

# Why Ending Child Marriage Needs to Be an Education Goal

The Case for Improved Coordination between Ending Child Marriage and Girls' Education Movements in West Africa

Judith-Ann Walker



**E**nding child marriage is critical for girls' rights, health, wellbeing and ability to survive into adulthood. Ending child marriage lessens the burden on health infrastructure and reduces the human footprint of resource poor countries. It reduces human suffering, recognizes human dignity and challenges gender based discrimination. Ultimately, ending child marriage frees untapped human resources and enables girls and women to more effectively contribute to global human development.<sup>1</sup>

Yet progress has been limited, particularly in West Africa, one of the world's child marriage hot spots. Five of the 10 countries with the highest rates of child marriage worldwide are in West Africa.<sup>2</sup> In 2011, of 14.9 million females in West Africa between the ages of 20 and 24 years, 6.2 million, or 42 percent, were married before the age of 18.<sup>3</sup> With 167 million people, Nigeria

has the largest population of married girls in Africa: 39.4 percent of all females in Nigeria between the ages of 20 to 24 were married before the age of 18 by 2011.

One highly fruitful but not yet fully tapped strategy is to use girls' education as a mechanism for reducing child marriage. Enabling all girls to have primary education would reduce child marriage rates by a sixth.<sup>4</sup> For each additional year that a girl delays marriage, her likelihood of being literate increases by 5.6 percent and the prospect of her secondary school completion rises by 6.5 percent.<sup>5</sup> Increasing girls' education in West Africa is a particularly significant strategy given that more than 80 percent of out of school girls aged 10-14 have never attended school and are at risk of early marriage.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, there is a newly emerged global consensus on the importance of girls' education as a

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strategy to combat child marriage—but it has yet to be translated into action in West Africa.

This paper argues that in West Africa there is a fundamental policy disconnect between educationalists and actors who are working to end child marriage that must be bridged urgently. In support of this argument, the paper first examines the issue of child marriage and its global prevalence. Four approaches to girls' education in relation to ending child marriage are examined, as a basis for showing that although actors have different ways of approaching girls' education as a strategy to end child marriage, at the global level, there is an increasing recognition of the need for convergence between approaches. Despite this growing global consensus, in West Africa a policy disconnect exists that hinders effective action and as a result severely limits progress on girls' education and ending child marriage.

As evidence of the disconnect between the work of advocates against child marriage and educationalists in West Africa, this paper reviews dy-

namics at both the local and global levels. Interviews with West African bureaucrats shed light on key obstacles to tackling child marriage in this region. Also at the regional level, recent meetings and policy relevant convenings are reviewed to show the disjuncture between policy and action on girls' education and child marriage. At the global level, the paper reviews the education sector plans (ESPs) submitted by West African countries to the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). These present an opportunity to integrate girls' education and child marriage goals through a bottom up, country driven planning process that drives implementation. Yet this study finds that ESPs also fail to integrate the goals of ending child marriage within the ESP's girls' education components. The paper offers explanations for the missed opportunity of the separate paths of girls' education and ending child marriage taken in West Africa and concludes with recommendations and a call to action for actors at the global, regional, national and subnational levels.

## CHILD MARRIAGE PRACTICE AND PREVALENCE

### **What Is Child Marriage?**

**C**hild marriage is a formal marriage or an informal union before the age of 18 years, before a girl is psychologically, physically and physiologically prepared for marriage and childbearing.<sup>7</sup> It is a harmful traditional practice and a form of gender based violence driven by both demand and supply factors; shaped by cultural traditions, religious belief and poverty; and exacerbated by vulnerability. The consequences of child marriage are felt at both the individual and societal levels; while it has a negative impact on girls' health, social status and life chances, the practice likewise overburdens the social, public health and economic infrastructure of poor nations and threatens global notions of human security and sustainable development. It is therefore a "hidden crisis" that has begun to garner the attention of global actors in both developing and developed countries.

### **What Is the Global Prevalence of Child Marriage?**

Globally, the prevalence of child marriage is on a downward trajectory, falling from 51 percent in 1955 to 40 percent in 1990.<sup>8</sup> However, the growth of the world's adolescent population from 400 million in 1950 to 1.2 billion in 2010 means that the sheer number of married girls or girls at risk of being married at an early age is greater than at any point in history. More than one third of the world's adolescent population resides in countries that are hot spots for child marriage, 338 million in South Asia and 94 million in West and Central Africa.<sup>9</sup> While data on child marriage rates vary according to sources, most researchers agree that the problem is worse than it appears as the practice is generally underreported.

Rates of child marriage are highest in rural areas, among poor households and in areas where a large proportion of girls are out of school. One-third of the world's female population is married before the age of 18, and 1 in 9 girls is married before age 15.<sup>10</sup> In 2011, an estimated 1 in 3 women between the ages of 20 and 24—nearly 70 million—had been married before the age of 18.<sup>11</sup> In developing countries, 9 out of 10 births to adolescent girls occur within a marriage or a union. Complications arising from pregnancy are the main cause of death among girls age 14 to 15 in the developing world.<sup>12</sup>

Nearly half the world's child brides live in Asia (excluding China), and South Asia is home to the highest number of child brides.<sup>13</sup> As of 2011, 46 percent of women age 20 to 24 had been married before the age of 18 in South Asia, and 18 percent married before age 15.<sup>14</sup> West and Central Africa have the second highest incidence of child marriage, at 41 percent,<sup>15</sup> and five West African countries (Niger, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso and Sierra Leone) are among the top 20 countries with the highest rates of child marriage. One West African nation—Niger—has the highest prevalence in the world, with 75 percent of its female population married before the age of 18 and the lowest median age of marriage (15.7 years).<sup>16</sup> While the rate of child marriage has declined in some countries with an otherwise high rate, such as Ethiopia and Nepal, its prevalence has nonetheless remained constant over the past decade—from 50 to 48 percent in rural areas, and 24 to 23 percent in urban areas.<sup>17</sup>

There are significant overlaps between child marriage and poverty, particularly where girls face limited economic and educational opportunities and, in turn, are highly dependent on

male breadwinners. Girls in poor households are nearly twice as likely to marry before the age of 18 than girls from higher income households.<sup>18</sup> Dowry, bride wealth or bride price, and other practices surrounding marriage likewise create economic incentives for early marriage, as families may pay lower dowries when marrying off young daughters, and young brides can sometimes fetch higher bride prices from a groom's family.<sup>19</sup>

Linked with economic determinants is the role of social norms and regional or national instability in contributing to the prevalence of child marriage. In some countries, unequal gender norms may cause parents to place less value

on a daughter, to view her as a drain on family resources, and to invest less in her education, skills, and potential—all of which reinforces the practice of marrying girls off at a young age.<sup>20</sup> Early marriage may also be seen as a safeguard against premarital sex, sexual harassment and violence. Regional and national instability and humanitarian crises—such as conflict, natural disasters and displacement—may make girls more vulnerable to early marriage.<sup>21</sup> In such situations, parents may marry off daughters to obtain some income, “to preserve resources by offloading economic responsibility for their girl,” or to offer girls protection against sexual violence.<sup>22</sup>

## THE EMERGING GLOBAL CONSENSUS ON GIRLS' EDUCATION AS A STRATEGY TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

### **Four Historical Approaches to Girls' Education and Ending Child Marriage**

Historically, there have been four approaches to girls' education related to the goal of ending child marriage. Two of these approaches originated in development thinking and two relate to human rights. The development approaches have stressed the many benefits of education and have noted that ending child marriage is an important positive subsequent effect—essentially, that is, an externality of development programs. As development programs have become more prescriptive, so too has the ability to design programs and policies in order to affect this externality. For the human rights perspective,

child marriage must be addressed directly (not as an externality) through the education system and the education system must empower girls to transcend institutionalized discrimination and gender based violence in the social structure. Traditionally, these different orientations led to different approaches toward addressing the problem of child marriage. This paper argues that convergence at the global level between these approaches has recently emerged, providing a more coherent set of prescriptions for how girls' education can effectively combat child marriage. The four approaches are detailed in appendix 1 and briefly described below. Figure 1 shows the growing convergence between these approaches at the level of global discourse.

1. *The social benefits approach* has its origins in the girls' education and fertility literature of the 1950s. This approach presents a scientific case for how education contributes to a

FIGURE 1. APPROACHES TO END CHILD MARRIAGE THROUGH EDUCATION AND EMERGING POINTS OF CONVERGENCE



delay in the age of first marriage, as a result of keeping girls in school. Education leads to many social benefits and contributes to development. Delayed fertility is one of these; delayed marriage is a related positive externality of education but not a primary focus. It is worth noting that as development approaches have become more sophisticated, interventions such as conditional cash transfers have been able to consider the impact of design elements on early marriage.

