



Until we are all equal

Tejitu, 15, prevented her own marriage with support from the Girls Advocacy Alliance, a Plan International initiative created to combat child, early and forced marriage in Ethiopia.

**My Choice
for My Life**



This project to help end child, early and forced marriage in Ethiopia has enabled more than **100,000** girls to begin building a better future.

Project Facts

WHAT: The My Choice for My Life project was implemented by Plan International Canada and Plan International Ethiopia. It was funded with \$8.19 million from Global Affairs Canada and Canadian donors.

WHO: Girls, boys, parents, health care workers, community members and leaders collaborated and learned how to address adolescent sexual and reproductive health, gender equality, and child, early and forced marriage. Local implementing partners included Jerusalem Children and Community Development Organization and the Association for National Planned Program for Vulnerable Children and in Need – Ethiopia.

WHERE: Ethiopia’s Amhara regional state (Awi zone) and Sidama regional state (in six *woredas*, or districts).

WHEN: The project started in January 2018 and ended in June 2023. This report focuses on the final project results.

WHY: The primary goals of this project were to:

- Increase the confidence of adolescents, especially girls, to delay marriage and utilize sexual and reproductive health information and services, including family planning
- Improve quality and the gender and adolescent responsiveness of sexual and reproductive health services, as well as child-protection services, in safe spaces like schools and community health facilities
- Enhance government and community responsiveness to the sexual and reproductive health and rights and protection needs of adolescents, especially girls

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Fethia leads a discussion at her school on the dangers of child marriage.



There has been a noticeable difference in the community since the My Choice for My Life initiative began. Today, a lot of parents give boys and girls equal opportunities. And due to the peer-to-peer education we facilitate, child marriage has declined at our primary school. Every time we hold a conversation, students are thrilled and eager to participate.”

– Fethia, Grade 7 peer-to-peer facilitator, Amhara region

The First Word

For five years, the My Choice for My Life project has advanced the right of girls to decide whether, when and whom to marry.

Marriage between two consenting adults is an act to be celebrated. But in many parts of the world, it takes place between children – and often against their will.

Harmful traditional practices such as child, early and forced marriage continue in part because of poverty, a lack of sexual and reproductive health education and limited family-planning services. When girls marry young, they often become mothers early and drop out of school permanently. They also face a greater risk of serious health complications in pregnancy and childbirth.

Ethiopia has one of the highest rates of child, early and forced marriage in the world. It is particularly common in the rural regions of Amhara and Sidama, which is why Plan International selected these states for the My Choice for My Life project. With your help, over the past five years we worked with thousands of girls, community members, leaders and government officials to create long-lasting change toward ending child, early and forced marriage in these regions.



Sexual and reproductive health programming in schools equipped girls to say “no” to child, early and forced marriage. Through community conversations that included boys and parents, we created allies against child marriage and improved gender equality in homes. Health care providers, police officers, government staff and child-protection workers were trained to work together to protect girls against child, early and forced marriage and gender-based violence. Child-safe spaces for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence were created, and we supported village savings and loan associations for female business owners.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT

By supporting the My Choice for My Life project in Ethiopia, you’ve helped provide life-changing training and health services that will enable teenage girls to delay marriage. Your generous contributions enabled 101,576 girls to begin building a better future.

Fethia, 13, is a peer educator in the Amhara region. As part of the My Choice for My Life project, she leads discussions at her school on topics including gender equality, child marriage and sexual and reproductive health.

Thank you for your continued support.



Our horse riders' association is highly valued by the community because of the social assistance we provide, and what we say is given careful consideration. **After we learned about the harms of child marriage, if we get information that a family is arranging for a minor to get married or abducted, we take it seriously and cancel their membership with our association.**

That means they are marginalized by the community and excluded from social events. On the other hand, if a girl is of age when getting married, we send 30 to 40 horse riders to escort her to the wedding ceremony. Our policies have contributed a lot to men marrying women of the appropriate age."

