



## Negotiating gender norms in the context of equal access to education in north-western Tigray, Ethiopia

Thera Mjaaland

To cite this article: Thera Mjaaland (2018) Negotiating gender norms in the context of equal access to education in north-western Tigray, Ethiopia, *Gender and Education*, 30:2, 139-155, DOI: 10.1080/09540253.2016.1175550

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2016.1175550>



Published online: 17 May 2016.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 172



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)



# Negotiating gender norms in the context of equal access to education in north-western Tigray, Ethiopia

Thera Mjaaland

Independent Scholar, University of Bergen, UiB Global, Bergen, Norway

## ABSTRACT

Girls in Tigray region in North Ethiopia have over the past decade started to outnumber boys up through primary and secondary education in terms of enrolment rates. But underage marriage still hampers rural girls' pursuit of education. Left unchallenged by governmental efforts to address marriage of underage girls is the female virginity ideal and the burden of sexual morality which girls continue to shoulder, and that sustains the practice. It is also a fact that despite positive enrolment rates, girls score on average lower than boys on the national exams. This article explores whether the modesty that girls are socialised into through the virginity ideal in order to acquire respect in the community impinges on the assertive drive and energy necessary for educational success. This ethnographic study, which focused on gendered processes of social reproduction and change by utilising education as the site for investigation, is based on long-term involvement in the administrative district Asgede Tsimbla Wereda in north-western Tigray from 1993 to the present. What will be addressed here are gender norms that continue to be reproduced in spite of the significant changes in Ethiopia's laws and policies to amend former gender injustice, and which have brought unprecedented numbers of Ethiopian girls into school.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 April 2015

Accepted 17 March 2016

## KEYWORDS

Girls' education; marriage of underage girls; virginity; normative femaleness; boys' responsibility; north-western Tigray; Ethiopia

## Introduction

Providing education for all, both boys and girls, has gained momentum over the past two decades in Ethiopia as part of its development strategy to become a middle-income country by the mid-2020s (FDRE-MOE 2010; FDRE-MOFED 2010). This article explores gender norms that continue to pass unquestioned in spite of changes in policy ensuring judicial gender equality and educational opportunities for girls that their mothers and grandmothers did not have. The methods applied in this ethnographic study for my Ph. D. degree in gender and development were grounded in participatory observation during 15 months of fieldwork between 2008 and 2012 in one semi-urban and one rural community in the administrative district Asgede Tsimbla Wereda<sup>1</sup> in north-western Tigray in North Ethiopia. My fair command of the local language Tigrinya has also enabled informal dialogue that spans the time from my first visit in 1993 to the present. The life-story-based interviews conducted in 2008 with 25 women ranging in age

between 18 and 75 were part of this ongoing dialogue, and reflected lives that have been structurally conditioned by different historical contexts with diverging opportunities for women in education. Two exploratory enquetes were conducted in 2009. These included 170 women aged between 18 and 75 in 109 semi-urban and 61 rural households, and 200 students (113 girls and 87 boys) aged 15–20 in grades 8–11, who were asked about marital and educational history as well as means of survival and support. The students also wrote a short essay about how they envisioned their future. When a documentary film disseminating the research findings back to the community was shot in the rural and semi-urban research location in 2012 (Mjaaland and Ashebir 2014), one group interview with parents/elders (12 men aged 40–80 and 2 women aged 40–50), and individual interviews with 6 male students aged 17–20 in grade 10–11, were conducted. Lastly, a follow-up fieldwork was carried out over two months in 2015.

The analytical perspective is based on Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) conceptual framework where a basic premise is that what is taken for granted in social practice enables misrecognition of and, hence, the social reproduction of power and domination – also in gender relations (Bourdieu 2001). 'Habitus', the hard-lived generative principle that is structured by practices adjusted to specific material environments, or specific 'fields' with their own unspoken rules, presume internalisation of this structural conditioning of practices and perceptions without conscious involvement. Consequently, and similar to the dynamics defined as 'adaptive preferences', it becomes possible to condone practices that goes against one's own empowerment (cf. Khader 2011). In fact, despite enrolment rates for girls having started to surpass boys in primary and secondary school in Tigray over the past decade (e.g. TRS-EB 2007, 2010, 2014), girls continue to score on average lower marks than boys on the national exams (FDRE-MOE 2015). The question is therefore whether the virginity ideal, which requires girls to be modest and 'hold back' in public in order to acquire respect in the community, impinges on the assertive drive and energy necessary for educational success. Hence, this article answers to the growing concern that gender inequalities persist despite rising numbers of girls enrolling in school (e.g. Chisamya et al. 2012; Unterhalter 2012; Unterhalter et al. 2014).

## Revolution, education and gender equality

Inspired by Tinkler and Jackson's (2014) concept of 'historical sensibility', I will, however, start by taking a swift detour in Ethiopia's educational history to avoid giving the impression that all changes in the country's education and gender policies can be attributed to the current global focus on girls' education. Up until the twentieth century and the establishment of public schooling in Ethiopia, education had, according to Tekeste (1990), been a male preserve belonging to the religious domain where the Ethiopian Orthodox Church<sup>2</sup> had close to monopoly. After public schooling in Ethiopia was introduced in 1908, girls continued, however, to be marginalised in modern education even though they were not *de jure* excluded. It took until 1931 before the first public school providing both primary and secondary education was established for girls; albeit mainly coming from upper-class families (e.g. Emebet 1998). While an educated elite had been important for Emperor Haile Selassie's autocratic rule as well as modernisation project, he found that precisely students played a central role in ousting him from power in 1974. Under socialist pretensions of educating the masses, the military regime (1974–1991) who had hijacked

this popular revolution, sent thousands of students to remote rural areas to carry out literacy campaigns (and to get them out of the way). While boosting the literacy rates for both women and men, these campaigns also became a tool for political indoctrination (e.g. Tekeste 1996; Balsvik 2007).

