

**“The word marriage in our language, is not easy.”**  
**Young women’s experiences of marriage, inclusion and exclusion,**  
**in Akpo, Eastern Region, Ghana.**



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## Abstract

Early marriage is a practice affecting 14.2 million girls a year (UNFPA, 2012). The bulk of early marriage literature concerns the prevention of the practice, but when research does explore effects, the focus generally rests on physical rather than social or mental impacts. Therefore, this study identified two research gaps: a lack of understanding of girls' experiences of marriage, and a lack of in-depth knowledge of more diverse effects of marriage, such as social impacts. To address these gaps, this study asks "How do young women and girls experience marriage, in Akpo, Eastern Region, Ghana, and how are these experiences understood in relation to a spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion?" This spectrum is a conceptual tool developed for this study, with three dimensions of in- or exclusion: social networks, personal relationships and civic participation. Feminist theory also informed this study. Interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation were used to gather data in Akpo, in Ghana's Eastern Region. Initial findings indicate that girls' experiences of marriage are largely exclusionary, although there are instances of opportunities of inclusion. A central finding of the study concerned varying experiences of in- or exclusion depending on the formality of the marriage union of which the girl is part. This research concludes that many girls experience exclusion through informal marriage, but that specific community dynamics offer opportunities for inclusion with formal marriage. Self-identification was also seen to play a role in inclusion. Understanding diverse experiences of marriage provides greater knowledge of the patterns of the practice, both formal and informal, built on girls' own perspectives. Interventions can better support girls in both formal and informal marriages by increasing opportunities for civic and economic participation, which boosts their confidence, self-sufficiency, and inclusion.

**Keywords:** Early marriage; feminist theory; spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion; Akpo, Eastern Region, Ghana; formal and informal marriage.

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## Abbreviations

FGD - Focus Group Discussion

HC - Her Choice

PMNCH - Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health

RCI - Relational Capability Index

SDG - Sustainable Development Goals

SRHR - Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights

THP Ghana - The Hunger Project Ghana

UN - United Nations

UNFPA - United Nations Population Fund

UNICEF - United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

USAID - United States Agency for International Development

UvA - University of Amsterdam

## List of figures and tables

**Cover photo:** Author's own photo, one interview participant and her child, walking nearby Akpo epicentre building, included with permission from participant.

**Figure 1:** Author's own model: a spectrum of inclusion and exclusion.

**Figure 2:** Conceptual scheme.

**Figure 3:** Daily Guide Network: map of Ghana, showing regions.

**Figure 4:** Her Choice: map of countries.

**Figure 5:** Author's own photo: THP Ghana Akpo epicentre building.

**Figure 6:** Author's own photo: THP Ghana Akpo-Bunase sign, located near the epicentre.

**Figure 7:** BBC World Service: map of Ghana, specifically Eastern Region and Koforidua.

**Figure 8:** Author's own photo: road into the Akpo community.

**Figure 9:** Photo from interpreter, Mustapha Shaibu: a typical earth house in Akpo, reproduced with permission.

**Figure 10:** Author's own photo: concrete house where I conducted the first three interviews.

**Figure 11:** Photo from interpreter, Mustapha Shaibu: Mustapha and I conducting a focus group with community leaders, reproduced with permission.

**Figure 12:** Adapted conceptual scheme

**Table 1:** Table indicating self-identification of marital status of interview participants.

# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Abbreviations</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>List of figures and tables</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1. Research aim and relevance	7
1.2. Problem statement	8
1.3. Overview of thesis	9
<b>2. Theoretical Framework</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1. Feminist theory	10
2.2. Early marriage and married girls	11
2.3. A spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion	13
2.3.1. Social exclusion	13
2.3.2. A spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion	14
2.3.3. The Relational Capability Index	15
2.4. Conceptual scheme	17
2.5. Conclusion	17
<b>3. Empirical Context</b>	<b>18</b>
3.1. Sociopolitical context of Ghana	18
3.2. Early marriage in West Africa	19
3.3. Early marriage in Ghana	19
3.4. Her Choice programme and results	21
3.5. The Hunger Project Ghana	22
3.6. Conclusion	23
<b>4. Research Design</b>	<b>24</b>
4.1. Research questions	24
4.2. Ontology and epistemology	24
4.3. Research location	24
4.4. Unit of analysis and sampling methods	26
4.5. Data collection methods	26
4.5.1. Participant observation	26
4.5.2. Semi-structured interviews	27
4.5.3. Focus group discussions	28

4.6.	Data analysis methods	29
4.7.	Quality criteria	30
4.8.	Limitations of research	31
4.8.1.	Loss of personal control	31
4.8.2.	Using an interpreter	32
4.8.3.	Community saturation and research fatigue	33
4.9.	Ethics and positionality	34
4.9.1.	Ethics	34
4.9.2.	Positionality	35
4.10.	Conclusion	36
<b>5.</b>	<b>“Pregnancy is the biggest reason for girls getting married”: analyzing girls’ views on, and experiences of, early marriage</b>	<b>38</b>
5.1.	Introduction	38
5.2.	Dynamics of marriage in Akpo	38
5.3.	Optimistic, realistic, or pessimistic? Girls’ definitions and expectations of marriage	40
5.4.	“Pregnancy is the biggest reason for girls getting married”: exploring girls’ reasons for marriage	42
5.5.	“Married girls are overburdened”: understanding girls’ experiences of marriage	43
5.5.1.	(In)security and self-sufficiency: economic dimensions	44
5.5.2.	Sweeping, sharing chores, and sex: physical dimensions	45
5.5.3.	Peer pressure and asking permission: social dimensions	48
5.6.	Conclusion	49
<b>6.</b>	<b>“The ones with rites are more respected in the community, than the ones without them”: exploring dynamics of marriage, inclusion and exclusion</b>	<b>50</b>
6.1.	Introduction	50
6.2.	“When we perform them, I become the wife”: the formal-informal marriage distinction	50
6.3.	Accessing social networks: health services, education and employment	53
6.3.1.	“When they ask for married women, I own up, because maybe they are going to educate them”: marriage and social networks	55
6.4.	Navigating personal relationships: parents, peers, and partners	56
6.4.1.	“They value a married person higher than others”: marriage and personal relationships	59

6.5.	Engaging in civic participation: church and community activities	60
6.5.1.	“If you are married, you have to take part”: marriage and civic participation	61
6.6.	Conclusion	63
<b>7.</b>	<b>Discussion and Conclusions</b>	<b>64</b>
7.1.	Introduction	64
7.2.	“What are young women and girls’ perceptions of marriage?”	64
7.3.	“How might these perceptions of marriage affect girls’ experiences?”	66
7.4.	“How do young women and girls understand their inclusion and exclusion, and how can their social inclusion be enhanced?”	67
7.5.	(In)formal marriage and self-identification: how do girls experience marriage?	69
7.6.	Methodological and theoretical reflections	70
7.6.1.	Methodological reflections	70
7.6.2.	The spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion	70
7.6.3.	Feminist theory	71
7.6.4.	Adapted conceptual scheme	71
7.7.	Recommendations for THP	72
7.8.	Suggestions for future research	73
7.9.	Final concluding remarks	74
	<b>References</b>	<b>75</b>
	<b>Appendices</b>	<b>83</b>
	<b>Appendix 1: Participant List</b>	<b>83</b>
	<b>Appendix 2: Operationalisation Table</b>	<b>88</b>
	<b>Appendix 3: Interview Guide</b>	<b>92</b>
	<b>Appendix 4: FGD Guides</b>	<b>97</b>
1.	FGD Introduction Document:	97
2.	First FGD with Girls:	98
3.	Second FGD with Girls:	100
4.	FGD with Parents and FGD with Community Leaders:	101
5.	FGD with Epicentre Executives	103



# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Research aim and relevance

Early marriage affects 14.2 million girls a year (UNFPA, 2012). While it has been the subject of much recent theoretical and policy discussion, it is still necessary to understand the full complexity of this phenomenon and in ending what is widely seen as a harmful practice. Furthermore, current early marriage literature focuses on prevention, at the expense of married girls. Increasingly, practitioners and researchers are calling for more attention to be paid to this group (Santhya and Erulkar, 2011; Koster, Miedema, Sotirova, Pouw and Meyer, 2019). Feminist theorists call for this focus to come not for the benefit of future generations, but for these married girls themselves, in their own right (MacDonald, 2015)

Broadly, this research project aims to contribute to this critical goal and focus attention on married girls, for the sake of girls themselves. Specifically, this research aims to explore how young women and girls experience marriage, in Akpo, Eastern Region, Ghana, in relation to a spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion. This project builds on the work of fellow UvA student Brittany Haga, who conducted research in Eastern Region in 2018, concerning early marriage and wellbeing (Haga, 2018).

To clarify, this research discusses ‘early’ marriage, rather than ‘child’ or ‘forced’ marriage. ‘Child’ and ‘forced marriage’ both felt unsuitable, as research has shown that marriage amongst young women in Ghana is not always forced (Koster, Miedema, Hodgkinson, Pouw and Meyer, 2017). Similarly, I found that ‘child marriage’ was associated with parents arranging their young daughters’ marriages to older men, another trend that was not reflected in my research location. Early marriage implies both young age and “notions of consent, force, physical maturity and schooling trajectories” (Koster et al., 2017, p.28). This term felt more appropriate for my research setting, a context in which marriages are not strictly forced, but are sometimes chosen by girls themselves, albeit at a young age and due to limited alternatives. While I recognise the validity of the terms ‘child’ and ‘forced’ marriage in wider practice, ‘early marriage’ was deemed more suitable for this research.

Findings from the 2016 *Her Choice* baseline report provided a starting point for this project, by outlining recommendations for future research, specifically, focusing on married girls (Koster et al., 2017). Additionally, findings specific to Ghana indicated a need to “place greater emphasis on sensitising girls on the social implications of early marriage” (Koster et al, 2017, p.60). Exploring girls’ experiences of the social implications of early marriage was



another aim of my research, through which I developed the spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion.

## **1.2. Problem statement**

Early marriage is defined as a legal or customary union in which one or both spouses are below the age of 18 (UNFPA, 2012). The practice is a recognised breach of human, women's and children's rights, according to various international conventions, that is, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN General Assembly, 1948), the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (UN General Assembly, 1979) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN General Assembly, 1989). As identified above, it affects huge numbers of young people every year, predominantly girls, on which this research is focused. The practice is the nexus of cultural traditions, gender inequality and poverty (Koster et al., 2017). Economic hardship and risk of gender-based violence may force either parents or girls themselves into accepting early marriage, which may seem like the safest option.

However, the consequences can be serious. Early marriage is often accompanied by pregnancy and childbearing, which at a young age, can have serious implications on the health of both mother and baby (Girls Not Brides, 2017b). Generally, younger girls know less about their bodies and sexual and reproductive health, and so are at greater risk of complications and unsafe sexual practices (Girls Not Brides, 2017b). Once married, girls often leave school and their family home, sometimes moving great distances to be with their new husband and often his family (UNFPA, 2012). Social isolation, economic dependence and domestic violence are real risks to married girls. Beyond individual wellbeing, it is argued that early marriage presents a huge challenge to countries' own development and international development priorities such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which call for gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls (United Nations, 2018). While these notions of the wider impact of early marriage can be interrogated (see Chapter 2), they do demonstrate how early marriage is a global research priority.

As stated, current trends in both research and policy literature tend to focus on the prevention of early marriage (Santhya and Erulkar, 2011; PMNCH, 2012; Svanemyr et al., 2015; Koster et al., 2017). While this is essential and important work, this focus neglects those who are already married, rendering a vulnerable group without much support (Greene, 2015). Research has found that some organisations do so because of a "fear that supporting

married girls could be viewed as condoning child marriage” (Freccero and Whiting, 2018, p.17). This fear presents an effective challenge to policy-making aimed at married girls. Another challenge in focusing on married girls is reaching them. Often they are more isolated, and it is difficult to ascertain their perceptions of any programming that does target them, thus it is harder to know how to improve interventions (Santhya and Erulkar, 2011). Despite these challenges, the unique needs of married girls should be a research priority. Motivations for this focus include for the benefit of girls themselves, and to contribute to prevention efforts by investing in those girls raising the next generation, a debate that will be considered in Chapter 2.

Furthermore, while vital research has explored the physical impacts of early marriage, the mental and social effects have been studied in less detail (Svanemyr et al., 2015). Therefore, my research aims to fill these two gaps: firstly, by considering the experiences of married girls, I am addressing the problem created by the focus on prevention of early marriage. Secondly, I explore the social impacts of early marriage by exploring girls’ experiences in relation to a spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion. My research contributes to a theoretical understanding of early marriage, from the emic perspective of married girls, and to policy efforts seeking to meet the needs of this population.

### 1.3. Overview of thesis

This section presents an overview of the following thesis, comprised of seven chapters, including this introduction, which laid out the research aim and relevance of the study and the problem statement. Chapter 2 provides the theoretical framework, exploring the major theories underpinning this thesis: feminist theory, early marriage, and social exclusion. Chapter 3 explains important contextual information, including key sociopolitical factors in Ghana, early marriage in West Africa and Ghana, as well as presenting the role of *Her Choice* and The Hunger Project. Chapter 4 concerns the research design, including methodology, quality criteria and limitations. Chapters 5 and 6 present the empirical analysis, the former exploring dynamics and experiences of early marriage in Akpo, and the latter analysing experiences of marriage in relation to a spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion. Finally, Chapter 7 provides final answers to research questions, discusses the data in relation to theory, offers recommendations for future policy and practice, suggestions for future research, and concludes this thesis.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter explores the major theories underpinning this study: feminist theory, early marriage and the spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion, before exploring the conceptual scheme designed for this research.

### 2.1. Feminist theory

This research has been informed by various strands of feminist theory, which, while potentially contrasting, have common theoretical threads, such as the relationships between gender, power and inequality, in social relations, economics and politics (Nussbaum, 2000; Harding and Norberg, 2005; MacDonald, 2015). While there is not the space in this thesis to have a full debate of feminist theory, which is vast and multifaceted, this subsection considers important feminist principles underpinning the study, which influenced design, execution and analysis.

Firstly, feminist theory contributes a great deal to international development in general, and the context of early marriage in particular. As Nussbaum (2000) advocates, issues of poverty and inequality cannot be fully addressed without a consideration of notions of gender and power. Feminism, in particular transnational feminism, can reveal important exploitative, gendered dynamics affecting women around the world, questioning power structures and institutions (MacDonald, 2015). As Koster et al., (2017) note, early marriage is partly the result of gender inequality, among other factors. Therefore feminism, seeking justice and equality for women, as Nussbaum (2000) contends, is central to the project of development and this particular topic.

Regarding this research, the focus on married girls has been informed by feminist theorists such as Nussbaum (2000), Harding and Norberg (2005) and MacDonald (2015). These authors, though from different feminist traditions, all advocate the idea of researching and focusing on women and girls for their own sake, rather than as a means of supporting the ends of others (MacDonald, 2015). Secondly, feminism questions notions of power, particularly in the realm of knowledge-creation, and whose knowledge is privileged over others (Harding and Norberg, 2005). In that sense, this research privileges girls' own definitions, perceptions and experiences of marriage, as a way of sharing their understanding of reality with wider early marriage literature.

Finally, Nussbaum (2000, p.1) combines feminist theory and a capabilities approach, arguing that “unequal social and political circumstances give women unequal human capabilities,” which exacerbate their exclusion. This idea recognises that there are certain barriers to women’s full inclusion in all aspects of human life, but that women themselves are not unable to achieve them. Therefore, feminist theory enables me to consider the specific challenges that girls and young women face, and to question gendered power relations, while simultaneously allowing me to consider the ways in which these girls and young women defy the construction of being entirely oppressed, as also argued by MacDonald (2015). Thus, using feminist theory, it becomes possible to consider complex dynamics of gender and power in early marriage.

## 2.2. Early marriage and married girls

Young married girls are central to this research. Most actors’ focus on prevention is important, but shifts attention to future suffering and future girls’ experiences. Instead, this research privileges contemporary married girls and any suffering they may be experiencing *now*. Doing so aligns with MacDonald’s criticism of the representation of women and girls in the “Third World” and avoids presenting girls as “emblems of futurity” (2015, p.1). By concentrating on prevention, actors emphasise the promise and potential of future girls and women, and so our understanding of ‘the girl’ is centered around what she *could* be experiencing, rather than what she is actually experiencing. These future girls become the standard against which we measure a country’s development and road to modernisation - positioning any change in future girls’ lives as good for development, for wider reasons than for themselves alone. Additionally, this construction simultaneously presents already-married women as hopeless, implying that these women are passive, oppressed, and unable to resist this oppression without external support (MacDonald, 2015). This research aims to interrogate these themes.

Furthermore, much of the literature acknowledges that theories around marriage vary in different parts of the world. In West Africa, marriages are often characterised by “a patriarchal structure [and] male supremacy over women,” in which women can seem to have little power; however, this claim needs to be questioned in this research, rather than relying on regional analyses of marriage, such as Stevanovic-Fenn et al., (2015, p.18). According to authors such as Fuseini (2013), the regional system of bridewealth payment (see Chapter 3) can reinforce traditional gender norms of male dominance and confirms notions of husbands’ ownership of their wives’ bodies and reproduction. While in a European context, marriage is

understood as a formal, legal ceremony and union, in Ghana, marriage is more fluid, with various customs and traditions constituting a union, as will be explored in Chapters 3, 5 and 6 (Agyei, Biritwum, Ashitey and Hill, 2000; Fenn, Edmeades, Lantos, and Onovo, 2015). In Ghana, customary marriage rites are completed with varying levels of formality (Fuseini, 2013; Haga, 2018). While there are conceptual definitions of marriage, for this research to be representative of girls' own experiences, I explore how girls themselves define, understand and identify with marriage.

Furthermore, girls' challenging experiences of marriage are established in the literature. The risks posed by early marriage, are well-known, well-documented and significant (Koster et al., 2017; Girls Not Brides, 2017a, 2017b; UNFPA, 2012). Girls risk physical, mental and social hardships when they marry early, which would severely influence how they experience marriage, and in turn, their experiences of social inclusion and exclusion. In many ways, early marriage could be understood to be inherently deprivational - it being associated with the end of schooling and job opportunities and isolation in their husbands' homes. Marriage could be considered a heavy burden for young girls to bear (Greene, 2015). Married girls are therefore harder to reach with support programs (Freccero and Whiting, 2018). Dominant theories acknowledge the overwhelmingly exclusionary nature of marriage, and underpin much of this research.

However, a more nuanced theoretical approach is necessary to understand the full range of married girls' experiences. For instance, *Her Choice* research found that many girls marry early to escape poverty, which motivates them to either look for a spouse or accept a proposal at an early age (Koster et al., 2017). In this way, it cannot be assumed that marriage for all Ghanaian girls is an absolute deprivation. As Boehm (2006) found, for some, marriage can be a source of freedom: an opportunity for independence from the natal home and a legitimate context for reproduction. This is true in Ghana, where marriage is a highly respected social institution and practice, due to traditional religious ideals privileging marriage as the only appropriate setting for childbearing (Fuseini, 2013). Literature also holds that in some sub-Saharan African countries, marriage is essential for becoming a socially mature adult, in which married couples gain entry into older social circles and take on 'adult' responsibilities (Boehm, 2006). These theories exploring the potentially inclusive nature of marriage provide an important theoretical framework for this research.

Therefore, while many of the circumstances and consequences of early marriage are challenging, it cannot be assumed that marriage is perceived this way by all girls, or at all times. This research does not offer a moral judgement about the 'right' or 'wrong' of early marriages, but seeks to better understand the practice and its consequences, recognising that experiences are diverse. Therefore, the theoretical debate about early marriage being wholly exclusionary or, in some ways, inclusive, is the principal conceptual framework on which this research rests.

