

## Child abandonment

### Five dramatic cases of mothers in Addis Ababa

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*In Ethiopia, many children are abandoned every year, directly or indirectly, in harsh or relatively safe environments. The problem appears to be more serious in Addis Ababa than in any other urban area of Ethiopia. In this paper, I present five dramatic cases of child abandonment which led to the death of the child, and examine the possible factors that account for this practice. The article is based on interviews with mothers, police officers, and court officials and on the study of hospital records. The problem of child abandonment in Addis Ababa is mainly linked to general conditions of poverty, incompatibilities in marital life and problems of migration.*

*[abandonment, murder, children, mothers, police, case study, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia].*

The increasing number of street children, including abandoned ones, is one of the most serious urban social problems facing Ethiopia today. It has been estimated that as many as one hundred thousand children are engaged, to varying degrees, in street-life activities. A large proportion of Ethiopia's children live in conditions which are widely recognised as pre-disposing factors to street life involvement; these include: poverty, lack of education, displacement due to war, drought, and disintegration of families. Out of a total population of about 55 million (1992), Ethiopia has 23.5 million children under the age of 16. About 60 percent of its 6.2 million urban poor live below the absolute poverty line; moreover, some 1.1 million urban children are victims of debilitating poverty. Similarly, in the rural areas, it is estimated that 65 percent of the children live below the poverty line. In effect, nearly two thirds of Ethiopian families live on incomes which fail to meet minimum basic needs. Throughout Ethiopia, only 38 percent of the school-age children are actually enrolled in school, though this figure is probably higher for the urban centres and lower for the rural areas (Angela & Azeb 1993).

The majority of street children live under conditions of severe deprivation which places them at both physical and psychological risk. Inadequate nutrition, long working hours, exposure to aversive weather conditions, and physical abuse while on the streets, endanger their physical, mental and social development. Since the fall of the Derg regime in 1991, there have been widespread fears that the number of children abandoned on the streets has escalated. This phenomenon is exacerbated by high inflation rates, increased urban poverty, and lifted restrictions on the movements of

individuals which has resulted in an influx of economic migrants and the displaced people to Addis Ababa and other major urban centres of the country. A large-scale movement of people is occurring throughout the country as people in resettlement sites and temporary shelters return to their places of origin. Similarly, people have been expelled from their previous homes in the southern part of the country, including the Asseb as well as the Eritrea; this was due to the socio-political turmoil created immediately after the fall of Derg (Angela & Azeb 1993). Furthermore, a large number of ex-servicemen who were demobilised by the Transitional Government are back in the city and their families now constitute a substantial portion of the population. Some of the families of these ex-servicemen and displaced civilians have already reached the point of breakdown. As a result, children have been abandoned due to lack of the proper family atmosphere and means of survival. During this period of instability, family members were dispersed, parents and children were separated, and countless children were abandoned or missing.

Another factor which aggravated the socio-economic problems of many urbanites was the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), introduced by the Transitional Government of Ethiopia in November 1991. With the introduction of this program, many Ethiopians lost their jobs and joined the vast number of unemployed. Almost all these people concentrated in various urban centres of Ethiopia, a substantial portion being in Addis Ababa. Any individual may suffer the consequences of job loss, however, when it came to families with their dependent children, the problems were more severe. Some mothers were forced to abandon their children when their husbands lost their jobs and stopped supporting the family.

Over one-third of the country's urban population resides in Addis Ababa. Like many other metropolitan areas in developing countries, the city is growing at a rate faster than what the existing employment opportunities, infrastructural set-ups, housing and social services can cope with (Solomon 1993). In the industrialised countries where urbanisation goes hand-in-hand with industrialisation, societal agencies have gradually taken over familial and community roles. However, the net effect of urbanisation in Ethiopia is breaking down the traditional supportive system rendered by nuclear and extended families and the community at large, often leaving the people without alternative supportive systems.

In spite of an apparent recognition of the consequences of child abandonment and a variety of societal responses to the problem, several questions remain unanswered. This article explores the conditions and possible causes of the most extreme form of child abandonment involving the killing of the child. It focuses on case studies of mothers of these children. The article is extracted from a large study conducted towards the end of 1995 involving abandoned children, mothers who abandoned their children, the police (who fetch abandoned children) and professionals and para-professionals working for child welfare institutions. To assess the socio-economic conditions of those mothers, ethnographic methods (i.e. case studies, in-depth interviews) as well as secondary data from different institutions have been utilised.

