



Early marriage in Ethiopia: the role of gendered social norms in shaping adolescent girls' futures

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Key messages

- In the context of rapid economic development, but from a very low base, gendered social norms for adolescent girls in Ethiopia are shifting, albeit in a highly uneven manner.
- Key drivers of progressive gender norm change include access to education, positive local role models, supportive male relatives, and top-down social mobilisation and legal changes.
- Key forces impeding progressive gender norm change include constraints on girls' education due to the care work burden, 'sticky' conservative gender norms about girls' and women's bodies and sexuality, and the geographic and social isolation of out-of-school girls.
- Policy and programming solutions include greater attention to educational and vocational training alternatives, investing in safe spaces where girls can seek advice and share their views and experiences, improving services for already married girls, and engaging men and boys in changing gender norms.

1 Introduction

Ethiopia has undergone strong economic growth over the past decade, but remains one of the world's poorest countries. It has also made significant progress in reducing the gender gap on a variety of indicators. There has been a decrease in the percentage of primary school-age girls who are out of school (from 70% in 1994 to 34% in 2008) and in the maternal mortality ratio (from 1,200 per 100,000 live births in 1994 to 500 in 2013). There has also been an increase in life expectancy at birth for girls (from 62 years in 1994 to 65 years in 2013) and in the ratio of male and female labour force participation (from 80% in 1994 to 88% in 2013). Nevertheless, the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) indicates that



Ethiopian women, adolescents, and youth are particularly disadvantaged, ranking Ethiopia 129th out of 136 countries (Population Council, 2010). Adolescent girls aged 10-19, who comprise 24% of the population (CSA and ICF International, 2012), face numerous challenges. The 2011 Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) reveals that the average age at marriage is 16.5 years, and over 41% of women aged 20-24 report that they were married by the age of 18 (CSA and ICF International, 2012). As a result of early marriage, Ethiopia has one of the highest adolescent fertility rates in sub-Saharan Africa – 72.4 births for every 1,000 young women aged 15-19 (UNFPA, 2011). Moreover, only 42.5% of pregnant women receive any form of prenatal care.

Despite these challenges, there have been significant policy developments over the past decade that have contributed to increased gender equality. These include laws to protect victims of domestic and sexual violence and to permit women to inherit land from their parents. Yet girls remain particularly vulnerable; they are less likely to have access to formal education, more likely to be married as children (to men who are, on average, five years older), and are growing up in a culture in which gender discrimination permeates social institutions. The Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) ranks Ethiopia 64th out of 86 countries, suggesting that there is still much to be done to improve girls' capabilities.

In light of such statistics, this policy brief presents the main findings of a research study that examined the key drivers of shifting and persisting norms surrounding early marriage in the Amhara region of Ethiopia, and its effects on adolescent girls' educational opportunities and broader wellbeing. It focuses on how gendered social norms are shaped by individual agency, socioeconomic conditions, demographic factors and social institutions. The policy brief concludes by reflecting on the policy and programming implications for the Government of Ethiopia and its development partners, as well as for non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

1.1 Study sample and methodology

The Ethiopia research study involved in-depth qualitative fieldwork undertaken in 2013 and 2014 in three sites in Amhara Regional State (Gojjam, Wollo and Gondar). This study is part of a broader multi-country, multi-year initiative (also covering Nepal, Uganda and Viet Nam) funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) on gender justice for adolescent girls (see Tefera et al., 2013, for year 1 findings). In this second year, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), in partnership with national researchers at Addis Ababa University, used a common set of qualitative research tools adapted to the local context to examine how early marriage practices and related social norms limit girls' future life chances.



Our primary research took place in three distinct kebeles in Amhara Regional State: Dembashi in Yilmana Densa Woreda (West Gojjam), Bulbullo in Worebabo Woreda (North Wollo) and Metema Yohanes in Metema Woreda (North Gondar). Amhara is one of Ethiopia's largest but most disadvantaged regions, situated in the north west of the country. Its population of approximately 20 million is overwhelmingly rural, with more than 85% engaged in agriculture; many experience high levels of food insecurity due to drought and deforestation. Education levels are low – for example, more than 60% of women over the age of 15 have never been to school (CSA and ICF International, 2012). Dembashi, Bulbullo and Metema are located in three zones of Amhara, namely Gojjam, Wollo and Gondor respectively, each with distinct demographic, geographic and cultural-religious profiles.

