

**‘My husband can go to work and I will go to my school’: exploring changing patterns in adolescents’ access to education and learning in Ethiopia**

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## Abbreviations

FGD	focus group discussion
FGM/C	female genital mutilation/cutting
GER	gross enrolment rate
GPI	gender parity index
IDP	internally displaced person
LSS	lower-secondary education
NER	net enrolment rate
NGO	non-governmental organisation
TVET	technical and vocational education and training
USS	upper-secondary education

## Introduction

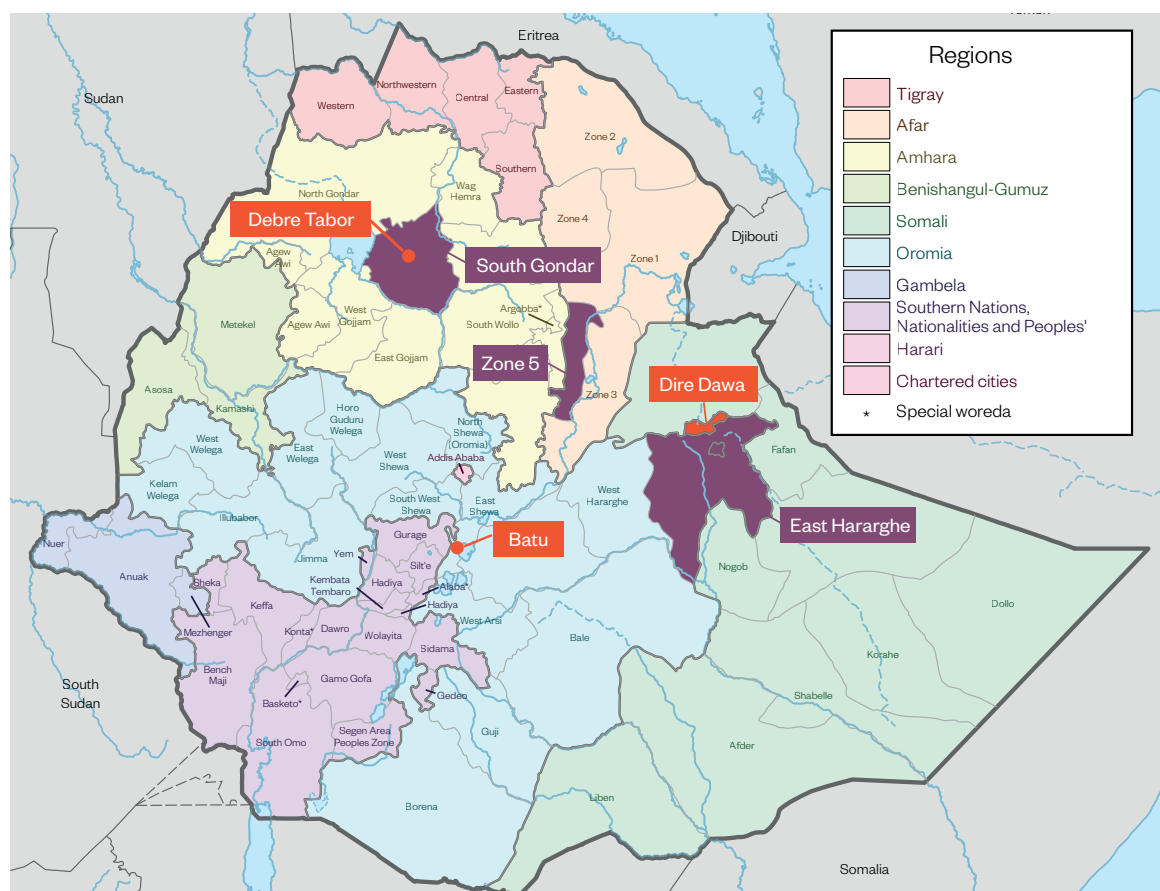
Ethiopia has seen remarkable progress over the past decade in terms of adolescents' access to education. Driven by the government's investments in educational infrastructure and awareness-raising, the gross enrolment rate<sup>1</sup> (GER) for upper primary school<sup>2</sup> (grades 5–8) climbed from 66% in 2010 to 82% in the 2019–2020 school year (Ministry of Education, 2020). That year, at national level, 71% of students completed 8th grade and the GER for 9th and 10th grades reached 51% (ibid.).

Despite progress, however, significant challenges and inequities remain. Enrolment rates in some regions are extremely low. In Afar, for example, only 1 in 5 adolescents enrol in upper-primary school and only 1 in 8 enrol in secondary school (ibid). Moreover, improvements in access have not been accompanied by improvements in quality. Evidence from the Young Lives study highlights that only a 'tiny minority' of students have achieved mastery

of basic literacy and numeracy by early adolescence (Oketch et al., 2020). In addition, and mirroring the slowing progress in the fight against child marriage in Ethiopia, progress towards gender parity has not only slowed but it has reversed, as enrolment for boys has increased more quickly in recent years than for girls. Despite government messaging about girls' progress, the primary gender parity index (GPI) fell from .93 to .91 between 2013 and 2019. The secondary GPI fell from .91 to .87 in that same timeframe (Ministry of Education, 2020).

This report synthesises findings from the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) programme's midline data collection (in late 2019/early 2020) to explore patterns in Ethiopian adolescents' education and learning. Paying careful attention to similarities and differences between groups of adolescents with different characteristics – girls and boys, those living in cities versus

**Figure 1: Research locations**



1 Due to over age enrolment, net enrollment rates are lower.  
 2 Ethiopia is changing the education system. Under the old system, primary school included grades 1–8 and was organised into two cycles: lower (1–4) and upper (5–8). Secondary school was also organised in two cycles, the first including grades 9 and 10 and the second – accessible only for those scoring high enough on the Ethiopian General Secondary Education Certificate Examination – including grades 11 and 12. Under the new system, primary school will include grades 1–6, middle school will include grades 7 and 8, and secondary school will include only a single cycle inclusive of grades 9–12. Recognising that there will be confusion as the transition takes place, especially given that GAGE midline data was collected before the reorganisation began, we have taken care to be specific about grades.

those in rural areas, those living in different regions, and those who are especially vulnerable due to disability, child marriage, or displacement – we explore young people's (aged 12–19) educational aspirations, their access to formal education, the support they receive from caregivers and educators (including for transitions, such as from primary to secondary and secondary to tertiary education), and their grade repetition and learning.

## Methods

This report draws on mixed-methods research undertaken from late 2019 to early 2020 (two years after the GAGE baseline) as part of GAGE's midline data collection in rural and urban sites in three regions of Ethiopia: Afar, Amhara and Oromia, as well as Dire Dawa city administration. Twelve rural districts (woredas) – of which two were in pastoralist Zone 5 (Afar), five were in South Gondar (Amhara), and five were in East Hararghe (Oromia) – were chosen for their combination of economic and social vulnerabilities (namely, areas with higher levels of food insecurity and high prevalence of child marriage). Their varying distances from the district town ensures heterogeneity in our sample with regard to remoteness (distance to services and markets). The three urban settings in the research sample – Batu (formerly known as Ziway) in East Shewa (Oromia), Debre Tabor in South Gondar (Amhara), and Dire Dawa city administration – are just as diverse. Their cultural and religious diversity, as well as differences in location, size, and migration patterns help to explain the different threats and opportunities facing

**Table 1: Educational statistics by region**

	National		Dire Dawa City		Afar		Amhara		Oromia	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
GER primary (1–8)	109.9	99.8	117.4	103.5	58	48.8	97.2	94.8	115.3	100.3
GER upper-primary (5–8)	84.9	78.5	96.1	79	33.1	26.4	92.8	96.3	79.9	67.2
GPI primary (1–8)	.91	.88	.91	.98	.87					
NER primary	99.3	91.3	102.3	92.1	48.1	41.5	86.7	85.8	105.9 <sup>i</sup>	93.6
NER upper-primary	67.4	64.1	69	59	21.5	18.3	71.8	77.3	63.7	55.7
GER 9–10	53.5	48.6	63.7	55.4	22.8	16.4	61.5	67	47.7	37.4
GER 11–12	29.3	23.5	24.7	20.7	9.9	7.7	31.7	30.8	32.4	23.2
GPI secondary (9–12)	.87	.86	.74	1.05	.76					
NER 9–10	25.7	26.1	20.3	22.6	7.4	6	25.1	31.3	21.7	19.6
NER 11–12	13.9	12.6	9.2	11.6	3.8	3.4	14.5	15.4	14	11.8

Source: Ministry of Education, 2020.

<sup>i</sup> The Ministry of Education notes this figure is not possible and reflects inaccuracy regarding age of enrolment.

**Table 2: GAGE midline quantitative sample**

	Overall	Urban	South Gondar	East Hararghe	Zone 5
All	7526	1987	2482	2255	802
Male	3199	933	1005	933	328
Female	4327	1054	1477	1322	474
Old cohort	3207	1370	668	747	422
Young cohort	4319	617	1814	1508	380
Disability sample	581	200	143	204	34
Early marriage sample	1090	182	360	392	156

adolescent girls and boys in accessing quality education and learning. See Figure 1 for a map of research sites and Table 1 for enrolment statistics at national and regional levels (Ministry of Education, 2020).

GAGE's Ethiopian midline sample, which differs from our baseline sample (see Box 1), includes 7,526 successfully surveyed adolescents (out of a possible 8,555) as well as their caregivers (see Appendix for more details on the sampling). The quantitative sample was divided into two cohorts: younger adolescents (most aged 12–14 at midline) and older adolescents (most aged 15–19 at midline). See Table 2 for a breakdown of the quantitative sample.

To ensure that the sample was consistently drawn from across sites and to minimise the risk of overlooking the most disadvantaged adolescents (such as out-of-school adolescents, married adolescents, and adolescents

with disabilities), a door-to-door listing was undertaken before baseline in all research sites, following a specific protocol, and complemented with purposeful sampling of disadvantaged groups.

The qualitative sample – of 388 core adolescents – was selected from the larger quantitative sample, deliberately oversampling the most disadvantaged in order to capture the voices of those at risk of being ‘left behind’. It also included caregivers, grandparents and siblings, government officials, community and religious leaders, and service providers (see Table 3).

Survey data was collected in face-to-face interviews by enumerators who were trained to communicate with adolescents, and spoke the local language (Amharic, Afar Af’, Afaan Oromo and, in the case of Dire Dawa, also Somali). Analysis of the quantitative survey data focused on a set of indicators related to education and learning (data tables are available on request). Sampling weights, reflecting the probability of selection into the study sample, were used to make the results representative of the target population in the study area. Statistical analysis was conducted using Stata 15.1. All differences cited in the text are statistically significant at least at the  $p=0.05$  level.

Qualitative tools, also administered by researchers carefully trained to communicate sensitively with adolescents, consisted of interactive activities such as timelines, body mappings and vignettes, which were used in individual and group interviews (see Jones et al., 2019). Preliminary data analysis took place during daily and site-wide debriefings. Interviews were transcribed and translated by native speakers and then coded thematically using the qualitative software analysis package MAXQDA.

### Box 1: GAGE’s baseline and midline samples

GAGE’s Ethiopian sample changed between baseline and midline. Our baseline sample did not include older cohort adolescents living in rural areas—nearly 2,000 of these young people were added for midline. At the same time, due to attrition, we lost nearly 1,000 of the adolescents who participated in our baseline. Because of these differences, the quantitative data presented in this report is cross-sectional midline data only. There will be a follow-up report on the longitudinal progress of the adolescents who were included in both baseline and midline.

Preliminary analysis of the group of young people lost to midline follow up shows that those living in South Gondar and East Hararghe were disproportionately likely to have been out of school at baseline (6 percentage points). Those living in South Gondar were more likely to have been living in female headed households (5 percentage points) and to be girls (2 percentage points). Those living in East Hararghe were more likely to have been living in households benefiting from Ethiopia’s public works programme (6 percentage points) and be girls (4 percentage points).

Prior to commencing research, we secured approval from ethics committees at the Overseas Development Institute and George Washington University, as well as from the research ethics boards in the regional Bureaus of Health of Ethiopia in which the research was conducted. We also secured informed assent from adolescents aged 17 and under, and informed consent from their caregivers (as minors under 18 are not legally able to give consent), and from adolescents aged 18 or above.

