Research Report

Young Marriage, Parenthood and Divorce in Ethiopia

Yisak Tafere, Nardos Chuta, Alula Pankhurst, and Gina Crivello

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YOUNG MARRIAGE AND PARENTHOOD STUDY

Young Lives

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YMAPS is a collaboration between Young Lives, a longitudinal study of childhood poverty following the lives of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam over 15 years, and Child Frontiers, a consulting company that works in partnership to promote the care, well-being and protection of children.

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Glossary

Aseenaa: A local practice whereby an unmarried girl attempts to compel an unmarried man into marriage by secretly entering into his home, uninvited; the custom requires his family to accept her and their marriage.

Gaaddissa: Reconciliatory payment made by the groom to the bride's parents when married by 'voluntary abduction' (elopement), to eventually be followed by the bridewealth payment.

Gabbarra: Bridewealth payment made by the groom to the bride's parents to formalise a marriage.

Gezmi: Dowry or wedding gifts provided by the groom's family and matched by the bride's family to the bride when she marries.

Health extension worker (HEW): Local female health advocates whose role is to improve the use of maternal health services in rural areas in Ethiopia, as part of a model introduced by the Ethiopian Federal Ministry of Health to provide community-based primary care that is feasible and sustainable in low-resource settings.

Irkene: A local custom whereby a man who has yet to pay bridewealth may request temporary 'dependent' status from his in-laws so that he can mix with the family at times of grief and celebration, something that is normally not allowed until the bridewealth payment is made.

Kebele: A small administrative unit similar to a ward.

Khat/Ch'at: A stimulant drug found in the leaves of an East African shrub that contains cathinone and cathine, and is known to cause excitement, loss of appetite and euphoria.

Morka: A form of customary litigation instigated when a girl has been sexually assaulted, requiring the man's family to compensate her family for the wrongdoing, including by marrying the victim.

Negate/negetee: The customary notification by elders to a girl's family that the girl is safe with the man's family, following voluntary abduction.

Tej: A local mead or honey-flavoured wine made with the powdered leaves and twigs of *gesho*, a hop-like bittering agent.

Woreda: The third-level administrative unit in Ethiopia, which is subdivided into a number of *kebeles*.

Women and Children Affairs Office: A government office that aims to ensure women's equal participation in, and benefit from, the economic, social, political and cultural spheres; and to protect the rights and welfare of children and promote gender equality in Ethiopia.

Part 1: Context

1.1. Introduction

In the past decade, Ethiopia has distinguished itself among other countries in Eastern and Southern Africa for the progress it has made in reducing its national levels of child marriage. UNICEF (2018: 8) estimates that the percentage of women aged 20-24 years who were first married or in a union before age 18 has decreased from 75 per cent in 1980 to 40 per cent in 2015.[1] This progress is testament to Ethiopia's commitment to reducing child marriage, witnessed also in a series of formal agreements. It is a signatory to both the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and part of the African Union's 'Campaign to End Child Marriage in Africa'. As recently as August 2019, the Ministry of Women and Children launched the 'National Costed Roadmap to End Child Marriage and FGM/C (2020-2024)' (Ministry of Women, Children and Youth 2019). Ethiopia is one of 12 countries supported by UNFPA, UNICEF and their Global Programme to Accelerate Action to End Child Marriage.[2]

Despite these efforts, Ethiopia still has among the highest prevalence rates of child marriage in the region, with 15 million girls and women having married in childhood (UNICEF 2018: 3). The Ethiopian government made a commitment at the 2014 London Girls Summit to end child marriage by 2025, five years ahead of the Sustainable Development Goal target. However, according to different projection scenarios, progress will need to be ten times faster than it is today to fulfil this commitment (UNICEF 2018).

The Ethiopian Government defines child marriage as a 'harmful traditional practice', emphasising the role of social and cultural norms in the victimhood of affected girls. Harmful traditional practices, especially child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), have received considerable government attention in legislation, programmes and campaigns, with strong international endorsement and support. However, other aspects relevant to young marriage and parenthood, including the experiences of boys and young men, have received less attention and tend to be siloed by sectoral specificity. For example, while there has been growing attention to adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health, there is virtually no policy emphasis on young parenthood, apart from the promotion of family planning which goes back to the National Population Policy of 1993.

Adolescent pregnancy and childbirth remain prevalent in Ethiopia and are closely linked with marrying in childhood. According to the most recent Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey (CSA and ICF 2017), 13 per cent of female adolescents aged 15 to 19 were already mothers or pregnant with their first child. Recent declines in early childbearing have been driven by a parallel reduction in early marriage (Mekonnen et al. 2018: 7).

1 In contrast, the most recent Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey (EDHD 2016) shows that only 5 per cent of young men were married under the age of 18.

2 For details on the programme, see: www.unicef.org/protection/unfpa-unicef-global-programme-accelerate-action-end-childmarriage

Despite these statistics on child marriage and early childbearing, there is a scarcity of qualitative research that gets behind the numbers. In particular, there is little that gives voice to the young people who married or who became first-time parents as children in order to improve understanding of their decisions, constraints, priorities, aspirations and service and support needs.

This report presents findings from a qualitative study into young people's everyday experiences of marriage, parenthood and divorce in Ethiopia. Conducted by Young Lives, it is part of the Young Marriage and Parenthood Study (YMAPS), a multi-country comparative investigation of young marriage and parenthood undertaken between 2017 and 2020 in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Zambia.

The study was undertaken in three different communities, capturing rural, urban and socio-cultural variations – in the capital, Addis Ababa, and in the regions of Oromia and Tigray. It builds on 15 years of Young Lives survey and qualitative research in these communities and with many of the same families, revealing considerable diversity and generational change in the practices, norms and expectations affecting children's pathways to marriage and first-time parenthood.

Young Lives findings underscore that important social changes are underway in the country, rendering child marriage and early parenthood increasingly incompatible with the values of modern childhood and child well-being. Improved access to formal schooling has contributed to a growing belief that younger generations of girls and young women enjoy a greater say in their life decisions, including in marriage, and that there should be greater gender equality compared to what life was like for their mothers and grandmothers (Crivello, Boyden and Pankhurst 2019).

Indeed, the wider cohort of which the participants in this qualitative study are a part have progressed much further in formal education than their parents. A Young Lives survey conducted with this cohort and their parents in 2016 (when the young people were age 22) found that 21 per cent of the parental generation had never gone to school, compared to only 4 per cent of the younger generation (males and females). And while a quarter of the younger generation had reached post-secondary level, only 6 per cent of their parents had.

Within this context, the current follow-up study was designed to generate in-depth qualitative information about the changing nature of marriage, cohabitation and parenthood for children and young people in different settings, and to elicit first-person accounts from young people about their experiences. Across the different communities in Ethiopia where the study was conducted, to varying degrees, there is a reported trend towards adolescents themselves choosing to marry or live together (regardless of parental consent). While such self-initiated unions might signal a degree of youth 'empowerment', many young people regret their decisions over time. The majority of young people in this study had not planned or desired to marry or become parents as adolescents, nor was separation, divorce or single parenthood part of their envisioned future. One of this study's main aims was therefore to better understand how young people make sense of and manage their evolving responsibilities and relationships in marriage and parenthood, and to identify the kinds of support that might help them and their families.

1.1.1. Organisation of this report

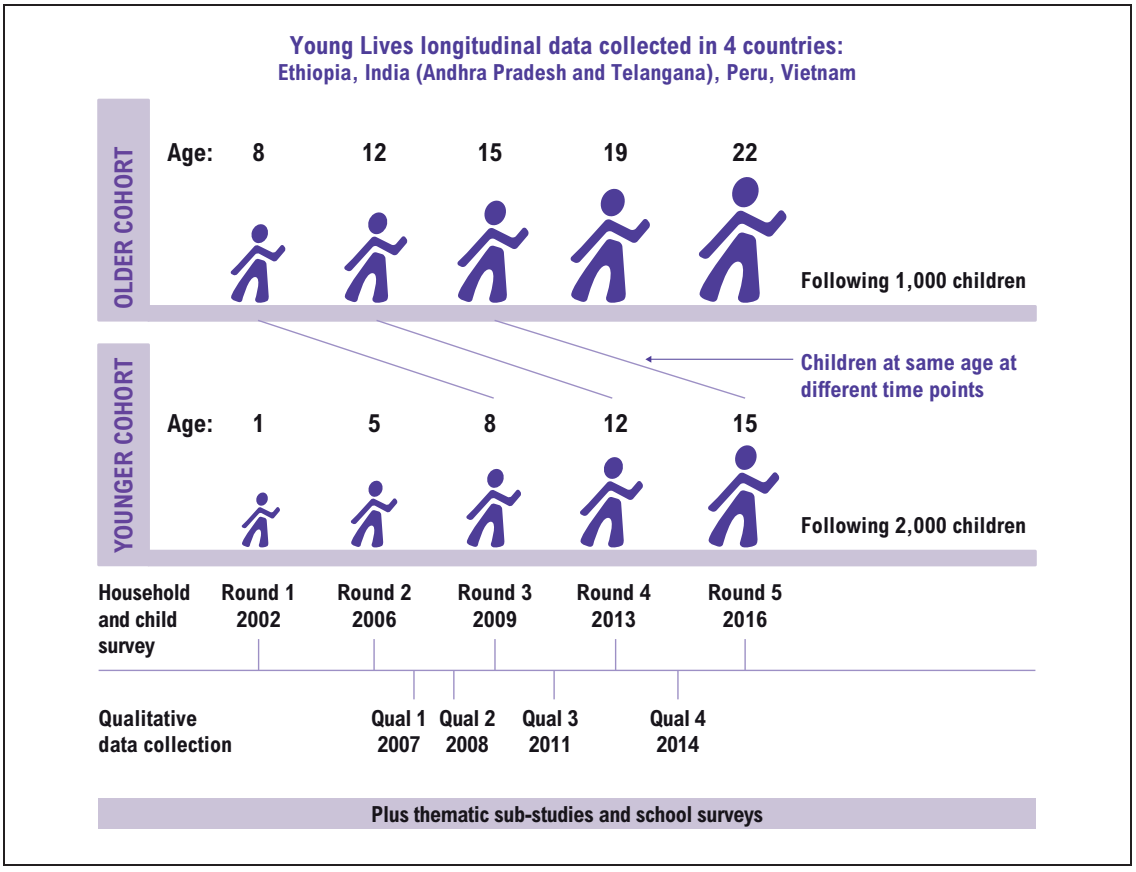
This report consists of four parts, beginning with **Part 1,** this introduction**. Part 2** provides a background to the Young Lives study from which the sample of communities and research participants was drawn, and outlines the research questions, conceptual approach, sample and methods of the qualitative study. **Part 3** presents the key findings: first, describing the diverse and changing marital practices observed across three research communities, and then looking at different aspects of the lives, vulnerabilities and hopes of the married, divorced and parenting young people. **Part 4** concludes by highlighting the policy relevance of the research findings and provides recommendations for policymakers.

