

CHILD MARRIAGE IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA



Child marriage violates girls' rights to health, education and employment. It exposes them to violence and traps them, their families, and their nations in a cycle of intergenerational poverty, thereby costing countries billions of dollars and preventing them from achieving sustainable development.¹ West and Central Africa hosts the three countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage in the world: Niger, Central African Republic and Chad. The region has the highest child

marriage rate and the fastest population growth in the world. Without immediate action, the number of child brides will continue to increase, with devastating consequences for the sub-region.^{2,3} Without concerted and accelerated efforts to end child marriage, countries in West and Central Africa will not be able to achieve the demographic dividend and eight of the Sustainable Development Goals.⁴

CHILD MARRIAGE IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA

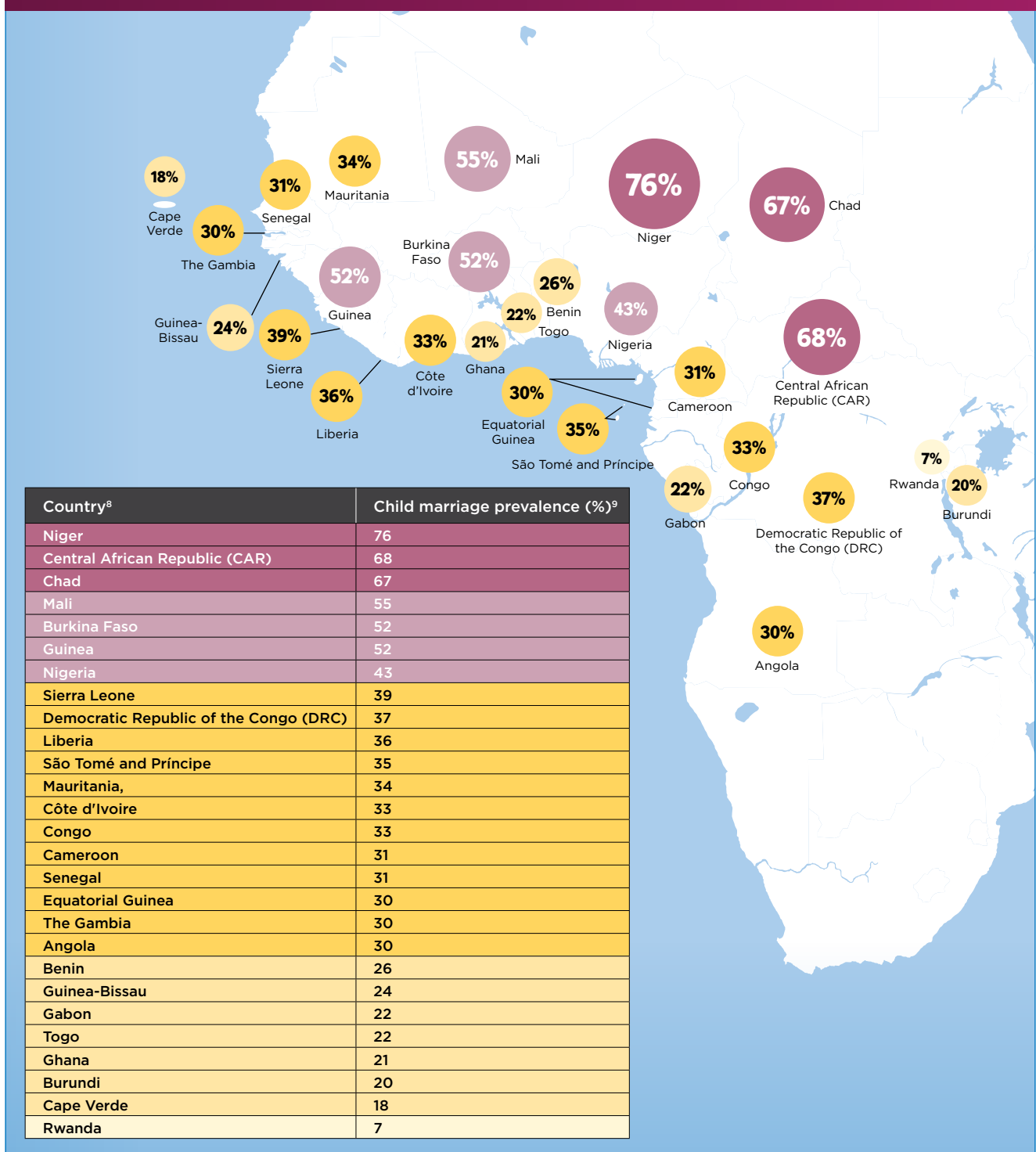
CHILD MARRIAGE: A PRESSING ISSUE ACROSS WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA

Child marriage is harmful to large numbers of girls in the region, many of whom are younger than 15 years old.

- Four in ten women aged 20-24 in West and Central Africa were married by the age of 18. Of those, one third were married by age 15.⁵

- While child marriage exists in all African countries, this issue is especially pressing in West and Central Africa, which hosts six out of the ten countries with the highest rates of child marriage in the world.⁶
- All countries in West and Central Africa face this issue, whether they have extremely high child marriage prevalence, such as Niger (76%) or lower rates like Cape Verde (18%). Rates can vary within countries too.⁷

CHILD MARRIAGE PREVALENCE IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA (ECOWAS AND ECCAS COUNTRIES)

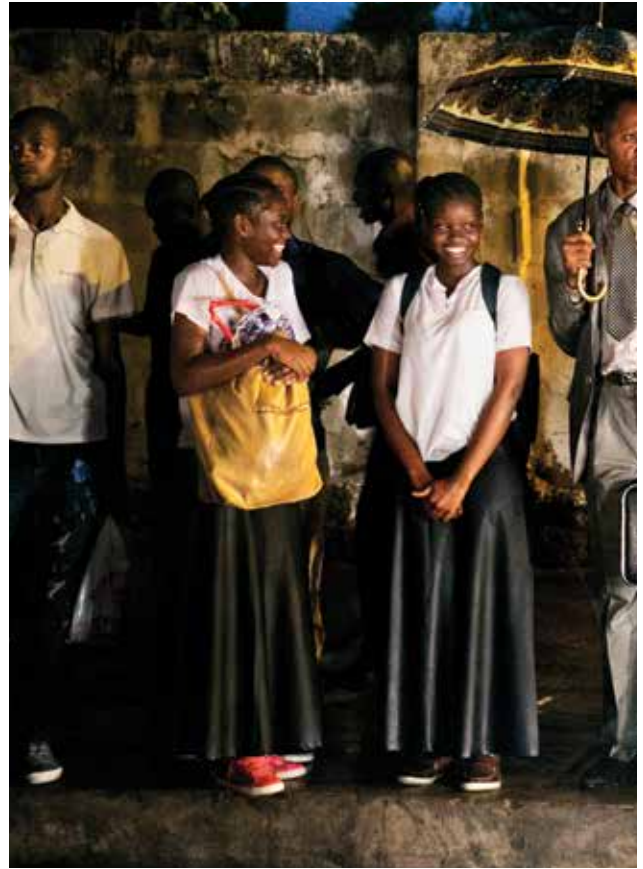




CHILD MARRIAGE: A COMPLEX PRACTICE CAUSED BY MULTIPLE FACTORS

Child marriage takes different forms and happens for different reasons across countries. Yet similarities exist across the sub-region:

