



The Role of Marriage Brokers on Adolescent Girls' Early Marriage: Qualitative Evidence-The Case of West Hararghe, Ethiopia

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Research Article

Volume 7 Issue 2

Received Date: September 27, 2023

Published Date: October 31, 2023

DOI: 10.23880/whsj-16000194

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Abstract

Marriages below the age of 18 are either forced or by own interest, influenced by different factors. The objective of this paper is to describe the role of marriage brokers in adolescent girls' marriage in West Hararghe, Oromia region, Eastern Ethiopia. Qualitative data were drawn from a formative baseline (March to August 2016) and consecutive studies including the mid-term (May 2018 to August 2018) studies of Abdiboru, a Girls' SRH and empowerment project. As findings demonstrate, adolescent girls below the legal age of marriage are forced to accept marriage proposals convinced by intermediaries/marriage brokers. Marriage brokers can be peers, relatives, elders or any skillful people in convincing and persuading girls. Marriage brokerage is commercialized and as a result, girls go through the burdens of early marriage and early child bearing. Marriage brokerage is a common act in the study area resulting in brokers to have a significant role on adolescent girls' marriage. They play an inevitable role in arranging potential matches for adolescent girls. Programmers working on ending child marriage and related areas need to include these influential people in designing interventions.

Keywords: Human Rights; Poverty; Gender Inequality and Vulnerability; Childbearing

Abbreviations: IMBRA: International Marriage Broker Regulation Act.

Introduction

In many rural parts of the world, marrying young girls below legal age of 18 is an uncouth tradition. Girls are persuaded to marry at an early age in hopes that the marriage will benefit girls both economically and in socio-cultural perspectives, while also relieving financial burdens

on their families [1]. In reality, child marriage is a violation of human rights, compromising the development of girls and often resulting in early pregnancy and social isolation, with little or poor education, reinforcing the gendered nature of poverty [2].

Intermediary in marriage is an act which has been taking place long ago. In previous times, marriage was used as a political power augmentation or wealth consolidation mechanism for upper class and royal families whereas,

it was a major way of gaining social and financial security for the community in middle and lower class. Therefore, intermediaries' duty was considered obligatory [3,4].

Intermediary can be international or local, modern or traditional [5]. Though different laws such as "The International Marriage Broker Regulation Act ("IMBRA"), January 2006" are promulgated, International match making has led many girls to go through early marriage, marriage migrations and be victims of domestic violence [6,7]. Significant number of women around the world are routinely subject to abuses and domestic violence due to marriage brokers [8,9]. According to UNICEF's report on early marriage girls susceptible to early marriage especially through the influences of mediators are the first line examples [10].

Early marriage is intrinsically linked to low levels of education, high levels of violence and abuse, social isolation, severe health risks and results in increased gender inequality and vulnerability to poverty for girls, young women, families and the society as a whole [11]. This practice also threatens the effort to fight against poverty and related challenges in developing countries [12].

In Ethiopia, Early Marriage has reproduced adverse effects on the socio-economic and health status of adolescent girls. Girls who marry at early ages would lose the opportunity of formal education, have little or no opportunity for wage employment and hence they mostly would engage in the informal type of job or fully engross in housework and childcare [9,13]. According to the EDHS 2016, 13 percent of girls aged 15-19 in Ethiopia have begun childbearing, more common in rural than in urban areas (15% versus 5 %, respectively). Compared to the capital city Addis Ababa (3%), regions adjacent to west Hararghe, afar (23%) and Somali (19 %) have the largest proportions. The proportion of teenagers who have started childbearing decreases with increasing level of education and wealth. Twenty eight percent of girls with no education in the age bracket of 15-19 have begun childbearing compared with 12% of who have attained primary education and 4% of those who have attained secondary education. Similarly, 22 percent of teenagers in the lowest wealth quintile have begun childbearing compared with 5 percent of those in the highest quintile [14].

Though recent studies show improvement in school enrolment of adolescent girls, continuation beyond primary level is very low compared to adolescent boys. Drop out from schools due to early marriage and economic instability are common [15]. Girls are enforced to accept marriage requests at an early age either forced or deceived. The objective of this paper is to qualitatively describe the role of marriage brokers in adolescent girls' marriage in West Hararghe,

Oromia region, Ethiopia.

