



**GIRLS NOT BRIDES**

The Global Partnership  
to End Child Marriage



# KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

**YOUTH-LED RESEARCH TO ADDRESS POWER DYNAMICS IN  
KNOWLEDGE AND ADVOCACY PROCESSES TO END CHILD  
MARRIAGE AND PROMOTE GIRLS' EDUCATION IN WEST AFRICA**

**Findings from Burkina Faso and Niger**

**July 2024**

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## ACRONYMS

AJEP: Association des Jeunes Engagés pour une Action Patriotique

CCNEJ: Cadre Consultatif Nigérien pour les Enfants et les Jeunes

CES: Collège d'Enseignement Secondaire or Junior Secondary School

COGES: Comité de Gestion des Établissements Scolaires – School Management Committee

ECM: Ending Child Marriage

ECRIS: Enquête Collective Rapide d'Identification des Conflits et des Groupes Stratégiques – Rapid Collective Survey for the Identification of Conflicts and Strategic Groups

GBV: Gender-based violence

IDP: Internally displaced person

LASDEL: Laboratoire d'Étude et Recherches sur les Dynamiques Sociales et le Développement Local – Research Laboratory on Social Dynamics and Local Development

MENAPL: Ministère de l'Éducation, l'Alphabétisation et la Promotion des Langues Nationales – Ministry of Education, Literacy and Promotion of National Languages

NSAG: Non-State Armed Groups

OCHA: United Nations Officer for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

ONG Kalubalen Illimanta: Défi et Éducation

SAT: Site d'Accueil Temporaire – Temporary Reception Site

SCOFI: Scolarisation de la Fille – Decree 935 on the Protection, Retention and Support for young girls during schooling

SongES:

SRHR: Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

ST-ESU: *Secrétariat Technique de l'Éducation en Situation d'Urgence* – Technical Secretariat for Education in Emergency Situations

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## INTRODUCTION

### Context

In West and Central Africa, 39% of girls are married or in a union before age 18. The region is home to seven of the 10 countries with the highest child marriage<sup>a</sup> prevalence in the world. Niger has the highest child marriage prevalence in the world, at 76%, closely followed by Central African Republic (68%), Chad (67%), Mali (54%), and Burkina Faso (52%).<sup>1</sup> At the current rate of progress, it will take another 200 years to end child marriage in West and Central Africa.<sup>2</sup>

*Girls Not Brides* is implementing a project funded by Education Out Loud (EOL), which seeks to address the linked issues of child marriage and girls' lack of access to quality education. It focuses on countries in French-speaking West Africa – especially Burkina Faso and Niger – which have some of the highest prevalence of child marriage and out-of-school girls in the world.

The project's overall objective is to motivate civil society organisations and others working on education and child marriage in West Africa and internationally to share learning and strengthen collective advocacy for the implementation of laws, policies and programmes that improve girls' access to quality education and retention in school, and contribute to ending child marriage. The specific project objectives are:

1. Improved coordination, advocacy and policy dialogue between national end child marriage coalitions, education coalitions and development partners in Burkina Faso and Niger.
2. End child marriage and education coalitions link effectively and foster alliances across West Africa to ensure peer-to-peer learning, information sharing and enhanced advocacy capacity.
3. National and regional learning on effective programmatic and advocacy approaches to girls' education and ending child marriage contributes to a global learning agenda

### Research objectives

*Girls Not Brides* believes young activists are critical agents and sources of knowledge and solutions in the process to end child marriage and guarantee access to quality education for girls. The EOL project therefore includes a youth-led research component, intended to position young advocates as key stakeholders in the generation, analysis and dissemination of data and evidence, and in providing decision-makers with evidence-based and actionable recommendations to end child marriage and promote girls' education. The overall objective of the youth-led research is to address power dynamics in research and advocacy processes through:

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<sup>a</sup> The term "child marriage" refers to all forms – formal and informal – of child, early and forced marriage or unions where at least one party is under age 18.

- Better reflecting concerns and priorities relevant to the age group most affected by challenges around girls' education and child marriage.
- Ensuring young advocates have sophisticated tools – like qualitative research and evidence-based decision-making skills – to conduct confident advocacy.
- Creating a culture of evidence-based advocacy among young advocates to promote accountability and credibility.
- Rethinking who has the power to produce and disseminate knowledge.

The results of this research project are intended to support work to end child marriage and promote quality education for girls in West Africa. Key stakeholders include local decision-makers, sector ministries and other relevant government representatives, young activists, civil society organisations, international organisations, the media and academic communities.

### Conceptual framework of youth-led research

#### **Knowledge is power: Youth-led research to revisit power dynamics in knowledge and advocacy processes**

There is growing concern in the child marriage and education sectors – and beyond – with the unequal power dynamics and Eurocentrism in research, knowledge production and advocacy practices around these issues.<sup>3</sup> *Girls Not Brides* recognise the importance of fostering high-level youth participation, supporting local ownership of solutions, leveraging innovative approaches and bridging evidence gaps as ways to address power imbalances and contribute to a stronger, diversified knowledge base.

Through this youth-led research project, *Girls Not Brides* aims to strengthen systems to resist the marginalisation of young West Africans – and particularly young women, in all their diversity – from public spheres at the local, national and international levels. In this, they aim to enhance the capacities of under-represented groups, and contribute to an environment in which they can voice their concerns and be seen and heard in decision-making processes, so consolidating their position as change agents in the region. The project also addresses the lack of recognition and circulation of knowledge coming from the Global South,<sup>4</sup> promoting South-South links and intergenerational knowledge sharing.

#### **A decolonial and feminist conceptual framework**

The youth-led research concept is based on co-creation, particularly through collective and individual reflection and discussion in each project, opening space for young researchers to own the process. It uses various conceptual tools from feminist theory, activist research,<sup>b</sup> youth-led research, and critical research domains like critical discourse analysis. This youth-led research also builds on place-based practices to adapt to local specificities.

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<sup>b</sup> « Activist research is premised on a politics of solidarity. An activist research ethic demands that we not only defy the academic canon by not maintaining distance, but actually go a great deal further, to actively relate to and engage with our 'research subjects' and explore ways of joining them and supporting their struggles. » (Mama:2011)

To navigate the variety of stakeholders involved in research and advocacy processes, the young researchers capitalised on their local anchorage, knowledge of cultural intricacies and modes of speech influenced by gender, age, ethnicity, class and other markers of identity. Young female researchers felt they were in a privileged position to access more authentic accounts of girls' experiences as girls could identify with them more easily.

As part of its decolonial and feminist approach, the research project encouraged young researchers to reflect on their own position, subjectivity, privilege, accountability and the power dynamics and oppressive structures – like colonialism and patriarchy – surrounding them.<sup>5</sup> In recognising how these factors influence their professional practices, the young researchers could relate with research participants in a more informed and mindful way.

The research process made space for less conventional methodologies, co-creation and creativity. By building on qualitative data collection tools like storytelling and life stories, it sought to counter practices that suppress girls' and young women's voices. That said, rigorous and objective processes were used to collect and package research findings, with regular systematic review of the research design, data collection and report writing by senior researchers from [Laboratoire d'Étude et Recherches sur les Dynamiques Sociales et le Développement Local](#) (Laboratory of Study and Research on Social Dynamics and Local Development, LASDEL). The credibility of findings was a central concern, and elements that fell short of the expected quality and ethical standards were discarded. As part of the project's transformative agenda, the research findings are intended to inform advocacy processes and policymaking to address child marriage and girls' education.

This project also aims to challenge conventional notions around what knowledge is considered valid. It includes capacity enhancement and financial and technical support for young researchers and advocates to confidently generate and share knowledge themselves.<sup>6</sup>

The body of evidence around child marriage prevalence, trends, determinants and correlates has expanded significantly over the last five years.<sup>7</sup> However, gaps in the evidence around the correlation between child marriage and girls' education in French-speaking West Africa – particularly in the context of multiple and intersecting crises, or a “polycrisis” – have limited civil society advocacy around child marriage.

The youth-led research project aims to fill gaps in the research and programme agenda by exploring emerging areas of interest like girls' agency and decision-making processes. The project prioritises the generation and sharing of contextual knowledge, offering new ways of thinking about child marriage and a more subtle understanding of key stakeholders' perspectives, depending on their lived experiences<sup>8</sup>.

## METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

The LASDEL was selected as a training and supervision institute based on its technical expertise in qualitative research and experience in building evidence around child marriage, girls' education and women's empowerment in West Africa. LASDEL also has extensive experience in training and supervising young researchers. They participated – in collaboration with the [Plateforme pour mettre fin au mariage des enfants au Niger](#) (Nigerien Platform to End Child Marriage, Niger Platform) and the [Coalition nationale contre le mariage des enfants au Burkina Faso](#) (the National Coalition to End Child Marriage in Burkina Faso, CONAMEB) – in the selection of nine young researchers: seven from Niger and

two from Burkina Faso. All the young researchers were between 18 and 25 years old, and six were women. As detailed in the table below, all the young researchers work or study in fields where they have witnessed the impact of child marriage and/or girls' education.

