



Secondary school girls' club in Amhara region, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2020

'Children are future leaders of the country': Ethiopian adolescents' access to voice and agency

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Introduction

Ethiopia has undergone rapid transformation over the past two years. Soon after being appointed in 2018, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, an ethnic Oromo, effectively dissolved the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, the party that had wielded absolute power since 1991, promising a restoration of political freedoms and peace with neighbouring Eritrea that was recognised with a Nobel Peace Prize (Gardner, 2020; Nobel Prize, 2019). That same year saw the appointment of Ethiopia's first female president, Sahle-Work Zewde, and a cabinet in which half the positions are held by women. This new era has seen improvements in people's rights to voice and association but has also been accompanied by increased insecurity and violence, which first erupted in 2015 and then spread throughout the country, leaving hundreds of people dead and millions displaced (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

This policy note synthesises findings from the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) programme's 2019/2020 round 2 data collection to explore changes in Ethiopian adolescents' access to voice and agency in the midst of the country's dramatic political transformation. It uses mixed-methods research that includes a survey (with 7,538 adolescents and their caregivers) and 601 qualitative interviews (with adolescents, parents and service providers). Respondents were from three diverse rural regions – South Gondar (Amhara), East Hararghe (Oromia) and Zone 5 (Afar) – as well as three very different urban areas (Debre Tabor in Amhara, Batu in Oromia and Dire Dawa City Administration). We pay careful attention to gender and regional differences in how young people between the ages of 12 and 20 are accessing decision-making opportunities within the family and community. We also explore changes in adolescents' mobility and access to safe space, and social interactions with peers, their access to age-appropriate information and digital

¹ Suggested citation: Presler-Marshal, E., Jones, N., Dutton, R., Baird, S. and Workneh, Y. (2020) 'Children are future leaders of the country': Ethiopian adolescents' access to voice and agency.' Policy Brief. London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence.

technology, and to inspirational role models. We then discuss key actions needed to accelerate progress, especially for girls, if Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 – ‘women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels’ – is to be achieved (United Nations, 2020).

Key findings

The broader changes unfolding across Ethiopia are reflected in myriad ways in adolescents’ lives. Since our baseline research in 2018, adolescents have become more comfortable speaking up for what they need, more involved in their communities, have more say over when they leave the house and where they go, enjoy better access to information, and are more likely to have a role model who inspires them. Changes have not, however, accrued uniformly to all groups of adolescents.

Voice and decision-making in the household and community

There has been substantial change over the past two years in adolescents’ ability to contribute to the decisions that shape their own lives, their households and their communities, although the patterning is complex. As expected, given that they are now two years older, considerably more younger adolescents (aged 12–14 years) reported feeling comfortable expressing their opinions to adults at midline (45%) than at baseline (29%). As also expected, girls (44%) were less comfortable voicing their opinions than boys (47%), and especially in the case of older adolescents (17–19 years) where the gender divide was greater (44% for girls compared to 50% for boys). This difference in the survey was, however, more muted than in the qualitative findings.

I cannot refuse. If I refuse the man who is going to marry me, he would be given permission to take me by force.

(A 17-year-old married girl from Zone 5 (Afar))

Our qualitative research suggests that this relative parity between girls and boys reflects girls’ lower expectations rather than their actual input to decisions, with fathers admitting that they have very limited communication with their daughters and girls explaining that even their mothers have limited say. *‘What can I talk about with my daughter? There is nothing I talk about with her!’* exclaimed a father from Debre Tabor. *‘Some mothers exercise their rights. The power goes to fathers mostly,’* explained a married 17-year-old girl from East Hararghe. Our findings further highlight that girls have very little say in the decisions that shape their lives, including whether and when to marry (see Box 1). *‘I cannot refuse. If I refuse the man who is going to marry me, he would be given permission to take me by force,’* emphasised a 17-year-old married girl from Zone 5 (Afar).

Our survey found that differences in adolescents’ voice by location were more notable than gender and age differences, with those living in rural Amhara and urban areas far more comfortable with speaking up to adults than those living in rural Oromia (approximately one-half versus one-third). This same patterning is reflected in an index capturing adolescents’ perceived input into household decision-making, which was higher in rural Amhara (4.8/8) than in any other location, especially compared to East Hararghe (3.8/8).²

Our qualitative work suggests that differences are shaped by both cultural norms and access to services. In

Box 1: ‘I can take care of myself’

Marta is a 13-year-old girl, married at age 8 and now divorced, living in rural South Gondar. She is exceptional not because of the age at which she was married but because of her determination to make her voice heard against formidable family and community pressures.