### **2.3. A spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion**

This section explores theoretical debates around social inclusion and exclusion, which constitute central concepts of this study. First, I discuss a traditional model of social exclusion. Then, I present how this study visualises the concept: a multidimensional spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion.

#### **2.3.1. Social exclusion**

This research largely looks beyond the traditional inclusion-exclusion dichotomy, which assumes that the states are polar opposites and there is no way to experience both (Rawal, 2008). However, there are important debates to be gleaned from this view of social exclusion, which are explored in this subsection.

Firstly, social exclusion is traditionally defined as “a way of analysing how and why individuals and groups fail to have access to or benefit from the possibilities offered by societies and economies” (Rodgers, 1995, p.44). Proponents argue that social exclusion looks beyond traditional economic conceptualisations of poverty, which hone in on formal economies and miss various other ways in which people can experience poverty (Sen, 2000; Beall and Prion, 2005). Secondly, a social exclusion lens constructs a multidimensional language for inequality, which considers economic, social, political and cultural dimensions (Rodgers, 1995; Giraud et al., 2013). According to Gore (1995, p.9), a social exclusion perspective enables international development actors to consider relational issues, such as “inadequate social participation, lack of social integration and lack of power.” Therefore, a social exclusion lens reveals broader forms of inequality than would otherwise be evident and allows new kinds of solutions to the challenges poverty creates.

However, challenges of using a traditional view of social exclusion persist. Firstly, the concept is historically European, and debate exists around its suitability to developing

countries. Social exclusion can “take for granted strong governance, a welfare state and a largely established formal economy,” which often are not as robust in developing countries (Mathieson et al., 2008, p.7). These priorities also denote a largely macro-level focus within social exclusion literature, which can privilege developed country contexts and support the argument that social exclusion is mostly a Western concept (Gore, 1995). According to Jackson (1999), this structural focus also homogenises individual forms of exclusion, such as age, gender, and ethnicity, by assuming that they are experienced in the same way and denying the opportunity to interrogate these experiences in greater detail. Secondly, predominant literature considers social exclusion as a fixed state, with inclusion as the polar opposite. This perspective presents inclusion and exclusion as mutually exclusive, a dynamic that allows “limited exploration of the contradictions in the multiplicity of exclusions or the paradoxes of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion” (Jackson, 1999, p.132). Exploring contradictions and paradoxes, within the context of early marriage, are central to this research.

Therefore, a traditional view of social exclusion seemed inappropriate. While social exclusion can reveal new patterns of inequality that married girls can experience, this perspective limits possibilities to question gendered forms of exclusion, which is essential to this discussion of early marriage. Similarly, according to Jackson (1999), marriage is a highly contradictory practice and a traditional view would not have sufficed. The theoretical debates presented above reflect the difficulty in creating one experience of marriage, as either wholly exclusionary or inclusive. Committing to a binary between inclusion and exclusion was deemed restrictive and would have ignored intricacies in young women’s experiences of marriage, which are not easily divided into two neat categories. In order to reflect the complex reality of girls’ experiences of marriage, a more innovative approach to social exclusion was needed. This development is explored below.

### 2.3.2. A spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion

This section explores this study’s interpretation of the relationship between social inclusion and exclusion as a spectrum, a dynamic and fluid process. Visualising the spectrum in this way better reflects the demands of this research topic, more accurately reflects reality for participants and strengthens social exclusion as a theory.

Firstly, the spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion acknowledges that some phenomena can be exclusionary in one sense, but inclusive in another. Applying a multidimensional



spectrum allows greater analytical depth, as it is possible to examine instances of inclusion and exclusion both across and within dimensions (Giraud et al., 2013). Secondly, a spectrum accommodates a more diverse range of experiences, varied according to characteristics such as age and gender (Gore, 1995). These factors are given more weight through the use of a multidimensional spectrum, which allows for deeper analysis at an individual level. In this way, it is possible to hone in on the particular experiences of young women, at the intersection of age and gender as potentially exclusionary characteristics (Jackson, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000).

Therefore, a spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion better represents the aims and methodological choices underpinning this study (see Chapter 4). The qualitative nature of this research privileges gaining in-depth and rich data. This kind of data is collected better using a tool that values individual experiences at a micro-level and accounts for greater depth of analysis. The next section explores the conceptualisation of this spectrum.

### 2.3.3. The Relational Capability Index

This study adopts concepts presented in the *Relational Capability Index* (RCI) to develop a multidimensional spectrum of inclusion and exclusion (Giraud et al., 2013). This index focuses on human capabilities and was developed by Giraud, Renouard, L'Huillier, De La Martinière, and Sutter (2013, p.2) in order to “focus on the quality of relationships among people and on their level of relational empowerment.” The authors argue that social connections are central to fulfilling human capabilities and facilitating their inclusion. This idea aligns with my constructivist and interpretivist stances (see Chapter 4.2). I am able to strengthen the RCI by also considering Nussbaum’s (2000) women’s capability approach, which allows me to specifically explore how social relations affect *girls’* ability to experience inclusion.

The RCI was selected rather than other multidimensional indexes because it “is the only one to focus on personal, social and political bonds, without providing data on economic exclusion,” which fits the aims of this research (Giraud et al., 2013, p.19). Therefore, the RCI and its focus on social relations can reveal important inclusive and exclusionary dynamics, which I link to early marriage as a social practice, by pairing this with Nussbaum’s (2000) theory of barriers to women’s capabilities. Other indexes would ignore this. The RCI analyses at community and individual levels, both highly relevant to this research.

Furthermore, the RCI is demonstrably suitable to a West African context, as the authors applied the index to cases in Nigeria. Evidently, Ghana and Nigeria are separate contexts, with different ethnic, religious and cultural divides, emerging throughout history that persist today (Langer and Ukiwo, 2007; Mancini, 2009; Otoghile and Obakhedo, 2011). However, according to Otoghile and Obakhedo (2011), there are important historic, political and economic points of convergence between the two countries. These areas of convergence allow valid comparisons to be made and suggest that I can reasonably apply the RCI to this study in Ghana.

According to Giraud et al., (2013, p.11) the RCI contains “three different dimensions of relational capabilities: integration into networks, private ties, and civic commitments,” each representing a different form of social inclusion and exclusion. Integration into networks considers access to “employment, transportation and information” (Giraud et al., 2013, p.14). Private ties concerns both quantity and quality of interpersonal relationships, and civic commitments includes participation in projects for the common good and a connection to wider society. These dimensions comprise the spectrum of inclusion and exclusion (Figure 1). Some adjustments were made during operationalisation, such as removing transportation from social networks, which seemed irrelevant for a community in which very few people own private transportation (see also Chapter 4.3).<sup>1</sup> The three dimensions are interconnected, as each dimension can affect the others, and experiences along the whole dimension. The use of the spectrum is purely conceptual, particularly useful in data collection and analysis stages. The reader should note that I do not place respondents at particular points along the spectrum, as this would introduce an unwanted quantitative element in this purely qualitative, exploratory study.

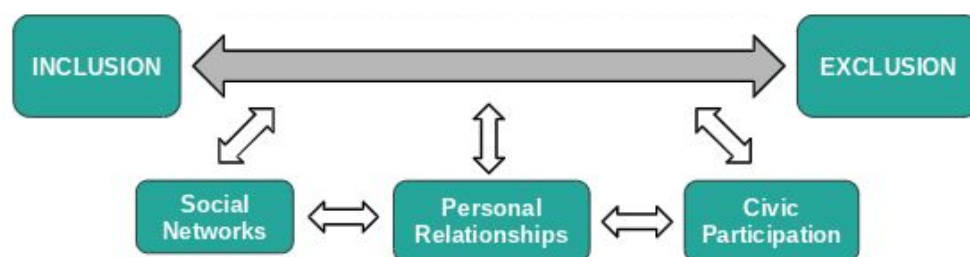


Figure 1: A spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion.

<sup>1</sup> For a full operationalisation of these concepts, see Appendix 2.

## 2.4. Conceptual scheme

This conceptual scheme below visualises the key concepts structuring this research. As shown below, the main unit of analysis is *girls' and young women's experiences of marriage*, which can be understood in relation to the *spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion*, composed of three interacting dimensions: social networks, personal relationships and civic participation. Finally, the research considers the relationship between girls' perceptions and experiences of marriage.

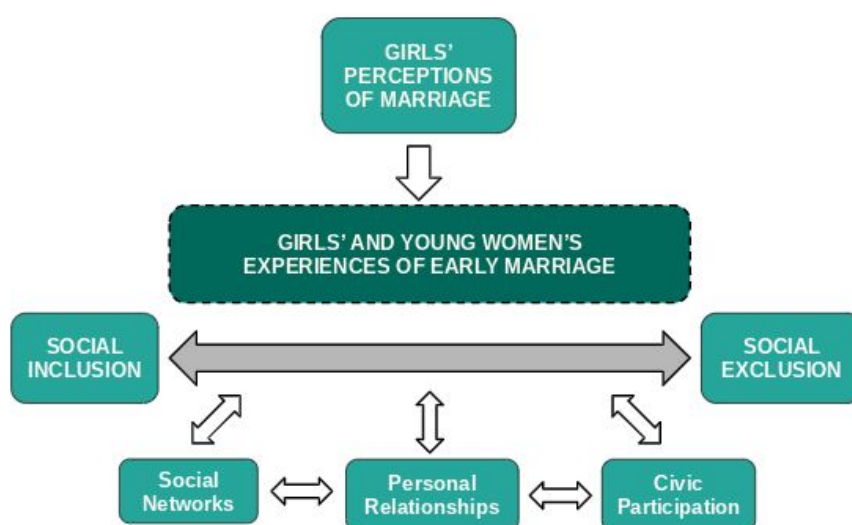


Figure 2: Conceptual scheme

## 2.5. Conclusion

This chapter considered the major theories underpinning this research, including feminist theories. Early marriage literature conflicts between presenting marriage as wholly exclusionary and deprivational, or offering *some* opportunities for inclusion. This debate provides the theoretical foundation of this study. A major theoretical discussion revolved around social exclusion, first considering traditional ideas surrounding this concept, then exploring a spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion. Finally, this chapter presented the conceptual scheme of this research. The next chapter discusses key contextual factors.

### 3. Empirical Context

This chapter provides an empirical background for this research in Akpo, Eastern Region. I explore Ghana's sociopolitical context, early marriage in West Africa and Ghana, and the role of *Her Choice* and The Hunger Project.

#### 3.1. Sociopolitical context of Ghana

Modern Ghana is named after the medieval kingdom of Ghana, which lies 800 kilometres northwest of the country (Ghanaweb, n.d.). Resources such as gold, copper and cocoa made the area and its empires highly lucrative, attracting Europeans to the West African coastline, where trade in gold, and later, slaves, boomed. European colonialism dominated and exploited the region for hundreds of years, and until independence, Ghana was known as the Gold Coast because of its abundance of natural resources (Ghanaweb, n.d.). On 6 March 1957, Ghana achieved independence, and is generally considered as the “first British colony in Africa to do so” (Ghanaweb, n.d, n.p.). The country's first Prime Minister, Doctor Kwame Nkrumah, was a leading figure of the Pan-African movement, and is still widely revered in Ghana and across Africa (South African History Online, 2018).

Now, “Ghana is considered one of the more stable countries in West Africa since its transition to multi-party democracy in 1992” (BBC, 2018, n.p.). In 2016, Ghana's most recent election, Nana Akufo-Addo won the presidency, with the incumbent John Mahama swiftly conceding defeat (BBC, 2018, n.p.) This election indicated the country's political and democratic stability, compared to the rest of the region. Ghana is a middle-income country; its economy has boomed in recent years with the discovery of oil reserves in the Gulf of Guinea in 2007 (Skaten, 2018). This industry is driving domestic economic growth and increasing Ghana's political power in the region (Skaten, 2018). The country is also highly religious: 71.2% of the population identified as Christian in 2010, 17.6% as Muslim, 5.2% as traditionalists and only 5.3% as having no religion (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013c). Ghana is a highly developed nation in West Africa, with political and media freedoms that are attractive to international organisations (World Bank, 2019). Ghana's population was 29.6 million people in 2018 (World Bank, 2019). Despite the various economic and democratic successes Ghana has recently seen, the country still faces challenges, including early marriage.

### 3.2. Early marriage in West Africa

West Africa has the highest rates of early marriage in Africa: 49% of girls under 19 (Walker, 2013), and some of the highest in the world, with nine of the 15 countries with the highest rates of early marriage (Stevanovic-Fenn et al., 2015). Marriage is widely regarded as the only appropriate context for childbearing, which is significant in West Africa, where societies are “mostly pro-natal and thus place so much value on childbearing than other aspects of a woman’s life” (Fuseini, 2013, p.4642). Marriage, therefore, is a highly respected institution, although the practice has diverse forms and processes across the region and within each country (Stevanovic-Fenn et al., 2015). One common theme of marriage in West Africa is the use of bridewealth: the money or wealth given by the groom and his family, to the bride’s family upon their union; the price is often higher when girls are younger, providing an incentive to parents to marry girls early (Fuseini, 2013; Stevanovic-Fenn et al., 2015).

Despite the cultural significance of marriage in West Africa, there are high premarital sex and adolescent birth rates: “close to 200 births per 1,000 girls” (Stevanovic-Fenn et al., 2015, p.6). In West Africa, early marriage and adolescent pregnancy are intricately connected (Stevanovic-Fenn et al., 2015). The dynamics between early marriage, adolescent pregnancy and premarital sex in West Africa are complex, affected by various external factors, including economics, education, and access to health and family planning services. While there is not room in this thesis to explore each of these relationships in depth, existing research has found that in West Africa, poorer girls, with less education, have less access to contraception, are more likely to engage in premarital sex, and have lower ability to make their own decisions regarding sex and family planning, which increases their likelihood to have children and marry early (Walker, 2013; African Union Commission, 2014; Stevanovic-Fenn et al., 2015). Understanding these factors forms a wider context for exploring early marriage in Ghana more specifically.

### 3.3. Early marriage in Ghana

Marriage is “one of the most important institutions in the Ghanaian society” because of the high value of child-bearing (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013c, p.78). Combined with the central role of religion, marriage is seen as the appropriate context in which to raise children. Marriage is both formal and customary, explored in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. Customary marriage, the oldest form in Ghana, “involves a gathering at which the bridegroom’s family makes payment of a bride-price to the bride’s family, followed by the bride being asked if she will accept the bridegroom as her husband” (Ghana Statistical Service, 2018, p.8).

Registration of these marriages is optional, due to the couple having to pay a fee for this registration, which deters some couples (Ghana Statistical Service, 2018).

Ghana recognises the harmful effects of early marriage, establishing 18 as the legal age of marriage in the 1998 Children's Act (de Groot et al., 2018). There is a vast discrepancy in experiences of early marriage: 2.3% of boys (de Groot et al., 2018), compared to “21% of girls” (African Union, 2018, p.22). Geographical disparities between north and south also exist. In 2014, northern regions observed early marriage rates of 33.6%, compared to 18.5% in the Central Region (de Groot et al., 2018; Figure 3). Northern Ghana is more rural, with less urban development than the south. Rural areas demonstrate higher levels of early marriage, due to, among other factors, lack of access to education and employment, both of which can drive the practice (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013c; UNFPA, 2012). Differences in cultural and religious practices between north and south also contribute to regional variations: “Islamic practices are strongest in the northern part of the country ... practices such as child-betrothal and child marriages are prevalent among some of the ethnic groups especially in Upper East” (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013c, p.91). Furthermore, Ghana follows regional trends of adolescent pregnancy. Pregnancies between 15 to 19 years represented 11.8% of all pregnancies in 2016, although this has reduced from 12.1% in 2015 (Ghana Health Service, 2017).



Figure 3: Map of Ghana, showing regions (Daily Guide Network, 2019).

The early marriage rate of 21% of girls in Ghana is considerably lower than others in West Africa: 52% in Burkina Faso, Ghana's northern neighbour (African Union, 2018, p.5). However, one in five Ghanaian girls still marry early, a significant proportion. National

interventions have reduced the early marriage rate: from 35% in the 1990s, to 28% in 2003, to 25% in 2008 (de Groot et al., 2018). Ghana is seen as a model country for lowering early marriage rates, due to the focus on educating girls (Walker, 2013). The country provides free basic education (includes Kindergarten, Primary School and Junior High School), recently implementing free Senior High School nationwide (Ghana Education Service, 2018). The Basic Education Division has a specific Girls' Education Unit, working to encourage and support teenage mothers returning to school (Ghana Education Service, 2018).

In 2014, Ghana created the Child Marriage Unit to effectively address early marriage and in 2017, launched a national strategic framework, aligned with the UN SDGs, to end early marriage by 2030 (Girls Not Brides, 2017a). Evidently, Ghana is working hard to keep girls from entering into early marriage, and the success in lowering such figures is commendable. However, at current rates, early marriage continues to affect huge numbers of Ghanaian girls and young women. Similarly, regional variations will continue and the rate of change progresses more slowly in rural areas, where many girls will keep marrying and giving birth early despite national prevention efforts. This section has provided a brief overview of early marriage in Ghana. The next section explores the *Her Choice* programme, one response to the global problem of early marriage.

### 3.4. *Her Choice* programme and results

The *Her Choice (HC) Alliance* aims to build child-marriage free communities in ten countries in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (Figure 4). The alliance is made up of four Netherlands-based organisations: Stichting Kinderpostzegels Nederland, The Hunger Project, International Child Development Initiatives and the University of Amsterdam, and works with 32 partner organisations (Koster et al., 2017). The HC programme lasts from January 2016 to December 2020. Specific methods include improving girls' access to SRHR services and knowledge of the impacts of early marriage; supporting girl-friendly schools; creating and supporting self-help groups for women and approaching legal and traditional authorities to create policy and community change (Koster et al., 2017). HC works in local schools and reaches out-of-school girls through community networks, conducting research and working to influence policy. HC treatment sites have received programming activities since mid-2016 (when baseline data had been gathered), and comparison sites began later, in 2018, after midline data collection had been completed (Koster et al., 2019).





Figure 4: *Her Choice* countries, (Her Choice, n.d.).

Akpo (Eastern Region, Ghana) is a HC treatment site, so has been part of the programme since mid-2016. Programme activities, such as SRHR education, were conducted through a local school, with the involvement of teachers. Girls' and boys' clubs discuss four thematic areas: SRHR, early marriage, gender, and children's rights. These clubs have regular meetings at school, and all girls are automatically members of these clubs, due to the small number of pupils. Out-of-school girls are reached through community volunteers. With this understanding of the wider and more local functions of *Her Choice*, readers can understand the empirical context in which this research is situated.

### 3.5. The Hunger Project Ghana

The Hunger Project (THP) is a global non-governmental organisation and HC partner, aiming to “end hunger and poverty by pioneering sustainable, grassroots, women-centered strategies” (THP, n.d., n.p.). Aiming for community-led, sustainable development in eight African countries, THP utilises the Epicentre Strategy. This strategy mobilises clusters of villages into epicentres, bringing together 5,000-15,000 people in centres of collective activity (THP, 2018). THP Ghana has mobilised 45 epicentres.

THP Ghana implements HC in two regions: Eastern and Central, working with local schools and epicentre buildings, alongside clinic staff, and with the support of community volunteers to reach out-of-school girls. THP granted me access to Akpo epicentre (Figures 5 and 6) in Eastern Region (see Chapter 4.3). Specific programs include: agriculture, economic development, education, health, and water sanitation. With the help of THP staff, I was able to meet community members, executives and girls and young women of the Akpo epicentre, and understand their lives in this small, rural community, mobilised by a large international organisation.

### 3.6. Conclusion

This chapter presented the empirical context of this research: sociopolitical conditions in Ghana, early marriage in West Africa and Ghana, and two international initiatives: *Her Choice* and THP. With these contexts in mind, the reader can better understand the experiences of girls and young women in Akpo. The next chapter discusses the research design underpinning this study.



Figure 5: THP Ghana, Akpo epicentre building.

