

Marrying off Early: Pre-Marital Virginity and Family Integrity among the Oromo in Central Ethiopia

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1. Introduction

According to the Revised Family Code of Ethiopia (2000), the minimum legal age of marriage for both girls and boys is 18 years. Article 7 No. 1 of the code reads, "Neither a man nor a woman who has not attained the full age of eighteen years shall conclude marriage." This law also established equal rights of men and women in the formation of marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution. The code reads, 'A valid marriage shall take place only when the spouses have given their free and full consent.' Despite this law, early marriage is widely prevalent in the study area. Thus, this study attempts to respond to the question 'why'. It focuses on early marriage among the Oromo in Ethiopia, particularly in Dawo District. The district is situated in central Ethiopia. According to CSA (2007), the population size of the district was 86,703. The inhabitants predominantly engage in agriculture. Nearly, 94% of the population are the Oromo, and more than 90% of them are followers of Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.

Keywords: Family honor, Bride abduction, Pre-marital virginity, Betrothal marriage.

2. Early Marriage

Child marriage or early marriage refers to the marriage of a child younger than 18 years (UNCRC 1989). It refers to a marriage of a person—male and female who has not yet reached the age of maturity. Globally, more than one-fifth of girls are married as children (UNICEF & UNFPA, 2018). Worldwide, more than 60 million women aged 20-24 were married before they reached the age of 18 years. This implies that 25,000- 30,000 girls become child brides every day (UNICEF, 2005; Malhotra, 2010).

Child marriage is widespread in Africa. All African countries have faced the challenges of child marriage, whether they experience high child marriage prevalence, such as Niger (76%) or lower rates like Algeria (2%). For instance, about 40% of women are married as children in sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF, 2014). Similar cultural practices are reported from Asia. 40% of marriages in Nepal involve girls under the age of 15 (UNIFEM 2004, cited in Coomaraswamy, 2005)..

According to UNFPA (2012), in all developing regions, one-third of women aged 20-24 were in a union before the age of 18 during the period 2000-2011. The percentage of child marriages in developing countries is high. One-third of girls in the developing world are married before the age of 18 and one in nine are married before the age of 15. Under the present scenario, the number of child brides in sub-Saharan Africa will double by 2050, and sub-Saharan Africa will overtake South Asia to become the region with the largest number of child brides in the world (UNICEF, 2014; Ahmed, 2015).

3. Perspectives on Early Marriage

3.1. Economic explanation of Early Marriage

Numerous theories and perspectives surround the subject of early or forced marriage. UNICEF (2005) and UNICEF (2001) show that poverty, family honor, and the provision of stability during unstable social periods are some of the factors leading to a girl's risk of becoming married while still a child. Guday (2005) provides explanations of early marriage in relation to the economic survival of the family of the girl. Early marriage reduces the economic burden of the family by reducing the number of family members to feed, clothe, and educate. It is also viewed as a means of economic survival for the family and the girl. FMRWG (2003) further notes that, "poverty is a major cause, as well as a consequence, of early marriage for many young girls under the age of 18." Tan (2004, cited in Guday, 2005) also argues that once married, young girls will no longer be able to stay in school and the situation causes the intergenerational cycles of early marriage and poverty.

Young brides are preferred in traditional societies because they have a longer period of fertility before them, and they are more likely to be obedient and docile, necessary qualities to learn and accept the rules and ways of their new household. Another explanation stems from the notions of family honor and female purity (Goody 1990 cited in Guday 2005). Across a wide range of societies, the honor and status of families are held to be dependent on the 'purity' of their women, which is ensured through strict control over their social and sexual behavior (Ortner 1978). Waner (2004) explains that child marriage is a "bartered transaction" in the form of a negotiation of a bride price from the spouses' family to the girl's family, or a dowry from the girl's family to the boy's family. Marriage may entail large bride price transactions from the groom family to the bride's family. According to Jensen and Thornton (2003), the price is usually correlated to the age of the bride, where the younger the girl, the higher the bride price or the lower the dowry. Malhotra (2010) shows that poverty is thus directly associated with early marriage, because poor families do not provide their girls with any other options beyond marriage and they try to maximize the return from the marriage.

