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DIFRET: LEARNING FROM A STORY OF CHILD MARRIAGE

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Abstract

Difret dramatises the true story of Aberash Bekele, Hirut Assefa, in the movie, a 14-year-old Ethiopian girl who falls victim to a rural tradition of abducting children for marriage. After escaping from her abductor, Hirut was charged with murder but acquitted after a two-year trial. The title of the movie is very meaningful because in Amharic, the official working language of Ethiopia, difret means both rape and courage. In the movie, courage refers to the fearless behaviour of both Hirut, the first girl to respond to a deeply ingrained male-dominated social norm, and Meaza, the lawyer who volunteers to offer Hirut legal protection and advocate for bride kidnapping to become illegal in Ethiopia. Despite the legal changes, bride kidnapping is still a common practise in rural areas of Ethiopia, where patriarchal rules still apply. Child marriage is a violation of the basic rights of women and girls. This deeply entrenched practise not only perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes, but also has a profound and far-reaching impact on the overall well-being, productivity and economic independence of girls and women. These detrimental consequences extend throughout their lives, from childhood through adolescence and adulthood to the next generation through their children. Child marriage also has a significant economic impact on girls and the country as a whole. Early marriage hampers girls' educational success, limiting their participation in productive sectors. Even when young brides manage to find education or employment, their opportunities are often hindered by domestic responsibilities, early pregnancies, related complications, maternal mortality and caring for the children of young mothers. The movie *Difret* is a powerful tool for promoting social change. It is a story of courage and resilience and has the potential to inspire people to take action against child marriage. In this chapter, we first tell the story, which unfolds in captivating and intense dialogue. We then propose an interpretation of the true story through the lens of a social scientist who endeavours to separate socio-cultural and economic factors that contribute to the persistence of child marriage. Finally, we ask what measures - either field programmes or other movie industry products - can be effective in ending illegal child marriage.

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

JEL: A13, J12, J16, O55, D09

1 Introduction

In Amharic, one of the main languages of Ethiopia, *difret* means both "to have courage" and "to be raped". The movie tells the true story of a young Ethiopian girl who fell victim to a rural tradition of abducting girls for marriage[1] in 1996, which was first reported on in a crime documentary produced in 1999 (Bergfelder 2019). The public outrage triggered by the movie helped to outlaw the socially accepted practise of abducting child brides (*t'elefa*) in Ethiopia.[2] Aberash Bekele (Hirut Assefa in the movie)[3] was 14 years old when she was captured on her way home from her village school. In her attempt to escape, she killed her would-be husband, but she was charged with murder and stood trial for two years. With the help of a courageous and passionate lawyer, Meaza Ashenafi,[4] Aberash became the first woman in an institutionally young Ethiopia to be acquitted of murder in self-defense.

The story of Hirut reflects cultural tensions that can also be found in other African countries such as Egypt, Rwanda, Kenya and South Africa. The progressive emancipation of women living in the cities compared to the unequal opportunities of women in rural areas, who are subject to unwritten rules imposed by men, still hinders their choice of whom to love. The male-only summary courts, which meet in a field under a tree, are at odds with the formal legal system, which has not yet been fully enforced, nor is it able to provide equal access to justice. The road to a profound change in social norms is long and costly. It requires women to have the courage to challenge the entrenched privileges and prejudices of the male elite and to take an active and effective role in political institutions.

In an interview at the Sundance Film Festival chaired by Robert Redford, where *Difret* won the World Cinema Audience Award for Drama, the US-educated Ethiopian writer and director Zeresenay Berhane Mehari said: "If there is a villain in my film, it's not a person, it's tradition… the cycle has to be broken at some point. What you have to do is educate. I hope this film will go a long way in changing people's thinking." And, we might add, especially the harmful traditional norms that are at odds with human development that promotes gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in a non-violent environment. As reported in the movie's credits, *Difret* was indeed a changemaker. The Hirut case made abduction for marriage illegal and was punished with a 5-year prison sentence. Between 1995 and 2002, Meaza Ashenafi's organisation ANDENET, which offers free advice 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) and helps women, especially disadvantaged women who have been

victims of gender-based violence, free of charge and is involved in strategic initiatives for women in the Horn of Africa such as the "negotiating change" project. This important initiative aims to strengthen women's groups at grassroots level, who have advocated for women's rights and made a difference in Ethiopia through the mainstream media or other projects working to promote gender equality and curb gender-based violence by providing legal aid, capacity building, public education and advocacy. However, in rural areas where patriarchal rules apply, bride kidnapping is still a common practise that is not considered a violation of privacy or violence, even if it is against the law, as judicial enforcement is weak and customary law still prevails.

