

Adulthood Deferred

Kidus

When I was a kid, one of my favorite pastimes was sitting alone in my parents' garage in the driver's seat of my father's busted Ford, gripping the steering wheel and making car noises. I dreamt of going for a late-night drive across Addis, being an adult with no bedtime curfews or any homework to worry about, an adult that was, in my young brain, the epitome of independence, becoming free and bigger than life.

But now, finally being the adult I always wanted to be, all I can think about are the days when my biggest worry in life was my homework, and the times I had the whole afternoon to myself, where I could freely play and get lost in my father's Ford.

I feel cheated. I was promised freedom, a car that I could actually drive around the city without having to beatbox its engine sounds, and a sense of independence I spent years dreaming about. No one told me about the sleepless nights spent worrying about my life choices, or taught me how taxes work, how to find a job, or how to deal with a passive-aggressive landlord. This is not the adulthood I saw in the movies or read about in books. I am frustrated because, in many ways, I feel closer to that kid in his parents' garage than the adult he dreamt of becoming. But why?

Why are we further from the adult versions of ourselves we dreamt of becoming? Why are we not the people we were so sure we would become? What went wrong? Is it our fault, or were we just born into a generation that has no shot at the simple things in life our parents enjoyed? Today, we will look into those questions to solve the mystery of the life we were promised in our adulthood that got deferred.

Before we get into it, first we need to define what an adult is and what things one needs to be considered an adult. Asked about what adulthood means, Lydia, a 19-year-old student, answers, "Adulthood for me is being independent and the decision maker of our lives." Lydia is not alone in this; many people associate adulthood with independence and being in charge of their own lives.

"Independence was not an option; it was the only way," says Azeb (50). Reflecting on her late teens, she describes moving to a city she didn't know, alone, with no one to turn to. It was an experience fueled by the desperation of escaping poverty, one that shaped the person she is today. "I was raised in a 4x4, one-room house with a single mother and five siblings. I had to find my way in life and provide support for my younger siblings as fast as I could. It's what was expected of me, and I didn't question it."

For Azeb and the youth of her generation, socioeconomic circumstances forced them to strive for themselves from an early age. According to historical data, nearly 97% of

women in Ethiopia were married by age 20, while the median age for men was in their early 20s. This stemmed from the fact that for most Ethiopian women's economic stability came through marriage; it was often the primary means of achieving financial security. At that time, the majority of women were uneducated and expected to become housewives.

'It wasn't the norm for women to focus on education and career growth,' Azeb recalls, remembering the social stigma she faced as the first woman in her family to obtain a college education. This lower educational and career status served as a direct driver for early marriage and larger families. The female literacy rate in Ethiopia was approximately 20-25%. Without the ability to enter the formal workforce, marriage wasn't just a tradition; it was the only "job" available, and the quicker you could get it, the better.

This explains the motivation behind women when it comes to marriage in the younger years, but what was the reason that pushed men into marriage at a relatively younger age? The evidence seems to point towards one thing: it was just easier, I know this sounds like a lazy tap out, that life was just easier back in the day, but hear me out, it really was, and I can prove it.

First off, your degree meant something just a few decades ago. The number of graduates in Ethiopia was staggeringly low compared to where it is right now. According to the World Bank / UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) Historical Data, in the 1980s, the gross enrollment ratio for higher education in Ethiopia was less than 1% (approx. 0.8%), meaning that having a college degree will literally put you in the top 1 percent of citizens. Your employment was almost guaranteed, and most people were recruited before they even graduated, setting you up with a consistent income early in your life.

Well, now you have a job, and you are approximately the only degree holder within a 100 kilometers, but you still have to find somewhere to live before you get married, right? Well, that doesn't seem to be a challenge as well. Nowadays, a mid-range apartment (~15M ETB) costs roughly 80 to 100 times the annual salary of a mid-level professional, which basically means you need a couple of lifetimes of saving up every cent of your salary for years, then you might be able to afford a roof over your head.

But a couple of decades ago, government-backed housing cooperatives and Kebele allotments provided a path to homeownership for workers, and those workers had to be heads of families to qualify for this government housing program. So, as a man, you had an incentive to get married and start a family, as that could directly be the reason for you getting a house which is a heck of a deal and most people jumped on it. But with record-breaking inflation and some socio-political disasters later, government housing is

rare, and unemployment rates are at an all-time high, the chances of the younger generation to start a family and own property seem to be slim to none.

“My plan for the next 10 years is to start my chocolate business, become an architect, get married, and travel,” says Lydia, her eyes filled with a life and hope that inspires anyone looking at it.

These dreams are shared by most people in our generation. The hope to start a family and become the people we hoped to become didn't leave us with our childhood. Yes, we aren't as naive or innocent as we used to be, and we know too much about the world to be delusional in our journey towards our goals, but I don't believe the search for the adulthood we were promised should end just yet.

We might be sitting in a busted Ford in a dark garage, beatboxing the sounds of an engine we can't afford to start, but we shouldn't take our hands off the wheel just yet the journey is not a sprint but a marathon we may not be where we want to be right now but the time will come we just have to keep driving even if our destination is deferred.

