



NIGER

COUNTRY PROFILE

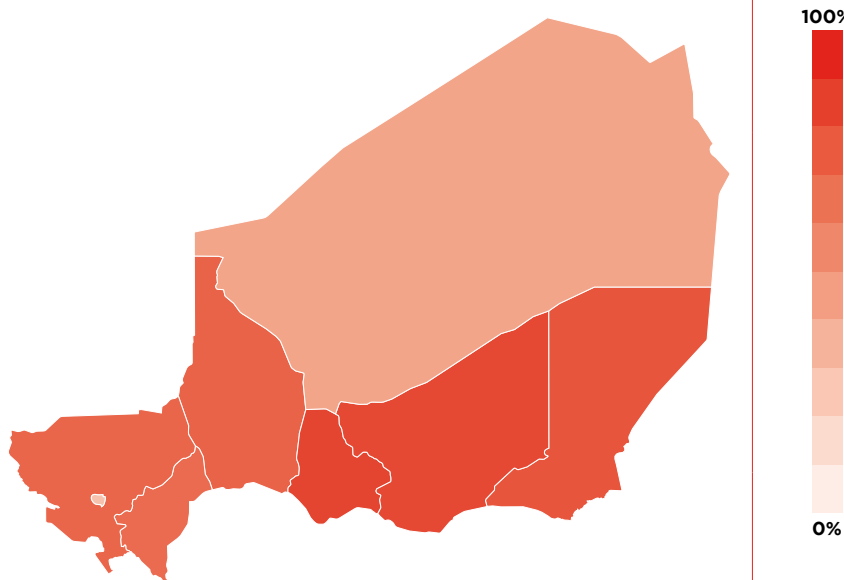


© UNICEF/UN0443426/DeJongh

NIGER

Percentage of women aged 20–24 years who were first married or in union before age 18.

Source: Niger Demographic and Health Survey 2012. **Note:** This map is stylized and not to scale. It does not reflect a position by UNFPA or UNICEF on the legal status of any country or the delimitation of any frontiers.



The country context

The Niger is home to 5 million child brides. Of these, 1.9 million married before age 15. The Niger is the country in the world with the highest prevalence of child marriage, with 76 per cent of all young women marrying before their 18th birthday – and there is no sign of progress in eliminating the practice.¹ Hence, projections for the country are not possible to assess, as it is not possible to build on observed rates of change. The projected prevalence will remain the same as today's levels until signs of progress are evident.

Further, parts of the Niger are considered part of the Sahel region, a broad swath of land across the northern portion of sub-Saharan Africa. Compounding crises affect the well-being of children and adolescents in the Sahel, both directly and indirectly. In this climate of uncertainty, in a region firmly rooted in cultural traditions, it is common for marriage to be considered a safe haven for girls with few opportunities. Not surprisingly, the Sahel has the highest levels of child marriage in the world – this is also the case for the parts of the Niger within Sahel: here the prevalence of child marriage is in line with the national average of 77 per cent, whereas the prevalence in non-Sahelian parts of the country is 47 per cent. On average, women in the Sahel region in the Niger marry nearly two years earlier than those outside the region (at age 16 compared with at age 18).²

Unlike the situation in the Niger, globally over the past decade, the proportion of young women who were

married as children decreased by 15 per cent, from nearly 1 in 4 to 1 in 5. This means that, over the last 10 years, the marriages of some 25 million girls have been averted. This remarkable accomplishment is now under threat due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the next decade, UNICEF estimates that 10 million additional girls are at risk of child marriage.³ This risks making an already hard situation for girls in the Niger even worse.

Despite these setbacks, the elimination of child marriage by 2030 remains a priority under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality. This monumental task puts pressure on the global community to deliver on effective interventions and policies at scale, generating calls for coordinated efforts and renewed commitments from stakeholders, particularly governments, to invest more to accelerate an end to child marriage.

Key highlights



Community mechanisms for protection of girls and surveillance of child marriage were strengthened through the establishment of



38
child protection committees and



221
village child protection committees.

More than



740
cases of child marriage have been postponed or cancelled, and



27,321
children have received child protection care services.



12,471
adolescent girls in the

97

new target villages acquired knowledge and life skills through their participation in educational discussion activities on themes relating to social mobilization, human rights, sexual and reproductive health, hygiene and sanitation, and traditional practices harmful to the health of women and girls.



The National Strategy for the Acceleration of Girls and Women's Education and Training (SNAEFF) was developed and launched with programme support. Following the launch, over

6,000

out-of-school girls have been able to return to formal education programmes.

