

# **Giving Girls a Chance: Ending Child Marriage and Promoting Education in Georgia and Niger**

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## ***Abstract***

*This article looks at child marriage in Georgia and Niger. Though Georgia has improved their child marriage laws, 14 percent of girls nationwide are still getting married off before they are 18 years old. The percentage of child marriage is considerably higher in Georgia's rural areas. Niger has the highest percentage of child marriage in the world, with 76 percent of girls getting married before the age of 18 years. This article analyzes the similarities and differences for child marriage in Georgia and Niger. It will also explore policies and precautions that can be taken to reduce child marriage in these countries.*

## **I. Introduction**

According to Girls not Brides<sup>1</sup> (undated) each year, 12 million girls are married before the age of 18. That is 23 girls every minute. Nearly 1 every 2 seconds. These child marriages hinder a young girl's chances to lead a successful life. "Child marriage is associated with a number of grave consequences for girls, such as social isolation, absence of reproductive control, and dropping out of school."<sup>2</sup> Georgia and Niger are combating the issue of child marriage by keeping girls in school and promoting delayed marriage. However, still too many girls get married before the legal age (18 years old) and they are typically the ones who drop out of school and have children before they are mentally and physically ready for having children.

Both countries have made some progress in achieving the third Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of promoting gender equality and empowering women. However, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (2014) reports that Niger still has an exceptionally high rate of child marriage, with 76 percent of girls marrying before the age of 18, and 26 percent marrying before the age of 15. In Georgia, far less, but still 14 percent of the girls are marrying before the age of 18, despite of Georgia's law that makes it illegal to marry before age 18. Poverty, lack of education, and traditions contribute to girls getting married.

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<sup>1</sup> Girls Not Brides is a global partnership of more than 1000 civil society organizations committed to ending child marriage and enabling girls to fulfil their potential. For further details, see <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> See United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (2014), p. 3.

To better understand the link between child marriage and education in Georgia and Niger, this article first provides a brief review of the literature (Section II) and then presents some empirical background for the two countries (Section III), reviewing the evolutions of GDP per capita, poverty, and life expectancy. Section IV then examines why child marriage exists, the legal age to marry in Georgia and Niger, the relationship between adolescent fertility and contraceptives, and the role of education, before the last section provides some conclusions.

## **II. Brief Literature Review**

There are many publications touching on child marriages in Georgia and Niger. With regards to Georgia, Jegorova-Askerova (2016) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (2014) analyze child marriage rates and give recommendations on how to reduce the percentages of child marriage within that country. With regards to Niger, Malé and Wodon (2016) and McCleary-Sills, Hanmer, Parsons and Klugman (2015) focus on some of the consequences of child marriage.

- Jegorova-Askerova (2016) reviews child marriage in Georgia and the regulations that have been put in place in hopes of reducing the number of underage brides. Most girls are unable to finish a basic education before they are married off. Yet, traditional people do not see a problem with this. Another issue addressed is that no one knows which children are married because most of the child marriages are not registered in Georgia.
- A Report by UNFPA (2014) provides some statistics on child marriages in Georgia and warns the readers about the consequences of child marriage. It gives an overview of recommendations for reducing the number of child marriage as well as the laws concerning marriage and education in Georgia. The report proposes that the laws regarding education and marriage should be more heavily enforced. It also suggests mandatory classes on sexual reproductive health for girls in school.
- Malé and Wodon (2016) focus on the very high rates of child marriage in Niger. Child marriage rates have declined over the past 25 years but not rapidly. They also examine how child marriage is associated with lower wealth, lower literacy, little education, and higher labor force participation. The authors focus on girls living in rural areas because that is where most of the underage marriage happens in Niger.
- McCleary-Sills, Hanmer, Parsons and Klugman (2015) analyze the correlation between education and child marriage in low income countries (including Niger). They examine the social and structural barriers that keep girls from completing school. They also provide some recommendations to keep girls in school, like, providing scholarships, hiring more female teachers, and reducing the distance between schools.

