



Love Alone is Not Enough: The Challenges of Separation and Divorce Among Young Couples in Ethiopia

This policy brief draws on qualitative research relating to young people in four communities (one urban and three rural) who are part of the Young Lives longitudinal study of 3,000 children and young people in Ethiopia.

Divorce and separation among young people is a rarely studied topic, and our insights show the difficulties young people face in their relationships and marriages, and the impacts of poverty, age, gender and location.

Key research findings

- Young people face challenges negotiating between customary expectations regarding marriage and modern values where couples make their own decisions. They are caught between the desire for independence and the need for family support and approval.
- Families have a major influence at all points on the marriage pathways of young people, including during divorce and separation. This also means that young women without family support are particularly vulnerable.
- Young people give a range of interrelated reasons – developmental, social and economic – for their separation or divorce. Many feel they were simply unprepared. Poverty combined with unequal gender relations lies at the heart of many break-ups, with negative consequences particularly for young women.
- The influence of patriarchal attitudes means that priority in both informal and formal processes for separation and divorce is frequently placed on keeping the couple together, with wives under pressure to go back to unsatisfactory relationships or abusive husbands.
- Most young couples find it hard to come to terms emotionally and practically with separation or divorce, especially when children are involved. But life does not end for young people who separate or divorce, and many are active in seeking to improve their lives through work and education.

Introduction

The policy context

Early marriage rightly remains a cause for concern, with 12 million girls globally still marrying every year, and numbers in many countries set to increase under COVID-19. In Ethiopia, the law prohibits girls and boys from marrying before they are 18.¹ In the past ten years, the country has made progress in reducing the levels of child marriage, having set a goal to eliminate the practice throughout the country by 2025. Policy and programmes have reflected this prevention agenda.

The percentage of women aged 20–24 years who were first married or in a union before age 18 decreased from 75 per cent in 1980 to 40 per cent in 2015 (UNICEF 2018: 8). But four out of ten girls in Ethiopia still marry under the age of 18.² Those from poor rural families are particularly affected.

Most research in this area has focused on looking at the causes of early marriage for girls, and its impact. Qualitative studies of the everyday lives of married girls and boys and young couples are rare (Tafere et al. 2020), and few programmes have targeted married adolescents and young adults (Erulkar and Tamrat 2014). We know even less about how young women and young men cope in relationships and deal with marital discord, and why young unions lead to separation or divorce. What are their experiences of services? What role is played by their families? (Siddiqi and Greene 2020; Van der Gaag 2020). There has been little investment in research, and very little programmatic focus, on how divorce and separation affect young people's well-being, and the influence of gender, location and other factors on their lives during and after the process of separation.

Young Lives

This policy brief is based on a study of 59 young people (37 women and 29 men) who are transitioning to adulthood and independent livelihoods. It draws on both qualitative and longitudinal survey data produced by Young Lives. The young people in this study were selected because they had experiences of separation, divorce or relationship troubles. Among the 59, 15 had never been married, 15 were married, 11 were separated and 18 were divorced. We also reviewed data from interviews with selected spouses and caregivers, and officials in the local women's and children affairs offices and the social courts.

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty and transitions to adulthood following the lives of 12,000 children in four countries (Ethiopia, India,³ Peru and Vietnam) since 2001. It aims to provide high-quality data to understand childhood poverty and inform policy and programme design.

In Ethiopia, Young Lives follows 3,000 young people from two cohorts (2,000 in the Younger Cohort, born in 2000/1, and another 1,000 in the Older Cohort, born in 1994/5). The study focuses on 20 communities drawn from five regions (Addis Ababa, Amhara, Oromia, Southern Nationalities and Peoples, and Tigray). Since 2007, there has also been a longitudinal qualitative study of 100 children and their caregivers from five communities, as well as numerous qualitative sub-studies.⁴ To date, Young Lives Ethiopia has carried out five rounds of surveys and five qualitative rounds.

The study communities

Box 1. The study sites

The current study focuses on 4 of the 20 Young Lives sites in Ethiopia – in Addis Ababa, Amhara, Oromia and Tigray. They are:

- **Bertukan**, an urban neighbourhood in Addis Ababa. This site is in a poor area near the city centre where many residents work in the informal sector.
- **Muz**, a rural village in Amhara where residents live mainly from agriculture. This site is over an hour's drive from the nearest small town.
- **Leki**, a rural village in Oromia where residents live from farming, livestock rearing and fishing. It is about an hour's walk from a large town.
- **Zeytuni**, a rural village in Tigray where residents live from agriculture; young people earn income from irrigation, cobblestone production and construction.

The names of the sites and respondents have been anonymised to protect identities.

