

ODI Executive Summary

A quantitative analysis of social norms relating to FGM/C and child marriage in Mali

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Cover: Bogolan is a traditional fabric from Mali. Bogolan means ‘made with earth’ and is a dyeing technique originating in Mali in the 12th century. Credit: Leonova Elena/Shutterstock.com.

Background

This report presents the key findings of what may be the first attempt to quantitatively assess social norms related to female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) and child marriage in Mali. Using a baseline survey, the study looked at intervention sites of the Spotlight Initiative in five regions of Mali: Bamako, Kayes, Koulikoro, Sikasso and Ségou.

FGM/C and child marriage constitute acts of gender-based violence and negatively affect the rights and development of children – particularly girls. This is of great relevance in Mali. Its estimated rate of FGM/C is 89% among women aged 15 to

49, rising to 96% in some regions. Meanwhile 53% of women in Mali are married before the age of 18, compared to only 4% of men.¹

The Spotlight Initiative programme in Mali – run by the United Nations system and the European Union, in partnership with the government and civil society of Mali – aims to contribute to the elimination of gender-based violence and harmful practices, notably FGM/C and child marriage. A core pillar of the programme is promoting social norms that are conducive to the abandonment of gender-based violence and harmful practices in these five regions.

¹ Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) (2018) ‘Demographic and Health Survey in Mali’ (Enquête Démographique et de Santé au Mali 2018). Institut National de la Statistique (INSTAT) and ICF.

The study

The aim of the study was to gauge people’s views on FGM/C and child marriage to understand better what may be driving their persistence, and to offer preliminary data points from which potential shifts can be measured. The study was conducted in June 2022 by ODI in partnership with local research partner Plan International Mali. The survey is not large-scale and is intended to be used in conjunction with other outputs of a wider research partnership.²

The research used a questionnaire administered by 10 enumerators through Survey Solutions: a free, computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) system developed by the World Bank. To understand social norms in a practical way, the study broke these down into four component

parts that influence how people think or act: reference groups, descriptive norms, injunctive norms, and outcome expectancies.³ The questionnaire was devised to explore these components. The study investigated child marriage – that is, marrying before the age of 18 – in terms of how it affects girls.

The total sample size for the survey was 575 respondents from villages across the five regions. People were randomly sampled from ‘treatment’ areas – i.e., sites where people have been part of the Spotlight Initiative – and ‘control’ sites, where they have not. It is worth noting that 89% of all respondents had been exposed to some form of campaign on FGM/C, and 77% to campaigns on child marriage, prior to the survey.

Box 1 Snapshot of survey respondents

- Median age: 40 years; 85% married or living with partner; 96% Muslim
- 61% had no formal education and were mostly illiterate
- Most women (60%) worked as housewives (*femme au foyer*); most men were in agriculture, were business owners or day labourers
- Living in rural areas correlated with lower educational and wealth levels

² The study is part of a wider research partnership between ODI and UNICEF, funded by the Spotlight Initiative. It comprises a literature review on social norms and behaviour change approaches related to FGM/C and child marriage; a mixed-methods study exploring factors that uphold the persistence of FGM/C in Mali; and the design of behavioural change tools to shift social norms towards the abandonment of FGM/C and child marriage.

³ Descriptive norms: beliefs about what people think and do. Injunctive norms: beliefs about what others *think* people should do or expect them to do. Outcome expectancies: beliefs about the perceived rewards and sanctions of engaging in a certain practice.

Key findings

Reference groups

- **Expectations of immediate family members and elders matter most**

Measuring reference groups can help to gauge the types of people who might exert the most influence on a respondent. These findings have important implications in terms of whom to target when seeking to change attitudes, behaviour and social norms related to FGM/C and child marriage.

The research found that all reference groups had some influence on respondents. They were asked ‘How important is it for you to do what the following group expects of you?’ – in relation to immediate family; extended family; friends and peers; elders; the community; faith leader; village chief.

