

# Young Women's Household Bargaining Power in Marriage and Parenthood in Ethiopia

Nardos Chuta



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### **About Young Lives**

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, following the lives of 12,000 children in four countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam) over 15 years. [www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk)

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## Summary

This working paper examines the factors that affect the bargaining power of young married women in marriage and parenthood in Ethiopia, where power structures remain overwhelmingly male-dominated and patriarchal. It draws on longitudinal qualitative data and survey information collected by Young Lives with children, young people and their families between 2007 and 2015. The paper's main focus is young women's changing relations and analysis of their 'bargaining power' before and after marriage. The concept of bargaining power has been used to understand gender inequality, primarily from the field of economics, but this mainly qualitative paper takes bargaining power to mean the negotiating capacity of young married women within their marital relationships and households.

The paper argues that intra-household, social-institutional and individual factors intertwine to shape young women's agency towards bargaining power in differing areas of their lives. Generally, factors such as urban or rural residence, education, standard of living, customs and norms combine to shape the bargaining power of young women in marriage. Decisions are usually made at a collective level, whereas agency at the individual level is often very shallow.

The paper recommends that policies and programmes targeted towards reducing gender inequality at intra-household level have to consider the wider contexts in which those households are situated, such as how cultural beliefs and norms shape marital practices, gender and generational relations, and decision-making more broadly.

# 1. Introduction

This working paper uses Young Lives longitudinal data to explore factors affecting young women's household bargaining power in the context of marriage and motherhood in Ethiopia. The main focus is on young women's changing relations and analysis of their 'bargaining power' before and after marriage as an aspect of gender inequality. In Young Lives, gender differences widen in adolescence across a range of indicators, from school enrolment, to work opportunities, to marital status and transitions to parenthood (Feeny 2015; Dornan and Pells 2014).

In Ethiopian government policy, marriage under the age of 18 is considered 'early marriage' or 'child marriage' and is categorised as a harmful traditional practice. Efforts to tackle harmful traditional practices in the country have been made in the name of gender equality. In 2014, Ethiopia ranked 129 out of 188 countries in the Gender Inequality Index (UNDP 2015). This is despite the government's commitment to improve the social standing of girls and women, and the number of programmes targeting different aspects of gender inequality, from early marriage to women's job creation, as well as attempts to change local cultural belief systems (Ethiopian Society of Population Studies 2008). These national developments must be understood within a wider global context and development agenda. To 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' is one of the Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 5), which includes a target to 'eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.' Gender inequality in different facets remains a major obstacle to human development in most developing countries, where power structures are still overwhelmingly male-dominated and patriarchal. Under such conditions, the marriage of girls is perceived as a fundamental mechanism in which existing norms and disadvantage are reinforced, to the detriment of girls (IPPF 2006).

One concept that has been used to understand gender inequality, primarily from the field of economics, is that of 'bargaining power'. Bargaining power is explained as negotiations between members of a household to arrive at decisions regarding the household unit (Seebens 2010). The basic premise is that men and women have different roles and priorities when it comes to household decision-making, and that decisions are made through a bargaining process in which household members each attempt to use the resources they have to achieve their desired ends.

For the purposes of this paper however, I take bargaining power to mean the agency of young women to make decisions within their marital relations and households. The basic premise is that women's limited bargaining power manifests in restrictions on their decision-making power within the household, reinforcing gender-based inequality (Dito 2011). Policymakers care about the bargaining power of women because of its direct correlation with different life outcomes. It is not enough to provide women with access to opportunities, services, or information, if they are powerless to act due to social and economic constraints. Increased bargaining power has been correlated with better outcomes in terms of health and education, and of the clothing of children and other members of the household (Doss 2011). This paper focuses on bargaining power as women's agency because of its strong association with household-level dynamics and gender relations.

## 1.1 Background to early marriage

Early marriage is a major policy priority, both at regional and global levels. Despite the legal frameworks in place in Ethiopia since 2013, marriage below the legal minimum age remains prevalent in some parts of the country, particularly for young women. Marrying young has been associated with negative outcomes (Jones et al. 2014; Erulkar 2013; Emirie 2005), including an inability to plan or manage a family, as well as early childbirth which brings with it its own risks (Pathfinder International 2006; Getnet 2014). Early marriage is linked to poverty, thus perpetuating intergenerational cycles of vulnerability (Emirie 2005; Chuta and Morrow 2015). At the same time, across many societies, marriage is an important requirement and marker of the transition to adulthood, and the average age of first marriage has been increasing over time. In Ethiopia, in 2000, 19 per cent of girls were married by age 15, while in 2011 this had declined to 16 per cent (Population Reference Bureau 2015). The average age to marry is 15.6, but in some regions there are girls who marry at as young as 9 years old (Milkias 2011). Social norms continue to represent a major force influencing community practices and expectations, such that in some parts of Ethiopia, early marriage is intimately connected to female genital mutilation/cutting as the practice is considered a requirement for girls wishing to marry (Chuta and Morrow 2015; IPPF 2006). Despite a preponderance of campaigns and advocacy around the abolition of early marriage as one of the most well-known 'harmful traditional practices', the practice continues to raise concerns for the welfare of the country's girls and women (UNFPA 2012; Boyden et al. 2012; Jones et al 2014; Asrese and Mulunesh 2014).

This working paper examines the experiences of a group of young women in Ethiopia, aged 20-21, who participated in qualitative research over a seven-year period (2007-2014) spanning pre- and post-marriage, and for some of them, pre- and post-childbirth. Using longitudinal qualitative data, it explores factors that influenced their bargaining power on a number of inter-related decisions concerning their education, livelihoods, marriage and parenthood.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows: The next section discusses the literature on household decision-making dynamics, factors that determine women's bargaining power and women's agency, as well as the situation of Ethiopian women within the context of recent national policy initiatives. The paper then discusses the background of the study, profiles individual cases, and presents findings.

## 2. Household decision-making dynamics and women's agency

Women's bargaining power is analysed across a number of domains and is usually evaluated in relation to ownership status and access to resources (Mutakalin 2008). In many countries, traditional patriarchal beliefs are linked to limited decision-making power of women in the family, expressed in the gendered division of household labour that dictates, for example, that women stay home and take care of the household and the children (Majstorović and Lassen 2011). In Ethiopia, men's and women's household roles are traditionally complementary, such that women assume responsibility for reproductive labour, including unpaid domestic work and child care. Women also contribute to the household income, with one study reporting that, worldwide, women spend up to 90 per cent of their

incomes on their families, while men spend only 30 to 40 per cent (FAO 2011). The restriction of women's primary roles to the domestic sphere is understood as one of the main causes of gender inequality as well as a major obstacle to implementing policies related to poverty alleviation (Sow 2010).

Literature in the social sciences has indicated several factors that affect women's bargaining power. For example, in economics, resources, materials and labour income are sources of measurement for bargaining power. Other fields of study have tried to see the factors of bargaining power beyond resources. For instance, some studies in Ethiopia have linked education to increased access to skills through employment opportunities, to improved participation in social and political arenas, and to the avoidance of harmful traditional practices (Teller and Assefa 2011; Gunasekaran 2010).

It is therefore important to understand the way individual-level preferences relate to intra-household decision-making and to the welfare of differently positioned household members (Seebens 2010; Sow 2010; World Bank 2010). Gender inequality has a direct impact on the welfare of women, which in turn further impacts on other members of the family, especially children (Seebens 2010). It has been shown that women who wield greater influence in household decisions can greatly improve their children's nutritional status (UNICEF 2006). Women's bargaining power may affect the way roles are distributed within the household, thus impacting on household production, allocation of labour, agricultural work and wage work (Doss 2011).

Many factors influence the bargaining position of women in the domestic sphere, in particular in rural contexts where traditional social structures remain highly influential (Dito 2011). In traditional societies where women's presence in public spaces, mobility and job options are limited, women rely heavily on men for engagement with the external social world (Dito 2011; Agarwal 1997). A wide range of measures and indicators of women's bargaining power have been used in understanding household dynamics, including income, employment, asset ownership and education (Doss 2011; UNICEF 2006). Ownership of assets such as land and non-land assets are often used as a proxy for bargaining power and can be important outcome measures (Njuki et al. 2014). Ownership of land, for instance, has a strong correlation with increased household food security (Kathewera-Banda et al. 2011; Ferede and Setotaw 2006). Further, social expenditures such as on education, health and food are positively linked to women's income and resources (Kathewera-Banda et al. 2011). Others have argued that bargaining power depends on wage rates (Pollak 2005). Social norms reinforce gender differences in bargaining power, for example, when women lack rights to land or property and other dimensions of social life (Agarwal 1997; Schmidt 2012; Rao et al. 2005; Mutakalin 2008). Moreover, poverty limits women's power to bargain (UN 2000).

