

# Why and how do parents secretly abandon their children? The psychosocial burden they went through: Qualitative case study in Gondar City, Ethiopia

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## Research Article

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# Abstract

## Purpose

Globally, studies on parents who secretly abandoned their children scarce and were unavailable in Ethiopia. This study, therefore, explored the lived experiences of mothers/fathers who secretly abandoned their children.

## Methods

Qualitative case study design was employed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposefully selected parents in Gondar city. Thematic content analysis was employed to analyse the data.

## Results

In the present study, three core themes emerged: parents' situation before delivery, parents' child abandoning experiences, and parents' psychosocial conditions after abandonment. Contextual factors before and after the child is born (e.g. challenging life situation, unwanted pregnancy, rape/abuse, etc.) played important roles in later child abandonment. Child abandonment is a process that includes contemplation, preparations and taking actions. Economic hardships, exacerbated by sociocultural factors pushed parents to abandon their children. Psychological sufferings begin before abandonment and continued after the abandonment.

## Conclusions

Child abandonment, as one form of avoiding parental responsibilities, is not a onetime act and sociocultural factors exacerbated the economic push factors. Therefore, it is recommended that extensive participatory studies, psychosocial support for vulnerable parents, and awareness creation campaigns need to be in place to mitigate child abandonment.

# Introduction

Child abandonment, one form of avoiding parental child care responsibilities, has been practiced long ago. Child abandonment can be open where parents give or relinquish the child to family members or institutions. On the other hand, child abandonment can be hidden where parents secretly leave their child in a place without supervision (Ferrara et al., 2013). The secret child abandonment can be performed in a safe place with parent's intention of the child being rescued by others. It can also be performed with the intention of killing the child (named as infanticide) where the child is damped in unsafe place (Ojedokun & Atoi, 2012).

Child abandonment whether it is openly or secretly performed leaves children without parental care. Studies consistently indicated that growing up without parental care and supervision is associated with a number of physical, mental, educational and social problems. Global evidences have depicted that children who lost their parents in their childhood experienced mental health problems (Gao et al., 2022; Misra et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022), retarded growth (Tian et al., 2017), elevated risk of mortality (Hiyoshi et al., 2021), poor academic performance and attainments (Cas et al., 2014; Kailaheimo-Lönnqvist & Kotimäki, 2020), etc.

Given the short-term and long-term effects of child abandonment on the life course of children, child abandonment needs to be prevented before it happened. This calls up on studies on the phenomenon including why and how parents abandoned their children.

While these are the facts, child abandonment is still the least explored phenomenon, and studies about its prevalence and trends are scarce (Delaunay, 2011). It is least explored because parents who secretly abandoned their children are difficult

to find (Bos et al., 2015). Finding the parents is difficult because the cases are rare (Mueller & Sherr, 2009) and some parents abandon their children in a different city or town far away from their place of residence (Ojedokun & Atoi, 2012).

As such the questions of why and how parents abandon their children remain unanswered. Particularly studies on the push factors or risk factors for the hidden child abandonment are lacking in the global literature (Mueller & Sherr, 2009).

Scholars argued that a number of sociocultural and economic factors are behind child abandonment. For example, Delaunay (2011) argued that a number of sociocultural beliefs and practices (attitudes about abnormal births, births from a single mother) contribute to child abandonment. Likewise, Onyido & Akpan (2018) mentioned that in Nigeria parents abandon their children because of many related factors that include family conflicts, barbaric cultural practices, poverty and homelessness.

In studies among parents who relinquish their children to institutions and parents who commit infanticide, economic and sociocultural factors are the drivers for parents' act of avoiding parental responsibilities (Amukugo et al., 2019; Bos et al., 2015; Dekel et al., 2018; Donmez et al., 2021; Ojedokun & Atoi, 2012).

Ethiopia ratified the United National Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991 and developed the National Children's Policy in 2017 (FDRE, 2017). The Ethiopian Constitution confirms equal rights for all children, a family law is enacted with the aim of giving priority to the well-being, upbringing and protection of children and the Criminal Procedure Code provide protections for children against abuse and exploitation (Cuninghame et al., 2018).

In practice high number of children in Ethiopia are living in dire situation where their rights or needs for basic goods and services unfulfilled. In a study by the Ethiopian Central Statistical Authority (CSA) & UNICEF Ethiopia (2018) 88% of children in Ethiopia are living in multidimensional poverty. This means that their rights or needs for three to six of the dimensions measured (physical development (stunting), health, nutrition, education, health-related knowledge, information and participation, water, sanitation and housing) are deprived.

One of the factors associated with high multidimensional deprivation is living without parents. Children who are orphaned or not living with their parents who are alive were found to have high multidimensional deprivation (CSA & UNICEF Ethiopia, 2018). In Ethiopian 10% of the children under the age of 18 is not living with a biological parent and 7% of the children are orphans, i.e. who lost one or both parents (DHS, 2016). But a number factors like HIV prevalence, economic hardships, etc. are challenging taking care of orphans (Abebe & Aase, 2007) and the number of children without parental care is increasing because of manmade and natural disasters as well as the dire poverty in Ethiopia (MoWA, 2009).

So far so nice, the legal and policy frameworks have created opportunities to governmental, non-governmental and community-based organizations to provide care and support for orphan and vulnerable children (Cuninghame et al., 2018). Ethiopia has also developed an alternative childcare guideline to provide quality and effective alternative care support orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) with their best interest (MoWA, 2009) even though the practical implementation of alternative care and support is not in line with the guideline (FHI, 2013). Besides, supporting OVC through strengthening community-based, local adoption, foster care and reunification and reintegration alternative care programs is one of the aims identified in the Children's policy (FDRE, 2017).

