

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Marriage and sexual experience of adolescent girls and women in West Gojam Zone, Amhara region, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Background: There is an increasing interest to minimize the negative health outcomes of early and child marriage in Ethiopia. However, very little information exists on marriage and sexual experience of girls and women in the country.

Objective: The study aimed at examining marriage and sexual experience of adolescent girls and women in West Gojam Zone, Amhara region, and providing programmatic recommendations to improve their status and reproductive health.

Methods: This is a population-based study of adolescent girls and women aged 10 to 45 years in West Gojam zone, Amhara region between May to August 2005. Descriptive analysis was conducted to examine attitudes towards marriage, consent to marry, and experience of marriage as well as divorce, remarriage and sexual activity. A structured questionnaire was administered by trained interviewers. Females eligible for interview were randomly selected from the household listing. If more than one respondent was identified in a household, a Kish grid was used to select one female respondent. Data were entered using Epi-Info and later converted to SPSS for analysis.

Results: A total of 3,223 adolescent girls and women aged 10 to 45 were interviewed. The ideal age at marriage for adolescent girls was relatively low: 16 years for girls compared to 20 years for boys. Median age at marriage being 17 among those aged 10 to 19, and 14 among those 20 to 29. The vast majority of marriages were arranged and very few included consent from the child bride. Most respondents first had sex within the context of marriage, meaning the timing of first sex and first birth was mainly driven by the timing of marriage.

Conclusion: Programs to delay marriage and support girls within marriage are critical. Such interventions should be reinforced with community based social change strategies to address underlying determinants of early marriage. Innovative social change strategies such as 'community conversations' have the potential to reduce the practice of early marriage in addition to interventions directed at girls themselves.

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Introduction

Amhara region has the lowest age at marriage in the country, with 46% of girls marrying by age 15, and virtually all girls married by age 18 (1). Marriage in these highland communities is an arrangement between families and not between individuals, with parents traditionally deciding on young people's marriage, including the timing and choice of partner. Culturally, a high value is given to marriage with parental success linked to the marriage of one's children, although there are suggestions that families marry girls to relieve economic burden on the household (2).

Most married girls do not have sex before marriage and in this population, the earlier a girl marries, the earlier she has sex. Recent evidence suggest that girls who marry early have increased risk of HIV infection, even compared to their unmarried sexually active peers, with 50 percent higher rates of infection among married adolescents compared to unmarried sexually active girls (3, 4, 5). Once married, adolescent girls are often confined and their movements and contacts with outsiders are often controlled and limited by members of their new families such as husbands and in-laws (6). While early marriage leads to early sexual initiation, it also frequently leads to early divorce. Amhara region has one of the highest rates of divorce with early marriage being a predictor of divorce (7). Among young women aged 15 to 24 in Amhara region, fully 12% are divorced. Indeed, a considerable number of divorced women migrate into urban areas following marital dissolution in rural areas, many ending up in vulnerable circumstances.

Women in Amhara region experience high rates of maternal mortality and morbidity, including fistula and other reproductive health (RH) problems. Many of the circumstances that make Amhara women vulnerable are conditioned during adolescent years, including lack of education or early school drop-out; early marriage

that is most often unwanted and without consent, and early first birth that is socially expected soon after marriage. Interventions in the area of education, and literacy have contributed to possible delays in marriage (8).

Research on marriage and sexual experience in Ethiopia in general, and in Amhara region in particular is limited. This study therefore, attempts to present the RH situation of adolescent girls and women in West Gojam, Amhara region, Ethiopia.

Methods and materials

Data for this study are from a population-based survey of adolescent girls and women aged 10-45 years conducted in Yilmana Dinsa, Mecha and Achefer woredas of West Gojam Zone, Amhara region, which was conducted between May to August 2005. One Kebele (the smallest administrative unit in the country) was selected from each Woreda for this study. The estimated population size were 8,772 for Gonji kebele in Yilmana Dinsa woreda; 9,231 for Rim kebele in Mecha Woreda; and 7,476 for Yesmala Jankit kebele in Achefer woreda; making a total of 25,479 population. In the first stage of the study, all households in the survey area were listed, collecting basic demographic information on all members of the household, regardless of age.

A household was considered eligible for survey if it had one female resident member aged 10 to 45. All eligible households were entered in the computer and 3223 households were randomly selected for interview in the study areas. Where a selected household had more than one eligible woman, a Kish grid (9) was used to select just one respondent. The instrument used in the survey was mainly a close-ended, structured questionnaire. Topic areas covered in the questionnaire were wide-ranging, including marriage, pregnancy and childbirth, sexual activity among others.

The questionnaire was translated into Amharic and back-translated to ensure accuracy. Female interviewers were trained for one day prior to the initial household listing and for five days prior to the larger survey. During the five-day training, interviewers reviewed the questionnaire item by item and engaged in practice and mock interviews. Towards the end of the training, interviewers practiced the questionnaire on girls and women who were recruited from outside the study area. Once sampled, a respondent may not be at home during the interviewer's visit for various reasons. Where respondents were not found in the household, interviewers paid up to three visits to a household to locate and interview the sampled female respondent. Informed consent was obtained directly prior to the interview from all respondents.