A study by UNICEF (2016) based on data from 2010 and 2013 estimates that 10 to 13% of marriages in the highest risk areas were abducted, while rates in lower risk areas were 1.4 to 2.4%. Annabel (2022) uses data from the 2005, 2011 and 2016 Ethiopian Demographic and Health Surveys to examine trends in child marriage over the past decade in different localities and regions of Ethiopia. Between 2005 and 2016, the percentage of young Ethiopian women married before the age of 18 fell from 49 to 40%, a decrease of 18%. The percentage of women married before the age of 15 fell by 26% over the same period. The largest decline in child marriage occurred in the Addis Ababa, Amhara and Tigray regions. The 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 the age of 18 and abduction is still high.

Hirut's inspiring story of human courage towards her abductor and Meaza's shining example of civil courage in being able to sue the Minister of Justice are certainly a powerful educational tool that clearly shows the way for social change. However, it is not enough to raise awareness on the assumption that an altruistic attitude already prevails among the public. What helps the movie make a big impact is its ability to get people to take effective action by implementing concrete proposals on how to bring about cultural change. For example, is *Difret* mainly aimed at a Western audience? What is the proportion of Ethiopians who have seen the movie in urban and rural areas? How cathartic, in the sense of the Greek Aristotelian meaning, is the movie? What is the proportion of people, regardless of gender and urban-rural divide, who stand up for the rights of girls and women in Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa and other parts of the world? How long do the behavioural changes that can be observed immediately after watching the movie, last without efforts being made to sustain them (Kubrak 2020)? Public investment in a movie may have a much greater socio-economic impact and better value for money than a large social

programme or many small local interventions. Relatively little money can move thousands of hearts and trigger a big wave of emotions that can become a powerful driver for social change if the empathic effect lasts long enough. A scientific experiment such as a randomized control trial (RCT)[5] to evaluate the social impact of a movie (Della Vigna and La Ferrara 2015) can help to answer the question of whether a movie can also help to eliminate the causes that perpetuate the application of traditional norms as opposed to the law.

First, we share with our readers the narrative of the drama conveyed in *Difret*. We then present the possible explanations for child marriage, paying particular attention to the case of abduction. Can child marriage be explained solely by economic causes such as poverty? Or do cultural norms play a greater role (Streeten 2006)? The causes may indeed be economic or cultural, as we will discuss in the third section through the rose-coloured glasses and crude hearts of non-Ethiopian social scientists. In the following section, we examine what measures can be effective in ending the practise of child marriage. We conclude the chapter with food for thought on the social and economic impact a movie could have on both individual behaviour and collective norms.

2 The Storytelling

Following the tradition of court case movies, what dominates *Difret*'s landmark case about the abduction for marriage in Ethiopia is not the quality of the actors, the picture or the direction, but the quality of the script. The original story unfolds as a sequence of vivid and meaningful dialogues, first in the rural setting where Hirut was abducted and under a large tree representing the customary court venue, and in the second part of the movie against the urban backdrop of traditional courtrooms. The dialogues touch on the sensitive chords of emancipated African women demanding a change in the tribal norms that govern marriage arrangements, which often allow for abduction, accepting unbalanced, often violent relationships within the couple, and the unequal distribution of opportunities, such as access to education for girls (Roemer and Trannoy 2016). The drama talks also advocate for the dignity and rights of women and highlight issues such as equal access to justice, prosecution without abuse, the cultural contrast between urban and rural areas, the friction between customary norms in rural areas and the legal system in place in cities. Tune into the *Difret* channel now and listen to the transcripts of some of the key dialogues.