**Table 1: Summary of young researchers and selected case studies**

Name and profile of young researchers	Country	Community	Research theme
Falmata Hamed Mallam Abba Falmata – Sociologist	Niger	Fandou Maiyaki	Menstrual hygiene management in schools: The case of Fandou Maiyaki General Education College
Flora Kone – Partnership Officer at Action Agains Hunger Burkina Faso and volunteer at JAPAME	Burkina Faso	Pazani	The impact of the security crisis on the education of Pazani girls: The case of internally displaced girls
Idrissa Salissou Harouna – Teacher and volunteer at Kalubalen Ilimanta	Niger	Maradi	School violence: A challenge to keeping girls in school (case of CEG 9/Maradi)
Mahaman Nouradine Saley Ibrahim – Teacher and volunteer at Kalubalen Ilimanta	Niger	Dan Issa	Parents' responsibilities in keeping girls in school in the rural commune of Dan Issa
Mamadou Ousseini Teoma – Volunteer at the Association des Jeunes Engagés pour une Action Patriotique (AJEP) and PhD candidate	Niger	Torodi	Forced displacement and the experience of out-of-school girls in Torodi
Natacha Pegdwendé Silga – Assistant and teacher at the Centre d'accueil Havre du Bon pasteur in Bobo Dioulassoba	Burkina Faso	Dioulassoba	The causes of early marriage of girls among Mandarin Bobos in Dioulassoba (Bobo Dioulasso)
Salamatou Abdoul-Karim Yamba – Social worker and volunteer at <a href="#">Cadre Consultatif Nigérien pour les Enfants et les Jeunes</a> (CNEJ)	Niger	Zinder	The influence of information and communication technology on girls dropping out of school and on early marriage
Tidder Moussa Adamou – Student	Niger	Bangabana, Niamey	Perceptions of child marriage and girls' dropping out of school – School: a place of debauchery?: The case of commune V of Niamey (Bangabana).
Zeilata Abdoulaye – Medical doctor and volunteer at <a href="#">SonGes</a>	Niger	Gaya, Katako	Dropping out of school: Experiences of young Hawru Police Girls (girl domestic workers) from Gaya, Katako Site

## Research design

The principle of ownership is at the core of the youth-led research. It promotes collaboration with young researchers and the research institute to identify and formulate research questions that address community-based gender issues related to child marriage and girls' education, and that hold personal importance to the young researchers.

On multiple occasions, the young researchers were invited to reflect on their personal connection with child marriage and girls' education, why the issues are important and their

role as advocates. To build a targeted framework for the research, young researchers selected themes based on:

- Providing evidence and/or the perspective of young people to support advocacy to end child marriage and promote girls' education in West Africa.
- Focusing research on the correlation between girls' education and ending child marriage.
- Conducting a context-specific analysis, looking at areas including humanitarian settings, COVID-19, refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), conflict-prone areas affected by school closures and/or disability-sensitive education.
- Demonstrating gender-transformative practice in action.

At the end of the research training, all the young researchers had refined their research themes with the help of their research mentors.

## Training and capacity development

### Research training

LASDEL was responsible for implementing theoretical and practical training in June 2022 in Niamey, Niger. The training included modules on:

1. Thematic exploration of issues and challenges of access to education for young girls in West Africa
2. Ethnographic survey
3. Semi-structured interview
4. Participatory observation
5. Research ethics during data collection
6. ECRIS methodology (*Enquête Collective Rapide d'Identification des Conflits et des Groupes Stratégiques*, or Rapid Collective Survey for the Identification of Conflicts and Strategic Groups)<sup>c</sup>
7. Writing a case study
8. Elaboration of the canvas
9. Definition of strategic groups

LASDEL researchers provided theoretical training, followed by a hands-on exercise of in-situ data collection. This was based on a methodology referred to as the ECRIS.<sup>9</sup> The ECRIS, conducted during a two-day training workshop in Niamey, saw both supervising researchers and young researchers begin fieldwork, working in four separate groups.

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<sup>c</sup> The ECRIS methodology is an exploratory collective investigation. The first objective of this framework is to develop, apply and refine a research practice. The second objective is to initiate analytical work and identify new research orientations. LASDEL applies this methodology at the launch of any research project to reinforce collaborative work.



## **Safeguarding training**

In collaboration with *Girls Not Brides*, a participatory safeguarding training module that was tailor-made to the needs and specificities of the youth-led research project was delivered. The training elaborated on the following content:

- Basic notions and concepts around safeguarding
- Key areas of the *Girls Not Brides* safeguarding framework and in the EOL project
- Reporting and complaint mechanisms
- Safeguarding within communication processes
- Safeguarding in youth-led research
- Outline of the Code of Conduct

## **Advocacy training**

An advocacy capacity development workshop, held in Niger, brought together young researchers and coalition members (working on ending child marriage as well as education for all) from Niger and Burkina Faso. The specific objectives were to create a space for young researchers to:

- Share their research findings
- Build their advocacy capacity
- Identify and plan advocacy and dissemination activities around youth-led research
- Generate audio-visual material to support advocacy around youth-led research.

Introductory sessions covered advocacy, youth leadership and power dynamics, public speaking, blogging, using social media safely, and safeguarding in advocacy.

The majority of participants expressed increased confidence in their ability to take on advocacy roles and engage with decision-makers in their communities – and this was attributed to the significant progress made during the workshop. The presence of Niger Platform and CONAMEB coalition representatives helped strengthen these achievements. They identified areas of collaboration and committed to involving the young researchers in advocacy activities, while using the results from the research to build evidence-based advocacy.

During the workshop, the young researchers defined and implemented a range of advocacy activities, and made recommendations to improve advocacy around ending child marriage, educating girls, and promoting gender-transformative education. Several participants developed messaging which was used during the video recording on the day.

## **Data collection, case study writing and reviewing process**

At the end of their research training, each young researcher prepared an individual research proposal. Proposals covered the research topic, rationale and contextual information, provided a brief overview of the planned methodology for data collection, and a mapping of target key informants. All research proposals were reviewed by LASDEL research mentors and the EOL Regional Research and Advocacy Consultant. Following this process, the young

researchers created their data collection tools and submitted these to the same group for validation.

The primary data collection phase lasted about four weeks. The methods were qualitative and involved a substantial life stories component. Semi-structured interviews were preferred, as key informants were expected to contribute far beyond the interview guides, and focus groups represented an opportunity to confront perceptions and observe patterns.

The young researchers prioritised these two methods with a variety of respondents, including schoolgirls, out-of-school girls, married girls and young women, parents, teachers and members of school administration, traditional and religious leaders, representatives from the ministries of education, social protection and/or gender, and IDPs. Most interviews were conducted in local languages and translated into French at the report writing stage.

LASDEL supported the young researchers in their analysis of findings and case study writing, with LASDEL mentors reviewing final versions. The EOL Regional Research and Advocacy Consultant compiled the resulting eight individual case studies into a final research report. Feminist and decolonial research methods guided the interpretation and analysis of findings for this.

## Limitations

The young researchers identified several limitations, especially during the data collection phase. These included:

- The limited time available for data collection, analysis and report writing did not allow an in-depth exploration of all the issues identified in the research scope, in particular complex ones like the impact of the polycrisis and emerging research interests around mental health.
- Time and resource limitations restricted the sampling of respondents to a small number.
- The sensitivity of the themes raised during the research – like child marriage, girls' education and sexual and reproductive health and rights – led to the mistrust and inaccessibility of some actors, if they suspected they might be facing police or state investigations. This was particularly the case for religious and traditional leaders.
- The research process reflected some of the power dynamics sustaining gender and other forms of inequality. During data collection, the young researchers faced daily difficulties in accessing public institutions and decision-makers involved in child marriage or girls' education.
- The young researchers almost unanimously experienced difficulties collaborating with government representatives and challenges accessing official government data. It was observed that government representatives resisted participating because of sensitivities around child marriage and governments' accountability.
- Some respondents refused to contribute without remuneration.

- Some young researchers faced difficulties obtaining school statistics and other quantitative data at the local level (either because of unavailability or confidentiality of data).
- Some young researchers experienced difficulties coordinating their schedule with those of girls involved in paid or unpaid domestic work, as most were only available at the weekend.
- Some young researchers, particularly male teachers, experienced resistance from some students because they were perceived as authority figures. Students said they felt intimidated and refused to participate or censored their contribution, fearing negative consequence for their future schooling.

### Ethics and safeguarding

The research training included a module on research ethics. It emphasised the protection of informants – for example by anonymisation – and the accurate reproduction of their contribution through voluntary and informed consent, before proceeding to any notetaking or recording.

A safeguarding focal person was appointed to support the youth-led research, responsible for:

1. Acting as the point of contact on protection issues and concerns within the national coalitions (Niger Platform and CONAMEB), and between the national coalitions and the *Girls Not Brides* Secretariat.
2. Leading the deployment of key protection communications, activities or training for the Niger Platform and CONAMEB.
3. Lead the development of methods to engage with all members on safeguarding.

During the safeguarding training (see above), the principles of the *Girls Not Brides* Safeguarding Code of Conduct<sup>10</sup> were shared and explained in detail. All the young researchers and research mentors were asked to sign the Code of Conduct, before proceeding with any other research activity, particularly data collection. Throughout the research process, the research methodology was continuously aligned and/or compatible with feminist research ethics. During the training, the team pre-identified a list of potential harms or risks and some mitigation measures.

