels were seen in Sao Tome and Principe (STP) and Ghana (GHA), while the highest rate was in the Central African Republic (CAF)²². As might be expected, the proportions married by 18

**TABLE 1:
Women aged 20-24
in West and Central
Africa who were
married by exact age
15 and 18**

Married by 15	29,1% maximum CAF
	14,8% average
Married by 18	5% minimum STP/GHA
	76,3% maximum NER
	43,8% average
	20,7% minimum GHA/GAB

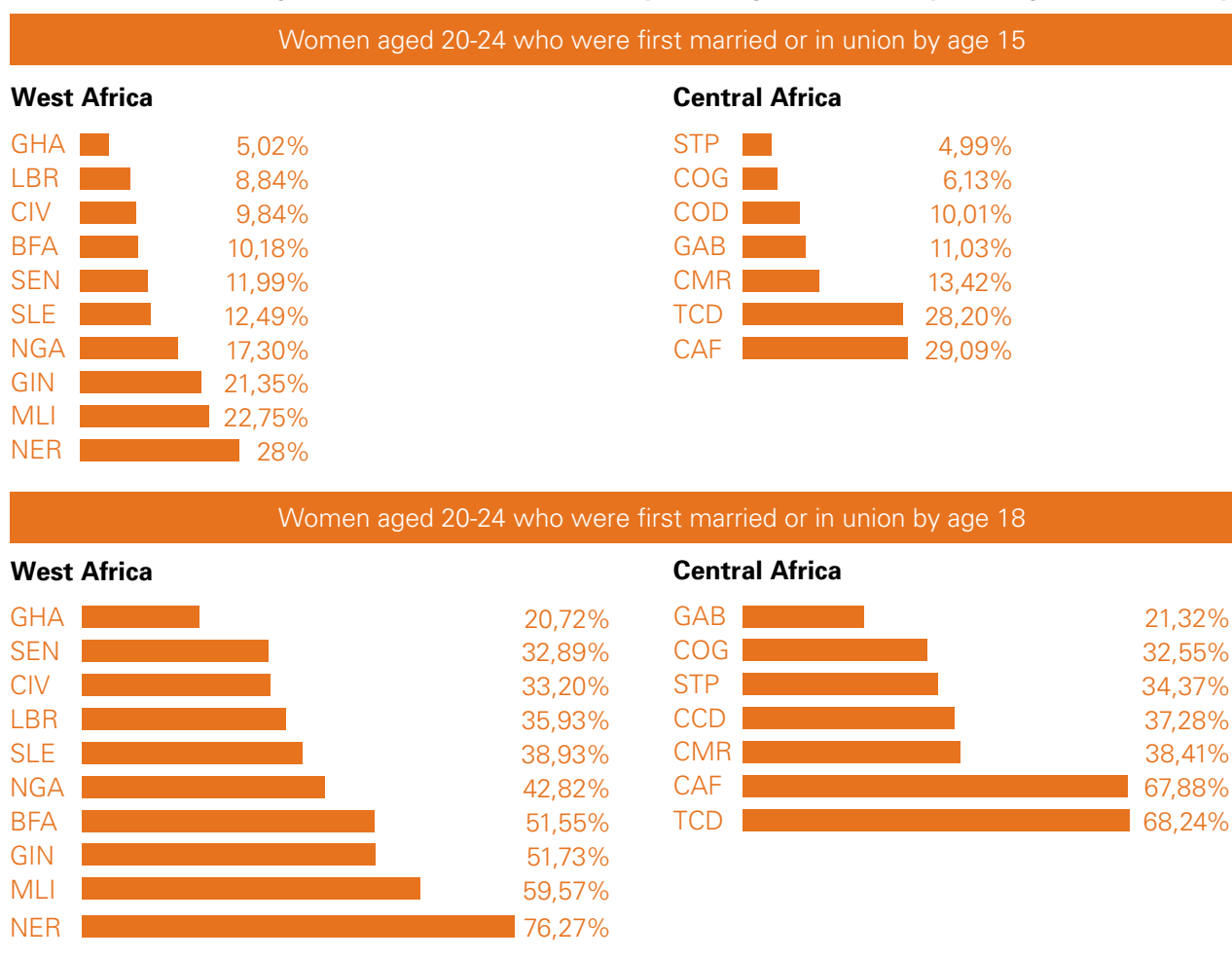
21. As noted in Part Two, this analysis focuses on the 17 of the 25 countries in the region that have recent, comparable data available at the time the report was written.

22. Central African Republic is generally abbreviated with CAR. However, for the purposes of this study and because DHS uses CAF as an abbreviation, CAF is used throughout this report.

were much higher across the region, increasing to an average of 43.8 percent (almost one in two), with the lowest rates being in Ghana and Gabon (GAB) and the highest in Niger (NER). In addition to demonstrating the high rates of child marriage in the region, these figures also indicate that, on average, the bulk of child marriage in the region is taking place after girls turn 15²³.

While these figures underline the pervasiveness of child marriage throughout West and Central Africa, they do not fully demonstrate the full diversity of prevalence rates across the region. Figure 1 below shows the percentages married by these ages for each country in the region (presented separately for West and Central Africa). While these figures underline the diversity within the region, with young women in Ghana being almost six times less likely to be married by 15 than their counterparts in the Central African Republic, Chad, and Niger, they also suggest that overall child marriage is somewhat more common in West Africa. While the proportions married at 15 and 18 are roughly equivalent for both sub-regions, statistics on child marriage in Central Africa are driven primarily by Chad (TCD) and the Central African Republic (CAF) whereas there is less variation in West Africa²⁴.

FIGURE 2: Women aged 20-24 who were married by exact age 15 and 18, by sub-region and country



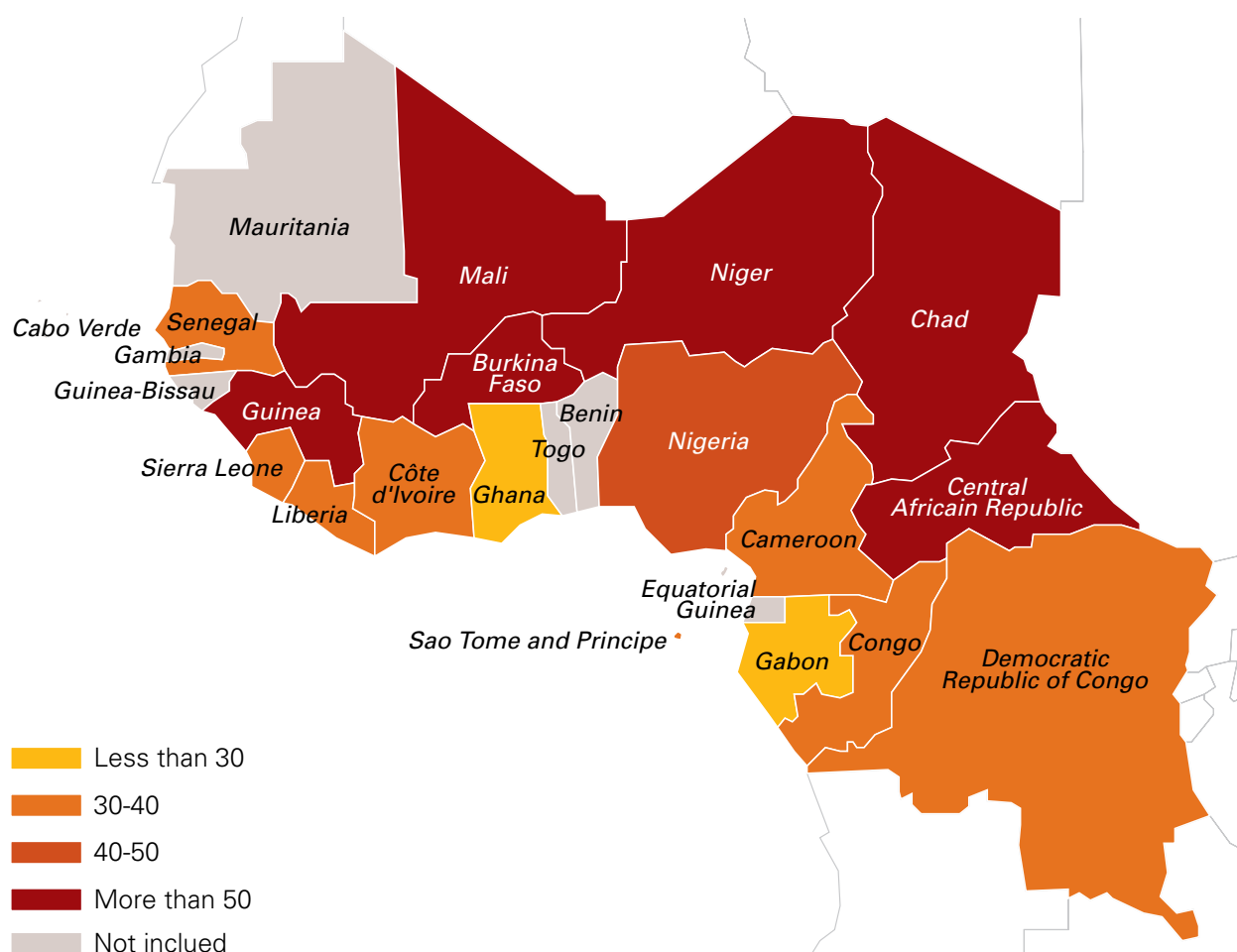
23. For a list of countries' abbreviations, please refer to Appendix 1.

24. This is confirmed when examining the standard deviations of the distribution of ages, which is somewhat higher in Central Africa.

PART 4. Contemporary trends and patterns in age at first marriage and childbearing

However, these sub-regional differences are less relevant when examining the geographic distribution of child marriage, as shown below in Map 2. While it is difficult to reach firm conclusions based on national patterns only, given the very significant subnational variations in child marriage rates, this map suggests that child marriage is concentrated in a 'band' of countries that broadly run across the northern portion of the region. Among other things, this suggests that these countries may share common factors that drive child marriage, possibly including ethnic or religious factors in addition to broader socioeconomic factors such as low levels of economic development and educational attainment.

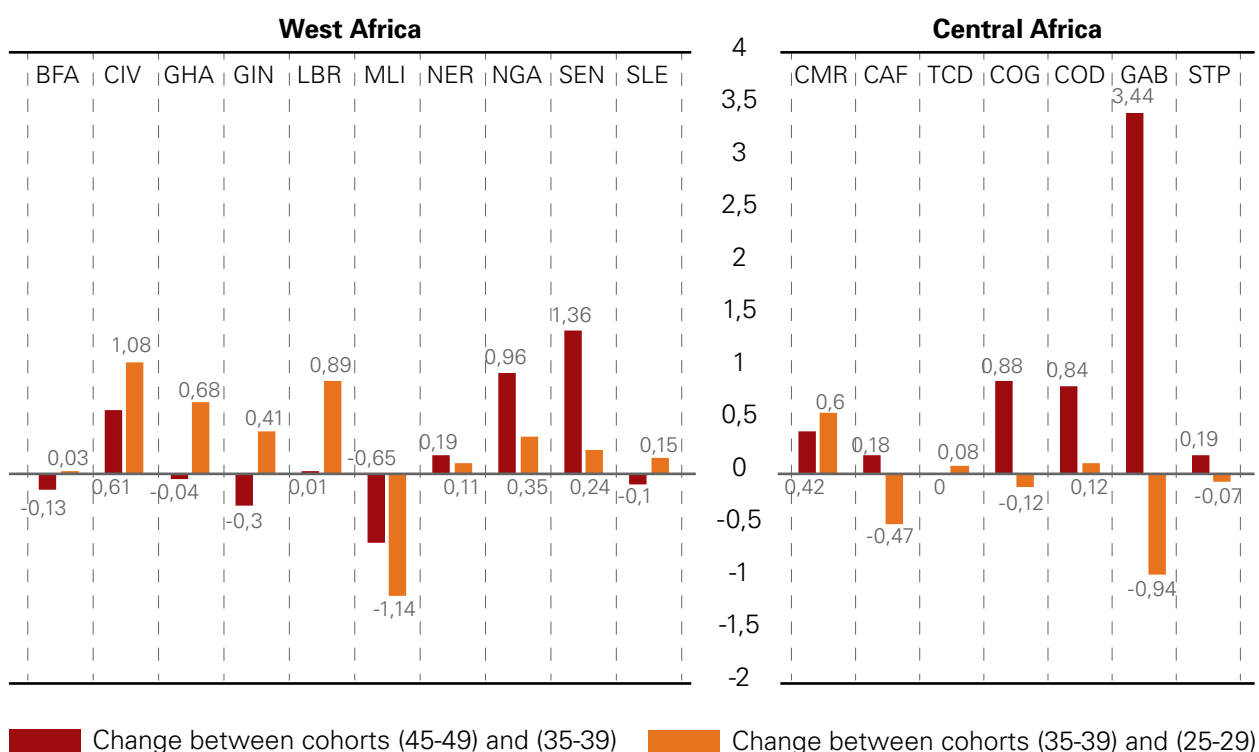
MAP 2: **Percentage of women 20-24 married by age 18**



1.2. Regional trends in child marriage

There is also considerable variation in how much rates of child marriage have changed over time across these countries, as shown below in Figure 2. Recent research examining this disparity in West Africa found that while some countries experienced significant improvement in age at marriage, others had either stagnated or showed a trend towards an earlier marriage age (Walker 2013). Figure 2 (below) shows the changes in the median age²⁵ at first marriage for three different age cohorts of women: those aged 25-29, 35-39 and 45-49. The first column for each country shows the change between the oldest cohort (45-49 year olds) and the 'middle' cohort (35-39), while the second column shows the change between the middle and youngest cohort (25-29). A negative value indicates that the median age at first marriage fell between cohorts (i.e. the age at marriage decreased) while a positive value indicates that the age at marriage has increased. In the context of this study, an increase in the median age at marriage can be interpreted as an improved situation regarding the rates of child marriage, while a decline can be interpreted as a worsening situation where more girls are married at younger ages. Using these three points of reference allows us to examine both the overall pattern and whether change has become faster or slower over time. It should be noted, however, that this provides only an indication of the broad trend and should be interpreted in tandem with an understanding of the underlying level of child marriage in specific countries.

FIGURE 3: **Changes between the median age at first marriage for the 25-29, 35-39, and 45-49 age cohorts of young women, by country and sub-region**



25. This is the age at which fifty percent of the age cohort had experienced the event.

PART 4. Contemporary trends and patterns in age at first marriage and childbearing

There are a number of interesting points to note in Figure 2. While there is a clear general pattern of increased age at marriage over time in both West and Central Africa, there is considerable variation both in the level of change experienced and in when the majority of the change took place. In West Africa, Côte d'Ivoire (CIV), Ghana (GHA), Liberia (LBR), Nigeria (NGA), and Senegal (SEN) have all seen substantial increases in the median age at first marriage, though in the case of Ghana, Guinea, and Liberia the majority of this change has happened quite recently (between the 25-29 and 35-39 cohorts). In contrast, the changes in Nigeria and Senegal are most dramatic between the older and middle cohorts, suggesting that the speed of change may have slowed in more recent times. Very little change was seen for Burkina Faso (BFA), Niger (NER) and Sierra Leone (SLE), with the median age at marriage being almost the same for the 25-29 and 45-49 age groups. Mali was the only country to record very significant declines in the median age at child marriage, with the intensification of child marriage particularly intense between the middle and youngest cohorts. The magnitude of this change is also very large, with the median age falling from 18.6 for the 35-39 age group to 17.4 for the 25-29 age group.

A similar diversity is seen in Central Africa, where general increases were seen in Cameroon (CMR), the Congo (COG), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Chad (TCD) and Sao Tome and Principe (STP) saw little change, while the Central African Republic (CAF) had an overall, and quite large, decline. The data indicate very dramatic swings in Gabon, with rapid and very large increases (almost of 3.5 years) seen between the oldest and middle cohorts and quite dramatic decreases seen between the middle and youngest cohorts. Changes of this magnitude should be interpreted with caution, as they may be the result of very specific factors related to that particular context, or to challenges in measuring either age or marriage over time. Nonetheless, even if one disregards the changes in Gabon, it is clear that while most of the countries in the region saw improvements in terms of child marriage, a significant proportion of countries saw little change or a worsening over time – in many cases, this has taken place relatively recently, reversing some of the earlier gains made.

1.3. Correlates of child marriage

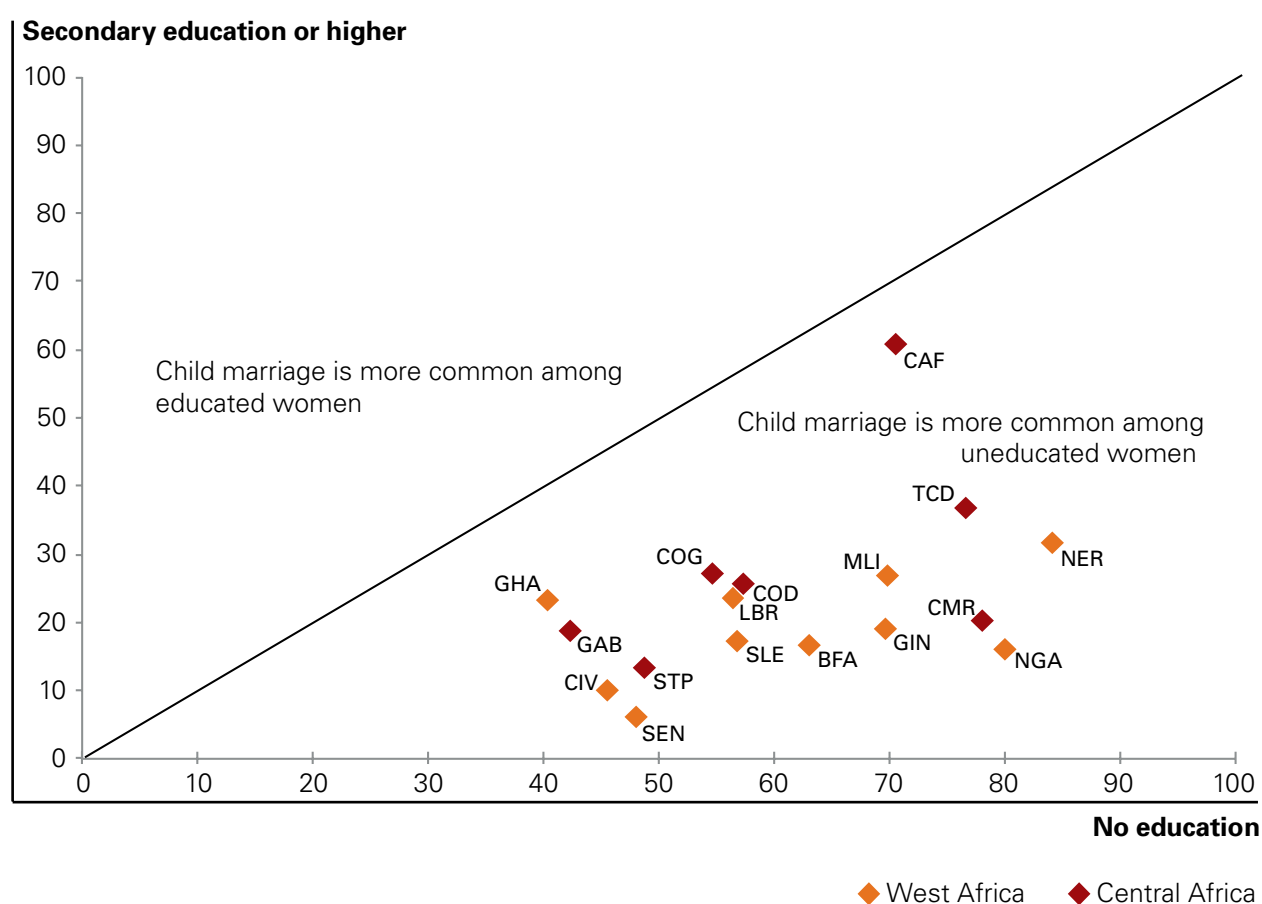
While the challenges with establishing causality and the interrelated nature of many of the causes and consequences of child marriage make more complex analyses challenging, there are a number of factors on which data are routinely collected by DHS and MICS that the literature, both global and regional, have established as very clearly related to child marriage. In this section, we focus on three of these: educational attainment, residence in a rural or urban area, and household wealth. While there are a number of other core outcomes that could be examined, these provide the most effective basis for comparison across the whole region. Each of these is discussed in greater detail below.

Education

Low educational attainment may be both a driver of child marriage, through limiting girl's employment and life options, and a consequence, reflecting parental priorities or the termination of schooling following marriage (in addition to the detrimental effects this may have prior to dropout). For both these reasons, it can be expected that child marriage be less likely among those with higher levels of education, either because the educational experience itself discourages marriage or because marrying later allowed girls to

continue their schooling for longer. However, this relationship may be stronger in different contexts, either because educational options are more or less constrained, or where educational outcomes are tightly tied to wealth and class. Figure 3 shows the percentage of women 20-24 who were married by age 18 for two extremes (in this context) of educational attainment: those with no education and those with secondary or higher education. The diagonal line indicates a point where child marriage rates are the same for the two groups, while any country below the diagonal line indicates that child marriage is higher for those with no education than for those with secondary education and vice-versa for those countries shown above the line. For example, 80.0% of 20-24 year olds in Nigeria with no education who were married by 18 compared to 15.9% for those with a secondary or higher education – in the Central African Republic, the equivalent figures were 70.5% and 60.8%.

