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

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Sexuality, marriage, and religion: Moralistic views and double standards

Marriage is one of the good things in life; it makes people shy away from doing many bad things and leads them to a life of happiness. In order to think of marriage, I must first secure an independent income of my own. I know that securing an independent source of income is becoming next to impossible given high rate of unemployment. In the light of this practically it is very difficult to abstain from sex till marriage and this means that premarital sex is inevitable for many young people, including myself (Mekonen 18 years male).

The main theme of this chapter is to pay attention to young people’s views about marriage, premarital sex, and its role in a relationship. It also discusses how young people construct an ideal partner. The impact of religion and religiosity on the sexuality of young people is an essential part of this chapter. The source materials are views obtained from school students only. Street boys had nothing to say about marriage – caught in their trap of economic deprivation, they considered it next to impossible and a dream never likely to be fulfilled. As one street boy put it: “We don’t plan to get married because we are not yet prepared for that. Marriage is difficult so we don’t need it. Otherwise, if a shoe-shine boy (listro) marries an idle girl, it won’t be a marriage at all”. The school students also expressed such pessimistic views about marriage, but they still thought that it would materialize in the distant future. Almost all street youths were sexually active; therefore I did not find it worth discussing their views about premarital sex here as well.

The main questions addressed in this chapter are: How do young people understand and express premarital sex and its link to marriage? How do they perceive marriage and what are some of the problems they encounter when they want to get married? What are 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 their perception of marriage and premarital sex? How is HIV/AIDS shaping discourses and behaviour in relation to young people’s perception of marriage and premarital sex? What is the relationship between religion, religiosity, and sexuality?

The chapter indicates that marriage is one of the most important aspirations young people want to cherish, but realistically they also see it as a very difficult goal to achieve, tied as if by a mill-stone by their precarious economic situation. The situation is made even more complicated by Western practices that have been adopted, such as gifts, a velo (wedding dress) and video culture, which makes the wedding ceremony unaffordable for most young people. Facing this wall of seemingly insurmountable economic and cultural factors, premarital sex is inevitable, given that marriage is unattainable in the near future. Most young people reported that sexual abstinence till marriage is well-nigh impossible. Contrary to existing literature and common-sense assumptions, the young people involved in the study argued that both religious and irreligious young people behave similarly in whether or not adhering to sexual values. This casts doubts on the assumed relationship between religion, religiosity, and sexuality in Dessie town. It was reported that the girls used the veil (nettela – a light cotton toga) or headscarf and hijab to disguise their intention to go dating under the pretext of going to the church or mosque.
A bit of history

Traditionally, the family exercised a strong control over love affairs, relationships, and marriage. It is safe to say that marriages were contracts drawn up for the mutual interest of the parents or extended families involved, and romantic love was accorded an insignificant place in marriage. Social class background, religion, and ethnicity were taken into account as criteria by parents in selecting their children's spouse. As pretty helpless bystanders, neither the woman nor the man had much influence in selecting their mate and a formal system of courtship was never culturally assimilated and established. "In many cases the prospective partners were not acquainted with each other, and in some cases they were betrothed in childhood. Girls could live with the bridegroom's family, where she was trained to assume her role of a wife and mother at puberty" (Lucas 2001:53). Early marriage, usually in their teens, was very common, but girls could even be given to marriage during infancy or childhood. Depending on religious and ethnic background, dowries, bride wealth or some types of gifts were exchanged (Lipsky 1962; Levine 1972; Pankhurs 1990).

The Civil Code of 1960 declares that legal marriage could take three forms: customary; religious; and civil (Shiferaw 1998). Qurban marriage (among Christians), civil contract marriage (semanya), temporary paid labour marriage (demoz/gered), k'ot'assir (marriage preceded by provision of labour), and marriage by abduction (telefa) and other forms co-exist under the umbrella of the three recognized types of marriages, though some types of marriage were more or less common among certain ethnic or religious groups (Lipsky 1962; Levine 1972; Pankhurs 1992 cited in Lucas 2001). At this point it should be noted that marriages in Ethiopia (perhaps as elsewhere) are mostly secular and prone to divorce. The exception is qurban marriage, at which both the bride and groom are required to take Holy Communion in the Orthodox Church to seal the marriage. A small minority of people like priests and other devout Christians practise this type of marriage. Nowadays, however, an increasing number of young people choose to seal their marriage with such a wedding ceremony. Muslims have followed Islamic laws of marriage and divorce and polygyny was and continues to be common (Lucas 2001). There was a considerable amount of polygyny at times with co-wives living together or apart, even among Christians. This was despite monogamy being the rule of the church. Demoz marriage is one typical example of approved polygyny among Christians. This type of marriage allowed men who were away from home for extended periods to establish cohabiting relationships with women. The groups most likely to be mobile, the nobility and military men, often had multiple wives and partners (Pankhurs 1990; Lucas 2001). Demoz marriage can also be concluded temporarily until a divorced man or widower finds a new wife (Gebre, 1997). The expression of sexuality was traditionally supposed to happen within marriage for girls, and I will pick this issue up again shortly.

Vance (1991: 880) argues that "Sexuality has a history and that its definitions and meanings change over time and within populations". Similarly, some aspects of marriage and mate choice described above still exist in rural Ethiopia, but the entire situation seems to have changed dramatically in the country today, particularly in urban areas. The expansion of urbanization, modern education, labour markets, and the mass media have ineluctably

38 Till recently abduction in some parts of Ethiopia was a 'legitimate' way of procuring a bride and had no legal sanction if the man agreed to marry an abducted woman. The usual procedure was to kidnap a girl, and hide her for a while. Later on, the village elders would be asked to negotiate the bride's price and to act as middlemen between his family and that of his bride (see Getahun 2001; Molla et al 2002 for a further discussion of abduction and sexual violence).

39 In addition, I learned of the existence of levirate marriage in Wello (mainly among Muslims). There is a practice known as Warsa by which brothers share the same woman in a sexual relationship. More specifically, the elder brother allows his younger brother to have sex with his wife, and when the former dies, the later replaces him (marrying his wife and protecting his children). This tradition is endorsed by the metaphorical proverb: "It is only a brother who ploughs his brother's land".
changed institutions that organize and give meaning to individual relations and processes. Far from
enjoying economic and social stability, Ethiopia as a nation is known for its
recurrent drought and famine, wars (both internal and external), and political instability.
Such socio-economic changes have transformed the entire fabric of sexuality, marriage,
kinship, and the family. These days, mate selection in urban areas is characterized by relative
freedom of choice. Young couples usually take the initiative and select their marriage
partners by themselves. Nominal parental approval is expected, and some would even say
required, but nonetheless the actual choice is usually made by the partners-to-be, rather than
by their parents. Choosing a mate does include romantic associations among the young
people though financial background, career prospects, reputation, and family background are
also taken into account. Not yet completely out of the picture, parents, relatives, friends, and
colleagues often help in the search for an appropriate bride or groom. Premarital sex is now
widespread if not explicitly allowed, and unmarried young people become sexually active as
early as thirteen or even before (Ayele and Berhan 2000; CSA and OR Macro 2001).

