Development, Environment and Foresight, 2015, Vol. 1, No. 2, 106—122, ISSN: 2336-6621

DEF journal

Early Marriage and Girls' Access to Education in Amhara Regional State, Ethiopia: Bahir Dar Special Zone Case Study

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Abstract

Early marriage is defined as marriage before the eighteenth birthday, and one-third of the girls in the global South are subject to it. The literature stresses that this harmful traditional practice negatively impacts the physical and mental development of girls, their number of surviving children, their vulnerability to domestic violence and the likelihood of them acquiring HIV (UNESCO, 2012; UNGEI 2007). A global focus on child marriages, exemplified by international events such as the 2014 Girl Summit in London, has created the momentum for addressing this harmful traditional practice more progressively. Despite the fact that marriage to a person under the age of eighteen is prohibited by Federal Law, early marriage is still prevalent in Ethiopia. This is driven by centuries-old traditions which view marriage as a tool for securing societal status and dowries, and for preventing the shame of pre-marital pregnancies. Moreover, gender norms value girls primarily for reproductive activities (Harper et al, 2014).

Research in Ethiopia has highlighted that girls dropping out of school (one effect of early marriage) causes a loss of economic opportunity that, in a girl's lifetime, equals 3% of one year's GDP (Gable, 2014). This study aims to explore how early marriage affects access to education for young and adolescent girls in the Amhara regional state in Ethiopia, using the Bahir Dar Special Zone as the case study. The study is based on literature review as well as quantitative and qualitative data on maternal and reproductive health service utilization in the Amhara regional state. The findings show that the mean age of marriage in Amhara is significantly associated with lower educational status. This again negatively correlates with a woman's age at first pregnancy and her total number of children. Early marriage is predominant in rural areas, whereas urban rates reflect the national average. This research concludes that the practice of marrying-off girls in Amhara denies them access to education, which fuels the vicious cycle of illiteracy, poverty and gender inequality, and also spills over to the next generation as illiterate mothers transmit the same patterns to their children and consequently to entire communities.

Key words: early marriage, education, Ethiopia, Amhara, gender inequality

Introduction

Almost one third of all girls in the global South are married before their eighteenth birthday, often against their will and to considerably older men. One in nine girls is married before the age of fifteen (Brown, 2012). This phenomenon is most prevalent in South Asia (one in two girls) and Sub-Saharan Africa (40% of girls) (GNB, 2015). Although this harmful traditional practice has declined in some countries over the last few years, evidence suggests there has been little real progress (Harper et al, 2014; Dopart and Wodon, 2013). Moreover, a country's data often fails to depict significant variations within that particular country. This is also the case with Ethiopia, a nation with one of the highest rates of early marriages in the world (Harper et al, 2014). However, in the capital of Addis Ababa less than 15% of female children were married, compared to 74% in the Amhara regional state in the same year (Brown, 2012). With 14.7 years being the median age of marriage, the Amhara region has the country's lowest average age for females to be married. Moreover, Amhara has one of Ethiopia's highest rates of illiteracy as over 60% of girls and women older than fifteen have never been to school (Hervish and Feldman-Jacobs, 2011; Erulkar and Muthengi, 2009).

Geographical and Demographical Context

The data for this article was collected in the Amhara regional state with a narrow focus on the Bahir Dar Special Zone, which is the region's capital city. Amhara covers almost 162 thousand sq. km of very diverse topography. More than 50% of the region is made up of mid highlands and fringe areas between 1,500 and 2,500 metres above sea level. The region is administratively divided into 11 zones, including the Bahir Dar Special Zone where the quantitative data collection took place.

The population of the Amhara region is over 19 million inhabitants with an annual growth of 1.8% which accounted for over 25% of the total population of the country in 2014 (AgroBig, 2014). The vast majority of the population resides in rural areas (87.4%) sustaining their livelihoods through small-scale agriculture (90%). Population distribution is unbalanced considering the population density. For instance, the Wag Hemra zone population density is 51.1 inhabitants per sq. km, in contrast to 673.0 inhabitants per sq. km in Bahir Dar. The age structure of the region more or less reflects the national figures: a hefty 42.6% of the population is younger than fourteen years, whereas people living longer than sixty-five years represent roughly 4%. Life expectancy at birth was less than 54 years in 2010 (ANRS BoFED, 2010). About 90% of the population is of Amharic ethnicity and almost 80% of its inhabitants are followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (ANRS HAPCO, 2010).

