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Changes and continuities in child marriage: Evidence from Kewet and Bahir Dar Zuria Woredas, Amhara region

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ABSTRACT

Despite the coordinated efforts Ethiopia has exerted against child marriage, the practice continues to negatively affect rural girls. Child marriage is embedded in the social structures (social norms and values) of rural communities and its eradication will require sustained efforts. In this research, we investigated social structure factors that enable child marriage and intend to give insights into emergent agency of young people in actively taking actions against child marriage. A mixed research approach combining quantitative and qualitative research methods was used to generate data from young people (15-24 years) residing in Kewet and Bahir Dar Zuria woredas[1], Amhara region. The quantitative sample consisted of 1.602 respondents while 23 qualitative interviews were conducted with young people, their parents, community and religious leaders, teachers, health extension workers, women and children affairs' officers and NGO staff. The result shows that child marriage was present among 37% of the respondent girls age 18-24 years. Further evidence of the continued practice of child marriage came from 62% of the respondents who indicated that they knew underage girls who got married without their consent. The view that child marriage is related to social norms (emphasizing girls' 'sexual purity' and community perception of 'a good wife') was supported by 74% of the respondents. For some parents, marrying off daughters early was considered a source of income (via bride wealth payments) for the household; and for many, daughters were seen as source of social and political capital in expanding and strengthening existing bonds between families. However, we witnessed young people are taking initiatives (via school clubs, mini-media activities, youth groups) to challenge the age-old practice of child marriage by postponing marriage proposals in favor of education and economic empowerment.

KEYWORDS: Child marriage, social norms, young people, agency, Amhara region

1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Child marriage refers to a union between a boy and a girl in which one or both are under the age of 18 years – this being the upper limit of childhood internationally and the minimum legal age of marriage in Ethiopia (Boyden, Pankhurst & Tafere, 2013; Jeniffer; 2013; Pathfinder International Ethiopia, 2006); It is one of the deeply entrenched cultural practices affecting the girl child worldwide, though its impact is severe in developing countries where girls are at higher risks of becoming child brides because of repressive social norms, poverty, and lack of education.

Ethiopia has one of the highest rates of female child marriage in the world, with one in two females among the 18-49 years old marrying before their 18th birthday and one in five girls marrying before the age of 15 (Dejenu, 2015; Emirie, Jones and Kebede, 2021). According to Psaki (2014) in Ethiopia 41% of women aged 20-24 are married or in union before they were 18. The Ethiopian Demographic and Health Surveys conducted at different times (Central Statistical Authority. 2000; Central Statistical Agency [Ethiopia] and ORC Macro. 2006; Central Statistical Agency [Ethiopia] and ICF International. 2012) indicated variations in the median age at first marriage and prevalence across the regions of the country, with Amhara region exhibiting one of the highest child marriage rates.

[1] Woreda is the lowest administrative unit below zonal administration and is equivalent to district.

The practice of child marriage in Amhara is reported to be widespread in many of the administrative zones and woredas, including in north Shoa and west Gojam zones where respectively Kewet and Bahir Dar Zuria woredas as study sites are located. According to Erulkar and Muthengi (2013), 50% of girls (age 25-49 years) in Amhara region are married by age 15 and 80% of them are married by age 18. Most child marriages are arranged by parents (National Committee on Traditional Practices of Ethiopia (NCTPE), 2013), and most planning related to early marriages takes place without the girl's knowledge or consent.

This paper focuses on the role of family and community-level factors which are contributing to the continued practice of child marriage based on data collected from two woredas in Amhara region. The main argument is that child marriage persists because parents, some siblings, relatives and community leaders support it and consider it as part of their social and cultural norms. Corollary to this is the growing youth social activism (especially school girls through their agency as change agents) contributing to reductions in the practice of child marriage across the study communities.

The paper's presentation is organized as follows: (1) drivers and consequences of child marriage are discussed by way of presenting a condensed review of the empirical literature, (2) procedures and methods of data collection and analysis are described, and finally (3) results and conclusions are presented.

2. DRIVERS OF CHILD MARRIAGE

The issue of early marriage is complex and multifaceted. Different studies link child marriage with factors comprising economic and political aspects and cultural values. In regions where child marriage is common, cultural beliefs and social norms generally uphold the practice (Erulkar, 2013). Most studies have shown that the dominant reasons underlying child marriage and its persistence are closely related to cultural values (Jeniffer, 2013). Crucial among these values are social norms that shape women's position in the society especially those related to girls' sexual purity and their desirability as wives and mothers (Muthengi & Erulkar, 2010). Parents are concerned about girls' emergent premarital sexuality and consequently encourage them to marry before or soon after puberty (Jones, et al., 2016).

There is a belief that a girl will miss her chance of marriage if she waits till she gets older which would cause embarrassment to the family and represent a failure on the part of her parents. If the girl grows older (beyond 20 years of age) she will reach an age where she will no longer be wanted as a wife (or ***Qoma Qerech in Amharic***). Because of such social concerns, and to ensure that the girl secures a husband, most parents would agree to a marriage request for their daughter even when they might not consider the girl old enough (Presler-Marshall, et al., 2016).

Parents believe that child marriage protects girls against unintended pregnancy and HIV/AIDS (Presler-Marshall, et al., 2016). As part of prevention of premarital sex, parents seek to maintain their daughters' virginity which, if not protected, affects family honor and daughter's future marriageability. Girls who lose their virginity before marriage often become an object of ridiculing by their peers, neighbors and the community at large. More importantly, it is considered shame and a dishonor for the family if a girl is not a virgin on her wedding day. Hence, in order to ensure that a girl's sexual virtue remains intact, girls may be married earlier so that they do not lose their virginity before marriage. For this and related reasons, delayed marriage would not be acceptable in the community (Assefa, 2005).