FIGURE 4: Percentage of women aged 20-24 years who were married or in union by 18, by level of education

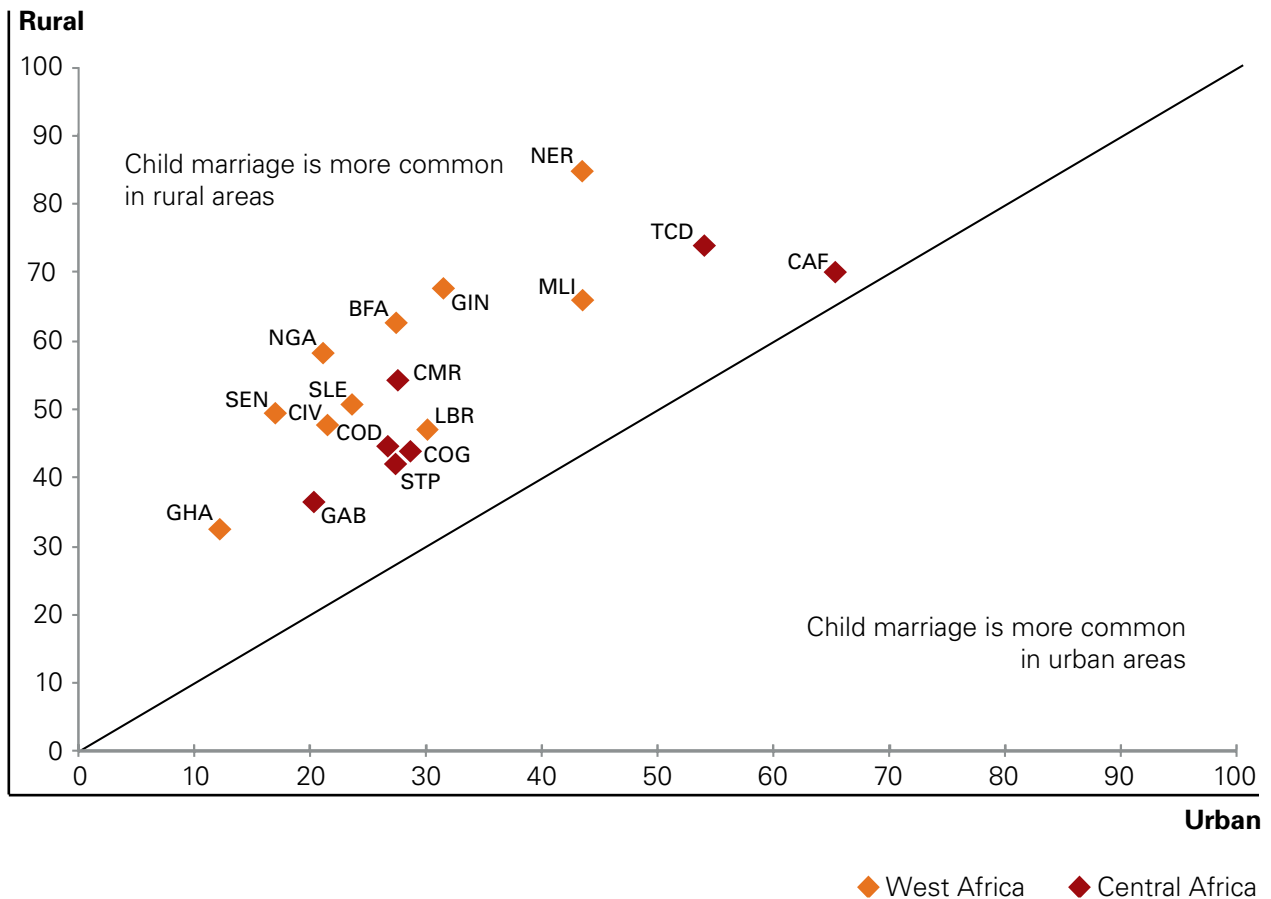


It is interesting to note that in Senegal, the percentage marrying by 18 is almost eight times smaller for those with secondary or greater education than for those with no education (48.4% versus 6.1%) while in Ghana the difference is narrower (40.3% versus 23.3%), though still significant.

Residence Type (Urban/Rural)

As with education, there is strong prior evidence for the effect of residence type on child marriage, with child marriage typically higher in rural areas than in urban areas. The reasons for this include a typically greater retention of traditional norms, a narrow range of life options, stronger community networks, lower educational opportunities, and greater levels of poverty in rural areas – all of which may encourage child marriage. Figure 4, using the same approach used above for education, presents the percentages of young women who were married by age 18 in rural areas, with the diagonal line once again showing where the rates are equal. As with education, there is a very strong relationship between residence type and child marriage, though the strength of that relationship varies considerably across the region. For example, in Niger, where 80% of women aged 20-24 reside in rural areas, 43.5% of those living in an urban area were married by 18, compared to 84.6% in rural areas. Child marriage rates were also more than twice as high in rural areas in a range of countries, including Guinea, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Senegal and Cameroon. The difference by residence type was smaller, in a number of countries, including Ghana, Gabon and the Central African Republic. As with education, this may be for a number of reasons – for example, in Ghana, where rates of child marriage are low relative to the region as a whole, the difference between rural and urban areas is relatively small, while in the Central African Republic the difference is also low while prevalence is high.

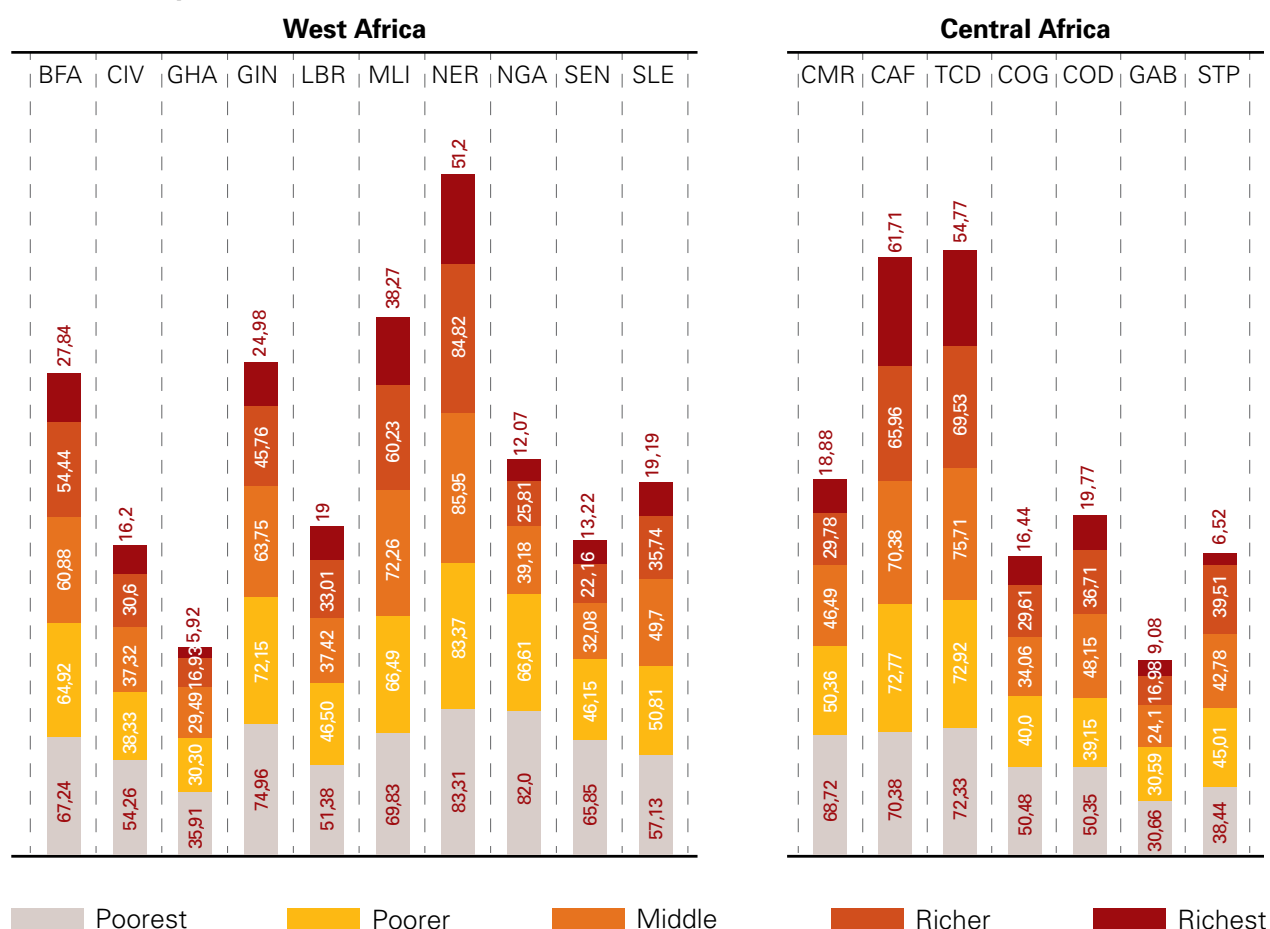
FIGURE 5: Percentage of women aged 20-24 years who were married or in union by 18, by residence type (rural/urban)



Wealth

Wealth, and the access it provides to key resources that may protect girls from child marriage, is a key potential factor driving differences seen in terms of educational attainment and residence type. Figure 5 presents the percentage of women aged 20-24 in each country who were married by wealth quintile²⁶, with the darker 'dots' representing the poorer groups.

FIGURE 6: Percentage of women aged 20-24 years who were married or in union by 18, by wealth quintile



The figure shows very clearly that child marriage rates are very closely linked to household wealth throughout the region, with the poorest households having the highest rates of child marriage and richer households having the lowest. For example, in Liberia the rates of child marriage for those currently residing in the

26. This is based on a listing of household assets, with a wealth 'score' calculated for each household. Based on this score, households are divided into five groups: Poorest, Poorer, Middle, Richer, and Richest. This is a relative measure calculated on information from households throughout the country. It is critical to note that this is based on the household in which the girl currently resides, and therefore may or may not represent the circumstances of her natal household, which would provide a clearer causal link to marriage.

poorest households are roughly two and half times higher than those residing in the richest households. However, there are also clear differences between countries that are worth noting. While in some countries, such as Nigeria, child marriage rates decrease steadily as household wealth increases, in others, such as Burkina Faso or the Mali, the bulk of the difference is between the richest group and the rest of households, which have similar rates of child marriage. This suggests that the relationship between wealth and child marriage also differs depending on the underlying economic structure of the country, its wealth distribution and level of wealth inequality. From a programming perspective, this also suggests that programs targeting child marriage through poverty reduction, such as those including conditional cash transfers, may have limited effects in settings where relatively small shifts in household wealth are less clearly linked to related shifts in behavior.

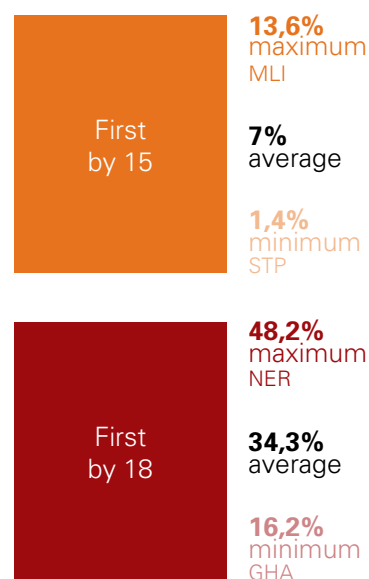
2. Adolescent childbearing in West and Central Africa

2.1. Patterns and trends

Very early childbearing poses a number of critical challenges to girls in particular, both directly in terms of their physical and emotional health and in terms of the often permanent curtailing of life opportunities. As with child marriage, West and Central Africa has some of the highest rates of adolescent birth rates in the world at close to 200 births per 1000 adolescent girls. Of the 15 countries globally where over 30 percent of women aged 20-24 had given birth before age 18, nine are in the region (UNFPA 2012a). Early childbearing is a major factor underpinning high maternal and child mortality rates in the region. However, while prior research suggests that childbearing in particular remains closely tied to marriage in the region, there are some signs that this link is becoming weaker, with premarital childbearing becoming more common.

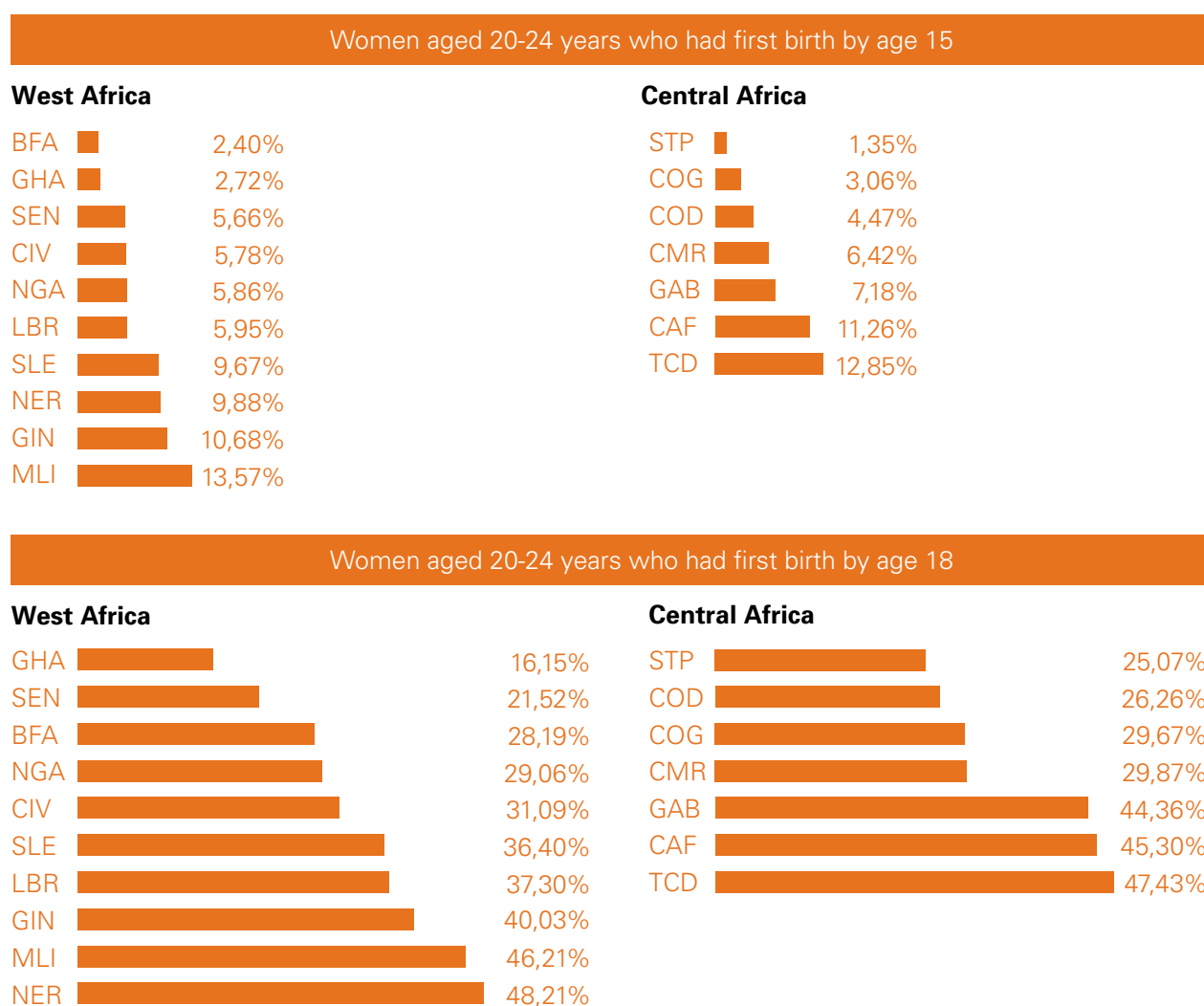
We begin by describing the patterns of childbearing in the region, again reporting both childbearing in very early and later adolescence separately, and then turn to the question of premarital sex and childbearing. The percentage of women 20-24 who gave birth by exact ages 15 and 18 are shown in Table 2. These figures underscore how common adolescent childbearing is in the region, with the average percentage giving birth by 18 being 34.3. As with marriage, the data suggest that the majority of adolescent childbearing takes place between the ages of 15 and 18 – in Niger, for example, the percentage having a birth by 15 is 9.9 and by 18 is 48.2, indicating that roughly 80 percent of births below 18 in Niger take place after age 15.

TABLE 2:
Percentage of women aged 20-24 in West and Central Africa who had given birth by exact age 15 and 18



The figures in Table 2 also suggest that there is considerable variation across the countries in the region in the proportions of young women giving birth by ages 15 and 18. Figure 6 shows the percentages giving birth by these ages for each country in the region. There is less variation in the percentages married before age 15 than at age 18, though there are large differences for both ages. In all countries, the proportion of births under 18 taking place between 15 and 18 is high – in Ghana, the country in the region with the lowest percentage of the 20-24 year old population having a birth by 18, only 17 percent of these births were before age 15, with the remaining 83 percent taking place after age 15.

FIGURE 6: Percentage of women aged 20-24 who had given birth by exact age 15 and 18, by sub-region and country

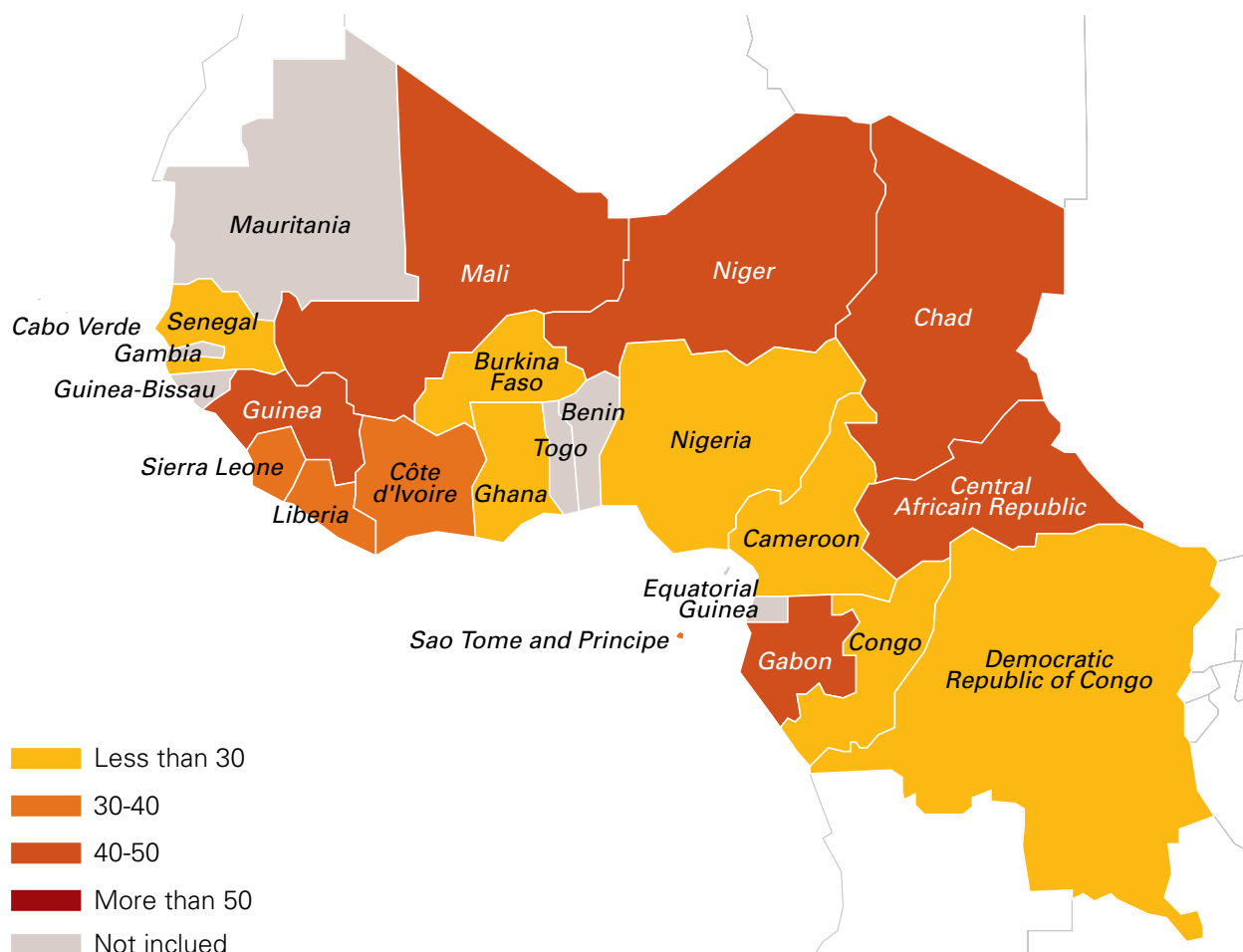


PART 4. Contemporary trends and patterns in age at first marriage and childbearing

A comparison of Figures 1 and 6 shows that for the most part the countries with the highest rate of child marriage also have the highest rates of adolescent childbearing. Mali, Niger, the Central African Republic, and Chad, the four countries with the highest rates of marriage by 18, also were the highest in terms of adolescent childbearing and Ghana, Congo, and Senegal, three of the four countries with the lowest prevalence of child marriage, also had relative low proportions having a child before age 18. With the notable exception of Gabon (and to a lesser extent Liberia), the percentage of those having a birth before age 18 was lower than the percentage married, indicating that for the most part childbearing takes place within marriage in the region. In the case of Gabon, this pattern suggests substantial levels of extramarital child bearing and sexual activity, which we explore further below.

