

# Adolescence provides a second crucial window of opportunity to address child poverty

This snapshot summarises what matters for young people's experience of adolescence in low- and middle-income countries, and sets out how development policy needs to respond to improve wellbeing and better address child poverty.

## Introduction

Evidence from Young Lives demonstrates a profound change in the experience of adolescence for young people growing up over the first two decades of the 21st century, with aspirations for social mobility and demand for education much higher than for previous generations.

“When I complete my education I will have a job to support my life and my grandmother and my life will be better”

**Miniya**, a young girl in Ethiopia

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

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

There are around 1.2 billion adolescents aged 10-19 years living in the world today, 89 per cent of whom are in low- and middle-income countries. This is the largest adolescent population the world has ever known. In fragile states, up to 50 per cent of the population is now below 20 years of age, compared to an average of 38 per cent across other developing countries. The potential to reap this demographic dividend is focusing much attention on young people's economic trajectories.

However, despite the huge opportunities, investment in broad development interventions designed to support adolescents is often neglected. Widespread hopes for achieving improved social mobility and development potential are often not realised, particularly when limited youth labour markets mean that the jobs young people aspire to simply do not exist.

## Key Implications for Policy and Programming

- 1. Adolescence provides a second crucial window of intervention.** Investment in adolescent development outcomes should be significantly scaled up to build on earlier phases of life and enable young people to reach their full development potential. A broad approach to improve health and nutrition, psychosocial wellbeing, empowerment, education and skills development is likely to deliver best results.
- 2. Experiences of adolescence are diverse and changing fast, and development policy needs to respond accordingly.** Chronological age is a poor absolute definition of adolescence and interventions narrowly targeted to specific age groups may be exclusionary or inappropriate to young people's actual experience.
- 3. The first 1000 days are profoundly important but sustained interventions also matter.** Early childhood development gains need to be sustained throughout middle childhood and adolescence, particularly for marginalised groups. Growth recovery from early stunting can occur even up to the age of 15, demonstrating the importance of extending nutrition and health investment across the first two decades of life.
- 4. Responding appropriately to why and how adolescents combine school and work (both unpaid and paid) is critical, especially for helping the most disadvantaged children to stay in school.** Efforts to reduce child labour should focus on the most harmful work, whilst recognising the potential benefits of some forms of work and care. Approaches such as flexible schooling and social protection schemes can support adolescents to continue their education and alleviate the pressure to increase work at times of family crisis.
- 5. Gender gaps widen significantly at the onset of adolescence.** Whilst gender has a profound bearing on adolescent trajectories, it is the way in which gender combines with other disadvantages, including poverty, rural location and minority language or ethnic status that often matters most. Measures to address 'harmful practices' such as early marriage should take into account underlying causes driving local decisions and provide viable economic and social alternatives where possible.
- 6. Responding to interrelated needs and experiences of both adolescent girls and boys is important for effective interventions.** Focusing on adolescent girls to the exclusion of adolescent boys ignores the important ways that girls and boys relate to each other and the impact this has on the household and communities as a whole.

Young Lives demonstrates that it is the combination of inequalities linked to poverty, gender, rural-urban location, ethnicity and minority social status that consistently disadvantages certain groups. The extent to which these factors influence development outcomes invariably depends on the underlying political and economic trends in diverse country contexts.

## Young Lives

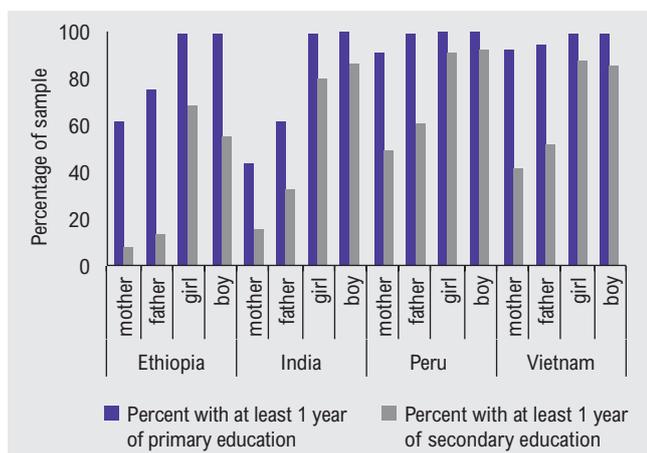
Young Lives is an innovative longitudinal study following the lives of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India (in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Vietnam over 15 years. The children are from two age groups: 4,000 born in 1994 (the Older Cohort); and 8,000 born in 2001 (the Younger Cohort). The study provides unique evidence on the drivers and impacts of child poverty, to inform policy and programme design and improve the lives of poor children and their families. Young Lives is recognised internationally as one of the few studies taking a holistic approach to children living in poverty.

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

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

In particular, the substantial increase in access to education has opened up a much longer window between childhood and adulthood. Young Lives shows that significantly more 22-year-olds have been educated than their caregivers, and stayed in school for longer (Figure 1). The associated reduction in time spent at work and care (both paid and unpaid), rise in age of marriage among girls, and high aspirations for social mobility have also contributed to a profound change in the experience of adolescence as a life phase.