**Table 3: GAGE midline qualitative sample**

	DD	DT	Batu	SG	EH	Zone 5	Sub-totals
Girls younger	9	6	–	24	25	12	76
Girls older	14	8	11	3	5	8	49
Boys younger	5	8	–	22	16	12	63
Boys older	12	8	10	6	4	5	45
Married adolescents	2	2	1	30	30	18	83
Adolescents with disabilities	2	8	5	16	12	9	52
IDPs	6	–	7	–	7	–	20
Total adolescents	50	20	34	101	99	64	388
Parents IDI	5	3	–	8	–	–	16
Key informants	5	4	21	39	51	9	129
FGDs adolescents	21	20	48	54	60	16	219
FGDs parents	36	–	28	117	133	68	382
<b>Sub-totals</b>	<b>117</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>319</b>	<b>343</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>1134</b>

## Conceptual framing

Informed by the emerging evidence base on adolescent well-being and development, GAGE's conceptual framework takes a holistic approach that pays careful attention to the interconnectedness of what we call the '3 Cs' – capabilities, change strategies and contexts – in order to understand what works to support adolescent girls' development and empowerment, both now and in the future (see Figure 2). This framing draws on the three components of Pawson and Tilley's (1997) approach to evaluation, which highlights the importance of outcomes, causal mechanisms and contexts, though we tailor it to the specific challenges of understanding what works in improving adolescent girls' capabilities.

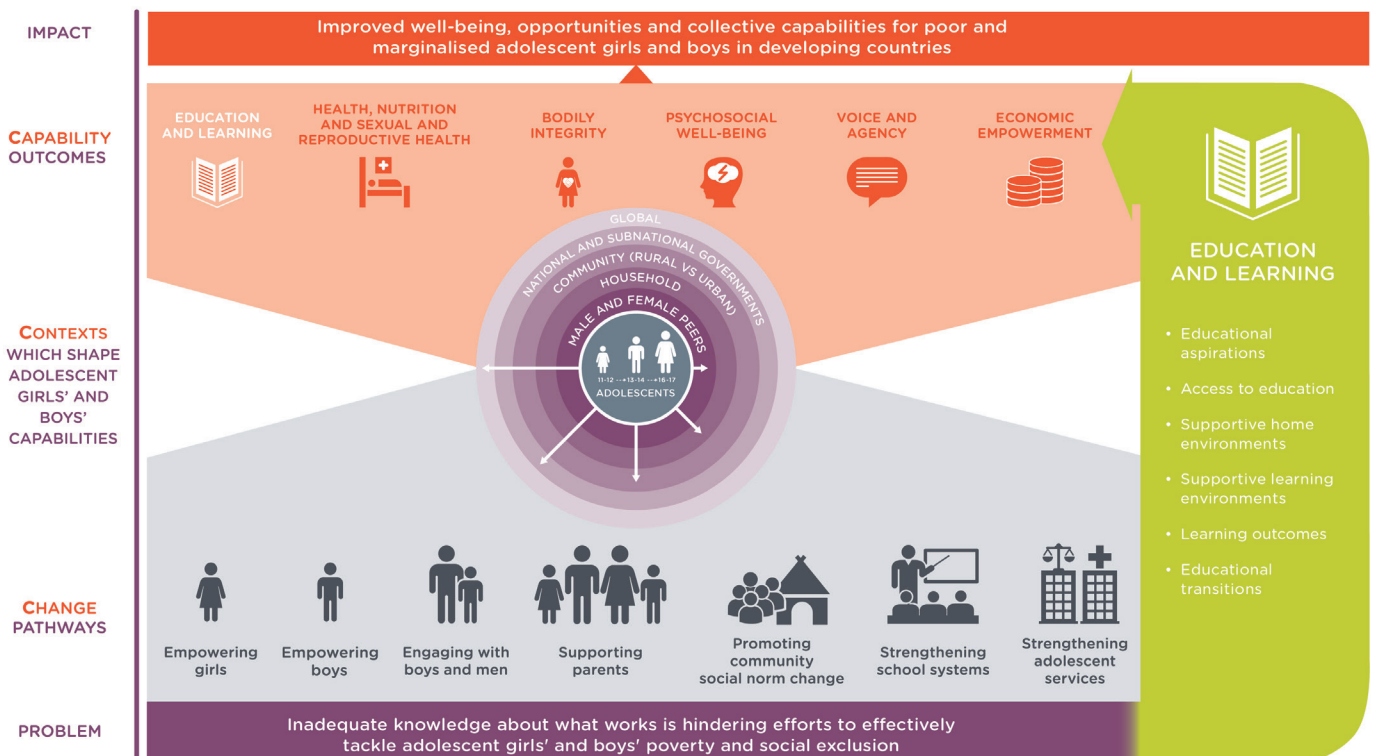
The first building block of our conceptual framework is capability outcomes. Championed originally by Amartya Sen (1984, 2004) and nuanced to better capture complex gender dynamics at intra-household and societal levels by Martha Nussbaum (2011) and Naila Kabeer (2003), the capabilities approach has evolved as a broad normative framework exploring the kinds of assets (economic, human, political, emotional and social) that expand the capacity of individuals to achieve valued ways of 'doing and being'. At its core is a sense of competence and purposive agency: it goes beyond a focus on a fixed bundle of external assets, instead emphasising investment in an

individual's skills, knowledge and voice. Importantly, the approach can encompass relevant investments in girls with diverse trajectories, including the most marginalised and 'hardest to reach' such as those who are disabled or are already mothers.

The second building block of our conceptual framework is context dependency. Our '3 C's framework situates girls socio-ecologically and recognises not only that adolescent girls at different stages in the life course have different needs and constraints, but that these are also highly dependent on girls' contexts at the family/household, community, state and global levels.

The third and final building block of our conceptual framework – change strategies – acknowledges that girls' contextual realities will not only shape the pathways through which they develop their capabilities but also determine the change strategies open to them to improve their outcomes. Our ecological approach emphasises that in order to nurture transformative change in girls' capabilities and broader well-being, potential change strategies must simultaneously invest in integrated intervention approaches at different levels, weaving together policies and programming that support girls, their families and their communities while also working to effect change at the systems level. GAGE focuses on six

Figure 2: GAGE conceptual framework





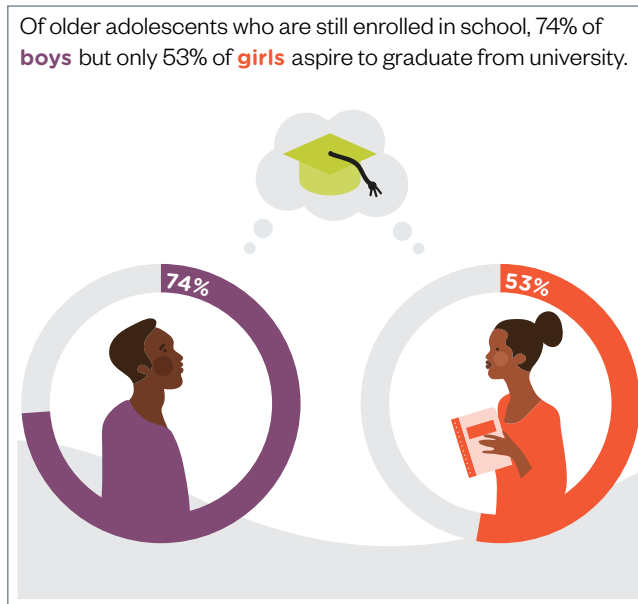
core capabilities: education and learning; health, sexual health and nutrition; bodily integrity; psychosocial well-being; voice and agency; and economic empowerment. This report covers the first of these domains, addressing adolescents' educational aspirations, access to education, supportive home and school environments, learning outcomes, and educational transitions (see Figure 2).

## Key findings

### Educational aspirations

#### Survey results

Our survey found that adolescents' educational aspirations are shaped by their desire for professional careers and are high, though unrealistically so. Across locations and cohorts, a large majority (73%) would like professional careers and, outside of Zone 5 (Afar), where 9% of adolescents view the completion of 10th grade as sufficient, most (74%) would like to attend college or university—with marked differences between those enrolled (81%) and those not-enrolled (46%). There were marked differences between girls and boys (61% versus 78%) and across locations, with those in Zone 5 (35%) least likely to want to attend college or university, and those in urban areas (90%) most likely to. While girls' aspirations are lower than boys', even in South Gondar (63% versus 75% for the younger cohort), gender differences are especially marked in East Hararghe, where 84% of younger boys but only 52% of younger girls aspire to college or university (see Table 4). Across locations, though less so in urban areas, aspirations decline (and become more realistic) as adolescents become older and better able to discern what is and is not possible. For example, while 75% of younger boys in South Gondar would like to attend college or university, only 52% of those in the older cohort have the same aspiration.



#### Qualitative findings

Our qualitative research nuances these survey findings – and suggests more diversity than one might anticipate. Much of this diversity stems from where young people live, as this shapes the options they consider open to them. In urban areas – unsurprisingly, given young people's better access to better schools and role models – adolescents' aspirations are not only high but relatively unchanged since baseline. In Batu, for example, a 17-year-old girl mentioned wanting to *'discover medication for HIV'*. In Debre Tabor, a 14-year-old boy stated: *'I aspire to be an astronomer.'* Again in line with baseline findings, adolescents' educational aspirations also tend to be high in rural South Gondar. Indeed, although most young people chose simpler goals than their urban peers – usually teaching or medicine, often because *'I need to make myself free from farming job'* (17-year-old boy, Community D, South Gondar) – some were starting to understand how many years they would need to be in school to achieve their goals and it was not uncommon for them to mention specific universities (often chosen based on proximity or the experiences of older relatives or peers). *'I'll go to Ebenat (the local town) until I reach grade 12 and join the University in Addis Ababa,'* explained a 12-year-old girl from Community E (South

**Table 4: Per cent of adolescents aspiring to college or university by cohort, location and sex**

Younger								Older							
Urban		South Gondar		East Hararghe		Zone 5		Urban		South Gondar		East Hararghe		Zone 5	
M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
96	87	75	63	84	52	46	31	93	87	52	52	79	39	32	25

**D** I just want to be a teacher...  
When you become a teacher, you can also inspire and create a sense of competition in other students.

(A 13-year-old boy from Community L)

Gondar). University 'choice', or lack thereof, emerged in our midline research as a significant source of concern for many young people. Due to government policy that assigns students to universities in different regions, and recent violence directed at students from other regions, several adolescents from South Gondar reported that they had given up aspiring to tertiary education because they did not feel safe outside of Amhara (see Box 5).

Of our qualitative participants, and in contrast to baseline findings, relatively fewer adolescents in East Hararghe and Zone 5 expressed high educational aspirations. When they did, it was also – like their peers in South Gondar – usually for teaching or medicine. *'I just want to be a teacher... When you become a teacher, you can also inspire and create a sense of competition in other students,'* explained a 13-year-old boy from Community L (East Hararghe). *'I want to be a doctor to help patients,'* added a mid-adolescent girl from Community B (Zone 5). What stood out at midline is that in East Hararghe and Zone 5, the highest aspirations generally felt as if they belonged to younger children and appeared especially unactionable – either chosen without understanding or so untethered from reality that they had little scope to shape actual trajectories.

### Box 2: 'Education is better'

Fatima is a 19-year-old divorcee from Community A (Zone 5). She is in 12th grade and hopes to attend university and study medicine. While her community and her family were initially opposed to her education, her determination has not only changed her own life, but is starting to change theirs.

*'My mother did not raise me,'* explained Fatima. *'When I stopped taking my mother's breast, my mother gave me to my grandmother. My grandmother became weak, and she gave me to my aunt.'*

Her aunt and uncle, she explained, were opposed to formal education, because they saw it as irrelevant compared to wealth: *'My family are rich... They say that education is not as good as wealth... My family were telling me repeatedly that learning was not good... They say they don't know about education... It is only goats that we know... Poor people might be better. Rich people remain in the field.'*

When Fatima began to try to sneak away to school, her aunt and uncle first resorted to hiding her schoolbooks. When that failed to dampen her interest, her uncle sought to use physical violence to keep her from going to school. *'He was tying and beating me... not allowing me to go.'*

Fatima remained undaunted. She had cousins attending university and was determined to follow in their footsteps. *'When I saw them learning, I said I would not be a fool... I was telling them that I was not any less than others who were learning.'* Her aunt and uncle gave in and Fatima was allowed to attend full-time.

