



# POLICY BRIEF

## Ending Early/Child and Forced Marriage in Cameroon

*Working a path Towards Achieving Gender Equality and  
Empowering Women and Girls for a Sustainable Tomorrow*

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## Key Take-Away Messages on Ending Early/Child and Forced Marriage: What Stakeholders Should Know

1. Because of early/child and forced marriage, girls' rights to education, to be protected and to be empowered to influence decisions that affect their lives are denied. The essence of the rights to education and health is that they facilitate and ensure the effective enjoyment of other human rights.
2. Cameroon has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Charter on Rights and Welfare of Child and several other human rights instruments setting the minimum age of marriage at 18. However, Cameroon's legal age of marriage as per the Civil Status Registration Ordinance is 15 years for girls. This national position is not suitable in the fight early/child and forced marriage
3. Early/child and forced marriage exposes girls to unions with older men, where they lack the status and knowledge to negotiate safe sex and places girls at risk of violence from their husbands (and in-laws), of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), as well as early pregnancy resulting in complications from pregnancy and childbearing which may lead to death.
4. Child marriage is an extreme violation of children's rights and a serious form of child abuse. It robs girls of their education, childhood, their wellbeing and their potential. Being married too young forces girls into physical and emotional relationships they are not ready for.
5. Change is possible if measures are taken to develop a multi-sectoral approach to end this practice, rally and educate parents and community members, ensure and improve girls' access to better quality education, ensure the implementation of standardized and supportive laws/policies, and empower girls with skills and provide economic support to their families among others .

## What is Early/Child and Forced Marriage? Why Must We Act Now?

According to Girls Not Brides<sup>1</sup>, every two seconds, a girl is married before she is physically or emotionally ready to become a wife or a mother. UNICEF estimates reveal that 12 million girls worldwide are married before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday yearly<sup>2</sup>.

**Early/child marriage** refers to any formal or informal marriage or union that happens when either one or both parties to the union are under 18 years of age<sup>3</sup>. It can also be defined as “Any marriage carried out below the age of 18 years, before the girl is physically, physiologically, and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and childbearing<sup>4</sup>.”

On its part, **forced marriage** is a formal or informal union at any age that takes place without the free, informed and full consent of either one or both parties.<sup>5</sup> Forced marriage further includes early/child marriage as it is considered generally that people under 18 years are not capable of giving free and informed consent.<sup>6</sup>

**Early/Child and Forced Marriage as a National Concern:** Although both boys and girls are exposed to this phenomenon, girls are more likely to marry early and be forced into marriages, thus bearing the greatest burdens on their health and well-being because of the practice.<sup>7</sup> With the practice (of early/child and forced marriage), a girl’s health and future is jeopardized. This significantly impedes progress on the realization of their human rights, education, health as well as their economic development. In most cases, such girls have been exposed to early pregnancies and social isolation, interrupting their schooling, limiting their opportunities for career and vocational advancement and placing them at increased risk of domestic violence.<sup>8</sup> There is thus a need for effective actions by relevant stakeholders towards the radiation of early/child and forced marriage in Cameroon failing to which the number of girls forced into marriage as children will double in the nearest future. Ending early/child and forced marriage is necessary if we are to make progress in global efforts towards attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

<sup>1</sup>Girls Not Brides is a global partnership of more than 400 civil society organisations, including a large number in Africa, working to address child marriage. Members of Girls Not Brides are united by a commitment to end child marriage and enable girls to fulfil their potential.

<sup>2</sup>UNICEF, “Child Marriage Is a Violation of Human Rights but Is All Too Common” (March 2018), <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>.

<sup>3</sup>See section 356 (1) and (2) of the 2016 Cameroonian Penal Code.

<sup>4</sup>The Inter-African Committee (IAC) on Traditional Practices Affecting the Health of Women and Children. (1993) Newsletter, December 2003

<sup>5</sup>Allison M. Glinski et al., “The Child, Early and Forced Marriage Resource Guide” (Washington, DC: Banyan Global, 2015).