The first scenes take place in the headquarters of the Andenet Women Lawyers' Association, which is identified by a sign on the wall. Meaza Ashenafi, a modern-looking lawyer who advises and represents women who have been victims of violence free of charge, reassures a woman who is regularly beaten by her alcoholic husband that "there are laws in this country … no one is above the law." The movie then pans to the countryside, three hours outside Addis Ababa, and follows two girls on their way to school. On the way home after class, where she has learnt to be promoted to year 5, Hirut is surrounded by a group of men on horseback who whisk her away to a dark hut. In a few minutes, Hirut goes from the highest happiness to the deepest despair and yet finds the courage to steal the rifle, flee into the forest where she is chased by the men and, fearing for her life, shoots her rapist. She is then rescued by the furious revenge of the kidnapper's friends by a lawman who takes her to prison.

When Meaza learnt that Hirut had been arrested, she went to the police station. The police and the lawyers there did not believe that Meaza could help because they thought Hirut was guilty of murder and would be sentenced to death. They also thought Hirut was almost an adult and not a child. Meaza then visited Hirut's parents to ask them for permission to represent Hirut in court. Hirut's mother said that they were poor farmers and could not afford to pay Meaza. Meaza assured her that her services were free. Hirut's mother accused her husband of sending Hirut to school and said that this would not have happened if Hirut had stayed at home. Meaza disagreed and said that Hirut's father had done the right thing. Hirut's mother agreed to let Meaza represent Hirut but said that her husband made the final decisions. Hirut's father was worried about causing a conflict with his family but gave his consent. When Meaza asked about Hirut's age, her mother was unsure and suggested asking the church. Eventually, Hirut's parents invited Meaza to stay for lunch, emphasising that it would be rude and against their traditions for her to leave without eating.

The case of Hirut undergoes 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 of males only, sits on the grass around three village chiefs in the shade of a large tree. The oldest village's chief says: "Good morning. Praise God. […]. 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, angrily accused the village teacher, claiming that the teacher's lessons encouraged daughters to disobey men, disrespect their fathers and even kill their husbands. He implied that the teacher's influence was negative and led to rebellious and harmful behaviour by the women.

The village teacher explains that they are teaching the children to improve their lives and that of the community. He reminds Alemayehu that he too grew up in the village and left it to acquire knowledge and help his people. Alemayehu dismisses the teacher's achievements by criticising his unmarried status and comparing him to his own son, who is younger but already married with children. Essentially, Alemayehu uses traditional societal expectations to belittle the teacher's education and career, implying that personal success is defined solely by marriage and family.

Then, the village's chief lets Hirut's father explain his viewpoint. "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 was different from her sister. "All she wanted to do was to go to school […]. She didn't want to end up like her sister. When 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." And the village's men agreed.

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 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. […]" Village's chief: "Our decision is final and not open for negotiation. […]."

Hirut, who lived under the care of Meaza in Addis Ababa, found city life quite difficult. She was curious about Meaza's unmarried status and asked if she was a "bad woman" because unmarried women were often stigmatised in her village. Meaza explained that she grew up with brothers and was brought up like one of them. She attended school and defied traditional expectations of marriage and motherhood. She assured Hirut that her father protected her from unwanted advances and that she could continue her education in the city. Hirut, still reeling from her experience, confided in Meaza that she was no longer a virgin and was worried about her future. Meaza comforted her and reassured her that she was brave and that her actions were in self-defence. She encouraged Hirut to focus on her strengths and not dwell on the past.

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 informal[8] 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 that are difficult to disentangle in a rigorous way. The relative explanatory weight may reasonably vary depending on the social and economic context. However, it is a clear example that culture plays a large role, even if it is difficult to quantify how much (Fernandez 2016). A related meaningful question is whether economic development and more equitable access to education alone can accelerate the decline of child marriage. This could indeed be possible if the emergence of social norms adapted to the modernisation and secularisation of both urban and rural societies - probably at a slower pace in the latter - are also incentive-compatible and aligned with economic and technological changes. Fernandez (2012), for example, documents how a politically male-dominated society was able to implement laws in favour of women in the United States in the second half of the 19th century. We can thus assume that even a male-dominated village council sitting in the grass under the shade of a large tree, as in *Difret*, would eventually accept and support norms and collective action to discourage child marriage. If tradition were not so much stronger in today’s rural Ethiopian society than it was in 19th century US society.

