

How Women Choose Their Schooling in Their Life Course: The Case of Maale, Southwestern Ethiopia

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Discussions of female education in Sub-Saharan countries often focus on ways to improve conditions and to achieve gender parity. However, a few studies have also examined the conditions under which individual women choose to go to school. The discussion of dropping out among female students has been focused on prevention and allowing more females to attend school, whereas there has been little discussion about education after dropping out or about those who did not enter school at customary age. This study used the community of Maale in southwestern Ethiopia as an example to investigate the process of female schooling with regard to how individual women decided to enter or return to school. To this end, I interviewed three women who entered or returned to school despite older than the usual school age. I identified two factors that enabled these women to enter or return to school: (1) the presence of a formal educational system and a community consensus in support of allowing females to make their own decisions about their education, (2) the relationships between the student and the people to whom she was close. Sustainable female education requires respect for the diversity of the decision-making processes by which individuals make choices.

Key words: school, life course, educational development, women, southwestern Ethiopia

1. INTRODUCTION

This article examines how women living in rural Africa think and make their choices about education, focusing on the Maale people in southwestern Ethiopia. I focused particularly on the life stories of married women with children, and I conducted interviews in which the women described the circumstances of their educational experiences and the negotiations with their families that determined whether they would be able to make their own decision to attend school.

International trends relating to educational development in sub-Saharan countries reflect great concern regarding the issue of female education. The World Conference on Education for All (EFA), held in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, was a turning point in regard to international cooperation concerning educational development. The primary issue for EFA in relation to Africa's educational development is the achievement of gender equality in education. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted in 2000 also include the goal of gender equality at all educational levels.

Academic discussion of female education has focused primarily on its social importance, improving its conditions, and the achievement of gender parity (Bloch et al. 1998; Bongaarts 2003). Numerous factors have been identified as hindrances to improving the conditions of girls' education, including economic factors, such as school fees or housework, and other factors, such as marriage, childbirth,

and social traditions (Rose et al. 1997). In some regions of Africa, it is claimed that early marriage and pregnancy prior to schooling are the main reasons for girls' dropping out. Indeed, even when returning to school after childbirth is legally accepted, girls' parents and communities rarely approve of this practice (Colclough et al. 2003).

On the other hand, enrolment rates have improved remarkably even in rural areas, which lag behind urban areas in terms of educational development. Hence, an increasing number of women are attending school.⁽¹⁾ Some women acquire a superior academic background, and a significant number have become salaried employees in rural Ethiopia. People from the area where the research for this article was conducted tended to regard going to school as natural and a part of the female life cycle. However, few researchers have examined the conditions under which individual women choose to go to school (Camfield 2011).

It is important to view girls' education as not only a life event but also a process that occurs within the context of social dynamics. It is also important to examine the significance of school for each woman. Discussions about the efficacy of female education and need for girls in developing countries to attend school often conclude that barriers to promoting girls' education originate from discord between African "culture and tradition" and school-based education. At present, the notion of school-based education is consistent with the local "culture and tradition" of women living in rural Africa. Indeed, education-related choices are viewed as critical life decisions. Rural Ethiopian communities are in a transitional period in which it is natural for women to attend school and participate in the workforce.

In this paper, I draw on "life course theory," which defines a life course as an orderly progression of socially defined life events and roles. This order is not fixed in advance, rather it can be contingent on social change and relationships with others (Giele & Elder 1998). On the other hand, the concept of the life cycle has been invoked in the field of anthropology to characterize an individual's life (Haviland et al. 2007). It posits that there are universal life stages that occur at various ages within specific cultural contexts. One criticism of this notion is that such a life stage model neglects social movements and, therefore, cannot reflect the reality of a society given that behavioral patterns vary in real life vary and that their order and timing depend on individual circumstances. Hence, they cannot be universalized (Johnson-Hanks 2002).

Based on the foregoing discussion, I use the term "life cycle" as a socially defined life pattern and "life course" as the trajectory of an individual life. What follows is based on the assumption that larger social groups follow known life cycles; thus, it is argued that problems related to education are caused by general cultural factors. This article contends that a change from a life cycle to a life course perspective highlights the diverse options that are available to individuals.

