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ECONOMICS AT THE CINEMA: LEARNING FROM A STORY OF CHILD MARRIAGE

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Abstract: *Difret* dramatizes the true story of a young Ethiopian girl, Aberash Bekele, Hirut Assefa in the movie, victim of a rural tradition of abducting girls for marriage. The title of the movie is highly evocative because in Amharic, the official working language of Ethiopia, *Difret* means both rape and courage. In the movie, courage refers to the fearless behavior of both Hirut, first girl reacting to a deeply rooted male-dominated social norm, and Meaza, the lawyer volunteering to offer legal protection to Hirut and committed to make abduction for marriage illegal in Ethiopia. We first narrate the story that unfolds through captivating and intense dialogues. We then propose an interpretation through the lenses of a social scientist striving to separate sociocultural and economic factors contributing to the persistence of child marriage. Finally, we ask what actions, either field programs or other products of the movie industry, can be effective towards ending illegal child marriage.

Key words: Child marriage, Gender inequality, Poverty, Culture, Social norms, Law enforcement, Ethiopia.

1. Introduction

In Amharic, one of the main languages of Ethiopia, *difret* means both to have courage and the act of being violated. The movie tells the true story of a young Ethiopian girl victim in 1996 of a rural tradition of abducting girls for marriage¹ that was first reported in a crime documentary produced in 1999 (Bergfelder 2019). The public resentment created by the movie helped outlawing the socially accepted practice of kidnapping of child brides (*t'elefa*) in Ethiopia.² Aberash Bekele (Hirut Assefa in the movie)³ was 14 when she was captured on her way home from her village school. In her struggle to escape, she killed her would-be husband, but was charged with murder and stood trial for two years. With the help of a brave and passionate

¹ Lateiner (1997) describes abduction marriage in Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*, an ancient Greek novel written in the mid-200s or 300s BC set in Egypt and Ethiopia. For the author, abduction marriage is a 'fact' of Mediterranean life of those times especially in environments of fragile honour where the "unavoidable" marriage after a capture was often accepted as the best among a poor choice of solutions.

² According to "t'elefa", kidnapping goes unpunished if the offender, usually a man, later marries his victim. T'elefa has officially been declared illegal in 1996 but is still a common practice in rural areas of Ethiopia.

³ According to the film's director, Zeresenay Berhane Mehari, he tried to contact Aberash Bekele many times while making the film without success. Because of this, the lead character has the name Hirut.

lawyer, Meaza Ashenafi,⁴ Aberash became the first woman in an institutionally young Ethiopia to be acquitted of murder based on self-defense.

The story of Hirut captures cultural tensions that are also found in other African countries such as Egypt, Rwanda, Kenya, and South Africa. The progressive emancipation of women living in the cities as compared to the unequal opportunities of rural women subjected to unwritten rules imposed by males still impede to choose who to love. The courts of summary justice composed by male only that meet in a field under a tree is at odds with the formal judicial system that is not yet neither fully enforced nor capable to grant equal access to justice. The passage leading to a profound transformation of social norms is long and costly. It demands women to be courageous to challenge the entrenched privileges and prejudices of male elites and to take an active and effective role in political institutions.

In an interview at the Robert Redford's Sundance Film Festival where *Difret* won the World Cinema Audience Award for drama, the US trained Ethiopian writer and director Zeresenay Berhane Mehari said: "If there is a villain in my film, it's not a person, it's the tradition... the cycle has to break at some point. What you have to do is educate. I hope this film will go a long way toward changing thinking." And, we may add, especially of those harmful traditional norms at odds with a human development fostering gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in a nonviolent environment. As reported in the closing credits of the movie, *Difret* was indeed a changemaker. Hirut case made abduction for marriage illegal and punishable by a 5-year prison sentence. Between 1995 and 2002 Meaza Ashenafi's organization ANDENET offering free counsel and representation for women in need helped over 30,000 women and children. The Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association is still active (<http://ewla-et.org>) assisting women, particularly disadvantaged women, who are victims of gender-based violence free of charge and participating to strategic initiatives for women in the horn of Africa such as the project "negotiating change." This important initiative has the objective of strengthening grassroots women's groups interested in promoting women's rights that had strong media engagement in Ethiopia via mainstream media or other projects striving to enhance gender equality and mitigating sexual gender-based violence through the provision of legal aid, capacity building, public education, and advocacy.

⁴ Meaza Ashenafi received several international human rights awards including the Africa Prize of The Hunger Project for her work defending vulnerable women and children in Ethiopia. In November 2018, she was appointed by the Federal Parliamentary Assembly as President of the Federal Supreme Court of Ethiopia.

