

Impact of Child Marriage on Community Health: An Empirical Study in Ethiopia

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Abstract

Child marriage is not a strange news for anyone. It is a marriage in which a child under the age of 18 years is involved. Though such marriages occur worldwide, they are mainly seen in South Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Child marriage is a harmful traditional practice that perpetuates an unrelenting cycle of gender inequality, sickness and poverty. Child marriage - the result of ignorance and evil social practice - was found during early civilization of humanity. It was considered more appropriate, socially accepted, recognized and prevalent in the primitive period. Child marriage cannot be ruled out even in the era of globalization even today in Ethiopia. There are many problems associated with child marriages such as social, physical, economical and psychological. It can be viewed as a case of human rights violation. Child marriage directly impacts girls' education, health, psychological well-being, and the health of their offspring. It increases the risk of depression, sexually transmitted infection, cervical cancer, malaria, obstetric fistulas, and maternal mortality. The offspring of child marriage includes increased risk of premature birth and, subsequently, neonatal or infant death. However, various studies show that many of child marriages - where the girls are forced to be married before they are socially, psychologically and physically well developed - the marriages through abduction are practised in different parts of developing countries especially in Africa. There are many factors responsible

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for this practice, the most common being poverty, protection of girls, family honour and the provision of stability during unstable social periods, lack opportunities for girls, lack of awareness about adverse health consequences, and the another big problem is the lack of awareness of law and also inadequate implementation of the existing laws. This practice is especially common in rural areas and amongst economically backward families. The daughter is married off at an young age to relieve the families from their economic responsibilities. Prevention of child marriages is imperative not merely from the child and human rights perspective but also in the interest of meeting several national goals and millennium development goals. To stop child marriage, policies and programs must educate communities, raise awareness, engage local and religious leaders, involve parents, and empower girls through education and employment. Successful community interventions, strict enforcement of legislation can also reduce child marriage rates.

Key words: *Child Marriage, Female Education, Social Acceptance*

Introduction

Marriage is a social situation that unites people in a special form of mutual dependence for the purpose of the founding and maintaining a family. As a social practice, it reflects the purposes, character and customs of the society in which it is found .Many societies have norms that limit the age of young girls to enter into marriage, but in some cases the age limit does not take into consideration their physiological readiness for childbearing. Marriage often takes place at an age, much earlier than the legally ratified minimum age.

Child marriage is the marriage of children and adolescents below the age of 18 year. The practice of child marriage is most common in sub-

Saharan Africa, South Asia, specific parts of West Africa, East Africa and South Asia. In the North Africa, the Middle East and other parts of Asia marriage shortly after puberty is common among those living traditional lifestyles. Marriage of female adolescents between sixteen and eighteen years of age also common in parts of Latin America and Eastern Europe.

Prevalence of Child Marriage practices in Ethiopia

Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world. Approximately 81 per cent of its population lives on less than US \$2 a day and 44 per cent of its population is under the age of 15 years. In this country the life expectancy fell to 49 years in 2005 (world fact book 2005), mainly due to the growing HIV epidemic.

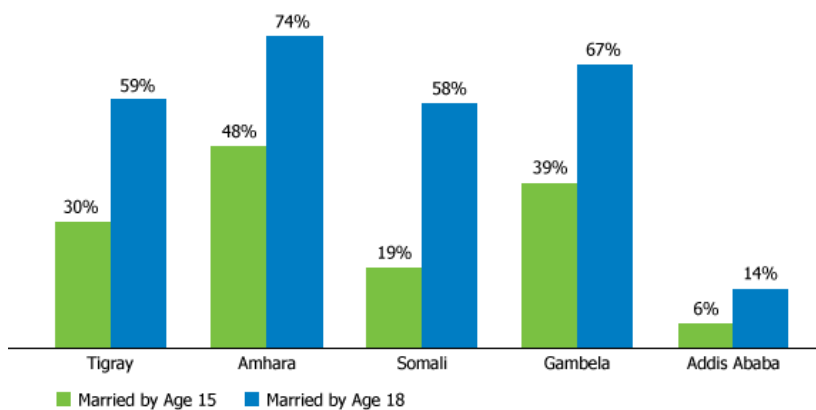
The 2008 Follow-up National Survey on the Harmful Traditional practices in Ethiopia revealed that the prevalence of child marriage in Ethiopia has decreased at national level to 21.4 per cent from 33.3 per cent of the 1997 baseline survey. A recent study in seven regions/states conducted by Population Council on Ethiopia Gender Survey also reported that the highest rates of child marriages occurred in the Amhara region, 52 per cent of respondents being married by the age 15 years (Population Council, 2010).

