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Community Understandings of Children's Transitions in Ethiopia: Possible Implications for Life Course Poverty

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Abstract

The paper explores the views of caregivers and other adults on the nature and timing of transitions made by children aged 11 to 13 in five Ethiopian communities, spanning rural, peri-urban and urban locations. The three transitions selected are schooling, work and 'early' marriage for girls, which provides a gendered example of rites of passage that are engaged in alongside institutional transitions and affect their success or failure. Adult perspectives are the focus as these are assumed to be more strongly reflective of the community norms that shape children's transitions. The paper provides a summary of the legislative and programmatic background to key transitions (for example, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the structure of the Ethiopian schooling system and secondary data on school attendance, grade retention, etc.) before exploring each in turn. It concludes that the rejection of government policies on marriage and education represents a critique of these rather than an attachment to 'traditional practices' which have become increasingly fragile as people respond to material poverty and environmental challenges. Policymakers need to understand and in some cases challenge 'invisible norms', but also recognise the visible economic constraints and limited opportunity structures that increase the appeal of child work or early marriage. In these communities, children's transitions are rarely linear, singular, or focused solely on 'learning', but are instead multiple and often contradictory. While children from poor communities and households are said to be constrained by their lack of opportunities, in fact their likelihood of making successful transitions is reduced by having too many potentially contradictory opportunities, too soon.

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1. Introduction

The paper explores the views of caregivers and other adults on the nature and timing of transitions made by children aged 11 to 13 in five Ethiopian communities, spanning rural, peri-urban and urban locations. The three transitions selected are schooling, work and 'early' marriage for girls.¹ These were chosen because both adults and children describe formal transitions in and out of schooling and work as being the most significant at this age. Marriage is a good example of a rite of passage that is engaged in alongside institutional transitions and has considerable influence on their success or failure; it also has a clear gender dimension.²

The reason for focusing on adults' perspectives in this paper is recognition that children's transitional experiences are partly influenced by their parents' decisions, which are based on parents' perceptions of what constitutes a good transition (Poluha 2004: 73-4).³ As their parents' perceptions may be influenced by norms originating in their community, understanding community contexts helps us understand how children's transitions are constructed and guided, and provides invaluable background to investigating children's experiences.⁴ In making community understandings our focus, we do not mean to frame children as passive, as they challenge, resist and negotiate social norms, and play an important role in the decisions that surround their transitions, albeit often from 'behind the scenes' (Alebachew 2007; Tekola 2008). The questions explored in this paper are:

- i) How are the three transitions of schooling, work and education specified for girls and boys in different contexts?
- ii) What defines a 'successful' transition and what does success or failure mean for children and their households?
- iii) What norms relate to these transitions in different contexts and how are they transferred within and between generations?
- iv) What do participants perceive as the environmental, political, and economic factors that determine whether children make successful transitions?

Important further questions, which we may not be able to explore fully here, are i) whether we can talk about 'community norms', or if a high degree of value contestation and internal contradiction in some communities makes this impossible, and ii) what role, if any, do they play in the persistence of poverty?

The paper explores these questions using qualitative data collected by Young Lives from caregivers and other adults in five communities (two rural, two urban and one peri-urban), combined with survey data on caregivers' aspirations and expectations for their children's

1 Early marriage is marriage below the customary age of 15, rather than age 18, which is mandated by Ethiopian law.

2 According to the Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey (2005), the median age for marriage for men aged 25 to 29 was 24.2 years (n.b. 25 to 29 years was the youngest age group worth recording for men as marriage before this age was so unusual).

3 Children's perspectives will be explored in a subsequent paper, which highlights the effect of gender, socioeconomic status and place of residence on children's expectations and experiences.

4 Norms are defined here as shared understandings or agreed expectations and rules by which a culture guides the behaviour of its members. This provisional and multi-dimensional definition includes personal evaluations, perceived evaluations, personal expectations, perceived expectations and reactions (Gibb 1991).

futures. It begins by introducing the questions addressed in this paper and providing a brief introduction to Young Lives and the research themes explored in the qualitative component (the methodology is described in Section three). The second section reviews theoretical and empirical literature on children's transitions in general, with a particular focus on Ethiopia and Sub-Saharan Africa, and on the specific transitions of schooling, work and marriage. It also provides background information on these transitions, including the legal framework and government policies that underpin them. The third section introduces the methods used in this paper and the fourth summarises the findings for each transition, highlighting any differences by location, background of the respondent and the gender of the child whose transitions are being discussed. Finally, the fifth section reprises the main findings and discusses their implications for how researchers and policymakers understand and engage with different community contexts.

Young Lives is a major international project on child poverty (2000-2015) funded by the UK Department for International Development (DfID) to follow the lives of 12,000 children growing up in contexts of poverty in Ethiopia, Andhra Pradesh (India), Peru and Vietnam. It seeks to improve understanding of the causes, dynamics and consequences of child poverty, and how specific policies affect children's well-being. Young Lives was initiated as a 'millennium study' and recruited 8,000 children born at the turn of the millennium (2000/1), along with 4,000 children who were eight years old at the time (born 1994). Together they comprise the two study 'cohorts' who, along with their caregivers, are participating every few years in a data-gathering survey that collects information on diverse aspects of their lives and livelihoods. The first survey round took place in 2002 and provided baseline information about Young Lives children, their households and their communities. Separate survey instruments are administered to older cohort children, their caregivers and community members. The completion of the second round of data collection in 2006-7 and subsequent rounds scheduled every few years through to 2015 will track changes in children's circumstances and enable longitudinal analyses.

The qualitative component has only recently been introduced (2007) and was designed as an integrated sub-study to explore in greater depth the lives of 204 Young Lives children across the four study countries (60 from Ethiopia) over the remainder of the project. The qualitative research comprises three broad themes: i) well-being (how is well-being understood and evaluated, what shapes and changes these understandings, and what are perceived as sources and threats to well-being); ii) transitions (what are the key transitions in children's lives, how are they experienced and what influences these transitions); and iii) service use, primarily in relation to transitions and well-being. The coexistence of longitudinal quantitative and qualitative data for the same children provides great potential for integrated analyses. This will be juxtaposed with data on the political and economic context collected by the policy team and supplemented with sub-studies of specific issues such as the interaction between child work and schooling in specific communities.

2. Literature review and country context

The literature review begins by outlining themes from the Western theoretical literature on transitions, before reviewing empirical studies from Ethiopia and Sub-Saharan Africa and the Ethiopian literature on the specific transitions of schooling, work and marriage.

2.1 Theoretical literature

Transitions can be characterised as both events (e.g. life changes, turning points, 'border crossings', see Ecclestone et al. 2005: 1) and more subtle processes of 'becoming somebody' that are woven through the fabric of everyday life (*ibid*: 9). To some extent it is possible to distinguish social transitions, which may be formal or informal, from formal institutional transitions, but these are often interwoven (for example, the civil and customary rituals surrounding marriage). Transitions are of interest to researchers and policy makers because they reflect existing inequalities and may reproduce them due to their influence on children's life trajectories and adult outcomes (Hunt 2006). According to Vogler et al's (2008) review of the field, transitions encompass *agency* (e.g. life choices for – and by – children), *processes* (e.g. 'rites of passage'), *representations and meanings* (e.g. local understandings of the life course), *expectations* (e.g. mismatches between children and adults' aspirations, or between their aspirations and material realities), and finally *identity and well-being*.

In many contexts adults define transitions in relation to their desire for children to become 'good adults' and function well in a particular setting (Wise 2000: 9). This may, for example, mean that they become 'better' adults than their parents (e.g. more materially successful), but only by continually demonstrating that they adhere to their parents' values and wishes, as illustrated by the extract below.

[The] family has to take care of children to develop good behaviour; to make sure they do not spend [time] with bad friends, do not adapt to the bad behaviour of family members, do not develop deviant behaviour like stealing and lying. Hence, we have to advise them, if they do not accept our advice we have to punish or become angry with them. There are children who accept our advice immediately, or there are children who do not accept our advice, so we have to make them to fear us by shouting at them. Clay does not like the stick, but children have to be punished with the stick.

Notes from a focus group with female caregivers, Yoboki

The impression gained from the qualitative data is that parents want to transfer their values to their children, especially during the transitional period explored here (age 11 to 14), and can therefore be seen as 'agents of culture'. According to Young Lives survey data (2006), these values include: 'hard work' (21 per cent of respondents felt this was one of the three most important qualities for children to learn at home), 'independence' (17.8 per cent), 'religious faith' (17 per cent), 'obedience' (8.7 per cent), and 'cooperation and conforming within your community' (8 per cent).⁵

⁵ 'I am going to read you a list of qualities that children can be encouraged to learn at home. I want you to tell me whether you think each quality is important for children to learn at home... Of all of these qualities (listed above), which three do you think are the most important?' (Section 11 Caregiver perceptions and attitudes, questions 11.17 and 11.18).

