One size does not fit all

The patterning and drivers of child marriage in Ethiopia’s hotspot districts

Nicola Jones, Bekele Tefera, Guday Emirie, Bethelihem Gebre, Kiros Berhanu, Elizabeth Presler-Marshall, David Walker, Taveeshi Gupta and Georgia Plank

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   - Badessa Woreda
   - Fedis Woreda
   - Gorche Woreda
   - Tahtay Adiabo woreda

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   - Dengel Ber Primary and Secondary School, Amhara, Alefa Woreda
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   - Wele Megadu Primary School, Oromia, Girja Woreda
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   - Idobas Primary School, Oromia, Fedis Woreda
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## Abbreviations

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<td>Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome</td>
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<td>DHS</td>
<td>Demographic and Health Survey</td>
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<td>EDHS</td>
<td>Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey</td>
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<td>EPRDF</td>
<td>Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front</td>
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<td>FGD</td>
<td>Focus Group Discussion</td>
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<td>FGM/C</td>
<td>Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting</td>
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<td>HIV</td>
<td>Human Immunodeficiency Virus</td>
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<td>IDI</td>
<td>In-Depth Interview</td>
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<td>KI</td>
<td>Key Informant</td>
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<td>KII</td>
<td>Key Informant Interview</td>
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<td>MCDO</td>
<td>Maternal and Child Development Organisation</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organisation</td>
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<td>ODI</td>
<td>Overseas Development Institute</td>
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<td>PSNP</td>
<td>Productive Safety Net Programme</td>
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<td>SNNPR</td>
<td>Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples</td>
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<td>SRH</td>
<td>Sexual and Reproductive Health</td>
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<td>Sexually Transmitted Infection</td>
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Glossary of types of marriage

**Absuma**: Marriage practice between two cousins (girls are expected to marry their paternal cousins and boys marry their maternal cousins) in Chifra, Afar.

**Addibaana**: Meaning ‘isolation’, refers to a practice whereby a girl goes directly to the household of the boy’s family without her parent's knowledge and asks for his parents’ permission to marry him immediately, on the same day, and without any financial conditions. This occurs most often where the girl is perceived by the community to be too old for marriage in Girja, Oromia.

**Adewana**: Occurs when a girl places a cane in the house of a boy she wishes to marry. Social convention dictates that the boy is expected to accept and that the girl has the right to request a payment in the form of cash or cattle in Gorche, SNNPR and Girja, Oromia. After this ritual has been carried out, community elders visit the home of the girl’s parents to secure their permission.

**Adosha**: A couple’s decision to cohabit without parental support in Gorche, SNNPR. This practice is generally less respected within the community and parental approval usually secured subsequently through the husband’s offer of a bride price.

**Bureau**: Where the girl’s parents arrange the marriage and ceremony, often conducted between girls and much older men and with the aim of strengthening the father’s or parents’ relationship with friends or neighbours in Gorche, SNNPR. Alternatively, parents may arrange the marriage to an unknown suitor through discussion with community elders.

**Butta**: Another term for marriage by abduction but no longer takes place in Fedis, Oromia, where it is replaced by jala-deemuu. However in Girja, Oromia, this practice known by this term is still common. In Girja, Oromia, when a girl refuses a boy’s proposal, whether made directly or formally through her parents, he may marry her through force.

**Chebsa**: Literally means to ‘break’ the arranged marriage system in Badesa and Fedis, Oromia. It is considered a short-cut through the traditional system but is deemed to be culturally binding. The boy and the girl agree first that they want to get married, and then he asks her parents with his friends. Then her parents ask the boy to send his father who comes to the bride’s house along with the elders to settle the bride price.

**Contract marriages**: Involves temporary wives, usually between the ages of 16 and 18, who accompany older migrating men in Quarit, Amhara. Girls are expected to provide both sexual and domestic work services and are theoretically paid in cash for their work. Traditionally known as kelabit mist or yekoterat gabecha, which was previously it was known as yäcən gäräd gabәčča, a type of marriage arrangement for a woman or a girl as both a servant and wife.

**Dersomelse gabecha**: Known as ‘go-back’ marriages. These marriages are arranged when girls are between five and 11 years old, are conducted by village elders under customary law, and are uniformly seen as merely symbolic in Quarit, Amhara. Girls typically spend ‘a short period of time, not even more than a week’ at their in-laws’ house, sleeping with their mothers-in-law, and are treated like the children they are.

**Hawadachu**: Practice whereby a boy and girl agree to marry each other of their own free will, usually without having sought the consent of or even informed their respective parents in Girja, Oromia

**Hawali**: Marriages based either on the mutual consent of the spouses or on parental decision-making (i.e. without the girl’s consent) may be entered into in this way in Girja, Oromia. The boy or his parents are expected to make repeated requests to the girl’s family, either directly or via the girl.

**Jala-deemuu**: Similar to waliin deemuu. Understood as marriage through elopement in Badesa and Fedis, Oromia.

**Kadhanna**: An arranged marriage that takes several years to negotiate and finalise, typically undertaken by boys from better-off families in Fedis, Oromia. Also known as hayyamma among older generations.

**Kelabit mist**: Temporary wife in Quarit, Amhara. See Contract marriages.
Kelebet: Formal practice of pre-arranged wedding agreements between parents and community elders in Badesa, Oromia.

Marriage by abduction: Girls are taken to the house of the future groom and held for a few days until formal requests for marriage have been accepted in Badesa, Oromia, and Gorche, SNNPR. This is not termed *butta* in these communities.

Marriage through inheritance: This amounts to a girl or woman being taken into a family member of the groom’s household, usually as a second or third wife in Fedis, Oromia.

Nika: A formal, binding contract practiced in Muslim communities that outlines the responsibilities of the bride and groom where consent to marriage is given verbally by both the bride and groom in Chifra, Afar and Badesa, and Girja, Oromia.

Polygamy: Where a man can marry more than one wife, particularly in the Muslim communities in Chifra, Afar, Jikawo, Gambela, and Girja, Oromia. It is on the decline in Badesa and Fedia, Oromia.

Religious marriage: Marriage between a virgin girl and a priest in Aneded and Quarit, Amhara. In Quarit, however, religious marriage can also be made by the mutual consensus of the two couples, after they are well matured, regardless of whether the man is a member of the clergy but does not allow divorce.

Religious wedding: Where Christian couples are married in the protestant church in Jikawo, Gambela.

Semaniya: A written agreement between the spouses’ parents explaining the responsibilities of each of the couple in Girja, Oromia (also known as *yäsämnya wol* in Amhara)

Waliin deemwu: Where girls and boys decide to become married without consulting parents or adults in Badesa, Oromia.

Widow inheritance: Whereby a widow is expected to marry a brother or other close male relative of her late husband, possibly as a second wife in Chifra, Afar, Jikawo, Gambela, Girja, Oromia, and Gorche, SNNPR.

Yegalemota gabecha: When girls get married for the second time in Aneded, Amhara, arranged through marriage negotiators and community elders and requires no elaborate wedding ceremony

Yelewut gabicha: Exchange marriage where parents marry their children with children of another parent just by exchanging the children without any marriage related payments in Aneded, Amhara.

Yäsämnya wol/yesemnya wole: This is a contractual marriage agreement that states that the marriage is conducted based on the equal agreement of the married couples and their parents and the amount of wealth each parent has contributed in Aneded, Amhara.
Glossary of local terms

Asir timd: Traditional measurement of farm land by measuring plough-able land by ten pair of oxen per day, equivalent to 2.5 hectare of land (4 timad = 1 hectare).

Aquolquay: Money, injera, and other items that they have given to others in the community during others’ wedding ceremonies in Aneded and Quarit, Amhara. Also known as lemate in Quarit, Amhara.

Barya: Insult meaning ‘slave’ in Aneded, Amhara.

Bell: To be sold—a Nuer girl marries a man after her parents have received a bride price of 15-27 cattle.

Bobbaa jimaa: Collecting/harvesting chat in a group in Badesa, Oromia.

Boreagi: Groom’s friend who is supposed to help bride and groom during their honeymoon in Tahtay Adiabo, Tigray.

Faro: Literally translates to luck or chance where the parents of boy and the girl listen for the sound of a particular bird during the proposal process, whose appearance is believed to herald good fortune for the marriage in Girja, Oromia.

Fice: Mark on forehead that girls make to indicate that they are virgins in Girja, Oromia. Girls who mark themselves as virgins may ask for a larger sum (it has been known for girls to be granted up to 20 or 30 cattle).

Gabbixaa: Traditional dowry practice in Badesa, Fedis and Girja, Oromia. Seen as a gift that the boy’s family give to the girls’ family.

Galemota: Traditional derogatory name given to widowed or divorced women who live alone in Aneded, Amhara.

Gargaarsa: Bride’s family in Badesa, Oromia.

Geyid/guido: Agreement for girls’ families meant to protect girls in Amhara from early sexual contact. If the girl is violated then the parents of the male are forced to pay an agreed sum to the parents of the girl.

Hafaa: Derogatory name given to unmarried boys over the age of 23-28 in Badesa and Fedis, Oromia.

Haftu: Derogatory name given to unmarried girls over the age of 18-25 in Badesa, Fedis and Girja, Oromia.

Injera: Traditional Ethiopian flat bread made of teff flour.

Jaarsolii: Local elders in Badesa, Oromia.

Jaladema: Practice of dancing together, sleeping together but not engaging in sexual intercourse between a boy and girl in Fedis, Oromia.

Kebele: An Amharic term referring to local governmental administrative unit at grass-root level and is found below the woreda.

Kemeite maskemet/kimit: Concubines or town wives. These are not formal wives but are also different from prostitutes.

Khat/chat: Flowering plant native to Horn of Africa. Chewed as a stimulant.

Mahber: Voluntarily monthly religious association for members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, organised around a parish church or at the home of a group member in honour of a chosen Saint. Used as a pretext for hiding child marriages in in some areas of Amahra.

Marii: Advance payment made to bride’s family to cover the cost of a wedding ceremony in Badesa, Oromia.
Maca/Maha: Bridal gift provided by the family of the groom, to the family of the bride, in Aneded, Amhara, to be used for buying bridal clothes and ornaments.

Milisot: Time spent after a honeymoon at own parent’s home in Tahtay Adiabo, Tigray.

Muro: Payment from husband to bride’s family in Gorche, SNNPR.

Najaasaa: Uncircumcised girls who are seen as religiously wrong as well as potentially sexually deviant in Fedis, Oromia.

Ni’edi: Traditional bed used in wedding rituals in in Tahtay Adiabo, Tigray.

Qadi: Is a religious leader and mediates or officiates the marriage process in Chifra, Afar.

Qomoqär: Derogatory name, meaning still standing/unmarriageable, given to girls who remain unmarried after the age of 15 in Aneded and Quarit, Amhara.

Qurban: Wedding ritual where priests bless bride and groom with holy water in Tahtay Adiabo, Tigray.

Shiro: Legume based dish.

Siiqee/Sinke: Term given to cane that girls place in house of boys they want to marry in Girja, Oromia and Gorche, SNNPR.

Solot: Menstruation in Chifra, Afar.

Sumna: Milder type of FGM/C where the tip of the clitoris is cut. People in Somali, Oromia and Afar are changing from practicing infibulation to this form.

Surnaa: Menstruation in Badesa, Oromia

Tilosh: another word for maca/ maha, effectively bride price.

Wata: Traditional musical instrument played at weddings in Tahtay Adiabo, Tigray.

Woreda: an Amharic term which means a formal governmental administrative structure similar to district and is found below the Zone.

Yelij ababa: In Amharic, yelijen abeba liy means ‘let me see my daughters’ wedding ceremony’–the bride is seen as a flower during her wedding and marrying off a daughter is seen as achievement in a parent’s life.

Zone: An administrative division found immediately below the region. It is usually responsible for coordination of the activities of the woreda and the regional executive.
1 Introduction

Report aims and key research questions

With an eye towards evidence-informed programming to eliminate child marriage in Ethiopia, this national mapping study was commissioned by UNICEF Ethiopia and the National Alliance to End Child Marriage by 2025 – with contribution from Girl Hub – to identify the hotspots for child marriage in Ethiopia, investigate the factors that maintain the practice of child marriage and explore the protective mechanisms that enable children to avoid child marriage. It is ground-breaking because it is the first study to examine child marriage on a woreda (district) level and is one of only a few to look at child marriage outside of Amhara regional state (see Presler-Marshall et al., 2015). The research, which required work in ten Ethiopian languages across seven regional states, pays particular attention to identifying drivers of child marriage in eleven hotspot woredas with high prevalence of girls married between the ages of 10 and 17 years, and highlights the primacy of gendered socio-cultural norms. It also examines the relative importance of economic drivers, land fragmentation, migration, education and post-education livelihood options and religious and traditional values and practices. Protective factors in each woreda are also examined, including forms of marriage that preclude early cohabitation, community role models, access to secondary education, the engagement of men and boys and the commitment of local leaders.

The limits of the Ethiopian DHS for understanding the patterning of child marriage

As discussed in an accompanying review of the literature (see Presler-Marshall et al., 2015), the past decade in particular has seen accelerating progress towards the abandonment of child marriage in Ethiopia. Nonetheless, Ethiopia remains one of many in the developing world where child marriage is still widely practised. According to the 2011 Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS), which provides the most recent regional and national-level data available, the median age at which Ethiopian women marry is 16.5 years, and 40% of all women in their early 20s were married before they turned 18 (CSA and ICF International, 2012). Men of the same age, on the other hand, were very unlikely to marry as children. Indeed, women are more likely to be married by the age of 18 than men are by the age of 25 (CSA and ICF International, 2012).

Figure 1: Median age at first marriage, by region, for women aged 25-49 (CSA and ICF International, 2012)

1 Our work required translation in to Amharic, Oromifa, Tigrinya, Nuer, Somali, Afari, Sidama, Afaan Oromoo, Sidmigna and Anuak.
According to the EDHS, girls who are urban, educated and well off tend to marry significantly later than their peers who are uneducated, rural and poor (CSA and ICF International, 2012). For example, women with no education married at a median age of 15.9 years – compared with nearly two years later for those with a primary education (17.5 years) and nearly seven years later for those with a secondary education (22.8 years). Similarly, women who live in urban areas married at a median age of 18.1 years, compared with 16.3 years for rural women. Geographically, as Figure 1 shows, the lowest median age at first marriage, 14.7 years, can be found in the Amhara region and the highest, 21.4 years, can be found in Addis Ababa.

Aggregate statistics, however, because they fail to account for the variation between older women and their younger peers, hide Ethiopia’s recent progress towards eliminating child marriage, which 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) were married before their 15th birthdays (see Figure 2). On the other hand, nearly 40% of the oldest group (those aged 45-49) were married by age 15. Similarly, while over 40% of women aged 20-24 were married before adulthood, this figure represents significant progress given that nearly three-quarters of women aged 45-49 were married as children.2

While the EDHS represents the most recent comprehensive data available about the patterns of and trends in child marriage in Ethiopia, it does not allow for sufficient disaggregation. It does not, for example, allow for the examination of the zonal- and woreda-level statistics that are crucial to targeted programming designed to reach girls most at risk of child marriage. It also does not tease apart the marriages of young children from those of young adolescents. Finally, because most its indicators are reported for all women of reproductive age, without any breakdown by age, the EDHS effectively hides many of the emergent differences between cohorts.

**Comparing the census and the EDHS**

Before moving on to a presentation of our own work, a mixed-methods analysis that began with a woreda-level examination of child marriage rates from the 2007 census and concluded with a large-scale qualitative study that included nearly 600 individuals from 11 child marriage hotspots across the country, it is useful to remind the reader that data from the EDHS and the census are not directly comparable. The EDHS looks only at women over the age of 15 and reports most thoroughly by median age at marriage. It also asks married women whether they were married by the exact age of 15 – or the exact age of 18. It reports these statistics not by actual age but by five-year age categories (see Figure 7). The census data available to us, on the other hand, provides a snapshot of girls aged 10-17 and identifies only whether they have ever married. It reports across one five-year age grouping, 10-14 years old, and one three-year age grouping, 15-17 years old.3 It allows us to identify the percentage of each age category ever married (as of 2007). This is not, however, the same as knowing the percentage of women married by the age of 18. According to the 2011 EDHS (see Figure 2), 41% of all women aged 20-24 had been married by the age of 18. According the 2007 census (see Figure 3), on the other hand, only 20% of all girls aged 15-17 had ever been married. This difference can be best explained by imagining the following simplified scenario. If a population includes 100 girls aged 15, 100 girls aged 16 and 100 girls aged 17 – and all 17 year old girls get married immediately before their 18th birthday – then 100% of girls will have been

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2 The percentage of girls aged 15-19 who were married by age 18 is not reportable because most girls in that age range have not yet turned 18.

3 The Ethiopian census typically reports by five-year categories. The data available to us was a custom produced sub-set – and again highlights the need for better disaggregation.
married by the time they turned 18, but only one-third of all girls aged 15-17 will be married.

**Report structure**

We turn first to our methodology, explaining how we identified our hotspot districts and the nature of our qualitative fieldwork. We then, to help the reader contextualise the vast differences between woredas, present an overview of our findings in terms of drivers, protective factors and possible entry points. Finally, we move on to detailed explorations of each of our televen hotspot woredas.

The discussion of each individual site begins with key messages highlighting the main findings and then presents a brief overview of the key characteristics of the district and focus kebele. This is followed by an analysis of the age, type and patterning of marriage, key drivers of child marriage, local protective factors, and then a discussion of entry points for future programming. Where possible we illustrate our analysis with case studies of adolescent girls and champions of change, as well as quotes from a broad range of stakeholders.
2 Methodology

2.1 Identifying hotspot districts

As noted above, this research began with a ground-breaking analysis of the 2007 census, which allowed, for the first time, both disaggregation of child marriage rates at the woreda level and disaggregation of child marriage rates by age groupings. This led to some surprising findings. We were able to see, for the first time, not only the extreme intra-regional variation that proves the existence of child marriage ‘micro-climates’ but also that locations where older girls and younger girls marry are often totally disjoint. For example, Amhara, which, as noted above, has the lowest median age at first marriage, does not stand out in terms of hotspots for the youngest girls. Indeed, of the top 10 spots, only two are held by that region – a number that places it on equal footing with Somal.

Oromia, on the other hand, 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 appendix for the top 50 top spots for all girls between the ages of 10 and 17).

Top 20 hotspots for child marriage, by woreda, girls aged 10-14 (2007 census) with hotspot woredas included in this report highlighted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Woreda</th>
<th>% ever married, girls 10-14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Gambela</td>
<td>Jikawo</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Somali</td>
<td>Kelalo</td>
<td>29.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Oromia</td>
<td>Girja</td>
<td>27.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Oromia</td>
<td>Chinaksen</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Amhara</td>
<td>Alefa</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Oromia</td>
<td>Bedesa town/woreda</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>SNNPR</td>
<td>Dila town/woreda</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Somali</td>
<td>Ayisha</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Oromia</td>
<td>Fedsis</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Amhara</td>
<td>Quarit</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Oromia</td>
<td>Haromaya</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Oromia</td>
<td>Kombolcha</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Gambela</td>
<td>Wantawo</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Oromia</td>
<td>Qercha</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Top 20 hotspots for child marriage, by woreda, girls aged 15-17 (2007 census), with hotspot woredas included in this report highlighted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Woreda</th>
<th>% ever married, girls 15-17</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Amhara</td>
<td>Jawi</td>
<td>57.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Oromia</td>
<td>Chowaqa</td>
<td>56.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Benishangul-Gumuz</td>
<td>Belojigarfo</td>
<td>54.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Oromia</td>
<td>Fedsis</td>
<td>53.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Amhara</td>
<td>Quara</td>
<td>53.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Amhara</td>
<td>Alefa</td>
<td>52.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Amhara</td>
<td>Quarit</td>
<td>51.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Benishangul-Gumuz</td>
<td>Sirba Abay</td>
<td>50.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Amhara</td>
<td>Aneled</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Amhara</td>
<td>Mirab Armachiho</td>
<td>48.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Oromia</td>
<td>Abe Dengoro</td>
<td>48.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Oromia</td>
<td>Girja</td>
<td>47.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Amhara</td>
<td>Baso Liben</td>
<td>47.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Amhara</td>
<td>Mirab Belesa</td>
<td>45.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Amhara</td>
<td>Sekela</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Oromia</td>
<td>Arena Buluq</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Tigray</td>
<td>Tahtay Adlyabo</td>
<td>45.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Amhara</td>
<td>Takusa</td>
<td>44.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Amhara</td>
<td>Shebel Berenta</td>
<td>44.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Amhara</td>
<td>Awabel</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From our analysis of the custom census data provided by the CSA, we identified eleven sites on which to focus our qualitative research. Our general principle was to identify hotspots with exceptionally high rates of child marriage – accordingly, six of our sites are in the top 10. At the same time, however, we also sought to ensure a regional balance and offset the reality that the vast majority of previous research on child marriage has focused solely on Amhara. 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.

Noting that the census data are now quite dated, and thus do not reflect the recent progress highlighted in Figure 2, Figures 4-6 show which woredas were chosen for this research. Figure 4 includes the 2007 rates of child marriage for all girls aged 10-17. Figure 5 includes the 2007 rates of child marriage for all girls aged 10-14. Figure 6 includes the 2007 rates of child marriage for all girls 15-17.

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Figure 4: Hotspot locations (and % of all girls aged 10-17 married, per 2007 census)

- Tahtay Adiabo (20.6%)
- Alefa (33.4%)
- Quarit (32.1%)
- Aneded (28.8%)
- Jikawo (43.9%)
- Gorche (23.3%)
- Sadhemene (16.8%)
- Girja (33%)
- Fedis (31.2%)

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4 Chifra woreda in Afar was included on the recommendation of UNICEF. A woreda from Afar was proposed with the request of MOWCA and the steering committee of the Alliance to get a balanced understanding of the situation in areas with high prevalence of FGM/C and leading a pastoralist livelihood.
Figure 5: Hotspot locations (and % of all girls aged 10-14 married, per 2007 census)

Figure 6: Hotspot locations (and % of all girls aged 15-17 married, per 2007 census)
The qualitative research component

Having identified hotspot research sites, teams of social scientists from Social Affairs Consultancy and Addis Ababa University – and the team lead and a research fellow from ODI – undertook field research in late 2014 and the first quarter of 2015. Using a variety of qualitative techniques, and working with nearly 600 adolescents, parents and key informants from seven regional states, the teams explored in the various sites the ways in which the patterning of child marriage is staying the same or changing and what forces are driving that stasis or change (see Appendix 3 for complete research instruments.)

For example, community mappings helped us capture the broader background of different communities and to understand how they differ from one another economically and socio-culturally, as well as the extent to which and ways in which child marriage is evolving over time in response to these broader structural forces. Focus group discussions with adolescent girls, adolescent boys, mothers and fathers 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 an understanding of how customs and beliefs are changing – or not – over time. Key informant interviews, with kebele and woreda officials, health extension workers, teachers and religious leaders, permitted an understanding of how local institutions are shaping child marriage. (See Appendix 3 for a list of interviews by site.)

It should be noted that while child marriage is recognised—both internationally and by national law—as any marriage that involves a partner under the age of 18, the term “child marriage” does not work well in conversation with most Ethiopians. Given that girls were, and in some rare cases continue to be, married as infants and toddlers, the term “child marriage” for most of our respondents implied the marriage of a pre-pubertal child. Accordingly, in the process of our interviews, we used the term “early marriage” and specially clarified that it mean any marriage that involved a person under the age of 18. Quotes included from the research reflect this terminology and in no way are meant to imply that the marriage of older adolescents is anything other than child marriage.

Summary of interviews by type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research instrument</th>
<th>Number of interviews (interviewees)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community timeline</td>
<td>10 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key informant interviews at regional, district and kebele levels</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group discussions with adolescent girls</td>
<td>13 (65)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group discussions with adolescent boys</td>
<td>10 (50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group discussions with mothers</td>
<td>10 (50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group discussions with fathers</td>
<td>10 (50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intergenerational trios with adolescents, parents and grandparents</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-depth interviews with married and unmarried adolescent boys and girls</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participatory photography with adolescent girls and boys in three woredas (Alefa, Tahtay Adiabo and Fedis)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>323 (585)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the analysis stage, transcripts were first transcribed from 10 local languages into the English language by a team working in Ethiopia, and then coded by a team organised by ODI. Coding and analysis used MaxQDA, a qualitative data software package used for large-scale qualitative studies, and a framework that was structured around the various instruments, paying particular attention to the themes mentioned above, namely: education, poverty and wealth and their accompanying social status, religion and associated cultural values, migration, community role models, land fragmentation and livelihood options, the engagement of men and boys and the commitment of local leaders. (See Appendix 3 for the MaxQDA coding scheme.)
Box 1: Participatory photography with adolescents: aims and objectives

Participatory photography refers to activities where participants are supported and empowered to generate their own story through images. In this study, a facilitator worked with a group of girls, often marginalised, disadvantaged, or a positive ‘outlier’, and teaches them to use a camera with the aim of supporting them to define and communicate their situation and perspective in relation to the topic of child marriage.

This method offers a different modality through which research findings are generated and communicated. Firstly, it provides unprecedented access into the lives of girls while providing grounded and nuanced understandings of their everyday experience in relation to child marriage. Secondly, as the photos are user-generated and attached to girls’ own worldview, they provide a unique form of credibility and voice to the broader findings.

In practice, a spectrum of 3-5 individuals was selected within each research site. The selection included married and unmarried girls as well as boys drawn from the inter-generational trio exercises. A half-day training was provided to these participants in three main areas: camera mechanics, photographic skills, and the concept of the broader research questions. Consequently, children were familiarised on the basic functions of their cameras, as well as how the framing and subject matter of a photograph could be used to tell a story. This training was advanced in the sense that it provided children with an understanding of conceptual storytelling and how image composition could be used in an abstract sense to communicate facts as well as emotions and feelings.

In terms of the research questions, children were asked to look at the aspects of their world which drive child marriage, and the aspects that served to prevent or delay marriage. A corresponding component looked at how children coped with negotiation or discussions around them concerning child marriage, and how they might cope with some of the negative experiences that might arise during marriage. Children were assisted by facilitators to seek images that explained these dimensions of their lives and to write down a list of potential images that could be used to explain these experiences. Over several days the participants and facilitators discussed the ongoing development of the photographs and their corresponding narrative so that a clear story emerged.
3 Key message: one size does not fit all

The overwhelming message to emerge from our research is that one size does not fit all. Across the country, ‘child marriage’ assumes different forms, is undertaken for different reasons – in some places increasingly driven by adolescents themselves rather than by their parents – and is being reduced by different protective mechanisms (see cross-site summary points fro hotspot woredas table). This suggests future efforts aimed at abandonment need to be carefully tailored to local reality (see also the accompanying report by Jones et al., 2016 on good practice programming).

Broad messages for incidence and age

- **It is important to distinguish between the types of child marriage:** while Amharan girls and parents do not distinguish semantically between ceremonial marriage and ‘real’ marriage, the risks of the former, given that it does not involve cohabitation and is nearly always accompanied by divorce, are negligible compared to the risks of the latter.
- **Progress towards eliminating child marriage appears most advanced in Amhara** – with fewer girls marrying as children and those who do marry as children marrying in middle adolescence.
- **In other regions, most notably Oromia and Gambela, there is evidence that child marriage is actually increasing** – in part because better nutrition is causing girls to enter puberty earlier and in part because girls are ‘choosing’ to marry age mates they meet in school.
- **Polygamous marriage and marriage by abduction in particular are increasingly rare – but not yet eliminated.**

As suggested by the literature review undertaken in preparation for this research (see Presler-Marshall et al., 2015), and driven by Ethiopia’s ethnic and religious diversity, child marriage assumes a wide variety of forms across the country. In Qurit, Amhara, for example, it is still common for girls as young as five to be married. These ‘marriages’, however, are purely ceremonial (and help parents accrue social status), involve no sexual contact and often only a week of co-habitation and are most often so quickly followed by divorce that girls remember nothing about the experience other than there was a celebration and that they are now technically both schoolgirls and ‘ever married’ women. In Jikawo, Gambela, on the other hand, child marriage can have devastating consequences for girls, who are not infrequently used as currency to secure better marriages for their brothers, rarely attend even second-cycle primary school and are often pregnant well before their 15th birthdays. These differences highlight a critical need in terms of future data collection: semantic disaggregation. Girls in both Qurit 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.

Our research also uncovered evidence of diverging trends in terms of eliminating child marriage. Amhara has long had the lowest median age of first marriage in Ethiopia – 14.7 years according to the 2011 EDHS, a full year younger than the next lowest region, Benishangul-Gumuz. However, given both the number of child marriage interventions working in Amhara and land fragmentation that is encouraging Amharan parents to invest heavily in girls’ education, our research suggests child marriage is becoming less common in that region, especially for younger girls. On the other hand, our data suggest that in Oromia child marriage may be becoming more common – even for the youngest adolescents. In part because girls are entering puberty earlier, owing to better nutrition, and in part because girls are increasingly choosing their own partners, eloping against their parents’ will with their first serious ‘love’, respondents noted that marriage was not uncommon even among 13-year-old girls and was quite common by 15. This divergence highlights another critical need in terms of future data collection: the establishment of sentinel sites for ‘real-time’ monitoring of child marriage patterning.

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5 Dixon-Muller (2008), reviewing a variety of legal and international standards, as well as data on physiological and cognitive readiness, suggests differentiating between early adolescence, ages 10-11 and 12-14, middle adolescence, aged 15-17 and late adolescence, ages 18-19. She concludes that early adolescents are never ready for marriage, middle adolescents are sometimes ready for marriage and older adolescents are probably “old enough”. However, while extremely useful in terms of understanding the risks that child marriage entails, these categories do not neatly map onto the Ethiopian experience, which includes infant marriage. They also do not account for variations in the way marital responsibilities, including work-loads and sex, line up, or fail to line up, with age at marriage.
Broad messages for drivers

- **Social norms** – reinforced by religious values and supported by religious leaders – that insist on girls’ virginity and stigmatise girls and their families if they are ‘impure’ or ‘too old’ are the largest driver of child marriage across study sites.
- **Adolescent decision-making is a double-edged sword**: in some sites, particularly in Amhara, it is allowing girls to choose education over marriage; in other sites it is encouraging girls to marry their ‘first love’ – especially, as in Oromia and Somali, where girls’ access to contraception is limited or prohibited.
- **Economic poverty does not emerge as a primary driver of child marriage in any of the hotspot sites**; where economic themes are mentioned it is nearly always in the context of consolidating wealth and demonstrating social status. (Poverty does, however, contribute to many girls leaving school – and in particular prevents their transition to secondary school.)
- **Reciprocating neighbours, relatives and friends** by hosting lavish wedding ceremonies remains a powerful driver of child marriage in Amhara and Tigray.
- **Commitment to girls’ education**, while improving, remains low overall, with girls unlikely to even finish primary school in many sites and discouraged from achieving academic success by heavy domestic workloads in others.
- **In many cases girls marry simply because they lack alternatives**; where secondary schools and local employment are not available, child marriage becomes the default option because it is perceived as the only one.

The drivers of child marriage in Ethiopia are as diverse as its patterning – although, as predicted, they largely revolve around social norms – especially those related to girls’ purity. Girls’ premarital sexuality is seen as shameful in most of our hotspot locations; premarital pregnancy is considered unacceptable in all. Parents’ fear of girls’ emergent sexuality has traditionally encouraged them to arrange child marriage either before or soon after puberty. This timing ensures girls will not humiliate their parents by appearing virgins; where secondary schools and local employment are not available, child marriage becomes the default option because it is perceived as the only one.

Notably, while on a global basis there is considerable concern that the poorest girls are the most vulnerable to child marriage, in Ethiopia, economic poverty itself does not emerge as a strong driver of child marriage. With the exception of sites in the Somali region, where poverty is a recurring theme, while economics are discussed in our hotspot sites, they are almost always presented in context of consolidating wealth through bride price and demonstrating social status rather than in terms of poverty itself. This is the case in both the one site with a dowry system (Tahtay Adiabo, Tigray) and the sites with a bride-price system. In Jikawo, Gambela, for example,
while girls are essentially seen as currency and traded for the cows that will secure better matches for their brothers or additional wives for their fathers, the overall tenor of transactions is not desperation but aspiration – and is similar to the emerging phenomenon of contract wives in Quarat, Amhara. Wealth also matters in Gorchë, SNNPR, and in Amhara, where girls from better-off families can be especially likely to marry early because their parents can endow them with land or livestock, making them attractive to suitors (and sometimes abductors in Gorchë). Furthermore, across the Amharan hotspots, it appears that many parents consider it vital to host an elaborate wedding ceremony (typically ceremonial) to both demonstrate that they are financially capable of doing so and recoup the expenses they have contributed to the weddings of their neighbours’ children.

Commitment to education in general and girls’ education in particular is growing across Ethiopia – though in most hotspot sites it remains low overall in part because educating girls is seen as unimportant given that they are needed for work and destined for marriage. Across the Oromia sites and in Gorchë, SNNPR, Chifra, Afar, and Jikawo, Gambela, boys remain far more likely than girls to ever attend school and children are extremely unlikely to complete primary school. Across the Amharan sites, on the other hand, while girls are more likely than boys to be enrolled in school, their performance is generally lower because they are often late for school – or absent entirely – and rarely have time to complete their homework owing to heavy domestic workloads.

It is worth noting that, in many cases, girls are not so much driven into child marriage as simply not prevented from marrying as children. Secondary schools are rare in rural areas – and both require a significant financial commitment, for rent and other independent living expenses, and engender a great deal of parental fear about girls’ physical and moral safety. Consequently, few girls, even those who successfully complete primary school and especially those from poorer families, are afforded the opportunity to attend Grade 9. Employment options are equally rare in many areas. Youth unemployment in Ethiopia is high and girls are especially constrained given cultural restrictions on the mobility. Effectively trapped at home after they leave school, many girls marry simply because they have nothing ‘better’ to do.

### Broad messages for protective factors

- In some sites, notably in Amhara, but also to an extent in Tigray, child marriage is not necessarily associated with cohabitation or early sexual debut.
- In some sites, again most notably in Amhara but also in Tigray, improving access to contraception is helping some unmarried girls delay marriage and most married girls delay pregnancy. However, in other regions (especially Afar, Oromia and Somali), even where contraception is physically accessible, it is largely deemed to be socially unacceptable (even for married women).
- While in some sites, where social norms are very strong, families are choosing to combine education and marriage, on the whole child marriage is declining where commitment to girls’ education is growing.
- In some cases, commitment to girls’ education is driven by families’ desire to prepare their daughters for paid employment; in other cases, it is driven by the higher bride-price commanded by educated girls.
- Schooling is contributing to the reduction of child marriage because it expands girls’ options, provides them with a venue to learn about the risks of and alternatives to child marriage and offers them a safe venue for reporting marriages.
- Girls’ clubs, especially when implemented with dedicated leaders and focused on both imparting information and growing girls’ confidence, can help girls resist marriage and focus on their broader futures.
- Positive female role models are critical to helping girls and parents understand why they should invest in education.

There are a variety of factors working to protect some girls from some of the risks of child marriage. For example, as noted above, in Amhara the earliest marriages are typically purely ceremonial. Furthermore, even when girls do live with their husbands’ families, as can be the case when they are married to deacons or priests, they are typically protected by *guido*, a contract under which the parents of the groom promise to prevent sexual activity – and agree to a fine for violation. As girls have begun to attend school, new protective customs are emerging. For instance, especially in Amhara but also in Tahtay Adiabo, Tigray, even when girls are married as adolescents they are increasingly allowed to delay cohabitation in order to first complete their educations.

Improving access to contraception is also protecting girls in some hotspots. Across Amhara and in Tahtay Adiabo, Tigray, for example, young married girls are regularly using contraception to delay their first pregnancies – in part to prevent fistula and other obstetric complications and in part to ensure they and their husbands are compatible before having a child. In many cases, husbands are proactively involved in making this choice. In Alefa, Amhara, respondents suggested access to contraception was preventing not only pregnancy but also marriage, because, as noted above, it decouples sexuality and pregnancy for unmarried girls. On the other hand, in Chifra, Afar, Jikawo, Gambela, Gorchë, SNNPR and across Oromia and Somali, even when girls have physical access to contraception, social norms typically discourage its use. In Gorchë, for example, demands for high fertility push girls into pregnancy soon after marriage, and in Jikawo girls expressed concern that if they were seen using contraception then it might be assumed that they disliked their husbands.
As noted above, growing commitment to education is also working to prevent child marriage. In most sites, girls are interested in school and the employment and economic independence it facilitates. Parents, especially when confronted with land fragmentation, are also incentivised to invest in their daughters’ education since they not only aspire for them to have non-agricultural jobs but also increasingly understand that the agricultural path is closed. Parents’ interest in education is further amplified when they expect their daughters, and not their sons, to provide for them later in life (Tahtay Adiabo, Tigray), when they expect to receive a higher bride price for an educated daughter (Jikawo, Gambela, and Girja, Oromia) or when having an educated child confers social prestige (Gorche, SNNPR).

Our research suggests schooling protects girls from child marriage in many ways. Not only does it help families locate them as children, rather than as wives in waiting, and help expand their future options, but also, across Amhara, and in Badesa, Oromia, and Jikawo, Gambela, it exposes them to information about the legal age for marriage and the risks of child marriage. Furthermore, in some cases, including Gorche and Quarit, school also teaches girls how to resist a proposed marriage and provides them – and their peers – with a known venue for reporting planned child marriages.

School-based girls’ clubs tend to amplify the impacts of schooling on the prevention of child marriage. In Badesa, Oromia, for example, club members reported that they received health- and legal-related information, but also messages about gender equality and personal safety; in Quarit, girls told us that legal messaging begins as early as Grade 3. However, while evidence is overwhelming that girls’ clubs can help girls imagine new futures – and develop the confidence to pursue them – most hotspots sites either lack clubs entirely or have under-resourced clubs that either serve just a handful of girls or exist in name only.

Roles models emerged across our hotspots sites as important sources of inspiration for girls and their parents – or as glaring in their absence. In Alefa, Amhara, for example, role models are multiple and powerful. There are local women who have completed secondary school and now have salaried employment, and the kebele in which we worked has sent dozens of children to study in the US – a source of inspiration for all. In Gorche, SNNPR, on the other hand, the kebele primary school has yet to hire a single female teacher, and in Chifra, Afar, we were told by educators that girls tended to come to school only in order to claim the oil handed out by the World Food Programme – and that they had little interest in learning because they had not yet seen what girls could become.

**Broad messages for entry points**

While noting that our evaluation of good practice programmes will offer a clearer look at what is and is not working to reduce child marriage across Ethiopia, this hot-spot research has also uncovered a plethora of entry points for future programming. We have organised them below in terms of whether they are directed at enforcement, awareness-raising, supportive programming or data collection.

**With regard to improving enforcement, we suggest**

- In regions where federal law has not yet been ratified, such as Afar and Somali, there is a need for advocacy work directed at legal change.
- Because the offices of justice, education and women or men, children and youth affairs appear to have only rarely developed coordinated plans for addressing child marriage, zonal, woreda and kebele offices should be supported to cooperate across sectors and levels to devise strategies – built on local realities – aimed at abandonment. Inter-sectoral strategies need to be buttressed by robust baseline data at woreda and kebele levels.
- Because officials are unable to enforce the marriage law when they cannot prove girls’ ages, there is a need for birth registration and consistent school records that will enable independent verification of age.
- Because in many sites officials are afraid to enforce the law owing to concerns about retaliation – and impacts on their social status – they need support in order to effectively and uniformly do so. Better funding, which would facilitate more regular visits from woreda-level officials, would relieve kebele-level officials of the onus of enforcement, making it clear to communities that local officials are also subject to top-down regulation.
- Because in many sites girls themselves, community members and educators are afraid to report child marriages because of the threat of retaliation, mechanisms should be developed to support anonymous reporting.
- Parents and communities need to be supported to handle rapidly changing norms surrounding adolescent decision-making, and to better understand their responsibility – and constructive ways to exercise it – under the law to protect children from child marriage. Officials need to step in and prosecute all child marriages, regardless of whether they are ‘free choice’, and where possible prosecute both sets of parents, elders and religious leaders involved in sanctioning any such unions.

**With regard to awareness-raising, we suggest**

- Because it is very common for parents, and even girls, to believe that ‘child’ marriage is different from adolescent marriage, attention needs to be directed at helping communities understand that girls and boys are children until they are 18. Attention needs to be paid to both familiarising communities with the letter of the law and helping them understand non-legal risks.
- Because religious leaders and community elders are key players in maintaining social norms – and must be key players in changing them – they should be prioritised for awareness-raising activities. Evidence from Afar
and Somali, where the support of religious leaders has helped shift FGM/C from infibulation to sunna over the past decade (and in the case of Afar increasingly towards total abandonment), suggest change can be rapid once religious leaders are on board.

- While the dissemination of health-related information (i.e. the risk of fistula and maternal and child mortality) has been critical to reducing child marriage in many sites, evidence suggests it is best coupled with broader messages that also target social costs such as divorce and poverty – and that messages be tailored and delivered in a way that fosters local ownership.

- Awareness-raising activities must target parents, who continue to drive the bulk of child marriages, helping them understand the risks of child marriage and directly addressing their concerns about their daughters’ sexual purity.

- Because husbands are typically five to seven years older than wives (EDHS, 2011), it is important to empower older boys and young men with information about child marriage – and introduce them to notions of positive masculinity so they can support girls to remain unmarried throughout childhood.

- Lacking experience and life skills, as well as undergoing significant changes in brain chemistry, adolescents frequently need support in avoiding risky behaviours and making decisions that will set them on a positive life trajectory. It is therefore important to target both girls and boys with developmentally appropriate information about the risks of and alternatives to child marriage.

- Girls need access to girls’ clubs – both in and out of school – where they can learn about their rights to avoid child marriage and other harmful traditional practices, be supported to manage menstruation after puberty, and develop confidence and voice. These clubs would be an excellent venue for helping adolescent girls develop the skills to resist peer and admirer pressure regarding child marriage – and to negotiate with family members who may prefer child marriage to education.

**In regard to parallel supportive strategies, we suggest**

- Because adolescent girls are adolescents, and the costs of premarital pregnancy are culturally high, it is important to make sure all girls, married and unmarried, have confidential access to adolescent friendly sexual and reproductive health information and services.

- In order to avoid child marriage, girls need alternatives. Broad programming aimed at encouraging girls’ school attendance and academic success is a necessary first step towards preventing child marriage. Girls’ on-time enrolment should be prioritised – with financial incentives such as scholarships, school supplies and uniforms if necessary – and tutorial sessions should be provided to offset girls’ more limited attendance due to domestic workloads.

- The real and opportunity costs associated with secondary school need to be minimised. Subsidised dormitories, for example, may represent a cost-effective way to provide students with room and board and to ensure children are adequately supervised.

- While in some sites schools are publically recognising successful girls and their parents, more attention should be paid to incentivising girls’ education through links to social status and prestige.

- Out-of-school girls need to be supported to become economically independent – and assisted to either find or create jobs of their own so that they have an alternative to child marriage.

**In regard to data collection, we suggest**

- There is a need for reliable, regular data about the incidence of child marriage. While the census and the EDHS provide their own useful snapshots, we suggest, especially given how quickly norms are shifting in some sites, that data be collected more regularly in order to ascertain where to focus resources – perhaps through monitoring sentinel sites. If programming in a context of scarce resources is to be optimally tailored, then having reliable and regularly updated data is an essential starting point.

- Because the EDHS is scheduled more regularly than the national census, and offers an opportunity to statistically verify recent changes in child marriage (both declines and potential spikes), we suggest additions to the survey and alternative ways of reporting data.

- However, we note that, because the sample of the 2011 EDHS was ‘only’ 17,800 households, if the desired outcome of the next survey is representative data at the sub-national level then it will be critical to either invest in a larger sample – or in designing a sampling frame that can use such a ‘small’ sample to capture sub-national variation.

- The EDHS would also be more useful for tracking patterning in child marriage if its sample was large enough to allow for disaggregation of age brackets. In locations where child marriage is declining very quickly, the experiences of 15-year-old girls and the experiences of 19-year-old girls may be disparate.

- We also suggest, if sample size permits, that the EDHS report relationships between age at first marriage and broader demographic variables (such as residence location, education, religion, wealth quintile, etc.) by age category – rather than by ‘all women of reproductive age’. This would allow policy-makers to see trends in how patterning is shifting and help ascertain where to focus resources. While the 2011 EDHS reported many of these relationships for women between the ages of 20-49 and for women between the ages of 25-49, allowing a glimpse at how change might be occurring, we suggest that in terms of looking at change, it would...
be better to direct the lens directly at adolescents and young adults. For more details see Box 2.

**Box 2: Possible questions to strengthen the EDHS as a tool to measure child marriage over time**

While our expertise is neither demography nor survey design, we suggest asking females some variant of the following questions:

(To tease apart the earliest marriages – and prevent having to include girls under 15 in the sample:)

1. Have you ever been married?
2. At what exact age were you married?

(To tease out a common protective mechanisms:)
3. Have you ever cohabited with your husband?
4. At what exact age did you begin cohabitation?

(To tease out another common protective mechanism:)
5. Have you had sex?
6. At what exact age did you begin having sex?

(To ‘measure’ another risk of child marriage:)
7. Are you currently married?
8. How many years older than you is your husband?

(To track the divorce rate and ascertain whether divorce is a protective factor:)
9. Have you ever been divorced?
10. How long did your first marriage last?
11. How many times have you been married?

