

Majority world countries could be defined as countries where most people live. These countries tend to have more poverty, less access to what the west considers formal education and lower socio-economic status within the world and have previously held the title of “third world countries.” This was seen as a negative term and gave a form of elitism to minority countries and put limits on the perceived development of the majority world countries (Byrne,2019). Equality is a world priority; the United Nations (UN) has set 17 sustainable development goals (SDG’s) which ask the 127 nations of the UN to work towards. These goals are the foundation of making the world an equitable place where everyone has the same opportunities, to be healthy and to look after the planet (UN, 2020). This essay will explore some barriers to accessing education for children and young people, specifically females, in Niger. Globalisation theories, social theories, the African Charter on the Welfare and Rights of the Child (1990) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) will be explored to explain the challenges faced by the people of Niger and what the effects are on Niger’s path to providing equitable education.

Niger is a landlocked country in Western-Africa, its capital in the south of Niger is called Niamey. Niger is mostly desert with the southern part being a savannah. The countries main religion is Muslim, and the main languages are Arabic, French and Hasau. Niger's economy is based on mining and agriculture (Britannica, 2022). Niger also has Africa’s second largest concentration of Hasau people, with half of Niger’s 23.4 million population being Hasau (Sawe, 2019). Half the population of Niger are female with around 58% of the population being under 18. The mortality rate for children under 5 is comparatively high, ranking 11th highest in the world (UNICEF, 2022). Niger recorded around 77 deaths per 1000 under 5’s in 2020 compared to 7 deaths per 1000 under 5’s in the UK (WHO,2022). The rate was approximately 5.8 per 1000 in Wales in 2020 (ONS,2020). The Hasau people live traditionally in villages in rural areas and speak Hasau, with their main religion being Muslim. Their education is mainly Koranic schools or ‘tarbiyya’ and ‘mahamadiy,’ which are the traditional teachings of morals, values and how to become an adult (Moumouni,1968). When Niger became a French territory in 1946 westernised schools were opened which conflicted with the traditional teaching thought necessary by

some of the people of Niger. The schools were opened in Niamey which made them inaccessible to the many children living in rural areas of Niger.

Niger's political and ruling past has been tumultuous, having gone through several military coups to oust political leaders and presidents and the colonisation of Niger by the French. The country was first occupied in 1890, with it officially becoming a French Territory in 1946. This affected the education of Nigeriens as a more westernised form of education was introduced. Karl Marx' (1847) theories could be used to explain the French colonisation of Niger. The theory originated by Karl Marx is one of exploitation by people in positions of wealth, which equalled power, in societies. Marx suggested that the proletariat are oppressed by the bourgeoisies, and then become alienated in society as they have no power or social capital. As the relationship is exploitive, this creates conflict between the classes. When the French colonised Niger in 1946, they came with their wealth, power, and social and cultural capital. This immediately placed the people of Niger at a disadvantage, this allowed for their natural resources to be exploited and their culture minimised or diluted.

This conflicted with their traditional teachings and caused conflict in families due to some parents' beliefs that 'boko' or westernised teaching gave children, in particular girls, a 'bad attitude' (Hartmann-Mahmud,2011). This could have been perceived by parents because western ways of teaching encourage pupils to question more and look at all experiences critically to deepen understanding. This is in direct conflict with the tarbiyya and mahamadiy ways which are based more on experience by observing what their elders do, much like Albert Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. Children will learn how to observe the religious beliefs and rituals, how to 'keep house,' or how to farm by watching their parent and families role model these experiences. In 1960 the French discovered uranium deposits in Niger, this should have led to Niger becoming financially stable and raised the income of the country. Around 70% of Niger's exports is uranium but it only adds 5% to the country's gross domestic product (Mohanty, 2018). Niger gained independence from France therefore giving the people of Niger more autonomy, but this was short-lived as several coups led to a one-party system and political unrest in the country. Niger was also devastated by a severe drought from 1968 to 1973, crops and

livestock were severely affected, meaning that Niger's main source of income was adversely affected (BBC,2018). The country has, and still is, being hit by conflict and terrorism which inevitably makes Niger a difficult place to grow up in.

Globalisation may be perceived to have had negative affect on Niger due to its economic instability. Globalisation can be defined as:

expanded interdependencies and rates of transaction around the world.