2. *The economic benefits approach* draws from the discourses on economic empowerment and technical education to demonstrate the benefits of nonformal education to the individual girl in terms of income generation alternatives to child marriage. The literature stems from early economic growth models in which the labor of men and women was valued as a key factor of production and child marriage was perceived as a barrier to females being able to participate in the labor force and to contribute to the growth of underdeveloped economies. As in the social benefits approach, ending child marriage may be seen as a positive externality of providing girls with a viable economic pathway.
3. *The education as empowerment approach* is rooted in feminists' critique of instrumental education approaches. Contributors to this approach recognize early marriage as a form of gender based violence and seek out alternatives to this practice. Recognizing the transformative nature of education, the gender responsive curriculum is the platform for developing this consciousness. In this approach, ending child marriage is an explicit goal.
4. *The legal approach* permeates the works of development agencies such as Action Aid,

PLAN and CARE. Where this approach focuses on child marriage, it focuses on the rights of girls to access free and compulsory education at secondary school level as an alternative to child marriage and also champions international and national laws on the legal age of marriage, birth registration and enforcement related to these laws. Ending child marriage is an explicit goal of this approach.

### ***The New Global Consensus: Girls' Education as a Leading Strategy to End Child Marriage***

How can child marriage be ended? This is a question that development thinkers have wrestled with since the postindependence era. After 60 years of debates and discussions, the past five years have witnessed clarity and convergence in the answer to this question as the global community now seems united in the view that girls' education offers the best strategy for ending child marriage. While the girls' education idea to end child marriage is not a new one, for the first time, think tanks, global development implementers and scholars are united in this recommendation.

While think tanks and girl centered global non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have done much of the background thinking on this issue within the past five years, by 2012 multilateral development agencies more clearly recognized the new linkage between ending child marriage and promoting girls' education and mapped out tactical directions for the development community and countries with high rates of child marriage. The turning point for multilateral global leadership came with the UN Secretary General's message on child marriage and girls'

education at the inaugural Day of the Girl Child in 2012:

Education for girls is one of the best strategies for protecting girls against child marriage. When they are able to stay in school and avoid being married early, girls can build a foundation for a better life for themselves and their families. And if they have already been married young, access to education, economic opportunities and health services—including HIV prevention and sexual and reproductive health—will help enrich their lives and enhance their future.<sup>23</sup>

The theme of ending child marriage through girls' education continued to dominate press releases and calls to action by UN agencies for the 2013 International Day of the Girl Child.<sup>24</sup> This new perspective seems set to influence the future development agenda as early releases of the 2014–2015 Education for All *Global Monitoring Report* make the case for the linkage between girls' education and ending child marriage: "If all women had a primary education, child marriages and child mortality could fall by a sixth, and maternal deaths by two-thirds."<sup>25</sup>

The contemporary consensus that child marriage can be ended through girls' education is the result of thoughtful contributions by multiple agencies and actors at the global level. These include multilateral agencies, such as the World Bank and other various UN agencies; independent think tanks, scholars and research agencies, such as the Council for Foreign Relations and the International Center for Research on Women; bilateral agencies, such as the U.K. Department for International Development (DfID)

and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID); and global NGOs and networks, such as the Population Council, World Vision, Oxfam, PLAN, CARE and Girls Not Brides. Getting girls at risk of child marriage into primary schools and keeping them in school through the secondary level is the point of departure and the minimum standard for contemporary voices concerned with ending child marriage through girls' education. The World Bank focuses on keeping girls in schools by reducing the cost of education through transfer payments, while the Population Council draws attention to alternative and nonformal learning environments that can also accommodate married adolescents.

Beyond access, however, agencies and thinkers shaping global policy in this area argue for critical attitude changes among opinion leaders toward girls' education as well as changes to the education system, the school environment and the pedagogy of the curriculum. For girls' education to end child marriage, they argue, community leaders must be educated through awareness creation programs. But even this is not enough, as the education system needs to be reformed by improving quality and recruiting more female teachers, and regulations must be put in place to give married adolescents a second chance at education. There is also general agreement among those currently working in the field that the school environment must be made safe and secure and that girls' sanitation and hygiene needs must be met. The pedagogy of the curriculum must be empowering for girls by providing life skills and marketable aptitudes that will give girls a viable alternative to early marriage.

The contemporary research examining the linkages between child marriage and girls' education

draws on a range of epistemologies to come up with clear characteristics of what the education system and its environment must look like if child marriage is to be transcended. Put simply, girls at risk of child marriage must be targeted as a prevention strategy, the wider environment and the school system must be enabling to address the needs of girls at risk, and married adolescents and the content of the curriculum must be empowering through quality and relevance.

These core factors are picked up in new convergence literature constituting minimum standards of what the education system should look like if it is to end child marriage.<sup>26</sup> However, the convergence literature also picks up specific recommendations from each of the four groups

of research on how girls' education can end child marriage. For example, the new buzz around common cores of teaching is drawn from the social benefits approach; recommendations on skills training derive from the economic benefits approach; the focus on family life education is drawn from the empowerment approach; and concerns about school safety and reforming regulations to accommodate married adolescents are drawn from the legal approach to education. The influence of these four paradigms is seen in the recent contribution of the UN Special Envoy for Global Education, Gordon Brown, which makes the case for girls' education as an antidote to child marriage by prescribing strategies drawn from all four approaches.

## THE DISCONNECT: HOW THE GLOBAL CONSENSUS FAILS TO TRANSLATE INTO POLICY AND PRACTICE IN WEST AFRICA

**D**espite the growing global consensus that girls' education is a key strategy to ending child marriage, and despite the emerging convergence in prescriptions for how this can be done, there remains a gap between those working to promote girls' education and those working to end child marriage in West Africa. Across the region, this message of the global consensus has not gotten through as both sets of policies have come to be implemented separately, with no deliberate points of overlap or synergy. The work continues in two separate spheres. The result is that neither education nor work on ending child marriage is maximally effective.

As discussed below, the evidence shows that while there has been progress in girls' education in West Africa, this progress has been

narrowly shaped by a movement driven by the (1) the nonformal and mass literacy movements; (2) constitutional and education policy reform; (3) the regional policy guidelines of the African Union and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); and (4) state accession to global treaties and alignment. On a parallel track to these streams of girls' education initiatives there have been interventions to end child marriage focusing on the law and the minimum legal age of marriage on the one hand and reproductive health services for married adolescents on the other hand. This is discussed in more detail below.

In order to understand the nature of these now siloed approaches, this section of the paper reviews the status of child marriage and girls' education in the West African region along with evidence at the regional and global levels of the policy disconnect between efforts in these two areas.

## THE STATUS OF EFFORTS TO END CHILD MARRIAGE AND TO PROMOTE GIRLS' EDUCATION IN WEST AFRICA: DIFFERENT ACTORS, DIFFERENT MOVEMENTS AND A CLEAR POLICY DISCONNECT

### Ending Child Marriage

Five of the 10 countries with the highest rates of child marriage worldwide are in West Africa.<sup>27</sup> The highest rates are in Niger and Chad with 76.6 percent and 71.5 percent respectively,<sup>28</sup> with Niger remaining among the top five countries for over 10 years (box 1).<sup>29</sup> Of 14.9 million females in West Africa between the ages of 20 and 24, 6.2 million, or 42 percent, were married before the age of 18 by 2011.<sup>30</sup> The pattern of child marriage in West Africa takes on the feature of very early marriage (table 1). More than half of married adolescents in Niger and Chad were married by 15 or earlier, and 18 percent of Nigeria's married adolescents in the age range of 20 to 24 were married at 15 or younger. Only Bangladesh and Ethiopia share a similar pattern of very early marriage, as the majority of girls are married between 15 to 18 years in Kenya, Uganda, Nepal and India.<sup>31</sup> Married girls in West Africa are more likely to be illiterate (box 2), live in rural areas, have restricted access to family planning and maternal health services, experience high rates of maternal mortality and morbidity, and live in polygamous unions with spousal age differences that are significantly greater than their counterparts in other countries.<sup>32</sup> Nine of the 10 countries with the highest proportion of married girls in the 15-to-19 age range who are living in polygamous unions are in West Africa.<sup>33</sup> Most of the subregions' 2.5 million population is Sunni

Muslim, with long-established connections to the Arab world but with a distinctly African Islamic culture that values polygamy and cousin marriages.<sup>34</sup>

#### BOX 1. REGION WITH HIGHEST INCIDENCE OF CHILD MARRIAGE

"On a regional basis, West Africa has the highest incidence of child marriage with Mali, Chad and Niger recording rates in excess of 70%."

Source: Gordon Brown, *Out of Wedlock, Into School: Combating Child Marriage* (London: The Office of Gordon and Sarah Brown, 2012), 10.

TABLE: 1. MEDIAN AGE OF FIRST MARRIAGE IN WEST AFRICA

Country	Median Age	
	2000	2011
Benin	18.8	18.6
Burkina Faso	17.7	17.0
Cape Verde	24.6	22.6
Côte d'Ivoire	18.7	19.0
Chad	15.2	16.0
Gambia	17.8	17.1
Ghana	19.4	19.8
Guinea	16.2	17.0
Liberia	17.8	18.4
Mali	16.5	16.6
Mauritania	17.1	17.0
Niger	15.1	15.5
Nigeria	16.6	18.3
Senegal	15.0	17.0
Sierra Leone	15.0	17.0

Source: Ford Foundation study by the author, 2013.