Bahir Dar Special Zone (BDSZ)

Bahir Dar is situated approximately 600 km northwest of Addis Ababa. It is located on the southern bank of Lake Tana. Bahir Dar is one of a few Ethiopian secondary cities

and regional urban centres growing at an unprecedented rate, mainly due to immigration (Amera, 2010). The Bahir Dar Special Zone (BDSZ) has a special status in the Amhara administration, and consists of seventeen urban and rural kebeles (lowest administration unit). The total population of the zone was 220,344 in 2007, of which 180,094 in urban kebeles (CSA, 2008). However, regional sources indicate that in urban kebeles alone there were 252,786 people in 2011. This may reflect rapid population growth or urbanization (Health Zonal Office Bahir Dar, fieldwork 2011). CSA (2008) states that there were 40,250 inhabitants residing in rural kebeles of BDSZ in 2007.

Due to its rapidly growing population, Bahir Dar has had to face challenges such as uncontrolled and unplanned growth, lack of infrastructure, traffic congestion, housing shortages and environmental degradation (Amera, 2010). Consequently, social problems related to urban poverty are on the rise in Bahir Dar: prostitution, begging, drug and alcohol abuse and children (often orphans) living on the streets (ANRS BoFED, 2010). A small scale study has been conducted on prostitution and street children in Amhara's towns, including Bahir Dar, and the prevalence of both phenomena was indicated as being on the increase. Indeed, urban poverty in Ethiopia is likely to be a persistent component often associated with long-term unemployment, exclusion and being trapped in insecure livelihoods (Kedir and McKay, 2005). ANRS BoFED states that social problems in the area are expected to increase.

Gender Inequality

Gender inequality and poverty are deeply rooted in the patriarchal Amharic society where women are structurally disempowered. Women do not have equal opportunities and are subject to harmful traditional practices that expose them to reproductive ill-health such as female genital mutilation and child marriage. As such, access to various social and economic services is poor for women in Amhara (ANRS BoFED, 2010). In addition, women carry the heavy burden of household chores, on which they spend five times more time than men (Gable, 2014). For instance, due to the population's limited access to safe drinking water (less than 64% of the Amharic population) women have to walk long distances to fetch water, which further reduces their economic contribution and is an important factor in parents' decisions concerning investment in girls' educations. The Mini Demographic Household Survey (CSA, 2014) shows that 40% of Amhara women aged 15 to 49 were able to read and write. Subsequently, women's participation in political, social and economic activities is very limited in Amhara. Lastly, the harmful traditional practice of female genital mutilation affects 47.2% of children under fourteen in Ethiopia (CSA, 2012). According to MOWA et al (2010) 67% of Amhara women of a reproductive age were circumcised in 2005.

Methodology

The objective of this paper is to explore the impact of early marriage on girls' access to education in the Amhara regional state, taking Bahir Dar Special Zone as the case study.

The authors' major hypothesis is that early marriage represents a significant barrier to girls' educational attainment, although not the only one. The combination of supply and demand factors which hamper access to education and learning has been well described, however its narrative would exceed the scope of this article, therefore the major focus is primarily on early marriage. The data for this article consists of both primary quantitative and qualitative data collected at different periods on-site between 2011 and 2014 and complemented with the relevant literature which has been analysed for its content through a desk review. There is no basis for statistical generalization since the authors could not utilize representative random sampling.

Sampling and Site Selection

The entire selection of the data collection areas (urban and rural kebeles) was carried out in close cooperation with the host organization FHI 360 and its regional office seated in Bahir Dar. Time and logistic constraints were taken into account, hence purposive sampling was utilized. Despite their persistent efforts to collect information on population figures and maps of the different kebeles of BDSZ, the authors were not able to assemble the data, even with the support of the Zonal Health Office in Bahir Dar. Consequently sampling became a highly intuitive task. The final decision on the choice of urban and rural kebeles was based on the existing health care infrastructure and its spatial distribution and exclusion of pre-test sites.

Data Collection Methods & Techniques

In depth-interviews were carried out with key informants between 2011 and 2014. All of them were professionally experienced and familiar with the reproductive health agenda embedded in the whole Ethiopian health sector (INGO, the UN or local NGO workers, health providers), often referring to financing and resource allocation. Informed consent, including the consent to use recording devices, was obtained from all key informants. Interviews usually took place in Addis Ababa or BDSZ during working hours in the offices/working places of the key informants. Additionally, apart from the official interviews, there were also numerous informal opportunistic discussions which helped the researchers to gain a complete understanding of the research-related phenomena.

