

# A Study of Western Hegemony in Gender Politics

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As analysed through the Gramscian concept of Hegemony, to what extent has the socio-political movement to end child marriage in Malawi impacted gender politics in Norway?

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# Introduction

Every year, 12 million girls globally marry before the age of 18—almost one every two seconds.<sup>1</sup> In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, an additional 13 million child marriages are predicted to over the next decade.<sup>2</sup> Child marriage, defined as “any formal marriage or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child”,<sup>3</sup> remains a widespread practice spanning all nation-states, disproportionately impacting girls. Does the recent expansion of the politicisation of child marriage from the Southern Hemisphere to parts of the Global North, including Norway, signal a global paradigm shift in gender politics?

A Malawian movement’s advocacy to end child marriage, partially driven by youth, resulted in a constitutional change in Malawi on February 14th, 2017, repealing the legal loophole that allowed children between 15 and 18 years of age to marry with parental consent.<sup>4</sup> <sup>5</sup> Similarly, the Norwegian Wedding Busters movement emerged in June of 2017, in which 9400 youth petitioned Norwegian County Governors with letters asking “Why can I marry?”.<sup>6</sup> On May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2018, the Norwegian Parliament unanimously voted in favour of “*Changes in the Marriage Act (absolute 18-year age limit to enter marriage in Norway)*”, a repeal of the

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<sup>1</sup> “Child Marriage,” Plan International, accessed September 10, 2020, <https://plan-international.org/sexual-health/child-marriage-early-forced>.

<sup>2</sup> “Millions More Cases of Violence, Child Marriage, Female Genital Mutilation, Unintended Pregnancy Expected Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic,” United Nations Population Fund, April 28, 2020, <https://www.unfpa.org/news/millions-more-cases-violence-child-marriage-female-genital-mutilation-unintended-pregnancies>.

<sup>3</sup> “Child Marriage,” UNICEF, March 10, 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-marriage>.

<sup>4</sup> “Malawi Parliament Adopts Amendment to End Child Marriage,” UN Women, February 22, 2017, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2017/2/news-malawi-parliament-adopts-amendment-to-end-child-marriage>.

<sup>5</sup> “Malawi Changes Law to End Child Marriage,” Plan International, February 14, 2017, <https://plan-international.org/news/2017-02-14-malawi-changes-law-end-child-marriage>.

<sup>6</sup> Kari Aarstad Aase, “Barneekteskap Er Lov i Norge: Hadia Tajik Vil Foreslå Lovendring,” VG, September 26, 2017, <https://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/i/59VjO/barneekteskap-er-lov-i-norge-hadia-tajik-vil-foreslaa-lovendring>.

Norwegian Marriage Act § 1 a, which allowed for a dispensation exception of county governors approving marriages of 16- and 17-year-olds. The absolute 18-year age limit for entering marriage in Norway came into effect on July 1<sup>st</sup> 2018.<sup>7</sup> Although this age difference is not substantial and child marriage is not a widespread practice in Norway, the change was primarily a matter of political principle. Norway, a widely regarded pioneering country on gender equality,<sup>8</sup> had, until then, not addressed this domestic rights breach, despite remarks from the U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as seen in their General comment no.4 from 2003.<sup>9</sup>

By 2030, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5.3 aims to “Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation”.<sup>10</sup> Despite child marriage having been a well-sustained aspect of Norway’s international aid and foreign policy for years, the issue has remained socially accepted and depoliticised within its own borders. When the gaze is reverted, the question of the state of internal politicisation of such issues is raised. Evidently, there is strong hypocrisy in terms of Western countries’ corresponding internal and external policies—a blind spot in contemporary gender politics. Hence, this essay aims to answer the research question: *As analysed through the Gramscian concept of Hegemony, to what extent has the socio-political movement to end child marriage in Malawi impacted gender politics in Norway?*

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<sup>7</sup> Stortinget [The Norwegian parliament], 2018, *Endringer i ekteskapsloven (absolutt 18-årsgrænse for å inngå ekteskap i Norge)* [Changes in the Marriage Act (absolute 18-year age limit to enter marriage in Norway)] Prop. 49 L (2017-2018), Innst. 267 L (2017-2018), Lovvedtak 55 (2017-2018).

<sup>8</sup> “Global Gender Gap Report 2020,” World Economic Forum, December 16, 2019, <https://www.weforum.org/reports/gender-gap-2020-report-100-years-pay-equality>.

<sup>9</sup> Knut Refsdal, General Secretary of Norges kristne råd [Christian Council of Norway], “Høringsuttalelse Fra Norges Kristne Råd: «Forslag Til Endringer i Ekteskapsloven» [Consultation Statement from the Christian Council of Norway: ‘Proposals for Amendments to the Marriage Act’],” January 31, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> “SDGs .. Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform,” United Nations (United Nations), accessed September 10, 2020, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/topics/sustainabledevelopmentgoals>.

