Women's Agency and Gender Norms in Oromiya: Implications for Demographic and Health Outcomes

Evidence from five rounds of the Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey, with emphasis on the 2024/25 regional profile

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WHY THIS MATTERS FOR OROMIYA AND ETHIOPIA: Oromia is Ethiopia's demographic heavyweight. When a region of this scale combines high levels of adverse gender-power conditions with weak positive agency indicators—and shows concerning breastfeeding and education patterns—the consequences are potentially national in reach. So, why Oromiya? In the 2024/25 EDHS, Oromiya ranked worst among Ethiopia's 14 contemporary regions in partner fear: 56.3% of women reported fearing their husband or partner at least some of the time. In a region containing roughly two-fifths of the country's population, that finding has implications extending well beyond Oromiya.

Acknowledgment of analytical support

Preparing this brief was methodologically and computationally demanding, as it required harmonizing five generations of Ethiopia's Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS) variables, reconstructing survey-specific definitions, preserving complex survey design, separating mutually exclusive from overlapping exposures, and auditing historical categories. Microsoft 365's platforms materially accelerated the work through computational and reasoning support for code development, statistical analysis, survey-design logic, diagnostic review, iterative methodological refinement, and image enhancement/rendering (e.g., see Figures 1, 2, and 3 below). Work of this scope would otherwise have required considerably more analyst time. The investigator retains final analytical decisions, interpretation, and responsibility for the reported findings.

A. Abstract

Oromiya warrants particular attention in Ethiopia's gender, demographic, and health agenda because it ranked worst nationally in 2024/25 on partner fear (NEG2), with 56.3% of women reporting fear of their husband or partner. This finding is especially consequential because Oromiya contains roughly two-fifths of Ethiopia's population, giving conditions affecting women and girls in the region substantial influence on national demographic and health outcomes. This brief therefore examines partner fear as an entry point into a broader assessment of women's agency and gender power in Oromiya, drawing together four complementary indicators of gender norms, fear, sexual and reproductive health (SRH) decision-making, and economic decision-making. The 2024/25 EDHS profile shows Oromiya near the adverse end of both negative gender-power indicators: 47.5% (95% CI: 40.8–54.1%) on the wife-beating norm (NEG1) and 56.5% (95% CI: 51.5–61.4%) reporting partner fear (NEG2, the highest regional estimate). At the same time, only 28.2% (95% CI: 23.3–33.0%) met the criterion for own informed sexual and reproductive health (SRH) decisions (POS1), while 52.7% (95% CI: 47.3–58.0%) reported joint economic decision-making (POS2), placing the region in the lower part of the

contemporary distribution. These findings converge with two other signals from analyses in a forthcoming book on a quarter century of demographic and health change by the same author: a substantial deterioration in exclusive breastfeeding in Oromiya, including early introduction of non-breast-milk feeds, cessation of breastfeeding before six months among some infants, and a female disadvantage in any formal education that exceeded the national gender gap in each of the five survey rounds examined. Taken together, the evidence suggests treating women's agency as a cross-cutting determinant of Oromiya's demographic and health trajectory rather than a stand-alone gender-sector concern. Beyond the regional prevalence patterns, cluster-level ecological analysis showed persistent coupling between gender norms and women's agency in Oromiya. The pooled association between acceptance of wife beating and women's own informed sexual and reproductive health (SRH) decision-making was inverse ($r = -0.30$), while the corresponding association with joint economic decision-making was weaker ($r = -0.08$). Importantly, both relationships showed essentially no between-survey heterogeneity ($I^2 = 0\%$), suggesting that these associations have been remarkably stable across successive survey rounds rather than representing a transient feature of a single survey. A spatial analysis further showed that the relationship between women's formal education and acceptance of wife-beating is not uniformly protective across Oromiya. Cluster-level regression slopes were predominantly weakly negative, near zero, or positive across much of the region, indicating that communities with higher levels of women's formal education do not consistently exhibit substantially lower acceptance of wife-beating. This spatial pattern strengthens the central finding of the brief: expanding educational participation is essential, but education alone may be insufficient to transform deeply embedded gender norms without complementary interventions addressing social norms, women's agency, household power relations, and community environments.

B. Introduction

The immediate impetus for this Oromiya-focused analysis is a striking 2024/25 finding: Oromiya ranks first among Ethiopia's 14 contemporary regions in the prevalence of women reporting fear of their husband or partner. An estimated 56.3% of women in Oromiya reported partner fear, placing the country's most populous region at the unfavorable extreme of this important dimension of women's lived experience and gender power. Partner fear is not merely an interpersonal or social indicator; it may constrain women's ability to communicate preferences, exercise reproductive autonomy, seek health care, negotiate household decisions, and translate educational and economic opportunities into effective agency.

Oromiya's demographic scale magnifies the significance of this finding. A gender-power disadvantage affecting such a large share of Ethiopia's women cannot readily be regarded as a regional concern alone. What happens to women's autonomy, safety, education, reproductive decision-making, and health in Oromiya has the potential to materially influence Ethiopia's national trajectory.

