



Parental responsibilities and (inter)generational ties in sustaining child marriage practice: Evidence from Aneded Woreda of Ethiopia

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Abstract

Child marriage (CM) is temporally and spatially diverse, and a complex affair. It has been increasingly questioned from the external perspectives (development and child rights angles globally, focusing primarily on biological age and the free and full consent of spouses) while neglecting the emic perspectives (the role of the quadripatriate child-parent-grandparent-community partnerships in sustaining the practice. Using relational, socio-cultural, and decolonial theories, this article critically explores, discusses, and analyses quadripatriate child-parent-grandparent-community partnerships in sustaining the practice. Primary data were generated from children, parents, and members of coalition for anti-harmful traditional practices using purposive and convenience sampling and qualitative methods (in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory group exercises). The data were coded and thematically analyzed. It is found that participants exhibited acceptance, resistance, or rejection of marriage with respect to : 1) its perceived impacts on them, 2) the values of their (grand) parents and the community and 3) their levels of agential actions thereof. Indeed, as the family is the core institution for children's safety and well-being, parents do not have intent to exploit children but it is a product of (inter)generational ties and cultural requirements having significant positive impact for wellbeing and care of their children. Thus, globalizing discourses' focus on full and free consent of marriage raises philosophical, logical, and ethical questions of legal preference over biological parents while ignoring socio-culturally and generationally embedded, dynamic, and complex quadripartite child-parent-grandparent-community relationships, and local knowledge and institutions reinforcing this. The ignorance of the quadripatriate partnerships creates community resistance to maintain their intergenerational ties and carry out CM underground within their socio-cultural milieus. Yet, further research needs to adequately document the diverse ethnographies of marriage practices to reimagine change from within.

Keywords: *Child marriage, Child-parent relationships, Collective societies, Ethiopia*

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Justification of the study

All marriages involving either or both spouses below 18 years are globally

considered child marriage and designated as harmful traditional practices (HTPs) that need to be eliminated (UDHR, 1948; UN, 1989; OAU, 1990; Revised Family code of Ethiopia, 2000). However, these policies are at odds both spatially and temporally. For example, there was no the notion of

childhood in Europe before 15th century and that the emergence of many of the current ideas about children are the results of the introduction of schooling that gradually increased the separation of children from adult life (Aries, 1962). Indeed “expectations concerning the treatment and behavior of children today in the UK differ from those common in the 1950s”; across “different social classes and ethnic groups as well as between boys and girls”, significant differences exist about expectations towards children and/or childhood (Ansell, 2017, p. 11).

The discovery of 27 marriage types in six regions of Ethiopia by Jones et. al (2016) also shows a wide diversity. Moreover, the types and prevalence of HTPs against women and children in Ethiopia also “vary among regions, cultural settings, religious values, and cultural heritages” (National Strategy and Action Plan on HTPs Against Women and Children, 2013, p. 10). Thus,

understanding CM within socio-cultural, politico-economic, and historical contexts and dynamics requires attending to (cross)cultural variations in defining what a child ought to be as well as what constitutes childhood, the rights and responsibilities of children, their parents and families, and the local community. Existing studies didn’t explore the emic perspectives of child marriage. Thus, the objective of this study is to explain the views of children, parents, and experts about CM. Using socio-cultural, relational and decolonial theories, this article showcases how inter-and intra-generational interdependence in Ethiopia presents practical challenges to tackle the practice of child marriage.

2. Research Methods and Ethics

As indicated in figure, this study was conducted in Aneded *woreda* (district), Ethiopia.

