

IDEAL AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE IS STILL BELOW THE LEGAL AGE OF MARRIAGE: THE CASE OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS IN WEST HARARGE ZONE, EASTERN ETHIOPIA: A MIXED METHOD STUDY

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: Early marriage is a harmful practice associated with serious adverse health and social outcomes. It is common practice in male dominated societies. Ethiopia has legislative provisions and stakeholders advocating for abolition of early marriage; however, the practice appears to continue due to perceived ideal age, which has not been monitored regularly. The aim of this study was to determine the ideal age at first marriage among adolescent girls and assess the role of girls' reference groups for early marriage in West Hararge Zone, Eastern Ethiopia.

METHODS: Descriptive analysis of ideal age at first marriage was done as part of a large cross-sectional survey. Participants were adolescent girls 13-17 years of age, male reference groups, and female reference groups. Both quantitative and qualitative data were used. Data were cleaned with SPSS version 20 and analyzed by STATA/SE version 13 and summarized by descriptive statistics. A thematic data analysis approach was utilized to summarize qualitative data.

RESULTS: The mean age which adolescent girls reported to be ideal at first marriage was 16.96 (95% CI: 16.81,17.11). Qualitative component of the study also revealed that girls still marry between ages of 12 and 15 years. Family, peer pressure, marriage intermediaries and community as a whole were found to influence decisions of young adolescent girls to marry early.

CONCLUSION: In conclusion, the age which adolescent girls reported as the ideal age for marriage in selected districts of west Hararge is below legal age of marriage in Ethiopia which is 18 years. This implies early marriage is still common practice in this study area. Since the role of family, peers, religious, and community leaders is relevant, in addition to young adolescent girls, working with all influential groups and communities as a whole could be necessary to decrease and eliminate early marriage.

KEY WORDS: Ideal age, first marriage, Legal age, early marriage, Ethiopia

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INTRODUCTION

Early marriage, defined as marriage before the age of 18, is an issue that disproportionately affects women and girls. The term “early marriage” describes a marital union by people who are below 18 years of age. It can be considered as a harmful practice that can be both a cause and an outcome of reproductive rights violations¹. Early marriage is common in male dominated societies and cultures². Global and national evidences show early marriage is high in some communities and it has its own deep cultural and economic foundations in favor of early marriage. Though early marriage is declining globally, it remains high in sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia^{3,4}. In 2012 UNICEF estimated 400 million women globally aged 20-49 got married before 18 years of age⁽⁵⁾. Similarly, a study done in India shows 7% of 20-24 year old females are married by age 15⁶. According to report by the International Center of Research on Women (ICRW), the percentage of girls married before age of 18 ranged from 41% for Tanzania and 74.5% for Niger, while 49.2 % for Ethiopia.⁷

In Ethiopia women tend to marry considerably earlier than men. An Ethiopian demographic and health survey of 2016 shows the median age at first marriage was 17.1 years among women age 25-49 and 23.8 years among men in same age range. Similarly, fifty-eight percent of women and only 9% of men in the 25-49 age range married before their 18th birthday^{8,9}. Early marriage affects girls’ health, education, and psychological wellbeing. It leaves most girls out of school and exposes them to health risks related to sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy related complications which repeat the cycle of poverty⁵.

Studies show married adolescent girls (15-19) years do have a higher chance of acquiring HIV infection when compared with unmarried counterparts. Additionally, being married is associated with frequent unprotected sex⁴. Evidences shows adolescent girls younger than 15 years are 5 times more likely to die in childbirth than those greater than 20 years of age⁷. Not only adolescent girls,

but also their children face risk of malnutrition and low birth weight which compromise their cognitive ability¹⁰. Although most African countries have civil laws prohibiting child marriage and setting a minimum age for marriage, the situation remains persistent in part because of strong traditional and religious practices that hinder enforcing the law¹¹. A study conducted in Nigeria shows early marriage is deeply entrenched in culture, tradition, and religion¹². In areas where poverty is deeply rooted, child marriage offers opportunity to enlarge the social network in which girls their family depend during times of need.¹³

Lack of autonomy on issues that seriously affect their health and wellbeing leaves adolescent girls in compromised situations. Findings from Northwest Ethiopia indicated that girls whose parents perceive ideal marital age to be less than 18 were 3 times higher in practicing early marriage than those mentioned above 18 years of age¹⁴. Studies show among the interventions on ending early marriage, shifting gender norms by intervention targeting influential people and adolescent girls’ family has been successful¹⁵. The impact of adolescent girls’ education on delaying early marriage was also found to be significant in Ethiopia. When compared with those with no education, adolescent girls with primary and secondary education are found to marry 2 to 7 years later¹⁶. Ideal age in this paper is defined as the age at first marriage which adolescent girls and male reference groups report to be appropriate.