Marta was unable to refuse her marriage, which was arranged by her grandfather because he wanted to see the family line continue. But she drew the line at being made to leave school by her husband, who was nearly 10 years older and still studying himself. ‘I said to him, “What am I going to do if you finish your school and become a government worker and leave me? Am I going to end up being a farmer and take care of your babies?”’

Indeed, having heard that girls can get pregnant even before menarche, as soon as she was forced to become sexually active she went to the local health extension worker and demanded a contraceptive implant. ‘I asked her for the implant that lasts for three years... I didn’t want to give birth before I become mature and know myself better and become self-sufficient,’ she explained.

Determined to escape her marriage and illiteracy and to realise her aspiration of going to university, Marta stole grain from her in-laws and sold it to finance her escape. When she was caught by a cousin, she fought back: ‘I was beaten and forced to go back but I refused. I told them that I would commit suicide.’ Although her father and her in-laws tried to intimidate her into returning to her husband, Marta persisted. She was allowed to divorce and was preparing, before the disruptions brought by covid-19, to start secondary school.

Married girls have less access to **friends, information** and **technology** than their unmarried peers.



Married girls are less likely to:



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East Hararghe, whereas initial explanations surrounding school dropout and child marriage emphasised adolescents' voice and adults' inability to exercise control, broader narratives highlighted how adolescent 'choices' are shaped by adults' demands. 'She has quit on her own. She doesn't want to go to school,' explained a 15-year-old in-school boy of his sister. 'But there must be somebody to prepare foods and do all these tasks, so that our mother orders her to do those tasks.' This view was reinforced by key informants. As a community leader in East Hararghe noted: 'When boys and girls reach the age of adolescence, conflict arises between the mother and such children... Once mothers initiated the girls for marriage, girls will go with someone for marriage.' In South Gondar, where school enrolment rates are higher (91% of younger adolescents enrolled, compared to 78% in East Hararghe and 61% in Zone 5) and schools are more likely to have active clubs on topics including gender and civic participation, young people are more regularly exposed to messages about their rights – including their rights to an education and to remain unmarried. 'They teach us about discipline, our rights and responsibilities and so on,' observed a 15-year-old girl who is a member of her school's civics club. 'I take part in school clubs... It is to get better knowledge,' added a 15-year-old girl who explained that she had drawn on this awareness to refuse a marriage arranged by her parents. In Zone 5 (Afar), pastoralist realities shape day-to-day adolescent decision-making. Young people reported that they largely did as their parents told them – because

livestock need herding – but that they have final control over the animals gifted to them by their parents. 'If I want to give them [livestock], I can give them. I can also refuse to give them goat. When I refuse, my family accepts my word,' noted a 16-year-old girl.

There have been increasing opportunities in recent years for adolescents to participate in their communities. In our midline research, this was most evident in East Hararghe, where the regional youth movement known as 'qeerroo' helped usher Abiy to power calling for redress of Oromo political and socio-economic marginalisation. While there is considerable debate about the role and nature of the qeerroo movement (Jalata, 2016), in our research sites our findings revealed qeerroos taking on some positive roles. For example, qeerroos were working beside government officials to provide for internally displaced persons, and locating truant children and returning them to the classroom. In addition, in communities where it has been banned, they were also involved in collecting fines from the parents of adolescents caught participating in traditional shegoye dances (some areas have banned shegoye given its negative consequences for participants' school attendance and performance). 'The chairperson of the qeerroo in our kebele has... connections and communications with kebele administrators,' explained an 18-year-old boy participant. 'Qeerroos work day-in and day-out and bring children to school. Qeerroo enable us to solve the serious problems that we have,' emphasised a father from a remote community.

2 The index (0–8) measures adolescents' perception of having a say about household issues such as: how much time they spent helping around the house, how much education they will get, when and who they will marry, who their friends are, what they do in their free time, when they can leave the house and their involvement in income-generating activities, with higher scores indicating more perceived input into household decision making

Children are future leaders of the country, but no one seems to think that way ... Even in our high school, no one contacted us about what we need and what we are doing.

