

# The prevalence and drivers of early marriage across three generations in three districts from Amhara, Oromia and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples regions of Ethiopia<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Early marriage is a harmful traditional practice which affects millions of children worldwide. In the developing world, one in three will marry by the age of 18 and one in nine will marry by the age of 15. This article presents the findings of a study which established the prevalence and drivers of early marriage in Alefa, Diksis and Gorche districts of the Amhara, Oromia and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) regions, respectively. A cross-sectional survey research design was employed. A total of 1199 women participated in a quantitative survey and data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The prevalence of early marriage among respondents was found to be 69.9%. The overall mean age at first marriage of respondents was found to be 14.8. An overall declining trend in the prevalence of early marriage and increasing trend in mean age at first marriage were noted. Respondents attendance of formal school, whether or not fathers ever attended formal school and size of land of natal family were found to be the variables significantly associated with respondents' age at first marriage. The drivers of early marriage were categorized into gendered social norms, economic contexts, and institutional factors. Some conclusions are drawn based on the research findings.*

**Keywords:** early marriage, prevalence, drivers of early marriage, Ethiopia

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## Introduction

Early marriage is an established harmful traditional practice which affects millions of children worldwide. In the developing world, one in three will marry by the age of 18 and one in nine will marry by the age of 15 (IPFF, 2006 cited in Hodgkingston, 2016). However, there are differences in the prevalence of early marriage across all the developing world, including Africa. For example, in sub-Saharan Africa, “a staggering 40 per cent of girls marry before age 18, and African countries account for 15 of the 20 countries with the highest rates of child marriage” (UNICEF, 2014 cited in HRW, 2015:3). Early marriage<sup>5</sup>, defined in this article as marriage below the age of 18, is widespread among communities in three study *woredas* (districts) namely, Alefa, Diskis and Gorche in Amhara, Oromia and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples (SNNP) regions of Ethiopia, respectively. The practice of early marriage is driven by the interplay of social, economic and institutional factors (Hodgkingston, 2016; Jones, et al., 2016 a, b). Although these drivers are categorised, for the sake of understanding, into three sets of factors namely gendered social norms, economic contexts and institutional factors, they are, in reality, intertwined and interdependent – one reinforcing the other. These drivers of early marriage vary not only from region to region but also at times from one community to another within a given region depending on differences in culture and other associated factors. This article presents the findings of this study which established the prevalence of early marriage in Alefa, Diskis and Gorche districts of Amhara, Oromia and SNNP regions respectively and also explores the drivers of early marriage from the point of view of the local perspective.

This article is divided into five major parts. The first section provides the background of the study followed by the methodology part which describes the study participants and sampling procedures, data collection instruments, data analysis techniques and research sites. The third one is the findings section which in turn consists of four subsections: the first subsection presents respondents’ socio-demographic profile; the second subsection deals with prevalence and trends of early marriage; followed by the third subsection which presents factors associated with age at first marriage. And the fourth subsection focuses on drivers of early marriage which in turn consists of three categories namely, gendered social norms, economic contexts and institutional factors. The fourth one is the

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<sup>5</sup> In the literature such phrases as ‘child marriage’, ‘under-age marriage’ and at times ‘forced marriage’ are also used.

discussion section which highlights the major findings on early marriage issues in the context of the communities in the three districts from three regional states in Ethiopia. Finally, the last section provides concluding remarks.

### **Background**

Early marriage is an issue which affects millions of children worldwide; some sources revealed that 15 million girls around the world are married as children every year (Girls Not Brides, 2017). In the developing world, 1 in 3 girls will marry by the age of 18 and 1 in 9 girls will marry by the age of 15. That is roughly equal to 39,000 girls being married each day. And 50% of these early marriages take place in Asia and one fifth in Africa (IPFF, 2006 in Hodgkinson, 2016).

According to UNICEF (2014), the 10 countries with the highest rates of early marriage are found in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa regions. Those countries with their respective early marriage prevalence include Niger (77%), Bangladesh (74%), Chad (69%), Mali (61%), Central African Republic (60%), India (58%), Guinea (58%), Ethiopia (58%), Burkina Faso (52%) and Nepal (52) (UNICEF, 2014). The prevalence rate of early marriage is higher in rural areas compared to urban ones. Consequently, girls living in rural areas are twice as likely to be married earlier compared to their urban counterparts. Specifically, 44% of girls in rural areas are likely to marry as children compared to 22% prevalence for girls in urban areas. Socio-economically, girls from the poorest backgrounds are more likely to marry as children than those from richer backgrounds. Data further reveal that globally 54% of girls in the poorest household income quintile marry as children compared to 16% in the richest (UNFPA, 2012). However, the influence of income level or wealth status on early marriage rates varies from country to country.

