Research Report

Young Marriage, Parenthood and Divorce

A Comparative Study in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Zambia

Gina Crivello and Gillian Mann

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YOUNG MARRIAGE AND PARENTHOOD STUDY

Young Lives

CHILD FRONTIERS

Young Marriage, Parenthood and Divorce: A Comparative Study in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Zambia

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About YMAPS

This research report was authored by Child Frontiers and Young Lives and produced by Young Lives as part of the Young Marriage and Parenthood Study (YMAPS), a three-year programme of comparative research examining young marriage and parenthood.

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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Introduction

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals call explicitly for an end to child, early and forced marriages and unions, and many countries have committed to ending the practice by 2030. As a result, the number of marriages under the age of 18 is declining in many parts of the world (UNICEF 2019).

Despite this decrease, every year, 12 million girls are married before they reach the age of 18 (UNICEF 2019). Most of those who wed come from families living in poverty: girls and young women are 2.5 times more likely to marry under 18 if their families are poor (Girls Not Brides 2019). There are also a small but substantial number of boys and young men who marry under the age of 18 (Gastón, Misunas and Cappa 2019).

There is a growing body of knowledge about why adolescent girls in the Global South get married. However, there is much less information about how to support them once they are married or in a union, and how being married or cohabiting alters their life trajectories (Sidduqi and Greene 2019). Evidence is limited about what supports personal well-being and the quality of married life, including girls' and young women's agency and decision-making in family contexts and intergenerational relationships; what contributes to violence, divorce or separation; and how these experiences shape young people's lives (Svanemyr et al. 2015). Only a few studies have engaged with boys and young men who are married, and there is little evidence on the most effective means of ensuring young couples' access to support and services to meet their needs. First-hand, systematically acquired, qualitative data from married and cohabitating young people and adolescent parents is particularly required in order to make the challenges they face visible to policymakers.

This report presents emerging evidence from the Young Marriage and Parenthood Study (YMAPS), a comparative qualitative study of marriage, cohabitation, parenthood and divorce among marginalised adolescents and young people in Ethiopia, India (in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Zambia between 2018 and 2020.[1] YMAPS is a multi-country collaboration involving research partners in Ethiopia, India, Peru, Zambia, Canada and the UK, led by Young Lives and Child Frontiers, and funded by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The report synthesises findings published in four country research reports (Crivello et al. 2018; Mweemba and Mann 2019; Rojas and Bravo 2020; Tafere et al. 2020).

YMAPS employed a socio-ecological life course perspective which took full account of the changing roles and responsibilities of girls and boys as they grow up, and the dynamic contexts in which they live. It emphasised the interrelated individual and structural factors that shape critical moments in adolescence, such as those involved with leaving school, taking up work, entering intimate partnerships and becoming first-time parents. It applied a relational approach to gender and generation, examining the relationships, cultural logics, power structures, and norms and practices that influence these transitions, both in terms of motherhood and marriage, but also, for boys and young men, fatherhood and the formation of new households. Parenthood, marriage and unions are by definition relational, yet policy and programme interventions on child marriage are rarely informed by a gendered evidence base. YMAPS aimed to contribute to filling this gap.

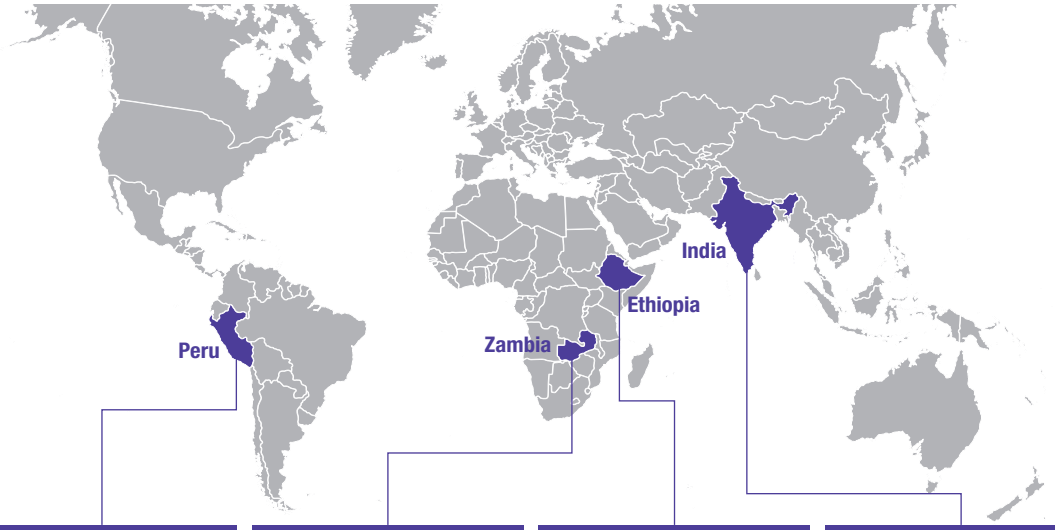
1 The research in India was funded by the Children's Investment Fund Foundation, with data collected from October to December 2016. The India study design and findings informed the development of data collection tools for YMAPS in Ethiopia, Peru and Zambia and thus facilitate the comparative analysis in this report.

Research locations

The purposeful selection of Ethiopia, India, Peru and Zambia aimed to capture diverse contexts of child marriage, cohabitation, parenthood and service provision in the context of families living in poverty on three different continents.

Three to four sites were selected in each county, covering urban, peri-urban and rural settings.[2]

Figure 1: *Study Countries: Ethiopia, India, Peru and Zambia'*



PERU:

Research Sites:
Rural jungle: Satipo, Junin region
Peri-urban: Sullana, Piura region
Urban: Lima, Lima Province

Child marriage facts:

- Legal minimum age of marriage is 18 for women and men*
- Nationally, 19 per cent of girls become pregnant by age 18.[1]
- Around seven per cent of young people between the ages of 15 and 19 are in cohabiting relationships and 0.3 per cent are married.[2]
- 2 in 5 girls complete primary school and approximately 1 in 10 complete secondary school.[3]

1 INEI (2019). *Encuesta Demográfica y de Salud Familiar (ENDES) 2018.* Nacional y departamental. Lima: INEI.
2 INEI (2018). *Resultados definitivos de los censos nacionales 2017. XII de población, VII de vivienda y III de comunidades indígenas.* Lima: INEI.
3 INEI (2019). Encuesta Demográfica y de Salud Familiar (ENDES) 2018. Nacional y departamental. Lima: INEI.

ZAMBIA:

Research Sites:
Urban: Kalulushi, Copperbelt Province
Peri-urban: Mazabuka, Southern Province
Rural: Katete, Eastern Province

Child marriage facts:

- Legal minimum age of marriage is 21 for women and 21 for men*
- Thirty-one per cent of girls are married before age 18 and six per cent are married before age 15.[1]
- By age 19, 20 per cent of girls in urban areas and 36 per cent in rural areas have been pregnant.[2]
- Around 40 per cent of girls in the poorest wealth quintile between the ages of 12 and 24 are married before 18 years, compared to 0.6 per cent in the richest wealth quintile.[3]

1 Government of Zambia, The Central Statistical Office (CSO), Ministry of Health (MOH), and ICF International (2014) Zambia Demographic and Health Survey (ZDHS) 2013-2014. Rockville, Maryland, USA. https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR304/FR304.pdf [access date: 3 Feb 2019]
2 Ibid (2014).
3 Ibid (2014).

ETHIOPIA:

Research Sites:
Rural: Zeytuni, Tigray
Peri-urban: Leki, Oromia
Urban: Bertukan, Addis Ababa

Child marriage facts:

- Legal minimum age of marriage is 18 for women and men*
- Four in 10 young women are married or in a union before their eighteenth birthday.[1]
- Of the country's 15 million child brides, 6 million are married before age 15.[2]
- Thirteen per cent of female adolescents aged 15 to 19 are mothers or pregnant with their first child.[3]

1 United Nations Children's Fund (2018) *Ending Child Marriage: A Profile of Progress in Ethiopia*, New York: UNICEF.
2 UNICEF (2018) *Ending Child Marriage: A Profile of Progress in Ethiopia*, New York: UNICEF.
3 Central Statistical Agency and ICF (2017) 'Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey 2016', Addis Ababa: CSA and ICF.

