

BECAUSE **I am a Girl**



FAMILY HONOUR AND SHATTERED DREAMS:

GIRL BRIDES IN MALI, NIGER AND SENEGAL

Published by Plan International in
West Africa & Central Africa
(PLAN WARO).

Plan International in West Africa &
Central Africa is a wholly-owned
subsidiary of Plan International, Inc.
(a not-for-profit corporation registered
in New York State, USA).

This publication is also available online
at plan-international.org/publications

First published in 2017
ISBN 978-92-9250-027-6

Research firms:
Child Frontiers Ltd. (Mali and Niger):
Lead consultant Gillian Mann
Group Strategy and Leadership
(Senegal): Lead consultant Yssa Bass

Research coordination: Faty Kane
(Plan WARO)

Text: Jenny Morgan
Editing: Faty Kane
Layout: Jenny Gatien
Photos: Vincent Tremeau © Plan Int.

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval
system or transmitted, in any form
or by any means, electronic,
mechanical, photocopying or
otherwise, without the prior
permission of Plan International
in West Africa & Central Africa.

Suggested citation:
Morgan, J (2016). Family honour and
shattered dreams: Girl brides in Mali,
Niger and Senegal
Dakar: Plan WARO

For further information, footage and
stills please contact:
Faty Kane
Regional child marriage program
manager
Plan West Africa Regional Office
(WARO)
faty.kane@plan-international.org
+221 33 869 74 30



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Plan International is grateful to the girls, boys and families in the studied communities for their invaluable contribution that made this research possible. We also want to thank members of government, multilateral agencies and non-government and civil society organizations and other individuals who shared their knowledge, perspectives and experiences.

Particular thanks go to colleagues in Plan International in Niger, Mali, Senegal and colleagues at the regional office (WARO) for their time, commitment, support and participation in the research: Ramatou Kane, Alassane Salmou, Moustapha Ibrahim, Saidou Idi, Fadimata Alainchar, Nadia Noor, Mamadou Keita, Papa Dambe, Bedo Traore, Mamadou Camara, Sidy Assalama, Oumi Diop, Lamine Bop, Zeinab Kane, Oumoul Khairy Mbengue and Fabienne Atakpa.

Special thanks to the members of the Reference group who provided invaluable feedback throughout the research and reviewed all key deliverables: Alexander Munive, Adeline Bennink, Alice Behrendt, Anja Stuckert, Anthony Vanoverschelde, Faty Kane, Jacqueline Gallinetti, Josaphat Tchetan-Awo, Lucero Quiroga, and Paul Fagnon.

ACRONYMS

ACRWC	African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
ANDS	National Statistics and Demography Agency in Senegal
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CO	Country Office
CCPBM	Community Child Protection Based Mechanisms
UNCRC	United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child
FGD	Focus Group Discussions
PU	Program Unit
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Funds
WARO	West Africa Regional Office





This report is a contribution to the ongoing efforts to gain a better understanding of child, early and forced marriages (CEFM) in West Africa. Our region, despite having the highest rates of child marriage across the globe, has rarely been the subject of solid qualitative research on the practice. This is why Plan International in West & Central Africa (Plan WARO) made the decision to generate knowledge and to identify the drivers of change that can be used for evidence-based interventions to contribute to ending the practice.

The research explored the contextual meanings of concepts such as “childhood”, “adulthood” and “marriage” from the point of view of girls, boys, their parents and other members of the communities where the research took place. In addition, the researchers explored the role and processes of marriage; the reasons for marrying girls early; and the benefits and risks associated with it.

The findings of our study contribute to bringing a new perspective on the drivers and processes of child marriage in this part of the world, nuancing some of the common assumptions that have often dominated approaches to the issue.

Our report makes a case about the importance of investing in understanding the issue from the communities' point of view and for the need to develop contextualized and tailored interventions.

Addressing the drivers of child, early and forced marriage requires in-depth knowledge on how CFEM takes place in targeted communities to be able to engage key stakeholders in a sensitive way in order to build trust. Child marriage is deeply rooted in social norms, cultural and/or religious beliefs which are impossible to alter overnight. Projects should be designed in order to reflect this reality, and **we invite donors to commit in long term and predictable funding to allow organisations to have the necessary time to lay solid foundational work and invest in the long-term processes of change.**

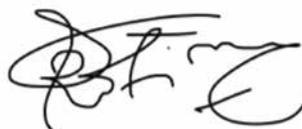
The importance of tackling child, early and forced marriage is gaining ever greater recognition, so much so that its centrality to advancing gender equality and women's rights has been reflected through a specific target under the Post 2015 Sustainable Development Goals framework. **We are calling on the Governments in our region to keep their promises to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls as set under the SDG 5.** Plan International is committed, alongside women's groups and youth led organisations, to closely monitor progress against its realisation.

Efforts to end child marriage have gained significant momentum on the global development and political agenda in recent years, and there is now a need to ensure the issue remains an area of focus for development actors, donors and policy makers until girls and boys in West Africa enjoy the right to live free from child, early and forced marriages.

I invite you to read this report and share the research findings with your colleagues, friends and families.

Sincerely yours,

Rotimy Djossaya
Regional Director
Plan International in West & Central Africa



Child, or early, marriage is defined as a formal or informal union, including legal, religious or customary marriage, of anyone under the age of 18. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child as well as the UN Convention of the Rights of Children prohibit child marriage and betrothal and recommends a minimum age of marriage of 18 years for both girls and boys.

The West & Central Africa region is home to 6 of the 10 countries with the highest prevalence rates of child, early and forced marriage in the world. Yet there is little quality evidence to why child marriage persists in so many communities across the region.

To shed more light on the practice of child, early and forced marriages and from the perspective of those who live it, Plan International West Africa Regional Office (WARO) commissioned consultants to conduct a qualitative study in selected communities in Niger, Mali and Senegal.

The aim of the research was to understand and explain local processes and the specificities of child marriage in the three up-mentioned countries, and to identify drivers of change that can be used by Plan International for evidence-based interventions to address the practice in the studied communities.

Hopefully, the findings of this research will contribute to bringing a new perspective and nuancing some of the common assumptions made about the drivers and processes of child marriage in this part of the world.

KEY FINDINGS

Childhood and adulthood

In all studied communities, childhood and the transition to adulthood are marked by clear bodily changes and a progressive acquisition of roles and responsibility within the community. Age is not an essential feature in the transition process. Readiness for marriage is achieved through physical maturity for girls and the ability to fend for their future families for boys. Once these stages are progressively attained, girls and boys are considered to have become adults and are thus ready to marry. Marriage and forming a family are the ultimate step in the transition to adulthood.

Process and role of marriage

The process of marriage is complex and involves all key members of the two families. Men, in particular fathers and paternal uncles, have the main role in the process in all three studied countries but the opinions of women and elderly family members are or can also be taken into account in the case of Niger and Senegal. In Niger, while men are ultimately the decision-makers, the decision to get married is often taken by the not-yet-married couple, and the girls' consensus is sought almost unanimously. In all three countries, dowries are systematically exchanged to ensure that the newly-weds are financially and materially able to start a life together; financial gains for the wider family are a less important feature in the decision-making process. However, there are cases in which economic benefits tend to be taken into account. These cases tend to happen in communities where the practice of child marriage is not prevalent or in cases where the suitors are much older.



Benefits and risks associated with marriage

Marriage is essential for individuals and families and for the survival of their communities. Viewing marriage as the simple union of two people de-contextualises a practice that is complex and meaningful for more than those directly involved. In Mali and Niger particularly, marriage is considered a strategy to protect girls' physical integrity and virginity and, by extension, their own and their families' honour. Marriage also signifies a formal acquisition of adult roles and responsibilities barred to unmarried young people. For parents, the marriage of their children is a testament to their role in the social, economic, religious and moral education of their sons and daughters.

Despite the reverence afforded to the practice, individuals in the communities where the research took place are also very aware of the potentially negative consequences of marrying early, especially those related to health risks associated with early childbearing. Parents also recognise that marriage can be a hindrance to educational opportunities for girls. However, it appears that if a girl is in school and is performing well, she will not necessarily be withdrawn in order to get married. The evidence varies across the research sites, even within countries, but there is enough to challenge the assumption that girls are automatically and inevitably taken out of school in order to marry (although the findings in Senegal mostly confirm that marriage ends a girl's school career).

Community reaction to external interventions

Communities' reactions to development actors' initiatives are varied. In areas where communities are aware of campaigns to prevent child marriage, the topic has become very sensitive, provoking some reticence to identify married and unmarried girls under the age of 18, and in some cases, resulting in village leaders completely denying the existence of the practice, something which was clearly refuted during FGDs (Focus Group Discussions). In general, however, communities seem to know little about initiatives that deal with child marriage or that provide support to married girls, except in few cases. While health sensitization activities seem to be more welcome, activities that promote international child rights are perceived as incompatible with social and religious norms.

Perceptions of the law

Mali, Niger and Senegal have signed and ratified the UNCRC, the ACRWC and CEDAW which all require States Parties to prohibit child, early and forced marriages and betrothal. However, very little is done to address the incoherence in domestic legislation governing the actions of children with Governments in these three countries failing to protect and promote children's fundamental rights. In Mali and Senegal, the legal age of marriage is 16 for girls and 18 for boys. In Niger, awareness raising activities on the legal age of marriage under the UNCRC and other international legal frameworks is considered irrelevant as the Nigerien law allows girls' marriage at 15 years, thus reflecting what communities already practice. The findings of this study suggest that criminalization, which is resource-heavy and difficult to implement, might not be the most effective way to end the practice of child, early and forced marriage, nor framing it as a 'harmful traditional practice'.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Facilitate access to comprehensive, age-appropriate and gender sensitive sexual and reproductive health and rights information and services
- Engage in context appropriate and meaningful discussions with men, young men and boys
- Target boys and young adults as beneficiaries of development programs
- Promote women' social and economic empowerment to increase women autonomy, self-esteem and leadership
- Engage, educate and mobilize parents, families and community leaders to create an environment where girls and boys grow up free from child, early and forced marriages
- Engage young people and ensure they play an active role in advocacy efforts against child, early and forced marriages
- Strengthen Community Based Child Protection Mechanisms (CBCPM)
- Support CBOs and local CSOs including women and youth groups to hold the government accountable of their commitments
- Realign communication strategies with multi-sectoral programming and build on positive community-led messaging



We are calling for the Governments of Mali, Niger, Senegal and other ECOWAS member States:

To invest in Girls' education to improve access, retention and transition to secondary education. The evidence of this study suggests that enrolment in school delays age at marriage, but failing and unaffordable education systems, as well as the looming inevitability of marriage, mean many girls leave school before puberty, and therefore have few opportunities for making a future for themselves outside of marriage. Efforts to strengthen the education system should include undertaking a Gender review of the Education Sector Plans (ESP) to identify barriers that prevent girls from accessing, staying and transitioning to secondary school. The recommendations issued from the Review should be implemented and resourced to enhance girls' education.

Provide quality, comprehensive, age-appropriate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights to girls and boys. Specific measures are needed to ensure that both married and unmarried adolescents are supported and enabled to access vital sexual and reproductive health services and that all adolescent girls are able to protect themselves against unsafe sex and unintended pregnancy. In order to help adolescents, make informed and autonomous decisions about their body and their health and to exercise a healthy and safe sexuality free from violence, coercion and discrimination, the school curricula should also include quality, comprehensive, age-appropriate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights.





CALL TO ACTION

To adopt a system approach to child protection to prevent child, early and forced marriage.

