

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

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

PART II: THE 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 Republic of Congo (RoC), in part because educational attainment for girls is 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 opportunities for girls. A first step is to better understand the issues, and this is main the contribution of this paper for the RoC.

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- 1 Jean-Christophe Boungou Bazika and Wolf Ulrich Mféré Akiana are with CERAPE. Quentin Wodon is with UNESCO's International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa. The opinions and views expressed in this article are those of the authors only and need not represent the views of their employers. In particular, they need not represent the views of UNESCO. The data used for this paper were collected when the third author was at the World Bank.
 - 2 Sub-Saharan Africa is now the region of the world with the highest prevalence of child marriage. See Alexis Le Nestour, Oliver Fiala, and Quentin Wodon, "Global and Regional Trends in Child Marriage: Estimates from 1990 to 2017," Working paper (London: Save the Children UK, 2018).
 - 3 Secretariat of State [of the Vatican], *Annuario statisticum Ecclesiae 2020 / Statistical Yearbook of the Church 2020 / Annuaire statistique de l'Eglise 2020* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2022). For an analysis of trends in enrollment in Catholic schools globally, see Quentin Wodon, *Global Catholic Education Report 2023: Transforming Education and Making Education Transformative* (Washington, DC: Global Catholic Education, 2022).

A companion piece is available for the Democratic Republic of Congo.⁴ 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.

At the time of writing, estimates from UNICEF suggest that 27% of girls marry as children in the RoC, with 7% marrying before the age of 15 (data from the 2014-15 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. The share of women ages 18-22 who had a child before 18 is estimated at 31.8% in the RoC.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 72% of girls complete their primary education in the RoC.⁷ For lower secondary, the completion rate is even lower at 49%.⁸

Child marriage, early childbearing, and low educational attainment for girls lead to low levels of human capital. The World Bank's Human Capital Index⁹ (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 5; (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,

4 See Jean-Christophe Boungou Bazika, Geneviève Bagamboula Mayamona, and Quentin Wodon, "Girls' Education and Child Marriage in Central Africa: Insights from Qualitative Fieldwork Part I: The Democratic Republic of Congo," *Journal of Global Catholicism* 7, no. 1 (2022): 32-59.

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

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

7 Latest estimate for 2012. <https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>.

8 Latest estimate for 2012. <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.

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.¹⁰ For girls in the RoC, the HCI took on a value of only 0.45.¹¹ This suggests that in adulthood, today's children will reach only 45% 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 9.1 years of schooling, this is valued at only 5.4 years when taking into account how much children actually learn in school.¹² 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.¹³

10 The HCI is constructed by multiplying the contributions of survival, school, and health to expected relative productivity: $HCI = Survival \times School \times Health$. Survival = 1 minus the under-five mortality rate. School = the expected number of school years youth will complete adjusted by student performance on international assessments as follows: $\exp(\Phi(\text{Years of schooling}) \times (\text{Harmonized test score}/625) - 14)$. Health = expected adult survival and the likelihood of avoiding stunting as follows: $\exp(\gamma_{ASR}(\text{Adult survival rate} - 1) + \gamma_{NSR}(\text{Not stunted rate} - 1))$. The components of the index are meant to capture contributions in childhood to adult productivity relative to complete high-quality education and full health. The parameter $\Phi = 0.08$ measures the expected labor market returns to an additional year of schooling: $\gamma_{ASR} = 0.65$ and $\gamma_{NSR} = 0.35$ measure the improvements in productivity associated with an improvement in health, using adult survival and stunting as proxies for health. Complete high-quality education is 14 years of schooling and a harmonized test score of 625. Full health is 100% survival into adulthood and a stunting rate of zero percent. See World Bank (2018) for details.

11 This estimate is for 2020, but some components of the HCI are based on data for prior years.

12 On the learning crisis in West and Central Africa and approaches to end it, see World Bank, *Western and Central Africa Education Strategy from School to Jobs: A Journey for the Young People of Western and Central Africa* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2022). On the role of faith-based education in the region, see Quentin Wodon, *Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Comparing Faith-Inspired, Private Secular, and Public Schools* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2014).

13 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>.

The available indicators on the prevalence of child marriage, educational attainment and learning for girls in the RoC, 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, especially for educational outcomes. 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).¹⁴ 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,¹⁵ thereby limiting the ability of parents to send their children to school.

