



Child Marriage, Gender Inequality and Young Girl's Agency in Niger

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Abstract

This thesis will focus on the pervasive issue of child marriage, which continues to affect numerous regions globally, presenting significant obstacles to the well-being and rights of countless children, especially that of young girls. To deepen the research, I have chosen Niger as a case study due to its alarming prevalence of child marriages. Estimated as one of the world's poorest countries, Niger struggles with the prevalence of child marriages, which is a complex phenomenon linked with gender inequality. Despite ongoing efforts to combat this issue, the occurrence of child marriages in Niger remains disturbingly high, with a profound impact on the agency, health, education, and socio-economic prospects of young girls. The primary goal of my thesis is to analyze and explain how young girls' agency is affected. At the same time I will delve deeper into the factors that contribute to the rise of child marriages and gender inequality in Niger and also the consequences of this practice, specifically education and health. I will conduct a secondary data analysis, integrating secondary interviews in the discussion/analysis section. I will utilize both the Feminist Theory to explain gender inequality and the Capability Approach Theory to explore how the agency of young girls is affected.

Key Words: Child marriage, agency, gender inequality, health risks, education, Niger

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Abstract.....	1
1. Introduction.....	3
1.1 Research Problem.....	4
1.2 Aim and Research Question.....	4
1.3 Relevance to Human Rights.....	5
1.4 Delimitation.....	6
1.5 Chapter Outline.....	6
2. Literature Review.....	7
2.1 Action Against Child Marriage.....	7
2.2 Drivers of Child Marriage.....	7
2.3 The Consequences of Child Marriage.....	9
3. Theory.....	11
3.1 Feminist Theory.....	11
3.2 Radical Feminism and Patriarchy.....	12
3.3 Patriarchy and Agency.....	13
3.4 The Capability Approach Theory.....	14
3.5 Martha Nussbaum's Capability Approach.....	14
3.6 Operationalization of Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities.....	16
4. Method/Material.....	17
4.1 Research Approach.....	17
4.2 Material Collection.....	17
4.3 Case Study.....	18
4.4 Research Limitations.....	19
5. Discussion/ Analysis.....	19
5.1 Child Marriage in Niger.....	19
5.2 The role of religion in perpetuating child marriage.....	21
5.3 What is the government of Niger doing to end child marriages?..	22
5.4 Gender Inequality in Niger.....	24
5.5 Agency, Health and Education in Niger.....	26
5.6 Secondary Interviews.....	31
6. Conclusion.....	34

1. Introduction

Child marriage is a harmful practice entrenched in centuries-old traditions and perpetuated by factors such as gender inequality, poverty, social norms etc., and serves as a testament showing the vulnerabilities and challenges that millions of girls face everyday. The practice of child marriage is defined as “any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child” (Unicef 2023). Approximately 650 million women and girls have experienced marriage before reaching the age of 18. The consequences of this practice are harmful, deeply affecting the girls who get married each year (UNFPA 2024, p. 29). Child marriage happens among both young boys and girls, however child marriage among boys is just one sixth of that of girls (Unicef 2023). Consequently, girls are disproportionately affected by child marriage’s unfortunate consequences. Having to experience child marriage, young girls suffer a great deal of challenges, where their lives are completely altered having to abruptly transition from childhood to motherhood. Their agency and decision-making is hindered, robbing them of their childhood and anticipated future. There is visible evidence of gender inequality, where existing systematic and patriarchal norms that are deeply embedded within our societies, affect girl’s rights and their autonomy. It is important to understand how valuable one’s agency and decision-making is and how deeply it affects the process of making the best decisions about oneself. In the context of child marriage, young girls’s voice is not being heard, diminishing the process of decision-making and having their lives being completely directed by other people. The practice of child marriage does not only affect their agency, but also their health, education and overall development. Getting married at a young age, child brides struggle with many challenges. Due to being married young and engaging prematurely in sexual intimacy they are at risk to have early pregnancies and complications during childbirth. To add on, they are more likely to acquire HIV and experience domestic violence and exploitation (Girls Not Brides 2024). Being forced into premature roles as wives and then as mothers, they confront the harsh realities of adulthood before they are emotionally, physically, or psychologically prepared for it. Moreover, the cycle of poverty and gender inequality is continued through child marriage, as girls who marry early are more likely to experience economic hardship and transmit this

cycle to the following generations (Girls Not Brides 2024). Realizing the harmful effects this phenomenon causes, there is an urgent need in addressing child marriage which demands a multifaceted approach that strengthens legal and social protections against early marriage, and also the need to tackle the root causes of gender inequality, which will help empower girls and their agency, will help them to pursue and complete their education, and to lower the health risks that come with early childbearing.

1.1 Research Problem

Despite significant efforts by governmental organizations and NGOs to tackle child marriage and promote the rights of girls globally, the prevalence of child marriages in Niger remains high. In Niger, a total of 5 million girls have gotten married at an early age. Out of 5 million, 1.9 million girls got married before the age of 15 (UNFPA-UNICEF 2021). While existing research has identified poverty and societal norms as key drivers of child marriage, there is a notable gap in understanding the specific impact that child marriage has on the agency of young girls in Niger, which will be the main focus of this thesis. Limited research has explored how child marriage perpetuates gender inequality and thus affects the agency, decision-making, and well-being of young girls in Niger. Therefore, the research problem addressed in this thesis is to analyze and explain how child marriage affects the agency of young girls in Niger, following also an analysis on how the increase of gender inequality is hindering their health and education. By filling this gap in the literature, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of child marriage in Niger and inform more effective interventions to address this serious human rights issue in the future.

1.2 Aim and Research Question

After identifying the research problem, the aim of this thesis is to delve deeper into and present the complexities surrounding child marriage in Niger, with a particular focus on its

impact on the agency of young girls. By conducting a secondary data analysis, this study aims to clarify how child marriage affects young girls agency and decision-making, while also looking at how child marriage perpetuates gender inequality in Niger impacting young girls health and education.

Research question:

How is young girl's agency affected by the practice of child marriage in Niger?

1.3 Relevance to Human Rights

Child marriage constitutes various violations of fundamental human rights that affect children on multiple levels. Namely, rights such as: the right to education, right to health, right to autonomy and self-determination, reproductive rights, the right to consensual marriage etc. (Human Rights Watch 2013), are all violated by the harmful practice of child marriage. Firstly, child marriage robs young girls of their right to autonomy and self-determination. By having minors participate in early marriage, which often happens against their will, child marriage denies children the freedom to make choices about their lives, relationships, and futures. Secondly, young married girls frequently withdraw from school, thus, they are denied the opportunity to pursue education. This not only deprives them of essential knowledge and skills that would help them in the future but also increases gender inequality, hindering their ability to participate fully in society and achieve their full potential. Additionally, child marriage intersects with other human rights issues, including women's rights and children's rights. It perpetuates harmful gender norms and attitudes, reinforcing unequal power dynamics between men and women. Furthermore, child marriage deeply affects young girl's health, as young brides face increased risks of complications during pregnancy and childbirth, increased vulnerability to sexually transmitted diseases and reproductive health problems, as well as being deprived educationally, where they have no other choice but to stop attending school due to other responsibilities as wives and mothers.

