

Early Marriage in Ethiopia: So Little Done but So Much to Do

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Abstract

Early Marriage is one of the global problems that undermine the personal development and the rights of women very seriously. It is very delicate among the developing countries such as Ethiopia. Under-aged girls in Ethiopia are susceptible for child marriage since a long time ago. Irrespective of the efforts of the government, the society, and the international community; the problem is still persistent throughout the country. The traditional beliefs, religion, and the economic motives are recognized as the root causes of early marriage in Ethiopia. It exposes the pre-matured children into psychological and emotional traumas, severe violence, denial of social services, reproductive health problems and migration to the nearby poor towns and abroad. Thus, sensitizing the stakeholders, educating girls, and supporting the runaways and others who would otherwise be the victims of early marriage are the way forward to reduce the adverse consequences of child marriage in Ethiopia.

Keywords: Early marriage; Human right; Tradition; Violence; Psychological traumas; Sensitization; Ethiopia

Introduction

Since a long time, women and girls are victims of diversified socio-economic and political violations and exclusions. They are severely affected by sexual violence, early marriage and harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation and tattooing. Due to these inhuman and discriminatory practices, women and girls are banned from access to education, health care services, employment and other opportunities and resources. Early Marriage is, therefore, one of the ways of violation of human and women's rights.

It is universally accepted that they are those who are adults and matured can only choose their marriage partners. Contrary to this fact, all over the world, within a single day, almost 39,000 girls are getting into marriage before their maturity without their will and consent [1]. Thus, a marriage can be said early when the person getting married is immature in age (below 18 years) and in physiological development.

In 2010 alone, more than 67 million women who were found in the age brackets of 20 and 24 had been exposed for early marriage in developing countries except China. This is very worst in Africa in general and in Ethiopia in particular. In Ethiopia, from every 10 women who were getting into marriage in 2011, about 3 had married before maturity age (ibid). It is more prevalent especially in the rural communities of Christian dominated and agrarian society of the Central highlands and Northern part of Ethiopia. This part of the country accounts the 54.6% of the national incidence. In addition, the South and South-Western part of the country have the prevalence of 50-80% so far as child marriage is concerned [2].

Early Marriage has reproduced adverse effects on the socio-economic and health status of the persons involved. Girls who marry at early ages would lose the opportunity of formal education, have little or no opportunity for wage employment and hence mostly in the informal type of job or fully engages in housework and childcare. It

may also lead into social power imbalances, such as unequal income generating opportunity, sexual violence, little money for attaining their daily needs and gender inequality in and out of their homes [3]. In addition, the children of early married girls also suffer from severe malnutrition, under-nutrition, and poor health. Therefore, this research is aimed at assessing the impact of early marriage on the lives of girls and women in Ethiopia.

Whys Does Early Marriage in Ethiopia Persists?

Most countries in the world have passed laws against early marriage. However, the laws are overwhelmed by socio-cultural and economic factors that significantly contribute for the perpetuation of this harmful and discriminatory practice. Most often; poverty, religious dogmas and practices, traditional norms and low levels of education are mentioned as the major factors for the continuation of child marriage in most developing countries [4].

Economic reasons

Apart from long-lasting and deep-rooted cultural reasons, the vulnerable economic situation of a family is another cause of child marriage. That is why early marriage is more prevalent in developing countries than developed nations. In Ethiopia too, to get the dowry or the cattle as the bride's price from the groom or his family, many of our sisters and brothers are victims of this harmful practice. Moreover, to start earning family's future reciprocal assistance, to link with a financially better off or a better "social standing" family, and to reduce the financial dependence of children, early marriage among the peasant community of Ethiopia is highly supported [2].

It is known that poor families have no financial means to invest on their children's education, health care services, and even to feed them. As a result, they would practice early marriage as an alternative solution to relieve their economic problems though short-lived and limited in amount.

This is harsher in orphaned children that the caregivers may see marriage to a financially sound man as an opportunity to better provide for their custody or to lessen their pricey caretaking responsibility. Furthermore, during the time of economic crisis where the family is incapable to pay its debt, children would be provided as a currency for the relief. Unless and otherwise, abduction, which is an illegal taking away or kidnapping of girls into forceful marriage will be followed. This is common in rural areas especially among the poor men who are not capable of paying the bride price. Most of the time, this type of marriage is formalized through the mediation of elders. In the southern part of Ethiopia, nearly 80% of marriages are the result of abductions.