What could be done to 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 they marry. But vice versa, a higher level of educational attainment reduces the likelihood of child marriage. Ending child marriage would improve girls' education, and conversely impact evaluations suggest that educating girls is one of the best ways to end child marriage.¹⁶

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.¹⁷ Could this also be the case in the RoC? To provide a tentative answer to

14 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).

15 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).

16 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).

17 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>.

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.¹⁸

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?¹⁹ (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?

This last question on the role for faith leaders and faith-based schools is important for the RoC. The Catholic Church as well as other denominations play an important role in the country, including in the provision of basic education as quite a few schools are faith-based, although less so than in RoC's neighboring country, the Democratic Republic of Congo.²⁰ In 2018, the latest year for which data are available in the World Bank's WDI for the number of students in RoC's primary schools, there were 783,448 such students.²¹ That year, according to the *Statistical Yearbook of the Church*,²² there were 24,699 students enrolled in Catholic primary schools in the country. For the number of students in secondary schools,

18 On broader policies for women's empowerment, as a useful study in the country's larger neighbor, see World Bank, *Women's Economic Empowerment in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: Obstacles and Opportunities* (Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2021).

19 For a discussion of some of the constraints to girls' education in the ROC, 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 Lembugusala 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>.

20 On Catholic schools in the Democratic Republic of Congo, 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>

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

22 Secretariat of State [of the Vatican], *Annuario statistico Ecclesiae 2020*.

the latest year for which data are available in the WDI is 2012, with a total of 339,250 students in the country. That year, there were 9,290 students in Catholic secondary schools according to the Church. This suggests that Catholic schools account for only a small share of all students in primary and secondary schools, but they typically have a good reputation. There is 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 perform 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.

DATA COLLECTION

The analysis is based on data collected in the RoC in 2017 by the Centre for Studies and Research on Economic Analysis and Policies (CERAPE) based in Brazzaville in the RoC. 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)	
Department	Department of Brazzaville	Department of Niari	Plateaux Department
District/Parish	Brazzaville (Mfilou, Talangai)	Nyanga District (Irogo Village)	Gamboma District (Village Bénin)
Respondents	50	50	50

Source: Authors.

The first locality for data collection was the capital city of Brazzaville, a metropolitan area with a projected population of the order of two million people in 2021. Brazzaville is one of twelve departments in the country on the banks of the Congo River with Kinshasa, the capital city of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, across the river. The city is subdivided into nine municipalities (*arrondissements*): Bacongo, Djiri, Madibou, Makélékélé, Mfilou, Moundali, Ouenzé, Poto-Poto, and Talangai. The city is multi-ethnic. Data collection took place in the municipalities of Mfilou, Talangai.

The second location is in the Department of Niari in the southwest of the country which borders Gabon. The Department has 14 Districts, including the District of Nyanga, which in turn has 32 villages including the village of Irogo, located 37 km from Nyanga and 27 km from Ngongo on the border with Gabon. Irogo is one of the largest villages in the Nyanga District with more than 2,000 inhabitants, most of which are from the Nzebi and Pounou ethnic groups. Irogo has a comparatively modern and well-equipped school and an Integrated Health Centre as well as two modern water wells. The main economic activity is the cultivation of cassava and peanuts. While groundnuts are grown annually, cassava is grown permanently.

Each month, nearly 600 tons of rolled cassava are sold on the Gabonese market. As Irogo has no electricity, households use storm lights and, when they have the means, generators. The main sporting activity is soccer. Most residents are Protestant or Catholic.

The third location is the village of Benin in Gamboma District. The village has about 750 inhabitants.²³ The population is mostly Batwa. There are also some other ethnic Bantu groups such as the Bangangulu, the Kouyou and the Teke. Women have an important role, often supporting husbands in agricultural and fishing activities. Men tend to go to the village where the woman lives. They hunt and harvest honey for the wife and her family. The dowry is in kind, for example hunting a wild boar or buffalo and giving it to the in-laws. Polygamy is frequent as men have the right to marry several women as long as they respect them all. The economy is based on hunting, fishing, harvesting, and yam cultivation. Rites and arts play an important role with artists transmitting traditions to the next generations. The village is located only 5 km away from Gamboma, the main urban center in the district. This is where the Batwa sell and buy their products. It is also where many go to church or go to school, especially at the secondary level. Motorcycle taxis have made access to Gamboma even easier. The village has a primary school built in the 1950s.