INDIA:

Research Sites:
Rural: Bolangir, Andhra Pradesh
Urban: Poompuhar, Telangana
Rural: Kotagiri, Telangana
Urban: Raipur, Andhra Pradesh

Child marriage facts:

- Legal minimum age of marriage is 18 for women and 21 for men*
- Globally, one in three girls married in childhood lives in India.[1]
- Around 36 per cent of women age 18-29 in Andhra Pradesh, and 31 per cent in Telangana, were married by age 18.[2]
- Twelve per cent of young women age 15-19 in Andhra Pradesh, and 11 per cent in Telangana, are mothers or pregnant.[3]

1 United Nations Children's Fund (2014) *Ending Child Marriage: Progress and Prospects*, New York: UNICEF.
2 International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF (2017) 'National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 2015-16: India', http://rchiips.org/NFHS/NFHS-4Reports/India.pdf.
3 International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) and ICF (2017) 'National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4), 2015-16: India', http://rchiips.org/NFHS/NFHS-4Reports/India.pdf.

* Although there is a legal minimum age of marriage, in many countries boys and girls below that age can get married with parental consent. Moreover, where dual legal systems run in parallel, customary law may allow marriage for a girl who has reached puberty.'

2 To protect the identity of local communities, the site names in Ethiopia and India are pseudonyms; in Peru, sites are referred to by their province name, and in Zambia, by their district names.

Research questions

The research teams used thematic analysis to identify and consolidate data to address the three main YMAPS research questions.

1. Who marries, cohabits or has children in childhood, why, and what consequences does this have for their well-being, identity and relationships?
2. How do children and young people who marry, cohabit 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 and young people who marry, cohabit or have children shaped by age, gender, and the changing social, cultural and structural contexts in which they and their families are living?

Methodology

YMAPS adopted a holistic approach that understood marriage to be one aspect of the complexity of some children's lives, rather than the sole lens through which to see them. It focused on young people's everyday realities, understandings, experiences and relationships, and how these are influenced by wider social processes. To do so, it employed a participatory approach that involved adolescents and young people directly as primary sources of knowledge in the research, using individual interviews and focus groups that included drawing, mapping and discussion, as well as digital story-telling in Zambia and Ethiopia.[3] This comparative report synthesises analysis of 345 individual narratives across the four countries, including from married and cohabiting adolescents and young people as well as married, never married and divorced young mothers and fathers (age 15 and over).[4] The study also involved 77 group discussions with spouses, young mothers and young fathers, peers in the community, senior family members, community leaders, and service providers such as teachers and health workers.[5]

The research was designed to capture a range of experiences, marriage types, and outcomes, including formal and informal marriages, family-arranged and 'love' marriages, cohabitation, single parenthood, and separation and divorce. In Ethiopia, Peru and India, priority was given to recruiting individuals from Young Lives, a longitudinal mixed-method study of children and youth in the context of poverty that began in 2001. In Zambia, the research followed on from an earlier study on child marriage in six districts (Mann, Quigley and Fischer 2015); one of the sites for data collection in the earlier research was included in YMAPS. The research was undertaken in the context of ongoing relationships with NGOs, government, multilateral partners and advisory groups in each of the study countries.

3 Some of these stories are available from the YMAPS page of the Young Lives website: www.younglives.org.uk/content/young-marriage-and-parenthood-study-ymaps

4 The youngest of the core female respondents was 15 years old, and the eldest was 24, and the study oversampled for individuals who married before the age of 18.

5 The data collection tools used in YMAPS were adapted from Young Lives interview guides (Crivello et al. 2017).

Findings

The study findings provide a glimpse into the lives of adolescent girls and boys and young people who are or were married or cohabiting. Some are parents.[6] In many cases, their unions are illegal. In this research, they talked about why they married young, whether they felt they had a choice, and how they felt their relationships were different to or the same as those of their parents and grandparents. In the process, the diversity of young marriages and unions became apparent. They disclosed the economic constraints that affected their schooling and their reasons for young marriage, and the role of intended and unintended pregnancies in their marriage pathways. They shared the joys of marriage and parenthood, as well as the many challenges: managing households and juggling the needs of different members; negotiating relationships with little prior experience or knowledge; and working within the constraints and frustrations imposed upon them by power imbalances within relationships due to traditional gender norms. Domestic violence, divorce and separation were common experiences.

In addition, the adolescents and young people involved in this research often had little access to the support, services or information that they needed, particularly in terms of access to, or knowledge about, contraception. They clearly described their circumstances and the situations they found themselves confronting as young married individuals and couples, and they had a strong sense of what they needed to improve their lives and those of their families. Despite the belief, on the part of young people themselves and their parents, that theirs is a more gender equal generation, they often found themselves living and interacting in ways very similar to their parents and grandparents. Many had not envisaged marriage to be part of their childhood experience. They were aware that their once-imagined futures had been frustrated by the social constraints they faced as young people living in poverty, and were concerned that the hope they had invested in education or employment as a means to a better life might no longer be achievable. Despite this, they also spoke of the joy their children gave them, and their hopes that things would be better for the next generation.

> I want to enrol my children in school … so that if I die, I will leave a better foundation for their future. (Young man, 24, rural, Zambia; married at 20 to a 17-year-old girl)

6 Individual respondents in Ethiopia, India and Peru were part of the overall Young Lives sample comprising two age cohorts, born in 2001 and 1994, and thus at the time of this research most were in their early 20s. Many had been married or divorced, or become parents, before the age of 18.

Cross-cutting themes

Six main interrelated themes emerged from the analysis, indicating salient differences and commonalities both within and between the four diverse country contexts:

Theme 1. Drivers of young marriage and cohabitation: how do young people, their peers, family and community articulate its causes?

Theme 2. Continuity, change and the diversity of different kinds of 'marriage': what are the consequences for young people?

Theme 3. Contraception, pregnancy and parenting: what do young people know about contraception and pregnancy and what is it like to be a young parent?

Theme 4. Unequal power relationships: what drives the experience of unequal power dynamics between young couples?

Theme 5. Violence and relationship conflict: what causes violence and conflict in young married and cohabiting relationships?

Theme 6. Relationship breakdown, separation and divorce: what leads to relationship breakdown, separation and divorce, and what are the consequences for young people?

These themes were selected both because they stood out in young people's life stories, and because they indicated promising directions for the tailoring of policies and programmes to reflect and account for their lived experiences.

Theme 1: What drives young marriage and cohabitation?

Marriage under the age of 18 is against the law in all four study countries (Pew Research Center 2016). The message that child marriage is a 'bad' practice has effectively reached many of the communities in this study, through NGOs, campaigns, media and schools, and influenced the growing belief that it is better to marry later. However, despite evidence that both caregivers and young people wish to delay marriage and raising a family until their twenties, these wishes are often not borne out in reality. In some places, marrying before the age of 18 or even 15 remains common. Knowledge about minimum age legislation may delay formal marriage in some cases, but by no means all: legal prohibition may in fact increase the numbers of girls and boys who marry informally or cohabit. The consequences of marriage bans in recent years are not yet well understood.

In Ethiopia, India, Peru and Zambia, as elsewhere, economic pressures interact with powerful social norms to undermine agency and create pathways to marriage under 18. There are sometimes legal loopholes that allow a judge to permit young marriage, or customary laws that have the same effect. Multiple factors at the individual, household and community levels work in concert to push girls and young women, in particular, into marriage and informal unions and away from opportunities that are known to delay these practices: in numerous studies, school enrolment at 15 years old, living in an urban area, and coming from a more economically or socially advantaged background have all been associated with lower rates of child marriage and adolescent parenthood (see YMAPS 2018). The poorest households often have the fewest resources to identify alternatives to young marriage.

'Why did you marry?'

Young people gave a range of economic, social and personal reasons for why they married or cohabited when they did. Decisions to enter into a union, whether formally or informally, were made in light of collective, familial and relational concerns, rather than solely due to the wishes of an individual young person.

