



Seble's story

A profile from
Young Lives in Ethiopia

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Seble's mother

Seble's story

Seble is now 17. It takes a little while to find out that there has been a major change in her life. Seble says she is happy about it, and her mother has a lot to say as well ...

The last time we interviewed Seble, she said she wanted to stay at school and become a teacher. She did not want to get married young. This time, when we ask her about what has changed, at first she says nothing.

“So what new things have happened in your family? Has anyone died? Are there any new babies?

No, nothing like that.

Was anyone sick?

No, no one.

Did anyone get married?

[Laughs] ... There is one!

Who is that?

It is me.

Seble was married 11 months ago at the age of about 16. Seble's mother, who was married at 14 and had two children by the time she was Seble's age, says it was her daughter's choice. She seems to be ambivalent – on the one hand, she says she wanted Seble to wait and to be educated, on the other she says that girls these days must be married early to avoid 'dangers'.

“Going beyond 16 or 17 is not good. We live in corrupt and dangerous times; it is better that she is married early. Many children have already fallen into bad ways. For instance, one girl I know, who is still a child has had a baby. She suffered a lot. Her father is not alive and it was hard for her and her mother. When you see these kind of things, it is better that a girl marries early.

The only joy that I have is in my married daughters. They often visit me and encourage me not to be cross with their father. They are doing well and I hope they will help me a lot in future. My boys are not as supportive as my girls. They don't get involved ... My husband has this chronic drinking habit. He often comes home drunk and insults us.”

When the Young Lives team came last time, Seble was about 12 years old, though she wasn't sure of her exact age. We had a long discussion with Seble's mother about her childhood and about how important she thought it was for her daughter to stay in school. Seble herself talked about her health, and about helping around the house. She was still in school but had dropped out once and missed a grade.

Seble's father 's drinking often causes problems, although in his interview he tells a very different story: "I am at peace with everybody. I do not quarrel with anybody. I do not argue with my wife ... My wife is the main person in the household. She controls all the important activities."

Seble says her own husband, who has been educated up to Grade 8, is good to her, but that he does not want her to work. She also says that her life is better now than it was before. Her husband is a fisherman, and provides her with all that is needed. She says she spends her time knitting, cooking and cleaning and mends her husband's fishing nets, which she enjoys because she feels she is contributing to the household. In her free time she visits her friends or her mother and also takes part in *ekub*, an informal saving association.

"How often do you have *ekub*?

Every month.

How much money do you contribute?

20 birr [just over a dollar].

How many people are there in your *ekub*?

There are five people.

Where do you get the money to pay for your *ekub* as you don't have your own job?

My husband gives it to me."

Seble's material circumstances seem much better than when she lived with her parents. The house she shares with her husband has a single room that serves as bedroom and living room. There is a tiny mattress on the floor that serves as a bed and a place to sit. There are three-legged chairs and a small table. Seble says they are waiting for some new furniture. The house has glass windows and the walls are decorated with beautiful pictures. Their compound consists of seven single-room houses, which are rented out. The owner of the houses also lives in the same compound. There is a communal toilet and cooking place. There is also a tap and a well.

Seble's mother says her daughter has a better life than she did when she was young:

"Seble's time is better [than mine]. Young people can go wherever they want to go and relax. Their relationships with their husbands are more friendly. They can even call their husbands by his own name. In my day, calling your husband by his name was taboo."

Then there is the question of children. Traditionally, until Seble has a child, her mother is not allowed to set foot in her home.

"Does your mother come here to see you?

Yes, but she does not enter my house. She is not allowed to enter until I give birth. But I go to her house whenever I want and we drink coffee, chat together and I wash her clothes.

When do you want to have a baby?

When I am 20.

You don't want to have one before that?

No.

Why?

We would like to get on better in life first.

You said you were taking contraceptives in the form of an injection. Are you still taking them?

I am still taking them.

How many children do you want to have?

Four. I think that is enough.”

Interestingly, although Seble dropped out of school herself, she says she wants her children to be educated.

“Do you plan to educate all your children?

Yes.

What is your attitude towards marriage? What do you advise your friends about marriage?

I tell them to marry when they have finished school.

Now you are 17. What will we find when we come in three years' time?

You will find me with a baby.”

Traditional practices and girls' choices

According to Ethiopian tradition, Seble has not married that young. Although 18 is the minimum legal age of marriage in Ethiopia, large numbers of girls are married before the age of 15. The median age at first marriage is 16 for women now aged 25 to 49 and 24 for men in the same age range.

What is interesting is that Seble and her mother both agree that the marriage was Seble's choice, not her parents'. Young Lives is finding that a number of girls are insisting on getting married young or undergoing female genital cutting,¹ despite their mother's objections. One mother explains: “The circumcision of my daughter who is 14 years old ... was done at her request. After she witnessed a girl insulting another who was not circumcised, my daughter came home and asked me to organise her circumcision.”

As we have seen with Seble's mother, attitudes towards both practices are mixed. There is a lot of resistance to change. Traditionally, both early marriage and circumcision were seen as a way of protecting girls; keeping them safe from sexual activity outside marriage, which is considered socially unacceptable.

