

How poverty and gender combine to affect youth and adolescence

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- Young people now make up a quarter of the world's population. Their economic and social potential is enormous, but needs significant investments to become a reality.
- Young Lives' longitudinal approach allows us to track the routes travelled from childhood to young adulthood; the broad message is that children's aspirations at age 12 are high, but that these are not being realised.
- Young Lives' research findings on adolescence, youth, gender and poverty have had wide impact with key players including the Know Violence in Childhood Initiative, the Global Early Adolescence Study, the Lancet Standing Commission on Adolescent Health, the World Bank and Save the Children.
- Our research in this area finds a specific focus in work on child marriage and child-bearing. In India, Young Lives evidence has contributed directly to a change in the law which makes sex with a wife who is a child an offence of rape, and in Ethiopia findings have been shared with the Ethiopian Government and other influential stakeholders.

The context

Worldwide, numbers of young people are at an all-time high. About 25% of the global population is aged between 10 and 24, and in the least developed countries young people are now in a majority. In planning for the needs of this group, developing countries face key policy questions on issues ranging from employment and skills to family formation and sexual and reproductive rights. There is huge potential for economic and social progress for countries which make the most of their demographic dividend, but without investments that help young people to achieve their aspirations this potential will remain unrealised.

Much of what is known about adolescence comes from research and practice in high-income countries, but adolescence and young adulthood looks very different in low-income countries, particularly for those from poor and marginalised backgrounds.

What does Young Lives research show?

As the Young Lives cohorts grow up, the study is generating more and more information about the lives and needs of young people in low-income countries. Disparities based on location, social status and economic status become more pronounced during adolescence; the impact of gender on decision-making and life chances increases through adolescence. The impact of gender is often best understood in conjunction with the impacts of poverty in determining life chances.

Pathways through adolescence are complex, and young people's lives are shaped by the major transitions they have to make (moving from primary to secondary school, leaving school, starting work, and – especially for girls – marriage and parenthood). Young Lives' particular strength is that we link all these different aspects of young people's lives, rather than focusing on each in isolation, and are able to trace the effects of earlier characteristics and exposures on later outcomes. This means that we are able to build a powerful multi-dimensional picture of the challenges and opportunities facing

young people. Our longitudinal approach allows us to track the routes travelled from childhood to young adulthood; the broad message is that children's aspirations at age 12 are high, but that these are not being realised.

The impact of Young Lives research

Adolescence is a window of opportunity to equalise young people's chances, and this means that interventions matter. Young Lives evidence shows *what* matters for them, and this can inform the timing and focus of policies and interventions needed to support positive transitions for adolescent girls and boys. It enables Young Lives to influence ongoing debates about youth trajectories, empowerment and gender, as well as to challenge and broaden views of adolescence. In particular the Young Lives evidence builds a picture of the complexity, and multidimensionality, of lives, and of the growing responsibilities – of school, work and family - which increasingly bear on children through this phase.

Young Lives' aim as set out in its Theory of Change (2015) is to ensure 'that international agencies and national policymakers have a better understanding of when and how gender disadvantages emerge, and a better recognition of how gender disadvantage intersects with poverty'. Study collaborators have worked to achieve this in the following ways:

1. A major conference on Adolescence, Youth and Gender

This conference, held in September 2016, allowed Young Lives to engage with many important stakeholders and attracted over 170 international researchers, policymakers and civil society representatives. Participants came together to share global research findings and consider when and how gender inequalities emerge, the relationship between gender norms and wider structures, how gender and other inequalities interact during adolescence and youth, what 'empowerment' looks like, and what works to reduce gender inequality. The focus of the conference was on knowledge for change: change which makes a positive difference to children and young people's lives.

“ The papers were all based on empirical research evidence, hence discussions were very interesting and helped point to both contradictions and similarities in experience across contexts. A huge learning. ”

Conference participant

The conference generated considerable momentum which is now leading to interdisciplinary collaborations on the theme of Youth Transitions, recognising the complexity of children's transitions to adulthood in low-resource contexts, where school, work and marriage do not often follow one another in a linear progression. (For more on this please see our [briefing note](#)). In particular, the conference strengthened Young Lives' relationship with the Know Violence in Childhood Initiative, whose flagship report 'Violence in Childhood' was launched in September 2017 and drew extensively on a specially-commissioned Young Lives paper on children's experiences of violence (see separate case study on [Providing evidence on violence affecting children](#)).

