Girls' Education and Child Marriage in Central Africa | Insights from Qualitative Fieldwork Part I: The Democratic Republic of Congo

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Girls' Education and Child Marriage in Central Africa: Insights from Qualitative Fieldwork

PART I: THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

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INTRODUCTION

Child marriage is defined as a formal or informal union before the age of 18. As in much of sub-Saharan Africa,[2] the prevalence of child marriage remains high in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in part because educational attainment for girls is too low. Based on qualitative fieldwork, this article looks at communities' perceptions of child marriage and girls' education and their suggestions for programs and policies that could improve outcomes for girls.

The article also discusses potential implications for Catholic and other faith-based schools, as well as faith leaders. The issues faced by adolescent girls discussed in this article are prevalent throughout sub-Saharan Africa. This is the region where enrollment in Catholic and other faith-based schools is largest and growing fastest. In 2020, according to data from the *Statistical Yearbook of the Church*,[3] 34.6 million children were enrolled in Catholic primary schools globally, with 19.3 million children enrolled in Catholic secondary schools and 7.5 million children enrolled at the preschool level. Africa accounted for 55% of all children enrolled in a Catholic primary school globally, and around 30% for children enrolled at the preschool and secondary levels. Under business-as-usual projections, the share of all children enrolled in Catholic schools who live in Africa is expected to continue to grow. Catholic schools and faith leaders simply must confront the issues of girls' education, child marriage, and early childbearing and find ways to provide better

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opportunities for girls. A first step is to better understand the issues, and this is main the contribution of this paper for the DRC.[4]

At the time of writing, estimates from UNICEF suggest that 29% of girls marry as children in the DRC, with 8% marrying before the age of 15 (data from the 2017-18 Multiple Indicators Cluster Survey).[5] Child marriage is a leading cause of early childbearing, defined as a mother having her first child before the age of 18. In the DRC, the share of women ages 18-22 who had a child before 18 is estimated at 25.6%.[6] It has decreased only slightly over time. Child marriage also contributes to low educational attainment for girls. According to estimates from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics available in the World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI), only 70% of girls complete their primary education in the DRC.[7] For lower secondary, the completion rate is even lower at 36%.[8]

Child marriage, early childbearing, and low educational attainment for girls lead to low levels of human capital. The World Bank's Human Capital Index[9] (HCI) measures the expected future productivity in adulthood of today's children. It is based on five variables likely to affect future earnings: (1) the survival rate of children past age five; (2) the expected number of years of education completed by youth; (3) the quality of learning in school; (4) how long workers will remain in the workforce,

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4   A companion piece is available for the Republic of Congo. The introductions and some of the conclusions in both articles are very similar, so that readers interested in only one of the two studies get the necessary background by reading that study only (i.e., they do not need to read both articles). But the data and analysis are specific to each country. One important conclusion is that many findings are similar in both countries, suggesting these findings may be robust. See Jean-Christophe Boungou Bazika, Wolf Ulrich Mféré Akiana, and Quentin Wodon, "Girls' Education and Child Marriage in Central Africa: Part II, Republic of Congo," *Journal of Global Catholicism* 7, no. 1 (2022): 60-89, https://crossworks.holycross.edu/jgc/vol7/iss1/4/.

5   UNICEF data are available at https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/. For a profile of child marriage in the country based on a previous survey, see Chata Male and Quentin Wodon, "Basic Profile of Child Marriage in the Democratic Republic of Congo," *Health, Nutrition and Population Knowledge Brief* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2016).

6   Chata Male and Quentin Wodon, "Basic Profile of Early Childbirth in the Democratic Republic of Congo," *Health, Nutrition and Population Knowledge Brief* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2016).

7   Latest estimate for 2015. https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators.

8   Latest estimate for 2014. https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators.

9   World Bank, *The Human Capital Index – 2020 Update: Human Capital in the Time of COVID-19* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2021).

as proxied by adult survival past 60; and finally (5) prevention of stunting in young children.[10]

The available indicators on the prevalence of child marriage, educational attainment and learning for girls in the DRC, as well as the data for the estimation of the HCI, all predate the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic is likely to have worsened these indicators substantially. This is in part because schools were closed for a substantial period of time, and most children did not have access to quality distance learning (the rate of household connectivity to the internet is very low).[11] In addition, as is the case for the sub-Saharan Africa region as a whole, the country is affected by other overlapping crises, including rising food and fuel prices that are leading more households to fall into poverty,[12] thereby limiting the ability of parents to send their children to school.

