Working Paper 193

Young Lives

When Things Fall Apart: Separation and Divorce Among Adolescents and Young Couples in Ethiopia

Alula Pankhurst and Gina Crivello

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Contents

	The authors	**4**
	Acknowledgements	**5**
	Summary	**6**
1.	**Introduction**	**7**
2.	**Young Lives study and data**	**11**
3.	**Study findings**	**13**
4.	**Conclusions and policy implications**	**31**
	References	**33**

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Summary

Separation and divorce among young people in low- and middle-income countries is a neglected topic within the field of child marriage, both globally and in Ethiopia. Evidence is limited about what contributes to divorce or separation, agency and decision-making in troubled relationships, access to support and services, and how these experiences alter the life trajectories of young people. This working paper contributes qualitative evidence from the Young Lives study in Ethiopia to address this gap. It asks: **How do young men and young women describe their experiences of divorce and separation, including their access to support, and the perceived impacts on their current and future lives? What are the impacts of poverty, age, gender and location on their differing experiences?** The analysed interview data are from 59 male and female youth with diverse relationship histories, in four rural and urban locations. The paper highlights the following research findings and reflects on their implications for policy and programming:

- Young people face challenges negotiating between customary values and expectations regarding marriage and modern values in which couples make their own decisions. They are caught between the desire for independence and the need for family support.
- Families continue to play an influencing role along all points of the marriage pathways of young people, including in divorce and separation. They played a crucial role in the pursuit of legal and social justice, rendering young women who lacked family support particularly vulnerable.
- Not everyone facing relationship troubles was able to access the help they needed.
- Young people gave a range of reasons for their separation or divorce. Recurring themes underpinning these reasons are the destabilising effects of poverty combined with unequal gender relations disempowering young women within these unions. The reasons and sources of conflict were frequently overlapping and interrelated.
- If informal means of reconciliation failed, some young people went to the social court in rural sites, or the women and children's affairs office in urban areas. Patriarchal attitudes meant that the priority was often to keep the couple together, and wives often came under pressure to go back to abusive husbands or unsatisfactory relationships.
- For some women who faced abusive husbands, separation gave a sense of relief and freedom. However, women who went back to live with their natal families with their children were sometimes badly treated because of the shame the family felt about the divorce.
- Separation and divorce triggered shifts in the lives of affected young people, who had to come to terms with numerous potential changes, including where and with whom they lived, their income and financial responsibilities, their family roles and relationships, and their social standing. These changes influenced their priorities and hopes for the future.
- Coming to terms both emotionally and practically with separation or divorce was difficult for most, especially when children were involved.

Life did not end for young people who separated or divorced, and many were active in seeking to improve their lives through work and education.

1. Introduction

In Ethiopia, first-time marriage and parenthood remain vital turning points in a person's life course and key markers in the gendered transition from childhood to adulthood. In past generations, marriage and motherhood in childhood was the social norm for girls, but this is increasingly seen as incompatible with expectations for modern childhood (Crivello, Boyden and Pankhurst 2019). The law prohibits girls and boys from marrying before age 18,[1] and any marriage before that age is considered a 'child marriage', one of several 'harmful traditional practices' that affect girls in particular.[2] In recent years, Ethiopia has garnered global attention for the progress it has made in reducing levels of child marriage, having set a goal to eliminate the practice throughout the country by 2025. Policy and programmes addressing child marriage have reflected this prevention agenda (Svanemyr et al. 2015).

Meanwhile, most research has focused on identifying the drivers, social determinants, and immediate impacts of child marriage on girls, but qualitative studies of the everyday lives of married girls and boys and young couples are scarce (Tafere et al. 2020); and few programmes have targeted married adolescents and youth (Erulkar and Tamrat 2014; Ketema and Erulkar 2018).

Even less is known about the pathways leading to divorce or separation for these early unions, and understanding of young people's strategies for coping and how these interact with local government interventions is also lacking (Siddiqi and Greene 2020). There has been very little investment and programmatic focus on the lives and well-being of divorced and separated young people, and there is much to learn about the influence of gender and other social factors on their varied experiences and outcomes.

Addressing these gaps, this working paper examines separation and divorce from the perspective of young women and young men with relevant experiences, based on multi-year and multi-sited qualitative research conducted by Young Lives in Ethiopia.[3] The paper addresses two inter-related research questions: **How do young men and young women describe their experiences of divorce and separation, including their access to support, and the perceived impacts on their current and future lives? What are the impacts of poverty, age, gender and location on their differing experiences?**

In Ethiopia, the Revised Family Code 2000 stipulates that a marriage involving persons below the age of 18 may be dissolved if an application is made, giving equal rights to spouses and requiring equal division of all assets between the husband and wife upon divorce (Tilson and Larsen 2000). However, as Ricker et al. (2020) argue, married adolescents frequently lack the legal, emotional, social and economic resources to use these laws to their own benefit. Indeed, our study found that the families of girls and young women

1 Ethiopian Revised Family Code 2000.

2 The National Strategy and Action Plan on Harmful Traditional Practices (HTPs) against Women and Children in Ethiopia adopted by the Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs in 2013, and the National Alliance to end Child Marriage and FGM/C have sought to stop early marriage, abduction and rape.

3 See www.younglives.org.uk (for details of the overall study) and www.younglives.org.uk/content/ethiopia (for information on the study in Ethiopia).

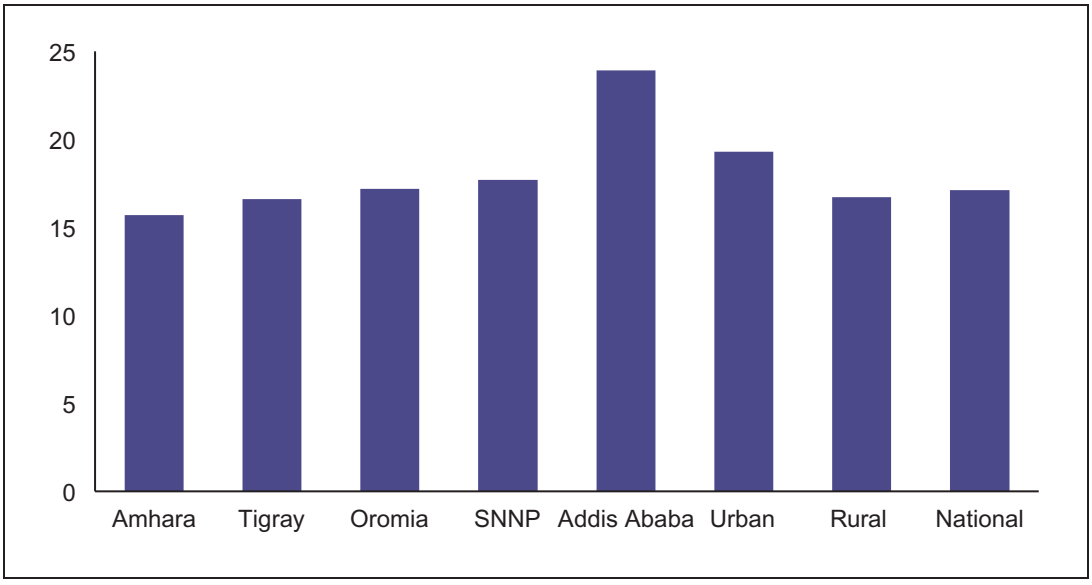
played a crucial role in the pursuit of legal and social justice, rendering young women who lacked family support particularly vulnerable.

The remainder of this introduction provides further information on the patterns of marriage, divorce and separation among young Ethiopians, then the next section describes Young Lives, the current study and the data sources used. This is followed by the research findings, in three sections: first, a discussion of changing marriage practices and young people's roles in decision-making; second, the main sources of conflict and reasons for divorce and separation; and third, the barriers and facilitators of reconciliation and support to affected young people. The conclusion reflects on the research findings and their implications for policy and programming.

1.1 Patterns of young marriage, divorce and separation in Ethiopia

Girls are less likely to marry before age 18 compared to the past. According to UNICEF (2018: 8), the percentage of women aged 20-24 years who were first married or in a union before age 18 has decreased from 75 per cent in 1980 to 40 per cent in 2015. The median age at first marriage among women aged 25-49 has increased slightly since 2011, from 16.5 years to 17.1 years (DHS 2016). However, there are significant regional and urban/rural variations, with urban women on average marrying 2.6 years later than rural women (Figure 1).

