Bleak prospects: young men, sexuality and HIV/AIDS in an Ethiopian town

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The Scarcity of love and money: A rhetoric of complaint

If I walk with my head down like a stranger in the town I know so well in broad daylight... it is because of you! If I lose the meaning of life and hate my creation as a human... it is because of you! If my life has become a race in a dark cave and I myself have become only better than the dead to be below all the living... it is because of you! If I have turned my eye away from all the life that is around so as to see more clearly the field of love that I have sown over the hillsides/mountains faraway in my imagination... it is all because of you! I thought you the very alphabets of love holding your hands and pointing them at each of them "L...O...V...E". But in return, you taught me the whole sentence of life and the wealth that money cannot and though I do not pretend to know better than you, I say you have it all the more by the wrong end of the stick. Please hold still that wandering heart of yours for just a moment, stop that selfish thinking in your mind and listen to me.. What is love? For me love is love! I promise.

As for me, I think God has given me not only the burden of your love but also strength to carry it. And if my love is 'primitive' it can't keep pace with its 'modern' counterpart. But the 'modern' put their hearts in their pockets together with their money and until I can learn to be one such fellow, I shall content myself in a self-exile that takes me away from you. But I think I shall return one day as my exile is for a partner in life, and because living without such a partner would be like clapping with one hand, I shall return for that partner one day! Sewnet I know not the day, but one day when I have become man enough I will return. That is if death doesn't overtake me in my race to become human. Then I will come straight to you even before going to my family and I beg you to receive me with outstretched arms. I feel such sorrow for not having found you any better. You hated me when you could have loved me, and when you could have drawn nearer. You fled further away. For this I feel sorrow, but could I hate you? How can I... My heart, though it cries from the bitter pain you inflicted on me, cannot find courage enough to hate you. And my prayer is this... may it please God to let us meet again when I am a 'man' and you are more kindly disposed. And even if I cease to exist and turn to dust, I will continue to love you! I promise.

He who loves you sincerely (signed) Yigzaw (3 Oct. 2001 at 3a.m.)
(Love) letters like the one above serve as one means for young lovers to share feelings, discuss conflict, or clarify the causes of break-up. Yigzaw and Sewnet used to attend the same school. He said that one day there was a musical show in an open ground in their
school. While enjoying the musical show, he suddenly saw Sewnet – ‘black girl with beautiful eyes’ - sitting with her face almost covered with her clothes to give herself some shade from the sun. Their eyes met as he was staring at her and he had to turn away and cast his eyes down. She soon slipped his memory and his attention turned to the music on the stage. But their eyes again met when he turned towards her a little startled. He says he did not know what had overcome him as he followed her to her class after the show was over. He saw that she was in Section D, and he was then in Section H. They were not very far apart. And after school, he followed her all the way to her home and only went back to his brother’s home after he had seen her enter into her compound. He said that he was besotted with her, even without speaking to her, and it took him more than a year to get in touch with her with the help of school teachers and friends. He strongly desired to possess her, and worked hard towards that goal with the support of teachers and friends. Finally he made it. Their relationship lasted for about eight months, and the letter was written after they broke up.

The letter is redolent with the excitement, sweetness, and strength of romantic love and the pain, anger, suffering, bitterness, and sadness when there is a breach with the beloved. He was desperately expressing a desire to be wanted, liked, and needed, and an agony of passionate love. He struggled to figure out what he had done wrong or what had gone wrong and attempted to give himself answers. It appears that things had fallen apart after he had made an enormous emotional investment. In the depths of despair, he had even attempted to commit suicide by drinking poison and had been hospitalized for several days. During my stay in the field, Yigzaw was depressed most of the time and there were times he was overcome with irritation about it and walked the streets like one possessed.

A number of interpretive challenges present themselves when we try to dissect the letter, but the central theme appears to revolve around the relationship between money and love. Competing rhetoric of modernity, love, and money intersect in the letter. Yigzaw stressed that he would win Sewnet back when he had become a ‘man’ that is, when he is earning money and has become rich. Manhood is defined in terms of the possession of wealth. Yigzaw strongly believed that his girlfriend, who was from an affluent family, had rejected him for being poor. He used the term ‘modern’ a couple of times as a metaphor for morally loose (Western) and money-minded (consumerist). His letter suggests the need to look at how the ideas and experiences of love, romance, and sexuality are embedded in an increase in consumerism.

In the preceding chapters, I introduced the study and presented the general socio-economic situation of Dessie and Ethiopia. This chapter now concentrates on love, relationships, and money in Dessie town, a place that many Ethiopian singers/musicians have praised for its beautiful women and atmosphere of romance. It will have emerged that not only Dessie but also the entire Wello province (Bati, Ambasel and other weredas and towns) enjoy a reputation for being home to beautiful, friendly, and romantically inclined women (see Chapter Two).

The main questions addressed in this chapter are: How do young people understand and express love and relationships in their daily lives? What are some of the changes in the meanings of traditional sexual values, manners, morals, and taboos as a result of socio-economic changes and how are these affecting the sexuality of young people? More specifically, how do young people initiate relationships and what is the role of money in a relationship?

Almost all the young men and women involved in the study were of the opinion that the first thing girls consider in response to a proposed relationship is money. Love is viewed by some young people as a misnomer for love of money and other material benefits, which a person might possess. The importance of money and wealth was emphasized not only for casual relationships, but also for marriage. Ineluctably this emphasis on monetary reward and socio-economic status puts poor males in a disadvantageous position. Unlike the school youth involved in this study, male street youngsters did not report having same-age girlfriends with whom they had a ‘romantic’ relationship. They had to buy sex from cheap prostitutes. I attempt to link the perceived organic unity between love and money with the
existing socio-economic and cultural situation of the country, and as a reflection of public
discourse that romanticizes a past golden age. I argue that for some women, money acts as
an extra spice but as a means of survival to others.

Love, relationships, and money among school pupils

If the boy is of a poor family and doesn’t dress well, he should not expect to have a girlfriend. Such a
thought does not enter his mind much because he has little chance of attracting girls even if he does
want to get one (Keder, 18-year-old male).