A household survey was carried out (2011) using a structured questionnaire targeted at women of reproductive age (15-49) who had at least one child at the time of data collection. Besides early marriage, the tool was designed to explore; a) household profile & economic status; b) knowledge & practice of family planning, antenatal care, child delivery and awareness of overall knowledge of services available.

The questionnaire was pre-tested on a similar population in kebele 11 on the edge of Bahir Dar city to test clarity, validity, reliability and the translation accuracy of the questions. For the actual study, respondents were selected through random cluster sampling. The selected kebeles were considered as clusters.

After field observations, each of the kebeles' streets were divided equally amongst data conductors. Each conductor from the research team had the task to try every eighth house in urban kebeles (13 & 17), every third house in Meshenti and every fourth house in Tis Abay. If the household inhabitant did not meet the criteria or refused to participate, then the assistant tried the house next door.

Ethical considerations

The household survey received formal approval from the Ethical Committee of the Amhara Regional Health Bureau, which means it met all the requirements set by the regional authorities. All participants and informants contributed to the study voluntarily, providing free and informed consent while being assured of anonymity and confidentiality. No one else, apart from the authors, had access to the data during the data collection period. No names of participants were recorded. Considering the key informants; their names appeared only in the Interim Report produced for the host organization.

What is Early Marriage

Early marriage is defined as marriage before the eighteenth birthday and it greatly influences girls' literacy, attained educational levels and overall welfare. While early marriage affects both girls and boys, it has a disproportionate impact on girls (Mutyaba, 2011). The age-old tradition adversely influences the physical and mental development of girls; it increases the number of children they will have, their vulnerability to domestic violence and the risk of acquiring HIV (UNESCO, 2012; UNGEI, 2007). Girls who get married before they reach eighteen are usually not mentally, physically and emotionally prepared for their roles as wives and mothers (Mutyaba, 2011). Arranged early marriage is particularly prevalent among the highland pastoralist and farming communities of the Amhara region, where daughters are often married-off without their consent. Erulkar and Muthengi (2009) state that only 15% of brides in Amhara consented to their marriages. Furthermore, 51% of the brides under 17 in this region had not wanted to consummate the marriage. Of the brides under 15 years, 32% were forced to experience their first sexual intercourse with their husbands (Erulkar, 2013).

Hence, it is important to consider the root causes of this old practice. Especially in rural areas of Amhara, early marriage has been viewed as a major form of social security as poverty is a key factor in marriage discussions. In addition, traditional gender norms that value girls primarily for their reproductive capacities are critical to understanding this phenomenon (Harper et al, 2014).

Human Rights Violation

Ethiopia has ratified international human rights declarations that acknowledge girls' fundamental human rights to life, health, education, freedom from degradation and discrimination, from inhumane and cruel treatment, and protection from harmful traditional practices. Mutyaba (2011) analyses early marriage in the context of international human

rights laws and names the following treaties: a) African Charter on their Rights and Welfare of the Child/Charter on the Rights of the Child 1999, b) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women/CEDAW 1981, c) African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights/ACHPR 1986, d) International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights/ICCPR 1976, e) International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights/ICESCR 1976, f) Convention of the Rights of the Child/CRC 1990 and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Women in Africa 2005. According to the UNFPA (2006), governments which ratify these conventions are committed to minimum global standards to prevent violations of human rights.

Allowing children and adolescents to be married before their eighteenth birthday is also a violation of Ethiopian law, namely the Family Code from 2000 (Federal Negarit Gazetta, 2000) which states that "marriage is only legal between consenting adults who have reached a minimum age of eighteen years". Revised Penal Code from 2004 also stipulates sanctions for the performance of sexual intercourse with children and adolescents below eighteen years of age (Mekonnen and Aspen, 2009; Mutyaba, 2009).

Types of Marriage

There are several types of early marriage practised in Ethiopia. Alemu (2007) describes three major types, although other authors (i.e. Tilson and Larsen, 2000) write about six types. Promissory marriage consists of a verbal promise given by parents either at childbirth or during infancy. In child marriage children under the age of ten are wedded and adolescent marriage involves girls aged between ten and eighteen (Alemu, 2007). In most cases, the child bride is taken to her in-laws immediately after the wedding. In some cases, the parents agree that the bride can stay with her parents until she reaches a certain level of maturity and she can then live with her husband.

