

# MASTEROPPGAVE

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**RAISING THE GIRL'S VOICE: ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD AND CHILD  
MARRIAGE IN MALAWI**

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## **DEDICATION**

*For the girls whose stories are captured in the pages of this thesis. You are brilliant, bright and beautiful. You allowed me to be privy to the most sensitive experiences of your life. That is brave. Thank you.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks be God for Your grace that is sufficient and for Your mercies that are new every morning. I acknowledge the Holy Spirit who is my ever-present help. ~ *Your unfailing love, O LORD, is as vast as the heavens; your faithfulness reaches beyond the clouds. - PSALMS 36:5*

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this thesis is to explore the practice of child marriage in Malawi by looking at how adolescent mothers experience everyday life. Relevant literature on the experiences of girls in child marriage was reviewed. In order to explore the research topic a qualitative methodology was applied. Primary data was obtained during field visits in two research sites in Malawi in January- February 2017. Adolescent mothers, both those who have been in child marriage and those who have not; community leaders; and community members, participated in the study through focus groups, an in-depth interview and a key informant interview. The findings were analyzed in light of the following theoretical perspectives: social construction of reality theory; post-structuralism, post-modernism, the strengths perspective, and West and Zimmerman's (1987) 'doing gender'.

The findings indicate that experiencing life within the context of child marriage had implications for the adolescent mother's identity because the study demonstrates how their identities are fragmented and subject to negotiation. Gender as an ever-present identity and a social role for adolescent mothers in child marriage is explained. The study found that the adolescent mothers to a large extent valued girls' education because it significantly impacted how they 'do gender.' The study also acknowledges adolescent mothers production and expressions of power at the micro-level; their expressions of power are observed within the context of child marriage. The study discusses the participant's harmful experiences in child marriage which include; health risks, domestic violence, and economic abuse. In fighting against the harms of child marriage, the study looks at community intervention through traditional leadership and, 'resilience vs. perseverance' demonstrated by adolescent mothers. The study found that engaging traditional leaders and community members play an important role in questioning and re-structuring the social order that perpetuates child marriage.

**Key words:** child marriage, adolescent mothers, Malawi, social construction of reality, identity, power, gender.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

ADC	Area Development Committee
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
CEDAW	Convention to Eliminate Discrimination against Women
CRC	Convention on the Rights of a Child
D&C	Dilation and Curettage
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HIV	Human Immune-Deficiency Virus
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNFPA	United Nations Fund for Population Activities



## CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

*“...it was something difficult for me because I was young. I only gave in to this marriage because I was pregnant and my parents did not allow me to live with them at their house, so I gave in to child marriage.” – Vitu, married at 17years old*

Despite universal efforts, the age-old practice of marriage unions that involve girls who have not yet reached their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday still occurs around the world. Child marriage is a worldwide phenomenon occurring most frequently in the regions of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (Mann, Quigley and Fischer, 2015). In Africa, child marriage, although varied in the extent of its prevalence, is so widespread that it is faced by girls in all African countries, and while there is evidence that marriages involving children below 15years old have declined over the past three decades, the number of girls who remain at risk of entering into a marriage union before 18years old, is still high (UNFPA, 2012). By international agreements and most national laws, marriage before the age of 18years is a human rights violation of a child that signifies a manifestation of gender inequality (UNICEF Ghana, 2015). The violation of human rights and the indication of gender inequality is central to the practice of child marriage because young girls are deprived of a choice that is ultimately theirs – choosing a life partner. As per the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), women should have the same right as men to “freely choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent” (CEDAW cited in Bhattacharyya, 2015). In addition to eliminating the freedom of choice, child marriage prevents girls from bonding and maturing with children their own age (Nour, 2006). For reasons such as these, national and international bodies recognize child marriage as a social problem and they stand upon commitments to end this practice.

Malawi is one of the countries in Africa where child marriage occurs at a high prevalence; 50 percent of women aged 20-24 years old were married before the age of 18 (UNFPA, 2012). Supporting this, the Human Rights Watch (2014) reported that ‘families often force girls into marriage, including those who are lawfully old enough to marry under the constitution.’ And a study by Mann, Quigley and Fischer (2015) outlined that pregnant girls are among those most likely to be in child marriage. This raises my curiosity about how adolescent mothers experience child marriage in a Malawian context. How do they adapt into new roles; how do they interact with old and new relationships? There is a knowledge gap in current literature on child marriage regarding the in-depth and personal experiences of adolescent mothers. For the most part, the

available data sources on child marriage are from studies of a quantitative nature. These studies present facts and figures concerning the comparative prevalence of child marriage; and the disproportional ratios showing more girls than boys in child marriage. Motivated by such patterns and trends other studies have looked at the effects of child marriage on girls, and in so doing they have uncovered far reaching psychological, social, and physical health consequences. Studies also indicate associations between child marriage and other socio-demographic characteristics. Other studies on child marriage identify the drivers of this practice, the key driver being poverty. These findings have contributed to various policy changes, program interventions and awareness strategies on child marriage in Malawi. However, quantitative research only gives a partial picture, not the in-depth understanding that could otherwise be drawn from inside stories about the experiences of girls themselves. Through this qualitative study, I intend to narrow that gap. This study intends to give a voice to the girl child of Malawi by exploring her everyday experiences in child marriage; and then analyzing those findings through the lens of theories such as post-theories, social construction of reality theory and others, with the intention of understanding areas such as the adolescent mother's negotiation of identities and her expressions of power in the context of child marriage.

### **1.1 Organization of Thesis**

This thesis is structured into nine chapters, starting with this first chapter which is the introduction to the study. This introductory chapter includes the background and context of the study, the purpose of the study and the research questions. Chapter two presents a review of the existing literature. Chapter three is the methodology chapter, and the theoretical framework is presented after the methodology in chapter four. Chapters five through eight, include the empirical data; in these chapters the findings of the research are presented and analyzed. The final chapter, chapter nine, consists of the recommendations, discussions and conclusions.

### **1.2 Motivation of the Study**

I come from Malawi and over the years I have gained a passionate interest in the girl child of my home country. Likewise, over the years this passion of mine has motivated my research, my community work focus and even my current choice to study social work. Often, my attention and efforts towards the girl child of Malawi have been poured into girl's education in terms of access, attainment and equity. However, in 2016 the phenomenon of child marriage caught my eye and

through this I gained curiosity in a new area concerning the girl child of Malawi. Child marriage is one of the demographic trends in developing countries that has received a considerable amount of attention in recent years. I became intrigued with the topic of girls in child marriage in 2016 because, for Malawi, 2016 was a year of significant advocacy and lobbying work in this area. During this year I could hardly go on Facebook without finding a post, an article, or a link about the social injustices of child marriage for girls in Malawi. It was through this mass media that I came to learn about the on-going yearlong campaign to fully outlaw child marriage in Malawi by removing a legal loophole which allowed for child marriage if there was parental consent. The campaign supported the amendment of section 22 and section 23 of our constitution so that a child shall be defined by constitutional law as any person under the age of 18years (Constitution of the republic of Malawi (Amendment) (No.3) Bill, 2016). I was motivated to study the experiences of girls in child marriage because this topic is reflective of the current atmosphere of the developments concerning millions of girls in my country.

As I followed this campaign closely, I turned to existing academic research to learn what has been explored on the topic of child marriage in Africa. Most of the existing research on child marriage is quantitative and sheds light on socio-economic and traditional causes of this practice. Reading this literature was very insightful for me but I still had questions about the adolescent mothers and the personal experiences of those who have been in child marriage. Current literature does shed light on this in that it provides quantitative evidence to support that girls in child marriage do experience domestic violence, limitations to education, maternal health vulnerabilities, and other violations of children's rights. But how do adolescent mothers who end up in child marriage experience these harmful consequences of domestic violence or, limitations to education or, rights violations? There is a blurry distinction between the prevalence of children's violations, with respect to child marriage, and the micro-level dynamics from which they occur. While a growing knowledge base on the causes and frequency of harmful effects of child marriage is essential in the fight to end this practice, I suggest that knowledge on the everyday experiences of adolescent mothers in child marriage will bring clarity to areas where the research base remains blurred. In addition, from a social work angle, it will aid in achieving empowerment, liberation, healing and quality of life for the adolescent mothers once the child marriages are terminated. This is because knowledge of personal experiences have implications on the assessment of individuals as well as the problems that they face. Therefore, it is beneficial to explore this sensitive subject

robustly. Quantitative research has indeed significantly contributed to the knowledge base yet only in part because no single research methodology can capture all dynamics of child marriage. This study therefore, takes a qualitative angle with the motivation of the study being to fill this gap concerning the experiences of adolescent mothers who are at risk of the phenomenon of child marriage in Malawi.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

The main research question that the study seeks to answer, and the question which shall guide every step of the study is:

- **How do adolescent mothers who marry young or are at risk of child marriage experience everyday life in Malawi?**

In addition, the main question has been broken down into the following sub-questions:

- In what ways do adolescent mothers who marry young or are at risk of child marriage exercise power and control over their lives?
- In what ways do adolescent mothers who marry young or are at risk of child marriage negotiate new roles and identities?

### **1.4 Background**

#### **1.4.1 Definition: What is Child Marriage?**

A marriage between two people where one or both of the spouses is under the age of 18 is a worldwide phenomenon that is popularly known as child marriage. Other terms frequently and interchangeably used to refer to this phenomenon are ‘child bride’ and ‘early marriage.’ The term ‘early marriage’ is ambiguous given that it does not automatically refer to child or children being at the center of the marriage union, more so, it does not operationalize the boundaries of the meaning of ‘early’ (Nour, 2006). Early marriage is subjective because what is early for one person may be timely or late for another. ‘Child bride’ distinctly references ‘child’ so this is a more explicit term than ‘early marriage,’ however, Nour (2006) does point out that the term ‘bride’ bears a celebratory or glorifying connotation. This is problematic given that a majority of such marriage unions are done without the child bride’s consent and in so doing, they expand the social concern of gender inequality. According to UNICEF the term ‘child marriage’ is the preferred because it conveys the fact that this practice affects children below a specified age, and therefore captures

the key message that marriage before 18 years old is a violation of children's rights representing a profound manifestation of gender inequality (UNICEF Ghana, 2015).

Of all the possible terminologies defining the marriage of a child below 18 years, this study shall use the term 'child marriage.'

#### **1.4.2 Definitions Used By the Study**

This study uses the following definitions:

'**Adolescent**' refers to any young person or youth in the age group 10–24 years old.

'**Child**' is a person below the age of 18 (Convention of the Rights of a Child, 1990).

'**Marriage**' refers to "a betrothal or union between two people, recognized under civil law, religious law, or customary rites, and understood to be binding by the spouses concerned, their families and the wider community, whether or not it has been formally registered in law" (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

'**Child marriage**' is defined as a union where one or both of the spouses are below 18 years of age. Notably the definition includes both girls and boys engaged in the practice. However, the risk is higher for a girl child to be married before 18 years old (UNICEF Ghana, 2015). For example, as mentioned earlier, in Malawi 50 percent of women aged 20–24 years were married before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2010, compared to 6.4 percent of boys in that same year (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Moreover often than not, child marriage is a phenomenon that largely affects girls. For this reason, in this study the focus is on girls who are at risk, or have experienced child marriage.

#### **1.4.3 Child Marriage: Laws and Legal Loopholes in the Malawian Context**

It has been widely argued that Malawi's existing laws bear inconsistencies and gaps in effectively ending child marriages. In Malawi, not all marriages are officiated by a religious institution or by magistrate court registration, according to Human Rights Watch (2014, p.35) most marriages in Malawi are entered into by customary law or by repute and permanent cohabitation. However, on various grounds, some marriages may not be recognized by the spouse's family or community members, even when the couple themselves define their relationship as a marriage. This reflects the flexibility inherent in the understanding of who is married, and what marriage is.

The minimum age for marriage in Malawi, as set by the Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations Act No.5 of 2015, is 18 years old (Human Rights Watch, 2014). The Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations Act also defines anyone below the age of 18 years as a child. However, it does not define

forced marriage or child marriage, nor does it create a specific offense of the practice of child marriage (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Legal developments to define and legalize child marriage, are the types of action which would have an important impact on public attitudes toward this practice.

In Malawi the customary law of the traditional authorities is recognized however, the constitution states that the customary law is subject to the constitution's provisions. By constitutional law, the practice of child marriage is technically illegal because Malawi's constitution does provide that no one shall be forced into a marriage. However, regardless of the provision, before 14 February 2017, the constitution had an ambiguity that allowed marriages of persons aged between 15 years and 18 years *if they had parental consent*. Irrespective of one's age, the traditionally low status of children in Malawi, girl children in particular, undermine children's ability to oppose the wishes or opinions of their parents, guardians, or community leaders. As previously mentioned, in 2016 Malawi witnessed intense advocacy work and lobbying to amend the legal loophole in the constitution by raising the marriageable age from 16 years to 18 years. Non-governmental organizations and Malawian youth groups ran a year-long campaign for Malawi's constitution to fully outlaw child marriage. The voice of the 2016 campaign cried for the end of child marriage in Malawi through legal amendments. In the process of this study, the cry of this campaign was finally heard on 14 February 2017 when the majority vote in Malawi's parliament adopted the constitutional amendment which raises the minimum age of marriage from 15 to 18 years, for both girls and boys. This is a monumental amendment for the end of child marriage in Malawi.

## **CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW**

The current body of literature on the subject of girls in child marriage includes an increasing use of mostly quantitative research methods, and much of it gives a large focus to the drivers and adverse effects of this practice on girls. In addition, there is a growing body of information about child marriage from NGO reports and United Nations (UN) country reports. The dominant literature on the topic of child marriage in Africa is on the harms of child marriage to girl's health and the harms of child marriage to the economy and society. This chapter presents a review of this existing literature by pointing out what knowledge is present on the topic of child marriage.

## 2.1 History of Child Marriage

Historically, child marriage was used as a mechanism for maximizing fertility owing to high mortality rates in the past; it also functioned as a way of strengthening economic, political or social relationships (Vogelstein, 2014; Caldwell, Reddy and Caldwell, 1983). In present times, given that mortality rates have improved worldwide, literature generally outlines the motivations for child marriage, for example poverty and gender inequality, in order to explain why the practice has continued over time. By and large, child marriages are arranged by parents, other family members or local leaders, sometimes with the child's consent and sometimes by coercive means (Raj, 2010). In Asian countries such as India where Hinduism is a common belief system, marriages are arranged by families and in many such societies young brides are favored because younger brides are easy to mold into the wife traits that her husband prefers (Caldwell, et al, 1983). Families with unmarried, teenage daughters are in some cases apprehensive about the risk of their girls becoming pregnant and therefore remaining unmarriageable. For instance, in Zambia and many other sub-Saharan African countries, it is usual for child marriage to occur among peer groups, that is to say teenage girls are married to teenage boys commonly with a small variance in age, but most often the male is older (Mann et al., 2015). These types of child marriages that involve boys and girls in peer age groups, are often forced upon the children as rectification for what is viewed as the dishonorable action of premarital pregnancy. African cultural perceptions of teenage pregnancy outside of marriage are attached to family shame and disgrace. Unmarried girls who become pregnant outside of marriage are in some cases disowned by their parents or marginalized by their relatives, for this reason child marriage functions as a remedy for teenage pregnancy (Munthali, Moore, Konyani, and Zakeyo, 2006). In Malawi studies have also found that the knowledge acquired by girls in traditional initiation ceremonies, are what lead to early sexual behavior which results in teenage pregnancy (Mbilizi, Kanyongolo and Zimpita, 2000). It is traditionally expected that the pregnant girl marries the boy or man who impregnated her, and these type of child marriages are typically imposed regardless of the child's consent (Mann et al., 2015). In the case that a girl marries as a minor, she is more likely to experience violence from her husband, and their in-laws (Raj, 2010). The outcome of child marriage is negative for boys too, however, owing to patriarchal gender constructions, girls are affected at a greater extent compared to boys (Plan International, 2013). Existing literature has explored the causes and consequences of child marriage for girls and studies show that they are often interrelated, multidimensional and deeply

rooted (Vogelstein, 2014). In summary, the history of child marriage lies in historical, religious, cultural, and socio-economic factors (Walker, 2012).