Ensure monitoring and reporting of cases of violence, abuse and exploitation against girls and boys at community level. A strong national child protection system should be put in place and resourced including community based child protection mechanisms chaired by State representatives. A special emphasis should be put on encouraging and facilitating birth and marriages registrations to enable the relevant authorities to identify, prevent and respond to cases of child marriage.

To strengthen legal protection against child and forced marriages. Governments should uphold their international and regional commitments by harmonising conflictual dispositions of domestic legislation with International Human rights standards. To be effective, legislation reforms should go beyond increasing the legal age of marriage at 18 and look at all aspects that impact or are impacted by child marriage and make the necessary adjustments. E.g. compulsory registration of all births and marriages.

To develop, resource and implement comprehensive national strategies to end child, early and forced marriages for girls as a key component in the efforts to realise girls' rights.

A couple of countries have developed such plans following the launch of the African Union Campaign to end child marriage. The development of a national strategy shows commitment but this should be translated into action through its effective implementation. Both in terms of process and content, a successful national strategy would adopt a multi-sectorial approach by involving all relevant actors including relevant ministries and agencies, Civil society organisations including women and youth groups. This inclusive and comprehensive approach will help build coordination and synergies in the efforts to combat the practice.

Everybody knows – from their own experience and observation, they say – that sending a young girl to be a bride in her in-laws' household carries risks. There's the risk she won't be strong enough to do all the domestic work expected of her, the risk she'll have trouble during childbirth, get obstetric fistula or possibly even die.

It's because everybody knows these dangers that parents say they don't marry their daughters before they're ready. 'I married my younger daughter before her older sister', a woman in Niger told researchers, 'because the older sister was still too small.'

What does 'smallness' mean in this context? 'A child is the one whose breasts have not yet grown', says a young married woman; an older man says, 'At 12-13 years the breasts become bigger, and it is at that moment that one understands that the girl has grown up'.

A girl herself may not think that just because she has breasts she's ready to become someone's wife. Brave Mariama, 13 years old and promised by her uncle to a 23-year old furniture maker, told Plan International, 'I said to my uncle, "You need to be patient. I am not ready to have sex with a man. Please, stop this marriage"'¹.

But there are not many girls like Mariama. In Niger, where she lives, three out of four young women are married by the time they're 18. Something over one in four girls is married by the time she's 15. Put differently, 61 per cent of females aged 10-19 are currently married (versus 2.6 per cent of males). Niger has the highest prevalence of girl child marriage in the world, and the highest percentage of women aged 20-24 who've given birth before the age of 18 (51 per cent)².

This study set out to find why child marriage endures in Mali, Niger and Senegal, in spite of the physical and psychological health risks everybody knows about.

The governments of Mali, Niger and Senegal are signed up to the African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage, launched in 2014. All of them have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and its African equivalent, which define the minimum age of marriage as 18. But in Mali, more than one in two girls is already married by the time she's 18. In Senegal, UNICEF figures show fewer girls are being married under 15 – the rate has dropped from 12 per cent in 2002-12 to 9 per cent in May 2016. But it is still the case that one in three girls in Senegal is married before she turns 18. A 2013 survey by the National Statistics and Demography Agency in Senegal (ANSD) discovered that 72.7 per cent of marriages nationwide were not registered – an indication that marriage takes place in social and cultural spheres considered to be outside the purview of the state³.

Plan International's researchers talked to married and unmarried girls, boys, women and men in villages and towns, to find out what they perceive are the benefits of girls marrying very young. Overwhelmingly the research reveals that child marriage is rooted in commonly-accepted ideas about the relationship between a girl's virginity and family honour. 'Only people that lack morality or have a bad character refuse to marry their daughters early', a village chief in Mali told Plan's researchers. 'We are wary of these people and will not want to have marriage bonds with the families of these people because otherwise we will lose our honour and the respect of the community.'

To safeguard the honour of the family, people say, the sexuality of girls must be controlled. Nawal El Saadawi speaks of ‘the very fine membrane called “honour”⁴. For most parents in Mali and Niger, and many in Senegal, it appears ‘honour’ resides in the virginity of their teenage daughters and nieces.

‘I’m afraid she’ll get damaged if she doesn’t marry’, 13-year old Mariama’s mother said. The ‘damage’, we understand, would be Mariama’s having sex and getting pregnant without being married. ‘One of the main reasons why we have our girls married while they are still very young is so that they won’t shame their families and go to hell’, says a religious leader in rural Senegal. ‘Fear of social stigma associated with bearing a child outside wedlock is much stronger than the fear of negative health consequences of early pregnancy’, says a 2014 review for Plan WARO⁵.

Even in Mali, where the usual dangers of early pregnancy are compounded by one of the world’s highest rates of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) – around 89 per cent of Malian women between the ages of 15 and 49 have suffered excision⁶ – family honour based on controlling the sexual behaviour of teenage daughters trumps considerations for their health if they marry and give birth very young. ‘If the girl is not a virgin or has a child before marriage she dishonours her family, who will be blacklisted because of the immoral behaviour of the girl’, a deputy mayor in Mali told Plan International’s researchers.

The roots of child marriage and FGM lie in similar ground – the notion that a family has ‘honour’, and that this honour resides in the bodies and sexual behaviour of girls and women. In this mindset, the boys and men who chase girls, flirt with them, seduce them or rape them, are scarcely visible. Their sexuality compromises girls and women, but it doesn’t compromise the ‘honour’ of their families.

Governments and concerned organisations need to find ways to question these deeply rooted assumptions, while recognising – and themselves probably agreeing with – the value that the vast majority of society places on the institution of marriage. As the researchers for Plan International in Mali conclude:

Marriage is essential for individuals and families and for the survival of communities. Through marriage, girls and young men can engage in legitimate sexual relations, thus also ensuring that new children will be born to reinforce the community’s ranks and support its survival. Marriage signifies a formal acquisition of adult roles and responsibilities...and once united, families are bound to support each other, including in times of hardship⁷.

Is it possible to imagine re-thinking the concept of ‘honour’ to put the rights and welfare of girls and women at its heart? Young girls with their breasts and their periods are only a threat to the honour of their parents and their communities because the men who make them pregnant outside marriage are themselves not regarded as shameful.

1. 13, and a Bride, Plan International video, published 10 July 2012; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K69c_yIO5v0

2. https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/ADOLESCENT%20PREGNANCY_UNFPA.pdf

3. <http://www.ansd.sn/ressources/rapports/Rapport-definitif-RGPHAE2013.pdf>, Chapter 9.

4. The Hidden Face of Eve, Nawal El Saadawi, Zed Books, London, 1980

5. Child Marriage in West Africa and Cameroon: A Desk Review, Louise Wetheridge and Laetitia Antonowicz, Plan WARO, October 2014

6. <http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/fgm/prevalence/en/>

7. Child marriage in Mali: a qualitative study of four communities in Kita and Barouéli, January 2016

INTRODUCTION

How do those who married as children feel now? From the villages of Mali, Niger and Senegal rose a small chorus of their voices:

I was married at 13 years old and started having children at 14. I would never want my children to get married young.

I was married at 17, and my wife was 13. I will never compel my children to get married young.

I got married when I was 14 years old, and I do not want my daughters to suffer as I did.

I married at 15 or 16, and now my daughter is 15. She knows that if she does not go to school, what awaits her is marriage. I do not want her to end up like me, so I am helping her to stay in school.

I got married at 20, when my wife was 16. Her health is very fragile; it took three days for her to give birth. I would advise a girl to wait for her body to be fit for the household chores and sexual activities.



All the reports are available from Plan WARO:

Child marriage in Niger: a qualitative study of four communities in Dosso and Maradi,
Lo Forte, Mann, de Vise Lewis, Child Frontiers Ltd, December 2015

Child marriage in Mali: a qualitative study of four communities in Kita and Barouéli,
Claudia Lo Forte, Gillian Mann, Emma de Vise Lewis, Child Frontiers Ltd, January 2016

Child marriage in Senegal: a field research of four communities in Louga and Kedougou,
Yssa Bass, Groupe Strategies & Leadership, April 2016

THE RESEARCH: WHO DID IT, WHERE AND HOW

In 2014, Plan WARO commissioned a Desk Review on child marriage⁸ that identified considerable research gaps. The authors said, for instance: 'CSPs (Country Strategic Plans) recognise child marriage as a rights violation and form of violence against children (girls in particular), but Plan International currently has little useful data on and around child marriage that would enable country offices to identify target groups and design tailored interventions'.

The current research is a step towards filling some of those gaps. It set out to understand how children and adults outside the capital cities of Mali, Niger and Senegal perceive child, early and forced marriage, and what they think its advantages and drawbacks are. The study also aimed to understand why previous actions towards ending the practice have not had the effect that was hoped for.

Researchers worked with Plan International staff to identify a mix of urban, peri-urban and rural sites (security concerns in Mali led to some last-minute changes). In Mali and Niger, local researchers took part with international researchers in a 7-day training and pilot programme on the skills and methods of qualitative research. The training materials and tools developed during this process were compiled into a research manual, which is available from Plan WARO.

In Senegal, the research team—two senior researchers and two note-takers—developed a field journal which they wrote up at the end of each day's work, drawing together all the interviews and discussions of the day and summarising findings so far.

The aim in the field was to organise separate focus group discussions, with between six and ten participants, of unmarried and married girls under 17, boys under 17, women aged 18-24 (married and unmarried), men aged 18-24 (married and unmarried), women aged 40 and above, and the same for men.

As the Senegal research team commented, for this research it was necessary 'to identify and interview those who are by nature difficult to locate'. In Mali and Niger, the hardest groups to convene were those of married and unmarried girls between the ages of 13 and 17. It was said that either there had not been time to get their husbands' permission, or girls were busy with domestic duties. Local leaders' responses to governmental and NGO initiatives on child marriage also created complicated situations: for instance, in the peri-urban area of Bolbol Goumandey in Niger, where Plan International is active, local leaders were at pains to say that marriage below the age of 18 was a thing of the past; when researchers did manage to meet with young women, some of whom had indeed married recently at around 15, it became apparent that some of them had been briefed on what to say. In addition, agricultural demands because of the rainy season, and the start of Ramadan (fasting month), limited the participation of some boys and men.

Researchers also conducted interviews at local and national levels with government agencies, community and religious leaders, teachers, and local and international non-governmental organisations.

8. Wetheridge and Antonowicz, *ibid.*, page 67

WHERE THE RESEARCHERS WENT...

Prevalence of child marriage

- Low
- Medium
- High
- Very high

Type of area

- Rural
- Peri-urban
- Urban



A NOTE ON ETHNIC GROUPS AND CHILD MARRIAGE IN SENEGAL

A number of ethnic groups with different cultural and traditional practices pertaining to marriage in general and child marriage in particular live in the four targeted sites: Fullah, Diakhanké, Bedick, Bassari, and Wollof. The researchers did not come across Bassari or Bedick girls who were married before the age of 18, because of the lengthy initiation processes these girls need to go through before they marry. The main reason for Bassari and Bedick girls to drop out of school is, it appears, teenage pregnancy. In Nguidila, an urban community inhabited by Wolofs, girls are customarily married after they turn 18.

But among Fullahs in Gueli, Bandafassi and Dakateli, and Diakhankés in Dakateli, it is common for girls to be betrothed on the day of their baptism, that is, when they are eight days old. These girls are often married soon after their periods start, may not meet their intended husband until just before the marriage, and sometimes may only meet him for the first time on the wedding night, when they're taken to his room.