As expected given the generally close link between adolescent childbearing and marriage, the geographic distribution of early childbearing follows that of child marriage, as shown below in Map 3. As with marriage, the map suggests a 'band' of countries where adolescent childbearing is particularly high.

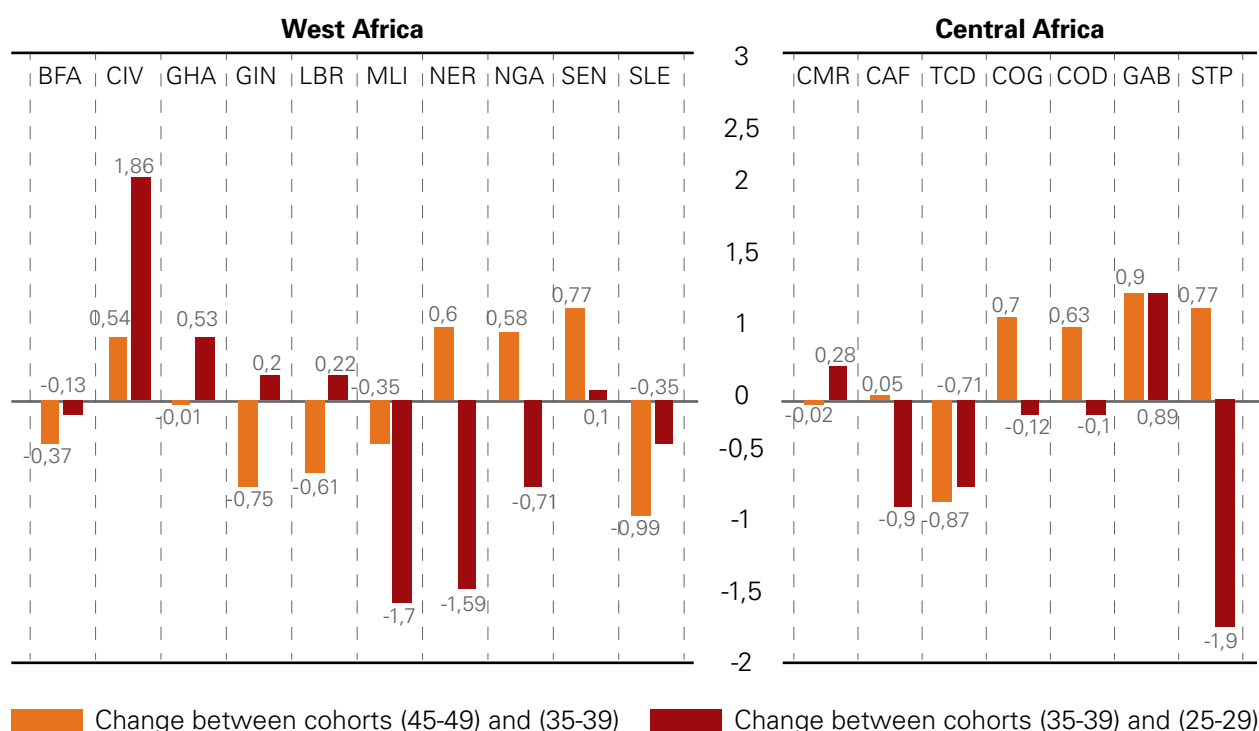
MAP 3: Percentage of women 20-24 giving birth by age 18



2.2. Regional trends in adolescent childbearing

The changes in the median age at first birth over the 25-29, 35-39, and 45-49 age cohorts are shown in Figure 7, following the approach used for marriage. The changes in the median age at first birth generally follow those for marriage, with the age decreasing (indicating younger ages at first birth) in Mali and the Central African Republic, both of which also saw declines in the median ages at marriage, particularly in the 'youngest' cohort and increasing in countries such as Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal. However, more countries saw declines in the median age at birth than was the case for median age of first marriage, and in some cases these were dramatic. For example, the median age declined by over one and a half years between the 'middle' and 'youngest' cohorts in Niger, despite no concurrent changes in median age at marriage, with a similar pattern in the Central African Republic. This change may be due to significant declines in the length of the interval between marriage and first birth or an increase in extramarital childbearing, or both. The latter factor is explored in more depth below when discussing changes in sexual activity. Overall, the chart suggests a pattern of general stagnation or worsening in terms of adolescent childbearing, with the majority of positive changes (interpreted as increases in the median age at first birth) having occurred sometime in the past – only Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Gabon showed significant increases in the age at first birth between the 'middle' and 'youngest' cohorts.

FIGURE 7: **Changes between the median age at first birth for the 25-29, 35-39, and 45-49 age cohorts of young women, by country and sub-region**



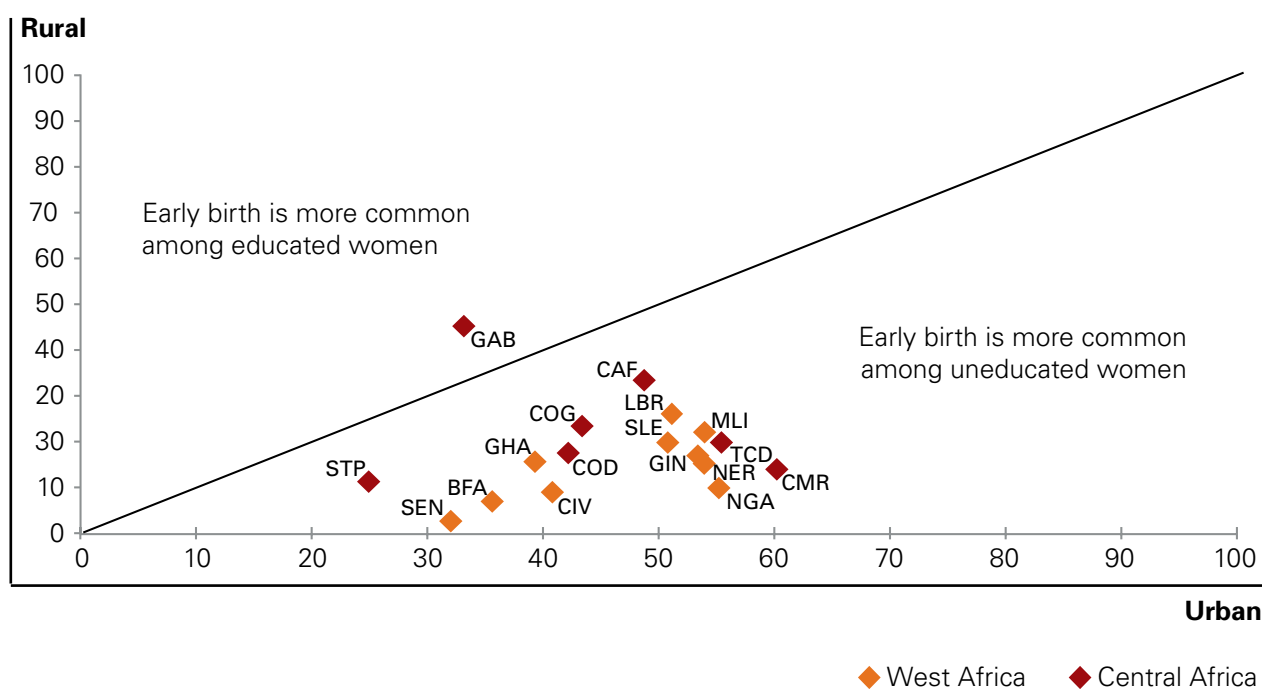
2.3. Correlates of adolescent childbearing

Many of the same factors are assumed to be correlated for adolescent childbearing as for child marriage, as the strong connection indicated above suggests. While there are a number of additional factors that could be examined, for the sake of comparison we focus on the same group of correlated factors as for child marriage, and discuss these individually below.

Education

As with child marriage, adolescent childbearing may be either a cause or consequence of poor educational attainment. Lower education may result in lower information on family planning options and reduced options that may act as alternatives to marriage and childbearing or be the result of school dropout following pregnancy. The latter factor is especially important in settings where pregnant girls are forced to drop out of school, as is the case in several of the countries in the region. As shown below, the general relationship between adolescent pregnancy and education is similar to that seen for child marriage, with those with no education much more likely to experience a birth than those with secondary or greater. Gabon is again the outlier in this case, with educated women slightly more likely to experience a birth before age 18. Despite the similarity of the pattern, the difference is less dramatic than for child marriage, as evidenced by the greater proximity of the dots to the diagonal line. Nonetheless, those with no education are generally around two times more likely to have a birth by 18 than their counterparts with greater educational attainment.

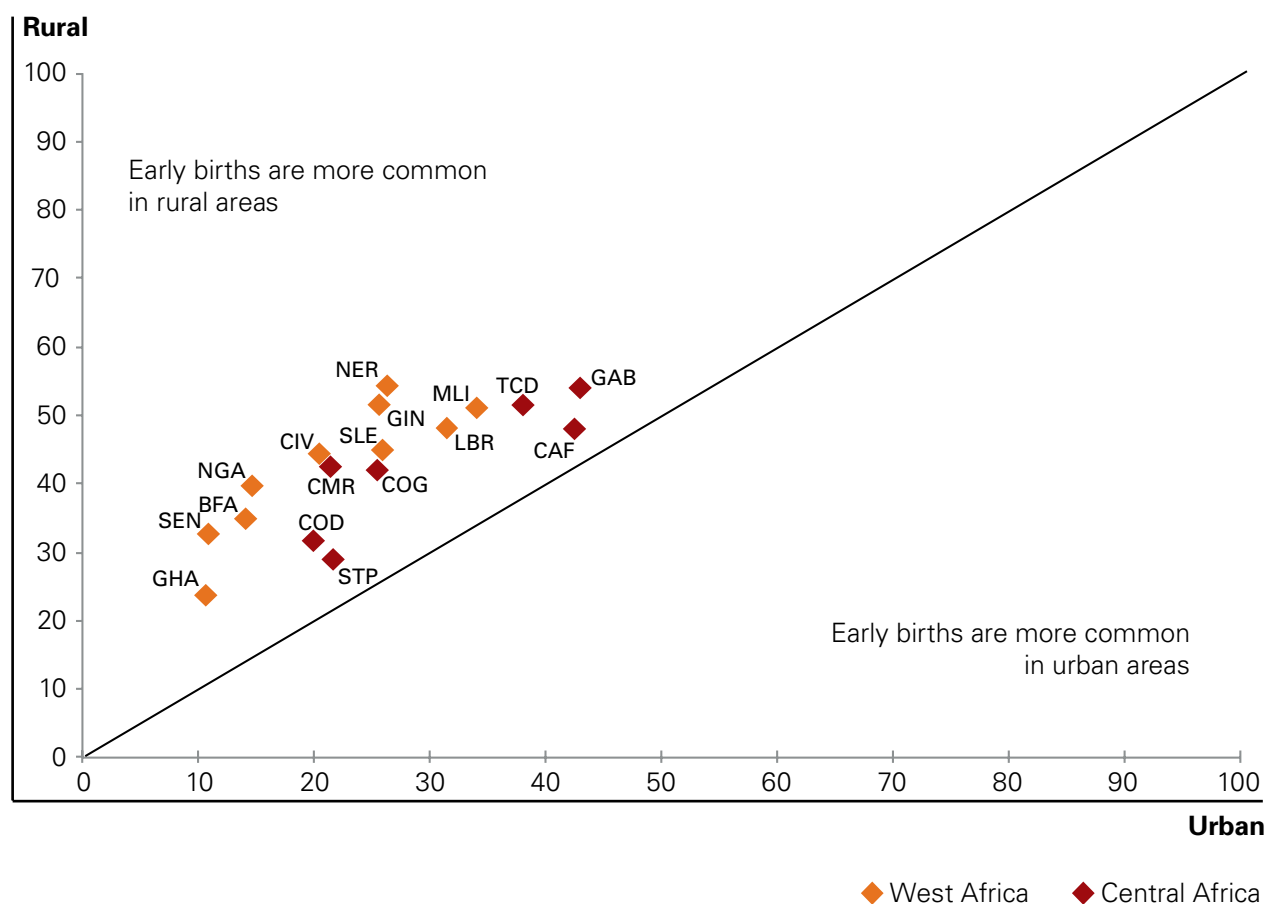
FIGURE 8: Percentage of women aged 20-24 who had first birth by 18, by level of education



Residence (Urban/Rural)

In addition to the reasons discussed above for why residence type may be important for child marriage, living in an urban or rural area may influence the likelihood of adolescent childbearing in a number of ways, particularly through restricting access to information and services on family planning. As with education, the broad pattern is consistent with that found for child marriage, with the percentage of women having a child before 18 higher in rural areas in every country throughout the region. However, this relationship also appears to be somewhat weaker than was the case for child marriage, with a less dramatic difference based on residence type. For example, while the percentage in rural areas married by 18 in Sierra Leone was 26 percentage points higher than in urban areas for the 20-24 age group, the difference in terms of childbearing before 18 was only 18 percentage points. Nonetheless, these results do indicate a relationship with type of residence.

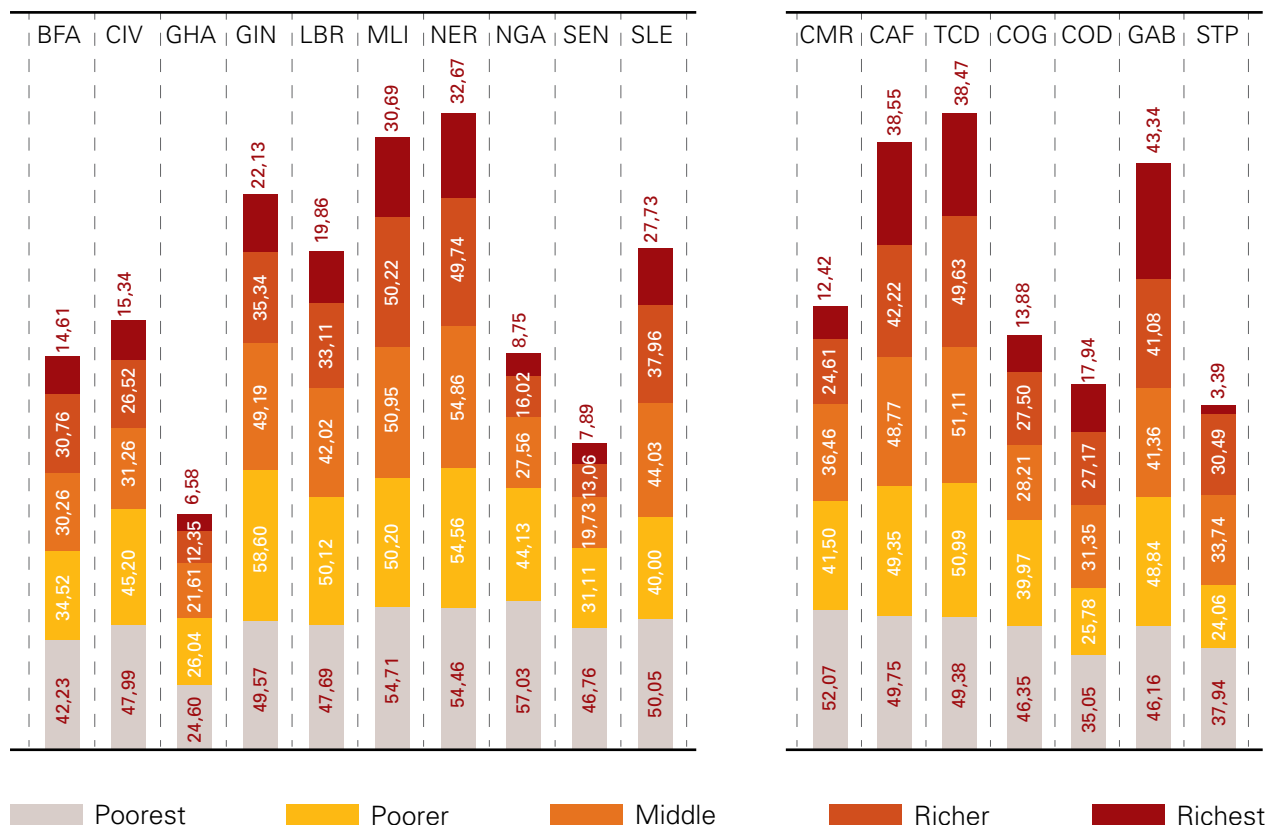
FIGURE 9: **Percentage of women aged 20-24 years who had first birth by 18, by residence type (rural/urban)**



Wealth

As with education, household wealth may influence adolescent childbearing in a number of ways, including through facilitating access to family planning, influencing the marital options of girls, and through access to education, among other resources. The percentages of women aged 20-24 who had birth before age 18 by household wealth status are shown below in Figure 10. As with education and residence type, the general relationship between wealth and adolescent childbearing is very similar to that for child marriage. Gabon is again an outlier in this regard – while the percentages married by 18 decreased steadily as household wealth increased, the relationship with childbearing is much less clear, with each level of wealth broadly similar to the others in term of the percentages who had married by age 18. Other countries in Central Africa with high rates of adolescent childbearing, such as Chad and the Central African Republic, also show relatively small differences between different wealth statuses. The West African countries with the highest prevalence of adolescent childbearing, Niger and Mali, show a similar though slightly different pattern where the bottom eighty percent of households are very similar while the richest households have significantly lower rates (again consistent with the pattern seen for marriage). Broadly speaking, this does suggest that wealth has less of an effect in countries with very high rates of adolescent childbearing in the region, either because the ubiquity of child marriage and childbearing makes wealth less relevant or because there is relatively little variation in actual wealth at the country level.

FIGURE 10: Percentage of women aged 20-24 years who had first birth by 18, by wealth quintile



3. Adolescent sexual activity in West and Central Africa

3.1. Patterns and trends

The link between child marriage and adolescent childbearing is conditioned, in part, on the link between marriage and sexual activity. The information presented above suggests that child marriage and childbearing are closely related, but it is less clear if this also applies to sexual activity. In comparison to other regions, particularly South Asia, adolescent sexuality appears less closely coupled with marriage, especially in urban settings where social norms and expectations are typically more in flux than in rural areas. The percentages of women aged 20-24 who had sexual intercourse by age 15 and 18 are shown below in Table 3. These figures suggest relatively high levels of sexual activity, with the average percentage having had sex by age 15 across the region being 19.3, ranging from eight percent in Sao Tome and Principe to almost one in three (30.1 percent) in the Central African Republic. This average increases to 65.5 percent by age 18, ranging from 36.5 percent in Senegal to 84.3 percent in Liberia. These percentages are substantially higher than for marriage, suggesting that a significant proportion of sexual activity across the region takes place prior to marriage. As with both marriage and childbearing, the bulk of first sexual intercourse below the age of 18 for the 20-24 age group takes place between the ages of 15 and 18.