In this paper, I will examine the education-related experiences of three women. In particular, I will focus on their negotiations with their parents, siblings, or husbands: How did they decide to enter or return to school? How have life events, such as marriage and childbirth, affected that decision? In the following sections, I provide details on Koybe, the area where this research was conducted, and the process of political change that has been responsible for improving the educational system in Ethiopia. In the second section, I examine recent changes in the educational conditions in the village under study. In the third section, I use interview data collected from three women to clarify the process by which each woman decided to enter school. This article reports on data from a field study conducted during 21 months between September 2010 and August 2014. I conducted interviews with 39 households in the sub-village T, which is one of 14 sub-villages in Koybe, to gather data on inhabitants' age, educational background, and occupation. I collected the life stories of 14 married women aged 20–60 years old who had attended school. I became acquainted with these women as a result of research conducted with the households in the sub-village T. Most of my subjects lived there, and the rest were their friends or others who had married people living outside the sub-village. In this article, I examine three life stories based on these interviews.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. Research area

The research area for this study was Koybe, Maale district (*woreda*), South Omo Zone, Southern Nation, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR), Ethiopia. Koybe is located in the southwest of Ethiopia, 700 km from Addis Ababa by road (Figure 1). More than 15 ethnic groups reside within the South Omo Zone, and the Maale are the second largest ethnic group in this area. Most of the people residing in the research area speak Maale, which belongs to the Omotic language family, as their mother tongue. The residents subsist on agriculture and livestock raising, and many gather honey to generate cash income.

In terms of religion, most people in Maale are Protestant or belong to local religions. Before the dissemination of Protestantism in the 1960s, most people subscribed to local religions. The mission station at Bako, built by the Sudan Interior Mission (SIM) in 1954 and sponsored by fundamentalist Protestants primarily from North America, converted people in South Omo including the Maale (Donham 1999). Missionaries established the first Maale church in Koybe. At present, most Koybe residents are Protestant.

2.2. Educational policy in Ethiopia

The current Ethiopian educational system is based on the National Education Training Policy, which was adopted in 1994 by an interim administration. Ethiopia's educational system changed to a 4-4-2-2-year structure from the 6-4-2-year structure in place during the era of the socialist government. Thus, primary education is now conducted over a period of 8 years.

In developing countries such as Ethiopia, which depend on international aid, policy is greatly influenced by the international consensus and by the intentions of donor organizations. The educational sector's most important goals worldwide include Universal Primary Education (UPE) and the achievement of gender equality in education, which is also included in the MDGs (Yamada 2007). The Education Sector Development Program (ESDP), a 5-year plan focused on the amelioration of gender and urban/rural inequality in the achievement of UPE, was initiated in 1997. At present, ESDP IV emphasizes improving the quality and training in scientific and technological fields.

The Ethiopian government has indicated that, under the objectives of MDGs, promoting female education is a critical issue. It adopted the National Girls Education Strategy in 2005, which aimed to achieve gender parity in both the quantity and the quality of education, and it included the following goals: increasing the number of female students, improving the academic results of females, and

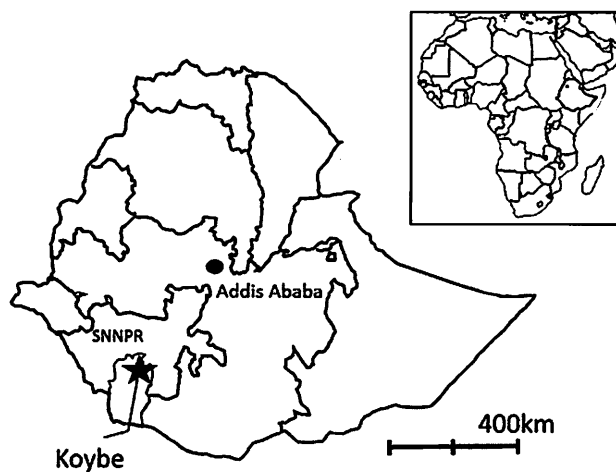


Figure 1. Map

preventing sexual harassment (Ministry of Education 2010).

2.3. Schools in the research area

Compared with other areas in the country, educational development in the South Omo Zone of Ethiopia came late. The Net Enrolment Ratio for primary education in the South Omo Zone was only 5% in 1994 (CSA 1998). Recently, however, the number of students in this area has increased remarkably, as it has in other areas in Ethiopia as well. In particular, the Maale *woreda* has been highly successful in expanding girls' enrollment in recent years.⁽²⁾

The Maale *woreda* is a new administrative division that was created in around 2005. Three-quarters of the schools in current Maale were built after its creation. Maale's first public school was established in 1970, during the time of the imperial government. The first educational institution in Maale was located in Koybe. Koybe Primary School, which was founded in the 1960s as a bible school for the Protestant church, was established in 1980. In addition to Koybe Primary School, there is also a 4-year primary school, built in 2009. Koybe Secondary School, the second of its kind in Maale, was established in September 2012.

Initially, Koybe Primary School had six grades, but it switched to the eight-grade system in 2004 (the Ethiopian government changed primary school from a six-grade to an eight-grade system in 1994). In September 2011, 1767 students were enrolled in Koybe Primary School, with female students (910) more numerous than males (857). Koybe Primary School has adopted a shift system: the first and second cycles of classes meet during different school hours, with one in the morning and the other in the afternoon.

Each school registers students at the beginning of the fiscal year. When a student is not registered for the previous year, it becomes necessary to check the enrollment records maintained by each school at the most recent attempt to register. Under the present conditions, students can easily enter or return to school even if many years have passed since they last attended or if they significantly exceed the normal school-age limit.

