



# Re-IMAGINE Baseline Study: Understanding Pathways to Delay Marriage and Childbirth for Adolescent Girls' in Niger

## Executive Summary

The Re-Inspiring Adolescent Girls to Imagine New Autonomous Pathways (Re-IMAGINE) program in Zinder, Niger aims to delay child marriage and first pregnancy among out-of-school (OOS) adolescent girls (ages 11–15). The program is adapting the successful “Pathways” education model from the Center for Girls Education (CGE) in Nigeria and testing a comprehensive intervention package that includes academic catch-up programming, social norms engagement, and schooling support as the default pathway for girls, with livelihood training as an alternative pathway.

### Baseline Study Overview

Re-IMAGINE’s baseline study, conducted in mid-2025, consisted of quantitative and qualitative data collection using a mixed-method baseline study across 95 villages in the Zinder region of Niger. The quantitative survey randomly sampled unmarried, out-of-school adolescent girls (ages 11–15), religious and community leaders, and parents. For the qualitative component, a cross-sectional social norms assessment was conducted through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) to explore social norms, attitudes, and behaviors among out-of-school adolescent girls and key reference groups in two communities. Re-IMAGINE’s baseline study provides critical insights into the pre-intervention context, highlighting the challenges and opportunities that shape adolescent girls’ lives in Zinder.

**Project Name:** Re-Inspiring Adolescent Girls to Imagine New Autonomous Pathways (Re-IMAGINE) program

**Location:** Zinder, Niger

**Research Partners:**

- GRADE Africa
- University of California, San Diego
- University of Washington

**Baseline Collection Period:** July 2025

**Donor:** Gates Foundation

**# of Baseline Participants:** 5,003

**Publication Date:** October 2025

## Critical Findings

### Early Marriage Norms

87% of girls marry before 18 with a **median marriage age of 15.4 years**. These strong social norms are reinforced by leaders.

### Girls’ Aspirations

70% of girls want to attend school; 44% hope to complete secondary school.

### Education Norms

Only 41% of girls ever attended school; average years of girls’ is 1.7 years. 24% self-report ability to read & write.

### Decision-Making

Fathers are primary decision-makers for girls’ marriage & education; Mothers are influential with limited authority.

### Social Norms Pressure

81% of girls agree marriage before age 16 is acceptable; 61% of fathers and 56% of leaders agree.

### Comparison to Girls in Nigeria

Girls in Niger are less likely to have attended school/more likely to marry younger than peers in Nigeria’s “Pathways” model.

### What This Means for Programming

**Build on education** by combining school access with efforts to build girls' confidence and self-determination.

**Embrace all opportunities** to help shape early aspirations for younger girls (11–13) and address imminent risks of marriage and school dropout for older girls (14–15).

**Engage community leaders and parents as allies and agents of change** through their involvement to create a shared and long-term vision.

**Implement a multi-level approach** by pairing social norms work with improved education and financial support.

**Target fathers** to leverage their slightly lower acceptance of early marriage.

**Leverage existing progress in social norms** by supporting promising girls and mitigating financial barriers.

## Background and Objectives

Niger has the highest rates of child and early forced marriage and unions (CEFMU) in the world.<sup>1</sup> These early unions are tightly connected to Niger, which also has the highest rates of adolescent pregnancy in the world at 145 births per 1000 girls aged 15 to 19 years,<sup>2</sup> with Zinder experiencing these rates higher than the national average. The persistence of CEFMU in Niger is largely rooted in social norms, including those emphasizing marriage to strengthen community ties, control adolescent sexuality, or uphold the belief that a woman's value lies primarily in marriage and motherhood. Polygamy also contributes to this practice.<sup>3</sup> The Government of Niger, alongside its development partners, continues efforts to address the root causes of CEFMU and adolescent pregnancy through initiatives promoting girls' education and empowerment.<sup>4</sup>

To support these efforts, CARE and its partners are implementing the Re-IMAGINE program. The cluster-randomized controlled trial (cRCT) will test a comprehensive intervention package that includes academic catch-up programming, social norms engagement, and schooling support as the default pathway for girls, with livelihood training as an alternative pathway. The baseline study serves as a critical, foundational step in assessing the outcomes of Re-IMAGINE interventions.

**Primary Goal of Baseline Survey:** Establish benchmarks to effectively measure the results of Re-IMAGINE on delaying marriage and first pregnancy, and on improving school re-entry and retention compared to a control group.

**Qualitative Focus:** Understand social norms shaping girls' education and marriage, identify key influencers and reference groups, and examine leaders' roles in reinforcing or shifting norms.

#### Purpose of Baseline:

1. Describe pre-intervention conditions and contextual factors in Zinder.
2. Inform program design for effective targeting and adaptation.
3. Enable comparison with CGE's "Pathways to Choice" baseline to guide contextualization.