Keeping families' social standing by establishing inter-family alliances is another driving force of child marriage. Parents of bridegroom establish alliances with families of bride and kin in order to cement their future socioeconomic relation by convincing and pressuring their children at early age (Workineh, Dejenu & Degu, 2015). Child marriage is valued as a means of achieving social security and political influence. For some poor parents, marrying off daughters young is seen as a way out of poverty through bride wealth arrangements.

In Amhara, resource exchange (e.g. labor and oxen power) is a common practice among families whose children are married off and this is considered one of the drivers of child marriage (Gurmu & Etana, 2014). In Oromia where bride wealth (***gebera***) can involve substantial sums of money and several cattle, it is an important incentive for parents to plan and execute child marriage. Parents consider arranged marriage as a means of exchanging girls for money (Boyden, Pankhurst & Tafere, 2013). For such families, marrying off their daughter at an early age essentially is a strategy for economic survival – one less person to feed, clothe and educate (Muthengi & Erulkar, 2013).

Some consider marriage of teens as a source of protection. In families where parents cannot provide daughters a safe space to live, Child marriage is considered a protection from risks such as abuse. In the eminent danger of sexual violence against their daughters, parents may genuinely feel their daughter will be better off and safer with a regular male guardian (UNICEF, 2001), and they may be tempted to protect their unmarried, young daughters by marrying them as early as possible, regardless of their age (Women's Refugee Commission (WRC), 2016).

3. CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD MARRIAGE

Child marriage has numerous far-reaching consequences on the physical, psychological and social development of adolescent girls. It is closely associated with poor maternal health outcomes including life-threatening disabilities such as obstetric fistula. Maternal and infant mortality tend to be high among child mothers. Under pressure to become mothers soon after marriage, many child brides become pregnant before their bodies can safely carry or deliver children. Complications during pregnancy can put them at risk of injury, or child marriage could increase young brides' risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV (Santhya & Jejeebhoy, 2007).

Many child brides are also victims of domestic and sexual violence, and negative physical scars resulting from having sex at a young age. Most child brides may experience ongoing dislike of sex with their husbands. They might develop feeling of resentment towards their families and the groom's family as well, whom they consider as collaborators in a forced marriage and sexual relationships with their partners. Most girls who experience imposed marriages tend to be unhappy, isolated and disenchanted. They have nobody to talk to as they are surrounded by people who endorse their forced marriage life. Loss of feelings of adolescence, being a victim of forced sexual relations, and lack of freedom and personal development have profound psychosocial and emotional consequences for the girl child (UNICEF. 2001. Because of the stigma associated with divorce, broken marriages leave many girls living alone and raising children with little chance for remarriage (Galbusera, 2018; Pathfinder International Ethiopia, 2006).

Child marriage has an immediate negative impact on girls' education because most early marriages inevitably lead to school dropouts. Most child brides often dropout of school and devote their time to house chores and child rearing. Early marriage inevitably denies school age children of their right to the education they need for their personal development, preparation for adulthood, and effective contribution to the future wellbeing of their family and society. This in turn inhibits them from breaking out of poverty as their access to formal employment is limited. Nationally, millions of girls miss the skills, knowledge, and employment prospects that would enable them to lift their family out of poverty and contribute to their country's economic development and prosperity due to child marriage (UNICEF. 2001).

Cognizant of the negative consequences of child marriage on young girls, the Ethiopian government has outlawed child marriage (Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1995). An emerging trend has emerged among young people where, due to economic reasons, some young men in Ethiopia would want to marry educated young women who could bring income into the household (Jones et al., 2016). Health messaging about the negative consequences of fistula has made some young people especially girls to change their thoughts about the ideal age of marriage. The support of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to the government's position on minimum age of marriage has led to changes in people's perceptions of the desirability of child marriage. Also, young people's migration experiences are challenging traditional gender roles, and girls now constitute the bulk of international migrants and this in turn is having the effect of delaying marriage not only among those with migration experience but also those who aspire to migrate.

4. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Marriage as an institution is structurally and functionally intertwined with basic institutions of society (e.g. family, economy). Structural functionalism has been one of the prominent theories in sociology that attempts to explain a given social phenomenon (e.g. society) in terms of its parts and the functions (Parsons, 1951). Structures are parts that make up the system while functions are the roles/contributions each part makes to the maintenance of the system. Equally important are social norms and values that serve as adhesives/glues so that the different parts can function in an integrated and harmonious manner (Ormerod, 2020; Black, 1961). Here, young people are considered subservient via socialization to the needs and requirements of society (Ritzer and Goodman, 2004).

This conservative view of individual in society was fiercely criticized by social theorist of the period (1960s & 1970s) that led to a more pragmatic approach to functionalism mainly developed by Jeffrey Alexander who argued that individuals are not merely controlled by society but are capable of making choices and influencing social systems (Alexander, 1985). Neo-functionalists, while pledging to continue fundamentals of functionalism (e.g. stability, order), seek to broaden structural functionalism's conceptual and theoretical scope to include issues such as individualism, agency and change. In this study, the focus is how young people's agency (ages 15-24) is actively changing deeply rooted social norms and beliefs governing child marriage and transforming to adolescent world without child marriage

Applying the notion of structures that sustain child marriage, here attention is given to roles played by marriage, family, kinship groups and the community in the continued practice of child marriage. In Ethiopia, marriage marks an important point in a woman's life as child bearing is highly valued by the society which poses high social pressure on girls and young women (Save the Children, 2011). In the past, most marriages used to be arranged by families; though, this has been changing. Typically, notwithstanding the diversity of customs, elders from the prospective groom's family approach the father of the prospective bride to propose a marriage (Eruklar, 2013; Jones et al. 2014). Because marriage has social, economic and political benefits for the parents involved, it is often their interests and needs which take precedence over that of the bride's or groom's needs and interests.

