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**Share-Net**  
Ethiopia



**Towards Ending Child Marriage in Ethiopia**

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**Policy Brief**

## I. The Situation of Child Marriage: Dynamics and Realities

Child marriage is a human rights violation and is recognized as a major development issue that affects women and girls globally. The age at which a woman or girl marries has tremendous implications on her rights, education, and the development of communities and nations (Erulkar, 2022). The practice has been linked to health risks, poverty, higher fertility (Gavrilovic, et al., 2020). Moreover, it curtails adolescents' educational and economic opportunities, puts married girls at heightened risk of intimate partner violence and at risk for early pregnancies and pregnancy-related injuries, such as obstetric fistula (Emirie, Jones and Kebede, 2021).

Child marriage is a global problem that cuts across countries, cultures, and religions. That is why the importance of ending child marriage is acknowledged in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals. Governments across the world have committed to end child marriage by 2030 through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Girls Not Brides, 2020).

The SDGs include a goal on gender equality and – as a fundamental part of it – a target to end the harmful practice of child marriage by 2030. SDG 5 – Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls – includes Target 5.3, which explicitly calls for countries to “eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and FGM.

Globally, over 700 million women and girls alive today were married before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and one in five girls are married before the age of 18 (Plan International, 2020; UNICEF, 2018). Although the problem is global, the highest rates of child marriage are found in South Asia and in sub-Saharan Africa (Emirie, Jones and Kebede, 2021). Ethiopia has the 15<sup>th</sup> highest rate of child marriage in the world. However, due to its large and growing population, the country ranks 5<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of the sheer number of child brides [Girls Not Brides, 2013]. Sixty two percent of Ethiopian women aged 20-49 get married before the age of 18 (Alemu, 2016). Furthermore, Ethiopia is among the countries with the highest rate of girls married by age 15 [UNICEF, 2014; Erulkar, 2022]. Some studies reported that six million girls get married before the age of 15 (Malhotra, Warner, McGonagle, and Lee-Rife, 2011).

The 2016 Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS) show that the prevalence of child marriage in Ethiopia, while still high, is decreasing (Gavrilovic, et al., 2020). The proportion of females currently aged 25–49 years who experienced child marriage is 58% nationally – down from 63% in 2011 (CSA and ICF,

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2016). Median age of first marriage for females in Ethiopia is 17.1 years, and this is varied by region, from a low of 15.7 years in Amhara to a high of 23.9 years in Addis Ababa (CSA and ICF, 2016)

## II. Policy and Legislation on Child Marriage

Over the past decade, many international conventions and laws, and policies and strategies have been developed to address the issues of child marriage globally, regionally and nationally. For example, Article 16 of the Universal Declarations of Human Rights (UDHR) states that marriage should be “entered only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses” (UN, 1948). The Declaration on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women strongly advocates that “child marriage and the betrothal of young girls before puberty shall be prohibited, and effective action, including legislation, shall be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage, and to make the registration of marriages in an official registry compulsory” (UN, 1979). The 1990 African Charter on the Right and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) also forbids child marriage and the betrothal of girls and boys; and calls on governments to take effective action, including legislation, to specify a minimum age of 18 years in order to marry (Rodgers, 2012).

In 1995 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), article 34 of the Constitution states: “Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses” (FDRE, 1995). Article 35(4) of the Constitution provides women with rights and protections equal to those of men and also goes into more specific rights, including the rights to equality in marriage (Presler-Marshall, Lyytikainen, Jones, 2016).

The 2000 Ethiopia Revised Family Code was enacted to ensure marriage and divorce procedures reflect equality, to make FGM/C illegal and to address domestic violence to some degree (Presler-Marshall, Lyytikainen, Jones, 2016). The Family Code sets the minimum age of marriage at 18 years for both sexes (Art. 7). It states that “... neither a man nor a woman who has not attained the full age of eighteen years shall conclude marriage” (Negarit, 2000). Furthermore, the Criminal Code of 2005 (art. 648) criminalizes child marriage, with punishments of up to three to seven years’ imprisonment (Presler-Marshall, Lyytikainen, Jones, 2016). The Criminal Code also criminalizes abduction (art. 586), early forced marriage (art. 648) and polygamy (art. 650) (Gavrilovic, et al., 2020).

