

INTERVIEW WITH THIRD GRADE TEACHER TENAGNEWOR ANEGAGRE ON THE SUBJECT OF EARLY MARRIAGE AND GIRLS' EDUCATION

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 there is a lack of adequate appreciation of the importance of girls' education 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 adult illiteracy rates, with only one in four adults in rural areas able to read and write, contribute to perpetuating the limited awareness of community members to the importance of girls' education. As a result, the majority of girls in Ethiopia are deprived of their basic right to education.

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.

Tenangework Anegagre was interviewed for a documentary on the practice of early marriage produced by the Norwegian television station NRK.



My name is Tenagnewor Anegagre. I am 23-years-old. I teach the 3rd grade. The area where I live is called Shum Sheha, in Bugna Woreda, near the town of Lalibela. The school is called Shum Sheha Primary School.

This is my second year of teaching, last year I taught in a village called Kob, which is also in North Wello.

Q: In the places where you have taught, both Kob and Shum Sheha, have you come across the practice of early marriage? How do you as a teacher tackle the

problem?

A: Early marriage in Kob is very common. It is worse than around here. They get married before they are even seven-years-old. At five years, even while they are still in their mother's arms. What can we do to fight this? There is the church. On Sundays, we go

before the people and teach that this is a harmful tradition. Those who accept what we teach will send their children to school. 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 teach the people in areas where large numbers gather. Still you do not get satisfactory results. The people really believe in the tradition. We cannot say that the problem is going away. It is still there.

Q: In your opinion, what needs to be done to end this problem?

A: In my opinion, there needs to be more education, and not necessarily from the usual people. But if a different group of people come exclusively for this purpose, if a large effort is made to change things among the people, I think it would be good. In rural areas it has become accepted to hear these types of messages from teachers. They expect that it is, because teachers want the number of students enrolled in their classes to increase. They think that is our only reason. So, in order for that not to happen, if other people were sent out to teach, who would say that they have come especially to address this issue and educate the people, then slowly, slowly, I believe the practice will end.

Q: What do you think the role of the church is in all this?

A: The church, often, regarding harmful traditions, for example in times of mourning, there is a tradition to scratch one's face, and this tradition is often decried by family priests. They tell the people not to peel the skin off their cheeks. However, we have not seen that tradition disappear as a result of their efforts. So, even on their part, they face difficulty. You can't say that it will be eradicated immediately. It is a tradition that has come down intertwined in their daily lives. You cannot just shake it off and end it. Unless we tackle it step by step from a variety of angles, we cannot say that it will cease quickly just by the efforts of teachers or the clergy.

Q: What role can priests have to be effective?

A: 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, because death does not disappear. They can declare that people who engage in this practice will not be buried in their church, or that they won't receive the absolution service when they die. If they do that, then with those kinds of strictures it may be possible. If it is just by teaching and condemning, then people will continue the practice even in secret.

Q: As a teacher, do you have the time to speak to parents and students about these things. Does this go with your work as a teacher? How do you see this as a teacher?

A: Teaching covers everything - everything we see, the harmful practices - to prevent them and to develop further the things that are useful. I have that obligation. Not just to the students, but to the whole community. Therefore at whatever occasion possible I like to teach on these things, out of my personal desire. To stop the harmful traditions and develop the beneficial ones. I don't stop my practice of going to where large groups meet to teach, for example, about AIDS. I used to belong to an anti-AIDS club. I speak about the dangers of AIDS. The rural population does not know. At the

same time, using AIDS as my entry point or focus, I will also teach about other issues that are relevant to that locality. This is something that I do out of my own desire.

Q: Regarding early marriage, what do you teach?

A: Let me give you an example. 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. 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.

Q: There are many girls who drop out of school. As teachers, how do you make sure that they don't dropout? How do you make the learning environment more appealing and comfortable for girls, so that they do not drop out?

A: Regarding early marriages, 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. 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. Other than that, there was not much that we did specifically for girls in Kob. The area is not well situated. It is about 90 kms from Lalibela. And for that reason we are limited and cannot provide much.

Q: There are girls who drop out for other reasons: if there is rape, if the school doesn't have toilet facilities for both boys and girls. How does the school make these things easier for girls? Or even the curriculum itself, how do you make what is in the textbooks more appealing to girls?

A: Girls tend to be shy. They are shy to stand up before other students. They are shy to answer questions. In response to this we call the girls separately for tutorial in a group, and we get them to stand up and read among their friends, among other girls. This is outside school hours. They practice. They are advised not to be afraid, not to fear making mistakes, and we help them to speak in front of their classmates.

For those who may encounter problems on the road to school, first the student must tell us that she is having problems. After that, if the troublemakers are known, we have them call in their parents. We inform them, reprimand them, and even go up to expelling them from school. We warn them that even outside of school they will be shut out of many things. We gather the boys and warn them that they will be put in jail, or we actually lock them up to scare them. That usually leads to the girls not having problems.

Q: What do you do to increase enrollment?

A: We do various things. As teachers we have different roles. There are villages around. Each one has a church. We divide ourselves between the churches and fan out to call on the people. We arrange for families who do not send their children to school to be penalized by the local government. There are things that they receive from the government, which we threaten to cut off. But at this time while it is possible for us to get a lot more students, as you can see even those that we have are not accommodated well. There are not enough learning spaces, and the students face problems. We are teaching as best we can. We can bring in a lot more students, but the classrooms are not there.



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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