COUNTRIES IN NUMBERS

	MALI	NIGER	SENEGAL
Rural population	75%	80%	56.6% ⁹
Life expectancy	55 years	56 years	66 years ¹⁰
Population living on \$1.25 a day or less	43.6%	43.6%	46.7% ¹¹
Girls married by 15	15% ¹²	28%	9% ¹³
Girls married by 18	55% ¹⁴	76.3%	32% ¹⁵
Legal age of marriage	16 for girls 18 for boys	15 for girls 18 for boys	16 for girls 18 for boys
Women aged 20-24 having given birth by age 15	10% ¹⁶	9.4% ¹⁷	5.7% ¹⁸
Women aged 20-24 having given birth by age 18	46% ¹⁹	51% ²⁰	21.5% ²¹
Birth-rate	6.8 children per mother	7.2 children per mother	5 children per mother ²²
Literacy rate	24.6% for women, 33.56% generally ²³	23.2% for women, 52.4% for men ²⁴	39% of women, 62% of men ²⁵

9. <http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=senegal>

10. <http://data.worldbank.org/country/senegal>

11. <http://data.worldbank.org/country/senegal>

12. UNICEF database, updated May 2016; accessed via <http://data.unicef.org/child-protection/child-marriage.html>

13. UNICEF child marriage database, updated May 2016

14. https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/ADOLESCENT%20PREGNANCY_UNFPA.pdf

15. Ibid

16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21. https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/ADOLESCENT%20PREGNANCY_UNFPA.pdf

22. <http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=senegal>

23. <http://en.unesco.org/countries/mali?language=en>

24. http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/niger_statistics.html

25. http://www.unesco.org/eri/cp/factsheets_ed/SN_EDFactSheet.pdf

WHO IS A CHILD, AND WHEN DOES A CHILD BECOME AN ADULT?

Governments, United Nations organisations and international development agencies rely mainly on age criteria to differentiate children from adults. The 2010 Civil Code in Niger defines as a child anyone under the age of 18; so does the Malian Child Protection Code of 2002. Senegal has ratified the UNCRC, which defines as a child every human being below the age of 18.

But in the communities where the study was conducted, chronological age turns out to be of little importance. 'Children' are understood to be those who lack a fully developed body and 'act without reflecting' on their role in the community. A married girl under 18 in peri-urban Bolbol Goumandey in Niger said, 'A girl child is the one whose breasts have not yet grown'; a woman in rural Mali said, 'The girl is "complete" when she has her period'; a community leader in rural Senegal said, 'Age is not a differentiator because you can see a 15-year old girl who has not yet started her menstrual cycle while a 12-year old has; the younger is a woman, because she can procreate, while the older is still a girl'.

Childhood is perceived as a period of apprenticeship for adult roles. But what constitutes the definitive marker between childhood and adulthood is, people say, marriage itself. 'We become adults when we are married and when we have children', says a young married woman in rural Niger. An unmarried girl says marriage is 'being proud to be among adults, because being married means becoming wise'.

For boys and young men, marriage is the marker too. 'The transition from child to adult is marriage', says an older man in rural Niger. 'Once a person gets married, he has his own family and is no longer a child.' 'Someone who does not have the means to support his wife is considered a child', says an older woman. (But girls in rural Mali expressed a less socially determined view; boys are adults, they said, when 'they start courting girls and can get them pregnant'.)

In two of the five study areas in Mali, Balandougou and Barouéli, it emerged that girls marry as young as 12. In Bayan, Kalaké and Segoubougouni, the more common age was reported to be 14-16. The head of the women's organisation in Barouéli said that of the 150 marriages in the area in 2015, only 30 were celebrated in the town hall because all the other girls were under the legal age of 16.

Young men in Mali marry later – generally at around 20 years, but sometimes later, because of the obligation on them to be able to support a wife and children. 'Boys must reach 18 years minimum to meet the responsibilities of marriage, that is, to support women's needs such as food and clothes and to take care of their health', said an unmarried girl in Barouéli.

THE QUESTIONS

THE RESEARCHERS ASKED

Among the nine married girls in the focus group discussion in Gueli, Senegal, the youngest age of marriage was 12, the oldest 14. All the girls were between 13 and 16 years old, and they'd been married on average for three years, to husbands roughly 14 years older than themselves. The five who had already given birth had done so between 14 and 15 years of age. The ten married girls in the discussion in rural Dakateli had similarly been married on average for three years, the earliest at 13; some had given birth at 14. In urban Nguidila, only three Wolof girls were located who'd been married before 18 – the youngest at 15; only one had given birth, at age 16; their husbands were on average 17 years older than themselves.

In Niger, the legal age of marriage for girls is 15. Discussants said most girls married roughly around this age, but puberty is the determinant. In rural Marake, however, some people, including young women, said girls should be married before their period starts, meaning they should be married by around 12 or so (although informants said the marriage wouldn't necessarily be consummated so early). It appears that the bloodstained clothing that might occur if a girl's period starts for the first time while she is away from home has the potential to cause shame for the girl and her family, since the blood might be read, not as menstrual blood, but as a sign that she has lost her virginity. If the girl is already married, the possibility of her and her family being shamed when her periods start away from home is avoided.



MARRIAGE AS THE MARKER OF ADULTHOOD: WHO CHOOSES THE BRIDE AND GROOM?

Despite the findings in Marake, in Niger discussants on the whole insisted that the decision to get married, and to whom, was most often made by girls themselves.

An older man told researchers: 'She must choose her husband; one cannot impose on her a husband. It is she who introduces the one she loves to her parents'. An unmarried girl said, 'In certain rare situations, she must submit to the will of her parents. If her hand has been asked for once or twice already, the parents will give her to the third suitor'.

Focus group discussants in the Zarma and Hausa communities in Dosso, Niger, described a young man and young woman deciding to marry and informing their parents, who would then investigate the other family's origins (including, it seems, whether the potential in-laws were the descendants of slaves). If the results were to their liking, the suitor would send a friend or family member to inform the girl's father that he would like to marry her. While the father or paternal uncle nearly always had the final say, the mother, the grandparents, and even family friends would be consulted, and maternal and paternal uncles and aunts would decide the amount of the girl's dowry.

In Mali, by contrast, individual brides and grooms (and their mothers) appear to have very little say in who marries whom. Women and girls generally report having no say in the choice of a husband; 'The girl is just informed by her mother, a friend of her father, or her uncle', said young married girls in rural Kalaké. The president of the women's organisation in Barouéli said, 'Elderly spouses are often imposed on girls by their parents'. Older men in rural Balandougou insisted this wasn't true: 'The decision of the girl is the most important because today's parents do not force their daughter to marry a man of their choice'. But married and unmarried girls in Balandougou said emphatically that a girl cannot refuse a marriage; she risks being beaten until she accepts.

Boys in the study sites in Mali are also very likely to have a wife chosen for them. 'Among us here, marriage is the result of negotiation between two families, that of the boy and of the girl', said an imam in rural Kalaké. 'It is a social pact between two families.'

In Senegal among the Fullahs of Gueli, Bandafassi and Dakatelli, a boy's first wife must be a first-degree cousin. Among the Diakhankes and the Wolofs, the first wife can come from any family provided she is from the same social caste.

MARRIAGE AS A SOCIAL PACT BETWEEN TWO FAMILIES

Focus group discussants in Mali described the role of the *démarcheur*, usually the boy's uncle, who is tasked by the father with checking the reputation of the family of the girl he has chosen for his son. The girl's family might also investigate the family of the husband-to-be, finding out if existing wives are well treated and if the household has enough to eat. If both sides are satisfied, negotiations begin. Mothers, both of grooms and of brides, do not appear to be involved in any part of these negotiations. In Balandougou, once the marriage is agreed, the bride-to-be might organise several get-togethers for her future husband and his friends, during which he may give her gifts. When the marriage ceremony itself happens, only the imam and the male members of both families are present: neither the bride nor the groom are involved. In three of the study sites, an older woman attends the bride and groom in the nuptial chamber, giving them advice on how to behave with each other. When the marriage has been consummated, the bride's virginity is verified by the husband's aunts.

Discussants described girls being married to men as much as 30 or 40 years older than them. An older man assured researchers that 'a man is never considered too old to marry a girl as long as he is sexually active'. Much older husbands tend to be those in polygamous marriages, those who are very rich and/or a family member (because the girl's father hopes the husband will take care of the wider family), those to whom the girl was promised when she was very young, and those who have migrated and are living abroad, who request their families to identify a young bride.

Migration creates particular circumstances in Mali. Although young men are expected only to marry when they have the means of supporting a wife and family, it appears that parents will sometime encourage a son to marry early, and will support this marriage, if it means the son remains in the village rather than migrating abroad. Similarly, parents of girls fear for the migration of their daughters, who may never return from the cities where they have gone to work (usually in the hope of building a trousseau). It appears that marriage may be used by parents as a strategy to keep the family together in the village or the locality, but more work is needed to investigate this.

Among Fullah pastoral communities in Gueli, Senegal, parents tend to compel their boys to get married very young so their wives can accompany them as they move with the animals. Illiterate young men are more compliant than boys who have attended school; but even in settled communities, there is little room for a boy to disobey his parents:

I am the fifth son of my parents, the first son to survive. When I was 17, I was informed a week before the wedding that I was getting married to my cousin's daughter. She was 13 years old and attending school, but my mother decided she had to stop attending so she could help with the chores. My father wanted us to start having children as soon as possible; we had our first child when she was 15. I am attending school now (at age 20), but I doubt I will go far because I have to feed my wife and son and I cannot find time to earn money and study at the same time.

RESIGNATION AND RESISTANCE AMONG THE BETROTHED; BUT MARRIAGE ALSO SEEN BY SOME GIRLS AS A ROUTE TO INDEPENDENCE

In rural Gueli in Senegal, researchers did not meet a single girl who was not married; the few unmarried girls older than 13 were away at secondary school. Eight of the nine married Fullah girls in the focus group discussion were betrothed as infants and had known the person they were intended to marry, but had had no particular relationship with him before the wedding. All the arrangements for the marriage process were handled by their parents. Three of the girls said they had wanted to stay in school, but they were coerced by their parents and siblings to go through with the marriage.

In rural Dakateli, by contrast, the eight unmarried girls under 17 in the focus group (which happened at the weekend, when they were home from school) had similarly all been betrothed as infants, but their parents had asked their opinion about getting married; they had all refused because they wanted to carry on studying; their parents had accepted their decision and encouraged them in their studies (see further discussion on the role of education on page xxxx).

The three Wolof girls in Nguidila who were married before the age of 16 were all married to cousins, who had migrated to Europe and come back on holiday with 'a lot of money'. The men had approached them before they approached their parents, and the girls had accepted. They all said they understood completely what they were doing; they had agreed to get married so young because they wanted to move out of their parents' homes and be independent.



A MARRIAGE FOR MONEY?

Is it true that girls are married by their parents, particularly if they are very poor, so the bride's family can benefit from her dowry? This study suggests a different, or at least more nuanced, reality. In Niger, an interviewee from UNICEF told researchers: 'It is not a matter of money; it's about family honour. The girl's parents always spend double what the young husband spends. It's more cultural than economic'.

Did focus group discussants agree? In urban Tessaoua and rural Marake in Niger, discussants uniformly reported that the families of betrothed girls were expected to pay the family of the husband two to three times the amount of the dowry. The family of the bride would be prepared to find this money in order to encourage the man to go through with the wedding as soon as possible, so there would be no delay.

