

# Policy Brief

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Students at school in Amhara, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams / GAGE



## Exploring changing patterns in adolescents' access to education and learning in Ethiopia

Policy and programming implications from the GAGE midline findings

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### Introduction

Ethiopia has seen remarkable progress over the last decade in terms of adolescents' access to education. Driven by the government's investments in educational infrastructure and awareness raising, over 70% of children now complete primary school (until 8th grade) and just over half enrol in secondary school. Despite progress, however, significant challenges and inequities remain. Enrolment rates in some regions are extremely low, improvements in access have not been mirrored by improvements in quality, and progress towards gender parity has not only slowed – but reversed – as enrolment for boys has increased more quickly in recent years than for girls.

This report synthesises findings from the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) programme's midline data collection to explore changes in Ethiopian adolescents' education and learning. Paying careful attention to similarities and differences between groups of adolescents – girls and boys, those living in cities versus 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 (from primary- to secondary- to tertiary-level education); and their learning.

### Research methodology

This report draws on mixed-methods research undertaken in late 2019/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 (Zone 5), Amhara (South Gondar) and Oromia (East Hararghe), and Dire Dawa City Administration. Our quantitative sample, which includes 7,526

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adolescents in two age cohorts (the older aged 17–19 and the younger aged 12–14), deliberately oversampled those most at risk of being left behind – such as out-of-school adolescents, married adolescents and adolescents with disabilities. Our qualitative sample of 388 core adolescents (plus their caregivers, siblings, peers, service providers and community key informants) was selected from the larger quantitative sample.

## Key findings

### Educational aspirations

Our midline survey found that adolescents’ educational aspirations are shaped by their desire for professional work, with most (69%) young people – even those who are out of school – reporting a desire for tertiary education. Our qualitative work, however, found marked variation across regions and between girls and boys. Shaped by their better access to both education and role models, adolescents in urban areas and South Gondar not only tended to aspire higher, but to be able to better articulate their aspirations. In East Hararghe and Zone 5, by contrast, many young people reported that education was not important to their futures. Others listed aspirations they did not understand. Across sites, girls’ educational aspirations were lower than boys’ – with the gender gap growing as young people move towards adulthood.

### Access to education

At midline, just over three-quarters (77%) of adolescents were enrolled in school, with younger adolescents and those in urban areas more likely to be enrolled than their older and rural peers. In rural areas, enrolment patterns vary by region and by sex. Enrolment is higher in South Gondar than in East Hararghe and (especially) Zone 5 – with younger girls (somewhat) advantaged over younger boys in South Gondar and Zone 5, and younger boys (very) advantaged

over younger girls in East Hararghe. Among the older cohort, boys are more likely to be enrolled than girls in all locations, with fewer than one-in-three girls in East Hararghe and Zone 5 still enrolled. Grade progression was slow, with most young people several years over age for grade. Our qualitative work emphasised that enrolment, attendance and progression are shaped by heavy demands on young people’s time, generally agricultural work for boys and domestic work for girls. Child marriage also limits girls’ access to education, with approximately one-third of out-of-school girls in South Gondar and East Hararghe reporting that they left school in order to marry.

### Supportive home environments

Our survey found that female caregivers have high educational aspirations for their children – albeit lower than those of adolescents themselves. Nearly three-quarters (74%) would like their children to study past the 10th grade. Our qualitative work found that nearly all parents express high regard for schooling but that their high regard is only sometimes backed up by the practical support that allows adolescents to focus on their schooling. This is especially the case for girls, even in communities where girls’ access to education is good. Girls are allowed far less time to study than boys, with those in East Hararghe particularly disadvantaged due to responsibilities for water collection.

### Supportive learning environments

Our midline research found that that schools and classrooms are under-resourced, that pedagogies are often rote and ineffective, and that violent discipline by teachers is common (with 81% of enrolled students reporting having experienced or witnessed violence in the last year). Across locations, though less common in urban areas, adolescents reported that their schools lacked functioning toilets and water, that classrooms were over-crowded, that desks and textbooks were in short supply, and that teachers lacked mastery

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>.