3. CHANGES IN FEMALE SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

3.1. The "traditional" life cycle of Maale women

There is no ritual stage, such as circumcision, to distinguish between adults and children in Maale society. Marriage Nonetheless, marriage is an important event in the Maale life cycle. The timing of marriage differs for different individuals. Most marry when they are between 16 and 20 years of age, whereas some marry when they are older than 30. The term for word used to refer to "women" changes after their marriage. Maale females are considered to be girls (*wudoro*) before their marriage, they are regarded as brides (*uuto*) for several months after marriage, and they finally become women (*laali*) after this period.

The Maale are organized patrilineally and patrilocally (Thubauville 2010). Donald L. Donham, who conducted anthropological research among the Maale in the 1970s, explained the organization of marriage in Maale households as follows:

"Marriage was the fundamental social relationship on which Maale households were constituted. Without a wife, a young man could not found his own household (...) Marriage was the first step in the process by which young men began to control their own labor (and that of wives and children) (...) When I asked what qualities a wife should have, Maale said that, before everything else, she should be a hard worker." (Donham 1994: 61–62)

According to this account, Maale women appear to be passive beings, following the social life cycles as parts of a patriarchal society. However, Sophia Thubauville, who studied the life cycles of Maale women in the 2000s, argued for a less passive view of Maale women. In this view, these women

are not simply passive able to make decisions about only their choice of a husband and the timing of their own marriages and entering into the negotiations that may result in divorce. There are few arranged marriages among the Maale. In general, boys approach girls they like, but the males are not themselves approached. Most couples meet repeatedly before deciding to marry (Hanna 2001; Thubauville 2010). It is possible to regard Maale women as passive with regard to marriage because they cannot approach men. On the other hand, they can be also seen as active, as they are able to reject proposals from those they do not like and to marry those for whom they have affection, even in the face of opposition from their relatives. In Maale society, women are not forced to blindly follow a culturally dictated life cycle but are able to negotiate to create their own lives.

3.2. Increase in girl's school enrolment and employment opportunities

In this section, I will examine how the conditions of female education have changed, comparing the conditions for young girls currently attending school with those in their parents' generation using examples from sub-village T, in Koybe. Girls from T were initially accepted into primary school in 1984, although, even then, only a minority of girls were able to attend.⁽³⁾ According to data on the academic backgrounds of people in T, half the women between the ages of 20 and 60 years have never attended school, whereas this was true for only two males in this age range (Figure 2). According to married women aged 30 to 60 years, it was more important for women to perform housework and agricultural duties than to attend school; it was also considered important for girls to eventually get married. Their work was harder than it is now. For example, until approximately two decades ago, grain to prepare meals had to be ground daily in in the home using hand stone mills . It has been claimed that the opening of the local flourmill relieved women of the hardest domestic labor (Thubauville 2010). Most women in their 30s who lived in T dropped out of school or never attended. According to informants, the main reason for doing so was marriage or childbirth.

Currently, however, all teenage males and females in the district attend school, and there are no individuals in this age range who have not yet entered school. In T, sending children to school has become normalized. In interviews that I conducted on the subject of schooling, most people used the popular expression "It is good to graduate from the tenth grade, find a job, and then get married," especially in reference to daughters or female students. Many aimed to graduate from secondary school and then to find some kind of work, such as a job in the formal sector, that will provide them with cash income. In 2007, the Maale *woreda* was created as independent administrative unit. Later, its 12 existing *kebeles* (villages) were reformed into 22. Due to this change, new public offices were

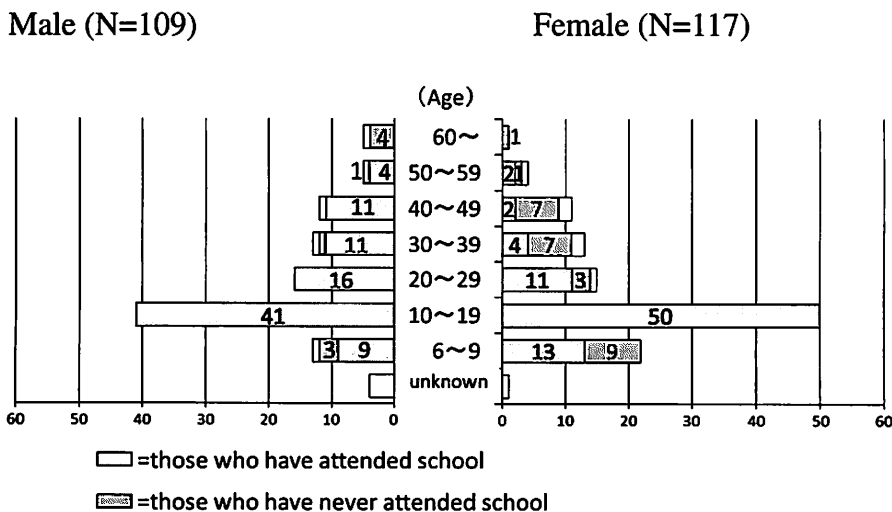


Figure 2. The academic backgrounds of people in the T sub-village (2011)

established in the *woreda*. In addition, schools and health posts have been created in every village. As a result, graduates from secondary school have more opportunities for employment in the formal sector. Cash has also become more important in the lives of villagers as a result of the new mechanical flourmills and clinics as well as the spread of mobile phones. Such developments have also increased the motivation to attend school and acquire jobs.