(To assess the inter-play between education and child marriage)
12. At the time of marriage were you in school?
13. After marriage did you continue your education? For how long?
## Cross-site summary points for hotspot woredas

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| Chifra, Afar  | While the 2007 census does not identify this woreda as a hotspot, our research found that most girls marry between the ages of 14 and 16, typically immediately after the onset of their menses and almost always to their cousins, following the tradition of absuma. | • Religious beliefs about protecting girls’ sexual purity are the strongest drivers for child marriage in the study area and outweigh any awareness and enforcement of the legal age for marriage.  
• Local investment in education is very low – enrolment past 5th grade is comparatively uncommon. | • There are nascent shifts towards girls’ own decision-making, which is enabling some girls to choose education over marriage.  
• Current programming is aimed at improving girls’ access to schooling, through providing them with cooking oil for attendance and allowing them flexible exam schedules to accommodate pregnancy. | • Greater efforts should be directed at improving girls’ access to and performance in school. Efforts must be built around nomadic reality and take into account the heavy domestic burdens placed on girls’ shoulders – especially during seasonal drought.  
• Because child marriage is driven by religious beliefs, it is vital to include religious and clan leaders in efforts to abandon child marriage – and to make it clear that girls of 16 are still children.  
• A preference for early and high fertility suggests a need for both access to contraception – and tailored messages supporting its use, especially for younger wives. |
| Alefa, Amhara | Child marriage is rapidly declining in this hotspot, primarily due to commitment to education, but girls are young as 15 are not seen as children when they do marry, especially when chosen their own partners.  
• The largest driver of child marriage in the study area is a lack of options. When girls leave school, often at the end of 10th grade when they fail exams, they typically marry.  
• Girls’ academic performance is hindered by excessive domestic workloads.  
• A lack of local employment options for girls also contributes to child marriage. | • Going to school protects most of the youngest girls from marriage. Most parents are very committed to supporting girls’ education for as long as possible, because they aspire for them to have non-agricultural jobs.  
• There is little evidence that unmarried girls are considered unmarriageable or that parents are overly concerned with their daughters’ virginity. Girls’ access to contraceptives is good, regardless of whether they are unmarried or married. This helps delay marriage and childbearing. | • Greater efforts need to be made in terms of awareness-raising and enforcement to drive home the fact that adolescents are children too.  
• Helping girls achieve academic success, so that they can stay in school longer, is critical to preventing child marriage.  
• Rural areas lag far behind their more urban counterparts in terms of parents’ preference for education over marriage and should be prioritised by future programming. | |
| Aneded, Amhara | Aneded is a hotspot for child marriage, with ceremonial marriage typical for very young girls and “real” marriage common by 15.  
• Parents’ desire for community respect drives most child marriage, as hosting a wedding ceremony is considered prestigious. In an effort to save money, parents increasingly marry all of their children, even the youngest, in a single ceremony.  
• Child marriage is also driven by stigma directed at unmarried girls.  
• Parental investment in education is low – with girls especially unlikely to attend secondary school, as parents perceive the travel required as unsafe. | • Nascent shifts towards girls’ own decision-making are allowing some to choose education and employment over marriage.  
• Girls have good access to contraception and are increasingly supported by their husbands to use it.  
• Schools, with the support of NGOs, are working to keep girls in school and prevent child marriage. | • Better enforcement of the law is required and should include anonymising reporting, as whistle blowers often face serious repercussions, and alternate ways of establishing girls’ ages (though school records, for example), as they are often forced by their parents to lie.  
• Girls – and their parents – need role models to encourage investment in education.  
• More concerted efforts need to be paid to helping parents understand the risks of child marriage. | |

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### Note

The information provided is based on the content of the document and is presented in a readable and structured format to facilitate understanding and analysis. The document focuses on child marriage in hotspot woredas, highlighting the drivers, protective factors, and priority entry points across different regions.
### Cross-site summary points for hotspot woredas (continued)

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| Quart, Amhara       | Most girls in the study area are married as young children, but few are at risk of long-term harm from these first marriages because the vast majority are purely ceremonial. Second and “real” child marriages are declining primarily due to commitment to education. | - Parents’ desire for the social prestige of hosting a wedding drives ceremonial marriage.  
- Parental concerns about stigma and girls’ virginity drive the marriage of older girls – parents are trying to protect their daughters’ futures by preventing pre-marital sex and heading off the shame attached to being “unwanted”.  
- Contract marriages, wherein girls’ parents are paid for their short-term marital “services” to a migrating man are a growing phenomenon that deserves immediate attention.  
- Family pressure, driven by concerns about girls’ sexual purity, encourage child marriage, as virginity is highly prized.  
- Stigma directed at unmarried girls also drives child marriage.  
- Parents do not prioritise education, with girls especially unlikely to attend school at all or to be given the time to study.  
- Both girls and boys are pulled out of school by participation in the emerging cash economy – which, because it provides them with their own income, facilitates free-choice child marriage. | - Parents – and girls – are very committed to education. As long as girls are making academic progress few are not expected to enter into second, “real” marriages – and those that do are not expected to begin their marital lives.  
- The presence of strong female role models is showing girls and parents what education can do for girls.  
- Girls’ own decision-making is allowing some to choose their own husbands and refuse ill-timed marriage.  
- Girls’ knowledge about and access to contraception is good, regardless of whether they are married.  
- Girls need access to psycho-social and educational support to help them understand their own rights and plan their own independent futures.  
- Girls need better information about and access to contraception.  
- Helping girls achieve academic success, by ensuring their parents give them time off to study and by offering them tutorial support, is the key to preventing “real” child marriage.  
- Awareness-raising messages need to be tailored to local reality. In a community where young girls are married but do not have sex, focusing on fistula on other health-related risks has fallen flat.  
- Attention needs to be paid to the issue of contract wives – tracking the phenomenon and ensuring that girls have legal redress. | - Helping girls achieve academic success, by ensuring their parents give them time off to study and by offering them tutorial support, is the key to preventing “real” child marriage.  
- Awareness-raising messages need to be tailored to local reality. In a community where young girls are married but do not have sex, focusing on fistula on other health-related risks has fallen flat.  
- Attention needs to be paid to the issue of contract wives – tracking the phenomenon and ensuring that girls have legal redress. |
| Jikawo, Gambela     | Jikawo has the highest rate of child marriage in Ethiopia, with the bulk of girls married before the age of 15 and many respondents believing that the practice is becoming more common because girls are entering puberty earlier due to better nutrition. | - The dominant driver of child marriage in Jikawo is based on economic gains from bride price exchange. The community does not engage in trade and thus gains from marrying off daughters are essential to secure the marriage prospects of sons or to afford additional wives.  
- Peer pressure and a desire for independence among adolescents, especially given the context of strict rules about girls’ virginity, are also key factors in perpetuating child marriage – with some couples marrying without permission and against their parents’ will.  
- Girls’ interest in education is expanding rapidly – giving them reason to delay marriage.  
- The potential to earn a higher bride price for more educated girls is helping to keep girls in school for longer, although secondary school enrollment rates for girls are very low.  
- Marriage via abduction appears to have been eliminated.  
- Girls are married but do not have sex, focusing on fistula on other health-related risks has fallen flat.  
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- Marriage via abduction appears to have been eliminated.  
- Girls are married but do not have sex, focusing on fistula on other health-related risks has fallen flat.  
- Attention needs to be paid to the issue of contract wives – tracking the phenomenon and ensuring that girls have legal redress. | - Attention should be directed to growing local awareness of rights more generally. Currently there is little awareness that child marriage is illegal, that children have the right to go to school or that women are not property – but have property rights of their own.  
- Girls need access to psycho-social and educational support to help them understand their own rights and plan their own independent futures.  
- Girls need better information about and access to contraception. |
| Badesa, Oromia      | Badesa is a hot-spot for child marriage, with respondents noting that most girls marry in mid-adolescence, increasingly to a partner of their own choice – and sometimes against their parents’ wishes. | - Polygamy and bride-price are much reduced in recent years.  
- There are nascent shifts towards understanding that all girls do not mature at the same rate and that menstruation is not the only signal of maturity.  
- Some girls are learning about the risks of child marriage at school via the curriculum and in girls’ clubs.  
- Both girls and boys are pulled out of school by participation in the emerging cash economy – which, because it provides them with their own income, facilitates free-choice child marriage.  
- Family pressure, driven by concerns about girls’ sexual purity, encourage child marriage, as virginity is highly prized.  
- Stigma directed at unmarried girls also drives child marriage.  
- Parents do not prioritise education, with girls especially unlikely to attend school at all or to be given the time to study.  
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- There are nascent shifts towards understanding that all girls do not mature at the same rate and that menstruation is not the only signal of maturity.  
- Some girls are learning about the risks of child marriage at school via the curriculum and in girls’ clubs. | - Fostering support for education is a critical first step as school enrolment helps communities see students as children.  
- Better enforcement of the law is required and should include anonymising reporting, as whistle blowers often face serious repercussions, and alternate ways of establishing girls’ ages, as those who want to marry claim to be over the age of 18.  
- Efforts need to target adolescents and help them understand the risks of child marriage and the advantages of education. | - Fostering support for education is a critical first step as school enrolment helps communities see students as children.  
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| Fedis, Oromia | Fedis is a hotspot for child marriage, with most girls marrying in adolescence – sometimes as young as 12 – and increasingly via elopement to partners of their own choosing against their parents’ will. | • Child marriage is driven by adolescent “love” and girls’ fear of being undesirable and unmarriageable.  
• Some child marriages are arranged by parents’ concerned about their daughters’ virginity.  
• Education is not prioritised by local parents, especially for girls, who are seen as destined for marriage. | • Awareness of both the law and the risks of child marriage is widespread – with schools serving as a vehicle for reaching students.  
• Intergenerational and polygamous marriage is becoming rare. | • Better records regarding girls’ age is critical to preventing child marriage.  
• Efforts need to target adolescents and help them understand the risks of child marriage and the advantages of education.  
• Awareness raising efforts need to use local channels to foster local ownership and prevent meeting fatigue.  
• Parents and students need exposure to role models to help them prioritise education over other options – especially as the cash economy expands. |
| Girja, Oromia | Girja is a hotspot for child marriage, with it common for girls to choose marriage at the age of 15 or 16 and not uncommon for them to marry as young as 13. | • Girls’ own decision-making is the strongest driver of child marriage.  
Girls are marrying early of their own accord, at an earlier age than before, and often without their parents’ approval – because they prefer the prestige of being married to the stigma of being seen as unmarriageable.  
• Education is not prioritised in Girja, especially for girls, who are pushed by their parents towards marriage.  
There were only 12 girls enrolled in 11th and 12th grades for the 2014-2015 academic year. | • Government programming, especially through health extension workers, has helped parents understand the health risks of child marriage and FGM/C.  
• Social norms are beginning to shift with increasing awareness of the benefits of education amongst parents and girls themselves.  
• Marriage via abduction appears to have been eliminated.  
• Higher bride price is working to delay the marriages of some young couples. | • Efforts need to target adolescents and help them understand the risks of child marriage and the advantages of education.  
• Greater efforts need to be made to encourage girls’ education – ensuring that they have access to a range of supports, ranging from toilets, to role models to school supplies.  
• Messaging disseminated by religious leaders, while promising, needs to more broadly address the risks of child marriage – and religious leaders need to lead by example.  
• Enforcement of the law is non-existent, with parents unable to have the marriages of their children cancelled even when they are undertaken very prematurely. |
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| Gorche, SNNPR      | While declining, Gorche has the highest rate of child marriage in SNNPR. It is common for girls to marry at 15 – usually by arrangement and sometimes through abduction. | • Child marriage is driven primarily by powerful norms that place a high value on marriage and childbearing as a source of social prestige and stigmatise girls who remain unmarried.  
• Economic incentives also matter, as both parents and potential suitors seek arranged marriage into wealthy families and community and family members often willing to arrange an abduction for a fee.  
• Education is not prioritized in Gorche, especially for girls, who are kept at home to do household work. Most children never even transition to upper-primary school. | • Adolescents’ own decision-making is working to delay marriage, with both girls and boys choosing to prioritize education and to aim for economic independence before marriage.  
• Having educated children is becoming a source of prestige within the community and a growing minority of parents is supportive of girls’ education.  
• The Christian church has played a critical role in reducing the incidence of child marriage by educating the community and intervening to prevent particular instances.  
• Irregular enforcement of the law, especially in regard to penalties for the abduction of girls, is serving as a deterrent for child marriage. | • Encouraging parents’ investment in education is a critical first step to preventing child marriage, as it simultaneously locates girls as students, helps them develop an awareness of their own rights and links them into reporting chains.  
• Greater attention should be paid to helping parents and community members understand the risks of child marriage.  
• Girls should be offered a menu of support, ranging from pencils to sanitary supplies to girls’ clubs to incentivize their attendance and help them further develop their voices.  
• Given the success of the Christian church, greater efforts should be made to cultivate local champions for girls and help them build local ownership. |
| Shashemene, Oromia | Girls usually marry at the ages of 15–17, although marriage as early as 12 is not uncommon. | • Girls’ own decision-making is identified by respondents as the strongest driver of child marriage.  
• Social norms that cause girls to fear the prospect of remaining unmarried. Their families may also fear the shame associated with female promiscuity, although the relative importance of protecting girls’ virginity is gradually abating.  
• Poverty is another key driver, as is the economic incentive of high bride prices  
• Some girls choose to delay marriage until the ages of 19–22 in order to pursue their education. They think pragmatically about their futures and prioritise securing economic independence, and some are deterred by the challenges that their peers who married as children often face.  
• Some parents actively support their children’s education and advise them against marrying early, especially in light of their own limited opportunities stemming from little or no formal education. | • Attention needs to be directed to helping adolescents see the advantages of adult marriage and continued education.  
• Programming must be rooted in an understanding that adolescents often engage in short-term thinking.  
• Parents need to be supported to better monitor their children’s education and prevent them from marrying as children—with attention paid to the fact that parents tend to defer to their children’s decisions because their children are better educated than they are.  
• More extensive and coordinated follow-up through schools and the one-to-five groups.  
• More effective enforcement of the law—with child marriages cancelled even if they are desired. |
4 Hotspot districts

Child marriage drivers in Chifra woreda, Afar

Key messages

Age of marriage

While the 2007 census does not identify this woreda as an child marriage hotspot, our research found that most girls marry between the ages of 14 and 16, typically immediately after the onset of their menses and almost always to their cousins, following the tradition of *absuma.*

Drivers of child marriage

- Religious beliefs about protecting girls’ sexual purity are the strongest drivers for child marriage in the study area and outweigh any awareness and enforcement of the legal age for marriage.
- Local investment in education is very low: enrolment past fifth grade is comparatively uncommon.

Factors protecting against child marriage

- There are nascent shifts towards girls’ own decision-making, enabling some girls to choose education over marriage.
- Current programming is aimed at improving girls’ access to schooling through providing them with cooking oil for attendance and allowing them flexible exam schedules to accommodate pregnancy.
Priority entry points

- Afar should adopt the revised family law that sets the minimum age for marriage at 18.
- Greater efforts should be directed at improving girls’ access to and performance in school. These should be built around nomadic reality and take into account the heavy domestic burdens placed on girls’ shoulders, especially during seasonal drought.
- Because child marriage is driven by religious beliefs, it is vital to include religious and clan leaders in efforts to abandon child marriage – and to make it clear that girls of 16 are still children.
- A preference for early and high fertility suggests a need for access to both sexual and reproductive health information and services (e.g. contraception and tailored messages supporting its use, especially for younger wives).

Overview

Chifra, in Administrative Zone 1 in Afar Regional State, is a primarily pastoral woreda with an overall child marriage rate of 5.3% – lower than the Afari average of 7.3% (see Table 5 below). Although the site ranks low nationally, it was included in our mapping in order to ensure a regional balance and following a UNICEF recommendation (based on ongoing programming activities, ease of accessing pastoralist community members at the time of the fieldwork and an understanding that the 2007 census data for Afar was somewhat problematic).\(^6\) Our fieldwork was undertaken in Jarana Kontola kebele upon the recommendation of the Woreda Justice Office\(^7\) (see Box 3 for an overview of the kebele characteristics).

Table 5: Percent of girls who are married, by age, by residence (Source: 2007 Census)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Chifra</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Zone 1</th>
<th>Afar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls 10-14</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>715(^b)</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls 15-17</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>645(^b)</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Current patterning of marriage and divorce

Age of marriage

While the 2007 census data indicated that a small minority of girls in Chifra woreda were married before 18, our primary research suggested that the current pattern, at least in Jarana Kontola kebele, is to get married between the ages of 14 and 16 (with almost all girls who get married dropping out of school before grade 8). Adult interviewees often claimed that girls were not marrying until 20 years of age, but triangulation with other respondents and other modes of questioning suggested that this was likely to be based on respondent bias. Adolescent girls and boys and other key informant interviewees, by contrast, reported that on average, girls are married by the time they turn 15, often soon after menstruation (see discussion below). The older generation also appear to maintain a preference for child marriage. For instance, one grandmother said: ‘Although I can’t be an eye-witness, I heard that girls of this time have been staying unmarried until they are in their twenties. Rarely, there may be situations whereby the girls may get married when they are 16 or 17.’ Yet, when asked her preference for the age at which she would like her grandchildren to be married, she stated that she ‘preferred to have granddaughters and grandsons get married around 14.’

Choice of marriage partner

Parents are overwhelmingly responsible for arranging both the marriage and the wedding ceremony. According to respondents, while the fathers have the power to make the decision as to when a girl gets married, it is the mother who tells her husband that the girl has started menstruating – an important indication that she is ready for marriage according to the community. This needs to be placed in the broader context of absuma (see Box 4) which is a distinguishing cultural practice among the Afar. This practice is the marriage between two cousins (girls are expected to marry their paternal cousins and boys marry their maternal cousins). As a result, both girls and boys typically know who they will marry from a young age. Inter-marriage between clans is not uncommon since the clans in the kebele share similar marriage practices and many participants who were married had married outside their clan.

In addition to the absuma tradition, polygamy is widely practised and, say respondents, a man is allowed according to religion to have up to four wives, with men having two wives on average. While there were no young girls in polygamous marriages in this sample, a majority of the young respondents reported that their parents were in a polygamous marriage. For instance, a father reported

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\(^6\) The 2007 Census (conducted by CSA) reported that Chifra had a total population of 91,080, of whom 50,861 were males and 40,219 were females. However, interviews with the education office head revealed that CSA data is often inaccurate as the community inflates the number of children because they believe it will result in more government support.

\(^7\) According to the office, this kebele can be deemed a child marriage hotspot.
I think most of the Afar community members have more than one wife. I have left my Amhara wife and am now living together with the Afar one. I have had many children from these women. Bearing and having many children is considered as wealth in the Afar culture and tradition.

This suggests that polygamous marriages are a source of ‘fame’ and status in the community. In some cases, wives ‘give permission’ to their husbands to marry another wife since it ‘common in the culture’. The cultural belief that supports polygamy is that a man can continue to reproduce more offspring if he marries a young woman after his first wife has had children. However, when asked...
whether women can have multiple husbands, female focus groups respondents said it was not possible.

**Wedding ceremony**

Marriage takes place through the religious and cultural practice of *nika*\(^8\) in the presence of a *Qadi*, a religious leader who officiates the marriage process. Wedding ceremonies range in scale from very modest to very costly. The most modest type of wedding ceremony involves chewing khat and drinking coffee and the most lavish include slaughtering up to two goats or camels and dancing in the forest. The number of people attending the wedding ceremony itself is very small. According to the head of the Women’s Affairs office, after the wedding ceremony (the *nika*),

“the husband takes the wife, to a forest or river for eight days. In the forest, she may climb a tree or so on to avoid sex. She usually suffers the pain during that time. The newly married women hate it (sex) at this time. This may be because they are circumcised."

FGM/C is highly prevalent in the community with all girls interviewed having been cut between six and eight days after their birth, although respondents noted that the type of cutting has shifted from infibulation to *sunna* – in part because the health risks to infibulation were severe.

**Divorce**

Divorce is common but there is inequality in terms of protection for women who seek out a divorce. According to the chairperson of the woreda’s women’s association, if the woman chooses to get divorced she can take any property that was given to her by her parents, but ‘the

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**Box 4: The evolving cultural practice of absuma in Chifra woreda**

Absuma has existed in the community since previous generations and is described by the kebele women’s association chairperson as follows:

In Absuma, marriage is based on heredity. For instance a boy will marry the daughter of his aunt. Assume there is a sister and brother. If one has four daughters and the other has four sons, then they will marry each other consecutively based on the age as priority criterion.

A key informant interview in the Justice Office indicated that in the community absuma is often considered ‘advantageous’ since:

…a female will not lose a husband no matter what happens. Even if she is handicapped, her absuma will marry her as she is. Even if she is on bed due to a disease, he will marry her. This is the best part of this culture. No other negotiating party is required for the marriage. The respective parents know the trend, they communicate with each other and tell some elders from the neighbourhood, plan and prepare a feast and perform the wedding.

Others believe that since the husband and wife know each other from before, and ‘the husband is a relative, he is not cruel to the wives.’

Bride price for marrying one’s absuma is typically 600 birr. However, if a man chooses to marry another man’s absuma, he must pay 12 cattle or 5,000 birr to the man whose absuma he marries. In fact, an interview with a boy revealed that the tradition of absuma is strictly enforced with severe consequences for those who marry another’s absuma:

The tradition of the Afar in this regard is so bad. They try to kill you if you are engaged in stealing another’s absuma. For instance, the absuma of my wife were looking for me in order to attack me because I have taken the girl from them. The Afar are very serious in this matter. Fearing that her absuma would attack me, I had to pay 5,000 birr to them. So I made it okay by taking proper care. Otherwise, they will kill you before you pay the money. The money could serve as reparation for them.

Recent changes in this tradition are noted with educated girls refusing to marry uneducated absuma. In this case, the penalty is paid to the girl’s absuma in order to release her from the marriage commitment.

*Source: Multi-informant interviews in Chifra woreda*

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\(^8\) A formal, binding contract that outlines the responsibilities of the bride and groom where consent to marriage is given verbally by both the bride and groom.
Drivers of child marriage

The drivers of child marriage in Chifra are, as in other hotspot woredas, multiple and complex. Here we attempt to disentangle the key drivers, suggesting their relative importance where the data permits.

Social norms about virginity/purity

Among the strongest drivers for child marriage in Chifra are beliefs around protecting girls’ virtue. There is consensus across all participants that one of the strongest indicators of a girl’s ‘maturity’ or readiness for marriage is the onset of ‘menstruation and enlarged breasts’. Once these are noted in girls, mothers inform their husbands that their daughters are ready for marriage. The underlying reason for these norms is the belief that ‘when she starts menstruating, she will have [sexual] feelings. So, we immediately arrange her marriage before she goes to bad places [engages in premarital sex].’ In one case, a 17-year-old girl reported disagreement between her parents and her absuma’s parents because ‘I am old enough but my body is not looking physically mature. Also, there are problems about the payment.’ The physical appearance of the girl seems to be the driving factor in indicating marriageability.

The community views pregnancy before marriage as shameful and parents fear gossip, leading them to marry their daughters as soon as they are considered mature:

*This bothers us because the community members in the surrounding area will point at you as result of the unmarried girl. They [unmarried girls] will have offspring from an illegal marriage and informal sexual intercourse. Unfortunately, if that happens, it is very difficult. Our culture is very strict in this regard. If she bears a child because of premarital sex with a boy, her parents will not feel comfortable with her actions. As a result, we urge boys and girls to get married before they have premarital sexual intercourse.*

In addition, high expectations around fertility drive parents to marry their daughters as soon as menstruation starts. Contraception is rarely used and it is expected that girls should have children (eight, on average) as soon as they marry. In cases where the wife do not give birth soon after marriage, the husband is allowed to marry other women without divorcing his first wife so as to not ‘abandon’ her. Infertile women are seen as a source of shame in the community. There is also a strong preference for sons given that sons can help fathers with physical tasks or in fights against other clans. Some girls, on the other hand, said that they would prefer their first child was a daughter so she could help with household work.

Limited legal awareness and/or acceptance of legal norms on age of marriage

Afar has not adopted the revised family law and instead relies on the 1960 Civil Code which set the minimum age for marriage at 15 for girls and 18 for boys. Given that the population is almost entirely Muslim, there is a heavy local reliance on religious custom, which sees girls as young as nine as old enough for marriage. As noted by a respondent in the community timeline exercise:

*What is important is her maturity. If she is matured – that is, if the criteria of the religion such as experiencing menstruation and physical maturation are fulfilled – then, the religion allows her to be engaged, even at the age of nine. If these criteria are not fulfilled, she may be unmarried even at 20 years old.*

Similar arguments were made in a focus group with fathers. One participant, when told that the national law called for girls to remain unmarried until the age of 18, replied: ‘To me the government’s (the legislation) is not right. It seems what is right is Solot (menstruation). Even you can judge for yourself. Can legislation be compared to what God said? What He said, no other man can change.’

Limited access or quality or beliefs in schooling

Another factor contributing to child marriage in Chifra woreda is the lack of awareness of the benefits of modern education, they do not take in to account the needs of their husbands. They do not respect their husbands. They do not bother about their husbands. I also believe that.

Father, 52
education. As a result, the community does not ‘pay’ more for an educated bride and thus there is almost no incentive for parents to send their daughters to school: ‘For urban dwellers and educated males an educated girl is preferred, whereas for pastoralists an uneducated girl is preferred for marriage.’ Instead, as seen in the quote in the box, some parents believe that education erodes a girl’s submissive characteristics, which are highly valued in the community. Moreover, both care economy burdens and social norms require girls to be engaged in household chores that place more value on responsibilities at home than on finishing their education. For instance, a kebele leader stated that ‘the common trend is that if a parent has four children, he sends one of them to school and the other three will be ordered to take care of his cattle.’ In-depth interviews with girls suggest that it is mainly boys who take care of the cattle and therefore drop out of school, while girls fetch water, collect firewood and cook food and simply miss school as a result.

For girls hoping to continue in school beyond primary level, beliefs about sexual purity are an obstacle. According to the head of women’s affairs of Chifra woreda, ‘parents make a girl quit education for the same reason. If she passes 10th grade and goes to town, it is inevitable that she will conceive.’ As a result, most girls are pressured to drop out of school by Grade 8 – around the time they turn 14 or 15 – in order to get married.

The decision on continuing a girl’s education after marriage is made by her husband. As a result, most girls drop out: ‘the problem is that if a married girl continues her education, she might be suspected of committing adultery and her husband may get jealous.’ Finally, with almost no girls completing their education, girls tend not have female role models to demonstrate the benefits of staying in school. Girls attend school only to receive incentives such as oil from the World Food Programme (WFP), which works with the Ethiopian government to provide food and special nutritional assistance for school children. A school principal noted: ‘I found that girls come to school to receive the oil, but they don’t concentrate in the classroom. With regard to the number of students, girls are greater in number, but with regard to educational performance, boys are around 60% but girls are around 40%. And the reason for that case is that girls come to school for the sake of the support, but they don’t want to focus on their education’ (quite likely because they are too exhausted from their heavy load of chores).

Changes in patterning of child marriage over time
While social norms still play a significant role in shaping marriage-related behaviours, the patterning of age and type of marriage is starting to shift over time. One of the biggest changes over a generation reported in the woreda is the increase in the age of marriage – from 13 or 14 years in grandparents’ and parents’ days, to 16 or 17 years in the current generation. This increase is attributed to the economic conditions; in previous times:

The growth rate of children was very high because of the food – the milk, butter and meat. Because of this female children became matured and ready for marriage at the age of 13 and 14. These days children are fed with shiro [a vegetable based dish] and do not get the ‘right’ food types. Because of this respondents believe that their growth rate is slow and they become ready for marriage at the age of 16 or 17. Only fast-growing female children become ready for marriage at the age of 15.

Box 5: Conforming to social norms of child marriage
Fatma is a 20-year-old girl, living in Chifra who was married to her absuma at the age of 16. Though many girls marry at 15, her mother wanted her ‘to be mature’. When her breasts had enlarged, Fatma says, her father ‘had the idea and asked about the marriage and I accepted his idea and he gave me for marriage.’ As a result, she dropped out of school. Her husband is also uneducated and prevented her from continuing education, but Fatma says she is not interested in education and prefers to be married: ‘when I was a child I had no chance to get anything. But now I can get shoes and clothing as I want, so now it is better.’

Her marriage was a traditional nika ceremony with a Qadi who officiated the marriage, though there was no signed agreement in the marriage ceremony itself.

She now has a son but hopes to have 10 children one day. She prefers to have more female children because ‘I need more daughters because they can support us. For instance, if we feel sick, I think our daughters will support us.’ However she believes her husband would like more sons ‘to support him in looking after the cattle’. Fatma stated that the expectation from her husband is that she ‘has children and takes care of my child without going outside for work. He even said that ‘just take care of your child by staying at home, we are here to work for you in the outside’.

Fatma wishes that she could have married at 20 so that could have taken care of her physical self and looked more beautiful before child birth. She also wishes she could have continued her education so she could become rich, but is now content with attending adult education with her mother.
Others report changes in wedding ceremony practices with present day ceremonies being smaller than those in the past. As one mother noted, ‘in today’s marriage there is no slaughtering of oxen. Only a few relatives are invited and the feast is small. Because the economic status of the people is currently low, the feast preparation is not that big.’ There has also been a change in the time put into the ceremony preparation since, ‘in the past, wedding ceremonial festive preparations were labour intensive because there were no mills to grind the grains, no water and fire wood in the nearby environment. But these days, only a small feast is prepared and grain grinding is carried out by mills and not by hand. So the present day wedding ceremony is better for females because it is not labour intensive.’

With regard to absuma, two changes were also reported. Firstly, the practice of ‘a young girl marrying an old man has stopped. That is, an old man waiting for a little girl until she is ready for marriage because she is his absuma is no more practiced.’ However, the evidence for this is mixed: the chairperson of the kebele’s women’s association stated that ‘since it is absuma, it can’t be helped. Even if he is an old man, she will marry him. It is required. Her father will beat her if she refuses and so will her mother – even if he is an old man.’

Additionally, a major change noted in the absuma practice is that participants state that an educated girl now desires an educated absuma. As one mother explained, ‘now, an educated man chooses an educated girl. But in the past people were illiterate and they preferred to marry illiterate girls because educated girls were considered as prostitutes. A girl who attends school was considered as rude and a prostitute! However, when people start to understand the importance of education, most men are attracted to choosing an educated girl as a wife.’

Protective/exit mechanisms from negative effects of child marriage
In the case of Chifra woreda, despite widespread child marriage, we noted several protective mechanisms worth mentioning, as described below.

Girls’ own decision making power
Interviews with young girls revealed that many young girls were unwilling to get married and wanted to continue their education. While many were pressured by their parents to marry their absuma when they showed signs of physical maturity (menstruation and breast enlargement), some girls have refused their parents’ demands to marry early, in which case either the parents listened to their daughters or the daughters threatened to kill themselves. According to the head of the women’s affairs office of the Chifra woreda, cases such as these have prompted a few parents to listen to their daughters when they refuse marriage:

Because they threaten their parents saying they will drink poison and commit suicide, some parents don’t marry their daughters [against their will]. Then we will make [the father] come here and tell him seriously to stop the marriage so that girls will not quit their education. Thus, there is a great change now compared to the past. Girls’ refusal to marry is the result of awareness about their rights.

Growing parental support for education
Although only a small minority of parents in the study supported their daughters’ education, it is indicative of a small and gradual change. One father said:

I allow my daughter to be educated so that she would get married to an educated individual. Educated individuals are better than the uneducated ones. … I have great interest in education of children and hence I strongly believe that my daughters and sons have to attend schools. I believe that education can change the lives of the youth and the people in general.

Not only do these parents understand the importance of education, they also recognise the negative effects of child marriage on education. One mother said:

I want my daughters to get educated. Yes, I am responsible for my children. If I force my daughters to get married, I feel that I am ruining their future life. As long as I am alive, I will let them continue their education up to first Degree or Masters level.

Existing programming
Programming interventions can play an important role in either spearheading social norm change around child marriage or helping to accelerate changes already afoot in a given locality. In the case of Chifra, programming efforts to date have been limited.

Strengths
The WFP’s initiative to provide oil and free lunch to girls to incentivise school attendance appears to be having a positive impact on girls’ enrolment rates. According to the kebele school principal, ‘We receive support once in every semester, even though there are issues in supplying the support in a timely manner. There would have been no education here, if there was no World Food Programme
support in our school; girls especially could not continue their education. If there is a gap after we give the oil to students, there is a tendency for girls to interrupt their schooling. But they also strictly follow their education for the last two weeks, so as not to miss the oil. As a result of regular attendance, both boys’ and girls’ performance has been improving. The WFP also provides free lunches for boys and girls in 29 schools in the woreda.

The schools also try to support girls who are pregnant so that they do not drop out of school by giving them additional days on which they can take their exams. This is only a school-level initiative, however, and there is no system in place to help pregnant girls continue their education at the regional level: ‘Pregnant girls will continue their education up to the eighth month, then on the ninth month I will give them permission [to take leave], and after birth they will come back to school to continue their education. If the interruption is during the exam time we will arrange exams for her and we can give her the exam in the office, and we use various ways to prevent dropping out. But the last girl like this dropped out from school because she gave birth on the eve of the Grade 8 regional examination day. She could have done the exam if it was a classroom exam, but as it was the regional exam the invigilators and police refused to allow it, so the girl was forced to drop out of school.’

**Weaknesses**

A number of challenges undermine existing programming efforts. With respect to the WFP initiative, school attendance is overly dependent on the cooking oil incentive. The school principal interviewed believes that if the assistance stops, children will stop attending school. With poor awareness of the benefits of education in the community, participation clearly needs to be addressed through a more holistic approach that includes interventions to improve local awareness and acceptance of girls’ education.

A second key weakness is the lack of health extension programming for community members. There is almost no contraception use by newly married girls. In cases of unwanted pregnancies, women chew leaves from the forest to abort their foetus instead of taking medication, which in some cases has reportedly caused them to die too. The risks faced by young married girls who give birth at home attended by traditional birth attendants instead of in health centres puts their health further at risk.

A related challenge is the disconnect between kebele leadership perceptions of women’s access to reproductive health service and the realities on the ground. For instance, a kebele leader said: ‘We heard that the service exists in health centres and extensions. Previously girls were afraid of visiting health centres and getting contraceptives. But now there are wives who courageously talk to their husbands about that they want to stop giving birth and use contraceptives. In the past women were extremely afraid to tell their husband that they had already been using contraceptives.’ However interviews with women in the community indicated that access to reproductive health services still a significant challenge for them.

**Entry points for programming**

Our research identified a number of ways forward for programming efforts—some of which were directly mentioned by respondents and others of which were more apparent to our outside research teams. These are:

- Afar should adopt the revised family law that sets the minimum age for marriage at 18—and then enforce it.
- Because child marriage is driven by religious beliefs surrounding the importance of girls’ sexual purity, it is vital to include religious and clan leaders in efforts to abandon child marriage – and to make it clear that girls of 16 are still children.
- Parents need greater awareness about the risks of child marriage.
Greater efforts should be directed at improving girls’ access to and performance in school. These should be built around nomadic reality and take into account the heavy domestic burdens placed on girls’ shoulders, especially during seasonal drought, and should also consider providing the poorest girls with material support.

A preference for early and high fertility suggests a need for access to both sexual and reproductive health information and services (e.g. contraception and tailored messages supporting its use, especially for younger wives).

Building a greater awareness of the risks of child marriage—and the advantages of adult marriage—is vital to elimination efforts in Chifa. Religious leaders continue in many cases to support the notion of child marriage and there is a broad misunderstanding, even on the part of local officials, that girls are old enough to marry as soon as their bodies look mature. For example, in an interview with a kebele key informant, it was noted that she herself felt that the appropriate age for marriage is 14-15 years old—meaning that she is unlikely to advocate against child marriage.

Additionally, there is a need to recognise that drought and drought-fuelled migration lead many children—especially girls, given their responsibility for the majority of domestic work including water acquisition—to drop out of school.

Finally, given the disjuncture between the census data for the woreda, which indicate that child marriage is rare, and our primary research findings which suggest that child marriage remains a significant concern, greater effort should be addressed at improving data quality so that we can better understand the current patterning of child marriage and track changes over time.
Key messages

Age of marriage

While Alefa is a hotspot for child marriage, the practice (which in the past was as young as toddlerhood) has declined significantly in recent years. However, local consensus that girls are ‘mature enough’ to marry in middle adolescence means that in the study area many young wives are not perceived as child brides, especially when chose their own partners.

Drivers of child marriage

- The largest driver of child marriage in the study area is a lack of options. When girls leave school, often at the end of 10th grade when they fail exams, they typically marry.
- Girls’ academic performance is hindered by excessive domestic workloads.
- A lack of local employment options for girls also contributes to child marriage.
- Factors protecting against child marriage
  - Going to school protects most of the youngest girls from marriage. Most parents are very committed to supporting girls’ education for as long as possible, because they aspire for them to have non-agricultural jobs.
  - There is little evidence that unmarried girls are considered unmarriageable or that parents are overly concerned with their daughters’ virginity. Girls’ access to contraceptives is good, regardless of whether they are unmarried or married. This helps delay both marriage (by preventing the pregnancy that forces it) and childbearing.

Priority entry points

- Greater efforts need to be made in terms of awareness-raising and enforcement to drive home the fact that adolescents are children too.
- Helping girls achieve academic success, so that they can stay in school longer, is critical to preventing child marriage.
- Rural areas lag far behind their more urban counterparts in terms of parents’ preference for education over marriage and should be prioritised by future programming.
Overview

Alefa, in North Gondar Zone of Amhara Regional State, is a woreda with approximately 190,000 residents who are almost entirely Orthodox Christian. According to the 2007 census, Alefa is a hotspot for child marriage: it is ranked 5th nationally in terms of the marriage rate for girls age 10-14 and 6th in terms of marriage rates for girls age 15-17.

While we asked to be directed to the kebele with the highest incidence of child marriage, accessibility issues meant the Office of Women, Children and Youth Affairs (WCYA) sent us to Dengel Ber instead. Dengel Ber is predominantly urban, having previously been the administrative centre of Alefa, but also has long enjoyed a reputation for being a pioneer in terms of education (see also Box 7).

Box 7: Dengel Ber Kebele

Dengel Ber, which consists of nine villages and has approximately 2,500 residents, is almost certainly not representative of Alefa. Not only is it one of the woreda’s three urban kebeles, meaning that it has levels of access to electricity, media and transport that are exceptional for North Gondar, but it has had formal schools since the reign of Haile Selassie and now has its own secondary school that runs through 12th grade. Indeed, local commitment to education is so high that the preparatory school (11th and 12th grades) was built by the community, rather than by the government, and the kebele ‘received a regional award for its effort in enrolling huge numbers of children to school’ (kebele-level key informant).

Exam pass rates in Dengel Ber are exceptional, the highest in North Gondar. For the 8th grade exam, 100% of students passed. Furthermore, over 80% of students passed the 10th grade exam.

The secondary school director reported that at the high school level there are far more girls than boys enrolled: in 2014-2015, 463 boys and 777 girls. Indeed, it appears that the ratio tips further towards girls each year. This year’s incoming 9th grade class has 170 boys and 282 girls, 70 more girls than enrolled a year before. Fathers in a focus group discussion explained that this is because, ‘boys go to the lowland (bereha) around Quara woreda to work as labourers’.

Tellingly, and the result of strong expatriate networks developed when locals had to flee the country during the Derg regime, Dengel Ber has sent over three dozen of its graduates for further study in the United States.

In addition to Dengel Ber’s ‘outlier’ status, it should be noted that even Alefa woreda is unusual compared to other hotspots included in this study. Its exam pass rates are higher than zonal averages (92% for 8th grade, 64% for 10th grade and 80% for 12th grade), most of its kebeles have good access to transportation and mobile phone service and five have electricity. While the woreda’s population density is substantially higher than zonal averages (86.9 versus 63.8), Alefa is not only food secure but surplus producing. The woreda’s plains are very productive, primarily growing rain-fed cereals, although its proximity to the lake means that some farmers also have irrigated permanent crops such as coffee.

Neither FGM/C nor formal polygamy is practiced in the study area – although it is common for men to have several concubines.

Current patterning of marriage

Age of marriage

As highlighted above and in Table 6, according to the 2007 census, nearly one in four girls were married before their 15th birthdays and over half were married before adulthood.

Table 6: Percent of girls who are married, by age, by residence
(Source: 2007 Census)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Alefa</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>North Gondar</th>
<th>Amhara</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls 10-14</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls 15-17</td>
<td>52.1%</td>
<td>6th</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
<td>27.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our respondents reported, however, that the situation today is very different than it was in 2007. How different is a matter of considerable contention. On the one hand, there are a great many respondents who insist that child

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9 The 2007 census reported approximately 170,000 residents – the 190,000 is according to a woreda-level key informant.
Marriage is ‘highly reduced’ in the last two or three years (woreda-level key informant). A kebele-level key informant explained that ‘in recent times, marriage before the age of 19 or 20 years old for females is unthinkable and practised very seldom’ and a local educator said that while in the past the school committee on marriage prevention ‘met on weekly basis’, this past year ‘we did it only twice a semester’ because ‘we are nearly on the way to forgetting about the issue’. Indeed, a grandfather, ‘There is no one in our community even who practises child marriage on secret basis; everybody has got civilised and changed in this regard.’

Even adolescent girls agreed that marriage typically takes place in adulthood. Focus group discussion participants settled on ‘after they are 18 years old’ as the most typical time for girls to marry. Similarly, an 18-year-old married girl said that ‘most of the time marriages here are done when women are aged 20 to 25 because most of the girls in this district have the chance to extend their education’.

On the other hand, it appears necessary to interpret such claims in light of two caveats. First, our respondents were clear that in the rural areas that surround Dengel Ber, child marriage remains far more common, with boys in a focus group discussion admitting that in outlying areas ‘most of the girls are married when they are still children’. Second, because this is a community in which girls used to be married while they were still ‘at bosom’, i.e. while they were still toddlers, local definitions of child marriage often do not encompass older girls. It appears that many girls, even in Dengel Ber proper, marry as soon as they leave school, usually after 10th grade (at 16 or 17). For girls who leave school early, even 12 seems to be considered ‘old enough’.

Not surprisingly, some of the strongest statements about the earliest marriages came from adolescents. For example, a 19-year-old boy said, ‘the trend for giving girls to a husband while she is a baby has been stopped, but now marriage is mostly when girls show secondary sexual characteristics.’ Similarly, an unmarried 14-year-old girl confided, ‘in this area usually girls get married at the age of 12.’ While some of the girls we interviewed had been wed as toddlers and were now divorced and in school, several had married in early adolescence (at 12 or 13) and had begun to live with their husbands immediately.

Key informants agreed that these child marriages continue to take place. An educator said, ‘Generally, child marriage is very common here’. This is, according to a health informant, in part because ‘a girl at the age of 14 may seem mature because of her body structure and her heavy weight’. While a few local officials felt that these mid-adolescent marriages ‘are practised rarely and do not show the totality of the reality in our kebele’, most admitted, when pressed, that girls are very vulnerable to marriage as soon as they ‘fail to pass from class to class or national examinations’. At the time she leaves school, a girl is expected to ‘start her married life with her husband’.

Given the diverse range of responses we were given when we asked when most girls marry, it is not possible to ascertain how many girls in Alefa – or even Dengel Ber – remain at risk of child marriage. The number is clearly high. While it seems likely that the youngest girls are increasingly protected from married life, since they are the most likely to be enrolled in school, those in middle adolescence appear to marry regularly and without triggering the concern of even the key informants tasked with protecting them.

**Marriage practices**

Marriages practices in Dengel Ber – although not necessarily in Alefa overall – have shifted quickly in recent years. They have moved from elaborate arranged marriages that took place in girls’ earliest years to simpler, freely chosen marriages that follow traditional pathways but are typically instigated by partners themselves. They are also more likely to be religious, rather than customary. It is important to note that because practices are shifting quickly, today’s adolescent girls have experienced a variety of marriage practices. Indeed, within the same family, daughters of different ages have often had remarkably different experiences with marriage. Some of the girls in our study, even those as young as 13, were married as infants. While now divorced and free to choose their own partners next, they are still considered ‘married’ girls in the eyes of the community.

Until very recently, most girls in Dengel Ber were married ‘while they were on their mother’s back’ (father). These marriages were arranged, ‘simply to get joy and happiness’.

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**At present girls are getting married when they are old enough for marriage. They get married starting from the age of 15.**

Woreda-level key informant

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**The law states that boys should marry at 18 and girls at 15.**

Mothers’ focus group discussion

**Law? Because I am not married, I don’t know that. But I have heard that. I heard that it is prohibited to marry before the age of 14 or 16.**

Unmarried 17-year-old girl

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**We are now unable to decide on the marriage affairs of our children without their consent. Our children are now teaching us that our traditions in the past were harmful traditional practices.**

Grandfather
(mothers’ focus group discussion), and regularly resulted in divorce long before the young couple ever cohabited. Spouses were chosen on the basis of wealth (in land and cattle), by ‘the parents of the groom calculating what they can get’ (community timeline). Wedding feasts were ‘extravagant’ (community timeline), as they were a sign of ‘pride and honour for the parents’ who wanted to demonstrate ‘their wealth and determination to other members of the community’ (girls’ focus group discussion). After the ceremony, girls were taken back to their parents’ home to grow up. At the first signs of puberty some were sent to live with their in-laws. Most, however, divorced because ‘the good relationship between parents’ soured as they ‘had disputes over property’ (girls’ focus group discussion).

In the past, whether marriages were the first marriages of toddlers or the second marriages of young adolescents, sex was often early and forced. Community timeline participants explained that while husbands, who are almost always at least five years older than their wives, waited until girls’ mothers said they were ‘mature enough’ before initiating physical relations, at that point he ‘was expected to have sex with her by force if necessary’. This was often very early. One mother, for example, said ‘I went to his home when I was 10 years old. We began sex at this age. Though I would say no, his parents would force me to go to the husband.’ She added that while ‘Sometimes, I used to disappear from him and stay a night at neighbours’ house, they used to bring me back’.

Today’s marriage practices are starkly different, ‘civilised’, rather than ‘backward’ (mother). In Dengel Ber, most are freely chosen, ‘made through children’s consent’ after they have formed ‘love relationships’ (girls’ focus group discussion). Our respondents explained that the typical pattern is for a boy to first approach a girl about whether she is interested in marriage. If she is, then the girl will ask him to ask her parents. If consent is given, then ‘the parents consult with the marriage elders and finally the marriages will be carried out’ (adolescent girls). Some partners ‘hold ring ceremonies (engagement ceremonies) but agree to stay in secondary school until they finish their education’ (father, focus group discussion). On the other hand, those who are already out of school ‘get some gift from their family to sustain their new marriage’ and begin their lives together immediately (community timeline).

While customs are changing as land shortages become more common, today couples are given land and cash in equal amounts by both sets of parents (community timeline). Few are feted as grandly as their parents were, since ‘people now expend little for wedding ceremonies’ (grandfather).

While most marriages in Dengel Ber continue to be negotiated through elders in the customary way, a kebele-level key informant explained that the ‘young generation’ increasingly ‘favours marriage which is settled in religious institutions’. These marriages, which do not allow divorce or concubines (see below), have become more popular because of the ‘spread of HIV/AIDS’ (father, focus group discussion). Fathers noted that government policy also favours ‘one wife for one husband’, meaning that ‘the government law and our religion go hand in hand’.

Marriages in Alefa are not formally polygamous, yet ‘there are many men who are married to more than one woman’ (boys’ focus group discussion). ‘Not considered as formal wives’ (mothers’ focus group discussion), these women are sometimes called kimit (concubines) or ‘town wives’. For the men, explained a woreda-level key informant, having more than one wife ‘is seen as prestigious’. Indeed, added a kebele-level key informant, ‘the community has a negative attitude to males who have only one wife because they believe that these men are dominated by their only wife’. While concubines often receive ‘cash or in-kind gifts’, they have no rights to property in the event of separation or death. It should also be noted that divorce and remarriage is very common (woreda-level key informant).

Finally, while marriage practices in Dengel Ber have shifted considerably in the space of the last decade, our study participants felt that the surrounding rural areas had seen far less change, with traditional child marriage still ‘almost a requirement’ (educator) and sometimes arranged ‘at the age of 3 or 4)’ (15-year-old adolescent girl). They reported that in the ‘remote areas’, girls were still forced into marriage by parents who tell them that they will be ‘cursed’ if they try to break the marriage arrangement (boys’ focus group discussion).

Drivers of child marriage
Our respondents noted that the drivers of child marriage have shifted in tandem with marriage practices. In the past, parents arranged marriage to accrue community respect and consolidate their wealth, but today they are largely driven by the confluence of tradition and a lack of alternatives. With a few exceptions, most notably religious leaders and elders, respondents are clear that it is best for girls to stay single and in school as long for as possible. Once they are out, however, the consensus in the community and among girls themselves is that the next step is to get married and assume adult roles.

Many religious leaders and elders continue to support child marriage. While they ‘may not be forthright about the issue face to face,’ explained a woreda-level key informant, ‘they are the one who bless and facilitate the marriage secretly’. A kebele-level key informant added that because ‘clergy and religious members also believe that education is making children ill-disciplined, they favour child marriage rather than modern education’. Adolescents noted that in addition to encouraging child marriage more

10 This means that the girl shows the boy that she is not interested in order to encourage him to leave her alone.
generally, because priests must marry girls who are virgins, the youngest brides are often those who are promised to priests. Indeed, a woreda-level key informant said that while most girls are no more than five years younger than their husbands, in the case of girls married to priests the age difference can be significant.

A prevailing theme in many other hotspot communities has been that girls must marry in adolescence in order to prevent being seen as unmarriageable. Being left ‘still standing’ is often deeply stigmatising for both girls and their parents. In Dengel Ber, however, this does not appear to be the case. One 17-year-old unmarried girl said that while ‘there is some verbal harassment, it is now clear that it is the girl herself who should be strong. She doesn’t have to give him her face.’ A health informant added that a girl who refuses marriage to stay in school might deal with the issue by putting ‘a ring on her finger’, so that ‘people will consider her as if she has a promise and no one will disturb her’. Only one girl, who chose to marry after she failed her 10th grade exams, said that she had done so for ‘security’. Even in her case, however, the issue appears to be not so much that she was stigmatised for being unmarriageable, but that she was sexually harassed at her coffee shop. ‘Here it is difficult for a single woman to work by herself. When the male customers know you are alone, they see you as a sex worker’. ‘Now,’ she added, ‘I am safe because I am married.’

Similarly, because in Dengel Ber marriages are decided on by partners, not parents, while a fear of premarital pregnancy continues to drive child marriage, the overall tenor of parents’ concern is quite different because it revolves not around girls’ virginity, but around pregnancy itself (see Box 8). Girls in a focus group discussion said that, ‘there are many girls who form love relationships with males when they are only 14 or 15 because they aren’t aware of the longer-term consequences of forming love relationships.’ While ‘parents need their children to calm down and complete their education first’ (mothers’ focus group discussion), girls ‘start to nag their parents to marry them with the person they choose’ (girls’ focus group discussion). Parents, according to boys, then think ‘if they didn’t give her to a husband in a timely way, that the girl might affront us.’ Adolescents and parents agree that these marriages are ‘totally the problem of female children, not of their parents’ (girls’ focus group discussion).

In addition, in other Amhara communities with a past history of extravagant child weddings there have been strong themes surrounding economic ‘pay-back’, with parents preferring to marry their daughters in part to recoup expenses they have contributed to the marriages of their neighbours’ children. By contrast, parent-level economic drivers in Dengel Ber were scarcely mentioned. Community timeline participants reported that older people still prefer child marriage because they ‘depend on their children and grandchildren for a pension’. A woreda-level key informant mentioned in passing that the wealthy and the powerful still tend to be the most likely to marry their daughters as children. Finally, a kebele-level key informant explained that parents prefer to marry their adolescent daughters off ‘at around 15, 16 and 17… as soon as they have the capital for marriage festivals and for engagement payments…and before they lose their property.’ This is because, he said, ‘if they lose their capital, the girl will remain single’.

For the overwhelming majority of our Dengel Ber respondents, the pertinent question about child marriage is not ‘why do girls marry?’ but rather ‘why would girls not marry?’ Taking this approach, the largest ‘driver’ of child marriage in Dengel Ber is ‘failing the General School Leaving Certificate Examination, which is taken upon completing grade 10’ (boys’ focus group discussion). Community timeline participants explained that when girls fail their exams, and are unable to continue on to preparatory school for 11th grade, they are left with no other educational options because most families have ‘no capacity to pay for private school’. This can lead to ‘a disagreement between parents and their children’ and in some cases means that the ‘daughter becomes a servant

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**Box 8: Plan B, combining betrothal with education**

Mr Assefa is a 43-year-old father of seven, all of whom are in school and one of whom recently completed Grade 12. Very committed to educating his children, he also acknowledged that his daughter may fall in love before he is ready for her to do so. He said:

Recently, a rich young man brought a marriage request for my 15-year-old daughter, who is in 8th grade. I replied, ‘it is impossible to raise a marriage request at this time before she completes at least Grade 10. If you agree with this you may deal with her and wait for her until she completes her education; nevertheless, nothing good will happen without my will’. He carried on asking for the two years and then stopped. My plan is to educate my daughter to her highest potential. Currently, she is in grade eight and I am supporting her progress. But as an alternative, I have also other options for her. That is, in case if she wishes to marry, I will let her get engaged with whomever she is in love. Then she can continue her education together with her fiancé.

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11 We were unable to obtain exam pass rates for Dengel Ber and Alefa. However, in other communities in Amhara they are as low as 50%.
for her family’. A health informant agreed that this was common. She said, ‘I know a number of girls who became low achievers in their education and then got married.’ Several of the married adolescent girls we interviewed told us that they had married right after leaving school because they have ‘no other options’.

Taking the ‘why not’ approach, respondents also noted that in addition to lacking educational options, many adolescent girls, especially those in rural areas, lack employment options. Indeed, the link between youth unemployment and child marriage was clear to a woreda-level key informant, who said that the former ‘is having a big impact on marriage practices’. While many respondents felt that adolescent boys and young men tended towards laziness and extravagance, most also felt that they had more options than girls. Fathers, for example, reported that ‘because boys are good in their school performance… and are hard workers…they get jobs easily’. Similarly, girls observed that because boys can work ‘day and night’, whereas ‘it is difficult for girls to work at night’, boys tend to be more successful at business. This reality leaves girls with few options other than marriage. One 18-year-old married girl confessed that she married because she did not have any start-up capital for her own business. ‘I took it from my husband’, she added.

All of the girls we interviewed in Dengel Ber who had married as adolescents, even very young adolescents, appeared happy with their marriages. All described their husbands as ‘good husbands’ and all reported that they were ‘happy with my current life’. None of them had voluntarily left school to marry (having either effectively never been to school or having failed their exams), so it is important to note that the decisions they made to marry were made in the context of very limited options. This has important implications for future programming.

Changes in patterns of child marriage over time

As noted above, in Dengel Ber the pattern of child marriage is shifting very quickly. This has resulted in a great deal of community complexity with, on the one hand, some younger adolescents unable to break the promissory marriages of their infancy (see Box 9) and, on the other hand, some older adolescents choosing to marry in civil ceremonies even without their parents’ permission. In part, this complexity has grown out of the speed with which change has come, especially over the last 18 months. In part, however, it grew out of initial community reluctance to comply with the marriage law. ‘At the beginning,’ explained a kebele-level key informant ‘even in the presence of the law, there was marriage at an early age’. A father explained that for years after the law was introduced, ‘the community did not accept it totally and practised marriage in a hidden way by pretending to be conducting different ceremonies, such as mahber, or even using bribery.’ While legal compliance has improved in the last few years, at least in regard to the youngest brides, earlier hidden practices have resulted in transition that can only be described as ‘messy’.

