



© Nathalie Bertrams / GAGE 2019



Gender and regional inequalities in adolescent bodily integrity and freedom from violence in Ethiopia

Policy and programming implications from the GAGE baseline findings

Nicola Jones, Elizabeth Presler-Marshall, Sarah Baird, Joan Hicks, Guday Emirie and Workneh Yadete

Overview

Ethiopia is making remarkable progress in reducing some of the threats facing adolescents around bodily integrity, evidenced by the fact that rates of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) are declining and age at first marriage is climbing. However, Ethiopian adolescents remain extremely likely to experience violence at home, at school and in their communities (Pankhurst et al., 2016). Moreover, while marriage rates among the youngest girls are dropping quickly (6% of girls aged 15–19 were married before the age of 15, compared to 14% of young women aged 20–24), rates of marriage before legal adulthood are evidencing much slower decline, still reaching over 40% in 2016 (CSA and ICF, 2017). As such, Ethiopia is still ranked fifth globally in terms of the absolute number of adolescent girls subject to child marriage.¹

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' bodily integrity and freedom from violence, which we define as protection from age-based violence, including corporal punishment and bullying; sexual and gender-based violence; early forced and child marriage; and FGM/C and other harmful traditional practices. We then discuss emerging change strategies and key actions to accelerate progress.


Key findings: scope and scale of the challenge

Age-based violence

In line with the broader literature, our research found that most adolescents in Ethiopia experience corporal punishment at the hands of their parents and teachers. Evidence suggests that intra-household violence directed at children and adolescents is commonplace (Pankhurst et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2017), largely because parents 'share cultural assumptions and beliefs in the necessity of child corporal punishment so as to insure [sic] proper child upbringing' (Wonde et al., 2014: 21). Indeed, nearly 70% of young adolescents who completed our survey reported that they had experienced or witnessed violence in the home, with no significant gender differences.

¹ It is estimated that 1.974 million girls in Ethiopia married before their 18th birthday. This is based on the number (in thousands) of women aged 20–24 years who were first married or in union before they were 18 years as at 2017. See United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) Population Division (2017).

In terms of teacher violence, previous studies have highlighted that corporal punishment is endemic across Ethiopia. It is meted out not only to punish children for misbehaving, but also for things that are often beyond their control (such as arriving late or not having completed homework) – usually driven by household poverty or having to do domestic chores (Jones et al., 2017; Pankhurst et al., 2016; 2018). Our GAGE findings confirmed this: 72% of survey respondents reported having experienced violence at school, boys more so than girls (78% versus 66%). Our qualitative research found that for boys especially (who tend to be less compliant), this punishment can be quite severe. Girls are more likely to be punished for violating gender norms, such as improperly preparing food or being seen in public with someone of the opposite sex, and for ‘misdeeds’ beyond their control (such as arriving late due to their domestic and care work responsibilities). Boys recognised these gender differences, agreeing overwhelmingly that they are punished more because they are less well-behaved than girls.

 **He [the teacher] does not beat them [girls] since they do not disturb the class.**

(10-year-old boy, Community K, East Hararghe)

Peer-to-peer violence is also widespread. Our survey found that nearly half of younger adolescents (46%) had experienced peer violence in the past year, with boys at significantly greater risk than girls (52% versus 39%). Our qualitative work found that violence is largely related to boys’ need to demonstrate their masculinity. In line with existing literature which emphasises the links between masculinity and violence in Ethiopia (Heinonen, 2011; Pells and Morrow, 2018), our findings highlighted that younger boys are more likely to fight over grazing rights and to prove their strength, while older boys tend to fight over girls and for revenge.