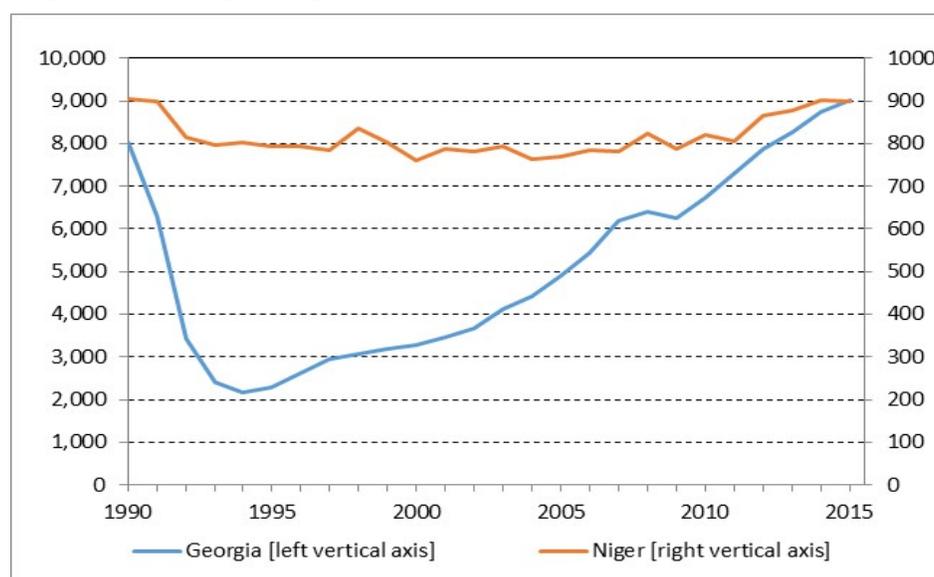
## **III. Empirical Background**

According to the Central Intelligence Unit's World Fact Book, Niger is one of the least developed countries in the world. This assessment is based on Niger's high food insecurity, lack of industry, high population growth, and a weak education sector. Niger mostly relies on agriculture and uranium. Agriculture makes up 44.3 percent of the economy while services make up 40.8 percent. Niger is a semi-presidential republic and gained its independence from France in 1960. In 2016,

Niger had the world's highest fertility rate at close to 7 children per woman. Also, almost 70 percent of the population is made up of youth (ages between 0-24 years).<sup>3</sup>

Georgia is currently an upper-middle income country. However, like Niger, Georgia has a large section (50.9 percent) of the working population in agriculture, while the service sector employs 39.1 percent and the industrial sector employs 10.0 percent of the working population.<sup>4</sup> As shown in Figure 1, following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and subsequent conflicts with Russia, Georgia's GDP per capita declined by about three quarters (from \$ 8,017 in 1990 to a low of \$ 2,181 in 1994). Fortunately, it grew rapidly since, reaching a GDP per capita of \$ 9,016 in 2015.

**Figure 1: GDP per capita (constant 2011 international \$), 1990-2015**



Source: Created by the author based on World Bank (2017).

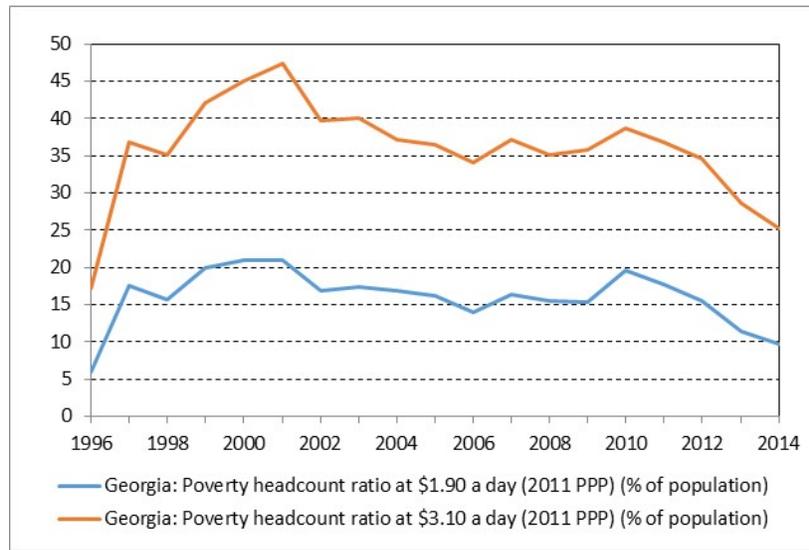
Unfortunately, as shown in Figure 1, Niger's GDP per capita has overall stayed about the same for the last 25 years. In 1990, Niger's GDP per capita was \$906. It then decreased for the subsequent three years, reaching \$798 in 1993. It stayed around \$800 from 1994 to 2011, after which it increased to \$902 in 2014 and then decreased again marginally to \$897 in 2015.