# Conceptual Framework: Gramscian Cultural Hegemony

The concept of cultural hegemony was first developed in-depth through a Marxist lens in Antonio Gramsci's *The Prison Notebooks [Quaderni del carcere]* (1929-35).<sup>11</sup> In response to a historical overemphasis on institutional politics and economic determinism, Gramsci emphasises culture, social movements and civil society.<sup>12</sup> In addressing Western hegemony, Gramsci argues that in the “hierarchical” unification of world civilisation, other cultures have “had a universal value only in so far as they have become constituent elements of European culture”.<sup>13</sup> Thus, cultures other than European have become irrelevant unless they pertain to European interests, submerged by Western prevalence.

Scholars have defined the concept of hegemony in multifarious ways. Williams describes hegemony as “not a metaphysical force, it is actively created, maintained, and reproduced”.<sup>14</sup> From a Gramscian perspective, Maney, Woehrle, and Coy define it as “persuasion as a form of control” and “cultural processes that contribute to the legitimacy of power holders and their policies”.<sup>15</sup> Connell, through a gendered perspective, defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women”.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Western hegemony in gender politics can be described in a

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<sup>11</sup> Antonio Gramsci, Joseph A. Buttigieg, and Antonio Callari, *Prison Notebooks*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Hardnack, Chris, “Gramsci and Goffman, together at last: Toward a counter-hegemonic framing approach to movement research”, July, 2019, <https://www.interfacejournal.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Interface-11-1-Hardnack.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Gramsci, Antonio, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (Hoare, Quintin & Smiths, Geoffrey Nowell Smith, Eds.; Hoare, Quintin & Smiths, Geoffrey Nowell Smith Trans.), (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 765.

<sup>14</sup> Raymond Williams, 1973, cited in Ransome, Paul. 1992. Antonio Gramsci: A New Introduction. First ed. PrenticeHall.

<sup>15</sup> Maney, Gregory M., Woehrle, Lynne M., Coy, Patrick G. “Harnessing and Challenging Hegemony: The U.S. Peace Movement After 9/11”. *Sociological Perspectives*, 48(3), 2005, 357–381.

<sup>16</sup> Demetriou, D. Z. “Connell's Concept of Hegemonic Masculinity”: A Critique. *Theory and Society*, Vol. 30, No. 3 June 2001, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/657965>, 337-361.

general sense, from a cultural perspective, or through the power one group holds over another.

Furthermore, the nature of hegemony and its power dynamics are deeply linked to civil society and the concept of counter-hegemony. Gramsci explains how hegemony “creates a new ideological terrain, determines a reform of consciousness and of methods of knowledge”.<sup>17</sup> Smith argues that in Gramsci’s notion of the integral state, civil society is an “essential component of the making of power, and thus, the challenging of that power”.<sup>18</sup> Further, Im explores counter-hegemony as “not a real hegemony in strict sense, but economic, political and ideological preparations for hegemony before overthrowing capitalism or before winning state power”.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, as a part of counter-hegemony, social movements such as Wedding Busters challenge the existing hegemonic *sensu comune* by providing alternate definitions of the real.<sup>20</sup> Through challenging cultural processes, including traditions and norms, and the legal framework of child marriage, the legitimacy of those in power and existing power dynamics are countered.

Rather than grounded in coercion, the fundamentals of hegemony are ideology and consciousness. As argued by Kendie, Gramsci believes the superstructure—consciousness and ideology—is fundamental to the role of the dominant class, and the superstructure encompassing these socialising mechanisms enforce and consolidate the

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<sup>17</sup> Gramsci, Antonio. “Prison Writings 1929-1935: VI Hegemony, Relations of Force, Historical Bloc: Structure and Superstructure ii. In D. Forgacs (Ed.), *The Antonio Gramsci reader: Selected writings, 1916-1935*. (Washington Square, New York, NY: New York University Press), 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, Kylie. “Gramsci at the margins: subjectivity and subalternity in a theory of hegemony”, *International Gramsci Journal*, 1(2), 2010, <https://ro.uow.edu.au/gramsci/vol1/iss2/7>, 39-50.

<sup>19</sup> Im, Hyug Baeg, “Hegemony And Counter-Hegemony In Gramsci.” *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Spring-Summer 1991, 142.

<sup>20</sup> Adler, Glenn, and James H. Mittelman. “Reconstituting ‘Common-sense’ Knowledge: representations of globalization protests.” *International Relations* 18(2), 2004, 189-211.

economic power pertaining to the base.<sup>21</sup> As this establishes hegemony as a rule by consent,<sup>22</sup> Gramsci strives to give “the popular and subaltern classes’ opportunities to assume social and political leadership”.<sup>23</sup> Smith addresses the operation of hegemony at a personal level, as it “comes from below, originating in the thoughts, beliefs and actions of everyday people”.<sup>24</sup> This is evident in how hegemony operates on different levels, such as individual political freedom and national consensus. Nevertheless, hegemony is not established at the international political level as soft power political interference is limited to a normative level.