During the data collection phase, participants received a consent form in French explaining the research objectives and the intended use of the data. This also included a declaration of consent, giving them an option of contributing anonymously. For participants who could not read or write, consent to take part in the study was requested and obtained orally. They were fully informed of the research objectives and understood that their participation was free and voluntary.

## FINDINGS

### The impact of social norms on girls' education and child marriage

A rich variety of cultures and traditions are prevalent across West Africa, but there is a common cultural basis, which is marked by patriarchal values, respect for seniority, and the importance of marriage and fertility.<sup>11</sup> Marriage is seen as an essential step in the passage from childhood to adulthood, and an important tool for confirming social relationships and support within the community. A central concept that drives decisions around child marriage in West Africa is the perceived relationship between a girl's virginity and family honour.<sup>12</sup>

In Niger, marriage is seen as an inevitable event in life. This is accelerated by factors like the lack of economic opportunities, social pressure within the community, and gendered socialisation of girls from an early age.<sup>13</sup>

In both Burkina Faso and Niger, gender norms around the reproductive role of women significantly influence girls' decision to marry early. Peer pressure and stereotypical gender roles reinforce the idea that girls can only project themselves as future wives and mothers and not as economic providers or key actors in their communities. This impacts girls' ambition to perform and succeed at school; resulting in weak enrolment and high rates of early school leaving. Poor quality and access to education increase a general resistance to girls' education, leaving many girls with limited to no viable alternative to early marriage.<sup>14</sup>

### Correlation between child marriage and girls dropping out of school

There is a strong correlation between child marriage and girls' education. Across West, Central East and Southern Africa, child marriage is a clear determinant of girls' low educational attainment. The literacy rate among women who married before age 18 is 29%, compared with 54% among women who married later.<sup>15</sup> In Niger, 81% of women with no education and 63% with only primary education were married or in union by age 18, compared with only 17% of women who completed secondary education or higher.<sup>16</sup>

In this youth-led research, most case studies establish a direct link between child marriage and girls leaving school early. In his case study, Saley Ibrahim – a teacher – discusses parents' responsibilities in keeping girls in school in the rural community of Dan Issa, Niger. He observes that girls tend to get married before reaching the third year of secondary school and that marriage almost systematically leads to girls leaving school. Marriage is prioritised over both Quranic and modern education, he argues.

Most young researchers demonstrated that the majority of girls who marry do not return to school. In Dan Issa, during the 2021-2022 academic year, 43 schoolgirls got married, and 30 of them have not returned to school. Of the 13 who did continue to attend school, most were in their final year.



**Table 2: Summary of married girls who left and/or returned to school, school year 2021-2022, CES by Dan Issa**

School level	6th	5th	4th	3rd	2nd	1st	Final year	Total
Number of married girls	12	6	9	1	3	0	12	43
Number of dropouts	12	6	8	1	2	0	1	30
Number of returns	0	0	1	0	1	0	11	13

Most girls who get married while studying face barriers to continuing their education, even if their families or husband do not resist. In Abdoul-Karim Yamba’s case study, a girl who married, while studying, before the age of 18 years explains: *"I have only been married for a few months now, even though my husband has not asked me to drop out of school, I already feel that my education is very compromised. I can't do both at the same time, I can't take it anymore. I am having a difficult pregnancy. I know that after I give birth, I won't be able to continue."*

Adolescent pregnancies are often cited as one of the main reasons why girls must interrupt their education. Happening outside of marriage, pregnancy is even more likely to lead to girls leaving school due to stigmatisation, shame and conflict between families, which can disrupt their educational attainment. This is illustrated in the following life-story interview, captured for Idrissa Harouna’s case study on the impact of delinquency on girls dropping out of school:

## CASE STUDY

### **Unwanted adolescent pregnancy, girls’ education and marriage**

At a secondary school<sup>d</sup> in Niger, a fifth-grade student who is the caregiver for her sick mother had to leave school after an unwanted pregnancy. The pregnancy was denied by the male counterpart, a classmate, which led a scandal that ended up in the Maradi Court of Justice.

Although the school administration authorised the girl to continue her education, she decided to leave school. She was afraid of being shamed, dishonoured and stigmatised as a single mother by her classmates. Afterwards, she was given in marriage to a marabout<sup>e</sup> who divorced her shortly after.

### **Peer pressure, agency in child marriage and representation: Defying the common narrative on girls’ choice in marriage in the era of new technology**

Discourses around child marriage tend to emphasise girls as victims, denying their agency in marriage processes. Normative constructions around “innocent childhood” have made it

<sup>d</sup> Given the sensitivity of this information, we have removed the name of the school to protect the identity of the student.

<sup>e</sup> A person involved in mystical/Islamic “counselling” or Quranic teacher

transgressive to question this notion of victimhood, and to investigate girls' perception and understanding of their role in those process.<sup>17</sup> The existing body of literature from global non-governmental organisations and the United Nations (UN) indicates a shared emphasis on child marriage as a cultural phenomenon, where girls are pushed into marriage by predominantly male family members.

To develop a more subtle understanding of decision-making dynamics in child marriage and girls' education, an in-depth analysis of situational agency and related power relations is needed.<sup>18</sup> Social influences and the extent to which girls have options when a marriage decision is made should be considered as critical situational aspects. Power dynamics refer to the interpersonal relationships between girls and their parents, extended family members and communities.

## KEY TERMS

### Agency

More Than Brides Alliance (2021) explore various types of agencies that can intersect, refining our understanding of girls' agency in the decision-making processes in child marriage.

**Oppositional agency** refers to an individual or a group's ability to resist or challenge dominant power structures and norms. It involves actively engaging in acts of resistance or defiance. In this instance, girls can reject or oppose the limitations imposed upon them.

In the case of **accommodating agency**, girls perceive marriage as an unavoidable institution and willingly participate in it, acknowledging and embracing the societal norms and disparities associated with it.

**Transformative agency** refers to an individual or group's ability to actively and intentionally bring about significant changes in their social and cultural environment. There is a lack of research – and therefore statistics – on the prevalence of child- and adolescent-initiated marriages, and the extent to which they occur inside formal or informal frameworks.

It is important to further investigate girls' decision-making power in child marriage, as demonstrated by a 2019 LASDEL report which highlights that 56% of Nigerien women married before age 18 did so by choice.

By prioritising accounts of lived experience, the young researchers have explored the intricacies of girls' agency and perceptions in processes around child marriage and girls' education. In Abdul-Karim Yamba's case study, informants frequently cited peer influence as a determining factor in girls' choices to marry. When a girl is married, her classmates often see attraction in her material gains, such as a phone, clothes, and money.

*"At one point in our sixth grade, there was a girl who got married, and every time she came to school, she had a lot of material possessions, and distributed money to us. Each of us envied her and wanted to get married because we know that before her marriage her situation was not like that. That clearly influenced some of us to agree to marry during the holidays."*

A schoolgirl in Zinder, Niger. Life story gathered by Abdoul-Karim Yamba

At the core of the analysis around girls' involvement in child marriage decision-making processes is the persistent idealistic representation of marriage, at the expense of other pathways to success for girls. Girls are underrepresented in spaces where they might be seen to have a successful educational and professional life. On the other hand, the overrepresentation of marriage in mass and social media makes girls feel pressured to get married as early as possible.

Girls' widespread use of smartphones and access to social media platforms may contribute to their perception of child marriage as a path to social mobility, so influencing them to imitate their married classmates to gain similar validation. Girls may have a desire for the social and material advantages of marriage, as represented in the media,<sup>19</sup> but have a limited understanding of the reality and what is expected from them within marriage.

*"I was already a big fan of kingwood movies, dandalin soyayya and TV series like those on the Zee magic channel and Novelas. In these movies and soap operas, I saw a lot of things that I considered to be the image of the modern wedding and the type of home I wanted to have. After I got a phone and joined social networks like Tik-Tok, Facebook, Instagram, the perfect image I had of marriage and all the good things we could have in it was complete."*

A 19-year-old girl who left school after getting married and becoming pregnant. Her little girl is a few months old. Life story gathered by Abdoul-Karim Yamba

In their decisions to facilitate their girls' marriage, parents are also influenced by the narrative disseminated by mass and social media.

*"We finally decided to give our daughter in marriage at the age of 17, but if we listened to her earlier, we would have given her in marriage a long time ago. Now with all that girls see as wonders of marriage on social media, in movies and sometimes with some classmates, each also wants to emulate and live the same experiences as soon as possible."*

Parent of a married 17-year-old girl. Life story gathered by Abdoul-Kari Yamba

### **Community and parental perception of child marriage and girls' education: fear of exclusion and social protection**

This section examines the attitudes of girls' social networks – including community members and parents – towards child marriage and girls' education, focusing on underlying factors like the desire for social belonging and safety, and the fear of marginalisation.

In 2019, LASDEL published the report *Empowering Girls to Fight Early Marriage*, analysing data on child marriage in Mali, Niger and Togo. The report explores how the preservation of a "cult of virginity" and a collective opposition to out-of-marriage pregnancy influence persistently high child marriage prevalence. In the same study, they argue that 29% of girls married before age 18 claim to have been forced by their parents.