Globally, girls without any formal education are three times more likely to marry before the age of 18 compared to those who finish secondary school (Harper et al. 2014). This means, the more education a girl has, the less likely she is to marry as a child. This trend is said to be linear and very strong at secondary education level (Brown, 2012; Yarrow et al., 2015). In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, girls with no education are 5 times more likely to get married as children than those with a secondary education (UNFPA, 2012). Prevalence rates in religious groups vary from country-to-country (Hodgkinson, 2016).

Although early marriage is an issue which affects millions of children worldwide and international laws that have relevance to the prevention and disapproval of early marriage have been evolving since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the attention given to early marriage by

governments, NGOs and international organizations increased in the last decade or so. Hodgkinson (2016) showed that the issue of early marriage was brought onto the international agenda by Elders.<sup>6</sup> Adolescent girls were left out from targeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and that addressing early marriage would also address other goals, such as education and maternal health. This resulted in increased attention to early marriage issues. The creation of ‘Girls not Brides’ and the first ‘Day of the Girl’ in 2012; and the fact that early marriage is explicitly noted in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) under Goal 5.3: ‘Eliminate all harmful practices such as child, early and forced marriage, and female genital mutilation’ gave further impetus for action and attention.

In Ethiopia, 40% of women married before the age of 18 (CSA and ICF International, 2012). Eight per cent of the youngest groups of women (aged 15-19) were married before the age of 15 (EDHS, 2011). Another source put the total prevalence of early marriage in Ethiopia at 41.2% of which 49% are from rural and 21.7% are from urban areas. In terms of education, 62.9% of them never went to school, 37.5% completed primary school and only 10.3% of them completed secondary or higher education (UNFPA, 2012).

A recent national child marriage mapping study conducted in Ethiopia (Jones et al., 2016b) identified 10 child marriage hotspot Woredas and examined the drivers of child marriage at district level. This study has calculated the prevalence of early marriage (% ever married girls aged 10–17) for the top fifty woredas using the national census data of 2007. The study suggested, among others, that in order to better target and tailor interventions to local realities, it is important to collect not only district level data but also rigorous baseline data on a regular basis. However, this study is based on analysis of more than ten years old national census data of 2007 (CSA, 2008). This research project was, therefore, designed against the backdrop of these contexts and was carried out to narrow the knowledge gaps on the prevalence and drivers of early marriage in three early marriage hotspot woredas in Amhara, Oromia, and SNNP regions of Ethiopia.

Notwithstanding recent and accelerating progress towards eliminating early marriage, Ethiopia has continued to have one of the highest rates of early marriage in the world. The median age at which Ethiopian women aged 25-49 marry is only 16.5 years and 40% of all women in their early 20’s were married before they

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<sup>6</sup> An international group of global leaders working together for peace and human rights who started working on early marriage by addressing gender inequality and tackling the effect of religion and traditions since 2010 (The Elders: <http://www.theelders.org/about>)

turned 18 (CSA & ICF International, 2012). In this regard, a number of national quantitative studies have identified the causes and consequences of early marriage and some of them have documented, albeit fragmented, that its incidence is considerably high in the country. However, these studies are out-dated and therefore they do not reveal, for instance, the prevalence and drivers of early marriage in Amhara, Oromia and SNNP regional states.

The reasons why millions of girls worldwide get married during childhood are multiple. Several studies in other parts of the world, for instance, in South Asia (e.g. Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan) showed that early marriage is driven by interplay of: (1) social norms, (2) economic structures, and (3) familial motivations. According to most studies, unequal gendered norms are said to be the main drivers of early marriage. Social norms are not only responsible for the persistence of the practice but they are also said to dictate the ‘correct way a girl should behave and live but also place a higher value on males, than females’ (Hodgkinson, 2016). In a similar view, Jones et al. (2016 a, b) have shown that social norms are important drivers to early marriage in Ethiopia.

Another study by Pankhurst et al. (2016), using the data from the Young Lives Research Project, assessed the interplay between community, household and child level influences on trajectories to early marriage in Ethiopia. It mainly examined how early marriage is influenced by household and family characteristics such as parental education, household wealth, parental death and family circumstances such as poverty, shocks and disputes. The two important findings of the study found father’s education to be the most important household characteristic which ‘reduces the likelihood’ of early marriage. Also “household wealth was particularly significant, with less than 10 per cent of early marriages among the top tercile, and family circumstances such as ill-health and drought were compounding factors” (Pankhurst et al., 2016:5). It should be noted, however, that the academic literature on drivers of early marriage in Ethiopia is very patchy. For example, a study, based on data, generated by Young Lives Ethiopia Research Project, by Boyden et al. (2013) looked at issues of early marriage and female circumcision; partly because the latter is considered as a precursor to the former.