It is an inevitable fact that most young men and women in all societies are attracted to
each other, fall in love, feel sexual desire, and end up in a marriage or a break-up. This is
why many poets, novelists, and storytellers throughout the ages have devoted their time to
narrating the intensity of excitement that arises when people fall in love, and the anger and
frustration generated when they break up. Therefore, love and relationships unfold over time
in almost all societies, and in the process people also exchange different things to initiate or
maintain a relationship. The quotation above was spontaneously expressed by one of the
informants in Dessie in response to a question “What do girls take into account in order to
say ‘yes’ to a relationship?”. Almost all the young men, women and even the key informants
were convinced that the first thing girls consider in response to a proposed relationship is
money. They argued that people (particularly women) usually marry for money and not for
love. The questions asked are “What does he own?” and “What does she own?” and not “Do
I love him?” or “Do I love her?” Some informants went even further and commented that
love is a thing of the past. Sendeku (22 years, male student) had this to say:

... In fact, I don’t think there is any love these days. Some people also say that the word ‘LOVE’ itself
has been omitted from the dictionary. As the time itself is corrupt, a man approaches a woman just by
spashing his money about and a woman approaches a man only when she believes that he has money.
Those who are drawn together by true love are very few. A man makes a woman agree with him only by
the power of his money or by force/intimidation, but not because of love. As I told you earlier, it is
money that plays the biggest role. It is the backbone in a man-woman relationship. If a man has enough
money, he can have sex with as many women as he desires. Especially now, a rich man can buy as
many ladies as he fancies just like chattels. It is becoming a common practice for girls these days to
look for a man with money and trap him. It is the amount of money a person has that is paid due
regard. They find out whose son he is, and if he has money then they hunt him down and grab him. The
culture has been corrupted over time.

It appears that it is not only women who approach men with money, men also approach
women by throwing their wealth around. Such behaviour implies that both partners are
aware of the existence of an exchange transaction. It was argued that money is the sole
motivation that binds women to men (implying that men could be sexually undesirable). To
make a long story short, love is perceived as a commodity and women are seen as objects
that a man with money can buy. It is also believed that a man in possession of wealth should
adopt a macho personality. The narrative reflects on commodified sexuality and sexualized
commodities in the sense that to be a lover is to be able to spend money on the beloved, and
to be loved is to be overwhelmed with gifts and other tokens of love. Love is constructed as
a commodity and offering love enables women to acquire and consume commodities. The
informant spewed out his discontent not only about developments in sexual culture but also
by commenting that the entire ‘culture has been corrupted’. This is a reflection of dominant
public discourse that everything is going in the wrong direction. Romanticizing the past
golden age seems to be part and parcel of public discourse in most societies. There are plenty
of issues that people usually view with positive nostalgia.

One of the most common contemporary slang expressions in Ethiopia is “There is no
love these days”. This informant went as far as to say that the word love has now been
omitted from the dictionary. When we extend his argument, it means that love has
disappeared from the face of the earth or perhaps just from Ethiopia or from Dessie, and a
word for something that no longer exists should be expunged from the dictionary.
Accordingly, the publishers or the authors of dictionaries have decided to omit the word love from the latest editions. The discourse that "There is no love these days" touches mainly on romantic love, but also touches on the dearth of love of humanity that people seem to display for one another. It is a frenzied, negative, and moralizing discourse which expresses the common belief that the drastic socio-economic transformations have been brought about by consumerism, urbanization, globalization, war, and famine, which have given rise to individualistic thinking and initiating the transformation of the entire fabric of traditional Ethiopian culture.

The role of money in relationships was emphasized time and again, and the comment that "There is no love these days" was pronounced more elaborately by Muhe (18 years, male student) as follows:

There isn't any love in the first place. It would have been very nice if there were real love, but unfortunately I haven't seen one such example of this so far. It is just love of money that is mistaken for love, and last too. Girls do not love those who love them; they love those who have money. Many lovers hold their love not in their hearts but in their life. It is just "I love you, I love you", then it is forgotten after they separate, and, if the girl finds a better person [in terms of wealth], she won't hesitate to go with him straightaway.

The young people in Dessie drew a picture in which the only thing women were interested in was money (see also Moyer 2003 for similar discourse in Tanzania). Women were presented to be manipulative - commodifying their bodies and some of the informants placed the blame fairly and squarely on girls/women, and tried to portray men as true lovers. Here is what Shigute (20 years, male student) said:

The woman/girl will not approach any man out of true love. Be sure it is a done deal, no one! What you may find is a lady who asks, "What is he? What does he own? In what business is he engaged in?" Men are better in this regard in Dessie. The men are true lovers. However, all the women care about is business.

Perhaps somewhat cynically, this informant perceived women as objects that can be fooled around with, and argued that a man may not necessarily be required to prove his financial status.

Since the women do not feel real love, if you just have some small thing to show off with, and if you back this up by boasting of the other things you have, you can go out with many beautiful women. Make no mistake, talk is enough for her. Just tell her that you have this or that. She doesn't even have to see you spending money. Just tell her that you have this or that and you will definitely have her. These are the types of women/girls that you will find in Dessie. To gain acceptance, one has to fulfill the criteria that are expected of a man. Not to beat about the bush, he has to have money. If he has, he can do whatever she wants him to do. A penniless man may beg a lady throughout his life, but he will never win her.

It appears that hegemonic constructions of both masculinity and femininity are displayed and acted out in a performing sense. The informant emphasized, sex-consumerism and seduction offered by rich men are the only way to gain the acceptance of women. Most of those involved in the study also noted that most relationships do not last for long as the motive is not love but money and sexual intercourse. To emphasize this, they said that they see a girl with a boy today and with that one the next day, and they said they have not yet seen a relationship that has endured even a single year. That is why they think there is no love in Dessie. Pursuing their theme they said that since most relationships are started mainly for sexual pleasure and material benefits, it does not usually take more than a week for sex to be initiated. After they have had enough of each other sexually, they both start looking for another partner.

In such a climate it is inevitable that the importance of money was emphasized not only for casual relationships, but also for marriage. They maintained that people usually marry for money and not for love. Even the key informants involved in the study echoed the above narrations. One young key informant (the chairman of the Anti-AIDS Club) concluded that
their (women’s) motto has become: “Be with a person who has money (ke alew tetega)”. The following story from one of the key informants is a good illustration of how even parents easily give consent to a wealthy person’s proposal. He said that one only needs money to marry whomsoever one pleases, and the only factor that determines the outcome of a proposal is the wealth of the man who proposes.

This informant narrated the story of a certain young man who was not particularly rich but unfortunately fell in love with a daughter of a very wealthy merchant. He said that the poor young man was, fortunately, not so poor when it came to his wits and he devised an excellent strategy that would enable him to secure the girl of his dreams in a legal marriage once and for all. He took a load of merchandise belonging to a friend of his to the wealthy merchant’s warehouse and asked if he would be able to store ‘his’ merchandise there for a while for which permission was granted. He then sent shimagles (men who propose marriage to the girl’s family on behalf of the man) to the wealthy merchant and asked for his daughter’s hand. When the wealthy merchant heard the name and could not recall having heard it before, so he asked, “Who is this man?” The shimagles responded “It is the man who stored all that merchandise in your warehouse the other day”. The old man did not need any more persuasion to give his consent. Only later did he become aware of the ruse after his daughter had been married and it was too late to remedy the situation.

