

13 May 2024

Guinea: Social Perception of Women, Prevalence of Gender-Based Abuse, and Attitude of the Authorities

Warning

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Résumé : En 2021-2022, le PNUD a classé la Guinée à la 182^e place sur 191 des pays les plus inégalitaires du monde sur la question du genre. Accès à l'éducation, accès aux soins, pauvreté, accès à la justice, violences physiques, excision, mariages forcés et mariages précoces sont autant de freins au développement des femmes en Guinée. Cette note fait un point général sur la situation.

Abstract: In 2021-2022, the UNDP ranked Guinea 182nd out of 191 on the list of the world's most gender-unequal countries. Access to education, healthcare, poverty, access to justice, physical violence, female genital mutilation, forced marriages, and early marriages all hinder the development of women in Guinea. This note provides an overview of the situation.

Note: The translation of sources in foreign languages is provided by the DIDR.

In 2021-2022, Guinea was ranked 182nd out of 191 countries in the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Gender Inequality Index,¹ making it **one of the most gender-unequal countries in the world**.² The World Bank estimates Guinea's female population in 2022 to be 50.2% out of nearly 14 million people.³

1. The legal framework

Guinea has several laws that are supposed to protect and promote women's rights, but these are often poorly implemented or ignored, particularly in cases of gender-based violence (GBV).⁴

1.1. International texts

- Guinea signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in August 1982⁵
- It has been one of the countries admitted to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) since 12 December 1958⁶
- The country signed the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1967 and ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1978⁷
- Guinea signed the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Banjul Charter) on 16 February 1982⁸
- It signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in July 1990⁹
- The country signed the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of Children on 27 May 1999¹⁰
- Guinea signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2008¹¹

1.2. National texts

Guinea also enacted several laws between 2000 and 2010 aimed at protecting women's rights, including Law L/10/AN/2000 on reproductive health, and Law L/2019/0011/AN establishing parity between men and women in access to electoral mandates and elective functions in public institutions.¹²

Guinea has also incorporated into its domestic law various provisions relating to the fight against female sexual mutilation (FSM), including articles 258, 259, 265 and 305 of the Penal Code and articles 405, 408, 409 and 410 of the Children's Code.¹³

However, the provisions of domestic law protecting women are rendered ineffective by the fact that articles 295 to 298 of the Civil Code suspend proceedings and prevent conviction when the victim "grants her pardon, which is all the easier to obtain because it does not always come from her".¹⁴

¹ This index is one of the components that UNDP uses to calculate the Human Development Index (HDI).

² World Bank, 09/05/2023, [url](#)

³ World Bank, 2022, [url](#)

⁴ Hommes & Libertés, March 2019, [url](#)

⁵ Lawyers without Borders, 2019, [url](#)

⁶ UN, 2022, [url](#)

⁷ Lawyers without Borders, 2019, [url](#)

⁸ AU, 2023, [url](#)

⁹ Lawyers without Borders, 2019, [url](#)

¹⁰ AU, 2022, [url](#)

¹¹ Lawyers without Borders, 2019, [url](#)

¹² Lawyers without Borders, 2019, [url](#)

¹³ UN, April, 2016, [url](#)

¹⁴ Le Point, 08/01/2023, [url](#)

2. Harmful practices, violence against women and social perception

According to Hélène Kokolou Zogbélemou,¹⁵ the path to gender equality in Guinea is hampered by deep-rooted discriminatory customs and practices.¹⁶ Tierno Monémbo¹⁷ believes that the situation of women in Guinea is "drastic". Polygamy, early and forced marriages, female circumcision and patriarchal domination are extremely problematic.¹⁸

2.1. Social perception of women

Most Guinean cultures place women in a central social role, since they are the ones who ensure the reproduction of the group and the solidity of the family. Women are subjected to double exploitation since they not only have to fulfil their obligations as "housewives", but also have to participate in economic activities, particularly agriculture. Traditionally, Guinean women have been excluded from the political arena, as it is assumed that women have no place there.¹⁹

Guinean society is marked by the domination of men over women. And even if the latter have been seeking solutions to this state of affairs since the 1950s, notably through a long feminist political commitment, their position has remained precarious.²⁰ As women are traditionally considered inferior, they often have to give up their rights to avoid being rejected by their family or community.²¹