In Tigray, only about 5% of the population had access to public schooling up until the commencement of the liberation struggle in 1975 (see Hammond 1989). For Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), as with other Marxist–Leninist-inspired liberation movements in the 1970s and 1980s, 'education to the people' (*tīmhirti nīhafash*), to raise both men's and women's consciousness (*nīqīhat*) as a prerequisite for social change in a Freirean sense (Freire 1972), was of political concern. In the revolutionary rhetoric of the time, education was not only seen as instrumental in TPLF's pursuit for seizing power in Ethiopia, but for the building of a more just society afterwards – also gender-wise.

Coinciding with an intensified global focus on education for *all*, both boys and girls, the TPLF-based coalition, Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) in government since 1991, has persisted in its commitment to education as a prerequisite for equitable growth and transformation of the country. In fact, the focus on gender equality in current laws and policies can be traced back to the revolutionary movements of the 1970s and 1980s in Ethiopia. For example, having taken up arms to fight alongside men during the liberation struggle in Tigray (1975–1991), Tigrayan women had been actively engaged in 'their own revolution within a revolution' (Gebru Tareke 1983, quoted in Tsegay 1999, 82) for equality (*maī'rnet*), albeit not without controversy (e.g. Young 1997; Hammond 1999; Zelalem 2015). In the poem 'Our Equality', written and recited by a girl in grade 9 at a female students' forum in the secondary school in my study area, this contribution from their mothers' and grandmothers' generation is acknowledged:

In the past girls suffered  
 We didn't know what education was  
 We had to endure being mistreated  
 One who gave birth to a girl was likened to one who sells salt [at a loss]  
 So this made us decide to struggle through ups and downs  
 From this situation could it get worse?  
 Wearing shorts which other women wouldn't  
 [Our feet] being pierced by thorns  
 Counting bullets like gravel  
 We were fighting paying with our lives  
 So we have reaped what was sowed  
 I'm done here my sisters  
 I hope you understood me  
 So we are remembering this  
 We must not to let down our sister who struggled [in the past]  
 Let's just lead like those [women] who led us.<sup>3</sup>

Tigrayan fighter-women's claims for equality as an integral part of the liberation struggle, while distancing themselves from Western (radical) feminism (Mjaaland 2013), laid the ground for new generations of girls having equal access to education as boys. In fact, schools have popped up 'everywhere', also in remote rural areas since I came to north-western Tigray for the first time in the aftermath of the struggle. According to the unpublished records of Asgede Tsimbla Wereda Education Bureau, the first permanent primary school had started up in the district's administrative centre, the market town Endabaguna,

in 1969, with three more schools being built during Emperor Haile Selassie reign. This number had increased to nine at the time of the downfall of the military regime in 1991, with the extensive teaching organised by TPLF in temporary huts or under trees during the struggle not being included. For the school-year 2014/2015, the number of schools in the wereda had increased to 63 primary schools, 3 secondary schools, plus 44 satellite schools providing different levels of education between grades 1 and 4 in temporary built huts in the rural areas (personal communication, 2015). This expansion has been imperative, not least for rural girls, who now can finish grade 8 in their home village without having to move away from home.

Likewise, and despite significant differences between regions in Ethiopia, net enrolment rates on a national level have increased steadily from around one-fifth of all 7-year-olds in 1991 (see UNICEF 2008), to 92.6% (95.1% boys and 90.1% girls) for the school-year 2013/2014 (FDRE-MOE 2015); in Tigray it is 100% (TRS-EB 2014). However, less than half of the enrolled boys and girls complete primary school. This 'leakage' is also reflected in the net enrolment rate in secondary school which for grades 9–10 was 19.6% boys and 20.9% girls on a national level; in Tigray 46.89% of boys and 52.82% of girls. For grades 11–12 it was 5.5% of both boys and girls on a national level; in Tigray 10.3% of boys and 10.83% for girls. However, while the educational system 'leaks' boys and girls in close to equal numbers in primary and secondary school, female students still comprised only 30.3% of the total number of university students in 2013/2014 (FDRE-MOE 2015). Around one-fifth of these female students enter under the affirmative action scheme that accepts girls with lower marks than boys. The question is, therefore, which gender norms continue to be actualised when girls want to continue their education through secondary to tertiary level?

## Negotiating underage marriage and education

Up until recently, sending girls to school had been considered unimportant in Ethiopia, since their fate was to be married off at an early age. According to Haile Gabriel Dagne (1994a, 1994b), the reasons for sustaining the practice of underage marriage in Ethiopia is based on (1) securing children's future before parents get old and die, (2) alliance-building between families and upward mobility of status through marriage, and where waiting too long might leave their daughters out of the competition, (3) avoiding that the girl is stigmatised as either having low morals, or as too old to marry, and (4) the issue of virginity. A peasant woman and female head of household in her 50s reflected on her own experience:

I didn't know about education, I didn't know the person I was engaged to, they brought him and forced the engagement on me. I got married at the age of 13. I gave birth at the age of 15, without any education. [...] With TPLF the revolution came. Meetings were conducted in the shade under trees (laughs), and we were able to gain some level of consciousness as we met with other people [with new ideas]. Then school was opened immediately. Adults also started learning in the meetings under trees. TPLF maintained their commitment to education, and we are sending our children to school today. [...] Marriage age was raised to 15 [for girls during the struggle]; people, including women, gained consciousness when learning. Women started to know what is good for them, and choose for themselves. This change came about as a result of education.

Hence, underage marriage was addressed during the liberation struggle when it was decided that the girl should be at least 15. Joining the struggle had also been a way for young girls to avoid being married to someone they hardly knew, or a way out for women who wanted to escape the marriages that had been arranged for them without their consent (Mjaaland 2004). In fact, change in marriage age for girls has occurred since some of the older women I interviewed had been married at around the age of 9–11, while their now middle-aged daughters had been around 12–14 years of age when entering marriage.<sup>4</sup>

Today, rural girls in north-western Tigray, where the liberation struggle had started, continue, however, to encounter the issue of marriage at around the age of 15 despite the legal marriage age for both boys and girls now being 18 after federal and regional revisions of the Family Law since 2000 (FDRE 2000; TRS 2007). Even though the Criminal Code amended in 2004 has instituted imprisonment for up to 3–7 years for the involved parties – depending on whether the girl's age is above or below 13 (FDRE 2005) – weddings with underage brides still take place openly in the rural areas of Asgede Tsimbla Wereda in north-western Tigray without any interference worth mentioning from local authorities. This resistance to change is also mentioned by Camfield and Yisak (2011) in their research on community understandings of childhood transitions for girls (as opposed to boys) in Ethiopia. Resistance is also reflected in the answer given by a community leader who, when I confronted him with the fact that he had taken his daughter out of school after grade 9 and married her underage, replied: 'We have demolished that law ourselves'.