This story reminds me of an Ethiopian novel (a very popular love story) by the Ethiopian novelist, the late Haddis Alemayehu (1968); “FiQir Iske MeQabir” (literally “Love Unto the Grave”). The novel depicts human relationships in feudal Ethiopia, and is a bold criticism of the system. The central characters in the novel are a young girl, the daughter of an upper class family who claim to be balabat (local notables; descendants of a distinguished family), and a poor young man who is recruited to tutor her. Eventually the two fall in love, but a marriage between these two people from different social backgrounds was unthinkable, as the girl’s parents would not consent to their request. Her father in particular was incapable of understanding her love that transcended social class barriers and wanted to find and punish her lover. Undeterred, the couple that was deeply in love, decided to elope and live together in Addis Ababa. The young man was the first to leave and the girl followed him later without knowing the whereabouts of her lover. Death overcame them both while they were still searching for one another, but eventually they were buried in the same grave, hence the title of the novel. This story from Dessie demonstrates that the rich businessman was not willing to give his daughter because her suitor was not from the same class (businessman with plenty of merchandise). Indeed, in the Ethiopia of the past (and even in the rural Ethiopia of today), marriage was more of an economic and social contract between the parents involved, lending the story above an element of truth.

It would be easy enough to assume that the males are pointing their fingers at females for commodifying sex, love, and marriage, and I had fully expected that the young women would repudiate such accusations. On the contrary, even young women from different schools admitted that most relationships do not involve love. Like the young men, the young women also upheld the belief in the power money and gifts exercise over women. They noted that a girl may accept a boy out of consideration for his material status, contemplating the material gain the relationship may provide her. Boys on their part, the girls claimed, resort to all sorts of ploys in order to increase their chances of being accepted. To this end, Sinke (18 years, female) said:

“A boy will present himself to a girl in whom he is interested as being the best of all his kind and try to convince her he would take care of her better than any other boy would. He will also claim to be in possession of great material wealth. “I am the son of a rich family, and we own a grain mill and other assets in the countryside”. Boys will also claim to be very popular and generally liked. Even clothing is a weapon. They borrow good clothes from their friends and when the girl sees another person wearing those same clothes, they claim to have given them to him as a present. Girls usually say “OK” if the boy happens to dress fashionably, that is if he wears real big shoes, baggy trousers, or real sunglasses and things like that (cool things)."
This story reveals that dressing well is an indication of prosperity and sophistication or a true expression of manhood in Ethiopia, where many young people cannot afford new clothes. These things, which are taken for granted in the West, are much sought after in Ethiopia. The image of big shoes, baggy trousers, and sunglasses is partly a hangover from exposure to Western films (Black American rappers), television programmes, and magazines. It appears that material goods, love, desire, and sexiness are intermingled, and manhood is expressed in dress, speech, and caring behaviour. Indubitably, the display of conspicuous consumption is seen as sexy and alluring and that to have sex and love, it is essential to consume. Money generates the power, authority, and ability for consumption and sexiness. The story also casts light on the fact that young men can count on their parents’ wealth in their pursuit of the hearts of women. The girls said that all men/boys are boastful (guregna) and assure girls that they are there to deal with all their problems and difficulties. Pertinently, the girls pointed out that a real lover would appear honest and full of humility instead of boasting about his imagined wealth, but unfortunately, girls rarely accept such boys for a relationship. This phenomenon of the absence of humble men approaching women and the materialistic tendency of women and their parents was elaborated on by another high school girl, Sada (17 years):

When it’s all said and done, men hate to humble themselves in their approaches to women. They would rather come over as arrogant and talk big about themselves. They fabricate false stories just to attract women. Only a few men speak the truth about themselves. On the other hand, women are not keenly interested in true love. Most of them opt for money. They are easily attracted by material stuff. Let me tell you a true story. There was a girl in my neighbourhood. A man living in Addis Ababa was in love with her. He came from Addis and settled in Dessie just to lure the girl into his hands. What he did was borrow a car and money from his friends in Addis and come to Dessie. In Dessie he rented a villa with the money he had borrowed. He also cruised around Dessie in his car. He did all these things to be accepted by the family of the girl he loved as a rich man. It so happened that the family of the girl was deceived by the pretence of the man and believed he was rich. They gave him their daughter. Mind you, he won the girl through cheating. He was not really rich. After a while, he told the girl that he is not a rich person that the villa he rented did not belong to him, but that he had rented it with the money he had borrowed from his friends. He confessed to his girl that he did all these things because he loved her and wanted to win her heart. The girl accepted his reason. Her family was also finally convinced. His real job in Addis Ababa was that of a broker (delala). This case shows that women and their parents in Dessie are easily attracted by money and fame.

This anecdote reminds me of a popular joke in Addis Ababa, namely, in order to find a beautiful wife, it is necessary to have three Vs: villa, video-player, and a vehicle. Video-players used to be very expensive during the Marxist regime because the centralized economic policy placed high taxes on them. Even these days, it is not easy for any public servant to have all these three Vs. Particularly, having a villa or even decent accommodation and a vehicle is beyond the means of most young people. The story above implies that the man came with a borrowed vehicle and started living in a rented villa claiming that they were his own personal property. This indicated that he had addressed two Vs, and people took the presence of a video-player in a villa for granted. The story again shows a notion of love and its link with consumption, catching a potential lover’s attention by displaying commodities, even if borrowed. Cogently, the story also reveals how parents are easily seduced into giving their daughters to rich men. It is true that many families in Ethiopia (even in urban areas) usually meddle in the marriages of their daughters and sons. Many families prefer a man who offers gifts (tilosh), and can provide their daughter with security and comfort. Though arranged marriages are becoming rare in urban areas, parents, relatives, friends, and colleagues are usually involved in mate selection to some extent. At times, when the parents do not allow their daughter to marry the man she loves, she runs away from home and ends up in prostitution.

32 Pornographic and other types of Western low-budget movies can be seen in a number of underground pornographic houses in Dessie, and young people frequently visit such places (see Chapter Five).
The role of money even features during sexual intercourse. Yigzaw attributed his inability to make love to a virgin girl (Sewnet) to poverty.