The child marriage norm can hardly be regarded as a Pareto optimum between the families of the future spouses because only one of the parties captures a welfare gain. The girl suffers directly for many obvious reasons. Her family suffers both psychologically, from seeing their daughter suffer, and financially because the abduction significantly reduces the bride price. The girl loses value on the marriage market because she is no longer a virgin, which makes Hirut completely desperate. If the resulting situation is too far from a Pareto optimum, Hirut’s family can turn to the local court to demand compensation that is acceptable to both families. The local court, which can observe both families on a daily basis, has a strong information advantage over an official, distant court in approaching the Pareto optimum. In the movie, it is much more difficult to find fair compensation and the local court has to assert its authority. An open question raised by the movie is the comparison between the value of a man’s life and the

dishonour of a female child, which is worse than death for her and her family. See Johnson-Hanks (2006) for a discussion of honour and motherhood in Africa.

In Hirut's case, the movie clearly shows that her parents suffer greatly because they feel forced to sacrifice her to tradition, but they are nevertheless humbly willing to accept it. The abduction gives Talete a certain freedom. He can invoke tradition to enforce his choice against the wishes of his parents, who initially got him another wife but subsequently supported his choice. Their honour is preserved, which mitigates their relative loss of decision-making power. From society's point of view, abduction is a means of preserving sustainability and at the same time granting the younger male generation a certain freedom to make their own decisions without formally disregarding or questioning the authority of the older generation.

Self-interest can also play an important role, even if unconsciously (Elster 1989). For example, the families of the village who are not directly involved in the abduction may also accept the tradition of t'elefa because they fear the sanctions that a refusal to follow the norm would trigger either in the present case or in the future when their families may become involved. Moreover, they may obey the norm because their own sons might benefit from it in the future. This perverse indirect reciprocity makes the system neutral for families where both girls and boys live but is detrimental for families that have only daughters.

The aim of the movie is to raise awareness of the problem of child marriage and bride abduction, in particular. According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, child marriage is a human rights violation, and its prevention is included in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The term child marriage refers to any formal or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child, but it is important to distinguish between younger child brides and older child brides. For example, Dixon-Muller (2008) suggests distinguishing between early adolescence (10-14 years), middle adolescence (15-17 years) and late adolescence (18-19 years). She concludes that only older adolescents are likely to be ready for marriage. Although legal and international standards have defined when a young adult is physically and emotionally mature for marriage, in developing countries many girls do not know their exact age due to the lack of birth registration and low literacy rates, making it difficult to verify a violation of the law against child marriage. As shown in *Difret,* the deputy prosecutor claimed Hirut was older than her stated age. Meaza proved Hirut's age by referring back to her baptismal certificate.[9]

In 2014, more than 700 million women worldwide were married before the age of 18 (UNICEF 2014, Riggio Chaudhuri 2015). More than one in three, around 250 million, were married before the age of 15. Although boys are also married off as children, girls are disproportionately at risk of child marriage. In Niger, for example, 77% of women aged 20 to 49 were married before the age of 18, compared to 5% of men in the same age group. This gender gap is also found in countries where child marriage is less common. In addition, girls are often married to much older men, putting them at risk of violence and sexual abuse. Child marriage among girls is most prevalent 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 among girls under the age of 15. 42% of all child brides worldwide are in South Asia. India alone accounts for a third of the global total.[10]

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

In many developing countries, child marriages are often arranged by the parents of the future spouses. In Ethiopia, the proportion of arranged marriages varies by region and religion. In a national sample of Ethiopian households - the Young Adult Survey - Erulkar *et al*. (2010) find that 70% of married girls aged 12 to 24 were in arranged marriages. Almost all girls who were married before the age of 15 had their husbands chosen by their parents. The arrangement can take place at any point in childhood or even before birth,[11] with the aim of strengthening the bonds between families.