If we consider custom, the woman owes "complete obedience and submission" to the man. This inferiority of women legitimizes a certain number of harmful behaviours in society such as physical violence.²²

2.2. Financial independence and education

For Hélène Kokolou Zogbélemou, in Guinean society, 80% of family expenses are borne by women. The latter are present in all income-generating activities but benefit very little from "the fruits of their labour".²³

The World Bank confirms this mechanism and deplores the "lack of investment in human capital." This is considered to increase the risk of poverty among Guinean women. Women's overall participation in the labour market remains below the average for sub-Saharan African countries in terms of job quality, which is often characterized by "informality, self-employment, and vulnerability." Guinean women are also at a disadvantage in accessing ownership and acquiring "productive and financial assets".²⁴

Women are more affected by poverty because of their more limited access to education, health and employment. In 2018, of the 53.3% of poor people living in rural areas, the majority were women. In addition, in 2018, the adult literacy rate (15 years and older) was 14.1% for women compared to 45.7% for men.²⁵

The World Bank says that lack of access to education is an aggravating factor in women's poverty. Despite progress made "in primary and secondary school enrolment rates for girls and boys", overall

¹⁵ An activist who, after having lived personal experiences of discrimination and violence, including female genital mutilation and rejection for early pregnancy and divorce, has been involved in the defence of women's rights in Guinea since 2009. She founded the NGO *Humanitarian for the Protection of Women and Children* (HPFE) in 2010, which aims to fight against human rights violations and discriminatory ancestral practices, and to promote gender equality. She has often faced resistance, including death threats and obstruction by local authorities, including in her work to combat female genital mutilation.

¹⁶ Hommes & Libertés, March 2019, [url](#)

¹⁷ Writer who worked on the massacre of a hundred people in September 2009 at the Conakry stadium and in particular on the issue of the rapes that took place during the event. Tierno Monémbo is a political opponent who is interested in the condition of women in Guinea.

¹⁸ Le Point, 08/01/2023, [url](#)

¹⁹ MANGUET, 1987, [url](#)

²⁰ DOUMBOUYA, November 2008

²¹ Hommes & Libertés, March 2019, [url](#)

²² World Bank, 09/05/2023, [url](#)

²³ Hommes & Libertés, March 2019, [url](#)

²⁴ World Bank, 09/05/2023, [url](#)

²⁵ PNUD, n.d. [url](#)

completion rates are worrying, particularly among women and girls from rural areas. Girls are more likely than boys not to go to school or not to complete their education.²⁶

Hélène Kokolou Zogbélé mou introduces other factors by explaining that women are traditionally considered inferior and often have to give up their rights to avoid family or community rejection. In particular, she mentions the fact that a large number of schoolgirls become pregnant. These young girls are then prevented from going to school and are kept at home to take care of the babies.²⁷

2.3. Physical and sexual violence

Guinean women face the possibility of "violence of all kinds" throughout their lives.²⁸ Thus, more than 80% of them suffer domestic violence, about 30% of which is of a sexual nature.²⁹

Sexual violence is on the rise in all levels of society, especially against minors.³⁰ Tierno Monénembo points out that in exceptional cases of generalized violence, such as the massacre committed at the Conakry stadium on 28 September 2009, where the army massacred more than 150 political opponents, more than 150 women were raped, with no hope of obtaining redress from the legal bodies.³¹ A 2016 survey also found that 29.3 percent of women have experienced sexual violence since the age of 15, and about 20 percent have been victims of rape.³²

On the other hand, access to appropriate health care and psychological support services is limited for women victims of violence, particularly outside the capital. The costs associated with medical care and legal procedures are often prohibitive for victims. As an indication, in 2021, the forensic medicine department of the Ignace Deen University Hospital in Conakry, one of the country's main hospitals, received 638 rape victims.³³

2.4. Female sexual mutilation (FSM)

Guinea, along with Somalia, remains the country with the highest prevalence rates of FSM in Africa. Michèle Sona Koundouno, president of the local NGO called the Centre for Women, Citizenship and Peace, states that the prevalence rate of female circumcision in the country is 97%.³⁴ The latest demographic and health survey, conducted in 2018 by the Ministry of Planning and Economic Development shows that, with the exception of Forest Guinea (N'zérékoré region) where the prevalence is 84%, the figures exceed 95% everywhere in the country. The regions of Labé and Kindia, in western Guinea, peak at 98%.³⁵ The World Bank also claims that Guinea has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world, probably due to the high prevalence rate of FSM.³⁶

