



Save the Children

**SPOTLIGHT SERIES**

# SAVE THE CHILDREN CALLS FOR AN END TO CHILD MARRIAGE IN **BURKINA FASO** AND TO ACCELERATE PROGRESS FOR GENDER EQUALITY

## STATUS OVERVIEW: GIRLS' RIGHTS AND GENDER INEQUALITIES IN BURKINA FASO

The latest national data on gender-based violence in Burkina Faso is now over a decade old – existing data indicates that adolescent girls are at high risk of violence and new data is urgently needed.

More than

**1 in 2 (52%)**

girls were married as children, and 1 in 10 before the age of 15.<sup>1</sup>

More than

**1 in 10 (9%)**

young women had experienced intimate partner violence in the past 12 months.<sup>2</sup>

Almost

**1 in 6 (13%)**

women and girls experienced female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) despite opposition to the practice among 90% of women.<sup>3</sup>

**1 in 4 (25%)**

girls experience adolescent pregnancy.<sup>4</sup>

Pregnancy and complications and maternal mortality are the leading cause of death for adolescents aged 15-19 years globally,<sup>5</sup> a risk increased by limited access to skilled birth attendants. More than 2 in 10 births in Burkina Faso are not attended by skilled personnel.<sup>6</sup> Rates of adolescent pregnancy are particularly high in rural areas, and among girls growing up in the poorest 20% of households.<sup>7</sup>

Burkina Faso ranks

**129 out of 153**

countries in the **Global Gender Gap report** which looks at indicators including women and girls' health, political empowerment and educational attainment.<sup>8</sup>

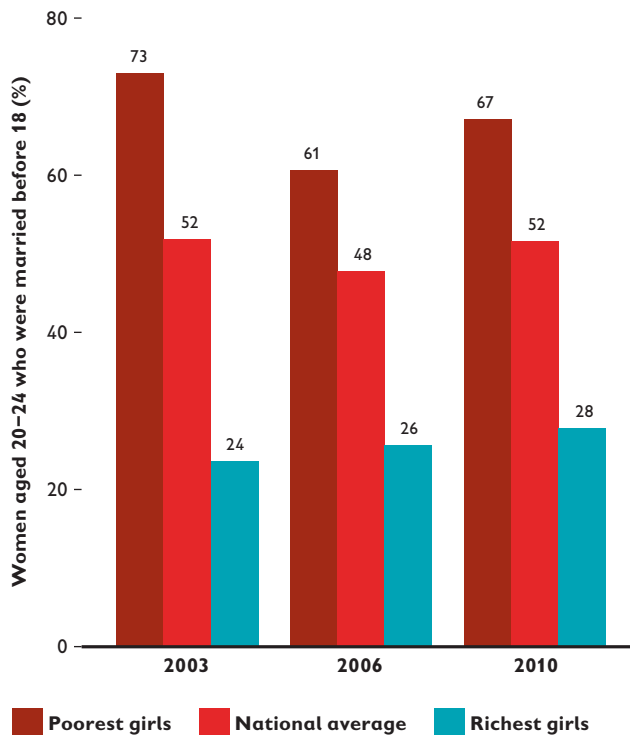
## DATA TRENDS AND IMPACT OF COVID-19

The national rate of child marriage did not change between 2003, 2006 and 2010,<sup>9</sup> and while more recent data is needed, rising instability in the region and country are likely barriers to progress.<sup>10</sup> Income inequality and region of residence are strong determinants of deprivation and risk of child marriage in Burkina Faso. Girls growing up in the

poorest 20% of households are more than twice as likely to be married before turning 18 than their wealthier peers (see Figure 1).<sup>11</sup> In the East of the country, more than 7 in 10 girls are married before age 18, while less than 3 in 10 marry as children in the Centre region (see Figure 2).<sup>12</sup>

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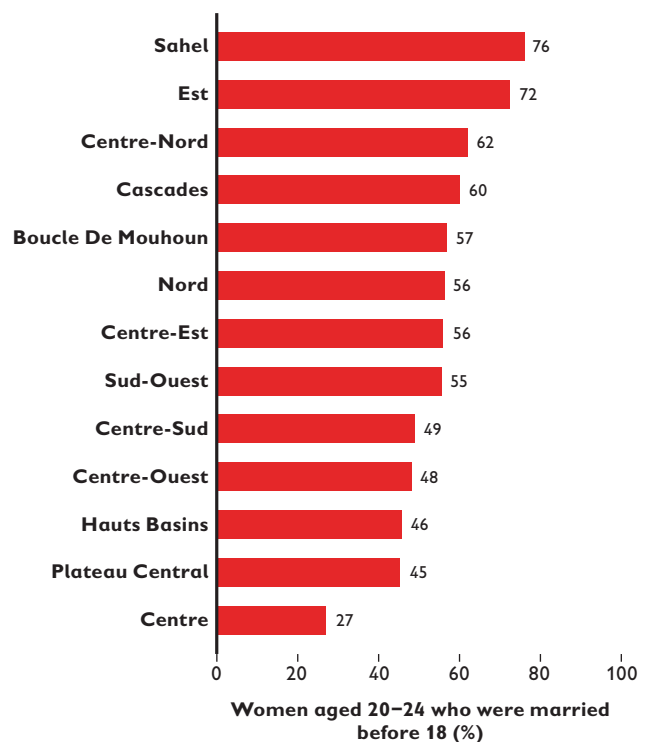
**Figure 1: The poorest girls in Burkina Faso face the greatest risk of child marriage**



