

Early marriage in Ethiopia: Causes and health consequences

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Advocates for gender equality and the abandonment of harmful traditional practices (HTPs) argue that early marriage is one of the most harmful practices as it usually denies girls educational opportunities, leads to poverty and economic insecurity and has a serious negative impact on their health and decision-making capacities. It also reinforces other forms of gender-based violence and problems.¹ Early marriage is mostly common in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia. It is rampant in Ethiopia, although prevalence varies from one region to another. At the national level, 62% of Ethiopian women aged 20-49 get married before the age of 18.²

Comparative studies conducted in 2004 identified the Amhara region as having the highest prevalence, with 48% of rural married women and 28% of urban married women having married before the age of 15.³ Types of early marriage in Ethiopia include *promissory marriage*, whereby a verbal promise is made at infancy or even childbirth by the parents to have their children get married; *child marriage*, in which children under the age of 10 are wedded; and *adolescent marriage*, which involves girls aged between 10 and 15. In most cases, the child bride is taken to her in-laws immediately after the wedding; in other cases the parents agree that the girl stays with her parents until she is mature enough to live with her husband. In general, husbands are much older than their young wives.

Early marriage is a violation of the fundamental rights of the child. Article 21 of the 1990 African Charter on the Right and Welfare of the Child states that “*Child marriage and betrothal of girls and boys shall be prohibited and effective action including legislation shall be taken to specify the minimum age of marriage to be 18 years.*” Also, the Maputo Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa (October 2005) and the newly adopted criminal law of Ethiopia (2005) acknowledge the minimum age of marriage for women to be 18 years and state that marriage shall only take place with full consent of both parties. Unfortunately, knowledge of and respect for the law is limited among many rural communities.

Understanding the forces at work at the community and family levels that drive parents to marry their girl-children off is essential



Photo: World Bank Protection of Basic Services Project / Michael Tsagaye

An 11-year-old Ethiopian girl who refused an arranged marriage and chose to stay in school receives an excellence in learning award from former World Bank President Paul Wolfowitz, July 2006

in the development of effective programmes to tackle this traditional practice. In 2006, Pathfinder International/Ethiopia conducted a study on the incidence, reasons for, and the personal and social consequences of early marriage in both urban and rural areas of the Amhara region. The study aimed to develop solid evidence upon which to build future programming. It combined both qualitative and quantitative research methods. A total of 2,072 women and girls aged 12-49 participated in the quantitative research. Focus groups involved parents (married men and women) and unmarried adolescents (boys and girls separately). Key informants – knowledgeable persons in the study areas including health and social workers, teachers and religious and other community leaders – were interviewed to find out their perceptions of the status of early marriage in their communities and of the problems associated with it. Also, information was collected on existing programme interventions, policies, laws and plans of action on the issue.

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The decision to marry

More than 55% of the ever-married women interviewed reported having been pressured into marriage. The sources of that pressure were predominantly fathers (91%) and mothers (88%), followed by community elders (22%) and others in the community. Parents were found to have chosen the husband in 85% of the cases, and to have arranged the marriage in 88% of the cases. More than 60% of the women reported that they were not informed about the wedding before the decision was made, and 72% were not asked for their consent, while 75% did not know the groom before the wedding.

One of our findings was that the mean age of marriage, though still very low (14), seems to be rising. According to the 2005 Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey, 13% of girls between 15 and 19 had been married by the age of 15, against 32% of women in the 25 to 34 age range. This would lend credibility to the argument that more and more young women, as well as community groups, are learning about the legal restraints and are turning to the law and community leaders to resist early marriage.

In general, there was a large age difference between couples: nearly 75% of ever-married female respondents were married to older men, and among these, the age difference was ten years or more in half of the cases. This age differential affects the level of communication, mutual understanding and the balance of influence within the family. It gives the man considerably more power and control than his young wife. One fifth of the women interviewed reported that their husbands had been previously married and 29% of these had been married twice or more times.

Causes of early marriage

Despite the legal sanctions against marriage before age 18 and the growing awareness among leaders and educators that it is harmful to girls and their families, parents continue to insist upon marrying their daughters in their mid-teens and go to some lengths to resist all opposition. Why? More than 80% of respondents could cite no reason other than it being a tradition they had to adhere to. According to interviewees, the strongest reason for early marriage is the desire or need to maintain the family's good name and social standing. For men in particular, the success of their children is a measure of manhood and community status, and a daughter's success rests in her making a good marriage and linking her family to another family. Concern about a girl becoming pregnant out of marriage is also prevalent, though not nearly as significant as the issue of status. Only about one-fifth of the respondents reported this as a reason for early marriage. For some families, the desire to get '*macha*' (money paid to the girl's family by the boy's family upon agreement to marriage) is an incentive.

There is little doubt that parents are well aware of the negative consequences of early marriage, which are commonly discussed in communities. Though many condemn it in public, they seem compelled to continue its practice. This pursuit of tradition in the face of compelling negative evidence is common to most cultures and must be well understood when developing social change programmes.

Consequences for health and well-being

Early marriage has severe consequences for the health and well-being of girls and women. In the Ethiopian context, some of these include:

- *Marital instability* – Among the respondents, about 27% of marriages in urban areas and 19% in rural areas had ended in

Reasons for getting married (in order of importance):

1. It is a tradition in the area
2. To strengthen relationships
3. For prestige
4. Difficult to get married if older
5. The family will be victim of gossip
6. To earn dowry
7. To protect virginity and avoid premarital affairs

divorce or separation. Of those that had married more than once, 56% reported that their first marriage ended either because they were too young or 'not interested' in the marriage. Many girls run away from unhappy marriages only to be sent back by their parents.

