

## FACTORS INFLUENCING EDUCATION AND AGE AT FIRST MARRIAGE IN AN ARID REGION: THE CASE OF THE BORANA OF MARSABIT DISTRICT, KENYA

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**ABSTRACT** The role of education in development is widely recognized in many countries. However, the value placed on formal education differs from one community to the next. In this paper I argue that among the Borana pastoralists of Marsabit District, Kenya, the value of formal education is based on wage-labor opportunities. High value placed on women's household labor and low accessibility to non-household employment places differential pressure on the education of Borana children. This leads to a higher dropout rate from school and earlier marriage for female than for the male children.

Key Words: Borana; Pastoralism; Education; Marriage; Parity.

### INTRODUCTION

Women's access to education and to employment has emerged as one of the most important issues in studies of development. Caldwell (1980) and Handwerker (1986) have shown clearly the importance in the Third World of women's education in fertility decline. Caldwell (1979), Levine *et al.* (1991) and Cleland and van Ginneken (1988) have shown the relationship between women's education and the lowering of infant mortality.

Despite the obvious advantages for development, women and men in many parts of the world give less priority to women's education. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, formal education is widely perceived as a key to economic success and to improving generally the quality of life. Yet, "education, like other forms of human capital, is less accessible to women than men, not only in formal schooling but also in the form of on-the-job training and vocational education" (Mueller, 1983: 283).

In many African pastoral communities parents prefer marrying their daughters at an early age to providing them with continued education. As Iverson (1992: 109) has shown, where education precedes employment, and in the absence of wage-labor opportunities, education by itself does not necessarily lead to economic benefits. By contrast, where women's household labor is highly valued (as in much of sub-Saharan Africa), and where access to non-household employment is scarce, early marriage to wealthy men (in exchange for some form of reward) produces immediate economic benefits for the natal family of the bride.

Some development theorists have argued that early age at marriage is a barrier to women's participation in formal schooling. Given the economic rewards of early marriage and the limited economic rewards for educating women, we should not

expect people to embrace women's education as a panacea. In this paper, I lay out the statistics on school enrollment and then explore reasons for low school enrollments and for early marriage among pastoral Borana girls of Marsabit District, Kenya. The discussion in this paper will be the basis of further research that will address the needs of pastoral women in Marsabit District and elsewhere.

## BACKGROUND

Marsabit District is situated in Eastern Province of Kenya. It shares a border with Ethiopia to the north, Turkana and Samburu Districts to the west, Wajir District to the east and Isiolo District to the south. The district boundary is about 1200 km-long, enclosing an area of about 78,078 km<sup>2</sup>. Marsabit District accounts for about 13% of the country's area.

The district is classified as the most arid in the country. Its agrarian carrying capacity is low and, as a result, population is sparse. In 1979, the population of Marsabit District was 96,216 with an average population density of 1.2 people per km<sup>2</sup>, and in 1989 the population rose to 129,262 (or 2 people per km<sup>2</sup>). Marsabit was considered a net loser due to high migration of people to other districts.

Most people in Marsabit District speak eastern Cushite (Oromo) languages. These people include the Borana, Rendille and Gabra. The district's population distribution by sex and age for 1979 and 1989 is given in Table 1.

I focus here on the Borana whose origin has been traced to Ethiopia. The Borana economy is based on pastoralism, although those who occupy locales such as Moyale and Mt. Marsabit and the higher altitudes grow a few food crops. Livestock is, therefore, an important resource for the Borana. It plays an essential role in ritual and religious sacrifices. For instance, it is used to pay fines in the traditional courts of law and in paying bride price. For example, a male child is presented with a heifer at his naming ceremony which takes place when he is around a year old. The heifer is known as handura (navel). The animal forms the nucleus of his own independent herd (Baxter, 1966: 125). Most important, livestock is a major food source. The Borana consider it important, therefore, that a man should establish his own herd as soon as possible. Women are not allowed to own cattle in the community. Since cattle are the basic form of subsistence, women have minimal control over this resource.

