

SAHEL RESILIENCE LEARNING (SAREL)

Women's Empowerment and Resilience in Niger: *An Ethnographic Study*

A Collaboration between the OASIS Initiative, University of California, Berkeley, and the Sahel Resilience Learning Project (SAREL)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women's empowerment. While the kinds of stresses and shocks that typically affect the Sahel region cannot be prevented, USAID's Resilience in the Sahel Enhanced (RISE) program was designed to help communities in Burkina Faso and Niger more effectively withstand and recover from them. Gender inequality can undermine efforts to enhance resilience capacity. A report by one of USAID's RISE partners goes so far as to state "it is impossible to build resilience in households and communities without also addressing systemic gender inequality." In this study we explored both gender inequality in Hausa communities in southern Niger and the meaning of women's empowerment in this context.

Naila Kabeer¹ defines empowerment as an increase in the ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied. She sees the exercise of choice as incorporating three interrelated dimensions: *agency*—the ability to define one's life goals and act upon them; *resources*—the enabling factors, competencies, knowledge, assets, and skills that enhance the capacity to exercise choice; and *achievements*—the outcomes of choices. *Resources* and *agency* together constitute what Amartya Sen refers to as capabilities—the *potential that people have to live the lives they desire*.

Is this way of understanding women's empowerment appropriate to women in rural Hausa communities in Niger? Can it be used to inform the design and evaluation of programming for women in rural Niger and the Sahel? Are there indigenous models of empowerment, and if so, what can we learn from them? These were some of the questions we explored in this study. We found that men and women in the study communities see women's and girls' strategic life choices as enrollment or withdrawal from school, when and whom to marry, when and how many children to have, acquisition of vocational skills, the choice of income generating activities, shelter, and how to best build a reciprocal network of kin and friends.

Methods. This study employed the ethnographic approach based on participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and informal group discussions. We conducted the research in four rural communities in Maradi Department, located in south-central Niger. Maradi has one of the world's highest rates of maternal mortality, child marriage, and infant mortality. We employed five native Hausa-speaking research associates (3 women and 2 men) who stayed in collaborating communities during the 9 months of the study. The researchers participated in the daily life of the community, lived with families (when possible), and wrote fieldnotes of their observations

¹Kabeer's definition of empowerment is the most widely used in social science research on gender, power, and social inequality, and it has proven relevant to a range of societies and social conditions. Her approach is used by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the World Bank, and other international development organizations.

and interviews in the evenings. In addition to the participant-observation the team interviewed 546 people of a range of ages and backgrounds for the study.

FINDINGS

Separate Worlds. Gender, age, status, and wealth are the social structures on which rural Hausa communities in Niger are organized. Households are hierarchical and usually led by a senior male. The husband provides for the material needs of the family. The wife obeys him, cooks for him, and raises his children. The vast majority of married women practice a form of seclusion in which they conduct most activities within their homes and the homes of their kin and friends.

Seclusion, polygyny, and related marital practices have created two independent social, economic, and spatial worlds for men and women. Hausa society recognizes a woman's right to earn an income and participate in female reciprocal networks. Yet this right is mediated by her need to get her husband's permission and the limitations that the practice of seclusion places on her mobility. Women with income generating activities say that their daughters are essential because they sell the final goods to customers.

With basic needs cared for by the husband, women dedicate much of their income to saving for her daughter's wedding and for the maintenance of social networks through gift exchanges and mutual support. The reciprocal exchange networks of friends, kin, and marriage ties center around weddings, naming ceremonies, and other cultural events. The *Zumunci* (kinship and friendship) that come out of these exchanges provide mutual support and assistance in times of climatic or economic hardship.

Agriculture in the Sahel has always been an uncertain endeavor, and a number of challenges in recent decades have made it even more so. In response, male labor migration has dramatically increased and has become an indispensable survival strategy. Not all migrants return after one season or provide reliable remittances to their households, leaving some women to bear the primary responsibility for household needs and food security. Women have long tried to meet their need for capital through *adashes* (rotating savings groups). Nongovernmental organizations have introduced Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) and related savings schemes that provide a more standardized model that offers increased transparency.

Bodily Integrity. We focused on two domains of bodily integrity—mobility and choice in matters of reproduction. Constraints on a married woman's mobility hinder her access to markets (to buy or sell) and reinforce her dependence on her husband and daughters. The extent to which a married woman appears in public spaces changes as she passes through her life cycle. It also varies by her husband's decisions about the appropriate levels of mobility. Our researchers observed

numerous cases in which women found ways to leave the house without their husband's approval to attend a meeting or make a visit they felt important.

There appears to be a general cultural consensus that a woman should have a period of rest after giving birth. Women said that 'resting the womb' allows for full recovery from the rigors of childbirth. We found that in general, birth spacing is rarely seen as a way to limit the number of children but rather in terms of the health of the mother and infant. The most common constraints on the uptake of family planning appear to be the lack of husbands' permission or women's fear of their refusal. A significant number of women access family planning services discreetly.

Indigenous conceptions of an empowered woman. Our researchers identified several Hausa terms that describe a woman who has gained increased ability to make strategic decisions. The term most often encountered was *ci gaba*—going forward, advancing, or progressing. When eliciting examples of *ci gaba*, a few older women told us about women who in the past were elevated to the title of *tambara*, indicating achievement in farming and the sharing of the goods obtained from the cultivation of fields. To be a *tambara* was to be listened to by both women and men. Their power was based on merit and acknowledgement of this merit. Though the number of *tambarey* are dwindling, the core values associated with the title—accomplishment in agriculture/commerce, securing a daughter's future, and redistributing wealth through reciprocal exchange networks—remain strong. When interpreted through the lens of empowerment theory, the *tambarey* exercises considerable agency, including the ability to acquire and redistribute resources and make strategic life choices. We see the *tambara* as a model of empowerment in the study communities and believe that the process used to identify this role is a possible method for determining similar conceptions of empowered women in other regions and ethnic groups in Niger.

DISCUSSION

Agency, resources, and achievements. A woman working to increase her agency and voice in rural Maradi must do so in a setting in which men dominate political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control much of the land and assets. Some women are nevertheless able to gain a greater influence over strategic life decisions and thus gradually alter some gender structures.

Women have found a wide range of strategies—negotiation, evasion, foot-dragging, perseverance, false compliance, and feigned ignorance—to gain increased freedom to pursue the goals or values they regard as important. Family planning is one of the domains in which women appear to be exercising the greatest amount of agency. In the past it was expected that the husband, as head of the household, would determine the number and spacing of children. With increasing access to information and contraceptives some women in the study communities have been able to

negotiate birth spacing with their husbands. Others use contraception without consulting their husbands, and still others hide the contraceptives from them.

Hausa communities have traditionally offered opportunities for girls and women to acquire resources—the competencies, knowledge, and skills that enhance the capacity to exercise choice. Mothers teach their daughters the basics of their own income generating activities and provide an endowment of crucial goods at the time of marriage. Women circulate resources through their reciprocal exchange networks and their *adashes*. The RISE activities we have focused on—savings groups and literacy training—build on the indigenous institutions of the *adashi*, Qur’anic schooling, and reciprocal exchange networks. The literacy training provided by the RISE partners facilitates women’s participation in other RISE activities and offers a platform for future leadership. Though many women are eager to enhance their agency and resources, we encountered little evidence that women have an interest in changing the larger gender structures in which they live.

Allies. Allies are critical for any subordinate group constrained by the inequality in which they live. We found the husband’s support to be the factor most critical to a woman’s success in a business, mobility and in access to health care. A minority fully embraces the success of their wives’ income generating activities and their new knowledge and skills acquired from RISE activities. The husbands’ groups appear to be supporting the role of husband as ally among those who attend.

Intersection of status, wealth and age. Rural Nigerien communities are stratified by hierarchies of gender, wealth, family, education, and other forms of status. Status shapes the exercise of choice and voice, and increased status can enhance a woman’s ability to express her opinions and concerns and influence decisions affecting her life. We found that many positions of leadership, whether in indigenous institutions or in the activities sponsored by RISE, are dominated by women of higher status or wealth. Women with leadership skills are sought out when new projects come to a community. In addition, male migration has created some openings for women to enhance agency and voice as they manage household finances, strengthen their businesses, and participate in NGO activities. However, these opportunities are generally taken advantage of by higher status women.

The presidents and directors of the RISE-sponsored women’s groups in the four study villages are often related by kinship or friendship to the village chief, the *marabout*, other decision-makers, or are educated or from a family that is relatively wealthier. Such social inequality influences which women are gaining agency and resources from RISE activities and which women are denied this opportunity. This is especially important to address if we are to avoid reserving opportunities for empowerment to women of greater wealth and status.

CONCLUSION

A life that she has reason to value. What kind of a life do women in rural Maradi say they want? The answers vary by individual, household, and community. However, at the core of what women told us were aspirations relating to marriage, motherhood, a steady livelihood to invest in her daughter and network of kin and friends, and to be recognized as a woman of value and generosity.

Most of the women we talked to said they want to secure their daughter's future, and they see marrying her off to a good and financially stable man as the surest way to do so. Most women said they wish to farm, trade, or raise livestock as a means for investing in their daughters' preparation for marriage and to strengthen the reciprocal exchange networks that are crucial to them. Many women expressed a desire to read and write, as well as to increase their capacity to produce and trade. In rural Maradi, most women want to share their wealth with kin and friends to be seen as a woman of self-sacrifice and perseverance as were the *tambarey* of the past. Most women want "as many children as God provides" but would like a break of two years between births. Women want to see their children thrive—"If all of my children do well, I will have succeeded," said one mother; "People will refer to them as my children and I will be proud."

Supporting empowerment in these communities will mean the creation of more opportunities for women to enhance the agency and resources needed to achieve their aspirations. However, unless we find a way of bringing all women in the community into this process—vulnerable women as well as those of higher status—we will not succeed. Our work might be helping the more vulnerable women increase their resilience – but not their empowerment. However, diverse strategies to address this challenge show promise.