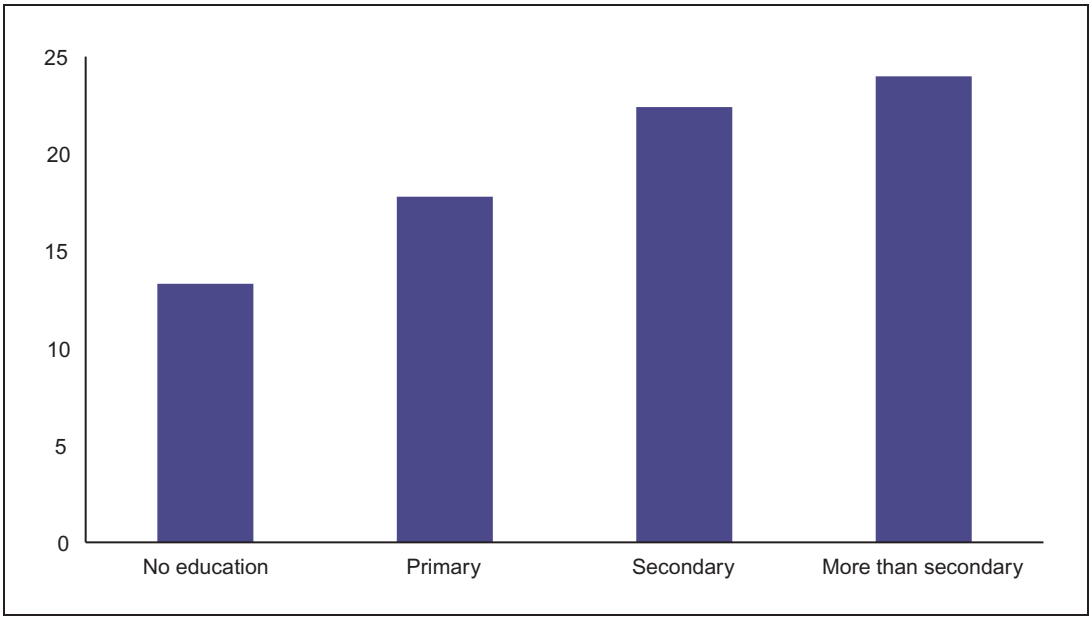
Figure 1. *Median age at first marriage by region (Young Lives locations) and rural/urban location*



Source: DHS 2016.

Moreover, the median age at first marriage increases significantly with greater education, from 16.3 years among women with no education to 24.0 years among women with more than a secondary education (Figure 2).

Figure 2. *Median age at first marriage among women aged 25-49*



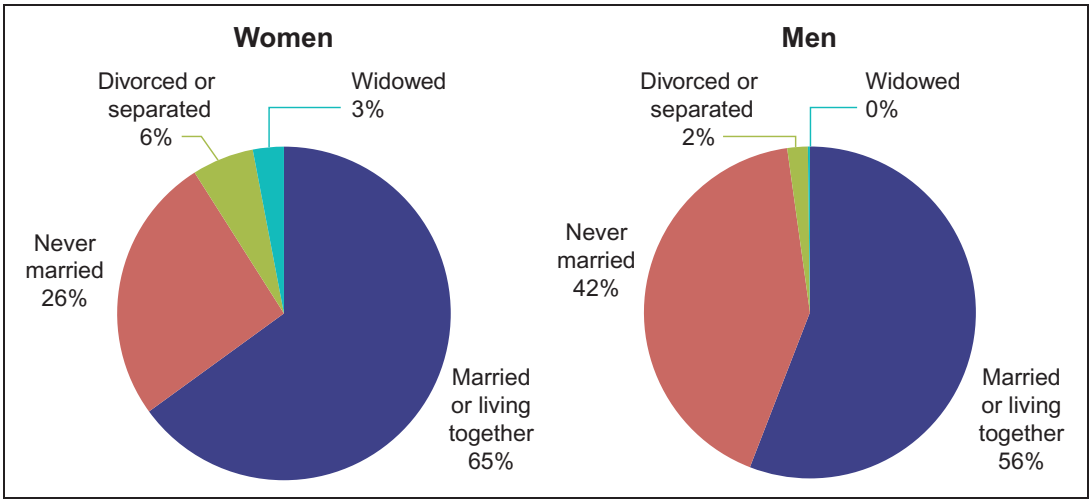
Source: DHS 2016: 67.

However, Ethiopia still has among the highest prevalence rates of child marriage in sub-Saharan Africa, with 15 million girls and women having married before age 18 (UNICEF 2018: 3).

Most of the literature on early and child marriage in Ethiopia highlights the norm of parental decision-making and forced marriage of teenage daughters to older men, and the related risks of abduction and rape (Jones et al. 2016; Presler-Marshall, Lyytikainen, and Jones 2016). However, there is growing recognition that this norm has changed to some extent, with young people making their own decisions to form relationships, cohabitate or marry, and even having children out of wedlock is becoming relatively more acceptable (Pankhurst, Tiumelissan, and Chuta 2016).

While the number of studies on child marriage has grown, there is very limited evidence both in surveys and in the ethnographic literature on divorce and separation among young couples in Ethiopia. The DHS 2016 data found that 4.9 per cent of women are divorced and 1.5 per cent are separated, compared to 1.8 per cent of men being divorced and 0.4 per cent separated (Figure 3).

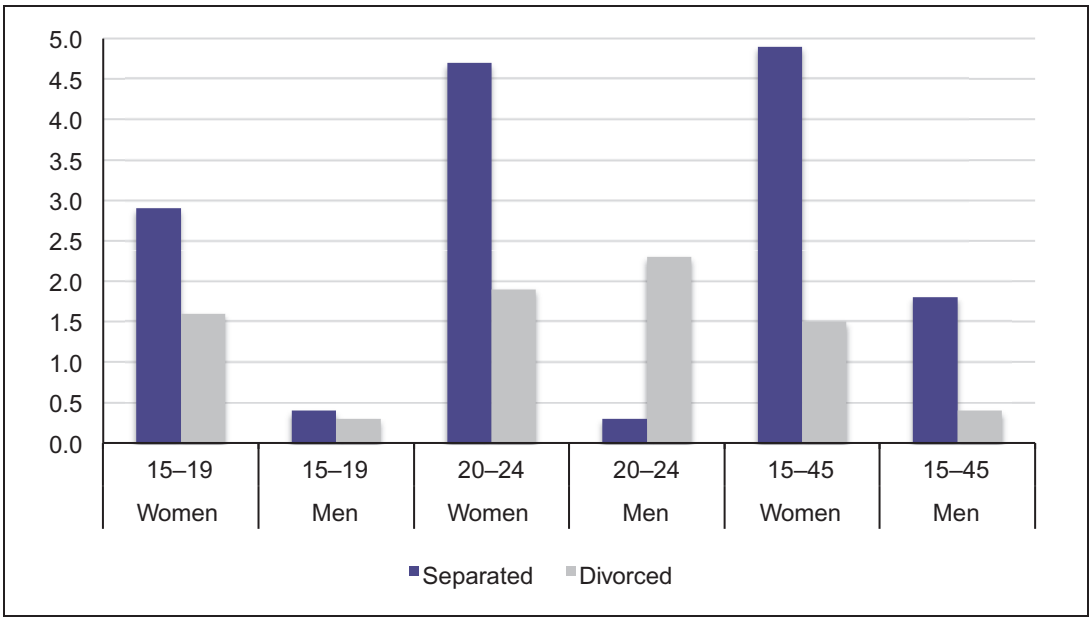
Figure 3. *Marital status by sex*



Source: DHS 2016: 65.

Rates of divorce and separation were relatively high among women in the youngest age groups, and divorce was particularly high among men in their early 20s (Figure 4).

Figure 4. *Divorce and separation by sex and age group*



Source: DHS 2016: 70.

A study using national survey data from 1990 found that early marriage had a significant impact on the risk of divorce, but that having a child within the first year of marriage reduced this risk (Tilson and Larsen 2000: 355). Marriage has been described as a fluid state in Ethiopia, with divorce particularly common among the Amhara (Askalemariam and Minwagaw 2013; Pankhurst 1992; Yohanis 2015) and in urban areas (Berhanu 2010; Mekonnen et al. 2019). Divorce was found to have negative economic impacts on divorced women (Shiferaw 1992; Serkalem 2006; Yohanis 2015), and was detrimental to their children

(Aster 2015; Tarekegn 2015). In one study, children fared worse after divorce in households where allocations favoured husbands over wives, with girls faring the worst (Kumar and Quisumbing 2012). Some studies addressed the social impacts, finding that divorce carried little social stigma (Tefera 1994), and that remarriage, including of women, was reportedly common after divorce (Fafchamps and Quisumbing 2005). Importantly though, most studies were based on adult perspectives and did not reflect the views of young people, including the potential stigma surrounding young single motherhood.

2. Young Lives study and data

The data used in this paper come from the Young Lives study of childhood poverty that has been running in Ethiopia since 2001, using surveys and qualitative research to follow the life trajectories of 3,000 girls and boys born in different parts of the country. Two age groups, and their households, participate; a Younger Cohort of 2,000 children born in 2001 and an Older Cohort of 1,000 children born in 1994, in five regions: the capital city, Addis Ababa, Amhara, Oromia, Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples, and Tigray.[4] The Young Lives sample is pro-poor, meaning that the wealthiest households were excluded, and while the sample is not strictly representative, it covers a diversity of social and economic circumstances and backgrounds in 20 sites across the country.

