

Slow Progression: Educational Trajectories of Young Men and Women in Ethiopia

Yisak Tafere and Agazi Tiumelissan



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Summary

This working paper documents the educational trajectories of young people in Ethiopia. It focuses on data from the Young Lives fifth-wave qualitative study in five Ethiopian study communities carried out in 2019, but also draws on survey and qualitative data from previous rounds.

The study finds that students have generally experienced slow progression through school. Students from rural areas and poor families had more disrupted educational trajectories, with most of them being over-age for their grade levels. Gender made little difference to the rate of progression through school.

Poverty, workload, illness/injuries and school-related problems (such as bullying and poor-quality teaching) led to children interrupting their schooling and repeating grades. As such, many students were unable to achieve their childhood educational aspirations. However, some managed to reach the level of education that they had aimed for, mainly those from better-off families, urban areas and a few other resilient young people. The study showed a strong association between progress through school and achievement, in that those who reached higher grade levels maintained high educational aspirations and vice versa. Prolonged schooling meant that young people were sometimes still at school even after becoming adults.

The paper provides some policy recommendations to address the main issues associated with slow progression through school. Smooth school trajectories require comprehensive social protection, including school feeding and the provision of healthcare and school materials.

The disparity in educational provision means that schoolchildren do not have equal access to a similar quality of education. Poor children and those from rural areas are disadvantaged as they cannot access private schools, which provide a better quality of education, with rural young people rarely accessing private colleges in towns. In line with the intent of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, we maintain that equal access to high-quality education is an important aspect of ensuring that gaps caused by location and economic status are narrowed.

Finally, prolonged educational trajectories make female students susceptible to marriage before they finish school. Efforts by parents, children and the government to improve girls' education can only be valuable if girls finish their schooling and find employment. Following SDG 5, education should ensure gender equity to make girls and young women equal citizens in wider society.

1. Introduction

Schooling is an expectation of modern childhood and is widely considered an important route to, and way of preparing for, adulthood. Generally, the transition from childhood to adulthood starts with finishing school, followed by having a job, leaving home, getting married and having children (Settersten, Ottusch and Scheneider 2015; Valentine 2003).

School is one stage in the human life course. A life course can be defined as 'a sequence of socially defined events and roles that the individual enacts over time' (Giele and Elder 1998: 22). Transition and trajectories are major components of the life course. Transitions are marked by a change of role and status within a short period of time. Graduation can denote a transition, marking an end to formal education and the beginning of the next stage of the life course – a job. The person concerned may have changed role and status, in this case from being a student to being a worker. On the other hand, trajectories can occur over an extended period of time (Elder 1985). For example, educational trajectories involve multiple years of schooling.

Educational trajectories as an important part of the life course have been a focus of research since the 1970s. Researchers have attempted to understand educational trajectories in terms of educational attainment measured by years of schooling and educational qualifications (Pallas 2003). The timing of educational trajectories may depend on different factors, particularly on the existing pathways. Pathways, as distinct from trajectories, are shaped by cultural and structural forces (Elder 1985). A trajectory is more about individual attributes, whereas a pathway is about structure, with possible constraints, incentives and choices (Pallas 2003). The link between the two is visible in that educational trajectories can be influenced by the pathways available.

Individual agency and actions also influence educational trajectories. People set certain goals that they aim to reach. They may aspire to have a good adult life through educational achievement. A good adult life may depend on having a good job and salary, which itself depends on achieving a better level of education. Educational aspirations are therefore motivated by occupational aspirations (Andres et al. 2007).

An aspiration is a desire to achieve a certain level in life (MacBrayne 1987). However, not all dreams can be achieved. For example, achieving educational aspirations may take a considerable amount of childhood schooling. Different external contexts and different people's capacities influence the educational routes to achievement. Aspirations can be broadly shaped by the settings and policy contexts young people live in. Family circumstances and role models, such as family members, also play a part in the process (Chenoweth and Galliher 2004). Furthermore, children's agency can influence their educational pathways, and as they grow up and progress through school, children and young people might review and revise their aspirations, depending on their experience of education and their level of success.

Young Lives, as a longitudinal study, is well positioned to document the changing relationship between educational trajectories and educational aspirations, the educational trajectories of young people, and the factors influencing their routes through school.

2. Education in Ethiopia

2.1 Brief overview of the Ethiopian education system

School education, considered as a major driver of development, is a core element of the Ethiopian Government's education policy initiatives. In line with Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2, which aimed at 'achieving universal primary education' by 2015, efforts have been focused on the expansion of primary education in Ethiopia, with policy envisaging that 'all school-age children get access to quality primary education by the year 2015'. Through education, the country could be transformed by creating 'educated farmers and other workers who utilize new agricultural technologies' (MoE 2005).

The current educational system in Ethiopia was established by the 1994 Education and Training Policy. Formal education starts at age 7. Primary education runs through Grades 1–8 (with the first cycle Grades 1–4, and the second cycle Grades 5–8), with secondary education covering Grades 9–12 (general education at Grades 9 and 10 and university preparatory education at Grades 11 and 12). The policy stipulates that general exams are taken at Grades 8, 10 and 12 to evaluate progress and identify students eligible for the subsequent level of education. The Grade 8 regional examination aims at certifying the completion of primary education. The national Ethiopian General Secondary Education Certificate Examination (EGSECE)¹ is taken by Grade 10 students with the aim of certifying the completion of secondary education and selecting those students who qualify for preparatory education for university. Those who fail the EGSECE are placed in technical and vocational education and training (TVET), which provides skills training for different occupations. Colleges of Teachers' Education (CTEs) offer a three-year training course for teachers, which leads to a diploma. In 2016/17, there were 36 CTEs in the country (MoE 2017).

Students who pass the EGSECE can continue their schooling in Grades 11 and 12 as preparation for university. Students who pass the Ethiopian Higher Education Entrance Certificate Examination (EHEECE) at Grade 12 are eligible to go to university.

2.2 Educational trajectories and progression

In 2016/17, nationally about 88 per cent of the Grade 8 students were promoted to Grade 9, while 70.4 per cent (74 per cent males, 66 per cent females) of those who took the EGSECE achieved the pass mark (greater than 2.00).² However, not all of those who achieve pass marks are able to join a preparatory school, because of limited space. The majority of those who complete Grade 10 join TVET colleges, CTEs, and other training centres. In 2016/17, only 41.27 per cent of students who took the EHEECE registered above 350 points, out of a maximum of 700, which is the pass mark to go to university.