Objectives of the study

The consecutive qualitative studies were conducted with the aim of understanding the context of the project implementation area and specifically to identify key social norms affecting adolescent girls' education, marriage and food allocation. In addition, the extent of agency adolescent girls have on these three themes, and the extent of influence and role of other individuals and institutions in these three themes were the objectives of the study.

Material and methods

West Hararge zone is one of the 18 zones of Oromia region. It has a total population of 1,871,706. Women and girls account for 48.8% of the population. Majority of the population resides in the rural area (91.4%) and is from Oromo Ethnic group (90.12%). Affan Oromo is spoken as a first language by 89.47%. Islam religion is practiced by 88.05% of the population. Around 85% of the population depends on agriculture related activities for living. Coffee and khat are the main cash crops in this region. 3.7% of Ethiopia's total coffee output is from west Harargae. With a mountainous topography and scarcity of water, this zone is identified as a drought risky area leading to food insecurity. Studies conducted as formative baseline (March to August 2016) and midterm (May 2018 to August 2018) assessments for evaluation process of Abdiboru project, a 5-year (2016 – 2020) operations research intervention focusing on adolescent girls in 4 selected districts of West Hararghe Zone, Oromia Region, Ethiopia. The project aims at improving the reproductive health, nutrition and education attainment of adolescent girls.

Study population

The study population included adolescent girls and their male and female references i.e. unmarried adolescent boys, parents, husbands and mother in laws. In addition to this marriage brokers; education, health, agriculture, women and child affairs and administration office focal persons; school teachers and directors; women association members and health extension workers were also involved.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria: For adolescent girls, aged 10-14 were recruited regardless of their marital status during the baseline study. For influential adult family members living together with the adolescent girl in the same household for at least six months was the criteria. Other adult respondents were also recruited based on their acquaintance to the

adolescent girls in the study area.

Exclusion criteria: The eligible subjects having mental illness and disability to give informed consent based on full understanding of the study objectives and procedures.

Study Design and Data Collection Tools

A qualitative research approach was employed using vignette stories for FGDs and separate guides for key informant and in-depth interviews. The vignette stories were developed based on a mini- assessment conducted on the context and social norms of the area prior to the baseline study data collection. The tools were translated to the local language Afan Oromo and checked for appropriateness.

Sampling Technique

This qualitative study utilized a purposive sampling technique. After the initial selection of participant in the age group of 10-14 (index adolescent girl-baseline and beneficiaries-midterm) with the help of knowledgeable experts from district office and program implementers, a snowball sampling strategy was employed to identify the rest of the participants. Focused group discussion participants (n=42 groups) included Unmarried and married adolescent girls, unmarried adolescent boys, parents of adolescent girls. In depth interview participants (n= 52) included married and unmarried adolescent girls, mother in laws and husbands of adolescent girls and finally marriage brokers themselves. Key informant interviews(n=74) included education, health, agriculture women and child affairs and administration office focal persons, school teachers and directors, women association members, health extension workers and program implementers. Case stories were also gathered from adolescent girls to visualize situations on the ground.

Data Collection Procedures

Focused group discussions and interviews were conducted in the districts where respondents were residing. Respondents were selected from the three implementation and one control districts of the project namely Chiro, Doba, Mesela and Boke. Each FGD has been conducted by two experts; one serving as moderator and one serving as note taker. FGDs and interviews were held in private space with minimal disturbance and with the local language (Afan Oromo). Audio was recorded with participants' consent. Right after each focus group discussion the moderator and the note taker had a debrief session on the particular session conducted. Summary of each FGD was prepared based on the field note. The audio records has been transcribed verbatim into Afan Oromo and translated into English to prepare for further analysis.

Data Management and Analysis

FGDs and Interviews were conducted using local languages by trained research assistants and researchers, with masters level training in public health and social sciences. The study was conducted in places convenient to participants and audio recorded base on their consent. Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, allowing for in-depth exploration of emerging ideas in the participants' narrative responses. Codebook and code report were prepared based on the major thematic areas. Data were coded and analyzed using Open Code software for qualitative data handling.

Limitations of the Study

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic and legal consequences, respondents had limitations in revealing information and disclose popular marriage brokers in the area.

Operational Definitions

Marriage brokerage- the act of negotiating or arranging a marriage contract between a man and woman in return for a consideration.

Matchmaker- one who tries to bring two unmarried individuals together in an attempt to promote a marriage.

Marriage broker- a person who conducts marriage brokerage. Female Reference (Mother and mother in law) – Female influential person for the adolescent girl.

