

# Young Men's Transition to Adulthood

Relationship Formation and Marriage in Maradi, Niger



## About this Study

This qualitative ethnographic study provides critical insights to better understand influences and mechanisms behind young men's and women's marriage formation in the Maradi region of Niger. The formative research was conducted by The OASIS Initiative's Center of Excellence in Women's Health and Empowerment at the Université Abdou Moumouni in Niamey and is co-published with Promundo-US.

The ethnographic research described in this report is part of a larger International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES)-inspired study conducted in Niger to understand the sexual and reproductive health motivations, attitudes, and behaviors of adolescent girls and their husbands in the Dosso and Maradi regions. More information about the broader IMAGES-inspired study can be found in the full report, *Child Marriage, Fertility, and Family Planning in Niger: Results from a Study Inspired by the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES)*.

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A Qualitative Ethnographic Study

# Acknowledgements

This formative research was conducted by the OASIS Initiative's Center of Excellence in Women's Health and Empowerment at the Université Abdou Moumouni in Niamey. The Center works to increase resilience capacity by building the evidence base and local leadership necessary to implement effective interventions on-scale throughout the region.

Daniel Perlman led the study and wrote the report. Sanoussi Chaibou served as Research Supervisor. Mackenzie Moore and Olivia Zaller assisted with the final stages of analysis and edited the draft.

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# About the organizations

## The OASIS Initiative

The OASIS Initiative (Organizing to Advance Solutions in the Sahel), a project of University of California, Berkeley, and Venture Strategies for Health and Development, is building the evidence base and local leadership necessary to overcome the most serious development challenges in the Sahel region of Africa. The OASIS Initiative is focused on three strategies critical for the region—1) educating and empowering adolescent girls and women, 2) expanding access to voluntary family planning, and 3) adapting agriculture to climate change—in order to improve the well-being of families in the Sahel region. For more information, see: <http://oasisinitiative.berkeley.edu/>

## Promundo

Founded in Brazil in 1997, Promundo works to promote gender equality and create a world free from violence by engaging men and boys in partnership with women and girls. Promundo is a global consortium with members in the United States, Brazil, Portugal, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo that collaborate to achieve this mission by conducting cutting-edge research that builds the knowledge base on masculinities and gender equality; developing, evaluating, and scaling up high-impact gender-transformative interventions and programs; and carrying out national and international campaigns and advocacy initiatives to prevent violence and promote gender justice. For more information, see: [www.promundoglobal.org](http://www.promundoglobal.org)

# Executive Summary

## BACKGROUND

The ethnographic research described in this report is part of a larger International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES)-inspired study conducted in Niger to understand the sexual and reproductive health motivations, attitudes, and behaviors of adolescent girls and their husbands in the Dosso and Maradi regions. More information about the broader IMAGES-inspired study can be found in the full report, *Child Marriage, Fertility, and Family Planning in Niger: Results from a Study Inspired by the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES)*.

**Purpose and specific objectives.** The purpose of this study was to inform the design of programs for young men aimed at transforming inequitable gender norms and unequal power dynamics within the Sahel. Its specific objectives were to develop a more nuanced understanding of the decision-making processes and norms influencing young men's marriage-related choices, as well as to explore the aspirations and subjective understandings of young men as they relate to relationship formation and marriage. The study addressed these objectives by focusing on six key research questions:

- What do young men look for in a woman they marry?
- What do young men want/need to have or be in order to get married?
- What drives marriage for young adult men?
- What do young men expect their marital relationships to be like?
- How do these expectations match or clash with reality? That is, what are young men's marital relationships actually like? What is the range of patterns of communication and relationship dynamics found in these communities?
- Have marital norms and expectations changed over time (e.g., what do older men and women think of relationship formation patterns and processes for young people)?

**Methods.** This research employed the ethnographic approach—participant observation, in-depth interviewing, informal discussions, and archival research—in collaboration with rural young men, their parents, girlfriends, and wives, and community leaders. The five research assistants lived in the two research communities in south-central Niger's rural Maradi Department.

**Research locations.** Maradi has some of the world's highest rates of maternal mortality, child marriage, and infant mortality (Institut National de la Statistique [INS] & ICF International, 2013). The region is predominately Hausa, an ethnic group of more than 50 million people living in Niger, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, and other West African countries. Southern Maradi is classified as Sahel and is one of the Niger's most important producers of millet, sorghum, peanuts, and livestock. Dosso Department, the site of Promundo's previous research, is more prosperous than Maradi, and its rates of maternal mortality, child marriage, and infant mortality are somewhat lower (INS & ICF International, 2013). The majority of the population in Dosso is Zarma, a people who inhabit the westernmost regions of Niger and adjacent areas of Burkina Faso and Nigeria. They grow millet, sorghum, rice, and maize for subsistence, and tobacco, cotton, and groundnuts as cash crops. Zarma culture, like that of the Hausa, is deeply rooted in Islam, and marriage between the two ethnic groups is common. However, Zarma gender structures are a bit less constraining than those found in Hausa communities. Labor migration for both ethnic groups is important, with Hausa men going to Niamey and abroad to Nigeria, Libya, and Algeria, while Zarma men are more likely to migrate to countries on the West African coast, especially Ghana.

## KEY FINDINGS

**Labor migration.** Young men's transition to adulthood is profoundly influenced by the crisis in agriculture and the ensuing weakening—and, at times, the collapse—of rural household economies (Idrissa, 2015). Young men's labor migration has become an indispensable survival strategy, and the remittances they send home are a critical source of income for many rural households. Land acquisition is facilitated by labor migration, and it establishes a responsible, financially independent persona and demonstrates that a young man is ready for marriage and capable of providing for a wife. It also allows a young man to farm independently, build a house, and accumulate wealth. Many of the men interviewed had plans to, or did, purchase land after returning from migration.

**Desired qualities in a prospective wife.** Beauty, particularly facial beauty, is the quality that young men most commonly mentioned they looked for in a prospective wife. One described it as “the gateway that will allow you to want to approach a girl or not.” While beauty was the most frequently cited trait, other factors such as reputation, family, obedience, and respect can ultimately outweigh the importance of beauty. Obedience, respect, and politeness—first to the man himself and then to his friends and family—are highly valued traits. A girl's reputation and that of her family are also considered important, along with her family's financial situation. A prospective wife's educational level appears to be a gray area—men with more education tend to prefer educated girls, and those with less education tend to prefer girls with less schooling. A girl's openness to polygamy, as well as her domestic skills (such as cooking and cleaning), also prove important. Age and fertility were also often cited, as younger girls are believed to be more fertile—a critical trait when a man's social status is linked to his family size.

**Prerequisite needs and desires of young men pre-marriage.** The accumulation of wealth is a primary prerequisite for marriage. The expected gift-giving during courtship can be costly, as can be the bridewealth and the wedding ceremony. Consequent married and family life is also expensive, as necessities such as

shelter, food, and clothing are seen as a man's responsibility to provide. If wives do not feel provided for, they may divorce their husband under Islamic law as practiced in the region.