Culturally determined ideas about the role of girls and women in society are a significant limit to girls' educational opportunities. Because women are traditionally valued through their fertility and domestic activities, and because girls are mostly destined to serve their husband's family after marriage, investing in their formal education is not seen as beneficial. Some parents even avoid sending their daughters to school because they consider it an obstacle to their training as future mothers and housekeepers, jeopardising their chances of

marrying.<sup>20</sup> In Niger, education for girls is seen as traditional and religious, provided first by their parents, and then by her husband.<sup>21</sup>

In Burkina Faso and Niger, the young researchers observed how families prioritise investment in boys' education over investment in girls' education, further exacerbating the inaccessibility of education to girls. In Burkina Faso, the Ministry of National Education (2020) reports that parents prioritise investment in school-related expenditures for boys, at the expense of girls.<sup>22</sup>

The young researcher Natacha Silga Pegdwende is a teacher at the Havre du Bon Pasteur shelter for girls and women at risk in Burkina Faso. She conducted a case study on the causes of early marriage of girls in the community of Bobo Mandarins in Dioulassoba, Bobo Dioulasso,<sup>23</sup> where there is high prevalence of forced and/or early marriages. Silga Pegdwende's findings demonstrate that early marriage is perceived as an ancestral practice. This continues today, especially in rural areas, with the aim of consolidating family ties. Early marriage is perceived as a safety net for the girl and an opportunity to flourish.

*"Marrying [my daughter] early ensures a home and saves the family from facing a pregnancy without a father or a single mother."*

Mother interviewed in Bobo Dioulasso, Burkina Faso by Natacha Silga Pegdwende

The safety supposedly provided by marriage is often an illusion. According to the LASDEL report, 31% of child marriages end in divorce, compared with 12% of marriages where girls or women were over age 18.<sup>24</sup> Silga Pegdwende's case study shows that in such circumstances, girls can be compelled to work on gold mining sites in search of decent living condition, take up street vending, or engage in prostitution. After a divorce, girls often face stigmatisation, mockery and rejection from their family of origin and their in-laws.

*"Girls who are victims of early marriage leave the home after having one or two children, either because of family responsibilities they cannot fulfil, or because of violence they experience in the household."*

An informant from Dioulassoba, gathered by Silga Pegdwende

Abdoul-Karim Yamba's case study shows how marriage can lead to "a brutal return to reality", even if the marriage is wanted by the girl in question. This occurs most often when girls realise that the lived experience of marriage is different from the ones portrayed on mass and social media.

*"We usually notice that after just a few months or years of marriage, these early marriages often leave child brides in distress and so many of them would seek help if they thought they could find it."*

Respondent from Zinder, Niger, gathered by Abdoul-Karim Yamba

There is an absence of female role models who succeed in education whilst also managing the responsibilities of wife and parent. This plays a significant role in parents' lack of support for their daughter's education. According to Saley Ibrahim, in the community of Dan Issa, Niger, some parents perceive school as no more than a way to keep young girls busy before marriage.



*“First of all the place of the woman is her home, and not school, because there is no female model of success in the commune, even those who have studied remain unemployed.”*

Parent from Dan Issa, Niger, testimony gathered by Saley Ibrahim

The young researchers also investigated husbands’ decision-making power in girls’ education. They found that married girls’ ability and/or space to pursue their education is often highly conditioned by their husbands’ will to cooperate.

Saley Ibrahim’s case study found that some married girls had prenuptial agreements recommending their husbands let them complete their studies. In other cases, the husbands clearly expressed their support for their spouse’s continued education.

On the other hand, Harouna – in his case study on the impact of school violence on girls’ retention in school in Maradi, Niger – observes that, even if husbands initially accept their wives’ continued education, they often break this pact as they cannot tolerate their wives’ unavailability and lack of time to take care of their households.

### **Discourse analysis around child marriage and girls’ education**

Throughout the primary data collection, it became clear that the promotion of child marriage and resistance to girls’ formal education are linked to the persistence of certain social norms. The young researchers collected and analysed a number of idiomatic expressions that reflect how deeply rooted certain convictions are about what is expected of girls to be accepted by their communities.

In Saley Ibrahim’s case study, parents express the belief that transgressive behaviours – like disobedience or sex outside of marriage – are caused by the “moral decay” taught at school. Courses like personal and social education are seen to have led to the mistrust of some parents who think that schools support girls in engaging in sexual practices outside of marriage, without fearing pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections.

In the Hausa language, the expressions “ya boko” or “ya dounia” are used to refer to girls who are involved in transgressive behaviours. These expressions imply that schools teach principles which go against religious dogma. They can also refer to girls who try to emulate a Western lifestyle and reject their traditions and culture.

Many parents hold the belief that a woman's most significant roles are that of wife and mother, so downplaying the importance of their education and professional pursuits. The Hausa expression “kasuwa Ankasa ba riba”, which is used to refer to educated women, literally translates as a “commodity with no profit”. This reflects how girls’ education is perceived as a misuse of resources. If even women with diplomas are unemployed, the proverb implies, having girls enrolled in school is a waste.

This shared opinion on girls’ education has a considerable influence on girls’ desire to perform at school. It can partly explain why girls decide to neglect school to get married, especially if they have suitors and many friends who are already married. Unmarried girls are often the objects of mockery, as a 2019 LASDEL study showed, and this influence is exerted within and across age groups. In Niger, unmarried girls over the age of 15 are often referred to as “Santo”, which translates as “out of date”.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Addressing the social norms that drive child marriage and girls' lack of education.**

1. Emphasise the representation of girls and women who have succeeded academically and professionally, so girls can identify with them.
2. Use information and communications technology and media as channels to change the narrative around child marriage and emphasise the benefits of education.
3. Improve the cultural relevance of community advocacy to promote new narratives around child marriage and girls' education.

### **The impact of economic factors on girls' education and child marriage**

Economic coping strategies and the reproduction of gender inequality at the family level play an important role in girls' lack of access to education and risk of child marriage. Economic factors can include the need to cover daily family expenses and health emergencies; the constraint of repaying debts; and the obligation to pay education fees and other indirect costs for younger children, as listed by LASDEL (2019).

### **Multidimensional poverty and the correlation between girls leaving school early and their obligation to provide for their families**

The young researchers' case studies were largely conducted in areas where endemic poverty continuously drives girls to act as caregivers and/or providers for their families.

Multidimensional poverty<sup>f</sup> also determines girls' access and chances to complete their education. All case studies on girls' ability to complete their education have demonstrated that the simple fact of not being able to pay for school fees is a major factor in them leaving school early. Indirect costs like school uniforms and supplies, transportation, and school management committee (COGES) fees also play a role; these costs have increased in recent years.

Saley Ibrahim's findings suggest that, in the rural commune of Dan Issa, Niger, one of the biggest reasons for girls leaving school is their role in meeting their family's daily needs. Parents – particularly mothers – seek their daughters' labour in their family's small businesses. Dan Issa is at the border of Nigeria, where opportunities for small trades are higher. The area is also suffering from the impact of climate change: when agricultural crops do not feed the family between rainy seasons, many husbands migrate to Nigeria, leaving their wives as temporary heads of household.

Many girls work – in paid and unpaid roles – before and after school, impacting their academic performance. In all case studies on the impact of economic and reproductive work, the majority of respondents cite this as the main factor in low performance and high school drop-out among girls. Many girls who are involved in intense income-generating activities or

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<sup>f</sup> “Multidimensional poverty encompasses the various deprivations experienced by poor people in their daily lives – such as poor health, lack of education, inadequate living standards, disempowerment, poor quality of work, the threat of violence, and living in areas that are environmentally hazardous, among others.” (Oxford)

domestic work have limited time to study. Time that should be dedicated to studying can also be the only moment of rest a girl might afford.

*"The only time to learn my lessons is the night after coming home from the porridge sale."*

A working schoolgirl. Testimony gathered by Mahaman Nouradine Saley Ibrahim.

*"Household chores and income-generating activities prevent young girls from studying well, because they cannot learn their lessons and do their homework as a result of always feeling tired."*

A schoolgirl. Testimony gathered by Mahaman Nouradine Saley Ibrahim.

## **Paid and unpaid domestic work, child marriage and girls' education**

This section discusses the experiences of girls who go to school and are engaged in paid or unpaid domestic work; girls who leave school to work full-time as domestic workers; and girls who have never been to school and work full-time as domestic workers.

The young researcher Zeilata Abdoulaye, a medical doctor, conducted a case study that investigates the experience of Hawrou Police Girls (domestic workers or maids) from the Katako Site in the city of Gaya, Niger. In Gaya, there is a widespread practice of young girls migrating to urban centres, particularly Niamey, the capital, to look for paid domestic work. There are high rates of girls leaving school, usually as a result of this migration to larger cities. Of the 10 girls surveyed, six were never enrolled in school, four dropped out of school early, and one got married during sixth grade.

Respondents argue that the main reasons for leaving school relate to parents' lack of financial support for their daughters' education. Some had to leave because they were caregivers and providers for their families.

