



INTERLINKAGES OF CHILD MARRIAGE AND FOOD INSECURITY: A Technical Brief



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INTRODUCTION

Child marriage and food insecurity are two interrelated issues that have profound implications for the well-being and development of girls, families and communities, particularly in low-income and resource-constrained settings. This technical brief delves into the complex interlinkages between child marriage and food insecurity, highlighting the multiple interlinked factors at play and their consequences. It builds on knowledge generated through a literature review exploring the correlation between food insecurity and child marriage, particularly in West and Central Africa. This document offers an overview of the challenges and opportunities related to advancing rights-based and gender-transformative programming addressing the common causes of food insecurity and child marriage.

Recognizing the interlinkages between child marriage and food insecurity in emergencies and protracted crises, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the World Food Programme (WFP) West and Central Africa Regional Offices engaged in a desk review and summary research on the topic to develop a technical briefing note that will inform policies and programmes on food security and child marriage and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) more broadly. It aims to improve programming within UNFPA-, WFP, the broader United Nations system and other development partners in addressing child marriage in the West and Central Africa subregion by supporting the design of an appropriate response to child marriage by protection actors in the region as well as the development of measures to track progress. Moreover, it sheds light on areas of research that require more substantive analysis to understand the relationship between child marriage and food insecurity in West and Central Africa, thereby encouraging a more robust research agenda on the topic.

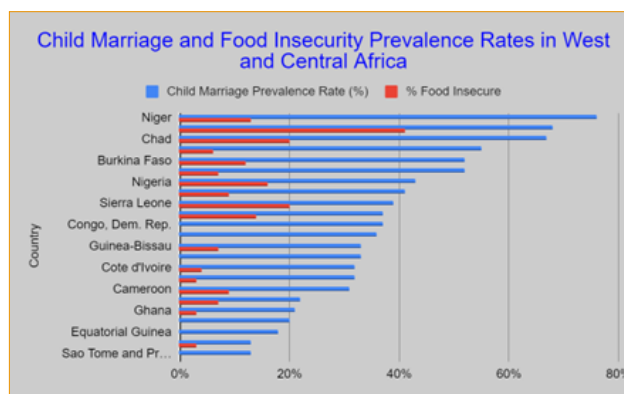
Food insecurity in the West and Central Africa region

Food insecurity results from the combination of material, biological, social and economic factors that lead to a lack of food at the individual, family or community level. The experience of food insecurity and vulnerability to it can have a range of effects that are detrimental to both individuals and communities.

Food insecurity continues to worsen in West and Central Africa, with the number of hungry people set to reach nearly 50 million people between June and August 2024. More than two out of every three households in West and Central Africa cannot afford healthy diets. Even more worryingly, close to 2 million children under 5 years of age were admitted for treatment of severe wasting¹ across nine Sahel countries, which represents a 20 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2022. Economic challenges such as currency devaluations, inflation, stagnating production and trade barriers have worsened the food crisis, affecting ordinary people across the region, especially those in Ghana, Mali, Nigeria and Sierra Leone². These four countries also have pre-existing norms that perpetuate high levels of child marriage.

Definition and scope of child marriage

According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), child marriage refers to the marriage or informal union of individuals below the age of 18 and an adult or another child, often without their free or full consent. It is a global phenomenon affecting millions of girls and boys, and disproportionately impacting girls. Some 650 million women and girls alive today were married before their eighteenth birthday, with nearly 60 million of them residing in West and Central Africa³. Child marriage is a serious human rights violation. Child marriage – even if done as a coping mechanism – is not considered in the child's best interests (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article. 3). Child marriage is thus considered to be a form of forced marriage by the United Nations (and particularly the Child Protection Sector), given that one and/or both parties have not/are not able to express full, free and informed consent.