Across the five regions, the two groups whose expectations mattered most to respondents were immediate family and elders, cited by at least 90% of respondents overall, with some regional differences.

Support for FGM/C and child marriage

- **Much stronger support for continuing FGM/C than child marriage**

More than two-thirds of respondents (67%) expressed support for continuing FGM/C compared to 44% who supported continuing child marriage. More than half of respondents (53%) thought that child marriage should be abandoned.

Respondents in rural areas and those with lower education were more likely to support continuing FGM/C. Among respondents with no formal education, 78% felt it should continue, compared

to only 37% of those with some form of higher education (just 7% of the total sample). Higher levels of education were associated with lower support for child marriage. Only 26% of those with more education supported child marriage, compared to 55% of those with no formal education.

The relationship between wealth and support for both practices followed the same inverted U-shape. Support increases when moving away from the poorest quintile, reaches a peak between the middle and fourth quintiles then falls sharply among those in the richest quintile.

Respondents were asked to estimate support for both practices among different reference groups. Elders and religious leaders were thought to be most likely to support both practices. They were also asked about readiness for marriage: 53% thought that a girl should marry before 18, while fewer than 5% thought this for a boy. However, more respondents supported arranging marriage for a girl aged 16 to 18 than for a girl under 16, although there were distinct regional differences on this.

Knowledge, attitudes and behaviours

- **People’s support for the practices matches their intention to follow them**
- **More awareness of the negative effects of child marriage than of FGM/C**

Respondents were asked about their intent regarding both practices. More than two-thirds (69%) said they would arrange for their daughter to undergo FGM/C. Nearly half (46%) agreed they would arrange for their daughter to get married before she turned 18. In both scenarios, respondents’ intent mirrored the levels of support

for the different practices, suggesting an alignment between what people think and what they say they would do. In both cases, those with more education were less likely to report intent. More respondents in treatment sites (30%) than in control sites (22%) said they were *unlikely* to arrange FGM/C for their daughter. This suggests that Spotlight Initiative activities could be having an effect on behaviour.

For **FGM/C**, more than 40% of the total sample associated no physical risks with the practice, while 54% said there were no psychological risks. Higher levels of education correlated with being more aware of such risks. Relatedly, 57% believed that FGM/C is a completely safe practice, with more women than men agreeing with the statement. More than two-thirds believed there were social risks associated with not undergoing FGM/C, principally linked to a tarnished reputation for the girl or her family.

The greatest consensus, with 90% agreeing, relates to associating tradition, culture and identity with FGM/C. The practice was also seen as a religious duty by more than 70% of respondents. Yet the idea that FGM/C is a violation of human rights or a form of violence against women was rejected by 59% and 60% respectively – with fewer women than men agreeing to either statement.

For **child marriage**, most respondents could identify at least one of each risk type: 75% named at least one physical risk; 72% at least one social risk; and more than 60% at least one psychological risk. This suggests that awareness of the negative implications of child marriage are more widespread in the study areas than of those related to FGM/C. Again, education levels were a good predictor of awareness. Yet around 60% of respondents identified social risks associated with a girl *not* marrying before 18 – chiefly a damaged reputation for the girl or her family, and the

‘shame’ of a girl getting pregnant while unmarried. Given the similarities here with FGM/C, the two practices could share some of the same drivers.

Tradition, culture and identity were also firmly associated with child marriage, by 76% of respondents, while 56% saw it as a religious duty. In contrast to FGM/C, more people agreed than disagreed that marriage before 18 is a violation of human rights or a form of violence against girls. This further indicates some appreciation of the negative impact of child marriage on a girl’s rights, but was not universal.

Descriptive norms: FGM/C

- **Majority believe that most girls under five have undergone FGM/C**
- **Perceived community attitudes linked to how people intend to act**

The descriptive norms research included investigating the share of girls under five who had undergone FGM/C; whether men in the community would marry a woman who had not undergone FGM/C; and perceptions of people’s views about the practice over time. Some 82% believed that the majority (i.e. more than half) of girls under five in their community had undergone FGM/C – and 24% believed that all girls under five had been cut.