**Driving forces behind marriage for young men.** Many young men openly said the opportunity to “know what being with a woman is like” and openly explore their sexuality is a primary and enticing incentive for marriage. Most said they are able to abstain from sex before marriage and their eventual marriage would likely include, as one young man said, “permanent sexual satisfaction in a responsible and lawful way.” Parents often fear their sons won't be able to control themselves sexually and therefore pressure their sons to marry to avoid the heavy social consequences of premarital pregnancy for their son, the girl, and their families. Return from labor migration typically marks the point at which a man either wants to get married and has the resources to do so, or a time when his family pressures him into marriage. Parents see these men as having matured from their migration experience and pressure them to “find a girl and get married” as soon as possible. The desire for respect and responsibility is another key motivation for marriage. Marriage is a symbol of stability and adulthood, and a man's number of wives is indicative of his masculinity and financial success. With marriage come children and a man's legacy.

**Marriage expectations of young men.** The most common marital expectation cited by young men was that their wives would be obedient and respectful—which are both key traits looked for in selecting a wife and strong expectations for the marriage itself. Obedience and respect appear to be interdependent characteristics that allow a man to maintain power and authority in the household and in society. A woman is expected to put the bidding of her husband above her own needs—“Obedience is marriage,” said one young man. Young men also look forward to sexual relations in marriage and to their wife's accommodation of their desires. “She cannot say no to you sexually,” one said. “It is her duty.” Solidarity between a husband and wife is another common expectation in marriage, though the young men did not speak of it as often as they did of obedience, respect, and sex. Solidarity was presented primarily in terms of a woman's support for her husband in financial matters and other family necessities.

**Marriage realities and relations.** Young men's reports of the realities of marriage both match and differ from their expectations, which appears to be contingent on the economic status of the man and his household, alongside a number of other factors. Several said that if they had understood the difficulties and complexities of marriage, they perhaps would not have gotten married so soon. Conversely, others described having a connection with their wives and the ability to work as a team—with the husband as the provider and his wife the caregiver. These men are pleased with this type of teamwork due to the belief that a successful marriage is founded on a lack of disagreement or fighting.

**Generational change in marriage norms.** This study, as well as the literature cited, have found a notable generational shift in the way marriage is viewed. The most commonly discussed change was the increased interaction between young men and women, facilitated by nocturnal events (such as night markets and evening ceremonies) and increased means of transportation and communication. This concerns elders, as they see it leading to sexual promiscuity. Perhaps most importantly, it has long been the norm in Hausa society for parents to select a bride for their son, but this has changed as young men become more financially independent due to their labor worker incomes. As one father asked, “How can you tell a son who makes more than you what to do?”



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**Background**

# Marriage formation in Niger

## Economic and migratory transitions

Niger's rural economy remains firmly rooted in household-based agriculture. Agriculture has been the primary means of creating wealth, and it absorbs a large proportion of the working population (The New Partnership for Africa's Development [NEPAD] Agency, 2016). However, dramatic reductions in mortality, early marriage, a strong preference for large families, and very low levels of contraceptive use have led to southern Niger having one of the highest rates of population growth in the world. This, accompanied by drought, economic shocks, and climate change, has contributed to the division and "degradation of land and the erosion of natural capital and an increase in the structural fragility" of agriculture in the region (Idrissa, 2015). Niger's agricultural model is facing an enduring crisis, which is leading to "the weakening and at times the collapse of the economic base of households and families" (Idrissa, 2015).

As agriculture increasingly provides less of Niger's rural household food supply, "vulnerable families are forced to shed their land capital...and are obliged to work for more affluent landowners" or seek employment in other regions of Niger or abroad (Diarra & Monimart, 2006). Though labor migration in the region goes back centuries, the dramatically increasing male labor migration has become an indispensable survival strategy. Labor migration "is also an adventure, a rite of passage that transforms male youth into men by exposing them to the world" (Masquelier, 2016).

In southern Niger, men "eat the dry season" by leaving their communities in search of work. In recent years, they are spending greater periods of time abroad, especially in Nigeria, Libya, and Algeria (Rain, 2000). The remittances they send home have become a critical source of income for rural households (Masquelier, 2016). As women, young men, and heads of vulnerable families manage the harsh daily reality of insecure livelihoods, "a mindset inspired by modes of accumulation imported from elsewhere" increasingly confronts "the logic of social cohesion and communal redistribution" (Diarra & Monimart, 2006).

## Marriage as a costly affair

**Courtship.** Marriage in Niger is a costly affair, and some level of wealth is necessary for young men seeking to marry. Young men often must compete for a girl's hand. In rural Niger, material goods have become an important means of attracting and keeping a girl's interest during courtship. There is a growing expectation that young men will be able to "shower" the girl he is courting with gifts (Masquelier, 2005). The gifts demonstrate a young man's capacity to provide for a wife and family. He can upstage competitors by giving more expensive and more exotic gifts, with gifts originating from the community seen as less valuable than those acquired during migration. Masquelier (2005) finds that monetary, jewelry and accessory gifts by a potential suitor all play an important role in influencing a woman's desire to wed, despite her initial hesitation at the idea of becoming a co-wife. In Sao Luis, Brazil, Taylor et al. (2015) similarly found that "most men and girls...say that girls marry...to have someone provide for them or give them presents."

**Bridewealth.** In Niger and much of the Sahel, an important prerequisite for marriage is the bridewealth provided by the young man's family to confirm and deem official the proposed union (Masquelier, 2016; Perlman, Adamu & Wodon, 2018).<sup>1</sup> Men who cannot afford to pay the agreed amount and the necessary quantity and quality of goods can be judged as unsuitable by a girl's family. As bridewealth has increased over time, more men have chosen to postpone marriage rather than to marry early with limited resources (Masquelier, 2005).

**The wedding.** Wedding ceremonies are perhaps the costliest stage of the marriage process. The groom and his family's contribution demonstrate their wealth and status to the bride's family and the community at large. These costs can result in increased financial stress following the wedding (Masquelier, 2005).

**Marriage.** Islam, as practiced in southern Niger and much of the Sahel, is seen as requiring the husband to provide for his family's needs—including food, shelter, clothing, health care, and education (Sada, Adamu & Ahmad, 2014). Young men often underestimate the burden this implies and increasingly fall short in meeting these expectations (Masquelier, 2005). Failing to provide for one's wife and family is grounds for divorce under Islamic law as practiced in the region, and divorce is common for this and a host of other reasons (Perlman, 2016; Masquelier, 2005). Thus, if a man's labor migration is not fruitful enough and his wives do not feel "adequately provided for," his wives may request a divorce (Masquelier, 2016).

## Driving forces of marriage for young men

**Desired qualities in prospective wives.** Age and fertility are two of the most commonly reported qualities that men look for in a wife. An overview of child marriage in Africa, Asia, and Latin America suggests that men tend to prefer younger women, as they will be able to produce the maximum number of children in their lifetimes (Greene, Perlson, Taylor, & Lauro, 2015). Children are seen as an expression of wealth and a marriage's "surest measure of success" in Hausa-speaking communities in rural southern Niger and northern Nigeria (Cooper, 1997, p. 151). The number of children a man fathers is closely linked to his social status, making high fertility in a prospective wife a key requirement. A study based in two low-income settings in Brazil found there are often "expectations for women to have children and have them in their 20s, before they are perceived to be too old" (Taylor, Lauro, Segundo, & Greene, 2015). Another study in Niger similarly found that newlywed women are pressured to have their first child within their first year of marriage (Masquelier, 2016).