2.1 Young Lives survey

Between 2002 and 2016, Young Lives administered five rounds of surveys with the full sample of participants. The most recent surveys included questions about marital status and childbearing histories. By age 22 (in 2016), more than one in three of the young women had married (nearly half of them by age 18). In stark contrast, only 7 per cent of young men had married by age 18. National figures show that childbearing among female teenagers (13 per cent) differs markedly between rural (15 per cent) and urban areas (5 per cent) (DHS 2016). One in ten young women in the survey had given birth by age 18, rising to over 1 in 4 by age 22, but only 2 per cent of men had fathered a child by age 22 (Woldehanna, Araya, and Pankhurst 2018).

Analysis of the Young Lives survey (Briones and Porter 2019) found that girls from rural areas and from poorer households were more likely than their urban and better-off counterparts to be married or cohabiting or to have given birth in their teens. Less than 30 per cent of young women who married, cohabited or became pregnant as adolescents had achieved their secondary certificate by age 22 (Briones and Porter 2019: 18), and nearly 40 per cent had not had a say in who they married. On average, husbands were 7.2 years older than their wives, slightly higher than the national average of 6.6 years (DHS 2016).[5] Among the married youth in the study, 56 per cent of females compared to 83 per cent of males were working full time; 36 per cent of young women were neither studying nor working outside of the home (Woldehanna, Araya, and Pankhurst 2018: 3).

4 See Woldehanna and Pankhurst (2014) for details on the Young Lives sample in Ethiopia.

5 In Young Lives qualitative interviews, it was common for young people to forget their exact age or to not know the age of their spouses. All references to chronological age in this paper should be read in this context.

2.2 Current qualitative study

The findings in this paper relate to a series of qualitative studies conducted in Young Lives sites, including a longitudinal study (fives waves, between 2002-2019), and two studies focused on young marriage and parenthood.[6] There is significant overlap between the samples involved in these studies. The relevance of marriage and parenthood emerged when the cohorts reached adolescence. While the Younger Cohort were around 18 years old in 2019 during the fifth qualitative wave and the Older Cohort about age 25, for some the study's longitudinal design allowed us to track their marriage pathways across time.

Young couples faced a plethora of challenges in their relationships, sometimes leading to divorce or separation by early adulthood. In this paper, we explore the lived experiences of divorce and separation among young people, even though the survey suggests the numbers are small. The data are from Young Lives sites and were generated with original Young Lives participants, and new participants with similar backgrounds and relevant experience, also living in those sites. We selected four contrasting sites to focus on, located in Addis Ababa, Amhara, Oromia and Tigray.[7]

- **Bertukan**, an urban neighbourhood in Addis Ababa. This is in a poor area near the centre of the capital city where many residents rely on work in the informal sector.
- **Muz**, a rural village in Amhara where residents live mainly from agriculture. This site is fairly remote and 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. The site is about an hour's walk from a large town.
- **Zeytuni**, a rural village in Tigray where residents live from agriculture; youth earn income from irrigation, cobblestone production, and work in the construction of a local factory.

Fifty-nine respondents from across these sites were the focus of analysis for this paper (Table 1).

Table 1. *Respondents by site, region and sex*

Site	Region	Female	Male	Total
Bertukan	Addis Ababa	7	8	15
Leki	Oromia	12	7	19
Zeytuni	Tigray	13	7	20
Muz	Amhara	5	0	5
Total		**37**	**22**	**59**

6 Pathways to Marriage and Parenthood (PMAPS) was conducted in three rural sites, one each in Amhara, Oromia and Tigray, in 2016 and was funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (Tafere and Chuta 2016). The Young Marriage and Parenthood Study (YMAPS) was undertaken in the same two rural communities in Oromia and Tigray and in an urban site in Addis Ababa in 2018 and was funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) (Crivello and Mann 2020). The latest wave of longitudinal qualitative research was conducted in 2019 (funded by UNICEF) in three sites overlapping with PMAPS and YMAPS sites; these three sites are included in this paper.

7 The names of the communities have been anonymised and their locations below the regional level withheld to protect the identity of the respondents in accordance with the commitment Young Lives entered into.

Marriage among young people is most common in the Amhara and Tigray sites and least common in Addis Ababa, where the trend is toward informal cohabitation. Abduction (whether coerced or voluntary as a form of elopement), eventually leading to formal marriage, is widespread in the Oromia site. As we shall see, the socially expected forms of marriage payments and gift-giving that legitimate both formal and informal unions also vary between the four sites, as do the customs for dissolving these unions. The 59 cases were selected because they had reported relevant experiences of separation, divorce or relationship troubles (Table 2).

Table 2. *Respondents by marital status*

	Never-married	Married	Separated	Divorced	Total
Women	7	13	6	11	37
Men	8	2	5	7	22
Total	**15**	**15**	**11**	**18**	**59**

Some of the cases have been part of the longitudinal qualitative study since 2007. Interview data from selected spouses and caregivers, and from officials in the local women and children's affairs offices and the social courts, were also reviewed.[8] Ethical clearance for the study was secured from the University of Oxford and locally from the Ethiopian Society of Sociologists, Social Workers and Anthropologists, which is licensed to provide approval for social research. We analysed the data first for broad themes and social patterns, and then, for each case, to understand the factors shaping individual trajectories and experiences.

3. Study findings

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

Young people face challenges negotiating between customary values and expectations regarding marriage and modern values in which couples make their own decisions. These challenges are particularly poignant for adolescent girls, for whom marriage and motherhood are increasingly seen as incompatible with the expectations for modern girlhood (Crivello, Boyden and Pankhurst 2019). A growing discourse of female empowerment suggests significant expansion of 'choice' for girls in important life decisions like schooling, work and marriage. In all the sites, girls' decision-making in the marriage process has improved, certainly compared to their mothers and even their older siblings, and they have more choice and can, and often do, reject proposals brought to or by their parents. They also take matters into their own hands. For example, in Leki in rural Oromia, Nedi married when she was age 15 by 'choice', to spite her brother with whom she was in serious conflict:

[8] Social courts are established by the government but run by appointed local community people and address civil matters (Pankhurst and Assefa 2008).

> I was 15 years old when my brother beat me severely. My former husband requested me to marry him, but I refused at that time. When my brother tied my hands and beat me, as a revenge to my brother, I married my boyfriend and I joined him in his home.

Claims to have formed a union 'voluntarily' and 'with interest' must be understood within the wider context of economic and social pressures that push young people into these relationships in the first place. Indeed, 'consenting to marriage is almost never free of degrees of socio-cultural obligations, control of sexuality, persuasion, pressure, threat and force from different actors' (Mowri et al. 2020: 22). Close inspection of the circumstances and constraints surrounding the decisions of the young women and young men in this study suggests a complex, uneven, picture.

Despite a growth in recent years of campaigns to stop early marriages through schools, clubs, and women and children's affairs and youth offices, such efforts have not been wholly effective. Patriarchal norms continue to influence these institutions. In Zeytuni, the Tigray village, Zebenay failed to stop her marriage even though she appealed to the women and children's affairs office and to her school. Her well-to-do family arranged her marriage when she was 15 and a student in Grade 8 to a husband who was 26. Regardless of her appeal, and even having her uncle's support, her parents insisted on her marriage:

> I did not want to get married and asked the school administration to help me though they kept quiet. Then I could not do anything but get married without my choice. If the school had supported me, I could have possibly continued my education. [I] think the teachers themselves had a backward mind-set … I said, "I don't want to get married, I want to continue my education", but they refused and forced me. The school administration also did not help me when I wrote them an appeal letter. Then I accepted it as my fate.

In many other cases, poverty and insecurity drove girls to marry in the hopes of an improved livelihood. Sometimes girls were married because their families had made a commitment to another family to provide a bride, as in the case of Chaltu in Leki. Chaltu's older sister died a year into her marriage, and under the local custom of *membeto* (substitution for a deceased sister) the husband requested that his in-laws provide him with another wife. He was given another older sister, then aged 16, but she escaped before the ceremony and Chaltu was offered as a substitute since all the wedding arrangements were already made. When Chaltu objected, she was told that marriage is a 'chance' rather than a choice and that she should accept her fate. Her parents orchestrated her abduction by the man's family, and she was married, aged 14, to a man of 40. This example shows that girls even within the same family exerted differing capacities to resist and escape forced marriages.

Families also arranged girls' marriages when they feared they might become sexually active and to avoid pregnancy and childbearing outside of marriage, with social stigma attached to having a *diqala* (bastard) child. Taboos surrounding female premarital sex rendered marriage a strategy to protect unmarried adolescent girls from spoiling their own and their family's honour. Related to this, girls who dropped out of school or were doing badly were sometimes pressurised by parents to marry, and some, like Mebrat, felt they had no option to resist.

> I mean, I had no other option because I was not a student at that time … I was out of school and I at least had to be a married girl … [M]y parents were happy to see me marry. (Mebrat, married aged 20, Zeytuni)

While cases of forced marriages were reported in all three rural sites, there were no 'forced' marriages reported in Addis Ababa. However, challenging circumstances also surrounded those unions initiated by young people and said to be motivated by 'love'. Unplanned pregnancy was a major factor behind couples moving in together, leading many young men to report feelings of being trapped and unprepared to take on the responsibilities of family breadwinner.

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

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

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

In some cases, men resisted pressures to marry but continued to have a relationship and children. For instance, Kokeb, from Bertukan in Addis Ababa, had three children with a sports teacher she met at a youth club, but he never committed to living with her, claiming he did not have sufficient income to set up a household.

