



Ensuring Education for Girls in Benin

A young girl has been promised in marriage to a much older man. A dowry has been paid and her family is pleased to have one less mouth to feed. She is expected to get pregnant soon. The course of her life has been set.

Forced early marriage is a common practice in Benin. Penon is a 15-year-old girl living in Kpessanrou, one of 13 villages in the Banikoara commune in northern Benin. She was set to join her fiancé, Bio Gani, in another village when a member of the local monitoring committee alerted community worker Sahadatou Issifou Adam. Sahadatou took quick action, meeting with the local monitoring committee and local authorities. Together they negotiated with the parents of the bridegroom to postpone the arrival of the bride at her marital home so that she could stay at her parents' house and finish school at Kpessanrou.



Photo: CAGE

Fifteen-year-old Penon postponed marriage to continue her education.

In 91 targeted communities, including Kpessanrou, USAID conducts community sensitization programs about the importance of girls' education and the impact of forced marriage. And USAID-supported monitoring committees work to increase the enrollment of school-age girls and improve their retention through activities like after-school study groups.

Efforts to create change in a society—in particular accepting the idea that girls too should attend or continue school, by fighting forced marriage can have a sustainable impact only if local communities are involved.

Since the monitoring committee intervened in Penon's case, many parents have realized that encouraging girls to stay in school does not prevent them from getting married later. The parents also understand that they should fight the practice of early forced marriage and give their daughters a chance to complete at least primary education. Penon's mother, a member of the local parent-teacher association, was satisfied to know that her daughter would continue her schooling.

Changing minds, attitudes, and behaviors is no easy task, especially when actions are deeply rooted in commonly accepted and shared beliefs, perceptions, customs, and traditions. The situation is not made easier in communities where many family matriarchs have also been victims of forced marriages. Sensitization campaigns seek to empower and involve communities so that they can work together to trigger change.

Penon is now enrolled in the fifth grade. Illustrating the opportunity to increase primary school retention and completion rates, Penon's experience also offers a glimpse into the promise of an educational future for all Benin's girls.

Success Story