The huge differences in GDP per capita between Georgia and Niger are also reflected in terms of differences in poverty between Georgia and Niger. Figure 2 shows that poverty increased drastically in Georgia after the collapse of the Soviet Union and subsequent economic and political conflicts with Russia. Hence, in 2001, nearly 50 percent of Georgia's population lived below \$3.10 a day, and 21 percent lived below \$1.90 a day. Though poverty has been reduced since 2001, in 2014, 25 percent still lived below \$3.10 a day, and 10 percent lived below \$1.90 a day. On the other hand, as shown in Figure 3, poverty is still a major issue in Niger, despite the gradual decline since 1994. In 2014, 75.5 percent of the population still lived below \$3.10 a day and 45.7 percent lived below \$1.90 a day.

<sup>3</sup> The information in this paragraph is based on the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency's World Factbook, Niger and World Bank (2017).

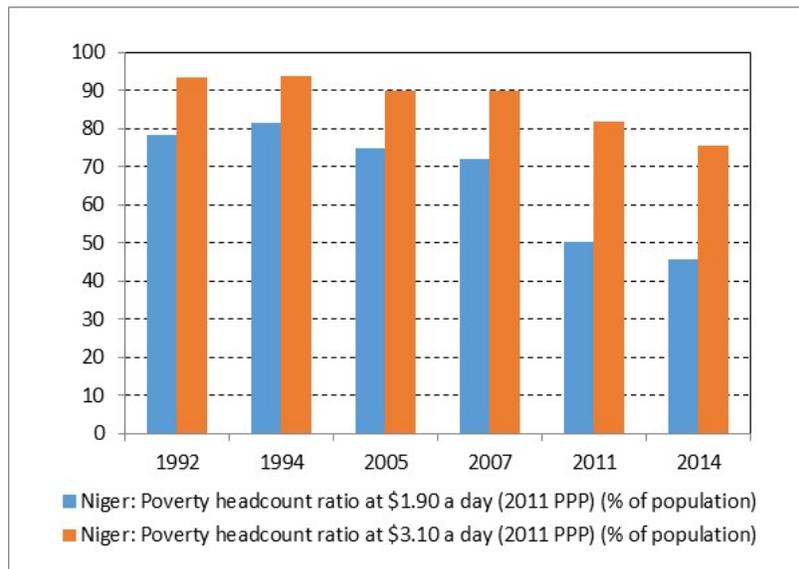
<sup>4</sup> World Bank (2017), based on latest data available for 2014.

**Figure 2: Poverty in Georgia (all available years)**



Source: Created by the author based on World Bank (2017).

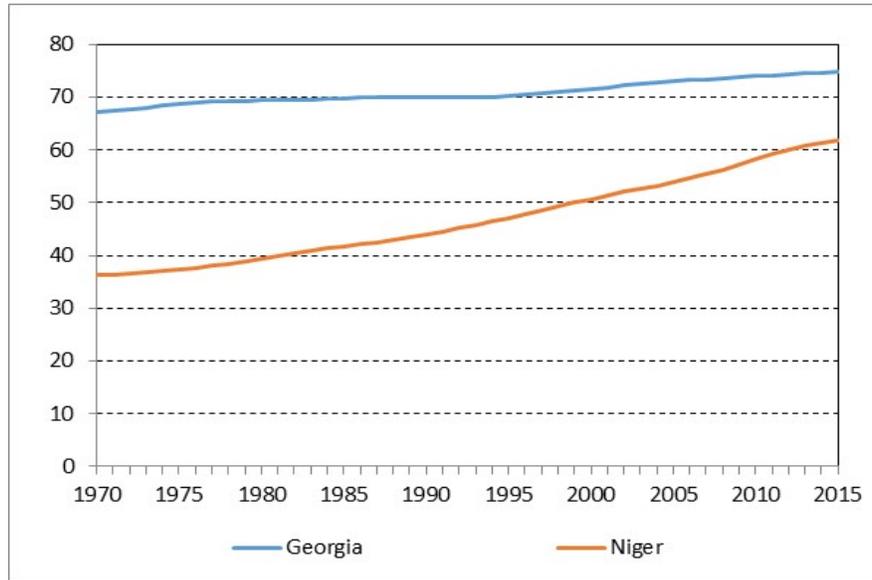
**Figure 3: Poverty in Niger (all available years)**



Source: Created by the author based on World Bank (2017).