Figure 6: THP Akpo epicentre sign.

## 4. Research Design

### 4.1. Research questions

Considering the gaps identified in existing literature, the research questions applied throughout this study are: How do young women and girls in Akpo, in Ghana's Eastern Region, experience early marriage, and how can these experiences be understood in relation to a spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion?

1. What are young women and girls' perceptions of marriage?
2. How might these perceptions of marriage affect their experiences?
3. How do married girls experience inclusion and exclusion, and how might their social inclusion be improved?

### 4.2. Ontology and epistemology

This research adopts a constructivist ontological position, which holds that the social world is produced and constantly revised through the interactions of social actors (Bryman, 2012). I apply this understanding of the world as socially constructed to the context of early marriage and processes of inclusion and exclusion. I adopt an interpretivist epistemological stance, which understands that reality needs to be interpreted to discover the underlying meaning of events and activities (Patel, 2015). This stance also allows me to consider a feminist perspective in my research, which guides my interpretations according to feminist considerations of gender and power in knowledge creation and the social world (Harding and Norberg, 2005). Regarding these ontological and epistemological positions, my research adopts an inductive approach to theory, wherein theory is an outcome of the observations and findings of the research (Bryman, 2012). I was able to enter the community with an open mind, freely reflecting on findings and creating theories in an iterative process of grounded theory.

### 4.3. Research location

This research project is located in Eastern Region, Ghana. This region had a population of 2.6 million people in 2010, around 10% of the total population of Ghana (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013a). My research base is Koforidua (Figure 7), the regional capital, approximately 83 kilometres north of the capital, Accra. THP Ghana and *Her Choice* conduct research and build relationships with rural communities around Koforidua, which make up "56.6% of the region's population" (Ghana Statistical Service, 2013a, p.3).



Figure 7: Map of Ghana (BBC World Service, 2008).

Data collection was conducted in Akpo, approximately 25 kilometres northeast of Koforidua. The Akpo epicentre includes eight villages, with a population of 1,568 people (NGO Aid Map, n.d). The community is isolated and upland, with poor road conditions, particularly in the rainy season. This terrain, common in Eastern Region, directly affects the community's accessibility for health and development programmes (Ghana Health Service, 2017b). Public transport is unreliable and only available on market days, that is, Mondays and Thursdays. Very few people have their own vehicle and walking is their main mode of transportation. Different communities within the epicentre range from a 15 minute walk to several hours from the epicentre building, and walking to the local market town takes two hours from the epicentre, via difficult roads (Figure 8). Housing is largely made of earth, with corrugated iron sheets as a roof (Figure 9). Most interview participants lived in such houses. Fewer houses are built of concrete, which seemed to indicate a higher economic position than those made of earth. Economic opportunities are limited, and most people farm yam, cassava, plantain and other vegetables to earn money and for personal subsistence. Most people are from the Dangwe tribe and speak Krobo, a regional language, and Christianity is the dominant religion.



Figure 8: Road into Akpo.



Figure 9: A typical house in Akpo.

#### 4.4. Unit of analysis and sampling methods

The main unit of analysis is young women's experiences of marriage, understood in relation to a spectrum of inclusion and exclusion. The principal sample population was married girls and young women, aged between 12-25. I sampled from young women over the age of 18 to study their reflections on their experiences of early marriage. I also sampled from groups of community members of various ages. I employed opportunistic purposive sampling methods in my research, which suit qualitative methods in that participants are selected for their relevance to the research questions (Bryman, 2012). While this method means that findings are not as generalisable to wider populations, it provides an opportunity to find relevant answers to research questions and is a useful sampling strategy. Due to time constraints, I used THP Ghana as a gatekeeper for sampling opportunities, as they had access to various community groups.

#### 4.5. Data collection methods

Due to considerations discussed in Chapter 4.2, I applied a qualitative research strategy. My study seeks to understand the specific context of Akpo and required flexibility throughout the research process, which best suits qualitative methods. According to McHugh (2014), these methods are suited to feminist research, as they place more emphasis on individual experiences and allow women's voices to be heard. Similarly, a qualitative strategy reduces any potential exploitation or objectification of women during the research process, an important feminist principle (Harding and Norberg, 2005; McHugh, 2014). Methods used are outlined below.

##### 4.5.1. Participant observation

This method is more informal than other methods I used, involving observing participants in their usual contexts, noting behaviour, conversations and interactions (Bryman, 2012). Participants are thought to behave more naturally, which would reveal more authentic data about girls' experiences of marriage. I conducted observation of girls and community members in epicentre meetings in Akpo, and more general observation in Koforidua, in order to better understand the local context. I kept a field journal, in which I sought to distinguish between neutral observations and my own interpretations by using separate columns for each kind of observation. Casual observation provides the wider context for the more detailed data I collected using other methods.

#### 4.5.2. Semi-structured interviews

This method allowed me to gather in-depth, rich information from a largely emic perspective. I did develop three a priori codes for the concept of marriage: economic, physical and social dimensions.<sup>2</sup> I did this in order to better structure my questions on the topic, which are evident in my interview guide.<sup>3</sup> However, this was a loose structure, which still gave room for participants' own interpretations and perceptions of marriage. Other than this one instance of a priori coding, the remainder of this data comes from an emic perspective. My aim was for these interviews to feel like a conversation for the participant, despite the use of an interview guide (Hennink, Hetter and Bailey, 2011). A strength of this method is that researcher and participant "co-create knowledge and meaning ... and co-construct reality," (Hennink, et al, 2011, p.109). In this way, using both a priori codes and participants' own reflections, I was able to create partnership and participant ownership of the research process, which suits my feminist perspective (Harding and Norberg, 2005).

I conducted 18 individual interviews with young women and girls between the ages of 15 and 24.<sup>4</sup> Interviews lasted between 30 minutes to an hour, and all were recorded, with permission (see also Chapter 4.9). I began by asking questions about participants' living situation, then asked them to describe a typical day in their lives. I hoped to make participants feel comfortable enough to then share their experiences of marriage. Interviews were conducted in participants' homes (Figure 10), whenever possible, to ensure the participants were comfortable and had privacy. In some cases, due to practical constraints and communication issues, interviews took place at a central location - inside the epicentre building, to ensure privacy. I used an interpreter for all interviews: six with Augustina, a local school teacher, and 12 with Mustapha, an intern with THP Ghana (see Chapter 4.8 for discussion of using a male interpreter). I fully discussed research questions and aims with each interpreter at the beginning of the data collection period, answering any queries they had about certain terms or concepts. I also updated them in regards to any changes to my interview guides or discussion topics. Both interpreters received the interview and FGD guides in advance so they could begin to prepare for translation. Both interpreters translated directly from participants' responses, which allowed me to probe immediately.

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 2 for a full operationalisation.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 3.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 1 for a full participant list.





Figure 10: A house in Akpo where I conducted three interviews.

#### 4.5.3. Focus group discussions

FGDs allow conversation to range more broadly than in individual interviews because respondents interact and discuss topics as members of a group (Bryman, 2012). Participants may challenge each other's views, potentially resulting in more realistic and complex data as people engage with each other. FGDs are also compatible with feminist perspectives because they grant participants more ownership of the process and somewhat reduce the power of the researcher, as noted by McHugh (2014). FGDs enabled me to appreciate the myriad ways in which individual girls in the community understand marriage. I facilitated five focus groups: two with young women and girls, one with parents, one with community leaders, and one with epicentre executives. In total, I had 41 focus group participants.<sup>5</sup>

The first FGD with young women and girls had 11 participants. This number was more than I had anticipated - due to communication issues between THP staff and participants, more girls arrived than planned, and I did not want to turn any away. This first FGD established various experiences and perceptions of marriage, and proved a useful opportunity for girls to respond to each other. The second FGD with young women had eight participants, all of whom I had already spoken to, in order to further clarify a few specific areas of inquiry, namely, inclusion and exclusion. Three FGDs were conducted with community members: parents of girls and young women; community leaders, including chiefs and queen mothers; and epicentre executives. These FGDs also provided a thorough understanding of life and community relations in Akpo, providing a holistic context within which I could analyse young women's experiences of marriage. I conducted each FGD in the epicentre building, as this central location offered more opportunity for open and free discussion. Augustina interpreted

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix 1 for a full participant list.



the FGD with parents of young women and the second FGD with young women and girls, and Mustapha conducted the remaining three FGDs (Figure 11).



Figure 11: Mustapha and I conducting an FGD with community leaders.

#### 4.6. Data analysis methods

In order to start data analysis, I transcribed interviews and FGDs whilst in Koforidua, using the full recording but only transcribing my questions in English and interpreters' translations of participants' responses, and any instances of probing (see also Chapter 4.8 for further discussion of translation). As discussed in the previous section, I developed three a priori codes in order to loosely structure my questions about marriage, while still providing space for girls' own reflections.<sup>6</sup> This was the only coding I conducted before data collection. The remainder of coding occurred after data collection and was more open and based on the data itself, representing my largely emic approach to analysis.

Returning from the field, I followed Charmaz's (2006) process of initial and selective coding. I first started initial coding, building on the basic open coding I completed in Koforidua. Initial coding was highly detailed, often with at least one code per line of text. According to Charmaz (2006), the aim of initial coding is to generate as many codes as possible. The next phase is selective coding, which involves selecting the most analytical and common codes in order to categorise the data (Charmaz, 2006). With the core categories produced through selective coding, I could develop key themes to answer the research questions. I used Atlas.ti 8 throughout the coding process, which was highly useful in forming and organising codes. Alongside the interview and focus group data, I analysed my fieldnotes, including participant and community observations, and my personal journal, containing more emotional reflections, as a way of triangulating my data analysis. The next section discusses the quality criteria of this research.

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix 3 for interview guide.

#### 4.7. Quality criteria

Due to my qualitative research strategy, I adopted Lincoln and Guba's (1985; 1994) quality criteria: trustworthiness and authenticity. Trustworthiness is composed of "credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability" (Bryman, 2012, p.390). Lincoln and Guba (1985, p.218) define credibility as "confidence in the 'truth' of the findings." To achieve this confidence and represent reality for participants, I conducted interviews, FGDs, observation and conversations with a range of different actors, including THP employees, young women and community members such as local teachers and elders. This triangulation improves the credibility of my data.

Another component of credibility is building trusting relationships with participants: before data collection, I confirmed that I had no expectations, there were no right or wrong answers, and that I was just in the community to learn. Doing so established trust between the participants and myself, ensuring that data I received from them was more realistic, increasing credibility. Reflecting with my MSc colleagues Samy and Zoe, allowed me to adjust certain choices according to their suggestions - including methods of approaching sensitive topics. Comparing our findings in our separate research communities strengthened my understanding of reality in Akpo, and sharing my process with others strengthens the credibility of the research.

Qualitative findings are specific to the particular area under study, which questions the transferability of my research on early marriage in rural Ghana. Transferability can be strengthened by providing a detailed description of the research location, which enables other readers to understand the particular context within which the research is situated (Chapter 3). With the rich account my research provides, other readers can judge for similarities between my particular context and others, and in turn, consider the transferability of my findings of early marriage in Akpo to other settings.

Dependability concerns the transparency of the research process. Following Bryman's (2012) guidelines, I kept detailed notes throughout the research process, including preparations for fieldwork, the data collection period, with transcripts, observations and personal reflections, and during analysis. Consequently, I can ensure clarity about my research process and the choices I made throughout, demonstrating dependability. This criteria requires evaluating the possible effect of my own subjectivities on the data collected (see also Chapter 4.10). I maintained a reflexive approach throughout the research process,

particularly in the field, evidenced in my fieldwork notes and personal journal, ensuring strong dependability.

Confirmability denotes that the researcher has “not overtly allowed personal values or theoretical inclinations manifestly to sway the conduct of the research” (Bryman, 2012, p.392). Confirmability, or objectivity, is important in any research, but felt particularly salient with my fieldwork. I interacted with women close in age to myself and family members. Hearing such personal, and often difficult, experiences, while a privilege, was at times emotional and I was constantly aware of my own position in this community (see also Chapter 4.10). I kept detailed notes of these reflections. Additionally, to prevent any possible bias, I made sure to clarify respondents’ statements and give them full opportunity for free expression, which is evident in transcripts. In this way, I improved the confirmability of my research.

While the authenticity of qualitative research is more debated than the others considered above (Bryman, 2012), it is still worth noting this quality criteria, as it concerns the wider social and political impact of research. Working alongside THP means that my research can contribute to the organisation’s work in Akpo. I will share the final thesis with THP, so that they can understand in greater detail, the experiences and needs of these women, in the hope that they will follow recommendations as suggested from participants. Consequently, my research can be considered authentic.

#### **4.8. Limitations of research**

This section identifies key limitations of my research and acknowledges how they may have influenced data collection, and subsequent analysis and conclusions. I also explain the actions I took to mitigate for these limitations, where possible.

##### **4.8.1. Loss of personal control**

One important limitation came with working alongside an organisation and at times, having little control over some aspects of the research process. While I greatly appreciated THP staff arranging meetings or data collection, as I would not have been able to do so myself because of language barriers, this extra layer of communication (from myself, to THP staff, to participants) did incur some complications. One example is my first FGD with women and girls, where I stipulated that I needed six to eight participants, and 11 arrived on the day. I was ultimately happy to talk to as many young women as possible, but would have preferred

two FGDs of fewer participants, rather than one of 11, so that quieter participants would have felt more comfortable in a smaller group setting. This example highlights the ease in which details can get lost in translation, and may have affected the results - I recognise that I may not have received the richest data from quieter girls, who may have been intimidated by the large number of participants. After this FGD, I resolved to be more explicit with the requirements of my research, in order to avoid future miscommunications and reduce the limitations on my study.

Similarly, there was some repetition of participants between the individual interviews and the first FGD with women and girls (the second FGD was specifically planned to repeat participants). This was another instance in which organising participants was beyond my individual control, and was arranged by my local supervisor. While the cross-over between participants may result in a smaller sample size, the data I gathered from the same participants across different settings was rich, varied and made alternative contributions to my data collection. Therefore, I do not see this crossover of participants as a limitation.

#### 4.8.2. Using an interpreter

According to Twinn (1997), translation can affect the validity and reliability of research and is often considered a limitation. For qualitative research, important details can be lost in translation, particularly when equivalent words do not exist in each language (Twinn, 1997). The use of multiple interpreters can also raise concerns, as different data sets can be understood differently by each interpreter (Twinn, 1997). These limitations should certainly be considered in my research.

Firstly, it was necessary to employ an interpreter, as none of the participants would have been able to complete a whole interview in English, due to a lack of formal education. I used two interpreters. Mustapha Shaibu, an male intern with THP Ghana, was my first interpreter, who conducted: 12 of 18 interviews, and three of the five FGDs. The second interpreter was Augustina Narh Adamkie, a female teacher at the local school. I would have preferred using only one interpreter, but due to practical realities of interpreters' free time and workloads, it was necessary to use both. I recognise that this may have affected the data, but, unfortunately, I was not able to find an alternative solution.

Instead, by fully discussing research questions and aims with both interpreters at the beginning of data collection, I was able to introduce them to my research in the same way,

reducing interpreter subjectivities on the research. I also updated them on changes to interview guides or discussion topics. Both interpreters often gave feedback on the style and language of the questions asked, which helped tailor the interview guide so it was more suitable to the local language and would yield the richest data from participants. Having informal conversations with them both also provided illuminating insights into the local context. I found Mustapha and Augustina to be highly useful and informative throughout the research, sensitive to the topic and with participants.

I was initially cautious about using a male interpreter. Mustapha was selected due to his language skills in English and Krobo, and due to Augustina not having enough free time to conduct the research. I was initially concerned that using a male interpreter would limit my research, particularly in the individual interviews with girls and young women, as we were discussing such personal information. However, I was assured by my local supervisors that this would not be a problem, and found that to be true. Mustapha was sensitive, thoughtful and considerate throughout the research process. He was 28, not significantly older than some of the older participants. He had a good sense of humour and connected well with the young women and girls. While I acknowledge the possibility that my results *may* have been different using only a female interpreter, I was ultimately happy using a male interpreter and do not feel it presented a significant limitation.

Interpreters enabled me to connect more effectively with participants and understand more about the local context. I would not have been able to conduct my study without the interpreters, so they were essential to my research process. While I recognise potential challenges of translation (Twinn, 1997), I do not regard this limitation as having an undue effect on results.

#### 4.8.3. Community saturation and research fatigue

In 2018, Akpo epicentre was a part of another UvA student's research project (Haga, 2018). As discussed above, arranging and selecting respondents was somewhat out of my control because I could not organise participants myself, but had to communicate through my local supervisors. They worked through established community networks to sample participants, and these same networks were also employed by Haga (2018), so it is possible that some respondents were used in both research projects. While I did provide a list of desired participant characteristics (e.g. age, marital status, occupation/education), I did not stipulate that respondents could not have been a part of Haga's research. Discussions with my local

supervisors indicated that, had I insisted on entirely new participants, it would have been difficult to find enough suitable participants for a worthwhile and meaningful study, as the participant pool in Akpo is relatively small. Indeed, even discussing organising more than 18 interviews prompted my local supervisor to worry that we had reached the limit of suitable participants. With the possibility of some girls participating in both projects, and having potentially approached all available and suitable respondents, it felt like the community was saturated and experiencing research fatigue.

This limitation is certainly significant, and may have affected the richness of responses participations gave, as they may have been frustrated by the repeated research process. The small sample size as a result of reaching the limit of potential respondents indicates that these findings may not be as transferable to other settings. However, the richness of data gathered mitigates for the sample size concern, as I am privileging the depth of the findings. Also, as no participants mentioned Haga to me during data collection and I wanted to keep participants focused on my own research, I did not ask participants if they had participated in Haga's study (2018). I believe that with the free and prior informed consent that I secured, girls and women would not have been a part of my study if they were not happy. This section has discussed various limitations that may have affected my study, and how I tried to navigate these limitations.

## **4.9. Ethics and positionality**

### **4.9.1. Ethics**

This section discusses ethical considerations that are important for the integrity of the research (Bryman, 2012). The main ethical principle is not causing harm to participants, either physical or mental, directly or indirectly, as a result of participating in research. In terms of physical or direct harm, I ensured that we had privacy during the interview or FGD, whether conducted in the respondent's home or the epicentre. I maintained confidentiality throughout the whole process: interview respondents had the opportunity to choose a pseudonym at the start of the interview. Only three participants did; others' pseudonyms were assigned during coding. FGD participants were referred to by their participant number during data collection, to preserve their confidentiality, and were also assigned pseudonyms during coding. These pseudonyms are used in Chapters 5 and 6 when referring to specific responses.

Causing mental harm was a particular concern, as early marriage is a sensitive topic and may cause participants to relive difficult memories. Therefore, I assured all participants that they could leave or withdraw their data at any time. If a participant looked uncomfortable or hesitated when asked a question, I checked if they were happy to continue or wanted to move on, and reminded them that they could finish the interview, if they wished. I thus maintained the important ethical principle of not causing harm to participants.

The ethical principles of not deceiving participants and getting informed consent were met throughout my research (Bryman, 2012). Upon arriving in Akpo, I informed the community of my research aims, which I repeated to each participant before beginning the interview or FGD. During data collection, I was sure to receive free and prior informed consent. I collected verbal rather than written consent, as my local supervisors' previous experience in the community indicated that participants are more comfortable with the former. I explicitly asked for consent before each interview or FGD. I separately asked for the participant's consent to be recorded, and did not begin recording until this was received. Therefore, my data meets these important ethical principles.

The final ethical principle, invasion of privacy, was particularly salient in my research on early marriage (Bryman, 2012). The nature of this research topic inherently requires private, personal information from married girls and young women. Receiving this data, while not invading participants' privacy, was a difficult balance to strike. In particular during interviews, knowing when to probe and when to move on took some getting used to. Many interview participants were willing to share their experiences and elaborate when I probed for further information. Some participants, however, were more shy and reluctant to divulge more information. In these cases, I rephrased the question or gently probed once, and if they remained shy, I moved on. In this way, I met the balance between a thorough interview and maintaining participants' privacy. In this regard, along with the other principles, my research can be considered ethical.