When she was married to her *absuma*,<sup>ii</sup> at age 15, Fatima's aunt and uncle again tried to force her to drop out. *'He [her uncle] said when they got me married I would stop going to school.'* Fatima was adamant that they could not make her drop out: *'I told him that I would not sit down and wait for my husband in the house. I told my uncle that if my husband has work, he can go to his work and I will go to my school. I told them that I did not want a husband that would not allow me to go to school. I told them that I don't want a husband who expects me to look after the goats for him.'*

Fatima again won – and was allowed to divorce and continue on to secondary school, emphasising that *'It was with my own decision that I reached here... I was the one who pushed hard to reach this level.'*

Fatima is delighted that the past few years have finally seen her family and her community begin to embrace education. *'Recently, people are getting better. Things are advancing... They have understood the value of education... Now they are happy because a school is constructed for them... My father and my uncle came to understand. My younger brother was not attending school. Now he has started to attend school.'*

ii In Afar, the *absuma* marriage custom dictates that marriage partners – for girls and boys – are maternal cousins. Boys and men have some input into which cousin and when they will marry. Girls have none.

**Table 6: Percentage of adolescents currently enrolled by cohort, location and sex**

Younger								Older							
Urban		South Gondar		East Hararghe		Zone 5		Urban		South Gondar		East Hararghe		Zone 5	
M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
98	97	87	95	88	65	57	64	86	77	58	51	72	31	40	28

A 12-year-old girl from Community J (East Hararghe), for example, stated that she wanted to become an engineer, but then added that she does not know what engineering is. *'I want to be an engineer... I heard when people talk that they say engineering is good but I do not know what it is.'* In Zone 5, while aspirations were lower, they were often even less realistic. A 13-year-old boy from Community B (Zone 5), which does not even have a functional primary school, reported that he would like *'to attend up to 10th grade'* so that he can become a civil servant. He then admitted that he does not yet know the alphabet.

Critically, and in contrast to baseline, a large number of out-of-school young people from East Hararghe and Zone 5 acknowledged seeing little value in education. *'I hated schooling. There will be no change in my life if I complete education. The salary graduated people get is small,'* explained a 19-year-old boy from Community H (East Hararghe). *'Learning is not good... It doesn't have a benefit... I will keep cattle very well and be rich,'* added a 12-year-old boy from Community A (Zone 5). Key informants in both areas highlighted that a lack of local role models is largely to blame for adolescents' (and parents') disinterest in formal education: *'In Fedis woreda in total, if you search for an educated person, the chance is too small. They do not have any child attending college. There is no university graduate.'* Adolescents, on the other hand, tended to emphasise the relative value of education compared to other, more lucrative livelihoods. Indeed, in Zone 5, where livestock equates to wealth, adolescents often admitted that while they might send some of their future children to school, they will not educate them all. *'I will not teach all of my children. Some of them will look after the assets and livestock in the family,'* explained a 19-year-old girl from Community A (Zone 5).

While our survey found that girls' educational aspirations are lower than those of boys, with the gender gap expanding in boys' favour as adolescents get older, our qualitative work captured girls' often fierce determination to change their lives through education. In urban areas and South Gondar, that determination is sometimes sparked by role models. *'I have an uncle who was an engineer and I wanted to be like him,'* explained an 18-year-old girl from

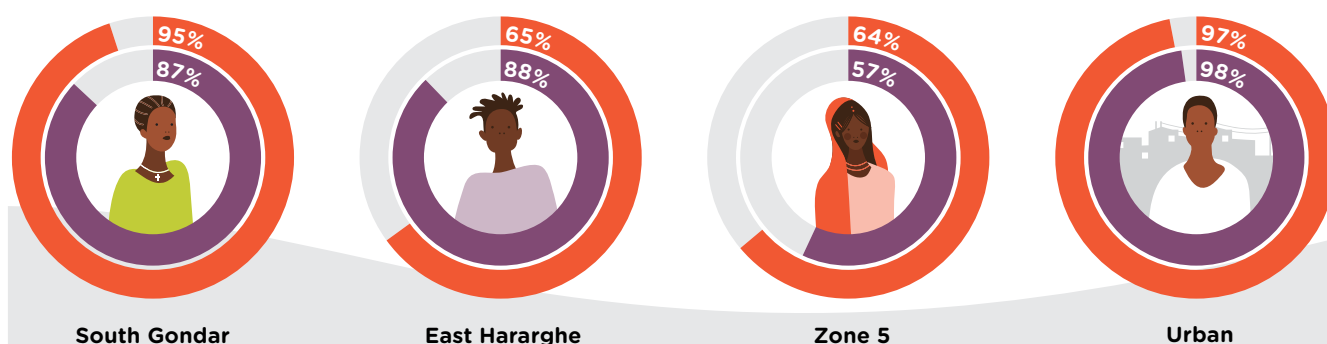
Debre Tabor. More often, however, that determination appears to be fuelled by girls' sometimes desperate desire to avoid traditional – and gendered – risks. For example, a 12-year-old girl from Community K (East Hararghe) explained that she sees education as a way to escape the constant work required of rural women: *'Here, we travel long distances to collect firewood. Women sell firewood and buy sorghum for household consumption, that is how they lead their life. Because of that I want to go to another area.'* Other girls see schooling as a way to avoid sexual harassment or child marriage. For instance, a 15-year-old girl from Community D (South Gondar) noted that girls are more diligent students than boys because they *'think, unless they are educated, they will be abused by men'*. A 12-year-old girl from Community J (East Hararghe), whose older sisters had all left school to marry as children, was adamant that education will help her avoid the same fate: *'I have emphasised that I will not drop out and get married. I shall continue my education... Till I complete 12th grade, join a higher education institution and graduate... I have this standpoint from the very beginning. I said the same thing last time when your team interviewed me.'* Indeed, in Zone 5, where educational aspirations – especially for girls – are lowest, there are a few girls willing to put themselves at risk to break the mold (see Box 2).

## Access to education

### Survey results

At midline, our survey found that just over three-quarters (77%) of adolescents were enrolled in school. As expected, younger adolescents were more likely to be enrolled than older adolescents and those living in urban areas were more likely to be enrolled than those in rural areas (see Table 6). Of older adolescents, 81% of those in urban areas and 49% of those in rural areas were enrolled. Of younger adolescents, the figures were 98% and 83% respectively. There is considerable diversity in enrolment rates across rural areas, with those in South Gondar (91%) significantly more likely to be enrolled than those in East Hararghe (78%) or Zone 5 (60%) (figures for the younger cohort).

The gender gap in enrolment varies significantly across regions – both in terms of who is disadvantaged and by what magnitude. Of younger adolescents:



### Box 3: Disability limits access to education

Across cohorts, our survey found that rural adolescents with disabilities (63%) are significantly less likely to be attending school than their peers without disabilities (76%) (see Table 5).

Table 5: Per cent enrolled, by location and disability status

	South Gondar	East Hararghe	Zone 5
Enrolled current session – adolescents with a disability	69	62	44
Enrolled current session – adolescents with no disability	85	71	50

Echoing GAGE's baseline findings, our qualitative work found that there are three reasons for these lower enrolment rates among adolescents with disabilities. First, rural schools often cannot accommodate students with disabilities. Infrastructure and curricula are not adapted and teachers have no training in educating those with special needs. As the mother of a 16-year-old boy with a physical disability in Community A (Zone 5) explained, *'Teachers tried to help him a lot, however, he couldn't stay in the classroom for a long time, and also he couldn't listen and learn attentively like other children.'* Second, many parents – mindful of the stigma that surrounds disability – choose not to send their children with disabilities to school, in order to keep them safe. *'I advised her that children may hit her and pressure her to stay at home,'* recalled the mother of a 10-year-old deaf girl from Community I (East Hararghe). *'My mother worries a lot... whenever I leave home and go to places,'* added a girl also aged 10, with a physical disability and from Community D (South Gondar). Third, parents' fears are not unfounded. Many adolescents with disabilities are bullied in school until they drop out. The mother of a 15-year-old girl with a communication disability from Community D (South Gondar) described her daughter's experience: *'She was coming to school. But when her heart was bright her mouth is tied. When others are reading, and when she is trying to read, she cannot read well and others would laugh at her. Then she left school.'*

Progress is being made, however, and especially in South Gondar. Enrolment figures have increased in recent years, according to research participants, because of the special needs schools slowly expanding from cities into rural towns. *'I immediately began once the special needs education programme was opened,'* stated a 16-year-old girl with a visual impairment attending 4th grade in Community C (South Gondar). Adolescents attending these schools were largely enthusiastic about their teachers. *'They answer all my questions if they know the answer and if they don't they ask their friends and get back to me,'* reported a 17-year-old blind girl attending a special needs school in Debre Tabor. Some young people with disabilities felt that they are being transitioned into mainstream classrooms too soon and with too little support. This means that even those who had been learning well begin to fall behind. *'Compared to lower grades, the work is getting tough from grade 5 to 6 and from 6 to 7, it keeps getting tough... I am trying hard to attend school, I am working hard. But since the teachers do not know any sign language, understanding becomes tough for me,'* explained an 18-year-old boy with a hearing disability in Batu. Adolescents with disabilities who had been integrated into mainstream schools emphasised that their learning challenges are exacerbated by their peers, who are often so loud and rowdy that it is difficult for them to hear or even see the teacher. *'Grade 4 was better... the students don't disturb,'* explained a 14-year-old girl with a hearing disability from Debre Tabor.

**Table 7: Proportion of school days missed in the past two weeks, by cohort, location and sex (enrolled students)**

Younger								Older							
Urban		South Gondar		East Hararghe		Zone 5		Urban		South Gondar		East Hararghe		Zone 5	
M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
5	4	13	12	9	12	5 <sup>iii</sup>	15	11	9	13	8	11	11	14	22

iii We suspect that younger boys did not accurately report their attendance—especially given that at baseline, younger boys in Zone 5 reported missing 29% of school days over the previous two weeks.

Rural adolescents with disabilities were least likely to be enrolled (see Box 3).

As was true at baseline, our midline survey found that gender patterning in enrolment is complex and varies across cohorts and locations (see Table 6). In rural areas, among the younger cohort, and despite their lower educational aspirations, girls are advantaged over boys in South Gondar (95% versus 87%) and Zone 5 (64% versus 57%). Younger boys are advantaged over girls – and the advantage is much larger – in East Hararghe (88% versus 65%). Of the older rural cohort, boys are advantaged over girls in all locations—for reasons which will be discussed below. In South Gondar, 58% of boys versus 51% of girls are enrolled; in Zone 5, the figures are 40% for boys and 28% for girls. East Hararghe has the largest gender gap in favour of boys: among older adolescents, 72% of boys and only 31% of girls are enrolled. In urban areas, younger girls and boys are almost universally likely to be enrolled in school (>97%). However, a gender divide opens for the older cohort and it is also in boys' favour. Of the older urban adolescents in our sample, 86% of boys are enrolled compared to 77% of girls.

Our midline survey, like our baseline survey, highlights that adolescents who are enrolled in school still struggle to maintain regular attendance. Across locations and cohorts, and including girls and boys, enrolled students report missing an average of 11% of school days in the two weeks prior to the survey (see Table 7). Recent absenteeism rates are largely stable across groups of young people, with two

exceptions. Of younger adolescents, those in rural areas (11%) miss twice as much school as those in urban areas (5%). Of older adolescents, and driven by girls, those in Zone 5 (22%) miss more school than those in South Gondar (8%) or East Hararghe (11%). A similar proportion (10%) of enrolled adolescents reported missing more than a full week of school in the past year. Among urban adolescents, those in the older cohort (14%) were more likely to miss a full week of school than those in the younger cohort (9%). Patterning in rural areas was more complex, with adolescents in South Gondar generally least likely to miss full weeks of school and those in East Hararghe most likely to. Younger girls in Zone 5 (17%) were most at risk.

Partly due to the fact that a minority of students outside of East Hararghe report enrolling in first grade 'on time'<sup>3</sup> (at the age of seven as per Ethiopian law), and partly due to high repetition rates (discussed below), the average adolescent in our quantitative sample is substantially over age for grade (see Table 8). Looking only at those who are currently enrolled, the younger cohort (age 12–14, median age of 13) has completed 6th grade in urban areas and only 5th grade in rural areas. The older cohort (age 17–19 median age of 17) has completed 10th grade in urban areas and only 6th grade in rural areas.

