

Ending child marriage in West and Central Africa on pace to take 100 years – UNICEF

24 October 2017 – Unless progress is accelerated, ending child marriage in West and Central Africa will take more than 100 years, with far-reaching, life-altering consequences for millions of child brides and crippling impact on the region's prosperity, the United Nations children's agency has said.

A new report released Monday from the UN Children's Fund ([UNICEF](#)), *Achieving a future without child marriage: Focus on West and Central Africa*, reveals that, due to rapid population growth and high prevalence of child marriage, even if the current decline rate was doubled, it would not suffice to reduce the annual number of girls married.

"We cannot continue to let so many of our girls miss out on their health, education, and childhood," said Fatoumata Ndiaye, UNICEF's Deputy Executive Director, in a press release, adding that "at current rates, our report shows, it will [take over 100 years](#) to eliminate child marriage in the region – how is this acceptable?"

The new projections, released during a UN-backed high-level meeting on ending child marriage in Dakar this week, aim to bring the spotlight on the region of the world where girls face the highest risk of marrying in childhood.

While the prevalence of child marriage in West and Central Africa has declined over the past two decades, progress has been uneven, and still four in 10 women are married before the age of 18 and, of these, one in three before the age of 15.

West and Central Africa includes six of the 10 countries with the highest prevalence of child marriage in the world: Niger; the Central African Republic; Chad; Mali; Burkina Faso and Guinea.

The report also highlights that progress is possible when the right mix of strategies is in place, such as empowering girls, mobilizing families and communities to change attitudes and behaviours, providing adequate services to girls at risk and to married girls and putting in place consistent laws and policies to protect and promote the rights of girls.

In five countries in the region – Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Togo, Ghana and Rwanda, declines ranged from 40 to 60 per cent over the past 25 years.

The longer a girl stays in school, the less likely she is to be married before the age of 18 and have children during her teenage years.

"Getting girls to schools should be our top priority," said Ms. Ndiaye. "Not only because it equips girls for life, but it also helps to lift their families, their communities, their countries out of poverty."