

Developing a Transformative Human Rights Approach towards the Practice of (Girl) Early Marriage in Ethiopia

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Abstract

The resiliency of human rights is tested by its ability to transform the everyday lives of local communities that appropriate the language of rights. My research aims to come up with a transformative human rights approach towards addressing the practice of early marriage in Ethiopia. The paper explores the perspectives of former child wives (now adult women) in the Amhara Regional State in Ethiopia, drawing upon post-colonial and feminist perspectives and through the medium of interviews. The key questions address the perspectives of former child wives relating to early marriage, the role of important relationships in their experience as child wives, their ways of negotiating and developing coping mechanisms and the role of the language of rights in their everyday lives. The findings of interviews with former child wives reveal the importance of listening to their voices in a way that goes beyond the need for drawing upon their stories. I argue that the former child wives' appropriation and use of the language of rights in itself, however diverse, makes a case for human rights in an age of ambiguity.

I. Introduction

Human rights have yet to become the main framework for social justice as applied to the lives of child wives in the Amhara Regional State, in Ethiopia. The practice of early marriage remains widespread in Ethiopia despite the presence of established laws and many interventions from global and local human rights actors.² A 2015 African Union report, for example, put the prevalence of early marriage of girls in Ethiopia at 41 per cent citing different government and NGO sources.³ Whereas, current official state figures put the prevalence of early marriage of girls in the Amhara region at 44.8 per cent, well above other regional averages.⁴ What is more alarming about the statistics in the Amhara region is the recruitment of child wives into marriage at a very young age.⁵ Ethiopia has made a commitment to eradicate the practice of early marriage

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² The 1994 Ethiopian constitution clearly provides that 'marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses' and sets the minimum legal age for marriage at 18 for both boys and girls. Ethiopia's Criminal Code of 2005, which is applicable to all regional states, outlines criminal sanctions against perpetrators.

³ African Union, "Draft Concept Note, African Girl's Summit on Ending Child Marriage in Africa," accessed at <http://pages.au.int/sites/default/files>, on Nov. 19, 2015. Source: UNICEF State of the World's Children, 2013 - data from UNICEF Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS),

⁴ National Strategy and Action Plan on Harmful Traditional Practices against Women and Children in Ethiopia, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs, June 2013, Addis Ababa

⁵ Other competing statistics, for example, shows that almost 50 per cent of girls in the Amhara region are married by the age of 15. See Annabel S. Erulkar and Eunice Muthengi, "Evaluation of Berhane Hewan: A Program to Delay Child Marriage in Rural Ethiopia," *International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 35, no. 1 (2009), accessed at www.guttmacher.org/pubs/journals/3500609.pdf, on Dec. 8, 2010; and Population Council and UNFPA, *The Adolescent*

by 2025⁶ and have launched a ‘National Strategy and Action Plan on Harmful Traditional Practices Against Women’ in 2013.⁷ The drafting of the strategy was partly a result of the insistence by the CEDAW Committee for a ‘comprehensive strategy to eliminate harmful practices and stereotypes that discriminate against women’ in Ethiopia.⁸

This paper investigates the ways in which adult women; whose age at first marriage was under 18 years of age, (hereinafter-former child wives) see their life experiences in human rights terms. It broadly engages the works of post-colonial feminist scholars on the importance of investigating the effectiveness of human rights from the perspectives of marginalised groups.⁹ All reference to the accounts is from three sub-zones of the Amhara Regional State [*Bahir Dar Zuria, Fogera and Mecha Woredas*]. The interview data was collected during five months of field research in 2015, focusing on the lived experiences of 18 former child wives. All the names of the interviewees were changed not to disclose their identity. Through their stories of encounters with community members, institutions and people in authority, it provides insights on how the language of rights is extracted and used as a tool of resistance.

II. Former Child Wives Experiencing the Human Rights Regime

The former child wives’ appropriation and use of the language of rights in itself, however diverse, makes a case for human rights in an age of ambiguities. I will lay the groundwork by considering a number of accounts from the former child wives that present the diverse ways of appropriating and using the language of rights. The accounts also provide the challenges they face in doing so.

Discussing first the encounter of the younger former child wife with the law will illustrate both the important role of the uniform minimum age for marriage and the difficulties for framing rights in local communities. *Zinash* was married at the age of 13 while she was in grade six at her local school. Initially she ran away to the regional city and stayed with close relatives. Many girls migrate to urban areas in similar conditions but often end up in domestic work and prostitution.¹⁰ After learning she could challenge her marriage through the law, she went back to

Experience In-Depth: Using Data to Identify and Reach the Most Vulnerable Young People: Ethiopia 2005 (New York: Population Council, 2009).