Adults' beliefs about what successful transitions consist in and how they can be achieved are culturally inflected, and these beliefs mediate their daily experiences and interactions (Rosenthal 2000: 7). Norms play a role in establishing the type of transitions children should pass through, the age at which they should experience them, and the resources required to actualise them (Rook et al. 1989: 234). For example, Boyle et al. (2002) assert that norms affect children's demand for schooling and are both gendered and age specific. Nonetheless, Marini (1984) argues that social norms are insufficient in explaining the real transitions of children as there is greater variability in the timing of actual role changes than in timing preferences (*ibid*: 231).⁶ Marini's proposition is supported by the data in Table 1, elicited by a question to caregivers about their expectations for their child's future.⁷ Not only do their preferences bear little resemblance to the usual timings of these events (c.f. DHS 2005), they also show little differentiation by gender, even for marriage and child-bearing.

Table 1: Caregivers' expectations for their child's future

Caregiver	Boy (mean, sd)	Girl (mean, sd)
Age NAME should earn money to support household	22.8 (5.04)	22.1 (3.87)
Age NAME should leave f/t education	21.2 (4.15)	20.7 (3.70)
Age NAME should be financially independent	23.3 (4.43)	23.4 (3.80)
Age NAME should leave household	24.5 (5.16)	23.9 (4.03)
Age NAME should get married	27.4 (5.93)	25.6 (4.93)
Age NAME should have child	29.4 (6.46)	27.5 (5.09)

Young Lives survey 2006

Norms and their related practices can be seen as one way of ensuring the collective well-being of family members (Harper et al. 2003: 541). However, Harper et al. acknowledge that the way resources are allocated and accessed is based on differences related to gender, age and position in the family, which may increase children's well-being.

2.2 Transitions in Ethiopia and Sub-Saharan Africa

Young people's transitions have been explored as a specific research topic in other Sub-Saharan African countries, although not yet in Ethiopia. An exception to this is Poluha (2004), whose monograph explores the role of education in encouraging 'cultural continuity' in Ethiopia, despite multiple regime changes. Influential qualitative studies in Sub-Saharan Africa include Durham (2000; 2004) who observed a constant, context-specific cycling between 'youth', 'adult' and 'elder' among the Herero in Botswana; Argenti (2002) on young men's roles in work and ritual in Cameron; Reynolds (1991) on child work in Zimbabwe; and edited collections by Honwana and De Boeck (2005) and Christiansen, Utas and Vigh (2006).

Wondimu (ed. 1996) and Poluha (ed. 2007) provide useful overviews of the situation of children and young people in Ethiopia, mainly drawn from qualitative studies (see chapters by Abdulwasie, Alemayhu and Chuta in Poluha 2007). Heinonen (2000), Tekola (2008) and

⁶ Marini also found little evidence of shared evaluations of what behaviour ought to be, or sanctions where this behaviour is absent, although this statement may be more accurate in Illinois than Ethiopia.

⁷ 'I am now going to ask you about some of your expectations for NAME's life specifically: At what age did NAME/do you expect NAME to...' (Section 11 Caregiver perceptions and attitudes, questions 11.21).

Tafere (2007) have focused on the experiences of specific groups of children in Addis Ababa and Awassa (both areas included in our qualitative research), while Abebe (2008) spans Addis Ababa and Gedeo, a rural community in Southern Nationalities, Nations and Peoples Region (SNNPR), which is becoming integrated into the global coffee market.

2.3 Country context

This section introduces the specific transitions addressed in this paper by first establishing the legal context, then providing information on specific transitions using data from Young Lives and national survey data (the Ethiopian Demographic and Health and Labour Force Surveys), and finally identifying relevant empirical studies using qualitative or mixed methods.^{8,9}

The legal context to youth transitions is as follows, with the proviso that even where awareness of rights and legislation is high (for example, through the compulsory ‘civics’ lessons given to students from grade 5 onwards), it may not be enforced or perceived as enforceable. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was ratified in 1991 and supported by Art 36 of the Constitution of Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), which recognised that children should not be subjected to activities that compromise their education, and Art 28 of CRC obliging states to ensure regular attendance at school and reduce dropout rates. In relation to this, the Ethiopia Labour Law proclamation No. 377/2003 prohibits the employment of people aged under fourteen (a modification of the internationally accepted work age of 15, or 18 for hazardous work [ILO Convention No. 138: Minimum Age 1973]). Ethiopia is a signatory to International Labour Organisation (ILO) convention 182 on the elimination of the worst forms of child labour, and conventions 29 and 105, which both relate to the abolition of forced labour.

Young women’s sexual and reproductive rights are protected via the Constitution of FDRE (Proc. No. 1/1995), which aims to eliminate ‘harmful traditional practices’ such as female genital cutting (see also Art 21 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and Art 24(3) of the CRC). Art 24(1) of the CRC also stipulates the right to a high standard of health and health services, without discrimination by socio-economic status, gender, disability, location or ethnicity. The revised Ethiopian Family (2000) and Criminal (2005) laws both specify 18 as the age limit for marriage and emphasise that marriage should be entered into with ‘the free and full consent of the intending spouses’ (see also the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, CEDAW, Art. 16). Further support is provided by the National Committee on Traditional Practices of Ethiopia and the so-called ‘Maputo protocol’ to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women, which was adopted by the African Union in July 2003.

8 The 2005 Demographic and Health Survey was designed to provide estimates for Ethiopia as a whole; urban and rural areas of Ethiopia; and 11 geographic areas (9 regions and 2 city administrations), including the five regions covered by Young Lives. The DHS sample comprised 14,500 households from 540 clusters (145 urban and 395 rural) and was stratified, clustered and selected in two stages.

9 The 2005 Labour Force Survey covered all rural and urban parts of the country, except Gambella Region and the pastoralist zones of Afar and Somali. The rural sample for the LFS comprised 24,900 households across 830 Enumeration Areas and the urban 29,850 households across 995 areas. Both the DHS and LFS are conducted by the Central Statistics Agency of the Ethiopian government.

2.4 Education

The current Ethiopian educational system is summarised in Table 2; see Poluha (2004) and Abebe (2008) for a discussion of the relative quality of the different institutions described.

Table 2: *Education in Ethiopia 2008 (UNESCO 2008)*

Institution	Entrance age	Grad. age	Duration	Notes
Preschool/ Kindergarten (KG 1-3)	4	6	3 years	Private/NGO, urban only
Primary school: 1 st cycle (grades 1-4)	7	10	4 years	School in every community, one teacher for all subjects, automatic progression, shift-system in rural (morning or afternoon), full-day urban (to 15/15.30)
Primary school: 2 nd cycle (grades 5-8)	11	14	4 years	Progression by examination, English medium from grade 6 or 7 in some regions, shift-system in rural (morning or afternoon), full-day urban (to 15/15.30)
Secondary school (grades 9 and 10)	15	16	2 years	Located in urban centres
High school (grades 11 and 12)	17	18	2 years	Entrance by exam, preparation for university
Vocation training (grades 11-13)	17	18	2 years	2 years for a certificate, 3 years for a diploma (this enables application to university, currently after a period of work experience)
Compulsory education (grades 1-7)	7	13	7 years	Linked to legal age to start work (14 yrs). Median duration of schooling = 7.6 yrs boys, 6 yrs girls

In order to provide basic education to marginalised groups and tackle adult illiteracy, the government introduced an Alternative Basic Education programme in 2006, which included initiatives such as night schools for domestic workers in Addis Ababa. In 2008 this was extended to include adult education for people aged 18 to 49. An Early Childhood Care and Education strategy (ECCE) also started in 2008 to provide government-funded preschools and extend them to rural areas. 2008 also saw the start of a General Education Quality Improvement Programme (2008-12), which focuses on teacher development, curriculum, textbooks and assessment, management and administration, improvement of school facilities, and the provision of school grants.

While there are gender disparities in primary enrolment (UNESCO 2008), these do not always favour boys. For example, girls from poor households or living in rural areas are more likely to be enrolled than boys, although the reverse is true for rich or urban households. The gender disparities are not evident in Table 3, which is compiled from DHS data; however, there are clear differences by location and socio-economic status (underlined).