Changes in the patterning of child marriage in Dengel Ber are uneven. Not only are 15-year-old girls likely to marry – without being seen as child brides – but even ostensibly freely chosen marriage does not exclude the marriage of very young girls. One 15-year-old girl in our study told us that she had married at 12 willingly after meeting a boy in the market. A rural resident and out of school since 2nd grade, she explained that ‘though I married at the age 12, it was not hard for me to have

Box 9: Trapped in a marriage to a priest

Gebeya is 13-year-old married girl currently in 5th grade. She was married at the age of 1 to a priest. ‘He is old,’ she explained, and I am not happy in my marriage.’ But because her husband is a priest and would lose his priesthood if he divorced, Gebeya is trapped in her infant marriage. ‘I talked to my parents and asked them why they married me,’ she explained, ‘but they didn’t say anything. I don’t know how they married me.’

One of seven children, including a married sister currently in 11th grade, Gebeya knows that girls should not marry before the age of 18, because she ‘heard it on television…in my neighbour’s house’. She is certain that when girls get married early ‘they may not live a peaceful life’.

While she knows that she ‘can’t marry anyone else, except him’, Gebeya is very focused on finishing her education before she begins living with her husband. ‘I don’t want to drop out, I will finish my education,’ she said. ‘I want to begin life with my husband after I get employed.’ She continued, ‘I don’t know what my husband wants, but until now he hasn’t asked me and my family if we should live together.’ Besides, she concluded, ‘even if they were to insist on me living with him now I would not accept it.’

Kids were married while breast feeding. However, this is a reality of the past. Nowadays, every child is attending school and they get married by themselves. When they reach puberty stage, they choose each other and get married.

Mothers FGD
sexual intercourse with my husband on my wedding day.’ Similarly, a young man who participated in our community timeline group insisted that ‘harmful traditional practices such as child marriage have been condemned and are not practised in our area’, that ‘marriage at this moment is made between the boy and a girl’, and that he had married on his ‘own free will’. He added that his wife ‘is younger… and still attending school in grade 8’.

**Protective or exit mechanisms from negative effects of child marriage**

There are a variety of protective mechanisms at play in Dengel Ber. For example, messaging specific to the risks of child marriage have fostered an emerging community consensus that marriage is harmful, at least to the youngest girls, and easy access to contraception is helping to protect all girls from pregnancy and the unmarried from marriage. The most powerful mechanism working to protect girls from child marriage, however, appears to be community commitment to education (see Box 10 and discussion below).

Kebele and woreda-level officials are delivering a variety of messages about the risks of child marriage. Because these messages build on actual community experience, they have contributed to a growing consensus that, especially for the youngest girls, marriage is dangerous. ‘We have seen fistula,’ explained one adult in the community timeline group. With ‘early sex [carried out] forcefully…such problems were common in the past’, added a grandmother. Respondents also understand that the kebele’s high divorce rate is a direct result of early and forced marriage, because ‘couples who didn’t choose whom to marry, quarrel and divorce’ (fathers’ focus group discussion) (see Box 11). Messages about wedding costs have also found purchase and are protecting girls from marriage. One father explained that while parents were initially resentful, ‘complaining that a government that forbids weddings has come to power’, now parents ‘really take it seriously’ and find pride in ‘cost-saving culture’ rather than ‘extravagant expenditure’. It is, however, worth emphasising that while our respondents were universally agreed that the traditional form of child marriage was backward, wrong

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**Box 10: Learning from the past**

A mother who participated in the community mapping explained that her own parents had not done well by her in terms of education and marriage. She is determined to not make the same mistakes with her own children.

_I am the first child to my family. The reason why I did not attend school was that my parents were afraid that I may not come back home. I was married according to the tradition at the age of three years. My husband was a student. The parents of my husband suggested that I attend school. However, my parents were not willing to accept their advice. The worst thing was when my parents tried to force my fiancée to interrupt his education so that we could live together as husband and wife. He refused to interrupt his education. Then my parents forced me to divorce him and let me re-marry an illiterate and ignorant person like me. I regret that I was not able to go to school. I regret that my parents forced me to separate from my first husband. He was an educated person. I have regretted so many time for what I become. Due to those regrets, I have sent all of my children to school._

Participant in community mapping.

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**Box 11: Determined to not make the same mistake twice**

Tigab is the widowed mother of four children and considerably poorer than many of her neighbours. Her older daughter, now 23, was married at 13, after leaving school due to illness. While she thought she was doing well by her daughter, arranging a marriage to an older man who was more financially stable, now – watching her daughter divorce and struggle – she is deeply committed to educating her younger daughter and delaying her marriage until adulthood. She said:

_I advised her [my older daughter] to get married after she dropped out schooling. Thus, my daughter’s marriage was arranged by my will and not her own. Now, she is divorced. She came home pregnant with her second son. My daughter didn’t share any of her property with her husband. We tried to ask her husband for property, but we were unable to find him as he migrated._

This situation taught me a good lesson. I will allow my little daughter to continue her education. I made a promise to myself not to make any attempt to marry her off. I will be resistant to all marriage requests. Last time people asked me for my daughter, I responded that ‘it is better to kill me rather than make me force my daughter to drop out of school for marriage’. I want my daughter to successfully complete her education and then we will manage the other things.
and harmful, little about their emerging consensus protects older adolescent girls from marriage. Indeed, if anything, it reinforces the notion of them being ‘old enough’, especially when partners are freely chosen.

Dengel Ber’s experience with formal education is markedly different from that of most other communities and ultimately may offer the best path towards eliminating child marriage. As noted above, the kebele has had its own school since the early 1960s (1955 EC). While uptake of schooling appears to have been fairly limited for quite some time, the history of education in the kebele goes a long way towards explaining the current levels of commitment, which appear to mostly protect educationally successful girls from marriage.

Despite respondents’ assertions, it is clear that some children, especially those from Dengel Ber’s more remote villages and in Alefa’s more rural kebeles, do not get the opportunity to go to school. While these left-behind children are clearly rarer every year, especially as the kebele begins to track children’s attendance through one-to-five groups (kebele-level key informant), a 19-year-old boy told us that poor children, who ‘work as servants in rich people’s families’ are hiding in plain sight in Dengel Ber. He said that he had been asked by a university student engaged in research, ‘to register those children whose age is right for school but didn’t join primary education’. He found 19.

Dengel Ber’s commitment to education is fundamentally rooted in economic change. On the one hand, it reflects the community’s increasing productivity (woreda-level key informant). This means that parents can afford to send their children to school and can aspire for them to ‘reach better positions…in towns…rather than give them to a husband in the rural area’ (woreda-level key informant). The ‘role model children’ that parents ‘see in their surroundings’ (educator) have done much to encourage parental aspirations, since parents can see that ‘educated females lead better lives than those who are not educated’ (kebele-level key informant), especially when they get jobs (educator). Indeed, noted a father, ‘Whenever a girl is educated she can lead a better life as she is close to every technology. She may also get office job’. A grandfather added that this has had knock-on impacts on marriage practices, as ‘the economic potential of the girl is one good criterion for selecting her as a marriage partner’.

On the other hand, while Dengel Ber currently produces a surplus, parents are increasingly aware that the scope for agricultural livelihood security is limited. As noted by a father, ‘after the government declared that children should go to school but not marry, the community did not accept it at first. Then living standards went on dwindling and the community opted to send their children to school instead of having them married.’ An educator explained that as land becomes more fragmented and parents cannot further subdivide it for their children, they are ‘obliged to send their children to school’ because ‘they think of education to be their means of income’.

Key informants and adolescents noted that while parents tend to focus on education as a path to a brighter economic future, schooling also protects girls from marriage by teaching them about the risks of marriage, the law and their right to refuse, ‘especially in civic and ethical education’ (girls’ focus group discussion). School also serves as the primary reporting channel, allowing girls to ‘report to their teachers if child marriage is arranged for them’ so that teachers can ‘then intervene and stop the child marriage’ (married adolescent girl).12

Respondents were agreed that another mechanism working to delay girls’ marriages and prolong their education is easy access to contraceptives. As noted above, while other communities have focused on girls’ virginity,
in Dengel Ber the prevailing concern was not virginity but pre-marital pregnancy. Both adults and adolescents spoke freely about how if ‘a girl is interested in sexual intercourse, she takes contraceptives’ (fathers’ focus group discussion). Young men appear either indifferent to the virginity of their future wives, believing it to be ‘a matter of chance’, or even preferring to marry a non-virgin if she had money (community timeline). Fortunately, contraceptives are easy to acquire in Dengel Ber. A health informant noted that the health centre and the secondary school are contiguous and that either ‘directly or indirectly’, students ‘come and ask for birth control methods’. She noted that while some ‘feel shy’ about asking, she matter-of-factly explains to them that if they think condoms are embarrassing they should try a baby.

The acceptability of adolescents’ own decision-making is also working to protect some children, including boys, from child marriage (see Box 12). As noted above, girls in a focus group discussion reported that ‘marrying through parental arrangements is a sign of backwardness and because of this, girls do not allow their parents to choose their partners’. ‘This,’ they concluded, ‘no doubt pushes up girls’ age for marriage’ since no girl wants to marry before puberty. Even when parents try to marry their daughters, girls have options. A 14-year-old unmarried girl, for example, reported that when her parents tried to marry her older sister, she refused and they didn’t force her. A health informant added that if parents tried to force a girl to marry, she would just ‘disappear by herself until things settled down.’

There are also a variety of mechanisms that protect Dengel Ber’s married girls from some of the risks inherent in child marriage. For example, like their unmarried peers, the kebele’s married girls are regularly using contraception (health informant). They reported doing so for two reasons: to ensure that they do not fall pregnant before they are physically mature and to make sure that they are economically stable before embarking on parenthood. A married 17-year-old explained that while her in-laws were ‘pushing us to have our first baby’, she and her husband believe that contraception ‘is important until we work and save some money.’ Indeed, a health informant noted that while ‘in the past most of the women hid family planning from their husbands, now men consult me about birth control methods for their wives.’

While noting that the transition is far from complete, nascent moves towards women’s empowerment are also protecting Dengel Ber’s married girls from some of the risks of child marriage. Fathers, for example, noted that while ‘a husband used to hit a wife, harass her and oppress her in many ways, now if the husband even speaks hard words, let alone attacks her, she goes to [the Office of] Women’s Affairs’. Girls felt that this assessment was largely accurate and that there is much more space these days for women to make decisions both at home and in the community. One explained, ‘in the past, husbands dominated their wives and never allowed them to take part in the social or economic life of the community’. Now, however, ‘the rights of women are respected and they have an equal chance to make decisions on every issues’. Mothers also agreed, adding that while it used to be that women were only ‘together in funeral and wedding ceremonies’, today they are ‘taking part in different meetings and getting education regarding children’s upbringing, social life, economy, health and many others’.

**Existing programming**

There are a variety of existent efforts to reduce child marriage in Dengel Ber and across Alefa. Outside of Save the Children-Norway, which worked in other kebeles in Alefa for about ten years (but is now gone), ‘establishing girls’ clubs in schools and community forums and raising awareness about child marriage’ (woreda-level key informant), those efforts have been entirely government led, largely by the kebele administrator and teachers. As noted, while programming is helping to support an emerging community consensus about the risks of child marriage for younger girls, it is yet to address the issue of mid-adolescent marriage. Furthermore, education
about and enforcement of the law appears nearly nonexistent. On the other hand, Dengel Ber’s support for girls’ education is exemplary.

**Awareness raising**

Especially since 2006 EC (2014), but first beginning almost 10 years ago, efforts to raise community awareness about the marriage law, the risks of child marriage and the advantages of girls’ education have used a variety of venues, including ‘teachers, health extension experts, the development army, the one-to-five structures, and the Women Affairs Office’ (kebele-level key informant). At school students are exposed to messages in the teaching curriculum, when ‘woreda officials come to our school’ (17-year-old adolescent boy) and by the ‘mini-media club, which prepares different plays, poems and leaflets... regarding child marriage and other harmful traditional practices’ (educator). The use of multiple channels, and messages that build on lived reality, has strengthened uptake into the collective consciousness and does not appear to be so frequent or heavy handed as to engender fatigue or backlash.

However, while awareness-raising efforts appear to be pervasive, they are clearly not targeted at the abandonment of child marriage. Many respondents, even students, have not heard of the marriage law at all, and many others believe that it only prohibits the marriage of the youngest girls. Messaging related to the risks of child marriage is also aimed primarily at delaying the age at which girls marry. By focusing on the physical risks of early pregnancy and the disadvantages of forced marriages, rather than on the advantages of waiting until girls are mentally and emotionally mature or their right to be supported to be successful students, anti-child marriage messaging has in some ways contributed to the entrenchment of adolescent marriage.

**Reporting**

Dengel Ber, like other communities in our research, appears to primarily rely on schools reporting child marriage since students are often the best source of information about its incidence. However, given that few schoolgirls appear to be at risk of marriage, particularly forced marriage, the most vulnerable girls are not linked into a reporting chain. The kebele has recently attempted to address this issue, as well as the issue of retaliation, by making confidential suggestion boxes available in the community. According to a kebele-level key informant, this gives villagers ‘freedom and more security and because it is confidential, they will not be exposed to any type of harassment for being a whistle blower’.

**Enforcement**

Enforcement of the law appears nearly non-existent in Dengel Ber. A woreda-level key informant noted that in the ‘in 2001, 2002 and 2003 EC’ (2009-2011), when ‘there was a wider trend of child marriage’, it was common to cancel ’50-70 marriages for girls age 6-10 each year’. However, while some parents and adolescents mentioned that today’s ‘compliance’ is a result of parents being penalised and even jailed for forcibly marrying those ‘baby’ daughters, the fact that the law also applies to girls between the ages of 10 and 18 appears to have attracted no notice at all, even from officials. Indeed, far from upholding the law it appears that the adults meant to champion the end of child marriage often agree with parents that mid-adolescence is ‘old enough’. Respondents suggested that enforcement in outlying rural areas is weaker still. Not only is there little coordination between sectors, meaning that the WCYA Office bears the brunt of the burden for eliminating child marriage, but transport issues prevent ‘police and justice officers’ from reaching the ‘lowland and desert areas which are the most common place for child marriage’ (woreda-level key informant).

A key enforcement gap, according to respondents, is the ineffectiveness of age checks. In Alefa, all marriages must ostensibly be approved by a committee which verifies girls’ ages and establishes their consent. However, both key informants and adolescents agreed that as long as ‘parents say their daughter is above 18 years old, the justice officers simply accept the words of the parents and there is no age investigation’ (19-year-old adolescent boy). Sometimes, agreed a woreda-level key informant, ‘parents advise their daughter to lie about their age’ and other times, contributed another, age ‘approximation methods’ fail. Regardless, added a health care provider, when girls are interested in the marriage, often no one asks their age at all. Broader support for girls

Dengel Ber’s broader support package for girls is in many ways outstanding. Students reported that while boys continue to score higher than girls, ‘teachers most of the time give support for girls’ (19-year-old adolescent boy). Girls are offered tutorial sessions, provided with ‘guidance and counselling’ by a psychology teacher (17-year-old adolescent girl), and taught about puberty, menstruation and contraception. According to a kebele-level key informant, who lamented that even boys’ families do not trust them not to waste resources, ‘the government is also giving credits to females to participate in small businesses’.

Respondents noted that while support for girls is strong, it is not strong enough. Girls in a focus group discussion, having previously argued that the community is very supportive of girls’ education, later observed that ‘boys are better in their academic performance’. An educator noted that this is because ‘teachers do not recognise students’ problems’. He admitted that while some students are ‘lazy and careless’, teachers rarely ‘consider the challenges faced by female students’. Girls, he said, ‘face work burdens in and outside of the household’ because ‘most of the community members are less educated and hence they do not consider girls’ education as more important’. The end result is that girls are less likely to have time to do their homework and more likely to be late or absent from school.
Entry points for programming going forward

The overwhelming response of study participants was that future progress towards reducing child marriage needs to come not from enforcement of the law, but from more inclusive, sustained attempts to build awareness about the risks of child marriage and the advantages of girls’ education. They also felt, as noted above, that girls needed more practical support to become successful role models for the next cohort. The following entry points were identified by our research:

• Clarity about the definition of child marriage: In order to eliminate child marriage it is first necessary for girls, young men, parents and officials to understand what child marriage entails. As long as girls over the age of 15 are seen as ‘mature enough’ to marry, there will be no attempts to prevent adolescent marriages.

• Target rural areas: Key informants and adolescents were well aware of the fact that Dengel Ber is not representative of Alefa as a whole. They felt strongly that ‘further similar campaigns are also needed in rural areas’ (kebele-level key informant), where child marriage is rampant and girls’ education still rare.

• Strengthen existing structures: Kebele-level key informants felt that ‘eliminating such deep-rooted traditional customs demands the overall involvement of different bodies and should not be left for a certain group or sector’. They called for more coordination between the WCYA Office and the Office of Justice and the woreda and the kebele, and also for the strengthening of grassroots organisations such as one-to-five groups and their awareness-raising efforts.

• More school: The critical role of education in preventing child marriage was apparent to respondents, especially key informants. While Dengel Ber’s efforts to enrol girls are laudatory, they need to be extended to all children, including from poor and rural areas. Given our empirical observation that girls tend to marry as soon as they leave school, greater efforts also need to be made to keep girls in school longer, which will primarily require developing initiatives to improve their performance in the classroom and on exams (see below).

• Build more support for girls: Acknowledging the need to keep girls in school longer, respondents called for a variety of forms of support for girls. Adolescents called for domestic workloads to be more equally distributed, educators believed that teachers need to be more accommodating of the many demands on girls’ time, and girls themselves wanted a girls’ club, which the kebele schools lack. Some stressed that they needed better access to sanitary pads, so that they would not have to miss school during menstruation and others wanted more information about puberty and contraception. A few girls also mentioned that young mothers need pathways to continue education.

• Involve elders and religious leaders: Given the critical role that elders and religious leaders play in the community, villagers believed that greater efforts should be made to involve them in teaching. Given the role that they play in perpetuating child marriage, key informants believed that they needed to first be targeted for education.

• Jobs: In Dengel Ber, as in many other communities, ‘unemployment is a very serious problem’ (woreda-level key informant). While efforts are being made to support young people in developing their own jobs, key informants were clear that the current situation is ‘discouraging the community from sending their remaining children to school’.
Child marriage drivers in Aneded woreda, Amhara

Key messages

Age of marriage

- Aneded is a hotspot for child marriage, with ceremonial marriage typical for very young girls and “real” marriage common by 15.

Drivers of child marriage

- Parents’ desire for community respect drives most child marriage, as hosting a wedding ceremony is considered prestigious. In an effort to save money, parents increasingly marry all of their children, even the youngest, in a single ceremony.
- Child marriage is also driven by stigma directed at unmarried girls.
- Parental investment in education is low—with girls especially unlikely to attend secondary school, as parents perceive the travel required as unsafe.

Factors protecting against child marriage

- Nascent shifts towards girls’ own decision-making are allowing some to choose education and employment over marriage.
- Girls have good access to contraception and are increasingly supported by their husbands to use it.
- Schools, with the support of NGOs, are working to keep girls in school and prevent child marriage.

Priority programming entry points

- Better enforcement of the law is required and should include anonymising reporting, as whistle blowers often face serious repercussions, and alternate ways of establishing girls’ ages (though school records, for example), as they are often forced by their parents to lie.
• Girls—and their parents—need role models to encourage investment in education.
• More concerted efforts need to be paid to helping parents understand the risks of child marriage.

Overview
Aneded is a woreda in Amhara region in the East Gojjam Zone. According to the 2007 census, it had one of the highest child marriage rates in the country (see Table 7 below).

Table 7: Percent of girls who are married, by age, by residence (Source: 2007 Census)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Aneded</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>East Gojjam</th>
<th>Amhara</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls 10-14</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>20th</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls 15-17</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>9th</td>
<td>37.4</td>
<td>27.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our fieldwork was undertaken in the Daget Yegeleqa kebele based on a recommendation from the Aneded woreda Women, Children, and Youth Affairs (WCYA) representative based on it having the highest rate of child marriage among Finote Hiwot (End Child Marriage Programme) non-intervention kebeles (see Box 13 for an overview of the kebele characteristics).

Current patterns of marriage and divorce

Age of marriage
Our research suggested that many girls in this kebele get married before the age of 15, although this includes all types of marriages, including more symbolic forms that are typically dissolved before co-habitation (see below). The school director said that, ‘almost all girls by eighth grade have been married and divorced.’ Similarly, a focus group discussion with boys revealed that they had all married their ‘first’ wives before they were 15 years old to girls who were much younger to them in age (and possibly as young as six; a six to seven year age gap is expected between the boys and girls getting married). Adult women in a focus group also reported marriage at a young age in their time and said that, ‘in our community the usual age for girls to get married is below the age of 15. We all got married when we were kids. We do not even remember the village where we went with our husband’. Young adolescents were asked at what age they believe girls should be married: most stated that girls should be married by 16 and boys by 19. A health worker claimed that the expectation is that the ‘majority of the children establish their own independent life at 14 or 15’.

Choice of marriage partner
The choice of a marriage partner is defined by certain rules in the community. Girls’ parents look primarily at the economic status of the boy. According to key informants, land ownership is strongly considered as well as livestock. Indeed, ‘if anyone hears about a girl whose parents are rich in terms of land resources, everybody would be competing with each other to marry her to have that land’. Another criterion for choosing a partner is the families’ background. Numerous participants shared the view that ‘in our locality, there is no inter-marriage between occupational groups such as tanners, blacksmiths, potters and weavers and other community members (well born groups), but there is intermarriage among the occupational groups themselves’. In other words, marriage ties take place between families engaged in similar occupations. Moreover, there is also evidence that historically marginalised communities do not inter-marry with other community members: ‘people don’t want to marry their children to children of the potters, weavers, ‘evil eyes’ [a marginalised caste group] and blacksmiths. These groups are undermined by the community’.

Wedding ceremonies/types of marriage
There are various types of marriage in the community. One is known as ‘exchange marriage’, or yelowt gabicha, where the parents of those getting married ‘exchange’ their children without any marriage related payments (tilosh or macha) or contractual agreements. As described by a school director: ‘if for instance, a farmer has two children, a girl and a boy, he will find another farmer who has also a boy and a girl. Based on an oral agreement they reach in front of community elders, they will exchange their children’. Our interviewees reported that this kind of marriage mostly ends up getting dissolved as often there is disagreement between one of the couples. Cultural norms dictate that if a marriage of this type breaks down, then the others also should separate. In this type of marriage, girls usually get married before the age of 15 but do not leave their parents’ home to go to their husband’s home and village. Adolescent girls in focus group discussion said...
that, ‘in our culture, girls usually establish their real life in marriage at the age of 15 to 25, which is mostly in the second marriage’. There are no HIV or AIDS check-ups for first marriages, further indicating that first marriages are symbolic in nature and do not involve cohabitation.

When girls get married for a second time, it is known as yegalemota gabecha. This predominantly takes the form of a ‘traditional’ marriage, the most common in the kebele. The school director reported:

> this traditional type of marriage is locally known as lemadawe gabecha (customary marriage) and is arranged through marriage negotiators and community elders. As the name itself shows, it is a form of marriage usually arranged and negotiated by community elders assigned by both marrying families. Community elders prepare a contractual agreement which parents and the two married couples sign to show their consent for the marriage. This contractual marriage agreement is locally known as yesemanya wul. It states that the marriage is conducted based on the equal agreement of the married couples and their parents and the amount of wealth each parent has contributed.

Another form of marriage that exists in the community is ‘religious’ marriage. According to a kebele official, this marriage type:

> is based on the church procedures when both the boy and the girl are very small because priests must marry a virgin. For instance, if the boy is 13 years old, the girl could be five years old. The nature of clerical education delays the start of an independent life for the couple. The boy will stay away from the family for more than
Parents do not reject marriage proposals from priests or deacons as they are highly respected in the community.

According to the kebele WCYA representative, ‘polygamous marriage is not common in the locality due to fear of diseases such as HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases’. In fact, ‘the community considers polygamy as a bad culture’. However, the kebele chairman clarified what type of polygamous relationships do exist in the kebele and stated that ‘while there is no pure polygamy practice in our kebele, in the past men used to have sexual intercourse with women who were either unmarried, divorced or widowed as well as to their own wives’. This type of a relationship is known as kimit maskemet and is thought to be different from both polygamous marriages and prostitution because ‘the man visits the woman regularly and she is expected to be reserved and loyal to him. It could be with or without the knowledge of his wife’. Kimit is reportedly becoming less common as it is viewed negatively in the community.

Divorce

Divorce is common and with rising awareness of laws protecting women’s rights, there is evidence of women getting an equal share of property after seeking divorce. While the first step to solving conflicts between a husband and wife is to involve their parents in helping them resolve their problems, if the conflict cannot be resolved, ‘the next step is divorce’ (interview with health extension worker).

Since elders keep written documentation relating to the couple’s property, the couple shares their assets equally. In case that conflicts persist, women have access to free legal services at the justice office to appeal their case.

Other changes have resulted from this growing awareness of rights. According to the kebele WCYA representative, the rate of divorce has declined. In the past, divorce was a result of ‘ill-treatment of women by men. However, the rate of divorce is notably declining owing to the equal recognition of women’s rights. Husbands fear having to share their property with their wives during divorce and this makes them treat their wives better so that they do not ask for divorce’. Similarly, the community timeline revealed that, in the past, divorced women were labelled as galemota, meaning they were ‘bad wives’ and men did not want to remarry them. Now, though, if a divorced woman has farmland, she is asked for remarriage because ‘land has become the most important means of production due to its short supply’.

Drivers of child marriage

The drivers of child marriage in Aneded are, as in other hotspot woredas, multiple and complex. Here, we attempt to disentangle the key drivers, suggesting their relative importance where the data permits.

Social norms

Social norms drive child marriage practices in this kebele. Multiple informants said that the most important reason for marrying children young is preserving social status: ‘If we fail to marry our children by preparing a big feast with ferida [slaughtering an ox] or if we are unable to prepare a big feast to invite as many attendants of the wedding ceremony as possible, our social status and honour will most likely be diminished’. Others stated that marriage at an earlier age is required so that ‘grandparents can see the wedding ceremony of their grandson or granddaughter before they die’.

My parents’ decision was binding but I had no interest in getting married. Even though I wanted to refuse, my voice was not heard. They simply wanted the marriage for the sake of cultural satisfaction. In our culture, if parents marry off their children while they are alive, they get respect from society and satisfaction. Preparing a marriage feast is among the key life events that almost all rural families want to experience.

Married, 18-year-old girl

Social status in the community is most commonly upheld by mothers. The kebele chairman said that mothers ‘put pressure on the husband to arrange the marriage ceremony’ because ‘they want to see the marriage ceremony of their daughter. They care about seeing the dancing of neighbours and relatives, the food and the cultural blessing ceremony of the wedding by the elderly’. Most importantly, parents are seeking to get back the aquolquay – the money, injera, and other items – that they have given to others in the community during others’ wedding ceremonies.

Fathers also play a strong role in driving social norms and driving child marriage practices, as noted in a 14-year-old girl’s interview:

It is my father who makes every decision regarding his children’s marriage. My mother does not have a voice on such issues. She might oppose, but her ideas are not heard. Everything is decided by our father. It is he who determines the ones we should marry or not. It is also he who decides when we should marry.
These social norms are clearly deeply ingrained, but not only among parents: girls, boys and young adults also drew attention to the advantages of marriage, such as bearing children and becoming independent – a ‘symbol of self-reliance’. This may also be associated with the fact that the community insulsts girls who remain unmarried by calling them gomoqär. Both parents and girls seek child marriage to avoid derogatory names. For instance, a 25-year-old woman who divorced when she was pregnant because her husband migrated without leaving her any economic support was glad to have married: ‘Compared to those who did not get married, my life is better. Now, I am relieved from insults. It is good to marry and be free of such insults and discriminations’ (see also Box 3 below). This suggests the extent to which shame of not being married overshadows any hardships faced within marriage.

**Economic**

There was a consensus across the participants that one of the major driving forces of child marriage is the ‘the expensiveness of goods and the scarcity of resources’. Multiple adult participants linked this to the prevalence of child marriage, for instance:

*In our time our families were preparing wedding feasts for each of their children, but nowadays resources are scarce and people are getting poorer. They can’t prepare a wedding feast for all of their children and so they prepare a single wedding for their under aged and mature children.*

Given the lack of family planning and the strict social norms around wedding feasts, parents who have multiple children find it more economically feasible to marry all their children off at once. A health extension worker noted that parents justify child marriage in terms of saving household resources and ‘because they [parents] know that these married underage girls will not establish their own family and start to lead their independent lives right away. The objective is only to save resources needed for marriage ceremonies’.

**Limited legal awareness and/or acceptance of legal norms on age of marriage**

Respondents had mixed opinions on the proportion of adults or children aware of the legal age of marriage, but it is clear that many who do know the legal age do not adhere to it. Some said that parents deliberately arrange marriages before the age of 18 despite knowing that it’s a crime. The justice office explained that there are various checks in place to ensure that children below the age of 18 do not get married but that parents find ways to circumvent them. For instance, parents will arrange a marriage ceremony for a six year old using a sibling over 18 years old as cover to get the maturity certificate required in order to host a wedding from the woreda office. A married 18-year-old girl told of how the system could be cheated (see also Box 15):

*The health workers at Amber health centre first ordered me to take off all my clothes; they looked at my breasts, hair around my vagina and hair under my armpits. Then they sent me to the court (justice office) where I was asked if I was a student or not and if I could read and write. I lied that I was not a student and I couldn’t read and write because my father had warned me to say that. If I had told people in the court the truth, my father would have kicked me out of the home. When I threatened to report the case to our school director, he mocked me and said ‘if you do, let him [school director] be your guardian and marry you’. Then, I did what I was told to do and they declared that I was old enough to get married.*

Moreover, community members are afraid to ‘blow the whistle’ and give evidence against those complicit in child marriage. The woreda education office representative indicated: ‘people in the community are not willing to be witnesses for such crimes. They don’t want to expose their neighbour. They know that the tables will one day be turned on them. Whistle blowers also fear the revenge of the victim’s family members. Their home and harvest could be burnt due to their act’.

**Limited access or quality or beliefs in schooling**

Another factor contributing to child marriage in Aneded woreda is the lack of awareness of the benefits of education for either boys or girls. As a result, the community does not ‘pay more’ for an educated bride, a practice which in other places provides parents with an incentive send their daughters to school. Some key informant interviews stated that the community feels that ‘education has no value’ and is not a factor in choosing a marriage partner for children. A few inter-generational interviews indicated that ‘educated girls want to get married in a modern way. They want to go by car on their wedding day rather than going by horse. They also want to have gold rings, jewellery, and modern bride clothes. Generally, educated girls don’t want to get married in a traditional ceremony’. Holding such perceptions would put people off choosing an educated bride for their son given the high levels of poverty.

The demands of household responsibilities also force girls to drop out of school. Parents prefer to send children to the farm than to school. One health extension worker said: ‘parents order their daughters to clean the barn and do other house-related tasks. The adverse effect of the lack of parental support is seen in grades six and seven where some students can’t read Amharic properly’.

Since some girls typically get married before the age of 15, they are unable to continue their education and choose instead to drop out. Social norms demand that husbands must give permission to their new wives to continue their education. Some wives are allowed by their husbands to continue
learning after marriage, but they may drop out for other reasons. According to a mother, 'the main reason [for dropping out of school] is getting pregnant; husbands also force them. Generally, marriage and education can't go together'.

The education office representative believes that despite trying to recruit female teachers for preschools, 'we face a shortage of female teachers who have completed their secondary school education. We pay 500 birr per month to pre-school teachers, which I don't believe is adequate. But since they are living with their parents, it could be considered enough to meet their basic needs'.

Changes in patterns of child marriage over time
While social norms play a significant role in shaping marriage-related behaviours, the patterns of marriage age and type are starting to shift. One of the biggest and most troubling changes over a generation reported in the woreda is the decrease in the age of marriage: from later adolescence in parents’ days to 12-15 in the current generation. This change can be attributed to economic hardships faced by parents who choose to marry all their children off in one ceremony to save money.

Though the kebele chairman noted that there were cases of marriage in early childhood (3-6 years of age) in grandparents’ time, informants said that ‘child marriage is a recent phenomenon’. As noted by a kebele WCYA representative:

During our day, girls were getting married after they experienced maturity. I assure you marrying girls as early as fifteen has just been a recent experience among the local people. Marrying children at an early age before their maturity was an unacceptable and inappropriate act and was simply perceived as forbidden. Girls were not referred to as qomoqär in our days. Using this word for those girls who stay unmarried is a recent practice among the local people. We never experienced this in our day.

Another change noted in the community is that the age difference between the boy and the girl getting married has reduced and ‘people don’t marry their daughters to older men anymore’. A girl labelled qomoqär, however, may still be married to someone much older than her.

Protective or exit mechanisms from negative effects of child marriage
As we have discussed elsewhere, while child marriage contravenes both international and Ethiopian law, the effects vary depending on the interplay of local practices and beliefs. In some cases, local cultural norms help to ensure that girls are protected from the worst effects of child marriage – e.g. cultural practices that prevent excessively early sex or pregnancy until girls are physically mature or allow girls to continue with their schooling even if married (Jones et al., 2014; Presler-Marshall et al., 2015). In the case of Aneded woreda, despite widespread child marriage, we noted the following protective mechanisms.

Girls’ own decision-making power
Though limited, there was some evidence that girls are pushing back against their parents’ decision to marry them early. For instance, one young girl said that ‘my parents had arranged a marriage for me, but I refused and escaped from the marriage’. Another girl said she did not need to convince her parents given that the decision to get marry lies solely with her; ‘these days we can decide on our life. Our parents do not impede our decisions’.

Other girls recognise that getting married early has negative impacts and say they want to get married only after they have a job. One stated that she didn’t want to get married before she was independent: ‘Though the right age

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**Box 14: Conforming to social norms of child marriage**

Eleni is a 25-year-old woman who was enrolled in school before leaving because ‘my friends were married and I feared to go to school alone’. Eleni was informed of her impending marriage to a man she did not know only a week before the wedding day. But, she said, ‘because it is the culture, I was happy when I was married’.

After getting married, though she had gone to the health centre to get ‘an injection’ she chose not to take any more contraceptives because she wanted children. She soon gave birth to a son: ‘everyone feels happy when you give birth to a male child’. However, she and her husband got divorced due to ‘economic hardship’: the ox her father had given her had died and her husband had to migrate to Addis Ababa. With no other alternatives for economic support, Eleni came back to her parent’s home and divided the crops between her and her husband. She requested child support but her husband was not reachable and his brother only gave her ‘50kg of food crops’. Nonetheless, Eleni says that she is living peacefully with her parents.

Reflecting on her situation, Eleni is happy that she got married because she is free from insults from the community and she has a child. She sincerely believes that getting married was the right decision for her and does not regret leaving her education or her marriage.
of marriage is 18. I don’t even want to get married at 18, but after I have had my own job and become independent. If I am independent, I can make my own decisions so that I can choose my own husband just like my sister did. This growing group of girls suggests that girls’ ability to make their own life choices is associated with a move away from child marriage in some cases.

Growing parental support for education

Although only a small minority of parents in the study supported their daughters’ education, their approach is indicative of a small and gradual change. A 14-year-old girl said that ‘my parents take a firm position on sending me to school until I complete my education. Thus, more than anything, I want to focus on my education. Marriage will come later on’. There are parents who express regret over marrying their older daughters off early and who say that they do not intend to repeat their mistakes: ‘When my daughter got married she was 7 years old and the other daughter was 9 years old. But now I regret that because it would have been better if I had sent them to school rather than getting them married. Now I am teaching my last daughter and I won’t force her to get married. She can marry whenever she wants’.

Some people feel they lack access to nearby secondary schools. One religious leader sent his daughter to the woreda town, Amber, for preparatory school, but said he could only do it because her brother was able to accompany her. Others in the community timeline also share similar beliefs: ‘parents prefer to arrange marriage for their daughters instead of sending them to faraway secondary schools’.

Existing programming

Programming interventions can play an important role in either spearheading social norm change around child marriage or helping to accelerate changes already afoot in a given locality. In the case of Aneded, programming efforts to date have been quite limited.

Strengths

Health extension programming in the woreda has been central to providing access and knowledge to girls and women in terms of reproductive health. For instance, the kebele WCYA representative said that ‘reproductive health services are now expanding. In the past, this service was inefficient and it was almost non-existent. Today, mothers and children are accessing better health care as a result of the growing accessibility of the service’. This was supported in the in-depth interviews where all girls said they had access to contraception and could choose between different birth control options. In fact, a health extension worker said that ‘females are using contraceptive methods with the knowledge of their husbands. Sometimes they come together to consult us about contraceptive methods. Couples want to get to know each other before they bear a child so they use contraceptives’. As a result, ‘family size is decreasing’. Moreover, there is a free ambulance service to bring women to give birth at the health centre in Amber.

Similarly, schools have made a big effort to discourage dropping out, increase awareness of the benefits of
education, and support girls to complete their education. For instance, Finote Hiwot and the Amhara Development Association provide girls in poverty with school materials, menstrual support and soaps. The school director also described how school staff had sometimes intervened to prevent child marriage in the kebele. Other respondents noted the particularly important role that teachers play in protecting female students from dropping out of school and empowering girls to be ‘confident’ about themselves. According to the woreda education office representative:

> Teachers try to control enrolment and attendance of female students in each class. If there are female students who are absent from school, teachers will follow up, identify the problems and report to the school. Solutions will be devised to get her back to school.

As Yaya’s story in Box 15 above, however, highlights, this only works in so far as girls first having the courage to report their concerns about forced drop out or child marriage to school authorities. Those who are intimidated into marriage out of fear of family reprisal or violence are unfortunately likely to fall through the cracks.

**Weaknesses**

Nevertheless, there remain several challenges that hinder the positive effects of health programming. For instance, while the health centre checks that the children are the appropriate age for marriage, parents find a way to trick the system. The kebele chairman indicated that even though they are aware that parents are using dubious maturity certificates for child marriage:

> Our emphasis is raising community awareness using various public meetings. We don’t want to follow the legal procedures strictly for parents who are practising early marriage. Rather we prefer that parents who are practising early marriage learn from their mistakes.

The lack of legal enforcement helps to perpetuate child marriage. According to the kebele chairman, the reason for not pursuing legal action is that if family members are imprisoned or penalised monetarily, their ‘family will be vulnerable to food and social insecurity’. While these concerns are well founded, it is important to find a holistic solution that takes into account ways to ensure that families can be punished without pushing them further into poverty. This could include social sanctions such as excluding households from local social gatherings such as mahber (cultural festivities).

The kebele and woreda administration have poor monitoring mechanisms for identifying child marriage practices, and many incidences are likely to go unnoticed. For instance, the kebele WCYA representative reported that their office gathers information about child marriage cases through ‘hearsay’. Similarly, the school director said that:

> We usually interrupt cases [of impending early marriage] by collecting information from the students themselves. Male students are mostly free to give us information if there is any case related to early marriage. But female students are not as open about notifying their teachers and the girls’ club head if anything happens to them, including early marriage.

Finally, a further weakness of the existing programming efforts lies in the selection process of giving training only to a few select parents as opposed to all parents. For instance, the school director reported that in order to improve girls’ attendance in school during menstruation, the school ‘gave training to some selected parents whose awareness is better than other community members in collaboration with the ADA-PACARD foundation’, with the aim that these parents could serve as opinion shapers. However, important gaps in awareness-raising efforts remain. The kebele chairman recognised this, saying that:

> We didn’t observe official resistance or opposition. In theory, everyone in the community accepts our teaching. But they are still practising early marriage under the cover of one or two members of the family who are approved for marriage by the woreda justice office.

**Entry points for programming**

Our research identified a variety of ways forward for Aneded. They include:

- Better enforcement of the law is required and should include anonymising reporting, as whistle blowers often face serious repercussions, and alternate ways of establishing girls’ ages (though school records, for example), as they are often forced by their parents to lie.
- Girls—and their parents—need role models to encourage investment in education.
- Efforts need to be made to reduce the stigma directed at unmarried girls—working, where indicated—to replace it with prestige for investing in education.

Respondents, when asked directly which of a list of interventions they preferred, added:

- Providing economic support to girls for completing their education
- Assigning counsellors in school to advise girls—perhaps through building the capacity of teachers to better counsel girls.
It is necessary to address the lack of awareness of any harmful effects of child marriage in the community by providing regular community dialogues. Key informant interviews indicated that there were strong programming efforts directed at reducing child marriage a decade ago, but now no non-governmental organisations work on this issue locally. Since social norms dictate large wedding feasts, there is also a need to focus on teaching the community about the harmful effects of large wedding feasts on the economic condition of the family, and proposing alternative ways of honouring the occasion.

Community dialogues need to include all members of the community: those who have high levels of awareness and those who have lower levels of awareness of the harmful effects of child marriage and the benefits of education.

There is also a need to change the system for checking girls’ and boys’ age at the health centre. There is no fear associated with being found to be complicit in child marriage and the police are ineffective in identifying cases. There need to be incentives and protection for ‘whistle blowers’ who report child marriage to the authorities.

Additionally, parents who have been successful in educating their children should be encouraged to share their experiences and build awareness among other community members. There is a need for positive role models in the community so that girls can use their decision-making abilities to convince their parents to support their education and stand up for their rights.

Finally, abandonment of child marriage is currently considered the sole responsibility of the office of WCYA, and efforts are poorly coordinated between other the mandated authorities, including the education office, police office and justice office. Unless they work together, child marriage cannot be reduced.
Child marriage drivers in Quarit woreda, Amhara

Key messages

**Age of marriage**

Most girls in the study area are married as young children, but few are at risk of long-term harm from these first marriages because the vast majority are purely ceremonial. Second and “real” child marriages are declining.

Drivers of child marriage

- Parents’ desire for the social prestige of hosting a wedding drives ceremonial marriage.
- Parental concerns about stigma and girls’ virginity drive the marriage of older girls – parents are trying to protect their daughters’ futures by preventing pre-marital sex and heading off the shame attached to being “unwanted”.
- Contract marriages, wherein girls’ parents are paid for their short-term marital “services” to a migrating man are a growing phenomenon that deserves immediate attention.

Factors protecting against child marriage

- Parents – and girls – are very committed to education. As long as girls are making academic progress few are not expected to enter into second, “real” marriages – and those that do are not expected to leave school or begin cohabiting with their husbands.
- The presence of strong female role models at the community level is showing girls and parents what education can do for girls.
- Girls’ own decision-making is allowing some to choose their own husbands and refuse marriages they consider ill-timed (whether child or not).
- Girls’ knowledge about and access to contraception is good, regardless of whether they are married.
Priority entry points

- Helping girls achieve academic success, by ensuring their parents give them time off to study and by offering them tutorial support, is the key to preventing “real” child marriage.
- Awareness-raising messages need to be tailored to local reality. In a community where young girls are married but do not have sex, focusing on fistula on other health-related risks has fallen flat.

Attention needs to be paid to the issue of contract wives – tracking the phenomenon and ensuring that girls have legal redress.

Overview

Quarit woreda is in the West Gojjam Zone of Amhara Regional State, and almost entirely Orthodox Christian. The woreda is a hotspot for child marriage. According to the 2007 census, girls are not only extremely likely

Box 16: Semogn Solela Kebele

Semogn Solela is one of Quarit’s most food-secure kebeles. While its 12 gots (villages) suffer from land fragmentation due to population growth and have seen marked drops in soil quality, farmers’ use of modern seeds and better agricultural techniques have resulted in surpluses rather than deficits. However, because there is no vehicular access to Semogn Solela – and Gebez Mariam is a seven-hour walk – farmers are rarely able to translate surplus harvests into cash, meaning that migratory labour is the norm despite sufficient food. This physical isolation is often exacerbated landslides in the rainy season.

Semogn Solela has its own schools that are compulsory through 8th grade. These include preschools now serving 180 of the kebele’s youngest children and satellite schools for first-cycle primary students living in more remote villages. Primary schools in Semogn Solela have almost achieved gender parity. This year there were 228 girls and 260 boys enrolled. However, exam pass rates are lower than the woreda average. Of the children who sat the 8th grade exam, only 87% of boys and 82% of girls passed.

In the fall of 2014, a new 9th grade opened in neighbouring Genet Abo, a 30-minute walk away. Because this proximity eliminated families’ need to rent lodging for their students, many children who had previously dropped out have now returned to secondary school. When students leave school, boys typically migrate and girls marry.

Semogn Solela does not have access to electricity, although some households have solar powered lights. While a cell phone service is available, coverage is spotty and most owners must go to Genet Abo to charge their batteries. Finally, while Semogn Solela has its own health post, it must serve all 12 villages and is frequently under-stocked.

In terms of the broader woreda characteristics, Quarit has nearly 170,000 residents, 28 of 30 are which are rural. Some 560 kilometres north of Addis Ababa, the woreda’s capital city, Gebez Mariam, has good access to roads, but more distant kebeles, including Semogn Solela are much less accessible due to mountainous terrain.

Quarit is a chronically food-insecure woreda that depends on rain-fed subsistence agriculture that emphasises crops over livestock. While there are some wage labour opportunities in Gebez Mariam, over three-quarters of the woreda’s households supplement their local agricultural efforts with the migratory labour of at least one person. Internal migration to other zones within Amhara, or to Oromia or Benishangul-Gumuz Regions, is especially common.

Quarit has 73 schools, including two secondary schools, one of which runs through grade 12. A Technical and Vocational Education and Training school is under construction. The woreda has achieved gender parity at the primary level and girls are significantly more likely than boys to attend secondary school (2,025 girls versus 1,756 boys). The very rapid scale-up of education in the woreda, especially at the secondary level, has resulted in uneven quality. While nearly all (99.4%) children who sat the 8th grade exams last year passed, only 57% of those who sat the 10th grade exams achieved passing marks. On the other hand, of the students who sat the 12th grade exam, all but three passed.

In Quarit, formal polygamy is not practiced and the keeping of concubines has become rare. However, nearly all children, girls and boys, are circumcised eight days after birth.

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13 Education through 8th grade is compulsory on a national level-but is rarely important
to marry as children, they are likely to marry when very young – although our research suggests that many of those marriages are purely ceremonial. As can be seen below (in Table 8), nearly 22% of all girls in Quarit are married before their 15th birthday, meaning the woreda ranks 10th highest in the country in terms of the marriage of young adolescents. Furthermore, over half of all girls aged 15-17 are married, putting Quarit 7th highest nationally in terms of the prevalence of child marriage.

Our fieldwork was undertaken in Semogn Solela kebele upon the recommendation of officials at the Quarit Office of Women, Children and Youth Affairs on the basis of being a recognised ‘hotspot’ and having a primary school (see Box 16 for details).

**Current patterns of marriage**

**Age of marriage**

As mentioned and as highlighted in Table 8, Quarit woreda is a hotspot for child marriage.

| Table 8: Percentage of girls who are married, by age and by residence (Source: 2007 census) |
|---------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|
| Girls 10-14                      | 21.8 %   | 10th     | 14.2%    | 9.8%     |
| Girls 15-17                      | 51.6 %   | 7th      | 35.6%    | 27.2%    |

Respondents told us that in recent years child marriage has decreased and yet at the same time they noted that most girls are married by the age of 13 (community mapping). These statements are difficult to reconcile except by noting that in the eyes of most, including woreda-level key informants who refuse to accept the validity of the 2007 census figures on child marriage, the marriages arranged for young children are ceremonial and ‘should not be counted as real marriages’ (see below).

There is also reason to believe that the patterning of child marriage in Semogn Solela may be shifting rapidly. Recent commitment to education – coupled with an educational infrastructure that improves each year – means that the options available to 15-year-old girls in 2015 did not exist even a year ago. Given that in this community school girls appear to rarely be at risk of being forced into a ‘real’ marriage involving cohabitation with a spouse and assumption of marital responsibilities, the recent opening of 9th grade means that a whole cohort of girls is protected for at least one more year. Government efforts to abandon child marriage are also both recent and evolving. One married 19-year-old, for example, told us that when she was married there was no understanding that child marriage was illegal: ‘the government has started to say that is illegal only recently.’

While noting that several parents refused to allow their adolescent daughters to be interviewed for fear of falling foul of the law, our findings suggest that despite Quarit’s exceedingly high rates of child marriage, perhaps only one or two in ten married girls actually lived with their husbands as wives.

**Marriage practices**

Our respondents identified a variety of forms of marriage in Semogn Solela. These include ceremonial marriages for young children (boys included), arranged marriages for adolescent girls (most often after they leave school), ‘religious’ marriages (often, but not always to clergy members), and – for a handful of more educated young adults – free-choice marriages. They also noted that short-term contract marriages, driven by high rates of migration, are becoming more common.

**Dersomelse gabecha,** or ‘go-back’ marriages, are nearly universal in Semogn Solela. These marriages are arranged when girls are between 5 and 11 years old, are conducted by village elders under customary law, and are uniformly seen as merely symbolic. Girls typically spend ‘a short period of time, not even more than a week’ at their in-laws’ house, sleeping with their mothers-in-law, and are treated like the children they are (FGD girls). Their husbands are often the same age or even, because these marriages are not seen as real and may therefore break with Amharan convention which requires husbands to be older than wives, a few years younger (kebele key informant). While girls are subsequently seen as married by their community – and indeed identify themselves as married girls – they often remember little of these child marriage ceremonies, which appear to always result in divorce before consummation. Several of our respondents said that these marriages were often made on an exchange basis, with all the children from one family marrying those from another, and in the past often included infants. Bride price is not required (or is a mere token) as these marriages are not expected to last.

Older adolescent girls in Semogn Solela, most of whom are marrying for the second time, are typically also married by village elders under customary law. These marriages are
arranged by their parents, usually when they are around 15 years old and most often after they leave school, and can require very significant financial inputs from the groom’s family, depending on the bride’s education level. ‘For the uneducated one,’ explained one father, ‘the price is a maximum of 1,000 birr’. Girls who have finished school and can earn their own income, on the other hand, can require up to 10,000 birr, according to adolescent boys in a focus group discussion. Much of this must be prepared in gold, they explained. ‘The one who wants to marry an educated girl is expected to prepare gold rings, a necklace and ear rings’. Notably, even when girls are married as adolescents, few live with their husbands unless they are out of school. On the other hand, if they are out of school, then even 14 is not seen as too young to begin married life.

