

# PLAN FOR GIRLS

IN BENIN & CAMEROON

**LOOKING FORWARD**  
When girls stay in school,  
they can look to the future  
rather than be forced into  
an early marriage



**GENDER GOALS**  
 In Benin, gender stereotypes hinder equality between girls and boys. To challenge social conventions, Plan International supports girls' football teams.



**BIRTHRIGHT**  
 A birth certificate gives a girl an identity, citizenship and access to basic health and education services. It may also help prevent her from being forced into an early marriage.



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# Benin

“Getting the jump” on access to education means girls can stay in school and avoid early pregnancy and address gender biases.



When girls stay in school instead of getting married, it reduces their risk of early pregnancy and exposure to gender-based violence.

# Class in session

In Benin, education is the key to giving girls an opportunity to shape their future. Plan for Girls offers hope to girls who may have left their studies due to an early pregnancy, gender biases, poverty or distance from school.

**AN UNPLANNED TEEN PREGNANCY** changed the course of Patricia's life. She dropped out of school, but thanks to your support for the Plan for Girls project, she was able to return after a four-year absence. When girls like Patricia get another chance to study and learn how to make a living, it helps break the cycle of poverty. (See page 12 for more of her story.)

## IN YEAR FOUR OF THE SIX-YEAR PLAN FOR GIRLS PROJECT, WE CONTINUE TO:

- 1.** Provide mentoring and scholarships so girls can return to school.
- 2.** Raise awareness about gender-based violence and ways to reduce it.
- 3.** Offer vocational training so girls can earn a living and reduce financial barriers.
- 4.** Increase girls' knowledge about their sexual and reproductive health.



**THANKS** for helping girls in Benin continue their education and avoid early marriage and the risks associated with it.

# The scene

**BENIN**, on the coast of West Africa, was established as its own independent republic in 1975 after years of shifting regimes following French colonial rule. More than half of its population of 12.45 million lives in rural areas, with the largest urban populations in the capital, Porto-Novo, and Cotonou. French is the national language, although many tribal languages are spoken. Despite the country's natural beauty, residents of Benin face challenges like this:

- Life expectancy: **61.2** years
- GDP per capita: **\$3,504**
- Total fertility rate (births per woman): **4.8**
- National poverty rate: **38.5%**
- Infant mortality rate per 1,000 live births: **59**
- Human Development Index: Ranked **158** of **189** countries

A traditional voodoo mural in a rural village in Couffo Department. Benin recognizes voodoo as an official religion.

## STEERING THE LEADERSHIP

The Girls' Advisory Committee is the backbone of the Plan for Girls program. Seventy-five girls from 60 villages participate in providing youth leadership and insights that make Plan for Girls activities relevant to the local culture and lifestyle.

The committee members, nominated by their peers, develop action plans that include working with authorities on issues related to gender equality and raising awareness about issues that affect their lives negatively, such as gender inequality and gender-based violence.

The goal is to change the norms that make it difficult for them to break the cycle of poverty and achieve their potential. In the process, they become leaders in their own right.

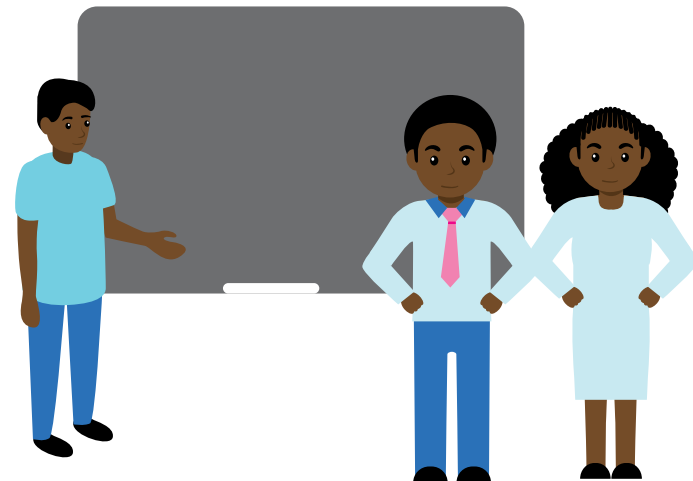
# THE RUNDOWN

Here's what we accomplished during year four of the Plan for Girls project in Benin.



