

LESSONS FROM LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH WITH ADOLESCENTS



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Adolescent lives in Ethiopia: what are we learning from longitudinal evidence?

GAGE consortium

Ethiopia has made remarkable progress over the last two decades. The poverty rate has halved (from 46% to 24%), the primary completion rate has more than doubled (from 18% to 50%) and the odds of marriage for girls under the age of 15 have fallen to less than 1 in 10. However, alongside the covid-19 pandemic, the last two years have seen increasing ethnic and religious tension and violence, as Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has struggled to deliver on promised political transformations.

Background to our research

The FCDO-funded Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research programme is generating evidence about the diverse experiences of adolescents (10–19 years) living in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). It is exploring the myriad challenges and opportunities young people are facing, identifying the supports they have and need, and highlighting ways in which international and national actors can better promote adolescent agency and voice and fast-track adolescent well-being. The GAGE sample includes those most at risk of being left behind, including girls who are (or have been) married and young people who have been forcibly displaced or have disabilities. As the world's largest longitudinal study focused on adolescents in LMICs, which is simultaneously evaluating a range of programmes aimed at supporting the development of adolescent capabilities, GAGE is contributing to the practical evidence that FCDO and its partners need to meet core development objectives, including the Sustainable Development Goals, and to build back better after the covid-19 pandemic.

In Ethiopia – and in partnership with the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs (MoWSA) – GAGE has collected baseline (in late 2017 and early 2018) and midline (in late 2019 and early 2020) data with approximately 8,000 rural and urban adolescents in Afar, Amhara and Oromia regions as well as Dire Dawa City Administration; fielded two rounds of covid-19 phone surveys; and is running ongoing participatory research groups with older girls and boys (15–19 years). Nested within the Ethiopian study, GAGE is also carrying out an impact evaluation of the adolescent empowerment programme 'Act With Her' (AWH). AWH is implemented by Pathfinder International and Care Ethiopia, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and aims to support very young adolescents (10–14 years) acquire life skills, learn about puberty and sexual and reproductive health, and



reflect critically on discriminatory gender roles and norms that limit girls' futures. This brief highlights headline emerging findings from this unique dataset, as well as providing links to more comprehensive publications and an annex with key quantitative indicators.

What are we learning?

» Girls' education and earning potential is increasingly valued – but future progress is likely to slow

Across locations, GAGE is finding that adolescent [girls' access to school is improving](#), largely due to government investment in primary educational infrastructure. However, our research suggests that the [easiest gains have already been captured](#) and that future progress will depend on directly tackling the gender norms that disadvantage girls – and doing so with programming that is carefully tailored to reflect Ethiopia's cultural diversity. In Amhara, for example, while girls' education is increasingly valued over boys', in part because families believe that educated girls are more likely than educated boys to ultimately send remittances to parents and siblings, girls are still responsible for a disproportionate share of housework and are unable to dedicate the regular study time needed for academic success. This means they are more likely to fail gateway exams that determine access to upper-secondary and post-secondary education. In East Hararghe, Oromia, on the other hand, educating girls is seen as counter-productive and most girls are allowed to attend school for only a few years before being made to 'choose' to drop out to fit broader narratives that position girls and women as impediments to progress. In Afar, although younger adolescent girls are more likely to be enrolled than boys, many parents openly admit that they forbid girls to attend school after mid-adolescence

Girls clean the house and go to fetch water. By the time they go to school, it is already late. She just sits in class. By the time she goes home there is a lot of work to do... She thinks about those things [and] she is not attentive to what is going on in the class. She is physically in class... but you will not understand it even if it is poured into your brain like water.