3.2. The Socio-cultural Framework of Early Marriage

Tradition and religion also contribute to early marriage in many countries. Parents want to marry off their daughters when they are still sexually innocent, particularly in societies where premarital virginity is valued (Malhotra 2010). The socio-cultural reasons for early marriage are: to forge alliances / links between families and to ensure that the girl is properly married while she is still a virgin and too young to act independently. In this context, early marriage may even occur where a family has pledged to give its daughter in marriage to a benefactor (FMRWG 2003).

In societies where the honor of the family depends on the honor of its women, there is a strong link between early marriage and the social goal of maintaining the reputation of daughters. Consequently, virginity becomes a necessary preliminary as well as an absolute prerequisite to marriage. This is because once a girl has lost her virginity, and/or given birth out of wedlock, she is considered a woman, even if she is too young (Heinonen, 2002, cited in Guday (2005). The socio-cultural justifications of parents for early marriage can be summed as: fear of being dishonored as a result of delayed marriage

and/or loss of virginity, to prevent bride abduction, to secure a proper marriage for daughters, and to forge links between families (Guday 2005).

Religious beliefs and cultural values can also be among the factors behind child marriage. For instance, in Zimbabwe, the Apostolic faith combines religion with traditional culture and encourages girls to marry older men at a very young age, between 12 and 16 years old. This is said to make sure girls maintain their premarital sexual innocence (Human Rights Watch 2015). Given the high value of pre-marital virginity for girls and its implications for girls' and their families' honor, this issue is pertinent to this paper.

3.3. Poor law enforcement and legal systems

Another factor found to contribute to the prevalence of child marriage relates to poor law enforcement and legal systems. Some scholars argue that the lack of information and limited legal services undermine girls' protection and make the practice go unpunished (Gaffney-Rhys, 2011). Most countries still count on several legal loopholes, like making exceptions when there is parental consent or under customary laws, that continue to allow early marriages in numerous circumstances (Vogelstein 2013). Legally, 18 is the minimum age of marriage for both boys and girls in many African countries (Human Rights Watch 2015). However, weak enforcement of laws is a common problem in these countries. Neither the institutions set up to deal with this kind of case are strong and committed, nor does the community abide by these laws. It is also very difficult to prove the age of the marriage partners because of the absence of birth and marriage registration in rural settings in these countries.

3.4. Early Marriage and the Human Rights of Girls and Women

A rights-based approach to early marriage is part of the universal principles of human rights. However, girls' and women's human rights, and sexual and reproductive decision-making remain contentious in several countries because of cultural and religious reasons (FMRWG 2003). Early marriage violates the rights of children, in particular girls, in relation to such matters as health, survival and development, education, and protection from sexual and other forms of exploitation. It is a denial of childhood and adolescence and a violation of a girl's human rights, primarily, the right to give full and free consent to marry (Guday 2005; UNICEF 2001). Early marriage disrupts the accumulation of human capital, due to early school drop-out, withdrawal from labor markets, and effects on health from early childbearing (UNFPA 2012; UNICEF 2001).

The feminist human rights theory is pertinent to the rights of women that attempt to promote the central idea of the subordination of women and its supposed essence and origin. The unequal power of men and women is backed by cultural values, rules, practices, and political organizations that enable men to exert power over women, which results in human rights abuses of women. Particularly, patriarchy is the basic explanation behind the perpetuation of the discrimination of women (Ogoe 2015; Diop, Stewart & Herr 2017).

Ethiopia is one example of a patriarchal society. Customary marital laws institutionalize the inferior status of women in both the private and public realms. The paper argues that the main reason for the surviving of early marriage in the research area lies in cultural values, backed by the patriarchal system.

According to Hodgkinson (2016), patriarchal structures promote gender inequality by providing special privileges to men to decide on issues pertaining to the family and family members. Early/forced marriages are often the result of the decisions of the parents, mainly fathers, who arrange the marriages of young girls and facilitate and/or negotiate bride abductions. Coupled with the patriarchal values, the prevailing economic and political environment has also contributed to the persisting early/forced marriage in the study area. Furthermore, despite the Ethiopian legal instruments that have banned any marriage below the age of 18, the practice is still persisting. Thus, we argue that the mere existence of a law does matter to practically prohibiting early marriage.