Some parents even promise their daughter to continue education after she is married to make her accept marriage. However, they are also well aware of that her husband and in-laws might be reluctant to let her continue school, or count on her soon falling pregnant and forget about education. One rural girl, first married in grade 8 at the age of 14, and despite having managed to divorce her husband within one year, found that her parents soon re-married her to preserve her moral reputation. Promising her to continue school if she married again, her education was, nevertheless, still pending one year after her second wedding. She lamented: 'Afterwards they haven't mentioned it with one word!' A female grade 10 student from the same rural area explained the pressure that these girls can be subject to: 'If the girl refuses to marry, she risks being thrown out from home. They will tell her, "leave"! With no means to continue her education on her own, she will comply.' Her father had wanted to marry her in grade 5, but when she notified her teacher who intervened, he cancelled the plan and allowed her to continue school.

However, these girls are dependent on both moral and economic support to be able to continue their education; if not from parents, from other relatives, including older brothers and sisters (see also Camfield 2011). One rural woman in her early 20s told how she and her sisters had supported each other: 'I and my older sister said that it's better to continue education. We said that we didn't want to be married. My younger sister did the same thing. All of us refused to marry.' Another young woman in her early 20s also told how access to education had made a difference when marriage had been at stake when she was still underage:

Yes, at first ... I said, 'not before I have finished school'. In fact, they had engaged me before I was born. They [the boy's parents] had told my father to promise that he will give me to them

after I was born. He then told them something like, 'okay, we shall see'. Suddenly, when I was in grade 3, my father died. After the death of my father, they asked my mother to give me [in marriage] to their son, and she told them, 'hah, let her mature first, learn, and afterwards if she wants to, she can get married. If she doesn't want to, she will not [marry]'. Then ... when they asked me to marry I didn't want to. 'I will learn', I told them. Then engagement was broken off. He got married to another that means; I went to school.

So, while underage marriage continues to complicate these rural girls' pursuit of education, access to education provides them with a bargaining card. However, when the rural girl above failed her grade 10 exam, she lost out on her possibility to bargain further and was soon pressured into marrying (albeit no longer underage). Hence, while underage marriage can be represented as preventing girls from continuing their education (which is not wrong per se), it is important to acknowledge how female students can *appeal* to education in negotiations with their parents to avoid being married. Girls' insistence might also results in parents changing their mind, especially if she is a clever student and manages to mobilise support for her pursuit from other family members or teachers.

Bourdieu acknowledges generational conflicts in his conceptual framework, because different material environments in a historical sense and, hence, different 'modes of generation', generate differences in parents' and offspring's 'habitus' (1977, 78). Bourdieu's argument is that power and forms of exploitation are misrecognised in the affectionate kinship relation between parents and offspring, since affectionate dispositions enables 'habitus' to generate impulses to obey or injunctions of duty that make offspring comply with the older generation's priorities counter to their own interests (1990, 160). These impulses to obey or injunctions of duty towards the older generation are much in line with the respect and obedience that children are socialised into in the Ethiopian context (see also Poluha 2004). Parents' use of pressure indicates, however, that these impulses are not sufficient to make their offspring comply with what they, as parents, consider important when new opportunities, in terms of education, are available. In fact, threatening to reject their daughters and throw them out from home, or to hold back resources for education is an *explication* rather than misrecognition of parents' power. Rural female students can also *explicate* their resistance towards parents' authority on the issue of underage marriage when wanting to continue their education. Rather, generational conflicts plays out in ways that *might* make children comply, but not necessarily, depending on the girl's own determination to pursue an education (see also Emebet 1998, 2004).

Simply classifying underage marriage as an adverse practice that impedes girls' education misses out on these generational negotiations. Emerging in the exploratory household enquete I conducted with women who were asked about the importance (or not) of education was the parental wish for their sons and daughters to have a less harsh life than they have had. However, a contradiction is at stake here in a gendered sense, as the educational trajectory is seen as risky for the girls as opposed to the boys. So despite education's positive contribution to marriage age increasing, a threshold for further change has been reached at around the age of 15 among rural girls in this area of Tigray. In the following I will, therefore, explore socio-cultural dynamics that constitute this threshold.



## The issue of female virginity

As mentioned above, the revisions of the Family Law, which sets the legal marriage age for both girls and boys to 18, runs counter to socio-cultural sentiments in this rural area of north-western Tigray. One widowed peasant woman, who is an elected member for her village in the wereda council and active in the Women's Association of Tigray, explained the difference between socio-cultural sentiments and the current government's stand on underage marriage as follows:

What is called the 18-years policy on underage marriage in the Family Law [...] the society has not accepted it. What is the reason for this [resistance]? It's said that if the girl has to wait until the age of 18, she will lose her virginity, another boy will have an affair with her, in the meantime she will lose her beauty, and when married her husband will divorce her. This is why the society doesn't accept the law. Why is this so? It is because the society doesn't understand what is to be gained [from the revised law]. Otherwise, what the policy says when setting the age for marriage in the Family Law to 18, the reason given for this is that at 18 she will be matured, she will also be physically ready for marriage, she will have developed love for her married life, and hence, will not divorce her husband; that's what the government policy says. What the peasants' 'policy' says, however, is that if she waits until she's 18, she will lose her virginity, another boy will have an affair with her, and the boy she marries will divorce her. These [views] do not meet; the awareness of the educated and that of the uneducated is different. [...] If not marrying her until 18 the society will say that she has become an 'old girl' (considered too old for marriage), that's it ... they will insult us [parents] by saying how come she is mature and not married. So, for this reason, the society is not respecting this law, that's it.

