

‘How could I think about my education when people are dying here and there?’

Evidence on Ethiopian young people’s education, from GAGE Round 3

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Introduction

Driven in part by the Ethiopian government's education sector development plans over the past decade, the country has seen significant progress in adolescents' access to education (Ministry of Education, 2021). Since 2012, the proportion of children who complete primary education has climbed from 42% to 57%, and the proportion who complete secondary education has increased from 11% to 14% (ibid.; UNESCO, 2024). Despite progress, however, Ethiopia continues to lag behind its sub-Saharan neighbours. There is an 8 percentage point gap in primary completion, and the country is considered off-track to deliver on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, on quality education, due to deficits in both access and quality (Sachs et al., 2023; UNICEF, 2024; World Bank, 2024).

This report builds on previous research by the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) programme and synthesises findings from Round 3 data collection (in 2021 and 2022) to explore patterns in Ethiopian young

people's education and learning (Jones et al., 2019b; Presler-Marshall et al., 2021). Paying careful attention to similarities and differences between groups of adolescents (broadly aged 13–17 at the time of data collection) and young adults (broadly aged 18–21 at the time of data collection) – based on their gender, geographical location, and intersecting disadvantages, which include disability and child marriage – we explore multiple educational indicators. These include: young people's educational aspirations; their access to formal education; the quality of education they receive; their progress through the school system, including their transitions into middle, secondary and post-secondary education; their experiences of violence perpetrated by teachers; and the support they receive from caregivers. Given the rapid political, economic and social changes occurring in Ethiopia over the past five years, we also highlight some key changes in education outcomes using earlier rounds of data. The report concludes with implications for policy and programming.



Girls in primary school, East Hararge © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2024

Ethiopian context

Country timeline

Since GAGE last collected data in Ethiopia, in late 2019 and early 2020, myriad events at the international, national and regional levels have combined to shape the lives – and educational trajectories – of young people. The Covid-19 pandemic forced schools to close in March 2020, and in-person instruction did not resume until October 2020. Although there were efforts to teach students remotely, in practice, distance education was available only in urban areas. Shortly following the reopening of schools, conflict in the Tigray region broke out in November 2020, creating country-wide unrest that saw education disrupted again. Several universities were closed and thousands of university students were not able to take their places at school. By mid-2021, violence had spread to the Amhara region, resulting in more school closures and widespread destruction of schools and learning materials.

Education

Since 2020, the K-12 education system in Ethiopia has included pre-primary (2 years), primary (grades 1–6), middle school (grades 7–8), and secondary school (grades 9–12) (Ministry of Education, 2023). Students sit for a regional exam to pass from primary school to middle school and sit for national exams to pass from middle school to secondary school, and to progress on to post-secondary education. Prior to 2020, primary school was an eight-year cycle, culminating in the regional exam; secondary school was two cycles, of two years each, with a national exam at the end of each (Ministry of Education, 2019).

In the 2021–2022 school year, the Ministry of Education reports that the net enrolment rate (NER) in primary school at the national level was 93% and favoured boys (97%, versus 88% for girls) (Ministry of Education, 2023). Enrolment falls sharply by middle school; only 47% of boys and girls were enrolled. There are large regional differences. In Amhara, the primary NER was 77% and slightly favoured girls (78% versus 77%). The middle school NER was 50% and significantly favoured girls (56% versus 45%). In Oromia, the primary NER was 107%¹ and significantly favoured boys (114% versus 101%). The middle school NER was 45% and again favoured boys (48% versus 43%). The Ministry estimates that at a national level, only 73% of girls and 77% of boys complete primary school.

Primary completion rates in Amhara and Oromia were 76%. In Amhara, girls were more likely to complete than boys (80% versus 72%). In Oromia, boys were more likely to complete than girls (81% versus 71%).

At the secondary level, the national NER is 33% for girls and boys. In Amhara, where the total NER is 40%, girls are more likely to attend secondary school than boys (45% versus 35%). In Oromia, where the total NER is 27%, Ministry of Education figures show near parity, with 29% of boys and 25% of girls enrolled.

While secondary enrolment rates are low, pass rates on the exam students take at the end of secondary school are even lower. In 2023, only 3% of students who sat the national exam at the end of grade 12 achieved the 50% score required to enrol in university (Bedasso and Rossiter, 2023). The same study notes that this pass rate, which plummeted 93% when the school system and exams were revised in 2020, partially reflects students' learning outcomes, which are poor and have been falling for many years, but primarily reflects the Minister of Education's determination to end the practice of 'selling' pass scores and cheating in exams.

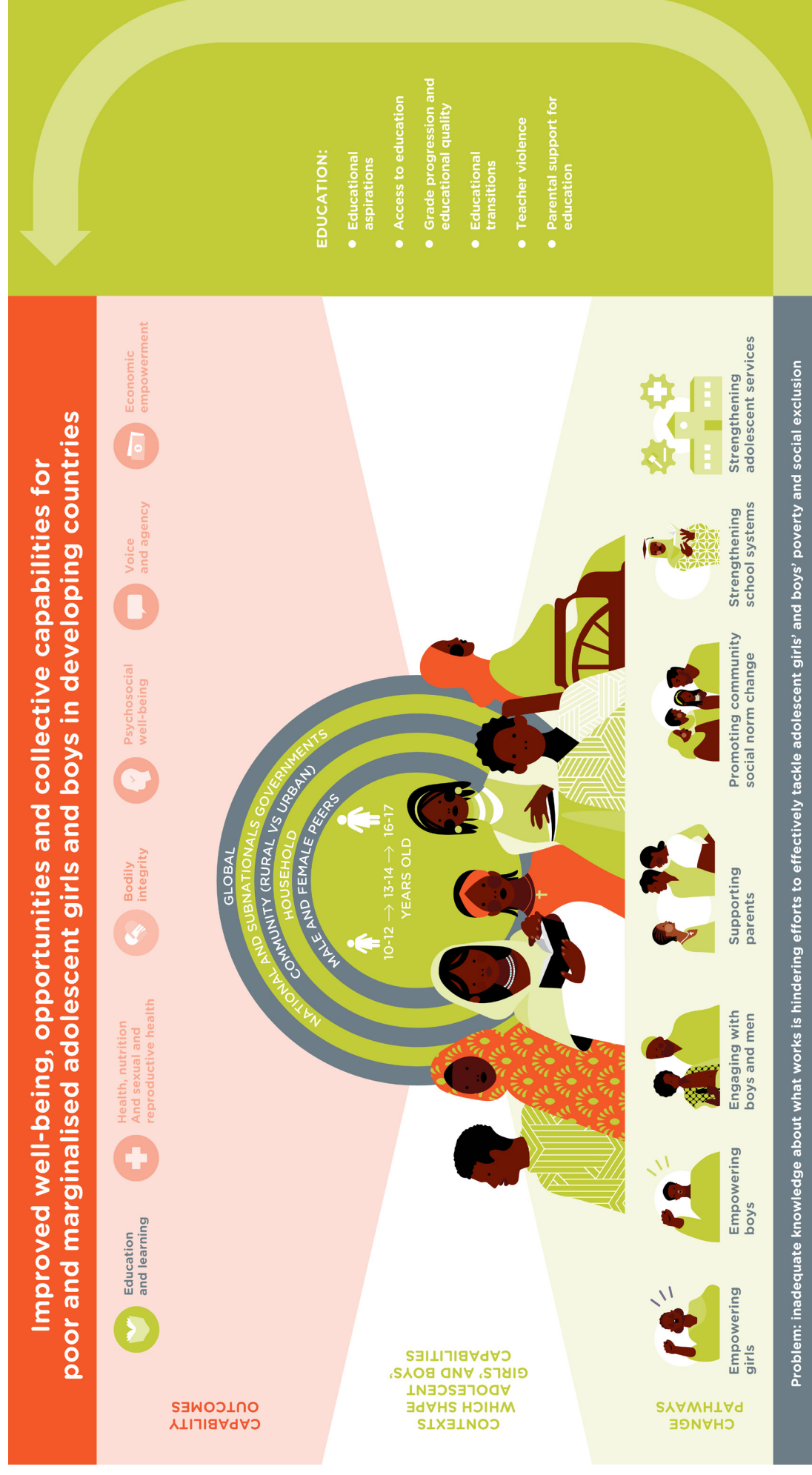
Conceptual framing

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 adolescents' development and empowerment, both now and in the future (see Figure 1). 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 adolescents' capabilities.

The first building block of our conceptual framework is capability outcomes. Championed originally by Amartya Sen (1985, 2004) and nuanced by Martha Nussbaum (2011) and Naila Kabeer (2003) to better capture complex gender dynamics at intra-household and societal levels, the capabilities approach has evolved as a broad normative framework exploring the kinds of assets

¹ The Ministry of Education states that NERs over 100% are due to issues with population projections.

Figure 1: GAGE conceptual framework



(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 children and young people with diverse trajectories, including the most marginalised and *'hardest to reach'* such as those with disabilities or those who were married as children. Although the GAGE framework covers six core capabilities, this report focuses on education and learning. It explores educational aspirations, access to education, learning outcomes and educational quality, violence at school, and parental support for education.

The second building block of our conceptual framework is context dependency. Our '3 Cs' framework situates young people socio-ecologically. It recognises that not only do girls and boys at different stages in the life course have different needs and constraints, but also that these are highly dependent on their context at the family/household, community, state and global levels. Within education, the key factors that we consider include household poverty, deeply entrenched gender norms, and the contours of the educational system and labour market.

The third and final building block of our conceptual framework – change strategies – acknowledges that young people's 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 socio-ecological approach emphasises that to nurture transformative change in girls' and boys' 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 young people, their families and their communities while also working to effect change at the systems level. The report concludes with our reflections on what type of package of interventions could better support Ethiopian young people's access to quality education.

Sample and methods

This report draws on mixed-methods data collected in Ethiopia between early 2021 and late 2022. It adds to what we have learnt from data collected at baseline (2017–2018) and during Round 2 (2019–2020).

At baseline, the quantitative sample included 6,924 adolescents from households across two cohorts (aged 10–12 years and 15–17 years), with purposeful oversampling of adolescents with disabilities and those who were married as children. Data was collected from three marginalised rural areas – Amhara's South Gondar, Oromia's East Hararghe, and Afar's Zone 5 – as well as urban Dire Dawa, Debre Tabor, and Batu. For this initial round, only younger cohort adolescents were sampled in rural areas, and in Batu only older adolescents were sampled.

For Round 2, an additional 1,655² young people (aged 10–20 at the time of recruitment) were added to the sample. Most were added because they were rural (to balance the older cohort in urban areas) or because they had married as children (due to this being of special interest to GAGE). Others were added because they were out of school, had a disability, or were internally displaced. Altogether, this brings the total sample size for Round 2 to 8,579 adolescents. Data was collected from the same three rural and three urban locations.

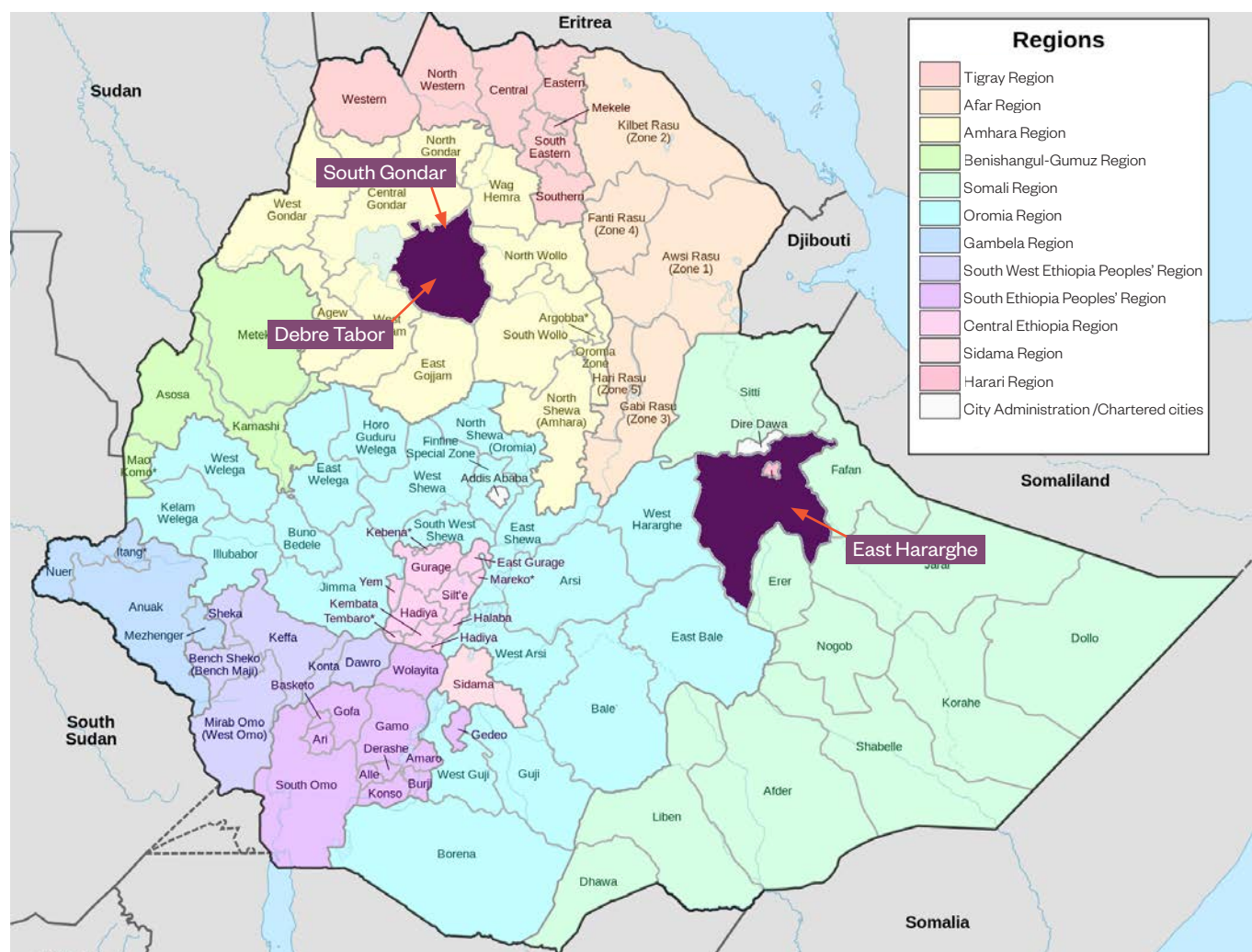
For Round 3, budget limitations meant that GAGE researchers only surveyed people living in rural South Gondar, rural East Hararghe and the city of Debre Tabor (see Figure 2). The total eligible sample was 8,543. This included 6,194 young people who were part of the Round 2 sample from these three locations, 807 older adolescents (new to the study) in Debre Tabor, aged 14–18 at time of recruitment, and 1,533 very young adolescents (also new to the study) aged 11–13 at time of recruitment. The final Round 3 survey sample involved 7,509 young people.

To facilitate the analysis of change over time, this report focuses on the 4,810 adolescents who were surveyed in both Round 2 and Round 3. Of these, 202 had reported a functional disability,³ even if they have an assistive device available (such as glasses, hearing aids or a mobility device) (see Table 1). The sample included more females

2 This total includes: a) 1,124 older rural adolescents (aged 17–19 at recruitment) from East Hararghe, South Gondar, and Afar – of these 680 were female (490 of whom were married) and 444 were male (117 of whom were married), b) 387 married adolescents, including those living in the same three rural areas (aged 10–16 at recruitment) and in GAGE's urban locations (aged 14–20 at recruitment), c) 157 adolescents with disabilities (aged 10–20 at recruitment) – but only 64 new individuals who were not part of a and b already detailed, and d) 140 adolescents with characteristics of special interest (e.g. those who were internally displaced or out of school) – but only 80 new individuals who were not part of a, b and c already detailed.

3 Determined by using the Washington Group Questionnaire: <https://www.washingtongroup-disability.com/question-sets/wg-short-set-on-functioning-wg-ss/>

Figure 2: GAGE Round 3 research locations



(2,802) than males (2,008). Of the females, and because GAGE over sampled those who had experienced child marriage, 734 had married prior to age 18. At the time they were surveyed, the younger cohort had a mean age of 14.3 years; we refer to these individuals as adolescents. The older cohort had a mean age of 18.9 years. To distinguish these young people from those in the younger cohort, we refer to them as young adults, despite the fact that a small minority of them are legal minors under the age of 18.