**Table 1.** Marsabit District Population Distribution by Sex and Age.

Sex	Age (years)	1979		1989	
		No.	%	No.	%
Male	< 5	7,961	8.3	11,498	8.9
	5 - 14	12,989	13.5	19,191	14.9
	> 14	27,910	29.0	34,432	26.6
Female	< 5	7,777	8.1	11,272	8.7
	5 - 14	12,333	12.8	18,027	14.0
	> 14	27,246	28.3	34,842	27.0
Totals		96,216	100.0	129,262	100.0

Source: Compiled from the 1979 and 1989 Population Census Reports (CBS 1981 and 1994).

The Borana marriage laws are very elaborate. The Borana community is divided into two moieties, the *Sabbo* and the *Gona*. Marriage between these two groups is based on the rule of exogamy. Thus a *Sabbo* is expected to marry a *Gona*. The *Sabbo* are subdivided into three sub-moieties: *Digalu*, *Karrayu*, and *Matarri*, while the *Gona* have two sub-moieties: *Fullele*, and *Haroressa*. Each of these sub-moieties is divided into clans. A more detailed treatise of the Borana moieties may be found in Legesse (1973). Cattle are an important part of these marriage laws. Without any cattle, it is difficult for a male to establish a socially recognized marital alliance.

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Data used in this paper were obtained from three sources. The first set is from Marsabit District Education Office. It is based on records of primary and secondary school enrollments<sup>(1)</sup>. The data are summarized in Figs. 1 and 2 which show enrollments for primary schools (1988 to 1992) and secondary schools (1989 to 1992), respectively.

The second set of data were obtained through two focus group discussions with mature married Borana men and women in separate groups, aged between 30 years and 60 years, from Central Division of Marsabit District. It is taboo for Borana men to share a formal discussion with women. The participants for the focus group discussions were selected through purposive sampling and comprised 6-10 members.

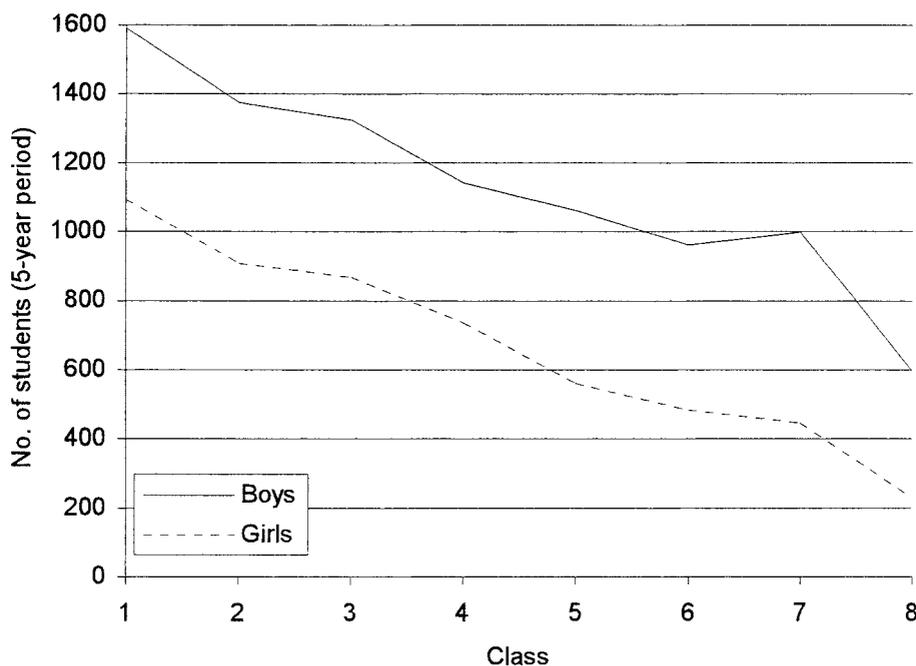


Fig. 1. Enrollment of Students over a 5-year Period (Primary School).