Capacity building. Women's empowerment is especially constrained by the social bias that inhibits women and girls' access to schooling and other essential capacity building opportunities. Given Hausa women's demonstrated capacity for building and expanding networks of kin and friends, naming ceremonies, and weddings, we suggest that well-run women's groups could prove to be invaluable platforms for women's resilience and empowerment. If attention is given to building rapport and solidarity, such a women's group could serve as a vessel for savings clubs, capacity building, gardening, and other activities. With time and quality programming, community norms should gradually change as the number of women participating in VSLAs, community gardens, and other women's activities increases.

Girls' education. An educated woman is currently one of few identities available to a young woman in these communities that provides the respect and voice of the *tambara*. We suggest programming for three segments of adolescent girls with a focus on the most vulnerable—girls

who are out-of-school, married adolescents, and girls in the last year of primary school. There is evidence of the effectiveness of using safe spaces to complement government schooling by improving girls' core academic performance and providing opportunities for them to build trusting relationships and acquire critical life skills not currently offered in secondary education. As with women's capacity building, activities for the most vulnerable girls must offer concrete benefits that are valued by the beneficiaries.

BACKGROUND

RESILIENCE AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN THE RURAL SAHEL

While the kinds of stresses and shocks that typically affect the Sahel region cannot be prevented, USAID's Resilience in the Sahel Enhanced (RISE) program aims to help communities more effectively withstand and recover from them. The strategy brings USAID's humanitarian aid and longer-term development assistance together with the goal of increasing "the ability of people, households, communities, and systems to mitigate, adapt to, and recover from shocks and stresses in a manner that reduces chronic vulnerability" (USAID 2012)

Resilience in the Sahel Enhanced (RISE) is the Sahel Regional Office-led resilience program that aims to address the root causes of persistent vulnerability. Based on joint analysis and planning between USAID development and humanitarian professionals and in collaboration with a multitude of partners across the region, this initiative brings together humanitarian and development assistance programming to build resilience in a targeted zone of intervention in Niger and Burkina Faso.

Gender inequality can undermine efforts to enhance resilience capacity (Gubbels 2011; USAID 2012). A report by one of USAID's RISE partners goes so far as to state "it is impossible to build resilience in households and communities without also addressing systemic gender inequality...When we do not account for and address gender inequality, we ignore factors that entrench vulnerability for the entire population" (Mercy Corps 2014). Thus an important focus of USAID's Sahel resilience strategy is to address gender disparities and facilitate women's and girls' empowerment as a source of resilience.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Naila Kabeer² defines empowerment as an increase in the ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied (Kabeer 1999). She sees the exercise of choice

²Kabeer's definition of empowerment is the most widely used in social science research on gender, power, and social inequality, and it has proven relevant to a range of societies and social conditions. Her approach is used by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the World Bank, and other international development organizations.

as incorporating three interrelated dimensions: *resources*—the enabling factors, competencies, knowledge, assets, and skills that enhance the capacity to exercise choice; *agency*—the ability to define one's life goals and act upon them; and *achievements*—the outcomes of choices. *Resources* ('the power to') and *agency* ('the power within') together constitute what Amartya Sen refers to as capabilities—the potential that people have to live the lives they desire (Sen 2001). *Achievements* reflect the extent to which this potential is actually realized.

Kabeer locates *agency* in the context of structural constraints (Gammage 2016). The social arrangements, formal and informal rules and practices have profound implications for the distribution of resources and agency among individuals and groups (Bourdieu 1986). Women exercising choice in rural Maradi must do so in a setting in which men dominate political leadership, moral authority, social privilege, and control much of the land and assets. When women in this context are able to redefine and expand what they are able to do and who they are able to be they alter these structures. "Structures shape the agency of individuals and groups, but the agency exercised by individuals and groups in turn shape structures, reproducing, modifying, or transforming them" (Gammage 2016). Our study investigated this interplay as it unfolded in the spheres of family, community, market, and state. We investigated the empowerment process at the individual and collective levels. At the collective level, we explored the situations in which women or girls come together with a common purpose or understanding in pursuit of a common goal ('the power with').

Is this way of understanding at women's empowerment appropriate to women in rural Hausa communities in Niger? Can it be used to inform the design and evaluation of programming for women in rural Niger and the Sahel? Are there indigenous models of empowerment, and if so, what can we learn from them?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

We focused on these questions by pursuing the following research objectives:

- Gain a better understanding of women's empowerment as seen through the eyes of women and men in rural Maradi;
- Identify and describe the most significant factors influencing women's empowerment in this context; and
- Explore indigenous models of empowerment and their applicability to RISE programming;
- Use the findings to inform the design of programming aiming to improve gender equity.

After exploring local understandings, practices, and explanations of empowerment, we explored the relationship between these conceptions of empowerment and women's acquisition of agency, *resources* and *achievements*.

METHODS

People's beliefs and practices are based on their understandings of the world and the economic, social, and material opportunities and constraints they face. The Sahel is littered with failed development projects that sought to change people's behavior without first learning the reasons why they do what they do. Establishing trust and understanding through ethnographic research can enable communities to give input into how activities aimed at increasing women's and girls' acquisition of key competencies and income-generating opportunities can be most effectively designed and implemented.

The ethnographic approach—based on participant observation, in-depth interviewing, informal group discussions, and archival research—has proven effective in portraying a people's beliefs and practices in their own terms. The approach is relatively unobtrusive and can be effective when gathering sensitive information and when encountering power differentials such as those associated with gender. Ethnographic methods are especially useful for exploratory research as they allow for spontaneity and adaptation of the study questions and design.

Location and Population. We conducted this assessment in four rural communities in Maradi Department, located in south-central Niger. Maradi has some of the most alarming rates of maternal mortality, child marriage, and infant mortality in the world. It is predominantly Hausa, an ethnic group of more than 50 million people deeply rooted in Islam, found primarily in eastern and central Niger and northern Nigeria, but present in several other West African countries as well due to their long involvement in regional trade. The Maradi Region is ecologically diverse spanning several rainfall and vegetative zones from south to north. Southern Maradi is one of Niger's most important regions for producing millet, sorghum, peanuts, and livestock.

Community descriptions (The names of the communities have been changed for this report.

Village	Yanwa	Kore	Dagura	Yakassa
Population	4,026 inhabitants (per the interviews)	3,000 inhabitants (per the village chief)	4,333 inhabitants	22,975 inhabitants
Men's Livelihoods	Agriculture, animal rearing, migration, business	Agriculture, animal rearing, migration, business	Agriculture, animal rearing, migration, business	Agriculture, animal rearing, migration, business
Women's Livelihoods	Agriculture, animal rearing, income generating activities (IGA)	Agriculture, animal rearing, IGA, asusu	Agriculture, animal rearing, IGA, asusu	Agriculture, animal rearing, IGA, asusu
Schools	- 1 Primary school, - 1 literacy center	1 Primary school	1 Primary school	- 1 primary school - 1 secondary school - 1 CEG
Professional training center	1 adult learning center	1 adult learning center	1 adult learning center	1 adult learning center
Health center	-	-	-	1 integrated health center (CSI); 1 professional learning center
Distance from Maradi	86 km	125 km	83 km	98 km
Number of VSLA	11	12 which have an agreement and 7 which do not	11	10 and 1 asusu network

Research Associates. We employed five native Hausa-speaking research associates (3 women and 2 men) who lived in collaborating communities during the 9 months of the study. Their training featured: 1) the presentation and demonstration of the essentials of qualitative data collection (participant-observation, in-depth interviews, and informal group discussions; and 2) fortnightly group analysis meetings emphasizing their reflection and discussion of their observations, interviews, and insights gained.

The researchers lived with families in one of the four rural research communities and participated in the daily life of the community for a period of 9 months (November 15, 2017 to August 15, 2018). This participant-observation facilitated the development of mutual trust and understanding and led to responses that were often franker than usually encountered in survey research. In the beginning of the researchers' stay, many villagers believed that they worked with one of the RISE partners and told them that they were using contraception and related many of the advantages of doing so. However, as the researchers came to know the families and they realized that in a number of cases the children's ages were only a year apart, they came to understand that at start, some villagers told the researchers what they believed they wanted to hear.

Sampling. We employed ‘purposive sampling’ and selected interviewees based on their level of knowledge of issues of importance. Sampling was purposive in the sense that we sought representation of important sub-populations (e.g. husbands and wives, struggling and successful women micro-entrepreneurs, single mothers, women acting as heads of households, unmarried girls, married adolescent girls, unmarried and married young men, community leaders, literate women and those who lack this skill, religious leaders, and teachers). Emphasis was placed on disaggregating categories of respondents.

This work did not involve tests of significance or tests of hypotheses or any attempt to generate population estimates of incidence or prevalence. The strategy employed was therefore one of ‘saturation.’ The goal was to continue interviewing each key category of people in the study communities until the information and descriptions being provided no longer generated new information.

Topics of investigation. What does women’s empowerment look like in the context of the rural Sahel, where strategic decision-making is often a communal process involving extended family members and shaped by conservative gender norms? We explored this question by first casting a wide net and asking open-ended questions and encouraging participants to respond in their own words and in greater detail than is typically the case with quantitative methods. When a participant brought up something the researcher found valuable or insightful, she/he had the flexibility to tailor subsequent questions to explore this new information.

Data gathering. The lead researchers, Daniel Perlman and Chaibou Sanoussi, supervised the data collection. We employed a range of research methods—participant-observation, structured observation, in-depth interviews, informal group discussions, and the review of program reports and documents. The research assistants participated in the daily life of the community, lived with families (if possible), and wrote fieldnotes of their observations in the evenings. This participant-observation brought together what people say (the content of interviews) and what they do (daily observations in the form of fieldnotes).