Gender norms, power relations and structural inequalities influence women's exposure to health risks, access to information and services, control over resources, and capacity to act on health preferences [1–3]. Women's informed participation in sexual and reproductive decisions is therefore both a rights outcome and a mechanism through which fertility, contraceptive use, maternal care, child feeding and other health outcomes may be shaped [2,4]. Likewise, social acceptance of wife beating and fear of an intimate partner are markers of unequal power relations that can constrain autonomy and health-seeking [1,5]. For Oromiya, these relationships have unusual national importance because the region contains a very large share of Ethiopia's population and, correspondingly, of its women, girls and future mothers. Even modest regional disadvantages can therefore translate into a large absolute national burden. This brief synthesizes four indicators in the forthcoming book, along with related findings on breastfeeding (Chapter 7) and educational gender inequality (Chapter 9), to identify a coherent policy signal for the Oromiya Regional Health Bureau.

C. Methods

Prompted by Oromiya's national #1 ranking on partner fear (NEG2) in the 2024/25 regional analysis, we conducted a focused descriptive and spatial assessment to determine whether this unfavorable position was an isolated finding or part of a broader pattern of women's agency and gender power in the region. The analysis used Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey data spanning the available survey years and examined four complementary domains: acceptance of wife-beating (NEG1), partner fear (NEG2), women's own informed SRH decision-making (POS1), and joint economic decision-making (POS2). For the 2024/25 profile, NEG1 measures the percentage of women endorsing the specified wife-beating justification used in the harmonized analysis; NEG2 measures women reporting fear of their husband/partner at least sometimes; POS1 captures own informed SRH decision-making; and POS2 captures joint economic decision-making with the husband/partner. Chapter 9 of a forthcoming book defines ‘any formal education’ from the household education attainment variable and examines the de facto population aged 15–49 across EDHS 2000, 2005, 2011, 2016 and 2024/25. Chapter 7 applies the DHS/WHO 24-hour infant-feeding framework to infants aged 0–5 completed months. All comparisons are descriptive and ecological at the regional level; they should not be interpreted as causal effects.

D. Findings

Partner fear emerged as Oromiya's most immediate gender-power concern and the principal finding motivating this regional brief. In 2024/25, Oromiya had the highest estimated prevalence of partner fear among Ethiopia's 14 contemporary regions, at 56.3%, placing it #1 nationally on this adverse indicator. The concern was not confined to NEG2. Oromiya also ranked unfavorably on acceptance of wife-beating (NEG1) and fell in the lower portion of the regional distribution on the two positive agency measures—women's own informed SRH decision-making (POS1) and joint economic decision-making (POS2).

Taken together, the four indicators therefore reveal a more consequential pattern than the partner-fear ranking alone: the region combines exceptionally high partner fear with substantial acceptance of wife-beating and comparatively weaker expression of women's positive decision-making agency. Subsequent cluster-level and spatial analyses further showed that formal education does not translate uniformly into more favorable gender norms across Oromiya.

Four 2024/25 indicators point to a consistent pattern of comparatively adverse gender-power conditions alongside relatively weak positive agency in Oromiya. Wife-beating norm acceptance (NEG1) was 47.5% (95% CI: 40.8–54.1%), placing Oromiya among the regions with the highest point estimates. Partner fear (NEG2) was 56.5% (95% CI: 51.5–61.4%), the highest regional point estimate in the contemporary 14-region profile. This is particularly notable because the confidence interval indicates that, even allowing for sampling uncertainty, at least half of women in the indicator-specific population reported being afraid of their husband or partner at least sometimes.

The positive-agency indicators reveal the other side of the pattern. Only 28.2% of women met the criterion for own informed SRH decisions (POS1; 95% CI: 23.3–33.0%). Joint economic decision-making (POS2) was 52.7% (95% CI: 47.3–58.0%). Both estimates place Oromiya toward the lower part of the regional distribution, although the confidence intervals underscore that close regional rankings should not be interpreted as statistically distinct unless their uncertainty is considered.

Persistence of gender-power coupling. The cluster-level analysis adds an important dimension to Oromiya's unfavorable 2024/25 regional profile. Across historically comparable survey rounds, higher cluster prevalence of wife-beating acceptance was consistently associated with lower prevalence of women making their own informed SRH decisions, yielding a Fisher-z pooled regional correlation of $r = -0.30$. (Figure 2). The association between wife-beating acceptance and joint economic decision-making was weaker but remained inverse ($r = -0.08$). Notably, between-survey heterogeneity was $I^2 = 0\%$ for both relationships, indicating unusually high temporal consistency in their direction and magnitude. Partner fear showed little pooled association with own informed SRH decision-making ($r = -0.03$) and a small positive association with joint economic decision-making ($r = 0.07$); these relationships likewise exhibited low heterogeneity ($I^2 = 23\%$ and 0%, respectively). Thus, the clearest persistent Oromiya pattern is the inverse ecological coupling of wife-beating norms with women's agency—particularly SRH agency (Figure 2).

