

Child Marriage and Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Program: Analysis of protective pathways in the Amhara region – Summary of report findings

KEY MESSAGES

- Child marriage remains a key development and human rights issue in Ethiopia.
- The study assessed the potential role of Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) in delaying child marriage for girls and explored possible pathways of impact.
- It was found that PSNP, through an economic channel, is effective in reducing financial pressures on families to marry off girls and in improving girls' education opportunities.
- Income-strengthening measures must, however, be accompanied by complementary efforts – including girls' empowerment, awareness-raising, and legal measures – to transform deep-rooted social and gender norms and attitudes that perpetuate the harmful practice of child marriage.

Several initiatives have been launched to address child marriage in Ethiopia, but rigorous evaluations of their effectiveness are relatively limited, and pathways of impact are poorly understood. Of interest to policy-makers is understanding whether and how the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP), given its national reach and potential to address poverty, can also affect child marriage outcomes.²

Ethiopia's PSNP is one of the largest social protection programmes in sub-Saharan Africa. It reaches an estimated 8 million beneficiaries through its public works and direct support streams, to address chronic food insecurity and improve health and nutrition outcomes.³

Although child marriage prevention is not an explicit objective of PSNP, a 2017 study found that the programme delayed the outmigration of adolescent girls aged 12–17 years from PSNP households, with potential spill over effects on delaying their marriage.⁴ However, the pathways and design features by which PSNP may influence child marriage outcomes have remained unknown.

INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia has made significant progress in reducing child marriage rates in recent decades. The proportion of females aged 20–24 years married or in a cohabiting union before the age of 18 decreased from 59 per cent in 2005 to 40 per cent in 2015.¹ Today, still approximately 4 in 10 young women are first married or in union before their 18th birthday.

To address this knowledge gap, researchers at the UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti, in collaboration with Frontieri, UNICEF Ethiopia and the University at Buffalo, have carried out a study to explore whether and how PSNP can reduce child marriage.⁵ The study draws on descriptive quantitative and qualitative data from an ongoing impact evaluation of the Integrated Safety Net Program (ISNP) pilot in the Amhara region.⁶

1 United Nations Children's Fund. (2018). *Ending child marriage: A profile of progress in Ethiopia*. UNICEF, New York.

2 Kalamar, A. M., Lee-Rife, S., & Hindin, M. J. (2016). Interventions to prevent child marriage among young people in low- and middle-income countries: A systematic review of the published and gray literature. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 59*(3), S16–S21.

3 Berhane, G., Gilligan, D. O., Hoddinott, J., Kumar, N., & Taffesse, A. S. (2014). Can social protection work in Africa? The impact of Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme. *Economic Development and Cultural Change, 63*(1), 1–26.

4 Hoddinott, J. F., & Mekasha, T. J. (2017). Social protection, household size and its determinants: *Evidence from Ethiopia*. International Food Policy Research Institute.

5 BDS Center for Development Research has recently changed its name to Frontieri, as reflected in this report, but the organization conducted its work for the report while still operating under its previous name.

6 The ISNP pilot, led by UNICEF and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, operates within the complementary services and linkages framework of the fourth phase of PSNP – PSNP4 – with additional components of community-based health insurance promotion and engagement of community social workers in the delivery of case management services.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: PSNP AND PATHWAYS TO DELAYING MARRIAGE