Despite the desire of parents, children and young people to prioritise the education of the younger generation as a means to improve their lives, **constrained economic circumstances** frequently made it impossible to do so. In Zambia, for example, although they had started school, more than half of girls (27/48) in the study sample and nearly a third of boys (11/36) had not completed primary education. Only 4 of the 48 girls interviewed had completed secondary school; this figure was slightly higher for boys (10 of 36). Once they had left school, marriage for many seemed the logical next step in their social maturity and in their search for economic security. Developing sexual relationships was in part a consequence of long periods of idle time with few opportunities for recreation or earning. Thus, school dropout preceded marriage, rather than the other way around.

> I wanted to go to school and yet my parents had no money to take me to school. Then I thought to myself that instead of being a prostitute … no, it is impossible. It is better I get married. (Young woman, 19, urban, Zambia; married at 13)

When facing poverty and economic uncertainty, many families, and in some instances girls and young women themselves, regard marriage as a way of ensuring that girls are provided for in adulthood, and of reducing the family's expenses. Girls from impoverished households were attracted by the possibility of accessing basic resources and financial security. This sometimes

meant living with an older man who was more likely to have these resources, thus reinforcing the power imbalance in the relationship.

> [Before we began living together] he helped me with various things … he bought my clothes, my shoes … my plates, my pots and pans … He told me: 'You're not going to have any problems, I'm going to support you with various things.' (Young woman, 24, rural, Peru; began cohabitation at 16)

In India, where marriage for a young woman under 18 is illegal, this study found that when a family received an offer with a low dowry demand, or where caregivers feared that educated girls would require a higher dowry, girls were removed from school and married young.

The second driver for girls and young women was **violence in their family homes**. Some wanted to escape abusive conditions and family members. Girls in secret premarital relationships feared being discovered and beaten by their families; in these circumstances they often opted to marry or cohabit in order to dispel rumours and potential punishments. This was the case for one of the young Peruvian women, who met her partner when she was 14. Her father was strict and controlling and she worried about how he might react.

> One day, we just went out for chicken ... I was late. I knew my dad could be mean, sometimes he would hit me when I was late. I was afraid, I didn't want to go home anymore because he was going to hit me, and he was going to scold me ... This is how they found out that I was in love, and they told me I couldn't go out any more ... and that's when I went with him [boyfriend]. (Young woman, 17, rural, Peru; began cohabiting at 16)

Third, the **stigma of having a sexual relationship, and the fear of a premarital relationship being discovered, or rumours of a sexual relationship** were enough to drive some couples to marry in order to avoid damaging their personal and family reputations. Families sought arranged marriages for their daughters in order to shield them from the perceived dangers and stigma associated with premarital sex. Getting married or establishing a union was therefore a main strategy to control and contain the prospective or already burgeoning sexuality of girls and the young men around them.

Fourth, **unintended pregnancy** was a common reason for young couples to begin cohabiting in Peru, Zambia and in urban Ethiopia.

> The way I came to marriage is full of sudden situations. I didn't have any idea of coming to marriage. The pregnancy came suddenly and she had to live there with me. (Young married man, 24, urban, Ethiopia)

Finally, **romantic love and mutual attraction** were also important motivators for marriage and cohabitation for a significant minority of young people, although it was difficult to disentangle the drivers of pregnancy from those leading to marriage and cohabitation.

> In Grade 9, I met a man and fell in love. Later I fell pregnant and we married … I am happy I married. (Young married woman, 18, urban, Zambia)
>
> Interviewer: When you left school, when you were 16, did you think you wanted to have a partner?
>
> Respondent: Um, I didn't think. It happened all of a sudden.
>
> Interviewer: Were you in love?
>
> Respondent: Yes, I was in love … I wanted to have my life … I was in love.
>
> (Separated young woman, 23, peri-urban, Peru)

There was a growing discourse in each study country describing the rise of adolescent initiated and influenced marriages, and of unions based on the couple's own 'interest' and love. By their late teens, many girls and boys said they **desired independence** from their families and the freedom to make decisions for themselves. In addition, for young men, marriage gave them status as an adult man that was otherwise difficult to achieve in environments characterised by limited social and economic opportunity:

> The time when she told me that she is pregnant I accepted it and I was very happy. It made me very happy that I am a man. (Young man, 22, rural, Zambia; married at 14)

In this context, marriage or cohabiting, and having sex and getting a girl pregnant were one means of 'proving' one's manhood. For young women too, childbirth was taken as proof of women's fertility. In all four study countries it was believed to strengthen the social standing of the couple.

The personal agency and actions of young people were an important force behind the drivers of young marriage and parenthood. However, their marital and reproductive choices remained heavily constrained, highly gendered and driven by the confluence of factors outlined above. The vast majority of married and cohabiting young people said they were not prepared to marry when they did and that, given the choice, they would rather have entered a union when they were older.

Theme 1: Drivers of young marriage

Key findings

Most married, cohabiting and divorced young people feel they did not marry at the right time.

The study found five key drivers of young marriage, all underpinned by poverty.

1. **School dropout, which in all four countries tended to precede marriage** or cohabitation. Pregnancy and boredom once out of school were also key.
2. **Escape from violence or excessive control** in the family home (for young women especially).
3. **Taboos around adolescent sexuality and, in particular, young women having sex**.
4. **The stigma of unintended pregnancy outside marriage**, which tended to occur because of a lack of knowledge about or access to contraception for young people.
5. **Romantic love and mutual attraction** were important motivators for marriage and cohabitation for a significant minority of young people in the study.

Theme 2: Continuity and change in marriage and informal unions

This study revealed a wide variety of forms of heterosexual marriage and informal unions involving girls and boys and young men and young women. Young participants started relationships for different reasons and at different ages, with varying degrees of formality, choice and enthusiasm. They transitioned into a range of living arrangements with their partners and families, each characterised by its own set of joys and challenges.

With changes brought about notably by education, urbanisation and an increased awareness of child rights and laws against child marriage, generally adolescents across the four study countries appear to have a greater say compared to their parents and grandparents in decisions about who, how and when they marry. However, in some contexts, this apparent increased agency comes at a cost when their unions lack formality or family backing, and their relationships are driven by social and gender norms that in the end are much the same as those experienced by their parents, and very far from what they had hoped or expected.

There are striking differences in forms of 'marriage' between and within countries, representing both continuity and change in the social lives of young people across the generations. There appear to be more informal unions between adolescent girls and adolescent boys, and more examples of pregnancy leading to cohabitation in Zambia and Peru, and in urban Ethiopia; a predominance of traditional family arranged marriages and pregnancy within the context of marriage in India; and a combination of arranged marriages, cohabitation and peer elopement in Ethiopia and Zambia. Depending on the context, each type of union differs in the types of legal protections, social value and personal consequences that it provides.

Formal marriages and financial transactions

Formal marriages often reflect a mix of old and new traditions. For example, the role of marriage payments persists to varying degrees in each country, with some notable differences by region and across rural and urban settings even within the same country. Cash, gifts, and endowments provided to the couple continue to be an important means of setting up an independent household together, particularly in contexts where young men and women struggle to access jobs, land and housing on their own. Dowry (payments made from the bride's to the groom's family) and bridewealth (payments from the groom's to the bride's family), depending on the context, are often funnelled into resourcing the newlyweds' household. In Zambia, however, where bridewealth is a longstanding tradition in many communities, these practices are today largely obsolete in some settings: when a marriage takes place to alleviate poverty, to prevent stigma from pregnancy, or to escape intolerable living arrangements, the customary processes for sanctifying it are often not respected:

> Nowadays, we give our daughters free of charge. (Adult father, peri-urban, Zambia)

In the context of poverty, or where these resources are no longer provided, young people are at a disadvantage if they want to marry but cannot afford to go through the formal channels. In Ethiopia, for example, young men who find it difficult to meet the rising costs of bridewealth are pushed with their girlfriends into socially and materially precarious partnerships – both formal marriages and informal, cohabiting relationships – and potential indebtedness at the time when they should be building their life together. In some communities, there is flexibility in negotiating these exchanges when families support a young couple's union.