1.4 Delimitation

As already mentioned this thesis will focus on young girl's agency, followed by an analysis on the consequences of child marriage, with Niger serving as a case study. However, certain limitations come with selecting Niger as the case study. While a body of literature and previous research exists on child marriage globally, country-specific data and literature on Niger is limited. Thus, the findings of this research should be interpreted within its limitations. Moreover, while multiple perspectives exist in examining the occurrence of child marriage, such as economic and legal perspectives, this research will primarily focus on a socio-cultural perspective. This decision was made in acknowledging the complex socio-cultural dynamics surrounding child marriage in Niger and the significance of these factors in shaping gender norms and young girls' agency. As a result, this study will focus on prioritizing the exploration of socio-cultural factors and their connection with gender norms and inequalities, while acknowledging the limitations of available data and the exclusion of other perspectives.

1.5 Chapter Outline

This thesis is structured into six chapters to comprehensively address the complex issues surrounding child marriage, gender inequality, and young girls' agency in Niger. Chapter 1 serves as the introduction, providing the research topic and problem, research aim, and research question. Chapter 2 includes a review of existing literature on child marriage, drivers of child marriage such as poverty and social norms, and consequences of child marriage such as health and education. Chapter 3 includes two theories, the Capability Approach and Feminist Theory, which will be utilized to explain child marriage, gender inequality and young girls' agency. Chapter 4 will include the methodology that is employed, explaining the research approach, material collection, the case study, the integrations of secondary interviews and research limitations. Chapter 5 will present the analysis of research findings, followed by Chapter 6, which will provide a conclusion

summarizing key findings, discussing their significance, and offering policy recommendations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Action Against Child Marriage

Governmental organisations like UN and various NGOs like Girls Not Brides, Save The Children & Human Rights Watch are dedicated to combat child marriage and promote the rights of girls globally. Their focus is to raise awareness and advocate for policy change regarding this issue. Additionally, numerous campaigns have been launched to address child marriage globally, such as: UNICEF's #ENDChildMarriage Campaign to raise awareness about the impact of child marriage and mobilize support for ending the practice, "Too Young to Wed" Campaign launched by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to raise awareness about the human rights violations of child marriage and to also advocate for policy change. However, the progress to stop child marriage has not been evenly distributed across countries (Save The Children 2021, p. 2). Rates of child marriage have decreased in South and East Asia the last 20 years. Meanwhile, in West and Central Africa child marriage rates have remained unchanged (Save The Children 2021, p. 2). Covid-19 has also affected the progress, slowing down the UN SDG target to end child marriage by 2030.

2.2 Drivers of Child Marriage

Poverty has been studied as the main driver of child marriage by other researchers. The growing population is causing financial hardships for many families. Due to such hardships, child marriage is seen as a strategy for survival to reduce their financial burden. Numerous studies identify the link between child marriage and poverty. According to Psaki

et al., there is a connection between poverty and child marriage, making financial difficulty play a big role in the prevalence of child marriage (Psaki et.al 2021, p. 14). Other scholars come to the same conclusion on how child marriage is a survival method for financially struggling families. According to Crane et.al, families acquire dowries through marriage and they are used to pay off family debts. Furthermore, Crane et.al state that child marriage is a result of poverty, but it also feeds poverty through early pregnancies that leave low-income families unable to support their children (Crane et.al., 2020, p. 5). Another researcher, Deane, draws attention to the severe economic circumstances in Niger, revealing that the majority of people live on less than two dollars a day (Deane 2021, p. 7). The concerning poverty rate in Niger demonstrates how child marriage both causes and perpetuates poverty. Families that are facing desperate situations are forced to marry off their girls at a young age because they see it as a way to get instant financial relief. However, by doing so families keep this cycle of poverty going due to this short-term solution, which has long-term effects. These young girls are unable to escape the cycle of poverty because they are not given access to economic and educational opportunities, due to existing gender norms. Families need to make choices that do not involve sacrificing their daughters' futures for immediate financial relief. However, this is easier said than done. This issue calls for governmental and societal interventions, where the economic conditions need to be improved and gender roles and societal norms need to be changed.

Another driver that has been researched by different scholars, is social norms and expectations. In Niger, traditional gender roles are deeply ingrained. The community views girls and women as inferior to men. According to them women should be pure and obedient. They encourage their daughters to get married early in order to avoid possible shame. Psaki et.al, reveal that child marriage is encouraged as a way to preserve ideals of virginity and purity since existing social norms are deeply ingrained in cultural and religious beliefs (Psaki et.al., 2021, p. 15). It is why many parents view child marriage as a defense against risks to their daughters' and their family's honor, such as unwed pregnancies, sexual abuse and premarital sex. According to Saul et al., marriage is seen by many parents as a time of honor and fulfillment. For example, a mother in Maradi expressed that she thought early marriage was a gift from Allah and that it should be commended (Saul et.al., 2020, p. 275). Saul et al., point out that girls who refuse early

marriage are subjected to harsh criticism and rumors from the community they live in, which paints them as being disrespectful and ungrateful to their parents. Waiting past the traditional age to get married can have negative effects for struggling families, making girls less appealing as wives (Saul et.al., 2020, p. 275). Lastly, Bucchieri et al., address how attitudes about chastity in our society influences parents' decision on the timing of their daughters' marriage. Other parents are influenced to make the same decisions and follow accepted standards and expectations set by fellow parents of their community. Thus, this cycle of social norms and expectations preserves the practice of child marriage.

2.3 The Consequences of Child Marriage

Child marriage has a negative impact on young girls' health and wellbeing, posing a number of serious health concerns. Many scholars have explored the negative impact that child marriage has on young girls. According to Efevbera et al., women in sub-Saharan Africa who marry before the age of eighteen are more likely to give birth early (Efevbera et.al 2017, p. 100). Early birth puts young girls at risk of stillbirth and neonatal death. According to Crane et al., girls who marry young run the risk of serious health problems since their bodies are immature and may not be ready for childbearing and childbirth. Pregnancy and childbirth are the primary causes of death for girls between the ages of 15 and 19 (Crane et.al., 2020, pp. 6-7). The transition from childhood to marriage and motherhood is emotionally draining for young girls, who must adapt to new responsibilities. Child marriage increases vulnerability to mental health issues like depression and suicide thoughts. According to John et al., there is a strong correlation between young marriage and poor psychological health in Ethiopia and Niger (John et.al., 2019, p. 5). Lastly, another harmful health risk that is widespread from the practice of child marriage is the risk of sexually transmitted diseases (STIs). Contrary to popular assumption, child marriage poses a greater risk of sexually transmitted illnesses (STIs), such as HIV and HPV, according to Nour (Nour 2006, p. 1645). Girls between the ages of 15 and 19 have a 2.8–3.8 times higher risk of HIV infection than boys in sub-Saharan Africa (Nour 2006, p. 1645).

119 million girls worldwide do not attend school, comprising 34 million elementary school age students, 28 million lower secondary school students, and 58 million upper secondary school students (Unicef 2024). Various scholars have examined how education of young girls is affected by early marriage. According to Deane, girls with little or no formal education are up to six times more likely to marry young than those with a higher degree (Deane 2021, p. 9). McCleary-Sills et al., also reveal in their research that there is a significant link between educational attainment and child marriage, emphasizing that prevention of child marriage can result in secondary school completion rates (McCleary-Sills et al., 2015, pp. 73-75). Lastly, according to Bremer's research, leaving school not only limits options for young girls, but it also has life-changing effects, such as having to move to the husband's home after marriage to start a new household. Once married, the demands of marital responsibilities make it practically impossible for girls to complete their education. Staying in school, on the other hand, has been identified as the most effective measure of delaying early marriage. Bremer adds to McCleary-Sills et al.'s results, supporting the statement that "education is not only a human right, but also a powerful tool for women's empowerment and a strategic development investment" (McCleary-Sills et al., 2015 in Bremer, 2018, p. 67).