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 Gamboma and Nyanga, while in Brazzaville, a larger share of respondents (one in four) live in female headed households, in part because of a larger proportions of household heads who are widowed, divorced, or separated. Household heads in Gamboma and Nyanga tend to be self-employed farmers, while in Brazzaville, the proportion of the employees is much higher. In terms of educational attainment, 28% of respondents in Brazzaville are from households where the head has a higher education. That proportion is almost nil in Gamboma and Nyanga. In Nyanga, educational attainment is especially low with 46% of

²³ The district had a population of 16,142 inhabitants in the 1984 census, but the current population is not known.



household heads have only a primary education. As for ethnic groups, many are represented in Brazzaville, but about eight in ten respondents are from a single ethnic group in the two rural areas (Teke in Gamboma and Nzebi in Nyanga).

SUPPORT FOR GIRLS' EDUCATION AND WOMEN'S WORK

There is substantial support for girls' education in Brazzaville, and Nyanga, with respectively 96% and 92% of respondents considering girls' education as very important, but support is weaker in Gamboma, with only 66% of respondents emphasizing girls' education as very important (see Table 2). Similar differences are observed for two other questions in the survey related to whether the benefits of education are the same for boys and girls, and the desired level of schooling for boys and girls. In Brazzaville and Nyanga, the desired level of schooling does not change by gender, but it does in Gamboma.

In practice, most children will unfortunately not attain the desired levels of schooling indicated in Table 2, but as higher levels of schooling progressively become more common for both boys and girls alike, at least in Brazzaville and Nyanga, parents have higher expectations, which is positive. In both localities, four in five respondents hope that their children (boys or girls) will go to university. Also of interest is the fact that in Nyanga, while there is an emphasis on girls' education, there is also an emphasis on continuing one's education only until getting a job. This is to be understood in the context of a labor market with high unemployment and underemployment among youth (a higher degree does not necessarily lead to a better job if there are few opportunities for graduates). Another issue which is particular to Nyanga is the low quality of the education being provided, mostly by volunteer teachers who are paid from parents' contributions. These teachers have typically not received any pedagogical training. As the income they receive from teaching is modest, they must also engage in other activities.

TABLE 2: SUPPORT FOR GIRLS' EDUCATION (%)

	Brazzaville		Gamboma		Nyanga	
	Importance of educating girls					
Very important	96		66		92	
Important	2		8		10	
Somewhat important	0		0		0	
Not that important	0		20		0	
Not important at all	0		8		0	
	Same benefits of education for boys & girls					
Yes	90		62		94	
No	10		38		8	
	Desired level of schooling by gender					
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Complete primary cycle	2	2	0	8	0	0
Go to secondary school	0	0	0	24	0	0
Complete high school	10	12	34	46	0	0
Complete higher education	78	80	44	14	6	0
Vocational training	0	0	0	0	0	0
Until you have a job	6	4	20	8	83	90
Until the wedding	0	2	2	8	0	0
Other	2	0	0	24	2	0

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

Note: Some categories may not add to 100% due to rounding, multiple responses or non-responses.

Comments in focus groups suggest that in Brazzaville and Nyanga, schooling is almost universally seen as a means of emancipation and professional and social advancement for girls and women. The image offered by women teachers and nurses in urban and rural areas is that of autonomous women who earn an income and have a much more comfortable standard of living than women farmers who have not been to school. These women civil servants have helped to raise the profile of girls' schooling and have given schooling considerable social importance in both urban and rural areas. Young girls want to be like these modern, scientifically literate, well-dressed, self-confident women, rather than do hard work in the fields and risk being poor. Likewise, parents want their daughters to look like those female

officials who command the respect of the community. Finally, for parents, having their children succeed in school is a way to ensure that their ability to get support in old age, given the lack of social protection systems.

Some respondents noted that education could allow girls to reach positions of responsibility on the political and social level such as those of minister or director general, and to earn the respect of the community. At the family level, they stressed the honor and joy that a girl's academic success brings to her parents, brothers and sisters, the ability she acquires to help them materially and morally, and the example she sets for the other members of the family. At the household level, respondents in Brazzaville were unanimous in stressing that a daughter's schooling brings her respect from her husband, the ability to contribute to meeting the household's needs and to children's schooling and health. It was said that educating a woman is like educating an entire nation.