Despite the change in the law at the beginning of the 21st century, as *Difret* shows, bride abduction still occurs in Ethiopia, especially in rural areas and in the southern parts of the country. Although it is difficult to find up-to-date official statistics on this practise, Erulkar *et al*. (2010) show that almost 13% of their sample of married girls aged 12-24 had been abducted, while Boyden *et al*. (2013) report that in a survey of households in the Oromiya regional state more than 10% of the girls had been abducted.

Even if the consequences of child marriage are only dealt with in passing in *Difret*, it is worth mentioning them. Child marriage has a negative impact on many areas of a child's life, from health, education and psychosocial well-being to economic security. Child marriage has serious consequences for girls. The health consequences of child marriage include negative effects on maternal and reproductive health, an 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 mothers in infancy are more likely to be born prematurely or with a low birth weight and poorer health and nutritional status (Adhikari 2003, Raj *et al*. 2010). Other important risks of child marriage for girls are a lower level of education, higher poverty rates and a lower socio-economic status (Delprato *et al*. 2015).

According to UNICEF (2017), one in three child brides in Ethiopia is married to men who are at least 10 years older. In many studies analysing the distribution of power in the household, the age difference is a decisive factor for male dominance in the family (Belete *et al*. 2022). Most young women who have married in childhood give birth to their children before they are of age and are less likely to receive skilled care during pregnancy and childbirth. They are less likely to go to school than their unmarried peers. Due to their lack of education, they are less likely to be employed than their peers who marry later or not at all. If they do work, they are more likely to work in agriculture and less likely to have a professional occupation.

Child marriage is not limited to a particular religion (UNICEF 2016). While it is sometimes associated with certain faiths, such as Orthodox Christian communities in Ethiopia, this is often due to cultural traditions rather than religious teachings. Even within Ethiopia, the Orthodox Church itself rejects the practise. In India, child marriage is practised by both Hindus and Muslims, and in Burkina Faso it is widespread among both Christians and Muslims. Research by the International Center for Research on Women shows that the commonality of countries with high rates of child marriage is not a particular religion, but rather socio-economic factors such as poverty and limited educational opportunities for girls. Although child marriage is not always directly related to religious beliefs, religious leaders play an important role in discouraging marriage. Their influence can help combat the stigma associated with child marriage and encourage communities to abandon the practise. This is particularly important as child marriages are often sanctioned and formalised through religious ceremonies.

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 murder 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 "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's] 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 insecurity are further factors in child marriage. Arranged child marriages are an opportunity for families to expand the social networks they rely on in times of economic downturn. In Ethiopia, there are also regional differences in how poverty affects child marriage. In some areas, the practise of dowry encourages child marriage because the youngest girls generally require the smallest dowry (Volgelstein 2013). In other regions, such as Oromya, where bride wealth is common, poverty forces parents to exchange their daughters for money (Boyden *et al*. 2012). Statistics show that abductions are more common in southern Ethiopia, where bride price fixing is popular (UNICEF 2014). In this socio-economic context, young men who do not have the money to pay for marrying resort to kidnapping and raping a girl in the hope that her family will allow him to marry her (a wedding can cost up to 15,000 Birr, about 250 dollars, in rural areas where the vast majority of the population lives on less than a dollar a day).[13] Poverty also makes parents more prone to accepting the abduction of their daughters because school is expensive and a forced marriage can be a means of providing security for their daughter in the future. However, in the Gojjam region of Amhara, bride marriage is more common among relatively affluent families, where the practise is used by families to maintain or increase their land holdings, further entrenching the interests of landed elites (Jones *et al*. 2014).

As a general comment, correctly identifying the relative importance of cultural or economic factors in explaining child marriage in a given context requires that both causal components be taken into account. If one assumes ex ante a dominance of cultural over economic factors or vice versa, it would be difficult to develop effective interventions that adequately address both dimensions.

