

# DIVORCE IN ETHIOPIA: THE IMPACT OF EARLY MARRIAGE AND CHILDLESSNESS

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**Summary.** Forty-five per cent of first marriages in Ethiopia end in divorce within 30 years, and two-thirds of women who divorce do so within the first 5 years of marriage. This paper looks at two factors that may have an impact on the risk of divorce in Ethiopia: early age of first marriage, and childlessness within the first marriage. Data used were from the 1990 National Family and Fertility Survey conducted by the Government of Ethiopia. A total of 8757 women of reproductive age (15–49) were analysed. Life table analysis was used to determine the median age at first marriage, first birth and the median duration of marriage. Cox models were analysed to determine the differentials of divorce. The results of this analysis showed that both early age at marriage and childlessness have a significant impact on the risk of divorce. An inverse relationship was found between age at marriage and risk of divorce. Having a child within the first marriage also significantly reduced the risk of divorce. In addition, several cultural and socioeconomic variables were significant predictors of divorce.

## Introduction

Forty-five per cent of all first marriages in Ethiopia end in divorce or separation within 30 years, and two-thirds of women who divorce do so within the first 5 years of marriage. Divorce has been a common and largely accepted practice in Ethiopia for centuries. As early as the 16th century, divorce was referred to as the ‘custom of the country’ (Pankhurst, 1990). However, neither the causes of divorce, nor the impact of divorce on Ethiopian society, and specifically on women, are fully understood as little research has been conducted on this subject.

This paper focuses on two factors that influence the risk of divorce: early age of first marriage and childlessness within the first marriage. Early marriage was selected for this study because anthropological research in many parts of Ethiopia indicates that many people consider divorce to be a greater risk if a girl marries at a young age, specifically before age 15 (Dagne, 1994; Pankhurst, 1992a, 1992b). Childlessness within the first marriage was included because interviews with both men and women

revealed that a common reason given for divorce is barrenness within the marriage (Pankhurst, 1992a; Worku, 1983).

Data used for this analysis were from the Ethiopia 1990 National Family and Fertility Survey (NFFS). A total of 8757 women of reproductive age (15–49) from both urban and rural areas were analysed. Life table analysis was used to determine median age of first marriage, first birth and median duration of marriage. Cox models were analysed to determine risk of divorce for each of the primary variables of interest (age at marriage and childlessness) and to control for several covariates.

### Background

There are six forms of marriage in Ethiopia among the Orthodox Christian people (54% of the population from the 1984 census, excluding the rural areas of Tigray and Eritrea) (Transitional Government of Ethiopia Office of the Population and Housing Census Commission, 1991, p.60): *serg* (ceremonial marriage), *k'urban* (religious marriage), *semayana* (civil marriage), *k'ot'assir* (marriage preceded by provision of labour), *gered* or *demoz* (paid labour marriage), and *t'ilf* (marriage by abduction) (Pankhurst, 1992a). These categories are not rigid and it is often difficult to place a woman's history into one category, as she may have experienced the characteristics of several of these types of marriages in progression to her first marriage. For example, in some cases the *t'ilf*, or abduction marriage, is really an elopement on the part of the couple, whose parents may not have agreed to the match. The 'abduction' may be then followed by a *semayana* or *serg* marriage ceremony. However, the majority of first marriages are *semayana* or *serg* marriages.

Generally, the parents of the couple decide upon the match. There may be a short engagement period and gifts may be exchanged. The engagement period is followed by a wedding feast in the bride's home, and then one in the groom's home. *Semayana* marriages are formalized through the signing of a contract, more often in cases where wealth is brought in from either side. This is to insure that in the event of a divorce, the partner who brought the wealth (land or other assets) retains rights to it. The contract signed in a *semayana* marriage involves both families and sometimes a church priest acting as a scribe, but in most cases the contract is not registered in a civil court or in a church register. Legal registration of a marriage is common among the more affluent in urban areas. The *semayana* contract is more difficult to dissolve than the other forms of marriage due to the contractual aspect involved. Pankhurst (1992a) notes that marriages that do not have significant outlays of land or wealth from the start are more easily dissolved than unions with significant assets.

Despite the predominance of religion in the daily lives of most Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, the Orthodox Church is not significantly involved in the area of marriage and divorce. The Orthodox Church has attempted to intervene in some areas of marriage, but without much success (Pankhurst, 1992a, 1992b; Beckstrom 1969). For example, the Church attempted to prohibit polygamy, but about 10% of the Christian population is in polygamous unions (Central Statistical Authority, 1993). The Church also prohibits divorce for the *k'urban* marriages of the priests, but there are still many priests whose marriages dissolve.

The marriage practices of the Muslim population in Ethiopia (33% of the population from the 1984 census, excluding the rural areas of Tigray and Eritrea) (Transitional Government of Ethiopia Office of the Population and Housing Census Commission, 1991, p.60) involve religious authorities to a greater extent than Orthodox Christian marriage practices. The traditional Muslim marriage will begin with an arrangement between the parents for the union of their children. The couple is not usually given any choice in whom they marry, although increasingly the sons have some choice. An engagement period will be followed by a ceremony that is presided over by a *quadi* (*imam* of the mosque). The marriage is defined and formalized according to the Sharia law of Islam. Polygamy is allowed and, although divorce is strongly discouraged, a marriage may still be dissolved with the husband's triple pronouncement of divorce (Mekonnen, 1986).