> My family is very poor and they didn't give me anything except 5,000 birr (US$156) as a dowry. But he [her husband] had more money since he was working in Saudi Arabia; he had 150,000 birr (US$4,680) and a boutique. With this, we got married … he didn't marry me for the money. He just wanted me to be a good wife … [L]ater my mother gave my share (50,000 birr; US$1,560) from [government] compensation [for] our land [that was] taken … for development. Now I am living a better life than before. (Young woman, 24, rural, Ethiopia; married at 19)

Living arrangements differ according to local custom and financial resources. Today, most young couples prefer to live independently, and many adolescents who chose to marry did so because they desired independence from their families and the freedom to make their own decisions. In reality, most face significant social and financial constraints to living on their own. In Ethiopia, the norm is for married couples to set up an independent household, if they can afford to. In Zambia and Peru, couples who lack the resources to live in a separate home reside most often with either set of parents, depending on who is best able to provide financial and other support to the young family.

In India, it is still common for newlywed couples to reside with the husband's family in joint households. However, where families had experienced conflict, a number of young married couples had decided to live separately. Doing so was understood to be a growing trend among the younger generation, and one that was frowned upon by elders who felt they lacked respect and had abandoned their in-laws.

Cohabitation and informal unions

Formal marriages are only one, and in some localities, a small part of the picture; despite – or perhaps because of – laws against marrying under the age of 18, informal marriages and cohabitation are common in all the countries except India. Pregnancy is closely associated with, and often a precursor to, cohabitation in these settings. Couples in informal unions typically consider themselves, and are viewed within their communities, as 'husband' and 'wife', 'as if' married, and are expected to fulfil the roles and responsibilities of married couples.

> Living together is as big a responsibility as a marriage! (Separated young man, 22, urban, Ethiopia; started his relationship around age 17)

Cohabitation allows young people to maintain a sexual relationship, otherwise taboo for adolescents outside of marriage and cohabitation. In the study sites in Zambia and Peru, formal marriages involving children and young people are infrequent and, in Zambia, have been declining over time.[7] Cohabitation is a growing trend in urban Ethiopia, but in this context the expectation is that cohabiting couples will eventually formalise their marriage, unlike in Peru where long-term informality is more acceptable, and in Zambia, where its acceptance, albeit often resigned, is growing.

Cohabitation is often driven by economic constraints when couples cannot afford the costs of a formal wedding, which can be substantial. In one of the Ethiopian villages where this research took place, elopement and informal marriage have become increasingly common as a temporary measure among consenting couples who cannot afford the costs of formal marriage, but who want to be together. Nevertheless, the informality of their relationship comes at the cost of social

7 In 2013-4, it was estimated that 6 per cent of females were married by age 15 and 31 per cent by age 18 (Zambia Demographic and Health Survey (2013-4). This represents a decline over time, particularly in the share of girls marrying before age 15. At the time of writing this report (Feb 2020), figures for the 2018 Zambia Demographic and Health Survey were not available. However, it is expected that these rates will have declined from 2013-4.

and financial exclusion, since local custom forbids them from socialising or from seeking support from the young woman's family until they formalise their marriage.

Although the study found that cohabitation was common in Zambia, Peru and in urban Ethiopia, only in Peru did young women state a preference for cohabitation over formal marriage: this was based on their understanding that it is easier to leave an informal relationship, should it not work out, than it would be to obtain a divorce. However, in all of the study settings it was evident that with informality often came fragile partnerships, in which young women are especially at risk of being abandoned by partners following pregnancy and childbirth.

Theme 2: The diversity of different kinds of 'marriage'

Key findings

1. **Young marriage takes many forms:** There are striking differences in marriage practices and forms between and within countries, representing both continuity and change in the social lives of young people across the generations.

2. **Cohabitation rather than formal marriage is becoming more common** in all countries except India. This change often comes at the cost of more fragile partnerships, placing young women especially at risk of being abandoned by partners following pregnancy and childbirth.

3. **Most young couples prefer to live independently**, and many adolescents and young people who chose to marry did so because they desired independence from their families and the freedom to make their own decisions. Yet, they face social and financial constraints to living on their own.

Theme 3: What do young people know about contraception and pregnancy, and what is it like to be a young parent?

Contraception and pregnancy

Open discussions of sex and sexuality are uncommon in all four countries. Female sexuality, in particular, is closely guarded and inextricably linked to the reputations of individual girls and the honour of their families. Information about contraception is difficult to obtain and adolescent girls and boys and young people have limited knowledge about sexual and reproductive health. Sex is always assumed to be heterosexual.

Despite the personal, social and health risks associated with unprotected sexual activity, the use of modern contraceptive methods is rare before marriage, especially among girls and young women, and usually only begins following the birth of a first child. This pattern is common in all research sites but the underlying reasons for it are different across contexts.

In India and in rural Ethiopia, where girls' sexual initiation tends to coincide with marriage and where social norms emphasise the importance of demonstrating a girl's fertility as soon as possible after marriage, information about contraception is often withheld from young people by parents and other adults until after the birth of a first child. In Peru, Zambia, and urban Ethiopia, where sexual and reproductive health information is theoretically available in clinics and schools, but in practice difficult to access, pregnancy commonly precedes marriage.

In both scenarios, most of the information that adolescents and young people involved in this study had on pregnancy prevention was made available to them after they had become pregnant or after their baby had been born. Social norms related to the appropriate age of, and context for, sexual intercourse keep these young people uninformed. In those uncommon cases where contraception had been discussed prior to pregnancy, as was reported in Zambia, it was only with young men, who said that they had not taken the information seriously at the time. Discussions of sexuality and intimacy with girls in India and Zambia were focused not on safer sex, but instead on girls' need to respect and obey their husbands.

When sexual and reproductive health services were available and known to young people, the vast majority reported that staff and the environments in which they worked were judgemental and unfriendly to them and their concerns. Some said they feared that confidentiality would not be upheld. In the absence of sensitive, age-appropriate information, boys and young men in Peru, for example, said they turned to other sources, such as the internet and pornography, in order to learn more about sex. In India, married young women said they found newspapers and books informative. They reportedly did not seek information through the internet; however, some husbands reported using phones to access sex-related information.

> Now everyone in the present generation knows … after these phones have come ... they come to know through them … there is nothing which I don't know. I know almost everything. (Husband of young woman he married when she was 20, urban, India)

Abortion services are even more difficult to access than contraception. This reality – coupled with girls' and boys' moral and safety concerns – makes this an undesirable and unrealistic option for

most. Some girls in India and Ethiopia had tried, at times successfully, to terminate pregnancies. In Zambia, no female respondents reported having had an abortion, but many spoke of having been dissuaded by parents and peers when they had wanted to do so, and related similar experiences of friends seeking informal means (using herbs) or formal services.[8]

Pregnancy and parenthood

Pregnancy and parenthood lead to an abrupt shift in the way a child or young person is understood socially and within the vast majority of families. In the context of formal marriage, these events are generally celebrated as important milestones and young people reported feeling new levels of support and respect from peers, family and the wider community.

This treatment stands in stark contrast to that accorded unmarried girls and young women, whether single or in a cohabiting relationship, when they become pregnant:

> 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 was my fault. (Young mother, 23, rural, Ethiopia; abandoned by the father of her child)

In Ethiopia, the boys and young men involved in unplanned pregnancies also face stricture; most are told by older adults that they must take responsibility for what they have done and prioritise the care and well-being of their child. The parents of young people in the research communities stressed how unprepared young people are in these situations for the roles and responsibilities that come with being a parent. Young mothers and fathers also asserted that it had never been their intention to become 'early' parents; most felt that the role had been imposed upon them by circumstance. While the vast majority cherished their children, they felt burdened by the tremendous responsibilities that came with looking after them.

Pregnancy does occur outside of marriage in India but was not captured in this study and it is seen as so shameful that it tends to be hidden. This sense of disgrace that hangs over unmarried pregnant girls and young mothers is also prevalent in Ethiopia, Peru and Zambia, where they face discrimination and stigma in their communities and often in their families. Some confine themselves or are kept inside by their families for fear of insults or mistreatment from neighbours. Those who are at school when they become pregnant frequently drop out as a result of verbal abuse by peers and school staff, or because girls themselves and/or their families feel that they need to redirect their spending towards the future needs of the baby.

The boys and young men involved in unintended pregnancies are similarly subject to social shaming and critique, and experience significant pressure to perform their masculine role of 'provider'. In Peru and Zambia, some respond by running away and ceasing all communication with the girl and family involved.