*"I went to school; I dropped out in the class of Elementary Class 2<sup>g</sup>. I was at my maternal grandmother's house who took care of me. She had fallen ill, for two years, and there was no one to take care of her. I dropped out of school to stay with her [...] When my grandmother started treatment, I came to Niamey. I work as a domestic worker, and I send the money to my grandmother."*

A 14-year-old Hawrou Police Girl in Gaya, Niger. Testimony gathered by Zeilata Abdoulaye

Girls reported cases of employers refusing to pay their salaries, failing to provide for their basic needs, or committing acts of violence – often verbal – against Hawrou Police Girls. One Hawrou Police Girl decided to return to school and faced the resistance of her employers.

*"Recently, there is a girl who has accumulated up to 12 months of salary without being paid." A 14-year-old Hawrou Police Girl says: "Often the bosses insult us and call us all names -- stupid, bandit, rude -- but I never answer, I keep quiet and that's it."*

An informant who tutors Hawrou Police Girls. Testimony gathered by Zeilata Abdoulaye

*"When a girl who was enrolled in school and whose host family did not want to let go, I intervened to free her and send her home. Today she is in high school in Gaya. Often some girls have to go to foster families and are sent back to their parents so that they can continue their schooling."*

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<sup>g</sup> Equivalent of 1<sup>st</sup> grade (Year 2 in the UK)

For girls who get married while in school, the intensification of domestic work is a significant barrier to academic performance. It is common for girls to leave school when the workload gets too heavy. Abdoul-Karim Yamba argues that after marriage, few girls can adequately continue their schooling up to a certain level. Most girls leave school only a few years or even months after marriage.

*"We face many cases of girls who were brilliant, but after marriage, there has been a clear decline in their academic performance, and they ultimately drop out. For example, even last year I had three schoolgirls who got married. After their marriages, they did not come all the time, and finally, before the end of the second semester, two dropped out of school. As for the only one who stayed at school, her level had become very low compared to before her marriage."*

A teacher. Testimony gathered by Salimatou Abdoul-Karim Yamba

This situation is exacerbated when, in addition to the many tasks that can hinder studies – like household chores, pregnancies or childbirth – the husband also stands as an obstacle. The young researchers report cases of husbands who, after marriage, order their new wife to stop studying or do everything to discourage her, sometimes through physical or verbal abuse.

### **Schoolgirls engaged in income-generating activities to prepare and finance their marriage**

Two case studies in particular highlight how some girls engaged in income-generating activities are in fact contributing to funding their marriages. Both Abdoulaye and Saley Ibrahim demonstrate that parents – and girls themselves – save the revenues generated by girls through small businesses or paid domestic work over the year to buy “kayan daki”, their wedding trousseau. Providing money for the wedding trousseau is considered a social obligation and an important part of the rites related to marriage.

Abdoulaye’s findings show that marriage preparation, and putting together their wedding trousseau, is a fundamental motivation for some of the girls who leave Nigerien villages like Bingou, Santché, Sabon Birni and Bana to work in urban centres. According to the girls who participated in the research, a wedding trousseau typically consists of wall covers, bedsheets, curtains, prayer rugs, cooking pots, mattresses, buckets, basins, furniture, cups, kitchen utensils, thermos, a dressing table, a wardrobe and carpet. Girls mentioned that they should collect money to cover a budget estimated at 100,000-500,000 XOF for the purchase of the trousseau.

Beyond the economic aspect, girls’ involvement in household chores and caregiving tasks is part of a broader strategy to prepare them for marriage. Young girls help their mothers to fulfil daily obligations including cooking, washing the dishes and laundry. Some mothers also keep girls at home after giving birth to help take care of the baby and/or to prepare the girl for motherhood.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Economic factors driving child marriage and girls' lack of education

1. Promote comprehensive coverage of education-related expenses for girls who are the most at risk of leaving school early, including school fees, learning materials, the school canteen, hygiene kits, transportation, uniforms, tutoring and other relevant needs.
2. Facilitate access to education for married girls, girls who have children, and out-of-school girls.
3. Promote vocational training for girls.

### The impact of the quality of the learning environment on girls' education and child marriage

Access to official and empirical data on how the quality of the learning environment impacts girls' access to education and retention in school remains a challenge, resulting in a serious research gap. The young researchers' findings demonstrate how important it is to better understand the correlation between the quality of the learning environment and girls' educational opportunities and protection from child marriage.

#### Measuring the quality of learning environments

UNESCO (2004: 36)<sup>25</sup> has defined a framework of indicators to measure the quality of a learning environment for students. Despite limited quantitative data, some of those indicators are useful for an analysis of the relationship between girls' prospects to complete secondary education and the quality of the learning environment. Those indicators are:

1. **Learner characteristics**, including aptitude, tenacity, school readiness, pre-existing knowledge, learning barriers and demographics.
2. **The context of the learning environment**, including public resources, parental support, adherence to national standards, labour market requirements, socio-cultural and religious influences, peer dynamics and time available for schooling and homework.
3. **Enabling inputs**, including teaching and learning materials, physical infrastructure and facilities, and human resources needed for effective education.
4. **Teaching and learning**, including time allocation, instructional methods, student performance evaluation and class size.
5. **Outcomes**, including reading, numeracy, values and life skills.

#### Exploring the conflict between the types of education available to girls (modern, religious, and reproductive)

Exploring Nigerian women's perception of girls' education in 2011, Hartman-Mahmud demonstrated that there is a belief which views the three forms of education girls receive – “boko”, formal education; “tarbiyya”, education at home; and “mahamadiya”, Islamic education – as incompatible. This conflicting perception is also rooted in the fact that postcolonial education systems in West Africa have not been adapted to their local context.

Education does not respond to local expectations of what girls need to evolve in the society they live in.

Diverse forms of community resistance to interventions to end child marriage correlate with the dissemination of subversive messages from religious leaders, which tend to discredit state policies on child marriage and girls' education. The presence of religious associations in the public arena has guaranteed the circulation of a continuous and credible discourse targeting communities, particularly the most isolated ones. Religious associations have actively occupied the media as a strategy to convince populations of the danger of moral deprivation and as an advocacy platform to demand the state not promote policies that would prevent early marriage.

*“Islamic associations are also watching, all these promoters of anti-Islamic values and these gravediggers of good morals. These are particularly natural and legal persons seeking to introduce bills to prohibit the marriage of girls from our towns and villages before the age of 18 but ready to protect all immoral acts in certain districts of Niamey.”<sup>26</sup>*

Declaration of Islamic Associations Against the Degradation of Morals and the Introduction of Sexual Education in Schools – Declaration shared by NigerInter<sup>h</sup>

The young researcher Tidder Moussa Adamou, a student, researched the perception of school as a place of “debauchery” in the district of Banga Bana, in Niamey, Niger. She investigated the impact this has on child marriage and girls leaving school, as community members can consider schools inappropriate places for girls' social integration as respectable women. In her case study, respondents are unanimous in considering Niger's education system “sick”.

Moussa Adamou explores the paradox raised by the district's population: rather than complementing the education their children receive at home, school is seen as a space that produces individuals who deviate from social norms. Her findings demonstrate how schools seem to be failing to teach morals and civics as important disciplines. Respondents conceded that there was a collective responsibility to address the issue, including parents, teachers, the government, pedagogical advisors, management committees, but also technical and financial partners.

The education system in Niger is in decay, Moussa Adamou argues, with a gradual regression in the quality of education reflected in the different forms of “delinquency” and violence that have transformed schools into what some perceive to be spaces of lawlessness. She explains that schools in Commune V, where Banga Bana is located, have become spaces of increased exposure to pornography. This, her case study argues, justifies the reluctance of some parents to send their children – and especially girls – to school long term. Instead, parents prefer them to marry as soon as possible.

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<sup>h h</sup> <https://nigerinter.com/2017/03/declaration-des-associations-islamiques-contre-la-degradation-des-moeurs-et-lintroduction-de-leducation-sexuelle-a-lecole/>

## **“We sacrifice a lot to go to school, but we get nothing in return”: Exploring the perceived opportunity cost of girls' education**

The demand for schooling is higher for boys than for girls given the high opportunity cost for girls. Strong demographic growth in Niger and Burkina Faso<sup>27</sup> puts pressure on the education system, jeopardising the achievements of the sector and resulting in low quality of education. Marriage is perceived as the safest option, especially when compared with receiving an education that may not provide the expected stability. In her case study, Abdoul-Karim Yamba highlights how parents can become anxious if they do not see girls succeed, despite education.

*“We see a lot of examples of girls who study a’ d can’t find work, and then find it difficult to marry after a certain age, which causes worries for them and their parents. So, to avoid such a situation it is better to give her in marriage as soon as possible.”*

Parent in Zinder, Niger. Testimony gathered by Abdoul-Karim Yamba

## **Poor quality education, weak school infrastructures and school violence as determining factors**

In his case study, the young researcher Saley Ibrahim, a teacher, shows the impact weak school infrastructure can have on parental decision-making. In many rural areas, there is only one secondary school that has the capacity to admit students from nearby villages. Dan Issa is an example of such a school: all children admitted to sixth grade (the first year of secondary school) and second grade (the first year of high school) are sent to this institution. For many students, this means a walk or the use of other means of transport to cover an average distance of seven kilometres every day. Alternatively, they may stay with a host family living closer to the school.