#### BOX 2. HIGH RATES OF FEMALE ILLITERACY IN WEST AFRICA

"A total of 65 million young people and adults in West Africa—more than 40 percent of the population—are unable to read and write. Of these, 40 million are women; less than half of the women over the age of 15 in West Africa can read or write."

Source: African Network Campaign for Education For All (ANCEFA) et al., *From Closed Books to Open Doors – West Africa's Literacy Challenge* (ANCEFA et al, 2009), 1.

#### Why Ending Child Marriage Needs to Be an Education Goal

The Case for Improved Coordination between Ending Child Marriage and Girls' Education Movements in West Africa  
Center for Universal Education

## *State Fragility and Commitments*

Commitments to ending child marriage for girls in West Africa have peaked recently within the global development community given the fragility of the subregion. Since 2000, one president has been assassinated; three governments have been in a civil war, one of which has continued for 14 years; and there have been 10 coups d'état and numerous nondemocratic attempts to extend the tenure of elected governments.<sup>35</sup> Emerging insights from humanitarian agencies suggest that the displacement, mobility and vulnerability triggered by state fragility increase the risks for girls and drive child marriage as parents seek to protect their daughters.<sup>36</sup> Side by side with this scenario are indicators of hope with democratic transition success stories in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, the emergence of Lagos as Africa's seventh largest economy, increasing inflows of Foreign Direct Investment and a 4.5 percent average annual real GDP growth in the sub region between 1995-2009.<sup>37</sup>

## *Critical Issues in Nigeria*

Critical issues in Nigeria stem from the coexistence of high rates of child marriage, out-of-school girls and poor educational outcomes in the Northeast and Northwest zones, in a context of poverty and insecurity caused by an anti-Western education Islamic insurgency. Roughly 35 percent of girls age 6 to 11 are out of school in Northern Nigeria, most of whom have never attended schools and almost all of whom are unable to read despite completing primary school.<sup>38</sup> For the girls who are enrolled in schools in Northern states such as Kano, Bauchi and Sokoto, recent studies show that literacy and learning rates, as well as female teacher ratios, are the lowest in country.<sup>39</sup> The largest

concentration of married girls is in the Northwest and Northeast of the country, where the median age of first marriage ranges between 15.2 and 15.6 years and 75 percent of girls are married before the age of 18. Overall, Nigeria has 10.5 million of its children who are primary school age out of school and contributes 1 in 5 of the world's out-of-school children in this age group, most of whom are at risk of child marriage.

## *The Ending Child Marriage Movement in West Africa*

Historically, the movement to end child marriage in West Africa was less mainstream than girls' education initiatives and derived its impetus from projects that focused on law, awareness creation and public health. Even those organizations that were primarily concerned with girls' welfare in West Africa did not focus on child marriage. The Forum for African Women Educationists, DfID, USAID, Action Aid, Danish AID and the Norwegian Church have implemented numerous girls' education projects since the 1990s, on a small scale. They did not establish a monitoring and evaluation framework to track the impact of girls' education activities on child marriage rates.<sup>40</sup> Most projects only tracked process indicators such as completion, outcome indicators such as learning, or impact indicators such as change in attitude toward learning.

The movement to end child marriage in West Africa has run along a parallel track with girls' education programs but without convergence. Two important aspects of this movement have been linked to public health and to child rights. The catalyst for linking efforts to end child marriage with public health can be traced to the meeting of the 1984 UN NGO Working Group on Traditional Practices in Dakar, where the

African NGOs present formed the Inter-African Committee on Traditional Practices affecting the Health of Women and Children (IAC). The IAC focused on eliminating female genital mutilation and early marriage through public education campaigns targeting traditional and religious leaders and advocacy for the introduction of laws. This was followed by the 2003 Technical Consultation on Early and Forced Marriages held in Burkina Faso, the resolutions from which were embodied in the Ouagadougou Declaration of 2003. The framing of child marriage in the Ouagadougou Declaration as “a public health concern” followed by a call “on Governments and International Development Agencies to recognize the efforts being made by civil society organizations . . . to respond to the challenges posed by child and forced marriage” led to a narrow public health response in the subregion in which NGOs and national governments were partners on obstetric fistula and adolescent reproductive health interventions.<sup>41</sup>

From the late 1990s, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and USAID were key agents on the public health track. Through partnerships with national governments and West African women’s NGOs, these organizations provided services for married adolescents through UNFPA’s National Country Strategies and through innovative USAID West Africa wide projects, such as AWARE I-RH (2003–8) and AWARE II-RH (2009–11). UNFPA also formed partnerships with Islamic opinion leaders across West Africa, with a particular focus on Senegal, Mali and Nigeria, supporting them to change attitudes and practices through public pronouncements and declarations to end harmful traditional practices such as child marriage and to affirm positive positions on reproductive health and girls’

education. Faith based initiatives by UNFPA, CEDPA and the USAID AWARE project culminated in the 2005 Abuja Declaration of the Network of African Islamic Faith-based Organizations.<sup>42</sup>

The catalyst for action against child marriage through laws was the accession of the Africa Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child in 2009. Article 21 of the charter set forth key legal provisions for 18 as the minimum legal age of marriage and laid down penalties for infraction of the law.<sup>43</sup> By recognizing 18 years as the minimum legal age of marriage and by establishing a Committee of Experts to monitor states compliance, the effect of the charter was to concentrate on ending child marriage efforts around domestication of minimum legal age laws across West Africa.

### **Girls’ Education**

There has been important progress in girls’ education in West Africa. The gross enrollment gender parity index at primary level is highest in West Africa compared to Central, South, North and East Africa. The index increased from the lowest level in Africa of 0.75 in 1999 to 0.9, by 2010.<sup>44</sup> If this trend continues, West Africa is on target to achieve Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2 by 2015. However, high dropout rates at primary and secondary levels coupled with low learning outcomes are significant counter-performance issues in West African girls’ education.

By the second half of the decade of the 2000s, all West African nations had a girls’ education policy framework in place, education was generally compulsory for ages 6 to 11, and gender parity at the primary school level had been largely attained based on gross enrollment ratios. However, it is important to note that these

successes appeared to be restricted, unsustainable and lacking in political commitment. Indeed, as table 2 shows, government expenditures on education remained below global averages and global recommended standards.<sup>45</sup> Thus, by the time the second decade on education was launched in 2006, it was noted in the opening address at the Gabon Conference in West Africa that “in spite of high ideals and intentions, the first Decade of Education for Africa was less than successful. Africa entered the new millennium with an education deficit at every level, formal and non-formal.”<sup>46</sup> Most recently, the director of education, culture, science and technology of ECOWAS noted that most countries in West Africa are off track from meeting MDGs 2 and 3.

### *Increasing Development Assistance*

As official development assistance for the education sector falls worldwide, the global spotlight on girls’ education in West Africa seems to have contributed to increased funding to this subregion.<sup>47</sup> From being third lowest recipient of total aid to the education sector in West Africa in 2002, with inflows of \$35 million by 2010, Nigeria moved to the second highest recipient of total aid to the education sector with inflows of \$165 million.<sup>48</sup> This trend is likely to continue with the new commitment of \$500 million announced during the September 2013 visit of Gordon Brown to Nigeria. Half this sum is being made available from the Federal Government of Nigeria. A total of \$200 million is to be contributed by USAID and the GPE. A new stream of funding from the European Union is expected to complete the \$500 million funding pledge. New funding has also been committed by the World Bank, DfID and foundations such as the MacArthur Foundation and Ford Foundation, as well as international

development partners such as the Population Council. This funding is critical given the dire need for support for the children of West Africa.

**TABLE 2. PERCENTAGE SHARE OF EDUCATION IN WEST AFRICAN GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT**

<b>Country</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2010</b>
Benin	3.2	4.5
Burkina Faso	1.5	-
Chad	2.4	2.8
Côte d’Ivoire	5.0	4.6
Gambia	6.0	5.0
Ghana	3.1	5.5
Liberia	-	2.8
Mali	2.2	4.5
Niger	3.1	3.8
Nigeria	0.9	-
Senegal	3.5	5.6
Sierra Leone	3.5	4.3

Source: World Bank, *World Development Report* (New York: Oxford University Press, various years).

### *Legal and Policy Framework*

Of the West African countries, Nigeria has the most developed policy and legal framework, with the greatest potential to catalyze the uptake of girls’ education in the region. Between the 1970s and 2013, approximately 52 pieces of legislation and policies were developed with implications for girls’ education in Nigeria. The average for other countries in the subregion was between 22 to 34.<sup>49</sup> Strategies to facilitate girls’ education were frontline objectives but were also embedded within policies on violence against women, national gender policy, and policies on trafficking in persons and irregular migration, school hygiene and sanitation. A robust legal framework also exists, starting with Chapter II, Article 18, of the May 1999 Constitution, which provided for free, compulsory and universal primary education and free secondary education and

including the Child Rights Act of 2003. Despite these instruments, Nigeria is the only country in West Africa where female secondary school enrollment rates have fallen over the period 1999 to 2012. Nigeria also has the largest number of out-of-school children in the region. Over 90 percent of out-of-school girls between the ages of 10 and 14 in Nigeria have never attended school.<sup>50</sup> Graphs 1 and 2 below similarly show little change in female enrollment at secondary school level and high female dropout rates in countries such as Chad, Liberia and Mauritania.

