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How Do Women in Niger Crush the Glass Ceiling?

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Patriarchal norms across West Africa curtail women's education and employment opportunities, with Niger standing as an extreme example. However, a small minority of Nigerien women succeed in accessing education and the formal economy. Based on in-depth research conducted between 2019 and 2024, this brief identifies three adaptive strategies - securing male support, balancing professional and domestic responsibilities, and achieving academic excellence - that enable women to navigate these structural barriers. It also highlights the limits of individual adaptation and suggest policy recommendations to support more inclusive access to education and formal employment.

INTRODUCTION

Across West Africa, entrenched patriarchal structures and socio-cultural norms continue to systematically exclude and marginalise women from education, economic participation, and decision-making. In Niger, these dynamics are particularly pronounced. The country records some of the world's lowest levels of girls' school enrolment, retention, and completion, alongside the highest rates of child marriage globally.[1] These intersecting demographic and socio-cultural factors severely restrict women's access to education and the formal labour market. Yet, in spite of such a structurally unfavourable context, a minority of Nigerien women defy the odds and succeed in accessing education and entering the formal workplace. This policy brief asks *how*?

It does so by analysing women's lived experiences and identifies the strategies they use to navigate male-dominated environments and gain access to the formal economy. It draws on an academic article by the authors on the same topic. Based on in-depth research conducted between 2019 and 2024 on gender relations in Niger, including life story interviews and focus groups with Nigerien women, it identifies three adaptive strategies: acquiring support from male relatives, balancing professional and personal lives, and achieving academic excellence. These strategies allow women to navigate and manage gendered structural barriers, yet paradoxically, they often do so without directly confronting the patriarchal structures, gendered norms and stereotypes that underpin their exclusion. This brief reflects on the implications of these strategies and puts forward policy recommendations for national and external actors interested in promoting and expanding girls' and women's access to education and formal employment in Niger, and beyond.

WOMEN'S ROLES AND PLACE IN WEST AFRICA AND NIGER

Across West Africa, women face persistent structural constraints despite diverse national contexts. These include gender discrimination, rigid divisions of labour, and limited access to education and social services, rooted in patriarchal systems that restrict women's participation in economic and professional life. Gender norms continue to associate women with unpaid care and domestic work, reinforcing their exclusion from formal employment and decision-making roles.

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In Niger, ranked third-to-last on the Gender Inequality Index,[2] these challenges are particularly acute, as traditional patriarchal structures and cultural practices continue to constrain, dominate and marginalise girls' and women's freedom of choice. High fertility rates, with 6.8 children per woman,[3] combined with widespread child marriage, 76 per cent of girls are married before turning 18 and 28 per cent before the age of 15,[4] restrict their access to education and participation in the formal economy. Consequently, low levels of access to education significantly narrow women's economic opportunities, making it more difficult for them to get formal employment. These patterns are often driven by poverty, traditional and religious norms, as well as practices that proscribe specific economic roles. As a result, women's labour force participation remains far below that of men, at 41.8 per cent, compared to 84.2 per cent for men, and they are heavily underrepresented in senior public-sector positions.[5]

Before the military coup in Niger in 2023, the government under President Bazoum had launched initiatives to advance the rights of both women and men, to reduce child marriage, and increase girls' access to education,[6] demonstrating a growing political will to change the status quo. However, since the suspension of the Constitution under the current military regime in power, there seems to be limited progress on these initiatives, weakening protection for human rights more broadly and gender equality specifically.

In our interviews with Nigerien women, many identified discrimination and stigmatisation as significant structural challenges in their professional roles, impeding their career progression, and mentioning experiences of exclusion from recruitment processes and career opportunities:

> "There were only two girls in the promotion, and when the recruiter came, he said to remove the girls' CVs from the selection, because he didn't want them."[7]

This sense of exclusion extends beyond formal processes; it was further reinforced by everyday practices of stereotyping and stigmatisation. Expectations from classmates, employers, and male colleagues often relegated women to traditional gender roles as wives and mothers. The interviewees further highlighted how gendered social norms and values such as assigning women's primary responsibility as caregiving, are normalised from an early age within households and family settings:

> "Inequality already begins within the family unit, between women and men. There's an imbalance right from the start, and as a result, we feel comfortable with discrimination and imbalance because we don't know any different."