A theoretical approach to gender enriches the complexity in understanding how our hegemonic consciousness is produced.<sup>25</sup> When incorporating Gramscian hegemony into feminist theories, the topic of hegemony and the female body, especially regarding bodily autonomy, emerges. To what extent is one taking away versus expanding personal freedom of choice when banning child marriage? Although there has been a politicisation of child marriage in recent years, there is no direct correlation with a change in international gender norms. Indeed, few countries have legislation that ensures an absolute 18-year age limit.<sup>26</sup> This question of freedom is reminiscent of trends in countries such as Somalia, Sierra Leone

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<sup>21</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The German Ideology,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1973), 3.

<sup>22</sup> Kendie, Daniel, “How Useful is Gramsci’s Theory of Hegemony and Domination to the Study of African States?” *African Social Science Review*, Fall 2006, <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1021&context=assr>

<sup>23</sup> Thomas, Peter, “The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism”, Chicago: Haymarket, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Smith, Kylie, “Gramsci at the margins: subjectivity and subalternity in a theory of hegemony”, *International Gramsci Journal*, 1(2), 2010, <https://ro.uow.edu.au/gramsci/vol1/iss2/7>, 39-50.

<sup>25</sup> Stoddart, Mark C. J., “Ideology, Hegemony, Discourse: A Critical Review of Theories of Knowledge and Power” [Abstract], *Social Thought & Research*, Vol. 28, (Social “Movements” (2007)), 191-225.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Her Er Barneekteskap Forbuddt [Here Child Marriage Is Forbidden].’ Plan International Norge [Plan International Norway], June 23, 2020. <https://www.plan-norge.no/weddingbusters/verdenskart>.

and Mali regarding female genital mutilation (FGM) as another harmful practice.<sup>27</sup> <sup>28</sup> <sup>29</sup> Exploring Western Hegemony in gender politics through a gendered theoretical lens allows for a deepened multi-scalar analysis, including at an individual and bodily level, in which the dimensions of the global political landscape are unfolded.

## Research Journey: Method and Positionality

As a youth ambassador in the Norwegian Wedding Buster campaign, present in Parliament at the time of the legislative change, and involved in work with *Norway's International Strategy to Eliminate Harmful Practices 2019-2023*,<sup>30</sup> I grounded the Extended Essay in my personal involvement and action research. Thus, I have valuable insight into the case study, especially on youth-led political advocacy and cooperation between Malawian and Norwegian youth. As a Norwegian, I had an advantage in language; three interviews were conducted in Norwegian and translated into English. My personal relationships influenced the data collection process to some extent, allowing me to undertake the research in a unique way that an outsider perhaps would not have been able to.

Due to a lack of former research on the issue, I based my EE on primary research consisting of four-in depth interviews with actors in the political fields of children, gender, and child

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<sup>27</sup> "Prevalence of Female Genital Mutilation" (World Health Organization), accessed December 20, 2020, <https://www.who.int/teams/sexual-and-reproductive-health-and-research/areas-of-work/female-genital-mutilation/prevalence-of-female-genital-mutilation>.

<sup>28</sup> Eusebius Small et al., "Hegemonic Masculinity Attitudes Toward Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting Among a Sample of College Students in Northern and Southern Sierra Leone," *Journal of Transcultural Nursing* 31, no. 5 (2019): pp. 468-478, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043659619875499>.

<sup>29</sup> Pascal, Sonia, "Cultural Crusades: Relativism and the FGM Debate," *SPICE: Student Perspectives on Institutions, Choices and Ethics*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 6, 2007.

<https://repository.upenn.edu/spice/vol2/iss1/6>

<sup>30</sup> Utenriksdepartementet [Ministry of Foreign Affairs]. "Strategi Mot Skadelige Skikker 2019-2023. [Norway's International Strategy to Eliminate Harmful Practices 2019-2023]" Regjeringen.no. Accessed September 13, 2020.

[https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/skadelige\\_skikker/id2673335/](https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/skadelige_skikker/id2673335/).

marriage. The primary data was complemented by relevant legislation and policies, and a theoretical underpinning of literature and case studies to ensure a sustained thematic analysis.

I contacted four interviewees in June of 2020, in which a comprehensive and multi-scalar approach was prioritised, respectively, at local grassroots, national political, and international soft power levels. Through varied political experience, types of engagement, and personal connection, different perspectives and political viewpoints were emphasised. The interviewees were:

1. Hamza Ali, a Norwegian youth at the forefront of the Wedding Buster movement.
2. Silje Hjemdal, a member of Parliament in the Committee on Family and Cultural Affairs and rapporteur of the legislation change “*Changes in the Marriage Act (absolute 18-year age limit to enter marriage in Norway)*”.<sup>31</sup>
3. Rose Sakala, a Malawian advocate who has fought to end child marriage since 2012.
4. Kirsten Sandberg, former leader of the U.N. Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013-2015).