Part 2: Study design and sample

2.1. About Young Lives

The current qualitative study of young marriage and parenthood (YMAPS) is a follow-up sub-study of Young Lives, a longitudinal international study of childhood poverty that has been operating in Ethiopia since 2002.[3] Young Lives has collected five rounds of survey data on 3,000 girls and boys and their households – with a Younger Cohort of 2,000 children born in 2001 and an Older Cohort of 1,000 children born in 1994. Repeat qualitative interviews were collected with a subset of young people and their caregivers between survey rounds. These data sources and earlier analyses[4] build a picture of children's inter-related pathways through education, work, marriage and parenthood, across lives and time, and provide a context for the new qualitative findings contained in this report.

Figure 1: *Young Lives study design*



The Young Lives sample is pro-poor, meaning that the wealthiest households were excluded, and while the sample is not strictly representative, it covers a diversity of children's circumstances, attributes and experiences in 20 sites across the country.

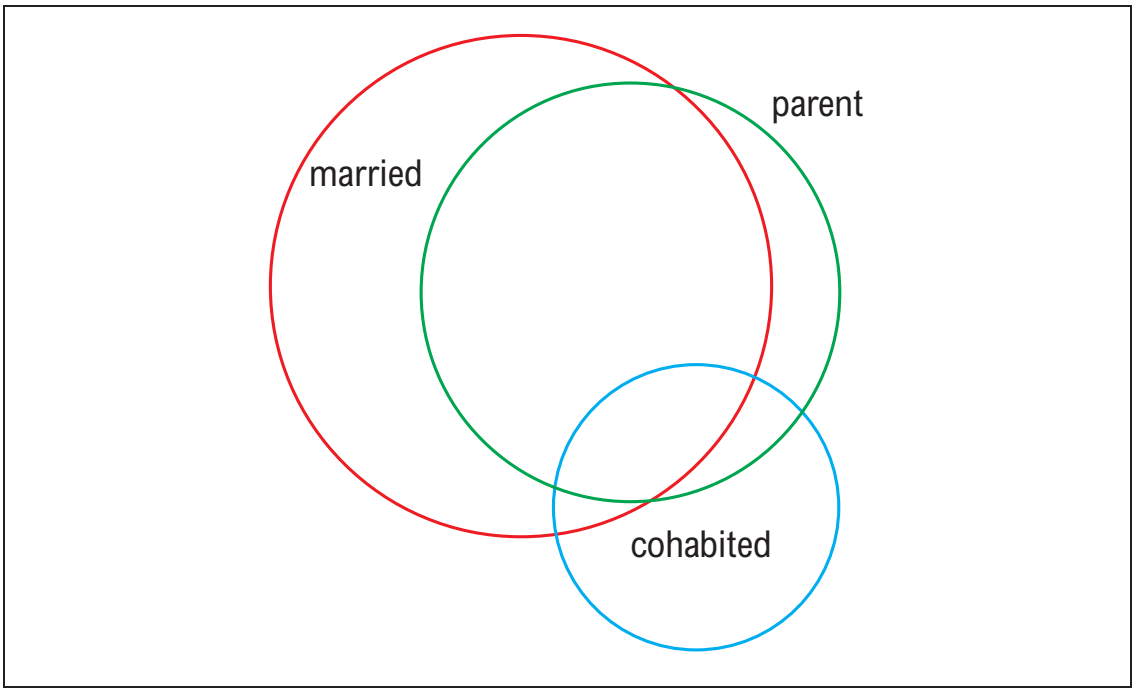
3 Young Lives study countries are Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam.

4 See, for example: Boyden, Pankhurst and Tafere 2013; Crivello, Boyden and Pankhurst 2019; Chuta 2017; Tafere and Chuta 2016; Woldehanna, Araya and Pankhurst 2018.

2.2. Young Lives survey findings on child marriage and parenthood

This section provides a snapshot of Young Lives survey findings so that the qualitative findings from YMAPS are set within a wider context of statistical and cohort patterns. According to the survey, more than 1 in 3 of the young women in the Young Lives sample had married by age 22 (nearly half of them by age 18); and 1 in 10 had given birth by age 18, rising to over 1 in 4 by age 22. In contrast, only 7 per cent of young men had married by age 22 and less than 2 per cent had fathered a child by age 19 (Woldehanna et al. 2018). The reported number of young women who bore children outside of marriage or cohabitation was extremely low (Figure 2).

Figure 2: *Overlap in girls' status by age 19 (n=366)*



(Source: Briones and Porter 2019: 9)

A recent study of the Young Lives survey by Briones and Porter (2019) found that girls from rural areas and who came from poorer households were more likely than their urban and better-off counterparts to be married, cohabiting or to have given birth in their teens. Almost 40 per cent of females who married as adolescents had not had a say in who they married. The average age gap between married girls and their older spouses was 7.2 years, and, once married, young couples tended to live in their own separate house, rather than with in-laws.

At age 22, there were important gender differences among married/cohabiting youth: 56 per cent of females compared to 83 per cent of males were working full-time; meanwhile, 36 per cent of young women were neither studying nor working outside of the home (Woldehanna, Araya, and Pankhurst 2018: 3). Fewer than 30 per cent of young women who married, cohabited or became pregnant as adolescents had achieved their secondary certificate by age 22 (Briones and Porter 2019: 18).

2.3. Current qualitative study

A team of Ethiopian researchers, with previous experience in conducting qualitative research with Young Lives families and who know the local language, was involved in all aspects of this study and led on data collection in the summer of 2018.

2.3.1. Research questions

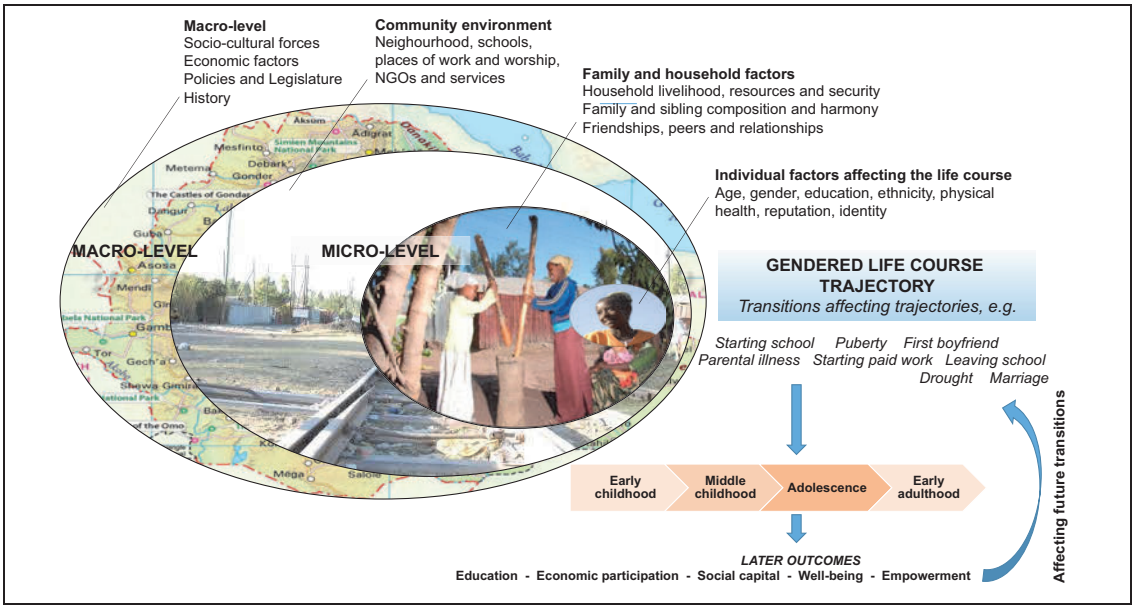
The study was designed to investigate three overarching research questions:

1. Who marries, cohabitates or has children in childhood, why, and with what consequences for their well-being, identity and relationships?
2. How do children who marry, cohabitate or have children navigate their new roles and relationships, including experiences of parenting, separation and divorce, and what support and services do they access?
3. How are the choices, opportunities, experiences and relationships of those children who marry, cohabitate or have children shaped by age, gender and the changing social, cultural, and structural contexts in which they and their families are living?

2.3.2. Methodology

The conceptual framework reflects a socio-ecological life course approach with young people at its centre, emphasising the multiple and interacting layers of influence that affect human development and gendered life trajectories across the early life course (Figure 3).[5]

Figure 3: *Conceptual and theoretical framework*



Prior to and following data collection, the study engaged a variety of policy actors and service providers, beginning with an initial series of face-to-face interviews, in order to maximise the relevance and uptake of the study findings.

5 This framework was developed by Young Lives for many facets of its research on gender and adolescence. See Young Lives 2015.

2.3.3. Research communities

The study was conducted in three communities from the Young Lives sample:[6]

- **Bertukan**, an urban neighbourhood in Addis Ababa
- **Leki**, a rural village in Oromia
- **Zeytuni**, a rural village in Tigray

Formal marriage among young people is most common in the Tigray site and least common in Addis Ababa where the trend is toward informal cohabitation, whereas abduction (whether coerced or voluntary), eventually leading to formal marriage, is widespread in the Oromia site. The socially expected forms of marriage payments and gift-giving that legitimate both formal and informal unions also vary between the three sites.