Much of the attention goes to expanded economic exchange: rates of international trade, global production or commodity chains, flows of technology and 'intellectual property,' flows of labor and laborers, and above all else, cross-national investment patterns. (Meyer, 2007, pp.262)

With the focus largely on economics in this description of globalisation, there are also more cultural paradigms such as homogenisation or McDonaldisation where westernized symbols of culture are permeating the globe due to multinational corporations (Pieterse, 1993). Due to the landlocked status, distribution of population and poor infrastructure of the country, Niger seems to have avoided the literal McDonaldisation (World Population review, 2022) and a lot of homogenisations for now, but will the SDGs encourage homogenisation? This theory argues that the world is becoming more westernised, specifically with Americanised values and has also been known as cultural imperialism in an educational context. Possible evidence of America's attempts to homogenise Niger is its involvement in Niger Education and Community Strengthening (NECS) project. These projects evolved from the majority worlds countries attempts to support minority world countries to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) and the subsequent SDG's. The projects objectives were to improve access to education for children with specific focus on girls and to "strengthen links between local communities and state structures" (Bagby et al, 2016, pp.1) This project and its accompanying activities were due to be rolled out to 150 villages throughout 7 regions in Niger but due to political unrest within the country and democratic changes the project was discontinued then revamped at a later date.

Another theory of globalisation is differentialism which explains globalisation as fragmentation of cultures and constant conflict and disorganisation (Yeganeh, 2012). This

could explain the documented parental opinions in Niger of boko being in direct conflict with tarbiyya i.e., the westernised schools do not teach the cultural traditions, morals and values that Nigerien children get from koranic schools or the social learning from their families. A third theory of globalisation that we can use to explain the way Niger is developing is hybridisation. This is where aspects of different cultures meld together to create a new way of doing things. In a sense the colonisation of Niger by France gave way to hybridisation in education, firstly by the introduction of a westernised approach to education. Subsequently, many schools in Niger now teach through several languages, including French, to ensure that access is inclusive, and hybridisation also led to the Nigerien government introducing the LOSEN law which calls for the use of local languages in schools to increase inclusivity (Amoako, 2015). This law also coincides with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) article 30 which states “In those states in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist...shall not be denied the right.... to use his or her own language”. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) does not specifically refer to language but encapsulates it within the world culture in Article 11, subsection 2c, which states “The education of the child shall be directed to the preservation and strengthening of positive African morals, traditional values and cultures”. One suggestion is that more prescriptive language needs to be used within the African charter to ensure that Nigerien education is totally inclusive.

The barriers to education in Niger are far reaching and complex. Simply being a female in Niger can be a barrier to education. The UN's (2022) sustainable development goal 4 is “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” and goal 5 is to “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”. Gender equality is a prominent issue for the world, but does it consider cultural customs and values. In Niger, child marriage is prevalent with 3 in 4 girls being married by the time they are 18. In Maradi, which is the second largest city in Niger with a high concentration of Hasau people, 89% of girls are married before they turn 18. Article 21.2 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) states:

Child marriage and the betrothal of girls and boys shall be prohibited and effective action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify the minimum age of marriage to be 18 years and make registration of all marriages in an official registry compulsory. (ACRWC, 1990)

With this article in place, some people in Niger are in direct contravention of the charter. The charter places responsibility upon local governments and societies to uphold the rights of the child in line with the charter (Lloyd, 2002), but there is little evidence on if or how this is monitored and what sanctions are in place should the rights not be afforded to the children in Niger. The link between accessing higher or secondary education in Niger and child marriage is disheartening, 63% of women with only primary education are married by 18. If Nigerien girls go on to secondary educational institutions that percentage drops dramatically to only 17%, therefore secondary education reduces the rate of child marriage (Andriamasinoro, 2021). This could go some way to proving that women are more confident in making decisions which affect their lives if they have access to education during adolescence and article 28b of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) calls for the development of secondary education which is fitting for the individual, whether it be academic or vocational. Maybe Niger needs to look at developing secondary education for girls that entails the cultural teachings along with life skills for modern times. Accessibility is also a key issue and to get the infrastructure in place for conveniently placed schools would take a lot of financial resources. There would also need to be a large investment in the training of teachers and the development of curriculum. For it to become a part of the culture maybe they could involve village chiefs or elders to participate in the development of the curriculum so that it is culturally conscience.