Ultimately, child marriage has a deep impact on young girls agency. McCleary-Sills et al. reveal in their research that child marriage impacts the loss of agency in numerous aspects. Initially, it violates individuals' fundamental right to provide "free and full consent" to marriage at the appropriate age, as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (McCleary-Sills et.al 2015, p. 71). Furthermore, Tomar et al. reveal that previous studies have found links between early marriage and women's agency. Women who marry early have little participation in decisions about their own reproductive health and are usually excluded from making major decisions (Tomar et.al, 2021, p. 75).

Despite previous research on child marriage, there is limited research on how child marriage impacts the agency of young girls in Niger. Taking into consideration the high rates of child marriage in Niger and how 28% of girls out of 76% get married before the age of 15, the agency of young girls needs to be thoroughly examined. I aim to contribute to this research gap by exploring how child marriage impacts young girls' agency and their decision-making.

3. Theory

In understanding the pervasive issue of child marriage and its connection with gender inequality and agency in Niger, i will utilize two theoretical frameworks: Feminist Theory and the Capability Approach Theory. These two frameworks provide important insights into the complex interplay of factors shaping the experiences of young girls involved in child marriage, serving as a lens through which will help to unpack the structural inequalities that perpetuate this phenomenon.

3.1 Feminist Theory

Through a critical lens, feminist theory addresses the systemic injustices and power dynamics that support gender-based discrimination. Feminist theory will be utilized to shed light on the factors behind this harmful practice and its consequences. Feminism emerges as a force that directly confronts sexist oppression, fighting for the freedom of all people from systems of discrimination (hooks 2000, p. 26). Essentially, its goal is to eliminate the systemic injustices that are deeply rooted in our society, rather than to promote a group above others. The harmful effects of discrimination and oppression against women highlight how urgent it is to take action and combat sexist dominance. Children are taught to internalize and perpetuate forms of oppression within the family unit, which reveals the existing hierarchical dynamics between men and women. Thus, there is a never-ending cycle that reinforces male dominance (hooks 2000,p. 36). Furthermore, sexism is reinforced by both individual behaviors and institutional structures. On the one hand, women might unintentionally prolong their own oppression through internalized beliefs and behaviors, while those in positions of dominance uphold and reinforce the existing power structures (hooks 2000, p. 43).

3.2 Radical Feminism and Patriarchy

Radical feminism reveals that institutions and societal norms are intrinsically linked to men's dominance of women (Lewis 2020, n.p). Radical feminism has its roots in the idea that patriarchy systematically oppressed women while favoring men and various political and religious institutions and organizations play a role in maintaining this oppression (Lewis 2020, n.p). For example, traditional marriage is seen by radical feminism as a patriarchal institution that treats women as men's property, constraining their autonomy (Evans 2024, n.p). Furthermore, radical feminists argue that existing laws are restricting women's agency and autonomy. Contraception and abortion are examples of how patriarchal institutions use control over women's bodies (Evans 2024, n.p). In addition, these patriarchal systems take the form of child marriage, which subjects young girls to systematic control and exploitation (Lewis 2020, n.p).

In Niger, patriarchy is deeply embedded in society, perpetuating gender inequality and restricting women's rights. Early marriage is a key mechanism through which patriarchal control is maintained, as it transfers a father's authority over his daughter to an often older male within the community (Walker 2012, p. 233). This practice not only reinforces the family's social status but also solidifies economic ties. Both religious teachings and longstanding cultural traditions are frequently used to justify early marriage. In traditional societies like Niger, where the social structure is predominantly male-dominated, religious and customary practices often converge to support the idea that girls should be married off before reaching puberty (Walker 2012, p. 233). This is particularly evident in regions where religion plays a central role in daily life, such as in Niger, where Islamic teachings are often intertwined with cultural practices to uphold early marriage as a normal norm. According to Walker, "the more traditional the society, the greater the likelihood that religious tenets will be used to justifying early marriage" (Walker 2012, p. 234). Consequently, women and girls are accorded low social status, perpetuating a cycle of gender inequality that is difficult to break.

3.3 Patriarchy and Agency

Meyers presents an engaging analysis of how patriarchal oppression impacts women's agency and self-determination. She contends that in patriarchal cultures, women's identities are strongly gendered, severely limiting their ability to function as autonomous, self-determining individuals (Meyers 2002, p. 5). Meyers defines self-determination as a process that requires the use of autonomous skills. These skills enable individuals to be responsible for their own decisions, allowing them to take control of their lives. However, in patriarchal civilizations, individuals might not get the opportunity to showcase these skills. Living in these patriarchal civilizations, women might not get the opportunity to exercise their agency. Furthermore, in traditional societies and families with traditional gender norms, the society's values are guided by cultural factors, which makes it even more difficult for women to break away from these traditional, constraining gender roles. Societal and familial reinforcement of gender norms emphasize how patriarchy impacts women's ability to acquire and exercise agency (Meyers, p. 27).

In the context of feminist theory, agency cannot be separated from the dynamics of power, as power relations fundamentally shape the extent to which women can act as autonomous social actors. Throughout history, women have been systematically denied the opportunity to exercise their agency due to patriarchal structures that prioritize male authority and control (Disch & Hawkesworth 2016, p. 39). Feminist scholars have emphasized the importance of examining power and emancipation as central themes in understanding women's agency. The struggle for agency is not just about individual empowerment but is also about challenging and transforming the societal structures that restrict women's autonomy. In recent decades, new forms of "empowered" agency have emerged for women, particularly in the context of globalization. However, this empowerment is often accompanied by new forms of social precariousness. Angela McRobbie's concept of "double entanglement" captures this paradox, where globalizing forces create opportunities for women to become individualized subjects and agents of change, while simultaneously reinforcing existing gender hierarchies (Disch & Hawkesworth 2016, p. 57). This feminized workforce, although indicative of progress in some respects, often leaves women vulnerable to exploitation and inequality.

3. 4 The Capability Approach Theory

When discussing the Capability Approach Theory two prominent philosophers come to mind, Amartya Sen's Approach and Martha Nussbaum's Approach. Amartya Sen defines agency as "what a person can do in line with his or her conception of the good" (Sen 1985, in Alkire 2008 p, 458). People with high levels of agency engage in activities that are their ideals. When people lack agency, they may be alienated from their actions, coerced into a situation, subservient and eager to please, or just passive (Alkire 2008, p. 458). In the context of child marriage, young girls' abilities include education, health, autonomy, psychosocial well-being, agency, and economic empowerment. These linked abilities have far-reaching implications for females' access to social networks, as well as important services such as quality healthcare and contraception. Furthermore, prevalent social standards frequently limit individual agency, coercing and restricting girls' choices in life. Interventions that acknowledge and challenge these structural 'unfreedoms' can better empower young girls and reduce the negative effects of child marriage on their lives (Jones et al., 2020, p. 299).

However, despite the strong theoretical framework, Sen lacks a clear picture of human agency. Action is often seen as a choice with a purpose in mind. The term 'agency achievement' refers to achieving goals, but does not explicitly define what humans do when acting, which may or may not involve setting and pursuing goals (Gasper 1998 , p. 290-291). On the other hand philosopher Martha Nussbaum takes from Sen's capability framework and adds her approach. Nussbaum considers that capability implies a power or a skill, which entails the action that a person can make to attain their goals. Thus, i will turn to Nussbaum Capability Approach to analyze how child marriage affects young girl's health, education, and most importantly, their agency.