Skills-building of **300 adolescent girls** in clothing-making alleviated the supply shortages of protective masks for refugees and displaced persons as they were able to produce **1,500 masks per day**.



2020 Achievements



Some

22,064

adolescent girls, enrolled since 2019 in cycle 5 of the Illimin initiative, were able to complete the programme at the start of 2020.

12,471

adolescent girls in the 97 new target villages acquired knowledge and skills through their participation in educational discussion activities on themes relating to social mobilization, human rights, sexual and reproductive health, hygiene and sanitation, and traditional practices harmful to women and girls.

Providing intensive support to marginalized girls

The Global Programme works towards enhancing knowledge, education and life-skills, and attitudes of marginalized adolescent girls, including in humanitarian contexts, on matters such as their rights, relationships, sexual and reproductive health, and financial literacy. At the individual level, this is done through interventions to strengthen girls' skills and capacity to empower them via the implementation of the UNFPA-supported Illimin initiative and the UNICEF-supported Community Approach to Child Protection (ACPE), where adolescent girls – both married and unmarried – from the most marginalized communities are taught to better express their opinions in decisions about their future.

Some 22,064 adolescent girls, enrolled since 2019 in cycle 5 of the Illimin initiative, were able to complete the programme at the start of 2020. They acquired knowledge of life-skills, sexual and reproductive health and nutrition, literacy and financial management, and were ready to face the challenges related to their situation as girls and young women.

Additionally, 12,471 adolescent girls in the 97 new target villages acquired knowledge and skills through their participation in educational discussion activities on themes relating to social mobilization, human rights, sexual and reproductive health, hygiene and sanitation, and traditional practices harmful to women and girls. Among these, 194 girls took on new leadership roles as 'child protection correspondents', leading community initiatives and being recognized and respected by their peers, who call on them in case of need. Supervised by qualified community facilitators, they represent the girls of the village in the child protection committees, where they make sure that their interests are taken into account, as illustrated by the testimony of Safiya Ibrahim, 15, Maradi Region member of the Village Committee for the Protection of the Child (VPE) of her village:

"Let's not be spectators,
but rather actors of our
destinies."

– Rahilatou, 15

"I feel very useful in the community because I intervene a lot with the VPE committee for awareness. Things have really changed, since I've been a protective correspondent, I feel proud to help my friends, and all my friends respect me and everyone wants to talk with me to take advantage of the messages I convey."

During the peak of COVID-19, these leaders played a key role in the prevention of disease transmission and in improving the dynamics around respect for girls' rights, going door to door, even as schools were closed for more than two months without the possibility of students continuing to learn through other channels (television, internet, radio), and organizing small-group participatory community workshops in their local languages where they shared their knowledge.

The Global Programme continued to provide economic empowerment opportunities to girls, with 300 adolescent girls enlisted in the Centre for Professional Training in Styling and Modelling in Niamey graduating and able to produce protective masks against COVID-19. The girls, who produced about 1,500 masks a day, contributed to alleviating the shortage of protective masks especially to refugees and displaced persons.

Next steps

The programme will strengthen and expand the existing 'community of champions' to advocate for girls' rights. The programme uses a human rights-based approach and aims to establish the general status of adolescent girls as rights-holders in the Niger.

Enhancing the family and community environment

The strategic approach of the programme is in line with the four strategic axes of the national plan, and within the Global Programme's results framework and gender-transformative approach. The programme's intervention strategy is based on a holistic approach that takes into account risk factors, traditions and norms, and the social and economic beliefs and systems that create and support the conditions under which child marriage is maintained. This approach also takes into account the respective roles that different stakeholders play in creating an environment that protects the rights of children, especially girls. These stakeholders have responsibilities at different levels to shape and influence the course of adolescent girls' lives at individual, interpersonal and societal levels.

The Global Programme is contributing to adolescent boys, families, traditional and religious leaders, community groups and other influencers demonstrating more gender-equitable attitudes and support for girls' rights. Supporting actions at the interpersonal and community levels are integrated into the Illimin and ACPE initiatives – these are essential actions for social and behaviour change of families and loved ones aimed at supporting girls in their choices and community mobilization around the rights of children and girls.



The Global Programme continued to provide economic empowerment opportunities to girls, with **300 adolescent girls** enlisted in the Centre for Professional Training in Styling and Modelling in Niamey graduating and able to produce protective masks against COVID-19.



