

# Measuring the Influence of Social Mutations on the Precariousness of Women's Marriage, the "Dismarriage": Case of Niger Republic

Zourkaleini Younoussi<sup>1</sup>, Yacoubou Alou<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universit é de Zinder, Niger Republic

Correspondence: Zourkaleini Younoussi, Universit é de Zinder, Niger Republic.

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## Abstract

The South societies, under the influence of their Northern counterparts, have undergone profound familial changes; these transformations are translated in a reduction of the number of marriages and in making wedlock unions fragile along with the consequences that this entails on children. Drawing on the data from four Demographic and Health surveys (DHS) (1992, 1998, 2006, and 2012) which Niger has so far conducted, this study aims at verifying whether the influence of social transformations on the family in Niger can be captured through an examination of the increase in median age at the first marriage, in the proportion of single women (and definitive celibacy), in polygamous marriages, in couples living in consensual union (not in wedlock), in the proportion of children living with their single mother, and in that of the divorced/separated women. Our results show that though urbanization and education influence marriage, women's "dismarriage" is yet to be a topical issue. Thus, we notice an intensification of marriages which comes, however, with a slight increase in the age at first marriage.

**Keywords:** social transformations, women, "dismarriage", Niger Republic

## 1. Introduction

Western societies undergo profound changes in family behavior notably an increase in women's autonomy. This autonomy has become possible thanks to women's ability to control their fertility and due to their massive entry into the labor market. This has helped reduce the protective role that marriage could play for women, or it has enabled them to deny marriage altogether to preserve their autonomy. This new situation affects old societal norms because it is part of a gradual transformation of social standards which traditionally regulate the institution of marriage. These changes also question the institutional aspects of marriage, or incite people to stop considering marriage as the foundation and regulator of solidarity of the couple (Roussel, 1986).

In Africa, these societal transformations are taking place as a result of cultural mingling, especially with Western cultures. This state of affairs influences the existing political, social, and economic structures. These mutations may originate from the intensification of urbanization, the advent of the modern school, and the development of audiovisual communication techniques (Kaura ĩ 2007).

In urban areas, contact with the Western world has gradually made individuals distance themselves from the old solidarities and their traditional affiliations to bring them into some kind of seeming resemblance with other residents of cities, who they consider similar and equal citizens to them. Similarly, the modern school offers greater openness to the outside world; its various teachings help people learn about other cultural values (Kaura ĩ 2007; Cordell & Pich é 1997). As for communication and media outlets such as TV, Radio, and the Internet, they have made the linkages between the different societies more palpable and have suggested new family models.

In this context, understanding a possible plurality of families in Niger points at an exploration of multiple mutations that have occurred in the "traditional" family and it calls for a highlighting of factors that contribute to the advent of these transformations. However, investigating the changes that have occurred in the distant or recent past is a difficult task because these changes are numerous and complex to be quantified. One of the major difficulties resides in the insufficiency of data and information which would enable a better understanding of the familial mutations in progress.

This study aims at exploring some significant family aspects to help shed some light on possible changes that have

occurred in the traditional family in Niger. These aspects include the spread of consensual union, an increase in the age at the first marriage, marriage rarity and its precariousness by making divorce/separation become commonplace practice, an increase in the proportion of children under 15 who live with their single mothers (as a result of these divorces and separations), and a progressive decline in polygamous unions.

Drawing on the data from four Demographic and Health surveys (DHS) (1992, 1998, 2006, and 2012) which Niger has conducted, the objective of this study is to verify whether the influence of the social transformations on the family in Niger can be captured through an examination of the increase in median age at the first marriage, in the proportion of single women (and definitive celibacy), in polygamous marriages, in couples living in consensual union (not in wedlock), in the proportion of children living with their single mothers, and in the proportion of the divorced/separated women. In carrying out this study, literature on marital changes in Africa has been reviewed, then the methodology has been explained, and finally the results are exposed and discussed. These results focus on the measurement of levels and tendencies of the different conditions of marital situation and that of the age at the first marriage.

## **2. A Brief Overview of Marital Changes in Africa**

In Africa, marriage traditionally encompasses the union of two families; parental involvement is a central and essential component of its process. Today, although traditional marriage remains a widespread practice, marriage process is undergoing significant changes. Indeed, women's integration in the market economy, the development of education and urbanization, and the influence of foreign cultural models brought about by religion and media have engaged African societies in 'modernization.' Thus, if in the past African societies were relatively stable and resting on often accepted values by all of its members, they have been caught, in recent decades, in an economic, social, political, and demographic dynamics which requires new changes and regulations (Thiriati 1999).

The main features of these transformations include freedom to choose one's spouse, love marriage, sexual autonomy and pre-marriage sexual intercourse, an increase in the age at first marriage, couples living in consensual union, the fact that divorce is becoming commonplace practice, and a greater independence vis-à-vis one's parents and relatives. Freedom to choose a spouse undoubtedly constitutes a major feature of contemporary marriage in Africa. Young girls are becoming freer and freer to choose their partners and this reduces parents' implication in the process of marriage.

