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# One Too Many Child Marriages: Time To Act Is Now !

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Nana Nyama Danso has over four years' experience working with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) that focus on entrepreneurship, gender issues and women empowerment. She is an advocate for women and children's well-being in West Africa specifically Ghana. She has interest in researching into maternal, child and adolescent health and changing perceptions of people on developmental disabilities. Nana Nyama believes in an equitable society where each individual has opportunities to become their best so they can affect society positively. She looks forward to working with and learning from development partners, other CSOs and stakeholders that work on the child marriage menace in Ghana and Africa. She believes collaborative efforts will help reduce the burden of child marriage on the young mother, child, society and nation as a whole.

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### **About WACSI**

The West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) was created by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) to reinforce the institutional and operational capacities of civil society in the region. WACSI also serves as a resource centre for training, research and documentation, experience sharing and political dialogue for CSOs in West Africa.

### **About WACSERIES**

WACSeries are analytical periodic write-ups on topical themes and issues relevant to West Africa. These write-ups provide experts, researchers and practitioners a space to reflect, analyse and posit views and recommendations on emerging issues and debates.

The WACSeries Op-Eds are thought provoking and intellectually engaging write-ups that provide critical reflections and analysis of issues relevant to civil society and development in West Africa.

### **Objectives of WACSERIES**

- To raise awareness on key issues in West Africa;
- To generate debates and discussions on these issues;
- To proffer recommendations on civil society involvement in advocacy;
- To provide recommendations to policy makers.

# **One Too Many Child Marriages: Time To Act Is Now!**

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## Introduction

Across the world, a girl becomes a child wife every two (2) seconds. Annually, 15 million girls marry before the age of 18, making 41,000 girls a day. It has been estimated that an extra 1.2 billion girls will be married by 2050<sup>1</sup>. To reverse this soaring trend, drastic steps need to be taken. Internationally, child marriage is considered as a violation of the girl child's rights and protection.

It compromises her development and often results in premature pregnancy and social isolation<sup>2</sup>. Sub-Saharan Africa has been tipped to surpass South Asia as the region with the highest number of child brides, if nothing significant is done to salvage the situation. Previous studies have estimated that more than half of the girls' population marry before age 18 in many countries in the Sub-Sa-

haran Africa (Mensch, Singh, and Casterline, 2006)<sup>3</sup>. About 39 per cent of girls are married before the age of 18<sup>4</sup>. West Africa has one of the highest rates of early and forced marriage<sup>5</sup>. Findings from a study by Care International (2015)<sup>6</sup> show that out of 26 countries with the worst prevalence rate of child marriage, 12 were from West Africa. Niger, Chad, Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso recorded the highest rates in the region with a prevalence rate of 76 per cent, 67 per cent, 55 per cent, 52 per cent and 52 per cent respectively<sup>7</sup>.

1. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2015/11/5-facts-about-child-marriage/>

2. [https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/Progress\\_for\\_Children\\_No\\_6\\_revised.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/publications/files/Progress_for_Children_No_6_revised.pdf)

3. Mensch, Barbara S., Susheela Singh, and John B. Casterline. 2006. "Trends in the timing of firstmarriage among men and women in the developing world," in Cynthia B. Lloyd, Jere R. Behrman, Nelly P. Stromquist, and Barney Cohen (eds.), *Changing Transitions to Adulthood in Developing Countries: Selected Studies*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press

4. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/region/sub-saharan-africa/>

5. Child marriage will be used interchangeably with early and forced marriage.

6. [https://www.careinternational.org.uk/sites/default/files/VOP%202015%20Report\\_CARE.pdf](https://www.careinternational.org.uk/sites/default/files/VOP%202015%20Report_CARE.pdf)

7. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Child-Marriage-in-West-Central-Africa.pdf>

## 1- Gruesome Effects of Child Marriage

The reasons and causes for marrying girls early in West Africa are similar yet diverse in context and complexity. They are deeply interrelated in gender inequality, religion, tradition and poverty. Child marriage exposes girls to increased health problems and violence, denies them access to education, social networks and support systems, and perpetuates a cycle of poverty and gender inequality.