4. Methods and Materials

This article is based on qualitative data drawn from the field in January and February 2020 through key informant interviews, case studies, focus group discussions, and a structured questionnaire. We selected eighteen key informants purposively from the Office of Women and Children Affairs (2), District Police Office (1), Culture and Tourism Office (1), District Education Office (1), elderly women and men (7) and school teachers (6). We also conducted two FGDs. The participants of the first FGD were 6 experts from line departments, particularly from the Office of Women and Youth Affairs (2), Culture and Tourism Office (2), Education Office (1) and Police (1). The participants in the second FGD were all married women who are aware of the marriage practices and pertinent values. We collected cases to report the real story pertinent to early marriage and we used some for analysis. This included legal actions taken by the court and some of the consequences of early marriage.

We also collected quantitative data from some randomly selected schoolgirls in five purposively selected schools. The participants were from grades six to twelve, taking into consideration their maturity level to respond to the questionnaire. Our data from the questionnaire were to support the interpretation of the qualitative data. The data from all sources are used concurrently.

Finally, ethical clearance was secured from the concerned bodies. For ethical reasons, informants and participants were informed about the objectives of the study ahead of time. Names in the text, if any, are pseudonym.

5. Types of Marriage in Dawo District

The common ways of arranging marriage among the Oromo of this district include *kadhaa* (betrothal), *ababaltii* (elopement), *butii* (abduction), *kallacha/irradhaaba*¹ (surprising or urgent request for marriage), and *aseenaa* (bride's request for marriage that is similar to what Kiefer (1974) termed as "going home to obtain a husband"). According to our key informants, *kadhaa* (betrothal) is the most

¹*Irradhaaba* is a marriage type without any prior arrangement between the marriage partners or their parents. The male side suddenly invades the premise of the parents of the girl and requests for her hand in marriage. The request and the marriage should be done at a time. Since the male side goes to the premise of the girl holding some ritually powerful cultural materials, declining the request is nearly impossible.

valued and preferred marriage arrangement. It gives both parents full rights to decide on the marriage and gives the girls no or little say in whether or not to consent to the marriage. In rare cases, parents consider the interests of their daughters (see Case Four).

The second type of marriage arrangement is elopement, which is realized in the mere interests of the marriage partners. Culturally, this sort of marriage arrangement is disgraceful to the family of the girl. The saying, '*intalli ebelu dhiira wajiin bade*' means 'the daughter of so and so's family has gone with a man.' The act is taken as an indicator of the unregulated and miss-handled sexual behavior of the girl. The blame often goes to the mothers for bad parenting. Since recently, as our data from all schools showed, this type of marriage arrangement is common. Schoolgirls frequently elope with the men of their choice and drop out of school. The third is bride abduction (*butii*), consensual or non-consensual. According to our data, consensual bride abduction has recently emerged as a viable alternative to betrothal and elopement.

The fourth type of marriage is *kallacha*, or *irradhaaba*, which happens seldom. The *kallacha* marriage arrangement got its name from a cultural material that is endowed with cultural and spiritual power, which the would-be-husband holds and goes to the home of the girl for marriage request. He and his companions visit her home early in the morning for a wedding to be effected now without any prior arrangement. The custom demands that the family of the girl must accept the request, because denying a request by *kallacha* is believed to cause a supernatural punishment.

The fifth type of marriage arrangement is *aseennaa*, in which the marriage arrangement is made without prior knowledge of the bride. A girl who is interested in someone goes to his residence by collecting solonaceous fruits (*hiddi*) and scatters in the house and embraces the pillar of the house. It is the other side of the *kallacha*, but the girl is not escorted by her friends as the *kallacha* attendants usually do. *Aseennaa* takes place rarely and is the most dishonorable decision for the girl and her parents.