#### 4.9.2. Positionality

As a white Western woman of a similar age as most participants, and as a feminist, positionality is important to consider. I was highly conscious of my position as a foreigner and external researcher, and the inherent association of wealth and the power dynamic attached to that. I did my best to assuage this assumption in the minds of participants, through interactions and in my general attitude, but it felt like a difficult task in such a short



timeframe. Therefore, I am aware that my position and these assumptions of wealth and power may have influenced how participants responded to me, and the possible effect on my data and my study.

Being close in age felt like both a strength and a weakness in terms of positionality. On the one hand, participants were open to talk with me because we were close in age and there would be less of a power imbalance between myself and the young female participants. However, being so close in age was also challenging: talking to these women and hearing their often difficult experiences was emotional at times, and made it hard to maintain my position as a neutral researcher. I was aware that I was talking to these women for my own Master's thesis, and while my research does contribute to a wider project, *Her Choice*, I initially had difficulty asking for such experiences for what felt like my own gain. This reflection felt particularly contradictory with my feminist principles.

Working alongside THP also had both advantages and disadvantages. I recognise that THP acted as local gatekeepers and gave me access and credibility as a researcher, which I would have been unable to achieve otherwise. Alternatively, working alongside THP seemed to present me as a part of the organisation, and despite explaining my position as an external researcher, a few times, participants asked what help I was going to bring them as a result of this research. These questions made me starkly aware of my perceived position in Akpo, as opposed to my actual position as a research student. I recognised that this had potential implications on my study, and did my best to acknowledge the participant's question and confirm that I would pass their query on to THP, who had more power to resolve it. I then reasserted that I was not directly working with THP, which seemed to resolve the situation.

The question of positionality is significant throughout the research process and I recognise that reflexivity is as important during analysis as during data collection. I remained as mindful of my position post-fieldwork as during my time in the field, and my aim is that this mindfulness reduces as much bias as is possible for a qualitative research project, in which the researcher is such an involved part of the process.

#### **4.10. Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined my research design, including the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning this study, methodological and analytical choices, the limitations

and ethics that must be considered. This chapter provides clarity and transparency of my research process, and confirms that my study was ethical and feasible. The next chapter begins my empirical discussion.

## 5. “Pregnancy is the biggest reason for girls getting married”: analyzing girls’ views on, and experiences of, early marriage

### 5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the first key theme that emerged during data collection: views on and experiences of early marriage in Akpo. This chapter discusses the dynamics of early marriage, including a distinction between formal and informal marriage that has significant implications for later chapters and this research as a whole. The chapter then explores girls’ definitions, expectations, reasons for and, finally, experiences of marriage, according to economic, physical and social dimensions.

### 5.2. Dynamics of marriage in Akpo

Firstly, the dynamics of marriage in this community include girls’ and their partners’ ages, and types of unions. The realities of sampling meant that most participants were over the age of 18, but their experiences indicated that 15 out of 18 interview participants were under 18 at the time of their marriage or first childbirth. Of these 15, most married or gave birth at age 16, with some exceptions at ages 13 and 14. These figures indicate the significance of early marriage in Akpo, and align with the global definition of early marriage, in which marriage unions take place when at least one of the partners is under 18 (UNFPA, 2012). Of the three other interview participants, these women gave birth at age 18, falling within the category of adolescent pregnancy (defined as aged between 15-19). These participants were demonstrative of a widespread practice of early marriage and adolescent pregnancy. Therefore, understanding their experiences as young mothers and partners can shed light on the practice of marriage in Akpo.

Male partners were, in most cases, fairly close in age to respondents, ranging from 18 to 29 years old. Most male partners were two or three years older than participants, although the maximum was a six year age gap, still not a significant age difference. These findings confirm *Her Choice* research, that “young women did not usually marry old men,” (Koster al al., 2019, p.71). However, these findings differ from major theories of early marriage, which often describe large age gaps between partners (UNFPA, 2012).

A significant element of this research revolves around the degree of formality of marriages. While this is explored further in Chapter 6, here it is necessary to introduce this discussion. In Akpo, formal marriage unions occur when, “*The guy comes to perform the marriage rites*

*for the girl*" (Abigail, 21, unmarried, interview, 11/2/19).<sup>7</sup> These rites require a list of items for the man to bring to the woman's house, including small gifts, drinks and food items, representing a kind of bride price for the woman's family (Bethany, 24, unmarried, 6/2/19). The relationship is made official and the pair are formally married in the eyes of the community. Completion of these rites indicates that the man is taking financial and personal responsibility for the woman (and any children they may have), and that he will take care of her in the future, as explored by Fuseini (2013). Women took this commitment seriously: *"If the rites are performed, you are the legally married wife, so there is no way he cannot take care of you,"* (Bridget, 19, single, 14/3/2019). However, a lack of economic resources can prevent partners from completing the rites (Nicole, 24, unmarried, 11/2/19), and only one of the 18 interview respondents had performed them, at the time of writing. All the other interview participants in relationships had plans to complete the rites. All participants confirmed that a couple needs these rites in order to be formally married.

However, many participants identified as married even though they had not completed said formalities. Table 1 presents girls' marital status and self-identification. Participants who identified as married gave their living situation and children as reasons for this identification (Mamle, 23, and Sarah, 19, 5/3/19). Another girl recognised that although her marriage was not considered official by others, it was official for her (Dede, 20, 5/3/19). These findings indicate the fluidity of marriage as a practice in Akpo, the complex experiences that these girls navigate, and allow me to analyse marriage as a practice, despite only one woman being formally married. Despite six participants identifying as unmarried, they were living in situations similar to their peers, who did identify as married. Therefore, their experiences contribute to this effort to understand perceptions of marriage and the wider context of informal living situations, which for some young women, does classify as marriage. Self-identification is a significant theme in Chapters 6 and 7. Understanding these dynamics is important for establishing how women defined and experienced marriage.

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<sup>7</sup> Henceforth, only FGDs will be specifically identified, not interviews. Interview references include: the participant's name, age, marital status and date. FGD references include the aforementioned characteristics and "FGD". All interviews are semi-structured. This is not referred to in-text, but is discussed in Chapter 4.5.

Marital status and identification	Age range	N
Single	15-19	2
	20-24	2
	Total	4
Identifies as married	15-19	1
	20-24	7
	Total	8
Identifies as unmarried, but living with partner	15-19	3
	20-24	3
	Total	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	

Table 1: Marital status and identification of interview participants.

### 5.3. Optimistic, realistic, or pessimistic? Girls' definitions and expectations of marriage

In order to analyse how young women and girls experienced marriage, it is important to understand their definitions of the practice. One girl explained, *"My understanding is that when you live with a man, you are married, so that is marriage"* (Keni, 23, married, 6/2/19). Another girl told me, *"What I see marriage like, when you see a guy you like, and the guy will come and see your family, and then you do the marriage rites"* (Bethany, 24, unmarried, 6/2/19). These statements contrast in their definitions of marriage as either a living situation, or in terms of a formal process, providing empirical evidence for the different kinds of marriage in Akpo.

Defining the purpose of marriage did generate similarities between participants: *"You are helping your partner and he is helping you, so you are all helping each other,"* (Mamle, 23, married, 5/3/19), and *"For financial problems, you can enter into marriage and both of you can help each other"* (Becky, 22, married, FGD, 28/2/19). "Helping each other" was a common theme, particularly in terms of financial help. This theme indicates girls' positive understanding of marriage as a supportive union, one in which both partners were equal and shared responsibilities. The mention of finance also indicates the role that economics plays in marriage unions in Akpo and which I discuss more below.

Furthermore, this research also explored girls' expectations and how these might have changed over time. Expectations indicate girls' former aspirations for marriage, and a change in expectations would reveal the kind of experience they have had. For instance, one girl explained, "*I thought when you are married, you are okay, you will have no problem,*" but that she no longer felt this way (Olivia, 22, married, FGD, 28/2/19). This change in her expectations of marriage may have resulted from difficult experiences since her union. Alternatively, this change could also suggest that having high expectations (that she would be "okay and have no problems") led to disappointment when the reality of her marriage did not meet these expectations. Other participants described the more sobering expectations they grew up with, which remain true today:

Dede: "My parents told me that marriage is not an easy thing.

I: How do you feel about that?

D: It's true,"<sup>8</sup> (Dede, 20, married, 5/3/19).

This extract indicates the inherent difficulty that some women associated with marriage, and the confirmation of these beliefs illuminates some women's reality. Of course, the idea of marriage being difficult is not unique to Akpo, but perhaps the particular economic challenges of this community (Chapter 4.3) further complicate a challenging social practice. Some girls had no expectations at all, claiming, "*I didn't really understand it when I was growing*" (Mamle, 23, married, 5/3/19). Evidently, ignorance of what a marriage entails is a universal phenomenon. However, in rural communities such as Akpo, education and access to health services can be lacking. Such ignorance of personal and sexual relationships can have serious consequences on the health and lives of young women, arguably perpetuating cycles of gendered inequalities that continue to exclude girls, according to authors such as Nussbaum (2000).

These various extracts demonstrate that definitions and expectations of marriage were highly individual, specific to the particular understandings of the participant. Experiences of marriage, therefore, will be as diverse as the definitions themselves, which - as various other authors have also argued - are fluid and flexible (Agyei et al., 2000; Fuseini, 2013; Stevanovic-Fenn et al., 2015). This fluidity of definitions created a rich and complex account of how women in Akpo navigate marriage.

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<sup>8</sup> I indicates the interviewer and D indicates the participant.

#### 5.4. “Pregnancy is the biggest reason for girls getting married”: exploring girls’ reasons for marriage

There are common trends that ran across interview and FGD participants’ reasons for marriage. Following national and regional patterns, Akpo has a high adolescent pregnancy rate, as one participant described, *“Those who give birth early are many in this community”* (Olivia, 22, married, 28/2/19). Research has found that adolescent pregnancy often drives rates of early marriage (Stevanovic-Fenn et al., 2015). One participant captured this directional relationship, *“Pregnancy is the biggest reason for girls getting married”* (Diana, 20, single, 6/2/19). All interview respondents had children, whether single, married or living with their partners, demonstrating the prevalence of premarital sex and adolescent pregnancy in this community.

In Akpo, many girls began sexual relationships at a young age, without being fully aware of family planning or contraception methods, or even the real risk of pregnancy. In an FGD, one girl used the phrase, *“Before you realise, you are pregnant,”* which reflects reality for many participants and highlights the risks of a lack of SRHR education (Sarah, 19, married, FGD, 28/2/19). While abortion was mentioned, this is not common in Akpo, due to social and religious norms (Becky, 22, married, 28/2/19). For most girls who got pregnant, their only option was to live with their partners, whether voluntarily, or through parental pressure. This was a common trend in Akpo, *“My parents made me go to my partner’s when I got pregnant”* (Chloe, 15, unmarried, 14/3/19). As discussed, for some, this living situation constituted marriage, *“As soon as you are pregnant, the guy will claim you are his wife, and you will live together”* (Nicole, 24, unmarried, FGD, 28/2/19). For many girls and women in Akpo, getting pregnant was the start of their married life, *“whether you like it or not”* (Becky, 22, married, 28/2/2019).

While it may seem like starting these sexual relationships was a choice made on the part of these girls, more complex patterns emerged. Economic opportunities in Akpo are extremely limited, centered around farming and petty trade (Arthur, 63, and Jack, 43, FGD with epicentre executives, 1/3/19). Consequently, a severe lack of economic resources is a reality for many families, and while basic education is free in Ghana, uniform, books and even daily food can create financial challenges (Christopher, 56, FGD with community leaders, 22/2/19). Many girls described their parents being unable to provide for their needs while they were at school (Daisy, 20, single, 22/2/19; Sammy, 18, unmarried, 14/3/19). For some girls, the lack of support was a result of being orphaned, *“When I was going to school, there*



*wasn't any help. Sometimes you are in a class and you are hungry, you can't concentrate on what they are teaching you"* (Olivia, 22, married, 28/2/19). One girl shared her particularly difficult story with me:

When my mum died, things became very difficult, like what to eat to go to school, so I stopped school, before I got pregnant ... When I was growing up, I told my mum I wanted to be a nurse. She said it was a good idea, so she helped me with everything she could to make it happen. I had to stop when my mum died (Mamle, 23, married, 5/3/19).

These extracts highlight the extent of poverty in this community (and other communities like Akpo, as some women moved there to be with partners). The lack of economic resources severely inhibited the choices that these young women could make. Therefore, whether orphaned or not, many women turned to men and male partners "to be taken care of." This was the case for the majority of participants, and I repeatedly heard versions of the same story:

I didn't consider marriage to be my top priority, but because I lacked someone to take care of me, I was

forced to do it, even though I wasn't ready for it (Tracy, 24, married, 11/2/19).

This story illuminates the difficult choices that girls in Akpo made: face economic hardship alone or accept help from a man, even though he often "*wants something in return*" (Sarah, 19, married, FGD, 28/2/19). Girls' need to be taken care of demonstrates how women in Akpo, whether intentionally or not, exchanged sex for economic stability, although financial difficulties often continued after marriage. Sexual relationships and early marriages in Ghana may appear to be girls' choices, in a way that contrasts with research on other regions' forms of early marriage (Koster et al., 2017), but these decisions to marry still took place in a context of very limited opportunities and alternatives, and little understanding of the implications of such choices. These same financial worries are a huge factor affecting women's experiences once they are married.

### **5.5. "Married girls are overburdened": understanding girls' experiences of marriage**

During operationalisation, I identified three dimensions of the concept of marriage: economic, physical and social.<sup>9</sup> As discussed in Chapter 4, these a priori codes informed my interview guide<sup>10</sup> and were explored during data collection and coding, where women's

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix 2 for operationalisation table.

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix 3 for interview guide.

experiences corresponded to these codes. Following the previous section, I first discuss economic dimensions of marriage, then the physical and social.

#### 5.5.1. (In)security and self-sufficiency: economic dimensions

Firstly, economic dimensions include girls' stated reasons for starting sexual relationships, such as limited employment opportunities in Akpo, amongst others. Some girls married for economic stability, because "*I want someone to take care of me,*" (Abigail, 21, unmarried, 11/2/19). Many women recognised that being provided for was a benefit of getting married. One participant explained "*When I need money, or he has money and I need something, he will always provide for me*" (Nicole, 24, unmarried, 11/2/19). Therefore, while the choice to marry was constrained by economic realities, it does appear to help girls in certain critical ways (Boehme, 2006; Koster et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, a major theme is economic precariousness, as economic stability often did not materialise after marriage. Many participants identified that once married, "*You don't have money to take care of yourself*" (Diana, 20, single, 6/2/19). Marriage often curtailed women's economic opportunities and heightened their financial dependence on men, which is inevitably precarious (see also Chapter 6). One girl captured the risk of relying on a partner: "*If your husband doesn't have enough money, then you don't have someone to take care of you*" (Bethany, 24, unmarried, 6/2/19). Girls' experiences of marriage could be defined by their economic dependence on partners, and instability associated with this dependence, as confirmed in previous research (PMNCH, 2012).

Moreover, having financial responsibility might increase the husband's power over his wife, in that she must respect, and presumably, obey him, in order to be supported (Fuseini, 2013). One participant described the power dynamic associated with economic dependence: "*I think you have to get a handiwork before you think of marriage. That way, the man cannot look down upon you, because you have your own work*" (Tracy, 24, married, 11/2/19). Tracy, here offering advice to younger girls, revealed how economic dependence created new challenges, namely her husband's increased power over her. This extract suggests that marriage was not the equal partnership that some girls expected, but a dynamic in which one partner dominates the other. This understanding of marriage suggests that married girls have limited power, dependent on their husbands for economic security, and remain burdened with financial and personal challenges, confirming Greene's research (2015).

However, the extract above also illuminates another important theme: aspirations for self-sufficiency. This theme was discussed frequently: *“I want handiwork like sewing or bakery, anything, so I can earn something for myself,”* (Mamle, 23, married, 5/3/19) and *“I really want to get some work, to be able to take care of the kids”* (Sarah, 19, married, 5/3/19). These extracts indicate the strength of girls’ desires to be self-sufficient. These aspirations might also transform their relationships with partners, as one participant observed: *“You can even help the man. When you are working and you have money, when he needs something, you can support him”* (Dede, 20, married, FGD, 18/3/19). This quotation demonstrates how self-sufficiency might reshape girls’ relationships with their partners, shifting their marriage from one of dependence to one of increased equality between partners. This change would alter how women are able to relate to their partners, feel about themselves, and ultimately, change their experiences of marriage according to this economic dimension.

Complex dynamics underpin girls’ experiences of economic dimensions of marriage, defined by economic dependence, a desire for self-sufficiency, and power dynamics created by this dependence. Married girls and young women in Akpo were constrained economically, and while marriage served as a way of supporting themselves in one sense, it certainly was not a simple solution to their financial concerns. The next section explores physical dimensions.

#### 5.5.2. Sweeping, sharing chores, and sex: physical dimensions

This section considers the physical dimensions of marriage, principally, domestic work and sex. While domestic labour can also fall under economic dimensions, in this research, it was classified as physical, as this how participants themselves understood household chores. They considered domestic work as part of a physical routine that began after marriage, and instead, saw economic dimensions as being able to work outside of the home. This research does acknowledge, however, the centrality of domestic work to informal economies, but does not present this dynamic here. Furthermore, pregnancy and childcare are also important physical aspects: pregnancy was closely tied to discussions of sex, and childcare is an important component of the discussion presented in Chapter 6. Therefore, physical dimensions of marriage are principally defined as domestic labour and sex.

Firstly, each interview participant described a similar daily routine: waking up early, sweeping the compound, fetching water, dressing children for school, going to the farm, cooking and cleaning. Many young women acknowledged the role that domestic work played in their

lives: *"When you are married, you have to cook, you have to clean, you have to do all those things that are important, you cannot live without doing them"* (Mamle, 23, married, 5/3/19). This labour became a natural part of married girls' lives, widely seen as an inevitable result of the marriage union. One girl described how, when she was living at her own home, she did little domestic work, but when she moved to live with her partner's family, *"They call me a married girl, so they allow me to do everything in the house"* (Sammy, 18, unmarried, 14/3/19). As if domestic work was a step to maturity and adulthood, this young woman was then almost entirely responsible for this household, demonstrating the amount of responsibility that is placed on married girls' shoulders, confirming existing research (UNFPA, 2012; Greene, 2015).

Secondly, due to their economic dependence on husbands, girls had less ability to disagree with partners or stand up for themselves, for fear of being forced out of the household. One participant captured this dynamic:

As a lady, you cannot just get up and decide not to sweep the house, not to cook ... when you do that, it makes the man angry because he doesn't see why you are not doing those things ... You get used to it, because you know you are the one to do it, so you don't complain, you just do it (Sarah, 19, married, 5/3/19).

Evidently, girls' physical experiences of marriage can be defined as having little control within but huge responsibility over their households, about which all participants expressed regret. One participant succinctly claimed: *"Married girls are overburdened, because everything is put on them,"* recognising the difficulty that her peers experienced (Bridget, 19, single, 14/3/19).

Nevertheless, men's role in domestic work did occur frequently, a surprising finding. In an FGD with community leaders, one male participant commented that *"It used to be that the wife did all the chores in the house. But now, things are changing, men are advising themselves to help with the chores,"* and that he helped his wife with domestic labour (Christopher, 56, FGD with community leaders, 22/2/19). This perspective was confirmed by several girls, who described how their husbands sometimes contributed to household work, moving beyond traditional gender roles that usually appeared to characterise marriages in this community (Nicole, 24, unmarried, 11/2/19; Sarah, 19, married, 5/3/19).