Bertukan is located within Addis Ababa, the capital city. The neighbourhood has a relatively dense settlement pattern and poverty is widespread. Regarded as one of the city's 'old quarters', it is a hub for commerce and small- and medium-scale enterprises, with many local residents making a living in the informal economy. Key sources of income include the street sale of fruit and vegetables, renting houses for storage/living, and carrying goods for cash. The presence of the market creates opportunities for young people to find jobs, such as serving clients, washing cars, shining shoes and selling or carrying groceries. Many women earn a living by cooking and selling food, cleaning or as washerwomen. There are two major asphalted roads passing through the community, but they are very narrow and in poor condition. The neighbourhood has community and privately-owned primary schools ranging from Grades 1 to 4, as well as a secondary school. There is one health centre, but in the case of referrals, local residents can seek health care in nearby government hospitals. The community lacks a recreation area for children and youth who must travel outside the locality to access recreational facilities. There are also *khat* houses and bars in the neighbourhood which residents believe draw local youth into risky and addictive behaviours.

Social media, such as Facebook and Telegram (a popular instant messaging service), is playing an increasingly influential role in facilitating interaction between the sexes, enabling girls and boys to introduce themselves to each other, exchange photos, and start relationships, which was not possible prior to these technologies.

Leki is located in the east of the regional state of Oromia. The population is made up primarily of Orthodox Christians who speak the Afaan Oromo language. Most locals are farmers who produce vegetables through rain-fed agriculture and irrigation, and a smaller proportion engage in fishing at the local lake. The locality is frequently affected by rainfall shortage which has brought food crises and an increase in food prices. Crop failure and food price rises have meant that many households depend on the government's Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) (Tafere and Woldehanna 2012). Modes of transportation include motorboats, cars, bikes and horse-drawn carts. There is only one school from Grades 1 to 8, and both education and health care services are of poor quality. An open area by the lake is where children spend the bulk of their time during leisure hours, and some young people earn money by collecting fish bones along the shore for sale, or sell sugarcane, among other activities.

Zeytuni is located in a rural area in the regional state of Tigray where the basic source of livelihood is agriculture, including through irrigation. The population is exclusively Tigrinya-speaking Orthodox Christians. Poverty is widespread and, similar to Leki, many households depend on the government's PSNP (Tafere and Woldehanna 2012). However, fieldwork in 2018 recorded important changes, as children and youth were increasingly drawn into generating income through irrigation schemes and cobble stone carving, which also provide spaces for the different sexes to meet and interact.

6 The names of people and localities in this report are pseudonyms.

2.3.4. Research participants

The study's focus on young marriage and parenthood meant that young people were disproportionately represented among the sample of participants, and more female than male participants were recruited since girls are more affected than boys by child marriage.

The research set out to capture a range of experiences and marriage types and outcomes, including both formal and informal marriages, family arranged and 'love' marriages, cohabitation, single parenthood and relationship breakdown. Sampling of young people was therefore purposeful, and priority was given to individuals from the Young Lives survey sample.

It was also important to understand young people in the context of their relationships, so in addition to the core group of young people, the study involved related spouses, senior family members and service providers. These significant others were included to provide information about intra- and inter-generational decision-making, family dynamics, conflict and support, and social norms influencing young marriage and parenthood.

2.4. Methods

The individual and group-based methods used in this study included:[7]

Semi-structured interviews: Individual interviews were carried out with 83 young people to document their personal histories and accounts of marriage, cohabitation and parenting.

Focus group discussions: Fifteen group discussions (five in each community) were held with family and community members, including adult parents and guardians and service providers (e.g. teachers, healthcare providers, Women and Children Affairs officers). Group discussions generated information about social and gender norms, family and marriage practices, and how these had changed within the community and across generations.

Table 1 gives an overview of respondents in each of the three sites.

Table 1: *Respondent groups and methods*

Category of respondent	Bertukan			Leki			Zeytuni			Total		
	FGD	IDI	KII	FGD	IDI	KII	FGD	IDI	KII	FGD	IDI	KII
Married/cohabitating girls and young women	1	8		1	9		1	7		3	24	
Married/cohabitating boys and young men	1	4		1	4		1	4		3	12	
Spouses/partners of respondent married girls/women/boys/men		4			3			5			12	
Never-married mothers		3			4			3			10	
Never-married fathers		3			0			4			7	
Divorced/separated girls/young women		3			3			3			9	
Divorced/separated boys/young men		4			3			2			9	
Adult mothers of married young people/mothers-in-law/grandmothers	1			1			1			3		
Adult fathers of married young people/fathers-in-law/grandfathers	1			1			1			3		
Service providers and other key stakeholders	1		3	1		4	1		4	3		11
Total	5	29	3	5	26	4	5	28	4	15	83	11

7 The data collection tools used were adapted from existing Young Lives interview guides (Crivello et al. 2016) and were part of the shared tools developed for use in the wider comparative study.

The research tools were reviewed and received ethical approval from the National Research Ethics Review Committee (NRERC) at the Ethiopian Ministry of Science and Higher Education prior to commencement of data collection.

2.4.1. Data

Interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, then later transcribed and translated from the original language into English. Researchers produced reports of group discussions with the aid of notes and audio records, following agreed reporting templates. The data were then thematically coded using Atlas-ti computer software. The data were anonymised as fully as possible following Young Lives guidelines, and pseudonyms for individuals and sites are used in all resulting publications.

Part 3: Qualitative findings: the lived experiences of adolescents and young couples

3.1. Marriage: diverse forms and changing practices

With changes brought about notably by education and urbanisation, adolescents and young people have a greater say compared to their parents in decisions about who, how and when they marry. However, this apparent increased agency comes at a cost when their unions lack formality or family backing, and customary norms still tend to regulate marriage practices.

Marriage practices are both varied and dynamic. In the past, families arranged the marriages of young people, even as early as the mother's pregnancy or in the children's infancy. Such promises socially bound two sets of parents and families in an alliance based on the agreement of the future marriage of their children. Nowadays, however, the process is changing as young people exert greater influence on marital decision-making and the unquestioned authority of parents to make decisions on their behalf has diminished. Moreover, there is a growing discourse describing the preference of young people to marry whom they love rather than to marry through a family arrangement.

The expansion of urbanisation, schools and local income-earning opportunities, combined with an increased awareness of child rights, appear to provide young people with the ability to more freely exercise choice over their relationships, including self-initiating their marriages or unions.

There are diverse routes to marriage in the different communities and multiple drivers and influences that push young people into unions. Currently, many relationships involving adolescents begin clandestinely without the families' knowledge, and if the couple wish to formalise their relationship through marriage the boy asks his parents to send elders to the girl's family, as is the custom in many communities.

Among our study participants, many adolescent girls decided to marry when they lost interest or performed poorly in education. A young married mother in rural Leki, who married at age 15, said,

> I was not as such interested in marriage, but since I had difficulty understanding my education, I decided to get married.

Friends and family members frequently tried to influence the choice of partner and timing of marriage for young people. Another young woman from Leki explained how her marriage came about, at age 19:

> His friend played a major role. He [the friend of husband] used to give us advice. The day we decided to marry, we invited him and he was part of it. However, we got married [because of] our interest and my husband didn't send elders to my parents. We decided to marry just by ourselves and there was no other external pressure except our love.

Many couples described their unions as having come from 'their interest', meaning driven by their own decisions. Informal interactions among adolescent girls and boys in school, at work and in the community facilitated the initiation of romantic relationships, thwarting the necessity or opportunity for parents to identify suitable partnerships for them. That said, and as we describe later, many young people continue to enter marriages against their will and 'interest' or are

pushed into relationships on account of pressurising circumstances, such as a family health-related or economic shock or in response to an unintended pregnancy.

3.2. Cohabitation

Informal cohabitation is largely an urban phenomenon and frequently a response to unintended pregnancy or the desire to maintain a sexual relationship while temporarily bypassing the costs of formal marriage. These unions are often characterised by fragility and subject to breakdown, unless they lead to formal marriage.

While formal marriage occurs in all three study communities, cohabitation was most common in urban Bertukan and was frequently initiated by couples in a romantic or sexual relationship or who had plans to marry in the future. Cohabitation is a relatively new strategy which young couples adopt to overcome increased economic challenges in the city, since living together in this way does not require the couple to arrange a wedding ceremony or exchange gifts between in-laws. It is a transitional and temporary type of relationship, potentially leading to formal marriage or ending in separation. Nevertheless, some treat cohabitation as a type of 'marriage' despite not having family consent or the backing of a wedding ceremony.

Afework, aged 22, from urban Bertukan, began a relationship with his girlfriend when he was aged 17. They eventually moved in together, living as "a husband and a wife" without the consent of their respective families. He said:

> We rented a house, and she brought a TV from her family's house. Then, we bought a mat, stove and things to cook with. It was enough for both of us. I was doing casual work and she was cooking food at home. We had a good life like husband and wife. We spent our time watching movies and then having a pleasant walk.

However, unless cohabitation leads to formal marriage, these unions are often characterised by fragility and subject to breakdown, not least because couples living together informally cannot rely on their families for resources or help.

Box 1: Bereket's story of friendship and cohabitation leading to pregnancy then marriage

Bereket, aged 23, met his girlfriend because they worked near each other. He decorated cars and his girlfriend worked in a restaurant. Their friendship developed into a romantic relationship and his girlfriend began to stay over in his rented house. According to Bereket, despite his insistence that she take birth control, they accidentally conceived. He was aged 20 at the time:

> The way I entered into marriage is full of accidental situations. I didn't have any plan for marriage. The pregnancy came suddenly and she had to live with me. After the pregnancy, we fully decided that we needed to live together.

He then sent elders to her family to formally submit a marriage proposal. Although her parents were initially unhappy because their daughter was pregnant before marrying, they reluctantly accepted the marriage proposal and eventually arranged a small ceremony in the local marriage council.