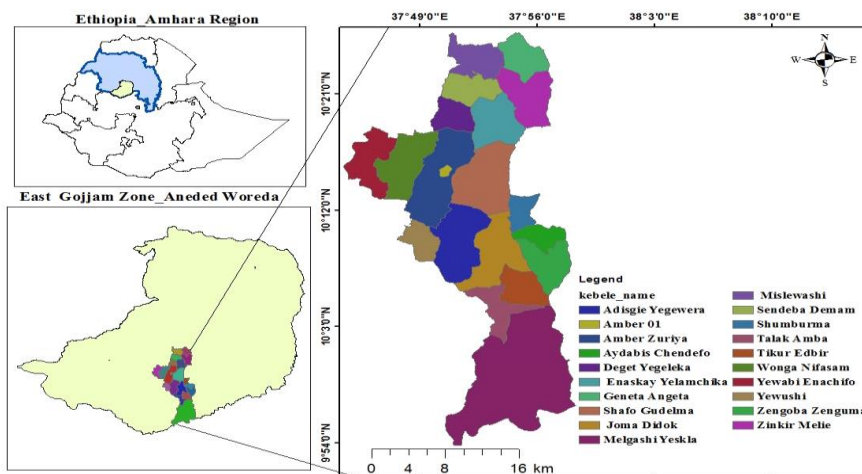


Figure 1. Map of the study area

Using personal networks to access a gatekeeper from Women, Children and Social Affairs office (WoCSA) of the *woreda* who gave me the list of three *kebeles* with highest CM prevalence rate, I did my actual field work in one of its 20 *kebeles*. In addition to high CM prevalence, my residence in Debre Markos town which is

only 18 km away from Aneded *woreda* with accessible roads facilitated access. Thus, I selected the *woreda* purposively.

2.1 Approaches, methods and tools

This study explored the interplay of child-parent-community linkages and CM. Thus, generating relevant data requires “being there, observing, listening, and

cross-checking interpretations of meaning with members from the study group” (Poluha, 2007, p. 11). Thus, I choose an ethnographic approach. It aims to closely understand, and describe the culture of the study groups and the contexts in which it occurs from the perspectives of the study participants and involves multiple methods, extended fieldwork and utmost reflexivity (Christensen, 2004; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). I also employed three methods discussed below. In each of them, the interplay between child-parent relationships and the practice of CM were the foci of discussion.

2.1.1 In-depth interviews (IIs)

In-depth interviews are particularly used to gain deeper data about private affairs which could not be obtained by group focused methods. Using purposive and convenience sampling techniques, I conducted IIs with six children (three males and females) (from 28 to 48 minutes), and three parents (from 43 to 55 minutes). Purposive sampling was used to recruit married children and their parents only. In addition, convenience sampling was employed to obtain data from participants who were available during the period of data generation.

IIs are the dominant form of interviews that flexibly require some set of predefined guiding questions in the order and framing of questions (Clarke & Braun, 2013). Before

conducting it, for example, I was introduced by children to their school and invited to their farewell, and the homes of three parents. Moreover, I discussed with children and identified the interviewees. Indeed, I conducted interviews with three sons during which daughters were observing close by. I thought these contributed to effective participant - researcher partnerships. However, it became difficult for the daughters to feel freer and more confident during an interview. This resonates with Punch (2002) who argued that children lack experiences to make one-to-one communication with adults they are unfamiliar with. Cognizant of this, modifying prior plan to interviewing each separately, I asked their preference during which they suggested to be interviewed together, which we did.

2.1.2 Participatory group exercises (PGE)

My experience with female interviewees shyness worried me to conduct the planned FGD effectively. Cognizant of this, I decided to replace FGD with PGE to stimulate children’s thinking and integration as well as to obtain richer data. Thus, unlike FGD where the researcher actively participates, I employed a modified version, PGE, to give children greater opportunity to freely discuss research questions with their peers while having the opportunity to request clarifications from the researcher who nearby awaits in service of this.



Photo 1. PGE of three groups

By reducing researcher-child power imbalance, this gives children more confidence and better control of the research



Photo 2. MPGE of sons and daughters (Sapkota & Sharma, 1996). This resonates with Christensen (1994) who argued that changing children’s position is one of the

keys to change their representations and Christensen and James (2000) who suggested reflexivity as a methodological necessity. Thus, in consultation with children, we established two groups of males (PGE1 and PGE2) each consisting of four participants and a group of females (PGE3) consisting of five participants. I wrote the topic, “the interplay between child-parent relationships and the practice of CM”, on separate flip charts and offered them to discuss, write, and present. This took 1:52 minutes and gave them the opportunity to exchange their knowledge, to relax and engage better with laughter and informal talks that enhance their freedom (see photo 4.1 and 4.2).