What could be done to end child marriage, educate girls, and more generally provide them with better opportunities? Research has shown that child marriage affects educational attainment as very few girls manage to remain in school once

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10 The HCI takes a value between zero and one. It represents the ratio of the expected productivity of today's children and youth in comparison to the productivity that they could achieve with full education and health. For girls in the DRC, the HCI took on a value of only 0.39. This suggests that in adulthood, today's children will reach less than 40% of their productive potential. Low levels of educational attainment as well as lack of learning in school contribute to this outcome. While girls may expect to complete 8.8 years of schooling, this is valued at only 4.3 years when taking into account how much children actually learn in school. Child marriage also affects the HCI, as it contributes not only to lower educational attainment for girls, but also to higher risks of under-five mortality and under-five stunting for the children of girls marrying and having children early, as well as higher risks of maternal mortality. See Quentin Wodon et al., *Educating Girls and Ending Child Marriage: A Priority for Africa* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2018). On the link between child marriage and early childbearing, see Quentin Wodon, Chata Male, and Adenike Onagoruwa, "A Simple Approach to Measuring the Share of Early Childbirths Likely Due to Child Marriage in Developing Countries," *Forum for Social Economics* 49, no. 2 (2020): 166-79. https://doi.org/10.1080/07360932.2017.1311799.
11 On the impact of the pandemic on learning poverty, defined as the share of children not able to read and understand a simple text by age 10, see World Bank et al., *The State of Global Learning Poverty: 2022 Update* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2022).
12 On the current food and fuel price crisis and its impact in sub-Saharan Africa, see Cesar Calderon et al., *Food System Opportunities in a Turbulent Time*, Africa's Pulse 26 (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2022).

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they marry. But vice versa, a higher level of educational attainment reduces the likelihood of child marriage.[13]

Indeed, in terms of specific policies, the literature suggests that economic incentives to keep girls in schools may work better than other policies for delaying marriage.[14] Could this also be the case in the DRC? To provide a tentative answer to this question, we conducted qualitative fieldwork in one urban and two rural areas. The aim was to understand perceptions of child marriage and girls' education in these communities, and listen to the communities' suggestions for programs and policies that could improve outcomes for girls, thus contributing to their empowerment in adulthood.[15]

Specifically, we considered four questions: (1) How much support is there in communities for girls' education and women's work? (2) What are the factors leading girls to drop out of school?[16] (3) What are communities' perceptions related to child marriage? And, given the focus of this journal, (4) Is there a role for faith leaders and faith-based schools in helping to end child marriage and promote girls' education?

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13   See for example Erika Field and Attila Ambrus, "Early Marriage, Age of Menarche, and Female Schooling Attainment in Bangladesh", *Journal of Political Economy* 116, no. 5 (2008): 881-930. https://doi.org/10.1086/593333. For Africa, see Minh Cong Nguyen and Quentin Wodon, *Impact of Child Marriage on Literacy and Educational Attainment in Africa, Background Paper for Fixing the Broken Promise of Education for All* (Paris and New York: UNESCO Institute of Statistics and UNICEF, 2014).

14   For reviews of the literature, see Iona Botea et al., *Interventions Improving Sexual and Reproductive Health Outcomes and Delaying Child Marriage and Childbearing for Adolescent Girls* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2017). See also Amanda M. Kalamar, Susan Lee-Rife, and Michelle J. Hindin, "Interventions to Prevent Child Marriage among Young People in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: A Systematic Review of the Published and Gray Literature," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 59, no. 3 (2016): S16-S21. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.06.015.

15   On broader policies for women's empowerment in the DRC, see World Bank, *Women's Economic Empowerment in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Obstacles and Opportunities* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2021).

16   For a discussion of some of the constraints to girls' education in the DRC, see Laura Bolton, *Barriers to Education for Girls in the Democratic Republic of Congo,* K4D Helpdesk Report 750 (Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies, 2020). On some of the historical roots of low educational attainment for girls, see Marc Depaepe and Annette Lembagusala Kikumbi, "Educating Girls in Congo: An Unsolved Pedagogical Paradox since Colonial Times?" *Policy Futures in Education* 16, no. 8 (2018): 936–952. https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210318767450.

This last question is important for the DRC. The Catholic Church and other denominations play an important role in the country, including in the provision of basic education. A majority of schools are faith-based, even if these schools are considered public schools (*écoles conventionnées*).[17] In 2018, the latest year for which data are available in the World Bank's WDI for the number of students in DRC's primary schools, there were 16.8 million such students.[18] That year, according to the *Statistical Yearbook of the Church*,[19] there were 4.3 million students enrolled in Catholic primary schools in the country. For the number of students in secondary schools, the latest year for which data are available in the WDI is 2015, with a total of 4.6 million students in the country. That year, there were 1.3 million students in Catholic secondary schools according to the Church. This suggests that Catholic schools account for about a fourth of all students in primary schools, and close to a third of all students at the secondary level. This provides an opportunity for Catholic schools to improve outcomes for adolescent girls, ensure that they remain in school at the secondary level, and avoid that they marry when they are not yet psychologically and physically ready. Furthermore, as Catholic and other faith leaders are often those who performs marriages, they also have an important role to play to end the practice of girls marrying before they reach the age of 18.

In what follows, after explaining data collection, the next four sections explore the four questions mentioned above (support for girls' education and women's work; factors leading girls to drop out of school; perceptions of child marriage; and role for faith leaders and faith-based schools). A conclusion follows.

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17   On Catholic schools in the DRC, see Quentin Wodon, "Catholic Schools in the Democratic Republic of Congo: Trends, Achievements, and Challenges," *International Journal of Education Law and Policy* 13 (2017): 55-66. On the relationships between faith-based schools and the state, see Annette Scheunpflug et al., "Relationships between Christian Schools and the State: A Comparative Analysis for Five Sub-Saharan African Countries," *International Studies in Catholic Education* 13, no. 2 (2021): 163-174. https://doi.org/10.1080/19422539.2021.2010456.

