

# Adolescence: A Second Window to Address Child Poverty in Ethiopia

## Key findings and messages

- Adolescence provides a second crucial window of intervention. Investment in adolescent development outcomes should be significantly scaled up to build on earlier phases of life and enable young people to reach their full development potential. A broad approach to improve health and nutrition, psychosocial well-being, empowerment, education and skills development with a holistic government strategy is likely to deliver the best results.
- Experiences of adolescence are diverse and changing fast in Ethiopia, with the expansion of infrastructure, services, communications, growth and urbanisation, and development policy needs to respond accordingly. Chronological age is a poor absolute definition of adolescence that consists of phases, and interventions narrowly targeted to specific age groups may not address the changes in young people's actual experiences.
- Nutritional interventions in adolescence are crucial to health and well-being, and can also contribute to reducing intergenerational transmissions of poverty. The first 1,000 days are profoundly important but sustained interventions also matter. Early childhood development gains need to be sustained throughout middle childhood and adolescence, particularly for marginalised groups in Ethiopia. Growth recovery from early stunting can occur even up to the age of 15, demonstrating the importance of extending nutrition and health investment across the first two decades of life, which has implications for adolescent mothers and intergenerational effects.
- Responding appropriately to why and how adolescents combine school and work (both



unpaid and paid) is critical, especially for helping the most disadvantaged children to stay in school, notably in rural areas of Ethiopia. Efforts to reduce child labour should focus on the most harmful work, while recognising the potential benefits of some forms of work and care. Approaches such as alternative pathways, flexible schooling and social protection schemes can support adolescents to continue their education and alleviate the pressure to increase work at times of family crisis.

- Gender gaps widen significantly at the onset of adolescence. While gender has a profound bearing on adolescent trajectories, it is the way in which gender combines with other disadvantages, including poverty, rural location, and regional differences, that often matters most. Measures to address harmful practices such as early marriage and FGM/C should take into account underlying causes driving local decisions and provide viable economic and social alternatives where possible.
- Responding to the interrelated needs and experiences of both adolescent girls and boys is important for effective interventions. Focusing on adolescent girls to the exclusion of adolescent boys ignores the important ways that girls and boys relate to each other, and the impact this has on the household and communities as a whole.

## Introduction

Evidence from Young Lives in Ethiopia demonstrates a profound change in the experience of adolescence for young people growing up in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, with aspirations for social mobility and demand for education much higher than for previous generations. As one child highlighted:

‘When I complete my education, I will have a job to support my life and my grandmother and my life will be better.’ (Haftay, a young girl from a Young Lives site in Tigray)

Adolescence is a period of significant, and often diverse, transition in the lives of young people, particularly in relation to the onset of puberty, attending school, the competing demands of work, and, for some, early marriage and parenthood. It is also when gender disparities can, and often do, considerably widen.

While early childhood has long been recognised as a critical period, adolescence is increasingly identified as a second crucial window of opportunity for effective interventions, particularly for marginalised groups and ensuring that no one is left behind (Young Lives 2018). Investment in adolescence is essential for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and for young people to reach their full development potential into adulthood.

There are around 1.2 billion adolescents aged 10-19 years in the world today, 89 per cent of whom are in low- and middle-income countries. This is the largest adolescent population the world has ever known. Ethiopia currently has the highest proportion (22 per cent) of 15-24 year olds in the world (Population Reference Bureau 2017). The opportunity to benefit from this demographic dividend is decreasing and so requires more focus, notably on young people’s economic trajectories.