As was the case at baseline, gender patterning in grade attainment varies by location. Looking only at enrolled students, in urban areas, girls and boys have completed a similar amount of education. In South Gondar, girls are ahead of boys – approximately a half a grade level for the

**Table 8: Mean grade attainment, by cohort, location and sex (enrolled students)**

Younger								Older							
Urban		South Gondar		East Hararghe		Zone 5		Urban		South Gondar		East Hararghe		Zone 5	
M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
6.2	6.1	4.9	5.5	4.7	4.4	4	3.9	9.9	10	6	7.2	6.4	5.9	5	5.3

3 Our baseline survey found that the average age of enrolment in first grade for younger cohort children was 7.7 years in South Gondar, 6.8 years in East Hararghe, and 8.2 years in Zone 5. It was 6.9 years in urban areas. We note that the Ministry of Education (2020) has expressed concern that there are inaccuracies in the way age of enrolment is reported in Oromia.



Adolescents at school in Afar © Nathalie Bertrams / GAGE

lower cohort (5.5 versus 4.9) and more than a full grade level for the older cohort (7.2 versus 6). In East Hararghe, where demands on girls' time are the greatest, the reverse is true. Boys are at least a third of a grade level ahead of girls across cohorts (4.7 versus 4.4 for the younger cohort, and 6.4 versus 5.9 for the older). In Zone 5, noting that enrolment (especially for the older cohort) is limited, there is parity for younger adolescents (3.9 for girls and 4 for boys), and girls are a few months ahead of boys among the older cohort (5.3 versus 5).

For the approximately one-quarter of adolescents in the sample who were not enrolled in school at midline, our survey enquired as to why they had dropped out. Explanations clustered around three reasons. Adolescents' own lack of interest (17% across the entire sample of unenrolled adolescents) was most common for younger girls in East Hararghe (31%). Adolescents' labour being needed for household agricultural production (11%) was most common for younger boys in Zone 5 (49%) and older boys in South Gondar (40%). Child marriage (18% among all unenrolled girls) was most common for older girls in South Gondar (35%) and East Hararghe (30%) (see Box 4).

### Qualitative findings

Our qualitative work adds depth to survey findings and highlights how location, age and gender shape

adolescents' access to education. In Zone 5, where access is most limited, the Government of Ethiopia has redoubled efforts since baseline – working to increase both supply and demand and with effects clearly visible in adolescents' improved attendance. Alongside non-governmental organisations (NGOs), it has been building schools, recruiting teachers, and distributing school supplies. 'They gave us school uniform, exercise books, pens, and also shoes,' explained a 17-year-old boy from Community A, who is currently enrolled in first grade. With awareness of education historically low, the government has also been working to motivate parents to send their children to school, albeit sometimes with threats. 'Even people from the government office do come and tell them that they will not give them [parents] support unless they send their children to school or they say we will close health centres unless you send your children to school,' explained a teacher from Community B.

Overall, respondents from Zone 5 are agreed that government efforts are working, though slowly and from a low base. Enrolment rates are climbing, for boys and girls – at least until the latter reach a marriageable age. 'Parents are today sending their children to school. Adolescent boys and girls in our locality are also interested to learn,' observed a 16-year-old out-of-school boy from Community A. The father of a married girl from Community

#### Box 4: Child marriage and education

The relationship between child marriage and education is complex, with child marriage driving dropout but dropout also driving child marriage (see also Presler-Marshall et al., 2020). This complexity begins to become visible in our survey results. Of the older girls participating in GAGE research, half were married before the age of 18. Indeed, of those in South Gondar, 25% were married by the age of 15. Despite the prevalence of child marriage, however, girls were comparatively unlikely to report that they had dropped out of school in order to marry. Of all girls who were not enrolled in school at midline, only 18% reported that they had left school specifically in order to marry. Of married girls, only 38% reported that they had left school to marry (43% in rural areas and 23% in urban areas).

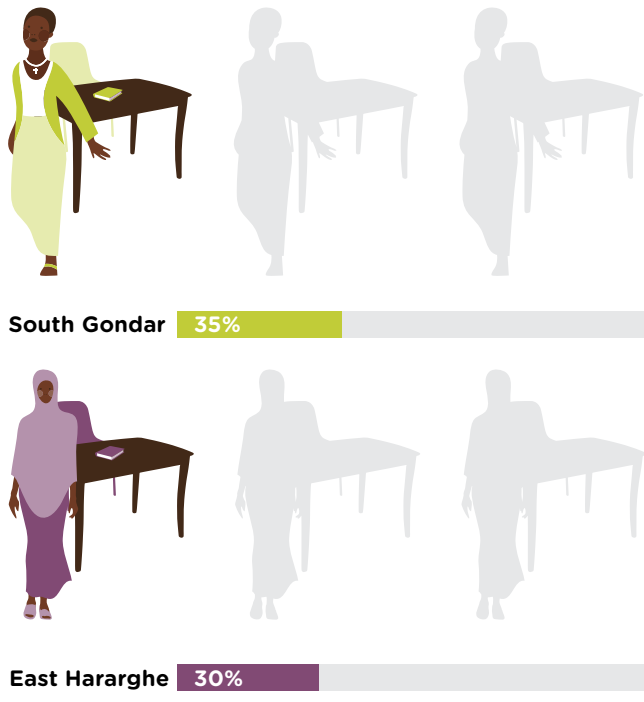
Our qualitative work continues to render visible the complex relationship between education and child marriage, and how that relationship varies across contexts. In South Gondar, where girls are most likely to report that they left school in order to marry, marriages are primarily arranged, with parents deciding when and to whom their daughters will marry. With girls' enrolment and aspirations generally higher in South Gondar than in other locations, girls understand that it is marriage itself that costs them access to education. *'They [her parents] told me to prioritise marriage rather than continuing my education... My interest was to continue my education but they ordered me to drop out... I was not happy but since I have no option I accepted them,'* recalled a 17-year-old girl from Community C (South Gondar). The opposite pattern is also common. When girls leave school, they must marry soon after due to concerns about their idleness and chastity.

The links between school dropout and child marriage are somewhat more blurred in Zone 5 and East Hararghe. In Zone 5, where marriages are even more likely to be arranged (due to the absuma or cousin marriage custom) than they are in South Gondar, far more girls have already left school by the time they are expected to marry. Indeed, quite a few parents admit that they refuse to allow their daughters access to education after early adolescence in order to ensure that they remain biddable about marriage. *'The main reason we don't send a girl to school is that she doesn't respect her parents and obey the rule. She will not marry an absuma. She says "It is my right" and she will marry a person she chooses,'* explained a father from Community A (Zone 5). In East Hararghe, by contrast, where child marriages are ostensibly 'chosen' by girls after they 'choose' to leave school, framing is around girls' 'choice', not marriage itself. *'I dropped out when I began to play shegoye [local cultural dance],'* recalled a 15-year-old girl from Community I (East Hararghe) who had married at age 12.

Interestingly, while girls in South Gondar are most likely to report having left school in order to marry, married girls in South Gondar are the most likely to have access to education after marriage. In South Gondar, 39% of ever-married girls were enrolled in school at midline, compared to only 8% in East Hararghe and 7% in Zone 5. Girls in South Gondar who have been married, but are now separated or divorced, have better access than girls who are still married. Of girls previously married, 48% reported being enrolled at midline – 15 percentage points higher than those who were still married. Separated and divorced girls also have better attendance than those who are still married.

Our qualitative work nuances the survey findings. In South Gondar, several young husbands reported that they were strong advocates for their wives' education. A young husband from Community C (South Gondar) explained: *'I also told to my wife to pursue her education... She had had an interest to attend school but she was forced to marry through the family arrangement... The school director refused to register her... I challenged him, it is one's right to get education even after getting married, which has to be decided by couples... She then began her education with my effort... I also got her a tutor [after school] when she had difficulty in understanding the lessons... She then improved her education and is ranked 4th in her classroom.'* Unfortunately, in Zone 5 and East Hararghe – and for most girls in South Gondar – marriage marks the end of formal education. *'In this area, I haven't seen any person who continues to go to school after getting married,'* noted a 15-year-old girl from Community H (East Hararghe) who married at age 13. *'It is difficult [to combine marriage and school]; you can't concentrate since your thoughts are divided thinking about [other] issues,'* added a married 15-year-old girl from Community D (South Gondar).

Approximately one-third of girl drop-outs in **South Gondar** and **East Hararghe** report that they left school in order to marry.



B added, 'When I let my daughter get an education, I'm giving her a chance to change her life as well as mine. I think she is going to be of a great help for her husband as well if she gets the proper education... She is going to

help and change the community if we let her get the proper education. I believe this is going to be good for the whole community.'

Despite recent progress, however, both government and GAGE enrolment figures reveal that many adolescents in Zone 5 continue to lack access to education. Some, particularly in more remote villages, have never had the opportunity to attend because their communities lack schools or teachers. As a 16-year-old boy from Community B commented, 'In our locality there is no good schooling... There is no teacher and also our school was destroyed by wind and rain.' A mother from the same community added, 'There is a water problem in the area and the teachers were away because of that.' Other adolescents are denied access to school by their parents, with several confessing that they attended secretly when they could. Notably, even families that support education often choose to educate only some of their children. A 17-year-old girl from Community A (Zone 5), who is in 12th grade and has an older sister at university, reported that her younger sister was made to leave school after second grade, to support their mother at home: 'My parents also have interest for my education... She [the girl's my sister] stopped in grade two... She is the one who is supporting my mother.'



School in Amhara © Nathalie Bertrams / GAGE



Echoing our survey findings, for adolescents who do enrol in school, irregular attendance – shaped by the demands of rural life – limits progression. Respondents report that some absences are driven by parents’ short-term needs for adolescents’ labour. *‘When the others refuse, I am the one who looks after the goats,’* explained a 13-year-old girl from Community A about why she most often misses school. *‘There is a shortage of water here and they go to fetch water and they don’t come [to school],’* added a teacher from Community B. Other absences are longer term. A 13-year-old boy from Community B, referring to the seasonal migration that pulls many of his classmates (especially boys) out of school for months at a time, noted, *‘They are pastoralist, and they would go in search of pasture.’* With exceptions, the qualitative data suggests that survey results understate the limits on adolescents’ access to education. It was common in interviews for young people to report attending school only one or two days each week – and for older adolescents to be attending first or second grade. It was also common for adolescents, even those from more settled communities, to frame leaving primary school not as dropping out – but as ‘enough’. *‘I will go to Jeddah when I complete 6th grade,’* noted a 12-year-old girl from Community A.

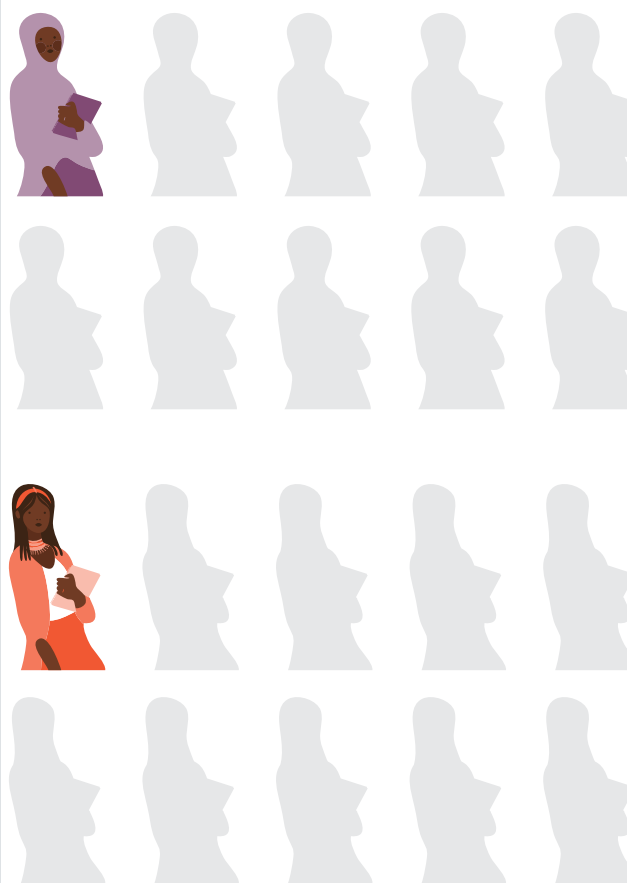
As was the case at baseline, East Hararghe has both differences and similarities with Zone 5 in terms of adolescents’ access to education. Namely, although educational infrastructure is better developed in East Hararghe than in Zone 5 (though still not as developed as in South Gondar), and seasonal migration is not the norm, parents’ demands on adolescents’ time similarly limit their access to education. As in Zone 5, some children are never allowed to go to school. A 13-year-old in-school boy from Community L noted that only one of his four siblings is in school. The other three, all girls, stay home to help their mother. Other children enrol years late, as they wait for younger siblings to get old enough to take on household work. *‘We joined school at the age of 10... We started working... at the age of six,’* explained an 18-year-old girl from Community H who attended only a few years, because she married at age 14.