18   Latest estimate for 2018. https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators.

19   Secretariat of State [of the Vatican], *Annuarium statisticum Ecclesiae 2018 / Statistical Yearbook of the Church 2018 / Annuaire statistique de l'Eglise 2018* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020).

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DATA COLLECTION

The analysis is based on data collected in the DRC in 2017 by the Centre for Studies and Research on Economic Analysis and Policies (CERAPE) based in Brazzaville in the Republic of Congo. The methodology for data collection followed similar work previously conducted by one of the authors in Ghana and Burkina Faso. The objective of the data collection and analysis was to explore some of the factors leading girls to drop out of school prematurely and marry early.

Three sources of data are used: (1) a small-scale survey; (2) interviews of key informants; and (3) focus groups. A particular emphasis was placed on the role played by religious and customary leaders in communities, and the perceptions of schools, including religious schools, given the importance of keeping girls in schools to prevent child marriage and early childbearing.

The survey was administered to 150 respondents, i.e., 50 respondents per locality, one urban and two rural, as outlined in Table 1. The aim of selecting three localities was to explore differences in outcomes and perceptions across areas that have different levels of economic development, as well as different level of access to services. The interviews with key informants include interviews with healthcare personnel, teachers, school principals, and other individuals with knowledge of conditions affecting development outcomes for girls. Focus groups were carried out to explore the motivations and testimonies of parents and young people.

TABLE 1: AREAS FOR DATA COLLECTION, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

Geographic areas	Urban area	Rural areas (x2)	
Provinces	Kinshasa	Central Kongo	Bandundu
Cities or localities	Kinshasa	Mbanza Ngungu	Kikwit
Districts or villages	Mount Amba and Tshangu districts	Muala Kinsende village	Ibongo, Kakoyi, Kwengé villages
Respondents	50	50	50

Source: Authors.

The first locality for data collection was the capital city of Kinshasa, a large metro-politan area with an estimated population of 17 million in 2021. Kinshasa has the administrative status of a city but is also one of the 26 provinces of the country. The economic, political and cultural heart of the country, Kinshasa is a city of contrasts, with some posh residential and commercial areas, but also shanty towns where poverty reigns. The city is subdivided into four districts: Mount Amba with six municipalities, Lukunga with six municipalities, Tshangu with five municipalities, and Funa with seven municipalities. The city of Kinshasa is multi-ethnic. Data collection took place in the districts of Mount Amba and Tshangu.

The second location was Muala-Kinsende, also known as Marchal. This is a village located in the province of Central Kongo, about 11 km from the city of Mbanza Ngungu, which itself is located about 150 km from Kinshasa. Its main ethnic group is Kongo, and the population lives mainly from agriculture. Access is difficult, as roads are almost impassable. The village has several schools, including Catholic, Salvationist, Kimbanguiste, and secular schools. Access to electricity and drinking water is limited, but development has been taking place. The village is located at the crossroads of two railways: the Matadi-Kinshasa railway and the railway leading to the town of Mbanza Ngungu, home to the Société Commerciale des Ports et de Transport. As a result, Muala-Kinsende is progressively becoming more urban.

The third location for data collection is a set of three villages—Kwenge, Ibongo, and Kakoyi, located at about 15 km, 5 km and 7 km respectively from Kikwit in the province of Bandundu. The agricultural feeder roads leading to the villages are in a state of disrepair, which makes access to the villages difficult. The main ethnic groups include the Bambala, the Pende, the Yanzi, the Basongo, and the Babunda. Much of the economic activity and trade is controlled by immigrants (Chinese, Lebanese, and others). Besides small-scale farming, there is an active pri-vate sector, including in telecommunications. Thanks to the Kwilu River, artisanal fishing is also an income-generating activity, as is public administration. The town of Kikwit has two school subdivisions that supervise preschools, primary, technical and secondary schools. Apart from public, private, and various religious schools

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(Catholic, Protestant, Kimbanguist, and Muslim), there are also institutions of higher learning, including the University of Kikwit.

As expected, there are important differences in the characteristics of survey respondents in the three localities. Close to nine in ten respondents belong to households with a male head in Mbanza Ngungu and Kikwit, while in Kinshasa, a larger share of respondents (one in three) lives in female-headed households, in part because of a larger proportions of household heads who are widowed, divorced, or separated. Household heads in Mbanza Ngungu and Kikwit tend to be employees or self-employed farmers, while in Kinshasa, the proportion of the self-employed in the non-farm sector is higher. In terms of educational attainment, almost two thirds of respondents in Kinshasa are from households where the head has at least some form of post-secondary education, while that proportion is below one fourth in Mbanza Ngungu and Kikwit, with a higher proportion of heads with secondary education in Kikwit than in Mbanza Ngungu. As for ethnic groups, many are represented in all three locations (the country has more than 400 ethnic different ethnic groups, but as mentioned earlier, there are differences between localities).

