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Supporting Soft Skills in Hard Times: Gender Inequalities in Social and Emotional Skills are Holding Adolescent Girls Back

Overview

A person's social and emotional skills refer to how they manage their emotions and behaviour, how they perceive themselves and how they engage with others. These abilities – also known as soft skills or life skills – are important for an individual's well-being and a wide range of life outcomes, including success in school, employability and family life. They enable people to achieve personal goals, communicate effectively, work collaboratively, cope with stress and build positive relationships.

While there is increasing recognition of why they matter, less is understood about how social and emotional skills develop over the life course, and why some people develop stronger skills than others. This is particularly true in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), where research in this area is relatively scarce due to limited availability of data.

New analysis of Young Lives' longitudinal data shows that while girls and boys exhibit similar social and emotional skills in the early years, gender differences widen during late adolescence. This leaves many young women at significant disadvantage as they begin their new working and family lives, particularly in Ethiopia and India.

Gender differences in social and emotional skills during late adolescence are most striking in skills associated with empowerment, such as self-efficacy (belief in your own capacity to achieve goals) and agency (sense of control over your own life). Adolescent girls have significantly lower self-efficacy than boys at age 19 across all four study countries, with gender gaps persisting through to age 22 in Ethiopia, India, and Vietnam; this is despite higher educational achievement among girls in Vietnam, and girls remaining longer in school in both Ethiopia and Vietnam (by half a year, and one year, respectively). Our evidence suggests that while educational achievement is positively associated with social and emotional skills, this does not explain the increasing gender gap in late adolescence.

Social and cultural contexts are key to explaining why adolescent girls and young women develop lower social and emotional skills than boys and men, particularly in relation to gender norms and gendered social expectations. Our new analysis shows that beliefs in more egalitarian gender roles are positively associated with higher self-efficacy and agency for both adolescent girls and boys.

Poverty also exacerbates gender inequalities in social and emotional skills. Gender gaps in self-efficacy were widest among those living in the poorest households and those in rural areas. Even in Peru, where the overall gender gap had narrowed by the age of 22, young women still have significantly lower self-efficacy than young men among those living in the poorest households.

Although gender differences in social and emotional skills appear in late adolescence, inequalities in a broad range of children's skills, including social, emotional and also cognitive skills, appear at a very early age.

While the negative effects of early deprivation on children's skills development is well documented, Young Lives longitudinal data shows that supportive parenting and early education can help to build the foundation for stronger social and emotional skills.

These findings are important for policymakers. Gender differences in social and emotional skills, though significant, are not universal or inevitable outcomes.

This policy brief highlights that:

- Improving adolescent girls' and young women's social and emotional skills requires targeted support, particularly to improve girls' empowerment, which can make a real difference for well-being and later life outcomes.
- Successful initiatives to improve women and girls' empowerment often combine education, life skills training and mentorship; adding life skills to school curriculums is crucial for gender equality and women's empowerment.
- Efforts to challenge social norms that discriminate against girls and women are more likely to succeed if they engage whole communities, including boys and men, working collaboratively with local leaders and civil society.

The Young Lives study

Young Lives is a unique longitudinal study that has been following the lives of 12,000 young people in Ethiopia, India (in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Vietnam since 2002. In each country, the study is divided into two age groups: 2,000 young people born in 2001 (the Younger Cohort) and 1,000 born in 1994 (the Older Cohort).

What are social and emotional skills?

Social and emotional skills are commonly referred to by a variety of terms, including soft skills, life skills, skills and mindsets, social skills, socio-emotional skills or competencies, or noncognitive skills. They include a broad group of abilities related to self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making.¹ These skills differ from cognitive skills, which refer to an individual's ability to think, learn and process information and are often measured using tests that focus on one specific type of academic skill, such as mathematics tests to measure numeracy, or vocabulary tests to measure literacy.

