Research Brief

Surprising trends in child marriage in Ethiopia

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Key messages

Patterning of child marriage in Ethiopia

- Child marriage (under 18 years) is outlawed in Ethiopia and awareness of the law is increasing, but millions of girls remain at risk.
- Many study respondents—girls, parents, and officials—believe that marriage after the age of 15 is no longer "early".
- The patterning of child marriage in Ethiopia is highly diverse; it assumes different forms in different regions across the country.
- Rates of child marriage are simultaneously declining in some districts and increasing in others.
- Child marriage permeates all religions and ethnicities and is present in all regions of the country.

Drivers of child marriage

- Social and religious norms that see girls only as wives and mothers are the largest driver of child marriage across study sites. These norms value girls' virginity and stigmatise girls and their families if they are 'impure' or 'too old'. They also prevent girls from being academically successful, because they are forced to spend hours a day on domestic work, and—in many cases—force them to leave school years before they would choose to do so.
- Adolescent decision-making is a double-edged sword: in some locales it is allowing girls to choose education over marriage, but in others it is facilitating girls to marry their 'first love'.
- In many cases girls marry simply because they lack alternatives; where secondary schools, local employment and female role models are not available, child marriage becomes the default option.
- Poverty does not emerge as a strong driver of child marriage. While economic motivations were common, most related to consolidating wealth through bride price and demonstrating social status rather than to extreme poverty. Notably, however, even in these situations girls are effectively being used as currency to secure the futures of other family members.

Good practice programming to reduce child marriage

- The most successful programming relies on strong government support, works through local government initiatives, focuses not only on child marriage but also on broader gender roles and inequality, and includes men and boys as well as traditional and/or religious leaders.
- Child marriage is declining where commitment to and investment in girls' education is growing—especially where schooling is coupled with active, participatory girls' clubs.
- In order to better target and tailor programming to local realities, it is necessary to collect district level data on a more regular basis and to invest in rigorous baseline data collection before embarking on new programming.

Introduction

Recent progress notwithstanding, child marriage remains common in Ethiopia. According to the 2011 Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), the median age at which Ethiopian women marry is 16.5 years and 40% of all women in their early 20's were married before they turned 18[1]. Child marriage, while admittedly not the only risk facing adolescent girls[2], is typically accompanied by truncated education and too early sexual exposure and adolescent pregnancy, which leaves girls subject to a wide variety of threats- including higher rates of birth injuries and maternal mortality, less access to familial decision-making and a greater likelihood of gender-based violence[3].

This briefing synthesises findings from a national study commissioned by UNICEF Ethiopia and the National Alliance to End Child Marriage in Ethiopia by 2025 spearheaded by the Ethiopian Ministry of Children, Women and Youth Affairs to identify the patterning and drivers of child marriage across Ethiopia—and to locate promising examples of good-practice programming which could be brought to scale as the government moves towards its ambitious goal of eliminating child marriage within a decade.

Improvements over time

Ethiopia's progress towards eliminating child marriage appears to be accelerating considerably. According to the 2011 DHS, on a national level, only 8% of the youngest group of women (those aged 15-19 years) were married before their 15th birthdays. This rate is half that of their slightly older peers (those aged 20-24) and is starkly lower than that of the oldest cohort (those aged 45-49 years)-nearly 40% of whom were married before mid-adolescence. Rates of marriage in older adolescents are also dropping. While nearly three-quarters of women in the oldest cohort were married before the age of 18, only two-fifths of women aged 20-24 were married in childhood. There is reason, based on the 2011 DHS, to believe that these trends will continue. While DHS data do not allow for sufficient disaggregation, they suggest that education is helping girls delay their marriages and that rural areas are beginning to close the gap with urban areas in terms of reducing child marriage.

Much of the recent reduction in child marriage can be attributed to Ethiopia's strong policy and legal frameworks. Building on the Constitution, the Family Code sets the minimum age for marriage at 18 and the Criminal Code specifically criminalises child marriage and stipulates prison terms for violators. With the launch of the[4] National Alliance to End Child Marriage and the National Strategy and Action Plan on Harmful Traditional Practices against Women and Children in Ethiopia, the Government of Ethiopia is aiming to eliminate child marriage entirely.

1 CSA and ICF International, 2012

2 For example, see Jones et al. (2014) for a discussion of how migration to Middle Eastern countries is harming girls' physical and psycho-social wellbeing.