Despite the low GDP per capita and high poverty rates, Niger has made impressive strides in increasing life expectancy, which (as shown in Figure 4) increased from about 36 years in 1970 to 63 years in 2015. In total, Niger has increased the life expectancy of its citizens by 27 years in 45 years. Georgia’s life expectancy has risen at a much more moderate pace. In 1970, the life expectancy was 66 years; in 2015, it had risen to 75 years. Hence, Georgia’s life expectancy has risen by 9 years in the last 45 years.

**Figure 4: Life Expectancy at Birth (total years) 1970-2015**



Source: Created by the author based on World Bank (2017).

## IV. Discussion

This discussion section examines a variety of arguments and possible explanations for child marriage. The first subsection provides a broad overview for why child marriage still exists today and why it is a problem. The second subsection reviews child marriage laws, while the third subsection examines adolescent fertility rates and access to contraceptives in Georgia and Niger. The fourth subsection discusses how education delays child marriage.

### IV.1. Why Child Marriage Exists

Child marriage is a multidimensional problem that cannot be solved overnight. It will take years of hard work and perseverance, but in the end, a better life will be provided for young girls that wish to attend school. Before diving into the discussion, it is important to examine why child marriage exists in the first place. According to Girls Not Brides (undated), poverty, cultural traditions, and insecurity are the reasons why this practice still happens today all over the world.

Young girls in poverty are more likely to be married because their parents cannot afford the expenses of taking care of them. Giving away their daughter is also a way to “repay debts, manage disputes, or settle social, economic and political alliances.”<sup>5</sup> Another reason why child marriage happens is because of gender inequality. In many developing countries girls are not valued as much as boys are. Most families think that sending their sons to school is a worthwhile investment, but they do not send their daughters to school.

During the 1990s, young girls in Georgia were married off because bride kidnapping was a prevalent thing in Georgia. Parents would marry their daughters early in order to prevent them from being kidnapped. This way, they were able to find their daughter a suitable groom instead of the alternative. Parents would go as far as to pull them out of school to prevent them from the

<sup>5</sup> “Why Does Child Marriage Happen?” *Girls Not Brides*, [www.girlsnotbrides.org/why-does-it-happen/](http://www.girlsnotbrides.org/why-does-it-happen/).

possibility of being kidnapped. Since the laws have become stricter on kidnapping, the cases of abduction have decreased immensely.

While bride kidnapping rarely happens in Georgia today, the biggest problem with Georgia's child marriage problem is that most people do not see this practice as a problem. As discussed in Jegorova-Askerova (2016), child marriages have been a widespread tradition for many years and Georgia's child marriage laws are not widely enforced. Many people in the remote village areas in the mountains are unaware of the laws put into place and they are also ignorant to the physical and psychological health of the young girls who marry.

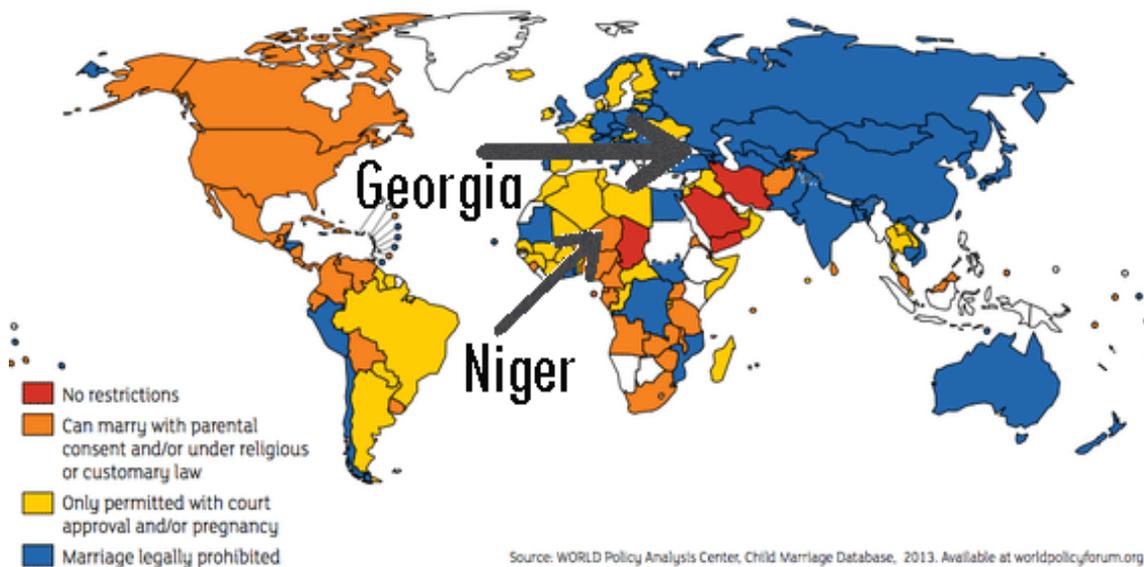
Child marriage is also seen as a traditional practice. In many cultures, when a girl starts to menstruate, people see her as a woman, who is now worthy of a husband. The next step is then to get her married so that she can become a mother. Most of the time these traditions go unquestioned because they are part of the culture. This adds another barrier for reform.