<sup>1</sup> Niger Demographic and Health Survey 2012

<sup>2</sup> <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/economies/niger>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2020/12/07/polygamy-is-rare-around-the-world-and-mostly-confined-to-a-few-regions/>

<sup>4</sup> Country Profile of Phase I: UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage: <https://www.unicef.org/media/88836/file/Child-marriage-Niger-profile-2019.pdf>

# Methodology Snapshot

## Study Design and Objectives

The baseline collection adopted a **mixed-methods design** combining a large-scale quantitative survey with a qualitative social norms assessment to address the program's research objectives.

## Quantitative Component

A census-based sampling process identified eligible study sites in Zinder. From an initial list of 150 villages, **90 were selected** using two criteria: (1) villages with 25–37 eligible girls for cost-effectiveness and (2) proximity within 30 minutes' walking distance to a paved road. Girls were then categorized as eligible for the program using three criteria: (1) aged 11–15 (2) out of school, and (3) never married or had a child. A census recorded the names and ages of all program-eligible girls, their parents, and six community leaders per village. Using this data, the University of Washington team applied random sampling algorithms to select **50% of girls for the primary sample and 40% for replacements**, ensuring age-group balance. Parents were randomly tagged for interviews to achieve balance between males and females. The final sample included **2,985 girls, 1,507 parents in the primary sample, and 580 leaders, across 95 villages**. Surveys were conducted by GRADE Africa throughout July–September 2025 via SurveyCTO in Hausa and French, following enumerator training, piloting, and strict quality-control protocols. From the final 95 villages, the team collected **3,035 complete girls' surveys, 1,324 complete parents' surveys, and 525 complete leaders' surveys**.

## Qualitative Component

A cross-sectional social norms assessment was conducted in two randomly selected communities, Gada and Tchalliga. Data collection included **22 rapid interviews** and **16 focus group discussions** with out-of-school girls, parents, and community leaders to explore attitudes and behaviors influencing school attendance and early marriage. Tools were refined through pre-testing and harmonized in Hausa for cultural accuracy.

## Quality Assurance & Ethics

Enumerators received comprehensive training on ethics, protocols, and data collection standards. Built-in checks in SurveyCTO and ongoing monitoring ensured data integrity. Research protocols were approved by **Niger's National Ethics Committee and U.S. institutional review boards**. Everyone was briefed on the study and agreed to take part, and enumerators were match to participants of the same sex to ensure they were comfortable sharing their answers.

# Key Findings

## Quantitative Highlights

### Education and Literacy

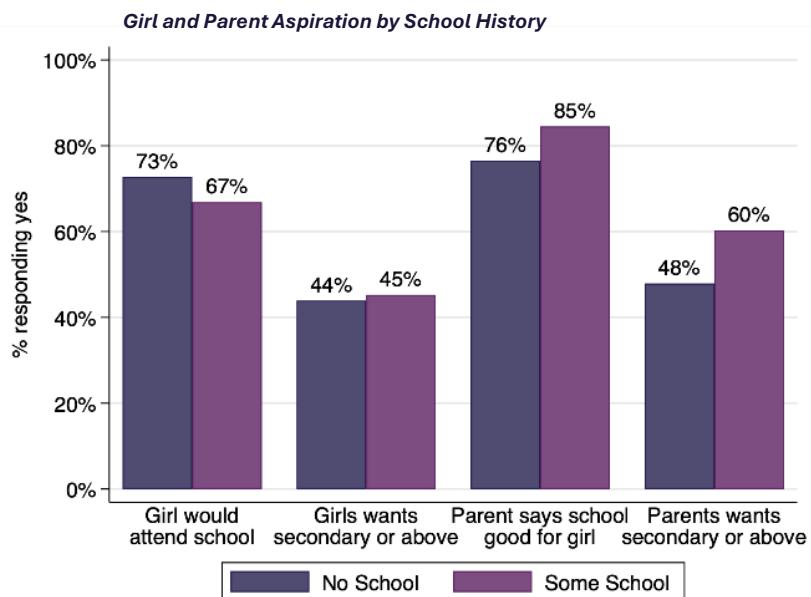
- The average age of girls in the study is 13.1 years.
- Only 41% of girls had ever attended school; those who did completed an average of 4.3 years.
- 24% of girls and 19% of mothers reported being able to read and write.

### Aspirations and Norms

- 70% of girls said they would be in school if they could decide; 44% aspire to complete senior secondary or higher.
- Parents largely view education as positive: 79% believe schooling is good for daughters; 53% want them to complete senior secondary or above.

### Work and Autonomy

- 56% of girls worked outside the home in the past year with only 26% having some control over earnings.
- 30% reported having savings.
- 62% could attend training alone and 20% could visit a health center alone.



## Marriage & Social Norms

- Ideal marriage age for girls is 16.7 years; with husbands being 21.2 years.
- 12% of girls aged 13–17 were married; 53% of 16–17-year-olds were married.
- 83% of girls agree that most marry before 16; parents share similar views, though fathers and leaders show less support.

## Reasons for Leaving or Never Attending School

- For those that attended: 33% cited lack of interest (often linked to peers or corporal punishment); 27% needed to work; 13% experienced academic struggles; 11% left due to illness/travel; 7% of families refused continued support.
- For those that never attended: 74% cited family refusal; 13% experienced work obligations; and 5% did not have access to schools.