The ethnographic literature on age of marriage, on the other hand, is not very explicit. This is partly because age is often considered as a diacritical factor, although there are references to girls marrying earlier than boys (Ambatchew, 1956 cited in Pankhurst et al., 2016).

Therefore, supplemented by document review and review of related secondary sources, this article is written based on data generated by a research project which was designed, against the backdrop of these contexts; and carried out

to fill, in part, these gaps by conducting a household survey to establish the prevalence and drivers of early marriage in three early marriage hotspot *woredas* in the Amhara, Oromia and SNNP regions of Ethiopia. The following major research questions were addressed: i) what are the prevalence rates of early marriage among three generations in the three hotspot *woredas* of Amhara, Oromia and SNNP regions? ii) What are the main drivers of early marriage in the three hotspot *woredas*?

## Research sites and methods

### Research sites

The two survey research sites (Alefa and Gorche) were purposefully selected out of top ten early marriage hotspot *woredas*<sup>7</sup> in the country identified by Jones et al. (2016b), whereas the third survey research site (Diksis) was selected because a recent baseline survey established that it has one of the highest (38%) prevalence rates of early marriage (CDTC, 2016). A brief description of each of the three research sites is in order.

**Alefa woreda:** Alefa Woreda is located in North Gondar Zone of the Amhara region. Shahura town is the centre of the Woreda. With an area of 1,961.66 km<sup>2</sup>, the total population of Alefa is estimated to be 197,860 (49.8% female). The Woreda's population density is 86.91 and this is greater than the zone average of 63.76 persons per km<sup>2</sup>. In the 2007 Population and Housing Census (CSA, 2008), a total of 36,072 households were counted in the woreda, resulting in on average 4.73 persons to a household. The majority of the inhabitants (99.5%) practiced Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity. According to the 1994 census, the two largest ethnic groups in Alefa were the Amhara (96.49%) and the Agaw Awi (3.19%). In terms of livelihoods, most people in these communities are engaged in rain-fed agriculture with crop production and livestock husbandry (CSA, 2008).

**Diksis Woreda:** Diksis Woreda is one of the *woredas* of Oromia region that falls under Arsi Administrative Zone. It has 27 *kebeles* of which only two are urban. In 2013, the population of the woreda was estimated at 87,682, of which the female population constituted 50.4 per cent (CSA, 2014). The centre of the Woreda, Hamda town, is located at 200 kms Southeast of Addis Ababa. The livelihood pattern is predominantly agricultural with livestock rearing and crop production

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<sup>7</sup> An Amharic word which refers to a formal governmental administrative structure similar to district and is found below the Zone.

such as Barley and Wheat. With regard to net school enrolment, the Woreda has 31 schools, of which 4 are first cycle (Grade 1–4), 24 are full cycle (Grade 1–8), 2 are general secondary (Grade 9–10) and 1 preparatory (Grade 11–12). Currently, there are 9,757 boys and 9,420 girls enrolled in full cycle primary (Grade 1–8). School attendance of both sexes, particularly that of girls, declines in higher grades (Grade 9–12), which is 830 for boys compared to 600 for girls (Diksis Woreda Education Office, 2016).

**Gorche woreda:** Gorche Woreda is one of the nine Woredas of the Sidama Zone (now it has become a regional state) in the SNNP region. Gorche is both the name of the Woreda and its urban centre, which is found at a distance of 317kms from Addis Ababa and 44kms from the regional town, Hawassa. With a total population of 143,460 (51.25% female), the Woreda is divided into 21 rural and three urban *Kebeles* (Gorche Woreda Administration, 2016). Their livelihoods have been based on rain-fed cultivation of cereals, perennial and cash crops such as *enset*, coffee and *khat*. There is shortage of agricultural land, and holdings are small with hoe-based cultivation of perennial crops. There are a total of 34 schools of which 9 are first cycle primary (Grade 1-4), 22 are second cycle primary (Grade 5–8) and 3 secondary schools (Grade 9-10) in the Woreda. Gross enrolment rate for girls is 46.16% for grades 1-8, which declines to 26.6% for grades 9-10 (Gorche Woreda Education Office, 2016).

## **Methods of data collection and analysis**

### **Study design**

A cross-sectional survey research design with a structured questionnaire tool was employed in this study to collect quantitative data. The survey was conducted in three early marriage hotspot Woredas: Alefa Woreda (North Gondar Zone, Amhara), Diksis Woreda (Arsi Zone, Oromia), and Gorche Woreda (Sidama Zone, SNNP).