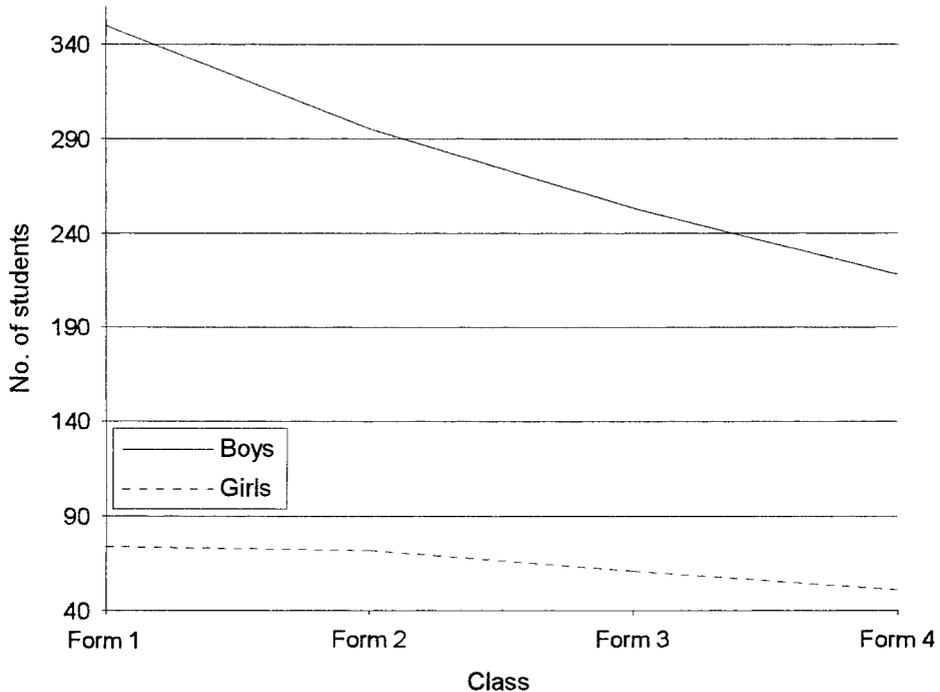


Fig. 2. Enrollment for Boys and Girls (Secondary School).

They were asked open-ended questions using an interview schedule. Discussion focussed on reasons for early marriage of girls and preference of boys over girls for formal schooling. For example, groups were asked to give their opinion on the appropriate age at first marriage for a Borana girl, and, given the choice between a boy and a girl, whom they would educate. They were then asked to explain their preference.

Each focus group discussion lasted for about one and a half hours. The interpreter/discussant guided the discussion in the Borana language and translated for me into English. I then recorded the responses and made conclusions to each of the discussion questions.

The third set of data was obtained through informal discussions with selected opinion leaders—sub chief, head teachers, indigenous healers and women leaders. They provided additional information on education and marriage. This information was afterwards linked to the first two data sets.

## OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Fig. 3a and 3b show the number of girls enrolled as a percentage of the boys enrolled at the same level. From Fig. 3a, it is clear that fewer girls are enrolled in each class, and that they have a higher dropout rate (especially at higher levels) than boys. Averaging data from 1988-1992, the ratio of girls to boys in primary schools

