Marriage Age, Fertility Behaviour and Women's Empowerment in Nigeria

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Extended Abstract

Description of Topic

Marriage age is an important proximate determinant of fertility. Early marriage in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa is not only one of the causes of unacceptably high fertility level but also a threat to the prospects of demographic dividend. It is widely believed that by delaying marriage, several hundreds of thousands of young girls will be able to acquire improved education which will make them to understand and demand for basic human rights and participation in the workforce, thus likely to cause change in their fertility desire and ultimately their fertility behaviour. There is therefore a nexus among marriage age, fertility behaviour and women's empowerment. However, in spite of several studies focusing on women's issues insufficient attempts have been made to simultaneously explore the influence of marriage age on fertility behaviour and women's empowerment. It is important to examine the inter relatedness of marriage age, fertility behaviour and women's empowerment in Nigeria because implementation of population and gender policies are yet to enhance the prospects of demographic dividend in the country.

Theoretical Focus

Liberal feminist theory provides the theoretical underpinning of the study. Liberal feminism aims at improving all round gender equality and empowerment by encouraging women's access to public institutions and bringing women's issues to the fore of national discourse (Walter, 1998). These are to be achieved through educational reforms and enactment of appropriate legislations not only to bridge the state of inequality between men and women, but to also change community norms and beliefs about early marriage as already been achieved in countries such as Cambodia, Nepal and Rwanda (Head *et al.* 2014). In Nigeria, Women and girls have unequal economic, social and political opportunities with men in the country (British Council, 2012). This is made possible and sustained by Nigeria's socio-cultural system that not only promotes women's subordinate position, but also sustains inequality in decision-making positions in government (Omoluabi, Aina and Attanasso, 2014).

Data and Research Methods

The data for this study were extracted from the 2013 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS). We analysed the women dataset focusing on a weighted sample size of 20,014 women having excluded women who were never married and women who have never had a live birth. The outcome variables in the study are fertility behaviour and women's empowerment. Fertility behaviour was measured by children ever born (CEB) and categorised into three groups with low fertility indicating 1-2 children, moderate fertility indicating 3-4 children, and high fertility indicating 5 or more children. Women's empowerment was measured using control of household decisions and educational attainment. All the indicators were regrouped into three categories to reflect low, moderate and high level of empowerment.

The key explanatory variable is marriage age grouped into four age intervals of 14 years or less, 15 to 19 years, 20 to 24 years, and 25 years and above. Other explanatory variables include selected socio-economic characteristics (wealth quintile, place of residence, employment status, religion and region). The relationships between the explanatory and

outcome variables were moderated by barriers to health care and access to mass media. Stata version 12 was used to perform statistical analyses. The chi-square statistic was used to examine the relationship between the research variables. Multinomial logistic regression was performed to ascertain the influence of marriage age on fertility behaviour and empowerment. The logistic regression was replicated in four models with moderate fertility and moderate empowerment as base outcome. The relative risk ratios (rrr) are used in the study to report the estimated coefficients of the multinomial model.

Findings

Findings show that 26.7% of the women married at age 14 years or less with highest proportion of early marriages occurring in the North-western zone of the country. The dominant age interval at first marriage across the country is 15 to 19 years. The proportions of first marriages occurring at 25 years or above were higher in the southern region and lowest in the northern region. Majority of the sampled women (38.2%) reported high fertility performance. When the CEB was disaggregated by region, high fertility was dominant in the North-eastern and North-western zones of the country, while low fertility was highest among southern women. Result further reveal that 15.7% of the respondents were currently using at least one method of modern contraception. Results of levels of empowerment provide evidence of low level of women's empowerment particularly in northern parts of the country. Results (Table 1) confirm significant association between marriage age and fertility behaviour $(\chi^2=130.7, \ p<0.05)$ and between marriage age and empowerment $(\chi^2=284.1, p<0.05)$.