The state has also attempted to regulate marriage, but without much success. The state has outlawed child marriage, and imposed a minimum age of marriage of 15 years (Ethiopian Civil Code). The state has also outlawed *k'ot'assir* marriages, which usually involve a boy coming into a wealthy household to provide labour, and later marrying a daughter of the family. Neither of these laws is widely enforced, and thus these practices still continue, as will be documented below in the case of early marriage.

#### *Divorce and a sociocultural discussion of the causes of divorce*

Pankhurst's (1992a) anthropological research among the Amhara people in North Shewa province suggests that there are many factors involved in the dissolution of marriages. The most common reasons women cited for dissolving a marriage were barrenness, husbands beating and ill-treating them, wasting money, adultery, exerting too much control over their activities, forcing intercourse, homesickness, and a large difference in age. The most common reasons that men cited were barrenness, wives' adultery, not keeping house correctly, and wives not obeying them or challenging their authority. These stated reasons of divorce have been reiterated by researchers working in other areas of Ethiopia (Pankhurst, 1992b; Giel & Luijk, 1968).

One view of the relatively high divorce rate is that it is a reflection of the empowered position of women to leave a relationship that is unsatisfactory. There is very little social stigma towards divorced women, and most women who divorce remarry within several years (Tefera, 1994; Central Statistical Authority, 1993). Both men and women agree that women more often are the initiators of divorce (Pankhurst, 1992a). This social acceptance of divorce within Ethiopian culture may ease the difficulties associated with divorce, thus empowering women to leave abusive or unhappy marriages (Beckstrom, 1969).

Divorce is more common among the Amhara ethnic group than among the Oromo ethnic group, and more common among Christians than among Muslims (Central Statistical Authority, 1993). There may be several explanations for this. People who practise the Muslim religion in Ethiopia may have a stronger tradition of the indissolubility of marriage than do the people who practise the Christian Orthodox religion. This may be in part because the religious authority plays a larger role in Muslim marriages than in Christian Orthodox marriages (Mekonnen, 1986). Muslims

are also more likely to practise polygamy than Christians, which may contribute to a lower incidence of divorce. Pankhurst (1992a) speculates that marriage practices among Christians are too unstable for the Orthodox Church to wish to be involved, and in cases where they have attempted to intervene, they have had little success.

This paper analyses two aspects of Pankhurst's sociocultural discussion of divorce and how they impact the risk of divorce: early age of first marriage, and childlessness within the first marriage.

### *Early marriage*

Women are often married at very young ages in Ethiopia. The 1990 NFFS indicated that among ever-married women, 34% were younger than 15 years at first marriage, 41% were 15 to 17 years, and 12% were 18–19 years. Eighty-seven per cent of ever-married women were younger than 20 years at first marriage (Central Statistical Authority, 1993). In most areas, tradition dictates that a girl marries as soon as she reaches puberty. This is to insure that she is a virgin at marriage, as well as to guarantee that the best possible match is found for her. In most cases, parents do not have as good a chance of finding a 'suitable' husband for their daughter if they wait until after puberty to look for a husband. In some areas of Ethiopia, child marriage (<10 years) is common. In the northern areas of Gondar and Gojjam, 75% of women marry before age 15, and 15% marry before age 10 (Dagne, 1994). Among the people that Dagne interviewed, most recognized that there were negative consequences of early marriage. These included an increased risk of divorce, physical damage to the girl's reproductive organs, and increased difficulty in childbirth. However, most parents believed that tradition and finding a good match for their daughter outweighed these negative consequences.

There are many reasons posed to explain why a young age at marriage would contribute to an increased risk of divorce; among them are immaturity, homesickness, and women's lack of choice in whom they marry. In her anthropological research, Pankhurst (1992a) recorded the stories of many women in North Shewa province who married before age 15. One woman reported that she was neither told of her marriage before her wedding day, nor was she told whom she was to marry until her wedding day. She reported being very afraid and not wanting to sleep with her husband, but having no place to run away. Another woman explained that because both she and her husband were so young when they married, they became interested in other people as they grew older, and separated because of this. Other women reported that they were not mature enough to maintain the commitment to their marriage, or they became homesick and ran away from their husband to return home.

### *Childlessness*

Not having a child is often a reason given for the dissolution of marriage in Ethiopia (Pankhurst, 1992a). Having a child to inherit the family land and to carry on the family name is a very important part of Ethiopian culture. In addition, a woman's status is, to a certain extent, measured by the number of children she has. Barrenness is often cited by both men and women as a reason that they left a

marriage. Failure of the first wife to bear children is often cited as a reason for the husband to take an additional wife, particularly among the Muslim population. In Ethiopia, about 14% of all currently married women are in a polygamous union. Of the women surveyed in the 1990 NFFS, 18% of Muslim women were currently in a polygamous union, as were 10% of Christian women (Central Statistical Authority, 1993).