Bereket's experience was not unusual in that young men facing an unplanned pregnancy were inclined to believe that cohabitation or marriage was the 'right thing to do', even if they did not feel ready to be fathers or responsible breadwinners for a family.

Our study found that cohabitation and pregnancy were closely linked: on the one hand, unintended pregnancies put pressure on unmarried couples to move in together; on the other, living together increased the risk of pregnancy, since contraceptive use was low among young couples.

When Bereket was asked: "Is the pregnancy the reason for you two living together?", he responded, "Yes, we had the idea that we would live together, but until the pregnancy came, we didn't fix the time to start living together". Living arrangements that began in this way often became untenable because they were established spontaneously, with meagre resources and without the legitimacy of formal marriage. Although an unplanned pregnancy might catalyse a young couple to move in together, having a child did not guarantee the longevity of their relationship, while economic hardship or conflict led many couples to separate.

3.3. Formal marriage

Despite greater opportunities for youth to select their partners, the role of family elders in negotiating marriages and of customary payments remains the norm in rural areas, and young people still value the social status conferred by becoming married.

This section discusses what might be considered the preferred form of marriage whereby the young couple marries through a wedding with the full involvement of both families in the process.

A wide variety of marriage practices exist across the three communities, representing a mix of new and old. Informal cohabitation is most common in Addis Ababa. In rural Tigray, formal marriage prevails. And in rural Oromia, a heterogeneous set of 'traditional' marriages co-exist as routes to formal marriage, including: (a) marriage through abduction; (b) wife inheritance or substitution, and (c) a*seenaa* (a form of female-initiated marriage).

Most young people would prefer and aspire towards a formal marriage rather than an informal union, since formal marriages provide social status within the family and community. For adolescents who have already left school, marriage might seem the logical next step in their social maturity and in securing a livelihood. Marriage can offer an escape route for girls engaged in hard labour who would rather be housewives. By their late teens, many girls and boys desire independence from their families: girls through marriage and boys through employment and work.

Box 2: Letish's story of her family-arranged marriage

Letish, from Tigray, was married when she was 19 years old to a man 12 years her senior. She was the fifth of ten children in her family and the household was poor. She left school in Grade 4 to work as a daily labourer in a stone crushing factory to help her family; it was hard work. Her father accepted the marriage proposal from her husband's family even though the couple had never met: "His parents came to ask my parents for me, and my father agreed and arranged everything." The first time she met her husband was when they went to the health centre to take an HIV test (a common practice nowadays prior to marrying). Letish agreed to marry at the time, explaining, "I wanted to be supported and relieved from the job I [had] … [I] would get married because I was not learning and was thinking of stopping working." They eventually had a daughter together and she hoped to have four more children.

In some communities, it remains socially acceptable for families to initiate marriage arrangements between girls and boys who have never met, although consent is increasingly important. However, more and more, adolescents establish 'friendships' themselves before marriage, relationships that sometimes, but not always, become sexual. Should the couple wish to marry, the norm is for the boy to tell his parents that he wants to get engaged to the girl of his choice and ask them to send elders to her parents to formally submit a marriage proposal. It is

highly likely that the parents on both sides will agree when there is an expressed interest and the mutual consent of the young couple.

Box 3: Hadush's story of initiating his formal marriage

Hadush is from Zeytuni and was married age at 19; his wife was 18 at the time.

How did you come to know your wife?

I asked her parents [to marry her], and after they consulted her, they all agreed. We sent elders and had the *areke* [local alcoholic drink] ceremony; and then we agreed.

Did your parents recommend that you marry her, or you chose her?

I myself asked them [my parents] to get engaged with this girl.

Is she from this community?

Yes.

Did you know her before?

Only physically [her face].

You didn't talk with her?

I didn't.

To whom did you tell?

I told my father about her and I told him to arrange the engagement. He sent elders and asked her parents. Her parents agreed.

For how long were you engaged?

Three months.

How many years did you know her before?

It is a matter of chance, there are some people who know each other for a long time, but we knew each other for a short time.

How long has it been since you got married?

We have been married for two years.

Customary marriage procedures in which parents arrange marriages initiated by couples are practised, to varying degrees, in the three communities. Moreover, it is increasingly common for a consenting girl to alert her parents to an anticipated marriage proposal and to the impending arrival of the elders. This differs from the past when girls were not involved in the timing, arrangement, or announcement of their marriages.

Formal marriages are underpinned and legitimated by marriage payments, typically from both sides of families, such as land, cash, cattle and a house – valued resources for establishing a first-time independent household. Currently, however, a major barrier to formal marriage is the inability of boys and young men to accumulate the necessary resources to make the payments, a point to which we return later.

3.4. Other forms of marriage

Unable to overcome the barriers to pursue formal marriage, many young people seek alternative routes that represent a mix of old and new traditions, with differing levels of risk and protection, and of social imposition and acceptance for the young people involved. Some customary norms and forms of marriage often continue to discriminate against women.

3.4.1. From forced to voluntary abduction

In Leki (Oromia), forced abduction used to be a common way to coerce girls into marriage. Abduction involved the physical abduction and sometimes rape of girls by the men who wanted to marry them. The suspected besmirching of the girls' honour led families to insist on *morka* procedures, a process of litigation with the man's family to ensure that payments were made to compensate for the insult to the girl's family.

Box 4: Demekech's story of marriage by abduction

Demekech, age 22, from Leki, was abducted at age 18 by the young man who would become her husband, after his girlfriend at the time refused to marry him because she wanted to continue studying. Demekech recounted how she was tricked into marrying:

> I was at my uncle's home in the local town to attend my education. Someone came and called me. When I came out of the house, there were a number of people, among them was one of my schoolmates. My future husband was also with them. Then my schoolmate requested that I get on a *bajaj* [three-wheeler taxi]. We went via *bajaj* to a place which I did not know. Then my future husband took me to a dangerous place where crimes are frequently committed, to frighten me. I became nervous and I couldn't understand what was happening at that moment. Then they tied up my legs and hands with rope and held my mouth to prevent me from shouting for assistance. They took me to the home of a relative of my husband … then the people who abducted me called my family using my mobile phone and told them, using another woman, that I was interested in marrying him and as if the abduction was done with my interest.

Following this telephone exchange, the man sent elders to Demekech's family to tell them that she was in his family's house and safe,[8] even though Demekech had been forced into the situation against her will. Her parents and sibling were upset and threatened to take the case to court, but the elders intervened and the issue was settled through a compensation payment made from the man's family to Demekech's family.

Although forced abductions continue to occur, they are less common nowadays, and there is a growing trend among the younger generation towards 'voluntary abduction' (similar to elopement) based on the couple's initiative.[9] However, the presumed mutual consent that underpins 'voluntary abductions' nonetheless masks pressure girls face from their boyfriends to consent or due to the fear of a sexual relationship being found out.

3.4.2. Wife inheritance and substitution

Wife inheritance, known as 'levirate' in the anthropological literature, is the inheritance of a widow by a relative, usually a brother of the deceased husband, and is still practiced in the rural Oromia

8 This act of notification is referred to as *negetee*.

9 See Boyden, Pankhurst and Tafere 2013 for more details.

site. Also found in Leki was the rarer practice of substitution, or 'sororate', where a husband who loses his wife can ask for her (unmarried) sister in marriage. Currently, boys and young men are able to exert their rights to marry according to their plan, whereas girls and young women have limited ability to make their own choice, as the following example illustrates.

Box 5: Chaltu's story of substituting for her sister in a marriage

The 40-year-old man in Leki who married Chaltu had been offered three sisters (from the same family) at different times. When Chaltu's eldest sister died two years into the marriage, the widower asked her parents to substitute one of the sisters. The parents were willing to accept this proposal, but the middle sister, age 16, who was proposed ran away before the wedding ceremony. The third sister (Chaltu, age 14) was forced to marry in her place.

How did you marry?

I married in the place of my elder sister. When his wife, who is my eldest sister, died, my current husband asked my parents to marry my immediate older sister. Preparation for the marriage of my immediate sister was completed. All the food and drinks were prepared. Then a week [before] the marriage ceremony, my elder sister ran away from the community. Then my family substituted me to marry my current husband in the place of my sister. I was married unexpectedly.

How did your family let you get married?

Initially, my family resisted letting me marry in the place of my elder sister since I was a child. But the elders from my husband's side tried to convince either my elder sister or me. Then my family requested me to marry my husband. I refused and I told them I wanted to learn and was not interested in marrying. I cried and left home. Then my family and the elders acted as if they had cancelled the marriage. Then my parents sent me to the lake to fetch water. When I went to the lake, there were people waiting for me with a motorboat. They abducted me and took me to the island where my future husband lives. I went on the boat crying and reached the island after three hours.

So, your family during that time decided to let you be abducted?

Yes, they decided for my abduction. What could they do with all the food and drinks prepared? … [T]here was nothing that they could do at that time. After that, I was trying to move away from that island, but it was surrounded by water. So, I spent a night outside my husband's home. Then, within a week, I returned to my family for the wedding ceremony and then went back to the island.

Coincidentally, Chaltu's husband's mother (her mother-in-law) had been inherited by her uncle when her father died, demonstrating some degree of intergenerational continuity in the transfers of girls and women through marriage.

3.4.3. Aseenaa

We also found the traditional practice of *aseenaa* being used as a route to marriage among young people in the rural Oromia site. *Aseenaa* is a mechanism whereby a young unmarried woman who has had a sexual relationship with a man can attempt to insist on his marrying her by entering his family's house uninvited and refusing to leave, thus forcing her in-laws to accept her. Sometimes the girls' parents pressurise her to pursue *aseenaa*. Tradition dictates that if she succeeds in entering the house, her boyfriend's parents are obliged to send elders to her parents to inform them that their daughter is with them through *aseenaa*, and marriage arrangements should follow.

