

Child marriage risks in the context of covid-19 in Ethiopia

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Introduction

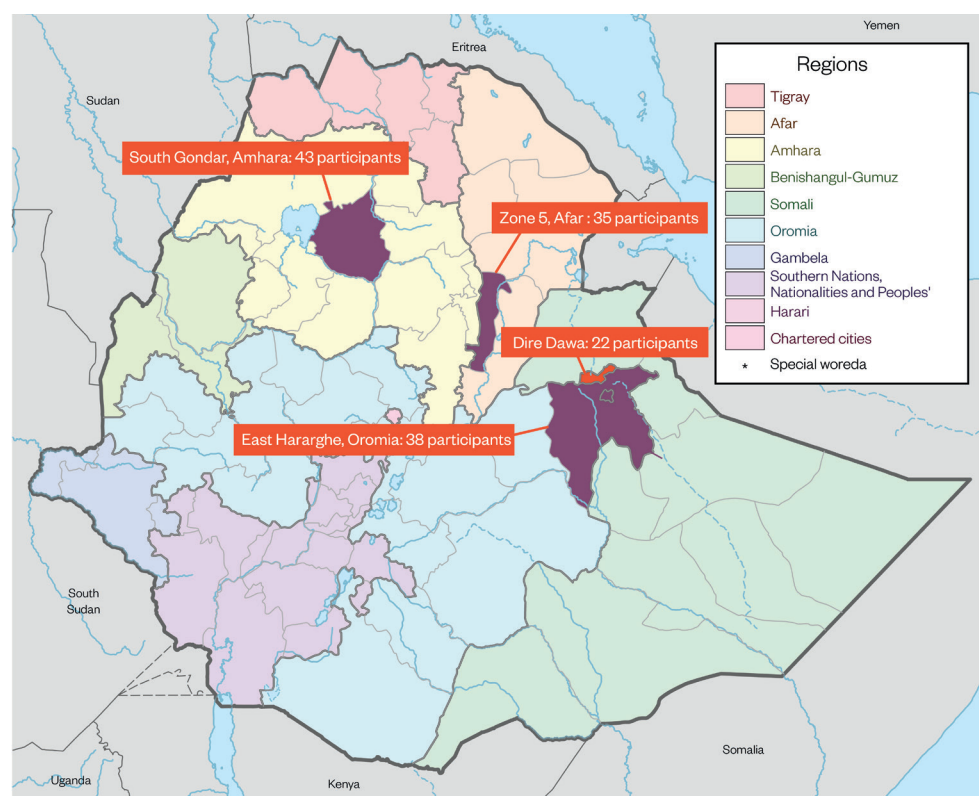
Ethiopia has seen one of the most significant declines in sub-Saharan Africa in the proportion of girls married before their 18th birthday over the last decade, falling from approximately 50% in the mid-2000s to 40.3% by 2016 (CSA and ICF, 2017). However, the overall number of girls who marry before adulthood remains within the top five countries globally, with an estimated 2 million child brides (Girls Not Brides, 2020). In order to build on the momentum achieved to date and in line with Sustainable Development Goal 5.3 on the elimination of child marriage, the government of Ethiopia launched a comprehensive National Roadmap to End Child Marriage and FGM/C in 2019, there are significant concerns now, however, that with the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic and closure of educational institutions during the resulting state of emergency, which is set to last until the end of August 2020, these gains could be undermined. Girls Not Brides (2020:1) has highlighted at a global level that 'Many of the complex factors that drive child marriage in stable environments are



exacerbated in emergency settings, as family and community structures break down during crisis and displacement' and that progress in reducing child marriage is now under threat as a result of the pandemic.

To explore the short-term effects of the pandemic and resulting policy response on adolescents' risks of child marriage, this policy brief draws on rapid virtual qualitative research from the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) longitudinal research sample in Afar, Amhara and Oromia regions of Ethiopia. A total of 138 adolescent girls and boys aged 13-19 years were interviewed by phone using a semi-structured format (see Małachowska et al., 2020) in May and June 2020. These were complemented by 31 key informant interviews with officials from the bureaus of health, education and women, children and youth affairs, emergency and food security, and kebele officials in each locality (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Map of research sites and numbers of study participants in Ethiopia



Source: Originally created from File:Ethiopia adm location map.svg by User:NordNordWest and modified to show GAGE research sites.

Findings: child marriage risks under covid-19

Our findings highlight that adolescent girls in rural areas and some adolescent boys are at heightened risk of child marriage even in the early phases of the covid-19 pandemic. Here we discuss key risk factors, highlighting gender and location differences, as relevant.