Participant-observation facilitates the kind of *informal discussions* that often provide deeper insight than formal interviews and focus groups. The researchers also conducted *in-depth, open-ended interviews* and consultations with key respondents. A number of the interviews took the form of *life histories* (with a focus on the acquisition of *resources, agency, achievements*). The interviewers supportively led the respondents through their stories, step-by-step, with as little interruption as possible. They prompted when needed but were flexible and attentive, and when possible, adapted their questions to the narrative being told.

Though qualitative research does not produce findings representative across populations and study sites it can be designed to be systematic and reduce bias through triangulation (the use of

multiple research methods and investigators in order to enhance confidence in the findings). We worked to enhance triangulation in our study design by ensuring diversity in the research team composition (e.g., multidisciplinary backgrounds, gender, age, etc.), types of respondents (e.g., gender, age, ethnic group, socioeconomic status, ordinary folks, specialists), reading research findings against existing literatures and global evidence to identify correspondences and departures, and characteristics of the communities serving as research sites.

Identification and selection of participants. Meetings were organized with community leaders and local officials to inform them of the objectives and methods of the study and to receive their permission to carry out the research in their communities. We worked with them to identify and invite interview participants to join the study. These initial referrals led to secondary and tertiary referrals, as did contacts made while living with host families.

INTERVIEWS, INFORMAL DISCUSSIONS, AND LIFE HISTORIES

Interview Type	Respondents	# Interviewed
Open-Ended Interviews	Married adolescent girls	17
	Unmarried girls (15-19)	19
	Women (young, middle aged, older)	149
	Men (young, middle aged, older)	64
	Vulnerable/less vulnerable	00
	Teachers	3
	Imams	5
	Community Leaders	20
	Community Leaders' Wives	3
	Divorced Women	2
Structured interviews		
	Young Men	17
	Women	33
	Men	59
	Older Women	6
	Older Men	6
Casual Conversations (Group)	Girls, Women, Men	64
Casual Conversations (Individuals)	Girls	6
	Men	21
	Women	52
Total		546

Data Analysis. The major analytical approach was thematic and qualitative. Preliminary data analysis began early in the data collection process and continued until after the completion of data gathering.

One of the lead researchers, assisted by an experienced investigator from the Centre for Girls Education, met with the researchers every two weeks for ongoing, iterative, qualitative analysis. The group analysis meetings usually began with a two-hour session starting with an opened-ended question such as “What did you learn that surprised you these last four days?” These open-ended questions facilitated the discovery of new themes and their inclusion in the research. After lunch, we often divided the researchers in groups (according to the community where they were working) and asked what they had learned about each of the key research topics. The groups then discussed whether these new observations and insights confirmed or contradicted what they had learned previously, what might be the reason for the contradictions, and what follow-up interviews were needed to clarify the issues raised.

The analysis meetings were tape recorded, translated into English, and analyzed by the lead investigators along with the interview transcripts and fieldnotes. As the process continued, preliminary categories and insights were then tested against data from new interviews, observations, and analysis meetings. This led to the refinement, abandonment, or redevelopment of themes and research questions and to the next series of interviews. During each round of data collection the interviews became increasingly structured and focused. We continued this process until the key conceptual findings appeared to remain stable with additional data. A final set of interviews was conducted in which tentative conclusions constructed through this thematic and qualitative analysis were referred back to a number of the most knowledgeable of the respondents for their response and refinement.

PROTECTION OF THE RIGHTS OF HUMAN SUBJECTS

Our research protocol and procedures for the protection of human subjects were approved by the Comité National d’Ethique pour la Recherche en Santé at the Nigerien Ministry of Health. Approval required the submission of the application and the presentation of the protocol at one of the committee’s bimonthly meetings.

Informed consent was obtained before all interviews and focus groups. Given that many of the participants of this research were likely to have been illiterate, the consent form was spoken to them and consent obtained orally. Oral consent confirmed that: 1) the respondent was fully informed of the objectives of the study; 2) the respondent understood that participation was voluntary; 3) the respondent understood that they could terminate the interview for any reason and at any time; and 4) the respondent gave informed consent. The study investigators also respected the local cultural norms and were aware that many times permission to interview women needed to be sought from the husband, even prior to the consent of the woman. The researchers were trained not to apply pressure or attempt to influence decisions regarding participation in the research. All data collected was anonymous to protect confidentiality.

FINDINGS

As we have seen, Kabeer defines empowerment as an increase in the ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied. She sees strategic life choices as those that structure a range of subsequent decisions. Men and women in the study communities see women's and girls' strategic life choices as enrollment or withdrawal from school, when and whom to marry, when and how many children to have, acquisition of vocational skills, the choice of income generating activities, shelter, and how to best build a reciprocal network of kin and friends. Such decision-making is usually a communal process that can involve extended family members. Mumtaz points out the difficulty of investigating women's autonomous decision-making in such settings, as "men and women, are tied together by strong emotional and structural bonds... [and decisions] are often a mix of cooperation and conflict between tightly interconnected family members." We focused on women's exercise of choice related to livelihoods and bodily integrity. This was in part because farming, trade, mobility and childbearing dominated so many of our open-ended interviews. In addition, our previous work in Maradi focused on early marriage and girls' education and is available for those wishing to learn more about these topics in the region (Perlman 2015; 2017; & 2018).

SEPARATE WORLDS

"In Islam men are the protectors and providers. They are mandated to care for the women in their household and to feed, clothe, and shelter them. Since a husband is called on to furnish the needs of his wife and to always mean well for her, she is expected to obey him. This is why men are seen to be above women in the affairs of day-to-day life. However, in the eyes of God a man and woman are equal." –Dr. Mardhiyyah Abbas Mashih, a female Islamic Scholar and Lecturer in Islamic and Arabic Studies at Ahmadu Bello University

Gender, age, status, and wealth are the social axes on which rural Hausa communities in Niger are organized. Households are hierarchical and usually led by a senior male. The husband provides for the material needs of the family. The wife obeys him, cooks for him, and raises his children. The vast majority of married women in the study communities practice a form of seclusion in which they conduct most activities within their homes and the homes of their kin and friends. The defining logic is that "the husband provides for his wife, so much so, that she does not need to leave the house to do anything," explained a woman in Yanwa. Seclusion confines women to private spaces and denies non-kin males access to these areas. Men receive visitors in the *zaure*, the entrance room at the front of the house, and some men even reported feeling ill at ease when passing through the women's spaces of their own family compounds. (Adamu 2004; Pittin 2002).

Seclusion, polygyny, and related marital practices have created two independent worlds for men and women (Adamu 2002; Pittin 2002). There are few collective household assets. Hausa society recognizes a woman's right to earn an income and participate in female reciprocal networks. Consequently, it is expected that women will make decisions about their businesses, income, and exchange networks independently of their husbands (Sada 2014). Women engage in a variety of economic activities at home and depend on their daughters to bring raw materials from the market, take part in processing or production, and especially to sell the finished goods. Women in the study communities mostly process foodstuffs like groundnuts for oil and prepare cooked food like fura (balls of cooked millet in cultured milk), tuwo (thick guinea-corn or millet flour pudding), and millet porridge.

Husbands feel a religious obligation to maintain the wellbeing of their families. With basic needs cared for by the husband, a woman's income is ideally dedicated to saving for her daughter's wedding and for the maintenance of her social networks through gift exchanges and mutual support. Hausa women build reciprocal exchange networks of friends, kin, and marriage ties that are independent of their husbands and parents. Visits and gift exchanges are essential features of these networks and center around weddings, naming ceremonies, and other cultural events. The Zumunci (kinship and friendship) that come out of these exchanges create feelings of closeness and mutual support that are nurtured through numerous visits, gifts, and assistance in times of climatic or economic challenge (Adamu 2004; Cooper 1998).

A woman's greatest asset in rural Hausa communities is her fertility. "It is by producing children that a woman can aspire to secure her position in the family" (Masquelier 2016). The material assets that women own and control are those derived from their wedding, farm, and business. "Women own the pots, pans, dishes, utensils and other things they use in the home," said a woman from Kore community. "They can have animals both small and big, they can own farm land, as some are given land by their parents before they get married." A woman can sell the pots and pans without notifying her husband, but if she wishes to sell her animals she will need to inform her husband first. Women avoid investing in anything they would lose should they divorce. "When your husband divorces you, you even take your mosquito net" (Masquelier 2016).

INDIGENOUS CONCEPTIONS OF AN EMPOWERED WOMAN

Ci gaba

One of the objectives of this study was to explore indigenous conceptions of an empowered woman. After looking for terms in everyday conversations and examining them in informal group discussions, our researchers identified three Hausa terms that describe a woman who has gained increased ability to make strategic decisions. One of the terms that arose was *bunkasa* (expansion, growth, increase, and achievement in business). As one researcher reported, "a waina (rice cake)

maker told me that she uses the word *bunkasa* when talking about the growth of her business from using a measure of millet per day to using about ten measures.” Another term often heard was *habaka*, which one woman used to describe the way her groundnut oil business grew.

The term the team most often encountered was *ci gaba*—going forward, advancing, or progressing. Some men explained that this term is used when describing the transition from poverty to wealth, while others said that it can be used in any positive way that implies progress, such as when describing a bumper harvest. Several women told us that they use *ci gaba* in relation to income generating activities—“I think of the phrase when a woman builds a successful business or farm and is able to use the money she earns without being questioned or denied,” said one woman. Also common was the explanation that *ci gaba* is used when a person advances to a higher level, such as assuming a leadership position and gaining the opportunity to speak in public; one woman reported, “There was a time when we advocated for a female teacher. Our primary school had none, and we were uncomfortable having our girls with only male teachers in the school. We met with the headmaster and asked him to speak with the village chief. The headmaster and village chief went to the local officials and a female teacher was transferred to our community. This is *ci gaba*.”