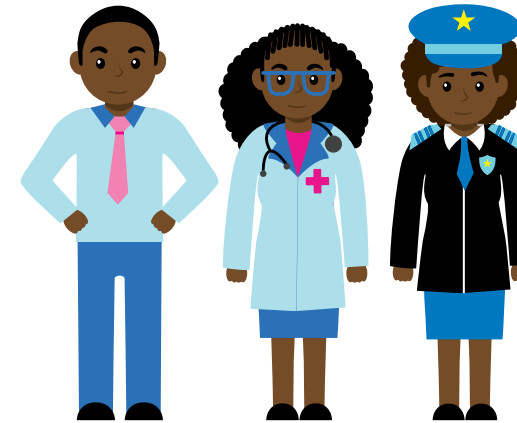
## 20,000

people were reached with community-radio-based messages to raise awareness about gender rights. Similar campaigns in schools reached 33,000 students and more than 250 parents.



## 120 COMMUNITY MENTORS

in the 60 participating villages were trained to work with youth in discussing sexual health, gender-based violence and healthy living.

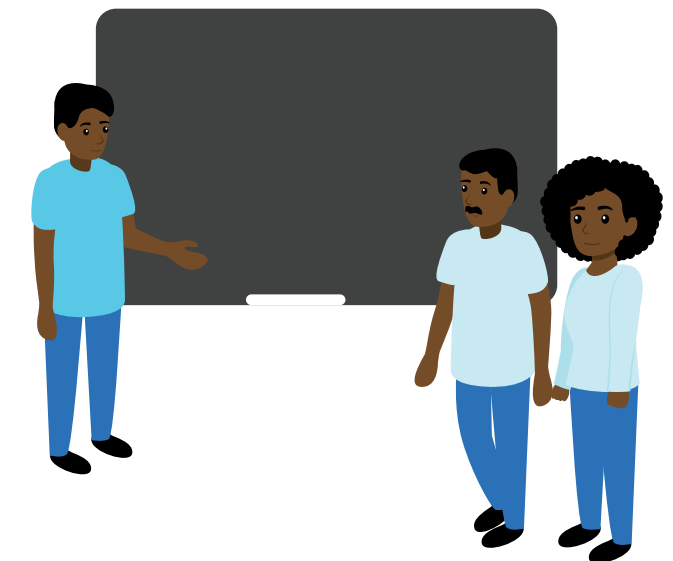


## 183 SCHOOL PRINCIPALS, 84 HEALTH WORKERS & 228 POLICE OFFICERS

were trained to better help girls and young women experiencing gender-based discrimination or violence.

## 36 FACILITATORS

were trained to lead Champions of Change youth groups in 18 communities.



## 334 GIRLS & 303 BOYS

participated in twice-monthly activities that did the following:

- Helped girls realize their right to an education
- Encouraged boys to help with chores
- Promoted girls' confidence and self-esteem





# Pencil her in

Second chances mean young women like Patricia can build a better future for themselves and their children.

**PATRICIA IS BACK IN SCHOOL** and she couldn't be happier. The 21-year-old mother returned to her studies after a four-year absence due to an unplanned teen pregnancy.

When her father first learned that Patricia was pregnant, he ordered her to leave the family home.

"He told me I had disgraced him because he was proud to have a daughter who would soon graduate from high school," explained Patricia.

Eventually, her father relented and Patricia was welcomed back home. Unfortunately she wasn't able to continue going to school.

"I gave birth just before the start of school," she shared. "I stopped going to take care of my child."

