



# **Guidance for Engaging Traditional Leaders: Child Marriage**

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## Acknowledgments

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## Introduction

Across West and Central Africa (WCA), the prevalence of child marriage is 41%, meaning that four out of ten girls and young women, or nearly 60 million, were married before the age of 18.<sup>1</sup> It is expected that, as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, child marriages will rise. This could mean that an additional 90,000 girls in West and Central Africa are at risk of child marriage in 2020 due to the pandemic, and West and Central Africa is the second region where the greatest number of child marriages is expected, after South Asia.<sup>2</sup> This situation reminds us that WCA remains a region where childhood is most threatened. Ending child marriage in all parts of the world, one of the main objectives of SDG 5, requires cooperation from all stakeholders at the global, national, and local level.

Child marriage is a harmful traditional practice in West and Central Africa, with 6 of the 10 countries most affected by child marriage in the world being in this region.<sup>3</sup> Despite some progress since 2000, a high prevalence of child marriage remains in the region.

Involving traditional leaders in the eliminating child marriage is crucial. Traditional leaders have a strong capacity to mobilize their communities to bring change.

Recent literature suggests that traditional leaders may have more capacity to address rural issues than elected politicians due to the influence they have on their community.<sup>4</sup>

Within local communities, traditional leaders are highly respected, regarded and listened to. This respect allows them to play a key role in raising awareness about the effects of child marriage.

When traditional leaders are equipped with a clear understanding of the issues and perceive the causes defended by organizations as being of interest to their communities, traditional leaders are often

willing to collaborate. Some of them are even actively involved with organizations that work on different topics such as marriage, schooling and health.

Tradition is one of the driving forces behind child marriage, and working with traditional leaders can be a way to address the root of the problem. However, the involvement of traditional leaders in advocacy and campaigns requires preconditions.

## Safe Hands for Girls

Safe Hands for Girls is an organization created by a Gambian woman who was the victim of early marriage.

Safe Hands for Girls engaged religious leaders and traditional leaders in its outreach strategy. From 16 to 18 June 2019, under the theme of the fight against child marriage and female genital mutilation, they organized a summit where heads of states, members of government, institutions, and traditional and religious leaders were invited. The organization's founder stressed the need for these leaders to commit to ending these practices.

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<sup>1</sup> UNFPA and UNICEF, (2018). [Child Marriage in West and Central Africa at a Glance](#)

<sup>2</sup> Save the Children, (2020). [Pan-African Girlhood Report 2020 : How COVID-19 is putting progress in peril](#)

<sup>3</sup> Girls Not Brides, (2020). [Top 20 child marriage prevalence and burden](#)

<sup>4</sup> Overseas Development Institute, (2009). [Town Chiefs in Malawi](#)

## What is tradition in West and Central Africa?

Tradition refers to a set of habits, beliefs, behaviours (religious, moral, political) particular to a group of individuals and which is transmitted over time. Traditions are a kind of 'collective agreement', and can either be similar or diverse and varied from community to community.

It would be difficult to estimate the number of people who believe in traditions in West and Central Africa. Many individuals have integrated traditional practices as part of their daily routines, and therefore may not consider them as 'traditions'.

However, we do know that traditional practices are widespread in this region of the world and affect a large part of the population. Revealed religions (such as Christianity and Islam) and modernity have resulted in the elimination of many of these practices - although religion and tradition are sometimes combined.

Despite the fact that tradition and religion are sometimes mixed in West and Central Africa, they are different.

The mixture of the two stems from the fact that, despite an individual's adherence to a religion that sometimes bans certain traditional practices, many people continue to practice traditions.

For example, people in Senegal, Mali, Niger and other countries wear amulets as protection, yet also follow Christianity or Islam.

There are also local traditional religions that existed long before the arrival of monotheistic religions.<sup>5</sup> These traditional religions are still found today.

Not all traditional practices have positive consequences. Often, their status as a 'traditional

## Examples of tradition in West and Central Africa

Storytelling and legends were used in West and Central Africa as educational tools to shape the psychology and moral characteristics of children. Through the story told, the child learnt about their physical and social environment, the history of their clan, their ethnicity, and the behaviours to adopt for their development in society. They are tools for the transmission of traditional knowledge and values.