In most rural communities across Ethiopia, girls would be socialized to shoulder household chores (e. g. food preparation, house cleaning, etc.) and be good wives and mothers while boys are expected to help their fathers with farming and also enjoy free time with their friends outside the house. The patriarchal family structure gives men (especially fathers) unfair advantage in making marriage decisions including child marriage and this is reinforced by unequal gender status and power relations together with stereotypical views of women´s roles and sexuality (Flavia, 2014, Parsons et al. 2015).

However, social and gender arrangements are not fixed but are constantly changing (Connell, 2002; Connell, 2011), gradually losing their influence and giving way to the agency of young people which is challenging child marriage. Agency refers to a recursive relationship between individual opportunities and the society's constraints which shape the action of individuals toward society and vice versa (Foucault, 1970). Human capability to effect/produce something (Giddens, 1984) or ability to transform a situation (Ritzer, 2003) is central to agency theory which seeks to elevate the individual as sole perpetrator of action.

The Overseas Development Institute's study (2015) highlights that rural communities in Ethiopia are undergoing gradual changes in social and gender norms resulting from broader social, economic, political and demographic processes. For example, young people are challenging parents' economic considerations of child marriage in favor of their physical, psychological and health wellbeing. The support of Ethiopian Orthodox Church to the government's position on the minimum age of marriage led to changes in parents' perceptions on child marriage.

5. METHODS

The data used in this paper was part of a study conducted in Kewet and Bahir Dar Zuria woredas in Amhara region for the YES I DO (YID) research program (2016-2020). The research design used a mixed-method approach.

Quantitative data was generated using a survey in 8 project intervention kebeles⁄communities (4 each from Kewet and Bahir Dar Zuria woredas). The quantitative sample size was decided to be 1,602 taking into account the prevalence rates of child marriage (23%) based on figures obtained from EDHS 2011. Considering the relatively homogenous nature of the population, an equal number of respondents were selected from each kebele. Since the issue of child marriage tends to affect girls more than boys, the proportion of girls in the sample was 70% (Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by woreda and sex

Woreda	Girls (70%)	Boys (30%)	Total
Kewet	552	240	792
Bahir Dar Zuria	575	229	804
Total	1127	469	1596[ϕ]

[ϕ] Six respondents are missing throughout the analysis where age is considered as their ages were not recorded at the time of the survey.

A tablet-based questionnaire was developed and administrated to the study participants who were randomly selected based on a register of households (provided by the kebele administration) with young people ages 15-24 as members. The questionnaire was developed based on a review of the available literature and the survey tools were pre-tested (21). The quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS data analysis software. Data was cleaned and checked for discrepancies before analysis was done. Descriptive statistics (e.g. mean, percentages, etc.) was employed to analyze and describe the collected demographic, socio-economic and behavior-related information

The qualitative component of the data was collected using Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and In-depth Interviews (IDIs). Participants (young people aged 15-24, parents/care givers, religious and community leaders, teachers, health workers, NGO staff) were purposefully selected by the research team, in consultation with Amref Ethiopia staff (Kewet woreda) and Plan Ethiopia staff (Bahir Dar Zuria woreda) and with woreda women's affairs officers. All qualitative interviews were guided by topical outlines developed for the purpose. A total of 23 qualitative interviews (6 FGDs, 8 KIIs and 9 IDs) were conducted for this study.

Qualitative data was analyzed in stages: The first stage involved content analysis using a comprehensive qualitative data analysis matrix developed from themes covered in the qualitative component; the second stage was undertaken by reducing the expanded notes of the thematic matrix into condensed themes, and finally, a coding framework was developed based on the thematic codes to guide through the data analysis. The codes were developed around social norms, intergenerational dialogues, and socio-economic status of study participants.

6. RESULTS

Respondents' demographic and family circumstances

The study population consisted of young girls and boys aged 15-24. The distribution of respondents by age groups was as follows: 67.2% were between 15 and 19; and the remaining 32.8% between 20-24 years of age. In terms of family membership composition, the most common type of family was mother-father- brother(s)-sister(s)-self living together and a typical family size consisted of 3-5 members (44% of the sample) followed by 6-8 members (35.1%). This shows that most of the respondents came from a relatively large family size greater than the national average of 5.

Although all of the respondents came from rural kebeles of the study sites where access to schooling might not be as universal, 87% of the respondents had completed some years of schooling: 1-4 years (21.2%), 5-8 years (41.6%) and 9-12 years (23%) (Table 2). However, school dropout was found to be a widespread phenomenon, with 49% of females and 43% of males being out of school at the time of the data collection. Among the reasons mentioned for dropping out of school were: for girls; getting married, burden of household chores, and illness; while boys identified lack of support from parents, demand for farm labor and illness. The fact that 73% and 84% of the respondents' fathers and mothers respectively did not have any kind of education partly explains why parents would be reluctant to support their children's education. Qualitative interviews held with parents revealed that they were not optimistic about education as many young people could not get jobs after completing grades 10 or 12 or even after graduating from college.