SUPPORT FOR GIRLS' EDUCATION AND WOMEN'S WORK

There is substantial support for girls' education in all three localities, with respectively 80%, 72%, and 88% of respondents considering girls' education as critical in Kinshasa, Mbanza Ngungu, and Kikwit (see Table 2). Traditionally, it used to be that in many parts of the country, marriage was what mattered for girls, but this has changed, with many households encouraging girls to pursue their education as is the case for boys. The presence of women in positions of responsibility as civil servants, ministers, and members of parliament and the fact that well-educated women earn a decent income and have a much higher standard of living than women farmers has helped raise expectations for the education of girls. Most young girls want to be like these modern, scientifically literate, well-dressed, self-confident women. When asked whether the benefits of schooling were similar for boys and girls, close to nine in ten respondents in all three locations responded in the affirmative, with perhaps surprisingly the lowest share observed in Kinshasa

at 82%, versus 90% in Mbanza Ngungu and 86% in Kikwit. Although differences in many estimates are not statistically significant given small sample sizes, the slightly smaller share in Kinshasa could be related to the fact that many women must engage in petty trading to make a livelihood, and the benefits from higher levels of educational attainment for these types of occupations may not be as large as for other occupations.

TABLE 2: IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION FOR GIRLS (%)

	Kinshasa	**Mbanza Ngungu**	**Kikwit**
Very important	80	72	88
Important	14	4	6
Somewhat important	2	8	4
Not that important	0	4	0
Not important at all	0	2	0

Source: Authors' estimation from small-scale survey in the three localities.
Note: Some categories may not add to 100% due to rounding or non-responses.

Asked about the benefits of educating girls, respondents emphasized the opportunity for girls to have scientific knowledge and access to a rewarding job that contributes to providing her with a stable and decent income as well as autonomy within the household. Some respondents also mentioned that education could allow girls to access positions of responsibility at the political and social level, such as those of minister or deputy, and to provide them with the respect that the community has for educated women. Respondents mentioned that academic success for girls brings joy and honor to their parents and siblings, in part because the ability that this may provide for girls to help them materially and morally, through the example that successful girls set for other members of the family. A good education also provides respect from the future husband, the possibility of contributing to household needs and future children's schooling and health.

Essentially, parents try to ensure that their children complete their schooling, which will make it easier for them to find decent jobs. In return, they expect the children to be able to support their parents when they are old and unable to work,

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given the lack of other social protection mechanisms. As a focus group participant explained it:

> In my family there were 10 children, six girls and four boys. My father was a cook in a big hotel and earned a small salary. He did not have the resources to support the schooling of all the children. Since I was doing well in school, he decided that I should be the only one attending school. He kept encouraging me to do well in school. I finished my secondary education and was able to get a scholarship from the Belgian government which helped me to get my master's degree. This allowed me to be recruited as an administrative manager. I took some of my brothers' and sisters' children, those who had intellectual potential, and I educated and supervised them. Today, some of them have succeeded in school and are working in the public and private sectors and, thanks to their income, are helping their parents who have grown old.

As schooling becomes more common for both girls and boys, parents have high expectations. In Kinshasa, the share of parents hoping that their daughter(s) will go to the university is almost as high as for their son(s) (80% for daughters and 88% for sons). In Mbanza Ngungu and Kikwit, expectations are lower, with half of parents hoping that their children will go to university, but again very similar for boys and girls alike.

The emphasis placed by parents on providing a good education to their children including up to the university level has been a hallmark of the country for some time. In Mbanza Ngungu, after the country's independence in 1960, many families encouraged their children to pursue their higher education and attend the university in Kinshasa. However, places at the state university were limited. Under the Mobutu regime, quotas were established for each province with the aim of giving children from all provinces equal opportunities to access higher education. Faced with this limitation, the Kongo community, the largest community in the province of Bas Congo where Mbanza Ngungu is located, took the initiative to create its own university in the 1980s. Today Kongo University includes faculties of medicine, agronomy, and polytechnics located in the town of Kinsantu and faculties of

economics, management, and law located in the town of Mbanza Ngungu. Kongo University is the first private (non-state) university in the country and has thousands of students. This helps explain why so many families in this rural area want their daughters to access higher education. In rural areas of Kikwit, the situation is a bit different as opportunities for higher education are more recent, but there is a strong desire for girls to complete secondary education.

Related to the strong support for girls' education, there is also widespread support among respondents for women's work, including work outside of the home, albeit with some differences depending on the locality. As shown in Table 3, support for women's work is strong in all three localities, but especially so in Kikwit. This also emerges from another question in the survey where respondents were asked whether women should work outside of home for cash income, versus at home for domestic work, or both. In most cases, women were expected to do both—work for cash income and also manage the household, but in Kikwit support for work outside of the home for cash income was the strongest.

TABLE 3: ACCEPTANCE OF WOMEN WORKING OUTSIDE OF THE HOME (%)

	Kinshasa	**Mbanza Ngungu**	**Kikwit**
Yes	80	86	96
No	6	2	4
Don't know	12	8	0

Source: Authors' estimation from small-scale survey in the three localities.
Note: Some categories may not add to 100% due to rounding or non-responses.

