SPEAKING ABOUT AND SPEAKING FOR THE THIRD WORLD: REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' AGENCY IN CHILD MARRIAGE DISCOURSES

by

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, child marriage has become an increasingly prominent issue in human rights and international development agendas. Prevailing child marriage discourses reveal the fetishization of issues affecting women and girls to demonstrate Third World backwardness. Mobilising key postcolonial feminist theory interventions on representation and agency, this thesis explores how the West speaks about and speaks for the Third World and unmasks the details of the global discourse production on child marriage. Using critical discourse analysis to locate child marriage within broader historical, institutional, and political contexts, I found that child marriage is constructed as a "Third World problem" explained through culture and agency, conceptualised within liberal frameworks of choice and emancipation. Although it appears that the discursive production of Third World women and girls has moved from victim into heroic agent and that rescue was repackaged into empowerment, I argue that both representations perpetuate the colonial encounter and maintain the agency of Third World women and girls narrowly circumscribed to resistance. By questioning how "traditional cultural practices" affecting women and girls are used to reinforce binaries of modern/traditional and oppression/resistance, this thesis contributes to postcolonial feminist theorising of representations of Third World women and girls and of their agency.

For Ben, Isabella, and Lia

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CEFM – Child, early, and forced marriage

DfID – Department for International Development

GNB – Girls Not Brides

ICRW – International Center for Research on Women

IR – International Relations

UN Women – United Nations Agency for Women

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNICEF – United Nations Children’s Fund

UNFPA – United Nations Population Fund

USAID – United States Agency for International Development

INTRODUCTION

> 12 million girls are married every year. That's one girl every three seconds who is robbed of their childhood. She's at greater risk of violence, trapped in poverty, often pulled out of school, and she can be left with serious health complication or even face death due to early pregnancy (Girls Not Brides, 2019b).

> We have just arrived in the beautiful country of Malawi, escaping the chill of London for an exciting visit focused on adolescent girls. Too often, these young people are ignored in global development efforts. Yet, we also know that if adolescent girls can grow up to be educated and healthy women, these girls can transform communities and countries into prosperous places (Girls Not Brides, 2016d).

Images and conversations about child marriage elicit discomfort and anger in most people. International organisations capitalise on this, using images of young girls dressed as "girl brides", employing expressions such as "marrying too young" and "lost childhood", and emphasising the life of rape and maternal mortality that awaits them. In the public imaginary, child marriage is an abhorrent practice that can only take place in backwards, underdeveloped, and culture and religion oriented places, requiring the benevolent effort of more developed civilisations to save these girl brides. However, these emotions and ideas associated to child marriage and the impetus for action to stop it do not happen in a vacuum, but are rather embedded in broader human rights and international development systems,

which inherently reflect Western and liberal values and, more importantly, colonial relations of power. The passages opening this introduction are quite representative of child marriage discourses: an issue affecting the Third World that requires urgent action and girls as agents of change that can fight this practice. Child marriage, as shall be explored throughout the thesis, is thus unequivocally gendered and racialised.

Over the past two decades, child marriage has become an increasingly prominent – and seemingly "urgent" – issue in the international agenda. Practitioners and researchers have employed mostly positivist approaches to document child marriage facts such as its prevalence, causes, and consequences. As discussed in more detail later in the thesis, I initially shared these goals and was compelled to examine child marriage in a specific developing country, envisioning a contribution to the existing knowledge about the prevalence, causes, and consequences of child marriage in that context. Indeed, most existing research on child marriage has been produced by international organizations and NGOs and focused on its causes and consequences to women and girls' health and safety. Although often acknowledging that they are intertwined and context-specific, existing research has identified a broad set of drivers of child marriage in non-conflict situations, including poverty, lack of access to education, lack of/unequal legislation and underlying gender inequality (see Girls Not Brides 2016a; Schlecht, Rowley and Babirye 2013; Mathur, Greene and Malhotra 2003; Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi 2003, among others).

However, I became intrigued about how *we* – as in the West or Global North – actually produce child marriage as a concept, a subject, and an object of interest and intervention. Although "it has become almost a platitude to characterize public problems as socially

constructed" (Hajer, 1995, 42), I found it powerful and revealing to challenge my own preconception that child marriage simply *was*. Rather than a natural or essential thing, child marriage is indeed constructed in very specific ways that prescribe how it should be addressed, shaping policies, programmes, public campaigns, research, and funding allocations. In addition, child marriage, like other so called problematic Third World issues such as female genital cutting, trafficking, and veiling, evidences the fetishization of issues affecting women and girls and their use to demonstrate and measure Third World backwardness. Practices such as child marriage are reduced to a "Third World problem" explained through culture and Third World women and girls hold very specific roles. Embedded in the growing hypervisibility of girls and agency in international development, child marriage embodies a conceptualisation of agency within liberal frameworks of choice and emancipation, with girls trapped within a binary of victim and heroic agent of change.

Child marriage is thus the vehicle of my analysis of the discursive representation of Third World women and girls and their agency. The focus is on discourses, representations, and discursive violence, examining how the West speaks about and speaks for the Third World and Third World women and girls. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory, the research aims at examining how child marriage "facts" came to be and which knowledge about it became accepted. It maps the processes through which child marriage discourses have been produced, locates it within historical, social, political, and discursive contexts, and ultimately examines the violent reproduction of colonialism in child marriage. I explore these themes through three intertwined research questions. First, how has child marriage become a salient object in feminist, human rights, and international development discourses? Second, what are the gendered, racialised, and colonialised representations of

Third World women and girls on child marriage discourses? Lastly, how is the agency of Third World women and girls conceptualised within child marriage discourses?

Speaking About and Speaking For Third World Women: Debates on Representation and Agency

My analysis of child marriage discourses and their implications for representations of Third World women and girls and their agency is positioned within the rich body of postcolonial feminist literature and its intersection with human rights and international development literature. This is aligned with human rights and development discourses increasingly using language that evokes key feminist vocabulary, such as agency and empowerment (Madhok and Rai, 2012). Rather than contributing to ongoing debates on whether Third World cultural practices are compatible with human rights and how agency means resistance to oppression, I question the very location of child marriage within human rights and development, highlighting structural issues that influence child marriage beyond culture and expanding how Third World women's agency can be theorised outside of (neo)colonial binaries. Postcolonial feminist scholars have challenged ideals of rationality, individuality, and secularity taken as ahistorical universalist frames of reference, questioning the very process of knowledge production, addressing the silences and erasures present in liberal discourses (Agathangelou and Turcotte, 2016; Agathangelou and Turcotte, 2015; Chowdhry and Nair, 2004; Nair, 2004). As argued by Madhok and Rai (2012), thinking about agency and representation in Third World women's contexts is complicated by the political economy of neoliberalism. I am particularly interested in the relationship between defining the self and defining the Other and the disruption of racist and gendered constructions of the

Other and binaries such as West/East, North/South, modernity/tradition that essentialise difference (Piedalue and Rishi, 2017; Agathangelou, 2004; Biswas, 2004; Chowdhry and Nair, 2004; Nair, 2004; Moore-Gilbert, 1997).

Colonising practices have a continued and persistent impact through not only material violence, but also epistemic and discursive violences that create certain representations of race, gender, culture, and sexuality in the Third World. Certainly, discursive violence reflects asymmetric relations of power and has material effects through the exploitation and management of Third World populations (Mohanty, 1985; Mohanty, 2003; Spivak, 1994). In doing so, discursive violence produces a "modernisation paradigm" (Biswas, 2004, 185), according to which the liberal West is the pinnacle of human development and the Third World associated with all that is inferior, requiring reform and rescue (Jabri, 2012; Chowdhry, 2004). Consequently, complex phenomena – like child marriage – are stripped of their historical, political, social, and economic contexts, thereby reduced to simplistic explanations such as women's oppression, religious fundamentalism, and cultural backwardness (Mahmood, 2001).

The rationale used for rescuing the Third World from itself normally alludes to human rights and international development, which far from neutral and universal, replicate colonialising binaries and the very paradigm of modernisation. The Eurocentric liberal human rights discourse presents the Third World as the site of human rights violations, ignoring Western complicity in the production of these abuses (Chowdhry and Nair, 2013). Similarly, international development theory and practice have historically reproduced the modernisation paradigm and neoliberal ideals of economic development brought about by

population control and individual entrepreneurship, also obscuring the relationship between "underdevelopment" and unequal economic globalisation that is rooted in colonialism and slavery (Wilson, 2011, Nair, 2004).

Drawing on this postcolonial feminist theorising of discursive violence and neocolonialism, I focused on literature related to how the West speaks about and speaks for Third World women and girls, i.e. how they are represented and how their agency is understood, particularly as it intersects with the discipline of International Relations. Women and girls hold a central role in this construction of the Third World as retrograde, culturally-driven, and the site of human rights violations and underdevelopment. Indeed, practices affecting women are used as a measure and ultimate proof of Third World backwardness (Mohanty (1984; 2003). Produced against an imagined liberated white Western woman, the Third World woman is poor, ignorant, tradition-bound, and oppressed by her culture and men, requiring enlightenment and rescue by the West (Mohanty, 2003). Victimising representations of Third World women have been thus largely criticised and as a response, they became increasingly represented as agents of change or "sheroes" (Fernando, 2016). This "new" representation builds upon neoliberal values of individualism, resilience, and entrepreneurship, in a functionalist approach that sees poor women as instruments of development that can lift their countries from poverty and solve Third World problems (Fernando, 2016; Calkin, 2015; Wilson, 2013; Wilson, 2011; Dogra, 2011).

The move towards representing Third World women and girls as heroines instead of victims is embedded in a broader "turn to agency" in international development theory and practice. Agency has been conceptualised as the capacity to act by individual actors that are rational,

calculating, self-regulating, and unencumbered by external influences, resulting in agency becoming deeply intertwined with choice: choice is considered to be available to all and taken up through agency to overcome coercion or oppression (Wilson, 2013; Hemmings and Kabesh, 2013). Feminist and mainstream accounts of agency have maintained a reliance on negative freedom and an inherent action bias that limits agency to the ability to act freely (Madhok, 2020; 2013b). Certainly, the concept of agency has become conflated with the ideas of resistance, emancipation, and empowerment (Pande, 2015; Hickel, 2014; Madhok, 2013a; Madhok, 203b; Mahmood, 2005). This perception of agency as liberation and resistance has also placed a great emphasis on women's voice, which is taken as a proof of agency and the symbol of their ability to make choices, to resist, and to "speak out" against the patriarchy (Parpart, 2010). This approach reinforces the opposition between West/non-West, creating a "winner/loser" lens whereby the West is not only the one who holds agency, but who decides what counts as agency, resulting in the marginalisation or dismissal of non-Western agency (Hobson and Sajed, 2017). In this scenario, analyses on Third World women's agency have been mostly focused either on how oppression restrict agency or on instances of liberation, rather than examining the inherent limitations of this understanding of agency and exploring alternative ways to conceptualise it. By questioning the colonial nature of representations and the liberal underpinnings of current understandings of agency, postcolonial feminist theory has called for thinking about Third World women's agency in more complex ways, beyond the binary of victim/super agentic and ideals of defiance and resistance that fail to capture the nuances and complexities of the many ways the agency of Third World women and girls can take place whilst navigating multiple structures of oppression (see Hobson and Sajed, 2017; Mahmood, 2005; Kandiyoti,1988).

Challenging Neocolonialism in Child Marriage Discourses: Position and a Note on Terminologies

Although at first glance it seems that the discursive production of Third World women and girls has moved from victim into agentic, my argument is that both representations perpetuate the colonial encounter and maintain the agency of Third World women and girls narrowly circumscribed to resistance. In advancing this argument, the contribution of the thesis is two-fold. First, by highlighting the neocolonial frameworks underlying current policies and interventions, it will contribute to how child marriage is conceptualised and consequently addressed. Second, by questioning how "traditional cultural practices" affecting Third World women are used to reinforce binaries of modern *vs* traditional and oppression *vs* resistance, the thesis will mobilise key postcolonial critiques that unsettle understandings of representation and agency to better understand how global discourses of child marriage are produced. Indeed, the representation of child marriage as a cultural practice confined to the Third World and both representations of women and girls as victims and/or super agentic reproduce essentialist views and colonial encounters that keep the Third World firmly within Western parameters and expectations. Explaining practices such as child marriage through culture only is caricaturising and oversimplifying, detaching it from social, economic, and cultural context, as well as eclipsing structural factors that often have Western complicity. Moreover, it also assumes that "problematic" practices affecting women are confined to the Third World and that marriage is unproblematic in the West or beyond child marriage. The ambivalent and oftentimes contradictory representations of Third World women and girls as victims and/or sheroes reinstate the colonial othering process, reinforcing gendered and racialised binaries. More importantly, it maintains the

West firmly in the spotlight, dictating the roles Third World women and girls ought to assume. Their inferiority is merely reassigned, adding to the hypervisibility and fetishization of their bodies and images (Fernando, 2016). Hence, the notion of victim is never truly erased, since to be full agents of change Third World women and girls inevitably require the West's enlightenment and funding. Rescue is reworked as empowerment, which is conceived and implemented according to liberal and Western values centred around knowledge transfer, individual realisation, and entrepreneurship.

Understandings of agency within liberal frameworks reduce it to choice and resistance, leading to an all-or-nothing approach where Third World women and girls are either powerless or only attributed agency when acting to resist (Madhok, 2020; Madhok, 2013b; Mahmood, 2005; Abu-Lughod, 1990). When women and girls express agency outside of the prescribed framework, i.e. deemed to reinforce oppression by their culture, this is immediately dismissed as "real" agency and explained through internalised oppression. I argue that the focus on individual choice and independent action locates oppression on local and family levels and oversimplifies complex decision-making processes taking place within interlocking and multiple systems of inequality. In actuality, child marriage is rarely a zero-sum game, especially in situations of extreme poverty, conflict, and forced displacement. Furthermore, oppression related to the broader structural causes that drive child marriage in the first place and that often have Western influence are removed from the analysis. Drawing on postcolonial feminist critique of the action bias in agency that attaches it to a capacity to act (Madhok, 2020; 2013b), I claim that agency can be understood in a more nuanced manner, detached from romanticised resistance and taking into account socially constructed interests, motivations, and loyalties involved in multi-layered decision-

making, which may not necessarily coincide with Western values of emancipatory freedom and self-interest. Indeed, agency can be conceptualised in a non-individualistic manner and as relational beyond confrontation and immediate rupture with social relations and norms, which are not always feasible or desirable. It provides an alternative framework to understand decision-making in complex phenomena and to perceive Third World women and girls outside of the victim-shero binary, allowing agency to be assigned to them in instances where it has been denied or downplayed by international relations, human rights, and international development discourses.

As I examine how child marriage is constructed within specific liberal and Western frameworks, it is important to clarify some of the terminology utilised throughout this thesis. The very terms "child marriage" and "girl bride", or even "girl" do not have a fixed or essential meaning, but are rather discursively produced. As it will be later discussed in chapter 3, there is much debate among organisations operating in child marriage spaces regarding the terminology used, including "adolescent marriage", "child marriage", "early marriage", "child and early marriage and unions", and "forced child marriage", and "child, early, and forced marriage" (see Taylor et al, 2019; Lowe et al, 2017; Girls Not Brides, 2016a, Nirantar Trust, 2015; Sexual Rights Initiative, 2013). It is claimed the term "child marriage" is often preferred by organisations because it attempts to fix minimum age of marriage at 18, aligned with broader attempts to define childhood around age, whilst also carrying a stronger emotive appeal than "adolescent marriage" or "early marriage" (Lowe et al, 2017; Sexual Rights Initiative, 2013). On the other hand, it is argued that "early marriage" is more inclusive, as it leaves room for local customs and norms and encompasses the marriage of a person who is under 18 but who has attained majority according to local

legislation (Nirantar Trust, 2015; Sexual Rights Initiative, 2013). Rather than to side with any of the positions described above, in this thesis I use the term “child marriage” not only because it is the most common term used in the material analysed, but mostly for simplicity. In the same manner that my goal is not to debate whether child marriage is right or wrong, I do not intend to uncover which of these terminologies is “accurate”, since all of them are discursively produced within specific contexts and with their own purposes.

The use of terms such as “West”, “Third World”, “global North/South” also deserve attention, especially because they do not refer (only) to geographic divisions as “there is no pure west and east. People, goods, ideas and texts travel backwards and forwards across the borderlands” (Bulbeck, 1997, 6). I opt mostly for the term “West” instead of the more recent “global North” to emphasise the political, economic, social, and cultural imperialistic influence of Western European liberal capitalist philosophy (Winter, Thompson and Jeffreys, 2002). Although the present research seeks to deconstruct and challenge universalisations, I acknowledge that over-arching terms such as “West” and “liberal” are totalising in themselves and fail to acknowledge heterogeneity. Indeed, “although neoliberalism is often referred to in the singular, it is experienced in the plural. The heterogeneity of neoliberalism is now cogently argued and empirically documented in numerous grounded studies of neoliberal-led globalization” (Madhok and Rai, 2012, 648). However, I employ those terms as ideal types in the Weberian sense, i.e. as abstract concepts used as methodological devices for analytical purposes (Benhabib, 1995). In that sense, “West” is used not only as an ideational construct, but also as a recognisable political entity (Anand, 2004).

From its inception, the term Third World[2] has not had neat geographic, political, economic, and cultural boundaries. The Third World is not homogenous based on nationality, race, or culture, as these are not naturally defined, but fluid and historically constructed (Mohanty, 1991). However, what it does have in common is that it is "non-Western" and that Third World peoples were physically and discursively subordinated to European ones during colonialism (Clapham, 1985). Hence, the term carries political and socioeconomic meanings that reflect imperialism and hegemony, with "Third" representing the lowest in the global hierarchy, associated with everything inferior, backwards, and impaired (Solarz, 2012; Muni, 1979). The concept Third World has always encountered criticism, at times deemed distasteful and obsolete, especially after the end of the Cold War. Alternative expressions have been increasingly suggested, including Global South, underdeveloped countries, less developed countries, and developing countries[3]. None of these terms though is unproblematic, as they are not only equally discursively constructed, but inevitably imply an elusive homogeneity and division of the world in hierarchies. As no terminology is neutral or perfect, I opt to use mostly the term Third World[4], in reference to how it was used as a sign of non-alignment, indeed as "a badge of defiance or honour rather than a slur" (Disorder of Things, 2017). More importantly, whilst acknowledging that the expression "Third World" (and any of its alternatives) implies and reproduces artificial divisions of the world, I share Christopher Clapham's position that

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[2] The origins and use of the term Third World over time have been discussed at length elsewhere (see Solarz, 2012; Berger, 2004; Randall, 2004; Kamrava, 1995; Berger, 1995; Wolf-Phillips, 1987; Muni, 1979; Wolf-Phillips, 1979).

[3] Postcolonial authors have suggested yet other terminologies beyond these. For instance, Dogra (2011) uses the terms "developed world" and "majority world", refusing to juxtapose "majority world" and "minority world" to avoid binary oppositions.

[4] Following the rationale elaborated in this section that justifies my preference for using the terms "Third World" and "West", it must be noted that at times "Global South" and "developing countries", as well as "Global North" and "developed countries" are used interchangeably throughout the thesis, especially when referring to other scholars and their own preferred expressions.

> I do not wish to signal acceptance of the 'us, them and the rest' view of the world which underlies it. I have chosen to use the term not because of its meaning in this respect, but rather, in a sense, because of its meaninglessness (Clapham, 1985, 2).

Drawing from the discussion above, I purposefully employ the expressions "Third World women" and "Third World girls" in light of Chandra T. Mohanty's influential discussion of the discursive production of the "Third World woman" as homogenous, ahistorical, oppressed, defined by her victim status, and ultimately in need of rescue (Mohanty, 1984). At this point, it is also important to clarify my use of women and girls as a terminology and analytic concept. As the very concept of "woman" in itself has been challenged by poststructuralist and postcolonial feminist scholars[5], the term "girl" also carries multiple meanings to different audiences (Hayhurst, 2013). Girls become "girls" through discourses, so that the "girl child" encompasses both discursive constructions and lived experiences (Pomerantz, 2009). Hence, neither "women" or "girl" is employed as essential categories that aim to reflect truth, but as discursive concepts. In that sense, I use "Third World women" and "Third World girls" interchangeably throughout the thesis. This is not done in a way that follows the fusion of "*womenandchildren*" as an indistinguishable unit in need of protection (as famously argued by Cynthia Enloe), but exactly because the discursive construction and representational practices affecting them are congruous. Certainly, although child marriage discourses – and the broader discourses these are embedded on – explicitly state "childhood", what they mean is "girlhood" (and the interest of policies and interventions is on girls, not boys), so that my use of Third World women and girls aims to

[5] For poststructuralist feminist critiques, see Butler, 1990 and Zalewski, 2000, among others.

capture how these discursive practices are implicitly and explicitly gendered and racialised across age.

As it will be argued later, international development and liberal feminism construct Third World women in a dichotomy of victims and/or super agentic. As the “girl child” gained increasing prominence in international development, these binary representations were uncritically extended from the Third World woman to her younger counterpart, the Third World girl child. The colonial encounter creates then the imbricated compound figure of the girl-child/woman (Lal, 2008), so that “the girl child in question is subaltern in terms of the gender relations in which she is inserted, her status as a minor, and her socioeconomic positionality accruing from economic marginality and low-caste status” (Nilsen and Roy, 2015). As the term “child” is not clearly defined philosophically and politically (or legally, for that matter), I am also leaving it purposefully open and the lines between women and girls blurred. When I refer to Third World women throughout the thesis, I am not ignoring that child marriage obviously affects girls, and not women, but reinforcing my argument and postcolonial approach on gender rather than age. Indeed, this is not a thesis on childhood, but rather a postcolonial feminist critique of discourses surrounding women and girls alike.

Doing Postcolonial Feminist Research on Child Marriage Discourses: Methodology and Evidence

The focus of my research is on discourses, discursive representation, and discursive violence, and as such it employs discursive analysis as a research method. Broadly

understood, discourses are systems that fix meaning, being intimately connected to power and therefore both productive and performative (Åhäll, 2011; Shepherd, 2008; Milliken, 1999). This focus and approach are especially relevant considering my overall theoretical framework, as postcolonial feminist theory is particularly concerned with representations and the discursive construction of the Third World and Third World women, examining the relationship between asymmetries in material and political power and the management of the Other. Analysing discursive practices does not intend to uncover truths that have been obscured or a hidden reality, but to understand the language, processes, and procedures that underlie knowledge production, making certain courses of action possible (Gill, 2010; Eyben, 2008; Doty, 1996). My analysis is particularly interested in the performative nature of discourses, since more than providing a language to describe objects and phenomena such as child marriage, they operationalise certain regimes of truth, authorising certain subjects and practices whilst silencing others (Shepherd, 2008; Milliken, 1999). By delineating how an issue can be known, discourses also determine how it can be or should be addressed, shaping policies and interventions.

Since discourses are action oriented and organised rhetorically to preclude alternative formulations, discourse analysis entails closely examining the concepts, practices, statements, and beliefs associated with discourses, evidencing the effects of power (Eyben, 2008). However, although discourses are articulated in written and spoken texts, they are not *just* language, so my overall approach draws from critical discourse analysis framework, identifying patterns across and between texts whilst also connecting them to wider socio-political processes and the contexts where texts were produced (see Fairclough, 1992; Fairclough, 1989). This process includes three interconnected levels of analysis:

textual analysis, process analysis, and social analysis. Textual analysis identified key linguist structures that constructed concepts central to the research, such as child marriage, Third World girlhood, agency, and empowerment. This enabled me to examine how certain subjects and understandings were naturalised and prioritised, including the linkage of child marriage to Third World only, and constructions of Third World women and girls as victims and sheroes and of agency as resistance. The process analysis looked into the contexts where texts were produced, including the fora where they were produced – the "discursive terrain" (Shephard, 2010) – and with what purposes. Although this study is not a detailed historical account of child marriage, I looked into the legal and institutional backdrop where child marriage emerged as a priority international issue in order to situate it within apparatuses such as the United Nations, human rights, and international development systems. Finally, social analysis delved into wider social, political, economic circumstances and related power structures where child marriage discourses are embedded. Child marriage is conceptualised and practiced within broader human rights and international development discourses, which are inherently informed and influenced by Western and neoliberal knowledge systems that ultimately reinforce neocolonial projects that define and manage the Third World and Third World women and girls.

Using the multi-layered approach that looks into text, process, and context, critical discourse analysis investigates the texts produced by different people or organisations presumed to be the authorised speakers or writers of a dominant discourse. As child marriage gained increasing prominence in the international agenda, hundreds of organisations included the topic in their activities, both at the international and local levels (Bessa, 2019). However, specific international organisations, NGOs, and practitioners were selected due to their

pivotal role in shaping how child marriage is conceptualised and ultimately addressed. In this sense, my analysis of child marriage discourses and related theoretical arguments on representations of Third World women and girls and their agency focused on documents produced by actors considered privileged discursive sites, including United Nations bodies and agencies, as well as research reports, program reports, evaluations, and public information materials produced by NGOs Girls Not Brides, International Center for Research on Women, Plan International, Save the Children, and Care International.

The analysis of this body of evidence showed that child marriage is represented as a cultural or traditional practice, where "traditional" means less developed. Child marriage is presented as a Third World problem that only takes place in the Global South and despite some evidence that it also takes place in countries in the Global North, this is often downplayed so that these countries remain seen as the ones who solve the problem, i.e. who rescue the Third World from itself. The discursive violence is also evidenced regarding representations of Third World women and girls. Through words, photographs, and videos, representations are indeed performative: they speak about and produce Third World women and girls in certain gendered and racialised ways that reflect wider West-centric discourses of human rights and international development. Organisations leading child marriage discourses greatly emphasise the need to place girls at the centre of child marriage theory and practice (Girls Not Brides 2016a; IMC Worldwide 2015; Warner, Stoebenau and Glinski 2014). Whilst a girl-centred strategy may seem obvious when it comes to addressing child marriage (Freccero and Whiting, 2018), this must be read as part of a broader context of that valorises agency, voice, and empowerment, placing girls as main agents of change. Indeed, prevailing discourses locate oppression at the local level, constructing families as

villains who are out there to deliberately exert negative impact on girls. This oversimplifies decision-making on complex issues such as child marriage, which is not captured by the oppositions of family *vs* girl[6]. In addition, child marriage discourses conflate agency with choice and resistance, so that the only way girls can exercise agency is by resisting and speaking up against their families, communities, and cultures. Other manifestations of agency outside of this model are readily dismissed as so. Masked by an individualist rhetoric of choice, "blame" is placed on individuals, ignoring global structures and power relations related to child marriage.

I found that child marriage discourses do not intend to make an "accurate" representation of it, similar to what Doezema (2010) argued about anti-trafficking discourses not being designed to make sense or reflect an "accurate" picture of human trafficking. Indeed, certain meanings and representations that reflect wider liberal and West-centric values and ideals are highlighted to "sell" a specific package of child marriage: a Third World problem, a practice that affects very young girls, and a traditional/cultural practice that violates human rights and impedes the neoliberal realisation of Third World women and girls. From these meanings it is derived that child marriage needs regulation and, more importantly, that the Third World needs to be protected from itself. Child marriage is thus yet another form of the global encounter between the West and the Rest (Fernando, 2016). Rather than an uninterested rescuing – or empowering – gift bestowed into the Third World, child marriage policies and interventions reproduce and reify discursive violence that transfers blame to

[6] It is important to note that families across countries and cultures are mostly built within patriarchal relationships of power, so that the very concept of family might be implicated in the reproduction of unequal gender relations. However, this thesis will argue that although families are frequently sites of gender inequality, child marriage cannot be reduced to a zero-sum game or binary opposition between men and women.

Third World "defective" cultures, families, and men, and the responsibility for solving the problem to Third World girls themselves. They ignore the complicity of the West in the very structures of global inequality, poverty, conflict, and forced displacement that drive child marriage, whilst also leaving the contradictions and shortcomings of current interventions untouched.

Research Limitations

The aim of the research is not to ascertain whether child marriage as a practice is "right" or "wrong", but to critically analyse representations, discourses, and ideologies produced and reproduced about the Third World and Third World women and girls. According to Sheila Nair (2004), a postcolonial approach does not mean to excuse abuses in the postcolonial world, for they surely exist, but rather to ground them in historical complexity. Likewise, I do not aim to make claims on whether women and girls are autonomous or agentic regarding decisions on child marriage or whether policies and initiatives focused on empowering girls are important or efficient. Instead I explore the concepts and knowledge systems underlying child marriage discourses and examine how and when agency is assigned (or not) to Third World women and girls, i.e. what counts as agency. Hence, my interest in child marriage is not geographically focused, so the research is not the case study of child marriage in a particular place, but of the discourses produced in the West about the Third World. Although child marriage is not homogenous, but varied across local contexts, the discourses that produce it move both within and across geographic and political borders, operating in transnational and deterritorialised spaces.

Feminist research often receives critiques for failing to address all the intersections of the multiple axes of oppression (Pedwell, 2007). The critique of presumably excluding some experiences has often been addressed by what Judith Butler calls the "embarrassed 'etc'" (Butler, 1990; cited in Pedwell, 2007, 58). However, no analysis will ever be fully comprehensive or inclusive, and my thesis is no different. Although I focus on racialised and gendered representations of child marriage, other aspects such as class, religion, able-bloodedness, and sexuality are left mostly outside of the analysis, even though they most definitely impact how child marriage is experienced, defined, and addressed. Additionally, it was outside the scope of this work to interrogate the inherent heteronormative character of prevailing child marriage discourses, which not only silences queer experiences within child marriage, but also fails to question the heteronormative nature of marriage itself more broadly[7]. Despite being informed by a postcolonial feminist framework, the thesis is inevitably produced from a privileged position, and even with the explicit intention of shifting the neocolonial focus from "them" to "us", it may invariable reinstate the very terminologies and binaries it aims to challenge. I am aware that turning the gaze and the focus to "us", (i.e. to how the West conceptualises and addresses child marriage), incurs the risk of "maintaining attention predominantly (if not exclusively) on the privileged 'Western' or 'First world' subject, and perpetuating a situation where the 'other' is used for the purpose of self-discovery, to define the 'I'" (Ahmed, 2000, cited in Pedwell, 2007, 27)[8]. Whilst the intention is fundamentally to reverse the imperialist gaze, such strategy in some level

[7] To illustrate this point, please see the 1962 Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages. It includes a long list of States' reservations focused on concerns about the imprecise nature of the term "couple" and it is argued that it could leave room for interpretations beyond the official/legal marriage between a man and a woman.

[8] Although the thesis is focused on turning the gaze to the West, I attempted to minimise this inherent limitation by addressing how child marriage discourses and knowledge systems produced in and by the West influence and turn actors in the Third World complicit in the very production and reproduction of these discourses.

inevitably builds upon these binaries, implicitly reinforcing the West as the privileged pole of such oppositions.

Rosalind Gill argues that epistemological scepticism does not need to eschew issues of values and that feminist scholars can be "unashamedly political" and make social transformation an explicit concern of their work (Gill, 1995, 182). Examining the women's piety movement in Egypt, Saba Mahmood reflected that asking questions about our (Western) assumptions about non-liberal practices does not mean to advocate for abandoning "our critical stance toward what we consider to be unjust practices in the situated context of our lives" or that we uncritically advocate embracing such practices (Mahmood, 2005, 39). She suggests instead leaving open the possibilities of transforming our political and analytical certainties, leaving the tensions between the prescriptive and analytical aspects of the feminist project productively open (Mahmood, 2005). This brings up discussions about the purpose of research. According to Ackerly and True (2006), feminist scholars must strive to not merely describe and explain global politics but to contribute towards its transformation. Discourse analysis has a political and ethical significance: as discourses are not closed systems but open-ended, "scholars can potentially denaturalize dominant forms of knowledge and expose to critical questioning the practices that they enable" (Milliken, 1999, 236). If all knowledge is situated and discursive, political resistance and change arise from challenging hegemonic discourses and opening up the possibility of other discursive formations (Hekman, 1997). Raising other interpretations of taken for granted "facts" enables these to be seen as not only challengeable but actually ought to be changed (Milliken, 1999).

Although postcolonial feminist analyses spring from an ethical desire to undermine ultimate claims to truth and bring to light the multiplicity of knowledge and ways of being and knowing, they have not avoided the idealisation of the marginalised/oppressed/native. This "sanctification" of the Other belongs to the same symbolic order of a colonial and imperialist discourse (Sajed, 2012). In fact, transcending the Western frame of reference does not mean

> that we should try to recapture a long-lost 'authentic' nativism, or to disentangle ourselves completely from Western influence. I have no such illusions. […] Rather I conceive of the construction and portrayal of otherness in such a manner as to transcend notions of mystery, unambiguous victimhood, and irretrievable silence (Sajed, 2012, 163).

In this sense, I am aware that my research will not change the lives of girls experiencing child marriage in any immediate way. This thesis is for better or for worse written for academic purposes and having the illusion that it will reach and immediately improve the lives of the "others" I write about is yet another assumption remnant of colonial and missionary undertones. I can only share what Laura Shepherd captured well: that my thesis "might, at best, make one or two people think differently about how policies are formed, and the constitutive effects of discourse" (Shepherd, 2017, 5). I hope then that my research contributes to better understanding how child marriage statements, policies, and programmes come about, as well as the neocolonial echoes in the assumptions produced and reproduced about Third World women and girls.

Thesis outline

This introduction discussed how the increasingly salient topic of child marriage sparked my interest in analysing the discursive representation of Third World "traditional" practices and of Third World women and girls and their agency. Using discourse analysis, I further advance the existing body of postcolonial feminist literature on representation and agency by questioning the attachment of Third World practices to culture and by theorising the agency of Third World women and girls beyond neocolonial binaries of victim/heroine and oppression/resistance. To flesh out this argument, the thesis ahead is structured in six further chapters.

Chapter 1 discusses how postcolonial feminist theory provides a framework to examine discourses on child marriage and related conceptualisations of representation and agency. It examines the existing literature relevant to the project at hand, particularly on postcolonial feminist theorising of the discursive construction of Third World women and representations of Third World cultures and Third World women and girls. I examine how the modernisation paradigm places the Third World always and already behind, which is bolstered and remedied through discourses of human rights and international development. This is followed by an overview of how non-Western women's and girls' agency has been theorised from a liberal understanding of autonomy that has led agency to become conflated with choice and emancipation, as well as postcolonial critiques of this conceptualisation.

Chapter 2 explores the methodological implications of the theoretical framework. It begins with ethical and reflexivity considerations, including the process through which the research evolved from a study of the causes and consequences of child marriage in a specific Third World context into an interrogation of how *we*, as West academics and practitioners,

conceptualise and consequently address child marriage. I delve into the personal and ethical considerations that informed this shift on research scope, especially my discomfort with "field work" and carrying out a potentially "otherising" research. As child marriage discourses became the focus of my research, the chapter offers a brief theorising of discourse from a postcolonial approach and explains the research method employed, critical discourse analysis, including the tools utilised. It also discusses the concept of discursive sites and its implications regarding the materials selected, as well as the epistemological and methodological limitations.

Chapter 3 discusses the emergence of child marriage as a "global priority issue", situating it within broader knowledge systems, and identifying overarching characteristics of current prevailing child marriage discourses. I offer a brief historical overview of how following incipient and sporadic mentions during the twentieth century, child marriage gained progressive international attention after the 2000s, and markedly since 2010. This descriptive historical account provides the background for evidencing the role of key organisations as the discursive sites where child marriage is produced, also locating the issue within broader knowledge systems and neocolonial projects such as the United Nations, human rights, and international development, which relate to girlhood innocence, population control, and the definition of Third World cultures as backwards and at odds with liberal rights and Western ways of living. Finally, I identify and explore three patterns in child marriage discourses that follow overall trends in human rights and international development practice that echo positivism and neocolonialism: the obsession with quantification, the protectionist and legalist approach, and the prominent role of Northern

and Western based NGOs as the devisers and implementers of rescue – and later "empowerment" – efforts in the Third World.

Having considered historic and broader aspects of child marriage discourses, the thesis moves into using child marriage to advance theorisation of representations and agency in postcolonial feminist literature. Chapter 4 analyses two representations related to child marriage, looking first at how child marriage is represented as an issue. Although it has been fetichised as a "global problem", representations of child marriage link it to "problematic" cultures and firmly place it as a Third World problem, so that "global" in fact means "practiced by the Third World and fixed by the West". Second, I explore how Third World women and girls are represented within child marriage, which follows broader trends that place them in a binary that oscillates between victim and super agentic. Each extreme of the binary is examined, identifying representational strategies used to construct Third World women and girls as victim and/or super agentic. I then analyse the limitations of both representations, arguing that they equally reproduce and reinstate colonial encounters, perpetuating essentialist and universalising binaries that enable the Other to be defined and managed.

The move towards representing Third World women and girls as heroines is embedded in broader discourses that valorise women's and girls' agency and empowerment, which is the focus of chapter 5. It begins with an analysis of the tensions regarding agency and choice, age, sexuality, and consent, evidencing the discomforts around girlhood innocence and sexuality, and ultimately the tension between protecting *vs* liberating Third World girls according to Western values and ideals. I then discuss how oppression and coercion are

reduced to the local level in child marriage, colluding agency with resistance that is materialised by voice. Drawing on postcolonial feminist critiques, I offer then an expanded conceptualisation of agency that may better capture the multiple and nuanced ways Third World women and girls perform agency. The chapter then explores how agency as resistance is operationalised by Western-led empowerment efforts, and although it is promoted as the best strategy to address child marriage, empowerment embodies neoliberal values and merely repackages colonial rescuing. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the contributions of this thesis both to how child marriage is conceptualised and addressed (including potential implications for practitioners) and to postcolonial feminist theorisations of representation and agency, highlighting potential areas for further investigation. Overall, this thesis calls attention to colonialising practices in contemporary child marriage discourses, in particular how it maintains the Third World firmly as the place of backwards cultures that oppress and victimise women and girls. The specific ways Third World women and girls are represented and their agency acknowledged further reinstate these practices. Indeed, the focus on Western "empowering enlightenment" of Third World girls shies attention away from questioning global structures of inequality that sustain child marriage.

CHAPTER 1 – SPEAKING ABOUT AND SPEAKING FOR THIRD WORLD WOMEN: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

> Theory, at the most basic level, is a way of seeing and speaking beyond the given. In the process of constructing knowledge, theorizing is where reality meets imagination (Connell, 2014, 539).

Postcolonial feminist theory provides the theoretical base and overarching framework for this thesis. The goal of this chapter is not to provide an overview of Western liberal feminism[9] and how it has been criticised and expanded by Black, postmodernist, poststructuralist, postcolonial, critical, and queer theoretical approaches. Neither it is to provide a genealogy of postcolonial, decolonial, and transnational theories or an in-depth account of their distinctions and extensive contributions to both feminist and International Relations literature. These are beyond the scope of this work and, most importantly, have been done brilliantly elsewhere (see Hobson and Sajed, 2017; Piedalue and Rishi, 2017; Ramamurthy and Tambe, 2017; Connell, 2014; Chowdhry and Nair, 2004; Lewis and Mills, 2003; Bulbeck, 1998, among others). Although postcolonial[10] feminist theory in itself is not monolithic, this chapter will engage with its key claims and commitments, particularly the criticism of liberal frames underlying the discursive construction of Third World women.

[9] "Western" or "First World" or "Anglo" feminism is by no means a unified project or monolithic. For a comprehensive genealogy and analysis of the common traits and variety within contemporary Western feminism, see Kaplan (1992).
[10] Indeed, the term "postcolonial" itself is a contested term that has attracted "admiration, controversy, and skepticism in academia", due to its very own inter-disciplinary nature (Chowdhry and Nair, 2004, 10-11).

The focus of the thesis is on discourses, discursive representation, and discursive violence, i.e. on how the West speaks about and speaks for the Third World and Third World women and girls. To this end, it will further discuss and advance literature on two topics central to postcolonial feminist theory, particularly as it intersects with the discipline of International Relations: representation and agency. I question the use of "traditional practices" affecting non-Western women to reinforce binaries of modern *vs* traditional and oppression *vs* resistance, which ultimately reproduce colonial encounters and maintain the image of Third World women and girls and of their agency firmly within Western frames of reference. The chapter is organised in four sections. The first part provides an overview of postcolonial feminism's main theoretical claims, particularly concerning critiques of universalism and attention to discursive violence. The following two sections review the two analytical categories central to the thesis: representation and agency. I examine how "traditional practices" are reduced to cultural explanations that are deemed to exemplify women's oppression in the Global South, as well as the representation of Third World women in binaries of victimhood and super-agency, and how such agency is circumscribe to choice and emancipation. The final section brings these strands together, explaining how a postcolonial feminist theory framework can be used to analyse child marriage discourses.

Postcolonial Feminist Theory and the Discursive Construction of Third World Women

Before looking into the analytical concepts of representation and agency, and how they are key to the project at hand, it is important to understand broad theoretical claims made by postcolonial feminist theory and criticism it has received. Drawing from Black and Marxist critiques of the erasures of race and class and the postmodern rejection of universalising

liberal ideals, postcolonial feminist theory challenged humanist, Eurocentric and modernist ideals of rationality, individuality, democracy, and secularity in mainstream International Relations theory (Chowdhry and Nair, 2004; Biswas, 1994; Bulbeck, 1998). In doing so, it highlighted the relationship between (neo)imperialism and the production of representations around culture, gender, race, and sexuality (Agathangelou, 2004; Chowdhry and Nair, 2004). By exploring broader understandings of imperialism and identity, issues of agency, subjectivity, and representation within material histories are central to postcolonial feminist theory (Anand, 2004; Chowdhry and Nair, 2004).

In general terms, postcolonial feminist theory attempts to understand the imbrications of gender and race, highlighting how gender is always racialised. It is thus a two-fold approach aimed at gendering postcolonialism and racialising feminism (Lewis and Mills, 2013), revealing the erasures of Western feminism (Nair, 2004). Piedalue and Rishi (2017) argue that "postcolonial feminism cannot be treated simply as another form of feminism or of postcolonial studies. Rather it intervenes in and changes both of these disciplines by investigating the intersections of gender-sexuality-race-nation-empire in the differing everyday contexts of women's lives and subjectivities" (Piedalue and Rishi, 2017, 550). Although they have been deemed to refer to events in the past and the "post" has been questioned within postcolonial literature (Jabri, 2012), postcolonial approaches examine the continuity and persistent impact of colonising practices, affecting how power is conceptualised in International Relations (Ramamurthy and Tambe, 2017; Chowdhry and Nair, 2004). Although direct colonialist control has ended, the material and epistemic violence suffered by the colonised left traces behind and formed the backdrop of knowledge that is constitutive of the postcolonial subjectivity's past and present (Jabri, 2012).

Therefore, postcolonial feminism is both an analytical and political project (Chowdhry and Nair, 2004; Agathangelou and Turcotte, 2015). In that sense, structural power relations are key to understand colonialism and neocolonialism, as power in the economic, political, religious, and ideological spheres are intertwined to perpetuate relationships of dependency and domination (Nkrumah, 1965). As it will be argued in this thesis, child marriage discourses focus on localising "blame" in defective Third World cultures, ignoring or minimizing the neocolonial relationships of power that play a key role in this practice.

Postcolonial feminist theory questions implicit referents of an elusive universalism, challenging the presumption of geographic location built into analyses of the global South, pivoting them to trace operations of power across place and time, in a relational understanding of power (Piedalue and Rishi, 2017). Moreover, it disrupts and challenges racist and gendered constructions of "the other" and dichotomous representations of self/other, West/East, North/South, modernity/tradition that essentialise difference (Piedalue and Rishi, 2017; Agathangelou, 2004; Biswas, 2004; Chowdhry and Nair, 2004; Nair, 2004; Moore-Gilbert, 1997). Similar to how Black feminist theory and poststructuralist feminist theory have problematised "women" as an essential or universal category, postcolonial feminist theory criticises the discursive production of the "Third World woman" (Bulbeck, 1998).

Certainly, critiques of the discursive construction of the Third World woman are a main contribution of postcolonial feminist theory, particularly as set forth by Mohanty (2013; 2006; 2003; 1984). She argued that the connection between women as historical objects and the representation of Women produced by hegemonic discourses is not a direct identity,

correspondence, or implication, but rather an arbitrary relation (Mohanty, 2003). Colonising discursive practices produce a composite and singular "Third World woman", "an image that appears arbitrarily constructed but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse" (Mohanty, 2003, 19). The "Third World woman" is thus a stable, ahistorical, and monolithic analytical category, bound by homogenous male oppression. In fact, "the discursively consensual homogeneity of 'women' as a group is mistaken for the historically specific material reality of groups of women" (Mohanty, 2006, 400). This homogenous "Third World difference" appropriates and (re)colonialises the complexity of the lives of women in the Global South (Mohanty, 1984; 2006), assuming the oppressive nature of non-Western practices and reifying ethnocentrism and essentialism (Pedwell, 2007).

Hence, colonising is discursive, through the appropriation and codification of certain "scholarship" and "knowledge" about Third World Women (Mohanty, 2013). According to Pedwell (2007), feminists have long argued that whilst erasing differences *within* groups, binaries exaggerate differences *between* groups and overvalue one pole. The production of analytical categories about "others" also create an implicit hierarchy (Mohanty, 1984) that is crucial for Western hegemony (Moore-Gilbert, 1997). These "pseudo-scientific" constructions "inscribe the cultural authority and dominance of the West under colonial rule and in the postcolonial present" (Chowdhry and Nair, 2013, 15). The Global South is then associated with "an incomplete modernity – with poverty, ill health, poor sanitation, ethnic conflict, corrupt governance, cultural backwardness, gender inequality, and so on" (Piedalue and Rishi, 2017, 554). Western feminisms have contributed to and maintained global hierarchies (Spivak, 1999) by creating "epistemological assumptions (e.g. West, free,

secular, white) against which everything else is measured and described" (Agathangelou and Turcotte, 2015, 48). In this sense, postcolonial feminist analyses attempt to dissolve not only the boundaries dividing inside/outside, but also superior/inferior (Ling, 2016).

In the hierarchical juxtaposition of West/non-West, the position of women has a central role through the opposition of Western and Third World women, where the former is the subject and the latter the object (Hobson, 2007; Biswas, 2004; Bulbeck, 1998). The so-called universal image of the Third World Woman is predicated upon assumptions about Western women as secular, liberated, and having control over their own lives (Mohanty, 1984). Western women are portrayed as educated, modern, independent, sexually liberated, having greater freedom to make choices, whilst Third World women are contrastingly presented as ignorant, poor, traditional, religiously constrained, family-bound, uneducated, and victimised (Hobson, 2007; Mohanty, 2003). Further to maintaining the victim status of Third World women, dichotomies "territorialize where violence is and who are the victims, perpetrators and protectors" (Agathangelou and Turcotte, 2015, 37) and downplay gendered practices in the so-called modern, globalised, and secular West (Biswas, 2004).