## **2.2 Country Context: Malawi**

This study focuses on child marriage within the Malawian context. Malawi is a country in sub-Saharan Africa with a population of 17.2 million people (Population Reference Bureau, 2016). In sub-Saharan Africa, more than 40% of all girls continue to marry before the age of 18 (Nguyen and Wodon, 2014). The fixed legal marriage age, according to the constitution of Malawi, is 18 years old however, such legal requirements are hardly observed in the rural regions of Malawi (Palamuleni, 2011). Only 16 percent of the people in Malawi are urban based, while a significant majority of the population are living in rural areas where girls are more likely to marry at younger age than girls in urban areas (Population Reference Bureau, 2016; Global, 2007). Age at marriage is critically considered because it signals the transition to adulthood in many societies; it is the mark at which certain life opportunities in education, employment, and participation in society are limited (Palamuleni, 2011). Worldwide, more than 700 million women alive today were married before their 18th birthday and about 250 million entered into a marriage union before age 15 (UNICEF, 2013). Among such statistics, in 2012 Malawi was reported as the eighth highest in the world in percentages for women aged 20-24 years who were married before the age of 18 (UNFPA, 2012). Below 18 years old a person has not yet physically or psychologically matured: therefore, anyone below 18 years old should not be expected to assume the post-childhood roles that are associated with marriage (Greene, Perison, Taylor and Lauro, 2015). 51 percent of the population is considered to be poor, as such, for more reasons than one the high prevalence of child marriage in Malawi results in adverse effects for the children who are engaged (Human Rights Watch, 2014).

## **2.3 Interrelated Causes of Child Marriage**

**2.3.1 Social Cultural Context:** Contextual factors of gender inequity influence child marriage (Raj, 2010). As previously mentioned, literature shows that girls are affected in higher numbers than boys in the practice of child marriage (UNICEF, 2013). Human Rights Watch (2014) says that while girls are forced to marry as early as 9 years old, boys of the same background are generally not married until they are aged 17 years old. A review of literature on child marriage documents social vulnerabilities at both national and individual levels that place girls in the high risk category for child marriage; and studies show that the main drivers of child marriage are



poverty, low education levels and traditional or cultural practices (Raj, 2010). Most, if not all, of these drivers are interlinked. Other studies have found that child marriage is perceived as a way of guarding children from HIV. For instance, parents in Malawi condone the practice of marrying their daughters early based on the belief that they are protecting their girls from contracting HIV (Clark, Bruce and Dude, 2006). This is based on the commonly held view that sex within marriage is more socially approved than sex outside of marriage.

**2.3.2 Poverty:** The drivers of child marriage are connected to social vulnerabilities such as being raised in the poorest and most rural areas (Raj, 2010). Literature shows that poverty is central in perpetuating child marriage. Parents from poor households consent to child marriage with the purpose of ensuring their daughter's financial security; at the same time, daughters are considered as economic burdens to a family because girls, unlike boys, will eventually leave the family name (Nour, 2006). For some parents the way of recovering the investment of raising a daughter may be to earn a bride price in exchange for her hand in marriage; in some countries, the dowry or bride price decreases as the girl gets older (Nour, 2006). This may be the reason why parents want to have their daughters married at younger ages; under these circumstances child marriage is more of a poverty survival technique which would otherwise have not happened in a high-income household. Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi (2006) link child marriage to poverty by supporting that the younger the age at the time of marriage, the lower the probability that girls will have acquired critical skills and developed their personal capacity to manage adverse situations that may affect their overall welfare and economic well-being. Girls from the poorest households are among those least likely to be sent to school especially in societies where beliefs support that it is more valuable to educate boys than girls (Mbilizi, Kanyogolo and Zimpita, 2000). The more education a girl receives, the less likely she is to marry before the age of 18 years and the less likely she is to have an early pregnancy. Notably, failure to complete formal education in most cases connects to social-economic vulnerabilities and gender inequity.

## **2.4 Effects of Child Marriage**

In addition to the drivers, existing literature also offers the harmful returns of child marriage. Child marriage is deeply embedded in cultural traditions and pervasive discrimination against girls (Vogelstein, 2013). Child marriage also presents health concerns for the married girls when they become young mothers.

### **2.4.1 Health Consequences**

The dominant existing knowledge on child marriage in Africa is mainly literature which has explored the harmful health effects of child marriage on the girls. Research findings show that child marriage is harmful for a girl's mental, physical and psychological well-being (Walker, 2012). Adolescent mothers are more likely than adult women to experience pregnancy complications such as obstructed labor, fistula, and maternal mortality during delivery (Raj, 2010). Experiencing these health risks in turn increases the risk for poor maternal, infant and child health outcomes such as; neonatal death, and infant and child morbidity (Raj, 2010; Palamuleni, 2011). Studies do generally agree that low status of women increases adverse health risks on the mother and child. Although various studies offer negative health returns for girls who marry as minors, changes in marriage patterns, for instance delayed marriage, are believed by parents to promote premarital sex, unwanted pregnancy, abortion, STDs and HIV/AIDS (Jones, 2007, cited in Palamuleni, 2011). The typical case for female partners who marry young and have a wide age gap compared with their husband, is that sexual intercourse is risky because HIV infection is more likely than if the male partner was younger (Walker, 2012). Clark, Bruce and Dude (2006) claim that in some settings, married adolescents have higher rates of HIV infection than their sexually active unmarried peers because these young women engage in frequent unprotected sex. Yet still, findings present a mixed picture on whether there is a significant connection between child marriage and a higher risk of HIV. Negative mental health risks are also among the health risks that accompany those that are involved in this practice. Research from Africa and South Asia found that the risk for depression and suicide is high for girls who are engaged or married as minors; this is partially connected with forms of gender-based violence, such as forced marriage and domestic violence, which sometimes accompany child marriage (Raj, 2010).

### **2.4.2 Socio-economic Consequences and Violation of Human Rights**

The practice of child marriage is a violation of human rights because of the manner through which child marriage is conducted. A girl's rights are violated when her marriage is enforced against her will, when she is forced to leave her family, when she has to endure sexual abuse or bear children while still a child herself (Vogelstein, 2013). According to Human Rights Watch (2014, p.23-24) power and authority is customarily held by men and older women in Malawi, and this can place young married girls at greater risk of abuse, violence, and other forms of rights violation. Irrespective of Malawi's existing laws, in practice women's rights are largely abbreviated (Human

Rights Watch, 2014). One's human rights are also violated when access and freedom of choice are denied. Studies on education show that child marriage denies school aged children the right to education, which is important for self and social development (Walker, 2012). Many girls are removed from school and few girls are able to return to school after marriage or pregnancy. The highest education deprivation rates is often among girls in rural areas (Deghati, Mora and de Neubourg, 2012). Studies also support that there is a relationship between child marriage and female illiteracy. For example what has mostly been observed in sub-Saharan Africa is that higher prevalence of child marriages are connected to lower levels of female literacy (Walker, 2012). For example, in Mali, Chad and Niger approximately 70% of girls aged 18 years and younger are married, and just 30% of women aged 15 to 18 years are literate (Walker, 2012 ).

### **2.5 What is being done?**

Given the harmful effects of child marriage other international and local stakeholders, along with the United Nations have attempted to reduce the prevalence of child marriage in order to eventually stop the practice altogether. This is done through prevention interventions and by the provision of support through services, with the most important emerging interventions being strengthening legal and policy tools in the effort to outlaw child marriages and protect the girl child (Walker, 2012). For example, as mentioned previously, recently the government of Malawi along with international agencies responded to the human rights violations of child marriage by strengthening Malawi's existing marriage laws with the aim of protecting Malawian girls. However, Heiserman (2016), points out that although this legal amendment shows an attempt to bring change, it does not legally override the constitution, which still allows child marriage with parental consent. Additional prevention interventions comprise of girl's education programs, as well as sensitization developments (Walker, 2012). More so, action against child marriage is in line with the United Nations which through Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that concerning marriage, persons must be at "full age" (UN cited in Nour, 2016).

### **2.6 Significance of the Research**

The literature review shows that there exists plenty of insights on issues concerning child marriage in Malawi. And the findings on the harms of child marriage, which include rights violation, sexual violence, other forms of gender based violence, and adverse health consequences, have even gone so far as stirring up responses from national and international bodies. The response is accounted

in regional and country wide reports from NGO's, such as the Human Rights Watch and Plan Malawi, which present the impact of NGO programs and efforts that work to end child marriage in Malawi. However, regardless of the availability of information on child marriage, which mainly covers the causes, effects and interventions, there is little knowledge on the experiences in child marriage by the girls themselves. To gain insights on how adolescent mothers experience the practice of child marriage and how they negotiate roles, this study shall utilize qualitative research methods by analyzing primary data that has been collected from a representative sample of adolescent mothers in Malawi. Qualitative methods are also chosen owing to the nature of the questions raised by the study in chapter one; on the premise that a study of qualitative nature on child marriage will be more informative as it will bring more to the picture.

### **2.7 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to gain qualitative knowledge on the experiences of adolescent mothers who have been in child marriage, or were asked to consider child marriage yet managed to avoid it altogether. As mentioned above existing literature points out the harms of child marriage for girls, and thus, this study aims to capture their personal stories about how they ended up in child marriage, how they experience any harms faced during child marriage, as well as how they felt and thought about those experiences. In addition to harms faced, the study explores other day-to-day involvements for adolescent mothers who are at risk of child marriages. The study also considers the adolescent mothers who do not comply with child marriage and what their experiences have been as a result of non-compliance. Not all child marriage unions last, yet there is not much knowledge on what the outcome is for girls once child marriages have ended. Therefore, with the purpose of bringing more knowledge on the subject of child marriage, the study also looks into how adolescent mothers progress after child marriage as well as how they feel and think about this. The study will also look at the ways in which adolescent mothers exercise power and how their experiences in child marriage create different way of seeing themselves.

## **CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY**

This chapter outlines the approaches in methodology and the research methods that were taken in answering the research question of this study. The research design, research site, sampling methods and description of the sample, as well as data analysis approach, ethical issues, and strengths and limitations to the study are described here in this chapter.

### **3.1 Research Design**

This study takes on a qualitative research design in order to ensure that the purpose of the research is effectively addressed. The selection of this design has been influenced by the nature of the study topic and the research questions. I realize that capturing the experiences of adolescent mothers in child marriage requires hearing the ‘stories’ from the girls and other key players. Silverman (2013, p.10) says that ‘research methods should be chosen based on the specific task at hand.’ For this reason, aside from the specific questions and objectives of this study, the study topic also played an important guiding role in selecting a qualitative research design. To answer the study questions – questions which address the experiences of child marriage and the negotiation of identities for adolescent mothers, - I found that qualitative research tools are the most appropriate research protocol in picking up authentic human experiences, in contrast to quantitative research tools (Silverman, 2013).

My field studies for this qualitative research were conducted from 2 January, 2017 to 3 February, 2017. This time period is during the early-rain season which is also the farming season in Malawi. For many Malawians this is a time when early mornings are spent working in the farms, particularly for those living in rural areas. My field studies were also during the time when the Malawian secondary school calendar is in session, therefore, many who fall into the secondary school age category were students attending class for a specified amount of the day.

### **3.2 Research Site**

The research was conducted in two districts, Dedza and Lilongwe. Dedza and Lilongwe are located in the central region of Malawi. The main language spoken in Lilongwe and Dedza is Chichewa. Chichewa is the national language of Malawi. It was important for me that this study was situated in sites where Chichewa is commonly well spoken. This is because of all the different local languages spoken in Malawi, Chichewa is the one that I speak and understand most fluently.

Starting with Lilongwe, two areas were identified as the research sites within Lilongwe. Lilongwe is the capital city of Malawi. The first area in Lilongwe was chosen in cooperation with *Plan Malawi*, who were some of the important gatekeepers in gaining access to the adolescent mothers. Physical access and availability of participants were the chief factors that guided my choice for the research sites. *Plan Malawi* allowed me to access girls from two secondary schools in Lilongwe where they are implementing their programs. However, the participants identified from one of those two schools were unavailable because she had been absent from school for several days. Therefore, I chose the second school because the participants identified there were willing and available to meet with me; furthermore the head teacher and the school matron from this second school also served as gate keepers because aided in identifying additional participants, who were not students at the school, but fit the study's sample criteria and lived within the same area.

The second area in Lilongwe was selected based on my prior knowledge. I had knowledge about this area because Lilongwe is my city of residence, therefore I used this to my advantage by reaching out to my existing contacts I was thus able to identify a secondary school where I gained access to one participant.

At all the research sites in Lilongwe, I informed the school authorities about my study. At the first school, I was granted permission from the head teacher who is the principal of the school and after this, the school matron identified and linked me to the participants that I wanted. In the second school, the principal granted me permission and, identified and linked me to a participant.

The second district where the study was conducted was Dedza. A unique feature about Dedza is that it is a district in Malawi where paramount chief Kachindamoto has customary authority over 900,000 people. Chief Kachindamoto is renowned for her actions in terminating child marriages in her region. Dedza was therefore chosen as a research site for this study because it would be an ideal site to access participants and collect data pertaining to the topic and questions of this research. In Dedza, the gatekeeper was the chief, and through her customary authority I was granted formal permission to access participants in her region.

### **3.3 Gatekeepers and Gaining Access to Participants**

As mentioned before, *Plan Malawi* were important gatekeepers in conducting this study. The first contact was made with this organization in the first week of my field research. I visited *Plan*

*Malawi* country office in Lilongwe and from there, I was directed to their field office. The staff at the field office allowed me to travel with a team from *Plan Malawi* for a day visit with the purpose of introducing me to the potential research sites and connecting me with key persons at the research sites who were the school authorities, this included headmaster and school matron of 2 secondary schools. The *Plan Malawi* staff did this by facilitating and arranging my meeting with the formal school administrative authorities at the schools where *Plan Malawi* is implementing programs. The staff shared information about the research site, about the implementation of their program, and other things relevant to know in relation to my study.

Initially I was skeptical about relying on *Plan Malawi's* support because my concern was that if the participants viewed me as part of *Plan Malawi*, this may affect their responses. However, *Plan Malawi* acted as a good point of access to the research sites. Johl and Renganathan (2010, p.42) say 'in the early access process it is important for the researcher to have someone of the community to vouch for his or her presence.' Owing to the trust that *Plan Malawi* had built through their work with schools in Lilongwe and with the chief in Dedza, the school authorities, customary authorities and the participants themselves, were easily trusting of me and my research because I met them through *Plan Malawi*. In addition, *Plan Malawi* was simply an access point. I was not seen as a *Plan Malawi* staff because my study and my role as the researcher was clearly explained to the participants before they gave their informed consent. My role as a researcher is discussed in further detail in the following section.