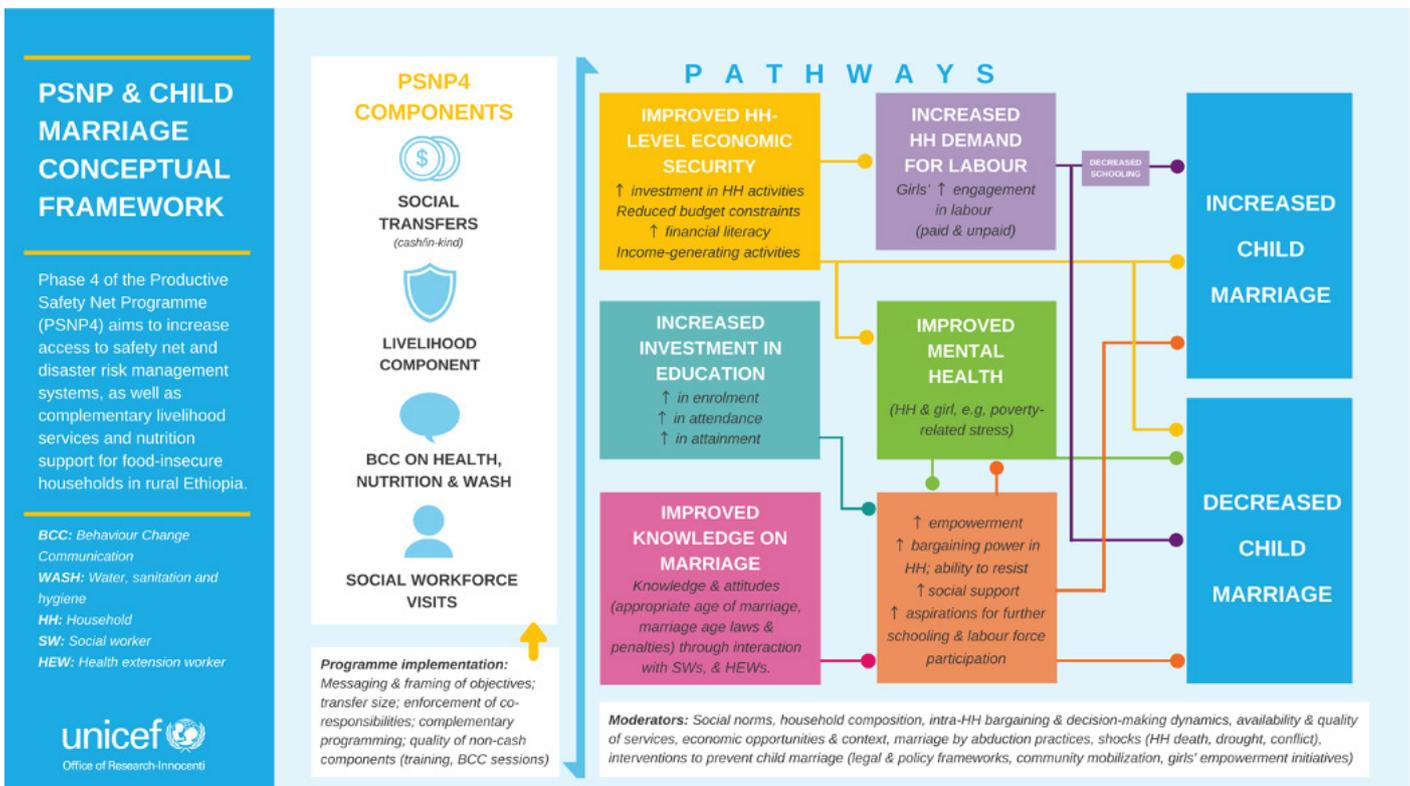
The researchers proposed several (mutually reinforcing) pathways of impact through which PSNP could influence child marriage. To guide the analysis, a conceptual framework was developed (see Figure 1). This categorizes these pathways across three core channels:

- improved economic security
- increased investment in girls' education
- improved knowledge of, and attitudes towards child marriage.

Various contextual and operational factors may moderate PSNP effects on child marriage outcomes:

- programme design features
- household composition
- sociocultural context
- ongoing interventions to prevent child marriage
- availability and quality of services and socio-economic opportunities.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of pathways of impact of the Production Safety Net Program (PSNP) on child marriage



STUDY DESIGN

Baseline data from the mixed methods impact evaluation of the ISNP pilot in the Amhara region were used for the analysis. Baseline data were collected from December 2018 to February 2019. Survey questionnaires were administered to the (female) primary caregivers of children in PSNP households in two treatment *woredas* (Dewa Chefa and Libo Kemkem) and two comparison

woredas (Artuma Fursi and Ebinat).⁷ Specific modules were designed to estimate the prevalence of child marriage and investigate various aspects around social norms related to child marriage, including attitudes, knowledge, perceptions and decision-making. The analysis for the study is based on responses from all households (N=5,355) while child marriage prevalence was calculated using the pulled sample of households containing a female aged 20–24 years (N=446).⁸

7 The households in the two treatment *woredas* were recipients of ISNP benefits while the comparison *woredas* included only regular PSNP clients. *Woredas* (districts) are third-level administrative government units of Ethiopia. They are further composed of a network of *kebeles* (also known as wards or neighbourhood associations), which are the smallest units of government in Ethiopia.

8 Members of this age group have already completed their exposure to child marriage. That is, analysis of the group that includes girls under 18 years of age may underestimate child marriage, since some currently unmarried girls may yet marry before their 18th birthday.