FACTORS LEADING GIRLS TO DROP OUT OF SCHOOL

While there is strong support for girls' education, many girls drop out before completing their secondary education. Multiple factors lead girls to drop out prematurely, but poverty, early pregnancies, poor grades, and a lack of motivation or interest were some of the most commonly mentioned factors. Survey respondents mentioned a wide range of factors leading girls to drop out, including poverty, the cost of schooling, and the lack of food, a lack of parental support or the death of a

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parent, the distance to school, the poor quality of the education received, too many punishments at school, a poor functioning of the school including the risk of sexual harassment by teachers, pregnancies, marriages, the risk of risk of premarital sex, a lack of interest or motivation to go to school, the need to work at home, etc.

Table 4 provides a synthesis of the three main factors leading to dropouts by locality. In Kinshasa and Kikwit, poverty and the perceived high cost of schooling are mentioned the most, while in Mbanza Ngungu, the issue of unwanted or early pregnancies came out first. That issue is also mentioned in Kinshasa. Lack of motivation and interest matter as well in two of the three localities, while marriages and lack of support are each mentioned in one of the three localities as leading factors contributing to girls dropping out of school.

TABLE 4: MAIN FACTORS LEADING GIRLS TO DROP OUT OF SCHOOL BY LOCALITY (%)

Factors	Kinshasa	Mbanza Ngungu	Kikwit
1st reason	Poverty or high cost of schooling	Unwanted or early pregnancy	Poverty or high cost of schooling
2nd reason	Unwanted or early pregnancy	Poverty or high cost of schooling	Lack of parental support or death
3rd reason	Reasons related to marriages	Lack of motivation or interest	Lack of motivation or interest

Source: Authors' estimation from small-scale survey in the three localities.

Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups suggest that especially in poor and large families, heads of households may have to make gender-based choices as to which children can go to school, or may not be able to send any of their children especially to secondary school. As a resident from Kinshasa explained it:

> Going to school is a right. [But] many girls and boys drop out of secondary school because, at the primary level, the costs are generally within the reach of the parents. In secondary school, on the other hand, school fees are very expensive and are, most often, beyond the reach of parents. We must reduce secondary school fees to encourage parents to send girls to school.

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In some cases, going to school may be more difficult for girls. In such cases, even if there is support for girls' education, some may not remain in school, as illustrated by this quote from a focus group:

> There is a difference in schooling between girls and boys.… When the family is unable to meet the needs of girls, there is a risk of dropping out of school. For example, a boy can walk [to school if] there is no transport that day but for a girl it is very difficult. Especially when she studies in the afternoon, with the insecurity in Kinshasa, the lack of transport can make it impossible for the girl to attend school. If this continues, there is a risk that the girl will drop out. Thus, girls' studies require more than boys'. The poor state of the roads and the scarcity of means of transport add to the difficulties of accessing school. The girl can wait a long time for transport because of traffic jams. The boy will walk. At the stops, there are more girls waiting for transport than boys.

The issue of early pregnancies comes out strongly in the survey in rural areas, as well as in the focus groups and interviews with key informants. Some parents manage to support their daughter through her pregnancy and keep her in school, or enable her to return to school after a pregnancy. A parent in Mbanza Ngungu explained that:

> Usually, the pregnancies that we have recorded lately in our village are pregnancies in cohabitation. There are times that marriage will not happen. Me, for example, I have a daughter who got pregnant in the sixth year of humanities (Terminale). I couldn't continue to leave her with the boy. She was picked up from home after giving birth to continue her studies. Today, she has just finished her studies in nursing sciences at Kisantu's Higher Institute of Medical Techniques. As she has become an adult, she can now commit to marriage.

But not all parents support their daughters when they become pregnant out of wedlock. As a teacher in Kinshasa explained it:

> Early pregnancy contributes to school dropout. It is not in our culture to teach the girl contraceptive methods, which leads to early pregnancies and her

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studies are jeopardized. Most girls who become pregnant are abandoned by their parents, sometimes also abandoned by their partners, which increases the girls' suffering and can lead them to drop out of school. There are also teachers who impregnate young girls. I know a girl who was impregnated by her teacher. In some schools, there is a lack of communication between parents and the school. There are serious schools that require parents to justify their daughter's absence from school in the event of an absence.

A lack of motivation or interest in remaining in school is also mentioned especially in Kikwit and Mbanza Ngungu. This lack of motivation could be explained by the low of quality of the education received in many schools, the need to travel long distances to go to school, or a lack of employment prospects for girls in areas with a high rate of unemployment among graduates. But there is also a perception, warranted or not, that girls tend to be less interested in pursuing their education than boys. Girls are also at high risk of unwanted pregnancies. A school director in Kinshasa explained that:

> Girls enter adolescence before boys. If the girl is not well supervised, she may drop out of school. Parents may have the means, but the girl's desire will ensure that she has a boyfriend. If she is really in love, there is a risk that she will use even the money her parents give her to finance her boyfriend's activities and run away from school. Socio-cultural factors coincide with physiological factors. With the advent of satellite channels, a girl can stay in front of the TV for a long time and go to school very late. Early pregnancy also contributes to school drop-out. It is not part of our culture to teach girls about contraceptive methods; once pregnant, their studies are compromised.

