

## Synopsis:

# Precocious weddings of young girls in Ethiopia

The practice of marrying at a young age is usual in many countries of the world. However, in certain countries of the sub-Saharan Africa and in South Asia, this is a very common practice. The matrimony traditions reveal the manner in which a society conceives a family, its role, structure, way of life and individual and collective responsibilities of each of its members. The early marriage exposes the level of the women's submission and the masculine authority.

In Ethiopia, in the rural areas, 74% of the women are married before their 15th birthday with a man that they are not permitted to choose, sometimes since they were 3 or 4 years old. For those who refuse to marry, the best solution is to work as a maid, a waitress, or, in the worst situation, as a prostitute.

*"I was married when I reached the age of 10. At 13, my son was born. My daughter followed a few years later" "I was married at the age of 7. My husband was much older than me. He waited for my 9th birthday to have sexual intercourses with me..."*

These are the stories that send us shivers down the spine, leave an acid taste of a failing life, a life interrupted, forced intimacy, which precipitate a too young body into emotional and healthy dramas that leads in harmful consequences.

In Ethiopia, approximately 50 percent of the young women are precocious married... occasionally before they were even born. The families offer their 4, 5 year old girls to marry with the adolescents, young men, and some are given to the 40, 50 year old "elderly" men. It's usual to find a 23 or 25 year old man with a young 9 or 11 year old girl.

**The social consequences of these precocious marriages are strong:** the young girls who abandon the primary school ... The successions of maternities prevent them to work or complete their studies. Others, whose husbands are too old, become prematurely widows and deprived after suffering years of conjugal violations.

**However, the gynaecologic impacts of a precocious sexuality and maternity are the most dangerous**

The husband has to respect the "*madego*", that is to live as "brother and sister" until the girl's puberty. Or, the man believes that the sexual intercourse activates the puberty... which leads to harmful health consequences for the young girls. Before puberty, the young girls' body is not prepared for childbearing and the access to contraception methods is low. The precocious sexual intercourses and early pregnancy provokes vaginal's fistulas. The young women become incontinent, urinate on themselves, feel pain and are repudiated for their spouse. Addis-Abeba Hospital, specialized in fistulas, treats part of these young victims. The others have no other choice than living alone or with their children and move to a place where they can work as maids, waitresses or prostitutes.

**For what reasons are there so many practices?**

The main causes of the precocious marriage are: the necessary of tradition maintenance, to strengthen the ties between the marrying families or between communities, to organize the transmission of possessions and to protect the girls from pregnancy before marriage, abductions and violations.

Poverty is one of the principal reasons of the precocious marriage. When the misery is high, poor families may regard a young girl as an economic burden and her marriage with an older man – sometimes an elderly - and as necessary survival strategy for her family. The husband offers livestock as the "price" for the young girl.

The priests of orthodox churches, that celebrate these unions, recommend and believe that the sexual intercourses should exclusively begin in the adolescence, expecting a long period of maternity

In other times, especially if a girl refuses to marry, she is abducted for an older man, who violates her until she get pregnant: in the best situation, the men proposes her to marry and a settlement is made between their families. If not, she is abandoned in an unfortunate destiny, frequently becoming a prostitute.

**They steal their childhood, their dreams, their sex, and their bodies.**

**Mutilated by the destiny, these young girls are only able to rely on local organizations for inform or assist them and ... to the power of the patriarchal traditions. The UNICEF's prevention campaigns are in the first beginning. Meanwhile, thousands of young women are buried in a marriage that escape from their hands, but from which they cannot escape!**