However, this behaviour can have implications for the man: *"Sometimes, when the man helps with chores, people can see him to be a fool,"* because he has taken up work usually seen to be *"for a lady"* (Keni, 23, married, FGD, 28/2/19). According to participants, this response to men helping with domestic work was enough to deter them from helping, and one participant remarked that, *"It's supposed to be the two of you, but mostly, the men don't do it"* (Sarah, 19, married, 5/3/19). This statement reveals the perception that marriage was "supposed" to be a partnership, with both partners contributing to physical elements of marriage, but that this was often not the case. Traditional gender norms about women and domestic labour prevailed in Akpo, and while some married girls experienced male support, most did not. The reality for many married girls, as researched previously, is that they bear the burden of domestic work in their marriages (PMNCH, 2012; UNFPA, 2012).

Another physical dimension is sex, seen as an important part of marriage, as one respondent explained: *"It's one of the reasons why there is marriage"* (Mamle, 23, married, 5/3/19). This extract presents contradictory attitudes to sex: despite the prevalence of premarital sex in the community, some young women still believed that sex should ideally take place within marriage. Evidently, girls had conflicting relationships with sex. When asked about the purpose of sex, one participant responded, *"Mostly, it's for fun, but we are just scared of the pregnancy,"* (Olivia, 22, married, FGD, 28/2/19). Even within marriage, where childbirth is considered appropriate and desirable, pregnancy seemed to present an ongoing threat to married girls' lives.

Due to unequal power dynamics, male partners have greater capacity to demand sex and women have less ability to decide the nature of these sexual encounters. One participant described this imbalance, *"Sometimes, when he is in the mood and maybe you are not, he will not force you, but the way he treats you, you have to give up,"* (Sarah, 19, married, 5/3/19). This extract illuminates how this unequal power dynamic, stemming from economic differences and present in negotiations of domestic labour, also reveals itself in sexual relationships between partners, as argued elsewhere in the literature (Nussbaum, 2000; Fuseini, 2013; UNFPA, 2012). Women have little say in the couple's intimate activity, and their concern is that, *"When the man wants sex, and you don't give it to him, he might be tempted to go outside"* (Olivia, 22, married, FGD, 28/2/19). The threat of infidelity is coupled with fears of sexually transmitted infections and the risk of the partner impregnating and favouring another woman (Olivia, 22, married, FGD, 28/2/19). Therefore, sex within marriage

remains a risky behaviour, something over which girls have little personal control, echoing existing research (Girls Not Brides, 2017b; Koster et al., 2017).

Overall, young women's physical experiences of marriage are largely defined by heavy workloads and limited control over their sexuality and reproduction, stemming from an unequal power relationship with their partners. Married girls had little personal security, often fearing infidelity and abandonment by their partners, concerns which were partly due to the informal nature of these marriages, discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6.

### 5.5.3. Peer pressure and asking permission: social dimensions

This section explores social dimensions of marriage. Much of this discussion crosses over with themes of the next chapter; therefore, I limit the discussion of social dimensions of marriage here. Specific personal relationships are discussed in depth in Chapter 6.3. This section considers social factors influencing women's experiences of marriage and social power relations within marriages. As a social practice, there are multiple points at which societal attitudes influenced girls' experiences of marriage. For instance, marriage can be considered as a response to peer pressure from friends, as one girl described, "*When you look at your friends getting married, and you are not, you think, 'I am older and I am not married, so I also need to get married'*" (Dede, 20, married, FGD, 28/2/19). This would suggest that her marriage was a rushed decision, taken, alongside other factors, as a need to fit in with others, which would influence her experiences once she was married.

Furthermore, many participants explained that they did not share personal problems with friends once they were married or living with a partner:

Mostly, when your friend comes to your house and you have a problem with your husband, they can be

gossiping, or they see the way your husband is treating you, and they go and fight with their husband, because they want their husbands to treat them like that (Olivia, 22, married, 28/2/19).

Evidently, social pressures such as avoiding gossip or jealousy from friends influenced how she related to peers, possibly limiting her contact with them altogether. While she might have limited interactions with friends for these reasons, isolating herself to only her husband's company may cause her to experience marriage differently than those with a bigger circle of friends (see also Chapter 6.3). While people vary in their social lives, marriage did appear to

affect how research participants engaged with their peers, confirming existing research (Greene, 2015).

Similarly to previous dimensions, exploring social dimensions also raises questions of power between partners. Girls' social experiences are also defined as unequal, and the power dynamic is clear. Many women explained that, "*When there is something, you need to inform your spouse, before he will allow you to go. It is the norm here*" (Nicole, 24, unmarried, FGD, 28/2/19). Stemming from the economic power they wield over their partners, husbands also have social control over young women, something that is, again, seen as normal. My interpreter Mustapha, elaborated on men's control of women, "*Sometimes, it's safety and security, and sometimes control. They feel they are in charge and control of the woman*" (interpreting for FGD, 28/2/19). He described a balance between men who worry about their partners' safety and those who wanted control over their wives. In any case, this indicates the influence that social factors have on women's experiences of marriage: a woman with a more relaxed, understanding partner may have more freedom and independence, than those with more controlling partners. Young women's social experiences, while diverse, can often be defined by unequal power relations, dependence on their partner, and lack of personal freedoms.

## 5.6. Conclusion

This chapter explored views and experiences of early marriage in Akpo. Understanding economic, physical and social dimensions of marriage allows a deeper appreciation of girls' contradictory and complex experiences, important for Chapter 6. This research recognises that participants are highly diverse, but that there are enough common occurrences in the data for patterns to be identified. Experiences of marriage can be defined by economic and social dependence on partners, desire for self-sufficiency, lack of control over physical aspects, and unequal power relations. This chapter provides the analytical foundation for the next chapter, which explores how a spectrum of inclusion and exclusion engages with experiences of marriage. Chapter 6 returns to the distinction in types of marriage, which will be presented in much greater detail than space could allow in this chapter.



## 6. “The ones with rites are more respected in the community, than the ones without them”: exploring dynamics of marriage, inclusion and exclusion

### 6.1. Introduction

This chapter explores the most important finding of this study: early marriage can be considered inclusive, in certain circumstances. While the different forms of marriage were introduced in the previous chapter, here, this comparison is discussed in relation to a spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion, comprised of social networks, personal relationships, and civic participation. This chapter first examines the formal-informal marriage distinction. Each dimension is then addressed in turn, first generally, and then in relation to marriage. Before discussing the different dimensions, it is necessary to reiterate their interconnections. For instance, civic participation and personal relationships cross-over in terms of girls’ relationships with the wider community, and personal relationships can affect girls’ inclusion in social networks. Therefore, while I drew on the conceptual tool for analytical reasons, married girls’ experiences cannot truly be so neatly divided and should be understood holistically.

### 6.2. “When we perform them, I become the wife”: the formal-informal marriage distinction

This study argues that by considering women’s social position and relationships with partners, there are ways in which formal marriage, with completed rites, offers *some* young women, in *some* circumstances, opportunities for inclusion. As discussed above, formal marriage in Akpo consists of the completion of marriage rites, which shows the community, the girl’s family, and the girl herself, that the man is taking responsibility for her and any children they may have together. Consequently, the woman’s social position changes with formal marriage: “*When we perform them, I become the wife*” (Nicole, 24, unmarried, 11/2/19). The woman feels like her husband is serious, that he “*has some kind of love for you,*” strengthening their relationship (Chloe, 15, unmarried, 14/3/19). The woman is treated differently by the wider community: “*The ones with rites are more respected in the community, the society, than the ones without them*” (Mamle, 23, married, 5/3/19).

These community responses to formal marriage form an important part of the following discussion regarding inclusion and exclusion. One participant explained how community leaders often approach the issue: “*They advise us that whenever you have money, even if it*

*is little, go and perform the rites*" (Nicole, 24, unmarried, FGD, 28/2/19). This extract demonstrates the central role that marriage rites play in Akpo, with community elders intervening in relationships to promote their completion. Yet with only one participant having completed them at the time of the study, it is evident that formal marriages are rare. One reason for failure to perform marriage rites was a lack of economic resources (see also Chapter 5.2). However, the last FGD with girls revealed a significant finding. One participant explained some men's reluctance to perform marriage rites and formalise their marriage: Others, they are very reluctant, they think if they perform the rites, the lady will have the upper-hand on

them, so ... they will not perform the rites ... they take the ladies to be something they don't value, so they think, if the rites have been performed, they embrace you to be in the community. To prevent all those things, they will not do it and if they don't do it, you are all the same (Nicole, 24, unmarried, FGD, 18/3/19).

As Nicole explained, formal marriage is seen to elevate women's social position, because they are now considered to be official wives, part of a highly respected social institution (see also Chapter 3.3). Therefore, it is possible to infer that completion of marriage rites acts as a gateway into the wider community, a form of inclusion into wider structures, discussed in greater detail below. However, with this elevated social standing, men might believe that women will "have the upper-hand," and all the ways in which men dominate their partners (see previous chapter) might no longer be as permissible. These men, according to this participant, do not place value in their partners, and might want to maintain the unequal power dynamic within the relationship. By keeping girls in a form of marriage that does not grant them any social respect, standing or power, men are effectively excluding their partners from the wider community, enhancing their exclusionary experiences along the spectrum.

Furthermore, this quotation highlights the distinction between the two forms of marriage. As discussed, several young women living with their partners *do* identify as married, justifying the use of the term 'informal marriage.' The formal-informal distinction extends beyond rites, shaping the various experiences girls and young women will have of their marriage. The data suggest that, while formal marriages are in no way entirely inclusive, they create more opportunities for inclusion, whereas informal marriages are inherently more exclusionary for girls. This argument was developed from an illuminating discussion with FGD participants.

Augustina, an interpreter, summarised these young women's perspectives of the exclusionary nature of informal marriages:

They [*participants*] are all complaining about their partners, they [*partners*] are not even happy about the

girls leaving them. The perception is there that, after completing the work [*handicraft training*], the women will not come back to them. To save their lives, they will not allow the ladies to leave them (Augustina, interpreter, FGD, 18/3/19).

"*To save their lives*" is a powerful phrase, introducing a male perspective rarely seen elsewhere during data collection. The extract suggests that men depend on women and their role in the home, (see Chapter 5.5) and if this were to change because of the woman gaining employment, the man would not be able to cope. Men's reported reaction to this fear of abandonment was to restrict women's freedoms and opportunities, illuminating men's power over women. When probed for clarification, participants confirmed that male fear of abandonment was connected to the concerns of female infidelity, which both arise from the informal nature of marriage and the man's failure to complete the marriage rites:

If couples had gone through official marriage, that kind of misunderstanding on those things [*infidelity*] would be limited. It's because those things [*rites*] have not been done, that is why men are thinking like that (Tracy, 24, married, FGD, 18/3/19).

Evidently, a disconnect exists between a man's rationale in not performing the rites, in order to maintain his dominance over the woman with their informal marriage, and the anxieties of women's infidelity that this informal marriage creates. In the event of a woman's infidelity in an informal union, the 'scorned' partner is able to abandon her much more easily than if she were his official wife. As a way of protecting himself from possible infidelity and policing the behaviour of the young woman, who wants these rites completed, the man postpones completing the rites. One participant captured this dynamic:

The guys advise themselves [*referring to men telling themselves*] to study the lady. They will be with you, they will study you for a number of years, if you are okay for him, he performs the rites (Tracy, 24, married, FGD, 18/3/19).

This participant suggests that eventual completion of marriage rites is a result of the woman gaining her partner's trust. Formal marriage, therefore, might be considered a reward for the woman, who has "*been the best in the community*" (Chloe, 15, unmarried, 14/3/19). This section has presented the most significant finding of this study: the distinction between formal and informal marriage, and the contrasting effects this distinction can have on married

girls' lives. This section explored changes in social status that women experience with official marriage, community responses and reasons for men delaying said formalities. All the components of this distinction coalesce in this study's main finding: formal marriage can be considered inclusive in some circumstances and for some girls, as compared to informal marriage, which appears to be more exclusionary.

### 6.3. Accessing social networks: health services, education and employment

This dimension comprises three sub-dimensions: health services, education and employment. Participants' experiences varied between each. Firstly, most girls and young women explained that they frequently visited the community clinic at the THP epicentre. Most girls felt confident in naming services provided at the clinic, most of which centered around pregnancy: "*When I was pregnant, that was where I went for checkups and when it was time, that was where I went to deliver*" (Keni, 23, married, 6/2/19). Some participants identified financial barriers to accessing health services (Becky, 22, married, 28/2/19). There were few other barriers for young married women, indicating their greater level of inclusion along this sub-dimension.

Secondly, the majority of participants felt excluded from the particular social network that education can provide. One participant had returned to school a year after giving birth, as her parents were caring for her infant child (Bridget, 19 single, 14/3/19). The remainder of the main participant group, however, were not attending school, and most dropped out due to either lack of economic resources or pregnancy, as discussed in the previous chapter. While Ghanaian law encourages young women to return to school after childbirth, this is rare, due to financial issues and fear of stigma, according to research (Ahorlu, Pfeiffer and Obrist, 2015). FGD participants expressed their desire to return to school but acknowledged that doing so would be highly unlikely. One participant explained challenges preventing girls' inclusion in education:

Being at school and taking care of a child can never be possible for you, you have to drop out ... Even if there is someone to take care of the child, you will not have the concentration to be in school" (Olivia, 22, married, FGD, 18/3/19).

This extract indicates the external pressures placed on young women in Akpo, whose options were limited by practical constraints such as childcare. Education proved to be a major indication of girls' exclusion, confirming existing research (UNFPA, 2012; PMNCH, 2012).

Thirdly, girls' and young women's experiences of employment were also exclusionary. Most young women, as common in Akpo, were employed in farming. Farming, however, was often not seen as an occupation, but rather, a survival strategy: "*We are compelled to do it, it is the only means to get something for your family*" (Olivia, 22, married, FGD, 18/3/19). Instead, many women aspired for a "handiwork," most commonly sewing, baking or hairdressing. Handiwork was valued both as a means of income and a way of spending time, and participants often expressed frustration about the lack of opportunities in Akpo: Living here isn't easy, because if you don't have a handiwork that you will do to get money, sometimes

you wake up and the whole day, you don't have anything on you, and it hasn't been easy for me at all" (Nicole, 24, unmarried, 6/2/19).

Exclusion from employment was widely experienced by young participants, who aspired for self-sufficiency (see also Chapter 5.5) but had few opportunities. Nevertheless, some women did report their economic activities in such a way that indicated their inclusion within social networks, albeit in a small-scale way: "*After selling the plantain, I take the cost incurred and the rest of the money I sometimes reinvest in the business*" (Keni, 23, married, 6/2/19). This participant's control over her own income from trading activities suggested she was in some way included in wider social networks, as she was able to take an active part in her economic decisions, an important element of the RCI (Giraud et al., 2013). When asked about their place in the economic system (explained as processes of buying and selling, working and earning money) - one participant said she felt included, but her lack of income and information meant that she could not gain as much access to the system as she wanted:

For me, I am part of the economic system - but, if you had a chance to be doing things yourself, it's better than going to the market and coming to buy and sell ... So if we had first-hand information, we could be making the products ourselves and selling them, that would be better (Nicole, 24, unmarried, FGD, 18/3/19).

This participant's response illuminates her desire for self-sufficiency, to be "doing things yourself," again demonstrating the structural barriers preventing young women's inclusion in social networks. Economic realities and the severe lack of employment opportunities affect the whole community, but particularly for girls and young women (Nussbaum, 2000). Lack of childcare was repeatedly mentioned as a barrier for young women's access to employment: It's a tedious thing, you cannot carry the baby behind you and do weeding at the same time. More or less, selling in the sun, you cannot take your baby (Nicole, 24, unmarried, FGD, 18/3/19).

Participants agreed that when children are at school, the women had more freedom to work (Olivia, 22, married, and Nicole, 24, unmarried, FGD, 18/3/19), but acknowledged that challenges to their inclusion in employment remained, including their partners and the form of marriage they were experiencing.

### 6.3.1. “When they ask for married women, I own up, because maybe they are going to educate them”: marriage and social networks

The formal-informal marriage distinction was particularly important for social networks. According to participants, husbands limited their wives’ ability to access employment and education because of the aforementioned fear of infidelity: *“Your partner would not allow you to leave your children behind to go back to school,”* and *“Our partners are not in favour of us going outside the town to go and learn work”* (Olivia, 22, and Keni, 23, both married, FGD, 18/3/19). Formal marriage rites indicated greater trust between the partners, which all participants acknowledged would cause their partner to grant them increased freedoms. Whether they would be able to gain access to employment or education remains hypothetical and dependent on external factors, but the fact remains that of either form of marriage, formal marriage grants more opportunities than informal, and could be considered inclusive.

Furthermore, the community response to formal marriage can offer greater inclusion into various social networks, such as informal health and education. At particular events, or “programs,” organisers can ask for married people to step forward, which can lead to certain benefits, as one participant explained.

When they ask for married women, I own up, because maybe they are going to educate them on something. I am living with the man, so that education can benefit me ... When you go for other activities, those who are married, they group them, and can give them counselling, like how to live with their husbands and other things, so I own up, because it can also benefit me (Olivia, 22, married, FGD, 28/2/19).

This quotation demonstrates the interconnections between dimensions of the spectrum and illuminates a complex dynamic between the forms of marriage. Firstly, this participant acknowledges the importance of considering the experiences of informally married women, or those living with partners, who are still navigating complex intimate relationships.

Secondly, this example rests on the assumption that “married” women are seen as more appropriate participants for counselling or education.

Finally, Olivia complicates the marriage distinction, suggesting that self-identification is also a gateway for inclusion, as well as rites. By “owning up” as married, Olivia saw herself as equal to those with rites and gained access to this group, facilitating her own inclusion despite her informal status. She challenges the distinction, highlighting the fluidity of marriage in Akpo. However, Olivia is an exception. For most girls, the distinction remains an important factor in their in- or exclusion, because they continue to see themselves as belonging to the informally married group. Again, then, it is possible to infer that formal marriage, whether through rites or self-identification, can be considered as inclusive, as officially married women are offered greater access to support and resources.

Informally-married women, without rites and this kind of identification, are excluded from said support, due to the social unacceptability of their relationship, despite having similar needs.

This section discussed how inclusive or exclusionary experiences in employment, education, and health services can be influenced by the formality of the marriage, or the ways in which girls see themselves. Informally married women are mostly excluded from this dimension, because of their status in the community, unless they see themselves differently. However, formally married women or those who identify in this way, would have greater access to various social networks, due to the wider acceptability of their unions, or their own belief in this acceptability.

#### **6.4. Navigating personal relationships: parents, peers, and partners**

This dimension considered relationships with family, friends, in-laws and husbands or partners, building on the discussion of social dimensions of marriage in Chapter 5.5.2.

Participants were asked if these relationships had changed since marriage, how they felt about any changes, and who they would talk to if they had a personal problem. It is difficult to summarise all girls’ relationships with all the different people in their lives, and for each young woman, there were often different levels of in- or exclusion for different social groups.

This dimension is first discussed generally, and then discussed in relation to the marriage distinction.



Firstly, family relationships often changed after pregnancy and subsequent marriage, as parents often felt their daughters had ignored their advice by getting pregnant, or girls felt more distant with disappointed parents. One parent captured this dynamic:

We don't disown our children just like that ... sometimes, when you are talking to the girl and she is not

listening, out of anger, maybe the parent can distance from girls (Paul, 49, FGD with parents, 14/2/19).

Many girls felt excluded from family relationships after marriage, due to both emotional and physical distance, echoing previous research (PMNCH, 2012). Many young respondents, in particular, expressed their regret at this distance: *"I feel sad I don't see them every day, I miss them"* (Sarah, 19, married, 5/3/19). Some participants, however, saw increased distance with their family as normal (Becky, 22, married, 28/2/19). Therefore, it is difficult to apply one answer to the question of inclusion or exclusion from family relationships, although many women recognised that marriage had influenced these relationships.

