'When I play football with my friends … there is no time that I feel sad': an exploration of adolescents' friendship networks in Ethiopia

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Abstract: The patterning and role of adolescent peer networks in low- and middle-income countries is under-researched and dominated by a 'crisis childhoods' framing. Using qualitative research in Ethiopia, this paper seeks to counter this framing, exploring how gender, marital status, location and disability shape adolescent friendships, in-person and online.

Our findings show that trusted friends provide emotional support and information, including about academic studies, work, puberty and marriage, but the peer networks available largely depend on gender and location. Urban adolescents, especially boys, are more likely to have friendships and older peer mentors linked to in-school and community-based adolescent clubs, and online peer networks, while their rural counterparts are more likely to participate in adolescent-only cultural traditions. Married girls and adolescents with disabilities appear to have fewer opportunities to establish peer networks, due to restrictive social norms and discrimination. The paper concludes by highlighting the context-specific and gendered dynamics of peer networks and children's cultures in shaping adolescent development and wellbeing.

Keywords: Adolescents, peer networks, friendship, gender, urban, rural, disability, married girls, digital environment, Ethiopia.

Note on the authors: see end of article.

Introduction

The second decade of life, from 10–19 years, is a key juncture in the life course, when the importance of peers is accentuated (Ross *et al.* 2020). The rewiring of the brain that happens during adolescence means that the threats and rewards that adolescents consider most salient are social, and that adolescents who have strong friendships are less sensitive to later experiences of social rejection (Blakemore 2018). However, evidence on the role of peer relationships in adolescents' experiences of wellbeing and agency in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), including sub-Saharan Africa, remains thin. In exploring the nuances of these relationships and their role in adolescents' trajectories, from young people's own perspectives, this paper aims to counter the negative 'crisis childhoods' framing that continues to dominate research in Africa (Abebe & Ofosu-Kusi 2016).

We draw on qualitative research from the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) longitudinal study involving in-depth interviews with adolescents and their peers (n=209) to explore the patterning and role of friendship networks. Drawing on a relational understanding of participation and agency to foreground adolescents' peer networks, we highlight how gender (including marital status), location and disability status shape friendships in a range of social domains, including neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces, online networks, organised clubs and adolescent-only cultural traditions.

We begin with an overview of the literature on adolescent peer networks and 'children's cultures', which informs our conceptual framing. We then present the methods and key findings, reflecting the varied perspectives of young people from four distinct cultural-linguistic zones of Ethiopia. The paper concludes by highlighting the context-specific and gendered dynamics of peer networks and children's cultures in shaping adolescent development trajectories and psychosocial wellbeing.

Literature review

Peer relationships and adolescence in sub-Saharan Africa

Accounts of the everyday lives of children and adolescents in Africa are often limited, problematic, and lack nuance. Abebe & Ofosu-Kusi (2016) describe portrayals of African childhood being framed either as 'crisis childhoods', in which children are presented as passive victims of violence, corruption and disease, or exoticised as growing up removed from technology, infrastructure and other 'modernities'. The plurality of childhoods is obscured by narratives that focus on poverty, conflict and other major challenges, characterising African children's lives in terms of 'lack'

(Twum-Danso Imoh 2016). Yet evidence from other contexts shows that peer relationships provide support and protection, especially during crises (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn 2000), and can expose individuals to a more diverse range of information, ideas and behaviours (Cochran *et al.* 1990). Peers can provide critical support during transitions and life events, and promote positive outcomes in various domains, including health behaviours (Bernat & Resnick 2009).

In Ethiopia, Camfield (2012) draws on longitudinal work with adolescents to suggest that while young people's extended social networks can provide support, they can also expose them to influences and obligations that diminish their wellbeing. Most research in this context has focused on friendships as a space in which cultural norms are reinscribed and behavioural risks such as drinking alcohol (Reda *et al.* 2012) or engaging in unprotected sex (Cherie & Berhane 2012a) are encouraged. However, other literature highlights the role of peers in the lives of vulnerable adolescents, including orphans and sex workers, in providing both camaraderie and practical support (Evans 2012; Lee 2012; Ruiz-Casares 2010; Thurman *et al.* 2006; Erulkar & Ferede 2009; Sewasew *et al.* 2017). These stark differences underline the need for more nuanced approaches to adolescents' peer networks and their role in wellbeing, reflecting young people's own perspectives.