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>U.S. Civil Society Working Group on Women, Peace and Security (U.S. CSWG), (August 17, 2018), *Ending Child Marriage is Integral to the Women, Peace and Security Agenda*, policy brief, P. 1.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

## Why Does Early/Child and Forced Marriage Persist in Cameroon?

Mostly in rural communities in Cameroon like in several other African societies, there exist several factors that promote early/child and forced marriage thus, posing numerous challenges for policymakers in eradicating the practice. Worth mentioning are:

### Gender inequality

In some rural communities within Cameroon just like in several African countries, girls are not valued as much as boys. To an extent, they are considered to be a burden or a commodity. Power structures especially within rural communities are still overwhelmingly male-dominated or patriarchal thus, exposing girls to the risk of being forced into early marriages. Under such conditions, the marriage of girls is perceived as a necessary way of reinforcing existing patriarchal norms. This results in women's massive dependency on men. For any government to be genuine in its efforts to eradicate early/child marriage, gender inequality must explicitly be tackled as an integral component of its gender equality strategy. Without addressing the inequalities that drive the risk of child marriage we will not succeed in eliminating the practice or supporting girls to realise their potential.

### Inflexible traditional norms

In many ethnic tribes in Cameroon, child marriage is deeply rooted in their culture. It is observed as a way of life, which is practised and handed down from one generation to another. As such, within these communities, the practitioners believe that straying away from tradition could attract sanctions from the ancestors and could as well result in exclusion from the community and family shame. In many tribal societies, parents are under pressure to marry off their girls as early as possible to prevent them from becoming sexually active before marriage; as it is customarily believed that a woman who does so brings dishonour to her family and community. In communities where child marriage is prevalent, there is, therefore, a strong socio-cultural pressure on families to conform to the traditional practice to avoid the likely consequences from the gods and the custodians of the tradition as well as to attain a preserve a socio-cultural status within the community.

### Lack of/limited education

The lack of education or limited education for girls is a risk factor for child marriage. Little or no schooling strongly correlates with being married at a young age. Contrary, attending school and having higher levels of education protect girls from the possibility of early/child and forced marriage.<sup>9</sup> In a study done by UNICEF, women between the ages of 20 and 24 who attended primary school were less likely to marry by age 18 than women without primary education.<sup>10</sup> In localities of a high prevalence of early/child and forced marriage, educating girls is less of a priority than educating boys especially as woman's most important roles in such communities are restricted to be a wife, mother and homemaker.

<sup>9</sup>Anju Malhotra, (2010). *The Causes, Consequences and Solutions to The Causes, Consequences and Solutions to Forced Child Marriage in the Developing World*, ICRW, available at: <https://www.icrw.org/files/images/Causes-Consequences-and%20Solutions-to-Forced-Child-Marriage-Anju-Malhotra-7-15-2010.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup>UNICEF, *Early Marriage: A Harmful Traditional Practice* (Paris: UNICEF, 2005).

### The need to maintain family ties

Marriages or betrothals of children in some parts of Cameroon (especially in the north and extreme North regions) is valued as a strategy in consolidating powerful relations between families; such as but not limited to sealing deals over land or other property and the settling of inter-family disputes<sup>11</sup>. Marriage is also considered a means of maintaining and promoting relations between ethnic villages. Thus, children's rights as individuals in such situations are less prioritised as are often disregarded and the children especially girls valued instead as objects or communities at the disposal of families. Though betrothals are traditionally not supposed to be engaged in sexual relations until the girl reaches adolescence, this is not often the case as the husbands are rarely restrained with the teenage girls in most cases compelled to initiate sex before attaining adolescence.

### Poverty and economic survival strategies

The high prevalence of poverty and economic hardship serve as push factors for parents to send their daughters into early and forced marriages. This is to reduce family expenses or temporarily increase their financial status through the bride price paid to the bride's parents: A father receives payment usually in the form of livestock, cash, or goods, and younger girls often fetch a higher bride price.<sup>12</sup> For many poor families within Cameroon's Far North region, marrying their daughter at a teenage age is thus an essential strategy for economic survival as it would also mean one less family member to feed, clothe and educate<sup>13</sup>. Child marriage is valued as an economic coping strategy that reduces the costs of raising daughters. In this sense, poverty and economic hardship becomes a primary push factor for early/child and forced marriage because of the perceived benefits to the bride's family.