The fear parents have of being exposed to shame in the case of their daughter losing her virginity and being considered 'damaged' (*tebalashiya*), even falling pregnant with a boyfriend, might therefore hold them back from sending their daughters to secondary school in town. Girls are considered sexually mature and ready to be married when they enter puberty, or 'fire age' (*tikus i'dme*), at around the age of 15 when she puts on weight and her breasts start showing. It is expected that girls will start having sex at that age, whether married or not. According to prevailing sentiments, it makes a difference, however, if she makes this transgression from childhood to womanhood on her own or in a socio-culturally sanctioned manner through a marriage arranged by her parents (Mjaaland 2004). Hence, securing the respectability of these girls, and with it, her parents' respect (*kibri*) in the community might still weight more than the perceived benefits of girls' education (see also Camfield and Yisak 2011; Boyden, Pankhurst, and Yisak 2012). In fact, it is considered a close to impossible task to protect their daughters' virginity until the age of 18, especially when continuing secondary school in town outside her parents' control. One peasant woman in her late 50s said:

Because of nature (*tefet'iro*; sexual urges), and with friendships in school that means, the boy and the girl may start to socialise, right? Then she is carried away. To wait until she is 18 is unobtainable. A girl must [therefore] be married at the age of 15. She has to marry at 15, before going astray, eh? Yes, to not go astray when she is still a child, she must be married. But [to wait with] marriage till 18 [...] she will take off on her own [be sexually active].

Discussing the issue with another peasant woman in her early 50s, this notion of girls 'going astray' if they are not married early resurfaced when asserting: 'When they have finished grade 8 or grade 10, even grade 12, they will start to make their own decisions. [...]



We therefore marry our daughters early to prevent them from going astray.’ The notion that girls who go to school become independent and start to make their own decisions, well in line with the emancipatory aspect of education in a feminist sense, is at issue here. Despite all the rural girls who are not ‘going astray’ when they move to town to continue in secondary school, those who do and end up pregnant contribute to a reconfirmation of the perception that girls will strike the first opportunity to jump to bed with a boyfriend when they are outside the control of their families. As one peasant in his mid-40s said: ‘Your children are equal; you don’t differentiate between daughters and sons. When it comes to school, however, it’s true, since you are afraid she will cheat on you by having a boyfriend; you don’t trust her that means.’ The reason why this ‘cheating’ is an issue for the girls only and not for the boys who have girlfriends is that brides can still be returned under the pretence that she is not a virgin, despite the uncertainty connected to establishing if a girl is a virgin or not in a medical sense (e.g. Hegazy and Al-Rukban 2012).<sup>5</sup> The elected member for her village in the wereda council, referred above, explained:

It’s the rule for us that she has to keep her virginity, if she stays a girl [virgin] she is respected, that’s it, even for the boy [who marries her] it signifies respectability, and it attributes respect to the family. If she hasn’t stayed a girl [virgin] that’s it, it’s demoting [everyone]; in our culture it’s an insult.

*-What about the boys?*

Concerning boys, there is nothing of the kind. Nobody asks if a boy is virgin, or whether a boy has ever been with a woman and the like, never, but it’s not right! In our system, in our law, in the laws of the Orthodox Church, boys and girls are equal; both must stay a virgin. But in practice there is pressure [only on the girl]. A boy, even if he has affairs with women [before marriage], will not be insulted if he has lost his virginity. But the girl, even if she was raped, or abducted, people will not be considerate towards her. She will be considered to have given away her virginity, to be a prostitute, that’s it, and will be divorced. This difference is not addressed by the law, that’s it, this [continues to] suppress women. Even if the boy has affairs with women, he’s not considered immoral, but if the girl loses her virginity, she’s insulted. That’s how it is.

Rendered unacceptable during the liberation struggle from the organised women’s point of view within TPLF, as one female cadre recounted, was to return a bride on a donkey in shame if she was found not to be a virgin. The fact that she could be returned was *not* questioned.

I have often been assured by officials and the public alike that underage marriage of girls is a rural problem, and that the issue of female virginity is not that crucial in urban areas if it is love between them and *she* is open about having been with somebody else. But discussing with a male secondary school teacher in his early 30s, and relating the issue to rural boys, he corrected me and said: ‘Virginity is not only important for rural boys; urban men would also prefer to marry a virgin.’ Then he added: ‘But even the girls think that virginity is important.’ His point was confirmed in a small enquete conducted with 14 students (3 boys and 11 girls aged 14–18) in grades 8–12 at the peer-to-peer club connected to youth-friendly reproductive health services in the wereda on my follow-up fieldwork in 2015. Except for one boy and two girls, all ticked off the box for ‘yes’ when presented with the following statement: ‘Scientifically, it cannot be proved if a girl has had sex or not by inspecting the hymen. Do you still think virginity for girls is important?’ This suggests that female virginity continue to be internalised by these girls as a female ideal necessary to secure their respectability in the

community. In fact, the wording used for the hymen (*kibre nitsihina*) means that her respect is dependent on keeping it intact.

When bringing up the issue of female virginity, I have been struck by the general lack of knowledge of what the hymen actually is also among educated people, men and women alike (including in my own country Norway). Consequently, and due to the fact that female virginity continues to pass unquestioned, it sustains the institution of underage marriage in order to prevent the girls from 'going astray' and becoming 'damaged'. The fact that parents feel they will not be able to control their daughter's sexuality after she has entered puberty explains why the process of change in underage marriage seems to have reached a threshold at around the age of 15; and especially so for rural girls who have to leave home to continue secondary school in town. Even though the involved parties risk imprisonment if the girl is married below the age of 18, they can still count on the law not being enforced (see also Camfield and Yisak 2011). Since official registration at birth has been deficient or lacking up till now, parents can also claim that their daughter is older than she actually is, making it difficult to prosecute in these cases.<sup>6</sup>

Based on girls' own accounts, teachers are among those state employees who most often intervene in the case of underage marriage by arguing that the girls should finish their education first. However, the common notion that girls are 'hot' and *want* to be married when entering puberty continues to be used also by teachers to justify *not* intervening in the case of underage marriage. Teachers are also concerned about not severing the trust they are dependent on in the community in order to make parents enrol their children, both girls and boys, in school. Furthermore, while underage marriage is one of the issues raised in separate forums for female students in secondary school in this area, the male students, who might still want to marry a virgin, are absent.

