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**Community Understandings of Childhood Transitions in Ethiopia: Different for Girls?**

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## ABSTRACT

The paper explores the perspectives of caregivers and other adults on the nature and timing of childhood transitions, elicited through group discussions in five Ethiopian communities, as reflective of the community norms that shape childhood transitions. The paper uses data from Young Lives, a longitudinal study of children growing up in poverty, to investigate the transitions made by girls from childhood to the onset of puberty. It argues that these transitions are rarely linear, singular, or focused on 'learning', but instead multiple and often contradictory. While girls are said to be constrained by lack of opportunities, the main constraint to successful transitions in the communities discussed in the paper is having too many potentially contradictory opportunities, too soon.



**Key words:** Gender; Ethiopia; Transitions; Education; Work; Community norms

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The paper explores the perspectives of caregivers and other adults on the nature and timing of girls' transitions in five Ethiopian communities, spanning near and remote rural and urban locations. Ethiopia is one of the poorest and most donor-dependent countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, which has experienced decades of civil conflict, poverty and famine, compounded by a history of authoritarian rule dating back to imperial times. It has more than 80 ethnic groups, distributed across nine ethnically based regions, and 85 percent of the population live in rural areas. Indicators of human development such as life expectancy and literacy fall well below the level of neighbouring countries and it was ranked 171st out of 182 countries on the 2007 Human Development Index. Nonetheless, there have been significant political and economic changes over the past 17 years since the coming to power of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front. The EPRDF's three-fold reforms of decentralisation, democratisation and economic liberalisation have begun to improve the lives and 'life chances' of Ethiopia's 33 million children (Ethiopian census 2007), for example, through a massive increase in primary school enrolment. The importance of this is underlined by Bevan and Pankhurst (2007:14) who characterize childhood in Ethiopia as "the time when personal agency profiles including the in/competences, habituses and autonomy which underpin choices and achievements in adult life are developed".

In this context childhood transitions are of particular interest because they reflect and reproduce existing inequalities due to their influence on future trajectories and outcomes (Hunt 2006). The three transitions selected are schooling, work and 'early' marriage for girls[i] because in previous research (Camfield and Tafere, 2009) these were described as the most significant and they are experienced very differently by boys and girls. The emphasis on adults' perspectives in this paper recognises that children's transitional experiences are shaped by their caregivers' decisions, which are based on what they perceive as a good transition (Poluha 2004: 73-4).[ii] As their caregivers' perceptions may be influenced by norms[iii] originating in their community, understanding community contexts helps us

understand how girls' transitions are constructed and guided, and provides invaluable background to investigating their experiences.

In making community understandings our focus, we do not mean to frame children as passive, as they challenge, resist and negotiate social norms, and play an important role in the decisions that surround their transitions, albeit often from 'behind the scenes' (Alebachew 2007; Tekola 2009). Nor do we wish to reify 'community norms' by downplaying their dynamic, contradictory and contested nature. Nonetheless, we recognise that adult understandings of what girls can and should be doing are as important as material constraints in guiding their trajectories.

The paper uses data collected by *Young Lives*, an international study of childhood poverty, to explore in different contexts how childhood transitions are specified for girls and boys, the characteristics of a 'successful' transition, and how norms relating to transitions are transferred across generations.

The first section outlines theoretical and empirical approaches to childhood transitions and provides background to the specific transitions of schooling, work and marriage in Ethiopia. The second section introduces the methods used in this paper and the third summarises the findings for each transition, highlighting the intersection of gender and location in shaping children's transitions. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of the findings for how researchers and policymakers understand and engage with different community contexts.

**Literature review**

Transitions can be characterised as both events (e.g. life changes, turning points, 'border crossings', see Ecclestone et al. 2005: 1) and more subtle processes of 'becoming somebody' that are woven through the fabric of everyday life (*ibid*: 9). According to Vogler et al's (2008) review, transitions encompass *agency* (e.g. life choices for - and by - children), *processes* (e.g. 'rites of passage'),

*representations and meanings* (e.g. local understandings of the life course), *expectations* (e.g. mismatches between children and adults' aspirations, or between their aspirations and material realities), and finally *identity and well-being*.

In relation to childhood transitions Ansell (2004) notes that there is no single point at which someone becomes an adult. Rather the process involves crossing a series of boundaries such as leaving school which are usually represented as parallel and often linear transitions where historically "the pattern was fixed and almost universal" (ibid:185). In most societies, including Ethiopia, this is no longer the case, and a key debate within the literature is the extent of young people's agency in the face of traditional and more modern structural constraints. The debate is salient at the level of young people's experiences as where people believe, as France (2000, in Ansell, 2004:199) describes, that "their personal biography is unique and their own responsibility, they also experience risks at the individual rather than the collective level" and the burden of making 'choices' that are essentially illusory.