Marriage: A distant dream

As argued above, the school students perceived marriage positively and as a necessary
obligatory stage of life, and this is not a surprising finding in a society where heterosexual
marriage is almost universal. Pertinently, the fear of being infected with HIV/AIDS seemed
to have a strong influence on their attitude towards marriage, and many young people
expressed a keen interest in getting married as soon as economic conditions allowed. They
reported that marriage, other than being one way of ensuring one’s protection from
HIV/AIDS, helps to realize one’s goals in life, to start a family, and to enjoy life. They
maintained that marriage serves to ensure one’s life is ‘programmed’, meaningful and it is
seen to be the perfect antidote for ‘carelessness’ (enachelalenet) in life and sexual
promiscuity. Semu (male, 20 years) described marriage as follows:

I see marriage as a mirror where you forsake the ‘I’ and see the ‘us’. It is a transition from being single
to being two. You start thinking together and share the burdens in life. Marriage is a state in which you
carry a big burden. It means plural (becoming many) and wide.

The school students stressed childbirth and social and economic cooperation (‘sharing
the burden’) as the major goal of life to be accomplished in a marital relationship. Despite
their enthusiasm, they remarked that people should not rush into it before they have a fairly
good idea of what it is and what its benefits are. As touched upon earlier, the informants’
discussions of factors that delay the marriage of young people mainly rotated around the
following cultural and economic difficulties and inadequacies:

- Shortage of money for wedding gifts (tilash).
- Inability to afford a fully-fledged wedding ceremony with a procession of many cars and
  the entire event videotaped.
- Inability to secure a reliable source of income and other necessary assets (for example
  accommodation) that are required to establish a family.
- Fear of contracting HIV from the other partner or unwillingness to undergo HIV testing
- Interference of family in mate choice.

There is a discourse that weddings have become very expensive these days, as women
demand a cornucopia of wedding gifts and a lavish party. Gainsaying this, most of the
female informants expressed their strong interest in marriage, and claimed not to be looking
for gifts, a house, car and other material possessions from potential spouses. They did admit
that ‘bad’ behaviour is prevalent among some women in Dessie. For example, if a friend of
the woman marries a rich man who has a car, a good salary, and has a big wedding, the
woman herself will often also desire a large and expensive wedding and gifts similar to those
provided for her friend. Such women would even desert their economically poor boyfriends
and look for another more likely to fulfil such criteria.

It is my impression that young people, particularly women, are very demanding about
the wedding ceremony, perhaps for understandable reasons - it is a moment of joy and
jubilation. It is also an important rite of passage. Grown up with this mindset, many women
(including the educated ones) refuse to marry unless a big party is thrown for them, a fleet of cars accompanies them, and velo is bought or rented for them. It often happens that the man provides these things for the bride by taking out a loan in order not to lose her. Plenty of the dramas featured on Ethiopian television convey the message of how a lavish wedding party paid for with borrowed money overshadows marital life and eventually leads to divorce.

It is not only money that is a bothersome issue, the entire process of getting married can be cumbersome since it is extremely bureaucratic and time-consuming; a process that many people find very upsetting. There are few or no institutions equipped with the paraphernalia to administer a marriage that falls within the financial reach of the vast marrying majority. Wedding items are becoming global and all the necessary articles, from sweets, videos and their accessories to wedding dresses, from Scotch whisky to cosmetics are imported and expensive. Video filming of the whole wedding process is proving to be virtually a requirement for a marriage ceremony, but at the same time is extremely costly for average citizens as they have to sign a contract with video studios for three to five days. To make any sort of a splash, music bands have to be paid for to give colour and splendour to the wedding dances. Most marrying parties cannot afford all of these, but they are determined to do it by any means (sometimes taking out a large loan). Even Ethiopians who have lived in Europe and North America have to adhere to such customs. There seems to be social pressure from important others that couples should have big parties, and hence even those who have been cohabiting and have children are forced to do so.

Some of the male school students suggested that contracting marriages without a celebration party by simply registering at local kebele (lowest administrative unit) levels might be a good solution to prevent expectations of extravagant ceremonies and not be too financially crippling for promising marriages. The Sergachin 90 (Our Wedding 90) Project was cited as a good example.\textsuperscript{40} The Sergachin 90 Project was organized by an NGO, and about 150 couples got married together in one day without incurring excessive expenses. It was a mass wedding held at Addis Ababa stadium during the 1990 Ethiopian calendar year.\textsuperscript{41}

Twenty to twenty-five and 25-30 were given as the age ranges in which females and males should preferably respectively enter into marriage. But whether they should wait until they have an adequate income of their own or marry within the above age ranges generated intense debate among the boys. It was agreed that at least one of the marrying parties (preferably the male) should have a reliable source of income. There was a consensus among the school students that female spouses should also have an income of their own whenever possible, although they did not see it as a necessary condition for their marriage as in the case of men. If the husband-to-be has an income that can support both of them and any children they might produce, it was argued, women should marry at the right time rather than wait until they had a secure income of their own.

The male school students were then asked how important it was that the male should have an income should the female earn enough to support both and enable them to live independently. Most boys argued that this does not usually happen, it runs contrary to custom and it is preferred that the male earns the money for their livelihood. If the female generated the income instead it would not be said “He married her” but rather that “She married him”. Sirak (17 years, male) vowed that he would rather die of hunger than do such a thing (techgere emotalehu engi set bete aleheded). He would not fall in love in the first place if he did not have the money to realize his dream of fully providing for his wife.

\textsuperscript{40} But it was also argued that such marriages will not find popularity among the public because parents often want their children (especially daughters) to be wed at lavish ceremonies so that it could be said “So-and-so’s daughter was married at a real wedding”, as there is the tendency to equate proper wedding with lavish parties.

\textsuperscript{41} Ethiopians follow the Julian instead of the Gregorian calendar for reckoning time, date, and year. From September to December, Ethiopia lags behind the Gregorian calendar by seven years and from January to August by eight years. The New Year starts in September and not in January. The mass wedding was conducted in 1990 Ethiopian Calendar and that was why it was named Sergachine 90.
Another informant (Damene 19 years, male) noted that he would have no problems with it if he loved the girl but considered it problematic; she might, for example, remind him time and time again that it was her money and not his. Therefore, he said, it is better that the man is the main bread-winner. Casting a gloomy look into the future, he remarked that were a fight to break out between the couple, the wife would surely say that it is because of her and her money that the man was surviving, thereby shaming him.

This is pretty clear indication that the school students perceived men as culturally superior and they should not depend on a woman's wealth. It appears that, as far as they were concerned, men's financial dependence on women puts socially constructed masculinity in jeopardy. In Ethiopia, historically and even these days, men make decisions, earn the money, and exercise both public and political power and given this, the above discourse is not a surprising finding. A debate also arose about whether young people could rely on the wealth of their parents when entering into marriage. The discussion ended without agreement, with some of the participants maintaining that such a marriage would be happy for just a while but once they had children, the couple would not be able to satisfy the needs of their children as they in turn depended on their parents for their own needs.

