



FIRST PERSON Choosing Education Before Marriage

Only 38 percent of girls make it to fifth grade



Photo: Save the Children-USA

Meseret was able to postpone marriage and stay in school to finish her education.

"I was persuaded that forcing very young girls into marriage and disrupting their education is indeed a crime and I have made a decision not to marry Meseret," said the groom after speaking to the Girls' Education Advisory Committee.

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December is harvest time in the Oromiya region of Ethiopia. It is also a popular time for marriage proposals and ceremonies.

So it came as no surprise that month when Meseret Anegecha, a studious 14-year-old student at the Tajab Primary School, and six other girls in her class received marriage proposals. Meseret's parents accepted despite her furious protests.

Early marriage of girls as young as 11 or 12 years old is common in Ethiopia. Parents consent to a daughter's marriage often without realizing its grave consequences, including a higher likelihood of falling into poverty and developing serious medical conditions through early childbearing. Girls who marry young are also unlikely to complete school.

In an effort to prevent early marriages, USAID is funding a project — the Community Government Partnership Program — that connects community and government officials with educators and women's affairs representatives to teach parents about the dangers of early marriages.

Tajab Primary School is one of the 3700 Ethiopian schools benefiting from this program. When the Girls' Education Advisory Committee at the school heard of Meseret's problem, they asked the women's affairs representatives to join them in approaching her parents. They had little success. They decided to approach the groom to tell him Meseret did not want to get married and that early marriage was not legal or morally right.

The day arrived for "Sedeta," a tradition in which the groom visits the future bride's home and produces the dowry. Meseret's parents slaughtered their finest cow and invited relatives and friends for a feast. But the groom did not come. He told the family he was touched by the committee's argument that forcing young girls into marriage and disrupting their education is a crime. Meseret's father had little choice but to accept and agreed to his daughter's request to continue her education.