For many girls, such a long distance to school presents insecurities. There have been reports of threats and cases of rape. This is a source of anxiety for parents who may decide to interrupt their daughter’s education when they cannot find another solution, like placing the girl with a trustworthy host family. Even when a host family is found, adequate learning conditions are not always met to allow girls to continue studying. Schoolgirls often lack necessities, like food or hygiene products.

Many factors can drastically exacerbate the decline in academic performance for girls. Parents who see weak academic performance in their daughters tend to take them out of school, often without looking for other alternatives. Parents’ concern with the poor quality of the learning environment is one of the main arguments why they no longer want to invest in girls’ education.

*“First of all, schools are now poor in quality because teachers do not teach by vocation. There is a lack of teachers in quality and quantity which leads to a drop in performance. In addition, the State does not cover certain school costs such as supplies and COGES.”*

Parent from Dan Issa, Niger. Testimony gathered by Saley Ibrahim

Two young researchers documented how parents’ perception of school as a place of moral depravity was used to justify resisting their daughters’ education. Idrissa Harouna, a teacher, investigated how school violence remains a challenge for girls’ retention in the secondary school of Maradi, Niger.

Violence – especially gender-based violence – is perpetuated in school due to the lack of knowledge of the different forms of violence, their consequences and the importance of reporting them. The reproduction of socio-cultural norms and gender stereotypes within schools contributes to a continued culture of impunity around violence. Factors like household economic and social conditions in the communities where schools are located also influence the reproduction of school-related violence.

However, there is a lack of evidence on the impacts of school-related violence, due to the persistence of social norms that encourage ignorance of violence, the lack of appropriate identification and care mechanisms, and the lack of data on the existence and types of violence.<sup>28,29</sup> Case identification and care are complicated by the culture of non-reporting and fear of reprisals. Families prefer negotiated solutions to legal proceedings to protect their children. Recent studies show that in areas affected by high rates of gender-based school violence, the weak capacity of local authorities to address this issue is a determining factor in its perpetuation.<sup>30</sup>

Harouna's analysis is anchored in the general discussion around the recent adoption of Decree 935 on the Protection, Retention and Support for young girls during schooling (SCOFI) and the challenges around the application of the directives from the Ministry of National Education. Harouna reports cases of sexual harassment against several girls by their male peers. Echoing Saley Ibrahim's findings, Harouna finds that schoolgirls are often victims of sexual harassment on their way to school.

Another element that contributes to a poor learning environment is parents' lack of capacity or availability to adequately and actively be involved in their daughters' educational journey. Harouna explains that the poor literacy levels of many parents in Maradi make it difficult for them to support their children when their academic performance is low. Parents in Maradi can rarely afford to hire private tutors. This lack of parental involvement and support can, in turn, cause a lack of interest and ambition for school, which is reflected in high rates of absenteeism for girls and higher risks of them leaving or being excluded.

Falmata Hamed Mallam Habba, a sociologist, led a case study on menstrual hygiene management in a secondary school in Hamdallaye, Niger. She focused on the challenges faced by girls, including lack of education, communication, stigmatisation and lack of appropriate infrastructure. Her research emphasises the correlation between girls' absenteeism and menstrual hygiene management, and seeks to identify barriers in terms of knowledge, behaviour and practice in the school environment. She argues that the state should develop appropriate policies and standards for menstrual hygiene management, reinforce teachers' capacities and build sanitation infrastructures in collaboration with education, water and sanitation, and health departments.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Shift advocacy from focusing on access to education to focusing on quality of education and inclusion.
- Advocate for systemic change in the education system and promote gender-transformative education by:
  - Ending all forms of school violence, including gender-based school violence.

- Intensifying the recruitment of female teachers.
- Revisiting school curricula that disseminate harmful gender norms.
- Build school facilities to prevent menstruation-related absenteeism and integrate spaces within schools to provide menstruation education.
- Promote culturally relevant education.

## The impact of the security crisis and displacement on girls' education and child marriage

Two case studies documented the experiences of internally displaced girls, early school leaving and child marriage in Burkina Faso and Niger, allowing some comparative analysis between the two countries.

In Niger, the young researcher Teoma Mamadou Ousseini, a PhD candidate, explored the forced displacement and experience of out-of-school girls in the department of Torodi. The specific objectives were to 1) describe the impact of displacement on girls' schooling, 2) identify the challenges faced by displaced schoolgirls, 3) highlight their survival strategies, and 4) describe existing strategies to keep displaced girls in school. Ousseini conducted 17 interviews with individuals involved in the schooling of displaced girls in the commune, including girls who re-enrolled, their classmates, teachers, education officials, humanitarian actors and family members.

Ousseini provides further information on the typology of displaced girls in Torodi:

1. Girls who are displaced with their parents – those able to continue their education were enrolled in primary school. Most families were placed in small camps and benefitted from the support of NGOs in the form of hygiene kit or school canteen, others were in houses rented or loaned by the local population.
2. Girls living in foster families – the majority of displaced schoolgirls in this situation are girls enrolled in middle school.
3. Girls living with a guardian – all the girls interviewed and enrolled in secondary school live with a guardian.

In Burkina Faso, the young researcher Flora Koné, a young diplomat and Partnership Officer with the international non-governmental organisation Action Against Hunger, conducted research on the impact of the security crisis on girls' education in the Pazani neighbourhood of the capital, Ouagadougou. She focused on internally displaced girls and the potential impact of their leaving school early en masse.

Her research highlights the gaps in the humanitarian response, the risks to which girls and women are exposed, and the role of coping strategies. Koné conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with internally displaced communities in Panzani, including daughters and parents, social action workers, humanitarian organisations, institutions, civil society actors, researchers, school leaders, and religious and traditional leaders. She also conducted four focus group discussions that brought together more than 200 internally displaced women aged 18-60.



## Displacement, school closure and girls' education

In Niger's department of Torodi, armed conflicts are leading to a massive influx of internally displaced persons. In May 2022, OCHA listed 1,500 internally displaced households in the department. Hasty displacements push populations to move in a context of vulnerability, significantly increasing social pressure. Armed conflicts and insecurity also disrupt the functioning of the department's education system, including school closures affecting over 12,000 primary school children.<sup>1</sup>

In Torodi, as in other departments in Niger, primary schools are located in administrative villages, while secondary schools are in communes and high schools are in the departmental capital. This means it is not possible to access the whole school cycle at the village level. To access the whole school cycle, the local population has put in place adaptation strategies, often sending their children away to a family member to continue their education.

Koné's case study charts how Burkina Faso has been plunged into a spiral of violence since 2015. Between October 2015 and the beginning of 2020, more than 550 attacks by armed groups were recorded, targeting civilian populations or the defence and security forces. The number of attacks has increased since, and the intensification of displacement has prompted the emergence of multifaceted temporary reception sites (SATs), located in different districts of host cities.<sup>31</sup>

Violence is leading to massive population displacement. Between 2018 and 2020, attacks against the civilian population resulted in the forced displacement of more than 848,000 people. Approximately 13% of schools in the country were closed because of armed conflicts. The 2019 Ministry of Education (MENAPLN) back-to-school report shows that of 33,383 displaced students (44% girls), only 17,705 (45% girls) were re-enrolled at the start of the 2019-2020 school year. According to data from the report of the Technical Secretariat for Education in Emergency Situations, school closures affected 525,299 students – including 249,173 girls – and 15,441 teachers (4,878 women).

In the Pazani neighbourhood, of the 700 children identified, more than 500 are of school age, and more than 60% are girls. However, only 275 children are in school and only 50 have their tuition fees paid. More than 55% of those in school are boys. About twenty girls in the *Brevet d'Études du Premier Cycle* and Baccalaureate level classes are out of school.

All those interviewed in Koné's case study stressed the severity of the psychological trauma resulting from the conflict and how forced displacement is often followed by extreme deprivation. Children and adolescents are often forced into negative coping strategies, like prostitution or recruitment into non-state armed groups, which can lead to further harmful consequences like unwanted pregnancies or increased risk of sexually transmitted infections.

The proliferation of attacks against schools and the continuing deterioration of the security situation now dictates the pace of operation in schools, which serve as safe spaces to protect children from violence and abuse in areas particularly affected by armed conflicts.<sup>32</sup> Schools

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<sup>1</sup>According to letter No. 05/21-22/ICEP Tdi of 13 November 2021, 93 of 154 educational establishments were closed in the department, including four out of nine secondary schools. This means a total of 508 secondary school students were out of school. Similarly, 144 out of 251 primary schools were closed, leaving 12,186 primary school children – including 5,917 girls – were deprived of their right to education (OCHA, 2022, [Les conflits et l'insécurité impactent la fréquentation scolaire dans des zones frontalières du Burkina Faso](#)),

can also prevent children from engaging in criminal or harmful activities, including association with non-state armed groups through forced recruitment.

## KEY TERMS

### Displacement

**Preventive displacement** is displacement of the population following a risk assessment or increase of danger in the surrounding environment – like an attack on a neighbouring village. Ousseini states that all members of the family move from their village to another village closer to – or in – the city of Torodi while waiting for the security situation to calm down. As a result, school-age girls travel with their parents, missing out on education. Even when displaced families return to their village of origin, schools often remain closed. Girls affected by preventive displacement fall behind academically because of the instability in their lives.