2.1.3 Focus group discussions (FGDs)

FGD ascertains collective views of social issues such as “group behaviors, beliefs and understandings and attitudes” by participants whom the researcher facilitates their communication (Lloyd-Evans, 2017, p. 361). I initially planned to conduct two FGDs with married children and their respective parents, and the other two with *woreda* (members of coalition for anti-HTPs at *woreda*), and *kebele* experts. However, realizing that *kebele* level coalition for anti-HTPs is barely functional, and the greater advantages of utilizing PGE over the preplanned FGDs with children, I left both. As planned, I conducted it with *woreda* experts where participants (five males and one female) from education, police, WoCSA office (#2), public relations, and agriculture and rural development offices took part for a duration of 1:41. In addition, I conducted FGD with six parents for 1:28. Both FGDs were conducted in places preferred by participants: a small meeting hall near their offices for the former and a rural local pub for the latter. Participants were recruited purposively to generate data as FGD guides.

2.2 Ethical considerations

I obtained ethical clearance with a reference number 469634 dated 03-06-2022 from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) (this study was part of the thesis work during my study in Norway, 2021-2023). I also obtained support letters from concerned offices in Ethiopia such as Aneded Woreda Administration Council on 4/12/2014 E.C. with reference number አስ/ፆ/800/16; Aneded Woreda Women, Children and Youth Affairs office on 28/11/2014 E.C. with a reference number ሴ/ህ/ጠ/ጉ 921/1-17; the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church East Gojjam Zone Diocese Office on 26/11/2014 E.C. with reference number 4917/1897/14 as well as Research, Community Service, University industry linkage and Postgraduate Studies Coordination office of the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Debre Markos University, with reference number ኮፆጠግድ-147-13-14 dated 25/11/2014 E.C.. In addition, participants took part voluntarily to obtaining informed consent about the research topic, aims, methods, processes, the use of data as well as their rights to withdraw from research (Ennew et al., 2009; Morrow, 2013; Resnik, 2018). Accordingly, mothers of married children did not participate because of their unwillingness while two parents who initially consented withdrew for reasons they do not want to disclose to the researcher. For these and other child participants who interrupted from participation, in consultation with children and their parents, the researcher added other children and parents. Moreover, to respect for cultural traditions, knowledge and customs of participants (Ennew et al., 2009), I bought and dressed typical local boot shoes, and *gabi* (cotton made traditional cloth); attended church services as well as local drink houses during data generation. Consistent to Alderson and Morrow’s (2011) advises to keeping confidentiality of identities and information of participants,

data were generated pseudonymously and removed from the computer after completing the research. As indicated under in-depth interview section above, I also made group interview for shy females attending to practical realities. The time and place of data generation sessions were also purely made in consultation with research participants. These all indicate adequate methodological and ethical reflexivity.

3. Findings of the study

3.1 Demographic profile of participants

As indicated in the table, this study utilized six parents who participated in interviews (#3) and FGDs (#6), their married children who participated in interviews (#3). Because of the inconvenience to present in the table, Aneded Woreda experts (#6, 1 female) from five sector offices who participated in FGD as well as four additional children of non-participant parents who took part in participatory group exercises were not added.

Table 1. Socio-demographic profile of some of the research participants

| Parents (fathers) | | | | Children | | Participant ¹ children, and their siblings (✓) ² | | | | |
|-------------------|-----|-----------------|-----------------|----------|----------------------|--|-----------------|-----|---------------------|-----------------|
| | Age | Schooling | Participated in | Total | Married ³ | marriage year | age at marriage | Sex | Current grade level | Marriage status |
| One | 45 | adult Edu. | FGD and II | 5 | 1? | 2020 | 18? | M | Dropout | Continued |
| | | | | | | | 12 | F | 3 | |
| Two | 37 | 4 | FGD | 5 | 2? | 2020 | 12 | F | 8 | Divorced |
| | | | | | | | 10 | F | 3 | |
| Three | - | Adult education | FGD | 6 | 3 | 2022 | 10 | F | 3 | Continued |
| | | | | | | | 6✓ | F | - | |
| | | | | | | | 5✓ | F | - | |
| Four | - | Adult education | FGD and II | 5 | 2? | 2018 | 10 | F | 7 | |
| | | | | | | | 8 | F | 4 | |
| | | | | | | | 6✓ | M | - | |
| Five | - | - | EGD | 6 | 2? | 2021 | - | - | - | Continued |
| Six | 37 | 3 | FGD and II | 4 | 2? | 2022 | 16 | M | 5 | |
| | | | | | | | 13 | F | 4 | |
| | | | | | | | 10✓ | M | 2 | |

3.2. Child-parent relationships

There is inseparably diverse network of relationships between children and their parents. To understand this, I posed an open

question about how children who participated in PGEs describe their everyday relationships with their parents and if this has a connection to their marriage. Each of the three groups simultaneously produced a

¹ Child participants refers to married children of participant parents (one through six) as well as others

² Shows non-participant children in this study who were reported by their siblings and/or parents to have married off underage.