In all the regions except Koulikoro, the majority of respondents – 64% overall – believed that most men in their community would be unwilling to marry a woman who was uncut. Among respondents who believed that community attitudes were shifting in favour of FGM/C, 80% said they were ‘very likely’ to carry out the practice on their daughter. The opposite was also seen: where they thought community attitudes had shifted against, more respondents (61%) reported being ‘not at all likely’ to follow the practice.

A clear difference also emerged between treatment and control groups. In treatment areas, numbers of respondents describing their community as a ‘lot less supportive’ of FGM/C increased across all five regions, compared to control sites. This suggests that Spotlight Initiative activities may be having an impact on shifting attitudes and social norms related to FGM/C.

Descriptive norms: child marriage

- **Respondents think most girls of 16 and 17 in their community are married**
- **Nearly two-thirds expect child marriage rates to be lower in five years**

The descriptive norms research included asking respondents to estimate how many girls aged (a) under 16, and (b) aged 16 to 17, were married in their community; whether men would marry a woman aged over 18; and how people’s views of child marriage have changed over time. Overall, 53% estimated that fewer than half of girls under 16 in their community were married. But more than 50% estimated that girls aged 16 to 17 were married. Meanwhile, 50% of respondents overall said that most men in their community would marry a woman over 18, and 30% thought that all or nearly all men would.

The majority (60%) felt that people in their community are now less supportive of child marriage compared to a year ago. Only 20% felt that people are more supportive, and 20% saw no change. For most regions, those in Spotlight Initiative treatment zones thought their community had become less supportive of child marriage over the past year compared to control areas.

As with FGM/C, a link was seen between perceived community support and a respondent’s views and intent, underlining the power of social norms

and expectations. Among respondents who thought community views had shifted in favour of child marriage, 48% reported being more likely to arrange for their daughter to marry while under 18. Among respondents who viewed their community as a lot less supportive, a greater proportion (67%) reported being ‘not at all likely’ to arrange for their under-18 daughter to marry. Separately, 65% estimated that rates of child marriage would be lower, and nearly a quarter predicted ‘much lower’ rates in the next five years.

Injunctive norms for FGM/C and child marriage

- **Widely held perception of community pressure to continue FGM/C**
- **Faith leaders, community and elders associated with pressure to comply**

To assess injunctive norms, respondents were asked whether they thought various reference groups expected them to continue or abandon the practices of FGM/C and child marriage. Respondents believed that all reference groups to varying degrees expected them to continue the practices, although these perceptions were far stronger for FGM/C than for child marriage.

Close to 90% thought that their religious leaders expected them to continue FGM/C. Other high-scoring groups on FGM/C were the community (86%) and elders (84%). For child marriage, 65% thought the community expected them to continue the practice, while 64% mentioned elders.

In both instances, respondents perceived that the reference groups with the strongest expectations that the practice would continue were those furthest removed from themselves, such as their community, religious leaders and elders. This might

be because respondents have less complete information about the attitudes of those further removed from them, or because norms relating to FGM/C and child marriage are more rigid and resistant to change within these groups.

Outcome expectancies

● Social sanctions thought most likely if FGM/C abandoned

Exploring outcome expectancies helps to elicit an understanding of *which* social sanctions and benefits are most relevant for respondents – which in turn can help to recalibrate programme intervention strategies. Respondents were asked about the likelihood of being sanctioned (i.e. judged, criticised, stigmatised) by others for abandoning the practices of FGM/C and child marriage.

Social sanctions appear especially important for norm compliance with FGM/C. Nearly two-thirds of respondents believed they would face sanctions for abandoning the practice, although, perhaps surprisingly, more than one-third (34%) thought it not at all likely that they would. Abandoning child marriage was unlikely to incur sanctions according to 62% of respondents, with 28% thinking it likely.