- *Termination of education* – In almost every setting, better-educated women are more likely to use contraception, bear fewer children, raise healthier children, make better decisions for themselves and their children and to make greater economic contributions to the household. More than 80% of girls aged 12 to 14 in our sample were in school. However, among out-of-school respondents, 28% cited marriage and 19% cited childrearing obligations as their reasons for quitting school. Four percent cited their husbands' disapproval of their school attendance as a reason.

Married adolescent girls' inability to negotiate safer sex and other social pressures represent a critical channel of vulnerability to HIV infection

- *Inability to plan or manage families* – Statistically, women who marry early are likely to bear more children. Among our respondents, those married under 15 averaged 4.96 children; those married between 15 and 17 had 4.15, and those over the age of 18 averaged 3.12 children. Young mothers exercise less influence and control over their children and have less ability to make decisions about their nutrition, health care and household management.
- *Impact on sexual health of women and girls* – Young girls can face considerable physical pain associated with sexual intercourse as a result of the physiological immaturity of their sexual organs. Complications due to pregnancy at a young age frequently include obstetric fistula (perforation of the bladder or bowel, due to prolonged labour).
- *Vulnerability to HIV infection* – A girl is physiologically more prone to contracting HIV than a male, as her vagina is not well lined with protective cells and her cervix may be penetrated easily. Young women are several times more likely than young men to contract the disease through heterosexual contact. Also, deeply entrenched socio-economic inequalities further compound their risk. Marriage can increase married girls' exposure to the virus, especially as older husbands may engage in unprotected sexual relations with other partners. The risk of HIV infection is higher among the poorest and most powerless in society, and, as such, married adolescent girls will be more at risk of infection than unmarried girls who are not having sexual intercourse. Married adolescent girls' inability to negotiate safer sex and other social pressures represent a critical channel of vulnerability.

What needs to be done?

The results of this study clearly confirm that early marriage practices in Ethiopia are driven by deeply-held beliefs and traditions that do not necessarily lend themselves to discouragement through rational arguments. Further examination and understanding of the forces

weighing on parents will prove invaluable to the development of effective ways to address their concerns. A big challenge is the long-term goal to enhance the status of women in Ethiopia, to strengthen their personal and reproductive rights, to strengthen their access and control over resources and thus fight women's poverty and economic insecurity, to heighten their influence and decision-making power within the family and the community and to firmly establish their value as equal partners in development and members of society.

Elimination of early marriage is a clear starting point. The outcomes from this study suggest the following strategies to address this problem:

- Challenge the traditions that surround early marriage. Inform parents, community members, and youth about the negative consequences of early marriage.
- Create a supportive network of (religious) leaders and teachers who can empower girls to negotiate with their parents.
- Expand training for health and community workers on the dangers of early marriage, engaging them as advocates and change agents in their communities and institutions.
- Strengthen and establish community networks and partnerships involving girls clubs, teachers, elders, local government officials, women and youth groups, community and religious leaders, etc., that jointly work towards ending early marriage.
- Strengthen the role of the judicial system particularly the police, judges and persecutors through training on enforcement of the law against early marriage.
- Develop strong support systems to keep girls in school. Provide scholarships where necessary and encourage teachers to support girls.
- Finally, bring leading professional women to communities to talk to girls as role models and a source of inspiration.

Pathfinder International/Ethiopia has adopted all these strategies and has developed concrete activities to fulfil its objectives. We provide information to the public (including women, youth, religious and community leaders) through electronic, audiovisual and print media. We mobilize communities to take action through for instance community networks, arts competitions and mass rallies. We also provide training and capacity building to government officials, NGOs and community-based organizations and we work together with a number of implementing partner organizations (IPOs) to eradicate the practice in our project areas. To gain the support of influential

people – including political, religious and community leaders – we carry out policy and community level advocacy continuously. In collaboration with the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association and the Ministry of Justice we have been conducting legal literacy training on the issue of early marriage. As a result of our work and that of our partners, more than 9,000 early marriages in Amhara and some 3,000 in Tigray were prevented in 2005. Communities in these project areas have widely accepted reasons to end early marriage through the educational efforts of health workers, women's associations, teachers and religious leaders. Finally, Pathfinder International has played an important role in influencing legislative bodies and other influential groups to enact and implement laws that protect women and girls from early marriage and other harmful traditional practices.⁴

It is the girls themselves who will ultimately change the custom and end the prevalence of early marriage in Ethiopia. It is our vision that girls ultimately refuse to get married at an early age, challenge their traditional role as mothers and family care givers, and aspire to be educated and improve their status in society as female professionals and women leaders in their communities.

More information about this study can be found in the Report on Causes and Consequences of Early Marriage in Amhara Region. Pathfinder International/Ethiopia, 2006: <http://www.pathfind.org/publications>

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Resources

on harmful traditional practices

How to end child marriage

Action strategies for prevention and protection

International Center for Research on Women, 2007 (6 p.)

This policy brief outlines what we can and should be doing to end child marriage: changing harmful cultural norms, supporting community programmes, maximizing foreign assistance, increasing access to girls' education, providing young women with economic opportunities, addressing the unique needs of child brides and evaluating programmes to determine what works.

<http://www.icrw.org/docs/2007-childmarriagepolicy.pdf>