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Gender and regional inequalities in adolescent education and learning in Ethiopia

Policy and programming implications from the GAGE baseline findings

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Overview

Ethiopia has made remarkable progress in expanding access to education over the past two decades. Its education budget has doubled, and with greatly expanded primary school facilities and increasing parent and student commitment to education, the country is close to universal primary enrolment. However, significant hurdles remain. Dropout rates are high (only about half of young people complete grade 5) and lagging investment in secondary school means the enrolment rate in upper-secondary is still in single digits. Moreover, school violence remains endemic and learning outcomes are generally poor – especially in rural areas and for girls.

This policy note synthesises findings from baseline mixed-methods research as part of the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) longitudinal study (2015–2024) to address these knowledge gaps. Our work included nearly 7,000 adolescent girls and boys between the ages of 10 and 19, as well as their caregivers, service providers and programme and policy actors. More details can be found in the full companion report (Jones et al., 2019). Paying careful attention to gender and regional differences, here we focus on adolescents' educational aspirations, caregiver support for education, access to education, learning and educational transitions. We then discuss key actions to accelerate progress.

Key findings: scope and scale of the challenge

Our research found that although adolescents' and parents' educational aspirations are generally high, there remain some significant barriers to adolescents accessing quality education. These include household poverty, overcrowded and poorly resourced classrooms, and limited capacity among teachers for positive discipline approaches. The challenges facing adolescents in pastoralist regions (including a dearth of teachers trained in the local language) and adolescents with disabilities (due to chronic underinvestment in special needs education and social protection for vulnerable families) are particularly acute. We also found that early adolescence marks a watershed point for intervention, with transitions to upper-primary and secondary school needing more support given the increased salience of gender norms in adolescence and the higher opportunity costs of their schooling.

Educational aspirations

While there are marked differences between study sites due to context – with urban students aiming the highest and those in Zone 5, Afar, the lowest – overall, adolescents' educational aspirations are high (see Box 1). Our survey found that most (61%) want to attend post-secondary school, and our qualitative work found that many aspire to professional careers – although they tended to have only the most limited understanding of what might be needed to realise those aspirations. Gender differences were notable and varied by context, with girls aspiring higher than boys in South Gondar and boys higher than girls in East Hararghe. Somewhat worryingly, we also found some evidence that

where youth unemployment rates are high, and even those with secondary and tertiary education are unable to find decently paid work, adolescents' aspirations for continued education may be falling.

Parental support for education

Parental support for education appears to be growing, in part due to the increasing riskiness of agriculture. Most parents reported that formal education is important for their children's futures and that they aspire for their children to attend post-secondary education (67%). However, in practice, parents' support for their adolescent children's education is more limited, and demands on adolescents' time to shoulder agricultural, domestic and care work remain high.

Box 1: Education as a route out of poverty

Khalid, age 17, is *'living and sleeping in the street'* in Dire Dawa with his 2-year-old sister, who is the *'first thing that makes me happy in my life'*. Abandoned by their mother for over a year now, Khalid has one goal in life: *'I do not want my sister to see what I have seen'*. Although he was forced to drop out of school for some time, pooling his wages with a kind neighbour who took them under her wing, he has now re-enrolled. *'I told myself that I have to go to school because all my peers are in school. I am not lesser than they are by any means. I have to get back again... My teachers are very nice and understanding... They have good education skills, but if you are unable to understand they are willing to come to your house and give a tutorial'*. Although he admits that he *'always feels inferior'*, because he lacks money for a school uniform and school bag, he is adept at putting his feelings aside and staying focused on his longer-term objective. *'When I grow up, I want to study management. I will get a job and change my family's life. I will provide my sister with shelter, food, and education. The only solution is education.'*

When we go to their homes to bring students to school, there are some mothers who throw stones at us. They think the girls should help them in the house because they have no other support.

(School principal in East Hararghe)

Educational access

Adolescents – especially rural adolescents and those with disabilities (see Box 2) – face a number of hurdles in accessing education. While nearly all adolescents in our sample (with the important exception of some pastoralist communities and adolescents with disabilities) had been enrolled in primary school, our qualitative work found that late enrolment is not uncommon, particularly where children are needed for herding.