Postoclonial feminism is particularly critical of ideals of rescue and redemption, which are often explicit or implicit in Western feminism. Despite its criticism to androcentrism, Western feminism is grounded in an "imperialist vision of redemption" (Chowdhry and Nair, 2004, 13), and is often "yet another Western civilising mission" through "the idea of the White Woman's Burden" (Hobson, 2007, 101). The victim status of Third World women, who can only be rescued through Western modernity, is a crucial part of the missionary logic of Western feminism (Sensoy and Marshall, 2010; Mohanty, 1984).

According to Hobson (2007), “there is a very thin (if not permeable) line between a genuine humanitarian feminist concern and a female imperial civilising mission” (Hobson, 2007, 103). By challenging ahistorical universalist frames of reference, postcolonial feminist theory also called attention to the “politics of location”, or the idea that experiences and knowledge are situated and fragmented, produced in the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality (Piedalue and Rishi, 2017; Agathangelou and Turcotte, 2016; Parashar, 2016; Sook Kim, 2007). Location is an epistemic intervention, signifying the role of place in knowledge production Madhok (2020). If concepts are the “building blocks” of theory, “the work of theory building requires concepts able to capture different encounters with the world in different locations” (Madhok, 2020, 402).

This important theoretical claim by postcolonial feminist theory has two important implications. First, it is paramount to acknowledge the existence of multiple sites of oppression (Parashar, 2016) and the role of intimate spaces and everyday life as sites for understanding power (Piedalue and Rishi, 2017; Madhok and Rai, 2012). Second, and as further discussed in the next chapter, knowledge is not produced from neutral spaces. Indeed, postcolonial feminist theory is often criticised for being siloed and producing knowledge that is not generalizable, as if only knowledge emanating from “neutral”, white, male European liberalism has universal applicability (Piedalue and Rishi, 2017). Therefore, “postcolonial feminisms account for how our political positions are informed by our geopolitical locations and how these personal locations inform and complicate the study of IR” (Agathangelou and Ling, 2004). The attempt of positioning oneself outside colonialism naively ignores the works of power and of colonial discourses in framing “us” and “others” (Ramamurthy and Tambe, 2017). Hence, it is crucial to understand the connection between

place/location and the imagination/idea of that place, and therefore the discourses produced and their effects (Piedalue and Rishi, 2017).

In this sense and influenced by poststructuralism, postcolonialism interrogates assumptions and presumptions of feminism, international relations, and international development more broadly, questioning the very process of knowledge production (Agathangelou and Turcotte, 2016; Agathangelou and Turcotte, 2015; Chowdhry and Nair, 2004). In particular, it questions how "the West continues to spin a web of knowledge–power regimes in the non-Western world" (Anand, 2004, 211). Power is then understood not as possessed by social actors, but rather as dispersed and not clearly located (Chowdhry and Nair, 2004), so that it produces meanings and subject identities (Doty, 1996). Representation and the production of meanings around gender, race, class, and culture in thus of paramount importance for postcolonial scholars (Agathangelou, 2004). The relationship between Western material and political power and Western knowledge and representations of the Third World is at the core of the work of influential postcolonial authors, including Said, Spivak and Mohanty (Chowdhry and Nair, 2013).

Similar to criticism directed at postmodern and poststructuralist theories, postcolonial feminist theory has been problematised as deconstructive, abstract, elitist, and concerned with "high theory", language, and words, instead of the material realities and lived experiences of the oppressed (Ramamurthy and Tambe, 2017; Fernando, 2016; Chowdhry and Nair, 2004; Bulbeck, 1998). Poststructuralist scholars have responded to the critique of ignoring or denying materiality by claiming that the so-called "real" conditions of oppression can never be known anyway (Bulbeck, 1998) and that analysing discourses does

not mean to disregard the material, but to understand where the meanings attached to it come from (see Åhäll, 2011; Shepherd, 2008). Postcolonial theory takes this further, highlighting how material experiences and oppression are linked to discourses, meaning, and representation. Material and discursive violence are inseparable and discursive violence always involves complex relations of force (Fernando, 2016; Ahmed, 2000). The very process of colonisation operated through a combination of both material violence, such as taking lands and physically subjecting people, and discursive violence, by naming and constructing specific representations of the other (Fernando, 2016). The colonial relationship has thus an inherent materiality that remains imprinted in the postcolonial subject (Jabri, 2012).

Given the effects of Western discursive practices on the everyday life of non-Western people, epistemic violence has a central role in postcolonial and postcolonial feminist theories. In her influential text "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) examined how epistemic violence enabled material violence and colonial domination. Oppressive relations of power exercise violence through the process of naming others, so that their body is "taken over through naming" (Fernando, 2016, 395). Northern-produced knowledge about the Global South in underpinned by registers of hegemony and superiority (Keenaghan and Reilly, 2017; Escobar, 1995). Categories such as "women" and "Third World Women" are not innocuous or merely descriptive, but rather normative and political (Bulbeck, 1998). Universalist and homogenising discursive practices are epistemic violence that effectively silences certain groups (Spivak, 1988) and "writes out histories and mutes voices" (Parashar, 2016, 371). Moreover, the process of othering and the complex ways non-Western bodies are constructed are intertwined with how these bodies are mapped

and managed (Chowdhry and Nair, 2004) and have wider implications, shaping policy-making processes (Anand, 2004). As argued in this thesis, child marriage discourses reinstate neocolonial othering processes, and the ways Third World women and girls are represented and their agency conceived have implications on how the issue is addressed and managed by international and local institutions.

Representing Third World Cultures and Third World Women and Girls

As discussed above, a major contribution of postcolonial feminist theory was calling attention to the discursive construction of Third World women. As this thesis mobilises critical postcolonial feminist theorising and uses child marriage as a vehicle to advance literature on how the West speaks about and for Third World women and girls, the analytical concept of representation is key and will be further examined in this section. Representation is a signifying practice, or the production of meaning that renders certain constructions visible and legible (Hall, 1997; Johnson, 2011). Indeed, "we give meaning by how we represent something, the words we use, the images we produce, the emotions we associate with, the ways we classify and conceptualise and the values we ascribe it" (Hall, 1997, 3). Naming, marking, assigning, and classifying someone or something in a certain way construct knowledge about it, so that representation is itself an act of power and fundamentally political and performative.

To better understand representation, it is important to look at stereotyping as a representational practice. Stereotyping reduces subjects to few and simplified characteristics as if given by nature (Hall, 1997). Stereotyping is also inherently exclusionary, symbolically

fixing boundaries and separating “the 'normal' and the 'deviant', the 'normal' and the 'pathological', the 'acceptable' and the 'unacceptable', what 'belongs' and what does not or is 'Other', between 'insiders' and 'outsiders', Us and Them” (Hall, 1997, 258). Hence, stereotyping is closely related to power and knowledge, being a key element of the exercise of symbolic violence, so that representation, difference, and power are interconnected (Hall, 1997). More than what is perceived as “real”, stereotyping refers to what is imagined, left unsaid, fantasised, and implied (Hall, 1997). Doezema (2010) has analysed how fantasy and fetishism[11] are effects of stereotyping and part of the “myth-making” that is central to discourses on issues that become themselves fetishized, such as human trafficking (and similarly, forced genital cutting, veiling, and forced and child marriage). Fetishised and emblematic figures such as the “veiled woman” or “the burnt widow” or “the prostitute” or “the girl bride” embody the perceived backwardness and oppression of the Third World as a whole (Piedalue and Rishi, 2017; Abu-Lughod, 2002; Doezema, 2001). They are not only signifiers of all Third World women, but of all Third World cultures.

Broader postcolonial theory has called attention to how practices of representation are a fundamental part of (neo)colonising processes as practices of representation are a commonality in all encounters between the North and the South (Doty, 1996). Representation of the Third World by the West takes place in intrinsically asymmetric global economies of information, commodities, and capital, and therefore asymmetric political, cultural, and economic power (Nair, 2013; Weems, 2009). This asymmetry is clear in the hierarchical construction of a superior West and an inferior Third World, where West becomes synonymous to civilisation and “the pinnacle of human endeavour and human

[11] The concept of fetishisation is examined to a greater extend in chapter 4.

intelligence" (Winter, Thompson and Jeffreys, 2002, 79). An implicit ideal of progress, conceived ahistorically and in Western terms, suggests transformation towards peace and justice, spearheaded by Western democracies (Jabri, 2012). In this "modernisation paradigm" (Biswas, 2004, 185), liberal and postcolonial selves are inscribed in dichotomies produced through racialised, gendered, culturalist, and classist discourses, such as modern and traditional/backwards, civilised and barbaric, free and unfree, developed and underdeveloped, secularism and fundamentalism, First and Third Worlds, core and periphery, agentic and non-agentic (Jabri, 2012; Biswas, 2004; Chowdhry and Nair, 2004; Chowdhry, 2004; Ahmed, 2000; Doty, 1996).

The construction of these dichotomies enables the West to not only define itself and produce the Other, but, more importantly, to manage and rescue the Other (Jabri, 2012; Chowdhry and Nair, 2004; Ahmed, 2000; Doty, 1996). Knowledge and power are intimately connected, as

> to understand other peoples, other regions, other histories, is always to do so in terms, in concepts, and in theoretical frameworks provided by the West, so that the other is always somehow lagging behind, perpetually identified in terms of a lack or an incompleteness (Jabri, 2012, 16).

The liberal Western self is then presented as global and engaged in governing/rescuing others, who are morally inferior and in need to be reformed (Jabri, 2012; Chowdhry, 2004). Representations are thus symbolic power, intimately connected to material and political power, having enabled in the past and continuing to enable Western domination and exploitation of the Third World (Nair, 2013; Chowdhry and Nair, 2004; Doty, 1996). Knowledge and power come together in interventions in the name of human rights, global

governance, human security, and rescue (Jabri, 2012). Through pseudoscientific constructions, the intertwined cultural, moral, and material authority and dominance of the West is established as the one who rescues, civilises, aids, and develops the Other (Nair, 2013; Kapoor, 2004; Chowdhry and Nair, 2004).

This imbrication between knowledge and power is particularly relevant in human rights, international development, humanitarian aid, and gender equality (where child marriage discourses are immersed), which are inherently West-centric and reaffirm the implicit understanding of Western superiority (Kapoor, 2004; Fernando, 2016). The desire to know "them" better in order to help "the less fortunate" is not simply altruistic, as "knowing" or "discursively framing" enables its disciplining, monitoring, and managing (Kapoor, 2004, 632). Human rights and international development theory and practice are informed by ideals of progress and modernisation, which far from a benign aspiration, are a projection of power that has material and discursive implications aimed at transforming the (defective) other. Doty (1996) notes that how the non-West is discursively represented by the West does not refer to knowledge accumulated by the West about the non-West, but how and which regimes of "truth" and "knowledge" have been produced. These representations are not natural, inevitable or even useful, but arbitrary and political (Doty, 1996). They "remain widely circulated and accepted as legitimate ways to categorize regions and peoples of the world" and make certain practices and policies possible whilst others not possible (Doty, 1996, 2).

In the politics and practices of representation of the non-West by and for the West, constructions of the Other woman bolster the definition of the Western self and further place

the Third World as inferior, ultimately legitimising rescue interventions (Mohanty, 1984; Spivak 1988; Abu-Lughod 1990; Narayan 1997). Drawing from Mohanty (1984) and Narayan (2000), Phillips (2007) claims that often feminist theories that criticise essentialist views of Women end up doing the same regarding cultural difference, for instance, when analysing the Third World woman or the Muslim woman. Certainly, victimising representations of the Other such as the Muslim woman in the veil reinforce the image of the liberated Western woman against her oppressed counterpart (Agathangelou and Turcotte, 2015; Biswas, 2004). Bulbeck (1998) argues that these representations of "other" women, which are so integral to white Western women's constructions of themselves are always stereotyped, often contradictory and pejorative[12]. Liberal feminism discursively colonises the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the Third World, producing a composite and singular Third World woman that is not coincidental, but carefully constructed to reflect Western humanist discourses (Mohanty, 2003). This "Third World difference" defines then Third World women by their apparently shared oppression (Mohanty, 1984). Mohanty (2003) further theorised six ways in which the discursive "Third World woman" is portrayed as victims: of male violence, of colonial (marriage) process, of familial systems, of development processes, of religious ideologies, and finally as universal dependents. These representations of shared oppressive practices against women in the Third World are reproduced by policy makers, academics, the media, and the general public.

[12] The attempt to seemingly overcome this opposition and highlight the existence of oppressive practices in the West has led to a proliferation of feminist cross-cultural analyses, for instance comparing female genital cutting and plastic surgery (Pedwell, 2007). Nonetheless, these have also received criticism, as cross-cultural comparisons of practices affecting women that attempt to "reveal the instability of essentialist binaries", "often efface historical, social and embodied particularities, while reifying problematic notions of 'culture'. When employed by privileged 'Western' feminist theorists, such strategies can involve appropriations which affirm, rather than challenge, dominant discursive hierarchies" (Pedwell, 2007, 2).

The discursively constructed Third World woman serves also as the measure and "proof" of the non-West backwardness, becoming a representation of the oppressiveness of entire cultures (Phillips, 2007; Narayan, 1997). Practices affecting women, and in particular those that involve aspects deemed to be "spectacular" or with some "hiddenness" spark special interest and fascination (Narayan, 1997, 66), such as female genital cutting, veiling, child and forced marriage, and "honour" killings. Descriptions of oppressive cultural practices that affect women and are perpetrated by men become the yardstick that mark the boundary between civilised and barbaric societies (Biswas, 2004; Chowdhry, 2004; Chowdhry and Nair, 2004). Shepherd (2005, 399) highlights that on the 1993 Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW), the expression "traditional practices harmful to women" understands "traditional" as equal to "lesser developed countries". This assumes that these practices are not present or even conceivable in Western or developed countries (Shepherd, 2005). Similarly, Shain (2013) claimed that the focus on cultural causes of Third World problems ignores global and structural issues. As I will argue throughout this thesis, using practices such as child marriage as proof of Third World backwardness obscures the role of racialised and gendered processes that influence them and often have Western complicity, including poverty, conflict, and forced migration.

The association of oppressive practices against women to Third World cultures is particularly relevant to exploring child marriage discourses, as child marriage is firmly constructed as a traditional or cultural practice (indeed understood as lesser developed). The term culture is contested in International Relations theory (Chowdhry and Nair, 2004) that has generated strong debates between universalist and relativist approaches (for further detail, see Phillips, 2007; Mullender, 2003; Tilley, 1998, among others). On one hand,

universalism espouses a universal humanism with minimal standards deemed to be applicable to all human beings, such as human rights. This approach has been highly criticised because so-called universal premises are in fact grounded on Western, and more specifically, Eurocentric values (Phillips, 2007; Chowdhry, 2004). Relativism, on the other hand, claimed to suspend judgement and respect differences, arguing that rights should be culturally and historically contextualised (Phillips, 2007; Chowdhry, 2004). According to Chowdhry (2004), both universalism and relativism have limitations, ironically suffering from similar constraints in their essentialist understanding of culture as given, homogeneous, fixed, and immutable. This point has been particularly criticised by postcolonial scholars, as non-Western cultures are often represented as inherently patriarchal and backwards (Wade, 2011). Narayan (2000) argued against essentialist views of culture, claiming that cultures are dynamic, evolving, and internally contested. Although approaches are not linear and easily categorised in neat niches, some scholars found that debates between universalism and relativism and on whether multiculturalism and feminism are compatible unproductive. Analysing scholarship on female genital cutting, Wade (2011, 26) contends that "both accusations of African 'barbarism' and of Western feminist 'imperialism' are empirically false and inflammatory". Instead of arguing in favour of either universalist or relativist positions, postcolonial scholarship rather "seeks to uncover "the operations of power in relation to knowledge formation" (Grewal, 1999, 338, cited in Chowdhry, 2004, 233).

Women, and especially Third World women, have a prominent place in discussions around culture, including on the compatibility between multiculturalism and gender equality and feminism, as well as whether cultural practices precede colonialism or are shaped by

colonialism. If multiculturalism asks for respect for all cultural traditions, feminism questions and challenges all cultural traditions (Pollitt, 1999). However, Kymlicka (1999) argued that both feminism and multiculturalism criticise liberal conceptions of human rights, and Honig (1999) invites interrogating whether feminism is well served by its association with liberalism. In the much-debated paper "Is multiculturalism bad for women?", Susan Moller Okin (1999) asserted that what is often presented as an essential cultural feature is what is preferred by dominant groups, especially men. In another text, she argued that the claim to "respect cultural differences" has increasingly become a euphemism for restricting or denying women's rights (Okin, 1998). Okin has been criticised for reinforcing an essentialist view of cultures, placing women as "patriarchy dupes" and victims without agency (Phillips, 2007). According to Honig (1999), Okin fails to perceive culture as something "more complicated than patriarchal permission for powerful men to subordinate vulnerable women" (Honig, 1999, 36) and raises concerns over the assumptions that all men are more powerful than women. In addition, Okin's position also assumes that Western liberal systems are less patriarchal and furthest advanced "along a progressive trajectory of unfolding liberal equality" (Honig, 1999, 38). More importantly, it is important to acknowledge that with colonialism and postcolonialism, Third World cultures become intertwined with Western cultures, who continually influence and shape them through material and epistemic structures of power.

Association with relativism or multiculturalism – or what has been called the "tired and overused charge of "Eurocentrism" (Bhabha, 1999, 83) – seems to have become an offensive charge in feminist theorising. Even postcolonial authors, who expectedly criticise Eurocentrism and Western imperialism, were quick to openly dissociate themselves from

relativism. For instance, Nair (2004) raised concerns that analyses on the limitations of Western and liberal dispensations of human rights "could be appropriated in defence of cultural relativism" (Nair, 2004, 261). Likewise, Winter, Thompson and Jeffreys (2002, 73) explicit that their position "is not a cultural relativist one" and that while they agree on the existence of Western imperialism, their stance was feminist, which "is relevant wherever women are subordinated to men and denied a human status of their own, and we know of no 'culture' where this is not the case" (Winter, Thompson and Jeffreys, 2002, 73). According to Phillips (2007, 2), relativism and the fear of being characterised as a "do-gooder" cultural imperialist has resulted in a "paralysis" of feminist theorising of practices such as female genital cutting, child marriage, and unilateral divorce. Hence, rather than further arguing whether cultural practices in the Third World ought to be challenged or protected, I question the rigid and politicised association of oppressive traditions against women to Third World cultures, reducing complex practices to "defective" cultures, as if they are not influenced by global structures of material and discursive power.

As discussed, defining Third World women by their shared oppression in the hands of Third World men and cultures serves the purpose of promoting the image of the liberated Western woman and further cement non-Western inferiority, sanctioning the need for rescuing the Third World from itself. Within (neo)colonial binaries of modern/tradition, the symbolic Third World woman can only be rescued from oppression and traditional harmful practices through modernity (Hobson, 2007; Biswas, 2004; Chowdhry and Nair, 2004). This coming to consciousness is supposed to happen through contact and intervention of benevolent Western agents. According to Spivak (1988) the discourse of white saviours rescuing brown

women from brown men[13] is an epistemic violence that has long enabled material violence and colonial domination.

The main rationale used by contemporary projects of rescuing oppressed Third World women refer to human rights protection and international development, which, as further discussed in chapter 3, are integral to child marriage discourses. Postcolonial feminist theory has criticised the pretence universality of human rights, given its origins in European Enlightenment political thought and liberal discourse (Nair, 2004; Chowdhry, 2004). Claims to universal human rights replicate the colonial encounter and oppositions of West *vs* non-West, i.e. modern, enlightened, and respectful of human rights *vs* backwards, traditional, and violators of human rights (Chowdhry, 2004). Sumi Madhok has analysed the role of the language of fundamental rights and international human rights discourses to produce a particular "development subject" (Madhok, 2018; Dunford and Madhok, 2015; Madhok, 2013a; Madhok, 2013b). Nair (2004) further argues that the Enlightenment and liberal discourses that are used nowadays to admonish non-Western countries for human rights violations are the same that "also sanctioned slavery, white racism, colonialism, and imperialism" (Nair, 2004, 258). Indeed, the construction of a liberal human rights discourse privileges particular representations and endangers certain erasures about Third World others. Human rights violations in Third World "sites" become the central focus of liberal critiques. However, these critiques ignore Western complicity in the production of these abuses (Chowdhry and Nair, 2013). Madhok offers a critique of the use of "rights language", arguing that it is crucial to pay attention to

[13] Fernando (2016, 397) emphasises how "constructing brown women as victims simultaneously casts brown males as inherently violent".

> the ways in which the languages of rights are picked up and put to use in different political contexts by disparate, and especially marginal groups so that we might produce accounts of how this manifold use complicates and expands the current thinking on rights. (Madhok, 2013b, 24)

She adds though that it is equally important though to bear in mind that this language is not necessarily always oppressive and used only ever by the powerful (Madhok, 2013b, 24). This is particularly important for the analysis of child marriage discourses, as the rights language is appropriated not only by Western-based organisations, but also reproduced by organisations and populations in the Global South as part of strategies to address and control child marriage.

Similar to human rights discourses, race and racism have historically and conceptually been inscribed in the theory and practice of international development. International development is historically rooted in constructions of race during the Enlightenment, colonial expansion, and slavery (Wilson, 2011). International development is also inseparable from the ideals of progress and modernisation, spearheaded by the West. In the post-1945 era, modernisation theory revolved around differences that reproduce racialised and gendered hierarchies, such as urban/rural, modern/traditional, productive/unproductive (Wilson, 2011). In fact, "the normative repertoire of this developmentalism emphasised individual rights, self-empowerment, self-improvement and the performance of individual agency" (Madhok, 2013b, 19). Postcolonial theory not only interrogates the inherent tensions within the liberal presumptions and the normative character of human rights discourses, but focuses on the relationship between an unequal economic globalisation (rooted on colonialism) and human rights violations (Nair, 2004). More importantly, as the Third World becomes the

site of human rights violations and the central focus of critiques and interventions, Western complicity in the production of these abuses remains ignored (Chowdhry and Nair, 2004).

Postcolonial feminist theory also criticises how international development discourses and interventions have associated Third World women to backwardness, particularly focused on their reproductive role, as noted in the promotion of population control policies as key to development (Wilson, 2011) and later promotion of the entrepreneurial Third World woman as the solution to underdevelopment (Calkin, 2015, Madhok, 2013b; Wilson, 2011). It is important to note that the West maintains a central role in these representations of the Third World woman in development. For instance, Spivak (1999) criticises how in UN Conferences in the 1990s Third World women were represented by First World intellectuals in the figure of "the development practitioner and the policy maker who seeks to develop them [Third World women] by speaking for their need to be developed" (Madhok, 2013b, 15).

As further discussed in chapter 4, human rights and international development discourses pay special attention to Third World women and girls, representing them within a binary that oscillates between victim and super agentic[14]. Both extremes essentialise Third World women and girls as nurturing, dependent, tradition-bound, and resilient in face of unimaginable suffering (Keenaghan and Reilly, 2017; Dogra, 2011; Mohanty, 2003). As victimising representations of Third World women received heightened criticism (including from postcolonial feminist theory), there has been an increasing focus on Third World

[14] Several authors have analysed and criticised such dichotomist practices (see Calkin, 2015; Hayhurst, 2013; Shain, 2013; Switzer, 2013; Wilson, 2013; Dogra, 2011; Wilson, 2011; Sensoy and Marshall, 2010; among others).

women's agency and empowerment, creating a new subject: the "shero" (Fernando, 2016). This super-agentic extreme of the representational binary builds upon neoliberal values of individualism, resilience, and entrepreneurship, in a functionalist approach that sees poor women as instruments of development, presented as active agents of change that work tirelessly to support themselves and their communities and to eradicate Third World problems (Fernando, 2016; Calkin, 2015; Wilson, 2013; Wilson, 2011; Dogra, 2011).

Representations of the Third World woman are also extended to her younger counterpart, the Third World girl child. Over the 1990s girls gained an increasing role and place in international development theory and practice (Khoja-Moolji, 2015). In this "turn to the girl" (Koffman, Orgad and Gill, 2015) or "girling of development" (Hayhurst, 2013), girlhood emerged as an unstable category between risk and extraordinary capacity (Koffman and Gill, 2013)[15]. "The girl" is at the same time the innocent and vulnerable victim and the resilient, productive, and future-oriented agent (Koffman, Orgad and Gill, 2015). In the victim extreme of the binary, Third World girls are not only oppressed by Third World men and cultures, but even more vulnerable due to the frailty and innocence associate with childhood and girlhood. In the super agentic extreme that represents Third World women as heroines, girlhood conveys an ideal of untapped potential. Moreover, the manoeuvre towards representing Third World women and girls as heroines instead of victims is embedded in a broader "turn to agency" that placed increasing focus on women's agency. Child marriage discourses exist within wider human rights and

[15] As explained in the Introduction, this is not a thesis about childhood and girlhood, but it is important to note that scholars researching girlhood from a postcolonial approach have highlighted that "girlhood studies have been dominated by the voices, theoretical orientations, and sites of analysis which center on White, middle-class, Western/Northern, heterosexual young women, and marginalize non-dominant or subaltern perspectives" (Weems, 2009, 58).

international development systems that frame how Third World women and girls are represented and how their agency is conceptualised and accepted. Indeed, I argue that child marriage discourses not only reproduce, but reinforce, the neocolonial encounter. Although rescuing Third World women is seemly repackaged into empowering Third World girls, they remain firmly constrained within Western parameters.

Third World Women's and Girls' Agency: Between Choice and Resistance

Having further explored how representation is theorised, this section examines the second conceptual category relevant to my analysis: agency. If representations allow us to investigate how the West speaks *about* Third World women and girls, agency enables understanding how the West speaks *for* them, i.e. whether/how/when Third World women and girls are allowed to be agentic. Agency is a central topic in broader feminist theory and has been intertwined with the concept of autonomy. Initially developed within contemporary moral and political philosophy, the *concept* of autonomy became conflated with the liberal *conception* of autonomy (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000). Drawing upon Rawlsian and Kantian theories, this liberal conception of autonomy focused on the individual right to be self-governing and to act in ways that are their own without undue external interference (Stoljar, 2015). This conception has been criticised by different feminist theories, including radical, socialist, postmodern, poststructuralist, and postcolonial (Stoljar, 2015). Such criticisms include the association of rationality with the masculine (Madhok, 2007; Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000) and the illusory character of the rational, hyper-individualised, and unified subject, abstracted from social relations (Mahmood, 2005).

Liberal autonomy also pays special attention to the values that animate one's preferences and acts. Freedom and self-determination are often presented as such values, taken as universal and ahistorical. They underpin most development interventions, including on child marriage, leading to an "all or nothing" approach to autonomy that creates antithetical representations of women as either fully autonomous or fully oppressed (Abrams 1999; Madhok, Phillips and Wilson 2013; Gill 2007). This has been particularly criticised by postcolonial feminists for obscuring diversity and reflecting "Western women's issues" (Mohanty, 1984), so that Western, white, middle class women's concerns become then the concerns of women everywhere (Lewis and Mills, 2013)[16]. Taking freedom as the only goal of autonomy leads to an "all or nothing" approach that creates antithetical representations of women as either fully autonomous or fully oppressed (Madhok, Phillips and Wilson, 2013a; Gill, 2007). A special area of contention has been whether acts that lead to and reinforce oppression or that violate moral values and human rights should be considered autonomous (Widdows, 2013). It has been argued that such view is patronising and over-victimising, reducing women to "patriarchy dupes" (Narayan, 2002). Moreover, which ethical values are considered relevant is highly debatable, as modern human rights reflect Eurocentric liberal values that are far from universal (Mohanty, 2003). Instead of repudiating the notion of autonomy altogether, some feminist scholars have attempted to reconceptualise it. For instance, the concept of "relational autonomy" acknowledges how agents are socially embedded and identities shaped by intersecting social determinants (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000). Other authors have acknowledged the limitations of

[16] Mohanty (2003) took this point further, criticising the notion of "global sisterhood" and the implicitly consensual list of priority issues around which all women are expected to organise.

traditional conceptualisations of autonomy and chosen to use the term agency instead (Abrams, 1999). Hence, although often used interchangeably, autonomy has become associated with ideals of self-government and self-direction, whilst agency with an alleged more normatively neutral capacity to act (Madhok, Phillips, and Wilson, 2013).

Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory, I argue that both conceptualisations of autonomy and agency remain strongly informed by liberalism, focused on individual choice and colluded with emancipation. This in turn constrains how non-Western agency of is understood. As the West posited itself as the champion of individual freedom and choice (Winter, Thompson and Jeffreys, 2002), non-Western agency is measured against this rational and atomised individual capable of exercising her free will to maximise her own gain. This is particularly relevant to human rights and international development discourses, as

> the growing appropriation of this individuated conception of agency (and increasingly of empowerment) within neoliberal-inspired development discourse is not too hard to explain: the autonomous, rational, self-determining subject of classical liberalism is reformulated to appear within neoliberal political thinking as a hyperrational subject (Madhok and Rai, 2012, 648).

In this sense, "agency-in-development is strongly influenced by neoliberal politics" (Madhok and Rai, 2012, 647). As it shall be explored later in my analysis, the agency of Third World women is thus conceptualised in two complementary and entwined ways: as the oppressed victim or as a hyper-agential heroine engaged in open defiance-resistance.

The attempt to overcome the portrayal of women as passive victims have led to what Gill and Donaghue (2013) called the "turn to agency" in international development and feminist theories and activism. From ignored or dismissed, agency became "increasingly culturally demanded or even normatively required" for women (Gill and Donaghue, 2013, 253). In this scenario, agency is deeply intertwined with choice: choice is available to all and taken up through agency (Wilson, 2013; Hemmings and Kabesh, 2013), overcoming coercion or oppression. Within this duality of choice and coercion, analyses either focus on how oppression restricts agency or attempt to find instances of resistance (Madhok, Phillips, and Wilson, 2013). Agency retains a strong liberal framing, focused on the individual and their internal ability to self-reflect (Madhok, Phillips, and Wilson, 2013), so that failure or "bad choices" are the individual's fault only, regardless of the constraints faced (Madhok and Rai, 2012).

Since Third World women are historically constructed and defined against Western women, this shift has also affected how Third Women's agency is theorised, with an increasing focus on how oppression restricts agency and how agency is exercised through resistance (Madhok, Phillips, and Wilson, 2013). In this sense, particularly for Third World women, agency became conflated with the idea of resistance, emancipation, empowerment, and liberation (Pande, 2015; Hickel, 2014; Madhok, 2013a; Mahmood, 2005). According to Mahmood (2005, 8), "agency, in this form of analysis, is understood as the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)". Although resistance can play an important role in transforming oppression, Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) has called attention to the tendency of romanticising resistance, "to read all forms of resistance as signs of the

ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated" (Lila Abu-Lughod, 1990, 42). The conceptualisation of women's agency within a binary of victim/super-agentic is reproduced and augmented when the agency of Third World women is theorised. According to Hobson and Sajed (2017, 548), even critical theorising of non-Western agency frames it "through a 'winner/loser lens' whereby the non-West is effectively denied agency because it is always seen as the losing party (i.e., as the victim)."

As Western women became increasingly demanded to exercise agency, non-Western women were then expected to possess characteristics presented as universal, including assertiveness, determination, and combativeness (Ang, 2013). This meant that Third World women and girls were then demanded to be self-reliable, innovative, financially responsible and 'developable Others'" (Hayhurst, 2014, 310). Gill (2007) has criticised analyses that focus on choices disengaged from contexts as complicit with – rather than critical to – neoliberal discourses that see individual actors as rational, calculating, and self-regulating, independent from external influences. Such approaches obscure important wider debates and privatise issues, focusing on individual choices instead of broader structures and contexts (Gill 2007).

The opposition of Western/non-Western agency reflects the wider opposition of Western/non-Western women. The fetishization of "the other" serves to reinforce Western agency (Ahmed, 2000), whilst at the same time Western agency is fetishised and non-Western agency marginalised or dismissed (Hobson and Sajed, 2017). Analyses on women's and girls' choices deemed to reinforce oppression, i.e. "controversial" expressions

of agency such as undergoing genital cutting or adolescents who initiate marriage, are often focused on how women's interests have been thwarted by internalised oppression or false consciousness (see Bourdieu, 2001; Cudd, 2006; Nussbaum, 2001; Scott, 1990, among others). Such explanations have been challenged by postcolonial feminism (as well as poststructuralist feminism) as they presume the existence of a "true" self that exists prior to or outside of power and discourses. They also reiterate the Third World woman as the victim of oppression by their men and their cultures that needs to be rescued. Hence, even though choice and agency are always constrained by multiple factors, including oppression and coercion, only certain manifestations of agency are accepted as so, with "wrong choices" quickly dismissed as such.

Postcolonial theory, and in particular postcolonial feminist theory, is thus concerned with "how to theorize power differentials and relations of domination without falling into reductionist-Manichean binaries of silence *vs* resistance or an all-powerful West *vs* a powerless non-West" (Hobson and Sajed, 2017, 551). Madhok and Rai (2012), argue that theorising agency in oppressive contexts should avoid reflecting any teleology of progress, as if conceptions of a good life, emancipation, and agency are waiting for individuals as they travel along a linear continuum of progress. Hobson and Sajed (2017) even question the persistent use of the very terminology "agency", as it could be "perhaps another instance of Eurocentric logic permeating our critical epistemological vocabulary on the other" (Hobson and Sajed, 2017, 549). Certainly, postcolonial feminist scholars have called for thinking about women's agency in more complex ways (Pande, 2015). Representations of non-Western subjectivities as either victims or super agentic "are not so much wrong, for there surely is silence and open defiance-resistance in evidence in the non-Western world"

(Hobson and Sajed, 2017, 548). However, they not only create caricatures of complex subjectivities, but also raise the agency bar so high that it becomes almost impossible for non-Western agency to be perceived in meaningful ways (Hobson and Sajed, 2017). Indeed, according to Scott (1990), "most of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found neither in overt collective defiance of powerholders nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites" (Scott, 1990, 136).

While analysing developmentalism and rights discourses and practices in Northwest India, Madhok (2020; 2013b) questions how agency can be theorised in oppressive contexts and proposes a new theoretical framework for agency. She calls for loosening the association of agency with and reliance on negative freedom and free action, also displacing the principal site of recognition and analysis of agency (Madhok, 2020; 2013b). Since most lives are constrained in some way, conceptualising agency needs to be decoupled from assuming that conditions of negative freedom are "standard" and that people "display their agentic selves through their ability to commit free acts" (Madhok, 2013b, 37). Certainly, nearly all feminist and nonfeminist accounts of autonomy and agency "place a high expectation upon persons to demonstrate a direct correspondence between their preferences and their actions" (2013b, 36). Madhok argues that theorising agency in oppressive contexts must not suffer from this "action bias" and should instead move away from emphasis on negative freedom and demand that agents demonstrate a direct correlation between preferences and actions (Madhok, 2020; 2013b). This action bias is characterised by act atomism and value monism, so that agency is evaluated on the coherence of a single act, detached from a broader sequence of acts and events (Madhok, 2013b).

Acknowledging that open resistance is not always possible, other postcolonial authors have considered more nuanced and complex conceptualisations of agency. Hobson and Sajed (2017) reject the liberal and individualist concept of agency according to which agents can choose freely among choices presented clearly as so and seemingly unaffected by power relations. Instead, they propose a notion of agency that "explores the layered interactions between individuals/communities/societies and structures of domination and oppression (whether Western or non-Western)" (Hobson and Sajed, 2017, 549). If agency is defined only in terms of holding and exercising power, non-Western agency becomes confined in an oscillation between powerlessness and heroic acts of open resistance (Hobson and Sajed, 2017). Beyond this binary though, "many instances of non-Western agency occur on an individual, everyday level, sometimes performed merely as a means of navigating oppressive structures as well as simply coping and surviving" (Hobson and Sajed, 2017, 549).

Silence and secrecy are then not necessarily a sign of passivity and disempowerment but may provide space for women to consolidate resources and develop long-term strategies and tools for gradual and subtle renegotiation of gender hierarchies and practices. Away from the "heroic" cases of open resistance, "at an individual level, silence and secrecy can protect women from disempowering contexts where their voices have no institutional or collective power" (Parpart, 2010, 9). In her analysis of silence, voice, and agency, Parpart (2010) argued that discourses on women's agency and empowerment have focused on

> women's ability to make choices, to speak out, to choose, and to challenge established gender hierarchies. […] Yet in many situations—particularly conflict and postconflict zones, as well as societies characterized by deeply masculinist

> practices, widespread criminal activities, and gender violence—the choice to publicly challenge the powerful is often extremely dangerous and even foolhardy (Parpart, 2010, 2).

Kandiyoti (1988) differentiated between short and long term effects through the concept of "bargaining with patriarchy", arguing the importance of analysing women's strategies and coping mechanisms in context. Analysing piety movements in Egypt, Mahmood (2005) criticises the focus on change and the inherent antagonistic framework of prevailing conceptualisations of agency, arguing that assuming agency to happen only when norms are subverted reproduces the (neo)colonial submission/resistance binary. An emphasis on finding examples of resistance obscures a better understanding of works of power, so she offers then a broader view of how women not only resist norms and social relations, but also perform, inhabit, and experience them (Mahmood, 2005).

Viewing agency as liberation and resistance also places a great emphasis on women's voice. Women's voices are taken as a proof of agency and the symbol of their ability to make choices, to resist, and to speak out against the patriarchy (Parpart, 2010). Parpart (2010) argues that Western feminism being "voice privileging" is understandable given women's historic struggles to enter male-dominated spaces. Voice has been equalised with agency and empowerment, whilst silence uncritically identified with disempowerment. Postcolonial feminist theory has long criticised Western discourses – including feminist discourses – that imagine "the other" who needs to be saved and the idea of "giving voice" to the oppressed (Spivak, 1988; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012). The interest and demand for voices and narratives of the marginalised are part of (neo)colonial strategies of surveillance and another form of violence linked to the West's craving for coherence, authorisation, and redemption (Jones,

2004). In "giving voice" the Western subject retains a central role, even when the intention appears to be to let "the other" speak, so that there is a dependency on Western (women) to speak for "the other" (Spivak, 1994). Hence, agency conceptualised around choice, voice, liberation, and emancipation provide a limited framework to understand the multiple ways non-Western agency can take place. The construction of Third World women and girls as super agentic not only places the burden of "saving" defective Third World cultures on them, but also reinforces colonialising epistemic violence that recognises – and allows – agency exclusively within Western-centred frames of reference.

A Theoretical Framework for Analysing Discourses on Child Marriage

Drawing on the discussions above on how representations and agency are theorised, postcolonial feminist theory provides an excellent framework to analyse discourses on child marriage, whilst advancing my argument that representations of Third World practices and of Third World women and girls within these practices perpetuate the colonial encounter, maintaining a problematically narrow focus of agency as resistance. By focusing on the intersections of gender, race, and culture and questioning the representations and knowledge produced about Third World women and girls, a postcolonial feminist approach enables us to engage with the erasures that come with liberal framings that inform prevailing discourses on child marriage. Child marriage discourses coalesce around (Western) representations of cultural practices in the Third World, representations of Third World women and girls in binaries of victimhood/agentic, and agency, understood as choice and resistance. Postcolonial feminist theory has called attention to how non-Westerns are defined by their culture, with practices affecting women serving as the symbol of backwardness. In this

sense, non-Western women are represented as driven by culture, whereas Western women are motivated by choice (Phillips, 2007). Masked by an individualist rhetoric of choice and consent, the agency of non-Western women and girls is theorised within a fixed binary of no-agency *vs* super-agentic in the form of resistance against an oppressive culture.

Topics like child marriage are at the intersection of gender, race, and culture and elicit attention for different reasons. Practices affecting women have a crucial role in colonial processes of cultural (self) definition (Narayan, 1997), as Western modernity is celebrated by measuring the position of women. The fetishisation of "the other", as raised by Ahmed (2000) serves to define the Western subjectivity. Representations such as the "woman in veil" or "the girl bride" bolster the image of the liberal Western women against the oppressed Third World Woman, who can only be rescued through Western modernity. These "traditional practices" – where according to Shepherd (2005), "traditional" reads as less developed – are seen exclusively through the culture lens, obscuring the effects of the modern, globalised, and secular West on women, including the feminised labour force of colour, feminisation of poverty in the South, and commodification of Third World women's bodies (Biswas, 2004). In child marriage, the focus on culture and individual choice and action have obscured the role of structural factors in driving child marriage, including global economic equality, poverty, conflict, and displacement.

Indeed, issues presented as "traditional oppressive practices", such as veiling, female genital cutting, and child, early, and forced marriage elicit heated debates on culture, often hinged on oppositions between universalism *vs* relativism. Western "anti" discourses (i.e. anti-FGC, anti-veil, anti-child marriage) reproduce an essentialist and imperialist narrative,

attributing these practices exclusively to cultural patriarchal domination, which "grossly oversimplifies their social, cultural, and economic functions" (Wade, 2011, 29). Moreover, reducing practices like child marriage to culture fixes non-Western cultures as immutable, in a paternalist assumption that "while "we" can survive change and innovation and endure the tensions created by modernity, "they" cannot; that "we" can repeatedly reinvent ourselves, our culture, our tradition, while "they" must adhere to known cultural patterns" (Tamir, 1999, 51). Perceiving Third World women and girls as threatened by their cultures reinforces colonialist views, defining them in terms of their "problems" or "achievements" in relation to an imagined free white liberal democracy, removing "them (and the liberal democracy) from history, freezing them in time and space" (Mohanty, 2003, 49). As Third World women are imagined in opposition to the ideal Western woman, it is left implied and unquestioned that such cultural "threats" and male domination are not a problem for Western women. Even though the "problem" is one of Third World women only, the solution prescribed reproduces Western women's desires and values.

In the same way that practices affecting women spark debates about culture and representations of Third World women, they also elicit discussions about agency. Indeed, agency, understood as choice and resistance, is central in child marriage discourses. Women's and girls' agency, and in particular Third World women's and girls' agency, has been conceptualised through liberal framings according to which individuals choose freely among choices presented clearly as so and unaffected by power relations. In an attempt to overcome seeing Third World women as victims only, the "turn to agency" placed them as agents of change. In this sense, they not only had the *possibility* of changing their situation of oppression, but the actual *obligation* to do so by making "good choices", which are

implied from a Western standpoint. Third World women's and girls' agency is thus conceptualised within a binary of powerlessness and super-agency, where this agency is understood as open resistance and defiance. It has been claimed that in the "turn to agency", where agency is equalised to women's capacity to make choices, has evacuated any notion of influence, coercion, and oppression (Gill and Donaghue, 2013; Madhok, Phillips and Wilson, 2013; Wilson, 2013). However, a postcolonial feminist approach highlights the narrowness of agency as resistance, as it assumes that the only way for Third World women to exercise agency is through speaking out and resisting, specifically their family, traditions, and culture (Mahmood, 2005).

I argue that particularly in the case of child marriage, coercion and oppression have not been evacuated from analyses, but moved to the local and familial levels. Through policies and interventions, discourses on child marriage construct families as sites of confrontation and conflict so that girls' agency can only be manifested through resistance and liberation from their families, communities, and cultures. Child marriage discourses focus on empowering Third World women and girls to freely make choices, although the "correct" choice is implied from a Western and neoliberal standpoint and may be at odds with local contexts and forms of kinship. Hence, as the romanticised resistance remains the mainstream representation of agency, a postcolonial feminist framework enables an expanded view of agency. Decision-making on child marriage is complex and includes motivations beyond culture and that are not as simplistic as men-win *vs* women-lose. Child marriage involves complex social relations within families and structural pressures that go beyond culture, so that agency may be performed in multiple and subtle ways. More importantly, the values

that animate agency can be expanded from the liberal focus on attaining individual gain to include collective values that fit into contextual forms of kinship.

Gendered and racialised representations of Third World women have "geopolitical and material consequences to how we examine and write any phenomenon in the world" (Agathangelou and Turcotte, 2016, 46). Discursive representations are not purely descriptive, but normative, as "representations of gender, sex and sexuality in policy documents do not simply describe bodily realities, but rather are constitutive: of domestic units, sexual relations, parental care and a host of other social arrangements" (Shepherd, 2010, 154). Drawing on this poststructuralist rationale, a postcolonial feminist approach examines how what is presented as "universal" or implicitly "correct" forms of kinship, values, and manifestations of agency are in fact Western, liberal, white, and heteronormative. The epistemic violence of discursively constructing the colonised object – the Third World women – as "the other" (Mohanty, 1984, Spivak, 1988) establishes "'*one* explanation and narrative of reality...as the normative one' (italics in original) (Spivak, 1999:267) through silencing or disavowing other ways of knowing" (Pedwell, 2007, 11). According to Agathangelou and Turcotte (2016),

> postcolonial feminisms work to expose narratives of "civilization," "domestication" and "growth" as forms of oppression; they reveal how colonial frameworks seek to exterminate and assimilate anybody who does not fit into the dominant discourses of the interstate system. This kind of suppression allows for the accumulation and forcible impositions of international policies against communities of the Global South, which in turn enables the continued privileged position of the Global North (Agathangelou and Turcotte, 2016, 41-42).

As child marriage discourses make assumptions about family dynamics and decision-making processes, it also pathologises forms of kinship, values and manifestations of agency that fall outside the Western model, leading to paternalistic and (neo)colonialist interventions. Child marriage is presented as motivated exclusively by culture and families constructed as hindrances and sites of antagonism, so that Third World women and girls are fixed in the oppression/emancipation binary. This is materialised by two images commonly used in child marriage discourses. On one hand, the "girl bride" represents the oppressed Third World woman and girl, whereas on the other hand the "hero girl" shows that Third World women and girls have the ability – indeed the *obligation* – to make the good choice to resist their families, demonstrating (Western) values of freedom, assertiveness, determination, and combativeness (Ang, 2013). As the oppressed Third World woman and girl need to be rescued, this is often done through modernising discourses of universalist human rights protection and international development. However, Nair (2004) invites a postcolonial rereading of these discourses, which "allows us to rethink the relationship between class, race, and gender, situates power and cultural representation, and shows how human rights abuses are shaped by both contemporaneous and historical conditions" (Nair, 2004, 261). More importantly, a postcolonial approach remains attentive to how the politics of representation cannot be understood separate from material factors such as political economy (Chowdhry and Nair, 2004).

I claim that thinking of child marriage as driven by culture alone obscures structural issues that result from complex interactions between West/non-West, including economic inequality, global migration, conflict, humanitarian interventions, and forced displacement.

These issues fuel and influence the conditions that enable and demand child marriage as a "choice" by non-Western populations, complicating how agency is understood within frameworks of choice and resistance to cultural oppression. Postcolonial feminist theory provides then a framework for grounding Western discourses on child marriage in historical contexts and critically moving beyond cultural representations that promote a universalist protection of human rights and Third World girls' agency manifested as resistance. Rather than contributing to ongoing debates on universalist *vs* relativist approaches to culture or oppression *vs* resistance views of agency, I question the very location of child marriage within human rights and development debates, highlighting structural issues that influence child marriage beyond culture and expanding how Third World women's agency can be theorised beyond (neo)colonial binaries.