Table 2: Respondents' level of education

Number of years of schooling	Frequency	Percent
No education	217	13.5
Grades 1-4	339	21.2
Grades 5-8	687	41.6
Grades 9-10	265	16.5
Grades 11-12	90	5.6
Graduated from college	24	1.5
Total	1,602	100.0

Prevalence of child marriage

Results of the quantitative survey show that 37.4% of the respondent girls (age 15-24) had experienced child marriage (Table 3)[2]. Disaggregation of data by woreda shows child marriage appears to be more prevalent in Kewet (48.2%) compared to Bahir Dar Zuria (30%). Qualitative interviews conducted with young informants (females and males) show that most underage marriages were arranged by parents with daughters' little knowledge. This finds support from the quantitative survey where 62% of the respondents said they knew girls in their community who got married without their consent.

Table 3: Child marriage rates$^{\phi}$ among respondents

Experienced child marriage	Bahir Dar Zuria		Kewet		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Yes	124	30.0	136	48.2	260	37.4
No	289	70.0	146	51.8	435	62.6
Total	413	100.0	282	100.0	695	100.00

$^{\phi}$ Only 6 boys (5 from Bahir Dar Zuria and 1 from Kewet) experienced child marriage

Depth interviews held with parents revealed that it was perceived that girls nowadays are growing fast, and local beliefs attributed this to hotter temperatures observed in Kewet – warmer climate increases young people's sexual activity. Some parents questioned 18 as the minimum legal age for marriage since girls were likely to develop interest in sexual pleasure at 16 or 15, and called for the need to lower the legal marriage age by two years. According to some parents, rural schools have become a fertile ground for boys and girls to confide sexual desires thereby creating an opportunity for occurrence of untimely sexual relationship between teens.

Decision-making regarding child marriage

Regarding decision-making about child marriage, there was a consensus among all young people covered by qualitative interviews that parents were responsible for deciding their daughter's marriage. Nevertheless, there was agreement among the study participants that the trend has been changing in recent years with daughters gaining some rights to refuse/accept a proposed marriage. Overall, fathers, in consultation with close relatives (e.g. maternal uncles), make marriage decisions with mothers making most wedding planning activities. Community members especially neighbors also participate in the planning by offering advice and contributing resources to the wedding.

Child marriage enabling factors

Included under child marriage-enabling factors are. Family contexts, community values and norms, youth preference for love marriage and weak law enforcement. Each is discussed below.

Family contexts

Child marriage is deeply embedded in the social and economic structures of the family and the community. It isn't simply about parents wanting to marry off their daughters early—it's tied to a complex system of reciprocity, social standing, and survival strategies. Weddings function almost like a community-based financial institution: families contribute to others' ceremonies with the expectation that they'll be repaid when their own daughters marry. This creates a cycle where parents feel pressured to organize weddings, not only for tradition but also to reclaim past investments and maintain their social reputation.

The motivations —bride-wealth, strengthening alliances, and achieving social recognition—show that marriage is viewed less as an individual milestone and more as a collective mechanism for sustaining networks of support. In this context, daughters are often seen as channels for maintenance of family honor and economic exchange rather than autonomous individuals. That's why resistance to child marriage can be so difficult: it isn't just challenging a tradition but challenging an entire system of reciprocity and social obligation.

[2]This is the child marriage rate, retrospectively calculated as the number of girls 18-24 who experienced child marriage divided by all the respondent girls in the sample of 18-24. In 2020, UNICEF reported a similar child marriage rate (37%) for sub-Saharan Africa.

Child marriage is also enforced through direct family pressure. That 60% of the respondents who experienced child marriage reported being pressured into underage marriage shows how widespread coercion is (Table 4). Fathers often emerge as the primary enforcers, but elder siblings, aunts, and uncles also play a role—making it a collective family affair. Girls are often asked to make quick decisions without time to reflect or resist, which undermines their agency. This urgency likely stems from families wanting to secure alliances or reclaim contributions before circumstances change. It also reflects a power imbalance: daughters are expected to comply immediately, reinforcing patriarchal authority.

Table 4: Have you been pressured to marriage (15-18 females who experienced child marriage)

Pressured to marriage?	N	%
Yes	**170**	**57.6**
No	**125**	**42.4**
Total	**295**	**100.0**

..

Parents who are economically disadvantaged often see marriage as a way to reduce household burdens—by transferring responsibility for their daughters to husbands—and an opportunity to gain bride wealth. In contexts where illness, death, or other shocks destabilize the family, marrying off a daughter can appear to be a survival strategy. The example of a 13-year-old girl from Abayatir kebele illustrates the link between child marriage and economic insecurity:

My younger sister got married when she was 13. Her marriage was seen as a solution to our poverty resulting from untimely death of our father and complicated by our mother suffering from illness. She married him just for his wealth. However, she herself did not fare economically as expected, let alone to help our family financially. (15-year-old female, Abayatir kebele, Kewet)

The above example is a powerful reminder that girls are expected to solve families' economic problems, though, in her case, the expected economic relief never materialized. Instead, she herself faced hardship, showing how child marriage often fails to deliver the financial security families hope for.

In the studied communities, the social value of girls is tied to a narrow "marriageable age," typically between 16 and 19. Once a girl passes that threshold, she risks being labeled ***kumo-ker***—a stigmatizing term that implies she is "standing idle" or unable to attract a husband. That label carries heavy social consequences, reducing her family's standing and intensifying the urgency for parents to arrange marriages before their daughters reach their 20s.