The sources of bargaining power thus reflect economic and non-economic factors and have a direct correlation with differentiating members within the household (Doss 2003). For instance, a person who earns the most money within the household often has the most influence in household economic decisions. Similarly, women with more wealth, education and assets may have greater bargaining power compared to poorer and less educated women (Doss 2003; Doss et al. 2014). In developing countries, women's bargaining power has mainly focused on their earnings gained or their assets acquired during marriage or brought with them into the marital home (Sow 2010; Doss et al. 2014).

This paper focuses in particular on how young married women make household-level decisions in relation to their education, marriage, engagement in income-generating activities, and the number of children to bear and their engagement in income-generating activities.



## 2.1 Women's agency

In patriarchal societies the supremacy of males dominates the different social arenas, and women are rendered vulnerable due to their structurally inferior social position. Yet, although women's access to and control of productive resources is limited, they are not completely without social agency (Verman 2007; Meyers 2002). Within the household context, women make decisions collectively with their partners, or they completely rely on their male partners, or they make decisions by themselves in female-headed households (Angel-Urdinola and Wodon 2010). Yet in order to break patterns of restrictive female bargaining power, women need to be empowered to utilise their agency (The World Bank 2005).

In this paper, I use the terms bargaining and agency interchangeably. By this, I mean an individual's or group's ability to 'bargain' to make desired decisions over life choices in the household and to transform those choices into desired outcomes. Within the household, agency is the process through which women and men use their endowments and take advantage of economic opportunities to achieve desired outcomes (World Bank 2011). Thus agency helps to understand how gender outcomes emerge and why inequality exists.

Numerous factors and contexts influence women's agency within households. For example, education increases exposure to information so may help women to resist demands from others, as well as facilitate their capacity to translate their preferences into desired outcomes (Seebns 2010; World Bank 2012). Education impacts women's outside options and agency (Doss 2011; Klugman et al. 2014). According to the World Bank (2013), education, employment and family formation are decision-making areas where women's ability to decide is increasing. This is reflected in the role of young girls in having a say in their level of schooling, in their age at marriage, and in the timing and number of offspring (World Bank 2013). Women's economic participation is also thought to empower women to make decisions in other areas of their lives by altering traditional definitions of gender roles, duties and responsibilities. Working to earn an income may thus give women the agency to affect household decisions (Doss 2011: 20).

Social norms also have a pivotal role in constraining or enhancing the agency of certain social groups, including young women, for example, by either helping or hindering an individual's capacity to take advantage of any available opportunities (World Bank 2013). There are also factors that negatively affect women's agency. According to the World Bank (2011: 150-151), 'norms can constrain women's agency when they prevent laws, services, and incomes from benefiting women and men equally.' Mekonnen and Kerebih (2014), in their study of women's household decision-making status in north-western Ethiopia, indicated that the involvement of women in household decisions is very limited because of the deep-rooted cultural norms that accept men as household heads. In addition, lack of knowledge and women's limited access to earning money prevents women's involvement in decision-making at the intra-household level.

The next section considers the specific situation of Ethiopian women and the policy contexts that frame gender relations in the country.

### 3. Ethiopian women and policy contexts

In many developing countries, including Ethiopia, gender inequality has become an important area of concern in national and sub-national economic development. In line with this, Ethiopia has adopted a constitution and national policies consistent with international legal instruments on gender equality.<sup>1</sup> The Ethiopian constitution guarantees the rights of women as equal to those of men in all spheres of life. Equality between men and women, and boys and girls, is also one of the central pillars of the recent Growth and Transformation Plan (GTP).

Yet in this patriarchal society traditional norms and practices limit women's agency on issues that affect their lives, and men exercise significant influence on household decision-making processes. Ethiopia remains a primarily agrarian economy where alternative livelihood options for women are severely restricted. The welfare of women depends on what happens within rural farming households and societies. Women constitute almost half of the total population, yet female-headed households and women in male-headed households have unequal access to productive assets and other resources (Adal 2006; World Bank 2015). Women and girls are also strongly disadvantaged compared to boys and men in several areas, including literacy, health, livelihoods and basic human rights (Massow 2002).

Ethiopia continues to perform poorly on gender equality and it lagged behind in Millennium Development Goal 3 which was intended to promote global gender equality and empower women (UNDP 2015; United Nations 2013). This is despite achieving gender parity in primary school enrolment, and significant gender gaps are still reported in rural areas (Gella and Getnet 2014). Furthermore, gender disparities increase at higher levels in education, where the enrolment of adolescent girls is lower than boys (UNDP 2012).

A major area of policy concern for girls and women pertains to harmful traditional practices, including early marriage, female genital cutting, rape and abduction (Boyden et al. 2012). There is a reported decline in the rate of female genital cutting, but child/early marriage remains prevalent, in spite of country-wide legal reforms. According to a UNFPA report in 2012, 16 per cent of women were married when they were 15. Because marriage is a relatively fluid state in rural Ethiopia, customary practices surrounding marital dissolution also affect the wealth and relative bargaining power of men and women (Kumar and Quisumbing 2015). Women's political representation is also low (Biseswar 2008), so that pressure on the government to increase the enforcement of the law is limited. In rural areas, female-headed households tend to be more disadvantaged than male-headed households on many fronts: they are more likely to be casual labourers than farmers, less illiterate and have fewer assets than male-headed households and less access to, and access over, land and other production resources (Kumar and Quisumbing 2012; Adal 2006).

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1 The Transitional Government and the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia have formulated several policies to rehabilitate the social and economic infrastructure and create an environment for sustainable development. These include the Economic Policy along with its strategy, the Agricultural Development Led Industrialization (ADLI), the National Policy of Ethiopian Women, the National Population Policy, the Education and Training Policy, Health Policy, Developmental Social Welfare Policy, Environmental Policy, Culture Policy, Policy on Natural Resources and Environment, and others.

## 4. Study context

This working paper draws on Young Lives longitudinal qualitative data gathered in 2007, 2008, 2011, and 2014 as well as Round 4 survey data gathered in 2013 in three Ethiopian communities (one urban, two rural) (see Crivello et al. 2013).<sup>2</sup> Data from a sub-study which was carried out on young people's pathways to marriage and parenthood in 2015 was added to the longitudinal qualitative data. The two rural communities are Zeytuni in Tigray region and Leki in Oromia region, and the urban community, Bertukan, is located in Addis Ababa. These three sites were chosen for analysis since it was in these communities where we had recorded cases of child marriage and motherhood within the qualitative sample.<sup>3</sup> On the whole, the Young Lives sample is pro-poor, meaning the majority of participating households are poor, yet they are culturally and historically diverse. In 2007, the qualitative sample was drawn from the survey sample to capture contrasting contexts and experiences of childhood, vulnerability and development.

The qualitative methodology combines in-depth individual interviews with thematic group discussions, with children, youth and adults (caregivers, community representatives and service providers). Interviews are conducted in different premises within the communities and the recorded audio is later transcribed and translated into English. Data are coded thematically, using Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software. The research received ethical approval from the University of Oxford, and ethical dilemmas arising during fieldwork are discussed and reflected upon as a team to generate shared learning.

## 5. Profiling the cases of married girls

This paper considers how both income and non-income factors relate to women's household decision-making, focusing on a group of young women who married when they were 16 and 17 years old and who, in the latest data collection round, were between 20 and 21 years old. The analysis takes advantage of the biographical approach to the research, meaning we prioritised gathering in-depth information on the same group of individuals, to record changes in their lives and circumstances. In this way, the approach for this paper favoured depth rather than breadth, although the survey data provide a broader context in which to situate the individual cases.

During the last four rounds of the qualitative study, five girls experienced early marriage from the qualitative sample and some cases were also added from the latest sub-study on pathways to marriage and parenthood. The added cases will not be profiled, but supplement the latest data on marriage and parenthood. One of these girls is from the urban site, and the other four are from two different rural sites. Households in both the urban and rural areas are very poor. Bertukan is an urban neighbourhood in Addis Ababa and is a centre for commerce

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2 Young Lives has been undertaking research in Ethiopia since 2001. It has been tracking 3,000 children growing up in poverty in 20 sites distributed over five major regions (Addis Ababa, Amhara, Oromia, SNNP and Tigray).

3 All names of research sites and young people are pseudonyms, in order to protect respondents' anonymity.

and small- and medium-scale industries. It is regarded as one of the city's 'old quarters' and poverty is widespread. Many people work in the informal economy; selling fruit and vegetables on the street, renting houses for storage/living, and carrying goods for cash are key sources of income for residents. The presence of the market creates opportunities for young people to find jobs, either selling or carrying groceries, or serving clients, washing cars, shining shoes, and so on. Children in many cases engage in different income-generating activities in the area, while women earn a living by cooking and selling food in the market and as washerwomen.