Conclusion

As the thesis aims to analyse how the West speaks about and speaks for Third World women and girls in child marriage discourses, this chapter grounded such analysis in postcolonial feminist theory. Upon reviewing main claims made by postcolonial feminist scholarship around (neo)colonial discursive violence and the discursive construction of Third World women, I explored in detail existing literature on two key analytical concepts for my analysis: representation and agency. I then brought this literature together to provide a framework to be applied to child marriage. Practices of representation have a role to define the self *vis-à-vis* the Other and women hold a prominent role in exemplifying the Third World's inferior and incomplete modernity. Indeed, practices affecting women, such as child marriage, are immediately and solely associated with (defective) cultures, legitimising

discourses and practices of rescue. If these practices are a sole “Third World problem”, Third World women and girls within them have been represented – spoken about – in a continuum of victimhood and super-agency.

The apparent move towards portraying Third World women and girls as agents of change, in fact *the* agents of change, led to rescuing efforts being repackaged as empowerment. As agency gains an increasingly salient role in human rights and international development (duly reproduced in child marriage), it is important to analyse what agency is ascribed or authorised to Third World women and girls. Framed within liberal values of individuality, rationality, and self-realisation, agency remains confined to choice, voice, liberation, and resistance. I call attention to the necolonial assignment of “right” and “wrong” agency and contend that both extremes of the representation binary are equal parts of colonising processes and that “shero” and empowerment discourses have material negative consequences for Third World women and girls. Following methodological discussions, the empirical chapters ahead further teases out the two analytical concepts of representation and agency and my contribution to their theorising.

CHAPTER 2 – DOING FEMINIST POSTCOLONIAL RESEARCH: METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

> Simply altering categories, however, is not enough. Without a substantial overhaul in how we understand the world (epistemology), we cannot change what we think of it (ontology) or do about it (methods and methodology) (Ling, 2016, 479).

This chapter discusses the methodological implications of applying a postcolonial feminist framework and how this informed the research design and methods. Postcolonial feminist theory shares some epistemological and methodological tenets with Western feminism (looking at issues of power and promoting social change) and poststructuralism (a social constructionist epistemology that recognises that knowledge is contextually grounded and linguistically constituted). However, postcolonialism takes these further by challenging the universalisation of ethnocentric and Western frames of reference, as well as power practices involved in discursive representations of Third World women (see Fernando, 2016; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012; Mohanty, 2003; Kandiyoti 1999; Bulbeck, 1998; Mohanty, 1991; Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 1984; among others). Mohanty (1984) was particularly critical of Western feminism methodological practices, especially methodological universalism and arithmetic methods that assume that a large number of fragmented examples add up to a universal "truth". These universalise Third World women's oppression and attempt to find proof of their powerlessness and victim status through the construction of monolithic images of Third World women defined as material subjects, as if detached from discursive representations. This in turn enables the Third World to be continuously constructed as a

place – or *the* place – where women's oppression happens. As I argue later, this enables that practices such as child marriage to be stripped of cultural and historical specificity, and, more importantly, of any linkage with global structures of inequality.

By using child marriage to further scholarship on representations, how the West speaks for and speaks about Third World women and girls is a recurrent theme throughout this thesis. As one of the main contributions of postcolonial feminist theory is the consistent critique of representations of the Third World and of Third World women, researcher positionality, problematic conceptualisations of the research subject, and the researcher/researched relationship are central methodological concerns. Although there is no single postcolonial feminist methodology (as there is no single feminist methodology), postcolonial feminist scholars often centre methodological discussions around the subaltern as a subject position, reflexivity, and positionality in fieldwork. In its critique of hegemonic forms of knowledge, postcolonial feminist theory aims to produce geographically, historically, and culturally grounded accounts, which is often done by "going into the field" and "listening" to Third World subjects, using methods that supposedly minimise neocolonial power imbalances and promote the voice and self-determination of the researched, such as ethnography or immersive fieldwork. Nonetheless, the research field is not "out there" waiting for researchers nor is necessarily a clear group of people or a place (Nast, 1994). Especially when examining discourses, as is the case with this thesis, the "field" is politically defined, cutting across time and place. Therefore, "from a postcolonial feminist perspective, identifying and examining discursive practices that produce a particular field (i.e. representations of Third World subjects in certain Western texts) are necessarily one part of the fieldwork" (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012, 576). Indeed, despite using postcolonial feminist

theory as an overall theoretical and methodological framework, I question and depart from such conceptualisations of fieldwork and "listening/giving voice" to the subaltern, which was decisive to shaping the research design and methods utilised.

Bearing this overall framework in mind, this chapter details my methodological approach in terms of research design and methods. It begins with an examination of how postcolonial feminist epistemology influenced the research design and related ethical and reflexivity considerations. I discuss my discomfort with "field work" and carrying out a potentially "othering" research, which led to my interest in analysing how *we*, Western scholars and practitioners, construct child marriage as a Third World problem and represent Third World women and girls in certain ways. I also discuss the imbrication between analytical and personal considerations that influence research design, which are usually kept hidden from academic scrutiny. The following section looks into the research methods and as child marriage discourses became the focus of the thesis, I explore how "discourse" is conceptualised, especially within a postcolonial framework, and offer an overview of the materials selected and tools utilised in discourse analysis.

Reflections on Reflexivity and the Making of a Postcolonial Feminist Research Project

In challenging positivistic assumptions of science as neutral and objective, postcolonial feminist theory has highlighted how the researcher is an inseparable part of the research process, which is not new in social science more broadly, as "the injunction to be self-reflexive in the research process has become somewhat of a commonplace for social science researchers" (Lewis, 2009, 211). This has led to a demand for reflexivity, particularly in

feminist research, which has repeatedly called for attention to knowledge production, the position of the researcher and related biases, as well as the dynamics of the relationship between researcher and the research(ed) (Riach, 2009; Fonow and Cook, 2005; Reinharz, 1992). Acknowledging that reflexivity – and how the researcher approaches the research subject – is inseparable from the research design, I also question the very colonialist nature of the demand for reflexivity in social science. The reflexivity account I offer here is then a reflection on my research subject intertwined with the story of the research process itself, and how the what (research topic), why (interest), how (methods), and who (researcher) are imbricated. Drawing upon postcolonial feminist theoretical insights, I aim to reflect on challenges related to how child marriage itself is approached, the development of the research project, and myself as a researcher.

Reflexivity in social sciences, including in feminist research, has a strong colonialist nature, in line with what Jones (2004) calls the West's craving for coherence, authorisation, and redemption. Ahistorical universalist frames of reference are used to fix the position of privileged individuals *vis a vis* "the other", i.e. Western Euro-American middle-class feminist scholars studying Third World women. The autoethnographic/self-referential aspect of reflexivity that treats the other in anecdotal or mystifying ways "produces a sanctification of the 'native', stemming from a 'Third Worldist fantasy' of the Western critical intellectual" (Sajed, 2012, 154). In representing the Other, Western scholars in turn represent themselves as transparent, ignoring their own socioeconomic, gendered, cultural, geographic, historical, and institutional positioning (Spivak, 1988; Kapoor, 2004). Rey Chow (1993) identifies this strategic rhetorical renunciation of power as the "productivity of the white guilt", "whose fantasy of the absolute and total difference of Eastern from

Western societies translates itself (textually and materially) into a representation of otherness that rematerialises the binary structure (West/East; West/Other) deconstruction claims to have subverted" (Sajed, 2012, 154). Indeed, there is an important distinction between using the Other as a mirror for Western consciousness and adopting a critical feminist practice of reflexivity (Pedwell, 2007).

Whilst the intentions behind reflecting on one's positionality, biases, and power imbalances may be morally and ethically laudable, being able to engage in such a process is itself privileged and socially located. Reflexivity is possible through access to resources, mobility, and power, requiring unfeasible degrees of rationality, self-knowledge, and freedom from social constraints (Scharff, 2009). Reflexivity can thus easily become a "tokenistic, self-indulgent or tick-the-box" exercise (Riach, 2009, 367) or a ritualistic reciting of the researcher's identities, deployed as badges (Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2009). Although it is meant to demonstrate the researcher's attentiveness to "difference", reflexivity accounts often do little reflection on the significance of difference to the research process (Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2009). Discussions of power imbalance have remained centralised on the researcher, "perhaps to the point of reproducing an account characterized by 'self fascination'" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, 72, cited in Riach, 2009, 366). In this sense, reflexivity is often presented as having an almost "cleansing effect" in research, which is closely related to colonial ideals of paternalism and benevolence. As if the act of acknowledging and presenting one's location is sufficient to eliminate its effects (Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2009), almost like a "'get out' clause, in that it allows us to seem like we are tackling such things in our research, when actually all we are doing is reflecting on ourselves, possibly in an over indulgent narcissistic way" (Ahmed, 2009, 102).

Accepting that imperialism in research cannot be overcome, Megan Daigle (2016) suggested that novelistic or narrative writing focusing on subjectivity and uncertainty is better than glossing over these issues. However, Lisa Tilley (2017, 36) argues that "narrative-based self-reflexive critiques of method do not necessarily counteract or erase this division". The binary opposition researcher/researched persists, and most importantly, so do discursive constructions of Third World subjects (Mohanty, 1984; 2013). Indeed, efforts to locate the researcher do little to disrupt the assumption that the researched lacks expert knowledge (Tilley, 2017). Ahmed (2009) argues that even when discussing oppressive practices, taken for granted knowledge and stereotypes of oppressed groups, we still fall into the trap of doing so in essentialist ways because, as researchers, we write for ourselves and for the academia. Spivak (1990) also highlighted the risk of postcolonial scholars to remove themselves of postcolonial dynamics, often with breast-beating about defending the marginality and somehow not speaking for the other. This fails to acknowledge that interactions between researchers and the Third World are never a level playing field and "our interaction with, and representations of, the subaltern are inevitably loaded" (Kapoor, 2004, 631).

In light of the ubiquitous demand for reflexivity and postcolonial feminist critiques, can reflexivity be conceived and practiced in a less tokenistic, self-centred, and colonialising manner? Reflexivity is always partial, limited, and lacking hindsight. Regardless of how much researchers attempt to be reflective and transparent, their intentions, emotions, and psyche are inaccessible to readers and to themselves (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). Presenting the non-linear story of my research project, I reflect on the processes of

objectification inherent to research and how research design influence and are influenced by not only epistemological, ontological, and theoretical assumptions, but also by personal, interpersonal, emotional, institutional, and pragmatic considerations. I first became interested in the issue of child marriage whilst working at an international NGO, discussing whether and how child marriage is a form of modern slavery. As I went into postgraduate studies, my initial interest was to examine the causes of child, early, and forced marriage, especially the decision-making processes behind it. However, as the research process unfolded, there were parallel challenges related to theoretical/epistemological approach, ethics, and research design that led me to shift the research focus.

My initial interest on causes and decision-making processes behind child marriage was heavily influenced by my background as a humanitarian and international development practitioner and my own preconceptions about it, especially assuming child marriage to be a material reality, a fact that could be described and quantified. The "logical" method to be used seemed to be "going into the field" to talk to women and girls about their lived experiences of child marriage, which in turn seemed to follow the "research formula" that has a defined order: research question, literature review/theory building, field work/data gathering, data analysis, writing. In this formula, field work enables that "local realities are reduced to the status of a "case" framed by metropolitan conceptualizations" (Connel, 2014, 525). Fieldwork is thought to bring "real" experience to researchers (Mitchell, 2013; Tilley, 2017), which is "a manifestation of the fetishisation of experiences of 'authenticity' and 'reality', particularly in Western societies" (Mitchell, 2013, 1254). This "fetishisation of the encounter with the 'victim' (Mitchell, 2013, 1248) assumes the existence of an unmediated reality that can be apprehended once experienced in the field (Nairn, 2005).

The fetishisation of fieldwork is part of a broader political economy of knowledge that has colonialising roots, where raw data is extracted from the South, processed and refined into intellectual property and finally commodified by and for the Global North (Tilley, 2017). Connell (2014) argues that feminist scholarship is embedded in a powerful global economy of knowledge that is structured in inequality, as concepts, methods, and theories are produced in the global North[17], with "the tacit assumption that the global South produces data and politics, but doesn't produce theory" (Connell, 2014, 520). Spivak (1990; 1999) called attention to this politics of knowledge production and the information retrieval, whereby "Western university researchers, armed with personal/institutional interests, go to the South to do fieldwork and collect data" (Kapoor, 2004, 632). This is yet another form of Western imperialism, so the Third World continues to provide resources for the benefit of the First World (Kapoor, 2004).

I also questioned the approach of "listening" to and collecting the point of views of the oppressed/subaltern. Although Western feminism has called attention to the androcentric nature of social sciences and the importance of listening to the lived experiences of women, postcolonial feminist theory has criticised Western ideals of accessing the authentic lived experiences of Third World women, as well as "giving voice" and romanticising the oppressed, which will be further discussed in chapter 4. Spivak (1994) argued whether researchers can *speak* for the subaltern, but can we actually *know* them? Like any other,

[17] This is a charge that certainly applies to this thesis to some extent. Despite being informed by postcolonial theory and having made an effort to draw from the work of postcolonial scholars from the global South as much as possible, my research is still largely informed by and embedded in a Western and Northern theoretical, epistemological, and methodological apparatus. Although I attempted to have a critical reading of such apparatus, my work is highly influenced by and cannot be easily separated from the social, political, and institutional structures where it is inserted.

women’s accounts of their “lived experience” are discursively constituted (Hekman, 1997) and not a neutral account of an unmediated reality. Experience is often conflated with truth, even though experience is different from self-representation, and therefore a problematic unit of analysis (Jacobi, 2006). Moreover, Mohanty (1984) also criticised the arithmetic method that presumes that if several examples of oppression are collected, it then amounts to a universal “truth”. Therefore, if all knowledge is situated, partial, and subjective, gathering more points of view or *the* point of view of the oppressed would not provide a more complete or accurate account of child marriage.

In addition to the limitations of experience as a unit of analysis, investigating the lived experiences of girls and women regarding child marriage also raised ethical concerns to me. Feminist and social science researchers at large have suggested several strategies in attempts to overcome or minimise issues related to power imbalance, objectification, and representation, most of them revolving around reciprocity, transparency, and involvement (Jacobi, 2006). Indeed, participative approaches, narrative writing, dialogue, and conversational interviews have been suggested to build a more ethical relationship and mitigate the objectification of participants (Tilley, 2017; Daigle, 2016; Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, 2012; Cornwall and Eade 2010). Diane L. Wolf (1996) has argued though that as power differentials are always present, these may in fact be manipulative, as friendships formed during fieldwork are not uninterested and often short-lived.

I felt then uneasy about interviewing women and girls who have undergone traumatic experiences for my own benefit, to “extract their words like gemstones, to later polish and arrange for publication and professional advancement, not least because I had nothing to

offer in return" (Shepherd, 2017, 5). There is an undeniable benefit gap in academic research, as researchers often have little to offer to participants as concrete benefits (Mitchell, 2013). There is vast literature on the principle of doing no harm (and it is generally the focus of ethical approval forms and processes within academia), but the issue of benefit *beyond* doing no harm is often glossed over or assumed to be the very act of "listening" or "giving voice" to marginalised groups. Interviewing processes are frequently framed as a source of catharsis for participants, so that researchers' "empathy" and these "quasi-therapeutic 'listening' services" are often presented as the actual benefit of the research for participants (Mitchell, 2013, 1257). Moreover, offering a space to "give voice" to marginalised groups or to issues often ignored, as well as amplifying their voices through Northern/Western targeted academic research is also often presented as a benefit per se, which carry emancipatory and missionary tones that have long been highlighted and challenged by postcolonial feminists (cf Spivak, 1994; Mohanty, 1984, among others).

As a postcolonial feminist researcher, I find it crucial to share not only the analytical, ethical and moral concerns that influenced the research design, but how my own life story and related social, personal, and practical factors also shaped the research. These factors are seldom discussed in academia, often due to fears of coming being read as unprofessional. Patricia Hill Collins remarked that formal academic training leads researchers to believe that in order to produce credible and scientifically valid academic work they need to extricate themselves from their communities, families, and selves (Hill Collins, 2000: viii). Standard academic practice – and even those challenging this standard practice, such as postcolonial scholars – prescribed immersive fieldwork over the course of several months in order to gain insight into the lived experiences of Third World women. However, this

was incompatible not only with my epistemological and theoretical standpoints, as detailed above, but with my position as a mother. In addition to my disbelief that ethnography provides “better” evidence or is somehow less extractive, I also encountered practical challenges. As a mother of two children in school age, it was unfeasible to me to either be separated from my children for a prolonged period of time or to take the children to field with me, removing them from school, their other parent, and their ordinary life[18]. Traditional academic methodological and reflexivity accounts often obscure these personal circumstances of the researcher, which have a strong influence on research process as much as theoretical and methodological choices, and often affect female researchers disproportionately.

In light of the epistemological, theoretical, and ethical reflections discussed, my research shifted in terms of focus and consequently methods. I questioned whether the causes of child marriage were a material reality to be grasped and categorised, as portrayed in reports produced by international organisations. In her thesis about female genital cutting and veiling, Pedwell shared her concern that “the very act of producing *yet another* analysis which takes practices of FGC or veiling as a focus, functions automatically to re-fetishise these practices” (Pedwell, 2007, 38, emphasis in the original). Indeed, as child marriage emerged as a “global issue” (which I will further discuss in chapter 3), I also felt like yet another research on the “lived experiences” of child marriage would do little more than describe the practice within hegemonic colonialising images and representations. I became particularly interested in the representations of Third World women and girls in child

[18] I wrote more about this in a post at the blog Feminist Academic Collective (Bessa, 2017). Although it is possible to bring children into the field (and some scholars have argued this, see Eggert, 2017), this is not always the case, depending on personal circumstances, location of field work, topic at hand, age of children, availability of funding and childcare, language, among other factors.

marriage, and although interviewing girls "out in the field" would certainly give me some insight into their situated, discursively constructed experiences of child marriage, it would still leave me none the wiser about how such representations came to be and their implications. I also considered examining different views on child marriage, juxtaposing the perceptions of specialists, practitioners, and the people experiencing it. However, this had the risk of dealing with difference through benevolent terms such as recognition, understanding, and dialogue, which not only have a preconceived outcome, but imply a "power-free speech situation without interference by entrenched presumptions, sensitivities and preconceived ideas" (Ang, 2003, 192). Rather than "uncovering" different views on child marriage, I was puzzled by prevailing discourses on child marriage, and most importantly how Third World women and girls are represented and how child marriage is constructed as a Third World problem, centred around culture, choice, agency, and empowerment. Instead of perhaps doing an "otherising" research, I wanted to turn the focus of analysis to "us": Western academics, practitioners, and specialists as producers (and consumers) of discourses on child marriage.

Analysing Child Marriage Discourses: Research Methods

As the focus of my thesis turned into understanding how child marriage emerged as a Third World issue and the related representations of Third World women and girls, the site of my analysis turned to discourse and the method to discourse analysis. However, and as will be discussed, discourse is a contested term and discourse analysis entails a multitude of approaches. Certainly, the choice of a particular research method is not a straightforward process and if we "pick the right method, everything else will fall into place – truth will

follow" (Vrasti, 2010, 87). If all writing is fiction or fictionalised (Daigle, 2016), there is no method that is more adequate or that will yield a more accurate account or research findings. The result of this complex and indeed "messy" process (Daigle, 2016) is hopefully that the choice of methods is coherent with the overall epistemological, theoretical, ethical, and methodological approach of the research.

The term discourse in itself is ubiquitous and highly contested, with multiple theoretical and practical meanings (Smith, 2020, Shepherd, 2008; Bacchi, 2005; Sunderland and Litosseliti, 2002). Used indiscriminately, "the concept has become vague, either meaning almost nothing, or being used with more precise, but rather different, meanings in different contexts" (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002, 1). The lack of a single or "correct" definition of discourse or discourse theory though is in line with it being a post-positivist or social constructionist project, as the "the whole idea of discourse is that definitions play an important part in delineating knowledge" (Bacchi, 2005, 198-199). A full account of the different traditions of discourse theory, especially pertaining the contributions of different theoretical approaches from Althusser, Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, and Laclau and Mouffe, and others, is out of the scope of this thesis, and more importantly, have been done with great rigour elsewhere (see Horwarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis, 2000; Howarth, 1998, among others). However, it is important to examine certain commonalities across these approaches, particularly their connection to social constructivism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, and critical theory, which share a critical approach to taken for granted knowledge, focus on historical specificity, and connection between knowledge and social processes (Burr, 1995).

Critical theory is associated with the Frankfurt School and the work of Jurgen Habermas (Held, 1980). Critical theory uses concepts of ideology and consciousness with the goal to uncover hidden power relations that are mostly constructed through language, and social phenomena of oppression. However, this school of thought claims that there is not necessarily an obscured hidden true within a discourse (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983). Instead, some interpretation of reality might be prevailing and preferred to subjects, although not truer in some objective sense (Powers, 2007). In fact, critical theory argues that positivistic claims about true knowledge and reality are not value-free, but embedded in certain interests, projects, and agendas. This is a particular important point that will influence postcolonial thinking, as Western science has become politically powerful despite – and perhaps because of – an assumed value-free character (Seidman and Wagner, 1992). Postmodernism has also criticised positivistic claims, rejecting totalizing narratives and universalist narratives of domination and emancipation and favouring analysis of historical and contextual power relations and the very process of discourses (Powers, 2007; Nicholson, 1992).

Perhaps one of the most influential theorising of discourse was provided by Michel Foucault, who was himself influenced by postmodernism and the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Friedrich Nietzsche. According to Wittgenstein, rather than definitions and essences, philosophical issues can be explained by situated and historical discursive tensions (see Scheman and O'Connor, 2002). On the other hand, Nietzsche has paid particular attention to power, particularly the will to power, manifest in two antagonistic tendencies of destruction and creation (Anderson, 2012). Nietzsche also argued that concepts used in a given time are historical borrowings, dominations, displacements, and

impositions and discourse sin any body of knowledge can be unravelled through an analysis that he theorised as genealogy (Powers, 2007). Dualism and antagonism are also important features in Lacanian discourse theory as he conceptualised four discourses (master, analyst, university, and hysteric) as the inverse of one another, reflecting the interconnected forms of different types of social links founded on language (see Schroeder, 2008; Bracher *et al*, 1994). Lacanian conceptualisation of discourse also pays attention to the reconstruction of consciousness and what has become structurally unavailable, rendering it particularly aligned with a social constructivist approach (Burr, 1995).

The Foucauldian conceptualisation of discourse and discourse analysis borrows from and further develops some of the theoretical stances discussed above and is particularly important for this thesis because it has influenced some of the approaches to discourse analysis employed and also because of the relevance of Foucauldian understanding of power. Despite criticism by several feminist scholars (see McNay, 1992; Fraser, 1989; Ramazanoglu, 1993), Foucault's ideas on power have had great influence in poststructuralist feminist and to some extent postcolonial analyses. Foucault criticised the "juridico-discursive" model of power underpinning liberal and Marxist theories, according to which power is possessed, flows from a central source and is inherently repressive (Sawicki 1991). Instead, Foucault claimed that power is exercised, capillary and located everywhere. Power is also productive inasmuch subjects are formed in everyday practices (Foucault, 1978). According to Fraser (1989), Foucault does not take up the questions of whether power is legitimate or whether knowledge is true, warranted, adequate or undistorted, but rather describes knowledge production procedures, practices, apparatuses, and institutions. One of the most influential postcolonial authors, Edward Said, draws upon Foucault's

conceptualisation of discourse to theorise about Orientalism, or the set of discursive practices used to produce knowledge about non-Westerns as part of imperialist projects that aim to not only know the Other, but dominate it (Said, 1978). As it will be detailed later in this chapter, these concepts are key to my analysis of child marriage discourses that is informed by postcolonial feminist theory, which in turn is influenced by the Foucauldian impetus to analyse the historically situated works of power and knowledge.

A key definition of discourses in the field of International Relations has been provided by Jennifer Milliken, who claims that discourses are produced through and by systems of knowledge that attach meaning to material objects (Milliken, 1999). In the process of fixing meaning, discourse is then inseparable from power (Åhäll, 2011; Shepherd, 2008). As power is diffuse and exercised, regimes of truth and discourses are also unstable grids that need to be articulated and rearticulated to fix meanings (Milliken, 1999). Fixing of meanings is always partial and historically contingent, so that discourses are inherently unstable and open for change and discontinuity (Shepherd, 2008; Milliken, 1999). Discourses are thus productive and performative, and further to providing a language to describe and define objects and phenomena, they operationalise certain regimes of truth, authorising some subjects and practices whilst silencing and excluding others (Shepherd, 2008; Milliken, 1999). By delineating how an issue can be known, discourses also determine how it can be (or should be) acted upon, making some forms of action natural and others unthinkable (Shepherd, 2017; 2008; Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). Hence, articulated discourses and representations produce policy practices and limit policy options considered acceptable (Milliken, 1999).

As discussed in the previous chapter, the role of discursive practices in constructing the other *vis-à-vis* the self is at the core of postcolonial analysis, as colonisation is inherently discursive (Ramamurthy and Tambe, 2017; Fernando, 2016; Jabri, 2012; Chowdhry and Nair, 2004; Ahmed, 2000; Hall, 1997; Doty, 1996). Western material and political power is intertwined with Western knowledge systems, so that representations of the Third World are a form of symbolic power that has enabled and continue to enable Western dominance and exploitation (Fernando, 2016; Nair, 2013; Chowdhry and Nair, 2004; Ahmed, 2000; Doty, 1996). In its imbrication with power, discourses operate within background knowledge taken to be true that enables the theorisation about how the world works and about its inhabitants (Doty, 1996). Doty (1996) describes discursive rhetorical strategies, including naturalisation, classification, surveillance, and negation, which construct subjects and objects and establish hierarchical relationships between them. Through presuppositions, discourses naturalise objects, creating backgrounds taken to be true, with description of "facts" or what is considered to simply "be" (Doty, 1996). This is further done through classification, i.e. placing objects and subjects within hierarchical categories presumed to be natural, often linked to the creation of stereotypes, which will be further discussed in chapter 4. These strategies further enable the monitoring and managing of the other and the consequent denial of its agency (Doty, 1996). Indeed, "many of the encounters between the North and the South have been occasions for the North to gather 'facts', define and monitor situations and problems, and subsequently enact policies deriving from those 'facts' and definitions. Surveillance renders subjects knowable, visible objects of disciplinary power" (Doty, 1996, 11). Postcolonial feminist theory is particularly interested in the discursive construction of Third World women as victim of her culture, religion, and socioeconomic system and defined in terms of their object status (Mohanty 2003). Bearing in mind this

understanding of discourse, I will use discourse analysis as methodology and method. My overall analytical framework rejects a distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices and attempts "to identify, problematize and challenge the ways in which 'realities' become accepted as 'real' in the practices of international relations" (Shepherd, 2008, 20).

Having discussed the different intellectual traditions that inform the conceptualisation of discourses, and particularly their application to the project at hand at the intersection of International Relations and postcolonial feminist theory, it is important to discuss the different theoretical approaches to discourse analysis[19]. Having been influential in theorising discourse, Foucault also play a key role in the development of discourse analysis theoretically and empirically. Drawing from the important conceptualisations of discourse and power/knowledge, Foucauldian discourse analysis is imbued with attention to knowledge, power, and history. Using what has been called archaeology and genealogy, this discourse analysis tradition looks at the continuities and discontinuities between epistemes, or knowledge systems (Willig and Stainton-Rogers, 2008; Weedon, 1987). This exercise reveals that works of power, although without gaining access to some universal truth, as it is not possible to analyse or speak from a position outside of discourse (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002).

Most contemporary discourse analysis approaches in some form have roots in Foucault's theories, such as the approaches elaborated by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, critical discourse analysis, and discursive psychology (see Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). Drawing

[19] As there are many conceptualisations of discourse, there are also several theoretical and methodological approaches to discourse analysis and the discussion posed here is by no means a comprehensive examination of all different approaches.

from Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe (2001) critique the Marxist division between material and production of meaning. There is thus no objective material reality and subjects' perceptions of reality are mediated entirely by discourse, so that discursive and non-discursive cannot be separated (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001). According to this theory, discourses attempt to fix meaning through nodal points that organise the discourse around a central privileged signifier or reference point, binding a system of meaning together (Horwarth, Norval, and Stavrakakis, 2000). A nodal point acquires meaning through its positioning relative to other signs, or articulation, so that a discourse is "the structured totality resulting from this articulatory practice" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, 105). When a discourse becomes hegemonic – or objective or common sense – the social practices they structure come to appear natural, although this process is never permanent or complete. Hence, crucial to discourse analysis following this theoretical approach are the inseparability of discursive and non-discursive and the identification of nodal points around which discourses articulate to struggle for hegemony.

This position contrasts with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): whilst Laclau and Mouffe view social practices as fully constituted by discourse, CDA distinguishes between discursive and non-discursive social practices. By emphasising the contingent nature of discourses, Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) argue that Laclau and Mouffe overestimate the ability of social groups to bring about change through the rearticulation of elements in discourses, ignoring unequal power relations and constraints that do not come from discourse, but from structural relations of dependency. In this sense, discourse has a dialectical relationship with social dimensions, as it is shaped and constrained by social structure and also constitutive of all dimensions of social structure which directly or

indirectly shape and constrain it (Fairclough, 1992; 1989). Indeed, “discourse is a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning” (Fairclough, 1992, 64). CDA connects macro and micro discourses to uncover the way in which texts and language produced borrow from societal level knowledge and vice versa. Drawing on Foucault, Fairclough (1992) identifies three aspects of language and constructive effects of discourse: identity (subject position), relational, and (systems of knowledge and belief). Hence, CDA aims to systematically explore the often-cloudy relationships between discursive practices, events and texts, and the wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes, emphasising how discursive practices shape and are shaped by power relations (Fairclough, 1993). Some key concepts and tools for that are intertextuality and interdiscursivity, i.e. examining how specific texts draw from earlier meaning formations and how they mix different discourses (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002).

The Critical Discourse Analysis approach is particularly interesting for the project at hand that draws from postcolonial feminist theory. Certainly, analysing discourses does not mean to disregard the material, but to understand the meanings attached to it and underlying knowledge systems. Neocolonial discursive practices are constitutive and constitute how the Third World and Third World women and represented, which emanates and feeds back into unequal poer relations and structural dependency between the West and the Third World. Postcolonial feminist discourse analysis has called attention to how representations of Third World women have an implicit authorial subject as reference, “the yardstick by which to encode and represent cultural others. It is in this move that power is exercised in discourse” (Mohanty, 2003, 21). For instance, “child marriage”, “child”, and “girl” do not have fixed and essential meaning but are rather constructed and connected to broader (or

macro) discourses and knowledges systems, which will be explored in chapter 3. Even though it acknowledges that meanings are fluid and contested, discourse analysis does not intend to find the origins of a certain discourse and dismiss it as "untrue" or reveal an essential truth that has been obscured. The goal of discourse analysis is then to understand the politics and construction of meaning, i.e. how power and regimes of truth operate to produce knowledge and shape representations, images, and policies (Shepherd, 2017; 2008). Examining the conceptual apparatus, myths, and ideologies does not intend to compare discourses to the "reality" or uncover the meaning of such myths, but rather understand the effects of discourse (Doezema, 2010). In particular, my framework aims at understanding regimes of truth that fix Third World culture in "problematic" ways. Analysing practices of representations entails understanding how language, images, and signs are used to communicate and convey meaning (Hall, 1997), even though meaning is not solely expressed "within rationalist discourses that are spoken or written in clearly laid out, well argued and sustained terms" (Johnson, 2011, 1017).

To select the materials that reflected child marriage discourses I turned mostly to written documents, noting that even though discourses are articulated in written and spoken texts, this does not mean that the social world can be reduced to textual truths (Hansen, 2006). As I focused on exploring how child marriage is represented and consequently how Third World women, girls, and their agency are represented, my approach to discourse analysis aimed at problematise and deconstruct what could – and often is – taken as such textual truth. Hence, more than the social and psychological examination of patterns of speech, language, and linguistic and rhetorical devices, I intended to analyse how issues are given specific meanings in a given social setting, in what Bacchi (2005) differentiated between

discourse analysis and analysis of discourse. Discourse is language, but it is not *just* language, as it works as systems that produce and fix meaning, enabling us to make sense of the world (Shepherd 2008), in what Milliken (1999) calls systems of signification or structures of meaning-in-use.

In an effort to keep with my ethical concerns further discussed earlier in this chapter, I made the conscious choice not to focus my analysis on visual representations, as I did not want to reinforce and reinstate the exploitation of these images[20]. Nonetheless, I acknowledge that although discourse analysis has traditionally concentrated on written language, communicative structures and meaning-production are not limited to it (Åhäll, 2011). In fact, images can elicit emotions and reactions, including empathy, pleasure, compassion, disgust, anger, curiosity, shock, fear, among others, and an increasing number of analyses examine non-textual and visual representations (Åhäll, 2011; Johnson, 2011). In International Relations, discourse analyses have traditionally centred on textual sources, but scholarship has broadened its focus beyond diplomatic documents, statistical data, political speeches, and international treaties, looking increasingly into non-traditional sources and types of knowledge, including images and narratives in popular culture and mass media (Åhäll, 2011). Similarly, Mohanty (2003) has argued that postcolonial feminist discourse analysis includes documents and discussions flowing out of international events such as the Beijing United Nations conference on women, as well as popular television and print.

[20] It is important to note that throughout chapters 3, 4, and 5 I refer to visual representations of child marriage, for instance how international organisations and NGOs use photographs of Third World girls to illustrate reports and other materials. However, I do not delve into scrutinising these visual representations to avoid reinstating and amplifying their objectifying and "othering" nature. I also made the conscious choice of not reproducing them in my thesis but whenever appropriate, I provide references to where images are available, so the reader can consult them if desired. The only visual representations present in the thesis are map representations of child marriage in chapter 3, as they are intrinsic to the argument made and do not contain images of Third World women or girls.

Having decided to focus on written documents, I selected materials produced by the main organisations working on child marriage both in policy-making and in program delivery, including research reports, program reports, evaluations, and public information materials. Hence, the analysis in this thesis draws on over 250 documents, reports, evaluations, and public information materials produced by different organisations , which were produced and made publicly available between 2000 and 2020. In addition, select international instruments and treaties on human rights, women's rights, and marriage were consulted as appropriate to contextualise the emergence of child marriage in the international agenda. The analysis was not based on one text or some "key" texts, but on a set of materials produced by different people or organisations presumed to be authorised speakers or writers of a dominant discourse (Milliken, 1999) or "privileged sites of discursive activity" (Shepherd, 2017, 26) on child marriage. The table below summarises the documents examined, organized according to main organizations – or discursive sites[21]:

Organisation[22]	**Documents examined**
Girls Not Brides	125 documents, including 99 "Girl's Voices" stories
UN agencies (UNICEF, UNFPA, UN Women, and UNHCR)	19 documents such as programmatic reports, research briefs, and public information materials

[21] As argued throughout the thesis, and particularly in chapter 3, I criticise the positivistic obsession with quantification in child marriage and international development more broadly. Nonetheless, the quantified information offered in this table aims at providing the reader with an overview of the main organisations producing and reproducing child marriage discourses.
[22] It is important to note that several of these documents are cited by the name of the author or authors, and not necessarily by the organisation that published it. It is common practice in international development that research reports, briefs, and evaluations include a "suggested citation", which names the author or authors of the documents, and not the organisation. Although it might seem like the citation refers to a secondary source, it is in fact a primary source, but the thesis follows the suggested citation recommended in each primary document consulted. This is also good practice to ensure that authors receive proper credit.

International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)	14 research and programmatic reports
Care International	11 documents, including public information materials and programmatic reports
Governments	8 documents from the UK Department for International Development (DfID), Global Affairs Canada, USA Department of State, and United States Agency for International Development (USAID)
Plan International	6 programmatic reports and public information materials
Save the Children	7 programmatic and research reports, as well as public information materials
International and regional documents	22 documents that included international and regional conventions, declarations, and resolutions, as well as reports by UN mechanisms
Others	48 documents from different international NGOs, think tanks, and the media, all but three from Western/North-based organisations

As noted from the description and table above, there is great variety in the organizations involved in child marriage theory and practice, be it through international cooperation and regulation, research, advocacy, or implementation of international development programs. Given their role in setting agendas, entities within the United Nations were heavily present

in the documentation analysed, and included both mechanisms and agencies such as the General Assembly, Human Rights Council, Committee on the Rights of the Child, UN Agency for Women (UN Women), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). As further examined in chapter 3, international NGOs have a prominent role in international development and humanitarian aid, so the analysis also included the main organisations working on child marriage. A coalition formed exclusively to address child marriage (as further detailed in the next chapter), Girls Not Brides (GNB) has become the main discursive site, acting as a guide and convenor of other organisations from different sectors. Other NGOs extremely active in child marriage are the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), Care International, Plan International, and Save the Children.

As child marriage emerged as an international issue, hundreds of nongovernmental organisations currently implement programmes and projects on child marriage, as noted in the table above. However, I selected these specific organisations for their pivotal role in shaping how child marriage is conceptualised and addressed. They are all Western-formed and Northern-based, with ample access to (and control of) international fora and funders. As such, they act as thought leaders in child marriage, setting the tone for the media, academics, and smaller NGOs at the regional, national, and local levels. Indeed, "NGOs and the international aid machinery are places where theory building does happen, more often in the interstices and around the edges than as a declared purpose" (Connel, 2014, 536).

The materials were obtained through Internet searches that were not country focused. The research is focused on the West (or global North) as a geopolitical and epistemic space, and,

more importantly, how the West speaks about and for the Third World (or global South). As so, the websites of the organisations based in the global North working (exclusively or not) on child marriage were consulted and search engines used to search for child marriage combined with related keywords, including, but not limited to, early marriage, forced marriage, early childbearing, adolescent pregnancy, women's empowerment, and girl-centered. Selecting some documents, such as UN resolutions, was a somewhat straightforward process, whereas others like reports and documents produced by UN agencies and international NGOs proved much more complex. As these organisations produce hundreds of documents, those considered to best represent or illustrate the organisation's position were selected to avoid redundancy. This can raise concerns about how the researcher can decide which texts are considered "typical" (Wodak and Meyer, 2009). These concerns are not exclusive to discourse analysis but to research in general. Selecting data and interpreting data is always an exercise of framing, from deciding which texts are to be included and excluded, which meanings are to be made and which parts are to be polished, written, and published. To minimise the partiality of this process (although it can never be eliminated), data collection and analysis were a concurrent and iterative process. The initial research design focused on how child marriage and Third World women and girls are represented provided provisional concepts and analytical categories that were then further refined and developed following *and* alongside data collection.

As explained in the previous section, the focus of my analysis is the West, i.e. how the West speaks about and speaks for the Third World. In particular, how the West conceptualises and therefore addresses child marriage as a purportedly "global issue". Therefore, the organisations selected for analysis (be it governmental or nongovernmental) are based in

the global North. Although they undoubtedly have an important role in the "management" of child marriage, organisations from the global South were not included in this analysis in order to maintain the project cohesive and coherent with the overall purpose of examining Western discourses about and for the Third World. The UN agencies, large international NGOs, and key donors in the development space often work through smaller and local organisations to implement research and development programs in the global South. Hence, in the political economy of international development and humanitarian aid (and likewise the academia), organisations (and academics) based in the global South are highly dependent on not only funding, but knowledge from that flows from the West to the Third World. This is closely linked to very nature of the processes of (neo)colonisation and related epistemic violence. The power and influence of Northern-based organisations is perceived not only on the fact that their conceptualisation and approach to child marriage reflects Western liberal values and ideas (as argued throughout this thesis), but also visible in their practical global reach. Indeed, these organisations are the ones who are able to not only fund large scale research and development programs, but also to publish the knowledge created through reports, briefs, and public information materials online and beyond. In fact, as the search for documents to be examined here was Internet-based, it naturally excluded those that have not been published or produced in languages other than English. This in itself demonstrates the exclusionary character of discourses, fixing certain meanings and "truths", whilst silencing others.

It is important to reflect on how having worked for different UN agencies and international organisations for over ten years affected my reading and interpretation of documents. Scrutinising organisations working with issues such as human rights or women's rights

always carries the concern of being overly critical towards them. Perhaps stemming from my background as a practitioner, I initially felt uncomfortable about criticising organisations working "on the ground", *actually doing something* (as opposed to me, who at that moment was working as an academic and no longer a practitioner). However, a critical reading of child marriage discourses is inseparable from a critical reading of those active in such discourses and I found comfort that exactly from my experience as a practitioner, there is a difference between the individual people working at these organisations and the collective organisation in itself. Moreover, "institutions to which we as feminist researchers can be "critical friends" deserve our analytical attention, not least because the policies and governance frameworks devised at that level have such profound impacts on so many people across the world" (Shepherd, 2017, 4-5).

In addition to documents produced by the organisations mentioned above, I initially intended to include interviews with specialists working in the field of child marriage so to explore a broader range of discursive practices and to produce a perhaps more nuanced and complete account. However, discourses are diffuse and, as I further argue in chapter 3, deeply immersed in broader (Western) knowledge systems. Therefore, discourses are not necessarily intentionally articulated by individual speakers, be these individuals or organisations, so that individual interviews would not complete, confirm, or validate claims apprehended through the analysis of documents. As previously discussed, interviews do not capture a person's "experience", but only a partial, time and context-bound perception that serves their own varied interests. As both documents and interviews are always a partial account and neither reflect "reality" more or less accurately, a small number of interviews

would not elicit any further insight into child marriage discourses than written documents could.

Having defined the goals of using discourse analysis, as well as the types of material analysed, it is important to explain the tools utilised. As discourse and discourse analysis are contested terms, the methods to carry out discourse analysis are also varied (Milliken, 1999). Rooted on a constructivist ontological approach, the overall analysis is deconstructive, although "[d]econstruction is not a method or strategy, but what happens as a result of strategies of analysis" (Shepherd, 2008, 27). My overall approach draws from critical discourse analysis framework (see Fairclough, 1992; Fairclough, 1989), which links texts to wider socio-political processes and the contexts where texts were produced. This process includes textual analysis to identify key elements, process analysis to examine the purposes of its production, and social analysis to examine wider social, political, economic contexts and related power structures. The textual analysis identified the linguistic structures that construct the meaning of concepts central to the thesis, including child marriage, Third World girlhood, agency, and empowerment. Identifying theoretical concepts enabled me to analyse how texts were organised and which subjects or issues were given priority (Shepherd, 2017). As mentioned above, "one of the most important aspects of a discourse is its capacity to naturalize" (Doty, 1996, 11). Indeed, through articulation, discursive objects and relationships are constructed out of "cultural raw materials" and "linguistic resources" that already make sense within a certain society, so these representations are accepted as natural (Milliken, 1999). Through textual analysis I attempted then to identify how certain understandings of the topics at hand were fixed and naturalised, including child marriage as a Third World problem, Third World girls as victims and/or heroes, and agency

as resistance and empowerment. In order to uncover the relational distinctions that hierarchically frame subject identities (Milliken, 1999), I also identified and displaced oppositions, especially those centred in what postcolonial theorists call "the Third World difference", i.e. how Third World women and girls are defined in terms of their object status *vis a vis* Western subjectivity (Mohanty, 2003). The point of deconstructing such oppositions was not to establish "the right story" (Milliken, 1999), but to highlight the ambiguities and tensions that emerge across the child marriage discourses, emphasising how "meaning itself is constituted through discursive practice" (Shepherd, 2017, 28).

Following the three layers of analysis of critical discourse analysis, the textual analysis was connected to examining the processes whereby the texts examined were produced. According to Shepherd (2010), it is crucial to analyse the "discursive terrain", or "the institutions, constituted through time- and location-specific legal systems, cultural and socio-political traditions, geopolitical positioning and histories" (Shepherd, 2010, 146), where policy-making takes place, as this is where ideas and ideals about gender inform the documents being crafted. Indeed, one of the key elements of the discourse analysis in this thesis was to examine the institutional context where child marriage emerged as an issue of international concern, which is discussed in chapter 3. Finally, the broader socio-political context where child marriage discourses take place was also analysed. In fact, "when we speak of a discourse we may be referring to a specific group of texts, but also importantly to the social practices to which those texts are inextricably linked" (Doty, 1996, 6). Child marriage is conceptualised within international human rights and international development theory and practice, which are inherently informed and influenced by Western and neoliberal knowledge systems. Child marriage discourses are thus embedded in and reflect

broader (neo)colonial projects that represent and manage Third World cultures, women and girls in opposition to imagined Western liberal ideals. Discourse has thus a material and performative character: whilst producing "truth" and "knowledge", it is also articulated with the exercise of political, military, and economic power (Doty, 1996, 6). Indeed, prevailing discourses on child marriage and representations of Third World women and girls inform how the practice is addressed, and ultimately the policies and programmes implemented in the global South.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the methodological implications of the postcolonial feminist theoretical framework, specifically how it affected research design, reflexivity, and choice of methods. I detailed how analytical, epistemological, ethical, and practical considerations influenced the research design and ultimately my interest in examining how Western organisations, practitioners, and scholars conceptualise child marriage. As the research focused on child marriage discourses as the vehicle to advance scholarship on representations of Third World women and girls and of their agency, I presented the methods employed, including guiding definitions of discourse and discourse analysis and details on the materials and tools utilised. The discussion of research design and reflexivity raised issues of positionality and partiality. I have no illusions that restating the partiality of all truth claims or being transparent about the values and choices informing my research at the theoretical, epistemological, methodological, and personal levels are enough to justify limitations or critiques of my arguments. The claims made by this – and any thesis – come

from a privileged discursive position[23] and are therefore challengeable, political, and contingent (Shepherd, 2008). Every analysis creates and leaves space for other voices and other silences and the data I selected, concepts, and discursive categories I made mean that others were inevitably silenced. Notwithstanding the reflections offered and being informed by a postcolonial feminist framework, the research was inevitably produced from a privileged position, and despite the intention to shift the neocolonial focus from "them" to "us", it may invariably reinstate the very terminologies and binaries it aims to challenge.

As I focused on child marriage discourses and representations, I wondered if I were distancing myself from postcolonial commitments. By not engaging with lived experiences and not "giving voice" to women and girls experiencing child marriage was I further silencing them instead? Would listening to *discourses* instead of listening to *people* make it an "ivory tower" research, disconnected from reality[24]? Jacobi (2006) argues that research that pays attention to the impact of language and challenges ethnocentrism is done by "going out into the field and embarking upon local, detailed, cross-cultural, and contextually based studies […]. Studying the very problematic and controversial "other" cannot be merely textual" (Jacobi, 2006, 158). However, as lived experiences are also situated discursive

[23] Coming originally from the global South and having received part of my education and training in Brazil do not make me any more or less "authorised" as a postcolonial feminist researcher. Having lived, studied, and worked in international development in countries in the global North for the past 12 years, my "place" as a postcolonial feminist scholar is rather complex, with intimate connections between physical and affective spaces of living (Agathangelou and Turcotte, 2009). Although I attempt to engage critically with "First World feminisms" (Agathangelou and Turcotte, 2014), I speak from a privileged discursive position and am inevitably part of such First World feminisms. "Being postcolonial or 'ethnic', according to Spivak, does not necessarily or naturally qualify one as Third World expert or indeed subaltern (1999: 310); in fact, valorising the 'ethnic' may end up rewarding those who are already privileged and upwardly mobile" (Spivak, 1999, cited in Kapoor, 2004, 631). I am undoubtedly part of what Connell (2014) called the widespread extraversion in gender studies, whereby global South scholars go to the metropolis for training and to produce (Connell, 2014).