The pathways leading young people to marriage are therefore many, and practices are changing. Formal marriages through wedding ceremonies remain common practice in rural areas, following traditional procedures which require marriage payments, whereas cohabitation has become more common in urban areas. It was still common for parents to arrange marriages in the Amhara and Tigray sites, although often consulting their daughters, but less so in the community in Oromia, where young couples often eloped to avoid family-arranged marriages. That said, the expansion of education, work, social media and urbanisation have provided increased opportunities and contexts for young people in all four sites to get to know each other and make their own decisions about forming relationships (Pankhurst, Tiumelissan and Chuta 2016). It was common for male and female youth to pursue friendships and intimate relationships prior to marriage, sometimes, but not always, of a sexual nature or leading to formal marriage. There was considerable social anxiety in urban areas among the adult generations regarding environmental and social threats, including bars, *shisha* and *khat* houses,[9] and sex video shops, which are believed to push adolescents into risky activities and early pregnancy.

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

3.1.1 *Families retain a crucial influencing and supporting role*

Young people remain heavily reliant on their families for social approval and for resourcing and arranging their marriages according to local custom, although most wish to have a say in whom and when they marry. In the rural sites, elders were sent by the parents of the groom to the bride's parents and negotiations were made over marriage payments unless the parents were very poor. The customs of marital gift exchange varied between the four sites (Tafere et al. 2020).[10] In practice, the amounts of marriage endowments varied according to wealth, and these have become less important. Couples sometimes received land allocations from the government, and poorer households made do with a small wedding feast, as explained by Rihisti from Zeytuni:

> It depends on your capacity; there are people who invite many people, prepare a big ceremony and give as much as 20,000 birr and even farmland. There are also people who don't prepare anything or have a small ceremony, like us. My mother gave me different traditional decorated plates and a basket of *injera* [traditional flatbread] which I prepared myself. She also brought me 200 kg of *teff* [flour].

However, family support was often crucial for young couples to establish viable households, to provide a plot of land and a means of livelihood, and as a source of childcare, so that couples forming unions or marriages without family support were more prone to separate. Not providing expected endowments, unkept promises about later payments, and the inability of poor husbands to pay bridewealth were common sources of marital tension and instability.

3.1.2 *Seeking justice in cases of rape and pregnancy*

Reports of abduction and rape were relatively rare and were often kept secret from girls' families until it became impossible to hide their pregnancies. Families played an important role in seeking reparations when girls became pregnant and when they were coerced into having sex. Several families took their cases to the social court when the father of the child could be identified. In Zeytuni, for example, Letay was imprisoned for a month and ordered to have a genetic test in the regional capital, but this was expensive (16,000 birr); instead he agreed to acknowledge paternity and pay 6,000 birr for the lawyer and 6,000 birr compensation costs at the time of the child's baptism.

Also in Zeytuni, Goitom had a relationship when he was 19 with a 17-year-old girl he met at the irrigation scheme where they worked. When she became pregnant her family made her tell them who the father was and they took the case to the police and court, claiming Goitom had forced her to have sex. His family sent elders to negotiate for marriage; he bought her a dress, the case was closed, and they got married. Even in cases of pregnancy from consensual sexual relations, many parents took their cases to the police and social court to force negotiations for a marriage settlement.

10 In Tigray and Amhara endowments are provided, ideally matching contributions of livestock and land, grain and sometimes cash in Amhara, and more contributions from the bride's side as a dowry in Tigray, often involving household equipment. Dresses and jewellery for the bride are also expected. In Oromia, bridewealth (*gabbarra*) in the form of livestock and/or cash is expected to be provided by the groom's family to the bride's parents, and in cases of marriage by abduction or 'voluntary abduction' if the couple chose to elope, a reconciliatory payment (*gaaddissa*) is required, eventually followed by the bridewealth payment to formalise the marriage.

In Leki, Soreti was 15 years old when she became pregnant by a man she did not know. She says she was tricked by her friends into meeting him and he took advantage of her, but she did not tell anyone until she could no longer hide her pregnancy. The man denied paternity and fled the locality. Her family put pressure on her to attempt *aseenna,* a local practice whereby an unmarried girl attempts to compel an unmarried man into marriage by secretly entering his home, uninvited; the custom requires his family to accept her and their marriage. However, her attempt failed because his family ordered the neighbourhood children to throw stones at her to prevent her from entering. She recalled:

> After this, my parents went to take the issue to court, but they were asked [by his family] to terminate the court process so that it could be solved in a traditional manner with elders in the area. They then dealt with the family of the boy and were able to get five livestock and 6,000 birr in cash. Now, the livestock belong to me. The elders ruled this because he confessed to [taking] my virginity [after a DNA test], and they actually made him accept that the baby belongs to him.

Such payments and compensation were meant to provide young women in these circumstances with assets that they could take into their next relationship and possibly allow them to marry in the future. But not everyone had access to justice. In Bertukan, Meaza, a young domestic worker, was raped by her employer and when she returned home, her mother blamed her for becoming pregnant and kicked her out as a punishment. She resorted to commercial sex work to survive:

> Can you imagine being raped and then having a baby with no father!?! … I was like a mad person, I started to drink alcohol, chew *khat*, doing a lot of stupid things! At the same time, I had no one to understand my problem and to provide me any kind of support except one friend …

It was difficult for both young mothers and for those coerced or forced into having sex to seek justice through either formal or informal channels if they lacked the support of family who could champion their case.

3.2 Not one but many possible reasons for separation and divorce

Young people gave a range of reasons – spanning developmental, social and economic factors – leading to their separation or divorce (Table 3). Recurring themes underpinning these reasons are the destabilising effects of poverty combined with unequal gender relations disempowering young women within these unions. The reasons and sources of conflict were frequently overlapping and interrelated.

Table 3. *Young people's reasons for divorce and separation*

Developmental • Too young for a long-term relationship • Unprepared, immature **Economic** • Unreliable income in the informal sector • Accidents and livelihood shocks • Unaffordable housing rent • Insufficient income to establish a separate household	**Social** • Husbands not wanting wives 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 not providing support for couples to establish separate livelihoods

The decision to separate or divorce was sometimes mutually agreed as the best option, rather than a grave point of disagreement. Many young people reflected on their experience and reasoned that they were **not prepared to shoulder the responsibilities of married life**. Afework, for example, in Bertukan, moved with his girlfriend into their own place, despite their families' disapproval. They lasted about a year but then decided to return to their respective families. Looking back, Afework described that phase in life as the "age of fire", meaning they were adolescents and made the rash decision to live together without having thought through the consequences.

Similarly, with hindsight, Bilen, also from Bertukan, felt that she should have been going to school at the time that she married:

> What I know now is that I was not mature enough to get married at that time … The age I gave birth at 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.

The experiences of young men and women suggest that greater agency among the younger generation to lead on decisions about forming relationships and seeking independence can later come at a cost when young people are insufficiently supported by the economic and social resources needed to sustain their relationships.

Poverty and lack of resources prohibited some couples who wanted to start a life together from marrying or cohabiting and made it difficult to sustain living arrangements they could not afford. In the urban site, **finding affordable housing** for couples was a common barrier, and inability to pay rent was sometimes a reason for separation even though they may have wanted to live together, especially when they had children. The head of the childcare and protection unit in the *wereda* (district) women and children's affairs office, explained:

> The biggest challenges are income and housing. This is the reason why they struggle to live. They may not have food to eat and in between the girl can get pregnant. Some of the couples start living with their parents in *kebele*[11] [low-cost government] houses ... if someone lives with someone for three to six months, the law considers them as married and whether they cohabit or marry the situation is the same … The cases that couples, especially women, bring … are mostly about housing and income.

In the rural site in Tigray, **lack of sufficient income to set up a household** was also a major reason for not starting to live together and in many cases young men and women postponed marriage in the hope that they would be able to save or find better jobs. In cases where the couple had a child, several young men felt they could not yet afford to live with the mother of their child. Young couples were very much dependent on parental families to provide them with access to land to at least build a house, and livestock, notably access to oxen to plough with, and those whose families were resource-poor or who came from families of single or divorced parents found it all the more difficult.

Livelihood issues were pressing in both rural and urban settings. In Addis Ababa, many young men relied on insecure or irregular work in the informal sector, and some faced shocks, including accidents or loss of jobs, that undermined their ability to live together and

11 The *kebele* is the lowest level of government administration.

bring up children. Afework, whose informal work buying and selling phones was unreliable, explained:

> I think that was one of the factors that led to our separation. I was doing only freelance work and I didn't have a sustainable income. You know, sometimes I get good money like 8,000 birr at once and I am able to afford the house rent and something to consume together. But it comes to an end, the business may not come again, and then we fall into trouble. That was really challenging.

Loss of livelihoods also contributed to separation and divorce. Belay from Bertukan had a leg injury, could no longer work and was unable to pay rent, so he asked his wife to return to her family while he started living in a temporary shelter with friends. Similarly, Beyene, a taxi driver also from Bertukan, lost his means of livelihood after crashing his taxi, and his wife lost her job in the café she worked in, leading to their separation.