Every time she groaned "Eh" in some pain I sprang to my feet for fear that I would hurt her. I always said, "There would be time enough for everything". But whenever she screamed in some pain, I always broke off the sex and many were the times that I had to ejaculate outside. But I think she had her own plans too and I now think she never wanted to give her virginity to me, may be because I was poor or maybe she knew she wouldn't be with me forever.

When asked about the conditions that lead to the break down of a relationship, the schoolboys argued "No one will love you if you do not have money; at least no girl will love you". They maintained that if someone has convinced a girl to have a relationship with the help of some cash, and if he experiences some misfortune in between that leaves him short of money; the woman will not waste any time in leaving him. Let me give an illustrative example:

For example, if I had had a girlfriend when I was attending primary and junior high schools in my village and we both came to high school here in Dessie, she would see that there were plenty of fashionable things that I could not offer, and she would look for someone who would offer her all these (Adam 19 years, male student).

It appeared that the young men considered all relationships to be basically consumerist in nature and overwhelmingly portrayed their idea that relationships are based on a constant stream of material gains, and a break in the transaction of material benefits leads to automatic termination of the relationship. This way, women are perceived to be invariably rational.

In the questionnaire, response to the question "What makes a girl say "Yes" to the relationship to the point of having sex?" yielded more or less similar results. The options given in the questionnaire were many (financial situation, love, physical beauty, peer pressure, intimidation, good manners, fame, and popularity) and they were asked to mark only the two most important ones. Thus, 25 percent of respondents opted for money and fame, 20 percent for money and intimidation, 15 percent for money and peer pressure, 15 percent for love and good manners, 10 percent for money and love, 10 percent for money and physical beauty, 5 percent for money and good manners. This is a categorical indication that money or socio-economic position appear to be the dominant and motivating factor in luring young girls into a relationship to the point of having sex. Going one step further, in addition to money, the quantitative results revealed that most of the girls seek popularity and like to appear trailing behind famous persons, apparently because they lack self-confidence, crushed by the inferior position to which society relegated them. A good athlete, for example, would be widely known in such a close-knit neighbourhood as Dessie, and women associating themselves with him would be respected. The other possible explanation is that associating with famous men guards the girls from being bothered by other young men who seek a relationship.

In conclusion, what prevailed in the discussion with informants totally excludes the existence of love and romanticism in Dessie. I argue that such an economic approach to love, relationships, and marriage should be taken with a pinch of salt. It is my impression that there are people who fall in love regardless of other extrinsic benefits. It also appears very difficult to detect clear-cut demarcations, whether the attachment is founded on financial benefits or emotional involvement or love. By and large, the economic approach contradicts the lofty ideals of love and relationships in many societies (poor or rich), and I would argue that not all relationships depend on the rational comparison of costs and benefits.

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33 This and other stories of young people also imply that boys did not find having sex with virgin girls as easy as might have been assumed. Yigzaw confided the difficulty he encountered in having sex with other virgin girlfriends, and from his description it is not clear why he could not make it with Sewnet after having slept together for eight months.
Sociologically speaking, socialization or environment to large extent influences the personality traits of individuals, but then it is not possible to claim that all individuals within a given community like Dessie are the same and behave in the same way. In other words, sex, relationships, and marriage can be matters of transaction to some people but not to all members of the sexually active population in Dessie. The informants’ explanations seem to deny individual differences, as each woman can be unique in a certain sense.

The argument also contradicts the works of Ethiopian artists, poets, and novelists who have been attempting to highlight the intensity of the excitement generated when people fall in love. It appears that cast down by the high rate of unemployment and subsequent hopelessness, young people have reached a state of a-motion, in which everything seems to have been robbed of its original meaning; an impression shaped by their fears and desires. Such a dreary outlook reflects personal emotions, aspirations, tensions, and uncertainties that young people are grappling with in their daily lives. They also seem to have been influenced by a public discourse that states everything has lost its original meaning (a nostalgic and stubborn conviction that all things are now going in the wrong direction). Senior members of the society have become harbingers of doom in all aspects of life and prefer talking about the demise of the ‘golden culture’ of past days.

So far an attempt has been made to highlight the interrelationship between love, relationships, and money. Now the question is how do young people initiate a relationship and where do they meet for an outing or sexual intercourse?

‘Fighting the war’: Negotiating love among school pupils

I have never asked a girl outright to be my friend. What I do is, after I get acquainted with her, I grow closer and closer to her and soften her heart. I mean, I have never said, “I love you” to any girl. What I do is (if, for example, it is in school), I borrow her things (like exercise books and books) and lend her mine. When I return her whatever she has lent me, I return it with many words of gratitude written on a piece of paper. The expressions of gratitude will be kept up with increasing force with every round of lending and borrowing. I tell her “You know you are a good girl, you are kind and you are this and you are that” and all that kind of stuff. That will make me come even closer. After a while, I will ask her for tea, and she won’t refuse because I have made myself pretty well known. You take her out and invite her and then you become friends.

Even when I initiate acquaintanceships, I do not just go and chat up a girl. I first make friends with some one close to her. Then I will talk with that person and get him/her to invite her somewhere some time where I will show up as if by accident. He/she will then introduce me to her and I will join them. The third party will then remember some urgent business he/she had quite forgotten to deal with and will soon be gone leaving us there to make the best of the time. Sometimes, he/she will come back after a while, sometimes not. But either way I will say whatever I want to to (ye meqedewn eqadaleha) and try to impress the girl. I would usually get their phone numbers and phone them at a later day. You know they prej:e: the phone as it puts them at ease and makes them feel relaxed, especially the Muslim girls. I think this is because other people do not witness the phone call. Anyway, I will make my call and things start moving. I have yet to see a girl who has said no to me consistently and refused to yield (Dagne 20 years, male).

This story reveals how most young people negotiate relationships. The story implies that initiating a relationship involves people other than the couple. The involvement of mediators in young people’s relationship will be discussed in detail shortly.