Qualitative research involved a set of 15 matched in-depth interviews (30 in total) with heads of households and girls/young women aged 12–24 years (married and unmarried).⁹ Additionally, key informant interviews were undertaken with *woreda*-level representatives of the Bureau of Women, Children and Youth Affairs as well as development agents and community social workers working at the *kebele* level in the Dewa Chefa and Libo Kemkem *woredas* respectively. Respondents were randomly selected from the quantitative sample. Qualitative research was used to (1) provide an understanding of the common norms, beliefs and attitudes held by girls and parents regarding the practice of child marriage; and (2) explore and map potential pathways through which PSNP (and its complementary components) may affect clients' perceptions, decisions and behaviour regarding child marriage to delay marriage for girls, as identified by the quantitative data.

RESULTS

What are common attitudes, knowledge and perceptions regarding child marriage?

Across all households surveyed, the average age reported as the ideal age a girl should marry is 16.6 years – below the legal marriage age.¹⁰ More than half of respondents (56 per cent) mentioned physical maturity as a primary reason for marriage at this age, with mental maturity also a popularly stated reason (31 per cent). Another common reason (26 per cent) indicated by respondents for the ideal age reported is alignment with the age at which everyone marries, underscoring the binding importance of social expectations and cultural marital norms.

Similar findings emerged from the qualitative interviews. Respondents reported that the common age for girls to marry is between 13 and 17 years, often determined in accordance with local customs and the socially accepted marriage age of the community. Physical signs of puberty and an interest in the opposite sex were commonly described as indicators that girls are ready for marriage:

“When she turns 10 years of age, we say she is ready.”

Interviewer: “How do you reach this conclusion?”

Parent: “We don’t see anything [special], except [her] breasts grow bigger.”

– Parent of unmarried girl, Dewa Chefa

Sociocultural and religious values related to the importance of maintaining girls’ chastity and family honour in the community underpin commonly held views in support of child marriage. An unmarried girl described these complex dynamics:

“The husband beats and divorces her if she is not a virgin.... [Parents] fear that she might lose her virginity if she stays unmarried.”

– Unmarried girl, Dewa Chefa

Knowledge of the existence of a legal age of marriage in Ethiopia for both girls and boys was limited in the sample of all households (8 per cent). Among those who reported that there is a legal marriage age for girls (for girls only or for girls and boys), 80 per cent correctly identified the legal age for girls. Only 32 per cent of respondents correctly identified the legal age of marriage for boys. Qualitative research highlighted that, when properly enforced, laws and legal penalties have positive effects on delaying or cancelling marriage requests.

Importantly, respondents demonstrated a strong understanding of the negative impacts of child marriage and pregnancy at an early age on girls’ health and psychosocial outcomes, leading to diminished opportunities for their schooling, employment and economic security. The majority of girls interviewed stated a preference for going to school over marrying when young:

“I was only registered to start first grade and left due to marriage. But if it is the will of God, I wish one day I get the opportunity to get enrolled.”

– Married girl, Dewa Chefa

In practice, however, most respondents reported that it is parents – either together or individually – who lead decisions about when females marry (70.4 per cent of respondents) and whom they marry (61.7 per cent). Girls typically have very limited agency to express their choices and preferences over marriage proposals.

“My father decides this [the marriage]. I couldn’t say any word to him. Our culture rules us to obey our fathers and his decision.”

– Married girl, Libo Kemkem

⁹ Interview questions and responses referred to the term ‘early marriage’ and translations of the interview transcripts reflect this terminology; the main text of the brief, including the analysis, refers instead to ‘child marriage’, as per UNICEF practice.

¹⁰ The legal age of marriage for girls and boys is 18 years.

How does PSNP affect child marriage?

Economic pathway

Overall, qualitative results show that improved economic security of PSNP households can decrease the risk of child marriage in the following ways: by mitigating financial pressures to marry off girls in order to cope better with poverty and income shocks; and by improving parents' financial capacity to keep girls in school and to invest in their human capital, through better food and health care.

"I usually borrow money to send my children to school, then I repay debt with the PSNP transfer. [The PSNP payment] decreases early marriage because girls attend school."

– Parent of unmarried girl, Dewa Chefa

The qualitative research also suggests that increased demands on adult labour as a result of PSNP participation cause adolescents, particularly girls, to be drawn into labour activities. These changes in labour demands may indirectly reduce the outmigration of adolescents (through marriage or employment) by encouraging parents to instead keep them at home as 'helping hands'. At the same time, the heightened work burdens placed on girls may interfere with their participation in school and learning outcomes.