Data: UNICEF 2022 CM prevalence and IPC 2024 food insecurity

Key drivers of child marriage and food insecurity

The desk review identifies several causes of child marriage. These include socioeconomic factors such as access to education and poverty, as well as traditional social and gender norms that undervalue adolescent girls. Evidence further points to the fact that food insecurity exacerbated by poverty is one of the causes of child marriage⁴. Countries in West and Central Africa have the highest rates of child marriage. Child marriage may be used as a coping



1 Malnutrition (who.int)

2 <https://reliefweb.int/report/mali/worsening-hunger-grips-west-and-central-africa-amid-persistent-conflict-and-economic-turmoil>

3 United Nations Children's Fund, Child Marriage in West and Central Africa: A statistical overview and reflections on ending the practice, UNICEF, New York, 2022

4 Gambir, K., Matsika, A.B., Panagiotou, A. et al. 'Associations between child marriage and food insecurity in Zimbabwe: a participatory mixed methods study', BMC Public Health 24, 13 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-17408-7>

mechanism to cushion social and economic hardship, including food insecurity suffered by households due to armed conflict and humanitarian crises, including those caused by the effects of climate change.

Political instability, expanding areas of conflict, climate events (including droughts, floods and fires), disease outbreaks, economic downturns, rising prices and overall rising household vulnerabilities have made it increasingly difficult to advance gender rights and end child marriage. West and Central Africa, in particular, is prone to a combination of these factors related to protracted conflicts and climatic shocks, chronic vulnerabilities and endemic poverty in addition to increasingly frequent mass displacements and the impact of global food shortages. The loss of purchasing power in West and Central Africa is also pushing millions of people into poverty and the most severe form of food insecurity in a context of lower food production with limited availability of nutritious food.

In Chad, Niger and Nigeria, child marriage is exacerbated in regions affected by armed conflict and climate change. The long-term impacts of the climate crisis are increasing the risks of child marriage in a number of ways, including being out of school, perpetuating poverty, food shortages and malnutrition during pregnancy. The effects can show cross-border impacts such as in Niger, where the Diffa region, which has experienced the most severe impact from the conflict, has contributed to significant shortages of food across Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger.

Niger's arid climate, population dispersion and migration patterns have led to economic downturns and challenges in addressing child, early and forced marriage. Niger has historically been subject to multiple forms of humanitarian crisis such as drought and armed conflicts. Evidence suggests that child marriage helps families maintain resilience during crises by strengthening community cohesion (Iris Group, 2022).

While there is a lack of reliable data regarding the specific effects of the crisis on child marriage in the region, there are reports of increases in the phenomenon. This is partly attributed to the perception that marriage provides protection against armed groups⁵.

In regions of Nigeria affected by armed conflict, especially the Boko Haram insurgency, 30.3 per cent of girls are married before their eighteenth birthday and 12.3 per cent are married before the age of 15 according to Girls Not Brides⁶.

In Chad, one of the main drivers of food insecurity has been erratic agricultural production due to increasing climate change and variability in a context of high dependence on subsistence agriculture⁷. This further translates into child marriages to ultimately provide labour for farms.

Interlinkages of child marriage and food insecurity

Food scarcity is one of the factors that impact the extent of child, early and forced marriage in different geographical contexts. Families may marry their daughters in an attempt to reduce the number of mouths to feed and therefore reduce their food-related expenses. While child, early and forced marriage may be seen as a corollary effect of food insecurity, the drivers of food insecurity, especially poverty, also have correlations with child marriage. The limited research carried out⁸ focuses on the specific interlinkages between the two phenomena.

1. Gender inequality is at the root of both child marriage and food insecurity

- Child marriage is deeply rooted in gender inequality, where girls are disproportionately affected by restrictive traditional social and gender norms. Gender disparities restrict girls' autonomy, agency, decision-making power and access to resources, including food. Unequal distribution of food within households often leaves girls and women malnourished and food insecure, thereby increasing the risk of child marriage as a (negative) coping mechanism for economic hardship and food insecurity.
- Discriminatory gender norms and the roles of girls within the family and community often intersect with food insecurity and poverty, becoming a significant factor driving child marriage. Child marriage creates a vicious circle by further limiting girls' and women's access to economic empowerment, negotiation power and agency and exposing them to risks of gender-based violence.