Building evidence on social and emotional skills over two decades

Young Lives is one of the few longitudinal studies in LMICs that collects detailed data on social and emotional skills development from early childhood through to adulthood. We have measured a range of social and emotional skills since our first round of data collection in 2002, including self-efficacy, agency, self-esteem, peer relations, pride, teamwork, leadership, grit, emotional stability and conscientiousness.

The evidence in this policy brief is drawn from a range of Young Lives publications over the last two decades, including from our new report, '**Gender Differences in Socioemotional Skills Among Adolescents and Young Adults in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam**' (Hossain and Jukes, 2023).

¹ Adapted from CASEL's framework. See CASEL (n.d.).

Young Lives findings

Social and emotional skills are important for a wide range of life outcomes

Social and emotional skills are important for an individual's well-being and a wide range of life outcomes, including success in school, employability and family life (e.g. Almlund et al. 2011). Evidence from high-income countries shows that social and emotional skills measured at an early age also predict health and behavioural outcomes in later life (e.g. Attanasio et al. 2020).

Young Lives research has shown that young people who demonstrate strong social and emotional skills in early adolescence are less likely to engage in risky behaviours as they enter early adulthood – including smoking, drinking, drug use and violent behaviour – which are also predictors of lower paid jobs, unemployment and divorce (Mitchell et al. 2020).

While there is increasing evidence on why they matter, less is understood about how social and emotional skills develop from infancy into adulthood, and why some people develop stronger skills than others, especially in LMICs, where longitudinal measures of social and emotional skills are scarce.

Gender differences in social and emotional skills widen in late adolescence

Our new analysis shows that while girls and boys tend to have similar levels of social and emotional skills in the early years, significant gender differences in favour of boys typically appear in late adolescence, particularly in Ethiopia and India (Hossain and Jukes 2023).

This finding is consistent with existing research showing that adolescence is a critical period for many aspects of developing a sense of self and identity; it is during adolescence that young people increasingly seek autonomy, particularly from their parents, alongside greater needs for connection with their peers (Goetz et al. 2010).

Adolescent girls are disempowered by lower self-efficacy and agency

Gender differences are particularly evident in skills such as self-efficacy and agency, both of which are closely associated with an individual's empowerment (Revollo and Portela 2019).

While there is little evidence of a gender gap at age 12 and 15, our results show adolescent girls have significantly lower self-efficacy than boys at age 19, across all four study countries, with the gender gaps persisting through to age 22 in Ethiopia, India, and Vietnam. In India, adolescent girls also have significantly lower agency than boys at age 22. In Ethiopia, boys scored higher than girls in agency after age 12, although the gender gap was less marked than in India (Hossain and Jukes 2023).

These results suggest that an increasing gender gap in empowerment typically happens during a critical period in young people's life transitions (between ages 15 and 19), particularly among those from the poorest households and in countries like Ethiopia and India, where strong patriarchal gender norms persist.

Educational achievement is positively associated with social and emotional skills, but does not explain gender gaps in late adolescence

There is a wealth of evidence exploring the complex relationship between education and skills development, including the positive relationship between academic achievements and social and emotional skills. For example, Young Lives evidence in Peru has shown that time spent studying at age 19 is associated with significantly higher skills related to self-efficacy and perseverance at age 22 (Mitchell et al. 2020). Similarly, our new analysis shows that individuals who perform well in mathematics tests at age 19 have higher agency at age 22 across all four study countries, and (to a lesser extent) higher self-efficacy (Hossain and Jukes 2023).

Young Lives longitudinal data also suggests a strong link between children's early cognitive skills – measured through performance in maths, reading and vocabulary tests – and later social and emotional skills. For example, children in Peru who perform well in maths and literacy tests at age 8 have significantly higher social and emotional skills at age 12, compared to those who underperform in cognitive tests, with an increasingly positive effect throughout adolescence up to the age of 19 (Mitchell et al. 2020).