³? This column indicates the total number of children whose parents reported having married underage. However, with the exception of the third parent who reported that he married off all underage, all the families reported the older child who took age evaluation to have turned 18. This contradicts the actual age of children reported by them. That is why each parent reported the number of under-aged children by reducing one child from the total who were married off together.

list of 8, 8, and 7 points. While participants in PGE1 indicated specific areas of joint or individual parents' involvement in their children's everyday life, those in PGE2 did not. Moreover, participants of PGE3 emphasized the gaps in parenting. Using this data, I categorized their points into five themes: work, advice, marriage, treatment in the family, and education.

While participants of PGE1 stated, “We work all the activities with our father with patience and respect”, those in PGE2 wrote, “We all work respectfully in our family”. Moreover, those in PGE3 stated, “Starting from early childhood, some families do not allow children to go to schooling but to work for them and gradually help in establishing an independent life with little money”. These quotes demonstrate that because of the rural location of the participants, work appears to be a common intermediary in describing child-parent relationships. Not only did children express their respectful work relationships with their families but also a distraction from schooling to family work. Participants in PGE1 and PGE2 started expressing their relations with parents through work. This could reflect the limited existence of other memorable child-parent relationships outside of the spheres of what could be considered work. This resonates with the work of Liebel (2017) who explained work as an inseparable part of the lives of children in the global south (the developing countries). Abebe (2016) noted this as a feature of many families and communities whose socio-economic realities necessitate children to engage in varied family (re)productive activities. Moreover, Kelly (1999) also critiqued neoclassical analyses of the labor market as a function of supply and demand, arguing for the community's embeddedness in sociocultural identities and power relations that operate under such contexts.

In addition, participants in PGE1 wrote, “If

we do something wrong, our mothers inform us by scolding; both father and mother advise us to reserve ourselves from wrong places and deeds and to respect and be obedient to our elders.” Similarly, participants of PGE2 expressed that “If we tell our families of our tiredness while working with them, they make us off” and that “Without considering as younger and older, we are treated equally in our family.” These quotes, too, and many others generally indicate children's positive relations with their parents. These indicate a complex and deeper network of child-parent relationships resonating with Lev Vygotsky's notion of embeddedness (as cited in Woodhead, 2013), where children's self-image, thoughts, and social relationships are shaped by spatial and temporal socio-cultural contexts. It also resonates with notions of families as a relational space for children's life (Huijsmans, 2015) and the notion of *mahaberawi nuro* (social life) involving an intricate web of adult-child interdependence that ensures children's security with communal embeddings (Poluha, 2004). Indeed, the national children's policy of Ethiopia (2017, p. 6), which defines family as “the most suitable and irreplaceable natural home for children” recognizes such intricacies.

These contrast to global north's (the developed countries) emphasis on children as active and autonomous social actors capable of freely deciding on their matters (Prout & James, 2015; Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008). This has been emphasized in all global conventions and laws about children. Such emphasis on children as autonomous individuals rather than embedded in social groups, I argue, assumed the 'one size fits all' principle. From a decolonial perspective, this could be said to have emanated from the universalizing discourse of rights concepts that assume abstract subjects (Burman, 1995), or what Ansell (2017, p. 230) called “a child of

Western imagination". While this could be acceptable from the hegemonic notions of childhood dominant in the global north (Ansell, 2017), it is less plausible in other contexts. As noted by Afroze (2022), for example, children navigate their agency within diverse, messy, and complex structural and relational constraints of the global south. Abebe (2019) also elaborated how children in rural Ethiopia carry out complex responsibilities backed up by reciprocal relationships. Rasmussen (2004), too, called for the importance of attending to time and place while recognizing social relations and cultural contexts in children's life. For Kjörholt (2005, p. 151), an overemphasis on individuals as right holders is dangerous against, inter alia, relational perspectives "emphasizing care, interdependence, and solidarity that links children as individuals to a wider network of relationships". Thus, children's participation rights embodied in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) could be critiqued for emphasizing socialization that subscribes to western values of individuality and freedom than the values of societies in the majority world (Griesel et al., 2002). Hence, it could be leveled as Western-centric or Eurocentric.