### Insecurity in the face of war/conflict

When families live in unsafe regions due to war/conflict, parents may genuinely believe that marrying their young daughters off to an authority figure is the best way to protect them from danger. In conflict-affected areas of the North and Extreme North Regions of Cameroon, for example, a girl may be married to an authority figure who can ensure her safety. Similarly, in Burundi, Somalia, Northern Uganda and Afghanistan, marrying a young daughter to a warlord or someone who can look after her maybe a strategy for physical security and support for the girl and her family.<sup>14</sup> In the extreme north region of Cameroon, girls have been abducted and recruited by Boko-Haram armed groups, and forced into temporary "bush wives" for the combatants.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup>IRIN, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Pakistan: Tribal Custom Forces Girls into 'Compensation Marriages', IRIN News, August 20, 2003; cited in "Virtual slavery: The Practice of 'compensation marriages'". UNFPA. [http://www.unfpa.org/gender/docs/fact\\_sheets/marriage.doc](http://www.unfpa.org/gender/docs/fact_sheets/marriage.doc)

<sup>12</sup>Sajeda Amin and Andrea Lynch (2011). When Girls' Lives Matter: Ending Forced and Early Marriage in Cameroon, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/ForcedMarriage/NGO/PopulationCouncil17.pdf>

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Anju Malhotra, (2010). Op.Cit. see also The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) (year not provided), Ending child marriage, A guide for global policy action, P. 20.

<sup>15</sup>See United Nations Human Rights Council report at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=16176&LangID=R>, also see United Nations News at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/08/1044481>

### A strategy to control a girl's sexuality

The practice of early/child and forced marriage is traditionally recognized amongst some communities in Cameroon as a necessary means for controlling girls' sexuality and reproduction which is considered to be directly linked to family honour and status. Cultural and religious notions of a girl's virginity in many societies are directly linked to the honour and status of a family. A Foubat palace official, from the West region of Cameroon, is noted to have said that: "*Early marriage ensures that girls are married with their dignity as virgins and maintain the family's honour.*"<sup>16</sup> This means that there is tremendous pressure on parents within most customary communities in Cameroon to marry off girls early to preserve the family's honour and minimize the risk of improper sexual conduct, which will bring shame and dishonour to the family.<sup>17</sup>

## Harmful Consequences of the Practice

Early/child and forced marriages within the Cameroonian society have significant devastating consequences as presented below:

### Fosters domestic abuse/violence:

Girls who marry at tender ages are more vulnerable to several forms of abuse such as but not limited to domestic violence (in such forms as assault, battery), sexual abuse, and marital rape by their spouses or in-laws. In most cases, these young girls are unable to speak out against these abuses and are forced to condone with them..

### Impact on the girl's health:

Child brides are prone to suffer from physical, mental, and emotional health difficulties. This is due to the pressure upon them in the course of the union before they have attained adolescence. They are vulnerable to strains associated with physical labour and trauma from sexual relations. They are also susceptible to higher rates of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) since some of their spouses (husbands) have multiple sex partners. More so, childbearing at a young age exposes young mothers to higher maternal mortality rates and the babies born to high infants mortality rates. Many child brides may suffer from *obstetric fistula*, a serious and tragic childbirth injuries-A hole between the birth canal and bladder and/or rectum, it is caused by prolonged, obstructed labour without access to timely, high-quality medical treatment.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Moki Edwin Kindzeka (2020), Cameroon Single Mothers Protest Forced, Early Marriages, available at: [https://www.voanews.com/a/africa\\_cameroon-single-mothers-protest-forced-early-marriages/6192513.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_cameroon-single-mothers-protest-forced-early-marriages/6192513.html)

<sup>17</sup> Sagade, J. (2005) Child Marriage in India: Socio-legal and Human Rights Dimension. Oxford: Oxford University Press

<sup>18</sup>Read more about *obstetric fistula* at <https://www.unfpa.org/obstetric-fistula>

**Girls are denied of their right to education:**

Most often, girls who are forced into early marriage hardly complete their education as they drop out of school (if they were in school in the first place), to devote their time to house chores and child-rearing. Consequently, they lose the skills, independence and subsequent benefits that education offers.

**Promotes high employment and poverty levels:**

Early/child marriage expose girls to be less able to get decent and higher-paying jobs, thus promoting the cycles of hardship, poverty and unemployment, especially in the formal economic sector. The practice could reinforce intergenerational poverty, a relentless cycle in which poverty is passed down from one generation to the next.