### **3.4 Positioning Myself as the Researcher**

From my social work course work at Nord university, I have learned to develop a 'co-discover' disposition in order to gain indigenous knowledge. Borg, Brownlee and Delaney (2010, p.22) refers to this as developing a 'position of uncertainty.' Therefore, in my role as a researcher it was important to me that I did not present myself as an 'expert' on the lives and experiences of the participant's. My rationale behind this is that I wanted the participants to freely share their stories from their own understanding of self and reality as opposed to giving answers that I expect to hear. Accordingly, I chose the most suitable data collection methods, and modified them according to the situations that I faced in the field. For instance, a situation arose at the sites in which the participants came for the interviews all at once. This happened three times. As mentioned above, it was school time and farming season, so the participants did not have a lot of free time and there was a high risk that they would not show up another day. Because of this risk of losing some

participants, I chose to use focus group discussion (FGD) even though I had planned for one-on-one interviews. FGD's take less time but still involve all participants.

I tried to minimize the demeanor of an 'expert' or 'professional' image during the field studies so I intentionally behaved and dressed in a socially acceptable way when I was in contact with the participants during the field work. I was accompanied by a friend during the field work: she took on the role of a research assistant. This was a necessity during the field studies because data collection is not only about hearing narratives, it is also about critically observing details such as gestures, settings and surroundings during the interview. These details are easier to observe if someone is specifically designated to looking out for them. This gave me leeway to give a lot of my attention to simply listening to the participants as they shared their stories. The critical eye of my research assistant was most helpful during the focus group interviews. I faced situations where I had a large group of participants at one time, as many as 9 in one case, therefore, the presence of a research assistant to take down extra notes and make extra observations ensured that I did not miss anything.

### **3.5 Purposive Sampling**

Sampling is required simply because the researcher cannot record or observe everything that occurs (Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam, 2003, p.77). Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014, p.46) say that research questions can help set the foci and boundaries for sampling decisions. 'Adolescent mothers in child marriage' is the specific group that this study's research question is addressing. I did not specifically look for mothers, however, all the people identified and recruited were mothers therefore, I decided that anyone who fit the description of 'adolescent mother in child marriage' is the sample population for this study.

In the sampling rationale for data collection within any case, social phenomena proliferate (adolescent mothers who have not been married) must also be sampled (Miles et al., 2014, p.46). For me, when I began gaining access to my initial choice of participants - girls who have experienced child marriage – further facets to the social phenomenon of child marriage that needed to be studied were revealed. Miles et al., (2014, p.46) refers to this as conceptually driven sequential sampling when initial choices of participants lead you to other ones. Samples in qualitative studies are usually not wholly pre-specified but can evolve once fieldwork begins (ibid). Once I commenced the fieldwork, it became apparent to me that my sample should not be



limited to adolescent mothers who have been in child marriage, but it should also include adolescent mothers who have not been married.

A non-probability sampling strategy was employed for selecting the sample population criteria for this qualitative study; individual participants were chosen using purposive sampling. Berg (2001, p.32) says that non-probability samples offer the benefit of not requiring a list of possible elements in a full population. This was useful for this study because attaining a list of all girls who have experienced child marriage in Malawi was not feasible given that child marriage is a widely occurring phenomenon, with Malawi holding some of the highest prevalence rates in the world.

I found that individuals who have experienced child marriage are an ‘invisible’ or hidden group and therefore, they are generally not easy for the researcher to identify. The choice of purposive sampling was due to its appropriateness for the hiddenness of the sample population. This study required a method that insured that individuals displaying the sample characteristics relating to the study topic, are included. Ritchie and Lewis (2003, p.79) say purposive sampling is when members of a sample are chosen with purpose to represent a location or type in relation to a key criterion. The key criterion for this study was girls who have experienced child marriage. I was not able to identify these girls on my own so, through *Plan Malawi*, I was connected to the school authorities at two secondary schools in Lilongwe, and the chief in Dedza. These connections assisted in identifying participants that met my sample criterion within their communities. They introduced me to the participants that were willing to participate in the study. At this introduction I shared information about my research and my intentions and I asked for the participant’s consent. After this, I engaged with the participants through interview or FGD.

For this study I wanted girls who are or have been married below the age of 18 years, and girls who had become mothers below the age of 18 years. In Lilongwe these participants were identified through community secondary schools and the communities surrounding those schools. In Dedza these participants were selected from various localities and they were identified through the chief.

### **3.6 Data Collection Tools**

The tools used for the data collection were focus group discussions, unstandardized interview and key informant interviews.

### 3.6.1 Focus Group Discussion

Silverman (2005, p. 177) defines a focus group discussion as ‘a way of collecting qualitative data which essentially involves engaging a small number of people in an informal group discussion ‘focused’ around a particular topic’. In this study the one’s engaged were groups of adolescent mothers who spoke about their personal experiences around the topic of child marriage. Silverman (2005, p.180) points out that focus groups unlike interviews are importantly ‘naturalistic’ and ‘closer to everyday conversation’ because of the dynamic quality of group interaction. Given that the study explored the a sensitive subject of child marriage, the ‘naturalistic’ aspect of focus groups allowed for a more natural setting where the participants were around others who have similar experiences; this setting facilitated conversation and free disclosure which would otherwise have been hindered in an interview that comes across as more ‘investigative.’ I wanted to choose a data collection tool that would allow the participants to share their stories freely without reservation and without feeling like their lives were being investigated. Participants can share experiences freely in focus groups because, as Berg (2001, p.114) describes it, a focus group is an ‘unobtrusive data collection strategy.’

I mentioned previously that since the field work was done during the school calendar, the group of school-going participants that were identified had different times of availability. I wanted to keep these participants within their local setting and engage all of them without the risk of losing some participants who would not be available later. Berg (2001, p.111) says focus group interviews also provide a means for collecting qualitative data in some settings and situations where a one-shot collection is necessary. Initially I had planned for one-on-one unstandardized interviews but given the situation that I was confronted with in the field, I chose to conduct FGDs facilitated by an unstandardized interview guide. My primary concern about FGD was that it would lack the depth of an in-depth interview. However, Finch and Lewis (2003, p.171) say that the strength of focus groups is in responding to each other, participants reveal more of their own frame of reference on the subject of study. This is why I chose FGDs as an alternative to in-depth interview, participants are able to reveal deep perspectives, and more so, their perspectives are less influenced by the researcher than what would be the case in a one-on-one interview (Finch and Lewis, 2003, p.171).

During my focus group people of similar composition were brought together. Ritchie (2003, p.58) claim that this ‘provide[s] a social context within which the phenomenon is experienced.’ It is

imperative to give particular care to the group composition when exploring a sensitive topic. The type of data collected in this study was on the participant's experiences and personal stories connected to the topic of child marriage within their social contexts. 'This context also means that they vividly display differences between participants, and create an opportunity for differences to be directly and explicitly discussed' (ibid). I found this to be ideal for the type of data I was looking to collect because the way experiences are shared reflect the important social constructions and shared knowledge of the social contexts where they happen (Finch and Lewis, 2003, p.172).

In total, three focus groups were conducted. All the three focus groups were audio recorded. An unstandardized interview guide was used to facilitate the focus group discussions and the average length of each discussion was around 45min. The setting for two out of three of the focus groups was conducted in the library of a community secondary school (during after library hours) where the participants attend, or had once attended, school. The third focus group was conducted under the shade of a large tree *pa bwalo* [in an open area] near the residence of the chief. Participants appeared fairly comfortable in these local settings of theirs.

### **3.6.2 Unstandardized Interview**

Given the exploratory nature of this study, I saw it fit to have questions that could easily be adapted because personal experiences are not identical. For this reason, I opted for an unstandardized interview guide, also known as unstructured interview guide. Berg (2001, p.70) says unstandardized interviewers must develop, adapt, and generate questions and follow-up probes which are appropriate to the given situation and the central purpose of the investigation. I chose to use an interview guide with questions that are adaptable and appropriated to the participants given experience.

'In an ideal unstructured interview, the interviewer follows the interviewees' narration and generates questions spontaneously based on his or her reflections on that narration' (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009, p.2). Unlike the case with structured interview guides, the questions from an unstructured interview guide can easily be tailored depending on the responses of the interviewees. I found this to be very resourceful in the field; follow-up questions were tailored according to the participant's narrations while the interview guide enabled me to remain focused on the topic at hand. Zhang and Wildemuth (2009, p.2), says that 'agenda in an unstructured interview encourages a certain degree of consistency across different interview sessions. Thus, a balance can be achieved

between flexibility and consistency.’ The discussions that ensued from the FGDs turned out to be exhaustive and the participants were able to share sensitive experiences that they had encountered. Occasionally, the discussion did divert from the focus topic when specific leads were explored, but having the interview guide helped me to refocus and to redirect back to the study topic. Therefore, I experienced flexibility and consistency when using the unstandardized interview guide.

### **3.6.3 Key Informant Interview**

A key informant interview is an interview with an individual known as a key informant, who provides desirable information, ideas, and insights on a particular subject (Kumar, 1989). In this study the key informants were the chief, group village headmen, one group village headwoman, women of the local mother group and women of the regional child protection. Kumar (1989, p.1) says informants are selected because they possess information or ideas that can be solicited. I selected the chief to be a key informant because she plays a key role in intervening on and ending child marriages in her region. Although this study is focusing on adolescent mothers who are at risk of child marriage, the strength of interviewing key informants is that, they tell of incidents, local happenings, or conditions that explain adolescent mother’s experience further (Kumar, 1989, p.3). The key informant interview with the chief was conducted in an informal manner, resembling a conversation among acquaintances.

With the other key informants - the group village heads, women of the mother group and child protection - the interview was conducted in the form of a FGD. The adolescent mothers were also present participants during this FGD. All participants were free to discuss generously as this FGD was not facilitated with an interview guide.

### **3.7 Ethical Issues in the Study**

Given that the nature of this qualitative research is to explore the personal experiences of participants, it raises ethical issues that were necessary for me to consider during and after the planning stages of the study. As social scientists we have a greater ethical duty to our participants than most, because of the way that we enquire into the personal lives of other people (Berg, 2001, p.39). The ethical responsibilities toward my study participants include: informed consent, anonymity and honesty (Miles et al., 2013, p.66).

As the researcher, one of the ethical duties to my participants was to protect them from any harm and risks that may occur as a result of their being a part of this study. To protect participants, I used anonymity as a way of keeping the participants unidentifiable in this study. Anonymity has been observed in this study by the use of pseudonyms to conceal true identities. This study also sought permission from those in positions of authority at the research site, namely: the paramount chief and the school head teachers. This ensured that community leaders were fully aware of the research that was being carried out in their areas.

Consent forms were given on the day of the interview. In fulfilling my ethical duty, all participants were fully informed about the intentions of this study and the participants were also informed that their consent was on a voluntary basis only. Miles et al., (2013, p.69) says that weak consent usually leads to poor data; respondents will try to protect themselves in a mistrusted relationship. Building trust with the participants was important for this study, therefore I was open and honest with them; and I welcomed any questions or concerns about the study. I assured all participants that their identities would not be disclosed and that the accounts they choose to share would be confidential and that they could withdraw from the study at any point. At the start of each interview and focus group discussion, I asked the participants for their permission to use an audio recorder. Only with their permission would an audio recorder be used. All this was done with the goal of ensuring that any process pertaining to their participation was not coerced.

It is also good to make ethical considerations for the research assistant who is a third party during the fieldwork (Naufel and Beike, 2013). The role of research assistant was taken by my friend entirely on a voluntary basis by no coercive means. I thoroughly explained to her the nature, objectives, research sites, and time allotment for the field study so that she was able to make her decision fully aware of any potential risks. In addition, the research assistant was made aware of her confidentiality concerning the information she gained.

### **3.8.1 Limitations of the Study**

As previously pointed out, the fieldwork for the study was conducted at a time in the year when the school calendar was in session, and the time set aside for this field work was only one month. Focus group discussions were the dominant method used for data collection; only two one-on-one interviews were conducted, one of which was a key informant interview. This presents the limitation of less depth in data. Individual interviews would have provided more details and

enhanced insight on the topic of study because, the participants would have been able to share other things which they perhaps felt they could not share to a whole group. This would have aided in understanding the experiences of the participants deeper.

The sample of this study was limited to the participants that were presented to me by the gatekeepers (the chiefs, and head teachers). Some of the participants who were presented to me were married at the cut-off age of 18 years and some even a year or two above the cut-off age. The limitation in this is that not all participants perfectly fit the sample criteria.

The study was conducted in two districts in Malawi; Lilongwe and Dedza, however the phenomenon of child marriage is prevalent throughout all districts in Malawi. In addition, personal experiences of child marriage differ from person to person. Hence the findings and conclusions of the study may not be generalized to reflect the experiences of all girls in Malawi.

The entire field work for this study was conducted in Chichewa. Chichewa is distinctly different from the English language. Therefore, it is possible that some of the original meanings were lost in the translation process.

### **3.8.2 Strengths of the Study**

The study focuses on the stories of adolescent mothers and their experiences in child marriage; yet still, the study includes key informants, other than adolescent mothers, such as the chief, village heads and women of the regional mother group. This adds a holistic dimension to this study, hence making the findings and conclusions of the study relevant in relation to future users of the study for purposes related to the study topic.

It is also important to note that during the course of this study, on 14 February 2017, the government of Malawi made a monumental amendment to its constitution to fully outlaw child marriage. The amendment in the law removes a legal loophole which, before 14 February 2017, allowed children aged between 15 years to 18 years to marry with parental consent. Hence, a powerful dimension of the study is that the findings and conclusions reflect a historical time in the constitutional rights of millions of Malawians girls.

### **3.8.3 Reliability and Validity**

Reliability as defined by Kirk and Miller (Kirk and Miller cited in Silverman, 2005, p.285) is the degree to which the finding is independent of accidental circumstances of the research. I worked with audio materials for all the focus group discussions and interviews that were conducted.

Silverman (2005, p.282) says ‘audio- or video- recorded data have intrinsic strength in terms of accuracy and public access.’ My choice of using an audio-recorder (subject to permission from participants) improves the reliability of the findings because the data that was captured through audio-recorder offers public access to judge the reliability of the data. However, the language used for the data collection, *Chichewa*, brings an element of exclusivity to the recordings. For this reason, I have taken other steps to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings such as documenting the focus groups and interviews in English translation.

In the detailed account above, I have described my data collection choices and experiences with the intention of strengthening the validity and reliability of the findings of this study. I have been transparent about the process and methodologies of this study.

Validity refers to the trustworthiness or credibility of the study’s interpretations Silverman (2013, p. 285). Another step taken to help apprise the findings from a perspective that was not influenced by my own subjectivity, was the presence of a research assistant who was a good moderator. A moderator checks, neutralizes and minimizes personal biases that may be formed by me, the researcher. Qualitative researchers should try to be as ‘objective and neutral as possible in the collection, interpretation and presentation of qualitative data’ (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003, p.20).

Using an unstructured interview guide was also another way that validity was ensured. The flexibility of unstructured interviews enabled me to rephrase the same questions in different ways throughout the data collection process. By excluding other scenarios when asking the same questions in different ways guarded against false conclusions and validity is strengthened. In addition, triangulation was used because more than one method was used to collect data.