Related to this debate is Gillies' (2000) critique of the concept of childhood transitions for its inherent individualism. He argues that the concept cannot acknowledge the blurred boundaries between dependence and independence in young people's lives (c.f. Punch's (2002) notion of 'negotiated interdependence'). For example, Punch (2002:133-4) notes that in Bolivia "most young people have a strong sense of responsibility towards their family, and negotiate ways to fulfil their individual needs whilst also contributing to the household. They balance family demands and personal ambitions, and [...] the decisions which they make in one arena, within the limited range of opportunities they have, can only be understood if one knows what is happening in the other contexts of their lives".

Recent edited collections on childhood transitions, e.g. Jeffrey and McDowell, 2004, identify their key characteristics as i) risk and uncertainty, ii) their complex, multiple and contested nature, and iii) the way transitions are shaped by and often reproduce social differentiation and inequality. For example, at a macro-level formal education appears to reproduce inequality in the manner described by

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), while at the micro-level it provides sites of sociality and networking (Ansell 2004; Punch 2002)). Jeffrey and McDowell (2004) highlight the paradox that childhood transitions appear to be both simultaneously slowing, due to longer periods in education and a lack of secure employment, and accelerating, due to family breakdown and migration for schooling and work. They highlight a "cruel irony", especially apparent in Ethiopia where neo-liberal social reforms have devastated the white-collar job market, "that, as Western ideals of youth transition have been exported outside Euro-America, it has become increasingly difficult for young people in Third World settings to emulate these ideas (ibid:137).

The focus of this paper is adult perspectives on the nature and timing of childhood transitions so the next section of the literature review briefly explores how these are shaped in particular contexts. In many settings adults specify transitions in relation to their desire for children to become 'good adults' and function well in a particular setting (Wise and Sanson 2000: 9). Their beliefs about what successful transitions consist in and how they can be achieved are culturally inflected, and these beliefs mediate their daily experiences and interactions (Rosenthal 2000: 7). Norms play a role in establishing the type of transitions children should pass through, the age at which they should experience them, and the resources required to actualise them (Rook et al. 1989: 234). For example, Boyle et al. (2002) assert that in Africa norms such as early engagement in household production affect children's demand for schooling and are both gendered and age specific. Nonetheless, Marini (1984) argues that social norms are insufficient in explaining childhood transitions as there is greater variability in the timing of actual role changes than in timing preferences (*ibid*: 231).

Childhood transitions have been explored as a specific research topic in Sub-Saharan Africa[iv], but not yet in Ethiopia although many authors address young people's transitional experiences without a specific theoretical framework, as described below. For example, Poluha (2004) explores the role of education in encouraging 'cultural continuity' in Ethiopia and how the pedagogical representation of knowledge as limited and static inhibits the "use [of] information to revise or question what they

already knew or to ask new questions" (p.193). Poluha (ed. 2007) provides a useful overview of the situation of children and young people in Ethiopia, drawn from qualitative studies by her students. Highlights include Ayele Tamene's comparison of male and female students' time use in Atkilit tera Markos and an adjacent rural area, and Binyam Alemayehu's ethnography which illustrates the pervasive influence of gender on how teachers address students and allocate duties, students' bearing and behaviour, and even in play (see also Nardos Chuta, same volume). Finally, Muluembeat Kiar (2007) explores representations of children in textbooks, arguing that these reinforce unhelpful stereotypes by depicting women as housewives or teachers. Heinonen (2000), Tekola (2009) and Tafere (2007) focus on the experiences of children living in poverty in the capital, Addis Ababa, while Abebe (2007) spans Addis Ababa and Gedeo, a village which is becoming integrated into the global coffee market.

## Background

This section provides background to the transitions addressed in this paper drawing on national and international legislation and survey data (the Ethiopian Demographic and Health and Labour Force Surveys collected by the Government's Central Statistical Agency).

### *Legislation*

To some extent transitions are shaped by international and national legislation which determine the type and timing of employment and the age and nature of marital contracts. While the legislation is unambiguous and universal in focus, interpretations of it are complex and context-specific as described in the results section. The main legislative instrument is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was ratified in 1991 and supported by Article 36 of the Constitution of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopian. This stipulates that children should not be subjected to activities that compromise their education. In relation to this, the Ethiopia Labour Law proclamation No. 377/2003 prohibits the employment of people aged under fourteen (a modification of the internationally accepted work age of 15, or 18 for hazardous work [International Labour Organisation Convention No.