The definition of child abandonment is culture-bound, and thus the form and interpretation of child abandonment may differ. According to UNICEF, abandoned

children are children who have no home, either due to the death of or the rejection by their parents or the unavailability or rejection of their extended family. Rejection could be a result of serious economic problems, i.e., poverty, or it may be a rejection of the child per se. This definition is so broad that it may include:

- 1 Children who were physically abandoned in most cases during their early years.
- 2 Homeless children who have lost their parents and are found in child-care institutions.
- 3 Children who have been abandoned, or who lost their parents, or for whatever reason have been left without a supporter, and are on the streets. This category includes those children who are supporting themselves by working on the streets after the death of their parents, the collapse of their family, or after having been rejected and/or abandoned by the family.

This article dwells on five dramatic cases of child abandonment, in which mothers killed their child, in most cases shortly after birth, differing from the other common and 'normal' abandonment cases.

Since child abandonment is a sensitive topic, and is commonly confined to the family circle or the knowledge of the abandoner, there is a dearth of written materials on the subject, both at national and international levels. In Ethiopia, no studies have been undertaken to assess the nature and magnitude of the abandoning of children. Except for a short, forty-page paper written in 1982 (1974 Ethiopian Calendar or E. C.) in Amharic (Anonymous 1982). I did not find any other scientific works on the problem. Even the 1982 paper was not written on the basis of solid research, but in fact was simply an outcome of repeated meetings and discussions among government officials from different ministries and organisations. Moreover, the limited literature which is available focuses on street children in general, with little or no distinction made between street children and those who have been abandoned. Hardly anything is known about why people abandon their children, who are the perpetrators of the act and the like.

The police, the court, hospitals and governmental and non-governmental child welfare organisations were extremely reluctant to co-operate with the researcher. Refusal by the police and the courts and even government hospitals was not surprising due to the 'bureaucratic' nature of such organisations. What was shocking to me was the unwillingness of the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that pretend to be entrusted to the well-being of children. It is reasonable to assume that institutions involved in assisting abandoned children should extend maximum co-operation to studies of this kind. However, to my surprise, some of these non-governmental organisations bluntly refused to co-operate with my endeavours perhaps due to the fear of exposure of some of their activities. Despite all these problems, attempts have been made to collect scanty institutional records and registers to make the information more or less complete.

On the basis of the data obtained from Ethio-Swedish Children's Hospital, I selected seven district (*woreda*) police stations situated in areas where children are frequently abandoned. To solicit the co-operation of police stations, I went to Region 14 (Addis Ababa) Administration Police Commission and asked them to write a letter to each of the police stations. After several telephone calls and repeated visits to selected police stations,

I managed to interview criminal investigators and the heads of each of the police stations, as well as some mothers detained by the police for abandoning their children.

From the police stations I tried to trace those mothers who abandoned their children and had been in jail, though I could not find as many as I expected. I had the opportunity to meet one woman in the District 14 Police Station but she refused to talk to me since she suspected me of being a journalist. However, I had the chance to interview a woman who was in District 7 Police Station for abandoning her child. I also met two mothers who were imprisoned for abandoning their children under the control of Region 14 (Addis Ababa) Administration Police Commission.

Since I failed to contact as many mothers as I had planned initially from police stations, I resorted my way to the Supreme Court and requested the files of those mothers who had been accused of abandoning their children. To my surprise, even the court had no specific recording system for these cases. Mothers who had abandoned their children and had been punished for the crime were categorised under murder cases. Hence, I could not even find the dead files. Eventually, however, I approached some judges informally, and asked them to recall some cases that they investigated. Fortunately, they told me some of the names of the mothers whom they could remember. After getting their names, I went to the archive section and tried to find their file numbers. After a long and difficult search, I finally managed to find their files. From the files I recorded their court testimonies on the assumption that they would give us an idea of their life history, economic background and the reason why they abandoned their children. I also documented the according punishment that they received, as well as the hospital data that indicated the condition of the abandoned child, how it died, etc. To obtain as much information as possible, I have also examined the mass media, particularly the Ethiopian Radio, and have secured one complicated case of a child abandoned by a mother thirty years back.

In writing this article I have focused only on five extreme cases of child abandonment, or more appropriately murder, omitting the less lurid ones. What follows is a story from one mother whom I interviewed while she was staying in police custody. I asked her to recollect all the events around the abandoning of her child. Since I interviewed her in prison, which does not ensure privacy nor a relaxed environment, the information obtained lacks specific details. It may also not be the definitive word and give all the answers. She was also not candid and expressive presumably due to the sensitive nature of the topic. I used a cassette recorder to record interviews verbatim. Verbal consent was sought from the participant to record the discussion and confidentiality of the proceeding was guaranteed. The discussion was held in Amharic, the local language. The names mentioned in this article are pseudonyms.

### **Case 1: Getenesh**

Getenesh was born in the Ajerie District of the Shoa region in Central Ethiopia and was brought up by her parents in the countryside. When she was about twelve, she came to Addis Ababa with her mother to live in the city after her father had died. At the time she

was interviewed, she had lived in Addis Ababa for the last twelve years. Getenesh is a follower of Orthodox Christianity, and she believes that religion is very important in her efforts to solve her problems.