The informants reported that dating in Dessie usually starts in late primary school and grade seven (once the boys have turned 14-15 and the girls are about 13-14 years old). They maintained that the way each relationship starts is different; some meet in schools or bars, on the road, or in cafeterias. Some may meet in religious places, others at wedding ceremonies and in houses of mourning, video houses and other such venues. The opportunities to meet are indeed many and varied, but most of them agreed that many relationships start in school since the students have reached the age of puberty. They said that in the school they are often assailed by boredom that causes them to seek entertainment and dynamism in one another. Interestingly, they noted that biology classes that focus on sexual reproduction also arouse an interest in sex and tempt them to try it out for themselves. In the questionnaire, 23 percent
mentioned school and wedding ceremonies, 21 percent school and hotels (cafeterias), 20 percent the bush and hotels, and 18 percent indicated pornography houses and hotels as the two most likely places where boys and girls meet to engage in a relationship or sex. Since they were asked to mark the two most likely places, the rest (18 percent) of informants frequently mentioned school in combination with churches or mosques, chat houses, porno houses, the bush, neighbourhoods, hotels/cafeterias, wedding ceremonies, wakes, and nightclubs or parties.34

It appears that most students first meet in school and then go to the bush, the bars or bedrooms in hotels, video houses and the like. Wakes are also a convenient occasion for young people to meet. It was argued that most women/girls use wakes as a pretext to escape from home. They act as mourners wearing their netelas (light cotton toga usually used as a dress over the skirt or as a scarf) reversed as is the tradition when someone passes away. In the mourning ceremonies the youngsters do the consoling secluded from the grown-ups, and young men and women spend their time chewing chait, playing cards and otherwise idling their time away. The women/girls bring tea and the men alcoholic beverages and chait that facilitates the interaction leading to sex. It was argued that young people, particularly those who are afraid of being seen by others, mainly go to the bush for sexual intercourse.35 Three of the five schools (Catholic, Hope Enterprise and Hote High School) involved in the study were located very close to bushy vegetation, offering every opportunity for students to sneak into these bushes for sexual intercourse and related activities. I learned that there was one place near Hote High School that young people used to visit frequently for sexual intercourse, and nicknamed it tessa (Dew) hotel. People used to find plenty of used condoms there, and the government cleared it when sexual activities there became alarmingly frequent.

Of all the different ways of initiating a relationship, mediation by a peer (s) appeared the most common. Friends are the main bridges that bring boys and girls together in a relationship. The schoolboys argued that if a boy wants to start a relationship with a girl, he first becomes friends with one of her female friends, but once he is introduced to the girl on whom he has set his sights, he forgets about the one he made acquaintance with first and focuses on the target girl. More specifically, they remarked that there are 'pimps' among the girl students. They are known as awagi (someone who gets the 'war' going). Ashagre (22 years, male) asserted:

*If you want to date a girl, you go and tell an awagi that you want to date a certain girl. She will make sure that you have the girl by fair means or foul (be balem be balem bla). She will ask her to go to the cafeteria during the tea break at school. Then, she will introduce the guy saying that he is from a wealthy family, and the girl thus targeted will give in very soon, and even consent to sex. After arranging the battle, the swagi will disappear. After you get what you want from the girl you dated, she (the mediator) asks you questions like, 'How was it?' and 'What did you do?'. I think the swagiwoch (plural for swagi) achieve vicarious satisfaction from listening to your response.*

Likewise, the female informants argued that it is not often the girl who decides for herself, but that her girlfriends will usually do the job for her. They noted that it sometimes happens that a girl might even accept a boy for whom she does not have any feelings, yielding to peer pressure (gudegna wosewosa/wolewota). When a girl gets a boyfriend she serves as a mediator between one of her boyfriend's friends and her own closest friend (girl) and fixes them up so that she will not be out all alone in the affair. They added that gifts from boyfriends also play a very important role, not only in inducing the girl recipient to commit herself to a relationship (including sex), but also in encouraging her friends to look for a similar boyfriend who would likewise give them gifts. In a nutshell, most of them

34 Qualitative methods also revealed that going to church/the mosque can serve as good pretext for going out of the home and meeting boyfriends for girls who are not allowed by parents to go out of their homes at other times (see Chapter Four).
35 Some informants noted that this tradition has been abandoned as young people now days go to hotel openly as they are no longer ashamed of having sex.
agreed that peer pressure (ye guadegna wosewosa) plays a key role in accepting or rejecting a boy.

The lengthy story of Yigzaw's relationship with Sewnet reveals that intermediaries, including teachers and friends became involved to enable him to speak and draw closer to her. The whole story is strewn with friends and relatives who either tried to help him secure the girl or who plotted to separate them. This is partly a reflection of the culture of mate selection, which involves many people (families, friends, colleagues). It appears that it is very difficult for many young men to express their love or feelings in words to the girls of their own accord, even after establishing closer relationships. Most of them either have to use mediators or express their feelings over the phone. It was argued that the phone was the most suitable medium for both girls and boys to discuss romance or dating and it circumvented the inevitable tension of expressing feelings face to face. This partly explains why issues related to sex and sexuality in Ethiopia are secret, and most young people do not dare to talk about it openly. It is a country where sex is not widely discussed in the family nor is it addressed in the formal education system.

Interestingly enough, sex is perceived as a war, and the one who mediates it is viewed as the master-mind of the war. When informants were asked about local idioms and metaphors referring to sex, some of them noted that sex is referred to as Badme (one of the war fronts in the latest war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, where a fierce battle was fought). When asked why is it called Badme, they responded that just as a war takes place between two opposite groups, sexual intercourse is also a battle between opposite sexes. Although Ethiopia has other good things to show the world, its image is associated with war and famine and in this context the war metaphor seems well chosen by the young people. This metaphor seems to apply not only to sexual intercourse, life as a whole for many young people is a daily battle for survival, and hence "The sexual story is a personal narrative that is socially embedded in the daily practices and strategies of everyday life" (Plummer 1995:15). It also implies that addressing sex bluntly and using the word sex are taboo. Hence young people employ various metaphors and veiled terms to describe it.

During my high-school days, writing love letters used to be a very common way to initiate a relationship. Times change and the young men in Dessie now noted that love-letters are becoming a thing of the past. The young men were then asked what a man should do or how he should present himself to convince a woman to accept him. Some maintained that the boy should seek her out very frequently and have a chat, but such matters should not be 'dry'. He should also invite her to some cafeterias and entertain her as best he can within his means. He should also be skilled in how to talk to women (afe linorew yigebal, enden ayenetu kerfafa kehone gene waga yelewom). Others noted that one should joke because girls like boys who can make them laugh. Dagim, a 19-year-old male, remarked that if he likes a girl, he does not need instructing in how to approach her:

By any means I can, I will try my best to grab her (ekelatefalehu...be balem be balem ekelefatfalehu). It is said that white (ferengi) girls have a hundred and one reasons when they say "No" to sex, but our girls here have only got three and I know them well. The first is "My mother will not allow me to do such a thing" (enate tekotagnalech); the second is "I already have a boyfriend"; and the third is "I have a goal in my life and doing this will only stand in my way" (adama alege). And as to how these can be got around, you tell her that her mother has also gone through what she is now doing (when she tells you her mother won't allow it), and if she tells you that she has a boyfriend, you ask her to introduce him to you, and she will be afraid to do that even if she has, thinking that you two will have a fight. As to the 'goal' stuff, you convince her that you will not demand sex and will not stand in her way to her goal. Once you convince her, sex will follow if you want it to.