An important point to note, for interpreting our findings, is that the younger cohort (3,857 adolescents) is much larger than the older cohort (953 young adults). The younger cohort is also more likely to be rural than the older cohort (approximately 90% versus 65%). Because of these differences, means by cohort that do not take account of location cannot be directly compared, thus our findings are presented by cohort. For some indicators, we present changes over time. Specifically, we present

Table 1: Quantitative panel sample

	Locations			Sub-sample of those with disability	Sub-sample of girls married <18	Total
	Rural South Gondar	Rural East Hararghe	Urban Debre Tabor			
Females	1260	1164	378	107	734	2802
Males	852	816	340	95	na	2008
Younger cohort	1777	1704	376	157	377	3857
Older cohort	335	276	342	45	357	953
Total	2112	1980	718	202	734	4810

change between Round 2 and Round 3, because both those samples included the older rural adolescents who were added for Round 2.

The qualitative sample for this report was primarily purposively drawn from the larger quantitative sample. However, it also includes additional research participants who were purposively selected to explore the effects of the conflict in South Gondar, given that this constituted a major shock to young people, their households and communities. Because of the security situation and the timeline of the national election, the Round 3 qualitative data was not collected during a single window. It instead represents an amalgamation of six rounds of data collected in urban Debre Tabor and rural South Gondar and East Hararghe during the same time period in which surveys were fielded. In total, the sample includes 203 interviews with 336 individual young people, as well as 37 interviews with 219 individual caregivers and 141 interviews with 198 individual key informants (see Table 2).

Quantitative survey data was collected through face-to-face interviews⁴ by enumerators who were trained to communicate with marginalised populations. Surveys were broad and included modules reflecting the GAGE conceptual framework (see Hamory et al., 2024). Analysis of the quantitative survey data focused on a set of

indicators related to education (data tables are available on request). Statistical analysis was conducted using Stata 17.0. For simplification, differences cited in the text as statistically significant have a p-value<0.05.

Qualitative tools, employed by researchers who spoke the respondent's native language (Amharic or Afaan Oromo) and had been 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., 2024). 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.

Prior to commencing research, GAGE secured approval from ethics committees at ODI and George Washington University, the Ethiopian Society of Sociologists, Social Workers and Anthropologists, and the research ethics boards from the relevant regional Bureaus of Health of Ethiopia. We also secured informed assent from adolescents aged 17 and under, and informed consent from their caregivers, and from adolescents aged 18 or above. There was also a robust protocol for referral to services, tailored to the different realities of the diverse research sites (Baird et al., 2020).

Table 2: Qualitative sample

Respondent Type	Sex	Location			Total
		Rural		Urban	
		South Gondar	East Hararghe	Debre Tabor	
Adolescents	Girls	56 (90)	11 (27)	9	76 (126)
	Boys	50 (81)	12 (29)	6	68 (116)
Total		106 (171)	23 (56)	15	144 (242)
Young adults	Females	13 (22)	8 (16)	8	29 (46)
	Males	13 (25)	6 (12)	11	30 (48)
Total		26 (47)	14 (28)	19	59 (94)
Sub-sample of those with disability		5 (11)	-	3	8 (14)
Sub-sample of girls married <18		5 (8)	2	2	9 (12)
Sub-sample of IDPs		4 (16)	-		4 (16)
Parents/Caregivers	Mothers	10 (58)	6 (35)	3 (18)	19 (111)
	Fathers	10 (56)	5 (34)	3 (18)	18 (108)
Total		20 (114)	11 (69)	6 (36)	37 (219)
Key informants		99 (125)	32 (63)	10	14 (198)
TOTAL		265 (492)	82 (218)	55 (85)	402 (795)

The table presents the number of interviews and then in brackets indicates the total number of participants as some interviews were with pairs or groups of people

⁴ Twenty-seven adolescents were interviewed by phone.

Findings

Our findings are presented in line with our conceptual framework: educational aspirations, access to education, educational quality and grade progression, educational transitions, corporal punishment, and parental support for education. As noted in the previous section, survey findings are presented by cohort – first for adolescents, and then for young adults.

Educational aspirations

Survey findings for adolescents

Reflecting that most adolescents believe that education is necessary for future economic security, at Round 3, adolescents' educational aspirations remained extremely high: 94% aspired to complete secondary school and 67% aspired to complete university (see Figure 3). Adolescents in Debre Tabor (92%) were significantly more likely to aspire to attend university than their peers in South Gondar (67%) and East Hararghe (61%). Gender differences in aspirations for university, which were insignificant in Debre Tabor and South Gondar, were large in East Hararghe, where boys were twice as likely as girls to aspire to university (89% versus 42%).

High educational aspirations notwithstanding, in the 18 months between Round 2 and Round 3 data collection, adolescents' educational aspirations slightly – but significantly – declined. In terms of aspirations for secondary school, declines are driven by adolescents in South Gondar, which saw a 3 percentage point drop between data collection rounds. As we discuss below, this is not surprising

given the experience of conflict in mid-to-late 2021 in the Amhara region, which resulted in far-reaching disruptions to education. Gender differences were not significant; declines in girls' and boys' aspirations for secondary school between Round 2 and Round 3 were similar.

Our data suggests small but important declines in aspirations to attend university, with important variation by location and gender (see Figure 4). In rural South Gondar and in urban Debre Tabor, both in Amhara, girls' aspirations for university increased (by 4 and 5 percentage points respectively), while boys' university aspirations decreased (by 8 and 3 percentage points respectively). As we discuss below, this is probably in part because boys were more likely to be recruited into armed forces during the conflict than girls – and because girls have little access to paid work unless they have post-secondary education. In rural East Hararghe, boys' aspirations for university increased by 5 percentage points, while girls' university aspirations fell by 14 percentage points, further evidencing the educational disadvantage facing Oromo girls that GAGE has been tracking since baseline (Jones et al., 2019b; Presler-Marshall et al., 2021).

Survey findings for young adults

Young adults' educational aspirations are also high. In aggregate, 85% aspired to complete secondary school and 61% aspired to complete university (see Figure 5). In terms of aspirations for secondary school, young adults in Debre Tabor (95%) had significantly higher aspirations than their peers in rural East Hararghe (89%) and South Gondar (72%). In terms of aspirations for university, young adults in Debre Tabor (87%) – a city with its own university – had

Figure 3: Adolescents' educational aspirations

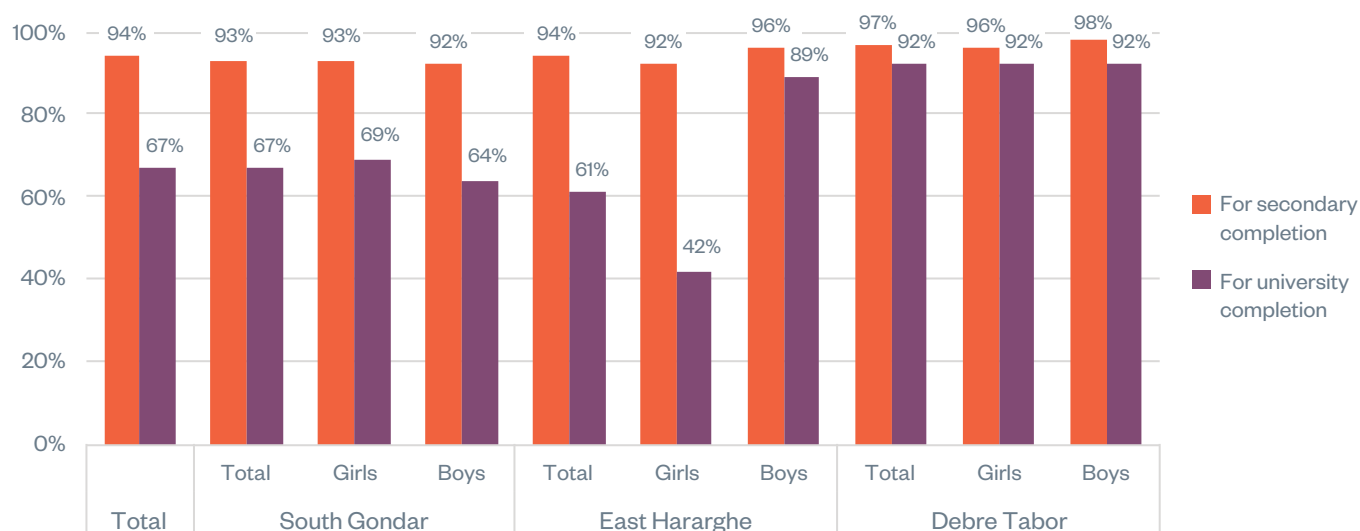


Figure 4: Change in adolescents' aspirations for university completion between Round 2 and Round 3

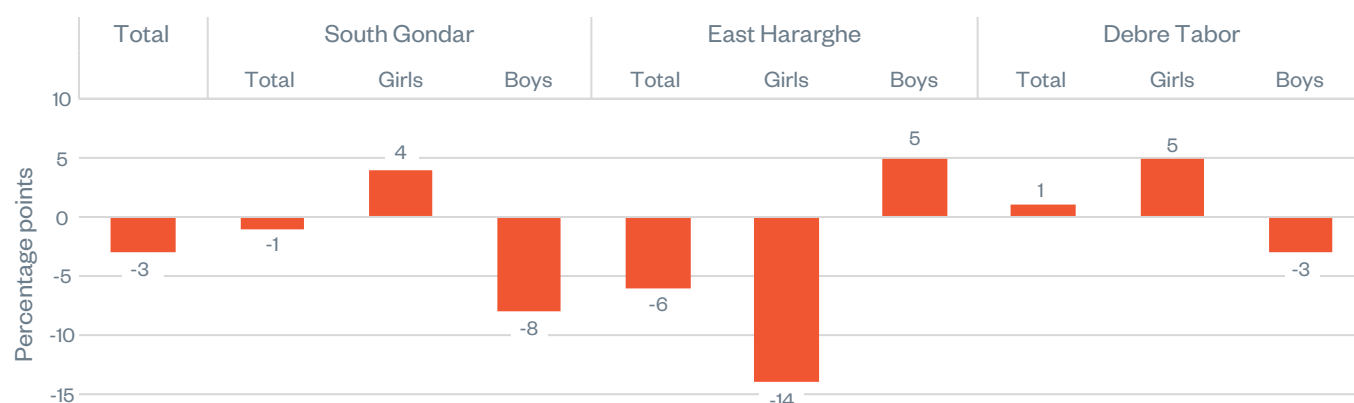
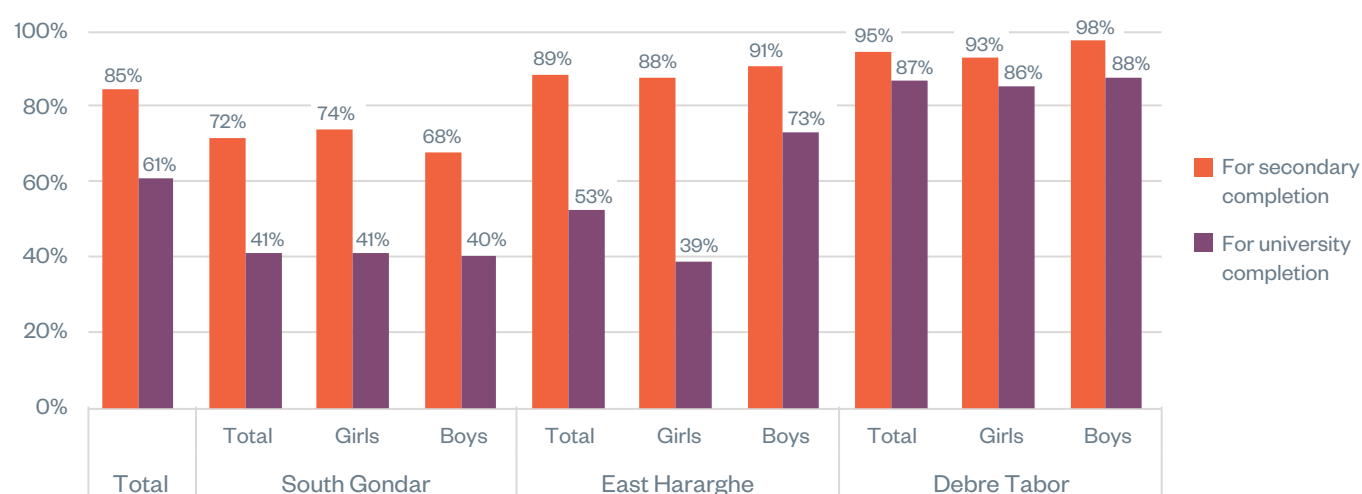


Figure 5: Young adults' educational aspirations



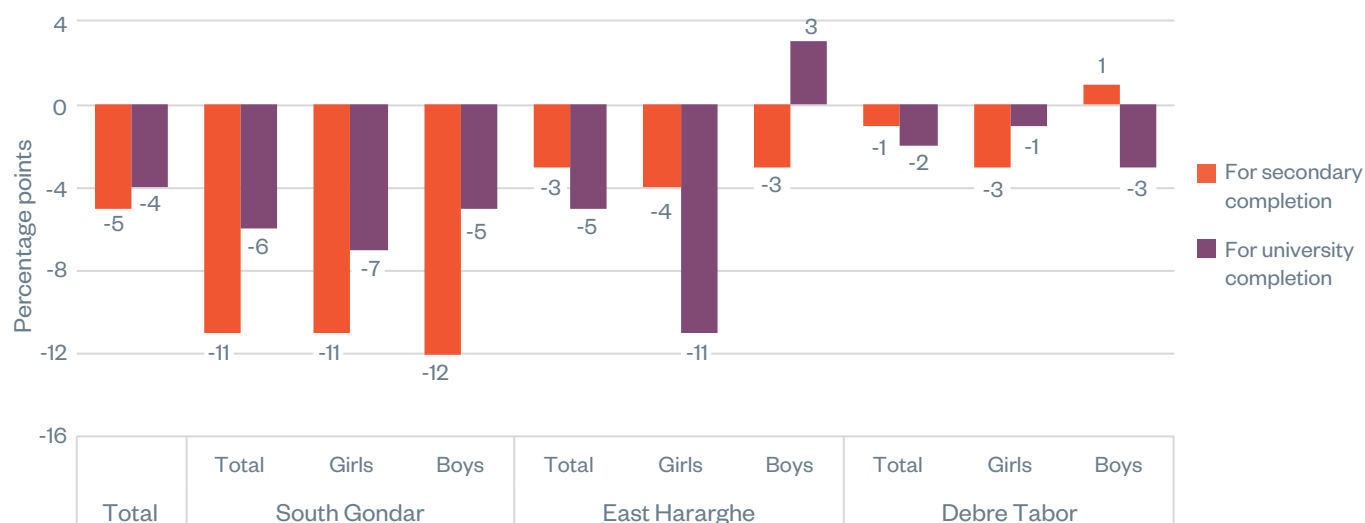
much higher aspirations than their peers in East Hararghe (53%) and South Gondar (41%). Gender differences in aspirations to attend university were significant only in East Hararghe, strongly favouring young men (73% versus 39%).

In the 18 months between Round 2 and Round 3, young adults' educational aspirations declined significantly (see Figure 6), particularly in rural areas. In terms of aspirations for secondary school, declines were again largest in South Gondar (11 percentage points), possibly due to conflict in that region. In terms of aspirations for university, declines were larger in rural areas than in Debre Tabor (2 percentage points), presumably (as we discuss below) because as young people mature, they better understand the multiple barriers between them and their aspirations. In East Hararghe, young men's and young women's aspirations for university are diverging (climbing by 3 percentage points for young men, falling by 11 percentage points for young women). This is possibly (as we discuss below) due to the different impacts of marriage on young adults' aspirations.

Qualitative findings

Qualitative research nuanced survey findings in several important regards. Most importantly, the qualitative findings highlight that Ethiopian young people – despite the upheavals they have experienced in the past few years – largely remain convinced that formal education is the basis of a successful future. Indeed, even most out-of-school adolescents and young adults would like to complete secondary school. Although a few young people patriotically reported wanting education 'to serve our people' (16-year-old boy, East Hararghe), most focused on the link between education and work. Some hoped that education would lead to non-agricultural work. An 18-year-old young woman from East Hararghe stated, 'We have to complete our education and we want to become hired'. Others hoped that education would lead to well-remunerated professional work. A 17-year-old girl from South Gondar, where girls and young women have little access to paid work unless they are well educated, stated, 'I have to study hard to be a doctor ... We also heard at school that doctors have big income.'

Figure 6: Change in young adults' aspirations between Round 2 and Round 3



Qualitative research also highlighted just how unrealistic many young people's educational aspirations are. A 13-year-old boy from East Hararghe, when asked what he wants for his future, replied, 'I want to attend school. I want to complete it and become a doctor, an engineer and a teacher.' When the interviewer then pressed him about which career he wanted most, noting that it is not possible to become all three, he insisted, 'Yes, I can.' While this case may be an outlier, it highlights the mismatch between young people's realities and their dreams for the future – a mismatch that was similarly illuminated in the quantitative data. Only in urban Debre Tabor, which is not a large city, did most adolescents understand what they would need to do (e.g. study hard for multiple years, pass exams, secure funding) in order to achieve their educational and occupational goals. A 16-year-old girl from Debre Tabor explained, 'I want to be an engineer ... The main thing is learning hard and getting the results.'