However, available studies in different corners of the country have depicted the challenges orphaned children are having. To mention some, a qualitative study in Gondar city depicted that institutionalized orphans have complicated psychosocial problems (Tadesse et al., 2014). In another study in Injibara, orphans experienced psychological, social, economic and educational problems (Alem, 2020). Likewise, a study among orphans who reside in an orphanage center and in the community in Addis Ababa, it was revealed that children who reside in the orphanage center experienced a number of psychosocial challenges including loneliness, anxiety, depression and poor social interaction (Amare, 2018). A

study among the OVC in Chilga woreda, northwestern Ethiopia, also revealed that the orphaned children experienced social and educational problems (Tefera & Mengstie, 2014).

Alongside the challenges orphaned children are facing, data about the severe risks children faced and about the rate of child homicide in Ethiopia are difficult to find mainly because “there is no mandatory reporting of child abuse or neglect cases” (Cuninghame et al., 2018, p. 12).

One of the severe risks children might face is child abandonment. In Ethiopia child abandonment is illegal. Abandoning a child to danger without proper care and attention was deemed a crime in Article 694 of the 2004 amended penal code (FDRE, 2005).

In line with the scarcity of studies in the global literature, studies on child abandonment, particularly on why and how parents abandon their children don't exist in Ethiopia, at least to the knowledge of the present researchers. The only exception here is the study in Addis Ababa entitled “Child abandonment: Five dramatic cases of mothers in Addis Ababa”. The study is conducted some 20 years before a researcher used qualitative case study among five parents who killed their children as well as data from the police, the court and hospital (Tadele, 2000). However, the study is on infanticide, not on parents' who secretly abandon their children.

As such the present study tried to fill this gap by investigating the lived experiences of parents who abandoned their children. Findings from this study will help to design the means to prevent child abandonment thereby to save the lives of children and to prevent the psychosocial sufferings parents might have. The study aimed to investigate the lived experiences of mothers/fathers who had abandoned their respective child under the age of 1 year old in Gondar city. Specifically the study tried to bestow answers for the following research questions: (1) what are the lived experiences of parents who abandoned their children before the actual abandonment act? (2) Why did parents abandon their child? (3) How did parents abandon their child? and (4) What are the parents' psychosocial conditions before/after re-joining.

## **Materials and Methods**

### **Research Design**

The lived experiences of mothers/fathers who abandoned their children were examined using a qualitative approach. Of the available qualitative approaches, a case study design was employed in the present study. The design is preferred because experiences of parents child abandonment is a complex issue and the design is more appropriate for in-depth analysis of complex phenomenon in a real life settings (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016; Bhatta, 2018). The design is also used for it is appropriate for unusual cases (J. W. Creswell, 2012). As depicted earlier parents who secretly abandon their children are difficult to find and qualitative case study design was employed to examine the lived experiences of these parents. Moreover, case studies are used when the inquiry is to bestow answers on why and how questions (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Hence, we employed case study to give answers for why and how parents secretly abandon their children.

### **Description of the Study Area**

The study area for this research was Bridge of Hope Orphanage Centre in Gondar City. The center is established in 2001 and was reregistered in 2009 with the FDRE - Agency for Civil Society Organizations with registry number 1161. In the orphanage centre abandoned children are raised and taken care of. Providing shelter, food, clothing, health care and medicine, education, psychosocial support, and other services are just a few of the supports offered at the center. The center sheltered 480 abandoned children since its establishment. Of these children 110 of them left the center either through adoption or reunification with extended families once they become 17 years old older.

### **Study Participant Selection**

The study use purposive sampling technique to intentionally select parents who once abandon their children. Purposive sampling is used because participants who have information rich and practical experiences of a complex phenomenon like child abandonment are necessary to better understand the phenomenon (Patnaik & Pandey, 2019).

Based on our preliminary document analyses we have found 14 eligible documents. The researchers decided to include all the 14 parents as participants of the study. We purposely selected these cases and approached the parents one by one. In four cases the parents agreed to give information but declined to participate in the study when they understood that the interviews will be audio recorded. In four other cases the interviews were stopped or the interview was rejected because we understood that the parents didn't secretly abandon, rather they relinquish the child openly to others. The interviews conducted in the remaining six cases were used in the present study. In one of the cases, we were able to collect data from both the father and the mother of child thereby seven parents (two fathers and five mothers) served as interview participants of the study. Brief descriptions of the participants are attached as Supplementary material 1.

## **Data Collection Instruments**

In qualitative case study, researchers gather comprehensive data utilizing a range of data collection techniques (J. Creswell, 2014). In the present study interviews and document analysis were employed.

In case study, interviews are important sources of information and the main data collection tool because they allow researchers to gain the best access to participants' perspectives on and interpretations of actions and occurrences (Patnaik & Pandey, 2019). In the present study in-depth interviews were employed as a major tool to collect data from the participants. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants were used for it will help participants to narrate their lived experiences in their own pace and with their own terms. Thus, an interview guide was designed to properly execute the in-depth interviews. The interview guide asked respondents about their life experiences before, during and after the abandonment.