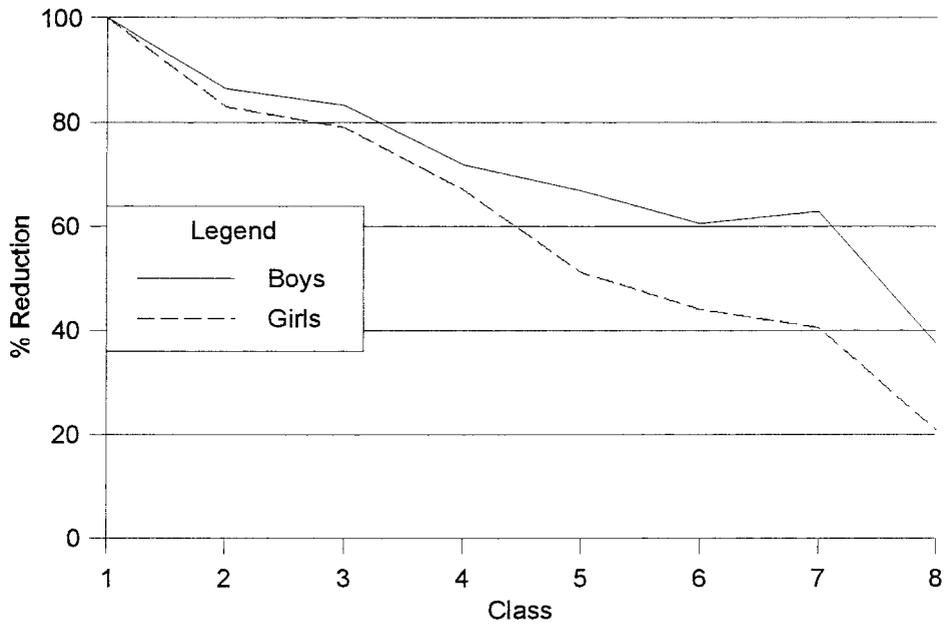


Fig.3a. Dropout Rate for Boys and Girls (Primary School).

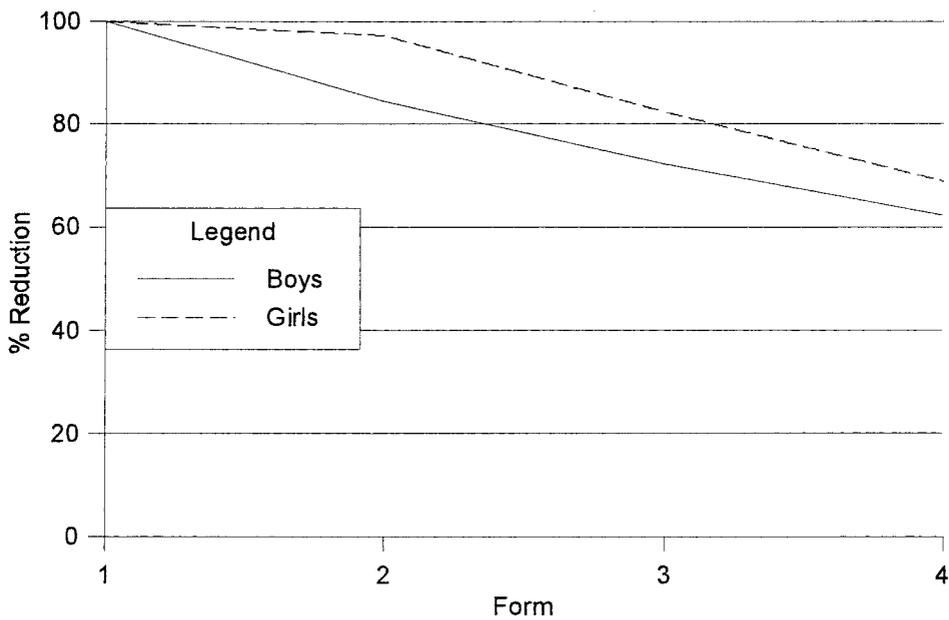


Fig.3b. Dropout Rate for Boys and Girls (Secondary School).

drops from 69 girls/100 boys in class one to 38 girls/100 boys in class eight. For the girls, the drop is much higher in classes five through eight than for classes one through four. In secondary school, the percentage of girls is still lower, but the ratio of girls to boys is stable at about 24 girls/100 boys through the four years of secondary education. In other words, few girls go on to secondary school, but the ones that do, stay the course and graduate at the same rate as males (Fig. 3b).

Using population projections for 1988 and 1990 (CBS, 1983: 86) and the national census data on school enrollment for Marsabit District, it is observed that less than 40% of the boys and less than 25% of the girls who were eligible enrolled for primary school education. However, these figures must be interpreted with caution because they are based on population projections. In the census of 1979, 2700 boys (20.8% of the eligible boys) and 1456 girls (11.8% of the eligible girls) were listed as enrolled in primary schools (CBS, 1981). In 1989 only a marginal increase was evident in the number of boys and girls enrolled in primary schools (21.5% for the boys and 14.2% for the girls, CBS, 1994). Adaw (1986) gave a figure of less than 15% for the children enrolled among the pastoral Somali and Borana in northeast Kenya.