Adolescents in East Hararghe, like their peers in Zone 5, added that they attended school irregularly – on a daily and annual basis – depending on what their parents demand of them. *‘I am the one who is responsible to fetch water and for watering the khat farm. So when I become late for schooling, I do not go school,’* reported a 12-year-old boy from Community H. *‘I support my parents. There is*

The ability of ever married girls to continue their education varies by region—nearly 4-in-10 in **South Gondar**...



...but less than 1-in-10 in **East Hararghe** and **Zone 5**.



*nobody else that can look after our cropland and livestock. I neglected my education for this reason,’* added a 13-year-old boy from Community I who has been out of school for several years but is planning to return next year. Educators, both teachers and school directors, noted that attendance issues have become intractable in recent years, with one harvest after another preventing children from coming to class. As a teacher from Community L explained:

## All of us stopped going to school because we are busy with housework

(A 15-year-old girl)

When they start farming peanuts, the majority of students drop out of school. When they complete harvesting it, the number of students attending increases. Again when they start planting the seeds, the number decreases. The situation of school dropout is worrisome. It is difficult to predict because when you expect there will be dropout during peanuts farming, there is also dropout during sorghum harvest.

While narratives about adolescents' initial enrolment and attendance are similar in Zone 5 and East Hararghe, those surrounding dropout diverge. In East Hararghe, there is far more emphasis on adolescents' disinterest in education – sometimes attributed to the allure of paid work. *'Children are attracted by the income that is generated from khat via helping their family. They prefer to generate money than attend school,'* said a teacher from Community J when explaining why enrolment drops off in early adolescence. Other times, disinterest is attributed to peer pressure, which is frequently related to adolescents' participation in the *shegoye* (cultural dance) that can keep young people awake all night. *'No one told me to stop it [school]. I stopped attending, when my friends stopped attending school,'* reported a 15-year-old boy from Community H.

Parents' and adolescents' emphasis on adolescent choice as a reason for school-leaving is particularly strong for girls and speaks to a need to carefully tailor awareness raising messages. *'We the boys have the work burden and we are forced to quit to do the work. But girls have just quit losing the interest to go to school,'* explained a 16-year-old boy from Community H. Indeed, most girl dropouts agree that they left school of their own accord – often against their parents' wishes – and in order to participate in *shegoye*. As a younger out-of-school girl in a group interview noted, *'They want us to go to school... it is because of our interest that we quit it... They pressure us to go to school but we dared to quit it.'* Only a few respondents – and only after first positioning girls' choice as their own – eventually admitted that their choices were overly constrained by the amount of work they were forced to do at home. *'All of us stopped going to school because we are busy with housework. If we were free, we could attend school,'* confessed a 15-year-old girl

who married at age 13, in part to escape household chores. Educators in East Hararghe, on the other hand, appear to have a better understanding of the constraints under which girls' 'choices' are made. A teacher from Community H described it thus:

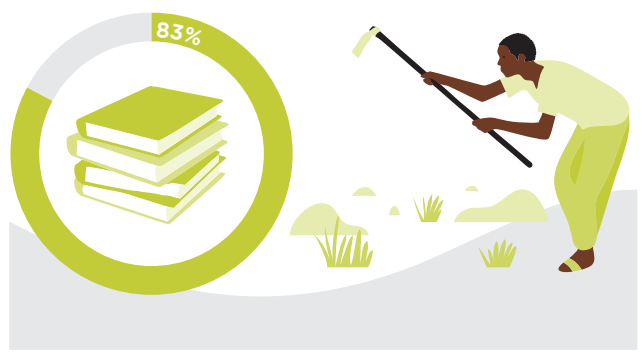
*Girls attend school from age 7 to 10. When a girl becomes 11 or 12 years old, community members would say, "She is old enough to marry and education is not important for her after that". From my school I know only three girls who are 15 or 16 years old who are attending their education. Community members are gossiping about such girls as if the girls are unable to get someone to marry them. In doing so, the community has broken their morale. So when girls grow up, they marry and form a family. This is why girls drop out.*

While noting that even at baseline, GAGE found that boys were more likely to be enrolled than girls in East Hararghe, educators observed that girls' access to education has eroded in the last two years. *'Before the last two years the number of girls and boys in school is becoming equivalent. But for the past two years it became worse and the gap is widening when it should have improved. Last year, out of the 874 students we had, 272 were female. The rest were male. The number of girls is declining,'* reported a school director from Community L, who blamed the government for *'lack of follow-up'*.

As was the case at baseline, South Gondar stands out in stark contrast to both Zone 5 and East Hararghe in terms of adolescents' access to education – at least for the younger cohort and recent violence notwithstanding. Most communities have primary schools and most parents – who can see that farming is unlikely to provide a stable income given population growth – are committed to educating their children. As a teacher from Community E explained: *'If we say school starts on September 15... they all send the children and the children come to school in multitude. Why? Because the understanding of the people is getting better.'* A grandmother from Community D added that government investments have driven this change:

*During this time, the time for my granddaughter, schools are found at the gate of the children. Pens and exercise books are available close to them. Government has also advised the children to continue their education, opening their heart. It is a good time for children. There is education at all levels... The water is found close to*

Of the older boys in **South Gondar** who reported missing at least one full week of school over the last year—83% said it was in order to engage in agricultural work for their parents.



*their home with a pipe. The children can fetch it before they go to school or after they come from school.*

That said, even in South Gondar, access to education remains a challenge for some, especially those from the poorest households and the most remote villages. While it is uncommon for young people to be completely denied the opportunity to attend school, livestock herding in particular prevents many from enrolling on time – or attending regularly enough to learn. A 12-year-old boy from Community G, for example, reported that he had just started 1st grade, because there had been *'no one to look after the cows.'* A 17-year-old boy from Community C added, *'I only attended once per week otherwise I missed class... I used to engage in different farm activities.'* As was highlighted in a previous report (Presler-Marshall et al., 2020), recent violence has also impacted access to education, as gun and knife fights have become so common that some adolescents are afraid to leave home. *'The number of killing incidents has increased... They use both gunshot and knives to kill one another,'* explained a 12-year-old boy, when asked about the violence in his community.

In contrast to East Hararghe, respondents agreed that boys in South Gondar have more limited access to education than girls, at least through mid-adolescence,

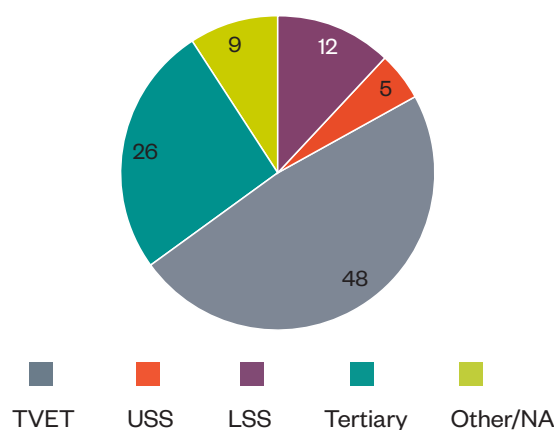
because the farm work they are tasked with is harder to fit around schooling than the domestic and care work assigned to girls. While girls tend to work more hours than boys, they do so at times that are compatible with attending school (though not necessarily doing homework). *'It is now the female children [that have] started to learn [in] large numbers,'* explained a father from Community D. *'It is males who are absent, whereas females' participation rate has increased... [boys] dropped out of school and left to commercial farm areas in search of income-earning jobs,'* added a teacher from Community F.

## Supportive home environments

### Survey results

Our survey found that mothers' educational aspirations for their younger adolescents are high – though markedly less so than those of adolescents themselves. Across locations, and for girls and boys, 12% of female caregivers would like their children to attain a lower-secondary education (LSS), 5% for them to attain an upper-secondary education (USS), 48% for them to study at the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) level, and 26% for them to study at a college or university (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Female caregivers' educational aspirations for their younger adolescents**



**Table 9: Percentage of female caregivers aspiring to various levels of education for their younger adolescents, by location, child's sex and desired level of education**

	Urban		South Gondar		East Hararghe		Zone 5	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Lower-secondary	1	4	16	19	6	8	19	15
Upper-secondary	0	2	2	3	6	15	16	17
TVET	67	71	66	63	24	24	52	37
Tertiary	31	22	5	6	55	46	10	13

**▶** We need them to learn and complete their education and be doctors and bankers. Otherwise herding is not benefiting as in the past.

(A father from Community B (Zone 5))

This broader picture, however, obscures significant variation in maternal aspirations. Unsurprisingly, and echoing baseline findings, female caregivers in urban areas have the highest aspirations. Nearly all envision post-secondary education of some sort for their children (see Table 9). Of urban mothers, 69% aspire for their children to attend TVET and 26% for them to attend college or university. While mothers in East Hararghe have their sights set on college or university, mothers in South Gondar (18%) and Zone 5 (17%) are more likely to aspire for their children to complete only 10th grade. They are also more likely to choose TVET over academic post-secondary pathways.

These regional differences, however, fail to capture gender differences in mothers' aspirations, which outside of South Gondar are significant – with mothers preferring more education for their sons than their daughters. In urban areas (31% versus 22%) and East Hararghe (55% versus 46%), mothers are more likely to aspire for their sons to attend college or university than their daughters. In Zone 5, where maternal aspirations are lower overall,

mothers are more likely to aspire for their sons to attend TVET than their daughters (52% versus 37%).

As already noted, parents' support for education is most clearly visible in the demands they place on adolescents' time. Of young people who were out of school for more than one week in the previous academic year, 26% of boys and 15% of girls reported that it was due to having to do agricultural work for their families. A further 5% of boys and 12% of girls reported that their parents simply did not want them to go to school. Interestingly, adolescents in South Gondar were far more likely to report having missed school due to household agricultural needs than their peers in other regions. Of older boys, for example, 83% of those in South Gondar and only 4% of those in East Hararghe reported missing a full week of school due to farming for their households. Girls in East Hararghe, on the other hand, were most likely to report that their parents simply did not want them to go to school. Of younger girls, 23% of those in East Hararghe versus 12% of those in South Gondar gave this response.