African cities seem to be favorable places to build and experiment new behavior. These places remain where self-reliance processes are more pronounced and where economic crises are acutely experienced. This plays a revealing or speeding role in the ongoing transformations in male/female relationships. The entry into union is delayed and its terms (conditions) are becoming diversified and they combine innovation and borrowings from tradition (Antoine & Nanitelamio, 1990; Locoh, 1991). Once out of an agricultural (rural) environment in which numerous children constitute a labor source for the family, female inhabitants of urban settlements can find it more advantageous, from economic viewpoint, to marry late in their life time and to have fewer children. Furthermore, recent studies show an increase in the proportion of women aged 20 to 24 who are unmarried or living in a consensual union (they have never been married). Researchers have found that "it is in Burkina Faso and Benin Republic, in particular, that the proportion of women from this age group, who have never married, has increased the most through an increase in celibacy and also in consensual unions" (Antoine & Marcoux, 2014).

Economic pressures and tensions related to the massive rural exodus in some West African countries are transforming the traditional dynamics of gender roles of both sexes which in turn affects the marital and reproductive systems in a contradictory manner (Mondain, Delaunay, & Legrand, 2014). Drawing on a qualitative study conducted in the region of Fatick, in Senegal, Mondain & al. (2014) find that communities consider the influence of girls' seasonal migration as the main factor which incites girls to delay their marriage, yet to get pregnant out of wedlock. Urban life usually involves coping with modernity and new social expectations related to marriage and fertility. This lifestyle exposes young women, in particular, to new forms of emotional and sexual relationships, more liberal and varied, and creates some sort of physical distancing from the older generations. Therefore, young female migrants enjoy greater financial and decision making autonomy regarding the issue of marriage and family (Mfoungungu, 2012; Hertrich, 2007; Delaunay & al, 2006).

However, in rural areas, the absence of Western models (ways of life) and the instability of market economy along with the weight of social and family structures often contribute to the continuation of old marriage strategies. However, the absence of decisive variations in a calendar showing the date of the beginning of the couples' union excludes neither a progressive decrease of the authority of families in making decisions regarding marriage nor an increase in the forms of unions and marriages (Thiriati, 1999). In a recent past, especially in the rural settlements, numerous economic motivations could push a poor family to marry one of their daughters at an early age in an attempt to avoid school fees, to relieve the family from the financial load that the child represented, to reimburse the debts contracted by the family, and/or to complete the household income (UNICEF, 2015). Today, the increasing precariousness of men's economic situation,

especially at the young men's level, makes it difficult for many young girls to find a desirable and eligible husband. This entails some waiting time which contribute to an increase in the age at the first marriage despite the availability of young girls who are ready to change their marital status.

Moreover, improvement of girls' education is often considered as one of the major factors explaining the increase in the age at the first marriage (Adjamagbo & al, 2014; Walker, 2013; Ikamari, 2005; Agyei, Biritwum, Ashitey, & Hill, 2000). Numerous hypotheses have been formulated to explicate how an improvement in girls' education would result in delaying their marriage. Some scholars contend that enrollment at school or university prevents girls from getting married early because marriage would not only oblige them to drop out of their studies but also because they may not have enough money to support marriage expenses (buying furniture and other materials) (Adjamagbo & al., 2014; Ikamari, 2005). Thus, the more years a girl spends at school, the greater will be the probability of delaying her marriage.

Moreover, by freeing girls from their daily household chores and exposing them to new ideas and values which are different from their traditional norms, Adjamagbo & al. (2014) and Ikamari (2005) support, schooling exposes girls to new understanding of their familial environment. Other scholars have probed deeper and suggested that it is not just schooling that delays the age of marriage but the autonomy that girls acquire at school (Lloyd & Mensch, 2006). Girls become often conscious of the existence of viable alternatives to early marriage and they can delay their marriage to find other ways of personal and professional fulfillment. Indeed, Caldwell and Caldwell (1987) opine that education could change firmly rooted vision of traditional societies in which early marriage and maternity confer on women their social status. This is possible, they insist, because education helps girls realize that there are other possible ways through which they can achieve higher social status, they understand that educated women are respected and enjoy a greater social position. In addition, it is possible that women perceive schooling as an opportunity to have access to jobs which would enable them achieve some financial autonomy vis-à-vis men, and this makes marriage less attractive and incites women to delay their marriage (Ikamari, 2005).

In a related development, Westoff (2003) demonstrates that a higher level of education delays women's marriage in sub-Saharan Africa. Similarly, Garenne (2004) contends that the level of education and income constitute major factors explaining the recent increase in the age of marriage in sub-Saharan Africa. Other studies reveal that the link between education and birth control is another factor affecting the delay in marriage. They suggest that by improving the access to information regarding modern contraception, education helps achieve an efficient usage of contraceptives which makes it possible to avoid unintended pregnancy and the resulting early marriage (Ikamari, 2005).

However, other researchers show that, even if the level of education enlarges women's perspectives, education comes with a cost because educated women are generally perceived as less submissive wives and thus less attractive (Antoine, 2006). This standpoint is corroborated by Behaghel & Lambert (2011), who observe that in Senegal, educated married women living in a polygamous family often occupy the place of second wife (less favored) which suggests that education can have an impact on the marital situation of a woman. It is possible sometimes as observed with the Igbo (majority ethnic group in the Eastern part of Nigeria) that the delay in educated girls' marriage explains new demands from families which are worried about getting back, through matrimonial compensation, the money invested by parents in their daughters' education.