FSM is a social norm in Guinea. Family, friends and society put considerable pressure on women to continue the practice. It is often the women themselves, in order to correspond to the social standards of chastity and aesthetics, who are the actors of this perpetuation.³⁷

Faced with social pressure, many women who did not originally want to be circumcised, end up giving in out of frustration and being worn down. The social state induced by the fact of not being circumcised creates a situation of marginalization that is very hard to bear. These women are indeed judged by society as impure. It is very difficult for them to find a husband or to integrate professionally.³⁸

While victims can indeed turn to the National Office for the Protection of Gender, Children and Morals (Office national de protection du genre de l'enfance et des mœurs - OPROGEM) for care, limited access to health facilities and the relatively low chances of legal proceedings do not encourage women to use

²⁶ World Bank, 09/05/2023, [url](#)

²⁷ Hommes & Libertés, March 2019, [url](#)

²⁸ Le Point, 08/01/2023, [url](#)

²⁹ Le Point, 08/01/2023, [url](#)

³⁰ Le Point, 08/01/2023, [url](#)

³¹ Le Point, 08/01/2023, [url](#)

³² Amnesty International, 2022, [url](#)

³³ World Bank, 09/05/2023, [url](#)

³⁴ Vatican News, 06/02/2023, [url](#)

³⁵ Republic of Guinea, 2018, [url](#)

³⁶ World Bank, 09/05/2023, [url](#)

³⁷ Plan International, 2018, [url](#)

³⁸ Plan International, 2018, [url](#)

the tools that are available. In 2017, during its information-gathering mission, OFPRA had identified structural problems with OPROGEM relating to a lack of resources and communication: these render it a blunt tool that is dysfunctional and ineffective. The population itself is relatively unaware of its existence.³⁹

For their part, circumcisers have a pecuniary interest in the perpetuation of this practice. In some regions such as Guinea Forestière (the Nzérikoré region), circumcisers are considered traditional priestesses, which gives them high social status, prestige and authority.⁴⁰

2.5. Forced/Early marriages

Another problem is forced marriages.⁴¹ According to the World Bank, the rate of early marriage in Guinea is one of the highest in the world. This situation is the result of "socio-cultural norms, beliefs and perceptions of gender roles". Forced marriages are said to be part of the precariousness and difficulty of women in acquiring wealth.⁴² According to the 2018 Demographic and Health Survey (Etude démographique et de santé - EDS), 17% of women aged 20 to 24 were married before the age of 15, and 46.4% before the age of 18.⁴³

Marriage is indeed highly valued as a means of obtaining a better social status and uniting two families. Early marriages of girls are often motivated by the desire to avoid pregnancies outside marriage, which would undermine family honour. Customary marriage and religious marriage, especially in the case of Muslims, are predominant, with a legal possibility of choosing between monogamy and polygamy. Despite this, many weddings take place without official registration. Forced marriage, although not approved by religions, is more common among Muslims and particularly among the Fulani. Social factors such as poverty, education level and the risk of pregnancy outside marriage are decisive, but the parents' level of openness and information also plays a crucial role.⁴⁴

Forced marriages violate the right to self-determination of individuals, especially women and girls. In 2019, a new Civil Code was introduced, setting the legal age of marriage at 18 for all and making mutual consent a fundamental principle. Forced marriage is explicitly prohibited by the Penal Code, with penalties for offenders. However, prosecutions remain rare and victims are often reluctant to seek justice, mainly due to a lack of knowledge of their rights, illiteracy, and fear of social stigma.⁴⁵

Despite the existence of legal remedies and available assistance, including those provided by associations and OPROGEM, women generally have little access to the justice system. This is often due to a lack of knowledge of their rights, illiteracy, the irregular functioning of courts, and the costs associated with legal action, as well as the fear of social stigma and family rejection.⁴⁶

Within the theme of forced marriages, early marriages are a major societal issue that affects many young girls long before they reach the age of majority. About three out of five girls are forced to marry before the age of 17.⁴⁷ According to the 2016 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), more than half of women (54.6%) were married before the age of 18, a practice that has its roots in a complex mix of cultural, economic and legislative factors.⁴⁸ In younger age groups, 10.5 per cent of girls aged 15-19 had been married before the age of 15. These figures show a significant prevalence of early marriage, especially in rural areas.⁴⁹ According to the World Bank, the rate of early marriage in Guinea is one of the highest in the world. This situation is the result of "sociocultural norms, religious beliefs, and perceptions of gender roles".⁵⁰

