



CREATIVE



## **NIGER**

**Early marriage, high birth rates, low literacy  
mean greater disenfranchisement for women**

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A new survey by the World Economic Forum ranked Iceland the best place to be a woman for the 11<sup>th</sup> year in a row. If Iceland is the best country to be a woman, by most measures, Niger is the worst. Niger ranks 189 out of the 189 countries in the UNDP Human Development Report's Gender Development Index and Women's Empowerment Index, a spot it has held since 1995—more than 24 years.

Niger also holds the dubious honor of having the world's highest rate of early marriage, the lowest age at first birth and the highest birth rate in the world. It also has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world. Twenty-eight percent of girls in Niger are married before the age of 15 and 76 percent are married before their 18th birthday. Thirty six percent of girls aged 15 to 19 have started their reproductive careers, and the average woman gives birth to 7.2 children. While 27 percent of men aged 15 and older can read and write, a mere 11 percent of women can do the same. The mean years of schooling for girls is 1.4 and for boys it is 2.7.

### The tangled web: Causes of women's lack of autonomy

It is no coincidence that countries with a high prevalence of early marriage are also those with the lowest rates of gender equality and women's empowerment. Early marriage starts a vicious cycle.

In Niger, girls usually marry men at least nine years older than them. Many are not their husband's first wife and are therefore expected to be obedient not only to their spouse, who is the legally established head of household, but also to their husband's other wives and to their in-laws. Girl brides are often married into the practice of *wahaya*—or the taking of a fifth wife—which has been noted as a form of slavery by the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery.

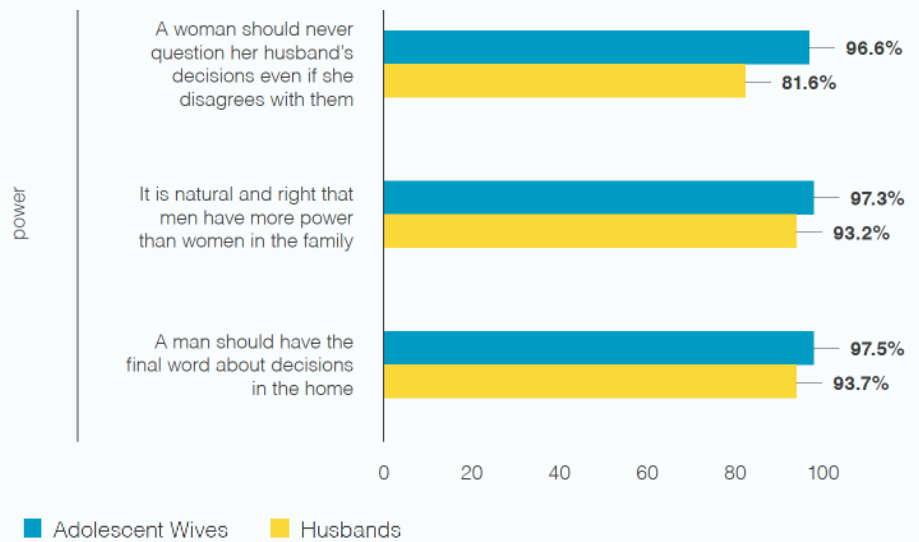
Early marriage means girls are likely to start their reproductive careers before their bodies are ready—leading to obstructed births, fistulas, low-weight babies and high infant and maternal mortality. In Niger, a woman's desired family size is nine children; for men it is 11 children. More children are considered to be a reflection of the husband's status and wealth. High fertility rates also lead to women's time poverty and severely constrain their ability to participate in income-generating opportunities and civil life.

Chart 1.

	Respondent	Person(s) who usually makes decisions about household activities			
		Husband	Wife	Husband and wife jointly	Husband's father
How money earned will be used	Adolescent wives	75.8	3.1	4.0	13.9
	Husbands	85.7	0.4	4.0	8.6
Whether wife should work to earn money	Adolescent wives	92.5	0.7	0.9	4.5
	Husbands	92.6	0.3	4	2.3
Seeking healthcare for the family	Adolescent wives	87.4	0.9	0.8	9.1
	Husbands	91.0	0.2	4.3	2.9
Making major household purchases	Adolescent wives	81.1	0.4	1.4	13.6
	Husbands	81.3	0.9	4.4	11.9
Visits to relatives outside the village	Adolescent wives	91.7	0.4	0.5	6.3
	Husbands	91.5	0.6	4.3	1.8

Source: See Spindler, E., et al.