2 Key findings

2.1 Marriage practices in Amhara

Findings from the study suggest that there has been an increase in the average age of marriage, from girls aged 4 upwards in the previous two generations to 10-plus years in the current generation. Although local realities were often different – as noted by the fact that a majority of the participants had been married before 18 (the legal age for marriage) – almost all study participants agreed that 18-20 was the most appropriate age for a girl to marry. Changes in people’s perceptions about what is an appropriate age for marriage can be attributed to recent improvements in education, legal monitoring by local governments (at kebele (ward) and woreda (district) levels), and greater awareness of the negative health consequences associated with early marriage and pregnancy such as fistula and maternal morbidity and mortality.

As a result of changing beliefs regarding appropriate age of marriage, there was a consensus that arranged marriages are now relatively uncommon, with boys and girls increasingly likely to choose their own partners. As arranged marriages become less common, a culture of dating is starting to emerge. However, young adolescents who choose to date tend to hold secret meetings for fear of bringing gossip and shame to their family. When partners want to marry, the boy/young man sends elders to the girl’s parents to make the offer as a formality to uphold traditional familial hierarchies.

Before marriage can take place, there is a culture of gift-giving in the form of cattle, oxen and, more recently, land, especially in Dembashi. In the context of land shortages and a rapidly growing population, ownership of land has become one of the more ‘desirable’ characteristics for a future wife, more so than beauty or education. With ever-decreasing land plots, an agrarian existence is becoming increasingly challenging. Ironically, girls from relatively better-off families who stand to inherit land are more likely to marry at an early age, whereas girls from poorer families with fewer land assets are likely to struggle to find a marriage partner.



2.2 Life within marriage for Amhara girls

Post-marriage, girls in our study noted a severe decline in any possibility of an independent life. Many young married girls reported that they were unable to continue their education without the support of their husbands, which they received relatively rarely. Girls who had managed to go against the grain and defy traditional gender norms similarly indicated that having an educated husband who supported them and their education was pivotal. Other factors that contributed to girls living a more independent life after marriage included being able to contribute to household income, having strong role models in the community, and having educational aspirations.

There was some evidence that domestic abuse had decreased. In Bulbullo, boys stated that *'Previously a husband used to get drunk and beat his wife. Presently, however, you don't get this happening in our area.'* Despite some girls reporting reduced incidence of domestic abuse, many other respondents reported that a consequence of disobeying their parents and husbands is to *'be beaten up'*. Moreover, domestic abuse continues to thrive in relationships where the woman has no access to an independent income, and becomes socially isolated due to economic reliance on her partner. This was the case with Rabia, for example, who is married to a much older man, who *'...doesn't have good behaviour, drinks alcohol and regularly beats me'*. Rabia wants to return home to take care of her elderly parents: *'I told him that, if he suspects I might travel to my parents and not return, he should come with me and we could visit them together. But he doesn't want to go with me, and is not willing to give me money for my transport.'* Rabia does not even have the financial means to obtain a bus ticket to go home.

Our qualitative data further indicated that a shift is taking place in terms of girls expressing the desire for more egalitarian decision-making in the home. Indeed, on average, young girls believed that egalitarian decision-making is increasingly the mark of a 'good husband'. Some girls and young women are striving for a greater say in decisions about how many children to have and over what time frame, or, in the event of a violent marriage, asking for a divorce if economic circumstances permit. While many girls expressed that they want a more equal division of labour at home, it was evident that boys and parents did not regard an 'ideal wife' as one who had ambitions for greater equality. In fact, most participants reported that an ideal wife is *'A woman, who manages her home properly, gives care to her children, teaches her children good manners. She observes the traditions of the community. Keeps good relationship with neighbours and friends.'*

Health workers providing education about reproductive health, contraception and menstruation have also played a key role in changing attitudes. According to the community timeline undertaken in Dembashi, women began using contraceptives around 2003, and openly so in 2005. Most participants were using a contraceptive injection to control their fertility; young interviewees stated they wanted between two and four children, with some expressing a son preference, as sons do not bring the risk of social problems such as pregnancy before marriage. However, health workers only teach girls about contraception and reproductive health, and the information on sex is largely biological rather than practical or rights-based in nature. As a result, there are still high expectations that girls will bear children soon after marriage.

Divorce is still viewed negatively (except in the case of theft or adultery) and couples are encouraged to stay together. However, when marital breakdown does happen, families generally do not disown their daughters. Indeed, several women who were interviewed had been married multiple times, as had the sisters or relatives of other interviewees; they had generally been able to return to their natal homes for short periods of time for emotional and possibly limited financial support. This said, a number of in-depth interviews revealed that even though girls may have been worried, scared or depressed about their marriage, they did not wish to shame their parents and knew they would eventually be taken back to their in-laws if they tried to run back to their parents' house, suggesting that divorce remains an option of last resort.