Some young men who got government **jobs away from their home** area also found it difficult to support a family. This was a source of conflict in the case of the husband of Yeshi from Muz in Amhara, who was assigned to a teacher training college away from where they were living and could not support his wife and daughter, who remained with his mother-in-law, leading to their separation.

Unequal gender and power relations reflecting patriarchal norms underpinned and were intertwined with these economic and livelihood factors, affecting decision-making and control over resource use and the division of labour within households; these were common tensions that often led to separation or divorce. Men held sway in **decisions about women's work**, and most required their wives to stop earning after they married or gave birth. Many women did not want to be financially dependent on their husbands but had little power to challenge male prerogative. For example, Fikirte from Bertukan left school, began to work in a shop and then began cohabiting with the owner, who asked her to be his wife. He no longer wanted her to work and employed someone else, insisting that she remain at home. In her view:

> If the couple doesn't have sufficient income, that makes life difficult. If you are dependent on him, it becomes difficult to always depend on his income. My husband didn't want me to work and earn money. We can see this in many men that they don't want their wives to work and earn money, which is such a bad thing. They assume if a wife has money, she will undermine the husband, which is not true.

Similarly, in Zeytuni, Zebenay wanted to work outside the home but her husband threatened to divorce her if she did:

> He said that if I start a paid job, it will be the end to our marriage … [B]ecause a married woman is not allowed to have a paid job; it is not the norm in this area … I cannot do whatever I need because I receive money from my husband, I don't have my own money, while those who are not married can be hired in a paid job and buy whatever they want using their salary.

Husbands not wanting their wives to work was also partly related to them wishing to **control wives' movements and prevent them from socialising** out of jealousy and fear that they might become involved in extra-marital affairs. For example, the husband of Aster from Bertukan became increasingly controlling and attempted to cut her off from the outside world:

> At first, he was allowing my friends to take me to places to relax and to spend time with them. Later on, he started to control me, [how I] dress[ed] and where I should spend my time and so on. He didn't want me to go out of the home … After I gave birth … I was at home for the whole day for four years; but when the baby started going to school, I started to get time to meet my friends and just spend time outside of the home … They thought that if a woman wears modern style, that means she has started [a] relationship with another man outside of home. So, they thought a woman should stay at home all the time … when I wanted to visit my friends, he was not happy. He was telling me that they should come to my home and I shouldn't go to them. This had caused a lot of conflict among us.

As noted above, some of the women wanted to work outside the home to have an independent source of income and not to have to constantly ask their husbands for money. Wives accused their husbands of not being hardworking and not providing enough for household expenses and for their personal needs.[12] For instance, Mebrat from Zeytuni was disappointed that her husband was not striving to improve their lives. She said he never had money to give her for household expenses or for her clothing and hair products, and she felt she could not dress well like her peers. Thus, **failure to meet the responsibilities of male breadwinner** was a source of arguments among young couples, and men were accused of abusing income for their personal needs and wants, especially alcohol, which sometimes led to violence and/or allegations of adultery by both parties.

Reports of male partners spending money on drink, staying out late, coming home drunk and disturbing neighbours, and **becoming abusive and violent**, were evident in all four sites.[13] For example, Fikirte decided to divorce her husband after he became abusive, on one occasion hitting her with a steel rod; she escaped with her child to her family in the countryside and later found a job in a café:

> [O]ne day, he threw a metal rod to hurt me … The metal passed by my head to the wall next to me. At that time, I immediately understood that I shouldn't have married this guy. I should have gone back to my parent's home. I felt it was totally wrong to stay with this man. Then, I left to [go to] my mum's home.

In situations like Fikirte's, extended family was a crucial source of support, but **family relations** could also be a source of problems. Tensions between spouses were often related to the view that one partner was closer to their family, or that in-laws were interfering and sometimes wanting the couple to separate.[14] In the rural sites, marriage gifts were a distinct source of strain on relationships. In the Amhara site, the husband of Hareg did not use the money provided to him for a dowry to help his wife open a shop as he had promised, which created tensions between them and was a factor leading to their divorce. In contrast, Heran from the same location did not receive the money promised by her parents at her wedding for her husband to build her a house, but only a heifer. Her parents reasoned that her husband

12 This was cited as a major reason for divorce in other studies (Berhanu 2010).

13 Alcohol addiction was also seen as a major reason for divorce in other studies (Askalemariam and Minwagaw 2013; Berhanu 2010; Mekonnen et al. 2019).

14 Parental interference was also seen found as a major reason for divorce in the study by Askalemariam and Minwagaw (2013).

had gone back on his promise to allow Heran to continue going to school and therefore he did not deserve more money.

Finally, young people cited **lack of love or commitment** as a factor contributing to the breakdown of their relationships. They ranked love and mutual understanding as key ingredients for a good marriage, while money alone, they believed, was insufficient in the making of a good relationship. Although lack of love was not a prime reason for breaking up, love was likened to the glue that held couples together. In Leki, for example, Kumsa was pressured into marrying at age 21 a woman he did not love despite having a girlfriend at the time who he preferred to marry:

> Love is the most important and the first thing. It is after love that money becomes important. Love is a must. If there is no love between them even though they have money, that money might be lost because of lack of love … If there is love, they can generate money. Unless there is understanding between them, they cannot have a better livelihood.

In the same community, 19-year-old Kenene started a relationship at age 15 and was later abandoned by the father of her child. Describing the foundations of a happy marriage, she suggested material well-being was also important:

> I think it is important to sustain the love that exists between them … More than anything, understanding each other is the most important … Love alone is not enough when there is nothing at your hand to make living. When you have nothing, your love deteriorates after a while … but wealth and love are complementary.

The view that love and material security went hand in hand in a good marriage was widespread among divorced and separated youth. Yet their capacities to overcome the challenges of poverty were constricted by unequal gender relations and norms that reinforced young women's dependence on their male partners and on their families.

3.3 Reconciliation – making amends and securing a future

Not everyone experiencing relationship troubles accessed formal mechanisms of reconciliation. It was common for young people to make attempts to mend their troubled relationships before deciding to separate or divorce, with most couples first attempting to resolve their differences among themselves; if this did not succeed, friends and family and elders were brought in. If informal means failed some then went to the social court in rural sites and the women and children's affairs office in the urban areas.

Fears of social judgements and stigma deterred some people from involving others when trying to resolve conflict. Bilen tried in vain to talk to her husband about his behaviour and did not want to involve anyone since she did not believe they could help and she wanted to avoid gossip:

> I discussed it with no one else; once I thought that the marriage didn't work, I decided myself. I had tried to resolve it by talking with him. I had told him not to come home late and not to spend time on silly things. But he didn't listen to me … they can't do anything to help me; they have nothing to do in my personal life except that they would make us the centre of gossip.

Likewise, Lielti from Zeytuni did not even tell her parents when she got divorced since she had made her own decision to get married. Others went to friends who helped bring about reconciliation, as in the case of Adane from Bertukan:

> I went to my friend when I had been in conflict with her and stayed for some three days … I shared the problem I was having with her. Then, he mediated between us and we did reconcile … He arranged separate discussions with her and with me; then, he reconciled us.

In most cases, and especially if matters were beyond immediate repair by the couple, elders were brought in to try to reconcile them. However, since these elders were generally male and had patriarchal attitudes, priority was frequently placed on keeping the couple together, and wives often came under pressure to go back to abusive husbands (Pankhurst 2006; Pankhurst and Assefa 2008). Fikirte was reconciled through elders who came to her parents with mediators so the husband could apologise, but his later behaviour did not change. Fikirte realised that if she went back to her parents she would be pressurised to stay with him again so when he came home drunk and threatened her with a knife she quickly left with a few personal items and her bank account details, and switched off her phone. Given societal patriarchal biases women came under a lot of pressure, not just from the husband's family and the elders but also from their own parents, to be reconciled and stay in troubled relationships, as Hadas from Zeytuni recalled:

> … they were opposing me and 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.

3.3.1 Divorce and separation processes

In many cases, especially if they have not been together long or if they are cohabiting informally, couples may simply separate without a formal agreement. Formal divorce was difficult to obtain in cases where one party, usually the man, left and was untraceable, such as in the cases of Meaza and Seble, both from Bertukan, whose spouses had another partner or wife. In some cases, women who faced abuse did not want to see or have anything to do with the man: "I didn't want to say a single word to him … I just wanted him to disappear out of my face" (Bilen, from Bertukan). In other cases, women feared violence, such as Aster who reported her husband to the community police for protection and was relieved when her husband was banned from contacting her. Sometimes one party may resist entering a formal separation process in the hope that they may be reconciled with their spouse or partner. For example, Adane, who had been living with his son for seven months after his wife went back to her parents, hoped he and his wife would get back together.

3.3.2 Formal processes

However, when property and children were involved the cases were usually resolved by the courts, and if there was violence, initially the police. Again, these institutions sometimes reflected patriarchal biases and at first tried to push women to be reconciled, as Hadas, from Zeytuni, suggested: "… we have tried to solve it by going to police and community court, and they told us to make peace and not fight, but now I refused."