### Qualitative findings

Our qualitative work found that caregivers' support for education is mixed, varying not only by location and the sex of the child, but by whether (and to what extent) they are willing to take concrete steps to ensure that their children



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 6<sup>th</sup> grade and those in **Zone 5** have barely started 5<sup>th</sup>.



are supported to learn. On the one hand, across research sites, most caregivers spoke strongly in favour of education. A father from Community B (Zone 5) explained, *'We need them to learn and complete their education and be doctors and bankers. Otherwise herding is not benefiting as in the past. It is a must for them to learn and change their life.'* An 18-year-old boy from Community I (East Hararghe) added, *'My father used to say "You have to become like Meles, the late Prime Minister... You must rule the country".'* Some adolescents, primarily in urban areas but occasionally even in relatively remote rural communities, reported that their parents are working hard to ensure that adolescents are able to prioritise education – for example, by taking on more chores themselves or even leasing out land in order to reduce their children's chores entirely. *'My mother told me that having a husband is like having a disease. She told me to focus on my education,'* recalled an 11-year-old girl from Community E (South Gondar). *'Parents began giving their farmland to a sharecropper in order not to hold back their children from school,'* added a 17-year-old boy from Community C (South Gondar). In other cases, parents are demonstrating their support for adolescents' education by not only freeing up their time, but also by ensuring that they have space (and light) to study. A 14-year-old girl from Community L (East Hararghe) explained:

*My father told me that I should be free so that I can study hard... I have a friend who is a 9th grader. She comes to our home and we study together all day by sitting in the room that my father has facilitated for us for studying. We continue and study in the evening as well, till we go to bed. We spend our time on studying and completing our homework... We don't have responsibilities that preclude this progress.*

On the other hand, especially in East Hararghe and Zone 5 but also in more remote communities in South Gondar,

parents' support for education is quite often more de jure than de facto, as parents are unable or unwilling to find the creative solutions that would allow their children to combine work and learning. *'Parents consider the schooling as if it is imposed on them by someone else... Their interest is to be supported by someone else to educate their children rather than exerting effort to educate them,'* explained a school director from Community L (East Hararghe). A teacher from Community B (Zone 5) added, *'Here families do not have an interest to send students to school... They say, we will not send our children unless you give food aid like other schools.'* The end result is not only that children miss class time – arriving late and missing days and weeks depending on household needs (as highlighted earlier) – but that too few are given the time they need to study. *'I have to study and work hard. It is my parents who force me to do the domestic work, even though I need to focus on my study,'* explained a 13-year-old boy from Community B (Zone 5). *'We are rural children and we cannot study for more time... If we were children from town, we would be able to study more,'* added a 12-year-old boy from Community E (South Gondar). Teachers added that many parents – especially in East Hararghe – also refuse to provide their children with school supplies, forcing them to either take on paid work to cover their own educational costs or to drop out. *'You can expect that if the child does not get an exercise book and pen, he will not attend school,'* reported a teacher from Community L (East Hararghe).

**▶** My mother told me that having a husband is like having a disease. She told me to focus on my education.

(An 11-year-old girl from Community E (South Gondar))

**Box 5: Act With Her**

Act With Her is a five-year umbrella programme being implemented by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), in collaboration with the Government of Ethiopia. It is designed to lay the health, education, and social foundations that adolescent girls need to thrive and navigate healthy transitions to adulthood. The programme is being delivered in different ways in different communities, to test which interventions (including empowerment programming for adolescents, awareness-raising for parents, asset transfers, and systems strengthening) create the largest and most sustainable impacts on girls' lives. GAGE is evaluating the programme. Our midline research found that while the programme is not without challenges, it is beginning to create subtle change in some communities that may, over time, lead to larger and broader effects on education (see also Baird et al., forthcoming a,b,c).

In South Gondar, where programme impacts are larger due to the area's historically higher uptake of education, participant girls reported that they had learnt techniques for convincing their parents to allow them to schedule housework around schoolwork. *'If they're planning to make me skip school so that I'll do something for them, I'll tell them whatever it is they want me to do, I'll get it done after school,'* reported a girl from Community G (South Gondar). Girls added that mentors had supported them to start their own small businesses, so that they could cover their own educational costs. *'I am growing gesho [a plant which is made into a local alcoholic drink] in our back yard. I will be able to cover my educational expenses using the income earned from selling gesho,'* explained a girl from Community E (South Gondar).

In East Hararghe and Zone 5, where educating girls – especially adolescent girls – is comparatively rarer, mentors have been working to increase girls' and parents' interest in education. In East Hararghe, messages are primarily framed around keeping girls in school after puberty, by supporting them to aspire to professional careers. *'They educated us that we will be able to become a doctor, a health extension worker, a veterinarian, or a teacher... There has been a belief that girls cannot be successful in education. They [the AWH facilitators] educated us that this belief is erroneous and educated us to study hard to attain achievements,'* explained a girl from Community J (East Hararghe). In Zone 5, where rollout has been slower and has struggled to adapt to pastoralist realities, Act With Her is working to increase interest in formal education. Adolescents, parents and educators agree that efforts are beginning to pay off. As a 15-year-old married boy commented, of his wife: *'She is attending 2nd grade. We were learning together before we got married and she stopped after the marriage. However, after [Act With Her staff] came here, and taught us the relevance of learning, I brought her back to school. Nowadays we are learning together in grade 2.'*

Also as noted above, our survey found that mothers' educational aspirations for their adolescent children are markedly lower in Zone 5 and South Gondar than in East Hararghe. While the first makes sense, given that access to formal education is comparatively newer and rarer in Zone 5, the second finding is less intuitive, given that uptake of formal education in Amhara is high. Our qualitative work suggests one possible explanation, which is that mothers in South Gondar have more realistic expectations. Given that access to education is more established there, mothers better understand the costs and odds of pursuing – and succeeding at – academic rather than vocational education. In rural East Hararghe, by contrast, where enrolment in secondary school is relatively rarer (especially in the kebeles in which GAGE is working), mothers are more likely to report extremely high aspirations, in part

because they do not understand how unlikely it is for their children to achieve those goals.

As was the case at baseline, and despite recent efforts of NGOs to improve parents' awareness of the importance of girls' education, respondents in our qualitative work highlighted that even in communities where girls' access to school is better than boys', girls' education is less supported by parents. With exceptions, the main way this differential support plays out is through time use. While boys can often combine homework and herding – *'When we go to look after the cattle we take our exercise books and our textbooks and we do our homework and we help one another'* (12-year-old boy, Community E, South Gondar) – girls are kept so busy that studying falls by the wayside. A 13-year-old girl from Community G (South Gondar) explained that her daylight hours are full and that the solar light recently given to her by the Act With Her

programme (see Box 5) has changed her life, because it allows her to study after dark. She reported, *'In the morning, I fetch water, clean the house and go to school. When I return back from school, I cook food and do other things like collecting firewood and so on. Then I will have to postpone my study for the night.'* Girls in East Hararghe added that they are kept so busy with chores that not only are they unable to do their homework, they cannot focus in class. As a 12-year-old girl from Community H (East Hararghe) stated:

*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.*

Even parents in urban areas sometimes consider girls' time their own. A 17-year-old girl from Batu admitted that she and her sister face regular beatings because they prioritise homework before helping their mother.

## Supportive learning environments

### Survey results

As highlighted in a previous report (Presler-Marshall et al., 2020), our midline research found that despite government efforts, violence at the hands of teachers remains extremely common. Across cohorts and locations, and including both boys and girls, 81% of enrolled adolescents admitted to having experienced or witnessed violent discipline at the hands of a teacher (see Table 11) in the past year and 42% admitted to having experienced it. Gender, age and location all shape adolescents' risk of violence. Boys are more at risk than girls, with half of boys but only a third of girls experiencing teacher violence in the past year. Younger boys (55%) are at especially high risk. For girls and boys and across cohorts, East Hararghe stands out as having the highest rates of violent discipline. More

**D** In the morning, I fetch water, clean the house and go to school. When I return back from school, I cook food and do other things ... Then I will have to postpone my study for the night.

(A 13-year-old girl from Community G)


than 9 in 10 young people (92%) report having experienced or witnessed corporal punishment by a teacher in the past year, and 58% report having experienced it. Emotional abuse by teachers, including name-calling, threats and public humiliation, is also common, with 41% of enrolled adolescents reporting having experienced or witnessed such abuse and 14% having experienced it. As with physical abuse, boys and younger adolescents are most at risk. Younger boys in Zone 5 are at the highest risk (31%).

The fact that violence in school is so common is presumably (at least partly) why so few adolescents bother to report it. Of those who experienced or witnessed violence from teachers, only 21% acknowledged having told anyone about it. Location and gender shape reporting patterns. Location differences are especially stark, with urban adolescents nearly twice as likely to report violence as their rural peers (29% versus 15%), and adolescents in Zone 5 highly unlikely to report (11%). Boys are more likely to report violence than girls (23% versus 18%). Girls in East Hararghe are least likely to report (9% across age cohorts). Unsurprisingly, adolescents are more likely to report violence to a friend (58%) than to their parents (35%) or a school official (20%).

Our survey also asked adolescents whether their schools had counsellors. With the caveat that our qualitative work suggests that many young people did not understand the question, more than a third (38%) of enrolled students answered in the affirmative. Age and location both emerged as important delimiters, with older adolescents more likely to report access to a counsellor than their younger peers (46% versus 36%) and those living in urban areas advantaged over those in rural areas (48% versus 35%). Adolescents in East Hararghe were

**Table 11: Percentage of adolescents (of those enrolled in school) who have experienced or witnessed violence, by cohort, location and sex**

Younger								Older							
Urban		South Gondar		East Hararghe		Zone 5		Urban		South Gondar		East Hararghe		Zone 5	
M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
91	86	87	83	95	90	80	61	65	48	86	69	86	89	64	33

 The teacher hit on my ear last year... I decided to drop out because I hate the school because of the violence and the illness resulted in partial damage of my hearing.

(A 13-year-old boy from South Gondar)

most likely to report that their school had a counsellor, while those in Zone 5 were least likely (52% and 12% respectively). Of adolescents who reported that their school had a counsellor, 41% added that they had seen the counsellor. Interestingly, boys were more likely to report accessing a counsellor than girls (51% versus 29%) and students in rural areas reported doing so more than their urban peers (58% versus 32% for boys).

Adolescents who completed our survey also reported on whether their schools had separate toilets for girls and boys and whether they had facilities that girls could use to manage menstruation. While nearly all urban students reported separate toilets, this was less common in rural areas, with Zone 5 (54%) particularly disadvantaged compared to South Gondar (80%) and East Hararghe (81%). Indeed, given that girls (42%) and boys (68%) in Zone 5 gave significantly different answers regarding toilets, it seems likely that our survey results understate how rare

separate toilets are. Menstrual hygiene facilities are far less common than separate toilets, even in urban areas (45% and South Gondar (34%). They are particularly rare in Zone 5 (9%) and East Hararghe (14%).

### Qualitative findings

Our qualitative research expanded on the survey results and explored adolescents' experiences in classrooms and schools. In line with both our survey findings and our baseline, adolescents emphasised that teachers can be violent disciplinarians. While young people from urban areas spoke only of 'normal violence', and were, on the whole, more afraid of their peers than their teachers (see Box 6), those from rural areas sometimes reported serious injuries caused by teachers. A 13-year-old boy from South Gondar, for example, reported that his teacher had left him partially deaf: *'The teacher hit on my ear last year... I decided to drop out because I hate the school because of the violence and the illness resulted in partial damage of my hearing.'* Adolescents explained that they were beaten not only for misbehaving, but also for things beyond their control, like arriving late for school. *'He beats me seriously... using a stick'*, stated a 13-year-old boy from East Hararghe, recounting what happens on the days he must do farm work before he goes to school. Despite school policies

#### Box 6: Urban violence limits access to education

In GAGE's urban research sites, community and peer violence born of ethnic tension and political unrest that has been ongoing since baseline in 2017-18 limits adolescents' access to education. Adolescents quite often reported that they are afraid to go to school because of violence in the streets, and they are afraid to be at school, because of violence on school grounds. A 19-year-old boy from Dire Dawa reported that he was regularly attacked going to and from school: *'They wait for me outside the school compound.'* Adolescents from Debre Tabor added that being inside the compound afforded little safety. A 13-year-old boy stated, *'The students throw stones and they shoot guns... everybody is afraid of them.'* A 19-year-old girl with a physical disability added, *'Students come together in times of clashes. The seniors gather new incoming students, help them and they attack the others together.'* Students in Batu observed that teachers are powerless to protect them. *'The students are more powerful than the teachers, they can't do anything,'* explained an 18-year-old girl. *'The teachers are afraid,'* added a 16-year-old girl. Several adolescents noted that recent outbreaks of urban violence had all but crushed the dreams they had been working towards, because their families were now refusing to allow them to attend university in order to keep them safe. A 19-year-old boy from Debre Tabor who was assigned to a university in another region recounted: *'My family wouldn't let me go, they prohibited me....There was chaos and instability.'*

For girls in urban areas, though also in rural South Gondar, sexual violence limits access to education. A 16-year-old girl in Dire Dawa explained: *'(Boys) harass you when you go back home from school. Saying something negative about you and physically touching you... I am afraid of boys who beat you when you decline their offer of a love relationship.'* An 18-year-old girl from Batu added, *'I face boys that try to harass, but I do not respond to them. Sometimes they hold my hand or clothes. I release their hand without communicating and separate. Sometimes they ask me whether I have a problem speaking or if I am deaf, I do not speak or communicate... Two of my friends got raped.'*



that call for violent teachers to be fined *'from 500 birr to 1,000 birr'* (educator, Community C, South Gondar), some teachers admitted that they see violence as a teaching tool: *'I beat them when they do not sit properly in the classroom. I also beat them when they do not give a right answer. I do this to make them disciplined and to give attention to their lesson'* (teacher, Zone 5). Adolescents observed that boys receive the brunt of the most extreme violence, not only because they are more likely to misbehave but because they are more likely to fight back, which infuriates teachers. *'There are some who try to beat teachers back,'* said a 12-year-old boy from Zone 5 (Afar).