The informant presented himself as smart and well versed in the skill of convincing girls, an adept at masculine behaviour. It appeared that the custom in Ethiopia (perhaps elsewhere

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36 There were very few young men and women who mentioned writing letters as a means of initiating a relationship.
as well) does not allow women to consent immediately when men propose, even if they want to, as they could be perceived as ‘cheap’ or as a ‘prostitute’. The young men appeared to be familiar with refusal at the first attempt and accepted it as part of the courting ritual (they emphasized that a refusal from a girl is no different from a yes; when girls say no it is like music, and it is tantamount to saying yes). It is perceived as innate female behaviour and adds flavour to the negotiation process. Some young men confessed that they do not want a girl who initiates a relationship or is easy to ‘conquer’. Teka (20 years, male) had this to say:

You know when a girl asks you or tells you she is in love with you, well you will publicize it and preen yourself in front of your friends, but you won’t feel terribly pleased about going out with her. I don’t know if this stems from our culture but you just don’t feel so pleased about dating her or feel as good as the way you feel when you ask a girl yourself and convince her to go out with you. You feel as if you are inferior if you accept a girl who asks you to date her.

These young informants have grown up in a society where men are supposed to initiate relationships and should go to great lengths to convince women. The inevitable upshot is women resist men’s advances and play innocent and hard to get, and males also believe that a man should not shirk setting out to woo the girl of his dreams. It appears that this sort of negotiation lends excitement and romantic opportunities and is perceived of as part and parcel of the courting ritual or flirting by both women and men. Besides being part of the courting ritual, women may use this strategy for pragmatic reasons, for instance, to evaluate whether the person could be a potential life-long partner.

**Negotiation or coercion?**

One of the most salient features that emerged from the discussion is that in addition to money, the boys emphasized the importance of force or threat in launching a relationship. They strongly believed that girls succumb to a relationship either by threat of force or by the actual use of force. They even said that they sometimes play a game of rescuing a girl from others. If one boy likes a girl, he sends his friend(s) to ‘assault’ the girl on her way to school or on the way home, and then he ‘rescues’ her and chases the assailants away. This stratagem will usually win him her favour. Female informants mentioned that many girls accept a proposed relationship for fear of physical abuse and beating. Warming to this theme, they pointed that if there is a boy/man who is much feared and respected for being tough, girls will often acquiesce in a relationship with him hoping that being with him will protect them from being bothered by other boys. This is not a surprising finding in view of the fact that abduction and rape are rampant in Ethiopia (Getahun 2001; Molla et al. 2002). In a nutshell, the situation reflects the existing gender and power relationships in the country in the sense that young men seem to think that they have every right to force girls to accept a proposed relationship. Their perception seemed to be that exploiting women as sexual objects is their basic right and part of manhood. The young women also appeared to have meekly accepted the role assigned to them.

‘Being Listro, No girlfriend’: Love and relationships among male street youths

The tales of the school pupils about love and money are echoed by the stories of male street youths. Unlike the students involved in this study, street youths did not report having same-age girlfriends with whom they could nurture a romantic relationship, and had to resort to buying sex from prostitutes. Desperate boys hungry for sex go to women equally desperate for cash. The reasons given for not having girlfriends were related to the young men’s low self-esteem and their abject social status. The street youths argued that what the girls of their age often consider when accepting or rejecting a relationship with a boy is his socio-economic status and his family background. It is only until they have ascertained such things that they may not consent, but once these facts have been verified to their satisfaction they tend to acquiesce. They noted that it is not only women but also the general public that treat
them as inferiors just because they have polished shoes. Almost all of street youths felt that the general public has adopted a negative attitude towards them.

Some people look down on us as if we are beneath the soles of their shoes. Such people consider us of less value than the shoes we clean and I hate being a listro (Agonafir, 20-year-old street male).

The view that having a girlfriend requires looking good, dressing smartly, and having some cash in the pockets was adamantly expressed by the participants. When asked what people like them who do not meet these requirements would do if they wanted girlfriends; they replied that no girl would be willing to be a girlfriend of a listro. If they wanted girls, their only choice was to go to a far neighbourhood and seek girls there and convince them to have sex with them in the twinkling of an eye, before their backgrounds might inadvertently be revealed by some misfortune. Bekele (19-year-old shoe-shine boy) expressed it like this:

I would like to approach some girls but when they hear that I clean shoes in the Piazza, they consider me as if I were less than a man and treat me as an inferior.

He did admit that there might be some girls for whom being a listro may not matter and that he is waiting for such a girl to come his way, but added many girls even avoid him because of what they have heard about him already by hearsay. He said that no girl would be willing to start a relationship with a listro knowingly. The only way to achieve anything was to assume a more pleasant persona and approach a distant girl who will not be likely to know about his background. He reported that he would rather buy sex from a prostitute than go through all this fuss and bother.

Even if you convince one girl by telling her things that you are not, the time will come when she sees you cleaning shoes and that is the end of you. Therefore, it is better to buy sex.

Wudu (22-year-old shoe-shine boy) said that he became acquainted with a girl attending high school. One day they met and spent some time in a private room together but without having sexual intercourse. They agreed to meet another time and to have sex. Another day she was passing by around the Piazza (the place where he worked), and when she turned around he happened to turn around too, and they saw each other. At that time the girl made the sign of the cross (to express her shock and disbelief), and went away saying ‘Oh God!’ Then he reported that he was ashamed, and broke off his relationship with her. He commented that such incidents happened to many of his shoe-shine friends.

My friends have suffered many incidents like this. Most of them broke up after having good relations. I know three guys who broke up relationships after having spent many times together. They even had intercourse with the girls. But after the girls realized that they were shoe-shine boys they went away. Sometimes the girls happened to see the guys at work and they went away after that. Very recently, I started a relationship with another girl. I told her everything, except what I do for a living. We had sex once. We are now still in love. Her friends know me now (that I am a shoe-shine boy). They have good relationship with me and they haven’t told her that I work as a shoe-shine boy.