Secondly, sometimes relationships with friends remained after marriage, mostly when both girls were married. Community leaders recognised the importance of these relationships between married girls: *"Sometimes they help, if they are all married or all have kids, they can have a very friendly relationship"* (Anne, 56, FGD with community leaders, 22/2/19). This quote would suggest that in some cases, married girls experience inclusion in relationships with other married girls, as they have experiences in common. However, it is also true that married women have extremely heavy workloads, and as one participant described, *"Mostly, before you come back from the farm, you are tired and it's late, so you don't really have much time to spend with friends"* (Mamle, 23, married, 5/3/19). In this case, as found by Greene (2015), farming and domestic labour can exclude women from personal relationships with other married girls, as their lifestyles give them little free time to socialise.

However, friendships with single girls without children were harder to maintain, and often did not last. One girl reflected on this:

Sammy: All of my friends have gone away ... I miss them. I want to go with them.

I: So they don't have children?

S: No, no kids (Sammy, 18, unmarried, 14/3/19).

In this sense, Sammy is excluded from personal relationships due to her child and the demands of living with her partner, because most of her friends are single. Therefore, experiences of in- or exclusion depend on the particular dynamics of the girl's social life, and it is difficult to identify one experience. In any case, it could be argued that, "*There is more unity between those that are married than those that are not married, because they are all going through the same experience,*" so perhaps experiences of in- or exclusion depend on the kind of friendships the girl is able to or aims to maintain (Daniel, 51, FGD with community leaders, 22/2/19).

Thirdly, regarding in-law families, most participants instantly described these relationships as "*cordial*" (Abigail, 21, Nicole, 24, both unmarried, 11/2/19). While I am sure this was true in some cases, the speed at which some girls answered caused me to question their authenticity. Perhaps they were worried their answers would be somehow passed back to in-laws (despite assurances of confidentiality), or perhaps that they feel disrespectful to be critical (or even honest) about these relationships. Similarly, discussions with community members suggested that these relationships can often be more difficult than girls indicated, "*Most of them, there is a lot of misunderstanding between them, because sometimes, you see that the girl has just brought a burden on the family, and you see them and you are angry*" (Rupert, 76, FGD with community leaders, 22/2/19). The tension in these relationships stem from the often unexpected nature of pregnancy bringing two families together, and would serve to exclude young women from positive or supportive relationships with their partner's family. While one participant (Keni, 23, married, 6/2/19) indicated a close relationship with her sister-in-law, most other participants were much more vague. Therefore, the data suggests that participants were more likely to be excluded than included for this aspect of this dimension.

As discussed in the previous chapter, many participants' relationships with their partners were, at times, difficult, or defined by male control and power. This dynamic is reflected in this dimension, in which many girls and young women experienced exclusion from personal relationships, either with or because of, their partner. Women having to ask their partner for permission to go out directly affects both the quality and quantity of girls' relationships with family and friends, as well as with the partner himself. Some women did express supportive, more equal and inclusive relationships with their partners, but these were fairly rare, and these participants still had examples of exclusionary experiences within their marriages (Olivia, 22, married, 28/2/19). In some cases, women expressed the perspective that

partners were the only source of support they had: *“Before I got married, when I was in the middle of something, I would ask my brother or sister. But now, no one helps because they say I have a husband”* (Keni, 23, married, 6/2/19). Even by virtue of being married, without any actively exclusionary behaviour from the husband, she is excluded from relationships with her family, a theme found elsewhere in the literature (UNFPA, 2012).

#### 6.4.1. “They value a married person higher than others”: marriage and personal relationships

Relationships with partners allow discussions of this dimension in light of the marriage distinction. These connections have been discussed in depth in the preceding analysis. I have argued that intimate partner relationships would be strengthened by the completion of marriage rites, as husbands have greater reasons to trust their wives, potentially relaxing their control of wives’ freedoms (see also Chapter 6.2).

Regarding family and friends, these relationships were largely understood in relation to girls’ relationships with partners. Participants noted that they were often unable to see family and friends because of the social control their partners’ were able to wield over them:

*“My family is doing something in the next town ... but the man is not allowing me to go,”*

(Olivia, 22, married, FGD on 28/2/19; see also Chapter 5.5.3). I stipulate, in light of discussions about how married rites would change partner relationships, that positive changes with partners would result in positive changes in relationships with friends and family (see also Chapter 6.2). However, participants did not link the marriage distinction as explicitly with this dimension, so this argument has been developed largely by extending analysis from the other two dimensions. Nevertheless, the argument remains based on participants’ own reflections.

However, links between marriage and the wider community were notable, as also explored in other areas of analysis (see also Chapter 6.2 and 6.3). The wider community is said to *“value a married person higher than others,”* (Chloe, 15, unmarried, 14/3/19). This increased respect indicates that formal marriage creates more opportunities for more inclusive personal relationships with the wider community, whereas elders’ responses to informal marriages - *“It’s not a good marriage,”* (Christopher, 56, FGD with community leaders, 22/2/19) - would inherently keep girls from interacting with these groups. The community’s approaches to marriage has important implications for girls’ in- or exclusion in civic participation, explored in the next section.

This section has explored the complex dynamics of married girls' social lives and their personal relationships with family, friends, in-laws and partners. The diversity in girls' experiences in these relationships means it is hard to provide one answer for this dimension of in- or exclusion, but it is important to understand that many girls do experience highly exclusionary personal relationships, and more inclusive personal relationships are less common. These trends are exacerbated by the marriage distinction, which can either exclude girls from close relationships, or enhance their inclusion due to relationship with partners and the acceptability of the union. The next section explores civic participation.

### 6.5. Engaging in civic participation: church and community activities

This dimension considered church attendance and approaches to participation in community activities, such as epicentre meetings and communal labour. Surprisingly, many women expressed mostly inclusive experiences, with the majority saying they felt connected to their community, welcome at activities, and aware of the importance of participation. I had not expected to find such results in Akpo, but I was pleased to explore inclusive and positive community relations.

Firstly, church was a major component of girls' and young women's civic participation, with many attending regularly, an aspect in which some women participated with more than just attendance. One woman explained how she helped with church activities: *"I am part of those who clean the church and arrange the furniture"* (Keni, 23, married, 6/2/19). Church was considered as an acceptable form of civic participation, in which all female participants felt included (Christopher, 56, FGD with community leaders, 22/2/19). There were few barriers to young women's inclusion in the church, and partners seemed to be partly responsible for this: *"When I go to church, he doesn't stop me from going"* (Keni, 23, married, 6/2/19). Church attendance was an important indication of young married women's inclusion, as explored by Fuseini and Kalule-Sabiti (2015).

Secondly, there was a split between those who attended community meetings and believed in the importance of doing so, and those who had little interest. Several participants did not attend, citing reasons such as not being aware meetings were being held, not feeling like they were invited, or feeling that they were too young (Daisy, 20, single, 22/2/19). Therefore, many girls and young women voluntarily excluded *themselves* from this aspect of civic participation.

However, most participants expressed an interest in and positive approach to community activities: *“Sometimes, they give us information that we’ve never had before. Through these programs, you receive new education”* (Nicole, 24, unmarried, FGD, 28/2/19) and *“When they are doing something in the community and you take part, you realise that you are part of the community”* (Mamle, 24, married, 5/3/19). Nicole gave suggestions for new meeting groups that could benefit the community: *“We should have a mother to mother group that we can learn from each other”* (24, unmarried, 11/2/19). While indicating the current lack of this kind of group, it does reveal the active citizens present in Akpo. In this way, many women expressed their inclusion in civic participation, a finding that illuminates community dynamics in Akpo and offers new information regarding the lives of women (married and unmarried). Before entering Akpo, I was not sure what I would find for this dimension, but was pleasantly surprised to find an active and rich discussion of civic participation. This finding confirms that while women in Akpo may experience many forms of exclusion, there are many ways in which they remain active citizens, important social actors and dynamic individuals, echoing the work of Ahorlu et al., (2015), and feminist theorists Nussbaum (2000) and MacDonald (2015).

Similarly, part of community activity in Akpo was communal labour, including tasks such as weeding on the side of major roads and construction at the local school (Abigail, 21, unmarried, 11/2/19). Only those over 18 are allowed to participate in communal labour, (Anne, 56, FGD with community leaders, 22/2/19), although some girls over 18 still considered themselves too young (Daisy, 20, and Mary, 18, both single, 22/2/19). An important clarification was made by community leaders: *“If you can give birth, it means you are grown and you can help, and when you are over 18, you have to come. As soon as you have given birth, you are grown”* (Christopher, 56, FGD with community leaders, 22/2/19). Girls responded to this age distinction fairly positively. One participant explained the importance of communal labour: *“When I take part, I feel like a part of the community”* (Sarah, 19, married, 5/3/19). These encouraging examples and perceptions of participation indicate largely inclusive experiences along the spectrum of inclusion and exclusion, a positive finding of this study.

#### 6.5.1. “If you are married, you have to take part”: marriage and civic participation

Continuing from the previous section, the discussion about the right age for communal labour revealed an important connection between civic participation and marriage: *“No*

*matter how grown you are, if you are attending school, you are exempt. If you are married, you have to take part*” (Olivia, 22, married, FGD, 28/2/19). This extract does not stipulate a type of marriage, suggesting that even informal marriage can be inclusive - just having a partner is enough to indicate maturity and participation in community activities, which participants considered as positive.

Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 6.2, official marriage is perceived to bring girls greater respect from the wider community. In itself, this respect might serve to make girls feel more comfortable and welcome in community events and activities, serving to strengthen their inclusion in civic participation. More tangibly, however, the respect granted by the community has other effects. For instance, in church, a crucial act of civic participation for many young women, being married results in seats closer to the front of the church: *“Even in church, they have a place where married people sit, and where unmarried people sit”* (Sarah, 19, married, 5/3/19). Sitting closer to the front indicates a higher social position and makes girls feel more connected to the church and pastor, important in such a religious country, as explored by Fuseini and Kalule-Sabiti (2015). Being welcomed into this important institution in such a way demonstrates how formal marriage can be deemed inclusive.

However, speaking to one woman offered a counterpoint to this argument - she observed how, despite her informal marriage, she is invited to act as the ‘queen mother’ in some community events, a role usually reserved for officially married women:

Olivia: There is supposed to be a queen mother and her assistant - but when they are not there, mostly,

they randomly pick you to be the queen mother of the town.

I: Do you get picked to be the queen mother?

O: Always [*laughing*]... they wanted to put me at the back, because my husband hasn't performed his duties ... but sometimes they let me represent the queen mother (Olivia, 22, married, 28/2/19).

Olivia seemed to take great pride in this act from the community and was laughing as she told this story. While it is possible to observe that this rule prioritises officially married women for such public events, her example demonstrates an interesting dynamic. Again, she is the exception to the rule favouring official marriage. Olivia's self-identification as married places her within the group of formally married women, from which she is seen as an acceptable substitute for the queen mother. In this way, too, her self-identification as married facilitates her inclusion. This is not the case for most other girls in Akpo, who, while some identify as

married, do not include themselves in the same way, perhaps because they still believe in the informality of their unions and their adherence to the marriage distinction.

Ultimately, this section argues that with formal marriage, comes increased community respect and reduced mistrust from partners, which would both reduce barriers to participation and enhance inclusion in this dimension. Alternatively, data from conversations with women in informal marriages indicate that they feel less respect from community leaders, knowing that they disapprove of their relationships, and receive suspicion from their partners, both factors which would severely limit the civic participation of married young women in Akpo. Once again, therefore, the potentially inclusive nature of formal marriage is evident, highlighting informal marriage, the most common experience, as highly exclusionary. Girls' self-identification also determines girls' inclusion, although this was only true for one participant.

## **6.6. Conclusion**

This chapter presented the major findings of this study: a distinction between formal and informal marriage, with respective opportunities and barriers for married girls' inclusion. This chapter has explored three dimensions of the spectrum of inclusion and exclusion and how each dimension can be better understood in light of this marriage distinction. The central argument of this chapter is that formal marriage is associated with increased trust and freedom from partners and increased respect from community members, which enhance young women's opportunities for inclusion. However, informal marriage, which is more commonly experienced by young women in Akpo, is more exclusionary, resulting in less community respect and increased disapproval, and more difficult and less trusting relationships with partners, both of which exclude young women. Further complicating this distinction is self-identification and the way in which one participant was able to include herself. This chapter represents the bulk of my analysis of young women's experiences of early marriage in Akpo. The next chapter explores my discussion of these findings and conclusions of this research study.



## 7. Discussion and Conclusions

### 7.1. Introduction

This study sought to explore how girls and young women experience marriage, in relation to a spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion. This study found a distinction between formal and informal marriages, which affects girls' experiences along three dimensions of inclusion and exclusion. Firstly, this chapter provides explicit answers to the research questions, first organised according to sub-question, and then the main question. Additionally, the chapter considers theoretical and methodological reflections, recommendations for future programming and suggestions for future research. Finally, I offer final remarks to conclude this thesis.

### 7.2. “What are young women and girls’ perceptions of marriage?”

There are internationally-recognised definitions of early marriage as a practice (UNFPA, 2012), which this study acknowledges as valuable for enabling a coordinated global response. However, this research aims to fill an important theoretical gap by exploring girls' own perceptions, which included their definitions and expectations of, and reasons for, marriage. The marriage distinction was central to girls' perceptions of marriage, as were economic factors. By researching perceptions and contributing more emic perspectives to early marriage literature, this study has enabled participants to share in the knowledge-building process, aligning with the feminist theories that informed this study (Harding and Norberg (2005).

As noted by Fuseini (2013), marriage in Ghana is a fluid practice centered around the completion of customary rites, which was reflected in the data on young women's multiple - often contradictory - definitions of marriage. It is important to note that participants explicitly stated that no one forced them to marry, contrasting with a dominant theme in early marriage literature (UNFPA, 2012). In this sense, this research can broadly contribute to literature exploring patterns of marriage and family formation in West Africa (Walker, 2013), but can also help better understand the lives of a much-neglected group of young women.

Secondly, existing research has found that in Ghana, some young women marry to escape poverty, as they associate marriage with economic necessity (Koster et al., 2017). My analysis confirmed these trends, establishing the existence of perceptions that marriage could reduce financial challenges, revealing a common view that access to a husband's economic resources would improve their lives. Boehm (2006) found a similar finding in

Lesotho, in which marriage was considered an opportunity for women to better their lives. However, it is acknowledged here and elsewhere in the literature (Koster et al., 2017, 2019) that such decisions to marry early are situated in a context of limited choices and economic alternatives. By illuminating married girls' economic motivations, this research can reveal more about why the practice continues in this region, privileging the girl of today (MacDonald, 2015), who continues to experience early marriage, despite many national and international interventions (UNFPA, 2012; Girls Not Brides 2017b; Freccero and Whiting, 2018).

Thirdly, research has found that in West Africa, and Ghana specifically, adolescent pregnancy drives early marriage (Agyei et al., 2000; Walker, 2013; Stevanovic-Fenn et al., 2015; Haga, 2018). This analysis confirmed this trend in girls' perceptions of early marriage. However, this pattern contrasts to broader theories within early marriage literature, which presents an alternative relationship: early marriage, *then* adolescent pregnancy (UNFPA, 2012; Girls Not Brides, 2017b; Koster et al., 2017). This study, therefore, confirms regional patterns of early marriage - that is, of marriage following pregnancy. Thus, this research highlights the importance of building more relevant and representative knowledge of early marriage in Ghana and West Africa more broadly, built on the perspectives of girls themselves, which I have done here, using feminist principles such as those suggested by Harding and Norberg (2005).

Finally, the custom of marriage rites is not a new finding, and is documented in regional literature (Fuseini, 2013; Walker, 2013; Stevanovic-Fenn et al., 2015). However, an important trend in girls' perceptions was the distinction between informal and formal marriages. Either side of the marriage distinction confirms a different perspective within early marriage literature. Firstly, as discussed in Chapter 6, formal marriage was perceived as a highly respected institution, through which members could gain access to adult circles. This perception echoes Bohem's (2006, p.153) study in Lesotho, in which marriage was essential to becoming "a complete socially and morally accepted adult human being." Once married, girls became women and were welcomed into community life, according to Boehm (2006), a trend that was reflected in girls' perceptions of formal marriage in Akpo. Alternatively, informal marriage was perceived as exclusionary, consistent with dominant theories of early marriage (UNFPA, 2012; PMNCH, 2012; Greene, 2015; Girls Not Brides, 2017b). This is considered further in Chapter 7.5. This broader effects of this distinction is a new finding, demonstrating how this study adds new complexity to the notion of the fluidity of marriage in

Ghana. Focusing on girls' perceptions contributes to efforts to develop more nuanced, emic understandings of early marriage to the wider literature.

### 7.3. “How might these perceptions of marriage affect girls' experiences?”

As explored in the previous section, central to girls' perceptions of marriage were adolescent pregnancy, hopes for economic security and aspirations for formality, all of which shaped experiences of marriage. However, due to the disappointment of these perceptions, experiences were largely negative.

Firstly, early marriage is widely considered as an exclusionary, deprivational experience for young women (PMNCH, 2012; UNFPA, 2012; Greene, 2015; Koster et al., 2017). Early marriage is considered, throughout the literature, to mark the start of adult responsibilities and domestic labour (PMNCH, 2012; UNFPA, 2012; Greene, 2015). Those who marry young are said to have little self-sufficiency or say in their households, dominated by the economic and cultural superiority of their partners (Fuseini, 2013; Stevanovic-Fenn et al., 2015). These theories were confirmed in this research, and true to girls' perceptions, most participants' experiences of marriage began with adolescent pregnancy, and were highly exclusionary. Similarly, this research identified a continuous cycle that women in Akpo face: they marry *because* they have no economic opportunities, but once they are married, it is much harder to improve their own situation, and so their dependence on their husbands continues. Their perceptions of marriage providing economic security were disappointed, and consequently, many described negative experiences of marriage. In this sense, then, existing research and this study align to represent early marriage as a largely exclusionary experience for young women.

Secondly, existing research suggests that many young women can perceive formal marriage as desirable (Boehm, 2006; Stevanovic-Fenn et al., 2015). These authors identify the possibility for economic security and the cultural value attached to the institution as reasons for this desirability, suggesting that many women want to be part of a formal union. Indeed, my research confirmed this theory, as many young women aspired for the completion of rites. In line with these perceptions, it can be argued that by constantly aspiring for these rites without hope of fulfillment, women's experiences without these rites would be negative.

However, according to some authors, this perception of the benefits of formality is misplaced, and would result in highly negative experiences of marriage. According to Fuseini

(2013), the completion of marriage rites and the full payment of bride price signals a man's increased social and economic control over his wife, with high rates of violence within formal unions. This contrasts with this study's conclusions, in which formal marriage was perceived to offer young women greater freedoms due to increased trust between partners. Perhaps these contrasting conclusions demonstrate that experiences of marriage depend on more than just perceptions of formality. Structural economic and social factors would also determine the power dynamic between partners more than the formality of their union, a dominant theme in much feminist theory (Nussbaum, 2000; MacDonald, 2015).

These conclusions of the largely negative, exclusionary experiences of marriage, do not aim to cast girls as wholly oppressed, but recognise the gendered power structures in place that create huge barriers for young women, conclusions informed by authors such as Nussbaum (2000) and MacDonald (2015). Therefore, this study echoes current policy recommendations of supporting and investing in married girls in order to improve their living situations (USAID, 2012; Svanemyr et al., 2015; Koster et al., 2017). Many theorists, such as Walker (2013), suggest doing so for girls' own health, and that of future generations, by contributing to prevention efforts. However, this research aligns with feminist theorists Nussbaum (2000) and MacDonald (2015) to argue for the protection of married girls for their own benefit, acknowledging their current exclusions rather than focusing on future suffering.