Box 2: Barriers to educational access for adolescents with disabilities

Our research found that adolescents with disabilities generally have high aspirations. More than a third (41%) would like to attend post-secondary education and some want to become professionals. As a 17-year-old girl with a physical impairment in Debre Tabor explained, *'I need to be a doctor. Especially I need to be a doctor to give support to those who are physically disabled. The sole agenda we have is education.'*

However, adolescents with disabilities face many barriers in terms of accessing their right to an education. Many experience transport difficulties; school buildings and learning materials have not been adapted to their needs; even where there are special needs teachers, they have often had inadequate training; and disability-related stigma and violence, whether at the hands of mainstream teachers or peers, remains common. Our research also found that it was not uncommon for adolescents with disabilities to have very little parental support. An older boy from Dire Dawa, who is deaf, explained that his parents did not believe in him until he had succeeded on his own. *'Previously there were disagreements between me and my family; they didn't help me do my homework. They perceived that I couldn't achieve anything. But after I completed my college training, which was only due to my own efforts and the support of my friends, I found a job and started to get a salary. Then they changed their mind and started to respect me.'*

The costs of disability are also reflected in education enrolment statistics. Our survey found that 62% of young adolescents with disabilities are enrolled in school (compared to 85% of their peers without disabilities). It also found that adolescents with disabilities have completed, on average, one year less of school than their peers without disabilities (3.3 versus 4.6 years), in part because they enrol a half year later (at age 7.8 years, compared with 7.2 years). Young adolescents with disabilities are also less likely to feel comfortable speaking up in class than their peers without disabilities (65% versus 81%).

Poor attendance, also driven by young people's paid and unpaid work responsibilities, is also common. Our survey found that rural adolescents had missed an average of 15% of school days in the two weeks prior to the survey, while our qualitative findings indicated that over time, those absences translate into poor learning and grade repetition (see Box 3). As children enter adolescence, the price of delays and repetitions is amplified by the higher opportunity costs of educating adolescents (as compared to younger children), given the allure of the cash economy and the prevalence of child marriage and sexual violence. Only approximately half of children successfully transition to upper-primary school (Ministry of Education, 2018). Gender differences in access to education are again notable and vary by context. In South Gondar, for example, girls are more likely to be enrolled than boys (96% versus 89%) and to have completed (on average) half a year's more education (4.8 versus 4.3 years). In East Hararghe, however, the reverse is true (85% of boys enrolled compared with 69% of girls, and boys completing 5.0 years' schooling compared to 4.5 years for girls).

▶ One of my younger sisters is 11 years old and in grade 1. But the younger one is 9 years. She looks after cattle until my sister's son grows up. She will start school after he grows up.

(12-year-old girl, South Gondar)

School violence

Our research found that school violence is endemic and can be severe. Three-quarters of adolescents in our sample had experienced corporal punishment at school, including

Box 3: Adolescents in pastoralist communities are highly disadvantaged when it comes to accessing education

Adolescents in our study from Zone 5 (Afar) were especially disadvantaged in terms of educational access. At one study site, there had been no functioning school for two years due to difficulty attracting teachers prepared to live there.

Pastoralist livelihoods place significant demands on adolescents' time. Our qualitative work highlighted that as adolescents get older, temporary seasonal migration drives non-attendance, especially for boys. Whereas younger adolescents in urban areas missed just 6% of school days in the two weeks prior to our survey (15% on average in rural areas), the figure was 25% for their pastoralist peers. Over time, this translates into stark differences in completion: whereas students in the 10–12 years cohort in South Gondar had completed 4.5 years and those in East Hararghe had completed 4.8 years, those in Zone 5 (Afar) had completed only 2.4 years.

forced kneeling, being beaten and kicked, and slammed into concrete walls. Punishments were meted out for many reasons, sometimes 'misconduct' (often minor, such as talking in class), but also for being late (due to chores at home), failing to have the right materials (often due to poverty), or for not understanding lessons. Our qualitative research found that violence is not an uncommon reason for school dropout, and there are significant gender differences too. Boys are more likely than girls to be punished (78% versus 66%), and to experience more severe types of punishment, partly (they admit) because they are less well-behaved. Girls are more likely to be punished for absences beyond their control (e.g. due to domestic or care work).

▶ I may take food for my father to the farm field. When I come back, I may be late for school because where we farm is far from our home.