Regarding her marital status, Getenesh told the researcher that she had been married once. "I had been married before I came to Addis Ababa. So far, I have been married to only one husband who died some time ago. I produced three children, two of whom are alive."

Getenesh has never attended school and does not have any knowledge of family planning services or contraceptives. As to why and how she abandoned her baby, she narrated the following:

After the death of my mother, I became homeless. I conceived the baby I abandoned while I was a street mother. At a certain point, the street boys violently forced me to have sex; as I faced a death threat, I had to accept their order, and consequently, I got pregnant. I was alone at the time of labour and delivery. Before abandoning my child, I was in deep thought; I had even thought of committing suicide due to a lot of anxiety induced by my economic problem, i.e., lack of job and the inability to care for my children. Finally, after lengthy thoughts, I threw my baby into the toilet early in the morning so that my supporters could not reveal the whole mystery. The next day I resumed my day-to-day activities.

Getenesh also revealed that she did not know the father of the abandoned child.

As far as her occupation is concerned, Getenesh explained that she did not have a stable job.

I used to work for different individuals on a daily labourer basis; I could get 5 to 6 birr (approximately \$1 US at that time) daily when I washed clothes. I could also receive 3 birr (\$0.5 US) per 100 kg when I roasted grains. I used to have a good life when I was with my husband, and also when my mother was alive.

She complained about the change in the cost of living, saying that it forced her to commit such a crime.

As a daily labourer, I could eat some injera (a flat and round pancake-like bread which is staple food in Ethiopia) and bread when people gave it to me, or when I obtained some money. I got accommodation from some sympathisers, and I was living under their umbrella at the time I abandoned my child. I gave birth to my baby around eleven in the evening, and abandoned it around five in the morning.

When I asked her if she had any prior information about child abandonment, she said that she had never heard about a woman abandoning her child. She also did not consult anybody, but acted alone. The abandoned baby was her third child.

As for her future plans and advice to for others, Getenesh complained about the bad living conditions of her children; one of her two children was with her in the prison. "With the will of God, I have a plan to work as a maid and bring up my children." As soon as she leaves the prison, she wants to take care of her children since she does not have any intentions to give them to other people for adoption. As her major constraint in life, Getenesh mentioned her imprisonment. The highest priority in her life is given

to the care and safety of her children. Lastly, Getenesh passed her messages to others that they should learn from her mistake and avoid such a deed.

A brief record on Getenesh's baby obtained from Menelik II Hospital read:

Name of the deceased	Unidentified
Age	Newly-born baby
Sex	Female
Date of Autopsy	03/12/87 (E.C.)

The brief medical history of the baby revealed that it was found dead inside a latrine, as witnessed by police. The external body examination had shown that the female infant had cyanotic, an untied umbilical cord, and was covered with excreta. The internal body examination had indicated emphysematous lungs where the air-pipes filled with excreta and froth. The main cause of death was reported to have been drowning in the toilet and the inability to breathe.

The information about the following four cases was obtained from the Supreme Court. While I believe that the details of the information that follows speaks well for its reliability, much of the story is from second-hand sources, none of whom were contacted directly by me. The stories also should be taken cautiously for the mothers narrated them under the pressure of police, judges and other agents of the criminal justice system, but the fact that the stories coincide with a reality in the country lends credence to what they say.

## Case 2: Frewoin

Frewoin was born in 1976, and lived with her parents in kebele 08, District 02 in Addis Ababa. She attended school up to the tenth grade. Frewoin had a love affair with a young man named Amanuel, a teacher who rented one of the rooms available in their compound. During his stay in this compound, Frewoin developed a strong relationship with Amanuel, and they started living together in good friendship. One day in September 1992, Frewoin and her boyfriend were enjoying themselves in the city. Having roamed the city, they ended up entering a pension. After that first sexual contact, Frewoin got pregnant.

From the time of conception onwards, I was concealing my pregnancy from both my parents and friends. At last, however, the time came; I started feeling the pain of labour. After some hours of labour, I gave birth to a baby girl, with the help of some individuals living in the neighbourhood while my parents were away from home. After I had kept the baby for about 10 hours, I threw it into the nearby toilet, and the baby finally died there. I killed the baby in order to conceal the whole matter from my parents, and for fear that I could not bring up my baby as I had nothing to feed on my own. Having realised that the baby was not with me, the people in the neighbourhood reported to the kebele officials. They, in turn, reported the case to the police. Soon, the police made a thorough investigation and found the baby dead inside the toilet. Then, I was arrested for murder.