Based on information obtained from the focus group discussions and from opinion leaders, girls must learn how to become good wives and good mothers by the time they are considered ready for marriage, usually as soon as they attain menarche. Chronologically this age is below eighteen years. Data on enrollment rates indicate that in upper primary school, girls' ages range between 12-16 years and it is from this age group that brides are chosen. In this age group prospective brides are taught role expectations, values, and wifely skills, according to Borana tradition. This is reflected in the higher school dropout rates for girls at upper primary levels. According to the focus groups discussants, since wifely knowledge and skills are imparted at home, girls must stay away from school in order to benefit from their mothers' and other relatives' counsel. As a result, formal education for female children, who after marriage will move out to their husband's home, is not emphasized.

Marriage involves a substantial resource commitment on the part of the woman and of her family of procreation (family of marriage) as well as her family of orientation (family of birth). Discussions with Marsabit opinion leaders revealed that a fair<sup>(2)</sup> proportion of pastoralist girls were more likely to be married to older men who assumed a paternal role. This is due to men's higher socioeconomic status based on ownership of livestock. In addition, they said, the young wife could receive further training from her senior co-wives. Upon marriage the young girl is socialized into the family of procreation. Community praise especially for high parity mothers creates feelings of dependency and inferiority in young wives until they deliver their first baby. Kituyi (1990) found similar justification among the pastoral Maasai for early marriage of young girls.

Material interests on the part of the girl's father (and sometimes elder brother(s)) who receive livestock as brideprice from the prospective in-laws also determine transactions for marriage. Thus, a young girl's marriage elevates her father's socioeconomic status as a result of the livestock he receives. If a girl is pregnant before marriage, the brideprice her father receives drops drastically, the Borana say, so girls are given away for marriage before they complete primary schooling so as to avoid

any economic loss. Therefore, their labor power is surrendered in exchange of bride-price. Kituyi (1990) also confirmed this material reason for early marriage of girls for the Maasai. Because the number of animals to change hands at marriage is fixed, a girl's marriage value (in livestock), is the same whether she is educated or not. This is a strong disincentive to investing in a girl's education. In one of the focus group discussions a respondent observed, "the girl is an outsider. Ultimately she will move from her mother's to her husband's house and the sooner she does that the better."

Is brideprice an economically rational choice for surrender of women's labor power? I will consider this against the ecology of the area occupied by the Borana. Marsabit is the most arid district in Kenya. The soils have low productivity. As a result of aridity and need for constant migration the Borana have adopted pastoralism as a coping mechanism. Division of labor as in the neighboring pastoralists, Ariaal, Samburu and Rendille (Fratkin, 1987), is based on differences of gender and age. Herding activities are allocated to different members of the household by the stock-owners.

During the drier months, animals are taken to distant places to feed, sometimes for a long period. Herding is demanding, and sometimes can be dangerous, because of the possibility of attack from wild animals and raids by the neighboring pastoral communities. The women are left at home, along with the younger children to take care of small stock. After attaining menarche, the possibility of early pregnancy becomes a concern to the parents. Early pregnancy leads to loss of economic gains because it lowers the bargaining power of the parents during brideprice negotiations. Given this situation it turns out that surrendering women's labor power makes more economic sense. Therefore, marrying off daughters when they are young gives her family higher economic returns. This in turn has an effect on female school dropout rate.

Early female marriage has its own opportunity costs to the individual and the community. As a result of early marriage, Borana girls are denied the chance to continue with education and the benefits that come with it. There are strong negative associations between women's schooling and fertility, that negative association is stronger in the case of women's education than that of men (Cochrane, 1983; Cleland & Rodriguez, 1988; Schultz, 1993). Schultz (1993: 84) has observed that women's education is likely to bring important changes in fertility, nutrition, and children's health and schooling. This implies that better educated women should post lower mortality rates for children below five years. This is the case in Kenya where there is a reduction of 26% in child mortality when children of mothers who have never been to school is compared with those who have lower primary education. The decline for those with upper primary, lower primary to secondary and above is 40%, 58%, and 71%, respectively (CBS, 1996). These support Caldwell's (1986) finding that children of unschooled women have higher infant mortality rates. Other potential consequences of early female marriages include early parity and bearing of many children both of which often affect maternal and child health negatively.

