

OHCHR call for submissions on child, early and forced marriage

For the past three years, Equilibres & Populations has carried out a project in three different countries in Western Francophone Africa, namely Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger. This project aimed at enhancing girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights, in order to empower them and hence, enable them to enter a working life. We believe no sustainable development goals can be reached without women's participation.

But this meant changing mentalities that are anchored deep in cultural customs. Hence, we had to face early marriages that constitute one of the major issue regarding girls and women, but we also had to act in consideration of the local practices. That was one of the major problems encountered in Western Africa. There is a real need to act in respect of the local communities. This meant adopting a soft approach.

This is why ours was based on data collected through social mappings, vulnerability analyses, social security exercises, monitoring and evaluation framework and situational studies.

We achieved practical successes, that must be extended over several years, for time is the major criterion to change mentalities.

However, as this was a pilot project, there were some gaps we need to fill and some difficulties we had not planned.

Standing back on our experience, we are now able to identify potential solutions for future projects..

1/ Data analysis from the project geographical area (Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger)

Benin

- ⇒ 16% of girls aged 15 to 19 already had sexual relations before 15
- ⇒ 47% of rural girls are married before 18; 18% in urban area
- ⇒ Girls' contribution to national fertility rates stands at 21%

Burkina Faso

- ⇒ 59% of women aged 25 to 49 were married before 18
- ⇒ 91% of women aged 25 to 49 were married before 22
- ⇒ The median age for marriage is 17.7

Niger

- ⇒ 36.1% of girls were married before 15
- ⇒ 74.5 of girls were married before 18
- ⇒ The average age for a first sexual relation is 15.1
- ⇒ 40% of girls between 15 and 19 are mothers or pregnant

These statistics are extracted from our database on early marriages. They show their magnitude and let us assume the consequences of this scourge for girls and young women.

Obviously, we are talking about early marriages here but they are not the only factor that leads to those figures. They do, however, contribute in a noticeable way.

It is to be noticed that it is not an isolated issue, but it has not the same magnitude everywhere. That means one set of statistics, one approach.

2/ Our Action Plans:

Based on those data, our action plans consisted in a global approach aiming at empowering young women and girls. Hence, it was obvious that sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) were the most important pillar of our actions. That meant tackling the issue of early marriage, which is, with the unmet need of family planning, one of the main factors that lead to young women's vulnerability.

The crucial step was to provide girls **with a framework in which they could share experience and deliver their feelings**. The goal was to make the whole community aware of their situation, to make them realize what girls could feel about the weight of local traditions.

Throughout our project we needed to raise awareness amidst the stakeholders, in order to keep them mobilized.

Three tools were used in that regard:

- **Thematic community meetings:** used to emphasize reasons why customs that prejudice women, such as early marriage, should be abandoned. Thus, 68 meetings, which had gathered more than 1,500 persons, were organized over three years. It revealed all the resistances that can be faced in communities, but it also induced a dialogue and a change of mentality in some way.
- **Peer mobilization:** groups of girls and boys were trained to disclose messages on SRHR.
- **Radio broadcastings** designed to highlight those topics and trigger debates among the populations. This allowed us to reach a wide range of population.

This global approach aimed at dealing with each level of the population in order to reach individuals as well as the community itself.

Indeed, violence based on gender such as early marriages is the result of **a lack of consideration and protection of women and girls** by the community.

And it is this work on communities that was the most difficult part of our project.

3/ Difficulties encountered

The major problem we had to face was **absenteeism**. It occurs to be very hard to mobilize people on this matter. Besides, in order to break this chain, we had to target girls between 10 and 12 years old and their parents.

Changes in communities are very slow. And our teams sometimes had to use circumvention strategies by relying on local actors who could help them to work along with girls in the most vulnerable situations, individually or not. Otherwise, local people could have reacted violently against a foreign organization that came to make "their women and girls" disobey their patriarchal traditions and customs.

Besides, if early marriages can be considered as a "stop" in young girls development, its refusal is an act of sedition against the community, mostly in rural areas. This reality makes the dialogue more complicated.

But the country's responsibility must also be at stake.

In Niger for instance, there is no political will to forbid early marriage. As we know, 40% of girls between 15 and 19 are mothers or pregnant. The legal code of Niger set at 15 years old the legal age to marry for women. If governments are not involved in the process, our action on the community is less efficient.

Nonetheless, laws are not always sufficient to stem the practice. Indeed, cultural roots are so deep they are even older than governments. Moreover, administrations **do not always have enough means to make people respect these rules**, especially in countries where marriages are not always registered.

So there is a **double level of difficulty**, with governments and with communities.

4/ Our recommendations:

Equilibres & Populations is not focused on early marriages in particular but on women and young girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). But as early marriages have a significant impact on SRHR, the recommendations that we present may also help to fight this plague.

1. Make girls visible in the statistics
2. Include the specific needs of girls.
3. Set up a gender-sensitive budget.
4. Increase financing for Boy-Girl equality in developing countries.
5. Combat violence against minors.
6. Promote girls' sexual and reproductive rights.
7. Integrate girls into policies fighting HIV/AIDS.
8. Give girls access to formal and informal education.
9. Promote girls' access to an officially recognized status (birth certificate and identity cards).
10. Strengthen girls' economic power.
11. Allow girls to take charge and make their own decisions concerning their lives.
12. Involve the entire community in this process of social change.