

FIGHTING EARLY MARRIAGE TO INCREASE GIRLS' EDUCATION

Twenty-three-year-old Tenagnework Anegagre and her fellow teachers are fighting the tradition of early marriage that condemns girls in their community to a life of illiteracy.



"They get married before they are seven years old, at five years, even while they are still in their mother's arms," said the third-grade teacher at Shum Sheha Primary School in Bugna District, near the medieval Ethiopian town of Lalibela in Amhara Region.

Every Sunday, Tenagnework and her colleagues go to church services, where large numbers of people congregate, to preach against child marriages. Unfortunately, they are not always successful.

"Those on whom the tradition weighs heavily, they don't accept us, and they even remove the children that are going to school in order to marry them. We try our best to educate the people in areas where large numbers gather. Still you do not get satisfactory results. The people really believe in it. We cannot say that the problem is going away. It is still there."

A number of complex and interrelated factors contribute to the low enrolment and high drop out rates of girls in Ethiopia. In much of the country, the importance of girls' education is under-rated on the part of parents and the community, particularly in rural areas where the majority of the Ethiopian population reside. Age-old traditions, such as early marriage, which is a common phenomenon in much of the country, reinforce attitudes that decry the value and need to send girls to school. Married girls, who would like to continue their schooling, are often prevented from doing so. High levels of adult illiteracy rates, with only one in four adults in rural areas able to read and write, and often abject poverty exacerbate the situation. As a result, the majority of girls in Ethiopia are deprived of their basic right to education.

Changing traditions that have been an integral part of everyday life for centuries does not happen overnight. Schools and teachers operating on already scarce resources have limited means to affect change, but basic interventions can make a difference.

"Sometimes when girls inform us that they are going to marry, they tell us that if they refuse, their families will refuse to provide them with the means to secure the supplies



they need to go to school," said Tenagnework. "If the school sees this and recognizes the problem facing the girls, then according to the resources available to the school, the girls receive pens, exercise books, and so forth."

Intervention also takes place at the individual level. "There was a boy in my former school. He told us that he was going to get married because of pressure from his family, but his real wish was to continue with his schooling," she said. "We went all the way to his home, spoke to his parents and got them to cancel the plans. We were able to do this by explaining the problems associated with child marriages and the benefits of learning. They heard us and stopped the wedding. They said, 'Ok, if he is really going to learn and become as you say,' and of their own free will they cancelled the marriage plans. Now the boy is still in school. This year he will complete the sixth grade."

Tenagnework recognizes the strong hold that tradition and religion have on the rural community. She believes that harnessing the influence of the church will compel change.

"As I see it, the priests, for example in church during burial times, they can refuse to bury people. Death is the fate of all people. They can declare that people who engage in this practice will not be buried or won't receive absolution service when they die. If they do that, then with those kinds of strictures it may be possible [to change things]. If it is just by teaching, people will continue the practice, even in secret."

According to studies conducted by the National Committee on Traditional Practices of Ethiopia (NCTPE), 57 percent of girls in Ethiopia marry before the age of 18. The practice occurs in its more extreme forms in northern Ethiopia with girls getting married as young as eight- and nine-years-old, and in some instances are even pledged at birth. Early marriage rates in Amhara and Tigray region are much higher than the national average, 82 and 78 percent respectively, according to NCTPE studies.

UNICEF is working with the Government of Ethiopia to end the practice of early marriage in the country. UNICEF has lobbied for changes in the legal structure and played an influential role in amending the family code, ratified at the federal level and in some of the regions, which among other things, increases the legal marital age for girls from 15 to 18. UNICEF is also supporting the training of teachers in issues relating to gender and harmful traditional practices with the objective of making them agents of change.

UNICEF has been supported by the Norwegian Africa Girls' Education Initiative (AGEI), which seeks to improve enrolment rates, as well as the retention and learning achievement of girls. Interventions include social mobilization and awareness creation activities, which are undertaken to convince parents to send their daughters to school. A

strong effort is also made to ensure the presence of female teachers to serve as role models and counselors. The initiative seeks to render the school environment more gender sensitive with the provision of teacher training, curriculum development to remove gender biases in textbooks and instruction, as well as the construction of separate latrine facilities for boys and girls.

Approximately 3.5 million 7-14-year-old girls remained outside the school system in 2000-2001. The overall rate of enrolment for girls in Ethiopia in 2000-2001 is 47 percent, up from 39.2 in 1999-2000. The Government's Five-Year Plan for the period 2000-01 to 2004-5 includes specific strategies to reduce the gender gap in gross enrolment rates to 15.8 per cent by 2004-05 from its current level of 20 per cent. The target set for the share of girls in primary school enrolment is 43.3 per cent.

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