3. 5 Martha Nussbaum's Capability Approach

Martha Nussbaum's Capability Approach is a significant contribution to the discourse on human development and social justice. Rooted in the Marxian and Aristotelian tradition of "truly human functioning," Nussbaum's approach offers a robust defense of universalism by emphasizing the intrinsic value of certain human capabilities (Vasbist 2010, p. 230). Nussbaum identifies 10 key characteristics that she believes are necessary for a dignified human life. These capabilities include life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, other species, play, and control over one's environment (Nussbaum 2003 , p, 40-41). According to her, these capabilities are not only instrumental to achieve other pursuits but they hold value in shaping individuals as fully human. This perspective challenges the traditional economic perspectives that often prioritize wealth and resources as the primary indicators of human well-being, but instead advocates for a focus on what individuals are actually able to do and be in our society. Nussbaum attributes the widespread acceptance of the capabilities approach to two key reasons. Firstly, her approach emphasizes capabilities, or opportunities for functioning, rather than actual functions. This difference between the two is crucial because it respects individual autonomy, allowing people to choose what they value and wish to pursue. Rather than prescribing specific outcomes, the capabilities approach emphasizes the importance of necessary opportunities to achieve what they view valuable in life. For example, the difference between a fasting man and a starving man illustrates the distinction between capabilities and functionings. While objectively both may appear to be without food, the fasting man has chosen not to eat despite having access to food, whereas the starving man has no such choice (Vasbist 2010, p. 236). The capabilities approach recognizes this distinction and its aim is to provide everyone with the resources needed to make such choices, leaving the ultimate decision to the individual. Second, Nussbaum's list of central human capabilities is not a rigid set of rules but is "open-ended and humble," allowing for contestation and modification according to different societal contexts (Vasbist 2010, p. 234). Nussbaum recognizes that while the list is universally relevant, the manner in which it is interpreted can vary significantly across different cultures and societies. This flexibility accommodates the "reasonable pluralism in specification," recognizing that different societies may prioritize or interpret these capabilities differently based on their unique circumstances and beliefs. This flexibility

makes the capabilities approach particularly valuable in diverse and multicultural societies. Furthermore, Nussbaum includes in her list "natural goods," an example is emotional health of women, which is influenced by factors beyond human control, and capabilities that governments can directly support. However, while governments may not be able to guarantee this emotional health, what they can do is adapt a "social basis" that supports these capabilities through appropriate policies in areas like family law, rape law, public employment, and safety (Vasbist 2010, p. 235). This approach highlights the importance of creating a supportive environment where individuals have real opportunities to pursue the lives they value, rather than being constrained by circumstances beyond their control. Ultimately, Nussbaum's capability approach is about providing individuals with the real opportunities to do and be what they value, without dictating what they should actually do or become. This emphasis on freedom of choice and respect for individual autonomy is central to the approach, making it a powerful framework for thinking about human development and social justice. Thus Nussbaum's approach provides a thorough and normative foundation for evaluating and addressing issues of gender inequality, health, education, and most importantly agency, making it an key tool for examining the impact of child marriage on young girls in Niger.

3.6 Operationalization of Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities

To examine the impact of child marriage on girls in Niger, I will operationalize Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach. Martha Nussbaum's Capability Approach offers a valuable framework to assess individuals' freedoms to pursue the lives they value, focusing on essential human capabilities. This thesis will focus on three important capabilities. Namely, practical reason (agency), bodily health (health risks), and senses, imagination, and thought (education).

As I will elaborate further, practical reason explains the capacity for decision-making, which is critical in understanding how young girls navigate life choices despite societal pressures like early marriage in Niger. Bodily health explains the physical well-being of young girls that get married early, risks such as early pregnancies and inadequate healthcare. The capability of senses, imagination, and thought will explain education and

the impact that has in the overall development, growth and decision-making skills, which in the case of child marriage, often gets disrupted. The analysis of these three capabilities will form the analytical framework for exploring how child marriage impacts agency in Niger, health outcomes that young girls face, and how education is affected. Additionally, secondary interviews will serve as illustrative narratives, providing the perspectives that highlight the lived experiences of young girls in Niger and the role of these capabilities.

4. Method/Material

4.1 Research Approach

This study takes a qualitative research approach to investigate the socio-cultural processes of child marriage, gender inequality, and young girls' agency in Niger. Qualitative approaches are used to study existing secondary sources and literature, allowing for a thorough examination of the topic within its sociocultural context.

Qualitative research delves deeply into human experiences by asking open-ended questions such as "how" and "why." It is different from quantitative research because of the exploratory nature of its investigations. One significant advantage is that it aids us in understanding complex human behaviors and authentic experiences that are difficult to quantify. Instead of just statistics, this technique is especially useful for capturing the complexities of phenomena such as attitudes, behaviors, and experiences (Tenny et al., 2022, np).

4.2 Material Collection

The primary data for this study consists of secondary sources, secondary interviews, academic articles, reports, policy documents, and other relevant literature on child marriage, gender inequality, and young girls' agency in Niger. These secondary sources

were accessed through academic databases, institutional repositories, and organizational websites.

Secondary data analysis involves using data collected by others for different purposes. Researchers examine this data to answer their own questions, even though they didn't gather it themselves (Crossman 2019, np). The advantages of conducting a secondary data analysis is that it provides an extensive amount of information because government agencies frequently perform huge national studies that individual researchers cannot handle. Many of these data sets include various time periods, allowing researchers to observe trends throughout time. Furthermore, the data collection process is typically carried out professionally, ensuring a high degree of knowledge (Crossman 2019, np). On the other hand, the disadvantages of conducting a secondary data analysis is that researchers have no control over the data's substance because they did not collect it themselves.

4.3 Case Study

A case study is a research strategy for gaining a thorough grasp of a difficult subject in its real-world setting. It is widely utilized in the social sciences and can be approached from a number of perspectives, including critical, interpretivist, and positivist.

Case studies are very beneficial due to the fact that they provide a thorough examination of the complexities and distinctive features of the phenomenon under study. It is advantageous especially because an author can apply multiple aspects and perspectives, including historical, cultural, social, legal and psychological factors that impact the issue. Additionally, they provide important viewpoints on how theoretical concepts are applied in real-world contexts, highlighting the interaction between theory and practice in specific situations. While case studies have been criticized for a lack of scientific rigor and low generalizability, these difficulties can be addressed using techniques such as theoretical sampling, respondent validation, and preserving transparency throughout the study process. Despite its limitations, the case study approach can provide useful insights into specific phenomena (Crowe et al., 2011, pp. 4-7).

Niger was chosen as the case study for this study for a variety of compelling reasons, all of which highlight its importance in terms of child marriage. Firstly, Niger has one of the highest rates of child marriage globally, with 76% of girls married before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2020). This alarming statistic makes Niger an important illustrative country for understanding the dynamics and consequences of child marriage. Secondly, the socio-economic conditions in Niger provide an important example for examining the intersection of poverty and child marriage. With over half of the population living on less than two dollars a day (Deane 2021, p. 7), Niger exemplifies how economic hardship drives families to resort to child marriage as a survival strategy. This situation allows for a comprehensive analysis of how economic deprivation perpetuates the cycle of child marriage and its associated impacts. Lastly, Niger's cultural context offers a unique lens through which to explore the social norms and practices that continue to sustain child marriage. The emphasis on maintaining girls' chastity and the strict adherence to traditional gender roles within this cultural framework draw attention to the intricate interactions between social, cultural, and economic variables that sustain child marriage. To summarize, Niger presents a relevant and instructive case study for analyzing the complex problem of child marriage due to its high rate of child marriage combined with its socioeconomic difficulties, cultural norms, and demographic traits.