(10-year-old girl, East Hararghe)

Quality of education

Our qualitative findings underscore that learning outcomes are low, particularly in rural areas. Contributing factors include overcrowded, poorly resourced classrooms, poor teacher training, and lack of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities. In some communities, where students progress through grades regardless of attainment (to ease overcrowding), out-of-school adolescents explained they had chosen to drop out because they were not learning.

▶ I like education. But I quit it because I couldn't write and read. I didn't pass grade 1. When I came to join from grade 1, they registered me in grade 3. Then I refused to continue my education.

(12-year-old boy, South Gondar)

Educational transitions

Adolescents' transitions into upper-primary school (especially in more remote communities and for students with disabilities) and secondary school are complicated by the reality that many students face long daily commutes or must pay to board in town, as the scale-up of higher schooling (particularly secondary) lags behind that of first-cycle primary schooling.¹ The draw of the cash economy (including khat in East Hararghe, sesame production in Amhara and flower cultivation in East Shewa) is a further hindrance for boys and girls alike. For girls, poor learning outcomes (driven by parents' demands on their time), child marriage, and parents' concerns about their safety and sexual purity represent additional barriers to higher education.

¹ While there are approximately 3,400 secondary schools in all of Ethiopia, there are more than 10 times the number of primary schools (almost 36,000) (Ministry of Education, 2018). However, school infrastructure alone is not the only challenge: the national net enrolment rate (NER) for grades 5-8 in the 2016/2017 academic year was only 59.7, compared to 112.9 for grades 1-4. The NER for secondary school was only 24.6 that same year (ibid.).

Key actions to accelerate progress

To capitalise on the window of opportunity that adolescence represents, and achieve its goal of reaching middle-income status through a well-educated workforce, the Ethiopian government and its development partners should refocus and expand efforts to ensure that all young people have not only access to basic education, but access to quality education through secondary school. Our research points to eight key actions to accelerate progress:

1. Support adolescents' educational aspirations.

Adolescents need to envisage a future that is both locally practical and aspirational – and receive guidance (e.g. through school counsellors, girls' clubs mentors, youth centres) on the support they need to realise their aspirations. Our findings confirm the value of role models, including those who have taken pathways that challenge gendered norms (e.g. through school alumni networks).

2. Intensify awareness-raising efforts – and education – aimed at parents

Invest in messaging that simultaneously emphasises the importance of education and offers parents practical guidance on how to support their children's education (and particularly their daughters' education). Outreach efforts to ensure that children are attending school, carried out throughout the school year, should be paired with warnings and monetary/ in-kind fines to ensure compliance.

3. Reconceptualise access to education

Schools need to have enough decently remunerated, trained teachers and have adequate equipment and resources, including materials, school feeding, gender-friendly water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities, and specialised support for adolescents with disabilities. Expanding evening schools in urban areas and, over time, in rural areas, will help adolescents who must balance paid and unpaid work responsibilities to pursue further education. In Zone 5 (Afar), and remote rural communities in other regions, the government should consider aligning the school calendar to pastoralist and agricultural calendars and, at secondary level, expanding free or heavily subsidised boarding schools.

4. Focus on learning outcomes

Children's learning should be tracked from the earliest years – rather than simply measured through national eighth and tenth grade exams, given that failure at these junctures can shut off entire pathways for future skills-

building. Students should not progress through grades before they have mastered content, and there should be additional 'catch-up' tutorials for those who are regularly absent or at risk of falling behind, offered at flexible times to match boys' and girls' schedules.

5. Put an immediate end to teacher violence

There should be an immediate end to punishment for 'mistakes' such as lateness and poor retention, which are often beyond students' control. Over time, teachers need to be trained in non-violent positive disciplinary approaches, with robust monitoring and reporting systems put in place to hold teachers accountable for corporal punishment.

6. Tackle student violence and harassment

The curriculum needs to be revised to include awareness-raising to tackle bullying and sexual harassment, and life skills including communication and negotiation. These should be reinforced through school clubs so as to promote non-violent communication and behaviour.

7. Target transitions

Target students and parents with outreach efforts that emphasise growth and potential, and the longer-term advantages of secondary and post-secondary education. Ensure that students with disabilities are provided with the support they need to stay in school as they transition into mainstream classrooms, supported by trained teaching assistants where necessary.

8. Support secondary education

A multi-pronged package – including building more schools and providing economic and logistical support – needs to be scaled up to meet demand, prioritising girls' gender-specific needs given the multiple disadvantages they face.

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