Given the near-unanimous view that education is key to a better future, young parents in all sites in all four countries reported feeling anxious and uncertain about their lives and those of their children. Without a secondary school diploma, many are unable to imagine a future for themselves beyond survival and prefer to focus on ensuring that their children's lives end up better than their own, just like their parents did before them.

Lack of family support, financial challenges and other barriers such as inadequate or insufficient child care services mean returning to school is almost impossible in these circumstances. Notwithstanding these challenges, young parents mostly enjoyed their positions as mothers and

8 Abortion is legal in certain circumstances in Ethiopia, India and Zambia, but illegal in Peru except in cases where the pregnancy threatens the woman's life. A lack of local providers makes it difficult to obtain an abortion even where it is legal.

fathers. Despite the fact that most had not intended to become parents when they did, and many people had been critical of the situation they had found themselves in, most described parenthood as a means of enhancing their sense of personal achievement, self-respect and social standing, especially when it was undertaken together with a spouse in a happy marriage. This improvement in social and self-esteem is exemplified in the description of a good husband and father provided by a young Peruvian man:

> He should have time, he should be with his family, he should give them everything, he should make them laugh, he should make them happy, he should make them feel good ... (Young man, 23, rural, Peru)

Theme 3: Contraception, pregnancy and parenting

Key findings

1. **Open discussions of sex and sexuality are uncommon**. Female sexuality, in particular, is closely guarded and is inextricably linked to the reputations of individual girls and the honour of their families in all sites in all four countries. There is huge stigma around being an unmarried mother, and in India it remains an almost completely hidden phenomenon.

2. **Information about contraception and abortion is difficult to obtain**, and adolescent girls and boys and young people have limited knowledge about sexual and reproductive health (and sex is always assumed to be heterosexual). Young people widely reported health staff to be judgemental and unfriendly to them and their concerns.

3. **Very few young people have access to contraception** or contraceptive advice until after the birth of their first child.

4. Some young women **relish an improved sense of independence**, social maturity and recognition when their roles as wives and mothers are supported and socially valued. Equally, married boys and young men feel a sense of pride in their ability to provide for their family.

Theme 4: What drives the experience of unequal power dynamics between young couples?

Across the four study countries, interviews with both older and younger generations identified an emerging discourse describing changes over time in the roles, rights and responsibilities of adolescents and young people. Many older female adults said that they had lacked agency in marital decision-making and in their marital relations, and several highlighted their suffering in these situations. The expansion of schooling was perceived by some in the older generation as having given today's girls new knowledge and skills and greater confidence in marital and reproductive decision-making.

> Now, the girl and boy have to like each other and they have to talk to each other before marriage. They go into the room and talk. They discuss whether they like each other or not. It was not like that when we were younger. Our parents told us to marry and we married. (Adult mother-in-law, rural, India)

Many respondents said they consider gender equality to be a central feature of modern childhood, affording girls more personal freedoms than ever before. Schooling was also so considered, and both parents and young people had hopes that well-being would improve with each generation. In Ethiopia, for example, the Young Lives survey in 2016 found that 21 per cent of the parental generation never went to school, compared to only 4 per cent of their offspring, aged 22 years (males and females) (Crivello, Boyden and Pankhurst 2019: 6). However, there remain significant challenges to achieving these ideals in contexts where girls' and boys' lives and trajectories continue to be moulded by poverty and discriminatory gender norms; these dynamics are frequently reinforced in the context of young marriage and parenthood.

This study's focus on the everyday experiences of married and cohabiting adolescents and young parents highlights the contradictions confronted by the younger generation as they contend with the discourses and realities of marriage and parenthood. For adolescent girls and young women, even when they were able to influence their marital choices (for example by initiating, or rejecting or accepting proposals), over time and particularly once they had children, they were increasingly subject to unequal power dynamics which gave them little control over their lives and sometimes exposed them to violence.

Domestic work and care roles

Patriarchal norms continue to bear heavily on household roles, relations among young couples, and decision-making within marriage, despite widespread assumptions about gender equality as characteristic of this generation of young people. Domestic relations remain heavily influenced by gender-age norms that position girls and women in the lower rungs of household hierarchies. The transition to 'married' life and cohabitation reinforces female subordination through the gender-age division of household labour. Domestic work and caregiving remain female responsibilities, whereas men are expected to take on the role of household provider.

> [P]reparing *injera* [flatbread], *tlews* [baking], brewing good *suwa* [local drink] for her husband, making good *gogo* [local bread]. She has to be a woman who is ready with boiled and cooked food when the husband comes home after farming and making good business in the market. (Adult mother, rural, Ethiopia; her daughter married at age 15)

Although the preference of the majority of young married and cohabiting couples was to set up their own households, local custom and financial constraints meant this was not always possible. In Zambia, married adolescent girls and young women felt controlled in most aspects of their lives when required to abide by the rules of the household and to live according to the decisions of their mothers or in-laws, and they depended on others to support themselves and their children.

In India, where the norm is for the bride to reside with her in-laws, the need for female household labour and to substitute the labour of ageing mothers were common reasons given by young men for why they married when they did.

> [M]y mother is old and she [his wife] is young, so she keeps things clean. (Married young man, urban, India; married at 22 to 16-year-old girl)

In rural and urban settings in all four countries, parenting roles are highly gender-differentiated, and childrearing continues to be the responsibility of women: feeding, bathing, nurturing and caring for all aspects of the child's well-being are the near exclusive purview of the mother.

Fulfilling their role of family provider is no easy task for young men and first-time fathers either, many of whom earn low incomes or struggle to find steady work. The opportunity to return to school is similarly curtailed. Many young men assumed these roles without wanting to and because of the pressures of circumstance.

> I started Grade 1 … up to Grade 9 [when] I got the girl pregnant after which I stopped school because I was told to marry. The pressures of the girl after marriage, the pressures I was going through were too many. (Divorced young man, 22, rural, Zambia; married at 14)

However, even in cases of economic need, young wives are often not permitted by their husbands to work outside the home lest they neglect their domestic roles or bring shame on their partners for not being able to provide.

Publicly available childcare is a challenge in all four country settings. In Zambia and Ethiopia, very few respondents were able to access crèche or day care facilities for small children, both because of lack of services and, perhaps more importantly, dominant social norms that emphasise women's domestic and caregiving roles. In rural Peru, where many young mothers said that they would like to have such services available to them, several also underscored their distrust of the few existing community-based providers, which they felt were not designed to meet the needs and schedules of families like theirs.

Given vested familial interests in women's reproductive capacity, these restrictions appear to rise as young women become mothers and their domestic role intensifies. In these circumstances, opportunities for accessing education or paid work become increasingly difficult to access and unlikely to materialise.

Decision-making power and sexual consent

When couples are married and living together, young women reported having more decision-making power than when living with their in-laws. This power is highly constrained in many instances, however, because decisions between couples are made within the context of unequal gender relations. Young men are positioned by society and within the family as the authority within their marital and family relations and are deemed the main decision-makers within the couple. The realm of married girls' and young women's decision-making is primarily in 'small decisions', especially in relation to childcare, for which as mothers they bear the most responsibility. Male partners make the 'big decisions' for the household. Young women within these relations often accept as normal the unequal gender relations that give their partners power over them, as do their husbands or partners.

> We should not encourage a wife in decision-making. Once a husband allows his wife to decide, he will be under her control. (Young man, 22, rural, Ethiopia; married at 19)

> [My wife makes] [d]ecisions about the baby. Above all else, she looks after the baby and the house ... What we are having to eat, she looks after everything … She takes care of her pots, her things. I take care of my cars … Before she makes any decisions, she has to talk to me. (Young man, 24, peri-urban, Peru; cohabited at age 20)

'Joint' decision-making usually means husbands consulting their wives and giving them the opportunity to agree with them, but it is easier for men to enforce their own decisions over those of their wives or partners.

> We both sit down and talk about it. She tells me what the issue is and she tells me her opinion. I will think about it and if I don't like her opinion, I won't follow it. If her suggestions are good, then I follow [them]. (Husband, rural, India; wife was married at 16)

Living with in-laws often means acquiescing to their preferences and demands, sometimes drawing couples closer together in the face of senior opposition on certain decisions.

