

## Adolescent Migration and Marriage: Evidence from Malawi, Mali, and Niger

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**Background:** Child marriage, or marriage before age 18, is declining in some countries but persistently high in others. Research examining the factors associated with marriage before age 18 has focused on poverty, education, and entrenched social norms (Nour 2009; Jain and Kurz 2007). There has been limited research on how migration relates to adolescent marriage despite migration playing an important role in the lives of many adolescents. Migration among adolescent girls is poorly understood, but adolescent girls are moving in ever-greater numbers in search of educational and livelihoods opportunities or to avoid hardship at home (conflict, drought, natural disaster, etc.). West Africa, which includes countries with the highest proportion of girls married before age 18, has seen an increase in migration among females from rural to urban settings, with female migration associated with increases in female financial and social empowerment and reductions in familial poverty (Bello-Bravo, 2015). In Malawi, migration among youth is more common among adolescent boys and young men (IOM, 2015). The extent to which adolescent migration impacts the timing of marriage is not well defined in the literature. We sought to understand the role migration plays in early marriage by examining the experience of adolescent girls living in three high-marriage countries: Malawi, Mali and Niger.

**Methods:** In 2016, as part of an impact evaluation of a program to delay marriage and childbearing (the More than Brides Alliance), we conducted baseline surveys with adolescent girls 12-19 in Malawi (n=1020), Mali (n=855) and Niger (n=600). Midline data collection is ongoing in Malawi, Mali and Niger (September-October 2018) and results will be incorporated into this analysis. Surveys asked girls about their experience and motivations for migration, including migration for educational or livelihoods opportunities or for marriage. Midline surveys also collect data on family experience of migration, including receipt of remittances.

In addition to quantitative data, our analysis uses qualitative data from married and unmarried adolescent girls; parents of adolescent girls; and key informants in Mali (2017), Malawi (2018) and Niger (collection ongoing, 2018) to explore factors related to early marriage in these communities. In Mali, we specifically focus on the influence of migration on adolescent girls' lives, including seasonal migration to larger urban and peri-urban areas for livelihood opportunities, both for reasons related to marriage (notably, for the purpose of building a *trousseau*<sup>1</sup>) as well as for reasons independent of marriage. Our qualitative analyses in Mali focus on an attempt to better understand how migration may serve to accelerate marriage by helping a girl prepare her trousseau or alternatively to delay marriage by serving as a means for girls to 'hide out' in the city to avoid a marriage back home. We examine whether and how migration influences girls' marriage prospects upon their return to their communities and the perception of girls' migration among parents. In Malawi, we focus less on adolescent girls' migration, as we found few girls reported ever having left their natal village for work, education, or marriage. Rather, we explore the influence of migration of male adolescents on their female peers and how male adolescent migration influences the marriage market.

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<sup>1</sup> Trousseau is the personal possessions of a bride usually including clothes, accessories, and household linens and wares.

**Results:** Table 1 provides data on the baseline sample. Girls in our sample were, on average, about 15 years old. We found that Niger had a higher proportion of girls ever married (30.7) compared to Mali (14.4) and Malawi (13.3). Table 2 provides information about the Mali and Malawi qualitative samples. Niger data will be incorporated at a later date.

We found that in Mali, respondents reported migration to be common among adolescent girls, even referring to the phenomenon as an ‘exodus’ of girls from their communities. Girls in Mali seem to consider migration to be a rite of passage that is useful for gaining practical skills and generating income as well as an opportunity for personal growth. As one respondent noted:

*For those who don't like early marriage, they leave and hide out in Bamako for a period of time.*

Focus group, engaged girls, Mali

Respondents reported that labor migration was often motivated by girls seeking to build their trousseau, the household items females accumulate prior to marriage, a goal that is inextricably linked with marriage. For some girls, earning money to constitute a trousseau was a nicety, but for many, it was an economic necessity, as shown in the quote below from a married girl:

*The village inhabitants know that migration isn't a good thing but if you don't have the means [to build a trousseau], you don't have a choice. You will let your girl leave. She will work in search of her trousseau, in search of money for her marriage trousseau. If her mother has nothing and her father has nothing, it's the children who do the seeking, which are the reasons why they don't have a choice.*

In-depth interview, married girl, Mali

Migration is also seen as important for building skills that may be useful for girls once they return to their communities:

*Migration can render certain girls more mature. They learn a lot of small business skills if they go in places where they can learn these small businesses like commerce. On their return, if they apply their knowledge in commerce, they can have a little bit of money.*

Focus group discussions, mothers of adolescent girls, Malawi

Contrasting to Mali, individuals in Malawi reported that migration was more common among males in the community. This migration had important implications for the marriage market, with males who migrated being more attractive partners. As one key informant noted:

*Boys go to South Africa and after some time they come with a lot of items, which, when other parents see, they wish for those items to be theirs so they arrange marriages for their girls so that they should also receive items from Durban.*

Key informant, Malawi

Data suggest that parents of adolescent girls are aware of the power male migration carries on the marriage market back in their communities. During a focus group of mothers in Malawi, one mother explained how migration might influence a young male's process for seeking a marital partner:

