

# Niger's Child Marriage Crisis: Health, Rights, and Protection

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## ABSTRACT

Child marriage is a harmful practice that strips millions of children's human rights by threatening their health, safety, and autonomy. While boys and girls are subject to this form of abuse, girls are disproportionately affected with more than 650 million women alive today married as children (OHCHR 2022). Niger consistently ranks as the country with the highest prevalence of child marriage with 76% of girls married before the age of 18. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was predicted that more than 100 million girls would be subject to child marriages before their 18th birthday. However, due to the pandemic, a predicted additional 10-13 million will be left susceptible to violence and severe health complications (UNICEF 2020). As a result, major plans need to be made to meet the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals' call for global action to eliminate child marriage by 2030 (UNICEF 2020). To understand the major implications of child marriages on the development of children in Niger, this paper will identify various convention violations, specifically the Convention on the Right of the Child (CRC), main drivers of child marriages, and the negative health and psychological impacts of child marriages. This paper will conclude with ways to develop interventions to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals for eliminating child marriages by 2030 on both a local and global scale and identify knowledge gaps to create more equitable and holistic interventions to eliminate child marriage practices for children.

## Statement of Problem

Child marriage is defined as a union in which one of the parties is under 18 (OHCHR 2022). More than 650 million women have married as children world-wide, with 40% of underage girls that enter marriages being from less-developed nations (Child Marriage 2022). According to data compiled by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for 18% of child marriages worldwide, with South Asia accounting for 44%, East Asia and the Pacific contributing to 12%, Latin America and the Caribbean 9%, the Middle East and North Africa 5%, and other regions 12%. Despite the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 5.3, 120 million girls are projected to marry before their 18th birthday by 2030 (United Nations 2022).

Specifically, Niger, a country located in West Africa, has the highest rate of child marriages in the disproportionately affected region. A staggering 76% of young women were married by the age of 18 according to a Niger Demographic and Health Survey administered in 2012 (Deane 2021). Due to Niger's unique economic, cultural, and social circumstances, the country struggles to keep adolescent girls safe from early marriages. In this paper, we will explore the drivers of child marriages in the region, its human rights and health implications, and ways we can ensure the safety and wellbeing of young Nigerien girls.

Despite the efforts of reformers in the early part of the 20th century, early marriage has received minimal attention from modern women's and children's rights movements. There has been virtually no attempt to examine the practice of child marriage as a human rights violation (UNICEF 2022). In order to shift focus towards child marriages in Niger, it is important to hold Niger accountable with their international and national commitments to human rights and early marriage specifically. Table 1 includes key instruments that lay down the legalities for child marriage, incorporating issues of free and full consent, age, and rights of women.

**Table 1:** Relevant Niger International and Local Commitments Summarized

Commitment	Article
1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights	Article 16 (1) Men and women of full age ... have the right to marry and found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution. (2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending parties.
1956 Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practice Similar to Slavery	Article 1 (c) Any institution or practice whereby: (i) A woman, without the right to refuse, is promised or given in marriage on payment of a consideration in money or in kind to her parents, guardian, family ...
1964 Convention on Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages	Article 1, 2, 3 (1) No marriage shall be legally entered into without the full and free consent of both parties, such consent to be expressed by them in person ... as prescribed by law. (2) States Parties to the present Convention shall ... specify a minimum age for marriage (“not less than 15 years” according to the nonbinding recommendation accompanying this Convention). No marriage shall be legally entered into by any person under this age, except where a competent authority has granted a dispensation as to age, for serious reasons, in the interests of the intending spouses ... (3) All marriages shall be registered ... by the competent authority.
1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women	Article 16.1 (a) The same right to enter into marriage; (b) The same right freely to choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent; ... Article 16.2 states: The betrothal and the marriage of a child shall have no legal effect, and all necessary action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage
1990 African Charter on Rights and Welfare of the Child	Article XXI Child marriage and the betrothal of girls and boys shall be prohibited and effective action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify the minimum age of marriage to be eighteen years.