The idea that a girl's "value" diminishes with age reflects deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. It also explains why families put pressure as daughters grow older: the longer they wait, the greater the risk of social shame and the loss of bride-wealth opportunities. This dynamic creates a self-reinforcing cycle where parents feel compelled to marry daughters off quickly, even against their will, to avoid stigma.

Community values and norms

In these communities, being a girl comes with a heavy set of obligations: sexual purity, obedience, modesty, and readiness to become a wife. Virginity is seen as the most valuable "treasure" a girl can offer her husband, making it central to her worth and marriage prospects. The qualities of a "good girl" are defined in restrictive terms: obedience to parents, avoidance of boys and towns, silence in front of adults, and general conformity to community norms. The Amharic concept of ***chewa***—keeping it cool, decent, and respectable—captures this ideal. For girls, being ***chewa*** is not just a moral expectation but a social asset that increases their chances of securing a husband.

In both Christian and Muslim communities studied, marriage is regarded as the ultimate test of successful family socialization. Husbands are portrayed as protectors—offering security against threats like rape or abduction—while girls are raised to become "good wives" by providing food and care (physical support), giving emotional support (comforting husbands), being ready for marital responsibilities, and being submissive to the husband's authority.

In addition, child marriage is supported by community norms. The two main norms are: Gender division of labor – girls stay at home doing domestic work; and early preparation for marriage – girls are raised mainly to become wives. The community expects girls to have limited social interaction with boys. Some girls see marriage as a way to escape hard domestic work and gain independence from family control.

In these communities, early marriage is seen as a tradition for girls, but not for boys. This is supported by 74% of respondents who agreed that girls marrying young is socially accepted (Table 5). For boys, less than 50% agreed → shows a clear gender difference. Respondents in Kewet showed higher agreement than others, and this shows that social norms are stronger there.

Table 5: Culture/tradition in the community for a girl to marry young

Responses	Bahir Dar Zuria		Kewet		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Agree	579	71.7	608	76.6	1187	74.1
Disagree	214	26.5	174	21.9	388	24.2
Others+	15	1.8	12	1.5	27	1.7
Total	808	100.0	794	100.00	1602	100.00

*Include neutrals and DKs.

A 75-year-old grandmother in Robit kebele, Bahir Dar Zuria, remembers that in her generation girls as young as 4-year-old were married off and she too was married while being hauled on her mother's back. This reflects a historical norm in Amhara culture, where child marriage was a deeply entrenched practice tied to family honor and alliances. While these traditions persist in some rural areas, social change and legal enforcement are gradually reducing the practice, giving younger generations more agency.

Youth preference for love marriage

Some young people perceive underage marriage as a choice rooted in affection, rather than purely imposed tradition. This shows that shows that not all child marriages are strictly coerced. In Table 6, boys were more likely to appreciate underage marriage based on love while girls were less likely to agree, which may reflect their lived experience of the risks and burdens that early marriage places on them.

Table 6: Underage marriage for girls is due to love

Response	*Female*		*Male*		*Total*	
	N	*%*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*
Agree	*427*	*37.7*	*232*	*49.4*	*659*	*41.1*
Disagree	*674*	*59.5*	*228*	*48.5*	*902*	*56.3*
*Others**	*31*	*2.7*	*10*	*2.2*	*41*	*2.5*
Total	*1132*	*100.0*	*470*	*100.0*	*1602*	*100.0*

*include neutrals and DKs.

The qualitative evidence suggests that consensual marriage among youth is increasingly seen as an alternative to traditional child marriage, which historically was arranged and imposed by parents or guardians.

> ***In our community, we do not encourage underage marriage. It is not beneficial for children – has health risks by way of fistula and causes difficulty of child birth. But girls as young as 16 often challenge us: "we want to marry." Especially if they drop out of school or if they do not perform well at school, they want to get married while still young.*** (Religious leader, Yelene kebele, Kewet).

Today's young people are asserting their own choices. When daughters themselves request marriage, parents often feel powerless to resist, even fi they are aware of the associated health risks as suggested by the above informant.

In Robit, Bahir Dar Zuria, a boy (16) and a girl (15), both attending school, had been in a relationship for over two years. Initially, they shared the husband's mother's house, but planned to move into their own home once the boy turned 18. This case shows how underage marriage can be framed as consensual and even aspirational, with the couple actively planning their future together. It challenges the stereotype of child marriage as purely coercive.

Another example came from a 22-year-old informant from Sefebere, Kewet, who got married at 14. She insisted that no one pressured her. She described marriage as a "golden opportunity" for girls, whether students or not, and claims that after age 15, "no girl refuses to marry". This reflects a cultural narrative where marriage is seen as inevitable and desirable, even by young women themselves. It underscores how deeply normalized early marriage remains in some communities.

Further qualitative evidence obtained from participants shows that a number of factors are acting as drivers of youth preference for love marriage. These include: (1) youth increased exposure to education. (2) schools foster increased interaction, (3) youth listening to FM radios covering youth issues, (4) youth exposure to social media platforms (e.g., Facebook), and (5) parents' growing leniency because of youth activism and pressure from the law. It is important, however, to note that girls are seen as "ready" for marriage earlier, often by age 14 while boys are expected to wait until 16–17 before marriage. This extra time helps them mature physically, emotionally and socially.

Poorly enforced laws

Ethiopia's federal and regional laws prohibit child marriage, and awareness among communities—especially women—is relatively strong. Yet enforcement and local action lag behind the legal framework and public knowledge. This gap often arises because in some communities, cultural practices and family pressures override legal restrictions. Even when people know the law (58% of respondents knew the legal minimum age), they may be influenced by tradition.