138). The revised Ethiopian Family (2000) and Criminal (2005) laws specify 18 as the age limit for marriage and emphasise that marriage should be entered into with 'the free and full consent of the intending spouses'.

*Schooling*

Children in Ethiopia usually start school at 6 or 7; in urban areas this may be preceded by 3 years of preschool and in rural areas it may be delayed if children's ages are not known or they are needed for other tasks. While there are gender disparities in primary enrolment (UNESCO 2008), these do not always favour boys. For example, girls from poor households or living in rural areas are more likely to be enrolled than boys, although the reverse is true for rich or urban households. For those enrolled in primary school, the 'survival rate' is good and the statistics show little variation by location, gender or socio-economic status (Table 1). Girls have lower drop-out rates up to grade 6 (27 percent vs. 44 percent for boys, CSA 2006) which means that a higher percentage continue to 8th grade. However, their completion rate is much lower, possibly because many either drop out during the final grade, when they would be aged 15 or 16, or fail to take/ fail the end of grade exam so cannot progress to secondary school. Failure to complete can be attributed to the cumulative impact of delayed enrolment and slow grade progression which begin to have an effect when girls reach puberty. Other studies, summarised in Camfield 2009, identify a range of constraints throughout girls' life courses from differential enrolment at the household level to teachers' beliefs about girls' intelligence.

[INSERT TABLE 1]

*Work*

Work is a valued activity and a potential competitor to successful educational transitions through both the time it takes, and the physical and mental stress of a triple or quadruple day of work, schooling, chores, and studying. The most comprehensive source of information on young people's work is the Child Labour Force survey (2001) which divides the 6.5 million children aged 10 to 14 into two categories: *studying* and *working*. 26 percent of those studying are working outside the home and 23

percent work in the household; only three percent are just attending school (the statistics are disaggregated by age or by gender but not by both, however, it is worth noting that girls aged 5-17 are slightly more likely not to be attending school – 66.7 percent for girls vs. 57 percent for boys). The majority of those working are in agriculture (91 percent) and 92 percent are unpaid family workers. According to the survey, girls spend 27.6 hours per week working and boys 34.4 hours, but this is clearly an underestimate as household chores are not included in economic activity. For example, Rose et al. (1997) observed that girls take on time-consuming domestic tasks[vvi] that cannot be combined with other activities (e.g. boys can study in the fields while looking after cattle) and Abebe (2007:87) notes that "a male child participating in school is seen as needing time to do homework, which to parents may seem to be of secondary importance for a girl attending school".

*Marriage*

Broad overviews of early marriage in developing countries, including Ethiopia, are provided by Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi (2003) and Jensen and Thornton (2003). There is little Ethiopia-specific research (e.g. Zabin and Kigaru 1998; Mekonnen and Aspen 2007), aside from NGO reports (e.g. Pathfinder [2006]), which present a negative and one-dimensional picture of early marriage. While Ethiopian law makes it clear that marriage should be entered into with 'the free and full consent of the intending spouses', it can be primarily an economic transaction, reinforced by the payment of *macha* or *gebera* among the Oromo by the husband or his family. There are three main types of arranged marriage: *promissory*, where a promise is made at birth or infancy (this typically occurs between rich families when the potential husband is close in age); *child marriage*, where the bride is aged under 10 (this is rare, particularly in the regions where *Young Lives* is working); and *adolescent marriage*, where the bride is aged 10 to 15. While the ages for both marriage and sexual debut seem to be rising (Table 2), there are regional variations. For example, early marriage is highest in Amhara and Tigray where the median ages were 14.4 and 15.7 years among those aged 20 to 49 (CSA 2006).

[INSERT TABLE 2]

Early sexual debut, marriage, and pregnancy are said to perpetuate the feminisation of poverty by reducing the acquisition of educational and occupational skills before marriage, which can reinforce women's lower status and lack of decision-making power (Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi 2003). While accurate birth and marriage statistics and greater sensitivity among local officials would be helpful in addressing early marriage, perhaps more valuable would be an understanding of the motivations behind it. Pathfinder's (2006) attitude survey suggests the most important consideration is 'following tradition', followed by 'daughter making a good marriage' and 'linking family's name to another family', rather than avoiding early pregnancy or securing *gebera*.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This section introduces the sites and methodology for data collection and analysis, focusing particularly on the qualitative research. *Young Lives* is a major international project on child poverty (2000-2015) funded by the UK Department for International Development (DfID). Two survey rounds were conducted in Ethiopia (2002 and 2006) with 3,000 children (born in 2000-1 and 1994/5) and their caregivers in 26 communities across the five most populous regions.