<sup>1</sup> Bridewealth is often referred to as the "bride price" in the literature. This research suggests that this term is unfortunate and misleading. The bridewealth is spent on purchases for the bride and to offset wedding costs. We found no evidence in this or previous studies that parents arrange the marriage of their daughters for the bridewealth, even during times of economic stress.

In rural Hausa communities in southern Niger and northern Nigeria, a young man's choice of a first wife is heavily influenced by his parents and extended family. However, in the context of common polygamous practices in the region, he will have more control over the selection of his second wife—at which point he will often look for a younger bride (Diarra & Monimart, 2006; Perlman, Adamu & Wodon, 2018). Obedience is another often-cited quality desired in a woman. A girl “who learns to obey her husband from an early age” is more attractive as a partner (Greene et al., 2015). Obedience is accepted as a learned quality, and younger women are seen as having more time to learn to respect and obey their husbands.

**Sexual drive.** The importance of finding sexual satisfaction in a culturally and religiously “lawful” way is a key motivating factor in a young man's decision to marry (Adamu, 2008). Many young men judge themselves as incapable of abstinence, and premarital pregnancy can have devastating social consequences for the girl, the man, and their families.

**Marriage makes the man.** Marriage is seen as a critical marker of the transition from immaturity to adulthood. There is a common belief in the Sahel that one can never truly be a man unless he is married, meaning marriage and manliness are one and the same. As one village elder stated, “Marriage makes the man” (Masquelier, 2005). When a young man is financially stable, be it through labor migration in Niger, his natural next step is often marriage, and his parents will likely see to it that he pursues marriage in a timely fashion. Young men who remain unmarried and at home while others of similar age are marrying and working outside the home risk having their health and manhood questioned by their peers (Masquelier, 2005).

## Expectations and realities of married life

**Expectations.** Marriages often rely on clearly defined gender roles to function. Many men have strong expectations that their wives will uphold their socially and culturally defined roles and that he will uphold his. In Nigeria, for example, men expect that women will make small decisions regarding daily food and clothing and that they will make decisions regarding “large investments” and money-related affairs (United Kingdom Department for International Development [DFID] & Promundo, 2015). In Brazil, wives are expected to “adhere to the preferences of their husband,” and such preferences may range from small “everyday desires and tastes to major choices about sex and child-bearing” (Taylor et al., 2015). Over 50 percent of men surveyed in Brazil, Chile, and Mexico and over 80% in Rwanda felt a woman's most important role in the family is to “take care of the home and cook” (Greene et al., 2015). Young men typically presume that they will control sex in marriage. In Nigeria, for example, a wife is expected to make herself “available to men's sexual desires...and men feel that they have ‘the right to do whatever [they] want with [their] wife’” (DFID & Promundo, 2015; Greene et al., 2015).

**Realities.** Studies from both Niger and Brazil report that young men can underestimate the financial burden that comes with marriage. As previously mentioned, this burden can be especially stressful in Muslim communities in the Sahel, given that the wife of a man who is unable to provide for his family possesses grounds for divorce (Masquelier, 2005). Some men complain that while they fulfill the role of the provider, their wives do not fulfill theirs as caretaker by respecting their husbands and performing cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing (Taylor et al., 2015).

**Generational change in marriage norms.** There appears to be a generational divide between young people of marrying age and their parents and grandparents. In Niger, elders are especially concerned by increased socializing between young men and women in the evenings and the sexual promiscuity they perceive as accompanying it. Such interaction can be seen as “moral degeneration,” and fundamentalist Izala preachers warn against “this potentially sinful behavior” (Masquelier, 2005). Elders are also perplexed when young people avoid or delay marriage; as one father said, “If you have reached the age of marriage, you must marry” (Masquelier, 2005). Young men counter that while elders’ greatest challenge was raising the bridewealth, contemporary youth must also prepare for a variety of additional costs (Masquelier, 2016). Also important, in past generations, young men relied on their family’s financial support as they prepared to marry. More recently, the labor migration of young men has made them less dependent on their parents’ financial contributions. As one elder stated rather strongly, “Before youths obeyed their fathers, they were afraid of them! Today, they have become women, and women have become whores” (Masquelier, 2005).



# Study Design

# Study objectives

The purpose of this study was to inform the design of programs for young men aimed at transforming inequitable gender norms and unequal power dynamics within the region. Its specific objectives were to:

- Develop a more nuanced understanding of the decision-making processes and norms influencing young men's marriage-related choices, and
- Explore the aspirations and subjective understandings of young men as they relate to relationship formation and marriage.

## Methodology

**Research location.** The research team conducted this assessment in rural communities in two rural districts of Niger's Maradi region. Dagura and Yanwa, both located in the rural commune of Dagura, share many characteristics with each other and surrounding villages. Dagura has an estimated 56,000 inhabitants and is the seat of the commune, with several villages under its jurisdiction. The town's origin story is that Kaoura Ama, the first inhabitant, met an animist called Yalo, who guided him to the valley where Dagura now lies. State services are concentrated in Dagura, and it has a primary, a secondary, and a Qur'anic school and a literacy program, as well as an integrated health center staffed by a physician, a state-certified nurse, a basic health worker, and two matrons. Both the schools and the health services face daunting challenges, including deteriorating infrastructure, a poorly trained workforce, and poor learning and health outcomes. After the harvest, many men migrate to larger towns in Niger or to as far as Libya to work in construction, security, or other available employment; when women migrate, they mostly go to Nigeria for the corn harvest. Dagura currently is served by a plethora of health, income-generation, literacy, and health projects sponsored by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Yanwa is located a few kilometers west of Dagura and has an estimated population of 14,000. Primary economic activities include farming and livestock, and the community has an integrated health center and a primary, a secondary, and a Qur'anic school.

**Data collection.** The research team employed five native-Hausa-speaking research assistants (four men and one woman) who had participated in previous ethnographic research by the OASIS Initiative (Organizing to Advance Solutions in the Sahel) in Maradi, Niger, and who lived in the collaborating communities during this period. Their training included the presentation and demonstration of the essentials of qualitative data collection (participant observation, in-depth interviews, and informal group discussions, as well as fortnightly group analysis meetings emphasizing their reflections and discussion of their observations, interviews, and insights.



**Sampling.** Sampling was purposive in the sense that the research team sought adequate representation of important sub-populations (e.g., men about to be married, young married men and their wives, men aged 18 to 27 who had participated in labor migration and men who had not, men and women influential in the lives of these young men, religious and political leaders, and community members). Emphasis was placed on disaggregating the findings from these categories of respondents. This work did not involve tests of significance, tests of hypotheses, or attempts to generate population estimates of incidence or prevalence; rather, the issue was one of “saturation,” with the goal to continue interviewing each key category of people in the study communities until the information and descriptions being provided no longer generated new information.