2. The Global Early Adolescence Study

Young Lives has also been strengthening its relationship with the international [Global Early Adolescence Study \(GEAS\)](#) which had a large presence at the conference and on whose board Jo Boyden sits. At the International Association for Adolescent Health's World Congress in October 2017, Young Lives joined with GEAS and other partners in a special session to disseminate key findings on early adolescence in India. Jo Boyden, Director of Young Lives, also gave a keynote presentation to the conference highlighting the importance of taking account of adolescents' work and care responsibilities in formulating adolescent health policies and interventions; more than 1,000 delegates attended. With Professor Robert Blum, the Director of GEAS, Jo Boyden co-authored a commentary for a special issue of the journal *Nature* in February 2018, entitled '[Understand the lives of youth in low-income countries](#)'.

In December 2017, Young Lives convened a three day workshop in Oxford funded by the Canadian organisation CIFAR. This workshop drew together academics from across the world and from a range of different disciplines and country contexts to share ideas for new measures of adolescent development and well-being in low- and middle-income country contexts. It was convened in recognition of the fact that even though adolescence is a vital window of opportunity for policy there is insufficient evidence to plan effective policies and programmes and what little evidence exists comes from high-income countries, where the challenges to human development and well-being are both fewer and different. The workshop was run in partnership with Robert Blum from the Global Early Adolescent Study (GEAS), Marc Bornstein from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, and Kate Tilleczek from the University of Prince Edward Island. It was followed up by a meeting in May 2018 in Bellagio, again with Young Lives and Robert Blum as the key organisers. This meeting involved policy, practitioner and academic stakeholders from diverse countries and disciplinary backgrounds, all of whom have extensive experience and expertise in adolescence and gender in low- and middle-income countries.

This second workshop focused on SDG5, which is intended to ensure gender equality by empowering women and girls. Its objective was to identify a research agenda that would advance global understanding of the factors that impede and promote gender equality among adolescents and develop evidence-based global and national policy and programmatic agendas to inform country-level programming and policy priorities related to SDG5. It acknowledged that adolescents are central to the achievement of SDG5 and highlighted how interventions to promote gender equality in adolescence are important for amplifying benefits in or provide catch up for deficiencies experienced in childhood, in order to set positive trajectories as adolescents age into adulthood and for national development and harnessing the demographic dividend. The workshop concluded that the inclusion of adolescents in SDG5 requires expansion of the goal's existing indicators to assure they are applicable for adolescents, with adolescents seen as central to its fulfilment for it is they who will be most impacted by gender inequalities over time; and it is they who hold the promise of reversing the current inequalities. The workshop is planned to lead to longer-term engagement with key global stakeholders on these issues.

Also following the 2016 conference, Young Lives has played an important role in exploring girls' and boys' care work, drawing on a series of new papers and book chapters. Care has been a neglected aspect of children's work which is revealed through Young Lives' rich time use data in particular. Gina Crivello was invited to an [expert roundtable](#) on children and care work hosted by UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti (OoR), where she shared Young Lives findings on girls' and boys' care work, and the Young Lives team presented findings at a Plan International event on girls' time use at the Commission on the Status of Women in March 2018. The theme of growing adolescent responsibilities is also central to a Young Lives summative publication with this focus, to be published in late 2018.

3. Influencing policy on child marriage

Young Lives' research on adolescence, youth, gender and poverty finds a specific focus in its work on child marriage and child-bearing. The life opportunities of young people, particularly girls, are strongly affected by expectations and practices in this area, but the factors affecting child marriage are complex. By examining and connecting many different aspects of young people's lives (work, school, home, marriage, community, peers), Young Lives can build a powerful picture of this complexity and hence be in a strong position to inform policy in constructive ways.

Young Lives has looked in detail at two countries, India and Ethiopia, where the effects of child marriage and the practices surrounding it (for example, female genital mutilation or dowry payments) are particularly marked. In India, Young Lives evidence has contributed directly to a change in the law which makes sex with a wife who is a child an offence of rape. In Ethiopia, Young Lives has highlighted the complexity of factors affecting child marriage, and shared findings with the Ethiopian Government and other influential stakeholders including UNICEF and the Population Council. See separate case study on ['Influencing policy on child marriage'](#).

4. Other engagements with important actors

The strength of Young Lives' research in this area has resulted in other types of policy influence:

- In January 2018 Jo Boyden was invited to sit on the influential [Lancet Standing Commission on Adolescent Health](#), contributing to the development of their second flagship report due in 2020 (the first being published in 2016).
- **Save the Children** has used Young Lives evidence on Adolescence, Youth and Gender to inform their programme planning, their internal documents and the way they collect data.