Peer networks and children's cultures

Children's everyday lives and relationships are central to the study of childhood and youth, with adolescence increasingly recognised as a time when peer relationships become very important (Crone & Dahl 2012). Changes that happen during adolescence affect the type and quality of friendships that adolescents develop. Peer relationships are shaped by gender norms (Mayall 2002; Morrow 2006), disability (Maxey & Beckert 2017), and socioeconomic inequalities (Hjalmarsson & Mood 2015). The role played by peers in adolescents' lives cannot therefore be understood without reference to the wider context in which adolescents are growing up—and within which they are active agents. Alongside studies positioning young people as political, economic and social actors, African scholars such as Abebe (2019) emphasise the interdependence at the heart of children's agency in contexts such as Ethiopia, where reciprocity between people and households is a cultural norm. This does not mean that children are not agents or individuals, but that their agency is shaped through interactions between their own personal goals and their social relationships with other actors at all levels (Abebe 2019; Abebe & Kjørholt 2009).

The *everyday* lives and social relations of children and youth are thus key to understanding social reproduction in relation to global, socioeconomic processes that shift over time (Katz 2004). 'Children's culture' refers to cultural production by children

as agents and actors in their own right, rather than adults-in-waiting. Researchers within the new sociology of childhood have called for children's culture to be treated as something that unfolds not only in relation to other young people in child-friendly, separate spaces, but also in relation to adults at home, at school and in other settings (James *et al.* 1998). Yet despite growing interest in 'children's culture' since the 1970s, there has been limited research on children's agency in cultural production in non-Western settings.

Important exceptions include Jirata's ethnographic research (2011; 2012; 2017; 2019) with Guji-Oromo agro-pastoralists in Ethiopia, which engages directly with children's games, folklore, riddles, and music as cultural production. Examples include the social nature of cattle tending, during which children play and sing songs that reinforce their understanding of cultural values and beliefs. These songs are recognised by adults and children alike as both a childhood tradition and a product of children's own culture in the context of wider socioeconomic relations (Jirata 2017).

Work by Twum-Danso Imoh & Okyere (2020) on young people's participation in Ghana and Nigeria underlines the importance of attending to adolescents' own understandings of their role in society. The authors challenge dominant conceptualisations of participation as being about expressing views or making decisions; instead, they assert that young people 'live' the concept of participation within their own cultural, economic, and social contexts, which shape the value they attach to different relationships such as those with peers.

Support for the idea of children's participation in cultural reproduction may, however, draw the line at practices relating to sex and relationships, where low parental involvement or lack of supervision is often implicitly problematised. An example of this in Ethiopia is '*shegoye*' cultural dancing, which occurs at night, away from adult supervision. Research usually highlights the connection between *shegoye* and early marriage (e.g. Abdumalik *et al.* 2018). Yet there has been scant attention to adolescents' own experiences and perceptions of cultural practices such as *shegoye*, and what they mean in the context of their relationships to their community and culture.

Gender, disability, and friendship

Despite attention to context within the social studies of childhood, there has also been little research on how friendship, leisure time and connections are shaped by gender, disability, and other social factors. Evidence from Africa and beyond indicates that gender norms affect susceptibility to peer influence when it comes to risky sexual behaviour (Cherie & Berhane 2012a; Muche *et al.* 2017; Widman *et al.* 2016). Gender norms also shape quality and type of friendships. Rock *et al.* (2016) found that in Malawi, very poor adolescent girls were much more likely to have few ties

outside their household than boys, who were more likely to report spending leisure time with peers. This echoes other research in Ethiopia identifying how norms about girls staying at home reduce their opportunities for social interaction (Poluha 2004).

In contrast, Sewasew *et al.* (2017) found that urban adolescent orphaned girls in Ethiopia draw on peer support *more* than their male peers, suggesting that strict gender norms may prevent them turning to family if they face problems beyond their control (although 'family members' were defined as guardians, such as grand-parents, rather than parents or siblings). However, friendships may also have ambiguous effects on young people's wellbeing and agency. Various authors focusing on a range of LMIC contexts (including India and Zambia) document that friendships between girls can help them feel less alone, but can also be relationships through which gender norms are reinforced and policed (Dyson 2010; Heslop & Banda 2013).

Gender norms also intersect with broader aspects, including what sources of support are actually available, to shape the role of young people's friendships. Research by Hunter *et al.* (2020) with street-connected youth in Ghana, Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) finds that restrictive gender norms shape opposite-sex sexual and romantic relationships among youth, but that same-sex relationships have primacy when it comes to trust and mutual assistance. A lack of trust in healthcare providers, who fail to build relationships with street-connected youth, makes these peer connections even more significant (*ibid.*). Mains (2014) suggests that acts of helping, and reciprocity are key to friendships among unemployed and under-employed youth in Jimma, Ethiopia, though these are strained by high unemployment and rising food prices.