Male Reference (Father, adolescent boys, Husband)- Male influential person for the adolescent girl.

Results and Discussion

Among mostly practiced marriage systems in the area, Jele dema a marriage by which adolescent girls elope with a boy without a prior permission from their parents, takes the leading place. This traditional marriage practice is catalyzed by the pressures and persuasion of married peers from both sides, neighbors, elders, marriage brokers or even close family members.

- “(common) marriage system is “Jala dema” or “Jala oofaa” which undertakes when a guy sends someone to the girl and the messenger convinces her to accept the marriage proposal. When she finally agrees, he brings both of them together but her parents are not aware of this process. It is just his peer who would convince her and bring both of them together and she will go with the man; that is why it is called “Jala dema” or “Jala oofaa” which means “going along with”.” FGD_ unmarried adolescent girls

According to majority of participants, without any prior consultation or interest of an adolescent girl, marriage brokers mediate and convince her with different mechanisms to marry a man, if chosen or selected by the male partner. Since marriage is considered as a cachet and an opportunity not be missed, these marriages made via the instrumentality of matchmakers usually favor the male partners and doesn't consider the maturity of subject adolescent girls. This act of marriage brokers patently includes deception of young adolescent girls with delusive words or presents. Girls also accept proposals since marriage is considered as a gift from God. This act of marriage brokers persuading girls for marriage is clearly a violation of the human right of 'free and full' consent to a marriage with the recognition that consent cannot be 'free and full' when one of the parties involved is not sufficiently mature to make an informed decision about a life partner. This in turn denies girls autonomy on their own marriage and educational attainments.

- "Different marriage practices exist in our community through religious process or the traditional ways. In both systems there is an early marriage. The society will convince the family and take the girl or they will use marriage brokers to persuade the girl to accept the marriage proposal.... Mostly girls marry at the age of 15-18 years." KII_ WCA

Who are marriage brokers?

Regardless of gender or blood relations to the girl, anyone who has the ability of convincing can perform matchmaking/intermediary, as long as they can persuade the girl to marry the potential husband or win over her parents to marry off their daughters using verbal or other possible deluding mechanisms.

"... they (brokers) can be either adolescent girls or boys, married men or women" FGD_ Married adolescent girls

- "Even if the girl refuses to agree with the marriage deal, there are other individuals who have more experience on negotiating. Either peers or neighbors negotiate and make her marry to get a profit as a broker." FGD_fathers of adolescent girl

Due to the proximity of the mediators either to the girl or her parents, divorce is rare and has a severe social sanction in such marriages. Mostly if the married couple do not get along, divorce is not a solution to think, it just means that they need to work harder on their marriage. In some cases, girls may run away and return to their parent's place and continue their education when they realize the setups. To avoid such scenarios, in rare cases marriage brokers and peers will prepare an isolated place for the couple to chew Khat (It is a traditional ceremony in which people gather

and chew the locally grown stimulant leaf "khat" to entertain themselves) together and get to know each other, eventually the potential husband will rape the girl. In most cultures of different parts of the country, once a girl is raped, she will be subjugated to marry a man that raped her due to the social and religious discriminations afterwards. It is a must that elders go to the girl's parents and convince them to marry the man who raped her since norms and sanctions for losing virginity before marriage will only leave their daughter "unmarriageable" for the rest of her life as it would lead to loosing social prestige. Even the girl will agree to marry the man in fear of social sanctions and their consequences.

- "He (the suitor) would give money to the broker and her peer so that they (the broker and her peer) can deceive her and take her somewhere (to the arranged place) and then they chew "Khat" together and eventually he will rape her there. Since he raped her, she has no alternative than going with him "FGD_ Unmarried adolescent girl

Convincing abilities of marriage brokers

According to the findings from this study, marriage brokers are highly ranked among the most influential people regarding decisions on adolescent girls' marriage. As most of the participants revealed, decisions made by adolescent girls not to marry at an early age or parents' reverence for their daughter's choice can be manipulated by marriage brokers as they have strong compelling abilities. Due to marriage brokers intimidation, most families give their daughters for marriage before age and without full consent.