The process is not straightforward, however, and some young women face physical abuse, resistance and humiliation in attempting a marriage through *aseenaa*. If the man's family are not willing to accept her, they could organise young people to prevent her from entering their house, sometimes involving stoning and bullying. Being unable to enter the house ends the chance of having a marriage through *aseenaa*.

One young woman from Leki, who has never married, described her experience of an unsuccessful *aseenaa* at the age of 15:

> Although I didn't want it [*aseenaa*], my family forced me to go for it. I went to the boy's house, and when the children in the area saw me, they started throwing stones at me, and two hit me. It was at that point that I decided rather than die, I would accept whatever problems faced me at my parents' home. Since my relatives were watching me from a distance, I took another route home, leaving them behind. My grandmother also supported my decision.

3.5. Dowry and bridewealth

The role of marriage payments varies according to context; in some communities, rising costs of marriage payments are a barrier to young people pursuing formal marriage, pushing them into socially and materially precarious partnerships and potential indebtedness. In other communities, these traditional payments are less rigid as long as families are in agreement and can assist couples in setting up their independent households.

3.5.1. Flexibility in dowry – *gezmi*

In Tigray culture, the social expectation is that the girl's family pays a dowry, or *gezmi.* Resources are ideally transferred from both families and predominantly go towards establishing an independent household for the newlyweds. For example, Hadush (married at age 19) set up a new household through the combined support of his family and in-laws; his wife's family provided them with 5,000 birr (around US$150) in cash and one cow, and his parents matched the gift with one cow, a house and half a hectare of farmland.

Nowadays, however, there is flexibility in the amount of *gezmi* and it has little influence on whether a marriage can take place, especially when all parties are consenting or when poverty is a barrier. As one of the young married men in the study said, it depends on "who can afford what and how much".

Box 6: Hagosa's story illustrating flexibility in dowry

Hagosa, from rural Zeytuni, was married at age 19. She explained:

> My family is very poor and they didn't give me anything except 5,000 birr as *gezmi*. But he [her husband] had more money since he was working in Saudi Arabia; he had 150,000 birr and a shop. With this, we got married … He didn't marry me for money; he just wanted me to be a good wife. My mother later gave my share [50,000 birr] from compensation [given for] our land [being] taken by the government for development. Now, I am living a better life than before. I can wear whatever I like and I eat good food and I chat with my friends freely. Before, I really was depressed … I felt I was a poor girl and I couldn't feel comfortable to interact with people and with my friends who wear shoes. Now, I am better than them and I thank the Lord for this improvement.

3.5.2. The socio-economic impact of bridewealth

In the Oromia site, bridewealth payments from the groom's relatives to the bride's family, known as *gabbarra,* were common in the past and continue to be exchanged. *Gabbarra* represents a relatively large (and increasing) cost that is difficult for many young men to meet.[10] A chief reason couples choose 'voluntary abduction' as a route to marriage is so that young men can temporarily circumvent the costly *gabbarra* to the girl's family. To reconcile with the family a compensation payment, called *gaaddissa,* is paid,[11] after which the couple can live together 'as if' married. However, they may not be fully accepted by the bride's family, who could withhold endowments from the couple or not let the couple and especially the groom visit them, including during family gatherings, such as weddings and funerals (Chuta 2017). Young women found it especially difficult and felt socially isolated and cut off from their families when this happened.

In exceptional circumstances, traditional mechanisms allow for a temporary suspension of such rigid restrictions. For example, one of the young male participants reported that he had resorted to *irkene*, a culturally recognised ritual request of dependency and protection made by the groom to the bride's family. Having not paid bridewealth and being forbidden from visiting his in-laws when a relative had died, he requested and was granted *irkene* which allowed him to be with the family for the funeral, though he was reminded of the need to formalise the marriage.

While bridewealth payments are often an obstacle to marriage and a major burden for young men, sometimes leading to the indebtedness and social isolation of the couple, increasingly the reconciliation payment seems to be substituting the full bridewealth payment. It still remains in the couple's best interest to make the expected payments, since once the bridewealth is paid by the groom's family, the girl's family will in turn provide the couple with cattle as dowry. Some young men resort to selling their cattle to afford these payments as a way to unlock the flow of resources from their family network. As one of the young married men explained, "if you do not pay *gabbarra*, do not expect a dowry!"

We found evidence that restrictions surrounding marriage payments might be relaxing somewhat in the Oromia community, as some families defied social norms to negotiate the timing and amount of bridewealth, much to the relief of young couples.

> My husband paid 8,000 birr as *gaaddissa.* The amount should have been birr 15,000 but elders begged my family to accept the 8,000 birr. My husband did not pay the *gabbarra* and I do not know when we will pay it. (Demissie's wife, married age 17, rural Leki)

Similarly, some families have grown lenient and lifted restrictions on visitations, as was the case with Ayu whose family, despite her husband's failure to pay bridewealth eight years into their marriage, allowed the couple to move nearby and to interact socially with them.

3.6. Negotiating married and family life

So far, this report has described the diverse routes to and practices underpinning adolescents' and young people's marriages, cohabitation and first-time parenthood. The descriptions are important because we found that the manner in which young people entered their marriages affected the quality, harmony and sustainability of their intimate and family relationships.

In this study, those who married on their own initiative, and with the consent and endorsement of their families, were more likely to report satisfaction in marriage than those who did not have a say or who lacked family agreement, although we found much variation in experiences. Indeed,

10 At the time of the research, *gabbarra* involves at least five cattle, six blankets, two jerry cans of tej (alcohol), clothes for the girl's mother, a bed and money for the expenses wedding ceremony. Gabbarra is required in both voluntary and forced abduction.

11 5,000-10,000 birr, depending on locality.

marriage, motherhood and fatherhood are for many young people vital sources of joy, pleasure and happiness, but their new roles and living arrangements can be difficult to manage. Unintended pregnancies were a common source of regret, not least because they pushed young people into untimely marriages and childbirth added significant responsibilities for which they were usually socially, psychologically and materially unprepared.

3.6.1. Gendered decision-making within marriage

Patriarchal norms continue to bear heavily on household roles, relations among young couples, and decision-making within marriage, despite widespread assumptions about gender equality being characteristic of this generation of young people.

Our study found evidence that adolescent girls and young women contribute increasingly to different aspects of marital decision-making, from initiating their relationship, agreeing to marriage (including 'voluntary abduction') and to the involvement of the elders and setting the date of marriage. Despite these changes, however, traditional gender-based roles continue to define marital relations and informal unions among the younger generation, such that the social expectation is that men take responsibility for generating and managing the income, resources and major expenditures of the household, and women are assigned the management of daily domestic activities and childcare. Young women continue to be subordinate to their husbands once they are married, subject to their decisions about whether their wives can work or even be consulted, and undertaking the majority of the unpaid care and domestic work in the home.

The degree to which young women made decisions jointly with their husbands depended largely on their husbands' willingness to do so, and young men expressed mixed views on their wives' involvement in different aspects of household decision-making. For example, in a group discussion with young men in rural Leki, one young man argued that, "while consultation with my wife is good, my decision prevails", and another said, "I will give the final decision if she refuses to accept my idea". Others maintained that they would not accept their wives' involvement in decision-making.

Generally, young women did not challenge the view of their subordinate position within the household and acknowledged the authority of their husbands over them (Crivello, Boyden and Pankhurst 2019: 4).

However, some young couples in this study challenged rigid gender role expectations within their marriages, sometimes motivated by economic necessity, as in the case of Kuru.

Box 7: Kuru's story of negotiating decisions with his wife

Kuru, age 22, from rural Leki, was married at age 19. In a group discussion with other young men he was insistent that, "We should not encourage a wife in decision-making; once a husband allows his wife to decide he will be under her control". Kuru eventually gave in to his wife's proposal that she relocate to the Middle East for work, reasoning that the income she earned could be life-changing for them. They made a bargain, as Kuru explained: "When she wanted to migrate to the Middle East, I was very angry because I feared if she left without having a child, the future may not be good. But she agreed to have a child and that is why she has conceived … she will go abroad leaving the child with me."

Kuru's story illustrates how husbands sometimes concede to their wives' wishes when the outcome is deemed to benefit them both. Generally, husbands usually decided whether their wives or girlfriends engaged in paid work after marriage and childbirth. Potential consequences observed in this study for young married women who stopped working outside the home included

diminished social interactions, increased isolation and deepened economic dependency on their husbands.

That young women bear a significant domestic burden following marriage is supported by the survey data, which show that young married women, at age 19, were spending up to 8 hours a day on unpaid work and care (Crivello and Espinoza Revollo 2018: 148). Young mothers, in particular, described being tied to the home after having children and looked forward to their children growing older so that they might earn money and pursue opportunities beyond the domestic sphere.

3.6.2. Parenting roles

Parenting roles remain heavily gendered, with young women bearing most responsibilities in the home. Many adolescents and young people are unprepared and lack the necessary material and social resources in their parenting roles, requiring those who can to call on support from their families.

Parenting roles in both rural and urban settings remain highly gender-differentiated, and childrearing continues to be the responsibility of women: child vaccination, postnatal care, feeding, and maintaining the hygiene of the child, are almost exclusively left to the mother, although more fathers are present during the delivery of a baby.

According to young married men during a focus group discussion in Leki, it is not common in the culture of the locality for fathers to engage in childcare. In fact, across all the study sites, fathers are primarily responsible for the family economy through their role as breadwinner. However, many young fathers struggled to fulfil this role due to lack of work or preparation for fatherhood, and economic uncertainty was a prevalent source of worry in both rural and urban settings.

Box 8: Medi's wish to combine parenting with earning an income

By age 24, Medi, from urban Bertukan, had two children under the age of four. Like many of the other young mothers in her neighbourhood who participated in the study, Medi struggled to balance her desire to earn money with her parenting responsibilities.

> "The reality is not as easy as we think before [marriage]. I have to prepare food for the family, take care of the children and there are situations in which I wish my husband could help me in the house… [I] just accept it… [B]ut it is always better if we both can have some income instead of one of us."

With young children in the household in need of care, the split of responsibilities between Medi and her husband were clear: "Our responsibilities are known. I have to take care of the children and he has to go out to work."