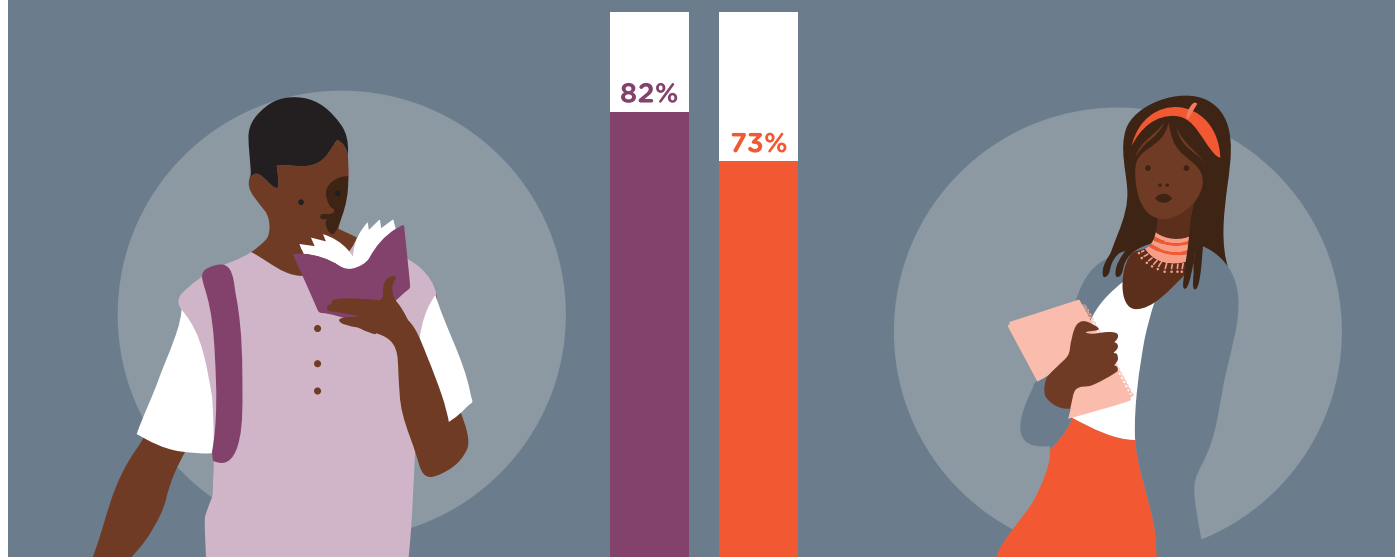
(A 12-year-old girl, Oromia)

specifically to protect girls' sexual purity and associated family honour. Even in urban areas, where commitment to education is far higher, girls remain disadvantaged by gender norms that see boys' education as more important than girls'. Among the older adolescent cohort in urban areas, 89% of boys and only 71% of girls were enrolled in formal school at midline. Across locations, child marriage is the largest impediment to girls' education, with some girls leaving school to marry and others leaving school to ensure that they remain marriageable. Of girls who have ever been married, only 17% were enrolled in school.

Girls also have [fewer opportunities than boys to earn their own incomes](#). This is primarily because families depend on their unpaid domestic labour, place more restrictions on their mobility and provide them with more limited access to productive assets. Furthermore, when girls do earn, they are more likely to see their incomes appropriated for household use than boys. For example, across locations girls reported being forced by their caretakers to join the 'international maid trade', undertaking domestic work in the Middle East in order to fund upgraded housing and more assets for their natal families. In addition, in East Hararghe it was not

Despite progress, Ethiopian girls continue to have **less access to education** than boys.

Of the adolescents in our sample, 82% of boys and 73% of girls were enrolled last term.



In rural areas, adolescents are years over-age for grade. Of the older cohort (age 15-17), those in **South Gondar** and **East Hararghe** have not yet completed 6th grade and those in **Zone 5** have barely started 5th.



uncommon for out-of-school younger cohort girls to be working in order to fund their brothers' schooling; in Zone 5,

» **Child marriage, FGM/C and sexual violence continue to jeopardise the current and future well-being of Ethiopian girls**

National progress towards the eventual elimination of child marriage and FGM/C hides not only regional variation, but also the [complex ways in which practices evolve](#) to perpetuate dominant gender norms. In Amhara, where child marriages are arranged by parents to ensure that sexual activity takes place within marriage, the incidence of child marriage is static but the age at which girls marry is increasing. This is primarily due to stepped-up investments in girls' education – in part because teachers help girls cancel planned marriages. However, given traditions in which girls are often promised in marriage in early childhood, the marriage of girls in mid-adolescence is rarely seen as child marriage, especially in communities where girls are not able to extend their childhoods due to the unavailability of secondary school. In addition, and likely slowing future progress, messaging about the risks of adolescent pregnancy, meant to discourage child marriage, has instead decoupled early marriage and early pregnancy, as [most married girls in Amhara are now supported to use contraception](#) until their bodies are more mature. Although the incidence of child marriage in Oromia is also static, the age at which girls marry – at least in some communities – is decreasing rather than increasing. This is because [adolescents are encouraging one another to marry](#) in very early adolescence to accrue social status, and because local social norms value very young girls' physical appearance

over that of older adolescent girls. Caregivers, and not girls, see child marriage as a pressing problem in part because caregivers have lost control over who girls marry and in part because caregivers lose access to their daughters' labour when girls marry. Pregnancy-related risks to girls' health are ignored by both parents and girls, given cultural demands that girls demonstrate fertility immediately after marriage. In Afar, 'absuma' child marriage is embedded in broader practices meant to strengthen clan relationships. Girls have no input into when and whom they marry or when they will become pregnant. Efforts to end child marriage – or even raise the age of girls' marriage – have had little traction in Oromia and Afar, as they have not taken account of these complicated dynamics. Across locations, only 29% of married older girls are using a modern method of contraception; unsurprisingly, 47% have already been pregnant.