**Increased pressure on national resources:**

Early/child and forced marriages provokes high birth rates and consequently population growth. As such, this can strain national resources, including health, welfare, and education systems.

**Deprivation of rights as children/childhood:**

Children can be deprived of their status and rights as children since married persons are considered adults in many societies. More than anything else, early marriage deprives girls of their childhood as they are thrust into the full burden of domestic responsibilities, motherhood and sexual relations rather than playing with friends and dreaming about a career among others. In many circumstances, the young married girls move away from their parent's home to live with the husband and his family, wherein they have few or no friends and little or no say in their own lives.

**Lack of power:**

Child brides often may not participate in decision-making, property ownership, and other responsibilities in the home. This is further worsened when young brides are in polygamous unions. As minors, child brides are rarely able to assert their wishes, such as in deciding whether to use family planning methods or practice safe sexual relations, that is if they are even aware in the first place. As such, the girls can be particularly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

## Why Ending Early/Child and Forced Marriage is Critical to Achieving UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

In 2015, the global community, Cameroon inclusive committed to ending child marriage by 2030. The persistence of child marriage is hindering Africa's efforts in general and that of Cameroon in particular in achieving eight (8) of the 17 SDGs (No poverty, Zero hunger, Good health and wellbeing, Quality education, Gender equality, Economic Growth, Reduce inequalities and Peace, justice and strong institutions). Community Centre for Integrated Development (CCID) recognises the following links between the eight SDGs and Early/Child and Forced Marriage thus, reinforcing why we must take steps to act now:



**Goal 1 – No poverty:** Early/child and forced marriage is strongly connected to increased poverty across homes and fosters cycles of poverty across generations. Child mothers often have limited skills, education and access to the economic assets and decision-making powers necessary to properly nourish their offspring, and are therefore likely to perpetuate the cycle of poverty.

**Goal 2 – Zero hunger:** Child brides and their children are more susceptible to starvation malnutrition. Thus there is a need to end the practice in a bid to end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round.

**Goal 3 – Good health and wellbeing:** Women who marry as children are exposed to several harmful health implications such as STDs, high rates of maternal mortality and infant mortality just to name a few.

**Goal 4 – Quality education:** Early/child and forced marriage constitute a hindrance to the education of the girl-child. It is imperative to ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.

**Goal 5 – Gender equality:** Ending early/child and forced marriage and other harmful practices such as female genital mutilation will contribute to achieving gender equality and empower women and girls for a sustainable future.

**Goal 8 – Economic Growth:** Young girls forced into marriage are less likely to participate in societies workforce upon attaining adolescence (as much focus in the course of the marriage is to occupy themselves with domestic chores and childbearing), which undermines economic growth.

**Goal 10 – Reduce inequalities:** Early/child and forced marriage significantly affects poor, rural and disadvantaged populations disproportionately, and creates cycles of poverty that reinforce inequalities.

**Goal 16 – Peace, justice and strong institutions:** For peace, Justice and Strong institutions to be observed effectively, there is a need to end Early/child and forced marriage. In doing so, there is a need to target ending abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children. More so, there is a need to end modern forms of slavery and child exploitation.

## Why a Human Rights Framework is Critical for Stopping Early/Child and Forced Marriage

This approach provides an empowering framework for protecting vulnerable and at-risk girls from early/child and forced marriage. Countries like Cameroon which have ratified several international human rights conventions or treaties are bound by minimum global standards and have a legal responsibility for preventing violations of human rights. Cameroon is obliged to protect their citizens, particularly children, due to their vulnerability, dependence and specific entitlements essential for their welfare overall development.



Within the context of early/child and forced marriage, despite that it is practised by private individuals and not directly by the government, the government can be held responsible for “lack of diligence in preventing through its executive, legislative, or judicial organs the private act of contracting early/child and forced marriage.<sup>19</sup>” International and regional human rights laws are now increasingly being consulted and utilised in domestic or national courts as well as in human rights treaty monitoring institutions to protect, promote and improve girls’ rights in particular and women’s rights in general.