The brief medical history obtained from Menelik II Hospital showed that the baby had been found dead inside the toilet. The external body examination revealed that the body of the baby was well developed; her umbilical cord was tied, and there was no placenta available. In addition, the internal body examination shows that there was strong congestion of the lungs, mucous substance was found in the trachea and bronchi, and there were also strong congestions of the liver, spleen and kidneys, as well as dilation of the heart. The general comment on the cause of death, as indicated by the physician, was that the baby had died due to asphyxiation of amniotic fluid into the trachea.

The court indicated that Frewoin could be imprisoned for up to five years. However, as the main aim of legal punishment is to teach criminals and not to avenge them, Frewoin's case had been analysed with consideration of the situation that led her to commit the crime. This included her living condition, age, educational status, general background, as well as the fact that she did not have a prior criminal record. Assuming that Frewoin regretted her crime and would try to reintegrate into society, the court finally decided that her two year, five month and 29 day imprisonment sufficed, and she was thus freed.

### **Case 3: Sara**

Sara was living with her mother, Mrs. Amarech, in Kebele (the lowest administrative unit) 08, District 11, Addis Ababa. She was born in 1968, in Dessie Town, Northern Ethiopia. She had been helping her needy parents until she left the town with her mother and came to Addis Ababa in 1985. As her mother has been poor and weak, Sara had to work as a maid to get some money and sustain the family.

Regarding her child abandonment, Sara indicated to the court that it happened while she was serving as a maid.

Starting from June 1993, I was hired for 30 birr per month to serve Mrs. Helen. However, I had previously been working for Mrs. Desta somewhere in the Eastern part of Addis Ababa; while I was there, i.e., starting from October 1992, I had a love affair with a man called Getahun who was a hired guard in the neighbourhood. In the meantime, I got pregnant, and later on, left that area to look for another employer. I abandoned my child when I was at Mrs. Helen's home. My employer never knew that I was pregnant. At last, when the time of childbirth came, I found my self in a confusing condition. I suffered a lot from the long time of labour I had.. The owner of the house asked me about the unusual matter; but, I concealed the reality, saying that it was a stomach-ache. The next day in the morning, Mrs. Hellen, as usual, left her home for work, without unravelling the mystery behind my unusual pain and restlessness. Mrs. Hellen's son, aged 11, was the only person who remained at home with me. I was rushing to the toilet time and again, but could not deliver the baby easily. Late in the afternoon, the owner of the house returned from working. After a while, I went to the toilet, and this time, I succeeded in delivering a male baby. Then I decided to throw the child into the toilet since I envisaged that I would not be able to care for my newly born baby.

Furthermore, Sara explained that she had stayed in the toilet room for a long period of time because of her delivery-induced bleeding before Mrs. Hellen came to find out what happened to her.

When Mrs. Hellen asked me about the cause of my bleeding, I told her that it was my period, and I usually had such bleeding. Then Mrs. Hellen called for people in the neighbourhood to help her and they took me out of the toilet room. The next day, I requested Mrs. Hellen to take me to my mother's home, and she did. A few days after I had joined my mother, I was caught by police since they witnessed that I had abandoned my baby, throwing it into the toilet and killing it.

The medical information from Menelik II Hospital indicated the following: Based on the information obtained from police, the baby had been found dead inside the toilet. No internal body examination had been made. However, the external body examination showed that the baby had pale conjunctiva, the umbilical cord was untied, and its body was covered with mud. The general comment on the main cause of death was that the baby had died of hypovolemic shock.

The court decision was that, considering the general conditions in which Sara lived, and realising that she did not have a prior criminal record, her imprisonment of one year, eleven months and 19 days would suffice, and then she was freed, according to penal code no. 487/2.

#### **Case 4: Mistre**

Mistre was born in 1971, in the Gondar Zuria District of Northern Ethiopia where she was raised by her parents. She had been living with them until she married a young man named Almu, in accordance with the traditional marriage custom of the region.

Having lived with my husband for some time, I gave birth to my first child. I lived together with my husband in peace for some more time. Later, however, our family life was spoilt with quarrels which happened quite frequently. At a certain point, Alemu threatened me that he would kill me. Since I was afraid of my husband, I fled to Addis Ababa as soon as I could. At that time, I had already conceived my second baby. After I had arrived in Addis Ababa and waited for some days, I was hired as a maid, and I started working around Markato area (the commercial centre of Addis Ababa).

Mistere's case, as documented by the Supreme Court indicates that she abandoned her child while she was still working as a maid in the same area. Around 5 o'clock in the morning, I took away my baby girl of about 3 and a half months, and threw her into the sewerage line. This incident happened around the Markato area, at a specific place known as Gojjam Verenda that is situated in Kebele 34, District 07. According to the document from the Supreme Court, Mistere has admitted that she killed her baby because she had a problem with caring for her.