1 The Ministry of Education announced in 2020 that this exam will no longer be set. However, there is no official policy documentation on this change yet.

2 This is a general pass mark, but the actual cut-off point for each year varies, depending on the intake capacity of preparatory schools.

In the same academic year, in all the CTE programmes (regular, extension and summer) 257,247 trainees were enrolled, with some gender disparity (59 per cent male and 41 per cent female). There were also 302,083 TVET trainees, of whom 51.3 per cent were female (MoE 2017).

Ministry of Education reports indicate that there is a great deal of grade repetition in educational trajectories in Ethiopia. As a result, many children are older than the intended age for their grade (over-age). Many drop out of school, either temporarily or permanently, and grade completion rates are low. Nationally, the repetition rate for primary school (Grades 1–8) in 2014/15 was 7 per cent, much worse than the planned 1 per cent target for the year (MoE 2015). Two years later, the rate had slightly increased, with more boys (7.5 per cent) than girls (6.8 per cent) repeating a grade (MoE 2017). Similar data show that primary school dropout rates for 2016/17 were high, but with little gender disparity (11.4 per cent for boys, 11.9 per cent for girls) (MoE 2017).

Grade repetition and dropout influence completion rates. Despite high enrolment rates, completion rates are very low. For example, in 2014/15 the completion rate of Grade 8 was as low as 51 per cent, compared to the national target for the year, which was 79 per cent (MoE 2015). The completion rate for Grade 8 slightly improved over the next two years, reaching 54.1 per cent (56 per cent for boys and 52.2 per cent for girls) in 2016/17 (MoE 2017). The low completion rate of primary education is significant, with girls being disproportionately affected.

National data show that many children find it hard to attend school regularly. Their educational trajectories are marked by repetition, dropout and low levels of completion. Drawing on longitudinal and in-depth data, this working paper explains why schoolchildren progress so slowly and irregularly through school.

3. Study research questions, data and methodology

This paper focuses on young men and women who are still in formal education, and specifically their educational trajectories, the challenges they have experienced, their educational hopes and aspirations, and their eventual achievements. The overarching research questions are as follows: What are the educational trajectories of young people? What factors affect their trajectories and achievements? What role do individual agency, location, gender and parental economic status play?

3.1 Young Lives

The paper is based on data from Young Lives, an international study of childhood poverty and transitions to adulthood following the lives of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India (in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Vietnam since 2001. Young Lives aims to provide high-quality data to understand childhood poverty and inform policy and programme design. In Ethiopia, Young Lives follows 3,000 children in two cohorts (2,000 in the Younger Cohort born in 2000/1 and 1,000 in the Older Cohort born in 1994/95), from 20 communities across five regions (Addis Ababa, Amhara, Oromia, SNNP and Tigray).

The study involves surveys every four years with the young participants and their households, and five rounds have been carried out so far. Since 2007, it has also conducted qualitative research with a sub-set of the children and their families, including a longitudinal study following more than 100 girls and boys across a 13-year period from childhood into early adulthood. Round 6 of the survey, which was due to be carried out in 2020, has been postponed and replaced with mobile phone surveys. This paper draws on data from the fifth-wave core qualitative study carried out in 2019, and also on previous Young Lives qualitative studies and the surveys.

Young Lives has researched education and work extensively, with many studies showing that children combine schooling with work (Boyden, Porter and Zharkevich 2020; Morrow and Boyden 2018; Tafere and Pankhurst 2015; Pankhurst, Crivello and Tiemelissan 2015; Morrow, Tafere and Vennam 2014).

Work is a part-time daily activity to combine with schooling, particularly for children from rural areas and poor families (Morrow and Boyden 2018). Analysis of the impact of this needs to weigh up the short-term benefits against the long-term educational outcomes. Compared to children in other Young Lives study countries, many children in Ethiopia are disadvantaged by late school enrolment, particularly those from rural areas (Rolleston and James 2014). Children are engaged in household work at an early age, although they may not be doing harmful activities (Pankhurst, Crivello and Tiemelissan 2015). Even at a very young age, children from poor backgrounds felt responsible for helping their families by working, without considering the effects of this on their later life (Tafere and Pankhurst 2015; Morrow, Tafere and Vennam 2014). The benefits of working are visible during their childhood, but the impact on their schooling and educational outcomes becomes noticeable as they grow older.

3.2 Study communities

The fifth-wave qualitative data were collected in 2019, when the Younger Cohort were aged around 17–18 and the Older Cohort were 24–25, at five study sites: Bertukan (Addis Ababa), Tach-Meret (Amhara), Leki (Oromia), Leku (Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region). and Zeytuni (Tigray).³ The urban communities of Bertukan and Leku are characterised by poor living conditions. Although there are schools of all levels, many families are financially unable to support their children to attend school regularly. As a result, children start working for income in early childhood, which affects their educational trajectories.

Tach-Meret, Leki and Zeytuni are rural communities where people earn a living through agriculture complemented by small trade and wage labouring. Previous Young Lives research has shown that children have been engaged in farming and other income-generating activities alongside their schooling. There are primary schools in the communities, but children have to travel to towns for secondary education and beyond. In Leki, children from better-off families go to town to get a higher quality of education, owing to the low quality of the education offered in the primary school in their community.

Young people from Tach-Meret have an advantage in terms of further education, as there are public TVET colleges and private colleges in the nearby town. Some of the sampled

3 The names of the communities and individuals are replaced by pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity.

children have had training or college education in these institutions. In Leki, vegetable growing, fishing and private flower farms provide employment opportunities for young people.

This paper will establish the impacts of different livelihoods and the availability of different levels of education on the educational pathways of both boys and girls from both rural and urban locations.

3.3 Data sources

Across the five communities, we conducted interviews with 120 individuals, consisting of 60 young people (an equal number from the Younger and Older Cohorts) and their caregivers or spouses (60). We also carried out 29 key informant interviews with local officials, including school directors, and 20 focus group discussions with about 100 young people and community representatives (Table 1). There were roughly an equal number of male and female participants. For this paper, we draw mainly on qualitative data from 29 young people who were undergoing different levels of education during the data collection in 2019. The young people were asked about their educational aspirations, learning experiences and schooling routes, and the situations influencing their educational trajectories.

Table 1. *Research participants*

Region	Site	Individual interviews	Key informant interviews	Focus group discussions
Addis Ababa	Bertukan	23	6	4
Amhara	Tach-Meret	24	6	4
Oromia	Leki	24	6	4
SNNPR	Leku	24	6	4
Tigray	Zeytuni	25	5	4
	Total	120	29	20

4. Findings

4.1 Educational trajectories

This section draws on longitudinal survey and qualitative data. While the survey reveals broader trends regarding educational trajectories, the qualitative data provide a deeper understanding of these trajectories and establish the circumstances that contributed to young people's different rates of school progression.