## A. International and Regional Human Rights Obligations on Ending the Practice

*“Duly approved or ratified treaties and international agreements shall, following their publication, override national laws, provided the other party implements the said treaty or agreement”<sup>20</sup>*

As earlier explained, States have a legal and/or moral obligation(s) under international law to protect minors from harmful practices in their best interests. They also have to ensure equal rights for men and women at the time of marriage, during the marriage, and at even its dissolution. By ratifying or acceding to international and regional conventions or treaties, Cameroon accepts the legal duty to abide by them and thereby become obliged to take steps to protect the exercise and enjoyment of human rights, investigate violations, and provide effective remedies to victims.

In the context of eradicating early/child and forced marriage, some examples of human rights obligations vested upon Cameroon can be found in the following international and regional human rights instruments:

1. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948): Articles 16(1) and (2)*
2. *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (1979): Article 16(1) and (2)*
3. *Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) (1989): Article 1, and CRC General Comment 4, para. 16*
4. *The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976): Article 12*
5. *The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (2000): Article XXI*
6. *Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (known as the Maputo Protocol) (2003): Article 6, clauses (a), (b), (d)*

<sup>19</sup>Sagade, J. (2005) Child Marriage in India: Socio-legal and Human Rights Dimension. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>20</sup>Article 45 of Law No. 96-06 of 18 January 1996 to amend the Constitution of 2 June 1972 (commonly referred to as the 1996 Constitution of Cameroon). Article 43 of the said Constitution gives Powers to The President of the Republic to negotiate and ratify treaties and international agreements

Despite that, not all the international human rights instruments highlighted above may provide comprehensive guidance in the area of early/child and forced marriage, the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)* which is largely observed as “the bill of rights for women” provides explicit provisions on key issues about the practice. Worth noting is the area of consent, and a minimum marriage age of 18 years, thus outlawing discriminatory ages for both parties. With regards to consent to marry, Article 16 (1) states that:

***“States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in all matters relating to marriage and family relations and in particular, shall ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women:***

***(a) The same right to enter into marriage;***

***(b) The same right freely to choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent;”***

*The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa* (commonly referred to as the Maputo Protocol) goes further to address the areas of consent and age and calls for all marriage registration.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, although the *Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)* does not specifically address early/child and forced marriage, it stipulates several norms and protective measures for children which collectively provide an enabling framework for tackling early/child and forced marriage in Cameroon particularly and the world in general. The CRC recognises a child as below the age of 18 years. The clauses contained in the Convention make it clear that child marriage undermines several rights which are guaranteed by this Convention. They include the following:

- ◆ *The right to life, Article 6*
- ◆ *The right to health, Article 24*
- ◆ *The right to be protected from harmful practices, Article 24*
- ◆ *The right to freedom from abuse and exploitation, Articles 19, 34, 39*
- ◆ *The right to education, Articles 24, 28, 29*
- ◆ *The right to participation, Articles 12, 13, 14, 15*

<sup>21</sup>The Maputo Protocol came into force on 25 October 2005, having been ratified by 15 member states. This African Regional Charter addresses a broad range of women’s human rights. Article 6 provides clear guidance on marriage and includes equal rights for males and females, marriage with consent of both parties, a minimum age of marriage for women of 18 years and marriage registration.

Worth mentioning is the fact that almost all countries in the world, with Cameroon inclusive, have signed the CRC. Cameroon is therefore expected to apply suitable measures to ensure the implementation of the rights recognized in the Convention. More so, the Convention stresses that in all matters concerning children, whether in the public or private domain, “the best interest of the child shall be a primary consideration.”<sup>22</sup> This all confirms and reinforces that early/child and forced marriage falls within the protective measures outlined in the CRC, thus providing valuable opportunities for Cameroon and monitoring institutions to use the Convention to ensure adequate protection of girls in particular and young women in general.

Again, *the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights* provides that marriage should be “*entered only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.*”<sup>23</sup> This is a clear indication that the Declaration frowns against forced marriage. However, in the majority of child marriages, there is often an element of “force” or “coercion” involved, perpetuated by the parents, guardians or families. Today, girls are still socialized into accepting child marriage as the norm of which many may give their consent as a sign of respect for their parents, guardians or families. Nevertheless, where one of the parties in a marriage is under 18 years, consent to marry in such cases cannot always be assumed to be valid (of free and full consent) and may also not always be in the best interest of the child.