⁶ The first World Girl Summit was held in London, the UK on 22 July 2014 with the aim to mobilize domestic and international efforts to end female genital mutilation (FGM) and child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) within a generation.

⁷ National Strategy and Action Plan on Harmful Traditional Practices against Women and Children in Ethiopia, Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs, June 2013, Addis Ababa

⁸ Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Ethiopia State Report, Forty-ninth session, 11 – 29 July 2011, Para.19(a)

⁹ See Ratna Kapur, ‘Tragedy of Victimization Rhetoric: Resurrecting the “Native” Subject in International/Post-colonial Feminist Legal Politics’, *The (2002)15 harv.Hum.Rts.J.*1.

¹⁰ See Hashim Ali Ahmed, *The Causes of Prostitution in Ethiopia*, excerpts from prostitution as a survival mechanism in Ethiopia, a Focus on Addis Ababa

her rural district and approached the Community Police Officer [CPO] to cancel her marriage. Often a single community police officer is the first point of contact for law enforcement in the rural districts in the Amhara region. She succeeded to cancel her marriage within a year but not without difficulties. With help from the CPO, she had to use the customary arbitration mechanism with the threat of criminal sanctions of the formal law to convince both her parents and the in-laws to cancel the marriage. Her main point of contention was that she was not old enough to get married under the law. The cancellation of the marriage arrangement did not stop harassment and intimidation from her ex-husband. She had also a hard time in accessing resources from her family to continue her education because of her 'disobedience'. Nonetheless, she continued to go to school while missing classes to support herself by working on a family farm. She was in her final year of high school at 20 years of age during the time of the interview.

Zimash's experience shows the importance of localising the international human rights principles, in this case, the uniform minimum age and consent for marriage. Despite controversies about applying a uniform minimum age for marriage in a context with a different understanding of age and maturity, the principle was found to be useful in her case.¹¹ However, the challenges she faced for her resistance illustrates the inadequacy of relying solely on legal sanctions in order to promote the wellbeing and autonomy of girls. On a positive note, the employment of customary arbitration to secure her right shows how the international human rights law can adapt to the local context. In this particular case, the local context refers to the absence of formal courts at district levels and the less antagonising nature of customary arbitration. In other cases involving younger girls, however, similar use of customary arbitration often endangers girls as they may be unable to challenge their families if the agreement for cancellation is found to be bogus.

Girls resist the practice of early marriage in various ways. At the age of 15, *Selam* threatened her father with suicide after a failed rape attempt by her husband in one of her visits to her marital family. She was one of the few former child wives who used the term 'rape' and not 'forced sex' to explain sexual violence in the context of early marriage. She was married at the age of 13 but the two families agreed she would continue her schooling with frequent visits to her marital family. Frequent visits resulting in co-habitation are common practice in the Amhara region

¹¹ For example, Bunting explains how the setting of a uniform marriageable age in the international human rights law was contested 'on the grounds of complexities of marriage and stages of development around the world' and that 'some saw it as a wrong strategy for eradicating early marriage'. See Bunting, Annie. "Stages of development: marriage of girls and teens as an international human rights issue." *Social & Legal Studies* 14.1 (2005): 17-38. 17.

known as *'milelesho'*.¹² Any girl who is married and has not co-habited is required to be acquainted to the in-laws through frequent short stays at her marital family. She learned about her rights at school early but was forced to obey the situation until the age of 15. *Selam* had a belief that 18 years of age was a very young to get married for girls as they would not be able to support themselves financially under the local context. She became an activist against early marriage in her school after the cancellation of her marriage. She participated in educating other students through drama and other arts. At 21 years of age, at the time of the interview, she was working as a part-time community facilitator for social change for an NGO in rural district.