However, despite the huge opportunities, investment in broad development interventions designed to support adolescents is often neglected. Widespread hopes for achieving improved social mobility and development potential are often not realised, particularly when limited youth labour markets mean that the jobs young people aspire to are still very restricted. In Ethiopia, government initiatives such as

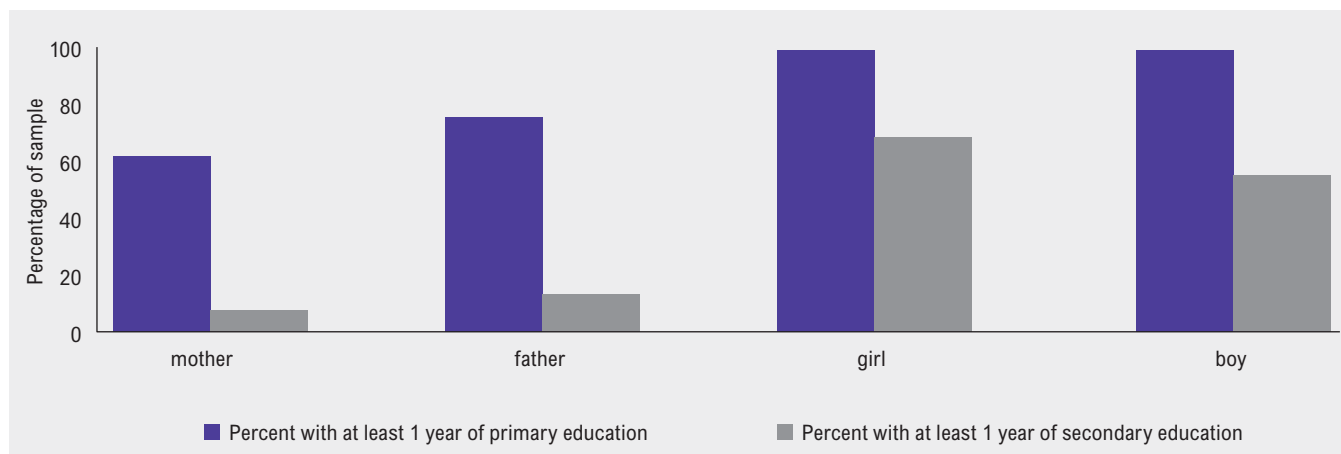
the Youth Development and Change Strategy and the corresponding Package and Youth Revolving Fund are important (MoYS 2017), as is the work by the Jobs Creation Commission and the Ethiopian Investment Commission to actively promote employment creation.

Young Lives research has shown that it is the combination of inequalities linked to poverty, gender, rural or urban location, and regional differences that consistently disadvantages certain groups. The extent to which these factors influence development outcomes invariably depends on the underlying political and economic local contexts in various rural, urban and regional settings within Ethiopia.

## Experiences of adolescence are diverse and changing and development policy and practice needs to respond accordingly

Significant socio-economic and cultural shifts have focused attention on adolescence as an increasingly important life phase, with the potential to break intergenerational poverty cycles. Overall, rising living standards across all four study Young Lives countries, including Ethiopia, have resulted in adolescents today being much better off than their parents or caregivers across many indicators.

In Ethiopia, the expansion of infrastructure (roads and electricity), economic growth, improved access to health and education services, increasing communications (mobile phones and satellite TV), and urbanisation have had profound effects, notably in rural areas (Pankhurst and Dom 2019). In particular, the substantial increase in access to education has opened up a much longer window between childhood and adulthood. Significantly more 22 year olds have been educated than their caregivers, and stayed in school for longer (see Figure 1). The proportion of girls in the Young Lives sample with at least a year of secondary education is also higher than that of boys. The associated reduction in time spent at work and care (both paid and unpaid), rise in the age of marriage among girls, and high aspirations for social mobility have also contributed to a profound change in the experience of adolescence.

**Figure 1.** Comparison between the education levels of 22 year olds and their caregivers

Source: Young Lives (2018).

The acceleration of change is not only evident between children and their parents' generation, but also between the two Young Lives cohorts. In Ethiopia, there has been a marked decrease in stunting over the period of the study, with fewer Younger Cohort children stunted (27 per cent) at age 15 than the Older Cohort (32 per cent) at the same age (Young Lives 2016a). Nevertheless, adolescent stunting levels of over a quarter of all 15 year olds remain far too high (Pankhurst et al. 2018).