A few street youths ventured to contest such an assertion. Here is an excerpt from an interview with Bedru (20-year-old shoe-shine boy):

This is their own view; this kind of thing has never happened before. We could in fact be despised by the society. But shoe-shining is not a type of work to be underestimated and you have to start from something simple to chase after real achievement. You have to be open when talking with a girl and not one has rejected me for the sole reason that I’m a shoe-shine boy. [Are there those who accepted you knowing that you are a shoe-shine boy?] I should ask a girl who is as poor as I am. I have to consider my social background and capacity and I should not go beyond the set boundaries by asking out a girl from a well-to-do family. We both have to be from the same social status. [Does a poor girl accept you knowing that you are a shoe-shine boy?] There is no problem with that; I haven’t (however) come across with any such a case (rejection).
His response could be partly true and partly self-defence, preferring not to admit he was inferior. The fact remains that girls could reject such young men’s proposals not only because the latter are poor with a low-paying job but also because they are considered hoodlums by the general public. They reported that since most of street children smoke or chew chat or because their clothes are dirty, people think of them as hoodlums (durie) and thieves, and even the drivers will not allow them to work with them if they see them smoke and chew chat. Building their case they argued that the common people (the passengers who come to the bus station (menaheria) to board buses) do not even consider them human beings and treat them with contempt and call them names: “You robbers; thieves; vagabonds”. “It seems that they [street youths] lack economic and political capital to be sure, but they also lack the moral and social capital one might possess as members of respectable households” (Moyer 2003:68).

It became clear that even the street girls consider street boys to be ne’er-do-wells, and prefer assistants to drivers and other men who can give them more money than street youths. At this juncture I should also say that the complaint constantly voiced by street youths is a reflection of a widespread discourse about money, love, and relationships in Ethiopian society. The other explanation is that street youths rate themselves low and are afraid that women will not accept them. Given their socio-economic status, they may fear that women may despise them and turn down their proposal for a relationship.

Given their lack of exposure to romantic relationships, street youths’ discourse was limited to negotiating sexual encounters with prostitutes rather than courting girls. Their narratives tend to revolve around how much they pay for a bed, a prostitute and other ways of buying sex. They noted that they pay on average 8 Birr (approximately 1 US dollar) for short-term intercourse and 15 Birr (about 2 US dollar) for overnight. They also noted that they maintain steady relationships with prostitutes while allowing them to make money from other customers.

If I come to a girl and if another person also happens to arrive, I will leave so that she will go with him. This is because I can meet her tomorrow or the next day. In addition, it is good if she gets money (Wudu, 22 years, male street youth).

Others even reported that they pimp for their steady prostitutes, and get free or discounted access for themselves. They also reported engaging in what they call ‘group sex’ (see Chapter Five).

The coercive situation already discussed with schoolgirls appears more serious in the case of street girls, as the following remark by Saba (18 years, street female) indicates:

Shoe-shine boys and other boys engaged in different work in the street call us names and when we give them malicious looks, they express their denigration of us saying, “You good-for-nothings. You think we don’t know you?” Then they propose sex to us and when we refuse, they beat us severely asking us “How come a good-for-nothing doesn’t know about sex? Aren’t you such a hard core?” Then they give us a hard time.

What is more intriguing is that even the police, the very body which is supposed to protect street girls and other citizens from abuse, is reported to be sexually abusive in exercising their power (see Moyer 2003 for similar discussion in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania). For this reason most of the street girls argued that they do not want to report to the police since the latter does not spring to their aid.

When you report to the police that a certain boy has beaten you, you sometimes encounter rude police officers who say, “What did you quarrel about? Why did you turn him down (his proposal for sex)? Say yes to him”. Even when they arrive while you are still quarrelling with the boy who took peanuts from you, they beat the boy. They won’t hesitate to make an indecent proposal (sex) to you at other times (Bernesh 19 years, street female).

Prostitutes working in a bar or a hotel had similar complaints, saying that the police is not over-willing to rescue them from their clients who want to have sex without a condom,
and even if police officers do so, they will propose free sex another time (often without a condom). They made no bones about commenting that if the police demand intercourse without the use of a condom and they refuse, the police officers will not come to their aid when they have problems with other clients. With this information in mind, I interviewed a policeman working for the child protection unit. When asked how true the allegation was, he replied:

_I myself have not heard that this is what they do before now. But if there are those who act this way, it is because they lack discipline and they should be dismissed. It is not that the thing is morally good or bad (right or wrong), but it is disgusting._

Taken together, it appears that the street youths are not only deprived of basic civil services (education, employment, and healthcare), but also of love. The street youths like many other young people are blessed with a goodly dose of energy and a curiosity about and interest in love and being loved, but poverty implacably forbids this in their lives. Early in their lives, they are engaged in shoe-shining and other back-breaking jobs to support themselves and in some case their families. Since they lack love and a sense of accomplishment, they are far more likely to end up in a series of purely physical sexual encounters in an effort to compensate for the lack of love and warmth in their lives, and to affirm their own self-worth. Distress encumbered by a stressful life situation and lack of affection pushes them into activities like smoking, drugs, and rape or ‘group sex’. Lacking in love and money, they also seem to be the farthest removed from the hegemonic masculinities which they cannot even hope to emulate, and they therefore have resorted to the use of violence to get sex (see the discussion on ‘group sex’ in Chapter Five). Most of the informants admitted that they use chat, alcohol, and smoke cigarettes. In short, their day-to-day lives were characterized by a constant struggle to find money and to maintain supply of food, chat, alcohol, and sex. The inexorable conclusion has to be that the street youth suffer both from extreme material and emotional deprivation caused by the prevailing poverty and social exclusion.

**Conclusion**

The foregoing description reveals that romantic love, relationships, and mate choice in Dessie are perceived to be not free or romantic but rational and calculating. The participants seemed to think that most women were either forced or ‘bought’ into a relationship. All their explanations of how women submit to a relationship revolve around these two concepts. Hence, girls are either seduced by gifts and the entertainment that good money can buy or forced to accept a proposal to start a relationship by the mere mention of threats.

Why so much interest in money? In contemporary Western society there is a widespread perception that love and financial motives are incompatible. Why have love and relationships not been accorded the proper place that they deserve in Dessie? Is money the sole motivation for starting a relationship? Are these women not like any other human beings who need love and affection, with or without other material benefits? To address these and other similar questions, we need to understand the role of the socio-economic factors and the cultural context of sexuality in Ethiopian society.

