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Report on Activities Undertaken on “Stop Early Marriage” Campaign





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Early Marriage is one of the prevalent forms of harmful traditional practices in Ethiopia with negative consequences on women’s and girl’s reproductive health, including maternal deaths, fistula, HIV/AIDS and other negative psycho-social problems. The median age of marriage in Ethiopia is 16.1 years but in regions such as Amhara, it is as low as 15.2 (EDHS 2005). Research has established that rural-urban migration and susceptibility to poverty, physical and sexual abuse are direct consequences of early marriage. UNFPA, the Ministry of Youth and Sports and the Population Council conceived a few months ago a national campaign on “Stop Early Marriage.” The “Stop Early Marriage” campaign includes a number of activities to be implemented in the course of 2008. The following sections provide an account of key events undertaken in the 2008 campaign to “Stop Early Marriage” to date:

UNFPA Ethiopia Representative delivers a Statement at the Organization for the African First Ladies Summit (OAFLA), 31st January 2008



Dr. Monique Rakotomalala making a remark at OAFLA

The campaign on “Stop Early Marriage” was launched under the auspices of the First Lady of Ethiopia, H.E. Woizero Azeb Mesfin, at the Summit of African First Ladies which was held in January 2008. UNFPA Representative to Ethiopia, Dr. Monique Rakotomalala, was given the floor to advocate for the “Stop Early Marriage” campaign – with the aim to also trigger joint campaigns in member countries. She described early marriage as “the most miserable component of Gender Based Violence.” She went on to say that despite the favorable policy and legal environment existing in Ethiopia the deeply entrenched socio-cultural values and practices continue to make girls and women vulnerable to various forms of gender-based violence, including early marriage. Dr. Monique lauded the relentless effort the First Lady of Ethiopia is making in restoring dignity and humanity to Ethiopian girls and women. She added that UNFPA’s has had successful experience in working with governmental and non-governmental organizations in fighting harmful traditional practices. She concluded here remarks by making a call for joint efforts in fighting gender-based violence, specifically early marriage.



Media spots on “Stop Early Marriage” February through May 2008

The “Stop Early Marriage” Campaign activities kicked off with the production and broadcasting of media spots on the different radio stations in the country, namely Radio Ethiopia (Amharic, Oromiffa, and Tigrigna national services as well as FM Addis 97.1 which caters to the residents of Addis and its environs); Ethiopian Television which also has national coverage; and Amhara Radio on Amhara Mass Media Agency which has a region-wide coverage in the Amhara Region in Northern Ethiopia. The spots are running on radio and television starting February through end of May. The spots promote the theme “Educate Girls to Escape Early Marriage” giving information on the successful intervention of UNFPA – and its key partners, the Ministry of Youth and Sports and Population Council – in the Amhara Region where the problem of early marriage is highly prevalent.

Press Conference on Ethiopia’s Big Impact Event on “Stop Early Marriage” Campaign: 3March 2008



Press conference on canvas painting event

UNFPA organized a press conference on March 3, 2008 at Hilton Hotel to share the contents and relevance of the big impact canvas painting event. Both local and international media were present and questions ranging from the effects of early marriage to why UNFPA is undertaking this initiative at this particular time; and what the role of art will be in fighting early marriage were raised by the journalists. Replies were given by both the representatives of UNFPA and the artists. Moreover, preceding the undertaking of the canvas painting a very fruitful and elaborate discussion was held between Dr. Monique Rakotomalala, UNFPA Representative to Ethiopia, and the 30 artists taking part in the canvas painting work



International Women's Day, and Ethiopia's largest painting on Early Marriage, Meskel Square, Addis Ababa



Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church signing on canvans

A key activity of the “Stop Early Marriage” campaign was organizing a unique, participatory and big-impact event which reverberates across various sectors of society. The big-impact event took place at Meskel Square in the form of painting of a 100 meter canvas on the theme “Stop Early Marriage” by 30 of Ethiopia’s prominent artists. It is believed that the event was a key milestone in enhancing the understanding of the public, policy-makers and development stakeholders on early marriage.

The painting of the 100 meter canvas, which is the largest piece of painting ever painted in Ethiopia, was undertaken at Meskel Square on March 7 and 8 in full view of the public. The painting was launched on March 8, the International Women’s Day. The team of artists who participated in the art work brought together an interesting mix of styles, ages and gender to express their feelings on the theme of stopping early marriage.