### **Sampling procedure**

With the objective of establishing the prevalence and drivers of early marriage, the study woredas as early marriage hotspot areas were purposefully selected. The target population for this study was the total population of the selected woredas in the respective regional states. From each woreda, more than 10 *kebeles* (the

smallest administrative unit)<sup>8</sup> were randomly selected and a few inaccessible kebeles, for instance, a kebele which doesn't have a bridge connecting it to the *woreda* town was excluded. Then, a sampling frame was obtained from the respective relevant *woreda* offices. The sampling frame included all the male- and female-headed households in the respective selected kebele by making sure that there was no duplication. In this research project, the sampling unit was the household. Each household from a randomly selected kebele had an equal chance of being selected and included in the sample. Sample households were selected using a lottery method and actual interviews were conducted with women, depending on their availability at the time of the survey period and consent to take part in the study.

#### **Inclusion and exclusion criteria**

Women aged 15 to 49 were interviewed using a structured questionnaire in Afaan Oromoo, Amharic and Sidama languages. In cases where the household was headed by a woman, the household head herself or if the household head was a man then the wife (aged 15 to 49) or in her absence the adolescent girl was interviewed. In the absence of an adolescent girl (age 15 and above), in a selected household a woman aged 15-49 or an adolescent girl who either resided in the household or visited the household during the night before the survey, was interviewed. In the absence of all of the above mentioned female respondents in the household, then the sample household was replaced by another one. Women with such types of disability as hearing and cognitive impairment were excluded from the survey.

#### **Sample size**

Given the total size of the population of the respective *woredas*, the sample size in each *woreda* was determined to be 400 with a sampling error of 5% and with a confidence level of 95% using a sampling table prepared by Cohen et al. (2005). Out of the determined total sample size of 1,200, the team was actually able to collect a total of 1,199 completed questionnaires from the three hotspot *woredas*.

#### **Data collection instrument**

Guided by the objectives of the research, a structured questionnaire was developed which consisted of 13 sections, including respondents' socio-demographic

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<sup>8</sup> An Amharic word which refers to the lowest local government administrative unit and is found below the *Woreda*.

characteristics; characteristic of natal family; childhood experiences; attitude towards gender relations at home; marriage and family formation; social expectations (empirical and normative); attitude towards timing of marriage and personal preferences; relationship with husband; household decision-making and gendered social norms; social networks and civic participation; education and school setting; and drivers and barriers of early marriage. Then, the English version of the questionnaire was translated into Afaan Oromoo, Amharic and Sidama languages.

#### **Training of research assistants and supervisors**

A total of 25 female research assistants were selected using such criteria as level of education, data collection experience and local language proficiency. In each of the study woredas, a two-day long training was given to the research assistants in each region by the lead researchers with the help of 5 male supervisors in a classroom setting, but in a participatory manner using copies of the questionnaire and role play. The training workshops covered the tools, research ethics and the safety of data collectors. The training conducted in Addis Ababa was designed in such a way that the researchers fine-tuned the structured questionnaire using feedback obtained from the role plays. On review of the results, the lead researchers and supervisors adapted the questionnaires to the local contexts of the woredas in order to maximize the validity and reliability of questionnaire items. The former involved a discussion with the research assistants about the translation of the questionnaire in the context of vernaculars and the team gathered their suggestions about how to increase the usability of the tool.

#### **Data analysis and validation of findings**

The survey data were entered, cleaned and analysed using SPSS Version 23. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to analyse the data. Descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation) were used to determine the prevalence rates of early marriage in the three study sites and across three generations and to identify most salient drivers of early marriage as perceived by the respondents. Multiple regression analyses were used to identify important factors that are associated with age at first marriage of the respondents and the daughters of the respondents. The preliminary findings of the study were validated by organizing validation workshop in each region followed by a national validation workshop.

### **Ethical considerations**

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Review Committee of the Ethiopian Society of Sociologists, Social Workers and Anthropologists, and that included approval to adhere to ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of study participants in accordance with the National Research Ethics Review Guidelines of Ethiopia (MoST, 2014, 5th Edition). Informed consent was secured from the study participants by first stating the objectives and content of the study; commitment to respect privacy and data security; voluntary participation; and the right to choose not to answer or skip any question. All study participants signed the consent form prior to the interview.

### **Findings**

#### **Respondents' socio-demographic profile**

A total of 1199 women participated in the household survey. Of these, 400 were from Alefa Woreda and Diksis Woreda each and 399 were from Gorche Woreda. As it is clearly indicated in the methods section, the population of the study was all women who are at their fertility ages (15-49). The mean age of all the participants was 30.7 and there was no significant difference among the participants in the three Woredas. As expected, the birthplace of almost all the participants was in rural areas. In terms of religion, all the participants from Alefa were Orthodox Christians; whereas the majority of the participants (70.5%) from Diksis were Muslims and the remaining (29.3%) were Orthodox Christians. The participants in Gorche were more heterogeneous than those in the other two Woredas in terms of religion. Accordingly, 85.5% were Protestant, 10.5% were Catholic, 3.8% of the participants were Muslim and 0.3% of the participants were Orthodox Christian. The majority (90.5% from Alefa, 87.8% from Diksis and 89.5% from Gorche) of the survey respondents were married. In terms of education, only a third (18.0% from Alefa, 39.5% from Diksis and 32.9% from Gorche) of the study participants had attended a formal school. Of those who attended formal school, most of them completed only primary school (87.5% from Alefa, 87.3% from Diksis and 93.9% from Gorche).