This study tries to determine ideal age for first marriage among adolescent girls and assess the role of reference groups on early marriage in west Hararge, eastern Ethiopia.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Study setting, design and period

West Hararge zone is composed of 13 Woredas (administrative areas) and one town. Based on the 2007 Census, the estimated population is 1,871,706. Women and girls account for 48.8% of the population. This paper presents description of

ideal age at first marriage of girls as part of large cross-sectional survey. It is part of baseline assessment for a project to improve adolescent reproductive health and nutrition through structural solutions (Abdi Boru project) in west Hararge zone of Oromia Regional State, Ethiopia. Qualitative data from in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and key informant interviews were used in addition to quantitative findings. The baseline survey was conducted from May 2016 to August 2016.

Study population

To prepare this paper, quantitative and qualitative data were primarily drawn from adolescent girls 13-17 year of age. The quantitative data were obtained from two individuals per household who are female and male people who were believed to influence decisions made by index girls. Similarly, besides the girls, participants of the qualitative study were female and male influential people to adolescent girls including parents, husbands, siblings, and in-laws. Selected key informants who were believed to be influential related to the girls' marriage were also part of the study population.

Sample size determination

The sample size was calculated assuming a reduction of early marriage from 22% to 15%, a 5 percent level of significance, 90 percent power, average cluster size of 30, a design effect of 1.5 and 10% non-response rate. Accordingly, a total of 3,420 adolescent girls, 3,420 male reference group members (influential people) and 3,420 female reference group in 3,420 households were included in the survey. For the qualitative part, purposive sampling with maximum variation technique and decided the sample size based on saturation. Accordingly, 20 focus group discussions, 32 in depth interviews, and 36 key informant interviews were conducted.

Sampling technique

A two-stage cluster sampling method was employed. A list of development army (a sub division of kebele) in each kebele was obtained from administration offices of the study districts and considered as clusters. In the first stage, 38 clusters were selected using simple random sampling technique in each

selected woreda. In the second stage, a complete census of households and populations in the selected clusters was done to identify households with eligible adolescent girls aged 13-17 years. Based on the complete census conducted prior to data collection, 30 households were selected randomly using a computer-generated random number. Respondents for the qualitative study were recruited using purposive sampling. For focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs) the main criteria for selection were permanent residence in the study kebele and willingness to participate in the study. Key informants were selected from woreda offices and schools in the woreda.

Data collection tools, procedure and analysis

Quantitative data were collected using a structured and pre-tested questionnaire. All study tools were first developed in English and then translated into the local language, Afan Oromo. The ODK (Open data Kit), an electronic data collection program, was used to record data. Data were transferred to SPSS version 20 for further cleaning. Then the cleaned data were transferred on to STATA/SE version 13 statistical software for data analysis. Descriptive analysis of socio demographic data and information related with ideal age for first marriage was done. Frequency and percentages were used to present findings.

For the qualitative part, Focus Groups Discussions (FGDs), In-depth interviews (IDIs) and key informant interviews (KIIs) guides were first prepared in English. Then, these tools were translated into the local language 'Afan Oromo' by research assistants who were competent in both languages. Interview guides were thoroughly prepared by public health and social studies researchers in order to capture social norm related insights of the community. Purposive and snowball sampling was employed to recruit participants. Semi-structured questions, as well as vignettes were used to ensure trustworthiness of the collected information. Codebook was prepared in combination of both deductive and inductive approaches. Data analysis was assisted

by a computer software (Open Code version 4.02). A thematic data analysis approach was utilized to synthesize the data.

Operational definition

Ideal age at first marriage: Age at first marriage mentioned by adolescent girls and reference groups as appropriate.

Legal age of marriage: Legal age of marriage in Ethiopia is considered 18 years.

Actual age of marriage: Age at which adolescent girls married.

Female reference: Female influential person for the adolescent girl in the household such as mother, sister, mother-in-law and sister-in-law.

Male reference: Male influential person for the adolescent girl in the household such as father, brother, husband, father-in-law and brother in-law.

ETHICAL ISSUES

The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Ethical Review Board of Addis Continental Institute of Public Health, (IRB Number 0029). Informed consent was obtained from all participants. All interviews among the study participants took place in a private setting.