Little is known about the quality and dynamics of peer relationships among adolescents with disabilities in contexts such as Ethiopia, where disability is stigmatised, and adolescents report experiencing teasing and bullying (Erulkar *et al.* 2010). In Ethiopia, as in other LMICs, the few adaptations to schools and other spaces are directed at promoting learning rather than enabling disabled children to expand their social networks (Franck & Joshi 2017). Research on friendships among adolescents with disabilities in high-income countries identifies the importance of accessible spaces in which to interact with non-disabled adolescents (Asbjørnslett *et al.* 2012; Kalymon *et al.* 2010; Orsmond *et al.* 2004), but analogous research in LMICs remains a significant gap in the literature.

Methods

This article draws on data collected by GAGE, a longitudinal study exploring gendered experiences of adolescence and the support and services that can most

effectively expand adolescent capabilities in LMICs. GAGE has been conducting research in Ethiopia since 2016. GAGE's social-ecological conceptual framework is based on the interconnectedness of the 'three Cs': capabilities, change strategies and contexts. 'Capabilities' refers to the ability to pursue lives that adolescents value; 'contexts' calls for recognition of the interplay between socio-cultural, economic and political factors at all levels that can enable or constrain adolescents' opportunities to leverage various 'change strategies'. With regard to peer networks, change strategies may include interventions to enrol adolescents in formal education (which can help foster peer networks), investments in non-formal education and safe spaces, and efforts to promote equitable and safe access to online peer networks.

Our analysis draws on qualitative data to address how social characteristics (gender, marital status, age, disability, location) shape the patterning and role of adolescents' peer networks. Data was collected in late 2018 and early 2019, and included in-depth individual and group interviews with 209 adolescent girls and boys and their peers from two age cohorts—younger adolescents (10–14 years) and older adolescents (15–19 years) (see Table 1). Research participants were from three diverse rural regions: South Gondar (Amhara); East Hararghe (Oromia); and Hari Rusa/Zone 5 (Afar); and an urban area, Dire Dawa City Administration. Participants were purposely selected from a larger quantitative sample[1] to ensure diversity in terms of educational status (in-school and out-of-school), household composition (female- and male-headed households), marital status (unmarried, married or divorced) and disability status (including adolescents with physical, hearing or visual impairments). The interviews (between 1- and 2-hours' duration) put adolescents' perspectives and experiences centre stage, allowing in-depth exploration of their support networks in-person and online.

The interviews followed a methodological toolkit (see Jones *et al.* 2018b and 2019a) that was adapted to each of the focal regional contexts, and included three key tools: social network hexagons, friendship circles, and physical and virtual community mapping. The social network hexagon explores the range of people (family, peers, romantic/intimate partners, online interactions, community members and neighbours) with whom an adolescent interacts and the quality of those interactions (see Figures 1 and 2). The friendship circle tool involves an adolescent bringing two friends to an interview to discuss the history of their friendship, how they support and interact with each other, and any changes in friendship over time. The mapping exercises allow for group

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[1] The GAGE quantitative sample of 7000 adolescents involved a two-tiered sampling approach. We sampled communities based on two proxies of vulnerability: food-insecure district status, and high prevalence of child marriage (based on the 2007 census data), then randomly sampled adolescents of the requisite age groups based on a community listing process (see Jones *et al.* 2018a).

Table 1. Number of adolescent participants involved in social network hexagon and friendship circle in-depth interviews.

No.	Research Sites		Younger Cohort						Older Cohort				Total Number of Participants
			Social Network Hexagon (Individual interviews)		Friendship Circle (Group interviews comprised of 3 individuals)				Community mapping – physical and virtual (Group interviews comprised of 4-6 individuals)				
	Zone / Region	Kebele	Girls	Boys	Girls		Boys		Girls		Boys		
					Group Interviews	Individual Participants	Group Interviews	Individual Participants	Group Interviews	Individual Participants	Group Interviews	Individual Participants	
1	South Gondar / Amhara	Jeman	2	2	(2)	3	(2)	3	(1)	6	(1)	6	22
		Aquashmoch	2	2	(2)	3	(2)	3	(2)	9	(1)	6	25
		Ebenat	-	-	-	-	-	-	(2)	10	(2)	10	20
2		Dire Dawa	4	4	(4)	12	(4)	12	(2)	10	(2)	10	52
3	East Hararghe / Oromiya	Bidibora	2	2	(2)	3	(2)	3	(2)	9	(2)	10	29
		NUK	2	2	(2)	3	(2)	3	(1)	6	(1)	6	22
4	Zone 5 / Afar	Daleti	2	2	(2)	3	(2)	3	(1)	5	(1)	5	20
		Melkajeba	2	2	(2)	3	(2)	3	(1)	4	(1)	5	19
	Total		16	16	(16)	30	16	30	(12)	59	(11)	58	209

discussions around peer interactions in different online and offline spaces and their relative importance compared to interactions with others. Together, these tools allow for a rich exploration of adolescents' relationships and how these develop during the transition to adulthood.