*Note.* Table was created to summarize Key Niger International and National Commitments. From “International Human Rights Instruments and Early Marriage,” by Stephen H. Umemoto, *Early Marriage: Child Spouses* (p. 3), 2001, UNICEF Innocenti Digest, no. 7.

In addition to commitments described in Table 1, Niger also ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989. As the world’s most rapidly ratified international human rights agreement, the CRC commits signatories to protect every child’s best interest, survival, and development. Every provision of the CRC is of some relevance to the issue of early marriage as summarized in Table 2. Specifically, Article 34, 35, and 36 focuses on the protection of the child from sexual exploitation, abuse, abduction, sale, and trafficking. For many of the children in Niger, their reality subjects children to the same instances of abuse through child marriage.

**Table 2:** Provisions of The Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 Pertaining to Child Marriage

Article	Description
Article 1	A child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.
Article 2	Freedom from discrimination on any grounds, including sex, religion, ethnic or social origin, birth or other status.
Article 3	In all actions concerning children ... the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.
Article 6	Maximum support for survival and development.
Article 12	The right to express his or her views freely in all matters affecting the child, in accordance with age and maturity.
Article 19	The right to protection from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parents, guardian, or any other person.
Article 24	The right to health, and to access to health services; and to be protected from harmful traditional practices.
Article 28, 29	The right to education on the basis of equal opportunity
Article 34	The right to protection from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse
Article 35	The right to protection from abduction, sale or trafficking
Article 36	The right to protection from all forms of exploitation prejudicial to any aspect of the child's welfare

*Note.* Table was created to summarize Provisions of the CRC pertaining to child marriages. From “International Human Rights Instruments and Early Marriage,” by Stephen H. Umemoto, *Early Marriage: Child Spouses* (p. 3), 2001, UNICEF Innocenti Digest, no. 7.

To globally commit to achieve peace and prosperity for people and the planet, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States, share an urgent blueprint of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to achieve an end to poverty, improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur growth, all while tackling climate change (UN 2015). In terms of child marriages, Target 5.3 aims to “eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early, and forced marriage and female genital mutilations by 2030.” Despite the SDG frameworks, child marriage rates remain practically unchanged, falling from 76.6% to 76.3% between 1998 and 2012 (Save the Children UK 2017). In order to meet the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, Niger needs to significantly increase the rate of progress to eliminate child marriages by 2030. The central promise of the 2030 agenda for SDGs is to “leave no one behind,” meaning child marriages must end for all segments of society, beginning with those most in need.

## Scope and Evidence

### Building Context

Before discussing the drivers of child marriages in Niger, it's important to understand the context reinforcing the power behind these drivers which includes looking deeper into the poverty and gender issues Niger faces.

In 2021, Niger was rated the least developed country in the world by the United Nations and is commonly ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world ("Poverty in Niger: 5 Things You Need to Know" 2022). Some factors to consider when looking at Niger's economic state is the geographical disadvantage it has. Niger is a land-locked country, so over 250,000 refugees and migrants from neighboring countries find their way to Niger, contributing to high poverty levels ("Poverty in Niger: 5 Things You Need to Know" 2022). Another important aspect to consider when looking at poverty is Niger's colonial history with France from 1922 to 1960. France noticed Niger's richness in natural resources, especially uranium, and industrial mining potential and established a strong French-owned industry which was one of the only feasible employment opportunities for native Nigeriens (Moctar 2021). The adverse health impacts of this type of work led France to close their domestic mines, leaving Niger as the sole provider of uranium despite the mines being majority French-owned (Moctar 2021). After achieving independence in 1960, Niger was left with political unrest that it still struggles to combat ("Poverty in Niger: 5 Things You Need to Know" 2022).