Moreover, the brief medical history of the baby obtained from Menelik II Hospital revealed that the baby had been found dead, as reported by the police. The external



body examination showed cyanosis of the lips, i.e., the colour of the baby's lips had changed. In addition, the internal body examination indicated that there had been congestion of the lungs, strong dilation of the heart, congestion of the liver, spleen and kidneys as well as congestion and edema of the brain. The general comment on the main cause of death was that there was asphyxia induced by pressure on the baby's mouth and nose; i.e., the baby died since she could not breathe through neither her mouth nor her nose.

The court decision concerning Mistere's murder case took into consideration her living condition and ignorance. They analysed the fact that Mistere was illiterate, did not have a prior criminal record, and had a problematic situation of simultaneously working as a maid and carrying her baby. As a result, the court realised that all these would force her to opt for killing her baby due to lack of hope and foresight. Therefore, the court decided to reduce the time of her imprisonment. Accordingly, Mistere would be imprisoned for two years without probation.

### **Case 5: Konjit**

Konjit was born in 1971, in Debre-Sina Town of Central Ethiopia. She had been living in this town until her mother brought her to Addis Ababa at the age of ten. Having migrated to the city, Konjit began attending school. However, due to lack of support she dropped out of school immediately after her father had died. As to her spiritual life, Konjit revealed that she is a follower of Orthodox Christianity.

After the death of my father, I started earning my livelihood by working as a day labourer. Later on, I got married to a man named Ahmed and had two children. Unfortunately, my partner died, and I faced another grief. Then, I resumed working as a day labourer, supplemented by petty trade.

Concerning the incidence of child abandoning, Konjit explained the conditions which forced her to do so.

It was some time in November 1994 when a feast was organised at the home of a man called Kebede. I was working the whole day at his home, serving food and drinks for the guests. In the evening, having seen off all the guests, I entered Kebede's room to arrange furniture and other items. As soon as I finished putting things in order, Kebede asked me to have sexual intercourse but I refused. Nevertheless, he used force and raped me. That was the incident which led me to suffer the consequences of unwanted pregnancy.

Further, the report from the Supreme Court quoting Konjit indicated that she gave birth to a male baby in 1995 and requested Kebede to support her in caring for the newly-born baby. However, the man refused to support her. He rejected Konjit's plan to give him his child and he even denied being the father of the child. Consequently, she resorted to working as a day labourer to feed her baby and sustain her life.

Having cared for my baby for about three months in an uncaring situation, I abandoned him. There was a deep well dug for pit latrine around my residence and I took my living baby and threw him down into the toilet, without anybody seeing it. Then I tried to conceal my deed by pretending as if I had been still hugging a baby. Later on, however, my stepmother discovered that I was hugging a toy which I had prepared from pieces of cloth. At this point, I told her the truth that I had abandoned my own baby because of despair and anger. At last, the woman reported the matter to the police, and I was arrested.

The brief medical history of the abandoned baby obtained from Menelik II Hospital stated that he died inside a toilet. The external examination reveals that the deceased infant was found with macerated skin, covered with excreta. Moreover, the internal body examination indicates that the air-pipes were filled with excreta, and the lungs were emphysematous. The main cause of the baby's death was drowning in a latrine and the inability to breathe.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

It seems that all women who abandoned their babies were the biological mothers and nearly all of them were in their twenties, except for Frewoin who was 17 years old. It appears that young people are more likely to get involved in premarital sex and other risky behaviour which exposes them to possibility of future child abandonment. This, however, should not lead to the hasty conclusion that child abandonment does not occur in other age groups. It also appears that most mothers had never been to school (Getenesh and Mistere), and some of them were school drop-outs (Frewoin – tenth grade, Sara – second grade and Konjit – fifth grade). There seems to be an association between educational attainment and child abandonment since education strongly influences one's income and occupation, which in turn, reduces the chances of child abandonment.

As far as marital status is concerned, the relevant lesson to be drawn from the cases is that there are various types of people out there. There are widows, deserted women and unmarried ones. Getenesh's case shows that street mothers are vulnerable to rape and unwanted pregnancy. Since they have problems feeding themselves and their child, these mothers may abandon their children somewhere in the city.

Frewoin's case shows a situation which may apply to girls living with their parents who engage in casual sex which exposes them to unwanted pregnancy. When they give birth, they may abandon their child out of shame. In an area where contraceptive techniques and devices were neither widely known nor available, avoiding pregnancy usually meant not engaging in sex. Although, once a woman became sexually active and then pregnant, she had very few alternatives other than abandonment. It is my impression that there are many young women who suffer the consequences of unwanted pregnancy. To escape possible negative sanctions like punishment and/or stigmatisation, they opt for abortion, but if this fails, they are likely to abandon their child.