While educational achievement is positively associated with social and emotional skills, both may be influenced by external factors, and differences do not explain the increasing gender gap in late adolescence. Among our sample in Vietnam, girls actually outperformed boys in maths and literacy tests at age 15, and in literacy at age 19 (Singh and Krutikova, 2017). By the age of 22, young women had completed more schooling than men in both Ethiopia and Vietnam (by half a year, and one year, respectively). Despite these positive outcomes, however, young women still have lower self-efficacy than men at age 22 in both countries. This suggests that efforts to improve educational achievement or increase school attendance, alone, may not be enough to close gender gaps in social and emotional skills (Hossain and Jukes 2023).

Gender norms are likely to have an impact on social and emotional skills in late adolescence

Understanding why adolescent girls and young women develop significantly lower social and emotional skills than adolescent boys and young men is likely to depend heavily on social and cultural contexts. Gender norms that systemically privilege men and boys – especially those prevalent in highly patriarchal societies – may negatively affect adolescent girls' social and emotional skills due to discriminatory social pressures and unequal gender role expectations.

Our new analysis provides important insights to better understand the link between gender roles and social and emotional skills. Across all four study countries, we found a strong association between attitudes towards women and young people's sense of empowerment: those who expressed more egalitarian views towards women's roles in relationships, education and employment, also showed higher self-efficacy and agency skills. Interestingly, this result was significant for both adolescent girls *and* adolescent boys. The association was particularly strong for adolescent girls in Ethiopia and India, suggesting that challenging discriminatory gender roles in highly patriarchal societies might also support girls' empowerment (Hossain and Jukes 2023).

Cultural differences in parental expectations for their sons and daughters may also play a role. Young Lives evidence in Ethiopia and India has shown that parental gender bias in educational aspirations against girls at age 8 affects the aspirations of girls themselves by the age of 12, which contributes to gender gaps in cognitive skills and lower self-efficacy and agency by the age of 15 (Dercon and Singh 2013) and educational attainment by the age of 19 (Favara 2017). This analysis suggested that gender bias against girls was 'institutionalised' in the education system in India and, to an extent, in Ethiopia (Dercon and Singh 2013).

Poverty exacerbates gender inequalities in social and emotional skills

While perceived gender roles and discriminatory gender norms are likely to have a profound effect on social and emotional skills, how this combines with other inequalities can also have a significant impact.

Our new analysis shows that gender gaps in self-efficacy in Ethiopia, Peru and Vietnam were widest among those living in the poorest households. Even in Peru, where the overall gender gap had narrowed by the age of 22, young women still have significantly lower self-efficacy than young men among the poorest households (Hossain and Jukes 2023).

Previous Young Lives analysis has also shown that adolescent girls from rural areas have significantly lower self-efficacy than those from urban areas, across all four study countries (Revollo and Portela 2019). This is likely to reflect significantly different gender norms between rural and urban communities, particularly in Ethiopia and India.

Early life circumstances matter for skills development more broadly

Young Lives longitudinal data shows that early life circumstances matter for skills development. Although gender differences in social and emotional skills appear in late adolescence, inequalities in a broad range of children's skills, including social and emotional skills, as well as

cognitive skills, appear at a very early age, with children from the poorest households and rural areas, those who are stunted or malnourished, and those whose parents had little or no education, most disadvantaged (Helmert and Patnam 2011).

Young Lives children growing up in poorer households and those who were stunted (lower height-for-age) at 8 years old subsequently had lower social and emotional skills by the age of 12 (Dercon and Krishnan 2009; Dercon and Sánchez 2011). Both poverty and malnutrition can be further exacerbated by early life shocks, including extreme weather events, which are becoming more frequent due to climate change. Our evidence shows that poor diets and malnutrition resulting from rainfall shocks can have profound long-term consequences, affecting physical growth, cognitive, social and emotional skills, and progress in school (Benny, Boyden, and Penny 2018). In India, our analysis has even shown that rainfall shocks experienced by a mother during pregnancy can negatively affect her child's social and emotional skills, such as self-efficacy, agency and self-esteem, even into adolescence (Chang, Favara, and Novella 2022).