4.4 Research Limitations

While secondary sources offer valuable insights into the socio-cultural dynamics of child marriage in Niger, they may be subject to biases, limitations, and gaps. Additionally, the interpretation of existing literature is influenced by the perspectives and assumptions of the original authors, which may impact the findings of this study.

5. Discussion/ Analysis

5.1 Child Marriage in Niger

As mentioned before, child marriage rates are disturbingly high in the state of Niger. Approximately 76 % of young girls get married before the age of 18 and 28% of them get married before the age of 15. On the other hand, young boys also do get married before the age of 18, however, only 6 % get married at a young age. There is a visible difference between getting married early for girls and boys (Girls Not Brides 2024). In a study conducted by Spindler et.al., in the region of Dosso, most young brides were married at an average age of 14. Meanwhile, the average age of their husbands was minimum 15 and maximum 53 (Spindler et.al., 2019, p. 32). In Niger, child marriage is reported to be more prevalent in the region of Maradi, where approximately 89 % of women aged 20-24 years old were already married before the age of 18 (Girls Not Brides 2024).

Child marriage is mostly driven by gender inequality and the existing gender roles and the belief that women are inferior to men. Other drivers that aggravate child marriage in Niger are poverty, gender norms, violence against women and girls, religion, cultural beliefs etc. Firstly, Niger is among the world's poorest nations. With a population of nearly 22 million the poverty rate is 44.1% (USAID 2021). Food scarcity, a harsh natural environment, and recurring droughts leave some families with no other choice but to marry off their daughters to wealthier men in order to survive and better their economic and social position (ibid). Due to these circumstances, families utilize child marriage to settle their debts. Despite this, child marriage is common even among the wealthy households (51%), indicating that, while household wealth is a contributing factor, it is not the entire cause of Niger's high child marriage rates (Girls Not Brides 2024). In Niger, it is perceived that girls' main responsibilities are to get married and be mothers. They have limited input in decisions that might affect their lives, both before and during marriage. Child brides are evaluated based on their level of respect and obedience, their ability to care for their mother-in-law, and their treatment of their husbands (Girls Not Brides 2024). Saul et.al., reveal that a participatory Nigerien girl on their survey stated that girls who disobey their parents and reject to get married are treated harshly by them and their community. “They’ll say bad things about her, they’ll make fun of her. People will say that she doesn’t listen to her parents, that she doesn’t respect them, because a child who respects their parents would never refuse them something” (As cited in Saul et.al 2020, p. 177). Having the pressure from family and their community girls accept to get married early. The reason families and

their community encourage their daughters to get married early is due to the fact that child marriage is viewed as a way to maintain a girl's dignity and purity. The dread of dishonor from pregnancy outside of marriage is made worse by the country's high rate of sexual abuse against women and girls. Some people in particular locations, including rural Marake, think that girls should marry before their first period because bloodstained clothing is viewed as a loss of virginity, bringing disgrace to families (Girls Not Brides 2024).

5.2 The role of religion in perpetuating child marriage

Another driver on the prevalence of child marriage is religion. The practice of child marriage is deeply influenced by cultural, religious, and social norms. The continuous prevalence of early marriage reflects the important role that religion plays in upholding these traditions, even in the face of legal frameworks that forbid this practice. Child marriage in Niger prescribes a minimum age without criminalizing the practice (Svanemyr, et.al 2013, p.12). There is an evident disconnect between legal provisions and societal beliefs. “Criminalization fails where there is no social norm of legal obedience, when a new legal norm is too far from a current social norm, or both. When a new legal norm is too far from a current social norm, law enforcement personnel have reasons not to enforce and citizens have reasons to disobey” (As cited in Svanemyr et.al, 2013, p. 18).

Islam, which is the predominant religion in Niger, plays an important role in shaping societal norms and practices, including those related to marriage. In many communities, religious leaders and organizations hold significant influence and often endorse child marriage as consistent with Islamic teachings. They are against legislative changes intended to increase protection against child marriage due to the fact that they are biased and subjective to prejudices and laws surrounding the practice of child marriage (African Union Campaign to End Child Marriage /AUCECMA 2023). This significantly reduces the possibility of new legal frameworks and policies that would help end child marriage.

Over 90% of Nigeriens are Muslim. Sharia (Islamic Law) has a strong influence over their believers in Niger. Given that the girl's age is not required, many families have opted to

wed their children in accordance with religious or customary law (AUCECMA 2023). Believers of the Islamic law have the perception that early marriage is a religious duty or a means to preserve family honor and ensure the protection and economic security of young girls.

Niger has ratified multiple international conventions such as the Convention on Consent to Marriage (1964), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (1999), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), which signifies a formal recognition of the rights of women and children. However, the co-existence of customary law, Sharia, and legislative provisions in the personal and family law domain complicates the enforcement of these conventions. The 2004 legislation specifies that customary law should only be applied if it complies with ratified international conventions, legislative provisions, or fundamental rules concerning public order or personal freedom (Svanemyr et.al, 2013, p. 32). Yet, in practice, the compliance to religious and cultural norms often overrules these legal frameworks. Additionally, child marriage is reinforced by the intersection of religion and patriarchy, which also contributes to gender inequality. Traditional interpretations of religious texts in many Islamic societies place a strong emphasis on the subservience of women and the value of male leadership (African Union 2023). Thus, young girls and women are placed in a vulnerable position by this patriarchal viewpoint, where their agency is severely restricted and their major value is viewed in their responsibilities as mothers and wives. As a result of these religious and cultural norms, parents view marriage as a practice that is in their daughters' best interests, placing it above education.

5.3 What is the government of Niger doing to end child marriages?

In Niger child marriage is regulated by family law, which encompasses various sources: the Civil Code, customary laws, and international legal instruments. The minimum marriage age was initially set by the Civil Code at 15 for females and 18 for boys. However, this was later altered to 21 for both genders (Civil Code, Articles 144, 148, and 158). However, customary law controls weddings to a significant extent, permitting females to be married off with parental approval (African Union Campaign to End Child

Marriage 2023). Even with these laws in place, child marriage remains prevalent in Niger. The Civil Code's minimum age restrictions are widely disregarded as a result of the strong devotion to customary law, which in this case takes precedence over statutory law, due to the fact that many child marriages happen because of family approval. Economic and sociocultural norms make matters worse since families still view child marriage as a suitable solution to financial difficulties and a means of maintaining traditional values. The disparity between the law and custom emphasizes how difficult it is to uphold laws and keep girls from getting married at a young age. To add on, another factor that might contribute to the high number of child marriages despite the existing laws is the lack of awareness and understanding of the legal framework. This gap needs to be eliminated in order to make sure that the legal age of marriage is upheld as per The Civic Code. For a change to happen effective enforcement tools need to be put in place, in addition having bring awareness and educate the community on the matter encouraging their involvement also, in the process of stopping child marriage. In the context of international instruments, Niger has ratified many various international treaties. Niger ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1999, which requires nations to guarantee free and informed consent to marriage, and ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1990, which obligates an 18-year-old minimum marriage age (Girls Not Brides 2024).

Niger has taken various actions to tackle child marriage. Niger has signed up to the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 5.3, which focuses on ending child marriage (AUCECMA 2023). The UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme's advocacy and engagement initiatives have resulted in the Niger Government developing a comprehensive national action plan to end child marriage. They have also issued a directive to protect females in school, ensuring that they have access to education and stay enrolled until the age of sixteen. The programme also helped to complete and distribute the National Strategic Plan on Adolescent and Youth Health (2017-2021) and the National Gender Policy and Action Plan. This programme helped to establish a multi-stakeholder collaboration platform named "Towards the End of Child Marriage in Niger," which organizes monthly meetings with the intent to push for better legislation that protects the rights of adolescents (UNICEF 2019). Niger held the 3rd African Girls Summit in

November 2021, with the subject "Culture, Human Rights, and Accountability - Accelerating the End to Harmful Practices." In his opening address, the country's president, H.E Mohamed Bazoum, reaffirmed his government's renewed commitment to ending child marriages through a concerted effort across all sectors and urged all partners to join in the campaign to achieve SDG 5.3.1 by 2030 (AUCECMA 2023).