Initiation rites (practiced by some peoples in West and Central Africa) mark the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Their function is to complement or perfect the education already received. The harsh trials that characterize them serve to instill courage and submission to the subject to guarantee the harmony and survival of the group. Initiation rites are generally the moment when young people are initiated into conjugal life, respect for the hierarchy, individual discipline, etc.

### Excision

The practice of female genital cutting (FGM) is considered an excision. The practice is not just found in West and Central Africa, but all around the world.

Excision can be seen as a rite of passage, a mandatory step (in some societies) to become an adult. The procedures can vary from the groups that practice FGM. FGM has serious physical and psychological consequences on the girls who are victims, and is considered a human rights violation. Beyond the suffering at the time of the practice, FGM has consequences for health, sexual life and childbirth.

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<sup>5</sup> Jele Mangany and Johan Buitenday, (2013). [A critical analysis on African Traditional Religion and the Trinity](#)

practice' can make those that practice it forget their harmful consequences, and the practices become a normal part of life.

Tradition itself can be used as an argument to justify continuing the practice. For example, parents who give up their daughter in marriage can consider this practice as a 'private matter'. Fear of being excluded from the community also leads some members to renounce denouncing these practices.

It is argued that tradition should be modernized, so that it remains valuable and useful. It is suggested that a tradition must be able to integrate new structures or borrow elements to improve the living conditions of the communities that adhere to them.

Tradition should therefore not be a rigid institution that resists change when it is necessary. It sometimes needs to be adjusted to time or corrected.<sup>6</sup>

However, this does not always happen. Although many traditions have evolved positively, there are still some traditions that have not, and remain harmful.

By mutual agreement or consent of much of the community, harmful traditions persist and have disastrous repercussions on present generations. This is the case with child marriage, which is a practice that is often motivated or justified by tradition. Tradition can serve as a pretext for the people who use it, and sometimes even serves to excuse other motivations, such as economic motivations.

Child marriage is driven by existing stereotypes in these societies such as gender inequality. Girls therefore must submit to it as it is a societal rule.

In West and Central Africa, such traditions are guarded by traditional leaders. The power of traditional leaders is based on belief in the sanctity of ancient traditions and the legitimacy of the one called to lead.

## Plan International using initiation ceremonies for change

Plan International has collaborated with traditional leaders in Zambia to eliminate violence against children (child marriage, transition rituals, etc.), in collaboration with other local organizations.

In the Eastern Province, a region where initiation of girls is a common practice (and a key factor in child marriage), Plan has successfully advocated changing the teachings girls receive during initiation ceremonies. Instead, it offered healthy messages about sex, hygiene and good behaviour.

The organization first succeeded in pushing traditional leaders to ban girls' initiation on school days; the ceremony now takes place only during school holidays. On the topic of child marriage, traditional leaders issued decrees and signed declarations prohibiting this practice in their communities.

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<sup>6</sup> Dr. Mungala, (1982). L'éducation traditionnelle en Afrique et ses valeurs fondamentales



## The Women's Saving Plan

Maria is a parent of two girls in Maradi, Niger. She and other mothers in her community have established a community savings plan where each member of the group contributes 250 CFA each week.

Every four weeks, these funds are then granted to a parent in the group who can use the funds to send their girl child to school. Because of this group, mothers in her community have finally gained the right to be heard.

"I am calling all parents to enroll their children at school, especially the girls," she said. "Once they are registered let them study until they reach their objectives."



## Who are the traditional leaders in West and Central Africa?

The functions of traditional leaders, date back to the pre-colonial era. Traditional leaders are symbolic figures, with recognized legitimacy, and play the role of arbiter in local conflicts.<sup>7</sup> In West and Central Africa, traditional leaders are mainly found in rural areas (note that the rate of child marriage in WCA is higher in rural areas).

