



See our World

An essential part of Plan's work is to help create spaces for children and young people to discuss together the issues which affect their lives, then ensure adults respect their views so that children may be involved in community decision-making. This communication has been prepared with and by children directly and is intended to give a general sense of the kinds of issues children discuss and how they work together.

How We Children are Working Together to Reduce Forced Marriage

Dear friends and sponsors,

We are a group of children who have come together to share with you our knowledge and experiences about the right of a child to have safety and protection. In Benin, "forced marriage" is a common cultural tradition. Parents marry off a young school-age daughter to an older man, who is often a stranger to her.



We children worked in groups to draft this document for you.

We children are so concerned about this practice that we selected this topic for "See Our World". This communication was created through a combined effort of the Committees of Children for Development in the areas of Lalo and Dogbo, where Plan works. We chose this topic because we are worried about the practice. We were helped by Antoine, Victoire, Laurence and Hilaire who are Plan staff. We formed small groups to brainstorm the key aspects of forced marriage that we wanted to tell you about. Then we finalised the document and selected the photos. Plan helped us with the final editing.

FORCED MARRIAGE TO HONOUR A GIRL'S FAMILY

In times gone by, our parents had to ensure that their daughter married a respectable man who could look after her, and the marriage had to be an honour to the girl's family. To achieve this, our fathers took the lead and managed the negotiations with the potential husband. Nowadays, forced marriage has become the means for a poor family to earn money. Our fathers look for older, wealthy men who can pay a lot of money, called a "dowry", to the family of the future bride. There are many men looking for a young girl to marry. Unfortunately, these negotiations usually result in the "kidnapping" of the young girl by one of these "suitors" and the marriage is a forced union. We believe that forced marriage continues because of poverty, and because people are unaware of the rights of us children.

"On my way back home from the market around 8:00pm, I was kidnapped by four strong men. They drove me to a remote village far away. Later, I was shocked to find out that it had all been planned by my parents, in order to marry me off for money. The man already had another wife! Luckily, I was freed two weeks later. It was the worst experience of my life."
Said Mèlé 16 years old.

HOW LIFE CAN TURN INTO A NIGHTMARE FOR A GIRL

There are many problems with forced marriage. Marriage means that young girls have to drop out of school and cannot continue with their education. Young girls are usually not prepared for marriage as they are still children themselves, and they often oppose it. Often marriages fail. Sometimes, husbands mistreat their girl wives.



"In our village, a young girl of 15 years old was forced into marriage. We investigated the case and then reported it to the police officer in charge of child protection in our area. Appropriate action was taken and finally, the girl was freed. Sadly she later felt that she could not resume her classes at school because she felt very ashamed."
Said Léocadie, a 16 year old member of Committee of Children for Development.

Some girls become pregnant, and they die when giving birth to their baby, because of their physical immaturity. Those who survive childbirth become mothers without any preparation for such a responsibility. So they pass on their poverty, their non educated status, their lack of experience of life, and their poor parenting skills to their children.

ACTIONS WE HAVE TAKEN AND THE WAY FORWARD

We have been very successful in raising the awareness of children and our parents about the problems with forced marriage. Many children now know what to do when it happens. We have succeeded in freeing many girls from the trap, through our investigations and reports to police officers.



Villagers including children learn about child rights issues, during training given by the government.

We have been successful because:

- ✓ We publicised the issue to other children, so that they could pass this knowledge on to their families.
- ✓ We investigated all possible cases, and we reported them to the local authorities and police officers that we are working with.
- ✓ We lobby our local government so that it helps us to publicise the problem as widely as possible, and therefore help us to reduce it.

In future we will:

- ✓ Continue to publicise the issue amongst children and families, through local radio channels, group meetings, and through a public awareness campaign with the support of Plan.
- ✓ Continue to report any case of forced marriage to the local authorities for the appropriate action to be taken.

This document was reviewed and edited by Plan staff.