## Household Context

- Average mother in the study is 40 years and father is 49 years.
- 40% of mothers self-reported as literate vs. 61% of fathers.
- The average household size has 6.3 children.

## Regional Comparison

- Re-IMAGINE girls in Niger are slightly older than Pathways Nigeria girls.
- 41% of Re-IMAGINE girls attended school vs. 74% of girls in Pathways.

## Qualitative Highlights

### Reference Groups and Social Networks

- Parents are the most influential in girls' schooling decisions, especially fathers, with mothers playing a less prominent role. Siblings (primarily brothers) and extended family also contribute.

### Parental Influence and Decision-Making Networks

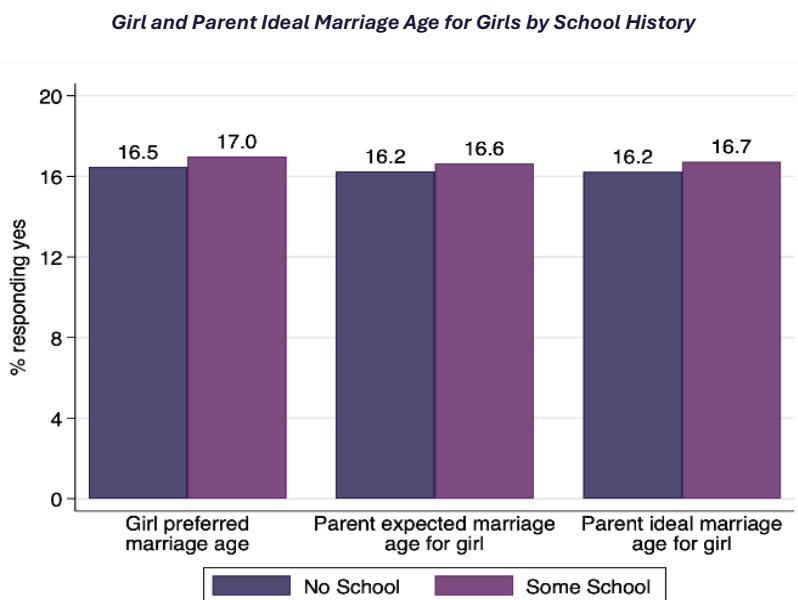
- References within social networks shift for marriage. Friends and peers become highly influential on this topic, alongside extended family and community leaders. Mothers acknowledge that husbands, uncles, village chiefs, and imams exert strong influence over marriage choices.

### Social Norms

- Girls face peer and community pressure to leave school and marry, reinforced by married friends and young men.
- Early marriage is viewed as normative and socially rewarded—preserving family honor and status.
- Fear of premarital pregnancy and associated sanctions is a major driver for school withdrawal.

### Exceptions to Social Norms

- Broad support exists for girls' education, but this value often yields to marriage norms and perceived risks.
- Girls showing exceptional academic ability or clear employment prospects after schooling are more likely to continue education. Families may mobilize resources or accept scholarships to support such girls.



### Participant Reflections from the Baseline Study

*"My husband and his brothers, and in the community, my neighbor—their opinions influenced my decision the most when it came to refusing a marriage proposal [for my daughter]."*

*– 30-year-old mother, ID#003, Gada, Rapid Interview*

*"Parents would be surprised to hear their daughter openly declare her matrimonial choice, and they would see it as a sign of disrespect on her part."*

*– 14-year-old girl, ID#002-P6, Gada, FGD*

## Implications and Next Steps

The baseline results underscore the need for multi-level interventions that pair social norms shifting and improvements in educational quality with financial support for girls' school-related costs.

### Community Level

The engagement of community leaders throughout the entirety of the project cycle is a critical priority. These leaders serve as gatekeepers and allies in shifting norms around early marriage and education. Re-IMAGINE will prioritize entry meetings, involve them in adapting program strategies on social norms change, and continually share information and invite collaboration throughout the implementation.

### Household Level

Fathers are key decision-makers, while mothers and extended families exert significant influence on various topics. Targeted interventions, such as SAA and Fada groups, will foster dialogue, help identify and champion role models, and strengthen community support for girls' education. These approaches will support community norms to delay marriage and embrace alternative pathways.

### School Level

School dropout drivers include lack of family support, poor school quality, and safety concerns for the girls. Re-IMAGINE will pair advocacy with practical support by strengthening parent-leader coordination, improving safeguarding protocols, reinforcing accountability through the school management committees, and creating community monitoring systems. These multiple approaches will increase family support and alleviate the burden of fear around girls' safety.

### Girls' Level

Girls express strong aspirations for education but face pressure that it's better to marry early. The program will work with younger girls to shape their aspirations and support older girls at risk of dropping out of school. To do this, measures include a **Code of Conduct** for facilitators to eliminate corporal punishment, which addresses the girls' fears directly and helps by establishing a safe learning environment.

*Baseline Interviews and Focus Group Discussions*