Supportive parenting and early education help to build the foundation for stronger social and emotional skills

Despite the negative effects of early deprivation on children's development, our evidence also highlights a number of protective factors which can potentially support social and emotional skills development. For example, in Peru, our analysis has shown that sensitive responses from mothers to their baby crying, and encouraging infants between 6 and 18 months old to play with their caregiver, are positively related to cognitive, social and emotional skills throughout childhood, with some positive effects persisting into early adolescence, up to age 15 (Hurtado-Mazeyra et al. 2022).

Our analysis in Peru has also shown that family investments in children's education at age 8, such as enabling more time to be spent on homework or buying school uniforms and books, can significantly increase both cognitive *and* social and emotional skills by the age of 12. Interestingly, it is children with the lowest cognitive skills who benefit most from early family investments in education (Mitchell et al. 2020).

While the link between preschool attendance and stronger cognitive skills is well established, Young Lives evidence also shows a strong association between early education and social and emotional skills in later childhood, up to the age of 12 (Favara et al. 2017). For children in Peru who started preschool early (at 3–4 years old), the positive impact on their agency persisted even up to the age of 15 (Arapa et al. 2021).

Policy implications

Although Young Lives evidence shows significant gender differences in skills such as self-efficacy and agency, gendered differences in social and emotional skills are not universal or inevitable outcomes. While supporting adolescent girls and young women to improve their social and emotional skills should always be tailored to individual circumstances and country / community contexts, our longitudinal evidence suggests several important considerations to guide effective policymaking and programmes:

1. **Targeting support to improve adolescent girls' and young women's social and emotional skills, particularly in relation to their self-efficacy and agency**, is critical to address gender inequality and to make a real difference for well-being and later life outcomes. Adolescence is an important window of opportunity for effective interventions to address structural inequalities which disadvantage the most marginalised, particularly girls from poor households and in rural areas.
2. **Successful initiatives to improve women and girls' empowerment often combine education, life skills training and mentorship, in schools and other community settings.** Young Lives evidence in Peru has shown that providing students with access to a trained psychologist at secondary schools (as part of a broad package of pedagogical and mentoring support) can lead to a significant improvement in social and emotional skills for adolescent girls and boys (Agüero et al. 2021).
3. **Adding 'life skills' and social and emotional learning to school curriculums is increasingly important in uncertain and changing times.** Supporting adolescent girls to confidently manage everyday situations and their transition towards adulthood, including how to negotiate relationships with partners, family and friends, and access to higher education and decent jobs, is crucial for gender equality and women's empowerment.
4. **Efforts to promote gender equality and challenge social norms that discriminate against girls and women are more likely to succeed if they engage whole communities.** This should include engaging with boys and men to challenge patriarchal norms, and working collaboratively with community leaders, civil society and local media.
5. **Early investment in children's social and emotional learning can have long-term benefits.** Investment in programmes that promote early child development, including affordable access to quality preschools, and encouraging positive parent-child interactions, can improve social and emotional skills in later childhood and adolescence.
6. **Supporting the development of strong cognitive skills can lay the foundation for future social and emotional skills.** Young Lives evidence has shown that the promotion of continuous enrolment in early education, alongside social protection to reduce poverty and improve nutrition, can significantly increase cognitive abilities *and* social and emotional skills. However, these measures may not be sufficient to close gender gaps in social and emotional skills, which is why more targeted initiatives to improve adolescent girls' soft skills are also needed in late adolescence.
7. **Investing in new research and building the evidence base in LMICs is critical to inform policies and enable evidence-based approaches to improve young people's social and emotional skills, particularly for adolescent girls and young women.** Further longitudinal research is important to understand both trends over time and the impacts of early life circumstances on later life outcomes.



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Continuing to follow Young Lives

Young Lives is conducting our next comprehensive in-person quantitative survey (Round 7) across our four study countries in 2023. This will include new data on social and emotional skills across both study cohorts, enabling further longitudinal analysis from infancy into adulthood.

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