The latest survey, Round 5 in 2016, indicates that about two-thirds of the Older Cohort had left education by the age of 22. Surprisingly, more than half (52.5 per cent) left school before completing secondary education (Pankhurst, Araya and Woldehanna 2017). A third of the Older Cohort were still in education. As Box 1 outlines, young people experienced slow progression through school and further or higher education. It also suggests disparities in terms of gender, location and wealth, with female students, urban children and those from wealthier families reaching higher educational levels than their counterparts.

Box 1. *Educational levels of the Older Cohort in Ethiopia in 2016*

Aged 22, a third of the Older Cohort (N=720) were in education. Of these, 41 per cent were in university, 22 per cent in vocational training, 15 per cent in the preparatory stage for university (Grades 11 and 12), 12 per cent in lower secondary school (Grades 9 and 10) and 11 per cent in primary school. More urban than rural young people, and more girls than boys were attending vocational training college or university. Among those who were still in education, 78 per cent of those from the richest households were either in vocational training or at university, whereas 58 per cent of those from the poorest households were still in Grade 12 or below, meaning that they were over age for their grade.

Source: Pankhurst, Araya and Woldehanna (2017).

Grade repetition and dropout contribute to the rates of over-age for grade levels. According to the 2016 survey (Woldehanna and Araya 2016), both cohorts had experienced school dropout. By age 12, the dropout rate was 4.78 per cent for the Younger Cohort and 2.62 per cent for the Older Cohort. A noticeable disparity occurred by location in both the Younger Cohort (rural dropout at 7.07 per cent, urban at 1.56 per cent) and the Older Cohort (rural 3.05 per cent, urban 2.03 per cent). More male than female students dropped out of school. Among male students, 6.22 per cent of the Younger Cohort and 3.31 per cent of the Older Cohort dropped out, compared to 3.18 per cent of female students in the Younger Cohort and 1.92 per cent in the Older Cohort. Family economic status played a larger role in the dropout rate. More children from the bottom economic quintile (6.96 per cent of the Younger Cohort, 3.78 per cent of the Older Cohort) compared to the top quintile (0.27 per cent of the Younger Cohort, 1.04 per cent of the Older Cohort) have experienced dropping out of school.

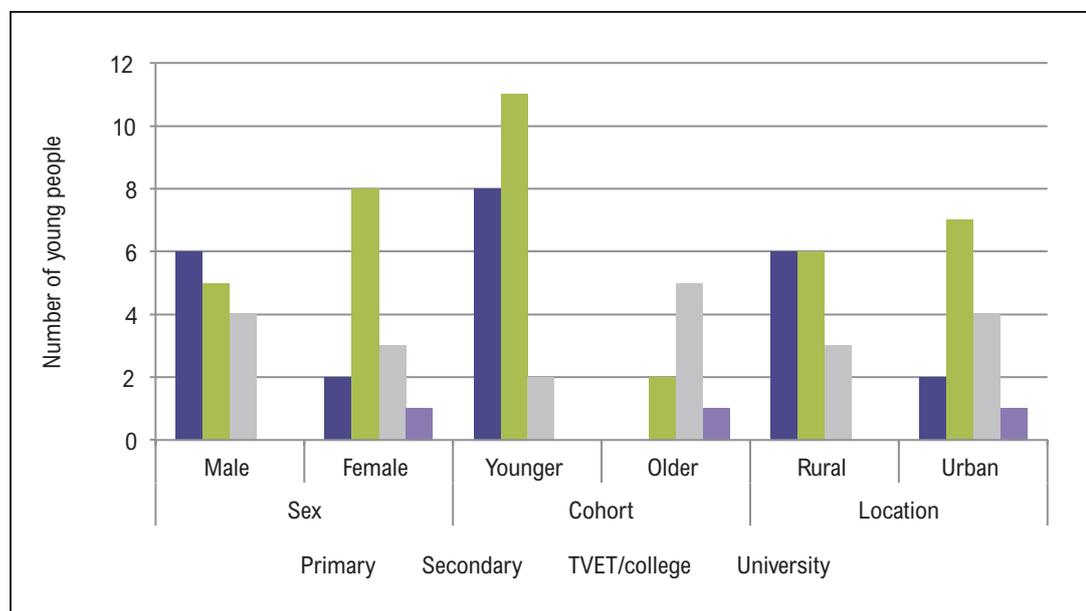
Rural children are more likely to do mainly family work, with more males than females expected to quit school for full-time farming (Frost and Rolleston 2013). Children from poor families may not be able to afford to continue their education, and are instead expected to start earning a living. About 19.59 per cent of children repeated a grade at least once. Many factors contribute to school dropout or grade repetition, including workloads, illness, family circumstances and school-related problems (Tafere 2017; Tafere and Pankhurst 2015).

The recent qualitative data for this study show a similar situation for these young people. During the data collection, the Younger Cohort were 18 and the Older Cohort 25. Children who normally start formal schooling at 7 years old are expected to finish their 12 years of schooling at age 18, and university education by 22. However, 29 (15 male, 14 female; 21 of the Younger Cohort, 8 of the Older Cohort; an equal number of rural and urban children) of the 60 study children were still in education, spread over levels ranging from Grade 5 to university (Table 2). Only one, an Older Cohort young woman, was at university (Figure 1).

Table 2. *Educational levels of young people still in education (2019) at ages 18 and 25*

	Male	Female	Older Cohort (age 25)	Younger Cohort (age 18)	Rural	Urban	Total
Grade 5	1	0	0	1	1	0	1
Grade 7	2	1	0	3	3	0	3
Grade 8	3	1	0	4	2	2	4
Grade 9	1	3	0	4	1	3	4
Grade 10	3	5	1	7	4	4	8
Grade 12	1	0	1	0	1	0	1
College	4	3	5	2	3	4	7
University	0	1	1	0	0	1	1
Total	15	14	8	21	15	14	29

Figure 1. Educational levels of young people currently in education (2019) at ages 18 and 25, by sex, age and location (N=29)



More females (12) than males (9) have reached secondary school or above. The Younger Cohort were mainly in primary and secondary school, while the Older Cohort were in secondary school and above. There was limited disparity by location, with those in urban areas doing a little better than those living in rural areas.