Main findings

In the Young lives sample, 15 per cent of girls in the Older Cohort had married under the age of 18, compared to less than 3 per cent of boys. Fewer young people in urban areas go through formal marriages, though these remain common practice in rural areas. Among the whole population, age at marriage is affected most by location – with urban women on average marrying 2.6 years later than rural women – and education – with young women with no education marrying at a median age of 16.3 years compared to 24.0 years among young women who have had some secondary education.⁵

In many cases, poverty and insecurity drive parents to marry their daughters young. Sometimes, girls choose to marry

1 Ethiopian Revised Family Code 2000.

2 <https://data.unicef.org/resources/child-marriage-in-ethiopia/>

3 In the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

4 Data analysed for the current study came from three Young Lives sources: a) the qualitative longitudinal study (2007–19); b) the Pathways to Marriage and Parenthood (PMAPS) sub-study carried out in 2015 and funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation; and c) the Young Marriage and Parenthood Study (YMAPS) carried out in 2018 and funded by the International Development Research Centre.

5 Ethiopia: Demographic and Health Survey 2016.

in the hope that this will improve their lives and give their families one less mouth to feed. Families also arrange girls' marriages because they are afraid of them becoming sexually active before marriage, or facing the stigma of having a *diqala* ("bastard") child, thus bringing dishonour on the family.

Caught between the desire for independence and the need for family support and approval

“ I said, ‘I don’t want to get married, I want to continue my education’, but they refused and forced me. Then I accepted it as my fate. ”

Zebenay, Zeytuni, married at 15 to a husband aged 26

Young people are often caught between customary values and expectations about marriage and modern ideas about couples making their own decisions. In addition, the fact that more girls go to school means they have greater expectations of what their future might hold. The study found that girls had more say in decisions about marriage than their mothers, and even their elder sisters, had had. Urbanisation and the expansion of education, work opportunities and social media have allowed young people of opposite sexes to get to know each other and even have sexual relations (Pankhurst, Tiumellisan and Chuta 2016). Parents, however, particularly in urban areas, are anxious, and feel this is driven by phenomena such as bars, *shisha* and *khat* houses,⁶ and sex video shops.

Most young people still want the approval of their families and rely on them to arrange and finance their marriages and provide resources such as land and livestock so that they can set up a separate household. They also support them with child care. Couples without this support are more likely to separate or divorce. Families also play an important role in seeking reparations when girls are raped or coerced into having sex and become pregnant as a result, often insisting on the father marrying their daughter.

But even the unions initiated by young people themselves are not without challenges. Couples often move in together following an unplanned pregnancy, and many young men say this leads them to feel trapped, as they are thrust into the role of family breadwinner before they are ready.

Financially, socially and psychologically unprepared for marriage or cohabitation

“ What I know now is that I was not mature enough to get married at that time. The age I gave birth was not the right age to be a mother. That was the time when I should have pursued my education and prepared myself for a better life. ”

Bilen, young woman aged 24, Bertukan

Young people themselves give a range of reasons – developmental, social and economic – for their separation or divorce (Box 2). Once again, poverty and unequal gender norms are key drivers. Many say they were **not prepared to shoulder the responsibilities of cohabitation or**

married life and were too young when they began. Others cite **poverty and lack of resources** for housing, particularly when husbands are in insecure informal work.

Box 2. Young people’s reasons for divorce and separation

Developmental

- Too young for a long-term relationship
- Psychologically unprepared, immature

Economic

- Financially unprepared
- Unreliable income in the informal sector
- Accidents and livelihood shocks
- Unaffordable housing rent
- Insufficient income to establish a separate household

Social

- Socially unprepared
- Husbands /male partners not wanting wives / female partners to work outside the home
- Husbands wanting to restrict wives’ socialising
- Husbands not providing enough for household expenses and wives’ personal needs
- Accusations of adultery
- Alcohol and domestic violence
- Difficult relations with in-laws and lack of support to establish separate livelihoods

Unequal gender and power relations are common tensions. Young men **feel they should decide** about whether their wives or partners can work, with most wanting them to stay at home and not allowing them to socialise or even leave the house. Many young women feel they have little power to challenge their husbands’ decisions. In all four sites, women report male partners coming home drunk and **becoming abusive and violent**. Finally, young people say **lack of love or commitment** contributed to the breakdown of their relationships. “*Love is the most important and the first thing. It is after love that money becomes important,*” says Kumsa, a young man from Leki.