### *Research hypotheses*

The first marriage and factors influencing the risk of divorce for the first marriage were the main focus of analysis in this paper. Further analysis may be conducted utilizing the 1990 NFFS to determine the differences in divorce rates and contributing factors for subsequent marriages and divorces. The hypotheses generated from this background research are twofold: first, that there is an inverse relationship between age of first marriage and risk of divorce; and second, that childlessness within the first marriage is significantly associated with the risk of divorce. Various other factors are included in the analysis as covariates. These include: education as a socioeconomic indicator; cultural indicators such as religion, ethnicity, who decided the first marriage partner, whether the first husband's family paid bride wealth to the woman's family and birth cohort; and regional differences.

### **Data**

The data used for this analysis were from the 1990 NFFS conducted by the Central Statistical Authority of the Government of Ethiopia. Of the 8980 women interviewed, 233 were excluded from analysis because of missing birth dates. The sample analysed included 8757 women, of which 1947 had never married. The multivariate analysis included 6179 ever-married women with complete information about all the covariates analysed.

Data quality in terms of reporting about the woman's age, birth dates of her children, date of marriage and divorce were deemed adequate (Central Statistical Authority, 1993). Comparisons with the 1984 census documented that the survey data are fairly representative of a national sample in terms of distributions by age, religion and education. There were two regions in the north-west and north-east highlands (Gondar and Wello) that were not covered in the 1990 NFFS, because of insecurity due to civil war. The omission of these regions resulted in the ethnic composition not being quite representative of a national sample. The Amhara and Tigrawais ethnicities were under-represented, and the Oromos and Gurages were over-represented in the 1990 NFFS (Central Statistical Authority, 1993).

### **Methods**

Life table analysis was used to determine the median age of first marriage for all women, as well as for differences in age at marriage between those never divorced versus ever divorced, by age at marriage and by birth cohort (Chiang, 1984). Life

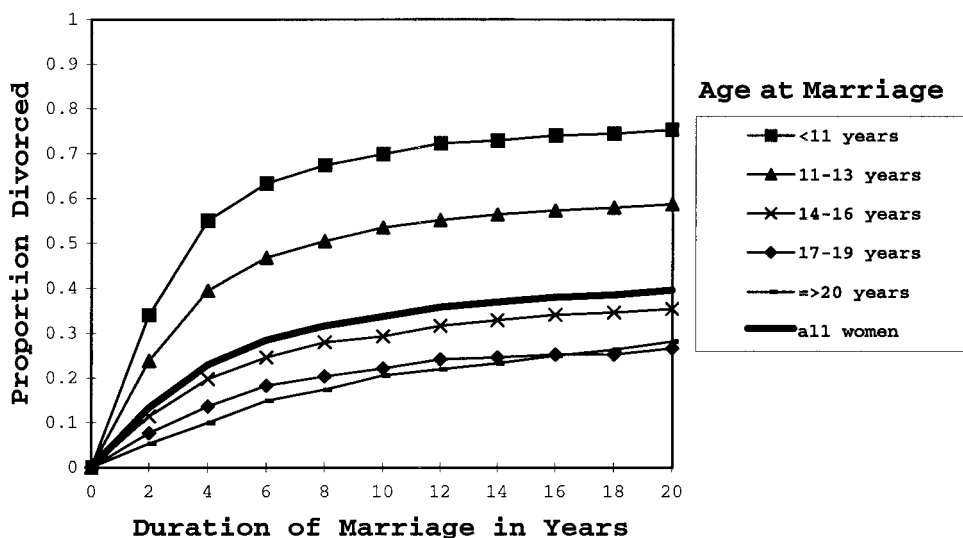


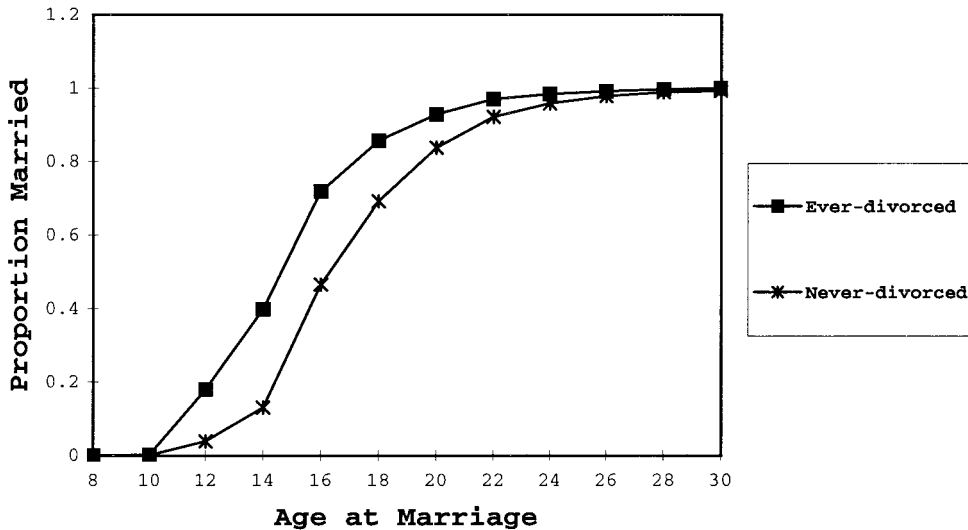
Fig. 1. Proportion divorced by duration of marriage and age at marriage.

tables were also used to determine median age at first birth and median waiting time to first birth for women married before menarche versus women married after menarche. The proportion married by age and the proportion divorced by duration of marriage were also analysed using life tables. Survival curves, based on Kaplan–Meier life tables, were used to illustrate the differences in age at marriage for ever-divorced versus never-divorced women. Survival curves were also used to determine the probability of divorce by age at first marriage, and by having a child or not within the first marriage.