In India, many adolescent girls and young women characterised the early phases of marital life by increased domestic responsibility, coupled with a sense of having less personal freedom to choose how to spend their time and to express themselves.

> Life was good before marriage. I would eat whatever is there and play with friends. I had no responsibilities. Now I have to shoulder all responsibilities. I must bear whatever people say to me. I am compromising about everything. I have no choice but to compromise: I have to eat what they give, take what they give and make do with whatever I have. That's it. My likes and dislikes don't matter. (Young woman, 22, urban, India; married at 17)

In Zambia, in addition to taking on the vast majority of housework, young women are also expected to make themselves available for sex whenever their husband wants. Across the study, men generally have the most say within the couple about the use of modern contraceptives. They also have greater influence on decisions about when to start and stop having children, and how many children to have, as discussed in Theme 3.

Theme 4: Unequal power relationships

Key findings

1. **There is a perception that the younger generation has greater gender equality, but significant challenges remain** when girls' and boys' lives and trajectories continue to be moulded by poverty and discriminatory gender norms, dynamics that are frequently reinforced in the context of young marriage and parenthood.

2. **Domestic relations remain heavily influenced by gender-age norms** that position girls and women in the lower rungs of household hierarchies: girls and women are usually caregivers in the home, while young and older men are meant to be breadwinners, even in contexts where earning an income is very difficult.

3. **Married girls and young women tend to have little explicit decision-making power**, except when it comes to looking after children, for which mothers bear the most responsibility.

4. **Some young women relished in an improved sense of independence**, social maturity and recognition when their roles as wives and mothers are supported and socially valued. Equally, married boys and young men feel a sense of pride in their ability to provide for their family.

Theme 5: What causes violence and conflict in young married and cohabiting relationships?

Poverty, economic uncertainty and imbalanced power relations are realities that affect the experience of young marriage, cohabitation and parenthood in all study settings. Notwithstanding that a good number of young respondents reported being satisfied, cared for, and optimistic about their relationships, a remarkable proportion of young people had experienced relationship troubles at some time. Violence against girls and young women at the hands of husbands and partners was a common feature of married life, yet access to formal services such as counselling, crisis intervention and justice remains limited. The support of family and friends was crucial to young women's protection and well-being in all instances.

Age and vulnerability of married girls

Adolescent girls typically occupy the lowest tiers of power within their households, reflecting the intersection of age and gender on vulnerability both before and after marriage. Marrying at a young age appeared to increase girls' susceptibility to intimate partner violence, particularly when older age augmented husbands' or senior in-laws' authority over them.[9] Such power imbalances made it difficult for girls and young women to advocate for their preferences, needs and bodily autonomy within their married relationships and households. Within both formal and informal unions, it was common for girls to have been coerced into sexual relations without free and full consent, or with insufficient knowledge. However, in some settings where sex cultures are characterised by coercion and female compliance, forced sex was not defined as rape but was considered somehow a 'normal' part of the way that unequal power relationships between men and women play out.

> I was just forced, I knew that my menstrual period days were close, but he never understood and forced me … he forced me but it was not rape and it was not once. (Never-married girl, 16, rural, Zambia; pregnant at 15)

In India, where families arranged their children's marriages and selected their spouses, the majority of girls and young women associated their first sexual encounters in marriage with memories of being frightened, ignorant of what would happen, taken aback, powerless, and with no one to turn to.

> Respondent: I was literally shocked and scared.
>
> Interviewer: Didn't you feel like discussing the details of the first night with others? Has your husband cooperated with you in the first night?
>
> Respondent: I couldn't dare to do so. He didn't even talk to me.
>
> (Young woman, 22, urban, India; married age 18 to a 40-year-old man)

9 For example, by age 22, the average age gap between young women and their older husbands/partners was 7.2 years in Ethiopia, 6.6 years in India and in 3.9 years in Peru (Young Lives 2016 survey).

Cycles and normalisation of violence

Adolescents in secret premarital relationships feared being discovered and beaten by their families; in these circumstances they often opted to marry or cohabit in order to dispel rumours and potential punishments.

One of the drivers of young marriage is escape from violence in the home, as discussed in Theme 1. Unfortunately, for many young women in this study, marriage did not offer the safe haven that they had imagined, and the cycles of violence continued in their marriage. Many young women claimed that their husbands began behaving differently after marrying.

> He was just fine when we were dating but when we got married, we would be fine one day and be fighting the [next] day, plus he used to drink and smoke (Divorced young woman, 19, urban, Zambia; became pregnant then married at age 16)

Drinking and smoking, and the mismanagement of money, were common accusations levied by young wives against their husbands or partners to explain the sources of disharmony that arose over time in their married relationships.

Many wives felt their husbands or partners had become increasingly jealous and controlling, and accusations of infidelity sometimes led to violence. One young male respondent in Ethiopia was jailed for three days for hitting his wife, who he believed was having an affair with another man; they eventually divorced.

> 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.' (Divorced young man, 24, urban, Ethiopia)

Tensions related to husbands' suspected infidelity led men to be violent towards their wives when they perceived them to be demanding, accusatory or overly judgmental.

> He used to sleep with other women so that's why we ended our marriage …
> He was the kind of person that would beat me up when I complained about his behaviour …
> (Divorced young woman, 18, rural, Zambia; married at age 13)

Failure to meet domestic role expectations

A common source of marital conflict was the perceived failure of married or cohabiting girls to carry out household work or cooking to the satisfaction of husbands, partners and in-laws, particularly in their initial transition to married life.

> When I do something, they say that I am not doing it properly and criticise me …
> About everything I do. When I sweep the house and yard, they say I did not sweep thoroughly. They say things like that. (Young woman, 18, rural, India; married at 15)

Verbal and physical insults were reportedly used to 'discipline' and teach girls and young women their 'wifely' roles. The willingness of young men to divulge the violence they had inflicted on their wives reflects the normality of such behaviours in many communities.

> I hit her because sometimes she didn't cook, right? Sometimes I was really jealous ... Sometimes she wouldn't let me go out and [spend time away] ... Sometimes my kids would look at me when we were arguing. Well, I used to hit her ... I mean, I didn't hit her like you see on the news sometimes, all beaten up, bleeding, bruised, no. Not like that. I mean, I pushed her. Sometimes she'd kick me, right, and then I'd kick back. (Young man, 29, urban, Peru; began cohabiting age 19 with 14-year-old girl)

Young women felt that their young age and lack of preparation warranted greater patience, rather than punishment, from their husbands or partners.

> [He] is a possessive, aggressive person ... For example, he wanted me to prepare something for him … when I was preparing something for him, he told me to do it again, just like that ... He didn't care about what I was doing, and if I didn't do it, he'd start yelling at me ... I was learning to be a housewife and I thought he should understand, because when he met me, I was a student, my studies were everything. That's how the problems started. (Divorced young woman, 24, peri-urban, Peru; began cohabiting at 16)

Resolving conflict

Access to formal services for couples experiencing marital conflict is limited in most communities. Although some girls and young women might have been unaware of available assistance, the vast majority were fearful that the involvement of the police or other formal authorities would further complicate the challenges they were experiencing. For these reasons, marital conflict was usually mediated first or exclusively by families; courts, where available, were a last option. There were, however, several cases of young women who had sought justice through formal mechanisms when they had run out of other options. In some rural areas, traditional justice systems are available to help settle marital disputes and cases of domestic violence. Mediation through traditional means often prioritised keeping the marriage intact and accused husbands were given more than one second chance, making it difficult for girls and women to leave abusive relationships when they wanted or needed to.

Theme 5: Violence and relationship conflict

Key findings

1. Marrying at a **young age increases girls' susceptibility to intimate partner violence** within their relationships.
2. A common source of marital conflict is the **perceived failure of married or cohabiting girls and young women** to carry out the household work or cooking to the satisfaction of husbands, partners and in-laws.
3. **Access to formal services such as counselling**, crisis intervention and justice remains limited and some young people are fearful of using these services.
4. **The support of family and friends is crucial** to young women's protection and well-being.

Theme 6: What leads to relationship breakdown, separation and divorce, and what are the consequences for young people?