### *The Girls' Education Movement in West Africa*

It is important to trace the factors that have driven progress in girls' education, and also to understand why girls' education has gained attention and yet the sector still has not focused on ending child marriage. The girls' education movement can be traced to the 1960s, when it was characterized by multiple stakeholders within government and civil society concerned with the education of women and girls as part of a mass literacy movement. On the other hand, as described above, the movement to end child marriage can be traced back to the 1980s and was largely driven by women's civil society groups through legal and public health platforms.

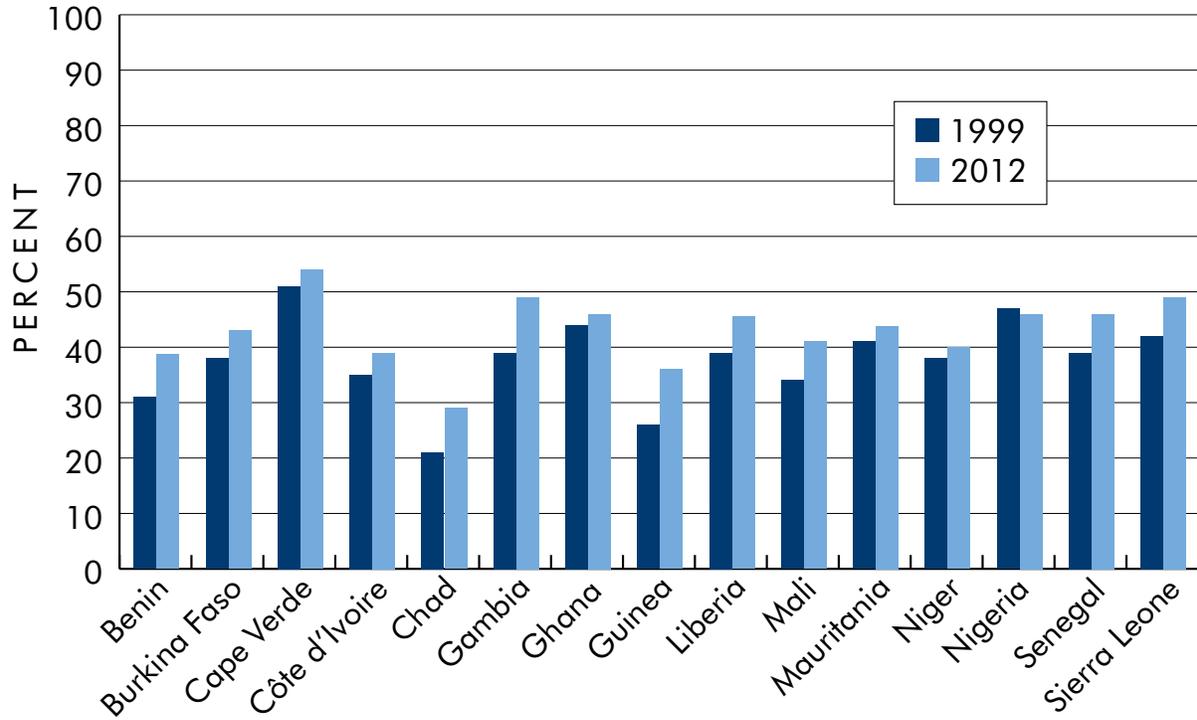
Four factors have shaped the direction and intensity of the girls' education movement in West Africa since the wave of independence in the 1960s which has contributed to gains in girls' education such as those shown in graphs 1 and 2.

1. *Nonformal education and mass literacy movements* in the postindependence era served as a vehicle for the newly emerging nation states to address the problem of

women's and girls' education. While the early expansion of formal education for girls for countries such as Ghana was noticeable in the subregion,<sup>51</sup> education for girls was associated with functional literacy and nonformal skills building to support the new agrarian economy.<sup>52</sup> As governments struggled to meet the school-place deficit, education for girls and women came to be increasingly delivered through community schools and the mass media. The successes of the nonformal literacy movement for girls in the 1960s and 1970s constituted a platform upon which UNICEF built its flagship nonformal literacy projects in Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria and Mauritania under the African Girls' Education Initiative launched in 1994.<sup>53</sup> In francophone West Africa, the nonformal education movement also provided a platform for a populist return to local languages, whereby the Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale in Guinea trained girls and women to contribute to a new agrarian driven socialist economy.

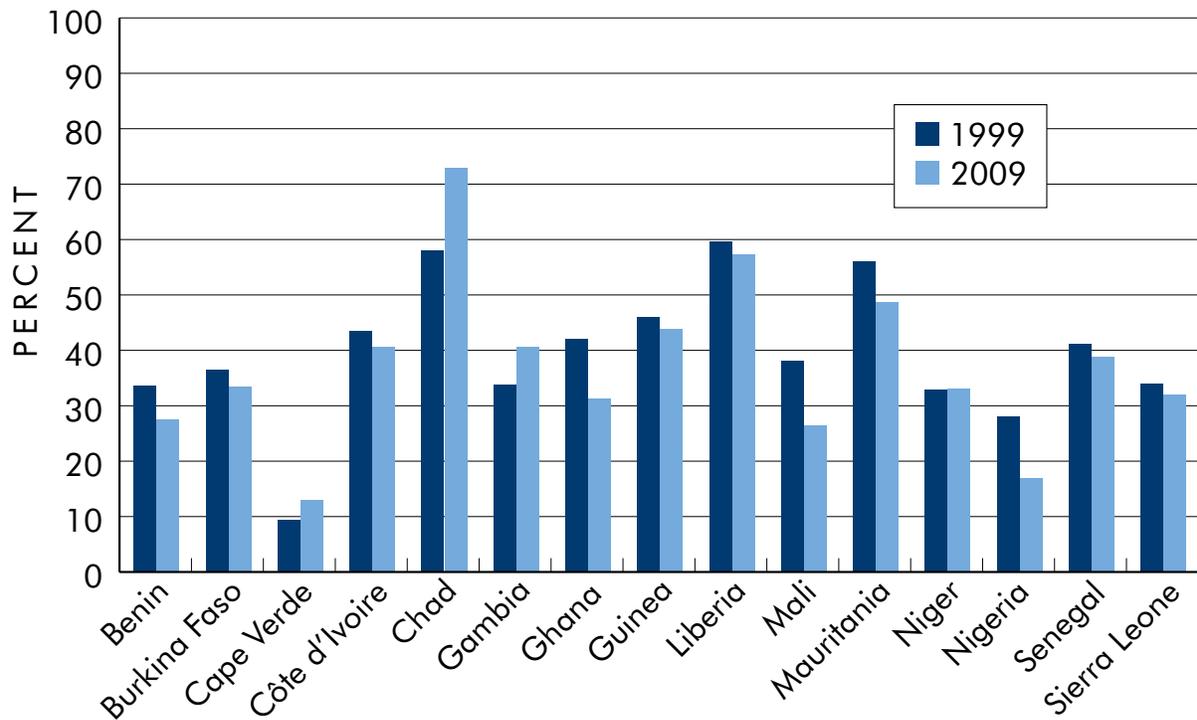
2. *Constitutional and education policy reform* in the 1990s saw a wave of new legislation that enshrined the right to education in national constitutions and the adoption of new affirmative action policies for girls in education. Even in Mali, one of the most religiously conservative countries in West Africa, Article 26 of Law 99-046 of December 28, 1999, the Education Counseling Law, stipulates that the right to education creates an obligation for parents to enroll their children in schools and to keep them there at least until the end of basic education, a period of nine years.<sup>54</sup>
3. *Regional policy* was set by the African Union and ECOWAS,<sup>55</sup> aligned with global policy, and provided a framework for girls'

**GRAPH 1. SECONDARY SCHOOL ENROLLMENT FOR FEMALES**



Sources: UNESCO, *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2012*, tables 6 and 7; <http://www.epdc.org/>; <http://data.un.org/DataMartInfo.aspx>; <http://wdi.worldbank.org/table/2.11>; [http://www.quandl.com/WORLDBANK-World-Bank/CIV\\_SE\\_SEC\\_ENRR](http://www.quandl.com/WORLDBANK-World-Bank/CIV_SE_SEC_ENRR); <http://www.measuredhs.com/>.

**GRAPH 2. FEMALE DROPOUTS, ALL GRADES**



Sources: UNESCO, *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2012*, tables 6 and 7; <http://www.epdc.org/>; <http://data.un.org/DataMartInfo.aspx>; <http://wdi.worldbank.org/table/2.11>; [http://www.quandl.com/WORLDBANK-World-Bank/CIV\\_SE\\_SEC\\_ENRR](http://www.quandl.com/WORLDBANK-World-Bank/CIV_SE_SEC_ENRR); <http://www.measuredhs.com/>.