Fatuma, age 20, used to live with her mother, grandmother, uncles and brother in shared accommodation with her mother's aunt in Bertukan since childhood. Her father is dead and she is the second child of two. Her mother was the primary caregiver and breadwinner, earning an income by running a tea house and laundering clothes for others. Fatuma joined pre-school, age 4, but dropped out immediately due to illness. Fatuma used to help her mother doing both light and heavy household chores. She was also following her lessons attentively, though in 2008 she indicated her fear that she may discontinue her education if she failed in Grade 10. After completing Grade 10, she joined Technical and Vocational Education in woodwork, but later dropped out due to lack of interest. Fatuma had aspired to become a doctor, until an unsatisfactory result in the Grade 10 National Exam. She had also planned to migrate to an Arab country for work; however, she changed her mind when she met her boyfriend and got married in 2012. She moved to currently live with her husband in the locality and has a baby girl. Her husband works as a trader and is the main earner for the family. Fatuma, on the other hand, is responsible for all domestic activities, as well as nursing her baby.

Ayu and Beletch live in Leki, while Haymanot and Sessen reside in Zeytuni, poor rural communities which are both food insecure. Leki is located in Oromia Regional State, and rain-fed and irrigated farming and fishing are the primary means of livelihood for the community. Children are mainly involved in waged work on private irrigated farms or in the private flower farm, while boys also engage in fishing. Agriculture is the main means of livelihood, and crop failure due to lack of rain sometimes causes food crises. Though the government has designed means of social protection such as the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP), it is reported not to be enough and often has unintended negative consequences for children, such as making them have less time for schooling and studying at home, in some cases leading to children dropping out of school (Tafere and Woldehanna 2012). Similarly, in Zeytuni, agriculture is the main livelihood but the community also engages in waged work related to stone-crusher plants, animal rearing, poultry, masonry, irrigated farms and trading. Children in middle childhood (6 to 11 years old) start assuming greater responsibilities for maintaining the family livelihood, often because of parental illness and absence (Chuta and Morrow 2015; Chuta 2014).

Early marriage is prevalent in both rural areas, though the details of how it is practiced differ. Generally, in Leki, marriage is practiced mainly through voluntarily abduction,<sup>4</sup> while in Zeytuni it is arranged by the parents. There are many girls who leave school because of early marriage in these two communities. Though early marriage was not the prime cause of leaving school for all the girls, it was for some. Four of the five married girls from the

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4 This form of marriage needs the consent of the girl. According to this practice, the girl is abducted and then the parents are asked to consent to the marriage. If a girl wants to get married to a particular boy, 'voluntarily abduction' may take place, meaning that she has consented to the abduction.

qualitative sample married after they dropped out of school either due to parent's illness and the need to do wage work to earn income for family or oneself, or lack of interest in school.

Ayu and Beletch are both 20 years old and had been attending the same school in Leki. Ayu studied up to Grade 2 while Beletch dropped out of Grade 6. Both of Ayu's parents are living; she is the fifth child of nine and used to live with her family in Leki before she married in 2010. She joined school at age 8 and dropped out of Grade 1 the same year she joined. She moved in and out of school intermittently before leaving completely in Grade 2, and she never returned to school. Ayu has been doing both household chores and wage work from a young age. She used to aspire to become a teacher and/or a doctor, but currently she wants to go into business opening a shop or a restaurant. Ayu married through voluntarily abduction at age 16 and is currently living with her husband and 2-year-old daughter in a different locality. She depends on the income her husband earns from fishing and farming and is not doing any wage work.

Beletch is a double orphan girl who was raised in her aunt's house in Leki. She had been actively engaged in both paid and unpaid work since childhood. Because she was the only girl in the family, she shouldered responsibility for many of the household tasks. She joined school when she was only 7, but missed classes frequently because of illness and her workload at home. Beletch dropped out of Grade 6 and got married through voluntarily abduction in 2011. She has a baby girl and lives with her husband in a different locality. She used to aspire to become either a teacher or a doctor but now thinks this is not going to happen. Though she sometimes does farm work to assist her husband, she fully engages in domestic tasks and has stopped doing wage work. She wants to run a tea-selling business in the future.

Haymanot is the middle of three children and lives in Zeytuni with her sister, mother and baby girl. Haymanot used to do domestic tasks and waged work when she was living in her mother's house. Due to her mother's illness, her family was in dire financial straits. Haymanot had to stop school in Grade 5 in order to assist the family by engaging in wage work at a stone-crushing factory as well as doing the domestic tasks. Haymanot struggled hard to overcome her family's poverty and she was also doing some handicraft works besides the wage work. Haymanot married through parental-arranged marriage in 2011, but divorced her husband when she was pregnant with her first child. After her divorce, she started moving residence between her mother's house and her sister's house. Haymanot's sister also assists her financially. Though Haymanot stopped doing wage work for some time after her marriage, in 2014 she sought out paid work again to support herself and her child. She is also planning to start a tea-selling business with her sister.

Sessen, unlike Haymanot, has very little educational experience. She only attended school up to Grade 1. Sessen used to live with her sister, mother and stepfather in one of the hamlets in Zeytuni. Her mother is living but her father is deceased. She stopped school at age 14 in order to help her mother with wage work at the stone-crushing plant following the death of her father. Sessen married through an arranged marriage, though she was in a relationship with her husband before her marriage. Her husband's income from farming and working at the stone-crushing plant is the main source of livelihood for the family. Currently Sessen only engages in domestic tasks and taking care of her child, but in the future she plans to help her husband by engaging in daily work.

## 6. Results

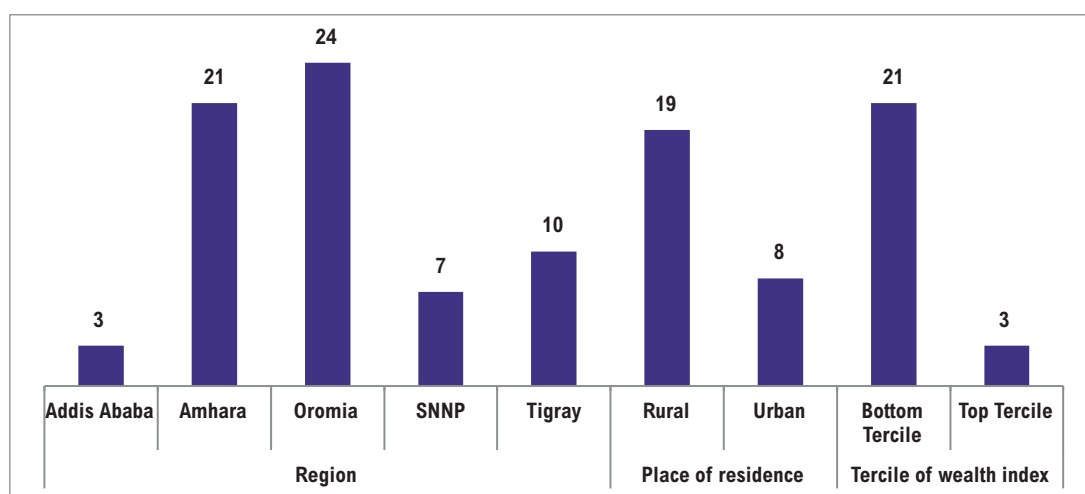
This section presents the main findings of the study, both in descriptive statistics from the survey and the qualitative data.

### 6.1 Quantitative data

#### 6.1.1 Marriage

By age 19, one in six young women in the Young Lives sample were married. Girls growing up in rural areas and in poorer households were more likely to be married by this age. Figure 1 presents the prevalence of marriage (as the percentage of Older Cohort reporting marriage in each region) in the Young Lives sample.

**Figure 1.** *Prevalence of early marriage by location and wealth*



Source: Young Lives Survey 2013.

Notes: n= 58 (53 girls and five boys).

Rural areas report the highest shares compared to urban areas, and among the regions, Oromia (24 per cent) and Amhara (21 per cent) have the highest prevalence. The following tables show young women's educational/employment status at age 19 (Table 1), and for those who are no longer in school, their highest grade achieved (Table 2).

**Table 1.** *Females current educational/employment status at 19 years old*

Current status	Urban no.	Urban %	Rural no.	Rural %	Total no.	Total %
Not studying, working, or married	14	6.7	14	6.64	28	6.67
Only studying	99	47.37	65	30.81	164	39.05
Only working	33	15.79	45	21.33	78	18.57
Married (not studying nor working)	8	3.83	23	10.9	31	7.38
Studying and working	47	22.49	48	22.75	95	22.62
Studying and married	3	1.44	0	0	3	0.71
Working and married	5	2.39	14	6.64	19	4.52
Studying, working and married	0	0	2	0.95	2	0.48
<b>Total</b>	209	100	211	100	420	100

Source: Young Lives Round 4 Survey.

As Table 1 shows, around 31 per cent of the rural girls were studying at age 19, while around 23 per cent were combining work with study. Twenty-one per cent of the girls were only working, which is slightly higher than their urban counterparts (16 per cent). Around 11 per cent of young women in rural areas are married and do not study or work. Most girls who marry tend to do so after stopping school or else stop working for cash after getting married. There are no girls who combine schooling with marital life in the rural areas.