Data collection was undertaken in local languages (Amharic, Afaan Oromo, Afar Af and Somali) by researchers of the same sex and from the same region as their interviewee. Informed consent was sought from those aged over 18, and assent obtained from those aged 10–17; consent was obtained from parents or caregivers, except where an adolescent was the household head. Ethical clearance for the research was granted by the Overseas Development Institute Ethics Review Board, the Addis Ababa University Institutional Review Board, and the relevant Ethiopian regional government committees.

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and translated into English by bilingual transcribers. Data was analysed thematically and coded in MAXQDA, a qualitative software package, using a detailed codebook developed in line with GAGE's conceptual framework and specifically the psychosocial capability domain indicators. These encompass factors that promote and undermine emotional resilience, access to support networks within and outside the family, the patterning and quality of peer interactions with age mates and older peer mentors, and adolescents' sense of social connectedness in the community, including opportunities for participation and agency (GAGE consortium 2019). To ensure trustworthiness of the deductive coding process, a sub-sample of transcripts was double coded and weekly debriefings were held with the coding team (research assistants with a qualitative social science background and East African experience) to discuss how to apply the codes in particular regional contexts.
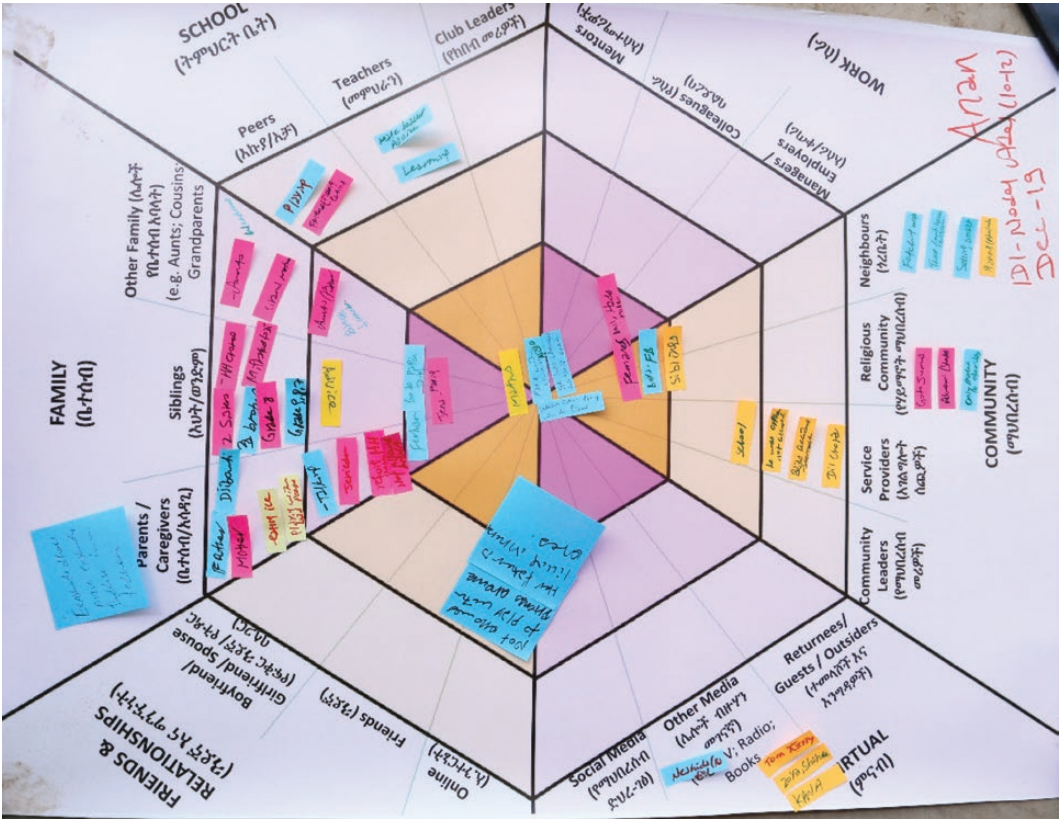
Figure 1. Social network hexagon with 12-year-old out-of-school girl, Dire Dawa City Administration.

Findings

Friendship networks and social connectedness

Our findings show that most adolescents have a friend whom they trust, and that friends play a key role in offering emotional support and sharing information about school, work, puberty, and sexual and reproductive health. Friendship networks span various domains, including neighbourhoods, schools, workplaces, organised clubs and online.