The definition and timing of adolescent transitions also differ. Young people often spoke about becoming an adult as a gradual process of acquiring knowledge, increasing contributions to family livelihoods and incomes, and leaving childhood behind. Large variations were recorded in key life events associated with the start and end of adolescence, notably the onset of puberty (including the age of first menstruation for girls), age at which education ends, and age of marriage and parenthood. All of these events were shaped by factors relating to poverty, gender, rurality, and regional differences. For example, by the age of 12 only 2 per cent of rural girls in Ethiopia had had their first period, compared to 54 per cent of urban girls in Vietnam. Access to new technology played an increasing role in the lives of some, but not all, Young Lives adolescents. By 2016, many Ethiopian 22 year olds reported using mobile phones with internet access regularly, though only 11 per cent of rural 22 year olds did so, and young women were less likely to than men.

Understanding the variety of adolescent transitions and the fast-changing experience of adolescence is critical to designing effective development policies

and programmes. Chronological age is a weak basis for defining adolescence and interventions narrowly targeted to specific age groups may be exclusionary or inappropriate to young people's actual experience. For example, outreach programmes after the school day may exclude young people who have important work or care responsibilities at home. Moreover, laws regulating the age at which young people may work, leave school or marry often do not take account of the local socio-economic context within which these decisions are made.

## The first 1,000 days are vital, but sustained interventions also matter

Early childhood development provides a critically important foundation for positive development outcomes. However, Young Lives research also demonstrates that early gains, particularly in health, nutrition and education, need to be sustained throughout middle childhood and adolescence, particularly for marginalised groups, to ensure that young people have the opportunity to reach their full development potential.

**In health and nutrition:** Young Lives provides strong evidence of growth recovery well beyond the first 1,000 days of life in all four countries. Significant plasticity in children's growth has been observed, with children recovering from early stunting even up to 15 years of age, though their potential for recovery depends on the degree of early stunting. Importantly, this recovery is associated with improvements in cognitive outcomes and other aspects of children's development.

In Ethiopia, a slightly larger proportion of boys than girls were persistently stunted and fewer never stunted, and yet the proportion of boys who recovered was much greater, whereas fewer girls were persistently stunted but more faltered. There were large differences by socio-economic group in terms of wealth, location, and parental education and a higher proportion of rural children than urban children recovered. Particular attention is needed for sustained investment for adolescent girls who may, as a result of cultural practices, have worse diets than boys at this age. It is likely that better nutrition for adolescent girls can improve their height, health and labour market productivity in adulthood, and help prevent inter-generational malnutrition cycles (Woldehanna, Araya, and Tafere 2018).

**In education:** The substantial increase in access to primary and lower secondary education means that schools can reach large numbers of young adolescents and provide important platforms for delivering effective interventions, including potential synergies with health and nutrition interventions. However, despite high educational aspirations, adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds face formidable obstacles to stay in school and make progress in their learning. Young Lives shows that poor quality teaching, poor school infrastructure and inaccessibility, violence in schools and inflexible school systems all present significant barriers that affect poor children the most.

In Ethiopia, 15 year olds from the poorest households had on average only completed Grade 5 (four years behind the official grade for their age), while 15 year olds from the richest households had completed Grade 7 (two years behind). Overall grade progression was therefore low, and worse for the poorest children. Location also makes a difference as to how long adolescents remain in school, with over a third of rural 19 year olds (36 per cent) having left school before completing Grade 10, compared to just over a fifth of urban adolescents (22 per cent). By age 19, about 60 per cent of the Older Cohort children were still in some form of education, but by the age of 22, only one third were in education, with slightly more young men (38 per cent) than young women (34 per cent). Of those still in education, 41 per cent were at university, 22 per cent in vocational school, 15 per cent in preparatory (pre-university Grades 11 and 12), 12 per cent in lower secondary school and 11 per cent in primary school (Young Lives 2016b; 2016c).