In addition to exploring 'married' life, this study also investigated the experiences of those who separated or divorced after marrying or cohabiting as an adolescent or young people. The focus was on better understanding the reasons for separation or divorce, who is involved in the decision to end a marriage or union, reactions from family and the community, and experiences of life after relationship breakdown. The findings related to this theme refer more to Ethiopia, Peru and Zambia, given that separation and divorce occur infrequently in India.

Young people's reasons for separation or divorce

Rates of divorce or separation vary across the four countries, although official figures are unreliable as they do not always capture the breakdown of informal unions or the end of a marriage that was illegal in the first place. Young couples in this study became separated or divorced for a number of reasons. Among these, four main factors emerged as particularly influential in the decision to end a marriage.

The first is the **inability or perceived unwillingness of the husband or partner to meet the economic and material needs of the household.** When this responsibility went unfulfilled for a significant period of time and there was no sign that things would change, some girls and young women, or their families, would instigate separation or divorce. This was especially the case when husbands or partners were reported to have repeatedly spent money on alcohol and not on meeting familial needs. Occasionally, when young husbands had exhausted all avenues of support or were unable to find paid work, and were still unable to support their families, they also ended their marriage for this reason. In these cases, divorce was understood by both parties to be undesirable, yet necessary.

The second cause of separation and divorce is **unfaithfulness and lack of trust** within the couple. In these cases, sexual transgressions, perceived promiscuity and jealousy led to marital breakdown.

> You will find messages on WhatsApp … she could do anything she wanted. Sometimes she would sneak out of the house at night … you just get surprised that the child has started crying, you try to look for her … you will hear that she is out buying airtime at 10 pm … and you wonder 'Whom do you want to talk to at this time? Because me, I am here, my phone is here. Who are you chatting to on WhatsApp?' (Divorced young man, 24, urban; married at 17)

Needing **to escape abuse and violence** against themselves or their children is the third reason for couples breaking up, as discussed in Theme 5.

> He was so aggressive, hitting me, usually with his hands, but then he threw a box of games at me ... It didn't hit me, but it hit [my son]. It hit him and yes, it cut him here [points to the head]. (Divorced young woman, 24, peri-urban, Peru; began cohabiting at 16)

The fourth is **abandonment of the wife by the husband** or partner. A small number of husbands fled marriages when they were overwhelmed by their unmet responsibilities, particularly in Ethiopia and Zambia.

> I initiated the idea of the divorce as I was unable to take care of my wife and child. I had no job and it was hard for me to buy food to feed the family. They would sleep on an empty stomach and I thought I was just troubling my wife. My wife understood and went back to her parents. I gave her most of the things in the house and only [kept] a mattress. (Divorced young man, 20, urban, Zambia)

It was, however, far more common for married boys and young men to leave the household to seek employment in another community, where they ended up meeting a new girlfriend and 'remarrying'. In Zambia, in all cases of this kind, young men ceased to provide support to their wives and children.

The importance of family support

Despite there being legitimate reasons to end a marriage, choosing to do so was extremely difficult for both individuals in the young couple. For girls and young women, familial support, particularly a home to move to, was an essential prerequisite to leaving: no female respondent in any of the study countries left a marriage when this safety valve was not in place, and in Ethiopia it was less available to those who were cohabiting than it was to their formally married peers, especially when bridewealth had not been paid and the girl or young woman's family had cut the couple off from material and social support.

For those whose marriages ended because of violence or the inability of a young man to meet his family's basic needs, divorce was often understood to be a reasonable and acceptable outcome, and girls and young women were usually provided with support in such instances. However, some families that struggle with economic survival confront a challenging dilemma in whether to support their daughter's divorce when her marriage is a much-needed source of livelihood for the family. Having one or more additional members in the household meant that scarce resources have to stretch even further. Young women who wish to return to school are often unable to do so because of the necessity to ration family resources among a larger household. Most who manage to re-enrol were said to eventually drop out again due to economic pressures. In Zambia, girls and young women in these circumstances were said to be especially vulnerable to engaging in sexual relationships with young and older men for economic survival and to support their children. This behaviour also puts them at risk of getting pregnant and acquiring sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. Others, not only in Zambia but also in Peru and Ethiopia, end up remarrying to escape their challenging circumstances; sometimes these fraught measures lead them into abusive and violent marriages, usually characterised by poverty. The cycle thus repeats itself.

In Ethiopia, young women who opted for informal or cohabiting relationships rather than formal marriage were less likely to receive the same degree of familial support in the event of relationship breakdown. A major concern among divorced and unhappily married and cohabiting young women is the failure of fathers to acknowledge paternity and abandonment of children after separation or divorce. Such situations were also commonly reported in Peru and Zambia.

Personally and socially, divorce was also difficult for married boys and young men, especially those whose marriages had ended because they were unable to provide for their families. Sorrow and shame were frequently experienced, and stigma from peers and acquaintances was also common, as it was for divorced girls and young women. Boys and young men in these circumstances faced pressure to contribute money or food to their household but were more

likely to re-enrol in school than divorced girls, in large part because they were typically not residing with their child, or if they were, their mother was the one providing direct care.

Remarriage was also said to be easier for young men than for young women, particularly if a divorcée has children. As single divorced mothers, the material and financial challenges that characterised marriage continued and limited formal support was available to them. Their near-complete dependence on their families for their well-being was difficult for some to handle when they had experienced the relative independence marriage had provided.

Young women's feelings after divorce or separation

Despite these challenges, in some settings, divorced respondents reported that life had improved since their marriage had ended. They expressed relief and a lack of regret; these sentiments were particularly common among girls and young women who had left abusive relationships, all of whom described a significant improvement in their emotional and physical well-being. For many in these circumstances, remarriage was not part of their newly-revised life plan.

> I go to the fields alone, there is no one to beat me up and now I decide everything by myself and I don't depend on anyone. (Divorced young woman, 19, rural, Zambia; married at 15)

Single young mothers reported significant improvements in their circumstances and a sense of hope when they had access to employment opportunities following divorce or separation.

> 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 mother, 24, rural, Ethiopia)

Theme 6: Relationship breakdown, separation and divorce

Key findings

1. **Separation and divorce are less common** in India than in Ethiopia, Peru and Zambia.
2. **Divorce and/or separation are caused by four main factors:**
   a. The inability or perceived unwillingness of the husband to meet the economic and material needs of the household.
   b. Unfaithfulness and lack of trust within the couple.
   c. Physical violence or abuse of the girl or young woman by her male partner.
   d. Abandonment of the wife by the husband, often related to the first factor.
3. **Those who divorce are often required to rely heavily on their families for material and financial support,** which is especially challenging for those who had tasted the independence that marriage or cohabitation had provided.
4. **Some divorced respondents felt that life had improved** since their marriage ended.

Implications and conclusions

Expanding the reach of current efforts

Efforts are underway across the globe to accelerate progress to eliminate child marriage by 2030 to meet the Sustainable Development Goals. However, the findings of this study suggest that a commitment to the 'leave no one behind' agenda requires expanding the focus of efforts to address child marriage to more explicitly include the experiences of young people who are married or in informal unions, as well as those who are divorced and separated. A focus on adolescent sexuality, the experiences of boys and young men, and a more accurate understanding of girls' and boys' agency and decision-making in their marriage and reproductive pathways are also needed.

Conducting this study in different rural, urban and peri-urban settings in different countries and regions of the world has revealed important diversity, as well as change and continuity, in the drivers and practices underpinning these pathways. Young people did not follow a single uniform path to marriage and cohabitation, and in some locations, informal rather than formal unions were the norm. Unintended pregnancy was a precursor to many of these unions.

If we are to eliminate child marriage, we need not only to understand the drivers, including poverty, inequality and unequal social and gender norms. We also need to know more about the lives of children and young people who are married or cohabiting, so that we can find better ways of supporting them.