Loss of tradition and reputational damage to the girl and to her family were the most likely sanctions mentioned for both practices. The results confirm the strong consensus that both practices are part of respondents' cultural identity. Abandoning the practices were not thought to attract any social benefit, with 80% judging this for FGM/C and nearly two-thirds (66%) for child marriage.

Local responsibility

● Strong preference for community-led change to end practices

When asked whose responsibility it should be to stop these practices in their community, respondents consistently felt this lay in both cases with everyone in their community (80%), and particularly with community leaders (59%). This may indicate that respondents wish people with knowledge and appreciation of local customs and traditions to be the ones engaged in ending harmful practices. Our findings suggest that these actors should be empowered to lead the change, with international development actors – including NGOs and UN agencies – providing support through locally designed, owned and led solutions to eliminate both types of gender-based violence through shifting social norms.

Key considerations for future studies/programmes

● Reference groups

- Consider asking about the importance of reference groups in regard to specific issues, such as FGM/C or child marriage, to inform programme strategy.
- Analyse which reference groups matter more for different demographic groups, and the programmatic implications of this for projects on social norm change.

● FGM/C

- Unpack through local qualitative research the overwhelming belief that FGM/C has always been part of respondents' traditions to better understand why it persists.
- Explore beliefs about the perceived safety of FGM/C.
- Conduct local research into the high perceived share of men willing to marry an unexcised girl/woman among the study sites in Koulikoro.

- **Child marriage**
 - Explore why there is substantially lower support for child marriage than for FGM/C.
 - Understand what drives lower support for child marriage among younger generations, and why this pattern is not mirrored for FGM/C.
 - Conduct local research into the very low reported rates of child marriage among the study sites in Ségou.
- **FGM/C and child marriage**
 - Examine why respondents perceived that expectations for continuing both practices were strongest among reference groups further removed from themselves.
 - Work with local communities on activities that promote the abandonment of FGM/C and child marriage in a way that maintains the cultural heritage of these communities.

Box 2 Notable regional findings

Koulikoro

- Survey sites all rural and particularly deprived: 62% of respondents in the poorest wealth quintile. Educational achievement lowest of all regions: almost three-quarters had no formal education.
- Very high prevalence of FGM/C but more respondents said it should be abandoned than continued.
- 60% of respondents believed that most men in their community would marry a woman who had not undergone FGM/C – different to all other regions.
- High support for abandoning child marriage (76% in **Koulikoro** and 62% in **Kayes**). People in both regions thought to be increasingly less supportive of it. Few respondents in both regions (16% and 17% respectively) would arrange marriage for a daughter under 16 years of age.

Bamako, Ségou and Sikasso

- These three regions particularly supported FGM/C continuing. In Bamako, 80% wanted it to continue. In **Ségou and Bamako** people reportedly becoming supportive of FGM/C over the past year, and had the highest share of respondents likely to arrange FGM/C for a daughter.
- All **Bamako** respondents were urban and had a relatively higher standard of living. Other regions' respondents were evenly split between rural and urban.
- **Ségou and Bamako** had highest level of support for child marriage – perhaps due to reportedly strong support among religious leaders for its continuation. Most respondents here disagreed that child marriage is an act of gender-based violence or violates girls' rights.
- In **Bamako** and especially **Ségou** (48%), respondents were significantly more likely to arrange their daughter's marriage before she turns 16.
- Incidence of child marriage estimated to be greatest by respondents in **Bamako**. But in **Ségou** more than three-quarters of respondents thought no girls under 16 in their community were married, and only 14% said that girls aged 16–17 were.
- In **Kayes** and **Sikasso** most respondents believed that fewer than half the men in their community would marry a woman over age 18.
- In **Ségou**, 38% thought child marriage would be 'much higher' in five years' time.