Variations are also found based on families´ religious backgrounds (Tilson and Larsen, 2000) as religion is predominant in the daily lives of most Ethiopians. For instance, in the case of Ethiopian Muslim communities, it is often deeply shameful for girls to remain unmarried after their first menstruation (Harper et al, 2014). The Orthodox Church in general is not significantly involved in the area of marriage, which is the opposite in Muslim communities where religious authorities are involved to a greater extent. Regardless of religious or ceremonial differences, in rural areas of Amhara, tradition dictates that a girl should be married as soon as she reaches puberty. This is to ensure she is a virgin at the time of the marriage (Tilson and Larsen, 2000).

Causes and Consequences of Early Marriage

Causes and consequences of early marriage in Amhara are interrelated through a vicious cycle of poverty and gender inequality deeply embedded in traditions. The literature (i.e. Mutyaba, 2011, Alemu, 2007; Tilson and Larsen, 2000) describes reasons for early marriage such as the preservation of the bride's virginity, maintaining the family's good

name and social status, concerns about girls becoming pregnant out of wedlock and ensuring girls have no pre-marital relationships. It is a measure of the parents' success: their daughters need to make a good marriage and link their family to another respectable family. In addition, receiving macha, which is an incentive paid to the bride's family by the groom's family upon the marriage agreement, is a considerable motivation, especially for poor families. Mutyaba (2009) highlights the customary attitude that a girl reaches marriage-ready status at the start of puberty, and this is something difficult to challenge. Alemu (2007) argues that 80% of respondents (including parents) in his study could give no other reason for marrying-off their mid-teens daughters apart from it being a tradition they have to adhere to.

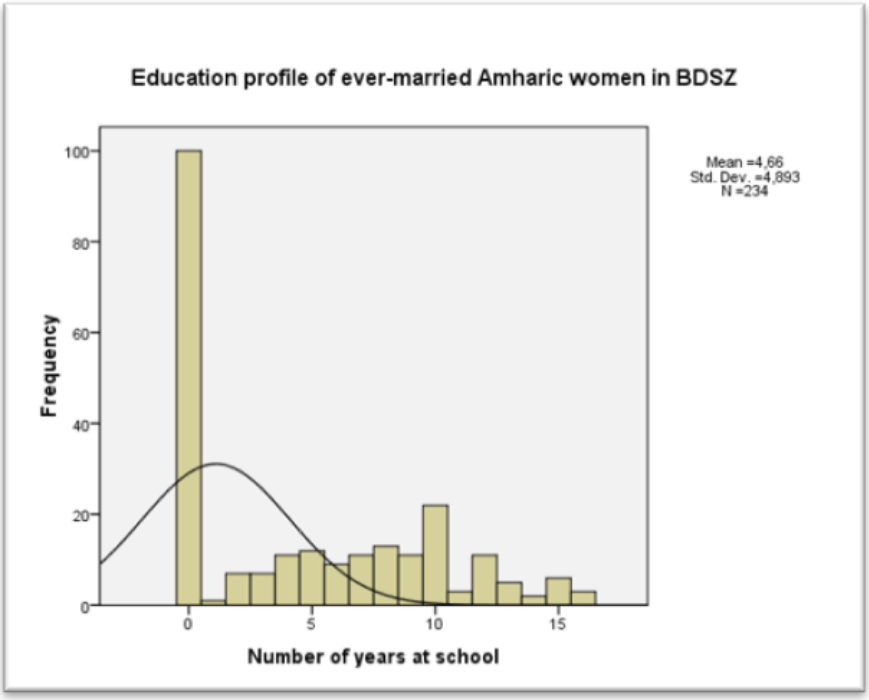
Turning to the consequences, the most immediate effects are on the health status of the young bride. As mentioned earlier, the vast majority of newly-married girls experience their sexual initiation directly upon marriage, often resulting in pregnancy at a young age. The most typical and serious consequence of early pregnancy in Amhara is obstetric fistula, which is a bladder or bowel perforation caused by prolonged labour typical for the immature bodies of young mothers. It causes constant leakage of urine and/or faeces. If untreated, fistula irreversibly damages a girl's physical health. Moreover, girls who suffer badly from fistula may be abandoned by their husbands and become social outcasts from their communities (Emirie, 2005). A more critical health consequence of early pregnancy and prolonged child labour is maternal mortality, the rate of which in Amhara has significantly decreased in the last two decades, although it is still very high with 350 deaths per 100,000 live births (Interview, 2014). The infant mortality rate is also very high: 76 deaths per 1,000 live births (CSA and ICF Macro, 2011) which even exceeds the national average.

