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Child Marriage Cancellation in Ethiopia

KIT Brief





Photo: UNICEF/Tadesse

Introduction

The YES I DO programme found that arranged child marriages are being cancelled in the Bahir Dar Zuria and Kewet woredas, in the Amhara region in Ethiopia, but there was limited evidence about the implications of the cancellations on the lives of adolescent girls.

This brief highlights the main findings of a study conducted within the YES I DO programme that focused on the experiences of adolescents girls who had cancelled their child marriage. It details some key recommendations for policymakers and programme implementers to further support adolescent girls who want to cancel arranged child marriages.

In Ethiopia, about 40 per cent of women aged 20-24 were first married or in union before turning 18. Ethiopia is also one of the countries that has made the most headway in reducing child marriage and Amhara is one of the regions that has made the most progress. However to eliminate the practice by 2030, progress needs to be 6 times faster than in the last 10 years. Therefore, a strong understanding of what works and how, such as child marriage cancellation, is important.



Cancelling Child Marriage - What does it mean for adolescent girls in Bahir Dar Zuria and Kewet?

Adolescent girls struggle to navigate the process of child marriage cancellation. They play a central role in the process, but they cannot do it alone. They are often informed about the marriage during the planning stage, with some only finding out a few days before the wedding ceremony. They often do not know who to turn to and carry a heavy emotional burden. Feelings of fear and sadness are common, sometimes leading to threats of suicide, and psychosocial support during and after the cancellation is limited.

Child marriage cancellation is a long, stressful, and unclear process for adolescent girls. The first reaction is often to express disagreement to their parents or relatives, particularly mothers or siblings. They also turn to teachers or school principals, sometimes health workers and rarely to the police or kebele (local) officials. Some parents gradually accept the cancellation after the mediation of teachers and relatives. Others react negatively and continue with the marriage preparations until law enforcement actors intervene. In this whole process, adolescent girls rely mainly - and often exclusively - on the support of school friends, peers and role model girls.

Who is involved in the cancellation as well as when the cancellation takes place strongly

influences the impact of child marriage cancellation on the lives of adolescent girls.

Reactions towards adolescent girls tend to be more negative when actors outside the family intervened in the cancellation, particularly law enforcement, as this was considered disrespectful to and shameful for parents.

When a child marriage is cancelled after the wedding ceremony, because of girls running away and returning to a family member, adolescent girls are more stigmatised and are less likely to go back to school. The emotional burden can also be heavier as the reasons for running away are often refusal to engage in sexual relations, discomfort in co-habiting with the husband and gender-based violence.

Adolescent girls whose child marriage is cancelled before the wedding ceremony tend to continue with their education or opt for migration in the case of Kewet. In general, the future perspectives of adolescent girls after child marriage cancellation are similar to the ones for youth limited job opportunities, e.g. migration, or marriage when they are older. All adolescent girls who shared their experience with child marriage cancellation said they were happy to have cancelled the marriage and to be able to decide if and when to marry in the future.



Recommendations - How Should Adolescent girls be Supported in Child Marriage Cancellation?

Interventions on child marriage cancellation need to be framed within the National Costed Roadmap to End Child Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting 2020-2024. Based on the study findings, YES I DO recommends policymakers and program implementers do the following:

Coordinate the documentation of child marriage cancellation cases to allow follow-up.

Strengthen the capacity of anti-harmful traditional practices committees to take up the role of compiling child marriage cases identified through different sources (schools, health workers, police) in coordination with the Women, Children, and Youth Affairs office. Having a complete and up-to-date overview of child marriage cancellation cases will allow the provision of constant and closer support to adolescent girls during and after the cancellation.

Inform adolescent girls how child marriages can be cancelled, both before and after a wedding ceremony.

Teachers and school principals should inform adolescents about the possibilities of child

marriage cancellation and how to navigate the process during the planning stage of a wedding ceremony. Legal and judicial actors need to be trained to be able to inform adolescent girls about the legal status and implications of traditional and promised child marriages and that cancellation is possible, even after a wedding ceremony.

Build intergenerational communication skills among youth so that adolescent girls can better express their marriage refusal and preferences.

As adolescent girls find it difficult to express and talk about their rejection of marriage, particularly with adults, include intergenerational communication skills in the educational curriculum and in training for out-of-school youth. Schools and girls clubs can build these skills among in-school youth and NGOs can work with out-of-school youth.

Ensure that adolescent girls receive proper psychosocial support during and after child marriage cancellation.

Provide training for teachers, health workers, NGO staff and staff of the Women, Children, and Youth Affairs office on how to accompany



or support girls in coping with the emotional burden during and after child marriage cancellation.

Sensitise parents about the adolescent girls right to know about and consent to marriage arrangements and raise awareness on the emotional burden of child marriage cancellation for adolescent girls.

Schools, health workers, governmental bodies and NGOs need to work together on this, with a particular focus on fathers who tend to be more reluctant to cancel an arranged child marriage. Those who have successfully cancelled their marriage can act as role models and also raise awareness with adults.

Analyse and address the implications of the intervention of law enforcement actors in child marriage cancellations.

Interventions by police officers can make the cancellation more emotionally complex for adolescent girls and community reactions towards them more negative. Therefore, these girls must be more closely monitored, and psychosocial support should be provided.

Provide tailor-made educational programmes and vocational training, particularly for adolescent girls and young women who cancelled their child marriage.

It is more difficult for adolescent girls who have cohabited with their husbands to return to school and their future perspectives are more limited as it is more difficult to continue with their education, engage in job opportunities or remarry, partly due to the stigma. Programmes tend to focus on preventing child marriage and less on creating alternatives for adolescent girls who have been married.

Empower adolescent girls economically through income generating activities.

Adolescent girls, particularly those out of school, have little economic means and opportunities which limits the alternatives to child marriage. Governmental bodies, NGOs, and actors of the private sector should provide mechanisms for out-of-school adolescent girls to access financial resources and have economic support during and after child marriage cancellation.

The study was done in collaboration with the Yes I Do program implementing partners in Ethiopia: Amref Health Africa, Plan Ethiopia, DEC and TaYA.

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Source

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