

Neetu A. John¹, Iman Barre¹, Meroji Seban¹, Funmi Olaolorun²

¹International Center for Research on Women

²College of Medicine, University of Ibadan

Title: – Understanding Shifts in Marital Dynamics and Relationship Quality by Comparing Early with Later Marriages in Urban Ibadan, Nigeria

Significance/background: Across the globe, spurred by forces such as industrialization and urbanization, marriage patterns are undergoing shifts. In modern economies, families are rapidly ceasing to be units of economic production. This can lead to weakening of ties among extended family members and a strengthening of the conjugal bond (Cherlin, 2012). In addition, the growing importance of individualism and the rise in the status of women are spurring further change to the institution of marriage (Wilcox & Nock, 2006). Burgess (1943) described these shifts as a transition from an “institutional” or “traditional” marriage based on traditional patriarchal authority, kinship and lineage systems to one based on “companionship.” Love, friendship and mutual respect are prominent aspects of companionship marriages. These marriages can be more egalitarian, with greater emphasis on communication and negotiation of mutual desires and goals between spouses, resulting in high quality marriages that are long lasting. Empirically the actual shifts in marriage patterns, in the west and across the globe, have been more complex than social theorists postulated. However, there is evidence to suggest that the ideation of the western family, with its emphasis on companionship and romantic love is spreading across the globe, even in settings with very little progress towards industrialization (Cherlin, 2012).

Main questions: However, while marital patterns are changing across the globe, there is less clarity on the different types of relationships that are emerging because of these shifts, especially in terms of power dynamics and emotional processes. Given these gaps, in this study, we use marriage timing (early versus later) to explore if more egalitarian forms of marriage are emerging in urban Nigeria.

Methodology: The qualitative study was conducted in urban Ibadan, Nigeria, where we conducted in-depth interviews with 20 young couples, where the woman was between 18-35 years old. The sample consisted of 8 couples, where the woman was married before the age of 18 years, and 12 couples with women married as an adult. The goal of the in-depth interviews was to illicit detailed information on their relationship with partner in terms of division of labor, decision-making as well as relationship quality.

Results/key findings: There were interesting differences between the child bride and non-child bride couples in patterns of sharing the household care-burden and decision-making, levels of intimacy, trust and communication. When it came to share the care-burden, not surprisingly, the women, regardless of the group, tended to bear a larger burden. The groups, however, differed in terms of how they elicited the husband’s participation in domestic chores and how strongly they felt the need to conform to rigid gender norms. While the child brides felt more intensely attached to their gender roles and found it hard to ask their husband to support them even if they felt overburdened, the non-child brides, in contrast, were very open about male involvement in household chores. When it came to decision-making patterns, although, no major differences were seen between the groups in routine everyday decision-making and household purchases, with the couples following a few different scenarios, differences emerged when the groups discussed how decisions were made on spending any disposable

income that could be used to purchase luxury goods as well as income used for future financial planning. While the child brides were more likely to leave the decision-making in these areas to their husbands and were satisfied with the arrangement, the non-child brides described a more discursive process, where the couples discussed and negotiated if the outcome was not to their liking. Similarly, while the men across the groups tended to view themselves as the lead decision-maker and breadwinner, the men married to child brides were more likely to hold on to the traditional breadwinner role for themselves, whereas, the men married to non-child brides described more openness to sharing the household expenditure and decision-making burden with their wives, especially given the current economic challenges Nigeria was facing.

Knowledge contribution: Our study found that while child brides were more likely to be in a more traditional marriage, the non-child brides were more likely to be in a companionate marriage. Unlike non-child bride couples, the child brides and their husbands were more likely to adhere to traditional gender roles. Moreover, while child brides had limited agency and felt constrained in expressing their voice, the non-child brides actively bargained and negotiated to achieve their goals. Our study expands knowledge of an understudied area in a new context and demonstrates how application of a theoretical framework can allow cross-cultural comparisons and help us understand the consequences of global processes on local institutions.