Moreover, documents from the Bridge of Hope Orphanage Centre in Gondar city were used as data collection instrument. Based on the information gauged from the orphanage center, detailed data about each and every child served in the center is collected. Before or right a child is accepted to the center data about the child will be recorded that include data about when the child joined the center, the child's age during admission, who brought the child, the relationship between the child and the person who brought the child, family information (if the child is brought by a relative/neighbor), whether the child abandoned and rescued or s/he is openly relinquished, where s/he is rescued (if in case the child was abandoned), etc. Later on, additional data about the child, including contacts made with extended family member and information about biological families (when found), will also be recorded. Therefore, document analysis is used, first to identify parents who have made contacts with their children and to recruit as study participants. Second, document analysis is used to tailor interview questions to each participant and/or develop prompt questions.

## **Data Analysis rigors**

When conducting a case study, a researcher develops a detailed analysis of a case, which is frequently a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals (J. Creswell, 2014). Thus, data from the seven participants collected about their lived experiences before, during and after their child abandonment is extensively analysed. The detailed analysis of each case is conducted using thematic content analysis.

All the interviews were conducted in Amharic by the second author (AA) and audiotape recorded. Then the interviews were transcribed verbatim in Amharic. Each interview transcript was coded right after it was transcribed. Codes were later clustered, categorized, and sub-categorized to capture the meaning of the text. In doing so, the codes from each interview were used to form categories. These categories were then grouped into sub-themes. Then, the sub- themes were

constructed to interpret the more latent meaning. Finally, the sub-themes formed the three core themes of the present study.

Two researchers (one who was involved in the interviews and the other who was not conducting any interviews) independently and concurrently analyzed the data. The research team discussed the themes generated; minor differences in coding were resolved through discussions and ensured that no aspect of the data was left out.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The proposal of the study undergone through rigorous review and the Ethical Review Committee of the Department of Psychology at University of Gondar approved the study. Formal letter from the department directed to Bridge of Hope Orphanage Center - Gondar branch is used to secure permission to conduct the study. At individual participant level, each participant was assured about the confidentiality of the information they will give. More importantly, they were fully informed about the purposes of the study. Participants were also informed about their right to withdraw from the study if they felt any forms of inconveniences and discomforts.

## **Trustworthiness**

Of the recommend strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of case study design (Baxter & Jack, 2008), we have employed purposive sampling, prolonged engagement with the phenomenon (continuous communication with the parents as well as reading and rereading the interview transcripts again and again) and independent data analysis followed by reaching agreements on the emerging codes and categories were employed in the present study.

## **Results**

From the analysis of the interview extracts and documents reviewed, three core themes emerged. The three major themes were labeled as: parents' situation before delivery, parents' child abandoning experiences, and parents' psychosocial conditions after abandonment.

## **Theme one: Parents' Situation before Child Delivery**

Parents' psychosocial, economic, and cultural situations before child delivery have direct impact in dealing with child abandonment. From the interviews conducted, the informants claimed that they undergone through varied difficulties in their lives before their delivery of the abandoned child. Five sub themes, described here under, formed this theme.

### **Challenging Life Situation**

Many of the informants claim that they had been in extremely poor conditions of their living standard before they gave birth. As such, many of the interviewees expressed their challenging life situation even long before they became pregnant. For instance, the mother in Case 1 had been living in extreme poverty with no means of earning money for living. Living in such situation was difficult for her, so she got married to a blind beggar. She had done this only to get money by supporting the beggar who became her husband.

The life situation of the mother in Case 2 is not far from the mother Case 1 since both of them had no means of living. Case 2 had no living place and even did not have a place to stay temporarily. Hence, she got married to a man who gave her a shelter to live. She gave birth to twins and her husband died when her children were 5 years old. Because of that she was having a challenging life before she became pregnant from an unknown man.

Case 4 and Case 5 were forced to live with their stepmothers. As living in such conditions were difficult for them, because of the excessive workloads and abuses of different kinds, these mothers left the home they were living and ran away. In fact, Case 4 took the advantage of living with her aunt until the conflict she had with her aunt forced her to migrate to the nearby city.

Similarly, Case 6 lost her parents in a car accident. This made her life difficult. As she had no means of living by her own, she was forced to live with her uncle. In her stay with her uncle, she said her own uncle raped her and his wife used to insult her.

As the above cases explain, all the five mothers had been living in a challenging life situation even before they became pregnant.

## **Rape and Abuse**

Some of the respondents to the interviews who later abandoned their children were raped and experienced abuses of different types. .

The traumatic experiences they had had at the time of conceiving the foetus forced them to abandon their own children. For instance, Case 2 said an unknown man raped and physically abused (beat) her on her way back home. She was raped by a young man in a jungle who deceived her he would find a place to stay. The young man not only raped Case 2, but also left her in the jungle at night time after beating her hard.

[It was in the jungle on my way home that he raped me. He raped me, he beaten me. It was dark and he raped me in the dark (in the night)]

Similarly, Case 6 said that she had conceived her abandoned child from her own uncle who raped her. It is recalled that Case 6 had lost her own parents in a car accident and had been living with her uncle. One day, she said that her own uncle raped her in his own home.

[It was when I went to the room to change my clothes that he (her uncle) followed me ... he was behind me ..... then he covered my mouth and....]

Moreover, she experienced continued sexual abuse from her uncle and verbal abuse from her uncle's wife.