I was not happy that I was married... I wanted to kill myself.'

(A 14-year-old married girl, Afar)

Progress towards reducing FGM/C evidences analogous diversity and complexity. In many communities in Amhara, and with the caveat that girls often do not know if they have undergone FGM/C, as it takes place in infancy, FGM/C is becoming less common. Just over one-third (35%) of younger girls have undergone FGM/C according to their female caregivers. By contrast, in Afar, where clitorectomies are replacing infibulation, the practice remains nearly

GAGE evaluation of the AWH very young adolescent empowerment programme

AWH is working with girls, families and communities to shift the gender norms that limit girls' lives. It is de-stigmatising menstruation, messaging about the risks of child marriage and FGM/C and encouraging parents and brothers to support girls' education by more equally distributing household work. It is also teaching girls how to report sexual violence, teaching caregivers that violence is not girls' fault, encouraging bystanders to intervene to protect girls and promoting **gender-sensitive formal justice mechanisms** for survivors. Early evidence of programme impacts is encouraging. For example, in Amhara, **girls taking part in AWH** were 52% more likely to know the legal age for marriage and 53% more likely to know where to report violence than their peers who were not taking part in the programme. Similarly, in **Oromia**, **participant girls** were 2.5 times more likely to be aware that FGM/C entails risks and 31% more likely to understand the menstrual cycle.

universal (88%), with broader narratives about progress in part because less invasive forms of FGM/C are often not conceptualised as FGM/C. In Oromia, FGM/C is not only nearly universal (89% among girls over age 14), but often wanted by girls (68% among girls over age 14), as it is required in order to take part in the adolescent-only dances (*shogoye*) that raise girls' social status among their peers. Indeed, there are increasing calls from adults to return to more invasive forms to lower girls' sex drive and prevent them from rushing into marriage.

GAGE findings underscore that sexual and gender-based violence limits girls' and women's mobility and participation in education and employment. It also drives child marriage and has cascading and intergenerational impacts on physical and mental health. The GAGE midline survey found that one-fifth of adolescent girls and boys aged 15 and older believe that girls who have been raped should be rejected by their family. Two-fifths agree that a woman would be stigmatised if she reported sexual violence.

» **Adolescents with disabilities or who are displaced have limited access to services and social protection**

GAGE research is finding that because disability remains highly stigmatised in Ethiopia, in part because of associations with divine disfavour, adolescents with disabilities are often marginalised by their families and communities. Compared to those without disabilities, adolescents with disabilities are far less likely to have a trusted friend (43% versus 65%) or a trusted adult (55% versus 65%). In urban areas, including some smaller towns in Amhara, there are nascent signs of progress. Special needs schools provide students with tailored education up to the end of 4th grade – in the process often affording them their first opportunities to develop friendships with those like themselves. Special needs education, however, does not continue past 4th grade and has not been taken to scale in rural areas of other regions. This leaves young people with disabilities to study in integrated classrooms that are inadequately adapted and equipped under the tutelage of teachers who quite often have no specialised training. Adolescents with disabilities also have limited access to the social protection that might support access to education. They are not prioritised by Ethiopia's flagship Productive Safety Net Programme, despite their often greater needs, and the monthly stipends offered to students attending special needs schools are not large enough to cover students' costs. Most are forced to work part-time to meet expenses.

Adolescents who have been displaced due to the ethnic violence that has roiled Ethiopia in recent years are also being left behind. GAGE findings with adolescents affected by the Oromia-Somali region border conflicts in 2017/2018 suggest that access to social protection has declined over time. In addition, promised employment opportunities have not been forthcoming. As a result, young people are not able to invest in the education that supports longer-term resilience. Indeed, many cannot meet their needs for food

It is work that brings you together. A person who does not have work is considered as a dog. A person cannot live without work. It is work that gives you a reason to live.

(A 17-year-old displaced boy, Batu)

and shelter and some have elected to risk further violence – and return to Somali – in order to find work.

» **Covid-19 has had myriad impacts on adolescent lives**

As is the case around the world, the covid-19 pandemic has disrupted many facets of Ethiopian adolescents' lives. Those more fortunate lost months of education; those less fortunate were pushed into permanently dropping out. Food insecurity, poverty, stress and violence have climbed; health services have become more difficult to access; and social isolation has taken a toll on young people's mental health, with girls most at risk due to gender norms that leave them with less access to mobility and communications technology.