3.3. Variety of life courses

The comment that “It is good to graduate from tenth grade, find a job, and then get married” seems to indicate that new factors, such as school and work, are being incorporated into the fixed life cycle. However, an examination of the real life courses of Maale women revealed that schooling and marriage are not independent factors but interact with each other. However, an individual female’s decisions related to school can depend on the intentions and strategies of others.

For example, one eighth-grade female student, approximately 18 years old, rejected a marriage proposal because she wished to continue her education. When her boyfriend proposed that they marry, she suggested that they wait for her to graduate from tenth grade. However, he did not accept her suggestion, and their relationship ended. She returned her mobile phone to him, which he had given her as a gift. According to the girl and her mother, when her father heard that she had a boyfriend, he scolded her and told her not to marry before finishing tenth grade. Now, she has another boyfriend, but has stated, “I will marry after finishing tenth grade and finding a job.”

However, although people often mentioned this as an ideal, it did not always reflect their true intentions. During the summer vacation after seventh grade, one girl who was in her early twenties said, “I won’t marry now. I would like to marry after graduating from tenth grade and getting a job.” One week later however, she left her home to marry (the equivalent of eloping).

In the sub-village T, 15 women married between September 2010 and August 2014. Four of them married while they were still students, and each of these four continued to attend school after marriage. At present, it is not uncommon for women in Koybe to attend school after marriage. At the time of this research, approximately 20% percent of seventh- and eighth-grade female students in Koybe Primary School were married, and approximately half of the female students in Koybe Secondary School were married.⁽⁴⁾ Marriage and childbirth affected their schooling in various ways: some were returning after having married and dropped out, others had continued to study at school even though they had married or had given birth while students, and still others entered school for the first time only after marrying.

At first glance, it would appear that schooling has become incorporated into the normative female life cycle in T. If we focus on individual female lives, however, we can find that many life courses differ from the ideal life cycle described in the following comment: “It is good to graduate from tenth grade, find a job, and then get married.”

4. SCHOOL ATTENDANCE OF OLDER WOMEN

In this chapter, I examine the cases of three women in relation to how they decided to go to school. The names used in this section are not the women’s real names.

Case 1: Britu

Britu is a teacher at Koybe Primary School.⁽⁵⁾ She lives in the center of Koybe with her husband, three children, and a female student at Koybe Primary School. Britu was born in Koybe in 1974. She is the second eldest daughter and has seven sisters and a brother. Her elder sister, who is 2 years older, entered school in 1984, and Britu began attending in 1993, when she was 19 years old.

At first, Britu explained claimed her schooling was delayed compared with her sister’s because she was required to perform household chores while her sister went to school. However, her sister related a different story. According to her sister, it was many years before Britu’s father granted her permis-

sion to attend school, because Britu had initially refused to attend. When I told Britu that her sister had related a different story, she informed me with a wry smile that, in fact, the actual events resembled her sister's explanation:

My father told me to enter school, but I didn't obey him. At that time, there was one bad teacher at the school. He used to hit students. When we visited the school to enroll, that teacher hit my uncle in his office. I believed he would also hit me in the future. After that, I escaped from home to my aunt's house in the mountains, and so my father let my sister attend school. (February 28, 2013)

Corporal punishment is still used in schools, and it would not have been unusual during the time referenced by Britu. The image of a teacher inflicting physical punishment may have affected her choice about whether to attend school. She succeeded in making it impossible for her father to enroll her and demonstrated her determination not to attend school by temporarily escaping from home. Although she had clearly refused to do so in the past, she did finally enter school. She explained her reasoning as follows:

I could not help but love (school) about a year after my sister had entered. Seeing her studying, I was beginning to like and like (increasingly like it). She walked with her friend. She was used to getting out of school at break time and would come (home) eating a lime. She was with her friend. I liked and liked (that). After that, I cried and cried and cried. So, who would allow me to enter? My father refused me for long time. He did not let me enter until she (Britu's sister) was an eighth-grade student. (June 27, 2014)

Her sister provided the following explanation of why their father initially thought that Britu should enter school before her older sister:

Our father told me to work at home. He said the stronger one should help our mother with the housekeeping. Britu was still little then, so he told her to enter school. In the end, Britu often prepared meals because I attended school before she did. (February 12, 2013)

As discussed in section two, like other residents of T, the sisters were forced to grind grain using grinding stones, because there was no mill in Koybe when Britu was working at home rather than attending school. In addition to grinding grain, many other housekeeping tasks were expected of girls. Initially, the older sister, rather than Britu, had been expected to serve as the main household worker. However, as a result of Britu's initial refusal to attend school, Britu assumed the main housekeeping role while her sister attended school. It is reasonable to conclude that the factors leading to the postponement of her formal education included the need to engage in household labor, as she claimed at first, as well as the fact that she was unable to easily obtain her father's permission to attend school after her initial refusal.

