

# Child Marriage in West and Central Africa

*At a Glance*



## Acknowledgments

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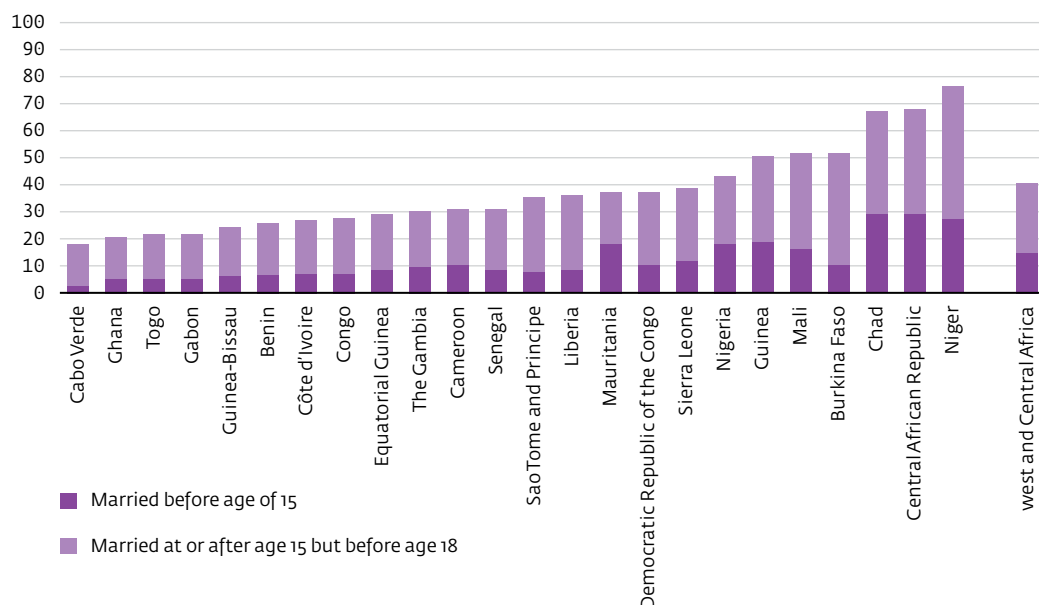
**Child marriage in West and Central Africa is one of the biggest challenges in the region and has enormous adverse effects on education, health, including sexual and reproductive health, and on the overall development of adolescents and youth. This brochure provides recent data and analysis of child marriage in the region. This brochure has been developed following the successful High Level Meeting on Child Marriage in West and Central Africa held in Senegal in October 2017. This was the first-ever High Level Event on Child Marriage in the region. It is also been developed to support the African Union (AU) work on ending child marriage on the continent. It has been produced within the framework of the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage as a resource for stakeholders working on, or researching, the issue of child marriage in West and Central Africa.**

# Scale of child marriage

The prevalence of child marriage in West and Central Africa is 41 percent<sup>1</sup>, meaning that four out of ten girls and young women - nearly 60 million - were married before the age of 18. However, this masks huge variations between and within countries. The region is home to six of the ten countries with the highest child marriage prevalence levels in the world, all six of which have a prevalence over 50 percent. Niger has the highest prevalence of child marriage in the world at 76 percent, followed by Central African Republic with 68 percent and Chad at 67 percent. The prevalence of child marriage below the age of 15 years is also very high at 14 percent for the region, with Chad, Central African Republic and Niger all having prevalence rates over 25 percent. As the most populous country in the region, Nigeria has the highest number of child brides. An estimated 22 million child brides live in Nigeria, which accounts for 40 percent of all child brides in the region. Niger, which has the highest prevalence in the world, has 4.1 million child brides.

## Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were married or in union by age 15 and by age 18, West and Central Africa<sup>2</sup>

Source: Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multi-Indicator Country Surveys (MICS), 2005-2017. Generated by UNICEF Data and Analytics Section, January 2018



<sup>1</sup> Covers 24 countries in WCA (full list of countries to be provided): <https://www.unicef.org/wca/where-we-work> UNFPA WCARO covers 23 of these countries (with the exception of DRC) while UNICEF WCARO covers 24 countries.  
<sup>2</sup> UNICEF is the custodian agency for SDG 5.3.1.