(A 19-year-old divorced girl in Zone 5 (Afar))

Although adolescents' actions and voices are increasingly visible in and respected by communities in East Hararghe, girls remain comparatively shut out by gender norms that position them as subservient. A 17-year-old girl who is a member of a female *qeerroo* group now led by a young man noted that when he asked her to take over the group's leadership, she declined – because she knew the community would never listen to her: *'I refused, believing that this village will not accept my leadership.'*

In South Gondar (Amhara) and Zone 5 (Afar), adolescents' engagement in the community tends to be less formal and relatively rare. In Zone 5, a 19-year-old divorced girl added that her generation is completely ignored by local leaders: *'Children are future leaders of the country, but no one seems to think that way. No one is concerned about the development of the area. Even in our high school, no one contacted us about what we need and what we are doing.'* A 17-year-old boy from South Gondar noted that he and his friends had recently come together to fight desertification and climate change, after hearing about the issue on the radio: *'We got the information from the radio, we planted a number of trees.'*

Mobility, access to safe spaces and peers

Adolescents' ability to control their movements outside of the home, to access safe spaces and spend time with friends is also highly variable. Overall – and to be expected, given that they are now two years older than at baseline – adolescents' mobility is improving. Our midline survey found that 38% of young people had left their *kebele* (community) at least once in the past three months and that fewer had had to seek permission to do so. *'I don't ask them and I don't want their permission to go everywhere,'* explained a 15-year-old boy from Zone 5 (Afar), who noted that where he goes depends more on his livestock than his parents.

In line with the broader evidence base, however, this was far less true for girls. Over half of boys (52%) but less than a quarter of girls (24%) reported having recently left their communities. Indeed, girls were quite likely to report even greater restrictions on their mobility over time, due to parents' concerns about girls' reputations and how they reflect family honour. *'Our mothers do not let us get out of home once we are becoming older,'* observed a 13-year-old girl from East Hararghe. *'The boys are set free,'* added a girl of the same age from South Gondar.

Regional differences were also marked. Adolescents from Zone 5 (Afar) were least likely (27%) to have left their communities, largely because they live in remote areas but also due to clan and inter-ethnic violence that has made travel risky. Those from East Hararghe were most likely to have travelled out of their *kebele* (44%), due to girls' need to fetch water from distant water holes and adolescents' greater engagement with the cash economy and markets. *'There is no limit and I can go to market based on need,'* observed a 15-year-old girl from a remote community in East Hararghe.

Box 2: Marriage multiplies girls' disadvantage across all domains

Our survey found that married girls have significantly less access to mobility, friends, and information and communications technology (ICT) than their unmarried peers. Compared to their unmarried peers, older married girls (17–19 years) are less likely to have a trusted friend (59% versus 71%), have a phone (36% versus 42%) or listen to the radio (24% versus 31%).

Our qualitative work found that the limits on married girls' worlds are shaped by social norms around the intra-household gender division of labour and a husband's control of his wife. Married girls across the regions in our study emphasised that they simply did not have time to engage with the world beyond their home. *'We spend most of our time searching for firewood, fetching water and working on the farm, so we don't get time,'* explained a 14-year-old married girl from East Hararghe. *'It is those unmarried girls who attend school that have happiness... Married girls have a lot of household responsibilities and worries about their household,'* added a 15-year-old married girl from South Gondar. More important, girls agreed, was that husbands exert almost total control over their young wives' lives. *'I say that I have to wash clothes today; I have to fetch water or collect firewood. These things I know and I decide on my own,'* explained a married 13-year-old from South Gondar. When asked whether she was allowed to have a say in larger decisions, she replied: *'It is the man who knows.'* Married girls added that while technology could help expand horizons even for those who are homebound, it tends to be controlled by men. *'Most of the time men sit and listen to the radio while chewing khat [a plant that acts as a stimulant, common in parts of Ethiopia] together. Females do not join them and listen to the radio. I never sit with them to listen to the radio,'* reported a married 15-year-old girl from Zone 5 (Afar).

Box 3: The gender digital divide

Across age groups and locations, girls have significantly less access to information and digital technology than boys. This is true of older forms of technology, such as radio, with 37% of boys having listened at least once in the past month compared to only 23% of girls. It is also true of newer forms of technology, with 25% of boys but only 18% of girls having a mobile phone for their own use. The gender gap is larger still in terms of phones with internet connectivity. In urban areas, 46% of older boys have a smartphone compared to 35% of girls.