While Niger represents an extreme case, these patterns reflect broader regional trends. Across the region, women are typically expected to balance domestic and family responsibilities alongside economic activity, often pushing them into informal or part-time employment with limited opportunities for advancement.[8] While regional, continental, and international frameworks have been adopted to promote gender equality, their implementation remains uneven. Against this backdrop, this policy brief asks: How do a small minority of women in Niger manage to crush the 'glass ceiling,'[9] and enter the formal workspace?

CRUSHING THE GLASS CEILING: THREE ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES

Women and girls in Niger whom we interviewed adopted various adaptive strategies to circumvent the factors restricting their access to education and the formal workplace. In discussions held during and after this research project, both in Niger and beyond, these strategies were echoed by other women as means to navigate gender inequality and progress in a male-dominated context. This suggests that the findings have broader relevance beyond the Nigerien case. These strategies include: acquiring support from male relative(s) and family, balancing professional and personal lives, and achieving academic excellence. All of this, while simultaneously embracing 'masculine norms'.

Acquiring male support

Support from family members and wider social networks, such as supportive teachers or supervisors, was mentioned by nearly all participants as important in facilitating their access to education, both primary and more advanced education. Within this network of support, fathers emerged as the most important figures. Fathers who supported their daughters' education were described as exceptional, often portrayed as diverging from traditional norms:

> "My father put a lot of emphasis on me, and education was important to him. He did everything he could to make sure that the children got an education. This was before gender discourses and all that, but he was already gendered."

Somewhat surprisingly, many women recalled facing resistance from their mothers when they wanted to pursue higher education, as this meant delaying marriage and motherhood, perceived as women's primary life objectives. Mothers' opposition was often linked to their own lived experiences - having had little or no formal education themselves, many did not see its value, especially within a context where marriage remained unavoidable.

> "My mom was more conservative than my dad; she wanted me to marry, but she had to bend to the will of my dad."

In this quote, the paradox of how this strategy is both constrained and facilitated by the same gendered hierarchies between men and women becomes clear. It is precisely the patriarchal authority of fathers that allowed their decisions to outweigh those of mothers, which ultimately enabled some women to pursue an education. Beyond fathers, other male figures, in some cases brothers or husbands, also played important roles in women's access to education and work. Their attitude and support (or lack thereof) towards women's ambitions determined their professional trajectories:

> "I had a rare chance with my husband; most men always have problems with successful women. My husband was very proud of me, and he was even pleased with my promotions."

Through these relationships, women navigated and partly contested traditional gender norms and roles by pursuing a higher education and formal employment, often delaying marriage and having children to a later stage than the average. Yet, they did so upon the approval of male figures, fathers and husbands. Rather than threatening the overall patriarchal structure that governs Nigerien society, their advancement was mediated through it. At the same time, the fact that these women were now ready to support their children, challenging the same narrow gender norms, also implied a gradual break with past structures and a step toward more tolerant gender roles. This notwithstanding, women who accessed senior or formal positions had to make sure that they led by example, perfectly balancing professional aspirations and personal responsibilities, as the second adaptive strategy illustrates.

Leading by example: balancing the professional and the personal

As primary caregivers and managers of household duties, women had to navigate male-dominated workplaces while meeting strict expectations of being a woman at home:

> "You have to be a good mother and a good woman to have the right to have a job, a career."

Such expectations were widely perceived as normalised and deeply entrenched. Women were expected to wake up early, manage household tasks, care for children, while at the same time succeeding professionally, while men were rarely held to comparable standards. Although participants recognised the unequal nature of this division of labour, it was often framed as inevitable—simply "the way things are." As one woman put it: "A man cleaning? No, that is a task that falls on the women."

Women's legitimacy as professionals was therefore conditional; women were expected to prove themselves first as wives and mothers before being accepted as workers or leaders. Negotiating these overlapping roles often came at a high personal cost. The interviewees reported criticism from husbands and extended family members, particularly mothers-in-law, who questioned their abilities as wives and mothers. Long working hours or work-related travel frequently triggered family tensions and social pressure:

> "They can say things. So, you have to provide the minimum for the family, you're not allowed to make any mistakes at home or at work, that way you're a complete woman, and they can't criticise you."