4.2 Interrupted trajectories and the reasons for these

Many of those who are still in education have experienced multiple grade repetitions or school interruptions. Different factors contribute to delay in school progression. The reasons reported are related to illness, work, poverty, family problems, school-related problems, having no interest in attending school, or a combination of these factors (Table 3).

4.2.1 Injuries and illness

In the absence of access to healthcare, injuries and illness can be serious enough to affect schooling. Working children are more likely to be exposed to injuries. Yibeltal, from Tach-Meret, is the 18-year-old son of a farmer and herds cattle. He interrupted his education in Grades 1 and 4, in the latter case because he broke both his legs while trying to collect animal feed from a gorge. He is in Grade 8 and hopes only to complete Grade 10 before moving into farming. Teje, 18, from Leku is a Grade 9 student. She broke her leg when she was in Grade 8 and was unable to study properly. Although she sat the exam, she failed. Samrawit, 18, from Bertukan repeated Grade 7 because of tonsillitis, which left her bedridden for a long time. She was unable to sit her examinations, and she had to repeat Grade 8 because she misspelt her grandfather's name during the national exam. Now she is in Grade 9, and she wants to go to university or receive training in food preparation. Her friend, Hanan,

18, is in Grade 10, which she has repeated once due to an eye condition. She hopes to finish university and become a medical doctor.

Abeba, 18, from Tach-Meret would be in Grade 10 if she had attended school regularly. However, she interrupted her education for a year because she had to move to another community to seek holy water healing as she could not find treatment for her illness. In the absence of proper healthcare, a minor health problem can become a reason for interrupting school.

4.2.2 *Workload*

Education and work are competing duties that children face. The Young Lives survey shows that 38.55 per cent of the Older Cohort (when aged 19) were combining work with education; and more than a third (38 per cent) had left school for work (Woldehannna and Araya 2016). At some point, work starts to affect their education, including their attendance, performance and progression. The following example shows how work affected the educational trajectory of a young man. Kebegna, 18, from Leki is currently in Grade 8. In previous data collection rounds and different education levels, he had reported:

I am in Grade 1. I also work. I protect the crops and also fetch water. Sometimes I collect firewood. I also look after the cattle. The work may affect my education if it forces me to repeat. (Kebegna, aged 7, 2008)

I am not attending school this year because I have to look after the cattle and I have to plough using a pair of oxen. (Kebegna, aged 10, 2011)

I am in Grade 8 but overloaded with family and paid work. I worked on an irrigation farm for wages. It is only recently that I began vegetable growing. (Kebegna, aged 18, 2019)

Kebegna has had to repeat a grade twice because of his work. He has been doing paid work growing vegetables since the age of 10. On the other hand, many young people were successful in combining work with schooling. The earnings from work help them to continue with their schooling. Ayenew, from Leku, is one of those who was combining work with schooling and gaining skills in the process. He outlined his experience:

For the last two years, I have been working in a garage. I work in the opposite shift with schooling and on weekends. I am working in a garage to learn the skills. Then I will have my own business with the skills I gained. Of course, I am paid 100 birr per week as a wage. But my purpose is to learn skills, not earning money ... I want to continue my education up to Grade 10. Then, I want to start my own business. (Ayenew, 18, 2019)

Ayenew is therefore using both schooling and work as important routes to a better adult life.

4.2.3 *School-related problems*

Some young people reported that failing an exam delayed their progression. In some communities, schools provide a poor quality of education and many find it hard to pass exams. For instance, in Leki three of the Younger Cohort who are currently in Grade 7 reported that they repeated grades because they did not pass the exams. Mitiku (male) failed twice, Negassa (male) who joined school late and then left because of illness and dissatisfaction with the poor quality of the education on offer, while Mulualem (female)

repeated one grade. Mitiku and Negassa have moved to towns to attend better-quality schools. However, Mulualem's parents were too poor to support such a move.

Tsega, 24, from Liku is currently in Grade 10. She dropped out for three years when she was in Grade 8. When asked why she dropped out of school repeatedly, she replied:

It was because of myself that I have dropped out of school. I didn't have any interest in education; I was bored with education. It was because I couldn't find everything as I expected in school. For that reason, I decided to discontinue my education.

Many others, like Tsega, were not happy with their school experience. The school environment, and unfriendly teachers and students, discouraged them from attending class.

Table 3. *Educational trajectories of young people still in education (2019) (N=29)*

	Sex	Cohort	Educational level	Reason for grade repetition	Educational aspiration
Urban					
Birkutawit	Female	Younger	Grade 8	Repeated twice due to illness	Become a doctor
Ayeneu	Male	Younger	Grade 8	Never repeated ^a	Complete secondary education
Birhane	Male	Younger	Grade 9	Never repeated	Go to university and become a doctor
Samrawit	Female	Younger	Grade 9	Repeated Grades 7 (illness) and 8 (failed exam)	Go to university or train in food preparation
Teje	Female	Younger	Grade 9	Failed once because didn't study due to a broken leg	Become a doctor
Tsega	Female	Older	Grade 10	Stopped for three years as she lost interest in education	Go to university
Emnet	Female	Younger	Grade 10	Never repeated	Become a doctor or, if not, a hairdresser
Hanan	Female	Younger	Grade 10	Never repeated	Go to university and become a doctor
Kudus	Male	Younger	Grade 10	Failed EGSECE; plans to retake exam privately	Computer engineering
Netsa	Female	Older	College	Failed EHEECE, joined college	Nursing
Seifu	Male	Older	College	Failed EGSECE, joined private college	Business
Tadiwos	Male	Older	College	Failed EGSECE but joined TVET at private college	Business
Habib	Male	Younger	College	Failed EGSECE but joined TVET at private college	College education
Yordi	Female	Older	University	Never repeated	Become an engineer
Rural					
Maregey	Male	Younger	Grade 5	Late enrolment due to death of his father, and his workload	Mechanic
Mitiku	Male	Younger	Grade 7	Repeated twice due to low academic performance	Farming and vegetable growing
Negassa	Male	Younger	Grade 7	Repeated due to illness, bullying and lack of interest in education	Business
Mulualem	Female	Younger	Grade 7	Repeated due to low academic performance	To finish school, but fears marriage through abduction
Kebegna	Male	Younger	Grade 8	Repeated once due to illness	Civil servant
Yibeltal	Male	Younger	Grade 8	Repeated twice due to illness	Complete secondary education
Abeba	Female	Younger	Grade 9	Repeated Grade 6 due to illness	Go to university and become a doctor, or TVET and become a teacher
Frezer	Male	Younger	Grade 10	Never repeated	Go to university to become a doctor
Getu	Male	Younger	Grade 10	Never repeated	TVET and become a teacher
Makeda	Female	Younger	Grade 10	Never repeated	Become a doctor after university
Helina	Female	Younger	Grade 10	Never repeated	University or college/TVET
Assefa	Male	Older	Grade 12	Dropped out twice (broken leg and workload)	University to become health officer or engineer
Yenealem	Female	Older	College	Failed EGSECE but joined TVET at private college	Go to college and then find employment
Yihune	Male	Older	College	Failed EGSECE but joined TVET at private college	Become an accountant
Kibra	Female	Younger	College	Failed EGSECE but joined TVET at private college	Civil servant

^a Several of the young people started school late, so are behind the intended age for their grade even though they haven't repeated a year.