Alongside these broader findings, GAGE research on covid-19 impacts is highlighting the critical role played by local educators – especially the teachers who run girls' clubs – in preventing FGM/C and child marriage. With schools closed, and girls unable to rely on teachers' support, many parents reverted to tradition and had girls undergo FGM/C or marry. Understanding the importance of local reporting and surveillance, and of girls' clubs in particular, will shape national and international efforts to eliminate FGM/C and child marriage in line with the Sustainable Development Goals.

» **Climate change is negatively impacting adolescents' education and livelihood options**

GAGE is finding that for Ethiopian adolescents, climate change is shaping not only future options, but daily realities. In Oromia and Afar, episodic drought increases food insecurity and drives school drop-out for girls (who spend up to six hours a day on water collection in some communities) and boys (who migrate to greener pastures with livestock). Drought is also raising adolescents' risk of violence in the home and community, due to increased stress and changes in mobility. Water shortages are forcing people to drink unclean water which precipitates health risks related to water-borne illnesses. Flooding has increased health risks, including malaria, and makes it difficult for young people to get to and from school.

Shifting climate patterns are also rendering traditional livelihoods less secure, meaning that adolescents can no longer rely on agriculture or animal husbandry to support themselves and their families. This in turn is forcing Ethiopia's youth bulge to compete for jobs in a labour market that is not expanding fast enough to meet need – leaving many unemployed and others trapped in exploitative work and distress migration.

What are the implications of GAGE findings for international actors?

Advocate for and support investments in quality education for all children, including those in remote rural communities

- Education is key to Ethiopia's sustainable development and as such FCDO and its partners should advocate for and fund efforts to ensure that quality education is available – and compulsory – for all children, at least until the end of secondary school. Donors should also support the expansion of upper-secondary education into rural communities, including in the short to medium term by funding boarding facilities for those from remote villages.

Tackle gender discriminatory norms underpinning child marriage and GBV through long-term investments in girls' education, parenting programmes, engagement with local champions and strengthened justice services

- Because investments in girls' education often return a double dividend by also preventing child marriage, there is an urgent need for aid-funded programming to directly tackle the gender norms (and household and community practices) that limit girls' access to schooling. This should include programming for parents, championed by sympathetic religious and/or community leaders where possible, and – for adolescent girls – universal access to school-based girls' or gender clubs that provide access to trusted adults and a safe space to interact with like-minded peers.

Increased donor funding is required to prevent and redress the sexual and gender-based violence that continues to limit girls' and women's lives. This should include not only community-based programming aimed at shifting the gender norms that drive violence and prevent reporting, but also attention to strengthening justice and survivor services.

Critically, given the stickiness of gender norms, programming – and funding – must be long term.

Prioritise interventions that support youth employability

- To encourage young people and their families to invest in secondary and higher education it is important that donors invest in broader efforts to expand and modernise the Ethiopian economy as well as more targeted programming that opens decent employment opportunities for young people. This should include providing educational loans for post-secondary study or training, stepped-up attention to ensuring that skills-training programmes are delivering the skills that private employers need, and improved access to credit that offers young borrowers favourable terms as well as business/entrepreneurship training.

Continue to support improved access to social protection, and consider investments in cash for education schemes

- International actors should work in tandem with the government to continue scaling up access to social protection, aiming to reach the most vulnerable in both rural and urban communities – including young people who have been displaced or have disabilities. To build longer-term resilience, programming should include cash-for-education schemes.

Ensure an integrated approach to programming for young people given complex and intersecting development needs and vulnerabilities

- Development goals – and funding priorities – require a more integrated approach to adequately address adolescents' complex development needs. They should acknowledge that goals cannot be siloed on an individual basis (e.g. unhappy young people are unlikely to perform well in the classroom). They should also recognise that longer-term 'adult' outcomes often depend on foundations laid in childhood and adolescence (e.g. open societies are supported by young people's exposure to participatory programming).

Further background

Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) is a nine-year (2015–2024) mixed methods longitudinal research and evaluation study. It follows the lives of 20,000 adolescents in six low- and middle-income countries in Africa (Ethiopia and Rwanda), Asia (Bangladesh and Nepal) and the Middle East (Jordan and Lebanon).

The GAGE consortium, managed by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), includes 35 partner organisations from around the world known for their expertise in research, policy and programming in the fields of adolescence, gender and social inclusion. GAGE is funded by UK aid from the UK government.

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