Some scholars argue that the changes in woman's role in the family have contributed to modify husband/wife relationship (Dumas & Belanger, 1997; Oppenheimer, 1994). In Nigeria and in Uganda, for instance, young educated women claim the freedom of becoming "the outside wife" due to less desirable situation of "the inside wife" who have believed in monogamy but enjoy less of its rights (Wakaranja, 1994; Thiriat, 1999). For these women, living in a consensual union gives them more freedom vis-à-vis men and the family, but it especially allows them to better preserve their rights over their children. Additionally, Garenne (2004) states that the increase in women's participation in the working population and the improvement of the level of education disfavor early marriage. It also affects girls' personal decision making process and that of parents with regards to marriage and family. It is possible that women's significant financial autonomy makes marriage less necessary for them, and the educated women become less inclined to marry, especially to marry men from rural settlements.

### **3. Methodology**

Because in cities people tend to abandon old solidarity and their traditional affiliations, we expect the following: a decrease in polygamy; an increase in the age at the first marriage; in divorce; in the number of unmarried couples; and an increase in the proportion of children living with their single mothers. We also expect other social transformations. Indeed, independently of settlement, modern education offers greater exposure to the outside world, this situation creates similar changes as those observed in cities where they are more pronounced.

During the following studies: DHS Niger-I in 1992, DHS Niger-II in 1998, DHS Niger III in 2006, and DHS Niger IV in 2012, the term 'union' applies to any woman who has declared herself married or who lives like a married woman with a

partner. Thus, these studies take into consideration people who are in legal, religious, or traditional marriage, and people living in consensual union.

At different periods of time, women's matrimonial situation is examined through the proportion of single, married, and divorced/separated women. The proportion of polygamy corresponds to the ratio between the number of women living in polygamy and the total number of women living in a 'union' at the time of data collection. The age at the first 'union' refers to the age at which a woman has started living with her first husband/partner. It is important to precise that some women, especially those who live in a 'union' while they are very young, have declared that they were married before their first sexual intercourse; in fact in the case of very early marriage, it may take some time between the celebration of the marriage and its consummation. In situations where sexual intercourses happen after marriage festivity, we have considered as the age at marriage, the age at the first sexual intercourse or the age at the consummation of the marriage.

Table 1. Number of households and women participants by residency depending on the year when the survey is conducted

Targeted group	Niamey	Other cities	Total urban	Rural	Total
1992					
Women	1 347	1 349	2 696	3 807	6 503
Households	968	1 060	2 028	3 204	5 232
1998					
Women	1 048	1 315	2 363	5 214	7 577
Households	702	951	1 653	4 275	5 928
2006					
Women	1 329	1 920	3 249	5 974	9 223
Households	913	1 449	2 362	5 298	7 660
2012					
Women	1 379	2 021	3 400	7 760	11 160
Households	1 135	1 842	2 977	7 773	10 750

Source: EDSN-I, EDSN-II, EDSN-MICS-III, and EDSN-MICS-IV (the four demographic and health surveys conducted in Niger in 1992, 1998, 2006, and 2012)

By capturing the matrimonial situation, the objective of these surveys is to show the link between marriage and fertility. It presumes that marriage and consensual union are suitable occasions per excellence for human reproduction. To carry out these surveys, questions were addressed to a targeted population (women between 15 and 49 years old: that is childbearing age). We notice that the number of surveyed women is relatively high in each settlement even though the last survey presents higher numbers (table 1).

The data collected from these national surveys help us not only to estimate the indicators at the national level but also to have reliable estimations of the formed groups from our classification variables. Based on the calculation of the evolution index, we examine the evolutions by considering Niger society's transformation factors, especially urbanization and education.

The exploitation of data collected from the four demographic and health surveys is used to envision questionnaires addressed to households to identify the children raised by single mother though the father is still alive. Table 1 informs us on the number of households surveyed by year depending on the location of the household (urban or rural).

We are interested in children under 15 living with their single mothers. In order to consider only divorce effect, children whose father has passed away but with a mother alive are not taken into account. Classification variables are child's age and the location of the household at the time of data collection.