**Topics of investigation.** Marriage holds a dominant and pervasive position in the lives of the people and communities of rural Maradi. Marriage provides opportunities for fathers to create and strengthen ties with other families, for mothers to ensure their son’s domestic future, and for sons to gain respect in the community, sexual satisfaction, and the children seen as a family’s greatest wealth.

The research team began by casting a wide net and asking open-ended questions, encouraging participants to respond in their own words and in greater detail than is typically the case with quantitative methods. When a participant brought up something the research assistant found valuable or insightful, the assistant had the flexibility to tailor subsequent questions to explore this new information. This research focused on the following study questions:

- What do young men look for in a woman they marry?
- What do young men want/need to have or be in order to get married?
- What drives marriage for young adult men?
- What do young men expect their marital relationships to be like?
- How do these expectations match or clash with reality? That is, what are young men’s marital relationships actually like? What is the range of patterns of communication and relationship dynamics found in these communities?
- Have marital norms and expectations changed over time (e.g., what do older men and women think of relationship formation patterns and processes for young people)?

**Data-gathering.** The team leader, Sanoussi Chaibou, supported and supervised data collection. The research assistants participated in the communities’ daily life and wrote fieldnotes of their observations every evening. This participant observation brought together what people said (the content of interviews) and what they did (daily observations in the form of fieldnotes). It also facilitated the kind of informal discussions that often provide deeper insight than formal interviews and focus groups.

Though ethnographic research does not produce findings representative across populations and study sites, it can be designed to be systematic and reduce bias through triangulation (the use of multiple research methods and investigators to enhance confidence in the findings). The research team worked to enhance triangulation in the study design by ensuring diversity in the research team composition (e.g., multidisciplinary backgrounds and by gender and age), types of respondents (e.g., by gender, age, ethnic group, and socioeconomic status, and laypeople and specialists), and characteristics of the communities serving as research sites.

**Identification and selection of participants.** Meetings were held with community leaders and local officials before research began to inform them of the study’s objectives and methods and to receive their permission to carry out the research in their communities. The research team then worked closely with them to identify and invite interview participants to join the study. These initial referrals led to secondary and tertiary referrals, and contacts were made while conducting participant observation (e.g., spending time where young men gather, living with host families, and helping women with their daily tasks in the case of the female researcher).

**Table 1** Summary of study participants and methods

Group	Method	Number
Young men preparing for marriage or recently married ( $\leq 27$ years old)	In-depth interviews	11
	Courtship and marital life histories	8
Women engaged to or married to these young men	In-depth interviews	5
Influential men in the lives of these young men	In-depth interviews	6
Influential women in the lives of these young men	In-depth interviews	2
Community, religious, and political leaders	Key respondent interviews	6
Members of the community	Informal conversations	9
<b>Total</b>		<b>47</b>

**Data analysis.** The key analytical approach was thematic and qualitative. Preliminary data analysis began early in the data collection process and continued after the completion of data gathering.

The team leader met with the research assistants every seven to ten days for ongoing, iterative, qualitative analysis. The group analysis meetings began with a two-hour session starting with open-ended questions such as, “What did you learn that surprised you these last four days?” These open-ended questions facilitated the discovery of new themes and their inclusion in the research. After lunch, the researchers were divided into groups (by the community where they were working) and asked what they had learned about each of the key research questions. The groups then discussed whether these new observations and insights confirmed or contradicted what they had previously learned, what might be the reason for the contradictions, and what follow-up interviews were needed to clarify the issues raised.

The analysis meetings were tape recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by the lead investigator along with the interview transcripts and fieldnotes. Four University of California, Berkeley, students assisted with coding the data and were mentored by Daniel Perlman, the lead investigator. The preliminary codes were then shared with the team leader for discussion at the next analysis meeting in Maradi. As the process continued, preliminary categories and insights were then tested against data from new interviews, observations, and analysis meetings. This led to the refinement, abandonment, or redevelopment of themes and research questions and to the next series of interviews. During each round of data collection, the interviews became increasingly structured and focused. This process continued until the key conceptual findings appeared to remain stable with additional data.

**Protection of human subjects' rights.** The research protocol and procedures for the protection of human subjects were approved by the Comité National d'Ethique pour la Recherche en Santé at the Nigerien Ministry of Health. Approval required submitting the application and presenting the protocol at one of the committee's bimonthly meetings.

Informed consent was obtained before all interviews and focus groups. Given that many of the participants of this research were likely to be illiterate, the consent form was read to them and consent obtained orally. Oral consent confirmed the respondent had been fully informed of the objectives of the study, understood participation was voluntary, understood they could terminate the interview for any reason and at any time, and had given informed consent. The study investigators respected local cultural norms and were aware that, many times, permission to interview women needs to be sought from the husband, even prior to the consent of the woman. In the case of young men or women under 16, the research assistants approached the parents of the household to ask permission to enroll their son or daughter in the research. (It is customary in Hausa society to meet with the senior male member of the family first. However, if the minor's mother was the only parent at home and she felt comfortable making the consent decision, her consent was deemed sufficient.) If the minor lived with only one parent or guardian, one parent or guardian's consent, plus the minor's consent, was deemed sufficient. The research assistants had been trained not to apply pressure or attempt to influence decisions regarding participation in the research. All data collected were anonymous to protect confidentiality.



# Findings

# What do young men look for in a woman they marry?

The key factors that influence a man's selection of a wife include physical attractiveness, family pressure, social norms, and his and his family's financial situation. As one of the research assistants aptly summarized, "The choice of a mate is conditioned by the girls' beauty, character, and her family lineage."

**Beauty.** Beauty is the trait that young men most mentioned they look for in a potential wife, with a woman's beauty, *kan huska*, brought up in almost all of the interviews. The young men said this is the first thing that attracts them—especially "the beauty of her face." The young men also spoke of the importance of a girl's charm, style of dress, makeup, and cleanliness, and the combination of some or all of these qualities appears to be what makes a girl beautiful. Physical attractiveness was cited as the reason for first speaking to a girl at a wedding, the market, a celebration, or a public space. Men described it as "the gateway that will allow you to want to approach a girl or not."

*"The only thing that interests young men in most cases in a girl is her beauty."*

**Mother from Yanwa community**

While beauty is the most referenced trait, it is not necessarily the most valued. Other factors such as reputation, family, and financial situation often outweigh the importance of beauty. "It was her character that attracted me," said one respondent. "She's so serious and serene." Several men said the woman they eventually married was not the most beautiful of those they considered. However, a few did say that looking back, they wished they had married a more beautiful woman.

Older residents of the study communities said beauty blinds young men from recognizing a girl's true nature; after marriage "the mask will fall," and the young man will become aware of her negative qualities such as disobedience, rudeness, laziness, or a family that is not respected. "She puts on her makeup, and they don't try to see what's underneath," said one father. "Women that are too attractive arouse the greed of the village. If her husband leaves to find work abroad, she will give in to temptation and fall into adultery." Several older men and women said that a beautiful wife would be "fragile" or "more prone to sickness."