A recent controversy in Niger has brought to light the complex issues surrounding child marriage. Human rights activists are extremely concerned about the legal consequences of a plan in Niger State to marry off 100 orphaned girls who were recently victims of a rise in banditry (Premium Times 2024). This plan has caused a stir among the public. People who are opposing this horrendous event from happening believe that the wedding should be called off because there is no concrete proof that these girls have reached the legal age of marriage. The state, which is meant to safeguard these girls, should not subject them to any humiliation, infringement of their human rights, or neglect when they are already traumatized by being victims of banditry. High-ranking officials, religious and traditional leaders who have been supporting this plan, such as the Speaker of the State House of Assembly, are involved in approving and proceeding with this plan. The legislator representing the Mariga constituency tried to justify his actions and explained that the proposal was intended to lessen the suffering of poor families. The plan was to take place on May 24 2024 and was completely dependent on religious leaders and traditional authorities in deciding whether or not to proceed (Premium Times 2024). Despite the established legal framework intended to protect girls from child marriage, enforcement of these laws remains inconsistent. The government should be proactive and advocate in upholding and respecting established laws, however, taking into consideration this recent controversy, it seems that the government is doing the opposite, it is failing to protect its most vulnerable citizens, children.

5.4 Gender Inequality in Niger

Gender Inequality is a pervasive issue in Niger. It is deeply entrenched in society and it is clearly seen through gender norms that affect girls really early on (World Bank 2019, p. 5). AS of 2015, Niger ranked second to last on both the Human Development Index and

Gender Equality Index (Spindler et.al., 2019, p. 18). It is due to social and cultural norms and expectation, that there is a distinction between men and women and their roles in society. These norms do nothing but perpetuate a never ending cycle of inequality and marginalization, where the most affected are women and girls. In understanding gender inequality in Niger, I will turn to Feminist Theory. As mentioned in the theory section, Feminist Theory advocates for the importance of having equal power dynamics, resulting in men and women being equal in all dimensions of life. However, patriarchal systems enforce inequalities and sustain existing gender roles. In Niger, as per traditional gender norms and expectations, women and girls are viewed as inferior to men, consequently, affecting their role in society, their agency and decision-making. In a survey conducted by Spindler et.al., in Niger's Maradi and Dosso regions with 2,400 married adolescent girls aged 13 to 19 and their husbands as participants, revealed a lot regarding gender norms and expectation. When asked about their opinion on women's rights and their decision-making, 91 % of the husbands expressed that men could lose out if more rights are given to women (Spindler et.al., 2019, p. 65). In the context of social expectations, when asked if men participate in household chores, 62 % of the husbands agreed that their community would consider engaging in household chores "shameful" for their wives. These findings highlight that gender roles are reinforced due to social norms and expectations, normalizing inequalities and expecting that for women the most important role is taking care of their households, and that it is "normal" for men to not participate in chores and taking care of their children (Spindler et.al., 2019, p. 61). When asked about partner violence, the husbands agreed on a concerning statement. 58% of them agreed that there are times where their wives deserve to be beaten (Spindler et.al 2019, p. 61).

Niger has made notable efforts to advance gender equality through policy, institutional, and legal reforms. However, the impact of these measures is limited due to certain reservations the country holds regarding international agreements like the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Despite ratifying various international treaties that support gender equality, Niger has yet to fully embrace the principles outlined in these documents, particularly in relation to eliminating discriminatory customs and practices, such as those governing inheritance and reproductive rights (African Development Bank/AfDB 2020, p. 22). The coexistence of

customary law with modern legal frameworks often results in the former taking precedence, perpetuating discrimination against women. Additionally, the government's actions to prevent and address gender-based violence and child marriage have been insufficient, further undermining efforts to achieve gender equality (AfDB 2020 p. 13). On the policy front, despite the introduction of a quota system through Law No. 2000-008, women's representation in decision-making bodies remains low. In 2017, Niger established a national gender policy under the Ministry for Women's Advancement and Child Protection, signaling a commitment to structural reforms (AfDB 2020 p. 19). However, these policy initiatives have yet to significantly alter the socio-economic landscape for women in the country. For instance, women's participation in the labor force is considerably lower than that of men, with only 34% of women engaged in the labor market compared to 90% of men (AfDB 2020 p. 34). This disparity is largely driven by early marriage, high fertility rates, and the heavy burden of domestic responsibilities, which limit women's opportunities for education, income generation, and personal development. The reliance on traditional cooking methods and the time-consuming task of collecting water and firewood further exacerbate the situation, as these chores consume time that could otherwise be spent on more productive activities. This cycle not only restricts women's economic participation but also passes the burden of household duties onto the next generation, particularly daughters, who are often required to take on these responsibilities when their mothers enter the labor market (AfDB 2020, p. 34).

5.5 Agency, Health and Education in Niger

In this section i will utilize Martha Nussbaum's theoretical framework on capability to analyze how child marriage in Niger affects young girls agency and also their health and education. As mentioned in the Theory section Nussbaum developed 10 normative Aristotelian capabilities that concentrate the capability of persons to achieve the life they value.

Practical Reason → Agency

According to Nussbaum, practical reason, one out of the 10 central capabilities is defined as being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life (Nussbaum 2003, p. 41). Nussbaum defines agency in terms of choice, what she specifically calls "practical reason." Practical reason, according to her, is the capacity to formulate a positive life vision and apply critical thinking to one's own intentions for the future (Crocker 2009, p. 17). Nussbaum's practical reason capability is linked with the concept of agency, as it emphasizes the capacity for individuals to make choices and govern their own lives. This capability highlights the importance of agency and decision-making. When individuals exercise practical reason, they are actively involved in planning and directing their own lives. The process of actively being involved in decision-making empowers individuals and also stimulates a sense of responsibility over their actions in life. In the context of child marriage, the link between practical reason and agency becomes particularly significant. Child marriage often reduces young girl's ability to engage in decision-making, as it forces them into a life path that is determined by others, stripping them of the opportunity to critically decide and plan their own future. Consequently, these young girls are deprived of the capability to act as autonomous individuals, ultimately affecting their agency and decision-making in multiple sectors of life such as being able to pursue education or make informed choices about their overall health and well-being.

Tomar et.al., reveal through their study that older age upon marriage is connected with more participation in decision-making. Research indicates that early marriage limits women's ability to make personal decisions, decisions regarding their reproductive health and also are constantly excluded from important home decisions (Tomar et.al., 2021, p. 75). Child marriage deeply affects young girl's agency and decision-making leaving them with little to no control over their life choices. In a research conducted by Perlman et.al there are several stories of girls who got married early, giving their perspective on the matter but also their families perspective. A young girl had to get married with her cousin due to the arrangement of her uncle. The young girl was pressured to say yes when the uncle asked if she loved him and wanted to get married to him. "I said yes. He's been my friend for some time and I do love him. But even if I didn't love him, I couldn't have said so and disappoint my family or put them to shame" (Perlman et.al 2018, as cited in World

Bank 2019). This story illustrates how girls do not express themselves due to social norms, fear of shame, family expectations and dishonor that comes in case she rejects the offer. Thus, they would rather accept and surrender their voice than stand for something they don't truly want.