2.3 Drivers of change in early marriage norms

Due to successful interventions by health workers, women association leaders and school directors, including via radio communication and other community awareness-raising initiatives, the legal penalty for marrying children under 18 years is widely known, and people are less likely to listen to elders on the issue of early marriage, listening to the law instead. In Bulbullo, kebele officials only approve a marriage when they have received written confirmation about the age of the partners from physicians and the Woreda Justice Department. In order to circumvent secret marriages, teachers and kebele officials are generally active in following up cases of girls who stop going to school; they may pressure parents to send the girl back to school (or else face a fine), and when a girl is absent, they try to find out whether it is due to early marriage.

Education is a major contributing factor towards changing 'sticky' norms. Most interviewees in Dembashi and Bulbullo agreed that education is important for girls and boys. The value of education is seen both from a practical perspective and an aspirational one. From a practical standpoint, there was a general agreement that

'men don't want to marry an illiterate girl', and so if a girl aspires to having an educated husband, she must herself push ahead with her studies. Also, in a context of growing economic hardships, there is greater awareness of girls' potential economic contribution to the household, and a sense that with better education, girls can aspire to make more money as well as manage household finances more effectively. Sometimes, parents believe their daughters are better off staying in education, particularly if they can hold onto their land in the meantime.

School clubs were identified by respondents as one of the most effective ways for girls (and boys) to learn about their rights as well as about sexual and reproductive health issues and services. Many respondents spoke positively about these clubs, especially as such discussions are not part and parcel of the regular school curriculum. For instance, in Metema, girls talked about school clubs as helping them with menstruation materials, something they cannot learn about in other places. *'We learn about reproductive health in the girls' club. We were organised in school clubs. We used to contribute cash for the club members. We used to get cash to buy soap and other things. We used to get pads during our menstrual period.'*

Religious leaders are also playing a role in changing established gender norms. The Orthodox Church in Dembashi, in line with the national-level church hierarchy, is reinforcing messages that girls should not marry before they reach the age of 18, although this rhetoric is not always matched by local priests' behaviour. In Bulbullo and Metema, where our study respondents were primarily Muslim, religious officials were refusing to carry out marriage ceremonies (at least publicly) unless the partners were 18 or over – in part because they can now be held legally responsible for sanctioning an early marriage.

Other factors that have helped to instil more progressive social norms surrounding early marriage are role models and the support of male relatives. As more girls are educated at higher levels and take up positions as health extension workers, teachers or government officials, younger girls see their achievements and are encouraged to develop similar aims, with some expressing ambitions for a better life through education. As the kebele manager in Bulbullo stated, *'Students who complete grade 10 and leave the place also become role models for the others following them. So the attitude of the community, especially the youth, is changed to giving attention to education and going abroad instead of into marriage.'* Therefore, girls who succeed in their education provide good examples to their peers and act as role models, thus encouraging other parents to send their daughters to school. However, in Metema, there are relatively few positive role models for girls, and many

parents stated that there is a strong need for more role models in their community.



The importance of engaging men and boys in promoting gender equality and increasing girls' opportunities also emerged strongly in our fieldwork. It was noted that supportive attitudes emerge from a combination of empathy and fear of the law. A surprising number of boys in the study recognised that girls' work burden at home has a negative impact on their school achievements. As such, a common ingredient across the successful outlier case studies from Dembashi (see Boxes 1 and 2) was the key role played by some fathers, brothers and husbands in supporting girls to continue their education and delay marriage.

Box 1: The power of individual agency: the story of Dembashi's only female militia member

Zemenwua* is a 23-year-old single woman who is Dembashi's only female militia member. While she is the subject of considerable gossip, especially among female community members, she is proud of her role. Her success in overcoming conservative gender norms is all the more remarkable when contrasted with the life paths of her two older sisters, who were married at age 3 and 5 respectively. Partly due to the disappointment of her sisters' multiple remarriages, and partly due to her clear personal ambitions, Zemenwua's parents have never attempted to arrange a marriage for her: *'I told them that I would marry a husband who I want after I have completed my education and get employed. I told them also that I would not marry a husband they choose for me.'*

Despite failing her grade 10 exam, her ambition is to join the police force. She has already undergone a 15-day training course to be a kebele militia, and is determined to put her career before both marriage and social approval: *'I know that it isn't good in our culture for a matured girl to be single. But I know what is good for me. If I engage in marriage, I will not compete for a job and not be able to participate in any training... It is very difficult to leave the home to search for a job once I get married. This is because it is the wife who is supposed to manage the housework here. Once a girl marries, her husband doesn't allow her to move freely. In this regard, it is good to be free.'*

Although Zemenwua has had a boyfriend for four years, she is not ready for marriage and does not plan to have children until she is financially prepared. She stated: *'Giving birth to a baby without having sufficient and dependable income is like going to prison.'* Her boyfriend, an ex-priest and farmer, is subject to considerable pressures from peers and family members to find another partner given her unorthodox views and behaviour. But both partners are of the view that community disapproval of their relationship stems from a deficit of education, and are thus able to resist the dominant social norms.