Qualitative research also explains why some young people's aspirations are falling compared with Round 2. Across locations, respondents reported that rising youth unemployment – especially among those with relatively higher levels of education – is dampening interest in school for the older adolescents and young adults who understand how it might impact their aspirations. A father in South Gondar, when asked why so many boys have given up on formal education, explained:

Adolescent boys are also losing their interest and hope to learn, since they observe many youths and boys who completed 10th and 12th grade and also graduated from the college but remained unemployed.

A father from Debre Tabor agreed:

The students quit their education and work as daily labourers because they have seen their older brothers and sisters who are unemployed after receiving their first degrees.

For adolescents and young adults living in Amhara – both in rural South Gondar and urban Debre Tabor – declining educational aspirations, especially for boys, are also the result of recent conflict (see also the companion GAGE report on psychosocial well-being, Presler-Marshall et al., 2024a). A 15-year-old boy from South Gondar explained:

In my opinion the major reason for adolescent boys' loss of interest to learn is problems they have at home, mainly parents' inability to afford school materials and even to feed them ... The other is that many adolescent boys are nowadays aspiring to join the military, especially the Amhara special police force, rather than continuing their learning.

A 19-year-old young man from Debre Tabor added:

Many students almost quit their education for fear of the fact that the government may force us to go to the war front ... The exam is planned for next October, but we are not sure whether we will be alive or not.

For adolescent girls and young women in East Hararghe, declining educational aspirations appear to be driven almost exclusively by child marriage (see Box 1).

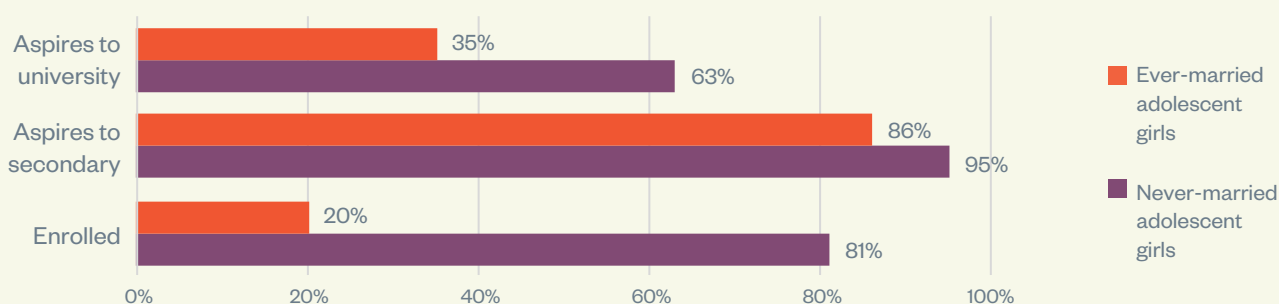
Box 1: Child marriage and education

The Round 3 survey found significant differences in educational aspirations and enrolment based on marital status, both for adolescent girls (those in the younger cohort) and young women (those in the older cohort). For young women, but not adolescent girls, the survey also found differences in grade attainment.

Survey findings for adolescent girls

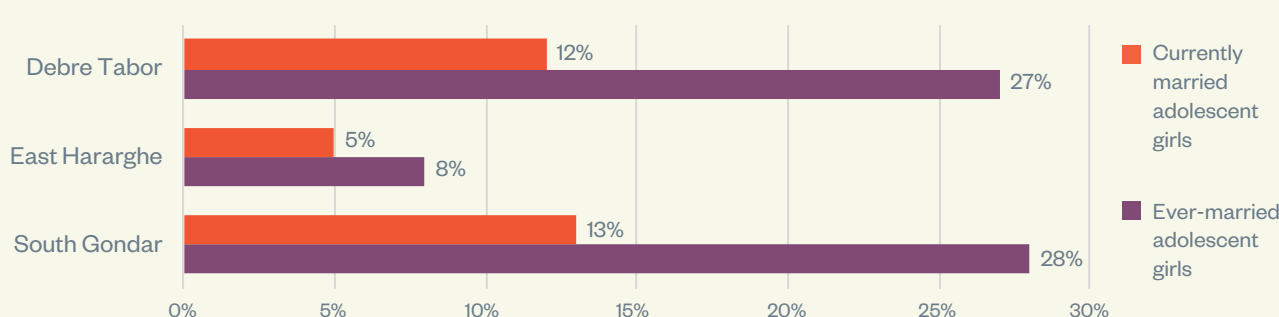
There were significant differences between adolescent girls who had ever been married and their peers who had not. Ever-married girls had lower educational aspirations and were one-quarter as likely to be currently enrolled in school (20% versus 81%) (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Educational indicators for adolescent girls who had ever been married versus those who had not



Ever-married adolescent girls' access to school varied significantly by region – and, for girls in Amhara, by girls' current marital status (see Figure 8). Ever-married adolescent girls living in rural South Gondar (28%) and urban Debre Tabor (27%) were significantly more likely to be enrolled than their peers in East Hararghe (8%). Currently married girls were less likely to be enrolled than those who had ever married (e.g. 13% versus 28% in South Gondar), which indicates that separation and divorce can afford ever-married girls a route back into education, at least in Amhara.

Figure 8: Enrolment status of ever-married adolescent girls, by current marital status and location



Survey findings for young women

For young women, the survey also found significant educational differences between those who had married as children (under age 18) compared to those who had never married (see Figure 9). Child brides were less likely to aspire to complete secondary school (78% versus 95%), to aspire to complete university (38% versus 88%), and to be enrolled (15% versus 75%). Child brides had also completed fewer grades of school. Of young women who were not enrolled, those who married as children had completed only 5.5 grades, compared with 7.2 for their peers who had not married. Of those who were enrolled, child brides had completed 9.7 grades compared with 10.9 for their peers who had not married.

The enrolment status of young women who had married as children also varied by location and current marital status (see Figure 10). Young women who had been child brides in South Gondar (28%) and Debre Tabor (26%) were more likely to be enrolled than their peers in East Hararghe (8%). In Amhara, young women who had been child brides and who were currently married were significantly less likely to be enrolled than those who had ever married but were no longer married, again indicating that divorce and separation can open up a route for child brides to return to school.

Figure 9: Educational indicators for young women who married prior to age 18 compared with those who did not

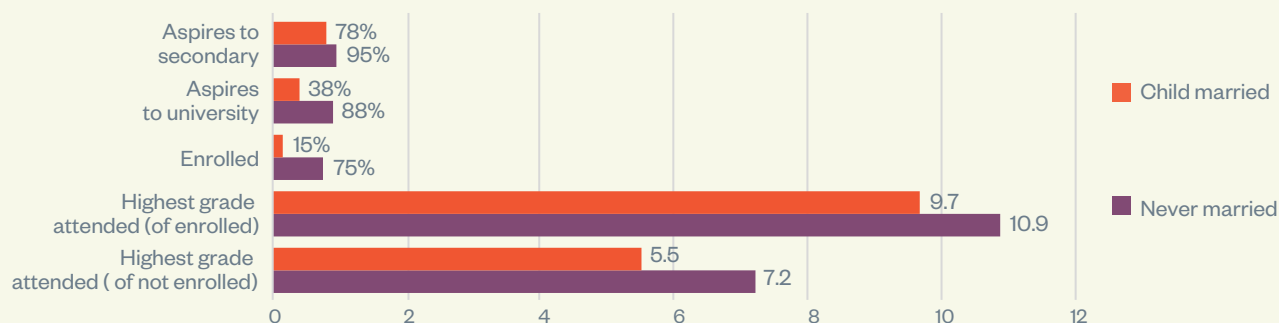
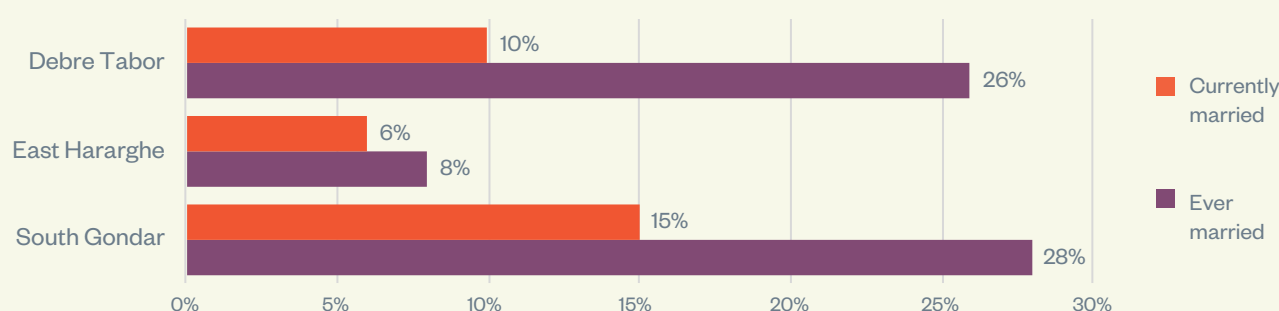


Figure 10: Enrolment status of young women who married prior to age 18, by current marital status and location



Qualitative research, in line with GAGE's previous findings (Presler-Marshall et al., 2021), underscores that child marriage and education are rarely compatible. Although some girls, especially in South Gondar (Amhara), are allowed to stay in school after marriage – or are more likely to return to school if they divorce – child marriage typically marks the end of a girl's education. In some cases, especially in East Hararghe (Oromia), this is because girls are refused permission by their marital families to attend school. An older boy in a group discussion in East Hararghe explained:

Once married, girls cannot continue with their education. Marriage leads to the end of girls' education. Married girls are not allowed to continue their education. They change the living place because they have to move to the place of her husband, and the parents of the husband do not allow the married girls to return back to school.

In other cases, this is because married girls lack the time to attend school. An 18-year-old young man from South Gondar explained that his married younger sister left school voluntarily: 'Girls can continue their education after marriage but she [his sister] was helping her husband with the housework and she discontinued her education willingly.' A 17-year-old mother from East Hararghe, where social norms dictate that girls must prove their fertility soon after marriage, added that motherhood leaves girls with even less opportunity to pursue education: 'I am married and have children. I wish to go back to school, but it is difficult to attend school after marriage. I am taking care of my children.'

In East Hararghe, where it is not uncommon for boys to also marry prior to age 18, the impact of child marriage on boys' education is markedly different from the impact on girls' education. A 14-year-old girl reported:

Boys also continue attending school after marriage. He may marry a girl, she cooks food and works at home, he goes to school as well as works in the farm field and any other work. Boys are not like girls, they do not quit school because of marriage.

Indeed, a 17-year-old boy noted that child marriage can improve boys' access to education, because their physical needs are catered to. He explained:

I want to get married ... I want to return to school after that ... You cannot attend school unless you are married. If you don't marry, you will terminate school. If you get married, you focus on your education. You relax with your wife and attend school. You will not look at girls. You only listen to what the teacher says.

Access to education

Figure 11 shows current enrolment at the time of GAGE Round 3 data collection, by the respondent's age, by gender and location. In Debre Tabor, enrolment was high (more than 90%) for girls and boys, through middle adolescence; it began falling for girls at age 16 and for boys at age 17. In South Gondar, enrolment dropped off earlier (by age 14) and from a lower base. Girls were more likely to be enrolled than boys through to age 18; young men were more likely to be enrolled than young women after that age. In East Hararghe, boys' enrolment was higher than girls', even in early adolescence, and the gender gap grew quickly. By age 20, just over 5% of young women in East Hararghe were enrolled.

Survey findings for adolescents

The Round 3 survey found that 75% of adolescents were still enrolled in formal education (see Figure 12). Despite conflict in Amhara region, enrolment was significantly higher in Debre Tabor (97%) and South Gondar (80%) than in East Hararghe (Oromia region) (66%). Gender differences matched figures from the Ministry of Education (2023), and were significant in rural areas. In South Gondar, girls were more likely to be enrolled than boys (84% versus 74%). In East Hararghe, the gender gap was much larger and favoured boys (84% versus 53%) – despite the efforts of teachers running girls' clubs and gender clubs (see Box 2).

Between Round 2 and Round 3, adolescents' enrolment fell by a significant 6 percentage points (see Figure 13).

Figure 11: Current enrolment at GAGE Round 3 data collection by exact age

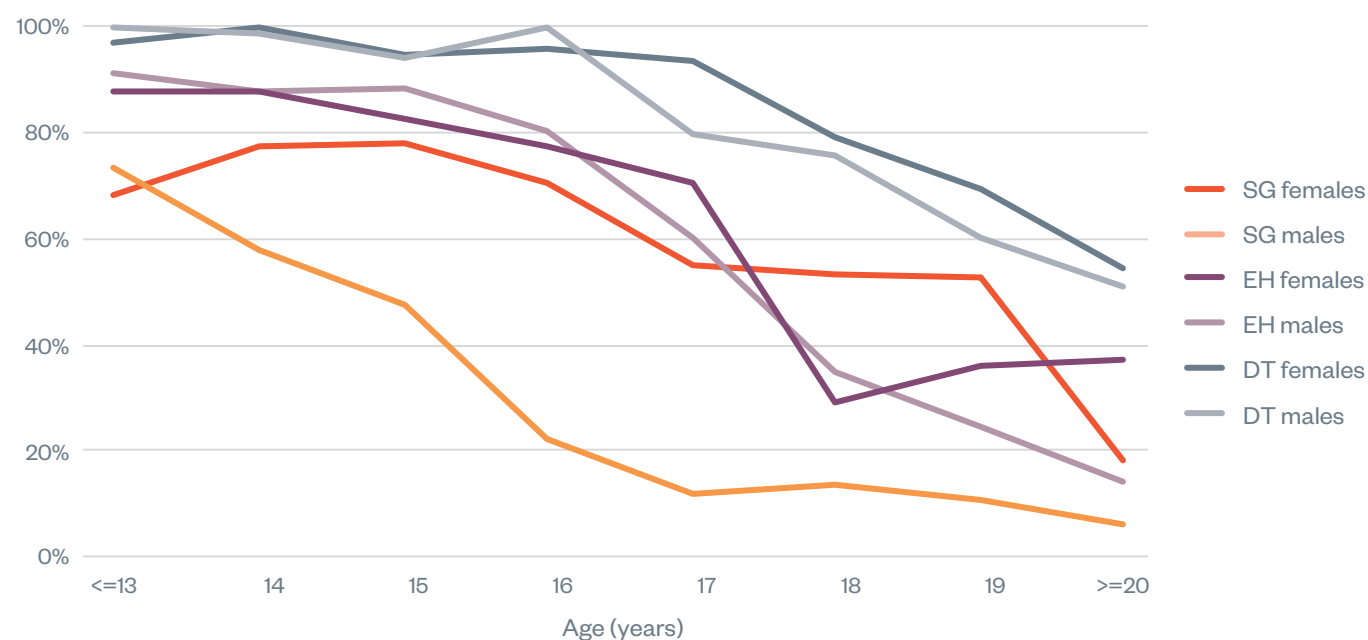
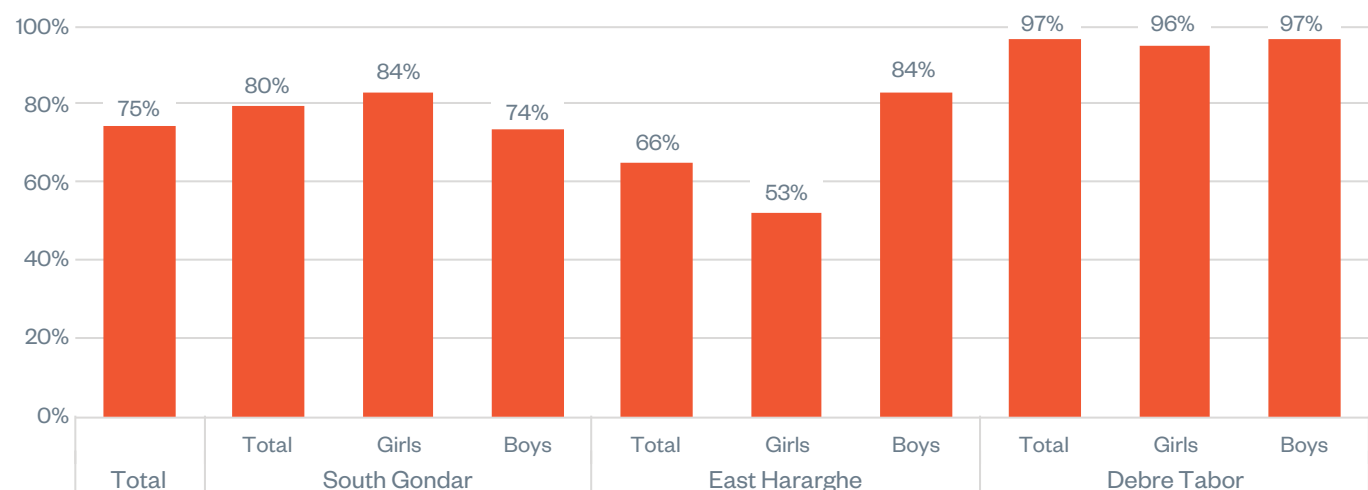


Figure 12: Adolescents' enrolment at Round 3



Box 2: School-based girls' clubs and gender clubs are working to address restrictive gender norms

Adolescents in all locations reported that school-based girls' clubs and gender clubs are working to address restrictive gender norms and improve girls' access to – and success in – education. Girls and boys reported learning about female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage and gender equality, and how boys can be girls' allies in ending harmful traditional practices. A 12-year-old boy from East Hararghe explained:

There is a gender club. Both boys and girls are members of the gender club. We talk together about gender equality issues ... We learnt that boys and girls have equal rights to the gender roles in the family.