Chart 2.



Source: See Spindler, E., et al.

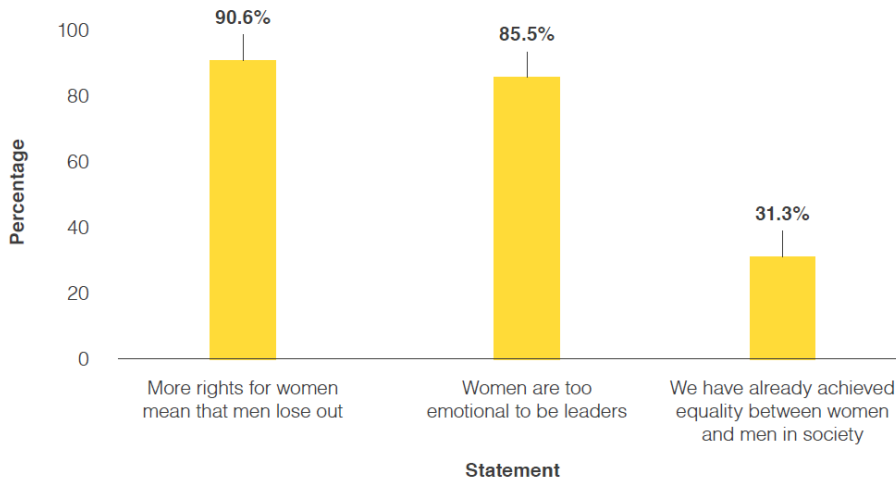
Once married, a girl is expected to leave school—or remain in the classroom only with the permission of her husband. The power differentials based on gender and age also mean that women are more likely to be subject to gender-based violence and more likely to feel that their beatings are justified than their male counterparts.

### Social & Economic Empowerment Denied

These dynamics make it hard to untangle the web of interrelated phenomena that conspire to prevent women's economic and social empowerment. Early marriage and early age at first birth make it difficult to continue

### Chart 3.

Figure 3.5.c Husbands' agreement with inequitable statements about gender equality



Source: See Spindler, E., et al.

school. Leaving school early hinders economic empowerment and the ability to exert more decision-making power in the family. Not having decision-making in the family or support to attend schools, or other viable options to earn an income, makes it harder for young girls to resist early marriage.

Traditional gender norms and the view that a girl's primary role is to provide children for her husband, combined with few paid jobs and role models for education, limit girls' aspirations and motivation to do well or stay in school.

These dynamics also have significant consequences for the state. High fertility rates mean that any development gains are quickly outstripped by the high rates of population growth. The state cannot keep up with the demands for schools, teachers or health facilities. Add to this recent droughts and the influx of refugees escaping from conflicts and violent extremist groups coming from literally all sides, as well as calls for autonomy coming from within. None of these dynamics makes it easy to convince the state that promoting women's empowerment or enhancing their participation in service delivery decision-making is the key for lifting the country out of its current dismal situation.

### Women's lack of participation in decision-making

While Niger is diverse ethnically and religiously, large swaths of it embraced Sufism in different forms. In the 1980s, several of these groups were active in advancing progressive views of women's literacy, health and civic engagement within an Islamic framework.<sup>1</sup> While these views were often vetoed by more extremist Islamic forces, they nonetheless played a role in the politics of the country. Today, these views have been eclipsed by more extremist Islamic views on women.

The recent report by Promundo et al. noted that: "Obedience and respect appear to be interdependent characteristics that allow a man to maintain power and authority in the household and in society." Likewise, the Chart 1. shows how little household decision-making power young wives have in Niger.

Similarly, additional research show confirms that women have very little say within the household.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps most disturbing is that men see more rights for women coming at their expense. This is demonstrated in Chart 3. Clearly, for

men, improving women's rights and access to resources is a zero-sum game.

### Women in service delivery decision-making

Given women's low level of decision-making in the household, it is logical to assume that women's participation in public service delivery decision-making is next to nothing—even in the public services upon which women are most reliant, such as health services or the provision of water for household and agricultural use.

A recent Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) compact requiring that women in Niger have direct and meaningful input into the design of all projects, however, shows what can happen when development projects mandate the participation of women in the design. The \$437 million compact is designed to strengthen the agriculture sector by improving the availability and management of water as well as improving roads.