By contrast, among the indigenous Batwa population of Benin village in Gamboma District, a substantial share of respondents does not place a high importance on girls' schooling. Priority tends to be given to boys for study, as girls are seen as having childbearing as their primary role. Although some Batwa girls go to secondary schools, this is rare. These girls may be subject to insults, bullying, and mockery because of their dress, which discourages school attendance. In addition, during the harvesting season (October to December), the Batwa tend to involve their children—boys and girls—in their activities, which also reduces their attendance in school. Enrollment in school for girls actually decreased in the three years prior to data collection, but not for boys. Another problem is the lack of educational materials and desks in the primary school, forcing children to sit on the floor, which is not conducive to learning.

Some respondents in Gamboma saw gender differences in education as legitimate. This quote from a villager reflects the social role assigned to girls:

In our village, girls, unlike boys, are destined for marriage and not for school. The parents, from the moment she is born, if they know that she is a girl, will already start selecting a family that will be able to receive her as a beautiful girl

and in which there is already her future husband. As soon as she reaches the age of 10, this girl will be placed with her future family-in-law so that she can get used to living with them. Her future is not in school but in her new family as a girl destined for marriage and to procreate children so that the clan will continue.

This does not mean that adolescent girls themselves agree with these views, as illustrated by another quote from a young girl in Gamboma:

I had a friend who attended with me in the same class, at the college of Gamboma. Instead of continuing her studies like me, she preferred to follow traditions and get married very early. Thus, she dropped out of her studies in fifth grade. She must have been 14 years old. I was not in agreement with her, and this disagreement pushed me to separate from her and to end our friendship. When she got married, she started having children very early. Today, I am in high school and preparing for my baccalaureate diploma. She, on the other hand, now has 4 children and, to survive, she trades cassava flour (*foufou*) in the street and lives in great poverty.

FACTORS LEADING GIRLS TO DROP OUT OF SCHOOL

Although there is strong support for girls' education at least in Brazzaville and Nyanga, many girls drop out before completing their secondary education. This can be due to multiple factors, including poverty, early pregnancies, poor grades, and a lack of motivation or interest. In the survey, respondents indicated a wide range of factors that could lead girls to drop out of school. The list included poverty, the cost of schooling, and a lack of food; lack of parental support or death of a parent; the distance to schools; low quality of teachers and instruction; too many punishments at school; a lack of quality and poor functioning of the school and bad behavior by teachers (sexual harassment); early pregnancies, the risk of premarital sex; a lack of motivation or interest for remaining in school, a failure at school failure or poor grades; the need to engage in field work; a lack of better employment opportunities with higher levels of schooling; social pressure; preparations for a wedding; and a range of other reasons.



Table 3 provides a synthesis of the three main factors that emerge from respondents' perceptions. Poverty and the inability to pay for school fees, as well as a lack of motivation and early pregnancies tend to be the main reasons for dropping out, but low school quality, the risk of sexual harassment, and a lack of support from some parents are also mentioned. Poverty tends to be the main reason for dropping out in Brazzaville, while a lack of motivation and early pregnancies appear to be more prominent factors in the two rural areas.

On the issues of early pregnancies and marriage, a quote from a woman in Nyanga is illustrative of the situations faced by many girls:

A young girl was married at 15 because she was pregnant. She had to agree to marry and live with a man who is a farmer in the village. This marriage resulted in two children. Today, the girl realizes that she had made a mistake. This error is explained by the fact that she had to drop out of school at the secondary level. At the age of puberty, she contracted a pregnancy and agreed to marry early and devote herself to field work. Later, conflicts appeared in the home, marital violence. Today, she wants to withdraw from the marriage. But the parents oppose it because they claim that the early marriage she performed was of her own free will. Now she wants to leave the marital home, she has no other alternatives. She greatly regrets having dropped out of school and speaks with great rage in her heart. If she had completed her school cycle, she would perhaps be in a satisfactory social position today.

The lack of motivation to remain in school, especially when a girl is not doing well in school, was mentioned more in rural areas, but it is also present in Brazzaville, as a woman explained based on her own experience:

I was not motivated at school because I saw no interest in it. In the fourth grade, my little sister, two years younger than me, caught up with me. We were both in the same class. She was doing well in class, and I started to feel ashamed because I couldn't stand the teasing from family members and friends. I finally broke down and dropped out of school, preferring to learn a trade.

TABLE 3: MAIN FACTORS LEADING GIRLS TO DROP OUT OF SCHOOL BY LOCALITY (%)

Factors	Brazzaville	Gamboma	Nyanga
1st reason	Poverty	Lack of motivation	Early pregnancy
2nd reason	Early pregnancy	Early pregnancy	Poverty
3rd reason	Lack of motivation	School quality/ sexual harassment	Lack of support

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.