However, bride kidnapping is still a common practice not considered as an intimate violation nor a violence in the rugged countryside where patriarchal rules are currently in force, even if it is against the law, because judicial enforcement is weak and customary law keeps prevailing.

A UNICEF (2016) evidence review based on data from 2010 and 2013 estimated that 10 to 13 percent of marriages in the highest risk areas involved abduction, with rates of 1.4 percent to 2.4 percent in lower risk areas of the country. Annabel (2022) uses data from Ethiopia Demographic and Health Surveys for 2005, 2011 and 2016 to explore trends in child marriage over the last decade in various locations and regions of Ethiopia. Between 2005 and 2016, the percentage of young Ethiopian women married before age 18 declined from 49 to 40%, an 18% decline. The percentage of women married before age 15 declined by 26% in the same period. The greatest reductions in child marriage took place in the Addis Ababa, Amhara, and Tigray regions. Over the period, estimates for Oromia and Somali, remote and very poor rural regions of Ethiopia, suggest that child marriage has increased in these regions, where more than half of all girls are married before age 18 and the prevalence of marriage by abduction is still high.

Hirut's inspirational story of human courage facing her abductor and Meaza's shiny example of civil courage capable to sue the Minister of Justice are certainly a potent educational outreach effort clearly indicating the route for social change. However, raising awareness presuming that the public already had a prevailing altruistic disposition may not be sufficient. What contributes to generate a large impact wave of the movie is the capacity to move people to take effective action implementing concrete suggestions on how to make cultural change happen. For example, is *Difret* addressed mainly to a Western audience? What is the proportion of Ethiopians who saw the movie in the city and countryside? How cathartic, in the Greek Aristotelian meaning, is the movie as can be gauged by the proportion of people that, independently of gender and urban vs rural divides, embrace the cause of girls and women rights in Ethiopia, the horn of Africa, and other parts of the world? How long do the attitudinal behavioural changes, which may be observed closely after watching the movie, last over time without effort to sustain them (Kubrak 2020)? The public investment in a movie may have a much higher socioeconomic impact and value for money than a large social program or many small local interventions. Relatively little money may move thousands of hearths generating a large wave of emotions that may become a powerful driver for social change if the empathic effect persists long enough.

A scientific experiment such as a randomized control trial (RCT)⁵ evaluating the social impact of a movie (Della Vigna and La Ferrara 2015) may help answering and whether a movie can also help to remove the causes that sustain the use of traditional norms in contrast with the law. m.

We first share with our readers the narration of the drama conveyed in *Difret*. We then move on presenting the possible explanations of child marriage placing special emphasis to the case of abduction. Can child marriage be entirely explained by economic causes, such as poverty? Or do cultural norms play a bigger role (Streeten 2006)? The causes can indeed be economic or cultural as we will discuss through the pink lenses and crude hearts of non-Ethiopian social scientists in the third section. In the subsequent section we explore what are that interventions that can be effective in ending the practice of child marriage. We close the chapter with thought-provoking ideas on the social and economic impact a movie might have on both the behaviour of individuals and collective norms.

2. The Storytelling

Following the tradition of court case movies, what is dominant in *Difret*'s landmark case about abduction for marriage in Ethiopia is not the quality of the actors, or the picture, or directing, but the quality of the screenplay. The original story unfolds as a succession of vibrant and pregnant dialogues initially in the rural scenario where Hirut was kidnapped and under a large tree representing the customary court place and, in the second part of the movie, with the urban background of traditional courtrooms. The dialogues touch the sensitive chords of emancipating African women asking for change in tribal norms ruling marriage arrangements, often admitting abduction, accepting unbalanced, frequently violent, relationships within the couple, and an unequal distribution of opportunities, such as access to education for girls (Roemer and Trannoy 2016). The drama conversations also stand up for the dignity and rights of women shedding light on issues such as equal access to justice, law enforcement without abuse, the cultural urban/rural contrast, the friction between customary norms of the

⁵ An RCT randomizes who receives a program (or has access to seeing the movie as in our case) – the treatment group - and who does not – the control. It then compares outcomes, mainly behavioral and attitudinal in the present context, between the two statistically similar groups to estimate the impact of the movie. By so doing, the control mimics the counterfactual, that is, what would have happened to the same individuals if they would not have been exposed to the movie.

countryside and the legal system enacted in the cities. Let us then tune on the *Difret* channel and listen to the transcripts of some of the main dialogues.