Table 3: *Net primary enrolment rates (DHS 2005)*

%	Total	Male	Female	Urban	Rural	Richest	Poorest
Primary net enrolment rate	45	44.9	45.2	<u>85.6</u>	<u>41.1</u>	<u>74.2</u>	<u>25.8</u>

For those enrolled in primary school, the 'survival rate' is good and shows little variation by location, gender or socio-economic status (Table 4). However, the completion rate is much lower than this at 57.1 per cent (62.1 per cent for boys, 52.1 per cent for girls), suggesting that many children either drop out during the final grade or fail the end of grade exam, which means that they cannot progress to secondary school.

Table 4: Survival rate to last primary grade (UNESCO 2008)

%	Total	Male	Female	Urban	Rural	Richest	Poorest
Survival rate to grade 8	83.5	81	86.5	92.4	82.1	88.1	79.3

Grade repetition and drop out rates are also high (Table 5), with an average of 2.9 per cent of boys repeating grades during the 1st cycle of primary school, and 2.4 per cent of girls. In both cases this mainly occurred during grade 1, which suggests that the introduction of ECCE may have immediate benefits. On average, 7 per cent of boys dropped out during the 1st cycle and 4.2 per cent of girls. This occurred mainly during grade 5 (the first grade of the 2nd cycle of primary school), although dropout rates were increasing steadily up to this point.

Table 5: Repetition and drop out rates for boys and girls, grades 1 to 6 (DHS 2005)

	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6
<i>Repetition rate (%)</i>						
Male	6.5	2.1	1.8	1.1	1.3	2.2
Female	4.7	1.2	1.1	2.5	2.0	1.5
<i>Drop-out rate (%)</i>						
Male	5.5	5.7	7.7	9.3	9.7	6.2
Female	3.6	5.4	3.9	4	5.2	4.8

While there are studies of education in Ethiopia using qualitative data, many focus on a single community or data collected in the 1990s (before the recent educational reforms), which reduces their utility for this research; e.g. Negash (1996); Wondimkun and Ashagre in Wondimu et al. (1996); Poluha (2004); Tadesse (2004); Kjorholt (2006); Tamene and Alemayehu in Poluha (2007).

2.5 Work

The main policy that affects the extent of child work is the Productive Safety Net Programme, which started in rural areas in 2005 and provides food or cash for 'public works' such as digging irrigation ditches, and 'direct support' in the form of food grants for households with no able-bodied members. While this provision is intended to alleviate poverty and therefore reduce child labour participation, the reverse appears to be the case (Woldehanna, *in press*).

The most current statistics on child labour are provided by the 2005 Ethiopian Labour Force Survey (LFS); however, more detail is provided by Ethiopian Child Labour Force Survey (2001)¹⁰. Both are reported below.

¹⁰ The 2001 CLF was the first 'stand alone' survey of its kind in Ethiopia, covering the same areas as the LFS and sampling 43,601 households. It collected information for all members of selected households, as well as for children aged 5-17 years, including age, sex, religion, ethnicity, school attendance and training, the economic activity status of the population aged 5 years and over during the last seven days, housing conditions, and household income and expenditure.

The CLF divides the 6.5 million children aged 10 to 14 into two categories: *studying* and *working*. 26 per cent of students are working outside the home and 23 per cent work in the household; only three per cent are just attending school. Of the working children, 36 per cent are working outside the home and 10 per cent work in the household; less than two per cent are unemployed ('idle') and thirty per cent of these are sick or disabled. The majority of working children are in agriculture (91 per cent), followed by retail and services (five per cent) and manufacturing (two per cent). Most are unpaid family workers (92 per cent), although three per cent are employees and 2.6 per cent are self-employed. For 91 per cent of respondents, the main motive for working is to assist household enterprises or supplement household income. On average, girls spend 27.6 hours per week working and boys 34.4 hours, so perhaps understandably over a third of working children felt that work had affected their schooling. The LFS confirms the large numbers of children working (64 per cent of those aged 10 to 14 reported working in the five days before the survey) and also shows strong rural-urban differences where urban employment averages 17 per cent and rural 68 per cent.

To some extent this picture is supported by Young Lives data (2006). For example, 40 per cent of children spent at least an hour a day on the family farm or business (range 0 to 12.25, mean 1.45, sd 2.01) and 68 per cent spent at least an hour on domestic chores (range 0 to 12, mean 2.25, sd 1.58). However, we suspect that there is significant under-reporting, particularly for family and domestic work, including child care. Nonetheless, the low number of children in the correct grade for their age (more than 50% are grade 4 or below) suggests that combining work and schooling may be having a negative effect.

There is a relatively large amount of literature on child work in Ethiopia and Sub-Saharan Africa as a whole (e.g. Zerihun [1996]; Abiye [2002]; Admassie [2000, 2002, 2003]; Ersado [2002]; FSCE [2003]; Woldehanna [*in press*]), and more recently an encouraging trend towards studies using qualitative or mixed methods, for example, Abebe (2007) in Gedeo and Addis Ababa; Alebachew (2007) in Dire Dawa; and Orkin (*forthcoming*) in Bale.

2.6 Marriage

Broad overviews of early marriage in developing countries, including Ethiopia, are provided by Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi (2003) and Jensen and Thornton (2003), however, there is little Ethiopia-specific research (e.g. Zabin and Kigaru 1998; Aspen and Mekonnen 2007), aside from NGO reports (e.g. Pathfinder [2006]; UNICEF Teachers' Forum [*undated*]), which present a negative and monotonic picture of early marriage. While Ethiopian law makes it clear that marriage should be entered into with 'the free and full consent of the intending spouses', the influence of family members and considerations of family wealth or poverty often make it primarily an economic transaction, reinforced by the payment of *macha* or *gerbera* (types of 'bride wealth') by the husband or his family. There are three main types of arranged marriage: *promissory*, where a promise is made at birth or infancy (this typically occurs between rich families and the potential husband can be close in age); *child marriage*, where the bride is aged less than 10 (this is not common, particularly in the regions where Young Lives is working); and *adolescent marriage*, where the bride is aged 10 to 15. While the ages for both marriage and sexual debut seem to be rising, there are some regional variations. For example, early marriage is highest in Amhara and Tigray where the median ages were 14.4 and 15.7 years among those aged 20 to 49 (DHS 2005).

Table 6: Median ages of marriage and intercourse for women from different age groups (DHS 2005)

	Married by age 15 (%)	Median age of marriage (yrs)	First sexual intercourse by age 15 (%)	Median age of intercourse (yrs)
Age 15-19	12.7	-	11	-
Age 20-24	24	18	22	18.2
Age 20-49	31.4	16.5	29.3	16.5

Non-arranged or 'free will' marriages are still relatively unusual, at least in rural areas, and once girls pass puberty the alternative to an arranged marriage is often *abduction* by force or through seduction ('voluntary').¹¹ Whereas forced abductions usually end in marriage (e.g. they often occur when someone wants to marry but can't afford *gerbera*, and can be covertly arranged between the future spouses), this is not necessarily so for the latter as there are no traditional mechanisms to ensure that the seducer keeps his promises. While none of the older cohort in the qualitative sites has been abducted, this is a concern for young women and their parents, and older respondents recounted stories of their own or their daughters' abductions. For example, one caregiver in *Yoboki* had her 13 year old daughter abducted by a 40 year old man from Sidamo, which meant that she left her family and finished a promising educational career at grade seven. Nonetheless, seven or eight years later, she is still living with her husband in Sidamo and has a second daughter; her mother also frequently asks her son-in-law's advice on educating the older daughter, which suggests that reasonably good relationships have been established.

Early sexual debut, marriage, and pregnancy are said to perpetuate the feminisation of poverty by preventing girls from developing social capabilities such as educational and occupational skills (Otoo-Oyortey and Pobi 2003). The perceived need for these skills provides a point of leverage for parents as participants in the UNICEF teachers' forum (October, 2002) described female pupils saying that their parents wouldn't give them school materials unless they agreed to marry. The main arguments against early marriage/sexual debut are that it reduces the acquisition of skills and experience before marriage, which can reinforce women's lower status and lack of decision-making power. This is particularly true where there is a large age gap between husband and wife and wives live in their husband's household or community, both of which apparently lead to higher rates of domestic violence and divorce. Jensen and Thornton (2003) studied early marriage in four developing countries using national data sets and concluded that the greatest benefits in autonomy measures, such as the ability to go to market on their own, came from delaying marriage till 20, or at least 15. This finding is not entirely supported by DHS (2005) empowerment data - which measures perceived control over income and decision making in four categories, including healthcare - as the differences between these age groups are small and largely cancelled out by a cohort effect. For example, while 11.8 per cent of 15 to 19 year olds would feel unable to refuse sex under any circumstances, even if they knew their husband had a sexually transmitted disease, women aged over 24 reported even higher figures. Women aged 15 to 19 are also less likely than other age groups to consider that a husband is justified in beating his wife (22.7 per cent) or support either female genital cutting (22.9 per cent) or abduction (2 per cent). Despite this, younger women are characterised as relatively ignorant about sex and reproductive health, including family planning, and obviously have more children across

¹¹ n.b. The distinction between voluntary abductions and non-arranged marriages seems blurred to an outsider, but was very clear to the respondents.

their lifespan due to an earlier start.¹² Early childbirth can lead to reproductive complications such as obstetric fistula, higher maternal mortality and morbidity (six times as high for those aged under 16 as those aged 20 to 24, according to Zabin and Kigaru 1998), and increased infant and child mortality. For example, according to DHS 2005, mothers aged under 20 reported infant and under-five mortality rates of 106 and 161 per thousand live births, compared to 75 and 124 per thousand live births for those aged 20 to 29.