Education changes the gender-power relations by enhancing the relative power of the women vis-a-vis that of men. The result of changes in the gender-power rela-

tions manifests itself in different ways. For example, educated women are less likely to be physically and sexually abused. Bradley (1995) in western Kenya and Handwerker (1993) in West Indies and Barbados have shown that a reduction in gender-related violence is preceded by women's higher educational achievement. By denying women education through early marriage, the balance of power in favor of men is maintained. This hinders women from freely making decisions and choices that enhance their well-being as well as the well-being of their families.

Finally, multiple marriages, usually to older men, introduces a new dimension in the epidemiology of HIV/AIDS. Women who are taken out of school early to be married to older men, first, become economically dependent on their husbands, and secondly, are likely to be widowed at a younger age. For such women, the death of a husband exposes them to economic hardships that they have to deal with as they find means to provide for their families. The temptation of these women to seek sexual liaisons with other married or single men to ease economic pressures exerted on them cannot be overlooked. Due to the distance from urban centers, access to protective devices such as condoms is limited. Under these circumstances the likely unprotected sex enhances the transmission of HIV if one of the partners is already infected. This, in turn, could have a multiplier effect. Thus, early marriage of girls, despite the obvious and immediate economic gains to the natal family, overall could have a negative effect on society as well.

## CONCLUSION

Iverson (1992) has shown that structural factors rather than superstructural ones provide more powerful explanations for fertility decisions. Sifuma (1984) argued that for the majority of the pastoral communities, education is utilitarian. For pastoralists, traditional education arises from the immediate environment in which they live and care for their animals. Formal education (with little prospects of wage employment<sup>(3)</sup>) to many does not provide the kind of training that would make the child a useful member of the household, village or community in a precarious ecological environment such as found in Marsabit. Traditional education and skills that would prepare boys for the rigors of a herdsboy and girls to be good mothers and wives are much more appreciated and recommended for the children than formal schooling.

Furthermore, the cost of sending children to school is immense. The child spends many years in school before he or she can contribute directly to the family's economy. Borana parents make rational decisions on whether they should send their children to school. These decisions are based on the projected cost for sending the children to school and the expected economic gains resulting from the children's education. This is the case for most pastoral communities in Kenya. We should expect to see Borana girls being sent to school when and if structural forces change in their favor. It is a lost cause to try and simply educate the Borana as to why they need to educate their daughters (and even sons). If people are educated about the value of going to school and at the same time provided with wage employment that requires formal education, then sending them to school will be worth the effort.

Sending girls to school for a longer period will help contribute to the general improvement of maternal health, bring down parity and rates of child-bearing as well as help policy makers to address the alarming rate of HIV transmission.

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#### NOTES

- (1) Kenya follows an 8-4-4 type of education system: students spend the first eight years in primary education, 4 years in secondary education, and, depending on the course of study, at least 4 years at the university.
- (2) I was not able to determine the exact proportion of women who were married to older men. However, discussions during the focus group sessions pointed towards younger women marrying older men. If this is indeed the case then we should observe higher rates of polygyny and widowed women among the Borana pastoralists. This is the case among the Ariaal of Northern Kenya. Fratkin (1989) reported that Ariaal men and women valued polygyny "for its contribution to labor supply." However, the institution of polygyny leads to "a large number of young widows, because men are often in their later years when they take a second wife." In the absence of data on the Borana, I cannot take this argument further.
- (3) In the last two decades the Kenyan economy has been unable to create jobs at a rate matching the growth of Kenya's labor force leading to the accumulation of many unemployed people. Those who find jobs in small-scale agriculture and informal sectors are underemployed. Women are more disadvantaged because their employment is characterized by low productivity, low pay and long hours of work (Kenya, Rep. of, 1997).

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