Our qualitative work highlights that gender norms prevent girls from using the digital technology that would allow them to access information. First parents and then husbands are afraid that girls will use phones to illicitly communicate with boys and men. *'In our area, females do not have phones. It is usually males who can have a cell phone... It is to prevent women from cheating with other men by calling through the phone,'* explained a 14-year-old girl from Zone 5 (Afar). Even in urban areas, girls often reported that they must rely on word of mouth to learn what is going on around them. *'I collect information from people,'* replied a 19-year-old girl from Batu when asked how she learnt about current events. In rural areas, where girls' mobility is more tightly restricted and their friends are just as likely to be deprived of information, many girls have no exposure to political affairs. *'Politics is like, umm, it is like, umm, I don't know what it is,'* confessed a 15-year-old girl from South Gondar.

Younger adolescents were less likely to report having a trusted friend at midline than at baseline (64% compared to 76%), presumably because they are less likely to be enrolled in school and – for some girls – because they are more likely to be married (see Box 2). There were no differences between unmarried girls and boys. However, those living in urban areas or in East Hararghe were more likely to have a confidant (approximately 75%) than those living in South Gondar (approximately 66%) and especially those living in pastoralist Zone 5 (Afar) (approximately 40%). The latter figure could be capturing the fact that due to more limited school enrolment in Afar, adolescents are missing out on opportunities to forge relationships with school peers. However, our qualitative findings suggest that they have opportunities to build friendships with age-mates: many Afar adolescents are active participants in *sadah*, a cultural dance where boys and girls dance outside at night without parental supervision. Adolescent boys also join *faema*, a tightly knit group of peers who support the elders in enforcing clan rules and sanctions, and commonly reported on the close relationships that they enjoy with their *faema*.

Our qualitative work suggests that the violence unfolding across Ethiopia during midline data collection was often a formidable barrier to friendship. Younger adolescents (12–14 years) in South Gondar reported that gun violence and local deaths encouraged them to limit social interactions; in East Hararghe, their peers remained wary following the border conflict of late 2017/early 2018 that left hundreds of thousands displaced; and in Afar, as already mentioned, clan and inter-ethnic tensions have disrupted community mobility over the past two years. Similarly, older adolescents in urban areas specifically detailed how friendships had been disrupted by inter-community violence. In Dire Dawa in late 2019 our qualitative findings highlighted that students from different groups were unable to learn in mixed ethnic groups due to harassment and fighting, and that some parents were forced to withdraw their children and move them to other schools. For example, a 19-year-old boy from Dire Dawa

reported that he changed schools mid-year *'to isolate myself'* from the daily violence that took place even inside classrooms. A 20-year-old young woman with a physical disability added that she can no longer use social media to communicate with her friends because her phone was stolen in a melee at Debre Tabor University: *'I had a mobile phone which is used to access Facebook but... my phone was stolen during the conflict in this university. I was with my friends in the cafeteria and when the students started throwing stones, I forgot my phone and left it on the table.'*

Access to age-appropriate information and digital technology

Adolescents' access to information and digital technology is also increasing, as technology filters further into rural areas, young people mature, and the need to be aware of current events has taken on new urgency as political events unfold and violence spreads. Although there are considerable differences by gender (see Box 3), residence location and age are the primary delimiters – a pattern established by our baseline research. Among older adolescents, 19% of those living in urban areas and 7% of those living in rural areas have read a newspaper at least once in the past month. Similarly, 61% of those in cities and only 33% of those in rural areas have a phone for their own use. (Among younger adolescents, who are less likely to work and to be able to contribute to the purchase price, figures for phone ownership are much lower – 10% and 9% respectively.)

Adolescents in our qualitative sample reported that improved access to digital technology is shaping not only their daily lives, allowing them to communicate with friends and listen to music, but also enabling them to invest in their futures. *'I used to download books,'* explained a 17-year-old girl from Batu, after noting that her phone had recently run out of charge. Somewhat surprisingly, given that they receive relatively little guidance from parents and educators, adolescents quite often also saw the downsides

Facebook users inform us about the political situation in the town.