Several women used the term to describe vocational trainings for women, and one used *ci gaba* in reference to “advancing in formal education and learning to read and write and becoming a leader in one of the NGO projects that provide an income for the work.” The reason that *ci gaba* is used more for vocational training than progressing in school appears to be the common perception that “after attending school for 12 years, a girl has nothing to show for it, but if she marries and starts a business she can bring money for the household through her work and skill and have greater influence over decisions because of her financial strength” —one of the researchers at an analysis meeting

The tambara

“It's because of my little business that people come to ask me for a loan. If you lend someone money, they will praise you in front of everyone.”-A tuwo seller from Yankassa community

When eliciting examples of *ci gaba*, a few older women told us about women who in the past were elevated to the title of *tambara*. Diarra and Monimart write that the title of *sarkin noma* (master farmer) for men and *tambara* for women are common titles in Hausa speaking communities in Niger that indicate achievement in farming and the sharing of the goods obtained from the cultivation of fields.

They found that in some communities *sarkin noma* had harvested 1,000 sheaves of millet (over 10 tons of grain) in one year (Diarra and Monimart 2006). A *tambara* required “courage, hard work, perseverance, self-sacrifice, and agricultural production” and evoked “the capacity to feed many people” (Diarra and Monimart 2006; Cooper). To be a *tambara* is to be listened to by both women and men. Their power is based on merit and acknowledgement of this merit. “*The great tambareys could speak out everywhere, even in front of men! But they’re a thing of the past now*” reflected an older woman who had earned the title of *tambara* (Diarra and Monimart 2006).

Though there are still a few living *tambara* in the study communities, they are now elderly, and the ceremonies related to the position have mostly disappeared over the last two decades. The *tambarci* celebration in which a woman was elevated to the title of *tambar* was usually done after the harvest. The position of *tambara* was rooted in a woman’s success in income generation as well as her willingness to redistribute the goods she acquired. In some cases, a mother accumulated wealth to support her daughter’s designation as a *tambara*. Whether the woman or her daughter was being celebrated, she slaughtered sheep and goats for the guests and distributed money, bags of millet and sorghum, livestock and other goods to other local *tambarey* (plural for *tambara*), her husband, the village chief and others.

One woman said, “When I became a *tambara*, I gave my husband a cow, three goats, three sacks of rice, a sack of sorghum flour and 100 000 CFA. The day of the celebration I made a tour of the village accompanied by tam-tams (drums), and *griots* (itinerant poets, musicians, and storytellers in the past in West Africa) sang my praises.” There were traditional dances specifically reserved for the *tambarey*. Some local *marabouts* (Imams/religious leaders) criticized the practice as an unnecessary waste and termed it non-Islamic. With the increasing precariousness of household economies and repeated droughts, women often lost or sold many of their livestock, and have since given a greater emphasis on the feeding of their families.

However, the values and aspirations symbolized in the *tambara* are still fundamental to rural Hausa women’s lives, values, and resilience. Women often say that increasing a woman’s entrepreneurial capacity, social status, support for their daughters, and redistribution of goods to kin and friends in their social networks are still proven pathways to improved status, social recognition, agency, and voice. As an older woman explained, “I am a respected woman due to my success selling groundnut oil. My co-wives are happy with me because I do their shopping for them when I go to the market for business. When they need loans I am there for them.”

Increasing women’s income generation potential, social status, entrepreneurial capacity, and other characteristics of the *tambara* concept may be pathways to improved status, social recognition, agency, and voice. But can they be considered empowering? Is the *tambara* an indigenous model of an empowered woman? If not, is there a more fitting Hausa conception of an empowered woman? This is one of the core questions of the study.

We believe that the process used to identify the role of *tambara* as a possible method for determining similar conceptions of the empowered women in other regions and ethnic groups in Niger.

LIVELIHOODS

The weakening household economy

“Women’s wealth comes from the fields. Everything you could wish for is there,” asserted Tambara Hawa. “You can’t make money as a trader because it’s all done on credit! The only way to pay it off is with what you’ve grown in your fields.” (Diarra and Monimart 2006)

Agriculture is the primary means of creating wealth and recognition in rural southern Niger. Men grow the staple crops that are the mainstay of the rural Hausa diet. Women borrow small plots of land from their husbands, or acquire land through purchase or inheritance, and produce the ingredients for the sauces that accompany the main dish. They are generally free to sell what they produce to meet their cash needs. Our researchers observed that when women have access to land, they typically put considerable effort in the fields despite having a range of additional responsibilities. A researcher in Kore noted that, “Men and women come home around noon to rest. The women, and especially their girls, return to the fields in the early afternoon while the majority of men stay at home.”

Agriculture in the Sahel has always been an uncertain endeavor, and a number of challenges in recent decades have made it even more so. Niger’s rural economy remains firmly rooted in household-based agriculture, and agriculture absorbs a large proportion of the working population (NEPAD 2013). However, dramatic reductions in mortality, early marriage, a strong preference for large families, and very low levels of contraceptive use have led to southern Niger having one of the fastest growing populations in the world. The fragmentation of household land with each successive generation, soil impoverishment, the irregularity of rain, and a host of other factors have led to the “degradation of land and the erosion of natural capital and an increase in the structural fragility” of agriculture in the region (Idrissa 2015).

This has led to an enduring crisis leading to “the weakening and at times the collapse of the economic base of households and families” (Idrissa 2015). Though labor migration in the region goes back centuries, the male labor migration in recent years has dramatically increased and has become an indispensable survival strategy. Labor migration “is also an adventure, a rite of passage that transforms male youth into men by exposing them to the world” (Masquelier 2016). In communities experiencing increasing pressure on land, young women are the first to be denied a plot, closely followed by the young men (Diarra and Monimart 2006.)

Men leave their communities in search of work at the beginning of the dry season. In recent years, they are spending ever greater periods of time abroad. As incomes from agriculture decrease, some households even arrange to alternate migration with other relatives. *“They alternate the trip among two brothers; for instance, one would remain at home and take care of the other’s farm and family while the one away sends money. And the next year that one returns and the other stays, and that is how it continues.”*

Not all migrants return or provide reliable remittances to their households, leaving some women to bear the primary responsibility for household needs and food security. *“I didn’t work in the fields or have a business when my husband left for Lagos three years ago. I now farm and feed, clothe and educate my children,”* said an awara (fried tofu) seller in Dagura community. It is a reality that came up often in our research. We also heard complaints about husbands fleeing their financial obligations. *“When a man sees that you are earning money, he tries to abandon his responsibilities to his wife and children,”* said one woman. *“I cannot afford to see my children go hungry. I don’t wait for him and instead do what I am able to do.”* A number of men who had returned from abroad said they did not want their wives involved in farming while they were away. *“I never asked my wife to plow the land,”* said one. *“But I don’t know what she does when I’m away and whether she has been trained by the NGOs in my absence.”*

Khadijah was a businesswoman

The Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be Upon Him) is our model. His wife Khadija was a businesswoman when they married and continued with her business afterwards. The Prophet (PBUH) did not forbid her from continuing nor did he say it is not right for her to have a business. Instead he supported her. There is nowhere in the Qur’an or Hadith that forbids a woman from doing business. Women have this right in Islam but in many cases our culture denies women their rights and attributes it to religion. ~Dr. Mardhiyyah Abbas Mashi, a female Islamic Scholar and Lecturer in Islamic and Arabic Studies at Ahmadu Bello University

Women say that though women’s microenterprises are less lucrative than farming, they offer a more reliable income stream. Most women’s income generating activities (IGA) involve food processing or preparation. Selling cooked foodstuffs such as *kosai* (bean pancakes) and *tuwo* is common, as it offers the possibility of running a business and feeding a family concurrently—*“When I sell tuwo, everyone in the household eats to their satisfaction and there won’t be need to cook other food.”* Off-season farming helps supplement decreasing production and provides additional cash. However, dry season farming is highly dependent on water availability, and sales of produce require market accessibility and demand. Some women say that with increased migration their markets are shrinking. *“With so many people leaving the village some women are going out of business,”*

wrote one researcher. *“When we did some rough calculations, we discovered that over 700 had left for Lagos, Djado, and Niamey.”*

Norms relating to when a woman can start an IGA may vary by village but establishing and implementing an IGA is typically linked to marriage, and many women have at least one child before they begin their microenterprises. Generally, wives are most likely to receive consent from their husband to start an income generating activity once they have produced multiple children. Early in marriage, a young wife’s primary duty is to have children and care for the family. As a woman ages and reaches menopause, there is less concern about her sexuality and she is more likely to participate in an income generating activity. One field researcher noted, *“as long as a woman isn’t married, she can’t fully access her economy.”*

Constraints on a married woman’s mobility hinder her access to markets (to buy or sell) and reinforce her dependence on her husband. Some women respond to their limited mobility with ‘house-trade’ from their own homes in order to relieve them of having to depend on their own daughters or an intermediary to go out hawking for them. *“If a house trader is known within her community, customers patronize her at home especially when the woman is consistent in her business,”* said a man from Yanwa community. Many married women rely on their husbands or other male relatives to buy the materials and resources necessary to start and maintain their businesses. *“If the woman owns a goat or a sheep which she wants to sell, in most cases her husband will sell it. She doesn’t have the right to determine the exact price at which the animal is sold. She simply accepts what he brings her,”* wrote one of the researchers.

Most women with small businesses say that their daughters are essential because they sell the final goods to customers. Consequently, a woman’s income is influenced to a large extent by the dedication and hard work of her daughters; when she does not have a daughter, she often fosters a daughter of her relatives. When a woman is unable to find someone to hawk for her, it is not uncommon for her to suspend her income generating activities. *“We look for other children to sell for us. But when they stop coming, you will have to stop until you find someone else.”* However, hawking does not have fixed hours, so girls can stay out as long as sales continue. Not only does the practice often interfere with school, but girls and their parents said that sexual harassment was common. Mothers are cognizant of the risks, having hawked themselves before marrying. However, this is one of the desperate choices that women make as they are financially dependent on the practice. Some women never engage in income generating activities and instead depend entirely on their husbands.