Discussions in focus groups confirm that for girls in rural areas, pregnancy and marriage are key factors leading them to drop out of school. As girls marry, they may no longer have the time to study, given the pressure of housework and child-care. The period before the arrival of the first child is generally short, and in some couples, the husband may pressure his wife to give up her studies or even her professional work to devote herself to the household. A girl's status in the eyes of her family and friends is enhanced by the fact that she got married and a man came to her parents to ask for her hand in marriage, and that she soon became pregnant and a mother. From her childhood to her teenage years, the upbringing she receives from her father and mother puts a special emphasis on the behavior she will have to display in her future household. Thus, the upbringing she receives as a child focuses on her future housework, respectful behavior, and even submission to men.

Another aspect of this upbringing concerns the criteria for choosing a husband. In some communities, it is the parents who will influence the girl's decision. In other communities, she has a free choice, but she is advised to make a good choice, namely a man with moral qualities, the ability to provide for himself and the whole household, the ability to help his in-laws in case of need, and even to accept to bring up some of the younger members of his wife's family of origin, to help them study. Lack of solidarity, arrogance and condescension are defects that will be criticized by the parents of the daughter and that may even lead to the latter being strongly criticized, or even isolated by her family of origin if it feels that her husband's behavior is incompatible with the spirit of inter-family solidarity.

Respondents made recommendations to promote girls' enrollment and reduce the risk of dropout (see Table 4). In Brazzaville, a majority of respondents recommended that vocational training courses be set up for girls so that they could learn a trade to facilitate their socio-professional integration. Next, they suggested financial assistance to parents to meet school fees. In third place, they recommended improving teacher training and recruitment so that schools are of better quality, with competent teachers who respect professional ethics.

In rural areas, the main recommendations were different. In Gamboma, the main recommendations were to raise awareness of the importance of enrolling girls in school, followed by the need to strengthen parental involvement of parents in monitoring school activities, and finally the government's duty to better train teachers and recruit teachers able to provide a quality education. In Nyanga, training and recruiting teachers came first, followed by greater involvement of parents, and the provision of financial assistance to families to cover school fees.

TABLE 4: SUGGESTIONS TO REDUCE DROP-OUT RATES FOR GIRLS BY LOCALITY (%)

Classification	Brazzaville	Gamboma	Nyanga
1st suggestion	Vocational training for girls	Awareness for girls' education	Teacher training & recruitment
2nd suggestion	Financial assistance for fees	Involving parents in schools	Involving parents in schools
3rd suggestion	Teacher training & recruitment	Teacher training & recruitment	Financial assistance for fees

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.

PERCEPTIONS OF CHILD MARRIAGE

Early marriage was the norm long before the colonial era. Almost all women born before the 1940s were married at an early age. In the villages, it was customary for a woman who had reached puberty to be married off by her parents to play the role of mother and reproducer of the clan. Marriages sealed the alliance between families and the decision was taken by the head of the family or the father after consultation. The opinion of the girl was often not taken into account. In some ethnic groups, such as the Vili in the Department of Kouilou, there was a virginity rite called Tchikoumbi. This rite obliged young girls to preserve their virginity until marriage. For a period of several months, the young girl, before proceeding with the marriage, was locked up in a house and coated with powder. She had to undergo this rite and at the end was handed over to her future husband with whom she spent the first night together. In the morning, women were in charge of checking the sheets for blood stains indicating that the girl had retained her virginity and that the marriage could then be tied. Her family was honored. Premarital sex was considered a dishonor to the family and to the parents. Traditional societies were aware of this danger, and this was a key reason for early marriages in the past.

With modernization and the development of schooling for girls, the rite of virginity has virtually disappeared, including in the countryside. However, the trend towards early marriage persists because of the traditional role assigned to women in society, especially in rural areas. That main role is that of having children, with husbands ensuring that the needs of the family were met. This division of labor between men and women was a source of inequality. Even when women worked, their income was perceived as marginal in the household. Even today, this division of labor persists and continues to influence behaviors in many geographic areas.