3 UNFPA, 2012; Brown, 2012; Alhassan, 2011; Erulkar et al., 2010a,b ; Gage 2009

4 It should be noted that in order to maximise this balance, care was taken to ensure that when multiple districts in the same zone were all hotspots, a single *woreda* was chosen for follow-up research.

Harnessing the census data

Our ground-breaking research began by harnessing data from the 2007 national census, allowing for the first time both disaggregation of child marriage rates at the *woreda* (district) level and disaggregation of child marriage rates by age groupings (10-14 and 15-17 years). This led to some surprising findings. We were able to see, for example, not only very high levels of intra-regional variation that proves the existence of child marriage 'micro-climates' and 'hotspots' where girls are particularly at risk, but also that locations where older girls and younger girls marry are often totally disjoint. For example, while Amhara Regional State has the lowest median age at first marriage (14.7 years according to the DHS), the region does not stand out in terms of "hotspots" for the youngest girls. Indeed, of the top 10 hotspots, only two are held by that region – a number that places it on equal footing with Somali (see Table 1). Oromia, on the other hand, a region which to date has attracted relatively limited attention in terms of programming, contains four of the top 10 hotspots. However, in terms of the marriage of older girls, Amhara holds six of the top 10 hotspots – followed by Oromia and Benishangul-Gumuz, both of which hold two (see Table 2).

From our analysis of the custom census data provided by the Ethiopian Central Statistics Agency (CSA), we identified 11 'hotspot' sites where we undertook in-depth qualitative research on the drivers of child marriage. These hotspots are characterised by exceptionally high rates of child marriage– accordingly, six sites are in the top 10 woredas with the highest prevalence of under 18 marriages. At the same time, however, regional balance was sought[4] and offset the reality that the vast majority of previous research on child marriage has focused predominantly on girls in the Amhara region.

Table 1: Girls aged 10-14 ever married

Location	Marriage rate
Jikawo, Gambella	43.8%
Kelafo, Somali	29.8%
Girja, Oromia	27.1%

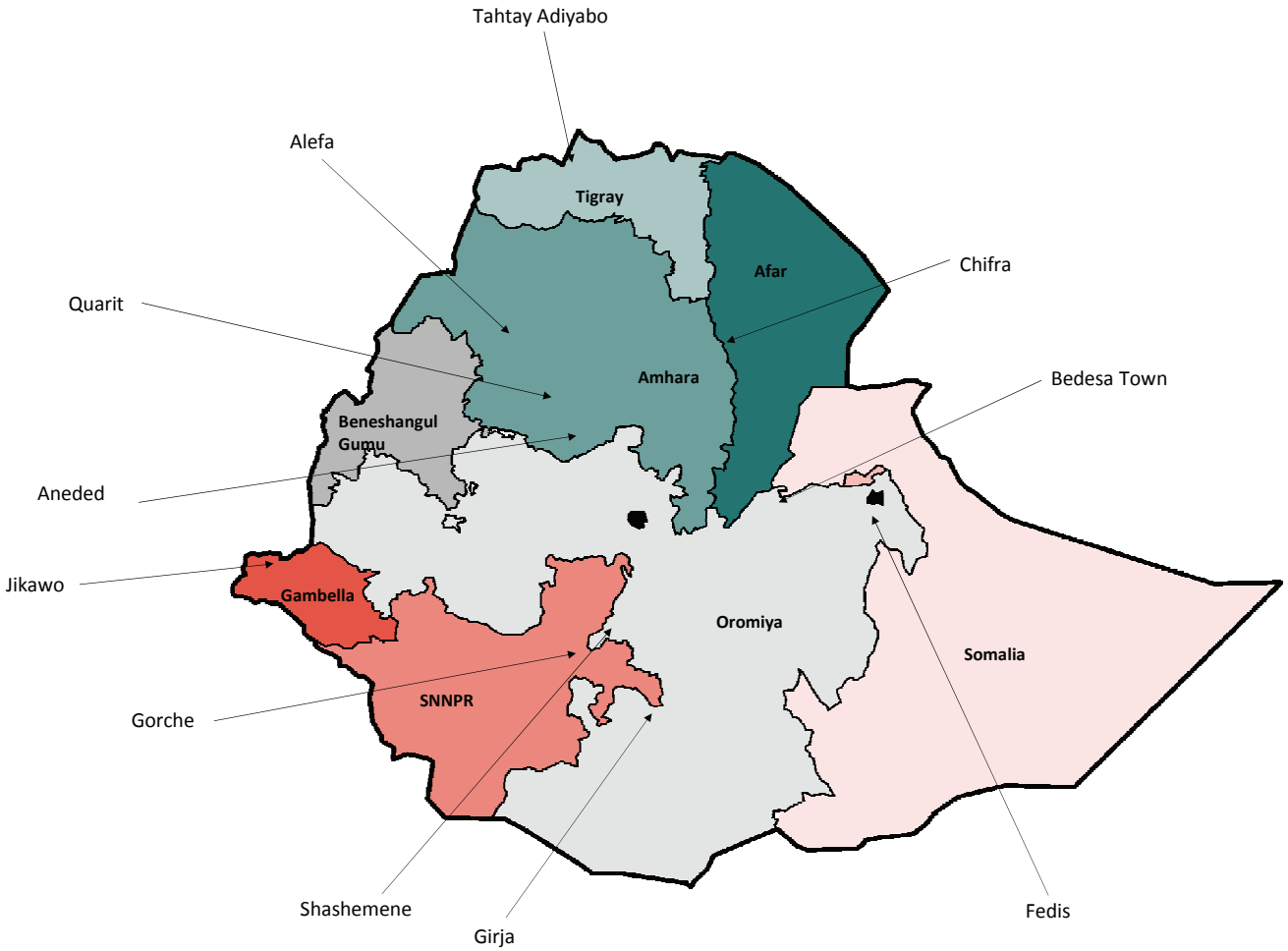
Location	Marriage rate
Chinaksen, Oromia	23.5%
Alefa, Amhara	23.5%
Bedesa, Oromia	23.4%
Dila, SNNP	22.6%
Ayisha, Somali	22.3%
Fedis, Oromia	21.9%
Quarit, Amhara	21.8%