Neighbourhood friendships

Many young people underscored the importance of friendships with neighbours, explaining that shared recreational time helps foster strong emotional bonds. A 14-year-old out-of-school divorced girl from rural Amhara described her neighbour as a key part of her daily life: '*We are best friends and we have never been in disagreement. … We just eat, be together and play together. … We share everything. … We*
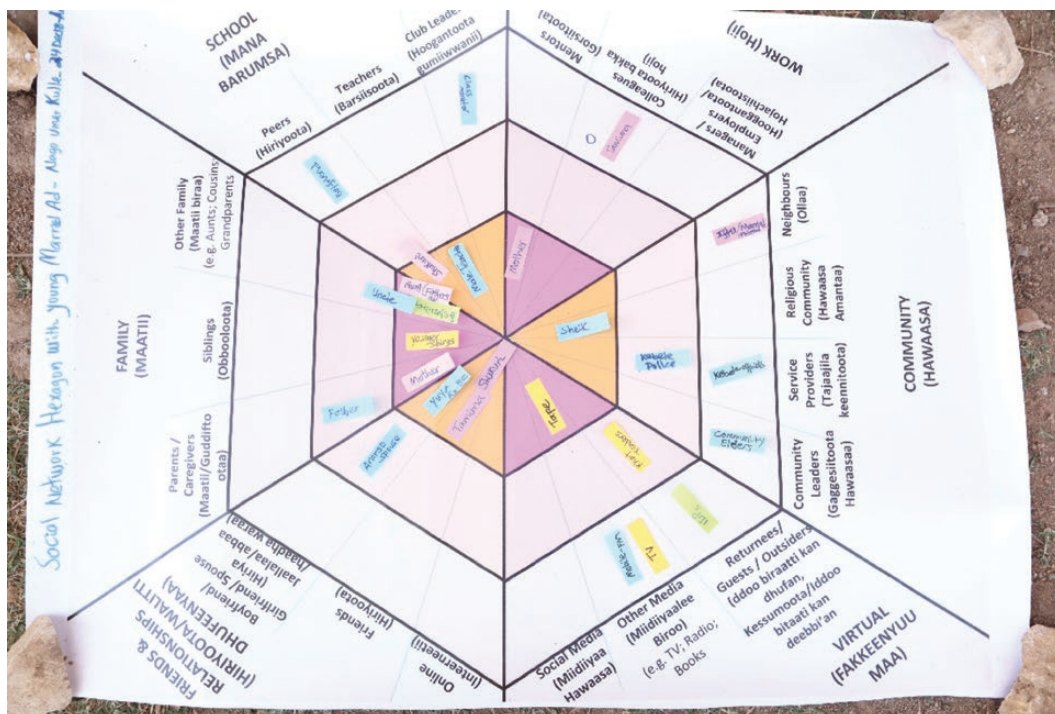
Figure 2. Social network hexagon with 14-year-old married girl, East Hararghe, Oromia region.

go together if we have to fetch water.' Some interviewees emphasised that neighbourhood friends were more likely to endure than school friends, as a 13-year-old girl from Dire Dawa explained: '*We spend lots more time with neighbourhood friends than school friends … I cannot rely on my school friends. They might transfer to another school and that will be the end of our friendship. You do not meet with school friends when school is closed for the summer.*'

Adolescents also placed considerable value on the quality of friendships and certain character traits among peers. A 12-year-old in-school girl from Dire Dawa noted: '*One of my friends makes jokes and makes us laugh … I love her behaviour. Another friend does not respond violently when other kids try to pick a fight. She is quiet and reserved. … And a friend helps you if you fall while you play. We are so different and that makes us good friends.*' Similarly, an 11-year-old in-school boy from rural Amhara noted: '*I like the children in the neighbours' homes. They do not make gossip. They do not falsely tell other people what we do not say.*'

For girls in particular, neighbourhood friendships can offer vital support in navigating social norms, especially pressures to marry. As a 12-year-old boy from rural Afar commented, reflecting on friendship circles among girls his age, '*Girls talk to each other about their marriage … about their 'absuma' [the cousin they are mandated to marry] and their aspirations for the future. They also consult each other about what*

to do if they face a problem and how to solve it … especially if she is unsure about marriage.' However, some girls noted that it is difficult to maintain friendships after marriage, due to time poverty, mobility restrictions and conservative gender norms around the intra-household gender division of labour. A 15-year-old married girl from rural Amhara explained these intersecting barriers to peer interactions after marriage:

> *After we marry, we have a husband and a home to take care of. If we leave the house whenever we want to, our husbands will ask where we are going without preparing food. It is tiresome. We get to have a break when it is the Assumption of Virgin Mary [Ethiopian Orthodox Church celebration]. … That is when we have a blast! We get to meet each other without any worries. Otherwise we do not get to meet often. … After we got married there is no more spending nights chatting with each other. You are all alone after you get married. … Our husbands don't forbid us to meet but we do not want to go out when we have chores to do at home. … They are also not happy if there is no food in the house when they come back. … We do not get to meet people, let alone our friends.*