The type of marriage or relationship leading up to childbirth influenced the material and social resources available for the care and support of children, such that young mothers and young fathers in informal unions and those who had separated or divorced faced some of the greatest challenges in providing for their children.

3.6.3. Fertility choices and decision-making

Married young couples encounter strong social pressures to conceive one or two years into marriage, discouraging them from delaying their first pregnancy despite many not feeling ready for parenthood at the time.

Young newlyweds in both urban and rural contexts are under considerable pressure to start bearing children, since childbirth is taken as proof of women's fertility and is seen to strengthen the marital bond and social standing of the couple. For example, Ayu, who married at age 16 in rural Leki, was under tremendous pressure from her family to get pregnant and her mother discouraged her from taking contraception. Her mother explained, "Traditionally, it is said someone becomes more considerate and sympathetic after giving birth to a child. That is why I wanted [Ayu] to have 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 Ayu's house due to Ayu and her husband's failure to pay the necessary bridewealth to formalise their marriage. Having a child, in her view, might push the couple to follow through and formalise their marriage (Chuta 2017: 27).

In focus group discussions, young men and young women in rural Leki described the pressures that beset newlywed couples. Young married men stated that couples are expected to have a child as soon as they marry. If a couple does not have a child soon after marriage everyone (family, relatives, neighbours, or friends) will ask them why they do not. The couple may begin to suspect each other and undertake fertility checks. Similarly, young married women explained that girls consider giving birth to a child as security for their marriage. If a girl does not give birth in the first two years, the husband's family will persistently ask her if she uses contraception, and two or three years of marriage, a fertility test may be undertaken.

Although marriage and motherhood were thought to offer girls and women security in their relationships, some young women in the study felt that motherhood had exacerbated rather than alleviated their poverty. Financial hardship thus clouded the potential joys of mothering.

3.6.4. Female agency and constraints

Imbalanced power relations within marriage based on sex and age, and in relation to in-laws and community values, disadvantage adolescent married girls and young women who wish to go against the social norm to delay first pregnancies.

Husbands have greater authority than wives in fertility decision-making, and senior in-laws, family members and service providers do not encourage young couples' use of modern contraception before having at least one child. Husbands might claim that these decisions are made jointly with their wives, but congruent with other domains of couple decision-making, it is essentially up to the woman to 'agree with' the man's idea (Chuta 2017: 26). For example, Beletch, in rural Leki, was married at age 16. Her husband explained, "I discussed with my wife to have a child early. She agreed with my idea. As a result, she did not use contraception." In rural areas in particular, fertility decisions continue to be negotiated in a wider family context, including in relationships where young women had had a say in marriage decisions (Chuta 2017).

However, the option to use contraception has become more feasible following government efforts to promote family planning through community health extension workers, and a number of young women in this study were able to challenge social pressures around fertility by using contraception, sometimes without their husband's knowledge. Health extension workers often act as intermediaries between wives and their husbands and try to convince husbands to agree to their wives taking contraception if that is what women want, particularly if they already have a

child. For example, in rural Zeytuni (Tigray), a young married woman reported asking the health extension worker for contraception because she had many children and did not want to get pregnant again. Despite her husband's reluctance, she was provided with the service.

3.7. Risk and vulnerability in young marriage and parenthood

Young women are especially vulnerable in the face of unintended pregnancy, separation, divorce and single parenthood, and the formal support available to them is inadequate and uneven.

This section highlights aspects of gendered vulnerability and service gaps with respect to young people's intimate and family lives, focusing particularly on pregnancy outside marriage, services for pregnant women, and the challenges of separation, divorce, and single parenthood in the three study communities.

3.7.1. Pregnancy outside marriage

Older adolescent girls and young women who are not married face constraints in accessing birth control and abortion services. Those who give birth outside of marriage risk being rejected by their families and socially ostracised, and tend not to feel confident to seek delivery services.

Female sexuality remains closely guarded and tied up with adolescent girls' social reputations and family honour. Child marriage of girls is a strategy employed by families to protect against the potential social disgrace brought on by rumours of premarital sex or by a pregnancy before marrying. Adolescent boys' sexuality is not guarded in the same way, nor do they face the same degree of social scorn if they become unmarried fathers.

Unmarried girls who become pregnant often face a cascade of difficult social and economic repercussions. Their families pressure them to disclose the identity of the father (if not already known) and encourage them to marry, even when the pregnancy is the result of rape. They risk becoming the target of verbal and physical abuse by their families and the wider community, so often confine themselves or are sequestered by their families in their homes for fear of insults and discrimination. Girls who decide to have a child without getting married may be rejected by the father of their child, their own family and socially ostracised by their community.

One of the young mothers from Leki, who'd been abandoned by the father of her baby, blamed herself and was made to feel that she had no choice but to endure punishment:

> My mother and sister hated me a lot. There were lots of disagreements between us and whenever there are such disagreements, they insult me. However, I have to bear all they have to say because it was all my fault.

Single mothers who give birth outside of marriage also face the practical challenges of earning a living and finding childcare with limited formal support available to them, and often had to rely on family or neighbours. A young mother from the rural Oromia site who had a child out of wedlock described how she was socially and materially deprived as a result of her pregnancy, until she was able to find work:

> During the late period of my pregnancy and early period of my delivery, my biological parents treated me like a 'dog'; I had nothing to wear for myself and for the baby as well. I was like a beggar who had nothing but remnants of my old clothes. I endured this problem until I started working for pay. My life started improving after I started earning a certain amount of money.

In time, some of the young mothers were able to take advantage of economic opportunities to improve their circumstances. As a single mother from rural Leki recounted:

> I wanted to take care of the child myself at any cost by working as a day labourer. Though this was challenging for me at the beginning, now I have learned how to cope with this challenge.

Single mothers lamented the fact that they often depended heavily on their families for support, so access to economic opportunities gave them hope, not least because they said it would be difficult for them to marry, unlike unmarried fathers who marry fairly easily.

> Once you give birth before marriage, the chance that you marry again is very small and if you marry again, the psychological impacts and other pains are very difficult to withstand. (Unmarried young mother, rural Leki)

Young fathers also faced social judgement and felt pressure to enact their masculine roles and paternal responsibilities, though many lacked the resources or preparation to do so. Some young men responded to news of an unplanned pregnancy by either fleeing the community (to avoid taking responsibility for the child) or by asking their girlfriends to terminate the pregnancy.

Although abortion is currently legal in Ethiopia under certain conditions (Behulu et al. 2019), young women wishing to terminate an unwanted pregnancy faced multiple barriers in accessing abortion services, including distance, social stigma and access criteria. In rural Leki, for example, the abortion service at the health centre was only available on condition that the pregnancy was a result of incest, or if the girl was considered to be in poor mental health or under the age of 18. The health worker reported that few abortions had taken place in the village health centre, possibly because young women sought services outside the locality.

3.7.2. Avoiding pregnancy in the first place

Adolescent girls were well aware of the potential social, health and economic repercussions of giving birth outside of marriage and the risk of becoming a single parent. Many adolescents were in relationships and some were sexually active, though they did not wish or intend to get pregnant at their age. However, health workers were reportedly reluctant to provide unmarried adolescents with information or services that might be seen to encourage their sexual activity, instead advising girls not to start sexual relationships.

But health workers are sometimes torn in their roles. In Bertukan, a group of adolescent girls reported that they had asked health extension workers to provide them with contraception on the basis that they were sexually active, yet not married. Knowing that the girls were in relationships, the health workers preferred to help the girls avoid pregnancy and reluctantly provided them with birth control, even though they advised abstinence. But the adolescent girls first had to convince the health workers, often requiring persistence. One young divorced woman recalled, “The health workers were not happy that I was taking contraceptives as they felt I was too young to start sex. But later I shared all my story and they helped me. After some days, I went back and took the injection for six months.”

3.7.3. Services for pregnant women

In all three communities, health care providers follow-up with pregnant women from the first time they report their pregnancy and later provide advice on birth spacing according to the couples’ preferences. Many young women who accessed health centres were satisfied with the care that they received:

> When I was pregnant, I was going to the clinic every time where the nurses gave me good services. They told me to come to the clinic if I felt sick. I had a monthly check-up. If I felt sick, I could go before the check-up time. (Married young woman, rural Zeytuni)

Pregnant women increasingly expect health workers to regularly visit their homes to provide prenatal services. However, dispersed populations and poor travel conditions make it difficult for services to reach women. A health officer in rural Zeytuni described the kinds of challenges facing health workers in the area:

> We have a standard regarding the different services we deliver. For example, one extension worker needs to reach 2,500 people a year. This means if there are 5,000 people living in a *kebele* there should be two health extension workers. The problem is that health extension workers face arduous conditions given the distances to reach the households. There are enough ambulances but the roads are difficult to drive on. In addition, there are shortages in the logistics, medicines and the like.

Most young women prefer to give birth in hospitals rather than at home, and government policies encourage hospital births. In some rural communities, however, the tradition remains for young women to give birth to their first child in their mothers' home, even though this might not be what the young women want. As in other aspects of marital and fertility decision-making, young women's preferences are often secondary to the preferences of their husbands and senior family members who wield greater authority to make decisions for them.

3.7.4. Separation, divorce and remarriage

Adolescents and very young couples often face economic and social pressures such that their marriages may lead to divorce, generally disadvantaging young women for whom remarriage tends to be more difficult, especially if they have children.

Separation and divorce are less common in rural areas, and whether married formally or informally, remarriage is rarely possible for a divorced woman and might require her to move out of the community. Remarriage is more complicated if she has a child from the former marriage. Divorced men, on the contrary, can easily remarry.

In this study, young people's intimate and marital relationships were fragile in the face of limited social and material resources and lack of preparation. Among the main reasons young people gave for separation and divorce were: early age at marriage; inability to finance the household; spousal conflict; suspected affairs; and husbands' drinking and spending habits. Many young people explained that they had not planned to marry at the time, but circumstances, such as unintended pregnancies, foisted them into marriage.