## 4. Results

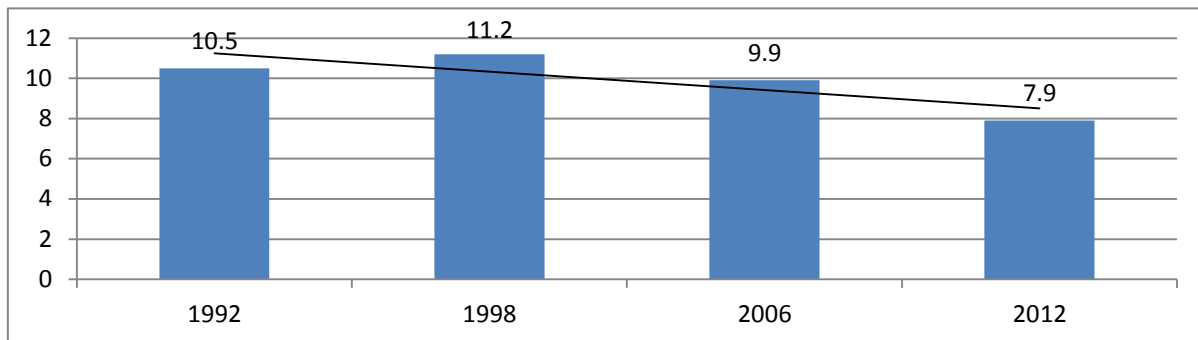
### 4.1 Women's Entrance in a Union

A comparison of the proportion of single women, from the age group 15-49 years, based on the four demographic and health surveys, reveals that in Niger the proportion of women who stay in celibacy has witnessed a slight decrease and almost all women end up in a union. Indeed, the proportion of single women age 15-49 remains constant (11%) between 1992 and 1998; it drops from 11% to 10% between 1998 and 2006; and it continues to drop to 8% in 2012. We observe that, during this period of time, there is a trend in the decrease of the proportion of single women, and thus, an increase in marriage intensity (Chart 1).

From table 2, it appears that the proportion of single women is higher in urban settlements with some variation between the capital city and other cities. However, this proportion decreases over time in cities and in rural settlements as well. We thus observe an increase in marriage intensity regardless of settlement.

We also observe that the proportion of single women increases with the level of education. Almost all of the uneducated women have already experienced their first marriage (93% to 97%) while half (41% to 54%) of those who have reached at least seventh grade level or higher have declared themselves as singles. However, the proportion of single women decreases over time at all levels of education which creates an increase in marriage depending on the level of education. It is important to notice that the analysis of these different proportions without taking into consideration women’s age does not allow having a clearer idea of the prevailing situation within this population of women.

Chart 1. Proportion (%) of women (15-49 years) singles at the time of the survey



Source: EDSN-I, EDSN-II, EDSN-MICS-III, and EDSN-MICS-IV (the four demographic and health surveys conducted in Niger in 1992, 1998, 2006, and 2012)

By examining the proportion of single women based on the age, we observe that this proportion declines very rapidly with age. Thus, it drops from 41, 38, 39, to 37 per cent at the age of 15-49 in 1992, 1998, 2006, and 2012 respectively. But it only varies from 7, 11, 10, to 7 per cent respectively in 1992, 1998, 2006, and 2012 at the age of 20-24. At the age of 25-29 this proportion is at 2% in 1992 and 2012 and it roughly passes to 3% in 1998 and 2006. For all the years considered in the study, from the age of 30, this proportion becomes very small: less than 1% within the age group 30-34. There is roughly no single woman, age 45-49, who remains in celibacy in 1992 but their proportion passes from 0.2% in 1998 and 2006 to 0.5% in 2012. An observation on this last age group shows a small proportion of definitive celibacy, less than 1% during the period considered, near 0% in 1992 and 0.5% in 2012.

Table 2. Proportion (%) of single women age 15-49 years by residency and level of education at the time of the survey

Variables	Year			
	1992	1998	2006	2012
<b>Residency</b>				
Niamey (capital city)	28.9 (1 347)	38.1 (1 048)	33.2 (1 329)	26.8 (1 379)
Other cities	15.7 (1 349)	20.0 (1 315)	22.3 (1 920)	19.6 (2 021)
Total cities	17.6 (2 696)	27.6 (2 363)	29.2 (3 249)	22.8 (3 400)
Rural	8.2 (3 807)	7.1 (5 214)	5.8 (5 974)	4.5 (7 760)
<b>Education</b>				
Uneducated	7.8 (5 300)	7.2 (6 066)	5.9 (7 079)	3.4 (8 326)
First to sixth grade	24.7 (726)	24.6 (934)	20.3 (1 171)	14.4 (1 439)
Seventh grade and higher	54.4 (477)	51.3 (577)	47.7 (973)	41.3 (1 373)
Total	10.5 (6 503)	11.2 (7 577)	9.9 (9 223)	7.9 (11 160)

Source: EDSN-I, EDSN-II, EDSN-MICS-III, and EDSN-MICS-IV (the four demographic and health surveys conducted in Niger in 1992, 1998, 2006, and 2012)

( ): Total number of women of the category

Note: The proportions are obtained through the ratio between the size of single women in the category and the total number of women in the category

It seems that women do not marry or live in a ‘union’ and then quickly divorce to stay in celibacy. Indeed, the majority of women participants in these surveys were either married or in a relationship at the time of the survey with a proportion increasing from 86% in 1992 to 89% in 2012. The analysis of the proportion of women living in a ‘union’ by age group over all the years covered by the surveys helps understand that this proportion increases with age to reach its maximum at 35-39 years (96%), then decreases very slightly due to the increase in the proportion of women who break

up or divorce, especially through widowhood and to some extent through divorce. This proportion reaches 8% at the age of 45-49 in 1992, 11% in 1998, and 9% in 2006 and 2012. These percentages show a relative stability in women's unions in addition to an increase in marriage intensity. How do the forms of contracted unions develop?

#### 4.2 Women's Consensual Union

In 1992, the number of women who declared themselves living in a consensual union is zero; but in 1998, 0.12% claimed to have contracted this type of union and this proportion doubles (0.21%) in 2006 to remain at a similar level (0.17%) in 2012 (Table 3). This type of union remains insignificant because it has no social recognition with a degrading consideration for those who practice it. The ongoing social control prevents women from committing themselves to such a union and even though it is the case, they would avoid declaring it openly and they want to be considered as in a socially accepted union, especially religiously celebrated marriage.