During the Round 4 qualitative study, the highest grade level completed by a young woman was secondary level (Grade 10), by Fatuma in Bertukan. Though she was placed and on track to pursue vocational education, she dropped out. For the young women in the rural areas, the highest grade level completed was Grade 5. Beletech dropped out of Grade 6 after a few weeks. The majority of the girls in rural areas stop school after completing lower primary school (i.e. Grade 4).

**Table 2.** *Female highest level completed for those no longer in education in Round 4*

Highest level/grade completed	Urban no.	Urban %	Rural no.	Rural %	Total no.	Total %
None	1	1.67	4	4.17	5	3.21
Lower primary (1-4)	4	6.67	25	26.04	29	18.59
Upper primary (5-8)	18	30	41	42.71	59	37.82
Secondary level (9-10)	29	48.33	23	23.96	52	33.33
Pre-university Grades (11-12)	1	1.67	2	2.08	3	1.92
Vocational/diploma	7	11.67	1	1.04	8	5.13
Total	60	100	96	100	156	100

Source: Young Lives Round 4 Survey.

Similarly, of those who are no longer in education, rural girls were more likely to be out of school in lower primary grades (26 per cent) compared to their urban counterparts (7 per cent). Very few young women (24 per cent) in the rural areas had completed secondary school level at age 19, compared to urban young women (48 per cent). It is clear that the majority of the girls in the rural areas are not at school when they are 19 and only complete the lower primary school level, for different reasons.

## 6.2 Qualitative data

The following section explores in more depth the themes arising from the individual cases of married girls, using longitudinal qualitative data to examine their lives before and after marriage. Table 3 depicts key decision-makers in different life choices prior to and following marriage.



**Table 3.** Summary of pre- and post-marriage decision-making of young married women

Community	Respondent	Decision-making actor before marriage			Decision-making actor after marriage*			Remarks
		Work	Education	Marriage	Work and/or (division of labour), and social relations	Education	Parenthood	
<b>Bertukan (urban)</b>	Fatuma	Self	Self	Self	Self and husband	Self	Couple	She has acquired different skills in addition to that of her formal education
<b>Leki (rural)</b>	Ayu	Parents and self	Parents and self	Self	Husband	Husband	Couple, mother	Her mother was telling Ayu stop taking contraception
	Beletch	Parents	Parents	Self and partially a close friend	Self	Self	Couple	In early rounds of the study, she used to think that marriage brings poverty
<b>Zeytuni (rural)</b>	Haymanot	Parents	Parents and family situations	Parents	Self and life situations	Husband	Parents and husband	Mother's influence was significant both in marriage and parenthood
	Sessen	Parents	Parents and self	Self and parents	Parents and husband	Self	Parents and husband	Initially her mother's reaction to Sessen's marital procedures was negative because Sessen was not supposed to be in relationship

Source: Young Lives qualitative longitudinal data.

Notes: \* Societal norms and expectations are crosscutting for any of the decisions made after marriage.

Besides the couple and their families, social norms affect the decision-making power of the young women, especially after their marriage. Social norms are especially influential with respect to the timing of when the couple should have a baby, and with how women are expected to socialise in society and act within the household.

### 6.2.1 Schooling and work and/or division of labour

The dynamics of young women's roles in decision-making vary across time, age and /or maturity, and societal expectations in line with norms and values, as well as structural factors like poverty and social disadvantage. In Fatuma's case, she appeared to be the main actor in decision-making within her pre-marital, parental household. During 2007, Fatuma indicated that she was doing all the domestic tasks at home, mainly to help her mother and not because she was ordered to. Similarly, she went to school based on her own decision. For Fatuma, the main driving force for pursuing education and doing tasks at home was personal interest. Since she enjoyed doing domestic tasks and education made her feel happy, she indicated she needed no one to force her to do these things. This was reflected in the decision she made in 2011 when she was in Grade 10. Fatuma had passed the exam to attend technical school but refused to join and continue with her placement. She withdrew from school and started to learn sewing at the local mosque. Though Fatuma's mother was not happy with Fatuma's decision, she later accepted it. Regardless, it was important to Fatuma that she obeyed and respected her elders, including her mother. The fact that she was able to make important life decisions partly emanated from her self-reliant character. In



addition, she was raised freely and encouraged to do things and make decisions on matters that concerned her. Thus Fatuma is a good example of a young woman who exercised agency on issues that concerned her, as indicated by her mother in the following interview extract:

Interviewer: Does she decide how she should pass her time and do certain things?

Fatuma's mother: Yes, it is on her own that she decides nearly everything. The moment she is back from Quran lesson, she studies.

Interviewer: Do you tell her to go to Quran study?

Fatuma's mother: She decides everything on her own. She stays at home until her friend comes back from school then they watch TV together. They barely walk out. She is free to do everything.

**In the same interview, the mother was asked about her wishes for Fatuma in the future.**

Interviewer: What do you expect from your child related to her life and education?

Fatuma's mother: Well, I wish that she could get a job and get married. I want her to end up in a good way. I want her to have a husband who is well endowed with riches. And in fact if I come across a person who is rich, I would not hesitate to marry her to him.

Interviewer: Who decides over that?

Fatuma's mother: Of course she decides on that, but I want her to get married and be better off. I also want her to have kids and be successful in life. This is just my expectation.

(Fatuma's mother, 2011, Bertukan)

From this conversation it is clear that the mother has some wishes for Fatuma regarding her marital life, but still indicated all decisions are up to her daughter. Even if it was Fatuma who decided who to marry later on, the marriage was finalised when the elders came to ask the mother to give her daughter in marriage.

After her marriage, Fatuma indicated that she wanted to work for income during the day and study in the evening. According to her, this was her decision and she was not forced by her husband. Child care and domestic tasks as opposed to the supportive nature of her husband led to her decisions. For Fatuma, what has changed regarding work after marriage is that now she has a minimal workload at home since her family size is small and she is only expected to prepare food for a family of three.

Senu also made the decision to leave school herself, despite the strong aspiration she had for education. She dropped out in Grade 5. Her future plan is therefore to educate her children and help them to reach a higher level.

Interviewer: At what age did you stop going to school?

Senu: Age 16.

Interviewer: Who decided that you had to stop schooling?

Senu: I decided myself. I asked my parents to send me my report card after I moved to a different locality but they did not send it; then I dropped out.

Interviewer: What was your educational aspiration when you were at school?

Senu: When I was a primary school student, my elder sister was a secondary school student. She was a clever student. I wished to follow her footsteps, to complete secondary education and to reach to a higher level. However, that aspiration was not successful. My lack of maturity contributed to my school dropout.

Interviewer: Do you regret dropping out from school?

Senu: I strongly regret that. I had to continue with my education. I should have been in Grade 9 by now if I had continued my education. Had I continued with my education, I would not have married and given birth to two children.

(Senu, 2015, Leki)

Ayu, on the other hand, seemed to be manipulated by people around her on issues of education and work. In 2007, Ayu told us how she joined school late (age 8) as her parents prevented her joining earlier as they were not in a position to afford her educational materials. For this reason, she also started wage work at an early age alongside carrying out domestic tasks at home. At first her parents prevented her from doing wage work, but after she was able to hand over some of her earnings, they became more amenable to the idea. Unlike Fatuma's case, Ayu's parents made the decision to send Ayu to school based on their financial ability, and they influenced her educational aspirations as well; she indicated that she wanted to become a teacher because her parents want her to become a teacher. Fatuma attended pre-school, unlike Ayu who even joined Grade 1 a little late. Similar to many cases in the study, since 2007, there were times when Ayu would have preferred to focus on earning money, but her parents pushed her to continue in school. Her mother confirmed that Ayu enjoyed doing waged work and said, "Yes, Ayu likes to go to work by stopping her education. But her brothers and I advise her to give priority to her education than to this temporary work."

However there was a complete shift following Ayu's marriage in terms of her bargaining power with regard to wage work and education. Soon after her marriage, although Ayu wanted to work at the Sher Flower Company, her husband did not allow her to do so, for fear that she might be exposed to dangerous chemicals (pesticides). In a similar way, she talked about the impact having a child had on her decision regarding whether or not to return to school.

"I could not return to my education. No one can care for my child even if I want to continue with my education. I wish to continue my education however my husband also prevented me from continuing. He said, 'education and family life cannot weave together'. He rather advised me to focus on leading family life and give good care for our child. Then I accepted his advice and totally stopped learning."

(Ayu, 2014, Leki)

Ayu's husband had a huge impact on her work. For example, before her marriage she used to be involved in daily labour to generate income. After her marriage, she focused only on accomplishing domestic tasks and child care activities, but was still interested in jobs outside the home: "I still want to do some income-generating activities, however, my husband does not want me work outside the home." Now that she is married and not working, she is totally dependent on her husband for any expenses.

Even if husbands allow their wives to participate in income-generating activities, the responsibilities associated with being a mother and a wife are prohibitive. This holds true for Senu. Senu did various types of domestic and farming work during her childhood. She was also involved in paid work even after her marriage and before giving birth. This has changed

after giving birth because being a wife and a mother means that she has to bear the responsibilities of undertaking domestic and child care tasks alone.