6. Early Marriage in Dawo District

Early marriage mostly happens in betrothal, elopement and bride abduction. Despite the legal enactments to halt early marriage in Ethiopia, our data from all sources show that there is a widespread practice of early marriage with some complexities. The offices of Women, Youth and Children Affairs (WYCA), which is a government office in charge of protecting the rights of women, and the police, confirmed that there are several cases of early marriage reported to their respective offices. One of our key informants from the office of WYCA said that '*maatiin umuriin xiqqate moo guddate herumsisuun garii dha, jedha.*' 'Parents always prefer their daughters get married regardless of their age.' Our quantitative data also leads to the same conclusion. About 61% of the school girls who responded to our questionnaire confirmed that early marriage is common in their locality while 39% of the respondents said it happens rarely (see Table 1).

On the other hand, data from the offices of WYCA and the police indicate that the absence of birth certificates and any other formal documents to confirm the age of girls in the rural setting causes

controversies to define whether a given marriage is early or not. Different actors play age games to accept or reject a given marriage and to accuse someone or defend themselves when it happens.

A girl who wants to elope with a man of her choice claims that she has already reached the age of maturity, even though she has not yet. Parents claim that their daughter has already reached the legal age of marriage when they want to marry her off, regardless of the actual age of the girl. To the contrary, parents take the age of their daughter as a point of entry to accuse someone who married her without their consent, even though the girl consented to the marriage. They may complain that their daughter is forced into marriage when she is still a child to consent even if the girl has already reached the age of majority. The office of WYCA, in cooperation with the Police tries to solve the controversies over the age of girls through medical examinations even though they are dependable.

6.1. Why and How Early Marriage Do Happens in Dawo District?

UNICEF (2005) and Human Rights Watch (2015) have shown the links between early marriage and gender discrimination, and poverty; poor access to education and health services; customary practices; and weak justice mechanisms. Corroborating these works, this paper shows that several reasons are invoked for early marriage to be sustained in the research area. The major reasons are cultural values such as family honor and pre-marital virginity; the dire economic situation, the fragile legal protection, and lack of interest in perusing higher education for many graduates in the study area were jobless and stay home with their parents. However, our data did not show any religious or spiritual explanation for the practice of early marriage as it is the case in Zimbabwe and reported by Human Rights Watch (2015).

According to data from the office of WYCA, despite the absence of any statistical evidence, the majority of the marriages are established via betrothal marriage contract. This is followed by elopement and abduction. The remaining two—*irradhaaba* and *assennaa*,—happen in rare cases. In a betrothal arrangement, the role of parents on both sides is crucial. In some cases, girls also elope with someone they love or may be abducted with or without their consent when they are still below 18 years of age. Data from our questionnaire show that betrothal, bride abduction, and elopement account for 55.43%, 22.83% and 21.74% of early marriages respectively in the area (see Table 2).

6.2. Early Marriage through Betrothal Arrangement

According to our sources, among the major reasons why parents opt for early marriage and prefer betrothal marriage arrangements are maintaining a pre-marital virginity, maintaining family self-esteem, ensuring the marriageability of girls, and discharging parental decision to choose appropriate spouses for their children.

6.2.1. Ensuring pre-marital virginity via Early Marriage

The cultural values that are attached to virginity at marriage have contributed immensely to the practice of early marriage. These values are the sources of respect for the bride and her family. Our data showed that the custom demands proof of the virginity of the bride on her wedding night by checking the bridal bedclothes for bleeding. If the bride is a virgin, she is appreciated, honored, and awarded by

her family as well as her husband's family. The latter celebrates the occasion and decently passes on the information to the remaining family members that the girl was a virgin when she joined them. This marks the turning point in developing self-esteem with her in-laws.

The same respect extends to her parents, particularly her mother who rejoices and enjoys special appreciation for having taken good care of her daughter. There is also a saying '*haadha ilaalii intala fuudhi*, 'see the mother before marrying her daughter'². This is because a mother is responsible in shaping the behavior of her daughter. If a girl performs in a culturally, and/or ethically wrong way, the problem is automatically associated to the way the girl has been brought up. By default, the blame goes to the mother of the girl. The saying '*guddisa baddee*, 'bad parenting' is a common expression often used to refer to a misbehaving girl. Successful marriage is partly an indicator of the sexual decency of the girl and good parenting of the mother.