Regarding marital status, the majority (89.0% from Alefa, 89.8% from Diksis and 88.7% from Gorche) of the participants were housewives. Only 9.8%, 7.0% and 7.3% of the participants from Alefa, Diksis and Gorche, respectively were the head of their respective households. The mean family size of the households surveyed in the three research sites was found to be 6.0 (5.7 in Alefa, 5.9 in Diksis and 6.2 in Gorche). No significant mean difference was observed in family size in the three research sites. The overwhelming majority of the

participants in the three research sites reported having their own children; while only 4.8% from Alefa, 7.5% from Diksis and 7.3% from Gorche reported that they have no child.

### **Prevalence and trends of early marriage**

The prevalence of early marriage among mothers of respondents of this survey was found to be 75.9%; it was higher in Alefa (94.5%) followed by Gorche (71.9%) and Diksis (61.3%). The overall mean age at first marriage among mothers of the respondents was found to be 13.5; this was much lower in Alefa (9.8) than in both Diksis (15.9) and Gorche (15.5).

The prevalence of early marriage among women who were directly interviewed in this survey was found to be 69.9%; this was higher in Alefa (88.0%) followed by Gorche (68.4%). The overall mean age at first marriage of the respondents was found to be 14.8; this was significantly lower in Alefa (11.49) than in both Gorche (15.9) and Diksis (17.2).

The prevalence of early marriage among first daughters of women interviewed in this survey was 74.3%; this was higher in Alefa (85.1%), followed by Gorche (77.1%), and 47.1% in Diksis. The overall mean age at first marriage of first daughters of respondents of this survey was found to be 14.6; this was significantly lower in Alefa (11.9), followed by Gorche (15.6). Mean age at first marriage of daughters of respondents of this survey in Diksis (17.5) was found to be closer to the legal age at first marriage.

An overall declining trend in the prevalence of early marriage and increasing trend in mean age at first marriage were noted as we go from mothers of survey respondents to the respondents themselves and to their first daughters (see Table 1). However, there is a significant difference among the research sites. In Alefa (Amhara), there is a clear increase in mean age at first marriage and a decline in the prevalence of early marriage from mothers to respondents and also from mothers to first daughters of respondents, but no increasing trend in mean age at first marriage from respondents to their first daughters. In Diksis (Oromia), there is a clear trend of decline in the prevalence of early marriage and a subsequent increase in mean age at first marriage from mothers to respondents, and from respondents to their first daughters, as well. In Gorche (SNNP), there is an increasing trend in mean age at first marriage from mothers to respondents and a further increase from respondents to their daughters. Nevertheless, the increase in mean age at first marriage from respondents to their first daughters was found to be very small. In Gorche, there is an increasing trend in the prevalence of early marriage from respondents to their first daughters.

**Table 1:** Prevalence of early marriage and mean (standard deviation) for age at first marriage

Variable	Alefa	Diksis	Gorche	Total
Mothers' age at first marriage	9.8 (4.2)	15.9 (2.5)	15.5 (2.5)	13.5 (4.3)
Prevalence of mothers' early marriage	94.5%	61.3%	71.9%	75.9%
Respondents' age at first marriage	11.49 (4.6)	17.2 (2.5)	15.9 (2.7)	14.8 (4.2)
Prevalence of respondents' early marriage	88.0%	50.0%	68.4%	69.9%
First daughters' age at first marriage	11.9 (5.1)	17.5 (2.4)	15.6 (2.6)	14.6 (4.2)
Prevalence of first daughters' early marriage	85.1%	47.1%	77.1%	74.3%

**Source:** Authors' own survey

### Factors associated with age at first marriage

Separate multiple regression analyses were done to determine the association of demographic, social, educational, economic and natal family characteristics (independent or predictor variables) with the respondents' age at first marriage (dependent or outcome variable) in the three research sites. This was done with the aim of identifying factors that significantly predict or contribute to the age at first marriage of the respondents of this survey. The data show that in Alefa (Amhara), the only variable that was significantly associated with age at first marriage of the respondents was attendance of formal education (Table 2). Respondents who attended formal school were married at a later age than those who did not attend formal school. In Diksis (Oromia), respondents who attended formal school and those whose fathers ever attended formal school were married at a later age than those who did not attend formal school and whose fathers did not attend formal school. The findings also revealed that in Gorche (SNNP), size of land of the natal family was found to be the only variable significantly and negatively associated with age at first marriage. That is, as the size of land of the parents increases, they would economically be better and they would in turn get their daughters marry off at early age.

