Article

Negotiating Identities and Power: Adolescent Motherhood and Child Marriage in Central Malawi

by

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Abstract

Introduction: despite universal efforts, child marriages still occur worldwide. However, not all child marriage unions last, and little is known about how such marriages end. Most critically, there is little information on what happens to young mothers when child marriage unions dissolve. This paper explores the experiences of adolescent mothers who were in child marriages in the cultural context of central Malawi.

Methodology: using qualitative methods, data was collected in two districts in central Malawi. One focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted with key community members (n=14) and three FGD, guided by an unstandardized interview guide, were conducted with adolescent mothers aged 15-22 years (n=15). The FGD with adolescent mothers were conducted in three groups, ranging from three to nine participants per group. In addition to this, a key informant interview was conducted with a community leader who is traditionally recognized as paramount chief (n=1). The data was analysed using a content analysis. The study applied the concept of 'doing gender' by West and Zimmerman (1987) in the analysis.

Results: what emerged from the data is that adolescent mothers embodied fragmented identities that are changing over time given the influence of life events. Amid different combinations of roles, several identities were observed: mother, wife, young, adolescent, girl, married, unmarried, victim of child marriage, survivor of child marriage, unemployed, employed, re-enrolled student, and school dropout. While these identities changed, gender did not, thus the changing identifications provided displays for 'doing gender' under a diverse set of subjectivities. Expressions of power at the micro-level were demonstrated by adolescent mothers through 'resilience vs. perseverance'.

Conclusions: the study highlights that cultural sensitivity and responsiveness by traditional leaders, such as the chief, play a role in the empowering revisions of one's identity by championing liberating life events through the termination of child marriage or access to girls' education regardless of resistance*.*

Introduction

This paper focuses on the experiences of adolescent mothers in Malawi by exploring how they 'do gender' as an identity and as a social role during and after child marriage. Despite universal efforts to limit child marriages, marriage unions involving children below 18 years old still occur worldwide, with the most frequent occurrence being in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (Mann, Quigley and Fischer, 2015). Moreover, not all child marriage unions last, yet little is known about how child marriages are terminated and what outcomes ensue for adolescent mothers. Age at marriage was critically considered in this study because age signals a transition into adulthood, and it is often also the limiting mark for certain life opportunities in education, employment and social participation (Palamuleni, 2011).

The prevalence of child marriage is widespread, given that it is faced by more than one-third of girls in Africa and South Asia (Swayer et al., 2012); and while there is evidence that there has been a decline over the past three decades, the number of girls at risk of entering into a marriage union before the age of 18 years old is still high (UNFPA, 2012), with 35% of girls in sub-Saharan Africa married by the age of 18 years in the period from 2013 to 2019 (UNICEF, 2020). A child is internationally understood as any person below the age of 18 years (Convention of the Rights of a Child (CRC), 1990), and while child marriage affects both male and female children, the risk is higher for a girl child. Take Malawi for example, in 2010 as many as 50% of women aged 20-24 years were married before the age of 18 years, compared to only 6.4% of boys in that same year (UNFPA, 2012). In 2015-16, however, the DHS data revealed a decline for females, with 42% of Malawian girls married by 18 years compared to only 7% of boys in that same period (National Statistics Office, 2017). This practice is problematic since gender inequality is therefore expanded (Nour, 2006), because even though child marriage affects both boys and girls, the latter are affected more with regards to harm caused to their mental, physical and psychological well-being (Walker, 2012). Studies that compare complications in pregnancy among adolescent mothers and adult women show that adolescent mothers experience more pregnancy complications than adult women, such as obstructed labour, fistula and maternal mortality during delivery (Raj, 2010; Svanemyr, 2012). More so, many child brides are withdrawn from school, and only a few are able to return after marriage or pregnancy, with the highest education

deprivation rates often among girls in rural areas (Deghati, Mora and de Neubourg, 2012). In Malawi, the prevalence of child marriage is high because traditional values concerning pregnancy are that childbearing is socially acceptable *only* if it occurs within the context of marriage (Munthali, Moore, Konyani and Zakeyo, 2006). Consequently, in Malawi it is not uncommon for the phenomena of child marriage and adolescent motherhood to intersect.