In addition, informed consent was obtained from the parents, and guardians or employers of adolescents when they had resident parents or guardians. Supervisors checked all completed questionnaires for data quality and completeness. Data were entered using Epi-Info and later converted to SPSS for analysis.

Results

A total of 3,223 girls and women were interviewed with a response rate of 90%. The study population was homogeneous in terms of religion and ethnicity with virtually all respondents being Amhara and Orthodox Christians. Nearly three quarters of the respondents (73%) had never been to school. Nearly two thirds of respondents (64%) were currently married and one quarter had never been married (Table 1).

Table1: Sample characteristics of respondents, by woreda (district)

Category		Yimana Dinsa (n=1,088)	Mecha (n=1,063)	Achefer (n=1,072)	All (n=3,223)
Age group	10 to 19	33.1	30.9	33.7	32.5
	20 to 29	37.1	41.6	34.9	37.9
	30 to 39	20.6	18.7	21.4	20.3
	40 to 45	9.2	8.8	10.0	9.3
Religion	Orthodox Christian	98.9	99.7	99.7	99.4
	Other	1.1	0.3	0.3	0.6
Ethnicity	Amhara	99.9	99.7	100.0	99.9
	Other	0.1	0.3	0.0	0.01
Ever attended school	No	69.0	77.5	71.4	72.6
	Yes	31.0***	22.5	28.6	27.4
Current marital status	Never married	25.7	22.5	25.0	24.4
	Currently married	56.5***	66.8	69.1	64.1
	Divorced/Separated	13.8	7.5	3.8	8.4
	Widowed	4.0	3.2	2.1	3.1
Mean no. of household members		4.4	4.7	5.4	4.9

*** Difference between groups significant at $p < 0.001$

In Yilmana Dinsa woreda women are less likely to be married, with a large proportion of them being divorced (14%). Households of respondents include roughly five members, with Achefer households having slightly more members (mean 5.4) compared to Yilmana Dinsa households (mean 4.4).

The survey examined adolescent girls and women attitudes towards marriage, age of marriage, consent to marry and divorce and remarriage.

Table 2: Ideal age at marriage for males and females, by age group, marital status and education

Category	10 to 19 (n=1,012)	20 to 29 (n=1,184)	30 to 45 (n=926)	Never Married (n=758)	Married (n=2,253)	No educ educ (n=2,253)	Some educ (n=867)	All (n=3,222)
Ideal female marriage age								
Below age 15	11.6	22.0	21.6	6.7	22.3	23.3	6.0	18.5
Age 15 to 17	21.0	30.2	29.5	16.9	30.3	32.3	13.1	27.0
Age 18 to 19	62.5	44.3	44.3	71.1	43.5	40.6	75.1	50.2
Age 20+	4.8	3.5	4.6	5.3	4.0	3.7	5.8	4.3
Ideal male marriage age								
Below age 15	2.2	4.2	3.4	1.6	3.9	4.1	1.3	3.3
Age 15 to 17	0.2	13.1	12.2	6.8	13.5	14.3	5.7	11.9
Age 18 to 19	14.1	13.3	12.9	13.0	13.6	14.2	11.2	13.4
Age 20+	3.6	69.4	71.5	78.6	69.1	67.4	81.8	71.4

Nearly one in five respondents (19%) viewed the best age for girls to get married at an age before 15, compared to 3% of respondents who held view for males. Conversely, while only 4% of respondents named an ideal marriage age of girls as age 20 or older, fully 71% of respondents felt an older marriage age was ideal for boys. Views on age at marriage differed by age group, marital status and education (Table 2).

Never married respondents and those who had been to school had the most progressive views on marriage age with over 75% feeling that a girl's ideal marriage age was at least age 18. Median age at first marriage was quite low, especially for women in the oldest age cohort and those who never went to school. Median age at first marriage was 17.3 among those aged 10 to 19, 14.1 among those aged 20 to 29, and 13.3 among those aged 30 and over.

Those who had attended school seem to marry the latest with median age at first being 17.9 for women who had attended school. The practice of arranged marriage was approved by the majority of respondents. Three quarters of respondents (75%) supported the practice of arranged marriage, with views varying by age, educational level and marital status.

Younger, more educated and unmarried girls and women were less likely to believe that arranged marriage was advisable, compared to older, uneducated, married women. For example, 84% of respondents with no education approved of arranged marriage compared to only 51% of respondents who had been to school; 82% of ever-married respondents approved of arrangement compared to 53% of unmarried women.