The “Essential Conditions of Marriage”(section 2, article 6-16) of the revised family code, (proclamation 2000),article 7 specifies the legal marriage age for both boys and girls as follows, 'neither a man nor a women who has not attained the full age of 18 years shall not have a concluded marriage'. Despite this law, the country is known for one of the most severe crises in the world viz., child marriage.

In **Ebinat Woreda** (district, where the present study is conducted) child marriages of several harmful traditional practices towards woman are commonly practiced. This induced to identify the cause and some problems and its solutions. Parents often approve of their

their daughters being married when they are as young as 10 to 12 years of age, even though the legal age of marriage in Ethiopia is 18 years. In Ebinat Woreda (district) child marriage of girls is very common and seen as a way to improve the economic status of the family through marriage as husbands often are financially more secure. Some parents forced their daughters to be married with someone without consulting them.

Figure 1: Age at First Marriage or Union for 20-to-24-Year-Old Females by Region



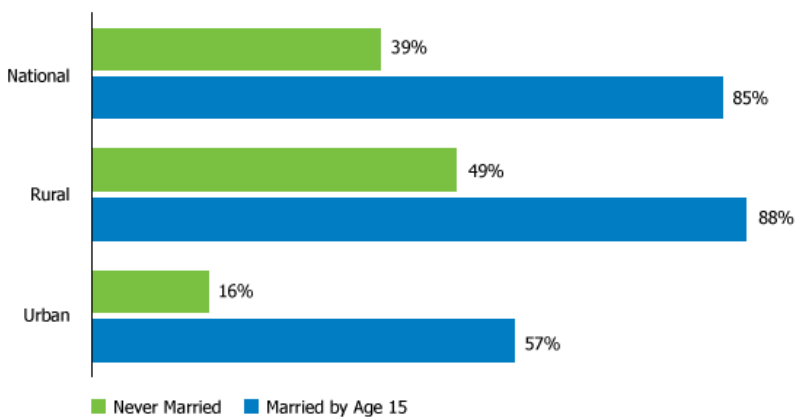
Sources: Population Council and UNFPA, *The Adolescent Experience In-Depth: Using Data to Identify and Reach the Most Vulnerable Young People: Ethiopia 2005* (New York: Population Council, 2009).

Note: Figures are based on the 2005 Demographic Health Survey in which women ages 20–24 reported being married by age 18 and age 15.

Ethiopia has one of the highest rates of child marriages in the world, with one in two girls marrying before her 18th birthday and one in five girls marrying before the age of 15. However, prevalence rates vary greatly by region(state) and are often higher than national figures, such as in the Amhara region(state) in northern Ethiopia, where almost 50 per cent of girls are married by age 15 (see Figure 1). Although the Ethiopian Constitution explicitly states that "marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the

intending spouses" and the minimum legal age for marriage is 18 for both boys and girls, the laws are not always enforced. Early marriage remains a deep rooted tradition in Ethiopian communities, perpetuated by poverty, a lack of education and economic opportunities, and social customs that limit the rights of women and girls. (Alexandra Hervish April 2011).

Figure 2: per centage of 15-to-24-Year-Old Females' (Who Are Illiterate), Marital Status



Sources: Population Council and UNFPA, *The Adolescent Experience In-Depth: Using Data to Identify and Reach the Most Vulnerable Young People: Ethiopia 2005* (New York: Population Council, 2009).

Note: Figures are based on the 2005 Demographic Health Survey in which women ages 20–24 reported being married by age 18 and age 15.