Table 1: Cross tabulations of marriage age with fertility behaviour and women's empowerment

	Fertility behaviour (CEB)						Levels of Empowerment					
	Low		Moderate		High		Low		Moderate		High	
Marriage age	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
≤14 years	1,151	21.5	1,378	25.8	2,817	52.7	3,471	64.9	1,580	29.6	295	5.5
15-19 years	2,996	33.1	2,581	28.5	3,485	38.4	4,181	46.2	3,836	42.3	1,045	11.5
20-24 years	1,557	40.1	1,267	32.6	1,061	27.3	714	18.4	2,125	54.7	1,045	26.9
25 +	898	52.2	540	31.4	283	16.4	190	11.0	734	42.7	797	46.3
Total	6,602	33.0	5,766	28.8	7,646	38.2	8,556	42.7	8,276	41.3	3,182	16.0
Statistic	Df = 6, χ^2 = 130.7, p<0.05						Df = 6, χ^2 = 284.1, p<0.05					

As shown in Table 2, in the four models constructed for predicting fertility behaviour, marriage age exert significant influence on fertility behaviour. Each additional year of marriage age multiplies the odds of low fertility rather than moderate fertility. Similarly, each additional year of marriage age reduces the odds of high fertility rather than moderate fertility. In Model 1, one additional year delay in marriage age in the interval 15-19 years multiplies the odds of low fertility by 45.9% (rrr=1.4595, p<0.05), at the interval 20-24 years, each additional year delay in marriage age multiplies the odds of low fertility by 68.4% (rrr=1.6838,p<0.05). When the socio-economic characteristics were controlled in Model 2, marriage age remains a significant predictor of low fertility as the odds of low fertility consistently increase with each additional delay in marriage age. When barriers to health and access to mass media were controlled in Model 3, marriage age maintained significant influence on fertility behaviour. In Model 4 results show that one additional year delay in marriage age in the interval 15-19 multiplies the odds of low fertility by 38.8% (rrr=1.3887, p<0.05), at the interval 20-24 years, each additional year delay in marriage age multiplies the odds of low fertility by 46.9% (rrr=1.4696,p<0.05), and the odds of low fertility rather than

moderate fertility were nearly doubled (rrr=1.9903, p<0.05) for each one year increase in marriage age at the interval 25 years and above.

Table 2: Multinomial logistic regression showing relative risk ratio (rrr) of low and high fertility with moderate fertility as base outcome

Variable	Low fertility				High fertility			
	Model 1 rrr	Model 2 rrr	Model 3 rrr	Model 4 rrr	Model 1 rrr	Model 2 rrr	Model 3 rrr	Model 4 rrr
Marriage age								
≤14 years (RC)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
15-19 years	1.4595*	1.3896*	1.4672*	1.3887*	0.7362*	0.6837*	0.7317*	0.6604*
20-24 years	1.6838*	1.4713*	1.6988*	1.4696*	0.5561*	0.4426*	0.5522*	0.4093*
25 years & above	2.3767*	1.9918*	2.3996*	1.9903*	0.3999*	0.2831*	0.3971*	0.2564*
Wealth index								
Poorest (RC)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Poorer	1.0486**	na	1.0666**	na	0.8402*	na	0.8368*	na
Middle	1.0069**	na	1.0531**	na	0.8104*	na	0.7989*	na
Richer	0.9358**	na	1.0063**	na	0.5943*	na	0.5811*	na
Richest	0.9524**	na	1.0370**	na	0.3421*	na	0.3330*	na
Place of residence								
Urban (RC)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	na
Rural	1.0491**	na	1.0426**	na	0.7955*	na	0.7972*	na
Religion								
Christianity (RC)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Islam	1.0413**	na	1.0350**	na	1.1587**	na	1.1631**	na
Others	0.8496**	na	0.8343**	na	1.2097**	na	1.2171**	na
Employment status								
Employed (RC)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	na
Unemployed	0.5319*	na	0.5398	na	1.5451*	na	1.5274*	na
Barriers to health care								
Yes (RC)	-	-	-	-	-	-	na	na
No	1.1133**	0.9882**	na	na	0.8643**	0.8501**	na	na
Access to mass media								
No access (RC)	-	-	na	na	-	-	na	na
Low access	1.0666**	0.9837**	na	na	1.0168**	0.9282**	na	na
Moderate access	1.1543*	0.9992**	na	na	0.9712**	0.8048*	na	na