During the survey and especially during focus groups, the issue of traditions was raised by participants. It is impossible to understand the motivations behind early marriages without perceiving the weight of traditions that are more or less anchored according to localities and ethnic groups and that influence individual and social behaviors. This diversity of traditions generates a diversity of approaches to

the role and place of women. As a 45-year-old focus group participant testified:

In my village, in the past ... it was not the girls who chose their husbands. It was their parents and especially the father who were responsible. I can mention the case of my mother. At the age of 14, her father decided that she should marry a boy 15 years older than her because he was a member of the family on her father's side. This boy had left the village and gone to other distant lands to learn about life. There he learned to sew and became a tailor. He also learned to speak other languages. Then, wanting to start a family with a woman from his village and clan, he returned to the village. His father consulted with my mother's uncle. My mother had just lost her father and mother and was orphaned. She now had a 12-year-old brother and a 10-year-old sister to support. She began to cultivate the cassava fields to support the family. Seeing that she was a good worker, it was decided that she would marry this man who had just returned to the village. But he was a very bossy person. "He is too mean a man and I don't want to be his wife," said my mother, crying. My mother refused the marriage. Her uncle took a big stick and threatened to beat her to death if she disobeyed. She had no choice but to agree. That is how she married my father. Traditionally, the decision had to be made by the father or the uncle. Today, this is not the case because the woman has gained more freedom and can decide for herself which man she wants to marry as well as how she chooses to work and how to spend her income.

While the role of women in society is changing, child marriage nevertheless remains prevalent. As shown in Table 5, most respondents in the three communities are aware that some girls marry as children in their community, albeit with differences between localities since in Nyanga, close to a third of respondents deny the existence of early marriages. Many believe that the prevalence of the practice is increasing, although again the proportion is much lower in Nyanga. The perceptions of a rising prevalence of child marriage are associated with other issues such as juvenile delinquency. As a school principal in Brazzaville explained in perhaps too stark terms:

Early marriages and pregnancies are becoming a common phenomenon in Brazzaville and can fuel ... children [who may] be abandoned, left to their own devices, and will swell the ranks of street children.

In rural areas, 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 Brazzaville, the daughter typically decides according to respondents (this is also the case in Nyanga, but to a lower extent). 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.

Some of the risks associated with child marriages include instability in the couple and intimate partner violence. A lack of maturity when getting married may not allow a mother to properly educate her children and monitor their health and nutrition. She may be unable to face the problems that arise in the life of a couple and create an understanding with her husband. Early marriages may be a source of conflict, domestic violence, and divorce. A quote from a woman in Brazzaville is illustrative of those risks:

I was 14 and got pregnant. I was in fifth grade in Brazzaville. My father decided that I should go live with my partner, who was 17 years old himself. My friend lived with his sister and was from a modest background. To survive, I started selling vegetables, then bread at the neighborhood bakery. The situation was difficult. With my husband there were a lot of disputes, fights. As I was serious about work, the owner of the bakery recruited me as a cashier. I was anxious and regretted the behavior I had. The situation in the marriage had become untenable. I was forced to flee the home and go back to my parents. My father wanted to put me back at home, but my aunt intervened against this idea. This saved me from poverty because, later, I went back to school and met a man at 25 who married me and with whom I founded a real family.

Many of the people interviewed understood that early marriage may lead to serious health problems and difficulties in childbirth for the woman. In interviews with medical personnel, various health problems faced by young mothers were raised.

In integrated health centers, medical staff believe that most cases of dystocia and cesarean sections as well as fistulas are related to the early age of the woman giving birth. In addition, the short life span of the child can be related to young mother's inexperience to follow and apply prenatal care during pregnancy. According to medical personnel, most premature children are born to young women who have undergone early marriages and pregnancies. The chance of survival of these newborns are low, and infant mortality rates are high for these mothers.

TABLE 5: PERCEPTIONS OF CHILD MARRIAGE BY LOCALITY (%)

Classification	Brazzaville	Gamboma	Nyanga
Are there child/early marriages in the community?			
Yes	86	96	63
No	6	2	29
Don't know	8	2	8
How is the prevalence of child marriage evolving?			
Growing	84	62	31
Decreasing	0	4	33
No Change	4	0	8
Don't know	10	34	29
Does child marriage affect the life of the couple?			
Yes	88	36	85
No	8	4	2
Don't know	4	60	11
Do social actors talk about child marriage?			
Yes	6	2	47
No	84	14	29
Don't know	4	84	24
Does child marriage affect girls' reproductive health?			
Yes	54	46	86
No	40	4	4
Don't know	2	52	9

Classification	Brazzaville	Gamboma	Nyanga
Who decides about the marriage? (Main responses)			
Father	0	74	63
Mother	0	6	12
Household head	0	22	0
Girl	100	4	57
Don't know/other	0	0	2
How important is the girl's consent?			
Very important	100	32	96
Somewhat important	0	30	2
Moderately important	0	10	0
Not very important	0	24	2
Not at all important	0	4	0
Do you know about the law regarding child marriage?			
Yes	26	46	24
No	72	54	74
Don't know	2	0	2

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.