However, whether in cities or in rural settlements, regardless of the level of education, this type of union seems to be reported by all sub-groups of the population. The discrepancies observed are in the expected results. It is more reported by women in cities than those from rural settlements and it increases with the level of education over the whole period (Table 3).

Table 3. Proportion (%) of women age 15-49 years in a consensual union by residency and level of education at the time of the survey

Variables	1998	Year 2006	2012
<b>Residency</b>			
Niamey (capital city)	0.76	1.36	0.46
Other cities	0.1	0.46	0.09
Total cities	0.38	1.03	0.25
Rural settlement	0.05	0.06	0.15
<b>Education</b>			
Uneducated	0.07	0.13	0.15
First to sixth grade	0.36	0.39	0.31
Seventh grade and higher	0.49	0.92	0.15
Total	0.12	0.21	0.17

Source: EDSN-I, EDSN-II, EDSN-MICS-III, and EDSN-MICS-IV (the four demographic and health surveys conducted in Niger in 1992, 1998, 2006, and 2012); \*: Refer to table 2 for total number of women per category

Note: The proportions are obtained through the ratio between the size of women in consensual union in the category and the total number of women in the category.

Table 4. Proportion (%) of women age 15-49 years living in a polygamous union by residency and education level at the time of the survey

Variables	Year			
	1992	1998	2006	2012
<b>Residency</b>				
Niamey (capital city)	34.8 (840)	31 (349)	35.6 (481)	29.3 (663)
Other cities	43.4 (1 015)	44 (637)	37.7 (712)	32.6 (854)
Total cities	40.5 (1 855)	39.4 (986)	36.8 (1 193)	31.2 (1 457)
Rural area	35.5 (3 377)	37.5 (5 396)	35.8 (6 748)	37.2 (8 424)
<b>Education</b>				
Uneducated	36.4 (4 578)	38.3 (5 695)	36.3 (6 957)	37.6 (8 352)
First to sixth grade	33.8 (654)	34.6 (519)	33.3 (715)	31.1 (1 014)
Seventh grade and higher		28.9 (167)	33.6 (269)	26 (504)
Total	36.2 (5 232)	37.8 (6 382)	35.9(7 941)	36.3 (9 881)

Source: EDSN-I, EDSN-II, EDSN-MICS-III, and EDSN-MICS-IV (the four demographic and health surveys conducted in Niger in 1992, 1998, 2006, and 2012)

( ): Total number of women living in a union at the time of data collection

Note: The proportions are obtained through the ratio between the size of women in polygamous unions in the category and the total number of women in union, at the time of the survey.

#### 4.3 Women and Polygamy

During the four surveys, we have differentiated, among women living in 'union,' those who live in a monogamous 'union' from those who have declared that their husband or partner has another or many other wives/partners. Despite the predominance of monogamous 'unions,' polygamy remains a widespread practice. Generally, nearly one over three (36%) women in a 'union' live in polygamy between 1992 and 2012. We notice a relative stability in polygamy practice

as far as women are concerned (Table 4). However, the proportion of women in polygamy regularly increases with age, increasing from 14%, 21%, 19%, and 20% with young women age 15-19 years; to 56%, 50%, 49%, and 47% with older women age 45-49 years respectively in 1992, 1998, 2006, and 2012.

Polygamy practice varies depending on settlement. Until 2006, it remains higher in other cities with a proportion of 43% in 1992, 44% in 1998, and 38% in 2006; then 33% in 2012 when this proportion is surpassed by that of rural settlement which reaches 37% during the same year. In rural settlement, however, there is no decreasing trend: 36% in 1992 against 37% in 2012. In all urban settlements, there is a slight regular decrease ranging from 41% in 1992, 39% in 1998, 37% in 2006 to 31% in 2012 (Table 4).

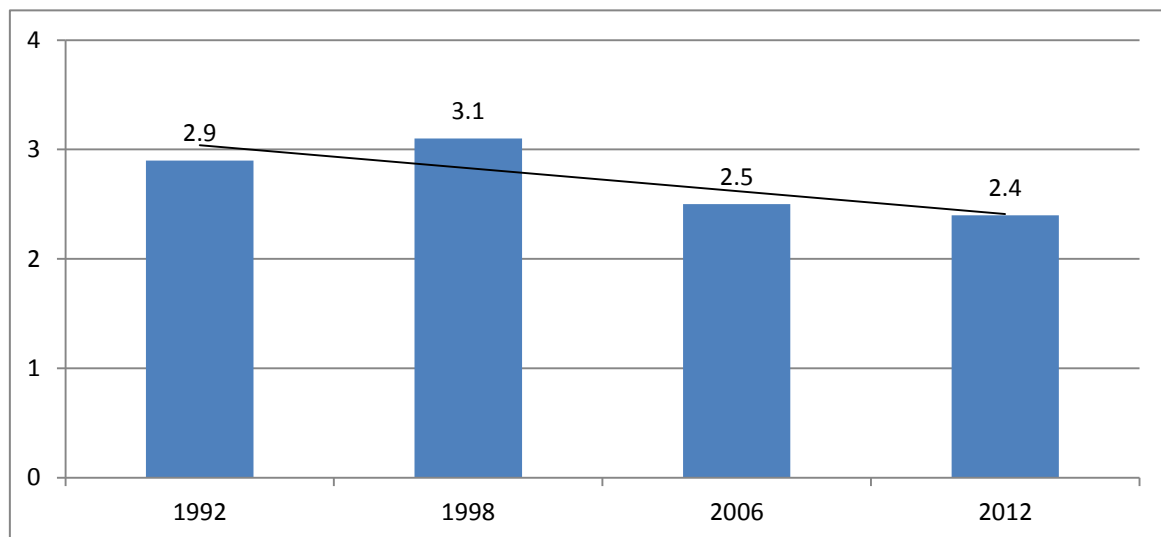
Polygamy practice varies also depending on women's education level. We observe that the proportion of women living in a polygamous union decreases as their education level increases. It drops from 38 % among uneducated women in 1998 and 2012 to 29% and 26 % among women who have seventh grade or higher level of education in the same years. In 2006, women of all levels of education were almost evenly in polygamy; the proportion of women living in polygamy increases from 33 % with those who have at least sixth grade level of education to 34 % with women who have seventh grade and higher level (Table 4).