Although child marriage and adolescent motherhood often do intersect because of their similarities, the literature shows that these two notions are quite different. Adolescent mothers are defined as girls between the age of 10-19 years who become pregnant and parent their children (WHO, 2020), while child marriage, used interchangeably with the term early marriage, is defined as a girl's or boy's marriage before the age of 18 or alternately, before the age of 20 (Erulkar, 2013). A significant number of girls who go into child marriage soon become adolescent mothers and this group faces a higher risk of maternal and lasting health problems (Darroch et al., 2016), as well as a higher likelihood for intimate partner violence and school dropouts (Raj and Boehmer, 2013). Most existing literature has shed light on the causes, negative effects, and interventions in child marriage, yet not many studies have explored the phenomenon as narrated from the adolescent mother's perspective. This paper contributes to closing that gap.

History of Child Marriage
Child marriage is a marriage union in which one or both of the spouses are below the age of 18 (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Historically, child marriage has always been a mechanism for maximizing fertility owing to high mortality rates in the past; it has also functioned as a way of strengthening economic, political or social relationships (Vogelstein, 2013; Caldwell, Reddy and Caldwell, 1983). By and large, child marriages are arranged by family members or local leaders, sometimes with the child's consent and other times by coercive means (Raj, 2010). In Asian countries such as India, where Hinduism is a common belief system, marriages are arranged by families and young girls are favoured because younger brides are perceived as easier to mold in relation to preferred wifely traits (Caldwell et al., 1983). For example, In Zambia and other sub-Saharan African countries, child marriage often occurs among peer-aged groups – teenage girls marrying teenage boys, with the

male often being older (Mann et al., 2015). These types of child marriages are often forced upon the children as rectification for premarital pregnancy. 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 show that knowledge transmitted to girls in traditional initiation ceremonies are what lead to early sexual behavior, thereby resulting in teenage pregnancy (Mbilizi, Kanyongolo and Zimpita, 2000). It is traditionally expected that the pregnant girl marries the one who impregnated her, and these type of child marriages are typically imposed regardless of the child's consent (Mann et al., 2015). When married as minors, girls are more likely to experience violence from their husband and in-laws (Raj, 2010). Negative outcomes are experienced by boys as well, although girls are affected to a greater extent due to patriarchal structures (Plan International, 2013). The causes and consequences of child marriage for girls are often interrelated, multidimensional and deeply rooted (Vogelstein, 2013). In summary, the history of child marriage lies in historical, religious, cultural and socio-economic factors (Walker, 2012).

Methodology and Ethical Considerations

The everyday experiences of adolescent mothers from two districts in central Malawi are explored through the research question: **What are the experiences of adolescent mothers in Malawi as they 'do gender' as an identity and a social role during and after marriage?** In this study, '**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).

This research question was further broken down into the following sub-questions:

(i) **In what ways do adolescent mothers who marry young, or are at risk of child marriage, exercise power and control over their lives?**

(ii) **In what ways do adolescent mothers who marry young, or are at risk of child marriage, negotiate new roles and identities?**

Purposive sampling was employed in selecting the two districts and the participants (Berg, 2001, p. 32). *Plan Malawi* played an important role as gatekeepers in this study because the study participants were recruited through the school authorities (i.e. a head teacher and school matron of two secondary schools) and community leaders (i.e. the chief) in sites where *Plan Malawi* programmes are being implemented. Owing to the trust that *Plan Malawi* had built through its work with schools in the district and with the chief in the study site, the participants were easily trusting and voluntarily consented to participate in this study. Research permission was sought from authority at the research sites, specifically, the paramount chief and the school head teachers. Consent forms were given to participants before receiving their informed approval for participation and audio recording (Miles et al., 2013, p. 66).

The data collection tools were a key informant interview and focus group discussions (FGD) guided by an unstandardized interview guide. The findings in this paper reflect data collected from a total of 29 participants. One key informant interview was conducted with the paramount chief. Four FGDs were conducted with groups of three, nine and three adolescent mothers, as well as 14 other participants categorized as community members (these included village headmen and women from the village mother group and regional child protection).

Fifteen of the participants were adolescent mothers who fall into two groups as follows: (i) adolescent mothers who have been in child marriage, and (ii) adolescent mothers who have not been married. Out of the 15 adolescent mothers who participated in this study, only four had never been married before. The FGDs were conducted in the local language, *Chichewa*, and the average length of each discussion was approximately 45 minutes. The discussions were audio recorded upon the participants' consent. As part of the pre-analysis, all the raw data from the audio recordings were translated into English and transcribed into text on Microsoft Word documents. The researcher's field notes were converted into a formal write-up. A content analysis (Holsri, 1968, cited in Berg, 2001, p. 240) was applied to analyse the data, with inferences about the data made from the different groupings and units of data. In addition, the names referenced in this paper are pseudonyms in order to conceal their true identities.

