



CHILD, EARLY, AND FORCED MARRIAGE: A Political Economy Analysis of Burkina Faso

November 2020

Stock Photo, Burkina Faso

In 2020-21, Iris Group conducted a series of gender-intentional political economy analyses (PEA) on the issue of child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) in eight countries. This brief is a summary of the full PEA report on CEFM in Burkina Faso.

INTRODUCTION

Landlocked, with limited natural resources, and confronting conflict-driven internal displacement, Burkina Faso faces substantial development challenges. In 2019, their gross national income per capita was among the lowest of the globe's 29 remaining low-income economies.¹ Close to 80% of the working population is employed in an unstable agricultural industry and 40.1% live below the national poverty line.¹

Burkina Faso is notable among the countries of West and Central Africa for its high rate of child marriage and its lack of progress in decreasing the practice. In 2010, 51.6% of women aged 20-24 years were married before the age of 18.² In 2015, under-18 and under-15 marriage declined slightly.³ However, overall rates of child marriage have remained stagnant over decades.⁴

The political economy analysis of CEFM in Burkina Faso consisted of a desk review and key informant interviews, with findings within the following four pillars of analysis:

- **Foundational Factors:** Embedded structures that are difficult or impossible to change, such as geography, class, ethnicity, gender inequality
- **Rules of the Game:** Laws, international commitments, policies, and social norms
- **Here and Now:** Current events and circumstances
- **Dynamics:** Interplay among the other pillars

This summary was prepared by Iris Group with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Preferred Citation: Iris Group. 2020. Political Economy Analysis of Child, Early, and Forced Marriage in Burkina Faso. Chapel Hill, USA.

FINDINGS

Foundational Factors

- The Sahel region has the highest rate of under-18 marriage at 76%.³ Both girls and boys in rural areas are much more susceptible to be married before they turn 18 than those in urban areas.
- Rates of child marriage are highest among the poorest families. Child marriage rates only drop below 50% in the richest wealth quintile.
- Rates of child marriage are highest among those practicing traditional or animist religions and among Muslim communities, possibly due to perceptions that child marriage preserves family honor (Interview, 11/4a) and beliefs that girls should marry at menarche (Interview, 11/4b).
- Burkina Faso ranks 129th out of 153 countries on gender equality⁵ and longstanding discrimination affects women and girls daily, driving child marriage. Several regions of the country have high levels of gender discrimination as well as elevated child marriage rates.⁶

Rules of the Game

- The Code for Persons and the Family (1990) establishes legal ages of marriage as 20 years for boys/men and 17 years for girls/women. However, this is easily circumvented due to weak enforcement, loopholes, and exemption of “consensual” underage marriages as well as traditional or religious marriages.
- In 2015, the government enacted the National Strategy for the Prevention and Elimination of Child Marriage, designed to be used by all stakeholders working on child marriage and the first of its kind in the region.
- Social and gender norms have a stronger bearing than laws on the practice of CEFM, especially in rural areas. Child marriage is seen as a form of social protection for young girls, and a way to seal family alliances. Harmful practices like female genital mutilation (FGM) and polygamy, and abduction of girls with/ without parental consent also play a role in CEFM.

Here and Now

- With a National Strategy, operational plans of action, and commitments from multiple ministries, Burkina Faso has strong government will to address child marriage.
- The National Coalition against Child Marriage in Burkina (CONAMEB) coordinates civil society action against child marriage and is headed by Burkinabè organizations.
- International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) rely on community-based organizations to implement programming at the local level.
- Programs tend to weave together educational, economic, community engagement, health, and social norms change approaches. However, not many child marriage programs are evaluated.
- COVID-19 has disrupted communications, programs, and monitoring related to CEFM. Armed violence and conflict-driven displacement affect the reach of anti-child marriage programs.

Dynamics

- **Progress:**
 - Advocates have gained support from the First Lady and local leaders, and the government actively engages with CONAMEB.
 - Advancements in research are increasing knowledge on the norms and conditions driving child marriage disparities in certain regions.
 - Anti-child marriage programs, spearheaded by multiple stakeholders and using diverse approaches, reach communities across the country.
- **Obstacles:**
 - Legal reform has not progressed and the government’s targets for child marriage reduction are timid.
 - There is a need for more subregional data or program evaluations to reliably underpin evidence-based interventions.
 - Programming is small-scale, under-resourced, and difficult to expand, as those in the most urgent need of anti-child marriage efforts are in rural, less accessible areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Case for Investment

- **Burkina Faso has several crucial ingredients for success that are not currently fully engaged due to limited funding.** The government's commitment to gender equality, the mobilization of civil society on child marriage, and experienced implementers tackling the issue are powerful factors that could contribute to moving the needle on child marriage, despite many obstacles.
- **Burkina Faso's civil society activism on child marriage could serve as a model elsewhere.** Effective long-term, issue-based networks are rare, and an investment in examining and documenting the work of civil society coalition CONAMEB could be very helpful to civil society groups still learning how to build their voice on this issue.
- **Sparking progress in Burkina Faso could provide lessons on how to address unchanging child marriage rates.** Unlike countries that have seen rates fall, Burkina Faso has not experienced the kind of economic progress that may have triggered declines in child marriage in some countries. It could provide an important test as to whether progress can be made in a country that has the political will and experience to address the issue, but lacks macro-level economic changes.

2. Key Points of Leverage on CEFM

- **The National Strategy and its Operational Plans serve as touchstones for both government and civil society.** Child marriage investments should track to this strategy and advance efforts to measure progress.

- **Diverse international and civil society organizations integrate attention to child marriage in their programming, with reach into communities across the country.** INGOs have brought global lessons and funding to address the issue, and CSOs are pursuing multicomponent strategies and connecting to key influencers even in hard-to-reach areas.
- **Existing investments in Burkina Faso and constructive relationship between donors and government can be leveraged to increase prioritization of adolescent girls.** Donors can help position child marriage as a priority within a government-led gender-transformative development approach and increase the level of public funding for it.

3. Turning Gaps into Opportunities

- **Child marriage programs in Burkina Faso need much more and better data on child marriage generated from quantitative and qualitative research as well as program evaluations.** International and civil society organizations need better data to strengthen their strategies.
- **Investing in the capacity of civil society organizations and norms-changing programming can lay the groundwork for future gains.** Youth- and women-led organizations need additional resources to implement their plans of action, sustain themselves, monitor program progress, and weather current challenges related to COVID-19.
- **Increased engagement of religious leaders at the national level could boost social change.** Given the high rate of child marriage among Muslim communities, prominent Muslim leaders could be effective influencers.

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