According to the 1994 census, only 26.5 percent of Ethiopian men in the 20-24 age range and 62 percent in the 25-29 age group reported being married (Central Statistical Authority 1999). This implies that many young men in Ethiopia are not married at their marriageable age and the most frequently cited reason was economic difficulty. Nega was a 24-year-old male, and when I asked him whether he would like to get married or not, he responded:

> It would be a joke were I to think about marriage now. First I have to make myself independent and lead a life of my own before I even start thinking of marriage. Even though I agree marriage is a good thing for both men and women. Life is dull if you live alone (single). I don't think anyone hates marriage. The problem is a person needs to have at least a secure source of income before thinking of a marriage and that takes a very long time. I cannot marry, for example, even if I wanted to, I have no job, no income. And I am not the only pebble on the beach, most young people do not have jobs, even those who have completed school. Therefore, they cannot wait to have a job before they have sex, instead sex becomes their only occupation and their only entertainment, as it were. And we are not to blame.

Therefore, premarital sex was attributed to economic problems, which prevent young people from getting married early. Sex is perceived as an 'occupation' and as a means of entertainment to pass the time. It appears that in an environment where youth labour markets are non-existent, prospects for education and training are very limited, and in the absence of a social security system, young people's bodies become the only resource that they have at their disposal. Under such circumstances, success, pleasure, self-worth, and emotional depth are satisfied through the pursuit of sex (Paiva 1995; UNAIDS 1999).

Young people with relatively reliable incomes noted the problem of finding a trustworthy partner as the most serious concern. The stance that women cannot be trusted at all was accepted by a consensus among the male study members. Most of the young men perceived that women approach them or consented to a relationship or marriage on a rational basis, namely anticipating material benefits. On the other hand, most of the young women had the belief that men approached them to fulfill their lust for sex and not for any serious relationship that might lead to marriage. They commented that it is not advisable to trust males, whether they praise themselves to the skies or kneel down with humility. Here is an illustrative example. Yosef (19 years, male) is a high school student, and he admitted that he has a girlfriend. When asked whether he trusted his girlfriend, he responded:

> Of course, understanding the behaviour of other persons is said to be difficult. But it is possible employing different means. For instance, you can send a person to her to give her a love letter pretending that he is in love with her. You pretend that you don't know the person (man) whom you sent to approach your girlfriend. If my girl friend couldn't give me the letter telling me honestly that she received it from someone else, it is a signal that she is not trustworthy. [Have you ever tried this technique?] Yes, I sent three different friends of mine to her pretending that they should give her their
love letters. They did. She received them all and showed them to me. That is how I proved that I can trust her.

Most of the discussion, therefore, revealed that neither men nor women trust their partners, and this mutual mistrust in a relationship seems to be more the norm than the exception. Although most of the informants were very young and had not lived through the Derg (Marxist) regime, the system seems to have eroded the trust that people had in each other. The government intelligence and security system during the Derg was so tight that parents did not trust their offspring, and as a reflection, many young people found it difficult to know whom to trust. Left in a quandary of doubt, the young people have resorted to a typical intelligence system to find out whether their partners are faithful or not, and they seem to be living under the shadow of mistrust. Lack of democracy and transparency, reinforced by the shadow tactics that are still being employed at the macro level, seem to have created a climate of mistrust and suspicion.

An ideal partner

The boys were then asked what they thought an ideal partner should be like. They responded that she must be as close to her partner as possible in belief and principles as well as in actions, one who would suit her partner. She should also have a goal of her own in life and a plan for the future, a woman who has a future vision (ye wodfit rayi yalat) and is strong and faithful; one who would encourage and strengthen her husband. Others added that a good wife should be well behaved. She should not be a drinker, for example, who would insist on going out for a drink every evening.

*She shouldn’t wait around sluggishly, and ask me to go out for a drink when I get back from work; if this is the case it is not marriage at all (ene kesera segebs afixsheks na enhed eneta yemetelegn kehene yeh tedar ayihonen) (Dagimaw 18 years, male).*

The young men, and especially the young women, seemed to be concerned about addictions. A man or a woman who drinks, smokes, or chews *chat* is not viewed as an ideal partner. Those who do indulge in these are viewed as unfaithful stemming from the perceived association between substance abuse and promiscuity. In her study of youth in Addis Ababa, Lucas (2001:104-5) also argues:

*Excessive drinking of alcohol and other substance abuses, especially chat, are recurring themes in both male and female focus groups and are directly linked to men’s sexual behavior, especially with regard to encounters with prostitutes. Thus, women evaluate men’s bad habits and activities prior to marriage as a sign of future irresponsibility to their spouses and families. Excessive drinking, promiscuousness, and other bad behaviors are indications of a man’s poor potential as a partner.*

Likewise, in the questionnaire 68 percent of the school students responded that they would trust a partner if she does not use addictive or intoxicating substances and if she is religious, and the remaining 32 percent replied that they would trust a partner if she is caring. When they were asked the circumstances that stimulate most of them to have sex, 59 percent responded taking alcohol or *chat* and watching porno movies. The remaining 41 percent mentioned peer pressure as a condition that pushes them to have sex.

Some of the young men said that a good wife is one who matches her husband’s behaviour perfectly and if the husband is a thief, he would find a perfect wife only among the thieves, and it is like that in every other perspective, whether in belief or in action. She should be like her husband.42 Others criticized this remark saying that when the wife does not correct her husband’s deficiencies, then there is no reason to call her a wife. One of the boys gave the example of the wife who would yawn and say “*Let us go and have a drink or two*”. He would not consider her as a good wife or even as a wife at all even if he were a

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42 The informants seem to have been influenced by the Ethiopian proverb: “Husband and wife are fetched from the same river” (*bale ena mist ke ande wonze yikedahu*).
drunkard himself. He would rather marry someone who would try to eradicate his inadequacies and not make them even worse. He emphasized that a good wife should correct her husband’s shortcomings as much as possible or otherwise it would be like *alem le alem abereh azgim* ("Birds of a feather flock together").

Most of the school students were specifically adamant about the virginity of girls at the time of marriage. They maintained that if the girl had had previous sexual experience, she might not think her husband sexually competent. This may lead to discontent and even end up dissolving the marriage. But if she has retained her virginity, she will please her husband, content herself in this sexual experience, and make her husband trust her and be faithful in return (see the discussion about premarital sex below). When describing an ideal partner, the girls did not mention male chastity at all. Instead they opted for a potential partner who dated a few women ("one who did not go out with many women"), indicating that men are not expected to abstain from sex until marriage.

Some of the male school students perceived intermarriage between different races (black and white) as problematic because, even if the two partners have no problems with it, there would be plenty of pressure and discontent from the relatives on either side. Dilating upon this, they said that white people often consider the *Habesha* (Ethiopians) and their country backward and may view the people as inferior and with contempt.43 There were others who preferred to argue that racial intermarriage (especially between whites and Ethiopians) should be encouraged because a white man marrying an Ethiopian woman would see for himself that Ethiopian people are not inferior or primitive and thereby amend his misconceptions and prejudice. Such an offer might smooth out previous racial prejudices.

Some maintained that there are people who considered marrying a white man or woman a desirable and highly valued consummation and some people could be jealous of those who were, so to speak, 'lucky' enough to marry whites. A stout opposition to this idea, however, was expressed by some who went as far as to say that they would personally prefer to marry a fellow Ethiopian who knows the culture and respects it and with whom they have no cultural or language barriers in communication in contrast to the problems likely with a completely alien *ferengi*. The final consensus was that it is usually the women who went running after and marry white men and they do it either for the money the white men bring or for the prospect of living abroad in the 'civilized' world.