While, in addressing early marriage, it would be helpful to have more accurate birth and marriage statistics and greater sensitivity among local law enforcement and community officials, perhaps more valuable would be an understanding of the motivations behind it. Why, for example, do men want younger brides (Longer reproductive lives? more energetic in the household? easier to control? guaranteed virginity?), and why do families need to marry their girls young (Poverty? wealth and status? protection? securing girls' reproductive futures by ensuring that they are virgins when they marry and not 'left to one side')? The attitude survey conducted by Pathfinder (2006) suggests that the most important consideration is 'following tradition', followed by 'daughter making a good marriage' and 'linking family's name to another family'. Less important considerations are the risk of early pregnancy (mentioned by only 20 per cent of respondents) and securing *gerbera*. Some of these rationales are explored further in the empirical section on early marriage on pages 25-28.

3. Methodology

This section introduces Young Lives research in Ethiopia, the methodology for data collection and analysis, and the sampled communities. As described earlier, two rounds of surveys have been conducted in Ethiopia (2002 and 2006) across twenty sentinel sites. The sites were selected from the five main regions, which contain more than 90 per cent of the Ethiopian population (Alemu et al. 2003). The surveys were conducted with caregivers and children who were born in 1994/5. The first round of qualitative data collection took place in 2007 in five research sites, selected from the five regions to encompass rural, peri-urban and urban settings, and experiences of poverty and ethnic and religious diversity. 12 children were sampled within each site (six born in 2001/02 and six born in 1994/5, equal numbers of girls and boys), again on the basis of poverty, vulnerability (for example, children who are orphans or from female-headed households), ethnicity and religion. While the qualitative research explored three themes, this paper focuses on *transitions*, specifically adults' understanding of older children's transitions in the five communities.

¹² According to Pathfinder (2006), the median number of children for under 15's is 4.96, compared to 3.12 for over 18's.

3.1 Methods

The qualitative data are drawn from twenty group discussions which were held separately with men and women in each of the five communities. The first two groups in each community were with community representatives such as local officials, teachers, health care workers, elders, religious leaders, traditional healers, and for the female group, the leader of the local Women's Association. The other two groups comprised caregivers of older and younger children and were intended to include men and women, but were in fact predominantly female. Respondents were asked to discuss questions such as:

- What are the key transitions for children aged 12 to 13?
- How do children in this community experience these transitions?
- What does a child in this community need to make a 'successful' transition and what are the constraints in achieving this?
- What happens if a child fails to make a successful transition?

The discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed to enable textual analysis. It was coded in *Atlas.ti* qualitative data analysis software using a broad coding frame agreed across the four country teams.¹³ The coded transcripts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith 1996; Willig 2001) to explore 'how participants are perceiving and making sense of things which are happening to them' (Smith and Osborn 2003) and develop understandings of community norms inductively. The qualitative findings were then compared with quantitative data from Young Lives and contextualised with national data sets.

3.2 Ethical aspects

The qualitative research team comprised equal numbers of men and women who spoke a mix of languages (Amharic [Amarignya], the language of official communication; Oromiffa; Tigrinya), enabling respondents to speak in the language with which they felt most comfortable. The researchers were able to build on the long relationship developed by the survey teams who have been visiting the communities since 2000, and the lead researcher ensured that a researcher who had previously done fieldwork in that community accompanied the team on the initial visit. During these visits the team organised introductory meetings with the local administration and took pictures, which were distributed during fieldwork to remind respondents of the earlier visit. During fieldwork, group activities were scheduled before individual interviews so that children and caregivers would feel more relaxed with the researchers, and researchers participated in children's daily lives (to the extent to which their time in the field permitted), for example, by playing games and in some instances eating with them.

Although the survey team had obtained consent from participants and the project had received ethical clearance in the UK, the qualitative researchers needed to establish the willingness of local authorities and participants to establish a new level of engagement. Instead of the common practice of signing consent forms, the team opted for a longer and less bureaucratic process of regularly checking participants' willingness and reminding them of their right to disengage whenever they wanted to. This right was exercised on several

¹³ This paper used codes from the family of 'transitions' and the subfamilies of children's activities, expectations, formal education_primary, relationships, transitions_educational, and transitions_other.

occasions; for example, in *Debre* some adults and children declined to participate in the interviews, and in *Angar* two children asked to leave in the middle of the group activities and were taken home by their caregivers. In fact, problems relating to participation mainly involved caregivers feeling that their children had been excluded (due to the small size of the qualitative sample) and refusing to return home, despite being assured that their participation wasn't required. Similarly, one or two sampled children had health problems that made it difficult for them to participate; however, their parents were determined that they should 'benefit' from the qualitative research (participants were given a small financial reward for participation, which may explain this), even to the extent of employing an older son to transport the injured child to the meeting on a horse (Morrow 2008).

3.3 Site selection

The qualitative research focuses on five communities, three rural (one near, one remote, one peri-urban) and two urban, one of which is in the capital, Addis Ababa.¹⁴ These represent different levels of connection to urban centres, social and cultural cohesiveness, infrastructure and services, and economic activities, all of which affect young people's current and future experiences. For example, the near-rural site in Oromia (*Bale*) is ethnically homogenous, primarily agricultural and apparently traditional, but these traditions are being challenged by the presence of vegetable farms, which offer remunerative work to children. While this can increase young people's independence and role in household decision making, it also reduces their school attendance (in conjunction with the poor quality of local schooling). The rural communities are: *Aksum* from the Amhara region, *Bale* from Oromia and *Angar* from Tigray. The urban communities are *Debre* from Addis Ababa and *Yoboki* from SNNPR.

The *Aksum* community is situated off the main road that crosses the *Amhara* plains, at the edge of a small town. For those who live on the edge of the town, the town reportedly exerts a considerable influence, but as the community extends backwards from the town, some respondents lived up to two hours walk away. *Aksum*'s population comprises *Amhara* Orthodox Christians (1,798 households) who mainly engage in farming. There are three local primary schools, but children walk between 30 minutes to two hours to attend the secondary school in the neighbouring town. There is a local government health centre, but this does not provide laboratory services and rarely has sufficient medicine.

The *Bale* community is in Eastern *Oromia* and is inhabited predominantly by *Oromiffa*-speaking Orthodox Christians. There are approximately 440 households whose livelihoods comprise subsistence agriculture, cattle-rearing, fishing and daily labour for local vegetable farms or the government-initiated 'food-for-work' scheme, both of which involve substantial numbers of older children. *Bale* has a primary school (currently up to grade five, although in 2008 they will extend to grade seven) and a small health post (open three days per week). While there are no kindergartens, some parents send boys to religious schools as preparation (Abebe 2008). The secondary school, health centre, hospital and main market are located up to 10 km away in the local town and there is frequent interaction via the causeway across the lake or on small rowing boats when the water level is high. The absence of adequate local healthcare is a problem for people with acute illnesses or complications related to pregnancy as they cannot easily cross the lake and the boats do not run at night. Additionally, children who want to study beyond grade seven need to either have

14 The original names of the communities have been replaced with pseudonyms.

relatives in the town, or an elder sibling who is also attending secondary school so that they can rent a house together during the week. This limits secondary education to children from wealthy families.