The paper presents primarily qualitative data on children aged 12 to 13 collected in 2006 and 2007 respectively (see Camfield and Tafere, 2009). The qualitative data presented in this paper are drawn from twenty group discussions which were held separately with men and women in each of the five communities (Table 3, Appendix). In each community there were four group discussions; two separate groups with male and female community representatives such as local officials, teachers, elders and religious leaders, and two mixed group discussions with caregivers of children aged 6-7 and 12-13, which were intended to include men and women, but were predominantly female.

The qualitative research team comprised equal numbers of men and women who spoke Amharic, Oromiffa, and Tigrinya, enabling respondents to speak in the language with which they felt most comfortable. Researchers were also able to build on the long relationship developed by the survey teams who have been visiting the communities since 2000.

The discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed and coded using qualitative data analysis software to enable textual analysis. The coded transcripts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Willig 2001) to explore 'how participants are perceiving and making sense of things which are happening to them' (Smith and Osborn 2003) and develop understandings of community norms inductively.

**Communities**

The qualitative research took place in five communities, which are described below: two urban (*Atkilit tera*, Addis Ababa and *Laku*, Hawassa) and three rural, two of which were relatively remote (*Leki,* Oromia, *Semhal*, Tigray, and *Tach meret*, Amhara)[vii].

*Atkilit tera* is a densely populated community in the national capital (14,066 inhabitants) which is ethnically, religiously and economically diverse, albeit with a predominance of the Amhara ethnic group and Ethiopian Orthodox Christians. It is by the city's fruit and vegetable market, which provides economic opportunities for adults and children, but is dirty and unsafe for girls.

*Leki* is a comparatively small (2,835) and ethnically homogenous community: predominately Oromiffa speaking Orthodox Christians, with a few Muslim families. It has good natural resources (for example, irrigated fields for vegetable growing) and a temperate climate, but is nonetheless materially poor.

*Semhal* is a similar size to *Leki* and also ethnically homogenous (Tigrinya-speaking Orthodox Christians). However, it is more remote as the nearest town is two to three hours on foot and the road

is only usable in the 'dry season'. Respondents were materially poor, participated in government 'safety net programmes' such as the Food for Work scheme, and had limited access to electricity and piped water.

*Tach meret* is situated in the middle of the central Amhara plains on the outskirts of a small town. The town has begun to influence life in the village, in tandem with the construction of an asphalt road and preparations for electrification. The population of 9,107 is predominately Amhara Orthodox Christians whose livelihood depends on farming.

*Laku* is the oldest neighborhood of Hawassa, the capital of Southern Ethiopian Nationalities, Nations and People's region (SNNP). Its population is estimated at 23,000 and is predominantly Wolayta and Sidama Christians. The area is densely populated due to high in-migration from rural areas with as many 15 to 20 people occupying dilapidated *kebele* houses[viii], which date from the early twentieth century. Most adults and children are engaged in petty trade, daily labor, or driving a cart.

## 3. RESULTS

This section reports caregivers' expectations concerning the nature and timing of childhood transitions and explores how these differ for girls. Our focus is on the definition of 'successful' transitions, the obstacles to achieving these, and whether norms have the determining power that is often attributed to them (White 2006). For each transition we explore the differences between caregivers' aspirations, 'local'[ix] norms, and what is actually taking place. We focus on norms and expectations for girls and their 'intersectionalities' (Crenshaw 1991) with location and socio-economic status.

### Caregivers' expectations

Across the five communities, respondents identified the main activities for boys and girls as attending school, family work or paid labour, and for girls beginning to have relationships and/ or prepare for marriage. They are seen as able to take some responsibility for their lives ('at 12 or 13 a child knows

him/herself', respondent from *Tach meret*) but the extent of this varies by location and gender. For example, another respondent in *Tach meret* quoted the proverb *Set tikat amchi, wond tikat melash*, a girl brings offence, a boy responds to offence, which reinforces an impression given by respondents from other communities that while girls may be as strong as boys (*Setna ahya yesetahachew yichilalu* – a girl and a donkey can cope with anything), they are not as bright or independent.

At least in their responses to survey enumerators, caregivers in the five communities express uniformly high expectations for their 12-13 year old child's future, for example, completing university (73 percent of girls, 75 percent of boys) and having salaried and professional occupations such as doctor (27 percent of boys and girls), teacher (15 percent of girls, 13 percent of boys) or civil servant (20 percent of boys and girls). There is little variation by gender, even for marriage and child-bearing (Table 4), although it is worth noting that these preferences bear little resemblance to the usual timings of these events (e.g. Table 2).

[INSERT TABLE 4]

*Children's socialisation*

The power of these expectations is ensured by the way that children are socialised, for example, being taught that children who respect community norms and behave appropriately for their age and gender are seen as good and therefore make successful transitions.