Location	Marriage rate
Belojiganfo, B-G	54.1%
Fedis, Oromia	53.1%
Quara, Amhara	53%
Alefa, Amhara	52.1%
Quarit, Amhara	51.6%
Sirba Abay, B-G	50.1%
Aneded, Amhara	50%
Mirab Armachiho, Amhara	48.7%

Table 2: Girls aged 15-17 ever married

Location	Marriage rate
Jawi, Amhara	57%
Chewaqa, Oromia	56.3%

Figure 1: Hotspot sites



Box 1: Our qualitative research

- We worked in 22 *woredas* in 7 regions using 10 languages.
- We interviewed more than 1300 respondents, including adolescents, their family members and key informants
- Community mappings helped us capture the broader background of different communities.
- Focus group discussions enabled us to explore community level views and customs surrounding gender norms in general and marriage in particular.
- In-depth interviews allowed us to explore married girls' experiences with child marriage – and unmarried girls' experiences with resistance and alternatives.
- Intergenerational trios, which involved in-depth interviews with adolescents, parents and grandparents from the same family, facilitated our understanding of how customs and beliefs are changing –or not – over time.
- Key informant interviews, with *kebele* and *woreda* officials, health extension workers, teachers, traditional and religious leaders, permitted an understanding of how local institutions are shaping child marriage.
- Interviews with programme implementers helped us better understand effective programme entry points as well as persistent bottlenecks and/or emerging challenges.

Child marriage experiences vary widely

Driven by Ethiopia's ethnic and religious diversity, child marriage assumes a wide variety of forms across the country. In Quarit, Amhara, for example, it is still common for girls as young as five to be married. These 'marriages', however, are purely ceremonial and are most often so quickly followed by divorce that girls remember little about the experience other than there was a celebration and that they are now technically both schoolgirls and 'ever married' women. In Jikawo, Gambella, on the other hand, child marriage can have devastating consequences for girls, who are not infrequently used to secure better marriages for their brothers, rarely attend even second-cycle primary school and are often pregnant well before their 15th birthdays. Girls in both Quarit and Jikawo are counted in the EDHS and census as married girls. The risks facing them – and the opportunities open to them – could not, however, be more different.

Diverse drivers of child marriage in hotspot districts

The drivers of child marriage in Ethiopia are as diverse as its patterning – although they largely revolve around social norms – especially those related to girls' purity and their eventual roles as wives and mothers. Girls' premarital sexuality is seen as shameful in most of the hotspot locations; premarital pregnancy is considered unacceptable in all. Parents' fear of girls' emergent sexuality, which in many cases is supported by both religious tradition and religious leaders, has traditionally encouraged them to arrange child marriage either before or soon after puberty. This timing ensures girls will not sully family honour, but also – and critically from their parents' perspective – protects them from damaging their chances of attracting a good husband.