TABLE 3:
Percentage of women aged 20-24 in West and Central Africa who had first sexual intercourse by exact age 15 and 18

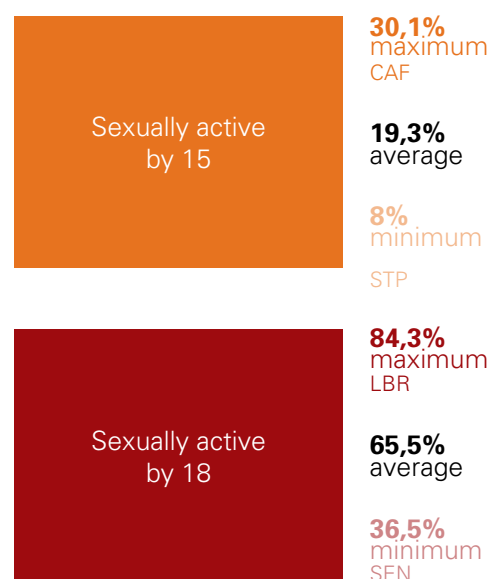
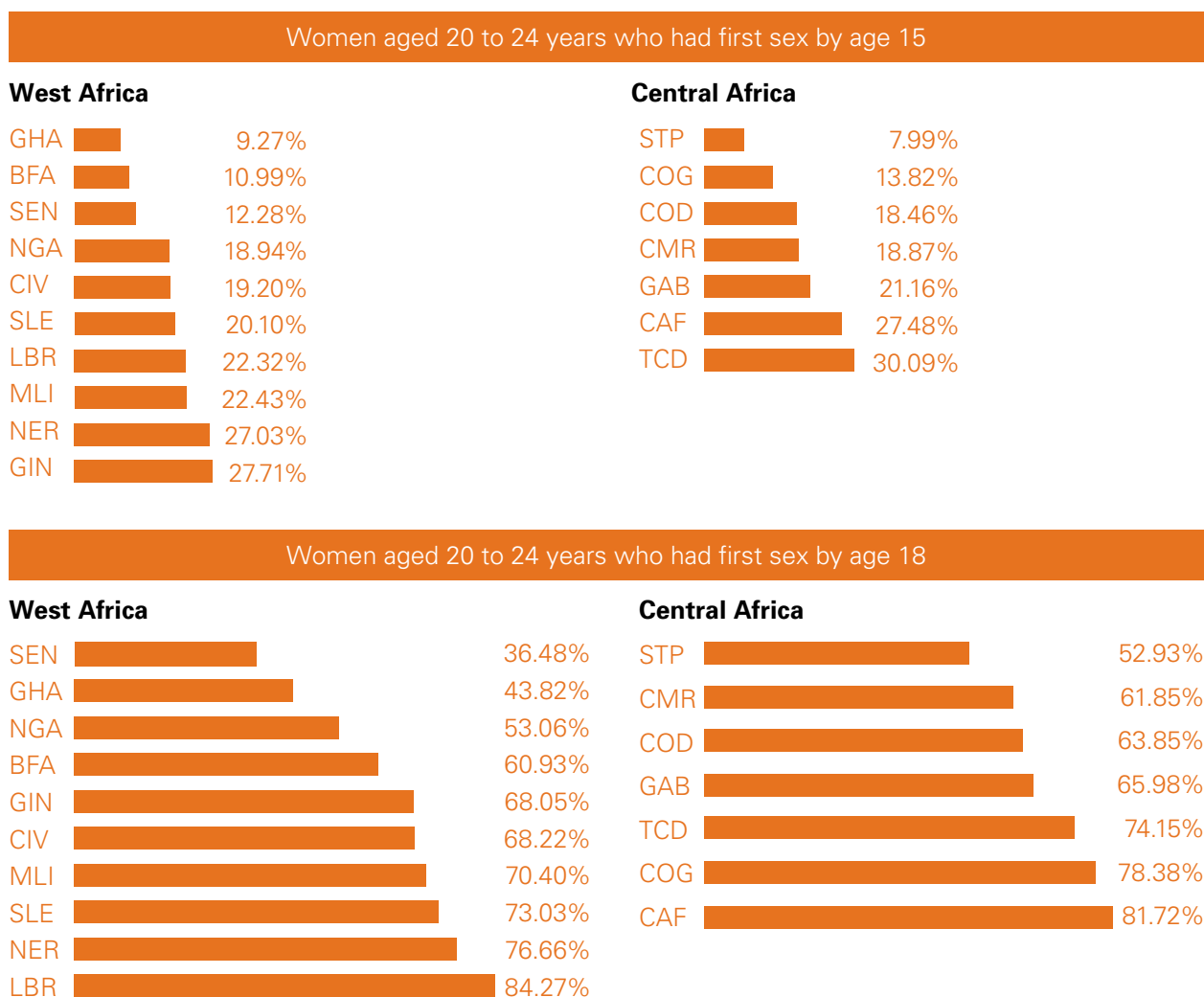


Figure 11 shows the percentages of 20-24 year olds who had sex before age 15 and 18 by country. As with marriage and childbearing, there is considerable variation between countries.

PART 4. Contemporary trends and patterns in age at first marriage and childbearing

FIGURE 11: The percentages of women aged 20-24 who had had sexual intercourse by exact age 15 and 18, by sub-region and country

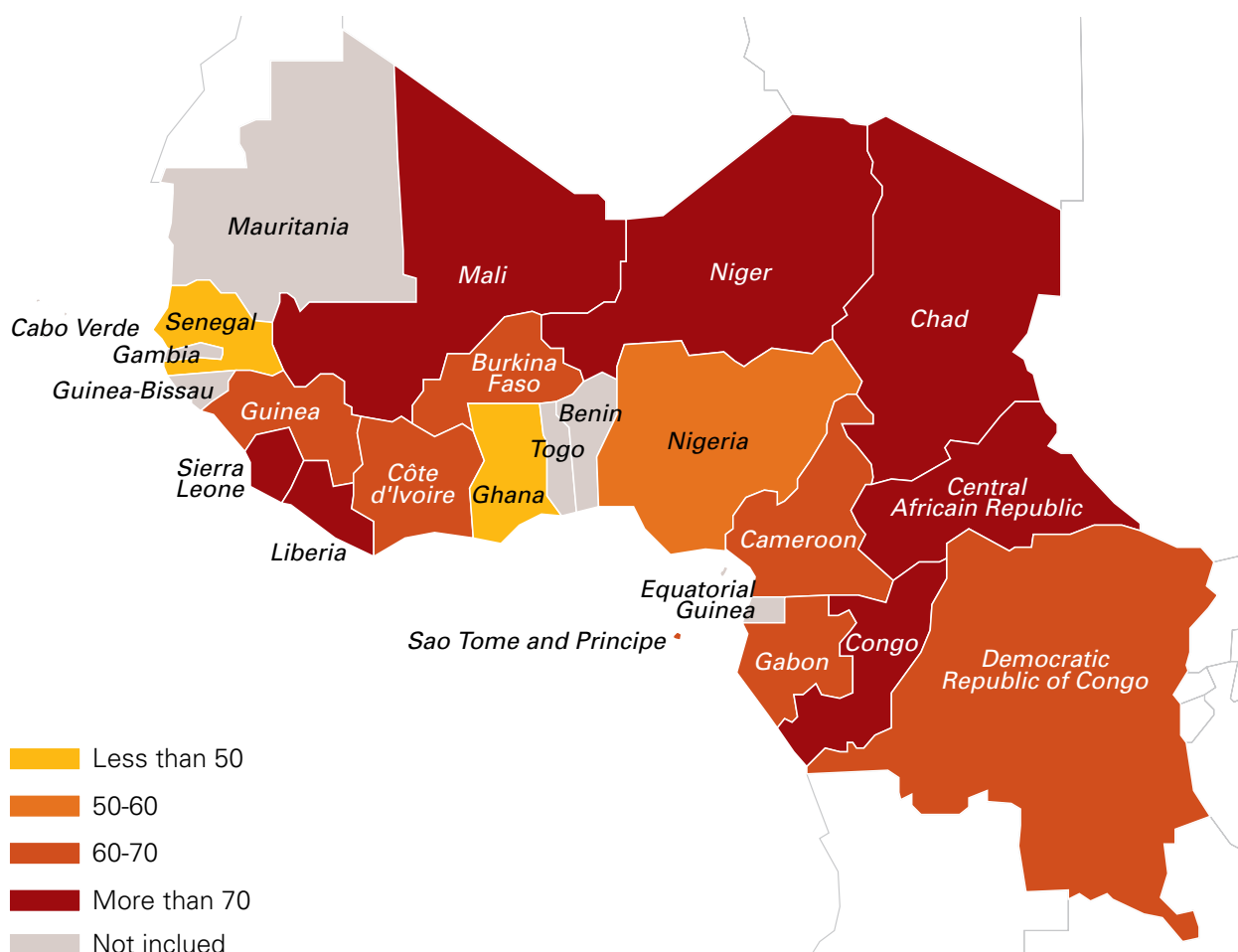


The variation between countries in the region remains large – for example, young women in Senegal are roughly half as likely to have had sex by age 18 as their counterparts in Mali, Sierra Leone, Niger, Liberia, Chad, Congo or the Central African Republic. Overall, in eight of the 17 countries covered by this study, over 20 percent, or one in five, had sex before age 15, and in 10 of the 17 over 65 percent had first sex before turning 18.

While the percentage of 20-24 year olds reporting sex by 15 and 18 is uniformly higher than the percentage reporting marriage, the difference between these varies significantly between countries. For example, in Senegal 32.9 percent report marrying by age 18 and 36.5 percent having sex, a difference of less than four percentage points – in contrast, the same figures for Liberia are 35.9 and 84.3 percent, a difference of almost 50 percentage points. This suggests that the entire process of family formation may be different in these two countries, a point discussed below in detail.

The geographic pattern, shown below in Map 4, is less clear for sexual activity than for either child marriage or adolescent childbearing, though the 'band' of high prevalence countries in the northern area of the region is joined by the Central African Republic and Congo.

MAP 4: **Percentage of women 20-24 having first sexual intercourse by age 18**



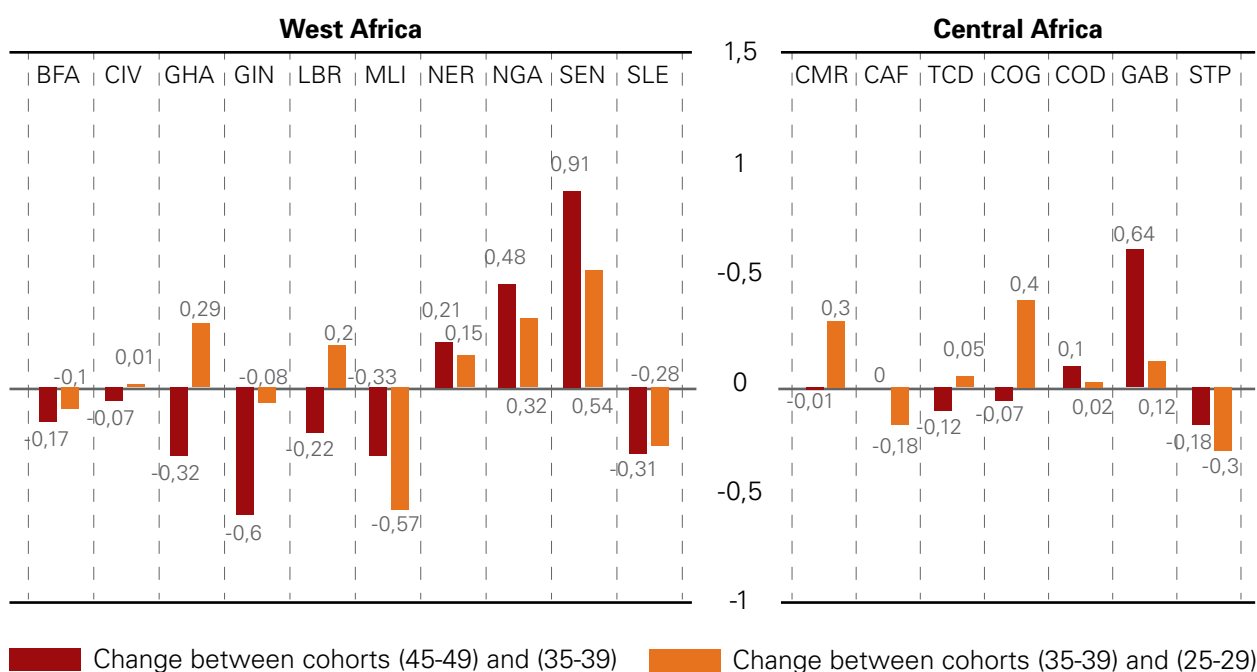
3.2. Regional trends in age at first sex

The trends in the changes in median ages at first sex over the 25-29, 35-39, and 45-49 age cohorts are shown below in Figure 12. Overall, the pattern is broadly similar to that seen with child marriage, with shifts towards younger ages at first sex taking place mainly in countries where there has also been a shift towards younger ages at first marriage, such as in Mali or Gabon, or where there has been little change in

PART 4. Contemporary trends and patterns in age at first marriage and childbearing

the age at marriage, such as Sierra Leone or Sao Tome and Principe. While important, the magnitude of the changes in age at first sex are generally smaller than those for marriage – for example, while the median age at first marriage declined by over one year between the 35-39 and 25-29 cohorts in Mali, the median for age at first sex decline by slightly more than half a year. A number of countries have seen recent increases in the median age of first sex, particularly in Nigeria (an increase of 0.32 years between the ‘middle’ and ‘youngest’ cohorts), Senegal (an increase of 0.54 years) and Congo (an increase of 0.4 years).

FIGURE 12: Changes between the median age at first sexual intercourse for the 25-29, 35-39, and 45-49 age cohorts of young women, by country and sub-region



3.3. Correlates of sexual activity among adolescent girls in the WCA region

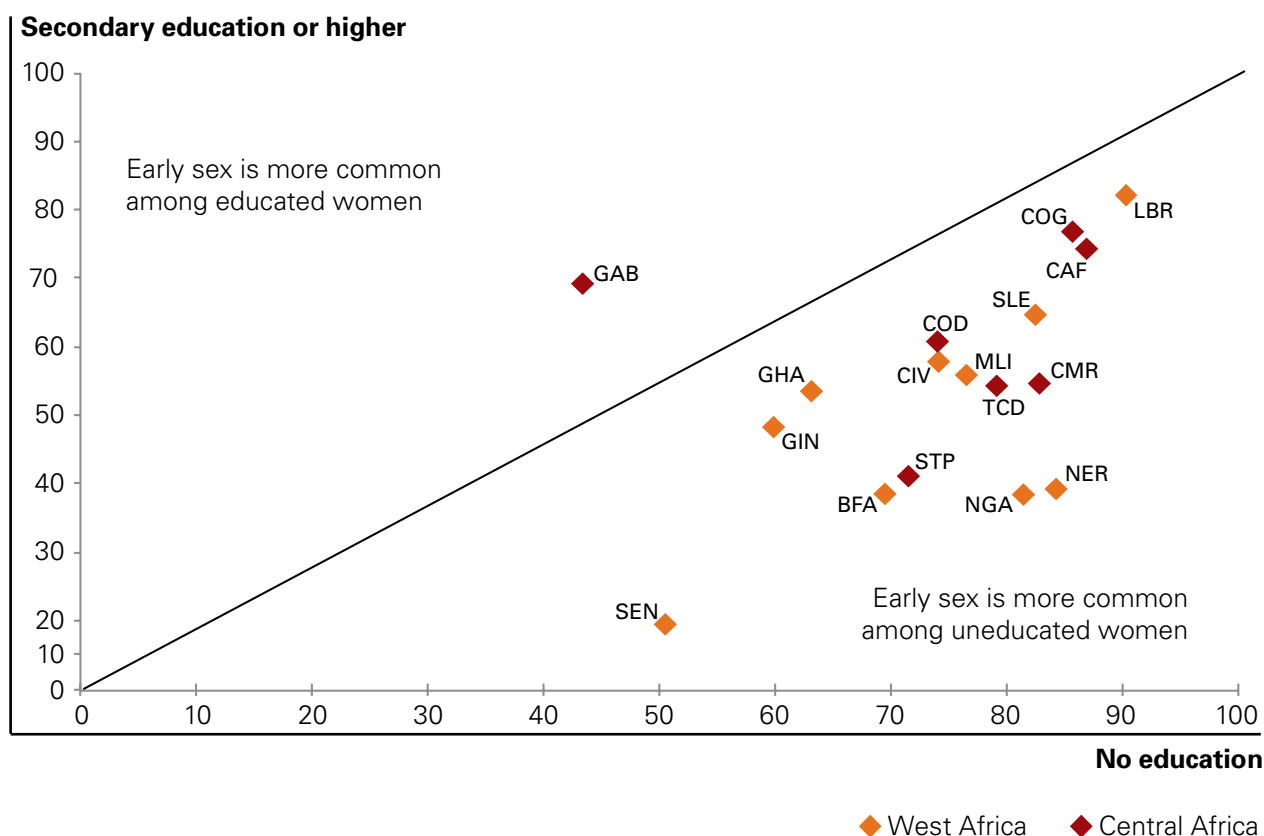
While the continued close relationship between marriage and sexual/reproductive behavior suggests that the correlates examined here will be broadly similar, there are a number of reasons that sexual activity specifically may differ somewhat from either marriage or childbearing. In particular, early and/or premarital sexual activity may be more common in urban areas or among educated elites, potentially weakening the relationships between marriage and childbearing and wealth, educational attainment and residence type. If this is the case, we would expect the differences in the age at first sex between urban and rural women, for example, to be smaller than the differences in age at first marriage, as sexual activity is more closely tied

to marriage in rural areas than in urban areas. A similar effect might be seen for education if more educated girls are more likely to engage in premarital sex. While we explore the role of premarital sex below, some inference can be drawn from the ways in which the correlates of adolescent sex differ from those for marriage and/or childbearing.

Education

The percentages of 20-24 year old women who had sex by exact age 18 are shown by educational status in Figure 13. As with both marriage and childbearing, women with no education are more likely to have had sex by 18 than those with a secondary or higher education, with the only exception being Gabon. However, in comparison to marriage, the differences are generally less dramatic, as indicated by the closer proximity of the countries to the diagonal line. For example, in Congo the percentage of women with no education who had sex by age 18 was 11.5 percentage points higher than that for women with a secondary or higher education (63.1 versus 48.8 percent), compared to a difference of 27.6 percentage points when examining the relationship between marriage and educational attainment. While for some countries, such as Senegal or Nigeria, this difference was less clear, the general pattern does suggest that educational attainment is more closely related to marriage and childbearing than to sexual activity.

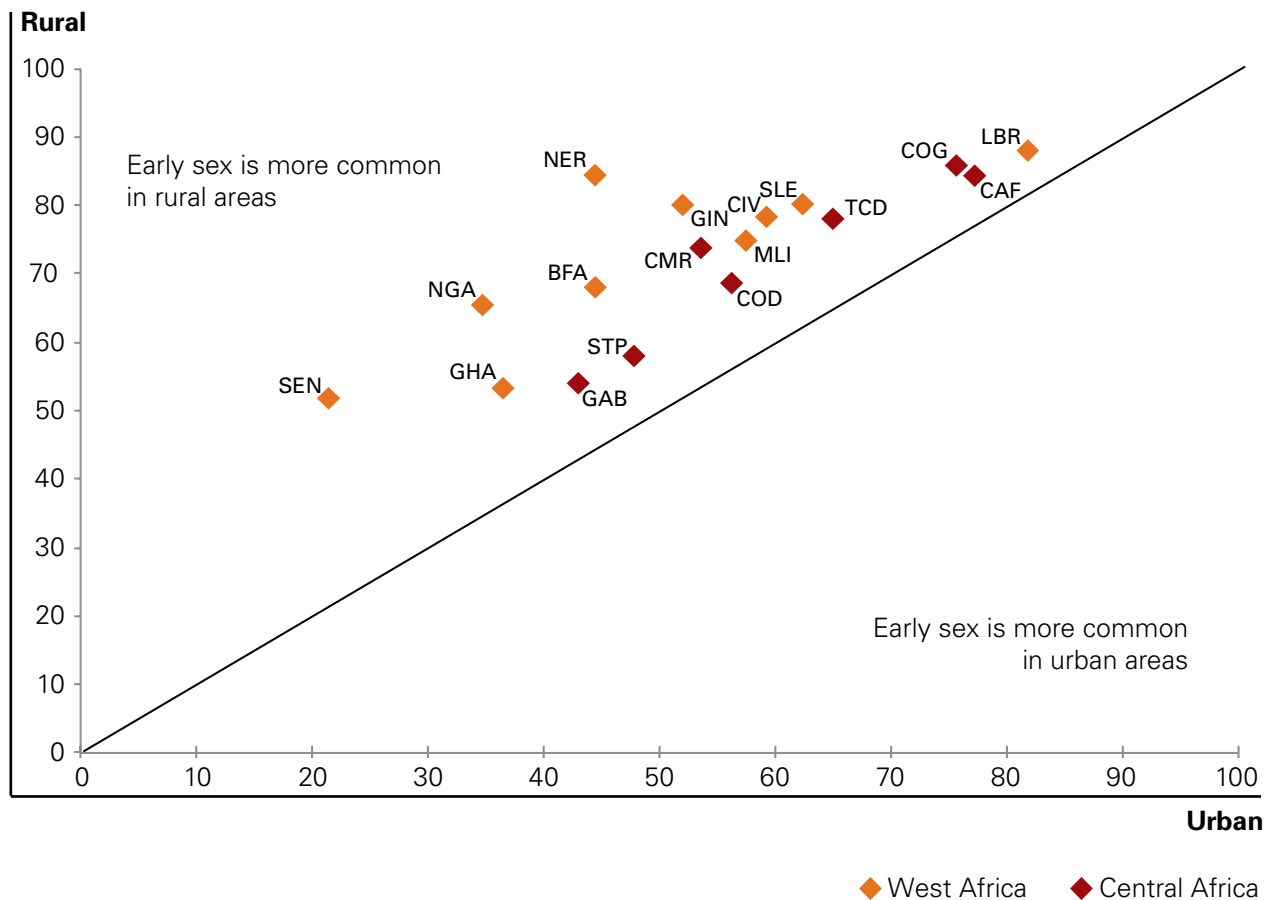
FIGURE 13: Percentage of women aged 20-24 who had first sexual intercourse by 18, by level of education



Residence (Urban/Rural)

Figure 14 presents the percentages of women 20-24 who had first sexual intercourse by age 18 by residence type. As with education, the difference between rural and urban areas is generally smaller than that seen for marriage, though in all the countries included those living in rural areas are more likely to have had sex. While there are a number of countries where the rural-urban differences are broadly the same for both marriage and sexual activity, another group of countries, including Burkina Faso, Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Chad and Côte d'Ivoire, type of residence is much less important for sexual activity than for marriage. For example, while the difference in Liberia in the percentage married by age 18 was 16.7 percentage points higher for those living in rural areas than for those in urban areas, the difference was 6.9 percentage points for sexual activity. It should be noted, however, that the differences between the pattern of sexual activity and childbearing by age 18 are more similar to each other than sexual activity and marriage.