The leadership of traditional leaders in West and Central Africa uses procedures that are generally different from those of modern societies. Their political role is not negligible, and their legitimacy may even be more important than that of modern rural authorities.

For example in 2015, after a popular uprising against the former president in Burkina Faso, there was a shift in political power and communities including traditional Leaders were seen as a powerful constituency.<sup>8</sup> In this context, Save the Children's campaign for free health care services for women and children under 5 identified the Mogho Naaba King of the Mossi as a source of credibility and a way of influencing policies. A position letter wrote by Save the Children highlighted the importance of providing free healthcare services for vulnerable people including women and children. In collaboration with the national coalition for universal health coverage, the Mogho Naba was lobbied to join the campaign. Through these efforts, they agreed to sign the position letter which was then published by the most read newspapers in the country. Two months later the new president released a decree stating that free healthcare services were available for children under 5 and pregnant woman.

Traditional leaders often have the final say in decisions made, and can also sanction a subject that would violate the rules established within the

community. They are therefore able to make decisions about the outcome of an upcoming or already sealed child marriage.

In countries such as Ghana, Botswana, South Africa, and Niger (see the case of Niger), traditional leadership is well structured when it comes to integrating it into government. Botswana, for example, has tribal administration offices in which chiefs participate in certain aspects of local government and the justice system.

Ghana has a well-developed system of chambers of chiefs. This includes several hundred traditional councils, each electing its members in one of the ten regional chiefs' chambers, each of which sends five members to a national chiefs' chamber. They are linked to the presidency by a leadership division. These chiefs' chambers have been involved in resolving very delicate situations. They are real "advocates" for their communities and increasingly demand that they be entrusted with responsibilities by the State.<sup>9</sup> The consequence of this structure is a good integration of traditional leaders into all forms of democratic institutions and a good adaptation of public policies to local structures. Ghana is often cited as an example of good practice, even by researchers in northern countries, when it comes to integrating local leaders, as they are genuine development partners.

In Côte d'Ivoire, President Alassane Ouattara institutionalized the status of traditional leaders. They now receive a regular salary, as in Cameroon.

Due to their power and influence, traditional leaders are increasingly courted, even by leaders. Leaders usually approach traditional leaders during elections, as their influence is recognized. This is why they are great allies to achieve our campaign goals.

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<sup>7</sup> Southern African HIV and AIDS Information Dissemination Service (SAFAIDS), (2011). [Traditional leaders on the Frontline: Addressing Harmful Cultural Practices to Reduce Gender-based Violence and HIV in Southern Africa](#).

<sup>8</sup> The Guardian, (2015). [Burkina Faso's army enters capital to disarm coup leaders in lead-up to poll](#)

<sup>9</sup> International Development Research Centre, (2011). [Enhancing the role of traditional leaders in African governance](#)

## UNICEF working with traditional leaders for change

In July 2019, Save the Children and partners collaborated with the First Lady of Niger for an ECOWAS high level event on 'Ending Child Marriage in West Africa, Promoting Schooling for Young Girls and Strengthening Girls empowerment'. During the event, ECOWAS First Ladies made a historic appeal supported by all the Traditional Chiefs of Niger, who were present in the Hall. This was also enhanced by the presence of the President of the Republic of Niger, Issoufou Mahamoudou, who spoke very strongly against child marriage. The appeal called on the traditional and religious leaders to be more involved in raising awareness and taking concrete steps to bring about behavioral and social change in favour of girls' education and the fight against child marriage.

In Malawi, a country with a high rate of child marriage, local traditional leaders worked with UNICEF. In the community of Machinga, collaboration with Chief Kapoloma resulted in more than 30 child marriages being cancelled and girls returning to school by April 2018.

In Burkina Faso, Save the Children collaborated with traditional leaders in the region of Boucle du Mouhoun, providing the region with a regulation system. This regional system brings in traditional leaders to check the age of girls and boys before any marriage. Currently, 44 traditional leaders are part of this regulation effort and frequently engage parents in a dialogue when there is a risk of a child marriage.