[24] Upon further reflection, I also realised the influence of my subject position in this dilemma. Since I have a background as practitioner, it was challenging for me and I faced some internal resistance towards the idea of working on a more theoretical (rather than empirical) project.

representations, listening to discourses is equally important. Hence, this research is aligned with postcolonial commitments not for "going into the field" to listen/give voice to women and girls, but for interrogating the colonising "discursive production of the 'Third World Woman'" (Mohanty, 1984, 334). Postcolonial feminist methodological thinking and approaches have often focused on power dynamics (particularly during fieldwork) and how the subaltern research subject is treated. Whilst acknowledging the utmost importance of these debates though, I suggest that we use postcolonial feminist theoretical, epistemological, and methodological tenets on *ourselves*, the West[25]. With this, I hope to disrupt yet another neocolonial opposition: the West as producer of methods and theories and the Global South as the producer of case studies and data. The following empirical chapters will use this methodological approach to flesh out my argument that child marriage discourses perpetuate colonialising representations of Third World women and girls, beginning with an exploration of how child marriage emerged as an issue of "global concern" and how such discourses are inserted in wider knowledge systems related to childhood innocence, human rights, and international development.

[25] It is important to acknowledge that geopolitical and epistemic entities such as "global North", global South", Third World, and West are not monolithic, with crucial differences in terms of power, privilege, and oppression. However, I employ those terms as ideal types in the Weberian sense, i.e. as abstract concepts used as methodological devices for analytical purposes (Benhabib, 1995). In that sense, they are used not only as an ideational construct, but also as a recognisable political entity (Anand, 2004) for the analysis.

CHAPTER 3 – CHILD MARRIAGE AS A "GLOBAL" PRIORITY ISSUE: UNDERLYING KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS, PATTERNS, AND TENSIONS

> This colonial legacy of focusing on age still shapes today's discourse on early and child marriage. The obvious similarity of contemporary debates to the discourse from a century ago is hardly coincidental. We have inherited three important legacies in how we engage with the issue: narrow focuses on health, age and the law (Nirantar Trust, 2015, 9).

International focus on child marriage and ensuing efforts to address it are a recent development, although it is no coincidence that such efforts are parallel to the emergence of the United Nations, human rights, and international development systems[26]. In fact, these wider processes and context provide the backdrop for how child marriage is conceptualised, managed, and addressed. Child marriage discourses reflect and are embedded in neocolonial projects related to population control and the definition of Third World cultures and traditions as backwards and at odds with liberal and Western rights and ways of living. Moreover, the emergence of child marriage in the international agenda is closely related to the discursive construction of Third World women and girls, who are defined in terms of their problems, so that issues affecting them become the yardstick to measure – and prove – the Third World's backwardness *vis-à-vis* the West. Following incipient and sporadic attention throughout the twentieth century, child marriage became truly prominent in international agendas after the 2000s (and particularly after the 2010s), accompanying

[26] Although the marriage of children has been recorded throughout human history, across virtually all societies and religions, it is outside the scope or interest of this thesis to provide a full historical account of the practice in all of its rich diversity across different countries, cultures, and eras.

broader shifts in human rights and international development theory and practice that increasingly focused on girls and on women's and girls' agency and empowerment. With girls at the centre stage of development, child marriage became an "urgent" issue, requiring growing concerted efforts by a multitude of international organisations, NGOs, academics, and the media.

This chapter begins with a historic overview of how child marriage became a salient topic in the international agenda, including a brief discussion on the different terminology used. This overview is purposely descriptive and does not intend to be exhaustive, but rather to highlight the main developments that have placed child marriage as a pronounced global issue. This descriptive historical account provides the background for evidencing the role of key organisations (or "discursive sites", as explained in the previous chapter) involved in child marriage, locating child marriage discourses within broader knowledge systems, as well as discussing certain patterns identified in child marriage discourses and interventions. In this sense, the second section looks deeper into the knowledge systems child marriage discourses are embedded in, namely childhood/girlhood innocence, human rights, and international development. Child marriage discourses embody and amplify long-standing concerns related to childhood innocence that emerged in the late nineteenth century and that are highly gendered and racialised. Defining child marriage as a Third World "traditional practice" firmly opposes it to human rights and international development goals (such as the Sustainable Development Goals), that far from "universal", neutral, and apolitical, reflect and reinstate binaries of modern/backwards, religious/secular, and developed/underdeveloped. The final section identifies patterns in child marriage discourses that follow overall trends in human rights and international development practice, which in

turn echo positivist and neocolonial projects. These are an obsession with quantification, a protectionist and legalist approach, and the prominent role of Northern and Western based NGOs as the devisers and implementers of rescuing and empowering efforts in the global South.

The Emergence of Child Marriage as an International Priority Issue

One of the first recorded initiatives to draw attention to and attempt to regulate child marriage took place during the colonial rule in India, in the form of the 1929 Child Marriage Restraint Act, also known as the Sharda Act (Tambe and Bhatia, 2014). In the aftermath of the Second World War and the emergence of the United Nations system, the topic slowly gained prominence. Article 16 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "men and women of *full age*, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family" (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, article 16, my emphasis), leaving "full age" ambiguous and open to interpretation. Similar language is used in the 1966 Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Likewise, the 1956 Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery urges States to "prescribe, where appropriate, suitable minimum ages of marriage" (Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, 1956, article 2). The non-binding preamble of the 1962 Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages calls States to "take all appropriate measures with a view to abolishing such customs, ancient laws and practices by ensuring, inter alia , complete freedom in the choice of a spouse, eliminating completely child marriages and the betrothal

of young girls before the age of puberty" (Convention on Consent to Marriage, 1962, preamble). Article 2 adds that "States Parties to the present Convention shall take legislative action to specify a minimum age for marriage" (Convention on Consent to Marriage, 1962, article 2).

The 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) establishes that "the betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage and to make the registration of marriages in an official registry compulsory" (CEDAW, 1979, article 16). The 1994 CEDAW General Recommendation 21 on Equality in Marriage and Family Relations clarified "minimum age" as 18 for both men and women (Sexual Rights Initiative, 2013, 2). The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) does not address child marriage directly, but further to defining "child" as any person under 18 years old, article 24 urges "abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children" (CRC, 1989, article 24). In 1994, the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities[27] of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights adopted a Plan of Action for the Elimination of Harmful Traditional Practices affecting the Health of Women and Children. According to the document, "the question of traditional practices affecting the health of women and children has been on the agenda of the Commission on Human Rights since 1984" (UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, 1994, 1). It urged governments to fix the minimum age of marriage at 18 and the mobilisation of non-governmental organisations and the media

[27] In 1999 this sub-commission was renamed Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights. In 2006, when the mandate of the Commission on Human Rights was transferred to the Human Rights Council, the sub-commission was replaced by the Human Rights Council Advisory Committee (United Nations Human Rights Council, n.d.).

around the issue. It is important to note the language used in these documents, which firmly inscribes child marriage in the realm of "traditional", tacitly opposed to the presumably modern West.

The Programme of Action adopted during the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo also addresses child marriage. Chapter IV (Gender Equality, Equity and Empowerment of Women) contains a sub-section on "The girl child" and Action 4.21 urges governments to adopt and enforce legislation on minimum age of marriage, though no specific age is suggested. The document also asks for measures to eliminate child marriage and to create "a socio-economic environment conducive to the elimination of all child marriages and other unions as a matter of urgency, and should discourage early marriage" (UNFPA, 2004). The 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted during the Fourth World Conference on Women recognised child marriage as a cause and consequence of discrimination against women and girls and its Actions to be Taken include calls for establishing minimum age of marriage. The 2003 Committee on the Rights of the Child's general comment Nº 4 on adolescent health discusses the impact of traditional practices such as early marriage on adolescent's health and recommends States to increase the minimum age for marriage with and without parental consent to 18 years, for both girls and boys.

Regional human rights instruments also addressed child marriage directly or indirectly. Both the 1950 European Convention on Human Rights and the 1969 American Convention on Human Rights use vague wording, stating that men and women of "marriageable age" have the right to enter marriage. The 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

calls for governments to prohibit child marriage and set the minimum age at 18. The 2003 Maputo Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa states that "the minimum age of marriage for women shall be 18 years" (Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, 2003, article 6). In 2005 the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted Resolution 1468 on Forced marriages and child marriage that defined child marriage as "the union of two persons at least one of whom is under 18 years of age" (Parliamentary Assembly, 2005).

Despite these sporadic and inconsistent mentions in international documents, child marriage did not begin to be seen as a pressing issue until recent years, particularly from 2010 (Lowe et al, 2017). Indeed, "in the second decade of the twenty-first century, child marriage has become an urgent topic for global health and development activists" (Tambe and Bhatia, 2014, 90), as well as for the UN, regional intergovernmental organisations, and governments. Although "early marriage" was mentioned in the preamble of the United Nations General Assembly Girl Child Resolution since the first resolution in 1997, this reference was strengthened from the 2010 Resolution onwards, when it was addressed not only in the preamble but also in the substantive provisions (Lowe et al, 2017). In 2011 the UN General Assembly established the International Day of the Girl Child and the theme for the first day, on 12 October 2012, was child marriage. In September 2013 the UN Human Rights Council adopted a procedural resolution on child, early, and forced marriage, which was followed by the adoption of a similar UN General Assembly resolution in December 2013. Both resolutions called for a panel and a report by the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR) on child, early, and forced marriage (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2013; United Nations General Assembly, 2013), which was

published in 2014 (United Nations General Assembly, 2014). In October 2016 the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights held an expert workshop on child marriage and a subsequent report was published in 2017. In 2017 the OHCHR also published a booklet on Recommendations for action against Child and Forced Marriages (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2017). In December 2014, December 2016, and November 2018 the General Assembly adopted further Resolutions on child, early, and forced marriage, as did the Human Rights Council in July 2015, July 2017, and July 2019. The 2017 Resolution focused specifically on child, early, and forced marriage in humanitarian settings and the 2019 Resolution had the theme of "consequences of child marriage".

In November 2020, the UN General Assembly adopted its fourth Resolution on child, early, and forced marriage, which focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on efforts to end child marriage. The Resolution was co-led by the governments of Canada and Zambia and in an official statement, the Canadian government used language focused on human rights and "girls' potential" and emphasised the health and education consequences of child marriage,

> Child, early and forced marriage is an abuse of human rights and a major obstacle to the fulfillment of women's and girls' potential. Too often, it results in an end to their education and in health complications, and it puts them at higher risk of encountering discrimination and violence throughout their lives (Global Affairs Canada, 2020).

This is well aligned with the connection of child marriage discourses with underlying knowledge systems of human rights and international development, as well as the patterns

of representation of facts and protectionist approach, which will be discussed and analysed in the next sections of this chapter. The Resolution also refers to the COVID-19 pandemic as an emerging obstacle to global efforts to end child marriage, noting that it

> not only exacerbates root causes of child, early and forced marriage, but also diverts international, regional and national attention and resources away from, inter alia, the prevention and elimination of child, early and forced marriage and other harmful practices, and furthermore that COVID-19 containment measures are delaying and disrupting efforts, including by civil society and other relevant stakeholders, to end child, early and forced marriage, especially at the local level (United Nations General Assembly, 2020, 5).

The Resolution is accompanied by a call "upon the international community to take concrete action to maintain and accelerate progress" (Global Affairs Canada, 2020), once again emphasising the urgent nature of addressing child marriage.

In addition to being immersed in human rights discourses, as detailed above, child marriage was also inserted in discourses of international development. Similar to how the human rights system reproduces Eurocentric Enlightenment values, international development theory and practice reinstate colonial relationships of power through ideals of modernisation, neoliberal economic development, individual entrepreneurship, and population control. Child marriage is thus placed both as a human right violation and an impediment to the development of the Third World along a purported evolution towards the Western model.

Child marriage became then part and parcel of international development. In 2015 child marriage was included in the Sustainable Development Goals (SGDs). Under Goal 5 ("achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls"), target 5.3 aims to "eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation" (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). Child marriage also became increasingly present in the agenda of other UN mechanisms, being addressed during progress reviews of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Declaration, the Committee of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Commission on the Status of Women (Girls Not Brides, 2016; Tzemach Lemmon and El Harake, 2014). In 2014 the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women the Committee on the Rights of the Child approved a joint general recommendation/general comment on harmful practices, defining child marriage as a marriage where at least one of the parties is under 18 years of age and also a form of forced marriage (CEDAW, 2014, 7). In 2012 the UN Special Rapporteur on Slavery published a thematic report on servile marriage, and other UN Special Rapporteurs have also addressed child marriage on occasion, including the Special Rapporteurs on traditional practices, on trafficking in persons, on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, on freedom of religion or belief, on violence against women, and on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health (United Nations General Assembly, 2016; United Nations General Assembly, 2014).

Similar to its emergence as a priority issue within the UN system from 2010 onwards, child marriage also gained increased prominence at the regional level. In October 2011 Commonwealth Heads of Government made a commitment to act against child marriage,

which led to the adoption of the Kigali Declaration to prevent and end child marriage in 2015. In August 2014 State members of the South Asia Initiative to End Violence Against Children adopted a Regional Action Plan to End Child Marriage, and following the Africa Girl Summit in June 2015 African Union members adopted the African Common Position on Ending Child Marriage (Girls Not Brides, 2016). Parliamentarians for Global Action, a network of 1,300 parliamentarians in 143 countries, launched a global campaign to end child, early, and forced marriage in 2014 and in the following year 600 parliamentarians worldwide signed a Global Parliamentary Declaration to End Child, Early and Forced Marriage (Girls Not Brides, 2016). In November 2016 the Organisation of the American States (OAS) held a forum on child, early, and forced marriage and motherhood in the continent. In 2017 the Steering Committee for Human Rights (CDDH) of the Council of Europe adopted a guide to good and promising practices aimed at preventing and combating female genital mutilation and forced marriage.

Over most of the second half of the twentieth century, child marriage was indirectly integrated in the remittance of UN agencies, usually mentioned in documents within broader themes pertaining to women's and children's rights. In the 2000s and particularly after 2010 the issue gained progressive interest and began to appear as a topic of its own in publications, media releases, and initiatives. For the United Nations Fund for Children (UNICEF), "the papers referring to CEFM [child, early and forced marriage] are few in the earlier years of operation and become far more prevalent into the 1990's as the focus of their organisation shifts towards child marriage and women's and girl's rights" (Lowe et al, 2017, 44). In 2001 UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre published the report "Early marriage, child Spouses". From then on, there was a policy change from acknowledging the existence of child

marriage to concrete action against it (Lowe et al, 2017). In 2005 UNICEF published the report “Early Marriage: A Harmful Traditional Practice” and in 2006 a Child Protection Information Sheet on Child Marriage. In 2010 UNICEF launched a pilot intervention program on child marriage in West Bengal and had an influential role in establishing child marriage as the theme of the afore-mentioned UN first International Day of the Girl Child in 2012 (Lowe et al, 2017). Since then, child marriage has become one of UNICEF’s priorities and the agency has implemented several programmes and published different reports on the issue. Likewise, from 2010 onwards child marriage began to feature increasingly as a prominent issue in the programmes and research carried out by other UN agencies, especially the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), UN Women[28], and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Likewise, from the 2000s and especially after 2010, child marriage has also become a topic of heightened interest for civil society organisations and activists. The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) claims to have started working on the issue of child marriage in 2003 (International Center for Research on Women, n.d.), when it published its first of many reports on the issue, “Too Young to Wed: The lives, rights and health of young married girls”. In 2006 the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) and the Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls, supported by the UNFPA and The Global Coalition on Women and AIDS, published the study “Ending child marriage: A guide for global policy action”. From around 2010 onwards other international organisations such as Care International, Save the Children, Plan International, and World Vision

[28] Until its establishment in January 2011, UN Women’s mandate was covered by the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

progressively moved from acknowledging child marriage to purposefully implementing programmes, carrying out research, and publishing reports on child marriage[29]. In 2011, The Elders, a group of independent global leaders brought together by Nelson Mandela in 2007 to "promote human rights and social justice" decided to take the issue of child marriage as one of its priorities (The Elders, n.d.). With support from the Ford Foundation, the Nike Foundation, and the NoVo Foundation, in September 2011 The Elders launched the Girls Not Brides global partnership to end child marriage, which claimed to have the goal of being a space for experts and activists to learn, raise awareness, and mobilise support to end child marriage (Girls Not Brides, 2016, 6). Girls Not Brides became an independent NGO in 2013 and it is set up as a global partnership that currently gathers over 1,000 organisations from over 95 countries (Girls Not Brides, n.d. b). Girls Not Brides has since become a thought leader in child marriage and a main discursive site.

As interest in child marriage increased, governments in the global North paid greater attention to it. According to a report by the Council on Foreign Relations,

> in April 2012, under U.S. leadership, foreign ministers from the G8 included a condemnation of early and forced marriage in the chair's statement for the first time.[…] Former British prime minister and current UN special envoy on education Gordon Brown, together with Sarah Brown, has taken leadership on the critical issue of combatting child marriage (Vogelstein, 2013, 24).

In May 2012, the US Senate passed the International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act (S.414), channelling State Department funding into addressing child

[29] Nowadays, the main non-governmental organisations in the child marriage field are Girls Not Brides, Care International, Plan International, Save the Children, and ICRW. As explained in chapter 2, the prominent role of these organisations on child marriage discourse and practice is the reason why they were the discursive sites selected for analysis by this research, alongside UN agencies UNICEF and UNFPA.

marriages globally (Tambe and Bhatia, 2014). In 2012 the United States Senate passed the International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act (S.414) that established a multi-year strategy to prevent child marriage in developing countries (International Center for Research on Women, 2010) and in 2012 The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) published its policy framework on child marriage (USAID, 2012), which was followed by the publication of a resource guide on child, early and forced marriage (USAID, 2015). The UK government has claimed to be at the forefront of international efforts to end child marriage and has committed £39m between 2015 and 2020 to programmes on the issue through its Department for International Development (DfID) (Department for International Development, n.d.). In July 2014 the UK government and UNICEF co-hosted the Girl Summit in London to discuss female genital mutilation (FGM) and child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM). At the end of the summit 43 government representatives and over 350 organisations and activists signed the Girls Summit Charter on Ending FGM and CEFM (Department for International Development, 2015). Following the Summit, UNICEF and UNFPA launched in 2016 a joint Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage in 12 countries, which has received approximately $80 million from the governments of Canada, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, and the UK.

As child marriage gained increased prominence in the twenty-first century, there was also greater attention to the terminology used. One important feature is the gradual combination of the terms "child marriage", "early marriage" and "forced marriage" (commonly abbreviated CEFM), with an increasing assertion that child marriages are forced marriages by nature. For instance, the Special Rapporteur on Slavery's 2012 report on servile marriages stated that "child marriages, which are unions that involve at least one partner

below the minimum legal age of marriage, constitute a form of forced marriage as the child is not in a position to consent" (United Nations General Assembly, 2012, 7). A 2010 report by the International Center for Research on Women uses the language "forced child marriage" (ICRW, 2010). It has been increasingly argued that the terminology "child, early, and forced marriage" is more comprehensive, holistic and precise, encompassing the marriage of children (regardless of how "child" is defined) and also the forced marriage of people over 18 years old (Lowe et al, 2017; Sexual Rights Initiative, 2013). Such terminology has been used in recent international documents, especially by the UN. Given the authoritative nature emanated by these documents, there is a growing acquiescence that this is the "correct" term. Indeed, Girls Not Brides states that "the *accepted* UN terminology for this practice is "child, early and forced marriage" based on multiple UN resolutions and definitions suggested by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights report of 2014" (Girls Not Brides, 2016a, 15, emphasis added). Likewise, the 2014 Girl Summit "has altered the name to what is considered the widely-accepted acronym of CEFM to encompass all forms of union" (Lowe et al, 2017, 49). The construction of certain terminologies as the "correct" or "accepted" ones is an inherent part of how discourses fix meaning, further evidencing that textual analysis, process analysis, and contextual analysis (as detailed in methodological discussions in chapter 2) cannot be separated.

The language used in international documents reveal the lack of precise definitions of child marriage. Although other expressions such as "adolescent marriage" have been used over time, the phenomenon has been almost always referred to as either "early marriage" or "child marriage" (Lowe et al, 2017). However, there is lack of clarity and competing preferences between the terms amongst the documents examined. "Early marriage has been

interpreted, on separate occasions, as synonymous with child marriage. […] Many United Nations resolutions and reports use 'early marriage' and 'child marriage' interchangeably, without any noticeable distinction" (Sexual Rights Initiative 2013, 2). The term "child marriage" is of course closely linked to the conceptualisation of child itself. Even though the Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as a human under the age of 18 years old, it is far from an universally accepted definition, as different countries "allow their citizens to attain majority at different ages, and some allow majority to be attained upon marriage" (Sexual Rights Initiative, 2013, 1). Hence, since there is no universally accepted definition of "child", there is no universally accepted definition of "child marriage" (Sexual Rights Initiative, 2013).

Despite this lack of clarity, it has been argued that the term "child marriage" is often preferred "because it is perceived as more emotive than 'early marriage,' and thus more likely to receive media and popular attention and support" (Sexual Rights Initiative, 2013, 3). The term "early marriage", on the other hand, has been interpreted as more inclusive than "child marriage" (Nirantar Trust, 2015; Sexual Rights Initiative, 2013). Early marriage is often used as if implicitly encompassing not only child marriage (understood as the marriage of a person under 18 years old), but also marriage of a person under 18 who has attained majority under local laws (Sexual Rights Initiative, 2013; Warner, 2004). Other authors have used the term "child marriage and unions", with "marriage" reflecting the legal (and assumed to be universal) definition whereas "unions" reflect cohabitation and informal marriage arrengements that are common in certain parts of the world (Taylor et al, 2019). It has been argued that "although early is not explicitly defined to mean less than 18 years old, it is frequently found in that context" (Sexual Rights Initiative, 2013, 2). Others argue

however that as “child marriage” is objectively associated to the age of 18 years old, “early marriage” is imprecise and less concrete, leaving space for exceptions that would allow the marriage of persons under 18 years old (Lowe et al, 2017, Sexual Rights Initiative, 2013). In that sense, child marriage has more of a legalist approach, attempting to fix the minimum age at 18, whereas early marriage can be a more flexible term, leaving room for social customs and norms and the intention of young people to get married.

Child Marriage and Underlying Knowledge Systems of Girlhood Innocence, Human Rights, and International Development

As described above, child marriage became a prominent issue in international agendas especially after the 2000s and 2010s, which did not take place in a political void. Rather, child marriage discourses are immersed in and reflect broader knowledge systems. Tambe and Bhatia (2014) claim that feminism and population control are the two key ideological interests that have shaped child marriage regulation. Using postcolonial feminist theory, I expand on their argument and offer a different, albeit related, perspective. I argue that contemporary child marriage discourses are embedded in broader knowledge systems of childhood/girlhood innocence, human rights, and international development as neocolonial projects. Through Western gendered and racialised representations of Third World cultures, child marriage is conceptualised as a Third World traditional practice at odds with liberal human rights and that symbolises the oppressed status of Third World women. Further to population control and Western missionary feminism ideals, child marriage also reflects the pivotal role of the (Third World) girl child in international development, who remains trapped between conflicting discursive representations of victimhood and agency.

In his study of child marriage in American history, Nicholas L. Syrett (2016) argued that although it has been part of everyday life for millions of Americans historically, child marriage came to be viewed as an anachronism due to the development of the concept of childhood. "In order to think it strange for a child to marry, we must see "childhood" as a stage of life separate from adulthood, cordoned off from adult rights and responsibilities" (Syrett, 2016, 3). The term "child" is a contested one, as it operates as "a highly potent discursive tool that is invoked to shape, limit, or foreclose arguments about social and material relations between individuals and classes of people" (Sammond, 2005, 3; cited in Garlen, 2019, 60). Drawing on Judith Butler's theorising on performativity, Garlen (2019) argues that childhood and "childhood" are different, the former referring to the early phase of human life and the latter being the "the social construct that defines a period of innocent ignorance as the ideal condition of early life", so that childhood is descriptive and "childhood" performative (Garlen, 2019, 57).

Positive and protective ideas about children emerged following the transformative effects of the Industrial Revolution, colonial expansion, Romanticism, and ideas about vulnerability and dependence (Orchard, 2019). The conceptualisation of childhood as separated from adult concerns and responsibilities is attached to the idea of innocence, which emerged from Western Christian values in the late nineteenth century. This idea was then normalised through theories of development and reflected in the emergence of protective laws and policies such as compulsory schooling and child labour and child welfare laws (Garlen, 2019). From its origins, this new childhood innocence ideal "was classist, patriarchal, and the exclusive property of whiteness", operated to maintain White and Western privilege and

to exclude others (Garlen, 2019, 61). For instance, black children in the United States are not afforded the same presumption of innocence and children born into poverty or marginalisation are always already excluded from innocence (Garlen, 2019). Globally, the childhood innocence ideal means that the imagined White (Western) child became equated to human potential and the measure of humanness (Garlen, 2019). In addition, besides being racialised, ideals of childhood innocence are gendered, closely related to the control of the female body, reproductive capacity, and sexuality.

The collusion between the increased focus on (Third World) women in international development over the 1970s and 1980s[30] with discourses on childhood innocence catapulted the "girl child" to the forefront of international human rights and development agendas. The 1990s were declared the "Decade for the Girl Child" by the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) and in 1990 UNICEF's Board recommended that its future strategy and programs explicitly addressed the needs of the girl child (Croll, 2006). At the 1995 UN Conference for Women in Beijing "for the first time, the girl child occupied her own place on an international agenda" (Croll, 2006, 1286). In 1995 the UN General Assembly adopted its first Resolution on the Girl Child, which have become a fixed item on the General Assembly's annual's sessions, culminating in the 2012 adoption of the International Day of the Girl Child. Hence, more than measuring an ideal of humanness, girlhood innocence reflects the juxtaposition of Third World women and girls against the imagined free, white, Western women and girls (Agathangelou and Turcotte, 2015; Mohanty, 2003; Mohanty, 1984).

[30] In fact, the relationship between women and international development has encountered different stages, from Women *in* Development to Women *and* Development and later Gender and Development (Fernando, 2016).

The increased attention to child marriage as a "global issue" is also immersed in the emergence of the post-war UN human rights regime. As detailed in the previous section, the *ad hoc* mentions of child marriage in international documents show the prevalence of this human rights perspective within soft law on child marriage (Lowe et al, 2017). International documents linked child marriage to rights to non-discrimination, equality, dignity, education, and health. This perspective was also reflected in all recent Resolutions by the General Assembly and Human Rights Council, which recognise child, early, and forced marriage as a "harmful practice that violates, abuses and impairs human rights and is linked to and perpetuates other harmful practices and human rights violations" (Lowe et al, 2017, 40). The organisations operating in the child marriage space have followed suit in this approach. A 2000 UNICEF document entitled "Equality, development and peace", explicated the aim of "making child marriage a 'human rights issue' […] taking the position that CEFM is actually a violation of the rights afforded to all humans under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to women under the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women" (Lowe et al, 2017, 46). In this vein, one of UNICEF's first document about child marriage on its own stated that "while early marriage takes many different forms and has various causes, one issue is paramount. Whether it happens to a girl or a boy, early marriage is a violation of human rights" (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2001, 2). Nowadays, this is the approach and language adopted by all organisations examined in this thesis. To Girls Not Brides, "child marriage is a human rights violation that we must end to achieve a better future for all" (Girls Not Brides, n.d. c). Care International's website urges "please join CARE in helping bring an end to this gross human rights violation" (Care International, n.d. b). Plan International's front webpage about child

marriage states that "early marriage is a violation of children's human rights" (Plan International, n.d. a).

Making child marriage a human rights violation has led to and enabled the mobilisation of international organisations and activists, which, as seen in the historical overview above, was crucial to launch and elevate it as a global issue of concern. According to Lowe et al (2017, 46), "the notion of determining the practice illegal or in breach of international law also brings the practice into the view of many governments, international NGOs and individuals". In fact, postcolonial theory has called attention to how the very production of a liberal human rights discourse "implicates not only the United States and other major Western powers, but also nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and institutions shaped in important ways by Western knowledge and power such as the United Nations" (Nair, 2004, 255). This is closely related to the prominent role of NGOs and the protectionist and legalist approach adopted, which are patterns in child marriage discourses that will be further discussed in the next section.

Despite the lack of specific binding agreements with agreed definitions and minimum age, placing child marriage as a human rights violation exhorts an aura of legality (and related illegality) that feeds neocolonial policies and practices of monitoring and punishing the global South. Lowe et al (2017, 46) state that "identifying the practice [child marriage] as illegal and making it a rights issue has assisted to mobilise human rights organisations and powerful governments to *apply pressure to offending jurisdictions* to reform their law and policy toward such practices" (my emphasis). Like other postcolonial scholars, I question though how such "offending jurisdictions" come to be and how this approach is linked to

broader ideals of rescuing and protecting the global South from itself. The emergence of a liberal human rights discourse is intertwined with how the West imagines the spaces where human rights violations occur (Nair, 2004). Human rights norms are then translated into practices in the postcolonial world, "where states violating these norms and principles are frequently the target of criticism from human rights groups and Western governments" (Nair, 2004, 255).

Parallel to its inscription within human rights discourse, child marriage was increasingly placed within international development with a strong emphasis on its impacts on education, health, and economic growth, culminating on the inclusion of the issue in the Sustainable Development Goals. Child marriage as an international development problem and goal fits into neocolonial projects of population control. In their historical analysis of child marriage policies in India, Tambe and Bhatia (2014) found that legislation on age of marriage in India over the twentieth century reflected population control interests and concerns that early fertility impeded development. In the 1950s, demographers began to discuss how postponing marriage could reduce fertility in developing countries and consequently to advocate for the use of the legal age of marriage as a means of population control, which was then progressively consolidated in institutional agendas such as the UN (Tambe and Bhatia, 2014).

Neocolonial population control discourses are explicit in UNICEF's first publication on child marriage in 2001, which states that "one important difference between marriage customs in many developing world societies and those in the industrialized world is that in the former, these customs tend to support high fertility even where overall fertility levels

are falling" (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2001, 6). According to the document, demographic studies carried out in the 1970s found a difference between traditional "familyist" systems "characterised by extended families, communal household, plural mating, authoritarian exercise of power by the paterfamilias, young age at marriage" and opposing modern "individualist" systems (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2001, 7). The document then describes theories of "demographic transition", according to which societies naturally and eventually abandon such traditional systems and embrace modern forms of living with a corresponding decline in fertility (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2001). Similarly, whilst analysing discourses on sustainable development and reproductive disciplining, Emma Foster (2014) argued that "the assumption that, given the 'correct' climate, women will choose smaller families is heavily tied to Western-centric feminist values, objectives and goals that interlink with neo-liberal economic models" (Foster, 2014, 1040).

In this sense, addressing child marriage becomes a crucial tool for modernising traditional and backwards societies. This clear opposition of traditional and modern systems replicates political antagonisms of the colonial encounter (Chowdhry, 2004) and reinforces binaries long criticised by postcolonial theory, such as modern/traditional, urban/rural, and productive/unproductive (Piedalue and Rishi, 2017; Wilson, 2011; Agathangelou, 2004; Biswas, 2004; Chowdhry and Nair, 2004; Nair, 2004). In particular, Third World women are associated with backwardness and therefore targeted by development initiatives that focus on their reproductive and entrepreneurial roles (Wilson, 2011). The idea of a "transition" or "modernisation paradigm" (Biswas, 2004) maintains the West as synonymous to civilisation, which far from a benign aspiration, is a projection of power

with discursive and material implications. Doty (1996) argues that although foreign assistance has been conceptualised as an instrumental tool for promoting security, economic interests, and humanitarian concerns such as alleviating poverty and fostering development, "it enables the administration of poverty, the surveillance and management of the poor" (Doty, 1996, 129). In fact, being "unreciprocated gifts, foreign aid works not to mitigate but rather to euphemize the existing material hierarchies between the North and the South" (Hattori, 2003, 246, cited in Nair, 2013, 637). Certainly, child marriage policies and programmes also carry out this disciplining role through the management of sexuality, fertility, family arrangements, and more importantly, by placing Third World women and girls at the centre of the problems international development aims to solve.

Child marriage policies are thus implicated in wider power relations and political-economic interests of Western governments. This linkage is evident in a report by US-based think-tank Council on Foreign Relations titled "Ending Child Marriage: How Elevating the Status of Girls Advances U.S. Foreign Policy Objectives". The report states that

> U.S. foreign policy interests in stability and prosperity and U.S. investments in a range of areas—including global health, education, economic growth, and governance—are compromised wherever child marriage endures. […] Given the abundance of evidence demonstrating the devastating effect of child marriage on a range of development and security priorities, the U.S. government should address this practice to maximize returns on its aid investments and promote stability in crucial parts of the world (Vogelstein, 2013, 21-22).

Although the language emphasises the role of the United States, and presumably the West, as the benevolent subject that spends considerable material resources to solve Third World

problems, it quickly becomes clear that such benevolence is closely attached to political, economic, and security interests and that returns to such altruist "investments" are expected.

Further to population control and neocolonial surveillance and management, the inclusion of child marriage in international development agendas is closely related to (Western) feminist activism and otherising representations of the Third World woman. In fact, both issues have long been intertwined, as "feminist engagements with reproductive rights have long been entangled and confused with population control" (Tambe and Bhatia, 2014, 90). The line between humanitarian feminism and a female imperialist civilising mission is thin and permeable (Hobson, 2007). The figure of passive, oppressed, and victimised Third World women who can only be rescued through Western modernity, is key to the missionary logic of Western feminism (Fernando, 2016; Sensoy and Marshall, 2010; Narayan, 1997; Mohanty, 1984).

As further discussed in chapters 1 and 4, over the 1990s feminism and international development theory and practice increasingly turned their attention from women to girls, in what has been called the "turn to girl" (Koffman, Orgad and Gill, 2015) or "girling of development" (Hayhurst, 2013). As girlhood emerged as an unstable category between risk and extraordinary capacity (Koffman and Gill, 2013), adolescent girls assumed a crucial place in development (Khoja-Moolji 2015). Consequently, development discourses and interventions repackaged "saving Third World women" into "empowering Third World girls" (Sensoy and Marshall, 2008), borrowing and mobilising discourses of "girl power" that have been circulating in the West for over two decades (Koffman and Gill 2013). This "turn to girl" is particularly relevant to child marriage discourses and practices, as "the more

recent interest in early marriage […] can be located in the advent of the adolescent girl as the latest figure of resilience and enterprise in global development" (Roy, 2017, 873). Girls' adolescence – and in particular Third World girls' adolescence – is presented as a period before marriage and childbearing, with a ticking clock for intervention and rescue (Koffman and Gill (2013), especially from traditional, backwards cultural practices that directly impede neoliberal development. In this vein, a 2007 research report by the International Research Center on Women (IRCW) claimed there is a "tipping point" age: "the age at which child marriage prevalence in a country starts to increase markedly (usually 13 or 14). Programs seeking to prevent marriage when it first becomes a serious problem should target and tailor efforts to young girls approaching the "tipping point" age (Jain and Kurz 2007, 2). As a consequence of the central position held by girls in neoliberal development, international organisations and NGO strategies have increasingly converged around "empowering girls", which has indeed become the most promoted approach to address child marriage in the global South and will be further discussed in chapters 4 and 5.

Measure the Third World, Protect the Third World: Patterns in Child Marriage Discourses and Interventions

As child marriage discourses are embedded in wider Western and neoliberal knowledge systems, they also follow overarching trends in human rights and international development practice that reflect positivist and neocolonial projects. Analysing the emergence of child marriage as a global issue of concern, I identified four of these trends, or patterns, in child marriage discourses: the emphasis on quantification, the discursive representation of "facts", a protectionist/legalist approach, and the prominent role of NGOs. The obsession

with quantification is shared with other topics that have gained increasing international attention, such as human trafficking and female genital cutting, for instance. Doezema (2010) argued how policy makers want to answer the question of how many people are trafficked and where, and similarly, policy makers want to establish how many girls are married as a child, where, how many will get married in the near future, and how fast the practice is declining worldwide[31]. The obsession with quantifying the phenomenon reveals a persistent positivist approach in research and policy-making, as well as little attention to the ideologies (Doezema, 2010) and politics that inform the construction of seemingly neutral data and figures. As child marriage emerged as an issue of "global" concern, so did the attempts to measure it. From the early 2010s, economists at the World Bank have explored measuring child marriage through a myriad of metrics, including incidence, child marriage gap, child marriage gap squared, cumulative distribution of age of first marriage, and others that would enable the comparison of different countries (see Nguyen and Wodon, 2012a; Nguyen and Wodon, 2012b). UNICEF has a database on child marriage that can be downloaded from its "UNICEF Data: Monitoring the situation of children and women" website and has produced documents with statistical data on child marriage (see UNICEF, 2019a; UNICEF, 2018a; UNICEF, 2018b).

The websites of all organisations examined in this thesis define child marriage prominently in terms of numbers. For instance, Girls Not Brides' "What is child marriage?" webpage informs that "child marriage is any formal marriage or informal union where one of both of

[31] There is discrepancy in the figures provided by different organisations, and it is often said that figures may not reflect the actual number of girls getting married as a child due to lack of data for certain regions and on informal unions. However, whichever figure is provided, numbers are always assumed to be under estimated, never over estimated; although misrepresentation or even manipulation of statistics is often not a deliberate exaggeration by campaigners and organisations, but their belief in "myths" connected to certain prevailing ideologies (Doezema, 2010).

the parties are under 18 years of age. Each year, 12 million girls are married before the age of 18. That is 23 girls every minute. Nearly 1 every 2 seconds" (Girls Not Brides, n.d. d). Care International's front page on child marriage begins with "marriage should be a time for celebration and joy – unless you are one of the 64 million girls around the world forced into marriage before the age of 18" (Care International, n.d. b). Plan International describes child marriage similarly, "12 million girls marry before the age of 18 each year – almost one every 2 seconds. If we don't act now, more than 150 million girls will become child brides by 2030" (Plan International, n.d. a), whereas UNFPA webpage on child marriage says

> child marriage is a human rights violation. Despite laws against it, the practice remains widespread: Globally, one in every five girls is married, or in union, before reaching age 18. In the least developed countries, that number doubles – 40 per cent of girls are married before age 18, and 12 per cent of girls are married before age 15 (United Nations Population Fund, n.d.).

Likewise, virtually all reports analysed – even when addressing child marriage in a particular context – contain extensive introductions providing a detailed description of child marriage, focused on its prevalence worldwide and its broad causes and consequences. An analysis by the Nirantar Trust (2015) found that most organisations working with child marriage ascribe to a legalist approach, centred on age at marriage, that pays great attention to numerical measurement and targets. The main example of the quantification obsession within child marriage discourses is perhaps the strong activism by key organisations for its inclusion in the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals as a target with an accompanying indicator (Girls Not Brides, 2020a; Girls Not Brides, 2015d). Similar to the Millennium

Development Goals, the very nature of the SDGs embodies the value afforded to measuring international development. Indeed, Girls Not Brides claims that "ending child, early and forced marriage is a concrete and measurable target that will contribute significantly to the achievement of gender equality while also accelerating efforts to achieve a safe, healthy and prosperous future for all" (Girls Not Brides, 2014a).

The obsession with quantification, particularly in international development and human rights policy and practice, was defined by Merry (2016) as "the use of numbers to describe social phenomena in countable and commensurable terms. Quantification depends on constructing universal categories that make sense across national, class, religious, and regional lines" (Merry, 2016, 1). Counting makes things comparable but inevitably stripped of their context, history, and meaning, leading to oversimplifications and homogenisation (Merry, 2016). Postcolonial theory has criticised how homogenising Third World women in terms of their problems and issues obscures the complexity of their lives (Mohanty, 1984; 2006). Mohanty (1984) has criticised the uncritical use of methodologies to "prove" universality and cross-cultural validity, including the "arithmetic method", according to which if there are lots of cases across cultures, it adds up to a universal fact. According to Martinez (2012, 86), "women's progress is thus frequently measured through a World Bank formula that calculates literacy rates against the number of children born per woman and which assumes 'traditional' family structures to be cultural obstacles". Indeed, universalised measurements used by a "league table" approach to gender equality carried out in international development makes "everybody looks discouragingly worse than Sweden" (Connel, 2014, 530). Certainly, this approach seems to "verify" that the West is far less

affected by such issues and further advanced along a progressive trajectory of equality (Honig, 1999).

Quantitative measures such as prevalence and other indicators "convey an aura of objective truth and scientific authority" (Merry, 2016, 1) and seem to allow policy makers, governments, funders, and the general public to make informed decisions. This information is assumed to be objective, scientific, transparent, rational, neutral, and technical, as if conceived by experts outside and above political interests (Merry, 2016). Examining the measurement of human rights, gender violence, and sex trafficking, Merry (2016) raises that the production of indicators is far from neutral and includes extensive interpretative work. Bond (2006) argues that Western-led campaigning goals such as the Millennium Development Goals (and the more recent version, the Sustainable Development Goals) define the conditions of poverty and desired solutions, but do little to critically analyse the role of the global North in perpetuating it. It is often argued that contentious issues such as human trafficking or gender-based violence lack precise quantitative data. Doezema (2010) argues though that this is not a problem of statistical shortcomings, but a matter of differing ideologies. Indicators reflect the social and cultural worlds of the actors and organisations that produce them, as well as the regimes of power within which they are produced (Merry, 2016). Drawing on Foucault's conceptualisation that power and knowledge imply one another, Merry claims that "indicators do not stand outside regimes of power and governance but exist within them, both in their creation and in their ongoing functioning. They are a blending of science and politics, of technical expertise and political influence" (Merry, 2016, 21). Hence, although they are perceived to describe, reveal, or measure the truth, figures in fact create it (Merry, 2016). In this sense, numbers are politically produced

and take a life of their own, being reproduced exhaustively. Once they are established and seemingly agreed upon, figures are normally portrayed by the media (and consequently by the general public) as “accurate descriptions of the world” (Merry, 2016, 3).

The current “indicator culture”, where indicators measuring different aspects of human rights and international development proliferate, is linked to a desire for accountability and for evidence-based policies. Indeed, there is a strong “evidence-based” culture in international development, where “acceptable evidence” is based on positivist framings of knowledge production (Eybe, 2008). Merry (2016) highlights two important shortcomings of this culture, expertise inertia and data inertia. Expertise inertia means that those involved in producing figures and indicators are “insiders”, global experts who “are usually cosmopolitan elites with advanced education or people who have had previous experience in developing indicators of the same kind. They are often from the global North and trained in political science, economics, or statistics” (Merry, 2016, 6). Gathering data is expensive and demanding, so existing data is often used to determine what an indicator will measure, leading to data inertia (Merry, 2016), or data recycling. Wells (2015) argued that international nongovernmental organisations often use a circular logic, whereby internally gathered evidence serves to legitimise new projects. Indeed, internal data on the prevalence and successful strategies to address child marriage are often used by organisations to reaffirm existing interventions, creating a chain of self-fulfilling “evidence”[32]. Moreover, expertise and data inertia exclude the inexperienced and powerless and relegate local knowledges (Merry, 2016). “Local, vernacular knowledge is typically less influential than

[32] This issue is further discussed in chapter 5.

more global, technical knowledge and, based on my attendance at meetings and reading of documents, often does not enter into the discussion at all" (Merry, 2016, 7).

A second pattern on child marriage discourses is the discursive representation of "facts", which is closely related to how, in fixing meaning, discourses naturalise objects and create ideas taken to be truth (Doty, 1996). Child marriage discourses emphasise establishing facts about child marriage, especially its causes and consequences and the quintessential victim. Despite repeated acknowledgements that the phenomenon is complex and that it is important to take specific contexts into consideration, most organisations working on child marriage universalise child marriage drivers and impacts. With minor variations in the language used, the websites of Girls Not Brides, Care International, Plan International, World Vision, International Research Center on Women, UNICEF, and UNFPA all list similar main underlying causes of child marriage: gender inequality (including issues such as control of female sexuality and reproduction, undervaluing of girls and women, commodification of girls and marriage, family honour), custom/tradition, poverty, lack of access to education, and insecurity (including ideals that marriage offers protection against sexual violence). Likewise, all organisations consulted describe the overarching consequences of child marriage in two main areas: health (including increased maternal and infant mortality, higher fertility rates, exposure to sexually transmitted disease, and exposure to domestic and sexual violence) and education (school drop-out). More recently, there has been increased interest in the economic impact of child marriage, with the World Bank and the ICRW leading research on the topic (see International Center for Research on Women, 2018; Wodon et al, 2017; Parsons et al, 2015).

International organisations – both within the UN system and nongovernmental organisations – had an increasing interest in child marriage in humanitarian contexts, which has been evidenced not only by the adoption of the 2017 Resolution 35/16 "Child, early, and forced marriage in humanitarian settings" and subsequent 2018 report by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, but also by programming and a series of reports and documents published by the organisations examined (in addition to emerging academic research), with a strong focus on the Syrian crisis. For instance, in 2013 World Vision published the report "Untying the Knot: Exploring Early Marriage in Fragile States", which was followed by Save the Children's 2014 report "Too Young to Wed: The growing problem of child marriage among Syrian girls in Jordan" (Save the Children, 2014), UNICEF's 2014 report "A study on early marriage in Jordan" (UNICEF, 2014), Care International's 2015 report "'To Protect Her Honour': Child Marriage in Emergencies – The Fatal Confusion Between Protecting Girls and Sexual Violence" (Care International, 2015b), and Women's Refugee Commission's 2016 report "A Girl No More: The Changing Norms of Child Marriage in Conflict" (Women's Refugee Commission, 2016). As a leading organisation working on child marriage and main discursive site, Girls Not Brides published a series of documents on child marriage in humanitarian settings, including: "Infographic: child marriage in humanitarian crises" (Girls Not Brides, 2016e), thematic brief "Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings" (Girls Not Brides, 2018d), brief "Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings: Spotlight on the Situation in the Arab Region" (Girls Not Brides 2018e), scoping review "Child marriage within the global humanitarian system" (Jay, 2019), and another thematic brief titled "Child marriage in humanitarian contexts" (Girls Not Brides, 2020b). With this increasing interest on child marriage in humanitarian contexts, all organisations claim that the causes and drivers of are heightened in fragile states and

during conflict, disasters, and displacement. The materials on child marriage in humanitarian settings provides interesting analyses on the central topics to this thesis – representation and agency – including the representation of child marriage as a cultural problem (further discussed in chapter 4) and the conflation of agency and choice (examined in chapter 5).

The victim of child marriage is also often universalised explicitly or implicitly. In line with the quantification obsession detailed above, the girl child/bride is described by UNICEF,

> the descriptive and multivariate analyses of data from the Demographic and Health Surveys related to child marriage allow for a clearer picture of who is married as a child: Girls married before they turn 18 are less educated, have more children and are married to men who are significantly older. Women who married as girls are more likely to experience domestic violence and believe that in some cases a man is justified in beating his wife" (UNICEF, 2005, 27).

