



**end
child
marriage**
A voice. A chance. A future.

UNFPA-UNICEF GLOBAL PROGRAMME TO ACCELERATE ACTION TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE IN NIGER



All girls and boys have the right to a **childhood** where they can play, rest and be protected from harm, abuse and exploitation.

But for thousands of children in Niger, childhood is cut short by marriage. UNICEF estimates that **around 3 in 4 young girls were married before the age of 18, and 1 in 4 before the age of 15.**

When a girl is married as a child her fundamental rights are violated. Ending child marriage can preserve a girl's childhood, promote her right to an education, reduce her exposure to violence and abuse, and contribute to breaking cycles of poverty that are

passed down from one generation to the next.

Delaying marriage and childbirth can also protect girls from the risks of death during childbirth, and debilitating medical conditions like obstetric fistula. Ending the practice transforms lives and enhances communities.

Putting an end to child marriage is a focus of UNICEF and UNFPA's work in Niger. Working with communities, families, governments and partners, the programme helps identify and address the social norms and economic and structural factors that contribute to the persistence of child marriage.



NIGER HAS THE HIGHEST RATE OF CHILD MARRIAGE IN THE WORLD



3 IN 4

GIRLS ARE MARRIED BEFORE THE AGE OF 18



1 IN 4

GIRLS ARE MARRIED BEFORE THE AGE OF 15



ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE COULD SAVE NIGER

US\$25 BILLION
BETWEEN 2014 AND 2030

KEY ISSUES

Niger has the highest rate of child marriage in the world. 3 in 4 girls marry before their 18th birthday. In some areas, the rates are even higher: in the region of Maradi, 89% of girls marry as children.

Given these exceptionally high rates, recent research from the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) and the World Bank suggests that **ending child marriage in Niger could save the country more than \$25 billion** between 2014 and 2030.

Poverty is a major driver of child marriage in Niger, bringing with it the hope of economic prosperity and an increase in social status for both girls and their parents.

Upholding social and religious traditions, including the fear of dishonour from pregnancy outside of marriage is also a major driver, as is instability caused by civil unrest and natural disasters.

The link between education and the prevalence of child marriage is particularly evident in Niger: 81% of women aged 20-24 with no education and 63% with only primary education were married or in union at age 18, compared to only 17% of women with secondary education or higher.

Young girls who are married are a uniquely vulnerable, though largely invisible, group. They are often required to perform heavy amounts of domestic work, are under pressure to demonstrate their fertility, and are responsible for raising children while they are still children themselves.

Married girls and child mothers have limited power to make decisions, are generally less able to earn income, and are vulnerable to multiple health risks, violence, abuse and exploitation. Due to the difference in age and maturity with their typically adult partners, child brides are not in a position to effectively discuss contraceptive use; therefore,

they face a greater risk of sexually transmitted infections and unwanted and frequent pregnancies.

Early pregnancies put young mothers' lives at risk and threaten the survival and health of their babies. Complications from pregnancy and childbirth are one the leading cause of death among adolescent girls. Infants of adolescent mothers are also more likely to have low birth weight, which can have a long-term impact on the child's health and development.

Pregnancy also undermines the adolescent girl's development because it stops her growth and negatively affects her nutritional status. Child marriage persists because of multiple factors including poverty, low levels of education and social norms to which families feel pressured to conform.



Girls are sensitized to prevent child marriage in the village of Tamrora in Maradi region, central Niger.



INTERNATIONAL INSTRUMENTS, RESOLUTIONS AND COMMITMENTS

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) recognizes the right to "free and full" consent to marry, and states that a person must be suitably mature to make an informed decision.

Several other legal instruments recognize marriage of a girl or boy before the age of 18 as a violation of the child's human rights, including the right to education, to express their views freely, to protection from all forms of abuse, and to be protected from harmful traditional practices.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which guides UNICEF's work, protects children from harmful and traditional practices like child marriage. General Comment No. 4 (2003) of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on

adolescent health and development further urges countries to set the minimum age for marriage for both men and women (with or without parental consent) at 18 years.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979) and General Recommendation No. 21 (1994) of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) prohibits child marriage. It sets 18 as the minimum age for marriage for both men and women.

To date, 55 countries are parties to the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage, and Registration of Marriages (1964).

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?



Getting girls into school, and keeping them there

Overall, women with little education are more likely to be married as children than women who have been educated. Education is one of the most powerful tools to delay the age at which girls marry. Simply being in school helps a girl to be seen as a child, and not ready to be married. Also, schools can be seen as 'safe spaces' for girls. Thus, as it becomes a socially acceptable alternative, school attendance helps to shift norms about early marriage.



Helping girls develop skills and support networks

Equipping young girls to better know themselves, their world and their options can diminish their social and economic isolation. Life skills education teaches girls to be more assertive and self-confident, and therefore more able to act and advocate for themselves in the short and long term. When girls have more self-esteem and are seen as having value in society, they are more likely to aspire to jobs and enterprises as alternatives to marriage. They will also be viewed differently by parents and community members, making it unacceptable to marry them at young ages.