Girls themselves are sometimes complicit in child marriage. In some cases, they wish to avoid the stigma directed at 'mature', unmarried girls and choose to marry as children solely to avoid being the subject of community gossip or insulted as *qomoqär* or *haftuu* (unwanted for marriage). In other cases, most notably across Oromia, girls are 'choosing' to marry, sometimes very early, because they believe themselves in love, want the prestige of being a married woman, or wish to assert their independence from their parents.

Notably, poverty itself does not emerge as a strong driver of child marriage in our research. With the exception of sites in the Somali region, where poverty is a recurring theme, economic motivations are discussed in our hotspot sites but are almost always presented in the context of consolidating wealth through bride price and demonstrating social status rather than in terms of poverty itself. Even in Jikawo, Gambella, where girls are essentially seen as currency, the overall tenor of transactions is not desperation but aspiration.

In many cases, girls marry as children simply because they lack "better" options. Commitment to girls' education is low across most hotspot sites, with parents preferring to keep their girls home to help with domestic chores and family care responsibilities. Indeed, even where girls are allowed to attend school, their irregular attendance often means their performance is poor, which prevents them

from passing required exams. Furthermore, for graduates of primary school, secondary schools are rare in rural areas-- and both require a significant financial commitment and engender a great deal of parental fear about girls' physical and moral safety. Employment options are equally hard to come by. Youth unemployment in Ethiopia is high and girls are especially constrained given cultural restrictions on their mobility.

Learning from good practice programming

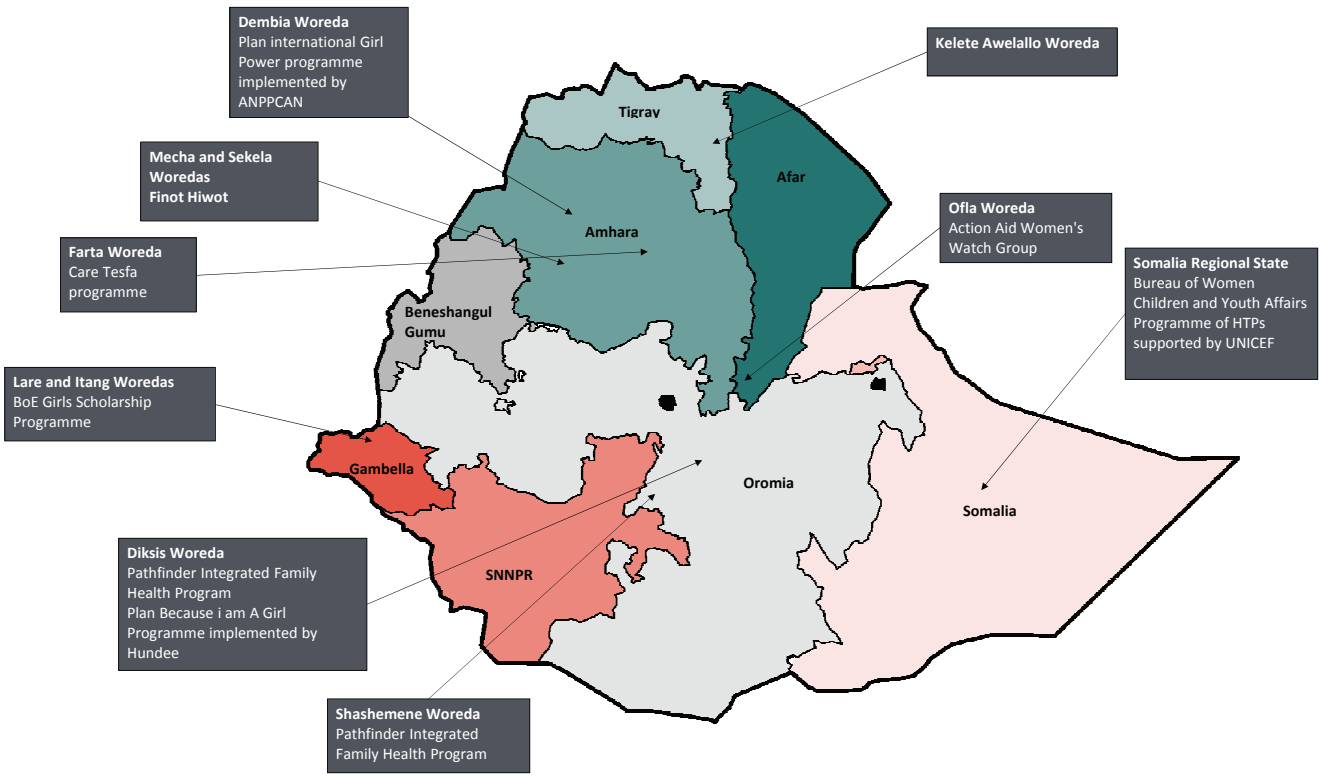
While many of the programmes we assessed have not been especially successful at reducing child marriage, there are a handful of programmes which can genuinely be called good practice examples (see Figure 2). These programmes, while very different from one another, have several features in common.