The relationship between work and family is complex in a society where first and foremost it is the husband who is expected to work to support the family, while the wife remains home caring for the children. Work and family do not interact, especially when women have young children, and gender roles become more segregated. Married women are full-time wives and mothers and men are expected to earn more than women, regardless of their individual skills or educational background. Though there are job opportunities available for women today, particularly in urban areas, having children usually means a career interruption, and thus deepened financial dependency on their husbands.

According to their understanding, it was their husbands who were the main household decision-makers. In many cases, the responsibility of heading the household was the husband's, and husbands had the main responsibility to earn a living. Women were assumed to be dependent on their husbands and they turned to their husbands for their needs. For Fatuma, this was the case when she indicated that she no longer goes to her mother for help. She said, "I ask him [my husband] if I need anything. I am not supposed to ask my mother since he is responsible for anything that I need."

Zebenay, who lives in Zeytuni, similarly indicated that her lifestyle has changed after marriage. She said, "I cannot do whatever I want because I receive money from my husband, I do not have my own income, while those who are unmarried can be hired in paid work and buy whatever they want with the salary they get." She feels constrained in her marriage due to her financial dependence on her husband, which creates conflict between them. Zebenay's mother also fears that her daughter's marriage may end in divorce.

Ayu has limited bargaining power in the household, mainly because her husband is the sole breadwinner and she cannot earn an income because she is restricted to the domestic sphere. As both Ayu and her mother confirmed, the husband makes every decision, from food consumption, to work, education and spending.

Unlike Fatuma and Ayu, Beletch was overburdened with both domestic tasks and paid work before her marriage. As Beletch was the only girl in the family, she had to work at home for long hours caring for the older family members. She was the one fulfilling her personal needs from the income she earned doing waged work. During her childhood when she lived in her aunt's house, she was not even allowed to play like other children. In 2008 she said, "I work for the whole day. My recess is only when I go for sleep." She was also absent from school a lot. She indicated that none of her family members wanted her to become educated nor did they worry about her wellbeing. Instead, her 'parents' expected her to marry in the future: "They just expect me to get married and earn them dowry. They do not care if I learn or not. I wake up early in the morning, clean the house, cook food, take the cattle to field and then go to school." In light of her heavy workload, she indicated she had no time to study at home. On the contrary, her aunt claimed in 2008 that her wish for Beletch's future was all about education:

Interviewer: What do you do for her education?

Beletch's aunt: I buy her educational materials such as notebooks and pens ... [I] want her settled in life before I die.

Interviewer: What do you expect from her in the future?

Beleth's aunt: I want her to be educated. I do not want her to get married. A married woman is like someone who goes to a prison. I want her to be educated and reach some level. I don't want to give her in marriage, no.

Interviewer: Why don't you want to give her in marriage?

Beleth's aunt: What does a marriage do for her? I don't want that.

Interviewer: Don't you get some dowry by giving her in marriage?

Beleth's aunt: What does that do for me? What do I benefit from her marriage?

(Beleth's aunt, 2008, Leki)

In 2007, Beleth stated that she wanted to become a teacher or a doctor after completing school. However, after she got married, she realised that she was not going to achieve this. In Beleth's view, her aunt ordered her to do work. The agency in Beleth's bargaining power was highly influenced by the fact that Beleth was the only girl in the family. Cultural expectations weigh heavily on girls compared to boys. Though both boys and girls work from early childhood onwards in rural parts of the country, the expectations on girls to work for their households are greater. Girls are encouraged to start helping parents with challenging tasks about two years earlier than their male counterparts (Arnett 2012). They often assume the full range of female adult tasks by age 12.

Before her marriage, Beleth used to engage in paid work as she had to cover the costs of her personal needs and schooling. However, in 2011, she stopped wage work and started working in her brother's shop. She helped to establish the shop with the money she earned from wage work. Marriage brought many changes for Beleth: changes in her religion, roles and responsibilities, and her place of residence. She moved from Leki to a different locality far away and also converted to Islam. She is now a mother of a girl and her responsibilities are limited to the home – domestic chores and child care. She married after dropping out of Grade 6 and does not want to continue with her education as she thinks it is no longer useful.

Household changes – including household shocks – prior to marriage affected children's work responsibilities, and, indirectly may have impacted on marriage decisions. For example, a major shock to Haymanot's family was the severe illness of her mother, because of which she stopped school in Grade 5 and began working in a stone crushing factory. In 2008, unless Haymanot worked for cash, the family's livelihood was at risk. Similarly, Sessen dropped out of Grade 1 when she was 14 years old in order to supplement her family's food consumption after drought struck her village and her father died. Before her marriage, Sessen worked both at home and at the stone crushing factory. She also used to weed on a farm and sell cactus fruit. She explained:

Interviewer: What did you feel because of dropping out of school?

Sessen: Nothing, what can I feel? I decided to stop because I wanted to do paid work from which I could earn money; but I could not get anything from going to school, sitting there and going back home. There was no profit.

(Sessen, 2014, Zeytuni)

Apart from the problems Sessen's family faced, Sessen did not seem to be interested in going back to school. For her, nothing would be gained by returning to school and she seemed to be more focused on the short-term benefits of paid work. In contrast, Haymanot was unhappy that she had discontinued her education. Once married, she thought her husband would not allow her to return.

Interviewer: Are your siblings going to school?

Haymanot: Yes.

Interviewer: Why not you?

Haymanot: Because I have to work.

Interviewer: What do you think may be a challenge to your school?

Haymanot: My husband.

Interviewer: How do you think you can solve this problem?

Haymanot: I will ask him, but if he refused I will not go to school.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Haymanot: Because my husband wants a child.

(Haymanot, 2011, Zeytuni)

During her marriage, Haymanot had limited bargaining power regarding her education, but she was at least relieved to be able to give up work at the stone crusher factory. After giving birth, she was not free to look for a new job because she had no one to look after her child. Such relief from working did not last long, since following her divorce, Haymanot had to return to work to support herself and her four-month-old daughter.

The level of decision-making power of young married women regarding the types of work they should be involved in, and whether to pursue education or not after marriage, vary by location and by level of education. Women living in urban areas with relatively high educational attainment, like Fatuma, have high bargaining power in whether attend school or not, in the selection of a marriage partner, and work. In urban areas they also have more options available to them. Woman's education relative to her partner's may increase their power in bargaining for more equal division of paid and domestic work (Schober 2010). In Fatuma's case, her husband has not attended formal education but he is older than her by seven years. However, this seniority in age does not suppress her bargaining power. The fact that she has pursued her education up to Grade 10 and that she is living in an urban area has boosted her self-confidence and bargaining power within the household.

In many cases, husbands preferred that their young wives discontinued or remained outside of education. This may have emanated from the male-dominated culture and the expectation from husbands that wives are only meant for the domestic sphere. Though gender roles are changing in the country, women are still relegated to a subordinate status, particularly in rural areas where women are expected to be wives and mothers first and foremost. Women's tasks typically include raising children, maintaining the household, grinding corn, carrying loads, washing clothing, and helping with farm work (Gish et al. 2007: 70). Family formation decisions, especially about the timing of marriage, child bearing and the number of children, are critical issues of consideration for women's investment in education (World Bank 2013). All the young women were not 'allowed' to do wage work directly following their marriage, nor were they allowed to continue their studies. To either work or study, they would have had to obtain the consent of their husbands.

## 6.2.2 *Marriage and parenthood experiences*

### **Marriage**

Marriage and parenthood are two major social institutions with serious commitments and responsibilities. Marriage is viewed by many as a relationship involving shared values, shared resources, and significant emotional support (Baker 2010). For the majority of the young girls in the study who married early, transitioning to marriage and parenthood was not easy. The position men hold within marriage also affects women's perceptions of work and the family. It seems that even in the girls' minds, there was the assumption of men's position as 'safeguards' and 'shelters'. This was reflected in the decision-making surrounding the marriage itself; while one of the girls in Zeytuni had a parental-arranged marriage, for the other four, marital decisions were made by the girls themselves. Fatuma's mother said regarding her daughter's marriage decision:

"She makes good decisions regarding her life. She decided to marry without consulting anybody. I was so surprised when the elders came to ask her for marriage. Even all the community members in our old place were surprised as they did not expect she is capable of making such important decision. It is not very common to marry at an early age in this community. On my side, I was very happy with her decision. Only a few girls can make such important decisions in life."

(Fatuma's mother, 2014, Bertukan)

Fatuma's mother was happy with her daughter's decision to marry because she wanted to live to see her daughter's marriage day, as she had a severe long-term illness. She also indicated that Fatuma used the opportunity to marry in order to escape from poverty and from other household problems.