- **It is rooted in gender inequality.** In West and Central Africa like in the rest of the world, women and girls are valued much less than men and boys, and often have little say in decisions that affect them and their community.¹⁰ As a result, they also lack the confidence and knowledge to access the few support services available at the local and the national level.
- **It is linked to family honour.** Child marriage is often perceived as a way to control girls' sexuality as soon as possible, thereby safeguarding their virginity and family honour, legitimising sexual relationships and births, and avoiding perceived shame of pregnancy outside marriage.¹¹
- **It is influenced by the socio-economic environment.** Girls in rural areas of West and Central Africa who have little or no education are more likely to be married before the age of 18.¹² Poverty exacerbates the practice; the poorest families often see child marriage as a way to provide for a daughter's future.¹³ A weak formal labour market, difficult access to school or low quality education often means that families have even fewer alternatives for their girls. Where opportunities are limited, girls themselves might also want to marry to gain more respect through the status of being a married woman.¹⁴
- **It is connected to religion and tradition.** Most marriages in West and Central Africa are religious and traditional and many are not registered civilly.¹⁵ This is especially important to consider when designing legal solutions to child marriage. Child marriage is not associated with one particular religion, but religious texts are often open to interpretation, and in some areas people use them to condone the practice.¹⁶ Other communities identify tradition as a stronger factor sustaining child marriage.¹⁷ In some cases child marriage has been traditionally used to settle disputes.¹⁸
- **It is linked to social norms.** Wide social networks play an important role in decisions that affect individuals. Thus the decision-making process for marrying girls off often involves several community members.¹⁹ Identifying and working with those actors is key to achieving attitude and behaviour change.
- **It is exacerbated in humanitarian contexts.** Conflict, environmental crises and forced displacement aggravate the causes of child marriage in the Sahel region. Families in these contexts may marry off their girls to cope with extreme situations and attempt to protect girls from increased violence.²⁰ In Chad, Cameroon and Nigeria, child marriage is a commonly reported form of violence among young refugee girls.²¹ Armed groups have also abducted girls who then experience various forms of violence including child marriage.²²



CHILD MARRIAGE: AN OBSTACLE TO WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA'S DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVES

With the second highest economic growth of the continent, West and Central Africa has the potential to lead on the achievement of Africa's development objectives.²³ Yet a number of issues are holding it back, and child marriage is one of them.

- **Child marriage often curtails girls' education.**

While child marriage is not always the reason for school dropout,²⁴ girls often leave school just before marriage or shortly afterwards when their marital and domestic demands increase.²⁵

- **It has dramatic health consequences for young mothers.**

Child marriage and early pregnancy are closely linked; nine out of ten births to adolescent mothers in developing countries occur within marriage or within a union.²⁶ They are major factors for high maternal and child mortality in the region. West and Central Africa has some of the highest adolescent birth rates in the world²⁷; 28% of young women in the region gave birth before 18 and 6% before 15.²⁸ Yet young mothers face a range of health risks such as obstetric fistula, and complications from early pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death for adolescent girls.^{29 30} Child brides are less likely to use contraceptives, which can lead to both shorter birth spacing and a later end to childbearing.³¹ Ensuring access to youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health education and services will help reduce risks linked to early pregnancy.³²

- **It is harmful to child brides' new-borns too.**

In low and middle income countries, babies born to mothers under age 20 have a 50% higher risk of being still born or of dying within their first few weeks than those born to older women.³³

- **It exposes girls to a greater risk of contracting HIV and sexually transmitted infections.**

Married girls usually use less contraception than their unmarried counterparts and have less power to negotiate safe-sex, especially when they marry older men.³⁴ Only four percent of married girls in West and Central Africa use modern contraception; this is the lowest rate in the world.³⁵

- **It exposes girls to various forms of violence.**

Child brides are more likely to suffer from intimate partner violence, including sexual, physical, psychological and emotional violence.³⁶ In Cameroon, Chad, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Liberia, São Tomé and Príncipe and Sierra Leone, most girls aged 15 to 19 years who experienced sexual violence said the perpetrator was an intimate partner.³⁷



- **It traps girls and their family in a cycle of intergenerational poverty**

by cutting short girls' education, pushing them into early, unplanned and repeated pregnancies, and limiting their opportunities for employment.