As demonstrated in the above empirical materials, the contents of statements produced by children about their relationships with parents are positive. More specifically, except for the case of marriage, child-parent relationships in many respects are smooth and considerate of children's capacities and consultations. They embodied emotional relations that are crucial for children's upbringing and intergenerational relations (Schumpf, 2023). This resonates with Jirata's (2019) explanation of the ways the Gada system of the Guji Oromo, Ethiopia, offer broader cultural spaces to children that open opportunities for play, care, and learning of their traditions. Therefore, irrespective of age, a child has a

relational status "defined by power dynamics with parents" (Cannon, 2021, p. 309). It could be argued that such power dynamics in traditional societies operate not through formal bureaucracies but largely from socio-culturally embedded practices, values, and knowledge. From a socio-cultural perspective, this, resonates with Vygotsky's proposal about the social construction of knowledge between people where "children develop sophisticated cognitive competencies" in their interaction with adults (Woodhead, 2013, p. 27).

Parents' consultations with children could be argued to be a recognition of this. Indeed, all patriarchal hierarchical structures prevalent in the global south are neither permanent fixtures nor closed systems, but dynamic and open systems that dialectically meet the local values and practices with individual needs. In this sense, the everyday routines of child-parent relations have little or no impact on parents deciding on CM. Rather, CM appears more to be an independent action taken by parents as a social obligation and cultural practice to *aqolquay*, an informal institution where community members and relatives support the family that hosts marriage by preparing and serving food and drinks for invited guests (Hailu, 2023). Thus, CM embodies economic rationale, parental responsibility and intergenerational glue. Weddings are community level practices where all kin-members are required to attend. This is reinforced through the community's logic, "wedding and death are the same, every relative must attend," which further reinforces *aqolquay* and generational relations. These have a strong connection with the African Philosophy of Ubuntu which operates within the relational philosophy of "I am because we are" reflecting not only cohesiveness, unity, and harmony but also the relationality of power as opposed to individuality (Tavernaro-Haidarian, 2018). Children

recognize these circumstances and may act responsibly and cooperatively in favor of parents' plans and actions. An incident that occurred during fieldwork supports this. A boy (8th grade) whom I met in the village, replied when I asked whether he was married: "Yes, I [was] married off years ago. I was interested in getting married. Since many neighboring children make their families happy through being married, I do not want my families to feel angry".

This illustrates how the life of children is embedded in community values and an interest in satisfying the needs of parents. Partly these could be captured by the notion of family practices (Morgan, 2011) which "consist of all the ordinary, everyday actions that people do, in so far as they are intended to have some effect on another family member" (Cheal, 2002, p. 12). Yet, they reflect the commonality (within diversity) of child-parent relationships across families in most of the above-identified themes. This resonates with Ursin et al. (2022) who argued that the children's sense of happiness and wellbeing is tightly interconnected with their parents' and other family members' sense of wellbeing. Such relational competencies develop not simply as children age but through everyday exposure and practice embedded in sociality and interactions (Abebe, 2013). Exposures and experiences born through these are also complex and deeply rooted in inter- and intra-generational care and mutual support in Ethiopia (Poluha, 2004). Thus, child-parent relationships are to a greater extent reflected from, and reflections of, community values and norms.

Indeed, the reinforcing roles of daily teachings of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church and its legal code, Fetha Nagast, have been influential. This is not only vital for social reproduction through interdependent agency (Abebe, 2013) but it also creates further avenues of relationships through their livelihoods (Kassa, 2017). In

other words, the five themes described by the children in the participatory group exercises reveal that parents do not only have positive values for their children but also actively engage and contribute to shaping them. This supports the finding by Kassa and Abebe (2016) who, using the concept of *qenja*, argued that children's daily life in Ethiopia unfolds not only from values and expectations held by parents or communities but through their active engagement in social reproduction. When children, for example, join families outside of their extended networks to serve with their labor in exchange for financial or in-kind payments, the emphasis is not only on the cultural imperatives of their upbringing and discipline but also to expand their possibilities (Kassa & Abebe, 2016). However, ignoring the "wider context of 'teaming' and 'collaboration' of rural agricultural labour" (Sophia & Tatek, 2016, p.51) and the possibilities that children themselves initiate and practice it (Belachew and Tefera, 2018,) global and national child focused discourses have been narrowly viewed as the transfer of children to work from economically poor families to economically wealthy ones. Such kind of global and globally infused national outlooks are also evident in defining child marriage.