Cox models were used to determine relative risks of divorce by age at first marriage, and for women who had a child within the first marriage versus those who did not, controlling for several other covariates (Cox & Oaks, 1984). Having a child within the first marriage was entered as a time-varying variable into the Cox model. The resulting risk ratio is interpreted as the change in risk of divorce after the birth of the first child compared with before the birth. Time dependence of the birth of the first child was also analysed to determine whether the effect of having a child on the risk of divorce changed over time.

## Results

The median age of first marriage for all women analysed (8757) was found to be 16.7 years. Marriage is nearly universal, and 95% of women in Ethiopia marry by age 30. Approximately 45% of all first marriages end in divorce within 30 years; 28% of first marriages end in divorce within the first 5 years, 34% within 10 years, and 40% within 20 years (Fig. 1).



**Fig. 2.** Proportion married by age at marriage for never-divorced versus ever-divorced women.

### *Life table analysis*

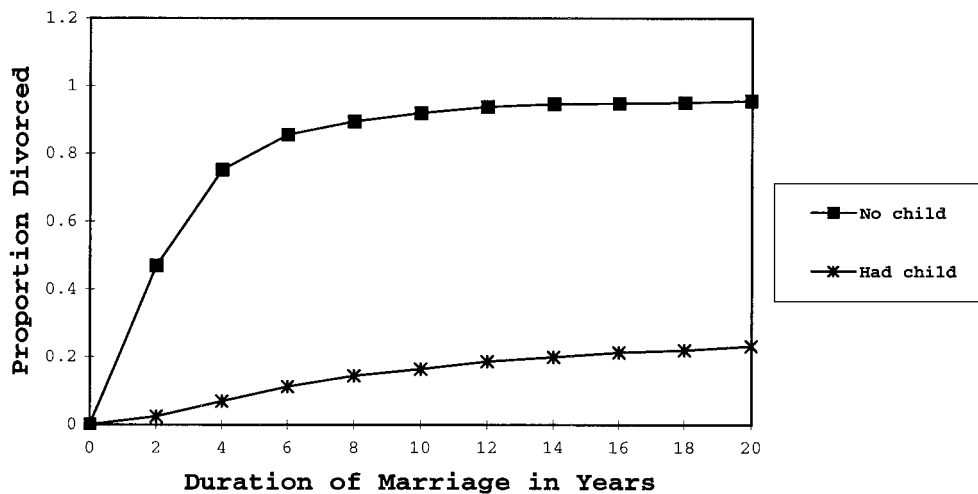
*Proportion divorced by age at marriage and by childbearing within first marriage.* The first main finding is that age at marriage is an important factor in the risk of divorce. Figure 1 illustrates that the risk of divorce increases with decreasing age at marriage. Seventy-five per cent of women who marry earlier than age 11 divorce within 20 years. Nearly 60% of women who marry between age 11 and 13 divorce within 20 years. The risk of divorce drops significantly for women who marry after age 14.

Figure 2 supports the point that women who divorce in Ethiopia marry earlier than women who do not divorce. Among all ever-married women, the median age at marriage for women who divorce is 14.5 years as compared with a median age of 16.3 years for women who did not divorce. This earlier age at marriage for divorced women may have implications for their ability to have children soon after marriage, and may confound the results regarding childlessness and the risk of divorce. This potential confounding effect was evaluated by stratifying the analysis, and is discussed below.

The second main finding from this analysis is that whether or not the couple had a child within first marriage is an important factor in the risk of divorce. Figure 3 shows that almost all women (95%) who did not have a child within their first marriage divorced within 20 years. Eighty-five per cent of these women divorced within the first 5 years. Significantly fewer women who did have a child within first marriage divorced (23% within 20 years).

The next hypothesis is either that the impact of having a child on the risk of divorce is being confounded by age at marriage, and that having a child is really the most important factor, or that the reverse is true: that the impact of age at marriage is being confounded by the child variable and that the age of first marriage is the most





**Fig. 3.** Proportion divorced by duration of marriage and having a child within marriage or not.

important determinant of divorce. In order to test these hypotheses, the life table analysis was stratified both by 'having a child or not' to see if age at marriage still matters, and by 'age at marriage' to see if having a child or not still matters. Age at marriage was dichotomized at age 15 for two reasons. First, the median age of menarche is 15, and marriage before menarche may have implications for the reproductive health of women and their fecundability, which may impact the risk of divorce. Second, age 15 is the legal age for marriage in Ethiopia for girls, although it is not enforced. Therefore, determining the risk of divorce for women who marry earlier than the legal age may be one mechanism to evaluate the potential impact of policy changes.