A few girls in Semogn Solela are married under religious law. These can include very young girls who are married by arrangement to deacons and priests ten to fifteen years their elder, but can also be made ‘by the mutual consensus of the two couples, after they are well matured’, regardless of whether the man is a member of the clergy (male elder). Most salient, in the minds of our respondents, is that religious law, unlike customary law, does not permit divorce. ‘This is because religious servants are not allowed to marry for the second time,’ explained an adolescent girl in a focus group discussion. A grandmother observed that while religious leaders encourage church ceremonies, ‘society is afraid to get married through religion’.

A small but growing number of marriages in Semogn Solela are undertaken through the free choice of partners. While grandparents expressed concern that their grandchildren ‘are not willing to respect my decision’ (grandfather), even some parents recognise that ‘marriage without the consent of couples is not successful and proper’ (father). Most free-choice marriages are formed by more educated adolescents and young adults, some of whom met while attending school. Most ultimately follow customary paths, with elders seeking parental permission and parents hosting a wedding feast. Some marriages, however, involve only a ‘ring ceremony’ for ‘proximate relatives and friends’ and are inexpensively and quickly concluded (kebele-level key informant).

Contract marriages are a fifth type of marriage, and appear to be becoming more common in Semogn Solela and across Quarit as seasonal migration to neighbouring regional states increases. Whereas in the past internal labour mobility was tightly restricted, over the last decade such restrictions have been eased and internal labour migration has burgeoned. Key informants explained that these gelabit mist are temporary wives, usually between the ages of 16 and 18, who accompany older migrating men. Girls ‘are expected to provide both sexual and domestic work services’ (woreda-level key informant) and are theoretically paid in cash for their work, although ‘if they are lucky, they might carry on being the wife of the individual’ (kebele-level key informant). Officials at the Justice Office have been asked by three girls in recent months to intercede when their ‘husbands’ refused to pay them at all. Furthermore, even when the terms of the contract are met, the ‘wives’ often do not benefit. One adolescent girl we interviewed noted that while her father had been paid 1,500 birr for her services, ‘this sum of money was not given to me’ (see Box 17).

Respondents, including adolescent girls, noted that while abduction was the basis for a form of marriage in the past, today it has been eliminated. It is, explained a woreda-level key informant, ‘highly condemned by the society’ because it ‘is considered as disrespectful towards the parents of the abducted’.

Another key feature of the marital landscape in Semogn Solela is the frequency of marital dissolution. Divorce is not only common but even the norm. Go-back marriages appear to always end in ‘divorce’, as they serve purely ceremonial functions. However, the arranged marriages of older adolescents and young adults also appear to typically end in divorce. Grandparents in our research had been married up to five times and one father, now on his third wife, explained that it was only when he got to choose his own wife that he got one he liked. Marriages in Semogn Solela can thus best be characterised as serial monogamy.

Drivers of child marriage

With the exception of contract marriages, the drivers of child marriage in Quarit are almost entirely socio-cultural. Some of these socio-cultural drivers apply to all types of child marriage. For example, respondents observed that parents in Quarit take great pleasure in seeing their children ‘flower’ through marriage (yelij ababa). Indeed, adolescent boys explained that for local parents, ‘flowering’ is essential to seeing ‘their children’s good future’ and it is a major reason why ‘parents are giving their children away for marriage at an early age’. Some parents emphasised that it was important to see their children married before

My parents would prefer if they choose my husband. But, that is the time of the past.

Kebele-level key informant, married at the age of 6 and then remarried after 10th grade.
they died; others said that it was a parent’s greatest pleasure in life.

Parents in Semogn Solela also insist on child marriage to prevent their daughters from losing their virginity and becoming pregnant out of wedlock. Premarital pregnancy is so shameful, resulting in ‘humiliation’ for both the girl and her parents, that we were told that some girls even resort to suicide if they find themselves pregnant before marriage. A grandfather explained that to avoid this, it is very important that girls ‘get married early before they lost their virginity’. It should be noted that while most adults are convinced that girls today are sexually active before marriage, the unmarried girls we interviewed were all aware of contraception but explained that they found it unnecessary because they were focusing on their studies rather than on finding boyfriends.

While child marriage in general is driven by parents’ needs to see their children flower and to protect their daughters from shameful sex, specific forms of child marriage do have their own unique drivers. For example, ‘go-back’ marriages are driven by parents’ need to foster community respect through hosting a wedding feast. A grandfather explained, ‘parents get honour when they prepare a wedding feast’. Mothers said that these feasts, which can cost ‘up to 18,000-25,000 birr’, are necessary to maintain social standing in the community. Indeed, parents who do not host week-long feasts for up to 2,000 people for a child’s first marriage can be ‘labelled as greedy or poor’ according to a grandfather. Adolescent boys noted that because these celebrations are so large, they depend on a cost-sharing system called *aqoleqoye* or *lemate*. ‘This is a kind of balanced reciprocity,’ one explained, ‘that parents should pay back in cash or in kind when the other family intends to prepare a wedding some other time’. It should be noted that while mitigating the high cost of marriage, this system also introduces, for some parents, an economic driver as they choose to marry their own children just to ‘get back’ what they have invested in the marriages of others.

For older adolescent girls, child marriage is often driven by parents’ desire to protect their daughters from being stigmatised as *kumoqer* (still standing) – or unwanted for marriage. Indeed, one kebele-level key informant explained that for many parents, the ‘whole reason for practising child marriage…is for their children’s future life’. A mother agreed: ‘from our experience, if boys or girls stay unmarried, they will be ridiculed by their friends at school’. While this is changing, with in-school girls now largely protected from ridicule, many adolescent girls agree that ‘if she is not learning, it would be good for her to get married and have her own well-established home’ (unmarried 15 year-old-girl). This is, explained a male elder, usually the ‘sole option’ for girls who have ‘failed to pass their secondary school education’, which exposes them to ‘depression and stress’. He continued, ‘Due to this, we choose to marry them at earlier ages’.

For girls marrying priests, the need to be ‘pure’ before marriage is an especially powerful driver. This is because, according to a woreda-level key informant, priests’ brides must be free of ‘any sexual desire or actual intercourse’. ‘To this end,’ explained a female elder, ‘priests might marry a child at five or six years old’ – and often, because they are typically publically supporting the campaign to eliminate child marriage, do so in secret’ (woreda-level key informant).

While contract marriages share many of the same socio-cultural drivers as other forms of child marriage, they are also more directly driven by economic need. As
noted above, three-quarters of households in Quarit are engaged in migratory labour. While most migrants are boys and men, girls and women are also beginning to migrate because locally ‘males could get jobs earlier and better than females’ (kebele-level key informant). However, in order for girls to migrate, they must first marry to avoid social stigma. ‘They don’t go without having married,’ explained a woreda-level key informant.

Changes in patterning of child marriage over time

As mentioned above, our respondents give somewhat contradictory responses about how the patterns of child marriage are shifting over time. On the one hand, most respondents insist that child marriage is in decline; on the other, few adults appear to see the marriage of mid-adolescent (15-17) girls as ‘child marriage’. They know that the legal age of marriage for girls is 18 but most grew up in an era where some girls were married as infants, and thus the current trend of mid-adolescent marriage is not viewed as problematic.

The only shift that emerges strongly from our research is a perception that parents are increasingly likely to marry all of their children at once; as soon as one is ‘old enough’ for marriage. A mother explained, ‘Nowadays there is a change in the type and form of marriage. In our time, people prepared a wedding for each of their children, but now people start to prepare a single wedding for all of their children.’ This means that ‘unlike previous times, very small girls are getting married’. Part of this shift, according to a kebele-level key informant, is economic: ‘Due to critical resource scarcity in agricultural production and farmland size’, parents cannot afford to host a wedding for each child individually. Moreover, other respondents felt that the age-check implemented by the woreda had actually made the problem worse as parents who had a maturity certificate for one child were tempted to use it to sneak all their children into marriage.

Despite community perceptions, it remains unclear whether the tendency to marry all children at once is significantly shifting age patterning. Based on the stories of parents and grandparents, most of whom were married as very young children, it seems likely not. Indeed, the fact that some girls in Semogn Soleta are now married for the first time at the age of 11 rather than 5 suggests that over time the period during which it is acceptable for girls to remain unmarried is growing longer. Furthermore, the presence of unmarried older adolescent girls in the kebele implies that child marriage is less likely now than it was in the past.

Protective or exit mechanisms from negative effects of child marriage

Despite the fact that child marriage is endemic in Quarit, local customs have long served to protect girls from the most obvious risks of child marriage – premature sex and adolescent pregnancy. Over time, as girls’ educational and economic options have expanded, practices have also shifted to protect girls’ in other ways. The majority, for example, are supported to stay in school as long as possible, some are allowed to remain unmarried, and a few are allowed input into decisions about their own lives.

While girls in Semogn Soleta continue to be married as early as five, respondents are clear that because ‘go back’ marriages are purely symbolic and very short in duration, they pose very little threat to girls’ wellbeing. As one grandfather noted, ‘Because the children getting marriage are of similar ages and are very young, they don’t have intercourse. This could not harm any of them. What is the problem of marrying these kids along with the older ones?’ Even married girls agreed. One, now 13 and married at 11, said, ‘my life is not that much different compared to unmarried relatives or friends of my age. The only thing is that I feel unhappy about being mocked by friends in school since I married young.’

For girls married to much older priests, local customs have also worked to prevent premature sex and adolescent pregnancy, at least for the youngest girls who are not believed to be ‘matured’ (woreda-level key informant). A female elder explained: ‘Her in-laws take her by having an oath not to view her different from their children. They also promise to take care of her in every aspect. Sleeping with the husband was prohibited and this was also considered in the oath. The husband also promised in front of the temple not to have intercourse before she is matured. The sin is the husband’s. Because he is a priest, he is expected to obey the doctrine and promises.’ A male elder added that as an additional form of protection, families usually have a Geyid14 agreement, meaning that if the girl is violated then ‘the parents of the male are forced to pay an agreed sum to the parents of the girl.’

Religious leaders and community elders are also playing a great role in promoting girls education.

Fathers FGD

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14 This is called guido in other kebeles.
As the educational and economic landscapes of Quarit have shifted, different mechanisms have evolved to protect girls from child marriage. For example, the simple fact that schools are now available has ‘highly reduced the incidence of child marriage in the woreda’, according to a woreda-level key informant. While in the past, explained a male elder, ‘it was too dangerous to send girls to school, today we are educating both female and male children equally’. Indeed, noted a female elder, because teachers and parents are ‘controlling’ girls more than boys, and because special tutorial classes are offered for female students, girls are increasingly ‘more successful than boys’ at school. Especially after 8th grade, explained a male elder, many boys ‘don’t want to waste their time on education’ so they ‘drop out of school to migrate to arid areas for business’. This trend is clear from enrolment statistics. While the 9th grade that opened in the fall of 2014 in Genet Abo has helped girls who were ‘scared to go away from my parents’ (divorced 16-year-old girl) continue on to secondary school, for years some girls have been studying in ‘Quarit town, renting a house and only visiting our family during the holidays’ (unmarried 19 year old).

Shifting economic reality has played a key role in helping parents prioritise education over marriage. Not only do parents ‘regret being uneducated’ (FGD mothers), especially when they see their ‘friends who have completed their education and are living in Addis Ababa’ (father, age 41), but they understand that ‘educated children not only liberate themselves but they could also be the instrument to liberate the life of their parents’ (male elder). This is doubly true given recent land fragmentation, which means that ‘parents are not willing to give land to their children, since it is too small to be fragmented further’ (female elder). As one male elder put it, ‘children have no alternative except being successful in their education’.

This new reality is working to keep most girls in school – and to keep many unmarried. Girls are largely agreed that as long as they are successful in school, ‘no one will force me to quit my learning’ (unmarried 15-year-old girl). Because they are seen as ‘cleverer’ students, and because Semogn Solela is a comparatively well-off kebele that does not have to worry about food security, parents are willing to invest in their daughters’ education ‘up to the end’ (father, age 41). This commitment is reinforced by an emerging consensus that ‘educated girls are in highly demand for marriage’ (mother, age 30). Because even adolescent boys are convinced that ‘educated girls can manage their life much better’ and have ‘better relationships with their husbands’ relatives’, parents do not have to worry that ‘late’ marriage means ‘unmarriageable’. Encouragingly, even girls who are married are rarely made to leave school, as was typically the case in the past. While several mothers noted that it used to be ‘common to get married by dropping out of school,’ (mother, 38) today ‘no one withdraws from school for marriage’ (mother, 30).

Strong female role models are also driving commitment to girls’ education. Half the kebele’s teaching staff are women, which ‘highly inspires’ children and parents to ‘dream to reach their level’, explained a male elder. A father added, ‘I am influenced by females who have high status in different positions’. He continued, ‘for example our kebele manager was female’. A mother observed that even outside of civil service positions, local women with education are also successful merchants.

While it only goes so far (see Box 18), girls own decision-making is also beginning to protect them from child marriage and keep them in school. Some ‘are not ashamed of being unmarried’ (mother, 30) and have refused to go along with planned marriages, threatening to report their parents to ‘teachers, particularly to the one assigned to counsel us girls’ (unmarried 17 year old). Others were unable to save themselves from marriage but managed to ensure that they were not married to a priest.

**Box 18: The limits of personal autonomy**

‘Female children are struggling against their own marriage. However, the parents are forcefully marrying them. As an example, we had a grade six female student who usually ranked first in her academic performance. Her parents arranged her marriage without her consent. On the eve of her marriage, she went missing, hiding herself in the church. She waited there for two days. Later she went to her friend’s home. The parents caught her and forcibly married her. Now, she has terminated her education. Her husband’s home is far from this kebele. I don’t think he will help her to continue her education.’

Kebele-level key informant
so that they could quickly divorce and ‘come back to my schooling’ (divorced 13-year-old girl). Divorced girls were determined to delay their second ‘real’ marriages as long as possible, convinced that leaving school for even a short period of time was the ‘worst and most unforgettable negative incident I had experienced in my life’ (divorced 16-year-old girl). Indeed, all the girls we interviewed were focused on completing their education, through university level if possible. A female elder noted that Semogn Solela’s girls ‘didn’t become hopeless’. She added that if they had failed their exams, they were ‘filling forms to take EGCSE re-exams’. Furthermore, if their exams were still unsuccessful, girls were prepared ‘to learn in a private college to secure [their] own job’ if necessary (unmarried 19 year old). A kebele-level key informant noted that this financial autonomy had knock-on impacts for marriage, since ‘independent’ girls who ‘don’t expect something from their parents’ can ‘decide on their marital life’ themselves. Girls in our focus group discussion agreed it would be best to wait until their twenties to marry and had had the ‘chance to establish a love relationship’.

In Semogn Solela, married girls who live with their husbands are more protected from the risks of adolescent pregnancy than they were in the past. In part because they understand the risk of fistula, but mostly because of messaging that has highlighted the relationship between fertility, land fragmentation and poverty (male elder), ‘girls are not expected to give birth immediately after their wedding ceremony’ (FGD adolescent girls). While religious leaders do ‘not encourage women and girls to use family planning methods’, leaving some to ‘feel they will be cursed’ if they do (FGD adolescent girls), most respondents are clear that it is best if couples ‘get to know the behaviour of one another…before having children’ (FGD boys). A key informant in the health care sector noted that to this end, ‘if the girls are above 12 years old when they get married then “parents bring them to our health post for contraceptive methods to minimise the premature pregnancy risk”, although overall our findings suggested that only a small minority of girls were at risk of pregnancy as very few were co-habiting with their husbands15.

Married girls are also protected by broader legal and cultural shifts that are improving women’s access to decision-making, reducing their workloads and protecting them from gender-based violence. Nearly all of our respondents reported that one of the most significant recent changes is women’s access to land. Because they now get half of marital property when they divorce, girls and women can leave unwanted relationships without fearing the penury of the past. Furthermore, while ‘in the past beating one’s wife was considered as a good because the local community believed that if women were not beaten, they would behave inappropriately’ (FGD adolescent boys), today violence against women is much reduced. Women know that they have rights and they also know that they have redress (woreda-level key informant). Community norms around workloads are also beginning to shift in ways that support girls and women. While adolescent boys acknowledge that ‘the highest household burden is resting on women’s and girls’ shoulders’, two of the young married women we interviewed commented that their husbands ‘even bake injera and cook wot’ when they are ‘busy doing other household chores’ (women aged 25 and 22).

**Existing programming**

While NGOs have a limited presence in Quarit (see Box 19), there are a variety of government interventions aimed at reducing child marriage. These interventions, which target both parents and children, primarily revolve around legal awareness raising, although there has been some attention paid to building reporting chains and working – at least on a theoretical level--to cancel planned weddings. Notably, while awareness-raising efforts in the kebele appear to have been initiated at least five years ago, they are not only weak – but seemingly never accompanied by enforcement.

Parents reported that they have learned about the child marriage law in a variety of venues, including ‘community dialogues, community conferences, community conversations, religious gatherings, and one-to-five development groups’ (FGD mothers). Some kebele-level officials explained that they were working especially hard to educate ‘the community in the church…about the harmfulness and illegality of child marriage’. Others

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15 Of the girls we interviewed, only one had ever cohabited with husband.
Box 20: A mind of her own

Genet is a 13-year-old 6th grader with a mind of her own. Last year, her parents wanted to her arrange her marriage. They were marrying her 7th grade brother and, as is now local custom, decided to marry all four of their children at once. ‘Fortunately,’ explained Genet, ‘I suspected them because they were making uncommon preparations for the festivity’. Unwilling to entertain the idea of even a ‘fake’ marriage, because ‘marriage and education do not go together’, she ‘warned them that I would report the case to the nearby Kebele, and I was readying myself to flee.’ Her parents, ‘having understood my position’, desisted and all plans for her marriage were cancelled.

Genet wants to marry after ‘I have completed my university education and have my own job’. This may be, she said, ‘around the age of 28’. She continued, ‘If I get married before I complete my schooling, I will spend much of my time preparing food and drink for my husband. This will leave me with no time to deal with my education, and I may not be successful’.

Genet believes that ‘marriage is advantageous’. It helps ‘perpetuate our generation’ and also ‘makes a better contribution for our country’. But she is particular about what kind of husband she wants to eventually marry. She insists that he be ‘well mannered, believe in equality and have a job of his own’. Genet also knows that if she gets ‘married later, at the right age’, then she will ‘make decisions by my own’ and only marry after she ‘clearly understands the true behaviour of my husband’.

Genet does not want a large family. ‘My parents have given birth to four children,’ she explained, ‘but they have fallen short of fulfilling our needs because they have limited land. So I don’t want to make the same mistake’. She wants to have only two children and does not care what sex they are. If having only two children is a ‘big deal for my husband or for my parents or for my in-laws’, and they try to ‘oblige’ her to have more, she would rather divorce. ‘My decision is no more children. I’d prefer to quit my marriage’. Besides, she added, ‘I will give birth [only after] I have recognised that he has good behaviour. If I have found him ill-mannered even in the midst of pregnancy, I will decide to abort’.

Emphasised the efforts of the ‘one-to-five structure and women’s development groups’ or health extension workers. It was clear to our research team, who visited Semogn Solela in February 2015 just as the marriage season was ending, that efforts had indeed been pervasive. Several fathers prohibited their daughters from participating in the research because they were afraid of being caught having married them as children.

In addition to awareness-raising efforts, some respondents mentioned more concrete efforts to prevent child marriage. A female elder, for example, said that as of last September, ‘people are getting age assessments’ which has caused the ‘problem of child marriage to decrease to a large extent’. A woreda-level key informant told us that the woreda had a ‘committee for eradicating the harmful practice of child marriage’. Composed of representatives from the administration, as well as the heads of education, health, justice and women, children and youth (woreda-level key informant), the committee is aimed at ensuring that those who violate the law ‘will be punished and arrested’ (FGD mothers). A woreda level key informant noted that while the committee had been renamed and reconfigured while Finote Hiwot was active, for the most part the “content of the previous and the new committee is almost similar”.

Children are also taught about child marriage. The topic is covered in the curriculum itself, ‘chiefly from civic education sessions’, and is a regular focal point of ‘training programmes which were conducted by the woreda gender and child protection experts’ (FGD adolescent boys).

Girls are further exposed to protection-oriented messages in girls’ clubs, which, according to a woreda-level key informant, are established in each school. One unmarried 15-year-old girl explained that ‘starting from grade three’, she had learned that ‘the law states that girls should get married when they are 18’.

Girls also ostensibly receive practical support in regard to protecting themselves from child marriage. For example, because ‘children are very open’ and a ‘major source of information’ (kebele-level key informant), we were told that schools form the base of the kebele-level reporting chain. A female elder explained that ‘teachers are also protecting female students from child marriage, sending letters for those who are tempted to marry’. Sometimes, she added, they are ‘successful in having child marriages abandoned, even after everything was prepared for the wedding’. Several girls said that they felt safe reporting marriages not only to teachers but to ‘people with responsibilities in the nearby kebele’ (unmarried 17-year-old girl) or their more educated male relatives (see Box 20). That said, this practical support does appear to be more theoretical than actual. We heard no specific stories about cancelations in Semogn Solela.

In addition to being supported to protect themselves from child marriage, girls in Semogn Solela are also...
supported to protect themselves from pregnancy. Indeed, adolescents – married or not – appear to enjoy very good information about puberty and contraception. According to a divorced 16-year-old, teachers ‘give us the reproductive health education at least once in a month. They teach us about how to manage our menstruation in and out of school. They also teach us about how to use birth-control contraceptives, whether the sexual intercourse is done intentionally or by force’. A kebele-level health practitioner confirmed this high level of attentiveness. She explained that to ensure that they also reach out to schoolgirls they use youth associations, making sure to get girls ‘full attention’ by teaching them independently about the importance of both abstinence and contraception. The girls we interviewed reported that they had both information about and access to a variety of forms of contraception. While only the married girls living with their husbands reported using any family planning methods, the unmarried girls said that that access was easy if there were ever any need.

However, while there are a variety of approaches aimed at protecting girls from child marriage in Semogn Solela, few appear to work as expected. Indeed, a constant refrain from our respondents, females and males, adolescents and adults, was that regardless of their awareness of the law, parents continue to arrange the marriages of their young daughters. An adolescent boy in a focus group discussion reported, ‘our parents have developed different ways around the law to give away their children for marriage without taking into consideration their physical, psychological and social maturity and readiness for marriage’. Key informants explained that it was common for parents to take one older child to the woreda for an age check and then use the resulting maturity certificate to marry all of their children at once.

Efforts to prevent child marriage in Semogn Solela appear to face multiple challenges. For example, kebele level officials said that reporting was very rare. In addition, a mother who leads a one-to-five group, and teaches others about ‘the importance of educating children rather than marrying them’, admitted that her own 10-year-old daughter had been secretly married to a priest 13 years her senior when she was only six years old. Even a kebele-level official reported that ‘I personally believe if there is one mature child, parents can minimise wedding expenses by arranging a marriage for the rest of the children’ as well. After all, he added, if he was expected to host more than one wedding then his ‘family economy would not recover for some years’.

Given these low levels of commitment it is not surprising that kebele-level officials have ‘never seen parents penalised for violating the marriage law’ and that even woreda-level officials have not seen ‘one in the last two years’. The difficulty, explained a woreda-level key informant, is that ‘we can’t get any witness or document that can be used to penalise them’. While one informant complained that the fault was the schools’ for not ‘giving us quick information ahead of the wedding day’, another acknowledged that ‘if [the girl] is not absent from school’, teachers often do not even know that a marriage has taken place. Another woreda-level key informant added that because the Justice Office does not have structures that extend to the kebele-level, it is necessary to rely on kebele administrators ‘to address such problems’. In some cases those local officials are ‘afraid to pinpoint child marriages’ because they fear outraged parents will seek revenge (woreda-level key informant) (see also Textbox). In other cases, because ‘they have strong linkages with the community, they can be easily “deceived” with a small bribe’ (woreda-level key informant).

**Entry points for programming**

Our research suggests several entry points for future programming to overcome the challenges and bottlenecks highlighted above, some of which relate to preventing child marriage while others are broader in focus.

- In regard to awareness raising, the most critical observation to arise out of our research is the need for relevant messages. Parents are aware of the law. They also know that early sex and adolescent pregnancy can result in fistula. However, because ‘our reality and the government’s accusation is far apart’, with ‘no case of fistula ever here’ (grandfather), even though ‘they listen very attentively’ to lessons about the law, they do not respond to them (kebele-level key informant) as they do not resonate with their local context. While there are nascent efforts to encourage families to save their money and invest in education, rather than marriage, future programming should consider both increased efforts in that regard as well as alternate rites of passage for children that confer community honour on parents.
- Given that parents ‘don’t put into practice what they know’, it is also vital to step up local enforcement (16-year-old girl). Woreda-level key informants believe that efforts would be more successful if the kebele-level Office of Women Affairs ‘is officially given recognition’, including a salary. As noted above, justice officials also need a weightier presence at the local level, including transport to make more frequent kebele visits and to support and monitor whether kebele officials are taking violations of the marriage law seriously.

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*There is one woman who is still hiding herself from angry parents who were trying to marry their daughter. There is another, a representative from a kebele-level Office of Women Affairs, who saw her home and harvest set fire due to such a problem.*

Woreda-level key informant
Given the critical relationship between education and marriage in Semogn Solela, with many girls of the view that schooling protects them from marriage entirely and others that it at least delays their second and ‘real’ marriages, it would also be advisable to expand girls’ access to quality education. Kebele-level key informants believed that ‘bonding’ teachers – forcing them to teach in rural areas – might address current deficits and improve students’ odds of passing their exams.

It is also important that Quarit continues to invest in school infrastructure. As evidenced by the number of students who returned to school when the new 9th grade opened in Genet Abo in the fall of 2014, there is tremendous demand for local schooling. Kebele-level key informants believed that while making ‘technical and vocational training centres available in local areas’ would be good for all 10th grade school leavers, it would especially benefit girls, who ‘wouldn’t have other opportunities as males do’ to study in other places.

The majority of respondents felt that largest education-oriented need was for messaging and programming designed to help parents prioritise girls’ education. They noted that while girls are demonstrably successful students who are increasingly growing into demonstrably successful women, ‘parents usually encourage boys to go to school more than girls because the local community has less confidence in girls’ potential and is pessimistic about girls’ educational success and achievement’ (FGD adolescent girls). Boys agreed that girls remain saddled with the lion’s share of domestic work, which leads to high rates of absenteeism, grade repetition and school leaving. Kebele-level officials noted that while the school has a variety of programmes aimed at helping girls improve academically, parents often refuse to let their daughters participate. One noted that parents do not send their girls to the library studies held in the evenings or allow them to take part in tutorial classes at weekends. While the kebele is doing what it can to help girls focus on their schooling, even opening preschools to relieve them of childcare duties, parents’ buy-in often remains weak and should be a focus of future campaigns.

Another entry point that could do much to prevent child marriage would be to pay greater attention to developing local jobs. This would afford girls more economic security, and with independence comes strengthened voice. Kebele-level key informants reported that while high youth unemployment plagues even boys, with it now ‘common to see university graduates participating in daily labour’ (male elder), ‘males have better opportunities to get jobs than females because parents are not willing to send females to the town to search for jobs’ (kebele official). Whether they become contract wives and migrate with men or stay in Quarit, unemployed girls have no option other than marrying (kebele-level key informant). While several respondents noted that there are some government efforts ‘to absorb the youths who fail their secondary school education in small businesses’ – and kebele key informants told us that a handful of 10th grade graduate girls have been hired to work in the preschools and teach/facilitate Adult Basic Education – it is clear from most that these efforts are far from adequate.

Greater efforts also need to be made to address the phenomenon of contract wives, which key informants believe is growing as land fragmentation forces migration. There appears to be no system in place to monitor how many girls are becoming contract wives – and no source of redress available to them should their “husbands” fail to honour their contracts.

Finally, greater efforts to address broader gender inequality could also work to protect girls from child marriage by positively shifting the value that the community places on them and helping them access their rights to decision-making. As noted by adolescent boys, ‘in our community, boys are looked upon as the guardians and protectors of their parents, siblings and relatives’. Even most girls acknowledged that it was important for them to eventually give birth to at least one son. The privileging of males over females plays out in a variety of ways, including decision-making related to child marriage. Most girls noted that ‘the final decision about marrying children is made by my father’ (divorced 16 year old) and that ‘my mother will be invited to take part in discussions after everything is completed because she does not have the power to say yes or no’ (unmarried 15 year old). While it is unclear that giving today’s mothers more voice would work to protect their daughters from child marriage – because they, like their husbands, are tightly bound by cultural norms – growing the space for girls’ and women’s voices would over time help to protect the next generation of children from marriage.
Key messages

Age of marriage

• Badesa is a hot-spot for child marriage, with respondents noting that most girls marry in mid-adolescence, increasingly to a partner of their own choice—and sometimes against their parents’ wishes.

Drivers of child marriage

• Family pressure, driven by concerns about girls’ sexual purity, encourage child marriage, as virginity is highly prized.
• Stigma directed at unmarried girls also drives child marriage.
• Parents do not prioritise education, with girls especially unlikely to attend school at all or to be given the time to study.
• Both girls and boys are pulled out of school by participation in the emerging cash economy—which, because it provides them with their own income, facilitates free-choice child marriage.

Factors protecting against child marriage

• There are nascent shifts towards understanding that all girls do not mature at the same rate and that menstruation is not the only signal of maturity.
• Some girls are learning about the risks of child marriage at school via the curriculum and in girls’ clubs.

Priority entry points

• Community level awareness of the legal age of marriage has done little to change practice. Fostering support for education is therefore a critical first step as school enrolment helps communities see students as children who require protection and adult guidance.
• Efforts need to target adolescents and help them understand the risks of child marriage and the advantages of education.
• Better enforcement of the law is required, and needs to include capacity strengthening of justice officials at woreda and kebele levels so that they can actively prosecute cases of child marriage, even when both parties are under 18 years. This should include alternate ways of establishing girls’ ages, as those who want to marry often falsely claim to be over the age of 18.
• It could also be complemented by the establishment of community watch groups and anonymising reporting, as whistle blowers often risk serious repercussions.
• Finally, given high levels of school dropout, opportunities for adolescent/youth employment and micro-enterprise development should be strengthened by the woreda or zonal government.

Overview

Bedesa is both a “special” woreda and town in the West Hararghe Zone of the Oromia Region. Its child marriage rate, 24% for all girls between the ages of 10 and 17, places it as the highest in the zone, in the top 10 for the region and 30th out of all 741 woredas nationwide. Upon the recommendation of the woreda Office of Women Affairs, our fieldwork was undertaken in Odoroba-- which is a rural kebele on the periphery of Bedesa Town (see Box 21 for an overview of the key woreda characteristics).

Current patterns of marriage and divorce

Age of marriage

The overall prevalence of child marriage (ages 10-17) in Bedesa at 24% clearly demarcates it as a hotspot. As can be seen in Table 9, the percentage of young adolescent girls in the woreda who were married as children is far higher than that of both the zone and the region.

Table 9: Percent of girls who are married, by age, by residence

(Source: 2007 Census)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Badesa</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>West Hararghe Zone</th>
<th>Oromia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls 10-14</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td>6th</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls 15-17</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
<td>208th</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Evidence from the interviews suggests these statistics continue to be valid if not marginally on the low side. For instance, the majority of respondents noted that the majority of girls are getting married between the ages of 15 and 17, although marriage as young as 13 is not uncommon. Boys tend to marry a few years later on average. An interview with a local Head of the Women’s Federation (Oda Roba Kebele) revealed that girls were seen to be marrying at 14 or 15. According to local perceptions, marriage at this age is largely justified on the basis of Islamic doctrine as well as understandings of physiological development - such as menstruation. However, as will be
discussed, an increasing proportion of child marriages are not in fact supported by families given the girls and boys are marrying of what they consider to be their own volition (although we acknowledge that young girls are incapable of giving genuinely free consent). Other testimony reinforces this:

“According to our personal observations, most of the girls marry at about age 15 or up to 17. There are rare cases of marriage at about 18 years or above. Sometimes there is even traditional practices of marriage starting from 12 years” (KII with school director)

“Question: What is the common age for getting marriage?

Answer: Some of them are marrying at 12, while others are marrying at 13, but the maximum age for getting married is 15.” (In-depth Interview with a Girl, 13)

Wedding arrangements and ceremony
A common marriage amongst Muslims is marriage by consent called “Chabsa” which literally means to ‘break’ the arranged marriage system. It is considered a shortcut through the traditional system but is deemed to be culturally binding. The boy and the girl agree first that they want to get married, and then he asks her parents with his friends. Then her parents ask the boy to send his father who comes to the bride’s house along with the elders to settle the bride price. In these traditions, both the bride’s and the groom’s families make preparations in advance of the wedding. A cash-based modality of arranging marriages, possibly in-line with growth in cash crop outputs in the area, are the dominant form of asset exchange during ceremonies and preparations. Cash is seen as the more modern payment by contrast to the much older or even ‘backwards’ traditional bride price ‘gabbara’ practice. In many cases, a ‘marii’ payment is paid in advance to the bride or to the bride’s family (‘gargaarsa’) in order to establish a set of fundamental utilities (furniture, cooking materials) and to enable expenses on wedding materials. This amount usually varies between 2000 and 3000 birr, but can be as high as 5000.

By contrast, another common marriage ceremony in the community is known as ‘jala-deemuu’ or elopement. This form of marriage entails the girl and boy choosing each other independently and proceeding without the knowledge of their parents or other community members. Formalities are then addressed after the event. For instance, one key informant interview reveals that “After the girl has gone with the boy, next day local elders (jaarsolii) will be sent to the girls’ parent to inform and ask for approval. The girls’ parents have no option to refuse rather than accepting the request and facilitate marriage processes “Nikkaha”.” This form of marriage appears now to be more common than arranged marriages in Badesa, and seems to have developed in prominence over the last two generations. The increase in cash-cropping as well as deflation of the dowry and costs associated with marriage is potentially a driver of this form of marriage (see Box 22).

A third type of marriage is marriage by abduction which involved a boy/man forcefully taking and raping a girl in order to compel her and her family to accept marriage to him. A key informant interview with a kebele administrator suggests that the word ‘abduction’ has taken on a new definition in the community: “Abduction is no more practiced here, but it was formerly. The one you have mentioned as abduction by agreement – jala demu [where the girl goes willingly but often on false pretenses (e.g. about the groom’s wealth] is very common.” A small proportion of the wedding ceremonies are based on ‘abduction enactments’ in which girls are taken to the house of the future groom and held for a few days until formal requests for marriage have been accepted - although abductions are conducted with dignity in order to retain the reputation of the girl. After these social proceedings, the more formal marriage ceremony takes place. In terms of the ceremony itself, respondents demonstrate differing viewpoints: for some there appears no significant pressure for families to conduct an ostentatious or grand

Box 22: Evolving marriage practices
Testimony from a community timeline exercise shows how marriage practices have changed over time, and what has shifted these changes in their view;

‘These changes in the marriage process and decision making by the two couples is a recent practice. During the two governments of Haileselassie and Derg it was different from now because marriage was processed under the knowledge of the two parents. In the early times, as there was traditional practice of giving dowry (“Gabara”), the male parents who have no the capacity to give cattle and would have faced challenges. The girl could then remain without marriage. Males can marry at any stage of age but the problem is critical on the side of the female. Today people have the opportunity to make money and they can afford gifts and can marry since the gift demand is not as high as before. Today the amount of money needed for marriage is less and most couples can easily have their own family as early as they wish’
becoming sexually active, or being seen to be sexually active; encourage their daughters to become engaged before marriage provides a strong incentive for parents to hand in marriage.

obligations directed at parents to accept any request for being seen as unmarriageable after the age of 20, and social prioritisation of virginity before marriage, pressures of perpetuate child marriage in the communities are the

The dominant social norms which encourage and perpetuate child marriage in the communities are the prioritisation of virginity before marriage, pressures of being seen as unmarriageable after the age of 20, and social obligations directed at parents to accept any request for their daughters hand in marriage.

The cultural view that virginity is paramount before marriage provides a strong incentive for parents to encourage their daughters to become engaged before becoming sexually active, or being seen to be sexually active;

“Formerly she used to be sent back home unclothed (nude). But these days, there is a tradition of sending porridge to the bride’s parents with a hole in the middle of the porridge if the bride is not a virgin. It is sent without a hole in it if the bride is a virgin. However, the issue does not end here-because the groom will pay less respect for his in laws in their forthcoming relations.” (Intergenerational Trio interview with father)

“For your information, in our area (community, being a virgin is the main pillar. A woman who marries without being a virgin is undermined by her husband and neighbours. On the other hand, the girl who marries as a virgin has respect from her husband, from the family and relatives of her husband and neighbours. Therefore, being a virgin is mandatory to judge a wife good or bad.” (Focus Group with Mothers)

Where girls and boys have independently decided to marry, the ability of parents to intervene and redirect their children appears again to be constrained by notions of shame and social duty. A key informant interview with the head of the Women’s Federation revealed:

“The girl accept early marriage because she has no detailed knowledge of marriage and its associated requirements and problems. Once the girl has gone to the boy’s house, it becomes shameful for the girl’s parent to refuse to accept the marriage. Refusal by a girl’s parent is considered to be against social values. The other reason for the girl’s parent not to refuse the marriage request is because that she could not get the chance to marry another person, or she might have become pregnant.” (Interview with the Head of the Women’s Federation).

Similarly, the situation of being ‘haftu’ - or unmarried over the age of 18-25 - usually puts pressure on girls to marry at the earliest opportunity in order to avoid being seen as unmarriageable.

“She will be called Haftu if all her friends of her age are married and she is not. Most of the time, they are called Haftu if they are not married until they are 25 or 27” (Grandson, Intergenerational trio interview)

“Question: Do you think that the fear to be haftu and hafaa encourages early marriage?

Answer: Yes. The community’s negative perception towards being haftu makes or pushes girls to marry early. The case might be acceptable for boys, but not for girls. Even the family doesn’t want the girl to marry late. Therefore, in some cases, the family encourages the girl to marry early fearing that the girl would be haftu. This means the father and the mother will be happy if their children marry early - up to 20 years old at the latest.” (Focus Group Discussion with Girls, 15-17)

The experience of being ‘haftu’ (or ‘hafaa’ for men, usually 5 years older) appears to have such a strong stigmatising impact on both an unmarried girl and her family, that specific rituals are established to address the issue, including undergoing a change of name (which may in turn be an attempt to dissociate the girl from the experience and break the cycle of stigma);
They always feel deeply sad for her because such a thing is considered as a curse. It is sacred. The only thing the family can do is pray and facilitate things for her through spiritual and cultural rituals. The cultural ceremony or ritual to liberate haftuu is known as hooda baafachuu-compensating Waaqaa. In addition, the family changes her name to another more advantageous name so that she has greater chances of getting a husband. (Focus Group Discussion with Fathers)

Religious beliefs
Religion provides a complex interplay of justifications that prevent, facilitate or drive child marriage. For instance Sharia law, by contrast to Christian doctrine, rules against bridal payment to families, but also accepts polygamy. Notably, the ruling against payment to families and toward daughters has shifted in two generations:

“He will give Gabbaraa. Gabbaraa is a gift that the boy’s family give to the girls’ family. Currently this gift will be only for her. That means the gift is for buying some materials and clothes for the bride. But in previous years Gabbaraa is only for her family.” (Intergenerational Trio interview, Grandmother)

Sharia law also justifies and promotes a shift in the perception of girls as domestic assistants toward a more reproductive role after their first menstruation, which in turn encourages child marriage:

“If surnaa (menstruation) comes she is not allowed to work by her hand, but rather her hand is for childcare. Working by such a hand is haram, and is sacred for her and her family. Due to this, Sharia law encourages marriage as soon as the girl sees her first menstruation.” (Community Timeline discussion)

Although there is limited reference to the role of religious institutions in child marriage, several quotes suggest that religious leaders do not intervene against child marriage:

“They always feel deeply sad for her because such a thing is considered as a curse. It is sacred. The only thing the family can do is pray and facilitate things for her through spiritual and cultural rituals. The cultural ceremony or ritual to liberate haftuu is known as hooda baafachuu-compensating Waaqaa. In addition, the family changes her name to another more advantageous name so that she has greater chances of getting a husband.” (Focus Group Discussion with Fathers)

“Even it is not expected from religious leaders to ask the age of the girls or boys because it is the family of the boys who call upon them to bless and make nikaa” (Intergeneration Trio interview, mother, 36). Though the Sheiks are aware of the legal age, they “don’t follow up whether the age of the girl is below or above 18.”

Yet, the justice office believes that the Sheiks are largely not told when child marriage is taking place:

“For example, many sheikhs do not tie Nikaa today for less than 18 years. Since they come to legal procedure many sheiks are not allow and make it. However, the existing challenge is culturally the fear/respect that the society has for culture and Sheiks so many youths secretly engage in early marriages without informing to their families. Youths engage in early marriage by their willing. When we ask their families, they do not know. In case of religious leaders we are disseminating the flyers to aware them. So that the challenge from religious and cultural cases, rather the case is harming through waliin deemuu (independent marriages or elopement)” (Key informant Interview with the Justice Office)

Levels and awareness of schooling
Overall parental commitment to their children’s education is relatively limited. “Many families believe the outcome of educating girls as nothing. They think succession through education as only for boys. Therefore they don’t educate their daughters. Even if they enter education at the beginning of academic year, they drop out after some months” (In-depth interview with an unmarried girl 15-17).

This low level of commitment is in turn reflected in high levels of school dropout, especially among girls, in favour of employment in the chat cash economy and/or marriage. As noted by the kebele women’s federation head: “most girls do not go school. This is because they think they cannot understand education. In some parts like the area known as ‘Lole’ totally girls do not like to go to school.”
They say that ‘Chat’ business and marriage is better than learning.” This trend tends to be exacerbated by poor performance in school. As one father explained: “There are at least two reasons for stopping education. The first one is when they score small mark in the school. Here they think as they can’t be success through education. Therefore they lose moral to learn. The second one is wish to get marriage. As their age is enough for marriage they start thinking about boyfriends and stop thinking about education.” Girls themselves also note the prominence of dropouts, particularly amongst girls; “there is significant percentage of students drop out. From this the number female students is more” (In-depth interview, Married girl, 15).

Girls are also dropping out of education as a result of household chores and labour expectations: “Girls drop out of school more than boys for many reasons: there is family pressure on girls. The family has no confidence in girls’ education as compared to boys. This discourages girls’ moral to learn. The community perception towards us is also discouraging. Moreover girls’ do not have enough time to study hard as we are busy in domestic activities. Due to this we are not ready to do home works and properly learn our education” (focus group discussion with girls).

Economic drivers
Many adolescents drop-out of school at 8th or 9th grade according to the Head of Women’s Federation (Oda Roba Kebele), which acts as an intensifier for the likelihood of child marriage. As noted in a key informant interview with the Justice Office, teenagers are engaging in remunerative cash-work on Khat farms. This practice often takes priority over schooling, particularly as opportunities for youth employment are seen to be minimal even if secondary school is completed;

“To give you some background there is chat related culture in this area. We call it bobbaa jimaa-collecting/ harvesting chat in group. This collectively harvesting chat requires more participants. The labour wage is 100 to 200 birr per day so it attracts the young generation. As a result many boys and girls drop their education and agree to participate in this activity for two or three months. After that they go to big towns like Chiro, Dire Dawa and Haran due to the fact that they get money. So this raises the question that why we need to learn.”

Further interviews confirm that many girls choose to drop out of school and seek employment or any form of generating income;

“Some students want salary from school. They say to school directors that they can continue education only if the school can pay salary for students and if not they decide to drop out their education. The dividends from learning is only after many years. But if they stop and being employed as daily workers with those traders of jimaa-ckat, daily they get money.” (In-depth interview with a Girl, 18-25)

If no remunerative employment is found, marriage becomes the only option for girls. This issue is related to poverty and also linked to the increasing dominance of the form of girls and boys marrying independently of their parents support (‘wola-deemuu’).

Legal awareness
Interviewees are often aware that the legal age of marriage is 18 years, but they choose to get married earlier. Fathers state that they will marry their girls at 15 if they grow up too fast. An interview with a grandfather shows that the community is not aware of families being prosecuted when child marriage takes place:

Q: Have you ever heard of someone accused of or prosecuted for arranging marriage for or marrying under 18 girls?

A: No, I have never heard such a story.

This statement is supported by evidence from the Head of the Women’s Federation that legal action is weak and that the law is not enforced systematically. Apparently there was an increase in legal prosecutions from the local administrative offices between 2010 and 2011, but after this spike prosecution rates declined again. A focus group discussion with boys also shows that girls who choose to get married are unwilling to tell the justice office their correct age, as does a focus group discussion with girls;

Question: If the entire community members have awareness about the marriage law do you think the law is effectively implemented?

Answer: Not that much. The law has been known to the community or it is in the minds of everybody but no one implements it. Boys and girls know it as illegal but engage in early marriage. Not only us but also our family keeps silent or reluctant when the marriage law breaks.

Family pressure
While religion, social norms, limited legal awareness and other limitations in life-skills knowledge push girls and boys themselves into informal marriages, these drivers obviously continue to be exercised by families. A focus group with school boys reveals the child marriage has increased between “last year and this year. Especially this year it is worse.” They attribute this increase to competition between parents: “It is a kind of competition now. If someone marries, others also follow.” This is further validated by a key informant interview with a school director who says “Most of the community members who give advice are relatives, neighbours and
friends of the parents including friends of the girls. Because they want her to marry earlier in the fear that she may not marry if her age increases above certain stage. This belief is common to almost all community members not partial. This competitive behaviour was also confirmed by the community health extension worker who noted that parents (as well as girls) were pressured into arranging marriage in order to convince others that they were “not less than the married ones”.

In Bedessa there is also apparently actors - or ‘brokers’ - that operate on behalf of parents in order to convince family members to get married:

**Question: Is there any organized institution or group promoting an early marriage in this area?**

**Answer:** Yes. There are local brokers who encourage girls to marry early. They are informal but do a lot.

**Question: Who are these brokers?**

**Answer:** Brokers are individuals who talk to girls the advantage of marriage. In doing so they get commission from the boy or his family if they are successful in persuading the girl for the boy. (Focus Group Discussion with Girls).

In support of this, the Head of the Women’s Federation noted that parents are often visited by someone with “good relation to the girl parent” who will attempt to convince parents that the marriage should be agreed.

**Independent decision-making**

A strong outcome of several drivers of child marriage is that girls and boys appear to be undertaking marriage arrangements on the basis of their own decision making. There was an overall sense from the intergenerational and in-depth interviews with adults that the ‘blame’ for child marriage is being placed on girls and boys own decision-making. The interviews suggest that the youth are not interested in education and are choosing ‘love’ instead. An in-depth interview with a girl illustrates this trend:

“Some students of grade 9 and above stop their education because they haven’t someone who can help them. But those students learning under grade 9 stop their education because of them start love early. Many boys and girls of under grade 9 start love and prefer staying in cafe and jima shop with their lovely rather than going to school. They repeat it again and again and lastly stop their education with no income and job.” (In-depth Interview, Girl, 18-25)

However, respondents often included several caveats that essentially question the possibility of informed and empowered decision-making (see other drivers in this section). However, a driving factor often invoked to explain these increases is the fact that girls and boys are increasingly sharing the same adult-free spaces - either at school or community level - including other weddings;

“Yes he had attended up to grade 6, but he refused to go to school as he grew in to adolescence. I lost control over his especially as he joined a youth play group which sing and dance at weddings and finally be married. Formerly it was parents who arrange marriage for their children, but now a days the boys and girls meet at wedding parties and the arrange the marriage by themselves” (Grandfather, Intergenerational trio interview)

“Question: What are the push factors to marry early? Answer: Limitless freedom given to them; conducive environment to talk with boys (schools, markets, etc.); lack of maturity and low level of awareness about risks of early marriage; etc.” (Intergenerational trio interview with Mother)

**Changing Patterns**

Over the past two generations, there has been a qualitative shift in the terms of marriage favouring the decisions of boys and girls themselves.

While the evidence for generational changes in the age of marriage shows clearly that girls and boys are getting married a few years older than their grandparents and through different modalities, the degree to which this is directly linked to growth in the cash economy is uncertain:

There are no differences regarding the roles of husband and wife. Still boys participation is in field work while girl’s participation is cooking. But there is some change regarding their rights to the family economy. From the economy of their family girls have a right to share 1/3 while boys share 2/3 in previous time. But currently they have equal right on sharing economy of their family. I can say this is the only change made between current and previous youths. (Intergenerational Trio interview with Father).

Other key changes have been in the area of education. Schools have become more available and demand for education at least at lower primary school level has grown significantly.

“This time we have schools here at our residence to send our children to school but in the past school was present distantly in which only those who have the capacity can send and teach their children.” (Community Timeline)

Nevertheless, while some girls had hoped to continue their education even after marriage, for the few who remain there are high levels of stigma attached:

“Before getting married you may think you can continue your education after getting married. But it is difficult. Still my husband is encouraging me to learn.
Local protective factors against child marriage

As we have discussed elsewhere, while child marriage contravenes both Ethiopian law and international conventions, the effects vary depending on the interplay of local practices and beliefs. In some cases, local cultural norms help to ensure that girls are protected from the worst effects of child marriage – e.g., cultural practices that prevent excessively early sex or pregnancy until girls are physically mature or allow girls to continue with their schooling even if married (Jones et al., 2014; Presler-Marshall et al., 2015). In the case of Bedesa woreda, despite widespread child marriage, we noted several protective mechanisms worth mentioning as follows.

Social norms

A reduction in both the practice of polygamy and dowry extended to families (rather than girls themselves) both increasingly provide additional choices to girls outside of child marriage. Polygamy is minimal and appears to be decreasing in Bedesa, as confirmed by several key informants as well as girls;

“Polygamy is not taking place in today's period. It has been the case in the past. Today if one husband plans to marry additional wife the garee and goxii leaders inform the kebele administrators so that there would be government intervention before be marries. Everything will be sorted out regarding why he is in need of additional wife. If there is problem among them the community elders mediate them and solve the problems. In such away polygamy is not the case today” (Focus Group with girls).

There is also a strong consensus that there is no longer any bride price practiced in the community. This practice is replaced by cash or gifts ostensibly directed toward the bride. This process can act as a way to secure the transfer of resources during marriage in a way that is more in the interests of the bride. This can happen because domestic or kitchenware materials, once purchased, are likely to remain and be used at the household level, whereas cash or luxuries are likely to be appropriated by other members of the extended household.