Ethiopia has also many other policies and action plans that call for ending child marriage. The 2013 “National Strategy and Action Plan on HTPs against Women and Children in Ethiopia” (MoWCYA, 2013) aimed to institutionalize national, regional and grassroots mechanisms by creating an enabling environment for the prevention and abandonment of all forms of HTPs, including child marriage (Presler-Marshall, Lyytikainen, Jones, 2016). More recently, on 14 August 2019, the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth (MOWCY) launched the National Costed Roadmap to End Child Marriage and FGM/C with the objective to eliminate these harmful practices within five years (2020 – 2025). The roadmap recommends five pillars of action: (1) empowering adolescent girls and families, (2) community engagement, (3) enhancing systems accountability and services, (4) promoting an enabling environment and (5) increasing data and evidence generation and utilization. Importantly, the roadmap highlights not

only the harmful effects of child marriage on girls and women but also the economic benefits and reduction in population growth that accrue as a result of eliminating child marriage (MoWCY, 2019)

### III. Drivers of Child Marriage in Ethiopia: Why practices Persist?

Despite the legal sanctions against child marriage and the growing awareness among leaders and educators that it is harmful to girls and their families, parents continue to insist upon marrying their daughters before their 18 (Alemu, 2016). Extensive research on child marriage in Ethiopia highlights that the drivers of child marriage are multifaceted and mutually reinforcing (Malhotra, et al., 2011; Boyden, Pankhurst, & Tafere, 2012; Erulkar, 2022; Jones et al., 2016). These include family income, family size, educational level of the father and the mother, young women who faced first sexual intercourse before 16, residence, poverty as well as complex sociocultural dynamics, such as social and gender norms, which prioritize child marriage as a way to ensure that girls enter marriage as virgins (Gavrilovic, et al., 2020).

One of the most significant drivers of child marriage in Ethiopia is poverty. Socio-economic conditions often drive families to marry off their daughters in order to obtain a dowry or to reduce the number of dependents within the household. For the poorest households, child marriage is an important strategy for establishing economic security for the girl and/or the family (Gavrilovic, et al., 2020). Poverty is also closely linked to schooling, which is an important protective pathway in reducing child marriage. Poor households may not have the means to send children to school, and school drop-out may lead to child marriage. Indeed, evidence shows that increased educational attainment has led to delays in marriage (Gavrilovic, et al., 2020).

The relationship between poverty and child marriage is not always straightforward. In some regions, such as Oromia, where bride wealth is common, poverty may incentivize parents to effectively exchange their daughters for cash (Boyden, Pankhurst & Tafere, 2012). In other cases, especially in Gojjam and Gondar of Amhara region, it is girls from relatively better-off families who are especially likely to marry at an early age, often as a way to allow families to keep or expand their land holdings (Presler-Marshall, Lyytikainen, Jones, 2016).

Consolidating kinship ties and wealth through marriage has traditionally been an important driver of child marriage in many parts of Ethiopia. For instance, in drought-prone rural areas where personal survival depends on collective efforts, marrying off girls early is a way to consolidate collective social ties and alliances (Boyden, Pankhurst & Tafere, 2012). It was more common in the past for rich families in Amhara to marry off their daughters early to seek alliances with other wealthy families (Boyden, Pankhurst & Tafere, 2012; Gavrilovic, et al., 2020).

Prevailing gender norms that girls must be virgins at the time of marriage (to secure more prestigious marriages) also represent a key sociocultural driver of child marriage. Delaying marriage is believed to increase exposure to premarital sex, and carries the risk of stigma for both adolescent girls and their parents if the girls are not married off by late adolescence (Boyden, Pankhurst & Tafere, 2012;

Gavrilovic, et al., 2020). Indeed, with few exceptions girls are valued primarily for their reproductive capacities (Rogers, 2012). Girls are married young, while their virginity is essentially ensured and while they are more easily controlled by their marital families. Shame for “failed” daughters can especially attach to their fathers who should, in the eyes of the larger community, arrange timely marriage in order to prevent reputational damage, unwanted pregnancy, social stigmatization and exclusion from the family or clan (Presler-Marshall, Lyytikainen, Jones, 2016).

Research suggests that child marriage should be contextualized and needs to be interpreted in light of the broader social norms that see girls more as property than as agents (Rogers, 2012). In Tigray, for example, parents saw early marriage and motherhood as the route through which their daughters could become ‘enlightened’ and ‘flower’ (Presler-Marshall, Lyytikainen, Jones, 2016). In Amhara, Alemu (2016) reports that the strongest reason for early marriage is the desire or need to maintain the family’s good name and social standing.

