



Iris Group

CHILD, EARLY, AND FORCED MARRIAGE:

A Political Economy Analysis of Niger

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Stock Photo, Niger

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 Niger.

INTRODUCTION

Niger ranked last on the 2019 Human Development Index and 2018 Gender Inequality Index, has the 4th lowest gross national income per capita among all countries, has low contraceptive prevalence, and has one of the highest fertility rates in the world.^{1,2}

The rate of child marriage in Niger is among the highest in the world. In 2012, 76.3% of women aged 20-24 were married before age 18 and 28% were married before age 15.³ The prevalence of marriage for girls under the age of 15 has declined faster than the prevalence for girls under the age of 18. The median age at first marriage for girls is 15.7, an increase from 14.9 since 1992.

The political economy analysis of CEFM in Niger 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

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FINDINGS

Foundational Factors

- Present and historical gender inequality underpins child marriage in Niger, reinforcing restrictive gender norms that drive the practice.
- Many families see child marriage as a way to strengthen community solidarity and sustain themselves through food scarcity and climate emergencies.⁴
- Rural areas report higher rates of child marriage than urban areas.⁵ They often lack social services that might protect against CEFM, such as schools and health centers.
- Relative poverty is not the primary driver of child marriage, as rates of child marriage are high across most economic classes.⁶
- Child marriage is practiced in most ethnic groups and tends to be geographically clustered. There are no notable differences by religious affiliation.

Rules of the Game

- The 1993 Civil Code stipulates a legal minimum age of marriage as 15 for girls and 18 for boys but recognizes conflicting customary and religious law in marriage and divorce.^{5,7}
- International agreements commit Niger to ending marriage before age 18 and have spurred development of a costed National Action Plan.
- International pressure has helped build political will to change national policies and guidelines to combat child marriage, but legal reform could risk backlash from conservative religious groups, and may not significantly affect family behavior.
- Deeply rooted social norms founded in patriarchal beliefs reward families and communities for practicing child marriage. These norms include: fear of pre-marital sex and pregnancy, social cohesion preserved by early marriage, the value of younger brides' fertility and perceived subservience, and marriage as the sole transition to adulthood (instead of adolescence).

Here and Now

- Stakeholders playing a crucial role in the fight against CEFM include: key champions within the central government and its ministries; the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme; and a National Platform that brings together many civil society organizations (CSOs) and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs).
- There is a perception that INGOs conduct the most visible work on child marriage and that CSOs have a weaker presence (Interview 5/14). However, CSOs have closer connections to communities and significant community-level programming (Interview, 5/27).
- Structural deficiencies, economic and educational barriers, and gender norms that restrict girls and women limit child marriage programming.
- Threats of armed conflict and COVID-19 may increase rates of CEFM.

Dynamics

- **Progress:**
 - International advocacy has increased political will to make meaningful gains on CEFM.
 - The costed National Action Plan motivates cross-Ministry focus on child marriage and provides a roadmap for accountability.
 - There are more anti-child marriage local advocacy efforts, especially by local religious, informal, and traditional leaders.
 - Research illuminates the social norms and structural issues sustaining child marriage.
 - More programs promote empowerment and support education at the community level.
- **Obstacles:**
 - Religious fundamentalism threatens political progress in the fight against CEFM.
 - CSOs struggle with national-level advocacy. Meanwhile, local anti-child marriage advocacy is complicated by community members' resistance to change.
 - There are large research gaps, particularly on program evaluation, behavior change in men, and the influence of polygamy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Case for Investment

- **Niger has the highest rate of child marriage in the world.** Child marriage in Niger is primarily driven by social norms. Niger offers an opportunity to learn how to effectively shift risks and benefits at an individual and community level while protecting girls from additional harm.
- **CSOs in Niger need increased investment and attention.** An investment in strengthening CSOs, linking their community-level efforts, and evaluating their programming would help build and sustain progress on child marriage.
- **Niger's child marriage solutions require changes across many sectors, but strategic entry points within a single sector can have an impact and play to donors' strengths.** By addressing the social norms that drive child marriage, investing in Niger should also help donors achieve multisectoral goals.

2. Key Points of Leverage on CEFM

- **The costed National Action Plan offers a roadmap for advocacy.** As the main voice for change on child marriage, the National Platform has an opportunity to develop a harmonized advocacy agenda to hold the government accountable to the National Action Plan.
- **Community level approaches that address social norms and economic vulnerability offer best hope for programmatic change.** Stand-alone educational or economic empowerment programs alone may delay marriage as effectively as gender-intentional social norms change programming.
- **Successful investments will engage religious and traditional leaders as well as fathers and**

husbands as essential influencers. The engagement of men as influencers and decision makers is essential to shifting norms around child marriage. Engagement of the village leaders' association and progressive Imams will help align child marriage efforts with religious and traditional values. Fathers, husbands, and elders, as decision-makers on CEFM in their families, are also critical to shifting norms.

3. Turning Gaps into Opportunities

- **Policy change should be an advocacy priority over legal reform in Niger's current political reality.** Pursuing legal reform could result in backlash that would harm child marriage programs. Advocacy agendas should clarify that legal reform in Niger will not be a priority without significant Nigerien support.
- **Stakeholders should address difficult social norms from a "do no harm" perspective.** Girls are the most vulnerable to unintended harm if programming is poorly designed or encounters structural obstacles. Through research, information sharing, and pilot testing, the most promising approaches can be identified for scaling.
- **Grassroots efforts should build networks and connections among villages.** Geographical clusters of child marriage imply that girls and their parents respond to what they see around them. Moreover, young people are a critical voice to identifying solutions on CEFM, and building their capacity as leaders can generate dividends on sexual and reproductive health and other issues as well. One informant was hopeful that networks among young people could provide powerful examples of leadership, role modeling, and alternatives to early marriage.

1. FP2020. *Niger FP2020 Core Indicator Summary Sheet: 2018-2019 Annual Progress Report*. FP2020; 2019. Accessed June 29, 2020. http://www.familyplanning2020.org/sites/default/files/Data-Hub/2019CI/Niger_2019_CI_Handout.pdf

2. UNDP. *Human Development Data (1990-2018)*. Published 2019. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/data>

3. Institut National de la Statistique - INS/Niger, ICF International. *Enquête Démographique et de Santé et à Indicateurs Multiples Du Niger 2012*. INS/Niger and ICF International; 2013.

4. Ministère de la Promotion de la Femme et de la Protection de l'Enfant. *Etat Des Lieux: Mariage Des Enfants Au Niger*. République du Niger; 2018.

5. UNICEF. *Briefing Notes on Child Marriage in Niger*. UNICEF; 2016.

6. Malé C, Wodon Q. *Basic Profile of Child Marriage in Niger*. World Bank Group & ICRW; 2016.

7. Girls Not Brides. *Niger Country Overview*. Published 2020. Accessed May 28, 2020. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/niger/>