> If a child wants to grow up in a good manner and to get a good status, he/she must respect his/her teachers, his older and younger brothers/sisters with no discrimination. If he/she does so in this regard, he/she will be successful in life, for obedience and respect signify most and God adores such qualities
>
> Caregiver from *Atkilit tera*

Schools, religious institutions and the community as a whole are also expected to play an important role in children's socialisation, for example, helping them to understand the value of respect and obedience and the negative consequences of non-normative behaviour (Marini 1984; Chuta 2008). In return parents are expected to fulfil their children's material and emotional needs, to the extent to which they are able, to enable their children to grow up well.

*Changing expectations and their relationship to practice*

This singular vision becomes more complex at the level of experience, not least because agents of socialisation often send conflicting messages. To take the example of schooling, although parents have a legal responsibility to send young children to school, children feel an equally great responsibility towards their parents that affects their willingness to enrol. School itself is perceived as risky by parents, particularly for girls - for example, developing relationships with boys might lead to pre-marital sex and the long walk to school in rural areas exposes them to assault or abduction. Additionally, many parents feel that school should concentrate on giving 'useful' knowledge and preparing children for work, rather than providing 'civics lessons' and after-school clubs that debate the value of customary practices such as female circumcision. A female teacher from *Atkilit tera* observed that girls' behaviour had changed greatly since her childhood, possibly as a result of exposure to many different ways of living:

> Our parent's advice was to be obedient for others and to do household activities. I could not see this at this time. I used to work household activities after school while my brother used to play after school. [...] Having relations with boys was an abnormal act. We did not feel comfortable to sit next to boys in the classroom. We did not have friends. But now girls can watch TV, film and listen to the radio, etc. They also want to invite their friends on their birthday. They even talk with their boyfriends by telephone.

These changes are perceived as problematic when girls reach puberty and are exposed to sexual risks that were previously managed through traditional practices such as early marriage, as explained below:

> In the past it was possible to marry girls before 15. Now it is changed. After the expansion of formal and religious education, girls' behaviour is highly changed. They start to say that they want to protect their rights and they want to establish marriage based on their interest. This leads to establishing marriage with any person without recognising the behaviour and economic condition of the person […which] greatly affects girls' education and future life.
>
> Focus Group, *Leki*

The change in girls' attitudes is encapsulated in the expression *lei laenatua mit astamarach*, which literally means that now the daughter 'teaches her mother how to give birth', implying that girls today believe that they know better than their elders.

**Caregivers' perspectives on specific transitions**

In the following section we use *Young Lives* data on schooling, work and time use and relationships and marriage to illustrate how changing attitudes and norms and emerging opportunities are impacting differentially on girls' experiences.

*Schooling*

*Young Lives* data shows late enrolment, low 'grade for age' and high dropout, especially in grades 1 and 7, which disproportionately affects girls (Camfield, 2009). Distance from schools is an important factor for girls, particularly in *Semhal*, where second cycle primary schools are up to two hours walk from the community and involve crossing a forest. Even in urban areas where schools are relatively near, respondents expressed anxiety about older girls spending time outside the home and being exposed to both risks and temptations:

> At this age girls are more exposed to sexual abuse compared to boys. So, they need parental follow up. […] Girls just want to get out of [their] home by dressing in clothes that attract boys
>
> Healthcare worker from *Atkilit tera*

An apparent reluctance on the part of parents to value girls' schooling or take it seriously was expressed in most of the rural communities. A community leader in *Semhal* described how "after school, [a girl] just drops her school bag and jumps into household chores. But even after playing or going around a boy usually picks up his exercise book and reads".

Focus group participants in *Semhal* argued that even if girls were good students, their achievements would benefit their in-laws rather than their parents. Education was seen as risking girls' reproductive and economic future because if 'you keep a girl in school rejecting marriage; either she gets a boyfriend or gets too old so nobody will ask you to marry her. Then she remains idle at home and parents start cursing her as useless, leading to conflict".

Work and time use

Young Lives survey data (2006) show gendered differences in time use from age 6 to 11 when girls take considerably more responsibility for household chores (2.03 hours per day vs. 1.30 hours for boys), increasing to 3.61 hours per day for girls aged 12 to 13 vs. 2.10 hours for boys . Conversely, boys spend an increasing amount of time on paid and unpaid work outside the home, which means that the total time spent working is similar for both groups (4.6 hours for girls and 4.3 hours for boys). Neither activity appears to affect the amount of time they spend at school and studying (approximately 7 hours per day), although girls aged 12 to 13 reported reduced leisure time (2.6 hours per day vs. 3 hours for boys).