The incidence of child marriage is mostly high in rural communities and increases with instability; making girls living in conflict or crisis situations particularly vulnerable to the practice<sup>8</sup>. According to a report by The Associated Press (2014), some girls abducted by the Islamic extremist group, Boko Haram in Nigeria, were forced to marry their abductors<sup>9</sup> and some of these girls were pregnant when they returned home.



8. <https://iwhc.org/resources/facts-child-marriage/>

9. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/abducted-nigerian-girls-forced-to-marry-boko-haram-rebels-1.2627701>



## 2- Measures to Address the Problem

According to UNICEF (2018), over the last decade the risk of a girl marrying before her 18th birthday has dropped from one in every four girls to approximately one in every five<sup>10</sup> globally. However, the global burden of child marriage is shifting to sub-Saharan Africa, where close to 1 in 3 girls marry before the age of 18 compared to 1 in 5 a decade ago. Efforts from international communities, governments, civil society organisations (CSOs), private sector and other actors have been tremendous in their persistent fight against child marriage. Yet, child marriage thrives! The herculean task to curb child marriage in West Africa will need a holistic and comprehensive approach that is tailored to local context and peculiarities. It requires multi-dimensional and participatory efforts in providing lasting solutions to end child marriage by 2030.

Governments play a crucial role in implementing appropriate policies and interventions to curb child marriage. They also support initiatives and programmes of other actors working on child rights and protection within their respective countries. All governments need to show stronger political will and deeper commitment in leading the fight against child marriage.

10. <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/25-million-child-marriages-prevented-last-decade-due-accelerated-progress-according>

## 3- What has Been Done?

- In 2018, four first Ladies from Niger, Sierra Leone, Ghana and Liberia took a strong stand against early child marriages and other socio-cultural practices targeted at women and girls in Africa<sup>11</sup>. They declared their stand against these inhumane practices and pledged to end child marriage by intensifying activities aimed at addressing the situation.

- In the Gambia, the government is implementing national policies on reproductive and child health, national youth policies and national gender and empowerment policies. These policies often involve coordination between different government departments, including those responsible for health, social welfare, gender, and education and family matters.

The Gambia Committee on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children also undertakes advocacy on sexual and reproductive health rights and children's rights, through community sensitisation, action research, capacity building and training of community educators.

- Cameroon has also adopted a National Policy on Gender, which aims at the eradication of inequalities between men and women, including child marriage, and focuses on access to education for girls and the creation of economic opportunities for women.

- In 2014, the government of Mali launched a wide scale national campaign together with local organisations to sensitise citizens on the root causes and consequences of child marriage.

## 4- What Should be Enforced?

- **Strong and comprehensive legislation:** In most West African countries, laws protecting children's rights are not comprehensive to cover both legal and traditional/ religious marriages<sup>12</sup>. For instance, in Burkina Faso, Article 376 of the Criminal Code punishes whoever "coerces someone to marry" and makes it an aggravating circumstance if the victim is a minor. However, these provisions apply only to legally recognised marriages. As such traditional/ religious marriages which usually permits girls to marry at a young age are not criminalised. Such legislation needs to be tightened to protect the girl child from being vulnerable to perpetrators of child marriage.

- **Maintain minimum age for marriage at 18:** Most West African countries have the minimum age for marriage to be between 15 to 18 years. The minimum age for marriage is lower for girls in most countries. 18 years should be made the minimum mandatory age for marriage in all countries. Again, the minimum age for marriage should be the same for both sexes in accordance to the principle of equality. Seeking parental or guardian consent for marriage for a child under 18 years should be annulled in every country. Even though children belong to a family, they belong to the state and the state should be able to safeguard their rights since some families (parents) have failed in that respect

- **Punitive measures:** Again, punitive measures meted out to people involved in the practice should be stringent and enforced to the latter. In Ghana, for example, although child marriage is punishable by law, the punishment is not severe. Article 560, Section 15 of the Constitution states that any person who commits this offence is liable to a fine not exceeding ₵5 million (GHS 500.00) or to a term of imprisonment not exceeding one year or to both. This punishment should be reviewed. People involved in the practice should face life imprisonment since the practice destroys the livelihood of the girl child. Act 560, Section 14 should also cover both legal and traditional marriages.