One of the young men from Leki explained that he was pressured by family to marry his pregnant girlfriend for fear that she might harm herself should he refuse to do so. He was 21 years old at the time: "I went for marriage because my uncle advised me to do so; otherwise, the girl would take her life." However, they divorced soon after the birth of their child; he explained that it was because the marriage was not planned.

Box 9: Kenna's story of divorce

Kenna was asked to marry a girl in Leki with whom he had had a one-off sexual encounter. When he ran away to avoid marrying her, his father was imprisoned as a consequence. To free his father from jail, he agreed to marry the girl and paid *gaaddissa* of 5,500 birr. Kenna was 16 years old at the time. He had dropped out of school because of the marriage and his family were too poor to support him. He recalled:

> While I was attending school, I saw a girl who became my divorced wife, I talked to her, she said ok, and we had sex. That day she went home late in the evening, and her family asked her where she had been. The next morning, her family arrived at our home early in the morning, with a machete, hammer and different tools. When we saw them standing at our gate, we said that they had come to kill me actually. After a day, I fled my home, but my father was jailed. My family told me that my father was in jail in place of me. I returned to Leki to get my father out of jail and I was imprisoned instead for five weeks. Then I agreed to marry her after giving *gaaddissa*.

The girl became pregnant, and despite eventually having a child together, they divorced.

Economic problems were a common contributor to the separation of cohabiting couples in the city. The high cost of rental housing forced some young couples to separate and return to live with their respective families, even though they would have preferred to stay together.

Poor financial management by male partners also led to conflict and separation or divorce. One of the young mothers said that during her three-year marriage, her husband squandered money on drink, leading to the family's economic decline. The combination of his drinking and misspending led to their separation.

Conflict also arises in the urban context due to jealousy and suspicion of adultery (by both sexes), leading to separation or divorce, as in the following example of a young father who left his wife who he suspected was having an affair:

> She wouldn't listen to me when I had repeatedly asked her to stop her relationship with another man. I had seen her with another man … She was lying to me that she went to visit her family while the truth was that she had stayed with her boyfriend. Then, I did hurt her. We were not able to respect each other.

He was jailed for three days for violence towards his wife, later separating. In the same neighbourhood, jealousy and conflict led to another couple's separation, after the young mother challenged her husband's controlling behaviour and his attempts to confine her to their home:

> *Tell me, how were you separated from your husband?*
>
> After I gave birth to my baby, I was at home for the whole day for four years; but when the child started going to school, I started to get time to meet my friends and just spend time outside of the home. Then, my husband started to complain that my style of dressing was not proper and things like that.
>
> *Had your style of dressing changed?*
>
> It was just normal, like I did when I went out of the house; you know it is not the same dress style as when I am at home … just as I discuss things with my friends, he also had friends to talk to … [T]hey thought that if a woman wears modern style, that means she has started a relationship with another man outside of the home. So, they thought a woman should stay at home all the time … [S]o when I wanted to visit my friends, he was not happy. He was telling me that they should come to my home and I shouldn't go to them. This caused a lot of conflict among us.

3.7.5. Support in separation, divorce and parenting

There is an increasing community and state-level trend towards protecting young women in marriage, and in the process of divorce and their rights to property and child support. However, patriarchal customary norms are still influential and women's rights are often not fully observed.

The mechanisms and degrees of support available for addressing relationship conflict, separation and divorce vary between locations and by the degree of formality of the relationship. Stronger informal and formal mechanisms are in place to address the problems and ending of formal marriages, whereas less support is available to handle the dissolution of informal unions of cohabiting couples.

In a rural area, if a marriage is on the verge of divorce, traditional reconciliation mechanisms are adopted to try to settle the dispute by involving community elders, neighbours and relatives. Women facing problems can also seek advice from community health extension workers who might refer them to the *woreda* (local) Women and Children Affairs Office. If conflict persists and the couple wants to divorce, the case is referred to the Justice Office, and then to court to settle property and child support. In the urban area, married couples also have recourse to administrative and judicial systems at both *woreda* and sub-city level; meanwhile, the separation of cohabitating couples is usually handled by the couple themselves.

A young woman in rural Zeytuni (Tigray) described the process she went through to divorce:

> I went to the community court when he kicked me, and I wanted to save my life. We tried to solve the conflict by going to the police and community court, and they told us to make peace and not fight. We tried for seven months. Now, we are not living together; he is living in the house and I left him and came back to my parents' house. We just meet in the court. Both of us want to be divorced. We had two cows; we each took one. We didn't have that much property, but we divided what we had. I took the farmland and he took the house. The court has decided that he should pay 200 birr every month for his son.

Unmarried women are less likely to seek mother and child services, and face problems asserting their rights to child support and finding childcare to enable them to work, unless they can rely on support from family or neighbours. Most young women (and their children) return to live with their parents after a break-up, although temporary support to single mothers and their children is sometimes offered by NGOs or by informal fundraising within the neighbourhood. Young women in informal or cohabiting relationships often do not feel the same degree of entitlement to seek help from their families when they separate, and may be ashamed to ask (Crivello, Boyden and Pankhurst 2019: 9).

There was widespread concern that young men often deny paternity to avoid paying support or the humiliation of having a child out of wedlock, and so local governments in some communities have strengthened systems for documenting paternity and holding fathers accountable for child support. A social court head in rural Zeytuni reported the case of a young man who had refused to acknowledge paternity and was sued, tested and subsequently required to pay child support:

> We assess the witnesses and try to help them. We sue the suspected person … and ask for a blood test. So, for the past two years there is not a child who has an unidentified father. We had three cases of children born outside of marriage … Two have had their fathers identified while the third one is in the court process. There are pregnancies outside of marriage, but we don't have children whose fathers are unknown.

Mothers are generally children's primary caregivers following separation or divorce, although they often rely on a wider web of care, with grandmothers playing a crucial role. Importantly, many young fathers remain active in parenting their children, through regular visits and material support, going against the social stereotype of paternal abandonment. One of the young men in Addis Ababa who separated from his girlfriend explained how he came to be his child's primary caregiver:

> She [his girlfriend] said she wanted to leave because her parents were nagging her to leave. I told her to leave with the child; but frankly she told me that her parents don't love the baby and that it would be bad for the baby if she took him to her home … I decided to raise my child myself.

Childcare services are not readily available, affordable or trustworthy, placing a considerable burden of care on young parents and disadvantaging those who lack access to wider systems and networks of support.

3.8. Young peoples' reflections on their choices and experiences

Many young people regret the timing and circumstances in which they married and became first-time parents, with their current realities requiring them to revise their childhood aspirations and prioritise meeting new adult responsibilities.

The majority of young people had not planned or desired to marry or become parents as adolescents, nor was separation, divorce or single parenthood part of their envisioned future. They chose or were pushed into their diverse formal and informal unions by family pressure, social expectation or circumstance. According to the Young Lives survey (at age 22), the majority (58 per cent) of young women who had married in adolescence felt that they had married too young (Briones and Porter 2019: 13). Earlier, as young adolescents, they had expressed the desire to finish their formal education, secure work and to marry by their mid-20s and have their first children. But many had left school before finishing their education. Having disrupted his university education to start living with his girlfriend, one of the young men in the study reflected, "the time we decided to live together was not the right decision. I have nothing else to regret.'"

For many young women, returning to school after having children was considered unrealistic. For instance, a young people from Leki who married at age 16 regretted quitting school when she married, saying, "I had aspired to finish my school, get a job and marry at the age of 25-30 years old," and she did not consider re-enrolling in school a feasible option for someone like her.

Not everyone regretted marrying young, though, especially if marriage was an improvement on their lives at the time, if they disliked or had already left school, or if marriage was deemed the next logical step in their life. Most young people, however, saw their married and parenting lives through the lens of lost opportunity and unfulfilled aspirations. Weyni's case (in rural Zeytuni) is a clear illustration.

Box 10: Weyni's story of missing out on her life's calling

Weyni's childhood dream of becoming a nun was cut short by the death of her father, which then led to her early marriage. She spent her childhood following religious education with the support of her father, who was a priest. When he died, she was forced to marry. With some regret she said:

> At that time, I had another dream. I was attending religious education and I had hoped to enter life at a monastery; but when my father died, I dropped all my dreams. I never had the idea of getting married. I just wanted to become a nun. It is God's will that anything in life happens; not just that of human will. I got married!

She reported facing problems in adapting to her new life after her father's death, since she had hoped for a spiritual rather than a materialist life, but without her father's presence her life course changed track.

Having a child outside of marriage was life-altering and an acute source of regret for young mothers and fathers alike, especially for those who had been compelled to abandon their schooling. An unmarried mother-of-two in urban Bertukan determined that her life would have been different, "You know, if I had listened to my mother's advice and completed my education, I wouldn't have fallen into this kind of life. I really regret this so much", adding that she nonetheless loved her children.

Young fathers were also ambivalent when they felt their lives had gone off-track by 'accidental' fatherhood. A young unmarried father in urban Bertukan both regretted the circumstances in which his son was born at the same time as expressing his love for him.

> I feel as if I have stolen my future. I was feeling as if all my future is darkened. The first thing I regret is about my education that I could no longer go to the university and learn. The other thing is that I would have preferred not to have a child with a woman who I did not marry. I say this because it is not good to have a child born with someone who you don't love. But I don't want my son to know that I regret having him.

Similarly, a young father in urban Bertukan felt that he had spoiled his life and that of his girlfriend after starting a relationship with her at a young age and having a child together.

> I really regret it because I didn't complete my education. I have come to understand the importance of learning. But I have also made a big mistake affecting her [his girlfriend]. I regret that she is living in a bad situation because of me … I had friends and family who I could have consulted about preventing pregnancy. I feel that I have made her life a mess.

Early childbirth did indeed end the aspirations of several young women who, prior to having children, had planned to migrate to the Middle East for work. A young woman in rural Leki said that her plan was to migrate to the Middle East after finishing school so that she could earn enough money and eventually return to Ethiopia, marry and raise a family. However, after having a child out of wedlock all her aspirations vanished. She neither finished school nor was she able to migrate.