Obviously, organisations need to communicate a complex phenomenon in a manner that is easily grasped by a diverse general public. However, these simplifications have a meaning and are political, with material and discursive impacts. (Neo)colonising discourses and interventions promote the figure of the victimised Third World woman and its younger counterpart, the Third World girl child – as an object of rescue and rehabilitation by the West. Indeed, the girl child exists as a subaltern in the intersection of her status in gender relations, her position as a minor, and her socioeconomic marginality (Nilsen and Roy, 2015).

The missionary logic of rescuing threatened Third World women is closely related to a third pattern observed in child marriage discourses: the protectionist and legalist approach. Discourses on child marriage are heavily imbued of a protectionist character stemming from both the "perennial narrative that childhood is at risk" (Garlen, 2019, 58) and narratives of rescuing Third World women. This approach maintains the victim status of Third World women and girls (Mohanty, 1984) that ought to be rescued by the West (Abu-Lughod, 1990). A report by UN Special Envoy for Global Education, Gordon Brown, on child marriage states that

> after years of silence it is time to put child marriage at the centre of the global poverty agenda. Governments in the world's poorest countries must act now to protect the rights of children to a childhood. That means challenging social and cultural practices that are hostile to equal citizenship for girls (Brown, 2012, 3).

Furthermore, the conceptualisation of child marriage from a legalist standpoint is closely linked to colonial efforts: certainly, an early attempt to address child marriage in colonial India is part of European ventures that aimed to civilise barbaric practices in the Third World (Nirantar Trust, 2015, Tambe and Bhatia, 2014).

This "legal and state-centric" approach has skirted other issues, including consent beyond age, structural factors, and seeing child marriage as a social and political issue (Nirantar Trust, 2015). In that vein, even though there is no officially and universally agreed definition of child marriage, in recent years the main organisations addressing the issue have increasingly referred to a firm definition. For instance, "according to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), child marriage is a marriage in which at least

one of the parties is a child" (Care International, 2018, 1). Similarly, Plan International claims that

> international law *clearly* defines child marriage as a human rights violation through provisions in several instruments […] In addition to prohibiting marriage under the age of 18 years, international law *requires* that the minimum age of marriage should be the same for both men and women (Plan International and Coram Children's Legal Centre, 2015, 17, my emphasis).

Written in emphatic language by organisations that enjoy prestige, these authoritative affirmations of an elusive official, legal, universal definition, become accepted as true and reproduced by practitioners, academics, and the media. As detailed in chapter 2, discourses are productive and performative, and more than providing a language to describe objects and phenomena, they also produce "truth" and "knowledge" that ultimately enable certain courses of action (Shepherd, 2008; Milliken, 1999; Doty, 1996). Indeed, this legalist approach to child marriage has enabled a focus on promoting legal reform and legislation prohibiting child marriage in Third World countries, even though similar laws are not necessarily widespread in the West, as further discussed in the next chapter.

Finally, the fourth pattern of child marriage discourses is the prominent role of NGOs, which is a common trait in broader international development. As detailed earlier in this chapter, from the onset, the emergence of child marriage as a priority issue was heavily dependent on the advocacy carried out by UN agencies, especially UNICEF and UNFPA, and civil society organisations and activists. With the privatisation of aid and the emergence of civil society as an arena for donor intervention and direction, NGOs gained new and expanded roles from the 1990s onwards (Wilson, 2011). In international development, and particularly

in gender issues, NGOs proliferated and Northern-based NGOs are directly influenced by Western and liberal feminist knowledge and have a pivotal role in enabling a neoliberal development agenda that is gendered and racialised (Roy, 2017). In fact, "NGOs do form a key node of what I call 'feminist governmentality' – an assemblage of discourses, practices, techniques, and entanglements of power that are aimed at empowering women, especially subaltern women of the South" (Roy, 2017, 870). As Spivak (1988) argued that speaking for and speaking about the subaltern are intertwined, Bebbington (2005) also claimed that development NGOs speak for and speak about communities in countries, using representational practices that produce knowledge about them.

Large, Northern-based NGOs have assumed then the role of advocates for Third World populations, which not only allows them to speak about and speak for the Third World, but to espouse legitimacy and gain access to potential donors and audiences. However, this relationship is in itself one of power asymmetry, as representational practices not always reflect what the populations spoken for want, and also because NGOs depend on foreign funding to exist and operate. This "means they must navigate questions about whether they have mainly their own self-interest in keeping the aid flowing, and whether aid flows ultimately result in a form of advocacy careerism, which is detrimental to the causes they advocate" (Nair, 2013, 646). Hence, far from a romantic act of humanitarianism, the NGO machinery in international aid and development is always already implicated in the perpetuation of neocolonialism.

The professionalisation of international development with the prominent role of NGOs led to the technification of gender knowledge (Connel, 2014). Indeed, "in terms of knowledge

production, NGOs are now a major source, perhaps *the* major source, of research and publications about gender across the global South and especially in the poorest regions" (Connel, 2014, 536, emphasis in the original). Similar to how quantitative data is perceived, knowledge generated by NGOs is often portrayed as technical, neutral, and apolitical, as if produced outside of power regimes. Nonetheless, researchers employed by NGOs are often Northern educated experts on short term contracts that spend limited time on research sites and frequently reproduce methodologies and templates imported from the North (Connel, 2014). Hence, "NGOs and the international aid machinery are places where theory building does happen, more often in the interstices and around the edges than as a declared purpose" (Connel, 2014, 536).

In the child marriage field, the 2014 panel and 2016 expert workshop convened by the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council were influential in the language and approach adopted by subsequent UN resolutions. Moreover, the main program implementing field interventions on child marriage, the UNFPA/UNICEF Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage, has established a Programme Support Unit and a Partner Advisory Group, which "serves as an institutional mechanism for dialogue and consultation between the Global Programme, sister United Nations agencies, donors and civil society representatives on issues critical to accelerating action to end child marriage" (UNFPA and UNICEF, 2017, 19). These arenas where experts meet are the sites where policies and discourses on child marriage are produced and reproduced.

Mapping the Discursive Sites in Child Marriage Discourses

In chapter 2 I presented the main organisations examined in the research and their keys texts in the sections above I identified and discussed the knowledge systems that underlie child marriage discourses (girlhood innocence, human rights, and international development), as well as the patterns in child marriage discourses and interventions (quantification, discursive representation of "facts", protectionist/legalist approach, and prominent role of NGOs). This section maps out these main organisations – or discursive sites – across the knowledge systems and patterns to analyse their overlapping narratives, distinctions, and areas of influence.

The UN , including both UN mechanisms such as the General Assembly and Human Rights Council and UN agencies such as UNICEF and UNFPA, had a crucial role in raising the topic of child marriage in the international agenda, by increasingly focusing on issues related to the girl child, which is in line with the girlhood innocence knowledge system. Indeed, in 1990 UNICEF explicitly recommended the need to centralise its efforts on the girl child (Croll, 2006). In 1995 the girl child held a central place at the UN Conference for Women in Beijing and in the same year the UN General Assembly adopted its first Resolution on the Girl Child, which became an annual feature to the present day. In 2012 the UN created the International Day of the Girl Child, solidifying the focus on girlhood. In addition, due to its very role in the architecture of international law, the UN has also led the both the imbrication of child marriage and human rights and a legalist/protectionist approach. Certainly, several UN documents have described the very language taken as the correct or officially adopt to speak about child marriage, including the term "child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM)" and the alleged universality of 18 as the minimum age for marriage. This is reproduced by other organisations with an aura of authority,

> according to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), child marriage is a marriage in which at least one of the parties is a child (according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child is "every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier") (Care International, 2018, 1)

As discussed in the previous sessions, UN agencies UNICEF and UNFPA have had a strong role in linking child marriage to population control and the discursive construction of the "victim" of child marriage as a universal fact. These constructions have permeated child marriage discourses more broadly, due to key role of the UN in the international arena, and particularly in the urgent emergence of child marriage as an issue of interest. The UN is "one of the most influential repositories of value in the contemporary global political system, central not only to the political organisation of the international but also to the construction of legitimate ways in which to live" (Shepherd, 2005, 399). In this way, the UN's manner to conceptualise and address child marriage reflects its very own origins as a Eurocentric humanist project that performs international cooperation as well as surveillance (of the Third World).

From its initial construction of child marriage as an issue of global interest, UNICEF and UNFPA are increasingly involved in the implementation of international development programs across the Third World. However, it is interesting to note that such programming is still heavily linked to a broader agenda-setting and convener role. This is evident in the publication of different documents that attempt to establish facts about child marriage, such as "Child Marriage Around the World: Infographic" in 2019 and "Child Marriage: Latest

Trends and Future Prospects" in 2018. UNICEF has partnered with the UK government to organise the 2014 Girl Summit that focused on garnering commitments to end child marriage and female genital cutting. UNICEF and UNFPA are also co-leading a Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage, which aims to convene other organisations within and outside the UN, and donors to accelerate action to end child marriage (UNFPA and UNICEF, 2017).

As the UN led the way, other organisations reproduced the human rights focus and legalist approach. This is the case of Girls Not Brides, Care International, Save the Children, and Plan International, who claim that "child marriage is a human rights violation that we must end to achieve a better future for all" (Girls Not Brides, n.d. c), "bring an end to this gross human rights violation" (Care International, n.d. b), "child marriage is widely considered as a violation of human rights and a form of violence against girls" (Wodon et al, 2017), and "early marriage is a violation of children's human rights" (Plan International, n.d. a). Save the Children has published a series of documents emphasising the legal aspects of child marriage, including "Recent Global Trends in Legal Protection against Child Marriage", "Measuring Illegal Child Marriages under National Law", and "Ending Child Marriage: Child Marriage Laws and their Limitations" (all with the World Bank). Some of the key organisations for the present analysis also had a strong focus on the girlhood innocence that animate the urgent emergence of child marriage as an international issue of concern. Some understandably, given their inherent focus on children, such as UNICEF and Save the Children. Likewise, Plan International has increasingly narrowed down its concern around girlhood, for instance through the campaign "Because I am a Girl" (Plan International, n.d. c).

As discussed in chapter 2 and earlier in this chapter, NGOs are key discursive sites in child marriage and converge in several of the overarching themes and patterns, such as girlhood innocence and the legalist approach, as well as the immersion in human rights and international development systems. The conceptualisation of agency around choice, voice, and resistance, which will be further discussed in later in chapter 5, is another commonality across the organisations consulted. For instance, this is evidenced in a 2019 document signed by over forty organisations, including ICRW, Care International Save the Children, and Plan International, advocating for the centrality of women's and girl's rights and agency in humanitarian action ("Women's and girls' rights and agency in humanitarian action", 2019). According to Girls Not Brides girls' agency is manifested when they "speak up and act to challenge child marriage and mobilise peers and the wider community" (Girls Not Brides, 2016, 39). Indeed, the centrality of voice for Girls Not Brides is evidenced in a specific section on its website called "Girls' Voices", which shares heroic-style stories of girls who resisted against child marriage and seemingly used their voices to defend such choice. Care International argues that child marriage reflects and reinforces social patterns of gender and age discriminations, including "the acceptance of their [girls'] lack of agency to make critical decisions about their own lives and health" (Care International, 2016, 2). ICRW's research on child marriage in Kenya and Zambia examined agency through "the choices and opportunities that girls have at different points in adolescence […] and how much control they have over decisions regarding those choices and aspirations" (Steinhaus, et al, 2016, 4).

Plan International reproduces utilitarian views of agency, arguing that education is the pathway to eliminate child marriage, as "educated girls are more likely to have the skills,

knowledge and confidence to claim their rights. Supporting girls to enrol in school and benefit from free, compulsory basic education (a minimum of nine years), in an environment that supports them to realise their rights, enables them to broaden their choices" (Plan UK, 2011, 4). Plan also reinforces the linkage that will be discussed later on in this thesis between agency and empowerment, advocating for strategies that "empower girls with knowledge, skills and confidence to make their own choices about when and who to marry and have alternatives when faced with the risk of early and forced" (Morgan, 2017, 46).

However, the narratives and approaches of the main NGOs analysed have some noticeable differences. Founded and headquartered in the United States and funded by individual contributions from Western audiences and large grants from governmental and non-governmental agencies, Care International has done mostly research and implemented international development programs across the Third World. The document "Child, Early, and Forced Marriage: Care's Global Experience" details Care's approach to child marriage, with a strong focus on building girls' agency (or empowering girls), and presents an overview of the organisations' programming on child marriage in 20 countries (Care International, 2018). The document states that

> CARE has developed regional strategies on CEFM that galvanize influence with regional, national, and global bodies, support feminist movements, connect the local to the global, scale up and share strategies that work, and target popular media with positive images of equality.18 At the same time, CARE is working on the ground in high prevalence countries around the world (Care International, 2018, 3).

In its programming, Care has particularly targeted the issues of age and the role of child marriage in humanitarian contexts. Care's flagship initiative on child marriage is the Tipping Point Program, which has been implemented in several countries across Africa and Asia and has generated several learning and research documents. Implemented since 2013, the Tipping Point Program has published over 50 documents between global research publications, project studies, program evaluations, programmatic strategies and summaries, and implementation tools for other organisations to reproduce the approach (Care International, n.d. a).

Also based in the United States and funded largely by governmental and non-governmental grant-making organizations, the International Commission for Research on Women (ICRW) is the leading organisation in research, which mostly aims at looking into the causes and consequences of child marriage and reviewing evidence of "what works" to address child marriage. This includes the 2011 systematic review "Solutions to End Child Marriage: What the Evidence Shows", which – as further detailed on chapter 5 – became extremely influential in the field, catapulting "empowering girls" as the preferred solution to end child marriage (Malhotra et al, 2011). Finally, Girls Not Brides has produced an unparalleled number of materials on child marriage. This is understandable considering the coalition was established with the sole purpose of convening and catalysing advocacy, research, and programming on child marriage. Girls Not Brides have produced several strategy level documents that are seemingly intended to be reference for other organisations in the child marriage spaces, including a Theory of Change, that articulates "what an effective response to child marriage entails" and "outlines the range of approaches needed, demonstrates how they intersect, and aims to provide a basis for identifying common indicators that could be

used by diverse practitioners to monitor progress" (Girls Not Brides, 2014c, 4). Girls Not Brides continuously produces several documents articulating connections between child marriage and different topics borrowed from human rights and international development discourses, such as gender equality, the Sustainable Development Goals, education, health, among others. By convening a growing number of local organisations across the world, Girls Not Brides also has a key role in raising and maintaining the profile of child marriage at the forefront of global, regional, and national arenas. This role is consistent with the fact that Girls Not Brides' *raison d'être* is child marriage. Whereas for all the other organisations analysed child marriage is *one* of their topics of interest, child marriage is the sole purpose of Girls Not Brides, which explains its strong commitment in maintaining the urgent and important status of the topic in the international agenda.

Knowledge devised within Western frameworks and by North-based organisations has a broader trickle-down effect: research reports published by UN mechanisms and agencies and by prominent NGOs, including the very language utilised, serve as the base – and indeed the evidence – for future research and policy-making, as well as to guide the work of smaller and/or organisations based in the global South. For instance, Girls Not Brides is a global partnership of over 1,000 organisations across the world, most of them local organisations. The quantitative data, language, and approach adopted by the Girls Not Brides leadership, as well as by the other Western-based organisations, set the tone for organisations in the global South. Certainly, small, local, and grassroots organisations "that struggle for funds feel compelled to align themselves with the vision of the development sector" (Nirantar Trust, 2015, 13). In the political economy of international development and its objects and subjects, such as child marriage, organisations and academics based in the global South are

highly dependent on knowledge, tools, and funding from the West. Topics that are constructed as prominent or urgent by North-based organisations need to be taken up by organisations in the South, both through the diffuse work of discourses in producing truths, but also in practical ways, so they can continue to be part of the international aid machinery. Considering the number of Girls Not Brides members and how international development works through local actors, thousands of organisations in the global South are currently involved in advocacy and the implementation of development programs on child marriage. As there are overlaps, convergence, and some dissonance among North-based organisations (as discussed above), it is likely that there are similarities and differences among global South organisations. In chapter 2 I discussed how the research aimed examining Western discourses on child marriage and therefore the materials selected for discourse analysis were those produced by North-based organisations. Hence, although an in-depth analysis of the discourses produced and reproduced in the global South falls outside the scope of this thesis, it is certainly an interesting area of future investigation in the field.

The reproduction of Western-led language, concepts, and approaches to child marriage by local organisations and communities throughout the Third World is further evidenced in a report by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), which states that

> a testament to the increasing awareness about and action to end child marriage in sub-Saharan Africa is the evident sensitization of the communities and individuals we spoke with for this study. Respondents used terms like “the girl child” and demonstrated familiarity with both previous and ongoing campaigns by local community-based organizations, as well as larger international non-governmental organizations working on the issue of child marriage. […] They could also name

> many consequences of child marriage, including disruption of girls' education, trickle-down effects on the education of the children of child brides, the fact that early childbirth presents health risks to both the mother and child and that early marriage perpetuates cycles of economic insecurity, as well as a greater likelihood of child brides experiencing domestic violence and having lower decision-making power (Steinhaus et al, 2016, 12).

The use of language as devised in Western spaces, such as "the girl child", familiarity with the work of Northern NGOs, and the reproduction of the main tenants of prevailing child marriage discourses are presented as a major accomplishment, as if "knowledge" about child marriage has finally been brought to presumably unenlightened communities. Certainly, the production of knowledge about the Third World is inseparable from practices and politics of discursive representation that define how issues affecting the Third World, such as child marriage, should be conceived and consequently addressed.

This section examined how different organisations – or discursive sites – hold distinct roles in child marriage theory and practice, with overlapping and diverging connections to knowledge systems and patterns identified by this research. UN mechanisms and agencies have initially brought the issue of child marriage into international attention and enjoy a high degree of authority and control of the agenda and funding. Having influenced and continuing to influence how child marriage is conceptualised, they are the ones who *speak about* child marriage; they provide the terminology and approach. As international NGOs such as Girls Not Brides, Care International, Plan International, ICRW, and Save the Children follow not only how child marriage is conceptualised, but funding streams, they implement research and more importantly international development programs throughout

the Third World, and take upon themselves to *speak for* Third World girls experiencing child marriage. Nonetheless, as they address child marriage by implementing programs and research, they continue to produce and reproduce knowledge systems and discourses, further revealing how representing and managing the Third World are inseparable and sustain each other.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed how child marriage emerged as an issue of international concern over the twentieth century and more markedly in the 2000s and 2010s. This process was led by international organisations and NGOs who were already active in the arenas of human rights, international development, and gender, and became therefore the main discursive sites of child marriage. The textual analysis of documents produced by and in these discursive sites is inseparable from the analysis of the processes and contexts whereby child marriage discourses emerged. They are embedded in broader Western and neoliberal knowledge systems that guide how childhood/girlhood innocence, human rights, and international development are conceptualised and practiced. Child marriage is thus portrayed as a traditional practice that further exemplifies the Third World backwardness and is in itself a cause and a consequence of the Third World's poor social and economic outcomes compared to the West. As mentioned, discourses are productive and performative, and by fixing meanings, they open and foreclose how an issue ought to be addressed. Again following broader trends in international human rights and development, child marriage policies and interventions aim to quantify, measure, protect, and manage the Third World. The ways in which child marriage is conceptualised, including the very terminologies

adopted as "correct", have a powerful influence to shape interventions to address the issue in the global South.

The imbrication of child marriage discourses with broader neocolonial projects leads to some contradictions and tensions, which will be discussed in the following chapters through the analytical concepts of representation and agency. Albeit seemingly presented as an "international problem", child marriage is in fact constructed as a Third World problem. In addition, representations of girls in child marriage reflect tensions between victimhood and agency, which are part of the discursive construction of Third World women in opposition to imagined Western liberal ideals. The next chapter will examine the contradictions and tensions in representations of child marriage and of Third World women and girls within child marriage, whereas the subsequent chapter will then look deeper into how Third World women's and girls' agency is conceptualised and how child marriage is supposed to be addressed by empowering the endangered Third World girl child.

CHAPTER 4 – FROM VICTIM TO “SHERO”: REPRESENTATIONS OF CHILD MARRIAGE AND THIRD WOLRD GIRLS

> What are the ethico-political implications of our representations for the Third World, and especially for the subaltern groups that preoccupy a good part of our work? To what extent do our depictions and actions marginalise or silence these groups and mask our own complicities? What social and institutional power relationships do these representations, even those aimed at ‘empowerment’, set up or neglect? (Kapoor, 2004, 628).

Drawing theoretically on feminist postcolonial theory, this chapter locates and analyses two representations of child marriage: how child marriage is represented as a practice and how women and girls are represented in child marriage discourses. Although not interchangeable with discourse, representation is an essential part of linguistic and textual elements that constitute discourses (Nair, 2013). Indeed, and as further explained in chapter 2, the goal of discourse analysis is to understand the politics and construction of meaning, i.e. how power and regimes of truth operate to produce knowledge and shape representations, images, and policies (Shepherd, 2017; 2008). This is particularly relevant for a feminist postcolonial approach, which is concerned with the discursive construction of Third World women and how discursive practices about the non-West derive from and enable symbolic and material violence. Analysing practices of representation entails understanding how language, images, and signs are used to communicate and convey meaning (Hall, 1997).However, it is important to notice that they are not expressed only “within rationalist discourses that are spoken or written in clearly laid out, well argued and sustained terms” (Johnson, 2011,

1017). Power, including symbolic power, circulates and is diffuse, so that representations are not neatly packaged in a single text or even type of text and are not present in written language only. Therefore, the present analysis does not focus on a single text or type of text, but rather examines the complex and often contradictory representations of child marriage and of Third World women and girls in different materials and images produced by organisations considered to be discursive sites.

The chapter is organised in three sections. The first analyses representations of child marriage, arguing that although it has been fetichised as a "global issue", representations of child marriage firmly place it as a Third World problem, explaining it mainly from a cultural lens. This is obviously not to claim that child marriage is as prevalent in developed countries as it is in developing countries, but I call attention however to how constructing child marriage as a "Third World problem" has implications to how it is then addressed. The following section discusses representations of women and girls in child marriage, which follow broader trends in human rights and international development that place Third World women and girls in a binary that oscillates between victim and super agentic. I examine each extreme of the binary, identifying representational strategies used to construct Third World women and girls as victims in child marriage and locating the "shero" representation within broader contexts that valorise women's and girls' agency and empowerment. The final section offers an analysis of the limitations of representations of child marriage as an issue and both representations of Third World women and girls within child marriage. They reproduce colonial encounters, perpetuate essentialist and universalising binaries, and are focused on defining and managing the Other (even if apparently re-packaged as empowerment instead of rescue).

A Third World Problem: Representations of Child Marriage as a Practice

In the process of producing meaning, representations engender new kinds of objects, subjects, and knowledge, giving shape to the rules, process and institutions that manage and govern the Third World (Nair, 2013). As detailed in the previous chapter, throughout the second half of the twentieth century and especially in the last two decades, child marriage was constructed as a "new" object of global concern and the girl bride constructed as a new subject. This was accompanied by a growing institutional apparatus, which encompasses new institutions such as Girls Not Brides and the increasing prominence of child marriage within the remit of existing organisations that become authoritative specialists in the topic. Child marriage as topic of international concern is also accompanied by a specific body of knowledge that defines it in specific ways. Representations of child marriage are immersed in wider discourses of international development, human rights, gender equality and childhood innocence, which are characterised by Otherising practices that define the West as liberal and civilised, engaged in governing and rescuing others (Jabri, 2012; Chowdhry, 2004).

In this context, issues affecting women are used to "prove" the Third World's backwardness, hence the fetishised "appeal" of topics like female genital cutting and child marriage[33]. Therefore, prevalent discourses on child marriage construct the issue specifically as a traditional practice affecting backwards, non-Western societies, perpetuating the

[33] Incidentally, these topics are often linked and presented as if they are one homogeneous "Third World people thing". For instance, the 2014 Girl Summit co-hosted by the UK government and UNICEF in London "aimed at mobilising domestic and international efforts to end female genital mutilation (FGM) and child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) within a generation" (United Kingdom Government, n.d.).

conceptualisation of the Third World as the site of everything that is unfamiliar and objectionable. Borrowing from wider meanings in anthropology, Marxism and psychoanalysis, Stuart Hall (1997) argued that fetishism in representation involves displacement and substitution of objects with powerful but forbidden force, so that "fetishism takes us into the realm where fantasy intervenes in representation; to the level where what is shown or seen, in representation, can only be understood in relation to what cannot be seen, what cannot be shown" (Hall, 1997, 266). Drawing on the Marxist concept of "commodity fetish", Sara Meger (2016)[34] offers an analysis of how sexual violence has become fetishised in international security through three stages: alienation, objectification, and monetary/value exchange. Likewise, (and like other past and present topics *du jour* such as veiling or female genital cutting), child marriage has been fetishised through a similar process.

In the first stage, the topic is decontextualised from local and global power relations and homogenised as a discrete phenomenon (Meger, 2016). As it will be argued later in this chapter, by circumscribing it as a cultural and Third World practice, child marriage discourses detach it from structures of inequality that animate it. The second stage involves the objectification of the topic as a "thing", an object of fascination and a threat that demands response and an urgent place in international agendas and practices (Meger, 2016). This sense of mounting pressure and need of urgent response is widespread in child marriage, for instance, the Girls Not Brides website states that "globally, the rate of child marriage is declining but progress isn't happening fast enough" (Girls Not Brides, n.d. d) and Care

[34] Although Meger offers good tools to make sense of fetishization, I acknowledge that she does so from a radical Marxist feminist philosophical and political background, rather than a postcolonial feminist one. However, the analytical steps provided are useful to understanding how child marriage has indeed become a fetishised topic in the international agenda.

International claims that “the world agrees that it is time to focus on CEFM as a barrier to the rights, needs, and potential of adolescents, particularly girls” (Care International, 2018, 3). This sense of urgency also borrows from the quantification obsession discussed in the previous chapter. For instance, Girls Not Brides’ website states that “each year, 12 million girls are married before the age of 18. That is 23 girls every minute. Nearly 1 every 2 seconds” (Girls Not Brides, n.d. d). Save The Children also claims that “one girl under 15 is married every seven seconds” (Save the Children, 2016). A policy brief on child marriage calls that “if we don’t act urgently, 134 million girls will be married between 2018 and 2030, and almost 10 million will marry in 2030 alone” (Save the Children, 2018, 1). Care International’s infographic “The Top 5 Things You Didn't Know About Child Marriage” states “the number of child marriages is staggering. In the developing world, outside China, one in three women who are now 20-24 was married before age 18. Each day, nearly 39,000 girls under the age of 18 become child brides. That’s one every 2 seconds. And more than enough to fill Fenway Park, where the Boston Red Sox play. Every day” (Care International, n.d. c). Likewise, Plan International’s webpage on child marriage claims that “12 million girls marry before the age of 18 each year – almost one every 2 seconds. If we don’t act now, more than 150 million girls will become child brides by 2030” (Plan International, n.d. a).

The final stage of fetishisation involves the establishment of a political economy, with objects fetishised in the market, valued for the status they confer above use-value (Meger, 2016). Indeed, child marriage has become a key commodity in the international agenda, with a growing apparatus of individuals and organisations competing for status recognition and resources related to it. Meger (2016) also calls attention that neither the victims or

perpetrators of sexual violence are the ones to speak of this threat in international policy, advocacy, and scholarship, but rather the elites who have the power and resources to shape understandings of the topic. This resonates with postcolonial scholar Spivak's argument that representation of the subaltern encompasses both "speaking about" and "speaking for" (Spivak, 1988, cited in Kapoor, 2004). Western-centric organisations remain the custodians of child marriage, speaking not only "about" child marriage but also "for" those affected by it. As it will be argued in the following section and in the next chapter, recent attempts to "listen to" and/or promote the voice of girl brides in fact reinforce the subaltern position of Third World women and girls within child marriage discourses.

As child marriage became a commodity in systems of human rights and international development, it was apparently presented as a "global issue". However, far from actually "global" child marriage discourses firmly place it as a "Third World problem". Indeed, "there is a tendency to frame early and child marriage as a "native practice" – a problem that plagues the Global South; that plagues a different culture and less educated people; or that plagues "the other"" (Nirantar Trust, 2015, 9). The message is thus clear: when calling child marriage a "global problem", "global" means that the South *practices* it whilst the North *fixes* it. The foreword of a 2016 US Department of State document called "United States Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls" is illustrated by the photo of a young black Muslim girl and reads

> every country and every culture has traditions that are unique and help make that country what it is. But just because something is a part of your past doesn't make it right […] There's no place in civilized society for the early or forced marriage of children. These traditions may date back centuries; they have no place in the

> 21st century – President Barack Obama, Remarks at Safaricom Indoor Arena, Nairobi, Kenya, July 26, 2015 (US Department of State, 2016, 1).

One of the earliest papers on child marriage by an international organisation in the twenty-first century claims that ideas of family vary across the world and are in constant "evolution", and that "old beliefs, customs and moral codes tend to persist during demographic transition" (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2001, 7), perpetuating understandings that the West is the peak of human evolution. A 2015 report by Care International states that "child marriage is a *traditional* practice in a huge number of countries around the world. It has been practised in *some* countries and cultures for thousands of years" (Care International, 2015a, 12, my emphasis). Another report claims that "child marriage is a cultural practice that continues to harm the lives and limit the futures of millions of girls around the world. Ending the tradition is more than a moral imperative" (Tzemach Lemmon and El Harake, 2014, vii).

Several of the international instruments that address child marriage directly or indirectly frame it as a cultural and traditional practice, associated explicitly or implicitly with the Third World. For instance, the 1962 Convention on Marriage aimed at "abolishing such customs, ancient laws and practices" (1962 Convention on Consent to Marriage, 1962, preamble). The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child also set out to "abolishing traditional practices prejudicial to the health of children" (CRC, 1989, article 24). Similar language is used in several other documents and is the central focus of certain initiatives such as the 1994 "Plan of Action for the Elimination of Harmful Traditional Practices affecting the Health of Women and Children" approved by the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, of the Commission on Human

Rights. Some organisations working on child marriage have argued that perceiving child marriage as a human rights violation moves beyond seeing it as a cultural issue. According to Girls Not Brides, "five years ago, child marriage was hardly on the global agenda. It was sometimes recognised as one of many issues facing girls but was not given political attention. There was reluctance in international fora to tackling issues which were seen as falling squarely within the remit of 'culture' and 'tradition'" (Girls Not Brides, 2016, 12). However, there is a persistent tension is how the West imagines human rights in the South and subaltern cultures.

As described in the previous chapter, there has been a growing interest in child marriage in humanitarian contexts, which is connected to the imagined Global South as a place of perennial disaster and human rights violations. However, the materials produced by the organizations consulted on child marriage in humanitarian contexts enable an interesting analysis of how discourses are not homogenous, as it is an instance when child marriage has been construed beyond cultural explanations. A report by the Women's Refugee Commission acknowledges that "similar to work presented by World Vision on this topic, the WRC found that issues of child marriage in crisis contexts go well beyond traditional or cultural norms" (Women's Refugee Commission 2016, 17). Indeed, the international organisations and NGOs consulted have often explained child marriage in humanitarian settings as a survival and/or protection strategy (Girls Not Brides 2018d; Women's Refugee Commission 2016; Care International 2015b; World Vision 2013, among others), which has also argued by researchers (Davis and Taylor 2013; Schlecht, Rowley and Babirye 2013). Reports by different organizations have claimed that during crises families may resort to child marriage to cope with increased economic hardship, as it enables them to

decrease the number of people to feed in the household, to potentially secure girls' future livelihoods and in some cases to raise income through bride price or dowry (Girls Not Brides, 2018d; Women's Refugee Commission, 2016; Tzemach Lemmon, 2014; UN Women, 2013). As sexual violence often increases during humanitarian crisis, child marriage has also been reported to be a form of protection against real and perceived risks to girls' safety and families' honour (Girls Not Brides, 2018d; Women's Refugee Commission, 2016; World Vision, 2013; UN Women, 2013). Education systems are normally disrupted during instability and hinder access to education, although this has a greater impact on girls, especially when trips to and from school become more dangerous (Tzemach Lemmon, 2014). Finally, stigma against unmarried girls after a certain age has also been linked to driving child and early marriages (Women's Refugee Commission, 2016).

The aforementioned 2001 UNICEF research paper described child marriage as a historical practice entrenched in "traditional lifestyles" (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2001, 5), adding that the average age at marriage has always been higher in Europe. However, child marriage was historically practiced in Western societies, particularly among the upper classes, as well as by certain Christian religious groups (Sri and Raja, 2013). "Shotgun weddings" as well as marriages to avoid rapes or sexual assault against minors are still common in developed countries (Sri and Raja, 2013; Syrett, 2016). In fact, Syrett (2016) carried out a detailed historical analysis of how the practice of child marriage was and still is widespread in the United States. Moreover, representations of child marriage as a barbaric Third World practice strips it of "underlying causes and complexities (such as teenage

pregnancies), which have resonance around the world, and are as relevant in the Global North as they are in the developing world" (Nirantar Trust, 2015, 9).

Although child marriage does happen in developed countries, this is usually ignored, downplayed or portrayed differently. In the infrequent instances it is acknowledged that child marriage takes place in developed countries, it is often associated to immigrant and diaspora communities (see Begikhani and Gill, 2015; Gangoli, McCarry and Razak, 2009; among others). A 2013 report by US-based think tank Council on Foreign Relations claimed that "although child marriage is uncommon in Western democracies such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, recent studies suggest that immigrant and diaspora populations in these countries are perpetuating the practice" (Vogelstein, 2013, 7). The 2005 Resolution on "Forced marriages and child marriages" adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe states that

> the Assembly observes that the problem arises chiefly in migrant communities and primarily affects young women and girls. […] It is outraged by the fact that, under the cloak of respect for the culture and traditions of migrant communities, there are authorities which tolerate forced marriages and child marriages although they violate the fundamental rights of each and every victim. […] Such marriages should, in fact, no longer take place in our societies, which uphold human rights and the rights of the child (Parliamentary Assembly, 2005).

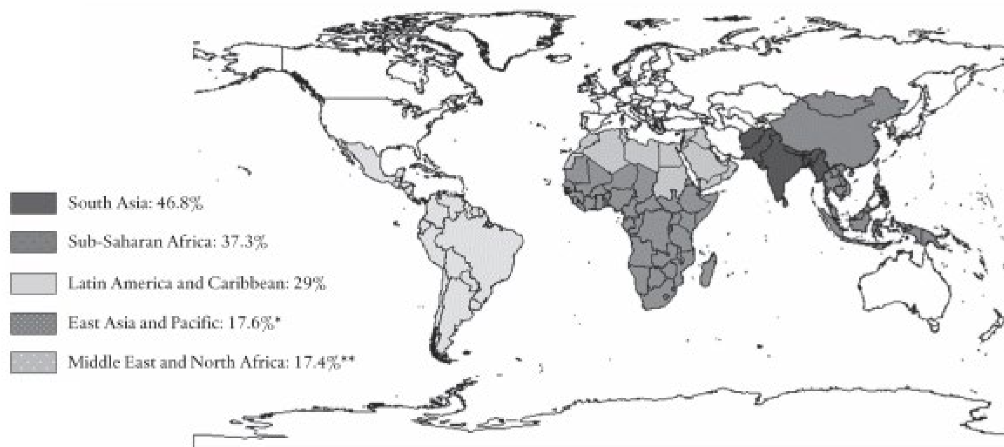
Seemingly oppressive practices such as child marriage are once again firmly associated with defective Third World cultures, reinforcing the hierarchical dichotomy between the non-West as a place of incomplete modernity and the West as not only the stronghold of all that is "right", but the bearer of the burden to rescue the Other.

When describing child marriage and its prevalence, most documents and reports consulted overwhelmingly refer to the Global South. For instance, "the practice of child marriage is found in every region of the globe and is entrenched in many parts of the developing world" (Vogelstein, 2013, 4) and "it is a practice rooted more in tradition than religious custom, and one that spans the globe, from Asia to Africa to the Americas" (ICRW, 2010, 2). A 2001 report stated that "early marriage, the practice of marriage before or during adolescence, prevails across much of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and *in some form or another* exists throughout the world" (Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls, 2001, 6, my emphasis). Although it is not clear what it is meant exactly, the use of the expression "some form or another" when referring to places out of Africa, Asia, and Latin America implicitly evokes how child marriage is perceived differently in the developed world. A Girls Not Brides article about child marriage in the United States titled "From Baltimore to Bangladesh" discusses how child marriage is prevalent worldwide, although it is illustrated by the photograph of a non-white girl wearing traditional non-Western clothing, furthering the persistent association of child marriage with the developing world only (Girls Not Brides, 2017f). Another example of how child marriage is perceived as a Third World problem (or somehow different when practiced in the West) is a 2018 study by Save the Children. The study claimed to carry out a comprehensive *global* review of literature on solutions to child marriage, but the methodology purposefully excluded evaluation of programs in high-income countries (Freccero and Whiting, 2018).

Child marriage in developed countries is also ignored in most map portrayals of the practice. Girls Not Brides' website offers a child marriage interactive map or atlas about the issue,

stating that "child marriage is a truly global problem that cuts across countries, cultures, religions and ethnicities. Child brides can be found in every region in the world, from the Middle East to Latin America, South Asia to Europe" (Girls Not Brides, n.d. e). However, the interactive map offers no data about child marriage in most developed countries, apart from the map on minimum legal age for marriage. Although they are not titled "*highest* prevalence", but only "prevalence", the maps below leave North America and Europe blank, implying that child marriage does not take place in these regions.

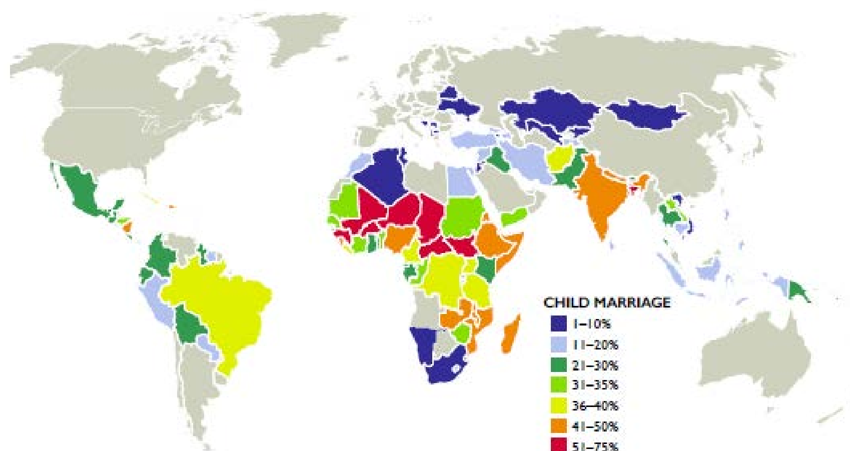
FIGURE 1: CHILD MARRIAGE PREVALENCE BY REGION (MARRIED BY AGE EIGHTEEN)



*Excludes China due to lack of available data.
**Excludes Bahrain, Iran, Israel, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates due to lack of available data.
Source: Statistics and Monitoring Section, Division of Policy and Strategy, UNICEF (2013).

Source: Vogelstein, 2013, 4.

FIGURE 1: GLOBAL PREVALENCE OF CHILD MARRIAGE

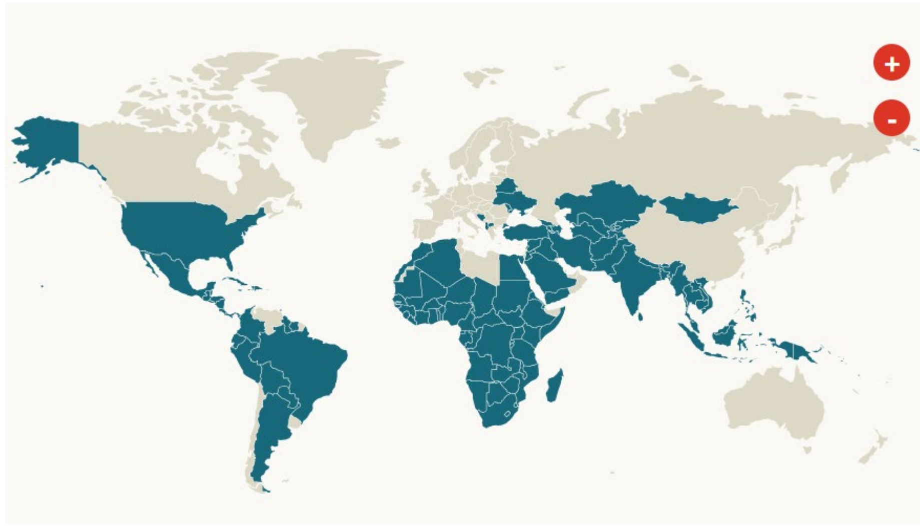


SOURCE: *Based on data from UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), and other national surveys. Refers to the most recent year available during 2005 through 2015 in which women ages 20 to 24 reported being married by ages 18 and 15.*

Source: USAID, 2015, 4.

Although child marriage in developed countries is often ignored, it must be noted that a few exceptions can be found in the materials consulted. A report by an India-based organisation states that "early and child marriage has been a prevalent practice at different points in the history of almost all societies around the globe, including Europe, the United States and the Middle East" (Nirantar Trust, 2015, 7). When publishing its analysis of laws on marriage age, the Pew Research Center made sure to claim "at least 117 nations (*including the United States*) allow children to marry" (Pew Research Center, 2016, emphasis added). World Vision's website has a timeline of progress towards ending child marriage, which includes a milestone in the North: "2018 - Delaware and New Jersey become the first U.S. states to outlaw child marriage without exceptions" (World Vision, n.d.). Care International's infographic "The Top 5 Things You Didn't Know About Child Marriage" states that "child marriage is not just a developing world problem. It happens in every major religion and every region around the world. In the U.S. most states set 18 as the minimum age for

marriage. But Mississippi allows girls to marry at 15 and boys at 17 and at any age with parental consent. In Massachusetts, girls may marry at 12 and boys at 14 with parental consent" (Care International, n.d. c). Finally, a map showing child marriage around the world at Girls Not Brides website includes the USA as one of the areas where child marriage is practiced.



Source: Girls Not Brides, "Child marriage around the world" (Girls Not Brides, n.d. e)

The case of the United States is perhaps the most emblematic of how child marriage in developed countries is either ignored or portrayed and addressed differently. Most American states have legislation setting minimum age for marriage, but several allow for exceptions such as parental or judicial consent, often with no bottom line age (Tahirih Justice Center, 2017). As mentioned above, child marriage is a historical practice that persists in the United States, with the Tahirih Justice Center estimating its prevalence at 8.9% (Tahirih Justice Center, 2016), with over 200,000 children married between 2000 and 2015 (Tahirih Justice

Center, 2017)[35]. Nonetheless, the issue is often explicit or implicitly associated to immigrant communities. The Council on Foreign Relations claimed that "a 2011 survey by the U.S.-based Tahirih Justice Center, *an organization that serves immigrant women*, uncovered as many as three thousand instances of known or suspected forced marriages in the United States, many involving girls under the age of eighteen" (Vogelstein, 2013, 7, emphasis added). However, Tahirih's research on child marriage has in fact stated that child marriage in the United States is diverse: "children from rural and urban, poor and well-off, white and non-white, multigenerational U.S. citizen and recent immigrant, and religious and non-religious families have been married at young ages in the United States" (Tahirih Justice Center, 2017, 25). It is important to note then that when the Council on Foreign Relations characterises The Tahirih Justice Center as an immigrant-oriented organization, it subtly produces and reproduces the idea that child marriage is a problem affecting "others".

During an event on child marriage, a representative of the ICRW and Girls Not Brides-USA claimed that

> she was recently given hope, however, when she met a firefighter from West Virginia at a wedding there, and he knew about child marriage and believed it was a good issue for the United States to be tackling abroad. He had learned about the issue from his exposure to the TED talk by girl activist Memory Banda from Malawi, and a 2012 *Washington Post* op-ed by elders Graca Machel and Archbishop Desmond Tutu that called for U.S. action (Greene and Perlson, 2016, 4-5, italics in the original).

[35] Although this thesis is critical of the quantification obsession in child marriage discourses, these figures are offered here to illustrate how even though the number of child marriages in the United States is not insignificant, it is not treated with the same alarm as numbers in the global South.

Child marriage is presented as something that belongs "elsewhere" as the child marriage practitioner celebrates a regular citizen in West Virginia that has been sensitised by international organisations' awareness-raising efforts and is now informed that child marriage is a problem the United States should "be tackling abroad". It is somewhat ironic though that West Virginia is one of the states in United States with legislative loopholes that allow people under 18 to be married and that has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the country (McClendon and Sandstrom, 2016). Likewise, an official policy document distances the United States from the practice,

> as of 2010, there were legal prohibitions against this practice in 158 countries, and 146 granted exemptions in the case of parental consent. In many countries, existing laws are weakly enforced, especially when they conflict with local customs. […] CEFM often occurs in contexts of poverty, displacement, or societal pressures, and prevalence rates are highest in the most impoverished and most rural regions of the world (United States Department of State, 2016, 5).

Indeed, although the majority of American states legally allow child marriage *de facto*, this is not alluded to; instead, the practice is once again firmly placed in the Third World.

The Girls Not Brides website provides country profiles on child marriage, with quantitative data on prevalence for most countries. In the United States page however, the percentage of girls married by 15 and married by 18 is marked as "N/A" (not available), although as seen above, other organisations have provided such figures[36]. Instead, the country is presented then as a champion of anti-child marriage efforts in the developing world,

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[36] Although figures on child marriage in the United States are left blank as "not available" at the top of the page, later on it is stated that "in February 2017, new data by Girls Not Brides member Unchained at Last, revealed that over 248,000 children had been married in the United States between 2000 and 2010, mostly to adult men" (Girls Not Brides, n.d. f). However, it is important to note that the information is presented in a

> as a leading donor for international development, the U.S. has a role to play in the global movement to end child, early and forced marriage. In the last few years, the U.S. government's commitments to ending the practice have markedly increased, through development as well as diplomatic work. In March 2016, the U.S. State Department adopted the Global Strategy To Empower Adolescent Girls, which includes specific provisions on ending child, early and forced marriage and addressing the needs of married girls globally (Girls Not Brides, n.d. f).

The United States' role in *combating* child marriage (and not *practicing* it) is also evident in documents produced by the think-tank Council on Foreign Relations, which have praised US government efforts' on tracking countries' minimum legal age for marriage, child marriage rates, and the prevalence of child marriage within immigrant and diaspora communities in American soil (Tzemach Lemmon and El Harake, 2014; Vogelstein, 2013). Presenting the United States not as a place where child marriage takes place, but as a leader in anti-child marriage efforts worldwide exemplifies the neocolonial ideals that such backwards practices have no place in the civilised West. Rather, they are practiced by Third World countries and fixed by developed countries.