In Case 4 a complicit female friend had facilitated the rape. She said that her friend convinced her to spend the night in someone's home and later during the night she pushed her to sleep with the homeowner. In explaining this she said:

[My friend said, "let us have a good sleep... just get up (and go)" ...then I slept with young boy and he raped me that way]

In all the three cases, the unpleasant life experiences the mothers had combined with the unfortunate incidents of rape and abuses. Besides these mothers claimed that they had bad memories linked to the rape and the abuses they experienced.

## **Unwanted Pregnancy and Delayed Testing**

The mothers interviewed for this study had experienced the unwanted pregnancy. As depicted earlier the mothers in Case 2, Case 4, and Case 6 had experienced the unwanted pregnancies because they were all raped to become pregnant. In Case 1 the mother had a strong pressure from her husband who was a beggar to become pregnant. These mothers didn't expect that they would get pregnant which led them to perform pregnancy test lately. For instance, Case 6 was raped by

her uncle repeatedly but performed pregnancy test 5 months later. She recalled how other people who suspected her pregnancy encouraged her to go to a clinic for a pregnancy test. In describing this situation she uttered:

[Then they (who suspect that she is pregnant) took me to the hospital and the doctors told them that I was 5 months pregnant]

When she was asked “does it mean you did not even suspect that you would get pregnant until then?” She replied:

[Never! I did not even think about it (getting pregnant)]

Similarly, the mother in Case 5 remembered how someone who had suspected her pregnancy recommended her to go to a health centre for a check-up.

[....when she told me that I have to go to the health center and check if pregnancy happened, I went to the health center, and I was told that I was pregnant. That was the first time I knew my pregnancy]

The mother in Case 4 had undertaken the pregnancy test at the 6th month of her pregnancy. Except the mother indicated as in Case 1, the other mothers had no awareness of their being pregnant. For this reason, they had not test for pregnancy on time.

## Psychological Response to Events during Pregnancy

Some of the parents expressed what they were feeling and their attitude towards the foetus in their womb. First and for most, the mothers were excessively worried for understanding that they were pregnant. As the respondents said, they were very anxious immediately they knew they were pregnant. For instance, the mothers in Case 4 and Case 5 were anxious about the future of their schooling and about the societal gossips. They were worry that they would become school dropouts. For example, Case 5 said:

[that time, I was thinking about what my family and the society would say to me. And I was also worried about my school]

Similarly, the mother represented in Case 4 expressed her excessive worry knowing her pregnancy. She was so worried that she even had no appetite for food and was asking herself a number of questions.

[I went to hospital and found out that I was pregnant ... then I became worried and anxious, I could not even eat food ..... How do I take care of the child?.... How do I give birth? Let alone raising a child, how do I give birth? In whose house am I going to give birth?.....]

The mother in Case 6 also said that she worried about her future life. She worried not only about her own life but also about what she would tell to her child about what her uncle did to her.

The mothers are not only worried but also psychologically disturbed. Especially the mothers indicated in Case 1, Case 2, and Case 6 were psychologically disturbed during pregnancy.

The psychological burden had made the mothers to develop suicidal thoughts. The mother in case 2 was worried about the economic burden the new coming child would add to what she was shouldering because of the death of the father of her twin children. Therefore, she was asking herself a number of questions including whether to kill herself or not. Here is was she had to say:

[I used to ask myself ‘should I kill myself?’... ‘How could I raise my child?’....]

Case 6 also expressed her wish to kill herself and the foetus as follows:



[All I wanted was for the foetus and I to die together]

The mother in Case 6 and Case 1 not only thought of suicide but also attempted to commit suicides. The mother in Case 1 was taking un-prescribed tablets to kill herself. Her husband described her attempt and his reactions in the following manner:

[She used to take tablets without diagnosis. I used to say 'please don't'...she randomly took a medic that stayed very long ... and decayed medic.... She took these tablets to annoy me .... Whenever she quarrelled with me]

In general, all the mothers described above have psychological responses to events during pregnancy and especially after they knew that, they were pregnant. These psychological responses during pregnancy might have impacted their later decisions of abandoning their children.

## **Failed Attempts to Abort**

Later child abandonment may be understood as a renewed interest of avoiding motherhood from the failed attempt of abortion during pregnancy. The mothers in Case 1, Case 2 and Case 5 attempted abortion during pregnancy. As the father of the abandoned child in Case 1 recalled the mother of his child had underwent through failed attempts of abortion by taking expired tablets.

The mothers in Case 5 and case 2 requested doctors for abortion. For example the mother in Case 5 said:

[I asked the doctors to abort my baby..... because of the advice from my friend that I told you earlier, I believed that I should take traditional herbals to abort the foetus ... I took it [the herbal] but it did not work]

Similar to the mother indicated in Case 5, the mother indicated in Case 2 had attempted to perform abortion. Both of these mothers were influenced by others suggestions to abort the foetus. For example, the mother in Case 2 described how a woman in her neighbour had recommended her for the failed abortion as follows:

[when one of my neighbours said to me 'you have to abort the baby now and make your living (go to your work).... I got confused]

As indicated in the statements of the respondents, child abandonment can be associated to the earlier practices and failures of attempting abortions. Hence, failed attempts of abortions may not remain as failed rather it may take other forms of avoiding motherhood like child abuse, abandonment, etc.

## **Theme two: Parents' Child Abandoning Experiences**

This theme describes parent's' experiences of abandoning their children. In doing so it gives answers as to why and how the parents abandon their children. The theme is formed from two subthemes: parents' pre-abandonment experiences and actual process of child abandonment experiences.

### **1. Pre-abandonment Experiences**

Parents' commitment to raise the child, signs of child abandonment, and preparations for child abandonment are the three categories under this subtheme.