4.2.4 *Multiple challenges*

Young people may face multiple challenges that affect their educational trajectories.

Maregey, 18, from Zeytuni is one such person. He lost his father when he was 7 years old. Since then, he has been helping his older brother with farming and herding to support his family. He joined school at age 10. As he grew older, he began cutting stone and selling it to local construction companies. He had to interrupt his schooling because of work and is in Grade 5. He regretted being unable to pursue his education like his friends.

Assefa, 24, from Tach-Meret is a Grade 12 student. He interrupted school twice, once because of a leg injury and then because he migrated for work. He explained how injuries and workload affected his educational trajectory:

[Breaking my leg] is the challenge that I faced in the last five years and I dropped out for one year for that reason. I [then] dropped out because of the unbearable workload in our household. I dropped out and moved to a nearby town to engage in construction work ... run by contractors who are my relatives. Later, I began to regret stopping my education, [so I went] back home and restarted my education.

He returned to school in the hope of finishing university and becoming an engineer. However, he is not sure that he will achieve his educational dreams. He has to walk for an hour to get to his school, meaning that he is tired and unable to pay attention in class. He also helps his family with farming and uses the family cart to earn up to 400 birr per day transporting goods. Assefa is therefore currently combining work and schooling, and weighing up which to focus on in the future.

Negassa, 18, from Leki interrupted schooling three times because of illness and school-related problems. At different rounds of the fieldwork, he explained his reasons for the interruptions and his decision to change school:

I have dropped out three times. Three years ago, I interrupted school because of an ear problem. Last year, I dropped out because of toothache which led to a serious headache. I could not eat for some days. I was forced to take only sauce and other fluid foods. My parents did not have enough money to take me to a health centre for treatment. That led me to quit school for the second time. Illness was the main reason for my school dropout in both cases

His mother reported that her son also disliked going to school because he had been bullied by other students because of his ear illness. She said:

He dropped out while he was in Grade 5 as students at the school laughed at him because of his ear illness ... he refused to attend school as students were bullying him. Even now, he cannot hear properly. I tried a lot to get him healed, including using traditional and religious means. But he is still suffering ... Such illness has affected him since his childhood.

Negassa had also dropped out of school when he was younger because he was not interested in how the teachers were teaching. He said:

Teachers are usually absent from school. I hate the school when teachers are absent. Teacher absenteeism is a major problem. For example, we have not learned social studies in a semester. Only one teacher teaches all the subjects all the time. In other schools, I was told that different teachers teach different subjects. I like being taught by

different teachers. This may help students to acquire good knowledge. In my current school, the teacher does not teach more than two or three subjects daily. The teacher teaches all the subjects as per the lesson plan. In addition, the exam is not given in a planned way. Students take only a few tests in a semester. This has impacted on students' performance. I do not want to continue here. (Negassa, 13, Leki, 2014)

Illness and poor-quality education affected Negassa's progress and pushed him to change school. He now goes to a different school in the local town where the quality of education is better. He preferred his current school:

In my previous school, the teachers let you pass without knowing anything. There was no library. I prefer to fail in this school because students pass or fail after they are educated well. My school performance is improving. My family is covering my living costs here. I live with my three friends, renting a house for 500 birr. We prepare our food ourselves. Sometimes we prepare porridge and sometimes we prepare bread (Negassa, 18, Grade 7, 2019)

4.3 Prolonged progression

Young Lives data indicate that 54.33 per cent of the Younger Cohort and 64.35 per cent of the Older Cohort were behind their expected grade at age 12. Differences based on location and economic status were notable, but there was little gender disparity. Among the Younger Cohort, more rural children (65.24 per cent) than urban (39.09 per cent) and more children from the bottom quintile (83.25 per cent) than those from the top quintile (32.08 per cent) were over-age for their grade. Similarly, the disparity was significant among the Older Cohort, among whom more rural children (74.27 per cent) than urban children (49.75 per cent), and more from the bottom quintile (81.31 per cent) than from the top quintile (43.75 per cent), were in grades below the appropriate level for their age. Similar numbers of boys and girls in both the Younger Cohort (54.62 per cent of males, 54.08 per cent of females) and Older Cohort (64.67 per cent of males, 64.02 per cent of females) were over-age for the grade they were in (Woldehanna and Araya 2016).

The 2016 survey data show that by age 15, Younger Cohort children on average reached Grade 5 or 6 instead of the 'normal' Grade 8. There was a disparity in terms of location (with more rural children over-age for their grade) and a slight gender disparity (55 per cent of boys being over-age), but a clear wealth disparity: 76 per cent of those from the bottom tercile were over-age for their grades, compared to 21.3 per cent from the top tercile (Pankhurst, Araya and Woldehanna 2017).

Late entry into school may impact on students being over-age for their grades. A third of those in school at the age of 12 had not enrolled by age 8 (Tafere 2014), suggesting that they first enrolled later than the expected age of 7. The current study shows that even those who did not repeat grades or interrupt their schooling are still older than they should be for their grade. For example, Frezer started school at 9 years old because he had to do work for the family before this time. In 2007, he was 6 and did not have access to a preschool in his rural community. In 2008, although he could have joined school, he was not allowed to, explaining:

I asked my parents but my mother told me that I will not join school. She said there is no one who could look after the cattle. She wanted me to herd cattle. (Frezer, 7, Tach-Meret, 2008)

After Frezer started formal schooling at 9 years old he was relieved of his work obligations and started to focus on his education. He progressed smoothly and by age 18 had reached Grade 10 and was ready for the EGSECE exam.