## Number of girls and women married in childhood in West and Central Africa

Source: Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multi-Indicator Country Surveys (MICS), 2005-2017.  
Generated by UNICEF Data and Analytics Section, January 2018

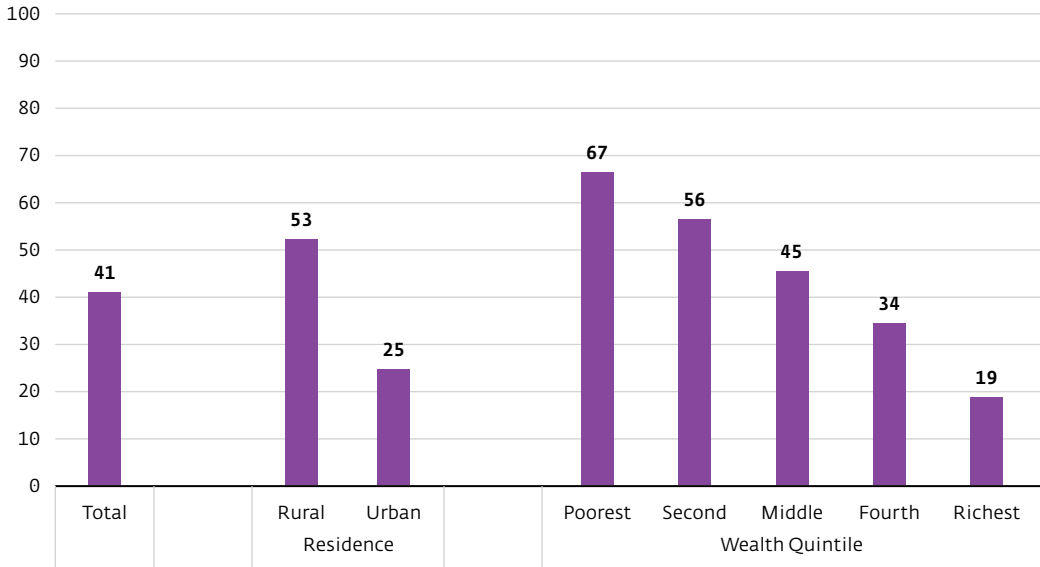
<b>Nigeria</b>	22 million	<b>Benin</b>	900,000
<b>Democratic Republic of the Congo</b>	8.9 million	<b>Central African Republic</b>	800,000
<b>Niger</b>	4.1 million	<b>Togo</b>	600,000
<b>Mali</b>	2.8 million	<b>Liberia</b>	500,000
<b>Burkina Faso</b>	2.6 million	<b>Mauritania</b>	500,000
<b>Chad</b>	2.6 million	<b>Congo</b>	400,000
<b>Cameroon</b>	2.4 million	<b>Gambia</b>	200,000
<b>Ghana</b>	2.3 million	<b>Guinea-Bissau</b>	200,000
<b>Côte d'Ivoire</b>	2.1 million	<b>Gabon</b>	200,000
<b>Guinea</b>	1.9 million	<b>Equatorial Guinea</b>	100,000
<b>Senegal</b>	1.6 million	<b>Cabo Verde</b>	30,000
<b>Sierra Leone</b>	1.0 million	<b>Sao Tome and Principe</b>	20,000
		<b>West and Central Africa</b>	59 million

## Disparities in levels of child marriage

Research and data show that poverty and living in a rural area are more strongly associated with child marriage globally. This holds true in West and Central Africa, where child marriage is more than twice as common in rural areas as compared to urban areas. Child marriage is over three times more common among those the poorest wealth quintile compared to the richest wealth quintile. There are disparities between the poorest and the richest in all countries in the West and Central Africa region, with particularly marked disparities in Nigeria, where over 80 percent of young women in the poorest quintile were married in childhood compared to 10 percent of those in the richest quintile.