**Table 2:** Factors associated with respondents' age at first marriage at Alefa Woreda (N= 219)

Predictor variable	B-coefficient	Standard error	t-value	P-value
Place of birth	-2.79	4.31	-0.65	0.518
Ever attended a formal school	-2.94	0.74	-3.98	0.000
Age gap with first husband	-0.61	0.50	-1.22	0.222
Are you a first, a second or a third wife?	0.48	1.67	0.29	0.775
Number of sisters	-0.26	0.18	-1.48	0.140
Number of brothers	0.09	0.20	0.45	0.651
Mother ever attended school	0.53	2.08	0.25	0.800
Father ever attended school	0.53	1.09	0.48	0.629
Size of land of natal family	-0.03	0.27	-0.01	0.923
What type of material was used for the roof of your natal family's house?	0.21	0.53	0.39	0.698
What type of material was used for the walls of your natal family's house?	-0.76	0.56	-1.36	0.174
How many head of cattle did your natal family own?	-0.02	0.06	-0.32	0.750

**Source:** Authors' own survey

In Diksis (Oromia), two variables were found to be significantly associated with respondents' age at first marriage (respondents' attendance of formal school and whether or not fathers ever attended formal school) (Table 3). That is those respondents who attended formal school and whose fathers ever attended formal school have got married at a later age than those who did not attend formal school and whose fathers did not attend formal school. The other variables (such as place of birth, age gap with the first husband, and number of siblings and economic status of the natal family) were not significantly associated with age at first marriage of the respondents of this survey.

**Table 3:** Factors associated with respondents' age at first marriage at Diksis Woreda (N= 334)

Predictor variable	B-coefficient	Standard error	t-value	P-value
Religion/belief system	-0.11	0.10	-1.04	0.301
Ethnic background	-1.18	1.00	-1.18	0.240
Ever attended a formal school	-0.63	0.30	-2.12	0.035
Age gap with first husband	-40	-0.22	-1.84	0.067
Are you a first, a second or a third wife?	0.05	0.54	0.09	0.932
Number of sisters	0.05	0.07	0.64	0.521
Number of brothers	0.12	0.08	1.49	0.137
Mother ever attended school	-0.27	0.44	-0.61	0.544
Father ever attended school	-0.67	0.32	-2.08	0.038
Size of land of natal family	-0.07	0.06	-1.12	0.266
What type of material was used for the roof of your natal family's house?	0.18	0.15	1.20	0.230
What type of material was used for the walls of your natal family's house?	0.91	0.98	0.93	0.352
How many head of cattle did your natal family own?	0.01	0.02	0.47	0.641

**Source:** Authors' own survey

The data showed that in Gorche size of land of the natal family was found to be the only variable significantly associated with respondents' age at first marriage. All the other variables (place of birth, respondents' attendance of formal education, age gap with the first husband, number of siblings and parents' attendance of formal education) were not significantly associated with age at first marriage of the respondents of this survey (Table 4).

**Table 4:** Factors associated with respondents' age at first marriage at Gorche Woreda (N= 334)

Predictor variable	B-coefficient	Standard error	t-value	P-value
Place of birth	-0.28	0.23	-1.23	0.219
Religion/belief system	-0.003	0.38	-0.007	0.994
Ethnic background	-1.20	0.73	-1.65	0.101
Ever attended a formal school	-0.60	0.35	-1.73	0.085
Age gap with first husband	-0.06	0.28	--0.20	0.843
Are you a first, a second or a third wife?	-0.18	0.34	-0.55	0.584
Number of sisters	0.08	0.08	1.00	0.319
Number of brothers	-0.004	0.09	-0.04	0.966
Mother ever attended school	-0.70	0.70	-1.00	0.320
Father ever attended school	0.11	0.47	0.229	0.819
Size of land of natal family	-0.28	0.11	-2.49	0.013
What type of material was used for the roof of your natal family's house?	0.25	0.17	1.47	0.142
What type of material was used for the walls of your natal family's house?	0.25	0.14	1.73	0.085
How many head of cattle did your natal family own?	-0.02	0.03	-0.64	0.524

**Source:** Authors' own survey

### Drivers of early marriage

The study has identified three categories of drivers of early marriage: gendered norms, economic contexts and institutional factors of which the major ones are highlighted here.