Nonetheless, my personal involvement in the campaign, a political youth party, and as a board member of Plan International Norway presented a challenge of personal bias, especially as I already knew Ali and Sakala. To ensure personal detachment and transparency, I utilised books about research processes, and I carefully transcribed and thematically analysed the interviews into transcripts totalling 15 891 words.<sup>32 33</sup> I purposely included a wide range of interviewees with different political standpoints, and both Hjemdal (The Progress Party) and Ali (The Norwegian Labour Party) have positions in political parties on different sides of the political spectrum.

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<sup>31</sup> Stortinget [The Norwegian Parliament]. 2018. *Endringer i ekteskapsloven (absolutt 18-årsgrænse for å inngå ekteskap i Norge) [Changes in the Marriage Act (absolute 18-year age limit to enter marriage in Norway)]* Prop. 49 L (2017-2018), Innst. 267 L (2017-2018), Lovvedtak 55 (2017-2018).

<sup>32</sup> John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, Fourth (London: Sage Publications, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> Tom Wengraf, *Qualitative Research Interviewing: Biographic Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods* (London: Sage, 2011).

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner which followed a standard set of interview questions slightly tailored to each interviewee to facilitate further argumentation, reflection, and ensure a coherent theorisation and conceptual analysis of the empirical data. Apart from the interview with Ali, which was conducted in person, all interviews were conducted over either video or phone call. Furthermore, to create genuine and transparent interviews, I ensured the ethical principles of informed consent concerning translation,<sup>34</sup> the essay's purpose, recording and identification by name, and sharing the research findings with the interviewees. The interviewees consented to their names being included, which can be seen as a testament to an established relationship of trust. Throughout the research process, preserving the interviewees' integrity and their work through a nuanced and robust essay has become significant to me.

## Empirical Analysis: Western Hegemony in Gender Politics

### International Solidarity and Hypocrisy

Gramsci's theory of Western Hegemony is reflected in the hypocritical gender policies of the West. "If Norway is encouraging other countries to overcome [harmful practices], it is not credible if the country itself does not have legislation on the field", Parliamentarian Hjemdal explains. As an actor in significant discussions in international forums, Norway has for years been painted as a pioneering country in gender equality whilst simultaneously allowing children to marry—a fundamental breach of children's, and especially girls' rights. Ali states: "The [work abroad] is insufficient until we introduce similar legislation as well. Double standards and double play in politics is an upside-down attitude". Several research participants argued that this inherent hypocrisy must be countered to establish a genuine and trustworthy domestic and foreign policy, thus illustrating the practical importance of symbolic solidarity.

To generate fundamental change, the cultural and ideological supremacy of the dominant class in hegemony should be countered. Therefore, contemporary international solidarity has

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<sup>34</sup> Rose Wiles, *What Are Qualitative Research Ethics?* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

to include a two-way dialogue and equal interaction of ideas and values. Malawian youth, and later Norwegian youth, had to actualise the issue of child marriage to place it on the political agenda, also seen in the closely connected Wedding Busters movement in Bangladesh which in turn highlights the impact of dialogue within the Global South.<sup>35</sup> As evident in Norway's *International Strategy to Eliminate Harmful Practices*, which Sakala contributed with input to, Western policies on gender become more fulfilling and comprehensive when the perspectives of the Global South are included.<sup>36</sup>

Is change being spearheaded from the bottom up, or is the Norwegian legislation change merely a superficial symbolic action? In answer to why the legislative change has not occurred before, Sandberg explains: "It has not been viewed as a great practical problem in Norway, and as a consequence of lack of political interests, combined with that, to my knowledge, no one fought hard to change the rule [on child marriage]". Amongst some respondents, there was an ambiguity in terms of a critical internal gaze when viewing internal gender issues. The issue of child marriage has been increasingly politicised in the Global South but has remained depoliticised in the Global North. Although child marriage has gained some further political focus, it is not often not described as a "Norwegian issue". Through Norway's *International Strategy to Eliminate Harmful Practices* and funding to end child marriage in international aid as seen in the national budget of 2019,<sup>37</sup> policy-makers such as the Norwegian Minister of Development Dag Inge Ulstein

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<sup>35</sup> Nandini Shahla Chowdhury, "A Dangerous Clause to 'Legally' Decrease Child Marriage in Bangladesh," Devex (Devex, April 22, 2015), <https://www.devex.com/news/a-dangerous-clause-to-legally-decrease-child-marriage-in-bangladesh-85966>.