The event was attended by His Holiness Abuna Paulos, Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and President of the World Council of Churches; Mr. Abdoulie Janneh, Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA); members of the diplomatic corps; and other high level dignitaries. Making a remark on the occasion His Holiness, Abuna Paulos, noted that early marriage is a very harmful practice which his Church condemns.

He went on to say that no instance of the practice will be blessed by his Church.

Remarks were also made by Dr. Monique Rakotomalala, UNFPA Representative to Ethiopia; Dr. Bogalech Gebre, Executive Director of Kembatta Metti Gezima-Toppe (a local NGO working on maternal health and prevention of harmful traditional practices); and Mrs. Neeru Singh, wife of Indian Ambassador to Ethiopia. Testimonials were also given by two adolescent girls from the UNFPA supported Bihuh Tesfa Project (a project located at Mercato – the biggest open-air market in Africa – which gives non-formal education and also life skills to adolescent girls most of whom came to Addis Ababa escaping early marriage) on the effects of early marriage.

The largest piece of canvas ever painted in Ethiopia was then unveiled. The dignitaries and other invited guests have put their signature on the piece of canvas that was set aside for entertaining pledges on joining the campaign to “Stop Early Marriage”. The 100-metre painting will be displayed for public viewing in April 2008 in Addis Ababa and then taken to the Regions with high prevalence of early marriage – to reinforce regional efforts to end the practice.

This event has received major media coverage in Ethiopia and abroad. Selected clippings of print media have been attached to this newsletter.



Supplementary events on Early Marriage: Study Tour on Early marriage to Ethiopia (3rd-8th March 2008)



Members of the Study Tour visting “Biruh Tesfa” project

UNFPA Ethiopia hosted a Study Tour on Early Marriage to Ethiopia from UNFPA HQ; Malawi, Liberia, and Zimbabwe Country Offices; United Nations Foundation; Finland Embassy; and Population Council. A working breakfast was organized, for the members of the delegation – and to a representative of the Ministry of Youth and Sports – where a presentation was made by Dr. Annabel Erulkar, Director of the Population Council, Ethiopia Office, on the plight of adolescent girls in Ethiopia. The presentation also included briefings on the operational experience of UNFPA supported projects in Amhara and Addis Ababa, highlighting the inter-linkage between occurrence of early marriage in rural Amhara and consequence of girls escaping early marriage and migrating to urban Ethiopia. The presentation triggered lively discussions. The members of the Study Tour indicated how impressed they were with the performance of the project and some expressed their view that it is an experience worth replicating. The issue of scaling-up the intervention on early marriage was also highlighted.

The members of the Study Tour were given an audience with Ato Abdissa Yadeta, State Minister, Ministry of Youth and Sports. He briefed the mission at length on initiatives adopted and measures being taken by the government to develop and empower adolescent and young people in Ethiopia.

The members of the Study Tour paid a visit to the UNFPA supported project located at Mercato, the biggest open-air market in Africa. The project called “Biruh Tesfa” (literally translating as “Bright Hope”) provides non-formal education and livelihood skills to adolescent girls most of whom came to Addis Ababa escaping early marriage and currently work as domestic workers. The members of the Study Tour discussed at length with the adolescent girls, their mentors who are giving them lessons at the center, and the project coordinator. The girls pleaded with the members of the Study Tour to help them to take their education further and the latter promised to take this issue back to their respective organizations. Three of the girls recited to the guests the poems that they themselves wrote.

The members of the Study Tour were then taken to a shelter run by Organization for Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Integration of Female Street children (OPRIFS) and funded by UNFPA Ethiopia, where adolescent girls participating in the Biruh Tesfa project but who do not have a place to stay are housed. The project manager briefed the guests on the services that the shelter renders to its beneficiaries such as provision of basic needs to the inhabitants, counseling to girls who suffered abuse, and so on.