4 Looking Ahead towards Child Marriage Ending: What Works?

The practise of child marriage of girls is less common in Ethiopia today than in previous generations. At the national level, there are signs of accelerating progress between 2000 and 2016, albeit with notable regional differences (Erulkar 2022). If the positive trends continue, UNICEF (2018) estimates that the proportion of girls marrying in early adolescence in Ethiopia will fall to 20% by 2030 and to less than 10% by 2050. However, to reach the 2030 target, the number of child marriages must fall six times faster than observed.

The impressive decline in child marriage over the past decade partly reflects the country's efforts to combat the practise (Erulkar 2022). The legal framework and policy environment in Ethiopia strongly support the abolition of child marriage. The revised Family Code of 2000 and the Criminal Law of 2005 set the minimum age for marriage at 18[14] years for both boys and girls and require the free and full consent of the prospective spouses for a valid marriage (Emurugat 2019). In addition, the Criminal Code criminalises child marriage, with a maximum penalty of three years' imprisonment if the child is 13 or older and seven years' imprisonment if the child is under 13. Abduction, early forced marriage and polygamy are also criminalised.

In Ethiopia, there are many other policies and action plans that call for the elimination of harmful traditional practises, including child marriage. In 2013, the country launched the National Strategy and Action Plan against Harmful Traditional Practises against Women and Children to reduce the high prevalence of such practises, especially in rural Ethiopia, and later the National Alliance to End Child Marriage to support the total elimination of this practise by 2025. More recently, in 2019, the President of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, together with the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs, launched the National Costed Roadmap to end child marriage and female genital mutilation (2020-2024). This is another step forward in the country's commitment to achieve the elimination of early marriage by 2030.[15] The roadmap is based on five evidence-based strategies: empowering adolescent girls and their families, engaging the community, improving accountability of systems and services, promoting an enabling environment, and increasing the collection and use of data and evidence. Importantly, the roadmap emphasises that ensuring that girls grow up protected from early marriage has positive social and economic development impacts that go beyond safeguarding girls' fundamental rights (Jones 2020, Wodon *et al*. 2018). Field *et al*. (2016) find that providing financial incentives to girls linked to marriage status is one of the most cost-effective measures to prevent child marriage, and also has the best benefit-cost ratio.

The Ethiopian government and non-governmental organisations have implemented several programmes over the last 20 years that are specifically aimed at combating child marriage. In a 2014 mapping study, Jones *et al*. (2016) document over 50 initiatives in 7 regions of the country and provide a detailed description of 8 programmes. Most are located in Amhara, are mostly small, have limited budgets and are managed by NGOs. These interventions include multiple components and social impact perspectives to respond to the multidimensional drivers of child marriage: Communication campaigns to raise awareness, including on contraceptive use; community engagement and conversations aimed at changing gender social norms; legislative advocacy; girls' empowerment; school-based clubs, interventions to improve girls' school performance and, in a few cases, the provision of conditional cash incentives to households or specifically for girls (e.g. small amounts of money for school supplies, scholarships) (UNICEF 2016). As these interventions are mainly focused on the Amhara region, little is known about the external validity of these programmes. The reduction in child marriage resulting from the implemented programmes may not be sufficiently robust, as it is difficult to control for important confounding factors such as demographic changes and secularisation.

Unfortunately, there are few rigorous evaluations of the effectiveness of the different systems applied by these child marriage promotion programmes on observed outcomes (behaviours and attitudes) and the results are mixed (Erulkar and Muthengi 2009, Stark *et al*. 2018, Erulkar *et al*. 2017, Chow and Vival 2022). Moreover, they focus mainly on the Amharan experience, leading to a lack of detailed evidence on what treatment works and which interventions are most appropriate for scaling 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 interventions to prevent child marriage are to support girls' school attendance, empower them to resist marriage and focus on an alternative future, and engage local communities in changing unfavourable social gender social norms that perpetuate this harmful practise (UNICEF 2016). However, changing culture, especially long-standing and deeply entrenched social norms, is quite a difficult endeavour, as is creating a more robust legal and judicial system (Chow and Vivalt 2022, Tewahido *et al*. 2022, Jones *et al*. 2020). In the future, economists should make more efforts to identify cultural norms related to marriage rites in the context of local religious beliefs.[16] This is crucial for developing contextualised interventions and for measuring and evaluating their changes over time.