#### ***Parents' Commitment to Raise the Child***

From the interviewed mothers/fathers about their lived experiences of child abandonment, it is observed that there are varied levels of commitment of biological parents before they actually abandon their respective child. Some of the interviewed parents have showed stronger commitments to rear their own child than other parents. For instance, the father in Case 1, though he is blind and has serious economic problems, has showed his commitment to rear his own child because his mother was reluctant to take care of their newborn child and the mother died when the child became three months.

The mother in Case 2 was committed to give birth, and she had the mental readiness to raise the new born by her own. It was noted that she had showed high level of commitment and had the psychological readiness during her pregnancy to rear her own child.

[no way! I would not give her to another person I would rather take her and raise her like I did with my first twins]

The mother indicated in Case 5 had experienced similar story of commitment of raising the child. In order to solve her economic problems; she decided to become a commercial sex worker. She used to give the money she got from her sex work to her step mom who was taking care of the baby.

### ***Signs of Child Abandonment***

From the interviews conducted in this study, some significant signs have been traced back before the child abandonment. The mothers in Case 1 and Case 4 were unwilling to breastfeed their respective child. These can be considered as one sign of later child abandonment. The father in Case 1 said the mother had refused to breastfeed her own baby. He expressed how seriously the mother in Case 1 rejected her baby. For about seven days after she gave birth, she refused to take care and breastfeed the baby. And it was because of the effort the father and neighbor exerted that the mother began feeding the child. In explaining this, the father said:

[Before that time (the 7th day) she was not willing to take care of the child. It is after seven days of her delivery that she nursed her child]

The respondent in Case 4 also said she had refused to breastfeed her baby. When asked why she refused, she replied that she herself had been hungry and even her breasts could not give the required breast milk. She uttered:

[it is because I did not get anything to eat that I refused to breast feed the baby and the baby was crying. When my brother forced me to nurse the baby, my breast had no milk]

Similarly, the attempts to commit suicide and to kill her six months child by the mother indicated in Case 6 were taken as signs of the later child abandonment. In fact, this mother avoided the rearing of the child by abandoning the child two months later. The respondent described her attempt in the following way:

[...then I was crying and took a rope and tied it to a tree while my baby was still at my back ....because I want my baby to die with me. And when I tried to hang myself, the rope broke and we fall down]

From the above interviews, some signs of child abandonment have been detected. This implies the signs preceded preparations for child abandonment, described below.

### ***Preparations for Child Abandonment***

From the identified lived experiences of mothers/fathers engaged in child abandonment, there were mental preparations for child abandonment. The preparations before the actual child abandonment can be seen in what the mother in Case 4

has done in the hospital where she gave birth. She described that she had the mental readiness when she was in the hospital. She said:

[I was thinking of abandoning my child in the hospital]

The mother and the father in Case 3 discussed on where and how they could abandon their newborn. They then decided to leave the child in the mother's home found in a rural area and runaway to a far place where they couldn't be found.

The preparations taken by the mothers indicated in Case 5 and Case 6 were not only mental readiness but also were preparations in action. Particularly, as the mother in Case 5 said she had facilitated her abandonment by providing her step mom with some money and food stuffs. Even before that time, she had already taken her own clothes out of the home she was living. She remembered her preparations and describes it as follows:

[that time, when I was about to abandon my child, I bought coffee and sugar for my step mother with the money I got from the guys. Before doing all these, I took out my stuffs (from my home)]

The above descriptions by the parents attest that child abandonment is not an accidental phenomenon. It is rather a process with some preparations done before the actual child abandonment. Hence, the parents had abandoned their children intentionally with pre-planning.

## **2. Actual Processes of Child Abandonment Experiences**

Obviously, child abandonment is a process. This implies child abandonment is a set of human mental and actionable activities to reach at a certain result. Attesting this, the respondents interviewed in this study described their performed actions to abandon their respective child. As such, they talked about how they leave their respective baby behind and the immediate push factors for child abandonment.

### ***Actions Taken in Abandoning the Child***

The respondents in this study expressed what actions they took when they actually abandon their respective child. The interviewed parents in this study abandoned their child in different ways. For instance, the father in Case 1 said that the mother of the child threw her new born baby in a trash basket expecting that the baby will die. This father remembered the prior actions and the situation of the actual abandonment as follows:

[she tried to throw the baby into a trash can along with a dirty carton but...]

The actions taken by the parents in Case 3, Case 4, Case 5, and Case 6 were that they deliberately left their respective child in the hands of others. The mother in Case 4 described how she left the child to be found by her brother as follows:

[when he (her brother) get out, I hide in the back yard ...I decided to collect my money ... I had three unpaid salary from my employers .... I decided run away to the lowland after collecting my three months salary]

The mother in Case 6 described her actions abandoning her child in detail. She said that she had already thought how to abandon her child. She said that there was a social gathering and she had already planned to leave her child in the hands of the persons invited to the social event. She assumed that these persons would not be cruel to her child because of her deceiving actions. Taking no belongings with her and only wearing her sandals, she left the place leaving her child in the hands of these persons. She talked about what she did while abandoning her child as follows:

[they were looking for something (participants of the social gathering) and I already planned about it (how to her child behind), the door was opened because people are coming in and out. I said that I would get you what you are looking for.