The mother of Teje, another child featured in this book, says that she was circumcised but her daughters are not. The 2005 Ethiopian Demographic Health Survey, shows that although more than 74 per cent of women between the ages of 15 and 49 have undergone some form of genital cutting, this has dropped to 38 per cent for their daughters.

1 Procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons (WHO 2010). Also known as female genital circumcision and female genital mutilation, the practice can have serious health implications.

Traditional practices and girls' choices *continued*

The practice of FGC varies throughout Ethiopia, with some girls being circumcised at birth and others before marriage. Both FGC and early marriage are now against the law. But getting rid of such practices, and the firmly held beliefs behind them is not easy. One grandmother says: "People are saying that it is taboo if a girl is left uncircumcised." But she also says that the circumcision caused her so much pain after marriage that she ran away from her husband. She notes:

"On the one hand, when I see a girl going around with boys, I think that it would be better to circumcise her because she would be calm and wouldn't be seen with boys all the time. On the other hand, some girls are circumcised but are not disciplined. So maybe it depends on the nature of the girl. My experience shows that female circumcision has to be condemned. It is only God's will that I have survived at all."

Despite the experiences of their mothers and grandmothers, some of the younger generation retains a strong belief that such practices are a necessary part of being female. Some young girls resort to being circumcised at night, which makes the operation more dangerous. The ban has also resulted in girls undergoing FGC at a younger age in some places.

Young Lives is looking into the reasons why these practices continue, and the policy implications of this. We believe that it is important to start with listening to and respecting the perspectives of girls and their families. Strategies aimed at reducing the practices need to be linked to other initiatives to improve the health and socio-economic status of women and families more broadly, including the promotion of education and employment opportunities for women and girls. The Government could also encourage culturally appropriate and sensitive ways of celebrating rites of passage (at birth or adolescence) which promote cultural values without causing physical damage. Changing cultural values is much easier through open dialogue about fears and anxieties concerning social processes of change, rather than just through legislation.

See also: Jo Boyden, Alula Pankhurst and Yisak Tafere (2012) 'Child Protection and Harmful Traditional Practices: Female Early Marriage and Genital Modification in Ethiopia', *Development in Practice* 22.4; UNICEF 'Ethiopia Statistics', http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/ethiopia_statistics.html.

*[Today] young people can go wherever they want to relax.
They can even call their husband by his own name.
In my day, calling your husband by his name was taboo.*

Seble's mother



Country context: Ethiopia

Ethiopia, a country in the Horn of Africa, has a population of 80.7 million. It is Africa's oldest independent country but remains one of the world's poorest, although progress has been made in recent years. Child mortality has fallen, access to healthcare has improved and advances have been made in primary education, in part due to the commitment to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. The Government has also introduced a number of Poverty Reduction Strategy Programmes.

For the last seven years, Ethiopia has had double-digit economic growth rate – around 11 per cent on average each year. More than 60 per cent of government spending now goes to what the Government calls pro-poor sectors, namely education, health, roads, water and agriculture.

But in 2011, the United Nations still ranked Ethiopia 174 out of 187 countries in terms of human development. Almost 40 per cent of the population survives on less than 1.25 dollars a day. The country also suffers regularly from drought, which affects up to 13 million people. Many families are unable to buy or grow enough food to feed themselves, and so need food aid each year to survive. The effects on children are devastating.

- One in every 13 children dies before reaching their first birthday, while one in every eight does not survive until they are 5 years old.
- Nearly one in two children under 5 are stunted (short for their age), 11 per cent are wasted (thin for their height), and 38 per cent are underweight.

Despite significant investment to increase enrolment in primary schools, they are often poorly staffed and equipped. There are large differences in children's attendance between urban and rural locations, between boys and girls, and between and within regions. Overall literacy is low, at 31 per cent for rural and 74 per cent for urban residents.

Sources: Tassew Woldehanna et al. (2011) *Understanding Changes in the Lives of Poor Children: Initial Findings from Ethiopia*, Young Lives Round 3 Survey Report; UNDP (2011) *Human Development Report 2011*; UNICEF (2012) *State of the World's Children 2012*.

Young Lives is a unique international study investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam. By following the lives of 12,000 children and young people over 15 years, we aim to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and provide evidence to support effective policies for children.

The profile presented here is one of 24 taken from the interviews we did with the children individually and in groups. Each one is accompanied by a theme of some kind that emerged from the material and which illustrates the issues that children are having to contend with, but also gives a sense of the wider context of their lives. These range from education and schooling, to inequality, health and illness, violence in school and at home, early marriage, the effects of migration, families' experiences of crises, government schemes to help poor people, and children's views and experiences of what it is to be rich or poor.

The children and their families who are participating in the Young Lives study willingly share with us a great deal of detailed personal information about their daily lives, and we have a responsibility to protect their confidentiality and ensure their identities remain protected. For this reason, the children's names have been changed here. The accompanying photos are of children in similar situations to the children within our study sample.

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Young Lives 
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