### Secret love relations in school and boys' responsibility

Both boys and girls are expected to have strong sexual urges when they enter 'fire age' at puberty. The issue of nature (*tefet'iro*) is central for understanding the extent to which an individual is perceived to be in control when sexual urges set in. As one male student in grade 10 said, 'if it's love, you cannot help yourself since this is natural'. Sexual urges are believed to be equally strong gender-wise, but it is a clear difference as to how females and males are expected to deal with it. While it is considered too much to ask of a boy/man to go against nature, this is clearly different for the girls/women; they are expected to 'hold back' their sexual desire (see also Mulumebet 2006). It is also she who faces the consequence if not being able to do so. One male student in grade 10 explained:

Even though they did it together [had sex], she is the one called 'damaged'; the mistake is attributed to her. This is a result of our culture that means. Since this culture has been there from the past, together with lack of education and poor knowledge; it's according to this culture that it's still expected of a girl to stay [a virgin] even if it might be a problem for her. Hence, it's considered her fault only [if she doesn't]. [...] Since this culture hasn't been left, parents have to bring him a virgin [to marry] that means. This doesn't mean that he hasn't been with anyone before, because he can be with someone [before he marries]. But for the girl it's still said she must be a virgin; this is a result of culture.

So while some of the interviewed male students mentioned that using contraceptives can prevent the girl from falling pregnant while still in school, *she* would be the one classified

as 'damaged'. She will be left to shoulder the shame; and especially so if she falls pregnant. So when asking more about what would happen to the boy, the male grade 10 student, referred above, elaborated:

It's not known [who the boy is]. No, it's not known. It remains unknown. This problem is the result of culture. Since it's the girl who gets pregnant and it happened secretly, it's not possible to know who the boy is. This is just how nature traps girls that means.

Clearly, the secrecy surrounding these love affairs in school is not to these girls' advantage, as it gives boys the possibility of denying any knowledge about it and run away from their responsibility. One male student in grade 11 explained:

Because it's the girl who gets pregnant, and the burden befalls her, he might simply walk away. The society's backwardness and cultural attitudes influence you. Of course it shouldn't but since you are part of the society, that's it, it does. [ ... ] [So] when she gets pregnant he can leave her; he might even threaten her to not reveal his identity. Then when she is asked who made her pregnant, even though she knows, she will say 'I don't know'. [ ... ] If she doesn't disclose him, nobody will know. Even though the society might know who he is, and even though there might be gossip, he's not called to account for his acts.

When pushed on the issue, some of these male students agreed (albeit reluctantly) that this was not fair to the girl. As one of them said: 'Since it is natural and simply happens, both should be made accountable for this mistake.' Nevertheless, male students who would not hold themselves back from love affairs in school still expected their future wife to be a virgin. The two main reasons the interviewed male students gave as to why they wanted to marry a virgin were that they thought they could not trust a woman who had been with another man, *and* that they felt the pressure from parents and the society to do so. In fact, having observed gendered dynamics in specific households over time has revealed that, while a rural girl can manage to negotiate her way out of underage marriage by appeals to education, her brothers would still want to (and is expected to) marry a virgin who eventually drops out of school. Rather than change in these hard-lived sentiments, a male supervisor at the wereda education bureau noted: 'What we see emerging now is that female students from grade 10 [and above] will not be considered suitable marriage partners since it is simply assumed that they have already had sex.'

Some male students even claimed that it is the girl's responsibility to protect herself, and if she ended up 'damaged' and pregnant, it was because she had not been well advised at home. Hence, boys can take advantage of socio-cultural sentiments that continue to blame the girls and relieve the boys of their responsibility. Discussing the UK-based *Young Men's Project*, Osborn (2006) notes that young men are commonly subject to low expectations when it comes to taking responsibility in sexual matters. Consequently, an opportunity for boys and young men to resist and challenge socio-cultural norms and stereotypes regarding masculinity as well as how to express themselves as responsible and caring men, sex partners and fathers is, in his opinion, more often than not, missed.

However, as mentioned above, there were male students whose perspectives were different. They asserted that they would marry the girl they loved irrespective of her being a virgin or not. As one male student in grade 11 said: 'It is education that will bring change over time.' He continued:

Since we [who go to school] have changed our attitudes a little compared to those who are not educated, I believe that this [change] will continue, and that we over time will be able to leave behind those aspects of our culture which legitimise bad practices.

In the meantime, and despite the fact that girls in Tigray have started to outnumber boys in primary and secondary school in terms of enrolment rates over the past decade, hard-lived socio-cultural sentiments continue to put the burden of sexual morality on the girl. Strategies to empower girls by getting them into school at par with boys do not address these hard-lived inequalities in gender norms. In the following I will therefore discuss how normative femaleness impinges on Tigrayan girls' success in and through secondary school, and consequently, their transition to higher education.

### **Normative femaleness and educational success: a contradiction?**

Female students' wish for a less harsh life than their mothers and grandmothers have lived in the rural area with numerous childbirths and heavy workloads has become dependent on succeeding in education. However, as addressed above, parents' fear that their daughter will have a boyfriend in school and ruin both her own and her parents' respect in the community if ending up 'damaged' and pregnant makes it risky to educate the girls. For example, Boyden and colleagues emphasise in their discussion of what has been classified as harmful traditional practices in Ethiopia (such as underage marriage) that parents 'resistance to change often centres on the belief that they know best what risks their daughters confront and that tried and tested customary practices is the most effective means of protection' (Boyden, Pankhurst, and Yisak 2012, 520–521). Rural girls, in my area of study in north-western Tigray, are also aware of the risk they take if they do not stay focused on their studies; and might take deliberate steps to avoid distractions that can taint their reputation. One rural female student in grade 10, herself having avoided underage marriage, said:

Not to fail yourself [in your educational pursuit], you have to take care not getting too close [to a boy], especially if you have a goal to accomplish, as I have. I don't know for sure, but I guess that I will be able to avoid it. [ ... ] To other [girls I will say]: don't end up in a bad situation like that. I will tell them the consequence of this kind of action and urge them to protect themselves before it's too late. What I mean is, if there is a sexually mature girl and a sexually mature boy they don't have to be intimate, but if they are, they don't need to have sex; which is the first means of protection. Second, in the case the boy keeps coming, if the girl has set her goal, if she truly has made up her mind [to have an education], I would try to convince her not to spoil it by surrendering to the temptation. I will tell her that if she sticks to her plan, it will make her happy in the future. This is the advice I want to give other girls.