Norms are also changing with respect to what is defined as a ‘good’ husband, the rights of girls, and age at which girls are eligible for marriage, and furthermore, that progressive views are filtering across age groups and genders;

“a good husband is “the one who has good relation with his wife, who considers his wife’s idea, who makes agreement with his wife in every aspects of life activities.” (In-depth interview with Girl, 18-23).

“Every girl has the right, no one can force them to marry, and no one can force a school girl to marry. The current government brought female right. These days females and males have equal rights. Formerly females were not thought to have right.” (Inter-generational trio interview with a Grandfather)

“The beginning of the flow of menstruation alone is not determining for the decision of marriage. The girl must be fit physically for marriage according to traditional adaptation. She should have physical fitness that can be accepted by parents and other elders as the growth rate of all girls is not similar. Therefore, physical conditions are also considered in decision making to permit or reject the requested marriage. The girl may not be able to lead family responsibilities and manage house activities” (Community Timeline Exercise)

As will be discussed below, the presence of awareness raising activities from NGOs and the government (often seen interchangeably) are often linked to these progressive changes.

Awareness of legal age of marriage

As discussed above, while many adult actors are aware of the legal of marriage through a range of education and awareness-raising efforts and do not necessarily act accordingly, this level of increased community awareness on the issue nevertheless acts as a protective factor for girls;

“NGO’s have taught us about harmful traditional practices and legal issues related to early marriage in particular. In the school in general and girls club in particular we have learned about what is early marriage and associated impacts to it. Hence, we have awareness about it. We know that marriage at less than 18 years old is crime or illegal and anybody who engages and supports early marriage shall be brought to the court/law.” (Focus Group Discussion with Girls)

There is also evidence that girls are receiving this awareness via the school curriculum, such as through ‘civics’ and ‘ethics’ classes, as well as through girls clubs;

“In the school in general and girls club in particular we have learned about what is early marriage and associated impacts to it. Hence, we have awareness about it. We know that marriage at less than 18 years old is crime or illegal and anybody who engages and supports early marriage shall be brought to the court/law.” (Focus Group Discussion with Girls)

The testimony from girls on the subjects that they learn about in club settings also include fairly technical references to health and legal concepts, including mentions of inequality, rights, fistula, HIV/AIDS, STIs, and personal safety. However, while discussions seem advanced, one girl...
declared that there were barriers to accessing the clubs - including registration and selection criteria - although the specific nature and scale of these barriers are unclear;

**Question:** Do have the interest to be its member?

**Answer:** I have no interest

**Question:** Why?

**Answer:** the leaders of the club are selective so I couldn’t get the chance to be the member. I have tried two times then I hate it. (In-depth interview, Girl, 15)

**Existing programming**

Programming interventions can play an important role in either spearheading social norm change around child marriage or helping to accelerate changes already afoot in a given locale. In the case of Bedesa, programming efforts to date have, however, been quite limited.

**Strengths**

Levels of awareness on the age of marriage, illegality of FGM/C and broader rights-based language are relatively high. Awareness is usually attributed to activities undertaken by the government or NGOs, or frequently both. It is therefore challenging to confirm attribution to any specific actors;

"There are gaps in teaching and giving awareness to the community about the law of the land and all legal procedures. In addition not adapting the law to local cultures is another problem. Moreover, the law is silent when the boy at less than 18 marries the girls at less than 18 years by their willingness. The common problem in our area is this." (Key informant interview with Justice Office)

In other words, not only are community awareness levels low, but legal professionals are unwilling to pursue prosecutions when child marriages are deemed to be initiated by adolescents themselves. From a child protection standpoint this is problematic but when neither parents nor children will give evidence as to the child’s real age, the likelihood of prosecution is very low.

Others are more focused in suggesting that awareness raising should be directed to girls around the value of education and addressing high youth unemployment;

"I think the government and other bodies have to work on how to support girls in school. Trainings and awareness creations have to be done for all communities so that there would be conducive environment for education” (In-depth Interview, married girl, 15)

"The government has to give attention on young generation especially for educated ones. Educated young unemployment has to be decreased so that we are optimistic about our education” (Focus Group Discussion with Girls)

More specifically, the lack of coordination with other government sectors is seen to cause problems in checking the age of girls who are getting married early. Birth registration is a critical barrier in the event of interviewing girls who either act in their own interest or have been briefed to inform officials that their age is above 18. The Justice office also reports that one option is to send the girls for a medical review, but the costs associated with this measure are prohibitive.

Apparently, the legal measures to address the “jala-deemuu” or elopement phenomenon are not clear to local officials. An interview with the Woreda Justice Office revealed that officials considered the “jala-deemuu” phenomenon to be problematic firstly as there is no foundation to take legal action, and secondly, there is a lack of capacity to obtain relevant evidence.

**Entry-points for future programming**

Our research identified a number of key entry points for programming in Badesa. They include:

80 Badesa Town woreda
• Better enforcement of the law is required, and needs to include capacity strengthening of justice officials at woreda and kebele levels so that they can actively prosecute cases of child marriage, even when both parties are under 18 years. This should include alternate ways of establishing girls’ ages, as those who want to marry often falsely claim to be over the age of 18.

• Fostering support for education is a critical step as school enrolment helps communities see students as children who require protection and adult guidance.

• Efforts need to target adolescents and help them understand the risks of child marriage and the advantages of education. Specifically, they need to be helped to prioritise longer-term thinking over shorter-term thinking.

• Improving adolescents’ access to contraceptives may help allay parental fears about girls’ sexual purity.

• Efforts need to be made to reduce the stigma directed at unmarried girls—working, where indicated—to replace it with prestige for investing in education.

• It could also be complemented by the establishment of community watch groups and anonymising reporting, as whistle blowers often risk serious repercussions.

• Finally, given high levels of school dropout, opportunities for adolescent/youth employment and micro-enterprise development should be strengthened by the woreda or zonal government.

Overall, despite heavy investment in community awareness raising efforts about the legal age of marriage, actual concrete impacts in Badesa have been quite limited. This suggests a need for several tactics.

First, at present when cases are taken to court, justice officials are of the view that there is little they can do if they are unable to obtain evidence about the girl’s age. Support needs to be provided to justice officials to find alternative means to obtaining proof of age (possibly through school records; triangulated information from community members; and from health post records)—especially as so-called “age tests” are not only unscientific but also unnecessarily invasive of girls’ privacy.

Second, justice officials need to be sensitised to the fact that in the case of child marriage, consent is irrelevant. It is often the case that even if the girl says she is willing to marry it may be as a result of coercion from her family. Furthermore, even if the marriage is genuinely her choice, it remains her parents’ responsibility to protect her—as a child—from her own bad decisions.

Capacity strengthening of woreda and kebele level justice officials should be complemented by community level watch groups that report and intervene on a case-by-case basis. This would however need to be accompanied by robust mechanisms to ensure anonymous reporting so as to protect whistle-blowers.

Additionally, given overall low levels of commitment to girls’ education in this community, awareness-raising efforts need to be broadened to make parents, community members and girls themselves more aware of the longer-term benefits of education. While the benefits of immediate cash are manifest—especially to adolescents and food-insecure families—helping people understand the longer-term pay offs of school is important. Educated, economically successful women need to be held up as role models and thought should be given to how to best replace the stigma of being unmarried with prestige for investing in education.

Finally, given the challenges that urban adolescents find in obtaining employment outside of the chat cash economy, investments in adolescent/youth employment schemes and the support for the creation of micro-businesses also needs to be considered so that child marriage is not viewed by adolescent girls as a potential ‘exit’ out of poverty.
Key messages

Age of marriage

- In Fedis Woreda almost one-third of girls are married between 10 and 17 years of age according to 2007 census data, which is also supported by our primary research findings.

Drivers of child marriage

- Five distinct forms of marriage can be identified, each with differing implications for the wellbeing of girls. Elopement – *jala deemuu* – is routinely cited by all respondents as a major factor contributing to apparently increasingly levels of child marriage.
- There has been a clear quantitative and qualitative shift in the exchange modalities used in negotiating child marriage over the previous two generations. The role of cattle has subsided in relation to the importance of cash, and significant increases in the magnitude of cash gifts have been witnessed over even the previous generation.
- Social norms are a particularly strong factor in encouraging girls to marry early – particularly the importance of preserving virginity and avoiding being considered undesirable for marriage – *haftu*.

Factors protecting against child marriage

- Protective factors include the apparent decline of both inter-generational and polygamous marriages, significant (if non-technical) awareness of the health risks associated with child marriage and pregnancy, the prominent role of schools in providing progressive civic education, and also the highly positive aspirations exhibited by girls.
**Priority entry points**

- Entry points for programming against child marriage include using Sharia law to counter drivers of child marriage and its negative impacts – such as doctrines on polygamy and contraception. Key informants suggested that audiences have been over-sensitised and are even hostile to repeated awareness-raising activities, suggesting that new actors, materials, media and messages are required to refresh sensitisation activities.
- Efforts need to target adolescents and help them understand the risks of child marriage and the advantages of education.

**Overview**

Fedis is a woreda in the East Hararghe Zone of the Oromia Region that had, at the time of the 2007 census, a child marriage rate of 31% (ages 10-17) which is second among Oromia’s 277 woredas, the highest in East Hararghe Zone, and 7th out of the 741 woredas nationwide. See Box 24 for an overview of the woreda’s key characteristics.

**Current patterns of marriage and divorce**

**Age of marriage**

As can be seen in Table 10 below, Fedis is a hotspot for child marriage, ranking in the top 10 for both younger and older adolescents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Girls 10-14</th>
<th>Fedis</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>East Hararghe Zone</th>
<th>Oromia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls 15-17</td>
<td>53.1%</td>
<td>4th</td>
<td>32.3%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The testimony from respondents concurs with these statistics: ‘Most of the time I see they marry at the age of 12 to 16. Generally, marriage is common at less than 18 years old, especially for girls’ (key informant interview with a health extension worker), who tend to marry spouses 3-5 years older than them. In addition, two respondents suggested that the age of marriage had also dropped over a generation:

*In our day most of us married at the age of 15-17. But today girls marry at the age of 12-15, which is shameful.* (Inter-generational trio interview with a mother)

*A girl was said to be ready for marriage at 20 years age or above in the past. No one would allow marrying under 20. But, now 15, 16 or 17 years old girls are marrying and even 11-year-old girls are dropping out from school and getting married.* (Inter-generational trio interview with a father)

**Wedding arrangements and ceremony**

The testimonies from different respondents suggest that there are largely five different types of marriage arrangements. *Cabsa* or *chebsa* is understood locally as an arrangement that is discussed and agreed fairly rapidly, often overnight. This is a well-respected wedding modality at community level, and has strong social sanctions attached if requests on behalf of the groom’s father are not accepted. *Kadhanna* – known as *hayyamma* amongst older generations – is an arranged marriage that takes several years to negotiate and finalise. *Cabsa* and *kadhanna* can therefore largely differentiated by the degree of negotiations and commitments required before marriage is agreed by all

**Box 24: Fedis overview**

Fedis’ population is 113,108 (2007) with a very low level of urbanisation (4%), which is marginally less than the zone average (6.5%). The vast majority of the population (99.2%) report that they Muslim.

Land surveys show that 11% of Fedis is arable, with 24.7% being appropriate for pasture, 19.5% for forestry, and the remaining 45% considered unusable. Market access is dependent on access to registered businesses (including wholesalers), but diminished by dry-weather-only roads and a distance of 28 kilometres to the town (Boko). Despite growing cash crop (groundnuts and onions), Fedis remains one of the most food insecure woredas in Ethiopia (EDRI Report, 2013). Both government and NGO relief activities have been addressing chronic food security issues for several years and reports show that there is high malnutrition among children in the woreda.

There are 62 primary schools in the woreda, which represents considerable growth given that there were only 18 under the Derg administration (1974-1987). In 2015, 35,422 students are enrolled in the 62 primary schools, of which 15,821 are female and 19,601 male. There are also two high schools and one preparatory school.
parties. As the _kadhanna_ is more intensive, it appeared far less often than _Cabsa_ in feedback from respondents.

By contrast, _butta_ is a form of abduction that purportedly no longer takes place and has been replaced by a fourth type of marriage in which bride and groom decide to wed without parental knowledge or consent. This form is known as _jala deemuu_, and is considered disreputable – although families often arrange more formal Nikka activities after _jala deemuu_ has taken place. Finally, there is marriage through ‘inheritance’. This amounts to a girl or woman being taken into a family member of the groom’s household, usually as a second or third wife.

Finally, the bride price exchange process seems to have shifted both quantitatively and qualitatively over the previous two generations. Interviews with grandmothers and mothers show that bride price (_gabara_) through _Cabsa_ or _hayyamaa_ marriage types usually entailed several head of cattle – up to five in once case – alongside cash and gifts to both the girl and her family. Cash appears to have taken increasing prominence recently, while the role of cattle has subsided. In a single generation the cash exchanged has grown by a magnitude of between 10 and 100. For example, prices have shifted from being in the hundreds to the tens of thousands, although exact figure varies significantly between families.

_It was done before but since about five years ago bride price has become more limited. The idea of bride price has been diverted to another concept. It is not regarded as bride price but rather as marriage expenses. For example, the boy gives more than 10,000 birr for the girl to clothe her while another 1,000 birr and a cow goes to her family._ (Intergenerational trio interview with daughter)

_**Question:** Did you give gabbara for your wife’s parents when you married her?

**Answer:** Yes, I did.

**Question:** What did you give?

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**Box 25: Illustrations of types of wedding arrangements in Fedis**

_Cabsa/Chebsa_: Chesa is a mode of marriage in which the boy goes to her parents with his relatives and friends at night. He leaves a horse whip hanging outside the girl’s home to signal that he has come to discuss a chebsa arrangement. ‘They will talk to the girl’s parents the whole night. Then her parents will allow their daughter to go with them. They give clothes to her parents and take a stick as our custom [the stick has spiritual significance]. The boy’s father, with two or three elders taking khat, goes to the girl’s parents and asks them to give their daughter to his son. They will also give them three cattle. According to our culture, parents can’t refuse to give their daughter for the boy. The boy will take the girl to be his wife.’ (Inter-generational Trio interview, Father)

_‘Kadhanna/ Hayyamma’_: ‘marriage through family arrangement. I have had no idea about my marriage and to whom I marry. I married hundred percent by the interest and decision of my family. It is known as ‘hayyamaa’ marriage process. It is equivalent to ‘kadhannaa’. In this marriage process, the family of the boy asks the family of the girl so that the family of the girl gives the daughter for the boy.’ (Inter-generational Trio interview, Grandmother)

_‘Buttaa (abduction)’_: ‘During the Derg time there was marriage by abduction involving a kind of rape to marry the girl one loves. The girl’s parents also sometimes force the girl to marry someone if they like the parent of the boy. Even if the girl is not volunteered her parents force her and she accepts the marriage. This is done to have high bondage with the boy’s family. In general there was forced marriage in addition to the traditional marriage made by the agreement of the two families.’ (Community timeline exercise)

_‘Jala Deemuu’_: ‘The family is disappointed to what the children are doing: marriage through jala-deemuu; dropping their education; early marriage, etc. In some cases some families bring the case of their children to the court. When the girl is brought up to the court she says “It is my interest and I have the right to do this. My age is enough for marriage.” This makes the lawyers groundless to punish them. Such cases have happened many times. Due to this the family prefers to keep silent because of fearing double shame. In front of the court it is the family who is ashamed not the girls.’ (Inter-generational Trio interview, Daughter)

_‘Inheritance’_: ‘Last but not least, polygamy can be a result of marriage through inheritance. For instance, if the brother of our husband died, our husbands have moral and cultural ground to inherit the wives of their brother. Question: Is there love and unity in the family where there is polygamy? Answer: It depends on the ability of the husband to manage well on the one hand and then the nature of the wives, on the other. Conflict is inevitable as they have one husband and resources in common.’ (Focus Group Discussion with Mothers).
Adherence to the ceremonial process remains strong. The majority of respondents note that the meeting of families and the chewing of khat takes place, even in some cases of jala deemuu (elopement). As noted in Box 1, there is a clear categorisation and hierarchy of marriage types, each with their own resilient corresponding activities and enactments of tradition.

**Divorce**

According to interviews with a school director and a focus group with fathers, many divorces are taking place in Fedis and their increase is associated with the growth of jala deemuu marriage arrangements. A focus group with mothers confirmed that in the past there was a stronger or more forceful emphasis on resolution processes, but also that current avenues for women and girls to divorce are often conducted informally (see Box 26). The respondents have mixed views regarding the agency girls have to make decisions on divorce: many suggest that girls are free to take such decisions, while others suggest the formalities are often led by men and boys. Interviews with the school director and a men’s focus group also suggest that a factor in divorce could be increasing migration of adolescent girls to Saudi Arabia, but is unclear whether this is a driver or a consequence of divorce in these cases. Overall, however, the references to international migration were few, suggesting that the girls who travel to Saudi Arabia are in the minority compared to ‘other’ areas, i.e. unidentified peripheral communities.

**Local drivers of child marriage**

**Social norms**

Social norms contribute to child marriage insofar as they devalue girls’ education. Focus group discussions with boys suggested that the community believes that ‘females need to get married, not educated.’ Similarly, there is a general lack of awareness of the benefits of education among adolescents with most girls believing that ‘education doesn’t affect marriage.’ While an interview with a 14-year-old boy suggests that some boys reinforce this attitude, a broader focus group discussion suggests there is some increasing awareness of the challenges that girls face in pursuing their education, but also that girls are seen to be contributing to their own disempowerment:

*A good wife is one who behaves properly, agrees with and is on good terms with the whole family of her husband, is good to her husband and beautiful not only physically but also behaviourally. Boys marry at 20 or older, or at 18 and 19 if early. For females 15 years of age is sufficient.* (In-depth interview with boy, 14)

**Box 26: Female-initiated divorce: a growing trend in Fedis**

*If females are not comfortable with their marriage and want to divorce, they simply leave their home and go to their parents rather than coming and informing us. When she goes to her parents’ home, the husband feels as if she hates him and tries to marry someone else. She does not inform us or apply to the court, rather sometimes husbands tell us she has refused the elders who tried to negotiate and they ask us what to do. In our area men are also visiting our office to complain because they understand that if they marry without divorcing the first wife they will be judged [stigmatised].*

Key informant interview with Women’s Affairs Office

*When I compare the present marriage system with ours there are many differences. For me marriage is better than it was in the past because the interests of boys and girls are central now, not the family’s. For instance, where a marriage is an arranged one, whenever there is a problem in the girl’s life she blames her family. She says, “My family has made it like this”. In today’s marriage process they ultimately decide themselves so there is no way to blame anyone else. In the past, when there was a marital dispute this wife might decide to return to her family home. The two families would negotiate a remedy and her return. However, in today’s marriage there is no such thing because the girl and the boy married each other willingly. If they love each other they can continue, or otherwise divorce immediately.*

Focus group discussion with mothers
People think that there is no need to teach girls. It makes no difference for her to be educated or not. So female students suffer from a moral crisis [torn between education and marriage] and have less interest for education. They don’t want to learn even in class. They talk a lot. (Focus group discussion with boys)

Adults also responded that discriminatory views on the value of girls’ education were commonplace, but also depended on how well the girls were doing in school. For instance, interviews with fathers and mothers, as well as with the Kebele Head, showed that there was a general understanding that girls’ education was valuable as a vehicle to future livelihood options, but only as long as their school performance showed no signs of waning.

Focus group discussions with boys also reveal a critical social norms driver: being seen as unmarriageable. Not being married – usually by the age of 20 – brings increasing pressure to avoid be considered undesirable or unwanted (haftu). Testimony from boys, mothers, father, girls and key informants emphasised that being labelled haftu is a strong insult, and can affect boys as well:

The other possible reason [for early marriage] is fear or risk of being haftuu. Culturally haftuu is sacred and shameful for both the family and the girls as well. Once the girl becomes haftuu nobody wants to marry her. The only chance she has is to marry a hafaa man. (Intergenerational trio interview with a mother)

This powerful social norm appears to be the dominant driver of child marriage, beyond other factors such as religious beliefs, economic incentives, legal awareness or the relative advantages of staying in school:

I know that it was not right decision to drop out of school. But there was nothing I could do because all of my friends had dropped out and married so when I continued my education my friends called me haftuu. They said “All her friends have married; what she is waiting for? Why doesn’t she marry?” That wasn’t good for my psychology. (In-depth interview with a married girl, 16 years)

There is a lot of peer pressure on girls to get married early. In an in-depth interview a girl who is a positive outlier vis-a-vis this social pressure explained that, ‘When one gets married one’s friends wish to do the same.’

Similarly, social norms concerning sexual relations before marriage carry enormous weight at the community level, which in turn drives child marriage. For example, a key informant interview with a school director suggests that girls choose to get married early because they want to have ‘sexual relations with their boyfriends’ sooner. Customs dictate that, ‘they dance together and even sleep together but never have sex. That is why they practise jala deemu since no sexual intercourse is practised there. In the event that they do have sexual intercourse, they should marry.’ In the event of a non-virginal girl getting married to a boy, the boy or his family can claim an annulment and the return of his bride price or other endowments to the family. A focus group with mothers underscored the level of influence that the social norm has on the community:

In this area, not being a virgin is uncommon because it brings shame for the girl and the family. But in some case it happens. In such cases the girl has very slim chance of marrying except to a very old person or as a second wife. Virginity is the spice in the marriage and it is a must for girls to have it. (Focus group discussion with mothers)

The practice of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) is also strongly connected to social expectations on the sexuality and promiscuity of girls. Although the practice is widely recognised as illegal, the majority of respondents – particularly younger generations and mothers – recognise that it continues in a hidden fashion. For example, a focus group with mothers underscored the level of influence that the social norm has on the community:

As per our discussion with different stakeholders, female genital mutilation takes place in our community. But it is not openly practised – people do it in secret as they know that FGM is a crime. I also understand that wives are not open with their husbands while they cut their girls. The reason is that the third level of cutting would cause high bleeding even to the extent to death. However, what they do is simple cutting. There are three levels of cutting: first, second, and third. Currently cutting is the first level (simplest). (Key informant interview with heath extension worker)

Feedback from girls also shows that high levels of FGM/C are present in the community and the impact of the broader community social norms remains a strong driver:

Question: What do you know about cutting or FGM? Does it take place?

Answer: Yes, I know about it. It is done in our area. Many girls have been cut.

Question: Is female circumcision legal?

Answer: No, it is illegal. Our society is told not to let their daughters get circumcised. But what can we do? It is our custom. … Look, unless I get cut I will not get husband. It is also shameful for my family. (In-depth interview with a girl, 14)

Question: So do you think that cutting has advantages?

Answer: No, it is illegal. Our society is told not to let their daughters get circumcised. But what can we do? It is our custom. … Look, unless I get cut I will not get husband. It is also shameful for my family. (In-depth interview with a girl, 14)
Answer: No. I don’t mean that but my idea is that the context of our community gives us no option. (In-depth interview with married girls)

Question: Why is female circumcision considered important in this community?

Answer: It decreases the sex emotion of the girl. If she is not circumcised she badly needs males to have sex with. But those who are circumcised have no emotional problem like this. I think this is why circumcision is important. (In-depth interview with unmarried girls)

Religious beliefs
The influence of religious doctrine on influencing child marriage can be linked to the inaction of religious leaders as well deeply held religious beliefs. The issue of FGM/C was viewed by one group of married girls, for instance, as having both a religious and customary/traditional justification. Non-circumcised girls are seen to be najaasaa or religiously wrong as well as potentially sexually deviant.

Religious leaders’ inaction vis-à-vis child marriages can also be considered an indirect driver of child marriage in Fedis. As noted by the Women’s Affairs office:

We tried to consult males like religious leaders and they replied that there is no problem in the kebele which could be of course being foolish. Actually I told them ‘Beshitawun yalaweke medihanit ayagegnim’ which means if you don’t know the problem it is impossible to find a solution. I came here to get to know the problems so the government could search for the solution, but they were not that interested and have shown little faith.

Levels and awareness of schooling
Our findings suggested that adolescent girls are dropping out of school in relatively high numbers. An interview with teachers showed that 17 students across grades 1-8, and three students from grades 9-10 had dropped out during the semester in which the research was undertaken. The main drivers for these dropouts were attributed to child marriage and ‘family problems’, although feedback from other informants shows that awareness of the potential advantages of education vary among adults and adolescents, including girls and boys themselves.

For instance, an in-depth interview with unmarried girls, as well as other interviews with girls, shows that they are aware of parents’ negative attitude toward the value of girls’ education:

Question: Why don’t parents allow their daughters to go to other place and continue their education?

Answer: They don’t consider the importance of education. They discredit it. They think female education will make no difference. The attitude they have toward girls’ compared to boys’ education is very different. They think boys have to learn to the end. But completing grade eight is enough for girls. After that they have to drop out of school. No need to continue their education more than that. This is a very dangerous attitude. (In-depth interview with unmarried girls)

Boys, by contrast, often focus the blame on girls themselves. In a focus group discussion with boys, they suggested that girls ‘talk too much’ and only think about marriage prospects – particularly when they reach grade eight. On the question of external pressures on girls, such as the demands of domestic work, boys again suggested that it was nonetheless girls’ choice to drop out of school, and that they have a tendency to ‘wander here and there’.

In turn, adults say the main motivation for dropping out is girls’ desire to work. An interview with the schools director reveals the view that girls themselves ‘lack the interest’ to continue, and prefer to look towards business opportunities, especially the lucrative production and sale of khat (see below). Views from a Health Extension Worker echo these comments, but also demonstrate how the rights-based agenda may have been misrepresented or misunderstood at community level, with significant implications:

The context of this area has a significant role in encouraging early marriage. The young generation doesn’t want to learn because there is the possibility of making money from khat production. Their level of understanding is also very low. Due to this they don’t know the advantages of education in their lives. Moreover, the misunderstanding of rights and duties plays a vital role in this regard. For them everything is their right. The cultural and moral duty of children to abide by the words of their family is dead today. (Key informant interview with a health extension worker)

The views of adults and boys contrast significantly with the aspirational attitudes towards education of girls themselves. When asked about their plans for future employment or their desired age of marriage, the vast majority of girls stated that they intended to marry after they had completed their education, sometimes at post-secondary level. These aspirations are often interrupted – including on the basis of foregone commitments to girls that they can continue their education after marriage:

Education is beautiful and successful before marriage. So the choice is either education or marriage. I don’t mean that education after marriage is impossible. But as I have observed some girls and boys who try to continue their education after marriage and see it is difficult. They are neither learning nor administering their life. It is just deceiving oneself and wasting one’s own time and resources. Also, the husband doesn’t allow his wife to
continue education after marriage even if he promised to. (In-depth interview with a girl)

Economic drivers

The direct role of the marriage bride price exchange process has diminished in terms of driving child marriage. According to interviews with the Women’s Affairs Office and a Health Extension Worker, the transfer of assets (gabara) is less of a driver in relation to girls’ and boys’ own decision-making, but a driver for some nonetheless as this quote suggests:

Because he is from a poor family I decided to marry him through jala-deemu to simplify things for him. (Intergenerational trio interview with mother)

By contrast, the benefits of cash crops – particularly khat – is a driving factor for both parents and girls alike (see Box 27). Significant growth in micro-enterprises that has facilitated job creation more broadly has also created an environment where young people are increasingly more employable. According to the Women’s Affairs Office, joblessness has decreased markedly over time, which is perceived to have had an impact on school-age girls looking for immediate livelihood prospects rather than continued education. These drivers are also linked to poverty at the household level:

I am eager to marry my boyfriend and bear children. We have to do our job and get out of poverty. We need to focus on how to improve our life. (Focus group discussion with girls)

Legal awareness

As in the case of FGM/C, knowledge and awareness of the laws concerning child marriage are fairly widespread – including amongst girls. Nevertheless, many girls disregard of the law:

Question: What does the law say about early marriage?
Answer: Early marriage is illegal.

Question: At what age should girls get married?
Answer: 19, 20 or more

Question: Didn’t you know this before you got married?
Answer: I knew it. We learned it in the school.

Answer: Though I knew the law, I got married at 15.

Question: Do your parents know the law?
Answer: No, they don’t because they are illiterate. (In-depth interview with a married girl, 17)

Overall, people appear to know the legal age of marriage and are aware of court proceedings that have been undertaken in regard to it. This suggests that awareness raising efforts by government and non-government actors has been fairly comprehensive yet at the same time largely ineffectual in the face of social norms and economic pressures.
Independent decision-making

In many cases, decisions on child marriage appear to be driven by girls and boys themselves, independently of other drivers. For instance, religious leaders may be seen by youths to be powerless in issues of child marriage – particularly jala deemuu. An interview with a boy suggested that religious leaders had no choice in the matter of child marriage as long as a boy and girl announced that they were in love. Similarly, the school director emphasised that peer pressure to get married early is a key factor in perpetuating the practice:

Question: What forces girls to get involved in early marriage: their parents, environment or religion?

Answer: It is not the influence of parents or that of religion. Instead, adolescents observe on another. It is peer influence. They are accustomed to do so. (Key informant interview, schools director)

Linked to this is an understanding of the irreversibility of the elopement process, or jala deemuu. It appears that once informal agreements have been made, there are limited options for further intervention. In this regard, it appears that the rights agenda and its role in protecting children has been interpreted to focus on children’s agency rather than parents’ responsibility as protectors of child wellbeing:

Sure, the majority marry under age. The main problem here is not legality but rather they simply went together without the knowledge of their family. As a result, the only option is allowing them to marry. (Key informant interview with the Women’s Affairs Office)

We know that the law has given them the right to decide on their lives but it shouldn’t be to this extent. Boys and girls finish everything outside and marry through jala deemuu. When the family wants to interfere in their decision, girls and boys take immediate action and marry each other. (Focus group discussion with mothers)

A jala deemuu marriage might also be conducted as a strategy to avoid the fact that a girl is too young to marry. Participants in an intergenerational trio interview reported that girls can proceed with jala deemuu to avoid confrontation with their parents on the matter of her age and schooling. An in-depth interview with a married girl indicated how girls can also manipulate legal confrontations: she tells a story of how a jala deemuu marriage was recently investigated but the girl testified that she was 18 and her parents could not provide firm evidence to the contrary.

Local protective factors against child marriage

As we have discussed elsewhere, while child marriage contravenes both Ethiopian law and international conventions, the effects vary depending on the interplay of local practices and beliefs. In some cases, local cultural norms help to ensure that girls are protected from the worst effects of child marriage – e.g. cultural practices that prevent excessively early sex or pregnancy until girls are physically mature or allow girls to continue with their schooling even if married (Jones et al., 2014; Presler-Marshall et al., 2015). In the case of Fedis woreda, despite widespread child marriage, we noted several protective mechanisms.

Social norms

Inter-generational and polygamous marriages have shifted over time in Fedis. There appears to have been a shift away from inter-generational marriage arrangements:

In the past there were marriages between individuals with large age differences. Now, though, girls never agree to marry a person who is much older. Girls and boys typically choose one of their peers. [Community timeline exercise]

The girl marries a boy of 15 or 16 years. She never would volunteer to marry a person with a large age gap. [Community timeline exercise]

A father of 40 years of age who married an adolescent girl confirmed the shifting norms around age differences in marriage, noting that his friends laughed at him and said that as an old man he was ‘not allowed to play with her or other girls like them’.

Polygamy also seems to be less prominent than in previous generations, although by how much is difficult to discern. The shift is largely attributed to both a lack of means to support larger households as well as government regulations that have made polygamy illegal.

Awareness of health risks and legal age of marriage

Despite the prominence of child marriage in Fedis, there considerable awareness in the community of the health risks associated with it, although this has not translated into widespread abandonment of the practice. Nevertheless, the recognition of the health risks of premature marriage is so commonplace that it has a proverb:

There is proverb which explains the risks/disadvantages of early marriage. It says: ‘lijoolummanti yoo beeruman dhalti nama dararti/miiti’ – which roughly translated means, ‘For a girl, being married early and undergoing child bearing endangers her’. There are many risks: divorce, health problems, fistula, difficulty during pregnancy and child delivery, social problems with her relatives and families, and economic challenges. (Inter-generational trio interview with a daughter)

According to testimony from both married and unmarried girls, the high levels of (often ignored) legal
awareness are predominantly gained from school. One respondent attributed it to ‘civic and ethical education’ classes, as well as science and biology classes. A key informant interview with a teacher also suggests there is significant impact from ‘1-to-5 groups’ (informal awareness-raising and message dissemination initiatives).

The community also announced how they understood the use of contraception to be directly related to religious doctrine:

Contraceptives are used but some females do not like to use them fearing that their husband may marry another wife if she doesn’t deliver a child. Sharia permits a delivery every two or three years for the sake of the first child to grow properly, so the use of contraceptives is directly or indirectly permitted for family planning. (Community timeline exercise)

**Schooling and empowerment**

A minority of respondents believe that education should continue after marriage with the appropriate support from the family and husband:

We send our girls to school on our own initiative because we understand the advantage of education. Nobody has forced us. Everybody has understands the importance of education (Community timeline exercise)

However, there was no explicit reference to the potentially protective role that schooling provides to girls in the short and long term. This suggests that schooling is seen as instrumental in facilitating further income but not in providing other important life skills and broader awareness about personal risks.

**Existing programming**

Interventions in Fedis on child marriage and women and girls’ empowerment more broadly are largely conducted by the government, although NGO activities, especially those of Care which is working on SRH programming in the area, are referenced in a minority of cases.

**Strengths**

As in the case of Bedesa in Oromia, the community has been broadly familiarised on the legal issues surrounding harmful traditional practices, including both FGM/C and child marriage. This awareness spans different age groups, although there is disparity between girls and boys regarding the value of girls’ education. Care Ethiopia is cited by the Women’s Affairs Office as having a particular a role in providing economic empowerment directed towards women, as well as having supported broader awareness raising activities given that the Women’s Affairs office does not have the capacity to reach out to all kebeles. Respondents at the community level provided limited insights on the strengths of existing child marriage interventions from any NGOs, but made a small number of observations regarding the positive impact the government was making:

**Question:** You said that parents have to send their children to school despite the distance. From where you have such an understanding?

**Answer:** I hear and learn it daily. The government teaches this through different instruments-shanee, garee [1-5 cells and Development Army structures] and kebele administration. The advantage of education is always made public through the media and local leaders. Therefore, I understand that parents should teach their children this. (Inter-generational trio interview with mother)

One area of success has been linking Sharia law to arguments against polygamy. As the community is 99% Muslim, Sharia law resonates strongly with respondents’ worldviews. The Women’s Affairs Office used this to their advantage in promoting the doctrine concerning polygamy, which outlines how husbands must demonstrate certain degrees of wealth before being allowed to gain any further wives.

**Challenges**

According to the Women’s Affairs Office, a critical challenge in pursuing underage marriage cases is the lack of birth registration facilities – and thereby the inability to prove whether a girl has married under age or not:

**If the case is taken to court sometimes families give false confirmation on the girl’s age, claiming that she is not underage if they are comfortable with the boy and/or his family. We tried a lot when we were at school to take it to court but we didn’t succeed. The girl said “I am fit to marry, leave me alone”. We tried to take the father to jail but that was not fruitful.** (Key informant interview, teacher)

The kebele leader also said that they were struggling to address child marriage adequately. The local government is working to improve monitoring information systems and to improve prosecution services. But budget scarcity is also affecting the ability to support girls who face maternity complications such as fistula or to provide specialist counselling training to teachers for sensitising girls about child marriage.

Finally, a key informant at the Women’s Affairs office explains how new awareness-raising techniques and messages need to be brought to the woreda alongside reform of the punitive dimension of child marriage:

Currently, the challenge we are facing is the short duration of jail terms, which are only six months. They also they think life in jail is better than the life they were in. They repeat the same mistake after release from jail and this is accelerating multiple marriages. Therefore, the penalty needs to be more serious and education
needs to be given to all segments of society. Second, higher officials or other professionals need to come here and create awareness so people do not get bored by having only us educate them. This may give people the sense that the situation is critical and demands attention. We are repeating the same lesson over and over and this has made them bored of us. Some think we are their enemies and doing this only for the sake of getting a salary. (Interview with Women’s Affairs Office)

Entry points
Our research suggests that finding entry points in Fedis will require care. On the one hand, it is clear that adolescents themselves need to be prioritised for education—as they are increasingly choosing to marry of their own accord. On the other hand, key informants suggested that audiences have been over-sensitised and are even hostile to repeated awareness-raising activities, suggesting that new actors, materials, media and messages are required to refresh sensitisation activities. Entry points we suggest include:

• Helping adolescents to engage in longer-term thinking and prioritise education over marriage. Efforts must pay particular attention to the peer pressure brought to bear on girls and the stigma directed at the unmarried.
• Attention must be paid to controlling the educational impacts of the growing cash economy. Given high levels of food insecurity in Fedis, lucrative chat farming will be hard for school to compete with.
• Greater efforts need to be made to help families invest in girls’ education. This should include not only community-level awareness raising, with successful girls and their families publicly lauded, but also material support to offset the real costs of girls’ education.
• Thought should be given to how to use Sharia law to counter drivers of child marriage and its negative impacts – such as doctrines on polygamy and contraception. Where messages can be aligned with religious doctrine, they are more likely to be heard.

Community members felt strongly that community dialogue and regulation through elders, religious leaders and customary law were preferable to formal regulatory systems. They also acknowledged that in order to reduce child marriage it is necessary for the community itself to play a much stronger role in monitoring and referring cases of child marriage. They suggested that in addition to teaching about the risks of child marriage, it is important to teach about the advantages of adult marriage.

Key informants, on the other hand, suggested that officials needed to develop inter-sectoral working plans to address child marriage. A school director, for example, said:

As for me, the government should train people and send them to this area to work on this issue. Both men and women should be trained and have their own office just to focus on prevention of early marriage. If those trained people work cooperatively with other governmental offices like the Court, Office of Justice, and schools, no doubt it will be solved.
Key messages

Age of marriage

Girja is a hotspot for child marriage, with it common for girls to marry at the age of 15 or 16 and not uncommon for them to marry as young as 13.

Drivers of child marriage

• Girls’ own decision-making is the strongest driver of child marriage. Girls are marrying early of their own accord, at an earlier age than before, and often without their parents’ approval – because they prefer the prestige of being married to the stigma of being seen as unmarriageable.
• Education is not prioritised in Girja, especially for girls, who are pushed by their parents towards marriage. There were only 12 girls enrolled in 11th and 12th grades for the 2014-2015 academic year.

Factors protecting against child marriage

• Government programming, especially through health extension workers, has helped parents understand the health risks of child marriage and FGM/C.
• Social norms are beginning to shift with increasing awareness of the benefits of education amongst parents and girls themselves.

• Marriage via abduction appears to have been virtually eliminated.
• Higher bride price is working to delay the marriages of some young couples.

Priority entry points

• Efforts need to target adolescents and help them understand the risks of child marriage and the advantages of education.
• Greater efforts need to be made to encourage girls’ education – ensuring that they have access to a range of supports, ranging from toilets, to role models to school supplies.
• Messaging disseminated by religious leaders, while promising, needs to more broadly address the risks of child marriage – and religious leaders need to lead by example.
• Enforcement of the law is non-existent, with parents unable to have the marriages of their children cancelled even when they are untaken very prematurely.

Overview
Girja, a woreda in Guji, had, according to the 2007 census, the highest rate of child marriage within the Oromia region (see Table 11 below). While the prevalence of child marriage in Oromia was relatively low on average (13.4% of 10-17 year old girls were married, ranking seventh of eleven regions), in Girja one-third of all girls under the age of 18 were already married. Our fieldwork was undertaken in Webe Megado kebele based on its accessibility, distance from the woreda town and the presence of a full cycle primary school (see Box 28 for an overview of the kebele characteristics).

Table 11: Percent of girls who are married, by age, by residence (Source: 2007 Census)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Girja</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Guji Zone</th>
<th>Oromia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls 10-14</td>
<td>27.1%</td>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Current patterns of marriage and divorce

Age of marriage
Our primary research findings suggest that the 2007 census figures on child marriage broadly reflect the current reality, but that the age of marriage has increased to middle adolescence. Girls usually marry at the age of 15-16, although marriage at 13 and 14 is common. Boys usually get married between the ages of 18 and 22 to girls several years younger than themselves. All types of respondents – adolescents, their families, government officials – expected that by the age of 18 girls would be married rather than in school or employment.

Marriage practices
There are seven ways that marriages are entered into. The first, and most common, of these is hawadachu, a practice whereby a boy and girl agree to marry each other of their own free will, usually without having sought the consent of or even informed their respective parents (see ‘girls’ own decision-making’ below for more). This practice has become prevalent only relatively recently, with increased access to education and opportunities for adolescents to meet and form relationships beyond their parents’ control.

Alternatively, a boy may present formal requests to the girl’s family, a practice known as hawali. Marriages based either on the mutual consent of the spouses or on parental decision-making (i.e. without the girl’s consent)

Box 28: Overview of Webe Megado
Webe Megado is home to a population of nearly 4,000 people, who primarily depend on mixed agriculture and livestock – with the latter the main source of income. The kebele is growing into a town as people begin to start up small businesses. It is common for young people to work in nearby gold mines, either to support themselves or to supplement their families’ incomes. The kebele is considered to be food secure.

Webe Megado has two primary schools, one catering for students of grades 1-4 and the other grades 1-8. Girls’ school enrolment slightly exceeds that of boys, with 724 male and 806 female students currently enrolled.

In terms of the broader woreda characteristics, Girja’s population of nearly 67,000 relies primarily on mixed farming (40%) and pastoralism (58%), with the remainder traders (2%). The woreda sits within the Guji zonal administration, which is food secure, and is very diverse in terms of religion. About 35% of the population is Protestant, 32% Muslim and 12% practice traditional beliefs; the remaining are classified as ‘other’. There is little access to transport throughout the woreda; livestock are used not only as food and a source of income, but also a means of transportation. Accordingly, access to services, including health, is limited.

On a woreda level, boys are far more likely to be enrolled in school than girls. Across grades 1-8, there are over 7985 boys and only 3722, girls, as of 2014/15. However, there are only 347 students enrolled in secondary school in Girja – and only 74 in preparatory school. Of those 74, only 12 are girls.

FGM/C is practiced in Girja, primarily in a hidden way – and as in polygamy, almost exclusively by the Muslim population.
may be entered into in this way. The boy or his parents are expected to make repeated requests to the girl’s family, either directly or via the girl. According to a custom known as faro (‘luck’ or ‘chance’), the parents of boy and the girl listen for the sound of a particular bird during the proposal process, whose appearance is believed to herald good fortune for the marriage. ‘Without the guidance of the faro it is impossible to marry’, because it is believed that she may die or not bear healthy children, or that the couple will live in poverty. Similarly it is believed to be bad faro if the girl happens to be fetching water (which represents mourning) when community elders visit her parents’ home to discuss the marriage’s arrangement, but ‘good’ faro if she is collecting firewood (representing life). (It should be noted that faro is most commonly associated with bawaii but may also be observed in different types of marriage arrangements.) Once the suitor has secured the approval of the girl’s parents, he is expected to support them in their agricultural labours over a prolonged period of time – spending months or even years feeding and rearing their cattle, ploughing their land, fencing and building – as a display of his respect for them. The family makes the final decision on the timing of the marriage (and may delay or bring forward the marriage based on a variety of factors including the girl’s age and the suitor’s wealth).

When a girl refuses a boy’s proposal, whether made directly or formally through her parents, he may marry her through force. Such a marriage, known as butaa, is followed by formal negotiation of the bride price or gabara but involves the integration of different families and the responsibilities of each of the couple. Before such ‘cultural’ marriages, the bride’s father shaves the front of her head as a symbol of her virginity, anoints her hair with butter, and gives her a cane (sinke) and a container of milk (chicho) to carry. She is then taken by her soon-to-be husband to his home, after which his family send community elders to her parents’ house as a sign of thanksgiving. After two days have passed, the elders visit the girl’s parents again to finalise the marriage agreement. Cultural rituals may also be carried out during the course of married life – for example, if a girl does not conceive for a prolonged period of time, community elders may carry out a blessing wherein they sny a drink known as boka (honey wine), prepared by the husband’s parents, on her head.

Polygamy is common amongst those who marry according to cultural traditions, but forbidden by Christianity. There is, however, some blurring of religious and cultural practices, with, for example, some Christian women listening for the faro bird before agreeing to marry through a Christian ceremony.

Traditionally, marriage is not just an individual affair but involves the integration of different families and clan groups. The payment of bride prices or gabara to the bride’s family from that of the groom is perceived to strengthen bonds and share out responsibilities and obligations between the couple’s families. Payments may be made in the form livestock, labour or cash, although the latter is the most common by far. At present, bride price payments are expected to exceed 10,000 birr with girls increasingly requesting an additional gift for themselves in the region of 8,000 birr.

The responsibilities of married life
In Girja, the responsibilities of married women are particularly burdensome: women are expected to participate equally in farming activities (looking after cattle, weeding, harvesting) but also to carry out household...
work (cooking, fetching water, gathering firewood) alone. Kebele health extension workers observed that, ‘Even if a man pitied his wife and wanted to help in fetching water or firewood, he would be considered inferior. Cooperation between husbands and wives is not encouraged by society.’

**Divorce**

It is taboo for women to be divorced, largely owing to beliefs that their children will be exposed to ‘family disorder’ and face harm and ‘crisis’ as a result. The main exception to this is in cases of abduction. One abductee reported that:

_Had I married by my own inclination and then divorced, I – let alone my family – couldn’t feel comfort. It would bring shame on me … [But they kidnapped me] so people have a good attitude toward me._

The rare instances of divorce that do occur are usually instigated by the husband and linked to the wife’s unwillingness to let him to enter into a second marriage. Although women are legally entitled to their fair share of the marital property, very few women appeal to the courts for formal divorce proceedings, meaning that most are left with nothing as it is customary that women give up their home and all property in cases of divorce. Alternatively, those who do enter legal proceedings may be convinced to abandon them and return to their marriage by the interventions of community elders. Girls who divorce may re-enter education. However, they find it difficult to remarry owing to the stigma of being a divorcee and often end up marrying men who are significantly older than they are (‘one who is three times their age’).

**Drivers of child marriage**

The drivers of child marriage in Girja are, as in other child marriage hotspots, multiple and complex. Here, we attempt to disentangle the key drivers, indicating relative importance where the data permits.

**Girls’ own decision-making**

While we acknowledge that young adolescent girls are incapable of giving genuinely free consent, respondents were clear that girls’ own decision-making is the primary driver of child marriage in this woreda. Girls are seen to be marrying of their own accord, at an earlier age than before, and without their parents’ approval. Elders, religious leaders, teachers, mothers and girls themselves were all in agreement, asserting that:

_[G]irls are marrying whoever they want against their parents wishes_

_A girl by herself marries the man she loves … Female students who want to marry do so even by stopping their education_

Girls’ decisions to marry early were perceived to be directly linked to their broader empowerment: ‘The problem is that girls are out of our control, since they spend most of their time with boys [either at school or the gold mines].’ For this reason parents may perceive child marriage to be connected to access to education and increased awareness of girls’ rights. Indeed, girls routinely employ the language of rights to justify and defend their decision to marry – for example, in a focus group discussion mothers reported that, ‘this week a young girl of 13 has got married; while the parents and other people object to the marriage she refuses to accept their advice, claiming that…it is her right to get married.’

Both traditional and formal sources of authority are perceived to be powerless to prevent girls from marrying early. Both parents and young people report that when parents seek legal recourse to prevent child marriage, the courts refuse to pursue their cases when the girl in question declares herself to have made the decision to marry, a claim corroborated by the woreda Women and Children’s Affairs Office. Staff of the woreda Justice Office reported that girls ‘routinely lie’ about their ages when referred to formal protection mechanisms and that officials have no means of verifying their claims. Churches have likewise failed to prevent instances of child marriage despite attempts to persuade boys and girls to delay their plans. By contrast, elders often intervene in favour of girls, exerting pressure on parents to accept child marriages of which they do not approve.

Girls reported that their peers are motivated to marry early, in part by social norms according to which marriage is a source of social prestige. They also want to avoid the shame of remaining unmarried; a broad swathe of community members reported that a woman who does not marry might be stigmatised and called derogatory names such as haftu (a term for those who remain unmarried or marry late).

Economic incentives also matter, for boys as well as girls. As in Gorce, girls from wealthy families are likely to marry early owing to competition among suitors who ‘aspire to share her family’s property’. Conversely, poverty may prevent girls from attending school, leading them to pursue marriage as an alternative. As one father put it: girls may ‘look outside’ the family where her family is unable to fulfil her needs. One schoolgirl reported that some of her peers had married, in part, because they believed that their labour burden would be reduced once they had left their family home:

_Girls are very much busier than boys at home, fetching water, collecting firewood, cooking meals, looking after cattle, and sometimes they even assist boys in farming activities. [They marry] to run away from housework at their parents’ home._

Economic factors thus play into the calculations of girls themselves.
**Level of schooling**

Parents still tend to prioritise boys’ education at girls’ expense, pushing them towards child marriage as an alternative: ‘They prefer to send their sons; for example, my father forced me to stop going to school and finally I married.’ Girls who do go to school may drop out owing to a lack of parental support.

The most significant problem is that girls who do enrol tend to be sent to school late, between the ages of seven and ten, meaning that they may only reach grade eight by the time they are 18. According to one 13-year-old schoolgirl, girls usually consider learning to grade eight to be sufficient and choose to marry either shortly before or after completing their primary education. Members of the wider community concurred: ‘when they reach grade seven or eight they became mature and marry rather than continuing their education.’ Although many of these girls marry aged 18, it is also common for girls to drop out one to two years before completing primary education, while they are still underage. Once married, husbands are reluctant for their new wives to return to education fearing that they may enter into sexual relationships with other boys; heavy home workloads and childbirth are also barriers. Girl interviewees reported that boys often promise girls that they will support them to continue in education after marriage but fail to do so in practice.

A lack of vocational opportunities discourages girls from pursuing education – as one boy put it: ‘the current unemployment situation confuses school children about whether secondary education pays off any more.’ Girls likewise reported that, once married, the ‘majority of girls prefer to work on activities other than education such as trading activities and farming that earns them more income than those who are employed after graduating from school.’

In addition, the quality of educational provision is impeded by low salaries and living standards for teachers, as well as the difficulty of recruiting female teachers to serve as role models.