Then I get up from my sit and went here and there pretending that I was looking for what I was asked for.....I thought they will be good for the baby if I run away and they will not be cruel to her because of me. So I just left the place empty handed]

The story recounted by the mother in Case 5 is found important to explain the strong attachment between a mother and her child as well as leaving a child behind is not an easy task. As the actions taken by this mother show, she was so depressed to leave her child behind. Her motherhood nature forced her to buy some clothes for the child and kissed the baby as a farewell before she left the place. The mother uttered:

[I returned and gave her a kiss. Before that, with the money I had in my hand, I bought her (the baby) clothes]

The mother and the father in Case 3 traveled from Gondar city to the mother's original place with their baby. They then left the child in the house and traveled to another city during the night. They do so expecting that the child's grandparents will take care of the child.

### ***The Immediate Push-factors for Child Abandonment***

There may be several push-factors for child abandonment. As seen in the responses of the interviewed parents, there are some immediate push factors for them to abandon their respective child. In fact, these immediate causes for child abandonment are not responsible for the final decisions of child abandonment. Rather, the previous mental readiness and preparations in actions are finally triggered by the immediate push factors.

The parents in the present study have various reasons for abandoning their babies. Economic problems played important roles behind the child abandonment experiences. A pure economic hardship is the reason for the mother and father in Case 3 to abandon their child in the hands of the mother's parents (the grand parents of the child).

Nonetheless, the stories from our respondents illustrate that there have been varied other push factors beyond the serious economic problems. For example, the mother in Case 5 had serious economic problems that she became sex worker only to get money. She thought the money that she got from her sex work would cover the expenses for the needs of not only her baby but also for the needs of her stepmother, who had been taking care of her baby. In the meantime, the social criticisms from her neighbours and the community had impacted her psyche. She said she could not endure and resist the socio-cultural pressures anymore that she abandoned her child.

[My stepmother nagged me every day saying "isn't enough to sacrifice for you? How come you bring to me your bastard child?" The society and even my school friends also said very bad things about me that I could not bear anymore.]

Similarly, the mother in Case 6 had decided to abandon her baby in order to get rid of the continued sexual abuse she had been experiencing from her own uncle and the insults from her uncle's wife. From the extracted interview of the mother in Case 6, it was observed that the continued sexual abuse even after she gave birth and the harassment she received from her uncle's wife were the immediate causes for her child abandonment.

[As I have told you earlier, he did not stop abusing me even after I gave birth. his wife also insulted me day and night. she always nag me. And because of this I decided to commit suicide]

As can be understood from the descriptions of the mother in Case 2, the mistreatment the mother received from one of the health workers was the immediate push factor for her to abandon her child. It is recalled that this mother didn't have the interests and intentions of child abandonment. But, the mistreatment and physical abuse she received from the cleaner of the delivery room was the immediate cause for her child abandonment. She said she unconsciously run away from the hospital's delivery ward abandoning the baby because the cleaner beat her with broomstick.

[...she shouted at me to leave the place by saying 'don't you get out of here?' Then she had beaten me with a broomstick on here (showing her hand) and on my leg. When she had beaten me hard on my leg, I was feeling shocked all over my body....I think, some evil spirit had also beaten me along with her. Unconsciously, even without knowing where I placed my child, I run away from that place]

In general, the insults and the physical attack by the hospital cleaner made the mother in Case 2 to leave her baby in the hospital and run away unconsciously. In addition, the bad feelings of loneliness that there is no one to take care of her baby made the mother in Case 4 to leave the new born behind secretly.

## **Theme three: Parents' Psychosocial Conditions after Abandonment**

Length of stay between the abandonment and re-joining, psychosocial conditions before joining, what initiated the re-joining and parents psychosocial conditions after re-joining were the sub-themes categorized under the third theme.

### **Lengths of Child Abandonments**

The time-length of child abandonment until re-joining has its own significant effect on the regaining the normal attachment between parents and abandoned children. From the respondents descriptions there have been varying time-lengths they were separated from their respective child. As such, the time-lengths of the parents' experiences of child abandonment ranged from a brief time to 14 years of duration. For instance, the mother in Case 1 had abandoned her child for a brief time until the father understood that she had thrown the baby into a trash basket and a neighbor rescued the baby.

The mother in Case 2 had abandoned her child for two weeks duration. In fact, she herself regretted for her action of child abandonment and she began to look for the baby. The mother in Case 4 abandoned her baby for two days before her brother found the abandoned child and gave the child back to the mother. The mothers in Case 5 and Case 6 saw their respective child some 10 and 14 years later, respectively

### **Parents' Psychosocial Conditions before Re-joining**

Explaining the lived psychosocial conditions of parents after abandoning and before re-joining has importance on understanding the meanings of separations. As the respondents in this study claimed, they have passed through various mental sufferings and physiological disturbances because of their child abandonment. These sufferings and disturbances had been continually observed beginning from their abandoning experience until they re-joined with their abandoned children. The mothers said that it was right after abandoning their babies that they began to worry about the fate of their babies.

What the mothers in Case 2, Case 4 and Case 5 reflected on the psychosocial conditions which they had been before they were re-joined to their respective child can be a good illustration for explaining the aftermaths of child abandonment. For instance, the mother in Case 5 was excessively worried that she used to have flashback memories of her child every time she saw a child. In her interview she claimed that her worries were so much to the extent that she was considering herself as mad. She describes the different issues she worried about as follows:

[after I abandoned my child, I used to worry a lot about ... will the baby die of missing her mom? ....Or will she be alive? ....Did something happen to her? ..... Did she get burned by a fire? Whenever I saw a child injured, I used think like 'my child is injured like this child' After all I suffered a lot and she also suffered a lot]

The mother in Case 4 expressed her excessive worry about the fate of her baby. Besides, she was shocked when she meets her brother without her baby in his hands. She recalled what happened one day when her brother visited her after two weeks. She said:

[when I saw him (her brother) empty hand, I was shocked and thought 'did the child died?' But I did not speak it out. I just thought in my mind 'why did he come without the baby? Did she died?']