Note: RC reference category, na not available, *p≤0.05, **p>0.05

As shown in Table 3, marriage age shows influence on empowerment. In Model 1, one additional year delay in marriage age in the interval 15-19 years multiplies the odds of high empowerment by 7.1% (rrr=1.0710, p>0.05), at the interval 20-24 years, each additional year delay in marriage age multiplies the odds of high empowerment by 40.2% (rrr=1.4023, p<0.05). When the socio-economic characteristics were controlled in Model 2, marriage age maintains significant effect on high empowerment as the odds of high empowerment was more than four times likely among women who married at age 25 years or above (rrr=4.8806, p<0.05). When barriers to health and access to mass media were controlled in Model 3, marriage age maintained significant influence on high empowerment. In the model, one additional year delay in marriage age in the interval 15-19 years multiplies the odds of high empowerment by 7.4% (rrr=1.0739, p>0.05), at the interval 20-24 years, each additional year delay in marriage age multiplies the odds of high empowerment by 41.6% (rrr=1.4164,p<0.05). In Model 4, results show that one additional year delay in marriage age in the interval 15-19 multiplies the odds of high empowerment by 45.7% (rrr=1.4572, p<0.05), at the interval 20-24 years, each additional year delay in marriage age multiplies the odds of high empowerment by 46.9% (rrr=1.4696,p<0.05), and the odds of high empowerment rather than moderate empowerment were more-than doubled (rrr=2.6316,

p<0.05) for each one year increase in marriage age at the interval 20-24 years, and more-than five times at the interval 25 years and above. On the other hand, each additional year of marriage age reduces the odds of low empowerment rather than moderate empowerment.

Table 3: Multinomial logistic regression showing relative risk ratio of high and low level of empowerment with moderate empowerment as base outcome

Variable	High empowerment				Low empowerment			
	Model 1 rrr	Model 2 rrr	Model 3 rrr	Model 4 rrr	Model 1 rrr	Model 2 rrr	Model 3 rrr	Model 4 rrr
Marriage age								
14 years or less (RC)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
15-19 years	1.0710**	1.3699*	1.0739**	1.4572*	0.8127*	0.5579*	0.7983*	0.4961*
20-24 years	1.4023*	2.2993*	1.4164*	2.6316*	0.5330*	0.1994*	0.5200*	0.1530*
25 years and above	2.5692*	4.8806*	2.6071*	5.8038*	0.6434*	0.1648*	0.6353*	0.1179*
Wealth index								
Poorest (RC)	-	na	-	na	-	na	-	na
Poorer	1.5243*	na	1.5677*	na	0.9576*	na	0.9090**	na
Middle	1.9776*	na	2.1234*	na	0.6062*	na	0.5350*	na
Richer	2.2067*	na	2.4662*	na	0.3499*	na	0.2852*	na
Richest	3.4576*	na	3.9593*	na	0.1117*	na	0.0874*	na
Place of residence								
Rural (RC)	-	na	-	na	-	na	-	na
Urban	1.7249*	na	1.7213*	na	0.9856**	na	0.0169**	na
Religion								
Christianity (RC)	-	na	-	na	-	na	-	na
Islam	0.6902*	na	0.6956*	na	5.6069*	na	5.7207*	na
Traditional & others	0.9699**	na	0.9968**	na	2.7284*	na	3.0158*	na
Employment status								
Employed (RC)	-	na	-	na	-	na	-	na
Unemployed	0.4365*	na	0.4430	na	1.6282*	na	3.0158	na
Barriers to health care								
Yes (RC)	-	-	na	na	-	-	na	na
No	0.8846**	1.1512**	na	na	0.6784*	0.4703*	na	na
Access to mass media								
No access (RC)	-	-	na	na	-	-	na	na
Low access	1.1034**	1.6724*	na	na	0.6949*	0.4796*	na	na
Moderate access	1.3253*	2.3429*	na	na	0.6470*	0.3320*	na	na

Note: RC reference category, na not available, *p≤0.05, **p>0.05

Conclusion

With increasing women's education and advocacy by women's groups and in line with the assertion of Liberal feminists, a number of positive steps have been taken in the country to bridge gender gap and empower women in the country. These steps will enhance the prospect of demographic dividend if they are complemented by the enactment and enforcement of legislation to eliminate early marriage in the country.

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