Expectations are also shaped by rural and urban location, as illustrated by the descriptions below from *Atkilit tera* and *Tach meret* of when girls are expected to undertake different tasks.

*Atkilit tera - urban*

Girls start work at age 5. They can take messages; carrying a baby, etc. […] Girls at age 7 usually help their mothers in the house cleaning, fetching water, carrying baby, etc. At age 7 to 9, they start making stew and coffee and at 10 they start baking *injera.*[x] At age 12, girls can perform the whole [household] activities and assume responsibility. […] [Girls] start dating at the age of thirteen and fourteen. Children nowadays are very fast. They could do everything at the age of fifteen

*Tach meret – rural*

Girls of this age [6 to 7] can boil coffee and have to start housework like cleaning the house and fetching at least 5 litres of water (starting from 5 years old). […] At 12 to 13 years old girls are expected to fetch 20 litres of water, prepare coffee and cook food, clean the house and the compound, wash clothes and do all the chores without any [adult] guidance

The descriptions suggest that girls' activities and the timing of their transitions vary according to local environments. For example, the greater sexual maturity expected of girls in urban areas. Even though only four percent of girls aged 12-13 reported paid work in the *Young Lives* survey (2006, *n*=20), the qualitative data indicated that the majority of girls were involved in either paid work to contribute to the household and purchase clothing and school materials, or domestic work and childcare to free parents from these activities. For example, in *Leki* girls worked on the vegetable farms, in *Tach meret* they picked runner beans, and in both *Leki* and *Semhal*, girls aged ten and above often replaced their parents in the construction activities carried out as part of the Productive Safety Net Programme (Woldehanna 2009). There was an inevitable tension between work and schooling and this was particularly acute in *Leki* where girls, began working on vegetable farms from age seven. One respondent described how the majority of farmworkers were "young girls […] from the poor families", chosen for their reliability and dexterity, who when vegetable growing started again in the spring were

"either absent [from school] or discontinue it". In *Laku* and *Atkilit tera*, girls sold tomatoes, onions and chillies outside their homes during the day and savoury snacks to accompany people's coffee ceremonies in the evening, and worked on construction projects.

Parents expect girls to contribute to the household and see this as an important part of their socialisation which will teach them the skills and attitudes to enable successful transitions in the future ('if she works, she will learn how to work', father from *Leki*). Nonetheless, some work activities are not considered beneficial as they expose girls to physical or social risks. Examples of these are 'heavy' labour, such as work in quarries or construction sites, or selling snacks on the streets at night and working in bars. Even when activities are considered legitimate and risk-free, some parents were concerned about the effect of an independent income on girls' behaviour and aspirations, even though girls were under far greater pressure than boys to give their income to their parents.

*Relationships and marriage*

While most girls are not expected to have any relationship with boys at this age, from puberty onwards the possibility of marriage by arrangement, 'abduction' or seduction increasingly shapes their trajectories. For example, in *Semhal*, parents start to arrange marriages for their daughters to secure their future and see them 'enlightened' (*berhan*) and 'flowering' (*abeba)* by marrying and having children. Rich households are considered fortunate as they have the resources to arrange wedding ceremonies and attract good son-in-laws, but even poor households can use marriage to assure the household's status and gain 'support and protection' from sons-in-law (described by one elder from *Leki* as 'exchanging the female children for money').

Non-arranged or 'free will' marriages are relatively unusual, at least in rural areas, and once girls pass puberty the alternative to an arranged marriage is often *abduction* by force or through seduction ('voluntary abduction')[xi]. Whereas forced abductions usually end in marriage (e.g. they often occur when someone wants to marry but cannot afford *gebera*, and can be covertly arranged between the

future spouses), this is not necessarily so for the latter as there are no traditional mechanisms to ensure that the seducer keeps his promises. While none of the girls in the qualitative sites have been abducted, one caregiver in *Laku* recounted how her 13 year old daughter was abducted by a 40 year old man from Sidama, which meant that she left her family and finished schooling at grade seven. Nonetheless, seven or eight years later, she is still living with her husband in Sidama and has a second daughter.

*Balancing competing threats*

Although early marriage represents a threat to girls' futures when these are viewed in terms of education and paid employment, many parents in rural and urban communities perceive marriage by abduction or pregnancy outside marriage as greater threats. Some respondents described how, in their opinion, the traditional practices worked better because, in the case of forced abduction, the authorities would be able to punish the perpetrator and parents could negotiate a better *gebera* from the elders settling the case. The practice of voluntary abduction has introduced ambiguity as sanctions depend on the evidence given by the protagonists, and girls will usually say that they consented to avoid shame or punishment from their husband. Even after marriage and pregnancy girls risk being 'cheated' because 'the marriage can easily be discontinued because marriages that do not get consent from the family can't be accepted' (father from *Leki*).