The WHO guidelines on preventing early pregnancy and poor reproductive outcomes among adolescents in developing countries note that the 'existence of an adequate legislative framework and an accompanying enforcement mechanism' influences child marriage rates (Chandra-Mouli, 2013). In light of this, it is important to recognize that during the course of this study, on 14 February 2017, the government of Malawi made a monumental amendment to its constitution and this was further solidified in law through the Marriage, Divorce and Family Relation Act 2015 where Section 14 fully outlaws child marriage. The amendment in the law removes a legal loophole which, before 14 February 2017, allowed children between the ages of 15-18 years to marry with parental consent. Hence, a powerful dimension of the study is that the data collected and the study findings reflect a historical time in the constitutional rights of millions of Malawian girls.

Limitations of the Study

Not all participants perfectly fit the defined sample criteria for 'child marriage' because a few of the study participants were married at the cut-off age of 18 years or a year or two above the cut-off age. Moreover, in this study '**adolescent mother**' includes any young person aged between 10–24 years at the time of data collection, which differs from the WHO's (2020) acknowledged definition above. Regardless, it is important to note that the study participants were between the ages of 10-19 years at the time of entering into child marriage. Finally, all fieldwork was done in the local language, Chichewa, which is distinctly different from the English language. Therefore, there is a limitation, in that a few of the original meanings were possibly lost in translation.

'Doing Gender' by West and Zimmerman (1987)

Gender is a very present issue within the study subject of this research, but also in the lived experiences of all people. Gender is particularly important to this study because creating and maintaining a marriage involves an ongoing interaction between genders. 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 it fundamentally encompasses roles and conduct. In addition to applying the perspective of gender in connection to roles and interaction, the study also understands gender as identity. Thus, 'doing gender' enables the study to analyse gender as a shared and ever-present identity among the adolescent mothers.

The two genders – masculine and feminine - are what one is because it is a socially constructed identity created with reference to social and cultural differences between men and women, as opposed to biological ones. The paper refers to a two-gender paradigm because it relates to how gender is understood in a Malawian context. Consequently, gender is embedded in the degree of a person's masculinity or femininity; hence, the analysis also applies West's and Zimmerman's (1987) perspective in light of societal feminine expectations in the context of Malawian culture, such as passive, submissive disposition, home-oriented, dependent and obedient to masculine male counterparts.

Findings

I Am Pregnant, Now What? – Child Marriage: The Social Reality for Pregnant Girls
During the FGDs with the participants, it became apparent that marriage is a likely outcome for pregnant adolescents. Pilirani was 16 years old and in primary school when she was forced into child marriage. This is what Pilirani narrated:

> 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 man 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 should get married.

It is taken-for-granted knowledge that marriage is the social 'remedy' for girls who become pregnant out of wedlock, especially in rural Malawi. According to Malawi's constitutional law prior to February 2017, it was indeed lawful for children below the age of 18 years old to marry i*f* their parents consented, implying that even if one parent in a two-parent household consented it would be lawful. This shows that to a certain extent this taken-for-granted knowledge was held, even at the constitutional level. Thus, teenage pregnancy, although not the only driver for all the cases of child marriage in Malawi, is certainly significant. However, not all child marriages in Malawi

go unquestioned. This is what Belinda narrated about her experience when she became pregnant at 14 years of age:

> I could not handle marriage; I was not ready. I had sex but I did not know what the implications of sex would be. So I chose not to get married. I wanted to go back to school. My parents accepted my decision.

Unlike Belinda, Agatha had a different experience. This is what Agatha said:

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

Agatha was 14 years old when her parents forced her out of her home, and she entered into a child marriage with the 18-year-old boy who got her pregnant.

Everyday Life in Child Marriage: Enduring Gender Based Violence

Violence against women can be defined in various ways because its manifestation takes different forms. The definition of violence against women or girls in this study encompasses, but is not limited to, any violence manifested against women or girls through domestic violence, economic abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse and psychological abuse. All adolescent mothers in this study said that they experienced 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/or the husband's controlling tendencies. This is what Walani shared:

> … 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.

Walani, aged 18 years old at the time of this FGD, had returned to school because she was no longer in a child marriage. 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 needed to go to the hospital, but he refused to let me go. 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 at the time.