The excessive worry in Case 4 induced feelings of regrets. She regretted for abandoning her child.

Feelings of regret were also reported from the mother in Case 2. She said that she had been away from her child for two weeks. She remembered what happened in the hospital and regretted for what she had done (leaving her newborn baby in the hospital).

The feelings of regret made the mother in Case 2 to show signs of a social problem. She had avoided meeting with her abandoned child who by then began living in the Bridge of Hope Orphanage Centre in Gondar city.

Thus, it was found that all the mothers interviewed in this study had been in unfavourable psychosocial conditions longing to meet their respective abandoned child.

## **What Initiated the Parents for Re-joining?**

Exploration of the lived experiences of what initiated the parents for re-joining is helpful to have new insights about what actions can be used to facilitate reunions. From what the informants described, there are a number of causal factors behind mothers interested to meet with their abandoned children. The mothers in Case 4, 5 and 6 mentioned that they have developed self-interest or at least wished to rejoin with their children. But other factors than the self-interest initiated the actual rejoining.

In Case 5 the death of her father initiated her actual rejoining. The woman came to her father's funeral and understands that her child was given to the orphanage center. She then reestablished her attachment with her abandoned child.

Assistance from others was crucial in Cases 4 and 6 in order to initiate the rejoining. In Case 6 the mother's self-interest combined with neighbors' keen interest and promise to render their own support in rearing the abandoned child had encouraged her to search for the child. In Case 4 the keen interest and actual effort by the mother's brother promoted the mother's interest. In fact, the mother in Case 4 had already regretted for her actions of child abandonment and wished to keep her baby with her after the abandonment. Meanwhile, her brother was successful that he found the abandoned child in the Bridge of Hope Orphanage Centre in Gondar city. Consequently, he facilitated the meeting of the mother with her abandoned child by requesting the authorities of the orphanage centre and secured permissions for the reunion.

The role of others support is also visible in Case 1. As described earlier it is a neighbor who rescued the abandoned child and rejoined him with his parents.

In contrast to the mothers in Cases 4, 5, and 6, the mother in Case 2 deliberately avoided meeting her child. She thought that the orphanage would force her to take her child home. Later on a request from the orphanage center made her meet (rejoin) with her child.

A lesson learned from the church made the parents in Case 3 to rejoin with their child. The mother in Case 3 said that one day she heard the church preaching about the sin of abandonment and abortion. By this, she was initiated for re-joining. She described the triggering situation as:

[in a church, the priests condemned child abandonment and abortion. I was surprised when I heard that such practices are sinful. Then I appreciated myself for raising the other children in spite of the serious economic problems I am having. I began searching for her and I thank Lord when I re-joined]

As discussed above, all the mothers of the abandoned children have experienced some triggering incidents, which initiated these mothers for re-joining.

## Parents' Psychological Conditions after Re-joining

As described earlier, the parents undergone through tough time after abandoning their children. Because of that the first reaction, during and after rejoining, was some sense of relief. In the interviews conducted parents felt happy for they have seen their child grown up in good hands (receiving what they described as better care in the Orphanage center). The parents in Case 1, 2, 4, and 5 mentioned that they are happy for their child is grown up. For example the mother in Case 4 is happy for her is getting proper care from the orphanage center. In describing her happiness she said:

[I am happy ... I am happy because her living condition is good. I am happy. I said that it is great that they took her (to the orphanage center) than she suffered with me. It is my pleasure that I didn't abandon her in the hospital]

The fact that the mothers have seen their children grown up in good hands induced a sense of guilt. For example the mothers in case 2, 4 and 5 regretted for their past deeds. For example the mother in case 2 regretted for her earlier attempt to abort the fetus and her suicidal thoughts. The mother in case 4 regretted for her thought of abandoning her newborn baby in the hospital. And the mother in case 5 regretted for abandoning her child in the first place.

## Discussion

The present study qualitatively examined the lived experiences of parents who secretly abandoned their children in Gondar city. This study is unique in the sense that it tried to collect data about why and how parents abandon their children using data from the parents themselves who once abandon their child.

In the present study it was depicted that child abandonment, as form of avoiding parental responsibilities, is a process that begins early during pregnancy. An attempt to abort the foetus is a good example found in the present study. Similar findings were reported from a study among parents who openly relinquish their children to institutions in Turkey. In the study it was found that the mothers requested to abort their fetus, implying that abandonment process begin early (Donmez et al., 2021).

In the present study we also found that the actual child abandonment begins with pre-planning and signs of abandonment were observed among the mothers. Pertaining to preplanning, the study in Vietnam based on data from actors in child abandonment (the police, NGO workers and government officials) portrayed that parents preplanned their acts before they relinquish their child to institutions (Bos et al., 2015). In the present study it was disclosed that parents showed symptoms of child neglect like refraining from breast feeding the new-born child before the actual child abandonment. This implied that child abandonment is not a one-time act. Similar to this finding in a study in South Africa among parents who commit child homicide half of the parents showed signs of child abuse and neglect before they killed their child (Mathews et al., 2013).