Selam did not have the support of the formal institutions in her fight to cancel her marriage. However, the fact that she learned her rights in school shows the role schools can play in translating international human rights norms into local contexts. If she had had access to courts, she could get her marriage cancelled but no other legal redress for sexual violence. Both the local norm and the formal law do not prohibit sexual violence within early marriage. Both early marriage and rape are crimes under the criminal Code of Ethiopia that came into effect in 2005.¹³ However, there is a marital exemption for rape within the context of marriage, which is also being applied to cases of early marriage. This is in direct contradiction with the international human rights norms. The Ethiopian Constitution specifically provides that international agreements ratified by Ethiopia are 'an integral part of the law of the land'.¹⁴ The international women's rights frameworks provide norms that promote freedom from sexual violence. The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women [DEVAW] in its article 4 addresses the issue of state responsibility in declaring that states 'should not invoke any custom, tradition or religious consideration' to evade obligations of eradicating such violence.¹⁵ The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women [CEDAW] recommendation on Violence against Women also affirms such state responsibility.¹⁶ The UN Child Rights Convention (the CRC) stipulates that governments should provide children with 'protection from violence, exploitation, abuse, neglect and maltreatment'.¹⁷ The African Women's Protocol treats violence against women under the rights to life, integrity and security and urges states to

¹² See Guday Emirie, 'Early Marriage and Its Effects on Girls' Education in Rural Ethiopia: The Case of Mecha Woreda in West Gojjam, North-Western Ethiopia / Frühe Heirat Und Die Folgen Für Die Bildung Für Mädchen Im Ländlichen Äthiopien : Am Beispiel Von Mecha Woreda in West Gojjam, Nord-West Äthiopien' (2005)126

¹³ Article 620 criminalizes rape outside of marriage whereas article 648 prohibits early marriage. See Ethiopia: Criminal Code [Ethiopia], Proclamation No. 414/2004, 9 May 2005

¹⁴ Art.9(4) Constitution of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 1991

¹⁵ UN General Assembly, Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, 20 December 1993, A/RES/48/104, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f25d2c.html> [accessed 30 May 2016]

¹⁶ Rhonda Copelon, 'Recognizing the Egregious in the Everyday: Domestic Violence as Torture'(1994)' 25 Columbia Human Rights Law Review 291. Page 360

¹⁷ UN General Assembly, 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' (1989) 1577(3) United Nations, Treaty Series Article 19

‘enact and enforce laws to prohibit all forms of violence against women’ among other obligations.¹⁸ However, as evidenced in this research, the courts in the Amhara region have not applied this principle in conjunction with the criminal law.

Under the local norm, families sometimes negotiate age of consent for sex if they believe the girl is too young for sexual relations. The tradition is referred to as *gedo* or *egid*, which literally means a negotiated age of ‘consent’ for the child wife between the two families.¹⁹ However, the local norm also perceives girls as young as 11 and 12 mature enough to start sexual relations.²⁰ And the accounts of the former child wives often show that even the negotiated age of consent under the local norm is not respected in reality and that there is no sanction for violators of the norm. As such, the lack of recognition of sexual violence within early marriage means that girls as young as six and eight do not get a legal redress for sexual violence. It also means that they are not eligible for support or trauma counselling as is the case of sexual violence outside of marriage.

The lack of translation of international human rights norms on sexual violence in the Amhara region context means that child wives opt for understanding their plight in terms of local norms. Child wives are not expected to give consent for sexual relations within marriage in the Amhara region.²¹ The use of coercion or force among husbands was a common theme in the conversations with the former child wives. It is traditionally accepted that boys and men will be sexually aggressive to child wives.²² Male spouses of former child wives and other community members interviewed often do not address the issue of sexual violence in the practice of early marriage. They explain the harmful effects of the practice in terms of ill reproductive health and/or absence of educational opportunities for the girls. There was only one account of an older male spouse²³ during the field research that openly admitted it a problem and regretted forcing his late wife into sexual relations in her early teens. Some child wives resort to other alternative frameworks in the local norm to understand their trauma when the human rights

18 Article 4, African Union, *Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Woman in Africa*, Series Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Woman in Africa (trans, African Union, 2003). Ethiopia has signed but has not ratified the Protocol yet.

19 Guday Emirie, 'Early Marriage and Its Effects on Girls' Education in Rural Ethiopia: The Case of Mecha Woreda in West Gojjam, North-Western Ethiopia / Frühe Heirat Und Die Folgen Für Die Bildung Für Mädchen Im Ländlichen Äthiopien : Am Beispiel Von Mecha Woreda in West Gojjam, Nord-West Äthiopien' (2005)126

20 Findings from interviews with community members, informal and community leaders (Church Priests and male elders).

21 Reminick, Ronald A. "The symbolic significance of ceremonial defloration among the Amhara of Ethiopia." *American Ethnologist* (1976): 751-763.