Limited research is available on the psychosocial impacts of early marriage. Emirie (2005) highlights that young brides often suffer from psychosocial problems arising from early intercourse and pregnancy. Consequently, there are reduced opportunities to develop their major psychological and social skills, exhibited in their limited autonomy and decision making abilities. Early marriage often leads to early divorce. Amhara has the highest divorce rate in the country (Erulkar and Muthengi-Karei, 2012; Tilson and Larsen, 2000). Among Erulkar and Muthengi-Karei's sample in the Amhara Awi Zone (2012), 53% of women who had been married were divorced or separated. One of the most typical divorce determinants in Amhara is childlessness, which is ironic considering the fact that many of those brides' bodies and minds are not ready to bear children. In addition, marriage with a considerably older husband leads woman into early widowhood which results in low social status and the impossibility of property inheritance (Bird, 2010).

Strictly, a girl does not have the chance to oppose her parents' will to marry her off. If she does, the community casts her out and she often has to escape to a city where she is vulnerable to various forms of discrimination; often exploitation for labour or sex (Interview, 2014). Some practitioners (Harper et al 2014, Interviews 2011-2014) are also

alarmed about Amharic girls' migration to the Middle East to work as domestic servants, which is a form of 'third way' option (besides escaping to cities). All sources indicated that parental pressure was a significant factor in girls' migration. While the majority of migrants to the Middle East are older adolescents and young adults, younger girls are beginning to migrate in larger numbers. Despite national laws banning labour migration for persons under eighteen, Harper et al (2014) highlight that up to 11% of migrants in 2013 were adolescents travelling with false IDs. The same source states that in the first eight months of 2013, 100,000 women left Ethiopia to work in the Middle East, so thousands of girls have been and are at risk.

Figure 1: Educational profile of ever-married Amharic women in BDSZ



Educational Impacts of Early Marriage

The official primary school entry age in Ethiopia is seven and pupils attend for eight years. Secondary school is divided into two 2-year cycles (lower secondary and upper secondary). In the case of primary school enrolment, gender parity seems achievable (Interviews, 2011-2014). However, this is not the case for completion rates. According to the latest Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS, 2014) 54% of girls aged 7-14 years are not attending school (CSA and ICF Macro, 2011). School attendance is highest for girls at the age of thirteen and then it drops significantly (FHI 360, 2014). Apart from dropout rates, the major educational issues related to early marriage are low academic performance due to irregular attendance and frequent absenteeism, lack of time for school-related duties, lack of concentration on education and high repetition due to academic difficulties. Final and terminal drop-out is a logical consequence. In her study, Emirie (2005)

compared the academic performances of married and unmarried female pupils in West Gojjam in Amhara and concluded that the married girls' academic performance was significantly lower than that of the unmarried girls.

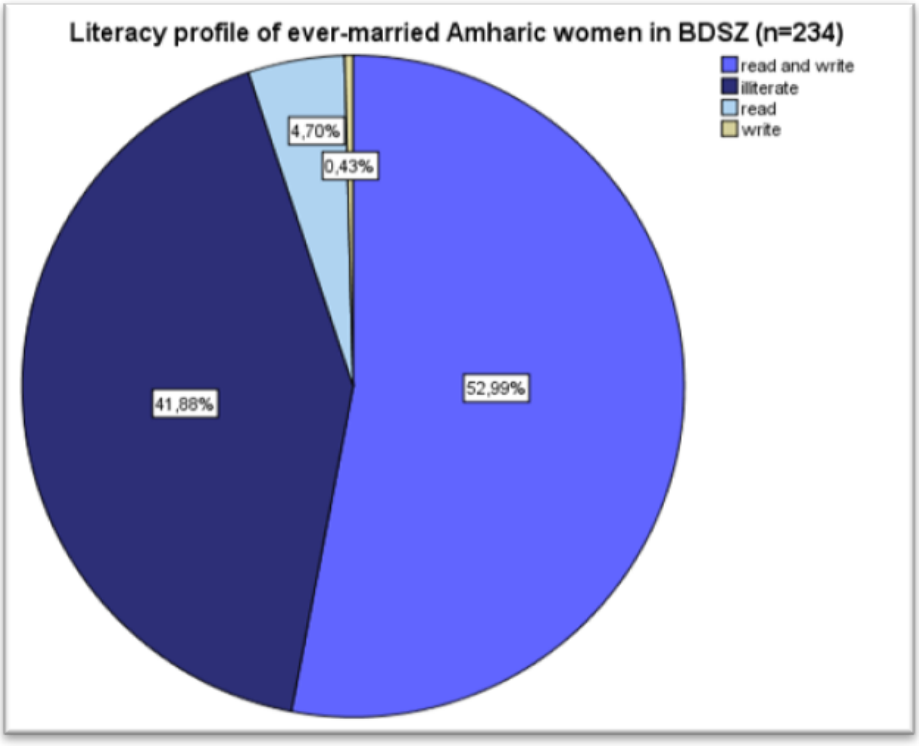
Relatively recently, studies on the lost economic opportunities caused by such phenomena as school dropouts have been conducted in order to grasp the social issues in monetary terms. Chabaan and Cunningham (in Gable, 2013) calculated the effect of female school dropouts in Ethiopia: If enrolled girls had completed primary school, their additional output over their lifetimes would be equal to 3% of the GDP. Moreover, if female dropouts completed secondary school, they would contribute the equivalent of 10% of the country's GDP for one year over their lifetimes.