The issue of food insecurity is significantly affecting the entire community residing in the Lake Chad Basin. Adolescent girls bear the brunt of the negative consequences of conflict and food insecurity.

The increase in violence and abuse of adolescent girls in the Lake Chad Basin can be attributed, in part, to the worsening economic conditions and persistent food crisis. In a recent report by Plan International, community leaders explained that parents, driven by frustration stemming from their household finances, had resorted to abusing and mistreating their children. Adolescent girls and their communities described how the violence perpetrated by armed groups has deprived them of the means to engage in farming for subsistence and as a means of generating income. As a result, they are compelled to purchase food at the market with the meagre resources at their disposal (Plan International, 2020)⁹.

5 Iris Group 'Child, Early and Forced Marriage: A Political Economy Analysis of Niger'. rep., 2020

6 <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/nigeria/>

7 SISAAP – Système d'Information sur la Sécurité Alimentaire et d'Alerte Précoce du TCHAD [Chad Food Security and Early Warning Information system], 2022

8 Gambir, K., Matsika, A.B., Panagiotou, A. et al. 'Associations between child marriage and food insecurity in Zimbabwe: a participatory mixed methods study', BMC Public Health 24, 13 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-17408-7>

9 Plan International, 'Adolescent girls in crisis: voices from the Lake Chad Basin', rep., 2020

- Child marriage reinforces gender inequalities, perpetuating restrictive traditional gender roles and power dynamics between males and females. Women and girls in such marriages often have limited decision-making power regarding household expenditure, including spending on food.
- The deeply rooted norm and acceptance of child marriage, the limited options for girls, the belief that child marriage protects girls and represents a source of income reinforces the need for parents to marry off their daughters at a young age.

2. Child marriage has an important impact on health

- Physical and psychological Impacts: Child brides face heightened risks of poor sexual and reproductive health outcomes, including early and frequent pregnancies, maternal morbidity and mortality. Child brides experience adverse health outcomes, including nutritional deficiencies, maternal and infant morbidities and mortalities stemming from inadequate access to nutritious food and healthcare services.
- Child brides are more likely to become parents at a young age, often before they are physically and psychologically ready. Early pregnancies can lead to increased financial burdens, as families must allocate resources to support both the child mothers and their infants, impacting the overall household food budget.

3. Child marriage compromises education and livelihood opportunities, including capacities to address food insecurity

- Child marriage disrupts educational trajectories, depriving young individuals, especially girls, of opportunities for education and skill development. At the same time, girls who are out of school are more likely to get married early.
- Lack of education perpetuates poverty and lack of bodily autonomy and hampers individuals' capacity to address food insecurity through informed decision-making and sustainable livelihood strategies. Child marriage has the potential to perpetuate economic vulnerability and poverty cycles, as young brides are often deprived of educational and economic opportunities. Limited access to resources and livelihood options exacerbates food insecurity within households and communities.

4. Child marriage reinforces economic vulnerability

- Women vulnerability Limited access to resources and livelihood options exacerbates food insecurity within households and communities. For example, child marriage is widespread among Nigeria's poorest, rural households and the Hausa ethnic group.
- Child marriage and food insecurity are interlinked through a cycle of poverty and socio-economic pressures. Pregnancy and breastfeeding increase the nutritional needs of young mothers, while inadequate access to healthcare services and nutritious food during pregnancy and breastfeeding exacerbate maternal and child malnutrition, perpetuating the cycle of food insecurity.

5. Child marriage reflects women's roles in agricultural systems

- Women are key drivers of the food system. The agricultural sector across West and Central Africa remains critical to local and regional economies. It is the basis for food security and an important source of employment, particularly for women. African women represent over 70% of agricultural workers and are the primary producers and processors of food in Africa, but they lack access to land and technology and, therefore, achieve lower agricultural yields and experience greater insecurity of income than men. Despite their central role in food systems, women still face disproportionate barriers to access to inputs, skills, markets, capital, training, and technologies. For example, less than 40% of women own land in Africa while producing up to 70% of the food in this region.
- Access to productive resources, including land and finance are particularly limited for women and girls despite their predominance in agriculture.⁹ Girls are often denied the right to inherit land as they are meant to marry into another family, denying them access to land (and assets) as a way of protecting family assets, depicting another manifestation of gender discrimination and a perpetuation of intergenerational poverty.
- In many rural communities, where agriculture is the primary livelihood, families struggling with food insecurity may see marrying off their daughters early as a way to reduce the number of mouths to feed and secure financial or social stability through dowries. On the other hand, men marrying girls at an early age is a way to not only ensure an additional resource for agricultural work, but also ensure household chores are covered, including cooking, while maintaining an unequal power relationship.