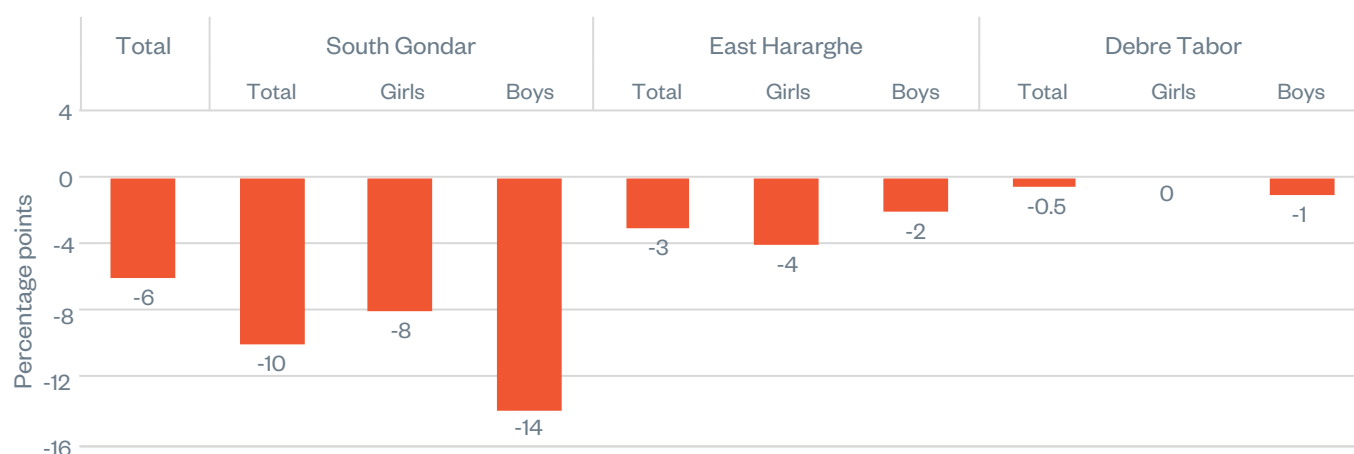
Girls added that clubs had also helped them understand that menstruation is 'nothing to be ashamed of' (13-year-old girl, South Gondar), and clubs had provided them with practical tips on how to manage menstruation at school.

Notably, several adolescents reported that access to girls' clubs and gender clubs drops off when young people transition to secondary school. A 15-year-old girl from East Hararghe stated that:

There was gender club when we were in primary school, in that club girls and boys were participants ... We were learning in gender club to avoid FGM, cutting of uvula, child marriage, forced marriage, and rape ... [There is] no gender club in secondary school.

It is important to note that in South Gondar, the Act with Her programme was able to leverage and build on a longer history of girls' clubs or gender clubs in schools in the Amhara region, whereas in East Hararghe (Oromia), the clubs established by Act with Her were often the first of their kind in these communities.

Figure 13: Declines in adolescents' enrolment between Round 2 and Round 3



Declines were driven by adolescents living in rural areas, and were much larger in South Gondar (10 percentage points), which was impacted by recent violence, than in East Hararghe (3 percentage points). In South Gondar, boys' enrolment fell by 14 percentage points between survey rounds, and girls' enrolment fell by 8 percentage points. In East Hararghe, girls' enrolment fell by 4 percentage points, and boys' enrolment fell by 2 percentage points.

Round 3 data showed that the average enrolled adolescent had missed 9% of school days in the past two weeks (see Figure 14). Rates of absenteeism were significantly lower in urban Debre Tabor (3%) than in rural South Gondar (8%) and East Hararghe (12%), where adolescents are more heavily burdened with domestic and agricultural work.

Survey findings for young adults

At Round 3, 43% of young adults were still enrolled in formal education (see Figure 15). Enrolment was significantly higher – approximately three times higher – in urban Debre Tabor (73%) than in rural South Gondar (28%) and East Hararghe (22%). Gender differences were statistically significant and large, and favoured young men in all locations, likely due to the high proportion of young women in the GAGE sample who had already married. The gender gap was largest in East Hararghe, where 36% of young men but only 12% of young women were enrolled at Round 3.

Between Round 2 and Round 3, as with adolescents, enrolment among young adults fell-- by an average of 6%, ranging from 2 to 10 percentage points (see Figure 16).

Figure 14: Adolescents' absenteeism in the two weeks preceding the survey

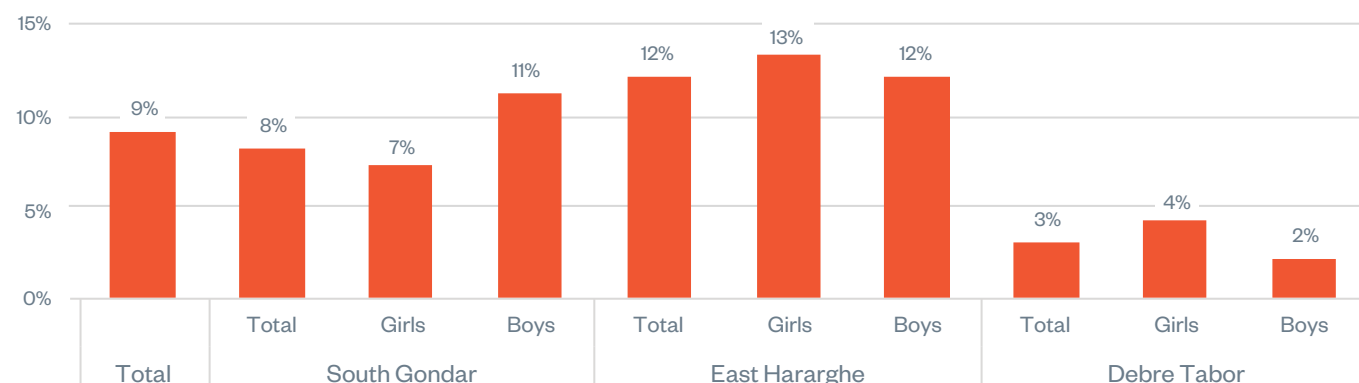


Figure 15: Young adults' enrolment at Round 3

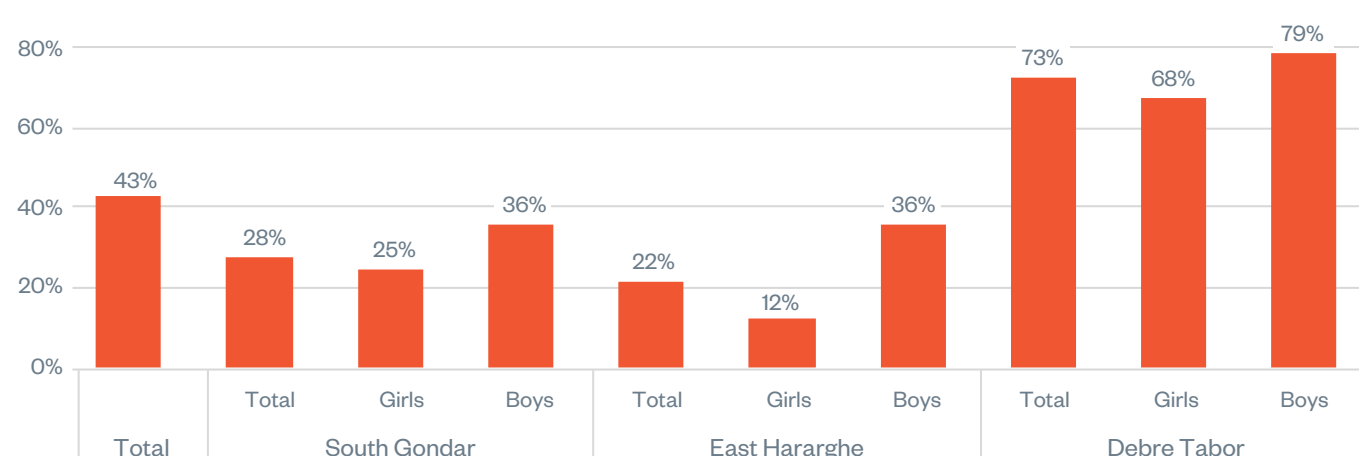
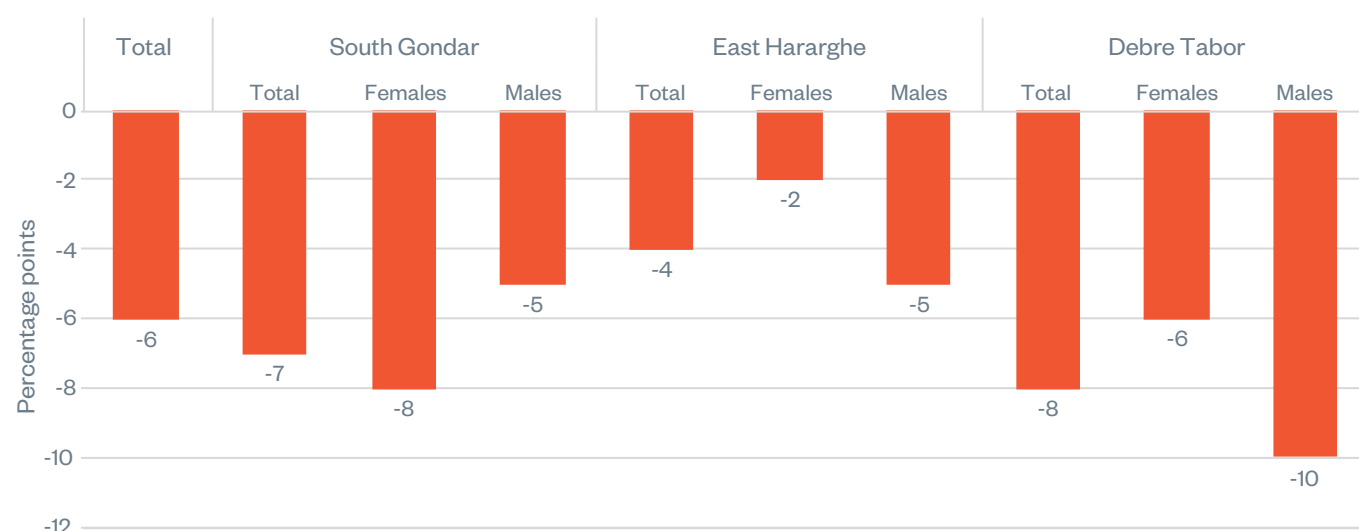


Figure 16: Declines in young adults' enrolment between Round 2 and Round 3

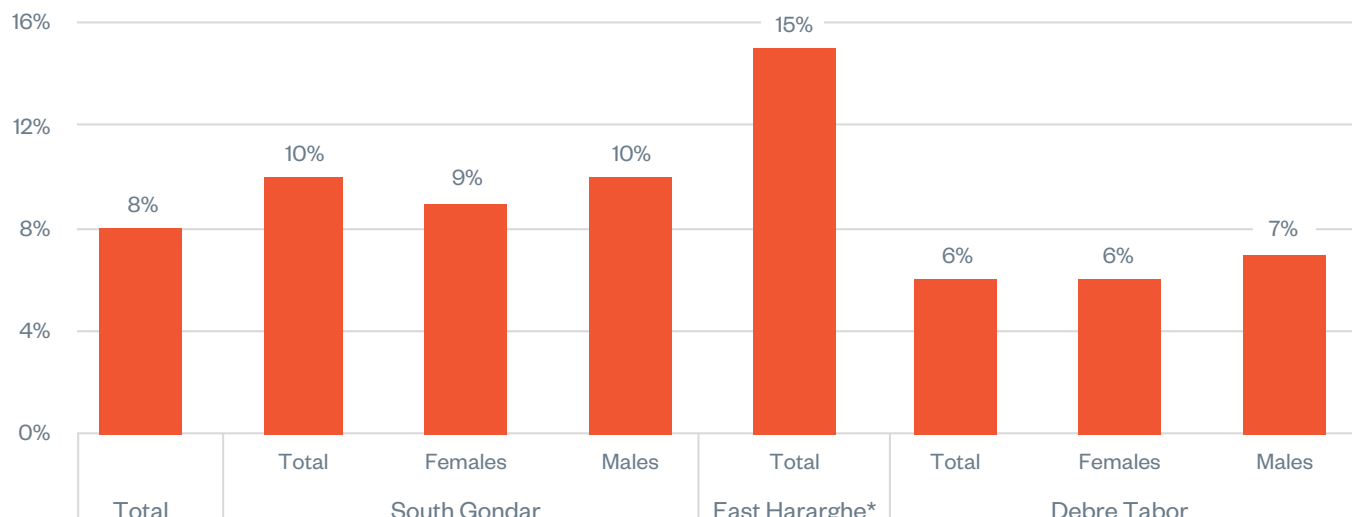


There was a more marked fall in South Gondar (7%) and Debre Tabor (8%) than in East Hararghe (4%), with slight gender differences in all locations.

The survey found that the average enrolled young adult had missed 8% of school days in the two weeks prior

to the survey (see Figure 17). Again, as with adolescents, absenteeism rates were significantly lower in Debre Tabor (6%) than in South Gondar (10%) and East Hararghe (15%), with similar rates by gender.

Figure 17: Young adults' absenteeism in the past two weeks



* The sample is too small to distinguish between males and females in East Hararghe.

Qualitative findings

Qualitative findings extend and nuance survey findings. Due to stark differences between locations, including conflict in Amhara and reversed gender patterns between South Gondar and East Hararghe, we present these by location – disaggregating by gender where relevant.

South Gondar

In South Gondar, respondents identified myriad barriers to girls' and boys' educational uptake. Many mentioned the continued impact of poverty. In some cases, there are real costs to education. A father reported that in his kebele (neighbourhood), parents are asked to pay to send their children to school:

This year the school asked parents to pay 300 birr for each child. You can see, how can a parent who has 3 or 4 children pay the school fee? A parent who has 3 children has to pay 900 birr, which is impossible for parents in this kebele since people in this kebele live under severe poverty.

In other cases, there are opportunity costs to education, which can be high given that the labour market is not generating enough jobs for well-educated young people. A key informant, pointing out the newer, better constructed homes in his community, explained to the interviewer that:

The good houses you see here are built by young people that drop out of school and migrate to Arab countries or Addis Ababa to get money. Those young people drop out of school, put their future at risk and help their family financially.

Conflict has also contributed to young people's school-leaving, because schools were closed, looted and destroyed during fighting. A woreda-level (administrative division) key informant with the Bureau of Education explained that:

During the war time, they destroyed learning materials in many schools including the desk, the blackboards, the desktops, and also other materials, so we had a difficulty to restart education immediately after the war, and we still had shortage of the learning materials.

Finally, efforts to improve educational quality have come at the cost of limiting some girls' and boys' access. The Amhara regional government recently closed the satellite schools that served remote communities, and has instead been encouraging parents to send their children to formal schools in more central communities. However, because schools are located around kebele centres, and are too far away to be accessed by many young adolescents and adolescent girls (given safety concerns), a significant number of young people have now lost access to education. A community leader explained:

The government ordered to close the satellite schools because there was a problem in the quality of the education. So we closed the schools, which caused many children to discontinue their education because the place is far from here and the children couldn't come here.

Other barriers to education in South Gondar primarily impact boys (and young men). Many of the young males in the South Gondar GAGE sample started school some

years later than they should have – sometimes beginning first grade at age 10 or 11⁵ – because they were required to herd cattle until their next oldest brother could take over. Boys' agricultural responsibilities also prevent them attending school regularly. A 16-year-old boy explained:

I was busy all day long. My father wanted me to look after the cattle all day and he wanted me to help him in keeping an eye on the grass because at that time he was guarding someone's grass as a job. Because of that, I couldn't follow my education attentively. I was absent from school many days.