The risk of getting pregnant before getting married is another main reason for why some girls are married at a young age. Parents feel that it is in everybody's best interest to marry young in order to preserve family honor. In areas of high violence and sexual assault, marriage is seen as the best precaution. In fragile states, child marriage is common because of the increased conflict and natural disasters.

## IV.2. Legal Age for Marriage

A report by the UNFPA (2014) explains that anyone who is getting married under the age of 18 years old cannot give full consent and that child marriages are considered a violation of human rights and the rights of the child. Figure 5 illustrates the differences in marriage laws around the world.

**Figure 5: Marriage Laws Across the World**



Source: Khazan (2015). Arrows added by author.

In Niger, the official minimum age for marriage is 15 years. However, children can get married even younger due to religious practices and by the will of the parents. Only recently has Niger taken action to improve the quality of life for young women by attempting to reduce child marriage. For instance, Barroy et al. (2016, p. 27) state that there was an effort to enact a law that would protect female adolescent students by having to obtain permission from a judge for a child to marry. However, religious leaders opposed this law and elected representatives refused to vote. Nevertheless, the President of Niger, Issoufou Mahamadou, has recently stated that child marriage will no longer be tolerated.<sup>6</sup>

In Georgia, the legal age for marriage is 18 years. However, most of the child marriages in Georgia are never officially registered. Therefore, the parents are typically not held accountable for marrying their daughters too early.

### **IV.3. Adolescent Fertility and Contraceptives**

UNFPA (2014 p. 4) states that a reproductive health survey of Georgia found that “some 76.6 percent of married women aged 15 to 19 years used no method of modern contraception.” The reasons for not using contraceptives were related to pregnancy, fertility, or sexual activity. However, another reason may be that there has not been any exposure to contraceptive counseling and family planning. On the other hand, the survey found that ethnically Georgian women have higher access rates to contraceptive counselling than other ethnic groups in Georgia.

Education on reproductive health is not part of the school curriculum in Georgia. Based on a reproductive health survey (referred to in UNFPA, 2014), only 3 percent of Georgian women aged 15 to 24 had learned about contraception in school before they reached the age of 18. Most of these young girls learned about sexual matters from their friends (31 percent) and their parents (26 percent). Unfortunately, most child spouses did not know anything about reproductive health or family planning when they got married. Most of the girls reported that they became pregnant soon after getting married. Most of the girls did not want to use contraceptives anyway because they are under an immense amount of pressure to have children to fulfill social expectations.