In Benin, the teenage pregnancy rate is high. One in four girls gives birth to her first child before the age of 18, putting her health and that of her baby at risk as there is often no access to essential

“

I began to feel confident that I could succeed, and that's what convinced me to go back to school.”

medical care. Furthermore, girls are usually forced to leave school to take care of their children.

In Patricia's community in central Benin, the high school-dropout rate among girls is due to a lack of awareness about sexual and reproductive health and rights and resulting teenage pregnancies. In addition, traditional gender stereotypes mean that parents often don't see the importance of educating girls, preferring to send only their boys to school instead.

While Patricia was home with her baby, she was asked to join Plan for Girls' 75-member Girls' Advisory Committee. She began to participate in activities that raised her awareness about her rights, including her right to an education.

"I began to feel confident that I could succeed," said Patricia, "and that's what convinced me to go back to school."

Patricia's father was invited to the talks organized by the committee and, as a result, supported his daughter's decision to continue her education.

"I had no intention of contributing to her schooling," he said. "But I changed my mind after taking part in the talks. I learned that school isn't only for boys and that women can do the same activities and functions as men as long as they have some training."

Today, Patricia is one of the top students, and she plans to finish her studies and move on to secretarial training.



# Cameroon

When girls stay in school, it means they can avoid early marriages and plan for their future.





When girls stay in school instead of getting married, it reduces their risk of early pregnancy and exposure to gender-based violence.

# A bright future

With your support, we worked with families and communities in 60 villages to help shift norms around girls' roles and to broaden their understanding of what opportunities are lost when girls don't get an education.

**CHARIFAH WAS SET TO BE MARRIED** to a man who was almost her father's age. She was 16. It didn't happen, in part because of your support for the Plan for Girls project in Cameroon. After participating in the Champions for Change program, Charifah and her father decided to call off the nuptials. Now, instead of heading to the altar, she's heading back to school. (See page 22 for more of her story.)

## IN YEAR FOUR OF THE SIX-YEAR PLAN FOR GIRLS PROJECT, WE CONTINUE TO...

- 1.** Provide mentoring and scholarships so girls can attend school.
- 2.** Raise awareness about gender-based violence and ways to reduce it.
- 3.** Offer vocational training so girls can earn a living and reduce financial barriers.
- 4.** Increase girls' knowledge about their sexual and reproductive health.