ADDRESSING INTERLINKAGES

- **Empowering girls:** Providing access to education and skills development opportunities for girls can empower them to make informed choices, delaying marriage and increasing their capacity to contribute economically. This requires working at all levels of the socioecological model with key stakeholders within communities (parents, families, religious and traditional leaders, women's and youth organizations, etc.) to promote girls' empowerment, make knowledge about their rights accessible, and challenge and transform power dynamics and inequitable gender norms that promote child marriage.
- **Enhancing livelihood opportunities:** Programmes aimed at enhancing economic opportunities for women and girls in their diversity for the prevention of child marriage can alleviate poverty and improve household food security. To address cases of child marriage, efforts should be made to design livelihood initiatives that are tailored to the experience and needs of child brides. Similarly, interventions around cash transfers can be effective if they are part of a multisectoral programme and are channelled to address the context-specific drivers of child marriage¹¹.
- **Improving health services:** Access to reproductive health services, including family planning and maternal care, can mitigate the health consequences of early pregnancies, contributing to better overall household health and well-being. Improved health services should incorporate specific interventions around food insecurity and the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, especially pregnant adolescents and young mothers.
- **Developing and implementing programmes that address conflict sensitivity in a humanitarian context:** It is important to design programmes that are sensitive to local conflict dynamics, ensuring they do not inadvertently exacerbate child marriage rates or gender inequality. Ensuring a timely humanitarian response, especially food assistance, can mitigate the immediate risks of child marriage by addressing the root cause of food insecurity.
- **Mainstreaming protection measures** that explicitly address the factors and consequences of child marriage in humanitarian and food insecurity settings. Robust protection measures should challenge harmful cultural norms and promote the prevention and response to child marriage through comprehensive mechanisms such as safe spaces and legal support services. Community-based initiatives that challenge harmful traditional practices, promote girls' education, enhance women's economic empowerment and agency, and the promotion of positive masculinities and engaging men and boys to end child marriage can help mitigate the root causes of child marriage and food insecurity.
- **Collaboration and coordination:** Stronger collaboration between humanitarian actors, development partners, and local communities to address child marriage and food insecurity in a cohesive manner.



11 Girls Not Brides, 'How Cash Transfers Can Contribute to Ending Child Marriage', 2021

ADDRESSING THE INTERLINKAGES BETWEEN FOOD INSECURITY AND CHILD MARRIAGE ACROSS SOCIOECOLOGICAL MODEL PATHWAYS

Promoting gender-transformative approaches to tackle the linkages between child marriage and food insecurity in West and Central Africa requires collaborative actions across all levels of the socioecological model. These approaches recognize the interconnected nature of individual, interpersonal, community and social elements that impact child marriage and food insecurity.

Individual level: At this level, interventions should focus on enhancing the agency of girls and boys, including improving knowledge and skills to make informed decisions about their lives.

This involves reinforcing access to training in livelihood skills to mitigate the impact of economic hardship as a factor of child marriage and/or food insecurity. Intervention at the individual level also implies empowering young people, particularly girls and young women, to actively participate in all stages of the food security value chain, including production, distribution and consumption. Additionally, ensuring access to high-quality education for all children, regardless of their sex, is crucial in delaying marriage and improving food security by increasing future earning potential. Keeping children, especially girls, in school requires establishing mechanisms and incentives such as school meals to promote regular attendance or school-based nutrition programmes, including take-home rations or food vouchers.