The first scenes are set in the seat of the Andenet Women Lawyers' Association as identified by a sign in the wall where Meaza Ashenafi, a modern looking lawyer offering free counsel and advocacy to women victims of violence, reassures a wife regularly beaten by her husband addicted to drinking that "there are laws in this country ... no one is above the law." The movie then cuts to the countryside three hours outside of Addis Abeba following two girls walking to school. On her way home after classes where she learned to be promoted to 5th grade, Hirut is surrounded by a group of men on horseback who abduct her to a dark hut. In a few minutes Hirut passes from the highest happiness to the deepest despair and still finds the courage to steal the rifle, to escape in the woods where she is chased by the men and, fearing for her life, to shoot her rapist. She is then saved by the furious revenge of the abductor's friends by a law official who takes her to prison.

Learning of Hirut's arrest, Meaza drives to the police station where the policeman and the assistant district attorney do not recognize her legal authority considering Hirut's case already solved with her summary sentence to death to pair the murder she committed and arguing that Hirut is older than 14 and close to the age of majority. Meaza then visits Hirut's parents to get permission to represent her in court. She is received by the mother who, with much dignity, reveals that "they do not have anything to pay" for her help "because they are poor farmers, as she can see". "Money is not necessary. Our service is free." The mother continues: "... it is her father's fault. He insisted that she should go to school. All of this would not have happened if she had stayed at home and helped her parents like I did when I was a little girl." Meaza: "I think you are mistaken. Your husband did the right thing." The mother then gives the permission but makes it explicit that "it is the father making decisions around here, talk to him." The father, though worried that granting permission would have started a war with his family, signs the permit with the finger because not able to read and write. Meaza asks then another question: "How old is Hirut?" "Ask the church, all my daughters are baptised" replied the mother who also was not sure about the age. The father then invites to eat lunch, saying it would be rude to leave. The mother reiterates the invitation: "It is not acceptable that you leave. You must not forget your culture. This is our tradition. Come, come into the house".

The case of Hirut undergoes to an informal court, taking place in the village, and a formal court, in the city. First, there is the village trial, which is one of the movie's key scenes. The

village council, composed by males only, sits on the grass around three village chiefs in the shade of a large tree. The oldest village chief says: “Good morning. Praise God. I think everyone concerned with this matter is here. The reason for this gathering is to discuss Hirut and the man she killed, Tadele. If there isn’t an objection, we’d like to go forth with the hearing. First, Tadele’s father, what do you say to this gathering? Tadele’s father: “I stand before you today as a childless father. I am fruitful, thanks to the Lord. But a fruit has been taken away from me by a girl that he wanted to marry. My son’s wish was to get married. Following his tradition, he abducted her. Only to find that the girl, I thought to be my daughter-in-law, became the cause of my misery.” A village’s man intervenes: “Abducting for marriage is our tradition. It’s not only here. The highlanders in the north do it. The southner in Hawassa do it. Hell, I abducted my wife. But she knew better, she didn’t go for my rifle.”

Another village’s man adds: “I say it is her teacher’s fault. Bad parenting too, of course. But it is these city people with their tie and jackets and books who are ruining our tradition.” This man realizes that education will go against tradition and will transfer some power from men to women. A third man [Alemayehu] railed against the village’s teacher: “Is this what you teach our daughters? To disobey men? Not to respect our fathers? Or do you teach them to kill their husbands?”

Village’s teacher: “We teach your children to read and write, so they can help you better. You must have forgotten, Alemayehu, I was also brought up here. I went to the city to learn, so one day I can help my village.” Alemayehu replies: “Well, look how you turned out. You are not even married. Yet, you’re older than my son who’s already got two children.” Village’s men laugh. Village’s chief: “The girl’s father, what do you say to us?”

Hirut’s father: “The good Lord honoured me with three girls. They are not boys, but they are good girls. My oldest daughter got abducted. She loved running. She ran like the wind. Won all kinds of medals too. But she got abducted. I let her go for fear of bloodshed. Now, she lives with a drunk and four children.⁶ But Hirut, she is a difficult girl. Stubborn. She has always been. She almost killed her mother at birth. All she wanted to do was to go to school, so one day she could go to the university in the city. She didn’t want to end up like her sister. When

⁶ The oldest daughter called Mestawet was abducted into marriage at 14. She was a contemporary of the athlete Derartu Tulu, the first black African woman to win an Olympic gold at Barcelona in 1992. Mestawet, too, was selected to run for her country and was about to depart when she was kidnapped. After divorcing from her husband, she returned to her village and lived close to her parents.

his son came and asked me for Hirut's hand, I told him: "She is just a girl. She is not ready." But that didn't matter, his son had decided to abduct her all along. She did what she did to come home to me. It was his son's fault to take her against her wills."

Tadele's father: "Your daughter is too good for my son? Ha?" Bystanders begin to quarrel. Village's chief: "We are here to resolve a grave matter. Isn't it? Tadele's father, what do you want from this court?" Tadele's father: "I'm an old man, I don't have many days left for me out on the farm. My son was the future of my family. But he is dead now. So, as it is with our tradition the girl must be killed immediately and be buried with the man she killed."