Divorce and separation processes are biased against women

“ They told me to keep living with him. They always told me to stay with my husband and I was trying to do that, but then it became too much for me to handle and we divorced. ”

Hadas, young woman aged 24, Zeytuni

Most young people try to become reconciled before separating or divorcing. If this does not work, they involve friends, family and elders. Many couples, especially if they have not been together long or are not formally married, separate without a formal agreement. However, when

6 *Shisha* is a tobacco water pipe and *khat* a narcotic plant chewed for its stimulant effect.

property and children are involved, the cases are usually resolved by the courts, and, if there is violence, initially by the police. These institutions, like the elders before them, often try for reconciliation, even if it is not in the woman's interest. In rural sites, divorce negotiations often involved returning marriage payments, land, livestock, household equipment and cash. Many legal, social, and customary processes for divorce are inaccessible to women, and particularly to adolescent girls.⁷

Box 3. Nedi's story

Nedi, 24, from Leki, left her husband because he was violent and often drunk. They had two children (ages 6 and 8). Though they were Muslims she did not have a Nikah agreement (Islamic marriage contract). She went to the district court to get a share of their property, but the local officials did not summon her husband. He took all their property, including the cattle, the television and the household appliances, and she was unable to retrieve any belongings. He was, however, ordered by the court to pay 250 birr monthly in child support, but after a few months of making the payments he began hiding again, so she gave up out of frustration and stopped asking.

The consequences and aftermath of divorce and separation

“I feel as if my future is stolen. I was feeling as if all my future is darkened ... But time heals almost everything. I have come back to a normal life again. **”**

Debebe, young man aged 24, Bertukan

Coming to terms both emotionally and practically with separation or divorce is difficult for most, especially when children are involved. Sometimes the end of a relationship initially leads to depression. On the other hand, women with abusive husbands say they feel relief. But those who take their children back to live with their parents are sometimes treated badly because of the perceived shame of divorce. When courts become involved in child custody, the assumption is always that mothers will keep the children, although fathers should pay child support. Occasionally the child stays with the father or his family. Adane's wife told him that her family would not have "*a good attitude towards the child*". Taking custody of the child was a struggle at first, he says, because "*at that time, he was a little baby and it was really difficult for me to take care of him because I had to go to work*". However, he has found a sense of purpose, saying "*my son is like the air I breathe. He is the source of my happiness and hope.*" Adane started evening classes and now wants to send his son to a good school. Some young fathers, like Adane, become more responsible, but others provide little or no support.

Young people who have been through separation or divorce feel wary of entering new relationships. This is particularly true of young women who have been in abusive relationships. Many hope for a better relationship but are worried about how a future husband will treat their children.

Improving their lives through work and education

“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. **”**

Soreti, young woman aged 24, Leki

Many separated or divorced young people want to improve their lives through education and work. Young women who left school several years earlier have limited hope of returning to their education. Most have children and feel it is hard to combine this with education. But some young mothers, like Soreti, were able to find work. They are, however, very dependent on their families for support, especially with child care, and young women who do not have that support face more challenges.

Policy recommendations

Divorce and separation among young married or cohabiting couples is a neglected topic for both policy and programming. Young people in these situations may be hard to reach, but their views are key to addressing this important problem. Further **research on divorce and separation is needed**, paying particular attention to what young women and men themselves have to say, and will contribute to the well-being of both the young people and any children they may have.

This study looked at the views and voices of both young women and young men. We found that young women's needs and wishes were often ignored, even when they were facing violence. Young men also had difficult times. They had more power in the relationship but were tied to unequal gender norms and struggled to play the role of provider. Young people who marry young often find themselves struggling financially and emotionally and are unprepared for adult relationships. Many end up divorced or separated. Often there are children involved.

The following recommendations are built on the findings from this study and the voices of the young people themselves. Figure 1 (see page 5) gives additional details. This section is divided into four sections – before marriage or cohabitation, during a couple's relationship, the process of divorce and separation, and the aftermath and process of moving on.

⁷ HRW reports from Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, UN Women VAWG database, Polavarapu 2016
https://drive.google.com/drive/u/2/folders/1oy9muiB0srF47o7_CueurJMq55ad7ZJH

Before marriage or cohabitation

We have seen that there are many drivers of early marriage, and that **poverty and constraining social and gender norms** play a major role. Ensuring that girls are not married under the age of 18 means reducing the pressures to marry before they are ready to do so.

1. Promote further use of schools as **platforms for social norm change and empowering young women and men** to avoid early marriage. Teach boys the importance of more equal relationships and violence prevention.
2. Improve knowledge about, and access to, **sexual and reproductive health for adolescents**, so that pregnancy does not precipitate couples into unplanned marriages for which they are not prepared and which can easily lead to separation or divorce.
3. Address the needs of the poorest young households by enhancing **social protection** programmes. Pay special attention to **young women from poor backgrounds**, and those at risk of rape or abduction.

During a couple's relationship

4. Promote **affordable housing** in urban areas and **access to land** in rural areas, as well as **training, employment and access to credit for small businesses**. These are all crucial in reducing the likelihood of disadvantaged couples separating under the stress of economic problems.
5. Promote better **access to high-quality day care, crèches and kindergartens**, particularly in work environments.