Family honour, and the risk of shame, are, discussants said, at the root of such behaviour, and more important than money: 'There is not one father here who thinks of money when giving his daughter in marriage', said an older man in Marake. 'On the contrary, if the father has the means he will even help his son-in-law to ensure that his daughter remains content in her husband's home and her honour is preserved.'

THE QUESTIONS THE RESEARCHERS ASKED

In Mali, the family of the husband provides the bride's family with significant material and financial resources as dowry, including animals. Part of the money is retained by the girl's father, but part is invested in the girl's trousseau, which is expected to include many pieces of cloth, sheets, blankets, kitchenware and so on. (This trousseau may in fact have been partially bought by the efforts of the girl herself, working as a domestic maid or street-seller in a city, or abroad. The vulnerability of girls like this to exploitation and cruelty has been previously documented by Plan International³¹ – but their determination proves the importance of what the bride can bring to her husband's household.) On the girl's arrival at her in-laws' house, at least half of her trousseau is given as gifts to the husband's parents, sisters and friends. An older man in Baloundougou assured researchers, 'The expenditures made in marriage are not considered as a loss by the boy's family and the property received is not considered a benefit by the family of the girl. These costs are a means of consolidation of marriage ties between spouses and a guarantee of social relations between families'.

But young women in the focus group discussion in Baloundougou expressed a clear sense of what a girl's marriage could do for her parents in the long term: 'When she marries a wealthy family, she supports her parents – they will build them a house, send money and cereals'.

In three of the communities under study in Mali – Bayan, Kalaké and Barouéli – mass marriages, of up to 300 couples, are organised once or twice a year, to assist families with the costs of entertaining large numbers of guests.

The findings in Senegal in some respects support the argument that the husband's family transfers wealth to the bride's family. Among the Fullahs and Diakhankes, for example, the groom gives the bride a heifer, and the bride's mother receives gifts to compensate her for the loss of her daughter. All the bride's siblings also receive gifts, usually cloths, and everyone who assists with the wedding receives at least some cola nuts.

However, if the groom and his parents are not financially ready to afford all the expenses of a wedding and a dowry, an arrangement can be made between his family and the family of the bride to 'lend' the bride until the dowry can be paid and the marriage celebrated officially. In a process meant to demonstrate – as indeed it does – that family ties have precedence over the financial aspects of the marriage, the girl moves to her husband's home and starts her conjugal life; the Fullah call this process 'lubgol', which means, literally, lending.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS PEOPLE ASSOCIATE WITH EARLY MARRIAGE?

Girls and women in all the study localities in Mali described the benefits of marriage in similar terms; for instance, a young woman in rural Baloundougou said, 'Why is it good to be married? Marriage brings respect from the community: a married woman has legitimate children accepted by the community; there is no fear of pregnancy outside marriage. The girl is safe from boys and men who now cannot harass her any more. Marriage protects'.

Disentangling these general endorsements of the value of being married from why it matters for a girl to be married very young, this young Malian woman, 20 years old when she spoke, had been married at 14: 'An unmarried girl is harassed and criticized by men (youth and adults)', she said. 'An unmarried 16-year old daughter is criticized by the elderly of the village; that's why parents marry off their daughters early.'

So the 'benefits' of early marriage include girls being protected from harassment by boys and men, and their parents being protected from gossip (and worse) by their peers. 'When you have a 16-year old daughter unmarried in the family, you can sometimes be a victim of sabotage by other members of the community', a young man said.

Boys and men in Mali spoke unselfconsciously to researchers about the harassment of unmarried girls. 'In our community, if a woman is not married, men of all ages will "court" you', said a young man in Barouéli. 'Marriage safeguards girls from boys with bad intentions', said a boy. Both young and older men complained that 'an abundance of unmarried girls in a community leads to promiscuity and a loss of respect for customs and traditions'³² – without apparently reflecting on the role of boys and men in cajoling or harassing girls into sexual relations.

This isn't to suggest that girls are innocent of sexual interest in boys, or the pleasures of flirting. As both boys and girls under 18 in the Mali study acknowledged, girls and boys 'look for each other at night' – which of course creates panic in the parents of the girl.

In Niger, 'shame' and 'honour' figured constantly in the accounts given by discussants of the benefits of early marriage. 'Parents are at ease once their daughter marries because they do not have to watch her movements so that she does not cause them shame', said one young woman;

THE QUESTIONS THE RESEARCHERS ASKED

‘For the father of the girl, the main advantage is knowing that his daughter is with her husband and the family and the girl’s honour is preserved’, said an older man; ‘Marriage allows the girl to be safe and to remain dignified in the community, because she got married with her virginity intact’, said an adolescent boy.

In all the research sites in Niger, participants of all ages, including girls, said post-pubescent girls become so interested in boys that they ‘leave the house at night’ and ‘follow boys around’. On the other hand, nearly every participant said that girls having pre-marital sex or falling pregnant outside marriage virtually never happened in their communities. And overall in Niger, only two per cent of women in their early twenties acknowledge having had their first sexual experience outside marriage. It appears that the fear of shame is deeply embedded in girls and young women; they have been brought up to believe that the honour of the family rests on their sexual behaviour, and most behave accordingly.

‘Marriage guarantees a position of respect within society’, says an advocacy worker. ‘A girl who is not married will never benefit from the same level of respect that a married girl has, regardless of how successful she is professionally.’

These are important considerations in communities where opportunities for alternative life choices, or indeed for challenging social expectations, are limited.

Some girls themselves may see benefits in an early marriage. The three Wolof girls in Nguidila, Senegal, who married before they were 16, told researchers that they had accepted offers of marriage from their cousins because they wanted to move out of their parents’ homes and be independent. The cousins had migrated to Europe, and returned to Senegal on holiday with ‘a lot of money’, researchers were told.

Fullah and Diakhanke parents said marriage sustains ties between community members; they, and Wolof parents, also argued that taking steps to guarantee their children in turn had legitimate children would ensure that they would be taken care of when they were too old to work.

GIRLS HAVING BABIES: WHAT DO PEOPLE THINK ABOUT THE RISKS?

‘Among all the challenges, the problem of the health of the girl is the most worrying’, said an imam in Balandougou, Mali, ‘because she can lose her life while giving life.’

‘If the 16-year old bride gets pregnant’, said a young woman in Bayan, ‘she may have difficulty during childbirth – she may get lacerations and/or fistula – and if there is no health centre, she may die.’

In all the research sites in Mali and Niger, people discussed the health risks pregnancy and childbirth can cause very young mothers, based, they said, not on information from the government or other agencies, but on their own experience and observation.

Simultaneously, older men in particular assured researchers that only girls with the right physical build would be married by their parents. A 15-year old girl in Marake supported this, saying that her parents considered her body still too immature for marriage: ‘I have had two suitors, but my parents have refused them’.

But in rural Senegal, it seems, particularly among the Fullahs and Diakhankes, the pressure to produce children outweighs any other consideration. ‘Once a girl is married’, say the Senegal researchers, ‘her in-laws will be paying special attention to how soon she becomes pregnant. If after three years of marriage, a girl has not been pregnant, her in-laws will start questioning her fertility. This is why very often, when a girl is her husband’s first wife, she would want to have at least one child as soon as she gets married, to delay her husband marrying another girl. If her husband already has other wives who have children, she will be laughed at for not being able to bear children.’

These pressures are social, and intensely felt, and exist in denial of teenage anatomy, even though parents insist they understand it because they only allow girls with breasts and periods to have sex with their husbands. Dr Elhadji Hainikoye’idi, working in the hospital in Dosso, Niger, was interviewed by Plan International shortly after helping a 15-year old girl in labour for the first time³³. ‘The pelvis isn’t fully developed, so giving birth is almost impossible’, said Dr Elhadji. ‘All these young girls in the remote areas that go into labour but can’t deliver are bound to get fistula. A girl is in labour at home for two or three days. The whole time, the baby is pushing against her bladder and cutting the blood flow, eventually creating a hole in her bladder.’

33. 13, and a Bride, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K69c_yIO5v0

THE QUESTIONS THE RESEARCHERS ASKED

What are the prospects for these young mothers with fistula? ‘Superstition surrounds fistula’, says Dr Elhadji. ‘In the villages, women with fistula are stigmatised. Some say it’s God’s punishment because the girl has cheated on her husband. We rarely see husbands here in the hospital. Usually these girls are sent back to their mothers.’

‘I don’t care if my husband wants to divorce me’, says the 15-year old with fistula in Dossa Hospital. ‘I don’t want to get pregnant again. I’ve suffered enough – I don’t want to go through that again.’ This girl’s experience adds to the common body of knowledge about the risks of childbearing for young girls. But social considerations of honour and shame and status continue to weigh more heavily than people’s observations of physical realities.

In each of the four study sites in Senegal, there is a health post with a nurse, a trained midwife, and community health outreach. But none of the healthcare services has developed a programme specifically designed to prevent child marriage or sensitise the public to its health risks; a nurse in urban Nguidila said, ‘That’s not part of our mission. If we start talking about early marriage from a legal or rights perspective, we may discourage the parents or husbands from letting the girls who are in need of healthcare come for check-ups, or visits when they are very sick’.



THAT VERY FINE MEMBRANE CALLED “HONOUR”

In most of the study sites, checking and celebrating the fact of the young bride’s virginity is woven into the ceremonial aspects of the wedding. Among the Fullahs, Diakhankes and Wolofs in the study sites in Senegal, the girl is showered by her aunts and dressed in an immaculate white cloth from her hips to her knees. She is taken to her husband’s room, where the bed is covered with a clean white sheet. ‘This is a dreaded night for most girls’, say the Senegal researchers, ‘because of its importance in their lives and for their future.’

Early the next morning, a crowd gathers in the yard. ‘It is generally the husband’s family’s praise singer who verifies if the girl was a virgin’, say the Senegal researchers. ‘If she was, then she is celebrated, and the bloodstained clothes are displayed in a sign of pride for her and her family and her husband. Drums are beaten and praises are sung because she has honoured herself and her family.’

But if she cannot prove she was a virgin, she loses half her dowry and brings shame on herself and her family. 'The whole community will remember it for years to come', say the Senegal researchers. 'She will be derided and won't have any say in public because there will always be someone to remind her about "what happened that night".'

Among the Fullahs in Gueli, a married girl whose menstruation hasn't begun doesn't immediately have sex with her husband. This girl, betrothed to her 21-year old cousin, was married at 11 because 'there was a terrible drought throughout the region; my parents are very poor, so they accepted to take our herd and some of the neighbours' herds to Mali to find grass, and our two families decided that I had to move to my husband's home. I was too young to have sex, so it was decided that I had to spend the night with my aunt; I did it for one year, and then when my aunt realised that I had started "seeing blood", she asked me to move to my husband's room' – by which time she was 12 years old. 'I became pregnant for the first time when I was 14 years old', she said, 'but I had a miscarriage because of all the work, and because I was too small.'

THE SHOCK OF SEX

The risks of early and unprotected sex are not only to do with childbirth. There's the shock of sex itself. In Niger, focus group discussants said that girls experience both excitement and anxiety at the prospect of sexual relations with their husband. 'It's not about the fact that the act hurts, nor the weight of the husband', said one young married girl. 'The problem is that girls are not psychologically prepared at home, and partners do not take the time to prepare their morale.'