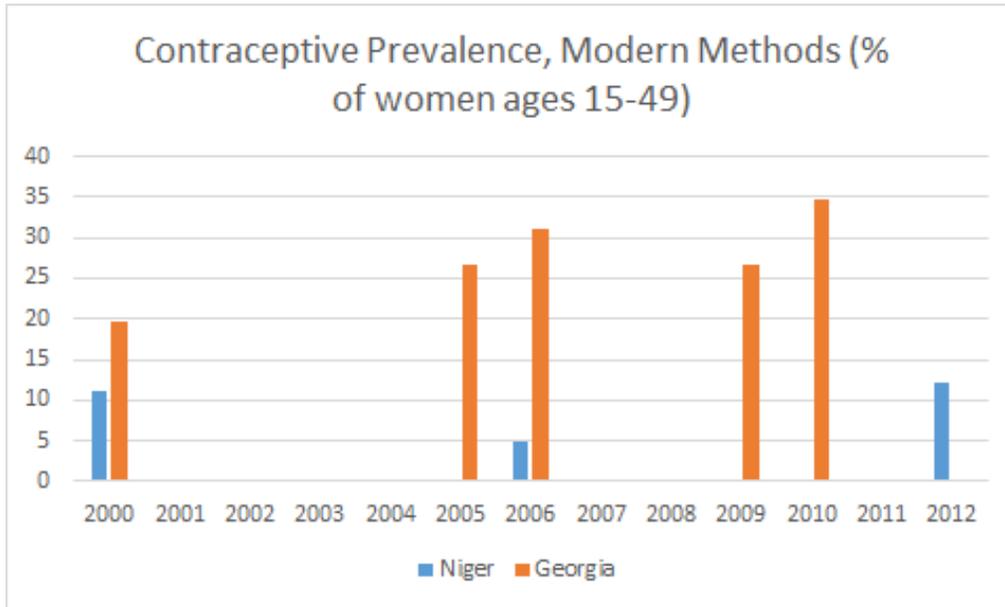
Figure 6 illustrates the percentage of women that use modern contraceptives in Niger and Georgia. This information is vague and scattered, but it is evident that Georgia has a higher percentage of women using contraceptives. In Georgia, women have more access to health care than women in Niger. Women in Niger are also expected to start having children at a very young age and because of this expectation, women aren't allowed to have contraceptives.

Another reason as to why Niger's contraceptive rates are very low is because it's a predominantly Muslim country. Because of this, woman's knowledge about family planning is very limited and it depends on whether she lives in an urban or rural area and her socio-economic status. However, according to Potts, Gidi, Campbell and Zureick (2011), Niger has provided free contraceptives since 2002 and has made efforts to promote family planning. Regrettably, contraceptive usage remained low. In 2009, 11 percent of Nigerian women ages 15-49 were actively using contraceptive methods. Fewer than half of the 11 percent were using modern methods. The most common reason for not using contraceptives was menopause, the desire to have more children, or sterility.

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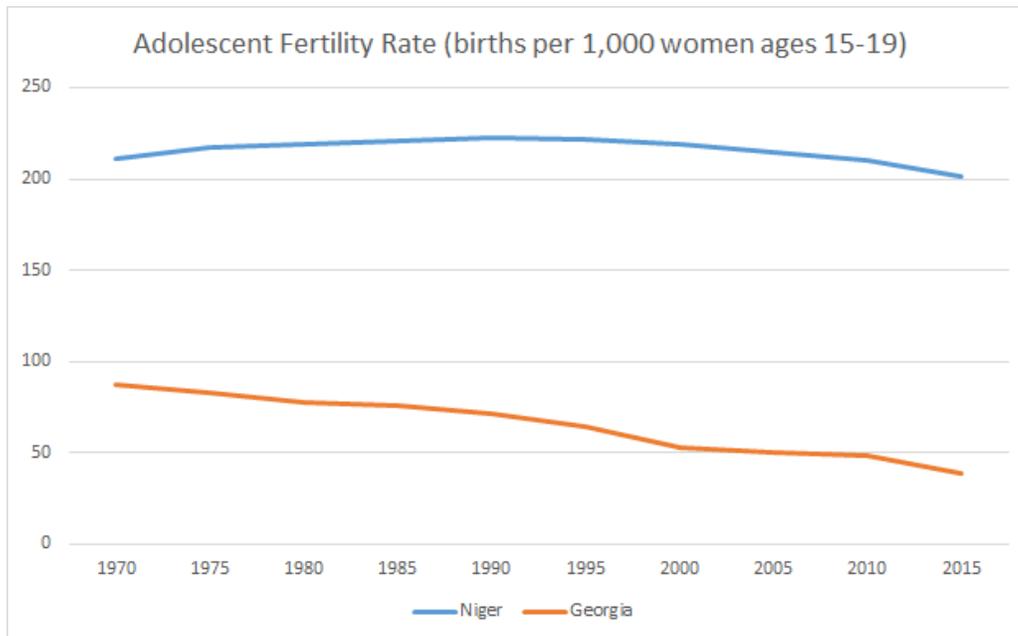
<sup>6</sup> See Plan International (2017).