### **3.9.1 Brief Presentation of Participants**

A total of 29 participants were interviewed. 15 of these participants included girls who are young mothers who were confronted with the option of child marriage when they became pregnant. 14 other participants known as key informants, were also interviewed in the form of a focus group discussion and a key informant interview: these included the chief, village head men, one village head woman, and women from the mother group and regional child protection. The names referenced in the following chapters are pseudonyms with the intention of concealing true identities. Names of buildings such as schools and hospitals have also been altered in order to keep the specifics of the localities hidden.

### **3.9.2 Data Analysis**

#### **(i) Pre-analysis Process:**

Miles et al (p.78) point out that raw data must be processed before they are ready for analysis. My raw data comprised of field notes and recordings, so my first step in data analysis was the preliminary pre-analysis of processing the raw data. In doing so, all recordings from the audio recorder were transcribed into text on Microsoft word documents. The text was translated from Chichewa to English during the transcription. My field notes were converted into a formal write up. Miles et al (p.78) says that a formal write-up usually will add back some of the missing content because the raw field notes, when reviewed, stimulate the fieldworker to remember things that happened at that time that are not in the notes. The transcripts were read repeatedly and content was formulated as words, phrases and subjects that emerged from the interviews.

#### **(ii) Content Analysis:**

Content analysis is "any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of messages" (Holsri, 1968, cited in Berg, 2001, p. 240). Coding is a way of systematically identifying by segmenting data into themes, categories and patterns (Miles et al., 2013, p.90). Berg (2001, p.130) says that in content analysis researchers examine artifacts of social communication. In this case, my artifacts were transcriptions of recordings and formal write-ups. The words in the transcriptions and writes-ups were organized according to the themes, patterns and dissimilarities that emerged from this analysis. Descriptive codes representing overt and latent content were formed from the transcripts. The application of coding helped me to reduce the initial amount of data, which was quite large, into smaller elements for analysis. In discussing the functions of coding Miles et al., (2013, p.90) argues that it helps the researcher elaborate a cognitive map. This function was helpful for me because after coding I was able me to make more sense of and better navigate through the data. Inferences about the data was made from the different groupings and units of data for analysis.

In the study various theories are applied in interpretive analysis of the findings. These theories are discussed at length in the following chapter



## CHAPTER 4 – THEORETICAL FRAME WORK

*“I chose to get married. I agreed to marry him. So we started living together but he started being abusive so I saw it best to leave the marriage.” – Teresa, married at 16years old*

The role of theory in the study is to understand the empirical data by shedding new light over it. For this reason, the theoretical perspectives chosen for this study are influenced by, and emerge from the empirical data; hence raising the voice of adolescent mothers in Malawi. It is the stories shared by the participants during the data collection that have guided me to what theories would best present and explain their experiences. Post theories are among the relevant theories chosen for the interpretation of the findings in the study. The post theories applied in this study are post-structuralism and postmodernism. The applicable concepts emerging from these post theories are ‘subjectivity’ and ‘power’ as explained by Healy (2005) and Fook (2002). In this study understanding the subjective identities and power of adolescent mothers will be done in light of their changing experiences surrounding the phenomenon of child marriage. As the researcher, my expectation for the fieldwork, based on the knowledge gathered in the literature review, was that interacting with participants who have experienced child marriage would be a heavy and daunting task. However, on the contrary, regardless of the problems and abuse that the participants have faced pertaining to early pregnancy and child marriage, my interaction with them was rather light. This is why postmodern theory is fittingly applied to this study because postmodern theory questions the dominant rational to social phenomenon such as child marriage. Similarly, post-structural theory is also applied because of its focus on deconstruction which paves the way for multiple rationales of child marriage to be uncovered.

Another theoretical perspective that is useful for the analysis process is *the Social Construction of Reality* by Berger and Luckman (1966) as explained by Wallace and Wolf (2006). This theory brings out the empirical data by highlighting how adolescent mother’s interaction with societal structures and social groups play a role in the continuous nature of shared knowledge construction. Applying this theory to the study is useful for understanding how the personal, objective experiences of adolescent mothers in Malawi simultaneously have socially constructed subjective meanings. In addition, the strengths perspective, the concept of social labeling, and ‘doing gender’ by West and Zimmerman (1987) shall also be applied in the empirical chapters for analysis.

## **4.1 Post Theories (Postmodern and Post-Structural)**

**4.1.1 Post-structuralism:** Post-structural thinking is most associated with the work of social theorists such as Derrida and Foucault (1990). In this study, post-structuralism refers to ideas concerned with the construction of power and identity in relation to social phenomenon not being confined to one structure such as gender or race, but rather having multiple perspectives subject to changing situations (Fook, 2002; Healy 2005; Ritzer, 2008; Wallace and Wolf, 2006). Post-structuralism places much attention on the importance of language in the construction of reality, identity, knowledge and power within any context (Healy, 2005). The theory sees language as being influential because language is the medium through which we understand other people's experiences as well as share our own experiences to others. In addition to language being a medium or a vehicle of reality, post-structuralism also asserts that language helps shape reality. By this, post-structuralism demonstrates that language is powerful in society and culture as discourses shape how social concepts such as power and identity are dominantly understood. This is the major contribution of post-structuralism to this study; it is applied to the social structures of identity and power in understanding the experiences of adolescent mothers surrounding child marriage. The concept of 'discourse' in post-structuralism refers to 'the language practices through which we understand reality' (Healy, 2005). Discourse or language is not fixed therefore, post-theorists, most famously Derrida, use the method of deconstruction for analyzing discourse (Fook, 2002). Deconstruction often exposes perceptions that are different from what dominant discourse represents. In analyzing the experiences of adolescent mothers, the study applies Derrida's focus of deconstruction to social closure and homogeneities in order to uncover hidden experiences of power and identity (Ritzer G, 2008, p.479). To deconstruct is to de-center from dominant discourse and to unsettle their expectations. For this study this means locating the adolescent mothers in positions of power and fluid identities that have not been explored as presented by dominant discourse in existing literature on child marriage. Ritzer (2008) points out that 'postmodernism rejects grand narratives by asserting that there is no essential narrative, only different narratives in various positions in contemporary discourse formations.' The topic of adolescent motherhood and child marriage have been represented in a dominant way in existing data sources, but by applying post-structural thinking to elements of postmodernism, the study explores various other formations of the same narrative (Fook, 2002). In the capacity of post-structural thinking, discourse is viewed as being relative to situations and subjective position; therefore, multiple perspectives to a single

social phenomenon are assumed (ibid). Post-structuralism's emphasis of the relativity and discontinuity of discourse, avoids the risk of otherwise ignoring the fluid nature of the identities that contribute to how adolescent mothers experience child marriage. This is important for this study because in raising the voice of adolescent mothers, the experiences that are voiced may be largely similar in some regard, yet because of the changing processes of power and identity, the stories differ in other regards.

Arising from the use of post structuralism, this study also employs the theory of postmodernism because post-structuralism is what has laid the groundwork for the development of postmodernism.

**4.1.2 Postmodernism:** Postmodern thinking touches on theories concerning society, culture and history, nevertheless, postmodern theory is renowned for being considerably diverse in its positioning. However in this study the application of postmodernism can be traced to the theory's strongest position which is relativism. Postmodernism attempts to eliminate all barriers to human authenticity by focusing on truth and reality as being relative concepts that cannot be restricted to structural barriers such as class and power (Brownlee et al., 2010; Wallace and Wolf, 2006). As a result postmodernism argues that reality is not of a unitary or singular rationale; rather, reality is of a plural and subjective nature (Wallace and Wolf, 2006). A key aspect of the empirical data that influenced the use of postmodern theory for this study is the individual experiences of the adolescent mothers surrounding the shared phenomenon of child marriage. Hearing similar experiences from a number of perspectives provides a rich variety for the plural realities of the single phenomenon of child marriage. Healy (2005, p.196) mentions that 'postmodernists focus on understanding local identities and complexities, such as the diverse experiences of people within a community, rather than trying to construct a single story or narrative about an event or a population.' Therefore, by applying the postmodern theory, the study commits itself to a position of relativity. This is especially useful in for discerning the differences in the experiences of power and identity of adolescent mothers in Malawi that would otherwise be ignored (Healy, 2005).

### **4.1.3 Subjectivity**

Identity, which is also known as 'subjectivity', is a key concept in post theories since it is understood as being (i) multiple and (ii) subject to change. While mainstream structural conceptions place identity into fixed social structures, such as race, post theories recognize that identity is not fixed because it is subject to change depending on individual experiences and

contexts. Through changing experiences and contexts, individuals participate in creating their identities and this construction is socially influenced. Fook (2002) suggests that understanding identities as changing has the potential to empower individuals with disempowering identities such as those with marginalized ‘victim’ identities. Postmodern and post-structural perspectives also recognize that identity is multiple and contradictory because it is subject to the context (Fook, 2002; Healy, 2005). Applying this concept of co-existing identities could expose unexpected identities of the adolescent mothers in this study as being for instance, both victims of child marriage as well as those who perpetuate child marriage.

Post theorists propose that there is a non-unified reality therefore, we must challenge conventional positioning (Wallace and Wolf, 2006). Through the lens of post theories, this study is able to understand a person’s sense of self in terms of subjectivity or provisional identity. Post theories put forward the concept of provisional identity because identity is a non-fixed categorization provisional to differing experiences, changes, contexts and backgrounds (Fook, 2002). Therefore, identity cannot be locked into a fixed categorization. This is applicable to the adolescent mothers of this study because of the shifting nature of their situations, interactions and experiences. In recognizing that one’s sense of self – identity - is not a stationary reality, postmodernists use the term ‘subjectivity’ as a more accurate description of ‘identity’, because the term ‘subjectivity’ conveys the changes and negotiations of identity from context to context (Healy, 2005). Similarly, the adolescent mothers in this study showcase changing identities subject to their social setting, age, parental status marital status and other such changes. Given these influencing fragmentations, I find it important to acknowledge and study the adolescent mother’s fluid identities by giving attention to the subjectivities that affect their experiences. Post theories assert that identities are socially constructed through language, as such differences do exist within common social groups such as women or adolescent mothers (Healy, 2005). In addition to constructing identities, subjectivities also construct power.

#### **4.1.4 Foucault’s Approach to Power**

Postmodern and post-structural thought challenges the structural perspective which represents power as a structural concept. By contrast, post-structuralism says that power is everywhere (Healy 2005; Fook 2002). Post-structural views of power stem from Foucault’s approach to power which can be summarized as: (i) power is experienced and exercised, (ii) power is repressive and reproductive, and (iii) power comes from the bottom up (Fook, 2002, p.52). In effect, post-

structuralism and postmodernism do not situate the concept of power within social structures; consequently, power is viewed as being exercised by all people irrespective of social class. The understanding of power as bottom-up means that power is expressed even at the bottommost local levels among disadvantaged groups. This assertion brings an important element to this study because focus will be given to how power is potentially exercised and expressed even among socially recognized 'powerless' groups such as adolescent mothers.

Foucault's approach to power provokes a decentering in analysis from dominant perspectives that are unconscious to the possibility of groups such as women, young mothers and victims of child marriage exercising power. The topic of power among marginalized groups such as women, young mothers and child brides is dominantly narrated as powerlessness and oppressive from a structural and anti-oppressive theories (Healy, 2005). In contrast, Foucault's approach to power empowers marginalized groups by conceiving that the reproduction of power occurs at micro-contexts of social relations as much as it does at macro-structural levels (ibid). Applying this concept of power to the study ignites a consciousness to everyday expressions of power that would otherwise be overlooked. Simply seeing adolescent mothers as powerless groups subject to the structural practice of child marriage does not empower them. On the contrary, applying Foucault's approach to power may allow the formation of an alternative narrative towards empowering adolescent mothers who have experienced child marriage.

Fook (2002, p.52) says 'different contexts may influence the type of power, and how it is exercised.' Thus the study will focus on different ways that power is exercised and how power is produced by adolescent mothers in the context of child marriage in Malawi. Given that the adolescent mothers of this study voice personal experiences in changing contexts, there is potential to appreciate how power expressed and what types of power are potentially produced by adolescent mothers in everyday relationships.

#### **4.2 The Social Construction of Reality**

The phenomenological position of the Social Construction of Reality by Berger and Luckmann (1966) focuses on how knowledge becomes socially constructed as reality. The social constructivist interpretation of reality is that there exists a social order or a social structure through which individuals experience everyday phenomena (Wallace and Wolf, 2006, p.286). Observations are, therefore, a reflection of the society because objective experiences are

subjectively meaningful. Lock and Strong (2010, p.7) put it this way; “ways of meaning,-making, being inherently embedded in social-cultural processes, are specific to particular times and places.” Individuals within a society have a shared reality that is experienced through objective actions and interactions. By subjective reality, the theory is talking about a shared reality, understanding, meanings and concepts, so that as social actors we do not have to reiterate socially accepted knowledge every time we meet. In other words, the social construction of reality ascribes a macro-sociological base to the everyday micro human actions. In this theory, Berger and Luckmann (1966) take social interaction and the reality of everyday life, which encompasses common sense knowledge or taken-for-granted knowledge, as the objects of our analysis (Giddens 2009; Wallace and Wolf, 2006). Attention is given to social interaction because human action is carried out in an “inter-subjective world, a world that I share with others” (Berger and Luckmann cited in Wallace and Wolf, 2006, p.286).

Considering the everyday experiences of the adolescent mothers in this study, Berger’s and Luckmann’s Social Construction of Reality builds a bridge between their subjective actions and, and the social processes that create a shared meaning to their individual experiences. The empirical data of this study has influenced the use of the theory of the social construction of reality for analysis because, the experiences of the adolescent mothers are not independent of their social world. For this reason it is important to understand the social contexts within which these adolescent mothers experience social phenomena such as child marriage. There is a relationship between how these young mothers experience and negotiate social roles, such as gender roles, and how those roles are socially defined.

The theory emphasizes that society is a production of individuals and individuals are a production of their society. As stated by the theory, the construction of socially accepted knowledge is done in three steps: externalization, objectification and internalization (Wallace and Wolf, 2006). To understand the first step, externalization, let’s consider the phenomenon of child marriage. In line with the theory, marriage is a social production that is created and maintained because it is both external to and produced by individuals within society. This may account for why some girls, when they become pregnant in their childhood, willingly opt for child marriage. The social construction of reality says that individuals are collaborators in the production of social reality (ibid). To that effect, the study also looks at adolescent mothers as active producers capable of acting on their own environment. Are adolescent mothers willing collaborators in the creation of the social reality

of their experiences in child marriage simply because they want to avoid an alternative reality (e.g. poverty)?

The second step is objectification. Objectification is when individuals apprehend reality as being imposed upon them, that is, they apprehend everyday experiences as being supposedly independent of the people who experience them (Wallace and Wolf, 2006). Objectification of social reality could explain why girls feel that they have no choice pertaining to their outcome and experiences in child marriage. Some girls feel that they *must* act a certain way in marriage, for example drop out of school. Yet still, some girls feel that they do not have a choice in the experiences that they *must* endure situations such as domestic violence. To that end, the study will look at how adolescent mothers bestow a certain social order on their everyday experiences in child marriage.