Adolescence is a critical period when expectations about the returns on investment in education can be seen to shift. In Ethiopia, boys' and girls' aspirations changed as the opportunity costs of staying in school increased for many boys who were able to earn income for the family through paid work: a pro-boy bias in caregivers' aspirations at age 12 switched to a pro-girl bias by age 19.

Young Lives shows that it is crucial to support the quality of education for adolescents, with a strong focus on delivering functional and foundational skills to fully participate in rapidly changing twenty-first century societies. However, the quality of education is about more than just teaching and learning. Too often, schools are not safe spaces for adolescents and inflexible systems undermine opportunities to stay in school (Chuta et al. 2019).

## Responding appropriately to why and how adolescents combine school and work is critical, especially for helping the most disadvantaged children stay in school

Young people, especially those from poorer backgrounds, typically need to balance two sets of responsibilities and expectations; first, that they do well at school and get decent jobs as adults, and second, that they fulfil family responsibilities in relation to care and work. These two pathways are not mutually exclusive and a significant proportion of Young Lives adolescents combine school with work, as the following case of a girl in Oromia shows.

Gadise, a girl in Grade 5, as the oldest girl in the family, performed domestic tasks including cleaning, grinding and cooking, worked on the family farm weeding in the afternoons, substituted for her parents on Safety-Net public works, sold leftover vegetables on Saturdays, and did waged farming work during school holidays. She said she was absent from school only if her mother was ill, which had happened on three days in the past year. (Pankhurst, Crivello, and Tiemelissan 2016:15).

Why adolescents work and how they balance this with their education is not always sufficiently understood, both in terms of the potential burden on, and improved well-being of, individuals and their families.

In Ethiopia, the worst forms of child labour are addressed by policy initiatives, notably the National Action Plan on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour (MoLSA 2012). At 97 per cent, the percentage of 10 to 17 year olds participating in work in Ethiopia was strikingly high compared to other Young Lives study countries (Espinoza-Revollo and Porter 2018). It is important to recognise that not all work is detrimental. For example, though the responsibility to support the family through periods of economic shock may place adolescents under significant physical and emotional burden and result in absence from school, being able to contribute to the well-being of the family can also be a source of pride and enhance social integration within the family and community, as well as develop important vocational skills (Pankhurst et al. 2015). Nevertheless, child labour remains a serious problem in Ethiopia, and harmful work and long hours spent on work and care in adolescence are shown to be directly linked to leaving school early (Tafere and Pankhurst 2015).

Inflexible and punitive school systems often make it difficult for adolescents to combine work and study. Schooling that allows more flexibility in attendance, such as 'shift-system' schooling, or enables children to re-enrol after an absence can have an important impact in enabling adolescents from poorer backgrounds to continue their education. Effective social protection schemes, boosted by incentives to attend school, such as school feeding, can also alleviate the pressure on adolescents to increase work at times of family crisis.