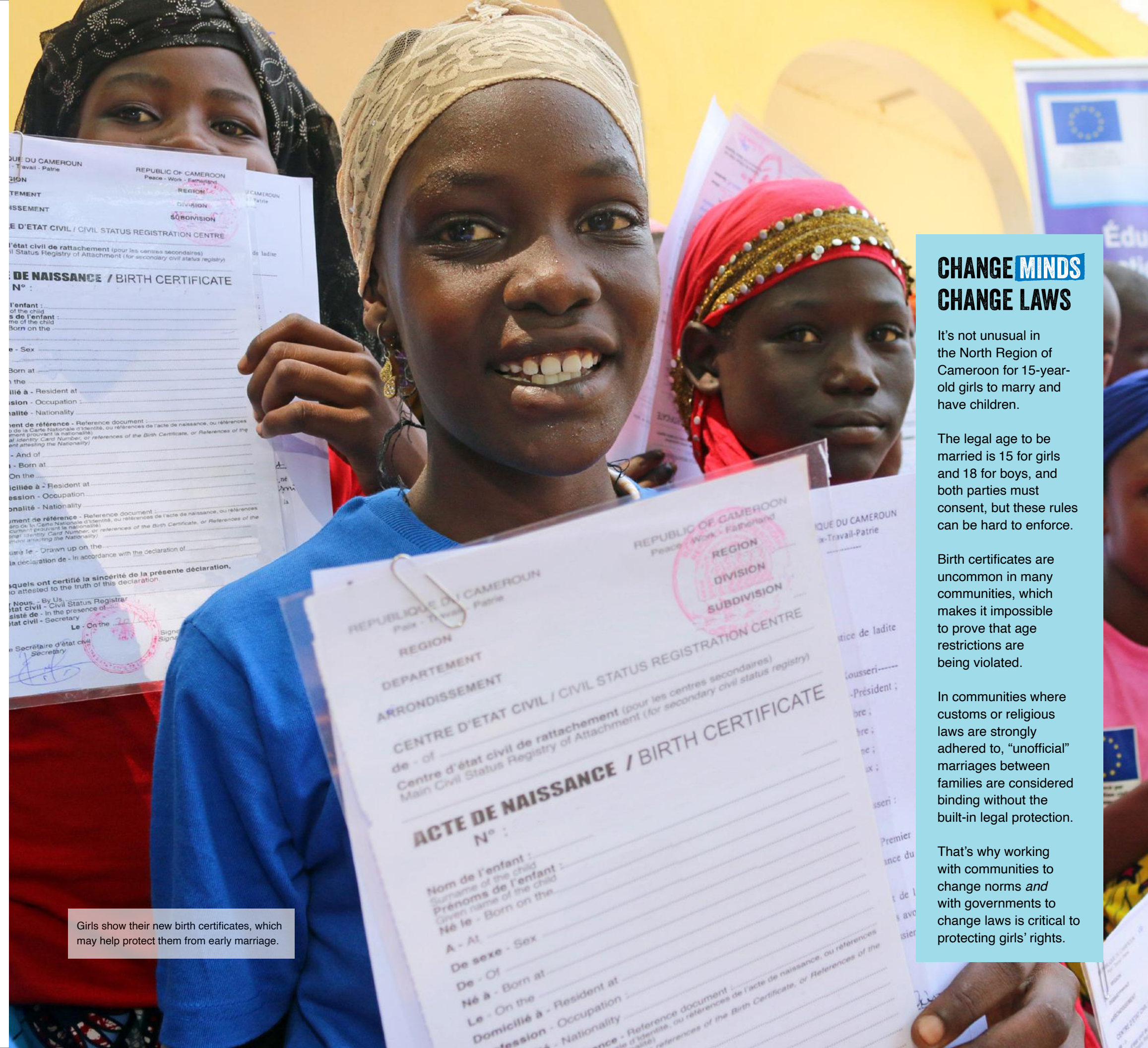
**THANKS** for helping girls in Cameroon continue their education and avoid forced early marriage and the risks associated with it.

# The scene

**CAMEROON IS SOMETIMES CALLED “AFRICA IN MINIATURE”** because so many of the features associated with the continent can be found in this one eclectic nation. Cameroon is a beautiful country with a rich cultural history, tropical rainforest and beautiful beaches. It also has modern-day challenges due to conflict and widespread poverty. It ranks 151 out of 189 countries on the Human Development Index. (The index measures life expectancy, access to education and standard of living.)

- In the North Region, one-quarter of married women were married before the age of 15 and two-thirds before the age of 18.
- **41.3%** of girls and young women between the ages of 15 and 24 believe that domestic violence is justified.
- **Less than 1%** of girls age 15 to 19 are both in school and married.
- In 2016, **only 43%** of secondary-school-age women were enrolled in school.

Girls show their new birth certificates, which may help protect them from early marriage.



## CHANGE MINDS CHANGE LAWS

It's not unusual in the North Region of Cameroon for 15-year-old girls to marry and have children.

The legal age to be married is 15 for girls and 18 for boys, and both parties must consent, but these rules can be hard to enforce.

Birth certificates are uncommon in many communities, which makes it impossible to prove that age restrictions are being violated.