In parallel with the girls' sessions of cycle 5 of the Illimin initiative, as part of a holistic approach to social change, the same communities were mobilized by community facilitators through 1,347 community dialogues on topics related to sexual and reproductive rights. Traditional leaders grouped within the Association of Traditional Chiefs of the Niger (ACTN) in the eight regions of the country (four of which are targeted under the Global Programme) have carried out actions on the ground through campaigns and community caravans, with a view to eliminating child marriage. Seventy leaders (15 funded by the Global Programme) exchanged with communities committed to eliminating child marriage. Each leader mobilized a team with two education officers, two health workers, two religious leaders, a youth representative and a women's representative.

During the year, 38 new community child protection committees and 221 village child protection committees were set up in accordance with the 2019 decree and are functioning as per the procedure manual – to manage child protection cases in their communities. These committees, with a total of 5,716 members, are elected in accordance with the defined criteria for a renewable two-year term. Committee members benefited from capacity-building on child protection issues, awareness raising techniques and case management. The committees work in partnership with the school management structures on gender-based violence (GBV) to ensure the implementation of the presidential decree on the protection of girls in school, allowing the committees to broaden their scope of action at the school level, to avoid school dropout and thus child marriage. Committee members played an important role in creating awareness of the prevention of the spread of COVID-19 and intervening in arranged child marriages. More than 740 cases of child marriage have been postponed or cancelled, and 664 girls were able to resume their education. More than 20 cases of sexual assault were referred to the appropriate services by the committees. Some 6,223 cases, 41 of which related to rape, were referred to appropriate services by the committees, and 408 child candidates returned to school.

Labour migration is a challenge for boys' and men's participation in the programme, especially after the rainy season. However, due to mobility restrictions, more boys and men ended up being engaged in the dialogues at the community level and participated in decisions to delay marriage with their own suitors. Close to 5,470 men and 824 boys from the 97 new villages in the programme participated in educational sessions on human rights, sexual and reproductive health, hygiene and sanitation, and harmful traditional practices, which

has enabled them to become agents of change among their peers.

Challenges, lessons learned and next steps

The modular sessions scheduled for 2020 as part of the implementation of cycle 6 of the Illimin initiative could not be conducted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, preparatory activities, namely five regional orientation workshops, were held to raise awareness among the programme's stakeholders between June and December. Training materials and data collection tools have been reviewed and printed. The inputs needed for the programme have been pre-positioned. Recruitment of actors (e.g., mentors, literacy teachers, supervisors, community facilitators, monitoring and evaluation) was finalized for the Maradi, Tahoua and Zinder regions in late December. Training for 23,000 girls will begin as soon as the health environment allows in 2021.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, community meetings, which were an opportunity to share action plans for validation in plenary, could not be held from March to July 2020 and the participatory workshops run by the girls also had to be postponed several times. Ninety-seven of the 134 planned villages were reached (72 per cent). A virtual rescheduling meeting was held with the partners, following which emergency support was provided to the partners to ensure connectivity and to take part in future meetings. Educational talks were interrupted pending a normalization of the situation. Following the experience of the mini-series 'Coping with COVID-19', in which two teenage girls from the Niger took part, and the impact this activity had on the participants, the programme will focus on the use of smartphones and WhatsApp to strengthen the empowerment of adolescent girls, especially the child protection correspondents, in their role as leaders. The door-to-door approach used by these girls reached girls who are generally invisible, including girls with disabilities, girls who have had a child out of wedlock, and those who cannot attend community participatory workshops due to their heavy workloads.

Strengthening systems

STORIES OF GIRLS

In the village of Groumdji, Maradi Region, the girls know about child marriage. Most are afraid of it. Some have no choice about the matter. But girls are increasingly standing up to the practice, with the support of child protection committees. “When our friend found out that her family had accepted her marriage, she felt so sad. She was traumatized. She even stopped eating and lost weight,” say Olabizi, 17, and Aminata, 18. They decided to alert the committee in their village and, after a process of negotiation and sensitization with the parents of their friend, her father agreed to finally refuse the marriage. “Next time, it will be her who decides how, when and with whom,” continued the girls.⁴

The Global Programme increased the capacity of education, health, child protection and GBV systems to deliver coordinated, quality programmes and services that meet the needs of adolescent girls and their families, including in humanitarian contexts. UNICEF (through other resources) has contributed to the development and extension of the SNAEFF. Through this strategy, 13,015 out-of-school children, including 6,021 girls, have been able to return to formal education programmes, with close to a half coming from areas affected by humanitarian emergencies (Diffa, Maradi, Tahoua and Tillabéry). Despite the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, child protection workers were able to provide appropriate services to children in need of care. A record 27,321 children in care were reached, or 167 per cent of the 2020 target. Child protection workers also provided care and response services to more than 10,000 conflict-affected children expelled from Nigeria following the closure of schools. Services were also provided to 893 migrant girls from neighbouring countries, including the cancellation or postponement of more than 200 child marriages.