The significance of the profile therefore lies less in Oromiya's precise numerical rank on any single indicator than in the convergence across all four measures: relatively high levels of adverse gender-power conditions occur alongside comparatively limited SRH and economic decision-making agency. This distinction is important because the 95% confidence intervals overlap with those of some neighboring regions in the rankings. The evidence supports describing Oromiya as having a consistently concerning four-indicator profile, rather than asserting statistically significant superiority or inferiority to every region appearing immediately above or below it in the figure. This interpretation is also consistent with the brief's stated caution that the contemporary profile should not be read as a regional "league table."

Within Oromiya, the map (Figures 3 and 4) is notable for the predominance of clusters with weakly negative slopes (pink/light-red), approximately neutral slopes (pale/cream), and, in some areas, positive slopes (blue). Strong negative relationships—where increasing educational exposure is associated with substantially lower acceptance of wife-beating—are not the dominant spatial pattern across the region. This finding is consistent with the broader regional coupling analysis, in which Oromiya showed only a modest persistent inverse association between women's formal education and the wife-beating norm (pooled $r \approx -0.31$).

Figures 3 and 4 also demonstrate considerable within-region heterogeneity. Oromiya should therefore not be treated as a single homogeneous social environment. Adjacent and geographically separated communities can exhibit different education–norm relationships even within the same regional administrative structure. Importantly, these are ecological cluster-level associations and should not be interpreted as demonstrating that an individual woman's education causes a particular attitude toward wife-beating.

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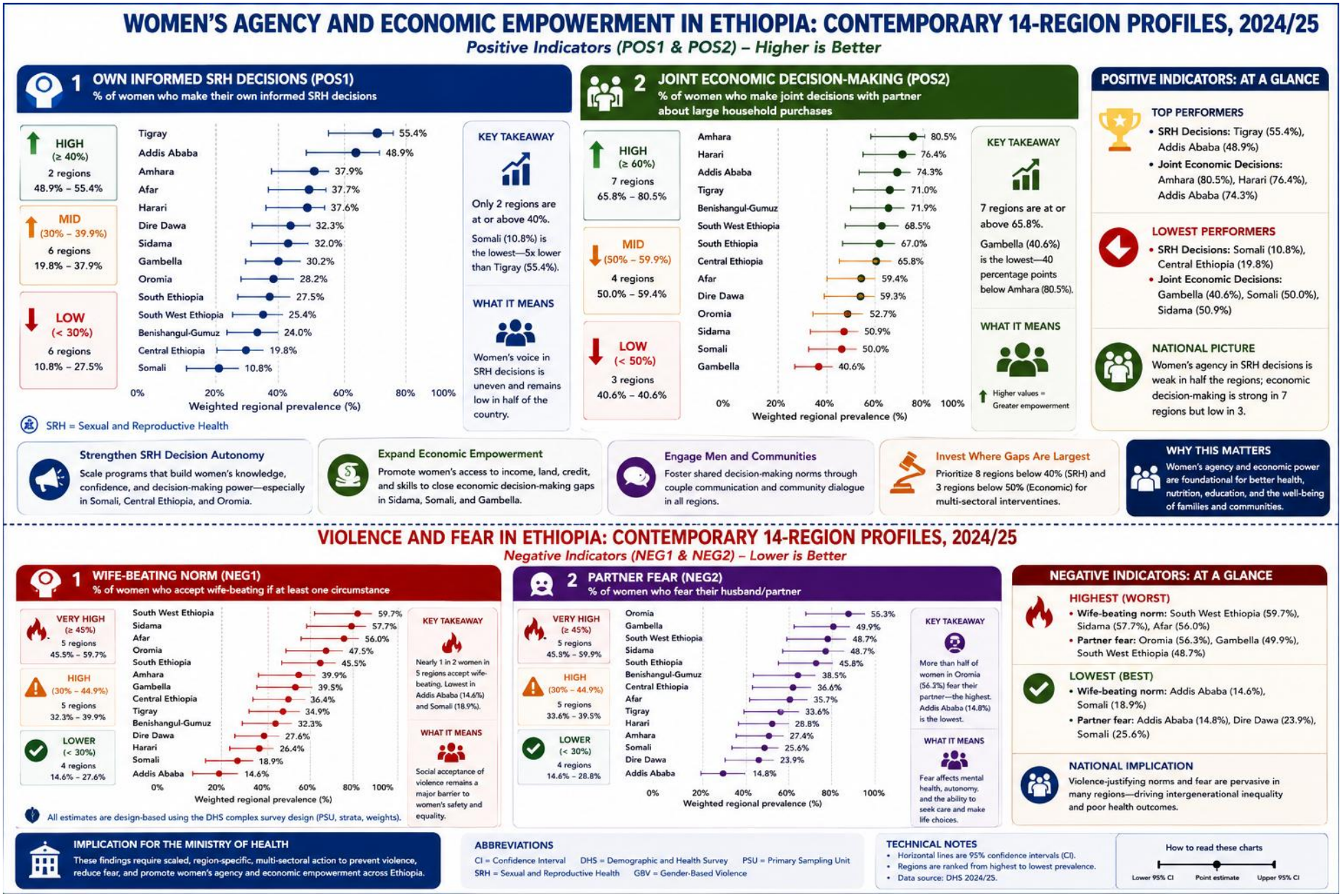