Britu began to view school from a positive perspective after her sister entered the school instead of her. Despite changing her mind, she was forced to wait for a long time for her father's permission, because she had refused his initial offer. She finally managed to attend school after negotiating with her father. Once she entered, she was promoted to the secondary school, which her sister attended, and did not drop out. In those days, there was no secondary school in the present area of Maale, and the sisters had to attend school in Jinka City, 40 km from Koybe. She was able to attend secondary school only by living with her brother and sisters in a rented house in Jinka. After Britu began attending school, her father helped her by defraying her educational expenses (e.g., the costs associated with buying notebooks, pens, and school uniforms; renting a house; and other expenses) until her graduation from secondary school.

Britu's father is the oldest son and has 11 brothers and sisters. He is estimated to be in his early

60s. In the early 1960s, he converted to Protestantism with his father and grandfathers. In approximately 1962 he entered the elementary school in Bako that was founded and managed by SIM. There was no school in Maale at that time. He was a member of the first generation in Maale to attend school. However, he was forced to drop out during sixth grade when he temporarily lost his eyesight due to snakebite. He taught at the primary school of a neighboring village for 2 years and holds a positive view of formal education. Indeed, he often emphasized its importance to his children, warning them not to drop out. In the past, he had made a living only through farming; however, when Britu's older sister went to secondary school in the city, he began to work as a weaver to earn money. When Britu and the other children entered secondary school, he changed from working as a weaver to working as a carpenter, building houses with tin roofs to earn more money. His ability to sustain a household and his high opinion of formal education supported the attendance of Britu and her siblings at school.

Britu was married at the age of 30, a relatively late age for marriage among Maale women, to a man from Koybe after she was promoted from the ninth to tenth grade. Her husband was initially a teacher in an elementary school in another village. She attended and finished tenth grade in Jinka, living away from him, with his sister and cousin. She gave birth to her first daughter approximately 6 months after she graduated from secondary school. The next year, she attended a teacher training institute (TTI) in Jinka for 1 year and became an elementary school teacher. Her husband suggested that she attend the TTI and defrayed the associated educational costs. In her case, there were no economic restrictions on her education.

Case 2: Meskerem

Meskerem, who was approximately 30 years old at the time of the interview, lived in Koybe's central district. She returned to primary school in the fifth grade in October 2011, after having dropped out 10 years earlier. The primary school was about 1 minute from her home on foot. When I interviewed her in November 2011, she had three children: an 8-year-old boy, a 6-year-old girl, and a 3-year-old girl. Her son was a second-grade student. She was born in a village northeast of Koybe, a 6-hour walk from her current home. Her father but not her mother was Maale; her mother was from the Kemba *woreda*, which borders the northwestern part of Maale.

Her father died when she was a small child. After his death, her mother's relatives allowed her mother to return to her home, so only the children remained in Maale. They earned the money required for schooling by cultivating and onions, garlic, teff, and other crops and selling them at the market. Meskerem has two older sisters, three younger sisters, and one younger brother. All except the oldest sister attended school. The second oldest sister dropped out when she finished fourth grade and left home to get married. In 1997, Meskerem entered school after her younger brother enrolled. She completed fourth grade in 2001 and then married in Koybe.

Her husband had dropped out in the fifth or sixth grade and began earning a living as a field-crop broker. He was also an elder at the evangelical church in Koybe. Meskerem had previously attended a different church, but she switched to her husband's church upon getting married. Her husband's business was going well, and he had built a house with a tin roof 5 or 6 years previously.

She was raised under difficult conditions, but her standard of living improved after marriage. In those days, most houses were made with straw roofs, and few houses in Koybe had tin roofs. According to this criterion, Meskerem and her husband were richer than most. At first, her married life seemed to be going well. However, her life changed when they built their new house, or to be more accurate, her husband changed:

My husband got worse when he started to drink alcohol, about the time our new house was being built. He was expelled from our church. After 2 years, I became a church elder in his place. There are five elders now, and I am the only female. Last year (in 2010), he was arrested and put in prison. He fought with a man. He made a pass at the man's woman (wife). He is still in prison now. This year, I attended school again. I bought my notebooks by selling maize

and sorghum. I had no time to think about schooling last year because my husband was arrested. We had a poor crop of sorghum last year, so I made a living by trading coffee beans. We had a good crop of sorghum and maize this year. (November 25, 2011)