Source: Outlier case study interview with a 23-year-old woman in Dembashi, West Gojjam

**Names have been changed to protect identities*

2.4 Inhibitors to changing early marriage norms

The research revealed that education acts as a strong driver of change against early marriage. However, the realities of the care economy in the context of large family size, combined with relative declining economic wellbeing (as a result of declining land plot size, rising food prices and a lack of mechanised farming in the research sites) mean that although adolescent girls are often enrolled in school, they only attend sporadically because they have to support their mothers' care work burden in the home (see Box 2).

Deeply ingrained beliefs among some parents that girls' education does not lead anywhere seem to further reduce girls' aspirations. Financial concerns are exacerbated by the high costs of materials such as books, uniforms and, sometimes, renting a room, as some children have to travel to nearby towns to attend secondary school. While very few girls in our study sites had been denied at least some primary education, parents tended to prioritise boys when it came to investment in their children's education at secondary level. Parents in all three kebeles were also concerned for girls' safety and their 'virtue'. The general perception is that if girls have to walk long distances to school each day, or live outside the parental home, they may be exposed to rape or engage in premarital sex. As a result, girls wishing to continue their education until 12th grade face numerous challenges and many drop out to get married instead of finishing their schooling. Our findings also suggest that there appears to be an especially strong sense of filial piety among girls, rooted in gendered ideals that girls should be obedient and submissive, which acts as a significant counterweight to the growing awareness of their individual rights to education and bodily integrity.

Greater awareness of girls' reproductive rights has so far failed to create a lasting change in conservative norms around girls' sexuality. Respondents suggested that girls are constantly viewed as a source of concern because of the close association between girls' sexuality and family honour. Girls who become pregnant out of wedlock may flee, commit suicide or give their child to their parents and then move out of the area to avoid the shame and community censure. Expectations of girls being virgins at the time of marriage continue to persist, but are beginning to decline in some communities. Previously, discovery of a non-virgin bride would have been grounds for divorce, wife-beating or shame; but as more unions are being formed on the basis of love as opposed to parental pressure, and HIV tests are becoming more accessible, virginity is no longer such an important social or health issue.

We also found that while female circumcision is still practised in the three research sites, it is in significant decline due to education campaigns by health workers, and reportedly it seldom enters into the marriage equation. This finding must, however, be treated with some caution given the cultural sensitivity surrounding this issue and the potential of respondent bias.

Finally, migration emerged as a factor that surprisingly contributed to both the perpetuation of early marriage and to empowerment for young girls. Discussions with key informants indicated that migration is a significant factor in the lives of adolescents in Bulbullo and Metema, although not yet in Dembashi. In Bulbullo and Metema, girls commonly migrate across the border to the Middle East to find employment as domestic workers. While some girls migrate partly to avoid a future of poor employment prospects and early marriage, in other cases parents are pressuring their daughters to marry before migrating so as to avoid the risk of sexual assault and family dishonour. Nonetheless, migration continues to offer some independence to girls, particularly as they increase their income, providing them with individual agency and power.

Box 2: Barriers to receiving an education: the story of Yichalem's constrained choices

Yichalem* is an 18-year-old girl who dropped out of school at 13 and was married at 17. She comes from a poor family with a disabled father. Although her mother and relatives arranged her marriage, she accepted their decision in an attempt to escape her caring duties: *'When he requested my mother to marry me, I accepted the offer. Otherwise, my role could have been caring for my mother and my younger brothers.'*

She had already dropped out of school in grade 8 because her family could not afford to send her: *'One day when I was grade 7, we were supposed to have sportswear. All my classmates brought it but I wasn't able to, as my mother didn't have any money. I thought that if my father wasn't handicapped, it could have been easy for me to buy sportswear.'*

Meanwhile, any money the family had was used to support her older brother who was training to be a teacher: *'They forced me to stop my education and made me marry. The reason they gave him money was that they were afraid he might migrate... It is because I am female that I have been forced to drop out from school.'*