22 Ibid

23 Interview with Alebachew Mola, Mecha Sub-Zone, Amhara Regional State

regime as they access it fail them. An extreme illustration of this failure is where child wives were forced to view their aversion to forced sex as a disease. The account of *Tsebay* who understood her ‘dislike of sexual relations’ with subsequent husbands as a disease of an evil spirit signifies how the human rights regime could provide an alternative framework for her to realise that she was not the problem. She believed she had a disease after her family suggested the possibility and she became known for running away from her marital homes [*alelemed alech*]²⁴. In any case, deeper conversations with the mother-of-three also revealed that she credited her resistance for having fewer children than her peers.

Other accounts from older women illustrate how the absence of an alternative social justice framework in the past has influenced the way they resisted the practice of early marriage. At the time, the formal law set the minimum age of marriage for girls at 15 and for boys at 18 but it was not enforced.²⁵ The account of *Emahoy Zenebework*, a monk in her 60s, exemplifies the sense of sisterhood and co-operation among child wives in very difficult conditions. As a child wife, she suffered both sexual and physical abuse as a young girl. Nonetheless, what she shared extensively during the interview was how she and other two child wives tried to save a new child wife from forced sex. All the girls were married to men from the same family and lived in the same compound. From their experience, they knew that the new girl would be forced into sexual relations on the day the parents left to attend a feast in another village. She said they were worried for the girl as she was very small in stature. The mechanism they came up with was to tie their legs together while putting the new girl in the middle to prevent the husband from taking her. They did not succeed and suffered physical violence for trying to help her. The new girl later was taken to a health facility after heavy bleeding and had to undergo life-saving surgery. What was very telling about this account was how the monk envied the new girl for being able to stay with her birth parents for two more years to recover.

Child wives are often separated from their birth family at a young age to live under the control of their marital family. The former child wives who were married and co-habited at a very young age often recall the anxiety they suffered for being separated from their birth family. This separation also came with the labor exploitation of girls. Their accounts of former child wives regarding separation were often discounted by the accounts of male spouses and families that perceived the situation as moving from one caring family to another. Though the international

²⁴ The term ‘melmed’ which literally meant ‘to give in’ refers to child wives who stay in their marital home instead of running away to their birth family or migrate to the cities.

²⁵ Art. 581, Civil code of the Empire of Ethiopia, 1960.

human rights framework on the rights of children provides a framework in which children 'have the right not to be separated from their parents against their will', the practice of early marriage routinely deprives girls this right.²⁶ This aspect of the child's rights is not often cascaded in the local communities. Interviews with government officials and local activists only mention the right to education or health and the uniform marriageable age and consent as part of the human rights framework. This is yet another example where the former child wives get access to information about the international human rights framework on a piecemeal basis. As the 18 former child wives uniformly agree on the wrongness of separating girls from their families, such human rights principles in conjunction with others, could serve as a rallying point for local activism.

For some girls, the use of the rights framework came late for challenging some of their early marriages but they still used it to avert other discriminatory outcomes of the practice. *Desta* used the formal institutions to realise her property rights upon divorce from her second husband. In fact, what she claimed was owed to her under the customary norm. The cattle that were given to her as an endowment from her family upon her second marriage was still under the control of her ex-husband. However, as any other system, customary entitlement does not mean enforcement is automatic. She did not have enough ties with powerful figures in her community to effect the return of the cattle with customary arbitration. At this juncture, she sought the involvement of a district office in the hope of getting her cattle back. *Desta* was married for the first time at the age of three and sent to grow up with the in-laws. She had no recollection of her life until the age of seven when she learned that she was not living with her birth family. She ran away to her birth family, preferring to help her mother at home than '*work for strangers*'. At that moment her father reconsidered and was convinced that early marriage had no benefits. As a result, she attended school at the age of eight. However, her parents began arranging two more marriages for her at the ages of 12 and 15. She refused to co-habitate for the first marriage which resulted in her family cancelling the arrangement. Nevertheless, she was forced to have a wedding and was sent to the in-laws after which she ran away to the regional city. She escaped with the help of a school friend and found a job in Addis Ababa (the capital city of Ethiopia) for two years. She returned and continued her schooling after reconciling with her parents.