**Family pressure**

Although most girls decide to marry of their own accord, some are married forcefully or pressured into marriage by their parents. As above, parents may push their children to marry early to avoid social discrimination related to marrying late or in pursuit of the social prestige that comes with marriage. They may also be motivated by the opportunity to secure economic and labour support from would-be son-in-laws. Economic incentives encourage competition among families; a school director reported that:

*When somebody’s daughter in the neighbourhood marries and her parents get money, the others will also influence their daughters to marry and bring them money. Though the parents will not directly decide that she must marry, they influence her to decide to marry.*

Other government officials reported that parents who are hesitant to marry their daughters early may be easily persuaded by opportunities for financial gain – for example, a proposal of marriage from a wealthy suitor.

Boy focus group discussants even reported instances of families placing considerable pressure on girls or even neglecting or subjecting them to abuse (verbal abuse or withholding food, for example) in order to push them towards marriage.

**Disregard for the law**

Some respondents demonstrate awareness of the legal age of marriage but have married early nevertheless. One 14-year-old girl stated that:

*[The law] states that one should get married after the age of 18 … I just wanted to get married. Nobody forced me.*

A few adolescents even express a desire for the law to be changed to allow marriage at an earlier age, with one 17-year-old boy asserting that, ‘the best age of a girl for marriage is 16 years old.’

As mentioned above, courts do not proceed in cases where an underage girl insists that the marriage was entered into on her own initiative. Members of the community, particularly adolescents, do not take the law seriously owing to the absence of law enforcement. One 17-year-old boy reported that, ‘I have heard [that it is illegal to marry before the age of 18] from the mass media but I have never seen or heard any concrete legal actions taken by the authorities that can teach others not to get involved in such criminal activities.’
Changes in patterning of child marriage over time

Unlike most child marriage hotspot woredas in this study, in Girja the average age of marriage for girls has decreased over time:

The current tendency for girls to marry at a younger age tends to be seen negatively by their parents’ and grandparents’ generation and is chosen, as set out above, primarily of their own accord. This fall in the age of marriage for girls is reflected in associated changes in the relative preponderance of the different ways through which marriage is entered into, with marriage based on consensus between the two spouses – hawali and hawadachu – now most common, with marriages based solely on parental decision-making or force in decline. Although community members now generally oppose marriages agreed without the girl’s consent, some, particularly the elderly, perceive this shift towards independent adolescent decision-making to be indicative of a social crisis:

Before the young man sent his father to ask her parents for permission to marry their daughter. Her parents would not allow him to do so immediately; they would evaluate him for some time, up to two years. During this period he would serve them and they would evaluate his plan and behaviour … The boy knew that he would marry her, though the decision was not yet made, because two had agreed before the parents began negotiations. Now the two agree and may engage in sexual relations without informing their parents. [However] some of them follow the old way, waiting for the decision of the parents even if they have agreed between themselves. School director and supervisors

In addition, the practice of abduction has declined to the point of near extinction, a development which interviewees attribute to the government making the practice unlawful.

Bride prices are between 10,000 and 20,000 birr today. The dominant bride price modality has shifted from cattle to cash payments. Many interviewees voiced strong opposition to current bride price norms, recognising the huge financial strain placed on the family of the groom

Box 29: A young girl married of her own volition

Shambi is a 14-year-old girl who married a fellow student by her own wishes six months ago. She was aware of the legal age of marriage, having learned about it at school, but chose to not to pay attention to it. Her parents were not aware of her plans: ‘I didn’t inform them. I loved the boy and decided to marry him.’ She describes both herself and her husband as ‘eager’ to marry.

She was motivated, at least in part, by social norms, claiming that, ‘according to our customs, married women have respect.’ Although not driven to marriage by poverty, her husband’s economic status does matter: she observes that his family are ‘rich enough’. Shambi perceives the main benefit of her marriage to be an independent home and property ownership. However, she struggles to articulate the marriage’s benefits beyond this: she asserts that she and her husband ‘will develop together’, but acknowledges that her personal development would have been fully supported by her parents.

Indeed, whereas her parents had supported her to attend school and saw education as a means to improve both her own and the family’s socio-economic status, Shambi and her husband agreed that she would drop out of school. The husband is older than her and has already completed his education. Shambi now regrets having dropped out of school and thinks that she has made a mistake by doing so: ‘I regret marrying early. I am sorry that I dropped my education.’ She recognises the benefits of education, observing that being educated would have spared her husband’s parents from the problems they face as a result of the father’s polygamy and alcohol consumption. She would advise other girls to complete their education before marrying.

Shambi’s husband paid her parents 8,000 birr as a bride price. However, she is now estranged from her parents, although she perceives this situation to be temporary: ‘According to our custom, it is impossible to see my parents until they invite me home. So I am waiting for them [to do so].’
and newlywed couples: ‘this payment exposes people to poverty’. As one mother argued: ‘girls today are being sold like goods in the market – this practice must be addressed.’ Boys and their families feel obliged to continue paying exorbitant sums as bride prices are decided by local elders. They are, nevertheless, hopeful that coordinated efforts among young people and other influential figures within the community could bring an end to this practice. Boys cite the example of SNNPRR where high bride prices, which had delayed marriage or caused boys to seek marriage outside of the region, have been abolished, falling from between 25,000 and 30,000 birr to only 2,000 birr. While the delaying effect of high bride prices could on the surface appear to be a possibly positive unintended outcome for girls, it does not necessarily manifest in this way as it is impacting on the age of marriage for boys but they do not necessarily marry age mates.

The practice of polygamy has declined owing to increasing awareness of the financial burden placed on families, particularly in a context of land scarcity. As a result, young people no longer enter into polygamous marriages of their own accord. However, girls, including young divorcees, may be married as second wives without their consent through hawali; most at risk are those not in education and from large, impoverished families.

**Protective or mitigation mechanisms from negative effects of child marriage**

As we have discussed elsewhere, while child marriage contravenes both Ethiopian national law and international conventions, its effects vary depending on the interplay of local practices and beliefs. In some cases, local cultural norms help to ensure that girls are protected from the worst effects of child marriage – for example, cultural practices that prevent excessively early sex or pregnancy until girls are physically mature or that allow girls to continue with their schooling even if married (Jones et al., 2014; Presler-Marshall et al., 2015). In the case of Girja, factors protecting against child marriage are considerably weaker than its drivers. Nevertheless, we noted several protective mechanisms worth mentioning as follows.

**Girls’ own decision-making and increasing awareness of the benefits of education**

Some girls expressed a desire to marry only after having completed their education. Just as some girls decide to marry of their own accord, some actively choose to delay marriage and are confident that they will be able to overcome any opposition to their plans. One 13-year-old schoolgirl argued that because there is ‘democracy’, she did not have to accept any attempt by her parents to marry her: ‘they cannot force me to marry against my will.’ Another girl of the same age reported that if her parents do not support her to pursue education, she would not look to marry as an alternative but continue to learn without parental support. It is unclear, however, whether she would be able to draw upon the necessary social and economic resources in practice. Nevertheless, girls like her demonstrated a strong awareness of the benefits of education, including vocational opportunities, financial stability and ability to maintain one’s health.

Some parents, most often mothers, demonstrated similar levels of awareness and ambition for their daughters:

> Educated girls can choose her husband without anyone interfering and they can also support their families financially. Besides, they can also assume high-level positions in the government and NGOs. Moreover, they could also become leaders of the nation by taking the positions of presidency and premier.

> She can speak for herself if she is educated. She will dare to speak for her rights.

Accordingly a growing minority of parents are beginning to provide effective support to their daughters to enable them to continue in education and delay marriage. Some girl interviewees report ‘having no problem in attending school as [our] parents support [us] to that end.’ In one case the parents of a girl who was abducted brought her home after two days and supported her to return to school. One father stated that he has set out ‘no fixed age for [his daughter’s] marriage but for education. She is free to get married to anyone of her choice after completing her studies and securing employment.’

There is some indication that social norms are beginning to shift with increasing awareness of the benefits of education. For example, when asked to describe what they look for in a wife, most boy focus group participants articulated traditional cultural expectations relating to household responsibilities, but some expressed a desire to marry an educated girl. These boys plan to remain in relationships with but not to marry their current girlfriends until they have both completed their education and secured employment. Bride prices tend to be higher for educated girls largely as a means of ensuring that parents make a return on their investment. In addition, although unmarried young men and women have traditionally been treated as outcasts, one father reported that ‘these views have been changing; people are accepting them as normal provided that they are in modern education.’

> [We parents need girls to go to school, complete their studies and secure employment before getting married.]

> Mother
Awareness (but relative weakness) of the law and formal mechanisms

Although most young people either ignore or disagree with the minimum legal age of marriage, a minority do pay attention to the law. Girls, particularly those in education, also demonstrate an awareness of the legal avenues available to them to prevent arranged child marriages, with one 14-year-old girl noting that ‘as an educated girl I can take the issue to the court.’ This possibility does seem to deter some families; one grandfather reported that: ‘If I control my daughter, she accuses me.’ One girl was let go by her abductor on telling him that she wanted to continue her education and was prepared to report him to the courts. However, none of the interviewees were able to point to specific instances where girls or their families had sought recourse to such mechanisms to prevent child marriage in cases other than abduction, suggesting their weakness and/or a more general unwillingness to make use of them.

Other harmful practices as barriers to child marriage

It is worth noting that certain harmful practices can work against each other. In Girja, rising bride prices are generally understood to represent a harmful practice that pushes people into poverty, although efforts by religious leaders to prevent them have generally been unsuccessful. However, multiple interviewees, primarily mother and grandmothers, note that one side effect of exorbitant bride prices has been the creation of an economic barrier to marriage for some boys and girls who wish to marry early and before becoming financially independent.

Existing programming

Programming interventions can play an important role in either spearheading social norm change around child marriage or helping to accelerate changes already afoot in a given locality. In Girja, as in other hotspots studied, programming efforts to date have been limited, with no NGOs working on child marriage.

Strengths

The reduction in the practice of marrying girls without their consent and increasing parental support for education is attributed overwhelmingly to government policy and awareness-raising initiatives. Awareness raising on the negative effects of child marriage has had the greatest impact on community knowledge, attitudes and practice in the context of broader health extension programming, i.e. integrated programmes addressing the issues of child marriage, SRH and female genital mutilation/cutting. The woreda offices for the Education Office and WCYA also deliver training, primarily targeted at students (both male and female) who, it is expected, influence broader community attitudes in turn. The Education Office also selects role models from among students, families and the wider community to receive awards for promoting school attendance and holds community panel discussions. However, there is little reflection as to which specific characteristics or activities make these interventions effective. Legal awareness-raising is referenced by officials but not community members.

Box 30: A girl’s commitment to education

13-year-old Shahi is a grade six student committed to her education. Although she makes is clear that few girls from her village attend school and are generally ‘not treated equally with boys with regard to education’, she has been able to do so owing to the support of her parents. Nevertheless, Shahi and her five sisters are each responsible for more household work than their brother. For this reason, she sympathises with those of her peers who have married to ‘run away from the burden of housework at their parents’ home.’

She perceives herself to be far too young to marry, ‘prefer[es] education to marriage’ and plans to ‘get married only after [she has] completed her college studies’ between the ages of 25 and 30. She believes education to be ‘important for many things’ including managing the household. She points to an older school friend, who married at the age of 25 after completing grade eight, as a positive role model, commenting that she ‘thinks that is the appropriate age for girls to get married.’ She is confident that her parents would not attempt to marry her against her will but is prepared to oppose them if were they to do so. Nevertheless, her parents’ approval of her eventual marriage is important to her.

She aspires to marry an educated man, but does not treat wealth as a criterion for marriage, asserting that ‘wealth without knowledge is useless; he wouldn’t even know how to manage his own business.’ If she were not able to marry someone who had completed his education, she would rather secure a job as a civil servant and lead an independent life than marry an illiterate.

Shahi’s resolve is particularly striking as she has never been involved in awareness-raising activities on the benefits of girls’ education or the negative effects of child marriage. The girls’ club in her school exists only in name and is not active, nor have her family advised her on these matters.
Weaknesses
Awareness-raising activities delivered primarily by government officials and teachers are carried out too infrequently (once or twice a year) to influence deep-rooted community attitudes and practices in a profound or enduring way. Poor coordination on the part of service providers also hampers the effectiveness of their interventions, with, for example, WCYA officials and law enforcement failing to organise their efforts to complement those of local schools and vice versa. Health, education and law enforcement officers carrying out awareness raising programmes all reported that schools permitted them access to their students only at the end of the day, when their attention span was weakest. These problems have been exacerbated by the area’s inaccessibility and local agricultural work patterns, which significantly limit the size of any single audience that trainers can reach. As a result community education has been shallow; community members report, for example, that woreda-level WYCA officers ‘have demonstrated some effort, but not reached deep into the community.’

Entry points for programming
There are multiple ways forward for programming efforts. According to the interviewees, the top three ways to tackle the drivers of child marriage are:

- Educating young people about the harmful effects of child marriage and the advantages of adult marriage. Messages must pay careful attention to the prestige currently assigned to married girls and begin to shift it towards educated girls.
- Educating the community about the importance of girls’ education—with local role models where possible—and incentivising girls and their families through the provision of material support and the building of separate toilets.
- Helping parents understand that adolescents are still children who, at times, require protection from their own bad decisions.
- Working with religious leaders and churches to design more effective messages.
- More effective enforcement of the law—with child marriage prohibited even when it is “free-choice”.

Both girls themselves and the community in general should be educated on the value of girls’ education, the negative effects of child marriage and the law. Awareness-raising interventions should work through educated women living and working in the community (health extension workers, teachers), whose opinions are valued, who have a visible and consistent presence there and can serve as role models for girls. It is important to target training at adolescents, both girls and boys, and particularly students, who are well placed to disseminate

Box 31: Religious institutions as (weak) champions of change

The Christian church provides a compelling example of the inefficacy of existing efforts to champion change to prevailing patterns of marriage. Multiple government officials praised the efforts of religious leaders and positioned them as influential figures within the community. And yet, at the kebele level, interviewees generally perceive the church’s interventions to have been ineffective.

Some members of the community reported that church leaders actively campaign against harmful marriage practices, including marriage before the age of 18 and exorbitant bride prices, and advocate girls’ education. One father claimed that, as a result, ‘public awareness has progressed tremendously.’ However, others perceive these attempts to be ineffective. As one grandfather put it: ‘religious leaders advise [young people not to marry before the age of 18], but they refuse to accept the advice.’

A wide range of interviewees perceive the church’s interventions to be, at best, inconsistent and, at worst, hypocritical. Kebele-level representatives of the Women, Children and Youth Affairs (WCYA) bureau reported that church leaders focus on sexual and reproductive health (SRH) messages and neglect the problems caused by child marriage. Mothers perceived them to fail to address the issue of polygamy. The church’s efforts are also undermined by the failure of some of their leaders to lead by example: while some ‘protest the practice’ of child marriage refuse to conduct underage marriages, according to girls ‘the majority keep silent’ and some even marry underage girls themselves. One grandfather goes so far as to describe religious leaders as ‘the main disease in the community’ as they ‘collect dowries rather than protect others.’

Older interviewees, usually grandparents, are suspicious of religious programmes (religious education, awareness-raising activities) and perceive these to carry the same attendant dangers as schooling – as forums that enable adolescents to form romantic relationships beyond their parents’ control and expose them to risky behaviours such as premarital and/or unprotected sex that bring shame on their families.
their learning to the wider community. Girls clubs and civic education currently exist only in name but potentially offer a clear entry point for awareness-raising activities. Religious and community leaders should also be targeted with these messages and supported to become more effective champions of change, capable of influencing girls both in and out of school.

Regarding the second point, local provisions for girls’ education are sorely lacking. Facilities are inadequate with, for example, common toilets for male and female students. Female teachers are notable by their absence (one primary school reported having 15 male teachers and only one female teacher) owing to the inaccessibility of schools and lack of respect from male colleagues; gender sensitivity training should be provided to male teachers, and financial incentives provided to female teachers as well as the schools that employ them. The NGO Rift Valley has built a dormitory to enable poor students to attend secondary education elsewhere in the woreda, but materials and other incentives should be provided to enable girls to attend school without having to work in the mines at the weekends to cover their expenses, and to encourage parents to prioritise girls’ education and to enrol them at a younger age (so that they reach the higher grades earlier and can better envisage the vocational/financial benefits of secondary education).

More consistent enforcement of the law is necessary to deter those who are aware of the law on child marriage but choose to ignore it. Monitoring based on levels of reporting is ineffective in this context and should be carried out in cooperation with local institutions regularly attended by adolescents (e.g. schools, religious institutions). With girls themselves driving child marriage, parents should be informed about formal mechanisms through which they might prevent, or have declared invalid, particular marriages – they should also be helped to see that a key mechanism by which they might prevent child marriage is to fully support their daughters’ education through the end of adolescence. Enforcement also requires more effective ways of assessing the legality of marriage in specific instances (for example, establishing a girl’s age without relying on her testimony).

In addition, encouraging more communities to regulate bride prices through community bylaws so as to combat rising bride prices, drawing on lessons (consultation, legal formulations, implementation) from reforms in the SNNPRR.
Key messages

**Age of marriage**

Despite higher levels of urbanisation than in other sites, girls usually marry at the ages of 15-17, although marriage as early as 12 is not uncommon.

**Drivers of child marriage**

- Girls’ own decision-making is identified by respondents as the strongest driver of child marriage in Shashemene. Girls are marrying early of their own accord and without informing their parents, but are pragmatic in their decision-making about marriage often taking economic considerations and family dynamics into account.
- Child marriage is driven, in part, by social norms that cause girls to fear the prospect of remaining unmarried. Their families may also fear the shame associated with female promiscuity, although the relative importance of protecting girls’ virginity is gradually abating.
- Poverty is another key driver, as is the economic incentive of high bride prices.

**Factors protecting against child marriage**

- Some girls choose to delay marriage until the ages of 19-22 in order to pursue their education. They think pragmatically about their futures and prioritise securing economic independence, and some are deterred by the challenges that their peers who married as children often face.
- Some parents actively support their children’s education and advise them against marrying early, especially in light of their own limited opportunities stemming from little or no formal education.

**Priority entry points**

- Attention needs to be directed to helping adolescents see the advantages of adult marriage and continued education—perhaps emphasising links to better economic outcomes.
In this urban site, where adolescents are increasingly making their own decisions, programming must be rooted in an understanding that adolescents often engage in short-term thinking.

Parents need to be supported to better monitor their children’s education and prevent them from marrying as children—with attention paid to the fact that parents tend to defer to their children’s decisions because their children are better educated than they are.

More extensive and coordinated follow-up through schools and the one-to-five groups.

More effective enforcement of the law—with child marriages cancelled even if they are desired.

Overview
According to the 2007 census, the prevalence of child marriage in the Oromia region was relatively low, ranking seventh of eleven regions with 13.4% of girls aged 10-17 married, although there are a number of zones where prevalence rates are substantially higher. The rate of child marriage is higher than average in Shashemene, a woreda in West Arsi Zone, where 16.8% of girls between the ages of 10 and 17 are already married. Our fieldwork was undertaken in Alelu Ilu kebele based on recommendations from the woreda women’s affairs office (see Box 32 for an overview of the kebele characteristics).

Current patterns of marriage
Age of marriage
Our primary research findings suggest that the census figures on child marriage are broadly reflective of current reality. Girls usually marry from the age of 15 (around grade five) onwards: according to the census data about one-quarter of all girls between the ages of 15 and 17 are already married—with more than one-in-six married before the age of 15 (see Table 12 below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Girls 10-14</th>
<th>Shashemene</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>West Arsi Zone</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>36th</td>
<td>10.9%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Girls 15-17</th>
<th>Shashemene</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>West Arsi Zone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td>237th</td>
<td>18.8%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marriage practices
There are four different ways through which marriages may be entered into. The first and most common of these is wal-hawwachuu (‘attracting each other’), a practice whereby a boy and girl agree to marry each other of their own free will, usually without having sought the consent of or even informed their respective parents. This practice has become prevalent relatively recently, with increased access to education since the early 2000s and opportunities for adolescents to meet and form relationships beyond their parents’ control (see ‘girls’ own decision-making’ below).

Second is the practice of dhaalaa or ‘widow inheritance’, whereby a widow is expected to marry a brother or other close male relative of her late husband, possibly as a second wife. This practice tends to involve marriages between girls and much older men but is generally viewed negatively by community members. A husband may also marry a younger sister of his wife upon the latter’s death, again as a form of ‘inheritance’.

The practices of butii – forceful abduction by boys – and gurgurtaa – arranged marriages in which fathers tend to play the key decision-making role – used to be widespread but have declined to the point of near extinction. Married women who were married through gurgurtaa as girls felt that they had effectively been ‘sold’ by their parents to individuals willing to pay high bride prices. However, a culture of aggressive masculine sexuality persists, with girls given herbal tonics or alcohol by her family in the run-up
to a wedding in order to weaken their resistance to sexual intercourse with their new husbands: ‘it is ignominious if she has a victory [successfully prevents the advances of the boy]’.

Polygamy is still common, with second and third wives usually considerably younger than their spouses. Husbands often choose to marry again when their existing wife finds it difficult to bear children or gives birth only to daughters. Having multiple wives is also a source of social prestige, with men who own more property (land, cattle) seen as ‘deserving’ of more wives.

Common criteria for marriage include the wealth (land, cattle), status and behaviour of the girl’s family. Girls are particularly judged against the nature and behaviour of their mothers, in line with the proverb baadha ilaalii intala fiinibi (roughly translated as ‘the best measure of an ideal wife is her mother’). The girl’s virginity is also an important source of respect for her family and prospective husband; indeed, if she is found not to be a virgin upon marriage, her family are expected to compensate the husband financially.

The dominant mode of the bride price is cattle, with payments ranging from 40 to 100 cows according to the wealth of the suitor’s family. Materials for building a new marital home may also be gifted. Within Arsi culture bride price payments are perceived to enable the participation of all family members in a marriage.

Divorce rates are high, largely owing to instances of deception, usually of girls by boys (see ‘drivers of child marriage’ below), during the practice of wal-hawwachuu. Parents tend to condemn the practice for this reason.

Drivers of child marriage

The drivers of child marriage in Shashemene are, as in other child marriage hotspot woredas, multiple and complex. Here, we attempt to disentangle the key drivers, suggesting their relative importance where the data permits.

Girls’ own decision-making

Girls’ own decision making is identified as the primary driver of child marriage in this woreda, perhaps reflecting the kebele’s proximity to a large urban centre, Shashemene. Girls marry early of their own accord—due to a confluence of strong social norms and surging hormones-- and often without informing their parents. Community leaders, fathers and boys were all in agreement, asserting that:

- Today girls and boys choose who to marry; even the family doesn’t know. Community timeline
- Parents send their children to school but children fall in love and decide to marry each other without informing their parents. FGD with fathers
- After 12 years of age, most girls in the school have boyfriends and start a love life. The love becomes unmanageable and leads them to think always about the boy. Due to this, they merely come to school to be with their boyfriends. After about a year they decide to marry each other at the ages of 14-17… The parents are not informed about it. FGD with boys

Age doesn’t matter. It depends on the will of the two, the extent of their love and their willingness to learn and work at any time and anywhere. For instance, education is possible after marriage provided that there is love and agreement between them. FGD with boys

Girl focus group discussion respondents reported that in the past year four girls they knew, all between the ages of 15 and 17, dropped out of school to marry of their own volition. They estimate that around eight to ten girls do so each year. The leader of the school girls’ club estimated this number to be higher, at between 10-15 girls per year.

Parents accept the decisions of their children to marry the partner of their choice as they perceive the younger generation to be more educated and better able to understand and exercise their rights. One grandfather described the way in which his daughter, then a 12-year-old grade two student, dropped out of school to marry of her own will:

- It is her choice. But her age is not right age for marriage… She just wanted to get married and we could do nothing. We couldn’t prevent her.

He continued:

- If they do this of their own accord we can do nothing. It is their will that matters. It is all about their decision. We don’t interfere with their will. We don’t violate their rights.

On his son’s decision to marry in the same way he noted:

- We didn’t go to school at our time…we missed our opportunity for education. We think that our children know more than us.

Despite their youth, girls tend to be pragmatic in their decision-making about marriage. One 17-year-old girl reported planning to marry later in the year because she had failed to trade successfully on her own and expected to be able to do so in partnership with her prospective husband, a merchant. Nevertheless, multiple interviewees noted that girls may be easily ‘deceived’ by suitors who, for example, promise to support their education following marriage, but fail to do so in practice.

Although parents reported that there is no external factor that encourages or pushes girls towards marriage, one unmarried 16-year-old boy claimed that girls may seek child marriage as a means to escape conflict in the home: ‘if there is a conflict in the family, she will marry to escape from it.’ Further, parental influence may be exerted indirectly, with some fathers beginning to treat their
Despite the consensus or understanding that marriage under 18 is early marriage, boys and girls still engage in early marriage. Many of our friends have married in such a way and many are preparing to marry girls of 15-17 years old.

FGD with boys

Economic drivers and incentives

Economic poverty is a major concern in this area for some of the population and is a significant driver of child marriage; indeed, poor girls are those most at risk. Those unable to meet the costs of education are at risk of marrying early, either of their own accord or at the behest of their parents, as are those from poor families who fail to pass school examinations. One kebele official reported that the marriage of their daughters into a ‘business’, demanding huge gifts to the tune of 100 cows or 50,000-100,000 birr. In addition, the decision-making of girls themselves, particularly those from poor families, may be influenced by the promise of money to cover personal expenses.

Changes in patterning of child marriage over time

The age of marriage has remained roughly consistent over the past two or three generations, with most girls tending to marry from the age of 15 but some as early as 12. However, a marked change has occurred in the relative preponderance of the different ways through which marriage is entered into, with marriage based on consensus between the two spouses now most common and marriages based solely on parental decision-making (the most common practice two generations ago) in decline.

One mother described this shift:

I was married at 14 years old. It was not my will rather the will of my family, especially my father. I had no word in it … However, today’s generation engage marry on the basis of their own will. The role of the family in deciding the fate of their children is very limited.

Accordingly, the criteria for marriage have shifted, with less importance placed on the social status and wealth of the girl’s parents than previously. Likewise, the value attached to girls’ virginity is also decreasing with increased levels of education; as the leader of the local women’s association put it: ‘if you want blood, go to the Qeeraa [butcher].’

The community has had far more success in reducing other harmful traditional practices such as abduction and female genital mutilation. It used to be common for boys to abduct girls who refused proposals of marriage, whilst FGM was carried out routinely at the girl’s parents’ home a month before marriage (or shortly afterwards in the case of abduction), but interviewees were adamant that both practices have been eliminated during the past ten years, primarily as a result of government and NGO awareness-raising activities.

Although bride prices remain high, and economic incentives strong in some quarters, they have nevertheless decreased and parents no longer practise gurgurtaa: ‘The time at which girls were being sold as cattle is over. Now there is forced child marriage.

Social norms

Child marriage is driven, in part, by social norms that cause girls (and their families) to fear the prospect of remaining unmarried. It is not socially acceptable for girls not to marry at all: as one girl put it, ‘our people see this as shameful’. Unmarried girls who are more than 20 years old are called by different names such as ‘old woman’ or ‘grandmother’, most frequently by women of their mothers’ generation. Parents fear that late marriage will restrict the number of children the couple will have, as well as their ability to raise them.

Girls who marry late are perceived to be clumsy or unable to use resources wisely. It is also feared that they will become promiscuous and ‘unmanageable for society.’ A girl over 18 who is unmarried is perceived to be beera (‘without virginity’). Parents may force their daughters to marry in order to avert the shame brought on families by promiscuous behaviour and pregnancy out of wedlock. Awareness around contraceptives is low and there is a widespread belief that their use has negative health consequences, while adolescents perceive them to be only for older couples. Rising pregnancy rates among unmarried girls in the community have resulted either in abortions or...
no need to sell one’s daughter’. Many respondents perceive demands for high bride prices as morally unacceptable and detrimental to the economic life of the community.

Protective or exit mechanisms from the negative effects of child marriage

As we have discussed elsewhere, while child marriage contravenes both Ethiopian national law and international conventions, its effects vary depending on the interplay of local practices and beliefs. In some cases, local cultural norms help to ensure that girls are protected from the worst effects of child marriage—for example, cultural practices that prevent excessively early sex or pregnancy until girls are physically mature or allow girls to continue with their schooling even if married (Jones et al., 2014; Presler-Marshall et al., 2015). In the case of Shashemene woreda, factors protecting against child marriage are considerably weaker than those driving it. Nevertheless, we noted several protective mechanisms worth mentioning, as follow.

Girls’ own decision-making and awareness of the negative effects of child marriage

Just as girls are able to decide to marry of their own accord, some actively choose to delay marriage until the ages of 19-22 in order to pursue an education. They similarly think pragmatically about their futures and prioritise economic independence, with a number of schoolgirls expressing their aspirations as follows:

[I want to marry] after I complete my education and secure a job. 16-year-old girl, sixth grade

[I want a boyfriend only] after I becoming mature psychologically and physically. Also when I think that it doesn’t have an effect on my education. 15-year-old girl, sixth grade

I need to have my own job before marriage. Until the age of 22 I can have my own job. This is to reduce the risks that could happen if we separated before marrying. 20-year-old girl, tenth grade

Unmarried girls and boys often perceive their married peers as negative role models or deterrents, frequently referring to financial difficulties and family tensions:

Neither of them [the married couple] have anything. They will be poor until they get their own jobs. In few months they will have a child. This means that they are having a child without the finances to bring them up. Love without finances is not sweet forever. Out-of-school girl

Everything about them has deteriorated: physically, psychologically and economically. What is horrible is the social crisis with their families and relatives. 15-year-old girl, eighth grade

Girls have a general awareness of the negative effects of child marriage that comes from exposure to awareness-raising activities (see ‘existing programming’ below). They are particularly aware of economic difficulties and health consequences, such as the problems associated with early childbirth and fistula.

Broader community awareness of the negative effects of child marriage and benefits of education

Many adults who married early have reflected on the negative repercussions for their own lives, with one mother listing the consequences as follows:

For instance, these are the problems I have faced: health problems related to child delivery; poverty; social crises with my family and relatives; moral crises when I compare my life with my friends who have finished their education.

As a result, they are likely to support their children to delay marriage and pursue education:

It was totally wrong to get married at that time. We were both supposed to complete our education. We needed to get jobs. We both dropped our education because we made marriage our priority. We made this decision because of our immaturity. We both regret it. We learned a lot from our mistake. That is why we are focusing on education of our children.

Mothers, fathers and kebele officials agreed on the value of girls’ education, with fathers actively encouraging their daughters and wives to go to school. They substantiated their views with reference to the proverb: ‘Educating girls/women is like educating the family.’ They are also conscious of the vocational and economic benefits of girls’ education for both themselves and their families, and they point to role models such as health extension workers who ‘serve their parents, their societies, and their communities.’ They think girls value education more and make better use of their educations than their male counterparts, who ‘waste their time on chewing khat and wandering here and there in the town.’ One mother said:

If educated, they can understand their rights in life, including whom to marry. Planning for their future is possible only for educated girls … An educated person
Parents actively advise their children not to marry early. They track their educational performance, seeing this as a core part of their parental responsibilities.

Although many boys choose to marry early, some have positive attitudes towards girls’ education and say girls should not marry until at least 18 or even up to 25. One commented that, ‘As a result of education, girls can maintain their personal safety, develop psychologically and mentally, and become an asset to the whole family.’ A few even consider education and a vocation to be criteria for their choice of wife in the future.

**Development (but relative weakness) of formal and informal mechanisms**

Community structures and 1-to-5 groups (for both adults and students) have become central to the monitoring of young people’s educational attendance and identification of instances of child marriage. For example, teachers provide lists of non-attendees to cell leaders and kebele officials, who then advise the youths and their parents. There is also some, albeit limited, use of formal prevention/exit mechanisms, with two cases of child marriage and one case of female genital mutilation reported to the woreda justice office in the past seven months (though it should be noted that the outcomes of these interventions were unclear).

Government officials emphasise the importance of effective cooperation between their own offices and community leaders. For example, in 2013 Gadaa leaders reported the planned marriage of a 75-year-old man and 15-year-old girl to the Women and Children’s Affairs Office, enabling them to intervene to prevent the union. What is perhaps most interesting in this case was that the Gadaa leaders chose to intervene in the case of a large age gap between partners, rather than because it was a case of underage marriage per se. Kebele leaders also noted improvements in coordination and communication amongst themselves, youths, parents, elders and government officials.

Increased community knowledge and understanding of the negative effects of child marriage has not, however, translated into broad changes in terms of attitudes and practice. Indeed, formal measures to prevent instances of child marriage tend to be thwarted by girls’ willingness to bear false witness to government officials (whether about their age or willingness to marry). Law enforcement is further impeded by the attitudes of some who should be responsible: for example, key informants gave the example of a local policeman recently marrying a 15-year-old grade six student and escaping prosecution.

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**Box 33: The costs of refusing child marriage**

Damitu is a 20-year-old girl who dropped out of school in the tenth grade after failing to pass her examinations twice. Her father, who has three wives and more than 20 children, has refused her requests to be sent to attend a private college, claiming that if he were to do so he ‘would not have enough income to feed her brothers and sisters.’

However, Damitu believes that her father has sufficient land and cattle to fund her continued education should he choose to do so. Instead, he stopped supporting her when, at the age of nine, she refused a proposal of marriage against his wishes. As she puts it, ‘my father again and again tried to convince me to marry by presenting marriage as a good tradition.’ Damitu was able to resist the pressure exerted on her by her father but, having chosen to follow the advice of her teacher to continue her schooling without his support, now finds herself unable to sustain her education.

She now lives alone in Shashemene town and struggles to support herself. She engages in a variety of economic activities including daily labouring work.

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**Box 34: Progressive fathers as champions of change**

Berhanu Desissa is a 42-year-old farmer with seven children (four sons and three daughters). Having been educated to grade 12, he is a passionate advocate of education for all children.

He believes that his daughters should marry only ‘when she has something which sustains her life.’ Accordingly, he argues that:

Girls should get married after they finished their [college and university level] education and become employed! Otherwise, they will be a burden to their family and face many challenges.

It is common for community members to recommend marriage to girls when they have completed grades 10 or 12. When one of Berhanu’s daughters was influenced to marry after finishing grade 12, he was quick to intervene, advising her of the advantages of continuing her education and of the challenges of marrying at a young age. As a result she has now graduated from private college with a BSc in Health Science. His second daughter is currently a student at Dilla University.
Existing programming

Programming interventions can play an important role in either spearheading social norm change around child marriage or helping to accelerate changes already afoot in a given locality. In Shashemene, as in child marriage other hotspots studied, programming efforts to date have been limited and concentrated almost solely on awareness-raising activities.

Strengths

Although not yet extensive or concerted enough to shift community attitudes on child marriage, both government and NGO awareness-raising activities, particularly those delivered by World Vision, are spoken positively about by a number of interviewees. These tend to focus on the harmful health effects of child marriage and benefits of education and are delivered in collaboration with kebele officials (activities include training of trainers by World Vision on an annual basis). As mentioned above, 1-to-5 groups, Health Development Armies and other community structures such as garee (the Health Development Army structure involving 30 householders who meet weekly) are important for spreading key messages, although one health extension worker complained that these are sometimes more political than development oriented. Schools also play a key role in raising levels of awareness amongst students through 1-to-5 groups and two girls’ clubs, one focused on gender equality and the other on harmful traditional practices and managing menstruation. As noted above, levels of coordination between government offices, NGOs, schools and community structures are good and enable simultaneous targeting of different stakeholders including girls, boys, parents and community leaders. A school girls’ club leader notes the particular importance of using these clubs to reach boys with key messages given their attempts to deceive girls into child marriage and that youth decision-making is now the primary driver of child marriage.

Weaknesses

It can be difficult to reach out-of-school girls with awareness-raising activities. Further, persistent cultural attitudes in which men are valued more highly than women mean that female attendance of activities targeted at community members, government employees and kebele administrators is sometimes low.

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Box 35: Gadaa system among the Oromo

Gadaa is a system of an age-grade classes that succeed each other every eight years in assuming military, economy, political and ritual responsibilities. It has guided the religious, social, political and economic life of Oromo for many years. It can be understood as a socio-economic and politico-cultural governance system for the community. Scholars believe that the Oromo have been practicing this system for well over 500 years. The activities and life of each member of the society are guided by Gadaa which is considered as the law of the society. Over the last decade, Gadaa system has started to emerge as a unifying symbol of the Oromo community. In this system the Oromo are ruled by a generational class that is assumed at the age of 40 years, when men are given the title luba. Each class rules for a period of eight years after which the next group of the same age assumes the mantle of leadership.

In this system, male members at every age go through specific stages of development, each of which defines his duties and way of life in the society. The following is how the Gadaa organise these stages:

- Dabballe: 0-8 years (child, loved and cared for well)
- Foollee or Gaammee Xixiqqaa: 8-16 years (young boy who learns about farm life)
- Qondaala or Gaammee Gurguddaa: 16-24 years (grown-up, trainee, mostly defense)
- Kuusaa: 24-32 years (man, militia, completes military service.)
- Raabaa Doorii: 32-40 years (candidate, respected family man)
- Gadaa: 40-48 years (leader at different levels)
- Yuba I: 48-56 years (adviser to active party for four years)
- Yuba II: 56-64 years (retired, blessing and peace making everywhere)
- Yuba III: 64-72 years (same as above)
- Gadamoojjii: 72-80 years (same as above)
- Jaarsa: 80 and above (same as above)

The Gadaa System encourages boys not to marry early (preferably in the 4th stage when they are in their early 30’s) while the fate of girls is determined by Siiqqee. Siiqqee is the system for women whose core functions are related to marriage, praying (to the god called WaqaFarta), and conflict resolution for girls (e.g., after abduction or helping haftu (girls who are unmarried at an older age- typically 18 or 20) find a partner).

Effective follow-up of individual cases of child marriage also proves challenging. The woreda justice office reported that:

*it is difficult to receive such information. We hear that child marriage is taking place but no one wants to inform in such cases. Even if we hear of it and make some follow-ups, the girl testifies that she married by her own will and not by force.*

More extensive and better co-ordinated follow-up is thus critical. This is particularly the case where occurrences need to be dealt with by multiple woredas.

**Entry points for programming**

There are multiple ways forward for programming efforts. According to the interviewees, the top ways to tackle the drivers of child marriage are:

- **Attention needs to be directed to helping adolescents see the advantages of adult marriage and continued education**—perhaps emphasising links to better economic outcomes.

- **In this urban site, where adolescents are increasingly making their own decisions, programming must be rooted in an understanding that adolescents often engage in short-term thinking.**

- **Parents need to be supported to better monitor their children’s education and prevent them from marrying as children**—with attention paid to the fact that parents tend to defer to their children’s decisions because their children are better educated than they are.

- **More extensive and coordinated follow-up through schools and the one-to-five groups.**

- **More effective enforcement of the law**—with child marriages cancelled even if they are desired.

It is important to target awareness-raising activities at adolescents, both girls and boys, whose decision-making is now the principle driver of child marriage. Girls should be educated on the value of education, the negative effects of child marriage and the law. They should not be perceived as ‘victims’ but rather equipped to make sound life decisions informed by long-term social and economic considerations. Awareness-raising interventions should work through educated women living and working in the community (health extension workers and teachers), whose opinions are valued by the community, who have a visible and consistent presence there and who can serve as role models for girls when making crucial life decisions. Community leaders should also be targeted with these messages and supported to become more effective champions of change, capable of influencing girls outside as well as inside school.

Parents should be trained to support and monitor their children’s education and to actively discourage them from marrying early. This is critical in a context where parents tend to be less educated than their children and, as a result, have interpreted child rights in a way that has arguably overestimated their children’s independent decision-making capacities and downplayed parental responsibility to protect their children from harmful traditional practices including child marriage.

More consistent enforcement of the law is necessary to deter adolescents who are aware of the family law and the negative effects of child marriage but pursue child marriage nevertheless. Monitoring based on levels of reporting of cases of child marriage is ineffective in this context and should be carried out in cooperation with families, 1-to-5 groups and schools. With girls themselves driving child marriage, parents need to know about formal mechanisms through which they might prevent, or have declared invalid, particular marriages. Enforcement also requires more effective mechanisms to establish girls’ ages without having to rely on their testimony.
Key messages

Age of marriage

While declining, Gorche has the highest rate of child marriage in SNNPRR. It is common for girls to marry at 15 – usually by arrangement and sometimes through abduction. In Gorche there is also a form of marriage which provide space for girls’ own agency in selecting their partners – ‘adawana’, but it is culturally de-valued.

Drivers of child marriage

- Child marriage is driven primarily by powerful norms that place a high value on marriage and childbearing as a source of social prestige and stigmatise girls who remain unmarried.
- Economic incentives also matter, as both parents and potential suitors seek arranged marriage into wealthy families and community and family members often willing to arrange an abduction for a fee.
- Education is not prioritized in Gorche, especially for girls, who are kept at home to do household work. Most children never even transition to upper-primary school.

Factors protecting against child marriage

- Adolescents’ own decision-making is working to delay marriage, with both girls and boys choosing to prioritize education and to aim for economic independence before marriage.
- Having educated children is becoming a source of prestige within the community and a growing minority of parents is supportive of girls’ education.
- The Christian church has played a critical role in reducing the incidence of child marriage by educating the community and intervening to prevent particular instances.
- Irregular enforcement of the law, especially in regard to penalties for the abduction of girls, is serving as a deterrent for child marriage more generally.

Priority entry points for future programming

- Encouraging parents’ investment in education is a critical first step to preventing child marriage, as it simultaneously locates girls as students, helps them develop an awareness of their own rights and links them into reporting chains.
- Greater attention should be paid to helping parents and community members understand the risks of child marriage.
• Girls should be offered a menu of support, ranging from pencils to sanitary supplies to girls’ clubs to incentivize their attendance and help them further develop their voices.
• Given the success of the Christian church, greater efforts should be made to cultivate local champions for girls and help them build local ownership of messages.

Overview

Gorche is one of the woredas of the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’ Region, and has the highest rate of child marriage within the region according to the 2007 census. While the prevalence of child marriage in the SNNPR region is relatively low on average (12.3% of 10-17 year old girls are married, ranking eighth of eleven regions), in Gorche 23.3% of adolescent girls are already married (see Table 13 below).

Table 13: Percent of girls who are married, by age, by residence (Source: 2007 Census)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gorche</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Sidama Zone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls 10-14</td>
<td>19.9%</td>
<td>19th</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls 15-17</td>
<td>33.6%</td>
<td>87th</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our fieldwork was undertaken in Harbe Gata kebele upon the recommendation of the woreda Women and Children’s Affairs office based on the highest prevalence of child marriage and the lowest formal school attendance of girls (also triangulated with the Education Office officials (see box 36 for an overview of the kebele characteristics).

Current patterning of marriage and divorce

Age of marriage

Community members generally report the incidence of child marriage to be decreasing in Gorche (see below for ‘changes in patterning of child marriage over time’) and perceive this to be a positive development. Most girls interviewed aspire to marry as adults, after completing their education, and many are now marrying at 15-18 years, rather than 12-14 years as in the past. Those who have been forcibly married at a younger age tend to regret the decision of their parents and/or abductors, particularly where they have had to drop out of school, but have usually resigned themselves to their personal circumstances.

Marriage practices

There are five different ways through which marriages are conducted. The first of these is ‘Burea’, whereby the girl’s parents arrange the marriage and ceremony – such

Box 36: Overview of Harbe Gata Kebele

Harbe Gata is home to a population of nearly 5,000, who are almost entirely Protestant. It is 32 kilometres away from the main road from Addis Ababa to Dilla and, although accessible by car, the road into the kebele is of poor quality and passes through hilly terrain.

98% of Harbe Gata’s population depends on mixed agriculture (primarily enset) and livestock, whilst the remaining 2% are traders. However, its hilly topography is not well suited to agriculture. Most households are poor and food insecure – respondents report that it is common for families to eat only once a day. Polygamy, high fertility rates and large family sizes put a strain on household resources. Despite high levels of food insecurity, there is no Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP).

There is a health centre thirty minutes away by foot and health extension workers operate in the kebele, with their work including raising awareness of SRH issues.

There is only one primary school in the kebele, which caters to students grades 1 to 8. Few children transition to 5th grade and girls’ enrolment lags severely behind that of boys. Specifically, in grades 1-4 there are 563 boys and only 273 girls and in grades 5-8 there are 127 boys and only 30 girls. These patterns are similar to those seen at the woreda level, where of the 28,000 children enrolled in early primary school, 15,000 are boys and of the 6,600 children enrolled in upper primary, 3,700 are boys. In all of Gorche, which has only one secondary school, there are only 1,100 secondary students – 800 of them are boys.

In terms of the broader woreda characteristics, Gorche’s population of nearly 118,000 is food secure and relies primarily on rain fed agriculture (primarily enset, barley and pulses) and animal husbandry (cattle and sheep) – the Sidama tend to attach a high value to livestock ownership. It is common for poor households to supplement their income by sending a family member out to undertake casual labour, most often on chat farms, or to engage in petty trade in SNNPRR’s regional capital – Hawassa. Most of the woreda’s kebeles are not accessible by car.

While they are on the decline, both FGM/C and polygamy are practiced in Gorche. FGM/C is most often the sunna type and is carried out in early adolescence.
marriages are often conducted between girls and much older men and with the aim of strengthening the father’s or parents’ relationship with friends or neighbours. Alternatively, parents may arrange the marriage to an unknown suitor through discussion with community elders. In such cases the elders also arrange the muro, a payment from the husband to the bride’s family.

The second ‘type’ is ‘Adolsha’, a term which refers to a couple’s decision to cohabit without parental support. It is typically brokered by a third person who may attempt to convince the girl of the male’s positive attributes (e.g. wealth) when in reality this is not the case. This practice is generally less respected within the community and parental approval usually secured subsequently through the husband’s offer of a bride price.

Girls who remain unmarried for longer than their peers may practice ‘Adawana’ by (voluntarily) throwing a stick in front of the door of their chosen husband. After this ritual has been carried out, community elders visit the home of the girl’s parents to secure their permission. Social convention dictates that the parents cannot refuse the elders and should, therefore, accept the marriage. The man is also expected to accept but not necessarily to treat his wife with the same level of respect as husbands married, for example, through ‘Burea’. The practice of ‘Adawana’ has traditionally been perceived to be immoral, largely owing to the free will exerted by the girl, and girls married in this way have thus been ‘undervalued’ by their husbands and ‘strongly snubbed’ by the community. Their parents are also less likely to support them in any conflicts that might arise between themselves and their husbands. It is also the case that because culturally it is the least valued form of marriage, that a wife married in this way may not be the first wife.

Marriage by forcible abduction is also common, although the abductors are often known to the girls. Accordingly, family members or friends may be involved in the abduction’s arrangement, often in exchange for cash payments.

The fifth type is the practice of ‘widow inheritance’, whereby a widow is expected to marry a relative of her late husband. This practice continues today and contributes to son preference in that if a woman has a son she may not be able to marry. This practice is typically brokered by a third person who may attempt to convince the girl of the male’s positive attributes (e.g. wealth) when in reality this is not the case. This practice is generally less respected within the community and parental approval usually secured subsequently through the husband’s offer of a bride price.

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**Divorce**

Divorce is commonly seen to be the lesser of two evils where the husband fail to manage or contribute to the household as expected. All types of respondents were in agreement that women and girls will be treated equally in divorce proceedings. Married girls who are mistreated or abused by their husbands can take their cases to community elders who may issue a fine, lodge a complaint with kebele officials, appeal to law enforcement or, if these routes prove an ineffective deterrent, seek to divorce them. This being said, a woman is unable to marry, even if husband abandons her. “She will stay on the land and raise her children. No one is also allowed to marry her. After all, she is the property of her husband and his relatives.” ....If she wants to marry another husband she have to go another woreda “she could go somewhere else and marry another husband. Even, she is not allowed to marry in the nearby area. She has to go farther if she needs to marry”, (community timeline). In other words, unlike in most of the other hotspot woredas, it is taboo for a woman to be divorced. “Another major problem is that women do not want to be labelled as ‘divorced’. It is better to die than to be labelled as divorced” (community timeline).

**Drivers of child marriage**

The drivers of child marriage in Gorche are, as in other hotspot woredas, multiple and complex. Here we attempt to disentangle the key drivers, indicating relative importance where the data permits.

**Social norms**

Child marriage is driven, in part, by social norms that cause girls (and their families) to fear the prospect of remaining unmarried. It is not socially acceptable for girls not to marry at all – as one girl put it: ‘People fear to become old without getting married’. Girls who do so are pointed to as negative role models by those seeking to put pressure on girls to marry: ‘It will be an insult. She will be a bad lesson for others. For instance, some may say…this girl will staying long like Miss X…It will be bad fortune for herself…She will be idle and hopeless’. Child marriage is linked directly to the fear of remaining unmarried; when asked, ‘Why do you think females get marriage at earlier ages?’ one grandfather responded, ‘So, are they going to marry their relatives? Or, are they born to stay home forever? If a person asks to marry, we don’t worry about her age. She should marry’.

Marriage and child bearing is a source of social prestige. Adolescent girls reported that many of their peers ‘want to be married with a festival or celebration for the sake of fame’. One father argued marriage to be ‘advantageous… because it commands respect according to the culture of the community. A married adult is highly valued within the society. Secondly, I am proud of the number of children I have through marriage.’

Bride price payments are associated with the girl’s potential to bear children; it is expected that the marriage will end in divorce and the bride price be returned if she fails to do so. The ideal timing of first pregnancy is generally considered to be between three and five years after marriage.
Some interviewees argue that child birth before the two year mark puts the mother's health at risk. However, girls themselves do not plan to use contraception until they have borne their preferred number of children. One young woman (see box 37) reported having visited a witch doctor in the past in the hope of giving birth to a child, but now considers that a 'bad' and 'unchristian' practice. Having a child out of wedlock remains a social taboo. In response to the question, ‘Why did parents force their children to marry at their earlier ages?’ one grandmother responded that ‘it was because we didn’t know [otherwise]. When a certain person came to request to marry our female children, we gave them to him.’

**Family pressure**

In the past marriages most commonly took place through parental arrangement (‘Bureau’), including through parental consent to the request of a bridegroom. Interviewees reported that marriage ‘conducted by the consent of the spouses’ is on the rise. Nevertheless, the first of these three types of marriage still seems to be the most common. Girls continue to believe that they must accept the wishes of their parents, particularly fathers, if they choose child marriage for them – as one school girl put it: ‘If they force me, I will marry. There is nothing to do except accept.’ Such viewpoints seem to be shaped more by societal expectations than any threat of (violent) repercussions.

**Level of schooling**

As the area is remote, access to education is limited; there is no secondary school in the kebele. Not all people send their children to the school; in particular, families who are not educated are less likely to enrol their children. Secondary level enrolment is very low for both boys and girls. Some parents fear that their daughters will be abducted on the journey to school – one interviewee was abducted on her return from school whilst making the one hour journey by foot and alone through a sparsely populated, wooded area.