#### **7.4. “How do young women and girls understand their inclusion and exclusion, and how can their social inclusion be enhanced?”**

Overall, respondents found marriage to be largely exclusionary, but, as indicated before, this research did find opportunities for inclusion within a formal marriage union. This conflicting finding emphasises the value of using the spectrum as a conceptual tool, which allowed space for contradictory experiences, which, as authors such as Jackson (1999) assert, are central to marriage.

Firstly, most early marriage literature would argue that married girls are excluded from important social networks, such as education, employment, and health services (PMNCH, 2012; UNFPA, 2012; Greene, 2015). Often, these exclusions stem from the gendered power dynamics and lack of economic resources than often drive early marriage, serving to exclude young women once they are in these unions, as Santhya and Erulkar (2011) discuss. The preceding analysis confirmed these trends, noting how financial challenges and gendered expectations of female domestic labour were barriers for married girls' inclusion, something

that participants themselves recognised. Santhya and Erulkar's (2011) research on interventions specifically aimed at married girls observes how successful projects offer health education and economic training, in order to boost married girls' inclusion in these areas. This echoes data drawn from this study, in which many women identified increasing training opportunities in the community as a way to enhance their inclusion in social networks, specifically, the THP handicraft training that was being organised at the time of writing. This theme aligns with major recommendations in the literature suggesting greater investment in married girls' lives (USAID, 2012; Greene, 2015; Svanemyr et al, 2015; Koster et al., 2019).

Secondly, it is widely regarded in the literature that married girls are largely excluded from personal relationships (Santhya and Erulkar, 2011; PMNCH, 2012; UNFPA, 2012). These theories often emphasise the social isolation of married girls, separated from family and friends. While this theme is certainly prevalent in this study, there were also several noteworthy exceptions that complicate this dominant assumption. This research found contradictions in some girls' experiences, suggesting both inclusion and exclusion within family and peer groups, as close friendships did exist between married girls. Evidently, there is no definite explanation, and a nuanced approach is required, again demonstrating the suitability of the spectrum to this research, which allows for such contradictions. Santhya and Erulkar (2011) found that successful support programmes provided spaces for married girls to socialise, an idea echoed in findings from this research that married girls want peer support groups and mother-to-mother advice groups. These groups would act as a bridge between different dimensions, highlighting the interconnections of aspects of social inclusion (Giraud et al., 2013).

Thirdly, early marriage literature also emphasises married girls' exclusion from civic participation (Greene, 2015). This research acknowledges that barriers to participation did exist, but that, overall, evidence of married girls' active and eager civic participation was strong. Therefore, rather than confirming dominant patterns in existing research, this study instead aligns with Ahorlu et al. (2015), who emphasise married women's resilience and capacity to cope with challenges, including early marriage. Being able to present these women as active citizens involved in local community life is a striking result of this research and follows the work of Nussbaum (2000) and MacDonald (2015) in defying representations of married girls as wholly oppressed. Future researchers should bear this finding in mind. Actors such as THP should continue providing opportunities and removing barriers for

married girls to accept leadership roles in support groups and community organisations, as a way of enhancing both their self-confidence and their inclusion.

### **7.5. (In)formal marriage and self-identification: how do girls experience marriage?**

This section provides a final answer to the main research question: “How do young women and girls experience marriage, in Akpo, Eastern Region, Ghana, and how can these experiences be understood in relation to a spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion?” I use the formal-informal marriage distinction to answer this question, while also acknowledging the role of self-identification. The impacts of this distinction on girls’ experiences of marriage is the most significant finding of this study, and offers new perspectives on dynamics and experiences of early marriage.

Firstly, informal marriage is largely experienced as exclusionary, consistent with dominant theories of early marriage (PMNCH, 2012; UNFPA, 2012; Greene, 2015; Girls Not Brides, 2017b). Informally married girls are generally excluded from social networks and often isolated from personal relationships. These young women often have little say in their households or their intimate relationships, lack economic resources and are largely responsible for domestic labour and childcare, as existing research has shown. However, many still enjoyed civic participation, suggesting that there are ways in which informally married girls resist the stereotypical image of total oppression, confirming feminist theory (MacDonald, 2015) and adding a new perspective to early marriage literature.

However, formal marriages in Akpo offer some opportunities for inclusion. While formally married girls still bear the brunt of domestic work, completion of marriage rites brings greater community respect and enhances trust between partners, both of which can have tangible results. The data highlight girls’ feelings that formal marriage would increase their access to social networks, due to the improvements in their personal relationships as husbands seemed to trust their formal wives more. Similarly, participants indicated that community members would be more welcoming and married girls’ civic participation would thus also be enhanced. Therefore, formal marriage can present opportunities within each dimension of the spectrum. This finding reveals the intricacies of experiences of early marriage, in ways that are often lost in broader theory, illuminating the need for more detailed and regional understandings of marriage as a practice.

Nevertheless, there is also an important case that breaks down this distinction. While unique, the case of Olivia (see also Chapter 6.3 and 6.5) demonstrated how the formality of marriage is not the only deciding factor on a girl's in- or exclusion. Her self-identification as married at community events meant she was able to facilitate her own inclusion in social networks and civic participation. Olivia thus experienced marriage in a more inclusive way than her informally-married peers - not because she was formally married, but because she believed that her right to be included was more important. While this is a notable example, it does remain true that other participants were excluded - even those who did identify as married did not include themselves in the same way, perhaps because they still placed more value in the marriage distinction than in their own needs. Therefore, while the marriage distinction decides inclusion or exclusion for the majority of participants, it is necessary to complicate this answer by considering how girls' identification can also play a role in deciding their self-inclusion or exclusion. This was a striking finding and should be considered in future research.

## **7.6. Methodological and theoretical reflections**

### **7.6.1. Methodological reflections**

Here, I want to establish some final methodological reflections. Firstly, I would have liked to use participatory methods, as McHugh (2014) argues that such methods are well-suited to feminist research, as participants can claim more ownership over the process. Practical issues made participatory methods unrealistic, but I appreciate that these methods could have added richness to my study. Secondly, I would have preferred to interview more young women, to gain a bigger dataset, but I am grateful for the richness of the data that I did gather. Other than these reflections, I am happy with the methodological decisions made throughout this study.

### **7.6.2. The spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion**

The spectrum of inclusion and exclusion did create some theoretical reflections. I developed the model in order to create a more representative conceptual tool that would include all girls' views and experiences. However, in the field, I felt slightly uncomfortable applying this spectrum. It seemed like suggesting marriage was inclusive was unrealistic, and when asked explicitly, many young women did not think there was anything positive about marriage. However, for consistency and with the aim of maintaining a representative study, I chose to keep the spectrum. Ultimately, this tool helped find important results and enabled me to consider all experiences of marriage, rather than just the exclusionary. Therefore, I greatly

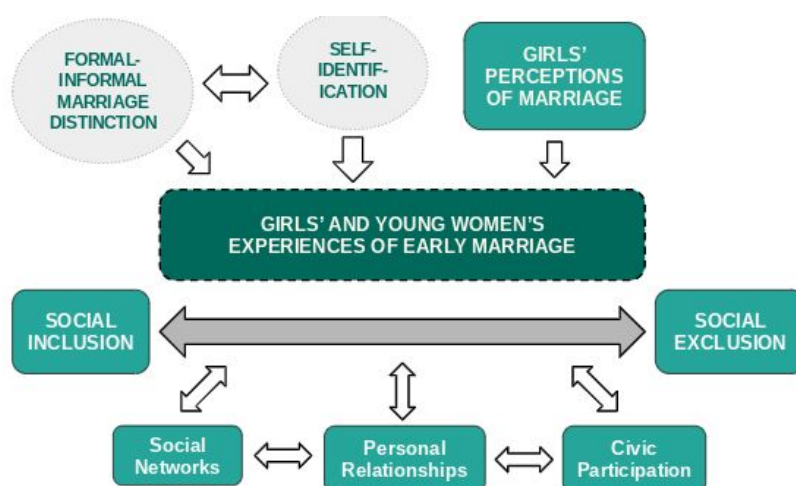
value its theoretical contribution. The spectrum allowed me to discuss both married girls' barriers and their role as active citizens, meeting my feminist principles, as informed by Nussbaum's women's capability approach (2000) and MacDonald's "emblems of futurity" (2015).

### 7.6.3. Feminist theory

As discussed in Chapter 2.1, there is not space in this thesis to have a full discussion of feminist theory. However, important ideas informing this thesis were the co-creation of knowledge with participants (Harding and Norberg, 2005), focusing on married girls for their own benefit, rather than as "emblems of futurity" (MacDonald, 2015, p.1) and recognising structural barriers whilst resisting a representation of young women as solely oppressed (Nussbaum, 2000; MacDonald, 2015). I feel I was able to fulfil these feminist aims: by privileging girls' definitions and perceptions, revealing important experiences and dynamics of marriage, and discussing young women's role in civic participation. Nussbaum's theory of women's capabilities was an useful way to link feminist theory with the RCI, providing a solid theoretical framework for this research.

### 7.6.4. Adapted conceptual scheme

The effects of the formal-informal marriage distinction and self-identification on girls' experiences of marriage was a surprising finding, which I feel has added a new dimension to this research. Thus, it is necessary to adapt the conceptual scheme to acknowledge the role that these findings might have on girls' experiences of marriage. Both factors, themselves connected, are represented by dotted lines, because they are new findings and require further research to better appreciate.





### 7.7. Recommendations for THP

Working alongside THP Ghana in Akpo was an opportunity to witness successful collaborative development strategies, but also illuminated ways in which the organisation could improve. THP Ghana worked hard in Akpo, establishing a clinic, bank and microfinance service, food store and epicentre leadership program. All of this has been warmly received by community members. However, I noted that many of these services were not specifically applicable to young women, married or not. Therefore, this study observed important ways in which THP Ghana could improve the impact on young (married) women in Akpo.

Firstly, the clinic was the most successful and recognised service. Even those who did not know specifically about THP had used the clinic, often during and after pregnancy, suggesting it is a relevant feature of young women's lives. However, during data collection, the clinic was closed, and girls had to travel further in case of a health problem, difficult in heat and on broken roads, particularly for women with young children. I highly recommend to THP Ghana that they make repairing and reopening the clinic a high priority, as this service greatly influences young women's and their children's health.

Secondly, several participants also knew of THP's loan service, and suggested it would help them acquire a job or start a business. However, several also recognised that they would not be able to pay back the loan, either because they were not working, or because of the interest payments. Epicentre executives also acknowledged that these women have no experience with money, so would not even be considered for the loan. Therefore, THP Ghana should make the loan more accessible for young women and enable them to increase their inclusion in social networks, by reducing interest payments, or providing information on how to handle finances, so they are better prepared to make use of this service.

Finally, while I was in the field, THP Ghana was recruiting out-of-school girls for handiwork training. Girls had been waiting for this service for almost a year, many expressing frustration that it had not started yet. This training lasts three years and provides 15 girls in Akpo with the opportunity to gain sewing or hairdressing skills. I highly recommend to THP Ghana that they ensure the successful implementation of this training, as the programme provides an

important form of inclusion for these young women. If THP can introduce this training programme, they would change the lives of a number of young women in Akpo. This recommendation is of the highest priority for THP Ghana.

### **7.8. Suggestions for future research**

Firstly, it is essential that researchers continue to address the dearth of research on married young women. I have worked to contribute to this field, but there is still more to understand, including the specific ways in which married girls can be better included. Similarly, while this research established connections between formal marriage, self-identification and greater inclusion, this relationship could be better examined in future studies. This research has to be motivated by a desire to improve the lives of married girls themselves, rather than positioning girls as a means to an end, or an “emblem of futurity” (MacDonald, 2015). This is a high priority for early marriage research.

Secondly, it is essential to better understand male experiences of early marriage, men’s role in initiating the sexual relationships that lead to early marriage, and their motivations in the completion of marriage rites. While so much early marriage literature, this study included, focuses on girls’ experiences and perspectives, this focus cannot tell the whole story. While girls suffer more due to early marriage (Nour, 2009), men and boys have an important role to play, and this needs to be better understood. Recent research (Gastón, Misunas and Cappa, 2019) has started to explore boys’ experiences of early marriage, and while this is laudable, more attention needs to be given to this important topic.

Finally, on a theoretical note, my development of a spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion of married girls could be expanded and applied to new contexts. For this short research project, the spectrum was not explored as thoroughly as possible. Further research could build on or adapt the three dimensions, the indicators within each dimension, and measure its suitability to other social phenomena. I would be interested in reviewing this research, which could further develop a useful and innovative conceptual tool.

### **7.9. Final concluding remarks**

To conclude this thesis, I want to establish that an initial aim of this research was to explore THP and girls’ perceptions of interventions in Akpo. This theme was operationalised<sup>11</sup> and

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<sup>11</sup> See Appendix 2.

explored using the interview and focus group guides.<sup>12</sup> However, during data collection, this theme did not emerge as strongly as marriage and the spectrum of social inclusion and exclusion, so it was not discussed here. Nonetheless, this aspect of data collection did raise substantive recommendations for THP.

Finally, I want to reiterate a key clarification to end this thesis. This research fills an important research gap in terms of married girls' experience - but this study *does not* suggest that marriage is the best option for young women and girls. Early marriage is not the solution to their exclusionary experiences, or a panacea for their economic challenges. International efforts should remain focused on supporting young married women to support themselves. To conclude this thesis, I extend a final thank you to the women and girls of Akpo whose experiences I have explored here. They have made this thesis possible, and I hope that this study does justice to the time and energy they shared with me.

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendices 3 and 4.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Participant List

N	Data collection	Date	Location	Pseudonym	Marital Status (Girls/ women only)	Age	Sex	Community	Others?
1	Interview	6/2/2019	Own house	Keni	Married (informal)	23	F	Akpo	Both FGDs
2	Interview	6/2/2019	P1's house	Bethany	Unmarried	24	F	Akpo	None
3	Interview	6/2/2019	P1's house	Diana	Single	20	F	Akpo	None
4	Interview	11/2/2019	Own house	Abigail	Unmarried	21	F	Akpo	Both FGDs
5	Interview	11/2/2019	Own house	Nicole	Unmarried	24	F	Akpo	Both FGDs
6	Interview	11/2/2019	Own house	Tracy	Married (informal)	24	F	Lower Akpo	Both FGDs
7	Interview	22/2/2019	Own house	Sally	Married (formal)	24	F	Akpo	None
8	Interview	22/2/2019	Own house	Daisy	Single	20	F	Akpo	None
9	Interview	22/2/2019	Own house	Mary	Single	18	F	Akpo	None
10	Interview	28/2/2019	Epicentre	Becky	Married (informal)	22	F	Akpo	Both FGDs
11	Interview	28/2/2019	Epicentre	Olivia	Married (informal)	22	F	Plau	Both FGDs
12	Interview	28/2/2019	Epicentre	Holly	Unmarried	18	F	Nusata	FGD 1
13	Interview	5/3/2019	Epicentre	Dede	Married (informal)	20	F	Plau	Both FGDs
14	Interview	5/3/2019	Epicentre	Mamle	Married (informal)	23	F	Akpo	None
15	Interview	5/3/2019	Epicentre	Sarah	Married (informal)	19	F	Terporse	FGD 1

16	Interview	14/3/2019	Own house	Sammy	Unmarried	18	F	Yisewa	None
17	Interview	14/3/2019	Own house	Chloe	Unmarried	15	F	Akpo	FGD 1
18	Interview	14/3/2019	Own house	Bridget	Single	19	F	Akpo	None
19	FGD Parents	14/2/2019	Epicentre	Kate	-	53	F	Akpo	None
20	FGD Parents	14/2/2019	Epicentre	Alice	-	57	F	Yiwase	None
21	FGD Parents	14/2/2019	Epicentre	Grace	-	60	F	Akpo	None
22	FGD Parents	14/2/2019	Epicentre	Eva	-	52	F	Akpo	None
23	FGD Parents	14/2/2019	Epicentre	Paul	-	49	M	Akpo	None
24	FGD Parents	14/2/2019	Epicentre	Charles	-	54	M	Akpo	None
25	FGD Parents	14/2/2019	Epicentre	Timothy	-	51	M	Akpo	FGD Epicenter; Community
26	FGD Parents	14/2/2019	Epicentre	Albert	-	54	M	Akpo	None
27	FGD Parents	14/2/2019	Epicentre	Fred	-	59	M	Akpo	None
28	FGD Parents	14/2/2019	Epicentre	Giselle	-	50	F	Akpo	None
29	FGD Community	22/2/2019	Epicentre	Christopher	-	56	M	Plau Sra	None
30	FGD Community	22/2/2019	Epicentre	Charlotte	--	54	F	Akpo	None
31	FGD Community	22/2/2019	Epicentre	Gwen	-	60	F	Akpo	None

	nity								
32	FGD Community	22/2/2019	Epicentre	Anne	-	56	F	Plau	None
33	FGD Community	22/2/2019	Epicentre	Timothy	-	50	M	Plau Sra	FGD Parents; Epicentre
34	FGD Community	22/2/2019	Epicentre	Rupert	-	76	M	Susi	None
35	FGD Community	22/2/2019	Epicentre	Maggie	-	55	F	Bunasi	FGD Epicentre
36	FGD Community	22/2/2019	Epicentre	Daniel	-	51	M	Akpo	None
37	FGD Girls 1	28/2/2019	Epicentre	Dede	Married	20	F	Plau Sra	Interview 13; FGD Girls 2
38	FGD Girls 1	28/2/2019	Epicentre	Becky	Married	22	F	Akpo	Interview 10; FGD Girls 2
39	FGD Girls 1	28/2/2019	Epicentre	Olivia	Married	22	F	Plau	Interview 11; FGD Girls 2
40	FGD Girls 1	28/2/2019	Epicentre	Holly	Unmarried	18	F	Sufa	Interview 12
41	FGD Girls 1	28/2/2019	Epicentre	Tracy	Married	24	F	Lower Akpo	Interview 6; FGD Girls 2
42	FGD Girls 1	28/2/2019	Epicentre	Abigail	Unmarried	21	F	Akpo	Interview 4; FGD Girls 2
43	FGD Girls 1	28/2/2019	Epicentre	Nicole	Unmarried	24	F	Akpo	Interview 5; FGD Girls 2
44	FGD Girls 1	28/2/2019	Epicentre	Georgia	Single	18	F	Akpo	None

45	FGD Girls 1	28/2/2019	Epicentre	Chloe	Unmarried	15	F	Akpo	Interview 16
46	FGD Girls 1	28/2/2019	Epicentre	Sarah	Unmarried	19	F		Interview 15
47	FGD Girls 1	28/2/2019	Epicentre	Keni	Married	23	F	Akpo	Interview 1; FGD 2
48	FGD Epicentre	1/3/2019	Epicentre	Timothy	-	50	M	Akpo	FGD Parents; FGD Community
49	FGD Epicentre	1/3/2019	Epicentre	Arthur	-	63	M	Akpo	None
50	FGD Epicentre	1/3/2019	Epicentre	Maggie	-	55	F	Akpo	FGD Community
51	FGD Epicentre	1/3/2019	Epicentre	Gloria	-	34	F	Akpo	None
52	FGD Epicentre	1/3/2019	Epicentre	Jack	-	43	M	Akpo	None
53	FGD Girls 2	18/3/2019	Epicentre	Dede	Married	20	F	Plau	Interview 13; FGD Girls 1
54	FGD Girls 2	18/3/2019	Epicentre	Nicole	Unmarried	24	F	Akpo	Interview 5; FGD Girls 1
55	FGD Girls 2	18/3/2019	Epicentre	Becky	Married	22	F	Akpo	Interview 10; FGD Girls 1
56	FGD Girls 2	18/3/2019	Epicentre	Olivia	Married	22	F	Plau	Interview 11; FGD Girls 1
57	FGD Girls 2	18/3/2019	Epicentre	Abigail	Unmarried	21	F	Akpo	Interview 4; FGD Girls 1
58	FGD Girls 2	18/3/2019	Epicentre	Tracy	Married	24	F	Lower Akpo	Interview 6; FGD Girls

									1
59	FGD Girls 2	18/3/201 9	Epicentre	Keni	Married	23	F	Akpo	Interview 1; FGD Girls 1



## Appendix 2: Operationalisation Table

Concepts	Dimensions	Variables	Indicators
<b>Marriage</b>	Social aspects	Perceptions of social aspects	How do girls define marriage? How do girls feel about married life? What were married girls' expectations of married life, and have these been met?
		Individual family relations	How do married girls describe their relationships with their family? How important are these relationships to married girls?
		Relations with in-laws	How much contact do married girls have with their husband's family? How do married girls describe their relationships with their husband's family?
	Economic aspects	Perceptions of economic aspects	Has marriage affected girls' economic situation? How do they feel about their economic situation?
		Employment status	Do married girls have access to employment? Do their husbands have better access to employment?
		Level of income	How do married girls describe their level of income? Is this an important part of marriage?
	Physical aspects	Perceptions of effects of marriage on health	Has marriage affected young girls' health? Have they noticed any changes to their health - physical or mental?