The results of the life table analysis after stratification by age at marriage and having a child or not showed that both variables significantly impact the risk of divorce (Fig. 4). It appears that whether the couple had a child or not had a greater impact on the risk of divorce than age at marriage. Most women who did not have a child within marriage divorced within the first 5 years, regardless of whether the woman married before or after age 15. Ninety per cent of women who married before age 15 divorced within 5 years versus 78% of women who married after age 15 (among those who did not have a child within first marriage). The percentage of women that divorced was much smaller among women who had a child, regardless of age at marriage. Twelve per cent of women who married before age 15 divorced within 5 years versus 10% of women who married after age 15 (among those who had a child within first marriage). However, a test for a difference by age at marriage showed that there was still a significant difference in the probability of divorce for women who married before versus after age 15, after controlling for the effect of having a child or not.



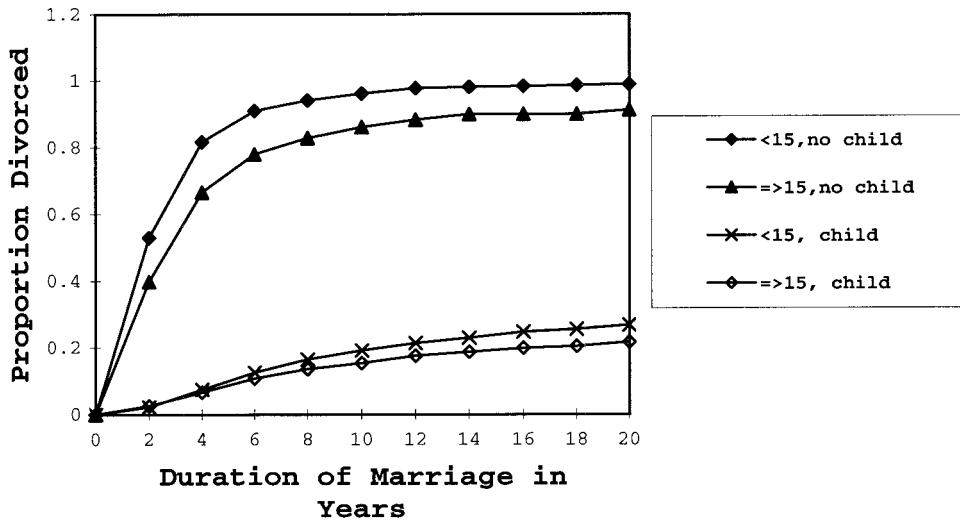


Fig. 4. Proportion divorced by duration of marriage and having a child within marriage or not.

*Age at first marriage and age at first birth, and waiting time to first birth.* Table 1 shows the median age at first marriage and first birth for all ever-married women (18.9 years for age at first birth), and for women who never divorce (18.8 years), versus ever-divorce (19.3 years). This significantly higher median age at first birth for ever-divorced women is interesting given that women who ever divorce marry at significantly younger ages than women who never divorce, thus giving them more time of exposure to conception (Table 1). This finding may indicate that women who ever divorce are less fertile than women who never divorce.

It was also found that the median waiting time to first birth from date of marriage is significantly longer for women who ever divorce than for women who never divorce. This longer waiting time to first birth may in part be explained by subfertility among ever-divorced women due to their younger age at marriage. The analysis was therefore stratified by marriage before or after menarche because an inability to conceive before menarche lengthens the waiting time to conception. It was found that even among women who married after menarche, ever-divorced women had a longer waiting time to first birth than never-divorced women (2.8 years versus 1.4 years).

One possible explanation for ever-divorced women being less fertile than never-divorced women is that women who marry at young ages (and are sexually active at marriage) are at higher risk for contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) because of their immature physical development (Moerman, 1982). STDs are one causal factor for subfertility (Duncan *et al.*, 1990; Westroem, 1975; Menken, 1972).

It should be noted that women in the middle cohort (born 1951–1960) have a significantly younger median age of first birth and a significantly shorter waiting time to first birth from marriage than women in the oldest cohort (born 1941–1950) (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Median age of first marriage and first birth, and waiting time to first birth for women married before and after menarche among ever-married women

	Sample size	Age at first marriage <sup>a</sup>	Age at first birth	Median years to first birth <sup>b</sup>		
				Sample size	Married after menarche	Married before menarche
All ever-married women	6209	15.5 (15.4–15.6)	18.9 (18.8–19.1)	2710	1.8 (1.6–1.8)	4.9 (4.3–5.5)
Never-divorced	4041	16.3 (16.1–16.5)	18.8 (18.7–18.8)	2023	1.4 (1.3–1.6)	2.4 (2.3–2.7)
Ever-divorced	2168	14.5 (14.5–15.1)	19.3 (19.1–19.6)	677	2.8 (2.3–3.8)	—
Age at marriage						
<11	385	10.5 (10.5–10.5)	17.4 (16.8–17.8)	2	—	—
11–13	1008	12.5 (12.5–12.5)	16.7 (16.3–17.0)	68	2.8 (2.1–4.8)	6.4 (5.2–9.3)
14–16	2762	15.5 (15.5–15.5)	17.8 (17.7–17.8)	1266	1.9 (1.8–2.1)	2.8 (2.8–3.3)
17–19	1263	18.3 (18.2–18.4)	19.9 (19.8–20.0)	857	1.4 (1.3–1.8)	2.3 (1.6–3.3)
≥20	791	21.5 (21.4–21.9)	24.0 (23.6–24.2)	517	1.3 (1.2–1.4)	1.6 (0.9–3.8)
Birth cohort						
1941–1950	2772	15.5 (15.4–15.6)	19.8 (19.8–20.2)	1183	1.9 (1.8–2.2)	7.5 (6.1–9.3)
1951–1960	2472	15.5 (15.4–15.6)	18.3 (18.3–18.6)	1074	1.4 (1.3–1.6)	3.7 (3.3–4.3)
1961–1975	965	15.5 (15.4–15.5)	18.0 (17.8–18.3)	453	1.5 (1.4–1.8)	3.6 (3.0–4.8)

—, fewer than 50% had the event.