Parents may also be reluctant to send their daughters to school owing to entrenched cultural norms relating to girls’ education and labour engagement. One uneducated young woman reported that, ‘When my age reached that of education my father allowed male children to go to school and refused me. He said that girls should work in the home and only boys should learn…He had the [financial] capacity. But he didn’t want female children to go out of the home and to be exposed to different problems. Besides, he needed us to keep the cattle and do housework.’

Parents marry their daughters as an alternative to education, either because they are not willing for their daughters to attend school or because girls themselves drop out owing to a lack of interest. Girls often drop out aged around 13 or 14. One mother attributed a recent instance of child marriage to the parents unwillingness ‘to send her to school’, whilst a father reported that his daughter ‘quit her education by her own will. Then, in the absence of an alternative, I married her.’

However, it should be noted that whilst some girls are confined to the home after marriage, others may continue their education – this varies in accordance with the views of their husbands and their families. The relationship between marriage, pregnancy and drop out rates is not consistent.

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**Box 37: An experience of family-organised abduction and polygamous marriage**

Deraro is 24 year old woman who was married forcibly as a second wife at the age of 15. Her brother arranged her abduction in exchange for a sum of 800 birr: ‘I was abducted when I was fetching water. My brother arranged the abduction when he knew my parents were not nearby. He arranged it because of the money he received.’ Her father was subsequently paid a bride price of 1500 birr.

Deraro is uneducated. Of her seven siblings, only two (both male) attended school, one up to grade 4 and the other grade 5. She attributes the failure of her parents (who are themselves uneducated) to send their children to school a lack of awareness of ‘the importance of education.’ Deraro and her husband are farmers. However, the land that once supported her parents is now insufficient, having become fragmented as it was divided up between many children.

Her husband is much older than her (c. 50 years old). He does not visit his first wife but continues to support her financially, along with the four children they had together. Deraro has a good relationship with these children, who often help her work the land.

Deraro is yet to have a child. Five years ago she sought the advice of witch doctors and carried out various rituals, such as slaughtering a sheep and washing herself in its blood, in the hope of becoming pregnant. However, since becoming a follower of the Hawaryat religion/apostolic church she has stopped visiting witch doctors and condemns their practices. She believes that praying to God will bring her a child.

Deraro described the way in which at the time of her abduction she ‘was crying but no one reached out to [her].’ She regrets having been married at such a young age and had originally hoped not to marry until between the ages of 20 and 24. Nevertheless, she has reconciled herself to the marriage – as she put it: ‘I can do nothing except accept and live peacefully with my husband.’
Economic incentives

Girls from wealthy families are likely to marry early owing to competition amongst suitors. One, unmarried, girl asserted that boys tend to ‘choose to marry a girl from a rich family.’ Another, uneducated, young woman reported that she and her sister ‘both married at an early age. This is because our father is rich and gives cattle such as sheep and goats’. Competition is fiercest when livestock and land are at stake.

Parents are motivated by economic incentives to marry their daughters early. Community elders arrange the payment of muro by the boy and his family to the girl’s parents (reported sums ranged from 40 to 8000 birr), including in cases of abduction where payments are used to reconcile parents to the marriage. One mother neatly summarised the combined socio-economic drivers of this practice as follows: ‘On one hand, abduction was the culture of the community. It was not considered immoral and unethical. Secondly, society’s abuse fades away when a bride price is given’ (see also Box 38).

Some [usually more educated] husbands may allow the education of their wives, whereas other husbands may not allow this saying that [the girl] married to perform household chores, not to go to school.

If the husband is not educated, he will not send [his wife] to school for fear that she will dominate him.

Adolescent girls

There is a lack of positive female role models in local schools – in the kebele studied there are currently no female teachers (one is due to be recruited next year).

Lack of legal awareness

Interviewees often demonstrated a lack of awareness of the minimum legal age of marriage, either declaring themselves and their parents to be unaware of the existence of such a law or stating the legal age incorrectly. Members of the women’s federation at the kebele level even reportedly believed the minimum legal age of marriage to be 15.

Further, those who are aware of legal requirements may choose to ignore them. Adult male focus group discussants reported that: ‘[T]here are some people who act against the law. For instance, some family members arrange the marriage of a minor forcefully, motivated by the bride price or warning the parents that this is the only chance never to be missed.’

Changes in patterning of child marriage over time

In previous generations girls were usually married between the ages of eight and 14, with marriage between the ages of ten and twelve most common. The most frequent ‘types’ of marriage were ‘Burea’ and abduction. It was common practice for parents to send girls away to other regions, particularly Oromia, to marry when they reached the upper end of this age bracket, out of fear that the opportunity for marriage might be missed. As one boy put it: ‘People used to say that Mr. X’s girls is ‘too big to marry’.’ Although age gaps between spouses have decreased, it is still the norm for girls and young women to marry men several years older than themselves – one unmarried girl argued that ‘[i]
and fathers with their responsibilities. Some interviewees who will, respectively, be able to support their mothers wanting equal numbers of female and male children, attributed to boys, on the one hand, and girls, on the other. However, he also notes that the gap between the value one grandfather put it: ‘Females…are born for others.’

The practice of polygamy is in decline, partly owing to the teachings of the Christian church and, partly, to greater awareness of the resulting financial burden for families. Young people no longer enter into polygamous marriages of their own accord; however, girls continue to be married as second wives through ‘Bureau’ or abduction. Most at risk are those not in education and from large, subsistence farming families (see also Box 37).

Family size in general has decreased over time, with the number of children falling from as many as 12-15 two generations ago to roughly 3-4 currently. Poverty is widely understood to result from large family size. It is common for women to manage the number of children they have through contraception, usually contraceptive injections, in agreement with their husbands. One 14 year old married girl described the way in which her family had advised her to have only two children: ‘they told me that I will be subjected to different types of problems if I have more than two children.’ She attributed the larger family sizes of earlier generations to a lack of awareness of its negative effects and claimed that ‘[n]ow we are aware of the problems of having many children.’

Male children continue to be valued more highly than females, with one married girl asserting that whereas, ‘[w]hen married, females go somewhere else…males stay in the same place and protect their parents’ property.’ As one grandfather put it: ‘Females…are born for others.’ However, he also notes that the gap between the value attributed to boys, on the one hand, and girls, on the other has diminished over time. Many interviewees reported wanting equal numbers of female and male children, who will, respectively, be able to support their mothers and fathers with their responsibilities. Some interviewees attributed the higher value placed on male children in the past to the need for young men to fight in recurrent conflicts between the Sidama and Arsi.

Protective/exit mechanisms from negative effects of child marriage

As we have discussed elsewhere, while child marriage contravenes both Ethiopian national law and international conventions, the effects vary depending on the interplay of local practices and beliefs. In some cases, local cultural norms help to ensure that girls are protected from the worst effects of child marriage – e.g. cultural practices that prevent excessively early sex or pregnancy until girls are physically mature or allow girls to continue with their schooling even if married (Jones et al., 2014; Presler-Marshall et al., 2015). In the case of Gorche woreda, despite widespread child marriage, we noted several protective mechanisms worth mentioning as follows.

Growing parental/familial support for education

A growing minority of parents are supportive of girls’ aspirations to pursue education, both morally and in practical terms – for example, by reducing girls’ workloads at home to enable them to study. This is a relatively recent development, sometimes based on awareness of the consequences of previous decisions to pursue marriage rather than education for girl children. One uneducated young woman described the way in which ‘many husbands are coming but my father refused to marry [her sister]. He told them that he regretted marrying his other daughters rather than sending them to school.’ Having educated children is also becoming a source of social prestige. What community support there is for girls’ education is attributed to government awareness raising campaigns. Interviewees also referenced positive role model effects: ‘There are individuals in our village who are successful in their life after completing their education.’ Health extension workers were most frequently cited as role models.

In the past marriage used to be arranged forcefully by the parents, there was abduction even at twelve and 13 years old. Now the marriage is arranged only by the goodwill of the spouses. In the past we used to live natural and cultural. At present, given the education, spouses can decide by themselves.

Adult men

Both my mother and my father do not support marriage before completing education. Thus, they will help me to keep on my education...

Unmarried school girl, 13
In rare instances the support of other male relatives can be important – one unmarried girl described the way in which she looks to an ‘uncle, the brother of my father, who shares [her] ideas’ for support in discussions with her immediate family. He works as a merchant in Hawassa and encourages her to pursue her education. Another relied on a policeman uncle to continue to influence her parents to choose education rather than marriage for her.

Girls’ own decision-making
In multiple interviews education was linked directly to increasing acceptance of young people’s right and ability to make their own decisions on marriage. One man argued that ‘now the marriage is arranged by only the good will of spouses…given education, spouses can decide by themselves’.

Accordingly, girls in education are better placed to refuse child marriage – as one woman put it: ‘if she is educated and employed [she can refuse]. Otherwise, it will be challenging for an uneducated girl remain unmarried for long. The culture of the Sidama does not encourage this.’ Accordingly, an 18 year old school girl asserted marriage to be solely her own decision and linked this right directly to her education status: ‘no one will force me to quit my education and marry.’

In addition, although fathers tend to remain the dominant decision-makers within households, parents often come to decisions through discussion and mutual agreement. This means that mothers, or other close female relatives, may be able to dissuade fathers from accepting a suitor’s proposal.

Economic self-sufficiency
Both girls and boys expressed a desire to marry later, after becoming economically self-sufficient. One unmarried school girl asserted that ‘rather than getting married at an earlier age and being poor, it is better to marry at about 20 or 30’; another that ‘[I plan to marry] after completing my education and becoming employed…Then I will able to lead the family life in a better way.’ In the same vein, an adolescent boy argued that ‘[B]oys [aged 18 and] above can better manage the family….can produce wealth and are able to properly plan when to establish one’s family… [They should] use the early years for education, making money and preparing to bear responsibility of the future family.’

Most of the adult interviewees concurred: ‘It is good if she marries after she complete her education and get her own job. She can help us if she gets a job.’ It is recognised that family members stand to gain financially from girls’ education: ‘she can be a role model, she may help her relatives during employment and in their different engagements.’

Changing social norms
Boy interviewees aspired to marry educated rather than uneducated girls and demonstrated an understanding of the potential benefits to the marriage. They expressed a preference for ‘one who is educated …who makes an effort to improve the family livelihood…who may work cooperatively with and have a common understanding with the husband. [One who] uses resources wisely.’ This is reflected by bride prices which increase with the educational status of the girl.

The incidence of abduction has decreased as attitudes towards the practice have changed. One woman observed that ‘now, abduction is considered to be a harmful traditional practice…As a result, the intensity of abduction is decreasing with time’.

Religious institutions
Girls and women reported that the Christian church ‘is relatively influential in the area’ and plays a critical role in reducing the incidence of child marriage by educating the community through its sermons and intervening to prevent planned instances of child marriage.

The church raises awareness of the negative effects of child marriage. Specifically, child marriage is presented, alongside large family sizes, as a contributor to poverty. Changing attitudes and the resultant increase in the age of marriage were often attributed to the church’s interventions, along with improved knowledge of the minimum legal age of marriage. For example, girl focus group discussants reported that ‘at church it is taught that marrying at an early age will lead to poverty and [that it is preferable] to give birth to a reasonable family size such as three children…People have been trying to practice what the law says and the Church educates.’

Marriages are increasingly carried out through religious rather than community/cultural ceremonies – the former tend to be voluntary and the latter forced. Churches refuse to oversee the marriage of underage girls. It is, however, unclear whether priests are leading by example.

Churches also promote girls’ education by laying the foundations for formal education. Local children usually attend pre-primary education at the church for one year before enrolling in school.

Awareness of the law and formal mechanisms
As mentioned above, interviewees reported that awareness of the minimum legal age of marriage has resulted in attitudinal change and reduced the incidence of child marriage: ‘Currently, everybody knows that a girl should marry after 18]. But previously no one knew about it. That
is why we were married at earlier ages.’ Boys reported that ‘the families’ attitudes are also changing. They say it is better to abide by what the law says’. The main sources of these messages seem to be the church and school clubs; however, school club provision is inconsistent with younger interviewees in particular reporting that they have not been involved in these activities.

Cases where the law has been enforced, although irregular, seem to act as effective deterrents. One boy was able to point to the example of ‘a person [from the woreda] arrested for an attempt to abduct a 15 year old girl when he was 36.’ The individual in question has been sentenced to fourteen years imprisonment.

Girls are aware of and express a willingness to seek recourse to formal means to avoid child marriage – reporting plans to educational authorities is mentioned most often: one school girl commented that her school director and teachers can ‘protect’ her. Child parliament members can inform authorities about those forced to marry at an early age or a girl may report this to a principal of the school herself. Parents are aware of and deterred by this possibility – according to one mother: ‘The girl will cry and accuse their parents in order to go to school and keep on their education. As a result, no parent forcefully marries his or her children by dropping them out of their schooling.’

Girls can also call upon supportive male relatives and/or law enforcement: one unmarried girl reported that ‘[I]f my parents want to marry me, I will tell my teachers or my uncle, who is the police officer of the woreda. Both my teachers and my uncle will not allow them to marry me before completing my education.’

Existing programming

Programming interventions can play an important role in either spearheading social norm change around child marriage or helping to accelerate changes already afoot in a given locale. In the case of Gorche, programming efforts, including those by NGOs, have been extremely limited.

Respondents claimed unanimously that the incidence of child marriage is reducing and attributed this change most frequently to government legal awareness raising efforts, as well as those of the church. However, there is very little reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of specific interventions.

Respondents tended to demonstrate only a very limited awareness of existing programming. Adolescents referred most often to school 1-to-5 clubs, in-school children’s parliaments and the provision of civic education on the legal minimum age of marriage (including by law enforcement officers). 1-to-5 groups in particular are perceived to have contributed to improved educational attainment and the development of leadership capabilities amongst girls. Although legal awareness remains low throughout the community, some parents did report that certain school children had disseminated their limited learning on the law to the wider community.

**Box 39: Attempting to defy social norms**

13 year old school girl Adanech is one of four sisters, all of whom are in school. She is currently in grade 7 and aspires to become a teacher. She believes that girls should marry at around the age of 30, only after they have completed their education and begun a career. She plans to marry an educated man with a profession, such as a teacher or doctor.

She speaks forcefully about the negative effects of child marriage, pointing to health risks and the problems associated with polygamy. If her parents were to attempt to marry her forcefully she is prepared to report them to her teachers. She has already dissuaded them from pursuing marriage for her by informing them about a classmate whose marriage was ended after she reported her parents to the school. She would also approach her uncle, a police officer who is supportive of her education, for help.

However, Adanech lacks awareness of the law and incorrectly states the minimum legal age of marriage to be 16. This understanding is based solely on conversations with other students; she has not been involved in legal awareness raising activities, either in or out of school. She states that although her father now advocates for girls to complete their education before marrying, he may also be unaware of the relevant legal provisions.

An additional difficulty is that, although Adanech’s parents support her education, as she is the eldest child she is responsible for household activities when her parents are away from home. This has had a detrimental impact on her educational attainment.
Adults are most conscious of health extension programming, which raises awareness on SRH issues (STIs, family planning) and provides contraceptives through community meetings and house-to-house visits. Health extension workers also contribute to legal awareness raising on the minimum legal age of marriage. Respondents noted the existence of some barriers to SRH services: a temporary contraceptive supply problem; the one hour journey to the health centre; and that local health extension workers, unlike their health centre colleagues, receive relatively little training. The community generally expects that only married women use contraceptives, although this was not perceived to be a problem by respondents, including girls themselves.

The change [the increasing age of marriage] comes because of the utmost effort of the government…

The government has enacted laws that prohibit the practice of harmful traditions such as polygamy and child marriage.

Mother

One 16 year old married through abduction claimed that the incidence of the practice has decreased owing to media awareness raising programmes. She argued that: ‘Everybody is receiving lessons through different media such as radio. As a result, the intensity of abduction is decreasing over time.’

Entry-points for programming going forward

Our research identified a number of programme entry points for Gorche, including:

- Encouraging parents’ investment in education is a critical first step to preventing child marriage, as it simultaneously locates girls as students, helps them develop an awareness of their own rights and links them into reporting chains. Efforts should be made to move the prestige currently afforded by marriage to education—so that the girls most looked up to are those who stay in school.
- Greater attention should be paid to helping parents and community members understand the risks of child marriage.
- Girls should be offered a menu of support, ranging from pencils to sanitary supplies to girls’ clubs to incentivize their attendance and help them further develop their voices.
- Given the success of the Christian church, greater efforts should be made to cultivate local champions for girls and help them build local ownership of messages.
- Better enforcement of the law.

When identifying areas for future interventions respondents attributed most importance to awareness raising activities – specifically, on the law, the value of girls’ education and the risks associated with child marriage, all of which were described to be ‘very important’ by multiple respondents. Interviewees disagreed on the target audience for these activities, some arguing that such messages should be levelled at parents and others that they should be targeted primarily at girls themselves. Media awareness raising – through radio rather than television – was also suggested by some interviewees but not considered to be critical.

Both girls themselves and the community in general should be educated on the value of girls’ education, the negative effects of child marriage and, particularly, the law (understanding of which is weakest at present). Adanech’s case (Box 39) demonstrates clearly the way in which girls attempting to pursue education and avoid child marriage will be better equipped to do so if able to articulate each of these. Relatively few students are currently involved in school clubs or parliaments whilst girls clubs appear to be non-existent – school-based awareness raising activities thus offer a clear entry-point. However, such messages should also be directed towards girls’ parents as in cases of ‘Bureau’ it is they, particularly fathers, who initiate or accept marriage proposals.

It is also important to ensure that community elders and other authority figures understand the negative effects of child marriage given their current role in facilitating child marriage and the continuation of harmful practices such as abduction. As demonstrated by the role played by the Christian church, influential community leaders can act as powerful champions of local attitudinal change.

Also deemed ‘very important’ are those interventions that facilitate girls’ attendance and attainment in school. Chief amongst these are the provision of material support – for example through scholarships, pens and books, sanitary pads – to incentivise consistent attendance and of school counsellors who might support girls to confront problems that might impinge upon their studies. The presence of female teachers who might act as role models is also necessary, but currently lacking. Material and educational support (books, additional tuition) should be provided simultaneously. Some respondents, both adults and adolescents, commented that stipends should be paid directly to parents in order to work as an effective incentive.

Enforcement of the legal minimum age of marriage is also necessary, although it is clear that enforcement efforts should be secondary or, at least, subsequent to the provision of much-needed advice and education. Respondents supported penalties but did not offer opinions as to how severe these should be to work as effective deterrents.
Child marriage drivers in Tahtay Adiabo woreda, Tigray

Key messages

Age of marriage

Tahtay Adiabo has the highest rate of child marriage in Tigray, with it common for girls to marry at 15 or 16.

Drivers of child marriage

• Social norms around protecting girls’ virtue are the main driver of child marriage in Tahtay Adiabo woreda, with girls who are not virgins seen as unmarriageable.
• Social norms around hosting lavish wedding ceremonies and maintaining social status in the community also perpetuate child marriage.
• There is a lack of parental support for girls’ education. With few role models and a belief that education does not lead to success, parents prefer marriage to education.

Factors protecting against child marriage

• Few girls in Tahtay Adiabo are pushed into child marriage by economic poverty. Land plot sizes are comparatively large and young people – both male and female – have the opportunity to earn a cash income in nearby gold mines.
• The local women’s association and teachers who run girls’ clubs are proactive in raising awareness among both boys and girls about sexual and reproductive health issues from a young age.
• A minority of parents support their girls’ education after marriage, suggesting that the next generation of girls may have more role models.
Priority entry points

- Because church leaders and elders set the standard for community behaviour, and are currently encouraging child marriage, it is vital that programming begin first by helping them understand the risks of and alternatives to child marriage.
- Since the law in Tahtay Adiabo is largely invisible and unenforced, there is a need to teach both parents and girls about the legal age for marriage (18, not 15), help girls identify champions to whom they could report unwanted marriages and assist local officials in sourcing proof of girls’ ages so that they can effectively intervene.
- Parents should be incentivised to support their children’s education. Given that the opportunity-costs of sending children to school are high, as students have less time to herd cattle, educational scholarships that offset other costs should be considered.

Overview

Tahtay Adiabo is a woreda in the North West Tigray zone of the Tigray region, close to the border with Eritrea. According to the 2007 census, the zone had the second highest incidence of child marriage for 10-14 year olds (8.2%) and 15-17 year olds (31.2%) in the Tigray region, rendering this region as a hotspot for child marriage. The Tahtay Adiabo woreda also showed high incidences of child marriage, particularly for 15-17 year olds. It ranked 17th out of 741 woredas in the country for child marriage in the 15-17 years age bracket and 61st out 741 woredas for all child marriage of girls aged 10-17 years old (see Table 14 below).

Table 14: Percent of girls who are married, by age, by residence (Source: 2007 Census)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tahtay Adiabo</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>North West Zone</th>
<th>Tigray</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls 10-14</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>228th</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls 15-17</td>
<td>45.4%</td>
<td>17th</td>
<td>31.2%</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our fieldwork was undertaken in the Aditel-om kebele based on the high incidence of child marriage indicated by the 2007 census data, the recommendation of representatives at the woreda women’s affairs office, and the absence of NGO intervention in that kebele (see Box 40 for an overview of the kebele characteristics).

Current patterns of marriage and divorce

Age of marriage

Our research findings indicate that many girls in this kebele get married between the ages of 15 and 17, including marriages that do not include co-habitation immediately after marriage (discussed more below). This does not imply that girls who are younger than 15 years do not get married. According to the head of the WCYA office:

_The worst cases of child marriage are from 13-14 years. Here the most problematic trend is that when a girl reaches 12, they decide that she must be engaged and they arrange the engagement. The next year, at 13 she is off to be a wife, a girl without any breasts or any signs of growth. However, more marriages are taking place in the 15-17 age bracket._

The high prevalence of child marriage is evident given that the majority of the girls interviewed in this study did not know of any of their peers still unmarried by the time they were 16 or 17 years old. A 19-year-old girl said, ‘My friends, all who were born with me, have got married’. Being unmarried till 19 or 20 is considered ‘late’ or ‘too late’. However, in the case of a local ethnic minority group, the Kunama, marriage may sometimes be later, in part because they are considered to have fewer ‘choices’ of marriage partner.

Choice of marriage partner

Parents take responsibility for arranging both the marriage and the wedding ceremony. Multiple interviewees reported that their own marriages had been decided upon and arranged by their parents, usually when they were too young to understand the meaning or consequences of marriage. While this was particularly true in the previous generation, the instances of the younger generation choosing their own marriage partners is “rare”. As a result, some young girls in our sample indicated that despite desiring educated and employed husbands, they ended up marrying boys who were neither educated nor employed. In some cases, this resulted in conflict and sometimes divorce.

While polygamous marriages are not formally practised, ‘concubines’ or informal wives are found in the parents’ generation. Although this practice has reportedly reduced significantly in the present generation, some adults in the sample were found to have informal wives. These informal relationships seemed to stem mainly from a desire to have more children. One 16-year-old reported that her father wanted to have other children. So my mother told him to go and have children with the other woman. However, as

16 10 timad is equal to 2.5 square hectares.
17 We have no information about the breakdown of students in the kebele.
one kebele administrator indicated, this type of informal relationship often brings unintended consequences:

Formally polygamy is not possible. He cannot get married to another wife. But some men have another wife as concubines or informal wives. When children are born in these relationships, a lot of problems come up. There are many cases like that and the fight is not a simple one. It is also prohibited by the church. Generally we take it as backward and harmful cultural practice.

Wedding ceremonies and marriage processes

Traditional arranged marriage is the most common form of marriage in the kebele. It does not involve any written agreement or contract and ‘most of the marriages are done through elders’. Elders ‘bring gold and agree to conduct the marriage’. During the wedding a religious ritual known as qurban is performed in which priests give the bride and groom holy water to wash themselves, after which the bride and groom sit on a traditional bed known as ni’edi. While qurban can take place in the church, priests come to the bride’s home after the wedding to perform this ceremony. Once this ritual is complete, ‘they pray for the bride and groom and ask them to hold hands while they bless them. Then, they take the bride to her husband’s home’.

The wedding ceremony itself is an expensive affair traditionally involving the slaughter of livestock. Better-off families are likely to hire musicians who play wata (a traditional musical instrument) and invite all community members to the wedding. Expectations on exchange of resources between families at the time of marriage are distinctive in this kebele: whereas in most of the other sites, bride price entails paying the bride’s family, here the bride’s

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**Box 40: Aditel-om kebele overview**

Aditel-om kebele has a total population of 3,131 (M=1,584, F=1,547). According to the kebele administration, 100% of the community identifies as Orthodox Christians.

The main livelihoods are farming and animal rearing, with ‘with very few who trade’. Sorghum, sesame and millet are the most common crops grown. In general, the kebele is food secure, and ‘a family on average has asir timd’ (a traditional measurement of farm land measured in terms of the land that can be ploughed by ten pairs of oxen in a day). The kebele administrator said the minimum land size a family has in this kebele can be on ‘average two-and-a-half to five times of asir timd. There are also many families who own 70 to 80 cows. There are some who live completely in the wilderness with them and who have more than hundred cows’. In short, households in the community generally have adequate land.16

Income is also generated by gold mining, with mines approximately an hour’s walk from the village. Participants say that the amount of gold collected is often small and they are unable to generate as much income from it as they once did. Boys, girls and adults participate in collecting gold. The income from the gold is used for household expenditure and the gold is also used to make jewellery. One participant described the community as ‘full of gold’ and gifting gold during marriage ceremonies is commonplace (as discussed below).

The kebele is not well connected to the rest of the woreda. Aditel-om is 11 kilometres from the asphalt road (a two-hour walk). There is a market centre at Adihageray which takes around takes two and a half hours to reach since there is no public transport.

Tahtay Adiabo has 47 schools, of which one goes up to grades 9 and 10. On a woreda wide basis, there is gender parity, but many children fail to progress to 5th grade. There are over 14,500 children in 1st-4th grades, but few than 8,500 in 5th-8th grades. There are only 520 child enrolled in secondary school – half girls and half boys. Every school has a girls’ club, according to the head of the Women, Children, and Youth Affairs (W CYA) office. Aditel-om itself has two schools for grades 1-4 and one school for grades 1-8. Many children under 10 drop out of school because of its distance from their home. Moreover, according to the school director, ‘parents send half their children to school and the other half are made to look after cattle’. Since gold mining is important to livelihoods, some students also drop out of school to participate. As a result, ‘they spend two days in the mining area and one day at school, leading them to attend school on and off’.

There are two health posts in the kebele dealing largely with immunisations. They are given monthly and doses are brought from the health centre in the woreda. Given that ‘the area is remote and hot, sometimes the health workers provide the vaccines at home’. There is also a sexual and reproductive health service that is provided by the health posts (see discussion below).
family must ‘pay back the bride price given’ – in other words it is a dowry system. The groom’s family is compensated for everything that they buy for the bride. ‘If the bride’s family is rich, they can order whatever they want from the groom’s family. But if they think that they can’t pay it back, they don’t’. If divorce occurs, ‘she takes it all back because her parents have paid for it’. The traditional norms of this honeymoon state that the first friend of the groom, known as boreagi, should be unbiased towards both the bride and groom so that the bride can share her problems with the boreagi. However, since the bride and boreagi do not know each other from before, this does not necessarily help the new bride with any problems she may be facing, so her own family members are allowed to visit her on a few days where she can discuss any problems she has in a private hut away from the groom, though this does not happen frequently. In severe cases, if the bride wants to escape the honeymoon, she has ‘an extra shelter covered with grass from the trees’. This shelter is typically used as ‘a toilet, a place for showering and other secret things like menstruation’. This shelter may also be the place where she and family meet on the few days they are allowed to visit. One grandfathers’ inter-generational interview suggested that in the past, the husband and wife did not consummate their marriage during this honeymoon period but now the trend is to do so.

This type of honeymoon is typical in the community and norms dictate that after the honeymoon is over, the bride goes back to her parental home. The time she spends there is known as milisot. The reasoning behind milisot is that ‘girls are not experienced enough for marriage and need to learn more to prepare for a married life’. Milisot can range from 1-4 years but our participants did not indicate the criteria that determine its length. During milisot, the husband visits the bride and a small ceremony takes place. In this ceremony, the groom typically gives a goat which is slaughtered in the bride’s home, after which either the husband is allowed to visit the bride whenever he wants or the bride goes back to the his home to start her married life. This type of honeymoon seems to be the norm and in general girls are not expected to live with their husbands immediately after marriage:

I: What do you think is good age for a girl to get married?

R: It is good to get married at 18 years old.

I: What about the age to live with your husband?

R: It is two or three years after the marriage ceremony.

The exception to this is if the groom does not have a mother or female relative to take of domestic chores and cooking. Given a strongly enforced gender division of labour in the household, a bride will be expected to take up her wifely duties early in such circumstances.

Source: Multi-informant interviews from the site
wants to sell the cattle or anything else it has to be based on both their interests. If the wife does not want it, the husband feels fear and cannot do anything without her consent in our kebele’. In most instances, the legal body will take care of the divorce proceedings but in some cases, elders mediate the divorce and settle the assets.

**Drivers of child marriage**
The drivers of child marriage in Tahtay Adiabo are, as in other child marriage hotspot woredas, multiple and complex. Here we attempt to disentangle the key drivers, suggesting their relative importance where the data permits.

**Social norms**
Socio-cultural norms push both parents and girls toward child marriage. It is ‘elders who support this practice the most’. In fact a kebele administrator stated that ‘people listen to and obey elders, even if the youth don’t like what they have to say’. As a school director explained:

The reasons for child marriage practices are associated with the cultural and traditional beliefs of the community including the desire or need to maintain the family’s good name and social standing. There is also a personal interest – mostly among fathers – in creating bonds or relationships with families of choice.

Social norms relating to girls’ virtue is also a key driver of child marriage in this kebele. Fears of promiscuity feature prominently in the interviews, particularly amongst male interviewees. One testimony from the community timeline exercise indicated:

We want to support girls not to marry before 18 but they themselves also have problem. We want to protect them. They don’t keep their virginity till they are 18. They destroy the culture of staying virgin till they are 18 or married. They bring shame to us. They bring further problems like children before marriage, diseases and so on. So we have them married under age for their sake and well-being since they bring a lot problems because of free sexual behaviour.

Arguments concerning the problems that are perceived to accompany promiscuity are used to rebut those of officials campaigning against child marriage. The woreda justice office representative explained that:

it is difficult for a girl to get married if she has been playing around with boys. She may lose her virginity and that is not acceptable to the future husband in our culture. They expect a bride must be a virgin when she gets married, but fear rape. So in the discussions the parents tell us “what you are saying is true and we believe it is right but we have a lot of problems afterwards if the girls are not married in time”.

Community timeline participants explained that virginity is a desired quality in brides and that ‘if one young man marries a girl and if he finds her empty [without virginity], he can return her to her parents. That is a silent disowning and humiliation for the girl and her family. To avoid this problem, the family wants to facilitate marriage of their girls as early as possible’. In fact if a girl is found not to be a virgin, she is sent back to her parent’s home ‘on a donkey’ to humiliate her and her family.

Promiscuity amongst girls is perceived to relate directly to their broader empowerment. A community timeline respondent said:

Today, girls or women go to school. They are equal in all things with men, they speak in meetings, they lead and they are empowered. They are working and walking freely with men, holding their heads high today. So some members of the community say that due to these freedoms, they are not preserving their virginity.

As a result of such social norms, family pressure on young girls to get married remains high, and they in turn have become socialised to believe that child marriage is right. One married girl said:

Oh, it is good to get married. What could happen to me if I would be unmarried till this time? (Laughing). It is better to stay married and then there is no problem if you look older after you get married. Otherwise, a girl in this community can’t stay virgin; how can she?

Another girl stated that she would commit suicide if she remained unmarried. Other girls also indicated that they were willing to be married but on probing revealed that their ‘willingness’ to get married was after their parents pressured them to get married in the first place. Similarly, a kebele administrator explained that, for the most part:

It is parents pushing them to get married. There are some who want to get married, but they don’t make it very clear – it is not overtly expressed as such. Most are obliged by their parents to get married.

**Limited legal awareness and/or acceptance of legal norms on age of marriage**
Given that girls typically marry at the age of 15-17, it is important to understand whether parents are unaware of the legal age of marriage or simply do not the legal norms. Overall, our findings suggested that while awareness is patchy, those who are aware of the legal age of marriage are unwilling to abide by it.

The kebele administrator explained:

As a theory, people know it and accept it. They don’t argue against it from theoretical perspective but they don’t practise it. For example, we stopped the already
The government has disseminated the laws, [but] the area leadership here should have taken the laws seriously and punished those who violate it. The leadership is not strict about the laws. In the community here, the majority do not accept the law at heart. They don’t believe in it. They should fear the law: the law must be applied seriously.

Community timeline members

arranged marriage of my brother’s daughter due to age – that was 15 years ago – and people still insult or scorn us about that decision.

Multiple respondents were of the view that the family law is not ‘useful’ or applicable to their community, but this was because they incorrectly assumed that under-age marriage referred to girls under 15 years, not under 18 years. Young girls who were forced to get married also said that they were unsure whether their parents knew about the law, but that it may not have made a difference if they did. Moreover, observation during the fieldwork highlighted that there was a cohort of married girls of 15-16 years of age who lived in very close proximity to the kebele administration office, but that no action had been taken to ensure they were in school and not married as children.

In instances where girls do know about the marriage law, they do not have any legal awareness of who to turn to for help. One girl shared the ineffectiveness of the concerned bodies and stated that there was ‘no medical check-up before she got married’, nor was there any awareness raising activity about underage marriage except in school. Other girls also shared their frustration and asked ‘where can I go’ to complain? The kebele administrator said:

All, the work of police, women’s affairs office, the court and so on have problems. The court insists that there must be clear evidence and the police are not always able to produce evidence. The age of a girl is dependent on witnesses or a urine test etc. All in all, the process is not effective.

There was one instance of a 15 year old girl who knew about the legal avenues to avoid child marriage and chose to seek out her teacher’s help when her father pressured her to get married. In this case, even though the teacher visited their house and spoke to the parents, her father responded by saying ‘this is not your business. It is my daughter. I know how old she is’. The end result was that the teacher was unable to negotiate with him and the girl ended up getting married.

Other interviewees also provided instances of arguments with legal bodies against the marriage law. Key informant interviews with the WCYA representative at both the kebele and woreda level said that mothers argue with them: ‘I gave birth to her. I know the year of her birth. What is she for you? How can you prove her age?’ Officials reported that they too are at an impasse given that girls are pressured by family members to present marriage as their own preference:

Some tell you that they want to marry because they are pressured by their parents to say so. If you ask the name of the boy she wants to marry she will tell you the name and place because she is guided to say that by her parents. But the girls have not actually reached the time and situation where they decide to marry someone. It is rare.

In some cases, members of the community had begun to report planned instances of child marriage resulting in their cancellation, but have stopped doing so in order to avoid conflicts with their neighbours (KII, school director). Students who attempt to educate community members that ‘girls should not get married underage and should be allowed to continue with their studies’ report that ‘the parents are not willing to listen [and] start to hate [them]’. Others also discussed the lack of enforcement of laws in the community.

Limited access or quality or beliefs in schooling

Another factor contributing to child marriage in Tahtay Adiabo woreda is the lack of awareness of any benefits of education. As a school director stated, ‘the traditional attitudes of the community concerning girls’ schooling is that they believe that girls will not be successful in schooling. They cannot bring changes in their lives if they are educated and rather they should get married and bear children’. Moreover, the majority of students do not continue their education after grade 8 owing to economic constraints. The closest secondary school is in Adi Hageray, some 15 kilometres away, increasing the cost of pursuing secondary education, including the costs of lodging or rent. Girls are generally unable to secure the permission of their parents to go to Adi Hageray for secondary education and are likely to get married instead (FGD, boys).

Adult interviewees also expressed concern that investing in girls’ education may not yield a return owing to high rates of failure and lack of vocational opportunities:

Because the government is not giving the young people jobs, those who failed school are loitering around and getting into undesirable lives. The community has a complaint about the government about not giving jobs to these young girls. (Community timeline)

Moreover, both care economy burdens and social norms require girls to be engaged in household chores and place more value on domestic responsibilities than on finishing their education. Due to cultural beliefs, customs and traditional attitudes:
Females are limited to domestic chores and other productive activities such as going to the market and, as a result, the amount of time they spend on chores and other activities reduces the time and energy they spend in schooling, affecting their academic performance.

One girl whose father did not see any benefit of school engaged her in ‘preparing traditional baskets and mining gold’ so that she could ‘contribute to improving their economic situation’. It is also difficult to return to school after marriage given that expectations around a dutiful daughter-in-law involve helping the mother-in-law with baking injera, fetching water and cooking sauce.

Other girls who themselves choose to stay at home to help their families understand the benefit of schooling when it is often too late. One girl said that she regretted not attending school when she saw friends reading for enjoyment and fun during her honeymoon. She felt bad that she had not attended school and wished someone had persuaded her to go to school.

Changes in patterns of child marriage over time
While social norms still play a significant role in shaping marriage-related behaviours, patterns of marriage by age and type are starting to shift over time. Girls used to get married at around the age of 12, but ‘with a lot of campaigning and awareness raising, there was improvement’ (kebele administrator). However, ‘now it has completely relapsed. Though the police and woreda administration keep saying that it is not allowed by the law and it is dangerous, people don’t take it seriously’.

Others report changes in wedding ceremony practices, with ceremonies today being larger and more expensive than those in the past. One reason given for this is that the number of people invited has been increasing as families have started inviting the whole neighbourhood. Moreover, money and gold were not considered as marriage gifts in the past but have become a central component of bride price today.

Protective or exit mechanisms from negative effects of child marriage
As we have discussed elsewhere, while child marriage contravenes both international and Ethiopian law, its effects vary depending on the interplay of local practices and beliefs. In some cases, local cultural norms help to ensure that girls are protected from the worst effects of child marriage – e.g. cultural practices that prevent excessively early sex or pregnancy until girls are physically mature or allow girls to continue with their schooling even if married (Jones et al., 2014; Presler-Marshall et al., 2015). In the case of Tahtay Adiabo woreda, despite widespread child marriage, we noted several protective mechanisms, described in the following sub-sections.

Girls’ own decision-making power in family planning
One of the ways in which girls are protected despite the high prevalence of child marriage relates to family planning. Multiple married respondents indicated that they are using birth control methods to prevent early pregnancy. In some cases the couple are able to discuss contraception openly. In one case, a married girl ‘discussed it with [my husband], with my parents and my mother-in-law. They advised me to
have the insertion. We discussed whether to use the one for one month or the one for three years or four years'.

While girls are empowered to make decisions for their sexual reproductive health, they are unable to make decisions regarding child marriage itself. However, in one 15 year old, married girl's case an agreement was reached with her father that she would go through with the wedding ceremony given his strong interest in reciprocating his neighbours and peers, but then that she would seek a divorce shortly afterwards, given that she was against the marriage from the beginning. According to this girl, her father wanted to ‘invite close family and neighbours and reciprocate. Otherwise there would be bad blood from the community’. As a result, she went ahead with the marriage but told him that she will not continue the marriage after the ceremony. She said:

I regretted my decision afterwards and wondered why I was not strong enough to refuse the wedding. But I was happy at least that the divorce gave me a way out.

Growing parental support for education

Although only a small minority of parents in the study supported their daughters’ education, their presence is indicative of a small and gradual change. One mother said: ‘I wish for my daughters to get enough education and know more and live more comfortably. At least I expect this – I expect them decide things themselves and rule themselves – without any influence’. Her daughter nevertheless got married when she was in ninth grade: ‘my son-in law is good. He is likely to let my daughter to continue in school. This is expected from him. I want him to continue school too’. According to another mother, this slow change is attributed in part to parents’ regrets over not having pursued their own educations. Others state that families invest in girls’ education in part because they expect daughters to support them financially later in life (more so than boys) (FGD, boys). In addition, work opportunities for girls, particularly gold mining, can enable them to save for their own secondary education and to cover the expense of living apart from their parents in Adi Hageray. In other cases, girls chose to stay with their parents ‘because [they] want me to continue my education’. One girl chose to stay in milisot till she finished her education since her husband’s home was very far away. Had there been a school near his town, she would have gone to live with him ‘but only if she could continue her education’. Girls who are in education are in a better

Box 43: Making the best out of her situation – Shaina’s story

Shaina is one of six siblings (two females) and lives at home. She lost her mother when she was seven years old. Shaina describes her father as one who ‘defended her and protected her’ from her grandparents who wanted her to get married. She says, ‘social norms here are bad. If a lady remains unmarried after 18, there are insults’. Though her father initially resisted the elders and wanted her to continue school, over time the elders ‘convinced her father’ and she got married last year. Shaina had aspired to get married only after 18 years of age and says that her ‘focus was on school’. However, the engagement was agreed upon between the families when she was 15 and she had no choice. Moreover she too felt the effects of peer pressure and ‘worried’ about what others would say when she went to fetch water or went to the gold mine.

She has had her honeymoon and is now back at home and back in school. Her priority is to focus on her education since she ‘likes going to school’. Her father also supports her education and her sister’s and has ‘promised to teach [them] till the end’. Importantly her father also negotiated when the marriage was settled that the groom would go back to school and also support his daughter’s education. Both Shaina and her father vow to ‘protect’ the youngest daughter in the house from child marriage and he regrets what happened to Shaina: ‘Child marriage is a bad culture among our friends and relatives’. Shaina attributes her strong understanding of the harmful effects of child marriage to what she has learnt in school.

Shaina now hopes to follow the footsteps of her role model, her neighbour who has completed 10th grade, lives in the city, and chosen her own spouse. She hopes to be a teacher one day and influence others to know the difference between right and wrong.
position to refuse marriage (see Box 43). A community timeline participants said ‘these days almost all families are really eager for their children to advance in education, so they don’t object if any child is capable and willing to continue in their studies’.

Existing programming
Programming interventions can play an important role in either spearheading social norm change around child marriage or helping to accelerate changes already afoot in a given locality. In the case of Tahtay Adiabo, programming efforts to date have been quite limited.

Strengths
Among the strengths of existing programming are the health extension workers and the sexual and reproductive services the health centre provides. The head of the woreda WCYA said:

Health services is one of the areas our woreda is good at. Girls use it from the time they start experiencing menstruation. It is actually a 100%. In every kebele, every three months birth control methods are provided. Sometimes the girls or women ask us themselves. There is very good availability for such services. They don’t like tablets because they are boring to take every day. They want the three-month prevention injection. The third option is for four years and so a few opt for that. The three-month one is the most popular.

Deeply entrenched norms, however, continue to get in the way of successful programming. As the woreda WCYA head explained:

Sometimes if people see a young girl using these contraceptives they assume that this lady is not fit for marriage and she might be going with many men. We also do not encourage young girls who are with their families to use it because they don’t necessarily need it. But because only the health worker and the girl do the procedure, it is not that much of problem. Many girls and women use it without anybody knowing about it, so it is not a big problem.

Another notable strength is that some planned child marriages have been prevented by local government interventions. Though this is contradictory to in-depth interviews from local residents themselves, key informant interviewees noted how efforts have attempted to stop child marriages and been successful in some cases. But as the head of WCYA described, people do not fear the law and this continues to hinder efforts.

Weaknesses
Existing programming efforts face a number of challenges. One reason for dropping out of school is that rural areas girls enrol in school later, at around 8-10 years old: a representative at the woreda education office said, ‘As the result, they would be 18 years old or more when they got to grade 9 or 10. These girls get affected by child marriage at high school level’. Since girls join school late, they are unable to finish their education given cultural expectations of marriage between 15 and 17 years of age. Moreover, organisations such as the World Food Programme (WFP) have stopped providing support to girls in school. The WFP used to provide food services but as per the school director, the organisation has informed them that ‘they are now going to send their support to some other places but the exact reason for stopping support is not known’. Together these contribute to lower attendance and higher chances of dropping out of school.

Weaknesses also plague the health services that are generally doing well in this kebele. One respondent who had a child immediately after marriage stated that ‘she didn’t plan to have a baby but had no idea how to prevent pregnancy’. This is further collaborated with testimony from the health extension representative who indicated that ‘school students above 14 generally do not come to take contraceptives from the health posts’. This suggests
that some girls in need of family planning services continue to fall through the cracks and require better follow-up to prevent early pregnancy.

Poor follow-up by the government has also contributed to the continuing trend of child marriage, according to the kebele administrator. He said that:

The government should do a serious and intense campaign of awareness creation for church leaders and elders. This is an area needing a lot of attitudinal change. Some years ago, the government started doing it very well but stopped and that is why the trend relapsed now. The government has to do more than drafting a law. It has to create awareness about the law, and follow it up and ensure adherence to it. Culturally all marriages occur in January here. The government could do a lot of campaigning in December just before the wedding season.

Entry points for programming

Our research identified a numbers of ways forward for Tahtay Adiabo, including:

- Because church leaders and elders set the standard for community behaviour, and are currently encouraging child marriage, it is vital that programming begin first by helping them understand the risks of and alternatives to child marriage.
- Since the law in Tahtay Adiabo is largely invisible and unenforced, there is a need to teach both parents and girls about the legal age for marriage (18, not 15), help girls identify champions to whom they could report unwanted marriages and assist local officials in sourcing proof of girls’ ages so that they can effectively intervene.
- Because parents push girls into marriage, either to “protect” their purity or to gain the prestige of hosting a wedding, they need to be taught about the risks of child marriage and the advantages of adult marriage. Parents who send their daughters to secondary school should be publicly lauded and care should be taken to link parents’ concerns regarding sexual purity with education about contraception.
- Parents should be incentivised to support their children’s education. Given that the opportunity-costs of sending children to school are high, as students have less time to herd cattle, educational scholarships that offset other costs should be considered.
- Adolescents should be provided with education about SRH and access to contraceptives.

Respondents in Tahtay Adiabo also mentioned links between schooling and cattle rearing. Specifically, they reported that efforts need to be aimed at teaching families about effective ways of raising cattle so that their children can be freed from herding and sent to school. As the justice office representative said:

It is important to unite in supporting those who are very poor. People have to learn to keep their animals in one place and be effective through better tying and feeding methods. They need to save by selling them in time so they can send their children to school.
Drivers of early marriage in Jikawo, Gambela

Key messages

Age of marriage
Jikawo has the highest rate of child marriage in Ethiopia, with the bulk of girls married before the age of 15 and many respondents believing that the practice is becoming more common because girls are entering puberty earlier due to better nutrition.

Drivers of child marriage
The dominant driver of child marriage in Jikawo is based on economic gains from bride price exchange. The community does not engage in trade and thus gains from marrying off daughters are essential to secure the marriage prospects of sons or to afford additional wives.

Peer pressure and a desire for independence among adolescents, especially given the context of strict rules about girls’ virginity, are also key factors in perpetuating child marriage—with some couples marrying without permission and against their parents’ will.

Factors protecting against child marriage
Girls’ interest in education is expanding rapidly—giving them reason to delay marriage.

The potential to earn a higher bride price for more educated girls is helping to keep girls in school for longer, although secondary school enrolment rates for girls are very low.

Marriage via stranger abduction appears to have been eliminated.

Priority entry points
Attention should be directed to growing local awareness of rights more generally. Currently there is little awareness, even among justice officials, that child marriage is illegal, that children have the right to go to school or that women are not property—but have property rights of their own.

Girls need access to psycho-social and educational support to help them understand their own rights and plan their own independent futures.

Girls need better information about and access to contraception.
Overview

Jikawo woreda, in Gambela’s Nuwer Zone, has the highest rate of child marriage in Ethiopia. According to the 2007 census, 43.9% of all girls between the ages of 10 and 17 were already married. This is 10.5 percentage points higher than the nearest hotspot (33.4%) and 31 percentage points above the national average (12.9%).

Our fieldwork was undertaken in Kuachthiang kebele, based on recommendations from the Bureau of Women’s and Children’s Affairs and because of accessibility constraints (see Box 44 for an overview of the key woreda characteristics).

Marriage patterns

Age of marriage

As noted above, with over four in ten girls marrying as children, Jikawo has the highest rate of child marriage in the country. Furthermore, and critical to understanding child marriage in the woreda, most girls marry as very young adolescents. Nearly 44% of girls between the ages of 10 and 14 were already married at the time of the 2007 census. This is 14 percentage points above the second highest woreda (Kelafo in Somali Region). The rate of marriage for older girls (44.1%) indicates that when older adolescents in Jikawo are married, they are overwhelmingly likely to have married as young adolescents (see Table 1 below). Semantic debates aside, in Jikawo, “early marriage” is genuinely “child marriage”.

Table 15: Percent of girls who are married, by age, by residence (Source: 2007 Census)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Jikawo</th>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>Nuwer Zone</th>
<th>Gambela</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls 10-14</td>
<td>43.9%</td>
<td>1st</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls 15-17</td>
<td>44.1%</td>
<td>21st</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>26.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Our respondents largely confirmed census statistics—and suggested that child marriage may be becoming even more common. An adult in a community timeline exercise commented, “Things are changing and it is difficult for us.”

Box 44: Jikawo overview

Kuachthiang has a population of nearly 6,000 and has only recently been recognised as a town. Its residents are primarily pastoralists—but some are government employees or self-employed in the catering business. The town has a dry weather road that links it to region’s capital, its own primary school and a secondary school that serves both the town and the surrounding more rural areas. School enrolment is low in Kuachthiang—and boys are more likely to attend than girls. Of the 515 students in primary school, 285 are boys. Of the 280 children in secondary school, only 75 are girls.

Jikawo’s population density, like that of the broader region, is very low—primarily because of annual flooding. Much of the population migrates during the rainy season, taking to the highlands with their cattle until the waters recede. The local population has developed a water-resistant form of housing – roofless clay huts – which are used to protect livestock during the worst of the rainy season.

The woreda’s economy is primarily agricultural, although most people are pastoralists who depend on their livestock for income. Local crops, which include maize, sorghum, and rice, are planted along the flood plains of river embankments and harvested in December and January. While productivity is low, due to flooding, pests and poor transportation infrastructure, Jikawo is food secure.

The majority of Jikawo’s population is Protestant (84%)—although 9% practise traditional religions and a tiny handful are Catholic or Ethiopian Orthodox.

Jikawo woreda has 21 primary schools, five secondary schools and one preparatory school. According to 2015 Ministry of Education data, few children transition to 5th grade and the gender gap is significant. Of the 8,500 children in first-cycle primary school, 5,000 are boys. Of the 3,900 children in second-cycle primary school, 2,300 are boys. Of the 1,800 children in secondary school, 1,200 are boys. Of the 500 children in preparatory school, only 49 are girls. No technical and vocational training facilities are located in the woreda.