Young women who did not have a strong voice or who lacked family backing were at a disadvantage. Local government officials were keen to avoid divorce. The expert in charge of recording key events in the *tabia* (local administrative unit) in the rural site in Tigray was proud of their low divorce rates, as elders tried to get women to agree to reconciliation:

> Couples present their divorce requests and they come to the social court but the elders try to end with an agreement among the couples as long as the woman is convinced. So, … we have a low divorce record … we have only one recorded divorce this year.

Likewise, in the Addis Ababa site, the women, children and youth officer noted that they first tried to reconcile couples before sending them to the justice office, which takes the cases to court.

In the rural sites, divorce negotiations were often partly about returning marriage payments and endowments in the form of land, livestock, household equipment and cash. Goitom, from Zeytuni, was asked to return the 2,000 birr given to him on marriage. Although he tried to argue that they had spent the money, his father paid it back.

In principle, during divorce negotiations, each party takes back what they brought into the marriage. In Zeytuni, Mebrat had land from her parents, her husband had his own land, and they each retained their respective plots on separation. Similarly, Goitom's father had provided a cow and 200 birr, while his wife's parents had provided a cow and an ox. Each side took back the livestock they had brought into the marriage and they divided the household equipment between them.

In Leki, Nedi had left her husband because he was a violent drunk. They had two children together (aged 6 and 8). Though they were Muslim she did not have a *Nika* 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 to court. He took all of their property, including cattle, a TV and 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 for support.

In the urban site, cohabiting couples who had not lived together long often had little property in common, and as Bilen noted, the separation was therefore simple. Sometimes, the divisions follow gendered norms that favour the man. For instance, Beyene, in Bertukan, said her partner took the TV, cabinet and his clothes and she took the kitchen items. Property acquired while living together should be divided equally; however, there were also cases of men trying to take more than their fair share. After Aster reported her violent partner to the police, he wanted to take the TV and satellite dish but since they had acquired them while together, she was able to retain them and he only took his clothes.

In other cases, while the agreement seemed to be equitable, there were still risks to women's legal rights. Hadas said they divided the property equally and they agreed for him to keep the house and she got the land. However, when pressed by the researcher she mentioned that the land certificate was in his name and that she had not realised this might be a problem. She also admitted that the loan they took which still needed to be paid was in her name; she added that although he said he would pay, this was not written down in the divorce settlement.

If the couple had not lived together long and had not established their own home, they often returned to their respective parental homes where this was possible. In the Addis Ababa site, some women remained in the kebele government house, as the man was the one to leave or it was registered in her name, as in the cases of Aster and Bilen. However, the legal rights to property were sometimes an issue if the accommodation was registered in a relative's name, and some women feared eviction. For instance, Seble was living with her 6-month-old daughter in a kebele house registered in the name of her aunt, who had moved to a condominium. She feared eviction and appealed to the kebele and even to the Prime Minister's office.

3.4 Consequences and aftermath of divorce and separation

3.4.1 Psychosocial impacts

Coming to terms both emotionally and practically with separation or divorce was difficult for most, especially when children were involved; nevertheless, experiences and attitudes varied.

In some cases, the end of a relationship initially led to feelings of depression. Adane from Bertukan recalled his state of mind and acute sense of loss, "I have stopped saving after she left because I feel I have no future and I have lost my personality. I can't be happy now that I am just struggling to survive the day." Similarly, Debebe, also from Bertukan, at first felt depressed but gradually came to terms with it, "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."

The initial circumstances of the marriage and the reasons for separation or divorce no doubt affected young people's varied experiences. For some women who faced abusive husbands, the separation gave a sense of relief and freedom. Bilen rejoiced, "You know, now I sleep in peace. Now, I have mental peace and I spend the nights safely." Others glimpsed a positive future when they had a means to support themselves and their children. In rural Leki, 17-year-old Soreti, who had a child out of wedlock, described how she was socially and materially deprived as a result of her pregnancy, until she was able to find work:

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

However, women who went back to live with their families with their children were sometimes badly treated because of the shame the family felt about the divorce. For example, Kokeb had three children from the same man, who refused to live with her. Her siblings with whom she lived disrespected and abused her and her brother beat her children, yet she saw no way to escape this servitude:

> I will just give up and stay a slave of my family … If he doesn't want me, who else can need me? I will have no choice than to become servant. I will tell to my family to consider me as their donkey and put anything on my shoulder and beat me as much as they can … everything in life becomes successful when the mind is in peace and a mother needs peace more than anybody else.

Divorced women, especially if they had children, often faced disrespect from the community, and the derogatory label *diqala* (bastard) was sometimes used to disparage their children.

3.4.2 Children and parenting

The main issues that arose were child custody, with the general assumption that mothers would keep the children, and the social courts playing a role in ensuring that paternal responsibility is recognised if this is denied and enforcing child support. Beyene mentioned that this was self-evident and customary: "It was obvious that my son had to stay with his mother and the court decided that he should be with his mother. That is the norm." Similarly, Goitom reported that when he and his wife got divorced, **"**They said [my son] had to stay with his mother and when he grows up, he may live with whom he chooses to live". This was also the position of the government officers, for example, the women and children's affairs officer and the social courts, that considered this to be in the best interest of the child until they are an adult or of an age to make the decision.

However, there were some exceptions of a child remaining with the father or with the father's family. In Adane's case, he had assumed his wife would take their son with her when they separated and she returned to her parents, but she told him her family would not have "a good attitude towards the child". His family in another town offered to keep the child but he did not want to be separated from his son, saying, "my son is like the air I breathe, he is the source of my happiness and hope." It was a struggle at first, he said, 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. But I could understand that it was difficult for her to take him with her. So, I accepted her decision and I was leaving my baby with the neighbours [to be watched].

In a case in Leki, a young mother abandoned her 6-month-old baby at home alone and fled the area. For 23-year-old Feyisa, the baby's father, this was grounds for divorce:

> After she left the baby at home alone, I went to the kebele to report her and the crime that she committed against the baby … I wanted to go to the police station, since it is considered a serious crime, and they could sue her for doing this. After some time, her family took the baby with them so the baby could be raised with her mother. But after some time, she left the baby with her parents. I usually buy and send baby clothes with people, but I can't see the baby face-to-face because her family suspects that I might take the baby for myself.

Some young men who had children without getting married or had separated from their partners expressed a strong sense of paternal responsibility. For instance, Debebe was not sure the child was his, so had a DNA test at a private clinic; thereafter he accepted his responsibility for his child and committed to being part of his life:

> Once I accepted him, I prioritise his needs rather than mine. It is good to fully commit yourself to your child … He is the most important priority I have in my life. Previously, I was enjoying myself with friends but now I have to think of him … He should understand that I am his father. I am afraid that they may create some bad image in his mind about me … He knows me very well; he is happy to see me. He also knows that I am his father. Since he is a little child, he only knows what I do for him currently. But later, I don't know what kind of sentiment he may develop towards me.

The regularity of visits depended to some extent on the relative harmony of relations after the separation or divorce. For example, Goitom was unable to visit his son since his ex-wife's father hated him, so he relied on his ex-wife to bring the child to an agreed location. Similarly, Bereket, a divorced father in Bertukan, saw his 3-year-old daughter when her mother brought her to him on Sundays:

> I see her each Sunday. It may take longer than that. I do not like to mix with her family. I do not like to pay visit to relatives from the very beginning. She brings her to me. I do not want to see her by going there, to mix there. She is not old enough for recreation of many types. When she brings her, I buy her what is necessary for her. I play with her and she goes.

Some separated or divorced young men felt a renewed sense of purpose and wanted to concentrate their energies on supporting their children: Bereket commented:

> You feel happy … it is a must that you should save money ... It is a must that you work. Many things must be done … For me when you got a child you get a purpose you are living for. When I work, I know why I work. Even though I am tired all day I know why I am tired. Your life will have a meaning.

Others, such as Debebe, felt a new sense of responsibility and the need to rethink their lives and mature to be able to care for their children:

> To speak frankly, I am have become a mature person after [having my child] … It helped me to grow ahead of my age. Previously, I only used to worry about myself. But now, I have to worry about my son first. I include him in every plan I have in my life. It helped me to see life from different angles.

For a few, having a child acted as a wake-up call to give up bad habits and become more responsible, as in Efrem's experience:

> At that time, I was desperate because I couldn't continue my education. I was spending whatever I had to drink alcohol with many friends. I was in trouble and was highly addicted. But now I have come back to my mind. I don't spend much time with those friends … I actually chew *khat* still, but it is not similar to what I was doing before. I know that the child expects a lot from me in the future, so I am preparing myself for such responsibility. Thanks to God now my behaviour is changed … I was shocked at the time the child came but later it was not bad because it changed me to a better situation. I came out of such a bad situation because of the child.

At the same time, some fathers provided little or no support, for a variety of reasons. For example, Debebe knew that his partner's family was able to look after their child, but regardless he wanted to be part of his child's life. He bought the child his uniform for nursery:

> **What do you contribute for him?**
>
> [My in-laws] actually do everything he needs. I also do what I can.
>
> **You told me that the child doesn't expect much from you because his grandparents are rich?**
>
> Yes, they are, but I don't stop doing at least something for him. I am not happy if they say they can do everything for him … I don't want to be out of the picture. I want to make some contribution.

