

The Causes and Consequences of Early Marriage in the Amhara Region of Ethiopia

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Marriage of girls at a young age has deep traditional roots in dozens of countries around the world. In Ethiopia, though the law stipulates that marriage for girls younger than 18 is illegal, knowledge of and respect for the law is limited. Ethiopian women's advocates argue that early marriage is the single most serious of harmful traditional practices, as it usually terminates education, and it has a serious negative impact on their health and their income-earning and decision-making capacities. It reinforces all other gender equity problems.

Early marriage is at its most severe in Ethiopia, though prevalence varies from one region to another. In 2006, Pathfinder International/Ethiopia conducted a cross-sectional community-based study of the incidence, reasons for, and the personal and social consequences of early marriage in the region of Amhara. Comparative studies conducted in 2005¹ had identified Amhara as having the highest prevalence, with 48.3 percent of rural married women and 27.8 percent of urban married women having married before the age of 15.

The purpose of the Pathfinder study was to develop a solid foundation of evidence upon which to build future programming that promotes the lives of women -- starting when they are young girls -- that will ensure their ability to attend school, earn income, and make responsible decisions for their families. Understanding the forces at work at the community and family levels that drive parents to marry their daughters when they are still children is essential, if we are to develop effective programming to change this custom.

The Study

An individual questionnaire on the causes and impact of early marriage was administered to 2,072 girls and women between ages 12 and 49 in 18 woredas (districts) of five strata (zones?) of Amhara. Ninety-three of the respondents were from the Amhara ethnic group, with 82 percent Orthodox Christian and 17 percent Muslim; 61.5 percent were illiterate and 59.5 percent with no education, (25.7 percent with some primary education). Among those who were ever-married, the mean age of marriage was 14 (the lowest in Ethiopia²).

The questionnaire was designed to capture highly specific data about the influences and attitudes (including the role of consent and sources of pressure) surrounding the decision to marry, the age at first marriage, and ages and previous marital experience of both men and women, the reasons given for early marriage, the incidence of divorce and remarriage, and their current marital status.

Qualitative data was collected through a series of 20 focus group discussions administered to groups of parents (men and women), and unmarried adolescents, and 20 personal interviews were conducted with key informants (local community and religious leaders, school teachers, health workers, etc.). In addition, review of relevant literature and personal observations supported the development of the questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews.

This qualitative data served to refine the interpretation of quantitative data, and was particularly helpful in understanding the historical and cultural context that supports traditions.

¹ *Report on Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices in Family Planning*, Pathfinder International/Ethiopia, 2005.

² Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey, 2005.

The decision to marry:

Age of marriage: Though the median age for all ever-married women in the study is under 14, the median age for those between the ages of 20 and 24 is over 15 and appears to be rising. This would lend support to the argument that more and more young women, as well as leadership groups, are learning about the legal restraints and are invoking the law and community supports to resist early marriage. The current national rate of marriage of girls between 15 and 19 is down to 12.7 percent.³

Age difference between couples: Nearly 75 percent of ever-married women respondents were married to older men, and among these, the age difference was 10 years or more in half the cases. This age differential affects the level of communication, mutual understanding, and the balance of influence within the family, and it gives the man considerably more control than that held by his young wife.

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

Previous marital experience among husbands: One fifth of the women interviewed reported that their husbands had been previously married, and 28.5 percent of these had been married two 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 will go to some lengths to thwart all opposition. Why? More than 80 percent of respondents could cite no reason other than it was a tradition they had to adhere to.

Cultural Norms and Values: According to interviews in this study, 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 (father) to another family, thereby strengthening both.

Concern about a girl becoming pregnant out of wedlock 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. This worry is growing, however, with modern outside influences and the increased incidence of premarital sex among adolescents.

Table 1. Percentage of women married before age 18 by main reason for getting married and place of residence

Reasons for getting married	Urban		Rural		Total	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
It is a tradition in the area	170	81.3	856	82.0	1026	81.9
To strengthen relationship	84	40.2	477	45.7	561	44.8
For prestige	75	35.9	411	39.4	486	38.8

³ EDHS 2005, p. 82.

