BERHAN project, Ethiopia: "If my parents want me to marry early, I will say no"

By Sarah Easter, Emergency Communications Officer, CARE Germany and CARE Austria

"I was around 15 when my first daughter was born. I was in labor longer than 24 hours and had a lot of pain. Since the birth, I have health problems and still did not recover fully from the pain," describes Astella, around 34. She was married when she was around 12. She is not sure how old she was, as she never had the age verification done, which is a common practice in Ethiopia to determine if a girl is old enough to marry. Astella is one of 15 million child brides in Ethiopia. With four in ten girls marrying before they turn 18, Ethiopia has one of the highest early marriage rates in the world. Astella has six children now. She looks at the framed pictures of her two oldest daughters in their graduation caps. They are going to college now. „I was married very early. At the age of 12, I already managed my household fully. I have to walk very far every day to fetch water, go to the market or to our fields to do farm work. My back suffered the worst and I feel tired all the time," Astella continues.

1 school year = 10% more earnings

When girls marry early it has a lot of health risks for the mothers and the newborns, but also a socially, economically, and psychologically impact. Girls married early are more likely to experience violence, abuse, and forced sexual relations due to unequal power relations. Astella dropped out of school when she was 12 to manage her household. Education, including comprehensive sexuality education, is essential for girls to be able to make informed decisions about their sexual health and wellbeing. According to the United Nations, every school year accounts for up to 10% more earnings. Education also links directly to child mortality. Children of mothers with secondary education or higher are twice as likely to survive beyond age five as those whose mothers have no education. Each extra year of a mother's schooling reduces the probability of infant mortality by 5% to 10%. Ethiopia ranks in the top five with the highest numbers of deaths for children under the age of five.

Astella now advocates against early marriage. She also told her daughters to wait. "I know the severity of the pain, so I advise my daughters to not marry early or give birth early. I tell them, 'You can marry any time when you are physically, emotionally, and economically ready'."

Negotiating against early marriage

CARE supports communities in Ethiopia to reduce early marriage cases. In the last twenty years, the number of early marriages has dropped. CARE works closely with communities to inform and educate about the consequences of early marriage.

"I heard a rumor that my father accepted a proposal for my marriage," remembers Eyerus, 14. "I was very depressed and angry when I heard about it. Why do I have to marry? I didn't want to stop going to school." She is in the 8th grade and her favorite school subject is geography. In her free time, she supports her family or reads a book. She reported her proposal to her school director, who is a facilitator in one of CARE's Social Analysis and Action (SAA) groups. In these groups, community members come together to talk about social norms and traditions and challenge and transform them. Eyerus then confronted her father Derso, 51, about the rumor. He said the reason for the marriage is to strengthen his family ties. Eyerus then negotiated until her father accepted her arguments. He cancelled the proposal and returned the 7.000 Ethiopian Birr (about 133 Euros) he already received from the family. "I understood that our community needs to transform and that this was the only right consequence," explains Derso and looks at his daughter proudly. He agrees to let his daughter go back to school. "I now even tell my neighbors that it is important that girls continue their education."

Confident as a girl

"It felt good to be able to convince my father to change his mind. I learnt how to negotiate in the girl's group. I also learnt how to be self-confident and what consequences early marriage has," explains Eyerus. CARE initiated girls' groups in communities that teach girls through different discussion sessions about life skills. The girls come together and sit on

Eyerus next to Tadella at a girl's group meeting

small stones in a big circle. "I learnt to be confident as a girl," Tadella, 14, a member of the girl's group says, showing her workbook that covers different topics – one of which also includes early marriage. "If my parents want me to marry early, I will say no." Before she attended the meetings, she was too shy to speak up. "I can now speak about my own ideas. I want to be a doctor and save lives."

Each girl's group session has a facilitator who moderates the discussion and supports the girls with their workbooks. Hawulte, 18, is one of these facilitators. She married at the age of 15. "I dropped out of school because my family pressured me into marriage. I have one son and gave birth when I was 16. Since then, I have been struggling with my health. I joined the girl's group, which helped me to feel better. Before, I was stressed and anxious. I didn't understand why my friends were allowed to continue school," says Hawulte.

Changing social norms

Before the girl's group, she did not know the consequences of early marriage. When she asks the girls sitting in the circle, nearly everyone raises their hands. The answers they give Hawulte are: serious injuries during birth, the uterus not being fully developed yet, more vulnerable to infections such as HIV, economic problems, domestic violence, and social discrimination.

Through CARE´s SAA groups and girl's groups, social norms are changing, and early marriage cases are dropping, which leads to a reduction in child mortality, higher education for girls, and better maternal health.