**Why Ending Child Marriage Needs to Be an Education Goal**

The Case for Improved Coordination between Ending Child Marriage and Girls' Education Movements in West Africa  
Center for Universal Education

education. ECOWAS was established in 1975 and the African Union was established in 1999. The major thrust of the focus on girls' education revolved around increasing enrollment and aligning with global gender parity goals and on expanding access to technical and vocational education. By the 1990s, sexuality education for both boys and girls was incorporated into the regional guidelines in response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

4. *Nation states' accession to global treaties and alignment.* Girls' education programs in West Africa were shaped by global forums and conventions, including the 1990 meetings in Jomtien, Thailand, that catalyzed new statements of commitment to girls' education across West Africa under the policy framework of the First Decade for Education in Africa (1996–2006) and the associated Decade for Literacy and Adult Education in Africa. The UNICEF-supported African Girls' Education Initiative, which commenced in 1994, shaped a decade of girls' education interventions in West Africa. At the turn of the new millennium, three events gave greater

momentum to girls' education efforts in the subregion. The first was the seminar on the follow-up to the Decade of Education in West Africa, which took place in Banjul, Gambia, in January 2000; and the second was the World Education Forum in Dakar in April 2000. The third was the launch of the MDGs in September 2000, which catalyzed the Second Decade of Education for Africa Plan (2006–15). The first conference of ECOWAS education ministers was held in Dakar in September 2002 to harmonize national education policies with the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) and the new global EFA Movement. By 2004, a second meeting of ECOWAS ministers of education was held with support from UNESCO and with a focus on expanding girls' education in the subregion.

Clearly efforts toward the promotion of girls' education in West Africa have developed on a parallel tack to those concerned with ending child marriage and have not intersected to any great measure. Further evidence and reasons for this disconnect are discussed in the next section.

## RECENT EVIDENCE OF THE DISCONNECT BETWEEN EDUCATION AND ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE IN WEST AFRICA

This section presents three pieces of evidence to make the case that there is a policy disconnect between the growing global consensus on the importance of girls' education as a leading strategy to combat child marriage and how policy is implemented in West Africa. At the regional level, findings from interviews with education bureaucrats and an analysis of recent meetings are presented to show the disjuncture in thinking between educationalists and child marriage advocates. Regarding global policy that affects the region, education sector plans submitted to the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) are analyzed, showing that a key opportunity to link girls' education with ending child marriage is being missed by the global and regional communities.

### **Education Policymakers in West Africa: Ending Child Marriage Is Not an Education Goal**

Why has the message that girls' education can end child marriage not gotten through to West African policymakers, who are no doubt aware of the subregion's characterization as a hot spot for child marriage and its large population of out-of-school girls? This question was put to key informants across West Africa during two years of fieldwork in a study funded by the Ford Foundation. Responses can be grouped into six broad categories:

1. *Child marriage does not need a special public policy solution.* This was the first and most commonly articulated response. Respondents in both anglophone and francophone

West Africa explained that child marriage was hidden, accepted and considered to be a natural right of passage within society and within government bureaucracies with the responsibility for education planning.

2. *Ending child marriage is not an education goal.* This reason was articulated by education bureaucrats across the subregion. For almost all education planners and politicians, ending child marriage was seen as a goal for child rights advocates, the groups opposing violence against women and the proponents of adolescent reproductive health (box 3). Bureaucrats in the departments of solidarity and gender promotion in the ministries of family and children across francophone countries expressed fear about having their programs linked with the problem of *les mutilations génitales féminines*, "excision" or *l'excision* (female genital cutting), while in anglophone countries bureaucrats working on women's affairs were weary of becoming too closely associated with reproductive health obstetric fistula projects, which they saw to be the main focus on child marriage efforts. In both cases, governments implement these programs without engaging ministries of education in their community awareness, political mobilization and specialized repair surgeries projects.

#### **BOX 3. ENDING EARLY MARRIAGE IS NOT AN EDUCATION ISSUE**

"Early marriage is a complex issue; for now it is likened to themes on violence which is easier to get action from the gender people."

—an education official, Mali, 2012

3. *This is a local problem.* Even in countries such as Niger, with its high rates of child marriage throughout the country, planners questioned

why a problem that was specific to particular regions should dominate education planning and find its way into national education plans. Both civil servants and NGO leaders viewed child marriage as a rural or location specific problem common in areas such as Kayes, Koulikoro and Sikasso in Mali or the Northern states in Nigeria. Civil servants who raised this problem were quick to point out that the politics of resource allocation in their countries would make it difficult to concentrate proportional resources in regions to address high child marriage rates.

4. *Measurement is complicated.* Ministry of Education officials also explained that they were sure that girls' education projects contributed to reducing high rates of child marriage, but they were quick to explain that they did not and could not measure such changes. Some respondents felt that while the Ministry of Education can implement programs, it was up to the Ministry of Health to measure changes. Other respondents from the Ministry of Education inferred linkages without evidence (box 4).

#### **BOX 4. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS WITHOUT EVIDENCE**

"The girl child support program is not directly linked with early marriage but it helps improve girls' retention rate up to Junior Secondary school level."

—Executive secretary, Basic Education  
Commission, Ministry of Education, Sierra Leone

5. *This should be funded by health.* Ministry of Education officials recalled the bureaucratic minefield of responding to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the 1990s, when they had funds deducted to source activities that they viewed as belonging to the health sector. Reluctant to repeat such an experience, a senior civil servant asked "so if we deal with child mar-

riage through education, does that mean that health will give some of their budget to education?"<sup>56</sup> NGOs representatives who were interviewed on this question linked the issue of bureaucratic competition over budgetary allocations to low capacity for "real" gender planning and analysis in departments.

6. *Lack of civil society partners.* A sixth reason was put forward not by education bureaucrats but rather by delegates at a Ford Foundation West African regional meeting. Delegates noted that there are few subregional organizations conducting civil society action and advocacy on child marriage issues, especially in comparison with education organizations, and so the interaction and education of government officials is limited.<sup>57</sup>

These responses demonstrate the difficulty of joining up two programming areas that many believe exist in different and often competing policy domains. Responses suggest an urgent need to convince stakeholders concerned with big questions of girls' education in development to focus on the implications of child marriage. However, the fear of lower line implementers that girls' education can be "contaminated" by child marriage is a real one to which one must respond. This suggests that education policy implementers at subnational levels in particular can be kept within their comfort zone, where they take a technical approach to girls' education policies. However, it is critical that they are pushed to implement smarter girls' education programs. Substate implementation can focus on areas where there is synergy between the work of ending child marriage and girls' education, such as promoting access, safe spaces, life skills, and learning for vulnerable populations.

### **Further Regional Evidence of Disconnect in West Africa: Recent Meetings**

As West Africa contributes to the post 2015 agenda-setting discussions, important regional meetings have been convened in 2013 to coordinate country level actions on girls' education as well as on adolescent reproductive health and child marriage. These initiatives are taking place separately with no coordination between the objectives, agencies and actors involved in improving girls' education outcomes and the advocates struggling to reduce the high rates of child marriage in the subregion.

Evidence of the disconnect between girls' education and efforts to end child marriage can be seen from two recent high-level regional meetings setting the agenda on girls' education and child marriage for West African countries. The first is the ECOWAS Commission's high level consultation of experts on the education of girls, which took place in Banjul, Gambia, on April 22, 2013. The delegates at this forum discussed West Africa's poor indices for girls' education within the framework of the MDGs, EFA and the African Union Plan of Action for the Second Decade of Education for Africa (2006–15), and they fashioned new directions for all 15 countries to accelerate actions toward 2015. These actions call for a special budget line for girls' education, strengthening existing education management information systems, the implementation of legal frameworks that guarantee the rights of girls and laws on free compulsory education, textbooks, fees and uniforms. No mention was made of ending child marriage and no indicators were outlined to trace the impact of any of these actions on child marriage rates.

The second regional meeting of significance in 2013 was the African Regional Conference on Population and Development Beyond 2014. Ending child marriage was a central focus of this forum of public health agencies and advocates. In his opening statement to this meeting, the executive director of the UNFPA set the tone by noting that

It is unacceptable that in the 21st century girls are still subject to harmful practices, such as female genital mutilation and child marriage, which violate their rights to health, physical and mental integrity and life. Of the 10 countries worldwide with the highest rates of child marriage, 8 of them are in Africa. . . .This must stop.<sup>58</sup>

This meeting ended with a call to action by delegates from ministries of health, population and gender, representatives of civil society organizations, UN agencies, international organizations and Pan-African Parliament around the strategies of adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights. There were no invitees from ministries of education, and ending child marriage through girls' education did not emerge among the strategies in the call for action.

### **Global Evidence of Policy Disconnect in West Africa: Education Sector Plans as Missed Opportunities for Synergy and Change**

The global community has a role to play in creating incentives to help link girls' education and efforts to end child marriage. GPE provides an opportunity for states to harmonize education plans and set new objectives in response to global guidelines while being driven by needs and demands from the country level.

Each West African country has produced an education sector plan (ESP) which elaborates country priorities in education for all demographic groups—girls, boys and adult females and males. ESPs have the potential to promote synergy between efforts to promote girls' education and ending child marriage. Yet analysis of these plans confirm the disjuncture between global policy discourse and state level action and reveal a missed opportunity to bridge that divide.