The third step in the construction of reality is internalization which is similar to socialization because in this step the social world becomes known in common with others (Hughes and Sharrock, 2007). This explains why the theory asserts that social reality does not exist independently of objective experiences because through internalization there is a symmetry between subjective reality and objective concepts (Wallace and Wolf, 2006). In the moment of internalization, Hughes and Sharrock (2007, p.246) says, reality, however it is defined, is defined that way 'because of processes of interpretation or definition work, not because of their own intrinsic character - for, sociologically speaking, they have no such character.' This is compatible and applicable to this study in trying to make sense of the adolescent mother's realities such as: school dropout, early pregnancy, child marriage and their experiences such as domestic and economic abuse. This concept of internalization yields quite different ways of understanding their experiences, as opposed to being fixed on intrinsic characteristics; the theory locates social influences on the observable outcomes of their experiences. As Lock and Strong, (2010, p.7) put it, 'our ways of making sense to each other are constructed to yield quite different ways of being ourselves' Applying this theory enables me not to overlook, nor to regard as 'truth,' the broader processes and social forces (for example patriarchy) through which reality is constructed.

#### **4.3.1 Strengths Perspective**

The strengths perspective is a collaborative approach to social work practice that focuses on the respect and self-determination of individuals. Although first founded in the field of mental health, the strengths perspective applies very well to social work practice because it is consistent with

social work ideals such as empowerment (Healy, 2005). For this reason, the study shall apply the strengths perspective as a theory to analyze the findings of this research. The outcome of the strengths perspective draws on the individual's strengths and not on their struggles; on future dreams not past challenges and; on capacities and not incapacities. As such, it takes a critical disposition from the traditional approaches which are problem-centered in trying to overcome challenges, these traditional approaches often look to what is lacking in a person as opposed to what capabilities are present (Tong, 2011).

The strengths perspective is grounded on certain underlying principal assumptions, these are: firstly, that all people possess strengths and capacities and all environments have resources (Healy, 2005). Secondly, that people have capable knowledge to determine their own situation and solution (Early and GlenMaye, 2000). Thirdly, prominence should be placed on a person's strengths as well as a cooperative exploration approach with the person (De Jong and Miller, 1995). And thus fourthly, social workers should collaborate with the individual in order to achieve quality of life (Healy, 2005). Applying these principal assumptions to the adolescent mothers in this study is useful because it orients the analysis toward a strength focus even when looking into subjects such as the harmful experiences in the practice of child marriage. Tong (2011) and Eimers (2012) point out that cultural strengths and environmental resources are also given preeminence in the strengths' perspective. This is applicable for the study given that culture and social setting are important influencers in how adolescent mothers face and cope with various experiences in child marriage. Therefore, applying the lens of the strengths perspective to this study can enhance the awareness of strong attributes of both the participants as well as the collaborative cultural resourcefulness in handling and overcoming experiences in child marriage.

#### **4.3.2 Social Labeling**

As a practice approach the strengths perspective has been influenced by work on resilience and empowerment, and by Goffman's work on social labeling. In the lines of resilience, healing, and sensitivity to language, the strength's perspective is relevant for the study given that adolescent mothers who have been in child marriages have experience in such things. Given that the strengths perspective encourages a sensitivity to language, this study, to a small extent, shall look at language through social labels. Social labeling theory looks at the labeling perception on deviance by concentrating on the ways in which society singles out certain behaviors to be deviant (Kraut, 1973). Although prominently applied in the sociology of deviance, McConnell-Ginet (2003) say



that social labeling theory offers a window into the construction of gendered identities and social relations. When a person is labeled a certain way, for example 'deviant,' to some degree that label becomes a cognitive influence of that person's self-concept (Kruat, 2003). Social labeling practices that for example, potentially deemphasize women's status, are a reinforcement of social relations, identities, and social practices (McConnell-Ginet, 2003). This study applies 'social labeling' as a concept, not necessarily to look at the effect of labeling, but more so in order to bring attention to what negative labels exist for adolescent mothers and, from whom those labels are expressed. In other words, social labeling is applied to guide the analysis to be more attentive to the language or labels used toward the adolescent mothers in this study.

#### **4.4 'Doing gender' by West and Zimmerman (1987)**

Gender is a very present issue not only within the study subject of this research but also in the everyday experiences of all people. Gender is important to this study because creating and maintaining a marriage involves an ongoing interaction between two genders – man and woman, or in the case of child marriage, between boy and girl. Therefore, the analysis of this study draws on West and Zimmerman's (1987) perspective of gender in relation to the identity and roles of adolescent mothers in child marriage. According to the sociological understanding put forward by West and Zimmerman (1987), gender is a recurring interactional 'doing' by men and women. Meaning that fundamentally gender encompasses roles and conduct within interactional institutional arenas. This is useful in explaining the experiences of adolescent mothers in child marriage because of the presence of gender roles for girls and women in marriage as well as other social institutions. This perspective gives the study leeway to see how gender is displayed by adolescent mothers in child marriage. In addition to applying the perspective of gender in connection to roles and interaction between men and women, the study also uses the understanding of gender as an identity. West and Zimmerman (1987) say that men and women re-currently 'doing' gender is fundamental to the understanding of gender, but they too acknowledge that gender is also what one is, i.e. identity. Gender – masculinity and femininity - is what one is because it is a socially constructed identity created to differentiate between men and women. As previously mentioned earlier in this chapter, postmodern and post-structural theories will be used in the analysis of identities of the participants of this study. In addition to post-theories, applying West's and Zimmerman's (1987) perspective of gender will enable the study to analyze gender as

a shared and ever-present identity among the adolescent mothers of this study, and what this entails in the context of child marriage.

## **CHAPTER 5 – TAKEN FOR GRANTED KNOWLEDGE: THE PARTICIPANT’S EXPERIENCES OF HOW THEY GOT INTO CHILD MARRIAGE**

For all the participants that took part in this study and in all the sites where this study was conducted, it was widely conventional that child marriage is the socially accepted response for teenage pregnancy. Owing to this interconnectedness between child marriage and teenage pregnancy, the participants of this study were separated into two groups as follows: (1) adolescent mothers who have been married, and (2) adolescent mothers who have not been married. Out of the 15 adolescent mothers who participated in this study, 4 of them had never been married before. This chapter mainly gives attention to the first group: adolescent mothers who have been in child marriage. I discuss and analyze their experiences in light of the theories presented in chapter four. But first this chapter starts by looking at why child marriage is a likely contender for unmarried adolescent mothers in Malawi.

### **5.1 Identifying Participants at Field Work Stage: Miscommunication or Misunderstanding?**

In chapter three, the methodology chapter of this thesis, I mentioned that the initial sample population of this study was Malawian girls in child marriage. However, once I began my fieldwork, further facets of the phenomenon of child marriage were discovered. When I asked gatekeepers, such as the school matron and head teachers, to help me identify girls in child marriage, I was easily linked to young mothers who had never actually been married at all but had only gotten pregnant at 18 years old or younger. When this happened more than once with different people at different schools, I began to question myself: *am I miscommunicating? Or do we have a misunderstanding of ‘child marriage’ and ‘teenage pregnancy’?* What quickly became apparent to me is that in Malawi child marriage can very rarely be separated from teenage pregnancy. I noticed this because during the FGDs, I learnt that traditionally it is expected that if a girl falls pregnant outside the context of marriage, then, regardless of her young age, she is expected to marry the one who got her pregnant. The social construction of reality theory explains that shared meaning and understanding are when two people are speaking the same social language and in so doing providing a different quality of social experience from two people who do not speak the

same social language (Lock and Strong, 2010). It was apparent that I was not fluent in the ‘social language’ that was spoken in the social contexts at the research sites, but this worked as a strength because it enabled me to easily identify any taken-for-granted knowledge.

Throughout the field work, from identifying participants, to collecting data from the narratives that ensued from the FGD, it was commonly shared knowledge that if a boy or a man impregnates a girl, then that girl’s parents were expected to give the girl to the man or boy for marriage. Berger and Luckmann (1966) discuss a person’s internalization of social roles, norms and values as being one of the processes in the social construction of reality (Wallace and Wolf, 2006). Through internalization, a person is incorporated into the taken-for-granted social reality of their society. The people I encountered at the research sites had internalized that girls who become pregnant in their teenage years must marry the one who impregnates them. This is taken-for-granted knowledge because the people at the research sites expected me to have their shared knowledge and understanding of child marriage and teenage pregnancy. Berger and Luckmann (cited in Wallace and Wolf, 2006, p.290) explain internalization by saying that “man is a social product.” Such knowledge is internalized through specialized social institutions such as the family institution. For this reason, most parents of the participants of this study were not opposed to giving their underage daughters into child marriage. One key informant confirmed this when she said:

*Religious leaders said that ‘We are the religious sector so if parents bring their children to be married by us we recognize that those parents have consented for their children’s marriage, therefore we indeed went ahead and officiated the marriage of their children’*

According to Malawi’s constitutional law prior to February 2017, it was indeed lawful for children below 18 years old to be married *if* their parent consented. This shows that to some extent, this taken-for-granted knowledge was held even at constitution level. However, this study did find that regardless of this taken-for-granted knowledge, not all child marriages in Malawi go unquestioned.

## **5.2 I Am Pregnant, Now What? – Child Marriage: The Objectified Social Reality for Pregnant Girls**

In this chapter I discuss the social expectations for pregnant girls in Malawi with the help of Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) social construction of reality theory. In the FGDs, I asked the participants to explain what they experienced once they became pregnant. The participants faced limiting and limited choices as a consequences of getting pregnant outside marriage. It also became very clear

that they had all faced a high risk of child marriage because this was the typical remedy for girls who become pregnant outside of marriage. This is what Pilirani said:

*I got pregnant and this disappointed my parents. So they forced me to get married. But when my parents were forcing me to get married, the traditional authority did not agree that I should get married. At this time the boy who impregnated me was insisting that I marry him. He was 20 years old. And because my parents felt like I had added a burden to their lives, the traditional authority ended up agreeing with my parents that I could get into the marriage.*

Pilirani was 16 years old and in primary school when she was forced into child marriage. Malawi is a very traditional society where the social values concerning pregnancy or childbearing are that childbearing occurring within the context of the marriage institution is the social norm (Munthali et al., 2004). Thus teenage pregnancy, although not the only driver for all cases of child marriage in Malawi, is certainly significant. In Pilirani's case, I observed that once becoming pregnant outside marriage, she was forced into child marriage as a 'duty-based' consequence or remedy for pregnancy outside context of marriage. By 'duty-based' I mean that the child marriage was carried out because it was the Pilirani's socially acceptable appeasement for bringing shame to her family by getting pregnant outside marriage, or as Pilirani puts it, "[for having] *added a burden to their [her parents] lives.*" Therefore, by being forced into child marriage, this adolescent mothers was given a chance to remedy her wrong. Similarly Maya said:

*To be honest, I only got into that marriage because things had taken a wrong turn. But for me personally it wasn't what I wished. The thoughts that I had about my future ... It's only that things turned bad [getting pregnant] that I am in this marriage. But if I hadn't, I would have been in school...*

Both Maya and Pilirani got into child marriage not because it was something they wanted to do, rather it seems like it was something they *had* to do. Drawing from the social construction of reality theory, which puts forward that a lockstep mentality demonstrates that roles and institutions can be well reified, I identify the child marriages in this study as being 'duty-based' marriages (Wallace and Wolf, 2006). This categorization helps me see that child marriage has been internationalized as a 'duty' or a right response for teenage pregnancy. For Pilirani and Maya, this internalization in turn minimized the choices available to them once they got pregnant outside marriage. In addition

to ‘duty-based,’ I also categorize the child marriages in this study as ‘peer marriages’ because I want to bring to attention that only two out of the 15 participants had gotten married to men who were more than five years above their age. All the other participants who entered into child marriage were approximately the same age with their husbands. Contrary to Pilirani and Maya, Belinda had a different experience when she became pregnant at 14years old. This is what she shared:

*I had had sex with a boy and I had not gotten my period since then. My younger mother [mother’s sister] told my mother about this and together they sat me down to say, “Now that this has happened to you, you need to make a choice between two options: you can either choose to get married, or you can choose to have this baby and then return to school.”*

*I asked them to give me two days to think over it. After those two days I had made my choice: “I cannot handle marriage, I am not ready. I had sex but I did not know what the implications of sex would be. So I choose not to get married. I want to go back to school.” My parents accepted my decision.*

I find Belinda’s account about her mother’s and aunt’s response to her pregnancy important for my analysis. Belinda’s mother’s response presented only two options available: *either* marriage, *or* continuing with education. Her mother’s choice of language in presenting the two options implies that it was not possible for Belinda to choose both marriage *and* to continue with her education. When Belinda’s mother presented the only two options of ‘either’ and ‘or,’ Belinda was faced with the objective social reality of the singularity of choice for pregnant girls. Therefore, it is through language that people communicate to each other their understanding of reality because as Wallace and Wolf (2006, p.288) put it this is “the role of language in maintaining common objectivations.” Berger and Luckmann (cited in Wallace and Wolf, 2006, p.288) describe objectivation as a step in the construction of reality when “the reality of everyday life appears already objectified, that is, constituted by an order of objects that have been designated as objects before my appearance on the scene.” Objectivation is reflected in Belinda’s situation because before Belinda had gotten pregnant – her ‘appearance on the scene’ so to speak – it was designated that in this society pregnant girls must either choose to marry, or choose not marry and return to school. Similarly for Maya and Pilirani, to be forced into child marriage was an objective reality that had already been designated before their ‘appearance on the scene.’

In recognizing the role of language in the objectivation of reality, I find it important to analyze how the participants responded to language that communicated marginalization and parental rejection. This analysis done in the following section.

### **5.3 Responding To Parental Rejection: The Power of Language over the One Who Is Labelled**

As the participants told their stories, they often brought up the fact that they felt that child marriage was not the life that they wanted and that they wished to return to school. Many of the adolescent mothers mentioned verbal rejection from their parents as reasons why they deferred to, and remained in child marriage. For instance Agatha, said:

*My parents were disgusted by my pregnancy so they chased me from home, so I entered into a marriage.*

Annie was 14 years old when her parents chased her from home. Chased from home and carrying language such as *disgusted by my pregnancy*, she entered into a child marriage with the 18 year old boy who got her pregnant. Another adolescent mother, Edith, who was 20 years old when she got pregnant and was forced into marriage, said this:

*... I got pregnant, and my parents saw this as a reason to chase me from home because they said that I have wasted a lot of their money. So when I told my husband about this, that's when we accepted each other and I started to live with him like a marriage.*

In explaining how they ended up in child marriage, the participants found it necessary to mention their parents disapproved of their teen pregnancy because the participants made mention of disempowering language like, as Edith said, *I have wasted a lot*. The participant's choice to share their stories by emphasizing on some of the negative language used toward them, functioned as a justification for why they consented to child marriage, and it also suggests that they would not have consented to marriage had they not been verbally offended and chased from home. In this case the negative labels pinned on Agatha and Edith through their parent's disapproval coerced Agatha's and Edith's consent for marriage. In other words choosing child marriage under such conditions is not voluntary consent, rather it is coerced consent. This is why it is important for social work to be sensitive to language. The strengths perspective, owing to its sensitivity to the power of language, focuses on strengths regardless of problems in order to separate the person from the problem in a way that stigmatization cannot (Healy, 2005). Interestingly enough, parents

may in fact only essentially disapprove of the sexual behavior that leads to teenage pregnancy while not fundamentally disapprove the girls themselves. But their lack of sensitivity to language fails to separate this.