A resident in Nyanga recounted a recent tragedy in the village:

A 15-year-old girl got knocked up by a young boy in the village. The boy was 20 years old. This early pregnancy progressed to childbirth. The delivery took place in the Integrated Health Centre (IHC) of the village itself. It is important to note that the health center is not well equipped and has only one nurse who is already retired. The IHC does not have a midwife. It is the birth mothers who take care of the delivery cases. During the delivery, she had many difficulties. She suffered a hemorrhage. The baby was already dead before it left the womb. The mother also did not survive due to lack of care and died a few hours later. This event greatly upset the whole village. The community, the village chief, and the two families involved decided that ... this tragedy should serve as a lesson for everyone. Parents have [since] been asked to be more involved in the education of girls and boys to avoid sexual relations and early marriages.

Communities seem to be aware that early marriages may have harmful consequences for couples and the reproductive health of young girls. This is however not the case for all respondents and there are differences between communities. In Gamboma where there is more tolerance for child marriage, there is also less awareness of its potential negative effects, as illustrated by the views of a respondent:

Early marriage has no consequences in married life. It guarantees the girl a home where she can play her role as a mother and have children early on, whom she can raise and see grow. This marriage gives her security and protects her from the hazards of life. It helps the girl and her family escape the shame and banishment experienced in the village when a girl is not married and continues to live with her parents until she is older or does not give birth.

The survey included questions as to whether any actors in society (the state, NGOs, etc.) had taken measures or carried out actions that would contribute to the fight against early marriage. The results of the survey suggest that in Brazzaville and Gamboma, most respondents were not aware of programs or initiatives to end child marriage. In Nyanga, half of respondents were aware of initiatives in their locality, especially by a community radio station which has made many broadcasts on this issue, with this information campaign much appreciated by the listeners. As to the marriage laws in place, they tend not to be understood by respondents. Most respondents in Brazzaville and Nyanga have not heard of the legislation governing marriage, while this is the case for only a fourth of respondents in Gamboma. But with regards to the legal age of 18 for marriage, while most respondents in Brazzaville and Nyanga agree with this provision, less than half do in Gamboma. Many respondents among the indigenous population consider that 18 years of age is too old for a girl to be married, as illustrated by this quote:

Why do we have to wait so long for a girl to get married? At the age of 18, the girl runs the risk of having premarital sex and not finding a husband. It is when she is still very young that she should get married, have children and learn her job as a mother. She will be able to listen to her husband and be docile in the

home. The best wives are those who get married at 14 or even 15 when their breasts start to come out.

In terms of recommendations for ending child marriage, community awareness initiatives about girls' rights and the family code were suggested in all three communities as a potential priority (Table 6). Other suggestions included offering scholarships to disadvantaged girls, educating parents, sanctioning parents who accept an early marriage, and in Nyanga preaching chastity by the churches. Remarkably, but not too surprisingly given attitudes towards child marriage in that locality, many respondents in Gamboma did not have any suggestions.

TABLE 6: SUGGESTIONS TO REDUCE CHILD MARRIAGE BY LOCALITY (%)

Classification	Brazzaville	Gamboma	Nyanga
1st suggestion	Community awareness on girls' rights/family code	No particular suggestions	Churches must preach chastity
2nd suggestion	Offer scholarships to disadvantaged girls	Community awareness on girls' rights/family code	Community awareness on girls' rights/family code
3rd suggestion	Educating parents	State must sanction parents who accept an early marriage	State must sanction parents who accept an early marriage

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

POTENTIAL ROLE FOR FAITH LEADERS AND FAITH-BASED SCHOOLS

The role of churches and faith-based schools had been in decline until the 1990s, but since the establishment of the multiparty system, there has been a revival. Alongside traditional churches (Catholic, Evangelical, Salvationist, Muslim, Kibangist, etc.), new churches have emerged. Traditional and religious leaders can

play an important role in raising community awareness about the negative effects of child marriage and the benefits from 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. Are faith leaders talking about these issues? As shown in Table 7, this does not seem to be sufficiently the case. For about half of respondents in Brazzaville and Nyanga, religious leaders do not talk about this issue, and the proportion reaches nine in ten respondents in Gamboma. While there is some awareness of issues related sexual and marital violence, faith leaders tend to be silent on issues of school dropouts and early marriages.