In addition to these pressures, structural barriers such as pay inequality and workplace harassment further contributed to discouraging women's professional advancement. Fear of losing their jobs or reputational damage often prevented them from reporting abuse or discrimination. In response to these challenges, many emphasised their collective responsibility to serve as role models. Professional success was seen not only as personal achievement but as a way to open doors for other women:

> "It wasn't going to help other women if I made a mistake. There are many women after me because I am an example of what can be done."

While this strategy was experienced as empowering, it also placed a heavy and unequal burden. Women were expected to be flawless and to justify their presence as representatives of women as a group, rather than as individuals. This pressure to do more and perform better than their male counterparts both challenged and, paradoxically, reinforced the gendered system they were navigating, a dynamic that was further reflected in the third adaptive strategy: the pursuit of excellence.

Striving for excellence

> "In a man's world, it's not enough to be excellent; you have to be the excellent of the excellent."

Across interviews, women repeatedly emphasised the importance of hard work and commitment, both in school and in the workplace, to navigate gendered challenges. Education was framed not only as a tool for individual advancement but also as a means of resisting patriarchy:

> "The men, here, they interpret the religious texts to their taste, but the more you learn about religion, the more you understand that there are very specific conditions, for example, for polygamy. That's why they don't want to give women access to education, because once they start to read and interpret things, the men will lose their power over women."

These women had integrated the need to meet standards far exceeding those expected of their male peers to reach senior positions in professional spaces:

> "If we, as women, don't master our subjects, men will use it to say that women don't know how to do anything."

Many women spoke of their academic journeys as paths of exceptional achievement, explaining how they represented a very small minority of girls or women in higher education. Narratives also referred to the importance of high grades, academic awards and competitive international scholarships. One participant, for example, held two masters from different countries, while another had completed seven years of specialisation in Europe. Others cited esteemed international experiences, including working on EU-funded projects or receiving scholarships from foreign universities. These international experiences and recognition were more than a symbolic stamp of approval; they gave them a sense of credibility and professional legitimacy in male-dominated environments. By drawing on these experiences, these women strategically positioned themselves as legitimate figures in their fields, advancing their standing in both the public and the private sphere at home.

This pursuit of academic excellence not only validated their capabilities but also demonstrated their ability to match, and often exceed, the work of their male counterparts in environments structured by masculine norms. Yet, to outperform their male peers or colleagues also implied risks of resentment or further exclusion, meaning that it was an almost impossible balance to strike between performing well enough to be accepted and respected, but not exceeding our outperforming male colleagues to avoid being perceived as threatening.

CONCLUSION

This policy brief has analysed how Nigerien women navigate deeply entrenched patriarchal structures to access education and employment within the formal economy. In doing so, it has illustrated the central role of women's individual agency in shaping their professional trajectories, but also the structural constraints that continue to limit their choices. Indeed, women's narratives consistently point to the need to be 'more than excellent' in a man's world, often requiring the adoption of masculine-coded norms and behaviours as the default standards of professional success. Only once they had secured higher-ranking positions, when their careers were no longer at risk, could they begin to 'deviate' and push back against these norms and assert themselves as more openly women.

While these adaptive strategies have enabled a small number of women to break into formal employment and senior positions, this does not mean that the broader system has become more inclusive. On the contrary, women's access to education and career opportunities remains contingent on male approval as well as on their ability to prioritise domestic responsibilities. Even as women challenge gender norms by occupying spaces historically closed to them, they simultaneously reproduce these very norms by conforming to the behaviours and values deemed acceptable within those spaces.

As such, sustainable progress towards gender equality cannot rely on individual adaptation alone. Crushing the glass ceiling in Niger requires policy interventions that address the structural conditions shaping women's opportunities. In particular, the findings of this brief point to three areas for action:

Invest in affordable and accessible childcare infrastructure: Enabling women's sustained participation in the formal labour market requires addressing the unequal burden of unpaid care work. The interviews show how women's professional legitimacy in Niger remains conditional on their ability to fulfil domestic responsibilities. Investing in affordable, accessible childcare services would significantly reduce this burden and allow women to enter and remain in formal employment without constant risk of social pressure, stigma, or sanction.