Since people from Dessie are known for their religious tolerance, similarity in religion and faith were accorded less importance.44 "What matters is love and not similarity in faith" was the most frequent response. They explained that they did not see any problem when people of different faiths married each other, arguing that religion is a personal thing and one might be convinced to convert to the other’s faith. This implies that there is a great deal of social integration between Muslims and Christians in and around Dessie (see Chapter Two).45

In general, it is reasonable to say that an ideal partner for the young men is a young woman with good personality traits, dignified in her behaviour and conduct. The bottom line, however, is that for many young people marriage is in the distant future, mainly because of their economic situation. On the horns of this dilemma, if marriage is something that cannot be achieved by the young people in the near future, then how do they perceive and express premarital sex in their daily life?

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43"While it is not uncommon for Ethiopians to refer to themselves, particularly in informal circumstances, as *Habasha* (Abyssinians), officially they prefer to be called Ethiopians" (Zewde, 2002: 1).
44 Only a minority of Muslim boys objected to intermarriage among different religious groups.
45 For instance, Orthodox Christians dominate the rural area where I grew up, and Muslim civil servants (for example, teachers), who came from other parts of the country, had to change their names to Christian names and pretend to be Christians in order to maintain themselves in the community. Intermarriage (as in the case of Dessie or Wello) was out of the question, even dining together or interacting in any community activities was frowned upon.
"Virginity and smallpox disappeared long ago": Premarital sex among male school students

Female virginity at the time of marriage is another issue, which is drenched in nostalgia in Ethiopia these days. Female virginity is somehow associated with the Virgin Mary and some people in Ethiopia jokingly say that these days the Virgin Mary has decided to create women without hymens (sign of virginity). Others make fun of it by drawing an analogy between female virginity and smallpox, remarking that both smallpox and female virginity were eradicated years ago. Pertinently, the public discourse on sexuality and AIDS in Ethiopia is based on the assumption that sexual values have become 'destabilized' through time, and reference is always made to 'the good old days'. The public argues that there has been a drastic change in attitude towards liberalizing sexual norms in tandem with modernization. It is common to hear people say that "Modernization made society permissive". Female virginity, which used to be considered sacred before marriage, is a case in point. Girls were told that virginity was a prize to be kept for their future husbands. It used to be a disgrace to the whole family if the girl was found not to be a virgin at her wedding or, even worse, if a girl became pregnant before marriage. The public argues that through the onrush of "modernization", these phenomena are now considered normal. In a nutshell, urban Ethiopians now tend to think that the adage "Virginity and smallpox disappeared long ago" means that premarital sex has become a norm rather than an exception.

Such forms of moralistic analysis gained momentum with the spread of HIV/AIDS, which was often attributed to “moral decadence”. Such moralizing discourse also implies that historically, social and physical integration between the sexes were restricted and young people did not have a lax environment in which to indulge in premarital sex. The sexuality of young people was strictly regulated and guided by elders and senior family members, and obedience was somehow automatic. Female virginity at the time of marriage was mandatory and a woman discovered not to be a virgin could face public dishonour, humiliation, and immediate return to her family. Male virginity was preferred, but was not subject to the same close surveillance as that of females (Levine 1972; Lucas 2001). The presence of the hymen was considered proof of premarital abstinence for women, and in order to avoid any accidental rupture of hymen, some families prevented girls from doing excessively heavy work (Levine 1972). The groom was expected to conquer the bride on the wedding night and the best men would take the bloodstained cloth to the wedding party as proof of the girl's virginity and the groom's victory in the bedroom (Barakai 1996, cited in Lucas 2001).

Like any other developing nation, the very fabric of Ethiopian society is changing because of unremitting urbanization and globalization, boosted by mass communication, and formal education. The problem is compounded by war, drought and famine, gender inequities, and an overall economic crisis, which trigger the migration of young men and women to towns. As argued in Chapter Two, migration results in the breakdown of community cohesiveness and creates a decline in the importance of a good reputation in the eyes of significant others. In such a climate, long-standing taboos about sexuality (premarital sex) or other customs may be violated. Such changes provide young people with a wide range of opportunities to interact regularly with people outside of family and kinship relations. In short, young people’s behaviour is guided and influenced more by their peers than by their families, and the opportunity for premarital sex ineluctably presents itself. There is statistical proof of such changes. A quantitative study of adolescent fertility and reproductive behaviour and employment status of the youth population in urban Ethiopia indicated that 50.2 percent of males and 21.2 percent of females in the 15-29 years age category had experienced sexual intercourse. Among the unmarried male youth, this

46 Followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church strongly believe that the Virgin Mary in particular and other saints and archangels in general mediate the relationship between God and human beings.
47 Of course, premarital sex has become widespread, particularly in urban areas, but such discourse goes to the very extreme, as there are girls who try to stay chaste till marriage.
proportion increased sharply from 22.9 percent among those aged 15-17 to 87.6 percent among those aged 22-24. Among females, only 5.4 percent of unmarried women at ages 15-17 had experienced sexual intercourse, while this proportion increased to 54.3 percent among those aged 22-24 years (CSA 1990). Despite such hard facts, my impression is that the majority of young people are sexually active and these figures may not be representative of the wider population.

In this study, only a small minority of the school students maintained that pre-marital sex is not only immoral but also quite dangerous these days - in the era of AIDS. Abi (18 years, male) remarked that:

"You can't even trust yourself let alone a strange girl whom you don't know well. A person will only lose his life and exchange the whole of it for a pleasure that lasts only a few minutes. Better organize your life soon and marry."

It appears that premarital sex was condemned not for religious or cultural reasons but to minimize the risk of HIV infection. This group of school students suggested alternatives to premarital sex, such as getting married soon after being tested for HIV or satisfying one's sexual urge either through masturbation or nocturnal dreams. What is interesting is that masturbation was viewed positively without mentioning any 'side effects'. 46 The issue of not trusting females featured again when premarital sex was discussed implying that females are not trustworthy and could maintain multiple partners thereby increasing the risk of HIV infection. It seems that these group of boys are greatly concerned about HIV/AIDS and their discussion of premarital sex revolved around health risks. This seems the result of public health messages, which advocate either to abstain, be faithful, or use a condom (ABC prevention paradigm) in order to avoid the risk of HIV infection.

Most young men, on the other hand averred that staying chaste till marriage is next to impossible. Here is a typical example from Asfaw (17 years, male):

"How can one live without sex for 30 or 40 years (since marriages could take that long)? There are many circumstances that force you to have sex. It is just not possible; look at what the girls are wearing, "Everything reminds you of sex". A man who lives without sex for 30-40 years will no longer be in his right mind. It is better to have one girlfriend you can trust and have sex with her."

Hence, most of the young men said that pre-marital sex indulged in with the proper precautions and care is a necessity, especially in urban areas. They remarked that it might take up to his 35th birthday before a man in urban areas might be married and questioned how it was possible to remain without sex for that long and that even when a person does manage this herculean effort, his sexual desire must have died leaving him half dead. They added that a girl would not even consider him a man if he does not ask her to have sex. There was the fear that not suggesting premarital sex would make girls question their manhood and masculinity, therefore premarital sex was one way to explore and establish their manhood. From their own point of view, if a fellow loves a girl and meets with her often, it is indeed very difficult even to wait a single week let alone until marriage to have sex with her. In short, whichever way it was looked at, platonic love was perceived as impossible.