Even when organisations acknowledge the occurrence of child marriage in the United States, it is addressed differently than elsewhere. In 2016 the Tahirih Justice Center published a report titled "Child Marriage in the United States: A Serious Problem with a Simple First-Step Solution" (Tahirih Justice Center, 2016), which advocates for the elimination of child marriage in the United States "by setting the minimum legal marriage

much more subtle, low-profile manner compared to how it is presented in the pages for Third World countries.

age at the age of majority" (Tahirih Justice Center, 2016, 2). From its title ("simple first-step solution") to the focus on a legal solution only, the document implies that solving child marriage in the United States is simple and that changing the law is enough to eliminate child marriage in the country, even though legislation reform is not the main strategy advocated for eliminating child marriage elsewhere, as will be further discussed later in this thesis. The idea behind these assertions is that the United States is a civilised country who respects the rule of law and once there is legislation setting minimum age, it will be respected and child marriage eliminated. Hence, child marriage is a *legal* problem in the United States, and not a *cultural* problem like in Third World countries.

Victim or Shero: Representations of Third World Girls in Child Marriage Discourses

Women and girls are at the epicentre of colonising representations of the Third World. As further discussed in chapter 1, issues affecting women are in fact used as a measurement of Third World problems and ultimate "proof" of Third World's backwardness. Women and girls have thus a prominent role in international development, human rights, and humanitarian discourses (Calkin, 2015; Dogra, 2011). Indeed, "women are ubiquitous across all representational sites of disaster, development and advocacy" (Dogra, 2011, 335), heavily present as subjects and objects of development and humanitarian interventions in public-facing documents such as fundraising appeals, websites, reports, academic papers, and media articles (Fernando, 2016; Calkin, 2015; Dogra, 2011). The representation of Third World women and girls in international development uses a binary that oscillates between victim and super agentic (see Calkin, 2015; Hayhurst, 2013; Shain, 2013; Switzer, 2013; Wilson, 2013; Dogra, 2011; Wilson, 2011; Sensoy and Marshall, 2010; among

others). Both extremes essentialise Third World women and girls, homogenising the “Third World difference” that produces the image of an “average Third World woman” based on her gender and Third Worldness (Mohanty, 1884; 2003; 2006).

As previously discussed, stereotyping serves the West’s long obsession with defining and representing the Other, in particular the Other woman. The plight of Third World women and girls has been a long-held concern in the West and central to colonial and imperialist projects, so that saving them has been used to justify military interventions, aid missions, and development projects (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Constructing Third World women and girls as in need of saving is problematic though, because “when you save someone, you imply that you are saving her *from* something. You are also saving her *to* something. What violences are entailed in this transformation, and what presumptions are being made about the superiority which you are saving her?” (Abu-Lughod, 2002, 788-789, my emphasis). The rescuing logic rests then upon two assumptions: that Third World women need to be saved from their oppressive men, religions, and cultures and that the West is the ideal and superior “destination” or way of living. The first part of the equation relies on the representation of Third World women as victims, with the corresponding construction of Third World men as inherently oppressive and violent. Indeed, there is increasing scholarship on how policies, campaigns, and the media portray Third World men, and in particular Muslim men, as “the monstrous Other, always carrying the potential for violence —from sexual assault to honor killing to terrorism” (Piedalue and Rishi, 2017, 557-558; see also Morrell and Lindegger, 2012). Likewise, Third World religions and cultures are commonly presented as anti-modern and backward, in need to be tamed, overcome, and

advanced (Piedalue and Rishi, 2017; Wade, 2011; Wilson, 2011; Biswas, 2004; Chowdhry, 2004; Chowdhry and Nair, 2004; Doezema, 2001).

Representations of women and girls in child marriage also fall into the binary of victim *vs* superheroine. However, having emerged as an "issue of global concern" particularly after the 2000s, child marriage has followed a broader "turn to agency" in international development, which shifted portraying women and girls less as powerless victims and more as entrepreneurial heroines. Although less emphasised, the "victim" end of the representational binary is present in child marriage discourses and follows three intertwined stereotyping strategies. These strategies that construct the "typical" victim of child marriage rely heavily on emotional appeal. Indeed, the report of an event on child marriage and media coverage states that

> time and again, we have seen that facts and statistics aren't enough to enthrall the public or convince decision-makers to commit resources […] We need to tell a story, to put recognizable faces to the 15 million girls who are married every year, to show the public and the decision-makers that these aren't numbers—these are people (Greene and Perlson, 2016, 9).

The first representational strategy that constructs women and girls as victims consists of associating child marriage to Third World backwardness through specific language and the almost exclusive use of images of Third World women and girls in printed and online materials. Since child marriage is presented as a Third World issue, representations of women and girls in child marriage are in fact representations of *Third World* women and girls. As discussed above, the language in international instruments and documents produced by international organisations frequently portray women and girls as victims of

Third World cultures and traditions, which is reflected even in the titles of reports, such as "'How Come You Allow Little Girls to Get Married?' Child Marriage in Yemen" (Human Rights Watch, 2011) and "Family Honour and Shattered Dreams: Girl Brides in Mali, Niger and Senegal" (Plan International, 2017). In addition, race has a crucial role in the process of constructing the "typical" victim of Third World problems, with an overwhelming use of images and statistics of girls of colour to reinforce racialised stereotypes and link issues such as trafficking or child marriage to certain populations only (Orchard, 2019). According to Greene and Perlson (2016), media has used "stronger visuals" to illustrate stories on child marriage, adding that almost half of the stories in 2015 were about India, Pakistan and Nigeria, which are countries where child marriage is presented as a cultural, traditional practice.

Certainly, the focus on "stronger visuals" is ever-present in child marriage (and in wider humanitarianism and international development), as documents and webpages on child marriage are overwhelmingly illustrated with photographs of women and girls of colour and/or wearing traditional non-Western clothing, leaving no doubts that child marriage belongs in the Third World. This is closely linked to stereotyping and fetishization, which turns the neocolonial subject into an object and licenses an unregulated voyeurism (Hall, 1997). This is particularly evident in the proliferation of photographic exhibits of Third World people and problems, which have the purported aim of raising awareness about these issues among Western audiences, serving the West's curiosity and concern about the oppressed Other and its craving for proof and entertainment alike. Abu-Lughod (2002) claimed that photo exhibitions of Muslim women have become commonplace, with titles such as "Afghan Women: Behind the Veil" materialising "rhetorical patterns [that] include

the demonization of the burqa, the homogenization of Islam, and the fetishization of 'unveiling'" (Abu-Lughod, 2002, 119).

Likewise, photographic exhibitions and projects focused on images of Third World girls are also common in child marriage. A few prominent examples include the "Girls' Voices: Speaking Out Against Child Marriage" (Girls Not Brides, 2015b) exhibition by Girls Not Brides and the government of Canada in 2015, an exhibition in India by HAQ Centre for Child Rights in 2017 (Hindustan Times, 2017), and "Too Young to Wed", a travelling photo exhibition initiated in 2012 by journalist Stephanie Sinclair and UNFPA (Too Young to Wed, n.d). This exhibition is described as a "transmedia campaign aimed at raising awareness of the problem […] features the haunting stories of child brides from Nepal, India, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Yemen, Afghanistan, and yes, even the United States". However, despite the surprised affirmation that child marriage happens *even* in the United States, the photos available on the website are exclusively of women and girls of colour and in traditional non-Western clothes, again reinforcing that this problem is a Third World one.

The second strategy to represent women and girls as victims is the association of child marriage with childhood and girlhood vulnerability and innocence, highlighting the youngest "child brides". In child marriage, the victimised Third World woman has a younger counterpart, the "Third World girl child". Further to victimisation in the hands of Third World men and cultures, the Third World girl child is also in danger due to the frailty and innocence associate with childhood and girlhood. According to Orchard (2019, 300), "the bodies and behaviours of female children have long been morally contested sites through which larger socio-economic, political, and cultural anxieties have been played

out". The threatened socio-sexual status of girls has been used to justify intervention, from child marriage in Colonial India to contemporary anti-trafficking discourses (Orchard, 2019; Roy, 2017). As further discussed in the previous chapter, modern constructions of children as innocent and asexual led to girlhood itself to be associated to moral panic, with girls – and particularly Third World girls – perceived as endangered and in need of protection from unsavoury adults or irresponsible parents (Orchard, 2019). The importance of childhood and its related innocence in child marriage discourses is reflected in the very own preferred language adopted by international organisations: whilst similar or related issues affecting the same age group are referred to as affecting adolescents, marriage is firmly delimited as affecting children. In fact, there is a very different emotional response to the terms "*teenage* pregnancy" or "*underage* sex" and "*child* marriage".

The emphasis on the childhood component of child marriage is noted in the widespread use of images of very young girls to illustrate reports, documents, and online materials. According to Greene and Perlson (2016, 5), "images of children under age 13 are most prevalent, even though typically it is older adolescents who are getting married, thereby influencing our emotional response to early marriage". Reports by different organisations (see Plan International, 2017; Care International, 2016; Steinhaus et al, 2016; Women's Refugee Commission, 2016; Care International, 2015a; World Vision, 2013; Myers and Harvey, 2011, among others) also resort to the use of dramatic photographs of very young girls – mostly of colour and in traditional dress to highlight their *thirdworldness* – often holding babies. The cover of a 2016 report by the US Department of States captions the photograph of a young girl as "Yemen's Nujood Ali was just ten when she divorced her abusive, much older husband. The girl's courageous act turned her into an international

heroine for girls' rights" (US Department of State, 2016[37]). Care International's website on child marriage highlights the article "Nine Years Old and Married", which is illustrated by the picture of a very young girl, incidentally with a "donate" button under it (Care International, n.d. d). A 2007 report by the ICRW provides a detailed statistical analysis of median age of marriage in several countries where child marriage is prevalent, claiming that in most countries examined the average age is 17 and 16 (and less frequently 15), and the number of very young girls getting married low (Jain and Kurz, 2007). Nonetheless, the photograph at the report's cover depicts a very young girl, building more into the dramatic appeal of this imagery than to the "facts" and figures presented. This discrepancy has been highlighted by those considered to be child marriage experts, with Greene and Perlson (2016, 6) calling for the need "to cover the missing middle in media coverage, i.e., the girls marrying at ages 16 to 17". The Nirantar Trust (2015) highlights the historic increase in the average age of marriage in India, indicating that "today this practice primarily affects adolescents and young people, whose needs are different from those of children" (Nirantar Trust, 2015, 7).

Finally, the third victimising representational strategy is constructing Third World bodies as suffering or ill, with a corresponding focus on the negative consequences of child marriage. Analysing the construction of victims of human trafficking, Orchard (2019) and Doezema (2010) argue that the use of emotive language and images, as well alarming statistics about sexual abuse, criminality, and health frame victims as damaged, morally ruined, and ill. A similar strategy is observed in child marriage discourses, with women and

[37] It is interesting to note that whilst the report is titled "United States Global Strategy to Empower *Adolescent* Girls" (emphasis added), several of the photographs illustrating it, and particularly the cover image, are of very young, prepubescent girls.

girls presented as victims in need of rescue and rehabilitation through the persistent focus on the consequences of child marriage, particularly regarding poor outcomes in health, education, violence, and economic development. For instance, a report claims that "research shows that early marriage results in reduced schooling, limiting girls' economic potential. It is also correlated with high rates of sexual violence and abuse, and with higher rates of maternal and infant mortality" (Tzemach Lemmon and El Harake, 2014, vii). UNICEF's website on child marriage warns that

> child marriage can lead to a lifetime of suffering. Girls who marry before they turn 18 are less likely to remain in school and more likely to experience domestic violence. Young teenage girls are more likely to die due to complications in pregnancy and childbirth than women in their 20s, and their children are more likely to be stillborn or die in the first month of life (UNICEF, 2019b).

A similar message is shared at Care International's website,

> marriage should be a time for celebration and joy – unless you are one of the 64 million girls around the world forced into marriage before the age of 18. Imagine the life those girls — who are 7, 10 or even 16 years of age — endure. Child brides have a diminished chance of completing their education and are at a higher risk of being physically abused, contracting HIV and other diseases, and dying while pregnant or giving birth (Care International, n.d. b).

Girls Not Brides also warns "she's at greater risk of violence, trapped in poverty, often pulled out of school, and she can be left with serious health complications or even face death due to early pregnancy" (Girls Not Brides, 2019b). Constructing the victim of Third World issues such as child marriage as damaged justifies interventionist impulses, transcribing "suffering bodies" into "saving bodies" (Doezema, 2010).

Having discussed how representations of women and girls as victims in child marriage emphasise their "thirdworldness", young girlhood, and damaged bodies oppressed by their men, families, and cultures, I refer back to Abu-Lughod's argument that rescuing someone *from* something also entails saving them *to* something (Abu-Lughod, 2002). As discussed in chapter 1, representations of Third World women as backwards, inferior, impoverished, dependent, and helpless also serve the purpose of reinforcing the West as advanced, superior, prosperous, free, and saviour (Keenaghan and Reilly, 2017; Fernando, 2016; Abu-Lughod, 2002; Doezema, 2001; others). In this sense, victimised, powerless, and oppressed Third World women can only be rescued by this superior and benevolent West (Piedalue and Rishi, 2017; Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mohanty, 1984). Contemporary humanitarian and development programmes reproduce past colonialist civilising endeavours to save Other women, although the motivation has seemingly changed from religion to liberal human rights (Kapoor, 2004; Abu-Lughod, 2002). Assuming Western women as privileged leads to a "benevolent enlightenment" that compels Western women to rescue less fortunate Third World women, as seen in nineteenth century Christian missionaries and currently exploited by humanitarian and development discourses that invite Western women to use their privileged position to support initiatives in the Third World (Calkin, 2015; Gill and Donaghue, 2013; Sensoy and Marshall, 2010).

In child marriage, rescuing Third World women and girls *to* something is closely linked to the emphasis on empowering girls[38]. This is inserted in a broader "turn to agency" (Gill and

[38] The meanings and nuances of empowerment in child marriage discourses and in particular the linkage with Western models of agency will be examined in the next chapter.

Donaghue, 2013), i.e. the increasing focus on women's agency observed in feminist and development theory and practice from the 1990s onwards and especially in the past two decades. In attempts to overcome the portrayal of women as passive victims, there has been a shift in how Third World women are represented in development and humanitarian discourses, moving away from negative to positive images, and therefore from the victim end towards the super agentic end of the representational binary (Dogra, 2007; Wilson, 2011). Indeed, critiques of essentialising Third World women as victims have been "interpreted as an imperative to represent these women as universally enterprising, productive and happy" (Wilson, 2011, 328). Different authors have analysed this shift (see Fernando, 2016; Calkin, 2015; Wilson, 2011; Dogra, 2011; Dogra, 2007; among others), highlighting the move from focusing on suffering into agency, the appeal to spectator's self-reflexivity instead of grand emotions such as pity and empathy, as well as the promotion of so-called "gender-conscious" images of Third World women (Fernando, 2016).

This move towards positive representations placed women and girls as the main agents of change to address Third World problems, creating a new subject: the "shero" (Fernando, 2016). Neoliberal values such as individualism, resilience, entrepreneurship, and work ethic are emphasised and Third World women presented as "constantly, diligently and happily engaged in small-scale but productive labour for the market" (Wilson, 2011, 323). Gender equality and social justice concerns are repackaged in terms of economic growth and sustainable development outcomes in narratives of "smart economics" that assume development to be synonymous with "economic development/progress" (Mohanty, 2003). In this functionalist approach that sees poor women as instruments of development, they are celebrated as empowered and active agents that work tirelessly to support themselves and

their communities and are therefore the key to eradicate Third World problems (Fernando, 2016; Calkin, 2015; Wilson, 2013; Wilson, 2011; Dogra, 2011). This leads to measures that attempt to discipline the individual and family levels, which in turn naturalise systemic inequalities and structural violences, rendering the poor both individually and collectively culpable for their own problems (Cameron, Smith, and Tepe-Belfrage, 2016). Wilson (2011) argues though that this is not new, but rather a reformulation of earlier colonial narratives such as 1920s tea advertising that used images of Indian women tea pickers as content and productive hard workers. This in turn creates ideals of "deserving" and "undeserving" poor, and more importantly those who can/should be rescued and empowered by the West and those who cannot/should not.

In this scenario that promotes positive representations of Third World women, girls have a prominent role. As discussed above, representation of Third World girls often follows those of Third World women more broadly, i.e. within the dichotomy of victims *vs* sheroes. If in victimising representations girlhood innocence added an extra need of protection, when Third World women are represented as heroines, girlhood adds the element of potential. Borrowing and mobilising discourses of "girl power" that have been circulating in the West for over two decades (Koffman and Gill, 2013), development and humanitarian interventions repackaged "saving Third World women" into "empowering Third World girls" (Sensoy and Marshall, 2008). By the mid-2000s the "turn to the girl" had been embraced by most NGOs and UN agencies working in international development, with interventions focused on adolescent girls multiplying quickly (Khoja-Moolji, 2015; Koffman and Gill, 2013). Prominent examples include the Girl Effect[39], launched in 2008

[39] http://www.girleffect.org/

and led by the Nike Foundation, as well as the Girl Up campaign[40], launched by the UN Foundation in 2010. Perhaps due to their high visibility, private sector involvement, and media engagement, such initiatives have been extensively examined (for critiques on such initiatives, see Moeller, 2018; Hayhurst, 2014; Hickel, 2014, Shain, 2013; Switzer, 2013, among others).

The seeming opposition between the Third World and the West – and therefore between backwardness/poverty *vs* modernity/economic advancement – is embodied by Third World girls, who have then two possibilities: "tradition, confinement, reproductivity, and peril" or "choice, autonomy, productivity, and promise" (Switzer, 2013, 347). Childhood is presented as a period before marriage and childbearing, with a ticking clock for intervention and rescue (Koffman and Gill, 2013). The Girl Effect campaign produced a video titled "The Clock is Ticking", which claims that when a girl turns 12 years old in poverty, her fate is to be married by 14, pregnant by 15 and at great risk of survival prostitution, death at childbirth, and contracting HIV (Calkin, 2015). The language and imagery such as the ticking clock dooming over Third World girls are especially relevant to child marriage. A 2007 report by the ICRW claimed there is a "tipping point" age, "at which child marriage prevalence in a country starts to increase markedly (usually 13 or 14). Programs seeking to prevent child marriage when it first becomes a serious problem should target and tailor efforts to young girls approaching such "tipping point" age" (Jain and Kurz 2007, 2).

Within neoliberal frameworks, Third World girls are fetishised as model subjects, imagined as ideal rational actors with potential for great economic agency that can reinvent

[40] https://girlup.org/

themselves and become "successful" (Calkin, 2015; Tyler and Gill, 2013; Wilson, 2013; Wilson, 2011). If in 1990s girl power meant that girls *could* be active, from the 2000s onwards they became *expected to* be fully self-actualised neoliberal subjects (Gonick et al, 2009). Calkin (2015) called this process the "marketisation of gender equality", "as it visualises the transformation of disempowered Third World girls into 'economically active citizens' whose entrepreneurial skills and credit-worthiness contribute to their position as prominent subjects of global governance" (Calkin, 2015, 663)[41]. Madhok remarks on how development came to replace seemingly inefficient and costly state-welfare provision with market-friendly strategies that are touted for their empowerment potential (Madhok, 2013b).

Third World women, and especially girls, are thus constructed as possessing untapped potential, being themselves a resource and an investment to build Third World economic growth, eradicate poverty (Calkin, 2015; Koffman and Gill, 2013; Wilson, 2011), and stop female genital cutting, child marriage or any other "Third World problem". Girls receive the role – and burden – to solve Third World problems that are structural and certainly beyond individual action, be it poverty or "cultural/traditional" practices. A report on child marriage quotes United States of America President Barak Obama as saying "'the single best indicator of whether a nation will succeed,' Obama told the African Union, 'is how it treats its women. If you want your country to grow and succeed, you have to empower your women.' And, of course, your girls." (Care International, 2015a, 39). A video produced by the Girl Effect campaign urges the audience to "invest in a girl and she will do the rest" (Wilson, 2011, 326). Other examples include slogans and phrases from campaign materials

[41] Both the marketing potential offered by empowering girls to fulfil their potential as well as the underlying neoliberal ideals of turning women and girls into workers and ultimately consumers led to strong sponsorship and involvement of the private sector in such initiatives (see Hickel, 2014).

such as “Change starts with a girl”, “The revolution starts with me” and “Adolescent girls are the most powerful force for change on the planet” by the Girl Effect; “Where there’s a girl, there’s a way” and the hashtag #girlhero by Girl Up; the tagline “Poverty ends with her” by The Coalition for Adolescent Girls (The Coalition for Adolescent Girls n.d.); and the “Because I am a Girl” campaign by Plan International, which asks the reader to “support girls to become agents of change” (Plan International, n.d. c).

As child marriage emerged as a topic of heightened international interest in the 2000s and particularly after 2010, it was always already immersed both in the “turn to agency” and the “turn to the girl”. This representation of girls as possessing super-heroic potential (and the burden) to solve Third World problems is observed in child marriage not only through the use of similar “girl power” language, but also by presenting girls as *sheroes* who pull themselves out of child marriage and stop the practice at large. A report on child marriage media coverage stated that “a consensus emerged among the panellists and audience members on the importance of not telling stories as if girls were passive victims. […] Girls deserve in-depth profiles that portray them as full human beings with their own individuality”, adding that “stories that focus on sympathetic characters also increase the odds of coverage” (Greene and Perlson, 2016, 12).

The majority of stories in the section “Girls’ Voices” in the Girls Not Brides website follows this representation. For instance, one story asks “what is the power of an 11 year old girl? CARE knows that with the right support, an 11 year old girl can change her community. She can save a friend” (Girls Not Brides, 2013a). Similarly, “given a second chance, Kidan could unleash the Girl Effect and help herself and her family” (Girls Not Brides, 2013b).

The story of Ruvimbo, married at 16 in Zimbabwe, states that she "sough a way out. First, she persuaded her father to let her continue education and follow her dream to become a nurse, and then at the age of 19, went to court with Loveness [a local NGO] to fight for the rights of all girls in Zimbabwe" (Girls Not Brides, 2018b). Rachana, from Nepal, "has stopped 37 child marriages and is making her voice heard around the world" (Girls Not Brides, 2016c). In India, Khushboo has "even prevented several child marriages from happening herself" (Girls Not Brides, 2014b). Another story interviews "the teens hailed by India's President for resisting child marriage", who claimed that the President "congratulated us for being courageous and fighting child marriage and she also told us that we have to continue to work hard in our community to stop this practice. She said that we have to stand in front of everyone 'with the flag of new change'" (Chowdhary, 2012).

Neoliberal values of individualism and self-improvement are also emphasised in representations of Third World girls as heroines. For instance, a story at the Girls Not Brides website emphasises that "they [girls] have rights: to say no to FGM, to early marriage. They have the right to education. They should never give up" (Girls Not Brides, 2018c), as if girls' access to and enjoyment of rights rests fully on them, depending solely on them not giving up. Such values are also embodied in the speech of an almost girl bride turned activist in India, "every day you are the leader of your destiny. Tell yourself what you want to do, know what your dreams are, and one day you will achieve them" (Girls Not Brides, 2017e). Such representation romanticises the "local" and eulogises subaltern women, indigenous knowledge and/or local politics, in attempts to "speak for" the subaltern whilst hyperbolically producing an "authentic" and "heroic" Other (Kapoor, 2004). Moreover, it homogenises the variety and complexity of Third World women and girls, so that "a browse

through these pages creates, through a process of repetition and accumulation of images, an overwhelming sense of 'the South' as a single, though endlessly diverse, place where 'poor women' are constantly, diligentlyand happily engaged in small-scale but productive labour for the market" (Wilson, 2011, 323), which will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Rescue and Empowerment as Two Sides of the Colonial Encounter

The representation of child marriage as a cultural practice confined to the Third World and both representations of women and girls as victims and/or sheroes reproduce essentialist views and colonial encounters that keep the Third World firmly within Western standards and expectations. As previously discussed, although international organisations have moved towards "positive" representations of Third World women and girls in attempts to overcome victimising constructions, the process of othering continues, reinforcing essentialist binary views of them and racialised regimes of representation (Wilson, 2011). Although international organisations' often contradictory messages present them as individual heroines, Third World women and girls remain within what is expected of them as a group (Dogra, 2011). According to Fernando (2016), the semiotic manoeuvre that re-makes Third World women from victims to sheroes merely reassigns their assumed inferiority, adding to the hypervisibility and fetishisation of their bodies.

More importantly, both ends of the representational continuum victim-shero maintain discursive violence, since overstating Third World women's agency and potential to "end poverty, make peace, save the world" reproduces the figurative woman who is "hyper-resilient and able to bear dehumanizing degrees of suffering and poverty that seem natural

in the Third World but considered unbearable in the West" (Fernando, 2016, 402). The opposition between "us" and "the other" persists and in fact, "the point here is not that one is less truthful than the other but that both are constructions. The notions of both the 'liberated' DW [developed world] woman and the 'oppressed' MW [majority world] woman are contentious" (Dogra, 2011, 345). These representations embody discursive violence and reinstate Western dominance, still serving the purpose of defining and managing the Other, even though rescue is seemingly repackaged as empowerment. This "is not a question of mere good intentions or semantics: for instance, development organisations or researchers may now call their subjects 'beneficiaries', 'target groups', 'partners' or 'clients', instead of 'poor', 'underdeveloped' or 'disadvantaged', but this does not by itself change the discourse or dismantle the us/them power relationship" (Kapoor, 2004, 629).

The representation of Third World women and girls as hyper-industrious, productive, and entrepreneurial reproduces and confirms neoliberal values and narratives, wherein "agency" and "empowerment" are necessary for neoliberal capitalism and to solve Third World problems (Wilson, 2011). In these discourses, assumptions about development and "progress" utilise Western values, standards, and metrics, so that the Third World is always already behind. This leads to functionalist interventions that fail to unpack structural causes and to problematize power dynamics and global and local inequalities, placing the burden of solving Third World problems on women and girls, and focusing on individual strategies that do little to change such structural causes (Keenaghan and Reilly, 2017; Dogra, 2011; Wilson, 2011). These decontextualised approaches focus on Western-centric rights that are in conflict with oppressive Third World cultures, so that "rights-based" initiatives remain

removed from broader frames of analysis and action (Dogra, 2011). Although it may seem that positive representations of Third World women and girls replace victimising constructs, they are in fact interdependent. The Third World woman – and especially the Third World girl – remain an ambivalent figure, at the same time an object of redemption that needs to be rescued and an agent of change full of capacity. The notion of victim to be saved is not eliminated, but reworked, as the ideal of self-transformation through individual realisation and entrepreneurship "echoes the structure of colonial discourses of salvation, which simultaneously infantilised its objects and imposed a moral responsibility for self-improvement on them" (Wilson, 2011, 329).

It is important to notice though that the transformative potential of Third World subjects is seen as dormant or inactive, requiring adequate intervention by Western institutions and individuals to be awaken, which is another reworking of colonial relations and dependencies. In these ambivalent narratives, girls are "both uniquely powerful and vulnerable, but entirely reliant on benevolent intervention by the Western spectator" (Calkin, 2015, 661). As oppression and exploitation are obscured or removed from wider frames of analyses, they become obstacles that can be overcome not only with hard work, agency, and speaking up, but with the fundamental intervention of Western organisations, projects, expertise, and funding (Keenaghan and Reilly, 2017; Fernando, 2016; Calkin, 2015; Wilson, 2011). Even though the language seems to have shifted and placed Third World women and girls as entrepreneurial agents of change, the real heroes are these organisations, who continue to save/empower them (Fernando, 2016). This also opens questions about whether "girl-centred" and empowering approaches, which are widespread

in child marriage, are driven by girls or by Western organisations, which will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Furthermore, the focus of humanitarian and development interventions continue firmly in the West. Rescuing/empowering initiatives are not only informed by Western values, and led and funded by Western organisations, but also fit into how Western audiences feel about themselves and the Other. This is closely related to the relationship that practices of representation create between the subject of representation and its spectator, reader, listener, and consumer (Orchard, 2019; Wilson, 2011). Representations build a stock of knowledge and cultural repertoire, which have been called "regimes of representation" (Hall, 1997) or "collective symbolism" (Åhäll, 2011), so that meanings accumulate, and texts and images implicitly refer to others. Representations circulate not only meanings about subjects, but also emotions related to them through affective economies (Ahmed, 2012). When viewers read a text or gaze at an image, they draw upon this store of social knowledge, a conscious or unconscious shared code that either reinforces or challenges their assumptions about the world (Åhäll., 2011; Johnson, 2011). In this sense, encounters with the subaltern are never pure, innocent, or benevolent (Kapoor, 2004). Indeed, "when white audiences gaze at images and texts of Third World women, they make raced/gendered meanings that come to the fore in proximal encounters with real, embodied women of colour" (Fernando, 2016, 395).

The relationship between representations of Third World women and the Western audience is marked by the Western obsession with the real or imagined plight of the Other woman, and therefore, with rescuing the imperilled Third World woman. This is reflected in the use

of language such as "unveiling" the Muslim woman, and repeated calls for action abundant in public materials produced by organisations working on child marriage. For instance, Care International calls the audience to "help her [girl bride, illustrated by a picture of a young girl wearing a head scarf] look forward to a brighter future" (Care International, n.d. b), whilst Girls Not Brides invites "join our campaign to protect girls from child marriage" (Girls Not Brides, 2019b). As representations seemingly shifted from negative to positive images, so did the intended emotions elicited and relationship formed with Western audiences. In an analysis of representations of women's empowerment in international development visual material, Calkin (2015) argues that they are built upon the relationship between empowered self and disempowered other, inviting self-reflexivity for "post-humanitarian" and "post-feminist spectatorships" in an instrumentalised and marketised rationale for action. However, the concept of empowerment offered is highly conservative and narrowly circumscribed, characterised by sexual and economic freedom only, so that "in the wealthy liberal states of the West 'our' young women are encouraged to understand themselves as 'grateful subjects of modern states and cultures', in opposition to distant others who lack access to Western freedoms" (Calkin, 2015, 660).

Postcolonial feminist scholars have criticised an idealised assumption of universal solidarity based on a shared womanhood, as it rests upon this underlying representation of Western women as unaffected by gender inequality and Third World women as inherently oppressed (Mohanty, 2003; Mohanty, 1984). Drawing on Farhana Sultana (2019), Madhok (2020) cautions against collaborative exercises reproducing colonial power relations all over again, as locations in global imperialism have the potential to jeopardize best intentions. Calkin (2015) argues that this elusive notion of solidarity among women across the world is

reoriented towards the self and avoids political commitments, rather reinstating civilisational hierarchies. The focus on the self is closely related to the process of fetishisation previously addressed. Images and texts portraying the suffering and/or resilience of Third World women and girls are produced for the consumption of white audiences. Despite being comforted by the "feel-good humanitarian empathy" that emanates from these images, Western audiences "remain blind to the discursive violence of these images, which overstate and overinvest in the agency and power of Third World women whose task it is made to end poverty, make peace, save the world" (Fernando, 2016, 402). Hence, regardless if intending to elicit pity or a fallacious "peer-solidarity", representations of Third World women and girls serve the purpose of making Western audiences feel good about *themselves*, since they emphasise and assure that oppressive practices do not belong in the West, who are instead the rescuers, the helpers, the enlighteners.

Prevailing representations of child marriage that circumscribes it to the Third World, and, more importantly, to Third World cultures, have crucial limitations. They "plaster neat cultural icons over messy historical and political narratives' (Abu-Lughod, 2002, 785), homogenising and simplifying cultural practices as detached from their social, economic, and historical contexts. For instance, Mahmood (2005), Abu-Lughod (2002), and Honig (1999), among others, have argued that understanding practices such as piety or veiling as oppressive only ignores the many social roles they hold in non-Western contexts. In her cross-cultural analysis of veiling and anorexia, Pedwell (2007) claims that relying on a model of universal patriarchy to link Western and non-Western practices fail to consider how such "cultural" practices may serve as adaptive strategies that respond to other oppressive systems such as racism and poverty. Similarly, when child marriage is explained

as a cultural practice only, it ignores how it can be an adaptive and coping strategy to respond to poverty, insecurity, conflict, natural disasters, and displacement.

Seeing child marriage as a Third World cultural practice assumes that marriage is only problematic there, as if the West has already "progressed" and overcome such problematics. A report on child marriage published by the ICRW (2003) reflects on historical motivations of child marriage, stating that in addition to maximising fertility in contexts with high maternal and infant mortality rates, child marriage has been a means for securing critical social, economic, and political alliances for families, clans, or lineages. It adds that as

> the world has changed radically since many of these institutional mechanisms and norms were established and, for the most part, such motivations have become much less important, if not obsolete. […] However, established norms and social structures that encourage the marriage of young girls have been difficult to change in many societies and have been most tenacious where demographic and socioeconomic change have been slowest (Mathur, Greene and Malhotra, 2003, 4).

This passage is interesting as it not only reduces the drivers of child marriage to high mortality rates and family/clan alliances (deemed to be Third World problems), but also assumes that child marriage persists only in societies that have not yet evolved or have been slow in making the progress that the West has seemingly attained. Another document claims that "what looks wrong to *us* seems right to parents for a variety of reasons: economic reasons, to avoid social shame, or fear of their daughters being left behind or abused as unmarried women" (Greene and Perlson, 2016, 4, emphasis added). Although it offers a

more complex array of child marriage causes, the language used reinforces the us/them binary and how the West is in a position of enlightened moral superiority.

Child marriage discourses also turn a blind eye to how similar "cultural" patterns happen in the West as well, prematurely closing important discussions about marriage more broadly, including the assumption of marriage as a place of protection and the roles of men and women in all stages of marriage. The materials analysed often make claims about child marriage – and marriage in general – as if they are exclusive to the Third World and unproblematic in the West. For instance, a report on child marriage in Southeast Asia states that "the study found that marriage plays a central and fundamental role in social, economic and political life" (Plan International and Coram Children's Legal Centre, 2015, 89), as if this is not as applicable to anywhere in the world as much as it is in Southeast Asia. According to a 2016 report published by Plan International, "marriage is essential for individuals and families and for the survival of their communities. Viewing marriage as the simple union of two people de-contextualises a practice that is complex and meaningful for more than those directly involved" (Morgan, 2016, 7). The broader social importance of marriage is applicable to many contexts, as marriage rarely affects only the couple, in developing countries and elsewhere alike.

A 2016 report on child marriage in Nepal and Bangladesh (Care International, 2016) emphasises issues such as control of girls' sexuality, value of virginity, taboo of extra-marital/teenage pregnancy, as well as girls and women taking the bulk of household work, as if these are present in the Third World only. Another report (Steinhaus et al., 2016) characterises how adolescents defying parents and engaging in romantic relationships that

often lead to early pregnancies are drivers of child marriage, although such behaviour is not confined to adolescents in the Third World. This report also highlights cultural pressures women face in certain Third World cultures to marry before a certain age, whilst another one claims that "research on age at marriage in different cultures and ethnic and religious groups suggests that getting married and bearing children are often the only means for young girls to secure identity and status in families and as adults in society" (Mathur, Greene and Malhotra, 2003, 4). Certainly, pressures related to marriage and marriage as a tool of social security and status are also part of Western cultures.

It is important to note that such assertions decontextualise, pathologise, and more importantly, present "socio-cultural features" as belonging to *the exotic Other*, even when similar or equal features are also part of Western cultures and equally problematic there as they are elsewhere. Indeed, in discussing Western representations of the Muslim burqa being a "prison", Abu-Lughod (2002) asks "if we think that U.S. women live in a world of choice regarding clothing, all we need to do is remind ourselves of the expression 'the tyranny of fashion'" (Abu-Lughod, 2002, 785-786). Similarly, as child marriage is firmly placed in the Third World, it is left implicit that marriage in the West is marked by freedom and choice, ignoring how in most Northern countries women are also pressured to get married and have children (before a certain age), single motherhood is frowned upon, women often have *de facto* lesser rights and more responsibilities within marriage, and men still dominate marriage processes and transactions (for instance, in most Western countries it is traditional that men, and not women, propose marriage, including asking the woman's father for her hand in marriage beforehand and presenting her with a ring and a formal proposal following specific social rules). Problematic behaviours (including violence against women and

underage marriage) often receive cultural explanations when associated to the Third World or immigrant communities, but not when associated to mainstream Western, white groups, reinforcing the tendency to perceive Westerns as devoid of culture (Pedwell, 2007; Volpp, 2000; Narayan, 1997). In fact, the very language frequently used in international documents, such as "traditional practices harmful to women", reproduces colonializing discourses that reads "traditional" into less developed countries and finds inconceivable that Western culture could be harmful (Shepherd, 2005).

Finally, representations of child marriage as a Third World cultural practice ignore structural factors that often have Western complicity. Abu-Lughod (2002) criticises analyses of practices such as veiling that focus on culture, religious beliefs, and treatment of women, instead of on the history of structural repressive regimes and the role of Western governments on them. She argues that

> such cultural framing, it seemed to me, prevented the serious exploration of the roots and nature of human suffering in this part of the world. Instead of political and historical explanations, experts were being asked to give religio-cultural ones. Instead of questions that might lead to the exploration of global interconnections, we were offered ones that worked to artificially divide the world into separate spheres-recreating an imaginative geography of West versus East, us versus Muslims (Abu-Lughod, 2002, 784).

Indeed, these discourses "cunningly frame out and fail to declare colonial histories and the root causes of poverty in the South—corporate interests" (Fernando, 2016, 402). Structural causes of child marriage such as global economic inequality, historic colonial exploitation, conflicts, and displacement, which are fed by and benefit Western countries, are often

ignored or overshadowed by cultural explanations. The elision of structural causes and more importantly of the pivotal role of the West in perpetuating them also preserves a humanitarian face and feeds into the "feel good" nature of development and humanitarian discourses in which child marriage is inserted, so that Western audiences remain oblivious and satisfied to support benevolent rescuing efforts. Calling attention to the patronising quality of the rhetoric of saving (Third World) women, Abu-Lughod (2002) invites us to imagine using a similar approach to examine disadvantaged groups in the United States such as African-American women or working class women, concluding that "we now understand them as suffering from structural violence. We have become politicized about race and class, but not culture" (Abu-Lughod, 2002, 789).

Conclusion

This chapter examined how child marriage is yet another proof and symbol of Third World's backwardness, and the seeming opposition of Third World culture and liberal human rights is used to "demonstrate" Western superiority. Even though child marriage is referred to as a "global problem", "global" comes to mean that it is practiced in the Third World and fixed by Western knowledge, funding, policies, and practices. Likewise, women and girls are prominent subjects and objects of development discourses and interventions, since their oppression once again proves and symbolises Third World's backwardness and consequently justifies the need for Western rescue and enlightenment. Therefore, racialised and gendered representations of Third World women and girls in websites, reports, fundraising appeals and the media follow a binary of victims and/or heroic agents of change. However, these representations are intertwined and at times mutually constitutive, and,

more importantly, both keep Third World women and girls confined to Western's perceptions and expectations. Such representations also pathologise issues related to women's oppression and marriage at large as if they are applicable to the Third World only, ignoring broader discussions such as the assumption of marriage as place of protection, gendered division of labour, male dominance in the marriage process, among others, that are in fact relevant to the Third World and the West alike.

Approaching child marriage as a (Third World) cultural issue obscures its structural causes, which coupled with the emphasis on heroic representations of women and girls, ultimately places the responsibility of solving Third World problems chiefly on them. Favouring cultural explanations of child marriage instead of critical assessments of structural causes affects not only how the issue is represented, but also how it is addressed by governments, organisations, and audiences. Protecting/empowering Third World women and girls has become central in feminist, human rights, and development agendas, rather than addressing larger geopolitical structures of violence that make such protection/empowerment necessary in the first place (Agathangelou and Turcotte, 2016). Instead, representations of Third World women and girls, either as victims or as sheroes, perpetuate epistemic violence against the Third World and Western privileges by remaking colonised geopolitical sites and regulating the bodies of women in the Global South (Doezema, 2010; Agathangelou and Turcotte, 2016). In fact, the shift towards positive representations also propelled empowering girls as the preferred response to child marriage (and to other Third World issues). The next chapter will further discuss this focus on empowerment and how it places responsibility at the individual level, instead of addressing global inequalities and conflict.

CHAPTER 5 – CAN GIRL BRIDES CHOOSE? AGENCY, RESISTANCE, AND EMPOWERMENT IN CHILD MARRIAGE DISCOURSES

> When you save someone, you imply that you are saving her from something. You are also saving her to something. What violences are entailed in this transformation, and what presumptions are being made about the superiority which you are saving her? (Abu-Lughod, 2002, 788-789).

The discursive construction of Third World women and girls involve both speaking about and speaking for them (Spivak, 1988, cited in Kapoor, 2004). Having analysed speaking about, i.e. the representations of Third World women and girls as victims and sheroes, this chapter focuses on how child marriage discourses speak for Third World women and girls, examining how their agency is conceptualised and promoted through empowerment strategies. As discussed in chapters 1 and 4, in an apparent response to previous victimising framings, the "turn to agency" in feminism and international development celebrated women's capacity to make free and autonomous choices (Gill and Donaghue, 2013; Madhock, 2013; Wilson, 2011). Girls' agency is then "increasingly culturally demanded or even normatively required" (Gill and Donaghue, 2013, 253) as they have "the opportunity (indeed obligation) to 'makeover' their lives, through carefully designed and executed 'choice biographies'" (Koffman, Orgad and Gill, 2015, 160). Conceptualised through neoliberal frameworks, agency is understood as the ability of rational actors to act to maximise self-interest regardless of external constraints (Stoljar, 2015; Madhok, Phillips, and Wilson, 2013). This utilitarian understanding creates a "winners and losers" logic, reinforcing reductionist binaries such as agentic *vs* non-agentic, voice *vs* silence, West *vs*

non-West, and powerful *vs* powerless. Agency in child marriage discourses (and in international development more broadly) is equalised with resistance and materialised by voice, and when agency is exercised outside of resistance (for instance by showing willingness to marry), it is immediately discredited. In fact, although girls' agency is increasingly expected, it "is not always accepted in all domains of behaviour" (Vaitla et al, 2017, 21). Girls can then make choices, as long as it is the "right" choice: to resist and speak out against child marriage.

It has been argued that the focus on agency and individual choices privatises issues, evacuating any notion of coercion and obscuring wider structures of material and discursive power (Gill and Donaghue, 2013; Madhok, Phillips and Wilson, 2013a; Wilson, 2013; Gill, 2007). According to Wilson (2011), "rather than challenging the racialised power relationships inherent in development, this focus on agency has decisively shifted attention away from both material structures of power and gendered ideologies" (Wilson, 2011, 317). I argue though that in child marriage coercion and oppression have been moved to the local and family levels. Families are constructed as sites of confrontation and hindrances, so that girls' agency is manifested through resistance and liberation from their families, communities, and cultures. This approach oversimplifies decision-making processes and pathologises forms of kinship and manifestations of agency that fall outside of the Western model, ignoring broader structures of poverty and violence. The framing of agency as resistance and speaking out also influences how child marriage is addressed. Although structural factors such as poverty, gender inequality, conflict, and displacement play a key role in child marriage, solutions implemented by international organisations are focused on empowering girls, instead of addressing global inequalities that fuel these causes.

As noted earlier, the aim of this thesis is not to analyse whether child marriage is "right" or "wrong" or whether empowering girls is important or efficient, but to explore the concepts and knowledge systems underlying this discourse that ultimately shapes and frames how child marriage is conceptualised, labelled, and addressed.

The chapter begins with a discussion of how child marriage discourses are focused on choice and the contentious relationship between choice, age, and consent, amplifying tensions between ideals of girlhood/childhood innocence and Third World girls as agents of change. This is followed by a deeper analysis of the conceptualisation of agency as resisting families and cultures and speaking out. Agency is materialised through girls' voice, which has been pivotal in child marriage policy and practice, and can be understood as a neo-colonial strategy of surveillance. Postcolonial feminist theory has criticised how the narrow view of agency as heroic resistance fails to capture non-Western agency and proposed broader and nuanced understandings of how agency in the Third World can be exercised in different ways. The final section contends that following the focus on agency, empowerment has been promoted as "the most effective" strategy to address child marriage. A buzzword in international development, empowerment is located in wider neoliberal and Western feminist discourses that repackage rescuing efforts: as representations of Third World women and girls shift from victims to agents of change, they must be empowered to help themselves, instead of simply rescued. Solutions to child marriage remain focused on empowering girls to resist and end child marriage, which might place them under greater burden and risk when they are unable to enact the change they were promised – and indeed expected – to achieve.

Messy Terrains: Choice, Age, and Consent

The conceptualisation of agency in child marriage discourses is deeply linked to concepts of choice, age, sexuality, and consent[42]. The formulation of these concepts from Western-centric and neoliberal frameworks evidence unsolved tensions and, more importantly, the neocolonising and narrow scope afforded to Third World girls' agency. Can Third World girls choose? More importantly so, can they make the *right* choice according to such frameworks? In the "turn to agency" experienced in international development and feminism in the 1980s and 1990s, agency became "increasingly culturally demanded or even normatively required" for women (Gill and Donaghue, 2013, 253). Agency was understood as the capacity to choose and act in one's self interest, so that agency remained intertwined with choice: choice is available to all and taken up through agency (Wilson, 2013; Hemmings and Kabesh, 2013). Likewise, child marriage discourses greatly emphasise choice. Care International frames its global approach to child marriage within a "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment framework", which has three domains: "agency (one's own aspirations, self-efficacy, and capabilities), relations (relationships in one's life that entail power balances), and structures (the legal, cultural, and economic environment that surrounds and conditions one's choices)" (Care International, 2018, 4). Plan International's "Because I am a girl" campaign "seeks to enable girls to have *more choices*

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[42] Liberal understandings of agency privileged individual capacity to choose and act according to one's own preferences and unimpaired by others. This also includes the ability to choose what is done to them, i.e. the capacity to give consent. The concept of consent is particularly relevant to this thesis because, as discussed in the Introduction and in chapter 3, child marriage is often conflated with forced marriage, in the increasingly common terminology "child and forced marriage (CFEM)". Marriage is often referred to as a contract that must be entered with free and full consent. In forced marriages it is considered that consent is not present (for more on arranged and forced marriages, see Gill and Anitha, 2011), and in the case of child marriage it is argued that children are unable to give such consent. However, this chapter will discuss how in child marriage girls' ability to choose and give consent is not straightforward: it is ascribed – and allowed – in certain areas such as sexuality, but not allowed in others like marriage.

in life, to allow them to play an active role in their community and to break intergenerational cycles of poverty, insecurity and ill health" (Davis, Postles, and Rosa, 2013, 9, emphasis added). In her analysis of an Indian organisation working on child marriage, Roy (2017) highlighted its focus on "creating an environment in which women have choices—where marriage, whether entered voluntarily or through coercion, would not be the only option for adolescent girls" (Roy, 2017, 875).