Therefore, child-parent relationships are part and parcel of the wider systems of gerontocracy and norms of social respect within and between all age categories and genders where every younger person should respect elders in all contexts. For instance, in home, an open area, and church where two or more people sit together, places are understood as lower side and upper side. Accordingly, younger people stand when their elders come, and leave the upper side of the seat to elders to the lower side. The elders sit on the upper side of the setting are followed by each successive younger one. As a matter of respect, the younger people stand from their seats, greet, and stand until

the incoming elders get seated. Meanwhile, those older or closer in age to those who are coming, do not stand. In addition, if someone sees that an older individual is crossing the road, the person awaits the elder to cross first. Moreover, when one is talking (including exchanging greetings) with those older than him/her, *erswo* (an Amharic term used to mean you, but in a respectful manner) is used to respectfully address them. Relatedly, blessing during invitations to weddings, and community gatherings of all kinds could be made only by a few eldest of all audiences from the available, starting with the youngest, and closing with the oldest of all, or a religious leader (if any). These examples of gerontocratic practices show the intricacies of culturally embedded relationality having a lot to do with deciding on CM as well as the forms children's consent may take. It could be argued that globalizing laws and different government initiatives to end CM either undermine or totally ignore the impacts such embedded relationality, leaving communities to question, resist or ignore culturally insensitive policies.

3.2 Child-parent relationships and implications on CM

In the study community, child-parent relationships continue irrespective of marriage. From the ethnographic fieldwork, I learnt that a significant part of establishing independent married life is supported by the spouses' parents who contribute with moveable and/or fixed assets, including land. Furthermore, if a woman gets divorced at any age, she will be supported by her parents and close relatives to get her share of assets either through local elders or formal legal procedures. She may also rejoin her parents' with her children until she re-marries, or construct, with the help of kin members, a house to live in with her children. If she does not remarry, she will continue to live together with her parents and take care of them as they retire. This suggests that

child-parent relationships do not take static patron-client relationships in a hierarchy trap as Poluha (2007) suggests. Rather, these relations are embedded in, and pave new avenues of reciprocal respect and support vital for their well-being. Thus, global notions of individuals as autonomous right holders (UN, 1989) show an onto-epistemological vacuum that needs to be shifted in decolonial, relational and contextual outlooks. Indeed, child-parent relationships continue as part and parcel of the collective life of the community throughout one's life, irrespective of marriage or divorce. A parent interviewee (P3), for example, explains child-parent relationship after marriage as:

We have a culture where during holidays as well as *mahbers* such as *senbetie*, we [parents] invite one another. We cannot go without our married children; if they do not accompany us [parents], how and why should we go? We do this because until they grow up and lead their own life, married children live in their respective parents' homes. Thus, we need to maintain parental and couples' relations during holidays. For example, every 3rd of December is my holiday, and December 16th is my child's in-laws. Ahead of these, we have *senbetie*, we have *mahber*. For example, during *baleegzihabher* [Feast of God the Son], if it is my *mahber*, I invite them [children's in-laws] and they will come. They drink *mikale* [St. Michael] *mahber*. When it becomes theirs, whatever the season it may be, I and our married children will go to their home, carrying *injera* (local food) on horse.

This empirical material demonstrates the continuity of intergenerational relations after marriage and shows how parents maintain responsibility for the children's marriage and

support them towards independent life. In the process, they exchange a complex array of interdependent and relational rights and responsibilities, where parents maintain responsibilities towards their children while children's responsibility is to marry and keep parents pleased while simultaneously meeting their own needs and aspirations. One recognizes here that inter-familial relationships bear fruit when they are accompanied by married children. One could argue that, in so doing, parents are practically training their children for their smooth transition into an adult and independent life as well as for adequate integration into their communities. Such practical exposure creates avenues for couples not only to take part but also to know how married life works, showing how generational relations facilitate and incubate development (Huijsmans, 2016). Because of the diversity of cultures and family systems, such generational relations are complex and diverse. That is why Minow and Shanley (1996) argued that family life and family's relationship to the state cannot be adequately addressed by contract-based, community based, and rights-based approaches. They advocated for the recognition of relational rights and responsibilities as a requirement for any coherent politico-legal theory of the family. This is consistent with the findings of Ursin et al. (2022) who showed that an African child placed in Norwegian child care system preferred her families in which the government designated as a danger to her rights. This informs that family members' rights and wellbeing are inseparable and that one may not ensure the rights and wellbeing of only one individual without considering the rights and wellbeing of the others in his/her care network.