Figure 1. Contemporary 14-region profiles of women's agency/economic empowerment (POS1–POS2) and adverse gender-power conditions (NEG1–NEG2), EDHS 2024/25.

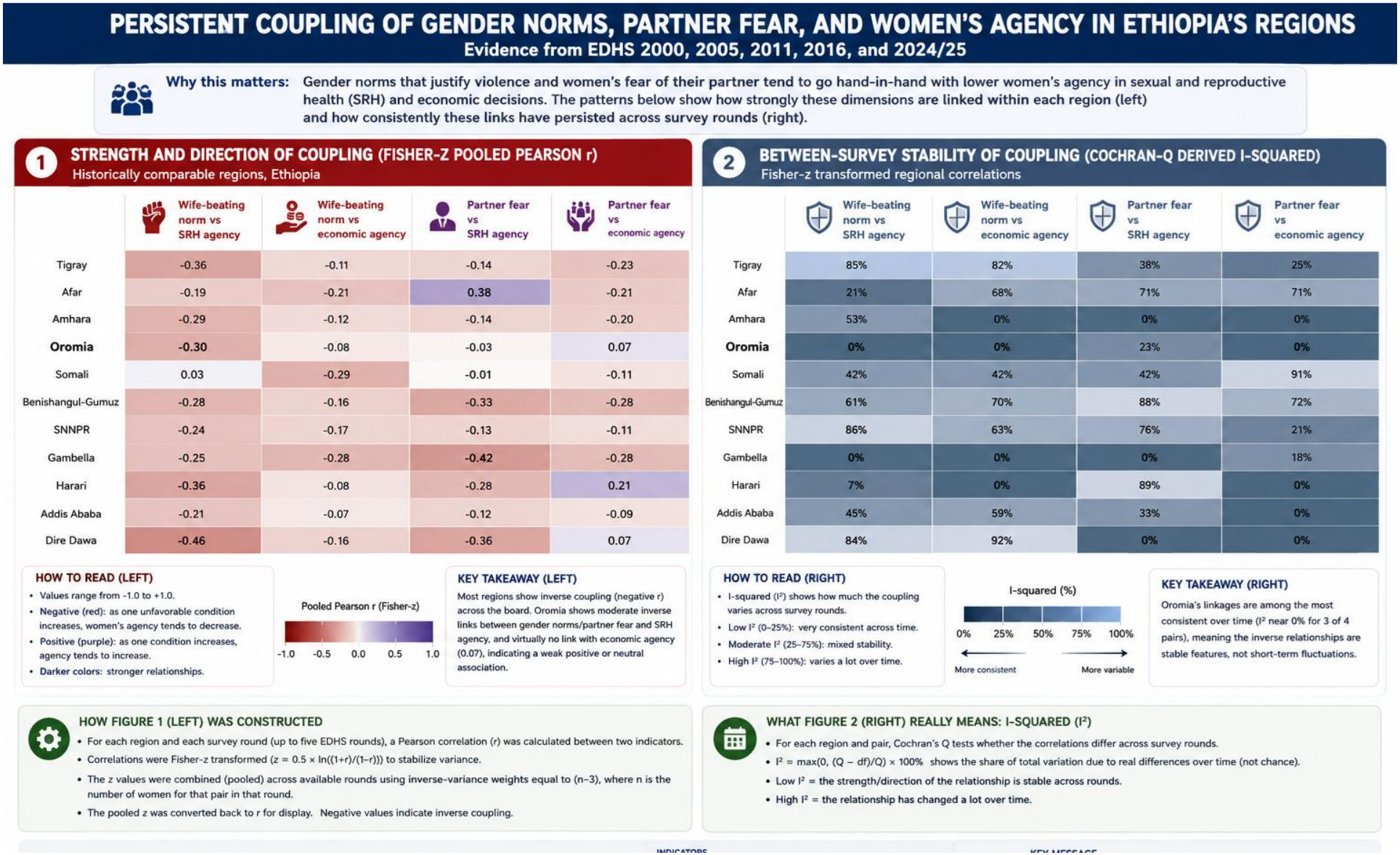

Figure 2. Persistent Coupling of Gender Norms, Partner Fear, and Women's Agency in Ethiopia's Regions, Evidence from Five EDHS Surveys – 2000, 2005, 2011, 2016, 2024-25.