<sup>36</sup> Utenriksdepartementet [Ministry of Foreign Affairs]. "Strategi Mot Skadelige Skikker 2019-2023. [Norway's *International Strategy to Eliminate Harmful Practices 2019-2023*]" Regjeringen.no. Accessed September 13, 2020.

[https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/skadelige\\_skikker/id2673335/](https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/skadelige_skikker/id2673335/).

<sup>37</sup> "Bistandsbudsjettet: – Ikke Glem Tenåringsjenter i Humanitære Kriser [The National Budget: Do Not Forget Teenage Girls in Humanitarian Crises.," Plan International Norge [Plan International Norway], October 8, 2018, [https://kommunikasjon.ntb.no/pressemelding/bistandsbudsjettet-ikke-glem-tenaringsjenter-i-humanitaere-kriser?publisherId=89868&releaseId=17854603&fbclid=IwAR3tfwCbt85\\_FPFu8-bZ1HiOfUJM\\_rXArAzrlBJT0s57FTtxM-33p2pIBk](https://kommunikasjon.ntb.no/pressemelding/bistandsbudsjettet-ikke-glem-tenaringsjenter-i-humanitaere-kriser?publisherId=89868&releaseId=17854603&fbclid=IwAR3tfwCbt85_FPFu8-bZ1HiOfUJM_rXArAzrlBJT0s57FTtxM-33p2pIBk).

have taken a more proactive role—is this evidence of a global deep-rooted, or merely a superficial, paradigm shift?

As a foreign actor and development partner, Norway holds part of the power to define what gender issues will be prioritised on the political scene. “The one who is responsible for the resources causes the short. The work of the Norwegian government, now that we have the strategy in place, is to enforce it enough on the countries we are financing, to make sure they come up with their own strategies on child marriage”, Sakala argues. As a stakeholder with economic power, Norway needs to meet a standard of political accountability through an active grounding in the Global South. Ali argues there is a silver lining, as Norway has become an example of a Western country that has had lacking legislation previously but has now taken active action to change. The research findings suggest a need to abandon the West’s sense of superiority as the manifestation of its hegemony and to revert the gaze.

## The Transparency of Gender Politics and Policy-Making

Transparency in gender policy-making is crucial to ensure political accountability, holistic approaches, and complexities in impacts. As Gramsci’s hegemonic analysis establishes as a tool of critical consciousness, organising the experiences of the masses is at the root of its validity.<sup>38</sup> Hence, the Wedding Buster movement emerged from the Malawian grassroots as a counter-force to the Western hegemony in the politicisation of gender.

As an issue predominantly impacting girls, child marriage cannot be viewed as an isolated part of the political and economic landscape, as all political policies are interdependent and impact each other. Thus, through the transparency of policies’ intent, patterns, and impacts, holistic and efficient programs can be built. Sakala describes the importance of financial grounding: “The girls face a lot of challenges, so it is not enough to run campaigns and pull out girls from marriage, but they should have economic empowerment programs. The

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<sup>38</sup> Kendie, Daniel, “How Useful is Gramsci's Theory of Hegemony and Domination to the Study of African States?” *African Social Science Review*, Fall 2006,

<https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1021&context=assr>, 92.

problems leading to child marriage, they are all leaning on economic aspects”. Indeed, political gender reforms must be accompanied by legal changes and broader economic and social empowerment policies to fulfil their purpose. One should not turn to symbolic politics in gender issues in an attempt to become ‘champions of change’ without ensuring long-term, sustainable, and grounded impacts. Without involving the target groups in laying the premises of programs, such complexities are easily overlooked.

Transparency of gender-policies’ complexity of impact, especially the nuances in legislation versus practice, is needed. Sandberg elaborates: “The dilemma is that one sets a formal marriage age, but then customary law marriages where there are no restrictions happen to a great degree. It is just as important to counter this, as it is equally viewed as married [culturally] and with the same negative effects as being formally married”. Hence, ‘categorical rules’ and legislation with positive intention can have negative consequences of increased informal marriages or, as legislation is often regionally limited, the ceremony being moved to a neighbouring village or country. Nonetheless, countering this with exceptions such as a 16-year age limit is ineffective, as Sandberg explains the exception to the rule is often practiced as the main rule. As hegemonic powers often shadow over the reality of gender-policies, transparency is critical to ensure political accountability and progress.

## Political Freedom: A Dilemma

The political complexity of child marriage is well addressed in the concepts of negative and positive liberty, as first described by Isaiah Berlin.<sup>39</sup> Negative liberty is an absence of something, such as an obstacle or interference, differing from positive liberty which requires the presence of something, such as control or self-determination.<sup>40</sup> Interference from external bodies on individuals or groups is emphasised by theorists of negative freedom, whilst theorists of positive freedom stress to what extent internal factors impact how autonomously

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<sup>39</sup> Berlin, Isaiah., 1969, ‘Two Concepts of Liberty’, in I. Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, London: Oxford University Press. New ed. in Berlin 2002.