All this was reinforced by the belief that men who stay chaste are abnormal or 'half dead'. Likewise, young informants in Ghana perceived sex as an important part of life that should be practiced by every normal human being, and not doing so could lead to sickness or madness (Bleek 1976; see also Romberg (2001) for similar account in Uganda). It also appears that "natural urges" for sex were perceived as uncontrollable and the way the women dress is partly blamed for men's inability to abstain from sex. Other authors also noted that men expressed powerlessness in terms of biological drive, sexual pleasure, and the dressing style of women (Lucker 1975 cited in Rhodes and Cusick 2002).

46 See the discussion on masturbation in Chapter Five where many male school students and especially street youths came up with a number of 'harmful effects' of masturbation.
The school students advocated double standards regarding premarital sex. They argued that it would be preferable for the male to have had previous sexual experience while the female should sit with her thighs closed until marriage. They also went a step further and associated remaining chaste till marriage with sexual incompetence in men. They maintained that sexual incompetence might arise after marriage if the male does not have the necessary love-making skills, which should be learned and practised during his bachelorhood. If the man is not a skilled lover, his wife will develop contempt for him and see him less of a man. Therefore, men should deve the skill in making love before entering into marriage; hence they considered premarital sex to be an imperative.

*Premarital sex can also be a good way of learning sexual skills; that is if it is done with proper care taken so that you will not expose yourself to HIV. I have read in a certain book that the male especially should be skilled in the art of love-making and many marriages break down in the face of sexual incompetence. Therefore, the male should acquire these skills through careful sex before marriage. But I don't think sex before marriage is so good for females. If the male has no premarital sexual experience, for example, and the female has had sexual experiences before him, he might not satisfy her and she might develop contempt for him. And this might cause the breakdown of their marriage (Yenew 19 years, male).*

The discussion suggests that the boys were beset by fears of sexual incompetence. Their arguments, however, present contradictions; if they advocate a preference for virgin wives, with whom would they have premarital sex? Where are they going to find virgin wives? The inconsistency lies in the fact that the same boys, who ardently argued in favour of premarital sex as a means of proving sexual competence for a married sexual life, placed a high social value on female virginity. The following example shows how one high school boy presented such a contradictory argument. In one of the focus group discussions, Dereje (20 years, male) supported premarital sex in order to solve the potential problem of sexual incompetence after marriage. Despite his assertions, he pronounced virginity to be a requirement for his ideal partner. He was then asked how he would reconcile this position with his would-be virgin wife's sexual inexperience. Dereje admitted that there is a chance that a virgin wife may not satisfy her husband sexually since she is inexperienced in sexual positions and the art of love-making. In that case, he said:

*Placing myself in the supposed man's shoes, I might go with my previous sexual partners once in a while for that kind of sex, but the important difference is that I would have sex with them with a condom whereas I will never wear a condom with my wife because I trust her. Importantly, I wouldn't go beyond two rounds (of sex) with them (keholu't 'biysjo' belaye aleshedem).*

It is my impression that many young men have their first and subsequent sexual experiences with prostitutes. There are plenty of prostitutes in Dessie (as elsewhere in the country), and they are accessible to young people. Such access to prostitutes has contributed to changes in the sexual life of young people, thereby encouraging them to be sexually active early while maintaining a double standard of virginity at the same time. His response also reflects the typical male perception that sexual access to more than one woman (other than a wife) is the prerogative of males, while married women are expected to be faithful.

It seems that the school students are struggling but unable to reconcile two opposing and contradictory beliefs. The first one is the traditional belief that emphasizes the importance of a virgin bride and the other is the constellation of modern beliefs and preferences regarding sex and marriage that suggests that sexual compatibility is an important consideration in marriage. Such double standards and the inherent inconsistencies in thinking about sexuality may be reflective of a more general state of contradiction in men's preferences regarding

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49 In a related development, Lucas' male informants in Addis Ababa remarked that "husbands who discover their wives not to be virgins at the time of their marriage have the moral right to disrespect their wives, the right to have affairs with other women, and the right to terminate the marriage all together" (Lucas 2001:112).
marriage and sex and could be a reflection of a new form of double standard in which there is still a strong premium on virginity, but there is also an emerging interest and desire for sexual compatibility (Lucas 2001). These appear to be indicators that young people’s lives are at a transitional stage in which they find themselves involved in both traditional and modern sexual cultures and practices.

In line with most of the school students’ arguments, the key informants involved in the study also made the case that youths have a gloomy future and do not aspire to achieve tomorrow but live only for today. As a result, they practise premarital sex, as the idea of marriage becomes more and more intangible for them. They noted that young people see 30- and 35-year-old people being dependent on their families and, therefore, none of them wants to postpone sex until the age they become economically independent. They noted that abstinence from sex does not work for the youth in Dessie town because the social expectations surrounding marriage make them feel that it is hopeless to abstain from sex until marriage.

*If you tell them not to have premarital sex, they will laugh at you because in order to marry, they have to have jobs and fulfil what marriage requires. Therefore, among the three methods of preventing HIV (abstinence, being faithful, and using a condom) abstinence does not apply to the youth in this town.*

The following remark made by Bisema (17 years, male) supports the opinion of the key informants.

*I often hear “No sex before marriage” as a way of fighting AIDS, but you don’t just sit and wait until you get yourself a job and are married to have sex because you will most probably be too old by then (tedar saleyeze beleh edrnehen atfejem).*

The ABC of the HIV/AIDS prevention paradigm assumes that young people will abstain from or delay their sexual debut if provided with the necessary information. In view of what the young people themselves have to say, it seems that any call for abstinence (particularly for males) is likely to have little impact.

Contrary to the above findings, in the questionnaire 91 percent of boys replied that it is wrong for marriage partners to have had previous sexual experience. The remaining 9 percent said that it is right only for men. They were also asked which of the ABCs of HIV/AIDS prevention they thought young people of their age would prefer to practise. Sixty-eight percent mentioned abstinence, 16 percent being faithful, and the rest 16 percent condom use. I posit that the informants must have responded to the ideal situation or what they thought it should be instead of what they actually prefer to do. In view of the fact that abstinence is right at the forefront of the campaign against the spread of HIV/AIDS, young people must have been influenced by such rhetoric or ‘general truth’ which they take on board but may not translate into practice on the ground. Religious institutions also preach abstinence before marriage as the only moral standard to which young people should conform. It implies the need to distinguish between what people say they will do, and what they actually do. This is one of the pitfalls of the questionnaire because it does not leave room for proving and clarifying questions and responses.

Summing up, most of the boys argued that it is not possible to maintain a relationship without sexual intercourse, but they placed a high premium on female virginity at the time of marriage. This demonstrates that their ideas regarding premarital sex and sexual relationships are imbued with contradictions and double standards, which could be partly explained by the influence of religion. Many of them grew up in religious households that accept the inferior status of women. As will be shown in Chapter Five, most of the young people did not admit engaging in various sexual practices such as masturbation, anal/oral sex, or to adopting various sexual positions despite the considerable knowledge they had about different sexual positions and practices. Such a difference between expressed sexual norms and actual sexual behaviour can be linked to religion. Many of them grew up in religious families that accept missionary vaginal penetration as the only acceptable sexual
practice. Therefore, at this juncture, it appears important to explore the role and influence of religion in shaping young people’s perceptions and practices of sex and sexuality.