Village's men: "Yes, that's right." Tadele's father: "If this court fails to do that, I'll take matters into my own hands and swear vengeance on her family." Village's men: "That's correct. That should be the decision." Village's chief: "This is very unusual. Since the girl is in police custody, it makes the matter a difficult one to judge. Also, since the person in question is a girl, it makes the case unusual and hard. We have decided for the girl's father to pay in the sum of 3,000 Birr,⁷ or its equivalent in livestock in compensation for the bloodshed. As for the girl, she is to be exiled to a place far away from this village. We hope that this judgment will ease the burden felt by the deceased's family." Tadele's father: "This is not fair. She must die. No. It's not right!" Village's chief: "Our decision is final and not open for negotiation. We are done with our work here."

Meanwhile, put in Meaza's custody, Hirut has hard time to adapt to the life in the city of Addis Ababa. She is curious about Meaza's life: "Why don't you have a husband?" And Meaza: "I don't know. My mother always asks that question." "Are you a bad woman?" presses Hirut "Because in the village when a girl is married, if she is not a virgin, the husband throws her out of his house. She can't even get back to her family and she is forced to live by herself because she disgraced the family. Did you disgrace your family?" "No ... you see, when I was a little girl, I grew up in a village just like yours. I have five brothers and I am the only girl. My mother made sure I was raised like my brothers. So, I went to school with them every day and did not want to get married and have children like everybody in the village. Men kept asking my father to give me to their sons. He told them that I was a difficult child. Not wife material. Of course, he was lying." "So, they did not try to abduct you after your father refused?" "I guess I was

⁷ In 2022, 3000 Ethiopian Birr amount to about 57 Euros, or equivalently to 57 USD, corresponding to the monthly cost of living of a typical rural family.

lucky that I had many brothers. ... After high school I moved to the city, and I was accepted at the university.” Hirut, always very sweetly, asks: “Do you wish you were married?” “I think about it but I’m always working. I think men are afraid to marry me because I don’t always stay at home.” Hirut resumes disconsolately: “I am not a virgin anymore. What is going to happen to me?” “Hirut, you’re a brave girl. What you did was self-defense ... Stop crying. You’re a beautiful girl.”

The first approach with the court left little hope because there is no evidence that she did it for her defence besides the open fact that the villagers want her dead. Meaza does not lose heart and asks the ministry of justice to do something about the case, but the answer is that the ministry does not want to mix itself with the customary law. So, she decides to challenge the Ministry of Justice in the High Court firmly willing to enforce the law. However, the existence of a formal law may not be sufficient if it is not incentive compatible, that is when individual act also in the interest of others and are therefore voluntarily consistent with the rules established by the group. The local informal⁸ courts have a significant advantage over the remote formal system in terms of information, since everybody can observe the behaviour of everybody involved, directly or indirectly in the conflict. This is one of the reasons why the formal legal system cannot go too far against the traditional one. When Meaza prompts the Ministry reaction, he decides to illegally shut down her organization without explanation, clearly abusing of office powers. Close to desperation, she finally learns that the Ministry is fired, and that her permit to operate is reinstated.

At the final court discussion, sufficient evidence in favor of Hirut is brought to the fore and she is not convicted. In the final scenes, Hirut in tears comments to Meaza with deep desolation: “I don’t feel like I won anything. I can’t even protect my little sister. They will get her one day. Can’t you see that? I can’t save her” leaving the audience with a strong feeling of hope for a real social change to happen.

3. Child Marriage: Culture or Economics?

The persistence of child marriage, despite legal recognition, is the result of both cultural (including social and religious norms) and economic forces, which are difficult to disentangle

⁸ The local court is informal from a Western viewpoint, but it is clearly considered formal, and respected, by the rural/traditional population.

in a rigorous scientific way. The relative explanatory weight may vary sensibly with the social and economic context. However, it is a clear example where culture matters a lot, though it is difficult to quantify how much (Fernandez 2016). A related sensible question is asking whether economic development, and a more equitable access to education, can alone accelerate the demise of child marriage. This may indeed be possible if the emergence of social norms adapted to the modernization and secularization of both urban and rural societies, likely at a slower pace in the latter, are also incentive-compatible and aligned to economic and technical changes. For example, Fernandez (2012) documents how a society politically dominated by the man was able to implement laws in favour of women in the second half of the 19th century in the US. Then, we could reasonably believe that even a male-dominated village council sitting on the grass in the shade of a large tree as in *Difret* may eventually accept and sustain norms and collective actions mitigating child marriage. If tradition were not that much stronger in nowadays rural Ethiopian society than in the 19th century US society.

