



# Intergenerational Education Effects of Early Marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa

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**Summary.** — This paper analyzes the evolution of the effects on educational inequality of early marriage by looking at the impact of whether women had married young on their children's schooling outcomes for 25–32 countries (Demographic and Health Surveys) in 2000 and 2010 for Sub-Saharan Africa. We also explore indirect pathways—mother's education, health, and empowerment as well as community channels—operating from early marriage to child schooling and assess the presence of negative externalities for non-early married mothers and their children on education transmission in communities with large rates of child marriage. In our econometric analysis we employ OLS, matching, instrumental variables, and pseudo-panel for a better understanding of changes over time. Our results show that early marriage is still a significant source of inequality, though its impact has decreased across time: girls born to early married mothers are between 6% and 11% more likely to never been to school and 1.6% and 1.7% to enter late, and 3.3% and 5.1% less likely to complete primary school, whereas boys are between 5.2% and 8.8% more likely to never been to school and 1% and 1.9% to enter late, and 2.3% and 5.5% less likely to complete primary school. Second, child marriage increases gender inequality within household's with girls losing an additional 0.07 years of schooling as compared to boys if born to early married mothers. Third, our estimates show that mother's education and health mediate some of the effect of early marriage and that the large prevalence of child marriage in a community also impairs educational transmission for non-early married mothers. Fourth, empowering of young wives can weaken other channels of transmission of education inequalities. Overall, our findings highlight the need to target these children with the appropriate interventions and support to achieve the greater focus on equity in the global post-2015 education agenda.  
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**Key words** — early marriage, intergenerational transmission, education, community, empowerment, Sub-Saharan Africa

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Dakar Framework for Action set at the World Education Forum in 2000 established an ambitious six Education for All (EFA) goals to be achieved by 2015. In relation to the goal of achieving access to education for all, there has been an improvement in net enrollment ratios with more children enrolled in school during the last decade in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), however, among the poorest children the chances of completing primary education still remains low (Akyeampong, 2009; UNESCO, 2014; World Bank, 2011). Besides poverty, cultural traditions, and gender violence, the incidence of early marriage is a major reason for disadvantaged groups, particularly poor girls, not making as much progress in enrolling and completing primary education (Lee-Rife, Malhotra, Warner, & McGonagle Gliniski, 2012; Loaiza & Wong, 2012; Malhotra, Warner, McGonagle, & Lee-Rife, 2011).

Although the incidence of early marriage and its impact on educational access is widespread and well documented (see, for instance: Carmichael, 2011; Delprato, Akyeampong, Sabates, & Hernandez-Fernandez, 2015; Erulkar, 2013; Field and Ambrus, 2008; Godha, Hotchkiss, & Gage, 2013; Jensen & Thornton, 2003; Raj & Boehmer, 2013), children of early married mothers is a group that has received little research and policy attention. In particular, research that has looked at the impact of marrying young on children's educational opportunities and the pathways through which this occurs, as well as the implication on gender gap, has been lacking. Understanding the factors underpinning the transmission of educational inequalities from early married mothers to their children in Sub-Saharan Africa is important for developing policies and programs that tackle the intergenerational effects

of early marriage on educational access for adolescent girls. Besides, because daughters of young wives are more at risk of not accessing or completing primary education because of social norms on age of marriage and related parental aspirations (Maertens, 2013), understanding the factors that promote early marriage for this group will help to understand what policies are likely to make a difference. Moreover, this is key to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDG4) and in particular goal 5 which makes an explicit call for the elimination of “child, early and forced marriage” (UN, 2015).

In this paper, we use the term early marriage, also known as child marriage, to mean legal or customary marriage between two people, of whom one or both spouses are below the age of 18 (Article 1, Convention of the Rights of the Child, CRC).<sup>1</sup> We focus on girls, and define early married mothers or young wives (henceforth denoted as EMM) as those who enter marriage before the age of 18. We chose to focus on Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) because of the high prevalence of the early marriage of young adolescent girls. According to UNICEF, currently, out of the 10 countries with the highest rates of early marriage 7 are in SSA (UNICEF, 2014). It is estimated that 700 million women will be married before age 18 by 2050 and that SSA will surpass South Asia on the number and global share of child marriage. Even by doubling the current rate of decline, in 2050 SSA, will account for 47% of the total child marriage in the world (UNICEF, 2014). This makes focusing on the issue of child marriage critical and important to improving access to quality education for adolescent girls, and the importance of research which helps to map out the scale of the problem, but also produce insights into the factors

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responsible for its prevalence in SSA. Findings from our study will also help to inform policies that have the potential to reduce its prevalence in SSA.

In this paper, we estimate the impact of early marriage on children's education for SSA, looking for changes in this relationship across time and taking stock on whether child marriage is a source of educational inequality. We analyze 25–32 countries (Demographic and Health Surveys) around the year 2000 (wave 1) and 2010 (wave 2) drawing on a range of child education indicators. We also investigate indirect pathways (mother's education, health and empowerment<sup>2</sup> as well as community channels) operating from early marriage to child schooling and, by focusing on non-EMM and their children, we explore the nature of negative externalities on the transmission of education in communities with high incidence of child marriage. The analysis is performed separately for boys and girls to establish if early marriage, not only diminishes education investments on children, but also if it contributes to widening gender inequality within households.