**Temporary displacement** is a displacement of the population forced to leave their lands under the threat of armed groups. Girls who are temporarily displaced are often affected by a disruption of their education often over long periods. Families may enrol children in the school where they have been displaced but as soon as the situation calms down, they tend to return to their village of origin where schools are still closed. Girls' education is destabilised by the lack of consistency during the academic year. Some stay at home until the end of the year and leave school for good.

**Permanent displacement** involves people who have left their village of origin without knowing if they will return. They adopt survival strategies including small income-generating activities. In some cases, the girl supports her parents by getting involved in "Talla" (a small youth business in Hausa) which often involves the sale of cakes, peanuts, etc. Girls are also much more involved in domestic work to support their families. These activities take time, so girls have very little space to focus on their studies, and their academic performance suffers.

In 2022, Torodi department in Niger experienced displacements and schools were closed in the middle of the school year. This has led to a massive early school dropout of young girls. When schools reopened, many parents decided or were not able to re-enrol their children in their village of origin. Of 4, 545 girls affected by the closure of schools, only 1,358 have been re-enrolled. Thus, 3,461 girls previously enrolled in the primary schools of Torodi remained out of school during this period.<sup>j</sup>

### **Insecurity exacerbates overprotective behaviour towards girls and leads parents to be selective in decisions around children's education**

In the context of insecurity, parents see higher stakes in protecting girls, as compared to boys. They believe a girl pursuing her education should have her material needs met, but often cannot ensure this as insecurity drives economic hardship. So, girls' education is deprioritised. Conversely, parents tend to believe boys can more easily deal with the situation, even they have to live away from their parents.

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<sup>j</sup> Data source: DDEN, 13 January 2023

Parents may decide not to re-enrol their daughters at other schools because they do not trust host families to look after them, particularly during adolescence. Parents feel more comfortable raising their daughters on their own, protecting them from “sexual temptation” or distractions from what they call “cultural and traditional achievements”. Instability and insecurity reinforce parents’ fear of pregnancy outside marriage.

Parents and girls from communities exposed to attacks or terrorism from non-state armed groups often suffer individual and collective trauma. Most girls and boys in Torodi have either witnessed or experienced traumatic events. The resulting psychological effects can significantly affect their reintegration.

*"These children when they come back to school, they really are traumatised. You will often see them isolated at school. We really understand them. For example, one day I saw a child who seemed disturbed and could not keep up with the rest of the class. I asked him some questions to find out what was wrong. He told me that he had been informed that his friend's throat had been slit by the armed groups. Imagine, slitting a throat. He was crying but all I could do was take him home for the day."*

A teacher from Torodi, Niger. Testimony gathered by Teoma Mamadou Ousseini

There is no psychological follow-up programme for girls and boys who have been displaced. In addition, teachers do not have the training or tools to support children with psychological trauma if and when they return to school.

Beyond the constant fear generated by insecurity, Koné argues that the social norm that prioritises boys’ education over girls’ education may be amplified. In the context of school closure, saturation of school capacities and lack of financial means, girls are the first to leave or be taken out of school.

*"A girl studying is not as important as a boy studying because she is destined to marry and to be taken care of by a man. However, the boy must fight because he is called to become a father and to take responsibility."*

A father of in a displaced family, in Burkina Faso. Testimony gathered by Flora Koné

### **Promising practices and gaps in governments’ responses to the education crisis for IDPs and impact on girls’ education**

To address the challenge of children leaving school because of armed conflicts, the authorities in Niger have put in place strategies like the creation of school cluster centres (*centres de regroupement scolaires*) and reception schools (*écoles d'accueil*). Under the lead of the Ministries of Primary and Secondary Education, the Government of Niger has instructed all schools to accept every displaced child applying for enrolment throughout the academic year.

Such political efforts led to many parents re-enrolling their children in schools, but the enrolment rate dropped a few months after the implementation of the education recovery strategy for displaced children.

*"When we created these centres, we even included some of them in the bush. However, the parents thought that girls would be provided with food kits and full coverage of the costs related to their education. But a month to two months later, these parents realised that it was not the case, so they started removing their daughters from school to keep them at home."*

A young girl leader, Torodi, Niger. Testimony gathered by Teoma Mamadou Ousseini

Ousseini found that when displaced girls in Torodi are re-enrolled in school, their academic performance is significantly weaker than that of their classmates. There are no refresher or reintegration programmes, or mental health counselling to support them. The resulting decline in their academic achievement is a factor in their exclusion from school.

Some community-based strategies have been put in place, as described in Ousseini's case study:

- During holidays, a summer class was set up in collaboration with young activists, young girl leaders and non-governmental organisations. Providing refresher classes, the programme aimed to improve the performance of displaced young people at the primary school level. However, after a few weeks, enrolment stagnated and enrolled students began to leave because the support parents had expected – including food and school supplies – was not provided.
- There is support for school supplies from the technical and financial partners of the Departmental Directorate of Education. However, this support is insufficient, poorly distributed and restricted to primary schools.
- Internally displaced girls who re-enrol face difficulty accessing health care in schools. Support for displaced people comes from organisations like Word Vision, APIS, Save the Children, UNICEF, and others, but there is no specific strategy for displaced schoolgirls in Torodi. Two types of health issues that are most frequently reported in Ousseini's case study are abdominal pain and genital infections.

Burkina Faso has a multitude of official and non-official sites, which receive a large number of internally displaced persons. Koné demonstrates the extent to which the government does not consider non-official reception sites for displaced persons, impacting on girls' ability to continue their education. The crisis particularly affects women and children, who account for 84% of displaced persons.

Deprived of income, personal property and even identity documents, most IDPs struggle to meet their basic needs, including shelter, food security, health and water. In the Pazani district, most schools are private, with tuition fees of about 30,000 CFA francs for primary classes and between 65,000 and 90,000 CFA francs for secondary classes. Unable to pay for all their children to go to school, parents are forced to choose, often at the expense of girls' education.

Of the 275 children going to school in Pazani, more than 40% are girls who study with the uncertainty of not being able to pay school fees. Some of the displaced schoolgirls declared that they hope persons of goodwill, charities, associations or organisations will help them pay their school fees.

*"I am often dismissed for non-payment of schooling but every morning I go to school with the hope that by the time we enrol for the baccalaureate exam, a benevolent person would help me by paying for my entire school fees."*

A 17-year-old schoolgirl in Pazani, Burkina Faso. Testimony gathered by Flora Koné

Koné elaborates on the limited state support and failure to implement emergency education policy. In its strategy to assist IDPs, the state favours official IDP sites.<sup>33</sup> The Pazani IDP site – though it has hosted more than 1,300 IDPs – is not recognised as an official site. During a state visit to Pazani, the government asked IDPs to return to their places of origin (Foubé, Barsalogho, Sirgadji, etc.). However, according to the IDP population, they cannot return because of the trauma and ongoing insecurity experienced in their places of origin.

According to IDPs, most of the government's actions are restricted to donations of food; school subsidies are rare. In Koné's case study, several IDPs complained about this.

*"We have been here for three years, and I remember, once, they [the government] came to share school kits with our children, like bags and notebooks, without worrying about their enrolment in primary or secondary schools."*

An internally displaced mother, Pazani, Burkina Faso. Testimony gathered by Flora Koné

Koné quotes a school director in the area, who said he was always keen to help internally displaced children, but that he needed the goodwill of the state to support the school. He had accepted 94.5% of internally displaced persons, 40% of whom were girls, but despite his request for government support, the lack of state funding left him with no choice but to expel some students, despite their excellent results:

*"The school can only be functional with the funds coming from students' tuition fees and an institution with deficits in tuition fees is necessarily a disappearing institution."*

School director from Pazani, Burkina Faso. Testimony gathered by Flora Koné

Several non-state stakeholders have supported displaced girls' education. Koné gives the example of Credo, a non-governmental organisation which supported more than 70 children to go to school in 2019, providing them with material support. They also helped parents to find sponsors for longer-term support.

Other isolated actions are led by stakeholders like L'Association pour le Bonheur des Personnes Nécessiteuses (ABPN), which provided cash transfers for a dozen girls – mostly at primary level – in 2022. The Youth Network of the Ministry of Humanitarian Action also provided tuition fees support for 11 girls in Pazani in 2022. However, such emergency education efforts may not be sustainable.

### **The experiences of internally displaced girls who re-enrol in school and out-of-school girls**

For girls who have been internally displaced, psychological trauma, the feeling of insecurity and restricted freedom, family separation and concerns about not being able to satisfy basic needs often result in a lack of concentration and motivation at school. Girls also report the psychological violence of not being able to do as well as other classmates, or not having access to the same comfort. The frustration around deprivation, in particular, leads some internally displaced girls to adopt other strategies for accessing financial resources, at the expense of their education.



## CASE STUDY

### The life of a girl who has been forcibly displaced to Torodi, Niger

Life story gathered by Teoma Mamadou Ousseini.