Today we are witnessing the emergence of a new type of traditional or customary leader, one that is flexible and adaptable. In addition to now including women in their ranks, traditional leaders are more and more educated, and even part of the ruling class. In Nigeria, for example, it is not uncommon

for former academics to convert into traditional leaders.<sup>10</sup>

The association of traditional leaders with religious leaders could add value to the achievement of our goal. The alliance between traditional and religious leaders is often made spontaneously due to the close linkage between culture and religion in many African countries, as discussed. In Niger and Mali, for example, both functions can be filled by the same leader.

However, in some contexts, traditional leaders decide to work with religious leaders. For example, during a Government of Canada awareness mission to Côte d'Ivoire, one of the traditional leaders committed to participate in change by promising to ask religious leaders to include the consequences of child marriage in their preaching, and to encourage families to abandon the practice.

The more traditional societies also tend to use religion to justify their practices. This is very often the case in countries such as Mali, Niger and Senegal. It is in such contexts that the association of these two types of leaders becomes interesting.

In addition to the groups of chiefs, we may have other types of traditional leaders. For example, the traditional communicators and the "guerrisseurs" can influence behaviours in some countries like Mali.

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<sup>10</sup> Perrot, (2009). [Les autorités traditionnelles et l'État moderne en Afrique Subsaharienne au début de XXI<sup>e</sup> Siècle](#)



## Mahamadou Abdou, Founder of the Coranic School Nour Islam Tessaoua

Mahamadou has become a prominent figure in his community where he devotes his time to educating girls despite what others in his community believe. His goal is to modify the radical thoughts of his neighbours On girls education."I call on the government to encourage girls to stay in school like boys, promote equal opportunities at school which discourage many parents from enrolling their children.

"Girls represent the mother of humanity which is why we prioritise the quality of education for young girls. Knowledge is a gift and the community cannot develop by only educating girls without the contribution of women."



## Why do we need to involve traditional leaders in advocacy against child marriage?

As described, the prominent role that traditional leaders hold in their communities is a good reason to involve them in our advocacy. So, we have highlighted six points that focus on the importance they could have in a possible collaboration:<sup>11</sup>

- ❖ Traditional leaders are people who are listened to and respected in their communities. Their word is always taken into account by the population and is rarely questioned
- ❖ The traditional leaders are part of the community. As a result, they understand the community better, and inspire more confidence. They could help to create the right climate for our advocacy work.
- ❖ Traditional leaders have access to extensive networks and channels of communication. They could therefore play an important role in disseminating messages and shaping public opinion. They can more easily engage volunteers, and support the cause.
- ❖ They generally have a connection with public authorities. They have the opportunity to defend their community's interests in front of political decision-makers and to influence public policy.
- ❖ A committed traditional leader could engage other traditional leaders. They could find the right arguments to persuade them to follow their example, becoming an advocate for the cause.
- ❖ Some governments can disapprove of NGOs interfering in what they consider to be internal affairs of the country. Making the case through traditional leaders can therefore be preferable, as they are listened to and respected by the authorities. In addition, NGOs may be asked to leave a

community or country for some reason, but traditional leaders remain and could ensure the sustainability of the work. This is why it is important to ensure that they are fully engaged and that they receive the appropriate training.

### Marriage: “No child play”

Oxfam Novib, together with Save the Children, Simavi, and the Population Council, is part of the ‘More than Brides’ Alliance.

Through its 5-year program ‘Marriage: No Child’s Play’, this alliance aims to reduce child marriage and its adverse effects on young women and girls in India, Pakistan, Malawi, Niger, and Mali.

We are convinced that young people, especially girls, are only able to decide if and when to marry if they are empowered to make informed decisions, if their protective assets are built, and if their community respects their rights.

The Alliance offers a multi-pronged approach of equipping adolescents with necessary skills and information, increasing their access to services and opportunities, and building their agency, while at the same time targeting girls and boys, husbands, parents of adolescents, community groups, influential leaders, including traditional leaders to shift social norms related to marriage formation, sexual reproductive health rights and gender equality.