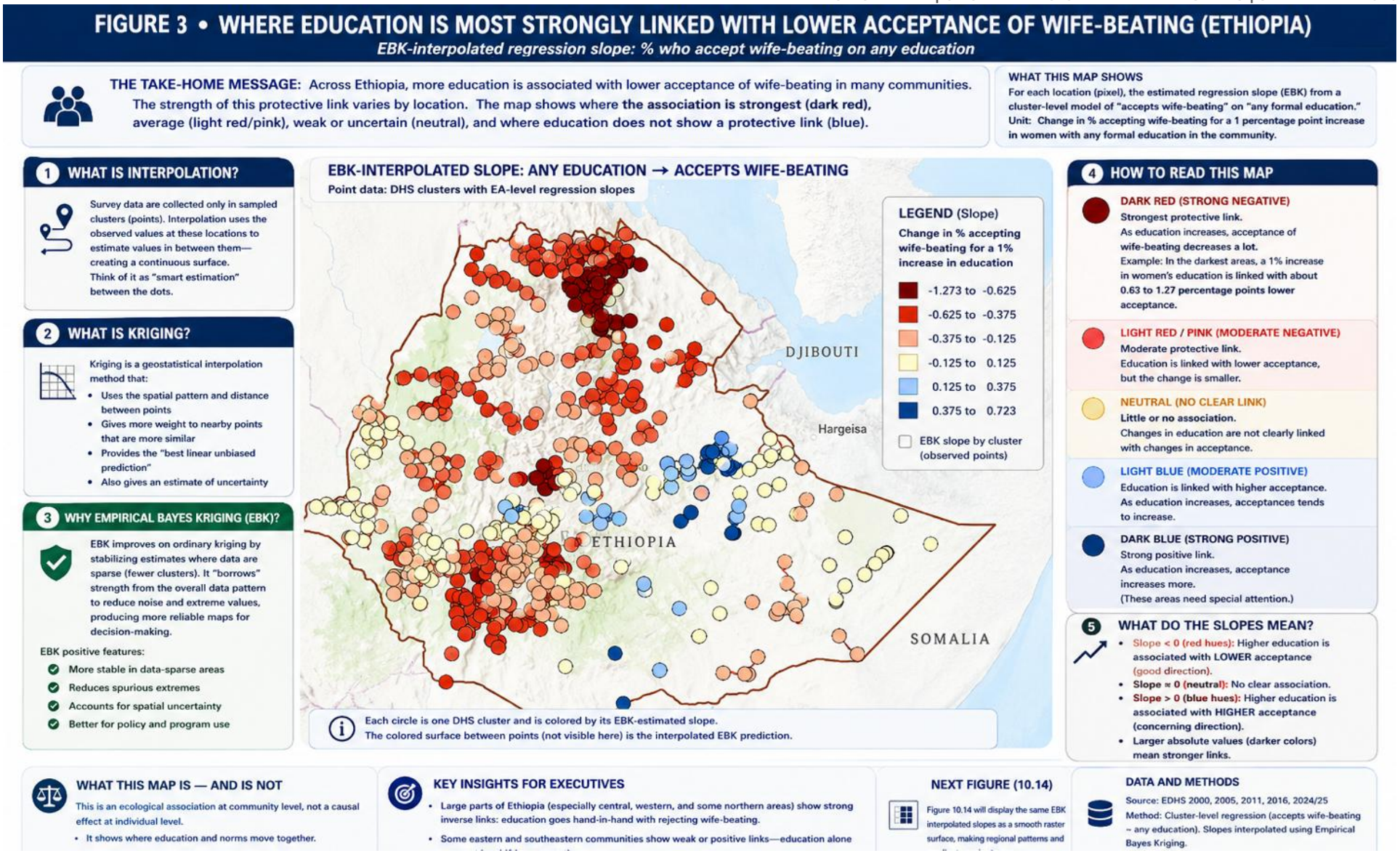

Figure 3. Where Education is Most Strongly Linked With Lower Acceptance of Wife-beating Based on Empirical Bayesian Krigging Slopes