Angar is only few kilometers away from *Mekele*, the capital of Tigray, but is nonetheless relatively remote as it only has a dry season road. It has 1,999 households (10,151 people) who are mainly *Tigrian* Orthodox Christians. There are three first cycle primary schools in different parts of the community, but only one second cycle primary school, and children travel on foot for 2 to 3 hours to the nearest town to attend secondary school. For this reason few continue after grade 4 or 8. While there is a health post at the centre of the community, its facilities are limited (for example, it cannot provide emergency care or laboratory services), and the healthcare worker commutes daily from the nearest town.¹⁵

Debre is situated in the historic centre of Addis Ababa and is close to the main fruit and vegetable market where adults and children load and unload lorries, sell vegetables, serve the population of lorry drivers, etc. Respondents view the market with ambivalence as, while it is a source of income for daily labourers, store owners and petty traders, there are associated risks from rotting vegetation and a large, transient population of young men. Consequently, prostitution is reportedly high and young men in the community are said to engage in gambling, drinking, watching pornographic videos, and chewing *chat*.¹⁶ The population is approximately 14,000 (2,000 households) and comprises people from Amhara, Gurage Oromo, and Tigray who practice Islam and Christianity (Orthodox, Protestant and Catholic). Although access to educational and health services is good, the houses are in poor repair, and there are problems with drainage and sanitation when it rains.

As might be expected for the capital of SNNPR, *Yoboki* has a diverse population, which is estimated at 60,000; however, population figures fluctuate almost daily due to rural-urban migration from *Sidama* and *Wolaiyta* and the presence of numerous educational institutes. The qualitative research selected the oldest neighbourhood, which contains about a third of the total population (approximately 23,000 people spread across 4,000 households), mostly from the *Wolaiyta* and *Sidama* ethnic groups who are Protestant or Orthodox Christian. The area is densely populated and local people engage in petty trading (at home or on the street), daily labour in construction or retail, driving horse carts and occasionally working in service roles in colleges or government offices.

3.4 Structure

Section IV reports caregivers' expectations for their children and addresses the influence of norms concerning the timing of children's transitions in general, and in specific relation to education, work and marriage/sexual debut. Our focus is on the definition of 'successful' transitions, the obstacles to achieving these, and whether norms have the determining power that is often attributed to them (White 2006). For each transition we explore the differences between caregivers' aspirations, international, national and local norms, and what is actually taking place. We focus on differences between rural and urban communities, richer and poorer households, and boys and girls within those communities.

15 A health post is the smallest health service unit, which provides reproductive health services and dispenses tablets for common illnesses such as malaria.

16 *Chat* is a mildly narcotic leaf, which men chew with friends or in *Chat* houses.

4. Results

4.1 Overview

Across the five communities, respondents identified the main activities for older children as attending school, performing family work or paid labour, and beginning to have relationships with the opposite sex and/ or prepare for marriage. Older children are seen as able to take some responsibility for their lives ('at 12 or 13 a child knows him/herself', respondent from *Aksum*) but the extent of this varies by location, gender and birth order. For example, in *Aksum*, first-born children are expected to take responsibility for younger siblings and help their parents until their siblings are old enough to take over, at which point they can start paid work and set up their own household (schooling does not appear to be part of this trajectory).

All children are expected to attend local schools and complete at least the first cycle of primary school, which is provided in every community. At this stage there is little difference between boys and girls in enrolment and attendance (see Table 3). However, urban children are better prepared than rural as they may have attended three years of kindergarten before first grade. Rural children may also start school late due to the attitude of local schools (for example, refusing to accept children who still have their first teeth, or cannot reach across their heads to touch their opposite ear), and the needs of their family (for example, young boys are responsible for herding cattle in *Bale*, *Angar*¹⁷ and *Aksum*, although elderly men and women are starting to assume this role in *Bale*). In rural areas in particular children are expected to attend school and contribute to family activities, according to their age and gender. The gender differences in time use are evident in Table 7 which reports data relating to *all* the children in Young Lives households (older cohort only, $n = 2,561$), which was collected from the household head. Even from age 6 to 11, girls take considerably more responsibility for household chores and the time spent on these increases for girls aged 12 to 15. Conversely, boys spend an increasing amount of time on paid and unpaid work outside the home, which means that the total time spent working is similar for both groups (an average of 3.5 hours for children aged 6 to 11 and 4.5 hours for those aged 12 to 15). Neither activity appears to affect the amount of time children spend at school or studying; however, for children aged 12 to 15, this is at the cost of their leisure time.

Table 7: Hours spent on different activities during a typical day for boys and girls aged 6 to 11 and 12 to 15

	Hours that child spent caring for others on a typical day (Mean, s.d.)	Hours that child spent on domestic tasks on a typical day	Hours that child spent on child care on a typical day	Hours that child spent on family farm or paid activities on a typical day	Hours that child spent at school on a typical day	Hours that child spent studying outside school on a typical day	Hours that child spent on general leisure on a typical day
Boy, age 6-11	0.41 (0.97)	1.30 (1.42)	2.15 (2.41)	0.10 (0.82)	4.45 (2.67)	1.23 (1.10)	4.43 (2.85)
Girl, age 6-11	0.80 (1.43)	2.03 (1.56)	0.91 (1.6)	0.05 (0.47)	4.69 (2.56)	1.24 (1.07)	4.23 (2.84)
Boy, age 12-15	0.33 (0.75)	1.64 (1.36)	2.13 (2.40)	0.34 (1.42)	5.22 (2.02)	1.81 (1.17)	3.28 (1.97)
Girl, age 12-15	0.69 (1.03)	3.05 (1.66)	0.76 (1.38)	0.13 (0.70)	5.65 (1.78)	1.81 (1.07)	2.72 (1.62)

Young Lives, Round 2, all children in the households of index children born in 1994/5, $n = 2,561$

17 In *Angar*, children in this position are described as *Chira enateasera* or 'tied by the tail of the cattle'.

The differences in expectations between rural and urban communities are illustrated by the descriptions below from *Debre* and *Aksum* of when girls and boys are expected to undertake different tasks, which provides an interesting contrast to Table 1.

Debre - urban

[Children aged 3 to 4] can play with soil and play on the road. At age 5 to 6 children can take and bring messages to someone. Girls start work at age 5. They can take messages, carrying a baby, etc. At age 5 boys can go out of home to play with their friends [and] move to *Mont rare* [vegetable market] to get fruit to eat. They are shining shoes, selling plastic bags [collected from the rubbish dump], tissues, etc. Girls at age 7 usually help their mothers in the house cleaning, fetching water, carrying baby, etc. At age 7 to 9, they start making sauce [*wat*] and coffee and at 10 they start baking *injera*.¹⁸ At age 12, girls can perform the whole [household] activities and assume responsibility.

Boys start playing football together in the neighbourhood from the age of 10 to 12. They also go to the shop buying stuff for the neighbours and the neighbours give them some cents or candies in reward. They could also start doing some paid work such as carrying stuff for people. There are some who go to school for half day and work during the rest of the day. The income might be for themselves or for their families. They could do carrying of goods, shoe shining, selling tissues and chewing gum. [Boys and girls] start dating at the age of thirteen and fourteen. Children nowadays are very fast. They could do everything at the age of fifteen. They see a lot of sex films and they want to practice what they see.

Aksum – rural

At the age of 6 to 7, children build up friendship with their peers. They start doing activities like calf keeping, serve parents at home by washing their [parents'] hands [before eating], taking messages to neighbours, carrying younger siblings. They also start schooling. Girls of this age can also boil coffee and have to start housework like cleaning the house and fetching at least 5 litres of water (starting from 5 years old). Boys of 6 to 7 years old are stern [responsible] enough to do animal herding, watch the house and start school.

At 12 to 13 a child 'knows him/herself', but equally is 'fiery' and needs protection. They follow their education and [boys] work hard in cattle herding and farming. Girls can clean house, prepare food and be engaged [to be married], though this is decreasing. At 12 to 13 years old girls are expected to fetch 20 litres of water, prepare coffee and cook food, clean the house and the compound, wash clothes and do all the chores without any [adult] guidance

The descriptions suggest that children's activities and the timing of their transitions vary according to local environments (for example in *Angar*, where daily labour in the local quarry is available but second cycle primary schools are not).

At least in their responses to survey enumerators, parents in the five communities express uniformly high aspirations for their children such as completing university (74 per cent) and having salaried and professional occupations such as doctor (42.7 per cent), teacher (19.5 per cent) or civil servant (17 per cent), rather than following their parents into farming, petty trade or daily labour (all of which were endorsed by fewer than one per cent of respondents). There

18 A spongy, pancake-like bread made out of teff flour that accompanies most meals.

is a degree of self-interest as children's success guarantees the well-being of their families. For example, more than 90 per cent of caregivers expected their children to help them and their siblings when they grow up, and this can be seen as informal social insurance. The power of these expectations is ensured by the way that children are socialised, for example, being taught that children who respect community norms and behave appropriately for their age and gender are seen as good and therefore make successful transitions.