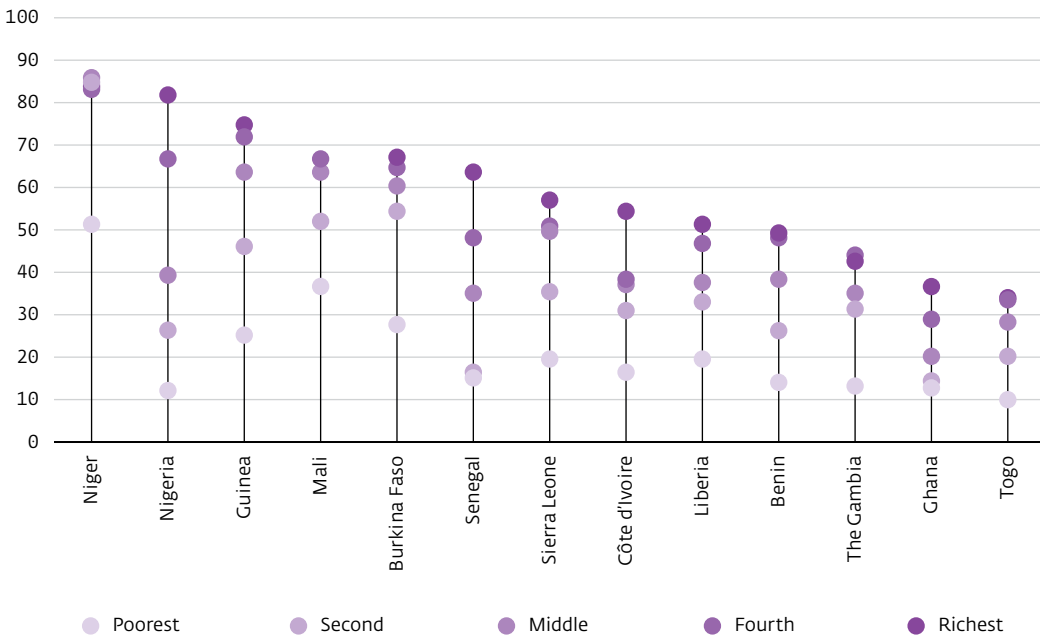
### Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, by residence and by wealth, West and Central Africa

Source: Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multi-Indicator Country Surveys (MICS), 2005-2017.  
Generated by UNICEF Data and Analytics Section, January 2018



### Percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 18, by wealth quintile, West and Central Africa

Source: Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multi-Indicator Country Surveys (MICS), 2005-2017.  
Generated by UNICEF Data and Analytics Section, January 2018

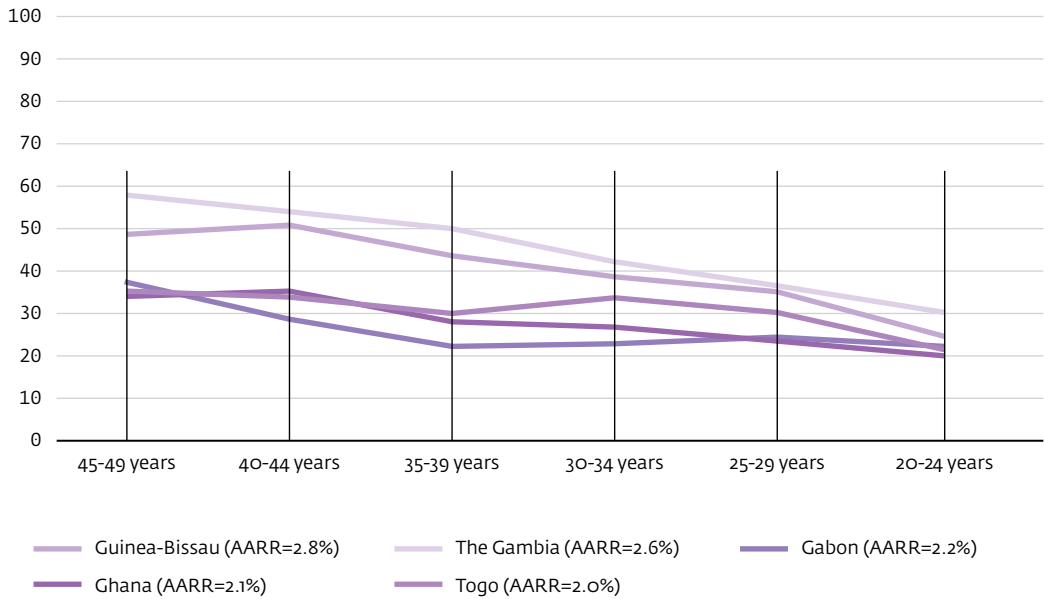


# Trends and projections

Overall, there has been a slow but steady decline in child marriage prevalence in the region since around 1990. However, there is enormous variation in the decrease in prevalence across and within countries. Countries such as Guinea-Bissau, The Gambia, Gabon, Ghana and Togo have seen the greatest declines in child marriage in the region, while countries such as Chad, Central African Republic, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde and Sao Tome and Principe have seen some of the slowest declines (in order of levels of declines). Of particular concern are Chad, Central African Republic and Burkina Faso which have some of the highest prevalence of child marriage in the region coupled with slow declines. Despite the gradual decrease in prevalence in the region, however, the number of child brides is projected to grow given the growing population in the region. Projections show that if current prevalence persist, there is projected to be 20.8 million child brides by 2050. If the declines in prevalence continue, then there will be 17.5 million child brides by 2050. Even if decline rates are doubled, the region will still have 14.8 million child brides by 2050.