**Obedience and behavior.** The second criterion young men spoke of is the young woman's attitude and behavior. They described "good behavior" as a combination of obedience, respect, and politeness, said to be recognizable through the manner in which a girl greets other people and carries herself.

*"While it is the physical beauty of the girl that dominates at first, what makes a marriage work is the character of the girl and how she acts."*

**Owner of a small village store**

The young men said they require obedience—first to themselves and then to their friends and family. "Respect in marriage is obedience," said one. "She must respect her husband's orders and never say no to him in whatever he asks." Many men spoke about how they sought a wife that talks to him politely in front of their friends. A group of young married and unmarried men in the market insisted that one should look for "a submissive and obedient girl who is modest and will not dare raise the tone of her voice before men" and that only this kind of girl can be trusted for a successful marriage.

Respect and politeness are often grouped together and extend to domesticity and chores, including cleaning, cooking, and living with other women in the compound. Respect for the mother-in-law was emphasized. Many men insisted a girl must be respectful and obedient to his parents, especially his mother, to whom she must never be "insolent or shout." This includes doing chores for his parents whenever told.

Nearly all the young men interviewed pointed to good behavior as a determining factor. Otherwise, as one put it, "a wife will do things that upset you, annoy your parents, and in the end divorce you." A village elder noted, "It is good conduct that maintains a marriage. If the bride does not behave responsibly, you will see that it will always cause problems, which eventually can lead to divorce. That's why before the wedding you have to see if the girl's behavior is exemplary." It must be noted, though, that the perception of good behavior is often relative. What is frowned upon by one young man may not be by another. This is particularly evident in young men's thoughts about a future wife's education, which is explored in the subsection "Education."

**Family reputation.** Family reputation is believed to influence how a girl behaves and to indicate her potential as a wife. The reputation of a girl's father appears to be particularly important, with men looking for a girl whose father is widely respected in the village and who "keeps his word." This is equally important for the future groom's family. There were several cases in which a young man wanted to marry a girl but was forbidden by his parents because of the girl's family's "notoriety" or because her family's origin in a village was considered unscrupulous. However, while family reputation was brought up often, many young men indicated most marriages in recent years do not take this into account as greatly as in the past. According to a young groom, "If you love the girl and she loves you as well, despite bad perceptions of her family, you can marry her. This is because nowadays more parents refrain from deciding who their children can marry."

**Education.** Among the young men, education is the most debated of a future wife's qualities. They were split between desiring an educated girl and adamantly opposing marrying one. These differences relate to formal "Western" education; Qur'anic schooling, on the other hand, was widely viewed as a positive attribute. Those seeking an educated wife see educated women as "cleaner," referring to both her hygiene and her ability to keep the family compound clean. This opinion was shared by both educated and non-educated men, with one saying, "Schoolgirls are clean because from kindergarten they teach cleanliness. Just looking at a girl, you can know if she is in school or not." An educated wife's ability to tutor her children is especially important.

Several men also mentioned that girls currently not in school are more demanding and focused on money and gifts. A number of men, young and old, denounced "some girls' love of material goods," believing that such greed is linked to a lack of education and that such "disrespectful" and "poor" behavior increases the likelihood she will leave the man for another who gives more money and gifts.

Men who had gone to school consistently said they desired an educated wife. They believe educated girls better know how to care for children and are more thoughtful and respectful in their marriage. They often expressed the sentiment that "if you studied and she studied, you can easily understand each other." Men who had not been to school but expressed interest in educated girls described them as "madams," with the phrase "Madam or nothing" brought up often. Many of these non-educated men had migrated for work to other parts of Niger or abroad and consider a girl who has received an education to be more respectful and of proper character as taught in school. A number of these young men explained this oft-used phrase as meaning the girls are "superior"; like the educated men, they said they would only settle for a girl who had been to school. However, it should be noted that many of these same men adamantly opposed the woman continuing her education after marriage because they believe it would conflict with her marital duties.

Virtually all of those viewing a girl's education as negative were men who had not gone to school. They argued that educated girls are "hard to understand" and will not follow anything they are told or asked to do. There was also a general consensus among these men that girls who have been to school believe they are superior and "are too proud. They will not respect you and you cannot impose proper behavior on them"; a girl smarter than her husband "will be deceitful and will lie to you." Another issue these men discussed was the interference of school administration. They complained that many schools prevent girls from getting married by saying she would have to withdraw if she did, a policy that makes courting too difficult. In short, these men believe an educated girl "will not submit to you, and will not be obedient" and describe them as trouble.

An interesting subset of men said they wanted an "out-of-school" girl—someone who has attended some school and is literate but who did not continue her education past 14, the age these men think a girl should be married. They see this as the best of both worlds—she will be better "able to educate her children and manage the household than an illiterate girl" but without the perceived negative behaviors of girls who go further in their schooling. For these men, a girl's education should be to develop a viable candidate for marriage and instill traits that will aid with household management and child-raising—not for her exposure to the wider world or her intellectual development.

Many girls in these rural communities attend small Qur'anic schools in their villages. The men view Islam as the guide to both spiritual and day-to-day activities, and they see Qur'anic school as instilling many of the traits they value in a wife, including obedience, respect, and acceptance of co-wives. "A girl who has gone to a Qur'anic school will obey everything her husband says to her and will respect his parents," said one young man. "You boast if your girlfriend attends the Qur'anic school. You are proud because you know that she will be a good wife and mother." A field ethnographer wrote that this belief was "almost unanimously shared by young men seeking a wife."

**Openness to polygamy.** Another commonly desired trait in a wife is her willingness to accept a co-wife once they are married or her willingness to marry a man that already has other wives. As one man said, "Practically all the girls of this village [are] taught since they are young that once they have a household of their own, they should expect to have a partner in the house. So, sharing a husband with another woman should be part [of] her upbringing." They seek a wife that does not have a "jealous nature" and who demonstrates enthusiasm for and openness to living with a co-wife.

**Domestic skills: Caring, cooking, and managing the home.** These traits appear to be highly valued by most of the men in the study communities.

## What do young men want and need in order to get married?

Before a young man can propose and marry, he is expected to meet a diverse array of economic, material, social, and familial prerequisites. Marriage is a core foundation of Hausa men's and women's lives. As such, much of a young man's life is dedicated to preparing for marriage.

*"Economic success will ensure success with girls and is the determining factor in the success of the marriage."*

**Young man from Dagura community**



**Financial preconditions.** Accumulating capital and acquiring land and material goods are essential prerequisites to marriage. During courtship, a man is expected to give a series of gifts to the girl. The young man and his family then need funds for the *Cin Goro*, a gift of money and goods to the girl's family as part of the proposal and engagement process, as well as to raise the bridewealth, contribute to the wedding costs, and ultimately provide for a household. His friends contribute knowing that "when they marry, they will then receive money too," wrote one of the field ethnographers. If the family can't access the necessary funds, the young man often becomes a migrant worker in other regions of Niger or in surrounding countries. Labor migration is rapidly becoming the norm in Hausa communities in southern Niger and a rite of passage. The money gained enables a young man to successfully court, propose to, and marry a woman.