(A 16-year-old boy from South Gondar)

of improved connectivity. A 19-year-old girl from Dire Dawa admitted that while her phone helps her study, it also facilitates time-wasting: *'There is 50% chance of anything to be good or bad. But our brain tends to balance towards the negative. Even myself, I do not use it properly. I could download books and read but that is not what I do.'*

In an attempt to capture the dynamic changes unfolding across Ethiopia, our midline tools included new modules to explore adolescents' political knowledge and beliefs. These tools highlighted that while some young people – primarily boys from rural East Hararghe and South Gondar – are embracing active citizenship, others are almost completely disenfranchised. In East Hararghe, 35% of older adolescents reported that politics were *'very important'* to them. Our qualitative findings underscored that the ascension of Prime Minister Abiy has been personally salient for many young people in these communities. However, his administration is increasingly seen as a grave disappointment given a perception of limited gains for Oromo communities coupled with increased ethnic violence and insecurity. Moreover, there have been campaigns by political activists to resist the Prime Minister's efforts to promote pan-ethnic unity. Nearly as many young people in South Gondar agreed that politics is *'very important'* (31%). *'There is now freedom of expression and transparency... This is since the government changed and Dr Abiy came to power,'* observed an 18-year-old boy. By contrast, in Zone 5 (Afar), 66% of adolescents reported that politics were *'completely irrelevant'* to their lives and in the qualitative findings only one adolescent was able to name the Prime Minister when asked.

Urban adolescents, despite their increased access to information, were far less likely to report that politics were *'very important'* to them than rural adolescents. Only 20% of boys and 17% of girls answered in the affirmative (versus 36% of boys and 24% of girls in rural areas). Our qualitative work found that for that minority, social media serves as a venue through which young people can discreetly engage in political movements. *'Facebook users inform us about the political situation in the town... A person who uses Facebook can get access to new information like the violence that occurs in town,'* explained a 16-year-old boy from South Gondar. Similarly, a 19-year-old adolescent boy from Dire Dawa noted: *'I have two Facebook pages. I use one of them to communicate with friends and to download videos. However, I use the second one to upload secret*

political messages and to share videos of ethnic violence within our community.' The majority of urban adolescents reported either that they *'followed politics but do not really care'* (40% of boys and 35% of girls) or that politics were *'completely irrelevant'* (40% of boys and 48% of girls). Our qualitative work strongly suggests that urban adolescents' apparent apathy is an attempt to disguise fear. *'I don't need to talk about politics. I only want peace and stability. What matters is not the one who leads; it must be about peace and stability,'* explained a 19-year-old boy from Batu, after noting that gangs had led to recent chaos in the city. A 14-year-old girl from Debre Tabor agreed, observing that university students have been fleeing to avoid violence: *'It wasn't that much of a problem in the past but now it is a big problem... These days university students are withdrawing because of the security issues and conflicts.'*

Role models

In part driven by the changing world around them, young adolescents were far more likely to report having a role model at midline than at baseline (54% versus 35%). Improvements were more marked among boys, of whom 63% reported an inspirational role model (compared to only 45% of girls); and among those living in South Gondar, where 59% had a role model (compared to 47% in East Hararghe and 38% in Zone 5). *'There is no one that I consider as a role model,'* reported a 12-year-old girl from a remote community in South Gondar. Gender and regional divides were also apparent in the type of characteristics adolescents valued about their chosen role model. Girls and boys alike admired those who were *'smart'* and *'successful'*, though those from South Gondar tended to emphasise educational success and those from East Hararghe financial success. *'My sister finished her education and started a job; she brings blankets for my father. He blessed her so much when she gave him her gift. When I see her status I started to focus on my education to be like her,'* explained a 17-year-old boy from South Gondar, when asked why he wanted to be like his sister. Boys, however, and especially those from Zone 5 (Afar), admired those whom they saw as *'strong'*, while girls were attracted to those with a *'good personality'*.

The individuals that girls and boys chose as role models spoke volumes about girls' relative disadvantage. While 47% of boys who had a role model said that that role model was from outside the home, this was the case for only 29% of girls. Furthermore, while boys were likely to choose someone famous (24% of those with role models outside of the home) or a male friend or relative (43%), girls were far more likely to choose a male relative (40%) than a female friend (20%) and were very unlikely to choose someone famous (3%). This was also captured in our qualitative work,