Parent-child relationships are deep, multiple, and significantly solidify intergenerational relations which reduce generational gaps. As noted by Brannen (2006), cultures of intergenerational relations of support across

generations of successive families and over time also redirect the way family members think about giving and receiving. Such practices build and develop interdependent relationships. As described by Abebe (2008) and Abebe and Ofosu-Kusi (2016), what exists in collective communities of Ethiopia is an interdependent agency where children actively negotiate on matters that affect their life and beyond. This is also shared by children's collective activities in social environment in African context which reinforce what Corsaro (2009) noted of interpretive reproduction where, rather than being passive, they actively engage in meaning making and acting that shapes their own and adults' life. Such relationships are mediated by religious and cultural holidays where children actively engage in music and dances within and across generations that reinforce interdependent well-being and enable them express all sorts of life, culture and social interaction through appreciation or critique. Thus, from a sociocultural theory, these reflect the statements of Vygotsky, "any particular child's development – their social relationships, sense of self, ways of thinking, etc. – is embedded in the social and cultural contexts of their lives at a particular point in history" (Woodhead and Faulkner, 2008, p. 134).

However, the empirical material from the PGEs shows that not all families have positive values or positively shape their children. Consequently, there is greater parental decision-making in regards to their marriage. As one of the parents (P3) described,

We marry off non-evaluated children with age-evaluated ones. Moreover, we may marry off all children without evaluating their ages. For example, I evaluated my brother's girl who is closer to 18 years to marry off three of my daughters aged 10, 6 and 5 underground. My brother's daughter avails during the wedding pretending a

bride.

Yet, decisions to marry off children or not vary across families in a continuum where, while some families do not arrange early marriage at all, a significant majority do it with or without consulting their children. Thus, parents' positive values, for example, could not be taken for granted when it comes to the practice of marriage. They operate more within adult-centered life worlds and reinforced through generational cultural traditions and religious values where rural children have limited power to practically contribute to its transformation. This resonates with Poluha (2004) who argued the very hierarchical family structure that requires children's obedience and respectfulness towards adults in Ethiopia, and Jirata (2013, p. 87) who described that "children remain subordinates to adults". However, there exists children's resistance to parents proposal for marriage that needs to be carefully studied, documented, and explained. Indeed, for the question posed to explain child-parent relationships, the interviewee child participant (P1, male, 18 years) explains:

Some parents have deep love [for their children]. However, for many parents, if a child questions why parents are planning to marry him/her off, she/he will be told, "What do you know? You are a child, why do you worry; it is me who is responsible for covering all the costs". The community has cultural influence from the past, from grandparents. Whatever is said 30 times, it has become accustomed culture. Even if the government teaches, no one hears because a person follows his own culture, what is perceived as right.

In the latter sections of the same interview, he added,

Children should do what they are

ordered by their father and mother. It is impossible to deviate from their order. If a child awaits without having done what their parents ordered to do, that is difficult [to tolerate]. Particularly females feel embarrassed even to hold up their heads and talk to their mother or father.

This empirical evidence reflects parents' relative control of decision-making power of their children and the strictness of parental orders. Yet, these vary across families. Indeed, the empirical evidence is obtained from an individual having opposite perspective to communal child upbringing. This shows the existence of resistance even by children in the community. Furthermore, during an FGD with religious leaders, two quotes forwarded by participants (P1 & P4) are central to explaining child-parent relationships:

If a father is unable to order a child, whom can he order? If an earthly father fails to control his child, there is nothing to say; the rules of God are being destroyed (P4).

Once created, no one lives alone. From age 10 up, children should be respectful and obedient to their parents. We cannot live without protecting the rules of God (P1).

These quotes, inter alia, emanate from God's fifth commandment, which focuses on honor for the parents (Exodus 20:12). This is among one of the basic biblical quotes frequently taught for the laity. Indeed, as discussed earlier, obedience and respect do not only apply to child-parent relationships. They are rather a fact of relational life between every younger person and an older one in all spheres of life and social interaction within and between children, adolescents, adults, and the elderly. Consequently, the cultural, moral, and social fabric of the society is built on an essence of

respect for one's older in the community. These are reflected in the daily religious teachings, and part and parcel of the Fetha Nagast since the 15th century guiding, inter alia, marriage practices of Orthodox Christians and power succession of their leaders. Thus, while the notion of control could be susceptible to varied interpretation, the meaning here confirms the necessities of respect to parents' orders which do not necessarily disgrace child rights.