Mistere's case shows the mild consequences of an arranged marriage (absent of a significant bond of love and affection) which is the most common form of marriage in

Ethiopia. Girls marry at an early age of about twelve years old and in some cases, eight or nine years old, at a time when they can hardly understand the meaning of marriage let alone being able to cope with the social and economic responsibilities it entails. It appears that marriage partners establish their families without a proper courtship period, and they eventually face interpersonal disagreements and incompatibilities. As a result, family disorganisation occurs and children are abandoned.

There appears to be some relationship between child abandonment and occupational status. Almost all of the presented cases are house maids and street girls/mothers except for Frewoin who is a school pupil. The case studies reveal that the mothers could earn approximately 40-50 birr (5-6 US dollars) per month. Moreover, not only is their income low but also originates from sources that are not reliable i.e., working as a daily labourer or house maid is the main source of income for almost all of the mothers presented. It seems that, very often, the few employment opportunities that exist for women without education compel them to become domestic servants. In this case, one can understand that a mother who has nothing to eat on her own, and strives to survive by way of working as a maid, is highly prone to abandon her child, because nobody wants to hire her if she carries her small baby. Moreover, employers usually fire their maids when they get pregnant. This situation suggests that they cannot keep their children and they would be forced to abandon them. Therefore, absence of reliable employment, coupled with lack of additional support from the extended family or community, creates possible circumstances and is conducive to abandon one's child.

Most of the mothers included in the study were not born in Addis Ababa, the place in which they abandoned their children. They migrated to Addis Ababa from different parts of the country, particularly from the Shoa region and Wollo. Migration seems to have conceivable destructive effects on the social organisation of the families. Young women, and sometimes families altogether, are forced to leave their communities of origin due to economic hardships, deaths of family members or supporters, or other provoking crises such as drought and famine. They find themselves in strange communities with neither members of the extended family nor friends to which to turn and would be forced to abandon their children when it becomes impossible to support them. Once they have settled in urban centres, rural migrants strive to get jobs and be able to support themselves. Many of the migrants come to towns alone, and particularly, there are a lot of young women who leave their partners in the rural areas in search of work and better life in towns. Since they constitute unskilled and non-professional labour, the migrants are engaged in various routine and laborious tasks. Some of them would serve as maids, while others are hired as bar-ladies. Still others remain in the streets, working as daily labourers, or simply begging, carrying their baby. All of the migrants have, however, certain things in common, i.e., they do not have a permanent residence or working place nor do they have a marriage partner and stable household. Because of compelling situations like rape and sometimes out of conscious choice they get pregnant and produce children in an unsafe and uncaring socio-economic environment. Since they are not in a position to raise their children, some of these mothers would abandon their children. It is important to note that most of the migrant mothers said they have regretted migrating to Addis Ababa.

Responses to the question why mothers, or parents in general, abandon their children vary: economic reasons/lack of resources coupled with unwanted pregnancy were given by Getenesh, and Konjit; and marital instability or conflict, combined with economic problems, was reported by Mistere. Although marriage does not provide a guarantee against child abandonment, family breakdown appears to have adverse effects on mothers and serves as an impetus for child abandonment. Similarly, early and unwanted pregnancy was identified by Frewoin. This means that the child was abandoned because of fear of the stigma attached to the state of unmarried motherhood in the community. Unwanted pregnancy and poverty seem to be the responsible factors for abandoning her child in the case of Sara. It seems that if resources were available, most of the parents would not be forced to abandon their children. As reported by abandoners, the action is not performed deliberately, but due to compelling circumstances. The mothers that I interviewed cried or had tears welling up in their eyes. Hence, if economic resources were available, common sense suggests that parents would not like to desert their children. For instance, Konjit appeared to have tried to survive with her child but became exhausted in poverty. Three months later she abandoned her child in a pit latrine.

Theoretically, we assume that a child may be abandoned because it is a rejected one. In this sense, we have to recognise the specific situations of the child for its own abandonment. The child could be ill, disabled, or require special needs. Under such circumstances, even if the pregnancy was desired, the infant may be rejected if the child is handicapped, or does not meet the expectations of the parent(s). This is particularly expected where the attitudinal level of support on the part of the family and the wider community towards handicapped children as a whole is strongly negative, and the phenomenon is regarded as God's punishment for the parents' sins.

In this regard, the findings do not give any room for the assertion that children are abandoned because they are rejected for being handicapped. Moreover, this assertion is not supported by the information obtained from the interviews with the police-men and women and other key resource persons. The police stations included in the investigation fetched few abandoned handicapped or impaired children. Therefore, the physical or mental defects of children could not have a significant role in the problem of child abandonment.