### **B. National/Domestic Commitments to Protect Girls from Early/Child and Forced Marriage**

Under Cameroon law, the main piece of legislation that addresses marriage is *Ordinance No. 81 – 02 of 29 June 1981* (commonly referred to as the 1981 Civil Status Registration Ordinance). Article 52 of this law specifically stipulates that: “*No marriage may take place if the girl is younger than 15 or the boy is younger than 18...*” This provision of the Ordinance thus sets the legal age for marriage to be from 15 years for females and from 18 years for males. In the same way, regarding the element of consent to marriage, the said law provides that “;” *No marriage may be celebrated: (4) if the spouses-to-be do not consent.*<sup>24</sup> This clearly shows that, the Ordinance frowns against “forced marriage”. Article 65 of the Ordinance reiterates the issue of consent by stating that “*The marriage shall not be celebrated if consent was obtained by force.*” The same law considers that, force will have been used where brutality or threats have been exercised on the person of the spouses-to-be, his father, his mother, his legal guardian, his customary head or his children to obtain the consent or refusal of such a spouse.<sup>25</sup>

*While Cameroon has ratified the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and several other human rights instruments setting the minimum age of marriage at 18, Cameroon’s legal age of marriage as per the 1981 Civil Status Registration Ordinance is 15 for girls with parental permission, and 18 for boys.*

<sup>22</sup>See Article 3, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

<sup>23</sup>See the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948): Articles 16(1) and (2)

<sup>24</sup>The 1981 Civil Status Registration Ordinance. Article 52 (1) and (4).

<sup>25</sup>Ibid. Article 65.

In Cameroon, forced marriage is penalised *in section 356 (1) and (2) of the 2016 Cameroonian Penal Code* which states that: *“Whoever compels anyone to marry shall be punished with imprisonment for from 5 to 10 years and with fine of CFA 25,000 FCFA to 1,000,000 FCFA. Where the victim is under the age of 18, the punishment may not be less than 2 years imprisonment, whatever the mitigating circumstances.”*

Despite the legal framework adopted at the domestic level with Cameroon acceding to several international human rights instruments that clamour against early/child and forced marriage, several evidence and reports show that the practice is still perpetuated.

For instance, according to a study by the Center for Reproductive Law and Policy (a U.S.-based non-profit legal advocacy organization that promotes women's reproductive rights worldwide): *“In Cameroon very early marriage still occurs in certain tribes (in Adamaoua and the Northwest, and the Extreme-North between eight and nine years of age). Some customs call for pre-pubescent girls to leave their homes and live with their husbands. Most of the time, the husband is a friend of the girl's father, and the marriage has been arranged without her being consulted. It is in the house of this stranger-husband that she will experience her entire sexual and domestic life”*.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, a 2020 study reveals that, *“In Western Cameroon, hundreds of single mothers protested...against the cultural practice of forced marriage. The women, who say their parents forced them into early marriage, called on authorities to help end the practice, saying it too often ends in broken families... Around the towns of Foubot and Fouban, parents often force their girls to marry early, believing that tying the knot after the age of 14 brings the family bad luck.”*<sup>27</sup>

## A Call for National Action

Faced with the prevalence of early/child and forced marriage in Cameroon, CCID recommends the following strategies for action to put an end to the practice:

### *The need to develop a multi-sectoral approach to end early/child and forced marriage*

This entails bringing together State Institutions/Ministries, traditional and religious institutions, civil society organisations, community-based groups and other service providers to work together on decisions about how to address the different causes and consequences of early/child and forced marriage in Cameroon. This could facilitate the development and **implementation of a nationwide action plan on eradicating the practice**. Funding is very crucial at this stage, thus, the government through its Ministry of Finance should ensure that each sector has the funding it needs to respond effectively to the plan adopted. A multi-sectoral response to end early/child and forced marriage in Cameroon should be tailored from the grassroots/community context towards a nation-wide context, engaging stakeholders to address key areas such as gender-based violence, health, education, child protection and welfare, justice and democracy,

<sup>26</sup>Center for Reproductive Law and Policy (CRLP). Women of The World: Laws And Policies Affecting Their Reproductive Lives: Francophone Africa. "Cameroon" (2000) <http://www.crlp.org/pdf/cameroon.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup>Moki Edwin Kindzeka (2020). Op.Cit.

economic growth, food security and nutrition, agriculture, women participation and girls' empowerment, conflicts and humanitarian crises. CCID recognises that strong and devoted leadership is essential to bringing together diverse sectors to act on this issue.

