

Evaluation of Berhane Hewan: A Program To Delay Child Marriage in Rural Ethiopia

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CONTEXT: Early marriage limits girls' opportunities and compromises their health, yet in Sub-Saharan Africa many girls are married before the age of 18, and few programs have sought to increase the age at marriage on the continent.

METHODS: Berhane Hewan was a two-year pilot project conducted in 2004–2006 that aimed to reduce the prevalence of child marriage in rural Ethiopia, through a combination of group formation, support for girls to remain in school and community awareness. A quasi-experimental research design with baseline and endline surveys was used to measure changes in social and educational participation, marriage age, reproductive health knowledge and contraceptive use. Chi-square tests, proportional hazards models and logistic regressions were conducted to assess changes associated with the project.

RESULTS: The intervention was associated with considerable improvements in girls' school enrollment, age at marriage, reproductive health knowledge and contraceptive use. Particularly among girls aged 10–14, those exposed to the program were more likely than those in the control area to be in school at the endline survey (odds ratio, 3.0) and were less likely to have ever been married (0.1). However, among girls aged 15–19, those in the intervention area had an elevated likelihood of having gotten married by the endline (2.4). Sexually experienced girls exposed to the intervention had elevated odds at endline of having ever used contraceptives (2.9).

CONCLUSIONS: The success of the Berhane Hewan program, one of the first rigorously evaluated interventions to delay marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa, suggests that well-designed and effectively implemented programs can delay the earliest marriages until later adolescence.

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Child marriage, defined as marriage before the age of 18, affects girls to a far greater extent than boys. Age at first marriage is generally increasing around the world, though in many parts of South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, a significant proportion of girls are still married before reaching their 18th birthday.^{1,2}

According to a number of international conventions, early marriage is considered a violation of human rights and effectively ends girls' opportunities for schooling, skills acquisition and personal development.³ Generally, girls in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia who are married early have less education and fewer opportunities, and the practice often forces a girl to reside in her husband's household, where she has low status and little power. After marriage, girls' confinement and isolation increase, likely due to greater domestic duties and control by husbands and senior household members.⁴ Marriage also marks the beginning of frequent and unprotected sexual activity, often leading to an early and risky first birth.^{3,4} Moreover, the younger a girl is when she marries, the greater the age difference with her partner, which further compromises her status and negotiating power within her marital home.⁵

In many settings, marriage also represents an increased risk of HIV infection. A study in Kenya and Zambia using biological markers and behavioral data found that married

adolescent girls had rates of HIV that were 50% higher than those of girls who were unmarried and sexually active; these elevated rates of infection were associated with more frequent intercourse, virtually no condom use and older partners who were more likely to be HIV-positive.^{6,7} Similarly, a study of more than 1,800 adolescent girls in Zimbabwe found that the odds of being HIV-positive for married girls were twice those for unmarried, sexually active girls.⁸

BACKGROUND

Ethiopia has one of the highest rates of early marriage in Sub-Saharan Africa: Nineteen percent of Ethiopian girls are married before their 15th birthday.⁹ Nationally, the mean age at first marriage among Ethiopian women aged 25–49 is 16.1, and 23.8 for men aged 25–59.¹⁰ However, national figures mask considerable differences in levels of early marriage by region. The Amhara region in northern Ethiopia is the second largest region in the country and has an estimated population of 19 million. In this region, 50% of girls are married by age 15 and 80% are married by age 18.¹¹ On average, married girls in Ethiopia are nine years younger than their spouses.¹²

The forms of marriage practiced in Ethiopia vary greatly. Most marriages are arranged by parents, particularly among highland agriculturalists such as the Amhara.^{13,14}