

Ethiopia

Creating Partnerships to Prevent Early Marriage in the Amhara region

In the Amhara regional state of Ethiopia, 50 percent of girls are married before the age of 15.¹ Many are betrothed even earlier and sent to live with their future husband's family by the age of nine or ten. Early marriage is one of many harmful traditional practices that are particularly prevalent in rural areas, along with female genital cutting, abduction, and unattended births.

The effects of early marriage are devastating. Girls married young suffer major disadvantages physically, emotionally, economically, and socially. Dr. Eskael Petros, the attending OB/GYN at Debremarkos Hospital, says "I face the complications of early marriage every day. Medically speaking, these girls are not well grown. During an obstructed labor the girl will labor for three to four days before the family brings her in, at which point the fetus is usually dead and the birth canal is often atrophied and torn."

Girls married early are at greater risk for reproductive health complications and gender-based violence, including marital rape, sexually transmitted infections and HIV, obstructed labor, and obstetric fistula. Due to exploitation and domination by their older husbands and in-laws, they are not able to create supportive social or economic networks through family or friends, are more likely to get divorced or abandoned at a young age, and are more likely to run away from home and become exposed to risky behavior in the cities, including prostitution. They do not complete their schooling and thus are more likely to grow impoverished and suffer from malnutrition.²

Pathfinder International/Ethiopia manages a large reproductive health and family planning project,



which includes HIV/AIDS prevention and women's empowerment activities, in 278 woredas (districts) in Ethiopia, through 46 local Implementing Partner Organizations (IPOs). Pathfinder works in collaboration with these partners to prevent early marriage through extensive advocacy efforts, paired with community and legal interventions through its community-based reproductive health programs.

Approaching the Community

Addressing an ingrained practice like early marriage at the community level presents multiple challenges. The very people whose influence and education makes them effective agents of change often marry early themselves, or marry their children at early ages.

Furthermore, the economic exchange and resource sharing of marriages often determines the timing more than the child's age or needs. Families

Patients waiting at Debremarkos Hospital.

"The difference between a boy and girl starts at birth. When women express their pleasure at a birth of a child, a baby boy gets seven ululations, while a baby girl gets only three."

—Ethiopian Orthodox Christian Priest

¹ Population Council Tabulations of Ethiopia Demographic Health Survey, 2000. From Erulkar, A. et al. *The Experience of Adolescence in Rural Amhara Region Ethiopia*, Population Council, 2004.

² Haberland et al., "Early Marriage and Adolescent Girls," YouthLens, No. 15. Published by YouthNet August 2005. Also, Population Council's "Child Marriage Briefing: Ethiopia", July 2004

CBRHAs Lule and Teferra were both married around 14 years old. Now, they both have 14-year-old daughters, who are in school, and not engaged.

marry daughters to increase family prestige or to forge social and economic ties with another family. Mothers without education, who were married early themselves, are hard to reach for counseling against the early marriage of their daughters.

Preventing early marriage requires creating fundamental shifts in gender roles and in the value of



Preventing Early Marriage: Who is involved?

Pathfinder and its Implementing Partner Organizations

Pathfinder and its partners train community members as Community-Based Reproductive Health Agents (CBRHAs), who go to households, community gatherings, marketplaces, and schools to educate and mobilize people. They also provide counseling, non-clinical family planning methods, and referrals for clinical services.

Pathfinder supports Woreda Advisory Committees (WACs), composed of influential religious and community leaders and local government officials, who actively support reproductive health activities in their areas. Both WACs and CBRHAs in the Amhara region campaign against early marriage. As respected, well-known members of their communities, their activism makes an impact on people's attitudes and behaviors.

Women's Associations

The Amhara Women's Association (AWA), an IPO of Pathfinder, is supported with funds from the Packard Foundation to fight harmful traditional practices, promote income generation for women, organize and guide girls' clubs, and arrange for scholarships for poor female students. The AWA mobilizes communities against early marriage through their local kebele (village) representatives reporting on early marriages planned in their community.

Schools/Girls' Clubs

Girls' clubs in schools are organized to educate girls on early marriage, harmful traditional practices, reproductive health, and other life skills. The girls act as peer educators and as a support network for girls trying to escape early marriage or withdrawal from school. Members frequently report planned early marriages of friends to the head of the girls' club or a women's association representative. The club head will report these events to the school director and women's association and begin the intervention.

Woreda law enforcement

Judges, administrators, and police at the woreda level are trained by Pathfinder, the National Committee on Traditional Practices (currently renamed Ye Ethiopia Goji Lemadawi Dirgitoch Aswegaj Mahber (EGLDAM)), and women's associations on

"I give them examples of other daughters who went to school, got jobs, and now help their families. We don't want our children to pass life the way we did. We want them to help themselves first, and choose their partners."

—Lule Fetene, CBRHA

women in Ethiopian society. Pathfinder partners with local NGOs, women's associations, the Ministries of Women's Affairs and Justice, legal and civil society organizations, and schools in an effort to change this practice at the community level.

Pathfinder holds advocacy sessions, workshops, and community conversations on the harmful effects of early marriage at national, regional, and community levels. These include:

- Workshops with **legal bodies** (judges, police, parliamentarians, etc.), to raise awareness of new legislation and the enforcement of new laws, such as the legal age of marriage for girls (18) and the consequences for breaking the law; and
- Public forums to reach **community stakeholders**, sensitizing them to the consequences of early marriage and childbearing for women and their increased vulnerability to poverty and health complications.