Respondents in the survey could make suggestions on how to encourage girls' education and reduce dropouts. As for the perceived factors leading to girls dropping out, respondents could make several suggestions. Table 5 provides a synthesis of these suggestions. In all three localities, the dominant suggestion was to sensitize the population to the benefits of educating girls. Other suggestions included

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providing financial assistance to help poor families pay school fees, and providing more opportunities for vocational training and skills training.[20]

TABLE 5: SUGGESTIONS TO REDUCE DROP-OUT RATES FOR GIRLS BY LOCALITY (%)

Classification	Kinshasa	Mbanza Ngungu	Kikwit
1st suggestion	Raising community awareness on girls' education	Raise community awareness on girls' education	Raise community awareness on girls' education
2nd suggestion	Financial assistance for fees	Skills training and tutoring	Financial assistance for fees
3rd suggestion	Vocational training courses	Financial assistance for fees	Vocational training courses

Source: Authors' estimation from small-scale survey in the three localities.

PERCEPTIONS OF CHILD MARRIAGE

When girls drop out of school, the risk that they get married as children (i.e., before the age of 18) increases. As mentioned in the introduction, child marriage remains prevalent in the DRC, including in urban areas. As shown in Table 6, most respondents are aware that some girls marry as children in their community, and many believe that the prevalence of the practice is increasing, especially in Kinshasa and Mbanza Ngungu. In rural areas (the villages near Mbanza Ngungu and Kikwit), even if the girl's consent to a marriage is sought, the decision for a girl to marry early is typically made by the father. These are areas where the patriarchal family still dominates. In Kinshasa, the daughter typically decides, according to respondents. Overall, marriages may not be "forced" to the extent that the girl's approval is sought, but in rural areas especially, parents have a lot of influence in the matter.

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20   For a discussion of potential interventions for girls' education in the DRC, see Jennifer Randall and Alejandra Garcia, "Let's Go Girls!: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Tutoring and Scholarships on Primary School Girls' Attendance and Academic Performance in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)," *FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education* 6, no. 3 (October 2020): 19–35, https://doi.org/10.32865/fire202063222.

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Communities seem to be aware that early marriages may have harmful consequences for couples and the reproductive health of young girls, although this is not the case for all respondents. Some of the risks associated with child marriages include marital conflict as well as intimate partner violence. Poverty and difficulties raising a family at a young age are factors leading to breakups, as a mother in Kinshasa explains:

> Some families are poor, extremely poor. The girls in these families tend to marry before the legal age while still underage. They will have children and after a few years, faced with all kinds of difficulties, they return to the home of the original family with all the children, and this impoverishes the parents even more, and life becomes more difficult than before.

A school principal in Mbanza Ngungu has similar views:

> I am against early marriage, because the spouses are unprepared and the consequences are ultimately borne by the girl's parents. If the girl is married early, at any time and at the slightest problem, she goes to the parents to stock up on food, clothes and other goods. When the grandson is ill, the parents of the girl still have to vouch as if it were their own child.

TABLE 6: PERCEPTIONS OF CHILD MARRIAGE BY LOCALITY (%)

Classification	Kinshasa	Mbanza Ngungu	Kikwit
	Are there child/early marriages in the community?		
Yes	96	78	90
No	2	20	4
Don't know	0	2	2
	How is the prevalence of child marriage evolving?		
Growing	80	72	42
Decreasing	10	14	30
No Change	2	4	16
Don't know	6	10	8

Classification	Kinshasa	Mbanza Ngungu	Kikwit
	Does child marriage affect the life of the couple?		
Yes	48	72	54
No	28	22	20
Don't know	18	4	24
	Do social actors talk about child marriage?		
Yes	66	84	6
No	18	6	44
Don't know	12	10	50
	Does child marriage affect girls' reproductive health?		
Yes	72	84	78
No	14	6	10
Don't know	8	6	6
	Who decides about the marriage? (Main responses)		
Father	22	72	58
Mother	10	18	50
Household head	0	16	2
Girl	86	34	90
	How important is the girl's consent?		
Very important	86	84	88
Somewhat important	6	4	10
Moderately important	6	2	4
Not very important	0	2	0
Not at all important	0	0	0
	Do you know about the law regarding child marriage?		
Yes	56	36	28
No	42	38	36
Don't know	2	6	26

Source: Authors' estimation from small-scale survey in the three localities.
Note: Some categories may not add to 100% due to rounding or non-responses.

There seems to be a difference in perceptions related to child marriage between Kikwit and the other two localities. In Kikwit, a smaller share of respondents believe that child marriage is increasing. In addition, a smaller share recognizes some of the potential negative effects of the practice. Furthermore, when asked whether social actors such as the government, civil society organizations, religious leaders,

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or the media talk about early marriage and its potential negative effects, the share of respondents stating that this is the case is smaller in Kikwit. This suggests that while awareness-raising campaigns may be needed everywhere, they are likely to be even more important in some areas than in others. In interviews and when implementing the survey, only sporadic references to actions against early marriages by the Ministry for the Advancement of Women, United Nations agencies, television programs, or other organizations were mentioned.