<sup>40</sup> Ian Carter, “Positive and Negative Liberty,” August 2, 2016,  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/liberty-positive-negative/>, Two Concepts of Liberty.

individuals or groups act.<sup>41</sup> In positive political freedom, Rousseau's theory of freedom argues individual freedom is achieved through participation in a community's democratic processes, as the community imposes collective control over its own affairs in line with the 'general will'.<sup>42</sup> Though, liberals such as Berlin have contested this concept, as oppressed minorities can take part in a society exercising self-control and still, as they are oppressed, be fundamentally unfree.<sup>43</sup>

The notion of freedom related to child marriage is double-sided—the freedom from marriage and the freedom to choose to marry as a child. Ali argues: "The freedom to love whom you want and marry whom you want, it is incredibly important and central. I believe the freedom from being forcibly married is so important that the [acceptable] individual cases have to yield". Although compromising the freedom of specific individuals, prohibiting child marriage is necessary to ensure protection from structural violations such as social isolation and sexual violence. Contrastingly, Sandberg describes the UNCRC and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women's (CEDAW) discussion while working on a commentary about harmful practices in 2014: "[The CEDAW] stressed the importance of women's right to self-determination and also girls'—at least the [older] girls. They argued that from 16-years-old, one needs the opportunity to decide if one wants to marry—and that some girls need [to marry] at that age. It was an important aspect of the autonomy of young girls".<sup>44</sup> The question of the girl's freedom to choose is put at the centre. Does prohibiting child marriage deprive her of the freedom to choose, or is she genuinely unfree when deprived of her safety, unable to make independent decisions?

Additionally, are girls exercising their freedom if external factors condition their choice to marry? Sakala further explains: "It is mostly us outsiders who saw [child marriage] as a problem. The girls that grew up in those communities do not see it as a problem; actually, some of them look forward to getting married. The problem is that we have high poverty

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ian Carter, "Positive and Negative Liberty," August 2, 2016, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/liberty-positive-negative/>, The Paradox of Positive Liberty.

<sup>44</sup> "Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women," OHCHR, accessed September 25, 2020. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CEDAW/Pages/CEDAWIndex.aspx>.

rates and some girls lack school fees, so they see marriage as the next step in their lives”. Both Ali and Sakala address the notion of political norm-setting. At an international level, the standards for conceptualisation of freedom often emerge externally.

To relate this discussion to an inherently linked case, the practice of FGM continues in the Pusiga District of Ghana where 60% of women have been victims of the practice. Its continuation is rooted in the pressure of older women, easy movement across borders, the false belief that it reduces promiscuity, and patriarchal forces undermining female autonomy.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the social norms at a local level are inherent to the root of harmful practices such as child marriage and FGM. The standards for conceptualisation may be set at an international level, but they are redundant if they do not have a grounding in local communities’ social context. Is prohibiting child marriage, to create future opportunities for girls, a more genuine notion of freedom?

## The Blurred Lines of Globalisation

Other cultures have merely “had a universal value only in so far as they have become constituent elements of European culture”,<sup>46</sup> according to Gramsci. However, Norwegian culture has been transformed by other cultures having a continuously increasing impact, not merely as constituent elements. Although difficult to define, globalisation can be described as “a process that encompasses the causes, course, and consequences of transnational and transcultural integration of human and non-human activities” and of “economic integration; the transfer of policies across borders; the transmission of knowledge; cultural stability; the

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<sup>45</sup> Evelyn Sakeah et al., “Persistent Female Genital Mutilation despite Its Illegality: Narratives from Women and Men in Northern Ghana,” PloS one (Public Library of Science, April 22, 2019), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6476474/>.

<sup>46</sup> Gramsci, Antonio, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, (Hoare, Quintin & Smiths, Geoffrey Nowell Smith, Eds.; Hoare, Quintin & Smiths, Geoffrey Nowell Smith, Trans), (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 765.

reproduction, relations, and discourses of power".<sup>47</sup><sup>48</sup> Hence, globalisation is a fundament of the ongoing process of hegemony, causing an increased doubt of the actuality of hegemonic forces.

Are the conceptual ideas of the West and non-West fading? Ali states: "The movement in the Global South impacts the Norwegian women's struggle. (...) The Global South is Norway, and globalisation impacts Norway in many ways. That division can no longer be made".

Cultural and societal expressions of the Global South, as well as issues, do not only exist in but are an integral part of the nature of Norway's political climate, making attitudes of cultural superiority paradoxical. Ali further criticises Norway for declaring itself "too progressive" and beyond the rest of the world when it is embossed by injustices, thus lacking an internal critical gaze.