However, in some contexts, adolescents explained that their ability to forge friendships beyond their immediate neighbourhood was circumscribed by language barriers and ethnic tensions, with some consciously restricting their friendship circles to avoid emotional hurt. As an 11-year-old out-of-school Oromo boy from Dire Dawa explained, '*My friends are just from my neighbourhood. My mother does not allow me to go to other villages. They insult me in Amharic words that I may not understand … I avoid them for this reason. … The Somalis live in the other sections of the city and I do not have the chance to meet their children. I cannot understand their language. …*'

Similarly, adolescents from a pastoralist community in Afar (which has seen recurrent conflicts with neighbouring clans as well as communities of different ethnic backgrounds in recent years) emphasised that friendships with neighbours from the same clans were key to ensuring their safety. As a 12-year-old in-school girl explained: '*We discuss where to keep our goats, where they can drink. If I saw people fighting, I can share the information with them [friends]. We share this sort of information with each other. … We discuss and fight them together.*'

School peer relationships

Adolescent reflections on friendships with school peers focused on shared educational interests and aspirations, with some emphasising information sharing and support with school life. A 12-year-old boy from Dire Dawa noted that, '*If I lose my book, I ask my friends to lend their book to me. We lend books to one another. … We also study together. When there are topics that I could not understand, I will ask them to explain it. … We go to one of our friend's houses—his father encourages us to come over and study together.*' Similarly, an 11-year-old boy from rural Amhara recalled sharing concerns

about teacher absenteeism and safety travelling to school: '*We talk about reporting a teacher who was absent. … We talk about whether we should report to the principal's office if the teacher does not come to class. … We talk about the places where a snake might be on the way to school … that we do not have to move in grasslands in case a python may inhabit it*.' Others discussed school friendships as important for sharing career aspirations they could not necessarily share with family. As a 12-year-old boy from rural Oromia explained: '*We tell each other we want to be a pilot or … teacher or government employee, depending on our interests. … We talk about being prime minister, like Abiy [the current prime minister], Lemma or Jawar [prominent political leaders from Oromia region]. …*'

For adolescents with disabilities, peer interactions at school appeared to be especially valued. Those attending special needs classes emphasised how important these were in enabling them to develop friendships that community-level discrimination and stigma too often preclude. As a 16-year-old girl with a hearing impairment from urban Amhara noted: '*I used to imagine I am the only person with a problem hearing. Now that I've been able to enrol in school with other deaf students, I do not stress like before.*' An 18-year-old girl with a visual impairment (also from Amhara) explained that forging friendship networks at school had transformed her situation: '*I thought I was dead, but not anymore. After I started school here, I now believe I can be just like any other person. I am looking for the future than the past. After I saw how blind people manage their lives, I started having hope again. My friends became the source of my hope.*'

Workplace peer relations

Adolescents in our sample who were working tended to be engaged in urban informal sector work or paid and/or unpaid agricultural activities. Because of these challenging work environments, relationships with workplace peers emerged as important sources of support. As a 17-year-old out-of-school boy from urban Amhara, who has a hearing impairment, explained: '*My best friends are other youth who have hearing impairments. We discuss our work [as porters]. We discuss being hardworking. … If there is someone who stays idle, we encourage him to wake up and get involved in some sort of job*.' Although in a very different setting (livestock herding), a 13-year-old out-of-school boy from Afar emphasised that his relationships with (work) peers are pivotal, now, and to how he imagines his future.

> *I aspire for our future to live and tend our animals together in the same place and not to separate from each other. I also aspire that we will share what we have with one another. For example, if one of us doesn't have a weapon and the others do, then we will loan it to help the one who has to search far away for disappeared cattle, and we will give him wholeheartedly.*

Although married girls (as already discussed) generally have limited friendship networks, those they do have tend to centre around work—both unpaid domestic and paid activities, given their multiple and overlapping household responsibilities. As a 14-year-old married girl from rural Oromia explained: '*She [her friend] is like my sister. We do everything together. We dine and wash clothes together whether it is in the river or at home. … We go to the khat [a stimulant grown in the Horn of Africa and consumed via chewing] plantation to work together. We discuss everything with each other. … She tells me to accept my marriage and [to carry on] living with my husband.'*

Organised adolescent clubs

In urban areas, youth groups organised by sports clubs, youth centres, churches and mosques provide valuable opportunities to connect with peers, although predominantly for adolescent boys. In larger urban centres, like Dire Dawa city, sports clubs are especially important spaces, as a 12-year-old in-school boy noted: '*I feel happy when I play football. We relax … when we go to the field to play together. … We have bought a ball, and a team uniform by collecting donations from people door-to-door. … We have a young but clever coach. … He is a role model to us.'* Other boys reported that they valued community youth centres, which show sports matches on TV and/or provide opportunities for peers to play pool or darts together. However, such spaces tend to be male-dominated and oriented towards older adolescents, with few organised activities and inclusive recreational spaces for younger adolescents, especially girls. Although small in scale, school-based girls' clubs, offering empowerment and life skills training, emerged as valued and powerful spaces for peer interaction and mentorship for girls fortunate enough to have access to such clubs. As a 13-year-old girl from Dire Dawa explained: '*The girls' club is popular with many girls joining. … The teacher is good and treats us all equally. She is almost like our sister. She advises us about how to protect ourselves from rape. She also gives sanitary pads to those who can't afford to buy*.'