Professionals however are well aware of the risks of child marriage, including in Kikwit. A doctor at in Kikwit hospital explained these risks in stark terms as follows:

> The pregnancies of underage girls are similar to rape since the girl does not consent. Following the families' expectations, these marriages are effective and favored by the parents who accept that the girl lives with the boy, often because she is already pregnant. Consequently, it is the pregnancy that leads to these early marriages. For doctors, the cases of underage girls in a state of pregnancy are followed with great attention, given that these are high-risk pregnancies. Often arrangements for surgery (cesarean) are made to avoid any risk. The hospital also sensitizes underage girls who have already become pregnant to the use of family planning methods in order to help them advance in their studies, but they often neglect these methods and become pregnant again. Thus, in general, girls who are 16-18 years old already have 2, 3, 4 children.

Similarly, a nurse in Mbanza Ngungu states that "during childbirth, the reproductive health of the girl is usually affected. We often encounter cases of cesarean because the genital organ of the minor girl is not very well developed. There is also the frequent mortality either of the girl, or of the child, or of two."

Marriage before the age of 18 is in principle not allowed under the law, but relatively few respondents are aware of the law, especially again in Kikwit. The same trend to the Family Code more generally, a legal instrument that governs relations within the family, including marriage procedures. When asked about specific provisions of the Family Code related to the legal age of marriage, the prohibition of

levirate (a widow becomes the wife of a deceased husband's brother), the right of widows to have a share in the inheritance, and the equal rights of the man and the woman over children, most respondents tend to be in favor of these provisions. Nevertheless, a substantial minority is opposed to the legal age of 18 for girls and the prohibition of levirate marriage. In Kinshasa, for example, 22% and 28% of respondents respectively do not approve of these provisions of the Family Code. Some participants in focus groups explained that they were not opposed to early marriage and even thought it could have advantages, especially if the husband had sufficient resources to support his underage wife, which means one less burden for the parents. They argued that women in the past were married at an early age and that this did not pose a problem in the community.

Clearly, ancient traditions about marriage still influence behaviors today. In the past, it was acceptable for a girl to get married at 12-14 years of age. Her parents would prepare her for marriage and make alliances with her future husband's host family. In the villages, mothers would educate their daughters to learn all sorts of household skills and practices. There were also birth attendants who assisted the girl during pregnancy and childbirth. When conflicts arose within the household, they could sometimes be resolved through community mechanisms. But this was often within patriarchal structures in which women were at a disadvantage. The application of laws against child marriage comes up against the weight of traditions and the persistence of mentalities inherited from these ancestral traditions.

For laws to be more impactful, the issue of child marriage needs to be brought to the center of public debate and policies. As for approaches to reduce the risk of girls dropping out of school, in terms of opportunities to end child marriage, respondents made a number of suggestions in the survey that are summarized in Table 7. Suggestions vary between localities. In Kinshasa, the main suggestion was that the community be sensitized to girls' rights and the Family Code, while in Mbanza Ngungu, it was recommended that young girls be helped to take charge of their lives and in Kikwit, that jobs be created to reduce poverty and vulnerability.

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TABLE 7: SUGGESTIONS TO REDUCE CHILD MARRIAGE BY LOCALITY (%)

Classification	Kinshasa	Mbanza Ngungu	Kikwit
1st suggestion	Community awareness on girls' rights/Family Code	Encourage self-care for girls	Create jobs to reduce poverty and child marriage
2nd suggestion	Implement the Family Code and strengthen its provisions	Raise awareness among young girls	Community awareness on girls' rights/Family Code
3rd suggestion	Preach chastity	Reintegrate out-of-school girls into schools	Provide sex education for girls

Source: Authors' estimation from small-scale survey in the three localities.
Note: Several reasons could be mentioned by respondents, hence percentages sum to more than one.

POTENTIAL ROLE FOR FAITH LEADERS AND FAITH-BASED SCHOOLS

Traditional and religious leaders can play an important role in raising community awareness about the negative effects of child marriage and the benefits of girls' education. They have a great deal of influence on the population, and they have an attentive audience during Masses, prayer ceremonies, or traditional festivals, as well as during court cases in which disputes are settled in the villages. Faith leaders are also those who perform most marriages, and they can advise against a marriage when girls are not psychologically or physically ready to marry.

Do faith leaders actually play this role? The data in the survey are limited to assess the extent to which faith leaders help in preventing child marriage, but responses to a question about whether faith leaders at least talk about the issue suggests that this is the case in the two rural areas, but less so in Kinshasa (Table 8). In Mbanza Ngungu and Kikwit, more than two thirds of faith leaders talk about the issue of child marriage, while in the capital city this is the case only for one third of faith

leaders. It could be that these differences come in part from the fact that the likelihood of child marriage is lower in Kinshasa than in rural areas. Still, there is room for improvement, certainly in Kinshasa, but also in rural areas.[21]

TABLE 8: ROLE OF FAITH LEADERS IN ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE, SHARES (%)

	Kinshasa	**Mbanza Ngungu**	**Kikwit**
	Faith leaders talk about the issue of child marriage		
Yes	34	72	68
No	64	20	32
Don't know	2	8	0

Source: Authors' estimation from small-scale survey in the three localities.
Note: Some categories may not add to 100% due to rounding or non-responses.