Similarly, in the same community, an unmarried adolescent discovered that she was pregnant just as she was about to migrate for work. She recalled: "I was waiting to migrate to the Middle East. I filled the visa to migrate. When I learned that I was almost five months pregnant, my visa came, but I left [this opportunity] aside for this reason." She is currently focusing on raising her child, hoping that she will migrate in the future.

Part 4: Conclusions and recommendations

4.1. Concluding summary

The ongoing efforts to prevent child marriage and delay early marriage are crucial to the well-being of adolescents and young people, especially young women, and to meeting the global commitments made to them through the Sustainable Development Goals. However, it is important not to overlook the vulnerabilities of millions of adolescents and young people who have already experienced marriage, cohabitation, and parenthood. This report has highlighted their views and the challenges they face in different urban and rural contexts in Ethiopia.

While there has been significant change in young people's personal agency in deciding to form relationships, cohabit or establish marriages, customary norms are still pervasive in marriage processes, particularly in rural areas, and gender norms constrain young women's agency. Moreover, within marriage, domestic roles and the division of labour remain gendered, and power imbalances based on sex and age disempower young women in household decision-making, including in relation to family planning and parenting. Single women, whether unmarried, separated or divorced, face particular vulnerabilities, social stigma and challenges in accessing mother and child services and support with childcare. While there are indications that women's rights to property and childcare upon divorce are improving in some contexts, customary norms often still constrain the implementation of these rights.

Diverse and changing patterns of marriage and cohabitation

With changes brought about notably through education and urbanisation, adolescents and young people nowadays have a greater say compared to the past in decisions about who, how and when they marry. However, this apparent increased agency comes at a cost when their unions lack formality or family backing, and customary norms still tend to regulate marriage practices. Despite greater opportunities for youth to select their partners, procedures around elders being sent to negotiate marriages and customary payments remain the norm in rural areas, and young people still value the social status associated with becoming married.

Informal cohabitation is largely an urban phenomenon and frequently a response to unintended pregnancy, or the desire to maintain a sexual relationship while temporarily bypassing the costs of formal marriage. Young people facing pressures of unemployment, the threat of addictive behaviours, digital and social media promoting promiscuity, and other urban environmental risks may more readily enter relationships and cohabit. However, these unions are often characterised by fragility and subject to breakdown unless they lead to formal marriage.

Unable to overcome the many barriers to pursue formal marriage, many young people seek alternative routes representing a mix of old and new traditions with differing levels of risk and protection, social imposition and acceptance for the young people involved. Some customary norms and forms of marriage continue to discriminate against girls and women, both reflecting and reinforcing gender inequality.

The burden of marriage gifts and opportunities of parental endowments

The role of marriage gifts, payments and endowments varies according to context; in some communities, rising costs of marriage payments are a barrier to young people pursuing formal marriage, pushing them into socially and materially precarious partnerships and potential indebtedness. However, in other communities, these traditional payments are less rigid as long

as families are in agreement and such resource transfers can assist couples in forming households and establishing independent livelihoods.

Practices of marriage gifts and parental endowments to the marrying couple remain pervasive in rural areas, but vary between the Oromia and Tigray sites and have been changing in recent years. Increasingly, young people are making their own decisions to get married, and in the Oromia site they often elope in order to avoid the bridewealth payments, which is a change from the past; many couples begin their lives together in debt, and they may not be fully accepted or provided with resources by the bride's family. However, some of the rules around bridewealth appear to be relaxing. Increasingly, reconciliation payments seem to be substituting full bridewealth payment. Similarly, in Tigray, the amount of dowry traditionally provided by the bride's family has become more flexible depending on the family's resources, and endowments from the groom's family are also often provided. These resources from parents on both sides can assist young couples, especially those from better-off families, to set up new households.

Post-marital gender roles and decision-making continue to be shaped by patriarchal norms

While young women now have greater say on who they marry and when, once married, gender norms continue to bear heavily on household roles, relations among young couples, and household decision-making, despite widespread assumptions about gender equality being characteristic of this generation of young people. Domestic work remains largely left to young wives, and husbands tend to feel entitled to take major decisions. Young women's agency even over fertility choices is often constrained by patriarchal values. Girls' and women's subordinate status makes them vulnerable to violence within their intimate relationships and families, which was sometimes brought on by male jealousy or economic insecurity.

Fertility decision-making and parenting roles are influenced by gender norms and community values

Imbalanced power relations within marriage based on sex and age and in relation to in-laws and community values disadvantage adolescent married girls and young women who wish to go against the social grain to delay their first pregnancies. Married young couples encounter strong social pressures to conceive one or two years into marriage, discouraging them from delaying first pregnancy, despite many not feeling ready for parenthood at that time. Parenting roles remain heavily gendered, with young women still bearing most responsibility for these and for the domestic work in the home. Many adolescents and young people are unprepared and lack the material and social resources necessary to support them in their parenting roles, requiring those who can to call on support from their families.

Reproductive health risks and parenting challenges for unmarried women

Older adolescent girls and young women who are not married face constraints in accessing birth control. If they conceive, they may be pressured or wish to have an abortion, facing social stigma and an inability to obtain services locally, exposing them to risky travel and unsafe abortions. If they decide to have a child without getting married, they may be rejected by their family and socially ostracised by their community, and not feel confident to seek delivery services for fear of humiliation. Moreover, they often face problems bringing up their children as single mothers and finding work and childcare, unless they can rely on family support.

Early marriage leading to early divorce disadvantages young women

Early marriages are often precipitated by unplanned pregnancies and older adolescent girls and boys and young people end up getting married without having intended to do so. Such couples frequently face many economic and social pressures, often leading to tensions in the marriage

and with in-laws. Many young couples do not feel they were ready for the responsibilities and challenges of married life. Such early marriages can often end in early separation or divorce.

In cases of separation or divorce, young men are often able to remarry fairly easily whereas young women face social opprobrium and more difficulty in getting remarried, especially if they have had children. Living as single women and especially as single mothers, they face social and economic challenges. However, there is evidence of changes in local-level *kebele* and *woreda* support towards women's rights in marriage and especially divorce, with local authorities upholding women's rights to property and child support. Nonetheless, patriarchal community norms are still influential and often prevent women's rights from being fully implemented.

Young peoples' reflections and regrets about their choices and experiences of early marriage and divorce

Older adolescent boys and girls and young people that Young Lives has been following were asked about how their lives had changed after they got married early. Most had had high aspirations and had not anticipated getting married so young; many of them regretted the timing and circumstances in which they married and became first-time parents, and not being able to continue with their education. This was especially the case when parental influences or unplanned and unwanted pregnancies pressurised them to get married before they felt ready to face the challenges of married life. Some young men regretted unplanned marriages when they felt their lives had gone 'off track' due to fatherhood, and putting their female partner's life in difficulty. Some young women who were hoping to migrate for work had to abandon their plans when they became pregnant. Others, however, who had left school and not obtained jobs felt that marriage was the only obvious choice left to them. Most felt they needed to review their aspirations to correspond to their new responsibilities.

4.2. Recommendations[12]

The issues affecting young men and women as they transition from adolescence to adulthood, form their own households, and have a family and bring up children, cut across different sectors, involving health, notably reproductive health, nutrition and early childhood care and education, all underpinned by poverty and lack of material resources. Gender differences, that become increasingly salient in late adolescence, also raise issues of the protection and empowerment of girls and young women and their rights to property, child support and access to services, especially on divorce. It is therefore important to promote multisectoral and coordinated approaches to ensure the well-being of young men and women as they form couples, establish households and bring up children.

In addition to preventing child marriage and delaying early marriage for the well-being of adolescent boys and especially girls, policy and programmes should pay more attention to the views and needs of the millions of young people who have already experienced marriage or cohabitation and separation or divorce.

Young people's agency over forming relationships and deciding on marriage partners is increasing, but gender norms give more say to boys and young men than girls and young women. Further promotion of adolescent girls' agency in preventing child marriage and in decision-making over their marriage choices is important, as well as supporting healthy relationships among adolescents more generally. But this requires that adolescent girls and their families have actual choices, including alternative economic and social opportunities beyond

12 These recommendations are further developed in a policy brief based on this report (Pankhurst, forthcoming).

marriage, from which to choose. This is why providing better access to jobs, training and resources is key.

In urban areas, the government needs to address the plethora of social risks and improve the everyday environments affecting young people's relationships and intimate lives. The priorities identified by urban youth in this study include: investing in the safety of neighbourhoods and public spaces; promoting responsible use of social media; employment; housing for young couples and childcare for families; and sexual and reproductive health and rights, including contraception.

In rural areas, marriage gifts, payments and parental endowments continue to be pervasive, though the forms and amounts are changing. Parental resource transfers that can help newlywed couples to establish themselves should be encouraged, aided by opportunities for work and housing support for male and female youth. Practices that lock young couples in debt and weaken their social connections at such a crucial time in their lives should be discouraged.

Since post-marital relations and decision-making continue to be shaped by patriarchal norms, it is important to create awareness about children's and women's rights and to strengthen systems that prevent violence within families. Policies and social norms need to promote a fairer division of household labour, greater domestic roles for husbands and childrearing roles for fathers, and more equal decision-making over property and family planning.

In both rural and urban settings, greater promotion of access to reproductive health by older adolescent girls, including contraception and safe abortion, can enhance their agency and choice over their lives and well-being. Priority should be given to access for unmarried women to delivery services and support for unmarried, divorced and separated women in ensuring their property and child support rights, as well as their access to childcare facilities, skills and jobs.

Listening to what young people who are married or in informal unions have to say, and asking them what they need, is still uncommon in Ethiopia. This research has given voice to the experiences of many young women and men. We hope it will lead to greater understanding of what it means to be married early and of the support young married parents need, so that not only can child marriage be prevented and the UN Sustainable Development Goal target met, but so that young people can have more choice in their lives and young women in particular no longer feel that early marriage is their only option.

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YOUNG MARRIAGE AND PARENTHOOD STUDY

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