Educational attainment strongly affects reproductive behaviour which influences fertility, infant and child mortality and morbidity (CSA, 2014). Better educated women are more likely to use family planning methods, raise healthier children and make better decisions for themselves and their children.

Results

Marriage was found to be nearly universal – 97.5% of the Amharic women sampled (n=234) had been or were married. The overall median age of first marriage in the Bahir Dar Special Zone was found to be sixteen. In its urban kebeles it even reached the legal threshold of eighteen years, whereas for rural women the age line was considerably lower with a median age of fifteen. Moreover, the youngest bride in the rural sample was three years old. The urban minimum age was nine (fieldwork, 2011 - 2014).

Figure 2: Literacy profile of ever-married Amharic women in BDSZ



Figures 1 and 2 depict the educational and literacy profiles of the population sample (n=234) of Amharic women who were or had been married and living in the area of the Bahir Dar Special Zone. The mean duration of their schooling was 4.7 years, which clearly indicates incomplete primary education. More than half of the women sampled could read and write (almost 53%) but almost 42% of the women sampled were illiterate. This figure corresponds with the figure of 43% representing the respondents in our sample who had never gone to school – neither a literacy programme nor a formal school.

There was a notable difference between urban and rural women in terms of the type of marriage. Whereas it was relatively common for the urban sample to select their beloved one as a future husband (42.2%), for those living in rural kebeles of the BDSZ it was their parents who made the decision instead: 81.2% of sampled rural women had their marriages arranged. There was also a minor percentage of rural respondents (0.9%) who were married by abduction.

There was a slightly positive correlation between women´s education attained and their age at the time of their first marriage (see Table 1 below). The more years of schooling in the Bahir Dar Special Zone a woman acquired, the later she got married (r= .410, n=233, p < .05). For a Pearson Correlation of (r=.410), the coefficient of determination was calculated as 16.81% shared variance between educational attainment and age at first marriage.

Table 1: **Relationship between education attained and age at first marriage of Amharic women in BDSZ**

		Years of education	Age at 1st marriage
Years of education	Pearson Correlation	1	,410**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,000
	N	234	233
Age at 1st marriage	Pearson Correlation	,410**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	
	N	233	233

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

A Chi-square test for independence indicated a significant association between age at first marriage and educational attainment, (1,n=234)= .238, p < 0.05, phi = .412 (Table 2 below).

Table 2: Age range at first marriage of Amharic women in BDSZ by education attained

			Education attained (years)				Total
			0	**1 - 4**	**5 – 9**	**10+**	
Age range at first marriage (years)	**1-10**	Frequency	13	0	2	0	15
		% within education attained	13.0%	.0%	3.6%	.0%	6,4%
	11-13	Frequency	20	3	6	2	31
		% within education attained	20.0%	11.5%	10.7%	3.8%	13,2%
	14-16	Frequency	37	11	19	11	78
		% within education attained	37.0%	42.3%	33.9%	21.2%	33,3%
	17-18	Frequency	19	7	18	20	64
		% within education attained	19.0%	26.9%	32.1%	38.5%	27,4%
	19+	Frequency	11	5	11	19	46
		% within education attained	11.0%	19.2%	19.6%	36.5%	19,7%
Total		Frequency	100	26	56	52	234
		% within education attained	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Interestingly, a Chi-square test for independence indicated no significant association between age at first marriage and income status of the sampled women, (1,n=234)= .130, p = 0.412, phi = .13 (Table 3 below). On the other hand, a Chi-square test for independence indicated a significant relationship between women's age at the time of their first marriage and the number of children they have given birth to, (1,n=234)= .312, $p < 0.05$, phi = .441 (see Table 4).