We employ ordinary least squares (OLS) and matching techniques as well as instrumental variables (IV) to account for the plausible endogeneity in the early marriage–children's schooling relationship. Moreover, we construct a pseudo panel which in our view offers a better understanding of change over time in comparison to analysis of each wave separately.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on how early marriage translates into lower schooling for children. In Section 3, we present a model linking early marriage and empowerment, because of the importance of the latter in addressing the former. Section 4 presents the data and Section 5 describes the alternative econometric approaches used. In Section 6, we present the main empirical findings and robustness analysis. Finally, in Section 7, we conclude with a discussion of the implications and present key recommendations from our analysis.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

### (a) *Theoretical perspective on early marriage*

Early marriage can have several effects on educational opportunities for young children. How early marriage affects children's education requires that we understand what lies behind the phenomenon. Decisions on child marriage need to be understood beyond parental preferences that are self-regarded, they should also consider other type of non-altruistic preferences and the role of social expectations.

How does one explain the incidence of child marriage? According to analysis by [Bicchieri, Jiang, and Lindemann \(2014\)](#), behaviors are influenced by pRefs., options and beliefs, and early marriage is not an exception. As collective practice, it is often based on a cluster of individual behaviors which regulates behavior as individuals conform to it by their beliefs. Thus, for early marriage to be a social norm, it needs to be influenced by what other people do (empirical expectations) and think should be done (normative expectations). They argue that one can categorize different types of practice of early marriage based on the different kinds of preferences and beliefs that sustain them. [Diagram 1](#) offers a typology of these different categories of early marriage.

The diagram shows whether child marriage is a rational response, a custom, a moral rule, a descriptive norm or a social norm. Knowing this is important as the incentives to modify it ultimately relies on what constitutes and drives child

marriage. For example, there can be incentives to marry girls young as wealth transfers from the bride's family to the groom at the time of marriage (dowry) are lower if brides are young and uneducated ([Maertens & Chari, 2012](#)). This makes the collective practice of child marriage a rationale response (category 1) as it is rooted in self-interest. Also, when parental personal normative beliefs (such as to preserve virginity before marriage and protection of girls' sexuality) are important, forcing daughters to marry young is a route to accomplished this ([Khanna, Verma, & Weiss, 2013](#)). In this case child marriage is classified as a moral rule. Moreover, when child marriage decisions are more strongly shaped by social expectations (where failure to conform can result in disapproval or shame for the family within the community for example), child marriage falls into categories 3 and 4. Rational responses behind child marriage can be weakened by changing economic incentives behind it, while if child marriage is a social norm changes can only occur collectively, in a coordinated way ([Bicchieri & Mercier, 2014](#)).

### (b) *Factors influencing education outcomes and early marriage*

The educational choice of households made for their children often depends on the expected returns and costs of education and household's income especially if family is credit constrained ([Black & Devereux, 2011](#)), but it also depends on the aspiration of parents ([Genicot and Ray, 2014](#)). Restricted investments in schooling may be due to, low parental aspirations because of their low education ([Chevalier, Denny, & McMahon, 2009](#)), which can also be influenced further by family composition (number of children and also gender composition) that puts a strain on the distribution of resources and opportunity costs of schooling ([Nishimura & Yamano, 2013](#)). Gender-cultural factors, in particular, can be a further obstacle to educate girls ([Glick, 2008](#)). Overall, these factors operate at different levels: individual, household, community, cultural.

Individual factors are particularly key. Children's ability and gender can influence the levels of educational investments made by parents. There is a genetic component in the transmission of ability—the nature component—([Becker & Tomes, 1986; Behrman, Pollak, & Taubman, 1995](#)) which directly influences the expected returns that children would obtain from further schooling. What is more, cognitive abilities can be setback for lack of care around birth. Young married girls start child-bearing soon after marriage with increased health risks from complications in pregnancy and death during delivery, low-birth weight, and high risk of infant mortality coupled with short birth spacing ([Godha et al., 2013; Raj & Boehmer, 2013](#)). More importantly, young wives' nutrition can decline during pregnancy, and coupled with a lack of maternal health care services and vaccinations' usage ([Singh, Kumar, & Pranjali, 2014; Singh, Rai, & Singh, 2012](#)), this can have long-term effects on children's cognitive abilities and their associated educational returns. In other words, by having children at a young age, young mothers risk transmitting genetic disadvantage that can affect the child's cognitive abilities and limit the returns from investing in their education. For example, health as a channel can result in fewer education investments through its impact on the cognitive abilities of the children of EMM. Educational investments also depend on a child's gender which traverses all levels. Families and communities may see girls as having little importance outside of their roles as wives, with any benefits perceived to accrue to the future husbands' families, while boys are given preference in the belief that they will look after their parents ([Huisman & Smits, 2009](#)).

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