To examine gender inequality, it requires a look at Niger's social landscape. Cultural traditions, rooted in gender differences, are ingrained in social institutions. For example, priority is placed on boys' education over girls (International Monetary Fund). In 2013, Niger scored worst-in-the-world for the "discriminatory family code" section of the Social Institutions and Gender Index, which is used to assess a region's discrimination against women within social structures (International Monetary Fund). Niger's Family Codes protects customary practices that are unfavorable for women regarding divorce, child custody, and inheritance (International Monetary Fund). Additionally, Niger has yet to ratify the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa. The document's purpose is to protect women's reproductive and sexual rights and their autonomy (International Monetary Fund). These societal and systemic factors contribute greatly to the state of Niger today.

The following discussion provides insight on the four major drivers of child marriages in Niger and the resulting health and psychological consequences. This discussion is crucial in pinpointing different mechanisms of early marriage and the baseline for which further interventions and recommendations can be made to eliminate child marriages as a whole.

### Drivers of Child Marriages in Niger

#### *1. Poverty*

The first main driver of child marriage is poverty. The high prevalence of child marriages is both a symptom and consequence of poverty. Niger is one of the poorest counties in the world, ranking second from the bottom of the current United Nations Human Development Index (UNDP 2022). With around 50% of the country's 20 million people or so living on less than 2 dollars a day and the poverty rate of 42%, early marriage is often viewed as a financial transaction that dictates the timing and reasoning of marriage for many children in Niger. Marriage is used to reduce financial burden by generating income, clearing debt, settling feuds, and an opportunity for families to claim dowries. UNICEF reports that girls living in poor households are approximately twice as likely to marry before the age of 18 than girls living in better-off households (UNICEF 2016). Not only does poverty exacerbate the prevalence of child marriages, but it also further promotes gender inequality. With parents viewing child marriage and schooling as equivalent, parents tend to trade the burden of paying for girls to attend school with receiving dowries.

## 2. Education

Statistical results drawn from a study on the spatial analysis of individuals and village level sociodemographic characteristics associated with age at marriage in rural Niger suggest that education is associated with delayed marriage. Education and literacy in Niger are relatively low overall and even lower among women. Only 9% of women have attained secondary education and 14% of women are literate, compared to 42% of literate men (Shakya 2020). Lower levels of education are linked to the prevalence of child marriage both within Niger and across Sub-Saharan Africa (Shakya 2020). Schooling is culturally seen as incompatible with childbirth, child-rearing, and wifely duties so child marriage and continued schooling cannot exist sustainably in tandem with one another (Psaki 2021). Despite some countries implementing educational resources for girls (such as in Nigeria), they have been unable to reduce child marriages due to its deep roots within traditional and social norms of the area (Greany 44). Overall, adequate education is associated with older age at marriage, but due to the high value child/early marriages have in Niger and a general lack in educational opportunity, child marriages remain at large.

## 3. Socio-cultural Factors

Socio-cultural factors that govern child marriages amplify the overarching lack of agency young girls have. Age hierarchies lead to parents and elders making decisions that concern transitions to adulthood, sexuality, and alignment with community norms, all of which impact the likelihood of a child's early entrance into marriage (Psaki 2021). In addition, there is a general lack of contraceptive usage in Niger, with only 12% of married women reporting their use (Shakya 2020). Historically, life expectancy at birth for females was around 20 years of age; early marriage and high fertility were clear pathways to ensure that enough children were born to maintain the population size (Shakya 2020). Effectively, Niger currently has one of the lowest household incomes yet has one of the fastest growing population sizes (Shakya 2020).

Social norms like the stigmatization of female sexuality and pregnancy are not only drivers of child marriage but also continue to be reinforced through the practice of child marriage. Mothers who marry early may be inclined to internalize the fears surrounding pre-marital sex and pregnancy through the support of child marriages for their own daughters, whether it be due to fear of social stigmatization or as a protective measure to prevent out-of-wedlock childbearing (Shakya 2020). Socio-cultural factors affecting child marriage often have a cyclical effect, as they continue to intergenerationally enforce the gender inequality that exists within Niger.