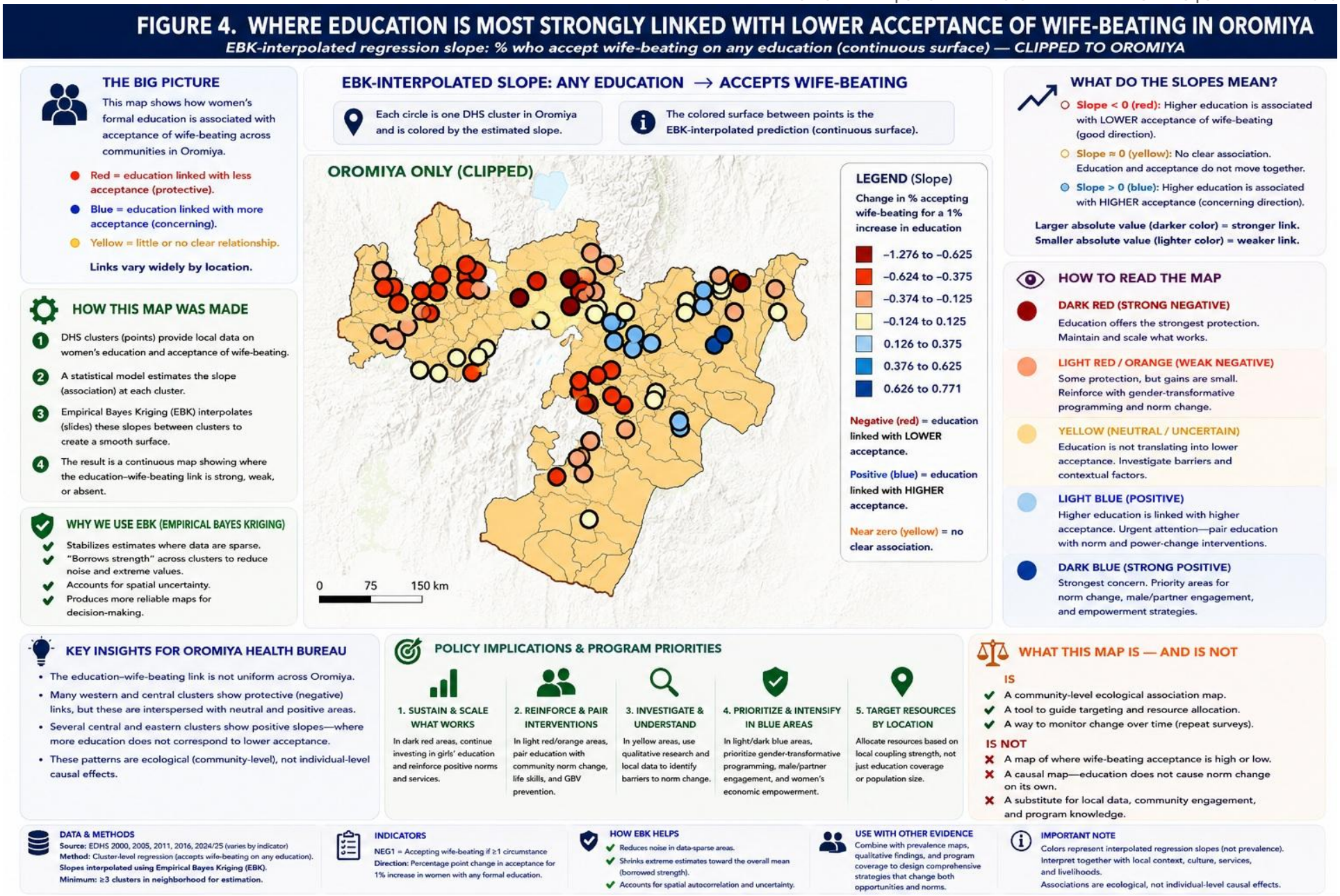

Figure 4. Where Education is Most Strongly Linked with Lower Acceptance of Wife-beating in Oromiya

E. Discussion

These findings warrant executive-level attention. Oromiya's population size means that a high prevalence of partner fear or restrictive gender norms represents a very large absolute number of women. More importantly, the indicators plausibly intersect across the life course. Educational disadvantage can narrow access to information, economic opportunity and bargaining power; constrained SRH agency can affect contraceptive choice, timing and spacing of births and timely care-seeking; unequal household power can influence control of resources and infant-feeding choices; and fear can suppress women's ability to negotiate or act even when services are nominally available [1–4]. WHO explicitly treats gender-responsive health systems, women's empowerment, transformed norms, strengthened relationship skills and accessible services as mutually reinforcing components of improved health and violence prevention [1,5,6].

The coupling analysis (Figure 2) suggests that Oromiya's gender and agency profile should not be interpreted simply as four independent indicators on which the region happens to perform poorly. Of particular concern, communities with greater acceptance of wife beating have repeatedly tended to be the same local social environments in which women have less SRH decision-making agency. The pooled inverse correlation for wife-beating norms and SRH agency ($r = -0.30$), coupled with $I^2 = 0\%$, indicates a relationship that has persisted with striking consistency across survey rounds. This temporal stability is programmatically important: it suggests that the observed pattern is unlikely to be explained solely by short-term survey fluctuation and may instead reflect enduring features of local gender-power environments.

At the same time, these are cluster-level ecological associations and should not be interpreted as individual-level effects or causal estimates. Nor does the weak coupling of some indicator pairs imply that partner fear or constrained economic agency is unimportant. Rather, the results suggest that the different dimensions of gender power do not necessarily move together and may require different intervention pathways. For Oromiya—given its demographic weight—persistent geographic co-occurrence of restrictive gender norms and reduced SRH agency warrants particular attention because improvements in these underlying social environments could potentially intersect with reproductive behavior, maternal and child health, breastfeeding practices, education, and ultimately population-level health outcomes.