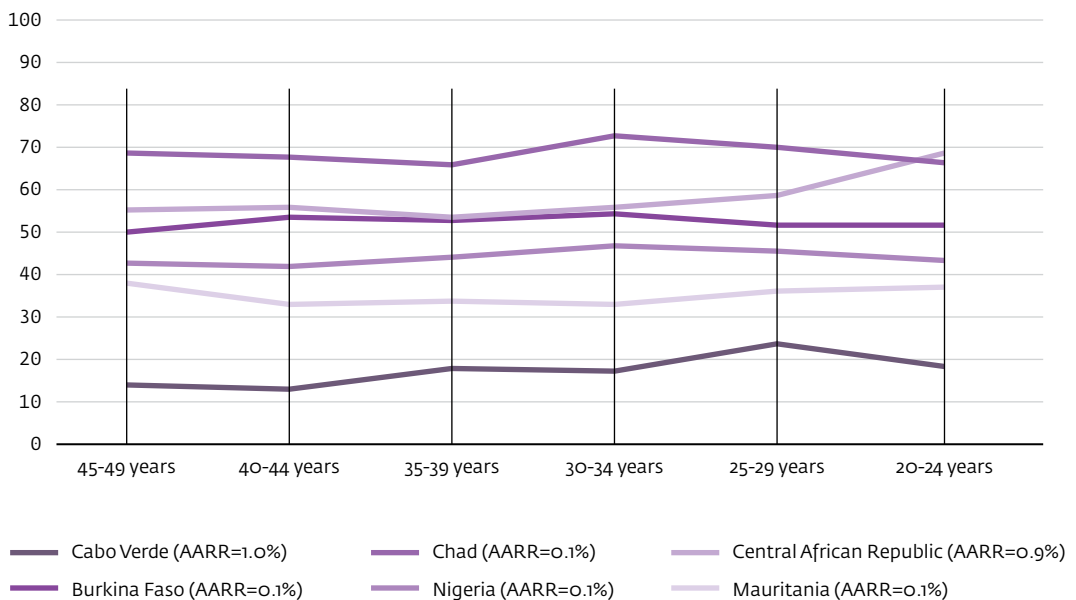
### Percentage of women aged 20 to 49 years who were married or in union by age 18, by age cohort, West and Central African countries with the greatest decline

Source: Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multi-Indicator Country Surveys (MICS), 2005-2017.  
Generated by UNICEF Data and Analytics Section, January 2018



### Percentage of women aged 20 to 49 years who were married or in union by age 18, by age cohort, West and Central African countries with the least decline

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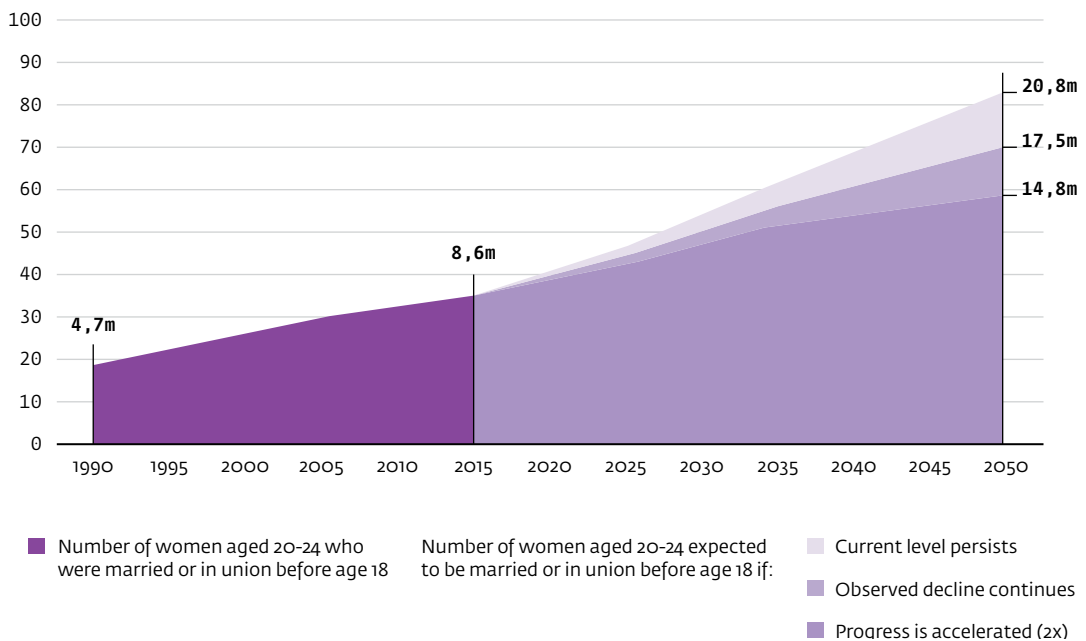