## 4. Inadequate Laws

In addition to poverty, education, and sociocultural factors, Niger continues to contribute to the prevalence of child marriages on a legislative level. Niger's domestic laws consist of several sources of law: the Civil Code of 1999, customary laws, and international legal instruments. Niger's Civil Code legalizes girl marriages at the age of 15 and boys at the age of 18. However, it gives parents the power to give consent to legalize a marriage between two minors (Deane 2021). As a result, many children are married before their 15th birthday. While the Civil Code legalized undegraded marriages, even this source of law is followed to a lesser extent. More importantly, in Niger, the Judicial System of the Republic of Niger Act (JSA) states that marriage is governed by custom. As a result, despite Niger being a signatory to various treaties and commitments as stated before, the JSA states the minimum age to marry is 14 for girls (Deane 2021). Additionally, religious law, the Muslim Law, makes no mention of fixed age limits for marriage (Deane 2021). While all international and national frameworks prohibit child marriages, very little is done to address the incoherence between domestic and global legal frameworks.

## Physical and Psychological Health Implications

In addition to being an indicator of deep-rooted inadequacies and differences in a region, child marriages have multiple health and psychological implications that considerably impact the life and health trajectories of young girls and women.

Research has found that even in contexts where child marriages are normative, like in Niger, marrying early is still correlated with negative psychological and health outcomes (John et al. 2019). Specifically for health outcomes, a review of literature saw that many studies in African populations found that being married by the age of 20 has become a risk factor for HIV infection since married girls are more likely to get infected with STDS (Nour 2006). Another case-control study in Mali found HPV prevalence in child brides to be 57% higher than those who were not child brides (Nour 2006). Based off this study, child marriage was considered a risk factor for cervical cancer (Nour 2006). Young brides are also known to suffer from more adverse health outcomes than older brides. When comparing women over the age of 20 and younger women, those between the ages of 10-14 were 5-7 times more likely and those who were 15-19 were twice as likely to die from childbirth (Nour 2006). Extremely early childbirth not only results in health consequences for women, but also the offspring. Research has shown that offspring of child marriages have an increased risk (35-55%) of being preterm or low birth weight babies. Additionally, the mortality rates of babies born to mothers under the age of 20 are 73% higher (Nour 2006).

With regards to psychological health and well-being for child brides, the outcomes still fare poorly. A literature review found that depression had the strongest association to child marriage, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was a close second for early marriage (Burgess et al. 2022). In a study of child brides, they found that early marriage and pregnancy was a major factor in distress surrounding loss of education, self-confidence, decision-making powder, freedom of mobility, and peer social networks" (Burgess et al. 2022). In various studies, suicidal thoughts were present in girls who were promised marriage or received early marriage requests (Burgess et al. 2022). Lastly, mental disorders were reported to be higher in prevalence and risk for those married as children compared to those married as adults (Burgess et al. 2022).

Country-specific research from Niger gathered large-scale population-based data and found a clear pattern of psychological well-being increasing steadily as age at first marriage increased (John et al. 2019). There was a statistically significant negative association between marrying at 15 or earlier and overall psychological well-being in Niger (John et al. 2019). When delving deeper into this statistic, the most significant negative association was for those married at 12 or earlier, emphasizing the need to put an end to child marriages (John et al. 2019).

## Recommendations

### 1. Improving Legal Framework: Birth Certificates

With any type of intervention, it must be carefully developed over a course of time in a participatory and inclusive manner that is considerate of the cultural and traditional norms of Niger. The first step in improving Niger's legal framework would be to garner community support and engagement. Since social norms can't be changed unless they are directly driven by the communities themselves, partnering with community influencers is a crucial part in preventing child marriages. By shadowing them, we can fully understand individuals' needs directly from the community instead of implementing what we believe they need. Once communities are on board, it will be beneficial to partner with organizations already established and respected in the Niger area such as UNICEF or each village's child protection committee. Current committees consisting of health care workers, teachers, and advocates have successfully worked to convince families not to marry their young girls.

With support from communities, it can lead to support of systematic changes, starting with birth certificates and registrations. Every year, around 40 million births –  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the world population – go unregistered (Girls Not Brides 2022). Without a birth certificate, a child has no first defense against age-related abuse, therefore reinforcing and subjecting children to child marriages. By implementing measures to provide birth certificates, the document will be able to follow children into their adulthood and provide protection if ever faced with challenges. By starting from a legal position that does not directly impose on cultural norms and religious beliefs, recommendations for reviews on established customary law will be received with less opposition. However, just addressing legal frameworks is not sufficient to drive change if other drivers are not addressed.