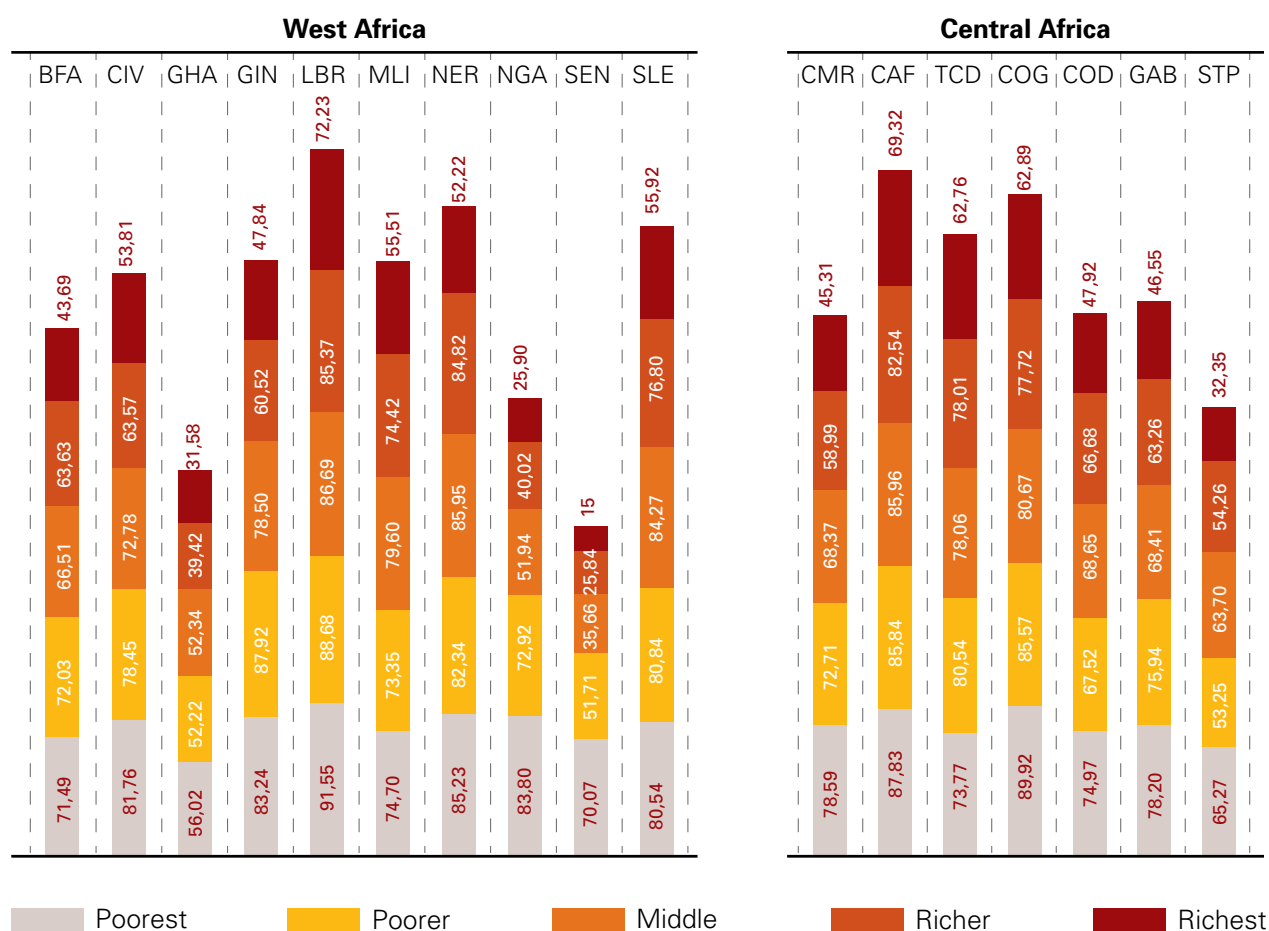
FIGURE 14: Percentage of women aged 20-24 years who had first sexual intercourse by 18, by residence type (rural/urban)



Wealth

The relationship between early initiation of sexual activity and household wealth is shown in Figure 15. As with marriage and fertility, there is considerable variation across countries in the strength of this relationship, with some countries, of which Senegal is one example, showing a clear pattern where the likelihood of sexual activity before age 18 lessens in tandem with household wealth while others, such as Liberia, show relatively little difference for the majority of households, typically only differing significantly for the most wealthy of households. While the overall pattern is very similar to that seen for marriage and childbearing, it should be noted that the percentages of young women reporting sexual activity before age 18 is higher than for marriage and childbearing for almost all countries and levels of wealth – for example, over 40 percent of 20-24 year old women in the richest households in Burkina Faso had first intercourse before age 18, compared to less than 30 percent who had been married by 18.

FIGURE 15: Percentage of women aged 20-24 years who had first sexual intercourse by 18, by wealth quintile



4. The relationship between child marriage and adolescent sexuality and childbearing

The results presented above suggest that there are two broad family formation profiles in the region: the first is where the median ages at first sexual intercourse and marriage occur at roughly the same ages and the median age at first birth is roughly a year after that of marriage; and the second where the median age at first sexual intercourse is significantly lower than the median age at first marriage and the age at first birth is closer to the age at marriage. In other words, the patterns at the national level for the first typology suggest a pattern where sexual activity is closely linked to marriage, while in the second typology sexual activity is less closely tied. Table 4 shows the median ages of first marriage, sex and birth for 25-29 year old women in each of the countries by typology.

TABLE 4: **Median ages at first marriage, first sexual intercourse, and first birth by 'type': Women aged 25-29**

		Median age at first marriage	Median age at first sexual intercourse	Median age at first birth
Type 1 Median age at first marriage and first sexual intercourse very close together	Burkina Faso	17.9	17.6	19.5
	Guinea	17.4	16.3	18.9
	Mali	16.7	16.2	18.6
	Niger	15.9	16.0	18.1
	Nigeria	18.6	17.9	20.4
	Senegal	19.9	19.4	21.4
	Central African Republic	16.9	15.8	19.1
	Chad	16.0	15.7	18.6
	Mean	17.4	16.9	19.3
Type 2 Median age at first sexual intercourse much lower than first marriage	Côte d'Ivoire	20.5	16.9	21.4
	Ghana	20.2	18.3	21.2
	Liberia	19.3	16.3	19.1
	Sierra Leone	18.2	16.0	19.3
	Cameroon	19.0	17.3	19.7
	Congo Brazzaville	19.9	16.4	20.1
	Congo, Democratic Republic of the	18.9	16.8	19.9
	Sao Tome and Principe	18.8	17.5	19.4
	Mean	19.3	16.9	20.0
Neither type	Gabon	22.1	17.1	20.3

While this typology is a somewhat crude approach to categorizing the relationship between these three components of the family formation process, and by necessity obscures important sub-national variations in patterns, there are some clear differences between the two groups. While the median age at first sexual intercourse is on average the same for the two groups, the average median age at first marriage is almost two full years lower for Type 1 countries, and median age first birth also is over six months earlier on average. This suggests a more complex relationship in the region between marriage, sexual intercourse, and birth than is typically assumed to be the case, with clear implications for programming aimed at addressing child marriage and/or adolescent pregnancy. For those countries classified as Type 1, it is likely that efforts to increase the age at marriage will also have the effect of increasing the age at first sexual intercourse, while for those countries classified as Type 2 it appears unlikely that raising the age at first marriage would have much effect on age at first sex.

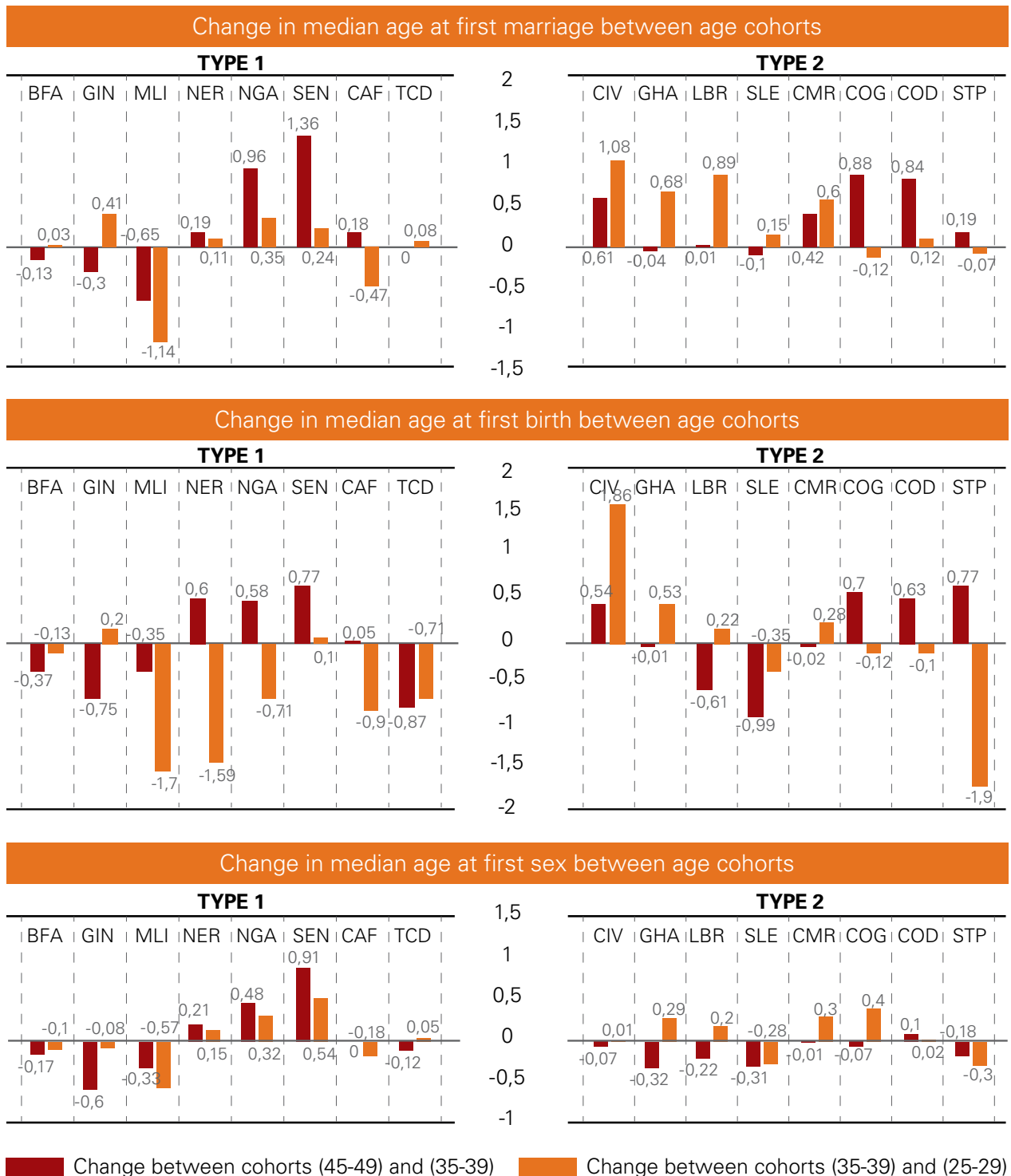
The differences between the countries in each of these typologies is also evident when examining the patterns of change in the median ages at first marriage, first birth, and first sexual intercourse, as shown below in Figure 16. This figure reorganizes the changes discussed above by typology. As might be expected given the higher median ages at marriage in Type 2 countries, this group of countries consistently experienced large increases in ages at marriage, particularly when comparing the younger cohorts. In contrast, Type 1 countries had less consistent pattern of change – for the younger cohorts in this group, change was largely flat or negative. When examining the age at first birth, the majority of Type 1 countries saw a shift towards younger ages, while the pattern in Type 2 countries was less consistent – with the exception of Côte d'Ivoire and Sao Tome and Principe, there was little evidence of large changes in the younger cohorts, with much of the changes taking place between the older two of the cohorts examined here. The two typologies also were broadly associated with somewhat different patterns of change in the ages at which sexual initiation takes place – while Type 2 countries saw a general increase or little change over time in the median ages at first sex (Sierra Leone and Sao Tome and Principe being exceptions), Type 1 countries were saw either large declines or large increases.

Overall, these patterns suggest that while the two typologies do capture two broadly different patterns of family formation, there is considerable variation, even within the typologies themselves. However, for the most part, these results do suggest that in Type 2 countries the increase in age at marriage has not been accompanied by equivalent changes in age at first sex, a fundamentally different pattern than seen for most of the Type 1 countries, where changes in age at marriage are mirrored by changes in age at first sex (Senegal being a good example of this pattern).

It is also worth noting that even in Type 1 countries the median age at first sex is typically somewhat lower than for first marriage. While this should be interpreted with caution given the aggregate nature of these estimates, this raises the possibility of significant premarital sexual activity in these countries. However, it seems likely that this sexual activity is taking place within a context of preparations for marriage (including formal commitments/engagement), as opposed to the looser connection in Type 2 countries.

PART 4. Contemporary trends and patterns in age at first marriage and childbearing

FIGURE 16: Changes between the median age at first marriage, birth, and sexual intercourse for the 25-29, 35-39, and 45-49 age cohorts of young women, by country and typology

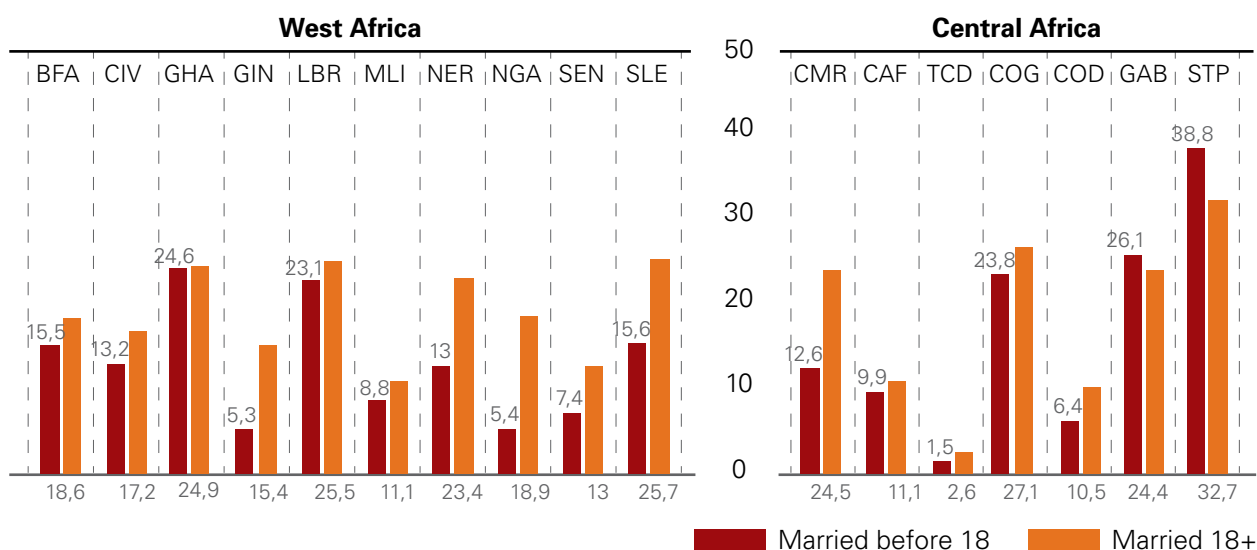


5. The longer-term differences between child brides and those marrying later

Despite the challenges associated with determining a causal relationship between child marriage, adolescent childbearing, and adolescent sexual activity and the broader correlates discussed above, there are a number of longer term outcomes where the differences between child brides and those marrying later provide some insight into how child marriage may influence the lives of girls and women. The following section examines the effect of early age at marriage on three of these: use of modern contraception, number of births, and whether the woman is in a polygamous relationship. The results are presented for women aged 25-29, as this is the youngest cohort where significant majorities of women are married in each country in the region.

Figure 17 shows the levels of modern contraceptive use for women who were married before and after 18 for each country. While use of modern methods is low overall, use is higher for those marrying later in every country except Sao Tome and Principe and Gabon (though the difference is negligible for Ghana and small for Liberia). The most significant difference is in Nigeria, where those marrying aged 18 or later are more than three times more likely to be using modern methods (18.9 versus 5.4 percent respectively), though the relative difference was also large in Niger (1.8), Senegal (1.6), Cameroon (1.9 times more likely), and Chad (1.7) and the Congo (1.69 times more likely). Overall, use of modern methods was much higher for Type 1 countries (results not shown), though the degree of difference between child brides and those married later is larger for the countries in Type 1.

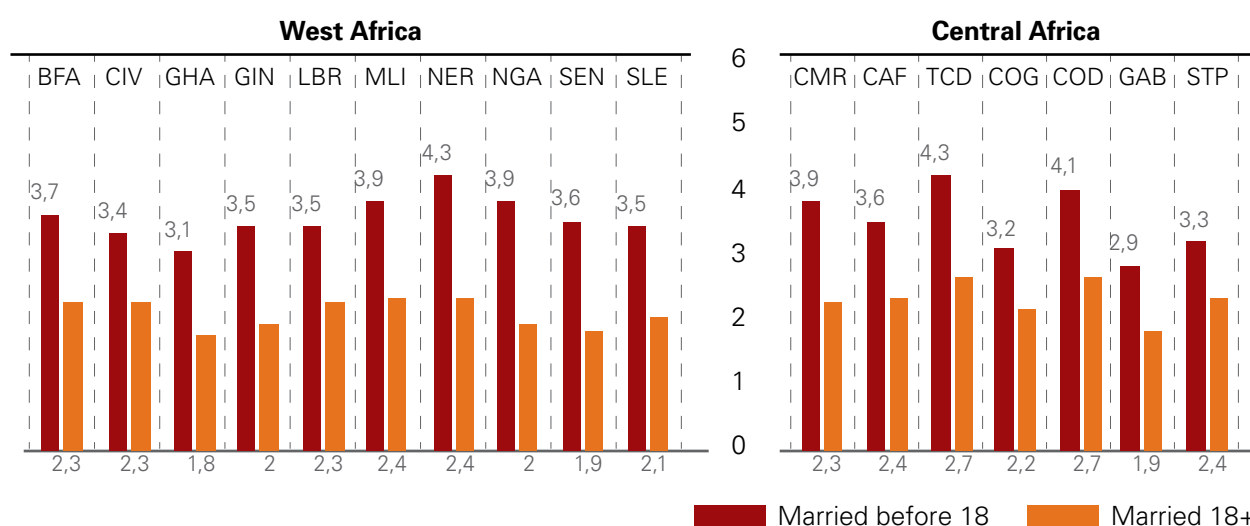
FIGURE 17: **Percentage of married women aged 25-29 currently using a modern contraceptive method, by age at marriage.**



PART 4. Contemporary trends and patterns in age at first marriage and childbearing

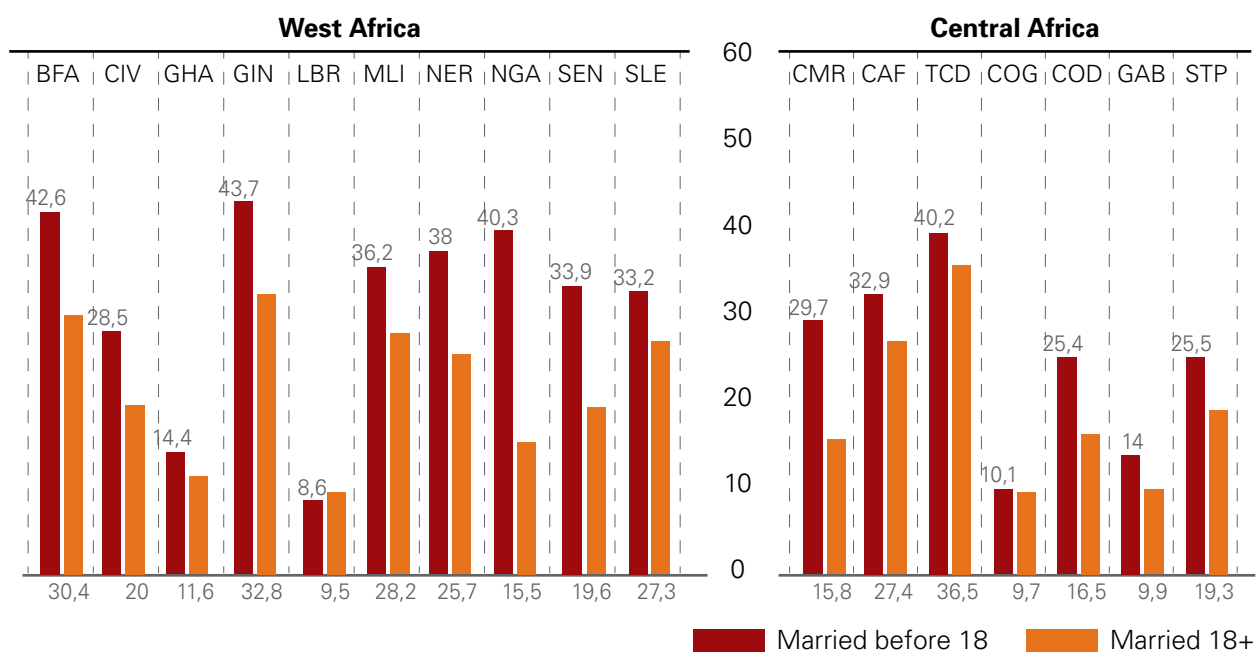
Child marriage has also been associated at the global level with significantly higher levels of overall fertility. In addition to lower use of modern contraception, there are a number of reasons why child brides may have more children than those marrying later. In particular, in contexts where marriage, sexual activity and, especially, childbearing are closely linked, duration of marriage (which is greater for those marrying as children) effectively also represents the time during which women are exposed to the 'risk' of childbearing. As Figure 18 demonstrates clearly, the average number of births to those marrying before 18 is significantly higher than for their counterparts who married later. In Nigeria, the mean number of children is almost twice as high for those marrying before 18 (an average of 3.9 births vs. 2 for those marrying later) – this difference is notable even in Sao Tome and Principe, where the relative difference was smallest (1.4 times more likely).