By mid-adolescence, often before boys in South Gondar have completed primary school due to late enrolment, work-related migration also pulls them out of school. A 15-year-old girl reported that out of her class of 40 students, only 10 are boys: *'When they [boys] get to the age of puberty, they prefer to go to arid areas like Metema to look for a job, than to continue their education.'* A boy aged 15 clarified that boys are not necessarily disinterested in education, they are simply more interested in survival. He explained: *'They migrated to other areas since their parents couldn't afford them and their siblings with school materials to learn and even food for survival.'*

A teacher added that adolescent boys' disadvantage vis-à-vis girls is also related to a woreda-level policy decision to only pay for girls' boarding expenses at secondary school level:

Since four years ago, the woreda has sent only girls to boarding schools, since the government and NGOs [non-governmental organisations] give emphasis for girls' education.

Recent conflict has also especially disadvantaged boys and young men, because they were more likely than their female peers to take up weapons and join the military. A community leader explained:

The situation was forcing them to join the military because it seems the country was collapsing and they didn't see any future for them in the school, so they went to the war.

Although girls' enrolment is higher than boys' in rural South Gondar, girls face multiple gendered barriers to accessing education. For example, respondents noted that girls are rarely given enough time to study. A mother stated that:

Girls are busy with housework, they cook food, do cleaning and take care of animals, and they are busy. Because of workload, girls do not get enough time to study.

Concerns about girls' sexual purity and safety also prevent girls in South Gondar from accessing education. Although this primarily impacts those transitioning to secondary school (see below), girls are at risk as soon as they reach puberty. A father from South Gondar stated: *'I observed boys violating girls while they were on their way to and from school ... I observed boys harassing girls.'* Girls in South Gondar, like their peers in East Hararghe, also see their access to education limited by menarche, due to schools' limited provisioning of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities (see Box 3).

East Hararghe

Respondents in East Hararghe also identified multiple barriers to adolescent girls' and boys' access to education. Most commonly, they reported that parents do not understand the value of formal education beyond basic literacy and numeracy. A 14-year-old boy explained:

They [parents] do not expect their children to be employed in the future. Rather, they send their children to school until they know counting numbers only. Once they become able to count numbers, it is enough for them to attend school. All that they need is that, becoming able to count money and to do simple mathematics that will help them do business.

Other respondents reported that poverty limits young people's access to education, especially at secondary school level and given the recent drought affecting the country. A father noted that the cost of school supplies is more than many households can bear: *'This year a dozen exercise books costs 780 birr ... a single father is schooling 5, 6 or 7 children. You can multiply by 780.'* A woreda-level key informant with the Bureau of Education added:

There are kebeles that are 10 km from the area that the secondary school is located. It is difficult to walk 10 km one way daily to attend secondary school. This is the season of drought and the community does not have enough food to send children to secondary school. The households that have money send children to secondary school in the town and educate them. Those

⁵ The official age of entrance to kindergarten is 5 years; first grade begins at age 7.

Box 3: Menstrual hygiene management shapes girls' access to education

The Round 3 survey found that a minority of female students in rural South Gondar and East Hararghe have access to menstrual hygiene management (MHM) facilities and supplies at school. Combining cohorts, 31% of enrolled females in South Gondar and 15% of their peers in East Hararghe report that their school has facilities and supplies to help students manage their periods.

In the qualitative data, across all locations, respondents reported that schools' lack of MHM facilities and supplies increases girls' stress levels and risk of truancy, absenteeism and dropout. A 15-year-old girl from East Hararghe, one of only two girls from her kebele in 9th grade, stated that she has never attended a school with running water and clean toilets: 'There are no places to go to wash or manage hygiene if a girl experiences menstruation at school in primary or secondary school.' A 13-year-old girl from Debre Tabor, when asked what would happen if she had a menstrual hygiene 'accident' at her school, which lacks running water and functional toilets, replied:

Bleeding at school is unacceptable. They will never forget it. If it is girls, they will cover for you. If it is boys, it is different. They will never forget and remind you of that day.

A boy, also aged 13, from rural South Gondar added that without facilities, some girls stay home for the duration of their period: 'Last year a grade 7 female student got her period at school ... she was ashamed and she was forced to be absent from school for 3 days.' In East Hararghe and South Gondar, but not Debre Tabor, many girls reported that new menstrual hygiene management rooms have significantly reduced their anxiety about getting their period at school. These rooms provide girls with sanitary supplies, water for cleaning up, and a place to retreat from embarrassment. A 14-year-old from East Hararghe explained:

The girls have the key to open the [MHM] room so, when you see them using the room, you have no reason to fear. You can take the key and clean up yourself and rest.

who do not have resources are unable to educate their children in secondary schools.

Several respondents reported that economic opportunity is also pulling adolescents out of school in East Hararghe.

A 17-year-old boy explained at length:

Last year, many children from the community were enrolled in school but this year, this has been declining... Young people and adolescents are more focusing on producing khat⁶ farming and trading business... Last year, the community constructed the local road. The local town had been expanding and the trading business expanded. The electricity was also installed for many households in the community...The local people also dug deep wells at household level ... The deep wells completely resolved the water shortage of the community and contributed to the expansion of the khat plantation because farmers have been irrigating the chat plantation.

With the caveat that several respondents reported that kebele officials are now fining the parents of girls who are absent from school – and that the recently installed wells with electric pumps have reduced the time that girls must spend collecting water – young people and

adults in East Hararghe overwhelmingly focused on the gendered barriers to education faced by adolescent girls. Most respondents first reported that girls' school-leaving is girls' own fault and is due to child marriage. A mother stated that:

Girls quit education and get married, they did not continue attending school till the end. You may try to help her to attend school. She will get married when you did not plan for that as a parent.

With only a few exceptions, respondents then added that girls' disengagement from school is driven by parental demands. A 17-year-old boy explained:

Girls have lots of work to do. They do household chores in the morning and in the evenings here. They have work overload. It is not like towns here.

A mother admitted:

We order girls to cook food for her brother and send him to school and order her to stay at home and work, we say education of girls is useless.

Girls noted that even when individual mothers support girls' education, broader social norms and community pressure generally work to limit it. A 16-year-old girl explained:

⁶ Khat is a shrub that grows in East Africa and is chewed for its stimulant properties.

Adults in the community discourage mothers, saying 'Why do you bother educating girls, by spending money on expensive educational materials?' The community does not trust girls to become attentive and follow school well.

Girls added that after years of poor attendance, for which they are often punished by teachers, dropping out of school seems a rational response – especially given very limited local opportunities for paid work (primarily khat farming). A 17-year-old girl who left school after grade 4 explained:

We have lots of work ... We are supposed to be at school early in the morning. At the same time we are supposed to do household chores, we have to prepare breakfast. After all this, when we arrive at school, we are late and our teachers are disappointed with us, they beat us for being late. So we drop out of school.

Debre Tabor

In urban Debre Tabor, although the average household is better off than those in rural areas, poverty limits some girls' and boys' access to education. Other barriers to education are gendered. An 18-year-old young man in Debre Tabor reported that girls' attendance is better than boys', because boys are inclined to skip school to hang out, while 'parents control their female children'. A 13-year-old girl, however, added that parents' control over girls' mobility and time can also impact girls' attendance:

I had to look after my baby brother. My mom was at work and my other siblings were at school. So, I had to stay behind and take care of the baby. I have missed 14 days of the school year. My mom told me that he will grow up and I no longer have to take care of him. So I need to hang in there until he does.

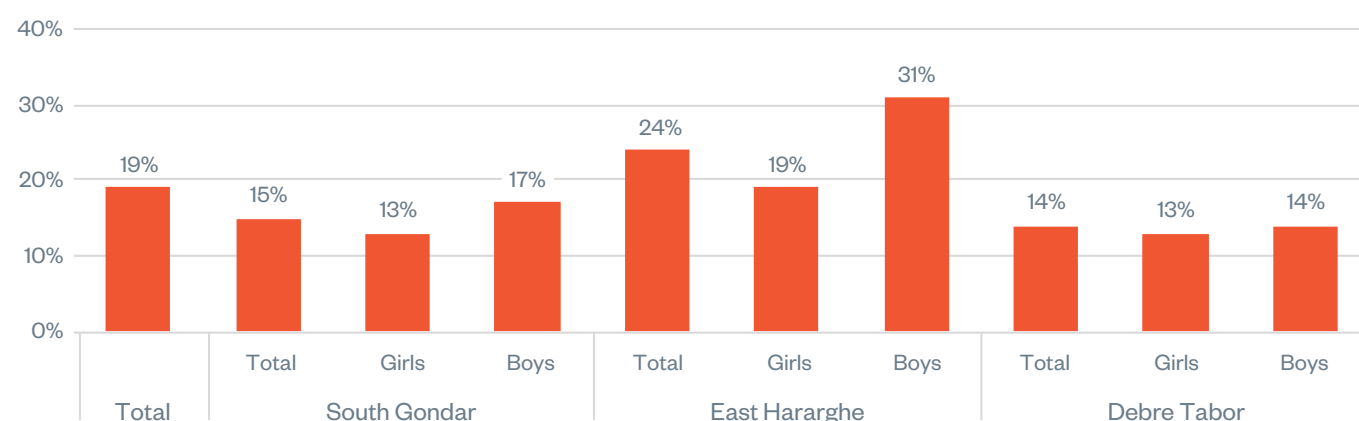
Academic progress and educational quality

Survey findings for adolescents

Round 3 survey data highlighted that grade repetition is common. Nearly a fifth (19%) of adolescents reported that they had repeated at least one grade (see Figure 18). Location differences were significant. Adolescents in East Hararghe (24%) were more likely to have repeated a grade than their peers in South Gondar (15%) and Debre Tabor (14%), probably because (as noted in the qualitative data in the previous section) so many are engaged in khat farming. Gender differences in grade repetition were significant in rural areas, with a particularly large discrepancy in East Hararghe (31% of boys versus 19% of girls).

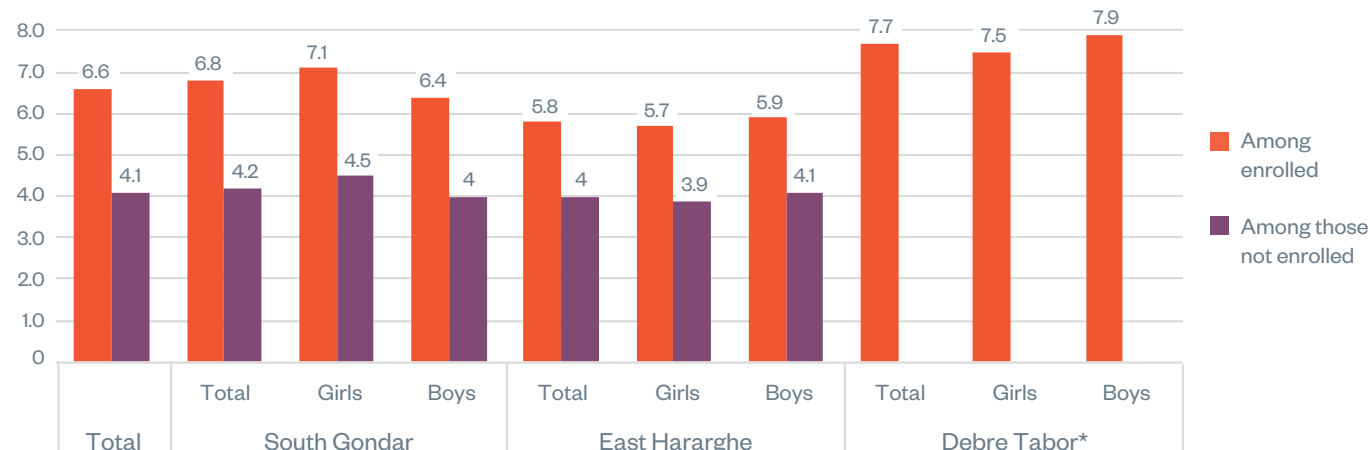
The Round 3 survey found that adolescents living in urban Debre Tabor had completed significantly more grades than those living in rural areas and were therefore less likely to be over age for grade (see Figure 19). Of enrolled adolescents, those in Debre Tabor had completed 7.7 grades – one full grade level more than their peers in South Gondar (6.8 grades) and two full grade levels more than their peers in East Hararghe (5.8 grades). Of enrolled adolescents, gender differences were significant only in South Gondar, where girls had completed over half a grade more schooling than boys (7.1 versus 6.4). As discussed in the qualitative data section below, this is most likely due to boys' engaging in child labour. Of the approximately 30% of rural adolescents who were already out of school,⁷ there were no differences between South Gondar and East Hararghe or between girls and boys. Dropouts had completed just over four years of primary education.

Figure 18: Proportion of adolescents who have ever repeated a grade



⁷ There are too few out-of-school adolescents in Debre Tabor to report the highest grade attended for those not enrolled.

Figure 19: Highest grade completed among adolescents

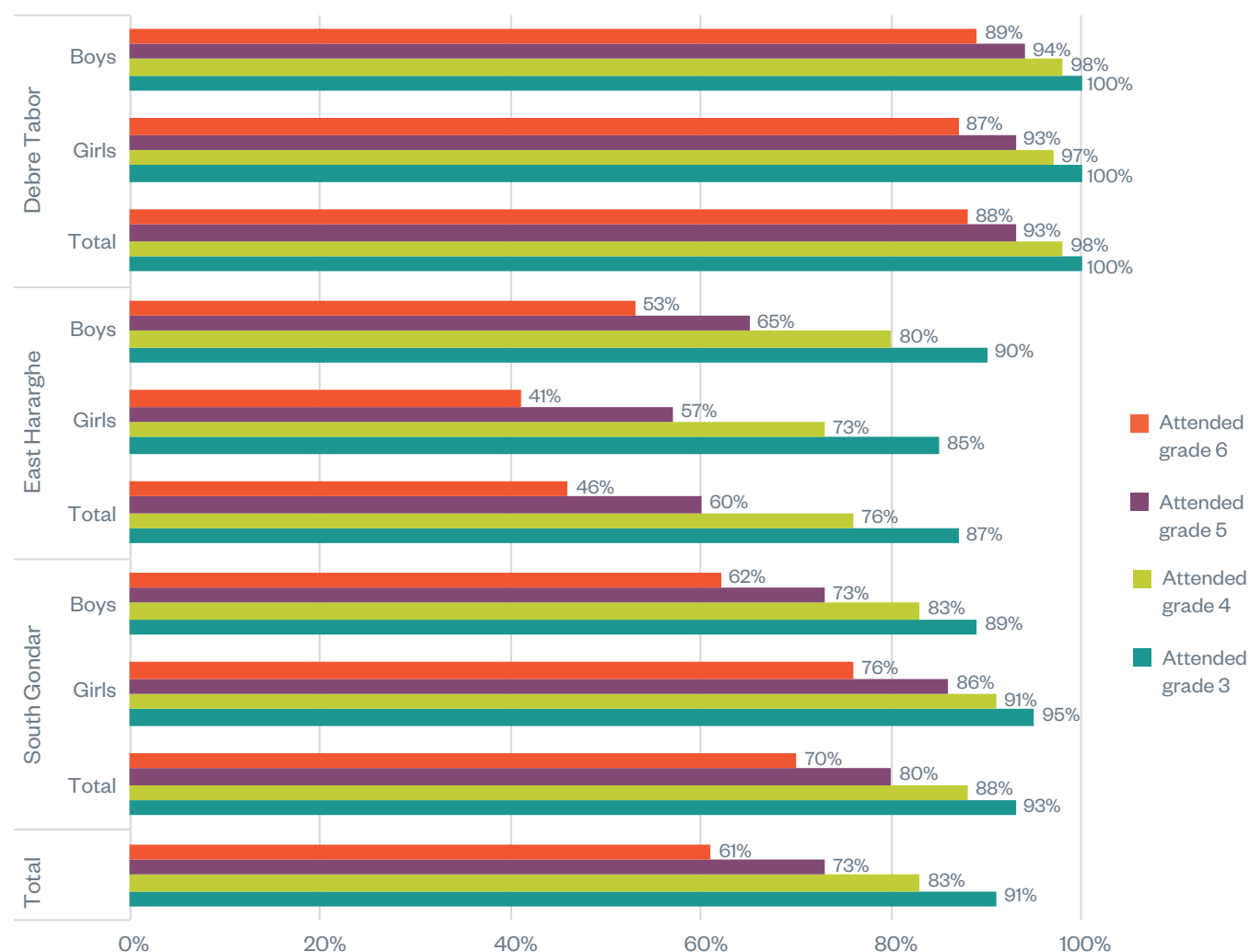


* There are too few adolescents in Debre Tabor who were not enrolled to report.

In the approximately 18 months between Round 2 and Round 3, the average enrolled adolescent had completed 1.3 grades, meaning that students who remain enrolled are making (relatively) appropriate progress.