*Some of them would ask their grandmothers to find a girl for them. For example, if I have my brother that lives in South Africa and he has requested me to find a girl for him to marry, I can go to some family where I feel like there is a girl that would suite my brother. There, I would discuss with her parents that I have a brother who works in South Africa and he would like to marry their daughter. Just by hearing "South Africa" her parents do not hesitate but allow or force their daughter to get married. The parents convince their daughter about the benefits of being married to someone that lives in South Africa.*

Focus group, mothers of adolescent girls, Malawi

In addition to males who migrate having more power on the marriage market, their migration can also lead to female migration. As noted during a focus group of unmarried adolescent girls, girls can be called away to migrate by a male already in South Africa:

*When the man got to South Africa then he calls to her parents that he needs a girl to marry. Then they arrange with the brother to stand on his behalf during the wedding and just after that then she is taken to South Africa.*

Focus group, unmarried adolescent girls, Malawi

**Discussion:** Migration behaviors among adolescents and the association between migration and marriage timing are different in each context included in this research. We found very different patterns of migration among females in Mali and Malawi, though in both contexts migration had an influence on the timing of marriage. We were interested to observe these differences in relation to overall trends in early marriage incidence in these countries. As shown in Figure 1, DHS data suggest that child marriage has been on a relatively rapid decline in Mali while the practice has seen slower declines in Malawi and Niger. Using our baseline data, we found that in Mali, girls who were never married were much more likely to be currently working for income (19.6%) compared to their counterparts in Niger (8.3%) and Malawi (4.8%). We are exploring the relationship between livelihood opportunities and child marriage with our quantitative data. We posit that decline in early marriage in Mali coupled with work opportunities for adolescent girls imply that Mali is further along in the trajectory of development. This may also suggest that the lack of livelihoods opportunities in Niger may be a driver of child marriage, however, we see similar disengagement in livelihoods opportunities in Malawi without the higher proportion married. This suggests that we need to more closely examine how livelihoods opportunities are linked to early marriage in these settings and how movement for livelihoods opportunities, either directly for adolescent girls' work or work for their partners, influences marriage timing. This paper will incorporate data from the midline data collection in 2018 and qualitative data in Niger to more closely examine adolescent migration in these high child marriage countries.

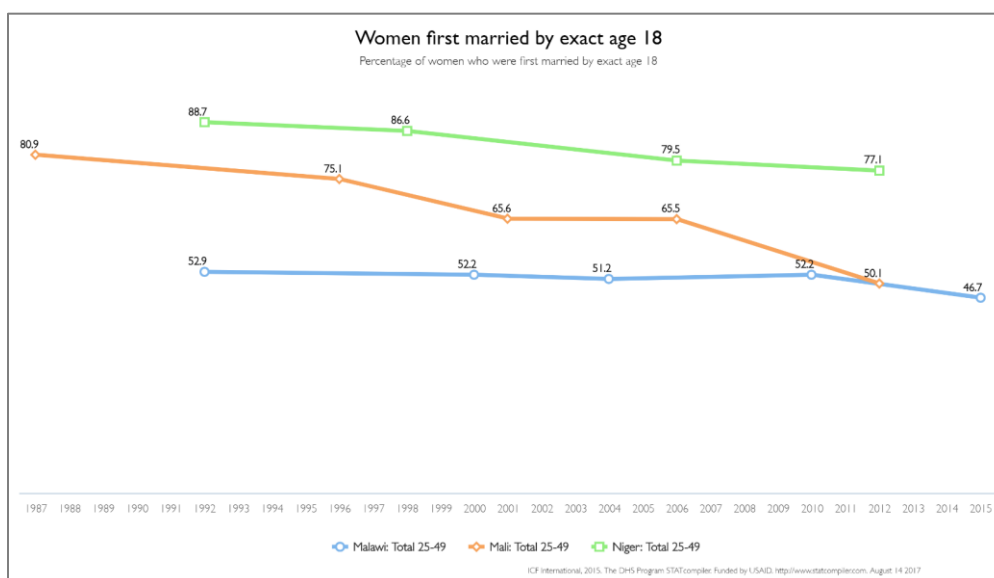
**Table 1. Demographics for Baseline Sample of Girls 12-19**

	Mali (n=855)	Malawi (n=1020)	Niger (n=600)
<b>Age (mean)</b>	15.2	14.9	15.1
Respondents who were currently married (%)	14.4	13.3	30.7
Age at marriage (mean)	16.1	16.6	14.5
<b>Schooling status</b>			
Out of school (%)	59.6	36.0	60.8
Years of school completed (ever attended school) (mean)	6.2	4.3	4.9
<b>Parental Education</b>			
Mother has no formal schooling (%)	87.4	23.4	84.5
Father has no formal schooling (%)	76.9	15.6	75.5
Is non-Muslim (%)	11.2	37.0	8.3
Number of siblings (mean)	5.1	4.5	5.5
Has always lived in the same village (%)	87.8	78.7	76.0

**Table 2. Characteristics of Adolescents in FGDs and IDIs in Malawi and Mali**

	Malawi		Mali	
	FGDs (n=124)	IDIs (n=21)	FGDs (n=99)	IDIs (n=41)
<b>Age (mean)</b>	16.2	17.0	16.8	16.7
<b>Ever married</b>	22.6	42.8	35.3	43.9

**Figure 1. Trends in Marriage by Age 18 in Malawi, Mali and Niger**



## References

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