Sexual and gender-based violence

Sexual and gender-based violence is also widespread in Ethiopia (CSA and ICF, 2017), but there is limited knowledge of adolescents’ experiences, and the evidence that does exist focuses on older adolescents (Jones et al., 2016b; 2017; Erulkar and Ferede, 2009). Our qualitative findings suggest that the links between verbal violence, physical violence and sexual violence are complex and difficult to disentangle. Girls are often verbally harassed with sexualised language and beaten when they are young, then increasingly at risk of sexual assault as their bodies mature. Although a minority of girls in our research were willing to defend each other from sexual harassment and physical violence perpetrated by younger boys, defences against sexual violence perpetrated by older boys and men were notably absent – largely because of gender norms that see girls as ‘willing’ participants in all sexual activity and blame them even if they are assaulted. In South Gondar,

many girls explained that if they were to be raped and their families found out, they would most likely be forced to marry to ensure that any ensuing pregnancy was within the confines of marriage. In Zone 5 (Afar), the same kinship patterns that perpetuate child marriage appear to provide some measure of protection against stranger rape – because the girl’s clan will fight to reclaim honour. Although less at risk than their female counterparts, some boys in our urban research sites also reported being subject to sexual violence – something that historically has been taboo to discuss.

Female genital mutilation/cutting

The Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS) (2016) found significant regional variation in terms of the proportion and type of cutting and the age at which cutting occurred (CSA and ICF, 2017). Our findings confirm that FGM/C is a deeply rooted cultural practice that is carried out on girls at very different ages (ranging from early infancy to mid-childhood and early adolescence). It also varies by type across regions (from the less invasive Type I or ‘sunna’ to the more invasive Types II and III) (see World Health Organization (WHO), no date). Our qualitative work in South Gondar, where the practice is carried out during infancy, found that it is becoming less common, largely because people are now more aware of the health risks (e.g. fistula). In East Hararghe, where cutting is often undertaken in early adolescence and tends to be more invasive, we found that girls themselves are demanding to be cut – so that they fit in with their circle of friends and are seen as upholding cultural norms. In Zone 5 (Afar), where historically the practice has been particularly invasive (e.g. infibulation), we found that FGM/C remains entrenched, but is gradually moving towards ‘sunna’ (the less invasive type) due to growing awareness of the health risks.

 **Their daughters beg their families in order to get circumcised.**

(10-year-old girl from Community J, East Hararghe)

Child marriage

The patterning of child marriage in Ethiopia is also striking. Rates of child marriage and age at first marriage vary considerably by region – and, as noted by Jones et al. (2016a; 2016b), even between kebeles (villages) and woredas (districts) in a single zone. Our research highlighted that while child marriage is rooted in attempts to control girls’ sexuality and preserve cultural traditions, the practice varies significantly across locations in terms of incidence, age at marriage (and how this compares to past generations), as well as the degree and quality of choice in marriage partners (see Box 1).

In South Gondar, age at marriage is climbing and the incidence of child marriage is falling, largely because of growing commitment to education, reflecting an

Box 1: Problematising choice in adolescent marriages

Zinash, 17, lives in Debre Tabor (South Gondar). She has been married for a year – of her own accord, to a man she ‘chose’. Now the mother of a 7-month-old girl, Zinash does not regret her choice, but she recognises that her options were very limited.


‘My mother had died when I was 3 years of age, my father was left alone to raise us... Soon, he brought us another mother, and had many other children’. When Zinash moved to Debre Tabor, to begin secondary school, she increasingly found that she did not ‘want to go and visit them [her father and step-mother]’, as she believed that the 150 birr a month her father was paying for her living expenses was most likely causing her father and stepmother to ‘be in disagreement’ because it was money that could have been spent on their younger children. ‘I did not want to become an obstacle for my younger siblings and a burden to my stepmother.’