The recent studies by the Gender and adolescence; Global Evidence shows that the type of marriage differed significantly across regions. In South Gondar of Amhara region 25% of girls married before the age of 15 and 50% of them before 18 and marriage is mainly arranged by parents. In East Hararghe zone of Oromia region and most districts in Somali region, marriage has been becoming adolescent driven where the roles of parents has been declining. In Afar, marriage is mainly arranged by parents through the *absuma* tradition (maternal cousin marriage to preserve clan unity (Kefyalew et’al 2022; clan (Presler-Marshall et’al 2020).

Disasters and humanitarian crises are also known to exacerbate, cause new drivers of child marriage. Crises disrupt social and institutional structures that protect children and adolescents – such as schools, health facilities, infrastructure, homes, families and communities. Parents may marry their daughters in an attempt to better allocate their own limited resources by having one less mouth to feed, particularly in contexts of food insecurity (Plan International, 2020). The impacts of COVID-19 pandemic are likely to put millions more girls at risk of being married off by their families as a strategy to cope with the social and economic impacts of the outbreak. The impacts of COVID-19 restrictions have caused disruptions to child marriage programming and economic crises, which will further weaken planned efforts to end child marriage (Plan International, 2020).

Girls experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination are at further risk of child marriage. Research shows that disability further enhances a girl’s likelihood of being forced into marriage, as well as the severity of the impact that marriage has on her life, and this is driven by structural factors that further exacerbate discrimination and exclusion for those with disabilities, such as lack of access to social protection systems (Plan International, 2020). Besides, weak legislative frameworks, poor implementation of formal laws and inconsistencies in legal frameworks perpetuate the practice of child marriage (Plan International, 2020).

#### IV. Changing Trends

Ethiopia has made significant progress in recent decades in reducing the prevalence of child marriage (Gavrilovic, et al., 2020; Jones, et al., 2020). Child marriage rates have fallen due to investments in girls' education, growing awareness of the legal age of marriage and community efforts to highlight the health and economic risks of child marriage and early childbearing (Jones, et al., 2020). The last several years have seen tremendous progress in terms of girls' school enrolment. The government has built thousands of schools in rural areas and programming that provides girls with school supplies or scholarships are helping families offset the costs of educating their daughters. Overall, the gender parity index for primary education climbed nearly 30% between 1990 and 2013 (from 66% in 1990 to 92% at lower primary level and 98% at upper secondary level in 2013) (Presler-Marshall, Lyytikainen, Jones, 2016). Parents are beginning to recognize that educating girls has economic benefits. It is also becoming more common for girls to continue their educations after marriage (Jones et al., 2014; Presler-Marshall, Lyytikainen, Jones, 2016).

In 1980, 75% of girls in the country were married before the legal age of marriage (UNICEF, 2018). In 2005, 59% of females aged 20–24 years were married by the age of 18; this was dropped to 40% in 2015 (Gavrilovic, et al., 2020). Among females currently aged 20–24 years, 14% were married before the age of 15 and 40% before the age of 18 (CSA and ICF, 2016).

The DHS 2016 shows that of young adults aged 20–24 years, 40.3% of women and 5% of men were married before the legal age of 18 (CSA and ICF 2017; Emirie, Jones and Kebede, 2021). According to UNICEF (2018), this reflects an annual average rate of decline of 4.2% over the past decade. Disaggregating by age cohort, the percentage of girls married by age 15 shows a remarkably fast decline by around 60%: of young women aged 20–24, 14.1% were married by age 15, compared to 5.7% of girls aged 15–19 years (Emirie, Jones and Kebede, 2021).

Given Ethiopia's ethnic and religious diversity, it is unsurprising that patterns and progress vary considerably across regions. Afar is the region with the highest rate of child marriage (67%), followed by Benishangul-Gumuz and Somali regions (both 50 per cent). While the child marriage rate in the Amhara region (43%) is just above the national average, this rate is still more than five times that of the capital city, Addis Ababa (8%) (UNICEF, 2017). Amhara also has the lowest median age at first marriage in the country, at 15.77 years versus the national average of 17.1 years (CSA & ICF, 2016) (Gavrilovic, et al., 2020). Comparing EDHS data from 2005, 2011 and 2016, the median age at first marriage for women aged 20–49 years has increased in all regions except Afar and Harari. For men aged 20–49 years, the median age at first marriage ranged from 22.5 years in Amhara to 24.8 years in Somali region (Emirie, Jones and Kebede, 2021).

Recent study shows that in Ethiopia’s ‘emerging’ regions – Afar and Somali which were predominantly pastoralists – rates of child marriage appear to be increasing (CSA and ORC Macro, 2001; CSA and ICF, 2017; Elezaj et al., 2019). Both regional governments did not ratify the national Family Law child marriage. These regions are also the regions where girls and women have especially limited opportunities for education and employment because of the links between harmful practices and discriminatory gender norms (Presler-Marshall et al., 2022).