After a series of consultations with local women's groups, the compact is ready to launch what will be the country's largest irrigation system. The purpose of the irrigation system is unique itself. It is designed to boost household incomes and food security. In Niger, the vast majority of women who work do so in the agricultural sector. However, due to droughts and lack of access to irrigated land, most of their work is unpaid, providing only for subsistence.

Ali Hadjia Abarta Roufai, the President of the Women's Association in Konni, where the irrigation project was launched, expressed what the project meant to her: "The compact is, for us women, a glimmer of hope because of the special place it reserves for women. The different consultations ... showed us that the advancement of women is of paramount importance to this program."

Her subsequent comments show the importance of putting women's voices in the center of service delivery decision-making to deliver development outcomes, not just for women, but for their children and the entire community. She continued: "[women] are limited in access to land for crops, means of production, [...] and capacity building, especially in literacy,

1 See the work of Peal Robinson. In particular, the Annual James S. Coleman Memorial Lecture of the UCLA African Studies Center on May 21, 2013.

2 See Demographic Health Survey, 2012.

because most of us did not go to school. The irrigation rehabilitation will certainly improve our access to land, which will lead to increases in our revenues and therefore our socio-economic situation. We will also use [...] our income to improve the health of our children and our girls' access to school and quality training.”

Ali Hadjia Abarta Roufai's comments confirm what development experts have known for some time: that improvement in women's status and decision-making are more likely to yield development results for women, their children, their families and their communities when compared with development outcomes targeted to men. The example that the MCC Niger Compact provides on what can happen when one project considers women's input should inspire us to think about the returns on development that could result if women were able to participate meaningfully in-service delivery decision-making at all levels. This is not rocket science; it is simply good development design.

## What is needed to advance the participation of women and marginalized groups in service delivery decision-making

First, women and other marginalized groups need to be aware of the government's responsibility and what is and is not reasonable to expect in the form of service delivery.

Second, women and marginalized groups need to recognize that they might have distinct service delivery needs that are different from their dominant male counterparts. For example, women may care more about having access to clean water to grow the crops, while men may be more interested in road improvements so they can take the crops to the market.

Third, once women and marginalized groups have identified their distinct service delivery needs or “asks,” they must be comfortable articulating these in community priority settings. This is often a challenge, given that women's

voices are rarely heard, let alone considered relevant, in public service delivery forums. Women and marginalized groups are not used to demanding that their needs and interests be considered—especially in public forums. Therefore, enhancing their capacity in using evidence for advocacy, public speaking and challenging traditional gender norms is in order.

Fourth, the male decision-makers, who usually base their decisions on what they “think” women might want, or what their wives or female family members might feel is needed, need to understand the value of the direct input of groups who are going to use the public services. This too can take some time, and, as evidenced above, gains for women are often felt to come at the expense for men. That is why framing women's and non-majority groups' distinct service delivery needs in terms of efficiency and fulfilling their mandate is often a helpful approach.

Finally, mechanisms for public input, not just into identifying service delivery needs, but into the management of service and service delivery as well as community satisfaction with it, will also need to be established.

All of these will need to represent a diverse array of citizens who are capable and confident in articulating their service delivery needs in a mixed group setting, and care must be taken to ensure that these forums are facilitated in a way that is gender sensitive and socially inclusive, but also do not present the needs of women and non-majority groups as pitted against those of dominant men.

It is not unreasonable to expect that with more women meaningfully participating in service delivery decision-making, access to health services will allow women more control to time and space their pregnancies; increased access to irrigation will allow them to improve their incomes and increased income will grant them more say in household decisions.

All of these, over time, will likely enable Niger to relinquish its spot in the Human Development Index as the worst place in the world to be a woman.



## About the Author

Rebecca Sewall is the Senior Advisor for Gender and Social Inclusion, responsible for designing and institutionalizing the technical approach to gender and social inclusion at Creative Associates International.

In addition to building staff capacity for best practices, Rebecca works across all divisions and projects providing technical advice, support and thought leadership while developing key tools to advance gender and social inclusion across all of Creative's practice areas.

## About Creative

Creative Associates International works with underserved communities by sharing expertise and experience in education, elections, economic growth, citizen security, governance and transitions from conflict to peace.

Based in Washington, D.C., Creative has active projects in nearly 30 countries. Since 1977, it has worked in nearly 90 countries and on almost every continent. Recognized for its ability to work rapidly, flexibly and effectively in conflict-affected environments, Creative is committed to generating long-term sustainable solutions to complex development problems.

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