Thus, in order to decrease the number of child brides, the region will need to more than double the current levels of progress. The data on child marriage in West and Central Africa clearly shows the scale of child marriage in the region and the populations most affected, while also emphasizing the differences between countries. Trend analysis and projections highlight the urgency and importance of rapidly scaling up investments in high-impact interventions to end child marriage in the region, especially when taking into account the growing population and subsequently the potential for a growing number of child brides in the region.

### Prevalence and burden of child marriage, observed and projected, West and Central Africa

Source: Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and Multi-Indicator Country Surveys (MICS), 2005-2017. Generated by UNICEF Data and Analytics Section, January 2018



## **POLICY AND ACTION TOWARDS ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE**

**The analysis of the data, trends and projections clearly demonstrate the importance of addressing child marriage through large-scale, integrated, multi-sectoral and evidence-based responses. In particular, key actions that are needed at regional and national levels are:**

### **Ensure child marriage is a national, regional and continental priority**

Governments should put in place an enabling legal and policy environment to combat child marriage. As part of these efforts they should invest in the development and implementation of national strategies, costed action plans and legislation to address child marriage. Continental and regional bodies such as the African Union, ECOWAS and ECCAS should strengthen their efforts at regional and continental levels to end child marriage in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the AU Agenda 2063. Existing global, regional and national level accountability mechanisms need to be used by countries to monitor progress and accelerate efforts to end child marriage. These actions are also included in the Dakar Outcome Document from the first-ever High Level Meeting on Child Marriage that was held in Dakar in October 2017.

### **Invest in improving the education and health of young people, particularly young girls**

Education is a powerful way to prevent child marriage as girls' education, particularly at the secondary level, is strongly associated with delays in age of marriage and this was further reinforced during the Summit on Education that was held in Dakar in February 2018. Education represents a positive alternative to child marriage. Research also shows that addressing sexual and reproductive health needs of all young people, including through comprehensive sexuality education and sexual and reproductive health services, can lead to significant

reductions in unintended pregnancies. This underscores the importance of investing in quality education – particularly secondary education – for girls, as well as ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health information and services for young people in order to reduce child marriage and unintended pregnancies.

## **Scale up evidence-based models that work**

The AU Common Position on Ending Child Marriage creates a framework for implementation across the continent and sets requirements for appropriate systems to prevent child marriage. The UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage contributes to this effort, and targets adolescent girls at risk of child marriage or already in union in 12 selected countries, including four in West and Central Africa. The Global Programme, in partnership with governments and civil society, is turning commitments into tangible actions to transform the lives of girls by using five proven strategies to end child marriage: building the skills and knowledge of girls at risk of child marriage; supporting households in demonstrating positive attitudes towards adolescent girls; strengthening the systems that deliver services (education, health, protection, justice) to adolescent girls; ensuring laws and policies protect and promote adolescent girls' rights; and generating and using robust data to inform programmes and policies relating to adolescent girls.

## **Addressing population dynamics**

Projection data and analysis clearly shows that the fast-growing population in the region will lead to a larger number of child brides, off-setting any positive potential gains made through declines in child marriage prevalence. This calls for action to address the population dynamics and demographics in the region and integrate this in sectoral plans and programmes that aim to address child marriage and high levels of adolescent pregnancy. Similarly, action plans and policies to achieve economic growth and demographic dividend must take into account the impact of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy.

**“The continent cannot meet its ambitious goals under Agenda 2063 while it limits a dynamic segment of its society, which women represent, from realizing its full potential. Investing in women and girls and their integration into the labor market, alongside delayed marriage and child bearing, and expanded access to education for girls, family planning, and sexual and reproductive health rights, have been attributed as the driving forces behind the economic successes of the Asian tigers.”**

AU Agenda 2063 Framework Document: The Africa We Want



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