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

Caregiver from *Debre*

Schools, religious institutions and the community as a whole are expected to play an important role in children's socialisation, for example, helping them to understand the value of respect and obedience and the negative consequences of non-normative behaviour (Marini 1984; Chutas 2008). The positive role of schooling in this process is described below.

Teachers should teach the children not only the modern education but at the same time they should teach them discipline, societal norms, civics, etc.

Elder from *Debre*

Previously, boys were not obedient to their parents even at the age of 8. But now they get awareness from school and become obedient to their parents. They perform cutting wood and fetching water.

Teacher from *Yoboki*

Religious leaders in particular advise that children should practice obedience towards their parents and elders (even older siblings), but that in return parents are expected to fulfil their children's material and emotional needs, to the extent to which they are able, to enable their children to grow up well.

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

Our parent's advice was to be obedient for others and to do household activities. I could not see this at this time. I used to work household activities after school while my brother used to play after school. There was a radio but when my family wanted to listen they turned it on. We had a long uniform skirt and we used to cut our hair and nails short. Having relations with boys was an abnormal act. We did not feel comfortable to sit next to boys in the classroom. We did not have friends. But now children can watch TV, film and listen to the radio, etc. They also want to invite their friends on their birthday. They even talk with their boyfriends by telephone.

Teacher from *Debre*

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

In the past it was possible to marry girls before 15. Now it is changed. After the expansion of formal and religious education, girls' behaviour is highly changed. They start to say that they want to protect their rights and they want to establish marriage based on their interest. This leads to establishing marriage with any person without recognising the behaviour and economic condition of the person. [...] As a whole the change in the norms on marriage, family relations, etc. greatly affects girls' education and future life.

Focus Group Discussion in Bale

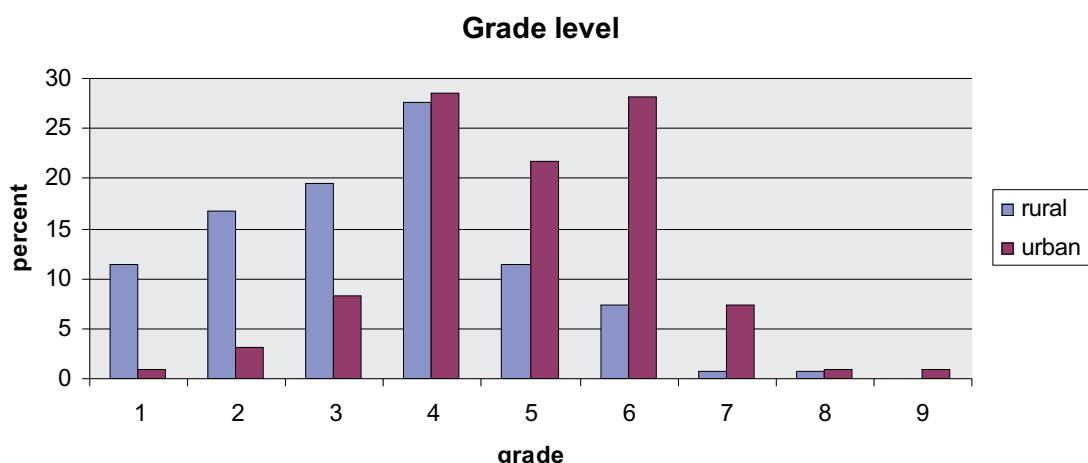
The change in children's attitudes is encapsulated in the expression *leg laenatua mit astamarach*, which literally means that now the daughter 'teaches her mother how to give birth', implying that children today believe that they know better than their elders.

4.2 Specific transitions

4.2.1 Schooling

All participants maintained that education would lead to a better future for their children and did not openly dispute the government's expectation that they would send their children to school from ages 7 to 13 (grade 7), even though many rural communities only have schools going up to grade 4. Nonetheless, the qualitative research suggests that many children have started late, particularly in rural areas, and attend irregularly, which affects their 'age for grade'. For example, according to Young Lives survey data (2006) on older children in the five qualitative sites, 30 per cent were below grade 4 (Fig. 1), which is the minimum grade they would be expected to achieve by age 11 if they started school aged 7. This finding is supported by an analysis of the full data set (20 sites, all household members aged 6 to 15, $n=2,561$) where the median age for starting school for children aged 12 to 15 was 7.4 years (the starting ages for girls and children aged 6 to 11 were slightly lower), and the median grade for those aged 12 to 15 was grade 4.

Figure 1 Highest grade achieved by children in the five communities ($n=250$)



Source: Young Lives Ethiopia, Survey 2006.

Figure 1 illustrates variation in educational attainment by location. For example, while 48 per cent of rural children have not achieved the correct age for grade, this only applies to 12 per cent of urban children. There are a number of reasons for this, some of which are explored in more detail below, namely: distance to second cycle primary schools; cost of school materials such as uniform and textbooks; delay in starting school; irregular attendance due to work or health problems (including being too tired or hungry to concentrate); lack of preschools; and quality of schooling, including teacher absenteeism (Abebe 2008).

Distance from schools is an especially important factor for girls, as illustrated by the comment from an elder in *Angar*, where second cycle schools can be between one and a half and two hours walk from the community:

The construction of schools in the community may reduce the risk of travelling long distances - this is especially good for younger children and girls, but the older children have to walk all the way and cross the forest to go to school to continue their education from grade 5 to 8.

An elder from *Angar*

Even in urban areas where schools are relatively near, respondents expressed anxiety about older girls spending time outside the home and being exposed to both risks and temptations:

At this age girls are more exposed to sexual abuse compared to boys. So, they need parental follow up. [...] Girls just want to get out of [their] home by dressing in clothes that attract boys. In fact this stage is a stage for her to be seen by boys or to be attracted by boys.

Healthcare worker from *Debre*

A general reluctance towards sending girls to school, or giving them sufficient time to study outside school, was expressed in most of the rural communities.

After school, she just drops her school bag and jumps into household chores. But even after playing or going around a boy usually picks up his exercise book and reads. And he does not bother [his] parents whether he succeeds in school or not.

Community leader, *Angar*

This was especially so in *Angar* (the most remote and conservative of the qualitative sites), where some respondents agreed that even if girls were good students, their achievements would benefit their in-laws rather than their parents.

We prefer to send boys to school. A girl never finishes her journey. She humiliates her parents. When you try to keep sending her to school, she does not progress beyond grade 7 or 8. She remains useless; she does not make plans for her future. Secondly, if she is weak at school, she gets close to boys and loses her virginity. She loses both her education and her virginity.

Community leader, *Angar*

Education was also seen as risking girls' reproductive and economic future because if 'you keep a girl in school rejecting marriage; either she gets a boyfriend or gets too old so nobody will ask you to marry her. Then she remains idle at home and parents start cursing her as useless, leading to conflict. [...] Parents prefer to marry her at earlier age when she is demanded by boys to clear her way by giving [her] some resources' (Focus group, *Angar*).

In the remainder of this subsection and the next, we will explore the interaction between work and education, especially in the case of households where parents are unable to provide school materials or even satisfy basic needs. For example, in the first round of the Young Lives survey (2002) when the children were aged 8, four times as many children from 'very poor' households were involved in paid work as those from 'poor' and 'less poor' households

(12 per cent versus three per cent, Alemu et al. 2003: xiii). As in the CLF (2001), for almost 75 per cent of respondents the main reason for working was to supplement household income (*ibid*). This trend is confirmed in Young Lives Round 2 data (2006) where index children from the lowest income quintile spent 2.08 hours per day in paid and unpaid work, compared to 1.18 hours for those in the highest income quintile ($n=978$). Poor children also reported a median grade of 3 or 4, rather than grade 4 or 5 as reported by those in the highest quintile, which suggests that it may be having some effect on their education. One father from *Bale* described how 'most of the time my children are responsible for farming':

My daughter involves in daily work [on the vegetable farm] and supports us in many ways. The income she obtains from daily labour is used for purchasing the household consumption. She works for up to 6 hours per day [...] when there is no schooling and on weekends. She gets 8 birr per day, but if it is half day it is up to 5 birr per day. The daily work involves weeding the vegetables in the irrigation field and digging and collection during the time of harvesting of vegetables like onions and tomatoes. Yes, [I accept her working] because it is impossible to live without work. If she cannot do daily work, she will not get medical treatment when she is sick.

Father from *Bale*

While not specific to *Bale*, the tension between work and schooling there is particularly acute as many children begin daily labour on vegetable farms from age 7 or 8, primarily to support their families. One respondent explained how:

Many of the children who do daily labour discontinue their education [and] most of them are young girls. These girls are mainly from the poor families - they help their families by doing daily work. During the summer season [school vacation] most of the daily work is reduced because the irrigated lands are converted into cereal production, but the cash production will start again in the spring, which directly coincides with the time of education. As a result many of them are either absent [from school] or discontinue it.