Examining how choice, consent, and ultimately agency, are conceptualised in child marriage indicates the discomfort and contradictions surrounding marriage and girls' sexuality. As detailed in chapter 3, childhood and particularly girlhood are identified with innocence, which precludes their association with marriage and sexuality. In fact, "this is the explanation used to separate young people marrying underage out of choice" (Nirantar Trust, 2015, 11). Although there is little disagreement that young children are not ready to be married or engage in sexual activity, the relationship between adolescent girls and marriage remains under examined and is explained outside of agency and choice[43]. Roy (2017) analysed how the interventions of a local organisation on child marriage in India reinforced liberal ideals of girlhood innocence. On an occasion when an adolescent girl did want to get married, the organisation staff's speech reduced her to "an innocent, asexual, unknowing, immature, and irresponsible child, affirming the normative assumptions of liberal conceptions of the child – *as being bereft of agency in the very moment in which she expressed agency*" (Roy, 2017, 877, emphasis added). When the adolescent girl in question insisted on her decision to get married, the attitude and language used by local staff and

[43] As argued in the previous chapter, despite the use of images and language referring to very young girls to elicit a strong emotional response, organisations acknowledge that most child marriage involves adolescents and older adolescents.

community changed, moving from innocent, passive, asexual, and misguided into treacherous, liar, manipulative, sexual, and ungrateful (Roy, 2017). The child bride was finally afforded "the status of a subject – one who was agential, calculative, rational – and not that of an object" (Roy, 2017, 883).

Third World girls are expected to exercise agency and make choices, as long as they follow prescribed Western models and are "the right choices". If and when Third World girls insist on "wrong choices", they are no longer associated to innocence and need of protection, but rather in need to be controlled. The refusal to acknowledge girls' agency or ability to make certain choices (even though agency and choice are the cornerstone of child marriage discourses) further evidences the representation of Third World girls as "developable others", i.e. fetichised model rational subjects who can be empowered to lift themselves, their communities, and countries from poverty and end culture-driven practices such as child marriage (Tyler and Gill, 2013; Wilson, 2011).

Adolescent girls' willingness to marry has limited acknowledgement and discussion by researchers and practitioners (Vaitla et al, 2017; Greene and Perlson, 2016). "Although some marriages are indeed the result of familial or community pressure, in many other cases girls are not passive actors in the face of strong social norms" (Vaitla et al, 2017, 18). Girl-initiated marriage has been noted as particularly prevalent in Central and South America (Vaitla et al, 2017; Greene and Perlson, 2016; UNICEF, 2005; Forum on Marriage and the Rights of Women and Girls, 2001). A story at the Girls Not Brides' website gives insight into the practice in Mexico, "getting married to Jesus seemed common sense to Itzel. 'I knew him, I liked him and we fell in love.' At the time, Itzel was 14 and her boyfriend 17"

(Girls Not Brides, 2017b). Girls Another story from Zambia further reveals how marriages are also initiated and pursued by girls,

> usually when you hear about child marriage, you hear stories of young girls being pressured by their families to marry early for a bride price, or they marry to escape poverty, or because parents say school is too expensive. I was only 15 when I got married. My parents didn't approve and tried to convince me to stay in school. I went against their wishes, convinced I was doing the right thing. I was young, determined, and had met a 27 year old man with a good job who seemed to hold the key to a better life. A life where I would feel wanted, and be well looked after, and escape the daily financial struggles at home (Girls Not Brides, 2016f).

However, agency manifested through willingness to get married is often dismissed as such, as it is outside of the prevailing understanding of how agency should be exercised. Indeed, the Zambia story above is titled "Marrying at 15: 'I was convinced I was doing the right thing'" on Girls Not Brides website and it emphasises how several years later the girls in question regretted her decision. In her research in India, Roy (2017), found that "it should come as no surprise, then, that when encountering the expression of desire to get married on the part of an adolescent girl, NGO personnel were skeptical" (Roy, 2017, 876). In order to make sense of girls' agency manifested as willingness to marry, this is often interpreted as evidence of coercion: if she said she wanted to get married, it must be by force and against her will. In that way, girls are still rescuable and fit narratives of innocence and the "developable other". This has been observed in analyses related to other topics such as intimate partner violence or female genital cutting, where women's "controversial" expressions of agency (such as not to leave a violent relationship or choose to undergo

cutting) are explained through claims of internalised oppression or false consciousness (see Bourdieu, 2001; Cudd, 2006; Nussbaum, 2001; Scott, 1990, among others).

Explaining women's choices without considering the nuanced and complex character of decision-making processes and the role of external constrains presume they have a "true" self with "true" interests that exist prior to or outside of power relations. Taking Third World women and girls as a unified powerless category prior to and outside of the analysis, it is assumed that "men and women are already constituted as sexual-political subjects prior to their entry into the arena of social relations. […] The crucial point that is forgotten is that women are produced through these very relations as well as being implicated in forming these relations" (Mohanty, 2003, 25). In addition, such explanations pre-conceive the value or goal of agency to be freedom and self-determination only, so that acts that ultimately reinforce oppression or go against values such as human rights are considered inherently non agential (Widdows, 2013; Superson, 2010). Although being presented as such, Western ideals of freedom and liberal human rights are far from neutral, universal, or ahistorical (Mohanty, 2003). This narrow view of agency reinforces the "all or nothing" approach to agency and antithetical representations of women as either fully agential or fully oppressed (Madhok, Phillips and Wilson, 2013; Gill, 2007), ultimately reducing Third World women to "patriarchy dupes" (Narayan, 2002). According to Madhok, oppression and agency do not take place in ahistorical, universalist, and acontextual frames, but "do so in specific contexts, in languages and relations that are laden with histories and through agency that is embedded within power relations" (Madhok, 2013b, 16-17).

Child marriage in the context of humanitarian crises, especially during conflict and displacement, enables further reflection on the imbrications of agency and choice in child marriage discourses. Child marriage is constructed within a framework of choice, oscillating between a deliberate choice and the total lack of it. It is interesting though that whilst in “stable” situations child marriage is presented as a “cultural” choice made by men at the expense of women and girls, in humanitarian contexts it is the referred to as the *only choice* possible for dispossessed and disempowered families. For instance, the documents analysed claimed that “early marriage is often deployed as a response to crisis, considered by families and communities to be the best possible means of protecting children” (World Vision 2013, 17); “parents actively encourage (and, in some cases, coerce) their girls to marry at a very young age, believing this to offer them the best protection.” (World Vision 2013, 11); “some families consider child marriage to be the best way to protect their female children and ease pressures on the family resources” (Save The Children 2014, 1); “families often view child marriage as the best or only option for girls” (Girls Not Brides and International Center for Research on Women 2016, 1); and “families often resort to child marriage as a way to protect the most vulnerable members of communities from threats—real or perceived” (Tzemach Lemmon 2014, 5). The lack of choice faced by families is also emphasized, such as “their [forced migrants’] personal, educational, and livelihood decisions were now framed in terms of survival” (Women’s Refugee Commission 2016, 17).

Girls’ choices and agency surrounding marriage are intimately related to discussions about minimum legal age and sexuality. Arguing alignment with human rights instruments, especially the Convention on the Rights of the Child, international and non-governmental organisations working on child marriage advocate for 18 as the minimum age for marriage

without exceptions (Girls Not Brides, 2017a). For instance, a document published by Save the Children, the World Bank, the Children's Investment Fund Foundation, and the Global Partnership for Education claims that

> the threshold to define a child and thereby child marriage internationally is 18 years of age. This threshold is used in multiple conventions, treaties, and international agreements, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The threshold makes sense for several reasons. First, research suggests that boys and girls younger than 18 are often too young for sexual, marital, and reproductive transitions. Marrying before 18 can also have large negative impacts on a wide range of other outcomes for girls and their children (Wodon et al, 2017, 2).

The legalist and protectionist approach is one of the patterns I identified in child marriage discourses (and further discussed in chapter 3). The fallacy of a universal age of majority at 18 years old ignores other definitions and lived experiences of childhood and adulthood outside of the West. Using the example of the history of child marriage in India, the Nirantar Trust (2015) criticised the focus on age in child marriage discourses, since the

> "appropriate" age is a random number that has changed dramatically over the years, as have the reasons for changing it. […] Government institutions, and the culture at large, are strongly inclined to enforce this rule, even though we recognize that it is arbitrary; few of us can convincingly explain what would change if a girl was married at 17 and a half instead of at 18. This silence indicates the arbitrariness

> of numerical age as the primary indicator of when marriage is acceptable (Nirantar Trust, 2015, 20).

The establishment of a minimum age for marriage is arbitrary and subjective and contrasts conceptions that the West is governed by well-established legal definitions and the rule of the law, whereas the non-West is governed by "cultural" delimitations of childhood and girlhood. For instance, a Plan International report on child marriage in Mali, Niger, and Senegal claims that rather than chronological age, the transition between childhood and adulthood in local communities is marked by bodily changes and progressive acquisition of responsibilities, so that readiness for marriage is related to physical maturity for girls and ability to provide for boys (Morgan, 2017).

Further complicating debates around age and agency, organisations often allude to the concept of "evolving capacities"[44], introduced by the Convention on the Rights of the Child and defined as an approach that recognises varying degrees of maturity and balances respect for children's agency with protection from premature exposure to adulthood responsibilities (Girls Not Brides, 2019a; Sexual Rights Initiative, 2013; Lansdown, 2005). The Committee on the Rights of the Child has recommended that minimum age for marriage, sexual consent, and medical consent should "closely reflect recognition of the status of human beings under the ages of 18 as rights holders in accordance with their evolving capacity, age and maturity" (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003). Additionally, the Committee on the

[44] Hamilton (2012) puts forward the concept of "marital capacity" as an alternative to the current legal concept of consent in the United States. "This new conception recognizes adolescents' and emerging adults' cognitive abilities to understand and voluntarily consent to marriage, but also accounts for their psychosocial immaturity and incomplete acquisition of other abilities required to sustain modern marriage" (Hamilton, 2012, 1818).

Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Committee on the Rights of the Child issued a joint recommendation stating that

> as a matter of respecting the child's evolving capacities and autonomy in making decisions that affect her or his life, in exceptional circumstances a marriage of a mature, capable child below the age of 18 may be allowed provided that the child is at least 16 years old and that such decisions are made by a judge based on legitimate exceptional grounds defined by law and on the evidence of maturity without deference to cultures and traditions (CEDAW, 2014, 7).

It has been argued that "evolving capacities" could be invoked to allow a mature and capable person under the minimum age to marry, "provided that the choice is made willingly and free of coercion", although it still remains unclear who should have the power to assess maturity and make a decision, leading to "concerns that such decisions might be made with more deference to cultures and traditions than to evidence of maturity on a case-by-case basis" (Sexual Rights Initiative, 2013, 3). Once again, the non-West is constructed as ruled by culture, with the corresponding construction of the West as a place with clear legal definitions that are taken as if neutral or ahistorical.

Despite attempts to set up guidelines on evolving capacities, they remain subjective and contentious. Although arguing that "setting the minimum age of marriage at 18 is an objective standard of maturity that prevents discrimination" (Girls Not Brides, 2017a, 1), Girls Not Brides later on claimed that "there is no single age at which maturity or agency occurs. The capacity to take responsibility for decisions affecting one's life can happen at different ages for children and adolescents with diverse life experiences" (Girls Not Brides, 2019a, 2). Indeed, and as mentioned above, age has been criticised as an "objective"

standard, further evidenced by the widespread practice of falsifying documents on age for marriage licenses and the fact that underage marriages and unions can often remain legally unregistered, purposefully to circumvent laws or as part of local understandings of maturity, marriage, adulthood, and cohabitation (Nirantar Trust, 2015, 20).

The relationship between age and choice within the context of marriage and sexuality remains highly contentious. According to Girls Not Brides (2019a),

> while there is increasing consensus globally that girls should not be forced into marriage as children, there is far less agreement about when young people should be allowed to have sex and at what age they are able to make an informed choice about whether to engage in a consensual sexual relationship (Girls Not Brides, 2019a, 1).

The discussion of girlhood and sexuality, and in particular, girls' agency regarding sex and sexuality, is seen with discomfort by many organisations operating in the discursive site of child marriage (Girls Not Brides, 2019a). This reflects and extrapolates long-held feelings of fear and need to control female sexuality, especially that of young girls (Orchard, 2019; Bernstein, 2010). A similar process has been observed in anti-trafficking discourses, as Western constructions of childhood innocence preclude any discussion of sexual agency among girls and young women (O'Connell Davidson, 2005; in Orchard, 2019). International organisations working on child marriage have argued both in favour and against streamlining minimum age for marriage and sexual consent. As mentioned above, several organisations advocate for 18 as a minimum age for marriage and sexual consent, while others argue that since the impacts of marriage and sex are different (with marriage creating a potential life-long contract and legal responsibilities), minimum ages do not need to be

aligned (Petroni, Das, and Sawyer, 2018). However, the separation between marriage and sexuality is not necessarily clear cut and sexual activity – especially when it leads to pregnancy – is often closely related to child marriage. Indeed, social norms that stigmatise girls' sexuality and pregnancy outside of marriage incentivise decisions to enter marriage (Taylor et al, 2019; Girls Not Brides, 2019a; Petroni, Das, and Sawyer, 2018; Vaitla et al, 2017). This is the case both for parental pressure to marry girls in case of premarital sex or pregnancy, but also for girls who choose to marry, as "in many societies, adolescents may feel the only way they can have sex – and access sexual and reproductive health information and services – is by being married" (Girls Not Brides, 2019a, 2).

The contentious and often contradictory debate around girls' sexuality and agency is also seen in discussions on sexual freedom. Girls Not Brides (2019a) raised that at least half of all adolescents around the world report having had sex before 18, calling for the recognition that adolescents do have sex, so that instead of punitive consequences that criminalise a biologically normal behaviour, policies and interventions should provide them with information and tools to choose when and with whom to have sex. It has been argued that laws on sexual consent that conflate ages of marriage and of sexual consent are often used to limit adolescent girls' and women's sexual agency, denying them "the right to make decisions about whether, when, and with whom to have sex" (Girls Not Brides, 2019a, 2). Petroni, Das, and Sawyer (2018) and Girls Not Brides (2019a) argue that progress towards raising the legal age for marriage to 18 is welcomed, but the rights of adolescents to express their sexuality must be protected. In this sense, restricting marriage of adolescent girls is presented as positive, and restricting sexuality as negative, i.e. establishing a clear minimum age for marriage *protects* girls, whereas a minimum age for sex *constrains* agency.

Therefore, Third World girls cannot choose marriage, but they can choose to have sex, as long as it does not lead to marriage. This further reflects the juxtaposition of West *vs* non-West that places Western values and ways of living as superior. Postcolonial feminist theory is critical of the promotion of free and liberated sexuality as a value presumably shared by all Western women (Bulbeck, 1998), which serves to reinforce the opposition between the liberated Western woman in full control of her sexuality and the oppressed and sexually constrained Third World woman (Mohanty, 2003).

At the same time that adolescent sexuality should not be restricted, it is raised that girls should be protected from sexual abuse, coercion, and exploitation, regardless if it happens within or outside marriage, and "nonconsensual sex at any age should be criminalised" (Girls Not Brides, 2019a, 2). As mentioned above, some organisations working on child marriage are adamant that although the minimum age for marriage should be set at 18, sexual activity should not necessarily be restricted by age, but rather by consent. Consent emerges thus as seemingly more important than age, as "a blind emphasis on age becomes a distraction from the real problems of choice and consent" (Nirantar Trust, 2015, 18). However, the concepts of consent, choice, and agency themselves, especially when conceptualised within Western frameworks, are themselves problematic. Centring debates on consent has been criticised for being repressive and non-emancipatory for women (Halley, 2016, in Roy, 2017) and Doezema (2010) highlights the limitations of focusing trafficking discourses on women's consent to distinguish between "voluntary" and "forced". This has limitations, including the uselessness of choice for political analysis (since nobody has a life of free choices without external constraints), the difficulties in measuring choice,

and how using choice as the standard implicitly legitimises the choices of Western women (Doezema, 2010).

The tensions described in this section were present during a public webinar on child marriage in October 2020, a researcher presented findings of a study in Niger, where 82% of women who had been in child or early marriages expressed that they had a voice in marital decisions, be it alone or alongside their families. In the chat box of the webinar, a gender expert from one of the main international development donor agencies remarked that it was crucial to note that minors under 18 can't legally give consent, so even those who "chose" (quotations used in the original comment) their partners did not really choose. This reinforced the legalist/protectionist approach on age discussed below, but also reaffirms the West as the one who decides what counts as choice and when/if girls can choose. Another expert, who worked in one of the major international NGOs examined in this thesis claimed that "having a say" does not necessarily means "having a choice", which further complicates the relationship between choice and voice that will be described in the next section.

As seen, women's and girls' consent is frequently discredited as illegal or immoral, and in the case of child marriage, the subject "girl child" in itself delegitimises consent, as it is stressed that the consent of girls under 18 is irrelevant as the marriage in itself is (or should be) illegal. In addition, as girls' agency is precluded regarding marriage but celebrated regarding sexuality (even when the lines between marriage and sex are not always clear), the question of at what age adolescents become able to consent to sex remains unanswered. Consent, choice, and agency are thus always and already "messy terrains", as women's choice or consent to marry is often not accepted as a straightforward expression of their

agency (Roy, 2017, 876). In this sense, although consent is often equalised with choice and child marriage discourses revolve around choice, it is not settled whether, when, and how Third World girls are allowed to choose, and more importantly, what is the "right" choice. In fact, the main question is not whether Third World girls are allowed to choose, but which choices are considered an expression of agency, according to predefined frameworks. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory, the next section examines how prevailing conceptualisations of agency reflect Western and neoliberal values, which either prematurely denies Third World women and girls of agency or only "sees" it in heroic acts of resistance. Child marriage discourses locate oppression at the family level, creating oppositions between families and girls, who must in turn resist their families, communities, and cultures in order to be the agents of change that end the practice. This opposition will be examined to criticise the narrow conceptualisation of agency as resistance and speaking out.

Agency as Heroic Resistance and Speaking Out

I contend that in the case of child marriage, coercion and oppression have been moved to the local and family levels. This contrasts with claims that the "turn to agency" in feminism and international development has led to a corresponding evacuation of any notion of influence, coercion, and oppression (Gill and Donaghue, 2013; Madhok, Phillips and Wilson, 2013a; Wilson, 2013). Child marriage discourses construct families as sites of confrontation and conflict so that girls' agency is manifested through resistance and liberation from their families, communities, and cultures. Coercion and oppression are thus placed at the local and family levels, obscuring global structures of material and discursive

power and placing blame on families and kinship. A similar process has been observed in other topics involving Third World women and girls. Initiatives embedded in the "girling of development", such as the Girl Effect, have shifted "attention away from global structural violence as it casts blame for underdevelopment on local forms of personhood and kinship, which judges from the standpoint of Western ontology" (Hickel, 2014, 1356). Analysing a video of the Girl Effect campaign, Wilson (2011) called attention to the visual representation of a chain of events linking Third World girls to baby-husband-hunger-HIV that locates the causes of suffering "firmly and solely at the level of the local, the cultural (ie early marriage) and the individual, and in particular in the person (or concept) of the oppressive HUSBAND" (Wilson, 2011, 325, capitalised in the original)[45]. Families and communities are then conceived mostly as hindrances that must be overcome and women and girls placed "as threatened objects – threatened by their 'communities', 'families' and practices of 'dowry'" (Khoja-Moolji, 2016, 748).

Similarly, child marriage discourses and interventions frequently present families as deliberately trying to exert a negative effect on girls' lives, without framing it within wider economic factors. Although it mentions structural socio-economic marginalisation as the main cause of child marriage, when discussing family relationships, a Care International report claims that

> parents' aspirations often do not align with their daughters'. For girls, the expression of their dreams – of working in various professions and earning an income – was invariably followed up by descriptions of their parents' wishes,

[45] This is closely related to how constructing Third World women as victims is parallel to constructing Third World men as inherently violent (Fernando, 2016; Abu-Lughod 2002), as discussed in chapter 4.

> which circumscribe their own aspirations; most of these descriptions entailed stopping their daughters' schooling and arranging their marriages (Care International, 2016, 4).

Reporting on its research on child marriage in Bangladesh and Nepal, Care International claimed that "the voices and decision-making power of the girls themselves are minimized, against the authority of fathers and brothers" (Care International 2015, Vows of Poverty, 32). Stories in the Girls Not Brides website often emphasise the opposition between girls and their families, for instance, "by marrying off their daughters in exchange for a bride price, some families see girls as a source of income. That's why some parents drag their young daughters into marriage against their will" (Nabimanya, 2013); and "Yalda was lucky enough to have a family who supported her so she could continue her education. Many girls of Yalda's age are not as fortunate" (Girls Not Brides, 2016b). A reports on media and child marriage highlighted that "media coverage takes a crime-and-punishment approach, casting parents as criminals, even though families who marry off their children at a young age are not necessarily evil villains" (Greene and Perlson, 2016, 6).

My argument then is that the portrayal of families as villains reduces child marriage to a (Third World) cultural practice and privatises the issue as "choices" disconnected from socio-economic contexts. As Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini (2016) claim, individualised explanations or exemplifications of social problems are assumed to be enough. This understanding of families as sites of conflict (with clear opposition of "bad" Third World men and "victimised" Third World women) oversimplifies decision-making processes involved in child marriage and limits how agency is conceptualised. Khoja-Moolji (2016) found that moving away from generalised and abstract constructions of "families" and

"communities", relationships were complex and actions were more collaborative than combative, illustrating this point with a girl who explained her efforts to obtain education as a desire to support her family and younger siblings, revealing a motivation outside of neoliberal individualistic advancement. Although of course both goals are not mutually exclusive, development interventions often present education as means for girls to achieve individual gains only, ignoring them as relational agents. If in the neoliberal framing of agency atomised individuals act rationally to maximise self-interest (Wilson, 2013), there is little room for the idea that an individual can act towards non-individualist outcomes – or outcomes that benefit others in addition or before the person herself. This view contrasts with the concept of relational autonomy, according to which "persons are socially embedded and that agents' identities are formed within the context of social relationships and shaped by a complex of intersecting social determinants, such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity" (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000, 4).

Understanding individuals as relational and with interests that are formed within social relations opens the possibility of constructing families not only as hindrances, but also as sites of belonging and support (Khoja-Moolji, 2016). Vaitla *et al* (2017) argued that parents are the most influential individuals in girls' social network and

> usually motivated by a genuine desire to act in the best interests of the child. Parents and other family members interviewed in this study strongly asserted their wish to be involved in the marriage decision-making process, not only to retain control but also because they believed that doing so would allow them to help resolve potential problems that might arise later in the union. Overall, our study

found that girls experience better life outcomes when parents are involved in decision-making around marriage (Vaitla et al, 2017, 20).

Photojournalist Stephanie Sinclair, founder of the photographic campaign "Too Young to Wed", stated "I have found that most families know in their hearts that this is not good for their children. But there are many outside pressures that contribute to their decision to marry off their children, such as poverty, wanting to create family alliances, and in some cases a need to settle debts" (Dukehart, 2011). The drivers of child marriage are complex and layered, so that parent's motivations are influenced by multiple and competing pressures. Rather than a perfect utilitarian model where rational and atomised actors can isolate variables and make perfect decisions, child marriage decision-making often happens in contexts of poverty, conflict, and displacement, with families weighting down short and long term trade-offs as much as feasible and inevitably achieving imperfect outcomes.

Therefore, within contexts of multiple economic and safety pressures, parents are usually acting in what they believe to be their children's best interest and do not intend to cause them harm. A few organisations acknowledge this: "many parents genuinely believe that marriage will secure a daughter's future and that it is in her best interests to marry early" (Care International 2015a, 7). Parents desperate due to hunger and extreme poverty marry off their daughters in the hopes of protecting them (World Vision, 2013). The materials consulted provided examples of that, including "many parents in Bangladesh view child marriage as a way out of poverty and insecurity" (Girls Not Brides, 2017g) or "in some places external forces, such as climate change, feed a family's poverty and fuel the urgency parents feel to protect their daughters and sons. […] families would marry off a daughter in order to feed and save the other children" (Care International 2015a, 7). In situations of

conflict and forced displacement, families perceive child marriage as a protective measure against other dangers such as sexual violence and trafficking (Women's Refugee Commission, 2016; Care International, 2015b, Davis and Taylor, 2013; Schlecht, Rowley and Babirye, 2013; World Vision, 2013). A Care International report states that "the economic issues which refugees have faced in Turkey have resulted in families who wouldn't usually have considered child marriage (or child marriage of younger girl children) using it as a way to reduce household expenditure, and the perceived average age of girls who marry has lowered" (Care International, 2015b, 7). Girls Not Brides also claim that "in conflict or displacement, some parents believe that marriage will protect their daughters from physical or sexual assault, or that marriage will ensure girls' economic security and lessen the family's expenses" (Girls Not Brides, 2014d). Certainly, precarious and unsafe living conditions can force families to adopt negative coping strategies, such as child marriage. For instance, the "bail-out" system has contributed to the rise of child marriage among Syrian refugees in Jordan. This system is based on a policy by the Jordanian government whereby Syrians could legally leave refugee camps and move to host communities only when sponsored by a Jordanian citizen. Living conditions in refugee camps have driven families into child marriage, so they are able to leave camps and settle in Jordanian cities and communities (Save the Children, 2014; UNICEF, 2013).

Likewise, girls may also take what they perceive as their families' best interest as a main factor in their decisions, especially in hopes of leaving poverty behind (Care International 2015a) and improving their families' economic situation. For instance, a 13-year-old Syrian refugee stated that "when he [groom] was on a visit to Jordan, he proposed. I thought about it. I liked him and I thought it was easier for my family in financial terms if I got married."

(Care International, 2015b, 9). Stories from the Girls Not Brides website also show that girls might indeed be part of marriage decision-making process in light of multiple pressures, such as "I did not want to marry but I agreed because of poverty at home" (Girls Not Brides, 2014e) and "I thought that getting married would be a way to get away. It was the only choice I had left" (Girls Not Brides, 2018f).

As previously mentioned, in child marriage discourses oppression and coercion were moved into the local and family level. Although it is often assumed that the local is more accessible to agents, it is not an uncomplicate space, since "the intimacy of spaces makes for intimate violence" (Madhok and Rai, 2012, 663). Madhok and Rai (2012) consider the role of risk in theorising agency and, claiming that risk is diverse, including physical, reputational, and operational risks at the individual, collective, and institutional levels. I contend that in the case of child marriage, there is a broader set of risks to consider. There are obviously physical risks attached to girls' resistance, but also physical risks to the whole family related to extreme poverty or conflict, as exemplified above. There are reputational risks due to pressures from communities and local cultures. Indeed, a report by World Vision states that "reluctance to go against traditional practice can be considered stronger in contexts of fragility […] Families living in unstable societies often choose to minimise risk by adhering to social norms and behavioural codes laid down at community level" (World Vision, 2013, 17). This is important because "multiple and drawn-out shocks have a cumulative effect on people, eroding their capacity to cope. The absence of social protection and the breakdown of informal protection and welfare networks in fragile states make children, their families and communities less secure, less resilient to adverse events and more vulnerable" (World Vision, 2013, 11).

The complexity of child marriage decisions and how choices are not clear cut and cultural norms and economic hardship are intertwined is further evidenced in other documents examined. A story by Plan International published in Girls Not Brides "Girls Voices" webpage shares that

> Meena and her friends from the children's forum had already put a stop to three child marriages in their community by speaking up, but now it was time for Meena to fight her own fate by calling in the local Child Protection Group (CPG). […] CDF and CPG members spoke with Meena's mother and brother, promising that Meena would receive vocational training and a job placement so she could start earning money. With that, the marriage was off (Chowdhury, 2013).

As it will be discussed later in this chapter, the language used emphasises girls as the ones stopping child marriage. The story also opens the reflection on what in fact stopped the marriage: the information provided by the international NGO or the offer of a financial alternative for the family? Another story shows the importance of addressing economic factors, stating that

> three years into secondary school, with no friends but my Dad, bearing long walks to school and back, hardship, hunger, and no money, I almost gave up. But Girl Child Concerns helped me. They helped pay for my school fees and books and gave me life skills training too (Girls Not Brides, 2013d).

Nonetheless, child marriage discourses often emphasise the Third World backwardness, failing to fully consider the nuances in child marriage decisions and the key role of economic factors. Certainly, a story by Plan International published on the Girls Not Brides website focuses on a "archaic and unjust custom", even though the parents portrayed had agreed to

marry their daughter because they were "financially disadvantaged and have always struggled to make ends meet for themselves and their thirteen children" (Khan, 2015).

Hence, child marriage cannot be understood through simplistic explanations that hinge on choice and binaries of consent/coercion. Decision-making on child marriage is complex and although coercion is oftentimes present, broader social, economic, and emotional factors are also relevant. Family relationships and dynamics are nuanced and cannot be captured by simplistic oppositions of parents *vs* girls, which reflect the historic construction of Third World women as an object threatened by Third World men and cultures. Third World women are consistently defined as victims of male control, and

> although it is true that the potential of male violence against women circumscribes and elucidates their social position to a certain extent, defining women as archetypal victims freezes them into ''objects-who-defend-themselves,'' men into ''subjects-who-perpetrate-violence,'' and (every) society into powerless (read: women) and powerful (read: men) groups of people (Mohanty, 2003, 24).

Certainly, dominant messages by international organisations and NGOs perpetuate the implicit binary of "good" women *vs* "bad" men, assuming Third World cultures to be inherently oppressive and always and already in conflict with individual rights (Dogra, 2011). However, Third World women are constantly negotiating between their practical and strategic interests, and this negotiation is not related to a lack of awareness or ignorance, but to the complexity and interconnection of different needs in everyday life (Dogra, 2011). Similarly, Kandiyoti (1988) argued that women frequently "bargain with the patriarchy" through constant and subtle negotiations between short- and long-term needs, being crucial to analyse women's strategies and coping mechanisms in context.

The oversimplification of child marriage decision-making processes and the construction of families as sites of conflict relate to the representation of Third World girls as heroic agents of change, discussed in the previous chapter. In this sense, girls' agency in child marriage discourses is understood as liberation and resistance. Being at the same time powerless but imbued of extraordinary potential, in order to gain the benefits promised by neoliberalism and be fully free and autonomous choosing agents, girls need to make "right" choices and exercise their agency through resistance (Koffman, Orgad and Gill, 2015; Pande, 2015; Hickel, 2014; Madhok, 2013a; Mahmood, 2005). "Agency, in this form of analysis, is understood as the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)" (Mahmood, 2005, 8). Malhotra et al (2011) highlighted how initiatives on child marriage often focus on a few "pioneers" or "positive deviants" who are ready to break with the status quo and lead change. The few special girls who assume such roles are promoted as "success stories" and branded as a model that resistance is indeed possible. This approach "hopes to inspire positive decision-making based purely on the fact that somebody else is doing so, without accounting for any of the structural reasons why families may be compelled to make certain decisions" (Nirantar Trust, 2015, 54).

The role of girls as agents of change is emphasised in child marriage, particularly through resistance against their families, communities, and cultures. When presenting the roles of different stakeholders to end child marriage, Girls Not Brides (2016, 39) claims girls should "speak up and act to challenge child marriage and mobilise peers and the wider community". Plan International (2013) states that a successful program to prevent child marriage starts

with girls receiving awareness from an NGO, then declining marriages that are arranged, and convincing other family members to postpone marriage. This is also clear in the success stories presented, for instance "even I stopped talking to my father. I forced him to agree with my view" (Warner, Stoebenau and Glinski, 2014, 20). Several stories from Girls Not Brides website follow a similar narrative, for instance,

> "it took a lot of encouragement but eventually Roshanara managed to persuade her mother to call off the wedding" (Girls Not Brides, 2017c)
>
> "I ran away from my family and went to a local town where I asked for shelter at a hostel" (Girls Not Brides, 2017d)
>
> "with the help of Vikalp Sansthan and members of the community we stood up to our family. We told them that we refused to get married and explained why it would a bad thing for everyone in the family. It took a long time and a lot of beatings from my father to finally convince them, but I was able to avoid marriage" Girls Not Brides, 2015a)
>
> "she told them that she didn't want to marry yet and that she wanted to go to school. Narmada's family said that if she did not marry, they would break off all contact with her" (Girls Not Brides, 2013c); "when I first protested my father become very angry and slapped me. But I did not stop protesting and told my parents that I am not ready for marriage" (Chowdhary, 2012)
>
> "I stood my ground, refused to marry" (Jeng, 2015)
>
> "when Sonita was 16, her parents tried to marry her off. They thought that marriage would provide stability and support for her. They also thought it would lessen the financial strain they were under. Sonita boldly refused to be married and used rap music to express her thoughts" (Girls Not Brides, 2017e).

From a few of these examples, it is also important to notice that agency taken solely as resistance and focus on girls individually speaking out and acting against child marriage place the burden on girls and may instead place them in greater risk. As mentioned, Madhok and Rai (2012) introduced the concept of risk to the analysis of agency and transgression, arguing that "individuals and groups challenge dominant social relations not as they please but within specific social contexts that are under-pinned by power relations and are therefore open not only to new possibilities but also to the risk of harm" (Madhok and Rai, 2012, 649). In fact, "agency-in-development" theorising neglects structural and temporal risks attached to performing transgressive acts (Madhok and Rai, 2012). In that sense, confronting their families might not be a strategy that girls want to pursue due to the complex emotional attachments and loyalties involved in family relationships. It may also be counter-productive and make families more reluctant to engage with programs on child marriage. Resistance may also not be a course of action girls are able to pursue, as "in many situations—particularly conflict and postconflict zones, as well as societies characterized by deeply masculinist practices, widespread criminal activities, and gender violence—the choice to publicly challenge the powerful is often extremely dangerous and even foolhardy" (Parpart, 2010, 2).

Indeed, girls asserting themselves against their families are often stigmatised (Care International, 2016). Gage (2009) found that many girls who stopped marriages felt depressed, lonely, and worried about their future marriage prospects. In their analysis of girls' agency in child marriage in Latin America, Taylor et al (2019) defined agency as the capacity to act mediated by history, place, structures of dominance, and social norms, in a

dynamic framework that overlaps material, institutional, individual, and social factors. Structural factors interact with individual ones and individual agency is fundamentally shaped by institutional, social, and material domains (Taylor et al, 2019). Hence, theorising agency involves "nuanced considerations of underlying 'desires, motivations, commitments, and aspirations to whom the practice is important', in this case of children and adolescents who navigate life-shaping decisions amidst complex material and structural realities" (Taylor et al, 2019, S50). Drawing on Murphy-Graham and Leal (2015) they found that in Latin America girls often exercised agency in ways that contributed to their marriages, categorising this agency as oppositional (girls seeking marriage to escape restrictive norms that constrain their actions, relationships, and sexuality), accommodating (girls entering marriage to find protection from transactional sex or abuse in the household and to secure economic stability), and transformative (girls challenging the system of norms that sustained child marriage) (Taylor et al, 2019). Although in this understanding girls' agency is not immediately equalised and associated with refusing to marry, it is still largely focused on resistance of gender social norms within marriage.

Postcolonial and postcolonial feminist scholars have criticised the conceptualisation of non-Western agency as resistance only and called for thinking about agency in much more complex ways. Understanding agency as individualistic action by rational and atomised actors assumes the West to be fully agentic, and reinforces reductionist binaries such as resistance *vs* silence, powerful *vs* powerless (Hobson and Sajed, 2017; Madhok, Phillips and Wilson, 2013). Non-Western actors are often deprived of agency, or when agency is assigned, it is stripped of complexity, as heroic agency creates a winner/loser binary, is caricaturist, and sets an impossibly high standard (Hobson and Sajed, 2017). This hinders

seeing non-Western agency[46] in any meaningful and consequential way, as “non-Western agency often, though certainly not always, works within the structural confines of Western power” (Hobson and Sajed, 2017, 549). They suggest then a non-liberal and relational conceptualisation of agency that captures the “layered interactions between individuals/communities/societies and structures of domination and oppression (whether Western or non-Western)” (Hobson and Sajed, 2017, 549).

Non-Western agency frequently takes place on individual and everyday actions, navigating oppressive structures, coping, and surviving, which are dismissed as silence and inaction and not captured by heroic and romantic notions of defiance and resistance (Hobson and Sajed, 2017). Madhok (2020; 2013b) has criticised what she called “action bias” in common feminist and mainstream accounts of agency that equate agency to the ability to act freely. There is a high expectation that individuals demonstrate a direct correspondence between their preferences and actions, which is not easily applicable considering that most lives are constrained in some way, and particularly under multiple forms of oppression (Madhok, 2013b). Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) has emphasised the tendency to romanticise resistance, “to read all forms of resistance as signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated” (Lila Abu-Lughod, 1990, 42). Mahmood (2005) also criticises this inherent antagonistic framework of agency that focuses on change, since presuming that agency happens only when norms are subverted reproduces and reinforces the submission/resistance binary. Mahmood (2005) offers then a broader view of how women not only resist norms and social relations, but also

[46] The term “non-Western agency” is used by Hobson and Sajed (2007) as part of the binary construction that privilege “Eurofetishism” and opposes West and non-West. “Non-West” is thus akin to “Third Word”, which is the preferred term in this thesis. Hence non-Western agency refers to the conceptualisations of agency of Third World subjects, particularly women and girls, as separated from that of Western subjects.

perform, inhabit, and experience them. “Albeit under structurally confined conditions” (Hobson and Sajed, 2017, 552), non-Western agency can take multiple forms that are often neither in overt collective defiance nor in complete compliance, but in the vast territory between (Scott, 1990). Indeed, “for several commentators on the governance of marriage, women’s experiences tend to occupy a gray area between power and powerlessness (Anitha and Gill 2009; Gangoli and Chantler 2009)” (Roy, 2017, 878).

Drawing on this rich body of postcolonial and postcolonial feminist critiques, I argue that the way agency is presented and conceptualised in child marriage discourses evidences and reinforces the neocolonial speaking *about* and speaking *for* Third Word women and girls. Girl power, agency, and empowerment have become ubiquitous and a necessity: Western women are exhorted to be assertive, decisive, to break glass ceilings, to have it all, to be the masters of their own destiny. Being agential and empowered have increasingly become a symbol of womanhood in the West and non-West, as Third World women are always measured against the imagined ideal Western woman. As pointed out by Madhok (2013b) and Doezema (2010), this illusionary character of agency ignores that nobody – in the West or in the Third World – lives a life of free choices and ample space for agency. More importantly, when understandings of agency are produced in the context of practices immediately taken as “Third World problems”, Third World women are fighting a losing battle: on one hand, any “choice” that seemingly reinforces oppression by their men and culture is proof of lack of agency; on the other hand, only overtly manifestations of resistance are considered agency. Although at first glance perceiving Third World women and girls as non-victims and full of potential seems liberating and respectful, in fact it places the burden to achieve changes that are beyond individual scope on them. I argue that the

turn to agency and the turn to empowerment (as it will be discussed later on this chapter) have in fact reinstated the colonial gaze in a manner that subtly releases the West of charges of patronising and imperialist, whilst also releasing it of any responsibility related to the political, economic, and symbolic power relations that animate Third World problems in the first place.

As mentioned, current approaches centring agency on choice and resistance have produced analyses that either focus on how oppression restrict agency or search for instances of resistance and liberation. Conceptualisations of agency within frameworks of choice and resistance locate oppression on local and family levels, oversimplifying decision-making processes on complex issues that respond to multiple and intertwined factors. Families, and especially men, are presented as a central figure that solely holds power and forces women and girls to marry for their own individual gain, although child marriage is rarely a zero-sum game, especially in situations of extreme poverty, conflict, and forced displacement. This leads to an all-or-nothing understanding of agency where Third World women and girls are either powerless or only perceived as agentic when resisting. Mobilising critiques of agency taken as "capacity to act" or manifested through as grand and romanticised gestures (Madhok, 2020; Madhok, 2013b; Mahmood 2005, Abu-Lughod, 1990), I claim that agency can be understood instead in a more complex that considers the nuanced and socially constructed interests, motivations, and loyalties involved in everyday decision-making, as well as the values and goals that are relevant in specific contexts and that may not necessarily coincide with Western values of emancipatory freedom and self-interest. In this sense, understanding subjects as constituted within power relations enables a broader view of agency as relational beyond confrontational. Hence, social norms can be seen as "the

necessary ground through which the subject is realized and comes to enact her agency" (Mahmood, 2005, 19). Dissociating agency from resistance also uncouples it from a necessary desire for rupture, which provides an alternative approach to perceiving Third World women and girls beyond the victim-shero binary. It also provides a framework to understand decisions related to complex phenomena such as child marriage, especially for families living in extreme poverty or forced displacement, who often face multifaceted trade-offs and experience continued losses, disruptions, and involuntary changes.

As discussed above, prevailing child marriage discourses are built upon conceptualisations of power as oppressive only and agency as choice and action towards emancipation and resistance. Hence, complex phenomena are reduced to simplistic explanations of women's oppression, religious fundamentalism, and cultural backwardness (Mahmood, 2001). The emphasis on finding examples of resistance obscures a better understanding of works of power (Mahmood 2005). Child marriage as a practice is universalised and consequently Third World women are defined as victims of homogenised oppression. By placing "blame" on individuals for their "choices", current interventions on child marriage often antagonize women and girls and their families, communities, and cultures, ignoring the complexity of decision-making processes on child marriage and broader structures of poverty and violence that influence them. The context and power relations within which agency takes place matter, and it is important to "pay attention to the sociality of persons and to the particularities of social and historical circumstances in which persons fulfil their moral obligations and pursue life plans and choices" (Madhok, 2013b, 38). As people experiencing child marriage have their motivations and preferences formed through social relations, it is not productive to identify men as oppressors and women as victims whose only form of

agency is to resist their families, communities, and cultures. Madhok (2020;2013b) has criticised the "action bias" in theorising agency that maintains the demand for individuals to demonstrate the direct connection between their preferences and action. In child marriage, agency indeed remains conceptualised within such action bias, as demonstrated by the focus on resisting and speaking out. It is crucial to loosen agency's reliance on negative freedom (Madhok, 2020) to "shift our theoretical gaze away from these overt actions" towards "cognitive processes, motivations, desires and aspects of our ethical activity" (Madhok, 2013b, 37-38). Indeed, other scholars have called attention to how equating agency to overt acts of resistance or desire for change and rupture limits the instances when agency is assigned or recognised for Third World women, as their agency can also be found in how they navigate and perform them (Mahmood, 2005).

Mobilising these key critiques, I argue that the analysis of child marriage enables us to examine yet other limitations in liberal understandings of agency and propose a broader view of the concept. In addition to the action bias (Madhok, 2020; 2013), an individual bias remains[47], as family dynamics, decision-making, and multiple risks within families are not taken into consideration. Other authors have remarked that agency (and autonomy) are relational (Mackenzie and Stoljar, 2000), but I contend that this relational character is not necessarily confrontational. As evidenced above, marriage – and child marriage – are almost always family affairs, and decisions often involve multiple actors within nuclear and extended families. A Decision-making does not necessarily mean a zero-sum game where one side wins and the other loses and in situations of poverty, conflict, and displacement –

[47] As it will be discussed later in this chapter, the focus on empowerment as the preferred solution to child marriage further shows the persistent individual bias in agency.

where child marriage frequently takes place – such winner/loser lens does not capture the various and nuanced factors present. Although theorising agency must take into account the physical, reputational, and operational risks involved (Madhok and Rai, 2012), child marriage offers a reminder that non-violent effects and motivations are key in decision-making and agency, including loyaly and emotional connections that are inherent to families. Agency, especially in situations of multiple oppressions and complicated social and power relationships, cannot be oversimplified into a "choice" assumed to be clearly presented and taken by a single individual at the expenses of others, as it is frequently portrayed that child marriage decisions are a simple cultural choice taken by fathers to oppress girls. Indeed, child marriage decisions are seldom purely "cultural choices" and women and girls can – and are in many cases - involved or even lead the process. Subjects are constituted within power and social relations that intersect at the individual, family, community, and structural levels. As such, preferences are formed and decisions made informed by a set of concrete and intangible factors. Indeed, several decisions such as on child marriage, take place at local and intimate spaces considering a varied set of risks and complex feelings of loyalty, respect, and care that are inherent to family relationships. Hence, agency must not need to be equated with choice or be only attributed when there is action to resist, but rather expressed and acknowledged in a step *before* action: during the formation of preferences and decision-making. In this sense, equating *independent* decision-making to agency and empowerment is extremely problematic as it perpetuates the individual bias and negates the processes that come before or instead of action. To discredit agency when it is expressed in decisions perceived as the result of "impossible choices" or when it is outside what has been prescribed as the "right choice" by external actors strips

Third World subjects not only from their capacity to act outside of resistance, but their very capacity to make or contribute to decisions.

Parallel to the narrow understanding of agency as liberation and resistance only, child marriage – and international development more broadly – discourses place great emphasis on women's and girls' voices. Their voice is taken as proof of agency and ability to make choices, to resist, and to indeed "speak out" against the patriarchy (Parpart, 2010). Finding and promoting women's and girls' voices is evident on how initiatives on child marriage are conceived and presented to wider audiences. For instance, Girls Not Brides (2016) claims that "the voices of girls, including at-risk and married girls, should be central in the movement" (Girls Not Brides, 2016a, 38). The voice focus also permeates titles of programs, like Save the Children's "Choices, Voices, Promises", as well as photographic and multimedia projects "A Voice for Child Brides" (Terre des Hommes, n.d.) and "Girls' Voices: Speaking Out Against Child Marriage" (Girls Not Brides, 2015b). A report on media and child marriage claimed that "coverage in the media represents a huge opportunity to hear girls' voices" (Greene and Perlson, 2016, 12). Plan International shares "7 Short Child Marriage Stories" (Plan International, n.d. b), a series of videos with titles such as "Because I am a Girl – I'll Take it from Here", "It's my Life – Girls Say No to Child Marriage in Africa", and "No Mountain too High – Ending Child Marriage in Nepal". Care International's Tipping Point program on child marriage has two sections on its website dedicated to girls' voices: "Photovoice" and "Stories of Change" (Care International, n.d. a). The Girls Not Brides website has a specific section called "Girls' Voices" (Girls Not Brides, n.d. a), which states that "every year 12 million girls are married as children. Every

girl has a story to tell"[48]. Most of these stories follow the shero and agency as resistance narratives, presenting success stories that follow a similar pattern: girls who challenged their family, community, and tradition, ultimately avoiding child marriage[49]. Third World girls are thus homogenised and their stories of oppression and liberation become a singular one, detached from history and contexts (Mohanty, 1984).

"Voice privileging" in international development can be initially seen as understandable, given women's historic struggles to enter male-dominated public spaces (Parpart, 2010) or taken as a response to criticism made to earlier girl-centered initiatives for overlooking diversity and complexity (Khoja-Moolji 2016). However, "giving voice" to the oppressed has been long criticised by postcolonial feminist theory (see Spivak, 1994; Ozkazanc-Pan, 2012). The interest in and *demand* for voices and narratives of the marginalised are part of neocolonial strategies of surveillance and yet another form of violence linked to the West's need of coherence, authorisation, and redemption (Jones, 2004). It follows the romanticised assumption that voice is transparent and reflects truth, so that through one's voice we are able to learn about her experiences and essence, and therefore the West is able to see the authentic "Other" (Spyrou, 2016; Kapoor, 2004). For instance, a report on child marriage claims that "it is important to ensure that *authentic* voices are heard" (Greene and Perlson, 2016, 12, emphasis added). Moreover, as voice has been equalised with agency and empowerment, silence is uncritically identified with disempowerment, although silence and secrecy are not necessarily signs of passivity and disempowerment and could have other

[48] The section includes videos with brief written summaries, poems written by girls, original stories, reproductions of material published by other organisations, and highlights of interventions carried out by different international or local organisations that are members of the Girls Not Brides coalition.
[49] For instance, please refer to the stories from the Girls Not Brides website shared earlier in this chapter that link girls' agency with resistance to their families.

meanings or even be strategies of survival and gradual and subtle renegotiation of gender hierarchies and practices (Parpart, 2010). Away from the "success stories" of sheroes that present agency as resistance only and voice as its materialisation, "at an individual level, silence and secrecy can protect women from disempowering contexts where their voices have no institutional or collective power" (Parpart, 2010, 9).