With regards to the statistics above, one would argue that polygamy practice remains high in rural settlements but decreases slightly in cities where it adapts itself to new household arrangements between spouses like separate housing for co-wives as a way of life which fits itself to this milieu today.

#### 4.4 Women's Divorce and Its Consequences on Children

From chart 2, we notice that divorced/separated women represent a small proportion of the total female population. Less than 4% of women live in this matrimonial situation during the total period considered. In addition, we observe that this small proportion decreases over the period. It drops from 3% in 1992 and 1998 to 2.4% in 2012. The rationale behind this situation resides in the fact that recognition of social union is most often achieved through religious marriage. This type of marriage brings closer the young married people and it facilitates their insertion in their in-laws new family. None of the partners has the right to do whatever he/she wants to do, they have to support their family and if by any chance there is a misunderstanding between the couple, the family will quickly intervene to solve the problem and prevent divorce from happening.

Chart 2. Proportion (%) of divorced/separated women (15-49 years) at the time of the survey



Source: EDSN-I, EDSN-II, EDSN-MICS-III, and EDSN-MICS-IV (the four demographic and health surveys conducted in Niger in 1992, 1998, 2006, and 2012)

Nevertheless, the small percentage of divorced women supposes that there are many remarriages. At this point, we notice a regular decrease in the proportion of women who have declared to be married more than once: 30% in 1992, 29% in 1998, 21% in 2006, and 18% in 2012. Such a situation has obviously, as a consequence, an increase in the proportion of women who have married only once. This suggests that first unions are becoming more and more stable.

Furthermore, we can stress that divorce frequency depends on settlements: we have three times more divorce in urban than in rural settlements (Table 5). Besides, the proportion of the divorced women increases with the level of education (the more the woman is educated the higher the chances for her to divorce). This proportion appears nearly three times

higher with women who have seventh grade and higher level of education than with the uneducated women (Table 5). Also, besides the fact that access to education helps women choose their husband/partner, we observe that with an increase in financial autonomy and open-mindedness that this access offers, the more the woman is educated the less she accepts some masculine behaviors which less educated women are ready to tolerate (Barr ère-Maurisson, 2012).

Table 5. Proportion of divorced/separated women (15-49 years) by residency and level of education at the time of the survey

Variables	Year*			
	1992	1998	2006	2012
<b>Residency</b>				
Niamey (capital city)	6.61	5.83	5.39	6.71
Other cities	7.04	6.82	6.27	4.77
Total cities	6.05	6.4	5.72	5.64
Rural area	2.04	2.27	1.8	1.73
<b>Education</b>				
Uneducated	2.58	2.63	2.22	1.89
First to sixth grade	4.4	5.44	4.46	5
Seventh grade and higher	6.34	6.58	3.18	4.51
Total	2.83	3.12	2.51	2.46

Source: EDSN-I, EDSN-II, EDSN-MICS-III, and EDSN-MICS-IV (the four demographic and health surveys conducted in Niger in 1992, 1998, 2006, and 2012); \*: Refer to table 2 for total number of women per category

*Note:* The proportions are obtained through the ratio between the number of divorced/separated women of the category and the total number of women in the category.

It has been often accepted that divorce can have negative consequences on children. Many studies have demonstrated that children, who have witnessed their parents' divorce, are inclined to suffer more from psychological and social problems; they also perform less at school, have less self-esteem compared to children who are raised in a stable, "intact" couple (Amato, 1994). With regards to education, Archambault (2002) shows that clear gaps in successful results at school are observed between children who have experienced their parents' divorce/separation before their maturity and those who have not. One would argue that a mother, who divorces, endangers her children's wellbeing and protection because their success requires a familial investment which is jeopardized by household instability and uncertainty occasioned by divorce/separation. How does the proportion of children living with their single mothers increase?

In Niger, during the divorce hearing, temporary arrangements are taken with regards to children's custody and stipend. It is only after an investigation, Lagoutte & al, (2014) support, that this custody is bestowed upon one of the spouses who has demonstrated greater interest in the child/children's welfare.