“ Young Lives is a project we at Save the Children want to track very closely and ... to use your learnings in our programmes as well as in the way we collect data on children. Your findings and technical notes can be extremely informative for the program and advocacy work we do. As an example, the Young Lives findings which identified that gender based gaps tended to widen during adolescence has been widely cited in our internal

[documents and provided evidence to check/confirm assumptions made by programming staff.](#) ”

Silvia Paruzzolo, Ph.D., Deputy Director, Child Poverty Global Theme, Save the Children (November 2016)

- In January 2016 Jo Boyden was both a keynote speaker and a panellist at the **Emerging Markets Symposium** (held annually to discuss a key global human development topic immediately before the World Economic Forum, Davos), and this led to her being asked to contribute to the report ['Young People and the Future of Emerging Markets'](#) launched in May 2016.
- Jo Boyden was also invited to give a keynote to the **World Bank Group's** Global Youth Forum in June 2016, which engaged a large number of stakeholders, young people and World Bank staff. As a result of this, Young Lives was invited to contribute to a review by the World Development Report team in preparation for the tenth anniversary of the flagship 2007 report 'Development and the Next Generation'.
- Jo Boyden was on the advisory group for the development of the **Commonwealth's 2016 Global Youth Development Index** launched in late 2016. As a consequence, a Young Lives case study highlighting the value of longitudinal research in understanding poverty in childhood and adolescence has been drafted for a Youth Mainstreaming Guide that will be launched at the 9th Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meeting in Uganda in July 2017. Highlights from Young Lives findings were also presented at a Youth Policy group meeting for youth organisations at the Commonwealth Secretariat in January 2017.
- In 2014 Young Lives was commissioned by the **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** to produce a [background paper](#) to inform life-course approaches to understanding vulnerabilities among youth. This was used extensively in UNDP's [Human Development Report 2014](#) ('Sustaining Human Progress: Reducing Vulnerabilities and Building Resilience'). Young Lives also contributed a [guest blog on the UNDP website](#).
- In Latin America, Young Lives has contributed to the design of an **IADB/IDRC funded project on Youth and the Labour Market**. This cross-country study is taking place in eight Latin American countries to investigate the transition to the labour market in young people aged 15-24. A number of Young Lives survey modules have been included, and a comparative study will be carried out using the data collected for the eight study countries plus Peru, using Young Lives data.

“ Our project seeks to better understand the opportunities and barriers that young people in Latin America face for their social and economic integration. We expect to measure youth aspirations and expectations, cognitive and non-cognitive skills, material and emotional well-being, and risky behaviour and social attitudes, as well as how these correlate with educational and labour market outcomes. Young Lives study methods and data greatly helped us guide the development of our own survey. Young Lives rich questionnaire covers many aspects of the lives of adolescents and young adults that are relevant for our study. We have benefited

from its tools and measures in building a more effective instrument that will hopefully help inform policy towards improving youth opportunities in our region. ”

Andrea Repetto, Espacio Publico and **Rafael Novella**, Inter-American Development Bank (IADB)

- In 2018, Young Lives was commissioned by the **Government of Ireland, co-chair of 2018's UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)**, to produce a policy brief focused on rural girls. The brief, presented at an official CSW side event in March 2018, outlines Young Lives' findings and argues for social protection, investment in rural schools, and support for water, sanitation and nutrition. It also argues that support to address rural girls' heavy workloads and to delay marriage must be priority interventions if the Sustainable Development Goals are to be achieved and rural girls and young women are to fulfil their potential.

“ To respond effectively to development challenges it is important that we know and apply approaches that work best to reduce poverty and improve lives. Ireland is committed to supporting research that builds evidence

and knowledge that can make a real difference to the lives of poor people and the communities in which they live. Irish Aid is pleased to support Young Lives research to do just that. The side-event at CSW 2018, **Learn, Grow, Thrive**, co-hosted by Permanent Mission of Ireland to the UN and Young Lives was informed by this research, providing a valuable contribution to our understanding of the situation of rural girls today. ”

Emer O'Brien, Policy Lead, Gender Equality, Irish Aid, Department of Foreign Affairs

- In 2018 Young Lives led on a briefing entitled 'Child Poverty and Adolescent Transitions', published by the Global Coalition to End Child Poverty. This briefing was intended to situate adolescence within child poverty debates, and to draw together both research and programming perspectives.
- The Department for International Development (DFID) Youth Team have also acknowledged that Young Lives input on youth transitions had been very helpful in informing DFID's work in this area.