Interpersonal level: Efforts within families and communities should target changing attitudes and behaviours related to restrictive gender roles and responsibilities as well as gender biases and discrimination. At the interpersonal level, it is critical to mitigate the undesirable effects that may result from unequal power dynamics and inequality in resource distribution. Food assistance and social safety net programmes may provide temporary relief to families in need, but there is a possibility that these actions might worsen the impact of forms of gender inequality on girls¹². This is the case when pre-existing gender and social norms that prevent women's and girls' decision-making, for example regarding household expenditure, are not addressed and or assistance is channelled to house holds rather than directly to the women and girls it is meant to support. To combat this pattern, it is crucial to create initiatives that provide instant assistance while simultaneously promoting gender equality and empowering girls and women. This may include actions such as:

- Facilitating access for girls and their families to vocational training and income-generating activities. Enhancing economic prospects for girls may reduce the tendency of families to perceive child marriage as a financial coping strategy.

- Food assistance efforts for households should include elements of community dialogue and sensitization to raise awareness about the negative impacts of child marriage. Engaging community leaders, parents and youth in these conversations can help shift restrictive social norms and attitudes towards girls' rights and opportunities during programme interventions.
- Ensuring women and girls are included in decision-making processes, policy development, planning, implementation and monitoring to promote gender equality. This implies making information related to normative frameworks available and accessible to them while also providing platforms that promote their activities and contributions to decision-making processes.

Community level: Establishing and strengthening community support networks, such as girls' clubs or women's cooperatives, may provide a foundation for collective action and peer support. These networks may support policies and programmes that advance girls' rights and access to nutritious foods, while also offering economic possibilities for women and girls.

Strengthening community resilience to alleviate both food insecurity and the underlying causes of child marriage should be formulated as a specific objective. This involves the implementation of activities that include food production and community-based agriculture initiatives, the promotion of climate-resilient agricultural practices and the strengthening of local food systems to increase the availability and accessibility of food for every individual in the community.

In addition, it is critical to promote food security outcomes that are sustainable and equitable by enabling women and girls to participate actively in food production and decision-making. By empowering women and girls to make decisions regarding food production and distribution and involving them in agricultural activities, traditional gender norms and advancing greater gender equality within communities can be addressed. This initiative not only enhances the capacity of communities to withstand food insecurity but also girls' agency, which could have a positive impact on efforts to end child marriage.

At the community level, it is important for programmes to engage creatively with boys and men beyond their roles as brothers, grooms, husbands, fathers or community leaders, using methodologies that support them to question and recognize harmful masculinities, expand their support for diverse and positive masculinities, recognize and positively leverage their privilege and share power and resources, including reproductive labour, equitably to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

¹² UNDP, Advisory Note 04 'Social Protection – Exploring gender-responsive safety nets in times of crisis', no date

Societal and Structural Level: Advocacy efforts at the societal level should aim to address structural barriers and systems of inequality that encourage child marriage and drive food insecurity. This involves collaboration between government institutions, civil society organizations and the private sector to develop and implement laws and policies that protect girls' rights, prevent child marriage and promote food security. It also entails challenging discriminatory social norms and harmful social practices through media campaigns, community mobilization and education.

Systems and institutions: Ensuring the strengthening of support services such as education, healthcare, legal assistance, social protection and psychological support, as well as access to those services, particularly in a crisis context, for girls who are most at risk of child marriage or impacted by it, is a foundational element of a gender-transformative approach to systems and institutions.

The implementation of an integrated service delivery approach, which considers the interconnected needs of girls and their families, is key to optimizing the effectiveness of interventions that target issues such as food insecurity and the prevention of child marriage. This entails the creation of coordination mechanisms or multisectoral platforms that bring together stakeholders from the social protection, housing, health, education and nutrition sectors. This will enable sustainable outcomes from the assistance provided to girls and their families, disrupting the cycle of vulnerability that is sustained by child marriage and food insecurity.

Ensuring equitable and transparent access to food distribution mechanisms such as cash transfers and food vouchers during periods of crisis is critical for protecting vulnerable populations, particularly girls who are vulnerable to child marriage, and averting exploitation.