Analysis of the four demographic and health surveys reveals that the proportion of children living with their single mothers varies from 8% to 14%. Nevertheless, there is no clear trend in an increase of this proportion because it was 10% in 2012 while it stood 14.4% in 2006 and 8% in 1998. Anyway, it is important to mention that the proportion of children living with their single mothers is so sufficiently significant that it calls for investigating the future of these children.

In addition, the scrutiny of these surveys shows some gaps in the proportion of children living in this situation depending on the settlement and the age of the children at the time of data collection. Regarding the settlement, the proportion of children living with their single mothers appears higher in Niamey as opposed to other cities with an exception in 2006. However, with regards to age, the proportion of children who live with their single mothers decreases with their age. By losing the total custody of their children, mothers loose the guardianship of older children in the benefit of another custodian, a tutor or father.

In the presence of their single mothers, these children can be in one of these two cases: the mother with whom they live is still single after the divorce (not remarried), or the divorced mother with whom they live is remarried to a man who is generally already married to one or many other women. This last case is the most widespread because more and more children of divorced mothers assist in rapid remarriage of their mother. There is a multitude of configurations of these types of families known as recomposed families and this situation raises many questions (Escots, 2006).

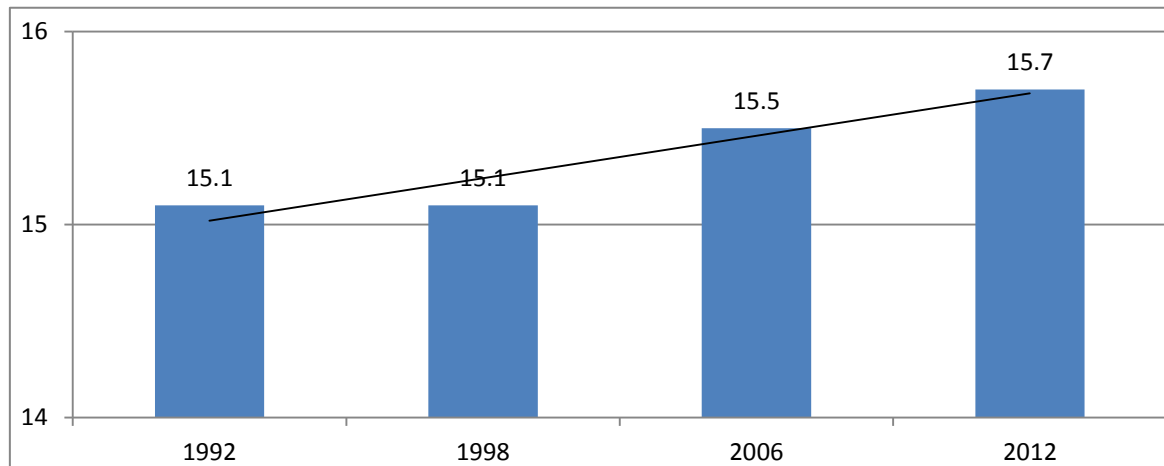
However, one should not consider these consequences resulting from parents' divorce/separation as totally negative. There are some positive aspects resulting from this situation. The fact that children live in different household situations when they live, for instance, in two different families can be considered as an enriching factor. Children would learn to cope with diverging normative settings, to open themselves to other cultural horizons with the presence of their half-brother/sister and their in-laws. They learn to live within contradictory rules and regulations and to create their own normative universe, which will help them become self-autonomous. They would learn to be flexible and to assess situations from different angles. They would learn to make the most of their needs and to develop negotiation abilities.



#### 4.5 Women's Median Age at First Marriage

Niger women marry extremely early in their life time. DHS Niger-II reveals exactly the same median age as what shows DHS-I, this means that there was no increase in the average calendar of first marriage between 1992 and 1998. Nevertheless, we notice a slow increase in the median age since 1998 (chart 3)

Chart 3. Women (25-49 years) median Age at their first marriage by the year of survey



Source: EDSN-I, EDSN-II, EDSN-MICS-III, and EDSN-MICS-IV (the four demographic and health surveys conducted in Niger in 1992, 1998, 2006, and 2012)

In addition, while in 1992 this median age seems to be the same for all age groups based on the findings of DHS Niger-II, this calendar has undergone a slight modification ageing wise over generations: median age at first union increases from nearly 15.1 years with old generation women (women aged 30 years and older at the time of the survey) to 15.7 years with younger generation women (women aged 20-24 years at the time of the survey). In 2006 and 2012, the median age at the first marriage for women aged 25-49 was estimated at 15.5 and 15.7 years respectively. This median age vacillates between 15.3 and 15.7 years from one generation to another in 2006 and between 15.6 and 16 years in 2012.

In short, during the period considered, we observe, in average, a slight increase in the median age at women's first marriage. It increases from 15.1 years in 1992 to 15.7 years in 2012 which represents a 0.6 years increase after 20 years. We realize that definitive celibacy does not affect this smooth transition because every woman ends up getting married at least once in her life time (at 50 years old the proportion of celibacy remains less than 1%). However, this decrease remains largely below the average observed in Africa. Indeed, the findings of the last census and surveys conducted in 45 African countries demonstrate that women's average age at their first marriage has increased to at least 0.5 year per decade for 30 countries and to more than one year for the other 15 countries (Lery, 1997).