To accelerate the end of child marriage, economists can also consider a simple law of the spread of social behaviour related to herd behaviour: what one person does depend on other people doing it (Mackie 1996). Effective social norms marketing would seek to persuade most households in a village or group of communities to reject child marriage and create appropriate economic incentives for others to adopt the same attitude and coordinate their actions. The goal is not to change personal beliefs, but to change beliefs about other people's beliefs. For example, a follow-up movie to *Difret* could tell a story of local changemakers successfully marketing socially acceptable norms to amplify the impact in the short term.

5 Conclusions

Child marriage is a human rights violation and a form of gender inequality that reflects economic and cultural norms that penalise girls. A central and compelling question today is how we can curb harmful traditional practises, violence, abuse, pollution, waste, drug addiction and physical and mental illness by changing individual and collective patterns of behaviour. Part of the answer lies in understanding the underlying causes of social problems, raising awareness among the public and policy makers and facilitating coordinated action. What role can movies play in this? *Difret* is an excellent example of how a movie can effectively reinforce and support a process of social, cultural and legal change, provided the socio-economic determinants underlying illiberal and biased customary norms are well understood.

However, legal reforms, even if they are publicly explained with the help of highly suggestive movies such as *Difret*, are undoubtedly necessary but not sufficient to end child marriage. Despite the changes brought about by the movie, many girls are still illegally abducted in Ethiopia, especially in rural areas. UNICEF reports released to the press in 2022, based on data from local authorities, show that there has been a dramatic increase in child marriages in drought-affected areas of Ethiopia as desperate parents marry off their girls to obtain a dowry so that the rest of the family can cope with hunger. Additional measures to prevent child marriages properly capture the cultural and economic constraints so that the change in the law is more enforceable, which is desirable.

An important policy issue is the allocation of public funds between investment in high-impact feature movies or documentaries that can also be seen in rural areas via television or telephone networks, and local programmes that promote, for example, equal access to education in rural villages, information campaigns on desirable marriage norms and contraceptive options. While

economists know how to assess the impact of an intervention, more needs to be known about how to assess the socio-economic impact of a movie, in general and, as in this case, on a community's willingness to change a traditional norm. Economists could assist in finding the best combination of effective projects and movies that maximise the decline of traditional norms as opposed to the law. On the other hand, the movie industry could also think of accompanying the process of social change by producing not only movies that focus on the problem, but also movies that deal with the possible solutions to the problem. For example, communities that are late to embrace the change in a social norm may be more inclined to imitate other communities that have already successfully rejected child marriage.

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[1] Lateiner (1997) describes the abduction marriage in Heliodorus' Aethiopica, an ancient Greek novel from the mid-200s or 300s BC, set in Egypt and Ethiopia. For the author, abduction marriage is a 'fact' of Mediterranean life at the time, especially in an environment of fragile honour, where the 'inevitable' marriage after capture was often accepted as the best of several 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.

[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.

[5] In an RCT, it is randomly determined who receives a programme (or, as in our case, is allowed to watch the film) - the treatment group - and who does not - the control group. The results - in this case mainly behaviour and attitude - are then compared between the two statistically similar groups to determine the effects of the film. In this way, the control group mimics the counterfactual situation, i.e. what would have happened to the same people if they had not seen the film.

[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.

[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.

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

[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.

[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 disproportionally predominant. Child marriages occur in patriarchal sociates 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.

[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.

[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).

[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.

[16] In some cultures, there are still rituals that refer to a symbolic bride kidnapping. According to some sources, the honeymoon is a relic of the abduction marriage, which is based on the practise of the husband going into hiding with his wife to avoid reprisals from her relatives, with the intention that the wife will be pregnant by the end of the month. In Catholic canon law, the impediment of raptus expressly prohibits marriage between a woman who has been abducted with the intention of forcing 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, the woman can marry the abductor if she is safe and decides to accept him as her husband. The canon defines raptus as a "violent" abduction involving physical violence, threats, fraud or deception. The Council of Trento, which took place between 1545 and 1563, insisted that an abduction in raptus must constitute an impediment to marriage.