Difficult to get married if older	52	24.9	318	30.5	370	29.5
The family will be victim of gossip	51	24.4	308	29.5	359	28.7
To collect dowry	39	18.7	229	21.9	268	21.4
To protect virginity and avoid premarital affair	46	22.0	220	21.1	266	21.2
Others	19	9.1	78	7.5	97	7.7

History: For hundreds of years, marriage was a means of establishing political and social bonds, strengthening a family or clan, and often smoothing a quarrel or resolving a conflict. As a result, marrying girls at a young age was firmly established as a desirable move, and their availability for such transactions added to their value as children.

Poverty and ignorance of consequences: 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 to arrange a marriage, but it ranked only 6 out of 8 factors influencing young marriage by the respondents in this study. Though important, it is not a major factor reinforcing the continued practice. Further, based on interviews and focus group discussions, there is little doubt that parents are well aware of the negative consequences of early marriage, which are commonly discussed in communities. Though many decry it in public, they seem compelled to continue its practice. This pursuit of tradition in the face of compelling negative evidence is common to every culture and must be respected when developing programs for social change.

Consequences of Early Marriage:

Having established the significant prevalence of early marriage in Amhara, and the social constructs that make people value and perpetuate it, this study places particular importance on analyzing the impact on the individual girls, their families, and communities – both immediate and long-term.

Instability of marriage: Results of the Pathfinder quantitative survey show that about 27 percent of marriages in urban areas and 19 percent in rural areas had ended in divorce or separation. Of those that had married more than once, nearly 56 percent reported that their first marriage ended either because they were too young or “not interested” in the marriage. Nearly 52 percent of these dissolved marriages ended within 3 years. (Note: Individual conversations report that many girls run away from marriages only to be sent back by their parents. These women often end up in cities expanding the population of commercial sex workers.)

Termination of Education: The Millennium Development Goals for universal female education are showing results in Ethiopia, as 23 percent of the respondents were currently attending school and more than 80 percent of girls aged 12 to 14 were in school. Of significance, however, is the fact that among out-of-school respondents, 28 percent cited marriage and 19 percent cited childrearing obligations as their reasons for leaving. Four percent cited their husbands' disapproval of their school attendance.

Inability to plan or manage families: Statistically, women who marry early are likely to bear more children than those who marry later. 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. Among the study 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.

Impact on Health of Women/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 delivery). They are also vulnerable to exposure to HIV/AIDS due to multiple partners among men with much younger wives.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

The results of this study clearly confirm the fact that early marriage practices in Ethiopia are driven by deeply-held beliefs and traditions that do not necessarily lend themselves to dissuasion through rational argument. Further examination and understanding of the forces weighing on parents will prove invaluable to the development of intelligent ways to allay their concerns.

A greater challenge is the long-term goal to enhance the status of women in Ethiopia, to strengthen their personal and reproductive rights, to grow their income-producing possibilities, to heighten their influence and decision-making power within the family and the community, and to firmly establish their value as equal members of society.

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

- Challenge the traditions that surround early marriage: Inform parents, community members, and youth about the negative consequences of early marriage. Strengthen the awareness and knowledge of students in school, encouraging them through anti-Harmful Traditional Practices clubs and creating a supportive network of leaders and teachers who can help girls negotiate with their parents. Bring religious leaders into the discussion, as they are essential to reassuring parents that the options to early marriage are not harmful to their status in the community;
- Expand training for health and community workers on the dangers of early marriage, engaging them as advocates and resources;
- Strengthen the role of police through training on enforcement of the early marriage law. Encourage community members who advocate for young girls to draw on police participation and broadcast information on the legal protections guaranteed to girls widely.
- Develop strong support systems to keep girls in school. Provide scholarships where funding is necessary, as well encouraging teachers to support the girls.
- Bring leading professional women to communities to talk to girls as role models and a source of inspiration, so that they can aspire to a new and different future. It is the girls themselves that will ultimately change the customs and end the prevalence of early marriage in Ethiopia.

The Government of Ethiopia passed the “Essential Conditions of Marriage,” of the Revised Family Code in 2000, which defines the legal age of marriage as 18 for both sexes. Gradually, woreda and kebele administrators, legal bodies, youth and women’s associations, school administrators, and local leaders are taking more initiative in supporting this law. Significantly, girls themselves, as they learn of the law, are seeking the support of local authorities to help them remain single and in school. In 2000 (Eth Cal 1997-98) more than 10,600 girls were saved from illegal early marriages in Amhara.⁴ This emerging consciousness and empowerment of young women is one of the most promising indicators of real social change on the early marriage issue.

⁴ *Information Bulletin*, Women’s Affairs Office of the Amhara Region, July 2003.