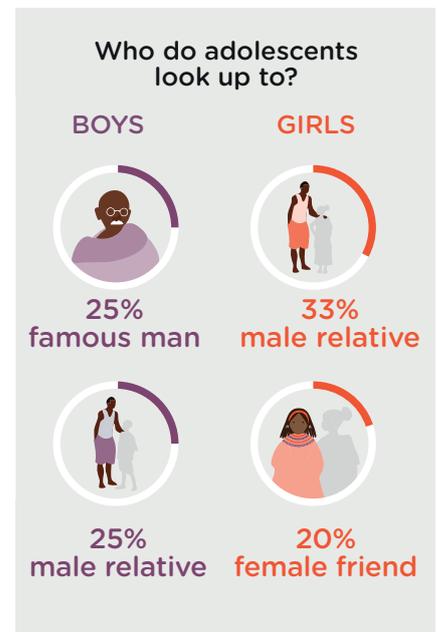
where boys singled out political leaders for emulation while girls did not. 'I want to be like Jawar [an influential political activist]... because he is analyst of the entire world, I want to achieve like that goal,' stated a younger boy from East Hararghe. 'I want to be like PM Abiy Ahmed,' added another, from the same region. Although Ethiopia's president is a woman, no girl in either the quantitative or qualitative data spontaneously mentioned her as a role model and few admitted to knowing about her, even when pressed. 'We heard her name,' stated a 17-year-old girl from East Hararghe. Girls instead tended to mention uncles and older brothers and male cousins as having inspired them along a particular path. 'I saw some who went to Addis Ababa University. My cousins were also educated... When I saw them learning, I said I would not be a fool,' reported a 19-year-old divorced girl from Zone 5 (Afar), now finishing secondary school after being married against her will at age

▶ I saw some who went to Addis Ababa University. My cousins were also educated... When I saw them learning, I said I would not be a fool.

(A 19-year-old divorced girl from Zone 5 (Afar))

15. Indeed, even in South Gondar, where there are more girls who could serve as role models, girls remain likely to choose a man on whom to pattern their aspirations. 'He treats us well and he is polite and doesn't mistreat us,' explained a 15-year-old girl from South Gondar when asked why she chose her male English teacher as her role model.

Girls are less likely than **boys** to have role models and most often **look up to men** rather than women.



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Key actions to accelerate progress

In order to capitalise on the opportunities opening up to adolescents in this time of rapid political and social change – and yet also to keep them safe – it is vital to balance young people's growing needs for independence and connection with their need for protection. In the case of adolescent girls – given their marked disadvantages as highlighted by our findings across the domains of voice, agency and mobility – it is especially important to invest in addressing the barriers they face at household and community levels to set the foundations for the realisation of SDG 5's ambitious vision of equal participation of women in the political arena.

Our research suggests the need for five broad actions to increase adolescents' access to voice and agency and facilitate their maturation into empowered adults who can make decisions about their own lives and contribute meaningfully to their communities and country:

- 1 Invest in adolescent clubs and safe spaces that provide young people with opportunities to foster their own voices in child-friendly venues that over time segue into scaffolded community interactions:** Provide adolescents with school- and community-based opportunities to spend time with peers and with adults who can mentor them through the transition from childhood to adulthood. Clubs, including municipal youth centres, should promote programming that endeavours to foster confidence and voice, supports boys to become champions of gender equality, and helps young people find meaningful and age-appropriate ways to contribute to their communities.
- 2 Provide parents with parenting education courses that help caregivers balance adolescents' needs for protection and participation:** Support parents to help them understand the importance of allowing adolescents to make age-appropriate decisions about their own lives and contribute to household decision-making. Focused attention should be paid to gender norms, and the myriad ways they disempower girls and women.
- 3 Recognise that married girls are the most silenced and step up cross-community efforts to eliminate child marriage and support married girls' agency:** Work with community leaders, parents and adolescents to help them understand the advantages of adult marriage – especially vis-à-vis investments

in education – and to cancel adolescent-planned marriages, as well as sanctioning adults who facilitate these unions. Simultaneously, provide programming for young married couples aimed at fostering more egalitarian forms of communication and addressing gender inequities.

- 4 Foster an engaged citizenry by ensuring that civics education fosters democratic and peace-oriented beliefs and behaviours and counters misinformation:** Whether delivered by school curriculum and/or in grassroots venues, civics education for young people needs to focus on encouraging democratic and peace-oriented beliefs and behaviours, including in the home, school and community. It is also vital to teach young people how to critically consume information and detect misinformation.
- 5 Inspire girls by creating campaigns aimed at providing them with female role models:** These should include regional and national-level role models, publicised on posters and billboards and in the school curriculum, given girls' limited access to other sources of information. There should also be concerted efforts at the local level to highlight successful girls and women, including to girls' families and communities.

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