In all research sites, though not in all schools, teacher capacity emerged as a significant concern. Although students emphasised that *'there are a lot of committed teachers'* (13-year-old girl, Community G, South Gondar) who *'ask us if we haven't understood lessons and encourage us to ask them questions'* (14-year-old girl, Community L, East Hararghe) and even *'support the children of too poor parents with pen and exercise book'* (16-year-old girl, Community I, East Hararghe), they added that there are just as many teachers that *'don't teach properly'* (19-year-old girl, Community H, East Hararghe). As was true at baseline, some students and parents blamed teacher laziness and reported that teachers cannot be bothered to regularly come to work or stay throughout the school day. *'Our teacher gets absent repeatedly,'* explained a 14-year-old girl from Debre Tabor. Other respondents noted that classrooms in some communities are severely overcrowded (+120 students) and that teachers have no opportunity to engage students on an individual basis. *'Students are congested in the classroom... When there are many students in any given classroom, the teacher will be disturbed and the teaching-learning process will be affected,'* admitted an educator from Community C (South Gondar).

Quite a few respondents, however, reported that the real problem is that teachers themselves are insufficiently educated. Although teachers observe that their education is good – complaining that they are often *'assigned to teach subjects they are not trained for'* (Community C, South Gondar) – adolescents were more scathing. *'Even I write better than her. When she takes our exercise books to grade our homework, she has to look up the answers herself before she starts to grade,'* noted a 13-year-old girl from Community G (South Gondar) of her teacher. *'There are some teachers who can only read without*

▮ The students meet regularly with the school director and the teachers to discuss the quality of education in the school... We prepare a plan to solve these problems.

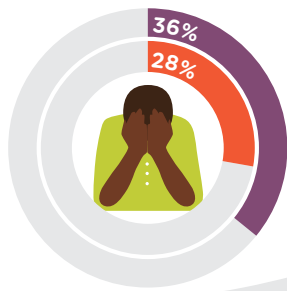
(A 17-year-old girl from Community C (South Gondar))

*knowing the meaning... He can't tell us when we ask him the meaning... When we ask him, he uses the calculator or his phone,'* added a 17-year-old boy from Community H (East Hararghe). Several participants observed that while there have been recent efforts to improve teaching by having students evaluate their teachers, those efforts can backfire. A 13-year-old girl from Community G (South Gondar), for instance, noted that her review had clearly not been kept anonymous, as her teacher had begun to *'see me suspiciously'* soon after.

As was the case at baseline, poorly resourced schools and classrooms were another recurring theme in our qualitative research, especially in rural areas. *'There are not sufficient tables and chairs... There is a serious shortage of textbooks,'* explained a 14-year-old girl from Community D (South Gondar), while a 15-year-old boy from Community H (East Hararghe) noted, *'There are no chairs and desks, we sit and learn on stones.'* Respondents, particularly but not exclusively in Zone 5, also emphasised that schools often lack drinking water. *'Children could come to school but there is no water to drink,'* observed a father from Community B (Zone 5). Students in urban areas, while observing that their schools had resources such as information and communications technology (ICT) and chemistry laboratories, libraries and playing fields, also noted that facilities are often in poor repair, primarily due to overuse. *'The main problem is toilets and lack of running water... The pipes have broken,'* noted a 16-year-old boy from Debre Tabor. An 18-year-old girl from Batu added, *'The chairs in high school were partially broken in most cases.'*

With classrooms overcrowded and largely reliant on rote pedagogies, adolescents in urban areas – and a few in more central communities in rural South Gondar – reported that school clubs could be important venues for developing new perspectives and learning new skills. A 14-year-old boy from Debre Tabor, for example, noted that Ethiopian history was coming alive through club participation. He said, *'I am a member in two school clubs... We visit different historical places by saving money*

Grade repetition is common. In the GAGE sample, 36% of **boys** and 28% of **girls** have repeated at least one grade.



monthly.' A 17-year-old girl from Community C (South Gondar) added that school parliaments in particular could afford young people opportunities for hands-on engagement: *'The students meet regularly with the school director and the teachers to discuss the quality of education in the school... We prepare a plan to solve these problems.'* Unfortunately, and with the exception of girls' clubs (discussed below), too many adolescents reported either that their school had no clubs or that their club options were hardly participatory. *'As far as I know there was no club,'* stated a 15-year-old out-of-school girl from Community A (Zone 5). A 15-year-old girl from Community D (South Gondar) observed that while she would love to be in an after-school club, she had never been *'assigned'* a spot. She said, *'It is assigned by teachers... I would have been happy had I been given the opportunity to take part in a school club to get new experience.'* A 14-year-old boy from Community F (South Gondar) added, *'[Teachers] don't force us. But they assign us to each of the clubs.'*

Girls' clubs, especially in South Gondar, emerged as a bright spot in our research, though perhaps one less vibrant than at baseline due to the political and ethnic unrest that has shaken the country. While many appear to function as mechanisms aimed more at public health than girls' empowerment – and finding female teachers to lead them can be challenging in remote areas – girls emphasised that club leaders and club members were often vital to helping them negotiate menarche, which remains deeply stigmatised. *'If a girl sees her periods accidentally, she will go to these clubs and get all the necessary materials like the pads and underwear. She didn't have to quit school,'* explained a 19-year-old girl from a rural area but now attending university in Debre Tabor. A

13-year-old girl from Community I (East Hararghe) added that her club leader offered both practical and emotional support. *'She advised us how we should manage our menstruation. She informed us that we should tell her if period comes to us while we are at school and she will help us by taking us to a separate room so that we will keep our hygiene,'* she recalled. Girls added that clubs could also be important sources of information on – and support to resist – child marriage and FGM/C. *'They told us we should not marry at the age of 14 or 15 years old... She told us that girls who marry later have better lives,'* noted an 18-year-old girl from Community H (East Hararghe). *'They also tell us that female circumcision should be stopped... They say that because we are circumcised, we are unable to labour during childbirth,'* added a 19-year-old girl from Community A (Zone 5). Educators added that running girls' clubs is a *'big work'* but that it needs to be bigger still in order to create change. *'We need to establish committees at the sub-kebele level so that they educate the community in their respective areas,'* explained an educator for Community L (East Hararghe).

Our qualitative work underscored that a key service missing from nearly all schools, even those in urban areas, is educational and career guidance. With young people's educational aspirations largely out of step with reality – given not only the limited places available at preparatory schools and universities but also high unemployment rates among preparatory and university graduates – there is a need to help younger adolescents realistically assess their options and develop concrete plans for reaching their goals. While, as noted earlier, nearly 40% of survey respondents reported that their schools have counsellors, it was clear in interviews that there was confusion as to what role counsellors might play, even in urban areas. When interviewers explained the concept, not a single adolescent admitted to even having heard of such a service. *'There was no one who gave us a counselling service about what to study or careers,'* reported a 19-year-old girl in Dire Dawa. Indeed, while key informants agreed that *'a person needs to be 25 years old for the mind to be fully matured, so they need support until they can be fully matured'* (key informant from Dire Dawa), they too acknowledged that *'there are no counsellors that provide such service'* (South Gondar).

**Table 12: Percentage of adolescents who report having repeated at least one grade, by cohort, location and sex**

Younger								Older							
Urban		South Gondar		East Hararghe		Zone 5		Urban		South Gondar		East Hararghe		Zone 5	
M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
28	25	27	19	43	36	27	35	41	36	27	26	51	29	29	28

## Grade repetition and learning

Our survey found that it is common for adolescents – especially boys – to have repeated one or more grades of school.<sup>4</sup> Across cohorts and locations, 32% of adolescents report having repeated a grade (36% of boys and 28% of girls). Grade repetition is especially common in East Hararghe, where classrooms are the most overcrowded (see Table 12). Of older boys in East Hararghe, (who, as already noted, are disproportionately more likely than other rural children to still be enrolled in school), 51% report having repeated at least one grade. High repetition rates for older adolescents in urban areas appear driven by their higher enrolment rates.

Of our survey respondents who were enrolled in school at midline, 29% reported being in the top 10% of their class and 65% reported being in the top 25% of their class. While much of this over-estimation is likely due to youthful enthusiasm, it also speaks to the rather dire learning outcomes emphasised by qualitative respondents. Many adolescents likely do not understand percentiles. Due to overcrowded, poorly resourced classrooms, poorly trained teachers and regular student absenteeism, adolescents and parents both reported that rural students are often barely literate and numerate, even by early adolescence. Unsurprisingly, outcomes tend to be the poorest in Zone 5, where it was common for students to report that they had learned only the alphabet. *‘They don’t teach us anything. I cannot write my name. They did not teach us about writing our names,’* explained a 13-year-old girl attending 3rd grade in Community A, while a 13-year-old boy in 2nd grade from Community B (also Zone 5) added, *‘We just learn Amharic letters, English and numbers together. We just don’t know if a given letter is Amharic or English.’* Outcomes are only marginally better in more remote kebeles of East Hararghe. *‘There are students who cannot write their names at grade 8. They should have learned that at grade 1,’* observed a 12-year-old girl from Community H. Teachers – and

some adolescents – observed that there were limits on what could be expected of teachers. *‘If students come on Monday, they will not come on Tuesday. If they come on Wednesday, they will not come on Thursday... The problem that makes them lag behind in their schooling is poor attendance at school,’* explained a teacher from Community J (East Hararghe). A 13-year-old girl from Community I (also East Hararghe) agreed: *‘The teachers are available. And they teach students who go to school. But a lot of children put education aside.’*

Across rural research sites, and suggesting that survey findings regarding grade repetition significantly understate how poor learning outcomes are, adolescents emphasised that promotions are regular, even when learning is limited.<sup>5</sup> *‘Teachers were not teaching us, and we were wasting our time without learning and teachers were giving us a pass mark, and we were passing from grade to grade without learning and knowing anything,’* reported a 20-year-old young man from Community A (Zone 5). *‘You may pass to the following grade without having knowledge,’* added an 11-year-old girl from Community E (South Gondar). As was the case at baseline, quite a few adolescents admitted that they had asked their teachers to be *‘demoted to lower grades... since I know nothing’* (13-year-old girl, Community H, East Hararghe). Others, particularly in upper-primary school, added that they had dropped out *‘because I do not understand what the teacher teaches’* (15-year-old girl, Community K, East Hararghe).

## Educational transitions

As noted earlier, few adolescents outside of urban areas have made the transition from primary to secondary school. Of enrolled older adolescents in our sample, only those in Dire Dawa, Debre Tabor and Batu are, on average, attending secondary school (mean grade attainment of 9.4, 10.6 and 10 respectively). Indeed, in rural areas, where children start school late and repetition is more common,

<sup>4</sup> Our survey found rates of repetition far in excess of those reported by the MoE (2020). This may be related to under-reporting on the behalf of teachers to the government – or to the fact that GAGE is working in especially vulnerable communities.

<sup>5</sup> Government policy calls for children in grades 1–4 to have one teacher and to be continuously assessed without exams. Starting in 5th grade, however, teachers rotate and exams determine progression (personal correspondence with Alula Pankhurst, 2021).



Adolescent boys in Afar, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams / GAGE 2020

the average enrolled older adolescent (15–17 years) has barely started 6th grade.