"Giving voice" to the oppressed also raises questions of *whose voice* and *who speaks for whom*. Even when the subaltern speaks, there are several intervening institutional structures that are not neutral, but filter, edit, frame, reinterpret, and appropriate the subaltern's voice (Spivak, 1988, 292, cited in Kapoor, 2004, 637). The Western subject maintains a central role, so that even when the intention appears to be to let the Other speak, there is a dependency on the West to speak for the Other, placing agency fully with the speaker (Fernando, 2016; Khoja-Moolji, 2016; Wells, 2005; Jones, 2004; Spivak, 1994). Third World women and girls are historically constructed and defined against Western values and ways to live and Western, white, middle class women's concerns are taken as the concerns of women everywhere (Lewis and Mills, 2013). Further to this implied list of priorities or concerns that are supposed to be universal to women (Mohanty, 2003), the qualities that women and girls are expected to possess are also universalised from Western liberal frameworks, including assertiveness, determination, and combativeness (Ang, 2013), so that giving voice to girls in child marriage is intertwined with speaking out and resisting. Indeed, when describing girls' idea of a good life for themselves, Care International claimed it "includes having their own livelihood; being married to someone of their choice or having the characteristics of their choice; having a nice house; bringing up their children properly, to be healthy, educated and good human beings. *Implicitly*, girls want education for

themselves" (Care International, 2016, 5, emphasis added). Although the list of issues is presented as raised by girls, the use of "implicitly" further evidences how international organisations synthesise, interpret, and filter girls' needs and aspirations according to the Western listener/speaker.

Furthermore, "girls' voices" have a fundamental role in international development funding, as their voice is used as "evidence" to amplify already established consensus around Third World girls' possibilities and limitations and to reinforce solutions and programmes already in place (Khoja-Moolji, 2016). This is understandable in a context where policy-making and decision-making on funding in international development is increasingly "evidence-based", although this approach has faced skepticism (Eyben, 2008) and what consists evidence is still not completely clear (USAID, 2016; Geoffroy, Léon and Beuret, 2015; Jones, 2012; World Bank, 2012). International NGOs often employ a circular logic, whereby internally gathered evidence is presented to legitimize further interventions and girls' voices is used to provide legitimacy (Khoja-Moolji, 2016; Wells, 2015). This is also related to the homogenisation of Third World women through the uncritical use of arithmetic methods to "prove" universality and cross-cultural validity, assuming that if there are lots of cases across cultures, it adds up to an universal fact (Mohanty, 1984). In child marriage, the success stories of girls raising their voices against child marriage are indeed used to reaffirm existing interventions. Further to creating a chain of self-fulfilling "evidence", this is used to support claims that certain strategies are the most effective to address child marriage, namely empowerment, which is discussed in the following section.

Empowering Girls as the Solution to Child Marriage (and Other Third World Problems)

As detailed in chapter 3, in the last decades of the twentieth century, and more pronouncedly since the 2000s, child marriage gained increasing international prominence and interventions around the issue abounded. Following broader international development trends of seeking evidence of results through evaluations, there has been an increasing interest by researchers and practitioners to analyse what works and what does not work in addressing child marriage. However, the body of peer-reviewed and grey literature is very limited (Psaki, 2015; DfID, 2014; Paina, Morgan and Derriennic, 2014; Malhotra et al, 2011). As noted by Pelayo (2015), available literature does a great job in describing child marriage, especially its quantified prevalence and causes, but solutions are treated more vaguely. Despite the ubiquitous and oftentimes vague statement made in reports and public information materials that the phenomenon is complex and context-specific, I argue that there is an incongruence between the causes identified and the main solutions promoted in child marriage. Although structural factors that are well outside individual control are cited as the drivers of child marriage (i.e. poverty, gender inequality, and conflict and displacement), the main solution to child marriage is targeted at the individual level. Indeed, prevailing discourses claiming to be evidence-based have promoted "empowering girls" as the most successful strategy to reduce child marriage, which has been uncritically accepted and reproduced.

Programmes on child marriage usually adopt one or a combination of five main strategies: empowering girls, mobilising families and communities, providing economic incentives,

enhancing access to education, and establishing/enforcing laws and policies (Care International, 2018; Freccero and Whiting, 2018; Girls Not Brides, 2018a; Girls Not Brides 2017; UNFPA and UNICEF, 2017; Glinski, Sexton and Meyers 2015; Malhotra et al, 2011; Jain and Kurz 2007; Mathur, Greene and Malhotra, 2003). According to Buchmann et al (2017), although empowering girls is increasingly popular, evidence of its success is very limited and contradictory. Some evaluations of programs focusing on empowering girls found positive results (Pande et al, 2006; Edmeades, Hayes and Gaynar, 2015), especially when implemented in combination with other strategies, whilst others found mixed results or no change in child marriage prevalence (Erulkar and Muthengi, 2009; Muthengi and Erulkar, 2010; Psaki, 2015). It is important to note that despite the positivistic focus on quantification[50], positive results of initiatives focusing on either empowering girls and mobilising communities are often presented vaguely and relying on anecdotal evidence, such as “in the years since the program started, very few girl leaders have married and had children” (Catino, Colom and Ruiz, 2011, 3) and “only one of the married participants said that she actually had significant input into the decision about her marriage” (Warner, Stoebenau and Glinski, 2014, 19).

Ambivalent results are also found regarding the second strategy, mobilising communities and families, with some programs reporting no impact on child marriage (LEHER, 2014), and others claiming that community mobilisation led to public declarations against child marriage (Diop, Moreau and Benga, 2008). Several evaluations of programs providing economic incentives found that conditional cash transfers and other forms of stipends contribute to reducing child marriage (Kosky et al, 2017; Kalamar et al, 2016; Parsons

[50] Please see chapter 3 for an in-depth discussion of this.

and McCleary-Sills, 2015; Paina, Morgan and Derriennic, 2014; Pathfinder International, 2006), whilst others showed that this type of intervention did not reduce child marriage rates or affected attitudes about delaying age of marriage (Nanda et al, 2016). Three systematic reviews of interventions addressing child marriage have claimed that empowering girls had the strongest results in addressing child marriage (Freccero and Whiting, 2018; Chae and Ngo, 2017; Malhotra et al, 2011). However, a closer look at the data used in these reviews shows that empowerment was heavily present in both successful and unsuccessful programs, making it difficult to ascertain it as "the most effective" strategy as claimed.

There are also some caveats and biases that make it difficult to claim that any of these strategies is "the most effective" in addressing child marriage. The authors of one of the systematic reviews acknowledge that "results tend to lean positive, but are not conclusive" (Malhotra et al 2011, 23) and that "the observed changes cannot be conclusively attributed to the intervention alone" (Malhotra et al 2011, 25). Several programs implement more than one strategy and evaluations are unable to attribute changes to one of them alone (Chae and Ngo, 2017; Malhotra et al, 2011; Muthengi and Erulkar, 2010). Most programs presented as successful used a combination of strategies, being hard to ascertain which one had greater influence in the positive results (Chae and Ngo 2017; Malhotra 2011; Muthengi and Erulkar, 2010). There is also a lack of uniformity on what "success" means, as programs often measure different things that cannot be compared, such as changing attitudes and behaviour, reducing child marriage rates, and increasing age of marriage. Measurement of success has also some inherent biases, as programmes with positive results are more likely to be evaluated, published, and disseminated (Malhotra et al, 2011). As beneficiaries of programs

are often those already open to the issue, positive results are likely to be upwardly biased and/or limited and temporary due to heavy doses of intervention (Malhotra et al, 2011).

Empowerment in child marriage is often implemented by Western organisations delivering information and knowledge to girls on rights, sexual and reproductive health, financial literacy, and vocational and life skills. For instance,

> at these meetings, Moushumi and her friends learn about their rights to an education, to not be married off as a child, and to own or inherit land. She is also learning intensive organic gardening skills that help her grow food to feed her family and perhaps one day earn a bit of money to help the family's finances (Halder, 2014).

Success of empowerment programs is measured based on "increased knowledge" and "attitudinal/behaviour change". It seems obvious that an increase in girls' knowledge after receiving intense information is expected, but it is rarely discussed how such increases materialise into actual change. Certainly, "there has been an absence of clarity on exactly if and how such programs empower girls, and if so, how this empowerment process leads to changes in attitudes and practices related to child marriage" (Warner, Stoebenau and Glinski, 2014, 26). Greene (2014) has questioned how programmes narrowly focus on girls' attitudes, and "most often, programs stop at 'wishes to marry later', and do not measure girls' capabilities or actual age at marriage" (Greene, 2014, 10).

In addition, the very concepts of attitude and behaviour can have multiple meanings that vary according to gender, ethnicity, and context. Changes in attitudes and behaviours are often self-reported and responses may be influenced by respondents' social desirability bias

and willingness to provide the "right answer" to NGO staff. The linkage between such changes in attitudes and behaviour with actual decreases in child marriage or increase of age of marriage is not well established. For instance, communities making pledges against child marriage have been reported as successful results of programmes (Malhotra el al, 2011; Diop et al, 2008), but, again, how pledges materialised into actual reduction of child marriage is left unexplained. Some reports claim that in some instances when awareness about the consequences and especially the illegality of child marriage increase, community members simply tried to conceal it through informal unions or other religious ceremonies (IMC Worldwide, 2015).

The focus on empowerment also evidences the disconnect between the causes identified by the organisations working on child marriage and the solutions promoted. For instance, a report describes that parents and community members are increasingly aware of the risks and harms associated to child marriage, but these are outweighed by the perceived benefits, such as lower dowry and alleviating the family's economic burden (Care International, 2015a). The report then suggests empowerment as the main solution to child marriage, urging interventions to "increase girls' awareness of gender and individual rights and build the confidence, skills and supportive relationships necessary to make progressive choices in their lives" (Care International, 2015a, 33), accompanied by engagement with parents and communities. However, if parents are already aware of the risks associated to child marriage, empowering girls and/or increased awareness-raising do not address to the causes identified, and it remains unclear how this type of intervention responds to the economic needs that ultimately drive child marriage. Although empowering girls is presented as the main/best strategy to address child marriage, most organisations acknowledge it is only one

pillar of a complex work and must be done alongside other strategies such as engaging with families and communities, providing services, and changing legal frameworks. This is aimed at modifying underlying social norms and creating an "enabling environment" (Bouman, Lubjuhn and Hollemans, 2017; Girls Not Brides, 2016a; Save the Children, 2016; Malhotra el al, 2011). Nonetheless, such breadth of interventions is seldom done by all organisations and programs at the same time (Malhotra el al, 2011; Jain and Kurz, 2007).

The empowerment component may also be more appealing to funders and the media as "empower girls/women" has become ubiquitous in international development. In addition, providing training sessions to girls is somewhat more straightforward to implement and to generate data that can be measured, scrutinised, and evaluated, compared to mobilising communities and promoting structural changes. Moreover, structural changes happen at a slower pace than empowering girls and communities' commitments to end child marriage may also be lip service that does not materialise into an actual "enabling environment". For instance, a story published by Girls Not Brides under the "Girls Voices" section on its website, describes how child marriage is being addressed through awareness-raining in girls' group meetings,

> at these meetings, Moushumi and her friends learn about their rights to an education, to not be married off as a child, and to own or inherit land. […] The group is led by one of Moushumi's peers and a local social worker. It was this social worker, who visited Moushumi's house at her request to help convince her parents to allow Moushumi to continue her schooling (Halder, 2014).

The intervention focused on providing empowerment-as-knowledge, doing little – if anything – to promote changes in structural barriers that hinder girls' access to education,

such as increasing availability of schools, financial incentives to families, or off-setting school fees and costs. In addition, it once again placed the burden of change on girls and reinforced the idea of opposing interests within families, as girls were "empowered" to convince their parents to let them continue education.

Hence, this model of empowerment that calls girls to be at the forefront of resistance may in fact place girls under great burden, and perhaps risk, especially when programmes end and NGO staff leave. Whilst expected to lead social change, they must still navigate unchanged structural inequalities, often without continued material support from Western organisations. Girls' knowledge about their individual rights (as presented from a neoliberal and Western point of view) and the risks of child marriage may indeed increase through empowerment-as-knowledge-transfer programmes. However, when this knowledge is not necessarily connected to their context and structural changes are not happening at the same pace, they are left in a state of "informed powerlessness": aware of such rights, but unable to effect the change they were promised – and in fact *expected* – to achieve.

Even though the very "evidence" available is insufficient, inconsistent, and even contradictory, the idea that empowering girls is the most effective strategy to address child marriage has become pervasive, being produced and reproduced by numerous reports, policy documents, and public information materials (see Women's Refugee Commission, 2016; Save the Children, 2016; Greene, 2014; Warner, Stoebenau and Glinski, 2014, among others). Vested in an aura of authority, such assertions have powerful consequences, informing research, policy-making and funding allocation. This is not "evidence-based" as asserted though, but rather informed by and part of wider discursive

production of Third World girls defined in terms of their problems and achievements, and how these problems should be addressed according to Western understandings of agency, resistance, and voice. In fact, and as discussed in chapter 2, discourses are productive and performative, as the production of "truth" and "knowledge" is implicated in the material exercise of power that enables certain courses of action.

Empowerment of Third World women and girls is part of wider feminist, neoliberal, postcolonial, and liberalising strategies that reflect the West's saviour complex, repackaged as a "will to empower" i.e. to help others help themselves (Roy, 2017; Cruikshank 1999). This is connected to the neoliberal turn within development, with the "cooptation and reformulation of the feminist language of empowerment of collective struggle over public resources into one of a private striving" (Madhok, 2013b, 16). Women, and especially young women, in the West are offered a narrow perspective of empowerment, centred on sexual and individual economic freedoms, so that the empowered and emancipated Western woman becomes the standard for Third World women to strive for and be measured against (Calkin, 2015). These representations reinforce Third World women and girls as "passive dupes of patriarchal culture" and "inherently incapable of solving their own problems" (Kabeer, 2000, 40; Alam and Matrin, 1984, 8, cited in Dogra, 2011, 342). Even when representations of Third World women and girls shift from victim to sheroes, their responsibility to help themselves is circumscribed to what it means to be empowered according to Western standards.

Certainly, one of the stories in the Girls' Voices section at the Girls Not Brides website quotes a girl who rose against child marriage,

> I tell the girls in our workshops to think of themselves as leaders. Every day you are the leader of your destiny. Tell yourself what you want to do, know what your dreams are, and one day you will achieve them. You will because I did. You too can stand up and raise your voice for your rights, I tell them every time. I love seeing their dreams get stronger day by day (Girls Not Brides, 2015c).

Arguing that girls' power to make decisions about their own lives is limited, Care International's vision to end child marriage requires girls and young women "to believe in their own worth and feel confident asserting their opinions, preferences, and choices" in order to "build their capabilities, cultivate their aspirations instead of abandoning them, and pursue opportunities that expand their experience of the world" (Care International, 2018, 15). This reflects the romanticised neoliberal assumption that "believing in oneself" or "dreaming" is enough to change structural constraints, once again juxtaposing Third World women and the imagined confident and assertive Western woman they must aspire to imitate. This refers back to the burden placed on girls to be the agents of change who stop child marriage and lift themselves and their communities out of poverty (or any other "Third World problem"). By shifting focus from global inequalities, women are granted individual empowerment without disturbing the status quo (Wilson, 2013), crystallising the idea that it is through Western development projects, and not the cessation of violent or exploitative conditions, that Third World women and girls can be "made happy" (Fernando, 2016, 402).

Although empowerment is supposed to be achieved by women themselves through agency, in practice it happens through Western-led development interventions (Wilson, 2013). This exemplifies and materialises the ambivalent discourse that presents Third World girls as full of capacity and at the same time still in need to be rescued or enlightened. Even though girls

are expected to not only effect changes that are outside the scope of individual action but to *lead* them, they still need a "little help" from Western organisations in the form of financial support, expertise-transfer, and imparted knowledge. It is then unclear and ambiguous who in fact is driving change and towards what goal (Fiedrich et al, 2003). Empowerment, participatory, and beneficiary-led approaches have been increasingly promoted and became buzzwords in development discourse and practice[51], but the reality is that strategies to address child marriage depart not only from international organisations and NGOs, but from Western values and knowledge systems more broadly. Efforts to empower through aid or international development thus "necessitate the reproduction of an asymmetry of power — specifically representational power—between donor and recipient" (Nair, 2013, 630).

Programmes targeted at empowering Third World women often merely list a problem that is supposed to be endemic only to the Third World, and for which a Western solution is offered (Dogra, 2011). Drawing on foucauldian concepts of pastoral power, Roy (2017) argues that organisations working on child marriage, and particularly those informed by neoliberal feminism, exercise punitive paternalism, using empowering discourses that promote self-improvement and agency, but at the same time controlling the parameters of choices to be made and how agency can be exercised. Indeed, an example of the coexistence of care and control in feminist governmentality is the focus on reporting and resisting child marriage, which serves a function of surveillance and disciplining (Roy, 2017). "At best this is another success for the NGO and at its worst it is an erasure of the complex ways in which MW [majority word] women negotiate their interests by themselves as well as of the long

[51] For an interesting discussion on buzzwords in international development, see Cornwall and Eade (2010).

history of feminism, awareness and conscientisation within MW nations" (Dogra, 2011, 342).

The Western will to empower is based on notions of agency that may be at odds with those of the people to be empowered, and it can often encounter objection, with initiatives being contested or even rejected by target populations. International programming is subject to various procedural demands, "technical requirements, deadlines, budgetary time frames, funding priorities—all of these intervene in programme delivery, having little to do with on-the-ground needs" (Kapoor, 2004, 634). Analysing gender initiatives in Pakistan and Afghanistan, D'Costa (2016) argued that the work of international agencies, "which is viewed as modern, secular, and 'Western', is becoming more distanced instead of grounded in bottom-up gender activism that engages with issues of traditional, religious, and 'local' identities" (D'Costa, 2016,410). Thus,

> women are at the centre of a turf war between 'modernized state institutions' and 'traditional/primitive' institutions […] while traditional and religious elites maintain and reinforce the control of women and their sexuality, the statebuilding agenda of the international community relies on a democratic and (for the purpose of this article) a secular notion of women's freedom and choices. Sandwiched between these two, women become the battleground for ideological warfare (D'Costa, 2016,422).

Within child marriage, Roy (2017) presents examples of "where the victim rejected the offer of being 'rescued' by the NGO and expressed consent to (early) marriage" (Roy, 2017, 869). Analysing community reactions to child marriage interventions in Mali, Niger, and Senegal, Morgan (2017) argued that "while health sensitization activities seem to be more welcome,

activities that promote international child rights are perceived as incompatible with social and religious norms" (Morgan, 2017, 7). Moreover, criminalisation of child marriage and criminal punishment of parents are not only resource heavy and difficult to implement (Morgan, 2017), but may also not be an effective strategy to end the practice as it causes tensions within families and precludes the collaboration of the different actors involved in child marriage decision-making.

Conclusion

This chapter examined how the West speaks for Third World women and girls in the sense of how their agency is conceived, i.e. whether/how/when Third World women and girls are allowed to be agentic. Child marriage discourses have followed the broader "turn" to agency and increasing pressure to represent Third World women and girls as super agentic in international development. Yet, agency remains conceptualised according to Western and liberal values of individuality, rationality, and self-interest, with oppression and coercion reduced to the local, individual, and family levels. I highlighted the tensions between agency and choice, age, and consent, including discomforts around girlhood innocence and sexuality and the Western impetus to protect and/or liberate Third World girls. In this context, agency is equalised to resistance and materialised by voice, so that not only a narrow understanding of non-Western agency is espoused, but "right" and "wrong" types of agency become evident.

The "turn to agency" in international development and feminism shifted representations of Third World women and girls from victims to sheroes, who had not only the option of be

agents of change, but indeed the obligation to do so. This focus on agency is also reproduced in child marriage discourses, with corresponding tensions surrounding choice, age, sexuality, and consent. Most organisations working on child marriage advocate for setting the minimum age of marriage at 18, whilst also arguing against restrictions to girls' sexuality. This reveals the discomfort around girlhood innocence and sexuality, and ultimately the tension between protecting *vs* liberating Third World girls according to Western ideals of sexual freedom. Choice, age, and consent are indeed messy terrains, as Third World women's and girls' choices are not necessarily and always accepted as expressions of their agency. "Wrong choices" are often explained through internalised oppression and false consciousness, which not only assume subjects to exist prior and outside of power relations but reinforce the discursive construction of Third World women and girls as victims who need to be rescued.

Representations of Third World girls as agents of change and understanding agency as resistance also inform prevailing discourses that the main, and in fact "best", solution to child marriage is empowering girls. Empowerment is taken as knowledge-transfer and part of wider neoliberal, development, and feminist projects that repackage Western rescue efforts into "helping others help themselves". As the structural factors associated to child marriage remain unchanged, "empowered" girls are placed under great burden (and perhaps risk), being unable to individually enact the changes they were promised and required to effect. Empowerment as knowledge-transfer in child marriage is focused on imparting Third World girls with information about their right to freely make choices, although the "correct" choices are implied from a strict Western and neoliberal standpoint. Child marriage, like other gender-focused interventions, rely on Western-informed perceptions of agency as

individual rational self-realisation detached from structural power relations, reproducing the essentialist gaze that recolonises Third World women (Fernando, 2016). "Agency, like empowerment, is projected as a gift to be granted by the consumer of the images—and potential donor—implicitly reaffirming the civilising mission" (Wilson, 2011, 329).

The promotion of empowering girls as the main or best strategy to end child marriage embodies and reproduces the patterns and knowledge systems underlying child marriage discourses and is closely related to prevailing representations of Third World women and girls, their problems, and how they must be addressed. The turn to agency and the turn to empowerment have led international development and human rights discourses and practices to firmly represent Third World problems (such as child marriage) as cultural practices, and Third World women and girls as the agents of change through their agency-as-resistance and voice. Far from overcoming colonialism, these representations and related conceptualisations of agency in fact reinforce it, whilst obscuring how global political, economic, and security power inequalities contribute to "Third World problems" such as child marriage.

CONCLUSION

> In order to halt foreign interference in the affairs of developing countries it is necessary to study, understand, expose and actively combat neo-colonialism in whatever guide it may appear. For the methods of neo-colonialists are subtle and varied. They operate not only in the economic field, but also in the political, religious, ideological and cultural spheres (Nkrumah, 1965, 239).

> Unlearning means stopping oneself from always wanting to correct, teach, theorise, develop, colonise, appropriate, use, record, inscribe, enlighten: 'the impetus to always be the speaker and speak in all situations must be seen for what it is: a desire for mastery and domination' (Alcoff, 1991, 24, cited in Kapoor, 2004, 642).

This study set out to explore how the West speaks about and speaks for the Third World and Third World women and girls, mobilising important postcolonial feminist interventions on representation and agency to analyse child marriage discourses. It aimed to explore how child marriage became a prominent issue in feminist, human rights, and international development agendas, as well as the representations of Third World women and girls and their agency. By locating child marriage within broader historical, institutional, political, and discursive contexts, I found that child marriage discourses produce and reproduce neocolonial and liberal understandings of representation and agency of Third World women and girls. The previous chapters advanced this argument and I now reflect on the

contributions made by the research and implications to broader and future areas of investigation. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory, I question how child marriage is circumscribed within broader Western-centric knowledge systems (such as human rights and international development), in particular its association to "defective" Third World cultures and the narrow conceptualisation of Third World women's agency. The discursive production of Third World women and girls seemingly moved from victimising into agentic, so that *rescuing* Third World women was repackaged into *empowering* Third World girls. However, my argument is that that both representations work simultaneously to perpetuate the colonial encounter and to maintain the agency of Third World women and girls narrowly circumscribed to resistance.

The rise of child marriage as a seemingly urgent international issue was detailed in chapter 3, when the main political and historical events behind this development were plotted, including an analysis of the main organisations involved in child marriage discourse and practice, their similarities, differences, and influence over other organisations around the world. This contextual overview showed that child marriage discourses epitomise values and ideals embedded in broader human rights and international development knowledge systems, including population control and childhood innocence. Moreover, the emergence of child marriage as a prominent issue in the international agenda is intertwined with the hypervisibility and valorisation of girls and agency within feminist and international development theory and practice. In chapter 4 I examined representations of child marriage as a practice, arguing that it is constructed as a "Third World problem" only, which solidifies imaginaries of the Third World as retrograde, culturally-driven, underdeveloped and *the* place of where violations – especially against women – take place. The modernisation

paradigm places the West as the pinnacle of human development, so that the Third World is always already behind (Jabri, 2012; Biswas, 2004; Chowdhry, 2004), needing to be rescued and enlightened through discourses of human rights and international development. Complex issues like child marriage are stripped of their historical, social, political, and economic contexts and reduced to simplistic explanations such as cultural backwardness, religious fundamentalism, and women's oppression (Mahmood, 2001), ignoring Western complicity in underlying structural factors.

Issues affecting women and girls attract particular attention and are fetishised and used as ultimate proof of Third World backwardness. Postcolonial feminist theory has long criticised the discursive construction of Third World women within universal and ahistorical frames that reinforce essentialist dichotomies and define them as homogenised victims of oppression (Mohanty, 1984; 1991; 2003). In response to such criticism of victimising representations, Third World women were increasingly represented in the other extreme of a binary: as super agentic "sheroes" (Fernando, 2016), which builds upon neoliberal values of entrepreneurship and a functionalist approach wherein Third World women are the key to solve Third World problems (Fernando, 2016; Calkin, 2015; Wilson, 2013; Wilson, 2011; Dogra, 2011). This move coincided with the "turn to the girl" (Koffman, Orgad and Gill, 2015; Khoja-Moolji, 2015; Hayhurst, 2013; Koffman and Gill, 2013), employing Third World girls' ambivalent position between innocence/frailty and untapped potential. Hence, it strikes me that representations of Third World women and girls in child marriage – and more broadly – are always stereotyped and often contradictory, and I argue that both extremes of the binary reproduce the colonial encounter that maintains the Other firmly

within what is expected from Western parameters, enabling it to be not only defined, but managed.

In chapter 5 I linked the representation of Third World women and girls as heroines with the wider "turn to agency", examining the prevailing liberal conceptualisation of agency as the capacity to act by rational, calculating, and self-regulating actors. Drawing on a solid body of postcolonial feminist theory critiques of such conceptualisation, I argue that even expanded relational conceptualisations of agency still perceive relations as confrontational, maintaining a firm focus on choice, voice, resistance, emancipation, and empowerment to overcome coercion and oppression. This is particularly relevant in child marriage, where debates on age, sexuality, and consent further complicate understandings of agency. Although agency and choice are never uncompromised, child marriage discourses are quick and easy to dismiss "wrong choices" or those that are outside of the prescribed framework, polarising consent and coercion and resistance and oppression, even though these are "entwined and implicated in each other" (Madhok 2013, 209). In response to arguments that the focus on agency obscures issues of coercion and oppression, I contended that in the case of child marriage, these are firmly located at the local and family levels, with families and communities understood as deliberately attempting to exert negative effect on the lives of girls, further obscuring structural factors of global inequality, poverty, and conflict that highly influence the complex decision-making process on child marriage. If families and are hindrances, Third World girls must resist, so that agency is taken as resistance against family, communities, and local culture. Third World women and girls become promised agents of change through empowerment led by the West. Certainly, I found that empowerment is elevated as the best strategy to address child marriage, which places an

undue burden on girls and merely reassigns past Western colonising and missionary efforts into rescuing the Third World from itself. This narrow view of agency has been contested by postcolonial feminist theory, who offered alternative conceptualisations that capture the multiple and nuanced ways Third World women perform agency: not in romanticised heroic acts of resistance or in the lack of agency assumed to be compliant silence, but in the vast territory in between.

Challenging the measurement of the world through Western lenses that pathologise other forms of knowing and being, the thesis has a two-fold contribution, both to child marriage conceptualisation and practice and to postcolonial feminist theorising of representation and agency. First, by highlighting the neocolonial frameworks underlying current policies and interventions, the thesis contributes to how child marriage is conceptualised and consequently addressed. There is often a disconnect between academics and practitioners, with the common belief that the making of international policies and programmes is neutral and devoid of theory and ideology, which in turn is deemed to belong to academia. According to Nair (2013), practitioners and scholars do not read each other, although both stake positions shaped by certain beliefs and ideas about the merits and demerits of aid (or international development), which are refined into prescriptions and dispensations of how to solve particular problems. I have questioned this belief and the academia/practitioner divide by employing critical discourse analysis to examine the historical, institutional, political, social, and discursive contexts of child marriage policies and interventions. In addition, my focus on the Western organisations that "make" child marriage, from the language used to projects carried out in the Third World, hopes to further bridge this

presumed gap and provide theoretically-derived insights so that *we*, Western academics *and* practitioners, can rethink child marriage practice[52].

Despite rhetoric claims that child marriage is complex, I contend that prevailing child marriage discourses in fact strip it of complexity through a blanket blame on backwards cultures and families, instead of the global structures of inequality that underlie the practice. Child marriage is often employed as a coping strategy by families in resource and security constrained contexts, so that child marriage is not simply a product of tradition and culture. This point is extremely relevant to how child marriage is addressed: if poverty, conflict, and forced displacement play a crucial role in driving child marriage, empowerment of girls as knowledge-transfer/awareness-raising/sensitisation cannot be the only or "best" solution. As noted in the previous chapters, public information materials emphasise education and employment as alternatives to child marriage. However, when interventions stop at empowerment, the practical barriers to education and employment are not remedied. Girls and their families may indeed know and even aspire to education and employment but pressing short-term needs may render them unfeasible. In addition, child marriage discourses also dismiss agency outside of resistance and eschew adolescent sexuality, failing to capture the complexity of decision-making processes around child marriage. International organisations and NGOs operate under assumptions that circumscribe child marriage to a cultural problem and agency to resistance, which coupled with limited ability to address structural problems that follow under the scope of States, lead to the continued offering of Western emancipatory and neoliberal-coded solutions. More importantly, on-

[52] I must note that I find myself in this intersection, as I am/have been both an academic and an international development practitioner. As so, I constantly experience the difficulties and the importance of navigating this real or perceived divide.

the-ground programmes are not the only thing these organisations offer. They offer discourse. And exactly by promoting empowerment as "the best" solution and shying away from structural issues, current discourses oversimplify child marriage, place burden on girls, and continue to pathologise the Third World.

More importantly, interventions addressing child marriage (and other "Third World problems") that are vested in an aura of liberation through a narrow model of empowerment-as-knowledge-transfer continue to elevate Western knowledge as superior and reinforce dependency on such knowledge, which can frequently lead to local resistance and rejection. For instance, Roy (2017) states that "in rejecting the mechanical presentation of education and employment in a context where their liberatory potential is ambivalent, rural women foregrounded the chasm between developmental interventions and the real options that subaltern women have to negotiate within the many facets of their subalternity" (Roy, 2017, 885-886). As further exemplified in chapter 5, other research and program evaluations found that girls resisting child marriage and "speaking out" against their families often felt stigmatised, depressed, lonely, and worried about future marriage prospects (Care International, 2016; Gage, 2009), with limited continued support from the organisations that "empowered" them in the first place. Furthermore, as I argued earlier on, the construction of families, communities, and local cultures as hindrances or forces that are out to purposefully exert negative effect on girls can also elicit rejection to interventions. Indeed, Morgan (2017) claims that framing child marriage as a "harmful traditional practice" and efforts centred on criminalisation are not only resource-intensive and difficult to implement, but also ineffective due to the creation of an opposition between women/girls and men. Likewise, Le Roux and Palm (2018) state that instead of opposition and accusations,

respectful engagement with religious leaders and positive framing could yield better results, as "telling them that they are wrong is extremely likely to reinforce resistance and provoke backlash" and "an integrated approach to child marriage [is] preferred to viewing it as a stand-alone issue" (Le Roux and Palm, 2018, iii).

Having questioned how "traditional practices" affecting non-Western women are used to reinforce binaries of modern *vs* traditional and oppression *vs* resistance, the second contribution made by the thesis is to postcolonial feminist theorising of representations of the Third World, of Third World women and girls, and of their agency. As oppression and coercion are moved to the family and local levels, agency is understood as resistance to family and therefore culture. Further to the action bias criticised by Madhok (2020; 2013b), this conceptualisation of agency maintains the liberal "individual bias", failing to take into consideration the complexity and often collective nature of decision-making processes related to child marriage. Child marriage decisions are influenced by a composite of individual, cultural, and structural factors. However, the way agency is understood in child marriage discourses only acknowledges the cultural and the individual aspects of it, drawing from the representation of child marriage as a cultural Third World problem and the hyper focus on girls as individual sheroes, both discussed in chapter 4. Based on this problematic conceptualisation of agency, the solution proposed to child marriage is also focused on the individual action and emancipation: empowering girls to resist oppression from their families (and cultures). My argument is not that cultural norms and particular gendered cultural norms do not play a role in child marriage, but that prevailing representations of child marriage as a Third World cultural practice and of Third World girls' agency as individual resistance offer only a partial account. This thesis located such representations

within neocolonial works of power and mobilised key postcolonial feminist interventions to expand the conceptualisation of agency beyond individualised action.

If child marriage is represented as a culture-driven Third World problem and if both victimising and super agentic representations of Third World women and girls are equally colonialising, how can we speak about the Third World? How can we conceptualise and talk about child marriage and other practices in a non-paternalistic and otherising manner? According to Abu-Lughod (2002), issues like the burqa (or child marriage or female genital cutting alike) raise the political-ethical problem of how to deal with cultural Others, and, more importantly, how to analyse difference navigating the treacherous lines between hegemonic ethnocentrism and passive cultural relativism. More than merely acknowledging difference, we must ask what kind of difference is acknowledged and engaged: difference can be seen either as diversity or conflict/struggle/threat (Mohanty, 2003). Certainly, my analysis of representations of child marriage and of Third World women and girls within child marriage revealed that human rights and international development discourses repeatedly claim to respect difference *within* the Third World (diversity), but the difference between the Third World and the West is always explicitly or implicitly conflictive and negative.

Other "Third World practices" affecting women have been previously raised by Western organizations and for Westerns audiences to demonstrate the Third World difference and backwardness, such as female genital cutting, veiling, violence against women, and others. These topics are extremely and continuously fetishized, eliciting discussions about the representation of Third World women and girls and how their agency can be understood.

Child marriage can be construed as yet another example of these "urgent" topics that the attention (and consequently management/rescue) from the West. Indeed, as argued in chapters 4 and 5, child marriage discourses mobilise and are inherently immersed in existing broader knowledge systems and concepts around human rights, international development, girlhood, and agency. However, child marriage further complicates discussions on Third World representation and agency, due to the relationship of marriage/child marriage with age and sexuality. Child marriage not only evidences tensions related to the very institution of marriage and women's sexual agency, but it does so whilst highlighting the works of knowledge production about the Third World. The relationship between marriage, sex, and gender equality is complex and the very institution of marriage has been the focus of feminist debates on gender roles and women's oppression. Hence, agency and choice are complicated in child marriage by the introduction of age into the fold. The analysis of child marriage evidences the tension and ambiguity on whether/what/when (Third World) girls are allowed to choose. Child marriage is defined from Western worldviews, i.e. Western models of marriage, family arrangements, women's sexuality (focused on freedom and liberation), and childhood/girlhood innocence. There is thus a dissonance in girls being allowed to choose sexual relationships but not marriage, further evidencing how Third World agency is equated to right/wrong choices as defined by the West.

I stated in the thesis' introduction that my aim was not to ascertain whether child marriage is right or wrong, but to deconstruct the representations, discourses, and ideologies produced and reproduced about the Third World and Third World women and girls through child marriage. I understand that this type of analysis is often accused of being apologist. However, liberal, secular, and humanist projects are normally free of such accusations,

"despite the terrible violences that have been associated with it over the last couple of centuries, from world wars to colonialism, from genocides to slavery" (Abu-Lughod, 2002, 788). Mainstream International Relations largely fails to contextualise "cultural practices", neglecting their "links to imperialism and contemporary regimes of modernization" (Chowdhry and Nair, 2004, 20). These understandings are premised on a separate historical evolution of West and non-West instead of acknowledging they are mutually constitutive and interstitial histories (Chowdhry and Nair, 2004; Ling, 2002). Practices such as child marriage are not merely product of Other cultures. The problem with cultural explanations is that Other cultures are part of history as much as Ours and inherently interconnected (Abu-Lughod, 2002). It is important then to critically examine how we are part of the process and "do not stand outside the world, looking out over this sea of poor benighted people, living under the shadow-or veil-of oppressive cultures" (Abu-Lughod, 2002, 790). According to Piedalue and Rishi (2017), postcolonial feminism is often understood as applying only to the Global South, which not only undervalues its contribution but reproduces a neocolonial assumption that it only examines phenomena that belong to certain geographies. As I argued in chapter 4, child marriage is emblematic of this geographic fixing that reinstates the West as an imagined place immune to oppressive or traditional practices affecting women. By turning the gaze towards the West – how Western organizations conceptualise and manage child marriage – this study contributed to challenging this fixing of postcolonial feminism to the Third World, further disrupting artificial separations of North/South and West/non-West and calling attention to how "cultural" practices are deeply implicated in broader relations of global inequality, conflict, and displacement.

Building on postcolonial feminist theory, I argued that agency is conceptualised within choice and resistance frameworks, which fail to capture the nuances and complexities of power relationships and decision-making process and how agency is exercised within them. The very purpose of agency is intrinsically informed by Western and liberal values, attached to individuality, action bias, and resistance (Madhok, 2020; Madhok, 2013b; Mahmood 2005, Abu-Lughod, 1990). I argued that the analysis of child marriage enables us to examine yet other limitations in liberal understandings of agency and propose a broader view of the concept. In addition to the action bias (Madhok, 2020; 2013), an individual bias remains and steps involved before or instead of (resisting) actions are ignored. I propose an understanding of agency that takes into account such steps, particularly the complex and nuanced decision-making process involved in practices such as child marriage, that cannot be explained by or reduced to simplistic "cultural choices" taken by a single individual. Instead, agency can be seen attributed to subjects when they are forming preferences and making decisions, especially when such decisions are not individualist in nature or promoting clear individual gains. Hence, agency can be expressed beyond and outside resisting actions and subversion of norms: they can take place as individuals and families make "impossible choices" or even what is prescribed as "wrong choices". Agency can therefore take into account complex decision-making within families and be broader than attributing independent decision-making to empowerment.

In that sense, women's defence (or "choice") of child marriage cannot be straightforwardly attributed to the defence of tradition, but must be read within contexts that are constrained by power relations and complex life decisions that cannot be pinned down to a binary of force and choice (Roy, 2017). As Abu-Lughod asked, "we may want justice for women, but

can we accept that there might be different ideas about justice and that different women might want, or choose, different futures from what we envision as best?" (Abu-Lughod, 2002, 787-788). Liberation and emancipation are historically situated desires that cannot be assumed a priori, but must be considered in light of other equally historically located desires (Mahmood, 2005). Could other desires be more meaningful to different groups of people, such as living in close families, supporting others, or living without war (Abu-Lughod, 2002)? Hence, drawing on postcolonial feminist theorising of agency that interrogates and moves beyond such universalist frames and as agency has an increasingly prominent role in international development, I interrogate who gets to assign agency, to whom, and when? If agency is defined from a Western point of view, it means that not only the West continues to be the one who assigns (or not) agency, but also that Third World women's and girls' actions, voices, inactions, and silences are prematurely categorised as "good and "wrong" choices and ultimately as agentic or not agentic. In fact, it is not that Third World women have not spoken or been empowered, but their agency cannot be made legible in a continuum of discursive violence (Fernando, 2016). This is particularly important because being a buzzword and indeed an increasingly coveted asset, *not having* agency according to Western parameters immediately reinstates the Third World in its subaltern position and in need of rescue and enlightenment.

Further to these contributions, the research also opens areas for future investigation, including on the role of social norms in child marriage and on decision-making in complex situations. Marriage and family are institutions that fulfil not only material needs, but also affective and emotional ones that are harder to measure and analyse. Better understanding of and better responses to child marriage require grasping the emotional and material

realities influencing such decisions, beyond simplistic explanations focused on culture. Certainly, "contrary to popular discourse, early and child marriage is not some archaic, static practice rooted in tradition. It is the product of dynamic, evolving decisions that are very responsive to changing external realities" (Nirantar Trust, 2015, 19). International development theory and practice have been increasingly interested in social and behaviour change, and interdisciplinary dialogue between International Relations, social service, and psychology may yield interesting insights into how agency is exercised in multiple ways within complex international phenomena. It is also important to further examine coping mechanisms in response to multi-layered and transnational structures of oppression such as poverty, conflict, and displacement. How and when do Third World women and families resort to "negative" coping strategies, such as child marriage, transactional sex, or high-risk migration? What are the implications of such strategies to how agency is conceptualised and assigned? Wilson (2011) claimed that literature on gender and international development uses theorising around the alleged rational self-interested individual and free will to circumscribe agency to individual transformation instead of collective. Madhok and Rai (2012) call attention for including analyses of risk and power relations in agency theorising, as these can be manifest and hidden, disciplining and disruptive. Third World women are then fully responsibilised for their "choices", even when they are simply "choosing" survival. This is closely related to neoliberal models of development that promote gendered ideals of women as hyper-efficient and resilient neoliberal subjects (Wilson, 2011). Future investigation on decision-making and the dynamics of coping strategies around child marriage and other complex phenomena must navigate this risk of unintentionally contributing to the feminisation of responsibility and constructions of Third World women and girls as self-sacrificing.

A second area for future research includes examining marriage itself: the political, religious, economic, and cultural values attached to marriage and the gendered and racialised implications of how marriage is constructed. Marriage is gender trouble (Basu, 2015, cited in Roy, 2017) as marriage has historically placed women in a position of inferiority across countries, cultures, and eras. Marriage – and not only child marriage and not only in the Third World – often leads to a series of risks and disadvantages for women, including increased risk of intimate partner violence, decreased access to education and livelihoods, legal and social constraints to divorce, and limited rights related to property and child custody. The impact of marriage and childbearing on women's income and the unequal division of household labour and caring responsibilities have been examined exhaustively across countries. Circumscribing child marriage to "tradition" and "Other cultures" creates (yet another) opposition between oppressive marriages in the Third World and imagined free marriages that are premised on Western notions of liberating romantic love and sexual freedom. It pathologizes issues around marriage that are problematic in the West as well, including the elusive public/private divide, gendered division of labour, and male dominance in all parts of the marriage process. By narrowing the focus on age, culture, and choice, debates on child marriage eclipse broader problematic issues surrounding marriage. If anything, child marriage only exacerbates existing issues in marriage and a later marriage is not necessarily a more egalitarian one. Furthermore, child marriage debates ignore and/or reproduce ideals of marriage as a place of protection. Marriage is often used to cleanse or validate sexual behaviour considered deviant (such as adolescent sex) and sexual violence

(for instance marry-the-rapist laws[53] or non-criminalisation of marital rape). Additional research is needed to locate child marriage within these broader conceptualisations of marriage and to challenge the gendered and racialised problematics embedded in them.

Additionally, another area for further research is to perhaps turn the gaze back to the Third World to explore in detail the child marriage discourses produced and reproduced by organisations based in the Global South. Although the focus of this thesis was on examining how the West conceptualises and ultimately manages child marriage, in chapters 2 and 3 I briefly discussed how Western discourses influence organisations in the Third World, who ultimately depend on not only funding, but also knowledge from the West. Further research on the nuances, overlaps, and dissidence between discourses produced and reproduced in the West and the Third World – and within the non-monolithic Third World – would certainly enrich both the child marriage field and how it relates to theorising representation and agency.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that not all representations and discourses in child marriage use a neocolonising approach. There are organisations trying to conceptualise and practice interventions on child marriage in ways that defy and deviate from prevailing of neocolonial frameworks. Even inside the main organisations working on child marriage there are dissenting voices, not only because the organisations examined are extremely large and often decentralised, but also because discourses are inherently unstable and open for change and discontinuity (Shepherd, 2008; Milliken, 1999). However, prevailing child

[53] Incidentally, this practice is allowed in the two states in the United States of America, Florida and Missouri, where the marriage of underage girls can be used as a loophole to avoid prosecution for statutory rape. This restates the frailty and arbitrariness of constructions of the Third World as problematic and the West as liberated and further advanced in an evolutionary scale.

marriage discourses are overwhelmingly pervasive because, as argued, they follow broader human rights and international development trends and patterns. Moreover, framing child marriage as a Third World problem solved through empowerment fits into and responds to funding practices, also leading smaller organisations to emulate how bigger organisations operate. As discussed in chapter 2, I was and still am an international development practitioner and am fully aware that the organisations examined are made of people, who in my 15 years of experience, are genuinely trying their best to solve complicated challenges[54]. In the same way that parents are not usually "out there" to harm their daughters, development and humanitarian workers are not out there to intentionally harm the Third World. However, when using buzzwords such as "participatory" or "empowering", it is easy to fall into the comfort that we are doing the "right thing" and that this is enough. As both academics and practitioners, we need to question the roots and meanings of these words and approaches. More importantly, by checking the box of often tokenistic participatory or girl-led interventions, bigger questions are left untouched. How much does focusing on victims/agents of change allow *us* to remain unaccountable? Likewise, I acknowledge that the criticisms advanced in this thesis may lead to paralysis, with child marriage practitioners feeling they are wrong no matter what they do, whether they portray women and girls as victims *or* agents of change. How can we overcome then the objectification of Third World women and girls?

The answers to these queries are not straightforward, nor do I claim to have them. However, I draw on postcolonial feminist scholarship that the way to overcome such objectification

[54] And indeed in the past years there have been increasing discussions and commitments to reflect on and take concrete steps towards decolonising international development practice, including large organisational financial commitments to social justice and equality within organisations and a growing trend to decrease staff and offices based in the global North and reduce the number of foreign staff in country offices.

and to keep us, the West, accountable, is not to allow the subaltern to speak or a radical critic to speak for them, but rather to change the very process of knowledge production, analytically breaking away from hierarchical binaries and the obsession with “difference” and the Other (Mohanty, 2013; Kapoor, 2004; Abu-Lughod, 2002). Either as academics or practitioners, we cannot work from a neutral or outside place, as we are all implicated in hegemonic discourses. Listening to the subaltern, or “learning from below”, or employing participatory methods are by now already tried and tested approaches in international development and to a certain extent in International Relations. However, despite their good intentions, they frequently result in more of the same (Kapoor, 2004). It is necessary then a previous step: to unlearn that the Third World is always in trouble and the West is indispensable, culturally superior, and has the solutions (Kapoor, 2004; Alcoff, 1991; Spivak, 1990). Missionary work and colonial feminism belong in the past (Abu-Lughod, 2002) and our task is indeed to unlearn.

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