Similarly, Efrem knew the grandmother of his child was well off and did not need his support, but he often took fruit, charcoal, or money for his milk, explaining, "I do it because I feel good doing something for him."

The local authorities take a strong interest in protecting children's rights in cases of separation and divorce. In the site in Addis Ababa, the women and children's affairs office helped to secure child support, and in the rural site in Tigray, the decision regarding child support was regulated by the social court, which suggests monthly payments of 150 to 200 birr and a certain amount of food for children after divorce.

3.4.3 Reconciling life changes and aspirations

Separation and divorce triggered shifts in the life pathways of affected young people, who had to come to terms with numerous potential changes, including where and with whom they lived, their income and financial responsibilities, their family roles and relationships, and their social standing. These changes influenced their priorities and their hopes for the future. The aspirations of separated young people varied depending on gender, the circumstances of separation and divorce, and their access to resources and second chances. Regarding the ex-partner, as we have seen, some had nothing or very little to do with them, whereas others hoped to be reunited with their partner or child.

3.4.4 New relationships and remarriage

Some young men who went through separation felt bruised and wary of entering new intimate relations. For instance, Efrem was angered to find the woman with whom he had a child and planned to live with having a relationship with another man. Although he went on to find a new girlfriend who knew about his child, he was wary of entering into a commitment with her, given his earlier experience. Young divorced men may face pressure to remarry since to live independently men still require women's domestic labour.

Feelings of distrust were even stronger among young women who had suffered abuse. Meaza was a double victim of rape and was abandoned by a man who promised to improve her life when she was a commercial sex worker. She explained:

> … it became hard for me to trust men. Perhaps God may give me a good blessed person to live with; but it is all hatred which has filled my heart. I can't tell you how I feel inside. As I was twice a victim, I can't feel positive.

Some women preferred being single because they saw marriage as a form of female servitude and the work required to fulfil men's daily needs as burdensome. Seble maintained:

> … having a man is another headache, another burden [laughing]; you know I have to care for him, wash his clothes, his socks, shoes. No no no …[laughing]. I don't want modern slavery again, to be his free servant. I have a child and that is more than enough.

Despite negative experiences, many young women still hoped they might find a better husband. Bilen at first said she never wanted to have another relationship, but when pressed she said she wanted to find a good husband who would care for her and her child. Asked about whether she would want to remarry, Aster said, laughing: "To be frank, it would be a blessing for me if I could get a good man who can help me with my children. I would have [more] children from such a person." Similarly, in Zeytuni, although Mebrat regretted marrying a lazy man and dropping out of school, she hoped to marry again, "if it is God's will".

Remarriage was a concern for those who had divorced or separated, and many felt like they were in limbo until their ex-partners remarried, thus freeing them to pursue a new relationship. Young mothers seemed to lack confidence in their chances of remarrying quickly, but were hopeful for the longer term. In the rural sites, three adolescent girls had family-arranged marriages around age 15 in which they had no say, and then divorced and married a second time through arranged marriages, about which they were consulted. Earlier interviews with them detail their pathways from childhood to married adulthood, and how their views about their marriages changed. The story of Haymanot from Zeytuni is illustrative.

Haymanot dropped out of school at Grade 5 to look after her mother, who could no longer earn money spinning cotton. At the age of 12 she was working in the safety net programme[15] earning 40 birr a month and used the money to buy food for the whole family. She also worked at the quarry carrying stones and water for two months, receiving 200 birr a month. She claimed her father, who was a soldier, had died, although the school director said he was still in the army but did not have any contact with the family. When asked about marriage, she said she wanted to get married when she was 20 or 25.

At the age of 15, she had already been married for a month to a man from her community who was about 20 years old and working as a construction worker on the highway. She did not know him before the marriage. Her sister contributed 1,300 birr as a marriage gift and covered the costs of the wedding ceremony at their home. Haymanot and her husband were living in a small room in his family's compound; she had injured her hand at her stone crushing workplace, and although she had recovered, had left work to look after her mother, whose heart condition had worsened. At the time she said she was happy to be married as it was arranged by her family and it meant she no longer had to work crushing stones. She was hoping to go back to school but had not discussed this with her husband and did not think he would allow it. She also did not want to have a child for another five years but her husband did, and she expected she might have a child by the time of the next interview in three years:

> I asked my mother to stop negotiating with the elders … to delay the marriage as I was too young. But she worried that she was getting very sick and she wanted to see my marriage before something bad happened. Then, I said OK … My sister tried her best to convince my mother not to let me get married; but my mother wouldn't listen. [she] said that she … wanted to see my marriage before she died … [S]he told me to leave the house if I didn't obey her. Then, I accepted her idea.

By the age of 20, Haymanot had a 2-year-old daughter, having become pregnant right after marriage, but had since divorced. She had worked as a daily labourer in irrigation, then had recently migrated to help her sister, who was working selling tea and was back home visiting her mother. She said she had argued against her marriage. Regarding her divorce, Haymanot said she and her husband had started arguing after they used up the resources they were given at marriage and he was not giving her money for household expenses. During the 2018 interview she felt that, with hindsight, her marriage failed due to her being too young: "It's not that I didn't have a heart, the reason why I divorced my first husband. He was young and I was also young."

[15] Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) is a social protection scheme that has been implemented since 2005, targeting food-insecure households in the country.

Both her marriages were arranged by her family and involved gifts from both sides, though the second one was her idea. Her second husband was divorced; his wife had left him. She was living with her husband and two daughters, one each from their earlier marriages, although her husband then left to work in Saudi Arabia.

Rihisti from Zeytuni comes from a poor family and left school at Grade 2 as she was not well. She was working as a wage labourer in irrigation when she was pressurised by her family to get married at age 14. When she was 18, she recalled: *"My parents tell me to get married if I cannot continue my education and I accepted that not to offend them".* After she got married, she first spent some time at her parents' house and later, when she became pregnant, went back to her family to give birth. When she came back, her husband started spending his money on alcohol, not providing for his family and not giving her money, and she suspected he might be having an affair. She left him and after two years he asked for forgiveness. Her family encouraged her to accept and they lived together for about another year, but his behaviour did not change and she went back to her family. She also said her first husband was lazy and never accepted her idea to build their house and take out loans to improve their lives.

Her second marriage was suggested by her sister, whose husband was related to the man. He had been working in Saudi Arabia but was deported, and his mother was keen that he should settle down. Rihisti was hesitant but her sister persuaded her. The marriage was arranged by elders and the couple had an HIV/AIDS test before getting married. Rihisti seemed pleased with her new marriage since there was not a big age difference, she was getting along with her mother-in-law, and the couple had their own house and had taken out loans and already repaid them. She was pregnant with her second child, and her first child, who was four years and eight months old, was living with her parents. She said she wanted to work when her child was 1 year old, and hoped to start her own business. When she was interviewed at age 22, she was living with her second husband, who worked in a nearby factory, and her second child, a boy, while her daughter was living with her first husband.

In Muz, in Amhara, Hareg was married off at 15 by her mother after she dropped out of school. She grew up with her mother, who was divorced. Her father had remarried and did not help her family. In her early adolescence, she was not doing well at school, was discouraged by the teachers, and dropped out at Grade 7. Two years later, when she was 15, her mother feared she would get into sexual relations and arranged a marriage with a man whom Hareg did not see until the wedding ceremony. She did not want to live in the rural area. She went along with the wedding preparations but fled back to her mother on the day of the wedding and the marriage gifts were returned.

Her second marriage, to a soldier when she was 17, was also arranged by her family and Hareg agreed to it to make her family happy. He was about to marry another woman and when that did not work out her family persuaded him to marry her. He promised to help Hareg build a house. He was stationed elsewhere, and she heard he had affairs. When he came back home, he mistreated her and she suspected he had another wife. She therefore decided she did not want to have a child with him and started taking contraception. When he discovered this, he got angry and tore up their marriage contract in front of her mother. She took the case to the court and although he contested it, they divided their property.

Some women in the study who were unable to look after their children and had to give them up expressed the hope to one day be reunited with them. For example, Aster would like to get her daughter, who is with her in-laws, back and raise her to have a better life than hers:

> Once I become economically stable, I want to go through the legal process of getting my daughter back. I don't want her to see the kind of bad life I experienced … I want to help her, to raise her properly, so that she has will have a better life than mine.

However, young women with children were also worried about how a potential future husband might treat their children, and some were not convinced that a man would treat them well, as Meaza suggested:

> … first of all, I am a mother and am poor. So, how can I be needed by a man? I don't feel someone could view me with love. [S]ometimes, I talk to my children in the evenings when we go to bed, telling them I might find a good man who can be a good father for them and they will accompany me with flowers in my wedding ceremony. But deep inside, I worry what if that man left me alone? [I]t is like an illusion that I dream about marrying a man who can be a good father to my kids and a good partner for me. But I also realise that he could be similar to all the other bad men who've been in my life.

