

CHILD MARRIAGE IN FRANCOPHONE WEST AFRICA

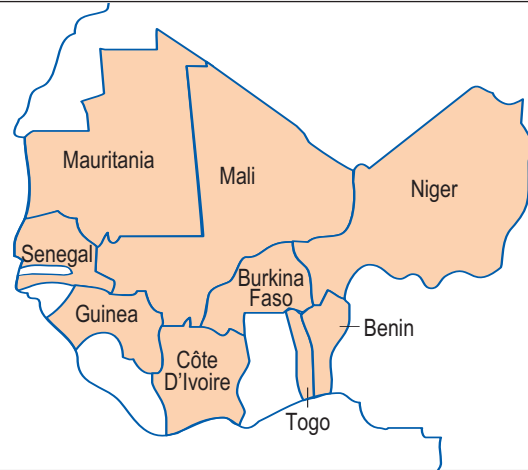
The context

For the almost 50 million poor women and girls in francophone West Africa, the prospects of a better life are bleak. Three of the nine countries in the region, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, are in the bottom five of the 177 countries in the 2007–2008 UN Human Development Index. Schooling—typically the pathway to a better life—is often cut short by early marriage, which is common across much of francophone West Africa. In Mali, 65 percent of women aged 20–24 were married by the age of 18, and 25 percent were married by the age of 15. In Niger over 70 percent are married by 18 and 36 percent are married before age 15.

Early marriage increases social isolation and launches girls on a cycle of poverty, gender inequities, and high risk of dying from pregnancy and childbirth. Child marriage is a violation of human rights. It forces children to assume responsibilities and handle situations for which they are often physically and psychologically unprepared.



Child marriage, which is common throughout francophone West Africa, receives little visibility and little funding from donors for programs to reduce the practice, despite its link to increased rates of maternal mortality, fistula, and HIV/AIDS.



With contraceptive use extremely low in many francophone West African countries, and the high pressure to bear a child soon after marrying, girls who marry early have little means of delaying their first birth. 63 percent of married Malian girls aged 15–19 have already given birth, and 1 in 10 gave birth before age 15. In an era when many developing countries have adopted family planning and are seeing the health benefits of smaller, better-spaced families, it is remarkable that fewer than 10 percent of women in francophone West Africa use any type of contraceptive method.

The consequences of early pregnancy and childbearing are dire. According to the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), girls aged 15–19 are twice as likely to die during pregnancy or childbirth as women aged 20–24. Among girls aged 10–14, the risk is five times greater. Rates of maternal mortality in francophone West Africa are among the highest observed in the world, with rates of death per 100,000 women of 1,000 in Burkina Faso, 1,200 in Mali, and 1,600 in Niger, making it unlikely that any of these countries will meet Millennium Development Goal 5 by 2015.

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Deaths among children under five years of age are equally alarming. Rates of death per 1,000 children under age 5 are 203 in Burkina Faso, 239 in Niger, and 247 in Mali. Throughout much of francophone West Africa, more than 20 percent of children will die before their 5th birthday (in developed countries child mortality is typically 4–8 child deaths per 1,000 children).

Why are we worried about francophone West Africa?

- Women and girls in francophone West Africa fare worse than their peers elsewhere on the continent on these issues.
- Africa will fail to meet the MDGs if the outcomes for millions of girls and women in francophone West Africa continue to be neglected.
- Child marriage, which is common throughout francophone West Africa, receives little visibility and little funding from donors for programs to reduce the practice, despite its link to increased rates of maternal mortality, fistula, and HIV/AIDS.



“We have been ignorant for a very long time. Instead of school, we marry our daughters and put them in hell. Please women, be wise, send your daughters to school.”

—*Abdou Bala Marafa, Emir or tribal king of Gobir*

How francophone West Africa compares to France

	France	Niger	Mali
Population in thousands	60,496	13,957	13,518
Maternal deaths per 100,000 women	17	1600	1200
Deaths among children under age 5 per 1,000 children	5	239	247

What can be done?

There is growing awareness at the global level that reducing or eliminating early marriage is a priority issue. But global policy and advocacy efforts must be complemented by community-based services to mitigate the situation of married girls and to protect unmarried girls from early marriage.

The Population Council has tested several promising interventions. These interventions have demonstrated that it is feasible to delay the first birth by making sexual and reproductive health information and contraceptives available to newly married girls. Other pilot programs have demonstrated the promise of top-down protection measures such as strengthening enforcement of laws specifying the minimum marriage age, and bottom-up empowerment measures such as increasing access to education, health, and economic opportunities for both married and unmarried girls. The existence of a supportive policy and legal framework makes it feasible to tackle these issues at multiple levels.

Join us in the support of research and programs to:

- 1) Enhance livelihood activities.
- 2) Train mentors for adolescent girls.
- 3) Support community programs to prevent child marriage.

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CHILD MARRIAGE, VISIT WWW.POPCOUNCIL.ORG/CHILDMARRIAGE