Executive summary

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

Patterns, trends and drivers of change
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 (Demographic and Health Surveys and Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys)) 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.
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.
Key Findings

- **The median ages of child marriage** have increased in 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.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Married by 15</th>
<th>Married by 18</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29,1% maximum (Central African Republic)</td>
<td>76,3% maximum (Niger)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14,8% average</td>
<td>43,8% average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5% minimum (Sao Tome e Principe / Ghana)</td>
<td>20,7% minimum (Ghana / Gabon)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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.