FIGURE 18: Mean number of births to married women aged 25-29, by age at marriage



A number of studies have also found that child brides are more likely than those marrying later to be in polygamous unions, typically being taken on as an additional wife. This is an issue of particular importance in the WCA region, where polygamous unions are relatively common. The proportions of married women in polygamous unions (i.e. having at least one other wife) are shown below in Figure 19. With the exception of Liberia, where the proportion in a polygamous relation is very low relative to other countries in the region, the proportion living in polygamous unions is higher in every country for those who marry as children (i.e. less than 18). The difference is particularly large in Nigeria, where those marrying before age 18 are 2.6 times more likely to be a polygamous union, though the difference is also very large in Cameroon (1.9 times) and in Senegal (1.7 times). Overall, both the highest levels of polygamous unions and the greatest differences between those marrying before and after 18 are seen in Type 1 countries (results not shown).

FIGURE 19: Percentage of married women aged 25-29 in a polygamous union, by age at marriage



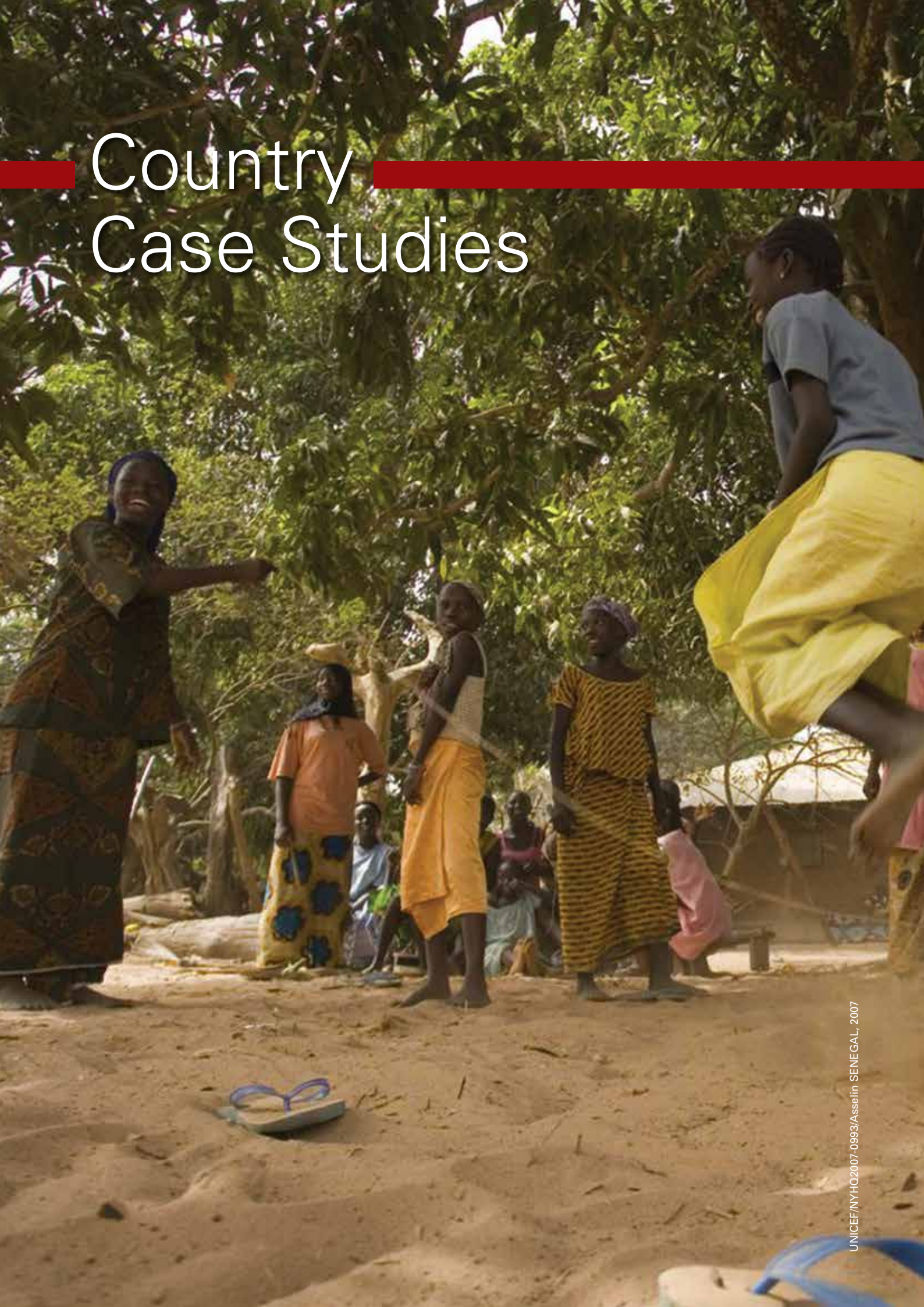
Discussion

The patterns and trends across the region illustrate both the importance of situating discussions around child marriage and adolescent pregnancy within a broader discussion of changes in family formation patterns. While the correlates of child marriage, adolescent childbearing and adolescent sexual activity all share common features, there are differences between these that suggest that the relationship is not the same in all countries in the region. The identification of two broad 'types' of family formation behaviors provides further support for taking a more nuanced approach to understanding both child marriage and adolescent childbearing. This is particularly important in the context of rapid social and normative changes around sexual activity, which may be the case in the Type 2 countries where marriage and sexual activity are not as closely linked.

These results also suggest that further research into the underlying reasons behind the dual family formation pattern in the region is needed. For example, further analyses could be conducted that focus on whether these differences are a more recent development resulting from broader economic and social forces or a continuation of existing trends. This in turn would raise questions about how strongly these patterns are related to cultural/ethnic normative systems (including religious beliefs) – while research at the global level finds no definitive association between religion and family formation patterns, it is less clear if this is the case for West and Central Africa. The presence of a 'band' of countries where child marriage and adolescent childbearing is particularly high suggests that there may be common factors in each of these countries, though whether these are sociocultural, economic, or coincidental is less clear.

From the perspective of program/intervention design, these results also demonstrate the complexity of developing region-wide strategies for addressing child marriage and adolescent pregnancy. In particular, the differences in the strength of the linkages between marriage and sexual activity make carefully tailored programming particularly important. While each of marriage, childbearing and sexual activity were related to the correlates examined in similar ways, there were also clear indications that the strength of that relationship varied depending on the outcome being examined – for example, residence type was more closely linked to marriage than to sexual initiation in many countries. This finding also has programmatic implications, as interventions that assume a uniform effect of education or wealth are likely to have quite different impacts on the different components of the family formation process.

Country Case Studies



Senegal

Total population
12 951 000
(UNDP, 2012)

Life expectancy at birth
63.5 Years
(UNDP, 2014)

HDI rank
163
(UNDP, 2014)

GDI rank
119
(UNDP, 2014)

Adolescent birth rate
94.4
(UNDP, 2014)

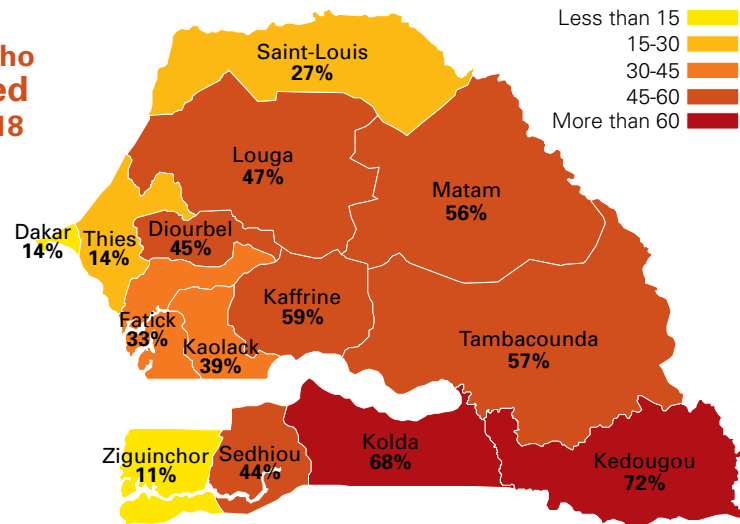
Net attendance in secondary, female
33%
(UNICEF 2014)

Legal age at marriage without/with parental consent or approval by pertinent authority
Female 16
Male 18
(ACPF 2013)

Current Law in Place
Family Code, 1973
(ACPF 2013)

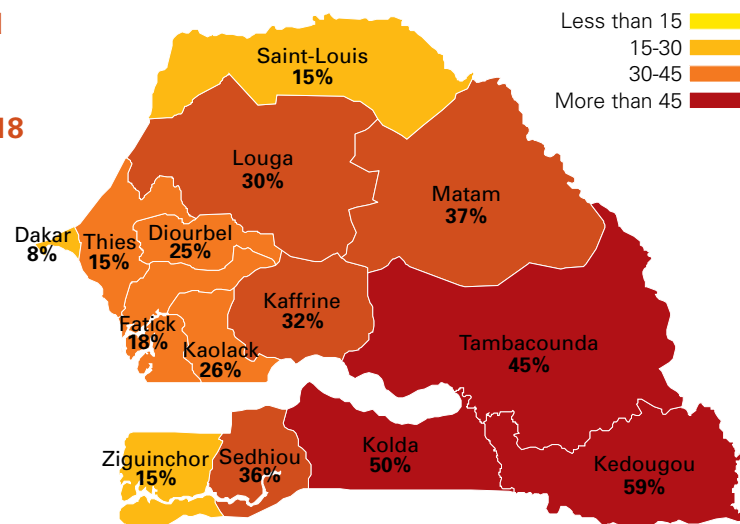
20-24 year old women who were married by exact age 18 by region

National average
32,9%



20-24 year old women who had birth by exact age 18 by region

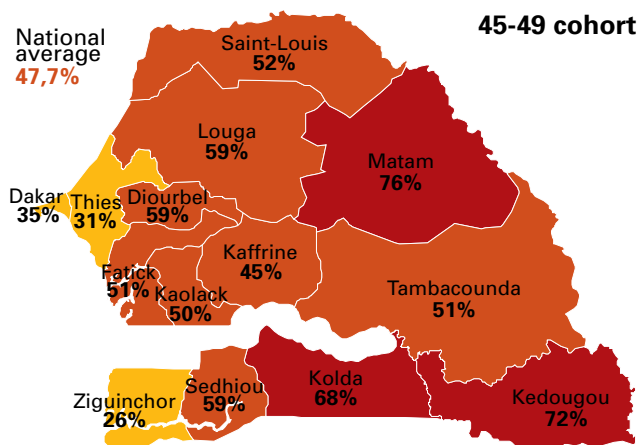
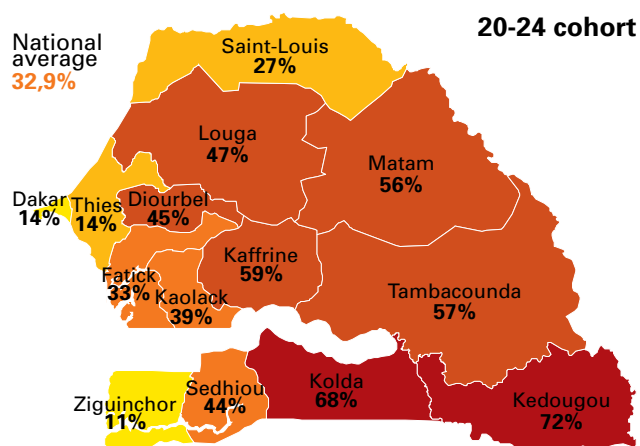
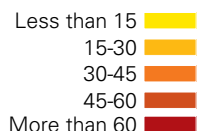
National average
21,5%



Almost one third of women aged 20-24 in Senegal were married before age 18 and one in five had given birth by age 18. There is considerable variation across the country, with the highest rates of both marriage and childbirth in the south-eastern part of the country. The highest rate of marriage is in the Kedougou region (72%), while the lowest rate is in Ziguinchor (11%). The region with the highest rate of adolescent childbearing is Kedougou (34%) while the lowest is Dakar (8%). In every region except Ziguinchor, the percentage married is higher than the percentage who have had a birth, reflecting the strong link between marriage, sexual activity and childbearing in Senegal.

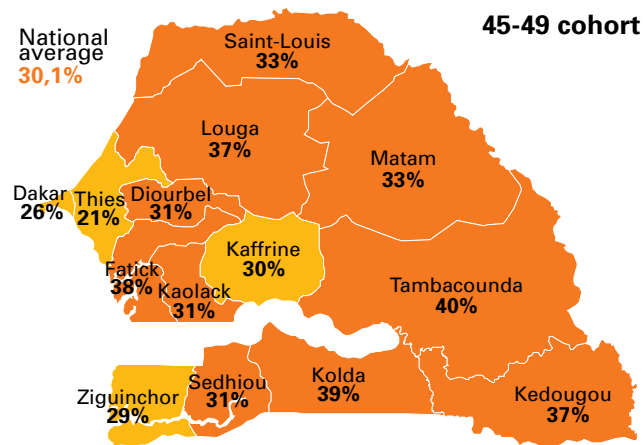
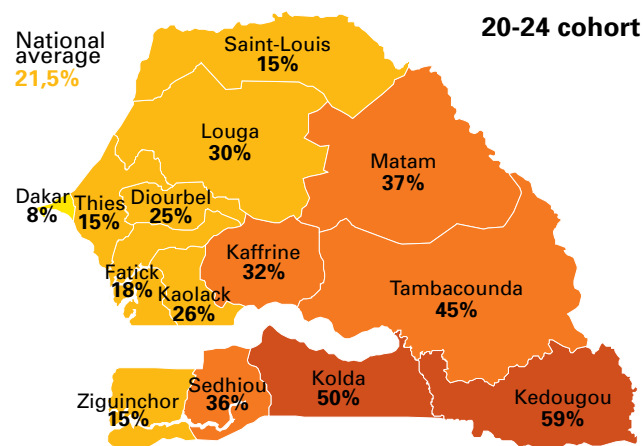
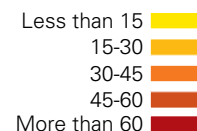
Sources for all maps: Data from 2010-2011 Senegal DHS. Spatial data from Spatial Data Repository, The Demographic and Health Surveys Program. ICF International. Available from spatialdata.dhsprogram.com [Accessed 10 December 2014]

Change in pattern of marriage before age 18 over time





Senegal has experienced very overall significant declines in the proportions having a birth by age 18, though as with marriage there is significant variation by region. The highest rates remain in east and southeast, where the proportions giving birth by 18 have increased quite markedly – in Kolda for example, the proportion has increased from 39% for 45-49 year olds to 50% for 20-24 year olds. The largest declines were in Dakar and Saint-Louis, both of which saw a change of 18 percentage points. The lowest prevalence in the younger cohorts was in Dakar (8%) while the highest Kedougou (59%).

Change in pattern of childbearing before age 18 over time



Child marriage has declined significantly in Senegal overall over the past two or three decades, as the maps above illustrate. However, there has been considerable variation in the speed and extent of the decline, with some regions, particularly those to the southeast where child marriage remains very common, seeing very little change between the 45-49 and 20-24 cohorts. The only region to see an increase in child marriage rates over this period is Tambacounda, where 51% of 45-49 year olds were married before 18 compared to 57% of the youngest cohort. The largest change in the prevalence of child marriage was seen in Matam (76% of 45-49 year olds versus 56% of 20-24 year olds).

Characteristics of those who married, had sex, or gave birth before age 18

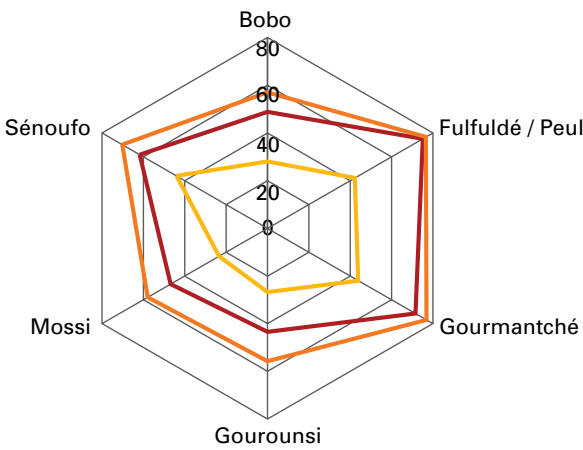
30-34 cohort 
20-24 cohort 



The figures above show the changes in the characteristics of those who had married, become sexually active or gave birth by 18 for two recent cohorts. While there have been declines in the proportions married as children and having sex before 18, there has been relatively little overall change in births. Overall the changes are not as large as seen when making the comparison with older cohorts, suggesting that the pace of change has slowed somewhat. Rural women were much more likely to have experienced all three events before age 18 than their urban counterparts, and in rural areas there was very little change between the two cohorts. In urban areas, in contrast, there were large declines between the two cohorts, suggesting the urban population has been a major driver of the nation-wide patterns of change. Overall, there are little differences between the two cohorts in terms of the prevalence rates at each educational attainment level, though for each there is a steady decline as education increases. Finally, while there is a clear pattern of decreasing prevalence as wealth increases for each of the three behaviors, there are signs that the prevalence for each of the three behaviors has increased in the poorest quintile in the youngest cohort, perhaps as a result of the economic challenges the country has faced in recent decades.

Ethnicity
What role does it play?

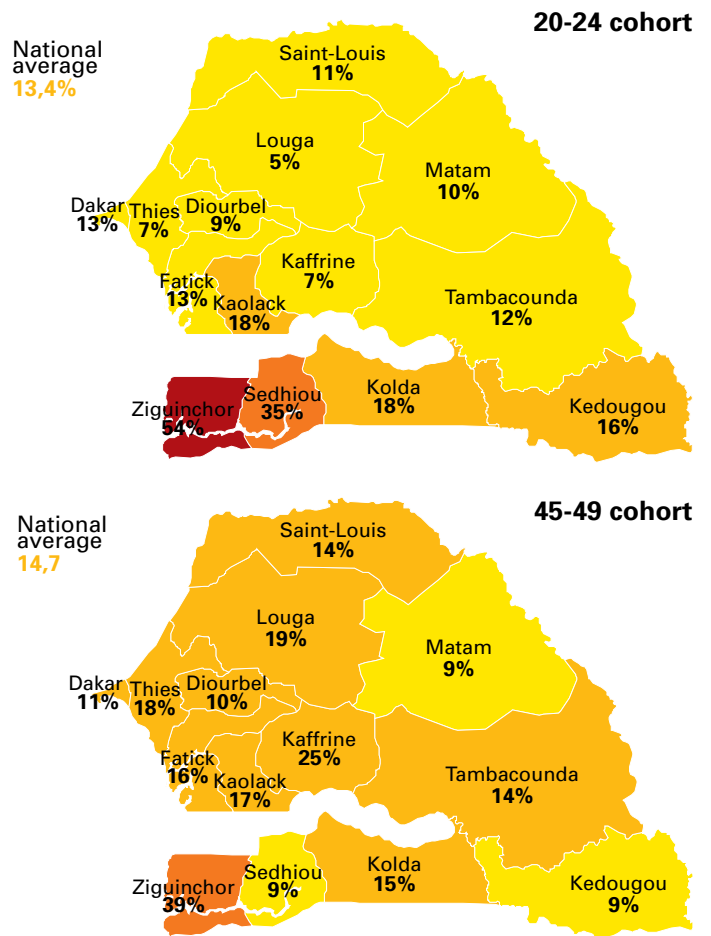
Married 18 —
Birth by 18 —
Sex by 18 —



There is considerable variation in the patterns of the timing of marriage, sex and childbearing across Senegal's main ethnic groups, as shown in this figure. For all except the Diola, the percentage giving birth by 18 is lower than that of marriage by 18. For the most part, the proportions for sex and marriage are quite close together, confirming prior findings showing a strong link between the two processes. The highest rates of marriage, sex, and birth are for those who are not Senegalese (i.e. migrants), the Mandingu, and the Poular, though highest rates of sex and marriage are among the Poular.