Harmful Consequences of child Marriage

The consequences of child marriage are physically, emotionally, and socially devastating. An analysis of several indicators from the 2005 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) in Ethiopia (the most recent DHS) shows that marital status greatly influences the sexual experiences and reproductive health of girls and young women in Ethiopia. Married girls are significantly more likely to be sexually active than their unmarried peers. (73 per cent versus 0.3 per cent) Because of tremendous social pressure on them to prove their

fertility these young brides become young mothers with the attendant dangers of early childbearing. In addition, only 21 per cent of 15-to-24-year-old married females (including those who were separated, divorced, or widowed) reported about using a modern method of contraception. With limited autonomy to make decisions and influence sexual relations, married girls face a greater risk of gender-based violence and marital rape. Moreover, young mothers are especially vulnerable to poor reproductive health outcomes, including prolonged and obstructed labor, obstetric fistula, and death.

Objectives of the study

1. To estimate the current prevalence of early marriage in the study area.
2. To study the socio-economic, educational and psychological factors leading to child marriage.
3. To make programmatic recommendation that will help policy makers to design interventions to mitigate the consequences of child marriage,.

Methodology

Area of the study

The study has been conducted in fine Kebeles(blocks) of Ebinat woreda (district) in Amhara, Ethiopia .Ebinat Woreda is located in the South Gonder administrative zone with elevations ranging from 1800-2150 meters.

Ebinat Woreda (District)

It is located 122 kilometers from Bahir Dar, the capital of the Amhara region and 714 kilometers away from Addis Ababa. Of the 249,427 hectares of land in Ebinat, 62,350 hectares are cultivable and 37,846 hectares are designated grazing lands. According to the 1996

population census, Ebinat has a total population of 259,053 of which 51.3 per cent are male and 48.7 per cent female. There are 35 rural kebeles(blocks) and 2 urban kebeles, in Woreda. 93.8 per cent of the total population resides in rural areas. Livelihoods are predominantly agriculture based, with 97 per cent of the population earning their livelihood from mixed farming (crop and livestock production), 3.35 per cent from wage labor and 1.25 per cent from petty trading. Crops grown include teff, chickpea, barley, maize, sesame, sorghum, lentils, beans, wheat and potatoes.

Significance of the study

The researcher intends to give current and timely information about the causes and consequences of child marriage in the area of Ebinat district. The study incorporates large data sets and relevant variables on the consequences of early marriage. This may make some contribution for policy makers and interested researchers by providing information concerning the consequences of child marriage.

Field work and Data collection

The present study is based mainly on primary data collected through survey. The field work was carried out in the month November 2012 for a week covering the five kebeles (blocks). These five kebeles of the district have totally 18628 women population from among them. 60 women were selected by random sampling method. It covers 0.322 per cent of the total sample population of civil servants who worked in that blocks.

Panel 1: Population and sample distribution Chart-Women

Sl.No	Kebeles (Blocks)	Total population			Questionnaire administered		
		M	F	Total	M	F	Total
1	Gela matebia	-	3198	3198	-	11	11
2	Giman	-	3528	3528	-	11	11
3	Deber	-	3725	3725	-	12	12
4	Selamaya	-	4007	4007	-	13	13
5	Zeha	-	4570	4570	-	13	13

Source: Field Survey

In addition, out of the total 80 Government servants of the area, 20 Government servants were selected by the same sampling method

Panel 2: Government (Civil) Servants Population and sample distribution

Sl.No	Kebeles (Blocks)	Total population			Questionnaire administered		
		M	F	Total	M	F	Total
1	Gela matebia	9	5	14	2	2	4
2	Giman	8	8	16	3	1	4
3	Deber	9	7	16	2	2	4
4	Selamaya	11	7	18	3	1	4
5	Zeha	11	10	21	2	2	4

Source: Field Survey

Data analysis and interpretation

The data have been collected by employing the interview guide from different sources. The data pertaining to the subject matter was collected through face to face interview with different categories of people. A set of questionnaires containing both close-ended and open-ended questions, were administered to gather data from 60 female respondents (100 per cent) and 20 government servants (100 per cent) living in that kebele(blocks). Analysis and interpretation

of the data was based on the responses obtained from the respondents and the data obtained from the documents Women Affairs Office. The subject matter of the study has been categorized into three major groups, the victims, government servants and family members. The interview schedule was administered to each of the group to summarize the prevalence age of child marriage, the socio-economic, educational and psychological factors leading to the consequences of child marriage and the problem faced by victims in their day to day life.