- "yeah, Merima (mother of an adolescent girl in a presented vignette story) may change her mind; she may regret and change her plans. Since most of the people in the neighborhood pressure her to allow her daughter's marriage, she finally changes her mind and marries off her daughter. Delala (local name for a marriage broker) is capable of convince the mother. Since Delalas are potent enough to convince the girl and other people they are not passive to convince the mother. Due to pressures from the community, she simply changes her idea and starts convincing her daughter." FGD_Mothers of adolescent girls

According to adolescent girl participants, brokers force girls to marry a man presenting marriage as a means of strengthening relationships among families, a means of acquiring prestige and as a gift from God. Intermediaries mostly deceive girls by introducing and promoting the potential husband as wealthy, handsome and respected person in the community.

- "He/she (marriage broker) can appreciate the one he who

is going to marry her by saying, "he is very handsome, he is very rich, his families are popular etc.". And by saying so, he/she (marriage broker) tries to convince her. "FGD_married adolescent girl

In some cases, the brokers may give money, cloths or other materials to the girls in order to tempt them. Their economic problems acerbating the situation, girls have no other alternatives but accepting the marriage proposals. In fact, as participants explained, girls who are able to fulfill their school materials and are on education are less likely to be deceived with such negotiations.

- "Yes, there were differences between girls at school and the others, it is difficult to persuade girls from school except those from economically poor family, who couldn't fulfill their school expenses." KII_Marriage broker

Community also supports marriage brokers as marriage is perceived an opportunity that cannot be missed and a means of avoiding premarital sexual affairs.

- "According to our locality, parents know nothing about their daughter's marriage. It is the "Delala" (local name for marriage brokers) that makes girls marry on behalf of their fathers and mothers, without the knowledge of the parents. At the end, old men would be sent to them to meditate and finally, they will agree. It is in this way that the delala makes girls to drop out of schools and persuades girls for marriage." FGD_Non-SAA fathers

As respondents reported, girls would be subject to social sanctions and the strains of getting married if older.

- "A girl who has not married at the age of 18, people call her as "Hafttee" meaning "remained at home" and would also say "heeruma dhabdee" i.e. someone who couldn't get a matrimonial partner." FGD_unmarried adolescent girls

The act of marriage intermediary commercialized. Though few respondents including marriage broker participants reported that intermediary is not a commercialized act, majority of the respondents revealed that usually the potential husbands show their appreciation for the intermediaries either by monetary rewards starting from 50 ETB or other material gifts.

- "The brokers are orators, they say the man has this and that, his behavior is like this.... etc. They take money, minimum 100 maximum 1000 birr (everybody laughed....) there are some who take 1000 to 3000birr, depending on the girl and the competitions on her." FGD_Fathers of adolescent girls_Boke

- "The broker who is negotiating to earn 1000 or 5000 birrs might be their own brother or relative" KII_School Director

Typically, marriage intermediaries assist with searching of potential brides, negotiating and bringing together compatible parties and they get compensated for it. Refusals are rare in these cases due to economic problems and social sanctions.

- "In this kebele there are some group of people who have natural gifts to convince others. These are the people who serve as a broker/ "Dellala". Most of these people are married women. In order to convince girls, they would present the one who wants to marry the girl as he is very exceptional in this universe. They take money in response. The amount of money depends on the situation." FGD Non-SAA mothers

Conclusion and Recommendation

Intermediary in marriage is both traditional and modern practice, marriage brokers playing an inevitable role in arranging potential matches for adolescent girls. Marriage brokers are not easy to identify while doing their tasks and their motives could be working for personal interest (financial) or they could be sympathizers to the girls (encourage girls to comply to marriage social norms). Marriage intermediary gives marriage a commercial aspect due to the rewards given. Peers play a significant role in channeling marriage brokers/intermediaries to adolescent girls. In conclusion this finding shows marriage brokerage is a common act in west hararghe zone and their role in facilitating marriage is not negligible to fully consider reduction of early marriage among young adolescent girls, one must also examine the deep-rooted roles of marriage brokers in persuading girls for early marriage, leading to a serious of health and psycho-social problems. Marriage brokers may reverse the gains in reducing early marriage in rural Ethiopia. Combating early marriage with other mechanisms while intermediary is widely practiced, will only make the elimination process back and forth relapsing the problem once it is addressed. Granting the appropriate attention for such reinforcing factors will not only save resources vested on the issue but helps either to reduce or eliminate the underlying causes of early marriage.

Acknowledgement

We would like to extend our deepest gratitude to the West Harargae community, CARE Ethiopia, West Hararghe zone administration sector offices, community members, everybody who has participated in data collection processes

and CARE office community-level facilitators.

Competing interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest for this study

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