## 2. Ensure Continued Learning: Cash Transfers

Cash transfers have shown extensive promise in ensuring continued learning in a variety of countries. Cash transfer programs are programs that transfer cash to targeted households or communities that are conditional or unconditional. Conditional cash transfer programs typically center their objectives on health or education of children so that they may secure a sustainable livelihood without having to resort to alternative methods, such as child marriage. In Brazil, the criteria for cash-transfer programs focused on death and life birth registration and was achieved by 2906 municipalities (Rasella et al. 2013). The goals specifically addressed nutrition and healthcare within families and had incredible success. Under-5 mortality rates attributed to external causes experienced a decrease of 17.9%, and deaths due to malnutrition decreased by 58.2% (Rasella et al. 2013). Socio-economic conditions continued to improve with mean monthly income increased by 46.5% (Rasella et al. 2013). As observed, cash-transfer programs can have a large impact on child mortality by addressing income improvement and healthcare participation.

More specifically related to Sub-Saharan Africa and educational objectives, the Social Cash Transfer Program (SCTP) has had incredible success in Malawi. The “Traditional Model” operates through increasing a child’s human capital through the results of schooling (Kilburn et al. 2017). Parental investment in schooling is typically low due to the delayed financial results of schooling. As a result, children often drop out of school to pursue more instantaneous ways of garnering income to assist the family or community financially. Despite the increased availability of schooling through the various teaching programs that have been implemented across sub-Saharan Africa, drop-out rates continue to be high once a child reaches the age of marriage or working age. Conditional cash transfers in these areas are dependent on child enrollment in a school program and aim to alleviate potential financial burdens on the family that would have otherwise acted as a barrier. Furthermore, the quality of education can vary substantially where the results of education and schooling would not be considered a valuable investment.

Low-income families can further inhibit child development via the family stress model, which associates financial stress to parental stress and emotional instability (Kilburn et al. 2017). Children often experience “destructive consequences” from parents as they are defined as financial burdens on the family (Kilburn et al. 2017). The primary pathways to alleviate this stress and for children to “pull their weight” is through the modes of child marriage (as is the case in Niger) or early entry into the workforce. Yet through the old age pension program in South Africa, unconditional cash payments resulted in higher enrollment for girls who were often a part of a female-led household, indicating that gender may play a pivotal role in the way the cash transfers are used (Kilburn et al. 2017). Overall, the program witnessed an increase in enrollment rates by 20% and overall reduced drop-out rates with a yearlong unconditional cash transfer. These results imply that cash transfer programs implemented in Niger would have incredibly high projected success rates of increased school enrollments and improved child health.

## 3. ‘Campaign to End Child Marriage’ Evaluation

After evaluating the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage, our next recommendation is to reimagine ways to achieve change and potential mediums for change. In 2014, the government of Niger partnered with the United Nations Population Fund and the Ministry for the Promotion of Women and the Protection of the

Child to initiate change in early marriages in the country. Through UNFPA-UNICEF's initiative, they managed to reach 115,078 girls aged 10-19 years old to participate in the interventions that empowered them with skills and knowledge to delay child marriage (UNICEF, 2019). Additionally, about one million people were in community dialogues to address the local issue, and specifically, 435,910 individuals were reached for educational sessions to acknowledge the harmful practice, rights, and protection (UNICEF, 2019). After reviewing the impact of the Global Programme to End Child Marriage, it lacks more systemic cultural change and impact. There should be more focus on achieving change and interventions through traditional chiefs, religious leaders and power holders in the communities. While also working with young girls, families, adolescent boys, and the general community, it is important that the leaders in communities and those that use societal and community norms are also informed and educated on this topic to promote change. Traditional chiefs are known to be the "guardians of Niger's traditions and customs" (Haro & Gosmane, 2020). They are extremely important because as it was mentioned, one of the main drivers of child marriages are these customs, so we recommend that the target population for interventions include these chiefs, religious leaders, and power holders. One example of chiefs playing vital roles of behavioral change is with COVID-19. During the pandemic, UNICEF partnered with the President of the Association of Traditional Chiefs of Niger for a campaign. Being president of the association is one of the most respected positions in the country, both in the community and the administration (Haro & Gosmane, 2020). As a result of the partnership, in 2020, the head chief mobilized other chiefs and religious leaders of other regions to raise awareness and encourage preventative measures (Haro & Gosmane, 2020). Using these leaders was an essential element in sensitizing the community and containing the pandemic. When it comes to child marriages in Niger, the efforts in changing community norms and views can be greatly impacted by the help of the Association of Chiefs and other important figures in the community.

