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’s work in Niger. Working with communities, families, governments and partners, UNICEF helps identify and address the social norms and economic and structural factors that contribute to the persistence of child marriage.
UNICEF NIGER ISSUE BRIEF

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.

“I was given in marriage when I turned 14. At that time I was healthy. I became pregnant one year after the marriage. I was in labour for two days and was transferred to a regional hospital where I had a caesarean. That’s when I suffered a fistula. This left me with chronic incontinence and pain. I lost my baby hours after he was born” - Habiba (Maradi, Niger)

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.

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.


To date, 55 countries are parties to the Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage, and Registration of Marriages (1964).
Empowering girls and women and ensuring girls and boys are healthy is at the core of UNICEF’s mission. Because UNICEF works across multiple sectors, and because it works both with high-level decision makers as well as with grassroots community organizations, it is uniquely positioned to identify and address some of the systemic and underlying factors that pose a challenge to reproductive health, rights and gender equality.

UNICEF is committed to efforts to end child marriage and is able to use its leadership position and its broad field-based programming in various sectors to bring about change on this issue. In 2017, UNICEF took a leading role in organizing a roundtable on girls’ education in 2017, resulting in a list of 10 Commitments signed consensually by the Government, Cooperating Partners, Civil Society and traditional, religious and community leaders, a first for Niger. This led to the adoption by the government of a decree in December 2017 for the protection of the girl-child in school to guarantee access and retention until age 16.

The government also demonstrated its engagement to tackle child marriage through a pledge to end this harmful practice and develop an action plan, made by the President of Niger during the high-level meeting of the African Union campaign. This event raised awareness of the issue and helped refocus attention on this harmful practice.

Addressing child marriage requires recognition of the various factors that contribute to the perpetuation of the practice. These include economic factors (e.g., the need to support many children, paying a lower dowry), structural factors (e.g., lack of educational opportunities), and social factors (e.g., sense of tradition and social obligation, risk of pregnancy out of wedlock, avoiding criticism whereby older unmarried girls may be considered impure).

What are the benefits of action?
Ending child marriage can contribute to the achievement of nearly all of the Sustainable Development Goals and targets to reduce poverty. It can positively impact indicators for child survival, protection, maternal health, education, food security, poverty eradication, HIV/AIDS and gender equality. The human rights of girls are more likely to be fulfilled when they have education, life skills, access to economic assets and decision-making powers. In addition, they will grow up to be better mothers and have healthier children, helping to end the cycle of poverty and reduce hunger. Girls who are educated are also better able to contribute to the growth and development of their country.

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.
UNICEF Niger Issue Brief

WHAT UNICEF IS DOING?

UNICEF works across sectors to support strategies that address child marriage. For example, UNICEF supports the development of laws and policies, and works to strengthen systems which make enforcing child marriage prohibition laws more feasible. The organization also works with communities to address the social norms that allow child marriage to perpetuate.

SUPPORTING NATIONAL LEADERSHIP

UNICEF works with government and civil society to design policies that help keep girls in school and encourage girls’ attendance. UNICEF took a leading role in organizing a roundtable on girls’ education in 2017, resulting in a list of 10 Commitments signed consensually by the Government, Cooperating Partners, Civil Society and traditional, religious and community leaders, a first for Niger. This led to the adoption by the government of a decree in December 2017 for the protection of the girl-child in school to guarantee access and retention until age 16.

A NATIONAL ACTION PLAN TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

The Niger’s action plan on child marriage has focused on girls’ empowerment, societal behaviour change – in particular at the community level – and, to a certain extent, to increased government commitment to address the issue. UNICEF and UNFPA have worked with the Minister of Women’s Promotion and Child Protection to implement the National Plan of Action to End Child Marriage in the Niger.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

To change address social norms and practices that violate children’s rights, UNICEF Niger is supporting the establishment of Village Child Protection Committees. The committees are the cornerstone of the child protection system at local level. Village Child Protection Committees reach out communities through educational sessions and community dialogues on child marriage, child health, education, protection and children’s rights. Through those sessions, communities in target villages are invited to make public engagement and declarations to end harmful practices against women and children, which includes child marriage.

MASS COMMUNICATION

UNICEF and its partners are engaged in a mass communication campaign to end Child Marriage in Niger, through series of partnerships with local media and campaigns. This experience shows that once communities have access to information on the detrimental consequences of child marriage, as well as are given an opportunity to participate in inter-generational and inter-gender open discussions on the issue, they are ready to change social norm-based practices.

FACTS AT A GLANCE

IN 2017

- 22,000+ people reached by educational sessions on child marriage
- 63,000+ benefited from village-wide dialogues on child marriage
- 440+ villages made public declarations to end child marriage
- 229 young girls saved from wedlock through mediation with parents

For more information

Félicité Tchibindat
Representative
+227 80 06 60 00
ftchibindat@unicef.org
UNICEF Niger