School closure

A critical reason that adolescents as well as key informants underscored for increased arranged marriages during the pandemic was the closure of schools. Many young people are at home, and uncertain when schools will reopen. An 18-year-old adolescent boy who had been in grade 8 from South Gondar, Amhara region noted:

I am tired of sitting idle and frustrated ... many boys and girls who interrupted their education due to school closure amid covid-19 are in a similar mood ... many of them engaged in marriage, while others left for urban areas to look for a job realising education will not start shortly.

■ In our locality if girls are not learning they can't reject the marriage arranged by their parents; however, those who are in school can say 'No' and everyone will support them not to be forced by parents. But recently since the school is closed many girls who were learning will marry in this season [spring].

(A 17-year-old adolescent boy studying in Grade 7 from Zone 5, Afar)

Similarly, a 17-year-old adolescent boy studying in Grade 7 from Zone 5, Afar region explained that his 15-year-old sister's impending marriage was unavoidable in the context of the pandemic:

Oh I can't oppose her marriage because she is not learning, she keeps animals, so that she is better to marry and have her own home. In our locality if girls are not learning they can't reject the marriage arranged by their parents; however, those who are in school can say 'No' and everyone will support them not to be forced by parents. But recently since the school is closed many girls who were learning will marry in this season [spring].

The majority of rural adolescents in our sample also highlighted that they lacked access to online education, especially those in high school and preparatory school where online classes are transmitted by TV or Telegram. Even for those who have access to TV or internet via their mobile phones, frequent power outages and insufficient money to cover mobile phone costs create additional barriers to online education. As an education bureau official in South Gondar explained:

How many people have TV and radio? How many of the students in grades 11 and 12 have access to laptops and read things by saving on memory sticks? Even for us, while sitting in the woreda [town], for how many days do we have access to electricity and water? This [approach] is useful for larger towns. It is not possible for towns like ours ... In such circumstances, 'education on television and radio' is unthinkable.

An equally important constraint appears to be parents' tepid attitudes towards education in some rural localities. Multiple respondents also emphasised that their parents were unwilling for them to spend time sitting at home studying and instead assigned them burdensome domestic and agricultural tasks, leaving them with very limited time for studying even if they were motivated to do so. As a 15-year-old adolescent girl from Zone 5, Afar noted:

For me, it is better when the school is open, because I spend half of my day in the school and I help my parents after school only. However, since the school closed, I work throughout the day. I can't reject my parents' orders even if I get tired, because it is not good to disobey parents.

Several adolescent girls also explained that because of this, and because of their concerns about being pressured into marriage if they remained in their village, that they had migrated to Bahir Dar.

Other adolescents noted that gender norms around the importance of marriage for girls and the shame associated with pre-marital pregnancies are also an important driver during the pandemic. Whereas school attendance can be protective, during school closures these norms have regained salience. As a 17-year-old adolescent boy from Zone 5 explained:

Parents won't coerce girls for marriage if they are in school, they coerce for marriage girls who are not in school. Currently parents in our locality coerce in-school girls for marriage since they are not in school due to the school closure in response to covid-19 ... Parents fear that their daughters will start relationship without being married if they are not married soon, and also girls will get pregnant without marriage unless they get married, so parents coerce their daughters get married if they are not in school.

Within these rural contexts, several adolescents emphasised that child marriages were celebrated rather than stigmatised. A 16-year-old adolescent boy from South Gondar, Amhara, pointed out that rather than seeking to hide the wedding



17-year-old girl who is married with a baby in a health clinic in Amhara, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams / GAGE 2020

ceremony of a child bride, the whole community had participated and had seen it as a cause for celebration. *'You have no idea what a wonderful wedding ceremony it was! No one was left from the locality as they were all attending the wedding ... The wedding ceremony was held two weeks ago between a 14-year-old girl and an 18-year-old boy due to school closure.'*

In some cases, the pressure on parents to arrange their daughter's marriage also stemmed from a concern that they may be at heightened risk of premarital pregnancy, which is culturally taboo, following the closure of schools. In Afar, for example, adolescents noted that young people were spending increased time participating in the *sadah* cultural dance during the pandemic. As a 17-year-old boy commenting on the impending marriage of his 15-year-old sister, which he was tacitly condoning, explained: *'If she were a student, I might help her opposing the marriage and she will not be forced to marry. However, since she is not even a student, I prefer my sister marry to one of her abino [the girl's mother's older brother's son] – otherwise there is risk she may get pregnant without being married in the sadah place.'*

These attitudes possibly also stem from a recognition that youth under-employment and unemployment is high and that in the context of the country's current political fragility, the likelihood of investments into education parlaying into decent employment is constrained. In this regard, we found that even some adolescent boys had been pressured to marry despite having previously been attending secondary school in neighbouring towns. A 19-year-old boy from South Gondar who had been studying in Grade 8 prior to the pandemic explained that his parents had arranged his wedding soon after the school closure:

I am going to marry a girl aged about 13 who has temporarily dropped from grade 3 due to school closure amid covid-19 ... our wedding will be held after 10 days and we are making preparation for the wedding ceremony including HIV/AIDS testing, bridal gifts and food preparations.