Education pathway

The qualitative research demonstrates that girls' education serves as a key protective factor by:

- empowering girls through knowledge and information to exercise their choices
- strengthening girls' agency and access to social networks and support to resist marriage
- enhancing awareness of penalties and in-school mechanisms to report child marriage.

Girls' clubs at schools emerged from the research as an essential platform for empowering girls, through peer support, to exercise their choices regarding school and marriage. Teachers were also reported to be key in preventing child marriage, as they often promote the importance of education to girls and their parents, disseminate information about the risks of child marriage and pregnancy at an early age, and serve as a point of contact for girls to lodge complaints of child marriage.

"We heard information about early child marriage from school, from teachers and school clubs. I also learn from the radio programme on life skills transmitted in our school on Saturday."

– Unmarried girl, Libo Kemkem

"For example, last year one family planned to marry their daughter at the age of 16 years and then she reported it to her teacher. The teachers intervened with the police and the marriage was interrupted."

– Parent of unmarried girl, Libo Kemkem

Improved knowledge and attitudinal shifts pathway

Finally, the complementary components of PSNP – such as behaviour change communication (BCC) sessions, the interaction of PSNP clients with community social workers, and 'co-responsibilities' in education – have been found to play an important role in shifting parental and girls' attitudes and beliefs around child marriage. In some cases, shifts in attitudes and perceptions may have led to behavioural changes:

"[PSNP] usually provides education on different community issues including the problems of early marriage. For instance, I asked my 12-year-old daughter whether she is willing to marry at this moment. She said she would marry, but I used my knowledge obtained from PSNP, and I advised her to continue her school instead... So, the education provided by PSNP has brought changes to our behaviour toward child marriage."

– Parent of unmarried girl, Libo Kemkem

Unintended effects

Although the influence of PSNP on child marriage is largely positive, qualitative evidence suggests that the programme can have some unintended effects on girls, increasing child marriage, mainly through the economic channel. For instance, the additional income from PSNP may enable families to accumulate the resources needed to cover the costs of a wedding and dowry, while the financial security resulting from regular participation in PSNP can enhance daughters' prospects of receiving marriage proposals:

"It is surprising that the society is considering the PSNP as a warranty. Even when a girl is asked for marriage, the membership in the PSNP is considered as criteria to be married."

– Development agent, Dewa Chefa

This finding shows that generalized economic strategies by themselves are unlikely to affect long-term changes in deep-rooted norms, attitudes and behaviour related to child marriage, and thus need to be accompanied by complementary awareness-raising efforts.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite important progress, child marriage persists in Ethiopia, with approximately 4 in 10 young women first married or in union before their 18th birthday. The Amhara region has both the lowest median age at first marriage in the country and a child marriage rate that exceeds the national average. Knowledge, ideals and actions related to child marriage are influenced by a multitude of factors including poverty and prevailing sociocultural norms.

Together, the findings show that PSNP, through a combination of income-strengthening and awareness-raising channels, is a promising strategy for addressing child marriage. Cash benefits on their own are not sufficient, however, to counter sociocultural norms that drive child marriage, and income support provided by PSNP may, in fact, lead to unintended effects.

To improve outcomes for girls, PSNP should facilitate stronger linkages to child marriage programming through the following strategies:

- provision of cash top-ups and case management support to vulnerable PSNP households to increase their demand for education for girls
- improved design of BCC measures with the explicit inclusion of a child marriage prevention module, which also addresses women's and girls' empowerment, in the existing BCC session curricula
- robust evaluation of BCC session effectiveness on child marriage attitudes and behaviour
- development of specific interventions for out-of-school girls to help them make informed choices and to improve their life skills and employability.

In terms of future research, the roll-out of the next phase of PSNP – PSNP5 – provides an opportunity to design rigorous impact evaluations to understand the contribution of different programme components to child marriage outcomes. Such efforts could further strengthen the evidence base on 'what works' to delay marriage and how successful strategies can be taken to scale, in Ethiopia and globally, in a bid to eliminate the harmful practice of child marriage.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For additional information on this study and its findings see: Gavrilovic et al (2020). [Child marriage and Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Program: Analysis of protective pathways in the Amhara region](#). UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti and Frontieri, Florence and Addis Ababa.

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