

BREAKING THE BONDS OF CHILDHOOD MARRIAGE

How young girls in West Africa are helping themselves (and their communities) by changing cultural perspectives on childhood marriage

POSTED BY ALANNA MITCHELL ON SEPTEMBER 19, 2018

If you are female in the African countries of Niger and Mali, you are more likely to be married as a child than as an adult.

In Niger, a landlocked country in West Africa, 76 per cent of girls become brides before they turn 18. In neighbouring Mali, the figure is 61 per cent. In many cases, the girls are only 13, says Ramata Thioune, a senior program specialist with the International Development Research Centre who is based in Nairobi, Kenya. Some are married at 10.

Niger and Mali are not alone. Six of the world's top 10 countries for early female marriage are in West Africa, Thioune says.

There is one bright spot. A 2017 UNICEF [report](#) found that, while still high, the rate of child marriage has dropped by a fifth across West and Central Africa since 1990.

But fast population growth in the same region means that the sheer number of girls is also growing and therefore so is the number of child brides. By 2050, the number of girls under the age of 18 will be 250 million, more than three times as many as in 1990. Even with declining rates of childhood marriage, that's still a lot of girls married too young.

The physical dangers are well documented, Thioune says. Child brides often become pregnant swiftly. Because they are not necessarily fully grown, rates of maternal and infant death are high. Obstetrical complications are common.

Not only that, but when girls get married so early, they leave school, sharply reducing their ability to earn money throughout their lives. They get left behind economically. So do their families, communities and nations.

What to do about such a complex issue?

A three-year, \$1.1-million IDRC-funded [project with Women in Law and Development in Africa](#), (WiLDAF), is trying to address the problem by teaching girls in Niger, Mali and Togo to become their own advocates.

The idea is to tell the girls about their own rights as women and as human beings and enhance their agency. "If we try to empower girls, they will be able to take initiatives and fight against early marriage in their community and their country," says Kafui Adjamagbo-Johnson, coordinator of WiLDAF for West Africa, which manages the project.

The barriers are formidable because the program goes directly to the heart of how women are perceived within their communities. Traditional beliefs dictate that women are made to serve men, Adjamagbo-Johnson says. Marriage is an agreement between two families, often for economic gain, rather than a love match. Because a husband must support his wife and her family, some families see early mar-



Three women hold a poster promoting civil marriage during a forum about child marriage with traditional and religious leaders in Sokode, Togo. (Photo: WILDAF)

riage as a way out of family poverty. Additionally, when a girl marries, the family saves the money it would have paid for her school fees.

Learning about their rights has been transformative for many in the pilot project, Adjamagbo-Johnson says. Girls became excited about the possibilities for them to remain in school, be trained and find work before getting married. It gave them confidence.

They also learned how to figure out which power brokers in the community reinforce the idea that girls should be married young. Often, they are male family members or the father's older sister. In many cases, they are also the village's traditional or religious leaders.

Then it's a question of teaching the girls how to reshape those views. The lessons get repeated over months.

Project leaders in each community taught young girls how to talk to people in positions of power. The girls then went into villages to practice their communication skills, using words and images to argue their case.

Eventually, some of the girls sought meetings with the traditional leaders in their communities to lay out the benefits of later marriage — and got them. Several of the girls attended a high-level meeting in Senegal to outline the case for later marriage and a handful also went to New York City to press their case at a meeting of the [United Nations Commission on the Status of Women](#).

"The fact is that they are doing the work," says Adjamagbo-Johnson. "And people are listening to them."

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READING AS THINKING

1. Before reading the article, read its title and look at the picture and its caption. Describe what you think the poster being held by the three women is trying to communicate:

After reading the article, answer the following questions.

2. Despite being aware of the physical, emotional and economic dangers associated with childhood marriage, many families in Niger, Mali and Togo choose to have their daughters marry young. Why?

3. WiLDAF is teaching girls to become advocates against childhood marriage. Why is it so important to have girls fulfilling this role?

4. Think about some of the people in your life that are married (e.g., parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, teachers, bus drivers, coaches, etc.). Fill in the table below:

In what countries did they get married?	
Approximately how old were they when they married?	
Did they get to plan their wedding?	
What events/celebrations took place during their wedding?	

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5. Now think specifically about some of the women in your life that are married (e.g., mothers, sisters, aunts, grandmothers, female teachers, etc.). Fill in the table below:

<p>How do you think their lives would be different if they had been married between the ages of 10 and 13? Provide specific examples.</p>	
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6. Design your own poster, like the one in the picture, that could be used by organizations such as UNICEF or WILDAF to promote safe marriage practices in West Africa.

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Think-Pair-Share

7. *Think*
 - a) Using the article and the [report](#) produced by UNICEF in 2017, identify three statistics that encompass the negative impacts associated with childhood marriages in West Africa and Central Africa.
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 - b) Now identify three statistics that you feel summarize the future outlook on childhood marriages in these regions.
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8. *Pair*
 - a) Compare the statistics you chose with the ones chosen by a fellow classmate.
 - b) With your classmate, research marriage statistics for a country outside of Africa using the [UN Data/Interactive Data on Marriages and Unions](#).
 - c) Now research how certain factors (e.g., population size, geography, culture, political structure, economy, education system, etc.) differ between West Africa and Central Africa and the country you chose. Do these factors help explain potential differences in marriage statistics? How?