Within Oromiya, the map (Figures 3 and 4) is notable for the predominance of clusters with weakly negative slopes (pink/light-red), approximately neutral slopes (pale/cream), and, in some areas, positive slopes (blue). Strong negative relationships—where increasing educational exposure is associated with substantially lower acceptance of wife-beating—are not the dominant spatial pattern across the region. This finding is consistent with the broader regional coupling analysis, in which Oromiya showed only a modest persistent inverse association between women's formal education and the wife-beating norm (pooled $r \approx -0.31$).

The maps also demonstrate considerable within-region heterogeneity. Oromiya should therefore not be treated as a single homogeneous social environment. Adjacent and geographically separated communities can exhibit different education–norm relationships even within the same regional administrative structure. Importantly, these are ecological cluster-level associations and should not be interpreted as demonstrating that an individual woman's education causes a particular attitude toward wife-beating.

For the Oromiya Regional Health Bureau, the practical implication is to avoid siloed responses. A regional women's agency agenda could be embedded across reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health; nutrition; community health; gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and response; and health-promotion platforms. Priority districts should be identified using disaggregated data, followed by locally tailored interventions that strengthen women's SRH knowledge and decision-making, engage men and community leaders in transforming harmful norms, reinforce confidential and survivor-centered services, protect breastfeeding through household and workplace support, and link health-sector action with education and women's economic empowerment. Because the region is heterogeneous, regional averages should trigger subregional diagnosis, not replace it.

F. Limitations and conclusion

These estimates are cross-sectional and do not establish that gender norms or agency caused breastfeeding, education, or other demographic and health patterns described. Indicator universes differ, historical comparability is limited to survey years in which constructs could be harmonized, and regional averages conceal substantial within-Oromiya heterogeneity. Consider confidence intervals when comparing individual regions, and do not read the contemporary regional profile as a league table.

Nevertheless, the signal's consistency across distinct domains is difficult to dismiss. Oromiya combines a high burden of partner fear and wife-beating acceptance with comparatively weak SRH and economic agency, alongside a persistent educational gender gap and worrying deterioration in breastfeeding. For Ethiopia's largest demographic region, improving women's agency is therefore not peripheral to the health agenda: it is potentially central to the future trajectory of fertility, maternal and child health, nutrition, human capital and intergenerational well-being. A focused Oromiya strategy—measured with the same rigor as conventional health indicators—could yield benefits at both regional and national scale.

References

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Appendix 1. Regional prevalence and 95% confidence intervals for four indicators of women's agency, economic empowerment, gender norms, and partner fear, Oomiya and other regions of Ethiopia, EDHS 2024/25

indicator id	short_label	direction	region	prevalence	Prevalence	se_%	ci_lower_	ci_upper_	Unweighted _n	psu_n	strata_n
				prop	_pct		pct	pct			
NEG1	Wife-beating norm	Negative	Addis Ababa	0.11	11.57	1.99	7.67	15.47	900	54	1
NEG1	Wife-beating norm	Negative	Afar	0.56	56.00	1.94	52.1	59.81	1144	52	2
NEG1	Wife-beating norm	Negative	Amhara	0.39	39.93	1.95	36.1	43.76	1289	67	2
NEG1	Wife-beating norm	Negative	Benishangul-Gumuz	0.32	32.82	3.10	26.7	38.90	901	50	2
NEG1	Wife-beating norm	Negative	Central Ethiopia	0.36	36.92	2.33	32.3	41.50	968	60	2
NEG1	Wife-beating norm	Negative	Dire Dawa	0.27	27.56	2.71	22.2	32.89	738	42	2
NEG1	Wife-beating norm	Negative	Gambella	0.39	39.48	3.38	32.8	46.12	954	45	2
NEG1	Wife-beating norm	Negative	Harari	0.26	26.58	2.46	21.7	31.41	787	40	2
NEG1	Wife-beating norm	Negative	Oromiya	0.47	47.47	3.38	40.8	54.10	1528	79	2
NEG1	Wife-beating norm	Negative	Sidama	0.57	57.65	2.16	53.4	61.89	1221	60	2
NEG1	Wife-beating norm	Negative	Somali	0.18	18.89	2.71	13.5	24.21	1030	60	2
NEG1	Wife-beating norm	Negative	South Ethiopia	0.45	45.53	2.26	41.1	49.96	1143	62	2
NEG1	Wife-beating norm	Negative	South West Ethiopia	0.59	59.70	2.54	54.7	64.69	1085	56	2
NEG1	Wife-beating norm	Negative	Tigray	0.34	34.85	2.03	30.8	38.84	1303	70	2
NEG2	Partner fear	Negative	Addis Ababa	0.14	14.83	2.52	9.88	19.78	437	54	1
NEG2	Partner fear	Negative	Afar	0.35	35.65	4.33	27.1	44.14	489	52	2
NEG2	Partner fear	Negative	Amhara	0.27	27.39	2.13	23.2	31.58	590	67	2
NEG2	Partner fear	Negative	Benishangul-Gumuz	0.38	38.50	2.65	33.3	43.69	441	50	2
NEG2	Partner fear	Negative	Central Ethiopia	0.36	36.57	3.22	30.2	42.89	463	60	2
NEG2	Partner fear	Negative	Dire Dawa	0.23	23.87	2.75	18.4	29.27	357	42	2