With farming in decline and a significant number of men on migration failing to send home sufficient resources, the more vulnerable women struggle to find ways to supplement the household income. Many feel compelled to do so in order to feed and educate their children and participate in their social obligations. Because economic vulnerability is often the main reason for

these women to pursue or expand an IGA, they do not always see their businesses as a form of empowerment, but rather as an added burden necessitated by economic contingencies (Masquelier 2016). *“These activities are usually funded by the traditional savings system or by agriculture. They do little to change women’s position in society but do enable them to organize social activities like marriages and [naming ceremonies and feed their families]”* (Diarra and Monimart 2006).

Economic stresses, shocks, and changing commodity prices impact not only agricultural production but also the local market for grains, livestock, and other raw materials. *“When the value of an animal goes down from 15,000 to 10,000 CFA,”* said one tuwo seller, *“and the price of food increases, your business can struggle, and debts rise.”* Given the advantages of focusing on food processing and preparation in communities facing food scarcity, many women say that too many women are selling the same products. The researchers suggested that some feel that the lack of diversification in NGO livelihood trainings and options might contribute to this—*“With the coming of the NGOs it seems that more women engage in the same types of business and this affects their sales,”* said a man from Yakassa.

Some of the successful businesswomen who shared with us their life histories said that they were forced to innovate due to the high degree of local competition. One woman used the profits from *akara* and *awara* sales to start selling male libido enhancers despite the fact that such types of transactions are usually done in private. This woman was open about her business and was respected for its successes. When the researcher asked her why she started such a business, she replied, *“Women come to my house to learn Arabic. I’ve learned that so many of them have challenges with their conjugal relationships that I made up my mind to try this business hoping that it would address some of the challenges they face.”*

Informal conversations with women revealed that having a husband's support was the most cited reason for the success of a woman's business, along with maintaining consistency in business and having access to training. That was reinforced by participant-observation. Because a woman's mobility becomes more restricted after marriage, she needs the support of her husband or other family members to obtain the raw materials she needs. *“My husband suggested that I start a business so that I would not be idle. When I agreed, he went to the market and bought maize for me to make tuwo from. I started selling it, and after some time my business expanded, and I added to my menu.”* Another woman told us that she requested and received permission from her husband to go door-to-door selling meat. *“Since starting the business I have become more independent. Other women come to my house looking for money or meat credit and this has brought me respect.”*

We found that increased economic empowerment does not necessarily increase influence over strategic choices in other domains of a woman's life. One successful businesswoman provided loans to men in the village and bought a larger house for her family. However, *“she rarely goes out and conducts all of her business at home,”* one of the researchers noted in his/her fieldnotes.

“Had she been able to leave the house she no doubt could have achieved even more.” However, increased economic empowerment does appear to enhance self-expression, self-esteem, leadership and agency and resources in other domains. This spill over (or lack of) is an area of importance, but our findings are too limited at this point to make additional generalizations. This question is the focus of an upcoming study being conducted by OASIS and the Center for Girls’ Education in northern Nigeria.

SAVINGS GROUPS

“One of the challenges which women face is lack of capital. If they want to start a business they have nothing to sell to start with,” -a firewood seller from Kore

Access to capital is a major constraint. There are few formal and informal banking services or savings mechanisms, and many women lack the funds to begin a business. Though some women can get start-up capital from their husbands or from their families, many women, especially young women, do not have access to such resources. Lack of access to reliable financial services leaves families more vulnerable to economic and health shocks as well as with a general inability to accumulate sufficient capital to invest in economic activities. Women have long tried to meet this challenge through individual and group savings. Participation in a savings group usually requires the husband’s consent.

Asusus. Women primarily rely on saving in an individual *asusu* (a container that is made of clay or tin and kept at home). This allows a woman to access her savings whenever needed, though some women say that easy access to their savings encourages spending for non-essential daily needs and raises the risk of appropriation by their husband. It is common for women to use livestock as a form of savings as a way to address these challenges. Small livestock production is another form of savings, and “chickens, goats, and sheep serve as stores of value in a non-banking rural society, bearing interest in the form of offspring and remaining available for liquidation when cash is required” (Simmons 1976).

Adashes—Rotating savings groups. There is a strong tradition in Hausa culture of women’s group savings. The participants contribute a set amount to a common fund at specified periods of time (often weekly). Each member takes the whole fund once (rotating through the members). They often use the money to purchase goods or supplies for their businesses or households, or a daughter’s wedding. Some girls learn about savings at an early age when they accompany their mothers to an *adashe*. Such savings groups are limited in their ability to respond to a member’s need for a loan on short notice for managing shocks, as members cannot rely on receiving their turn to obtain the funds at a particular time needed. *Adashes* also do not allow savers to earn interest on their deposits, and the groups require trust that all members will continue to contribute through the lifecycle of the *adashe*. Problems arise when there is poor leadership and

unpaid loans. *“There are people who get credit from the adashe but don’t pay back. Others just don’t contribute when they are supposed to. I used to be in an adashe, but it hasn’t been functional for months because a lot of the members haven’t returned the money they borrowed. They were supposed to pay off their loans with grains after harvest, but most are finding it difficult to pay back because they had a poor harvest and the cost of the grains has doubled.”*

Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) and related savings schemes. VSLAs were first developed by CARE in Niger and based on the *adashe* model. VSLA members meet regularly to contribute money into a group fund. VSLAs differ from *adashe*s in that funds are allowed to accumulate rather than each member taking them for their use in rotation. The pooled savings are used as a source of lending funds, and members can borrow from the group and pay a user’s fee. The VSLA platform allows participants to borrow from the pool (proportionate to their needs and repayment capacities) when needed to meet business and household necessities. When the lifecycle of the group ends, all loans are called back with interest and the fund, with accumulated profits, is distributed back to the members. The VSLAs in the study communities are seen as effective and popular and as helping to increase food security and to smooth consumption.

Participants see *adashe*s and VSLAs as safe spaces because the members are exclusively women from the same community. They are most often led and utilized by more prosperous women. *“The savings groups are especially important for women who do not have many friends, those who do not come from a wealthy family, and who are who are struggling financially,”* wrote one researcher in her fieldnotes. We found that women commonly used the funds accumulated to start or expand a business, pay for health care or a daughter’s wedding, or enhance their reciprocal gift-giving network. In Dagura, a financially stable woman described how she bought a female goat with a loan from her VSLA savings group. *“When the goat gave birth and the number of goats multiplied I sold them for a cow. I sold the milk and started trading in groundnut oil and gradually made enough to buy my second cow.”* Through a simple loan, this woman, along with many others in the various *asusu* groups scattered through Niger, are able to start -- and can maintain incoming generating activities.

The RISE sponsored savings groups have introduced a more standardized model that offers increased transparency. In addition to their financial benefits, the *asusus* offer a valued opportunity for women to maintain and enhance exchange networks and provide them exposure to family planning, nutrition, and other basic information. Uptake of the savings groups is not as high as one would expect. Vulnerable women appear to be less involved in VSLAs out of fear of defaulting on their loans and seem to prefer the more informal *adashe*s with kin and women in their networks.

Savings groups help facilitate individual leadership among the less vulnerable women by promoting self-expression and organizational skills. The NGO-sponsored savings groups sometimes share

land or an income generating activity. One researcher wrote, “The group gains knowledge, animals, and land for cultivation in the dry season.” The groups often have a leader, usually a woman of status, who organizes and conducts the meetings and a treasurer who keeps track of loans. On several occasions, the researchers witnessed the ability of some of these leaders to speak in public. “A woman speaking in public is something very rare in this village.”

BODILY INTEGRITY

A woman has the right to go out of the house for business, to visit her parents, go to a wedding, or for other reasons provided that she has the approval of her husband or father or another male under whose care she lives. She cannot go out if her husband refuses her request. The rationale behind this obedience is again that the man is responsible for protecting and providing for her. Everything depends on the circumstances and situation. God has given women the right to do whatever they need to do but they must do so in consultation with their parent if she is not married or husband if married. However, some men deny their wives’ requests simply to feed their egos. This is wrong and sinful. No man who is knowable about Islam would do so. – Mardhiyyah Abbas Mashi

Bodily integrity is one of the ten human capabilities that Martha Nussbaum argues are essential to a life with dignity. She defines bodily integrity as, “being able to move freely from place to place; to be secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence; having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and for choice in matters of reproduction.” In this section we will discuss two of these capabilities—mobility and choice in matters of reproduction—as understood and practiced in our study communities. For reasons of rapport and discretion, we limited data gathering on sexuality and domestic violence to occasions where these themes arose naturally in the fieldwork. Our findings on these topics are thus tentative and need to be further verified before reporting them. Our previous research in Maradi discussed child marriage and its impact on bodily integrity (Perlman 2015).

MOBILITY

The extent to which a married woman appears in public spaces tends to vary as she passes through her life cycle. It also varies by her husband’s decisions about the appropriate levels of mobility. In most cases, husbands do give their wives permission to visit neighbors, attend weddings and naming ceremonies, and return home for family visits. During her first year of marriage a young woman’s mobility is often the most constrained in her life cycle. One researcher noted that, “Here in the village young married women do not go to the market. Some husbands even forbid them even to go to the village festivals.” Her fieldnotes also described a married adolescent who fell ill and wanted to visit the health center. When her husband refused, she remained home and relied on herbal remedies instead. Masquelier reports that in Morey, Niger, men take away

their daughters' mobile phones after marriage: "Who are they going to call now that they are married?" (Masquelier 2016).

Women's mobility tends to increase with age and the constraints are most relaxed after menopause or divorce. They often simply inform their husbands that they are going out for these activities and do not need to request permission (Masquelier 2016). As a result, the majority of women who participate in the savings groups and have successful businesses are older.