‘A pretext for sex’: Religion, religiosity, and sexuality

Religion plays a significant role in the lives of Ethiopians. Most people explain significant or minor events in life or disasters (famine, HIV/AIDS, despotic rulers) with reference to God. They believe that most events happen at the will of God and nothing could ever happen without God’s consent (Cruise 1995). For most Ethiopians, whatever scourge - HIV/AIDS or famine - is sent by God to punish undesirable behaviour. Hareide (1991) remarks that he once asked a group of students in Addis Ababa what should be done about the famine. He was taken by surprise when the first one answered: “We must pray more”, the next one said: “We should fast more”, and the third: “I have been thinking of joining a monastery to devote myself truly to fasting and prayer”. Hareide argues that famine is strongly tied up with politics, agricultural policy and other secular matters, and the students could have discussed these issues as causes and solutions to the problem of famine but did not. Writing about the suffering of Ethiopian people under various regimes, Mesfin Wolde-Mariam (1991:181) questions why the Ethiopian people tolerate such exploitative and impoverishing regimes, what the basis is of their tolerance and their calm and dignified suffering? In his attempt to answer these questions he maintains:

...[T]here is a deeply ingrained belief that God is the fountain of authority and power. He grants authority and power to rulers in accordance with the people’s actions in relation to him, i.e. God. When their sins outweighs their virtues, authority and power are used by God for punishment. When their virtues outweighs their sins, the same, authority and power, are provided as a reward...This deeply rooted belief insulates those in power from any accountability to the people. In famine or in war, the peasants almost never charge any government or institution with any responsibility. Nothing, including their object poverty and suffering, happens without God’s will. This belief is so pervasive that even urbanized and apparently educated Ethiopians accept in fact if not in theory.

Like Hareide(1991), Wolde-Mariam also argues that Ethiopians solicit God for help with all their problems, and they go to churches and mosques for prayers to ask Him to intervene and change bad government. Similarly, almost all of the boys in Dessie knew that HIV/AIDS has no medical cure, but they were quick to mention God as a cause, and holy water (tsebel) and prayer as an ultimate cure for HIV/AIDS (see Chapter Six; Tadele 2003). When I hinted that HIV or famine also affect non-sinners (children and other innocent citizens), they reacted with the Ethiopian proverb: “What comes for the sinner does not spare the virtuous” (Le hatan ye meta le tsadiljan yeterfale).

Most of the school students in this study came from the two dominant religious groups: Orthodox Christians and Muslims. As has been said before, people in Dessie and Wello in general are known for their religious tolerance. Therefore, Muslims date and marry Christians and vice versa. When Gelaw (22 years, male) was asked if religious differences pose any problems in dating, he replied:

No, that is not much of a problem. Well, there are a few Muslim girls who wouldn’t even want to eat with a Christian boy let alone have sex with him. But the majority have no such problem. For example, most of both my male and female friends are Muslims while I am a Christian and I like Muslim girls more because they look after their feminine hygiene much better than the Christians do. But in general I wouldn’t say religious differences pose any problems in dating.

When they were asked if they saw any relationship between religion, religiosity, and the sexuality of young people, most of the boys (including most schoolgirls involved in the study) argued that for girls who are not allowed by parents to go out at other times, going to church or the mosque can serve as a good pretext for leaving home and meeting boyfriends. Most of the boys and girls stated that both Christian and Muslim girls tell their parents that they are going to church or the mosque and spend the time with boyfriends. They
substantiated their argument by giving the example of the monthly Holy Saviour (Medhanealem) holiday, which is used as an occasion to meet with the opposite sex and start a relationship. With some degree of confidence they remarked that it is not hard to find a girl who longs for this day to come so that she can set an appointment and meet her boyfriend. In Dessie, on the 27th of every Ethiopian month, families send their daughters to church to light candles as homage to Medhanealem, and some girls use this opportunity to engage in different activities related to romance. Accordingly, the day has come to be called ’women’s day’ (ye setoch gene).

The church has two compounds, one of which is the graveyard. They remarked that some couples make an appointment to meet around the graveyard. Even though most of girls belong to strict families, they are given permission on that day and do whatever they want with their sexual partners until the church programme ends at 8 p.m. in the evening. Then, the girls from the same neighbourhood wait for each other at the gate of the church and they go home as if they had been together in church. Two school students gave an additional example of the Estifanos (the Saint Stephen) Church, where girls and boys not only meet but also indulge in sex in the woodland adjacent to the church. Another key informant from the Organization for Social Services for AIDS (OSSA) also noted that young people themselves admitted in a workshop OSSA organized that sex is enjoyed even in the graveyards on the premises of many other churches. He also noted that Sunday school students are befriending each other within the church as boyfriends and girlfriends.

Not all were prepared to agree with the claim that boys and girls meet in the church; they might use it as a pretext to get away from home but they never meet in the church itself and start relationships there. Interestingly, this group of young men divided mosque/church-goers into two: true believers and fake believers. They maintained that those who go to church/mosque as a pretext for something else are not true believers because what they are doing is forbidden by God. It is, therefore, impossible to call these people true believers; rather they are corrupting the faith. There are ‘true believers’, who are imbued with the fear of God and reveal a sound personality, living a good moral life. They maintained that it is these people who live by the rules of their religion and thereby maintain their faith and culture who deserve respect. Those who lose their faith and culture, and who behave frivolously in other things in the name of religion are also the ones who behave badly at school.

Some of the Muslim boys attributed such apparent contradictions between religiosity and sexuality to religious liberalism and advocated ‘Talibanism’- remarking that women should stay at home and not be expected even to shake males’ hands. Seeking solidarity in the scriptures, they maintained that according to the teachings of Islam, a girl’s only proper place is her home and that is where she should remain until she finds a husband. It is not right for her to be seen much in public, emphasizing that it is even better if she does not frequent the mosque much. And she should not even lift her eyes to look at men, let alone start a relationship. As one informant put it, “There is no such staring at men till they feel they are blenching”. Warming to their formal religious theme, they noted that it is only well-behaved girls who are fit to wear the hijab. The girls who wear the hijab are not supposed to greet men with a handshake or any other way that involves any physical contact, let alone be seen with them in cafeterias and other public places. They should stay at home and that is where potential husbands should come to look for them. They said that the hijab has become nothing more than a disguise and the mosque no other than a pretext to go out, even quite late in the evening, and have sex under the protective darkness of every corner. In this respect, they said, those who sit at home without ever going to the mosque/church are better behaved. They reasoned that this is all because badly behaved girls do not know anything about the religion or what it teaches, but use it instead only to serve them in furnishing acceptable excuses for going out.

When they were asked about which religious group could be considered better in controlling their sexual urges and abstaining from premarital sex, some of them argued that the church provides better opportunities for young people to meet with the opposite sex than the mosque, since it does not segregate the two sexes. In the mosque, the entrances for males
and females are differently marked and they cannot be together. Christians, on the other hand, noted that Muslim women who cover their faces and wear long dresses (hijab) are often sexually promiscuous. Both the Christian and Muslim participants in the study pointed fingers at each other, and it was very difficult to establish which religious group conforms better to religious values related to sexuality.