Another participant, Walani, said:

*I have seen a lot of hardship. When I would try to run away for refuge at my mother's place, he [husband] would not let me go because he would say "she is the same mother who agreed that you should be in this marriage in first place"*

Walani was 17 years old when she married the 22 year old man who impregnated her. Here, her account reveals another way that adolescent mothers respond to parental rejection – by justifying why they should remain in child marriage. For Walani, being reminded that her mother was the reason that she was in child marriage in the first place, functioned as a justification for why she had to stay in child marriage and could not run back to her mother even when things gotten hard. Interestingly enough Agatha, Edith and Walani remained in child marriage and did not return home until the chief heard of their cases through the regional mother group and then terminated these child marriages. Kaplan and Girard (cited in Healy, 2005, p.158) say that “people are more motivated to change when strengths are supported... [This] creates a language of strength, hope, and movement.” This helps understand why some adolescent mothers do not seek help out of child marriage even when they are having bad experiences. When girls become pregnant outside marriage and the outcome of that pregnancy is rejection and shame from their parents, the focus is directed to their deficits rather than to their ever-present capabilities. For Agatha, Edith and Walani who became pregnant outside marriage, hearing language of rejection from their parents meant living demotivated to improve their situation by failing to seek help when their marriages became harmful and unhealthy. Incidentally, the choice for remaining in child marriage is rather suggestive of how adolescent mother's parents react to their teenage pregnancies. This is because language that connotes marginalization, stigma and rejection imposes difficulties for the person who is labelled. In this case labelling kept Agatha, Edith and Walani deferent or submissive to the practice of child marriage.

## CHAPTER 6 – EVERYDAY LIFE IN CHILD MARRIAGE: NEGOTIATING ROLES, IDENTITY AND POWER

*“One doesn’t find herself fitting well into all those roles; you feel humbled and intimidated.” –*

*Pilirani, married at 16 years old*

As explained in the previous chapter, out of the 15 adolescent mothers who participated in this study, 11 of them have been married before. These 11 participants entered into child marriage when their parents learnt that they were pregnant. Having examined how some of these participants ended up in child marriage in chapter five, in this chapter I now turn to analyzing the different experiences that the participants faced as an outcome of entering into a new context – child marriage. As mentioned in chapter four, I shall use postmodern and post-structural theories, ‘doing gender’ by West and Zimmerman (1987) and the social construction of reality theory. The participant’s experiences include taking on new roles which encompass identity changes and micro-level manifestations of power. Through personal stories about the experiences in child marriage the participants talked about: violence and abuse, denied access to education, troubled relations with in-laws, financial problems and health issues.

### **6.1 Enduring Domestic Violence: The Unassuming Dimensions of Power**

Violence against women is a global endemic that is present in every culture, age, and race. Violence against women can be defined in various ways given that its manifestation takes different forms. The United Nation’s (1993) definition includes gender-based roots; it says that violence against women is “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.” McMahon, Borg and Delaney (2010, p.43) defines violence as “violence includes direct physical attacks, verbal assaults, intimidation, threats, and manipulation.” Stemming from these two definitions, the definition of violence against women or girls in this study shall encompass, but is not limited to, any violence that is manifested against women or girls through domestic violence, economic abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse and psychological abuse.

Across the two research sites, all narratives from the adolescent mother’s told of experiences involving some form of violence in their marriage. Accounts of violence in child marriage were said to have ensued from financial problems, an overwhelming sense of responsibility by the husband, and the husband’s controlling tendencies. This is what Walani shared:



**Walani:** ... *I was experiencing problems in the marriage, for example sometimes he would beat me or he would not allow me to eat food even though we had both worked that day so it was my money too that had contributed to the purchase of food, yet he would not allow me to eat. When I would say to him that 'I should eat and I deserve to eat because I worked too today', he would beat me.*

**Interviewer:** *So why didn't you just eat your food while you were cooking?*

**Walani:** *Such thoughts don't even cross your mind. The thing is, I also had a little baby to think about. So how could I steal food when my little baby was with his dad? It would not work.*

Walani is now 18 year old and she has returned to school because she is no longer in child marriage. Upon first hearing Walani's story about physical abuse it is easy to perceive power from a structural perspective. For example, feminist thinking locates power within gender-based hierarchies that are in and at work to perpetuate male domination and female disadvantage (Gottfried, 2006). By applying feminist thinking here, power is recognized within the gender structures because the female in the story, Walani, is the one who is beaten by the male, her husband, in the marriage. Yet, in explaining why she endured abuse, Walani said, *the thing is, I also had a little baby to think about*. Foucault (1980, p. 119) argues that power is "much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression." Accordingly, there are positive dimensions of power. As Healy (2005, p.203) explains it, 'people submit to power because they gain something from their submission.' In Walani's case, by tolerating physical abuse in child marriage she was able to manipulate and maintain control over her son's health and safety. This shows that although Walani was relatively powerless to her husband because of the physical and verbal abuse that he showed her, Walani still exercised power through the decisions that she made to protect her young son.

Another experience about abuse in child marriage came from Teresa. Teresa's husband became very controlling when Teresa fell ill. This is what Teresa shared:

*He started being abusive when I fell ill. I told him that I need to go to the hospital but he refused. So I went to the hospital alone and returned with prescription medicine from the hospital. When I got home he threw my prescription medicine into the toilet. By doing this he annoyed me. So I told him that 'Even though I am ill, I am returning to my parent's*

*home because with them I am able to go to the hospital. I can get medicine.' I had malaria. I was three months pregnant that time.*

Teresa entered into child marriage when she dropped out of school at 16 years old after getting pregnant in her first year of secondary school. From the account that Teresa gives, I see that power can be produced in rather unassuming ways, for example here power was produced in the unassuming setting of a disempowering relational context. As demonstrated in her account, Teresa experienced disempowerment because her husband was controlling, yet at the same time Teresa's response to her husband's abusive treatment empowered her to take a stand by choosing to leave the marriage and return to her parents. Teresa now lives with her parents and at the time of the interview, she was re-enrolled into secondary education. The manifestations of power in Teresa's marriage reflect Foucault's argument that power is exercised and produced, not possessed. Both Teresa and her husband exercised power in this context – Teresa's husband exercised power through his control over Teresa. While Teresa exercised power by walking out of an abusive marriage; this is an unassuming expression of power in the context of child marriage, but an expression of power nonetheless. From this we see that on the less apparent relational and micro-level, there is still a production of power because 'power is something people use and create rather than simply possess' (Fook, 2002, p.52).

## **6.2 Role Playing: Gender Roles as A Way of 'Doing Gender' In the Context of Child Marriage**

Building upon the discussion above about the abuse and violence that the participants experienced in child marriage, I now turn to analyzing how gender is enacted as a sex category. West and Zimmerman (1987) put forward that in addition to being gendered, people also 'do gender'. This study analyses what 'doing gender' looks like for adolescent mothers in child marriage in relation to their socially constructed realities. I apply Berger and Luckmann's (1966) dialectical process of internalization to examine how the adolescent mothers do gender through their gender roles. As illustrated in chapter five, the adolescent mothers in this study showed deferent and subordinate dispositions when they complied with the practice of child marriage once becoming pregnant, or as discussed in section 6.1 the participants deferred to their abusive husbands once in child marriage. This interaction or role play between a deferring girl and an abusive husband is the 'doing' of gender.

It was widely held among the participants that abuse within child marriage was unsolicited and problematic; in section 6.1 Walani referred to abuse in child marriage when she said, *I was experiencing problems*. Similarly Teresa's words about the abuse she experienced were, *by doing this he annoyed me*. However, some participants, including Walani, were of the belief that encountering problematic experiences in marriage was nothing out of the normal. For example, this is what Walani and Edith said,

**Interviewer:** *So you would split **your** money with your husband, but you would not split the money that **he** had earned?*

**Walani:** *Yes this was the case, because he is the man, so the money is his. He would take out a little from his lot and give it to me, but the rest of it he would use it wherever he goes drinking alcohol.*

**Edith:** *It's so common for boys in these parts who get you pregnant not to attend to your needs very well. They usually run off to other girls.*

As mentioned in section 6.1, violence against women can be expressed through economic abuse. Here we see that Walani's and Edith's attitudes towards economic abuse are that, men or boys economically abusing women or girls is understandable because as Walani puts it, *because he is the man*. In analyzing these perceptions, the study finds that such attitudes among the participants reflects what doing gender looks like in this social setting. The interaction or role play of Walani deferring and submitting to economic abuse from her husband, is the 'doing of gender' so to speak. This doing of gender – the conduct in interaction between male and female – is ushered in by the participant's internalization of gender roles. Traditional African beliefs about the marriage institution have patriarchal undertones linked to gender roles involving the subjection of women to men because, the man is regarded as the head of the household. When Edith says, *'It's so common for boys in these parts ...'* I get the impression that within this social setting – *in these parts* – it is legitimized and maintained that women or girls do gender by respecting the male figure as the head of the household even if it means deferring to his economic abuse. Walani put this in her own words when she said, *'because he is the man, so the money is his.'* By internalizing this belief, Walani conforms to the social order when her gender role play is aligned with his belief. I now use Berger and Luckmann's (1966) internalization as I analyze Teresa's narration.

Hearing from Walani and Edith and analyzing their attitudes towards economic abuse shows that gender roles provide a way for doing gender. Turning now to hear from Teresa, the analysis shall illustrate that internalization of gender roles makes the participants question their own character when their 'doing gender' is supposedly done incorrectly. Teresa said:

**Teresa:** *I knew that I am a child because when my husband would talk to me I would get easily offended and, like my friend has said, I would just cry. I would cry over no good reason.*

**Interviewer:** *Maybe they were reasonable the things you cried over?*

**Teresa:** *It was small things. Like when my husband would tell me, "No, you should do this and this for me."*

**Interviewer:** *Do what things exactly?*

**Teresa:** *Like "you should clean my shoes." And I ended up not cleaning his shoes. So when he gets back home and he asks about his shoes and I say, "I was chatting [with friends] so I didn't get to doing it."*

*He'd say, "So is chatting a reason for you not to wash my shoes? You are rude/proud."*

*Then on account of that, I would start crying. I'd cry and cry until I got tired.*

All participants spoke of various expectations such as; cooking, cleaning, working part time jobs, caring for the family, and more. When Teresa found herself 'doing gender' incorrectly by not cleaning her husband's shoes as was asked of her, she cried because her husband labeled her as *rude/proud* for failing to attend to the task of cleaning his shoes. I interpret this response of crying as Teresa bringing herself to account when she assessed that she failed to do gender correctly. In the original language which is Chichewa, the word Teresa used to say what her husband said to her was 'wamata.' Independent of context, the closest literal translation of *wamata* is 'one who is extravagant or high-end.' However, it is not easy to translate *watama* in the context that Teresa applies it. I have used two words; *rude* and *proud*, in trying to capture the meaning of this word in English. From her narration, Teresa demonstrates that one's personal character is questioned as opposed to the social institution being questioned when one does not play the role correctly. Teresa failing to 'do gender' accordingly resulted in her husband calling her out for incorrectly doing gender because, she was *rude/proud*, which is quite the opposite of the expected way of 'doing

gender' by 'doing submission'. The social construction of reality theory says that when people participate in internalization they are complying with the beliefs and expectations imposed on them by the prevailing social intuitions (Wallace and Wolf, 2006). Teresa participated in the internalization of gender roles by not questioning the social institutions that constructs the gender roles but instead, by crying she convinced herself that it is her who is childish when she does not role play accordingly.

### **6.3 'School Dropout' Versus 'Re-Enrolled Student': Significant and Empowering Identity Changes**

In all the research sites, the adolescent mothers told stories of how they had experienced school dropout at one point or another. The reasons for school dropouts where teenage pregnancy and child marriage. When asked about life after child marriage, Maya said:

*When I see my friends in their uniform, I don't feel good, even till this day I still don't feel good.*

When I started the fieldwork for this study, I was a little apprehensive about discussing this very sensitive topic of child marriage. As I have already briefly explained in chapter four, I imagined that the discussions would be emotionally heavy and somber as the participants who had been in child marriage recalled some of the hard experiences they faced. But to my surprise, discussing experiences in child marriage turned out to be a lighter conversation than I expected. Even with heavy topics such as abuse, a majority of the participants spoke with a disposition of hope. Except for one participant, Maya. Maya was neither hopeful nor cheerful. Maya was the only participant who did not re-enroll into school after the termination of child marriage.

The post-structural perspective suggests that identities are not unified; identities are shaped by the subjectivities that people encounter (Healy, 2005). This means that although the participants of this study are identified as 'adolescent mothers,' this one identity does not unify how all adolescent mothers experience themselves and how they are experienced by others. Maya and Teresa were schoolmates, they both got pregnant as teenagers and they both adhered to the social norms by dropping out of school to get into child marriage. Eventually, Maya's marriage ended after five months and she returned home to live with her parents but she was not re-enrolled into school again. Teresa on the other hand, who also ended her marriage and returned to her parents, did re-

enroll to re-start school again. When asked about her life after child marriage, this is what Teresa shared:

**Interviewer:** *How would you assess your married life now that you are back in school?*

**Teresa:** *...I am living properly. And my parents disciplining me, which shows me that their love for me has not faded unlike my ex-husband, his love for me faded. So now my situation is better.*

I use Teresa's and Maya's contrasting attitudes of hope and optimism for my content analysis. Maya and Teresa's identities can be fragment according to their contexts, backgrounds, experiences and life changes. Teresa and Maya both experienced teenage pregnancy, school dropout, child marriage and domestic abuse, but unlike Maya, Teresa was re-enrolled into secondary school once her child marriage ended. The term 'situated subjectivity' is often used to interpret people's fragmented identities in light of their negotiated contexts (Fook, 2002, p.74). This negotiable nature of identity presents the possibility for contradicting identities to co-existence. Thus adolescent mothers such as Teresa and Maya can be identified as 'victims of child marriage' as well as 'survivors of child marriage.' When I compare what Teresa said with what Maya said, it is clear that although having experienced much of the same subjectivities, Maya lacks hope and speaks regretfully about her experiences in child marriage because she has not returned to school. Concerning life after child marriage Maya says '*I don't feel good, even till this day I still don't feel good.*' On the contrary Teresa said '*now my situation is better.*' By observation, the participants were more optimistic *because* they had returned to school. What Maya and Teresa demonstrate here is that subjectivities can be negotiated (for example from 'child bride' to 'free from child marriage') but it is the negotiation of certain subjectivities, in this case education, that validates and makes significant the other identities. In other words, terminating child marriage produces empowerment to the degree that it gives adolescent mothers access to girls education. This is not to say that adolescent mothers should not be freed from child marriage if they are unable to return to school, rather it is to emphasize that negotiating into the identity of 'student' was significant in producing optimism and hope as well as empowering the participants.

From Maya's story, and in fact from stories that ensued in all the FGDs, I observed that the adolescent mothers in this study esteemed girl's education as being something valuable especially during the time that they were in child marriage. As shown in the analysis, the participant's

identities and subjectivities were unfixed and thus negotiable. However, gender was an ever-present, non-negotiable identity for the participants of this study. Connecting the analysis in this section to the analysis in section 6.2, we can see that participants such as Maya, esteem doing gender under the identity of ‘educated’ as opposed to the identity of ‘non-educated.’