– Tilaye, head of the Agiw Horse Riders Association, which played an important role in changing social norms in the community



Tejitu (second from left) stands with fellow members of her school's anti-marriage group. In rural Amhara, where they live, 75% of girls are married before the age of 18, with many married off as young as 12.

The Situation

The My Choice for My Life project succeeded in Ethiopia despite challenges along the way.

Ethiopia is the largest country in the Horn of Africa. With a population of 126 million, it's also the second-most populous in the continent. Over the past decade, strong economic growth has led to reduced poverty in both urban and rural areas. In 2018, parliament elected Ethiopia's first woman president, Sahle-Work Zewde, who promised to work to make gender equality a reality.

But despite economic development and social progress, Ethiopia faces the effects of decades of drought and political unrest; it is among the poorest and most food-insecure nations in the world. Beginning in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and the outbreak of a two-year civil war in the Tigray region caused significant disruptions. Last year, the country experienced one of its worst droughts in 40 years. These events have led to high inflation, which continues to make basic necessities, such as food, unaffordable for many families.

In this environment, sexual and gender-based violence, gender inequality and child, early and forced marriage have flourished. According to data from 2016, 40% of Ethiopian girls are married before their 18th birthday, with 14% married before turning 15. Humanitarian workers in Ethiopia say that the rate of child, early and forced marriage has climbed even higher during the recent period of instability.

OVERCOMING BARRIERS

Widespread displacement and instability caused by pandemic lockdowns and the Tigray war presented challenges for Plan International's staff in Ethiopia. The team adapted its



A special unit was established to serve youth on various sexual and reproductive health issues. Before this, it was challenging for adolescents to publicly get health services, but now that they have their own distinct area, they can do so with confidence and without feeling embarrassed. For instance, young girls in their community are now able to obtain family-planning services without difficulty."

– Masresha, an adolescent health service unit representative in Sidama region

programming but frequently needed to pause activities. After the war ended in November 2022, the My Choice for My Life team was able to resume all program activities.

In the past year, rising inflation has led to higher costs, presenting new barriers to carrying out project activities. And following global supply chain disruptions and a lack of funding after the war, the Ethiopian government has struggled to secure enough contraceptives for youth family-planning services.

Despite these setbacks, the My Choice for My Life project has been successful at meeting and exceeding its goals. The Ethiopian government has commended Plan International for its work. After visiting a participating health facility, the country's minister of health said that the interventions were the best he had seen among donor projects and that the facility would serve as a model for the rest of the country.

Landscape in Ethiopia's Amhara region





The Rundown

Here are some achievements from the My Choice for My Life project.

4,972 adolescent girls and boys were mentored to become Champions of Change for girls' rights and gender equality.

37,872 in-school adolescent girls and boys were trained on gender-transformative life skills, gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and ending child, early and forced marriage.

815 community and religious leaders, traditional birth attendants and circumcisers were trained to become change agents to challenge harmful social norms and practices such as child, early and forced marriages, female genital mutilation and sexual and reproductive health.

28,517 engagements were conducted in which messages were shared in the community about child, early and forced marriage and other pressing issues through billboards, radio messages, documentaries for schools and other activities.

2,500 adolescent girls received training for their business initiatives, and 515 of them were supported with seed money to start or expand their businesses.

613 Members of local woreda government offices (including women's and children's affairs, police and judiciary) were trained to implement existing policies, procedures and laws regarding child, early and forced marriage and sexual and reproductive health.

12 adolescent-friendly sexual and reproductive health units were renovated based on gender- and youth-needs assessments.

282 health care providers based in health facilities learned to provide adolescent-friendly sexual and reproductive health services and referrals, including child-protection referrals.