<sup>a</sup>95% confidence intervals in parentheses.

<sup>b</sup>For women who had a first birth within first marriage.

The median age at first birth for women in the middle cohort is 18.3 compared with 19.8 for the oldest cohort. The median waiting time to first birth also declined from 1.9 years for the oldest cohort to 1.4 years for the middle cohort. These findings may reflect improved reproductive health of women, and improved nutritional status. The results from the youngest cohort cannot be interpreted as they are affected by the young age of the women in this cohort.

*Remarriage and duration between first and second marriage.* Life table analysis also shows that the vast majority of women remarry after their first divorce. Sixty-six per cent of women remarry within 2 years and 87% of women remarry within 10 years (results not presented). The median duration between the first and second marriage is 1.2 years. It also appears that the younger the woman married for the first time, the more likely she is to remarry. Eighty-seven per cent of women who married younger than age 14 remarried within 10 years versus 83% of women who married older than age 16. Women who did not have a child within the first marriage were more likely to get remarried than women who did have a child within the first marriage although most women in both categories eventually remarried (89% versus 83% remarried within 10 years). The prevalence of second and third divorces is as high or higher than for the first divorce. According to life table analysis, 45% of second marriages end in divorce within 20 years, and 63% of third marriages end in divorce within 20 years (results not presented).

#### *Differentials of divorce*

*Univariate models.* The results of univariate Cox models, presented in Table 2, show that age at marriage and having a child within first marriage are significantly related to the risk of divorce. The risk of divorce is 0.48 for women who marry after age 15 relative to women who marry before age 15. When birth of a child within first marriage is modelled as a time-varying variable, the instantaneous risk of divorce decreases to 0.61 upon the birth of the first child relative to what it was before the birth of the first child. Time dependence of having a child was also tested based on the hypothesis that the reduced risk of divorce associated with the birth of the first child would gradually decrease with time. The latter time-dependent variable did not add significantly to the model (result not presented).

Several covariates were tested in the univariate analysis. There was an insignificant difference in risk of divorce between the middle (1951–1960) and oldest birth cohort (1941–1950). However, as discussed in the life table analysis, the finding about the youngest cohort is difficult to interpret because of the high proportion of younger women surveyed who were not yet married.

Level of education was analysed as a socioeconomic indicator. No other questions from the survey served as proxies for socioeconomic status. For instance, husbands' level of education could not be used because only level of education for the current husband was available. Household variables such as electricity, tap as a water source versus an open water source, and whether the family bought or grew most of their food were investigated but not presented. The results showed that women who lived in households with electricity, tap water source, and who bought most of their food

**Table 2.** Univariate and multivariate models of risk of divorce

Variable	Univariate models relative risk	Univariate sample size <sup>a</sup>	Multivariate models relative risk <sup>b</sup>					
			Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	
Age at marriage								
<15	1.00	2106	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	
≥15	0.48***	4103	0.49***	0.53***	0.49***	0.63***	0.68***	
Child within first marriage (time varying)								
No	1.00	2469	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	
Yes	0.61***	4281	0.68***	0.80*	0.69***	0.69***	0.70**	
Birth cohort								
1941–1950	1.00	3172						1.00
1951–1960	0.95	2602						0.98
1961–1975	1.47***	967						1.29***
Education								
None	0.62***	2804			0.64***			0.88
Primary	1.00	903			1.00			1.00
Literacy programme	0.84***	2575			0.86***			0.99
Secondary or higher	0.57***	413			0.63***			0.58***
Religion								
Muslim	1.00	1945				1.00		1.00
Christian	1.72***	4274				1.69***		1.52***
Other	0.87	429				0.53		0.55
Ethnicity								
Oromo	1.00	2717				1.00		1.00
Amhara	2.87***	1774				4.25***		3.47***
Other	1.17***	2235				0.97		0.92
Interaction Christian/Amhara						0.44***		0.49***
Interaction Christian/Other						0.98		1.06
Interaction Other/Amhara						0.93		1.05
Interaction Other/Other						2.54*		2.55*
Age at menarche								
<14 years	1.40***	535		1.03				
14–15 years	1.11	2806		0.94				
>16	1.00	1549		1.00				
Who chose the first marriage partner?								
Parents/relatives	1.00	4883				1.00		1.00
Woman herself	0.62***	1194				0.69***		0.76***
Women and parents	0.35***	343				0.41***		0.45***
Other	1.52***	306				1.78***		1.82***
Husband paid bride price in first marriage?								
No	1.00	1661				1.00		1.00
Yes	0.93	5065				0.80***		0.77***
Region								
Addis Ababa	1.00	973						1.00
EW Gojjam	1.89***	501						1.27**
Other	0.62***	5252						0.83**
Always lived in location of interview?								
No (moved)	1.54***	3950						1.44***
Yes	1.00	2776						1.00

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

<sup>a</sup>The sample sizes do not add up to the same total in the univariate models as there was missing information about some covariates.