Halimatou is a 16-year-old displaced girl from the commune of Tchouridi, in the department of Torodi. Her community was affected by an increase in violence by armed groups, which caused the closure of schools. To allow Halimatou to continue her studies, her parents decided to send her to Torodi to live with a host family.

Halimatou faces several difficulties in pursuing her studies. She explains that she does not have the necessary learning materials to properly prepare for the upcoming exams. She also has the feeling of not being at the same level of understanding as her classmates, who live in the city of Torodi. She has no money to buy books, her parents cannot afford it and her guardian in Torodi does not have the resources to help her beyond what he already does for her.

*"Every morning I walk a long distance before coming to school. The house where I live is on one side whereas my school is on the opposite side. I walk 30 minutes to go to school. I don't have money to pay for a snack during recess. I have to wait to go home to eat something."*

With the destruction of telephone networks by armed groups, girls who are displaced can often barely access information related to their village or families. To access the information, Halimatou goes to the weekly market of Torodi, where she waits all day to look for inhabitants from her village who might share information from her home.

Limited access to financial resources for families and displaced girls plays a decisive role in girls' experience. Parents who remain in conflict-affected villages do not engage in income-generating activities and have limited cash. As economic coping strategies, some displaced girls go to Torodi market to sell items, with no guarantee of earning enough money. They may also have to support their family by taking on paid domestic work, often preventing them from staying at school.

The economic vulnerability of internally displaced girls may also expose them to transactional sex. Displaced girls have limited to no access to information on the risks and consequences of transactional sex, particularly with regards their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Although the data is limited, unwanted adolescent pregnancies are reported in Torodi and the stigma, and complex circumstances around adolescent and/or out-of-marriage pregnancies are significant barriers to displaced girls' education.

In her case study, Koné explores how the mass drop-out of internally displaced girls in Pazani jeopardises their future and comes with consequences like child marriage, exploitation and child labour. The security crisis has significantly increased the risks of child, early and forced marriage, with some expressing fears about the increase in the number of child marriages as a result of deepening poverty.

According to one respondent from Koné's case study, child marriage has emerged as a predictable solution to have "one less mouth to feed". Other respondents insisted that a girl who is no longer attending school, and does not work, is to be married. In Pazani, dozens of girls are married before age 18, often after leaving school due to insecurity and its devastating consequences.

In the context of forced displacement, children – particularly girls – are more likely to experience sexual violence, including rape, attempted rape, sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexual exploitation and abuse, sexual slavery and/or trafficking, and transactional and survival sex. In Burkina Faso, more than 6% of reported cases of sexual abuse occurred during displacement.

## CASE STUDY

### **The impacts of child marriage as a negative coping strategy during displacement in Burkina Faso**

Mariam is 16 years old and fled the armed conflicts in the Sahel region to take refuge in Pazani. Her village was attacked when she was in fourth grade. Due to multiple conflicts and threats, her school was closed, and she fled with her family.

Once in Ouagadougou, Mariam's parents used the resources from the sale of livestock to send her two brothers to school. They thought it would be best for Mariam to marry to reduce the number of mouths to feed, even though she wanted to go back to school. She became a stay-at-home single mother after her husband left. She is now the head of a household.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Strengthen IDP care mechanisms by registering those living in official and informal sites.
2. Strengthen the implementation and financing of emergency education policies with an emphasis on an integrated/gender-transformative approach for internally displaced girls.
3. Ensure the voices of girls who are internally displaced are rigorously and systematically taken into account in policies and programmes.
4. Strengthen support to education sector actors to provide better care for girls who have been displaced.
5. Integrate mental health into the reintegration of IDP children into school.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO STRENGTHEN YOUTH-LED RESEARCH

The young researchers issued specific recommendations for local decision-makers, national governments, and civil society organisations and networks – particularly national end child marriage and education coalitions – in Burkina Faso and Niger. These were outlined in each section of the report and are summarised in the conclusion below.

The following recommendations are based on the young researchers' findings. They provide specific guidance for *Girls Not Brides* and LASDEL – and other organisations working in the education and child marriage fields – to improve youth-led research and advocacy efforts at the local, national and regional levels.

1. Strengthen capacity enhancement on advocacy for young researchers.

2. Continue the work with young researchers, so the finalised documents can be used in advocacy at the national and international level.
3. Foster networking of young researchers with other young activists engaged in research and advocacy in other regions and thematic areas.
4. Allocate more time to conduct research and strengthen mentorship processes.
5. Ensure young researchers have the appropriate ICT tools to conduct the research and participate in trainings.
6. Support researchers to access relevant literature and documentation.
7. Use young researchers' findings to inform advocacy efforts at the local, national and international levels.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper builds on case studies conducted by nine young researchers from Burkina Faso and Niger on two interdependent and urgent issues in West Africa: child marriage and girls' education. The research aims to create a supportive environment for under-represented groups to voice their concerns and be visible in decision-making processes. The research is based on a decolonial and feminist conceptual framework, incorporating feminist theory, activist research and critical discourse analysis.

The research findings are intended to support advocacy and policymaking efforts to address child marriage and girls' education in West Africa. The research also challenges conventional notions around knowledge validity by providing opportunities for young advocates to be involved in the production and dissemination of knowledge. This conclusion summarises the findings and recommendations generated by the young researchers.

### **Making space for girls' voices to shift the discourses around social norms in child marriage and girls' education**

In Part 1, the young researchers provided a critical examination of girls' agency and the overall power dynamics in decision-making processes in child marriage and girls' education. This section sharpens our understanding of how some rigid social norms and peer pressure exacerbate the risk of child marriage and girls' lack of access to education.

The central focus of the study on girls' participation in decision-making processes in child marriage is around the persisting idealistic representation of marriage, widely circulated by mass and social media, which prioritises it above other pathways to success for girls. The view of child marriage and girls' education within the community and among parents is also shaped by concerns of exclusion and the need for social protection.

**As entry points to the West African context, the researchers highlight the importance of:**

1. Promoting female role models who have achieved academic and professional success, so that girls can identify with them and adapt their own aspirations.

2. Using information and communication technologies and media platforms to reshape the prevailing discourse around child marriage, with a particular focus on the advantages of girls' education.
3. Enhancing the cultural pertinence of community advocacy efforts, by promoting the development of new narratives around child marriage and girls' education.

### **Towards an integrated and inclusive approach to supporting girls involved in paid and unpaid work**

In Part 2, the young researchers explored the impact of economic factors on girls' education and child marriage. The section elaborates on their involvement in domestic work and participation in income-generating activities, which limit their educational opportunities and increase the risk of child marriage.

The young researchers argue that girls' engagement in economic activities can be linked to the need to meet everyday familial expenses, unforeseen health crises, and the responsibility of fulfilling educational responsibilities for younger children in contexts of multidimensional poverty and climate change crises. This section provides an in-depth look at the experiences of girls who 1) go to school and are engaged in paid or unpaid domestic work; 2) left school to work full-time as domestic workers; and 3) have never been to school and work full-time as domestic workers.

#### **Key recommendations for mitigating the impact of paid and unpaid work undertaken by girls include:**

1. Advocating for the provision of comprehensive support for education-related expenses for girls who face the highest risk of interrupting their education, covering school fees, learning materials and other related costs.
2. Improving access to education for girls who are married, parenting and/or who are not already enrolled in school
3. Advocating for vocational training opportunities for girls.

### **A call for quality, inclusive and culturally relevant education**

In Part 3, the young researchers show how girls' access to education and protection from child marriage are influenced by the quality of the learning environment. They also explored communities' perception of schools as sites of immorality and as unfavourable environments for females to assimilate into society. Boys' demand for education is higher than girls' due to high opportunity costs for girls. The prevailing belief that marrying girls is a safer choice than pursuing an education is also reinforced by the increase in school violence and the decline in the quality of learning and school infrastructure.

#### **The young researchers urge:**

1. A fundamental change in the emphasis of advocacy efforts, shifting from a focus on access to education to one centred on the promotion of quality and inclusive education.

2. The implementation of structural reforms in the education system to foster gender-transformative education, and to rethink school infrastructures and environments to mitigate absenteeism for girls.
3. The advancement of culturally relevant education.

### Safeguarding internally displaced girls' rights through education in conflict settings

In Part 4, two young researchers elaborate on how armed conflicts have resulted in massive internal displacement and closure of schools, leading to psychological distress and deprivation which disproportionately affect girls. They also note significant disparity in early school leaving between girls and boys, as parents particularly fear for girls' safety.

Governments have developed several recovery initiatives; but have not adequately addressed the challenges faced by girls who are displaced. For example, material support is not sufficient, and girls often struggle with academic performance. The security crisis has the risk of forced marriages and sexual violence. Despite these challenges, there are promising practices and gaps in government responses to the education in emergency settings.

#### Some critical recommendations include:

1. Enhancing the effectiveness of systems for providing care to internally displaced persons by ensuring the registration of IDPs residing in official and informal sites
2. Improving the implementation and funding of emergency education initiatives, with a particular focus on a holistic and gender-transformative approach for girls who have been displaced
3. Carefully and consistently including the perspectives of internally displaced girls in policies and programmes.
4. Expanding state support for stakeholders in the education sector working to improve the wellbeing and empowerment of internally displaced girls.
5. Incorporating mental health aspects into the reintegration of IDP children into school.

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