11. <http://dailyguideafrica.com/african-first-ladies-stand-against-child-marriages/>

12. [https://www.chr.up.ac.za/images/publications/centrepublishations/documents/child\\_marriage\\_report.pdf](https://www.chr.up.ac.za/images/publications/centrepublishations/documents/child_marriage_report.pdf)

## 5- Role of Different Stakeholders

• **The role of governments:** Governments must also provide adequate health, legal and other services, which will remove structural barriers that prevent child brides from accessing support within their marriage and society. Adolescent-friendly health services, safe spaces and other support services must be available to meet the needs of married girls in rural communities.

• **The role of CSOs:** CSOs tend to be closer to the grassroots than many governments. They can empathise with the minority masses (women and girls) who are forced into child marriage and provide appropriate services for them. CSOs should intensify their community sensitisation projects on child marriage. These sensitisation projects should seek to change perceptions, attitudes and behaviours of the people. During these sensitisation projects, punishment meted out to those involved should be publicised for the audience to know that child marriage is an offence punishable by laws of the country and that it is being executed to the later CSOs must also build their capacity to advocate meaningfully and engage governments and other stakeholders on interventions and policies to end child marriage.

• **The role of men:** In fighting child marriage, the role of men cannot be ignored. They should be the focus if any change is to happen since they benefit more from the practice. Men must empathise with females and realise the horrors of the practice through sensitisation. CSOs can leverage on men's role as community leaders to become 'change makers', 'enablers' and 'influencers' who can propagate the horrors associated with child marriage to their fellow men. Young boys should be groomed to be the whistle blowers in this fight by reporting families and older men involved in the practice to security and appropriate agencies in the community. Young men and boys must become their sisters' keeper and be taught to value young girls.

• **The role of educators:** Teachers in schools can educate young girls and boys on their sexual and reproductive health rights and the adverse effects of harmful practices like early and forced marriages. Girls should be empowered to call out for justice and challenge the status quo. This method may sound radical, but it will go a long way in changing perceptions about women's assertiveness. Child brides should be reintegrated in the educational system if they want to.

• **The role of the private sector:** Private sector investment in the development of the girl child cannot be undervalued. As part of their corporate social responsibilities, they can give scholarships and provide opportunity to victims of child marriage to acquire life/entrepreneurial skills to start a business. They can build shelters for young girls who are homeless and provide them with security. The private sector (individuals and institutions) can also groom child marriage survivors to become advocates against child marriage. They can share their stories with other young girls and become peer mentors encouraging young girls to challenge the status quo





### Conclusion

In the words of Ban Ki-moon (Former UN Secretary General), "I urge governments, community and religious leaders, civil society, the private sector, and families especially men and boys to do their part to let girls be girls, not brides."<sup>13</sup> This is a clarion call to everyone to contribute to the fight against child marriage.

Join in this good cause as we create a haven of hope for every young girl in West Africa.

To achieve this, the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) is playing its role as a facilitator and convener of CSOs to brainstorm and strategise on effective ways of curbing the menace in West Africa.

It is currently working on a project with the Ford Foundation on strengthening capacity of CSOs working to eliminate the practice of child marriage in West Africa. The Institute believes CSOs working on child marriages should have the requisite capacity to engage their respective governments on existing regional and national framework aimed at ending child marriages. The project will be implemented in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and Niger.

13. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2012-10-11/secretary-generals-message-international-day-girl-child>

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