As far as enforcing laws is concerned, local authorities may lack resources, training, or political will to intervene in cases of child marriage. Sometimes, enforcement is inconsistent and varies from place to place. Families and communities may conceal child marriages, making it difficult for authorities to detect and act. Although women (61% of females vs. 58% of males) showed higher awareness of the legal marriageable age, they often have less power to resist family or patriarchal decisions.

Police officers who are responsible for enforcing laws often avoid confrontation to maintain community acceptance. They fear being labeled as "bad guys" for stopping weddings. Their absence during weddings signals tacit approval. The falsification of age certificates by health workers shows how enforcement mechanisms themselves can be compromised by persons who are expected to protect children. Parents also encourage age falsification by bribing police and health workers for fake age data. Parents paying for fake age data reflects how economic incentives override legal obligations. This issue was highlighted by a religious leader:

> ***The main challenge we are facing is false age certificate. Parents influence the hospital personnel who undertake age estimation by giving bribes to report the girl having reached 18 while the actual age is under 18.*** (Religious leader, Yelen kebele, Kewet).

Enforcement of child marriage laws in Ethiopia is not just a matter of police action, but a multi-actor responsibility that often falters under social pressure, limited resources, and entrenched norms. The anti-traditional harmful practices committees—women's affairs officers, kebele administrators, and teachers—all face challenges. Because they live in the community, they risk social isolation or hostility if they intervene. For example, canceling a wedding can permanently damage trust between committee members and parents. Remote communities (e.g. Abayatir in Kewet) remain outside the reach of police oversight and hence traditional norms dominate.

Emergent agency and young people's voice

Nowadays, young people have begun to challenge traditional norms sustaining child marriage. Their actions are creating cracks in the long-standing arrangement of child marriage. Parents are no longer as free to enter into marriage contracts without consulting their daughters. Girls have become social activists in the fight against child marriage. They are actively contributing to efforts to abandon child marriage and to create a world where adolescent girls and boys can decide by themselves when to marry. Their activism is manifested in a number of ways including in education, as role models, student peers, and seeking economic independence. In their fight against child marriage, young people are not alone – grassroots, government and NGOs are intervening.

The role of education

There was a growing understanding among residents of the study communities that education is a powerful tool to fight child marriage. Girls who consider education as an alternative are avoiding child marriage. This was articulated by a religious leader in Latamba kebele, Bahir Dar Zuria.

> ***Education is vital for girls. It changes their lives positively. It helps them develop socially, emotionally and mentally. It is a steppingstone to success and development. However, completing grade 10 and going to Bahir Dar to continue grade 11 is a challenge for many girls. Most girls find it difficult to pass grade 10 national exam. Those who succeed in the exam may not have the financial means to go to Bahir Dar. Most rural parents do not have money to support their daughters in terms of paying dormitory fees and providing food. Parents fear that allowing daughters to continue school far away from parents is likely to expose them to various risks including premarital sex.***

A 75-year-old grandmother (in Robit kebele) who regrets for not attending school when she was young (because there was not any school in the area back then) argued:

> ***If a girl is not educated, she becomes ignorant. Education gives a girl her livelihood. I was married when I was four. My parents were not educated and I did not have the chance to attend school.***

Schooling's positive impact in reducing child marriage can be seen in a number of ways: the more rural girls stay in school, the less vulnerable they become to child marriage since out-of-school girls are more preyed upon for marriage than in-school girls. Educated girls can successfully fend off (via intervention of school teachers) child marriage proposals. Education has an empowering effect on girls who see child marriage as harmful. It paves the way for jobs and income which makes girls economically independent and less vulnerable to child marriage.

Positive influence of role models

This is a powerful example of grassroots change. Its significance lies in the fact that role models—whether they are girls who resisted child marriage, peers in school clubs, or supportive teachers—create multiple effects that go beyond their own lives. Girls' clubs and mini-media activities in schools like those in Abayatir (Kewet) and Yigoma Huletu (Bahir Dar Zuria) are not just extracurricular spaces; they are sources of empowerment. When girls see their peers speaking out, leading, or simply living free from child marriage, it reshapes their sense of what's possible.

Teachers, both female and male, also play a crucial role by building trust and modeling respect. This combination of young peer influence and adult support is what makes these communities fertile ground for change. Interestingly, some of the most impactful role models are those who were once at risk themselves—girls who avoided child marriage and now embody resilience. Their lived experience makes their voices especially persuasive.

Role models are also family members who set a powerful example of how role models within the family can shape values and aspirations. In many communities across the region, elder siblings often serve as guides—not just emotionally, but also in setting practical standards for life. A young man from Latamba kebele explains how he was influenced by his brothers' emphasis on hard work and independence, which has led him to prioritize economic independence before marriage. It shows how elders in the family can instill resilience, discipline, and a sense of responsibility

> ***My brothers are my role models. They bought 11 baby sheep with ETB 5500 and then feed them well for three months. They sold them for ETB 18000. Then they bought two oxen and fattened them for two months. With the proceeds from the sale of the oxen, they bought 40 goats. They taught me how to do business before marriage. Both of my brothers have now good amount of money and property. One of them has just found a good girl to marry. I will do anything for them, including preparing coffee, since they are having a good impact on my life***. (Male, 19, Latamba, Bahir Dar Zuria).