RESULTS

A total of 3420 adolescent girls aged 13 – 17 years were expected to participate in the study; 3186 (93.16%) actually participated. The majority of the girls 2811 (89.24%) were never married, 77% have attended at least primary education, 50.51% were students at the time of the survey, and 87.9% were Muslims (Table 1).

Table 1: Socio demographic characteristics of adolescent girls (13-17 years old) in west Hararge zone, Oromia region, eastern Ethiopia, 2016.

Characteristics		Frequency	%
No. of adolescents visited		3420	
No. of adolescents responded		3186	93.16%
Girls' educational status	Never attended	583	18.51%
	Primary(1-8)	2427	77.05%
	Secondary (9-12)	140	4.44%
Fathers' educational status	Never attended	2086	66.22%
	Ever attended	1064	33.78%
Mothers educational status	Never attended	2621	83.21%
	Ever attended	529	16.79%
Religion	Muslim	2770	87.94%
	Orthodox	335	10.63%
	Protestant	8	0.25%
	Catholic	35	1.11%
	Others	2	0.06%
Marital status	Never married	2811	89.24%
	Married/living together	253	8.03 %
	Divorced	66	2.10%
	Separated	20	0.63%
Ethnicity	Oromo	3043	96.60%
	Somali	1	0.03%
	Amhara	106	3.37%
Occupation	Farmer or Family farm work	481	15.27%
	Household work/housewife	767	24.35%
	Student	1591	50.51%
	Others	311	9.87%

Similarly, a total of twenty Focus Groups Discussions with married and unmarried adolescent girls, adolescent boys, and parents of adolescents were conducted using locally developed vignettes. A total of 32 in-depth interviews with married and unmarried adolescent girls, husband of adolescent girls and mothers-in-law was conducted using in-depth interview guides. In addition, 36 key informant interviews were conducted with 7 government woreda level officials using semi-structured interview guides.

Ideal age at first marriage

The reported average ideal age at first marriage for adolescent girls was 16.96 (95% CI: 16.81, 17.11), Female and male references said that ideal age for girls to get married was 17.58(95% CI: 17.44, 17.73) and 17.63(95% CI: 17.53, 17.73) respectively. Adolescent girls who reported the ideal age at first marriage to be below 18 years of age were 44.9 % and all of those ever-married adolescent girls married before their 18th birth day (Table 2).

Table 2: Adolescent girls and reference groups' response on ideal age of marriage in west Hararge zone, Oromia region, eastern Ethiopia, 2016

Respondents	Mean ideal age at 95% CI
1 Adolescent girls thought about ideal age for first marriage	16.96 (16.81-17.1)
2 Female references thought on ideal age for first marriage	17.58 (17.44-17.7)
3 Male references thought on ideal age for first marriage	17.63 (17.53-17.73)
4 Actual age at marriage of those ever married	13.76 (13.49-14.02)

Among adolescent girls participating in the study, 339 (10.6%) of them were married. The median age at their first marriage of those ever-married adolescents was 15 years; all of them married below 18 years of age. According to the qualitative findings, most adolescents would accept a marriage proposal at the perceived ideal age; which is around 15 years in the study area.

“If a girl refuses a marriage proposal, she is considered as if she has made a big mistake in her life, both by the community and her friends. It is conceived as if she missed out her chance. Even she will not get a boyfriend after that, people say she may also have another problem like health problems or she is abnormal so on average they marry at 15 and 16 years of age” according to one Unmarried adolescent boy.

Most of the participants have information about legal age of marriage in the country which is 18 years. Some of the parents mentioned that they may face punishment by the local government authorities if they marry their girls before the age of 18.

While it was generally assumed that early marriage is decreasing, most participants of the study revealed that girls still commonly marry between ages of 12 and 15 years. Some of the discussants mentioned 16 -17 years of age. When the girls marry at this early age, the majority of them discontinue their education.

“Most of the students when they complete grade 7, they discuss with their groups and engage in marriage. Even though their age is too small reaching 12 and 13, they rash to marriage. Their parents also did not say anything on such issues because they do not have enough awareness on education.” Married adolescent girl.

This study also shows 44.9% of adolescent girls responded that the ideal age at first marriage is below 18 years of age and all of those ever-married adolescent girls married before their 18th birth day. Community and reference groups were also found to have considerable to influence on adolescent girl's decision to marry early.

“In this community, girls would marry at the age of 15 and below. The major reason that makes them get married at this age is peer pressure. If a girl is beautiful and her family has large farm land, she will immediately engage to marriage even while she is below the mentioned age. If girls do not get married at 15, they will be disgraced and this will enforce them to make wrong decisions.” Husband of adolescent girl.

