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ETHIOPIA

SUCCESS STORY

Preventing Early Marriages

One determined woman prevented more than 300 marriages of girls aged 10 to 18



Photo: Pathfinder-Ethiopia

Yeshi Alem educates her village about the perils of making girls marry young.

“I teach from experience. I know the hardships of raising many children,” said Yeshi Alem, a member of her community’s early marriage committee.

Telling Our Story
U.S. Agency for International Development
Washington, DC 20523-1000
<http://stories.usaid.gov>

Early marriage is one of several traditions harmful toward women that are commonly practiced in some regions of Ethiopia. In the Amhara region, 50 percent of girls are married by age 15. Parents often consent to a daughter’s consummated marriage when she is as young as 10 or 12 years old, despite the legal marriage age of 18.

Early marriage puts girls at risk of serious health consequences, including increased vulnerability to HIV/AIDS and obstetric problems due to immature bodies and undernourishment. Also, early childbearing has been shown to both increase a women’s vulnerability to poverty and decrease her chances of completing her education.

In response, USAID helped fund a program to discourage early marriages through advocacy and education. Using community and legal interventions, the program engages religious leaders and teachers and hosts public forums

for discussion and sensitization on the harmful effects of early marriage. The country’s two main religious bodies, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council, signed statements of action condemning early marriage and outlining punishments for such offenses. “When girls are married at a young age they get hurt because their bodies have not matured yet,” said a Muslim leader at an advocacy session. “We as religious leaders should be serious about this.”

One example of the program’s success is Yeshi Alem. As an active member of her community’s early marriage committee, a mechanism set up to address the issue, and a representative of a women’s association in Kemissie village, she has helped prevent more than 300 early marriages in her community. “I teach from experience. I know the hardships of raising many children,” Yeshi says. “My husband now sees the benefits of what I started eight years ago, even though he wasn’t convinced of it then.”