Raising awareness with parents and community members

Ending child marriage will require support for communities to be able to collectively explore the option of delaying the age of marriage. Such discussions must respect the desire of families to uphold tradition while exposing the harm associated with the practice and reinforcing human rights principles. A greater voice should be given to girls themselves, while at the same time supporting the strong engagement of men and boys. Families must be convinced that enough other people in the community will support – or at least tolerate – a move to delay marriage.



Offering economic support for girls and their families

Immediate economic opportunities provide an acceptable alternative to marriage and increase the value and contribution of the daughter to her parental family. This reduces both the economic and social pressure to marry a daughter early.



Supporting laws and policies to end child marriage

Government commitment to enacting legislation is crucial. National measures and strategies can be used to diminish support for the practice and, as social acceptance begins to wane, to provide legitimacy to those who are moving to end the practice.

Roumanatou, Pioneer of Girls' Rights in Matameye, Niger



"I just knew I couldn't leave my studies," says Roumanatou. "It was a devastating time for me."

At 16 years old, Roumanatou was promised in marriage to a much older man. He worked in Niamey as a driver for one of the Ministries.

"He paid a dowry of 50,000 CFA (\$US 90) to my parents, with the promise that he would come for me soon."

Until that moment, Roumanatou was an excellent student, one of the highest in her classroom. But upon realising she was to be married, her grades started to drop and she got depressed thinking that she would soon have to leave school and her classmates.

Early marriage for girls in Niger can happen as young as 13-15 years old, and is nearly as high as 90% in regions of the country like Maradi (89%) and Zinder (87%).

"My father saw me as an expensive problem. Something else to pay for. And so when I started to refuse to get married, to say I wanted to continue studying, he didn't support me at all, but rather fought with me about it."

"I went to my family, and only one of my brothers supported me. I then went to the local Military Police and explained the situation. They told me it went beyond them, and that I had to take it to the courts. So I did. And I won."

WHAT ARE WE DOING?

The Niger UNFPA-UNICEF programme works across sectors to support strategies that address child marriage. We support the development of laws and policies, and work to strengthen systems which make enforcing child marriage prohibition laws more feasible. We also work with communities and adolescent girls to address the social norms that allow child marriage to perpetuate.

SUPPORTING NATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The Niger Government, as a result of the Global Programme's advocacy and engagement efforts, has developed a multisector national action plan to end child marriage and adopted a decree for the protection of the girl-child in school to guarantee access and retention until age 16. The programme also provided support towards the finalization and dissemination of the National Strategic Plan on Adolescent and Youth Health 2017–2021, and the National Gender Policy and Action Plan. The programme supported the establishment of a multistakeholder collaboration platform, 'Towards the End of Child Marriage in Niger', which convenes every month. The platform is used to compile information about ongoing actions, harmonize key messages and rally stakeholders to advocate for better legislation in favour of the rights of adolescents

PARTNERING WITH RELIGIOUS AND TRADITIONAL LEADERS

The programme partnered with the Niger Traditional Leaders Association and the Islamic Congregation - called Faouzia to help promote positive change in the communities. Traditional and religious leaders regularly carried out community dialogues and organize village-wide assemblies using their leadership roles to tackle this harmful practice.

WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES

The programme continued to reinforce community-based child protection mechanisms that are effective in addressing social norms. The programme supported the Government in expanding the network of Village Child Protection Committees to promote positive practices in communities targeted by the programme. Education sessions by the Village Child Protection Committees were able to prevent cases of child marriage through direct mediation with parents and assisted girls to return to school. Through community dialogue and engagement, villages made public declarations for the abandonment of the child marriage practice.

EMPOWERING ADOLESCENT GIRLS

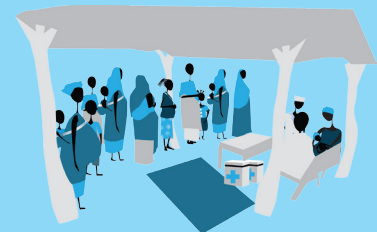
The Illimin initiative is structured around two main lines of intervention: adolescent empowerment and social change at the community and national level. It provides girls with comprehensive knowledge related to reproductive health personal hygiene; gender-based violence; financial skills; gender issues and girls' personal aspirations. The initiative also aims to strengthen girls' social competencies to help them express themselves, make their own decisions and fully participate within their community. The programme provided support to hundreds of Local School Action Plans aimed at supporting girls' education.



FACTS AT A GLANCE
FROM 2016 TO 2018

480,000+

PEOPLE REACHED BY EDUCATIONAL
SESSIONS ON CHILD MARRIAGE



900,000+

BENEFITED FROM VILLAGE-WIDE
DIALOGUES ON CHILD MARRIAGE



117,000+

ADOLESCENTS HAVE ENHANCED THEIR
KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

3,000+

YOUNG GIRLS SAVED FROM
WEDLOCK THROUGH MEDIATION WITH
PARENTS