Premarital sexual activity - levels and trends²⁸
Change in pattern of levels of premarital sex over time

Less than 10 —
10-25 —
25-40 —
More than 40 —



While in other contexts increases in age at marriage have been accompanied by rises in premarital sexual activity and childbearing, there is little evidence that this has taken place in Senegal as a whole. While the general pattern has been one of gradual increase between the 45-49 and 20-24 cohorts, there have also been large declines in Louga and Kaffrine (from 19 to 5% and 25 to 7% respectively). By far the largest increases have been seen in Ziguinchor and Sedhiou (increases from 39 to 54% and 9 to 35% respectively).

28. Premarital sexual behavior is defined in this case as when the age at first sex is before the age at first marriage or cohabitation

Niger

Total population
15 894 000
(UNDP, 2012)

Life expectancy at birth
58.4 Years
(UNDP, 2014)

HDI rank
187
(UNDP, 2014)

GDI rank
151
(UNDP, 2014)

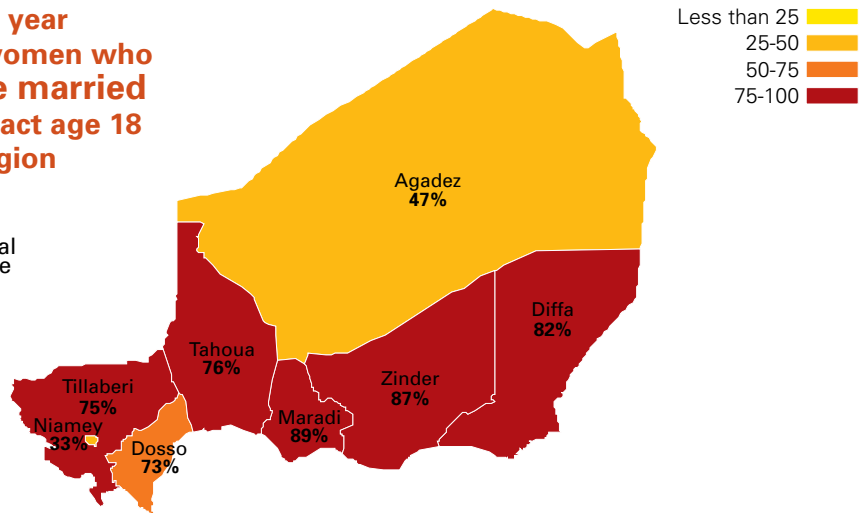
Adolescent birth rate
204.8
(UNDP, 2014)

Net attendance in secondary, female
13%
(UNICEF 2014)

Legal age at marriage without/with parental consent or approval by pertinent authority
Female 15
Male 18
(ACPF 2013)

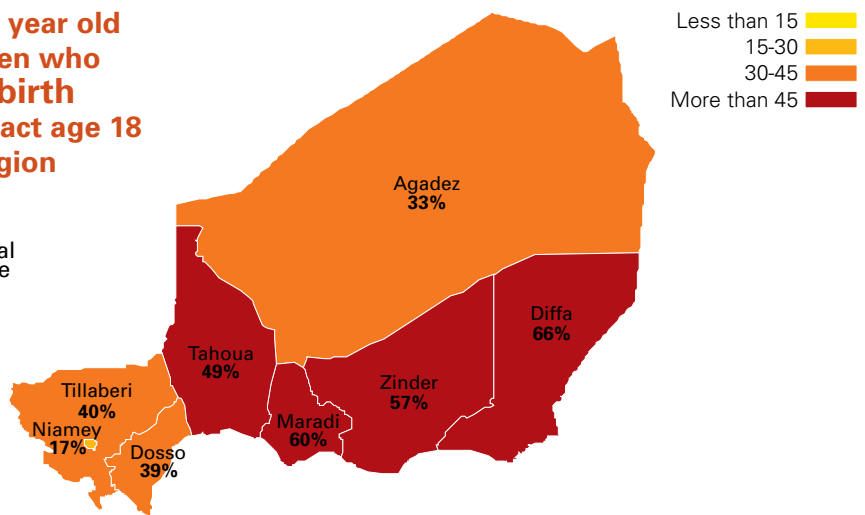
20-24 year old women who were married by exact age 18 by region

National average
76,3%



20-24 year old women who had birth by exact age 18 by region

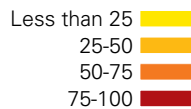
National average
48,2%



Niger has the highest rates of child marriage in the world. Over three quarters (76.3%) of young women aged 20-24 were married by age 18 and almost half (48.2%) had had a child. There is considerable variation across the country, with the highest rates of both marriage and childbirth in the south and eastern part of the country (Niamey being an exception). The highest rate of marriage for the 20-24 age group is in the Maradi region (89%), while the lowest rate is in Niamey (33%). The region with the highest rate of adolescent childbearing is also Maradi (60%) while the lowest is again Niamey (17%). In every region the percentage married is higher than the percentage who have had a birth, suggesting a strong link between marriage and childbearing.

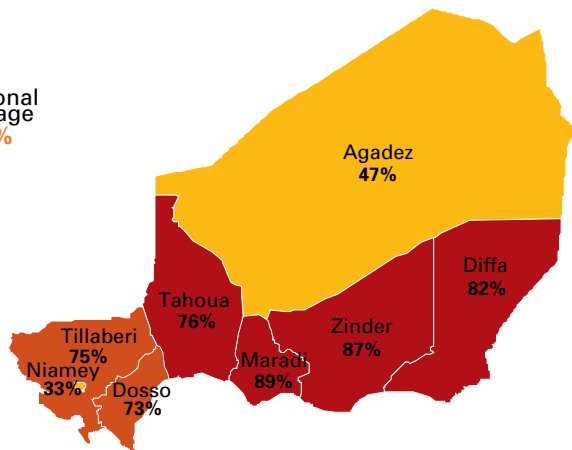
Sources for all maps: Data from 2012 Niger DHS. Spatial data from Spatial Data Repository, The Demographic and Health Surveys Program. ICF International. Available from spatialdata.dhsprogram.com [Accessed 10 December 2014]

Change in pattern of marriage before age 18 over time



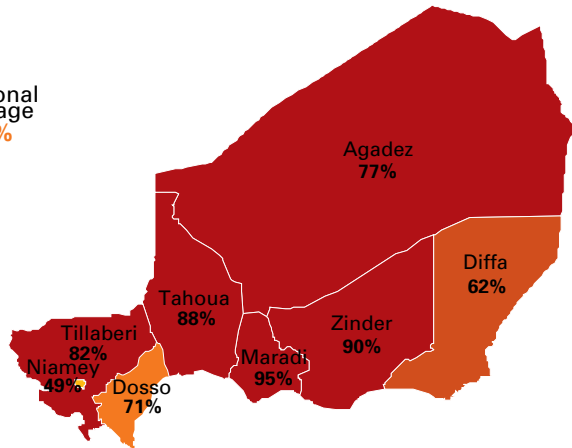
20-24 cohort

National average
76,3%



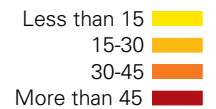
45-49 cohort

National average
83,5%



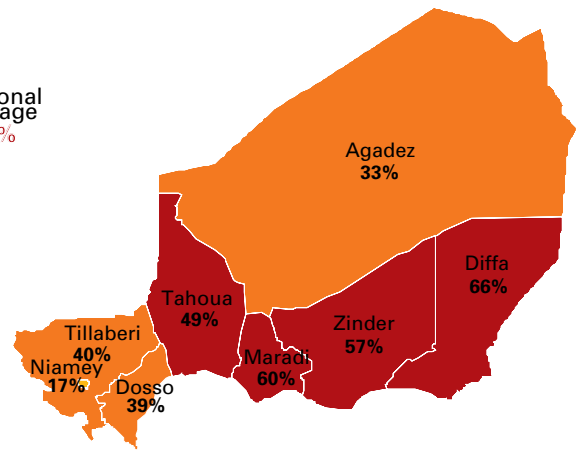
Child marriage has declined in Niger overall over the past two or three decades, as the maps above illustrate, but this change has been very moderate and uneven. Change in the southern regions has been very minor, and in Diffa prevalence has increased over time. Maradi remains the region with the highest prevalence (89% for 20-24 year olds), while Niamey has the lowest (33% for 20-24 year olds). The region with the largest change was Agadez, where the prevalence declined by 30 percentage points (77% to 47%) between the two cohorts.

Change in pattern of childbearing before age 18 over time



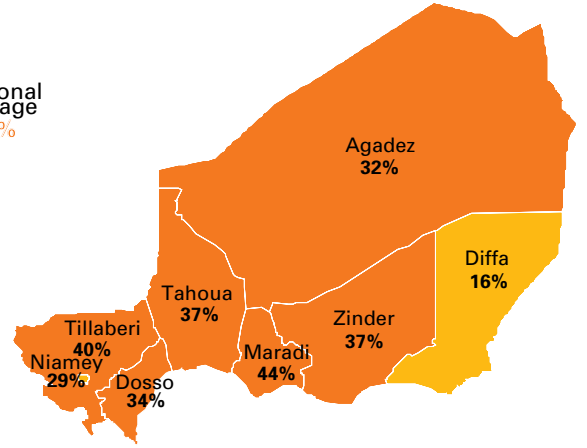
20-24 cohort

National average
48,2%





45-49 cohort

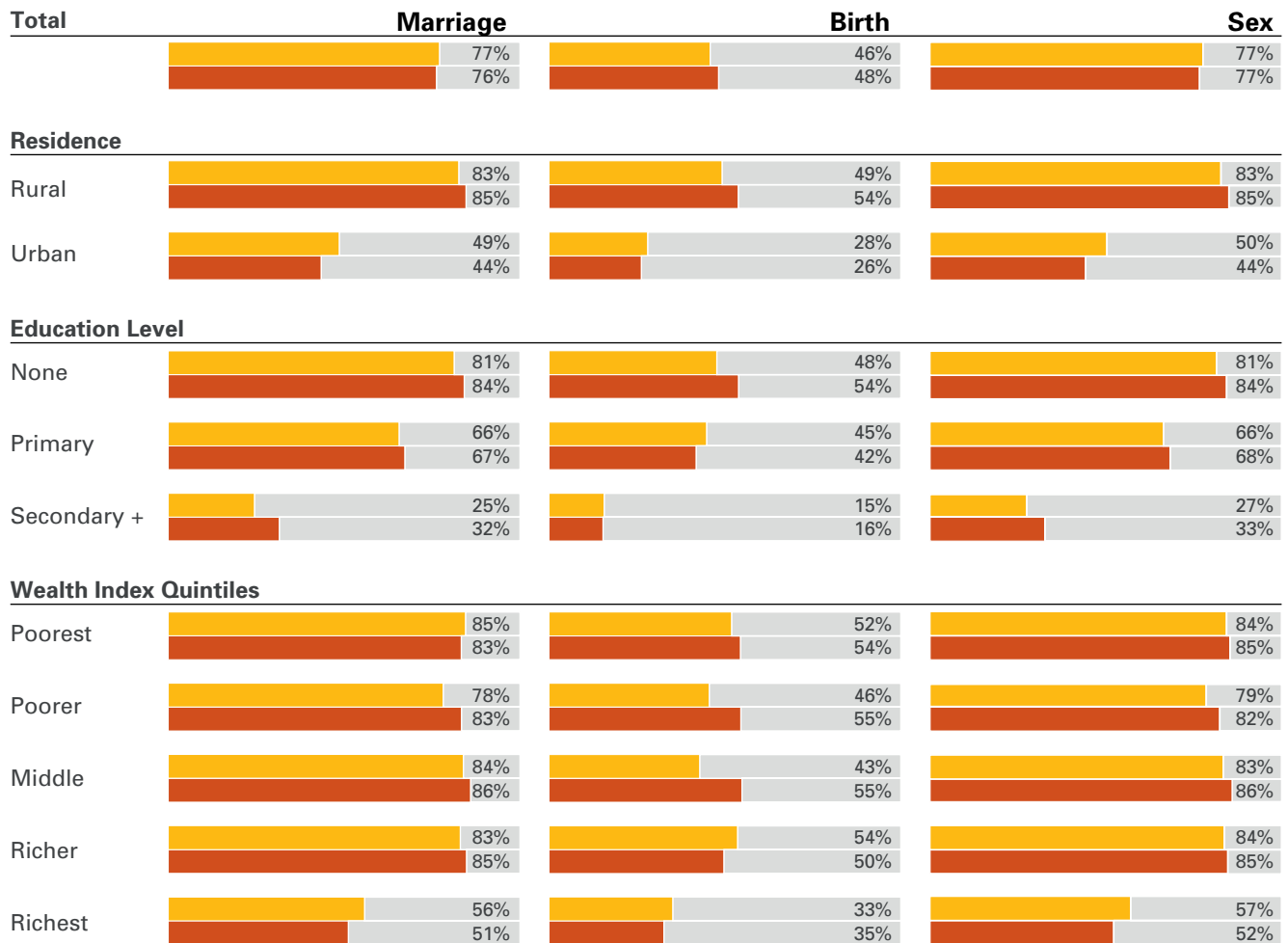
National average
37,5%



In contrast to the moderate declines seen in child marriage, the 20-24 cohort in Niger has much higher prevalence of adolescent pregnancy than the 45-49 one, indicating a further concentration of childbearing at younger ages. The most substantial increases have happened in the band of regions in the south of the country, with Tahoua, Maradi, Zinder, and Diffa all seeing significant increases. This was particularly dramatic in Diffa, where the prevalence increased by 50 percentage points, from a relatively low 16% of women in the 45-49 cohort to a nation-wide high of 66% in the 20-24 cohort.

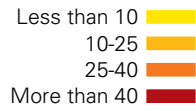
Characteristics of those who married, had sex, or gave birth before age 18

30-34 cohort 
20-24 cohort 



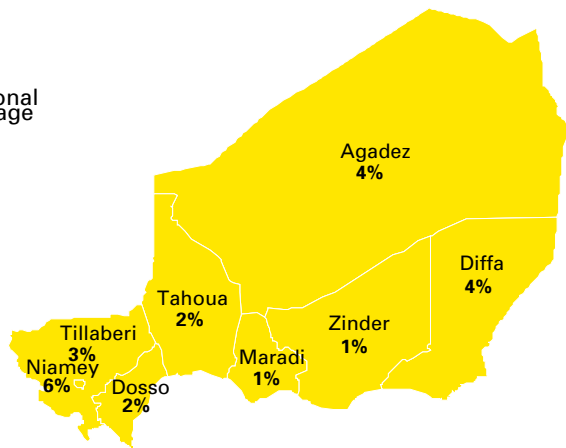
The figures above show the changes in the characteristics of those who had married, become sexually active or gave birth by 18 for two recent cohorts. Overall there is very little difference between the two cohorts, reinforcing the pattern of very slow change indicated in the maps above. Rural women were much more likely to have experienced all three events before age 18 than their urban counterparts, and in rural areas there was very little change between the two cohorts, though there are signs of increases in the prevalence of both births and sex in rural areas. In urban areas, in contrast, there were small declines between the two cohorts. Overall, there are little differences between the two cohorts in terms of the prevalence rates at each educational attainment level, though for each there is a steady decline as education increases and again the higher prevalence in the younger cohort is evident. Finally, there are very little differences in the prevalence rates for the bottom 80 percent of the wealth distribution, with only those in the top fifth (richest) having noticeably lower prevalence. Within the poorer groups, the prevalence of each event is higher for the 20-24 cohort. Overall, this suggests a concentration of these events in the poorer, rural population.

Premarital sexual activity - levels and trends?
Change in pattern of levels of premarital sex over time



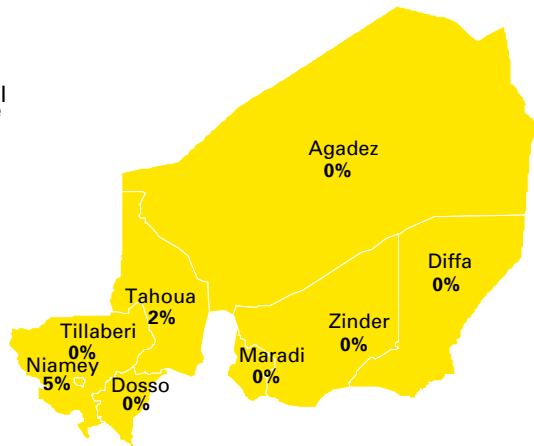
20-24 cohort

National average
2,1%



45-49 cohort

National average
0,7%



While in other contexts increases in age at marriage have been accompanied by rises in premarital sexual activity and childbearing, there is no evidence that this has taken place in Niger to any significant degree. The proportions reporting premarital sexual activity are extremely low throughout the country for both cohorts, with the exceptions being in Niamey (6% for 20-24 year olds), Diffa (4%) and Tillaberi (3%)²⁹.

29. DHS did not have any data on ethnicity in Niger.

Burkina Faso

Total population
15 540 000
(UNDP, 2012)

Life expectancy at birth
56.3 Years
(UNDP, 2014)

HDI rank
181
(UNDP, 2014)

GDI rank
133
(UNDP, 2014)

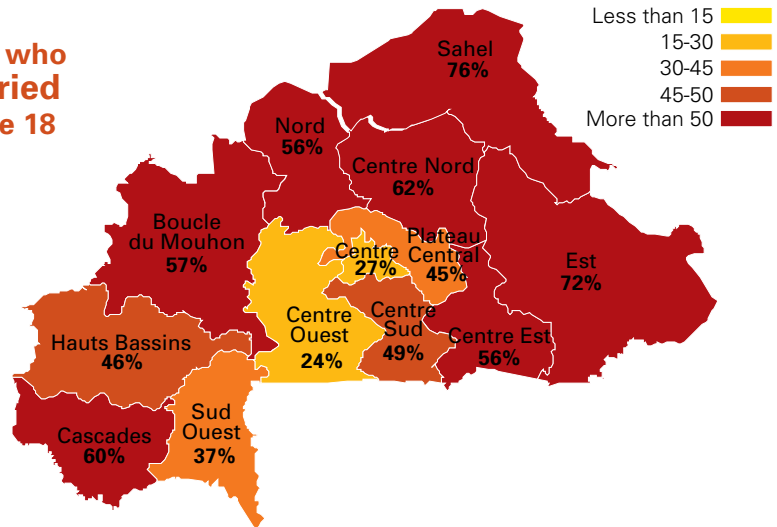
Adolescent birth rate
115.4
(UNDP, 2014)

Net attendance in secondary, female
17%
(UNICEF 2014)

Legal age at marriage without/with parental consent or approval by pertinent authority
Female 17
Male 20
(ACPF 2013)

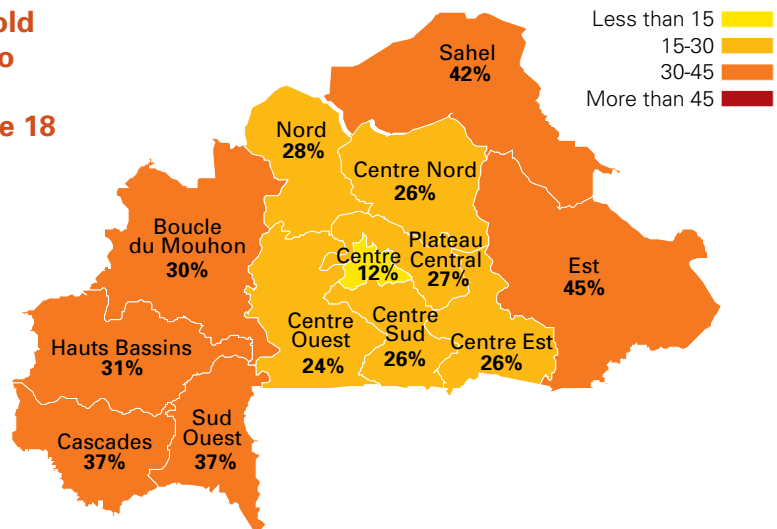
20-24 year old women who were married by exact age 18 by region

National average
51,6%



20-24 year old women who had birth by exact age 18 by region

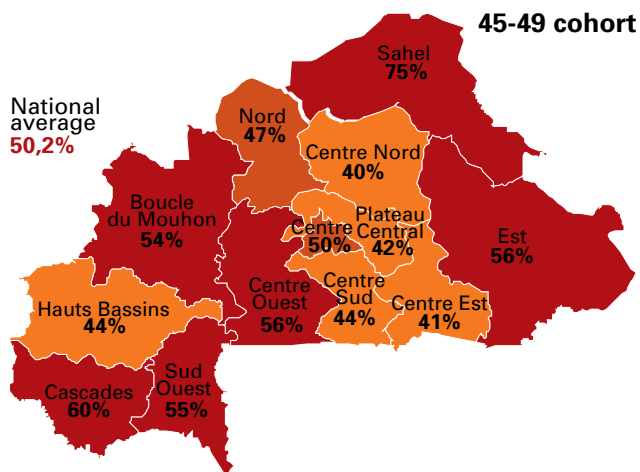
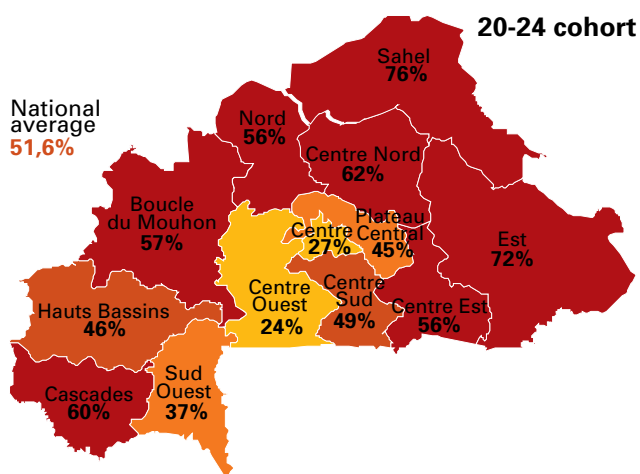
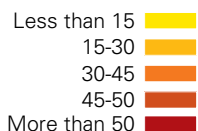
National average
28,2%



Over half (51.6%) of young women aged 20-24 in Burkina Faso were married by age 18 and almost one third (28.2%) already had a child at age 18. There is considerable variation across the country, with the lowest rates of both marriage and childbirth in the central part of the country. The highest rate of marriage is in the Sahel region (76%), while the lowest rate is in Centre (27%). The region with the highest rate of adolescent childbearing is Est (45%) while the lowest is Centre (12%). In every region the percentage married is higher than the percentage who have had a birth, reflecting the strong link between marriage and childbearing in Burkina Faso.