Young men in Barouéli in Mali described the case of a young bride who was hospitalised for three months after the nuptial chamber ended because as a child she was unable to withstand sex with her husband. In the study areas in Senegal, time for the girl to 'heal the wound caused by her losing her virginity' is built into the marriage process: for a week after the wedding night, the young bride stays in her room, 'surrounded by her friends and family', in order to recover.

Conflict and instability have caused fears of the further spread of HIV and Aids and other sexually transmitted diseases³⁴. But as the authors of the 2014 Desk Review said, 'Girls' ability to negotiate safe-sex practices with their partners is often limited, especially in a context where many girls are involved in relationships with much older men and having multiple wives is widespread... Fewer than half (48 per cent) of married women believe it is justified to refuse sex even if the woman knows her husband has a sexually transmitted disease'³⁵.

34. http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/mali_71670.html 35. Desk Review, page 46

35. Desk Review, page 46

IS THE ISSUE OF A GIRL'S HONOUR SETTLED WITH HER MARRIAGE?

For parents, marrying their children fulfils one of their most important roles: ensuring that two respectable families are united through a 'good' marriage. The status of the father of the bride is enhanced because he has avoided shame for his family and upheld his honour.

The groom is welcomed into the ranks of responsible men: 'Marriage grants a man more respect and responsibility. A man who is not married cannot perform certain responsibilities in the community, such as conducting prayers, representing the family in certain social functions or negotiating on behalf of the family'. And a young husband helps his bride's family with physical labour: in Niger, for instance, 'parents benefit from "anzourey bougou", in which the young man and his friends come to help the girl's father with farming, construction work and other such things', said a young unmarried girl.

What about the young bride herself? She may be accorded 'dignity', and may feel 'protected' from the shame of sex outside marriage, but the work she needs to do to uphold her own honour and that of her family increases substantially with marriage. She moves into her in-laws' household, and is expected to take on all or most of the domestic work previously carried out by her mother-in-law. If there are other wives, they might put some of their work onto her as well.

In rural Gueli in Senegal, a married girl's day starts with milking the cattle at dawn, and ends only when the entire household has finished dinner at night. 'My husband has three wives, and I am the youngest', says a 14-year old girl in Gueli. 'He spends two nights with each wife in turn; when it is my turn, I am responsible to do everything to please him. I prepare all the meals for the whole household and I fetch water for myself and my husband. When it is not my turn, I take the sour cream and the milk that we produce to the market, and use the money for buying food.'

The village chief in Bolbol Goumandey in Niger said the young bride needs to 'master her new tasks and responsibilities while keeping silent, even when discussions concern her directly, and respect her mother-in-law, taking on her tasks'. How well the bride cares for her mother-in-law and carries out her work reflects back on her own mother; if she is respectful, obedient and hard-working, her mother gains esteem from having successfully educated her daughter.

It appears the young bride is constantly being judged: 'She takes actions that show she is a woman', says another village chief. 'She knows how to treat her husband with tact; she cares for his language and gestures in front of her in-laws; she respects different groups during ceremonies and she does not behave awkwardly.'

So marriage saves a young girl from one kind of shame, but opens the door to years of arduous domestic labour and the risks of a different kind of shame, if she doesn't please her mother-in-law and doesn't know her place. In the focus groups in Mali, a chorus of women's voices described 'misunderstandings with mothers-in-law', bodies not strong enough to take on all the work they were expected to do, misunderstandings with husbands who 'take the side of their mothers over their wives', and so on. Researchers in Senegal found that two of the young married girls in Gueli who were their husbands' only wives were 'asking their husbands to marry other girls to help them with the household chores', because the volume of work was so great.

'There is little benefit for girls, and those who regret marriage outnumber those who don't, because of the difficulties she faces in satisfying the husband and his extended family', said an adolescent boy in Niger. 'She has to be proper and reasonable in the face of all these people; there is no room for error.'



WHAT HAPPENS IF A YOUNG BRIDE CAN'T SUSTAIN HER NEW LIFE?

Discussants in Niger described a level of physical and psychological violence inflicted by husbands on their young wives – slaps, kicks and insults – that appears to be normalised. This is sometimes due to sexual expectations on the part of the husband that the young wife cannot, or does not want to, satisfy.

Another source of tension and violence is the inability of the girl to perform all the domestic and household tasks placed on her in her husband's home.

In the communities where this research took place, divorce was mentioned as a cause of much unhappiness. Under Islamic law, husbands can obtain a divorce much more easily than wives, and divorce is usually initiated by husbands. In Tessaoua in Niger, the Chief of the Canton explained to researchers that husbands seeking a divorce had got into the habit of preparing a list of all the gifts they had given to their wife, and claiming reimbursement from her parents. The Chief had gone on the radio to say that such behaviour was neither customary nor supported by legislation, and it needed to stop.

The story is further evidence of the intense pressure young girls experience when they marry. Discussants said sometimes a girl would ask her own parents to intervene with her mother-in-law if relations were particularly difficult, but doing so would offend the pride of her husband, who would feel humiliated by what he would see as his young wife making public his inability to control her.

WHAT ARE THE SOCIAL PRESSURES FOR NOT CONFORMING TO THE PRACTICE OF EARLY MARRIAGE?

'I had problems with my brother, who treated me in all sorts of ways because I did not want to give my daughter in marriage at 14 years', says the first deputy mayor of Barouéli in Mali. Civil servants or "Fonctionnaires" are often insulted because they do not want to marry their daughters, and unmarried girls 18 and older are treated as bad girls.'

'The few families who refuse the marriage of their girls in school are denigrated by women and men in their neighbourhood', says the president of the women's organisation, CAFO, in Barouéli. 'Very often it is said that their daughters at school engage in prostitution.'

Can parents withstand the social pressure? The first deputy mayor says fonctionnaires sometimes crack, and 'accept under pressure to marry their girls under 18 years', but others continue to resist: 'My father was perceived as a rebel against tradition', says a woman school director in Balandougou. 'Time has proved that he was misjudged. We studied, had jobs, and we are married. None of my daughters will marry before they are 18 years old.' The interim village chief in Balandougou said that 'other members of the community were afraid to ask the girls' hands. The father was a teacher who educated his daughters. They all married after 22. Some villagers said that the old man was not normal'.

In rural Senegal, a woman who is not married is derided and ridiculed; the Fullah word for such women is 'tiodho', also used to refer to goods that have not been sold because nobody wants them. In the village of Gueli, girls marry around the age of 13; they can bring almost no forces to bear against the power of their fathers, and in any case they believe it is a curse for a girl to become 'tiodho'. But in the primary school in Gueli, the principal was so outraged when his best student, a 12-year old girl, came to him in tears saying her father intended to marry her, that he reported the case to the police, and the father was obliged to cancel the wedding. (Nonetheless, the father forced the marriage through at the end of the school year, and the girl dropped out; two years later, the principal learned that she had died in childbirth.)

Although unmarried girls in the focus group discussions reported being mocked for not being married, they generally considered themselves lucky to have got good enough grades at school to be able to escape marriage for the time being; their parents were hopeful that they would complete college. There was only one girl in the focus groups who was unmarried and not at school – and she said she wanted to get married because she feared becoming 'tiodho'.

EDUCATING GIRLS – WHAT’S THE RELATIONSHIP WITH CHILD MARRIAGE?

‘As I am still in school, nobody ever talks to me about marriage’, says a 16-year old girl in rural Dey Gorou in Niger. ‘Our school is more than three kilometres from the village, but this does not discourage us [five girls from the village] because we like to go to school.’

The research findings in Niger appear to overturn the common assumption that girls are inevitably taken out of school to be married. The opposite appears to be the case – if a girl is doing well, her family will support her to stay in school. ‘People in my family support me a lot’, says the 16-year old. ‘They take care of all my school-related needs, such as school levies, uniforms, recreation fees and the purchase of books and notebooks. Here, when the daughter attends school, we do not talk to her about school. But if she fails the end of primary education examination twice, marriage awaits her automatically.’

However, the vast majority of girls (and boys) in the communities where this research took place were not in school, and perhaps had never been. School enrolment rates and attendance in Niger are amongst the lowest in the world, although education is nominally compulsory between the ages of 7 and 15. Difficulties for people include access to schools, and their cost. Plan International is working with the Ministry of Education in Niger to extend the availability and quality of education; in the meantime, some parents are paying large sums of money to keep their daughters in private schools.

One woman who was married ‘at 15 or 16’ told researchers she had sold four goats to finance her 15-year old daughter in the third grade ‘because I do not want her to end up like me. She knows that if she does not go to school, what awaits her is marriage – an idea she does not even consider, and I don’t either’.

A similar picture emerged in Mali. Of the 27 unmarried girls between the ages of 11 and 17 that researchers met in three research sites, only three were not enrolled in school. It is possible, the researchers say, that all the girls in the focus group discussions were the daughters of local elites, ‘fonctionnaires’, who are known to prefer education for their daughters rather than marriage. But the data also suggest that when there are schools available and affordable, girls of marriageable age may be allowed to attend, and not necessarily forced to drop out to get married.

Boys and young men in Mali certainly say this is the case; ‘Girls that go to school do not marry early’, said one boy; ‘It’s because of school that girls do not marry early’, said a young man. ‘If they go to school, they don’t marry.’

However in Mali there are secondary schools in only two of the five research sites: urban Segoubougouni and peri-urban Barouéli. There is a proliferation of private schools of variable quality, but in certain areas, only madrassas, or Quranic schools, are available. The education system as a whole suffers from poor teaching quality, poor infrastructure, high costs for parents, and violence, which on its own often prompts parents to withdraw their daughters.

IS THIS A SIMPLE STORY?

So is there a simple story to tell about the relationship between educating girls, the age at which they marry, and the attitudes of parents? The researchers in Senegal found that marriage did indeed terminate a girl's education in most cases: of the thirty married girls in focus group discussions across the four sites, who had all attended school at some time, only four had resumed their studies after the wedding, and three of these were still living at home with their parents because their husbands had migrated. One girl's husband is a university student; one is married with a civil servant; both husbands support their wives continuing to study.

The major problem girls report is the amount of work they have to do as new brides in their in-laws' household. 'When I got married, at first I was still going to school: I loved going, and I was the best student in the whole school', says a 16-year old in rural Dakateli. 'But I had to wake up at 5 in the morning to prepare breakfast and lunch before going to school, and my husband's first wife never stopped complaining that they were having to eat cold food at lunch and that she was doing all the household chores while I was going to school, so my husband asked me to focus on my duties at home.'

In Dakateli generally, girls get very poor grades at school; one focus group discussant, who is betrothed to her cousin, explained: 'Even if my husband would want me to stay in school, his parents won't allow me to do so. So what is the point in trying to work hard at school? I am attending school right now only to stay away from the household work at home. When I am at school, I rest a bit with my friends; we learn; but the main reason we are here is to stay away from home'.

The principal of the high school in peri-urban Bandafassi said no girl had passed the high school diploma in the three years the school had been open. He attributed this to the amount of work they need to do in their parents' households, which means they don't have time to do homework for school. A primary school teacher in rural Gueli said, 'The parents send their young daughters to primary school only because they are too young to be used for household chores and there needs to be someone taking care of them while their mothers are working. As soon as they start to grow and can start working, they are taken away from school to get married or to work at home'.

But even this is not the whole of the story in Senegal. All the parents interviewed in the four research sites said that they valued the education of all their children, girls as well as boys, and that if their daughters did well in school they would prefer to see them finish their education than marry young. A parent in peri-urban Bandafassi said, 'I would have loved to see my daughter stay in school and complete her education to become a doctor or a teacher, but she had very bad grades and ended up being expelled. If I did not find her a husband, she would have been at the mercy of these young boys, and maybe brought me shame. That is why I forced her into marriage. Her sisters are still at school, and I will do my best to see that they finish their education'.

