



# Discussion Paper BRIEFS

Food Consumption and Nutrition Division of the International Food Policy Research Institute

Discussion Paper 185

## Assets at Marriage in Rural Ethiopia

Marcel Fafchamps and Agnes R. Quisumbing

This paper contributes to the economic analysis of marriage and the family by examining and analyzing the relative importance of potential determinants of assets brought to marriages in rural Ethiopia. One potential determinant is assortative matching, whereby the rich marry the rich and the poor marry the poor, generating a positive correlation between assets brought to marriage by both spouses. Another determinant explored is compensating parental transfers at marriage, whereby parents reduce assets transferred to their marrying children if their spouses bring more. The third determinant analyzed is parents' strategic behavior to improve the marriage-market ranking of their children by transferring more assets to them at the time of marriage.

### Breaking New Ground

This paper breaks new ground by distinguishing assortative matching from compensatory transfer motives. It also separates factors that affect intergenerational transfers from those that reflect the relative scarcity of brides and grooms. In addition, instead of focusing on transfers at marriage from one family to the other, it used detailed data from rural Ethiopia to investigate the totality of assets brought to marriage, whether acquired from parents or other sources prior to marriage or received at the time of marriage.

### Why Rural Ethiopia?

The diversity of this low-income, drought-prone country and the largely untouched local traditions in isolated areas make Ethiopia an ideal site for studying marriage customs. The study drew on the 1997 Ethiopian Rural Household Survey, which covered approximately 1,500 households in 15 villages across the country. Sample households were randomly selected, but these villages represented Ethiopia's major farming systems and the range of its agroecological, ethnic, and religious diversity.

In Ethiopia's primarily agrarian economy, how one fares in the marriage market is an important determinant of welfare. Assets brought at marriage constitute the dominant form of start-up capital for new farms. These assets affect farm-size distribution, since newlyweds typically initiate their own farming operations. They also shape how assets and incomes are

distributed in a society where assets are accumulated with difficulty.

### Evidence Used

The 1997 survey questionnaire included modules designed to address intrahousehold allocation issues, particularly conditions at the time of marriage, and were pre-tested in four non-survey sites. Questionnaires were administered in several separate visits by enumerators, who resided in survey villages for several months. Careful data cleaning and reconciliation took place in 1998 and 1999.

In the sample, 62 percent were monogamous couples. Polygamous households—or parts thereof—accounted for 7.6 percent of the sample, while 20 percent were headed by unmarried individuals, usually divorced or widowed women. Separated couples accounted for the remaining 9 percent.

The intrahousehold modules collected information on the parental background, marriage histories, and pre-marital human and physical capital of each spouse and the circumstances surrounding the marriage, including the type of marriage contract and involvement in the choice of a spouse. A variety of assets brought to the marriage were recorded, as well as all transfers made at the time of marriage. Exhaustive questions were asked about each union listed by the household head. These pertained to assets—the value and quantity of land, houses, and livestock, as well as the value of any cash, jewelry, linen, clothing, grains, and utensils—that were brought to marriage, either by the male household head and his spouse or spouses, or by a female household head and her last husband.

Questions were also asked about transfers from the bride's and groom's families at the time of marriage, whether to the couple or individually. Background information about parents at the time the household head was married was collected for

each spouse and each union. This included the land-holdings of parents and the educational attainment of each. Data were also collected about the age and education of each spouse, as well as experience of each prior to marriage in farmwork, wage work, and self-employment.

***In rural Ethiopia, marriages are characterized by assortative mating—like marries like—but parents of brides may act strategically to ensure better marriage prospects for their daughters.***

### Survey Results Relating to Assets at Marriage

In the survey area, grooms bring nearly 10 times more assets than brides, and most of the start-up capital of newly formed households. For grooms, land is the asset with the highest average value. The next most valuable asset is livestock, followed by grain stocks. Brides bring very little land to the marriage, and less livestock than grooms. Two-thirds of brides bring no asset to marriage. Though gifts at the time of marriage are distributed more evenly between groom and bride, these are very small relative to assets brought to marriage.

Parental wealth has a positive effect on assets brought to marriage by both bride and groom. Farming experience also has a positive effect, reflecting individual accumulation by spouses. However, experience in wage work is negative for men, suggesting that those working for wages are less capable of accumulating assets than farmers. But for women, experience in self-employment and off-farm work—the primary avenue through which they earn an independent income—is associated with higher values of assets at marriage.

Widows and women with children from previous marriages bring more assets to marriage. However, the number of children from previous marriages of a groom does not have a significant influence on the assets brought to marriage.

The number of brothers has no effect on assets brought to marriage, suggesting that sibling competition is not an important concern in the study area. Contrary to expectations, the combination of parental land and number of siblings has a positive impact on both brides and grooms. This means that brides with more brothers receive more from their parents. Perhaps this is because siblings—and particularly brothers who are more likely to be gainfully engaged in farming or other work—indirectly contribute to the marriage.

Parents give more if doing so improves the marriage prospects of their daughter. There is also some evidence

that parents reduced transfers to daughters at marriage if the groom brings more, but this evidence is only significant at the 15 percent level. Parents also adjust transfers in relation to how easily they can obtain a better match for their daughter. However, parents of grooms do not take marriage-market outcomes into account when determining the assets their son brings to a marriage. It is as if parents first decide how much to endow, based purely on their own preferences and endowments, and then look for a marriage prospect. The data thus primarily reflect assortative matching, with more similar people marrying each other.

This means that different processes drive assets brought to marriage by grooms and brides. For grooms, there was no evidence of compensating transfers or strategic behavior. However, the study found ample evidence of assortative matching and some evidence of strategic behavior by parents of brides.

These results make sense in the context of rural Ethiopia, where grooms bring the lion's share of the new household's assets. Grooms do not act strategically because the outcome of the marriage market is not an important determinant of their future welfare. For brides, however, their future welfare may hinge on how they fare in the marriage market. It is therefore not surprising if we find evidence that parents seek to influence the process and adjust what they give to their daughter as a function of marriage-market outcomes. It remains to be seen whether similar behavior obtains in economies with more off-farm income-earning opportunities for women, and where parents can effectively influence their daughters' welfare by bestowing education or vocational skills.

**Keywords: intrahousehold allocation, marriage market, inheritance, assets, intergenerational transfers, Ethiopia**

Copyright © 2004 International Food Policy Research Institute. The full text of this document and other FCND Discussion Papers are available on our Website ([www.ifpri.org/divs/fcnd/dp.htm](http://www.ifpri.org/divs/fcnd/dp.htm)) or via [M.Aspillera@cgiar.org](mailto:M.Aspillera@cgiar.org)

## FCND BRIEFS



International  
Food  
Policy  
Research  
Institute

2033 K Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20006 U.S.A.

---

*In rural Ethiopia, marriages are characterized by assortative mating—like marries like—but parents of brides may act strategically to ensure better marriage prospects for their daughters.—DP185*

---