There are many reasons why child marriage is popular in Niger, it can boost a family's income as a bride price is paid for brides and reduces the number of mouths to feed in a household. If a girl is living a particularly difficult life at home due to abuse, poverty or neglect, child marriage may provide an escape for some girls in Niger. In many cultures, girls reaching adolescents are obliged to take gender biased roles such as becoming a wife, housekeeper, and mother (Johansson, 2015). It is important to seek the opinion of

the people who child marriage directly affects, the girls. In a study conducted in 36 villages in Niger, girls argued that their social status would be positively affected, and their economic status would also increase (Myers & Harvey, 2011). It could be argued that outsiders should not make decisions or enforce their cultural practices on the girls of Niger, it is important to ensure that they have a chance to experience opportunities which allow them to make more informed decisions, this can be achieved by access to education. It has been suggested that parents in Niger are reluctant to send their girls to school due to attitudinal changes that do not coincide with their traditional beliefs and ways of life. Lincove (2009) suggests that extra funding should be made available to support the education of girls in Niger by training more female teachers, ensuring appropriate facilities for girls to use while in school and to have more female supervisors available or single sex schools. By providing these additional measures perhaps Nigerien parents would be more confident that their girls would keep in mind their traditions and culture.

The effects of child marriage on girls can be profound; they will be discouraged from attending school or getting a job, they may be forced to have children when their bodies are not ready, they are not skilled or mature enough to have children, their well-being can be negatively affected, they can be cut off from friends and family and can miss the joy of growing up in their adolescence (Pesando & Abufhele, 2019, Andriamasinoro, 2021). Child marriage in Niger is a violation of human rights and a direct result of gender discrimination, and it inhibits Niger from achieving the SDG's (Nour 2009, Davis et al 2013, Clark, 2017). Further evidence that child marriage is inhibiting Niger from achieving the SDG's is that studies conducted show a direct correlation between elevated levels of literacy and education in women decreases infant mortality, fertility rates and malnourishment in children (Browne & Barrett, 1991), therefore eradicating child marriage in Niger would also support the achievement of SDG's 2 and 3 which are zero hunger and good health and well-being. Another implication of child marriage is the increased risk of intimate partner violence. Kidman (2017) highlighted that child brides are often socially isolated due to becoming pregnant and this increases the risk of intimate partner violence which also has a negative impact on mental and physical health.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which has proved to be yet another barrier to accessing education, the girls of Niger are under increased risk of child marriage. This is due to movement restrictions; schools being closed and the economic vulnerabilities that concur with a pandemic. A study conducted by Yukich et al (2021) found that several factors could pertain to an increase in child marriage during the pandemic. One of the factors they investigated was parental death which yielded an impact on child marriage during the pandemic, this increased the risk for girls which is similar to the risk factors for parental deaths due to AIDS/HIV, which is also a prevalent health issue in many African countries (Beegle & Krutikova, 2008). Access to services and sexual health care including child marriage preventive programmes had ceased due to the increased rates of transmission of Covid-19. This allowed for a whole cohort to be possibly missed during the time of programme shutdowns. This could mean that there will be an increase in child marriages in the next year, although there is little information on the effective programmes were (UNFPA, 2020). In a survey commissioned by the UN (2021) in Africa during the pandemic, African respondents stated that “COVID-19 threatens progress on SDGs for vulnerable and marginalised groups across Africa.” SDGs pertaining to Women and children were seen as severely at risk with a score of 86%.

Although the stats are getting better for Niger in their journey to meeting the sustainable development goals and providing equitable education for all, the pandemic has set the whole world back when it comes to sustainable development. Mandatory school closures meant that worldwide around “1 billion children were at risk of falling behind” (UNICEF, 2020), the consideration is that will it have a bigger impact on minority world countries. Will the SDG’s timeframe be lengthened to accommodate the setbacks that the pandemic has caused? All the support is in place for countries like Niger to improve their equity in education such as the United Nations and their own charter and majority world countries fund a lot of development. Gender equality is a worldwide issue and child marriage has many detrimental effects on health, well-being, poverty, and child mortality. The people of Niger could potentially be grasping on to their culture and that could explain the reluctance to send their girls to school and economically it makes more sense for them to consider child marriage. Petit and Wheeler (2005) make an interesting point “for rights to become meaningful they must be claimed and realised by real people engaged in specific

struggles". Do the SDGs and UNCRC force countries to sacrifice their culture, heritage, and beliefs in order to meet westernised expectations? People at the heart of the issues need to be given a voice in what directly affects them. To give them a voice they need access to education so they can experience options and articulate their preferences. It could be viewed as a vicious circle as one cannot happen without the other, but the people of Niger need to be supported to get to a point where they are developed enough to have options. Until minority world countries have proxy over their natural resources and majority world countries stop taking advantage of them, there can be no equity, in education or humanity.

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