The manifestation of voices from the Global South in the Norwegian political landscape is evident and crucial to address the challenges Norway is facing domestically and as a development partner. Hjeddal explains: "Not talking about [gendered] issues is a new violation against these women. The fact that some of these women are now taken seriously, that some of these resilient ladies who knew the context more than the rest of us engaged in the issue and dared to take the debates, has not been free for them", referring to strong backlash. One example is seen in "The Shameless Girls" Sofia Srour, Nancy Herz, and Amina Bile, who revolutionised the Norwegian debate on honour culture.<sup>49</sup> As voices

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<sup>47</sup> Al-Rodhan, Nayef R. F., Dr., "Definitions of Globalization: A Comprehensive Overview and a Proposed Definition [Abstract]", Ambassador Gérard Stoudmann Director, Geneva Centre for Security Policy, *Program on the Geopolitical Implications of Globalization and Transnational Security*, June 19, 2006.

<sup>48</sup> 1 P. V. Nikitin and J. E. Elliott, "Freedom and the Market (An Analysis of the Anti-globalisation Movement from the Perspective of the Theoretical Foundation of the Evaluation of the Dynamics of Capitalism by Palanyi, Hayek and Keynes)", *The Forum for Social Economics*, Fall 2000, pp. 1-16, p. 14, as cited in G. Gaburro and E. O'Boyle, "Norms for Evaluating Economic Globalization", *International Journal of Social Economics*, Vol. 30, No. 1/2, 2003, pp. 95- 118, p. 115.

<sup>49</sup> Herz, Nanzy., Srour, Sofia., Bile, Amina., "Vi er de skamløse jentene, vår tid har begynt - og det skal mye til å knuse styrken vi har bygget opp,» January 25, 2017,  
<https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/sid/i/p2qlo/vi-er-de-skamloese-jentene-vaar-tid-har-begynt-og-det-skal-mye-til-aa>

connected to the Global South, they have spoken of issues that have previously not been addressed and consequently largely remained depoliticised and viewed as irrelevant in the context of the Global North. As the international community's socio-political spheres are becoming more interlinked and cultural divisions are increasingly erased, do concepts such as "Western" and "non-Western" actually hold value when those very conceptual boundaries are becoming blurred into one?

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the socio-political movement to end child marriage in Malawi has had a significant impact on gender politics in Norway by triggering the formation of the Norwegian Wedding Buster Movement. This resulted in a legal absolute 18-year age limit to enter marriage in Norway just one year after the Malawian constitutional change, and contributed to the creation of a strategy to eliminate harmful practices. It is difficult to determine if this impact is a sign of a dawning paradigm shift in global gender politics, counteracting the current dictation of Western Hegemony, or if it is an extraordinary exception.

Through The Prison Notebooks, Gramsci strives to give the "subaltern classes opportunity to assume social and political leadership" and counter the supposed hegemonic "rule by consent".<sup>50</sup> <sup>51</sup> It is evident that the rise of these movements grounded in the Global South demonstrate a change and possible newfound direction for the conduction of gender politics in the Global North, as the Global South is to an increasing extent able to define what issues are raised on the political agenda, challenging the *senso comune* set by Western hegemony. Through the empirical research of this essay, it can be concluded that the hypocrisy of Western countries' non-corresponsible internal and external policies is a blind spot in contemporary gender politics that must be challenged. As the conceptual boundaries between the West and non-West increasingly become blurred, Western arrogance has become inherently paradoxical. In gender politics, Western Hegemony must be contested by reverting

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<sup>50</sup> Thomas, Peter, "The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism", Chicago: Haymarket, 2008.

<sup>51</sup> Kendie, Daniel, "How Useful is Gramsci's Theory of Hegemony and Domination to the Study of African States?" African Social Science Review, Fall 2006,  
<https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1021&context=assr>

the gaze and including voices from the Global South to successfully address the philosophical and social complexity of gendered issues, lifting a variety of gendered issues, and ensuring transparent, holistic, and sustainable gender policies. Likewise, future research should to a greater extent utilise literature, case studies, and methodological approaches from the Global South into its lens and arguments than this EE has.

Throughout this EE process, a research gap on the Global South as a counter-force to Western Hegemony in gender politics has become evident, particularly in terms of youth-driven socio-political movements. There is scant academic literature on the transparency of Western gender policies and the growing importance of the Global South in redefining gender problematics. Whether there is an ongoing shift in gender politics where the Global North recognises gendered issues raised by the Global South as legitimate priorities, or whether this adherence merely demonstrates acts of symbolic politics should be explored through further research.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Interview Questions in English

### Opening Questions

- Can you tell me about your work or involvement with issues in the fields of children, equality, development, or child marriage?
  - What is your connection to the issue?
  - Have you worked with such issues in a professional context? If so - can you tell me about your experience?
  - How long have you been working with/ did you work with this?
- How is the situation in your country surrounding child marriage?
- Can you tell me about your involvement in the work against child marriage?
- Has your stance on child marriage changed during this work?