Gambela region now has 44 secondary schools, up from 21 five years ago. It has 258 primary schools, up from 205 five years ago.

Polygamy is practiced in Gambela but FGM/C is not.
Those young people have their own lives and it is different from in the past. The girls are mostly pregnant at the age of 13 or 14: you can try to ask her husband for cows, but you will get no cows. They will also show a lack of respect to their parents. So at the moment early marriage is increasing.” Adolescents and young adults, who often hold very different views than community leaders, also felt that child marriage was becoming more common. One boy, for example, reported that “The marriage age now is 13 or 14, which was never the case before.” A girl added that the marriage of young adolescents dates only “since the year 2000.”

Respondents, who admittedly have difficulty with ages and time, felt that there were likely two reasons that the age of marriage has dropped in recent years. First, with better nutrition, girls are entering puberty earlier. In a culture where puberty signals readiness for marriage, earlier puberty leads to earlier marriage. Second, as more young people choose their own partners, younger men and boys, who had previously been forced to wait for their parents’ arrangements, are beginning to marry—usually to younger girls.

Wedding arrangements and ceremony
There are two main types of weddings in Jikawo: religious weddings, where couples are married in the protestant church, and traditional weddings, which are arranged by parents and follow older, less formal, customs (see Box 45). In both, bride price—the payment given by the groom and his family to the bride’s family—tends to be important. Traditionally, given Jikawo’s pastoralism, bride price was paid in cattle. While some respondents noted that that cash or grain equivalents are becoming increasingly commonplace, most felt that cattle were still key to marriage.

**Question:** Nowadays, can a person get married without cattle?

**Answer:** No he can’t. He must have some cattle. (Intergenerational trio interview with son)

This emphasis on cattle as a medium of exchange in some cases works to delay marriage, as younger boys and men are usually unable to raise the benchmark 22 cows and 5 oxen required to “purchase” a bride. Traditionally, this meant that men did not marry until they were well into their 20s.18

Recently, however, adolescent boys (between 15 and 18) are forging their own new paths to earlier marriage. In some cases they are obtaining support or credit from family and kinship networks—so that they can pay bride price earlier. In other cases they are negotiating drawn out ‘payment’ schedules. For example, one respondent spoke about a 17-year-old boy in the community who had recently paid 10 cows for his young wife—and promised to send another five as soon as he was able. Many respondents felt that while such arrangements allowed boys access to marriage sooner, girls’ were left more vulnerable. They explained that in such arrangements young wives could be seen as everyone’s ‘property’ or servant and generally maltreated.

Respondents in Jikawo told us that a new form of marriage, one that has only emerged in the last few years, can allow boys to avoid bride price altogether. They call it “secret” or “informal” marriage and it is contracted solely between two adolescents—without the consent, or even knowledge, of parents. Adolescents reported that “girls and boys are marrying themselves without the knowledge of their families, which never happened before.” Most agreed that the practice is increasingly common, although

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18 According to the 2011 DHS, the median age for marriage in Gambela is 17.1 for women and 23.9 for men (for adults aged 25-40).
they also noted that some girls’ families refuse to relinquish their daughters without cattle. An adolescent explained:

“There is a third type [of marriage] which is done by the agreement between boy and girls without informing their parent, but when they go to their home secretly, the boy’s family will accept the girl and they will send someone to inform the girl’s family, and then they will come and take their cows. But if the boy’s family has no cows, the girls’ family will take back their daughter.”

Key informants in the community timeline exercise noted that young men who did not have sufficient cattle for bride price used to practise abduction. They reported that this has been eliminated in recent years, although our research in other woredas in Gambela leads us to suspect that this may not be the case.

Polygamy and divorce
While it is acceptable in Jikawo for men to have up to nine wives, polygamy is increasingly uncommon because it is expensive. A KI reported, “Culturally, men should marry more than one wife. Sometimes if he has a lot of livestock he can marry up to five women.” Community timeline participants told us that the church, which in other areas of the country has been quite active in speaking out against polygamy, has been largely silent in Gambela—which has one of the highest rates of polygamy in the country.

Divorce is not uncommon in Jikawo. Government officials noted that there was a ‘high level’ of divorce and that after divorce girls usually migrate to Sudan for work. Several other respondents, however, noted that divorce usually leads to a girl returning to her family home. Notably, according to both community members and government officials, when divorced girls return home, they have right to take personal property with them. Indeed, as girls and women are seen as property themselves, they do not even have custody rights to their own children. While they might be permitted to raise their daughters until they are of marriageable age—to trade them for cattle. A respondent explained:

In Nuer culture, the women have no right to take any property, even children, because they perceive that a woman is like your property that you bought in the market with 27 cows.

When girls and women are widowed in Jikawo, they are typically inherited into the family of the deceased—usually by a brother.

Local drivers of early marriage
Economic drivers
In Jikawo, girls—like cattle—are a medium for exchange. Economic drivers of child marriage are paramount. A mother explained, “In our culture men are seen as superior to women and men see women as something they buy.” A community timeline participant added that girls are seen as a “source of income”. Indeed, a father told us that it was acceptable for a father to force his daughter to marry “because she has to pay back her parents because they fed her from the time of her childhood” and a mother in a focus group discussion told us that a girl is likely ‘to be chased away if she decides not to marry’.

The social pressure on girls to marry as children is accordingly high. While girls know that for themselves “there is no advantage to early marriage”, they also know that for their families their marriages are very valuable. A 14 year old noted, “The advantage is the cows that will be paid to my family.”

The economic importance of girls is further highlighted by a custom that has evolved when an older man is no longer able to father children. In that case he may request that one of his grown sons sleep with one of his wives (not the biological mother of the son in question) in order to produce more daughters—who then become known as the father’s children, rather than the son’s, children

Social norms, beliefs and attitudes
Social norms also contribute to encouraging child marriage in Jikawo. One male respondent, for instance, noted that he felt it was ‘compulsory’ for him to get married because girls of his age were often already married and he was being pressured by his peers.

Adults’ beliefs about girls’ sexuality—and virginity—are also an important driver of child marriage. Given that contraception is still controversial, even for married girls who worry that “people would hate me and have a bad attitude towards me”, girls and boys may wish to get married as soon as possible in order to engage in sexual relationships without the risk of pre-marital pregnancy. This is especially important since girls who are suspected of being “impure” typically bring lower bride price—and increased household tensions.

19 According to the 2011 DHS, the median age for marriage in Gambela is 17.1 for women and 23.9 for men (for adults aged 25-40).

132 Jikawo woreda
Social norms about filial piety also push girls into marrying as children. Girls reported that that they have no choice but to do as their fathers tell them:

*When the man asks you to marry, and you say no, he can continue to ask your family and he might be accepted by your father. Your father will then inform you that he believes this man, so he will marry you. Therefore, you have no option and you have to agree with their idea.*

Indeed, mothers added that should a girl defy her parents, she may be risking death:

*Answer: He could tell you something that you will badly affect you in your life [curse you], and according to Nuer culture, if you refuse your parents decision, they will tell you something that could lead you to death in the future.* (Intergenerational trio interviews with a mother)

While girls’ access to schooling is slowing expanding (as discussed below), overall respondents were clear that thus far social norms about the value of girls have kept them out of school and pushed them into marriage. Recent shifts that reward the parents of more educated girls with higher bride price not-withstanding, a community timeline participant reported that parents refuse to let their daughters go to school and “keep them at home and let them play with boys”. Other respondents noted that while married girls could go to school—if their husbands allowed them to—this option is closed to most girls because only “husbands who are educated” would consider the option. Institutional support from the ‘supply side’ also seems to be entirely absent, leaving married girls entirely dependent on the capacity and willingness of their kinship network to support and facilitate continued education. A married, in-school girl told her that “there is no special support given for us.”

**Independent decision-making**

As noted above, recent shifts towards own-choice marriage in Jikawo are also driving child marriage. While some adult women—even younger women—frame the emergence of choice negatively, emphasising that today’s adolescents “do not respect their family” (20 year old woman), other women frame things more positively. A mother, for example, explained that in the past “girls had no right to choose their husband. Their family would choose, and whomever they chose, even if he was an old man who was not able to walk, you had to accept their choice”.

Adolescents, on the other hand, were more uniformly positive about their own agency in choosing marriage partners. While a handful said that they would defer to the interests of their parents and family – “it is better for my family to select for me” (intergenerational trio interview with a daughter) – most, with the short-sightedness typical of adolescence, saw only the positives of choice (see Box 46).

Respondents had very different opinions about what is driving recent shifts towards independent decision-making. Some emphasised a changing political context and rights-based discourses. Others emphasised adolescents’ desire to leave the home and their interest in sexual relationships.

For instance, a focus group discussion with fathers resulted in a consensus that after the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front ‘introduced rights for everyone’, marriage culture changed. Fathers reported that emergent democracy has provided adolescents with the right ‘to choose their partners themselves’. Mothers, on the other hand, told us that girls are choosing to marry early because “they simply decide to have their own home in early age because they want to enjoy sex freely at an early age”. Other respondents simply explained that adolescents ‘have their own thoughts’ and could not be told what to do.

While adolescents’ access to decision-making is growing, “official” approval of the marriage process is still required in most cases. A mother noted that when adolescents enter a secret marriage—without parental permission—kebele officials step in to ensure that bride price is paid:

*That marriage is not legal because it is done without the knowledge of their parent, and the children meet outside of the home. The kebele administrator will solve the problem and cows will be paid to the girls’ family; the number of the cows should be 15.* (Intergenerational trio interview with a mother)
Local protective factors against early marriage
The main protective factors that help Jikawo's girls and boys to navigate away from child marriage are their basic level of awareness of the health implications of child marriage and pregnancy, their appreciation of the potential economic advantages of education, and their understanding of the marriage law.

Awareness of health risks
Girls and mothers involved in our research have a general understanding that child marriage and adolescent pregnancy have “effects on girls’ health” (Intergenerational interview a woman, 20) that can be dangerous. They also understand that adult marriage ensures that girls “will be mature physically and mentally” (Intergenerational interview a woman, 18). Much of this basic understanding appears to come from the school environment—with not only girls, but mothers, reporting that “there are many useful things we learned in school, even the problem of early marriage— we learn it in school.”

However, more detailed knowledge about the health risks of child marriage, and how to prevent them, appears to be highly scattered. For instance, a focus group discussion with in-school girls revealed a fairly good understanding of the risks of marriage and sexual activity. One girl explained that “married people especially are going to the clinic and using different medicine for family planning and disease protection. Unmarried people also use different disease protection during sex.” Other girls, however, had not only a more limited knowledge of options—but also stronger beliefs that contraception was appropriate only for married women. Girls in one group, for example, reported that while adolescent pregnancy was a problem in their school, they had no access to contraception. One said, “We are not using the medicine to protect ourselves. We don’t know that medicine. We have never even heard its name, so we don’t know how to protect against pregnancy.” Another, age 14, added, “No medicine has been given to us to protect ourselves from pregnancy because we are young and that medicine should be for mature girls.”

Several adults felt that girls were being given information and options regarding reproductive health and were choosing to ignore them due to other imperatives. For instance, government officials said they thought that girls were avoiding contraception because they wished to become pregnant—as they were largely unaware of the broader demands of motherhood. Similarly, a focus group discussion with mothers of adolescents revealed they thought that there was ‘a lot of training [about health risks] in schools’, but that because girls had little interest in school itself, they had little interest in preventing pregnancy. Mothers concluded that if the benefits of education were brought into sharper focus, then girls would apply the knowledge they had received about protecting themselves from pregnancy.

Schooling and empowerment
While mothers may feel that girls are not interested in education, many of the girls involved in our research were keenly interested in attending school—sometimes to university level:

"I want to be married at the age of 16 because I want to pursue my education." (In-depth interview, girl, aged 13)

"20 years old will be my age of marriage, I must first complete my education." (Intergenerational trio interview – daughter)

"I want to marry after I complete school because I want to be independent economically." (In-depth interview, girl aged 15)

A confluence of two trends is working to improve girls’ school attendance. First, the government is investing in new school infrastructure. As noted above, the number of secondary schools in the region has more than doubled in the past five years. Second, in recent years more educated girls have brought their fathers a higher bride price:

"I educated my daughter and she completed diploma, so after that she got married and her husband paid 35 cows because she is educated and this is an advantage." (Community timeline exercise)

"It is educated girls who can get a husband easily. If she completes her education, the number of cows that her husband brings will increase." (Intergenerational trio interview a father)

This instrumental valuation of girls’ worth does not appear to empower them in the short term. Outside of the fact that few parents appear willing, given enrolment statistics, to consider the potential trade-offs between the threats to girls’ virginity versus the financial rewards of allowing them more schooling, there is the reality that in Jikawo the notion of “investing in girls” is purely pecuniary. It may also be the case that when girls bring the highest bride price, they are effectively trapped in even the most exploitative and abusive relationships because they know that their parents will be unwilling to return the cattle for which they were effectively sold.

That said, it is likely that in the longer-term, improvements in girls’ education will bear more positive fruit. Not only does global evidence suggest that in-school girls are relatively more protected from child marriage, especially when schools deliberately foster the aspirational thinking that can help them prioritise learning and delay sexual debut, but over time it may also help produce educated women who are capable of growing their own livelihoods—providing role models for the next generation.
Interviews with in-school girls suggest that the seeds of future progress may already be planted. Some, for example, show better awareness of the marriage law. Others have more understanding of the benefits of contraception. In-depth interviews also suggest that schools are beginning to foster parents’ awareness about the benefits of education.

**Legal age of marriage**

Awareness of the marriage law is nascent—but growing. While students had been introduced to the minimum age of 18 at school (for girls, for boys the minimum age for legal marriage is 20), there was widespread confusion even among adolescents about customary law versus national law (see Box 49 below). Parents, on the other hand, were confused about the relationship between national law and religious law. For example, mothers reported that religious law is connected with modern changes taking place in society and while this law supports the promotion of girls’ education, the bible is also said to dictate that a girl should not marry before 18.

**Box 47: Views of boys and girls on the legal age of marriage in Jikawo**

*We have been given training about early marriage which explains that the girl should be married when she is 18 years old and above, and that boys should get married when they are 20 years old and above. We understand that, but there are some people who are still not putting that into practice. If everyone was aware of it, all children would continue their education freely without thinking about marriage.*

Focus group discussion with boys

*Today there is no law regarding marriage but some years back there was a customary law that families and schools taught to children that marriage should take place at the age of 18 or above and sometime after a girl completes her education. Even though we used to learn that in the school we are not putting that teaching into practice.*

Focus group discussion with adolescent girls

**Existing programming**

Government programming activities to address early marriage in Jikawo are largely focused on six core areas: engaging in community dialogue to make people aware of the legal age of marriage, implementing laws on the basis of the ‘1-to-5’ Development Army networks, raising awareness among parents on the value of girls education, raising awareness on the health risks of early marriage by engaging health extension workers, providing cash transfers to orphan, and working with counsellors. Our research found no evidence of any programming run by NGOs 20, faith-based organisations or community-level membership organisations.

However, despite the theoretical commitments outlined above, the kebele administration is young and lacks the resources and capacity to effectively tackle child marriage. Indeed, even justice officials seemed largely unaware that child marriage is illegal.

A critical challenge, especially in light of early sexual debut, is the lack of access to contraception. Adolescents made several key points. First, the nearest health centre is a considerable distance from Jikawo. Boys noted the need to travel long distances to the regional capital (Gambela), which often proved unfruitful because of the lack of pharmaceutical stocks and/or language barriers in interacting with medical staff (who are often from other parts of Ethiopia and do not often speak the local language). Girls also noted a significant language barrier when trying to access services at the health centre and reported that translators were only irregularly available. Girls also noted that psycho-social counselling support services for advising girls on life choices were lacking in schools, and that awareness-raising regarding early marriage was largely conducted in a negative or punitive way, rather than using the more positive, aspirational approaches that adolescents tend to hear best.

**Entry points for programming**

According to the government officials involved in our research, the first point of entry in Jikawo should be raising awareness about the impacts of child marriage. Currently, they told us, awareness levels are very low—especially outside of more urban areas. This will, as noted above, require strengthening kebele and woreda institutions. Currently the bureaus of health, education and women’s affairs lack the human and financial resources to support any sort of programming in schools and in the community.

The Justice Officer emphasised that such awareness-raising needs to be done alongside broader legal-rights education on gender equality and cover topics such as property distribution after divorce and child custody. Currently, as noted above, women and girls are seen as property—not as citizens with rights to property.

Given the high levels of dependence on children—on boys for protection (especially in the context of ongoing tribal conflicts) and on girls in terms of the bride price they attract—shifting social norms to allow for a stronger focus on children’s rights is also critical. Parents and

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20 NGOs working in Jikawo are primarily focused on the refugee population—which is sizeable given that the region borders Sudan.
children need to understand that children have a right to an education and a right to remain unmarried. We suggest targeting parents through the 1:5 Development Army structure, which is of yet underutilised in Gambela, but has shown great promise in Amhara and Tigray.

Targeting children is best done through school. Adolescents suggested that girls would be more likely to stay in school if they were supported “financially by providing exercise books and writing materials”. They also noted a need for school clubs, where they could not only be provided with life-skills education, but informally support one another to address their own problems.

Key is to ensure that interventions for parents and children work together in mutually reinforcing ways that encourage more girls to aspire to independent futures—and more parents to let them (see Box 48).

**Box 48: Case study of Nybeda – my own independent future**

Nybeda is a 15 year old 6th grade student in Jikawo who is a positive outlier relative to her contemporaries. She not only has an advanced sense of self-empowerment, but she also has a strong family support structure that understands the dangers of early marriage.

Nybeda is determined to be economically independent. She knows that to achieve her goal she must stay in school, get her own job, marry as an adult, choose her own partner, and be the only wife in her future family. Critically, after Nybeda brought home the lessons about child marriage and independence she had learned at school, her parents support not only her final goal—but all the interim steps she has laid out in order to achieve it. Also critically, Nybeda knows that should she encounter any obstacles along her path, her older sister and her uncle, both of whom live nearby, will support her.

Nybeda is not typical of girls in Jikawo. Whereas most girls aspire to 8th grade, Nybeda aspires to finish at least secondary school. Similarly, while most girls ultimately do as they are told, as they recognise that their value to their families is in the cattle they can bring in marriage, Nybeda has helped her parents to understand that she is a person with a future of her own.
References


Appendix 1: Top 50 hotspots for child marriage, all girls 10-17, by woreda (2007 census) with report hotspot woredas highlighted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Wereda</th>
<th>% ever married, girls 10-17</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Gambela-REGION</td>
<td>JIKAWO-WEREDA</td>
<td>43.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 AMHARA-REGION</td>
<td>ALEFA-WEREDA</td>
<td>33.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 OROMIA-REGION</td>
<td>GIRJA-WEREDA</td>
<td>33.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 AMHARA-REGION</td>
<td>QUARIT-WEREDA</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 AMHARA-REGION</td>
<td>JAWI-WEREDA</td>
<td>31.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 OROMIA-REGION</td>
<td>FEDIS-WEREDA</td>
<td>31.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 AMHARA-REGION</td>
<td>QUARA-WEREDA</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 SOMALI-REGION</td>
<td>KELAFO-WEREDA</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 (RED) AMHARA-REGION</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 AMHARA-REGION</td>
<td>TAKUSA-WEREDA</td>
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<tr>
<td>11 AMHARA-REGION</td>
<td>JABI TEHINAN-WEREDA</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 AMHARA-REGION</td>
<td>SEMEN ACHEFER-WEREDA</td>
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<td>13 Gambela-REGION</td>
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<td>17 AMHARA-REGION</td>
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<td>18 AMHARA-REGION</td>
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<td>21 AMHARA-REGION</td>
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<td>27 AMHARA-REGION</td>
<td>MIRAB BELESA-WEREDA</td>
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<td>28 Gambela-REGION</td>
<td>WANTAWO-WEREDA</td>
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<td>29 AMHARA-REGION</td>
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<td>30 OROMIA-REGION</td>
<td>BEDESA/TOWN-WERESA</td>
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<td>31 AMHARA-REGION</td>
<td>GOZAMIN-WEREDA</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>32 BENISHANGUL-GUMUZ</td>
<td>DANGUR-WEREDA</td>
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<td>33 AMHARA-REGION</td>
<td>BAHIR DAR ZURIA-WEREDA</td>
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<td>34 AMHARA-REGION</td>
<td>SHEBEL BERIATA-WEREDA</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>35 S.N.N.P REGION</td>
<td>GORCHE-WEREDA</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
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<td>Region</td>
<td>Wereda</td>
<td>% ever married, girls 10-17</td>
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<td>36 AMHARA-REGION</td>
<td>ENARU ENAWGA-WEREDA</td>
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<td>ABE DENGORO-WEREDA</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>38 S.N.N.P</td>
<td>GURAFERDA-WEREDA</td>
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<td>39 AMHARA-REGION</td>
<td>DEBAY TILATGIN-WEREDA</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
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<td>GONCHA SISO ENESE-WEREDA</td>
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<td>41 OROMIA-REGION</td>
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<td>49 AMHARA-REGION</td>
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<td>50 S.N.N.P</td>
<td>WENAGO-WEREDA</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
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## Appendix 2: Number of interviews per site

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<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Total number of interviews</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chifra, Afar</td>
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<td>Alefa, Amhara</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aneded, Amhara</td>
<td>33</td>
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<td>Quarit, Amhara</td>
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<td>Jikawao, Gambela</td>
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<tr>
<td>Badessa, Oromia</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fedis, Oromia</td>
<td>29 + 4 photo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girja, Oromia</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gorche, SNNPRR</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tahtay Adiabo, Tigray</td>
<td>34 + 4 photo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3: Research instruments

Community mapping

Objective: a) to understand general community history and b) changes in norms around child marriage, girls’ schooling and employment, marriageability and age of first pregnancy.

Participants: include religious leaders, women’s development arm, elders, youth association leader, teacher

Expected length of interview: 2+ hours

Draw a timeline on a large sheet of paper or on the ground to map shifts at community level against the backdrop of major events in the country/district/community since 1990 (start of government of EPRDF)

In each case ask about:

- the type of change;
- probe on specific changes;
- timeframe for change – i.e. when did change start
- drivers of change – why are things changing (or not)
- participants’ views about changes – are they positive? Negative? Why?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of change</th>
<th>Example of issues to probe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impacts of political events</td>
<td>e.g. start of EPRDF govt; after 2005 presidential election;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrastructure changes</td>
<td>e.g. development of roads, transportation, new technology such as introduction of electricity or mobile phones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service changes</td>
<td>e.g. development of health posts; primary school; secondary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic changes</td>
<td>e.g. rising unemployment; land fragmentation; rise in external migration; introduction of PSNP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal changes</td>
<td>e.g. land reform; land titling for women; compulsory primary education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in attitudes and practices towards age of marriage</td>
<td>e.g. age of girl vs age of boy/man awareness of law on child marriage; enforcement of law;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in marriageability</td>
<td>e.g. importance of family with connections; importance of land; importance of economic wealth; importance of livestock; bride wealth vs dowry importance of level of education of girl;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in type of marriage</td>
<td>e.g. choice vs arranged; patriclocal/matrilocal/unilocal; polygamy vs monogamy; use of guida; cohabitation formal wedding ceremony vs underground ceremony vs no ceremony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in attitudes and practices of FGM/C</td>
<td>e.g. age of FGM/C; who performs circumcision; public ceremony or underground ceremony or no ceremony; rationale for cutting (e.g. cleanliness; marriageability; reduce sexual promiscuity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in attitudes and practices towards desirable age of first pregnancy</td>
<td>e.g changing attitudes towards contraception, abortion, awareness of risks of maternal ill-health or mortality as a result of early pregnancy; attitudes towards ideal family size</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of change</td>
<td>Example of issues to probe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in attitudes and practices towards divorce</td>
<td>e.g. women can initiate; accepted back into natal family; ability to remarry; level of stigma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in attitudes and practices towards girls’ education</td>
<td>e.g. positive; positive up to a certain level (e.g. 8th grade); concerned as limited links between education and gainful employment; equally important vs less important for boys; quality of education services; utility of education services and links to employment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Incentives and sanctions related to girls’ marriage:

- Why do parents want their girls to marry at an early age? What are they hoping to gain (either for themselves or the girl or the family at large)?
- What are their fears/what are they trying to avoid?
- How often do these gains or problems happen in reality?
- How do other community members view these consequences?
- If a girl’s parents wants her to get married early and she refuses, what happens?
- If a family is not willing to marry their daughter off early, what happens?
- If a girl gets married or cohabits early without informing her family what happens?
- If a girl gets pregnant before she is married, what happens?
- Why do girls want to get married early? What do they hope to gain? What are their concerns?
- Why do some girls want to get married later? What do they hope to gain? What are their possible concerns/fears?
- Are there specific people/groups who actively work to resist girls school attendance beyond primary level? Who are these people? Why do their opinion carry weight? / Why are they influential?
- Are there specific groups working to promote girls’ education beyond primary level? Who are they? [If national level actors] How are their views communicated/conveyed at local level? Does their opinion carry weight here? Why? (e.g. role of women’s associations)

Incentives and sanctions around girls’ education:

- If a family wants their daughter to continue in school beyond what most girls do, what happens? (Consequences re economic? Social? Legal? Mixed?)
- If a girl tries to stay in school beyond what her parents want, what happens? (Consequences re economic? Social? Legal? Mixed?)
- If the parents want the girl to continue her schooling, and she refused what happens? (Consequences re economic? Social? Legal? Mixed?)
- If the expected level of education for girls here differs from the legal level of compulsory education, how do people decide what to do? What motivates this decision-making process? What happens? (Consequences re economic? Social? Legal? Mixed?)

**Focus group discussions**

*Objective:* to understand average community members views on social norms and practices related to girls’ marriage and education

*Expected interview length:* 90 mins-120 mins

*Respondent types:* Total of four groups (approx. 5-8 participants per group – not from the community mapping):

- Adolescent girls (13-17) – married and unmarried
- Adolescent boys (13-17) – married and unmarried
- Adult women (25-50)
- Adult men (25-50)

*Warm up exercise:* Qualities of a marriage partner

[get the group to fill in the blanks... ask for quick responses]

- A good wife is/does ____________?
- A good husband is/does ____________?
- A bad wife is/does ____________?
- A bad husband is/does ____________?
Probe: reasons for these, change over time, similarities and differences with their parents, vary according to different types of girls/boys (sex status, religion, caste, ethnicity etc.)?

Marriage age

- What do you think is a good age for girls to be married? How about for boys? Do adults feel the same?
- What is the usual age of marriage for girls in this community?
- Are you aware of any laws related to age of marriage? What is your understanding of the law? If so, how did you learn? Has the law changed people's attitudes? Has the law changed what people do?
- What are some of the advantages for girls to marry early?
- What are some of the advantages if a girl marries later e.g. 20 years plus?
- What are some of the advantages if a girl doesn’t marry at all?
- For parents
- For girls
- Other family members [e.g. brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents]
- What are some of the disadvantages of marrying at an early age?
- Marrying later?
- Remaining single?
- For parents
- For girls
- Other family members [e.g. brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins]
- When do you want to get married? Why do you choose that age? What about intended first pregnancy?

Form of marriage

- We would like to talk about marriage in this community. Can you please describe the most common forms of marriage and marriage processes/practices here?
- Religious, civil and traditional
- Monogamy vs. Polygamy
- Formal ceremony vs underground ceremony vs no ceremony vs Co-habitation
- Bride wealth or Dowry
- Have these practices changed over time? Since when? Why/why not/ causes? What are your views/feelings on these changes?
- What kind of marriage do you want? Why?

Views on fertility

- What is the ideal age of first pregnancy?
- What is the usual size of the family here?
- What about the gender of the child? Does it make any difference to you, your husband, your parents/ parents-in-law?
- What if you can’t have a child?
- What if you have a child out of wedlock?
- How are these views/expectations different between you and your parents/ grandparents? Now/long ago?
- How many children do you want? Do you care whether your children are girls or boys?

Views on access to services

- Do adolescent girls have access to reproductive health services in this community? (contraception, safe abortion, professionally attended births)?
- What are some of the obstacles to service uptake? (e.g. awareness, language, attitudes of service providers, perceptions of quality/confidentiality, distance, opportunity costs)
- Do you have to be married to have access to these services? Is being married a barrier to access?
- Is there sufficient information about SRH accessible to girls in this community?
• In the case of domestic/gbv who can girls turn to for help? Are there specific services? What about legal aid? Is divorce an option? Why/why not?
• If a girl is divorced/abandoned/widowed how is she supported (e.g. do families take them back in)? Is there legal protection? If there is, do the courts treat girls equitably?

Views on education

• Do most children go to school here and until what age? Are there any differences between boys and girls?
• What are the expectations for sons vs daughters – if there are differences why?
• Do some girls not go to school? What influences this? Are there any particular groups of girls who are less likely to go to school and why? Are there particular groups of girls who are especially likely to leave school early? Is it different for boys? Why?
• Are there some ideas/customs/attitudes that promote or discourage girls’ education? Do these change with the age of the girl? Have these ideas/attitudes etc. changed over time? Why? In what ways?
• Are there specific people/groups who actively work to resist girls’ school attendance beyond primary level? Who are these people? Why does their opinion carry weight? / Why are they influential?
• Are there specific groups working to promote girls’ education beyond primary level? Who are they? [If national level actors] How are their views communicated/conveyed at local level? Does their opinion carry weight here? Why?
• Do community, traditional or religious leaders lead by example?

[Adolescents only]
Are the experiences of boys and girls similar or different in school? If different, why?

• Treatment by teachers – favouritism, discipline, abuse
• By peers
• Language
• Teaching/learning experience
• School environment – safety/sanitation
• Leadership/participation in schools
• Extra-curricular activities
• Sports
• Discipline/subjects
• Performance
• Retention/dropouts
• Transportation to and from school?
• Impact on learning/schooling of domestic responsibilities?

• Do you have vocational training in this community? For what sorts of jobs? Can both girls and boys participate? Does it help people find jobs?
• What has your school experience been like? Are you learning important and useful things? Do you think it is preparing you well for your future?
• What about your future plans about school? Beyond school? What thinking informs these plans? Are there barriers for you to achieve those plans?
• How does marriage affect a girls’ education trajectory? Do girls leave school to get married or are they already out of school before they are married?
• If girls are withdrawn for marriage...at what age? What do you think about this? Has it been changing?
• Are married girls allowed to go to school? Are you aware of any laws on this? Do you have any friends or relatives who have had any experience of this?
• Does education have any influence in the marriage payments [dowry or bride wealth]? For the girl? For the boy?
• Do you think being more educated makes you a better wife, mother, daughter-in-law? Or do you think this may create problems? [for example....]
• Do you think education makes boys/men better husbands/son-in-laws/brothers/fathers?
Views on jobs

- What do women in your community do for work?
- What do men in your community do for work?
- What do adolescent girls do?
- What do adolescent boys do?
- Who has an easier time finding work… Men or women? Boys or girls?
- Does girls' work and boys' work earn similar amounts of money? Respect?

Programming solutions

Please rank the following programming options in terms of most likely to least likely to bring about positive change in adolescent girls’ lives

- Awareness of the law on child marriage
- Enforcement of the law on child marriage
- Awareness raising among parents about the values of girls’ education
- Awareness raising among parents about the risks of child marriage
- Changed attitudes by community leaders
- More discussion about risks of child marriage and early pregnancy in the popular media
- Economic incentives for girls’ to stay in school given to girls (e.g. scholarships, pens and books, sanitary pads)
- Economic incentives for girls’ to stay in school given to parents/households (e.g. cash stipends)
- Community dialogues to raise community awareness about problems of child marriage
- School counsellors to whom girls could turn with their problems

In-depth interviews with girls and young women married as children

Length of interview: 90-120 mins

- Interviewee categories: 3 per age group
- 13-14 yrs – married, unmarried
- 15-17 yrs – married, unmarried (both in school and out of school)
- 18-25 yrs – married, unmarried

Please take photos

For married girls

Background information (natal family)

Critical to completely fill in basic information grid as above – probing around questions for details and background to fill out stories. See page 1.

Views on marriage and childbearing

- Did you want to marry at age __? Why or why not?
- Whose idea was for you to marry at age __? Why did they want you to marry?
- What did you gain from marriage/did your parents gain from your marriage?
- Did you leave school to get married or were you already out of school?
- How did you feel about leaving school?
- Whose idea was it?
- Specifics about your marriage:
  - What type of marriage did you have? [customary/religious/civil; monogamy/polygamy]. How did you feel about this and why? Were the views the same as your parents? If no, how was this difference resolved?
  - Was your marriage arranged or did you choose your partner? What are your feelings about this? Was your opinion sought? Is this the same as or different from your parents?
What did you or family have to prepare for your marriage – e.g. bride-wealth/goods? How did this make you feel? Is there any change in this practice from your parents’ time?

Was your marriage type/age typical for community? If different, how and why?

Did you know that it is illegal to marry before the age of 18? Did your parents know? Would it have made a difference if you/your parents DID know?

If you did not want marriage – did anyone stand with you to try to stop it? Who? Why didn’t it work?

How is life different for you now vs unmarried peers or relatives? How do you feel about these differences?

What was your ideal husband before marriage? What did you expect you would do/contribute to the relationship? What did you expect your husband would do/contribute to the relationships? What has really happened?

How many children are you expected to have? How many would you like to have?

Does it matter girl or boy?

To you? To your husband? To your parents? To your in-laws?

Do you have access to SRH services? Do you use them now/before marriage? Why/why not? What does your husband or in-laws think about this? What about abortion – is this an option?

If you have a child, did you give birth in hospital or home?

What are your hopes and worries currently and for the future?

Has marriage fulfilled your aspirations or not? How/why?

How would your life have been different if you married later?

Intra-hh power relations/decision-making [re use of resources, mobility, agency]

Could you tell us about the family you married into?

Economics / occupation/ land

Religion/ethnicity

Family size

Education levels

Community standing/prestige

Relationships among males and females – e.g. mother and father, brother and sister

Relationships among children and parents or grandparents [could include links to step-parents here too]

Relationships between children and parents, parents and parents-in-law

What about any other relatives living in the hh? (e.g. aunts, uncles, cousins)

Monogamous and polygamous

How would you characterise your experience as a daughter-in-law?

What is expected of you?

By mother in law?

Father in law?

Husband?

What happens if you don’t meet these expectations?

Do you think your experience is common around here? Why/why not?

Cutting

Are most girls in the community cut? At what age? By whom? What type?

Is it important that girls are cut before they are married? Can a girl who is not cut be married? Is a particular type of cutting required for marriage?

Were you cut? At what age? By whom? What type?

Sources of support

On a scale of 1-10 with 1 very unhappy and 10 very happy, where would you put yourself and why?

What is your main source of psycho-emotional support? Who do you go to if you have concerns or worries? (relative siblings, parents; close friend - ). How adequate was that support?
• In many households there are tensions/differences between household members at different times. Does this happen here and if so between whom? How are the tensions manifested – does this ever result in violence? If so how do you deal with this situation? Do you feel you have adequate support?
• What if any links do you have with your natal family? If so, with whom, how, how frequently? Would you like more or less contact or ok with the status quo?
• What if any links do you have with your childhood friends/friends from natal residence? If so, with whom, how, how frequently? Would you like more or less contact or ok with the status quo?

**Programming solutions**

Please rank the following programming options in terms of most likely to least likely to bring about positive change in adolescent girls’ lives

• Awareness of the law on child marriage
• Enforcement of the law on child marriage
• Awareness raising among parents about the values of girls’ education
• Awareness raising among parents about the risks of child marriage
• Changed attitudes by community leaders
• More discussion about risks of child marriage and early pregnancy in the popular media
• Economic incentives for girls’ to stay in school given to girls (e.g. scholarships, pens and books, sanitary pads)
• Economic incentives for girls’ to stay in school given to parents/households (e.g. cash stipends)
• Community dialogues to raise community awareness about problems of child marriage
• School counsellors to whom girls could turn with their problems

[For unmarried girls]

**Background information (natal family)**

Critical to completely fill in basic information grid as above – probing around questions for details and background to fill out stories. See page 1.

**Views on marriage and childbearing**

• At what age do you think it is ideal to get married? Why? Do you want to get married? At what age would you like to get married?
• Who will make the decision about marriage in your family?
• What do you think characterises the ideal husband? Do you think this is attainable?
• What do you see as the advantages of marriage?
• What do you see as the risks of marriage? Did you want to marry at age __? Why or why not?
• Do you anticipate trade-offs between your education and marriage? What about employment and marriage?
• Are you aware of the law on child marriage? Do your parents know? Would it make a difference if they did?
• Who could you turn to for advice about marriage? Why?
• How many children are you expected to have? How many would you like to have?
• Does it matter girl or boy?
• To you? To your husband? To your parents? To your in-laws?
• Do you have access to SRH services? Do you use them now/before marriage? Why/why not? What does your husband or in-laws think about this? What about abortion – is this an option?
• What are your hopes and worries currently and for the future? Has marriage fulfilled your aspirations or not? How/why?
• How would your life have been different if you married later?

**Cutting**

• Are most girls in the community cut? At what age? By whom? What type?
• Is it important that girls are cut before they are married? Can a girl who is not cut be married? Is a particular type of cutting required for marriage?
• Were you cut? At what age? By whom? What type?
• If uncut, are you under pressure to be circumcised, why/why not?

**Sources of support**

• On a scale of 1-10 with 1 very unhappy and 10 very happy, where would you put yourself and why?
• What is your main source of psycho-emotional support? Who do you go to if you have concerns or worries? (relative siblings, parents; close friend - ). How adequate was that support?
• To what extent do you think marriage will shape your happiness and aspirations?

**Programming solutions**

Please rank the following programming options in terms of most likely to least likely to bring about positive change in adolescent girls’ lives

- Awareness of the law on child marriage
- Enforcement of the law on child marriage
- Awareness raising among parents about the values of girls’ education
- Awareness raising among parents about the risks of child marriage
- Changed attitudes by community leaders
- More discussion about risks of child marriage and early pregnancy in the popular media
- Economic incentives for girls’ to stay in school given to girls (e.g. scholarships, pens and books, sanitary pads)
- Economic incentives for girls’ to stay in school given to parents/households (e.g. cash stipends)
- Community dialogues to raise community awareness about problems of child marriage
- School counsellors to whom girls could turn with their problems

**Key informant interviews re drivers**

Length of interview: 45–60 mins
With whom? (7 KIIs)
Woreda level: Education, Women’s Affairs, Justice
Kebele level: health extension worker, kebele administrator, school director, women’s association /women’s development army

**Background information (only kebele administrator; education woreda)**

Population; main sources of livelihood; religions; ethnic groups;
Services (schools/training institutes; health structures; social centres; commercial centres)
Overview of issues around youth/young people
Overview of key issues around gender
Key questions to explore:
Overview of marriage forms and practices that may inhibit adolescent girls’ capabilities (probe throughout for changes overtime)

• At what age do girls normally get married? Does it vary from place to place? By ethnic group and/or religion? By urban/rural?
Discuss with woreda officials– census data – do they find this surprising? Confirming what they know? 10-14 yrs; 10-17 years – how it compares to other woredas in the region.

• Forms of marriage (monogamy; polygamy)
• Type of marriage contract (civil, religious, customary)
• Customary practices (arranged marriages; marriage by abduction);
• Are these types of marriages/ practices common throughout this district? Do they vary by religion/socio-economic status/ethnicity?
• Practice of bride price; age differential between husband and wife;
• Are most girls in this community cut before they marry? If, when, what type and by whom?
• Women’s roles/rights/responsibilities within marriage;
• Issues of consent to marriage; issues to do with the dissolution of marriage (divorce /widowhood/ abandonment);
• Domestic violence...
• Is migration impacting marriage practices? How?
• Is youth unemployment impacting marriage practices? How?
• Causal factors for persistence in social norms and practices around child marriage
• Do girls want to marry early or is it their parents or the larger community who push them to marry?
• Who benefits when girls marry young?
• Who in the community supports child marriage the most? Who works against it?
• Consequences of child marriage
• Educational / physical or health / psycho-social....
• Changes in social norms and practices around child marriage
• Any changes over time? In particular regions? Urban/rural? Migration? How/where/why are norms and practices around child marriage changing?
• Has the legal age limit made any difference? Why or why not? Do most families even know about the law? How well is the law enforced in this district? What are some of the challenges? What sorts of outreach does the justice office engage in if any?
• Adolescent pregnancy and childbirth outside of marriage
• Is this a common problem in Ethiopia? Or is it rather rare? Does it vary from place to place? What factors lead to differences?
• Has the situation been changing over time?
• Is pregnancy/childbirth out of marriage accepted by the community (by families, by religious leaders, by others)
• Girls’ education: progress and challenges
• Key issues in girls’ education in your woreda today (Primary? Secondary? Tertiary?)
• Factors contributing to progress in girls’ education
• Challenges to progress in girls’ education
• How are social norms around girls’ education changing over time (or remaining the same)? (Does this vary from place to place? How/why?)
• Any specific linkages between child marriage/girls’ education (including drop-outs due to child marriage/pregnancy; lack of parental investment; parental desire for bride wealth...)
• If local – are there vocational training options available? If so, are they for boys and girls? What sorts of jobs do they train for? Are they effective at helping young people improve their employment prospects?

Employment options for girls (vary wording by type of KI)

• Do girls and women do the same sorts of jobs as boys and men?
• Is it harder for girls and women to find work or is it harder for boys and men or is it the same?
• Does the work that women and girls do pay as well as the work that men and boys do?
• What is your office doing with regard to child marriage and related challenges? What is working well? Where is there room for improvement?

Programming solutions
Please rank the following programming options in terms of most likely to least likely to bring about positive change in adolescent girls’ lives

• Awareness of the law on child marriage
• Enforcement of the law on child marriage
• Awareness raising among parents about the values of girls’ education
• Awareness raising among parents about the risks of child marriage
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• Economic incentives for girls’ to stay in school given to girls (e.g. scholarships, pens and books, sanitary pads)
• Economic incentives for girls’ to stay in school given to parents/households (e.g. cash stipends)
• Community dialogues to raise community awareness about problems of child marriage
• School counsellors to whom girls could turn with their problems
• Other?
Inter-generational trios

Interview duration: 60-90 minutes x 3 participants
Sample size: 1 married adolescent; 1 unmarried adolescent; male and female – with parents and grandparents (2 male, 2 female trios)
Please take photos

Marriage

- When you were a child, what were the ideas and customs/beliefs as to when a girl should get married?
- And what age did they usually get married?
- What were the ideas/customs/beliefs as to why a girl should get married at a particular age? [e.g. honour, fertility, virginity].
- What was the type of marriage that was typical (religious/customary/civil) and what type did you have?
- What was the process for getting married when you got married? [economic preparation [bride price, hope-chests etc./ rituals…]. What were your views about this?
- Did you choose your partner? Why/why not? How did you feel about that?
- Who told you what to expect during the marriage process and after marriage? What was your experience?
- Who if anyone provided you with information or guidance on marriage and sexuality? What sorts of things did you get information/guidance on? Is it helpful? What were the gaps? What else would you have liked to have known more about? What about girls today – who helps them?
- What were the reasons for you to get married at the age you did? [e.g. filial piety, obedience, resistance, reluctant agreement, willingness]
- Were your reasons for getting married at the age you did in line with common attitudes and customs? Why/why not?
- If they were in line with typical attitudes/customs, what were the positive gains that you expected from following the attitudes/customs? And were these gains realised?
- If it wasn’t in line with typical attitudes/customs, what were the expected consequences from resisting the typical attitudes/customs? And what happened in practice [to you or to others]?
- Did your family support your approach or not? If so why/why not?
- If they didn’t support you, was there ever any threat or practice of violence? Would violence have made a difference to your views/ practice?
- Before you got married how did you view marriage? What did you think it would bring you? Did you have any concerns?
- After you got married, did your views stay the same or change? Why?
- Do you think that ideas/attitudes/customs around girls’ age and form/type of marriage have changed since your day? If so, how and why? What were the drivers of change? Who are the opinion leaders? What do you think about these changes? Who do you listen to and why?
- What were your expectations in terms of marriage age for your daughter? And for your granddaughter? Have they been met? Why/why not?
- What about age of first pregnancy? ideal family size?

Education for girls

- Did you go to school?
- If not, why not?
- If yes, tell us about your schooling experience.
- Where?
- When?
- For how long?
- Why did you stop? How did you react? Would you have liked to have continued?
- What was positive?
- What was challenging?
- Did school experiences vary for boys or girls? If so, how and why?
- Attitudes / treatment by teachers
- Attitudes of parents
- Length of schooling
- Time for homework
- School environment/ facilities
- Getting to school – distance/transport
• Have you been influenced by any particular role models? E.g. teachers, older sisters, successful business women, community leaders.
• How?
• In what way?
• How did this change your perspective as to what you could be?
• Relationships with others etc…
• Did going to school / not having gone to school have an influence on your later life?
• Material
• Psycho-emotional
• Intellectual
• Social capital
• Do you think that ideas/attitudes/customs around girls’ education have changed since your day? If so, how and why? What were the drivers of change? What do you think about these changes?
• What were your expectations in terms of education for your daughter? And for your granddaughter? Have they been met? Are they the same or different vis-à-vis your expectations for your sons/grandsons?

Intersections between marriage and education for girls [ensure to probe re perceptions of change over time…]
In your day…
• Would an 18 yr old girl have been in school or married? What were the advantages/ disadvantages? Have things been changing over time and if so how? What about a girl with a child – married? Unmarried?
• Was it common for girls to be withdrawn from school for marriage? At what age? What did you think about this? Has it been changing?
• [What did you think about married girls and schooling? Were you aware of any laws on this? Did you have any friends or relatives who have had any experience of this?]
• What about unwed girls with children and schooling? Were you aware of any laws on this? Did you have any friends or relatives who had any experience of this?] [can skip if no response]
• Do you think more educated girls had more problems finding husbands than less educated girls in your day? If so why/why not? Is this changing nowadays?
• Did education have any influence in the marriage payments? For the girl? For the boy?
• Do you think that being more educated made you a better wife, mother, daughter-in-law? Or did you think this may create problems? [for example…]
• Do you think education made boys/men better husbands/son-in-laws/brothers/fathers?

Daughters’ futures
• When do you want your daughters to marry? What does your husband want? Why?
• Who will choose? How will differences be resolved?
• Is what you want different from what your community expects? How will you resolve differences? Will there be sanctions? What sort?
• Are marriage patterns changing in your community? How? Why?
• How long do you want your daughters versus sons to stay in school? Why? Does your husband agree? Is this changing in your community? Why?
• Will you cut your daughters? Why?

If divorced…
• When and why?
• Common in community?
• Advantages and disadvantages?
Themes directed at parents of married girls

- Hopes for their children’s marriage
- How was the partner selected – and what criteria led to the choice or acceptance of the choice?
- Did you and your child see eye to eye on this?
- Would the decision have been different if it were a son/daughter?
- Did you and your spouse agree? Why/why not?
- Did anyone else in the family disagree with the timing of marriage/choice of spouse?
- What preparations [economic, information, guidance, skills training] were entailed in the marriage transaction? What did you think about this? Did it go as expected? How is this similar or different to your day?
- What are your views and expectations about the spouse? Are they being realised?
- Were there trade-offs with the daughter’s schooling? What were your feelings about that? Satisfied/regrets?
- Has what you want for grandchildren’s futures changed as the result of your daughter’s experience?
- What are your expectations of your daughter/daughter-in-law/son/son-in-law?
- Economic support
- Care work
- Psycho-emotional support
- Reproduction – children
- Community standing
- Social capital
- Grandchildren
- Grandsons vs granddaughters?
- How many?
- Care expectations?
- What happens if the couple doesn’t have any?
- Problems in the children’s marriage/tensions
- What kinds?
- What do you do?
- What do your counsel your children to do?
- Are there support structures?
- Frequency of interaction between parents and married daughter?
Appendix 4: MAXQDA Coding structure for drivers’ analysis
- Respondent status and views
  - Assets and capabilities
  - Past/future comparison
  - Occupation
  - Aspirations
  - Rights awareness
  - Support networks
  - Views on FGM
  - Views on abortion/contraception/pregnancy wedlock
  - Views on extramarital relationships / polygamy

- Community contextual factors
  - Dominant religion
  - Diversity of livelihoods
  - Past/future comparison
  - Dominant bride price modality

- Protective factors of early marriage
  - Role model effects
  - Access to educational opportunities
  - Changing social norms
  - Religious institutions
  - Support from male relatives
  - Support from parents/family in general
  - Girls’ own decision making
  - Peer pressure on parents
  - Peer pressure on adolescents
  - Awareness of benefits of education
  - Economic status
  - Livelihoods options
  - Land shortage
  - Labour engagement (chores / economic activities)
  - Vocational opportunities
  - Awareness of legal age
  - Awareness of legal avenues to avoid EM
  - Legal enforcement
  - Awareness of negative effects of migration
  - Awareness of negative effects of EM
  - Awareness of health risks
  - Communications (ICTs)
Drivers of early marriage in practice in research site

- pressure from male relatives
- protecting virtue
- pressure from parents/family in general
- girls' own decision-making
- religious institutions
- negative role model effects
- peer pressure on parents
- social norms
- peer pressure on adolescents
- lack of awareness of educational opportunities
- lack of awareness of benefits of education
- lack of access to secondary educational opportunities
- grade 10 failure
- economic status
- lack of livelihoods options
- land shortage
- labour engagement (chores / other economic activities
- lack of vocational opportunities
- lack of awareness of legal age of marriage
- disagree with legal marriage age
- lack of awareness of legal avenues to avoid EM
- inadequate legal enforcement
- migration pressures
- lack of awareness that EM is a problem
- lack of awareness of health risks
- conflict
- communications (ICTs)

Strengths of programmes according to interviewees

- awareness raising / community engagement
- good x-govt coordination
- economic support / incentives
- provisions for girls' education / training
- others (list)
Weaknesses of programmes according to interviewees
- inadequate engagement with social norms
- inadequate or poorly targeted economic support / incentives
- unintended effects (e.g. practice driven underground)
- under-funded
- others (list)

Ways programmes could be improved according to interviewees
- awareness raising / community engagement
- better economic support / incentives
- provisions for girls’ education / training
- capacity building e.g. for trainers
- others (list)
- better funding

Key challenges according to interviewees
- entrenched socio-cultural norms / lack of community support
- limited political will / poor x-gov coordination at local level
- lack of funding
- others (list)