To the contrary, a loss of virginity before marriage is disgraceful to a bride and her parents. If she is not a virgin at her marriage, either the marriage is dissolved automatically or she may stay under the blame and complaint of her husband for her remaining marriage life. From this time on, her respect and acceptance by her in-laws also diminish. If her loss of virginity before her marriage is public, it is less likely for a girl to marry or she may marry with a widow status to a divorcee or an old man. Such a girl is '*kashalabe/halalee*', meaning 'amorous or suggestive of sex'. The community thinks that the longer a girl stays unmarried, the higher her risk of losing her virginity before getting married, and it also makes her more unattractive to the scarcest grooms out there, which adversely affects the honor of the girl, her marriageability, and the honor of her parents. If a girl remains unmarried beyond a certain age, she is a *haftuu* (a spinster). It has the connotation that the girl is unlikely to marry for some reasons, including her seductive behavior.

Under this cultural value of pre-marital virginity, parents feel secure if their daughters marry early when they are still virgins. This, in turn, brings honor and respect to her family for their excellent parenting and to herself for being decent. These findings corroborate that of Guday (2005), who states that in North-Western Ethiopia, parents prefer early marriage to secure a proper marriage for their daughters.

Establishing appropriate Affinal Relations and Status Promotion

Marriage has a wider implication beyond the formation of a union of two persons. The culture values marriage as one of the ways of status achievement for the marriage partners and their parents. There is a culturally loaded term '*jifuu arguu*' meaning 'attaining one's marriage' or 'a desired status or accomplishing one's destinies'. For the youth '*Jifuu arguu*' is to marry.' For adults who have grown children '*jifuu arguu!*' is 'to attain the marriage of one's progeny'.

Linked to the concept '*jifuu arguu*' there is also high cultural value in realizing the social status of "*abbaa soddaa* 'father-in-law' or *hadhaa soddaa* 'mother-in-law' in their vertical relations. The mandate of selecting *warra soddaa* is always in the hands of the parents and even extended family. In this regard, marriage establishes '*warra soddaa*, 'in-laws' or 'affinal' relations between the families on the wife and husband horizontally. There are marriage preferences based on wealth, fame, seniority of a clan with

²This proverb has similar connotation with the proverbs 'all daughters grow up to be their mothers', 'an apple does not fall far away from the tree', and 'like mother like daughter'

certain ascribed or achieved status. The saying *'intala warra ebeluu'*, 'the daughter of so and so family/clan' is common in marriage preference. The primary focus to decide in establishing affinal relations is the girl, but her family and/or clan.

The better the social standings of the families are, the more their daughters are requested for marriage early. According to one of our key informants, parents do self-assessment before requesting formally for marriage arrangement. If there is no mismatch between both sides, the parents of the girl accept the formal requests under the pressure of the reputation of the requesting family regardless of the age of the girl. One may ask himself questions like 'how can I decline the request of this family for marriage? To whom shall I give my daughter if refusing this family?' To the contrary, if the parents of the girl feel that the request for their girl's hand in marriage came from a wrong family whose son does not deserve to marry their daughter, the request can be declined. The Oromo use a proverb "*hiriyaa malee dhaqxee geggeessaa malee galte*", 'if one visits unequal, he/she receives no welcome' to show this kind of uncomfortable decision. The assumption is that parents make the right choice of spouses for their inexperienced young daughters and sons.

Further, the culture also demands and prescribes marriage as the only way of ensuring the continuity of one's descendants through procreation. Marriage has a potential to promote the status of the parents of the marriage partners to grandmother and grandfather. Thus, parents always inspire and work to attain these ends in parenting and arranging marriage for their sons and daughters. Betrothal marriage arrangement is the most preferable, respectful and graceful way to achieve this goal for it enables parents to play their parental role in deciding on the marriage of their daughters and sons. Thus, regardless of the age of a girl parents marry her off as far as they are convinced that the demand comes from an appropriate spouse.