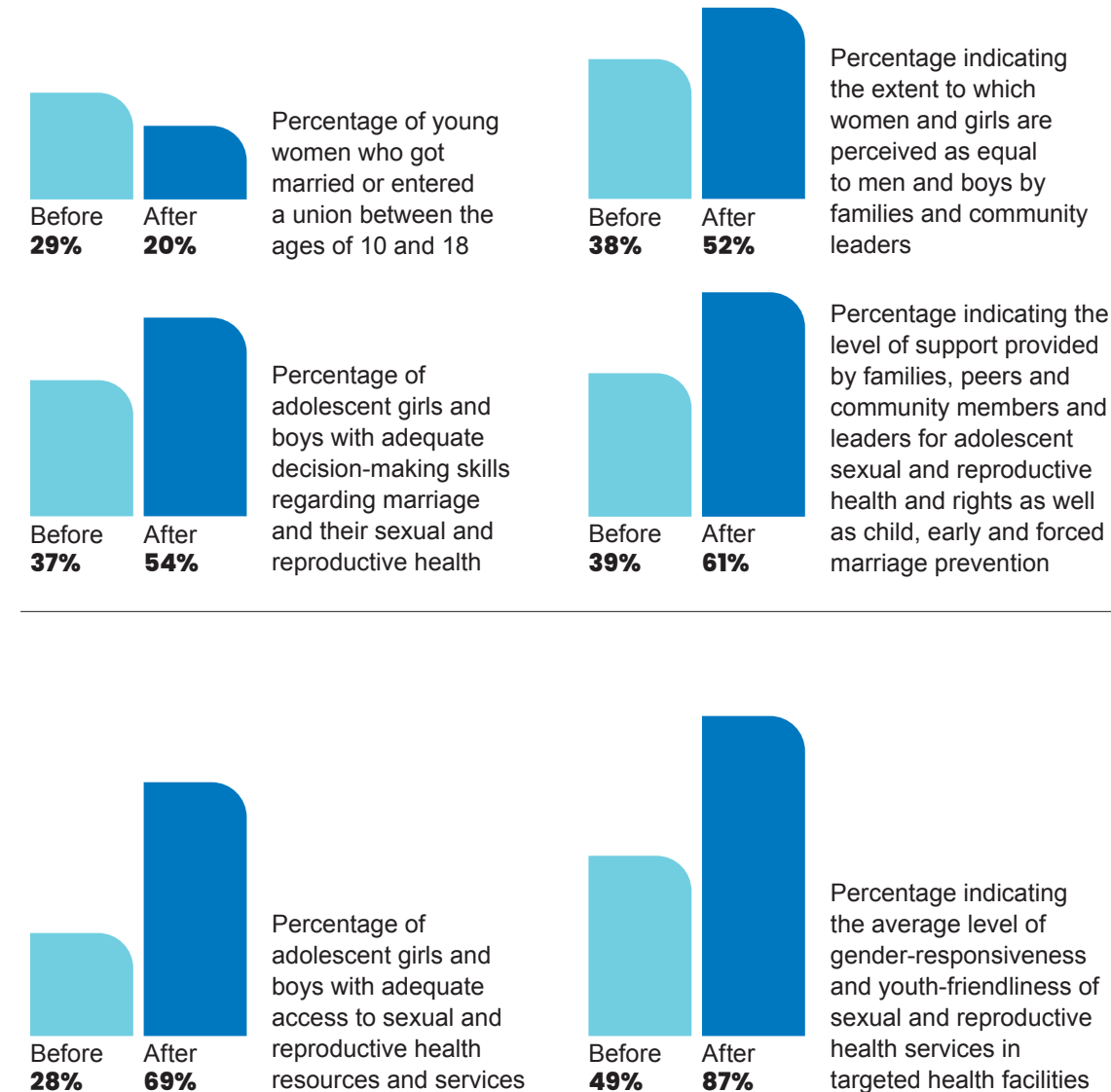


Changing behaviour and deeply ingrained gender and social norms is not an easy thing. That's why we decided to use a comprehensive approach to tackle the barriers at the individual, household, community and systems levels. The other unique and exciting thing about My Choice for My Life in Ethiopia was that we worked on ending child, early and forced marriage and improving sexual and reproductive health simultaneously. It was a challenging but rewarding project, and it was a pleasure to see it end with very successful results."

– Mohammed Ibrahim, senior health advisor for My Choice for My Life at Plan International Canada

The Report Card

Here's a snapshot of the difference you've helped make through this project.