It should be noted that the role models aren't distant individuals or public figures—they're right there in the family, in the community, living proof that effort and perseverance matter. This kind of influence tends to be more sustainable because it's rooted in everyday interactions and shared experience.

The qualitative evidence suggests that role models can directly intervene in preventing harmful practices like child marriage. In Bahir Dar Zuria, the role models have been actively acting against child marriage by: (1) providing information to schools about girls at risk, especially those who had dropped out in preparation for marriage, (2) confronting parents who tried to arrange secret weddings for underage daughters, and (3) raising awareness among schoolgirls, helping them understand their rights and the importance of education. A recent study in Bahir Dar Zuria woreda highlighted the importance of role models in reducing child marriage through cancellation (Galbusera, 2018):

> ***Role models have a great influence on a girl's cancellation of her marriage. Girls see it as inspiring and as something they want to aspire to do. Linking role models with parents could be used in the same way. Parents and other family members involved in the planning of the marriage could learn about the role model's stories and experiences.***

Role models aren't just passive figures; they are active agents of social change. Their credibility within the community gives them the confidence and moral authority to challenge traditions and protect vulnerable girls. It's a powerful reminder that social change often begins with individuals who are respected and trusted enough to speak out.

Contribution of youth employment

Providing employment opportunities for young people can help them escape child marriage. Examples are females working at the Tana flower farm in Latamba kebele (Bahir Dar Zuria) who were acquiring work skills (e.g. discipline, responsibility) in addition to earning money. Seventy-five percent of the farm's workforce were girls (mostly ≤18 years of age) and many were working in the farm to financially support their parents to buy chemical fertilizers. Because of their relative economic independence and contribution to family income, parents had become less keen to marry them off. The employment experience was also contributing to young girls' increased decision-making power about their marriage. A 52-year old religious leader who has a daughter working at the flower farm argues:

> ***Most of the girls working at the farm are very young who are trying to make money to support their families. My daughter (17) has been saving her meager wage (about 800 birr/month) to buy fertilizer. We are grateful to the financial support we have been receiving from her. Her plan is to go back to school and finish grade 12. Marriage will come later. Decisions about her money, education and marriage are all made by her with consultation from us***.

In Yelen kebele, Kewet woreda, the onion economy is not just about agriculture—it's directly influencing marriage patterns and expectations. Young men renting land to grow onions are essentially using farming as a stepping stone toward financial independence. Their determination to save for marriage and future ventures like restaurants shows how employment and entrepreneurship are intertwined with family formation.

On the other hand, the expectation of ***macha*** (matching-fund, with marriage turning into a joint financial venture) from women creates a reciprocal pressure: girls also need to accumulate savings before marriage. This dynamic delays marriage for both genders, but it also raises the financial requirements for entering into family life. In effect, marriage becomes less about age or tradition and more about economic readiness.

Local coalitions against child marriage

The committee against harmful traditional practices, bringing together teachers, women and youth representatives, kebele leaders, police, and traditional and religious leaders, has created a multi-stakeholder front against harmful traditions. Even though not all members show equal commitment, the committee's work has had tangible effects in the areas of awareness raising, establishing reporting mechanisms and demonstrating powerful influence of collaboration among secular and religious leaders

In Yigoma Huletu kebele, Bahir Dar Zuria, teachers and police form the backbone of local committees. Their roles are complementary: Teachers act as the first line of detection. Because they see students daily, they can quickly notice absenteeism patterns. When a girl misses several days of school, it often signals a planned marriage. Teachers' vigilance allows early intervention before arrangements are finalized. Police provide enforcement power. Once teachers raise concerns, police can step in to investigate and halt illegal child marriage practices, ensuring that community norms align with national laws. In Bahir Dar Zuria, Yigoma Huletu Primary School has created a suggestion-box to allow students to anonymously report peers who dropped out due to marriage. This peer-monitoring system is a powerful mechanism to strengthen local initiatives by detecting child marriage.

Anti-child marriage actions by NGOs

The YID-alliance's work in Kewet woreda shows how combining health, education, and economic empowerment are contributing to change. Here, young people are taught about their reproductive health rights. The slogans: "my life, my choice", "we, young females can do" reflect a shift in mindset, with girls seeing themselves as capable of shaping their own futures. Amref's youth-friendly services (e.g. voluntary HIV testing) increase young peoples' access to healthcare. Their age estimation scheme is impactful as it prevents parents from disguising child marriages. The Women Support Association's financial support for women entrepreneurs

(e.g., small shops) gives women income and economic independence bargaining power. This reduces the economic incentive for families to marry off daughters early.

Plan International's interventions in Bahir Dar Zuria were particularly notable because they tied to address financial constraints (e.g., lack of school materials) and the social pressures (e.g., traditional practices). Educational support helps students remain in school and hence prevents underage marriage. The revolving fund in Yigoma Huletu allows young women to start income-generating activities, with families starting to see marriage not as the only survival strategy. The FM radio program with young people discussing harmful traditional practices broadens the reach of awareness campaigns. Training young people to protect themselves and report planned underage weddings strengthens community vigilance. Teachers benefit from this flow of information, making early intervention possible. School-based mini-media activities like poetry readings and drama empower girls by building confidence and self-esteem. This cultural and artistic engagement of girls is powerful because it equips them with the resilience to resist pressure from parents and relatives.