These community conversations engage local leaders like teachers and religious leaders in interventions against early marriage, as their participation reduces unfavorable reactions among community members and parents.

| HARMFUL-TRADITIONAL PRACTICES - EARLY-MARRIAGE * | | | | |
|--|----------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|--------|
| IN 10 WOREDAS OF EAST GOJJAM ZONE | | | | |
| NO | WOREDA | AVERTED BY SEWERING COMMITTEES | RECENT COURT CASES | REMARK |
| 1 | AWABEL | 186 | 198 | 19 |
| 2 | BASSO LIBEN | 19 | 112 | 8 |
| 3 | BIRUAGH | 79 | - | - |
| 4 | D/TURAT GIN | 30 | 338 | 4 |
| 5 | DEJEN | 96 | 97 | 3 |
| 6 | D/MARCOF | - | - | - |
| 7 | D/EMIAS | 42 | 98 | 10 |
| 8 | ENABISE S.M. | 3 | - | 79 |
| 9 | ENEMAY | 4 | 143 | 14 |
| 10 | ENARJ-ENAWWA | - | 135 | - |
| 11 | GONCHIT S.E | - | 707 | 6 |
| 12 | GOZANIN | 10 | 3 | 2 |
| 13 | MACRONIA | 96 | 3 | - |
| 14 | MOTTA | - | 3 | 2 |
| 15 | SABRES BORINGA | 83 | - | - |
| TOTAL | | 643 | 1783 | 147 |

Pathfinder IPO, Ethiopian Aid, tracked the prevention of 1,783 early marriages and the progress of 147 court cases between July 2005 and January 2006 in their project areas in East Gojjam.

preventing early marriage, female genital cutting, and marriage by abduction.

National legal and civil society organizations EGLDAM and the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA) work closely with Pathfinder, women's associations, and the newly created Ministry of Women's Affairs to raise national awareness on early marriage and other harmful traditional practices as violations of girls' and women's rights. EWLA gives free legal counsel to victims of early marriage, marriage by abduction, rape, and gender-based violence. Pathfinder conducts advocacy workshops with both EWLA and EGLDAM to train judicial bodies and law enforcement agencies, as well as religious leaders from Orthodox Christian, Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant faiths. These sessions also involve and educate members of the Pathfinder-initiated WACs, who identify early marriage interventions through the CBRHA network. Research is undertaken by Pathfinder on early marriage and other harmful practices to inform advocacy and community-based activities.



“CBRHAs are often women’s association members trained in reproductive health duties and education, and they are the community leaders in health. They know everything that is happening because they go home-to-home. They are more trained than any other members of kebele committees and other AWA members, so they are very active, more so than others, to give information on early marriage.”

—Haimanot Mekonnen, Head of AWA, Debreworkos.

How are they involved?

An example from East Gojjam, Amhara.

East Gojjam, a land of harsh terrain and deep gorges carved out by the Blue Nile, is characterized by strict gender roles and glaring gender inequalities. Girls assume domestic duties as young as six or seven years old. Pathfinder works with Ethiopian Aid and the AWA to prevent early marriage here, where both boys and girls are usually married before they complete puberty.

In the village, a student or CBRHA will often hear about a *metachachet*, an Amharic word for

In Basso Liben Woreda, Amhara Region, Judge Kassa travels to remote villages, armed with a list of girls who are old enough to be married and those who are not. He screens girls who are scheduled to marry during the marriage season of January-February. Judge Kassa says now that they are enforcing the new penal code and punishments, people are changing their behavior.

“From year to year, we are seeing behavior change. Early marriage causes economic crisis. This is a burden for the government and society.”

—Judge Kassa





Aleme Salil (right), 13, was to marry a year ago, but a friend informed the school through the teacher of the girls' club. The school director called on her parents, who didn't respond, then wrote a letter to the judge. Alemé's father was imprisoned as a warning. She was not married, and still attends school.

Although Alemé's parents have been warned not to marry her before she is 18, her future is still not secure. They have attended many weddings and spent money on presents that they hope to recoup from neighbors and family at her marriage.

"I'd like not to commit that mistake. If I marry at this age, I will be exposed to many diseases, also maternal problems like fistula. After I finish my education, I would like to marry, after my aims are fulfilled."

— Aleme Salil

"formal engagement," agreement between two fathers, which requires witnesses. The CBHRA will inform the school director or the women's association, and together with the school director or girls' club leader will go to counsel the parents against marrying their children.

In some kebeles, an early marriage screening committee will hear the case. Composed of three recognized decision-makers (oftentimes including the CBRHA), the committee can fine the parents upwards of \$173.

If the parents persist in marrying their daughter, the school director or AWA representative will inform the woreda administrator. Woreda administrators usually chair the local WAC and will send out a judge or policeman to the family to determine the girls' age and marriage plans.

If it is a clear-cut case of violating the law, police can take the father, both parents, and anyone else who helped broker the marriage into custody. If there is a disagreement over the betrothed's age, she will be sent to the hospital for age determination. Families found in violation of the law will be called into court, and fined up to 5,000 birr, or \$578 US, with up to 7 years in jail, and the marriage will be annulled.

What has been accomplished?

In the past year and a half, Pathfinder and its partners have succeeded in preventing or annulling over 14,000 early marriages in Amhara and Tigray. Communities in project areas have widely accepted reasons to end early marriage through the educational efforts of CBRHAs, women's associations, EGLDAM, teachers, and religious leaders.

In advocacy sessions with Pathfinder and partners, religious leaders of the major faiths in Ethiopia, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Muslim Faith, the Catholic Church and Protestant Churches, developed and signed statements of action condemning early marriage and other harmful traditional practices, and exhorted religious bodies throughout Ethiopia to advocate against these in their communities.

— Margot M. Kane, June 2006. Photo credits same.

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