Online peer networks

Online friendships also emerged as an important part of adolescents' peer networks. As of 2019, 19 per cent of Ethiopians had some internet access, with young people more likely to be online than older people (ITU 2019). In urban Ethiopia in particular, Facebook is popular and used as an extension of in-person friendship groups, especially among boys, who are much more likely than girls to own a mobile device and have internet access (Jones *et al.* 2019b). A 17-year-old in-school boy from Dire

Dawa city explained how he and his friends use social media to engage with peers, highlighting both its advantages and downsides:

> *These days most adolescents of our age are social media users, especially Facebook … I upload sporting videos to upset my friends who support rival teams. … Our friends also boast by showing the number of likes they receive from Facebook friends. … I often use Facebook to chat with my friends. … But I see that it can change one's personality or behaviour and may lead to depression—for example, if someone doesn't feel they get enough likes from friends.*

While rural adolescents have significantly less access to online networks, our findings suggest that this is changing quickly, with boys in pastoralist communities gaining increased access to mobile phones given their migratory lifestyles. As a 13-year-old boy from a remote rural community in Afar explained, mobile phones are being used to recreate oral traditions of information sharing among his peers, including about conflict-related risks:

> *I use the mobile phone to make Dagu [traditional way of passing on information orally in Afar culture] with my friends. I can tell them to bring something I need. I can also dig up information about my community using the mobile phone. They can also call me and share ideas. … This time, there is conflict among the Afar and Amhara people; I need to update myself about the extent of conflict.*

Children's cultures and their role in facilitating mixed-sex and romantic relationships

In rural communities of Afar and Oromia, amidst hierarchical social structures, many young people reported participating in cultural dances (known as *shegoye* in East Hararghe, Oromia, and *saddah* in Afar). In Oromia, these dances are an important venue for young people to interact in a culturally sanctioned way (without adult supervision) with members of the opposite sex and to seek a potential marriage partner. Adolescents begin attending from age 11 or 12, and because the dances take place at night and often go on very late, regular participation can lead to school drop-out. While religious leaders are increasingly keen to ban *shegoye* due to concerns they contravene religious norms, and youth activists increasingly support a ban due to the detrimental effects on adolescent schooling, *shegoye* remain popular as a rite of passage. As a 16-year-old out-of-school boy from rural Oromia explained:

> *We play shegoye together. … We play in the evenings—usually daily. We hear the music on the tape and dance. I've been doing this for five years. We meet our girlfriends there. We call the girls by name by going near to their home. … They come out with us after they serve dinner. … Our 'girlfriends' bring us nuts, sugar and khat and we chew khat together. They lay down with us somewhere, feeding us khat and sugar. … There is no adult; our parents are not present.*

In Afar, the *saddah* cultural dance has one major difference to *shegoye*: participation is not a means to meet potential marriage partners but rather to interact with peers and enjoy culturally sanctioned recreational time in an adolescent-only space in what is otherwise a very rule-bound cultural milieu. For many adolescents, when asked about positive memories with friends, playing together during *saddah* was the main response. The tradition accommodates both younger and older adolescents, although adolescents emphasised that their interactions were solely with age-mates as skill, practice and physical maturity is required to perform in the main dance group. As an 11-year-old out-of-school girl noted:

> *We play saddah when the moon rises around 3 o'clock (9pm) and we finish playing at midnight. We don't play with the older adolescents. … They are much taller and bigger and may accidentally hurt us when jumping and dancing. Older girls play with older boys. We don't stay in the saddah playground when they are playing saddah—they often play through the night. We watch them for a while or we play with the younger adolescents in a separate place and then go home.*

In some cases—and reportedly increasingly so, due to growing access to modern contraception—adolescents also conduct sexual relationships with *saddah* participants. Some adolescents suggested that these spaces provide an opportunity for young people to explore their sexuality before conforming to the dominant cultural norm of *absuma* (arranged cousin) marriage. As a 14-year-old out-of-school boy explained: '*Mostly we talk to each other and we discuss the girls' beauty. We choose beautiful girls for one another, and we will talk about the beauty of girls we see at the 'saddah' playground. … After discussing these beautiful girls we will ask them and if they agree, we will take them somewhere.*' However, further exploration reveals some ambiguity as to whether these relationships are consensual or forced, as this account from a 13-year-old out-of-school boy highlights:

> *Boys and girls will line up in opposite rows, and move in and out towards and away from each other, singing and dancing. … Saddah brings us happiness. … They don't take girls at the saddah place, they only play and dance. But if they want to be with their girlfriends, they will take them to a dark place or to their home in the village. … We can't catch a girl if her family is found there. We will catch them secretly, and we can take them to another place. … And then we take girls to such homes if boys wanted to be with these girls and if they ordered us to bring girls for them somewhere. And then the boys will come and we leave them alone.*

As this account underscores agency and power in these encounters appears to rest with adolescent boys not girls. *Saddah* may therefore act as a space in which dominant cultural norms related to male sexual dominance are enacted and perpetuated.

Discussion

In contrast to a 'crisis childhoods' framing, our findings show that adolescent friendships in diverse urban and rural communities in Ethiopia are pivotal for cultural

production. Not only do adolescent peer networks provide emotional support, but they are spaces to share information about school, work, puberty and marriage, and to forge a sense of social connectedness, including with older mentors. Across all four study locations, adolescents emphasised the importance of carving out spaces within their everyday lives for interaction with peers. Neighbourhood, school and workplace-based friendships were most frequently cited as important; for young people with disabilities, special needs education classes were highly valued as opportunities to develop friendships that community-level discrimination and stigma too often preclude. This echoes findings from research in high-income country contexts—that tailored spaces for adolescents with disabilities are vital to enable them to connect with their peers (Asbjørnslett *et al.* 2012; Maxey & Beckert 2017).

Our findings offer a nuanced understanding of adolescent internet use, though previous research has largely explored only the negative effects and risks, such as high levels of engagement with and sharing of sexually explicit media (including violent and abusive imagery) (Cheney *et al.* 2017; Le Mat *et al.* 2019). Although we do not deny these possibilities, our findings suggest that online spaces are important for adolescents to connect with other young people, especially for sharing news and information. As with other leisure activities, our research reiterates findings from other studies that young people's internet use in Ethiopia is shaped by gender, urban/rural and socioeconomic inequalities in access to technology (Araya *et al.* 2018), with working adolescent boys and young men more likely to be able to afford phones and internet access (Banati *et al.* 2020).

One difference between locations was the extent to which opportunities for adolescent interaction are facilitated—or whether adolescents have to create these for themselves. In urban settings, adolescent boys and girls spoke positively about youth groups organised by sports clubs, religious institutions and community organisations. These not only provide opportunities to make friends but often enable positive interactions with trusted older peer mentors and adults. Yet while social groups were positively appraised by young people, we also find that some adolescent interactions and activities are deliberately organised to take place away from the direct supervision, pressure and behavioural expectations of parents and other adults. In rural areas, in the context of hierarchical social structures, many young people emphasised the important role of culturally sanctioned dances such as *shegoye* and *saddah* in providing access to mixed-sex peer networks and relationships. However, it is important to emphasise that this does not mean they are free from wider societal influences and norms, and especially for girls, who face considerable risks in terms of their bodily integrity and agency within mixed-sex relationships. Though adolescent girls themselves report embracing the opportunities that the dances give them to find possible marriage partners away from parental intervention, it is important to remain cautious about uncritically celebrating these socialising ventures as a safe space for adolescents' sexual agency and

cultural production. As the accounts of young married girls show, both in this data and in the extant literature (Gage 2013; Emirie *et al.* 2021), the freedoms with which these ventures are initially associated may be short-lived. Rather, their importance to young people as a space for social interaction should inform efforts to provide safer opportunities for adolescents to build relationships in ways that are genuinely supportive of the positive aspects of socialisation, rather than structured around possibilities for marriage and the more negative trajectory that adolescent marriage steers girls towards.

Conclusions

Overall our findings on adolescent friendships in urban and rural communities in Ethiopia underscore the importance of paying more attention to the critical role of adolescent peer networks and children's cultures in shaping young people's development and wellbeing during the second decade of life. Drawing on a relational understanding of participation and agency to foreground adolescents' peer networks, our research highlights that the peer networks available to young people are highly context-specific and shaped by location, gender and other social characteristics—not least education, marital status and disability status. Access to inclusive safe spaces and recreational opportunities—especially for adolescents who are out of school (temporarily or permanently) and for girls and adolescents with disabilities—can play a critical role in fostering adolescents' emotional resilience and social connectedness. However, a nuanced understanding of peer networks and children's cultures necessitates a recognition that such spaces are also venues of cultural production and may serve to enforce dominant social norms that perpetuate existing inequalities.

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