Save the Children analysis based on DHS/MICS.

Child marriage rates in Burkina Faso have been stagnating for decades, and the harmful practice disproportionately affects poor girls.

**Figure 2: Girls in Burkina Faso face very different risks of child marriage depending on where they live**



Save the Children analysis based on DHS 2010.

Region of residence is a strong determinant of whether a girl will be affected by child marriage.

Save the Children's region-wide projections estimate that by 2025 the economic impacts of COVID-19 will put up to an additional 90 000 girls at risk of child marriage and 260 000 girls at risk of adolescent pregnancy every year in West and Central Africa.<sup>13</sup> The pandemic is already increasing risk factors for child marriage in Burkina Faso. A survey conducted in July 2020 found that since the outbreak, access to family planning services had become more difficult for

1 in 4 respondents, increasing risk of adolescent pregnancy – a factor for child marriage and maternal mortality.<sup>14</sup> Phone surveys administered by the World Bank found that as of October 2020, 54% of households were suffering from moderate or severe food insecurity,<sup>15</sup> both of which can increase risk of child marriage as during times of instability families may see marriage as a means of protection or economic relief.<sup>16</sup>

## DRIVING PROGRESS TO END CHILD MARRIAGE AND OTHER FORMS OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN BURKINA FASO

Child marriage is a form of gender-based violence and a violation of girls' rights. Burkina Faso is working to end child marriage, address risk factors that drive this harmful practice and eliminate other forms of gender-based violence through political leadership and by strengthening its legislative policy framework.

In 2015, Burkina Faso adopted a National Strategy for the Prevention and Elimination of Child Marriage (2016-2025) with two subsequent action plans for 2016-2018 and 2019-2021. The National Strategy is focused on preventing all forms of child marriage, strengthening national efforts to end child marriage, supporting girls who have been married and monitoring and evaluating implementation.<sup>17</sup> A multi-sector

platform was established to support the implementation of the national strategy in 2018,<sup>18</sup> when Save the Children officially launched a national campaign to end child marriage.

In 2017, the First Lady Mrs Sika Kaboré hosted a national panel on child marriage urging the National Assembly to raise the legal age of marriage for girls to 18.<sup>19</sup> The following year the National Assembly adopted the revised Penal Code to criminalise child marriage and strengthen legal protections for female students at school against gender-based violence, including sexual abuse by teachers.<sup>20</sup> Yet national laws remain inconsistent. At Save the Children's centennial celebration on July 16, 2019 the President

of Burkina Faso stated “I would like to ensure that the Penal Code and the Code of Persons and Family will be harmonized to set up 18 as the minimum legal age of marriage. The code is being reviewed and I would like to assure you that this is an action and a measure that will be taken very quickly.”<sup>21</sup> More than a year later, the children of Burkina Faso are still waiting for the fulfillment of this promise to give them legal protection.

Recognising the importance of social norm change to support legal efforts, the government has partnered with UNICEF-UNFPA on a national campaign to shift attitudes toward child marriage called *Ne m'appellez pas Madame* (“Don’t call me Mrs.”).<sup>22</sup> Social norm change measures in Burkina Faso have been found to be

effective, a study in the country found that a community dialogue of local leaders led by trained facilitators was effective in delaying child marriage and in increasing school attendance.<sup>23</sup>

The government of Burkina Faso has also introduced measures to reduce gender-based violence and improve girls’ access to sexual and reproductive health rights as causes and consequences of child marriage. In 1996, Burkina Faso was one of the first African countries to introduce a national law against FGM/C and cases have been brought through the community-based mobile court system.<sup>24</sup> In 2019, Burkina Faso committed to provide free family planning services, including contraceptives and medical consultations.<sup>25</sup>