6. Provide **affordable and appropriate counselling and parent training** that is not biased towards keeping the couple together regardless of the woman's wishes.
7. Improve **access to safety for young women and their children** in cases of domestic violence, and work with **young husbands and fathers** to prevent violence and promote greater equality and a more equitable division of labour.

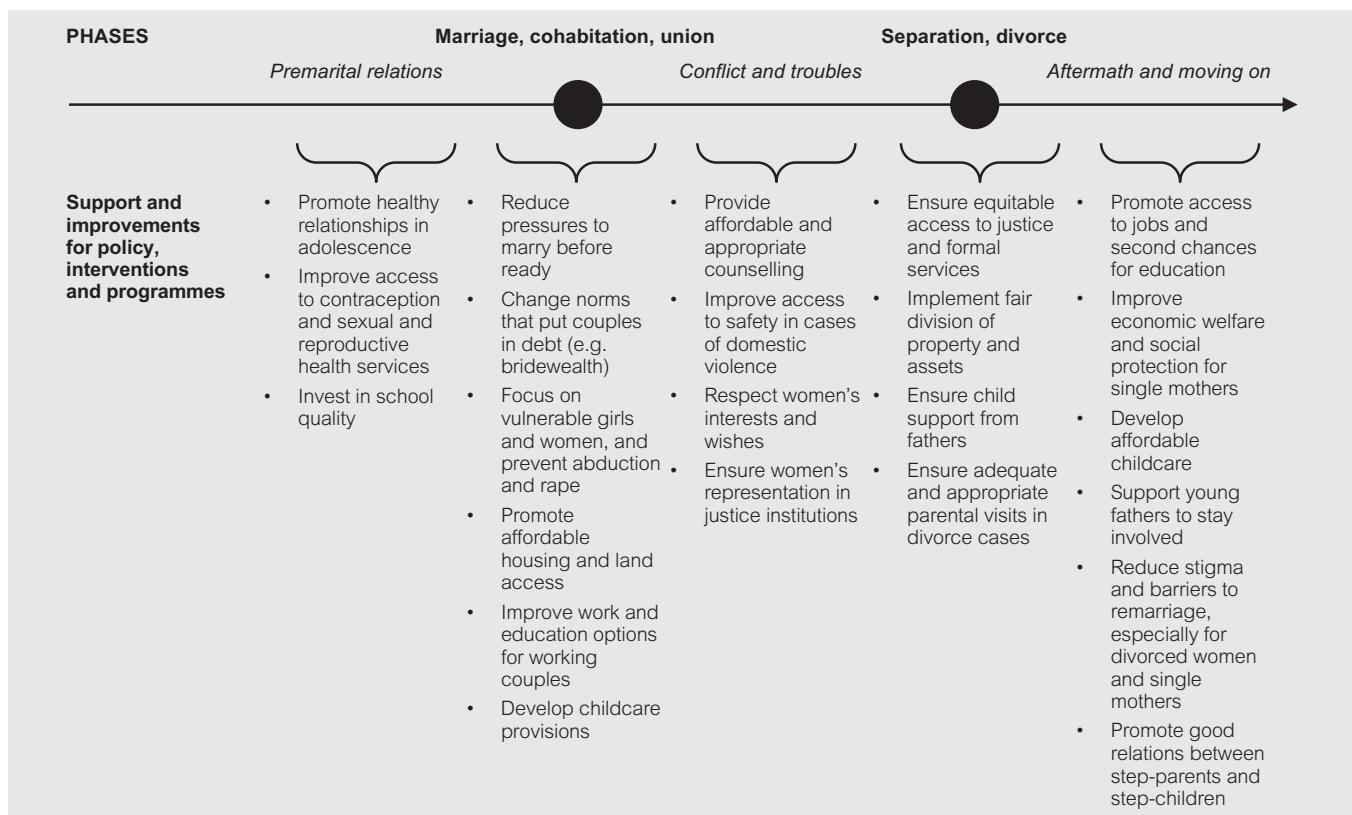
The process of divorce or separation

8. Ensure that divorced and separated young people, in particular young women, have access to **formal and informal justice systems**.
9. Implement **fair division of property and assets** and ensure that fathers agree to **support children** and that this is enforced. Ensure **adequate and appropriate** parental visits are agreed and observed in divorce cases.

The aftermath and process of moving on

10. **Young single mothers** face multiple challenges. Single mothers should be considered **priority beneficiaries** of housing and safety net programmes.
11. Support **young fathers** to stay involved through regular contact with their children, by giving them child support.
12. Reduce **stigma and barriers** to remarriage, especially for divorced women and single mothers, and promote good relations between children and **step-parents**.

Figure 1: Critical moments and potential interventions along the marriage-divorce pathway





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