Characteristics of respondents

Description of the characteristics of the target population gives some basic information about the sample population involved in the study. The following Tables, contain the information regarding the general, educational, economic status and attitude of women and civil servants on child marriage.

- **Child Marriage and Gender**

According to the personal observations as well as the findings, it can be seen that all respondents are females constituting 100 per cent. This shows that the female participation in child marriage has been indeed a common characteristic features in the study area. It happens just because of ignorance, lack of awareness, and the relaxation of the existing law of the land in Ethiopia.

- **Child Marriage and age group**

With regard to the age of the respondents, majority of the victims belong to the age group of 11-17 year (58.3 per cent), where as 28.3 per cent of respondents come under the age group of 18 – 24 and 13.35 per cent of respondents belong to 25- 31 age group. Regarding the government servants, 12 respondents (60 per cent) are male and the rest 8 respondents

(30 per cent) of them are female. This shows that male participation in the study area is greater than female under 'Government Servant' category. One of the previous studies showed that, in Ethiopia, nearly one in five girls is married by the age of 15, and some girls are married as young as 7 years of age. The rural Amhara region, where 43 per cent of girls are married by the age of 15, has one of the highest child marriage rates in the world. Three out of four girls are married by the time they turn 18 in this region.

- **Attitude towards child marriage**

Majority of the women respondents (26 respondents, 43.4 per cent) opine that child marriage is a bad custom. Hence the attitude of women towards child marriage is found negative in the family as well as in the community. As far as the attitude of government servants towards child marriage is concerned 17 respondents (85 per cent) feel that child marriage is a bad custom and among others, Two respondents (10 per cent) feel 'low' and one respondent (5 per cent) expressed 'medium' opinion about the child marriage. Hence, the government servants have negative attitude towards child marriage. They feel that it affects educational, psychological and economical aspects of female victims.

- **Child Marriage and Economic status**

The study shows that a large portion of victims i.e., 40 respondents (66.7 per cent) has lower economic status, 12 respondents (20 per cent) have medium economic status and 8 respondents (13.3 per cent) belong to higher economic status. In Ethiopia's Amhara region, girls face tremendous challenges. The most common age for a girl to marry is 12. One of the respondents by name Himanot Yehewala, who was married

five years ago at the age of 13, expressed her feelings in this way: "I wanted to get an education but my parents were determined about my marriage with somebody". Poverty plays a central role in causing and perpetuating early marriage.

Table1: Responses of the respondents

Sl.No	Question and responses	Women victims	
1	Whether child marriage affects health status		
	Yes	15	75
	No	3	15
	No response	2	10
	Total	20	100
2	Whether child marriage accepted		
	Yes	15	25
	No	43	71
	No response	2	3.4
	Total	60	100
3	Whether child marriage affects economic status		
	Yes	39	65
	No	14	23.4
	No response	7	11.6
	Total	60	100
4	Whether child marriage affects education status		
	Yes	41	68.3
	No	13	21.7
	No response	6	10
	Total	60	100
5	Whether child marriage affects health status		
	Yes	37	61.6
	No	23	38.4
	Total	60	100

6	Civil servants		
	Whether child marriage accepted by you		
	Yes	-	-
	No	20	100
	Total	20	100
7	Whether child marriage affects economic status		
	Yes	17	85
	No	3	15
	Total	20	100
8	Whether child marriage affects education status		
	Yes	18	90
	No	2	10
	Total	20	100

Source: Field Survey

- **Child marriages and Health status**

Health problem can be caused by many factors. As far as the child marriage is concerned the study reveals that, 37 women respondents (61.6 per cent) feel that child marriage leads to poor health and 23 respondents (38.4 per cent) of victims do not realize that health problem is caused by child marriage. But 15 government officials surveyed (75 per cent) feel that health of the victim is affected by the child marriage. But only 3 government officials (15 per cent) do not agree. Two of them (10 per cent) gave no response. It has been observed that the victims of child marriage suffer from a multitude of physical, psychological, economic and social harms. As they have not achieved full maturity, they are not psychologically and physically ready to be the wives and mothers. Their first sexual experience is often forced and traumatic with pregnancy and childbirth resulting in complications that harm their health. Most of the girls who end up in divorce are obliged to join their

parents, especially those having a child, are often isolated and degraded by their family and the community. Some are forced to flee to towns where they end up as domestic house workers or commercial sex workers, becoming vulnerable to different forms of violence and abuse and subsequently exposed to different sexually transmitted infection including HIV and AIDS.