Focus group in *Bale*

Combining work with school is perhaps less detrimental in urban areas, due to a wider range of education options. For example, one caregiver from *Yoboki* described how 'my 15 year old son has a girlfriend. He has a job and earns 80 birr per week. He supports her and he learns at the night programme'.¹⁹

4.2.2 Work

Even though only seven per cent of index children from the older cohort reported paid work in the Young Lives survey (2006, $n=979$), the qualitative data indicated that the majority of children were involved in either income generation, or domestic work and childcare to free parents from these activities. For example, in *Bale* children worked on the vegetable farms and boys caught fish for sale,²⁰ in *Aksum* boys worked in the quarry or carried stones and girls picked runner beans, and in *Angar* some boys herded cattle for cash (five birr per cow, per month). In both *Bale* and *Angar*, children aged ten and over often replaced their parents in the construction activities carried out as part of the Productive Safety Net Programme (*Woldehanna, in press*), despite their being well below the legal minimum age (14). In *Koboki*

19 The night programmes in *Yoboki* and *Debre* are Alternative Basic Education programmes that are provided five evenings per week from six to eight. They are free for the first four grades and subsidised thereafter (up to grade ten) and were originally intended for domestic workers from rural areas who are not permitted to attend school during the day.

20 Fishing was particularly lucrative during the 60 day 'fast' that precedes the Christian Orthodox Easter.

and *Debre*, boys collected plastic bags and worked on the street selling chewing gum and tissues and shining shoes, while girls sold tomatoes, onions and chillies outside their homes during the day, and roasted corn, *Kollo* (roasted barley), nuts and boiled potatoes in the evening.²¹ In *Debre*, boys carried goods at the vegetable market, while in *Koboki* they drove horse carts; and in both sites girls and boys worked on construction projects. Children worked to support their families in the family farm or business (for example, by preparing food at home for their mothers to sell), to contribute to household consumption and to provide their own expenses for clothing, schooling and occasionally leisure. For example, one mother from *Bale* described how:

When there is wage labour in the village, [my 12 year old son] works and uses the money for his own needs such as school expenses, clothes and shoes. Moreover, when he has no other work and is out of school, he does fishing both for family consumption and for sale. It is [his] father and mother who helped him to learn all these activities while he was a child and now he learns on his own by seeing from peers.

Mother from *Bale*

From this we can conclude that for most children work is relatively normal and need not interfere with their other activities. In fact it can even support their schooling when, as one teacher from *Angar* described, 'children from the poor families were coming crying because of hunger and could not attend class properly. For them work and getting food would be necessary [in order to concentrate on their education]’.

Nonetheless, there are some work activities that are not considered beneficial because they expose children to physical or social risks. Examples of these are 'heavy' labour, such as ploughing or quarrying, and for girls selling snacks on the streets at night or working in bars or *chat* houses.

It is mainly girls of the poor families [who] involve in daily work which may expose them to rape and abduction. Many girls are working as daily workers in the expanding private vegetable farms and some girls are employed as housemaids so that they could not access education. Sometimes the work may be heavy and becomes beyond the capacity of the girls to perform.

Group Discussion from *Bale*

Even where the activities are considered legitimate and risk-free, some parents were concerned about the effect of an independent income on children's life trajectories and morals. For example, parents in *Bale* worried that being able to earn as an adult meant that children would see school as irrelevant, and having cash encouraged boys to spend it on 'unacceptable and risky activities', including friendships with girls.

Parents expect their children to contribute to the household and see this as an important part of their socialisation which will teach them the skills and attitudes to enable successful transitions in the future ('if she works, she will learn how to work', father from *Bale*). Although schooling is (apparently) their main activity, in practice most children study and work, and for poor children schooling might not be possible without this due to the cost of school materials, etc. Respondents in all communities indicated that children from poor or vulnerable households faced the greatest challenges combining work and schooling, and were often literally too tired to follow their lessons or were absent with work-related illnesses. For example, a local official from *Yoboki* described how children are:

21 These savoury snacks were purchased to accompany people's evening coffee ceremonies.

Selling plastic bags and driving horse and carriage to earn income for the household and because of this, they can not attend their education properly. They spend half their day engaging in different activities and they may not eat their lunch before they come to school if they are attending class in the afternoon. Those who are 13 or 14 yrs old are attending grade 1 since they were not started learning at an early age.

Local official from Yoboki

While less than three per cent of the 1994/5 cohort have dropped out, the figures from the third survey round in 2010 are likely to be higher and show clear differentiation by socio-economic status, as in the qualitative sample.

4.2.3 Marriage and sexual debut

While most children are not expected to marry, have sex, or even have relationships with boys or girls at this age, *early marriage* and *early sexual intercourse* are expected and even viewed positively in some communities. For example, in *Angar*, parents start to arrange marriages for their daughters from puberty onwards to secure their future and see them 'enlightened' (*berhan*) and 'flowering' (*abeba*) through the experience of marrying and having children. Rich households are considered particularly fortunate as they have the resources to arrange wedding ceremonies and attract good son-in-laws. Although early marriage represents a threat to girls' futures when these are viewed in terms of education and paid employment, many parents in rural and urban communities perceive marriage by abduction (whether 'forced' or 'voluntary') and pregnancy outside marriage as greater threats. Marriage is seen not only as an opportunity to assure the household's status and the 'personal development' of the bride, but also to gain 'support and protection' from sons-in-law, which is an important consideration for poor households. When early marriage is practiced in *Bale*, for example, it is 'mainly through the full involvement of the parents of both couples [especially] when this would involve *gebera* ['bride wealth']. In this case, the family of the bridegroom will pay *gebera* of up to 2000 birr (£100) and many livestock to the family of the bride. This kind of marriage can be considered as exchanging the female children for money' (elder from *Bale*).

Early, arranged marriages can also be seen as beneficial by parents as they remove the risks associated with early sexual relationships. Some respondents described how, in their opinion, the traditional practices worked better because, in the case of forced abduction, the authorities would be able to punish the perpetrator and parents could negotiate a better *gerbera* from the elders settling the case. The practice of voluntary abduction has introduced ambiguity as sanctions depend on the evidence given by the protagonists, and girls will usually say that they consented to avoid shame or punishment from their husband. The consequences of not making the marriage work are described below:

[If] she becomes pregnant the man forces her to leave his house saying that he has no capacity to bring up the child. Then, she starts to return back to the house of her parents but since she married without the consent and out of the norms of the community, [her] parents do not accept her.

Focus Group Discussion in *Bale*

The possibility of voluntary abduction has also created tensions between rich and poor families in *Bale*. While rich parents say that poor girls have 'ensnared' their sons and tricked them into paying a larger *gerbera* than they would otherwise be able to attain, poor parents say that rich ones use their wealth to abduct or seduce their daughters, realising that 'the parents could not take the case to the court because of their poverty [and so] girls of these destitute families are helpless'. Parents who are neither rich nor poor are also concerned because unplanned

marriages 'create shock for the families' and mean that 'it is difficult to know the economic and social status of the man' (father from *Bale*). In their opinion, girls also risk being 'cheated' because even after marriage and pregnancy 'the marriage can easily be discontinued because marriages that do not get consent from the family can't be accepted' (*ibid*).

The situation in the two urban communities is rather different as, according to the group discussions, casual or 'self-arranged' relationships are the 'new norm', and girls feel able to choose to have sex before marriage. For example, when a researcher asked participants in *Debre* at what age children in this community married, the respondents laughingly replied, 'these days we never see any wedding ceremony in the community. Girls may have love affairs with boys and start living together without having legal marriage'. One respondent attributed this to changes in norms caused by girls from female-headed households engaging in commercial sex work or related activities from the age of 12 which is 'totally changing people's way of living'. Respondents from *Yoboki* blamed the changes on rural migrants who, presumably unlike local girls, will have sexual relationships with boys from age 12 and bear children as early as 14. Nonetheless, we saw many young girls selling snacks on the main road after dark, which suggests that poverty rather than rural or urban *mores* might be a common factor.