In terms of why parents abandon their children, the present study depicted that sociocultural factors alongside economic hardships are behind parent's child abandonment. This finding is in line with the literature that mentioned sociocultural and poverty related factors for child abandonment (Delaunay, 2011; Onyido & Akpan, 2018). Likewise, a study in Nigeria,

that examined the perception of market mothers towards dumping children, it was depicted that multiple factors are responsible for parents to dump their children (Ojedokun & Atoi, 2012).

With regard to the specific causes of child abandonment, participant market women in the study in Nigeria depicted that economic factors are the main drivers. However, the participants also depicted other sociocultural factors as drivers of child abandonment including gender inequality, modernization (eroded power of family as an institution), prostitution, infidelity, and physical disability in children (Ojedokun & Atoi, 2012). Coupled with this, the study in Addis Ababa identified poverty, marital incompatibility and migration as the causes of child abandonment, conceptualized as killing one's child in the study (Tadele, 2000).

Similarly, the study in Vietnam identified mother characteristics who abandon their children. In doing so, unmarried mothers, adolescents/teenagers with an expected pregnancy, women with health problems including mental illnesses, economically deprived mothers, divorced women, mothers who want to remarry, mothers with disabled children and mothers who have many children were found to abandon their children (Bos et al., 2015).

With regard to the question of how thereby where the parents abandon their children, the present study revealed that four of the cases leave their children in the hands of others, one of the mothers left her child in the hospital and the remaining mother dampened her child in a trash basket. Unlike the findings of the present study, in a study in the UK using media reviews of abandonment it was depicted that majority of the children were abandoned outdoors (Sherr et al., 2009). The difference in findings could be attributed to the intentions of the mothers in Ethiopia and in the UK.

In the study in Nigeria the participants stated that parents abandon their children riverbanks, refuse sites, pit toilets, open-market places, roadsides, mosque or church premises, and bush paths. The participants also indicate that parents whose intention are to kill the child leave their child in unsafe places while parents who intend the child to be found leave their child in safe places (Ojedokun & Atoi, 2012). Based on these accounts the participants in our study, except the mother in Case 1, leave their children in safe places implying that their intentions were for their children to be found and rescued by others.

The psychosocial experiences of parents who leave their children unsupervised before, during, and after their acts of leaving the child are the least explored (Sherr et al., 2009). In the present study parents were found to experience a host of psychosocial challenges before, during and after they abandon their child. Studies among parents who relinquish and commit infanticide reported similar findings. In a quantitative study among 55 mothers who were incarcerated for killing their child in Rwanda (Muziki et al., 2022), majority of the respondents experienced negative emotions (anxiety, anger, shame, guilt and depression) and personal wellbeing (low happiness and life satisfaction).

Correspondingly, in the study in Vietnam parents who relinquished their child were found to feel regret for their act and they were hopeful for their reunification with their child (Bos et al., 2015). Findings from a study in Namibia among 11 mothers who were incarcerated because they abandoned and/or killed their children are comparable findings to our study (Amukugo et al., 2019). Like what is found in our study, the mothers in the Namibian study undergone through a number of emotional problems that are described unbearable. Besides, the mothers in Namibia felt rejected by their partners were fearful about their future which is similar to the mothers in our study who were worried a lot after they understand that they were pregnant.

One important difference between our findings and the findings from the Namibian study is over the role of the psychological factors. In the Namibian study psychological factors are considered as the only cause and consequence of child abandonment and/or infanticide (Amukugo et al., 2019). In the present study we have seen that psychological factors are not the major causes of child abandonment but are consequences of child abandonment. Technically, the



study in Namibia didn't clearly identify the psychological problems that the parents experienced before, during and after the child abandonment and/or child homicide.

Contrary to the finding from our study in the study in Addis Ababa, the mothers regretted for migrating, not killing their children (Tadele, 2000). The difference in findings could be attributed to the fact that the study in Addis Ababa includes cases that migrated.

## Conclusions

Child abandonment, as one form of avoiding parental responsibilities, is not a onetime act. It is rather an extension of other forms of avoiding parental responsibilities that includes attempted abortion, showing signs, contemplation, preparations and taking actions. Based on the findings of the study it was spotted that contextual factors before and after the child is born (e.g. challenging life situation, unwanted pregnancy, rape, peer pressure, etc.) played important roles in child abandonment.

In a least developed country it could reasonably be argued that parents secretly abandon their children because of economic challenges they have. However, the findings of the present study depicted that other sociocultural factors are the push factors that exacerbated the economic push factors. As such it can be concluded that a single factor, economic hardship per se, can't explain why a parent secretly abandon his/her child. Studies among parents who killed their child had also depicted that multiple factors are the drivers of avoiding parental child-care responsibilities (Tadele, 2000; Dekel et al., 2018).

Therefore, it is recommended that extensive participatory studies that include community leaders, law enforcing bodies, staffs from orphanage centers, health care workers, child care experts, child right activists, etc. need to be conducted to better understand the size and nature of child abandonment in Ethiopia. Besides, government organizations and NGOs who are supporting abandoned children (remedy), or who at least concerned about abandoned children, need to complement psychosocial supports on existing economic assistances to vulnerable parents (prevention). It is also imperative to design and delivery community awareness creation campaigns about child abandonment.

## Declarations

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethical Review Committee at the Department of Psychology, CSSH, University of Gondar.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [YM], upon reasonable request.

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