Beyond faith leaders, schools also play an important role in ensuring that girls can go to school, which is as mentioned earlier one of the best ways to avoid child marriage. Since a majority of schools are faith-based, faith-based schools have an important role to play. Part of that role consists in providing an education of good quality, so that it is both feasible (by passing the required examinations) and worth it for girls to remain in school (and for their parents to bear the financial cost that this implies), including at the secondary level. Unfortunately, the quality of the education provided in the DRC is low, including in many faith-based (and Catholic) schools. Lack of quality is indeed one of the reasons why girls drop out of school.

The education system as a whole has major shortcomings, including a lack of qualifications and mastery of the material to be taught for many teachers and low teacher salaries which may affect motivation. As a parent told other focus group members:

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21   It is not clear if the performance of students in faith-based schools is statistically better than that of students in public schools. See Prospère Backiny-Yetna and Quentin Wodon, "Comparing the Performance of Faith-Based and Government Schools in the Democratic Republic of Congo," in *Emerging Evidence on Vouchers and Faith-Based Providers in Education: Case Studies from Africa, Latin America, and Asia*, eds. Felipe Barrera-Osorio, Harry A. Patinos, and Quentin Wodon (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2009).

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> The social life of teachers is not good. This means that if the teacher is hungry, under these conditions, he or she will not have the courage to prepare the material to be taught and will not be concerned about the children's understanding of the course, especially if the students are troublemakers. Therefore, children should make personal efforts to understand the lessons, otherwise the failure rate will be very high, which will lead to disgust for school.

Other issues include overcrowding, unhealthy premises, and lack of teaching aids, especially in rural areas. Nevertheless, probably because of low expectations, about two thirds of respondents stated that public secular schools in Kinshasa and Mbanza Ngungu were meeting the needs of the community (see Table 9). By contrast, in Kikwit, the proportion was at less than a third. There are however differences in perceptions of quality between secular and religious schools. Religious schools tend on average to be considered as better schools, especially in Kikwit. This is also the case in Mbanza Ngungu, and to a smaller extent in Kinshasa. That is, a much larger share of respondents considers religious schools to be better, in comparison of the share of respondents who consider secular schools to be better.

Also of interest is the fact that while parents probably focus on the quality of teaching and less on faith or morals when selecting a school, they do favor religious instruction in schools. Indeed, when asked whether religious education should be provided in schools, most parents respond in the affirmative (90% in Kikwit, followed by 84% in Mbanza Ngungu and 78% in Kinshasa).

The statistics provided in Table 9 suggest that comparatively, faith-based schools may perform relatively well. This does not mean that they perform well in absolute terms, given low levels of learning in school in the country as a whole.

TABLE 9: PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC AND RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS, SHARES (%)

	Kinshasa	**Mbanza Ngungu**	**Kikwit**
	Do public secular schools meet community needs?		
Yes	66	60	28
No	30	32	66
Don't know	4	8	6
	Which types of schools are better?		
Religious schools	46	58	86
Secular schools	4	12	0
No difference	40	22	6
Don't know	6	8	2
	Should schools provide religious instruction?		
Yes	78	84	90
No	4	8	2
Don't know	12	6	8

Source: Authors' estimation from small-scale survey in the three localities.
Note: Some categories may not add to 100% due to non-responses.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this article was to explore the issues of girls' education and child marriage in the DRC based on qualitative fieldwork from the capital city of Kinshasa and two rural areas. Four main questions were explored: (1) How much support is there in communities for girls' education and women's work? (2) What are the factors leading girls to drop out of school? (3) What are communities' perceptions related to child marriage? and (4) Is there a role for faith leaders and faith-based schools in helping to end child marriage and promote girls' education?

There is substantial support for girls' education and women's work in the communities where the qualitative fieldwork was conducted. In many cases, parents are opposed to their daughters marrying early. But a range of factors including the out-of-pocket costs of schooling for parents, the poor quality of the education being provided, and the risk of becoming pregnant leads some girls to drop out

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of school prematurely. In those cases, child marriage is more likely, even if in all three communities, there is somewhat broad agreement about the negative effects of early marriages. Faith leaders have an important role to play in preventing child marriages, and in two of the three communities, they talk about the issue publicly.

It was mentioned several times that faith leaders and faith-based schools have an important role to play to improve opportunities for girls. This may lead to difficult questions. For example, following good practical advice from the international community, should Catholic schools provide comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education to girls (and boys) while they are in school, and if so, what does "comprehensive" mean? This type of question has not been explored in this article, but it needs to be, if only to prevent unwanted pregnancies.

In many ways, the findings provided by the qualitative fieldwork are not surprising although the fact that there is some heterogeneity between communities is very important to adapt program and policies to local contexts. Overall, the findings are encouraging, given fairly broad support in all three communities to end child marriage, support girls' education, and promote women's work. Similar support is found in the companion paper for the Republic of Congo, although in that country, there were sharp differences between the capital city of Brazzaville and one of the rural areas in comparison to another mostly indigenous rural area where support to end child marriage and educate girls was weaker. The challenge for public policy, as well as for faith leaders and faith-based and other schools, is to build on the support to provide better opportunities for girls, taking into account differences in context and attitudes between communities.

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