Furthermore, this national average hides some disparities depending on people's residency and on their level of education (table 6). Women living in rural settlements marry earlier than those living in urban places: 15.0 years against 16.2 years in 1992; 15.0 years against 16.9 years in 1998; 15.6 years against 18.5 years in 2006; 15.6 years against 19.5 years in 2012. The gap between the two different settlements widens over time: It multiplies by more than three times between 1992 and 2012 (from 1.2 to 3.9 years). Besides, women in Niamey marry more belatedly than those living in other cities: 15.1 years against 16.2 years in 1992; 15.6 years against 16.9 years in 1998; 15.8 years against 18.5 years in 2006; 17.2 years against 19.5 years in 2012. Thus, the age gap has multiplied by 2 between 1992 and 2012.

The most important gaps are observed with the level of education. The increase in the level of education contributes to the delay in women's first union: from 15, 15.4, and 15.6 years with uneducated women it increases to 15.9, 16.5, and 16.7 years with women who have at least sixth grade level of education, and to 20.5, 21.5, and 21.1 years when they have at least seventh grade or higher level of education, respectively in 1998, 2006, and 2012 (Table 6).

Table 6. Median age at first marriage of women (25-49 years) by residency and level of education at the moment of the survey

Variable	Year			
	1992	1998	2006	2012
<b>Residency</b>				
Niamey (capital city)	16.2 (734)	16.9 (525)	18.5 (760)	19.5 (831)
Other cities	15.1 (773)	15.6 (768)	15.8 (1 100)	17.2 (1 217)
Total cities	15.4 (1 507)	15.8 (1 293)	16.7 (1 860)	17.9 (2 048)
Rural area	15 (2 355)	15 (3 130)	15.6 (3 812)	15.6 (5 243)
<b>Education</b>				
Uneducated	15 (3 394)	15 (3 778)	15.4 (4 693)	15.6 (5 916)
First to sixth grade	17.1 (458)	15.9 (421)	16.5 (610)	16.7 (790)
Seventh grade and higher	-	20.5 (224)	21.5 (409)	21.1 (585)
<b>Total</b>	15.1 (3812)	15.1 (4 423)	15.5 (5 712)	15.7 (7 291)

Source: EDSN-I, EDSN-II, EDSN-MICS-III, and EDSN-MICS-IV (the four demographic and health surveys conducted in Niger in 1992, 1998, 2006, and 2012)

( ): Total number of women age between 25 and 49

Note: Median age at the first union is defined as the age at which 50% of women surveyed started living with their first husband/partner.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The objective of this study is to verify whether the influence of social transformations on families in Niger can be understood (captured) through a scrutiny of the evolution of the median age at the first marriage and that of the proportion of single women (and definitive celibacy), the proportion of unions, of polygamous unions, of consensual unions, the proportion of children living with their single mothers, of the divorced/separated women. For this purpose, under urbanization and education impulse, we expect a decrease in polygamy practice, an increase in the age at the first marriage, in divorce, in consensual unions, and in the proportion of children living with their single mothers.

Our results show that urbanization and education have an impact on the matrimonial situation without impinging on the necessity to build a family through some sort of union which is socially accepted or without making divorce commonplace. People living in rural settlements marry earlier and are more polygamous than people in cities. Consensual union is higher in urban settlements and with more educated women but it remains negligible in other residencies regardless of the level of education. The almost universal feature of marriage makes definitive celibacy a marginal phenomenon. The proportion of divorced/separated women remains very low but that of children living with their single mothers is relatively high though it has witnessed small variation during the period considered.

The observed trends do not point at a “crisis in marriage,” they rather reveal an intensification of marriage. During the period considered, there is a downward trend in the proportion of single women, and thus, an increase in the intensity of marriage.

The proportion of divorced women remains low and seems to decrease over the 1992-2012 period. We additionally notice a relative stability in polygamy practice with women living in rural settlements over the whole period but a slight decrease in this practice in cities.

Consensual union remains marginal during the period but it is becoming more and more pronounced. However, marriage has not yet lost its monopoly to other forms of union and is still the foundation of family in cities as well as in rural settlements regardless of the level of education.

The age at first union remains very low but presents a slight increase and it appears by far the lowest in Africa. A study, conducted based on a series of data collected between 1950 and 1995 in 45 African countries, shows that the age at the first marriage has never been less than 17.5 years (Lery, 1997). Today, only women living in cities and/or those who have the seventh grade or higher level of education can reach these years before their first marriage. Early marriage certainly contributes to an increase in the chances of having many children. Niger has the highest fertility synthetic index in the world. The control of population growth, one of the main objectives of Niger population policy, has to take into consideration an increase in the age at the first marriage of women. Studies which examine these new trends depict that delaying marriage has a positive consequence on women’s social development. It allows them to finish their studies, to acquire skills and develop interest at professional level. As it competes with maternity within union, delaying marriage helps women limit the number of their children and/or plan their pregnancy (Palamuleni, 2011; Jensen & Thornton, 2003).

Furthermore, the situation of children living with their single mothers calls for a particular attention. Despite the low

proportion of divorce, the proportion of children living with their single mothers remains high and reaches the level of that observed in the West. More studies need to be conducted to better shed some light on this situation in order to help guarantee children's wellbeing and protection.

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