Child marriage norm can hardly be considered a Pareto optimum between the families of the spouses-to-be because, normally, only one of the parties capture a welfare gain. The girl clearly directly suffers for many obvious reasons. Her family suffers both psychologically to see the daughter suffer, and financially because abduction significantly reduces the bride price. The girl loses value on the marriage market because she is no more virgin, which makes Hirut totally desperate. If the resulting situation is too far from a Pareto optimum, Hirut's family may go to local court to ask for a compensation acceptable by both families. The local court, which can daily observe both families, has a strong information advantage compared to an official remote court to go closer to Pareto optimality. Finding a fair compensation is far more difficult in the movie, and the local court has to enforce its authority. One open question raised by the movie is the comparison of a man's value of life compared to a female child dishonour, which is worse than death for herself and her family. See Johnson-Hanks (2006) for a discussion on honour and motherhood in Africa.

In the case of Hirut, the movie clearly shows that her parents deeply suffer to feel constrained to sacrifice her to the tradition, but still humbly willing to accept it. Abduction gives some freedom to Talete, who can refer to the tradition to impose his choice against his parents' will, who initially arranged another wife for him, but still support his choice *ex post*. Their honour is safe, which mitigates their relative loss of decision power. From the point of view of the society, abduction is a means to preserving sustainability while offering some limited freedom

to the male young generation, who may decide by themselves without formally disobeying or challenging the authority of the old generation.

Self-interest, even unconsciously, may play an important role too (Elster 1989). For instance, the families of the village not directly involved in the abduction may also accept the tradition of t'elefa because they fear the sanctions that would be triggered by refusing the norm either in the actual case or in the future when their families may be implicated. Further, they may conform to the norm because their own sons may benefit from it in the future. Such perverse indirect reciprocity makes the system neutral for families who have both girls and boys, but it is detrimental to daughters-only families.

The goal of the movie is to raise awareness about the issue of child marriage, and in particular bride abduction. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, child marriage is a human rights violation, and its prevention is covered in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Child marriage refers to any formal or informal union between a child under 18 and an adult or another child, but it is relevant to distinguish between younger child brides and older child brides. For instance, Dixon-Muller (2008) suggests distinguishing between early adolescence (ages 10-14), middle adolescence (ages 15-17), and late adolescence (ages 18-19). She concludes that only older adolescents are probably ready for marriage. Although legal and international standards have defined when a young adult is physically and emotionally ripe for marriage, in developing countries given the lack of birth registration and low rate of literacy many girls do not know their age with precision, making onerous verify any violation of the law against child marriage. As shown in *Difret*, the assistant district attorney claimed that Hirut was older than the age she said. Meaza proved Hirut's age resorting to her baptism certificate.⁹

In 2014, more than 700 million women were married before the age of 18 worldwide (UNICEF 2014, Riggio Chaudhuri 2015). More than one in three, about 250 million, were married before age 15. Although boys are also married as children, girls are disproportionately at risk of child marriage. For instance, in Niger 77 per cent of women aged 20 to 49 were married before age 18 compared to 5 per cent of men in the same age group. This gender difference is also found

⁹ For example, the legal age of marriage in Ethiopia is 18 years for both girls and boys, but to punish those who perpetrate child marriage there must be a functional public register of births for authorities to prove the age of a girl, as the movie clearly shows.

in countries where child marriage is less common. Furthermore, girls are often married to much older men making them at risk of violence and sexual abuses. Child marriage among girls is most common in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Niger has the highest overall prevalence of child marriage in the world, while Bangladesh has the highest rate of marriage involving girls under age 15. 42 per cent of all child brides worldwide are in South Asia. India alone makes up one third of the global total.¹⁰

Ethiopia ranks fifth in the world in terms of absolute number of child marriages (UNICEF Data and Analytics Section 2014). As in 2015, about 4 in 10 young women were married or in union before their 18th birthday (UNICEF Data and Analytics Section 2017). Child marriage prevalence varies across Ethiopia. Afar is the region with the highest rate of child marriage (67 per cent), followed by Benishangul-Gumuz and Somali regions (both 50 per cent), and in the Amhara region the child marriage rate (43 per cent) is just above the national average, while fewer than 10 per cent of women are married in childhood in Addis Ababa. Child brides are more likely to be found in rural areas, among poor and less educated households.

In many developing countries, child marriage is often arranged by parents of the future spouses. In Ethiopia, rates of arranged marriage vary regionally and with religion. In a national sample of Ethiopian households - the Young Adult Survey - Erulkar *et al.* (2010) find that 70 per cent of married girls aged 12-24 years were in arranged marriages. Almost all the girls married before the age of 15 had their husband chosen by their parents. The arrangement can be done at any time during childhood or even before birth¹¹ with the aim of binding the ties between families.