**Figure 6: Modern Contraceptive Prevalence for Women Ages 15-49**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2017).

**Figure 7: Adolescent Fertility Rate From 1970-2015**



Source: Created by the author based on World Bank (2017).

Figure 7 illustrates the adolescent fertility rate in Niger and Georgia from the years 1970 to 2015. As shown, Georgia has made a few improvements to keep the adolescent fertility down. In 1970, the rate was approximately 87 children born per 1,000 women. In 2015, this number dropped to

about 38 children per 1,000 children. This is due to the new child marriage laws and widespread knowledge about modern contraceptives. Unfortunately, this has not been the case in Niger because their fertility rates have not gone down much in the last 45 years. In 1970, the number of children born per 1,000 adolescents was 210. Then, in 2015, this number was 201. The number of children has fluctuated between 200-215 but has still remained almost the same in the past 45 years. The fertility rate has stayed the same because Niger has not made huge efforts to educate people on modern contraceptives or introduce laws to combat child marriage.

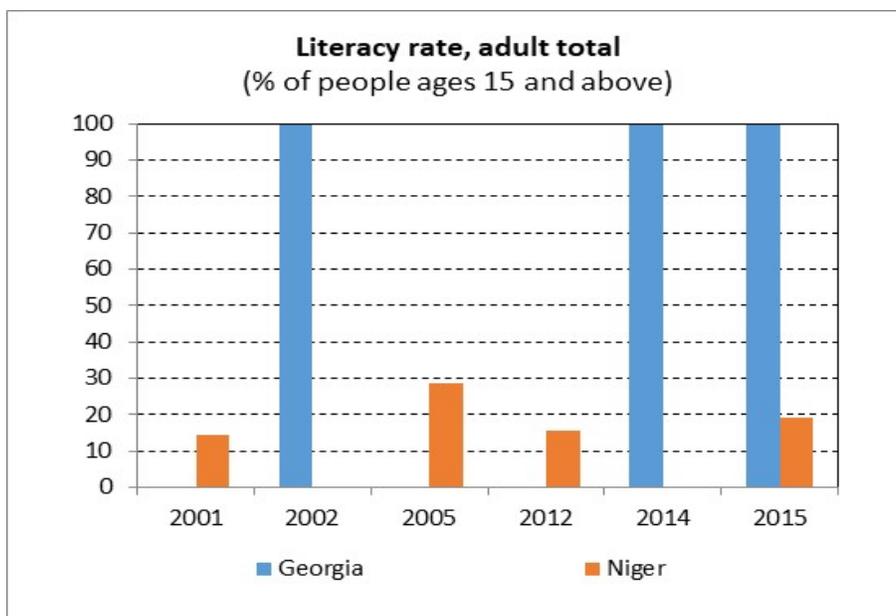
#### IV.4. The Role of Education

Education can prevent girls from marrying too young and give them the support they need to succeed in life. Smith, Paulson Stone, and Kahando (2012) explain that school dropouts is a reduction of opportunities for young girls since the girl must relocate to the husband’s village after marriage and start a new family. There is no hope of continuing an education after the increased responsibility of marriage. Dropouts lead to a young marriage but if girls stay in school then that is the best way to delay marriage.

McCleary-Sills, Hanmer, Parsons and Klugman (2015, p. 69) state that “[e]ducation is not only a human right, but also a powerful tool for women’s empowerment and a strategic development investment.” There is a clear correlation between women who are educated and women who were married young. Those women with an education tend to lead healthier and happier lives. This is due to having greater economic opportunities and a higher chance of getting out of poverty.

Jegorova-Askerova (2016) reports that there is a higher percentage of people with little to no education in the high mountain villages, which is where most of the child marriages take place. By educating these village areas, there is a possibility child marriage can be delayed. If people are educated on the dangers and barriers of child marriage, then Georgia can create a better life for these girls.