Abeba raises awareness in Amhara region about the consequences of child marriage and says she's noticed a change in community attitudes.

HOW WE DID IT:

- Engaged community members, religious leaders and parents to become change agents in promoting gender equality and preventing child, early and forced marriages
- Communicated information about child, early and forced marriage and sexual and reproductive health through radio and television spots, billboards and school plays and videos

HOW WE DID IT:

- Trained community health workers and health-facility staff to provide child-friendly, gender-responsive sexual and reproductive health services
- Refurbished health facilities, equipping them with essential medical equipment and supplies (including contraceptives) and creating adolescent-friendly spaces
- Enhanced referral processes between relevant community players and institutions
- Facilitated conversations and trainings with adolescent girls and boys about their right to access sexual and reproductive health services

A STORY OF CHANGE

A Change of Heart

Debitu rallied community support to challenge her parents' plans for her marriage.

When Debitu was in grade 10, her mother became severely ill. As the youngest of seven children and the only one still living at home, Debitu was charged with her care and had to drop out of school.

Her parents felt that Debitu would be better able to support them if she were married, and they quietly began making plans. When Debitu learned about her upcoming nuptials from a family member, she confronted her parents and asked them to cancel the wedding. They refused, saying it would make them outcasts in the community.

"I was crying and stressed out," says Debitu. "I considered running away from my family, but I was terrified since I didn't know what I might encounter."

She confided in her friend Zewditu, who had been participating in Plan International's My Choice for My Life Community Conversations program and learning about the drawbacks of early marriage.

Zewditu introduced Debitu to the program facilitator, and they went together to the district's bureau of women's affairs, where staff reported her case to the police. Debitu's parents were ordered to appear at the police station.



"My mother and father instantly changed their minds," Debitu says. "Rather than go to jail, they called off the wedding ceremony and agreed to discuss the issue. I was relieved that the forced marriage had been called off."

Now part of the Community Conversations program herself, Debitu has learned a lot about gender equality as well as sexual and reproductive health. More importantly, she has the self-confidence to assert her rights and help others do the same. If she were to encounter another girl facing forced marriage, Debitu knows precisely what she would say: "I would tell them to refuse and report it to the authorities. It is their life. They should say 'no' to child marriage!"

Debitu can see that her mother has had a change of heart. "Now that she is aware that getting married at 16 or 17 is harmful to a girl, she advises her neighbours not to marry off their daughters at an early age," Debitu says.

When her mother fell ill, Debitu had to drop out of school to care for her. Not long after, her father decided she should get married. With the support of the My Choice for My Life project, she was able to stop her marriage.

A STORY OF CHANGE

A Sweeter Future

A teen mother's sugar-cane business has taken off with help from the village savings and loan association.

Like many girls in her village in the Amhara region, Sadia got married at the age of 14. Shortly thereafter, she became pregnant and dropped out of school.

Sadia's pregnancy was difficult, both physically and emotionally. "Neither my family nor my husband's family were interested in visiting or providing care for me after I got married," she says. "As a young girl, I found those days very hard."

Sadia suffered during childbirth and was unable to move for four days after delivery. Even then, no one helped her. Moving forward, she knew she had to learn to rely on herself. She decided to start a sugar-cane business but immediately faced challenges. Without sufficient funds to buy materials, she struggled to deliver on her orders.

All of this changed when she joined the My Choice for My Life project's village savings and loan association, alongside 25 other girls and young women from her village. "After I got a loan from the money collectively saved by the group, I was able to secure materials, and my farm is now productive," Sadia says. "I take pride in caring for my sugar-cane plot."

She adds that the training provided has been invaluable in helping participants launch or grow their businesses. The program has also helped boost her confidence in her ability to expand her business. "My great hope is that I will become a successful example for others through my hard work," she says.

What are village savings and loan associations?

► Women perform most of the agricultural labour in rural Ethiopia, yet they are often underpaid or not paid at all. Their fathers or husbands are often in charge of financial decisions and restrict women's access to resources as well as their participation in community life.