Meskerem returned to school as a fifth-grade student at Koybe Primary School. Despite the 10-year gap in her schooling, she was able to enroll without having to complete any extra procedures. This implies that the present school system is easy to navigate and has a good deal of flexibility. However, her younger brother and husband did not view her return to school positively:

I returned this year, but some opposed me. My younger brother said to me, "To begin with, why did you drop out before? Now you should not go to school but stay at home." I originally wanted to study, but my husband said to me, "Don't go to school. Don't attend the meeting. Don't get involved with anyone." So I could not return to school. He also said, "What use is school?" I would like to study up to the tenth grade in the future, but I have no idea about that now. I hope to become a missionary if possible. Otherwise, it would be good to find some job. (November 25, 2011)

When I visited Koybe in February 2013, Meskerem had left the area. A woman who belonged to her church told me that her husband had taken another wife and sent Meskerem away as soon as he had returned from prison. I heard that Meskerem lived at her relatives' house in another village and attended school there as a sixth-grade student. She had returned to school despite having left previously because her relationship with her husband had ended. The unexpected arrest of her husband changed her life course.

Case 3: Etenesh

Etenesh is in her 20s and was a sixth-grade student in 2013 when I interviewed her. She lived apart from her husband, at his parents' house, with two of her children. She had not attended school before her marriage. She is from Basketo, which is north of the South Omo Zone. As a child, she lived in Jinka with her relatives. Then, she moved to Beneta, a village west of Koybe. In Beneta, she worked as a waitress and lived in an acquaintance's house. Her husband was born in Koybe. He was a policeman, and Beneta was his first place of employment. She spoke of her marriage as follows:

He used to come to our restaurant, and eventually started (to flirt with me). I was too young to know the meaning of marriage. In Maale, a boy asks a girl first. If she loves him, he sometimes gives her presents such as money. However I was too young. I didn't get anything like that. Some people around me advised me to marry him. They said that he was a good man, and worked hard. That's why I said yes. Not long after, we married. It was about 3 months after he approached me. It was very soon. (January 28, 2013)

Etenesh said, "I was a child" repeatedly while talking about the event of her marriage. Her husband's sister (14 years old) said, "Etenesh is grown now, but she was very little when she got married to my brother. She was still a child then. She was married as young as I am now."

At first, Etenesh and her husband lived in a rented house in Beneta. She gave birth to her first son 1 year after her marriage, and the family moved to Koybe to follow her husband's job. Their house is at the center of Koybe, and it takes approximately 2–3 minutes to walk from their home to the primary school. In September 2006, the year after her child's birth, she enrolled in Koybe Primary School.

I hadn't yet studied at school. My husband advised me that I should go to school to become literate in Amharic, so I entered school. When he transferred to the other village for his job, our son and I didn't move with him. We lived in the house where he was born, with his family in

Koybe. I left my baby with my mother-in-law and others and went to school. My mother-in-law said, "Studying is good. Let her study." When I was a first-grade student, I didn't live with my husband. When I was a second-grade student, I lived with him and studied there because nobody cooked for him except me. At that time, we left our child in Koybe because his mother and others said not to take a child there. When I became a fourth-grade student, we lived together with our child. (January 28, 2013)

Etenesh attended school while taking care of her child and was successfully promoted without repeating any grades. When she was in fifth grade, she became pregnant again. After finishing the fifth grade, she gave birth to her second child during the summer vacation of 2011. She discussed schooling after childbirth as follows:

I wondered whether to continue attending school or not. If I had stopped my schooling then, I wouldn't have remembered what I had learned in school up to then. If I'd forgotten what I had learned before, I wouldn't understand the material, because in class we repeatedly study what we learned in the previous year. That's why I will continue to go to school. My husband also advises me to continue attending school as I have been. (November 17, 2011)

Deciding to continue with her schooling, Etenesh went to live with her two children in her husband's father's home in Koybe, where she was separated from her husband. The household included her husband's parents, their third son, who was unmarried, and her husband's five younger brothers and sisters, all of whom were students. Etenesh slept with the second daughter, her husband's sister, in a house that was separate from the main house.