GPE does not direct the country planning process, but it does provide guidelines that shape the methodology, consultative process and format of the plans. Current guidelines do not steer national governments to mainstream gender into the analysis and processes of the plan. The present framework does provide a broad template for national governments to consider gender based barriers to girls' education and to reference existing gender policies. GPE is now working with the UN Girls' Education Initiative to revamp this process so that girls' education concerns are addressed in planning, policy and programming. Yet the current absence of gender in the planning methodology results in girls' education being treated without appropriate context or tools in many cases. However, since the ESPs are expected to come out of a country driven process, it is reasonable to expect that local planners will spot the opportunity for synergies and build in girls' education components designed to reduce high rates of child marriage.

As a means of examining the way that girls' education policy and programming interacts with policy and programming related to child marriage, this author reviewed ESPs of 13 African countries.<sup>59</sup> The findings were stark: Governments are not leveraging girls' education to work to end

child marriage, despite clear synergies. Not one of 13 ESPs makes a specific policy statement about ending child marriage. Only the ESPs for Senegal and Benin note child marriage as a barrier to girls' education, yet these plans include no indicators to track the impact of girls' education on child marriage. These findings are summarized in table 3.

Girls' empowerment, which is a rights based approach that is clearly linked to child marriage, features in a number of plans but still is not clearly linked to measurable indicators to end child marriage. In the nine cases where girls' empowerment components formed the basis of girls' education activities, no indicator was developed to track the impact of these initiatives on child marriage; nor did any of these nine plans build in monitoring links with public health or gender rights advocates. This is particularly noticeable in the case of Liberia, which had a broader consultative framework at the plan development stage. Where girls' empowerment activities such as family life education were incorporated into plans, the potential to make an impact on child marriage rates was adversely affected by the fact that girls at risk of child marriage were not targeted specifically, because this was not a lens that factored into planning. While more than half the plans set out to target girls at risk in hot spot regions through interventions to increase enrollment and reduce dropout rates, none sought to measure the impact of these initiatives on local rates of child marriage. Overall, ESPs were aligned with the gender equality norms and to varying extents incorporated activities that targeted girls; but these were not coordinated with ending child marriage goals.

ESPs do focus on girls' education overall, a fact that may be encouraged by GPE's strate-

gic focus on girls' education. In all 13 countries, governments' focus on girls' education aimed to address problems of gender parity in enrollment at primary and secondary school levels and laid out plans to stem high dropout rates. Still, there were some deficiencies. The plans of Chad, Niger and Nigeria were low on girls' education components or failed to mention them at all.

action to refocus the planning process so that the problems and needs of girls are addressed and that the ESPs thus become aligned with the new global consensus on the synergies between girls' education and child marriage. National governments are accountable for the dual problems of large numbers of out-of-school girls and high rates of child marriage in their countries.

The lack of focus on ending child marriage in the ESPs for West Africa signals the need for urgent

**TABLE 3. SUMMARY REVIEW OF EDUCATION SECTOR PLANS OF WEST AFRICAN COUNTRIES**

Country	Timeline	Identification of child marriage as a barrier to girls' education	Inclusion of goals or objectives related to ending child marriage	Inclusion of M&E indicators to track impact of education on child marriage	Targeting of regions because of high rates of out of school girls	Targeting of regions because of high rates of child marriage	Expanded access at primary & secondary	Use of Gender equity indicators and empowerment (S,M,W)*
Benin	2013-2015	✓	X	X	✓	X	✓	S
B/Faso	2012-2021	X	X	X	X	X	✓	S
Chad	2013-2015	X	X	X	X	X	✓	W
Coted' Ivoire	2012-2014	X	X	X	✓	X	✓	M
Gambia	2006-2015	X	X	X	X	X	✓	S
Ghana	2010-2020	X	X	X	✓	X	✓	S
Liberia	2010-2020	X	X	X	X	X	✓	M
Mali	2010-2012	X	X	X	X	X	✓	M
Mauritania	2011-2020	X	X	X	X	X	✓	M
Niger	2011-2013	X	X	X	X	X	✓	S
Nigeria	2011-2015	X	X	X	X	X	✓	W
Senegal	2013-2025	✓	X	X	X	X	✓	M
S/Leone	2007-2015	X	X	X	✓	X	✓	S

\*Key: S-Strong (gender indicators - positive discrimination in favor of girls; gender violence, family life education and civic education in curriculum; health, sanitation and hygiene for girls in school environment; improved female school teacher ratios; and community mobilization for girls' education)

M – Medium (positive discrimination in favor of girls and 2 of the other gender indicators)

W – Weak (any 2 of the gender indicators but no positive discrimination in favor of girls)

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

A call to action is needed for global, regional, national and subnational actors to build on the understanding that girls' education is a critical strategy to end child marriage. A recent survey of 41 hotspot countries for child marriage globally pointed to the continuing reluctance of national governments to commit to ending child marriage.<sup>60</sup> This section provides recommendations for each set of actors toward a policy consensus at the implementation level.

### **Global Actions**

The inclusion of gender in the GPE methodology for ESPs is a significant action that can lead West African countries with high rates of child marriage to align girls' education programs with such goals. Strategic objective II of the GPE 2012–15 Strategic Plan addresses this gap through a process supported by the Technical Reference Group on Gender and Education coordinated by the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UN-GEI). These recommendations to GPE are framed against the background of the current gender driven initiatives under strategic objective II:

- Implement quick-win measures such as gender audits and midterm reviews of ESPs in hot spot countries with a specific focus on child marriage.
- Reform the grantmaking guidelines and provide tools to encourage states to expand the consultative process to include a wider cross-section of government agencies and NGOs concerned with the problems adolescents face from a gender perspective.
- Reform the grantmaking framework to encourage nation states to recognize and respond to

regional differences, given that gender issues can be more acute in local areas.

- Reform the guidelines of the ESP process to encourage nation states to increasingly focus on girls' education and child marriage.
- Require applicant countries to incorporate analysis of gender based barriers to girls' education, and how education can address problems faced by girls.

Global agencies that are behind the message that girls' education can end child marriage must do more than recommend strategies to the national government; they must give operational directions to guide the actions of nations and planners. The following are proposed:

- Global leaders on girls' education agencies must reach out to other global actors committed to ending child marriage to develop a road map and to provide tools and program design templates to maximize the synergies between adolescent reproductive health and rights and girls' education policies. This is a particularly important follow-up role for the UN special envoy on global education, Gordon Brown who can engage the so-called H8—the World Health Organization; UNICEF; UNFPA; UNAIDS; the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; GAVI; the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation; and the World Bank.
- The leadership taken by the ambassadors of Sierra Leone and Chad to be among 107 delegates to move the first ever UN resolution on child, early and forced marriage at the Human Rights Council must be leveraged throughout West Africa. The ECOWAS Permanent Observer and the African Union's

Permanent Observer Mission at the United Nations must communicate the significance of this resolution down through regional organs such as the African Committee on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

- The Office of the High Commission for Human Rights, which is currently developing the report on child marriage for the Human Rights Council in June 2014, must extend its call for submissions to girls' education program implementers to ensure that the human rights challenges and possibilities in girls' education are addressed.
- Global agencies concerned with reproductive health of adolescents such as UNFPA and the World Bank must ensure that new adolescent reproductive health projects rolled out in child marriage hot spot countries such as Niger<sup>61</sup> are designed with programmatic levers to ensure girls' education activities aim to delay child marriage. The fact that UNFPA is guided by International Conference on Population and Development provisions to "empower adolescents to continue their education and lead productive and satisfying lives"<sup>62</sup> creates an opportunity to develop synergies with girls' education interventions while at the same time keeping within its reproductive health mandate.<sup>63</sup>
- The World Health Organization which rose from its 65 World Health Assembly with a strong resolution to end child marriage is currently convening meetings and must ensure that global girls' education players are invited to the table as strategies and indicators are being developed.
- The Girls Not Brides global network with civil society branches throughout child marriage

hotspot countries must do more to harmonize the actions of country level initiatives around the clear message that girls' education provides the most strategic opportunity to lead the fight against child marriage.

### **Regional and subregional actions**

Regional and subregional actors have a leading role to play in bringing attention to the issue of child marriage in West Africa, building capacity of regional actors, and maintaining progress on child marriage.

- The African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC), the treaty body that monitors the implementation of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), must be supported to convene an immediate dialogue. The ACERWC must also be supported to carry out awareness creation activities and to commission child marriage country reports in keeping with the Committee's 2013 Day of the African Child theme of ending harmful traditional practices.
- Regional public service capacity building agencies which have been working with weak and outdated gender planning paradigms must be supported to update tools and methodologies on integrated gender planning for education planners in West Africa. The Centre for Girls' and Women's Education in Africa (CIEFFA) in Ouagadougou and the African Training and Research Centre in Administration for Development (CAFRAD) can support these activities.
- The West African Civil Society Forum (WACSF) was supported by the Ford Foundation in 2013 to roll out a new project to

end child marriage with strong advocacy components. WACSF is strategically placed to formulate strong evidence based advocacy messages around the effectiveness of the girls' education strategy. The WACSF must be strengthened to sharpen its focus around the potential of girls' education and to develop materials in French, English and Portuguese and train NGOs throughout the subregion on this message.