The influence of community and family on the acceptability of early marriage is revealed by the qualitative finding. Pressure and sanctions from family, marriage intermediaries and community were found to be influential.

“The community’s opinion and insult affect her very much. More than mother’s opinion and insult, the neighbors are hurtful to those girls.” Women Association officer “I can say the big influence is played by intermediaries; they strongly talk to her for negotiation. Adolescent girls of same age help intermediaries by bringing the lady to him to discuss in person.” Women Association officer.

Fathers of adolescent girls also emphasized that early marriage of girls is customary in the study area due to the different pressures. Eighteen is perceived as the maximum limit age that girls can remain unmarried by whom? (the community? The family?) “When intermediaries come, we collaborate with them and marry even girls who are 14 or 15 years old. Most girls in this local area normally marry between the age of 14- 18. If a girl could not find a husband and remains single elapsing 18 years of age she will be called “haftu” meaning, the one who could not find a man. Thus, people say to girls once your time is over you cannot find a man so get married before that happens.” Father of adolescent girl

DISCUSSION

Findings of this study show ideal age for first marriage is still below legal age of marriage in Ethiopia, which is 18 years. The average ideal age at first marriage mentioned by adolescent girls was 16.96 at 95% confidence interval (16.81-17.1). Median age at first

marriage of those ever married is 15 years which is similar with the Ethiopian demographic and health survey report of 2011 and 2016 which shows median age at first marriage among women aged 25-49 to be 16.5 and 17.1 respectively⁸.

This is supported by reports from many African countries and south Asian countries which shows persisting early marriage practices contrary to reduction seen at the global level.⁷

Both quantitative and qualitative results of this study are consistent indicating low ideal age at first marriage. Reference groups (influential people to adolescents) have also mentioned the ideal age of marriage to be below 18 years. A report by UNICEF in 2016 was based on analysis of 2007 Ethiopian demographic health survey data which indicated that there are numerous factors which influence decisions to marry at an early age. Similarly, variations were observed among regions of Ethiopia and even at zone and district level indicating existence of microclimate regarding early marriage.¹⁷

Though there are legal frameworks in many countries, decision regarding age of marriage is influenced by family, peers, and norms in the community and religion⁷. Findings from Nigeria indicated religious leaders have a role in marriage related decisions¹². This is similar to findings of this study, which revealed if adolescent girls do not get married early, it is considered as shame and has backlash, but boys are not expected to marry as early as girls. Another study done in Northwest Ethiopia shows family income, perceived ideal age of marriage, and knowing legal age of marriage were determinants of early marriage¹⁴.

In this study, qualitative results show there are also other drivers like peer pressure and family’s economic status which contribute to the decision to marry early. This is supported by a study which assessed early marriage in Africa which concluded with “countries with highest rate of poverty are also with highest rate of early marriage and highest population growth rates”¹⁸. Similarly another study in Ethiopia shows that in areas where girls’

education and employment is limited, marriage is considered as a rational option by parents ².

When age at marriage is below the legal age, the consequences related with early marriage continue. In this study area, persistence of early marriage could be due to lack of disapproval by community and mentioned drivers, such as poverty.

Finally, this study revealed age at first marriage accepted as ideal age by adolescent girls and reference groups is below legal age of marriage in Ethiopia. This indicated commonness and approval of early marriage in the study setting. The study used adequate sample size, data was collected by professionals with adequate knowledge of the locality, and carefully designed questionnaires and interview guides were utilized. Therefore, the findings likely represent the actual situation in west Hararge where the majority of people share similar lifestyle, religion and culture.

One of the limitations of the study is that people may not know their exact date of birth and age, which they self-reported in the study. There are no adequate studies done in Ethiopia on ideal age except data on actual age at first marriage. Ideal age at first marriage does not equate with actual age at first marriage but it can indicate commonness of early marriage. To gain additional understanding, more segmented analyses are needed that cover not only geographic variety, but religion, ethnicity, education, and social class to know the differences among countries regarding child marriage ⁹.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Ideal age at first marriage of adolescent girls' in selected districts of west Hararge is below the legal age of marriage in Ethiopia. This implies early marriage is not discouraged and could remain common practice in this study area unless intervention occurs. Intensifying interventions to end early marriage of adolescent girls' is crucial. Since the role of family, peers, religious and community leaders is influential, working with all influential group and community as a whole could be necessary to decrease and eliminate early marriage.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no conflict of interest for this study

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