Table 3: Percentage of arranged & consented marriages by age at marriage & age group

	Age at marriage				Age group			
	<10 (n=429)	10 to 14 (n=1,182)	15 to 19 (n=728)	20+ (n=81)	10 to 19 (n=327)	20 to 29 (n=1,159)	30 to 39 (n=935)	All (n=2,444)
Arranged by parents	98.1	95.1	91.1	84.0	95.1	94.5	93.2	94.1
Consent given								
Yes	96.5	88.3	70.9	59.3	82.2	83.7	83.6	83.6
No	3.5	11.7	29.1	40.7	17.8	16.3	16.4	16.4

The vast majority of marriages was arranged, and was not consented to by the bride. Overall, 94% of marriages were arranged by parents. That similar percentages of marriages are arranged across age cohorts suggests that the practice of arranged marriage is not changing in the region. In only 16% of first marriages was consent given by the bride. The extent to which marriages are consented to is associated with the age at marriage. Only 4% of girls who marry below age 10 consented to the marriage; 12% who married between ages 10 to 14 consented, while 29% of those who married from 15 to 19 gave consent. Regardless of age at marriage, only a minority of marriages in the study sites were consented to by brides (Table 3).

Twenty eight percent of respondents are in polygamous unions. Polygamy is not as common in these highland communities as other regions of the country. Ever married respondents were also read statements related to their relationship with their husband and asked if they agreed or disagreed. It should be noted here that many of the issues raised during this 'agree' or 'disagree' statements were sensitive and some misreporting, especially underreporting may have taken place.

Nevertheless, fully 15% of married women feel their husband has not always been faithful and 8% suspect them of frequenting sex workers. About one in ten married women have experienced violence in the past year with 11% reporting being beaten in the last year and 12% reporting sex that was forced by their husband.

Divorce and remarriage is very common among respondents. Twenty-six percent of first marriages ended in divorce. Many divorced women get remarried with 20% of the sample having been married twice and 8% having been married three or more times. Among girls who married before age of 10, 47% were married more than once. In comparison, 33% of girls who married from age 10 to 14, married more than once and only 12% of young women who married after age 20 were divorced and remarried.

Ninety-nine percent of respondents first had sex with their husband, reflecting that sexual initiation takes place in the context of marriage.

Table 4: Mean age at first sex, by age and at first marriage

Age at first marriage	Mean age of first sex
Less than 10 (n=416)	12.7
Age 10 to 14 (n=1,189)	13.3
Age 15 to 19 (n=735)	16.0
Age 20+ (n=79)	20.6

The earlier that sexual initiation took place, the less likely that it was wanted.

The vast majority of girls who had first sex before age 15 did not want it (Table 5).

Table 5: 'Wantedness' of first sex, by age at first sex

Age at first sex	Wanted sex	Did not want sex	Was undecided
Less than 10 (n=35)	8.6	74.3	17.1
Age 10 to 14 (n=1,307)	14.6	69.5	15.8
Age 15 to 19 (n=1,002)	31.7	54.3	14.0
Age 20+ (n=85)	54.1	35.3	10.6

Among those married at age 10 or less, median age at first sex was 12.7 years; among those married during early adolescence (10 to 14) median age at first sex was 13.3; for girls married from age 15 to 19, median age at first sex was 16.0 (Table 4).

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that the vast majority of marriages were arranged and very few included consent from the bride. Despite modest increases in age at marriage, median age of marriage is still low: 17 years among the 10 to 19 age group. Furthermore, most respondents first had sex within the context of marriage, meaning the timing for first sex and first birth was mainly driven by the timing of marriage.

Divorce is a peculiar outcome of early marriage and a clear reflection of mistimed and unwanted marriage. The advantages of delaying marriage in this population include delayed sexual initiation and first birth, as well as allowing girls time to achieve full development and potential. In areas where early marriage is rampant, young girls have their childhood cut short and their social, educational and economic opportunities limited when they enter into marriage before age 18, often with a stranger and often without their input or consent. In other words, adolescent girls married before age 18 have low educational attainment,

earning power, social mobility and they face negative health outcomes including HIV and sexually transmitted infections. In some settings, married girls have been shown to have higher rates of HIV infection than their sexually active unmarried peers (3, 4, 5).

In order to foster delayed early marriage and to eliminate its negative consequences among girls in their early adolescent period, programs that provide social support and options to families has to be initiated. A good example of an innovative project to delay early marriage is the Berhane Hewan Girls' support program in Amhara region, which has been implemented in Yilmana Dinsa woreda, Mosebo Kebele from 2004 to 2006 based on a formative research and evaluated in 2006 (10, 8). In this particular project, multiple interventions such as community conversation, house-to-house visits and subsequent formation of groups, school material support, household and community incentives in the form of ewes to girls and water wells for every village were employed.

Programs to delay marriage and support girls within marriage are critical. Such interventions should be reinforced with community based social change strategies to address underlying determinants of early marriage. Innovative social change strategies such as 'community conversations' and social mobilization have the potential to reduce the practice of early marriage in addition to interventions directed at girls themselves.

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