Teresa entered into child marriage when she dropped out of school at 16 years of age after getting pregnant in her first year of secondary school. Teresa explained her experience further:

> As time went by I eventually gave birth to a still-born baby at Nthambi[1] hospital. He was a baby boy. They had to refer me to a district-level hospital so that I could 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, given what I had experienced, one should be able to learn about the evils of foolish behaviour.

Teresa 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). As mentioned above, the definition of gender-based violence includes 'violence that results in, psychological harm or suffering to women' (United Nations, 1993) – this accounts for what Teresa experienced.

The adolescent mothers in this study showed deferential and subordinate dispositions. 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 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.

Traditional African beliefs about the institution of marriage 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. 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 this belief. Teresa, however, illustrated that the internalization of gender roles makes

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[1] The names of buildings such as schools and hospitals have also been renamed in order to keep the specifics of the localities hidden.

one question their own character when they are supposedly 'doing gender' incorrectly. Teresa said:

> **Teresa**: I knew that I was 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 such and such for me.'
>
> **Interviewer:** Do what things exactly?
>
> **Teresa:** Like, 'You should clean my shoes.' Yet I ended up not cleaning his shoes. So when he gets back home and he asks about his shoes and I said, 'I was chatting [with friends] so I didn't get around 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 and working part-time jobs, caring for the children and/or family, and more. The social construction of reality theory (Berger and Luckman, 1966) highlights that when people participate in internalization they are complying with the 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 construct the gender roles, but by crying she instead convinced herself that it is her who is childish when she does not conform to pre-established gender roles.

Resilience Against the Pressure to Remarry

Considering the concept of resilience in social work, 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, who married at 17 years, said:

> 'I went back to school and I have now 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 the strengths perspective in social work practice, which is that people can profitably gain from previous life events, and people usually do not repeat the harmful events

experienced in their childhood (Saleeby, 1997 cited in Healy, 2005). Notably, 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. However, one participant did give an opposing comment about remaining in child marriage if things had turned out differently. Alinane said:

> For me, if all had worked well [*in child marriage*], 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 freedom from poverty through financial security. Although during the FGD, Alinane had spoken about experiences of physical abuse in child marriage, her statement here suggests that she was willing to place herself in any context, whether harmful or not, as long as it would cure her poverty. Existing studies (Raj, 2010; Nour 2006; Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi, 2003) do indeed show that poverty is a major determining risk factor for girls in child marriage.

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

All the adolescent mothers who participated in this study eventually ended their marriages in one way or the other; none lasted in child marriage past three years. 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. 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, by actively terminating already existing child marriages. Vitu shares her story of how change agents in her community freed her from child marriage:

> …the mother group sought me out and found me at my marriage 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] ... But my parents insisted that I remain in marriage and they continued to stand by this until my baby was born. … But my parents feared the group village headman, so my marriage was eventually terminated and my husband left.

As explained in her narration, it was not Vitu who took the initiative to end her marriage. It was the mother group who had to scout her out in order to rescue her 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 parents had for the group village headman that eventually persuaded them to support the termination of the child marriage. From this, it is clearer why Vitu could not take the initiative to end the child marriage on her own; 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 because leaders such as chiefs have a lot of authority in the regions where they are paramount.

Denise also spoke about the significant role that community leaders played in terminating 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, while Denise's marriage was very difficult to terminate because the families involved only allowed for termination once the case was taken up to the chief's level. In terms of the traditional authoritative power in Malawi, the rank is from group village head (GVH) to traditional authority (TA) to paramount chief (Samati, 2013). 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.

Concluding Discussions: Understanding Gender and Power in Adolescent Motherhood and Child Marriage

Gender as an Identity and a Role for Adolescent Mothers

Gender is largely understood in Malawi as the social and cultural differences between masculinity and femininity that are differentiated by the biological gender categories of male and female. Gender is 'an aspect of what one is … [and] it is something that one does'; therefore, although gender is an identity, fundamentally it is a role (West and Zimmerman, 1987, p. 140). 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. 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. Postmodernist deconstruction puts forward a conception of self as multiple and changing (Fook, 2002); stemming from this, the study observed that since gender is an ever-present identity for the participants of this study, their other diverse sets of situated subjectivities hence provide displays for 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Fook, 2002). Furthermore, the participants demonstrated that negotiating identities altered their attitudes and their perceptions of self. For instance, many participants shared how, now that they are re-entrant students in secondary school, they are hopeful for a preferred future as compared to previously feeling helpless. Education status is a significant contributor to this disposition among adolescent mothers. Similarly, owing to child marriage, the literature shows that limited educational and employment prospects among adolescents negatively affects self- and social development (Walker, 2012; Chandra-Mouli, 2013). Bearing in mind the case of one participant who had negotiated identities from 'child marriage' to 'unmarried,' the identity of 'school dropout' remained with her. Because of that unchanged aspect of her identity, the participants 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 as 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**'.