Slow school progression can have specific effects on girls. Biruktawit, from Leku, repeated Grades 1 and 2 because of illness and associated weak performance in school. The delay in her schooling means she risks another school interruption. At the age of 18, she is still in Grade 8, which puts her under pressure to marry, in which case she would have to leave school before finishing her secondary education. She is facing harassment from boys, but her grandmother has come up with a plan to help her deal with it. She said:

I reported to the school principal that a boy was bothering me. But the principal told me, "You have to understand him." He meant, "You have to be with him." I was upset with what he was saying and I shared it with my grandmother. She advised me to wear a ring when I go to school. She gave me her ring and advised me to tell them that I have a fiancé.

Biruktawit still aspires to finish university and become a doctor. However, slow school progression means that at her current age she is more inclined towards marriage than pursuing schooling. For young women, marriage can force them to leave education. Muluaem, from Leki, who is only in Grade 7 at the age of 18, fears that marriage will happen before she finishes school. She said:

I think that I will attain a good opportunity if I succeed in my education. However, I have some fear. I want to keep up my education but I may be stopped by abduction. I have some suspicion in my mind. Abduction is a normal practice in our community. The boys deceive the girls systematically and pressure them to get married. I do not know what to do. Anyway, I pray to God to save me for I am fearful. Currently, I do not go out of home because I am suspicious. After all, what can I do about it?

This suggests that for girls, slow school progression is not just being unable to finish school in the expected time, but also being pressured into married life before achieving childhood educational aspirations.

4.4 Successful trajectories

The qualitative data show that a limited number of young people had conventional educational pathways (Table 3). Children from better-off families have the opportunity to pursue their schooling more effectively. Unlike those from poor families, they can change schools to receive a better quality of education. For example, Birhane, 18, is a Grade 9 student from Bertukan. He has never dropped out of school or repeated a grade, but he started school a little late. As his family's economic status improved, he was able to change from a government school to a private school. He compared the two schools:

The teachers in the private school know each student well, but in a public school the teachers do not know the students. Private school is also good in terms of having enough textbooks. In the private school, they provide us with a plate and spoon when we eat our lunch. So, the teaching-learning process is good in a private school compared with a public school. Generally, it has lots of differences. (Birhane, 18, 2019)

Birhane is happy with his schooling and wants to go to Oxford University to become a doctor.

Young people continue to dream of university education, a dream shared even by some of the children from the rural areas. Frezer is in Grade 10 and dreams of becoming a physician after university. When he was in Grade 2, he said, “When I grow up, I will be a doctor. I want to treat patients.” He continued to have high aspirations, and his parents supported him by relieving him of work duties and helping with his schooling. He said:

As there is no family workload, I am attending my education properly. I have to show changes after completing my education. They [my parents] do not want me to be absent from school. I never missed school ... After I complete my university education, I want to be a doctor. I need to attend my education properly and achieve a good result. (Frezer, 18, 2019)

Frezer maintained his childhood aspiration and hopes to achieve it by working hard at school. Of Frezer’s classmates, Getu, 18, hopes to finish school and become a teacher, whereas Helina, 18, never dropped out of school and wants to study at university, or at least join a nearby TVET. Emnet, 18, from Leku started formal schooling at 8 years old and is now in Grade 10. She has not faced any interruptions and feels she is on track to pursue her education until she finishes a university degree and becomes a medical doctor.

The fact that there is an opportunity for further or higher education within their reach seems to help young people continue their schooling and pursue education beyond it. Those who live in urban areas and the rural community of Tach-Meret have better opportunities. Young people in Tach-Meret have an advantage compared to those in other rural communities, as their community is very close to a town where they can access both public and private colleges.

Some who dream of going to university may choose to privately resit exams that they have failed. Young people who had high educational aspirations in childhood may try hard to achieve them despite failing key exams. One such young person, Kudus, said:

What I take as a challenge is that I did not pass the Grade 10 exams. I have to study hard to score a good result. I want to take the Grade 10 exam [again] and join preparatory school, then university. I would like to go to university and study computer science. I want to be a software engineer. (Kudus, 18, Leku, 2019)

Having a role model to emulate also helped some students to study hard to achieve their dreams. Makeda, 18, is a Grade 10 student in Leki and expressed her high aspirations:

I want to become an engineer. I know a girl and a boy in our district’s capital who are engineers. They are my role models. I prefer to become an engineer like them.

Both the Young Lives survey (Box 1) and the qualitative data (Tables 2 and 3) show that a small number of young people made it to the highest levels of education. Young people who are unable to pass the EGSECE can join public TVET or private colleges for skills training. Others who pass the EGSECE go on to Grades 11 and 12 before joining university.

Those who can afford the fees associated with attending private college can benefit from a second opportunity. Kibra, 18, from Zeytuni failed the EGSECE and is studying for a diploma in accountancy in a private college by funding herself. She works during the day and attends college in the evening. She explained how she struggles to continue her education because of financial difficulties:

My education is an extension [evening] programme. My monthly salary was 1,500 birr. I used to pay my monthly education fee of 400 birr and transportation expenses. I have

paid three months' education fees from my savings from my salary. My job had an impact on my education because I did not have enough time for study.

Kibra left her job at a local textile factory to focus on her education, after her brother promised to fund her.

Failing in Grade 10 has a negative impact on children's aspirations for higher education. Some join a college because they have no chance of getting into a university. Habib, 18, from Bertukan did not do well enough in the exam to join a preparatory school. He is now a first-year college student studying accountancy, and wants to complete his college education despite remaining unhappy. When asked about his interest in accountancy, he replied,

No, I never thought about studying this, I am learning just so as to not spend my time doing nothing. I just want to make myself busy.

Netsa, 24, from Bertukan failed the Grade 12 national exam (she scored 3.00, while the university entry cut-off point was 3.35) and joined a private college, where she is currently a second-year nursing student. The monthly fee of 500 birr is covered by her caregiver. She has started to go to a private dental clinic to get practical lessons, and they give her pocket money, which she uses to cover her personal expenses. Yihune, 24, from Tach-Meret failed the Grade 10 exam twice. He is studying accountancy at college and has two more years until graduation. The total cost of the course is 11,000 birr. Seifu is an Older Cohort boy from Leku who is also attending college after failing Grade 10.

Despite challenges, some young people demonstrated their resilience and were able to succeed in education, moving beyond secondary education and going to college. The story of Yenealem from Tach-Meret, who has faced poverty and a heavy workload since childhood, illustrates how some persevere in overcoming challenges, combining paid work and schooling, and achieve their educational aspirations.