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Discussion

This study found that the prevalence of child marriage in the study communities was 37%, which is lower than figures reported in previous studies conducted in other parts of Ethiopia (Marshall, Lyytikainen, & Jones, 2018; Getu, Kassahun, & Mekonnen, 2022; Gelchu, Wirtu, & Dheresa, 2024). It is also lower than government estimates, which tend to report higher rates (e.g., EHDS 2016). On the positive side, child marriage has recently shown a declining trend – from 63% in 2000 to 58% in 2011 and this points to a gradual but meaningful reduction over time, even if the pace is slower than desired.

The continued prevalence of child marriage in Amhara region can be attributed to parents' desire to maintain their daughters' chastity and family honor. According to Billa et al. (2023), parents often view early marriage as a way to protect girls from premarital sex, which is considered a misfortune for both the girl and her family. In many rural areas of Ethiopia, sex before marriage is regarded as shameful (Galbusera, 2018), and virginity is widely seen as a key condition for securing marriage (Molla, Berhane & Lindtjørn, 2008).

Additionally, some parents force underage daughters into marriage to enhance the family's socio-economic and political standing within the community. In other cases, girls marry due to a lack of alternatives; where access to secondary education, local employment opportunities, and female role models is limited, child marriage becomes the only available option (Jones et al,. 2016).

Generally, Ethiopia, and especially the Amhara region, has made significant progress in reducing child marriage. A 4.2% annual reduction rate was achieved (UNICEF, 2020), and this shows that coordinated efforts by young people especially girls, students, local communities, government policies, and NGOs are contributing. Our findings highlight that young people, especially girls, are not just passive beneficiaries of interventions against child marriage—they're becoming active agents of change. The fact that they are acquiring knowledge and agency capabilities via education and NGO-initiate training means they can recognize risks, speak up, and even cancel marriages themselves.

The fight against child marriage is most effective when young people themselves are empowered and supported. Our analysis shows that agency, education, and employment opportunities are crucial in enabling girls to resist and cancel child marriages. But equally vital is the network of support around them – elder siblings, teachers, peers, and even the police—who reinforce their efforts and give legitimacy to their actions. Further analysis of the qualitative evidence shows three key insights: (1) education as capability (access to schooling equips girls with skills and awareness of their rights and the confidence to resist child marriage), (2) local employment as empowerment (economic independence gives young people, especially girls a leverage to delay marriage and prioritize their own futures) and (3) community support networks (role models are most effective when backed by teachers, peers, and law enforcement—creating a protective environment around vulnerable girl).

In all of this, education plays a key role.in reducing child marriage. It builds awareness, confidence, and ability to challenge harmful practices. The data from the Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey (2016) shows median age at first marriage jumps from 16.3 years for women with no education to 24.0 years for those with more than secondary education. That is an eight-year difference, which underscores how transformative schooling can be. When girls stay in school, they are less likely to marry young, and when they avoid early marriage, they perform better academically and have more opportunities later in life. This not only benefits the individual but also strengthens communities and the economy.

This synergy between education, youth agency and community support structures is what makes cancellation efforts successful. It's not just about stopping individual marriages—it's about shifting norms and creating a protective environment where girls can rise and challenge child marriage.

However, there appears to emerge a critical tension between education and parents' orientation and value towards it. While education is clearly reducing child marriage, its long-term impact is threatened if parents begin to see less value in educating their daughters (Berhanu et al., 2019; Raj et al., 2019. This is a common challenge in many communities—parents weigh the immediate economic costs of schooling against uncertain future benefits. Parents worry that the pathway from education to economic independence isn't guaranteed. If daughters don't achieve enough grades for college, parents may question whether schooling is worth the investment. Lack of jobs after graduation from college exasperates parents' concerns.

To address parents' concerns, it is vital that both local (e.g. community and NGO) and national (e.g., government) efforts are directed at key intervention activities: (1) diversifying pathways (vocational training, apprenticeships, and skill-based certifications can provide alternative routes to employment), (2) introducing school-to-work transitions (partnerships between schools and local industries can help ensure that education leads to tangible opportunities), (3) community awareness (highlighting success stories of girls who used education to secure livelihoods—even outside formal college tracks—can shift parental perceptions), (4) social and economic opportunities :making education directly relevant by helping young people find work in their communities) and (5) undertaking gender role transformation (introducing programs that challenge unequal gender norms to ensure that girls' education is not undervalued compared to boys).

8. CONCLUSION

Concerted efforts by local (e.g. anti-HTP committees), national (e.g. outlawing child marriage) and global actions are contributing to weakening of old social structures (e.g. patriarchy, gender roles, etc.) which are being eclipsed by broad changes, stressing on girls' sexual and reproductive health rights for a child marriage-free community and society. Locally, change agents such as girls' clubs in schools, awareness creating activities by NGOs and Women's Affairs Office are coordinating their efforts against child marriage and other harmful traditional practices.

In summary, child marriage in Amhara region is undergoing significant transformation at individual, family and community levels. This shift is particularly notable in key aspects including age of marriage, decision-making power, community norms, youth agency and value-orientation toward education (Table 7).

Table 7: Changes vs. continuities of child marriage in Amhara region

Aspect	Past (grandmother's generation)	Present generation
Age of marriage	Girls as young as 4-10	Legally 18, violations occur
Decision makers	Parents arranged marriage	Youth ready to decide
Community norms	Strongly enforced	Gradually shifting with awareness
Girls' agency	None, passive	Willing to take active roles and engage in advocacy
Value of education	Girls' education was not a priority	Education is empowering girls

Finally, this study's findings underscore the need to devise an educational curriculum relevant to the needs of young people with a focus on creating local opportunities for employment and economic activities. Through education, program interventions addressing unequal gender norms and improved local economic opportunities for young people, child marriage can be history.

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