## V. Consequences of Child Marriage

The impacts of child marriage in Ethiopia are wide-ranging and affect every area of the lives of girls and young women. It has various consequences on the health and social outcomes of girls, women and their children. These include the following. .

**Marital instability** – While overall divorce rates are relatively low, girls and women who had been married at the youngest ages—and with the least free choice regarding marriage partners—are the most likely to divorce (Presler-Marshall, Lytikainen, & Jones, 2016; Alemu, 2016).

**Termination of education** – Early marriage compromises girls’ ability to attend a school that leads to school withdrawals (Malhotra, et al., 2011). Among out-of-school respondents, the majority of them had mentioned childrearing obligations as their reasons for quitting school (Alemu, 2016).

**Impact on health of women and girls** – Adolescent girls who marry are more likely to begin childbearing earlier than their unmarried peers and to have less time between their pregnancies, increasing their risk of complications relating to pregnancy and childbirth (Plan International, 2020). Complications of pregnancy and delivery are the leading causes of death among females aged 15–19 and some studies show that girls who bear children before age 15 are five times as likely as older mothers to die of pregnancy-related causes (Erulkar, 2013). Girls are also at increased risk of non-fatal complications, including fistula, which leads to stigma, social isolation and poverty that lasts a lifetime (Presler-Marshall, Lytikainen, & Jones, 2016).

**Vulnerability to HIV infection** – Evidence suggests that women who marry early have an increased risk of HIV infection; the infection rate among married adolescents is higher than that among their unmarried, sexually active peers (Erulkar, 2013). The higher rate of infection among married than unmarried adolescents may be related to the former having a greater frequency of intercourse, having lower rates of condom use and having partners who are older and more experienced than the partners of unmarried adolescents (Erulkar, 2013). Marriage can increase married girls’ exposure to the virus, especially as older husbands may engage in unprotected sexual relations with other partners. The risk of HIV infection is higher among the poorest and most powerless in society, and, as such, married adolescent girls will be more at risk of infection than unmarried girls who are not having sexual intercourse (Alemu, 2016; Presler-Marshall, Lytikainen, & Jones, 2016).

**Mental health risks:** Child marriage also jeopardizes girls’ mental health. Studies found that Ethiopian girls who were married or knew they were likely to get married in the near future were more likely to

have depressive symptoms and to have considered suicide than those for whom marriage was not yet planned (Presler-Marshall, Lytikainen, & Jones, 2016).

**Child health risks:** The children of adolescent mothers are also at increased risk for adverse health outcomes, including low birth weight and malnutrition (Plan International, 2020). In Ethiopia, the 2011 DHS found that the neonatal mortality rate for children born to mothers younger than 20 years old is nearly 50% higher than that of infants born to mothers in their 20s (Presler-Marshall, Lytikainen, & Jones, 2016).

**Inability to plan or manage families** – Early marriage is associated with elevated total fertility rates (Erulkar, 2013). Women who marry early are likely to bear more children. According to a study by Alemu (2016), those married under 15 averaged 4.96 children; those married between 15 and 17 had 4.15, and those over the age of 18 averaged 3.12 children.

**Limited voice and decision making ability** – In Ethiopia, child marriage also limits girls' access to voice and decision making, with impacts on mobility, fertility, and gender based violence (Presler-Marshall, Lytikainen, & Jones, 2016). Girls who marry early are generally at a distinct disadvantage within the marriage. Once married, a girl's decision-making and influencing power within her new household is likely to be limited because she is young and holds a lower status. She is typically required to perform most of the household tasks and has few opportunities to leave home to pursue education or economic opportunities (Care, 2021; Erulkar, 2013).

**Partner violence** - Some evidence in Ethiopia suggests that women who marry early are at increased risk of intimate partner violence (Erulkar, 2013). Compared to girls married at 18 or 19, those married before 15 are far more at risk of forced first sex (32.1% versus 8.2%) and more likely to have been recently hit or beaten (7.1% versus 3.1%) (Presler-Marshall, Lytikainen, and Jones, 2016). Power imbalances that manifest in marriages and unions, and which are worsened by larger age gaps between spouses, mean that young girls are less able to make decisions, negotiate within their relationship, or have control within the home (Plan International, 2020).