In 2007 Yenealem was in Grade 3 because she started school late, and by 2019 she was attending a private college for technical training. She started paid work in 2008 at age 13 and has been working ever since. Over the last 12 years, Yenealem outlined in interviews how her education has unfolded:

I am in Grade 4 attending a primary school in my community. I am also involved in haricot collection with my mother for cash, and prepare coffee, fetching water and cleaning animal dung. (Yenealem, 13, 2008)

I am in Grade 6 ... I have never repeated a grade and I was only absent from school for only a week for work. I pick haricot beans and also do house chores. I support my parents at home. (Yenealem, 16, 2011)

I am attending secondary education in Grade 9. On Mondays, I usually go to pick haricot beans early in the morning (6 am). I work there until 11 am, then return home and prepare for school. I eat my lunch and go to school and attend to my education in the afternoon. I return from school at 5 pm and support my mother. I study in the evenings after have dinner (after 9 pm). On Sundays, I go early in the morning and work till noon. We eat our lunch at home and return to work. I return at 5 pm, fetch water and wash my clothes. There is no rest if you do not leave the work. I need support from my family. If my family relieves me of working to pick haricot beans, I can study and improve my education. (Yenealem, 19, 2014)

I took the Grade 10 national exam and registered a point of 2.28. I could not move to preparatory because the pass mark was 3.00. I am attending TVET at a private college, paying a monthly fee of 300 birr. My parents are covering the school fees. I am in the final year of my study in accounting. The study is a two-year diploma programme and I will graduate this year. (Yenealem, 22, 2019)

Yenealem has achieved more than her childhood education aspirations. Considering her busy life, with family and paid work, she used to hope only that she could finish Grade 12. Although her workload has prevented her from going to university, she was able to go to a private college, with the savings from the paid work she has done for more than ten years helping her to pay for this.

Similarly, other young people had the opportunity to attend private colleges when they failed to go to university. Such opportunities are more open to young people from urban areas who can afford the fees. For example, one young woman said:

I wanted to join public TVET to get training in hairdressing or cooking. But I was not allowed. So I had to join a private college to study nursing.' (Netsa, 24, Bertukan, 2019)

That was because public TVETs are only open for those who take the EGSECE at Grade 10 but fail the exam, and not to those like Netsa who passed the EGSECE and went on to Grades 11 and 12 but then did not pass the Grade 12 exam to go to university.

Those who have a TVET college diploma can proceed to a private college if they retake and pass the EGSECE exam. Tadiwos, 24, from Leku studied surveying at TVET college and had started working, but he wanted to accomplish his ambitions, so he retook the EGSECE exam and went to a private college to study accountancy. This level of education is lower than at a public university but higher than at a TVET college. He could not pursue the linear pathway from secondary education to university, but managed to advance via TVET training.

Among the children in the current study, only one has successfully transitioned to university. Yordi, from Leku, is a fifth-year engineering student at a university. She went to a private school up to Grade 2, but following the death of her father she moved to a government school as her mother could not afford to pay for the private school.

In 2007, she reported that the change of school had affected her performance, as the public school provided a lower quality of education. In the subsequent interview rounds, she continued to report that her dream was to be an engineer. In 2019, she was in her fifth year of a civil engineering degree at a university in SNNPR. She said:

I chose civil engineering because I was good at mathematics. I remember I was saying "I want to be an engineer" when teachers were asking us in Grade 4 but I don't know the reason for that.

Yordi has had good results in during her degree and is planning to go abroad for postgraduate study. She said:

I want to study in Norway or India where I have already applied for a scholarship. I am waiting to graduate and get my degree to complete the application documentation.

Yordi seems to be an exception. In general, this study has shown many young people are unable to achieve their childhood educational aspirations, or are a long way from achieving them. Many are over-age for their grade. Different factors contributed to their irregular educational trajectories, with disparities based on location, gender and economic status.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The discussion here focuses on the educational trajectories of young people, the factors contributing to slow school progression, and the impact of these factors on young people's transition to adulthood.

5.1 Educational trajectories: slow progression

The educational trajectories of the young people in this study show that students generally have slow school progression. Both the survey and qualitative study indicate that students were greatly over-age for their grades. For example, at age 12, more than half of the Younger Cohort (54.33 per cent) and Older Cohort (64.35 per cent) were over-age for their grade levels (Woldehanna and Araya 2016). The qualitative data also show that, except for one girl, all the young people were in grades below the expected levels for their ages (Table 3). The Younger Cohort, born around the turn of the millennium, should have completed primary education by 2015, but few have achieved this. This resonates with the national data: in 2016/17, the completion rate for primary education was as low as 54.1 per cent (MoE 2017). A large proportion of students in Ethiopia are therefore not progressing through school as expected.

The data also clearly indicate that the rate of school progression varies across locations and according to economic status. Children from rural areas and those from poor families have experienced much slower school progression. Most of them remain over-age for their grade levels. There is limited gender disparity: among the Young Lives sample, girls are even progressing slightly better than boys.

A number of factors contributed to the slow school progression. Late school enrolment, grade repetition and dropout all appeared in heterogeneous schooling trajectories. Interrupted schooling could be the result of external factors or associated with students' personal circumstances. The Young Lives survey indicates that about 30 per cent of the Older Cohort were not in school when they were 8 years old, but were enrolled when they were 12 years old (Favara 2017; Tafere 2014). This suggests that a third of the children, mostly from rural areas, started school late.

Schooling is also interrupted by grade repetition and dropout. Both survey and qualitative data indicate that school interruption increases over-age for grades. Four out of five of those in the study have experienced one or more interruptions in their school lives. Either they have failed exams or have interrupted schooling for different reasons. The causes of interruptions are mainly poverty, workload, illness or injuries, or school-related problems such as failing exams or a lack of interest resulting from the poor quality of teaching. The pathways lead to irregular educational trajectories, with the existing structures doing more to constrain young people than providing them with opportunities (Elder 1985).

5.2 The link between aspiration and achievement

This study indicates that many young people were unable to realise their childhood educational aspirations. In analysing the characteristics of the few better achievers, we noted a relationship between aspiration and achievement. The survey data show a clear correlation, whereby those who reached higher educational levels maintained high

aspirations (Favara 2017; Tafere 2014). The qualitative data also support this, as seen in the examples of Yordi, Frezer and Emnet. Aspiration, as a motivator, can enhance educational trajectories and achievement (Andres et al. 2007).

Despite living in the same challenging contexts, some children have demonstrated their agency in maintaining their educational aspirations and working hard to achieve these. Many children from poor families had combined their schooling with paid work and reached college. Others who repeated grades or interrupted their education due to illness or economic problems have resumed schooling and continue to pursue their dreams. They also still maintain their childhood aspirations.