There is another story on the perspective of a father and his role in decision-making on marrying off his young daughter. A wealthy man with the intent to marry the neighbor's young daughter offered money without saying the reason. The father who was struggling financially, accepted the money without a second thought. Later, the man expressed the intent to marry the neighbors daughter, however the father denied, citing that he wanted his daughter to complete education. When the man requested his money back, and the father didn't have the means to pay him back, he felt compelled to marry off his daughter without her being able to finish education (Perlman et.al., 2018, in World Bank 2019). This story illustrates how young girls' agency is severely limited by child marriage, which is caused by cultural standards and economic difficulties. Their capability to achieve their academic and personal goals is compromised when young girls are often pressured to make life-changing choices without their genuine consent.

In both stories, the girls' voices and choices are marginalized, showing the profound impact of child marriage on their agency and their future prospects.

Bodily Health →Health Risks

Nussbaum defines bodily health as “being able to have good health, including reproductive health; to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter” (Nussbaum 2003, p. 41). Nussbaum's capability of bodily health will serve as an understanding the health risks associated with child marriage. The capability of Bodily health encompasses the ability to maintain good health, reproductive health, to have adequate nourishment, all in order to live a fulfilling and healthy life. However, child marriage puts the overall well being of girls at risk. Their bodies are not fully developed to go through the process of delivering a child. It is not only extremely physically exhausting, but also emotionally taxing. Young girls are forced to have a really fast transaction from childhood to motherhood. Their mental health is affected due to the abrupt environment change as they have to leave their

home and move to their husbands house. It is only imaginable how a child can have difficulty adapting to a completely new environment away from their home and loved ones. Having to go through early pregnancies, young girls face dreadful health risks, including maternal mortality and complications during childbirth.

Child marriage is directly associated with poor health. Many young brides are put at risk of having various health complications, especially during childbearing and childbirth. Being healthy during adolescence encompasses young girls to be physically and mentally healthy but also having decision-making abilities and life skills (Igras et. al 2014, p. 557). By having decision-making abilities and life skills, young girls would be able to realize the health risks they might face entering child marriage and for them to determine and decide that child marriage and early pregnancy is not something they wish to go through.

Pregnancy-related complications are a leading cause of mortality among young girls. “Women in Niger have a 1 in 20 lifetime risk of maternal death” (USAID 2021). Early pregnancies endanger not only the life of young mothers, but also the well-being and survival of their babies. Girls aged 10 to 14 years old are 5-7 times more likely to die during childbirth than girls at an older age and mortality rates are 73% higher for infants born to mothers younger than 20 years old (Nour 2006, p. 1646-1647). To add on, young girls' bodies are not fully developed for child bearing. Their overall development is disrupted by early pregnancy and also negatively impacts their nutritional status (UNICEF 2023). Matters might have been slightly better if knowledge regarding family planning was higher. In a study conducted by Saul et.al, in Niger, only 18.3 % out of 600 young girls were aware of condoms (Saul et.al, 2017, p. 12). The girls had more knowledge about HIV, where 61.5 % had heard about it, however, only 29.3 % had the information that consistent condom use can reduce the risk of HIV (Saul et.al., 2017, p. 12). Unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), are highly prevalent in areas with inadequate awareness and comprehension of family planning methods. Married girls are more likely to catch these infections compared to unmarried girls (Nour 2006, p. 1645). Unfortunately, young brides do not only suffer physically, but also mentally. Child marriage has severe implications on girls that are married young. Research conducted by ICRW reveals that girls who marry before the age 18, suffer emotional distress by the sudden responsibilities as wives and mothers, but also feel helpless that they can't pursue education (ICRW 2024).

Senses, Imagination and Thought → Education

Nussbaum defines Senses, Imagination and Thought Being as the capability to “be able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason – and to do these things in a “truly human” way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education” (Nussbaum 2003, p. 41).

This capability will be used to understand education and how important it is for young girls, due to the fact that it is seen as a measure to delay child marriage. Education serves as a tool that helps children to acquire knowledge, skills and capacities, ultimately helping them grow into productive citizens that will put their knowledge into good use. With this interpretation we see a connection between education and Nussbaum's capability of sense, imagination and thought which essentially is the ability a person has in using their senses, to reason in an informed manner and to engage in critical thinking. In the context of child marriage, education has an impact on child marriage and vice versa. For young girls that get married early, education is seen as a way of delaying marriage and also a way to improve their futures. Education can help these young girls to change their paths beyond the existing traditional gender roles. It also helps girls cultivate a sense of agency, being more aware and informed in choices they have to make.

Child marriage directly impacts education. Globally, nearly one in four girls between the ages of 15 and 19 does not attend school (Taylor 2020, np). Attending school helps prevent child marriage, by empowering young girls to have more agency and to have more knowledge that would help them develop their decision-making skills. According to World Vision's 2019 study on child marriage, a girl's chance of getting married before turning 18 is decreased by five percent for every year she attends secondary school (Taylor 2020, np). By attending school young girls will be more informed and aware of their legal rights, which can help girls resist child marriage, due to the fact that they would have more knowledge on the consequences of child marriages (Taylor 2020, np). Young girls would have more economic opportunities if they were to complete their education. Since poverty is one of the main drivers of child marriage, having more economic opportunities would reduce the financial pressure to marry early.

Deane reveals that early marriage is six times more common for girls with little to no formal education than for those with a higher degree (Deane 2021, p. 9). On the other hand, the number of boys in secondary school is double that of girls (Perlman et.al., 2018, p. 180), showcasing the significant gender disparity in educational opportunities and access. This disparity not only limits girls' future economic prospects but also perpetuates cycles of poverty and gender inequality, as education is a critical factor in empowering women and improving their social and economic status. According to traditional gender norms in Niger, girls don't have to attend school because they eventually will get married and be busy taking care of the family and children (Bremer 2018, p. 68). This belief not only undermines the potential of girls but also reinforces systemic gender inequality by denying them the skills and opportunities needed to participate fully in society. However, struggling families cannot afford to send their daughters to school. Only a few rural communities have secondary schools, so parents have to send their daughters away, cover their costs of transportation and living expenses. "If you have a daughter you also have to worry about what kind of men are around there. It's better to marry her off so that she won't bring shame on us" (Perlman et.al., 2018, p.188). The father's statement reflects the pervasive fear and societal pressure that drive parents to marry off their daughters early, often at the cost of the girls' education, health, and future opportunities. Changes need to be made accordingly, in order to reduce child marriage rates. Adding one additional year of education at primary level can reduce child marriage by 5.4 % according to World Bank (Save The Children 2024).

5.6 Secondary Interviews

The Story of Fatouma

Fatouma is now 21 years old, but she faced child marriage twice. She had to flee home twice to avoid getting married that young. Everything changed for Fatouma when her father passed away when she was 12 years old. Her mother, unable to provide for her family, forced Fatouma to get married. Fatouma then fled home for the first time, refusing to get married to a stranger. She then returned home hoping her mother had changed her

mind. Unfortunately, nothing had changed and her mother asked her again to marry, in order to help lessen the family burden. Fatouma rejected again, arguing that she wanted to pursue her education instead. Being angry at Fatouma's disobedience, the mother burned her birth certificate and school records just to stop Fatouma from attending school. After this Fatouma fled for a second time. During the time she was away from home, she made it her mission to stop as many child marriages from happening as she could. In a time span of 18 months, Fatouma was able to stop 12 child marriages. She went around convincing parents how important it is for young girls to stay in school. "If you keep your daughters in school, they could become ministers, even president". Fatouma now volunteers for a non profit organization in Niamey, helping girls in need and fighting to end child marriage (Paquette 2021).

