

WUBIT: CHILD BRIDE



Eleven-year-old Wubit Deresse's small fist grips the metal pestle tight, bringing it down with a firm thud. Inside the mortar are the coffee beans that her mother-in-law has just finished roasting. Wubit pounds the beans into a smooth powder, which she then scoops into a clay coffeepot and places over the charcoal fire. Wubit's in-laws have unexpected guests, and she is helping to serve them. While her mother-in-law prepares *kollo* (roasted grain) for the guests to snack on, Wubit brings the coffee to a boil. She takes the pot off the fire and sets it onto a holder made of woven grass. After waiting for the grounds to settle, she pours the coffee into small cups placed in neat rows on the tray before her. Her face is stern throughout the process. She responds with discipline and concentration to all that her in-laws ask, dutifully performing each task put to her. When the third pot of coffee has been drunk and the cups collected, washed and put away, Wubit's mother-in-law tells her that she is free to go to school. She rushes to the back of the hut to change into her uniform, grabs her small bundle of exercise books and heads out to school.

"I want to become an agricultural extension agent," she says, and to this end she hikes 30 minutes from her village of Meskel Iko to the Zebena Primary School in the foothills of the Semien Mountain range in North Gondar Zone of Amhara Region. Wubit joins her fellow third-grade students who are also making their way to school for the afternoon shift, and her face brightens up, losing the austere expression she wears when in the company of her husband and his family. As they march across the fields, Wubit joins in the lively chatter and laughter, no longer the responsible spouse or duty-laden daughter-in-law, but a regular 11-year-old child.

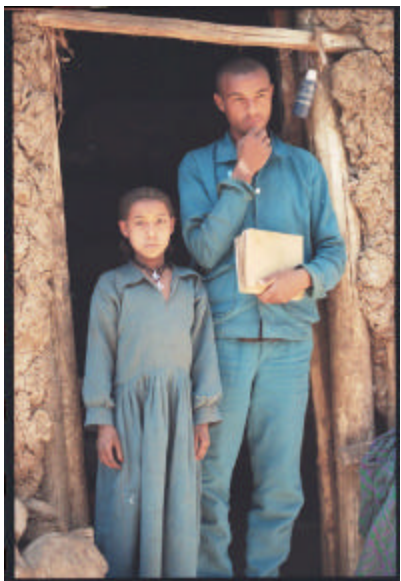
Wubit married two years ago when she was nine-years-old in accordance with local tradition. It was an arranged marriage, and she had no say in the matter. Wubit is silent when asked if she loves her husband, a forlorn stare her only response to questions about her marriage and life with her in-laws.

For their part, her in-laws are quick to express their satisfaction with Wubit. "She does what we ask. She is a good girl, and we are happy with her," says her father in-law.

Tegegn Bizu is his parents' only son, which is why they insisted on an arranged marriage for him. "My heart was set on finishing school, not on getting married," Tegegn said. "I did it to fulfil my parent's wishes."

Tegegn's family is held in high esteem by the community, because he and his father are priests serving in the local church. For this reason, they had no difficulty identifying potential brides for

him, despite efforts by the local women's association to bring an end to the tradition. When the time came for him to wed, Tegegn was offered a selection of four girls. The reluctant 18-year-old groom chose nine-year-old Wubit.



Tegegn is now 20-years-old, and a fifth grade student at Zebena Primary. As part of their marriage contract, Tegegn agreed to allow Wubit to finish school. They both say that they would like to become teachers or agricultural extension workers when they graduate, professions which they hope will remove them from the drudgery of farming life.

As young Wubit gets older, however, the obstacles that stand in her way of achieving this dream will multiply. Wubit has already moved in with her husband and sleeps in the same bed with him in his parent's home. Tegegn insists that he has not had sexual relations with her, and that he will wait until she is mature, but exactly when that will be is not clear. If Wubit were to get pregnant as a teenager it would probably bring an end to her schooling. The couple will at some point move out and establish their own household. Wubit's household responsibilities will multiply making attending school difficult, if not impossible.

Other factors also threaten Wubit's dreams. Should she manage to complete the sixth grade at Zebena Primary, Wubit will have to transfer to an elementary or secondary school to continue her education, and the nearest one is located over an hour's walk away in the town of Debark. The extra distance will mean that Wubit will have less time for cooking, cleaning, collecting firewood and water, assisting with farming, tending to cattle and other household duties, all of which are traditionally the responsibility of females in the family. Having to walk to Debark will also increase the risk of being attacked or raped along the lonely country paths. If she is forced to choose between school and her home duties it is most likely that school will lose out.

Communities that continue to practice early marriage, including in North Gondar Zone, do so for a variety of reasons. High on the list of commonly cited explanations is the need to guarantee that girls are virgins when they marry. Marriages are also used as a means of securing alliances between families, particularly in situations where they want to consolidate their wealth. The desire to see one's children married and established with families of their own is another major factor, a concern which is influenced by the low life expectancy in Ethiopia, presently estimated to be in the 40's. The premium placed on successful marriages is so high that if a child, especially a girl, remains single beyond the accepted age in the community, the family risks being labeled as social outcasts, and their daughter as a '*galemota*' or unwanted woman.

"Early marriage violates the human rights of the children involved. It deprives them of the security and affection of their parents' home at a young age," says Zewdie Abegaz, Chief of UNICEF Ethiopia's Gender and Child Protection section. "The responsibilities that come with marriage, maintaining a household, make attending school virtually impossible. Girls are deprived of the right to play. They are exposed to physical violence perpetrated by members of their husband's family. Their workload increases and in poorer families the child bride will be allotted the least amount of food. The girls are totally powerless, lacking assertiveness and other essential life-skills. They have low self-esteem. Their health is completely neglected. Becoming sexually active and getting pregnant at an age when their bodies are immature exposes them to serious health risks."

These risks are magnified by the limited infrastructure and scarcity of health centers in a country where over 85 per cent of the population live in rural areas. It is not uncommon to have to walk for up to two or three days to get to the nearest health clinic. Girls and women often do not receive adequate care during their pregnancy. This exposes girls to the risk of prolonged labor extending over several days, which can result in still births. Girls face the possibility of developing fistulae, which can deprive them of control of their urine and even bowel movements.

According to studies conducted by the National Committee on Traditional Practices of Ethiopia (NCTPE), 57 per cent 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. Women's Affairs Offices, established at the federal and regional levels, are fighting the three major harmful traditional practices identified as being particularly detrimental to the situation of girls and women: early marriage, female genital mutilation, and marriage by abduction. 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 supporting the training of teachers in issues relating to gender and harmful traditional practices with the objective of making them agents of change. The agency is also working to improve the capacity of the Regional Women's Affairs Bureaus, which are addressing the issue of early marriage. By supporting this multifaceted approach, UNICEF is actively working to ensure that Wubit's will be the last generation of child brides in Ethiopia.

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