Although some Muslims and Christians blamed one another, the general conclusion was that church- and mosque-goers are all the same in terms of sexual behaviour. In this respect the following text from Gelaw (22 years, male) is interesting:

> There isn't any difference; they are all the same. Christian and Muslim are all alike. And even those who cover their heads with headscarf and wear those long black robes, they are just the same as those who do it openly. Their hearts and minds are all the same.

In the questionnaire, they were confronted with the following provocative statement: “Some people say that religion does not have any effect on the sexual behaviour of young people because, for the most part, religious and irreligious people are all the same when it comes to their sexual behaviour”. The outcome amazingly contradicts the qualitative result. Only 20 percent responded affirmatively, and 80 percent disagreed with the statement. The statement is very grandiose and does not allow leeway for exceptions, and this seems to be the reason that the majority disagreed. I guess that some even might have considered the statement an insult to their religion. As might have been expected, in interviews and FGDs the informants talked about nameless others, but this statement refers to themselves too. When asked which religious group adheres better to sexual values and norms of the society, 48 percent said members of the Orthodox Church, 25.6 percent said Muslims, 17.3, 2.9, and 6.2 percent said Protestants, Roman Catholics and others (for example, Jehovah’s Witnesses) respectively. It appeared that the majority of respondents rated Orthodox Christians as conformists. This is simply because the majority of informants (62.8 percent) belong to this church, followed by Muslims (28.5 percent). Under such circumstances it is possible to say that the response was somewhat religio-centric.

Incontrovertibly, the recent massive socio-economic changes in Ethiopian society have created a gap between young people and their parents. Despite social and economic circumstances that have changed earlier patterns of relationships between parents and children, parents usually refer back to the way they were brought up, and do not seem willing to consider the wide generation gap between themselves and their children in terms of behaviour, attitudes, and values. Tiruneh’s (2004) study on how Ethiopian parents in the Netherlands perceive and communicate about their children’s sexual behaviour shows that Ethiopian parents are very restrictive, and advocate sex for adolescents should never be justified. Although they live in the Netherlands (a liberal society), Ethiopian parents seem to have failed to understand that the world of young people today is very different from that of their generation, with many new influences on behaviour, including mass communication, the Internet, television, and radio.

It is my impression that using the church or mosque as pretext for sex seems to be an outcome of the search for ways to try the circumvent strong parental control that deprives girls and in some cases boys from having their own private space and time to conduct intimate parts of their life. I learned that most Muslim families in Dessie usually opt for severe restrictions, prompting their daughters to sneak out with boys using every opportunity which comes their way to feel more at ease and taste the freedom of which they know so little. The problem is compounded because some girls from Muslim families in particular are given in marriage to husbands their parents consider fit for them soon after they finish school or even before they reach puberty. Hence, these girls often race against time to find boyfriends to have some love affairs before they are handcuffed by wedlock. This situation highlights the need to give girls some freedom where they can learn to manage their lives rather than feeling they are never going to escape from the boundaries their parents/family
have drawn for them. In most cases, it is trust (not strict control) that may produce loyalty and a sense of responsibility. Such restrictive parenting, coupled with lack of information about sexuality has also forced many young people to hunt for underground pornographic films (see Chapter Five).

When it comes to the prevention of HIV/AIDS, religious leaders from different denominations have claimed that HIV is not a problem to their respective followers. The Protestant pastor in Dessie, for instance, argued, "Only people who before going to church spent their time in the world of entertainment doing whatever that pleased them may have AIDS". He was not alone in his conviction, one key informant and a member of the Protestant Church who was involved in teaching the public confided that Protestant religious leaders believe that HIV is not an issue for members of their church. As long as the Gospel is preached and sin is not committed, there is no HIV, and the Bible is enough to create awareness about HIV/AIDS, they maintained. They also argued that HIV/AIDS is transmitted only through sexual intercourse, and if a person is a Christian he or she has two options: the word of God states that engaging in sexual intercourse before marriage is a sin and also that remaining faithful to one's partner is a rule that has to be respected. They claimed that it is unlikely that a person who has respected the two rules might catch the virus and since science suggests that 98 percent of the time AIDS is transmitted by sexual intercourse; they invoked this to shore up their argument and conclude that education about HIV/AIDS is not necessary.

More or less the same opinion was expressed by members of the Islamic religion:

A person with deep faith in Allah or a good Muslim will never fall victim to AIDS. A person will succumb to a disease if he/she is guilty of infidelity. It is believed that one, by virtue of being a true Muslim, will never contract the disease (AIDS). Because we are protected by the words of Muhammad, and if we follow these, we know for sure that we will be protected. I believe that AIDS will not worry Muslims any longer and it is not because of the threat of AIDS that Muslims have begun to pay attention to unsafe sex. It is our doctrine that dictates we be faithful to our marriage partners and remain abstinent from sexual intercourse out of wedlock. This is why we have said AIDS is not a threat to the Islamic community. We are out there to teach Muslims to respect these religious tenets and by doing so, we know they can avoid HIV. Our sole concern is to teach the rules of the religion not because HIV is a threat to Muslims but for the sake of the religion. We aren't worried that AIDS poses a danger to Muslims (young Muslim Anti-AIDS Club leader).

When I challenged them with allegations about their members' sexual behaviour, they gave all sorts of explanations. They averred that church people are taught the Bible and will remain faithful to the church. Perhaps more judgmentally, the Protestant pastor divided the Protestants into those who had changed and those who have not exhibited any change. He did admit to the existence of backsliders. He grudgingly agreed that the allegation is true and that there are people who have not shown any signs of changing in their lifestyle. He commented that these few people who inhabit both worlds are ruining their reputation. He asserted that 80 percent of their members have really changed their lives and live in accordance with the words of God. Young Muslim anti-AIDS club leaders also admitted that there are people who say they are strict Muslims, go to the mosque wearing their veils but are still seen, in practice, indulging sex out of wedlock (zimut). They said that they could not say these people know what it means to be a Muslim, and therefore, they cannot represent either the mosque or the Muslim community. They are using religion as a cover-up for the zimut they commit (see Chapter Six for further discussion of the stance of religious leaders concerning condom use).

Conclusion

Although individual attitudes towards premarital sex among young people varied greatly, the dominant views about sexuality in general and premarital sex in particular appeared to be challenged and reconstructed by the school students. We have seen different views from the most conservative (very few) to the most open-minded extremes. Most of them could not
imagine a relationship without sex and most doubted that it existed at all in this day and age (among their generation). Most of them repeatedly noted the importance of premarital sex and learning the skills of making love. It was assumed that premarital sex for men with a variety of partners would prepare individuals to be skilled in the art of love. Convinced of this knowledge, most of the boys upheld an ambiguous double standard that premarital sex is right for men but wrong for women. Levine (1972) maintains that premarital sex for boys is considered an ordinary course of nature, implying the existence of a double standard in Ethiopia at least as early as the 1960s and probably much earlier. Lucas (2001) argues also that a double sexual standard has always been in place in Ethiopia and attributed it to the prevailing inferior social, political, and economic status of women and the imbalance of power in interpersonal relations.