Her uncle even contributed to her brother's education, but did not financially support her at all, leaving her at home to care for her mother and younger siblings. She said: *'I have suffered a lot as a result of dropping out my education. The chance to attend school was given to my brother.'*

Source: Outlier case study interview with an 18-year-old girl in Dembashi, West Gojjam

**Names have been changed to protect identities*

2.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, girls in Amhara are undergoing transformative gender norm change that is impacting their lives in varied but uneven ways. Our findings underscore that helping girls attain agency and improve their capabilities, especially through staying in school and avoiding early marriage, requires a combination of tactics. These include building on effective and evidence-based interventions used locally and internationally; the development of a robust legal machinery, including strengthening awareness about girls' rights at community level and the capacities of local officials to translate these rights into reality on the ground; and tailoring policies that are specific to the varied realities that girls in Amhara face, even those living in relatively close geographic proximity. Our study findings point to the following more specific policy and programming priorities:

3 Policy and programming implications

Given the key role of education in shifting gender norms, ensure continued and expanded support to girls' schooling. Though girls' enrolment in primary school is higher than it has been in previous generations, an overwhelming number of girls drop out of school by 8th grade either because they have failed school exams, the distance to school is too great, or they have to spend their time on care economy realities. The government needs to address this high dropout rate through a variety of strategies, including: financial incentives (e.g. targeted loans or cash transfers) for families that have daughters who complete high school; affirmative action for girls to pass exams (in line with Article 35 (3) of the Ethiopian Constitution), reducing the rigidity of the examination system at Grade 10 which precludes education advancement; transport options for girls from remote areas in order that they can attend secondary schools; and alternative options for employment that include vocational training.

In 2008, the Ministry of Education in Ethiopia launched the National Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) strategy to improve the training of technical teachers and the improvement of technical capacities at selected TVET institutions by 2017. It is also necessary, however, to think critically about how to communicate information and facilitate access and admission for girls from rural households to these TVET institutions.

Empower communities to have a 'bottom-up' approach to changing gender norms. Our findings indicate that there are mismatches between what adults believe about changing gender norms and what is occurring in homes with respect to gender roles. Strategies are needed to mobilise the community in ways that will help to create an environment in which the prevention of child marriage is seen as a common good and a collective responsibility, rather than a rule to be circumvented. A combination of top-down legal changes and a bottom-up approach emanating from the community will strengthen prevention efforts.

Engage more boys and men in conversations about gender equality and encourage new masculinities. Since constraints on girls' capabilities are often a result of gendered rules dictated by male relatives, it is vital that men and boys are engaged in conversations about changing gender beliefs, norms and practices. Having the support of male relatives or boyfriends is crucial in ensuring that girls' voices are heard. Programmes that have proved most effective tend to be well designed, integrate all levels of the family and community, include mass media campaigns, and have targeted conversations about how to transform gender and masculinity (Barker et al., 2007). Helping men to learn about new forms and practices of masculinity through awareness-raising and education initiatives – led by professionals who have experience of working sensitively with boys and men – is crucial to bringing about change.

Encourage progressive role models for adolescents so that they can imagine future lives that are different from those of their parents. Our participants – both young and old – point to the importance of positive role models in providing girls with the agency to challenge gender norms in their society. Initiatives could include educational programming, visits to university campuses in urban centres, and inviting female role models to give talks to girls' clubs.

Invest in school clubs and out-of-school clubs for girls who are at risk of child marriage. School-based girls' clubs are considered safe spaces for girls where they can seek advice and share their views and experiences on issues related to reproductive health, early marriage and sexual violence. It is important therefore to not only strengthen such clubs but also to seek innovative ways to provide a similar platform for girls who

have dropped out of school – to give them a safe space and provide them with accessible information, including on family planning, gender-based violence and mental health issues.

Enhance and provide support services for girls who are married. While it is clearly important to take a preventive approach to early marriage, many adolescent girls in Amhara are already married and their needs must not be overlooked. Because of the social and physical isolation many of these married young girls experience, they need support services that can help them cope with the rigid cultural expectations of being a ‘good’ wife. Given evidence that child marriage is associated with higher likelihood of suicide for girls aged 10-17 in Amhara (Gage, 2013), initiatives are needed that can provide mental health services and support for young girls who are already married, including options to re-enter school after a gap in education.



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Page 1: Group of school children, Dembashi Kebele, Amhara, 2013
Page 2: Inter-generational fieldwork, Dembashi, 2013
Page 3: Adolescent girl 15 years, Dembashi, 2013
Page 5: Group of fieldwork participants, 2013

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