Graphic designed by Ottavia Pasta for GAGE

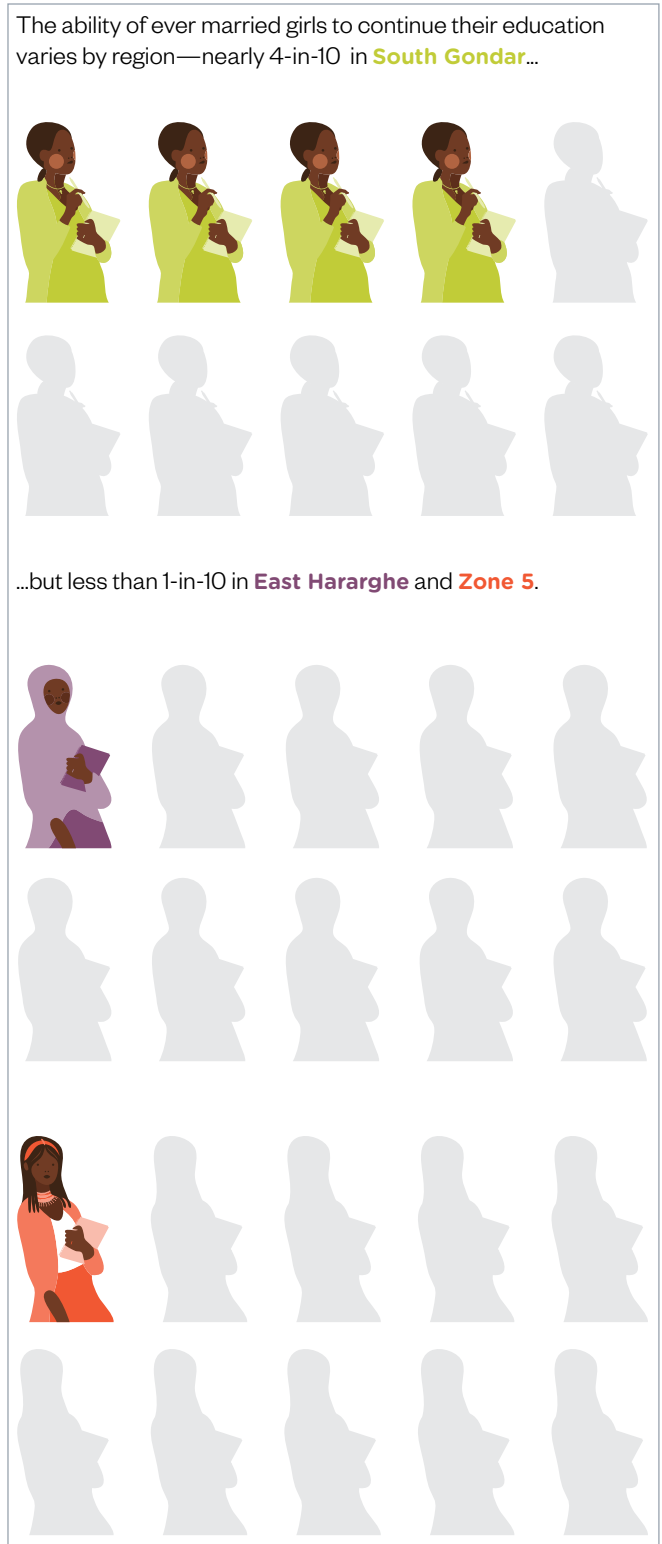
of the content they were meant to be delivering. In Zone 5, some communities had no school buildings and others had no teachers. Young people reported being beaten for misbehaving, but also for mathematical errors or for arriving late to school (because they were working for their parents). Girls' clubs, more common in urban areas and South Gondar, emerged as important for supporting girls through menarche (because menstruation is stigmatised) and adolescents expressed an interest in educational and career guidance that could help them understand their options – and how to get there.

### Educational transitions

Outside of urban areas, it was rare for even adolescents in the older cohort to have transitioned to secondary school. Due to late enrolment and slow progression, most enrolled rural adolescents were still a year – or even two – from completing primary school. Transitions are complicated by the reality that only the most central rural communities have secondary schools of their own, meaning that adolescents who wish to study past 8th grade must either undertake long daily commutes or board in town (which is expensive). Girls are especially disadvantaged, as parents are afraid that they will be raped or engage in love affairs – both of which reflect badly on family honour. In Zone 5, some communities have agreed to prevent girls from attending secondary school specifically in order to ensure that they do not reject local marriage customs, which require them to marry maternal cousins. Our qualitative work highlighted that post-secondary transitions are even more complicated. Recent ethnic violence in urban areas has dampened university enrolment (as policy assigns young people to schools outside of their home regions) and while most TVET students report positively on their training, TVET continues to be seen as 'second best' to university, meaning that families often refuse to cover costs.

### Grade repletion and learning

Our midline research found that learning outcomes are very poor. While one-third of students report being in the top 10% of their class – one-third also report having failed at least one grade. Boys are more at risk of grade failure than girls. Our qualitative research found that survey results likely understate how poor learning outcomes are, as adolescents emphasised that promotions are regular – even when learning is limited. It was not uncommon for adolescents, especially those in Zone 5, to report not being able to write their names. Quite a few young people observed that they had dropped out of school because they saw no point in wasting their time.



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## Policy and programming implications

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 has even grown – 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.
- 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. time for study). Where possible, messages should be paired with incentives.
- 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.
- Directly addressing – with parents, adolescents and community leaders – the gender norms that limit adolescents' access to education and learning.
- Encouraging interest in TVET by actively promoting it to adolescents and parents as a viable, respectable alternative to university in rural communities.

### 2 Promote better access to education by:

- Continuing to scale up access to learning by investing in inclusive educational infrastructure and ensuring that schools and classrooms are staffed and resourced in a manner that supports learning for all students.
- 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.
- Continuing and intensifying efforts to ensure that even remote communities have access to drinking water and fuel sources.
- Investing in the provision of drinking water and school meals to encourage attendance by children from the poorest families.

### 3 Improve education 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.
- To support inclusive education, ensure that teacher training includes courses on disability-friendly teaching approaches for all teachers.
- Focusing on learning outcomes by reducing class sizes, offering more hours of instruction each day, and ensuring that students are not promoted until they have demonstrated achievement of grade-level skills.
- Initiatives could potentially be supported by implementing a tuition-for-service programme.
- Addressing violence in schools – whether from teachers or students.
- Investing in data that allows for tracking of sub-regional gaps and progress over time.