#### Gendered social norms

Gendered social norms are the major drivers of early marriage among the study communities. One of these is stigma directed at unmarried girls. In Alefa (Amhara), social norms cause both families and girls to fear the prospect of remaining unmarried (*qomo-qar*) and the stigma directed at unmarried girls. Likewise, in Diksis, (Oromia,), girls who remained unmarried soon after puberty are locally stigmatised as *haftuu* (unmarried girls until the age of 17 who are

considered as ‘a curse for the family’). Among study communities in Gorche (SNNP), there is also a strong social stigma attached to girls who remain unmarried after the socially appropriate age of marriage that is 15 years locally known as *elima* (unmarriageable). Linked to these gendered social norms in Diksis is the custom of *Irra Dhaaba* (customary marriage practiced in a hurry)(see also Seyoum, 2016).

Second, securing family honour by ensuring a girl’s virginity at marriage and thereby avoiding premarital pregnancy were found to reinforce the practice of early marriage. Because girls are generally expected to be virgin at marriage, parents prefer to marry off their daughters early in order to protect them from premarital sex and pregnancy. If a girl is not married before 18, it is considered a shame for the family. Furthermore, at least half of the survey respondents singled out four benefits of marrying off girls early: parents can see their children married before they die (63.6%); parents can see grand children before they die (62.1%); parents can help their daughters to avoid pre-marital sex (50.5%); and parents can help their daughters to maintain virginity until marriage (49.1%).

Low value for girls’ education was found to be one of the drivers of early marriage. The incentives to send girls to secondary school are minimal; and costs associated with education can result in marriage at a young age. This is due to the gender-based traditional division of labour according to which girls’ and women’s roles and responsibilities are confined to reproduction and centred around domestic chores. The practice of polygyny which is common among the study communities in Oromia and SNNP is driven by the desire to have many children that fetch higher status for men. In this regard, 40.3% of the respondents in Oromia and 38.3% in SNNP reported that their fathers had more than one wife. In this form of marriage, the second or the third wife mostly tends to be below 18. Adolescent girls’ choice to marry their ‘first love’, particularly reported among study communities in Oromia and SNNP, is an emerging yet important driver of early marriage with important implications for policy and programming. Perception about gendered norms and decision-making is also the other driver of early marriage. Around 60% of the survey respondents agreed to the statement “a man should have the final say about decisions in his home.” There was also wider age gap of 6 to 10 years between wives and their husbands (43.4% of the respondents had age gap between 6 to 10 years and 7% more than 10 years).

### **Economic contexts**

Economic dependency of girls, income poverty and bride wealth/price were found to be important factors that reinforce the practice of early marriage among the

study communities in Diksis (Oromia) and Gorche (SNNP). First, this study found that, because of the gender-based traditional division of labour, girls are confined to domestic work and reproduction. As a result, girls are often economically dependent on their parents before marriage and on their husbands after marriage.

Bride wealth is found to be an important driver of early marriage among the study communities in Oromia and SNNP, but not among those in Alefa (Amhara). Among study communities in Diksis (Oromia), bride wealth is common, where low income families normally pay a sum of ETB 20,000–30,000 as bride wealth (*gabbara*); while rich families are reported to have paid up to ETB 400,000 as a *gabbara*. Such a very high bride wealth payment is more common among rich Muslim families who have children working in the Diaspora. The high amount of bride wealth payment seems to have motivated some parents to marry off their daughters at early ages. Like among the study communities in Oromia, in SNNP early marriage seems to be mainly driven by economic factors related with *muro* (bride wealth). The amount of *muro* payment has reached the sum of ETB 20,000 for an educated girl in the study communities, though it has been made a fixed rate of payment (ETB 2,040), by a Sidama law (Guday Emirie et al. 2017). 83.5% of the survey respondents from Diksis (Oromia) and 74.2% from Gorche (SNNP) reported that their first marriage involved bride wealth payment. Moreover, among the study communities in SNNP (Gorche), some low-income widowed mothers and fathers arrange early marriage for their daughters to get bride wealth payment, while elder brothers and uncles of girls also facilitate the early marriage of school girls through abduction by receiving money from abductors. Furthermore, girls themselves may be incentivized to marry early by gifts given to them during a ceremony when they return to their natal family after marriage arranged through voluntary abduction (Guday Emirie et al., 2017).

### **Institutional factors**

The household survey respondents in Alefa, Diksis and Gorche were asked about the major drivers of early marriage in their respective locality. Accordingly, almost half of the survey respondents (48.7%) from all sites reported that absence of secondary schools is a perceived driver of early marriage. In this regard, in this study more than half of the survey respondents from all sites (52.9%) reported absence of secondary schools in rural areas as drivers of early marriage. That is not surprising given the fact that about 8 in 10 of the respondents (78.5%) from all sites reported that there is no secondary school in their locality. Furthermore, findings from this survey revealed that there were several factors that hinder girls' from accessing services at secondary and preparatory schools. Seven in ten of the

respondents (69.9%) from all the three sites reported that long distance from home to school; 4 in 10 of them (39.9%) reported insufficient availability of instructional materials and slightly more than a third of them (35.6%) reported lack of means of transportation as important concerns of parents for accessing services at secondary schools.