Though Fatuma had not indicated any marriage aspirations in the previous rounds of the study, Ayu, in 2007, indicated that she wanted to marry when she was 22 through parental-arranged marriage. However, Ayu married before she was 22 through voluntarily abduction, without consulting her family. In 2008, Ayu's mother was asked about Ayu's marriage and responded saying that she would not have permitted it: "We will not permit it. But what can I do if she goes by her will without my knowledge? I can do nothing except accepting it." Indeed, Ayu's aspiration did not match the reality; on the one hand, she said she wanted to marry through an arranged marriage, while she secretly cooperated with her partner in a voluntarily abduction. She also did not resist when she was abducted and taken to the family of her husband. Though Ayu got married through voluntarily abduction, before the abduction, her husband had sent elders to her parents to ask for her marriage. However, Ayu refused, saying that the proposal was made without her agreement: "He [the husband] should have asked me first and go with my agreement before sending elders to my parents. My parents have no right to decide on my behalf. I have the right and capacity to decide about my future life." Ayu's bargaining power over the marriage decision was so strong that she could decline the marriage proposal that came through elders, but consent to the marriage through voluntarily abduction which in form and status is far below than that of formal marriage.<sup>5</sup>

Beletch, on the contrary, had a clear and firm stand regarding marriage since 2007. In different interviews, she indicated that she did not want to get married because she thought

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<sup>5</sup> Formal marriage is one which is processed through sending elders and which is also called arranged marriage. It is the culturally accepted form of marriage in many societies in Ethiopia.



marriage leads to poverty. But if she had to marry, it has to be the way her 'parents' wanted it. In 2011, she indicated that she wanted to marry the way her 'parents' wanted and not by her will. However, this contradicts with her current life decision as she married by her will without the consent of her 'parents'. It is clear that she is the sole decision-maker regarding her marriage, although a friend had influenced her decision to some extent. A neighbourhood friend told Beletch that the would-be husband owned a house in town and has large farmland. Beletch said, "I simply quit school and decided to marry." Back in 2008 and 2011, Beletch was afraid of being married forcefully through abduction and had no interest in getting married:

Interviewer: Do your parents want to marry you off soon?

Beletch: No, they don't. But I am afraid that I will be abducted.

Interviewer: Is abduction still present?

Beletch: Yes, even though it is not as it used to be.

(Beletch, 2011, Leki)

Beletch had very contradictory views on who should decide about her marriage and perceptions about marriage. She had no wish to get married in 2007, yet in 2011, she thought she might be forced to get married through abduction.<sup>6</sup> In many instances, she reiterated her intention to comply with the will of her 'parents' on the issue of marriage, but at the same time she indicated that she would be with the man she loves, even if his proposal was not accepted by her 'parents.'

On the other hand, Saqxu, who lives in the same community as Beletch, was married through forced abduction as a substitute for her elder deceased sister. She was married at 15 and the marriage was arranged by her parents. Replacing wives in this way (sister substitution) is known to occur within the community, although the practice is declining. Saqxu felt she had little option to refuse. although another (elder) sister was initially given as a substitute, the marriage did not take place as the sister ran away a week before the wedding day. Even if Saqxu's marriage was not her plan, she felt obliged to abide by the cultural and societal expectations for her to marry in order to maintain her parents' good social standing. After her marriage, the advice she received from relatives and her husband's friends helped her focus on family life. She said, "my husband's mother and sisters advised me to focus on my family. They told me that it is good to live with the first husband."

In Zeytuni, parents have the dominant position in deciding whom their girls have to marry and when they should get married. This is especially the case when girls are no longer attending school. Once girls leave school their parents are unlikely to want them to remain at home. Rihisti, Wuney and Zebenay got married soon after they left school. Wuney narrated her story:

Interviewer: Have your parents discussed with you about the marriage?

Wuney: No, they did not. They finished everything and told me to go to the tailor shop in order to give my size for the new dress.

Interviewer: Did you try to refuse the marriage proposal?

Wuney: Yes, but they did not listen to me.

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6 Beletch got married through voluntarily abduction after her husband's proposal was rejected by her 'parents'.

Interviewer: So, you got married by your parents' will and not by your choice?

Wuney: Yes, they forced me.

Interviewer: What did they say to you when you refused?

Wuney: I did not have the guts to confront them because I failed in my education and my fate was only getting married.

(Wuney, 2015, Zeytuni)

Marriage arrangement types have considerable implications for bargaining power, with wide variation across contexts (Dito 2011). Generally, arranged marriage is associated with lower equality in gender relations when compared to marriages based on personal choice and, in Ethiopia, voluntary abduction (a kind of elopement). Young women in arranged marriages negotiate a wider set of power relations that go beyond the immediate married couple, including parents, in-laws and other kin who might wield influence on decisions affecting the married couple. Unlike the two girls in Leki who married through voluntarily abduction, Haymanot and Sessen in Zeytuni had arranged marriages.

### **Marriage transfers**

There are diverse marriage practices across Ethiopia which involve differing forms of marriage endowments. For the girls in Leki, marriage transactions came from the husband to the bride and her family, while in Zeytuni, parents of the bride pay the dowry to the husband. Hence the bride wealth and dowry to be paid influence in some part the bargaining power of the young women and their families, especially the future relations of the couple with extended family and the fulfilment of household needs (Tafere and Chuta 2016; Tafere 2015). Haymanot had to consent to her marriage because the husband was not asking for dowry and her mother wanted to see her get married before she died (Chuta and Morrow 2015). Yet for Haymanot, marriage was not her prime interest, rather, she emphasised marriage as an expression of compliance with her mother's will.

Interviewer: Did you know your husband before your marriage?

Haymanot: I didn't know him before.

Interviewer: How many days before your marriage have you seen your husband?

Haymanot: I had seen him in the community about six months earlier and I knew that he was going to marry me.

In the same interview she indicated why she accepted the marriage proposal the husband sent through elders.

Interviewer: What was your position at that time; did you blindly accept the proposal or did you have your own say?

Haymanot: Yes, I asked my mother to stop negotiating with the elders. I begged her to let me work and help her for some time up until she gets well. I also asked her to delay the marriage as I was too young. But she worried that she was getting very sick and she wanted to see my marriage before something bad happened. Then, I said ok.

Interviewer: Were there people other than your husband who had asked you for marriage before?



Haymanot: Yes, there were; but my mother was refusing them because they were from far away villages. She wanted me to marry a man in the same locality so that I wouldn't be too far to see her as she was sick.

(Haymanot, 2014, Zeytuni)

In Zeytuni, money and cattle are the most common gifts transferred from girls' parents to her husband. Hence, the larger the amount of gifts, the better the wife's bargaining position (Dito 2011). The fact that Haymanot's parents were not asked to pay dowry and her mother's sickness intensified the marriage decision of Haymanot. She felt she couldn't say no. Even following her divorce, Haymanot did not feel able to use legal means so that she could claim legal custody of her child and maintenance from the child's father.

Sessen also had an arranged marriage, but unlike Haymanot, she had been in a relationship with her husband for some time. She met her husband at the crusher plant workplace and knew him well before her marriage. She was his girlfriend for some weeks before he formally proposed through sending elders to her family. Though both her parents and she consented to the marriage proposal, in 2014 Sessen indicated that it was her husband who decided about the marriage.

Interviewer: Why did you decide to get married?

Sessen: I just wanted to have married life and have babies.

Interviewer: Whose idea was it for you to get married?

Sessen: My husband's.

Interviewer: What did he say?

Sessen: He asked me to live together then I said ok.

Interviewer: Did you have to take time to think and decide about your marriage?

Sessen: Yes, I asked him if he was going to marry me; I told him my concern is that he might leave me after having a baby. Then he agreed on living together.

(Sessen, 2014, Zeytuni)

Though Sessen was married by parental-arranged marriage, her marriage differs from the marriage norm in the area. According to the culture in Zeytuni, the parents should choose husbands for their daughters. However, in Sessen's case it was the couple who first decided about marriage, then sent elders to the family. This procedure angered Sessen's mother.

"Because she chose her husband herself; this was a taboo in our culture. When I heard this rumour, I behaved like a mad person. I thought he had broken her virginity and I was to accuse him. But then I realised that they had no such contact at that time. They were just friends going to their work together. I was getting so angry when some people told me that they saw them together. I was to kill her saying that she was doing something abnormal that was not even practiced by her elder sisters. However after she got married to a man whom she loved, I see her having better life than her sisters for whom I had chosen husbands and thought that I had blessed their marriage."

(Sessen's mother, 2014, Zeytuni)

In choosing her partner, Sessen diverged far from the norm where parents choose the husband for their daughters and then notify daughters about their choice. In her case, the decision to marry was not top-down. Even dating as a transitional phase of boyfriends and

girlfriends is considered taboo, and for Sessen's mother a cause for disgrace. Initially, this was a source of shame both to the mother and the community, although in the end, her mother seemed to be happy with Sessen's choice of partner. It could be said that Sessen took a big risk by deviating from the norm, and it paid off.