The young men’s discourse concerning premarital sex is opposed to the stance of the young women involved in the study. As indicated in Chapter One, almost all schoolgirls involved in the study denounced pre-marital sex as ‘unnecessary’ and ‘risky’. They said that girls should retain their virginity until they are married because doing so would win them the respect and trust of their husbands, and their family and all who love them would be proud of them. They also believed that if a girl proves to be a virgin at her marriage, this will make her husband love and respect her all the more. In their thought world, the girls implied that virginity guarantees pride, and respect from important others and losing virginity before marriage exposes to public dishonour and disgrace; boys, on the other hand, perceived that male virginity leads to sexual incompetence or impotence, and girls may question their manhood if they do not initiate sex in a relationship. The schoolgirls also maintained that engaging in sex before marriage increases the chances of HIV/AIDS infection and unwanted pregnancy. They particularly appeared to harbour the fear of unwanted pregnancy, which may result in the social stigma of bearing a child out of wedlock. There are cases in which young women have abandoned their children because of economic problems and fear of the stigma attached to the state of unmarried motherhood in the community (Tadele 2000). This situation reflects limited availability and use of family planning methods, which are essentially inaccessible to unmarried adults in the country (Lucas 2001). There is the alternative of abortion but, since abortion is illegal in Ethiopia, women opt to terminate unwanted pregnancies by illicit means thereby putting their lives at risk. Complications from unsafe abortions account almost 55 percent of all recorded maternal deaths in Ethiopia, 13 percent of which occur in the under 20 years of age group (Korra and Haile, 1999).

It is quite patent that young women and men gave premarital sex and its place in a relationship a different significance, because of the different consequences of the act for the parties involved. Except for HIV/STDs and hepatitis infections, premarital sex for boys poses no dangers. Turning to their female counterparts, in addition to advocating dominant socially desirable values towards premarital sex and prevailing norms of femininity, it is reasonable to assume that girls harbour fear of pregnancy out of wedlock and are hence opposed premarital sex. Except for some social and pragmatic reasons, the girls did not consider staying chaste a religious duty. Though all the girls agreed on the value of staying chaste until marriage, they admitted that the reality on the ground is different, and reported that many girls in Dessie are sexually active before marriage.

The study also highlights that HIV/AIDS is shaping young men’s views of the fabric of love, marriage, premarital sex and a wide range of other issues. School pupils, irrespective of their background, aspire to marry when their economic situation allows. In addition to being the cultural norm or rite of passage, fear of HIV infection is the main motivation for contemplating marriage as soon as possible. Some school pupils equated premarital sex with ‘risking one’s life’, implying that it leads to HIV infection. The issue of mistrust in a relationship is very high in the premarital era and marital sex is perceived as a safe haven from HIV/AIDS infection. How young people can meet their aspiration for marriage in a context of chronic poverty and increasing consumerism remains the question.

The study shows that economic incapacity is the main obstacle that stands in young people’s way to marriage. Acute poverty denies them to right to be able to earn their own livelihood and forces them to remain single young pensioners, dependent on their parents.
The continuous development of consumerism much influenced and fed by media seems to have impact on wedding ceremonies, putting marriage beyond the reach of many young people. Though it is a traditional Ethiopian aspiration, such growing consumerism in the context of mounting poverty is perpetuating the desire for lavish feasts and gifts. More subtly, such increasing consumerism and commodified sex/marriage has created a shadow of mistrust between men and women though such misgivings have not led to an increase in condom use (see Chapter Six). Men thought that women are only interested in money and would desert them if they found other, wealthier men. Marriage is, therefore, a very distant mission to be accomplished in the faraway future by most young people in Dessie, mainly because of the precarious economic position. This prolonged period between sexual maturity and marriage, not surprisingly, has led to increased sexual activity before marriage. This implies that young people are not in control of their sexuality and their ability to make changes in their sexual behaviour is influenced largely by social and economic factors. This indicates the need to address poverty in order to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS.

The public perceives that church and mosque-goers are decent and conform better to the sexual values and norms of the society than non-church- or mosque-goers do. With this perception very much in evidence, religiosity has been one of the requirements for choosing an ideal partner. The informants involved in this study ruled out such a sweeping generalization. Most of them concluded that religion does not have any effect on the sexual behaviour of young people. It is true that some (certainly not all) girls in Dessie may use religion and religiosity as a smoke-screen, either practically to get away from parental control or, more hypocritically, to impress others with a false pretence of being religious. Even being aware of this, the categorical argument that religious and irreligious people are all the same when it comes to their sexual behaviour seems a crude, simplistic, and exaggerated generalization that does not take the proportion of abstinent young people into account. Given the small number of mostly sexually active young people on which the analysis is based, it cannot be claimed that all young women and men use going to church/mosque as pretext for sex. In fact, it is my impression that religion and religiosity is reviving in the country (including in Dessie) after having been relegated during the 17 years of the Marxist regime, and there is a strengthening commitment to fundamental religious identities among Christian and Muslim young people these days.50

The whole discussion with the boys and girls on the effects of religiosity on sexuality centred on girls, as the boys are free to come and go from home any time with or without parental permission. Women’s presence in public space is often sexualized and, except for schooling, church, work and other valid reasons, they are not allowed to go out of home and occupy public space. As in many other societies, girls tend to be closely supervised and are prevented from spending time with boys/men as there is high premium placed on the virginity of girls at the time of marriage. Particularly in the era of HIV/AIDS, parents are uncertain about how to handle the situation and how to approach the issue of the sexual behaviour of their children, and strict control is inevitable. Such strict supervision seems to have forced girls to look for different pretend reasons (for example, going to church/mosque) to find space and time for romance. Conditions at home are not conducive to romance because of the poverty (as described in Chapter Two) many people live in a single-room house and young people do not have their own private room for the intimate aspects of their lives. The situation seems to have forced them to transform public space (church or mosque) into a private space and to disregard the religious teachings of these institutions regarding sexual behaviour. Young girls in Uganda seemed to have used the same strategy (being “saved”) to evade social control and maintain respectability in the eyes of the community (Romberg 2001).

50 The Mahbere Kidusan (literally Association of Saints) of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, an association that consists largely of young educated members of the society is a typical example which can be cited (see Chapter Nine)
I have attended the regular sermon and prayers from 5-7 o’clock in the evening at Medahenalem (Holy Saviour) Church a number of times, but it was very difficult to confirm the claims made by the informants. I was surprised by the presence of a large number of young people of both sexes in their teens and early twenties in that church. The absence of many adults and old people was again something that took me by surprise. As shown in various chapters, religion, sexuality, illness, and health intersect in young people’s everyday lives in Dessie and perhaps elsewhere in Ethiopia. I would, therefore, like to argue that with all their limitations, the strength of religious institutions in addressing the problem of sexuality and HIV/AIDS should not be overlooked. As I will argue in Chapter Nine, they seem to have a unique potential to deliver HIV/AIDS message to a large segment of the population. Bearing this in mind, governmental and non-governmental organizations involved in HIV/AIDS prevention need to find out how best to equip religious institutions in the fight against the spread of HIV/AIDS.