Another female student in grade 11, from the same rural area, emphasised:

I don't want to have a boyfriend at this stage since I want to achieve the goal I have set for myself that means. Boys might say at first that they want me to help them with cooking. If I allow them to come close, I know they are able to do things that can hold me back from reaching my goal. [ ... ] My schoolmates, even the girls, are bullying me for my stand by calling me backward, 'why doesn't she want to be close to anybody', they say, but I don't care, and it does not affect me. I'm focused on my goal, and if I break it just because I'm afraid of what they will call me, I have failed. So when they bully me, I just ignore it and move on.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, on the one hand, these girls set themselves up against gender norms by being assertive and challenge their parents' authority when demanding to continue their

education in town as opposed to being married underage. On the other hand, they succumb to the normative femaleness that require of them to be modest and 'hold back' their sexuality, as a trade-off that makes it possible for them to pursue education in the first place, risking female peers' spite in the process. While underage marriage hits rural girls harder than their urban age-mates in my study area, since urban girls can continue to stay at home when continuing to secondary school, all run up against 'frontiers' in relation to sexual morality in ways that male students do not. To avoid the social label of being 'damaged', or 'immoral', one strategy that these girls can, and do use, in order to accomplish their educational goals is, therefore, to comply with normative femaleness, which require of them to be modest and 'hold back' to avoid the society's moral gaze. However, while 'holding back' in relation to the opposite sex might keep these girls from falling pregnant while still in school, it is not necessarily conducive to being an assertive student eager to ask and answer questions in class. In fact, 'I hold back' (*ane suq ile*), which can be used about not being sexually active, is also an expression that girls and women often use about their own withheld behaviour in public and when men are present (see also Mjaaland 2004). Hence, the female virginity ideal, when internalised as a gendered requirement for respectability that pass unquestioned, would also condition these girls' school attainment since 'holding back' their assertiveness works counter to the drive and energy required for educational success as reflected in their lower scores than boys on national exams (FDRE-MOE 2015); pulling them back into marrying early. The fact that girls' socialisation impinges on their educational success is also asserted by Genet:

While boys are encouraged in ways that will enable them to achieve, compete and win, girls are discouraged to develop such traits because, they are not necessary for the stereotyped roles of housewives and mothers. Such an encouragement, which the girls are denied is a key factor that helps boys to develop the sense of competitiveness in their educational endeavours. [...] Being brought up in a patriarchal society, many women have developed a withdrawn attitude about their capacities and potentials in participating in education. (1998, 27)

'Doing gender' in West and Zimmerman's (1987) conceptualisation is in this context informed by a moral obligation to comply with what is perceived as the appropriate way of fulfilling the natural order where 'women' and 'men' are created by God as distinctly different and culturally assigned gender-specific practices and behaviours that should not go against the natural order; thus, holding gender relations in check (see also Krug 2000). Despite the changes to Ethiopian policies over the past decades in terms of gender justice, hard-lived socio-cultural sentiments pertaining to gender norms, described by Zenebework four decades ago, are still present:

So submission is so embedded in the attitude of society towards women that *energy* and *creativity* are synonymous with masculinity in spite of great contributions by women. Whenever a woman appears to be particularly gifted, she is complimented by comparison with men. (1976, 4; emphasis in original)

The notion that forthrightness in women is unfeminine (see also Bilen 2002) explains why the gender transgressing contribution of the fighter-women that took up arms during the liberation struggle in Tigray had placed them in the category 'men' (Mjaaland 2004, 2013). This points to what Cockburn and Clarke calls a 'femininity deficit' (2002, 661) in certain practices, and which generates embarrassment and holds girls back (in their UK study,

related to girls' participation in sports education). Poluha suggests that, since some ways of being an Ethiopian girl (or woman) are privileged over other alternatives, it is possible to talk about a 'hegemonic femininity' (2004, 149). Doing gender according to prevailing gender norms in the Tigrayan context maintains the distinction between male and female gender or, to paraphrase Schippers (2007), avoids threats to the hegemonic relationship between masculinity and femininity. Hence, when female forthrightness risks transgressing the gender distinction, normative femaleness, which obliges Tigrayan girls to be modest and 'hold back', is reaffirmed in order to not go 'male'.

Hard-lived gender norms that continue to pass unquestioned are also at issue in Tebeje and Gale's (2014) argument that, despite policies aiming at creating enabling environments for female students in higher educational institutions in Ethiopia, a patriarchal gender culture prevails that exposes women to prejudice about their academic capacities in terms of low expectations from male peers and teachers alike. These taken-for-granted gender assumptions and beliefs that sustain repressive gender relations and make women conform to structures of disadvantage indicate, as Tebeje and Cuthbert (2014) emphasise, that educational institutions in Ethiopia legitimise rather than transform prevailing gender norms, holding girls back in terms of their educational attainment. In line with my own reference to Bourdieu's focus on the misrecognition of power as enabling its reproduction in social practice, these authors argue that female students in higher educational institutions in Ethiopia 'are profoundly "misrecognised" and come to internalise this, risking the misrecognition of themselves as valid actors in this space' (Tebeje and Cuthbert 2014, 760).

Access to education constitutes an opportunity structure for girls (and boys) in my study area in north-western Tigray (and in Ethiopia in general) today. However, 'holding back', as internalised through the female virginity ideal, stands out, in my study, as the most hard-lived aspect of gender norms working counter to girls' success in and through education since it impinges on their assertiveness. The ultimate consequence of what Tebeje and Gale call a 'superficial framing of the problem and subsequent marginalization (or silences on) structural aspects of the problem' (2014, 12) is, as Milligan (2014) notes in her study of girls' educational pursuit in Kenya, that the causes for lack of success in and through education are individualised with girls being blamed, and blaming themselves, for their own educational failure. In fact, national and global strategies to get girls into school at par with boys, when based on a liberal strategy of what Mama terms 'entry-ism' (2007, 150), rather than a critical scrutiny of power and domination in gender relations, leaves, as in the Tigrayan case presented here, socio-cultural and institutional aspects of gender inequality for girls themselves to grapple with in their own lives.