Despite the change in law occurred at the beginning of the 21st century, as shown in *Difret*, Ethiopia is still home to bride abduction, especially in rural area and the southern parts of the country. Though it is difficult to find up-to-date official statistics about this practice, Erulkar *et al.* (2010) show that almost 13% of their sample of married girls between 12 and 24 years-old had been abducted, while Boyden *et al.* (2013) report that over 10 per cent of girls had been abducted in a survey of households in the regional state of Oromiya.

¹⁰ Being a practice involving mainly girls, it is evidence that child marriage is a form of gender discrimination persisting in societies where manpower is still disproportionately predominant. Child marriages occur in patriarchal societies where parents have a significant role in choosing spouses for their children and often new brides join their new families as domestic help.

¹¹ Promissory marriages have the role of cementing the ties between families or within families as is the case of *adsuma* tradition, where girls marry their maternal eldest cousin.

Though in *Difret* the consequences of child marriage are only marginally examined, it is worthwhile mentioning them. Child marriage negatively affects many domains of a child life, ranging from health, education, psychosocial well-being to economic security. Child marriage has serious implications for girls. Health-related consequences of child marriage include adverse maternal and reproductive health outcomes, increased risk of sexually transmitted infections, intimate partner violence, maternal mortality, and increased suicidality (Boyden *et al.* 2013, Clark 2004, Kidman 2016). Children born to child-mothers have an increased likelihood of being born prematurely or with low birthweight and poorer health and nutritional status (Adhikari 2003, Raj *et al.* 2010). Other important risks of child marriage for girls include lower educational attainment, higher rates of poverty, and lower socio-economic status (Delprato *et al.* 2015).

According to UNICEF (2017), in Ethiopia one in three child brides are married to men who are at least 10 years older. In many studies estimating the distribution of powers within the household, age difference is a critical factor determining the male dominance within the family (Yirga Belete, Menon, Perali 2022). Most of young women who married in childhood give birth before their completed adolescence and are less likely to get skilled care during their pregnancy and delivery. They are less likely to be in school compared to their unmarried peers. In relation to the lack of education, they are less likely to be employed than their peers who marry later or not at all, and if working they are more likely to be agricultural labourers and less likely to be in professional activities.

The practice of child marriage is not tied to one specific religion. In Ethiopia child marriage often cohabits with the tradition of Orthodox Christian communities, even though the country's Orthodox Church opposes the practice. For instance, in India child marriage is prevalent among both Muslims and Hindus. In Burkina Faso child marriage is practiced by Christians and Muslims alike. An analysis by the International Center for Research on Women found that what is constant across countries with high child marriage rates is not attachment to one religion, but rather factors such as poverty and limited education opportunities for girls. However, if child marriage may not be directly associated with faith beliefs, religious leaders may play a crucial role in curbing the practice because their behavior may significantly affect the stigma consequences on the girls and child marriages are often ratified as part of a religious ceremony.

The practice of child marriage has its roots both in economic and cultural drivers.¹² The movie director of *Difret* emphasises mainly the role played by culture. In many parts of the movie people claim that “It [abduction] is our tradition” and because of that it is accepted and justified. For both the village council and formal law, represented by the assistant district attorney, Hirut deserves the death penalty for the murdered of her assaulter. In *Difret*, in two scenes the reasons behind the behaviour of Tadele are explained. During the village trial, Tadele’s father says that “My son’s wish was to get married. Following his tradition, he abducted her,” and then a close friend of Tadele says: “Men abduct when they fall in love. And Tadele got angry when her [Hirut] family told him that she didn’t want him. His family had arranged another wife for him, but he didn’t want to miss out on her.” These dialogues are evidence of social norms that consider women more as property than as individuals with their own desires and aspirations about their future.

Poverty and economic uncertainty are other determinants of child marriage. Arranged child marriage is an opportunity for families to extend the social networks on which relying during economic downturns. In Ethiopia, there are also regional differences in how poverty affects child marriage. In some areas the practice of dowry boosts child marriage, because the youngest girls in general need the smallest dowries (Volgelstein 2013). In other regions, such as Oromya, where bride wealth is common, poverty pushes parents to exchange their daughters for money (Boyden *at al.* 2012). Statistics show that abduction is more common in South Ethiopia where bride price arrangements are popular (UNICEF 2014). In this socio-economic context, young men who do not have the money to pay for marrying resort to abduct a girl and rape her hoping that her family will allow him to marry her (a wedding can cost up to 15,000 birr, about 250 dollars, in the countryside where the large majority of the population lives on less than a dollar a day).¹³ Poverty also makes parents more prone to accept their daughters’ abduction because school is costly, and a forced marriage may represent a means to provide security to their daughter in the future. However, in Gojjam area in Amhara bride marriage is more common in relatively better-off families, where the practice is used by families to maintain or enlarge their

¹² Understanding the causes of child marriage, and of marriage by abduction, is fundamental for the design of effective programmes with the aim of ending the practice of child marriage.