This finding is striking given that families had already invested in their sons' education for a significant number of years, underscoring the extent to which households are affected by the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic and the possibility that school graduation would be prolonged as a result of missed school time.

Lack of surveillance

A second key factor shaping the heightened risk of child marriage at this time is the relative absence of government officials at the community level. Teachers have largely returned to their home towns and health extension workers are predominantly focusing on covid-19-related issues. Moreover, transportation between district towns and communities

Previously, girls had their teachers to whom they could report if they were being forced into marriage by parents and the teachers can even take the parents to justice if they insist. However, now, children do not have these opportunities, as schools are closed and teachers are not in the locality.

(A 17-year-old boy from South Gondar, Amhara)

has also become more challenging, initially due to restrictions in transportation and over time due to increasing costs, further hindering reporting of child marriage cases. Accordingly, the usual monitoring of possible child marriage cases has been weakened during the pandemic, and adolescent girls have also lost key figures in the reporting chain against forced marriages. As a 17-year-old boy from South Gondar, Amhara, explained: *'Previously, girls had their teachers to whom they could report if they were being forced into marriage by parents and the teachers can even take the parents to justice if they insist. However, now, children do not have these opportunities, as schools are closed and teachers are not in the locality. So, parents are taking this as a good opportunity to force their daughters into arranged marriages.'* Similarly, an 18-year-old adolescent boy also from South Gondar emphasised that in the past school directors played a key role in supporting girls who wanted to pursue their studies and avoid early marriage.

The school director will first ask the girl if she is willing to marry. If she is willing, he could allow her to marry. If she is going to be married forcefully, the director will report to the concerned body and stop the marriage. If the father of the girl refused, the school director will take the case to the court ... But teachers are not here at this time ... Even the school director is coming just once a week and he is not accessible for the students ... Even the kebele chair is not following this up.

Several key informants noted that they expected the marriage risk to adolescents over time would increase, especially for girls. As an expert from the Bureau of Women, Children and Youth Affairs in Zone 5, Afar explained:

I suspect that if the school closure continues for a long time, parents [especially in rural places] might force their daughters to get married ... When I go to raise people's awareness about the covid-19 pandemic, many girls are asking me in the town and in rural kebeles [communities] why schools are closed when the pandemic has not reached our locality. They also complained about having to herd animals throughout the day, especially young girls in rural places.

Seasonality

One of the striking differences across the three research sites was the issue of seasonality – i.e. in localities (Afar and South Gondar) where it is the traditional marriage season, both adolescents and key informants reported increases in child marriage, whereas in East Hararghe where marriages are traditionally carried out later in the year (following the harvest in October/ November) there were few reports of imminent child marriages. In Afar and South Gondar, respondents emphasised that while the period following Ramadan and the Orthodox Christian Easter, respectively, is the usual season for marriage, the number of adolescent girls – and even boys – whom parents are pushing into marriage appears to be significantly higher this year than in the past. As a 17-year-old adolescent girl from South Gondar explained: *'Easter is a marriage season. People have been married off since then. There are girls who were married off at the age of 15. Most of them are from the rural parts. There is an eighth grader who got married from the town, but it was her decision though.'* Similarly, a 17-year-old adolescent boy from Zone 5, Afar, noted that after Eid many girls in his locality were expected to be married off to their *absuma*:² *'Even the girl, who you interviewed before me, she [a 15-year-old girl] will marry in this marriage season, but she is not aware about her marriage, no one tells her about her marriage.'*

In East Hararghe, while respondents did not report an increase in child marriage given that the marriage season is later in the calendar year, our findings did point to several possible risk factors. First, adolescent girls highlighted that with the absence of government officials in the communities during the pandemic, girls were at heightened risk of FGM/C, a precursor to marriage. As a 12-year-old adolescent girl from East Hararghe explained:

► There was a female teacher that used to register the names of parents who allowed girls to undergo FGM/C, but since there is no school they cut girls and there is no one to question them.