- **It costs billions to West and Central African countries' economies.**

By curtailing education, it reduces girls' expected earnings later in life by 9%. Through lost earnings, child marriage is costing Nigeria \$7.6 billion. A recent study on the economic costs of child marriage indicated that child marriage is costing trillions to the global economy.³⁸

- **It prevents the achievement of the demographic dividend.**

As child brides are likely to have more children, achieving the demographic dividend is more challenging in countries with high rates of child marriage.³⁹ Ending child marriage and early childbirths could reduce population growth significantly.⁴⁰ Addressing child marriage in the region will not only change the lives of millions of girls, it will provide a critical window of opportunity for harnessing Africa's demographic dividend.⁴¹



MOMENTUM TO ADDRESS CHILD MARRIAGE IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA IS GROWING

Governments and regional institutions have taken important steps towards addressing child marriage. However, only strong implementation of commitments will produce concrete change in the region.

- In most West and Central African countries, the law has yet to fully protect girls from marriage.** Almost all countries have ratified major regional and international human rights conventions, which state that marriage should not be allowed for boys and girls under 18 years old.⁴² Yet national laws still allow marriage before 18 – either because the minimum age of marriage is lower, or because there are exceptions (such as parental consent) to enforcing 18 as the minimum age of marriage. Laws can also be contradictory, like in Niger where the customary laws, sharia law, and the civil code include different provisions related to marriage, or in Nigeria where legal frameworks vary across different states.⁴³ A review of laws in five countries in the region, found that only Ghana had unequivocal legislation that set the age of marriage at 18 years for both girls and boys, with no exceptions.⁴⁴
- West and Central African governments are increasingly making commitments through regional and international institutions.** As part of the African Union, Member States made a commitment to end child marriage on the continent. The African Union's fifty-year vision for development (Agenda 2063) stresses the need to end child marriage and other harmful practices affecting women and girls.⁴⁵ The African Common Position urges States to develop comprehensive action plans to end child marriage and establish and enforce laws to set the minimum age of marriage at 18.⁴⁶ Governments in fourteen countries in West and Central Africa have also launched the African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage to raise awareness about this issue on a large scale.⁴⁷ At the sub-regional level, the new strategic framework on national child protection systems of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) identifies child marriage as a priority area for efforts by Member States in the next five years. It includes strategies to address child marriage and an indicator to measure progress on this issue, which is in line with the one used in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁴⁸ Countries also made commitments at the international level, especially to achieve the SDGs, whose target 5.3 is to end child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C).
- Targeted national initiatives are in the early stages of implementation.** Several countries have been



developing national strategies or action plans that aim to provide a holistic and coordinated response to child marriage. Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal and Togo are all at different stages of this process, however few countries have turned to implementation.

- Governments are increasingly collaborating with other key actors.** With the support of donors and the UNICEF-UNFPA Global Programme on child marriage, governments, international organisations and UN agencies in Benin, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Niger and Nigeria have organised multi-actor platforms to address child marriage through coordinated advocacy initiatives.
- Civil society has taken important steps towards a more coordinated and comprehensive response to child marriage in the sub-region.*
- Civil society organisations are joining forces.** A growing number of civil society coalitions to end child marriage have been created, and could be strategic partners for governments. At least eight civil society national coalitions exist in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali, Senegal and Togo. Civil society organisations have also joined multi-actor platforms to ensure greater collaboration on efforts to end child marriage in their countries.
 - Innovative programmes are being implemented.** A myriad of grassroots, national and regional organisations use interesting approaches to address the practice but mostly in a non-coordinated way. Examples of approaches include using action-research to support context-specific interventions to address the practice; implementing holistic community-led programmes that facilitate conversations about values and practices in a non-judgmental way; empowering married girls including in crisis settings, by providing or supporting access to health and legal advice, counselling, income-generating activities and life skills; working with

multiple actors to influence effective government educational policies.

- **Girls and young people are recognised as key actors to lead the movement.** Committed youth champions are speaking up across the continent, informing and supporting their peers who are at risk of child marriage or have already married, and holding their governments to account for their international and regional commitments to end the practice.