In addition, the field data indicate that parents are not tolerant of waiting until girls reach the age of maturity to marry them off. This is partly because of their fear of losing their daughter to a passerby. They may not be confident that their daughters would not elope with someone they love when they reach the age of puberty. Words like 'do not boost a girl, she may run away with someone she loves' are common sayings that push parents to marry off their daughters as soon as requests for their hand in marriage come. Under these cultural pressures, parents rarely decline betrothal arrangements for their daughters, even if the girl is too young to marry. The following cases are among the examples of early marriage through betrothal arrangement to establish affinal relations horizontally and status promotion vertically.

Case One

In fifth grade, a fourteen-year-old girl was forced to marry. *The father who begot children late in his age was so eager to see his children married, and would allow him to be a grandfather before his death. He agreed with the initial request for his daughter hand in marriage. The young girl gave birth to her first child when she was fifteen years of age. But she suffered serious medical complications. A year after she was about to get her second child. However, this time she could not give birth to the child; she died with her child while she was in labor. The father regretted too much. He blamed himself for the early marriage and the consequent death of his daughter. However, it happened irreversibly*

Case Two

A young girl of fourteen was forced to marry from grade five. Her parents are economically better off. Her fiancé was from a former landlord family. As the request came, the girl strongly resisted marrying for she wanted to peruse her education. However, her mother, who was so eager for the marriage of her daughter, threatened the girl that she would commit suicide unless otherwise she accepted the marriage. The girl accepted the marriage under serious pressure. She could not agree with her husband and tried to escape several times. She even requested the dissolution of the marriage. When she fled away to her parents' home, they often pacified her or forced her to go back to her husband. They tried to advise her now and then to be good with her husband, rather than thinking about leaving him or dissolving the marriage. She gave birth to her first child, but problems between the couple continued for the next three years. Finally, she committed a suicide when she was seventeen.

The above discussion corroborates Guday (2005), who shows that early marriage is one of the ways to forge links between families. In some cases, families promise to establish a marriage alliance by arranging a marriage between their yet unborn children. Despite the fact that this sort of marriage arrangement is nonexistent in our research area; case two above shows the environment in which marriage alliances are established based on clan, family, or lineage preferences. This finding is still consistent with the work of FMRWG (2003), which shows that forging alliances or links between families leads to early marriage.

It is unusual for girls to turn down the request for their hand in marriage. Regardless of their interests, girls ultimately submit to the interests of the family and get married. The custom demands that girls have to pretend that they do not want to marry even if they want. Approximately 71.74% of the schoolgirls who responded to our structured questionnaire said they would submit to their parents' interests if forced to marry. Only 28.26% stated that they would resist parental decisions and seek another way to escape the pressure as long as they are not interested in marriage (see Table 2). However, 76.09% of participants reported that the most difficult factor to overcome in order to avoid an early or forced marriage is parental pressure. The remaining 23.91% stated that a lack of support from legal institutions, as well as a lack of knowledge about where to look for help, are important factors in the girls' decision to submit (see Table 1).

In spite of this, about 57.61% of our respondents claimed that girls have the right to turn down any formal request for their hands in marriage. The remaining portion, 42.39% reported the culture does not give girls the right to decline marriage requests through betrothal arrangements (see Table 1). That is why 57.61% of our respondents are not confident that they may not be forced to marry in either way. The remaining 43.39% stated that they do not have any fear of being forced to marry (see Table 2).

However, our data did not show any direct link between the age of the bride and the amount of pride wealth. This finding is contrary to what Warner (2004.239) terms as “bartered transaction” and the discussion by Jensen and Thornton (2003.18), who show the correlation between the age of the bride and the monetary exchange.

Table 1: the prevalence and factors for Early marriage

	Item	Frequency	Percentage
1	How often early/forced marriage is practiced in your locality?		
	common	56	60.87%
	Rarely happens	36	39.13%
	Total	92	100%
2	Why do girls marry early?		
	Forced in any ways	38	41.30%
	Girls' interest to secure their future	54	58.70%
	Total	92	100%
3	What is a major challenge to escape forced marriage?		
	Parental pressure	70	76.09%
	lack of support from formal institutions	22	23.91%
	Total	92	100%
4	Do girls have the right to turn down a marriage request?		
	Yes	37	57.61%
	No	39	42.39%
	Total	92	100%