On one school day, I confirmed through observation that Etenesh was able to spend most of her time at home taking care of her baby. When she was in class, her mother-in-law took care of her baby. Her mother-in-law usually prepared breakfast. Etenesh or the second daughter assumed that role for the weeks when their classes were held in the afternoon. On weeks when their classes were held in the morning, they went to school without having breakfast. The second or third daughter assumed the time-consuming work of milling grain. It was job of the younger children, including the third and fourth daughters and their adopted daughter, to draw water. This does not require as much time as milling grain, but it does require leaving home for a period of time. Etenesh did not participate in this work, but she helped to prepare meals, clean, and so on. Her mother-in-law and her second and third daughters primarily maintained the house. The cooperation of her family was necessary for her to continue studying at school despite having a baby. Her mother-in-law offered the following comment about taking care of the baby while Etenesh was at school:

It is difficult for me to take care of the baby. It bothers me. I have no time to visit people who are sick. Actually, I haven't visited the wife of my brother-in-law yet. It's a problem. I said to Etenesh that she should return to school next year, after her baby is older, otherwise it would be troublesome. I advised her not to continue her schooling now, but she wanted to continue attending school. My son (Etenesh's husband) said to me, "I see your problem, but I want you to take care of our baby in order to let her go to school. Because I'm burdening you, I will buy you clothes if your clothes wear out. So please take care of our baby." At this, I stopped complaining. (November 17, 2011)

These comments show that Etenesh's mother-in-law did not have a positive view of Etenesh's decision to continue her schooling. However, this is not to say that she was negative about formal education per se. She was able to read and write in Amharic and even understood the Amharic Bible, which is rare for people, such as herself, older than 50. She had entered school and dropped out of second grade before marriage as a result of the death of her mother. Afterward, she studied at the school in the Protestant church for 2 years and was a teacher at that school for another 2 years. Before

Etenesh became pregnant with her second child, her mother-in-law noted, "It is good to go to school."

In Maale society, the position of the first child, especially the first son, is authoritative. This social factor is relevant to Etenesh's case: her mother-in-law could not easily reject the request made by Etenesh's husband, because he was the first son. His persuasion of his mother enabled Etenesh to continue studying at school; thus, he played a vital role in her education.

5. NEGOTIATIONS AND DECISIONS TO OBTAIN PERMISSION TO ATTEND SCHOOL

As people currently living in rural Ethiopia experience life events in different orders, it is difficult to apply the theory of life cycles generated by other cultures to this particular culture. Under this assumption, I examined the cases of three married women to understand how individual women perceive the meaning of their education. I also hoped to determine why they chose to attend school and to negotiate with the people in their lives to do so. In the following sections, I will examine three topics: (1) the social conditions and educational systems in the research area that enabled these women to attend school, (2) the position of education in the life course of individual women, and (3) the process by which the decision to attend school, including negotiating with family members and other people, is made.

5.1. The social conditions and educational systems related to female schooling

This section highlights an important contributor to the primary and secondary educational system in Ethiopia. I will also discuss changes in rural communities, such as lighter housework, and the infiltration of the market economy. Under the present school system, students are able to enter or return to school regardless of age. As a result, the opportunity to attend school is always guaranteed, even for those who had missed an earlier opportunity. Additionally, in Etenesh's case, the school's shift system enabled her to receive the support of her sister-in-law, as their school hours differed. It has been suggested that certain systems of school management may contribute to female schooling.

Furthermore, social changes in the Maale community regarding schooling may have encouraged these women to attend school. In particular, attitudes are changing, and female schooling is now viewed positively, even to the point where the ideal life cycle now places marriage after graduating from school and acquiring a job. In addition, we should note that older generations, primarily those who have had a positive experience with formal education from a relatively early age as a result of the work of Protestant missionaries, played an important role in creating a social consensus in favor of female schooling. Educated women received support from members of this generation; then, the educated women themselves became role models that increased the motivation of other women to attend school.

5.2. The position of schooling in women's life courses

As mentioned above, schooling can have a variety of social meanings during the life course of women. Of course, not all individual women are able to fully exploit the potential impact of their education on their life course. If they attend school, they spend half the day in class instead of working in the household. This means that their households must fill a vacancy, as in the cases of Britu and Etenesh: it was Britu who was primarily responsible for housework when her sister attended school, and Etenesh received childcare support from her mother-in-law so she could continue her schooling. For some students, school may entail relief from housework, and this expectation of a change in daily life may provide the motivation to attend school, as it did in Britu's case.

The three women described the immediate significance of their choice to attend school, but none offered a clear motivation (e.g., a particular goal for the future) in support of continuing their education. When Meskerem and Etenesh, who were both still attending school at the time of my interviews with them, were asked about their future plans, they said that they intended to become

missionaries or government employees. However, at the same time, they undercut the feasibility of these plans by saying, “But I don’t know about the future now.” Their comments imply that they thought their future was uncertain and contingent on other things. They did not attempt to provide a clear motivation for their education, instead giving it a position in their life course when negotiating with their family.

5.3. Negotiation with their family members

In all three cases, the women’s relationship with their family played an important role in their education in addition to the role played by their own motivation. At first glance, of the three women described in section 3, Britu’s life course is the closest to the “ideal” life cycle (school, then graduation, then marriage) as viewed in Koybe. In her life course, she was troubled for a long time by her role in domestic labor, which was a result of her initially rejecting her father’s offer to allow her to attend school. This indicates that her own desire was a more important factor than economic or social circumstances when deciding to attend school. In the case of Britu, who married when she was a secondary school student, the presence of her father and older sister, who had attended school before she did, probably greatly influenced her decision to attend school; this was unlike the case for the other two women, whose decisions were influenced by their husbands.