In the two urban communities, however, casual or 'self-arranged' relationships are apparently the 'new norm', and girls can choose to have sex before marriage. For example, when a researcher asked participants in *Atkilit tera* at what age girls in this community married the respondents laughingly replied, 'these days we never see any wedding ceremony in the community. Girls may have love affairs with boys and start living together without having legal marriage'.

When other options are limited or unappealing, and early marriage is sanctioned by local norms and historical practice, it has an understandable appeal to parents. From one perspective it could be seen

as mutually beneficial because not only do parents gain honour and material resources from arranged marriages, but girls also increase their status and resources, assuming that they are marrying into a richer household and have children quickly. Young wives are able to lead an independent life, within the constraints described earlier, and some even return to schooling.[xii] While early sexual intercourse and pregnancy typically lead to health problems and cessation of schooling, at least within the context of marriage they do not reflect badly on the 'parenting skills' and character of the caregivers. Instead they are a source of personal satisfaction and represent a successful transition from the perspective of the parents, even without the *gebera*. The arguments made in this section are obviously unbalanced without the perspectives of girls in these communities. Nonetheless they redress a different imbalance which is the representation of early marriage in terms of 'suffering' and 'victimhood' in NGO-funded literature (e.g. Pathfinder 2006) without recognition of the cultures and environments in which it is practiced.

## 4. DISCUSSION

Throughout the paper we have presented examples of where despite claiming to have the same expectations and standards for boys and girls, the comments that caregivers make or the language they use suggest that girls are regarded differently, even before puberty. This is supported by studies in other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, Walker's (2004) research with secondary schoolgirls in South Africa which argues that girls' aspirations to further education and employment are blocked by racism, disrespect and low expectations from teachers and school officials, as well as the prevalence of sexual violence. Similarly, Porter et al.'s (2009) research in rural South Africa and Ansell's (2004) research in Lesotho and Zimbabwe highlight the same combination of lower expectations for girls, greater restrictions on their mobility, and an extremely limited job market at the end of it.

A common perception, clearly not unique to Ethiopia, is that girls are experiencing increasing freedom and that this needs to be balanced with increased control over mobility and even clothing to ensure

that they make a successful transition into adulthood. To some extent this debate is played out through the practice of female circumcision, which even in urban *Laku* is characterised as way of preserving girls' femininity so that they are not 'permanently erect' (i.e. ready for a fight, *kaltegerezech koma tekeralech*) or heedless (*kaltegerezech eka tesebralech*) in the way that boys are. Setting aside this extreme example, there are other ways in which increasing control over girls' mobility and time affects their daily and future lives, for example, a reluctance to send them to higher levels of schooling or allow time for studying uninterrupted by household tasks.

Attitudes towards girls relate to a more general debate about the extent to which globalised norms such as universal primary education, which are reflected in government policies, have been adopted at the local level. While lack of adoption is often attributed to the perverse influence of local norms or 'culture', we argue that it is more informative to observe how caregivers negotiate local, national, and global understandings to produce what they feel are successful transitions for their children. In each community, we found that specific socio-cultural and material contexts interacted with parents' expectations and experiences to affect transitions into and out of school, work and early marriage. This suggests that, contrary to the impression given by international finance institutions such as the World Bank (Luttrell-Rowland 2007), childhood transitions are rarely linear, singular or focused solely on 'learning'. Our data suggest instead that it is usual for girls in particular to experience multiple and often contradictory transitional trajectories: to 'work at farming, give attention to their education and accept advice from parents' (elder from *Leki*).

While respondents had clear ideas about what *should* happen when and to whom, these diverged from the 'statistical norms' within the data (Marini 1984:238). This suggests that norms need to be considered in context, acknowledging how fragile they become as people respond to material poverty and environmental challenges. For example, one 12 year old girl in *Leki* had taken on the traditionally male role of herder as they could not afford to employ anyone and justified her family's decision by citing her grandmother who "dug and produced crops even when she was pregnant". We also cannot

conclude that social norms govern the nature or timing of transitions, as parents' expectations and practices are internally inconsistent and potentially contradictory. For example, they may describe their ideal for boys and girls as studying hard and therefore having a materially prosperous future, while expecting girls in particular to work for their family and make a good marriage.