### Challenges and Spearheaders

- How was it to raise this issue?
  - Can you describe the resistance to and support for initiatives such as the Wedding Buster-movement?
    - What responses do you encounter in a political context vs. working in your local community?
    - What was the rhetoric/ argumentation for both viewpoints?
    - Were the responses gendered? Was there any particular connection to nationality or political orientation? Any other type of relevant background?
- In July of 2018, child marriage was officially banned in Norway. Do you have any thoughts surrounding why this change had not occurred before?
- Do you have any thoughts surrounding the potential value of this movement originating from Malawi?
- Do you think that this as an issue is politically relevant in a country like Norway? why?
- Who do you believe were the main actors spearheading the change?

## Impacts

- What significance do you think this change has had or will have? What are the positive impacts? What are the potential negative impacts? How do they compare to each other?
  - What impact do legal changes have on social norms?
  - *In many ways, the topic of child marriage links to the idea of freedom which often diverges into the ideas of freedom from and freedom to. For instance, the freedom to choose to marry vs. the freedom from domestic violence.*
    - Where do you stand on this issue? How does this legal change impact the freedom of people?

## Accountability and Political Priorities

- Do you believe it is the responsibility of Western or European countries to adopt similar policies to the law change? Why?
- What do you see as the political priorities for gender in Norway/ in your country?
- Do you know any other examples of the global south influencing Norwegian/ western gender politics? What else might be learned from this?
- Is there anything else you would like to add?

## Appendix 2: Interview Questions in Norwegian

### Åpningsspørsmål

- Kan du fortelle meg om arbeidet ditt eller erfaringen din med saker som blant annet barneekteskap, likestilling, utvikling og angående barn?
  - Hva er tilknytningen din til saken?
  - Har du jobbet med slike eller lignende typer saker i en profesjonell kontekst? Hvis ja - kan du fortelle litt om erfaringene dine med dem?
  - Hvor lenge har du jobbet med / vært involvert i eller jobbet/ var du involvert i dette?
- Hvordan er situasjonen i Norge angående barneekteskap?
- Kan du fortelle litt om hvordan du har vært involvert i arbeidet mot barneekteskap?
- Har din stilling til eller mening om barneekteskap endret seg i løpet av den tiden du har jobbet med tematikken?

## Utfordringer og forandringskapere

- (Kirsten: Det kom fram i høringsinnspillene til lovendringen at FNs barnerettighetskomité løftet problematikken rundt denne lovgivningen i Norge i 2003. Hvorfor tror du ikke det ble gjennomført en politisk forandring før i 2018?)
- (Silje: Hvordan var det å lede denne saken i Stortingskomitéen? Hva slags spørsmål og diskusjoner kom til syne? Hvordan ble det mottatt?)
- Hvordan var det å løfte denne problemstillingen?
  - Kan du beskrive motstand til og støtten til initiativer som Wedding Buster-bevegelsen?
  - Kan du beskrive retorikken / argumentasjonen fra begge sider?
    - Var sidene på noen måte kjønnet - var det en spesiell tilknytning til politisk orientering eller kjønn? Noen annen type relevante mønstre i forskjellige tilknytninger?
- I juli 2018 ble barneekteskap forbudt i Norge. Har du noen tanker rundt hvorfor denne forandringen ikke har skjedd før?
- Synes du at barneekteskap som en politisk sak er relevant i et land som Norge? Hvorfor?
  - Selv etter forbudet ble innført? Utviklingspolitikk, internasjonal kontekst
- Hvem mener du var de viktigste aktørene for å skape denne forandringen?
  - Kommenter på rollen ungdom, og særlig ungdom i det globale sør har spilt i denne prosessen.

## Virkninger av forandringer

- Hvilken betydning tror du denne lovendringen har hatt eller kommer til å ha? Hva er de positive virkningene? Hva er de potensielle negative virkningene? Hvordan sammenlignes de opp mot hverandre?
  - Hvilken virkning har lovendringer på sosiale normer?
  - *Debatten om barneekteskap knyttes på mange måter til idéen om frihet, som ofte deles inn i idéene om frihet fra og frihet til. For eksempel, friheten til å gifte seg vs. friheten fra vold i hjemmet.*

- Hva er din tanker rundt dette - hvordan påvirker ulike typer frihet hverandre? Hvordan påvirker denne lovendringen menneskers - og jenters - frihet?

### **Ansvarlighet og politiske prioriteringer**

- Har vestlige eller Europeiske land et ansvar for å følge i Norges fotspor med lignende lovgivninger? Hvorfor?
- Hva mener du er de politiske hovedprioriteringene for kjønn i Norge?
- Vet du om noen andre eksempler der det globale sør har påvirket vestlig eller norsk (kjønns)politikk? Hva annet kan vi lære fra dette?
- Har du noen flere tanker eller idéer du har lyst til å legge til?