In rural Dakateli, the eight girls who were not married (and who took part in a focus group at the weekend, when they were home from senior high school in the town of Salemata) had all been betrothed as infants, but were allowed to continue studying by their parents rather than marrying. However, these are also parents who can afford it. A man in Dakateli, married for the first time at 19, with four wives and 13 children, said he 'always wanted all my girls to attend school and graduate to become doctors or work for the government'. However, he couldn't afford high school for all his children, and he chose to educate his sons because they would stay in his household. 'When the girls reach puberty, I hurry up and have them married because I cannot afford keeping them in school, and if they stay at home, they may be tempted by the boys and bring shame on the family.' Apparent good will towards the education of his daughters runs up against the lack of affordable schooling, and the fear of shame.



BRIDE KIDNAPPING – IS IT STILL HAPPENING?

Among Fullahs in the Diery region of Senegal, a practice known as 'goofgol' – bride kidnapping – persists. A young man plots with his friends to kidnap a girl; because she is often raped by the young man, her parents generally consent to her marrying him, at the cost of a hefty dowry. The imam of Gueli told researchers the practice was dying because people understood it was illegal, and that he was not aware of a case in the past ten years; however one of the married girl discussants said there had been a case in the previous year.

WHAT DO COMMUNITY MEMBERS THINK COULD BE DONE TO DELAY THE MARRIAGE OF GIRLS?

In Mali, focus group discussants had a number of suggestions for what could be done:

- Engage men, who are the central decision-makers, because women are not listened to, nor are they engaged in any decision-making, and they cannot oppose marriage;
- Sensitise traditional and religious leaders as key cultural gatekeepers and influencers, because they are the ones pushing for early marriage to happen;
- Convince parents of the importance of education; make education compulsory until the end of primary school; and ensure all girls go to school until then;
- Where poverty pushes parents to marry their daughters, support girls with alternative income-generating activities;
- Actively engage authorities and NGOs in disseminating information about the risks of child marriage on the health of young girls, and the dispositions of the law.

One young married woman in rural Bayan said wisely that agreeing to delay marriage was a decision that communities needed to take collectively: 'It's all the families in the village who have to agree and take a decision that the age of marriage is delayed. Men and women need to know and acknowledge the consequences of the practice'.

In Niger, by contrast, focus group discussants claimed they scarcely understood the question, because, they said, marriage is seen as a positive event that is welcomed by all those involved. They said a girl is rarely forced to marry against her will. It is typical for a girl to choose whom she marries, and her preference is usually deemed acceptable. In three out of the four communities where this research was conducted, discussants insisted a girl's physical development was taken into account before she could be married.

They assured researchers that girls are counselled on what to expect from marriage and what their household responsibilities will be. Parents supplement the cash received in the dowry to ensure their daughter has everything she needs, and continue their support, particularly if there are medical needs. If there are problems in the marriage, they support their daughter, and in very bad circumstances allow her to return home.

These comments perhaps reflect the fact that in Niger, most focus group discussants were identified in collaboration with local leaders, who in certain areas, particularly Bolbol Goumandey, where Plan Niger is working, were keen to show that marriage below the age of 18 no longer happens. Efforts by the researchers to convene a discussion group of married girls under 18 met with resistance in Bolbol Goumandey, and when a group did meet, the researchers were told that all the girls had married before Plan Niger began its work. It soon became evident, however, that several girls aged 15 and 16 had married recently. Village leaders in Dey Gorou were also aware of campaigns to stop child marriage, though the area had not itself been targeted in a sensitisation programme, and initially said there were no married girls under 18 in the village. They responded more openly once they had been reassured that the legal age of marriage for girls in Niger is 15.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS?

In most of the communities in this study, society is organised through social norms and religious laws which are often more valued than formal national laws. In the research sites in Senegal, Gueli and Nguidila are a hundred per cent Muslim, while in Bandafassi and Dakateli there are a few Christians, and Bassaris and Bedicks who practise African traditional religions. However, child marriage existed among the Fullahs before their conversion to Islam, and is in fact more prevalent among Fullahs who are not practising Muslims.

The intersections (and contradictions) of religion and ethnicity indicate that religious affiliation is not the main driver of child marriage. Islam wasn't mentioned in any of the discussions in Senegal as the driving force; the word used was 'aadha', which means 'tradition'; it promotes conformity with basic societal values and beliefs.

But the Muslim religious leaders interviewed for this study did generally condone child marriage; an imam in Gueli said that neither the Qur'an nor the Hadith explicitly forbid child marriage, and it was the responsibility of a father to make sure his daughters don't 'fall into fornication'. A religious leader in Dakateli said, 'Our religion dictates that a girl child who bears a child without being married must be stoned to death. We do not respect that principle because we are not an Islamic state; however, it shows how much we abhor sexual deviations. This is one of the main reasons why we have our girls married while they are still very young'.

However, the imam in peri-urban Bandafassi has disentangled the issue of child marriage from perceived religious dictates, and is refusing any longer to celebrate the marriages of under-age girls. He became a member of the Local Child Protection Committee (CLPE) three years ago – a

strategically important person to be part of such a group. He says he used to grant permission for the marriage of girls, but once he understood the effects of the practice on girls, and the legal implications, he became a forceful advocate of ending child marriage.

The ability of the Bandafassi imam to view the issue in human rights terms is a hopeful sign. But his actions lay bare the roots of the child marriage phenomenon: the low status of women and girls, and the primary importance given to their roles as wives and mothers rather than as citizens and equal members of society. Systemic discrimination against women and girls turns them into domestic skivvies in the name of ‘family honour’.

HOW DO COMMUNITIES AND COMMUNITY LEADERS REACT TO EXTERNAL INTERVENTIONS AND THE LAW?

The sequence of events in Bolbol Goumandey in Niger is instructive. When Niger announced it was signing up to the African Union’s campaign against child marriage, in December 2014, an event was organised in Dosso, attended by the First Lady and the Minister for child protection. In their presence, the village chief declared that he ‘solemnly reiterates his commitment to forbidding any celebration of child marriages in his village’.

Months later, adults in leadership positions in Bolbol Goumandey insisted to the current researchers that there were no married girls under 18 in the village: ‘The local leader that I am and the marabouts in the village have often dissuaded our people and thank the Lord, the fruits of our efforts are here. There is no more child marriage here’. No amount of discussion could shift the leadership away from these assertions, despite the fact that participants in focus group discussions clearly declared that the practice continued.

It appears that a woman has been appointed in every neighbourhood to report to the community surveillance committee, the Dan Banga, any case of child marriage she comes across. When researchers asked how considerations of family honour were being dealt with, a compelling picture emerged. The Dan Banga, established to protect the village from theft and other crimes, had, it appeared, been instructed to patrol the streets, the bus station and so on after dark to look out for any potentially dubious behaviour by young people. The Dan Banga is authorised to fine or thrash and escort home anyone it considers to be behaving inappropriately. Many respondents said girls’ movements were being more frequently monitored, and girls were being denied the opportunity to participate in normal daily activities, like going to the market.

In the communities under study in Maradi, by contrast, people clearly felt they had nothing to hide: 'It's not that we don't listen to NGOs; it's just that their message doesn't really relate to us', said an older man in urban Tessoua, 'because we don't marry our girls at a very young age, and we don't impose a husband on them or force them to marry. There aren't any girls to save here.' Another older man said, 'There are NGOs, but we don't listen to them because they ask us to do things that go against our religion, such as not marrying our girls before a certain age, even if they are ready'.

An interviewee from the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) noted that external programmes often target local leaders to be champions, but these local leaders live with and operate on the same value system as their communities:

We have established partnerships with traditional chiefs to educate communities on child marriage, but in reality, traditional chiefs never truly commit. Once they return to their villages, they are discouraged by the villagers, who say, 'You take money from UNICEF to convince us, but will UNICEF help us when our children catch STDs or fall pregnant? It is our honour that is at stake, and honour has no price'.

These arguments discourage traditional leaders.

NIGER: HELPFUL TO RAISE THE LEGAL AGE OF MARRIAGE?

Discussions in all four research communities in Niger on raising the legal age of marriage for girls to 18 took similar paths. On the one hand, respondents were unanimous that raising the age of marriage would reduce the health risks of early pregnancy and enable girls to be better prepared for married life and household work and responsibilities. On the other hand, respondents feared that girls would be more likely to engage in pre-marital sex and become pregnant. A young woman in the 18-24 discussion group in Bolbol Goumandey said, 'Before they turn 15, girls stay quiet and are not too interested in boys. From 15 years they reach puberty, so you have to marry them. If we wait two or three years after 15, we allow them time to pay more attention to boys. Staying until 17 or 18 without getting married is difficult to bear'. (What's interesting about this comment is that it acknowledges girls' sexual interest in boys, and suggests young women may subscribe to the argument that getting married is a way to satisfy sexual curiosity.)

Approaching the issue of child marriage through a legal lens – raising the legal age of marriage for girls – may be less successful than appealing to people on the basis of the reality they experience, part of which involves the health risks to young girls from early pregnancy. However, another part of that 'reality' is the notion of family honour, which is deeply embedded: 'In our village we cannot leave an out-of-school girl up to age 18 without a husband', said a girl under 18 in Dey Gorou. Even if the legal age were to be changed, respondents universally suggested it would be unenforceable.

MALI: THE LAW ONLY GOOD FOR 'EDUCATED PEOPLE AND THE WHITES'

In Mali, the current study found that child marriage tended to figure alongside FGM in NGO discussions and mobilisation on 'harmful traditional practices'. The reticence of girls (and others) to participate in the focus group discussions convened for this study may, as in Niger, have had something to do with the launch of the African Union Campaign against Child Marriage in Mali, which occurred in the commune of Konobougou, Barouéli, on 11 October 2015, a few weeks before data collection for this study began. The First Lady of Mali, the AU Special Rapporteur on Ending Child Marriage in Africa, and other notables, spoke, and Plan International Mali was involved in organising the event. Researchers wondered if potential respondents were subsequently wary of reflecting on a practice they do not necessarily regard as negative.

In Mali the Personal and Family Code was revised in 2011 to lower the legal age of marriage for girls to 16 (15 with parental consent), 18 years for boys (the Code adopted in 1962 gave 18 as the legal age of marriage for girls and 21 for boys). Focus group discussants in Mali were mostly not aware of the change in the law, but when they heard about it, they thought it was appropriate, since it fitted with what they already do, and respected current customs and traditions. 'Men and women in the villages ignore the law', said the head of the women's organisation in Barouéli. 'They see only the question of shame and dishonour.' A young man said, 'In our community, people don't like to talk about the law because they think the law is good for educated people and the whites'.

SENEGAL: EFFORTS AT CHILD PROTECTION

Through the National Strategy for Child Protection, adopted by the government in Senegal in 2013, a mechanism for reporting cases of child abuse has been developed for implementation at all levels, from the Departments to the villages – but so far very few Communal Committees or Village Committees for Child Protection have been established, and no sanctions are known to have been applied to parents who married their children below the legal age.

Participants in the current study all knew the legal age of marriage for girls, but in Gueli and Dakateli they said the absence of any legal sanction meant there was no reason not to ignore the law. In any case, most marriages are not civil; overall in Senegal around 73 per cent of marriages are not registered. And members of the Gendarmerie interviewed in the rural research sites said they could not remember any case of a girl coming to the Gendarmerie to complain that her parents were obliging her to marry.