Objectification and Internalization: Understanding Adolescent Mothers as Social Productions

The study found that the participants' socially constructed realities were largely pre-arranged, so much so that when the adolescent mothers found themselves falling short of doing gender correctly, they would call themselves to account rather than bringing to account the institutionalized social order. Contextual factors of gender inequity influence child marriage (Raj, 2010). For example, pertaining to the gender expectation for the everyday domestic responsibilities of a wife, the participants admitted that they did not feel adequate. 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 and norms within the institution of marriage are internalized and thus legitimized and maintained. By legitimized, the meaning alluded to is 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 expectations for unmarried pregnant girls. The study 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 mentality when, for instance, they gave in and entered into child marriage under the pretense of, 'I have to do this because I have no choice.' Berger and Luckmann (1966) assert that people are social products, with the study acknowledging the participant's conformity to social order, even when it perpetuates harmful practices as evidence of this.

Understanding Adolescent Mothers' Expressions of Power in Child Marriage as a Source of Conformity

The analysis was guided by Foucault's (1980) 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 light of Foucault's (1980) approach, the study found that the participants of this study, although being of a disempowered minority group, still exercised power. For example, some of the participants of this study expressed power when they said no to entering into child marriage at the cost of deviating from the social expectations, and consequently receiving negative labeling from members of the society. Likewise, the participants who did marry also demonstrated that power is not only in saying no, given that the power expressed when the participants submitted to abuse while in child marriage is not parallel to the power expressed when adolescents' rights are realized once child marriages are terminated. The participants submitting to abusive husbands was in fact a conformity to the gender roles and expectations; therefore, this dimension of power is a source of social conformity, and thus a way of doing gender in this social context. Adolescent mothers were most empowered when their subjectivities were negotiated from 'victim of child marriage' to a 'survivor of child marriage'. Using Foucault's (1980) conception of power, the production of power at

the micro-level demonstrates that power may not only be affixed to structures such as gender; instead, adolescent mother's exercise greater power when they embody empowered identities such as negotiating from a 'school dropout' to a 're-entrant student'. Nevertheless, in choosing not to end child marriage sooner, powerlessness was also produced due to the adolescent mothers' experiences of violence and their deprivation of opportunity for education, which were both attached to being in a child marriage. As Erulkar (2013) points out, addressing child marriages should first focus on girls who have dropped out of school. In supporting this, the literature repeats the need for keeping girls in school, as well as increasing their education opportunities in the reduction of the risk of child marriage (Svanemyr et al., 2012; WHO, 2011).

Recommendations for Social Work and Conclusion

There is no singular or unified identification that can fully encompass different subjectivities that affect each adolescent mother's experiences in child marriage. Negotiable and in-process identities foster the hope of achieving empowered identities. An example of this is seen in the findings when the termination of child marriages changed the participant's identities, and because they were then re-enrolled into school, thus enabling them to gain more control over their futures. Being aware of multiple subjectivities has implications, because how people are perceived is lodged into the everyday work of social work practice. As a result, it is critical that social workers operate in recognition of the multiplicity of a person's sense of self. This can be done when social workers seek out ways to individualize and customize services and care.

The study found that the empowering revisions of one's subjectivity are fostered by liberating life events, such as the termination of child marriage alongside access to girls' education, and that such experiences cannot be attained when isolated from community leadership and parental support. The strengths perspective states that when community support is developed for one's capabilities, there is leeway to enhance their quality of life (Healy, 2005). An enhanced life quality in turn recreates empowered identities, and consequently positively shapes how one embodies various roles. The study recognized manifestations of power among adolescent mothers in child marriage, no matter how small that power was. A collaborative production of power between influential groups in the community, such as traditional

leaders collaborating with adolescent mothers to end child marriage, is beneficial for change in social settings where social norms and gender roles create harmful practices. The 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 in Malawi, social work should endeavour to also engage boys and men – the husbands in child marriages – in strategizing against teenage pregnancies and child marriage. Involving boys and men opens up the possibility of creating expressions of power (and/or empowerment) that benefit all people, because 'doing gender' is not done in isolation of either sex.

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