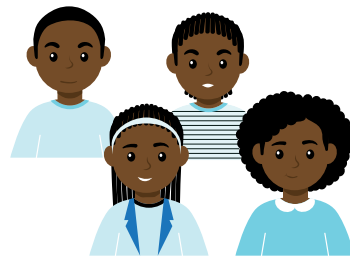
In communities where customs or religious laws are strongly adhered to, “unofficial” marriages between families are considered binding without the built-in legal protection.

That's why working with communities to change norms *and* with governments to change laws is critical to protecting girls' rights.

# THE RUNDOWN

Here's what we accomplished during year four of the Plan for Girls project in Cameroon.

## 10,800



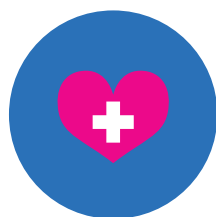
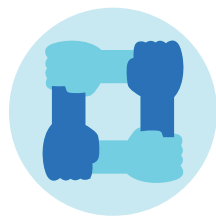
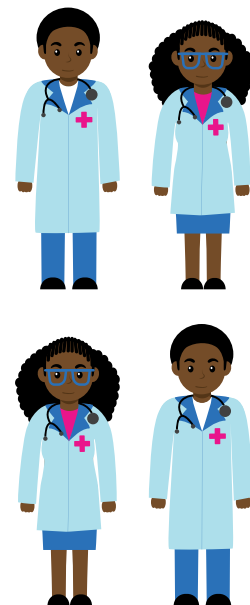
parents attended community sessions and workshops where they discussed ways to prioritize girls' education and brainstormed solutions to problems faced by local youth.

## 210 HEALTH WORKERS

were trained to provide health services to adolescents, especially girls, in a safe setting.

## 4,536 GIRLS & BOYS

enrolled in leadership training and learned about inclusion and gender equality and sexual and reproductive health rights. Some of these youth attended a government-supported leadership camp where they participated in workshops on topics like communication, self-esteem and gender-based violence.





# Dis-engaged

A father and daughter discover together that choosing school over an early marriage unlocks future dreams.

## EVERYONE WAS EXCITED THAT

**CHARIFAH** was about to marry a man her father's age – everyone except the 16-year-old herself. “I was scared,” she shared. “I didn't want to leave my father's house, but I couldn't confront him either.”

In the area where Charifah lives in northern Cameroon, it is tradition for a

girl to be married once she menstruates. It's an income source for the family, and it avoids the possibility of a girl getting pregnant before marrying, something many in the region feel is shameful.

Her father, N'gambo, said he felt he should follow the custom because he is an influential figure and it's important that he set an example.

“

I almost ruined my daughter's future. I am convinced that her future is full of promise, and I will support it as best I can.”

– N'gambo, Charifah's father

“Charifah is my first daughter,” he explained. “Giving her in marriage according to our custom is a sign of gratitude.”

The Plan for Girls project aims to offer an alternative path for girls like Charifah by getting them involved in Champions of Change groups. In this setting, they talk openly about gender equality, discrimination and cultural norms. Charifah joined the group, and the experience helped her realize she could stay in school rather than get married. She decided to approach the protection team for help.

“I was ignorant of my rights, but now I know that my education is paramount and that I should only get married when I am ready and to the man of my choice,” Charifah explained.

Members of the protection team approached her father to see if he would join the child protection committee. After some training sessions with other traditional and religious leaders, N'gambo understood the negative effects that forced early marriage has on girls.

After a few weeks on the committee, N'gambo called off Charifah's marriage. Today, she's in school and teaching others about the negative consequences of early marriage and other harmful practices that affect girls. Her father also continues to be an active committee member.

“I almost ruined my daughter's future,” N'gambo shared. “I am convinced that her future is full of promise, and I will support it as best I can.”



To mark International Day of the Girl, children took part in an activity to raise awareness about gender-based violence.

# THANK YOU!

You play an important role in fostering girls' empowerment in Benin and Cameroon. Your support offers many girls alternatives to early marriage and the opportunity to take control of their own health, go to school and shape their own future.



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