In many cases, girls marry simply because they lack alternatives. Where secondary schools, local employment and female role models are not available, early marriage becomes the default option (Jones *et al.*, 2016a:3). In all the study communities, the limited availability of local job opportunities for secondary school and college graduates discourages some parents from sending their children, particularly daughters, to secondary schools.

### **Concluding remark**

The survey measured prevalence rates for early marriage among grandmothers, mothers and daughters in the studied communities. The prevalence of early marriage is declining in study communities in Amhara and Oromia owing to interventions implemented by government and civil society organizations but increasing in communities in SNNP. Yet even in those regions where the prevalence of early marriage has been in decline the absolute numbers of girls who get married early may increase due to population growth.

A perusal of the literature (Hodgkinson, 2016) on the subject under consideration shows the existence of a strong association between lack of education and higher rates of early marriage. The findings of this study at least in two out of three sites are corroborative evidence for the above assertion. The data showed that in Alefa, Amhara, the only variable that was significantly associated with age at first marriage of the respondents was attendance of formal education. Respondents who attended formal school were married at a later age than those who did not attend formal school. In Diksis, Oromia, respondents who attended formal school and those whose fathers ever attended formal school were married at a later age than those who did not attend formal school and whose fathers did not attend formal school. Whereas in Gorche, SNNP, the findings revealed that size of land of the natal family was found to be the only variable significantly and negatively associated with age at first marriage.

Overall, the literature showed that culture is difficult to change and a better grasp of the cultural norms associated with marriage rites is crucial for intervention mechanisms which can be designed to address early marriage. These norms and practices include cultural and community attitudes as well as norms related to marriage, gendered perception of norms, agency and voice including roles and

position of women in society, control of female sexuality such as maintaining virginity until marriage and avoiding premarital sex. Some factors were operational in some of the study communities and did not apply to others. A case in point is bride wealth which is a driver of early marriage in Diksis (Oromia) and Gorche (SNNP) study communities but not in those communities in Amhara.

This study found that the practice of early marriage is associated with social norms, institutional factors and economic contexts. Among the gendered social norms, parents in rural areas tend to give low value to girls' education and hence early marriage is considered an alternative to rural girls who suffer from low education. It is precisely for this reason that low education (of girls and their parents) is closely associated with the practice of early marriage. In economic terms, rural parents in Gorche (SNNP) and Diksis (Oromia) with low income reported to have adopted early marriage as a coping strategy to gain access to economic assets and resources through bride wealth payments. In addition, two emerging issues which were not common drivers of early marriage in the Ethiopian context before, but found to be important in this study were adolescent girls' preference to marry their 'first love' and anticipated lack of employment after graduating from secondary schools and colleges. These are some of the key issues this study has highlighted and tackling them requires multi-sectoral efforts by both governmental and non-governmental organizations. These issues have a wide range of implications not only for youth centered programs and youth policy of the country at large, but also for the education and training and economic development policies of the country too. For example, there is a need to support girls from families with poor economic standing to go to school and prepare them to join the labour force so that they become economically independent citizens.

Although there is no single strategy which is likely to end the practice of early marriage in the study communities and beyond, the following measures are worth considering. A social norm perspective is needed to deal with the gender-based division of labor that relegates girls to low socio-economic status in the family and community at large. The need to apply a social norms perspective in designing and planning programs, in turn, requires, among others, being familiar with how to address collective behavior changes in a program; foster community empowerment; create positive social change; assess whether or not social norms are at play; apply a social norms understanding to gender issues; and develop programs using a human rights-based approach. Education of females is a powerful tool to weaken the negative influence of social norms, though lack of secondary and preparatory schools and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutes in many rural localities is a serious challenge facing efforts

directed towards delaying early marriage by extending girls' schooling. Expanding schooling in rural areas especially at the secondary level, therefore, requires the attention of relevant government and other organizations. However, expanding schooling can make a difference in the lives of girls by protecting them from early marriage and other harmful traditional practices (HTPs) only if it goes with the provision of 'relevant and better quality education' (a curriculum with a relevant and gender sensitive content) offered by schools and institutions at various levels.

Finally there is a need to conduct longitudinal studies to generate data that would enable to see the clear trend of the magnitude of early marriage in the country. In general, the findings of the study on early marriage protective factors and challenges call for further region specific studies on how to address the problem of inaccessibility of secondary and preparatory schools/TVET and that of the quality of education as a whole. Related to these issues is the negative outcome of education as reflected in the increasing number of unemployed youth and the resultant effect of this on the practice of early marriage is also an important area which requires further research with a view to informing future programs and projects.

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