- **Child marriage and Social acceptance**

The above Table 1, shows that majority of women respondents (43 respondents, 71 per cent) have negative attitude towards child marriage, where as 15 women (25 per cent) women have positive thinking. But all the 20 government officials (100 per cent) surveyed express negative attitude towards particularly, the child marriage. So, child marriage is not accepted officially but practised traditionally especially in rural areas in Ethiopia and Ethiopian law of child marriage remains silent in rural areas. The strongest reason for child marriage is the desire or need to maintain the family's good name and social standing. 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 late marriages.

- **Child marriages and economic condition**

Child marriage has a greater impact on the economic condition of women as 65 per cent (39 respondents) of the victims say that child marriage is the one of the main causes of economic deterioration of the family, leading to poverty. 14 respondents (23.4 per cent) are of the opinion that child marriage has nothing to do with family economic condition. With regard to

the child marriage and economic condition, 17 government servants (85 per cent) say that the economic condition of the family of the victim is one of the main causes for child marriage, whereas only Three respondents (15 per cent) from government officials category deny it. Child brides-already poor -are isolated and denied of education and employment opportunities, making it difficult for them to break out of the cycle of poverty. It is an obstacle to alleviating from poverty and hunger.

- **Child marriages and Educational status**

Majority of women surveyed (41 respondents, 68.3 per cent) believe that child marriage is one of the major factors affecting the educational status of females, but 13 respondents (21.7 per cent) deny it. And majority of the government servants (18 respondents, 90 per cent) are of the opinion that child marriage affects the education of victim, where as only Two of government officials (10 per cent) disagree with it. Most of the girls engaged in marriage at an early age are either deprived of their right to join school or obliged to drop out of school.

Table 2 : Possible Factors responsible for child marriages : Respondents' view

Sl.No	Factors	Women		Government servants	
		Frequency	per cent	Frequency	per cent
1	Low level of awareness	56	93.3	19	95
2	Marriage with kinship	43	71.6	17	85
3	Poor economic status of women	39	65	18	90
4	Gender inequality	28	46.7	20	100

Source: Field Survey

The above Table shows that 56 women victim respondents (93.3 per cent) and 19 government servants/respondents (95 per cent) claimed that the low level of awareness led to child marriage.

The other possible factor for child marriage, as stated by the respondents, is marriage with kinship. About 43 respondents (71.6 per cent) stated this reason whereas 17 government servants (85 per cent) express the same feelings as the victims. Another factor viz., poor economic status of women was the opinion of 39 women (65 per cent) and 18 government servants (90 per cent).

Gender inequality is the other possible factor for child marriage, according to 20 women (46.7 per cent) and 20 government servant (100 per cent) respondents

Findings and Suggestions

- Low awareness of the society about the evils of child marriage is found to be one of the major factors. Another reason among the major factors behind the practice of child marriage is found to be the deep rooted traditions and socio cultural concerns prevailing in the Amhara region. There is an old traditional belief that a girl will become over aged for marriage if waited till she gets matured, which would cause embarrassment to the family and thus represents a failure on the part of her parents.
- Lack of economic stability and strength is another major reason influencing the child marriage. Ethiopia is well known as the land of drought and poverty. There is extreme poverty found even today both in rural and urban areas. This encourages poor people to think of early marriages for their daughters. The practice of bride wealth, in which the girl's family receives a payment from the groom's family in marriage, is still a common scene.
- The study shows that majority (61.6 per cent) of child marriage

victims face health and psychological problems. They undergo a greater risk of depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder. Child marriage has also resulted in: increased risks of sexually transmitted diseases, cervical cancer, malaria, death during childbirth, and obstetric fistulas.