The next leg of the study tour was in rural Amhara, where the UNFPA, Ministry of Youth & Sports and Population Council pilot project was the highlight of the visit. In Bahir



Dar, capital city of Amhara region, the team first met with the key sector ministry representatives and implementing partners of UNFPA Ethiopia. The visit was coordinated by the region's Bureau of Finance and Economic Development (BoFED) office, who provided a comprehensive picture of the region's key development statistics (supplemented with additional data on HIV/AIDS, adolescent and gender issues by the participating sector ministry representatives). In his presentation, the deputy head of BoFED, Ato Mesfin Gebremedhin, noted that UNFPA was one of the important donors in the population and development area. A key issue of concern discussed was the need to scale-up successful intervention such as the Berhane Hewan project and to increase funding to address the high unmet need for contraceptives in the region. The meeting also included a presentation on the Berhane Hewan (literally meaning 'Light for Eve') project in west Gojam of Amhara region by the project coordinator, Tesfahun Wondie.

This was followed by a visit to UNFPA supported "Student Information Centre" in Bahir Dar University. This part of the visit brought to light the importance of the resource centre for girls and the existing anti-AIDS club in accessing information on sexual and reproductive health

issues. The vulnerability of youth to HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases was reiterated by the Director of the University, Dr. Tsehay Jembere, owing to high employment in the city. The last leg of the journey involved visiting the Berhane Hewan project in two areas of operation; Debre Mawi and Mosebo kebeles – where the visitors had the opportunity to extensively discuss with community representatives on early marriage and related issues. Highlights of the community interactions included hearing fathers speak about how supportive they are to school and non-formal education attendance of girls. Community leaders such as the local priest and a woman representative indicated change processes in the community and brought to light the importance of addressing reproductive health needs (specifically contraceptives).

The visit to Zege, a monastery on one of the islands in the vicinity of Bahir Dar, gave the study tour members the opportunity to understand the importance of religion in the lives of communities. Noteworthy is that while the doctrine of the Coptic Church supports marriage of girls at an age when they are 'physically and mentally matured,' the local deacon blesses underage marriages suggesting the interplay between culture and religion in Amhara.

Dissemination Workshop on the end-line survey on the Berhane Hewan Early Marriage prevention project

Hilton hotel, 7th March 2008



A half-day dissemination workshop entitled "Critical issues & promising solutions: Addressing early marriage in rural Ethiopia" was organized by UNFPA and Population Council to share the findings of the end-line survey on the UNFPA, Ministry of Youth & Sports

and Population Council pilot early marriage prevention project in the Amhara region. Presentations were made by Drs. Annabel and Tekleab from the Population Council and Ato Berihun Degu, Amhara Regional Youth and Sports Bureau on the project interventions and findings of the end-line survey of the early marriage prevention project. A key highlight of the research findings was the contribution made by targeted literacy, RH, and livelihood and community-based social change interventions on delaying early marriage.

Close to a hundred people from governmental and non-governmental organizations, UN agencies, and others were in attendance and raised various issues in relation to the presentations made. A documentary film produced by Engel Entertainment narrating the early marriage prevention intervention project in the Amhara region was also shown during the event.



Women First Run, 23 March 2008



Participants of Women First Run

“Stop Early Marriage” was UNFPA Ethiopia’s slogan for the 2008 Women First Run which took place on 23 March 2008 and in which close to 7000 participants, including 185 elite athletes, took part. This all-women race highlighted the importance of fighting the practice of early marriage and the participants gave enthusiastic support through their participation. UNFPA Ethiopia, together with CONCERN and DKT-Ethiopia, co-sponsored this annual event for the 5th consecutive year.

“Stop Early Marriage” campaign continues to roll-out in the Regions

The “Stop Early Marriage” campaign will continue in the course of 2008. Regional campaign events have been planned to take place in the three regions, namely Amhara, Benishangul-Gumuz, and Tigray, where the practice of early marriage is highly prevalent. The campaign will also have a resource mobilization objective – to generate resources for expansion of programmes on preventing and dealing with the effects of Early Marriage. Extension of the “Stop Early Marriage” campaign in the regions is also being explored with the National Coalition of Women Against HIV/AIDS (Chaired by Ethiopia’s First Lady) – through social mobilization efforts in the three regions where the prevalence of early marriage is very high.

UNFPA Ethiopia will also ensure that the campaign is linked with other advocacy and publicity events such as the United Nations week, sixteen days of activism against gender based violence, World AIDS day, etc.



UNFPA staff taking pictures with the artists

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