<sup>b</sup>All multivariate models were run on a sample size of 6179 cases, the number of cases that had complete information.

all had a higher risk of divorce than those who did not have these facilities. However, these variables were highly collinear with regional differences of Addis Ababa versus other regions. This collinearity suggests that these household variables are more an indication of urban/rural differences than socioeconomic differences. In addition, these variables were asked of the women's current residence, and not of the residence where she lived in her first marriage. They are therefore not very useful as predictors of first divorce.

Several cultural indicators were analysed. These included religion, ethnicity, who chose the first marriage partner, and whether the first husband paid bride wealth. Birth cohort, age at menarche, region of residence, and whether the woman had always lived in the location of interview were also analysed in the univariate analysis for risk of divorce. Each of these variables was significantly associated with divorce (Table 2). For instance, women living in all regions except Gojjam had a significantly lower risk of divorce than women in Addis Ababa. The region variable was first divided into thirteen regions as they were defined at the time of the survey (Addis Ababa, Gojjam, Harrarghe, Shoa, Arsi, Keffa, Sidamo, Borena, Omo, Shewa Illubabor, and other). Women from Gojjam were 1.89 times more likely to divorce than women from Addis Ababa. The regions were then combined into those that lived in Addis Ababa, East/West Gojjam, and all other regions. As discussed in the background section, Gojjam has a higher proportion of women who marry at very early ages, and therefore it was expected that women from Gojjam would have a higher divorce rate than women from Addis Ababa or other regions. This regional division may also be a proxy for urban or rural residence. The survey code for women's current residence as urban or rural was unavailable, and thus the regional division of Addis Ababa versus other regions is as close a proxy to a variable about urban or rural residence as was available. Urban/rural coding definitions were not included in the data set and were unavailable upon request.

*Multivariate models.* A series of multivariate models were constructed to determine first the main effects of age at marriage and childlessness, and subsequently to determine the changes in main effects as socioeconomic and cultural covariates were added. Model 1 shows the results when both having a child or not and age at marriage were entered (Table 2). Both variables were highly significant. The risk of divorce for women who married later than age 15 was 0.49 compared with women who married before age 15. For women who had a child within the first marriage, the instantaneous risk of divorce dropped to 0.68 of what it was before the birth of the child. An interaction term between having a child within first marriage and age at marriage was added to Model 1, and it was not significant (result not shown). Model 2 includes both age of menarche and age at marriage, in addition to having a child or not. Age at menarche was collinear with age at marriage, and thus age of menarche became insignificant as a predictor of divorce in Model 2.

Model 3 includes education as an indicator of socioeconomic status, in addition to age at marriage and having a child or not. Women with secondary and higher education have 0.63 times the risk of divorce compared with women with primary education. Women with no education as well as those who had attended a literacy programme also showed lower risk of divorce than women with primary education.

Model 4 includes several cultural factors that were hypothesized to influence the risk of divorce: religion, ethnicity, who decided the first marriage partner, and whether the groom paid bride wealth in the first marriage. All of these covariates were significantly related to divorce. Christians were more likely to divorce than Muslims, Amharas were more likely to divorce than Oromos, women whose parents decided their marriage partner (as opposed to the woman herself or jointly deciding), and women whose husbands paid bride wealth. In addition, an interaction term between religion and ethnicity was highly significant in the multivariate model. The results show that women who were both Amhara and Christian had 3.13 times the risk of divorce compared with women who were Oromo and Muslim. The interaction was calculated with the formula  $B_1x_1+B_2x_2+B_3(x_1x_2)$ , and the risk ratio of Christian Amharas versus the reference group Muslim Oromos is:  $\exp(0.5242+1.4478 - 0.8309)=3.13$ . The relative effect of age at marriage on the risk of divorce was reduced in the model including cultural factors, e.g. women married after age 15 versus women married before age 15 have RR=0.63 in Model 4 compared with RR=0.49 in Model 3.

Model 5 added the regional variable, as well as whether the woman had ever moved, to the socioeconomic and cultural variables from Models 3 and 4. In this final model the effects of age at marriage and having a child or not on the risk of divorce remained significant: women married after age 15 had a reduced risk of divorce versus women married before age 15 (RR=0.68); and for women who had a child within first marriage the risk of divorce dropped to 0.70 relative to what it was before the child was born. Furthermore, women from Gojjam were 1.27 times more likely to divorce than women who lived in Addis Ababa, and women from all other regions were less likely to divorce than women from Addis Ababa (RR=0.83). The other significant predictors of divorce were whether the woman had always lived in the location of interview, ethnic group, religion, education, who had decided the first marriage partner and who paid the bride price.

### Discussion and conclusion

The two hypotheses outlined at the beginning of this paper have been substantiated through this analysis: first, that there is an inverse relationship between age of first marriage and risk of divorce; and second, that childlessness within the first marriage is significantly associated with the risk of divorce. This analysis documents that both early marriage and childlessness within first marriage are important and significant factors that influence the risk of divorce in Ethiopia. It also illustrates that the effect on the risk of divorce of age at marriage and having a child or not within the first marriage remains, even after the effects of cultural and socioeconomic variables are taken into account.

