

NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES AND POWER: EXPERIENCES OF ADOLESCENT MOTHERHOOD AND CHILD MARRIAGE IN MALAWI

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT: Despite universal efforts, marriage unions involving children below 18years old, still occurs worldwide. Moreover, not all child marriage unions last, yet little is known about how child marriages are terminated nor what the outcome is for adolescent mothers after marriage. This paper explores the ways in which adolescent mothers in Malawi who are at risk of child marriage negotiate new identities and how they exercise power over their everyday lives. Age at marriage was critically considered in this study because age, signals one's transition to adulthood; it is the mark at which certain life opportunities in education, employment, and participation in society are limited. This study was qualitative in nature and data was collected in Dedza and Lilongwe districts during field work that was conducted from January, 2017 to February, 2017. The data collection tools were focus group discussions (FGD), unstandardized interview guide, and key informant interview. The findings reflect data collected from a total of twenty-nine participants. Four focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted with a total of 29 participants; three FGDs were with three, nine and three adolescent mothers respectively, and one FGD was with 14 community members which included the paramount chief, village headmen, and women from the community mother groups. Content analysis was used to analyze the data.

The study applied several theories, namely: post-structuralism, post-modernism, the social construction of reality by Berger and Luckmann (1966), the strengths perspective, and the concept of '*doing gender*' by West and Zimmerman (1987)

The study found that adolescent mothers embodied fragmented identities that are changing over time given the influence of life events such as child marriage and early school dropout. Amid the different combinations of roles, the several identities that were observed in the adolescents who participated in this study were: mother, wife, young, adolescent, girl, married, unmarried, victim of child marriage, survivor of child marriage, unemployed, employed, poor, 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 situated subjectivities. Furthermore, negotiating identities, such as 'school dropout', negatively altered the adolescent mother's attitude and perception of *the self*. The study identified expressions of power at the micro-level which were observed through 'resilience vs. perseverance' demonstrated by adolescent mothers. The analysis, guided by Foucault's approach to power, found that the participants of this study, although being of a disempowered minority group, still 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. The findings also show that the empowering revisions of one's identity is fostered by liberating life events such as termination of child marriage or access to girls' education, and it was also found that such cannot be attained in isolation of community and parental support.

KEY WORDS: child marriage, adolescent mothers, identity, power, gender, Malawi.