9. *Share*
 - a) Have students share their research results with the class by creating graphs, tables or charts that compare data from West Africa and Central Africa with data from their chosen countries. Use this opportunity to help your students learn Microsoft PowerPoint.
 - b) As a class, or in groups of four to six, have your students write and present a skit or play that communicates the ongoing issues related to early marriage, and current efforts to reduce associated impacts. Consider the following:
 - It may help to include a “narrator” who helps to tell the story or clarify the message
 - Give your students time to brainstorm whether the skit will be presented in a light-hearted or serious manner
 - Write a script
 - Narrow the focus by choosing a known incident in history or a current issue being discussed in the media
 - Incorporate educational facts in the script

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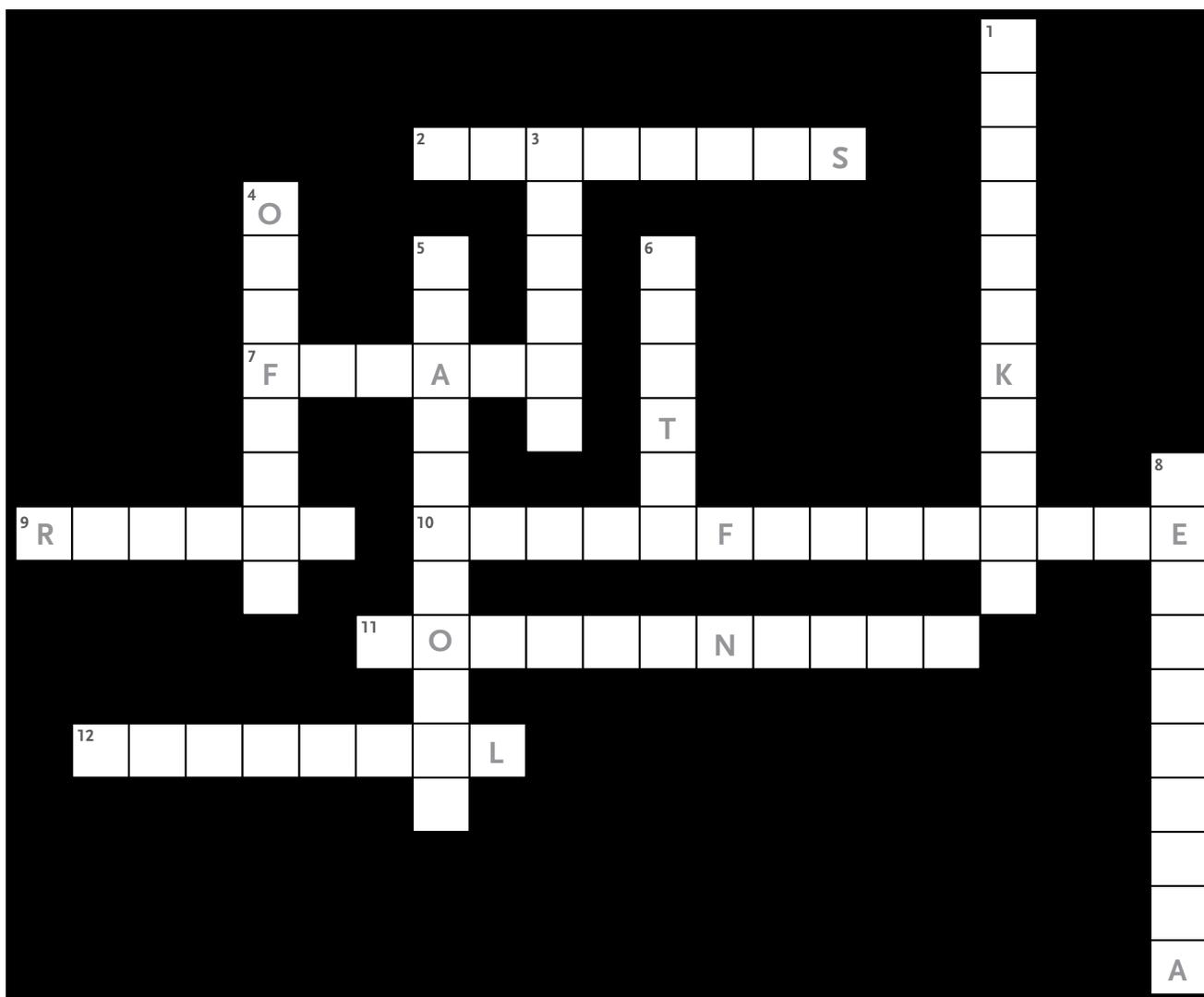
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ONLINE

1. Explore the [UNICEF data page](#) on child marriage. Journal articles explaining issues such as the effects of young maternal age on child growth and the progress and prospects related to ending child marriage are also available.
2. UNICEF also has a [Q & A document](#) about global data related to child marriage.
3. [Girls not Brides](#) is a global leader in early marriage education.
4. Visit the [United Nations Population Fund](#) for information on how to explain that child marriage is a human rights violation.
5. The [International Center for Research on Women](#) is leading efforts to find solutions that will eliminate the harmful traditional practice of child marriage.
6. [The World Bank](#) has infographics, charts and videos that explain the global state of child marriage.
7. [The Council on Foreign Relations](#) provides links between geography and child marriage.
8. [World Vision](#) recently published a motivational story from the point of view of Fatou, a 17 year-old from Senegal.

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CROSSWORD:

Across

- Girls can travel to these places to talk to people in positions of power
- In some African countries, you are more likely to be married as a child if you are this
- Empowering girls means teaching them about these
- The word used by girls to describe their experience with the pilot project
- Kafui Adjamagbo-Johnson's position with the WiLDAF project
- Complications that arise when girls become pregnant at a young age lead to this type of danger

Down

- The location of the meeting of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (three words)
- People of power need to do this when presented with cases outlining the benefits of later marriage (two words)
- the rate of child marriage has dropped by this amount in West and Central Africa since 1990 (two words)
- This type of belief dictates that women are made to serve men
- Lessons provided by the pilot project get repeated over this period of time
- Six of the world's top 10 countries for early female marriage are here (two words)