³⁹ DIDR, 2018, [url](#)

⁴⁰ NU, April 2016, [url](#)

⁴¹ Le Point, 08/01/2023, [url](#)

⁴² World Bank, 09/05/2023, [url](#)

⁴³ CGRA, 15/12/2020, [url](#)

⁴⁴ CGRA, 15/12/2020, [url](#)

⁴⁵ CGRA, 15/12/2020, [url](#)

⁴⁶ CGRA, 15/12/2020, [url](#)

⁴⁷ Le Point, 08/01/2023, [url](#)

⁴⁸ UNICEF et al., 2017, [url](#)

⁴⁹ CGRA, 15/12/2020, [url](#)

⁵⁰ World Bank, 09/05/2023, [url](#)

For the World Bank, the high rates of early marriage partly explain the economic precariousness of Guinean women. These early marriages are considered to prevent women from participating in economic activities and exercising their free will. Women thus find themselves in a situation of financial dependence on men.⁵¹

Culturally and religiously, early marriage is often seen as a way of preserving family ties and respecting ancestral traditions. Many families also believe that marrying off their daughters young protects them and guarantees their dignity. This phenomenon is exacerbated by illiteracy and a lack of awareness of women's rights and health, leading to a cycle of misinformation and the maintenance of traditional practices.⁵²

On an economic level, poverty plays a crucial role in the perpetuation of child marriage. In the context of economic precarity, marrying off a young girl is sometimes perceived by families as a strategy for reducing the economic burden. The dowries received at weddings are also seen as significant economic contributions for families in financial difficulty.⁵³

The consequences of these marriages are profoundly harmful. Socially, they reinforce gender inequalities, limiting young girls' access to education and condemning them to a permanent status of inferiority. From an educational perspective, early marriage almost always interrupts girls' schooling, jeopardizing their economic future and increasing their dependency. In terms of health, young girls at risk of early marriage are at increased risk of complications related to pregnancy at a young age, maternal mortality, and the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases.⁵⁴

In response to this problem, efforts are being made by the government and international partners to combat child marriage. These initiatives include awareness campaigns, improving access to education for girls, and infrastructure to reduce the domestic chores that weigh particularly heavily on young girls. These strategies aim to create a more protective and empowering environment for girls, allowing them to enjoy their childhood and continue their education safely.⁵⁵

Despite the existence of a number of institutional protections such as OPROGEM and the Guinean Child Protection System (Système de Protection des enfants de Guinée – SYPEG)⁵⁶ and an enforceable legal framework, the application of laws on early marriage is often inconsistent. The practice of early marriage remains widespread due to the persistence of strong cultural traditions and a lack of awareness of existing laws.⁵⁷

There is also a lack of awareness of legal rights among rural and less educated populations. Many families are not informed about the legal consequences of early marriage, which contributes to the perpetuation of the practice. Added to this is the fact that cultural norms and social pressures often prevail over laws. In many cases, respect for traditions is more valued than obedience to national laws, making it difficult to combat forced or early marriages.⁵⁸

3. Attitude of the authorities and actions undertaken by civil society

3.1. Attitude of the authorities

The State created the OPROGEM in 2009, and the National Observatory for the Fight against Gender-Based Violence in 2011. Nevertheless, these organizations struggle to stem the problems related to the violation of women's rights. One of the main reasons is the State's difficulty in enforcing the laws relating to the respect of these rights. Thus, although polygamy was banned in 1968, the adoption of the relevant law by the National Assembly did not reduce the practice. Worse still, faced with the impossibility of applying the law, polygamy was reinstated in 2019, "in order to reconcile the law and the facts".⁵⁹

⁵¹ World Bank, 09/05/2023, [url](#)

⁵² DJELO BA, December 2020, [url](#)

⁵³ DJELO BA, December 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁴ DJELO BA, December 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁵ DJELO BA, December 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁶ This system makes it possible to deal with protection issues at different administrative levels and includes local and regional committees that work for the protection of children from forced marriage.