Under these complex scenarios of social interaction that are reinforced culturally and religiously, children's and parents' thoughts, decisions and actions could not be independent but socio-culturally embedded, interdependent and relational. Thus, CM operates not in a vacuum and could not be easily thrown away. Dealing with CM, thus, requires not just age and consent based legal prescriptions from the global rights perspectives but also adequately attending to (1) diverse interplay of socio-cultural and economic systems in which complex practice of child upbringing unfolds, and (2) children's and parents' inter and intra-generational relations, rights, and responsibilities. Thus, hierarchical relationships are neither binary between children and adults as Poluha (2004) described; nor is it be simply taken as authoritarian as Tefera et al. (2013, pp. 72-73) uncritically acknowledged of Poluha's description between "adults and children, teachers and pupils and men and women". It rather operates in every youngster's interaction with an elder person, both within and across all age groups, in the form of respect for one another. This, both at family and community level, keeps peace and social order operate smoothly.

It is arguable that 'consent' is not a value free concept, but it is rather strongly embedded within systems of socio-cultural values and beliefs. Equally, parents' decisions should not be seen as merely obstacles for children's 'being' and

'becoming'. With all their knowledge and capacities, parents take full responsibility for the well-being of their children, one of which is marrying them off to 'good families'. This reflects how relational wellbeing is intrinsic to human relationships in meeting psychosocial and material necessities (White, 2015). This resonates with Haidt (2006, pp. 236-237) who argued the source of happiness to be "right relationships" with work, with others and "with something larger than the self". As these relationships dynamically operate at "the interplay of personal, social and environmental processes" (White, 2015, p. 2), there is a need to adequately attend to such contexts. Children's expression of having child-sensitive and smooth relationships with their parents, in many respects other than marriage, is reflective of these relationships. Thus, an arbitrary focus on child agency that fails to adequately attend to their inter- and intra-generational relations with whom they live is problematic and questionable (Abebe & Ofosu-Kusi, 2016; Ansell, 2017). Indeed, childhood and children are shaped not in a vacuum but by the roles of the state and/or families (Mayall, 2009). Furthermore, the collective and overlapping nature of agency engages human with their cultural values and norms (Raithelhuber, 2016). Thus, a disproportionate focus on child agencies could not be applicable to collective living communities of Ethiopia.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The study found that: (1) socio-culturally imbued (inter)generational system of respect and support require children to respect parents, and parents to fulfil responsibilities to children in their everyday lives; (2) CM is reinforced more by the quadripartite child-parent-grandparent -community values and expectations mediated by institutions such as *aqolquay*, not simply by the patriarchal parent-child relationships as

presumed. Children's reaction to their parent's proposal for marriage takes all forms: acceptance and resistance, runaways, handing them to government authorities during the wedding, and refusing to pay a visit to their in-laws after marriage, leading to a final divorce. Thus, the presumption of child marriages as forced marriages is less generalizable (Horii, 2020) in the context of the study community.

(3) Notwithstanding the applicability of universal laws, the diversity of marriage practices entails the need to employ diverse solutions commensurate to specific socio-cultural contexts - globally, nationally, and locally.

Thus, the same solution - age and consent - may not work everywhere. Free and full consent, for example, barely meets the social fabric characteristic of collective living communities. Strong intergenerational ties among children, parents and grandparents, for example, put free and full consent of children for marriage at stake. A sustainable reduction in CM needs to be backed by a sufficient understanding of the practice and community logics behind it. This, *inter alia*, requires rethinking why hitherto initiatives to deal CM did not work out well in Ethiopia since the 15th century where marital age was set legally. The root causes of child marriage are many and differ across communities. There is a need to identify and prioritize based on their impacts before instituting initiatives dealing with them. Particularly, why collaborative, sentimental, and happier child - parent relationships in much of the daily routines tend to be stricter for marriage decision needs further research to level child - parent - grandparent - community relationships. It is not only the communities, but also children, who resist globalizing laws. Reconciling these not only requires balancing the existing top-down approaches employed by bureaucrats with bottom-up approaches. It also requires examining community dynamics, spatially and temporally.

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