## SAVE OUR EDUCATION TO ACCELERATE AN END TO CHILD MARRIAGE

2020 has been the most difficult year in a decade for Burkina Faso and one of the consequences of the deteriorating humanitarian context is the constant increase in school closures. As of December 5, 2020, the government has counted 2,169 schools closed, affecting 306,946 students and 12,075 teachers.<sup>26</sup> Education is critical to girls’ individual, economic and political empowerment and being out-of-school is both a risk factor

for child marriage and a common consequence. Girls in Burkina Faso without formal education marry nearly four years earlier than girls with a secondary education.<sup>27</sup> School can provide a critical protective factor for girls during the years they are most at risk of marriage,<sup>28</sup> yet in Burkina Faso, just 2% of girls complete secondary school and secondary enrolment declined between 2018-2019.<sup>29,30</sup>

## BARRIERS TO PROGRESS

Much of the progress made to strengthen the legal and policy environment for girls in Burkina Faso has been made since the most recent child marriage data was collected in 2010 so the impact of these efforts may not be reflected in the available data. The following remain key barriers:

### Legal loopholes and lack of prioritisation

Despite government commitments, the minimum legal age of marriage for girls in Burkina Faso remains 17 years (and 20 years for boys). Implementation, knowledge and enforcement of existing laws remain a challenge as the majority of child marriages are customary or religious marriages that are not legally recognised and the legal age of marriage can be waived to allow girls as young as 15 to marry.<sup>31</sup> Efforts to change the Code of Persons and Family and harmonise national laws have not been prioritised by key actors, including the Ministry of Families.

### Humanitarian context

Burkina Faso is among the ten countries with the highest rates of child marriage, all of which are considered fragile or extremely fragile states.<sup>32</sup> Effective governance and reform in humanitarian contexts is challenging and risk factors for child marriage including risk of exposure to gender-based violence, economic and food insecurity, lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services and education typically increase.

### Harmful norms around gender and adolescence

that promote control of girls’ sexuality continue to support harmful practices like child marriage and FGM/C and create barriers to girls seeking access to contraception, even under the subsidised scheme.<sup>33</sup> Gender inequality and harmful social norms, including gender norms that limit girls’ access to economic independence create pressure for families (and girls themselves) to continue the practice of child marriage to avoid social stigma and other consequences for refusing a marriage. Pressure to marry may also support the continued practice of FGM/C where it is considered to improve a girls’ perceived marriageability.<sup>34</sup>

## CASE STUDY FROM VIVIENNE\*

### “Spared from child marriage, children, especially girls, are able to dream and build a better future for themselves and their communities”

*“I come from Pissila-Poullalé [Burkina Faso]. My parents gave me in marriage in a neighbouring village of Poullalé called Guèssa in 2010 when I was 12 years old and in fifth grade. The husband I was given was over 50 years old and had five wives and several children. When I got in his house, I felt uncomfortable and got a general trauma. I was sick while at his house for 17 days, without taking any bath or eating well. I had a strong desire to continue my studies instead of getting married so early; that’s why I decided to escape. My only decision was to get rid of this marriage and also to continue my studies. I walked more than 40km from 8am to midnight. A family housed me until the morning in a village called Tallé. The next day, I walked again and I spent 4 nights in the bush because I didn’t know where to go to avoid this dangerous situation that could destroy my future. On the fourth day, when I was almost there in Kaya, I was unfortunately found and taken back to my husband’s house. The same night I was able to escape again. I walked 50km and found myself in the crossroads of Nioko where I got the bus to get finally to Kaya, where*

*I live in a center since 2010 with thousands of other girl victims. I was banished from my family. I haven’t seen my parents since then. I returned to school in 2012. I obtained my certificate to enter “sixth grade” during the 2012-2013 school year.”*

Vivienne has validated her diploma and in 2019, she passed her Baccalaureate. Now, Vivienne has moved to Ouagadougou, capital city of Burkina Faso. There, Vivienne is currently taking training courses in a health school in order to become a nurse to help communities. At the same time, she is taking courses at the public University of Ouagadougou. Because of her hard work, courage and perseverance, Vivienne has become a role model and an example that shows that, spared from child marriage, children, especially girls, are able to dream and build a better future for themselves and their communities.

\* Name changed to protect identity

Rosine, a graduate from the Youth in Action programme in Burkina Faso for children aged 12–18 years.





## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

To track and realise the potential of ongoing efforts to end child marriage and eliminate other forms of gender-based violence, the Government of Burkina Faso should:

- 1. Accelerate the process to adopt and implement the revised Code of Persons and Family to set the minimum age of marriage at 18 years.** The Ministry of Families is critical to driving this change and champions for ending child marriage within government must push for more urgent action to make promised changes a reality.
- 2. Commit additional resources to fund the National Strategy for the Prevention and Elimination of Child Marriage and agree a new action plan for work beyond 2022.** Both the 2019-2021 action plan and new plans should incorporate recommendations made in this brief and fully fund initiatives in relevant ministries to support tangible actions, in line with the strategy's commitment to a multisectoral approach.
- 3. Engage community leaders to change gender norms that enable child marriage and other forms of gender-based violence.** Collaborating with leaders at the regional level will strengthen national messaging and legal and policy measures to end child marriage.
- 4. Invest in girls' right to education.** Investments must include support for technical education and to ensure that girls who are married and girls who are pregnant or mothers can continue their education and catch up on lost learning.
- 5. Close data gaps by urgently updating national data on child marriage** to inform evidence-based policy and track the impact of ongoing efforts to end the practice.
- 6. Apply growing evidence of promising practice to address child marriage in humanitarian contexts.** Increased recognition of the risks girls face in humanitarian contexts is leading to a growing body of evidence on what works. The government should apply this guidance and seek increased funding for gender-based violence against adolescent girls in humanitarian responses, including child marriage.
- 7. Implement a gender-sensitive national COVID-19 response** to address the unique ways that girls are affected by the pandemic, including through protections to curb drivers of child marriage like poverty and limited access to education.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> UNICEF/DHS 2010.

<sup>2</sup> WHO from DHS 2010.

<sup>3</sup> UNICEF from DHS/MICS 2010.

<sup>4</sup> MICS 2017-2018.

<sup>5</sup> WHO (2020). [Adolescent pregnancy](#).

<sup>6</sup> World Development Indicators 2015.

<sup>7</sup> "GRID: Child Inequality Tracker." Save the Children International, [www.savethechildren.net/grid](http://www.savethechildren.net/grid).

<sup>8</sup> World Economic Forum (2020) [Global Gender Gap Report](#). The Index comprises 14 individual indicators grouped in 4 categories: Health and survival, Educational attainment, Political empowerment, and Economic participation and opportunity.

<sup>9</sup> Save the Children analysis based on DHS/MICS

<sup>10</sup> Girls Not Brides (2021). [Child marriage rates in Burkina Faso](#).

<sup>11</sup> Save the Children analysis based on DHS/MICS.

<sup>12</sup> Save the Children analysis based on DHS/MICS

<sup>13</sup> Save the Children (2020) [Pan-African Girlhood Report](#).

<sup>14</sup> Innovations for Poverty Action (2020). [Analyse de l'enquête RECOVR au Burkina Faso](#).

<sup>15</sup> World Bank (2021). [COVID-19 High Frequency Phone Survey 2020. World Bank Microdata Library](#).

<sup>16</sup> Girls Not Brides (2018a) [Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings: Thematic Brief](#).

<sup>17</sup> Girls Not Brides (2018b) [Burkina Faso - Child Marriage Around The World](#).

<sup>18</sup> Girls Not Brides (2018b) above.

<sup>19</sup> Girls Not Brides (2018b) above.

<sup>20</sup> UNICEF (2019) [Burkina Faso Country Profile: UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage](#).

<sup>21</sup> Burkina 24 (1 July 2019) [Burkina: Save the Children celebre son centenaire](#).

<sup>22</sup> Girls Not Brides (2018b) above.

<sup>23</sup> Erulkar, Annabel, et al. "Designing and Evaluating Scalable Child Marriage Prevention Programs in Burkina Faso and Tanzania: A Quasi-Experiment and Costing Study." *Global Health: Science and Practice* 8.1 (2020): 68-81.

<sup>24</sup> 28 Too Many (2018) [Burkina Faso: The Law and FGM](#).

<sup>25</sup> Amnesty International (2019) ["Burkina Faso: Historic Day for Advancing Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights."](#)

<sup>26</sup> UN-OCHA (2020) [Burkina Faso Aperçu de la situation humanitaire](#).

<sup>27</sup> Institut National De La Statistique Et De La Démographie (INSD) and Ministère De l'Économie Et Des Finances (2012) [Burkina Faso: Enquête Démographique Et De Santé Et à Indicateurs Multiples 2010](#).

<sup>28</sup> Rafaeli, T & Hutchinson, G. (June, 2020). [The secondary impacts of COVID-19 on women and girls in Sub-Saharan Africa](#).

<sup>29</sup> UNESCO WIDE from DHS 2010

<sup>30</sup> UNICEF (2019) above.

<sup>31</sup> Girls Not Brides (2018b) above.

<sup>32</sup> Girls Not Brides (2018a) above.

<sup>33</sup> Amnesty International (2016) [Forced and Coerced: Forced Marriages and Barriers to Contraception in Burkina Faso](#).

<sup>34</sup> 28 Too Many (2020) [Burkina Faso Country Profile](#).