As far as the places where the children are usually abandoned, we can deduce two common sense assumptions. The first assumption is that those mothers who abandon their children because of economic problems often leave them around hospitals, public squares, churches, kebeles, nearby charity institutions and market places. The underlying reason for child abandonment for this category of mothers is that they have a problem in raising their children and they want to give the responsibility to others. Another assumption is that abandonment is motivated by cultural factors. For instance if a child is born out of a wedlock or rejected due to special physique or impairment, mothers abandon their children in the bushes, under bridges, on the banks of a river, and in pits and latrines. Unlike the first category of mothers, the latter want to get rid of their children in any case. Our findings do not fully support the prevailing assumption. We have pointed out that most of the mothers included in the study abandoned their

children for economic reasons. However, many of them threw away their children into the toilet as did Getenesh, Frewoin and Sara, where Konjit and Mistere threw them into a deep well dug for pit latrine and sewerage line, respectively. All of the abandoners seem to have preferred abandoning their child in the toilet since it is the nearest private place easily available to them. This also reflects that they have taken maximum precautions not to be seen by the public and avoid arrest for their deeds.

As to the places where children are frequently abandoned in Addis Ababa, the police officials' interviews have indicated different sites: (i) in District (woreda) 3, children are mostly abandoned in and around Black Lion Hospital; (ii) in District 7, abandoned children are often found around Bus Station, in Kebele (the lowest administrative unit) 31 and Kebele 32; (iii) in District 13, they are often picked from the vicinities of Yekatit 12 Hospital, the Sidist Kilo Zoo, Menelik II Hospital, and Kidanemehret Charity Organisation; (iv) in District 14, the most frequent places are Trinity Church and St. Gebriel Church Yards, as well as bus stops and some spots covered with leaves and shrubs; (v) in District 17, children are abandoned mostly in Kebele 25, around the Dairy Development Centre, and at the back of Holy Saviour Church; (vi) in District 21, the most frequented areas are Begtera (Kebele 11 and Kebele 12), Lager (Kebele 09 and Kebele 20), as well as Kebele 21 and Kebele 22; and (vii) in District 23, children are mostly abandoned in Kebele 12 and Kebele 13, under bridges, as well as in quiet and secluded sites.

Furthermore, police officials have tried to pinpoint why these specific areas are commonly targeted by those mothers who abandon their children. Each District police official has given specific reasons as to why those areas are chosen.

If we take the case of Black Lion Hospital, there are two reasons why children are often abandoned there. The first reason is that mothers can enter the hospital pretending as if they needed treatment for their children, but when the time is right, they leave the hospital abandoning their offspring. Secondly, there is a rumour that the Ethio-Swedish Children's Hospital is situated in the premises of the Black Lion Hospital, and it receives children and cares for them and therefore mothers could be tempted by this rumour and abandon their children in the hospital.

The bus station is another most-frequented area for mothers abandoning their children because there are thousands of people moving in and out of the station, and there is a possibility for the abandoned children to be picked by some individuals who want them for adoption. Moreover, mothers may have the intention to create a wrong impression to the police that they have already moved out of the city. On the other hand, Kebele 32, District 7, is an area where a lot of prostitutes, beggars and daily labourers concentrate, and there are so many people moving around for 24 hours. Consequently, some mothers use this opportunity to abandon their children as it is very difficult to detect them.

On the other hand, Yekatit 12 Hospital, Menelik II Hospital, and Sidist Kilo Zoo are also preferred since passers-by can easily see the abandoned children and pick them up. Some mothers choose to abandon their children around Kidanemehret Charity Organisation since they assume that the organisation would take care of them.

There are also mothers who prefer to abandon their children in the Trinity and St. Gebriel Church Yards because it is easy for them to leave their children there after

entering the compounds with the regular church-goers. Sometimes, they request other people to hold their children for a while, and then disappear without any trace. Mothers also prefer some spots covered with leaves and shrubs since it is easy for them to abandon their offspring pretending as if they were sitting there to relieve themselves. Areas near the Dairy Development Centre and the Holy Saviour Church are frequented because they are very quiet in the evening and nobody detects those mothers who abandon their children there. Moreover, there are numerous people moving around during the day light, and the abandoned children have the chance to be taken by some individuals.

In contrast, Begtera and Lager are congested areas where there is high population concentration. Moreover, there are a lot of prostitutes living in these areas, and they abandon their children without being detected.

In District 23, Kebele 12, and Kebele 13 are preferred since many wealthy people and Diplomatic Community members reside there and mothers think that these people would take their abandoned children.

When I asked the mothers if they already had any information about a woman abandoning her child, most of them reported that they did not have prior information about the issue. Again, they did not also consult anyone before committing the act. They, however, revealed that they were in deep thought and anxiety before and immediately after deserting their children.