Economic capital is also essential if the man desires greater selectivity and more than one wife. Young boys and men participate in a range of money-making ventures to save for marriage. In these rural agricultural communities, men historically gained the majority of their subsistence from farming and/or raising livestock, and the parents primarily financed the costs required for the first marriage. However, as labor migration becomes more and more common, young men increasingly find themselves with the financial means to pay for the marriage process themselves. Marriage to a second or third wife is "mainly conditioned by the young man's wealth."

With changing economic circumstances, labor migration, typically referred to as "exodus," is becoming the most widespread income-generating activity for young men. Young men migrate to "gold sites" in Nigeria or to larger cities for trade, construction, and other income-generating activities. This provides men with the opportunity to save money to bring back and use for a wedding, a business, and eventually, a family. As one interviewee said, "The income that comes out of the gold sites has allowed almost all young people who are married to have at least two wives." Labor migration also transforms the way young men are seen in the community. They gain status and are more respected. When they come back, "their parents feel that they have become responsible and feel that it's time to talk to them about marriage," said a married man.

**Motorcycles and cell phones.** Several young men said they feel pressure to "dress expensive like the DJs and actors from the movies" to court a woman. However, the two most important personal items in courtship are a motorcycle and a cell phone. When a man has a motorcycle, as one young man said, "he attracts young ladies. They feel honored to be with a young man on a motorcycle." Additionally, cell phones now play an important role in communication, socializing, and arranging meetings with girls, with one young man reporting, "Men give their girlfriends or fiancées phones to have easy contact with them." Smartphones are also an effective way of attracting girls. As one respondent recalled, "My friend and I were watching a video on the phone at the market and were soon surrounded by girls."

**Gift-giving.** Gift-giving is an integral part of courtship, and one of the primary benefits of migration is additional income to purchase material goods to send to the girls they are pursuing while away. They also bring back gifts for girls and their families when they return. While the majority of men complained about girls who are only interested in presents, virtually all spoke of how important the gift-giving process is in keeping a girl while away and in convincing her to marry upon return.

Many of the unmarried men spoke of the fear of losing a girlfriend to others giving her money and gifts, pointing to the importance material goods play as prerequisites to marriage because they help to keep or woo a prospective wife. Gifts typically include “jewelry, pagne [cloth wrap], cell phones, money to for clothes or for activities.” For the parents of the girl being courted, this is viewed as “signs of love and affection for their child” and can lead to the couple’s families meeting to set plans for the union. Several men also spoke of the importance of bringing gifts for the girl’s parents. “If you bring gifts to the parents, it shows you are truly committed,” said a young man from Dagura village. “A gift shows that you intend to marry the girl and your feelings are real. The parents are pleased by this and help you get their daughter to marry you.”

Gift-giving continues after the migrant workers return. When girls go to the market to sell food their mothers have prepared, it is common for them to receive gifts and small amounts of money from men. Men who have money use such gifts and tips to keep the girls coming to see them. With the increased interactions between youth at markets, dances, and ceremonies, gift-giving has expanded to include an exchange for sex. One young man remarked, “They are interested [in] sexual pleasure, not marriage, and the girls don’t care because they are interested in the gifts.”

**Acquisition of land.** Land acquisition is facilitated by labor migration, and it establishes a responsible, financially independent persona and demonstrates that a young man is ready for marriage and capable of providing for a wife. It also allows a young man to farm independently, build a house, and accumulate wealth. Many of the men interviewed had plans to, or did, purchase land after returning from migration.

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**Heterosexual social interaction.** The young men said that if they are to have a greater say in choosing their wives, they need opportunities to meet them. A number of public spaces exist in the study communities in which young men and women socially interact. Local shops in which mobile phone batteries can be charged and laptop stores are run by young people and are popular spots for young people to gather. For those attending school, “it is the school that is the meeting place and training for all kinds of premarital friendships away from the eyes of their parents,” said one mother. Other noted meeting places include tailor shops, video clubs, and nighttime markets.

**Parental support.** Parents’ support for their child’s marriage in communal cultures like the Hausa is essential. They feel a “moral obligation to organize the first marriage of their child,” and when they support their son’s choice of wife, they are more likely to agree to funding the marriage and the couple in the future. However, with increased labor migration from these communities, this financial support is becoming less significant.

# What drives young men to marry?

**Sexual drive.** Many young men openly said that they married “to discover a woman.” The idea of “know[ing] what being with a woman is like” and openly exploring their sexuality is a primary and enticing incentive for men to marry. However, “almost all of the boys in Yanwa community experience their first sex before marriage,” said a married man, and marriage is the way to “protect oneself ‘from fornication’ and satisfy sexual needs according to Islam.” He went on to say, “Nowadays, young boys marry essentially to have permanent sexual satisfaction in a responsible and lawful way.” This “fear of fornication” is a common concern among young unmarried men. They describe it as a “trap of debauchery” and feel the need to marry because they feel they cannot abstain from sex. Marriage also prevents pregnancy out of wedlock, another major fear. One young man said, “If I by chance agree to sleep with a girl and she gets pregnant, my father will blame me. I’m afraid of committing a sin as a Muslim, and I’m afraid of my father’s reaction.” Parents also fear their sons won’t be able to control themselves and pressure their sons to marry to avoid the heavy social consequences of premarital pregnancy for the son, the girl, and their families.



*“The factor that most motivates young men to marry is the search for satisfaction of sexual desire.”*

**Researcher fieldnotes**

**Familial, social, and peer pressure.** Return from labor migration marks the point at which a man either wants to get married and has the resources to do so or a time when his family pressures him into marriage. Parents see these men as mature and pressure them to “find a girl and get married.” Several parents said if their son remains unmarried, “when he returns from exodus, he will be unable to control his spending and his savings will be wasted.” As a result, they push him to marry to ensure that he is “responsible” and “organized.”

In the past, it was the parents’ responsibility to finance their son’s first marriage, and they thus had enormous influence on when and to whom their son wed. “The first marriage of a young boy is organized by the father,” according to one researcher’s fieldnotes. “The father and his brothers chose the bride and cared for the couple in their compound.” One young man said his parents forced his marriage because his younger brother needed to get married; the man said, “As long as the older brother is single, it is almost forbidden for the younger brothers to get married.”

A mother also has considerable influence over her son's marriage and choice of wife. One 19-year-old man said his mother rushed his marriage because "she knew that he was able to feed [or financially support] a woman," since he had returned from Nigeria. Mothers tend to pressure their children to marry at younger ages because, as one young man said, "as soon as they see someone younger getting married, they will start saying that their son too must do so." A woman involved in leading an NGO project in the village reflected, "As soon as a mother's friend's son is married, that mother gets in a hurry to marry off her son" to keep up with the other mothers. She can also force him to divorce a wife she does not like and pressure him to wed a second wife. According to one researcher, "Even if the son loves his wife, he is obliged to comply with his mother's demands." When discussing the idea of divorce, "it is the mothers who lead the discussion even when their husbands are present."

Peer pressure is another key driver of marriage in these communities. When girls are with their close friends, they mostly talk about boyfriends, suitors, and which of them will marry first. Their peers also influence young men. "All my friends and almost everyone my age in the village is married," one young man reflected. "My friends tease me because I'm the last to have a wife." Young men also marry to protect themselves and their families from more serious gossip—"If all your comrades get married before you, people talk about the poverty of your parents or a lack of understanding in your family," according to one respondent.