For others like Zebenay and Wuney who had no say about their marriage, life after marriage with a partner whom they had never met before was difficult. Zebenay said, "I was not happy and I am not still happy because it was not my choice. I got married by my parents' pressure." She further stated:

Interviewer: How was living together or marriage at first?

Zebenay: It was difficult at first but I started to get used to it through time.

Interviewer: What was difficult about it?

Zebenay: The household chores.

Interviewer: What about the other things like living with a person you do not know before?

Zebenay: It was difficult too.

Interviewer: Why?

Zebenay: We never agree on all issues; he always likes to be the boss; he thinks he knows everything. That is why I am not happy in my life with him.

Interviewer: Is he changing his behaviour from time to time or it is like it was before?

Zebenay: It is getting worse.

(Zebenay, 2015, Zeytuni)

## **Parenthood**

It is clear that for young women in this context, decisions around marriage are closely intertwined with decisions around parenting and fertility. Economic factors, education and normative expectations play an increasing role in explaining demographic choices and family formations (United Nations 2009). In reality, the social, institutional, and individual factors that influence how many children people want are not well understood (Hayford 2009). This section addresses young women's bargaining power in parenthood, focusing on negotiating fertility choices and on first births.

Regarding first birth and parenthood, with the exception of one woman, the women received important advice from their mothers, including information about birth preparations, breast feeding and supplementary feeding. However, on contraception issues, young women often turned to married friends or relied on information communicated on television. On fertility issues, the idea is that couples decided together, yet we have already seen how husbands' opinions influence outcomes. Beletch's husband said, "I discussed with my wife to have a child early. She agreed with my idea. As a result, she did not use contraception. We planned to have the first child and then create a gap to have the second." The discourse suggests it is a joint decision, but it may be, as in the case of Beletch, that it is up to the woman to 'agree with' the man's idea.

For Ayu, her first pregnancy was unplanned. Prior to her first pregnancy, Ayu was taking contraception after consulting her husband. But when she stayed at her in-laws' house for six months, her injection was interrupted and she fell pregnant. She said, "I didn't actually want it

happen. But there was nothing I could do.” Similarly Fatuma was using contraception for six months then when they decided to have a baby, she stopped it.

For these girls gradually settling into a new life before deciding to have their first baby was not an issue. All of these young women lacked their own income and were not well-educated, factors that had they been otherwise, might have caused them to delay. In addition, they were also subject to strong normative expectations in the culture of their community that once a girl is married she is expected to soon to bear a child. If they do not, it will damage the reputation of both the family of the girl and the girl herself. For example, in Ayu’s case, her mother did not want Ayu to take contraception, and wanted her to become pregnant soon after the marriage. Ayu’s mother said, “Traditionally it is said someone becomes more considerate and sympathetic after giving birth to a child. That is why I wanted her to get a child as soon as she got married.” The other reason for pushing Ayu to have a child was because Ayu’s mother was not allowed to enter into Ayu’s house unless Ayu gave birth and paid the bride wealth.<sup>7</sup>

Although Ayu said her pregnancy was unplanned, she was happy when the health professionals told her the news of her pregnancy. “I became delighted for becoming pregnant because I wished to have a child. My husband was also happy when he heard that I became pregnant.” According to Ayu, marrying early at 16 is good. In 2014 she said, “It is good to marry early and have a child early. It is better to marry early than become *haaftu* [left unmarried]. It is not good to give birth at a late age. There is no problem in having a child at 18.”

From the 2015 data, there are variations in how the young women made the decision to have their first baby. For Gani, contraception did not figure into her decision. In fact getting pregnant contributed to her decision to get married and so the couple were not using contraception after marrying. Even in the future the couple do not want to use contraception because the husband believes that modern forms of contraception can negatively impact women’s health. Family economic status is the other factor that affects women’s bargaining power over fertility decisions. Some women feel constrained in the number of children they can have due to their economic circumstances, so they wouldn’t negotiate with husbands over the number they should have. For example, Senu says she wants to have five children but only if she becomes rich.

Apart from deciding when to have a baby, there is the decision of *where* to give birth to the first child. According to the Ethiopian Health Policy, health care for all segments of the population has been assured since 1993 (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia 1993). Currently the Health Ministry has a special component on ‘improving maternal and child health’ that includes safe motherhood, which encourages mothers to deliver at health institutions. However, in some parts of Ethiopia, girls upon their first delivery are expected to give birth at or stay in their mother’s house for post-natal care, and in rare cases they stay at their in-laws’ place. Ayu’s gave birth in her parents’ home. Though it is a tradition in Leki for a woman to give birth to her first child at the house of her parents, she first had to discuss the options with her husband. Following his permission, she moved to stay with her mother. Her mother also insisted that Ayu should give birth at her place.

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7 Since Ayu was married through voluntarily abduction, some transaction money needed to be paid before legalising the marriage. It has three phases, with different amounts of money and materials to be paid in each phase. See Boyden et al. 2013.

Apart from giving birth at the house of a mother, a woman is also expected to stay in the house of her parents after her first delivery. However, this was not the case for Beletch, for three reasons. First, the marriage Beletch chose was not in the interest of her family, that is, her aunt who acted as her guardian. Since she married without the knowledge and consent of her family, her marriage has created disagreement between them. Although there is a contradiction between what her aunt says and what Beletch says, her aunt indicated that she had always wanted Beletch to pursue her education rather than marry young. Second, her marriage was not legalised as her husband had not yet paid the required bride wealth or *Gabbaraa*. Beletch's aunt asked for a large amount of money which the couple could not afford at the time. Third, the fact that Beletch is married to a different clan and moved far away from her aunt made her aunt uncomfortable.

Haymanot and Sessen were not using any form of contraception when they got married because of a lack of accurate information about the options. They both became pregnant soon after marriage. Sessen said, "I heard about contraception from some women who gave birth and from health workers at the health centre." She had no other relevant information regarding giving birth. Yet Sessen was going to the health centre for pre-natal check-ups and fortunately her delivery happened on the day she went for her last check-up. She said, had it not overlapped on the day of her check-up, she would have given birth in her mother's house with the help of traditional birth attendants. According to her, women in her area give birth at home and go to the health centre only if they have complications while giving birth. Haymanot also gave birth at home through the help of traditional birth attendants because she was afraid of going to the health centre. Unlike the other young mothers who tried to plan their pregnancy and intended to give birth at health centres, Sessen and Haymanot from the very start had planned to give birth at home.

Haymanot and Sessen had limited knowledge of family planning, although Sessen had at least followed up with the pre-natal health care service. Apart from a lack of knowledge about the benefits of family planning, mothers and husbands of the young women influenced their decisions to have children. In her case, Haymanot's decision-making power was very limited. Though she wanted to have a baby after five years, her husband and her mother insisted that she should have a baby in no time. In addition to deciding when to have a baby, relatives also wanted to decide on the number of children couples should have. Again, here Haymanot's mother was very influential. Haymanot wanted to have three children yet her mother wanted her to have either six or seven.

Young mothers from Bertukan (urban) and Leki indicated they decided about their pregnancy and parenthood together with their husbands, in spite of the norms that may influence their decision about giving birth. On the contrary, young mothers from Zeytuni were not able to do this and they were totally overwhelmed by the expectations of their family and community. Traditional expectations and traditional male dominance can sometimes overtake the bargaining power of women. Husbands, mothers, and in-laws are the major actors who usually take part in the decisions about having children.

In the interview above where Haymanot, having married, was asked whether she might return to school, she replied that she would ask her husband, but that he might refuse because he "wants a child". This highlights a recurring theme in young women's narratives of bargaining power – whereas the constraints brought on by marriage may vary, the birth of a child consistently constrains agency such that the margins for bargaining become ever more narrowed. The transition to parenthood results in more profound changes in the division of labour between couples compared to most other life-course events (Gershuny 2004; Baxter

et al. 2008). Culturally, women are the main carers for children, especially for very young children, so there is little scope for negotiation between the couple; and whereas men can assume the breadwinner role, women's paid work and education take a back seat to their mothering responsibilities.

### 6.2.3 *Social relations after marriage*

Marriage affected young women's social networks – with past friends and relatives – and placed new social responsibilities on their shoulders – for example, their participation in different traditional local institutions. After marriage, the young women were expected to take part in community-based social institutions such as *Iddir*<sup>8</sup>, *Mahiber* (religious gathering), *Iqqub* (saving association) and other community meetings. Fatuma participated in *Iddir*, reasoning, "If there is any death, I should participate in the mourning event. Previously when there was bereavement, I was not supposed to attend and it was not mandatory for my age. But after marriage, I have to attend every social event as part of my social responsibility."

In most cases, the women indicated that they had limited interactions with their previous friends after their marriage, but that there were high expectations to participate in different aspects of societal life. There were restrictions on the type of relations they could make with people. For example, for Fatuma and Beletch, their relationships with people after marriage were restricted to those who were also married. It is thought that married people's subject matter may not suit the unmarried. Beletch had to seek advice from other married women about how to sustain her marriage, treat her husband and raise her child.