Challenges, lessons learned and next steps

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the education system, hampering activities on the ground, particularly social mobilization and follow-up activities. At the same time, it was an opportunity to raise the awareness of the Government, donors and implementing partners, and local communities about the need to develop intelligent solutions for data management; explore a partnership with the private sector to facilitate continuity of learning; build regional and local capacity in preparing for an emergency response; and build an effective knowledge management system.

The insufficiency of social workers as a result of the recruitment freeze in the public service since 2016 reduces their capacity to intervene. Despite the support of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), monitoring the number of migrant children remains a major challenge. Advocacy will continue as soon as the new Government and local authorities are established with the announcement of the results of the presidential and local elections held in December 2020.

Facilitating supportive laws and policies

During the year, the Global Programme enhanced the capacity of its partner governments to fund, coordinate and implement national and subnational action plans and systems to end child marriage. In the Niger, the programme supported the midterm review of the 2019–2021 National Strategic Plan, with the participation of all stakeholders in September, following the lifting of restrictions on the organization of workshops by the Government. This allowed for field partners to also join the exercise. The findings of this review highlighted the actions that bring about change, namely, better involvement of traditional and religious leaders and community actors in child protection actions and the promotion of the abandonment of child marriage and diversification of awareness programmes on child marriage broadcast via community radio stations (radio debates, public broadcasts, leaders’ appeals). The main challenges raised have been the limits of programmes and initiatives to strengthen girls’ empowerment, and the lack of coordination of actors at the community level. It was proposed at the end of this review to support actions aimed at keeping girls in school and creating job opportunities; to create the conditions to strengthen intergenerational dialogue; to have harmonized model modules for all themes related to the fight against child marriage; and to make an inventory of the current best practices in order to scale them.

Generating and applying data and evidence

The Global Programme supported a study on social demand to identify community perceptions of education and how to achieve change in the current environment. Preliminary results of this study helped to increase understanding of the critical factors affecting children's access to formal education and the different sensitivities surrounding the values underlying Nigerien society. The issues of equity and gender remain crucial and will be at the centre of future educational reforms. The study laid the groundwork for a political dialogue on the vision of education in the Niger. Overall, the responsibility and accountability of the decentralized services of the State for the implementation of interventions and their

capacity-building remain critical preconditions for the effectiveness of efforts to end child marriage.

Challenges, lessons learned and next steps

The measures imposed by the Government for the prevention of the COVID-19 pandemic, including restrictions on movement and border closures, have had an impact on the implementation of studies involving international consultants. With the use of rapid testing and the advent of COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX), a normalization of the situation will allow the completion of studies planned for 2020 that have been postponed to 2021. The priority is to continue to gather evidence in order to be able to influence the design of large-scale programmes.

Partnerships and working as one

In 2020, the Global Programme engaged 304 partners across regional and country offices – an increase from 249 partners in 2019. In the Niger, the programme engages six partners: four government bodies and two civil society organizations. The government bodies run across the sectors of gender, education, protection and information – noting the importance of working across government entities and sectors to enable a holistic prevention of and response to child marriage.

UNFPA and UNICEF continue to work together at the national level and in selected elements of the community initiatives of the Global Programme. One example is how the two organizations have signed working protocols with the ACTN, under which there is a model village initiative based on a number of indicators agreed on between the two organizations.

Studies and evaluations, and advocacy at the political level for fairer legislation that respects the rights of adolescent girls, will also be jointly carried out in 2021.

The joint implementation will be further strengthened, facilitated by the incorporation of the Spotlight Initiative to End Violence Against Women and Girls, which will target the same regions as the Global Programme (Maradi, Tahoua, Tillabéry and Zinder) but increase coverage with 5 villages in each of the 60 targeted municipalities; thus, the joint child marriage programme in the country will reach 300 villages in total. The other two agencies that also jointly implement the Spotlight Initiative – UNDP and UN Women – will further focus on complementary interventions related to legal and judicial assistance, holistic care for GBV survivors, and socioeconomic reintegration.