In rural Zone 5 and East Hararghe, qualitative respondents reported that few students ever make it to secondary school. *'Most people dropped out after reaching 6th or 7th grade,'* explained a 17-year-old boy from Community H (East Hararghe). This was particularly the case for girls, for whom child marriage is prioritised. *'Only males have the chance of continuing their education further in the town,'* observed a father from Community B (Zone 5). *'From our kebele there are only three individuals who are learning in grade 10, 11... All are men... girls do not go anywhere,'* added a 17-year-old girl from Community I (East Hararghe). A 19-year-old boy from Community H (East Hararghe) added, *'I am the only person who supports the family. How do the other family members live? There are only girls in the family. They don't know how to do farm work.'*


Matriculation into secondary school is more common in South Gondar. While adolescents often transition years *'late'*, because of their late enrolment and relatively flat educational trajectories, farmers are *'selling what they can in order to educate their children,'* explained a father from Community C (South Gondar). Narratives about girls' versus boys' access to school are complex in South Gondar. Despite the fact that older boys are more likely

to be enrolled than older girls (58% versus 51%), who are in turn far more likely to be in an arranged marriage, most qualitative participants were unequivocal that girls' access to secondary school is at least as good as boys'. Indeed, influenced by the reality that only a few short years ago it was rare for girls to complete primary school, most argued that it is better. A 16-year-old girl in remote Community D (South Gondar) reported that her brother had *'wanted to pursue his education after grade 10, but he couldn't get family support.'* She, on the other hand, had parental promises to *'cover my college education.'* Respondents noted that parents' preferences for which children to educate are shaped by boys' inattention in the classroom – but also by the fact that boys' opportunity costs are higher. A 14-year-old girl in 9th grade from Community G (South Gondar) observed that her class contained only four boys; the rest had *'gone to Metema'* for seasonal agricultural work. We have reasons to doubt the consensus that girls have better access to secondary school than boys. Across communities, and in stark contrast to what participants say, what girls and boys (and their parents) do is generally more in line with tradition – and with our survey results. Indeed, the 16-year-old girl quoted above who was promised support for college was instead forced to marry after 10th grade, when *'neighbours and elders'* pressured her father.


Across rural research sites, adolescents' access to secondary school is limited by the fact that most schools are located in relatively more urban areas. This means that rural students must either make long commutes each day or board, which is expensive given average incomes. Boys in Community L (East Hararghe) reported that they 'rise in the early morning' and travel two hours by foot in order to attend 9th and 10th grades. Caregivers in South Gondar spoke of the high costs (relative to income) that they must bear to support students learning in town. 'One of my daughters is a high school student... She is living in a rented house... We are paying 200 birr per month [approximately 5USD],' reported a father from Community D (South Gondar). We must also send 'the food, grain, charcoal and firewood,' added a grandmother from the same community.

Respondents noted that both options – commuting and boarding – are especially fraught for girls, because of concerns that they will be raped, or fall in love. 'It is unthinkable to expect our girls to study at that level... Girls could be raped while travelling long distances,' reported a father from Community B (Zone 5). 'They are afraid she might disappear with a boy. They don't trust girls,' added a grandmother from Community H (East Hararghe). Girls noted that recent violence has only amplified concerns. 'It's not like past times. There are bandits and they will fight and rape the girls,' explained a 14-year-old girl studying in Debre Tabor.

As was noted at baseline, and is acknowledged by the government – which is restructuring the educational system and the exam schedule<sup>6</sup> – educational transitions are also limited by gateway exams. While the regional exams that determine access to 9th grade are considered less onerous than the national exams that control access to 11th grade and university, rural students observed that they are quite often not sufficiently well prepared to pass them due to the poor-quality teaching they have received. An 18-year-old boy from Community I (East Hararghe) reported that of the 67 students in his class who sat the 8th grade exams prior to midline data collection, only 42

 They are afraid she might disappear with a boy. They don't trust girls.

(A grandmother from Community H (East Hararghe))

 When I was attending school, I used to have many goals.... When I did not pass grade 10, I lost hope.

(A 23-year-old woman living in Debre Tabor)

passed (and only two continued on to 9th grade). A woreda education officer in South Gondar added that national exams are far worse, because rural students are ranked alongside better-prepared urban students. A 19-year-old girl, currently in 12th grade in Community A (Zone 5), observed that not a single student from her school had yet passed the university entrance exam: 'All of the students who were before us failed... Not even a single one joined the university.' She was not optimistic about her own chances, because her school was so under-staffed. 'We never had a biology teacher this year... We are going to take the national exam at the end of grade 12. If we did not learn biology and physics, how are we going to sit the exam?' she asked.

For young people who do not score high enough on the 10th grade exam to continue along the academic pathway (into upper secondary school), TVET is an option. Indeed, it is the government's preferred option for most adolescents, as TVET is seen as the fastest way to expand the skills that will grow the economy. However, few adolescents are interested in TVET. Most, aiming for university, see TVET as second best. As a 23-year-old woman living in Debre Tabor, who married at 17 to spare her family further expense, explained, 'When I was attending school, I used to have many goals. I used to think that I would be attending school until grade 12. Join the university and graduate... I wanted to teach people about health and to become a doctor... When I did not pass grade 10, I lost hope. I was thinking that I had been a burden on my family for 10 years until grade 10. I did not want to continue to be a burden after that.' Others are interested in TVET, but cannot afford it – sometimes because their families cannot and other times because they choose not to. 'Their parents are also not willing to send them to college because they don't want to encourage additional cost. They will not pay for it. They will say, "I educated you all those years. You didn't get a job. Are you trying to put me under extra pressure?"' explained a 20-year-old girl studying in Batu.

Of the adolescents and young adults who do pursue TVET, the experience appears to be largely positive. Our respondents reported studying diverse fields – including

<sup>6</sup> The exam schedule has shifted in tandem with the reorganisation of grades. There is now no exam administered between 10th and 11th grades. The regional exam currently given after 8th grade will be moved to after 6th grade. There will be a national exam given after 8th grade in coming years.



A school in Amhara © Nathalie Bertrams / GAGE 2020

accounting, ICT, and hospitality – and noted that teachers are overall good and course work is generally well paired with hands-on internships. *‘The teachers are good teachers, they teach really well...The theory part is about metals and the benefits of metals. The practical class is welding,’* explained a 19-year-old girl in Batu. Interestingly, despite concerns that specific courses are overly gendered, young women in our sample were quite likely to be learning ‘masculine’ skills such as mechanics. Indeed, several noted that most of their classmates were women. *‘There are four men and the remaining seven are women,’* reported a young woman from Debre Tabor who is learning to lay cobblestones. Outside of concerns about being unable to find employment after graduation – which respondents observed is quite common due to Ethiopia’s high youth unemployment rate – TVET students noted a need for more and better equipment, and that exam fees were sometimes extortionary. Several reported paying 250 birr to sit each level of Certificate of Competency examinations.

University students in our sample also discussed how exam scores and poverty have complicated their educational pathways. Because students are assigned universities – and majors – based on their exam scores, even those who score well enough to gain admission are often disappointed. A 19-year-old girl studying engineering, despite dreams of becoming a midwife, admitted that she had been devastated to learn of her placement. *‘He phoned and told me “Dire Dawa, engineering”... When I heard it was engineering, I cried a lot,’* she recalled. A 20-year-old young man studying management in Debre Tabor recounted, *‘I wanted to become a doctor... In grade 11 and 12, I was not studying well. It was due to the shortage of money...That was why my plan did not succeed.’* University students reported that poverty also makes it hard for them to succeed at university. *‘It’s the rich kids that graduate with good grades because they have laptops and the financial capacity to photocopy teacher’s hand-written notes or smartphones that enable them to download pdf books,’* stated a 19-year-old girl, also studying in Debre Tabor.

## Conclusions and implications for policy and programming

The Government of Ethiopia is highly invested in improving access to quality education and learning. It is signatory to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which target free and equitable education through the end of secondary school as well as affordable TVET and tertiary education (SDG 4), and it has formulated both a 10-year Education National Roadmap as well as an inclusive education policy. Despite these efforts, however, our findings underscore that Ethiopian adolescents have highly uneven access to quality education and learning. There are large disparities between those living in urban versus rural areas (with those in the most remote areas especially disadvantaged), across regions, and between those with and without disabilities. Critically, and despite government efforts, girls continue to be significantly disadvantaged compared to boys and there are worrying hints that the gender gap has stabilised – and is even growing – in the last few years. Based on our research, we

propose the following policy and programmatic actions to accelerate progress in improving Ethiopian adolescents' access to quality education and learning.

### 1 Support adolescents' and parents' aspirations for education by:

- Encouraging high but realistic aspirations by exposing adolescents to multiple alternatives, via classroom curricula, school- and community-based clubs, and local role models (identified through alumni networks where possible and tailored to local realities). Pair this with hands-on guidance that supports adolescents to develop a personal plan that builds on their individual interests and strengths, and offers a realistic sense of which study and career options are available to them, and what grades they will need to pursue them.



Young adolescent girl in Afar © Nathalie Bertrams / GAGE 2020

- **Intensifying awareness-raising efforts for parents, moving beyond simplistic messaging about the value of education to include more practical ways that parents can support children's education** (e.g. through time allowed for study or through prohibiting *shogoye*). Where possible, messages should be paired with incentives (e.g. need-based or merit stipends and community ceremonies to acknowledge model students and supportive parents).
    - › **For married girls**, messaging should also target husbands and parents-in-law and emphasise that marriage and education can be compatible, and will support better earnings over the longer-run.
    - › **For adolescents with disabilities**, messaging should focus on the importance of education for all young people and provide information and referrals to appropriate education facilities depending upon disability type and needs.
  - **Directly addressing – with parents, adolescents and community leaders – the gender norms that limit adolescents' access to education and learning.** Messages about girls' education must include parents not over-burdening girls with housework (and that boys should do their fair share); they must also tackle the stigma that surrounds menstruation, and address continued preferences for child marriage (regardless of whether it is arranged or adolescent initiated). Messages about boys must include the importance of prioritising education over agricultural and paid labour. Awareness-raising should be delivered in a variety of community- and school-based venues, making sure to target parents as parents (and not just community members).
  - **Encouraging interest in TVET by actively promoting it to adolescents and parents as a viable, respectable alternative to university in rural communities.** Simultaneously invest in improved programme resourcing and better linkages between programmes and employment opportunities.
- ## 2 Promote better access to education by:
- **Continuing to scale up access to learning by investing in inclusive educational infrastructure** (including building special needs and secondary schools in rural communities and secure boarding facilities in urban areas), and ensuring that schools and classrooms are staffed and resourced in a manner that supports learning for all students, including those with disabilities. At the macro level, this may mean reviewing investment priorities that are leading to under-investment in secondary education (compared to tertiary and primary).
  - **Ensuring that all schools have separate toilets for girls and boys as well as facilities that girls can use for menstrual management.**
  - **Scaling up school- and community-based clubs and programmes that promote gender awareness** for girls and boys, providing them with role models that show what women can do and offering girls a venue for strengthening agency and voice.
  - **Continuing and intensifying efforts to ensure that even remote communities have access to drinking water and fuel sources, as a way of reducing girls' time poverty** and increasing their time for school attendance and study.
  - **Investing in the provision of drinking water and school meals** to encourage attendance by children from the poorest families.
- ## 3 Improve educational quality by:
- **Investing in teacher training, making sure that teachers have mastery of both content and child-friendly pedagogies, and that they are offered regular refresher courses and options for online certification.** Strengthen anonymous student evaluation in order to identify strong and weak teachers. Where possible, incentivise teacher performance – and placement into difficult work environments (including in remote rural communities) – with bonus pay.



- **To support inclusive education**, ensure that teacher training includes courses on disability-friendly teaching approaches for all teachers, as well as quality specialist training for teachers in Braille and sign language and pedagogical approaches for supporting adolescents with specific needs.
- **Focusing on learning outcomes** by reducing class sizes, offering more hours of instruction each day (including through tutorials and full-day instruction flexibly arranged around agricultural calendars), and ensuring that students are not promoted until they have demonstrated achievement of grade-level skills.
  - › Such initiatives could potentially be supported by implementing a tuition-for-service programme whereby teachers' college students are supported with subsidised tuition and accommodation to get their teaching certificate, in return for a mandatory period of service in under-staffed rural areas. This could also help attract more mother-tongue teachers in emerging regions such as Afar.
- **Addressing violence in schools** – whether from teachers or students – by implementing zero tolerance policies, ensuring that adolescents can anonymously report experiences of violence, and that repeat offenders are forced see their employment terminated.
- **Investing in data that allows for tracking of sub-regional gaps and progress over time.**

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## About GAGE

Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) is a nine-year longitudinal research programme generating evidence on what works to transform the lives of adolescent girls in the Global South. Visit [www.gage.odi.org.uk](http://www.gage.odi.org.uk) for more information.

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