Table 3: **Age at first marriage of Amharic women in BDSZ by own income status**

			Has own income		Total
	Age		**Yes**	**No**	
Age at first marriage (years)	**1-10**	Total	9	6	15
		%	7.4%	5.4%	6,4%
	11-13	Total	19	12	31
		%	15.6%	10.7%	13,2%
	14-16	Total	34	44	78
		%	27.9%	39.3%	33,3%
	17-18	Total	35	29	64
		%	28.7%	25.9%	27,4%
	19+	Total	25	21	46
		%	20.5%	18.8%	19,7%
Total		Total	122	112	234
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table 4: **Age range of Amharic women's first marriage by distribution of children**

			Number of children			Total
			≤1	**2 - 3**	**4+**	
Age at first marriage (Years)	**1-10**	Frequency	2	6	7	15
		%	2.6%	5.5%	14.6%	6,4%
	11-13	Frequency	3	19	9	31
		%	3.9%	17.4%	18.8%	13,2%
	14-16	Frequency	18	35	25	78
		%	23.4%	32.1%	52.1%	33,3%
	17-18	Frequency	27	30	7	64
		%	35.1%	27.5%	14.6%	27,4%
	19+	Frequency	27	19	0	46
		%	35.1%	17.4%	.0%	19,7%
Total		Frequency	77	109	48	234
		%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Discussion

The median age of first marriage in the Bahir Dar Special Zone (16.1 years) was found to be considerably lower than the overall median age of marriage for rural girls when aggregated for the whole country - 17.3 years (Erulkar and Muthengi-Karei, 2012) and also lower than the national median of 17 years as measured by the latest Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey (Gable, 2014).

In contrast, the overall educational level attained by respondents in our sample appeared to be higher than the one collected for the Amhara region by the latest EDHS in 2011 (CSA and ICF Macro, 2011). The EDHS shows that 62% of Amharic women have never gone to school, against 42.7% in our sample. The illiteracy level in the EDHS was also considerably higher: 75% against 41.8% in our sample. Nonetheless, one could not fully compare this data as the methodology of its collection was different from ours. DHS refers to a fully literate woman if she attended secondary or higher school and can read a whole sentence or part of a sentence. The authors of this article did not examine the real level of respondents' literacy. Respondents could choose from 4 options: a) can only read, b) can only write, c) can do neither, d) can both read and write. The last option was operationalized as full literacy. The overall direction of the results is still in line with Brown's (2012) finding that girls in Amhara often start schooling long after the official enrolment age and dropout as soon as they reach the median age of marriage, before primary school completion.

As was extensively stated by our key informants (Interviews 2011-2014), a woman's role in Amharic society is solely to become a housewife and mother, meaning that the benefits associated with educating women are still perceived as low. Investing in girls' education is seen as an extra cost rather than an investment. Parents do not see their daughters' education as a future pay off, although studies show the opposite is true (Gable, 2014). She argues that private returns to education are particularly important for females in developing countries, and there is an estimated 11% of private return for Ethiopian girls' education. Another parental concern is the girls' safety when walking long distances to school, as this may put them at risk of sexual harassment and rape. Paradoxically, keeping them home is considered a protective measure. Some informants expressed their thoughts that parents naturally feared that girls in particular and those around lower secondary level, would meet up with boys on the way to school or in college dormitories, and start to explore their own sexuality, which goes against traditional values (Interviews, 2014). These barriers are also related to those discussed in most of the literature, such as the avoidance of virginity loss and/or pre-marital pregnancy (Mutyaba, 2011; Alemu, 2007; Tilson and Larsen, 2000; Emirie, 2005, etc.).

Concerning community awareness of early marriage, as pointed out by one informant, 'no one dares to organize an early marriage wedding ceremony publically these days' (Interview, 2014), which does not imply these ceremonies do not happen. On the contrary, they tend to be organized rather undercover – i.e. parents set up a ceremony in a neighbouring village where the family law enforcement is not as strong because police, schools and/or health centres do not follow up these issues. In addition, parents organize a ceremony without letting their daughter know that it is her wedding day and she also meets her husband for the first time (Erulkar and Muthengi-Karei, 2012). A large number of girls were also reported to have married during school holidays and never returned to the classroom (Interview, 2014).