The international development community is supporting national efforts to strengthen and scale up programmes to end child marriage in the sub-region.

- UN agencies and development partners have scaled up their investments in child marriage. The UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage is a large scale, multi-country programme supported by Canada, EU, Netherlands and the UK. It offers a framework promoting the right of girls to delay marriage, addressing the conditions that keep the practice in place, and caring for girls already in union in response to SDG 5.3.1. It is part of global efforts to end child marriage in partnership with governments, civil society and young people. Of the twelve countries covered through the programme, four are in West and Central Africa: Burkina Faso, Ghana, Niger and Sierra Leone.⁴⁹
- **However, more support is needed from donors.** While donor governments and private foundations have been champions in the movement, more funding from diversified sources is required to support efforts by grassroots groups working directly with those affected, and scale up the prevention of child marriage and support to married girls in the region. In particular, targeted investment in education and health programmes for girls, as well as in initiatives which tackle social norm change over the long term are needed.

Recommendations: Government leadership is essential to end child marriage in West and Central Africa

- **Governments must lead a comprehensive, large-scale response to child marriage.** This means combining four key strategies: empowering girls, mobilising families and communities to change attitudes and behaviours related to child marriage, providing adequate services to girls at risk of child marriage and to married girls, and establishing and implementing consistent laws and policies that protect and promote the rights of girls. This involves developing and implementing costed national strategies and action plans, or integrating child marriage into strategies and plans for women, girls or children in related sectors, in order to match the scale of the issue.

- **An effective response to child marriage requires strong partnerships** between actors (e.g. civil society, young people, religious and traditional leaders, etc.), sectors (e.g. education, health, justice, etc.), and levels (national, district, etc.). Governments are uniquely placed to coordinate efforts to end child marriage through inclusive and functioning coordination mechanisms. These are critical to ensuring alignment between various stakeholders, to maximise impact of joint initiatives and to generate coherence and coordination between sectoral programmes and policies at all levels.
- **Action to end child marriage must be evidence-based.** Countries in West and Central Africa must invest in solutions that are proven to work. While extensive efforts are underway at the regional and sub-regional level to document and evaluate solutions to end child marriage, further research is needed to better understand how effective solutions can be tailored and taken to scale.
- **More investment from high-prevalence countries' governments is needed** to improve essential services and systems, including in the education, health, social protection and justice sectors.
- **More investment from development partners and the donor community** is needed to support and scale up existing efforts to prevent child marriage and support married girls, especially at the community level. It is critical to ensure efforts by grassroots groups working directly with those affected benefit from sustainable support.
- **Efforts to end child marriage at the country level must align with continental and global commitments.** This includes commitments in the African Union charters, protocols and initiatives that relate to child marriage, as well as global standards and frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals. Existing accountability mechanisms need to be used to monitor implementation of these commitments, incentivise progress and investment, and accelerate efforts.





END NOTES

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⁵UNICEF global database, September 2017.

⁶Ibid.

⁷ICRW and UNICEF, *Child marriage, Adolescent pregnancy and Family formation in West and Central Africa*, 2015.

⁸As this factsheet was prepared ahead of the High Level Meeting on Ending Child Marriage in West and Central Africa in October 2017, this table also includes Angola, Burundi and Rwanda to cover both ECOAWS and ECCAS member states.

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¹⁴Conversation with *Girls Not Brides* members in Cameroon, 2017.

¹⁵Conversations with *Girls Not Brides* members across 5 countries; Op.Cit. Plan international, 2017.

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¹⁷Religious affiliation was not identified as the main driver of child marriage in Mali, Niger and Senegal. Op.Cit, Plan International, 2015.

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PHOTO CREDITS

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High-Level Meeting on
**ENDING
CHILD
MARRIAGE**

This factsheet was prepared ahead of the High Level Meeting on Ending Child Marriage in West and Central Africa
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