## Conclusion

Global and national development strategies focused on equal access to education based on numerical parity measures to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment circumvent, as Aikman and Rao assert, the fact that 'attaining gender-equitable quality education requires multi-faceted strategies that address not only different dimensions of girls' and women's lives, but understand gendered relationships and structurally entrenched inequalities between women and men, girls and boys' (2012, 223–224). In the Tigrayan context, hard-lived socio-cultural sentiments relating to normative femaleness remain

unaddressed and continue to place Tigrayan girls at a disadvantage relative to boys, despite gender parity trends in enrolment up through secondary school. My ethnographic study from Asgede Tsimbla Wereda in north-western Tigray suggests that overcoming the 'holding back' that is internalised through the female virginity ideal, and which impinges on their assertive drive and energy in educational settings where men are present, is essential for girls in order to succeed in secondary school and manage the transition to higher education. This finding corresponds with authors like Sawade (2014) and Unterhalter et al. (2014), who suggest that the way forward concerning research (and work in the field) is a much stronger focus on normative gender relations and sexuality issues involving both girls and boys to ensure that girls not only have access but also succeed in and through education.

## Notes

1. The levels of administration concurring with elected decision-making bodies are federal, region, wereda (district) and tabia/kebele (sub-district).
2. According to the 2007 Census, 95.6% are Orthodox Christians and 4% are Muslims in the close to ethnically homogenous region of Tigray. On a federal level the numbers of Orthodox Christians are 43.5%, Muslims 33.9%, and Protestants 18.6% (FDRE-PCC 2008).
3. This translation of grade 9 student Faley Darcha's poem only paraphrases the Tigrinya rimes in order to communicate its meaning.
4. However, the socio-culturally preferred age gap of 7–10 years between the woman and the man (which still prevails) was rather reaffirmed than changed during the struggle when the boys' minimum age was set to 22.
5. Medically, the hymen is a reminiscent from the foetal stage. While the extent to which a girl has a hymen or not at birth can differ, the state of the hymen will also be in a natural process of change as the girl grows older, irrespective of sexual or other physical activities. In fact, if it happens that the hymen is still imperforated at the time when the girl starts menstruating, the menstrual blood cannot pass.
6. This point was also mentioned by the local leader of Women's Association of Tigray. The reason I can assert that parents manipulate with their daughters age is because I have known many of these girls since they were born. I would also cross-check age by asking parents about the age gap between their offspring.
7. These two quotes are from the documentary film made to disseminate the findings from my doctoral research back to the community in Tigray. When showing the film at a meeting the wereda education bureau arranged with bureaucrats, school directors/teachers, community representatives and parents before the start of the school-year in mid-September 2015, 'everybody' laughed (in disbelief) when the latter of these two girls claimed she did not have, and did not want to have, a boyfriend while still in school.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## References

(Ethiopian authors are listed by their first name)

- Aikman, Sheila, and Nitya Rao. 2012. "Gender Equality and Girls' Education: Investigating Frameworks, Disjunctures and Meanings of Quality Education." *Theory and Research in Education* 10 (3): 211–228.



- Balsvik, Randi Rønning. 2007. *The Quest for Expression: State and the University in Ethiopia under Three Regimes, 1952–2005*. Addis Ababa: Addis Ababa University Press.
- Bilen Gisaw. 2002. *Some Reflections on Criminalizing Domestic Violence Against Women with Emphasis on Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: CERTWID/Addis Ababa University.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 2001. *Masculine Domination*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Boyden, Jo, Alula Pankhurst, and Yisak Tafere. 2012. "Child Protection and Harmful Traditional Practices: Female Early Marriage and Genital Modification in Ethiopia." *Development in Practice* 22 (4): 510–522.
- Camfield, Laura. 2011. "'A Girl Never Finishes Her Journey': Mixing Methods to Understand Female Experiences of Education in Contemporary Ethiopia." *Research Papers in Education* 26 (4): 393–412.
- Camfield, Laura, and Yisak Tafere. 2011. "Community Understandings of Childhood Transitions in Ethiopia: Different for Girls?" *Children's Geographies* 9 (2): 247–262.
- Chisamya, Grace, Joan Dejaeghere, Nancy Kendall, and Marufa Aziz Khan. 2012. "Gender and Education for All: Progress and Problems in Achieving Gender Equity." *International Journal of Educational Development* 32: 743–755.
- Cockburn, Claudia, and Gill Clarke. 2002. "'Everybody's Looking at You!': Girls Negotiating the 'Femininity Deficit' They Incur in Physical Education." *Women's Studies International Forum* 25 (6): 651–665.
- Emebet Mulugeta. 1998. "Against the Odds: The Educational Experience and Coping Strategies of Female Students in Rural Ethiopia." Doctoral dissertation, University of Cincinnati, Ohio.
- Emebet Mulugeta. 2004. "Swimming Against the Tide: Educational Problems and Coping Strategies of Rural Female Students in Ethiopia." *Eastern Africa Social Science Research Review* 20 (2): 71–97.
- FDRE. 2000. *The Revised Family Code*. Proclamation No. 213/2000. Federal Negarit Gazette Extra Ordinary Issue No. 1/2000. Addis Ababa: Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.
- FDRE. 2005. *The Criminal Code of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia*. Proclamation No. 414/2004. Addis Ababa: Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.
- FDRE-MOE. 2010. *Education Sector Development Program IV (2010/2011–2014–15)*. Addis Ababa: Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Education.
- FDRE-MOE. 2015. *Educational Statistics Annual Abstract 2006 E.C. (2013/2014)*. Addis Ababa: Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Education.
- FDRE-MOFED. 2010. *Growth and Transformation Plan 2010/11–2014/15*. Addis Ababa: Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Ministry of Finance and Economic Development.
- FDRE-PCC. 2008. *Summary and Statistical Report of the 2007 Population and Housing Census*. Addis Ababa: Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Population Census Commission.
- Freire, Paulo. 1972. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.
- Genet Zewdi. 1998. "Women in Education: A Study of the Academic Performance and Participation of Female Students in the High School of Addis Ababa Region." *IER Flambeau* 1 (6): 26–53.
- Haile Gebriel Dagne. 1994a. *Socio-cultural Background of Early Marriage in Ethiopia*. Addis Ababa: Inter-African Committee.
- Haile Gebriel Dagne. 1994b. "Early Marriage in Northern Ethiopia." *Reproductive Health Matters* 2 (4): 35–38.
- Hammond, Jenny. 1989. *Sweeter than Honey. Testimonies of Tigrayan Women*. Edited by N. Druce and J. Hammond. London: Links Publications.
- Hammond, Jenny. 1999. *Fire from the Ashes. A Chronicle of the Revolution in Tigray, Ethiopia, 1975–1991*. Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press.
- Hegazy, Abdelmonem A., and M. O. Al-Rukban. 2012. "Hymen: Facts and Conceptions." *Health* 3 (4): 109–115.
- Khader, Serene J. 2011. *Adaptive Preferences and Women's Empowerment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Krug, Stephanie. 2000. *Anthropologie der Kriegs- und Nachkriegszeit in Äthiopien*. Münster: Lit Verlag.