3.4.5 Improving their lives through work and education

Life did not end for young people who separated or divorced, and many were active in seeking to improve their lives though education and work. For example, Adane had started extension classes and wanted to send his son to a good school. However, many young women who had left school many years ago had limited hope of returning to or continuing their studies. Most had children, and returning to school while having to look after children was a distinct barrier. Mebrat continued with her schooling after being raped, took her Grade 8 exam just before giving birth, and continued in Grade 9, but she interrupted her education due to the court case with her spouse. She hoped to continue with her education but expected it would be difficult with a child.

Single mothers who give birth outside of marriage also face the practical challenges of earning a living and finding childcare with limited formal support available to them, and often had to rely on family or neighbours. In time, some of the young mothers were able to take advantage of economic opportunities to improve their circumstances. Soreti from Leki, explained how she has learnt to manage as a single mother:

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

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

> Once you give birth before marriage, the chance that you marry again is very small and if you marry again, the psychological impacts and other pains are very difficult to withstand.

4. Conclusions and policy implications

This paper set out to address two related questions: first, about **how young men and young women describe their experiences of divorce and separation**, including their access to support, and the perceived impacts on their current and future lives; and second, about **the impacts of poverty, age, gender and location on their differing experiences**.

Our findings on separation and divorce point to the importance of tracing back to the reasons and circumstances behind the formation of these relationships in the first place. Their unions reflect numerous drivers and motivations, a variety of influencing actors and societal pressures, and a spectrum of consent and choice by the young people involved.

According to the accounts of young people, their generation has had a greater say in deciding when and whom to marry, with fewer 'forced' marriages at younger ages. Yet young people find themselves caught between traditional norms, in which marriages are arranged, and modern values of young people making their own decisions. The data show that their choices remain constrained, not least by material poverty, but also because society does not approve of female adolescent sexuality and premarital relations, and unwed motherhood is also stigmatised. There were also still a few cases of abduction and rape, notably among more vulnerable women, including migrants. Fear of being accused of being in a relationship and of unplanned pregnancies drove many young people into longer-term unions for which they felt financially, socially and psychologically unprepared. Some desired independence and to live life as a married couple, but the reality of living together and of running a household often did not meet expectations.

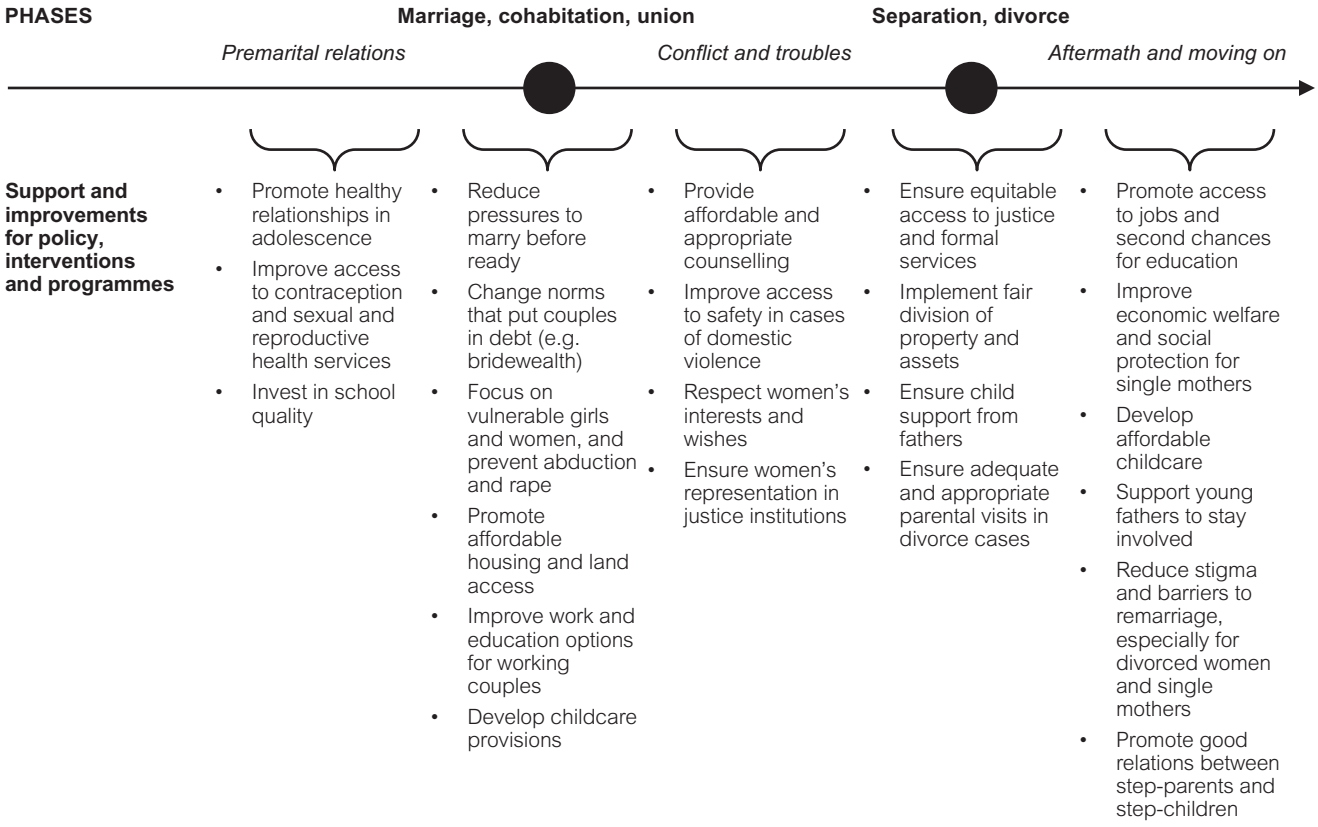
There were many economic and social pressures on couples that contributed to separation or divorce. Across all sites, perceived failures to live up to their male and female roles, including the squandering of the household budget and accusations of infidelity, troubled young relationships. Moreover, patriarchal norms of husbands not wanting wives to work outside the home, restricting their socialising, and not providing enough for household expenses and wives' personal needs led to conflict. These tensions sometimes led to violence, often made worse by alcohol abuse. In the urban context of insecure livelihoods or instable or declining income, loss of work due to illness or other shocks are major causes for separation. In the rural sites lack of sufficient income and parental inability or unwillingness to provide resources, notably land and livestock to establish a separate household, are major constraints on young people becoming independent and explain why some have children without getting married. Unexpectedly, we also found that poverty was a reason behind the separation of young couples who wanted to remain together but simply could not afford the costs of housing and of sustaining a young family; young fathers separated from their children as a result of poverty found it especially difficult to fulfil their parental aspirations.

Not everyone facing troubles was able to access the help they needed. Those involved in trying to reconcile couples – whether families, elders or legal services – frequently prioritised preserving the marital union, even if this resulted in young women remaining in unfulfilling and abusive relationships. Likewise, while local government institutions seek to protect women and children, the social courts and the police are often dominated by men and tend to

reflect patriarchal values, which seek to avoid divorce, especially where children are involved, often justified as being in the best interest of children. Young women are especially vulnerable in the face of unintended pregnancy, separation, divorce and single parenthood, and the formal support available to them is inadequate and uneven (Tafere et al. 2020).

To conclude, we identify **implications for policy and programming** aimed to protect and improve the well-being of young people along multiple points in their potential pathways to separation or divorce (Figure 5). A (forthcoming) policy brief based on the study findings develops these points more fully.

Figure 5. *Critical moments and potential interventions along the marriage–divorce pathway*



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When Things Fall Apart: Separation and Divorce Among Adolescents and Young Couples in Ethiopia

While there is rightly a major focus on child marriage, we know very little about separation and divorce among young couples, either in Ethiopia or elsewhere. How do they negotiate their relationships? What contributes to relationship breakdown? What access do they have to support and services? And what happens after they separate?

This working paper uses qualitative evidence from the Young Lives study to answer some of these questions. It is based on interviews with 59 young people from two rural and two urban locations. It examines the impacts of poverty, age, gender and location, and reflects on the implications for policy and programming.

This working paper and the accompanying policy brief are part of a set of eight working papers and eight policy briefs on gendered transitions into young adulthood in Ethiopia

Young Lives

An International Study of Childhood Poverty

About Young Lives

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, Peru and Vietnam). Young Lives is a collaborative research programme led by a team in the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford in association with research and policy partners in the four study countries.

Through researching different aspects of children's lives across time, we seek to improve policies and programmes for children and young people.

Young Lives Research and Policy Partners

Ethiopia

- *Policy Studies Institute*
- *Pankhurst Development Research and Consulting plc*

India (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana)

- *Centre for Economic and Social Studies, Hyderabad (CESS)*
- *Sri Padmavati Mahila Visvavidyalam (Women's University), Tirupati (SPMVV)*

Peru

- *Grupo de Análisis para el Desarollo (GRADE)*
- *Instituto de Investigación Nutricional (IIN)*

Vietnam

- *Centre for Analysis and Forecast, Viet Nam Academy of Social Sciences (CAF-VASS)*
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