¹³ A 1970 Italian movie, *La moglie più bella* (The Most Beautiful Wife) directed by Damiano Damiani and starring Ornella Muti, is based on a “fuitina” case in Sicily where the “elopement” rather than capture was accepted for similar economic reasons. The law allowing “rehabilitating marriages”, also known as marry-your-rapist law, to protect rapists from criminal proceedings in Italy was abolished in 1981.

land holdings thus making the vested interests of landed elites more entrenched (Jones *et al.* 2014).

As a general comment, the correct identification of the relative importance of cultural or economic factors in explaining child marriage, in a given context, requires that both causal components are taken into consideration. Assuming *ex ante* dominance of cultural over economic factors, or vice versa, would make it arduous to design effective actions that properly account for both dimensions.

4. Looking ahead Towards Child Marriage Ending: What Works?

The practice of girls' child marriage in Ethiopia is less common today than in previous generations. At the national level, there is evidence of accelerating progress between 2000 and 2016, even if with remarkable regional differences (Erulkar 2022). If positive trends continue, UNICEF (2018) estimates the proportion of girls who marry in early adolescence in Ethiopia would drop to 20 per cent by 2030 and to less than 10 per cent by 2050. However, child marriage reduction needs to be six times faster than observed to achieve the 2030 target.

The impressive decline of child marriage over the last decade partly reflects the country's effort to tackle this practice (Erulkar 2022). Ethiopia's legislative framework and policy environment strongly support the elimination of child marriage. The Revised Family Code issued in 2000, and the Criminal Law of 2005 both set the minimum legal age for marriage at 18¹⁴ for both boys and girls and require for a valid marriage the free and full agreement of the intending spouses (Emurugat 2019). Moreover, the Criminal Code criminalizes child marriage with maximum punishments of three- and seven-years' imprisonment when the child is aged 13 or above, and under 13 respectively, and criminalizes abduction, early forced marriage, and polygamy.

Ethiopia has many other policies and action plans that call for the elimination of harmful traditional practices, including child marriage. In 2013 the country launched the National Strategy and Action Plan on Harmful Traditional Practices against Women and Children to reduce the high prevalence of such practices, particularly in rural Ethiopia and later the National Alliance to End Child Marriage to support the abandonment of this practice entirely

¹⁴ However, in many countries around the world, it is still legal to marry a girl younger than 18 years (Wise *et al.* 2017, Riggio Chauduri 2015).

by 2025. More recently, in 2019, the President of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, with the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs launched the National Costed Roadmap to end child marriage and female genital mutilation (2020–2024), an additional step forward in the country’s commitment to achieving early marriage elimination by 2030.¹⁵ The roadmap relies on five evidence-based strategies: empowering adolescent girls and their families, community engagement, enhancing systems accountability and services, promoting an enabling environment, and increasing data and evidence generation and utilization. Importantly, the roadmap highlights that ensuring girls grow up protected from early marriage has positive effects for society and economic development beyond just upholding the basic rights of the girls (Jones 2020, Wodon *et al.* 2018). Field *et al.* (2016) find that providing girls with financial incentives conditional on marriage status is one of the most cost-effective action preventing child marriage, which also delivers the highest benefit-cost ratio.

Given the regulatory framework described above, over the last 20 years the Ethiopian government, and non-governmental organizations, implemented several programs specifically designed to address child marriage. In a 2014 mapping study, Jones *et al.* (2016) document above 50 initiatives in 7 regions of the country and provided a detailed description for 8 programs. The majority are in Amhara, mostly small-scale, with limited budgets and managed by NGOs. These interventions incorporate multiple components and social influence perspectives to respond to the multidimensional drivers of child marriage: awareness communications campaigns also on the use of contraception; community engagement and conversations aimed at changing gender social norms; legislative advocacy; girls’ empowerment; school-based clubs, interventions to improve schooling outcomes for girls; and, in few cases, the provision of conditional cash incentives to households or to girls specifically (e.g., small amounts of money for school materials, scholarships) (UNICEF 2016). Because these interventions are mainly concentrated in the region of Amhara, little is known about the external validity of these programs. Because of the difficulties in controlling for significant confounding factors, such as demographic changes and secularization, the reduction in child marriage resulting from the implemented programs may lack sufficient robustness.

¹⁵ Addressing the issue of early marriage is one of the components of Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals. Target 5.3 aims at eliminating all harmful practices such as child, early, and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.