Mekonnen and Aspen (2009) bring an interesting view to the debate, stating that the campaign against early marriage is a clash between the modern state and traditional peasantry. These authors see schools doing the work of the police instead of providing open arenas for learning and teaching. This argument relates to the opinion of another key informant who stated that it is impossible to imprison the entire community so the principle of collective responsibility is inapplicable (Interview, 2014). This attitude corresponds with another key informant's view which confirmed that law enforcement is weak because the federal government gives priority to social mobilization and awareness raising. In recent literature (i.e. Ogato, 2013; Bayeh, 2015) the lack of law enforcement in Ethiopia as related to early marriage is contributed to the government's lack of capacity in resource allocation and human resources deployment at large, and particular in institutes which address gender inequality. The lack of law enforcement is also attributable to the absence of women in higher and decision making positions.

Consequently, there have only been a few official cases against parents forcing their daughters into early marriage (Interview, 2014).

Contrary to the mainstream literature, some of the informants argued that poverty is not a strong driver for early marriage, reasoning that girls from better-off (rural) families in Amhara are still being married off. Moreover, dowry or bride price has a rather temporary effect on overall family wealth and therefore poverty cannot be the main explanation for early marriage. These informants stressed that early marriage is principally an outcome of strong cultural traditions which are strongly connected to gender inequality.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Early marriage is both a cause and a consequence of girls' insufficient educational attainment and illiteracy. The denial of access to education for Amhara's adolescent females fuels the vicious cycle of poverty, illiteracy, and gender inequality which carries over to the next generation as poor and illiterate mothers transmit the same patterns to their children and consequently to entire communities.

A combination of community awareness-raising, support for girls' smooth transition from primary to secondary education, economic strengthening initiatives and legal empowerment for girls and women need to be considered at all levels (Harper et al., 2014). There is no single strategy which is likely to end the practice of early marriage. There are a number of different approaches which are context-dependant in Ethiopian culture. Comprehensive responses to early marriage include the development of supportive laws and enhancing girls' access to education, together with the provision of economic support to girls' families in order to address the poverty-related issues which push girls into early marriage. The education of parents and community members and leaders should be carefully tailored to community beliefs.

It is important to point out that education alone is not the solution. It needs to go hand in hand with the promotion of decent youth employment opportunities so parents can see the benefits of higher education for their daughters. The authors of this article have identified a few promising (combinations of) intervention schemes which address the issue (Interviews, 2011-2014; Erulkar and Muthengi-Karei, 2012):

1) Community conversations led by experienced and trained facilitators, including male religious leaders
2) Educational support/scholarships in the form of school materials exchanged for parental assurances that they will keep their daughters at school
3) Conditional cash transfers to parents if they keep their daughter(s) unmarried for a period of 2 years or longer

4) Suggestion boxes installed in schools where pupils/students can anonymously report suspicions of early marriage to inform schools and local NGOs/rights groups so they can intervene

5) Girls' clubs established in schools to confidentially discuss fundamental reproductive health issues without shame and prejudice

The 2014 Girl Summit in London pledged to end harmful traditional practices (FGM and early marriage) by 2025 and it is everyone's concern to build strong, comprehensive national responses to early marriage. Besides the social and cultural aspects, there is also an economic perspective which needs to be taken into account. Gable (2013) concludes that for every 1% of girls who complete secondary education the annual national economic growth per capita increases by about 0.3%. The overall social inclusion of adolescent girls will result in significant economic growth.

In the context of the global formulation of a transformative post-2015 development agenda, global, national and local policy makers and practitioners should bear in mind that each year a marriage is delayed is a year that a girl can remain in school. Education will raise the age at which she will conceive her first child. According to CSA (2014) a woman with higher educational attainment is likely to have fewer children (the total fertility rate of women with no education is 5.0 against 2.2 for women with secondary education or higher). Moreover, an educated woman is able to execute her autonomy and hence she will be more likely to utilize reproductive health services, such as child delivery at a health facility or family planning. Finally, it is important to point out that all the interventions which address early marriage in Ethiopia (federal, regional, non-governmental, academic, etc.) should be evidence-based and carefully tailored to local settings. Those should be complemented by ex-ante and ex-post evaluation with dis-aggregated quantitative and qualitative data, otherwise communities will always find ways to continue the tradition, even though it has been violating individual freedoms and the rights of millions of Amharic girls and women over centuries.

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