Grade attendance provides another way to visualise adolescents' progress through school. As can be seen in Figure 20, despite the fact that the average adolescent is just 14 years old, a sizeable minority of those living in rural

Figure 20: Adolescents' grade attendance



areas have yet to attend third grade. Adolescents living in East Hararghe are 6 percentage points less likely than their peers in South Gondar to have ever attended third grade. By sixth grade, the gap has grown to 24 percentage points. Within location, gender patterns are as expected, given other indicators. Girls are more likely than boys to have attended any given grade in South Gondar, while the reverse is true in East Hararghe. Only 41% of adolescent girls in East Hararghe have ever attended 6th grade, compared to 53% of boys. In Debre Tabor, while 100% of adolescent girls and boys have attended 3rd grade, only 88% have attended 6th grade.

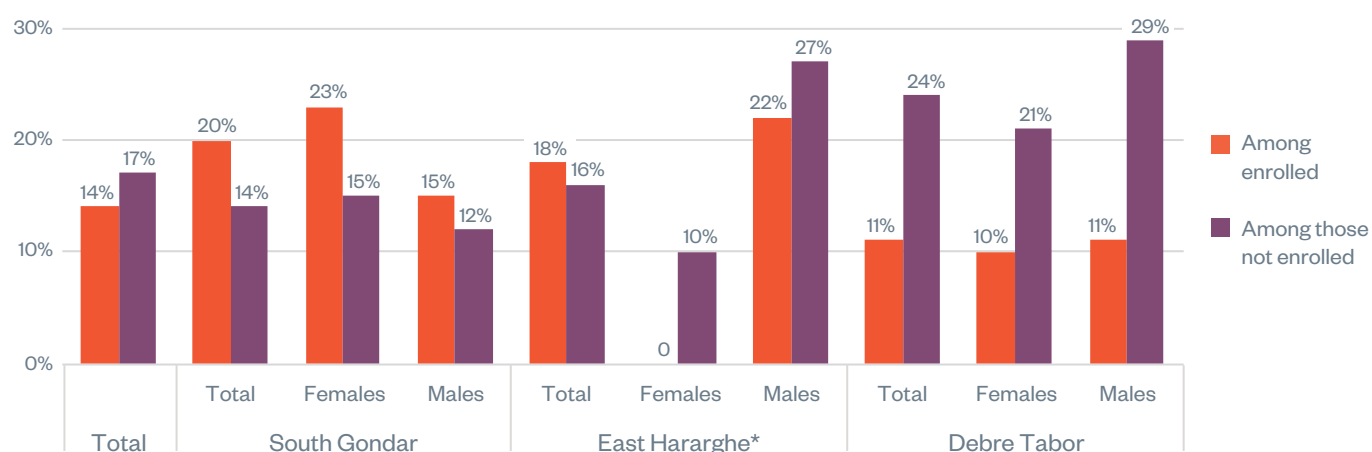
Survey findings for young adults

Young adults were also likely (16%) to have repeated at least one grade, with the highest rates of repetition among males from East Hararghe (25%). Aggregate figures, however, obscure meaningful differences between those

who are still attending school versus those who have dropped out (see Figure 21). In South Gondar, young women who are still enrolled are much more likely to have repeated a grade than their male peers (23% versus 15%), most likely due to pressures on them relating to domestic and care work. In East Hararghe, on the other hand, there are so few young women still enrolled in school that it is not possible to report their repetition rates.

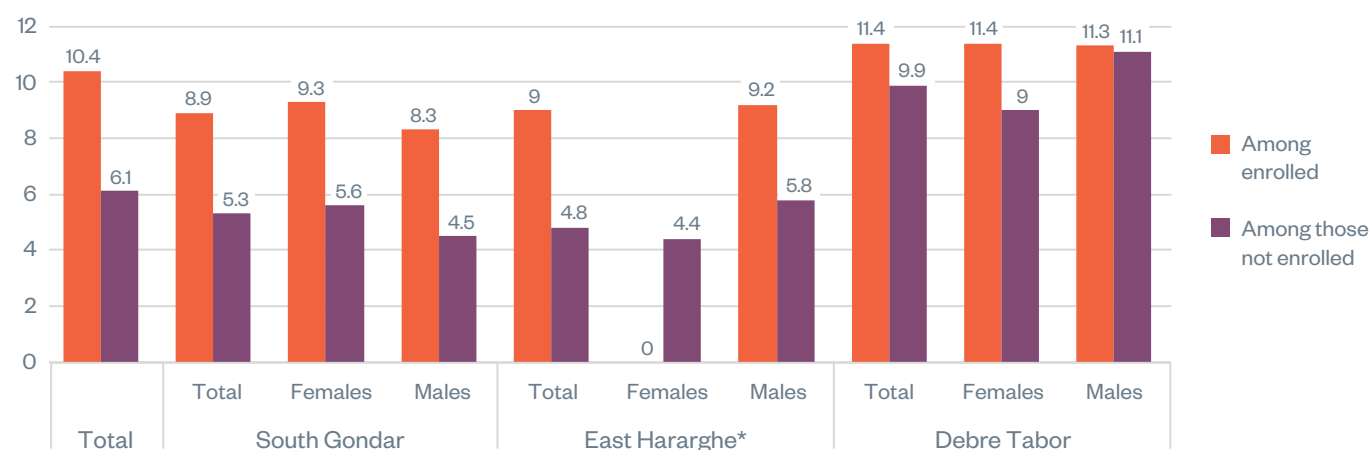
As was the case with adolescents, Round 3 data showed that young adults living in Debre Tabor had completed significantly more grades than those living in rural areas, which means they are less likely to be over age for grade (see Figure 22). Of enrolled young adults, those in Debre Tabor had completed 11.4 grades – two and a half grade levels more than their peers in South Gondar and East Hararghe. Gender differences in grade repetition were not significant in any location, though this is primarily due to the small number of young adults who were enrolled in

Figure 21: Proportion of young adults who have ever repeated a grade



* There are too few enrolled young women in East Hararghe to report.

Figure 22: Highest grade completed among young adults



* There are too few enrolled young women in East Hararghe to report.

rural areas.⁸ Of young adults who were out of school at the time of the survey, those in Debre Tabor (9.9 grades) had completed approximately five grades more than their peers in rural areas. Gender differences among out-of-school young adults were significant in all locations, and favoured girls in South Gondar and boys in Debre Tabor and East Hararghe.

In the approximately 18 months between Round 2 and Round 3, the average enrolled young adult had completed only 0.8 grades, indicating that young adult students are making slow progress.

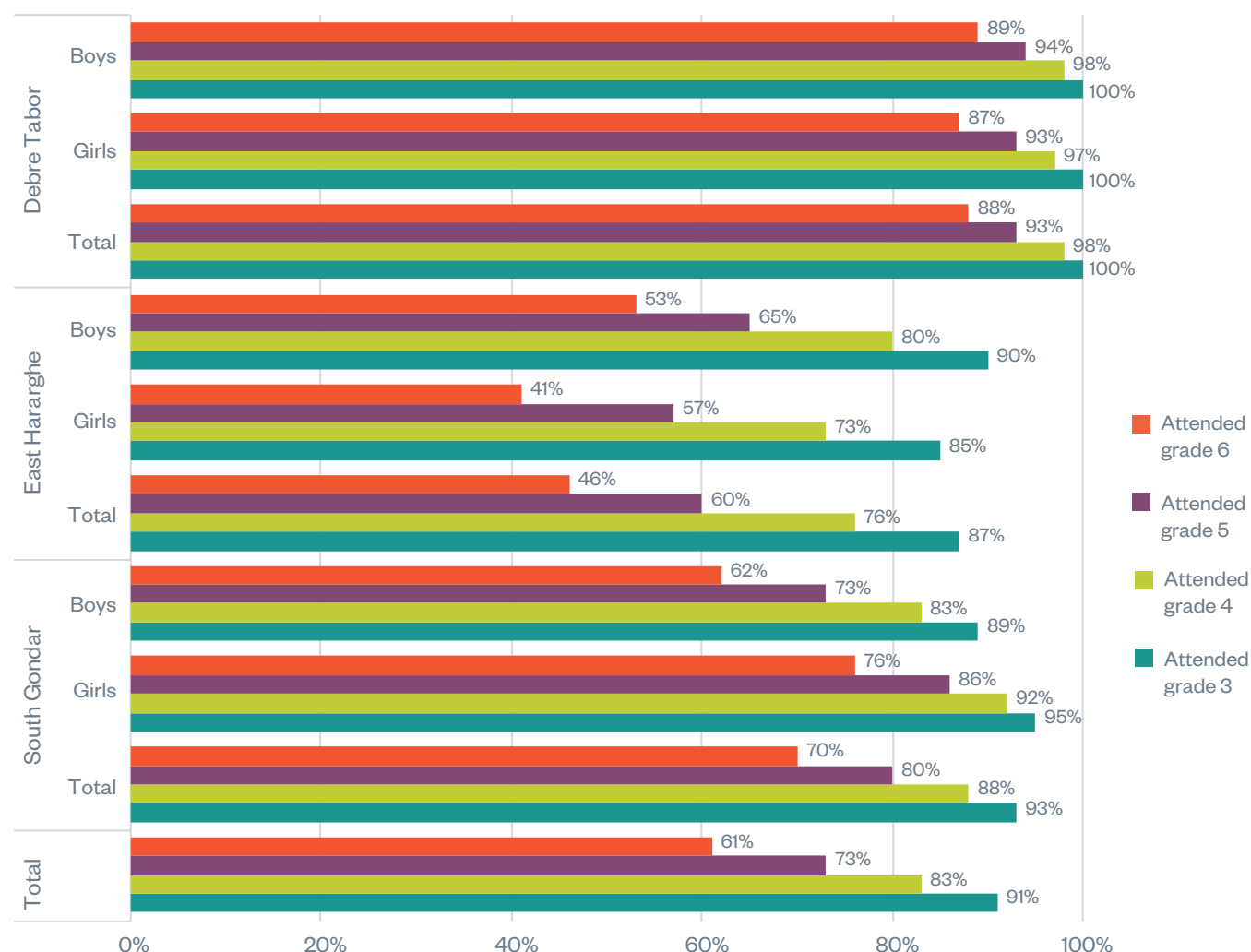
Grade attendance provides another way to visualise young adults' progress through school. As Figure 23 shows, a sizeable minority of young adults have only the most limited education. In aggregate, 9% have never attended third grade, 17% have never attended 4th grade, 27% have never attended 5th grade and 39% have never attended

6th grade. Young adults living in urban Debre Tabor are most likely (88%) to have stayed in school until the last year of primary education; their peers in East Hararghe (46%) are least likely to have done so. Gender patterns are as expected, with young women in South Gondar 14 percentage points more likely than young men to have attended 6th grade, and young men in East Hararghe 12 percentage points more likely to have attended 6th grade than young women.

Qualitative findings

In line with survey findings, adolescents and young adults in the qualitative sample regularly reported grade repetition. Usually this was due to heavy agricultural responsibilities (primarily boys) and domestic responsibilities (primarily girls), which preclude regular attendance. A 15-year-old girl from East Hararghe explained that '*Students are not*

Figure 23: Young adults' grade attendance



⁸ In East Hararghe, there are so few young women still enrolled that the highest grade attended cannot be reported.

regularly going to school. I think that is maybe because of workload.' Respondents added that the Covid-19 pandemic has contributed to grade repetition, because students forgot what they had learnt while schools were closed, because teachers 'were rushing to finish the chapters' (17-year-old girl, Debre Tabor) in order to help students catch up, and because since schools reopened 'there was no one following up on the quality of education' (mother, Debre Tabor).

Critically, from respondents' perspectives, grade repetition is not as common as they believe it ought to be, given typical learning outcomes. In rural areas, nearly all respondents agreed that educational quality is dire and has declined precipitously since the change in curriculum in 2020. A 14-year-old boy from South Gondar reported that at his school, 'students are suffering from absence of textbooks' that are aligned with the new curriculum. A 13-year-old girl from South Gondar added that teachers do not understand the new curriculum, and cannot explain it to students:

In other schools teachers are trained for new textbooks, but teachers in this school are not trained at all. When

we ask the teacher, he says, 'I don't know this.' He simply gives us homework and he and we go home.

Rural adolescents' concerns about the quality of education are so substantial that dozens reported in qualitative interviews that they could not read (by 5th or 6th grade) and had begged their teachers to be allowed to repeat a grade. A 13-year-old girl from East Hararghe, now in second grade for the second time, recalled:

I was in grade 4, but I know nothing, I asked teachers to return me to lower grades, they said no. Then my mother gave birth ... I quit going to school. Then last year I re-enrolled to grade 1 and this year I am in grade 2.

Most respondents agreed that schools in urban Debre Tabor are far better than schools in rural areas – teachers are better trained and less likely to be absent, classrooms are better provisioned, and some schools even have computer labs and libraries. A 14-year-old boy stated, 'Teachers are teaching us very well. They don't miss classes unless a female teacher gives birth to a child.' Better-off students who had been afforded the opportunity



Primary school students in Amhara, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2024

to attend one of Debre Tabor's private primary schools were especially laudatory of their learning experiences. A 19-year-old young man recalled of his primary school:

The school is very well known here and at national level. It is modernised. There are high scorers. The teachers are good. The library and the laboratory are in good standard.

However, respondents agreed that government schools in Debre Tabor still have significant quality issues. A 16-year-old girl attending a government secondary school, whose primary school had had an anonymous complaint box, stated, 'There are many teachers in our school whose teaching ability is not satisfactory and when we complain about their teaching, no one will listen to our complaints.' A boy the same age, who attended private primary school prior to matriculating at a government secondary school, added, 'In private schools the teachers teach very well, whereas here in the government [schools], the teachers do not.'

Qualitative research also found that it is common for young people to take a year or two off school and then re-enrol. In South Gondar and Debre Tabor, this was most often due to Covid-19, household poverty, or the recent conflict. An 18-year-old young man from Debre Tabor, who took two years off school due to Covid-19 and then the conflict, explained that, 'In and after the corona[virus], I lost that hope [for education]... How could I think about my education when people are dying here and there?' In East Hararghe, some boys take time off to make money growing khat. An 18-year-old young man explained:

I am a grade 10 student. I discontinued my education for two years. I should have been in grade 12 now ... Due to the expansion of the local market, I had to participate in trading business.

One 14-year-old girl in East Hararghe reported that she had re-enrolled in third grade after two years at home due to the efforts of Act with Her (AwH) programme staff: 'I dropped out of school and stayed at home for two years and returned to school after AwH' (see Box 4).

Box 4: Act with Her programming supports girls' education

The Act with Her (AWH) programme, which has been implemented by two NGOs, Pathfinder and CARE, aims to improve the educational, health, psychosocial and economic outcomes of Ethiopian adolescent girls (see Hamory et al., 2023 for details). Delivered in different ways in different communities in rural East Hararghe and South Gondar, in order to disentangle the impacts of various aspects of programming, AwH provides adolescent girls – and sometimes boys – with near-peer mentors and an age-appropriate curriculum that focuses on sexual and reproductive health, negotiation skills, and gender norms. In some communities, the programme also works with parents and service providers.

Although GAGE survey data found no relationship between programme participation and school enrolment, qualitative data found evidence that AwH is supporting adolescents' (and particularly girls') interest in and access to education. In East Hararghe, where commitment to education has lagged, several young respondents reported that AwH has strengthened their interest in education. A 13-year-old girl from that location explained, 'We became interested in education after we started attending AwH. We benefit a lot from AwH.' In both locations, but especially South Gondar, qualitative research also found that AwH has improved girls' attendance, partly because parents have reduced girls' household chores and partly because some boys are helping their sisters with such work. A father from South Gondar explained that:

Nowadays, girls' situation of becoming absent and late-coming [for school] seems reduced since adolescent boys started helping their sisters doing house chores so that girls' burden of doing many chores reduced.

In East Hararghe, where it has been (until recently) all but unthinkable for girls who are or have been married to attend school, a few respondents reported that AwH has inspired married and divorced girls to return to school. A programme facilitator explained how:

Girls never think of education once they get married. Now they learn the importance of education from the programme, and they go back to school after marriage, even when they are in the marriage, when husbands are convinced, they attend school. Not only has the divorced one gone back to school, the married one too.'

AwH has also reinvigorated school-based girls' clubs and helped many schools to construct menstrual hygiene management rooms.

Educational transitions

Survey results for adolescents

As Figure 24 shows, and as might be expected given that only 61% of adolescents had attended 6th grade, a minority of adolescents aged 13 and older (48%) had transitioned from primary school to middle school (which includes 7th and 8th grades) at the time of the GAGE Round 3 survey. Adolescents living in Debre Tabor (81%), who (as noted above) were less likely to be over age for grade, were far more likely to have done so than their peers in South Gondar (56%) and East Hararghe (33%). In South Gondar, boys were less likely to have attended 7th grade than girls (46% versus 63%); in East Hararghe, the reverse was true and the gap was larger. Only 29% of girls had attended 7th grade, compared to 60% of boys. Unsurprisingly, adolescents were even less likely to have transitioned to secondary school. Of those aged 15 and older, only 24%

had attended 9th grade. Adolescents living in Debre Tabor (59%) were far more likely to have attended 9th grade than their rural peers, who are not only more likely to be over age for grade, but must also commute or board to attend secondary school, given that rural schools usually end at grade 8. As expected from other indicators, girls in East Hararghe (10%) were the least likely to have matriculated to secondary school.