Many pieces of research on the area had commonly revealed that poverty is the bottom line of early marriage in Ethiopia. However, contrary to these studies, Alemu in 2008 has come up with a new finding which stresses that poverty is not the fundamental reason for child marriage in Amhara regional state, where the region suffers a lot because of premature family formation.

Social reasons

A strong and deeply embedded cultural, traditional, religious and social norms and values, particularly among the Ethiopian Muslim community, is a favorable ground for child marriage in Ethiopia. Even if the degree differs, all over the country, child marriage is accepted as a usual incident. It is occasionally encouraged due to the belief that it is the way of protecting the child from loss of virginity, abduction, and unwanted pregnancy. Furthermore, fear for social exclusion and stigmatization by the surrounding community, apprehension of losing the dowry and for not to departing from the accustomed tradition whereby to bolster their kinship ties, prestige and social acceptance, the parents of the child would never regret to give their child for early marriage (ibid). This is also supported by the UNICEF's 2001 report, which states that such marriages are encouraged from the motive that her families thought it as a means to protect their child from any pre-marriage risks and whereby to submit herself to her husband who is an ultimate protector. Moreover, the children that she is going to bear would be legitimate as well.

The implementation of regulatory and legislative measures on child marriage at global, regional and national levels is solidly deterred by religious and traditional practices. For instance, the Muslim followers who practice child marriage argue that they are doing this because their religion or the Shariah allowed for doing it. They additionally pointed out that stopping such practice means ignoring their religious norms and dogmas. Thus, this segment of the population encourages early marriage from religious perspectives that goes against the legislative prohibition of such bigoted customary practices.

Like that of the above studies, a research undertaken by Alemu [5] showed that the major causes for child marriage are traditional concerns. In line with that the parents, pressurized by community elders, are the forerunners to arrange such marriages (about 22%).

Prevalence of Early Marriage in Ethiopia

The distribution of child marriage in Ethiopia is uneven. It significantly differs from region to region and in between urban and rural areas. But in general, Ethiopia is one of the nations that have the highest early marriage proportion. In 2010 in Ethiopia, the number of girls who were found in the age brackets of 10 to 19 had been exposed for forced marriage constitutes 49.2% of the target population.

With regards to the prevalence of child marriage in Ethiopia, a number of researchers have been done till to date. Among these, Erulkar [6] and Ezra [7] are the notable ones. To start with Ezra, he has done his research in the Southern part of Ethiopia and he took religion, ethnicity and residence area as factors to explain the pattern of early marriage in the study area. In so doing, he found out that early marriage is more rampant in Gurage and Sidama ethnic groups (about 80%). In addition, he concluded that the extent of early marriage is more raging among the Muslim, Orthodox, and traditional religion followers than the Protestants [7]. Besides, the study made by Erulkar [6] on ever married women ranging between 20 and 24 years of age showed that the probability of getting married in rural areas before the age of 15 were 4 times higher than urban areas. Additionally, the study discloses that Muslim women who were found in between the age brackets of 15 and 17 were more likely to get into marriage before the age of 15 as compared to Orthodox Christians and other religious followers. In the same vein, as compared to literates, those who were illiterates had 9 times higher probability of getting married before the age of 15. From here, one can understand that low level of education is the main cause for child marriage in Ethiopia.

The Impacts of Early Marriage in Ethiopia

Early marriage is a human as well as women's rights violation [4,8,9]. It is against the efforts to promote socio-economic and cultural developments. In the last few decades, millions of girls were subjected to early marriage and their fundamental right to live, freedom of choice and access to education and other essential basic needs are strictly denied. Despite the fact that the previous decade was the last decade of the MDGs, it has been finalized with the rights of women and girls were substantially compromised and around 58 million girls were subject to child marriage [4].

In Ethiopia, since a long period of time, early marriage has continued to be one of the cultures and traditions of the society. Irrespective of the various attempts and legislative establishments by the country's government, the negative impact on the lives of girls and women is still the same. Many of our sisters are dying, drop out from school and living and working as a slave-like condition in different parts of the country. Many talks about the issue and others take the training (not practicing ever). However, the change is very insignificant. Country-wise surveys carried out from 2000 to 2010 show a decline in the number of girls marrying before the age of 15 in Ethiopia. Meanwhile, millions of girls are still at risk or the practice still persists.

If one critical looks the consequences of early marriage, it is worst in its disgusted form. A research done by the USAID in 2012 depicted that child marriage is inversely correlated with education, maternal health, poverty reduction and other pro-women issues. Accordingly, the impacts of child marriage in Ethiopia have been discussed below.