**Effects on national economy** - Child Marriage not only has negative consequences at the individual level, it can also impact development at a community and national level. The direct and indirect impacts of child marriage such as lower educational attainment, higher fertility, and women having fewer agencies in decision making, can also affect the participation of women in the labour force, thus having further impacts on the national economy (Plan International, 2020).

## VI. Policy and programme Implications

Ending child marriage is a clear starting point. As resourcing is scaled up to meet the government's 2025 deadline for the elimination of child marriage and achieving the SDG goals by 2030, we offer the following key policy and programming recommendations.



## Policy Recommendations

- It is critical to develop more effective systems for enforcing the laws on child marriage. This should include attention to developing consistent reporting chains, so girls know where to turn for help, and providing Woreda and Kebele- level officials with the support they need in order to consistently enforce the law.
- It is helpful to work with Ethiopia's new Charities and Societies Proclamation. It is imperative for Ethiopia to have a fully functioning, independent civil society that acts as a complimentary entity to the government and to acts as effective checks and balance for the government.
- It is important to implement a registration system that tracks all records of births, deaths and marriages. This is important for safeguarding young women's basic human rights in choosing when and whom to marry, enforcing the country's marriage laws, and reinforcing relevant international conventions that the country has endorsed.
- Funding for skill trainings and jobs should be made available so that families can see the short and long term financial benefits to keeping girls in school. Funding toward skills training and micro loans and savings programs, job placement services, and helping families afford education fees are just as important for married girls, since survival and security of impoverished households is an important way of lifting households out of poverty.

## Programming Recommendations

- It is important to engage communities through public campaigns, pledges, or incentive schemes. Where communities are involved in selecting messages and modalities, they tend to select the ones they will be most likely to hear.
- Strengthen the role of the judicial system particularly the police; judges and persecutors through training on enforcement of the law against child marriage are important. It is critical to publicize and enforce the national law that establishes 18 as the legal age of marriage.
- Strengthen and establish community networks and partnerships involving gender club, teachers, elders, local officials, women and youth groups, community and religious leaders that jointly work towards ending child marriage. Community and religious elders need to be prioritized for child marriage messages as they are often the ultimate gatekeepers of social norms.
- Develop strong support systems to keep girls in school. Provide scholarships where necessary and encourage teachers to support girls. Girls' clubs can bring transformatory change to girls, helping them build their confidence and voice while learning about their rights (and serving as critical venues for reporting planned marriages).
- Prevent child marriage by improving girls' access to information and developing their voice and agency. The school curriculum (through civics and biology classes) could lay the foundation for girls to think about their rights to bodily integrity and freedom from violence.
- Schools could play a role in protecting girls from child marriage. Teachers, particularly those who lead girls' clubs, provide adolescents with a safe way to report planned marriages (their own and those of siblings and friends) in time to have them cancelled.

- Bring leading professional women to communities to talk to girls as role models and a source of inspiration. Educated women should be recognized for their accomplishments. Similarly, parents who have supported their daughters to stay in school should be encouraged to share their experiences.
- Boys and men need to be targeted for programming aimed at encouraging new masculinities that support their sisters and daughters to reach adulthood before they become wives.
- Develop social and economic programs for out-of-school girls, including non-formal education programs.
- Expand training for health and community workers on the dangers of early marriage, engaging them as advocates and change agents in their communities and institutions.

## VII. **Conclusion**

The negative impact of child marriage on a wide range of development outcomes explains why in many countries child marriage is prohibited by law, and why the elimination of child marriage is part of the SDGs. Ethiopia has followed similar initiatives. Yet, more is needed to eliminate the practice than adopting laws and issuing policies and strategies. In order to inform program and policies to reduce the practice, this brief provided a basic profile of child marriage in Ethiopia.

Across contexts in Ethiopia, girls' life-course trajectories remain circumscribed by socio-cultural norms, practices and economic realities. As there is no single model of child marriage, the patterning, drivers and impacts of child marriage also reflect Ethiopia's diversity. How adolescents' broader individual and collective capabilities impact girls' vulnerability to child marriage are also highly variable. Thus, in order to design programs and policies to reduce child marriage, information is needed on the trend in the practice over time, where it is most prevalent in a country, and what the characteristics of girls marrying early are.

Moreover, if girls are to have real choices, it is important to pair messages aimed at raising awareness about the immediate and life-course risks of child marriage with economic and social policies that support alternative pathways for girls and their families. If the SDG's agenda to eliminate child marriage is to be realized, the Ethiopian government and development actors must devote more political and economic resources and expend them in ways that raise girls' status and support their access to meaningful choices.

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