The analysis suggests that women who ever divorce are less fertile than women who never divorce. For instance, the median waiting time to first birth for women who ever divorce and who marry after menarche is 2.8 years (among women who had a birth within their first marriage), while the median for women who never divorce is 1.4 years. One explanatory factor for this finding is that divorced women marry at younger ages than women who do not divorce, as illustrated in Fig. 2. Another

explanatory factor is that sexual activity at a young age leads to an increased risk of STD transmission, which may result in reduced fertility. A study published in 1990 using data from 1975 among 2111 Ethiopian women found that women who were sexually active before they reached menarche were more likely to be infected with STDs and pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) than women who were not sexually active until after menarche (Duncan *et al.*, 1990). If women who marry young and are sexually active before menarche are more likely to become infected with STDs, then it follows that they may have more fertility problems than women who marry later and do not have as high a risk of contracting STDs. Other studies also suggest that women who initiate sexual activity at young ages (whether it is before or after menarche) have increased risk of contracting STDs and thus becoming infertile (Larsen, 1995; Westroem, 1975; Menken, 1972). There is also clinical evidence suggesting that very young women experience more complications at child delivery, and therefore may have an enhanced chance of subsequent reduced fertility and infertility.

The final model (Model 5) shows that women who decided their first marriage partner themselves were less likely to divorce ( $RR=0.76$ ) and women who decided their partner in conjunction with their parents were much less likely to divorce ( $RR=0.45$ ) than women whose parents were the sole decision-makers. The implication of this finding may be that women who have some involvement in choosing their first marriage partner may have more of an emotional commitment binding the marriage compared with women who do not have any input in deciding who they marry. Furthermore, the correlation between age at first marriage and whether the woman herself chose her first marriage partner was 0.14 (this correlation is much higher than any other correlation between age at first marriage and a covariate). This strong relationship indicates that women who marry at older ages have more control over who they marry than women who marry at younger ages. The latter finding may partly explain the importance of age at first marriage on the risk of a divorce of the first marriage. It should also be noted that women whose husbands had paid bride price to her family were less likely to divorce ( $RR=0.77$ ), supporting Pankhurst's (1992a) hypothesis that marriages that involve a greater outlay of wealth and ceremony are less likely to dissolve than more informal marriages.

It is plausible that the rate of first divorce in Ethiopia would decline if the level of formal education of women increased given that women with higher education have lower risks of divorce. Furthermore, if more girls attended school throughout their early and mid-teens, then age at entry into first marriage might increase because women cannot continue to attend primary or secondary school if they marry. Women with higher education probably have more say in the choice of a first marriage partner, and this study has shown that women who participated in the choice of their marriage partner have a reduced risk of divorce. Also, if the age at first marriage and first sexual intercourse were to increase, then a reduction in subfertility and childlessness within the first marriage may be seen.

One may question, however, whether divorce is bad or good for the women involved. Many rural women in Pankhurst's (1992a) research stated that leaving their husband allowed them to get away from an abusive relationship, and enabled them to move on and find a better situation. Even some women living in the cities who



were barely making ends meet after a divorce stated that they would rather be in their present situation than still married in the rural village they had migrated from. It should be noted that there is very little social stigma associated with divorce. The majority of divorced women in Tefera's (1994) study stated that they did not feel ostracized by their peers, family, or friends. Divorce in Ethiopia is portrayed in the literature as very much an accepted, if not expected, fact of life.

However, most women agreed that whenever possible, the stable, single marriage was still the ideal. This is because there are also negative consequences of divorce for women, their children, and for society as a whole. Women's economic status often drops as a result of divorce because they lose the land, income and labour of the husband. The Civil Code of Ethiopia (Article 689) stipulates that each partner takes away from the marriage what each brought, in addition to half of what the couple accumulated during the marriage. In many cases, however, women do not receive their share (Pankhurst, 1992a; Weissleder, 1974; Beckstrom, 1969). Women often go back to their families with little or nothing, resulting in a drop in social and economic status. In some cases, if a girl's family refuses to take her back or if she has no relatives, she will migrate to an urban centre where one of the few income generation opportunities is prostitution (Pankhurst, 1992a). Other negative economic consequences experienced by divorced women in urban areas include a reduced standard of housing, difficulty in paying school fees for their children, food insecurity, medical problems, and insufficient money to buy clothing and other household items (Tefera, 1994).

It can be concluded from this analysis that both a young age at marriage, and childlessness within the first marriage, significantly increase the risk of divorce in Ethiopia. The high rate of divorce among first marriages could be expected to decline if efforts to increase the age at first marriage and first sex were effective. It is clear that previous efforts to enforce a minimum legal age of marriage of 15 years have not been effective. This analysis suggests that increasing girls' level of education may lead to an increase in age at marriage, and a subsequent reduction in divorce. The 1994 UN International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) strongly promoted efforts to improve women's reproductive health and level of education. If efforts were made to raise the level of education and improve women's reproductive health in Ethiopia, then an increase in the age at marriage, a reduction in childlessness within the first marriage, and a reduction in divorce might be seen.

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