Educate men and boys about gender equality: The findings underscore the importance of male approval for women's educational and professional advancement. This highlights the need to move beyond policies that focus exclusively on improving women's capacity and instead actively engage men and boys in promoting gender equality. Educational programmes should emphasise shared responsibility, women's rights, and the social and economic benefits of women's education and workforce participation. Such approaches could help dismantle restrictive gender norms, reduce resistance to women's professional ambitions, and create space for women.

Expand international education and mobility opportunities for girls and women: This research also highlights the importance of international educational opportunities in enhancing women's legitimacy and professional credibility within their home country. Scholarships, stipends, exchange programmes, and study-abroad opportunities often serve to elevate women's social and professional standing, reinforcing their authority and recognition in contexts where their competence is otherwise questioned. From both practical and policy perspectives, governments, donors, educational institutions, and employers, both within and beyond the African continent, have a role to play in expanding and sustaining such opportunities. Supporting international academic and professional mobility can help

level the playing field and improve women's access to formal employment and leadership positions.

Taken together, these recommendations point to a broader conclusion: while Nigerien women demonstrate remarkable agency, sustained progress towards gender equality cannot rest on individual adaptation alone. Without parallel efforts to address care responsibilities, engage men and boys, and expand equitable access to education and professional opportunities, women's advancement will continue to depend on exceptionalism or conformity to exclusionary norms.

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Endnotes

1 Girls' school enrolment, retention and school completion rates are among the lowest globally: in rural areas, fewer than 20 per cent of girls complete primary education, while the female illiteracy rate stands at 61.89 per cent. These figures can be partly explained by Niger's high number of child marriages, with 76 per cent of girls married under 18 years old, again setting a global record. See UNICEF. (2023). Child marriage (dataset). Available at: http://data.uis.unesco.org; UNESCO (2021) Education (dataset). Available at: http://data.uis.unesco.org.

2 UNDP (2022) Human development report. Available at: https://hdr.undp.org/content/human-development-report-2021-22.

3 UNESCO (2021) Demographic indicators (dataset). Available at: http://data.uis.unesco.org.

4 Girls Not Brides (2025) Education is key: ending child marriage in the Sahel. Available at: http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/899/Child-marriage-in-the-Sahel.pdf.

5 World Bank (2022) Female labour force participation (dataset). Available at: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator; World Bank (2022) Male labour force participation (dataset). Available at: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator.

6 Through a campaign sensitising traditional chiefs and by building state-financed boarding schools for young girls. Controversially, he also condemned polygamy and urged his ministers not to take a second wife (see also All Africa (2022) Niger: no polygamy in My Gov't - president. 15 June. Available at: https://allafrica.com/stories/202206160312.html; France 24 (2022) Niger: l'éducation des filles, un chantier prioritaire de longue haleine. 11 May. (available at: http://www.france24.com/fr/afrique/20220511-niger-l-%C3%A9ducation-des-filles-un-chantier-prioritaire-de-longue-haleine). Legal frameworks supporting gender equality include Niger's Politique nationale de genre (revised 2017), supplemented by National Action Plans (2016-2019; 2020-2024), the Economic and Social Development Plan (2017–2021), and the Sustainable Development and Inclusive Growth Strategy for 2035 (2017). Legislation such as Law 2000-008, which introduced gender quotas for elective positions, has further contributed to measurable gains, raising female parliamentary representation from 1.2 per cent in 1999 to 30.7 per cent in 2023. However, the country's ratification and implementation record is uneven (see also Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023) Women in politics: 2023. Available at: http://www.ipu.org). For example, Niger has not ratified the 2005 Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa, and it lacks nearly half of the gender-specific indicators needed to monitor SDGs.

7 All quotes are from interviews with Nigerien women in high-ranking positions, conducted between 2021 and 2024 in Niamey, Niger.

8 OECD Development Centre (2017) Gender equality in west Africa. Available at: http://www.oecd.org.

9 The metaphor of the 'glass ceiling' describes the invisible obstacles women face and explains their underrepresentation in senior or formal positions (seel also Grangeiro, R., Silva, L. and Esnard, C. (2021) "I broke the glass ceiling, now what? Overview of metaphors to explain gender inequality in organizations". International Journal of Organizational Analysis, 30(6), 1523-1532).

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