Psychological impact

If a child marries in the early ages of her adolescence, she would be exposed for emotional and psychological messes. This becomes more relentless when they face forced sexual relations, hammer their adolescence and disclaimed from the rights of personal developments. More often than not those who are victims of child marriage are unhappy and isolated from the rest of the society. The childbearing and premature sex is also the major causes for emotional shocks and traumas. This all pains and unpleasant experiences either forced a girl

to run to their parents' home or feel distress which is expressed by extreme silence and deep crying in front of their mother-in-laws or alone. The saddest part of this trauma is brides are beaten from both sides - by their parents and in-laws or husbands while they run away from their homes as a way to escape from the upsetting.

Denial of social services

In addition to the emotional and psychological impacts, early marriage has also an adverse impact on the social service opportunities of immature-married-children. They are most often drop-out from schools, have no access to adequate health care services and denied to move from place to place and limited or no social networks are the fates of these girls. Instead of their integration to social services and resources, they are used as reproductive and domestic household workers. Particularly in the rural part of Ethiopia, rearing children is the sole responsibility of these early married girls.

Child marriage inescapably denies girls from their right to education. As many scenarios portrayed that early married children in Ethiopia have not the right to prepare themselves for their future life and adulthood. They are not decision makers in their rights. It is always an imposition from the elderly, her parents, and the society. Some researchers show that the behavior and perception of educating girls seem to have a slight change. But it is still believed that investing on a girl means investment on another person's property, which at the end belongs to that particular person. Likewise, there are peoples who regret to educate their children because of the perception that she will leave the family in the near future and works for her new family (in-laws and husband) than theirs.

Reproductive health problems

According to WHO [10], thousands of adolescent girls have died because of early pregnancy and childbirth. This is also confirmed by the UNICEF's 2013 worldwide report that disclosed that around 70,000 early-married girls aged 15 to 19 die each year due to complications of pregnancy and childbirth. The report additionally exclaimed that early pregnancy and fertility had mostly been followed by negative consequences such as obstetric fistula, excessive hemorrhage, contamination in HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases [11].

Since the time of early marriage is the period when the girls are not yet ready to sexual intercourses, pregnancy, and fertility, very often it is concluded by a greater number of maternal mortality and child morbidities. That is why the number of married girls died under the age of 15 was 5 times greater than the number of married girls died under the age of 20s during childbirth [8]. So, in general, it is easy to understand that early marriage most often resulted with high prenatal and postnatal mortality and morbidity.

Risk of violence

The under-aged married girls are not seen as wives. They are not included in the planning, discussions and decisions making processes of a family. Her husband does not care for her; he regularly beats insults and makes her uncomfortable. Furthermore, she undergoes with a prolonged domestic violence. Meanwhile, she cannot leave the marriage due to low economic and educational levels.

According to the report made by UNICEF, some husbands are also experienced with drinking alcohols such that they violently abuse their

wives. This violence include; coercive sex, intimidation and beatings [9]. Because of this aggression she may sometimes decide to go away from that surrounding, nonetheless, she would get into acute poverty as she has the responsibility to nurture her children and low capacity to generate income for herself and her children. Hence, child marriage is the main cause for the 'feminization of poverty' for under-aged married girls and their children as well.

Migration

Another major consequence of early marriage is migration. When children cannot resist the pains and traumas, without the consent of their husband, in-laws and parents they flee to the nearby poor towns or to foreign countries such as Middle East through the help of brokers. Sadly enough, they may live the worst life than their homes in these places. They are inhumanly treated as domestic workers. For example; in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Qatar, they are forced to work for a long period of time without a social network. In their new destinations, girls are exposed for rape, prostitution, crime, beating, murder, and cheatings by brokers. There are also some occasions where these girls commit suicide as a means to escape from stress and strain. While these all happens; national and international stakeholders do not develop a strong and enforceable law on such malevolence practices [12].

Necessary Actions to End Early Marriage

So far, Ethiopia has shown a good progress in drawing policy actions and adopting legislative fireworks to reduce the negative impact of early marriage. The current Ethiopian constitution condemns early marriage. According to the constitution, any marriage will be considered as legal if and only if it is concluded by the free and full knowledge and consent of the partners. Besides, the criminal code of the country inflicts a penalty on those who permit, convene, formalize and witness to an early marriage. Similarly, the family law of Ethiopia strictly imposes laws on early marriage. However, the enforceability of all the above-mentioned legislative and regulatory drawings is still in question. Some accuse the Ethiopian government of its lack of commitment to putting these laws and rules into practice. But others reason out that the problem is not only from the government side but also from the society who is reluctant to cooperate with the government because of its prior traditional sentiments. Thus, the possible and necessary measures to relieve this cultural imposition on our sisters and brothers have been analyzed as follows [13-16].