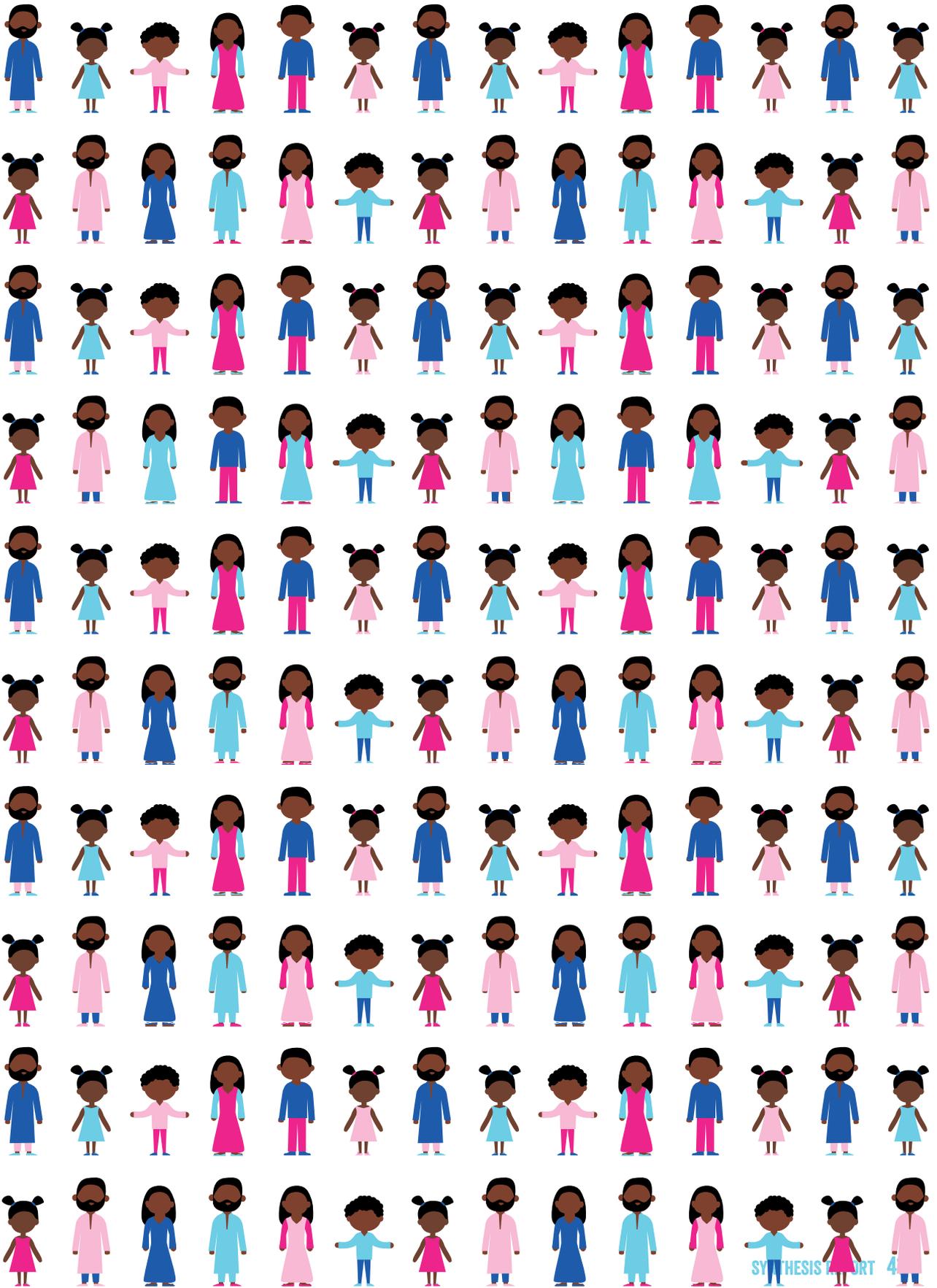
In Bandafassi the Local Child Protection Committee does appear to be functioning; as described earlier, the imam is an active member, and the Sous-Préfet is the chair. Thirty villages take part, there is a mechanism which allows for anonymous reporting, and it is argued that the incidence of child marriage is decreasing. Researchers found one girl in the focus group discussions who had complained to the Committee when her parents wanted to marry her; the Committee warned her parents about the legal consequences of marrying her under-age, and the parents reconsidered.

VIEWS ON CIVIL VS RELIGIOUS MARRIAGE IN MALI

The new Code in Mali equates religious and civil marriage, but a number of women expressed unhappiness with the absence of a wedding contract registered at the town hall.

'We need the mayor to oblige parents to accept that the marriage celebration takes place at the town hall', said a married 20-year old young woman in Balandougou. 'If I had to do it again, I would marry in the town hall to have a paper that will protect me and also protect my children against abuse by my in-laws in case of repudiation, or the death of my husband. When a woman divorces or is sent away by her husband, she will lose her children. When the husband dies, his property goes back to his brother. The woman also is "inherited", and she cannot refuse.'

That men appear to prefer a religious marriage without a contract over an official civil marriage is understandable in these circumstances, but raises many questions about the rights of married girls and women. It could be that drawing up an official religious contract, legally equivalent to a civil contract, would be beneficial in protecting the rights of married girls. However, recognising the equivalence of religious and civil marriage would harm the efforts of civil society activists in Mali, who are lobbying for a return to the principles of the 1962 Code, which states the prevalence of civil over religious marriage.





Child marriage is perceived by parents as a strategy that protects girls from risks to their and their family's honour.

Efforts to eradicate child marriage need to engage with this reality, and support children and families to find alternative ways of managing the sexual harassment and sexual temptations girls face.

Marriage provides a context in which girls can have sex legitimately.

Parents recognise the burgeoning sexuality of their daughters, and see marriage as the best way to protect them not only from men but from their own desires. In situations where sexual and reproductive health information and services are largely unavailable, efforts to tackle child marriage need to acknowledge the primacy that sex and sexuality play in the decisions families take.

Honour and shame are key drivers of child marriage.

Honour and shame are powerful driving forces in the communities that marry their daughters when they develop breasts and start to menstruate (or even earlier). Unmarried post-pubescent girls and their parents are looked down on and denigrated, and may be socially isolated. A girl who is not a virgin at marriage, or who has a child out of wedlock, brings shame on herself and her family and risks profound social isolation.

Marriage is intended to strengthen family ties and mutual support.

In the villages under study, marriage takes place in the context of extreme poverty, lack of educational opportunities, short life-expectancy, and a profoundly patriarchal system that prescribes specific gender roles for girls and boys. Marriage, it is hoped, increases the chances of survival by creating the possibility for the two families involved to support and assist each other. In environments where there are limited opportunities and very little external support, such reciprocity and mutual assistance are regarded as central to the self-preservation of communities.

Child marriage can be prevented by the availability of education.

Girls are not necessarily out of school because they need to be married; they are more often out of school because it is inaccessible to them, geographically and through cost. In Niger, the vast majority of boys as well as girls, aged 12 or 13, are unable to complete primary and go on to secondary school. But in both Mali and Niger, if girls had managed to stay on in school and were doing well, parents said they were willing to support them to continue, and did not take them out of school to marry. In Senegal, all parents interviewed said they would prefer their daughters to be educated and find professional work – but if the girls were not doing well at school, or if the parents could not afford school expenses, the only alternative was to get them married. The desire of many girls to continue their education, and the receptiveness of parents to the benefits of formal education for their daughters, should be major factors in considering how to challenge child marriage.

THE FINDINGS SYNTHESISED

Receipt of dowry may be less significant than previously thought.

In Niger in particular, despite the high levels of poverty in the communities where this research took place, child marriage is not necessarily undertaken to reduce the financial burden on the family or augment income through the bride-price. The bride's family makes significant gifts to the groom's family, and spends a great deal of the dowry on the household goods the bride will need. In Senegal, parents will sometimes 'lend' the bride to the husband if his family cannot afford the dowry; the relationship between the families, and the avoiding of potential shame, are regarded as more immediately important than any receipt of money and goods.

The key decision makers on marriage are mostly adult men.

Girls and women, even mothers, have very little say on who will marry whom, when, and under what conditions. Marriage is by and large the preserve of adult men, whose engagement is crucial in any effort to tackle the practice.

Some girls exercise some agency in choices around marriage...

Girls in the research communities in Niger were said to be able to decide who they want to marry, and to decline the overtures of suitors (though it appears their parents would only tolerate them doing this twice). In the face of very limited alternatives, girls appear to have some success in having a say in who they marry (even if it simply amounts to saying 'no' to certain suitors). Wolof girls in Senegal were able to accept marriage offers from their older cousins independently of their parents.

...though the majority do not.

Researchers in Senegal found the vast majority of girls they spoke to regarded marriage as a divine act from which they could not escape. Girls in rural Gueli and Dakateli had no idea that betrothal and child marriage were illegal in Senegal, and had never heard of the rights guaranteed them under the conventions to which the government of Senegal is signatory. Girls in all three countries internalise the system of honour and shame, and accept their place in it.

Parents believe they are attentive to the health risks of early pregnancy.

As constantly asserted in this research, parents believe they protect their daughters by marrying them only when their bodies are perceived to be sufficiently developed, not when they reach a particular age. They believe their society has mechanisms for ensuring that the practice of marrying girls remains within acceptable boundaries.

Most marriages are religious and traditional...

...and in the absence of efforts to enforce the legal age of marriage for girls are likely to continue to be so, driven by social norms and ideas of honour and shame. But married women say they would prefer a civil marriage, to have a contract that would give them and their children inheritance rights.



...but criminalising child marriage may do more harm than good – the evidence is mixed.

The adults and children in Niger who participated in the research were not receptive to messages related to international legal standards, and clearly feared interventions that ban or criminalise child marriage. In Mali, classing child marriage as a 'harmful traditional practice' appears to have gained less traction than efforts to stop FGM. Strong legalistic campaigns risk alienating communities and driving child marriage underground, with even further potentially fatal consequences for girls' health and well-being. But the experiences of the Child Protection Committee in Bandafassi in Senegal show how child marriages can be prevented and the well-being of girls protected when key stakeholders in a community set their minds to enforcing the legal age of marriage and intervening on behalf of girls.

Migration as a driver of child marriage.

In Mali in particular, the migration of girls and boys from villages threatens the very survival of communities, because it deprives them of those who would otherwise marry, have children, care for their parents and other family members, and tend the land. In order to prevent or delay this happening, sons may be pushed to marry earlier than would normally be considered acceptable, in the hope they remain in the community, or at least to ensure that a young wife assists her mother-in-law in the household, and bears children. This is one example of how global forces may be influencing the cultural dynamics of early marriage. Insecurity is also affecting the survival mechanisms of villagers, and increasing migration flows to Europe.

A STORY FROM SENEGAL

My mother died when I was an infant, and I was raised by my aunt, who always treated me like her own daughter. I was among the best students in my primary school, and passed the secondary school entrance when I was 12. I was doing very well in secondary school, but my breasts appeared faster than other girls'. By the time I was 14, I looked like a big girl.

My problems started when my periods began, because menstruation makes my breasts swell. My parents started to question me about having sexual relations with boys; they thought I was pregnant. I explained to them however I could that I was still a virgin, but they would not listen, and one day my father decided it was time for me to get married. It was a Thursday. My aunt called me when I came home from school and told me that I was going to get married the next day, after the 5pm prayers. The man I was being married to was from another village; I had never seen him before.