#### **6.4 I Am Not Roleplaying: Health Risks Encountered in Child Marriage**

One of the known harmful consequences of child marriage is that it increases health risks to girls. According to Nour (2009) one particular health risk for girls in child marriage is their increased risk for premature birth and neonatal death during labor and delivery. Teresa experienced a difficult delivery. Teresa gave birth after she had ended her marriage and had returned home to her parents. This is what Teresa said:

*As time went by I eventually gave birth to a still-born baby at Nthambi hospital. He was a baby boy. They had to send me to a bigger hospital so that I can have the D and C [Dilation and Curettage] process to clean the uterus lining. So I went through this process and I also received counselling where I was advised that, looking at what I had experienced one should be able learn about the evils of foolish behavior.*

Teresa had ended her marriage because of the ill treatment that her husband had shown her when she was pregnant and sick with malaria. Malaria during pregnancy has been recognized as a causal factor of low birth weight, and fetal mortality given that premature and false labour commonly occur in malarious mothers (Brabin, 1983). The UN definition presented at the start of this chapter in section 6.1 says that gender-based violence is, “violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women.” By this definition, Teresa’s husband’s actions fit the description of gender based violence because he threw her prescription medicine into the toilet, which likely resulted in Teresa’s harm. In addition, Teresa’s account about her birth experience that necessitated counselling, conveys physical and psychological suffering on her part.

Another participant who faced health risks in child marriage is Alinane. Alinane said:

*I am very happy with my life right now. ...because the way my physical appearance deteriorated during marriage was bad. I look physically better now. I used to look pitiful, I had a mark on my neck from the abuse.*

The participants spoke about harmful health incidents in child marriage with a tone of relief that they were no longer in a child marriage which was harmful to their health. Participants did not speak about health risks in the same manner that they spoke about gender roles. From this I gather that experiencing poor health is not something that is ‘role played’ as one would do with gender.

Maya said:

*During the marriage if he [husband] was fine, we would have good days. But if he was not fine, he would beat me. I reported all these experiences to my parents and I was advised by those who had been pregnant before that it is not good for a man to beat a pregnant person because it leads to misfortune. So that is when my parents asked me to return home.*

Maya had not been married for longer than five months when she ended her marriage. The process for terminating child marriage in Maya’s case simply meant returning home to her parents. I wondered then why didn’t Maya do this simple act of returning home all along? From her narrative I observe that Maya’s parents feared the health risks that would be harmful to both Maya and her unborn child as a result of physical abuse. This is why they asked her to come home.

## **CHAPTER 7 – TERMINATING CHILD MARRIAGES: SOCIAL DE-CONSTRUCTION AS GROUNDS FOR SOCIAL RE-CONSTRUCTION**

In the previous chapter I analyzed power and identity by discussing the ways that gender roles are legitimized through internalization. The analysis showed that the adolescent mothers in this study participated in constructing knowledge by ‘doing gender’ through social conformity in context of child marriage. But the participants were no longer in the context of child marriage at the time that the FGDs interviews were being conducted. All the adolescent mothers who participated in this study eventually ended their marriages in one way or the other, none of them lasted in child marriage for more than 3 years before termination. The reasons explaining why and how the child marriages came to an end, as well as what specific situations the adolescent mothers encountered for the termination of child marriages, shall be discussed and analyzed in this chapter.

### **7.1 Social De-Construction: The Termination of Child Marriage in the Backdrop of Social Order That Perpetuates Child Marriage**

In recent years, as awareness of the harms of child marriage have increased, the number of intervening actors in ending child marriage in Malawi has grown. Intervening actors are involved



directly or indirectly in roles that address either the drivers of child marriage or, in work that actively terminates already existing child marriages. In this study, traditional leaders played an influential role as intervening change agents by enforcing the termination of child marriages for most of the adolescent mothers who participated in this study. Unlike Teresa's and Maya's explanation in the previous chapter of how their child marriages ended, nine out of the 11 participants who were in child marriages, had their child marriages terminated through community intervention. Vitu shares her story of how change agents in her region freed her from child marriage:

*When the mother group heard that I dropped out of school and entered into marriage, they came to see my parents about this issue. And my parents confirmed that I was indeed married. So from there the mother group sought me out and found me at my married home. The women pulled me aside and told me that they will terminate this child marriage and if they fail they'll take the case to the mfumu [village headman] and to the chief Kachindamoto if necessary. "You are children, you have not reached marriageable age." But my parents insisted that I remain in that marriage and they continued to stand by this until my baby was born. When my baby was born that is when mother group came and said that I need to return to school and my marriage needs to be terminated. But my parents feared the group village headman, so my marriage was eventually terminated and so my husband left.*

My analysis reflects on the way that Vitu's marriage was terminated. As explained from her narration, it was not Vitu who took the initiative to end her marriage. It was the mother group who had to scout out her case in order to rescue Vitu from child marriage. When her case was identified, the mother group faced opposition as Vitu's parents insisted that she remain in child marriage. It is clear from Vitu's account that it was the fear and respect that Vitu's parent had for the group village headman that eventually made them allow for the termination of the child marriage. From this I understand why Vitu could not take the initiative to end the child marriage on her own, because in the absence of support from community leaders, her parents would not have allowed this marriage to be terminated. In Malawi, there is a high level of respect for traditional leaders. This shows that traditional leaders in Malawi, such as chiefs, have a lot of power in the regions where they are paramount.

Denise also spoke about the significant role that community leaders played in the termination of her marriage. She said:

*...some days, my husband would beat me; he was abusive to me. One day the women from the mother group came to my place and told me to end this marriage. But my husband refused, and his family and my family refused. It was such a big and difficult case that our story reached the group village headman. The group village headman came to discuss with us, up until Gogo [chief] came and personally ended the marriage herself.*

It did not concern Denise's parents that their daughter was experiencing physical abuse in child marriage. For Vitu, once her case reached the group village headman, the child marriage was terminated, but Denise gave the impression that her child marriage was very difficult to terminate because, the families involved only allowed for termination once the case was taken up to the chief. In terms of traditional authoritative power in Malawi, the rank is from group village head to traditional authority to paramount chief (Samati, 2013). Paramount chief is a position of power that is passed on within a royal family and the one who holds the position of chief is culturally referred to in the local language as *gogo* or *inkosi*. In Denise and Vitu's accounts they mention powerful authorities such as village headman and chief to convey the difficulty in ending their child marriages.

In order to understand why community intervention needed to occur through the action of traditional leaders to terminate child marriages, I analyze Vitu's and Denise's cases by considering the extent of their family's conformity to social order. In discussing the process of the social construction of reality, Berger (cited in Wallace and Wolf, 2006, p.291) talks about the role of religion by saying that "The actor becomes *only* that which is acted upon." I find that this statement about the role of religion can be applied in this study to the role of culture. Vitu's and Denise's cases demonstrate that, to the degree that traditional leaders question and oppose negative social norms and values that perpetuate harmful practices like child marriage – to that degree, can long internalized knowledge held by people within a social setting, be re-constructed. Therefore, in this cultural context, the traditional leaders are custodians of socio-cultural values and norms. In Denise's and Vitu's difficult cases, traditional leaders show that they have the potential to either maintain or change negative social norms. As mentioned in chapter five, it was socially constructed knowledge that if a girl gets pregnant outside of child marriage, she must be married. The

participants exposed that their parents refused to have their child marriages terminated and thus reveal that their parents were grounded in culture and sturdily adhered to social norms and beliefs that perpetuates child marriage. Looking at Denise's case in comparison to Maya's story in section 6.4, Denise's parents upheld this shared knowledge regardless of the abuse that their daughter was enduring in child marriage. When the mother groups intervened by scouting out child marriage cases, they functioned as a sort of 'questioning' of the social order and this initial step paved way for potentially deconstruction of the long held socially constructed knowledge that pregnant girls must be forced into child marriage.

## **7.2 Social Re-Construction: Building a Community System That Questions the Social Order**

For Denise's and Vitu's child marriages to be successfully terminated, I gathered that this was done through collaborative coordination. This coordination is clearly seen when the mother groups first took the cases to the group village headmen and then, if needed, the village headmen took that case to the next level of authority which is the chief. As the strengths perspective points out, interpersonal collaboration through the formation of community support fosters the improvement of one's quality of life and resilience (Healy, 2005). Stemming from the strengths perspective, I analyze the intervention through the mother group, village headmen, traditional authorities and chief, as a community support system that fostered the re-construction of the existing social order. Therefore, let us look at what ensued from the key informant interviews. The chief described how this community support system was built when she said:

*So I called on the ADC, Area Executive Committee, and we called NGO's, religious leaders, group-village-head people, and we all gathered together... I told them that I want child marriage to end... In the past people didn't speak directly to the chief but things changed when I came into power...*

*So in the year 2004 we wrote a memorandum of understanding but things were still not really changing... So together with the traditional authorities who were under my jurisdiction signed an agreement that I wrote ... By 2008 I noticed that I hadn't done things correctly. I needed to personally visit the group-village-heads and sensitize them... I met with custodians of culture first... I addressed negative traditions such as fisi, ku sasafumbi after chinamwali, and chidikilo... They argued with me over some of these things.*

The chief said *'I noticed that I hadn't done things correctly. I needed to personally visit... and sensitize them.'* How I interpret this statement is that if social construction happens at the point of internalization, then de-construction happens at a moment of externalization through sensitization. According to the social construction of reality theory, externalization is the dialectical process of reality construction (Wallace and Wolf, 2006). Therefore, when the chief said she met custodians of culture and intentionally *'sensitized'* and *'addressed negative traditions,'* she was essentially holding a meeting where long held beliefs could be deconstructed. I also noticed that the chief also said *'things were still not really changing'* and even after sensitization, the custodians of culture still *'argued with me over some of these things.'* So externalization is not just one moment, it is many moments that form a process of reconstruction.

In chapter five I spoke about the power of language over adolescent mothers in justifying why girls entered into, and remained in child marriage. Negative labels that carried parental rejection made Agatha, Edith and Walani feel like they had no choice but to get into child marriage. Compared to the community system built by the traditional leaders, parental rejection through statements such as *'[you] wasted a lot of their money,'* was a response to the participant's deficits, not their strengths. One of the key informants, a member of the regional child protection, acknowledged this when she said:

*Our job involves us searching for children because our efforts are toward sending children back to school. When girls are pregnant we try our best to visit those girls so that they can go to school. After the girl has given birth we visit her six months down the line, as this is part of our job as the child protection. When we visit the girls we try to get the girls to agree to return to school.*

This key informant's account is in line with the strengths perspective because, although not explicitly stated, the regional child protection's efforts to send the adolescent mothers back to school is done on the premise that all girls have capabilities and strengths. I see that this community support system was built on the basis of re-constructed labels of adolescent mother's by averting their focus from the adolescent mother's deficits to their future possibilities.

### 7.3 Resilience Against the Pressure to Re-Marry

The concept of resilience in the strengths perspective establishes that people's future capacities are not strictly predicated on their adverse life experiences (Healy, 2005). Having come out of child marriage, the participants in this study displayed a determined attitude about avoiding decisions that may harm their future in the manner that child marriage once did. For example Vitu said:

*I went back to school and now I have gone as far as form 4 [grade 12]. My ex-husband sometimes still tries to get back with me but my response to him is that, 'I am not going backwards, I am going forward.'*

Vitu's 'forward' looking attitude demonstrates one of the foundations of strengths perspective which is that, people can profitably gain from previous life events and people usually do not repeat the harmful events to which they experienced in their childhood (Saleeby, 1997 cited in Healy, 2005). I noticed that all the participants felt determined about not re-entering into child marriage because they spoke with certainty about how life is better outside of child marriage. One participant did however, give an opposing comment about remaining in child marriage if things had turned out differently. Alinane said:

*For me if all had worked well, I would not have thought of going back to school because money would already be available.*

In her statement Alinane connects 'all working well' with 'money being available'. By this she reveals that her great motivation is the end of poverty through financial security in her life. Although as discussed in previously in chapter six, Alinane had spoken about physical abuse experiences in child marriage, her statement here suggests that she was willing to place herself in any context, harmful or not, as long as it would cure her poverty. Poverty is therefore a major risk factor for girls in child marriage. Central to social work is the principle of social justice, therefore social work must uphold social justice by enhancing the wellbeing of adolescent mothers who are at high risk of child marriage when they are challenged by poverty. The implications of this study to social work shall be discussed further in chapter nine.

## CHAPTER 8 - RESILIENCE VS. MARGINALIZATION: ADOLESCENT MOTHERS WHO DID NOT ENTER CHILD MARRIAGE

So far in the analysis chapters I have given attention to participants who experienced child marriage. However, as explained in chapter three and five, it was important that this study look into other facets of child marriage by including adolescent mothers who did not get married. One of these participants, Belinda, has already been introduced in chapter five. The other three participants, Arise, Emily and Esme, shall be introduced here in this chapter. Although these four participants became pregnant outside marriage they avoided child marriage altogether. Nevertheless, even these participants narrated that child marriage was a strong contender once they fell pregnant because marriage is the socially acceptable response to teenage pregnancy. In the following sections I analyze what going against the norm looks like in a society where pregnant women are expected to marry. This shall be done by giving attention to how these four participants have been perceived by their families and others members of society. I also consider some of the major differences between them and the experiences of the girls who did get into child marriage.

### 8.1 Resilient or Marginalized? - Going Against The Norm of Child Marriage

In the previous chapter in section 7.3 I discussed Vicky's resilience against the pressure to re-marry and how her 'forward-looking' attitude was helpful in fighting the pressure to re-marry. We now turn to look at the kind of resilience that is required for adolescent mothers to avoid child marriage all together. The reasons that Belinda, Esme, Emily and Arise gave for not entering into child marriage are: their parents did not allow them to get married, they wanted to continue with their education, or they felt that they were too young and therefore unready for marriage. This is Emily's story:

**Emily:** *In my first term of form 1 [grade 9] I got pregnant. I ended up dropping out and I went a year without school but I hoped to return to school because I was still young. But my parents couldn't afford it. So since that time I have still been waiting for a chance to get back to school*

**Interviewer:** *Did you get married to the father of your child?*

**Emily:** *No, we didn't get married to each other.*

**Interviewer:** *Why not?*

**Emily:** *He had accepted responsibility for my pregnancy but my father did not allow for it [marriage] because my father said I would be re-enrolled into school.*

Emily's story stands out as being different from the experiences of participants such as Vitu and Denise. Unlike most of the participants discussed in the chapters above, Emily's experienced support and protection from her father after becoming pregnant in secondary school. Unlike the other participants, all the four girls who did not enter into child marriage were interviewed at the research site in Lilongwe. Lilongwe is a district in central Malawi with a population of 628,191 rural areas and 329,991 in the urban area (National Statistics Office, 2008). Lilongwe is also the capital city of Malawi however, a third of Lilongwe's population are estimated to be living in sub-standard settlements in areas that are characterized as urban-poor, rural or poor (Lindstrom, 2014). Some participants of this study, like Emily, come from rural Lilongwe. Yet still, Emily's narration implicitly reveals that child marriage was the socially acceptable norm even in this society too. I notice this when Emily says, '*but my father did not allow for [marriage].*' Emily's father had to take a stand for her so that she would not be forced into child marriage. For Arise, it was different, with regards to re-enrolling back into school, she had to take a stand for herself. This is what Arise said:

**Arise:** *While learning here I got pregnant in January in form 2 [grade 10]. My mom told me to drop out of school and that she wouldn't pay for my school fees anymore. I told her to just let me write my exams so that when I am strong and healthy after delivering the baby I can return to school.*

*My mom agreed with my proposal so I continued with school until I wrote my exams.*

**Interviewer:** *When you found out that you were pregnant was there an option that you would to get married?*

**Arise:** *When I got pregnant there were talk about going to leave me and marry me off at the boys. But the boy refused and didn't take responsibility for the pregnancy. But when the baby was born that's when he accepted responsibility.*

My interview with Arise was the one-on-one interview that managed to happen. At the time of this interview Arise was out of school and she brought her three month old baby along with her. The idea of pregnant girls taking a break from school is so that they can have time to deliver their

babies, nurse them, and allow for the young mother's body to heal. Arise and Emily's stories show that re-enrolling into school depends on how agreeable this option is with the parents.