Survey results for young adults

Young adults, who are 4.5 years older (on average) than adolescents, are more likely than adolescents to have transitioned into both middle school and secondary school. In aggregate, 64% of young adults have attended 7th grade (see Figure 25). Those living in Debre Tabor (94%) are more likely to have done so than those living in South Gondar (52%) and East Hararghe (42%). Young women living in East Hararghe (33%) are the least likely to have

Figure 24: Adolescents' educational transitions

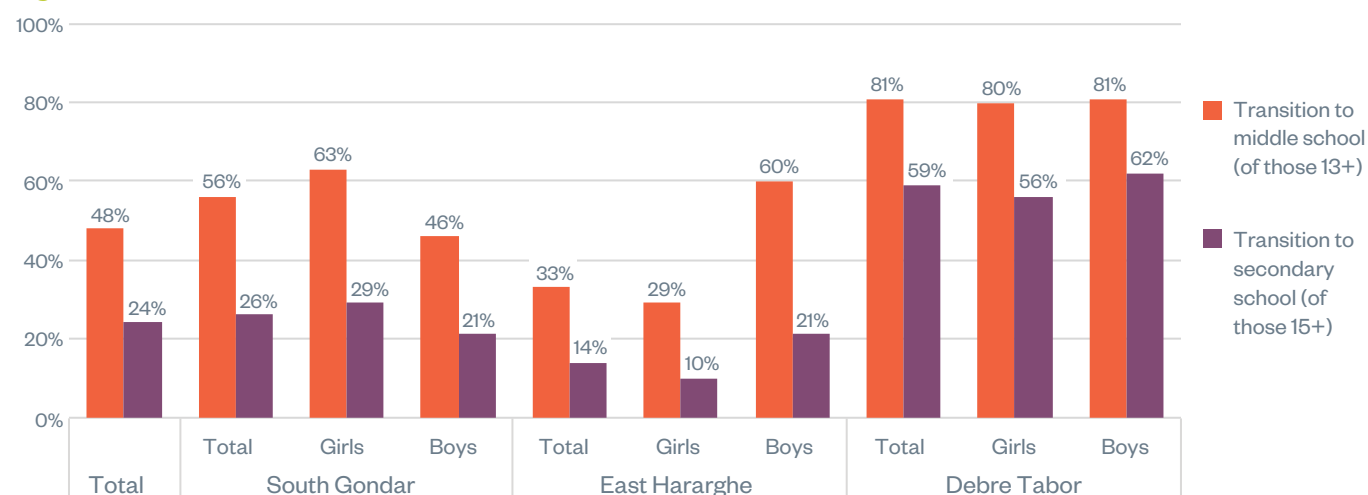
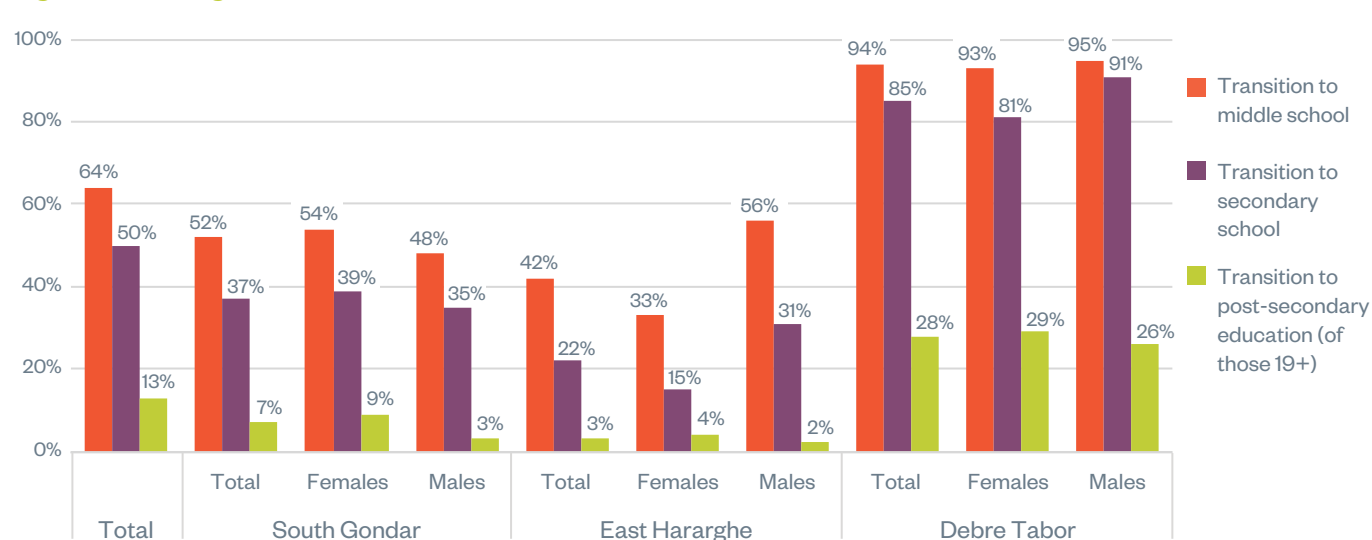


Figure 25: Young adults' educational transitions



attended middle school. Only half (50%) of young adults had ever attended secondary school (9th grade). Those in Debre Tabor (85%) were again advantaged over their peers in South Gondar (37%) and East Hararghe (22%). Young women in East Hararghe were again the most disadvantaged; only 15% had matriculated to secondary school. Figure 25 also shows that access to post-secondary education and training is extremely limited: only 13% of young adults aged 19 and over had enrolled in any sort of short- or longer-term academic or vocational programme. Because post-secondary programming is not available in rural communities, uptake rates were highest in Debre Tabor (28%). They were lowest in East Hararghe, where few young adults complete secondary education – and those who do are typically years over age for grade.

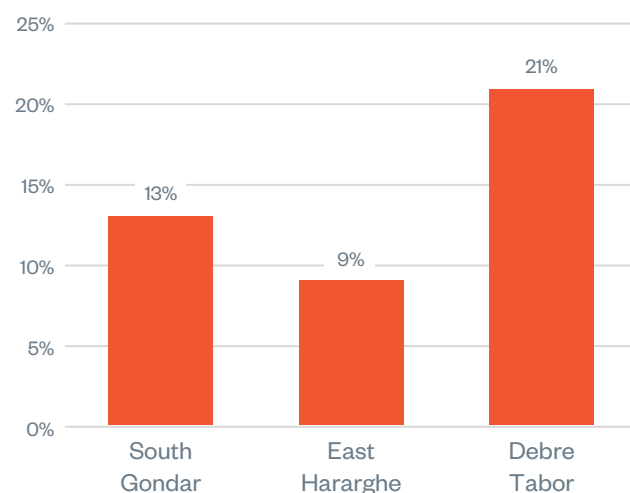
Qualitative findings

In qualitative research, respondents reported that educational transitions are often accompanied by higher than normal – and deeply interwoven – barriers. Because middle schools tend to be located in kebele centres and secondary schools tend to be in towns only, distance and the added costs associated with it become significant barriers to educational transitions for girls and boys alike. Young people in rural communities must either walk long distances, pay for transport, or board in town. A community leader in East Hararghe noted that few adolescents in his community have ever been to secondary school, because ‘we don’t have a secondary school in a nearby location’. A mother from South Gondar added that few parents can afford to support students to live on their own: ‘Girls want to attend secondary school but it is difficult for parents to cover their expenses and help them to attend school in another village.’

For girls, sexual violence – and the threat of sexual violence – amplifies the impact of distance, because girls who are travelling long distances to school are more at risk (see Figure 26, and see also GAGE companion report on bodily integrity, Presler-Marshall et al., 2024b). A worda-level key informant with the Bureau of Women and Social Affairs in East Hararghe explained that in their area, violence is usually perpetrated by young males on the young females they wish to bully into marriage:

Sometimes when boys want to marry girls they warn them not to go to school, they frighten them, saying, ‘I will beat you if I find you going to school’ ... Girls are afraid to tell parents since boys warn them, saying, ‘I will kill you if you tell parents!’ ... Boys take their exercise books from

Figure 26: Females who have ever experienced sexual violence



them [girls] by force. The abuse is common when they attend secondary school.

In South Gondar, on the other hand, sexual violence is usually perpetrated by strangers, and rape is so endemic that it is common for parents to support their daughters to use contraception to avoid pregnancy in the event that they are raped. A mother in South Gondar reported that her own daughter was raped en route to secondary school:

Men wait for girls when they go to school ... Sometimes those men wait for girls around the school compound. That discouraged girls from attending school and they drop out of school. I have a daughter, she was attending secondary school, she was raped and gave birth to a child and dropped out of school.

The cost of education itself also becomes a higher barrier as young people advance in their education. Students need uniforms and more school notebooks, and respondents report that those who do not have them are sometimes beaten, often sent home, and regularly refused permission to sit exams. A mother from Debre Tabor reported that her daughter may have to leave school because she cannot afford to buy the uniform required for secondary school:

I think my daughter will have to drop out of school next year because I do not have money to buy her a school uniform ... Unless you pay, your child will not sit for exams.

Exam failure also shapes educational transitions – especially for rural students, given quality issues; and for girls, given the more limited time they are allowed for homework and exam preparation. A 15-year-old girl from

East Hararghe explained that nearly half of the students in her class had failed the regional exam required to enter secondary school: *'Out of the 60 students that took the regional exam, 25 students failed and they repeated grade 8.'* A 14-year-old boy from South Gondar, where expectations and pass rates are higher, added that some girls choose to leave school, rather than re-sit the exam, because they are embarrassed: *'Some girls didn't want to continue their education especially when they failed grade 8 regional exam ... If they failed in the school, they will be ashamed to continue their education.'*

The national exam given at the end of 12th grade is an even more substantial barrier. A 15-year-old boy from East Hararghe reported that rural students struggle in secondary school, because the language of instruction switches to English and students do not understand English well enough to take in the content being taught: *'We didn't learn in English before. It is tough because of that.'* A 16-year-old girl from Debre Tabor added that students from rural areas cannot compete with their peers who live in Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa, given that schools in cities deliver much higher quality education. She explained, *'The exam is prepared for everyone and we have a problem in*

answering those questions.' A woreda-level key informant in South Gondar added, *'Almost all students scored under the minimum requirement of the Ministry of Education to join the university.'* Students who do not receive a passing exam score may attend private colleges, rather than public universities, but these tend to be more expensive, and few households can afford them. A 14-year-old girl from Debre Tabor reported:

I have a relative that completed grade 12 and failed to join university. She could attend private colleges, but parents are not willing to pay for private colleges.

Young people's access to post-secondary education is further reduced by government policy, which assigns a student to a particular university, rather than allowing the student to choose their own school. Not only does it cost more to send a child to school in a distant location, but recent ethnic conflict has made parents wary of sending their children outside of their home region. A mother in Debre Tabor explained, *'The conflict in the universities is also making it worse. No parent is willing to send their child to the university.'*



Primary school students in rural Oromia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2024

Corporal punishment

Survey findings for adolescents

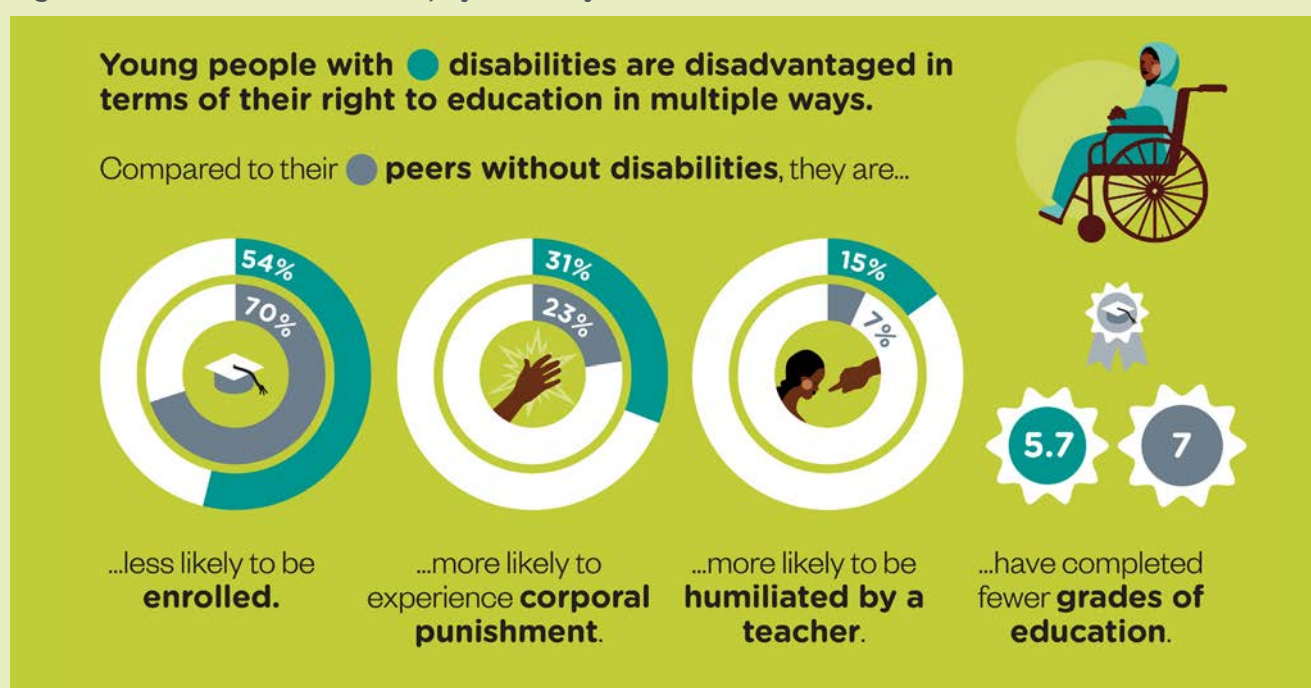
Despite the fact that corporal punishment at school is illegal in Ethiopia, the GAGE Round 3 survey found that just under a quarter (24%) of enrolled adolescents – and 31% of adolescent students with disabilities (see Box 5) –

had experienced corporal punishment at school in the 12 months preceding the survey (see Figure 27). Adolescents in South Gondar (18%) were less likely to report teacher violence than their peers in Debre Tabor (29%) and East Hararghe (31%). Gender differences were significant in all locations, with girls much less likely to report experiencing corporal punishment than boys.

Box 5: The impact of disability on young people's education

The GAGE Round 3 survey found that young people with disabilities significantly lag behind their peers without disabilities across myriad educational indicators. They are less likely to aspire to secondary school (78% versus 93%), to aspire to university (49% versus 66%), and to be enrolled (54% versus 70%) (see Figure 29). They are also more likely to have experienced corporal punishment (31% versus 23%), to have been humiliated by a teacher in the past year (15% versus 7%), and have attended fewer grades of education (5.7 versus 7 grades for those who were enrolled).