Unfortunately, rigorous evaluations of the effectiveness of the different schemes adopted by these child-marriage related programs, on observed outcomes (behaviors and attitudes) are scarce and present mixed findings (Erulkar and Muthengi 2009, Stark *et al.* 2018, Erulkar *et al.* 2017, Chow and Vival 2022). Furthermore, they mainly concentrate on the Amharan experiences, leading to a lack of detailed evidence about what treatment works, and which are the most appropriate interventions for scale up (UNFPA-UNICEF 2021, Lee-Rife *et al.* 2012, Malhotra *et al.* 2011).

Although policy evaluations are limited, the available evidence from Ethiopia and around the world suggests that the most effective actions to prevent child marriage is to support girls' school attendance, to empower them to resist marriage and focus on alternative futures, and to engage local communities changing unfavorable gender social norms that perpetuate this harmful practice (UNICEF 2016). However, changing culture, particularly long-lasting and deep-rooted social norms, is a quite challenging endeavor as it is establishing a more robust legal and judiciary system (Chow and Vival 2022, Tewahido *et al.* 2022, Jones *et al.* 2020). In the future, economists should dedicate more effort for eliciting cultural norms associated with marriage rites in the context of local religious beliefs,¹⁶ crucial to design context-relevant interventions, and to measure and evaluate their changes over time.

To accelerate the demise of child marriage, economists may also consider a simple law of propagation of social behavior related to herding behavior: what a person does depends on whether other people do it (Mackie 1996). Effective "social norms" marketing would try to convince most households of a village or group of communities, also providing proper economic incentives, to reject child marriage, then others would take the same position and may coordinate their actions. The objective is not to change personal beliefs but rather changing the beliefs about other people's beliefs. A follow up movie after Difret, for example,

¹⁶ Rituals indicating a symbolic bride kidnapping still exist in some cultures. According to some sources, the honeymoon is a relic of marriage by capture, based on the practice of the husband going into hiding with his wife to avoid reprisals from her relatives, with the intention that the woman would be pregnant by the end of the month. In Catholic canon law, the impediment of raptus specifically prohibits marriage between a woman abducted with the intent to force her to marry, and her abductor, as long as the woman remains in the abductor's power. According to the second provision of the law, should the woman decide to accept the abductor as a husband after she is safe, she will be allowed to marry him. The canon defines raptus as a "violent" abduction, accompanied by physical violence or threats, or fraud or deceit. The Council of Trento held between 1545 and 1563 insisted that the abduction *in raptu* must be for the purpose of marriage to count as an impediment to marriage.

may describe a story of local changemakers being successful at marketing socially good norms with the objective to reinforce the impact in the short run.

5. Conclusions

Child marriage is a human rights violation, and a form of gender inequality, which reflects economic and cultural norms that discriminate against girls. A major compelling question nowadays is how we can curb harmful traditional practices, violence, abuse, pollution, waste, substance addiction, physical and mental illness by changing patterns of individual and collective behaviour. Understanding the underlying causes of social problems, raising awareness of both the public and policy makers, and facilitating coordinated actions are part of the answer. What is the role that can be played by movies? *Difret* is an outstanding example of how a movie can effectively reinforce a process of social, cultural, and legal change, and sustain it, provided that the socioeconomic determinants underlying illiberal and biased customary norms are well understood.

However, legal reforms, though publicly explained also with the help of highly suggestive movies such as *Difret*, are certainly necessary, but not sufficient to end child marriage. Despite the changes induced by the movie, many girls, especially in the countryside, are still illegally abducted in Ethiopia. UNICEF reports released to the press in 2022 citing local government data document that in the drought-afflicted areas of Ethiopia there is a dramatic surge in child marriages because desperate parents marry off their girls to seek dowries to help the rest of the family coping with hunger. Additional interventions to prevent child marriage properly capturing both cultural and economic constraints, thus making the law change more self-enforceable, are clearly desirable.

A key policy question is how to allocate public money between investing in high impact movies or documentary films visible also in rural areas via television or phone networks, and field programs, for example, fostering equal access to education in rural villages, to information campaign on desirable marriage norms, and to contraception opportunities. While economists know how to evaluate the impact of an intervention, less is known about how to evaluate the socioeconomic impact of a movie, in general, and, as in the case at hand, on the willingness to change a traditional norm of a community. On hypothetical grounds, economists may help searching for the best combination of effective projects and movies that make the impact on the demise of traditional norms in contrast with the law as large as possible. On the other hand,

though, the movie industry may think to accompany the process of social change producing not only movies centered on the problem, but also movies focusing on the possible solutions to solve the problem. Thus, communities late in adopting the change in a social norm may be more prone to imitate other communities already effective in persistently rejecting child marriage.

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