Our researchers observed numerous cases in which women found ways to leave the house without their husband's approval to attend a meeting or make a visit they felt important. In one instance, a woman deceived her husband in order to attend a savings group. "*He doesn't allow his wives to participate in adashes or NGO activities in the community,*" wrote one researcher. "*His younger wife followed his rules, but his senior wife still sneaks out to go to the savings group. She tells him she's going to visit her parents so that she can go to the adashe or other places she needs to go to. He found out and scolded her and they quarreled. But she still kept attending the adashe. Eventually he gave up and she now attends the meetings with perfect attendance.*" In this and other examples it appears that in addition to facilitating the acquisition of financial and human capital, women's savings groups also facilitate increased mobility.

CHOICE IN MATTERS OF REPRODUCTION

"Childbearing is not coordinated according to some calculus in which children have costs and benefits, but rather by a set of decisions made on the basis of bodily health... as well as other factors such as [a woman's] status in the household" - Masquelier writing of reproductive decision making in southern Niger (Masquelier 2016).

Birth spacing. There appears to be a general consensus that a woman should have a period of rest after giving birth. Women said that 'resting the womb' and allowing for full recovery from the rigors of childbirth can greatly improve the woman's health and infant's health. One father claimed that too many births made a woman "run short on blood," with the danger of loss of life, while other men explained that "women who space their births look younger, healthier, and more attractive."

Previous research in Hausa communities in northern Nigeria suggests that in past generations a pregnancy conceived soon after an earlier child's birth was seen as spoiling the mother's milk and harming the health of the newborn child (Renne 1997). She found that in past decades abstinence was the most socially accepted method of spacing. "*It is not sleeping with the husband that spoils her milk,*" said one elderly woman, "*it is the pregnancy that does that...It is not right that she should sleep with her husband for two years; if he insists, she should wear a kolanut charm (Smith 1981:148).*" However, birth spacing is rarely seen as a way to limit the number of children. The question of, "How many children

is too many?” does not adequately reflect a Hausa women’s reproductive strategies (Masquelier 2016; Bledsoe 2002:164). However, there can be disagreement about the time to allow between births and whether modern contraceptives interfere with a woman’s fertility.

The most common constraints on the uptake of family planning appear to be the lack of husbands’ permission or women’s fear of their refusal. Many women access family planning services discreetly. Why are men resistant to modern methods of family planning? Many see procreation as the primary object of marriage and believe that a woman must make the most of her reproductive period (Idrissa 2015). Children are seen as wealth and “the surest measure of the success of a marriage” (Cooper 1997:151). A young motorcycle taxi driver told one of the researchers that he wants a large family. *“If each of the four wives I’d like to have has 10 children some will surely die but I will still have enough.”* In most cases, there is an expectation, both from the husband, family, and the woman herself, that a young wife will become pregnant within the first year of marriage. She is seen as becoming an adult through childbearing and enhances her prestige with each child. Idrissa discusses the concept of *zazage ki huta*, “that is, ‘produce and rest,’ where the onomatopoeic word *zazage* means to yield as in series and in cadence.” (Idrissa 2015)

“There also some who are of the opinion that they [women] should not stop giving birth until they have given birth to all the supposed children God desires them to have,” -- a teacher in Yankassa community

Also important are local interpretations of Islamic teachings on procreation. A migrant who had just returned home from Lagos, Nigeria said, *“It is obligatorily to have many children. The Prophet (Peace and Salvation on Him) asked us to produce children like fruits of Marula tree.”* Others agree and say that the number of children one should have is governed by “God’s will.” The neighbor of one of our researchers said that she didn’t use family planning because her father-in-law is a Qur’anic teacher and claims that contraception is forbidden by Islam. *“I’m confused,”* she confided, *“because I recently heard another Qur’anic teacher say that it is a sin to have children that one can’t take care of. Whom should I believe?”* We spoke with several husbands who believe that Islam encourages naturally spacing children by breastfeeding. All of these interpretations can be supported by passages from the Qur’an and Hadith.

Some husbands told us that if their wives use birth control they are using it to cover up an extramarital affair. Others are concerned about what other men will say if they find out that his wife uses contraceptives. *“I used to take birth control pills,”* said one woman. *“But people in the community gossiped that in order to do so I was controlling my husband. So I stopped taking them to maintain his reputation.”* A husband claimed that he refused his wife’s use of contraception because “the white man” was bringing pills and injections to prevent their wives from having more children, so as to reduce the population of Muslims.

Pregnancy and care of a newborn can be perceived as an opportunity cost and a disruption in business. One of the field researchers wrote that, “A woman having a baby every year must stop her work for a good period of the year, if not all year, to take care of her children. But when she spaces her children, physically her body is able to rest, and she can more easily maintain her business. However, she can only stop her births to continue her business with the consent of her husband, behind his back, or with luck.” Another woman recounted that she had to suspend her business to avoid any ill effects on her pregnancy and newborn. Still another woman uses modern family planning and said that she uses her “rest” to improve her business and take care of her husband. *“Some women told me that family planning gives them the opportunity to do better in their business. They said when they are pregnant or breastfeeding, they usually have less time for business than when they are not”* - from a researcher’s fieldnotes.

INDIGENOUS METHODS

“The first few weeks they told me about family planning pills and the injections which they felt was what I wanted to hear. With time the same women began telling me to me that they were actually not using the modern but rather traditional methods.”- from a researcher’s fieldnotes

Charms, herbal medicines, waist strings, and writing passages from the Qur’an on a blackboard and dissolving the chalk in water and drinking it, were all mentioned as indigenous birth spacing methods used in the communities. *“Some say they use Karhu (a type of charm worn around the waist) and others laya (another charm worn on the hands or around the neck).”* Using breastfeeding to space birth was also often mentioned. Interestingly, while the discussion of modern contraceptives is treated as a sensitive topic, indigenous methods such as herbs and charms appear to be more openly discussed between women and sold out in the open. Many women see modern contraceptives as a “plan B” if their indigenous methods fail. Even some of the volunteer community reproductive health workers (*relais*) who promote family planning do not use modern contraceptives themselves. *“She only gets pregnant after she has weaned the child – which could be up to 2 years – so she thinks she doesn’t need family planning as she is lucky to do that naturally,”* one woman said about a *relai* in her community. However, it appears that messages from the NGOs and health workers are gradually changing attitudes and increasing awareness about the failure rates of traditional methods. *“Some say that through their own experience and the information they have received, they know that the traditional methods are not always effective.”*

Young women return to their parents’ house for their first birth. Some report that their mothers or women in the family offer them herbs to space their next birth until after weaning. One said that her mother didn’t feel that she had to advise her husband of this. *“She said that my husband doesn’t need to know what happens when my sisters and I come home for our first birth.”*

DISCUSSION

Kabeer's definition of empowerment—an increase in the ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied—has served as the basis for our analysis of the fieldnotes and transcripts. Following Kabeer, we viewed the exercise of choice as incorporating three interrelated dimensions: *agency* ('the power within/the power to'); resources (skills, knowledge, networks and financial assets); and achievements. The three dimensions together constitute what Amartya Sen refers to as capabilities—the *potential that a person has to live the lives they desire* (Sen 2001).

The micro interactions of gendered life have a profound impact on the distribution of resources and agency (Bourdieu 1986). A woman working to increase her agency and voice in rural Maradi must do so in the context of male domination of positions of power, male privilege, and male ownership of the greater share of household assets. Some women are nevertheless able to gain a greater influence over strategic life decisions and thus alter gender structures.

Though the number of *tambarey* are dwindling, the core values associated with the title—accomplishment in agriculture/commerce, securing a daughter's future, and redistributing wealth through reciprocal exchange networks—remain strong (with some erosion from agricultural downturns). Can we see this path to increased status as an indigenous model of an empowered woman? When interpreted through the lens of empowerment theory, the *tambara* exercises considerable agency, including the ability to acquire and redistribute resources and make strategic life choices.

AGENCY, RESOURCES, AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The purpose of the study is to investigate gender power relationships in rural southern Niger and is not meant to be an evaluation of RISE programming. However, a quick look at two RISE programs in terms of agency, resources, and achievements should suggest the utility of an empowerment perspective in the monitoring and evaluation of women's programming in the region.

Agency.

"Agency means setting goals, being heard, knowing how to stay firm, and accumulating around you the means to achieve this without violence." ~researcher's fieldnotes

"It wasn't possible to tell my husband that I was going to space our children," said one woman. "He would have said no and left me to keep having one child after another."

We have seen that both Islam and Hausa norms acknowledge the right of a married woman to have her own business. Yet this right is mediated by her need to get her husband's permission and the limitations that the practice of seclusion places on her mobility. A woman is dependent on others for access to markets and public services. Women need daughters to hawk for them and their husbands or other intermediaries to sell their livestock. Women are especially constrained by the social bias that inhibits women's and girls' access to schooling and other essential capacity building opportunities. For example, the researchers encountered savings groups in which none of the members were literate enough to keep the records. One group brought in a schoolboy to help with this. When he could not attend, the group couldn't meet. Even with the improved access to opportunities to acquire critically important skills and knowledge offered by the RISE partners, women face entrenched intra-household norms and gender ideologies that limit their access to financial resources. We have found that increases in women's individual empowerment may be fragile because of the slow change of the status quo.

Women in rural Maradi have found a variety of ways to circumvent these constraints. They employ a wide range of strategies—negotiation, evasion, foot-dragging, perseverance, false compliance, and feigned ignorance—to gain increased freedom to pursue the goals or values they regard as important (Sen 1985; Scott 1987). A young woman explained how she struggled to get her husband to permit her to volunteer with a RISE project promoting breastfeeding. “He said that I couldn't go and accused me of wanting to cheat on him. This didn't stop me from volunteering. He called me a prostitute and burned my notebook and work materials. I still kept volunteering. He eventually gave up and finally began to appreciate my position.”