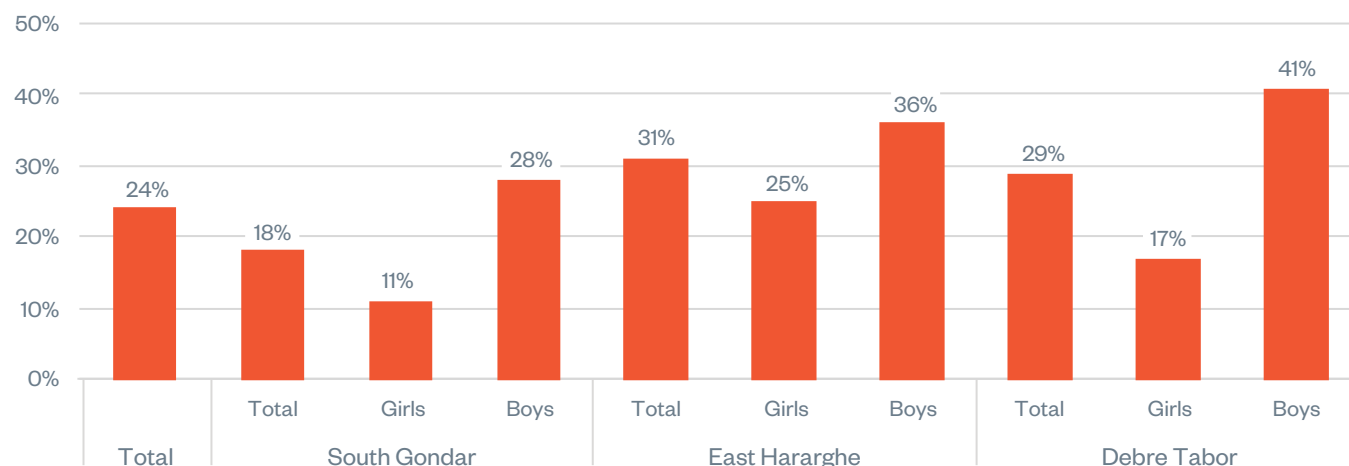
Figure 27: Educational indicators, by disability status



GAGE's qualitative research has found that young people with disabilities are prevented from accessing quality education because schools, classrooms, learning materials and pedagogies are not accessible and because disability is deeply stigmatised. This leaves many parents loathe to send their children to school due to safety concerns. A mother from East Hararghe, whose daughter has a hearing impairment and who took part in the Round 2 research, explained how, *'I advised her that children may hit her and I pressured her to stay at home.'*

Special needs schools, which the government has been slowly rolling out in more urban areas, are providing some young people with disabilities with a pathway that was unimaginable just a generation ago. Students with visual and hearing impairments are taught braille and sign language in self-contained classrooms through to the end of 4th grade, at which time they are expected to join their peers in mainstream classrooms. Uptake has been enthusiastic. A 16-year-old girl with a visual impairment, who lives in South Gondar, reported that, *'I immediately began once the special needs education programme was opened.'* Young people attending special needs schools report that they not only value the education they receive there, but also the opportunity to interact with adults who see their potential and with peers who make them feel less alone. A 17-year-old girl with a visual impairment, from Debre Tabor, explained that, *'Here, we are free and live equally with others.'*

Figure 28: Proportion of enrolled adolescents who have experienced corporal punishment in the past year



Compared with Round 2, adolescents' experiences of corporal punishment had declined a significant 19 percentage points (see Figure 28). Declines were largest in East Hararghe (25 percentage points), and smallest in South Gondar (14 percentage points).

Survey findings for young adults

The GAGE Round 3 survey found that 12% of enrolled young adults had experienced corporal punishment at school in the year preceding the survey (see Figure 30), with rates ranging from 6% among females in Debre Tabor to 20% among males in East Hararghe. Gender differences were statistically significant only in Debre Tabor, where enrolment was higher. Young men were more likely to report experiencing corporal punishment than young women (18% versus 6%).

Compared to the Round 2 data, experiences of corporal punishment had significantly declined for some

groups of young adults (see Figure 31). Young women in South Gondar and young men in Debre Tabor were 14 percentage points less likely to have experienced corporal punishment at school in the past year at Round 3 than they were at Round 2.

Qualitative findings

Most respondents agreed that corporal punishment is less common now that young people have reached mid-adolescence and early adulthood. A 16-year-old girl from Debre Tabor reported:

There were punishments with hitting when we were at elementary school but currently there are no punishments. I think they stop that because we are grown-ups.

A 17-year-old boy from South Gondar agreed: 'No one was hit by the teacher in high school.' Students in South Gondar

Figure 29: Declines in corporal punishment for adolescents between Round 2 and Round 3

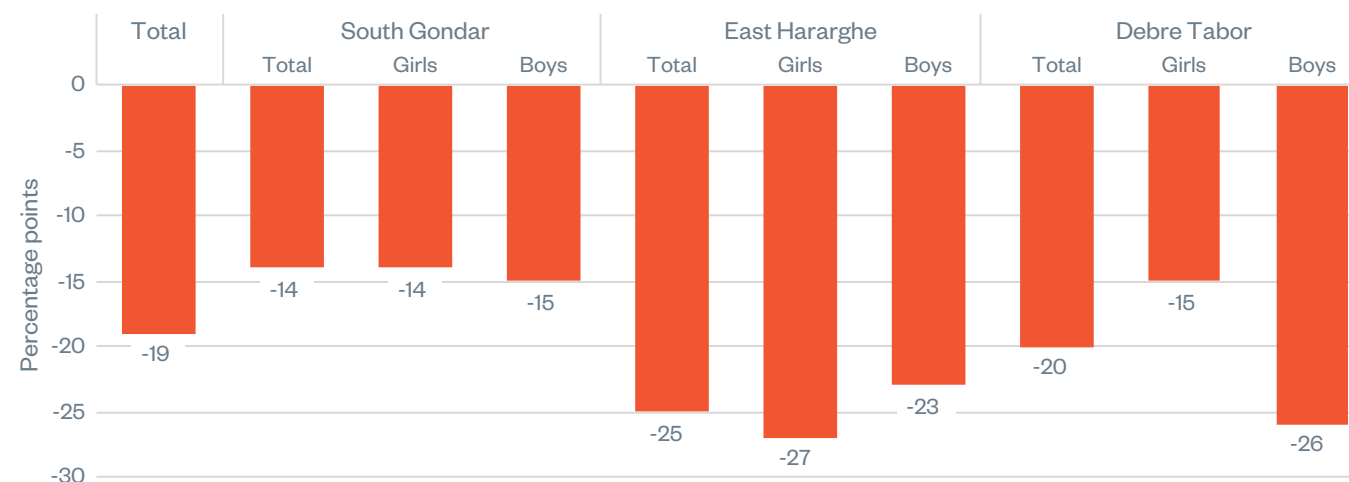


Figure 30: Proportion of enrolled young adults who have experienced corporal punishment in the past year

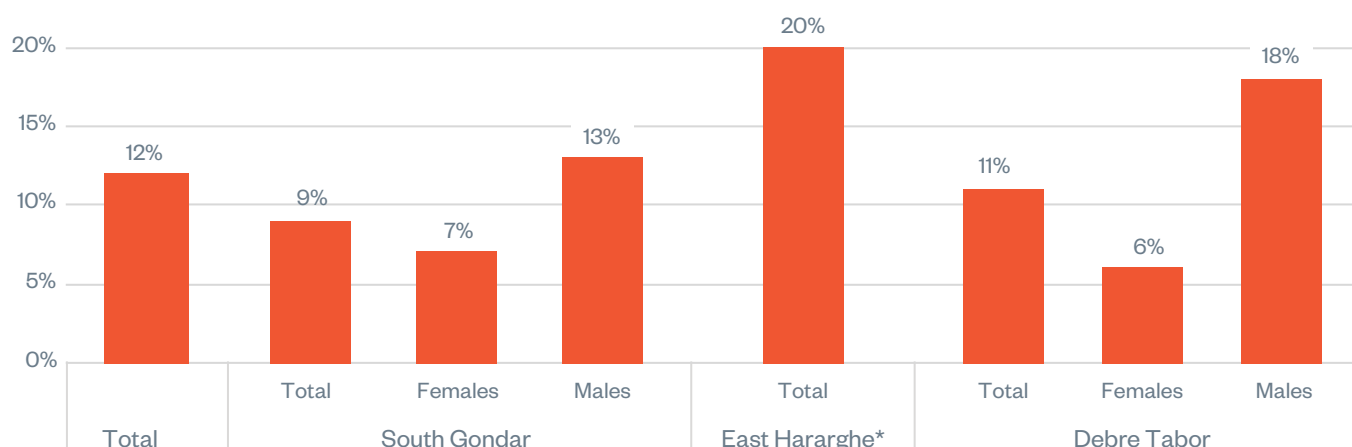
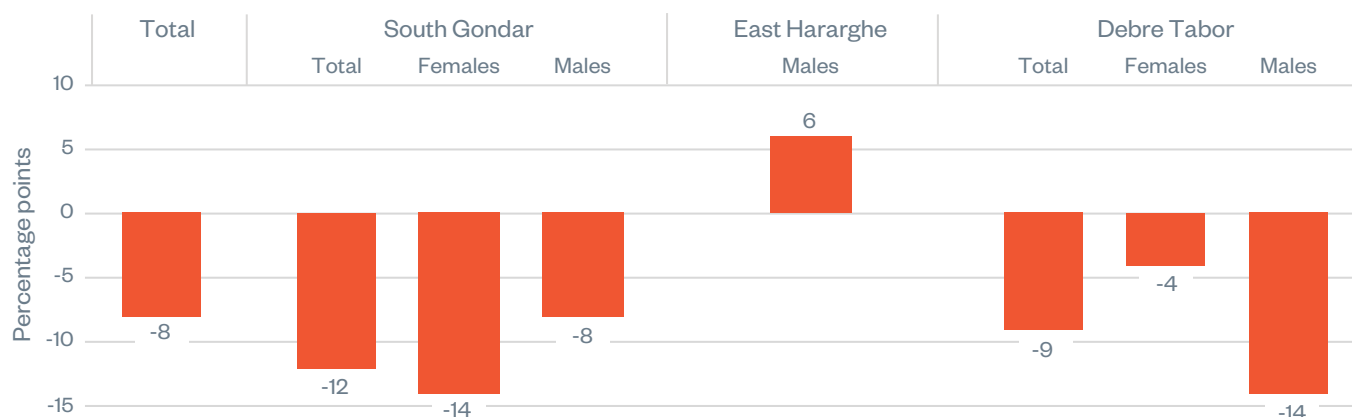


Figure 31: Declines in corporal punishment for young adults between Round 2 and Round 3



and Debre Tabor also reported efforts to reduce violence, with teachers using words rather than fists and principals sending students home to bring in their parents for joint conversations. A 14-year-old boy from South Gondar explained how two disruptive students were recently disciplined: *'The principal told them to bring their parents and he gave advice to them together with their parents.'*

That said, teacher violence remains common and can be severe, especially so in East Hararghe, according to respondents. Across locations, students reported being hit for being late to school, for not having done their homework, for answering questions incorrectly, for talking with their friends, for chewing gum, and for being disrespectful to school staff. A 16-year-old boy from East Hararghe, enrolled in 6th grade, reported having been beaten by his school principal for talking back to his teacher:

The principal beat me up a lot. He hit me on my back and legs! He beat me so harshly and made me to beg that I wouldn't repeat the behaviour.

A 13-year-old girl from that same location added that she is afraid to go to school:

We fear the teachers ... We will be punished when we do something wrong and also when we didn't get answers correct like our classmates ... Mostly they use a stick to punish us.

As in previous GAGE research – and with the caveat that girls and young women are less likely to report violent discipline because they are ashamed – young people largely agreed that boys are more at risk of corporal punishment than girls, because they are more likely to be disruptive. A 15-year-old boy from East Hararghe explained, *'They punish boys more severely ... The girls don't misbehave as much as boys. That is why boys' punishment is more.'* As noted earlier, when girls are beaten, it is generally for reasons beyond their control, such as being late to school because they were making breakfast for family members at home.

Parental support for education

Respondents had mixed opinions about whether parents are supportive of their children's education. Some young people, primarily in Debre Tabor and South Gondar, reported that their parents provide educational supplies, time, and emotional support. A 14-year-old girl in South Gondar explained that educational spending comes first in her family:

My father gives permission if it is about education. He supports his children's education with anything he can. If we asked him for hair oil or other fancy things, he will not give us a penny. But if we ask for exercise books, pen or other learning materials, he will definitely give to us.

A 15-year-old girl from Debre Tabor commented that her parents reward her for good grades: *'If I get good grades, my father will buy me shoes and clothes.'* Parents too often agreed that they do their best to support education, sometimes because they want their children to have a better future than they themselves had – and sometimes because they want their children to secure a better future for the family. A mother from South Gondar stated, of her son, *'I want him to attend school and not be like me.'* Other young people reported more limited parental support for education. This was particularly the case in East Hararghe, where a strong cash crop economy means that education carries high opportunity costs. A 16-year-old boy from East Hararghe noted that he is not allowed to attend afternoon tutorial sessions, because he has to work on his parents' farm: *'We don't go because we are asked to do farm work by our parents.'* A 13-year-old boy, also from East Hararghe, added that this is because *'our parents don't know the benefit of education'*.

Although parents in South Gondar often lean heavily on their adolescent and young adult sons, expecting them to not only carry their own costs but also contribute to the household economy, it is adolescent girls and young women who – across locations – tend to have the least parental support for education. Indeed, a woreda-level key informant in South Gondar observed that:

Girls are more vulnerable in this community. The boys have the right to learn. When they discontinue their education, it is because they don't want to continue. No one forced them to discontinue.

Parental support for girls' education appears most limited in East Hararghe, where even 10-year-old girls are required to miss days of school at a time, as a 14-year-old girl explained:

We could not learn beyond grade 8. Parents do not want to support you to learn beyond that ... You may be interested for education and parents tell you there is no girl that achieves a position in education.

Even in South Gondar, however, parental support for girls' education is bounded. A 14-year-old girl noted that she has to 'discuss politely' with her mother her need to study, and is permitted to do so only after she has completed household chores. By age 16, according to a mentor from the Act with Her programme, few girls are supported to stay in school, because:

... parents say, 'I want to arrange marriage for my girl before she gets pregnant, has sex before marriage and becomes a disgrace to her family', instead of helping them to join a university.

Conclusions and implications

The GAGE Round 3 research finds considerable room for optimism. Despite household poverty, the allure of paid work, early marriage, limited parental support for education, teacher violence, poor school WASH facilities, and the conflict that has engulfed much of the country, young people's educational aspirations remain high and their enrolment remains 'solid'. That said, our research also identifies many reasons for concern. These include: the cumulative effects of the pandemic and conflict on aspirations and enrolment; the continuing impacts of child labour, child marriage, and disability on education; and poor – and declining – educational quality, especially in rural areas. If the Ministry of Education and its national and international partners are to deliver on the goals laid out in the Education Sector Development Plan 2020-2025 (including equity, quality, relevance, and unity in diversity) (Ministry of Education, 2021), our research suggests prioritising the following areas:

1. **Continue raising awareness about the importance of formal education.**
 - Target parents and adolescents to help them understand that the longer-term benefits of education outweigh the shorter-term benefits of having children assume adult roles (i.e. in paid work and marriage) – and pair this work with urgent attention to investments in the supply of quality education, in order to make this a reality.
 - Teach parents how they can practically support their children's schooling (e.g. sharing herding responsibilities between families and sharing household chores between daughters and sons).
 - Provide girls with tailored empowerment programming aimed at raising their aspirations and strengthening their ability to recognise and challenge the gender norms that limit their lives.
 - Provide adolescents with school-based educational and career guidance sessions that help them plan educational trajectories (including technical and vocational education and training, or TVET) that are aligned with labour market opportunities, and help them understand how to set and achieve their own short-, medium- and long-term goals.
2. **Expand access to education, especially in rural areas and at the secondary and post-secondary levels.**
 - Target husbands and in-laws of married girls with messages that emphasise that marriage and education can be compatible, and will support better earnings for the family over the longer term.
 - Identify and publicise local role models who have translated education into economic and social success.
 - Ensure that no schools charge fees for education.
 - Build more, and more inclusive, schools in rural areas – and rebuild and restock educational facilities damaged by recent conflict.
 - Provide students in outlying communities, and students with disabilities, with transportation, to restore access lost when satellite school centres were closed.
 - Police (e.g. with the support of local militia or community watch groups) routes to and from school, to relieve parental concerns about their children experiencing sexual violence.
 - Incentivise school attendance for children from the poorest families by providing school feeding programmes and free school supplies.
 - Ensure that all schools (especially those in rural areas) have potable water and separate toilets for girls and boys.
 - At the secondary level, provide more students with free or subsidised dormitories.
 - Step up the provision of social protection – including the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) and other supports – so that families are not forced to make trade-offs between basic needs and education for their children.
 - In East Hararghe, continue community-led efforts aimed at improving girls' attendance by fining parents of truant girls.
 - End the practice of assigning students to universities that are distant from their homes—and allow students to choose their own schools.



A student doing homework, Amhara © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2024

3. Redouble efforts to improve educational quality.

- Invest in teacher training, especially in rural areas, making sure that teachers have mastery of both content and of child-friendly and disability-inclusive pedagogies, and that they are offered regular refresher courses – particularly given recent changes to the curriculum.
- Hire more teachers to reduce class sizes and increase the number of hours of instruction.
- Provide more students with more tutorial support – especially in rural areas and in the years in which students sit gateway exams.
- End the practice of automatic promotion, reduce the focus on continuous assessment, and ensure that students are not allowed to move up a grade until they have mastered content.
- Scale up the provision of girls' clubs and gender clubs to help young people learn about gender norms (including child marriage and menstruation-related stigma) and how these limit their educational trajectories and broader lives.
- Address violence in schools – whether from teachers or students – providing teachers with training on alternative discipline strategies, enforcing the government ban on corporal punishment, and making efforts to rebuild social cohesion given recent ethnic conflict, and to address disability-related stigma.
- Assign and provide training to school counsellors in psychological first aid so that they can support students affected by the conflict (and make referrals in cases of serious mental ill health), given that trauma is a barrier to students' educational futures.

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'How could I think about my education when people are dying here and there?'



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About GAGE

Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) is a decade-long (2016-2026) 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 for more information.

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