Similarly, Esme, shared about the marginalization she experienced from her family and other people within her village. She said:

*They say some harsh things to me sometimes but I never resort to wanting to get married. If I wanted to get married I would, it's easy in this village. People sometimes tease us by saying that, "At your age why don't you just get married?" But I tell them that, "You are not God. I am waiting on the right time." So I just persevere.*

While Vitu's story in chapter seven exemplified resilience, Esme's story talks about perseverance. Both Vitu's resilience and Esme's perseverance convey a sense of looking toward the future, however I understand resilience as being connected to empowerment, as opposed to perseverance, which I see as being more connected to marginalization. What I notice from the way Esme tells her story is that within her society she positioned as being marginal or deviant from what is typical for girls of her age. Esme was 18 years old when became pregnant and dropped out of school. Esme now lives with her parents and she has not re-enrolled into school since dropping out. At the time of the interview which took place via FGD, when she remarked that people expect a girl of her age to be married, Esme was 20 years old. The impression given by Esme is that marriage is the social norm for adolescents. Therefore, it seems that within this social setting, single motherhood coupled with school dropout is a status that is likely to experience marginalization.



## **CHAPTER 9 - CONCLUDING DISCUSSIONS: UNDERSTANDING GENDER AND POWER IN ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD AND CHILD MARRIAGE**

This chapter discusses the findings of this study in light of the theoretical perspectives that were presented in chapter four. In addition, as stated in chapter seven, the implications of the research findings shall also be discussed in this chapter. Then finally, some recommendations for social work practice are put forward with the concluding remarks.

### **9.1 Gender as an Identity and a Role for Adolescent Mothers**

Gender is largely understood as the social and cultural differences between masculinity and femininity which are differentiated by the biological sex categories of male and female. Gender is “an aspect of what one is ... [and] it is something that one does;” therefore gender is an identity but fundamentally it is a role (West and Zimmerman, 1987, p.140). By using post-theories in chapters six, this study looked at the experiences of adolescent mothers by highlighting how they embody fragmented identities, and by explaining how their subjectivities are negotiated when their identities change over the course of time, influenced by life events. For example regarding marital status, the participant’s identities have so far changed from ‘unmarried’ to ‘married’ to ‘previously married.’ This study found that adolescent mothers in child marriage negotiated new identities and roles through life changing experiences such as school re-enrollment and child marriage termination as mentioned above. Amid the different combinations of subjectivities, the fragmentations of identities that were observed among the participants of this study were: mother, wife, young, adolescent, girl, married, victim of child marriage, survivor of child marriage, unemployed, employed, poor, student, and school dropout. Fragmenting or deconstructing is encouraged by the postmodern idea of identity which puts forward that the conception of self is multiple and changing (Fook, 2002).

I observed that gender is an ever-present identity for the participants of this study. The omnipresence of gender means that the participant’s other subjectivities provide displays for doing gender under a diverse set of situated subjectivities (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Fook, 2002). Furthermore, the participants demonstrated that negotiating identities altered their self-perceptions and attitudes. For instance, many participants shared how now that they are re-entrant students, they feel hopeful for a good future as compared to feeling hopeless. As one participant put it, she said she felt like she was ‘*settling in life*’ when she was a school dropout in child marriage. The study found that education status is a significant identity change for adolescent mothers. Bearing

in mind the case of one participant who had negotiated identities from ‘child marriage’ to ‘unmarried’ but she remained with the identity of ‘school dropout.’ Owing to this unchanged identity of ‘school dropout,’ this participant still carried a sense of disempowerment and lack of hope even after coming out of child marriage. On this premise the study sees education acting like a bridge for adolescent mothers in child marriage; it is a bridge between how they are currently doing gender, *who I am*, and the way they desire to do gender, *who I want to be*.

## **9.2 Objectivacation and internalization: understanding adolescent mothers as social productions**

The study found that the participants socially constructed realities were so well constructed or so well pre-arranged that when the adolescent mother’s found themselves falling short of doing gender correctly, they would call themselves to account rather than bringing to account the institutionalized social order. For example, pertaining to the gender expectation on the everyday domestic responsibilities of a wife, the participants admitted that they did not feel that they adequately sufficed. When asked about how they felt about the gender roles of simultaneously being both a wife and a mother one participants said: *One doesn’t find herself fitting well into all those roles, you feel humbled and intimidated*. And another said: *Sometimes I would just cry*. In line with such beliefs, gender roles within the marriage institution are internalized. In other words, every time the participants deferred to their abusive husbands, the social order which consists of gender norms and roles within the institution of marriage, is internalized by her and thus legitimized and maintained. By legitimized I mean that doing gender is assimilated to the extent that the adolescent mothers hold the role as *my own*.

All the participants spoke about the social expectation for unmarried pregnant girls therefore, in the empirical chapters of this thesis I discussed they ways that the practice of child marriage is perpetuated by the social order – social roles, norms and values – which are the shared knowledge that is internalized by members of the society. In chapter five we looked at the power of language and how it influences how adolescent mothers objectify and internalize the social reality. This is demonstrated in the participant’s limited choice mentality when for instance they give in and enter into child marriage under the pretense that ‘I have to do this because I have no choice.’ This analysis is built from Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) idea that people are social products, and the study points to the participant’s conformity to social order, even when it perpetuates harmful practices, as evidence of this.

### **9.3 Understanding Adolescent Mother's Expressions of Power in Child Marriage as a Source of Conformity**

Returning to the concept of power that was discussed in chapter six, the analysis, guided by Foucault's approach to power, found that the participants of this study, although being of a disempowered minority group, exercised power. For instance some participants of this study expressed power when they said *no* to entering into child marriage at the cost of social pressure and negative labeling from members of the society. Likewise, the participants who did marry, also demonstrated that power is not only in saying no; they expressed power by tolerating physical abuse from their husband's in order to protect their children. They produced power through submission and in so doing gained provision and protection for their babies. While recognizing that this level of leverage and unassuming expression of power in deference and submission appears to be a strength for adolescent mothers who are in child marriage, the study found that the power expressed when the participants submitted to abuse, is not parallel to the power that was expressed when their children's rights are realized. The participants submitting to their abusive husbands was in fact conformity to the gender roles and expectations of girls and women in society. Therefore, this dimension of power is a source of social conformity and thus a way of doing gender. The study observed that when participants were most empowered when their subjectivities were negotiated from 'victim of child marriage' to 'survivor of child marriage,' or from 'drop-out' to 're-enrolled student.' Having analyzed the production of power at the micro-level using Foucault's conception of power, it is indeed clear that power may not only be affixed to structures such as gender, however, this study found that adolescent mother's exercise greater power when they embody empowered identities. At the same time, regardless of the power that was produced in choosing not to leave or, choosing not to take action by doing something else, powerlessness was also produced. The study found that there was still a sense of powerlessness for the adolescent mother's; their powerlessness was attached to how they said they felt in child marriage. Yet still, analysis through Foucault's conception of power, enabled the study to give attention to something that is rarely seen - the unassuming ways through which power is exercised at the micro-level by the adolescent mothers in child marriage.

#### **9.4 Recommendations for Social Work and Conclusion**

Throughout the chapters of this thesis, there has been specific reference to the practice and profession of social work. For this reason, I now consider the implications of this qualitative study to social work practice.

Firstly, given that empowerment of people is highly advocated by social work, the study sought out the ways in which power was exercised by adolescent mothers in child marriage. This was done by applying postmodern and post-structural approaches of power and identity. The study finds the negotiable nature of identities presented by post-theories to be useful to social work – a practice based profession that seeks to empower and liberate people. Negotiable and in-process identities foster hope for people to achieve empowered identities. A picture of this is seen in the findings when termination of child marriages changed the participant's identities, which enabled them to gain more control over their futures because they were re-enrolled into school. Being aware of multiple subjectivities has implications for social work because how people are perceived is lodged into the everyday work of social work practice. Therefore, I suggest that social workers perceive every case as unique; social work should operate in recognition of multiplicity of a person's sense of self. The study found that there is no singular or unified identification that can fully encompass the different subjectivities that affect each adolescent mother's experiences in child marriage. On the grounds that identity is subject to factors such as varying context, and that identity is both multiple and flexible, every person is unique and thus, social work should seek out ways to individualize services.

The study found that the empowering revisions of one's subjectivity are fostered by liberating life events such as termination of child marriage or access to girls' education, and it was also found that such things cannot be attained in isolation of community and parental support. Practices that consequently deny girls access to education are inconsistent with social work values because limited education does not contribute to the girl's self-determination, in fact, this weakens it. The strengths perspective says that when community support is developed on people's capabilities, there is leeway to enhance quality of life (Healy, 2005). An enhanced life quality in turn recreates empowered identities, as a result, this positively shapes how people role-play or embody different roles. The study recognized manifestations of power among adolescent mothers in child marriage, no matter how small that power was. The study also looked at the collaborative production of power between powerful groups in the community such as traditional leaders collaborating with

adolescent mothers to end child marriage. For effective social change in social settings where social norms and gender roles create harmful practices, custodians of culture ought to be engaged so that the social order can be reconstructed. From witnessing this collaborative network between two groups with varying dimensions of power, the study suggests that in addition to involving custodians of culture, social work should endeavor to also engage boys and men – the husbands in child marriages – in ending child marriage. Involving boys and men opens up the possibility of creating manifestations that benefit all people, because ‘doing gender’ should not have to perpetuate domestic violence.

Human rights, such as the right to education and the right to freedom from violence, are some of the principles in social work. In Malawi, women and girls have the right to live free from all forms of violence owing to the provisions of international treaties such as the CRC, which are approved by the Malawian government (Human Rights Watch, 2014). This research showed that there are harmful experiences that are encountered by girls in child marriage and these include forms of violence such as physical violence and domestic violence. It was observed in this study that adolescent mothers rarely reported the acts of violence that they experienced in child marriage. This makes me question if adolescent mothers are fully aware of their right to be free from any form of violence. Adolescent mothers not knowing how to exercise this right may also be understood as an expression of powerlessness. In this study, the few participants who did report cases of violence, did so to their parents and those parents in turn protected their daughters from such ill treatment by suggesting that their daughters end the child marriages and return home. In regards to social work in rural-Malawi, this study suggests raising awareness among girls and women about their human rights regarding freedom from violence, and with that said, the study also recognizes the need for safe places, such as well-equipped women’s crisis centers and other such facilities, where women and girls can go to find protection and help.

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## APPENDIX 1 – INTERVIEW GUIDE

### In-depth unstandardized interview guide: girls who are married

#### **Background/ personal information**

Age: Occupation: Home district:

Marital status: Age at first marriage:

Number of children: Level of education:

#### **Life background**

1. Please share with me something from your childhood; what was your childhood like?
2. What does a typical day look like for you? (i.e. personal circumstances? Family relationships? Social interactions? Daily activities?)

#### **Marriage experience**

3. Can you please describe the process that led to you getting married? (When, how, who were involved?)
4. How did you decide to get married?  
(What and/or who were the influences that contributed to your decision to marry?)
5. Did you ever feel pressured to get married?
6. How has your experience of marriage been like so far?
7. Does your experience about marriage match what you expectation about marriage?  
(How so and how not?)
8. What are the major changes that you have experienced in your life since getting married? (positive and negative changes)
9. How do you feel about these changes?

#### **Negotiating roles**

10. In your own words who is a child? Do you consider yourself a child? Why and why not?
11. How do you feel about your role as a wife?
12. Since becoming married, how have you experienced the new roles that come with being a wife? (Role of daughter-in-law, mother? Etc)
13. Could you please share with me your positive and negative experiences in your new roles since marriage? (Physical, mental, social changes etc)
14. How has your relationship changed with your parents/friends/extended family since getting married?
15. How do you feel about changes in relationships and responsibilities?
16. What were your future plans before becoming a wife? (Did you have any work or education aspirations?)
17. Have those plans changed now that you are married? If so, how has being a wife affected your future plans?
18. What are your ambitions for the future now?

**In-depth unstandardized interview guide: girls who are not married**

**Background/ personal information:**

Age:                      Occupation:                      Home district:  
Marital status:                      Age at first marriage:  
Number of children:                      Level of education:

**Life background**

1. Please give me a background about yourself; where did you grow up and what is your childhood experience?
2. What does a typical day look like for you? (i.e. personal circumstances? Family relationships? Social interactions? Daily activities?)

**Negotiating roles**

3. Have you ever felt pressured to get married? If so, please tell me more about that.
4. What and/or who are the influences that have contributed to your currently being unmarried?
5. Do you feel suitably ready for marriage? Why and why not?
6. In your own words who do you define as a child? Do you consider yourself a child? Why and why not?
7. How responsibilities and roles do you shoulder in your daily life?
8. As a girl, how do you feel about these different roles and responsibilities?
9. What were your future plans and aspirations? (e.g. work or education aspirations?)
10. How do you feel about pursuing these goals if you get married?

**Interview guide: parents who have married off their girls**

**Background information:**

Age:                      Sex:                      Occupation:  
Religious beliefs:                      Ethnicity:

1. Could you please tell me about how your daughter ended up getting married?
2. How did you feel about marrying off your daughter?
3. Did you play any role in her decision to get married? If so, what role?
4. How do you feel about the impact you have had in your daughter's marriage?
5. How has your role and relationship to daughter changed since she got married?
6. How do you feel about these changes?
7. Is there anything concerning your daughter's marriage that you wish could have gone differently? If yes, how so? Why do you feel this way?

**APPENDIX 2 – CONSENT FORM**

**Informed Consent to Collect Data for a Master Thesis in Social Work with a Comparative perspective**

**Title: The Experiences Of Girls In Child Marriage and Their Negation Of Roles: The Case of Malawi**

I am a Master student in social work with a comparative perspective at the Faculty of Social Science, Nord Universitet in Bodø, Norway. I request your participation in my Master thesis research about the experiences of girls or women who were married below the age of 18years. This is an academic study and it will be shared with my supervisor and other appropriate members related to Nord Universitet. The master thesis that results from this work will be published and housed at the Nord Universitet, Norway.

Your participation will be taken in the form of interviews (individual or group). This research will be conducted with:

- (a) Guarantee of confidentiality
- (b) Maintain the anonymity of the participants.
- (c) Pseudonyms will be used in the place of real names of the participant. This will be used in the thesis in order to protect the participant’s identity. There are no anticipated risks to participating.

Your participation is voluntary and you also have the right to ask for more information about this study and to withdraw from the study any time during the interview without the need for providing any reasons and without any consequences.

The records of this study will be kept private

The research will be conducted fully within NESH guidelines.

I appreciate your cooperation in this study.

Thank you!

Elita Chamdimba .....

Nord Universitet, Faculty of Social Science

Name of Supervisor: Janne Breimo

Nord Universitet, Faculty of Social Science, 8049, Bodø, Norway

(Please sign below if you are willing to participate in the interview process for the Master thesis research outlined above.)

I ..... have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions. I affirm I consent to take part in the research study.

Signature: ..... Name: ..... Date.....