		Number, age and spacing of children	When was the child born in relation to the marriage - before or after? How do married girls feel about being mothers?
<b>Spectrum of inclusion and exclusion</b> <i>(derived from the Relational Capability Index)</i>	Social networks	Employment	Do married girls have access to employment? What is married girls' level of financial independence? How do their current employment opportunities compare to before they were married?
		Level of education	Do married girls attend school? How much access do married girls have to information? How does their access to school compare to before they were married?
		Health networks/services	Do married girls make use of health services and, if so, how often? How do they feel about using health services? How does their usage now compare to before they were married?
	Personal Relationships	Personal family networks	How much contact do married girls have with personal family? How do married girls describe their relationships with family?
		Networks with in-laws	How do married girls describe their relations with their in-laws? How important would girls say these relations are?
		Friends/peers	How much contact do married girls have

			<p>with friends?</p> <p>How do married girls describe their relationships with friends?</p> <p>Are these relationships important to married girls?</p>
	Civic participation	Interaction beyond the household for collective interest	<p>Do married girls engage in activities beyond the household?</p> <p>Do married girls engage in any collective projects?</p> <p>Do they want to engage in these kinds of projects?</p> <p>Are there opportunities to do so in their community?</p>
		Political activity	<p>Are there opportunities for married girls to participate in local political activity?</p> <p>Do they want to have these opportunities?</p>
<b>Interventions (THP)</b>	Focused on education projects	Knowledge/awareness of this intervention	<p>How much do married girls know about outreach in the community?</p> <p>How do these forms of outreach engage with the community?</p>
		Perceptions of this kind of intervention	<p>How do married girls feel about this kind of outreach?</p> <p>Would they use this kind of outreach?</p> <p>How could this outreach be improved?</p>
		Level of engagement	<p>Which form of outreach do married girls engage most with?</p> <p>Have these projects increased married girls' education opportunities?</p>
	Focused on health projects	Knowledge/awareness of intervention	<p>How effective are these different forms of outreach at achieving their various</p>

			goals? How do these forms of outreach engage with the community?
		Perceptions of intervention	How do married girls feel about this kind of outreach? Would they use this kind of outreach? How could this outreach be improved?
		Level of engagement	Which form of outreach do married girls engage most with? Have these projects increased married girls' health opportunities?
	Focused on social projects	Knowledge/awareness of intervention	How effective are these different forms of outreach at achieving their various goals? How do these forms of outreach engage with the community?
		Perceptions of intervention	How do married girls feel about this kind of outreach? Would they use this kind of outreach? How could this outreach be improved?
		Level of engagement	Which form of outreach do married girls engage most with? Have these projects increased married girls' social opportunities?

## Appendix 3: Interview Guide

### Introduction:

- *Introduction in Twi:* Name, where I'm from, thank you.
- My name is Eleanor, and I want to thank you for taking the time to help me with my research contributing to understanding the experiences of **married girls**, feelings of being included and excluded, and how this influences how you feel about interventions. The interview will last between 1 and 1.5 hours. Do you consent to participating in this interview?
- If you do not understand any questions, please make that clear and we can rephrase them for you. If the questions are difficult or upsetting, and you feel uncomfortable or unsettled at any point during this interview, you don't have to answer, or you are free to withdraw yourself and any data you have contributed up to that point. If you would like to talk to someone for support after this interview, I can provide contact details of someone that can help. Please contact Thomas at THP.
- I will keep all your personal information and answers confidential and anonymous - in a minute, you can choose a pretend name for yourself for the purpose of this interview. I would like to record this interview and transcribe it later, but the information will remain confidential. Do you agree to being recorded?
- Finally, remember - there are no right or wrong answers, I am just here to learn about your experiences as a young girl in your community, so please be as honest as you can with these questions. Everything you tell us helps increase knowledge of your experiences and how THP can help you, so please be open with us. I am here to learn about you and your life, so thank you so much for sitting down with me!

Name:

Age at first childbirth:

Date of interview:

Marital status:

Pseudonym:

Age at marriage:

Community:

Occupation:

Current age:

Level of education:

Number of children:

### General questions

1. I would like to ask about your current living situation - *e.g. with parents, with husband/partner, alone?*
2. For single mothers, living with parents:
  - a. What were the circumstances that led to you becoming pregnant?

- i. Did you plan this?
  - b. How do you parents feel about your situation?
  - c. Has becoming a single mother changed your life? In what ways?
  - d. How do you feel about being a mother?
- 3. For girls that are married/living with partners:
  - a. How long have you been living with this partner/been married?
  - b. How old is he? What does he do?
  - c. When were your children born in relation to your marriage? Did you plan this?
- 4. Do you know much about family planning/contraception? What kinds of methods?
  - a. What do you think about family planning?
  - b. Have you ever used family planning? Would you use family planning in the future?
- 5. Can you describe a normal day for you? [*Probe for evening as well*]
  - a. What parts of the day do you enjoy? What do you not enjoy? Why?

**Marriage - Next, I would like to ask you some questions about marriage and married life, and what that means to you.**

- 1. How do you understand marriage? - *e.g. a formal ceremony with legal characteristics, or more based on traditional rites?*
  - a. How do informal living arrangements with a partner compare to marriage?
- 2. Are you, or would you consider yourself to be, married?
  - a. If so, why?
  - b. If not, why not? - *is this to do with the completion of marriage rites/ceremonies?*
- 3. What were the processes that led up to you getting married/living with a partner?
  - a. Did you plan to get married/live with your partner?
- 4. What are some reasons for girls getting married/living with their partners?
  - a. Is it important for children that their parents are married/live together?
  - b. Is love important in a marriage? Why/why not?
  - c. Are economic reasons also important?
- 5. When should a girl get married? Is there a right age for a girl to get married?
- 6. What were your expectations of marriage when you were younger?
  - a. Have been met?
- 7. Is there anything you *can* do now that you could not do before you were married?
- 8. What are important parts of married life/living with a partner, for you?

- a. What are the physical aspects of married life? - *sexual relations, workload and domestic work, raising children, etc.*
    - i. Does your partner/husband help with the domestic work?
    - ii. Is sex an important part of married life/marriage?
  - b. What are the social aspects of married life? - *relations with in-laws, relations with other married women, time with peers.*
  - c. What are the economic aspects of married life? - *being able to work, control over finances, etc.*
9. Do you think marriage is an important part of life in this community? What do elders think about marriage?
- a. Is it the same for girls and boys/women and men? Why/why not?
10. Overall, how do you think marriage/living with a partner affects a girl's life?

**Spectrum of inclusion and exclusion - I would like to ask some questions about your feelings of being included or excluded in local life and society. This includes social networks; personal relationships; and civic participation.**

*General*

1. How connected do you feel to your community? - *e.g. to other people, to community buildings (such as the THP epicentre).* Can you tell me how/why?
2. Do you feel any responsibility for the future of the community? Can you tell me why?
3. Would you say you trust other people in the community? Why/why not?

*Social networks - employment, education, health services.*

1. Do you currently have any way of earning money?
  - a. How does this compare to before you got married/had children/started living with your partner/?
  - b. How much control do you have over your household's money?
2. Level of education:
  - a. If under 18 - do you go to school?
  - b. If over 18 - would you like to have more education?
  - c. What age did you stop going to school? How did you feel about finishing school?
3. Do you use formal health services in your community, or do you prefer to remain at home?
  - a. If so, how often? If not, why not?

4. How does your usage of health services compare to before you were married/had children/lived with your partner?
5. Do you think there are any barriers to your employment, education and accessing health services?

*Personal relationships - personal family networks, networks with in-laws, friends/peers.*

1. How often do you see your own family? - *do they live in this community?*
  - a. How does this compare to before you were married/had children/lived with your partner?
  - b. How do you feel about this?
2. How would you describe your relationship with your partner/husband's family?
  - a. How often do you see them?
3. How much time do you spend with friends or peers?
  - a. How does this compare to before you were married/had children/lived with your partner?
  - b. How do you feel about this?
  - c. What do you do when you spend time with friends?
4. How would you describe your relationship with your partner/husband?
  - a. Is it what you expected? Why/why not?
5. If you had a personal problem, would you talk to anyone about it? Who?
  - a. If your husband/partner causes a problem, who would you talk to?
6. How important are your personal relationships to you?
7. Would you like to change your personal relationships, in any way?

*Civic participation - interaction beyond the household, local community action.*

1. How much time do you spend in your own house, compared to time spent in other places? - *e.g. market, church, neighbours' houses, community areas?*
2. Before you were married/had children/living with your partner, did you want to take part in community life?
3. Now, do you take part in many activities outside your own household? - *e.g. community meetings, epicentre meetings.*
  - a. Are you interested in taking part in any activities beyond your household? Why/why not?
  - b. Do you feel welcome in community activities?
4. Do you think there any barriers to you taking part in community activity? Like what?



5. How do you think these could be resolved?
6. Do you see community activities as an important part of life? Why/why not?

**Interventions - Now I would like to ask you some questions about interventions in the community.**

1. What are the biggest problems facing everyone in this community?
2. What are the biggest problems for **you specifically** in this community?
3. Do you think The Hunger Project is relevant to you?
4. Do you know of any specific work that The Hunger Project does in this community? - *clinic, microfinance and loans, providing farming support.*
  - a. If yes -
    - i. What about the clinic being closed?
    - ii. What do you know about this work?
    - iii. What do you think about it - has it helped you/this community?
  - b. If no, why not? - *i.e. not interested, don't hear about anything.*
5. Do you know about the animators?
  - a. If yes - do you know them personally?
  - b. Have you spoken to them?
  - c. Have you learned anything from them?
6. What do you know about Her Choice?
7. Can you think of any ways to improve the work of The Hunger Project in this community? - *any suggestions for future work?*
8. Do you think being a mother or having a partner changes how you think about The Hunger Project?

**Finally:**

1. Overall, do you feel a part of life in your community, or do you feel separate? Why?
2. How do you feel, talking about marriage/motherhood/living with a partner?
3. What are your aspirations for the future?
4. Do you have any advice for younger girls in your community?
5. Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you so much for talking to me today, I really appreciate your help. If you would like to change or withdraw any answers, you can contact the THP project officer, Thomas, and we can arrange that.

## Appendix 4: FGD Guides

### 1. FGD Introduction Document:

- I am from the University of Amsterdam, in the Netherlands. For my Master's thesis in International Development Studies, I am researching girls' experiences of married life, inclusion and exclusion, and how all these experiences affect married girls' perceptions of interventions in their community. The reason for this focus group is to gather detailed information about these girls' experiences. I want to use this group to collect different people's perspectives on the important topic of early marriage.
- I want to assure you all that:
  - I really appreciate your help in my data collection. Thank you for joining me today. This focus group will last no more than two hours. Do I have everyone's consent to participate in this discussion?
  - Everything said here remains anonymous and confidential: I will ensure that no one's real name is mentioned in the report of this discussion. I would like to ask everyone's permission for recording this discussion, which allows the flow of the discussion to continue and means that I don't have to interrupt anyone. I will later transcribe everything that has been said here, but no identifiable information will be included. All the data I collect today will remain confidential and will not be accessed by anyone else. Do I have your permission to record this discussion?
  - You are free to withdraw yourself or your data from this discussion at any point. Please contact Thomas at THP if you would like to withdraw your data at a later date.
  - Remember, there are no right or wrong answers, and I am interested to hear your honest opinions of early marriage. I want to encourage discussion, but ask that when someone is speaking, please wait until they have finished before you respond with your own opinion.

## 2. First FGD with Girls:

### Marriage

1. How do you, as young women in this community, understand and define marriage?
  - a. Just living with a partner or do you need the rites to be officially married?
2. Would anyone here describe themselves as married? - Why/why not?
3. What are some of the reasons that girls get married/have children/start to live with partners?
4. Who decides when girls get married/have children/start to live with partners?
  - a. How much control do you have over your own living situation? Did any of you plan your marriage?
5. Is there a right age for a girl to get married? - Why?
6. Did anyone have certain expectations of marriage when they were younger?
  - a. Have these been met?
7. Is there anything you can do now, that you could not do before you got married/started living with your partner?
8. What are important parts of marriage?
  - a. *Housework/chores? - share with husband?*
  - b. *Is sex important?*
9. How does marriage/having children/living with a partner affect girls?
10. Is marriage an important part of life in this community?
  - a. Same for girls and boys?
  - b. Is early marriage a big problem in this community?
  - c. What do you think older people in the community think about girls who get married early?
11. What do you think about projects trying to reduce early marriage?

### Spectrum of inclusion and exclusion

12. What are some of the issues you have faced, as married girls/mothers/girls living with partners, in relation to education, community acceptance and accessing health care?
13. What are the general relationships between married girls/mothers/girls living with partners, and:
  - a. families,
  - b. peers,
  - c. husband/partner
  - d. husbands/partners' family
  - e. Are these relationships important to you?

14. Does marriage/being a mother/living with a partner provide you more opportunities or barriers?
15. Do you, as married girls/mothers/girls living with partners, take part in community activities, such as attending epicenter meetings?
- a. Are you interested in participating? - Why/why not?
  - b. Does marriage/having children/living with a partner prevent you from participating more in community meetings and events?
  - c. How important do you see your participation in community activities?
  - d. Do you think the community values your participation? Do you feel welcome to join?

### **Interventions**

16. What are the biggest problems for **you specifically** in this community?
17. Does anyone know much about The Hunger Project?
- a. Any specific work they do?
  - b. Animators?
  - c. Has any of this helped you specifically?
  - d. What about Her Choice?
18. Can you think of any ways to improve the work of The Hunger Project in this community? - *any suggestions for future work?*
19. What kind of projects do you think are most important for married girls/mothers/girls living with partners?
20. Overall, do you feel a part of life in your community, or do you feel separate? Why?
21. How do you feel, talking about marriage/motherhood/living with a partner?

Thank you for taking part, I really appreciate your participation.

### 3. Second FGD with Girls:

1. What were all of your aspirations before you got married/started living with partners/had children? How do these compare to your aspirations now?
  - a. *“How do current experiences relate to prior expectations?”*
2. Does anyone here feel like they are included in the economic system? Why?
3. Does anyone here not feel included in the economic system? Why?
4. What do you think would make you feel more included in the economic system? -
  - a. *probe: is it possible to move for work?*
5. Do any of you have any financial help or support? Do you expect to receive any help in the future?
6. Can you tell me about how you combine work and childcare?
7. What kind of opportunities in this community exist for you all to become more included economically?
8. Would any of you like to go back to school?
  - a. What challenges would there be in going back?
9. Are any of you planning to participate in The Hunger Project’s sewing or hairdressing training?
  - a. How do you feel about this?
  - b. Do you know when it’s going to start?
  - c. Can you see any challenges to you being able to participate fully?
  - d. What are your hopes for this training?
10. Lastly - my research is part of an international project trying to reduce the number of girls who get married early. What do you think about this international effort to reduce early marriage?
  - a. Should it be international, or should it be left to communities by themselves?
  - b. What change needs to happen to stop girls getting married at a young age?

#### 4. FGD with Parents and FGD with Community Leaders:

##### Marriage

1. How do members of this discussion understand and define marriage in this community? - *informal and formal forms of marriage?*
2. What are some of the reasons that girls get married/have children/start to live with partners?
3. Who decides when girls get married/have children/start to live with partners?
  - a. How much control do girls have over their own living situation?
4. How does marriage/having children/living with a partner affect girls' lives?
5. Is early marriage a big problem in this community?
  - a. Does this community have other concerns?

##### Spectrum of inclusion and exclusion

6. What are some of the issues married girls/mothers/girls living with partners face in relation to employment, education, community acceptance and accessing health care?
7. What are the general relationships between married girls and:
  - a. Their own families,
  - b. Their in-laws (partners' family)
  - c. Friends and peers
  - d. Their husbands/partners?
8. Do you think marriage is more of an inclusive or exclusionary living situation?
  - a. Does marriage/having children/living with a partner provide more opportunities or barriers for girls? Why do you think this?
9. Do married girls/mothers/girls living with partners take part in community activities, such as attending church programs or epicenter meetings?
  - a. What form does this participation take? What effect can it have on their lives?
  - b. Are there any barriers to girls' participation?
  - c. How important do girls see their participation in community activities?
  - d. Does the community value married girls'/young mothers' participation?

##### Interventions

10. What do you know about the work The Hunger Project has done in this community?
11. What are the biggest challenges facing this community?
12. What kind of interventions are most important for married girls/mothers/girls living with partners?
  - a. Have recent interventions in the community affected their living situation?

13. How can The Hunger Project work to support married girls/young mothers more?

14. How can the community find ways to include married girls/girls living with partners/single mothers, more in community life?

Thank you for taking part, I really appreciate your participation.

## 5. FGD with Epicentre Executives

1. What is life like for most people in Akpo and the surrounding communities?
  - a. What kinds of jobs are there for people around here?
  - b. What are some of the challenges of life in Akpo?
2. What are your experiences of working with The Hunger Project?
  - a. Why did you start working with THP?
  - b. What do you enjoy about working with THP?
  - c. What has been challenging?
3. To start with - what kinds of services does this epicentre offer?
  - a. What kinds of people use these different services?
  - b. Do you find there is an age difference in people attending meetings?
  - c. How can people in the community find out what services are available here? -  
*i.e. are there announcements, is there an up-to-date noticeboard?*
  - d. How have these services affected the community?
4. How often do epicentre meetings take place here?
  - a. What kinds of people come to these meetings?
  - b. Do you find there is an age difference in people attending meetings?
  - c. How can people find out about the meetings?
  - d. What effect do you think meetings have on people in the community?
5. The epicentre clinic - is it correct that it is currently closed?
  - a. How long has it been closed?
  - b. Will it be reopening again soon?
  - c. Are there any other health facilities nearby?
  - d. What effect do you think the closure has had on the community?
6. Moving on to talk about married girls/single mothers - What are the biggest challenges facing married girls/single mothers?
7. Do they visit the epicentre in general?
  - a. If so, how often? What kinds of things do they use it for?
  - b. If not - why do you think that is?
8. Do married girls/girls living with partners/single mothers attend **epicentre meetings**?
  - a. Do you know which communities these girls are from? - *i.e. Akpo, right by epicentre, or from the other communities?*
  - b. Do they actively participate?
  - c. Are there any barriers to them attending meetings? - what would these be?



9. Are there currently any projects/services in the epicentre that specifically benefit married girls/single mothers?
  - a. If so - what are they? Are they popular? Do girls attend?
  - b. If not - why do you think that is?
  - c. What effect is Her Choice having in Akpo epicentre?
10. Are there any plans in the future for projects/services in the epicentre that specifically benefit married girls/single mothers?
  - a. What kinds of projects would these be?
  - b. Are they likely to be successful?
  - c. Are there any challenges that might prevent these plans taking place?
11. Can you think of any ways to improve the epicentre? What about The Hunger Project in general?
  - a. In general, and for married girls/single mothers in particular.