TABLE 7: ROLE OF FAITH LEADERS IN ENDING CHILD MARRIAGE, SHARES (%)

	Brazzaville	Gamboma	Nyanga
Faith leaders talk about the issue of child marriage			
Yes	48	14	51
No	50	86	49
Don't know	2	0	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, faith-based and other schools also have a role to play in ensuring that girls can go to school, which is as mentioned earlier one of the best ways to avoid child marriage. As a respondent from Brazzaville stated:

Our church is very interested in the schooling of boys and girls. It has formed a special committee to assist young people who are in secondary school and who are in need. This committee encourages the young people to take their studies seriously and to work hard for their academic success. It organizes evening coaching classes to help the youth of the church understand the lessons and application exercises and improve their academic performance.

But for faith-based and other schools to play their role, they must provide an education of good quality, so that it is for girls both feasible (by passing the required examinations) and worth it to remain in school (and for their parents to bear the financial cost that this implies), especially at the secondary level. Unfortunately, the quality of the education provided in the RoC is typically low, including in some faith-based (and Catholic) schools.

Communities are aware of this lack of quality. Satisfaction with secular schools is low. Most respondents are either moderately satisfied or dissatisfied with the schools. This crisis of confidence is likely to affect the enrollment of girls, who tend to be more vulnerable and face more socio-cultural constraints to enroll than boys. Another issue mentioned earlier is that of the risk of sexual harassment in schools. The words of a woman in Nyanga district on those issues speak volumes:

Girls in school are not in good conditions. They are often sexually harassed by teachers. Study conditions are bad. Students do not have benches, and some teachers do not come to provide training and are conspicuous by their absenteeism. Instead of wasting her time at school, I prefer that my daughter comes to help me in the field. That way, she will be useful for something.

There are however differences in perceptions of quality between secular and religious schools. Religious schools tend on average to be considered better, at least in Brazzaville and Nyanga. In those communities, a much larger share of respondents considers religious schools to be better in those two localities, in comparison of the share of respondents considering secular schools to be better. By contrast, among the indigenous population in Gamboma which has a stronger attachment to traditional beliefs, this is less the case.

Finally, while parents tend to focus on the quality of teaching and less on faith or morals when selecting a school, many do favor religious instruction. Indeed, when asked whether religious education should be provided in schools, most parents respond in the affirmative, albeit with differences between communities since the proportions are 66% in Brazzaville, 98% in Nyanga, but only 44% in Gamboma given a strong attachment to animist traditions and rites among indigenous populations.



TABLE 8: PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC AND RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS, SHARES (%)

	Brazzaville	Gamboma	Nyanga
Do public secular schools meet community needs?			
Yes	26	72	43
No	72	28	57
Don't know	2	0	0
Satisfaction with secular schools			
Very satisfied	8	4	20
Satisfied	22	36	14
Moderately satisfied	34	28	37
Dissatisfied	34	24	29
Very dissatisfied	2	8	0
Which types of schools are better?			
Religious schools	50	20	63
Secular schools	30	0	16
No difference	20	18	14
Don't know	0	60	4
Should schools provide religious instruction?			
Yes	66	44	98
No	28	0	0
Don't know	6	56	2

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.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this article was to explore the issues of girls' education and child marriage in the RoC based on qualitative fieldwork from the capital city of Brazzaville 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 support for girls' education and women's work in the communities, although less so in Gamboma which has a predominantly indigenous population. 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 when sexually active lead some girls to drop out of school prematurely. In those cases, child marriage is more likely, even if in two of the three communities, there is agreement about its negative effects. Faith leaders have an important role to play in preventing child marriages, but they tend not to talk about the issue, in contrast to what is observed in the companion paper for the Democratic Republic of Congo. Faith-based schools also have a role to play in efforts to keep girls in (secondary) school, especially as they tend to be perceived as being of higher quality.

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.

The findings provided by the qualitative fieldwork are not too surprising, although the fact that there is substantial heterogeneity between communities is very important to adapt program and policies to local contexts. Overall, except perhaps for Gamboma, the findings are encouraging, given fairly broad support to end child marriage, support girls' education, and promote women's work. Similar support is found in the companion paper for the Democratic Republic of Congo. 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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