When we investigate the hospital data on the state of abandoned children, it seems that an equal proportion of males and females were abandoned, and it does not give room to discuss the differential treatment of boys and girls within this framework. The information also indicates that ages of the deserted children did not vary widely, ranging from zero to five months. It seems that most of the children who were abandoned in the toilet and then died seem to be predominantly neonates (new borns), no more than one day old. Getenesh, Betel, Frewoin and Sara, abandoned their unwanted neonates soon after birth. Abandoning an unwanted neonate, especially by an unwed mother, probably suggests that certain women consider abandonment as an extension of induced abortion. Therefore, it is possible that women who undergo induced abortion without guilt can feel similarly about abandoning a neonate immediately after its birth.

Interdependence among people, instead of individual autonomy, characterises Ethiopian social relations. It seems to me also that children are highly valued in Ethiopian culture. Further, Ethiopian parents, particularly mothers and their children remain very close, both physically and psychologically. As a result, many destitute women, instead of abandoning their children, struggle to find the answers to life's difficult challenges along with their children, both engaging in strenuous, backbreaking and irregular jobs. It could be said that those mothers who abandoned neonates did not establish strong natural bond with a baby prior to abandonment. What is disturbing is the case of the mothers who abandoned their children who were three to five months (as in the case of Mistere and Konjit), after establishing the strong natural bonds that takes place between the mother and a child. At the time of abandonment, emotions such as anger and despair seem to have clouded their love, sympathy and reasoning towards their children. Whether the psychodynamics of the mother-child relationship described above is weakening or disappearing with changing social norms is a question that can

be answered only in the light of further empirical research. The situation, however, may reflect the weakening of community solidarity and the decline in trust of and reliance upon unknown others as a result of the processes of urbanisation. They seem to have experienced an extreme sense of distress, isolation and loneliness in the city. In the absence of family support or day-care facilities, domestic work and a baby seem to be incompatible for these women. Moreover, their wages barely cover the meagre necessities for themselves, let alone the additional expense of a child. Even if they struggle to keep their baby with them, their long hours of work and inadequate diet might render them unable to nurse. With survival of themselves at stake, abandonment seems to have been taken as the only realistic option.

When we consider court information, the court seems to have classified all mothers who abandoned their children as murderers. However, from the information obtained from the hospital about the abandoned children, it appears that it is not clear if the children were killed before they were abandoned or whether they were abandoned alive and died before discovery. It is my assumption, however, that mothers must have tended to abandon their children, although, all of them died before they were found by some one else. Anyhow, the court seems to have been sympathetic in all of its verdicts considering the compelling circumstances that pushed these women to abandon their children.

So far, an attempt has been made to analyse some of the possible circumstances contributing to the problems of child abandonment as reported by the mothers. Now, what conclusions can be drawn from the study? What has the research informed us about the possible causes of child abandonment?

For every crime committed by individuals, society is always behind. That is why criminologists who try to explain causation of crime argue that society is criminogenic. It creates conditions that precipitate individuals to commit crime. These mothers abandoned their children due to compelling circumstances created by their own society. Further, when we talk about mothers who abandoned their children, their male partners also should take the share of the blame. Some of the mothers were deserted by their partners, and still others were raped and abandoned the children born out of such a violent sexual crime.

The study seems to have revealed that severe economic pressures, tied with ignorance about family planning services, migration and some cultural factors, lead to family crises, and thus can expose children to the problem of abandonment and other difficult circumstances. When mothers, or parents in general, are bombarded with most or all of the above predicaments they are likely to sink into deeper stress and frustration, and as a last resort abandon their children. The fact that most of the abandoners migrated from drought and famine prone areas (north Shoa in central Ethiopia and Wollo in northern Ethiopia) seems to indicate that drought and famine cause migration and disorganisation of families, and consequently, the prevalence of the problem of child abandonment.

However, creating a strong association between child abandonment and poverty, illiteracy, premarital pregnancy and other factors mentioned above is a tempting explanation and overtly simplified. The fact that there are mothers who are extremely poor but did not abandon their children leaves us in vain when considering poverty as a



cause of child abandonment. There are mothers who do backbreaking jobs such as carrying fire wood for long distances to sell it, and care for their children. Similarly, not all women who are poorly educated, who give birth out of wedlock, or are unaware about family planning abandon their children. So, the question remains: under what conditions does child abandonment occur? Further, while there are several other ways and places to abandon a child (as described by the police above), why these women decided to throw their child into the toilet remains puzzling. Instead of taking such cruel and risky measures, they could have even starved the child or suffocated it as it is generally difficult to prove wilful neglect resulting in death. In Ethiopia, no mothers have been accused of killing their new-borns when such deaths actually resulted from sudden infant death syndrome. It seems difficult to understand what went on wrong in their hearts and minds.

### Note

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I am grateful to the African Network for the Prevention of and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN)-Ethiopian Chapter and Radda Barnen for their material and financial support while conducting the study. Profound appreciation should also go to Professor Sjaak van der Geest for his comments and his support and interest in my work. LeAnna Fries edited the text.

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