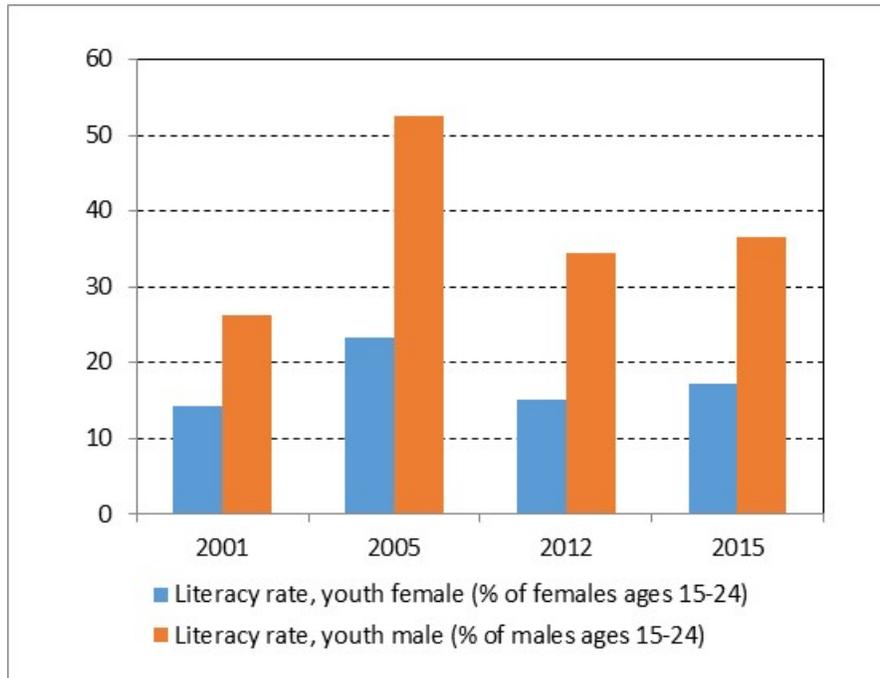
**Figure 8: Literacy rate, adult total (% of people ages 15 and above)**



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2017).

Figure 8 shows the total adult literacy rates available for Georgia and Niger. Georgia has an extremely high literacy rate, with 99.7 percent of the country being able to read for all three years such data is available. Hence, Georgia’s remaining child marriages cannot be due to uneducated girls or parents. This is in sharp difference to Niger’s low literacy rates, which have fluctuated between 15 and 30 percent for the four years (2001, 2005, 2012, and 2015) such data is available. Furthermore, as Figure 9 shows, there is a huge gender difference in youth literacy rates in Niger. In Niger, literacy rates for females are about half of males. In Niger, it is thought by many that girls do not have to go to school to learn how to read and write because they are going to get married and will be busy with taking care of family and children.

**Figure 9: Youth Literacy Rates in Niger (all available years)**



Source: Created by the author based on World Bank (2017).

For most children that marry between the ages of 15 and 17 in Niger, their marriage does not affect their primary education. However, some girls marry earlier so they have to drop out of primary school with no hope of attending a secondary school. Malé and Wodon (2016, p. 3) agree with this by stating:

Marrying between the ages of 15 and 17 tends to affect primarily secondary education enrollment or completion, and may not necessarily affect the completion of primary education. But marrying even earlier can also prevent girls from completing their primary education.

Furthermore, girls who come from a lower socio-economic class and are from rural areas are more likely to marry early. In fact, Malé and Wodon (2016, p. 3) explain that rural girls are twice more likely to marry early than urban girls. One of the reasons why these girls are more likely to get married earlier is because their families cannot afford to support them anymore.

## V. Conclusion

This article highlights some of the deep and complex issues of child marriage in Georgia and Niger. By giving attention to the dangers of this problem, we may come one step closer to abolishing child marriage and giving girls a chance to lead a life without worry of the psychological and physical dangers of this tradition.

While Niger still has an exceptionally high rate of child marriage, with 76 percent of girls marrying before the age of 18 years, Georgia's child marriage rate has been reduced. Today, only 14 percent of the girls are marrying before the age of 18. Georgia has enacted laws to prevent the marriage of young children that discourage parents from marrying their children. Now, the only places that practice this tradition are the very rural areas and villages in the mountains of Georgia.

Finally, a joint United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (2016) Press Release announced an accelerated program to end child marriage by 2030. The program will focus on increasing access to education and health care while also educating parents and the community about the dangers of child marriage. There will also be efforts to raise the minimum age for marriage to 18 years old. This program will span across twelve countries in Africa and the Middle East, where child marriage rates are the highest.

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