### *The need to rally and educate parents and community members*

It is imperative to intensify actions aimed at educating parents and community leaders on the need to end the practice. Targeting this group is essential, families and community leaders are traditionally responsible for choosing whom and deciding when their daughters marry. Educating them through several different segments of community meetings, public announcements and informative campaigns on how early/child and forced marriage impedes health and future will spark powerful change. With the information provided, parents' attitudes toward the practice will change and they will more likely become challenging agents of this repugnant traditional practice.

### *The need to ensure and improve girls' access to better quality education*

Girls with little or no education are more likely to be forced into early marriages by their parents. Some of the suitors will promise to sponsor the girl in school while in their marital homes, if they accept the union. However, upon marriage, this promise is hardly fulfilled, as most of their husbands will compel them into sex, to start having children for the family. This situation is obviously not suitable for a girl who wants to pursue her education. A testimony from a child bride in Buea, the capital city of the Southwest Region of Cameroon, reads: ***“I am a 16 year-old married to a young boy of 25 years. We agreed that I will be going to school while in his house but he wants us to have sex even in my unsafe period. Surprisingly he wants us to start having children out of my wish. It has brought serious problems that he tears my pants “***<sup>28</sup>

Providing incentives and support in the forms of scholarships, school uniforms and textbooks, up-to-date learning classrooms or any necessary support for girls to enrol and remain in school can help delay marriage, especially for girls. Teachers in primary and secondary schools based in the communities should help in creating an enabling environment for increased school enrolment and retention of girls. They should be included in policies and programmes that aim to improve school environments and the safety of girls. When parents enrol their daughters in school, the children are less likely to be seen as brides by their parents and community members. Classroom learning will equip girls to be able to develop supportive social networks, skills and knowledge to better advocate for themselves their goals.

### *Ensure implementation of standardized and supportive laws/policies*

International laws acceded by Cameroon which frown against early/child and forced marriage represent a commitment by governments to translate and domesticate them and give guidance to policymakers and community activists.

<sup>28</sup>Berlyne Ngwalem Ngwentah (date not provided), Children's Rights & Politics: The Tragedy of Child Marriage in Cameroon, *Safe World for Women*, available at: <http://www.asafeworldforwomen.org/global-news/africa/cameroon/4841-tragedy-of-child-marriage.html>.

As such, based on international standards, the minimum age (18 years) of marriage for girls should be legislated in Cameroon to bring the situation in line with the human rights standards discussed earlier. National laws and policies especially those dealing with marriage, family and women's employment should be able to safeguard the rights of children and women and eliminate discrimination between males and females. As such, CCID supports the African Union (AU) strategies on ending child marriage, which include among others:

- ◆ A Campaign on ending child marriage that comprises of the following components: Advocacy, Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E), Facilitation of Technical Assistance and Capacity Building.
- ◆ The adoption of an appropriate legislation and policies that effectively prohibit and prevent child marriage;
- ◆ The adoption of national programmes and social movements at grassroots level involving lawyers, magistrates, judges, teachers, health and social workers, traditional and religious leaders, men, boys, among others to Prevent and End Child Marriage as an issue of human rights and harmful traditional practice
- ◆ The Promotion of universal access to birth registration, quality education and sexual and reproductive health (SRHR) services.
- ◆ The implementation of all key continental policy and legal instruments relating to human rights, gender equality, maternal and child health, as well as harmful traditional practices.
- ◆ The Promotion of gender and culturally sensitive policies.
- ◆ The building of partnerships with media, CSOs, foundations and the private sector among others and working with these partners to mobilize resources for specific country projects on Child Marriage in line with country plans and priorities.<sup>29</sup>

CCID further supports the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) recommendation on ending child marriage, which demands that action to enact and enforce national and international laws on child marriage should include the following measures:

- ◆ Amend or introduce new legislation on child marriage and enforcement mechanisms where necessary, to guarantee 18 as the minimum age of marriage for both males and females and to address consent and appropriate sanctions.
- ◆ Review and amend, where necessary, national family and marriage laws and policies that discriminate against women and girls, to promote their rights to property and economic independence.