Family planning is one of the domains in which women appear to be exercising the greatest amount of agency. Some women in the study communities were able to negotiate birth spacing with their husbands. Others use contraception without consulting their husbands, and still others hide the contraceptives from them. “I'm the one that carries the pregnancy,” said a woman from Kore, explaining why she is taking contraceptives without her husband's approval. One researcher estimated that in her community a majority of women who use contraception do so without their husband's knowledge. These women tend to prefer injections because they say that pills can be discovered. In doing so, women take risks. Women risk their marriages to space their births. It is not unusual for a man to abandon a wife who does not have children, as infertility is generally attributed to the wife (Masquelier 2016). Discussions between husbands and wives about birth and infertility are difficult and appear to be rare. *“I lost three boys in succession, but my husband and I never spoke about it. In Hausa people call the problem ‘wabi’ when infants die birth after birth. And it is a big problem for the woman.”*

Adamu describes a number of ways in which women exercise agency and choice within the practice of seclusion.

“A man buys you cloth, buys you shoes, if you request for henna he buys, you do nothing but [practice] seclusion.” -an elderly woman speaking on the trade-offs of seclusion (Adamu 2004)

Our findings suggest that many women reaffirm their husband’s obligation to provide for the family, and thus their right to acquire and accumulate their own resources. Adamu reports the same and concluded, “the majority of the secluded women [we interviewed] defined seclusion in relation to not engaging in farming, fetching water and gathering firewood” (Adamu 2004). Furthermore, separation of the sexes structured by seclusion allows women “to see themselves as separate, different and independent of men” (Adamu 2002). Through their ongoing reciprocal exchanges and participation in RISE-sponsored activities, women consciously increase their mobility and interaction with other women. Jackson found that with attendance at weddings, naming ceremonies and visiting family and friends, seclusion does not significantly reduce a woman’s social life, and concluded, “at no time of year are women said to be immobilized within the compound” (Jackson 1981).

Divorce is a final strategy that women can employ if they are not happy with the conditions of a marriage. Divorce is common in the region and not difficult for a woman to obtain if her husband is not fulfilling his obligations to provide for and protect his family—which is the primary reason a woman would want to leave a marriage in rural Hausa culture. Though divorce is not stigmatized, and both spouses are likely to marry again, children are seen as the father’s and are returned to his house after they are deemed old enough to be without their mother’s care.

RESOURCES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

“It can be said that there was a breakthrough because there were women speaking in public. It’s very rare in the villages to see this.” –researcher’s fieldnotes about the changes coming from leadership in a RISE-supported VSLA.

We have seen how rural Hausa communities have traditionally offered opportunities for girls and women to acquire resources—the competencies, knowledge, and skills that enhance the capacity to exercise choice. Mothers often teach their daughters the basics of their own income generating activities and provide an endowment of crucial goods at the time of marriage. Women circulate resources through their reciprocal exchange networks and their *adashes*. Most girls and women in the communities have attended Qur’anic school in order to acquire “a complete guide for a good, abundant, and rewarding life in obedience to the commandments of Allah” (Rippin 2011). They learn to read Arabic script (though do not learn Arabic). One often hears that “Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim” and that learning to read and write is especially important. (Rippin 2011).

The RISE activities we have focused on—savings groups and literacy training—build on the indigenous institutions of the *adashe*, Qur’anic schooling, and reciprocal exchange networks. The literacy training provided by the RISE partners facilitates women’s participation in other RISE activities and offers a platform for future leadership. Women who attended the literacy trainings serve as VSLA secretaries, and two group income-generating projects grew out of literacy classes in two of the study communities. These opportunities in turn facilitated the acquisition of public speaking skills that can be so critical to the growth of agency. One of the savings groups made it a priority to create opportunities for the members to gain confidence in expressing themselves at the meetings. “With all the discussions we have, we are managing to explain and defend our opinions,” said one of the participants. We should note that we found that though literacy building increases women’s capacity and leadership potential, the outcomes are not as dramatic as with girl’s education (Perlman 2016).

Some of the women who participate in activities like a VSLA or literacy training appear to gain increased mobility in general. The researchers interviewed several women who in the past were only given permission to leave their homes to go to their parents’ house, weddings or naming ceremonies. After joining the savings group, several of the women were able to gradually negotiate with their husbands for greater mobility. Perhaps this is due to the precedent set by their going out for regular meetings or perhaps due to their increased negotiation skills. Yet in many cases, women’s mobility did not increase, or these gains were limited and did not challenge the expectations of a married woman.

We found that RISE has facilitated a greater awareness of family planning in the study communities. Women have increased access to method-specific knowledge. One of the life histories the researchers took was of a woman who had served as a “*relie*” (*relais communautaires*—volunteer reproductive health worker for one of the RISE programs). At first her husband was unhappy about her attending trainings and her absence from the house when working as a *relie*. “Each time I returned from a training I told him about what I learned about modern methods of birth spacing. Gradually he began to understand. He eventually agreed for me to take a break before my next birth.” However, in general this increased knowledge about family planning does not seem to be leading to an increase in birth spacing.

A number of women have built on the training they received from a RISE partner. “*It was at the training that we decided to start the garden,*” said one. “*It was our own initiative. We acquired the land, went to the [agricultural extension service] for seeds, and started.*” Many RISE projects support women’s livestock raising. This generates some income but often serves as a savings vehicle. “*Animal rearing is just like a savings. There is little profit when you take into account everything from the time get the animal to the time you sell it. I spend the 50 CFA or 100 CFA I get from my business or a ceremony on the animals rather use it for non-essential immediate need, or risk my husband spending it.*”

We found that many women are eager to enhance their agency and acquire resources, however, we encountered little evidence that women have an interest in changing the larger gendered structures in which they live.

MY WIFE USED TO OBEY ME

“I’ve discovered that any woman with an exceptional ability and capacity to relate with others, take certain decisions, and then becomes popular, is seen as a woman who is controlling her husband. When I talk with such women, they often say that people are of the opinion that she is disrespectful and controlling her husband” from a researcher’s fieldnotes

With agriculture in decline and dramatically increased male migration, women have had to take on an increasing role in meeting the basic needs of the family. However, gender roles in the study communities are so clearly delineated that a wife’s contribution to her family’s income can threaten a husband’s identity as provider. Thus, while a significant number of women have enhanced their household and community standing and mobility—through success in their income gathering activities and participation in *adashes* and RISE partner-initiated activities—their husbands can be perceived as unable to control their wife or having been bewitched by them. In response, some men restrict their wives’ participation in business and/or participation in a savings group, trainings, and other activities outside the home.

“My wife used to obey me,” said a man in Yankassa. “She has some education and when a project came seeking literate women I gave them her name and she was selected. Now I don’t understand her anymore. I can no longer tell her what to and what not to do. I found some contraceptives in her room and asked why she was using them without my consent. She outright told me that I couldn’t stop her from taking them. The trainings have influenced her and that’s why she behaves the way she does.”

In many households it is expected that the husband, as head of the household, will determine the number and spacing of children. “Today the decision is often being wrestled from them by wives who have access to information and contraceptives” (Masquelier 2016). While the idea of birth spacing is generally accepted it can still be a potential source of discord between husband and wife (Idrissa 2015). With the greater accessibility of family planning, some husbands worry that their wives are gaining control over the growth of the family. Masquelier suggests that “men feel threatened not only because women ‘are sneaking behind their backs’ to purchase contraceptives but also because by limiting the number of offspring they produce, women are striking at the heart of their identity [as provider]” (Masquelier 2016).

The female researchers asked the women they spent time with to give examples of women in the community that they felt had progressed (*ci gaba*) in their income generation activities or other areas in their lives. Several pointed to a woman whom they go to for advice on religious matters and who has taken responsibility for the feeding and health of her children. “She makes so many decisions in her house that people consider [her husband] weak and a ‘mijin Hajija,” or the husband of a woman who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca before him (Masquelier 2016).

ALLIES

“My husband is not the type that prevents his wives from going out, especially to sell their wares. He is very simple and understands that it is to his advantage if his women have a source of income that allows them to reduce his burden.” A trader in groundnut oil in Yanwa community

Allies are critical for any subordinate group constrained by the inequality in which they live. We found the husband’s support to be the factor most critical to a woman’s success in a business, mobility and in access to health care. A minority fully embraces the success of their wives’ income generating activities and their new knowledge and skills acquired from RISE activities. The husbands’ groups (*écoles des maris*) appear to be supporting change within the household. *“I had no intention of using contraceptives after the first birth, but I was selected to be a mentor in the school for husbands. They told us that people need to see us to actually space our births if they are to believe in what we say. So we tried and now space our own children.”* It is unclear how much this has disseminated to the communities at large.

...in a context where this ability was previously denied

In cases of notable agency, more often than not a unifying thread between most female leaders is that they have continued their education past middle school. ~researcher’s fieldnotes

Virtually all the women in the study communities would comfortably fit in Kabeer’s category of women who live in a context where their ability to make strategic life choices has been denied. However, a lesson learned and relearned in rural development is that a community is rarely egalitarian but rather made up of hierarchies of competing status, wealth, and interests. In the study communities, some women more than others have been marginalized and excluded from opportunities to build agency and voice. We found that most women who are able to express their opinions, advocate for themselves, and succeed in farming or business, tended to be older women—especially those with more education, wealth, status, or support from their husbands. Positions of leadership, whether in indigenous institutions or in the activities sponsored by RISE, appear to be dominated by these less vulnerable women.