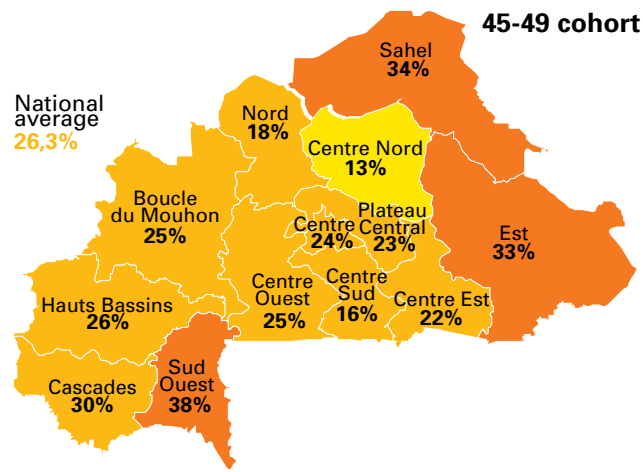
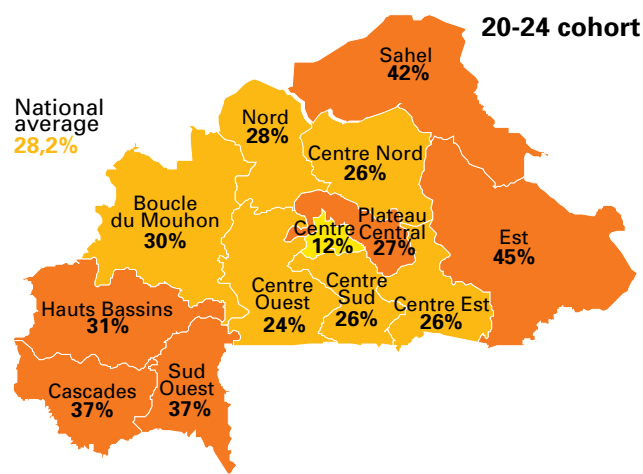
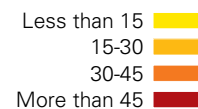
Sources for all maps: Data from 2012 Burkina Faso DHS. Spatial data from Spatial Data Repository, The Demographic and Health Surveys Program. ICF International. Available from spatialdata.dhsprogram.com [Accessed 5 December 2014]

Change in pattern of marriage before age 18 over time




Child marriage has essentially remained at the same levels national in Burkina Faso over the past two or three decades, as the maps above illustrate. There has been an intensification in the prevalence of child marriage in some regions, particularly those in the eastern part of the country, though for the most part changes have been small, with only the Centre region showing significant declines (from 50% in the older cohort to 27% in the younger).

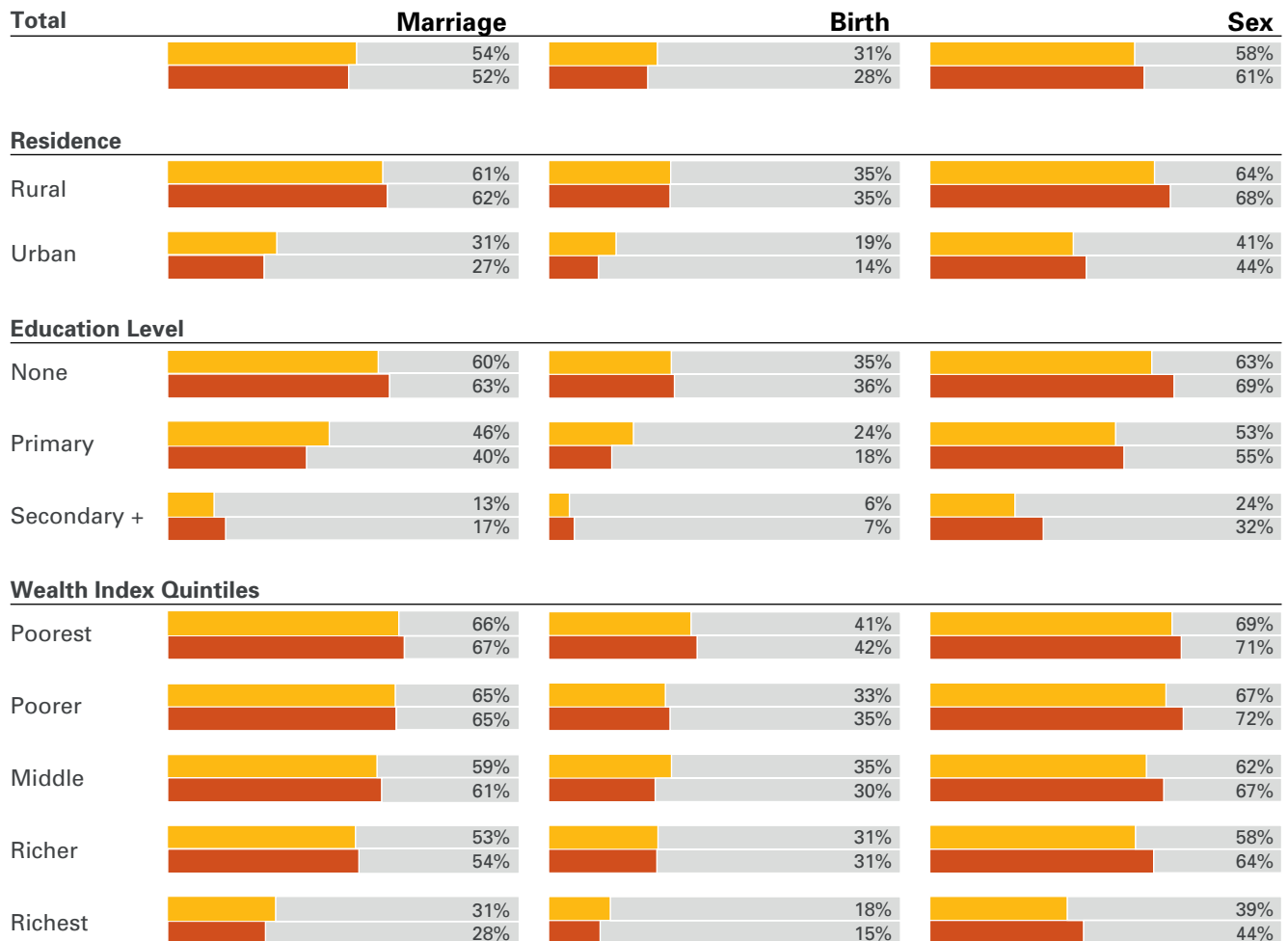
Change in pattern of childbearing before age 18 over time



There has also been a slight increase in adolescent childbearing in Burkina Faso, rising from 26.3% among the 45-49 year olds to 28.2% among 20-24 year olds. As with marriage, the greatest increases have been seen in eastern regions, with Sahel increasing from 34% to 42% and Est from 33% to 45%. With the exception of the Centre-Nord region, declines have been confined largely to the center of the country, with the largest fall in prevalence taking place in the Centre region (24% to 12%).

Characteristics of those who married, had sex, or gave birth before age 18

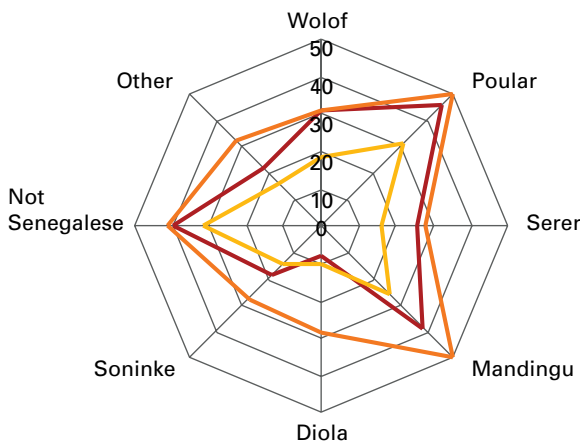
30-34 cohort 
20-24 cohort 



The figures above provide further evidence of the very slow changes seen in Burkina Faso. While there have been moderate declines between the 30-34 and 20-24 age groups in marriage and birth before 18, there are signs of slight increases in sexual activity before 18, which in any case are much higher than for either marriage or birth. These patterns are also evident when examining rural/urban residence, though the overall pattern is of much higher levels in rural areas. There is a clear pattern of decreasing prevalence for each behavior as educational attainment increases, though with only moderate differences between cohorts. There are relatively small declines in the prevalence as wealth increases, though the largest changes are between the top wealth group and the bottom four-fifths of the wealth distribution.

Ethnicity
What role does it play?

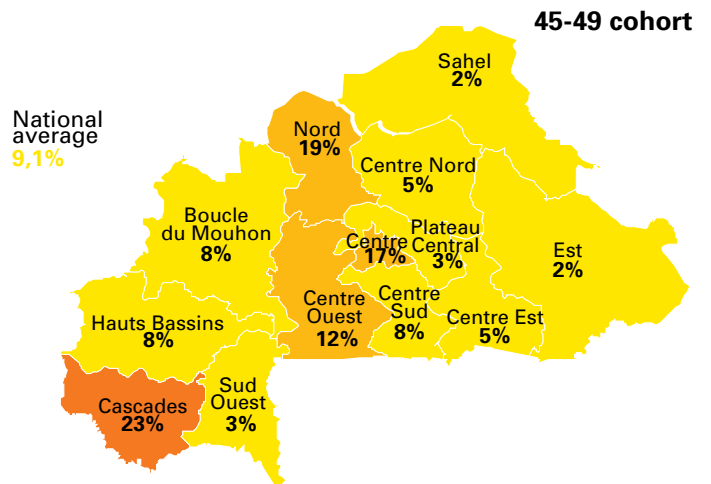
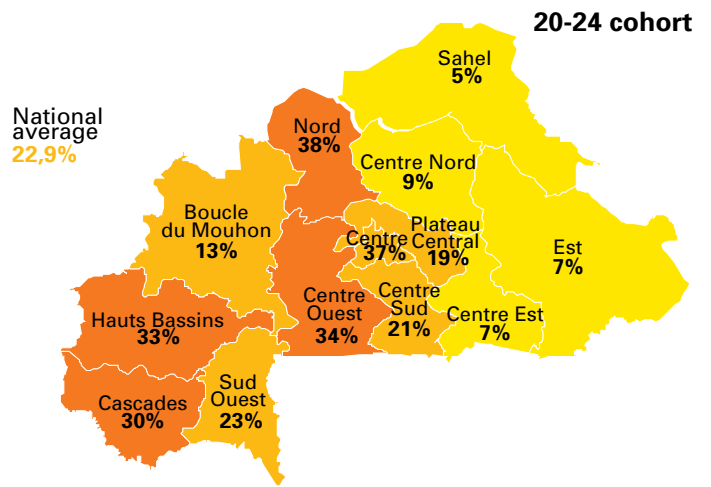
Married 18 —
Birth by 18 —
Sex by 18 —



There is relatively little variation in the patterns of the timing of marriage, sex and childbearing across Burkina Faso's main ethnic groups, as shown in this figure. For all groups, the proportions having a birth are much lower than for marriage or sexual activity, with levels of sexual activity exceeding those of marriage for all groups (though the difference is small for the Fulfulde/Peul). Overall this pattern suggests significant premarital sexual activity, particularly among the Gourounsi, Mossi, and Senoufo groups. The highest overall percentages for all three outcomes are for the Fulfulde/Peul and Gourmantche.

Premarital sexual activity - levels and trends?
Change in pattern of levels of premarital sex over time

Less than 10 —
10-25 —
25-40 —
More than 40 —



As the pattern above suggests, there is substantial (relative to other countries in the region) premarital sexual activity in Burkina Faso, and this proportion has been increasing over time. The proportion who were sexually active before marriage was 9.1% among the 45-49 year cohort and 22.9% for the 20-24 cohort. There is a clear geographic pattern with the prevalence of premarital sex increasing as you move west. The greatest increase was in Hauts-Bassins, which increased from 8% to 33% between the two cohorts.



Conclusions and implications for further research

PART 6

The goals of this study were to assess the levels, trends and relationships between child marriage and adolescent pregnancy in West and Central Africa. While the high prevalence of child marriage throughout the region is well documented, relatively little research has been done to develop a broader, region-wide perspective on what may drive changes in marriage and related patterns. This study, by approaching the question of child marriage as an integral part of the family formation process, provides the basis for the development of more theoretical and empirical research to explain change in the region and inform programming and policy approaches.

The research findings highlight the need to approach child marriage as part of a broader and dynamic process of family formation that is affected by deep demographic, economic, and sociocultural changes. As highlighted in the literature review, the process of family formation in the region has been challenged by a variety of 'macro' forces, including economic changes, increased migration, and changed perceptions of women's role in the economy. The manner in which young people adjust to this in terms of the timing of the formation of their families and the particular ordering of each of the key components of this process – marriage, sexual activity, and childbearing – underpins the changes and, in some cases, the lack of change, in both child marriage and adolescent pregnancy/childbearing. Future researchers should focus on developing a clearer understanding of how the different trajectories towards the formation of families both reflect and drive changes in the timing and prevalence of child marriage, and adolescent pregnancy, as well as what the implications are for effective programmatic or policy interventions that meet the actual, rather than perceived, needs of youth.

The research data capture this social complexity and are used to bring out the nuanced relationship between wealth, education, and the timing of marriage. For example, poorer and less educated women throughout the region are more likely to marry at early ages. A similar pattern is evident for secondary education, which may play a critical role in delaying marriage through providing a clear alternative to marriage (both immediately and through increasing long-term earning potential) and enhancing girl's empowerment/agency. Further research is required to better understand the ways that these relationships play out in different contexts and what the implications are for programs and policies. In addition, qualitative research needs to be accompanied by an extensive analysis of the context of the communities researched, covering aspects such as existing policies and legislation, services available and socio-demographic indicators to assess their impact, as well as a wider socio-cultural and historical contextualization.

These findings, coupled with the identification of two distinct 'types' of family formation patterns in the region stress the importance of context and of developing locally contextualized interventions that build both on an understanding of family formation and on how the latter is being affected by social change in that particular setting. Family formation, a key building block of families and society, is indeed at the locus of this process of change and is a particularly contested area of change. Specifically, the findings suggest that the linkage between marriage and sexual activity is in flux throughout the region. While the implications of this phenomenon for child marriage are unclear and as such merit further research, it is critical that interventions designed to address the needs of adolescents in this region, including those aimed at delaying marriage and pregnancy, 'meet them where they are' in terms of their situation and needs. In some contexts, this may mean an increased focus on providing information on sexual and reproductive health and access to family planning to married and unmarried youth, while in others the needs may be primarily within the context of marriage. Future research should seek to explore the differences in the situations of adolescents in the two types of countries more specifically to better understand both how predictive these typologies are and what types of interventions are likely to be effective at meeting their needs. Similarly, further research is needed to understand the geographical distribution of child marriage in the region, which is particularly concentrated in a northern 'band', and how this is linked to broader socio-cultural and economic determinants, including ethnicity, religion, economic insecurity, and the interplay between these.

PART 6. Conclusions and implications for further research

Related to the point above, these findings also highlight the need to develop more contextualized conceptual frameworks for this type of analyses. In order to understand child marriage within a broader process of family formation and socioeconomic change in a particular setting, researchers must first develop a context-specific theoretical model. The emphasis should be given to investigating in detail the layers that have the most direct influence in shaping behavior, rather than a model that depicts a general version of child marriage practices. It should incorporate the cultural and social specificities of family formation within a particular context. For example, it should include a careful investigation of the level at which marriage decisions are made with all their characteristics (e.g. if made at the household level, then wealth, age and sex composition of the household, residence (rural or urban), etc. are important variables to take into account in the analysis) as well as how those are being affected by socioeconomic change.

To date, research on child marriage has heavily relied on theoretical models developed in the context of marriage practices in South Asia. The findings from the current study, however, suggest that this model may not be as applicable to an African context, specifically in certain regional/local contexts. One of the shortcomings of applying a South Asian model is the assumption that marriage payments have the same direction and magnitude, failing to account for the fundamental difference between bride price (mostly in sub-Saharan Africa) and dowry (South Asia and several Middle Eastern and North African countries) in addition to their varying implications on family dynamics. Another problematic aspect of using such a model lies in the different patterns of family formation that this study found in which sexual activity and childbearing in some parts of West and Central Africa come before marriage – a situation that is fundamentally different in South Asia where sex and childbearing typically follow marriage. To account for these variations, researchers and programmers concerned with child marriage need to create a platform for more specific research on the practice, with conceptual frameworks that apply to the settings in which the research is being conducted and that account for the social and economic change on family structure and relationships specific to that setting.

These analyses also highlight a persistent challenge to researchers in the fields of child marriage and associated behaviors – that of clearly assigning a causal relationship between family formation patterns and key causes and consequences. One way to address it is through further qualitative research across the region, preferably including countries that fall into either of the two typologies identified, as this approach allows for a more nuanced assessment of causality than is typically possible relying solely on quantitative data. This approach could be particularly effective if combined with a purposive selection of ‘comparison’ sites that differ primarily in terms of key theorized determinants of child marriage, such as education, while remaining similar in other aspects such as rural/urban status. There is also a clear need for longitudinal data, both quantitative and qualitative, that follows individuals or communities over a significant period, including intergenerational perspectives, thus allowing a clearer assessment of causality than is possible using cross sectional data of the type used in this study.

Moreover, this research stresses the need to examine child marriage within a gendered context that focuses on the relational aspect of the process of family formation, particularly in terms of the significant differentials there are between men and women in terms of decision-making around marriage, sexual activity and childbearing. The trend towards increased premarital childbearing in many of the countries in the region touched upon in the quantitative research suggests that additional work is needed to understand better how gendered relations have changed in response to the broader changes in family formation, particularly as these relate to women’s autonomy and negotiating position within relationships, both within and outside of marriage.

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Appendix 1

Datasets used in quantitative analyses

Country	Country Code	Survey Year	Survey
West Africa			
Burkina Faso	BFA	2010	DHS
Côte d'Ivoire	CIV	2011 - 2012	DHS
Ghana	GHA	2011	MICS
Guinea	GIN	2012	DHS
Liberia	LBR	2013	DHS
Mali	MLI	2012 - 2013	DHS
Niger	NER	2012	DHS
Nigeria	NGA	2013	DHS
Senegal	SEN	2010 - 2011	DHS
Sierra Leone	SLE	2013	DHS
Central Africa			
Cameroon	CMR	2011	DHS
Central African Republic	CAF	2010	MICS
Chad	TCD	2010	MICS
Congo Brazzaville	COG	2011 - 2012	DHS
Congo, Democratic Republic of the	COD	2013 - 2014	DHS
Gabon	GAB	2012	DHS
Sao Tome and Principe	STP	2008 - 2009	DHS

Note: All DHS datasets are standard DHS datasets. To remain consistent, the standard DHS dataset (2010-2011) is chosen over the continuous DHS dataset (2012-2013) for Senegal. According to DHS, statistically significant changes are not expected to exist between the two surveys (see <http://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/DM34/DM34.pdf>).

*Due to a large number of missing observations to key variables used in this report, countries with datasets prior to 2010 (Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Mauritania and Togo) are excluded from the quantitative analyses.

*Cape Verde and Equatorial Guinea datasets are not available to the public.

*Benin could not be downloaded at the time of data analyses.

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West and Central Africa Regional Office Dakar, Senegal
www.unicef.org/wcaro/english