Desta returned to school but the challenges she faced did not end there. She could not get back the cattle which her relatives believed was her share of the family's property. Then a deputy director at her school resorted to asking her parents to marry her when she refused his advances

²⁶ Art.9, UN General Assembly, 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' (1989) 1577(3) *United Nations, Treaty Series*

at school. He continued to stalk her after which she was forced to drop out of the school. At the time of the interview she was hopeful that she would continue her schooling and retrieve her cattle. It was not possible to learn the outcome of her effort at the district office during the span of the field research. The discourse between local norm inconsistencies with international human rights law ideals is that customs also offer an alternative social justice mechanism. In this case, even though not at the level of the international human rights framework, the customary norm entitles child wives to take what they brought with them upon divorce, particularly their marriage endowments. However, girls and women are often deprived of such entitlements as the existence of a supportive norm does not mean that its violation is properly sanctioned. In fact, it seems that local norms that are meant to protect girls and women have often-weak enforcement. This in effect shows that the human right regime does not only afford girls and women, which they were deprived under the local norm, but it is also appropriated to enforce their customary entitlements.

Wosene, a 32-year-old woman, told her account of resisting the pressure of elders and her own family to marry off her eight-year-old daughter. She herself was married at the age of seven to a man 15 years older than her. She thought the wider spousal age gap between them was unacceptable even for the local norm of the time. She accounted her resilience in resisting her daughter's marriage to the encouragement and friendship she received from a women's affairs expert at the sub-zone (Woreda) level. The expert made frequent visits to their rural districts to strengthen the local women development group of which *Wosene* was a lead member. *Wosene* knew about the illegality of early marriage before that but support from the expert gave her more courage to resist. These are everyday victories that women won appropriating right with minimal information and encouragement. Her resolve, however, was not without challenges. She had multiple health issues. She also suffered from obstructive labour during her last home birth. She had little say on how to use the family resources which impedes her from getting proper treatment for her condition. In addition, she still fears that her family may marry off her daughter if something happened to her.

Her story shows the need for an institutional mechanism that supports the effort of women and girls in resisting the practice of early marriage. What she shared later, on the other hand, illustrates how the strategies in enforcing laws often fail girls. She was able to ensure her daughter would not marry at a young age but then the same man went on to the next rural district and married her eight-year-old niece. In this circumstance, resisting or cancelling marriage

without the necessary legal sanctions on the perpetrators often move the case of early marriage from one girl to another instead of eradicating the chance for the would-be male spouse. Despite the law on paper, there was no one to hold the perpetrators responsible. The strategies of the law enforcement, when working, often do not hold male spouses and their families responsible for arranging marriages. Rather, the focus falls on the girl's relatives which often jeopardises the girl's reintegration with her family. There seems to be a correlation between the strategies of the law enforcement and the impunity with which the family of the would-be male spouse involvement in the practice. In one of the cases, a father who arranged a marriage between his adult son and a 7-year-old first grader contended that he and his son were not to blame as his son was old enough to get married.²⁷

There is a tendency to look at child wives who co-habitate as a lost cause as far as law enforcement and activism is concerned. This has also created a discrepancy between access to rights for child wives and those in the process of a marriage arrangement. The account of *Admaswork* shows that it is never too late to apply the human rights framework to the case of early marriage. After experiencing sexual violence by her second husband and a stillbirth at the age of 14, *Admaswork* managed to migrate to the next town and make a life for herself as a petty trader. She suffers from the trauma of sexual violence she experienced at a young age as she often sees the perpetrator [her second husband] in a local market. She was married at the age of 17 to a person of her choice in the town and thought that was the most important freedom she experienced. However, making her own choice did not prevent her current husband from physically abusing her. She also struggles economically to support her two children by selling a local alcoholic beverage from her house. Moreover, migrating to the next town and disobeying her family meant that she was unable to claim land from her family in the rural district. Cancelling first-time early marriages are viewed by activists and law enforcement agencies as being of primary importance that leaves a considerable number of girls without support and the reach of the law. Attempts on ending early marriage, when successful, are often limited to first-time cases and do not consider girls such as *Admaswork* in their interventions or support systems. The way international human rights norms were translated to local norms does not seem to take into consideration the long-term impact of early marriage on women and girls.

²⁷ This was one of the instances where a cancellation of a marriage through arbitration was found to be bogus. This case happened not in remote areas of the region but just in the outskirts of the regional capital (Bahir Dar). I was able to observe the arbitration process through the invitation of school administration and the law enforcement.