To start with, by all standards, Ethiopia is one of the poorest countries in the world, with an average annual per capita income of about $100. It is a country recurrently afflicted by drought, famine, and war (see Chapter Two). Ethiopia is a country, which has not set up a social security system. Unemployment is at an all time high and the urban poor cannot afford even the basic amenities. This sort of situation compels us not to downplay the important role that money plays in the negotiation of sexual relationships, which is the familiar argument in most of the literature on Africa. “The ‘transactional nature’ of sexual encounters and relationships in Africa is virtually an article of faith in the social demography and social research on AIDS across the continent, and “old saw” in which sexuality and marriage are seen as essentially commercial transactions”(Schoepf 1992:355 in Setel 1999:141 see also
It is undeniably true that, in self-defence, women may consider what a relationship or marriage will provide in terms of material benefits as men have monopolized most of the scarce resources in the country. Educational opportunities for women are limited, and this affects their ability to support themselves as adults. With most doors closed to them, taking a boyfriend or husband is one strategy for survival and many authors have depicted the practice of taking a male for financial reasons (Standing 1992; Schoepf 1994; Van der Geest 2001; Mill and Anarfi 2002; Price and Hawkins 2002). Consistent with these findings, there are women from impoverished families in Dessie who enter into a relationship calculating the material gain it provides. They are simply following an inexorable logic, money or material benefits inescapably play a role in sexual relationships, and such women could well be aware of the exchange transaction taking place.\footnote{I am not referring to prostitutes - who explicitly ask for money in return for their sexual services.} I, however, argue that money is only one of many factors that bind them to men, and emotional involvement may exist. It should, therefore, be noted that even though money and other material benefits are exchanged, it is very difficult to conclude that all relationships are no more than purely commercial transactions devoid of love or emotional attachment. It is rather “complex constellations of economic dependence, love, physical attraction and the pressure of social norms” (Gysels et al. 2002).

Pertinently, the strong relationship between love, relationships, and money cannot be explained by poverty only, as there are women who are paid perhaps more than their partners earn but still expect some form of material exchange. In the Ethiopian context, even the most successful professional or business women who earn more than their partners expect the men at least to cover most of the expenses of a date. For such women, offering luxurious gifts or taking them to expensive resorts and covering all expenses alone expresses love and commitment on the man’s side and has a symbolic or cultural significance in a relationship. Such women are not desperate for money; they may not be aware of the existence of any exchange transaction, and love or a relationship constitutes an end by itself. Men also feel that it is a masculine obligation to assume such responsibilities, and they may even do it without being aware of the transaction. Economic exchange in this context seems to be part of wider cultural constructions and practices. Having accepted this, we must understand that a gnawing need for erotic love and affection is present among women, and I would argue that money is not the only motivation for all women to start a relationship or to have sexual intercourse. In other words, for some women, money acts as an extra spice in a relationship that they enjoy for its own sake and would enter into it anyway. Even though it is a means of survival for others, different levels of emotional attachment could still exist in both cases. When we are aware that not all is cut and dried, it appears very difficult to accept fully an economic explanation of love and relationship as it implies a view of women as self-centred, materialistic robots devoid or incapable of any emotional attachment.

Analysis that focuses too heavily on the connections between economics and sex while excluding the themes of desire, passion and, in White’s terms, “comfort”, run the risk of suggesting that only those with enough money can afford love and pleasure. In order to avoid this assumption, it is important to reclaim desire, passion, and love as important themes in understanding sexuality... (Moyer 2003:257).

As early as the 1920s and among very simple Melanesians, Malinowski uncovered the existence of the exchange for sexual favours. With insight he contextualized this and argued that material exchange is not the only motive that binds women to men:

In the course of every love affair the man has to constantly give small presents to the woman. To the natives the need of one-sided payment is self-evident. This custom implies that sexual intercourse, even where there is attachment, is a service rendered by the female to the male. As such it has to be repaid in accordance with the rule of reciprocity or give-and-take, which pervades tribal life, so that every gift, every service and every favour must be paid by something of equivalent value. ... This rule is by no means
Although love or a relationship is something mutual for both men and women, the social construction of masculinity always portrays men as needing sex or a relationship. In a nutshell, since men are the ones who are perceived to ‘need’ love, sex, and relationship or ‘the service’, they are expected to pay for it in one form or another. Cogently, the emphasis on the power of money or coercion implies that there are particular constructions, performance, and practices of masculinity that seem somewhat hegemonic and to which both the young men and women try to ascribe.

I also posit that the informants’ views about the strong relationship between love, relationships, and money is a reflection of the widespread public discourse about the difficulty in identifying ‘trustworthy’ marital partners, as most women are only ‘after money’ (acquisitive motive), and as most men ‘after sexual intercourse’ (lust-driven motive). Bearing this in mind, the ideas and opinions expressed by the informants might be based on assumptions that are taken for granted. Overall, the interrelationship between love and money is not simple, transparent, and linear, as argued by the informants but rather fluid and complex that needs deeper contextualization. “...Sexuality is among the forms of behaviour most dependent upon contextualizing contingencies” (Simon 1996:115).

Overall, the experiences with love and negotiating a relationship among street youths and school pupils are opposites. Street youths, once they developed a bond of trust and were comfortable with our research, spoke openly of their experiences with sex, but school pupils narrated more romantic stories. In other words, school pupils talked about negotiating relationships, which eventually lead to sexual intercourse, but street youths talked about negotiating sexual access to prostitutes. Moreover, the street youths had been initiated into sex early and appeared to have more practical experience of sex than school pupils (see Chapter Five). Their socio-economic heterogeneity resulted in heterogeneous sexual practices. Importantly, whenever we speak of youth sexuality, there is nothing homogenous about youth sexual culture and practice, even in a small town like Dessie. Within the same box (youth), there is a need to unpack and contextualize, and policy makers should take such differences on board. Therefore, designing youth sexuality and HIV/AIDS interventions, particularly those for the street youths, requires addressing other socio-economic problems beyond dissemination of information about HIV/AIDS (Swart-Kruger and Richter 1997).

Finally, the love letter which launched this chapter and the other narratives from school pupils reveal the existence of romantic love, but why they claimed, ‘There is no love these days’ is a question that begs an answer and requires further investigation, perhaps by using a historical perspective. It appears that many of those involved in the study were very young and in the stage of exploring sex but with little or no emotional attachment. When the young boys talked about love and relationships, they seemed referring to sexual relationships as well. As a result, sex and love are intermingled at all levels in young peoples’ discourse. In an era of globalization, the ways in which Yigzaw and many other young people talked about love seemed very much influenced by and reminiscent of stereotypical popular and increasingly visible Hollywood representations of love centred on romance, intimacy, active sexuality, and an almost natural sense of belonging altogether that are in stark contrast to the actual structure of many relationships in Dessie and perhaps throughout Ethiopia. Cogently, the discourse that there is no love these days, however, suggests the existence of strained gender relations in the context of poverty and social change. It also seems that young people are less likely to invest in love if marriage is not a feasible option in the near future, kept at a distance by poverty. These matters will now be explored in depth in the next chapter, which deals extensively with marriage, premarital sex, religion, and religiosity.