- The African Child Policy Forum, an independent web-based platform supported by development partners such as PLAN, the Oak Foundation and Investing in Children and their Societies (ICS) can be energized to introduce a page profiling countries' initiatives to end child marriage through targeted girls' education projects and comparing changes in rates of child marriage in the subregion.
- Think tanks with regional reach, such as Women in Law and Development, Trust Africa, and the Forum for African Women Educationists, should establish a learning community to provide the evidence and templates for political decision makers and bureaucrats. Several international development partners<sup>64</sup> are implementing girls' education projects across West Africa and a multitude of government agencies<sup>65</sup> are also working to support girls' education. A comprehensive country by country review should be carried out of girls' education projects to examine the impact on child marriage rates and to compare implementation strategies and mechanisms.
- The gender mainstreaming and peer review mechanisms of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) provide an

opportunity for countries in the subregion to learn from each other about best practices in accountable and participatory planning for girls' education. Such a platform can document Liberia's strength in multisector consultation during the ESP design phase and the Senegalese government's *faire-faire* (making things happen) strategy based on strong partnerships with NGOs and community schools to meet gender parity targets in basic education. Exchange visits can evolve from this platform during the peer review stage.

- Countries of the West African subregion must move forward to develop gender focused security and education programs for internally displaced girls under the protection provisions of the Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (the Kampala Convention). More awareness must be raised by the NGO Forum in the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights on state obligations to internally displaced girls and their families under the Convention.
- The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights and the NGO Forum in the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights must use all available instruments to compel national governments to implement policies in line with the October 2013 Joint Statement to Governments on Innovation in Girls' Education.<sup>66</sup>

### **National actions**

National governments must work around bureaucratic politics and regional tensions to bring girls' education policies in line with the new global strategy in which education is central.

- At country level women's leadership for girls' education must be developed to champion increased expenditure, school to work policies for girls, nonformal alternative education models for married girls and gender responsiveness within education bureaucracies at all levels. Leadership development programs targeting women in West Africa such as the new UN Ele Wa program must develop the leadership skills of girls' education activists and include them among cohorts of reproductive health leaders to develop holistic gender responsive models to end child marriage.
- Strategic government think tanks must bring together multisectoral agencies and take the lead in a policy dialogue with line Ministries and parastatals with responsibility for education, public health, protection and justice for children as well as NGOs, associations of teachers, social workers and counselors and international development partners. For example, the Senegal Coalition des Organisations en Synergie pour la Défense de l'Éducation (COSYDEP) can be a strategic partner in this process. In Nigeria, the apex Federal Government think tank, the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS), can lead the process.
- Child marriage requires presidential level leadership at national level in each of the countries of West Africa. As has been demonstrated in this paper, child marriage is a cross-sector issue that fails to be addressed by education officials because of budgetary constraints and other sectoral issues. Top level leadership, including from the Minister of Finance so that cross-sector solutions can be developed, is needed to develop innovative solutions to address this crisis. A presidential roundtable initiated by one of the West African leaders could bring much needed attention to this issue among others.
- Impact investors such as the Open Society Foundations with a focus on rights must support civil society organizations across the subregion to launch a new generation of education rights awareness building interventions and judicial actions against states which have refused to enforce girls' rights to education laws enshrined in constitutions and Acts of Parliament.
- The community of girls' education researchers and evaluators in West African countries has an obligation to discover, document and produce policy briefs on success stories where education has provided alternatives to child marriage and improved the life chances of girls. In 2012 the Norwegian Development Corporation funded the Forum for African Women Educationists to support female researchers in the region to carry out such studies. This endeavor must be continued and extended to regional research agencies such as the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa in Dakar, Senegal.

### **Subnational actions**

While religious and cultural norms are significant barriers to girls' education in West Africa; poverty, poor quality education as well as knowledge that both male and female youths are unlikely to find jobs are the biggest disincentives for parents to invest in education. Against this background child marriage is rationalized in traditional and conservative Islamic communities of the subregion. In this context the following is recommended:

- Local NGOs and implementing partners such as Mercy Corps and Action Aid implementing girls' education programs in communities with high rates of child marriage across West Africa must revisit project monitoring and evaluation frameworks to bring out clear evidence of program impact on ending child marriage. This evidence must be presented as policy briefs showing the benefits of such interventions to the girl, the family and community. Local administrators must be encouraged to take successful interventions to scale and the path to scale must be supported through capacity building programs to enable planners to develop youth employment policies that identify marketable skills sets and employment possibilities for female youth in the formal and informal sectors.
- UNICEF, World Vision and Oxfam must support a new generation of in-depth studies which examine the impact of the different drivers of displacement on child marriage in the West African region. These studies must also identify coping mechanisms, resilience and opportunities for the education of displaced girls within countries and across

the region as populations are increasingly crossing borders due to climate change, insurgency, political crisis and poverty.

- Local NGOs with an intermediary role at global and local levels must do more to create a sustainable platform for local groups to tell their stories, leapfrog into the global arena, access funding, expand their activities and shape the current and post 2015 agenda on how girls' education can end child marriage.

## CONCLUSION

**E**nding child marriage through girls' education is an important strategy that global actors propose to hot spot countries such as those of West Africa. As pragmatic as this strategy may appear, bureaucratic politics and the absence of guidance on how to roll out girls' education policies for maximum effect present barriers to policymakers' ability to implement the targeted and integrated interventions that have been suggested by the global message. It is now the time to go beyond the message that girls' education is an effective strategy and to take the initiative to develop the tools and templates to implement this recommendation.

## APPENDIX 1: DECONSTRUCTING GIRLS' EDUCATION APPROACHES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILD MARRIAGE

The following sections show how thinking on the relationship between child marriage and girls' education has differentiated and developed, starting from the decade of the 1960s. Four main approaches to girls' education have different implications for efforts to end child marriage: the social benefits approach, the economic benefits approach, the empowerment education approach and the legal approach. The first two approaches can be broadly characterized as development approaches to girls' education, and the latter two as human rights based approaches. It is critical to note the distinction between the development and human rights approaches to girls' education and the implications for child marriage. For the social and economic benefits approaches, ending child marriage is an externality for the medium to long term impact of girls' education programs. These approaches have stressed the many benefits of education and have noted that ending child marriage is an important positive subsequent effect. As development programs have become more prescriptive, so too has the ability to design programs and policies in order to affect this externality.

In contrast, human rights approaches view child marriage as a form of gender based violence that can be transcended by building individual agency among girls, by working with communities to change attitudes and by working through the nation-state to uphold the rights of girls through education. The human rights approaches focus on the role of the curriculum and

law in overcoming gender based constraints to girls' education. For the human rights perspective, child marriage must be addressed through the education system and the education system must reflect gender concerns. The following section highlights the basis for each of these approaches, as well as the limitations of each. The four approaches are highlighted below.

### ***The Social Benefits Approach to Girls' Education***

The literature on the social benefits of education takes as its point of departure the positive impact of education, and especially girls' education, on the public health, demographics and social stability of countries in the Global South. Girls' education is proposed as a solution that not only improves the health and life chances of girls but also produces social benefits for their families, communities and societies. In this context, if education serves to delay the age of marriage, it is positive because delayed marriage is likely to equate with reduced fertility and infant mortality.

The earliest works on the social benefits approach to girls' education paradigm evolved as part of a focus in the 1950s and 1960s on fertility, infant mortality and development in the Global South, especially in the sub-Saharan African countries, which had failed to make the demographic transition to nuclear modern family structures. Leading this research agenda were demographers, population scholars, ethnographers and sociologists whose works demonstrated the complexity of simple linear propositions equating numbers of years of schooling with changes in the age of marriage, numbers of births, numbers of live births and child mortality.<sup>67</sup> Being largely scholarly works, few of the authors sought to lay down policy prescriptions for governments. It was left to development

think tanks such as the World Bank to outline recommendations for girls' education to reduce the risk of child marriage and reduce high fertility rates. By the 1990s, the prescriptive branch of the literature on fertility had evolved into a rigorous paradigm, whereby scholars focused on the "well-being and conditions" of girls in child marriages and recommendations to address this problem.<sup>68</sup> Among the recommendations made is that of keeping girls in school to delay age of first marriage. By the 2000s, a robust body of literature on girls' education pointed to the specific social benefits that could be expected from additional years of schooling. For instance, an additional year of girls schooling could lead to a 5 percent reduction in infant mortality rates. A woman who benefited from an additional year of school would have children who were likely to remain in school for an additional one-third to one-half of a year.<sup>69</sup>

The social benefits approach continued to evolve in the late 2000s, as World Bank economists produced a number of background studies on how conditional cash transfers can be tailored to both promote demand for education and create incentives that cause families and girls to delay marriage.<sup>70</sup> In 2012, World Bank seminal papers exploring the manifold linkages between girls' education and child marriage were produced under a broad thematic study on the issue of child marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa, funded by the Trust Fund for Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Development. The interesting issue about this new generation of studies on the social benefits of education is the careful rigor with which the search for effective policy instruments was conducted and the comprehensive mix of recommendations proposed, many of which even go beyond common cores of teaching. For example, when asking the question "What can be done to

deal with issues such as child marriage?" in a World Bank paper, Dopart and Wodon mention the importance of "providing public transportation to go to schools, ensuring access to water in schools" and similar factors.<sup>71</sup> The social benefits approach has been important given the focus it has brought to investing in girls' education, and to identifying the incentives that will create demand for education and the potential to change behavior in relation to girls' education.