The Story of Yakoura

Yakoura caught HIV at the age of 12 after being forced to wed. She was only 12 years old when her father died after being attacked by armed men in their family home. The rest of the family was able to escape and cross into the Diffa region. Struggling financially, Yakoura's mother tried to marry her off three times. After rejecting her mother's offers, Yakoura complied and accepted to get married when she was 12. She had to marry a stranger that was the same age as her deceased father. After some time, Yakoura's husband started being abusive. "I tried to run away to my family's home but my mother would always send me back to him". Yakoura then fell pregnant. After experiencing complications during pregnancy, she found out she was infected with HIV. Yakoura was often sick and was struggling to take care of the baby. Her mother expressed she felt regret marrying her daughter off so young, but she justified herself by saying she had no other choice but to do so. "By doing so I thought it would offer her a better life". Yakoura didn't give up and is now advocating against gender-based violence and child marriage (Plan International).

The Story of Haua

Haua got married when she was only 15 years old. She was rushed to the hospital after experiencing complications during her pregnancy. The doctor's examination revealed that Haua had fistula, an abnormal connection between two body parts, which is common to happen to girls who undergo childbirth before they are fully developed. Since the pelvis is not fully developed, giving birth was almost impossible for Haua. "I've suffered enough and I don't want to get pregnant again". Haua expressed that she didn't want to get married, it was a decision made by her family and relatives. "Marriage is not a good thing" she expressed. Unfortunately, Haua's baby died during childbirth (Plan International).

The Story of Mariama

Mariama was 13 years old when her mother convinced her that it was time to get married. Mariama expressed that she wasn't happy about the wedding and that she couldn't eat nor sleep due to the pressure she was feeling. She was even afraid to go outside in case kids her age would mock her and call her a "new bride". Rumor traveled fast with all of her classmates hearing about the wedding. Mariama had to stop going to school due to bullying from classmates and teachers. As soon as Mariama stopped going to school, her mother went on to arrange and proceed with the wedding. When interviewed, the mother said she had no choice but to marry her off. Being afraid that Mariama would get pregnant by some stranger, she thinks it's best if she gets married early, so she won't bring disgrace to the family. Due to the intervention of Plan International, a judge banned Mariama's wedding. Plan International also ensured that the school bullying stopped, making Mariama able to start school again, even passing the entrance exam to secondary school (Plan International).

The stories of Fatouma, Yakoura, Haua, and Mariama vividly demonstrate how child marriage in Niger fundamentally impacts girls' agency, which in turn affects their health and education. Agency, the capacity to make choices and act independently, serves as an umbrella term encompassing various aspects of a girl's life. When a girl like Fatouma is forced into marriage, her ability to make decisions about her own future is stripped away, severely limiting her autonomy. This loss of agency directly compromises health, as seen in Yakoura's case, where early marriage led to HIV infection and abuse. Similarly, Haua's

development of fistula due to early childbirth emphasizes the severe health risks posed by lack of agency. Furthermore, in Mariama's story, bullying and forced marriage disrupted her schooling, demonstrating how agency is intertwined with educational opportunities. As a result, the loss of agency brought about by child marriage has detrimental impacts on health and education, continuing the cycle of disadvantage and disempowerment.

6. Conclusion

This thesis has explored the pervasive issue of child marriage in Niger, focusing on its severe impacts on young girls' agency, health, and educational opportunities. The research aimed to illuminate how child marriage perpetuates gender inequality, reinforcing a cycle of limited agency and opportunities for young girls, as well as reinforced gender inequality. Through a thorough secondary analysis of socio-cultural factors also implementing secondary interviews, this study has provided an understanding of the complex dynamics that sustain this harmful practice in Niger. Child marriage, as highlighted in this research, is deeply rooted in traditional gender norms, poverty, and religious beliefs that prioritize the dominance and control of girl's fundamental rights. Despite various national and international efforts to combat child marriage, such as the ratification of treaties like CEDAW and CRC, the practice remains alarmingly prevalent in Niger, with 76% of girls married before the age of 18. The persistence of this practice is largely due to the conflict between modern legal frameworks and entrenched customary and religious laws that continue to support early marriage in the country. The theoretical frameworks of Feminist Theory and the Capability Approach provided critical insights into the structural and systemic inequalities that underpin child marriage. Feminist Theory was utilized to unpack the patriarchal structures that deny girls agency and autonomy, while the Capability Approach, particularly through the lens of Martha Nussbaum's capabilities, allowed for an exploration of how child marriage limits girls' potential in terms of agency (practical reason), health risks (bodily health), and education (senses, thought and imagination). This thesis argued that child marriage severely restricts these capabilities, thereby hindering the overall development and empowerment of young girls in Niger. The research findings suggest that child marriage in Niger is a deeply rooted issue, not only a socio-cultural one

but also legal and socio-economic. As explained throughout the thesis, gender norms and cultural beliefs and practices are main drivers of child marriage. Additionally, poverty is also a factor that perpetuates child marriage. Families tend to marry off their daughters early, often viewing child marriage as a means of financial relief or protection for their young daughters. Furthermore, cultural and religious justifications for child marriage, despite being in conflict with international human rights standards, continue to hold significant sway over community practices. This thesis also highlighted the government's efforts to address child marriage, such as the establishment of a national action plan and protective measures for girls in schools. However, these efforts have been insufficient due to the overwhelming influence of socio-cultural norms and the challenges in enforcing laws that protect girls' rights. The case study of Niger provided a detailed illustration of how child marriage perpetuates gender inequality and limits the futures of young girls. Through secondary interviews, the realities faced by girls who are married off at a young age, including health risks, loss of educational opportunities, and a lifelong cycle of suppression were disclosed. These stories emphasize the urgent need for more effective interventions that address not only the legal aspects of child marriage but also the deeply entrenched cultural and religious beliefs that support it. In conclusion, this thesis has shown that addressing child marriage in Niger requires a multi-faceted approach that goes beyond legal reforms. It necessitates a shift in societal attitudes towards gender roles, greater economic support for families, and enhanced educational opportunities for girls. Only by tackling the root causes of child marriage—poverty, gender inequality, and cultural norms—can significant progress be made in protecting the rights of young girls and ensuring they have the opportunity to lead fulfilling and autonomous lives.

Further policy recommendations

To tackle child marriage in Niger, it's important to create strong policies that not only enforce the law but also address the cultural issues that keep this practice alive. Setting a clear minimum age for marriage and passing laws to prevent and punish gender-based violence are key steps. Additionally, centers where victims of violence can receive comprehensive care and support should be established. Improving the quality of education

and technical training is also essential. Kalamar et al. highlights that educational interventions such as cash transfers, school vouchers, free uniforms, reduced school fees, teacher training, and life skills programs are some of the most effective strategies for combating child marriage, and these initiatives have generally been shown to either reduce the prevalence of child marriage or delay the age at which girls marry (Perlman et.al., 2018 , p. 190).

A national plan to end child marriage should be well-coordinated, inclusive, and fully supported, ensuring it aligns with both the Nigerien Constitution and traditional laws. Empowering girls with education, information, and skills will help them understand their rights, say no to early marriage, and stay in school. Schools should offer support services like mentorship programs, after-school activities, and safe transportation to help keep girls in school, especially those at risk of dropping out due to pressure to marry early. These combined efforts could greatly reduce child marriage and give young girls the opportunity to shape their own futures.

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