► Village savings and loan associations (VSLAs) help young women improve their finances and have more agency in all aspects of their lives, including when to marry. Savings groups are based on a community microfinance model developed in Africa over 30 years ago. The groups bring together 15 to 25 members who each contribute small amounts of money weekly to create a shared pool of funds. Women can then take small loans to cover things like small-business start-up costs and their personal health care expenses.

A STORY OF CHANGE

A Role Model for Her Community

After experiencing sexual assault, Tigist bravely reported the crime and got the help she needed.

Trigger/content warning: This story involves sexual violence.

When her mother died, Tigist* went to live with her elderly grandmother in a neighbouring village. Every day, she travelled the 15 kilometres from her new home to her school in Amhara region. She didn't realize that someone was tracking her routine.

One night, while Tigist and her grandmother slept, two men broke down the door and entered the house. They assaulted her grandmother and dragged Tigist to the jungle at the edge of the village. Her grandmother shouted for help, but no one came. The men sexually abused and raped Tigist.

Tigist's grandmother recognized one of the attackers as her grandson's friend. An investigation later revealed that her grandson had arranged the sexual assault because he wanted to inherit his grandmother's properties. He had hoped Tigist would flee in shame after the assault. She didn't.

Tigist and her grandmother immediately reported the attack to a local government-sector office, which contacted the My Choice for My Life project staff. Working together, they helped Tigist get the health care and child-protection services she needed.

The My Choice for My Life project team has been supporting all of Tigist's medical and travel expenses, allowing Tigist to focus on recovering from the impact of the assault. Now that she has had proper treatment, her physical and mental health have steadily improved.

Tigist's outcome is unusual: In her community, girls are unlikely to report an assault, out of fear of being stigmatized. By coming forward, she enabled the police to bring the perpetrator to justice. She has become a role model in her community and set an example for other survivors of gender-based violence to speak out and get the support they need.

**Tigist is a pseudonym, which we have used at her request.*

Did you know?

According to the 2016 Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey:

- ▶ **10%** of women and girls ages 15 to 49 reported having experienced sexual assault.
- ▶ **Only 25%** of girls and women who had experienced physical or sexual violence sought treatment.
- ▶ **25%** of women and girls reported having suffered physical abuse since the age of 15.
- ▶ **Two thirds** of victims didn't express a need for assistance or inform anyone about the violence they had experienced.



Girls take part in a Champions of Change group meeting in Sidama region.

Thank you for your support

Every girl has the right to choose if, when and whom she marries. Through the My Choice for My Life project in Ethiopia, thousands of girls and young women have been able to refuse early marriages, increasing their chances of staying healthy, continuing their educations and earning an income for themselves and their families.

The project has provided more responsive health services for youth and has strengthened community allies to uphold girls' rights. It has also created opportunities for young people to develop greater agency in their sexual and reproductive choices.

Preventing and ending child, early and forced marriage is no easy feat, but change is possible if we work together. Through collaboration with youth, parents, community leaders and governments, we are successfully challenging this harmful practice in the regions where we work. Plan International Canada is immensely grateful to our generous and dedicated community of donors. Our work would not be possible without you.

Thank you again for your commitment to the safety and well-being of children in Ethiopia and around the world.



Until we are all equal



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HUMANITARIAN COALITION

Tizita is a Champions of Change facilitator in Ethiopia's Sidama region. She joined the My Choice for My Life program to help advance gender equality, adolescent sexual and reproductive health rights and child protection in her community.

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About Plan International Canada

Plan International Canada strives for a just world that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We stand with children, especially girls, wherever they are oppressed, exploited, left behind or not equally valued. Plan International and Plan International Canada have no political or religious affiliations; however, we do believe in the power of global citizenship. We are a member of a global organization that partners with youth, families, communities, local organizations, supporters, celebrated ambassadors and governments. We collaborate with women-led groups and youth councils in shaping our programs. We work to ensure that children, especially girls, are safe, healthy, educated and empowered.