Parents’ Assets and Child Marriage

Child marriage places girls at an increased risk for school termination, sexually transmitted infections, teenage childbirth, and accompanying childbirth complications, thereby hindering the realization of gender equality. The number of new child brides each year is projected to increase, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa where the number is expected to double by 2050 because of persistence of the practice and population growth. Efforts to address child marriage have achieved mixed results indicating that more insight is needed to inform the development of effective interventions.

We examine whether there is a link between household poverty and child marriage by investigating the relationship between daughters’ child marriage and parents’ asset ownership in Ethiopia. Ethiopia has one of the world’s highest rates of child marriage, with an estimated 14% of girls married by the age of 15 and 40% by the age of 18 years. Our study is novel because we examine whether the relationship depends on the gender of the parent who holds the asset. Further, we use panel data, which addresses concerns about reverse causality in previous research. Drawing upon household bargaining theory, we hypothesized that maternal assets would be a stronger predictor of daughters’ child marriage than paternal assets.

Using data on girls aged 6–17, from the nationally-representative Ethiopia Socioeconomic Survey, fielded in 2011 and 2014, we find that more maternal asset holdings are associated lower likelihood of daughter’s transition into child marriage whereas paternal asset holdings are associated with higher likelihood of child marriage. We also find that daughters of wealthier mothers are more likely to be enrolled in school.

These results indicate that the link between parental assets and child marriage depends on the gender of the parent, and that ignoring gender may lead to divergent findings. This finding implies that the outcome of economic interventions may depend on who the target is. Improvement of women’s ownership of assets and the elimination of child marriage are both targets of the gender equality sustainable development goal. This study highlights the interconnectedness of these targets and suggests that the realization of one gender equality target could have implications for other targets.