Table 2: Girls view and experiences of Early marriage

S. No	Item	Frequency	Percentage
1	What is the major way for early/forced marriage?		
	Betrothal marriage contract	51	55.43%
	Bride abduction	21	22.83%
	Elopement	20	21.74%
	Total	92	100%
1	What may be your response if your parents force you to marry?		
	Obey their decision	66	71.74%
	Resist their decision	26	28.26%
	Total	92	100%
2	Have you had any fear of being forced to marry?		
	Yes	53	57.61%
	No	39	42.39%
	Total	92	100%
3	Have you ever been threatened for abduction?		
	Yes	32	38.55%
	No	51	61.45%
	Total	83	100%

6.3. Early Marriage via Abduction

Bride abduction is the second major way in which girls are forced to marry early. About 38.55% of our respondents to the structure questionnaire reported that they have been threatened for being abducted, whereas the remaining 61.45% have not been (see table 2). Our data from the key informants indicate that there are several reasons behind bride abduction. The high cost of marriage for betrothal marriage contract, fear of being denied the right to marry a girl of one's interest, sense of urgency to get married, and competition over a girl are the major ones. Teshome (2002) shows the high bride price in some rural areas of Ethiopia leads poor young men to abduct and rape underage girls to secure a marriage. This finding also corroborates with other findings on similar issues, including Guday (2005).

Betrothal has now become the most expensive type of marriage arrangement. It demands high expenses in the form of bride-wealth and a wedding ceremony. When a man abducts a bride, he is more likely to pay a smaller amount of money and less likely to arrange a wedding. To escape these expenses, economically weak young men opt to marry via elopement or bride abduction.

In this area, a bride abduction can be consensual or non-consensual. Given the high value of pre-marital virginity, if a girl is abducted and raped, it is more likely for her to accept her abductor as her husband. If she refuses the marriage and insists in taking her case to court her abductor may be imprisoned for several years. If she goes back to her parents, she is still considered a widow by her peers and the community. She automatically loses her reputation and confidence in going to school. She feels that she has already entered into a status of womanhood regardless of the way it happened. The pertinent cultural values put pressure on her to go for the only option of staying as a wife of her abductor. However, the following case is one of the few in which the girl and her parents insisted on taking the case to court, and the abductor served a prison term.

Case Three

A girl of sixteen years of age was abducted in 2017. The abductor formally requested her hand in marriage before. However, the girl as well as the parents refused the marriage for the mere reason that she wanted to continue her education. The young man and his parents agreed to abduct the girl out of spite. Fortunately, the abductor did not hide the girl too far with the confidence that the parents would agree to the marriage as he had already shown his interest in marrying her. His parents tried to negotiate on the issue and presented the standard amount of money for compensation. However, the parents of the abducted girl denied the negotiation out of spite again. The police arrested the abductor. The girl was taken to the nearby hospital for medical treatment. She was found raped and underage. She joined her parents and continued her class; in the 2019/2020 academic year, she was in grade ten. He was sent to jail for fifteen years of prison time.

Case Four

A young man in his early twenties abducted a small girl of twelve years of age as she went home from school in November 2019. For some days, all attempts to rescue the girl by her parents and the police was not unsuccessful. Fortunately, a week after the abduction, took the girl to one of the nearby town to take a picture of her with a professional camera. However, the girl was not happy to take the

photograph with him and started weeping in front of the photographer. The photographer and people around asked her what happened to her. The abductor tried to hide the secret and lied that she is his sister and that taking photography was her first experience and she might not be happy. But the girl overtly told the photographer that she was abducted by the man with her. The abductor was soon arrested by the police, and the case was taken to court. She was examined for a medical condition, and thankfully, he did not rape her. The girl joined her parents. He served a two-year prison term.

A bride abduction is also conspired against by parents from both or either of the two sides. This happens when there is an intervention by a third party, particularly the police or the office of the WYCA, to abort a planned early marriage. These offices may advise and also warn all actors to stop processing any forced or early marriages. However, a conspired bride abduction could be the consequence. The following case is an example.