(A 12-year-old adolescent girl from East Hararghe, Oromia)

FGM/C is practised widely in the kebele, two girls from my neighbourhood experienced it a few days before the fasting season began. There was a female teacher that used to register the names of parents who allowed girls to undergo FGM/C, but since there is no school they cut girls and there is no one to question them.

Similarly, a 14-year-old adolescent boy from East Hararghe noted:

Yesterday three girls were circumcised. They are aged between 11 and 13 years old. One of them is a daughter of my uncle. Their mothers took them to the home of the circumciser, who is in the same village, in the evening. Since people already heard about it, a friend and I hid ourselves at the back of the house of the circumcisers and we were following what happened to the girls. The girls were circumcised turn by turn with blades. Mothers held their legs and hand tight, so they could not move. We heard that the girls were screaming for long hours.

Adolescents reported that even though the local administrators knew about this practice, they did not take any action and that the religious and local leaders also support the practice. The district-level officials have already stopped working around harmful traditional practices as a result of the covid-19 pandemic. Older adolescents emphasised that June is the major FGM/C season in this area and they expect that many adolescent girls will face circumcision during this time.

Second, given the growing trend of adolescent-initiated rather than arranged marriages in East Hararghe (see Jones et al., 2016; 2019), our findings suggest that since the closure of schools, young people are spending more time participating in the nightly *shegoye* cultural dances. The *shegoye* is a local dance in which adolescents participate without adult supervision and is a key venue where young people meet future marriage partners. A 19-year-old boy from East Hararghe explained that this practice had increased during the pandemic: *'What do they do? Both boys and girls now all rush together to shegoye in the evenings. Many of them started love relationship among themselves. The school closure has created good opportunity for them.'*



An adolescent girl who was married and is now divorced in Oromia, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams / GAGE

Conclusions and implications for policy and practice

Our findings highlight that adolescent girls and some adolescent boys are at heightened risk of child marriage, even in the early onset phases of the pandemic. Given these early vulnerabilities it will be critical going forward to continue to monitor the situation as the covid-19 situation evolves, especially in areas of the country that are already known to be child marriage 'hotspots' (see Jones et al., 2016; MOWCY, 2019) and during traditional marriage seasons. To mitigate the risks of child marriage and keep the country on track to achieve SDG target 5.3, our findings suggest the importance of the following priority actions:

1. **Support young people to access distance education options and continue their studies during school closure:** Given that many young people are at risk of child marriage because they and their parents are faced with uncertainty as to when schooling will resume, it is key to support young people to access distance education by distributing study materials for adolescents who lack access to radio, TV or internet, and potentially by organising volunteer youth to mentor younger adolescents in their studies in socially distanced ways. Public awareness-raising with parents and communities about the importance of young people continuing their education – and the risks of the *sadah* and *shogoye* cultural dances at an early age – are urgently needed, and catch-up programmes should be considered to compensate for the period of schooling missed before the next academic year.
2. **Resume community reporting mechanisms to counter child marriages:** Adolescents and key informants alike noted that the absence of school officials in particular had disrupted child marriage reporting chains. It will be important for the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth to establish and raise awareness about interim community committees to whom adolescents can report threats of child marriage, as well as other harmful traditional practices, including FGM/C.
3. **Ensure that adolescents have access to sexual and reproductive health services and supplies:** Given that unwanted pregnancies are a risk factor of child marriage, it is important that during the pandemic young people have access to community health services and that condoms are widely accessible and affordable.
4. **Support programming that provides safe spaces for adolescent girls to resume in safe, socially distanced ways:** Given that girls' clubs and safe space programming provide important outlets for adolescent girls to share experiences and discuss concerns with peers and trusted adults, it will be important for the government to provide guidance on how such programmes can resume services, and deliver them in safe, socially distanced ways.
5. **Invest in gender- and adolescent-responsive social protection programming:** For some families, child marriage is being driven during the pandemic by concerns about economic vulnerability, and this is likely to increase over time as the economic downturn deepens. It will therefore be important to consider linking an expansion of the Productive Safety Net Programme to a labelled cash transfer to encourage families to send their adolescents back to school, especially adolescent girls at secondary school age.



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Endnotes

- 1 Suggested citation: Jones, N., Gebeyehu, Y., Gezahegne, K., Iyasu, A., Workneh, F. and Yadete, W. (2020) 'Listening to young people's voices under covid-19. Child marriage risks in the context of covid-19 in Ethiopia.' Policy brief. London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence.
- 2 In Afar culture, the marriage system mandates that girls must marry their maternal cousin or *absuma*, in order to preserve kinship lines.