First, our assessment suggested that good practice programmes are tailored to their environment. They are based on a solid understanding of local drivers, take account of community norms and power structures, and incorporate existent protective factors into programming. They also plan for iterative improvement by collecting baseline data and regularly evaluating their impact.

Second, while taking care to avoid meeting fatigue, successful programmes work with and through existing government interventions, including health extension workers, school-based girls' clubs, and the Women's Development Groups (WDGs)/ Development Army. This ensures not only broad dissemination of messages, but also fosters local ownership by promoting local girls and women as examples. Key is that while local groups enjoy good access to community members and are more sustainable than external interventions, their core curriculums can be so broad that child marriage messages can get lost unless targeted programming helps them focus.

Successful programmes also focus directly on gender roles and inequality. They not only help communities understand why child marriage is harmful, they help girls understand that they have rights, including to an education

Figure 2: Good practice sites



Box 2: Views on how programme interventions can transform social norms

Girls have equal rights with men.
(Boy from Ofla, Afar)

I have been astonished with the objective of TESFA; it is about saving lives.
(Priest from Farta, Amhara)

I told my father that I will report the case to the school director if you ever tried to marry me off. I told him that I only want to continue my school.
(Girl from Dembia, Amhara)

If you are serious and work hard at the grass-roots level there is nothing you can't change.
(Justice official from Kilteawlalo, Tigray)

and to refuse a marriage they do not want, husbands understand why they should bake *injera* and mind children, parents understand why they should allocate household chores equally between their sons and daughters and brothers understand that they must support their sisters.

Additionally, the inclusion of boys and men is a core component of successful programming. Where men, especially religious and traditional leaders, lead the fight against child marriage and for women's equality, messages enjoy broader, faster uptake. Similarly, where boys are included in club-based programming, they can become potent messengers to their parents and the broader community—and unafraid reporters of child marriage.

Good practice programmes also recognise the central importance of education in preventing child marriage and supporting the development of strong women and work to keep girls in school—and invested in education--as long as possible. Some programmes prioritise enrolling girls and carefully tracking their enrolment. Others incentivise girls' education by providing them with the uniforms and school supplies which allow them to successfully negotiate with their parents. Still others provide girls with either tutorial support, to offset their more limited homework time and help them pass exams, or help them manage menstruation, which allows them to maintain regular attendance after the onset of menses.

Finally, regardless of programming modalities, government commitment is crucial to success. While different communities have different ways of identifying and protecting girls at immediate risk of child marriage, the most successful programmes not only work cooperatively with local leaders, but exist in an environment where inter-sectoral commitment to elimination is high, financial and human resources are adequate to the task and kebele- and woreda- level links are strong. While our respondents were agreed that awareness-raising was ultimately key, they also noted that consistent enforcement of the law was critical to gathering momentum.

Priority actions for future programming

Our study has identified four priority areas which future programming could usefully focus on:

Better evidence

- Given how quickly norms are shifting in some sites there is a need for reliable, **regular data collection** about the incidence of child marriage. Care must be taken to ensure that it is disaggregated by location and cohort and captures not merely the number of child marriages cancelled, but the number of girls actually married.
- Because officials need to be able to prove girls' ages to enforce the legal age of marriage, birth registration and consistent school and health records are critical—as is inter-sectoral cooperation.