Communicating the need to end child marriage

In 2020, the *Coping with COVID-19* video series was launched,⁵ a global initiative of UNICEF to give adolescent girls across the world a platform to share their experiences through mobile phones during the COVID-19 pandemic when schools were closed. Two teenage girls from the Niger, Esta and Rahilatou, took part in this enriching initiative and on 11 October, on the International Day of the Girl, they were invited on national television in the Niger to further share their stories.⁶

“Since the public and private schools closing, we young people are in a very challenging situation.” – **Rahilatou, 15**

“I have a friend who was married off at age 14.” – **Esta, 15**

In 2021, the programme in the Niger will continue to work to raise awareness on the need to end child marriage, including through multimedia campaigns (e.g., on digital platforms for wide-scale dissemination) and special advocacy events (e.g., cultural events).

Summary of output indicator performance (2020)

Indicator	Target	Result
Indicator 1111: Number of adolescent girls (aged 10–19) who actively participated in life-skills or comprehensive sexuality education interventions in programme areas	9,940	12,471
Indicator 1121: Number of girls (aged 10–19) supported by the programme to enrol and/or remain in primary or secondary school	4,500	276
Indicator 1211: Number of boys and men actively participating in group education/dialogues that address harmful masculinities and gender norms	8,940	6,296
Indicator 1221: Number of individuals (boys, girls, women and men) who participated in group education/dialogue sessions on consequences of and alternatives to child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls, and gender equality	66,680	17,852
Indicator 1222: Number of individuals (boys, girls, women and men) reached by mass media (traditional and social media) messaging on child marriage, the rights of adolescent girls, and gender equality	204,687	36,369
Indicator 1223: Number of local actors (e.g., traditional, religious and community leaders) with meaningful participation in dialogues and consensus-building to end child marriage	215	734
Indicator 1231: Number of civil society organizations newly mobilized in support of challenging social norms and promoting gender equality by the Global Programme	85	1
Indicator 2121: Number of primary/secondary/non-formal schools in programme areas providing quality gender-friendly education that meets minimum standards	N/A	N/A
Indicator 2131: Number of service delivery points in programme areas providing quality adolescent-responsive services (health, child protection/gender-based violence) that meet minimum standards	N/A	N/A
Indicator 2211: Number of partnerships (both formal and informal) established to deliver adolescent-responsive social protection, poverty reduction and economic empowerment programmes and services	N/A	N/A
Indicator 3111: Number of policies or legal instruments addressing child marriage drafted, proposed or adopted at national and subnational levels with Global Programme support	N/A	N/A
Indicator 3211: Number of pieces of evidence and knowledge generated that focus on what works to end child marriage	4	1
Indicator 3212: Number of pieces of evidence and knowledge generated that apply a gender analysis	N/A	N/A
Indicator 3221: Number of South–South cooperation activities (conferences, expert visits, peer consultations, study tours, communities of practice) supported	N/A	N/A

N/A, not applicable.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Niger Demographic and Health Survey 2012.
- 2 United Nations Children's Fund, *Child Marriage in the Sahel*, UNICEF, New York, December 2020, <<https://data.unicef.org/resources/child-marriage-in-the-sahel-brochure/>>, accessed 17 August 2021.
- 3 United Nations Children's Fund, *COVID-19: A threat to progress against child marriage*, UNICEF, New York, 2021, <<https://data.unicef.org/resources/covid-19-a-threat-to-progress-against-child-marriage/>>, accessed 17 August 2021.
- 4 Haro, Juan, 'Friends Against Child Marriage: The story of teenage girls determined to prevent forced marriage in Niger', United Nations Children's Fund, Niamey, 29 July 2020, <www.unicef.org/niger/stories/friends-against-child-marriage>, accessed 17 August 2021.
- 5 United Nations Children's Fund Niger, 'A Pandemic Through a Girl's Eyes: UNICEF collaborated with adolescent girls from nine countries - including Niger, asking them to share their lives through the lens of their mobile phones', UNICEF, Niamey, 5 August 2021, <www.unicef.org/niger/stories/pandemic-through-girls-eyes>, accessed 17 August 2021.
- 6 See the national television coverage here: <www.youtube.com/watch?v=SoDaMKgNNFE&list=PLZihjOZRNOtbQ2wQ6xCRTLx-IPolsTQC9y&index=4>; and see the specific Niger-focused additional episode of the series here: <https://youtu.be/33dj2pH_v_Y>.

UNFPA-UNICEF
GLOBAL PROGRAMME
TO END CHILD MARRIAGE

ACT NOW:

Accelerating gender equality
by eliminating child marriage
in a pandemic

2020
COUNTRY
PROFILES