Recognising and engaging with contradictions

One of the characteristics that differentiates the experiences of younger and older couples, as demonstrated in this study, is that married girls and boys and young people occupy a liminal position that is unique to them, one that sits squarely between childhood and adulthood and affects all aspects of their roles in marriage and parenthood. This transitional position gives rise to a multitude of contradictions and challenges affecting their access to the services and support appropriate to their specific needs and realities. This study has highlighted a number of common considerations that cut across different contexts:

- **Adolescence is a phase of transition between childhood and adulthood, and for many a time of romantic exploration and sexual initiation both outside and within marriage**. The persistent shame, silence and taboos surrounding female adolescent sexuality disregard girls' sexual needs, desires and concerns, and deprive them of the information they need to prevent unintended pregnancies. Social norms that ignore the reality of adolescent sexuality and approaches that promote abstinence only are counterproductive during this crucial time. Very few sexual and reproductive health services are accessible to, or welcoming of, young people, particularly girls and young women. Boys and young men are also largely ill-informed about sex and contraception.
- **Young people's agency in choosing their partners and deciding to establish a relationship is increasing** in most settings. However, choices remain constrained. That girls and boys might 'choose' to marry challenges assumptions about agency and powerlessness among the young. Unequal gender and age norms still give more choice to boys and young men, and to families, than to girls and young women.

- **Young people are often pushed into relationships and responsibilities for which they feel unprepared**, particularly the responsibilities that come with being a parent. The pregnancies that precede marriage or cohabitation are often unintended. Motherhood and fatherhood are a source of joy and meaning in the lives of young people, but poverty and economic uncertainty make it difficult to raise a family, and their relative inexperience makes it even more so.
- **Informal unions and cohabitation are on the rise in some communities,** but young couples living in these arrangements have less access to family and legal support compared to their formally married peers.
- **Young newlyweds often face intense pressure to conceive soon after marrying.** Where this is the norm, the information and services needed to delay pregnancy may be withheld until the birth of the couple's first child. Where couples have more say in the matter, family planning is considered the young woman's responsibility. In reality, however, men have the power in decisions related to contraception and family planning, although they, too, often have little information or understanding.
- Although some young men do leave their families, **many young fathers want to take responsibility and provide and care for their wives and children.** This reality goes against the prevailing social discourse and anxiety around paternal abandonment. Restrictive gender norms mean that married young males rarely contribute to childcare and housework, and the continuing drive to see men as in charge of the family and as the provider is a constant problem when confronted with poverty and a lack of employment opportunities.
- **The expectation of independence is difficult to achieve.** Independence is something that girls and boys crave as they grow older, and they see marriage as a path to its attainment. In many cases, young couples in poverty are required to rely on their parents or other family members to support them to meet their own and their family's basic needs. This dependence leaves young men, in particular, feeling as though they are incapable of competently performing their role as provider. Marriage and especially childbirth have the effect of intensifying female dependence vis-à-vis their partners. Unequal gender relations mean that young women have limited decision-making power compared to their husbands.
- **Failure to perform socially expected gender roles and the resulting frustrations are a reason behind domestic conflict and violence.** Girls who marry very young, often from the poorest households, are often socially isolated and most at risk on account of their lack of experience and preparation to take on their new roles.
- **Marriage and cohabitation usually do not live up to their promise.** Adolescent girls are attracted to the possibility of having greater freedom in deciding about their time-use, friendships, sexuality and futures, and believe their married homes and relationships will be safer and more caring, particularly if they have grown up in violent households. But gender norms and pressures mean that some husbands and partners are jealous, controlling, even violent, and young women can often do little to escape this, especially when the perpetrator is the breadwinner or contributing to the economic sustainability of in-laws.
- **Divorce and separation feature prominently in child marriage pathways** in three of the four countries (all but India) but the support needs and hopes of young people in these circumstances do not feature prominently in local and national efforts to address child marriage. Girls and young women generally suffer from the majority of the negative consequences, though some separated young women say their lives have improved, particularly when they have been able to find work.

- **Young people's own sense of liminality is made more poignant when marriage and parenthood mean deferring their aspirations to return to or complete school, or to pursue desired work**. Many regret the timing and circumstances in which they married and became first-time parents. Their current realities require them to revise their childhood aspirations and prioritise meeting new adult responsibilities. Most young people in this study regretted marrying young, and wanted their own children to avoid taking the same route.

Building on promising social change

As the world moves slowly towards the eradication of child marriage, it is crucial to address the challenges faced by adolescent girls and boys and young people as they negotiate their life choices and decision-making in changing environments, such as those influenced by schooling, social media and the internet, migration and urbanisation. However, as social disapproval of child marriage grows, so too does the risk of stigmatising the young people already in these relationships. Whether it was their choice or not to marry, it is important to respect their diverse experiences, motivations and aspirations so that they can live their lives with dignity and without shame.

- **There is an increasing belief in gender equality** expressed by parents, children and young people. Embedded in this idea is a wish to ensure that each generation has a better life than the previous one. But poverty, inequality, and social and gender norms are shifting only slowly; the result is that the young people in this study who have married face lives very similar to those of their parents.
- Along with the laws that make it illegal, **there is a growing cultural narrative that delaying marriage and parenthood until early adulthood is best,** in all four study countries. This suggests there are other root causes, including poverty, that need to be tackled.
- **Parent-child relations are changing and should be capitalised on to improve inter-generational communication** so that young people can share their concerns, ask questions, and receive the support they need from family and community-based service providers without shame or embarrassment.

Life does not end for girls and boys who marry, cohabit or become mothers or fathers in childhood. Despite their experiences of hardship in marriage, cohabitation and parenting, many young people in this study remained hopeful about the future: the majority wanted to return to or complete their schooling; to access training and opportunities to learn a new trade once their youngest children had grown older; to open small businesses, including ones that could be run from their home; and, most of all, to educate their sons and daughters and give them better futures. Married and cohabiting girls and young women in particular need access to social and economic opportunities if the current gender power imbalances within their relationships are ever going to shift. The boys and young men who are their husbands and partners need also to see how their imagined futures might be attainable.

The Sustainable Development Goal target of ending child, early and forced marriages and unions will not be achieved through changing laws alone, but by removing the systemic, social and economic inequalities that drive young people to marry before they are ready to do so.

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Partnerships

The Young Marriage and Parenthood Study (YMAPS) was undertaken as a collaborative effort between Young Lives research partners and Child Frontiers.

Young Lives is a collaborative research project coordinated out of the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford. Since 2002, it has followed the lives of 12,000 boys and girls from different social, religious, ethnic and language groups in 80 rural and urban sites throughout Ethiopia, India (in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Vietnam and Peru. The largest cross-country longitudinal study of young people ever, its purpose is to shed light on the drivers and impacts of child poverty, and generate evidence to help policymakers design programmes that make a real difference to poor children and their families. Its approach allows for the placement of the lived experiences and daily realities of children and young people at the heart of its analysis, giving insight into what matters to them, in their own words and from their point of view.

YMAPS partners from Young Lives include the *Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo* (GRADE) in Peru, the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) in Ethiopia (formerly the Ethiopian Development Research Institute), and the University of Oxford. Analysis for this Comparative Report drew on additional contributions made by Young Lives partners at Pankhurst Development Research and Consulting (Ethiopia), the Young Lives Research to Policy Centre (India), and Sri Padmavati Mahila Visvavidyalayam (SPMVV) Women's University (India), as well as research carried out by Child Frontiers in Zambia.

Child Frontiers is a consultancy group that aims to improve the development, care and well-being of children and adolescents in developing and humanitarian contexts through engagement in research, policy development and programmes. Established in 2008, Child Frontiers has worked in over 50 countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East and the Pacific, partnering with United Nations agencies, governments and international and national non-government organisations. Working across a range of child welfare and protection priorities, the group conducts research on issues affecting children's vulnerability to abuse and exploitation; evaluates child protection initiatives and programmes; facilitates the development of national legal and policy frameworks for children and young people; trains and mentors service providers and protection workers; and facilitates culturally relevant solutions, designed to have optimal impact on children's lives. In recent years, child marriage has become a focus of its research, policy and programmatic work at the national, regional and global levels.

The research report was authored by Child Frontiers and Young Lives and produced by Young Lives as part of the Young Marriage and Parenthood Study (YMAPS), a three-year programme of comparative research examining young marriage and parenthood. The study 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.

YOUNG MARRIAGE AND PARENTHOOD STUDY

Young Lives

CHILD FRONTIERS

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