While some parents described the respect they felt towards their traditional practices, many more felt government policies were fundamentally misguided and exposed their daughters to an unacceptable level of risk. For example, self-arranged marriages were seen as poorer quality and disruptive to both schooling and a fundamental understanding between parent and child that, in return for respect and obedience, their parents will be there to provide support for as long as they need it. A religious leader from *Semhal* observed that 'our cultural norms and religion have been with us through generations […but] governments come and go, and so do their policies'.

Attempts to enforce the laws in the study communities have been unsuccessful, as people balance the potential consequences of failing to respect either government laws or local norms and often made their decisions by stealth. For example, a female healthcare worker from *Laku* described how:

> When you talk to people they tell you they have brought attitudinal change, but in practice there is no significant change yet. [...] You tell them about the harmfulness of traditional practices [such as female circumcision] and they seem to agree and even tell you back what you tell them. But in practice they do not respect it.

Respondents were prepared not only to manipulate government policies to accommodate valued practices (for example, describing marriages as 'engagements', even when the girl was living with her husband) but also to directly and successfully challenge them. An example of this occurred in 2005 when, after surprisingly low support in the elections, the government accepted the petition of rural parents that children should only attend half a day's schooling as opposed to the full day that was

initially proposed to meet the Millennium Development Goal on primary education. This was a compromise for all parties as rural people agreed to all their children attending school, despite doubting its value, while the government acknowledged the reality of child work.

Throughout this paper we have argued that there is a large gap between ideals, expectations and experiences of childhood transitions, particularly for girls. The meta-themes of risk and uncertainty are evident in the experiences of girls alluded to within the paper, exacerbated by complexity, contestation, and structural constraints. Although life courses are increasingly destandardised and young people and their families faced with a bewildering range of options, this may not represent an increase in the choices available, given that the alternatives are not equally valued or equally accessible. While girls in Ethiopia are said to be constrained by their lack of opportunities, in fact their likelihood of making successful transitions is reduced by having too many potentially contradictory opportunities too soon. This contrasts with the experiences of, for example, a middle-class teenager in Addis Abba who might be concentrating on her studies and not planning to marry until she has completed university and secured a good job.

The transitions explored here raise a number of questions for policymakers. We propose firstly that any intervention needs to understand why actors make or guide transitions in a way that will produce less than optimal results, at least in relation to international understandings of well-being. Recognising both the rationality and the emotion that drives people's actions, and the complexity of the decisions that underpin them, is important in understanding why practices such as early marriage continue, even when this requires parents to break the law.

Secondly, without wishing to reinforce a perception that girls are more vulnerable than boys, it goes without saying that their experiences and the standards they are evaluated against are different, even in urban areas. These differences are dynamic rather than immutable, and cross-cut by equally salient differences of age, location and socio-economic status, all of which need to be taken into account

when evaluating the 'child-friendliness' of interventions or operationalising international conventions such as UNCRC.

Thirdly, despite the legal provisions related to the transitions discussed here, our data show little evidence of effective sanctions when these laws are broken. The main reason for this is that the policies are also ideals rather than norms and do not entail the material resources that are necessary to make them effective. As one father in *Semhal* said to his daughter's teacher: "if you say "no early marriage", please feed her"'.

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Appendix

[INSERT TABLE 3]

[i] Early marriage is marriage below the customary age of 15, rather than age 18, which is mandated by Ethiopian law.
[ii] Children's perspectives will be explored in a subsequent paper, which highlights the effect of gender, socioeconomic status and place of residence on children's expectations and experiences.
[iii] Norms are defined here as shared understandings or agreed expectations and rules by which a culture guides the behaviour of its members. This provisional and multi-dimensional definition includes personal evaluations, perceived evaluations, personal expectations, perceived expectations and reactions (Gibbs 1990).
[iv] For example, Ansell (2004) on rural secondary schooling in Lesotho and Zimbabwe; Argenti (2002) on young men's roles in work and ritual in Cameron; Reynolds (1991) on young people's work in Zimbabwe; Durham (2004) on the labels 'youth',

'adult' and 'elder' among the Herero in Botswana; and edited collections by Honwana and De Boeck (2005) and Christiansen, Utas and Vigh (2006).

[vi] See also Ayele Tamene, 2007.
[vii] The original names of the communities have been replaced with pseudonyms.
[viii] The kebele is the lowest form of administrative unit. Kebele houses are similar to council houses in the UK.
[ix] Local is in inverted commas recognising that norms which manifest locally are nonetheless multiply determined.
[x] A pancake made from *Teff* that accompanies most meals.
[xi] The distinction between voluntary abductions and non-arranged marriages seems blurred to an outsider, but was very clear to the respondents.
[xii] One caregiver in *Debre* had returned to school after giving birth at 16 when her husband got a job as a policeman and was now studying for a law degree, although we suspect this is fairly unusual.