⁵⁷ DJELO BA, December 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁸ DJELO BA, December 2020, [url](#)

⁵⁹ Le Point, 08/01/2023, [url](#)

In 2011 the State implemented the National Gender Policy (*politique nationale du genre – PNG*), which was revised in 2018. This policy was adopted to combat gender disparities, particularly in "education, employment, the economy and decision-making bodies". A corporate social responsibility (CSR) component was also taken into account, particularly in employment within local communities.⁶⁰ This NGP is based on 5 strategic principles:

- Access to basic services: education – health (especially HIV) – water – hygiene and sanitation;
- Respect for human rights and the elimination of violence: fundamental rights – early childhood – GBV – HRD;
- Access to and control of resources coupled with a more equitable sharing of income: fight against poverty and respect for the environment;
- Improving governance and equitable access to decision-making bodies: institutions – media – strategies;
- Gender mainstreaming in the macroeconomic framework: national development policies and programmes – budgeting – development of inequality indicators (Africa Development and Gender Inequality Index – ADGII).

However, due to the level of corruption of state officials and the social pressure exerted by society, relatives and family in Guinea, women have very limited access to effective justice. In practice, the ability of State policies to coerce or influence in favour of improving the situation of women is badly impacted.⁶¹ Illiteracy, poverty and the interference of customs in the law also often hamper the legal proceedings undertaken by the few women who engage in a judicial process.⁶² Custom often ends up prevailing over the law.⁶³ The Guinean writer Tierno Monénembo reports that, in 2021, only 500 complaints of sexual assault were recorded, and that this figure seriously underestimates the problem.⁶⁴

3.2. Actions undertaken by civil society

Several initiatives and programmes supported by national and international NGOs have been put in place in Guinea to improve the situation of women, by addressing the economic, social and legal barriers that limit their emancipation.

A central aspect of the commitment to women's empowerment in Guinea is improving their access to financial services and entrepreneurship. The World Bank has stressed the importance of these initiatives, noting that development challenges include promoting gender equality and improving health and education outcomes for women and girls. Access to equitable economic opportunities is crucial for their empowerment.⁶⁵

For its part, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) launched a program called "Wakili" in 2023, aimed at strengthening the capacity of young people and women to help them become leaders and agents of change in their communities. The four-year, 3.5-million-dollar initiative aims to increase the participation of women and young people in peace mechanisms and decision-making bodies, while supporting socio-economic resilience at local level.⁶⁶ The international NGO *UN Women* has also been actively working in Guinea since 2009, implementing programs to eliminate violence against women, improve maternal health, and promote female entrepreneurship. *UN Women* is developing strategies against gender-based violence, as well as national gender policies, to integrate these perspectives into various policy sectors.⁶⁷

⁶⁰ Lawyers without Borders, 2019, [url](#)

⁶¹ Lawyers without Borders, 2019, [url](#)

⁶² *Hommes & Libertés*, March 2019, [url](#)

⁶³ *Le Point*, 08/01/2023, [url](#)

⁶⁴ *Le Point*, 08/01/2023, [url](#)

⁶⁵ World Bank, 09/05/2023, [url](#)

⁶⁶ USAID, 19/10/2023, [url](#)

⁶⁷ UN Women, 2024, [url](#)

In terms of reproductive health and rights, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has been involved in the provision of essential services and education programs that aim to improve women's reproductive health in Guinea, highlighting the need for equitable access to health care for women.⁶⁸ Since 2009, the NGO *Humanitaire pour la Protection de la Femme et de l'Enfant* (HPFE) has also been conducting numerous awareness campaigns to educate and mobilize women on their rights and on topics such as sexual and reproductive health.⁶⁹

According to H  l  ne Kokolou Zogb  l  mou, founder of HPFE, if a woman engages in the defence of human rights, her initiative is considered contrary to customary morality or as a serious interference in Guinean administrative affairs, a mechanism that makes the work of NGOs specializing in women's rights difficult. This observer believes that there are still some signs of improvement, and points out that "Guinean women sometimes take time to adhere to a process, but once they are made fully aware of the issues, they can become very strongly involved. Aware of their rights, they can lead the way in this fight against violence against women around the world."⁷⁰

⁶⁸ UN Women, 2024, [url](#)

⁶⁹ Hommes & Libert  s, March 2019, [url](#)

⁷⁰ Hommes & Libert  s, March 2019, [url](#)

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