- Mama, Amina. 2007. "Critical Connections: Feminist Studies in African Contexts." In *Feminisms in Development. Contradictions, Contestations and Challenges*, edited by A. Cornwall, E. Harrison, and A. Whitehead, 150–160. London: Zed Books.
- Milligan, Lizzi. 2014. "They Are Not Serious Like the Boys': Gender Norms and Contradictions for Girls in Rural Kenya." *Gender and Education* 26 (5): 465–476.
- Mjaaland, Thera. 2004. "Ane suqh' ile. I keep quiet. Focusing on Women's Agency in Western Tigray, North-Ethiopia." Cand. polit./MA thesis in Social Anthropology, University of Bergen. <https://bora.uib.no/handle/1956/1453>.
- Mjaaland, Thera. 2013. "At the Frontiers of Change? Women and Girls' Pursuit of Education in North-Western Tigray, Ethiopia." PhD dissertation in Gender and Development, University of Bergen. <http://bora.uib.no/handle/1956/6361>.
- Mjaaland, Thera, and Genet Ashebir. 2014. "At the Frontiers of Change. Girls' Education in North-Western Tigray, Ethiopia." Documentary film disseminating PhD findings. Tigrigna and English version on YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCaeB557N2Gss4WsKDQluSNw>.
- Mulumebet Zenebe. 2006. "Negotiating Gender and Sexuality in the HIV/AIDS Discourse in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia: Contradictions and Paradoxes." Dr. Polit. thesis, University of Tromsø, Norway.
- Osborn, Mark. 2006. "Young Men's Project: Great Yarmouth, UK." *Reproductive Health Matters* 14 (28): 123–126.
- Poluha, Eva. 2004. *The Power of Continuity. Ethiopia through the Eyes of Its Children*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.
- Sawade, Olloriak. 2014. "Lessons, Challenges, and Successes While Working on the 'Triangle' of Education, Gender, and Sexual and Reproductive Health." *Gender and Development* 22 (1): 127–140.
- Schippers, Mimi. 2007. "Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony." *Theory and Society* 36: 85–102.
- Tebeje Molla, and Denise Cuthbert. 2014. "Qualitative Inequality: Experiences of Women in Ethiopian Higher Education." *Gender and Education* 26 (7): 759–775.
- Tebeje Molla, and Trevor Gale. 2014. "Inequality in Ethiopian Higher Education: Reframing the Problem as Capability Deprivation." *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*. doi:10.1080/01596306.2013.871447.
- Tekeste Negash. 1990. *The Crisis of Ethiopian Education: Some Implications for Nation-building*. Uppsala Report on Education 29. Uppsala University.
- Tekeste Negash. 1996. *Rethinking Education in Ethiopia*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.
- Tinkler, Penny, and Carolyn Jackson. 2014. "The Past in the Present: Historicising Contemporary Debates About Gender and Education." *Gender and Education* 26 (1): 70–86.
- TRS. 2007. *The Revised Family Law of Tigray*. Proclamation No. 116/1999 E.C. (in Tigrinya). Negarit Gazeta Tigray. Mekelle: Tigray Regional State.
- TRS-EB. 2007. *Education Statistics Annual Abstract 1999 E.C. (2006/2007)*. Mekelle: Tigray Regional State Education Bureau.
- TRS-EB. 2010. *Education Statistics Annual Abstract 2002 E.C. (2009/2010)*. Mekelle: Tigray Regional State Education Bureau.
- TRS-EB. 2014. *Education Statistics Annual Abstract 2006 E.C. (2013/2014)*. Mekelle: Tigray Regional State Education Bureau.
- Tsegay Berhe. 1999. *The Tigrean Women in the Liberation Struggle and Its Aftermath, 1975–1996*. Research Report on Gender Issues. Addis Ababa: Organization for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA).
- UNICEF. 2008. *Education Statistics: Ethiopia*. New York: UNICEF, Division of Policy and Practice, Statistics and Monitoring Section.
- Unterhalter, Elaine. 2012. "Mutable Meanings: Gender Equality in Education and International Rights Frameworks." *The Equal Rights Review* 8: 67–84.
- Unterhalter, Elaine, Amy North, Madeleine Arnot, Cynthia Lloyd, Lebo Moletsane, Erin Murphy-Graham, Jenny Parkes, and Mioko Saito. 2014. *Education Rigorous Literature Review: Girls' Education and Gender Equality*. London: DFID.
- West, Candace, and Don H. Zimmerman. 1987. "Doing Gender." *Gender & Society* 1 (2): 125–151.

- Young, John. 1997. *Peasant Revolution in Ethiopia. The Tigray People's Liberation Front, 1975–1991*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zelalem Meressa Teklu. 2015. "The Women's Movement in Tigray (1976-Present): Emergence, Development and Relationships with TPLF." M.Phil./MA thesis in Gender and Development, University of Bergen.
- Zenebework Tadesse. 1976. *The Condition of Women in Ethiopia*. Unpublished research paper, Addis Ababa.