When other options are limited or unappealing, and early marriage is sanctioned by local norms and historical practice, it has an understandable appeal to parents who want to do their best for both their daughters and other members of the household. From one perspective it could be seen as mutually beneficial because not only do parents gain honour and material resources from arranged marriages, but girls also increase their status and resources, assuming that they are marrying into a richer household, and are able to make the marriage work (for example, by swiftly having children). Young wives are also able to lead an independent life, within the constraints described in the literature review, and some even return to schooling.²² They avoid some of the risks associated with premature sexual relationships, for example, sexual abuse and pregnancy outside marriage, which might reduce their chance of making a good marriage in the future and would humiliate their family. An additional consideration is that while early sexual intercourse and pregnancy typically lead to health problems and cessation of schooling, at least within the context of marriage they are not also a source of shame that reflects badly on the 'parenting skills' and character of the caregivers. Instead they are a source of personal satisfaction and represent a successful transition from the perspective of the parents, even without the *gerbera*. While the arguments made in this section are obviously unbalanced without the perspectives of girls in these communities, they do redress a different imbalance which is the representation of early marriage in terms of 'suffering' and 'victimhood' in NGO-funded literature (e.g. see <http://www.pathfind.org>) without recognition of the cultures and environments in which it is practiced.

4.3 Agency and constraints

While the shared ideals of completed primary education, limited participation in labour and avoidance of early marriage/sexual debut are reflected in government policies, they have not attained the status of norms, as they are so rarely achieved. Any argument that attributes this failure to the perverse influence of local norms is insufficient. As researchers, we should ask what role local norms play and how actors (in this paper, caregivers and other adult

22 One caregiver in *Debre* had returned to school after giving birth at 16 when her husband got a job as a policeman and was now studying for a law degree, although we suspect this is fairly unusual.

community members) negotiate local, national, and global understandings to produce what they feel are successful transitions for their children.

While some parents described the respect they felt towards their traditional practices, many more felt that government policies were fundamentally misguided and exposed their daughters in particular to an unacceptable level of risk. A religious leader from *Angar* observed that 'our cultural norms and religion have been with us through generations [...] governments come and go, and so their policies'. For example, self-arranged or 'free will' marriages were seen as disruptive to schooling; of poorer quality than arranged marriages; and a challenge to the fundamental understanding between parents and child that, in return for respect and obedience, their parents will be there to provide support for as long as they need it. Policymakers need to understand and in some cases challenge 'invisible norms', but also recognise the visible economic constraints and limited opportunity structures that make child work or early marriage seem appealing, despite repeated 'awareness creation programmes'.²³

Attempts to enforce the laws in the study communities have been unsuccessful, as both adults and children balanced the potential consequences of failing to respect government laws or local norms and often made their decisions by stealth. For example, a female Healthcare worker from *Yoboki* described how:

When you talk to people they tell you they have brought attitudinal change, but in practice there is no significant change yet. If men have some changes, still women at home are more inclined to cultural values. You tell them about the harmfulness of traditional practices and they seem to agree and even tell you back what you tell them. But in practice they do not respect it.

Female Healthcare worker from *Yoboki*

Respondents were prepared not only to manipulate government policies to accommodate valued practices (for example, the *Bale Kebele* leader's fluid interpretation of the age threshold for marriage which, in the absence of a birth certificate, seemed to be based primarily on the female petitioner's weight) but also to directly and successfully challenge them. An example of this occurred in 2005 when, after surprisingly low support in the elections, the government accepted the petition of rural parents that children should only attend half a day's schooling as opposed to the full day that was initially proposed to meet the Millennium Development Goal on primary education. This was in every sense a compromise as it involved rural people, some of whom were deeply ambivalent about the value of schooling (at least for more than one member of a household), agreeing to all their children attending school, while the government acknowledged the reality of child work, its inability to provide a deep enough safety net to replace this, and the inevitable consequence of lower educational attainment.

While the government has not addressed child work, even within its own safety net programme, illegal marriage has been challenged, partly due to the level of international scrutiny. For this reason, dissenting parents used a range of devices to avoid discovery, against which the government was relatively powerless, even assuming it had the full support of local officials. Examples included describing marriages as 'engagements', even when the girl was living with her husband, disguising the ceremonies as religious feasts or holding them during the summer vacation, inflating the girl's age, and even sending an older sister to court in her place.

23 For example, one caregiver from *Yoboki* described how 'one time some people gathered us to tell us about the equality of man and woman and we spend too much time in the meeting and gave us 15 birr and they sent us to our home. I had a lot of things to do at home the whole time I sat there. They just talk about things; they are not practical.'

5. Discussion

In this section we discuss the findings relating to children's transitions, address the extent to which norms influence these and support the intergenerational transfer of poverty, and highlight some of the questions this raises for policymakers. As the paper is based on five communities ($n=120$) and uses data from a single method, albeit triangulated and contextualised with data from other sources, these reflections are indicative rather than conclusive.

In each community, we found that the specific socio-cultural and material context interacted with parents' expectations and experiences to affect transitions into and out of school, work and early marriage. This suggests that, contrary to the impression given by international finance institutions such as the World Bank (Luttrell-Rowland 2007), children's transitions are rarely linear, singular or focused solely on 'learning'. Our data suggest instead that it is usual for children to experience multiple and often contradictory transitional trajectories: to 'work at farming, give attention to their education and accept advice from parents' (elder from *Bale*).

While respondents had clear ideas about what should happen when and to whom, we found more instances of 'statistical norms' within the data (Marini 1984:238) rather than examples of these expectations being fulfilled.²⁴ We cannot therefore conclude that social norms govern the nature or timing of transitions, as parents' expectations and practices are internally inconsistent and potentially contradictory. For example, they may describe their ideal as their children studying hard and therefore having a materially prosperous future, while also expecting them to work for their family and make a good marriage. The ideal may bear little resemblance to the possible, and neither the ideal nor its pragmatic adaptation necessarily connects with their children's views. We could argue that the norm is what actually happens, rather than what 'everyone' agrees should happen, especially as compromises are accepted by all parties (for example, around child work), particularly in circumstances of poverty. This seems plausible in the absence of sanctions at either the government or community levels. However, we should not underestimate the impact on a parent of a feeling of failure, perhaps because they feel they have not respected collective values or have been shamed or humiliated by their children's failure to conform (eight per cent of respondents felt that 'cooperation and *conforming* within your community' was one of the three most important characteristics for children).

Rather than debate the power of norms in the abstract, we propose a grounded investigation of why in some instances these do not become shared values and why transgressions do not incur sanctions. While norms clearly exist, at least at the level of discourse, they need to be considered in context, acknowledging how fragile they become as people respond to material poverty and environmental challenges.

Throughout this paper we have argued that the gap between people's ideals, expectations and experiences of their children's transitions is very large, particularly where people have few material, human or social resources. While our sample is too young to establish the extent to which poverty is being transferred across the generations, it seems likely that early marriage, involvement in too much/heavy labour, and interrupted schooling will have the negative effects that are described by our respondents and in the literature reviewed earlier.

²⁴ Statistical norms are the age at which transitions typically occur, rather than the age at which they should occur.

While children from poor communities and households are said to be constrained by their lack of opportunities, in fact their likelihood of making successful transitions is reduced by having too many potentially contradictory opportunities too soon. This contrasts with the experiences of, for example, a middle class teenager in Addis Ababa who might be concentrating solely on her studies and not planning to marry until she has completed her university education and secured a good job.

5.1 Policy questions

The transitions explored here raise a number of questions for policymakers. We propose firstly that any intervention to reduce life course poverty needs to understand why actors make or guide transitions in a way that will produce less than optimal results, at least in relation to international understandings of well-being. Early marriage is a good example of this, because parents feel that in the current environment, government legislation against early and arranged marriages removes an important source of protection for their daughters and threatens their future. To ensure that they are protected from abduction and abuse, they prefer to marry their daughters at the point at which they become vulnerable, even if this is at the cost of their formal education. Recognising both the rationality and the emotion that drives such concerns, and the complexity of the decisions that relate to them, is clearly important for policymakers' understanding of why practices such as early marriage continue, even when this requires parents to break the law.

Secondly, our data suggest that in contexts of pressing need, international conventions such as the CRC should be interpreted carefully in relation to the local, grounded experiences of all members of communities, rather than imposed from above. Policies without resources, like the ubiquitous English-language mission statements on the walls of *Kebele* offices, can otherwise seem like so much window dressing for the benefit of international donors (Berre 2004).

Thirdly, despite the legal provisions related to the transitions discussed here (work, marriage, schooling), our data show little evidence of effective sanctions when these laws are broken. The main reason for this is that the policies are also ideals rather than norms and do not entail the material resources that are necessary to make them effective. Prohibiting paid work for children under 14 so that they concentrate on their education when they cannot go to school without food or school materials is unlikely to be successful, even leaving aside variations in the extent and quality of local schooling. For this reason policies or legislation that are not supported by resources are unlikely to be effective. As one father in Angar said to his daughter's teacher: 'if you say "no early marriage", please feed her'.

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