<sup>29</sup>See African Union, Campaign To End Child Marriage In Africa: Call To Action, available at: [https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/32905-file-campaign\\_to\\_end\\_child\\_marriage\\_in\\_africa\\_call\\_for\\_action-english.pdf](https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/32905-file-campaign_to_end_child_marriage_in_africa_call_for_action-english.pdf)

<sup>30</sup>The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), Op.Cit; P. 27.



- ◆ Enforce the registration of all births and marriages to support the effective implementation of laws on minimum marriage age.
- ◆ Ensure that reports to international human rights treaty bodies, in particular the CRC and CEDAW, include a focus on measures adopted to delay child marriage and progress towards reducing child marriage.<sup>30</sup>

### *Empower girls with skills and provide economic support to their families*

Providing information to girls and bringing them together to learn necessary and basic skills relating to literacy and numeracy, communication and negotiation with others, staying healthy during reproductive years and how to work, earn and manage money will expose girls to become more knowledgeable and self-confident. All these will enable girls to advocate for themselves and make better decisions. On their part, providing economic support to the parents of these girls will improve their finances especially as many parents are forced to send their daughters into early marriages to have financial benefits or to reduce the number of mouths to feed due to economic hardship. Thus empowering their parents with economic opportunities such as a loan or an opportunity to learn an income-generating skill can provide economic relief for poor and struggling families. More so, children who learn skills, which enable them to earn income in the future, can be seen as adding more value to their families.

### *Create and/or ensure supportive programs that:*

- ◆ Strengthen the role of community-based organizations, especially women's and young people's organizations that promote women's empowerment.
- ◆ Support health professionals to promote anti-child-marriage messages, and help them to mobilize at the community level, as these workers may be highly respected by communities.
- ◆ Sustain girls who escape child marriages through the creation of safety nets, such as the provision of shelters, education and health services that can address the specific needs and fears of married children.
- ◆ Ensure that child brides living with HIV can access new technologies for care, including antiretroviral drugs and community-based care.
- ◆ Improve access to child and maternal health services, including antenatal and obstetric care, and child immunization and nutrition programmes, particularly for child wives/mothers who often have the least access to these services.
- ◆ Combat all forms of violence against girls and women, especially sexual violence and abuse, through policies and programmes focusing on prevention, treatment, counselling and legal protection.
- ◆ Support grassroots advocacy that targets males within the community, in particular boys, young men, fathers, and religious and community leaders.



# About Us

Constituted on 6th April 2016 as a non-profit organisation and recently being awarded an ECOSOC status by the United Nations, we work with communities to bring diverse groups together and leverage their abilities, interests, and resources to engender shared values and benefits. We ensure local ownership of initiatives by working with communities to drive program design and implementation. We highly value developing a comprehensive understanding of the social, cultural, political, and economic dynamics in the communities where we implement our programs and interventions.

At CCID, we aim to empower individuals and communities to uplift women, young people—especially girls—and the wider community to be leaders for positive change. We are an organisation made up of community development experts who recognise that to create a sustainable world, we must harness communities' potential. We strongly believe that women and young people in Cameroonian communities are central assets whose full potential remains untapped. We are also cognizant that the majority of indigenous people in communities across Cameroon live under the poverty line and work with community-based organisations to meet their needs.

CCID has been working in several areas to advance women's rights and gender equality set by BPFA +25, namely sexual harassment, community development, SRHR advocacy and policy management.

We have held campaigns called "Safe Schools for All" to promote an academic and community culture that effectively and strategically addresses and prevents sexual harassment in learning environments.

We have fellowship programs to educate and train young leaders regarding gender issues, development and capacity building at the grass-root level so that there can be a bottom to top change, and last but not least, we devote time and energy toward developing policy and advocacy documents that provide readers with an understanding of key issues regarding human rights and community development in Cameroon especially in the context of women and girls. We also use these briefs to urge community leaders, local policymakers, government officials, and other authorities to reform policies, traditions, and norms that interfere with Cameroonians' basic rights.

## Contact Us

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