<sup>11</sup> Southern African HIV and AIDS Information Dissemination Service (SAFAIDS), (2011). [Traditional leaders on the Frontline: Addressing Harmful](#)

## How to involve traditional leaders in our advocacy?

There are many examples of collaboration between NGOs and traditional leaders across Africa on different issues. For example, traditional leaders have committed themselves to family planning, against sexually transmitted diseases, for the schooling of children, against infant mortality, for the return of peace in conflict zones and many other topics concerning the well-being of populations. In Zimbabwe, UNAIDS collaborated with traditional leaders for the elimination of HIV infections among children and for the survival of their mothers. Chief Chiveso of Mashonaland Central Province in Zimbabwe has demonstrated a strong commitment to the health of the people of his village. He also provided important support for the engagement of men in this mission, in a context where women and children are excluded from most important decisions. In Ghana, it is common for traditional leaders to engage in the fight against HIV. The leader's position greatly influences the adherence of his subjects.

In Zambia, traditional leaders have collaborated with INGOs to improve access to health care for children and their families, and to reduce malnutrition. They have been involved in awareness campaigns, which have allowed the organization to see significant improvements in the maternal, sexual and reproductive health of adolescents. Beyond health issues, traditional leaders have been called upon to participate in the peace process in countries impacted by conflict such as Mali, South Sudan and Nigeria, due to their close proximity to communities and their ability to bring these communities together around a consensus. Local and international organizations have offered training to provide them with complementary tools so that they can properly fulfill their roles as mediators. One of them, His Majesty Mogho Naaba Bâongo, king of the Mossi, the largest community in Burkina Faso, won a prize for his

great contribution to the dialogue for peace and conflict prevention on the continent.

In November 2018, a summit was hosted by UN Women and other local and regional organizations in Nairobi, Kenya, around the theme of child marriage and female genital mutilation. The summit brought together 17 traditional leaders from 17 African countries to discuss how to end child marriage and female genital mutilation and “develop a roadmap for a coordinated and sustainable approach”.<sup>12</sup> In particular, they discussed strategies that worked in their respective communities. It was also an opportunity to recall the work of traditional leaders who have made significant efforts to end child marriage in their respective communities.

Queen Mother Best Kemigisa of the Kingdom of Tooro, Uganda, a powerful ally, also reiterated her commitment to ending child marriages. Aware of the power of traditional chiefs, she recalled the role they could play in this project.

Supreme Leader Inkosi Teresa Kachindamoto of Malawi (watch her testimony), who has cancelled more than 2,000 child marriages in her region between 2013 and 2018, called to adapt good habits to cultural contexts and to abandon harmful practices (watch his testimony).

However, there are challenges in working with traditional leaders:

- ❖ Possible reluctance due to a strong attachment to tradition. As guardians of this tradition, they may be hostile to any change that would affect or challenge traditional practices. We must therefore expect various positions that do not necessarily match our own.
- ❖ The possible abandonment of the fight after the departure of NGOs from their community. To mitigate this, it is important

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<sup>12</sup> UN Women, (2018). [African Traditional Leaders united against child marriage and FGM](#)



to ensure their full commitment. It is also a risk that some traditional leaders may attempt to use the subject for their own benefit.

Previous experiences offer good examples of collaboration and involvement. In Kenya, organizations have worked with the leaders of the Massai (semi-nomadic herders living in central and southwestern Kenya and northern Tanzania) and the Kaya (people living in Kenya). Through key moments such as that of circumcision, which marks a moment of dialogue with men, collaboration with traditional leaders becomes precious. They could encourage men to reject practices that subordinate women and girls and subject them to violence. This is about addressing the root of child marriage. In one year, 10,000 boys and men of the Massai tribe rejected female genital mutilation and polygamy.<sup>13</sup>

Another possible collaboration would be with other organizations already working with traditional leaders.

### West Africa Civil Society Institute

WASCI works on ending child marriage in the West Africa region.

WASCI works with traditional leaders who are building on their significant potential to raise community awareness. The chiefs enjoy the privilege of being able to speak directly with the parents of the girls.