Helping young people to pursue their schooling properly therefore entails indirectly enabling them to maintain their aspirations, which help them to achieve their goals.

5.3 Education and the life course: prolonged educational trajectories and the transition to adulthood

Schooling is one stage of the life course (Elder 1985), and an important part of the transition from childhood to adulthood (Settersten, Ottusch, and Scheneider 2015: 3; Valentine 2003). Although education involves lifelong learning, educational attainment is largely measured by reaching a certain level at formal educational institutions and gaining a qualification (Pallas 2003). This study has shown that in relation to their age, a considerable number of young people in Ethiopia are at a far lower level of education than would be expected.

Parents send their children to school and invest their limited resources in the hope that their children will complete their education and have a better adult life. Many children were expecting to finish their schooling and find well-paid employment. However, the data generally suggest that progress through school is delayed, requiring more time and other resources. For this reason, many have questioned the value of education. Instead, they tend to combine schooling with work. This often impacted on school progression, with many examples of repetition and dropout.

The gendered impact is clear. While young men can stay in school as long as possible, even combining it with work, it is different for young women. This paper has documented how prolonged schooling is pressurising some girls (see Birtukawi and Mulualem) to consider marriage before finishing their education.⁴ This hinders the attempt to address gender inequality, which is part of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5. Girls marrying before completing their education and not having jobs are likely to have adult lives as wives dependent on their husbands. The intended role of education in empowering women is therefore compromised.

Prolonged schooling influences the overall timing of education in the life course, with the educational trajectory taking more time than it should for an individual, stretching into adult life.

4 Many young women who were not included in this study are considered in other papers in this series (see Crivello et al. 2020; Pankhurst and Crivello 2020).

6. Policy issues

This paper has outlined the many different causes of school interruption, the low school completion rates, and the fact the many schoolchildren are over-age for their grade. The Ministry of Education is trying to address these issues, but the challenges persist. On the basis of our study, we raise some issues to be considered for policy and programming.

6.1 Poverty, illness and social protection

Both the survey and the qualitative data show that children from poor families and rural areas are prone to dropout, repetition and being over-age for their grade levels – suggesting a need for social protection to ensure they can attend school. We believe a comprehensive social protection programme is needed for schoolchildren. This could include school feeding, healthcare and support with educational materials.

Illness and injuries were strongly associated with school dropout. Children who were unable to get immediate and proper healthcare were forced to stay at home or use traditional remedies. It is vital that schoolchildren have access to suitable healthcare so that they do not interrupt their schooling.

6.2 Managing the combination of work and schooling

Workload seems to particularly affect rural children and those from poor families, and may impact schooling in two ways. First, working children may miss classes or not have time to study. Second, work may expose them to injuries or illness that force them to drop out of school.

However, we have an ambivalent view of work from a policy point of view. On the one hand, we note that child work has often had a negative effect on children's educational trajectories and achievements. On the other hand, we also find that a number of working young people were able to fund their school and even college education themselves (for example, Yenealem started working at age 10 and was still funding her college education). Some of those in private colleges were also covering their costs through their earnings.

Others considered work to be a route to new skills (for example, Ayenew, who worked in a garage). Most of the working young people expressed their readiness to start their own businesses (Table 3). In a context where educational success is uncertain and job opportunities limited, combining work with schooling seems to provide young people with another chance. Notwithstanding earlier reports (e.g. Tafere and Pankhurst 2015) that argued against children working, at this stage in the longitudinal study we note some positive outcomes in early adulthood from engagement in work during childhood. We therefore suggest that, while children should not be exposed to hard or excessive work that affects their schooling or health, young people should not be discouraged from combining schooling with work.

6.3 Improve the quality of education and ensure equity

The poor quality of education in public schools, especially those in rural areas, has discouraged many young people. Students in rural public schools reported receiving poor-

quality education. Some have left school, while others – those whose families could afford it – have transferred to private schools. In line with the Ethiopian Government's commitment to SDG 4, the Ministry of Education needs to work hard on delivering high-quality education in all locations.

Since the majority of the young people are unable to achieve the university education that they aspire to, strengthening the existing skills training through TVET would also be helpful. We found that only urban children and those from wealthy families were able to access private colleges if they failed to get into to public universities. This creates a disparity in access.

Equity in terms of the quality of education could be reached by closing the gap between the poor and the rich, rural and urban areas, and boys and girls (SDG 4). Prolonged educational trajectories are overlapping with the stage at which female students (in particular) would normally get married, making them susceptible to marriage before they finishing school. The efforts of parents, children and the government to improve girls' education can only be valuable if girls are able to finish their education and find employment. Economic self-reliance would empower them as adults. Following SDG 5, education should ensure gender equity to make girls and young women equal citizens in wider society.

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Slow Progression: Educational Trajectories of Young Men and Women in Ethiopia

As children, the young women and men in the Young Lives study often had high aspirations for their lives after school, but many have found themselves unable to fulfil their dreams. Drawing on Young Lives longitudinal qualitative and survey data in Ethiopia, this working paper finds that more than half of the young people in the study dropped out of school early and that many students are older than the intended age for their school year. Because of their prolonged school trajectories, several are still attending school as adults. Only one has completed university education. Prolonged educational trajectories also mean young women are susceptible to marriage before finishing school

The paper examines the influence of workload, teaching quality, and illness and injury and asks: Why do young people repeat classes or drop out of school early? What effect do poverty, location, gender and other factors have on school progression? And finally, what stops these young people completing their education?

This working paper and the accompanying policy brief are part of a set of eight working papers and eight policy briefs on gendered transitions into young adulthood in Ethiopia.



An International Study of Childhood Poverty

About Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty and transitions to adulthood, following the lives of 12,000 children in four countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam). Young Lives is a collaborative research programme led by a team in the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford in association with research and policy partners in the four study countries.

Through researching different aspects of children's lives across time, we seek to improve policies and programmes for children and young people.

Young Lives Research and Policy Partners

Ethiopia

- *Policy Studies Institute*
- *Pankhurst Development Research and Consulting plc*

India (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana)

- *Centre for Economic and Social Studies, Hyderabad (CESS)*
- *Sri Padmavati Mahila Visvavidyalam (Women's University), Tirupati (SPMVV)*

Peru

- *Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (GRADE)*
- *Instituto de Investigación Nutricional (IIN)*

Vietnam

- *Centre for Analysis and Forecast, Viet Nam Academy of Social Sciences (CAF-VASS)*
- *General Statistics Office of Viet Nam (GSO)*

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