Stronger legal enforcement

- The threat of retaliation against whistle blowers is real and must be addressed—local officials need support to enforce the law and community members need a route for anonymous reporting.
- Accountability mechanisms aimed at ensuring consistent legal enforcement are key. In communities with universally tight enforcement, child marriage is on its

way to abandonment. In communities where officials often look the other way, especially for their own relatives and friends, community support for change is nearly non-existent and hidden practices rampant.

- Too often ending child marriage is seen as solely the task of Bureau of Justice or solely the task of Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs. Legal enforcement instead needs to be seen as a joint effort—with all sectors working cooperatively to support one another.
- Attention must be directed at helping girls, their parents and local officials understand that girls and boys are children until they are 18. It was common in most study sites for even officials and girls to believe that 16 was old enough for marriage.
- In regions where the legal age of marriage is not yet aligned with the federal family law and is below 18 years of age, there is a need for advocacy work directed at legal change.
- Parents and communities need to be supported to handle rapidly changing norms surrounding adolescent decision-making in order to better protect children from child marriage. Officials need to step in and prosecute all child marriages, regardless of whether they are 'free choice'.

More and better awareness-raising efforts

- The Federal Government should increase public expenditure to expand and consolidate the existent community communication and outreach programmes which are contributing to reductions in child marriage-including Health Extension Workers, Women's Development Armies, and girls' clubs.
- Messages aimed at the elimination of child marriage must include both health risks as well as social costs such as divorce and poverty and should be delivered in a way that fosters local ownership of the messaging. Linking messages to those which help parents understand the advantages of education (including its importance in strengthening girls' life-skills and decision-making capacities) is likely to be particularly powerful—perhaps especially so when combined

with messages about how this could translate into greater community wealth and national development. A coordinating role could be played by the National Alliance to End Child Marriage by 2025 in this regard.

- Given their moral authority and their position as role models, religious leaders and community elders should be prioritised for awareness-raising activities aimed at tackling both child marriages specifically and gender inequality more generally. Clergy training schools should investigate incorporating modules aimed at helping shift norms on the basis of religious texts. Furthermore, religious institutions should develop internal mechanisms to ensure that clergy members are not supporting child marriage—either by marrying girls themselves or by officiating marriages involving children under the age of 18.
- Given the pervasiveness and 'stickiness' of social norms, messaging on child marriage needs to be broadly aimed. It must target parents, especially through channels such as the Women's Development Army and religious and community leaders-- as the latter continue to drive most child marriages.
- Messaging also needs to involve adolescent girls and boys - through school-based and community clubs- who are not only beginning to choose child marriage themselves in some locations, but need to know that they are supported by the law if they are faced with an unwanted arranged marriage. Given this, the Ministry of Education at federal and regional levels should consider investing more on strengthening girls' clubs which are valuable platforms for girls in and out of school to learn about their rights and develop confidence and voice. However, governmental and NGO support to girls' clubs should focus more on providing discussion materials, as evidence suggest that transformational impacts come from thinking and talking—rather than from audio equipment.
- Given the important role that boys and men play in shaping marriage decision-making, **boys and young men need access to better information about child marriage and positive masculinity** more broadly. We suggest that boys should have access to GO and NGO-run school clubs and that greater efforts be made to help them feel like they too are crucial in ending harmful traditional practices.

Comprehensive support to promote greater gender equality

- The government should consider increasing public expenditure to enable the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Women, Children, and Youth Affairs to implement programmes which support girls' completion of primary school. This should include community awareness raising about the value of education and material support for the most vulnerable.
- Similarly, the government should **consider increasing public expenditure to the Ministry of Education to support girls' transition to secondary school**. This might include upgrading primary schools to include 9th and 10th grades so that girls can continue their schooling in their local communities, building boarding facilities near secondary schools so that girls have safe, affordable living options, or offering girls stipends to offset the costs of schooling.
- To encourage rapid uptake of education, and increase the value that parents place on education, it is important to **prioritise youth employment** so that families understand that education is an investment that will pay off. The government could consider adopting and/or enforcing affirmative action or quotas to increase the number of women within public office-- as these positions are plentiful even in rural areas.
- As efforts to increase the age of marriage expand, they will need to be accompanied by **physical and social access to contraceptives for adolescents, married and unmarried**. Free contraceptives are available in theory across the country but regional access and uptake is much more uneven and requires attention.
- **Support to strong local female role models**, especially given the important demonstration effect of local teachers and health workers, is also needed, including in the form of affirmative action, support networks and information and experience sharing.

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