<sup>13</sup> Girls not Brides, (2012). [Mobilising spiritual leaders to prevent child marriage in Kenya](#)



## Chief Chamuka, Zambia

In the Central Province of Zambia, Chief Chamuka is determined to end child marriage. He works with various international organizations, to achieve this result. As a result, he has successfully promulgated new rules within the community he heads. This has significantly reduced the rate of child marriage and teen pregnancies with the valuable cooperation of the public.

Chief Chamuka managed to convince other traditional leaders to join his fight by adopting regulations to raise the age of marriage to 21 and enforce registration in villages.

“The new rules have had a significant impact on people’s changing mindset. This is because they are community driven and not imposed by the chief”, he explains.

When he ascended the throne, says Chief Chamuka, he found that 45 girls had been married early and 209 pregnancies had been registered in his community. But after the new customary rules, there was only one child marriage and only eight pregnancies. Today, he continues his struggle and actively participates in community activities. Chief Chamuka does not hesitate to speak at major forums to denounce this harmful practice.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, collaboration with traditional leaders is key to ending child marriage, and involving these actors should be a priority. As 'defenders' of tradition, it is imperative that we engage traditional leaders to denounce harmful, traditional practices.

We can already see that involving traditional leaders helps to eliminate child marriage in communities. In areas such as Dedza in Malawi, the local regulations implemented by Chief Teresa Kachindamoto have significantly reduced the rate of child marriage in her country.

However, there is still a lot of work to be done to successfully involve traditional leaders. One way that we can do this is to understand the type of traditional leaders that we work with.

It is necessary to understand how we can take advantage of the emerging 'modern' traditional leaders, as most of these leaders are open to change and offer NGOs the opportunity to work with them.

By working with different organizations that have experience working with traditional leaders, we can strengthen our efforts and lead joint actions.

Work with traditional leaders cannot be done in isolation, and we need to ensure that we connect with governments for policy change in child marriage laws.



## Guidance for engaging Traditional Leaders in Ending Child Marriage

- ❖ **Identify traditional leaders in each of the targeted areas and study their position on child marriage.** The idea is to listen to their thoughts on child marriage and the possible reasons to supporting this practice, allowing us to adapt our messages to influence them. We should take advantage of the emergence of new types of traditional leaders, as many of them are open to change. There is also a need for traditional leaders to be seen as development actors, with modern political systems threatening their existence, which we should take advantage of.<sup>14</sup> Through an open approach to dialogue, we might be able to engage the most reluctant traditional leaders to join our cause.
- ❖ **Hold training sessions with traditional leaders** to raise awareness of the harmful effects of child marriage and give them tools to raise awareness in their own communities. We could involve traditional leaders already involved in the fight against child marriage in these workshops to enhance the credibility of our interventions. We could also involve professionals such as doctors, professors or sociologists.
- ❖ **Organize discussions between traditional leaders and parents** to solicit opinions and provide space for these groups to exchange views on their respective positions.
- ❖ **Focus on the harmful effects of child marriage** to convince traditional or customary leaders. It is necessary to emphasize each of the harms so that leaders understand the dangers to which children are exposed.
- ❖ Following the model of the previous summits organized, **create a national and regional platforms** for traditional leaders to exchange experiences. This would involve sharing information, lessons learned, best practices, challenges and practical solutions. Leaders could inspire each other and identify initiatives to collaborate on.
- ❖ **Use key moments of community tradition** (such as initiations) to get messages out to boys and girls. Also, encourage traditional leaders to address the theme of child marriage at large community meetings.
- ❖ **Create whistle-blowing committees** in which people could denounce child or future marriages.
- ❖ **Support traditional leadership initiatives** that encourage the abandonment of the practice of child marriage. Also convince them to put in place regulations and protection spaces that would deter community members engaging in this practice.
- ❖ From a comparative perspective, **identify the actions of other organizations** that have had the most impact when working with traditional leaders.

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<sup>14</sup> Sarda, Alou, (2009). [Les pouvoirs locaux au Niger : à la veille de la décentralisation](#)