**Competition.** A girl can potentially have several young men giving her gifts even if one considers her to be his girlfriend. "A young man told me that he isn't alone in dating his girlfriend," one researcher wrote in her fieldnotes. "If he doesn't rush to make the engagement official someone else will do it and he will lose her. To avoid this, he's obliged to rush to inform his parents and introduce his girlfriend officially." Men who migrate for work send their girlfriends clothing, cash gifts, and telephone recharge cards to keep his ties to her strong in fear that she will sleep with another man. A village elder explained, "When a boy has a girlfriend, he needs to move quickly to formalize the engagement. It's the race against the clock. The more he delays, the more likely it is that someone can take away his girlfriend."

Many girls want to get married to avoid the shame and severe repercussions of premarital pregnancy and to "preserve her dignity," explained an 18-year-old female respondent. Other girls view marriage as an outlet to becoming more "autonomous and responsible," looking forward to having their own room, caring for just their husbands, making household decisions (such as what to cook), and no longer having to go out hawking. Girls seeking this relative autonomy will push their boyfriends towards marriage, but they often encounter a less attractive reality once wed. Mobility during the first year of marriage is more restricted than at any other period in their lives; they serve their mothers-in-law and older co-wives, and they are at the bottom of the household hierarchy.

**Status and respect.** The desire for respect and responsibility is another key motivation for marriage. Marriage is a symbol of stability and adulthood, and the number of wives a man has is indicative of his financial success. With marriage come children and a man's legacy. Children help their mother in the home and their father on the farm, and they facilitate prosperity. "Even a donkey is proud to give birth," said a village elder. "The young donkey will relieve the heavy burden carried by his father." Greater autonomy from parents and influence in the family is another driver. "A young boy who's married or recently married is more likely to be involved in family decision-making," said one father.

*“Marriage elevates a young man’s social status. This new status consecrates not only the transition to adulthood but also and above all a certain responsibility and dignity in the community and in the family. This implies the delegation of responsibility by the father, involvement in decision-making in the family, and participation in ceremonies.”*

**Researcher fieldnotes**

The appeal of increased status plays a particularly important role for returning migrants. “Someone who returns after several years and is still unmarried is considered a young man who has failed and his migration has not borne fruit,” said a former migrant worker. “Marriage promotes him in the community and boosts his image.” This is a sentiment that came up often in casual conversations and in-depth interviews. Finally, it appears that some young men marry after migration simply because they have the money and there are no restrictions on their ability to do so.

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## What do young men expect their marital relationship to be like?

The research team spoke with unmarried men about their expectations of marriage and their future relationships with their wife (or wives). We also talked with married men about the reality of their marriage(s). The interviews, participant observation, and casual conversations revealed both disparities and similarities between men’s conceptions of marriage and the reality.

*“If a girl loves you, she will respect you and all those who are members of your family, especially your parents,”*

**Young married man from Yanwa community**

**Obedience and respect.** The most common expectation men cited was that their wives would be obedient and respectful. These are key traits looked for in the selection of a wife, as well as strong expectations for the marriage itself. Obedience and respect appear to be interdependent characteristics that allow a man to maintain power and authority in the household and in society. A woman is expected to put the bidding of her husband above her own needs. “Obedience is marriage,” said one young man. “When you have a girl, who does what you tell her to do, and drops whatever you tell her not to do, she is the best wife.” Furthermore, men expect their wives to show respect towards their parents, especially their mothers, with this respect often seen as evidence of respect for the husband as well. Obedience and respect are seen as expressions of the wife’s love.

Some men also said they expect their wife to never question them or talk back when they make a decision. Women are expected to be submissive, to listen, and to respect their husband’s authority. However, though women are expected to obey and show respect, some men also welcome their advice. One man described the role of a wife as the voice of reason for her husband: “The good woman is the one who prevents her husband from selling his property whatever the difficulties are.”

**Sexual satisfaction.** Another commonly cited expectation of marriage was ongoing sexual relations. A man is not said to truly “know” a woman until he has had sex, and thus, physical consummation is one of the primary expectations of marriage. Several young men said that one of the appealing things about having a wife is that “she cannot say no to you sexually. It is her duty.” The idea of not having to pursue sex—with it instead viewed as an expected part of marriage—appeals to many young men.

**Subsequent marriages.** Not every man has more than one wife (as allowed by Islamic law), but the practice is so common that men often expect it to be part of marriage. They believe that as long as they have the financial means to provide for the larger family—as required by Islam—they can have up to four wives. Because of the link between wealth and marriage, having multiple wives can elevate a man’s social status. One researcher wrote in his fieldnotes that men often believe having more wives is important for the women as well; they say that “for the husband to get the money to remarry is a pride for their wives because to speak in a spiritual way it demonstrates that they carry ‘wealth stars.’” Women’s perspectives on the subject are more nuanced and complex, influenced by education, opportunity, the household situation, rural or urban origin, and other factors. Additionally, though a first marriage often involves considerable parental intervention and influence, the process of marrying a second and subsequent wives is typically more directly under the control of the future husband. Polygamy is so accepted that women can be shamed for not having co-wives. One researcher said that women who do not have co-wives “will be criticized, by saying, ‘She is alone with her husband.’”

**Solidarity between husband and wife.** Another common expectation in marriage is solidarity between a husband and wife, though the young men did not speak of it as often as they did of obedience and respect. Solidarity was presented primarily in terms of a woman’s support for her husband in financial matters and other family necessities. Several men explained that if a man is struggling financially, his wife is expected to contribute to the family from her own savings. Several men said a good wife would “bear the poverty and keep the secrets of her husband.” If he migrates in search of work, she is expected to take on some of his responsibilities.

# How do marital expectations match or clash with marital reality?

Young men's reports of the realities of marriage both match and differ from their expectations, which appears to be contingent on the economic status of the man and his household alongside a number of other factors. Several said that if they had understood the difficulties and complexities of marriage, they would not have gotten married so soon.

**Financial realities.** The most commonly discussed disparity between expectation and reality was the financial burden of having a family. In these communities, women can give birth every one to two years until menopause, leading to an increasingly large family. Men said they were surprised by the heavy economic responsibilities that came with providing for the family's shelter, food, clothing, and education, as required by Islamic custom. At times of economic downturns, disappointing crop yields, lower agricultural commodity prices, drought, or other difficulties, many men feel pressured by their wives to continue supporting the family at an adequate level. Given the realities of southern Niger, these periods of crisis are all too common. Men fear divorce if they are unable to adequately provide for their families, and this is accepted as a cause for divorce in Islam as practiced in the region.

**Reduced freedom.** Several men mentioned the lack of freedom they encountered after getting married. Single men go out as they choose and associate with whom they want. After marriage, they must conform to certain norms and do not have the same easy mobility, which came as a surprise to many men.