Awareness creation

More than ever before, awareness creation campaign should be the first strategy to reduce child marriage in Ethiopia. It is obvious that such campaigns are costly. So, a collaborative effort among the public sectors, NGOs, individuals and others is a paramount important. In this process, it is important to note that the composition of the group to be trained should be mixed and all-inclusive. Particularly; religious leaders, elders, local agents, polices and the main actors of the action (parents and children) should be involved.

Educating girls

Education is a weapon for fighting any forms of societal problems. The Ethiopian government should be appreciated for its devoted works in educating girls in the last decade. For meeting the Millennium

Development Goals in one hand and reaching educational accesses to girls on the other, Ethiopia had shown a substantial achievement. Especially, the slogan that is common everywhere in Ethiopia “Educating a girl or women is educating people” is one of the manifestations of the good works of the government as far as girls education is concerned. But still educating the community through non-formal education system or short-term training is lacking from the Ethiopian government side. The non-formal educational program can be also used for teaching girls who miss the formal schooling because early marriage. The parents should also promise to send their daughters in the nearby schools. Plus to that, constructing a school (at least elementary) closer to the community will increase the likelihood of girls to go to school and reduce the worries of their parents for not sending them because of farness from their surroundings. It is not only constructing a school, but also who teach who should be underlined. Female teachers should be involved in the teaching-learning process wherein female students will follow their footsteps and make them their role models. Finally, the runaways are very small children without the means to live and learn. Hence, supporting them by any means possible (legal protection, food, shelter, cloth, learning materials, etc.) is the only way to leverage them from their school dropouts and other early marriage consequences [17-20].

A strong political will and commitment

Though the will and devotion of the government are not denied but implementing laws laid in the constitution and other subsidiary regulations need more attention than before. After all, the government should always take a central position to mobilize the community and other stakeholders at the grass-root and higher levels. In extending social services such as education and health care services for runaways and other children, who would otherwise go to early marriage, the government is a major but not a sole responsible body. Donors and parents have also irreplaceable roles. The international community has also a moral and structural liability to lobby the government to enforce laws, to deliver social necessities, and to make marriage restriction compulsory.

Economic support

Poverty is both a cause and consequence of early marriage. It makes the under-aged girls economically depressed. They have no any other option to overwhelm this adverse effect than staying as a housewife for the bread-winners (husbands). Therefore, integrating girls to different income-generating schemes is the way to liberate from their slave-like household reproductive responsibilities. Providing training, creating a conducive business environment and financial support in the labor market is a good outlet for empowering and saving children from such discriminatory activities. Resolving the economic problem of children will reduce the parents’ strong motive for early marriage. This is why? Because, parents are doing this activity for earning money. So, employment opportunities should be extended to women in various occupations that are favorable for them.

Birth and marriage registrations

To easily identify the early marriages and under-aged childbirth and to enforce the law that prohibits early marriage, adopting a law that promotes the official registration of all forms of marriages and births should be mandatory. In many parts of Ethiopia, except urban dwellers, the birth date of a child is very rare to know since Ethiopians have no a culture of celebrating birthday of their child. As a result, the

court trial is prolonged due to the difficulty of identifying the proper age of a child, who is litigating. Therefore, developing such regulations could facilitate the court and judiciary processes. Moreover, it is also a means to follow up who is marrying and bearing and at what age he is doing that. Through using this mechanism, laws adopted by the government can be implemented easily.

Conclusion

Child marriage is against women’s and human rights. Talking about sustainable development without respecting the rights of women and girls is totally impossible. It is estimated that if things continue like this, by the year 2020 there will be 140 child spouses worldwide. Developing countries like Ethiopia are expected to take the lions’ share.

Ethiopia is one of the countries, which have the highest proportion of early marriage throughout the world. The intact and deepening tradition, religion, and economic motives are the major reasons for the persistence of this discriminatory practice in the country. Because of underage family formation, girls are suffering from psychological and emotional traumas, various violence, and denial of social services, reproductive health problems and migrations. Thus, sensitizing the stakeholders, educating girls, and supporting the runaways and others who would otherwise the victims of early marriage are the way forward to reduce the adverse consequences of child marriage in Ethiopia.

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