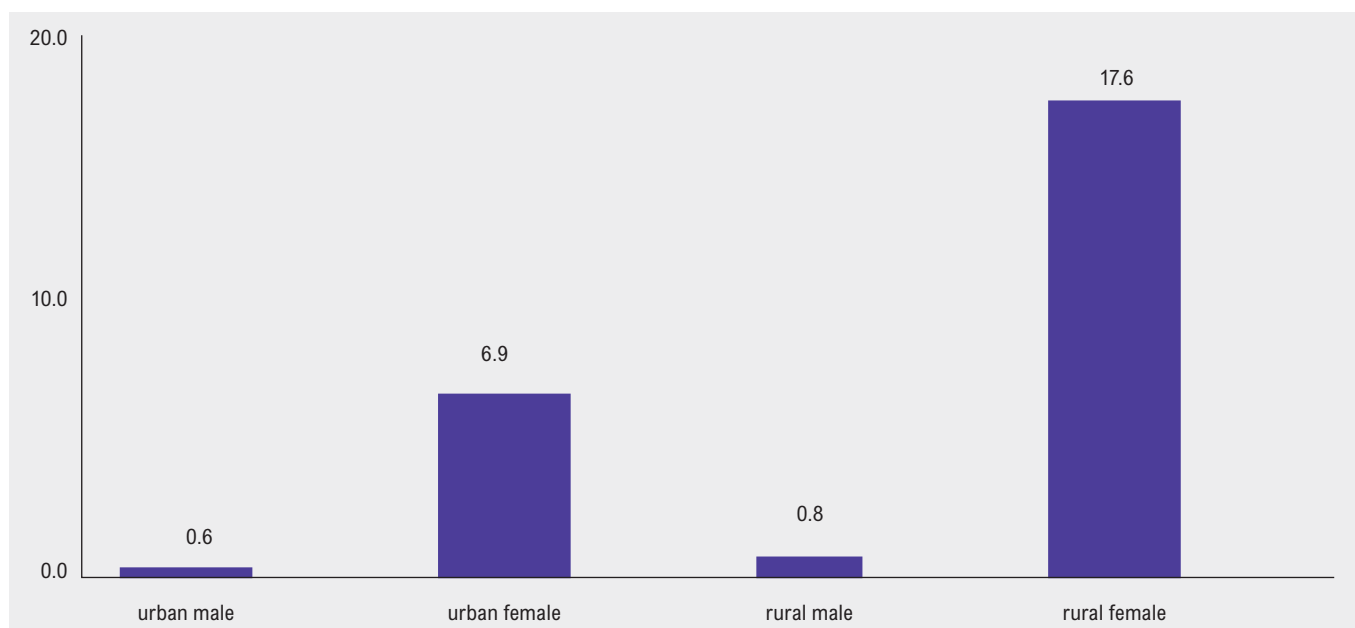
## Gender gaps widen significantly at the onset of adolescence

Young Lives research demonstrates that while gender has a profound bearing on adolescent trajectories, it is the way in which gender combines with other disadvantages, including poverty, rural location and minority status that often matters most.

**In education:** Young Lives shows that gender gaps in learning emerge more strongly at around age 12, and continue to widen until age 15, persisting into early adulthood. Findings from the four countries show marked differences in how gender disparities manifest. Interestingly, girls are not always disadvantaged, with girls in primary schools in Ethiopia doing comparatively well, and a higher proportion of girls than boys having at least one year of secondary education. Gender differentials alone, for both education enrolment and learning, are consistently smaller in magnitude than those linked to wealth.

**In relation to early marriage and parenthood:** Many assumptions underlying gender in adolescence fail to recognise the actual experiences of young people and their families and communities, particularly in relation to underlying socio-economic influences. Understanding why Ethiopian girls marry early and their experience both before and after being married is critical to addressing underlying causes (Figure 2). For example, in situations of entrenched poverty,

**Figure 2.** Percentage of 19 year olds who were parents



Young Lives (2018).

particularly in rural areas, early marriage may be viewed as empowering by young women by conferring a respectable status and granting them access to property. Moreover, given limited secondary and college education and work opportunities, and constraints on their access to, and information about, reproductive health and consequent risk of pregnancy and child bearing, some older adolescent girls may have no alternative or prefer to get married.

***In relation to work:*** Surprisingly, overall levels of work (paid and unpaid) for Young Lives adolescent girls and boys are largely similar, but the types of work and care undertaken become increasingly gender-differentiated during adolescence and reflect socio-economic circumstances.