### ***The Education and Training for Employment Approach to Girls' Education***

The earliest arguments for expanding girls' access to education to include training opportunities were shaped by the 1970s International Labor Organization basic needs strategy and by the Women in Development (WID) movement of the mid-1970s to early 1990s.<sup>72</sup> With the ILO's basic needs strategy coming out of the World Employment Programs and the WID movement informed by Boserup's 1970 critique of women's exclusion from economic development, education in general—and, in particular, girls' education—became linked to a wider discourse on employment and economic growth. Although pioneering WID scholars devoted copious pages to the problem of child marriage and polygamy, they were mainly concerned with explaining the barriers these practices posed to labor productivity and economic growth.<sup>73</sup> Against this background, education for women and girls was proposed as the strategy to eliminate a range of economic barriers to growth in the Global South, including poverty, low human resource capacity, and low economic productivity. While the lost decade of the 1980s and the emergence of neoliberalism saw a shift away from an in-depth focus on the role of women and girls in the economy, the focus on girls' education for employment

was picked up by the new structural adjustment agenda of the 1980s and 1990s, and ending child marriage remained valid as an externality. The World Bank's seminal 1991 paper *Letting Girls Learn* captured the high expectations held for the individual and economic payoff from girls' education and explored the central role for the state in providing efficient education services in this process.<sup>74</sup> While this 1991 work took note of culturally and gender based barriers to girls' education, no mention was made of child marriage as one of these barriers. This was not the case in subsequent works of the Bank, where the focus shifted from girls' education to providing girls with training in nonformal education settings and in turn to providing them with an alternative to domestic labor.

The shift to girls' training was part of a broader discussion on the skills set required for youth to contribute to economic growth and to survive structural adjustment and economies growing without employment. This broader focus contributed to agencies such as ILO, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the United Nations Development Program, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Bank undertaking gender analyses of demand and supply side determinants of adolescent girls' under and unemployment. The solution to this problem was vocational skills building programs in nonformal settings for girls. In the case of the World Bank's Adolescent Girls Initiative (AGI), gender analysis led to studies that recognized the comparative advantage of livelihood initiatives in adolescent reproductive health programs by the Gender and Development Group. The AGI noted that adolescence for boys is associated with mobility and autonomy, "but for girls it often comes with increased restrictions, fewer opportunities and less

freedom to exercise choice. During this formative period in their lives it is important to provide adolescent girls with the tools they need to become economically empowered young women."<sup>75</sup>

In a recent joint publication, IFAD, FAO and ILO point out that the potential of nonformal training programs to serve as an empowering platform for girls and women escaping from traditional roles, including that of child marriage, has been missed in the framing of the MDGs.<sup>76</sup> While the literature on girls' education and training for employment does not address the problem of child marriage per se, by focusing on the problem of girls' training and learning of market driven skills as a strategy for their employment, this paradigm provides an alternative to child marriage.

### ***The Empowerment Approach to Girls' Education***

The starting point of the approach of girls' education as empowerment as it relates to child marriage is that child marriage is a form of gender based violence perpetuated by a male dominated power structure. Child marriage is a replication of patriarchy, and because in most cultures, girls who are wives have expected household duties, childhood marriage excludes girls from their right to education. An approach to education that focuses on empowerment assumes that child marriage and other social practices that limit girls' freedoms can be ended or mitigated through an education system that equips girls to unpack gender stereotypes, recognize gender constructed barriers and learn how to effectively self-advocate. Such an education system will provide girls with the knowledge and skills to understand, confront and take action to challenge the male dominated status quo. Therefore, proponents of empowerment

education are principally concerned with the pedagogic content of girls' education, or what Stromquist refers to as "curriculum justice," and recommend nonformal education, which has the potential to reach more girls than formal schools in contexts where many girls are marginalized.<sup>77</sup> Empowerment education is often complemented by efforts to target traditional and religious leaders as custodians of culture. This group may be targeted for attitude change through public enlightenment and awareness creation campaigns that encourage them to reject gender norms that are harmful to girls.

The origins of empowerment education have been traced to feminist and alternative critiques against the "instrumentality" of the World Bank's position on girls' education, whereby an almost linear relationship is expected to exist between schooling and economic and social transformation.<sup>78</sup> It is this feminist critique that filtered into the international development agenda from as early as the 1970s and shaped education policy recommendations to governments in the Global South.

A host of global policies on gender and on women's and children's rights set the stage for what practitioners would later operationalize in the empowerment education approach.<sup>79</sup> This global policy constituted the basis for an in-depth focus on girls' learning and the curriculum by multi-lateral agencies such as UNESCO and UNICEF as well as in international nonprofits such as the Population Council, PLAN, the International Centre for Research on Women and Girls Not Brides. These groups drew from the gender focused conventions to fashion guidelines and recommendations on how the content of girls' education curricula in both formal and nonformal education should be designed to address issues of gender

based violence within the school and in the wider society. Research on the impact of empowerment education on HIV/AIDS prevention among high risk groups of adolescent girls in Kenya contributed to the development of these works.<sup>80</sup>

Against this background, compelling arguments for empowerment education were made by development agencies vis-à-vis the MDGs.<sup>81</sup> For example, the World Health Organization, in the preface to its 2003 toolkit for sexuality education, and UNESCO implemented programs to combat sexist stereotypes and terminologies in the curriculum.<sup>82</sup> Recognizing the special need for empowerment education for girls affected by conflict, UN Women argued in 2012 for initiatives to support a curriculum that "will provide girls and young women with tools and expertise to understand the root causes of violence in their communities and educate and involve their peers and communities to prevent such violence," and in a joint statement by UN agencies to commemorate the 2013 International Day of the Girl Child important empowerment policy recommendations were reiterated on how education can end child marriage.<sup>83</sup>

### ***The Legal Approach to Girls' Education***

The empowerment education and the legal approach are both important human rights perspectives that share common roots in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, issued in Cairo in 1994, in particular, and to a lesser extent the other global conventions mentioned in the empowerment approach. The gender contribution to MDGs has been hotly debated, as many observers have noted the inclusion of gender in the MDG Declaration but that the goals were based on achievable targets that failed to

challenge the subjugated status of women and girls in the Global South.<sup>84</sup> Agencies such as UNICEF and UNESCO implement programs in both areas as they address the problem of how to end child marriage through girls' education. The approach of girls' right to education is located within a broader rights based paradigm that dominated the discourse on how to end child marriage before the current conjuncture, where education is proposed as the catalytic factor. A point of departure for the legal approach is the government's responsibility to pass and enforce laws on free and compulsory primary and secondary education. UNICEF argues that governments should make and enforce laws that facilitate girls' participation in education and states that this is a strategy to end child marriage.<sup>85</sup>

Similarly, the Program of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development Beyond 2014 (ICPD) specifically mentions the obligations of government to address the education, health and social needs of girls as a strategy to prevent child marriage. In its Beyond 2014 agenda-setting report, ICPD maintains a strong focus on ending child marriage by compelling governments to fulfill their responsibilities in the area of girls' rights in health and education.<sup>86</sup> Beyond securing compulsory education, with regard to child marriage, the major concern of the core rights based approach has been on passing and enforcing legislation on the minimum legal age of marriage and the registration of births, marriages and divorces. This approach has been found wanting because states are quick to promulgate laws on the minimum age of marriage but have been slow to set up the judicial machinery to enforce them.

Having noted that a strategy focused purely on international conventions and on laws related

to the age of marriage has been insufficient, the proponents of this approach have broadened their efforts to include a focus on laws and enforcement that emphasizes keeping girls in school and free from the threat of child marriage, and on supporting girls' right to education even if they have been subjected to child marriage. In this vein, the proponents of the human rights based approach make the case for how the girl's right to education can protect her against child marriage through three substrategies:

- Governments must make schools gender friendly. Penalties for removing girls from schools for purposes of marriage will be imposed, and a child protection system will be strengthened to identify and refer such cases to the judicial system.
- The education bureaucracy of government must put in place regulations and guidelines to protect girls from harm in the school environment and to introduce flexible school administrative systems so that married girls can still fulfill their right to get an education.
- Civil society actions are recommended to track government's compliance with obligations under education laws, policies and regulations and to monitor the spending from education budgets for girls and boys.<sup>87</sup>

Foundations and nonprofits play an important role in the human rights space and can continue to address the issue of patriarchy and male power blocs by addressing the legal barriers to girls' rights. International rights-focused nonprofits such as Oxfam, Action Aid and the Open Society Foundation have taken the lead in the rights based approach. Action Aid and to a lesser extent Oxfam have linked civil society mobilization and budget tracking actions with the goal of ending child marriage.

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#### Why Ending Child Marriage Needs to Be an Education Goal

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