I had never cried so much until that day. I begged and pleaded with my father, but he would not listen. He had decided on his own that I was not going to marry the cousin to whom I was betrothed because my father wanted to avoid being shamed by my not being a virgin (as he believed).

A week later I was taken to my husband in Dakateli; we arrived there at night, and I was put into his room. I was very scared. He came and took away my virginity. It was not until the next day that I saw his face: he was 41 years old, with one wife, and his youngest daughter is older than me.

I have been living with him for more than a year, but I have never had a conversation with him. He calls me and sends me, and I do what he tells me, but he does not know what I like. I am married to a man who knows nothing about what I think. I am not happy.

BECAUSE I am a Girl



Empower girls with knowledge, skills and confidence to make their own choices about when and who to marry and have alternatives when faced with the risk of early and forced marriage. There is a strong association between higher age at marriage and higher education levels. The increase in girls' educational attainment during the last several decades is widely viewed as the primary cause for the delay in marriage of girls. As seen in this research, girls are not necessarily out of school because they need to be married; they are more often out of school because it is inaccessible to them, geographically and through cost. Programmes to end child marriage should seek to promote girls' education and vocational and life skills training for girls who are already out of school.

Facilitate access to comprehensive, age-appropriate and gender sensitive sexual and reproductive health and rights information and services. As highlighted throughout the research, fear of pre-marital pregnancy is a commonly cited trigger for marriage. This fear tends to be associated with shame and dishonor more than with the risks to young girls' health. Once married, girls are more likely than their same-age counterparts to be sexually active and have unprotected sex. Within marriage girls often face limited decision-making power about when to have sex or using contraception and sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention. Programming should address the specific challenges and risks faced by married girls but also unmarried girls who are increasingly having sex outside marriage; a trend which is unlikely to be reversed. Adolescent girls and boys whether they are married or not are often not equipped with the knowledge needed to make healthy decisions about their sexuality and often face barriers to accessing essential services. Such services should be accessible to adolescents and youth, and provided in youth-friendly ways which are non-judgmental, respectful and which ensure confidentiality.

Engage in context appropriate and meaningful discussions with men, young men and boys. Girls' SRHR depends heavily on the actions, attitudes and knowledge of boys and men. In all three studied countries where traditional and patriarchal gender norms are so widespread, boys and men are very often the primary agents for poor SRH outcomes amongst girls. However, boys and men are also subject to immense pressure in their own right to conform to certain stereotypes of masculinity that are detrimental to women, by their peers, the wider community, the media and through sexism in schools and other institutions. Their actions are very often cultivated by society and therefore should be possible to address through social action too. Engaging with men as potential husbands is also particularly critical so that programs address the 'demand' for child marriage as well as the supply. Specific work with fathers would also be useful in order to devise strategies for change that address their dominant role as patriarchs. Identifying male champions for child marriage reduction and mitigation in communities and supporting them play a mediator role must be considered.

Target boys and young adults as beneficiaries of development programs. In the past ten years there has been an increased focus on improving adolescent skills and economic livelihoods, partially addressing the causes and consequences of child marriage by providing girls with income generation and negotiation skills and authority to postpone marriage. Much of the literature articulates the critical importance of interventions that focus on adolescent girls as a specific and critical target population for development initiatives, including in relation to child marriage. However, as we have seen in the research, boys who are educated expressed their will to marrying later in order to pursue their studies. They are also much more likely to challenge the traditions. On the contrary, boys and young adults who have not schooled have expressed their adherence to the traditions and willingness to perpetuate them. Interventions should also target boys and young adults and ensure they too, have other alternatives in life other than marriage.

Promote women' social and economic empowerment to increase women autonomy, self-esteem and leadership. The increased visibility and mobilization of women's savings and credit groups is often cited by communities as a factor that contributes to a general sense of the strength of women's groups in bringing about change in their community. Improving livelihoods, particularly of women, can be an accompanying measure to other projects (e.g. for income generating activities to contribute to children's schooling) or projects in their own right linking women's income generation to empowerment, increased decision making in the household and reduced vulnerabilities. Efforts to address child marriage should seek to promote and bring to scale girls and women's economic empowerment (savings groups and women's business associations) and strengthen them to help them become models for female leadership in communities.

Engage, educate and mobilize parents, families and community leaders to create an environment where girls and boys grow up free from child, early and forced marriages Far too many girls are denied the choice of when and who to marry as these decisions are often made by parents, families and communities. Therefore, engaging in a dialogue and raising awareness is crucial to changing attitudes, behaviors and social/cultural practices and creating environments where girls are able to complete their education, delay marriage and childbearing and make free choices on when and whom to marry. It is necessary to raise awareness and carry out public education programs among families and communities – including by working with communities and traditional and religious leaders - on the risks and dangers of child marriage and on the benefits of keeping girls in schools. Such programs should be provided in ways which promote dialogue, build capacity and enable individuals and communities to act to address the social, cultural and religious norms and attitudes which result in child marriage.

Engage young people and ensure they play an active role in advocacy efforts against child, early and forced marriages. Young people should be consulted and associated in efforts to address the practice. They can be powerful agents of change when provided with the capacity and support needed to organise, connect and mobilise. Young people are often more likely to challenge their situation actively, and to become change makers. Boys and girls should be able to access the information, skills and space needed to take collective action to challenge policy makers and claim their rights. As Girls Not Brides rightly put it “Change will only happen when this generation of boys and girls choose not to perpetuate the practice and choose to offer better alternatives for their children”. The role of young people in participating to and ensuring their own protection is therefore critical. However, development actors should be aware of the potential risks some of the boys and girls may face when exposed on an issue that may be sensitive in their context.

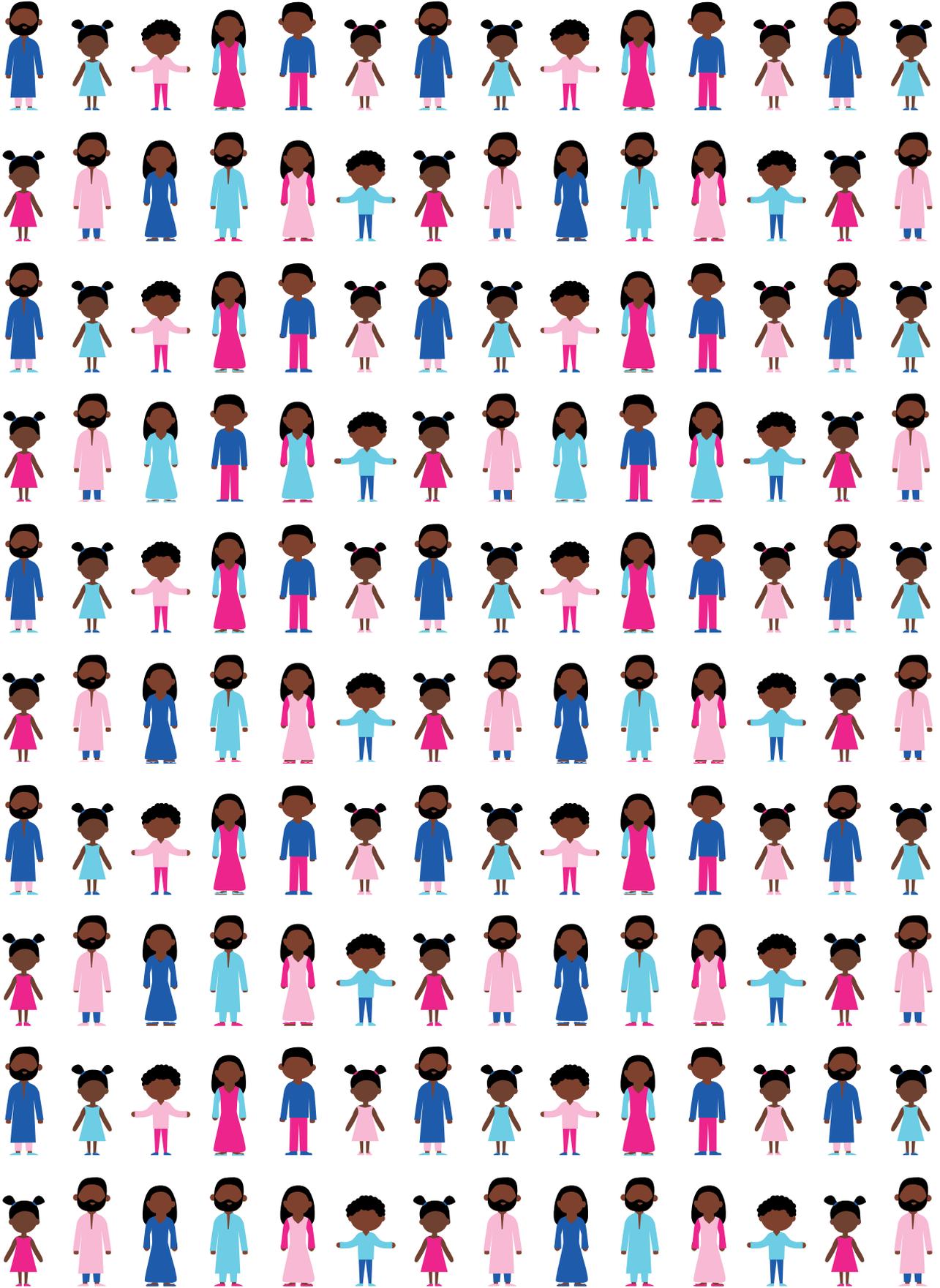
Strengthen Community Based Child Protection Mechanisms (CBCPM) to systematically prevent, report and monitor child, early and forced marriages. The study has shown how effective community child protection based mechanisms can be when the right actors are involved. The setting up of functioning child protection committees, along the lines of the Local Child Protection Committee in Bandafassi, Senegal, which includes religious and traditional leaders as well as local officials who dialogue with communities have proven to be successful. Beside, greater systematic communication and coordination between child protection actors to pool information, promote complementary Community Based Child Protection Mechanisms (CBCPM) approaches, share expertise and learn lessons on what works in different communities is key to this approach.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Support CBOs and local CSOs including women and youth groups to hold the government accountable of their commitments through the signing, ratification and implementation of regional and International human rights frameworks. While most interventions are well articulated at community or local level, the national advocacy strategies that sustain them are more opaque. The recent emergence of regional initiatives such that recently launched by the African Union is providing a great opportunity for coordinated advocacy efforts at national level. Such efforts should put civil society organizations, including women and youth groups at their core. Civil society organizations at all levels (local and national) should be provided with the technical support and resources needed to document and report violations of children rights and to advocate for a strengthened and fully resourced national child protection system which will protect girls from abuse, violence and exploitation which result from practices such as child, early and forced marriages.

Realign communication strategies with multi-sectoral programming and build on positive community-led messaging. Currently, communication and awareness raising material is geared towards increasing understanding of the negative health and education consequences of child marriage, as well as international child rights instruments and the family code. An important shift needs to take place between communication strategies that highlight the negative attitudes of girls', boys' and families and focus instead on positive and productive messages. These should elaborate sustainable and meaningful opportunities for girls to actively participate in their lives and those of their communities. The aim of this approach would be to promote social norm changes, build bridges, based on girls' real needs as identified by girls and families themselves. These strategies should be accompanied by an elaboration of multi-sectoral programming so as to ensure that the benefits that these programing generates are clearly communicated.





BECAUSE **I** am a **Girl**