NEG2	Partner fear	Negative	Gambella	0.49	49.87	4.98	40.1	59.64	345	44	2
NEG2	Partner fear	Negative	Harari	0.28	28.83	3.25	22.4	35.21	365	40	2
NEG2	Partner fear	Negative	Oromiya	0.56	56.46	2.49	51.5	61.35	703	79	2
NEG2	Partner fear	Negative	Sidama	0.48	48.68	3.3	42.2	55.15	578	60	2
NEG2	Partner fear	Negative	Somali	0.25	25.77	3.43	19	32.50	439	59	2
NEG2	Partner fear	Negative	South Ethiopia	0.45	45.90	2.72	40.5	51.25	540	62	2
NEG2	Partner fear	Negative	South West Ethiopia	0.48	48.74	3.13	42.5	54.89	525	56	2
NEG2	Partner fear	Negative	Tigray	0.33	33.60	2.72	28.2	38.94	585	70	2
POS1	Own informed SRH decisions	Positive	Addis Ababa	0.48	48.86	3.41	42.1	55.55	722	54	1
POS1	Own informed SRH decisions	Positive	Afar	0.37	37.68	3.48	30.8	44.52	1019	52	2
POS1	Own informed SRH decisions	Positive	Amhara	0.37	37.90	2.62	32.7	43.04	1052	67	2
POS1	Own informed SRH decisions	Positive	Benishangul-Gumuz	0.24	24.01	2.67	18.7	29.24	786	50	2
POS1	Own informed SRH decisions	Positive	Central Ethiopia	0.19	19.79	2.12	15.6	23.95	900	60	2
POS1	Own informed SRH decisions	Positive	Dire Dawa	0.32	32.25	3.05	26.2	38.23	596	42	2
POS1	Own informed SRH decisions	Positive	Gambella	0.30	30.21	1.80	26.6	33.75	806	45	2
POS1	Own informed SRH decisions	Positive	Harari	0.37	37.63	2.73	32.2	42.98	641	40	2
POS1	Own informed SRH decisions	Positive	Oromiya	0.28	28.20	2.46	23.3	33.03	1376	79	2
POS1	Own informed SRH decisions	Positive	Sidama	0.32	32.04	1.57	28.9	35.13	1118	60	2
POS1	Own informed SRH decisions	Positive	Somali	0.10	10.77	2.83	5.21	16.32	926	60	2
POS1	Own informed SRH decisions	Positive	South Ethiopia	0.27	27.61	2.24	23.2	32.00	1054	62	2

POS1	Own informed SRH decisions	Positive	South West Ethiopia	0.25	25.39	2.17	21.1	29.66	964	56	2
POS1	Own informed SRH decisions	Positive	Tigray	0.55	55.39	2.83	49.8	60.95	1020	70	2
POS2	Joint economic decision-making	Positive	Addis Ababa	0.74	74.29	1.96	70.4	78.14	677	54	1
POS2	Joint economic decision-making	Positive	Afar	0.59	59.40	3.49	52.5	66.25	887	52	2
POS2	Joint economic decision-making	Positive	Amhara	0.80	80.51	1.99	76.6	84.41	1033	67	2
POS2	Joint economic decision-making	Positive	Benishangul-Gumuz	0.71	71.85	3.68	64.6	79.06	773	50	2
POS2	Joint economic decision-making	Positive	Central Ethiopia	0.65	65.80	2.14	61.6	70,00	863	60	2
POS2	Joint economic decision-making	Positive	Dire Dawa	0.59	59.33	2.44	54.5	64.13	564	42	2
POS2	Joint economic decision-making	Positive	Gambella	0.40	40.63	3.30	34.1	47.11	747	45	2
POS2	Joint economic decision-making	Positive	Harari	0.76	76.39	3.82	68.9	83.88	588	40	2
POS2	Joint economic decision-making	Positive	Oromiya	0.52	52.68	2.71	47.3	58.00	1242	79	2
POS2	Joint economic decision-making	Positive	Sidama	0.50	50.86	2.79	45.3	56.34	998	60	2
POS2	Joint economic decision-making	Positive	Somali	0.49	49.99	3.79	42.5	57.44	885	60	2
POS2	Joint economic decision-making	Positive	South Ethiopia	0.67	67.03	2.71	61.7	72.34	1019	62	2
POS2	Joint economic decision-making	Positive	South West Ethiopia	0.68	68.49	2.18	64.2	72.77	848	56	2
POS2	Joint economic decision-making	Positive	Tigray	0.71	71.86	2.22	67.5	76.23	966	70	2