



Iris Group

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

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Stock Photo, Senegal

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 Senegal.

INTRODUCTION

Among Sahelian countries, Senegal is the most politically stable and has the highest economic growth.¹ Despite its stability, women's access to land, financing mechanisms, markets, means of production, contraception, sexual and reproductive health services, and other assets remains limited by gender inequality.²

As of 2019, 31% of Senegalese women aged 20-24 were married before 18 years and 9% before 15 years.³ Over the past 20 years, the average national prevalence of child marriage has decreased by 16 percentage points in Senegal, bringing it well below the regional average of 42%.⁴ However, Senegal's rate of progress needs to increase by 1.5% to meet the Sustainable Development Goal target to eliminate child marriage by 2030.⁴

The political economy analysis of CEFM in Senegal 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

- Child marriage is three times higher in rural areas than in cities, reflecting girls' differential access to education, economic opportunities, family planning and concepts of gender equality and empowerment.³
- Ethnic differences affect social norms underpinning child marriage, contributing to geographic differences in rates. Almost all Senegalese are Muslim and religion does not appear to be a main driver of child marriage.
- The poorest economic quintile has the highest rates of child marriage – at 62%, it is twice the national average – and the slowest decline.
- Gender inequality in Senegal is less stark than in its neighbors, with modernized schools and low levels of fundamentalism, but persists through the patriarchal Family Code, which codifies fathers as the primary authority over children and household decisions.

Rules of the Game

- Senegal's Family Code establishes legal age of marriage at 16 for girls, 18 for boys; it is considered a civil infraction unless the girl is under 13.
- Application of child marriage laws in Senegal is difficult because birth registration is not mandatory and requires a fee, and there is no legal sanction for child marriage other than annulment.
- Senegal has signed international agreements recognizing 18 as legal age of marriage but has not harmonized its laws with these commitments.
- Social norms related to unmarried girls' sexuality are reinforced through female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage, and bride price. Polygamy also contributes to child marriage, as men seek younger second, third, or fourth wives to produce children.

Here and Now

- The Senegalese government has made some efforts on child marriage, especially through the Women's Ministry, but has not taken an ambitious stance on the issue.
- UNICEF regional and national programs have focused primarily on female genital cutting, incorporating aspects that target child marriage.
- A national coalition of 32 civil society organizations (CSOs) has operated since 2017 to end child marriage. The coalition has provided recommendations to the Ministry of Women, Family and Children on a national action plan, which is still being finalized.
- Some CSOs have engaged imams and traditional leaders to fight child marriage.
- Most child marriage programmatic interventions focus on FGM, early pregnancy, rights, and norms, and not as much on increasing girls' and young women's access to economic opportunities.

Dynamics

- **Progress:**
 - Advocates have made headway against child marriage by building a coalition and pressing government on a national action plan.
 - There are new sources of data, including program evaluations, to underpin evidence-driven interventions.
 - Senegalese CSOs have strong background in implementing norms-changing interventions.
- **Obstacles:**
 - Leaders' resistance to raising age of marriage is based on anticipation of potential religious backlash.
 - Implementing organizations need improved knowledge management and more program evaluations.
 - Programs need expanded attention to male engagement and a more strategic approach to economic drivers of child marriage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Case for Investment

- **Senegal has a favorable environment for sustainable and effective investments.** In comparison to its neighbors, Senegal's relative environmental, economic, and political stability has created constructive conditions to address child marriage.
- **Senegal offers the possibility for a child marriage win in Francophone West Africa.** Senegal gets relatively little donor attention on child marriage but investments can build on its advantages and make headway in communities that have not benefited from existing interventions.
- **Senegal's experience offers the opportunity to test the effectiveness of "norms-forward" program design and lay the groundwork for legal change.** Senegalese implementers have long prioritized shifting gender and social norms, offering the opportunity to build in other elements – such as economic empowerment – while preserving their successful emphasis on norms.

2. Key Points of Leverage on CEFM

- **Religious leaders are an important key to driving change in the community and nationally.** Increased advocacy nationally by these influencers can help build political will for legal reform and push back against a conservative religious response.
- **Senegal has skilled and experienced civil society partners and a collaborative government, who**

work well together and with international partners. There is an opportunity to build on the existing trust among the key actors working on child marriage, with INGOs, CSOs, and government collaborating relatively smoothly.

- **Senegal is a regional positive outlier on youth contraceptive access and ability to talk about sexual and reproductive health.** Child marriage approaches can build on decades of successful work on sexual and reproductive health access in Senegal.

3. Turning Gaps into Opportunities

- **Investments in expanded research and greater knowledge management capacity are essential for effective and targeted programming.** Studies and evaluations in Senegal can also begin to address the deficit in French-language research on child marriage and related issues.
- **The National Action Plan on child marriage, if budgeted and embraced across government, can harmonize child marriage approaches and prime the country for legal change.** The plan is a critical step in enshrining government commitment to ending child marriage.
- **Child marriage projects should pilot evidence-based integration of economic components.** Projects that address social norms and schooling alone may only go so far in reducing child marriage in parts of the country where poverty is a strong force maintaining the status quo. Adolescent girls need to be able to aspire realistically to viable options outside of marriage.

1. World Bank. The World Bank in Senegal. World Bank. Published July 17, 2020. Accessed December 18, 2020.

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/senegal/overview>

2. UN Women. Senegal. UN Women | Africa. Accessed December 18, 2020. <https://africa.unwomen.org/en/where-we-are/west-and-central-africa/senegal>

3. Save the Children. Save the Children Group-based Inequality Database (GRID) - Country Dashboard - Senegal - Child marriage. Save the Children. Accessed January 8, 2021. <https://www.savethechildren.net/grid>

4. Save the Children. *Child Marriage in Senegal*. Save the Children; 2017. Accessed November 16, 2020. <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/13233/pdf/child-marriage-senegal.pdf>