Case Five

The parents agreed to the marriage of their daughter, who was fifteen years of age and a grade seven student. Upon information about the arrangement, the police, in cooperation with the office of WYCA, warned all those involved in the marriage processing. Officially, the parents of the girl accepted the advice and terminated the betrothal. However, the mother of the girl was eager that her daughter get married to the requested man. She saw the potential economic return from her would-be in-law. He is economically well to do while the families of the girl are poor. The mother conspired against her daughter. Under the cover of going to a nearby market together, the mother let her daughter enter into a mini-bus that was arranged to abduct the girl. After a short trip, the mother got off the bus, leaving behind her daughter with her abductor. When the police arrested the mother, she complained that the girl had joined her husband in her free interest and there was no conspiracy.

This case shows how parents use the marriage of their daughters as a source of income. Some literature clearly associates child marriage with poverty (Levine et al., 2008; Vogelstein, 2013). Families may view child or early marriage as a strategy for economic survival in the face of acute poverty and declining land productivity (Gaffney-Rhys, 2011).

6.4. Elopement as an Early Marriage

Girls marry early through elopement. According to our informant from the office of WYCA, young girls elope with men of their choices even though they are underage and unable to take reasonable decisions. In addition to immaturity, other factors such as the absence of job opportunities and role models encourage girls to opt for marriage at any age. According to our informants from schools, the high demand for escaping from rural life and poverty at home, coupled with weak academic performance and lack of hope for post-college/university job opportunities easily drives the young girls to elope with men to urban centers where they would become wage earners or daily laborers. Moreover, regardless of her age, a girl may elope with someone because of a love affair. The following is one of the examples in which a girl of fifteen strongly claimed the age of maturity and insisted on marrying a man with whom she eloped.

Case Five

A girl of fifteen eloped with a young man in his twenties. He was working for the dairy farm of the family that brought up the young girl. At a certain point, she eloped with this man who escaped to his birth place. The head of the household and the father of the girl followed him to his place. They reported the case to the Police who were able to arrest the man with the eloped girl. She declared that she loved him and wanted to marry him. However, the father insisted that the girl was only fifteen years old and therefore could not consent to her marriage. The police took the girl to a nearby hospital to check her age and other medical cases as a result of the rape. The police arranged for the girl to stay with her father for a few days until the medical results were ready. However, the girl fled to somewhere and the father was not able to find her anymore. Sometimes the police declined the case in despair and released the eloper.

The overall discussion shows that the cultural value that produces an impetus behind early marriage is patriarchal. Our findings clearly showed that the society under investigation is patriarchal and this system provides the cultural framework of the practices and perceptions of early marriage. To use (Hodgkinson 2016) terms, patriarchal structures promote gender inequality by providing special privileges to men to decide on issues affecting the family and family members.

7. Conclusion

This paper shows how the patriarchal system accommodates unequal gender norms among the Oromo in central Ethiopia at the disadvantage of women. Gender inequalities are the main reason behind the prevalence of child marriage that affects girls. The Ethiopian criminal code prohibits child marriage. Congruent to this law, the Ethiopian Revised Family Code has enacted that the minimum age of marriage for both males and females is 18. However, the practice persists in favor of prevailing cultural values such as family honor, pre-marital virginity, and ensuring girls' marriageability as a means of securing their future. Besides, girls themselves view marriage as an alternative life career and thus quit school to marry.

The study clearly indicates that early marriage is under the impetus of a patriarchal attitude and a male-dominated cultural framework which provides special importance to the pre-marital virginity of girls. The smallest rumor of premarital sex would ruin the decency of one's daughter and thus destroy the girl's chance of getting married. Once a girl has lost her virginity before marriage, and/or given birth out of wedlock, she is considered a woman who lost her honor. Thus, early marriage through betrothal marriage contracts while the girls are still virgins is used as a means of protecting the honor of the girls and their parents. This finding is also consistent with the findings of Ortner (1978) and Malhotra (2010). Long ago, Ortner (1978) showed how early marriage is related to family honor and female purity. In societies where women's purity is a marker of the purity of the community, early marriage is common. Families do not want to lose the honor related to the purity of their girls.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our special thanks of gratitude to our informants who provided us with valuable information to write this article. We also express our appreciation to the district administration and our institute for research permission.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest on this paper

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