For example, in Ethiopia, family shocks such as illness of household members had a larger effect in increasing the amount of unpaid work (including household chores and caring) for girls than for boys: 12-year-old girls spent around 3 hours and 25 minutes in unpaid care work, more than an hour and 20 minutes more than boys of the same age. Gender differentiation is also reflected in young people's labour market transitions. Although formal unemployment is often low, significantly more young women than men report that they are neither working or studying by the age of 22, principally due to unpaid caring roles, including motherhood.

## Responding to the interrelated needs of both adolescent girls and boys is important for effective interventions

Focusing on adolescent girls to the exclusion of adolescent boys ignores the important ways that girls and boys relate to each other and the impact this has on their households and communities. For example, Young Lives data show how young girls work longer hours in domestic and care work in addition to going to school, often rising earlier and staying up later than boys, affecting their concentration at school and their time for homework. Young Lives data also illustrate that boys in Ethiopia may be negatively affected in regions where they are expected to amass bridewealth before marrying, although changing

practices are allowing some young couples to marry without bridewealth. For adolescent girls, marriage was seen by many families as a way to secure their daughters' future in contexts of economic insecurity. This highlights the importance of intra-household gender dynamics on adolescent transitions and related developmental outcomes.

***In relation to violence:*** Adolescent girls' and boys' experiences of, and responses to, violence in Ethiopia are shaped by a combination of socio-economic factors, notably poverty and rurality. Young Lives shows that girls are subjected to much higher rates of sexual violence, whereas boys are more likely to experience bullying and physical violence at school, home, and work. Violence consistently undermines access to school especially for girls, who frequently report concerns over personal safety (on the way to or at school). Limited access to appropriate toilet and hygiene facilities can be a key driver of bullying and harassment, which for girls is particularly common during menstruation. Corporal punishment is associated with poorer cognitive development. Some forms of violence, such as emotional abuse, may have a huge impact on the daily lives of adolescents, but are often overlooked and under-researched (Chuta et al. 2019). Moreover, new risks facing adolescents, such as unemployment, substance abuse and media exposure, are perceived as potentially aggravating violence.

***In relation to disaster responses:*** Young Lives qualitative research illustrates that boys, as well as girls, are seriously affected by natural disasters (Morrow et al. 2017). While coping strategies for girls are more likely to include early marriage, boys are more likely to leave school and migrate to find new work. For example, during drought in Ethiopia many boys had to drop out of school and assume the role of family breadwinner, while struggling to repay loans that their families had taken out to offset the effects of drought. Focusing only on girls in times of disasters risks ignoring how the whole household is affected, and how individual household members are tasked to respond. The potential role of adolescents in disaster prevention and response needs to be better understood and supported.

## Conclusion

Adolescence is a crucial phase in children's development towards adulthood. The contexts in which adolescents are growing up in Ethiopia vary notably between urban and rural areas, and are changing rapidly, with expansion of education, services, growth and urbanization. A focus on adolescent health and nutrition, offers a second window to improve children's opportunities and wellbeing. Social protection and flexible schooling can enable the more vulnerable to continue with education and avoid excessive and harmful work. Adolescence is a time when gender gaps widen and where girls face particular risks and pressures. Interventions to prevent early marriage and protect and empower girls should consider the interrelated needs of girls and boys in order to promote successful transitions to adulthood.

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## About this brief

This brief, produced in partnership with UNICEF Ethiopia, draws on evidence from Young Lives Ethiopia. It is also based on the 'Adolescence Snapshot' written by Kath Ford, published following the Young Lives conference 'Young Lives, child poverty and lessons for the SDGs' held in June 2018. More information is available at [www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk). This brief is one of five briefs produced under a joint Young Lives/UNICEF study into transitions from childhood to young adulthood in Ethiopia.

The briefs are available from Young Lives ([www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk)), Young Lives Ethiopia ([www.younglives-ethiopia.org](http://www.younglives-ethiopia.org)) and UNICEF-Ethiopia ([www.unicef.org/ethiopia](http://www.unicef.org/ethiopia)).

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