The issues of early marriage become an issue of not only health and education but also property rights. A considerable number of girls and women are displaced because of the practice, which also results in the loss of land and housing rights in their rural districts.²⁸ *Aberash's* account, an advocate for fistula survivors, shows the day-to-day struggle child wives face in order to secure their right for better access to health and their right to housing. A fistula survivor herself, she had difficulties maintaining her humble house near a local market in a small town after being evicted by her third husband from her marital home. Ethiopia has one of the highest rates of obstetric fistula and the median number of days in labour for child brides is three to eight.²⁹ World Health Organization estimated 8000 new cases occur every year in Ethiopia.³⁰ Obstetric fistula is highly linked with young women/girls who deliver for the first time. This link has been evidenced by research conducted in rural Ethiopia in which most of the patients were found to be married early through family arrangements or abduction.³¹ *Aberash* suffered from fistula for the first time at the age of 14 after days of obstructed labour and a stillbirth. It was her second marriage, being married for the first time at the age of seven. She was isolated as a result. '*My husband saw my condition and divorced me. I was put in a separate hut and everybody was disgusted to sit with me,*' she said. Surviving such a condition is not an isolated event for many girls. She had a recurrence of fistula while giving birth to her daughter from her subsequent marriage and had no other alternative than to accept the marriage arrangement. After migrating to the next town, she was able to support herself and her daughter as a petty trader.³² She became aware of the language of rights and access services of a non-governmental organisation when her house was in danger of being demolished due to expansion of the local market. She was able to secure a temporary hold on it by reasoning with authorities that, as a fistula survivor, she should be given protection.

The accounts of the former child wives illustrate how they appropriate the limited human rights norms they were able to access in ways that can enhance their autonomy. A human rights framework based on uniform minimum age and consent is not enough to address the challenges girls and women face in an environment that perpetuates the practice of early marriage. The human rights norms should be able to provide frameworks in which child wives can resist all forms of exploitation including sexual and physical violence. Most importantly, in order to be

²⁸ Erulkar, Annabel S., Tekle-Ab Mekbib, Negussie Simic, and Tsehai Gulema. "Migration and vulnerability among adolescents in slum areas of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia." *Journal of Youth Studies* 9, no. 3 (2006): 361-374.361

²⁹ Muleta, M., M. Fantahun, B. Tafesse, E. C. Hamlin, and R. C. Kennedy. "Obstetric fistula in rural Ethiopia." *East African Medical Journal* 84, no. 11 (2007): 525.526

³⁰ World Health Organisation. *World Health Report 2005. Make every mother and child count.* Geneva. WHO, 2005

³¹ Muleta, M., M. Fantahun, B. Tafesse, E. C. Hamlin, and R. C. Kennedy. "Obstetric fistula in rural Ethiopia." *East African Medical Journal* 84, no. 11 (2007): 525. 526

³² She would ferment and sale cereal grains used for Ethiopian homemade brew (*Tella*)

viable in this context, they should provide a means to resist the discriminatory practices of distribution of resources that early marriage perpetuates.

III. Conclusions

In this paper, I have analysed the ways in which former child wives appropriate the international human rights norms in as much as it has provided the space to do so. Their lived experiences create a forceful narrative about their agency and the central relevance of their voices, if listened to, in dealing with the practice of early marriage. The primary lesson of listening to the voices of the former child wives is the understanding that their resistance to the practice of early marriage pre-dates their knowledge of the human rights regime. Intrinsically, what the human rights regime offers them is the legitimisation of their resistance as opposed to the local norms that may dismiss or demonise such efforts. For the international human rights regime to be a viable alternative for child wives, it must focus on strategies that are empowering and that promote the autonomy of girls and women. Otherwise, local norms also claim protection of girls for condoning the practice of early marriage.

The challenges child wives face are too complex to fit into the routinely identified ‘reproductive health and education’ impacts of early marriage in the Amhara region. The way child wives experience the practice is in a manner where resistance will cost them access to community affiliations that also determines access to resources. The recognition of the rights of child wives, irrespective of the diverse attitudes in local communities about such rights, brings an alternative framework in which women and girls can understand their lives. This understanding provides a means by which they understand their past (resistance) in a new light. Examining perceptions of rights of child wives also reveal ways in which other community members do not consider a child wife to have an ‘autonomous’ existence, therefore not acknowledging that she has ‘rights’. Nonetheless, such views that see the rights of child wives as antagonistic should not preclude others in the same communities who provide support to child wives to realize their rights. In any case, the role of the international human rights primarily should be to build on the resilience of child wives in order to strengthen its own.