In these circumstances, marriage offered a solution. Zinash did not know her husband well before they married. *‘I just knew him at school. When I was in grade 9, he also was going to school and working... We met in September and in November he asked me to get engaged. I agreed... and by January we were married.’*


Zinash knows that girls are supposed to ‘marry after they turn 18’ and is clear that parents and adolescents know ‘a lot about the impacts of early marriage’. Her own marriage, she insists, was not really ‘early’ – because it was undertaken ‘in my interests... This is different from the early marriage practised in rural areas because there, girls marry when it is not in their interests.’ Zinash is glad that she is no longer ‘a burden to my father and my younger siblings’.

understanding that agriculture no longer provides a secure livelihood. Furthermore, while most marriages in the area are still arranged – and, for the youngest girls, almost always still forced – there is growing (albeit still limited) space for girls to have a say in who they marry.

In East Hararghe, on the other hand, narratives around child marriage are more complicated. Although key informants reported that child marriage has always been common, parents and girls in some locations noted that age at marriage is falling and that girls are increasingly ‘choosing’ to marry as children – often against their parents’ wishes. Some parents believe that the drought is to blame, as it has made parents pull their children out of school, and girls would prefer to marry rather than work alongside their mothers. Others believe that traditional shegoye dancing has taken on a different form and has now become a cultural space that is encouraging child marriage, especially where marriage brokers are involved. Girls themselves sometimes blame peer pressure.

 I got married because they [referring to friends] got married.

(Mid-adolescent girl, Community J, East Hararghe, Ethiopia)


 Especially if she is going to get married to an adult who is older than her; she hates him, since he is going to beat her when they get married.

(Young girl, Community A, Zone 5)

In Zone 5 (Afar), there are limited signs of change, largely because of the absuma marriage custom, which dictates that marriage partners are maternal cousins and mandates that girls have no say in who or when they marry. While adults and some adolescent boys are highly committed to the practice, because of the way it reinforces family and clan relationships, we found that most girls are simply resigned to it – even though many would prefer any other option. Indeed, respondents reported that even attempted suicide was not an exit strategy, as girls who survived such attempts were forced to marry anyway.

Change strategies

Our research findings highlight that efforts to tackle age- and gender-based violence against adolescents are highly uneven, depending on the type of violence and the regional context. In general, very little is being done to tackle the corporal punishment that adolescents experience at home and at school. While some civics teachers tell students about the Convention on the Rights of the Child and children’s right to be free of violence, adolescents noted that those same teachers continue to perpetrate violence. Efforts to address sexual and gender-based violence are nascent, but more promising. For example, in Batu (East Shewa) there is now a special justice division working with the Ministry of Women and Children’s Affairs to deal with rape, encouraging girls and women to report violence by working to ensure that they are protected from retaliation. Efforts to reduce child marriage (and, to a lesser extent, FGM/C) are more advanced, especially in Amhara, and largely revolve around awareness-raising for parents and girls, though legal approaches are also sometimes brought to bear. Our research highlights the critical need to focus on child marriage hotspots and to develop strategies that are informed by the uneven and complex nature of social norm change processes.

 When we are teaching in girls’ club, sometimes we face challenges or conflicts. If we teach them directly to stop early marriage and cross-cousin marriage (abino), we will provoke conflict.

(Teacher, Community A, Zone 5)

Key actions to accelerate progress

The transition between childhood and adulthood presents opportunities and risks. On the one hand, it provides the Government of Ethiopia and the broader development

community with a chance to ensure that rapidly maturing young people understand their rights to bodily integrity – and know how to keep themselves safe. On the other hand, due to adolescents’ age-related imperatives (including heightened risk-taking and a preference for short-term thinking), adolescence can entail a whole new range of vulnerabilities. In order to better support adolescents’ bodily integrity and uphold their right to be free of violence, our research suggests six key areas for action:

1. Engage with adolescent girls and boys through puberty education classes, in-school and out-of-school clubs, and media platforms to raise awareness about and help address underlying gendered social norms that perpetuate age-based, sexual and gender-based violence. This should include messaging to tackle the normalisation of violence, the emphasis on girls’ sexual purity, and aggressive masculinities, and raise awareness of the referral and response pathways available to survivors of violence.
2. Engage with parents, community and faith leaders to raise awareness about and shift underlying gendered social norms that perpetuate adolescents’ vulnerability to multiple forms of violence, and raise awareness of the prevention, referral and response pathways available to them.
3. Work with school management and teachers to support non-violent classroom management techniques, backed up by anonymous reporting options for students, and systems to discipline teachers where needed.
4. Expand discussion of the risks of child marriage and FGM/C and how to tackle these in school-based student clubs (particularly girls’ clubs and ‘gender’ or mixed-sex clubs focusing on positive gender relations) and student parliaments, addressing all forms of child marriage, even those ‘chosen’ by girls.
5. Strengthen formal justice mechanisms by investing in gender- and age-sensitivity training for police and justice personnel and promoting uptake of such mechanisms among communities and local service providers.
6. Ensure that Ethiopia’s new cadre of social workers are trained in how to identify adolescent survivors of age-based, sexual and gender-based violence and how to make referrals to appropriate response pathways.

References

- Central Statistical Agency (CSA) Ethiopia and ICF (2017) *Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey 2016*. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and Rockville, Maryland, USA: CSA and ICF
- Erulkar, A. and Mekbib, T. (2007) ‘Invisible and vulnerable adolescent domestic workers in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia’ *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies: An International Interdisciplinary Journal for Research, and Policy and Care* 2(3): 246–256
- Heinonen, P. (2011) *Youth gangs and street children: culture, nurture and masculinity in Ethiopia*. New York: Berghahn Books
- Jones, N., Presler-Marshall, E., Tefera, B. and Gebre, B. (2016a) *The politics of policy and programme implementation to advance adolescent girls’ wellbeing in Ethiopia*. London: Overseas Development Institute
- Jones, N., Tefera, B., Emirie, G., Gebre, B., Berhanu, K., Presler-Marshall, E., Walker, D., Gupta, T. and Plank, G. (2016b) *One size does not fit all: the patterning and drivers of child marriage in Ethiopia’s hotspot districts*. London: UNICEF and Overseas Development Institute
- Jones, N., Tefera, B., Yadete, W., Emirie, G., Gezahegne, K., Birhanu, K., Ahmed, N. and Vithlani, A. (2017) *Exploring Ethiopian adolescents’ gendered experiences and perspectives: findings from formative qualitative research*. London: Overseas Development Institute
- Jones, N., Presler-Marshall, E., Baird, S., Hicks, J., Guday, E., Yadete, W., Alemayehu, Y., Bekele, B. and Kifle, E. (2019) *Adolescent bodily integrity and freedom from violence in Ethiopia*. A report on GAGE Ethiopia baseline findings. London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence
- Pankhurst, A., Crivello, G. and Tiemelissan, A. (2016) *Children’s work in family and community contexts: examples from Young Lives Ethiopia*. Oxford: Young Lives, Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford
- Pankhurst, A., Woldehanna, T., Araya, M., Tafere, Y., Rossiter, J., Tiemelissan, A. and Berhanu, K. (2018) *Young Lives Ethiopia: lessons from longitudinal research with children of the Millennium. Country report*. Oxford: Young Lives
- Pells, K. and Morrow, V. (2018) *Children’s experiences of violence: evidence from the Young Lives study in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam*. Summary report. Oxford: Young Lives
- United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA) Population Division (2017) *World Population Prospects: the 2017 revision*. DVD edition (<https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/where-does-it-happen/atlas/#/>)
- Wonde, D., Jibat, N. and Baru, A. (2014) ‘The dilemma of corporal punishment of children from parents’ perspective in some selected rural and urban communities of Jimma zone, Oromia/Ethiopia’ *Global Journal of Human Social Science: Sociology & Culture* 14(4): 17–27
- World Health Organization (no date) ‘Classification of female genital mutilation’. WHO website (<https://www.who.int/reproductive-health/topics/fgm/overview/en/>)