In general, the young married women indicated that marital life denied them of some degree of freedom of mobility and association. For any interaction with other people, they have to ask their husbands for permission. Gani from Oromia said, "I have to get the permission of my husband to meet up with people and friends." Similarly Saqxu thought that her unmarried friends have greater freedom than her. She said, "my unmarried friends are still students. They have freedom to do anything. I am not free now. I have to give care for my child; I have many responsibilities at home and in the community." The responsibilities associated with being a mother and a wife can cut into free time and limit certain areas of women's social lives. For example, Zebenay must negotiate with her husband about seeing her family, but she has more freedom to participate in community events, like weddings and christenings, and local associations to which she belongs such as *Iddir* and *Iqqub*.

However, Ayu's social relations both increased and decreased after her marriage. She had one close friend who gave birth recently and besides her, had no other contact because she believed that her focus should be on leading the family and giving maximum care to her child. She was also a member of an *Iddir* and contributed 10 birr monthly.

Sometimes the changes are practical, as in the case of Sessen, who understandably remarked, "I used to have enough time to chat with my friends before I gave birth; now I cannot do so because I have to look after my daughter." For some girls, marrying means relocating to a new community where one may not have existing social relations, so networks must be built up. At the same time, social bonds with family and friends may be weakened across lengthy distances. On the whole, marriage and motherhood limited the social relations

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8 *Iddir* is a traditional burial association where members are mostly married women and men. Money is contributed monthly and the association's main aim is to support members who have lost their loved ones. Meetings are held with the members at different times and currently the association is also extending its service to building a network of support.

and bargaining power of young women by turning their focus to the domestic arena, especially so for women in rural areas. On the contrary, the expected social responsibility of young women in social institutions allowed them to have good bargaining power with their husbands.

## 7. Discussion

This working paper set out to examine changes in the bargaining power of a group of young married women by comparing their experiences before and after marriage. Three main messages from the analysis are that intra-household, social-institutional and individual factors intertwine to shape young women's agency in differing contexts and social status.

As children living in the house of their parents, there are variations as to how the young women exercised their bargaining power in education, work and about marriage. It was clear that the girl in the urban area was very active agent on these matters, while for the four girls in the rural areas, the pressures from family and living conditions were significant to some extent. Parents here were primary decision-makers for some of the things the girls wanted to do. Therefore, the best interests of the girls were not necessarily taken into account when parents were deciding to delay their enrolment into school or their involvement in either paid or unpaid work.

Poverty, combined with other factors, has debilitated the bargaining power of the young women and their agency is very shallow. While the urban girl exhibited relatively better agency in bargaining both before and after her marriage, the rural women had limited bargaining power. For example, limited life choices weakened the bargaining power of these girls. When parents were unable to provide for the educational needs of their children, they either delayed the girls' enrolment to school or encouraged them to do waged work. Household shocks also leave the girls with limited bargaining power. Parental illness and drought left the girls with no other options but to quit school, supplement the family income, and in some cases hasten their decision of early marriage.

At the social-institutional level, the form of the marriage significantly contributes to the bargaining power of the women. As seen in the findings, many factors weave together to enhance agency within the context of marriage and parenthood. Social conformity at the time of the marriage, which includes the type of marriage arrangement and the amount of marriage transaction, can influence when and how the girl should get married and also the level of bargaining power later in marriage. Young women who had arranged marriages, in contrast to those who choose their own marriage partner, had less decision-making within marriage, especially in negotiating with husbands to engage in income-generating activities, go back to school, when to have children, as well as use of contraception. When families were exempted from paying marriage endowments because of their poor economic status, this had a negative repercussion on the bargaining power of the woman. The young women in the rural area exhibited less bargaining power with their husbands on deciding about first pregnancy and use of family planning. Arranged marriage mostly marks the beginning of sexual relations and childbearing among young women in Zeytuni. Some of the women were unable or less confident in communicating and negotiating with their husbands, either because they had married a person they did not know before or expected to honour male dominance. Hence traditional norms play a large role in shaping women's marital agency.



Child or early marriage is an accepted marriage custom in many African societies, including Ethiopia, regardless of the minimum age set in law. Young women married early are often excluded from decisions about their marriage. They become wives and mothers before assuming economic independence and achieving a high level of education, which reduces their power to bargain at an individual level. Women who do not have their own source of income and who are less educated are less able to delay their first birth. The timing of marriage and child bearing are partially influenced by parents and the social contexts, and these had direct correlation with the young women's decisions on returning to school and doing waged work. Once girls are married early, they soon bear a child and hence it is unlikely for them to go back to school and engage in income-generating activities. A woman who has attained a high level of formal education is perceived as a scholar in her own right. Yet women, because of expected marital responsibility and child-bearing, tend to opt out of education. Marriage, unlike parenthood, is the act that generates the widest spectrum of mutual rights and obligations between two married adults (Weiner 2015). However, for many of these young women, the situations in which they were living determined and limited their ability to bargain. Though in some instances they tried to maintain their agency, in many cases this was restricted by the persistent local norms and obligations within their societies. Poverty also plays a role in the bargaining power of these young women.

Despite recent policy instruments and legalisation meant to address gender inequality, Ethiopia remains a tradition-bound country, where women in rural areas still live in a state of poverty and male dependence. Traditional gender norms and roles continue to play a role in the perpetuation of poverty. When the young married women were restricted only to the domestic domain, poverty is perpetuated as they do not do income-generating activities. All of the young married women stopped doing wage work when they got married, making the husband the sole breadwinner for the family. There are variations in how women's power in patriarchal and matriarchal societies is exercised. Due to these variations, one has to have deeper understanding of how women's power and negotiations are portrayed (Kathewera-Banda et.al 2011).

Generally, factors such as urban or rural residence, education, standard of living, customs and norms shape the bargaining power of young women in marriage. The existing cultural norms and traditional expectations, women's education and economic dependence determine women's bargaining power, unlike tangible assets such as land, within the context of collective societies such as those described in this paper. Decisions at the household level are constituted by multiple actors such as parents, husbands, and norms that are mainly constructed to treat women as dependents and thus set limits on what can be bargained over. Hence bargaining power entails that individuals bargain both with other individuals and also bargain with the existing traditional system.

## 7.1 Policy implications

The study has several policy implications. First, policies aimed at helping women exercise gender equality in marriage and even before marriage have to consider the household-level factors, individual-level factors and the wider perspective of community level factors that shape the bargaining power of women.

Second, policies and programmes targeted towards reducing gender inequality at the intra-household level have to also consider contexts and how cultural beliefs and norms shape the frameworks of marriage and of decision-making more broadly.

Third, this examination of bargaining power draws attention to the role of relationships, such that policies aimed to empower women must also work with and for those who have a stake in limiting or enhancing women's agency, including their mothers, husbands, other relatives and community members.

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# Young Women's Household Bargaining Power in Marriage and Parenthood in Ethiopia

This working paper examines the factors that affect the bargaining power of young married women in marriage and parenthood in Ethiopia, where power structures remain overwhelmingly male-dominated and patriarchal. It draws on longitudinal qualitative data and survey information collected by Young Lives with children, young people and their families between 2007 and 2015. The paper's main focus is young women's changing relations and analysis of their 'bargaining power' before and after marriage. The concept of bargaining power has been used to understand gender inequality, primarily from the field of economics, but this mainly qualitative paper takes bargaining power to mean the negotiating capacity of young married women within their marital relationships and households.

The paper argues that intra-household, social-institutional and individual factors intertwine to shape young women's agency towards bargaining power in differing areas of their lives. Generally, factors such as urban or rural residence, education, standard of living, customs and norms combine to shape the bargaining power of young women in marriage. Decisions are usually made at a collective level, whereas agency at the individual level is often very shallow.

The paper recommends that policies and programmes targeted towards reducing gender inequality at intra-household level have to consider the wider contexts in which those households are situated, such as how cultural beliefs and norms shape marital practices, gender and generational relations, and decision-making more broadly. This examination of bargaining power also draws attention to the role of relationships, such that policies aimed to empower women must also work with and for those who have a stake in limiting or enhancing women's agency, including their mothers, husbands, other relatives and community members.



An International Study of Childhood Poverty

## About Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, involving 12,000 children in 4 countries over 15 years. It is led by a team in the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford in association with research and policy partners in the 4 study countries: Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam.

Through researching different aspects of children's lives, we seek to improve policies and programmes for children.

## Young Lives Partners

Young Lives is coordinated by a small team based at the University of Oxford, led by Professor Jo Boyden.

- *Ethiopian Development Research Institute, Ethiopia*
- *Pankhurst Development Research and Consulting plc, Ethiopia*
- *Centre for Economic and Social Studies, Hyderabad, India*
- *Save the Children India*
- *Sri Padmavathi Mahila Visvavidyalayam (Women's University), Andhra Pradesh, India*
- *Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (GRADE), Peru*
- *Instituto de Investigación Nutricional, Peru*
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