**Family planning.** Conversations about fertility and family planning—though still uncommon—are a newfound reality among younger married couples. Though significant numbers of women seek contraception behind their husband's back without his approval, the research team found that couples are increasingly accessing family planning services together. Some of the men said this was not something they had previously considered. This is, in part, due to the work of a number of NGOs, the community volunteers they have trained, and the programming of the community radio station in Aguié Department.

**Obedience and respect.** The participant observation, casual conversations, and in-depth interviews suggest young married men are generally satisfied with their marriages. They described having a connection with their wives and working as a team—though for them teamwork means men focused on being providers and women focused on caretaking. In casual conversations, the researchers often heard the phrase, "There is understanding between us." The men are pleased with this due to the belief that a successful marriage is based on a lack of disagreement or fighting. Men who said their wives are respectful and obedient credit this to their wife, as one young man said, "com[ing] from a respectable household, so she is well educated on how to behave." Men who had unsuccessful marriages claimed they failed because of the woman's disobedience or family background, saying conflicts with in-laws often resulted from these in-laws expecting continued support after the initial payment of the bridewealth. In addition, some husbands attribute a wife's obedience and respect to her having attended lessons with a local Qur'anic teacher.

# How have marital norms and expectations changed over time?

*“We are facing a kind of mutation in marriage. Young people today do not have the same conception of marriage as their parents. Most of these young people marry to free themselves from parental guardianship at the expense of the extended family. Before, it was the parents who decided on the timing of the marriage and the choice of the spouse for their child. Now young people marry as a sign of success in their work abroad.”*

**Researcher’s comment during an analysis meeting**

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**Increased socializing between young men and women.** The most commonly discussed generational change is the increased interaction between young men and women. Several factors appear to underlie this change: labor migration, the creation of new locations conducive to social interaction, nocturnal events (such as night markets and evening ceremonies), and increased means of transportation and communication.


In previous generations, one of the only public spaces in which young people could interact was the village center. “These days, when you go to the village center, you only find old ladies selling peanuts,” said the father of a recently returned migrant worker. The new meeting spaces allow young people to interact in casual, unmonitored settings, with nighttime marketplaces now serving as public spaces in which young people can socialize. It appears that parents are not as concerned with their girls staying out late to attend marketplace festivities as prior generations. Additionally, day markets, wrestling matches, phone shops, and battery-charging kiosks have become key locations for young men and women to “rub shoulders.” Community gardens are also popular spots, as girls irrigate the plants at night to save water. Girls have also begun to “sit with boys during the day for tea,” marking a departure from past norms.

One village elder complained that youth at market festivals behave “as if they were alone. Young men pass with their young girl arm in arm!” Such public displays of affection are a dramatic change from previous generations, and they peak at night dances with hired DJs. According to the young men that host and frequent these events, the parties can go as late as 4 or 5 a.m. and are a good place to meet and “stroke girls.” This is widely considered inappropriate, yet is discussed openly by young men.



Additionally, the increase in cell phones has dramatically enhanced young people's ability to communicate, flirt, and set up meetings without the knowledge of their parents and extended family.

**Increased financial independence.** It has long been the norm in Hausa society for the parents to select a bride for their son. This has changed with the money young men make working as migrant workers. "How can you tell a son who makes more than you what to do? You cannot!" said one father. Another change is how parents are informed about the marriage. Before "a man would tell his friend, and the friend informed the parents," commented one mother, "Often the young man would leave the village out of modesty." Now he directly tells his parents he's getting married. "Since it's the young people who finance everything, they only come to inform us or give us money to do this or that," the mother continued. "You used to have to wait for everything from the father." For this reason and others, the marriage-related decision-making power of parents has diminished.



*"In the past, parents had the power to choose wives for their sons because they took on all the expenses. Now it is quite the opposite. Young people choose their wives and pay for almost all the costs of the marriage."*

**Village elder**

**Forced marriage.** The researchers heard a number of stories about both boys and girls who refused to enter arranged marriages. In one instance, a girl refused to marry the man her father chose despite his threats to leave the village if she did not obey. In general, "girls now do not easily accept forced marriage," said one elder, "and if they accept, they divorce in just a few months." The national government and NGOs are raising awareness of girls and women's marriage rights, and state radio stations have featured discussions about forced marriage. The same is now true in secondary schools. In addition, with young men's growing financial independence, fewer are willing to marry someone imposed on them by their parents. The imam of the Great Mosque in Makada said he has the ability to intervene in a forced marriage if appealed to and he "cannot even count the number of times" he has settled in favor of the girl who does not want to be married to whom her parents chose—"As a religious leader, I cannot support this coercion."

**Increased polygamy.** This research suggests a possible increase in the number of men who are taking on a second or third wife. One of the men and one of the women the research team spoke to said that in previous generations, a man typically had to be at least 40 before he could accumulate the capital needed to marry another wife. However, this finding is based on a small number of interviews and should be interpreted with caution.

*“One day, the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) was going to the savannah and found the frame of a girl. He asked the corpse what caused her death. The girl told the Prophet (PBUH) that her parents wanted to force her into a marriage, so she fled and she died in the savannah. The Prophet (PBUH) proposed to bring her back to life but said she must return to her family. She said she preferred death to being with a husband she did not want. After his return from the savannah, the Prophet (PBUH) asked the Islamic Ummah to let each girl and boy choose the one they want to marry.”*

**Imam of the Great Mosque in Makada**



# Conclusion

Marriage is an essential milestone in Hausa men's and women's lives, with marriage shaping a man's identity and reputation and helping to define his masculinity. Thus, much of a young man's life is dedicated to preparing for marriage. The research team used ethnographic methods—participant observation, in-depth interviews, and informal group discussions—to explore localized male perspectives on a range of marriage-related topics.

One of this study's most important findings is the degree to which young men's labor migration shapes the courting and marriage process. Agriculture has been the primary means of creating wealth. However, a rapidly increasing population, drought, economic shocks, climate change, and a host of other factors have led to the division and “degradation of land and...the weakening and at times the collapse of the economic base of households and families” (Idrissa, 2015). Though labor migration in the region goes back centuries, the dramatic increase in male labor migration has become an indispensable survival strategy. Labor migration helps vulnerable families manage the harsh daily reality of insecure livelihoods and can also diminish “the logic of social cohesion and communal redistribution” by facilitating “a mindset inspired by modes of accumulation imported from elsewhere” (Diarra & Monimart, 2006). Additionally, migration can “open the minds” of young men (Masquelier, 2016); their travels often expose them to differing gender norms and practices such as birth spacing.

Courtship and marriage depend on the financial resources available to a man. Greater wealth (and the material goods and land that come with it) is a prerequisite for a valued marriage and the masculine, esteemed persona and the Islamic respectability that so many of these young men desire. Gift-giving during courtship can be costly, as can be the bridewealth and the wedding. Consequent married and family life is also expensive. Necessities like shelter, food, and clothing are seen as a man's responsibility to provide, and if wives do not feel provided for, they may lawfully divorce their husband.

The increase in financial independence through labor migration and the subsequent accumulation of wealth have granted young men greater autonomy in decision-making. This increased independence is one of the most dramatic generational shifts related to marriage. Though family preference remains highly important, young men increasingly find themselves with the financial resources to dictate the terms of their marriage.



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