## Conclusion

Child marriages are a harmful and discriminatory global practice that robs millions of girls of their human rights by hindering their health, development and well-being, and its continued practice is a form of abuse and a violation of various commitments. Ending child marriage can contribute to the achievement of nearly all of the Sustainable Development Goals and targets to reduce poverty, eliminate gender inequality, improve general child health, and improve access to education. It is apparent that child marriages have been influenced by various factors such as poverty, education, socio-cultural factors, and lack of governmental support. By implementing interventions as mentioned earlier, it can positively impact child survival, protection, maternal health, education, food security, and poverty. The human rights of children are more likely to be fulfilled when they have access to education, life skills, economic assets and decision-making powers with a government and society that backs their rights and become members of society contributing to the growth and development of their country.

## Areas for Further Research

### 1. Boys and Child Marriages

While there has been substantial research done for girl-children in regards to child marriages, one of the challenges has been the lack of gender based research done for boys. UNICEF's first even in-depth analysis of specifically child grooms was done in 2019. It estimates that 115 million boys and men around the world were married as children (UNICEF 2022). With the concept of child marriages dating back to the eighteenth century, the first report done in 2019 is not substantial for gathering information on drivers and impacts of boys forced into early marriage (Dukakis 2017). While girls are much more disproportionately affected by child marriages, the Sustainable Development Goal of eliminating child marriages will not be achieved without protecting boys. It will be important to replicate and build



off of innovative projects such as UNICEF's mission in Pakistan where they worked to empower adolescent boys to promote and protect children rights and the rights of others particularly girls (UNICEF 2001).

## 2. Pre-existing Forms of Education

Implementing a multi-generational approach through the use of pre-existing "Apprentice Systems" within communities in Niger may increase the likelihood of changed conceptions of child marriage. For example, cash transfers, a suggested solution, increase enrollment rates during their acceptance, yet long-term tend to delay early entry to the work-force. Furthermore, as secondary education becomes more expensive and less accessible, children are more likely to be pulled out of school once they reach marriageable age (Kilburn et al., 66). Through interactions with the elders of a community, the communal benefits of child education can be explained. Further, through conversations with community leaders the concept of child marriage as a necessity to increase a child's human capital can be understood and addressed.

## 3. Child Marriage Monitoring Mechanism

Established by UNICEF in 2021, the Child Marriage Monitoring Mechanism (CMMM) Global Initiative was created with a mission of achieving the Sustainable Development Goal target 5.3 (Chalasani et al., 2021). It hopes to do this by generating relevant data and analyses to have global and national child marriage data. From past experiences with maternal and child health, education, and sanitation, investing in global monitoring and generating data has played an important role in informing policies and maintaining accountability (Chalasani et al., 2021). Further research should be conducted within the CMMM to get up-to-date information on child marriage rates and the ways in which COVID-19 has impacted these rates to inform interventions and policy development. Additionally, it can generate data to examine changes in disparities and how we can effectively address these and work towards the SDG goal.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Professor Maraym Farzanegan for all of her support and for enriching our minds with her 20+ years of experience working for UNICEF. Additionally, thank you to Laura Gulbinas from UCLA's Writing Center for assisting in finalizing this research review paper.

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