Meskerem, who returned to school after a gap of 10 years, would not have resumed her schooling had it not been for her husband’s arrest. She dropped out of primary school when she married. It would have been regarded as natural, by Meskerem herself and by the people around her, for her to drop out at that time, because a substantial number of women in the area had never attended school. Meskerem did not have parents and was required to support her siblings while she was still a child. It would have been difficult for her to continue her formal education even if she had not gotten married. Marriage did not interfere with Britu’s and Etenesh’s education; however, Meskerem’s husband was a barrier to her schooling. In fact, I did not hear Meskerem say whether she had directly asked her husband about returning to school. She may not have had the opportunity to discuss her schooling with him or did not even think to do so. I surmise that the divorce was a serious situation for her, forcing a change in her life course. In other words, the absence of her husband led to a choice that she had not previously considered.

The case of Etenesh illustrates the life course of a woman who entered school after marriage and childbirth. She was married at a young age and tried to manage married life, childcare, and schooling by living with her husband’s family or leaving her children at home after she entered primary school. Upon giving birth to her second child, she faced a crisis regarding her continued attendance at school; however, she succeeded in continuing to study without dropping out as a result of her mother-in-law’s contribution to childcare, which was negotiated by her husband. Etenesh’s role as a student was given preference over her role as a wife. By advising her to attend school, her husband created the opportunity for her to continue her education. Thus, it may be concluded that his opinions greatly influenced her education.

Previous studies have found a relationship between a child’s education and parental factors, such as economic status and academic background (Weir 2010; Eshetu and Dula 2013). Expanding our research from school-aged children to older women who may have dropped out or missed an earlier opportunity to attend school revealed that a broader set of relationships, including those with husbands and in-laws, can influence female education. Decisions about education may be influenced by individual circumstances, such as the father’s livelihood, the opinions of the husband about the value of education, or childcare requirements. However, the decision to attend school does not depend only on circumstances related to individual households. Indeed, some women, such as Britu and Meskerem, maintain the desire to attend school even through periods without any opportunity to do so, whereas others, such as Etenesh, decide to attend school to follow the advice of others, like. It is important to consider decisions related to education in context, as they are made through negotiation with others.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article, I clarified the process by which Maale women make decisions about their education during their own life course through negotiation with their families, focusing on married women who have had children. This research identified two main factors in addition to an individual's motivation and desire that play central roles in enabling female education. One factor is that the current formal educational system and the attitudes of society concerning female education align with an individual's desire to attend school. The other key factor is the nature of the relationships between the women and those close to her, such as family members.

The importance of formal education has increased as educational policy has been revised and the market economy has expanded. In the current situation, people consider marrying and finding employment to be part of the ideal life cycle. However, we should not conclude that women's life courses have greatly changed; the ideal of graduating from school before marriage reflects the potential conflict between married life and academia. Women do not always follow socially dictated roles; on the other hand, they do not always determine their life courses on their own. Life courses are shaped by the transformation or negotiation of intimate relationships and considerations of the socially accepted ideal life course. A life course is a structured set of life practices, and school attendance is a part of daily life. The model of linear development with regard to education presupposes that daily life practices are arranged according to a fixed life cycle. The achievement of sustainable female education in rural African society requires that we consider individual life courses as resulting from various decisions in daily life.

Although the cases presented in this article are limited and specific, they indicate that even those women who have missed the opportunity to attend school can begin to study later in life, depending on their circumstances. Undoubtedly, the efficiency of education is enhanced by the ability to attend school on a continuous basis. However, to achieve EFA, it is important to allow women who have experienced marriage and childbirth to find a path to the type of education that is suitable for their own life courses.

NOTES

- (1) According to statistics from the Ministry of Education (2011), in 2010/11, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) at the primary level was 96.4%, of which women represented 93.2%. This means that, to a certain extent, Ethiopia has achieved a quantitative expansion of its primary education. However, the GER at the secondary level was only 38.4%. Thus, the continuity of schooling requires improvement (MoE 2011).
- (2) The rate of female students enrolled in primary education in Maale increased from 33% in 2005/06 to 47% in 2009/10 (these data were provided by the South Omo Zone education office).
- (3) According to the oldest enrolment list (1985) for Koybe Primary School I was able to obtain, there were only 11 girls of 96 total students in all six grades. Two of these were girls from the sub-village T.
- (4) I conducted a questionnaire survey focusing on marital status with 608 students in grade 7–9 at Koybe's primary and secondary schools in February, 2013. The questionnaire was written in Amharic, and an oral explanation was provided in the Maale language. The number of valid responses was 536 out of 608.
- (5) Eleven of the 37 teachers in Koybe primary school were women (in February 2013).

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