



CHILD, EARLY, AND FORCED MARRIAGE: A Political Economy Analysis of Ethiopia

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In 2020-21, Iris Group conducted a series of gender-intentional political economy analyses (PEA) on the issue of child, early, and forced marriage (CEFM) in eight countries. This brief is a summary of the full PEA report on CEFM in Ethiopia.

INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia's government aspires to be a middle-income country by 2025, and positions ending child marriage as contributing to that goal.¹ The country has made significant economic gains from 2000 to 2016² and poverty rates have dropped from 44% to 24% in that time period,¹ though youth unemployment and informal employment rates are higher than the national average.

Ethiopia has made significant progress on child marriage in recent decades. Among women aged 20-24 years, rates of marriage before age 18 declined from 75% in 1980 to 40% in 2016.³ This progress varies greatly across regions. Globally, Ethiopia has the 15th highest prevalence and 5th highest absolute number of girls married before age 18. It must accelerate progress to fulfill the government's commitment to end the practice by 2025.⁴

The political economy analysis of CEFM in Ethiopia consisted of a desk review and key informant interviews, with findings within the following four pillars of analysis:

- **Foundational Factors:** Embedded structures that are difficult or impossible to change, such as geography, class, ethnicity, gender inequality
- **Rules of the Game:** Laws, international commitments, policies, and social norms
- **Here and Now:** Current events and circumstances
- **Dynamics:** Interplay among the other pillars

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FINDINGS

Foundational Factors

- Regional differences and hotspots shape prevalence of child marriage. Tigray, Amhara, SNNPR and Addis Ababa have made the most headway on reducing the practice, Afar and Somali's rates have remained the same, and Harari's rates have worsened.⁴ Ethiopia's ethno-linguistic regions differ in important ways from each other in terms of the conditions that facilitate child marriage.
- At the national level, child marriage prevalence declines in upper economic quintiles,⁵ but in some regions, richer girls get married at younger ages than poorer girls.
- Orthodox Christian and Muslim religious groups both have perpetuated the practice, although with different characteristics.
- Systemic gender inequality has excluded women from decision-making power, cutting across religions, ethnic groups, and income levels.⁶

Rules of the Game

- In 2000, the Ethiopian Family Code established 18 as the legal age for marriage and the 2005 Civil Code established penalties for adults involved in child marriage.⁷
- Though most people know about the law, evading it is common.⁸ Rapists may marry their victims and families may be treated leniently by a complicit justice system.⁹
- Ethiopia's commitment to ending child marriage is codified in several international agreements.
- Social and gender norms are strong drivers of CEFM in Ethiopia, varying regionally and sub-regionally. They include: taboos against premarital sex; restriction of girls' freedom;¹⁰ disregard of adolescent decision-making;⁵ stigma against girls who delay marriage;¹¹ and beliefs that unmarried girls, especially orphans, are a burden¹².
- Common child marriage practices include arranged marriage, child-initiated and involuntary abduction, and marriage to maternal cousins.

Here and Now

- The government is the primary actor on child marriage programs through Ministries, regional bodies, the Women's Development Army, and the National Alliance.¹³
- International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) have made important headway on reducing the practice, but not at scale. Civil society organizations (CSOs) have less prominent involvement on CEFM due to legal restrictions on advocacy activities.
- Programs approach child marriage with a combination of educational, economic, and norms-based interventions, with less focus on rights-based approaches.
- Both COVID-19 and ethnic/political instability are having serious impacts on child marriage rates and programming. Children of all genders are vulnerable to CEFM as COVID-19-related school closures gives parents the opportunity to arrange marriages without teachers reporting it.

Dynamics

- **Progress:**
 - The federal government's engagement on CEFM, spurred heavily by international advocacy, has facilitated community-level action and propelled the issue onto local agendas.
 - Evaluations of child marriage programs have provided important information about what interventions work.
 - Decreases in child marriage prevalence since 1980 may have been driven by economic and schooling gains, as well as poverty reduction measures like the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP).^{14,15}
- **Obstacles:**
 - Sub-regional data is not easily discernable from DHS data, which is reported regionally.
 - Many child marriage programs have been successful but small, and scale is a daunting challenge. School-based programs tend to leave out vulnerable girls.¹⁴

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Case for Investment

- **Ethiopia is at a potential turning point.** Economic growth and increased investment in schooling have helped drive down child marriage in the past 40 years, but progress has not been universal and may be fragile. Investment at this urgent moment can help stem regression in a country seen as a child marriage success story.
- **Ethiopia has important ingredients for success, but needs more resources.** Ethiopia is equipped with experienced donors and partners and an evidence-based roadmap for continued progress, but does not have the resources for massive CEFM interventions at scale.
- **Donors have existing successful investments on child marriage in Ethiopia and relationships with stakeholders.** Donors' presence in Ethiopia and relationships with the government and implementing organizations enhance their influence on this issue.

2. Key Points of Leverage on CEFM

- **The Ethiopian government has extensive reach and commitment.** The government wants to be seen as making progress on this issue, and has extensive tools at its disposal.
- **Robust research provides insights not only about where, but also how to address different types of CEFM.** Sub-regional data can identify broader trends that may require urgency – such as areas where girls risk violence if they resist CEFM – or a shift in focus – such as areas where girls are “choosing” marriage against their parents' wishes.

3. Turning Gaps into Opportunities

- **More information on economic drivers can help promote responses in areas where child marriage is driven by aspiration instead of desperation.** The PSNP may be effective in reducing child marriage among households that are chronically poor, but leave out girls (and boys) whose families aren't destitute but have dismal chances for economic advancement.
- **Gaps in data should be filled with sentinel sites and more frequent monitoring.** Analyzing sub-regional data in Ethiopia is tremendously important for programmatic responses in Ethiopia. Regional monitoring and evaluation through the government and sentinel sites can provide more frequent data on CEFM trends and characteristics.
- **Programs should become more sophisticated in addressing specific types of CEFM.** While certain methodologies can be adapted to any context, project design should identify the type of CEFM in the target area and the theory of change should demonstrate how it will address the norms and incentives that drive that type of marriage.
- **Women-led civil society organizations can play an important role in CEFM reduction.** With the change in laws restricting CSOs from advocacy activities, there is an opportunity to seed girls' and women's grassroots organizing to keep momentum at a local level, while building the capacity of national women's groups to ensure government accountability to its commitments on gender and rights.

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