Age. Each stage of a woman's life cycle offers new roles and relationships to power. "In the absence of her son, a mother-in-law can make decisions concerning the health matters of her daughter-in-law such as giving or denying her the permission to seek medical care. Equally important are the pressures mothers-in-law can exert on their sons to allow or disallow their wives to visit health centers" (Adamu 2002). At menopause, most constraints associated with marital obligations are significantly relaxed. Older women's accumulated experience, knowledge of herbs and medicinal plants gives them authority over the health of women and children in the household (Adamu 2002; Adamu 2004). The vast majority of births in these communities are monitored by a traditional birth attendant—a position reserved for a woman who has passed her reproductive years. In a Hausa community in northern Nigeria, Kisekka reported that 45% of women who did not attend antenatal care said that they did not do so because of the discouragement of their mothers or mothers-in-law. (Kisekka 1992 cited in Adamu 2002).

Wealth. Our research suggests that the more financially comfortable women—e.g., women who have a few cows, loan money to people in the community, or whose family owns a motorcycle—are generally the ones leading both indigenous and RISE women's activities outside the home. They are more likely to be literate, attend RISE trainings, and acquire public speaking skills. One researcher wrote about a woman she described as being "one of the wealthiest and mobile women in the community. She has the art and talent to sway the women around her. Women are constantly at her house, helping her with her business, or talking with her to gain knowledge." Another researcher recorded the life history of a businesswoman who decided to organize a VSLA without outside support or training—something that is rarely done in these communities. The woman recruited 25 women, was elected president, and by all accounts runs the group smoothly and efficiently.

Education. Education is now one of the few ways a woman in rural southern Niger can increase her ability to make strategic life choices. Diarra suggests that an educated woman is one of the few currently available social positions for a woman that brings the respect formerly reserved for a tambara.

Early in her stay one researcher noted how much she was impressed with the self-confidence and presence of two women she met during a visit by a RISE partner's outreach team. One was the president of a savings group and the other a teacher of literacy classes for teenage girls initiated by a RISE partner. "The day of the meeting the two women came first and with their notebooks in their hands. They are educated and influential and were the women to receive us when we arrived in the village." Though an educated woman has the social recognition of the former tambarey, at present education is only for the fortunate few.

Opportunity. Rural Nigerien communities are stratified by hierarchies of gender, wealth, family, education, and other forms of status. Status shapes the exercise of choice and voice, and

increased status can enhance a woman's ability to express her opinions and concerns and influence decisions affecting her life.

Women with leadership skills are sought out when new projects come to a community. "The positions with the NGOs are often given to the leaders of the VSLAs," wrote one researcher. "So they see these posts as a place of job opportunity." Furthermore, male migration has created some openings for women to enhance agency and voice as they manage household finances, strengthen their businesses, and participate in NGO activities.

However, as discussed earlier in this report, these opportunities are generally taken advantage of by higher status women. The women from more vulnerable households tend not to view these openings as empowering but rather as an added burden necessitated by economic circumstances. The presidents and directors of the RISE-sponsored women's groups in the four study villages are often related by kinship or friendship to the village chief, the *marabout*, other decision-makers, or are educated or from a family that is economically more stable. These women are seen as influential and being able to bring other women together. Our initial mapping of the study communities identified more than 50 women's groups. Roughly 60% of the group leaders were from a family of higher status. The leaders tend to be older, from 30 to 60 years old. Interestingly, one of the communities had a reverse pattern in which the majority of leaders were from families of average or even low status and wealth. The poorer women who do hold positions of leadership are able to do so because of their literacy skills. They have become group secretaries and treasurers but have generally not attained the role of group president or director.

The *tambarey* of the past present a metaphor for current patterns of social inequality in rural southern Niger. This elite group of women was seen as being above the common woman (the *Houloua* or idle ones). During the *tambarci* celebration, when a new *tambara* was presented, other women were called to step back. They *tambarey* could use their increased voice to scoff at common women and settle scores with them. This differentiation between the *tambara* and the *houloua* appears to have been partly based on the fact that the position of *tambara* was merit based. A woman became a *tambara* through her own sweat and determination.

This inequality, this class of an empowered women above the others, currently continues but in a changing social environment in which merit appears to be of less significant value in the placement of a woman in the hierarchies of power. The voice and choice of the *tambara* are now less available to most women. Structures of social inequality influence which women are gaining agency and resources from RISE activities and which women are denied this opportunity. This is especially important to address if we are to avoid reserving opportunities for empowerment to women of greater wealth and status.

CONCLUSION

A LIFE THAT SHE HAS REASON TO VALUE

What kind of a life do women in rural Maradi say they want? The answers vary by individual, household, and community. However, at the core of what women told us were aspirations relating to marriage, motherhood, a steady livelihood to invest in her daughter and network of kin and friends, and to be recognized as a woman of value and generosity.

Most of the women we talked to said they want to secure their daughter's future, and they see marrying her off to a good and financially stable man as the surest way to do so. Most women said they wish to farm, trade, or raise livestock as a means for investing in their daughters' preparation for marriage and to strengthen the reciprocal exchange networks that are crucial to them. Many women expressed a desire to read and write, as well as to increase their capacity to produce and trade. In rural Maradi, most women want to share their wealth with kin and friends to be seen as a woman of self-sacrifice and perseverance. Most women want "as many children as God provides" but would like a break of two years between births. Women want to see their children thrive—"If all of my children do well, I will have succeeded," said one mother; "People will refer to them as my children and I will be proud" (Perlman 2009).

Supporting empowerment in these communities will mean the continuation of creating opportunities for women to enhance the agency and resources needed to achieve their aspirations. However, unless we find a way of bringing all women in the community into this process—vulnerable women as well as those of higher status—we will not succeed. If it is mostly women of higher status who expand the parameters of voice and choice in their communities, the leaders who emerge will be less likely to inspire more vulnerable women, as the vulnerable women will see the successful women as "different" in having opportunities that they themselves have been denied. This being the case, development projects might be helping the more vulnerable women increase their resilience – but not their empowerment – through various initiatives. However, diverse strategies to address this challenge show promise.

CREATING THE VESSEL: WOMEN'S CAPACITY BUILDING

Given Hausa women's demonstrated capacity for building and expanding networks of kin and friends, naming ceremonies, and weddings, we would suggest that well-run women's groups could prove to be invaluable platforms for women's resilience and empowerment. Ideally, women would come together in a space where they feel comfortable to say what is on their minds, connect with other women, and acquire the knowledge and skills they need to work towards

their objectives. If attention is given to building rapport and solidarity, such a women's group could serve as a vessel for savings clubs, capacity building, gardening, and other activities.

It will not be easy to effectively recruit vulnerable women to these activities and ensure that participation provides the tangible benefits valued and desired by the women. Leadership mentoring and support will be critical. A possible starting point might be a small ethnographic study to gain a more complete understanding of the daily realities of vulnerable women's lives. This could be followed by a series of informal group discussions, and the insights gained would inform the adjustment of program design.

Activities aimed at enhancing the empowerment of women must offer clear and tangible benefits that are valued by participants if we expect the most vulnerable women to attend. With time and quality programming, community norms should gradually change as the number of women participating in VSLAs, community gardens, and other women's activities increases.

THE TAMBARA AND THE EDUCATED WOMAN

“Women say that an educated woman who has a profession is more than equal to a tambara”
(Diarra and Monimart 2006)

An educated woman is currently one of few identities available to a young woman in these communities that provides the respect and voice of the tambara. An education demonstrates personal merit and a mother's investment, “and confers the inalienable status of an educated woman” (Diarra and Monimart 2006).

Girls' education offers an opportunity that must be maximized. In previous research, we found a strong consensus that schooling is the most socially viable alternative to early marriage (Perlman 2015). This is despite the fact that the majority of girls in the study communities were not in school, as poor quality of learning outcomes leave little incentive for parents to take on the expense and opportunity costs that come with education. Thus, the strengthening of core academics for primary school girls should be a priority.

Girls' education, vocational training, and life-skills development expand the range of choices and opportunities available to girls and their families and will make delayed marriage and childbearing both more viable and desirable. We suggest programming for three segments of adolescent girls—girls who are out-of-school, married adolescents, and girls in the last year of primary school (Perlman 2015). The most vulnerable girls in a community are those who are not in — nor likely to return to — school. This group has the highest risk of early marriage, complications in labor and delivery, and is most likely to have large families. Capacity building for this segment of girls might focus on building financial literacy, microenterprise skills, and enhancing access to savings.

The mobility of married adolescents is especially constricted during their first year of marriage, and many of the basic resources and services available to other segments of girls are beyond their reach. Strengthening of a young women's ability to succeed in a home-based enterprise such as trading and handwork like sewing and knitting might increase income and elevate her status and bargaining power in the household.

As with women's capacity building, activities for the most vulnerable girls must offer concrete benefits that are valued by the beneficiaries. Two week-long livelihood trainings appear to have little effect on a young woman's ability to make strategic choices. However, sustained vocational training with yearlong apprenticeships (many in new trades like phone repair) is proving promising in northern Nigeria (Mohammed 2018) The other priority segment of girls is those who are in their last year of primary school. Across the rural Sahel, there is a large drop off in girls' enrollment after primary school; 88% of girls in Maradi Department either drop out or fail their primary school completion exams. There is evidence that accelerated literacy and life skills training in after-school safe spaces can increase the participants' academic performance dramatically. Consequently, parents are pleased with the results and let their daughters remain in school— "You could say the girls are being reeducated in the fundamentals that they were taught in school but never learned," said one father. "The mentors sit the girls down and teach them in a practical way, and when they get back home, they share what they learn with their siblings."

WORKING COLLECTIVELY IN THEIR OWN INTEREST

"Any strategy that seeks women's empowerment should have as a central component the enhancement of women's ability to function collectively in their own interest." - Bina Agarwal

Women's empowerment, some suggest, requires collective action—women coming together in unions, village councils, or women's groups in processes of collective empowerment leading to a change in social norms. There is evidence that individual empowerment is often best achieved collectively (Perlman 2015). When women and girls come together to express themselves and enhance their capacities, they are building individual assets but are doing so collectively. With time, community norms change gradually as the number of young women working in income generating activities increase from four to twenty to fifty per rural community.

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