- Majority people have accepted the practice of child marriage in Ethiopia. The factors responsible for people to accept child marriage in their community in Ethiopia is the economic conditions of the land. The country is well known internationally as land of poverty and drought. Poverty plays a central role in causing and perpetuating child marriage. Poor families in the country often lack resources to support healthy alternatives for girls, such as schooling.
- The study reveals that all women are not treated equally in education (68.3 per cent) as compared to their male counterparts in their family and community. Most of the girls engaged in marriage at an early age are either deprived of their right to join school or obliged to drop out of school. Lack of education and the huge age difference between the girls and their husbands put them at disadvantage in negotiating and bargaining with their spouses.
- The findings of the study indicate that most of the victims of child marriage have negative attitude towards child marriage in their community. The women victims of child marriage experienced, learnt and suffered in their life and undergo many difficulties in their day to day life. It makes them to view child marriage from a negative approach. Because, most of the girls end up in divorce or obliged to join their parents, especially those having a child. Further, they are often isolated and degraded by their family and the community.
- The study also indicates that the attitudes of parents towards child

marriage with kinship is acceptable for the community. The fact behind this reason is that, girl's parents believe that kinship will take care of their daughter if she is married in early age. But the girl's parents never realize the impact of child marriage and the kind of sufferings their daughter has to undergo throughout of her life, which the victim only has to experience it. .

- The study shows the domination of male over female due to gender inequality. The domination against women is very common in child marriage system in Ethiopia.

Recommendation

- The study showed that the awareness and knowledge of the communities on negative consequences of child marriage is significantly low, which calls for the need for designing culturally appropriate strategies towards the need for change in the practice among the parents and other community leaders. Intensive community conversations and dialogues, visual and audio education materials and radio programs that discuss the dangers associated with child marriage and the benefits of delaying marriage could be used.
- The study revealed a major gap between the law of the land and its enforcement, which is also manifested through the high prevalence of the practice. Informants also pointed out that in some cases there is ignorance among the law enforcement bodies in taking timely actions against reported child marriage cases, which requires attention.
- The study revealed that people in Ebinat district where the study is conducted lack knowledge on legislations against child marriage. This calls for intensive community awareness interventions on the specific laws pertaining to child marriage, along with ensuring the enforcement laws.

- The findings revealed that in the study area, The religious leaders and elders have high acceptance from and considerable influence on the community. Homogeneity of the population in the study district in terms of religion and ethnicity gives an opportunity for using religious leaders as change agents for changing the social norms among parents pertaining to child marriage practice.
- Programmes of training local resources including schools, teachers, community groups, and volunteers, and supporting them to conduct community based initiatives could contribute in bringing out a transformation of the beliefs around child marriage.
- Public need to be sensitized to support girls' education. The present research suggests that access to school for girls is crucial in delaying marriage and enabling them to decide their own destinies.
- Families in the intervention areas who stood against the child marriage practice and encouraged delayed marriage for their children, and those girls who refused for child marriage should be rewarded in some form, as way of formal recognition and to point them out as role models in their communities.
- Most interventions in the study area targeted on prevention activities against child marriage. Response intervention programmes for those victims of child marriage including those girls with pregnancy and delivery related health complications, those married girls, and support programs for reintegrating those girls running away from child marriage should be designed.

Conclusion

This study has shown that child marriage is a well-accepted and a deep rooted cultural practice in the district. Despite the country's legal provisions against child marriage, it is widely practised in the study area violating the basic human rights of girls. In the study,

child marriage practice was found less likely or non-existent for boys. It targets girls as young as 10 - 12 years of age.

The effects of child marriage are plainly evident within communities of the studied district under study where the practice is common. The basic rights of girls are violated – as they are denied of education, family decision making, having their own income and access to other service. As a result of the early marriage their health is also threatened. In addition, they are denied the right to decide their own marriage partner and when to get married and start a family.

The multifaceted problem associated with child marriage calls for particular attention and collaborative action. The findings of this study gave the situation only at the surface of the problems. There are several areas of particular concern where extensive research and intervention programs at different level might be required. ■

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“You need to be aware of what others are doing, applaud their efforts, acknowledge their successes, and encourage them in their pursuits. When we all help one another, everybody wins”

- Jim Stoval