In Chad and Niger, the Breaking Barriers to Girls Education (BBGE) programme has seen an increase in the number of girls enrolling and being retained in school by strengthening the capacity of government institutions to effectively address barriers to girls' education and their health, nutrition and protection needs, through multisectoral policies, strategies and programmes, including in emergencies.

- In Chad, the programme has supported 42,141 girls including 9,164 at the secondary level with cash assistance. This is augmented by the country's commitment to increase school canteen coverage by 15 per cent in provinces that are highly vulnerable to food and nutrition insecurity and have low attendance rates and school results. The government has also developed a school meals strategy based on locally produced harvests to diversify the diets of schoolchildren, improve opportunities for smallholder farmers and support the local economy, as well as developing and adopting a law on school meals that outlines the process of gradually increasing the budget from national resources.
- In Niger, 118,687 girls and boys have been reached through school meals, scholarships for adolescent girls, hygiene kits, etc.

An evaluation of the programmes showed that in both Chad and Niger, school meals and financial incentives were widely considered to provide crucial support for facilitating school access for children. Increased enrollment of girls supports delay in child marriage.

(Joint Evaluation of the Breaking Barriers for Girls' Education Programme in Chad and Niger (2019-2022), 2024).



CONCLUSION

The interlinkages between child marriage and food insecurity are multifaceted and deeply entrenched in structural inequalities, restrictive social and gender norms, and unequal resource distribution. Addressing these interconnected challenges requires holistic and context-specific interventions that prioritize gender equality, human

rights and sustainable development goals. Efforts to eradicate child marriage and alleviate food insecurity must be integrated into broader development agendas to ensure the well-being and empowerment of individuals and communities worldwide.



CALL TO ACTION

- **Comprehensive Policy Frameworks:** Comprehensive policy frameworks: UNFPA, WFP and partners can further strengthen their support to government and stakeholders to consolidate their normative framework to prohibit child marriage, promote gender equality and address the underlying drivers of food insecurity, including poverty and inequitable access to resources, among others. Supporting government institutions in mainstreaming gender equality and addressing gender discrimination in food security and climate change policies should also be given priority.
- **Data and monitoring:** Robust data collection systems and monitoring mechanisms are critical for tracking progress, identifying vulnerable populations and informing evidence-based policies and programmes aimed at addressing child marriage and food insecurity. It is recommended that food security data collection tools be enhanced by integrating variables related to child marriage, to better understand its correlation with various factors such as food security, coping strategies, child and maternal health, livelihood strategies, access to social services, household demographics, displacement and other relevant aspects. Furthermore, addressing the lack of official statistics on child marriage caused by weather-related disasters and climate change is essential, as well as examining the impacts of conditionality in cash transfer programmes on child marriage within specific contexts.
- **Development of a research agenda:** Focusing on exploring and documenting effective strategies and coping mechanisms during periods of scarcity can help prevent child marriages in households facing food insecurity, while documenting the impact of weather shocks on the timing of fertility can help understand the enduring effects on women's lives and their children. Furthermore, capturing the perspectives of adolescent girls experiencing food insecurity, who are often overlooked, can provide valuable insights for research in this area.
- **Multisectoral approaches:** Integrated interventions that combine health, education, nutrition/food and livelihood programmes are essential for addressing the complex interlinkages between child marriage and food insecurity. The success of school meals programmes in various contexts has proven the importance of coordinated interventions in the promotion of girls' education and child nutrition, and, by extension, efforts to end child marriage¹³.
- **Strengthening systems:** The multisectoral approach should be strengthened through mapping and inclusion of relevant systems in the coordination mechanisms addressing child marriage and food insecurity. In particular, ensuring awareness and the inclusion of food insecurity and child protection interventions in protection and food security programming should be strengthened. This may include prioritizing identified at-risk girls in food distribution, feeding and/or cash voucher assistance programmes.

¹³ World Food Programme 'Chad: Increasing access to life-changing education for girls and boys' (no date). Available at: <https://www.wfp.org/publications/2023-wfp-chad-increasing-access-life-changing-education-girls-and-boys>