**Figure 1:** *More 22-year-olds have been educated than their caregivers, and for longer*



Source: Briones (2018)

The acceleration of change is not only evident between children and their parents' generation, but also between the two Young Lives cohorts themselves. For example, in Peru there has been a marked decrease in stunting over the period of the study, with fewer Younger Cohort children stunted (16 per cent) at age 15 than the Older Cohort (31 per cent) at the same age. But worryingly, there has been a significant increase in overweight and obesity at age 15, from 17 per cent of the Older Cohort to 25 per cent of the Younger Cohort.

The definition and timing of adolescent transitions is also diverse across the four study countries. Young people often spoke about becoming an adult as a gradual process of acquiring knowledge, increasing contributions to family livelihoods and incomes, and leaving childhood behind. Large variations were recorded in key life events associated with the start and end of adolescence, notably the onset of puberty (including the age of first menstruation for girls), age at which education ends, and age of marriage and parenthood. All of these events were shaped by factors relating to poverty, gender, rurality, ethnicity and minority status. For example, by the age of 12 only 2 per cent of rural girls in Ethiopia had had their first period, compared to 54 per cent of urban girls in Vietnam.

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

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

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

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

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



Particular attention is required for sustained investment for adolescent girls who may, as a result of cultural practices, have worse diets than boys at this age. It is likely that better nutrition for adolescent girls can improve their height, health and labour market productivity in adulthood, and help prevent inter-generational malnutrition cycles.

**In education:** The substantial increase in access to education in primary and lower secondary schools means that schools can reach large numbers of young adolescents and provide important platforms for delivering effective interventions, including potential synergies with health and nutrition interventions. However, despite high educational aspirations, adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds face formidable obstacles to stay in school and make progress in their learning. Young Lives shows that poor quality teaching, poor school infrastructure and inaccessibility, violence in schools and inflexible school systems all present significant barriers that affect poor children the most. For example, in Ethiopia, 15 year olds from the poorest households had on average only completed Grade 5 (four years behind the official grade for their age), while 15 year olds from the richest households had completed Grade 7 (two years behind). Overall grade progression was low, and worse for the poorest children.

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

Young Lives shows that supporting the quality of education for adolescents, with a strong focus on delivering basic skills to fully participate in rapidly changing 21st century societies is critical. However, the *quality* of education is about more than just teaching and learning. Too often, schools are not safe spaces for adolescents and inflexible systems undermine opportunities to stay in school.

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

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

“We have to take up studies and work simultaneously during holidays. If we depend totally on education alone we will not be able to do any work in case we don't get a job.”

15-year-old boy in India

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

Whilst a focus on reducing the most harmful work is obviously important, interventions should recognise that not all work is detrimental. For example, though the responsibility to support the family through periods of economic shock may place adolescents under significant physical and emotional burden and result in absence from school, being able to contribute to the wellbeing of the family can also be a source of pride and enhance social integration within the family and community, as well as develop important vocational skills. Nevertheless, long hours spent on work and care in adolescence are shown to be directly linked to early school leaving.

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

## Gender gaps widen significantly at the onset of adolescence

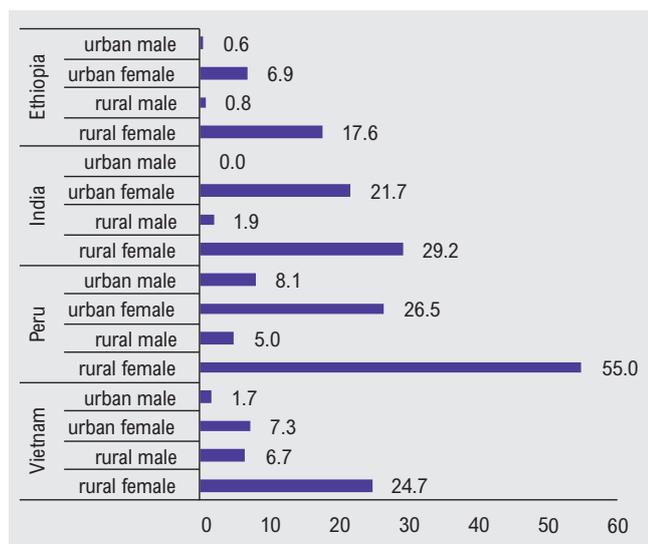
Young Lives demonstrates that whilst gender has a profound bearing on adolescent trajectories, it is the way in which gender combines with other disadvantages, including poverty, rural location and minority language or ethnic status that often matters most.

**In education:** Young Lives shows that gender gaps in learning emerge more strongly at around age 12, and continue to widen until age 15, persisting into early adulthood. Findings from the four countries show marked differences in how gender disparities manifest, and interestingly girls are not always disadvantaged. For example, pro-male aspirations and learning outcome in India contrast markedly with pro-female aspirations and learning outcomes in Vietnam. Gender differentials alone, for both education enrolment and learning, are consistently smaller in magnitude than those linked to wealth.

**In relation to early marriage and parenthood:** Many assumptions underlying gender in adolescence fail to recognise the actual experiences of young people and their families and communities, particularly in relation to underlying socio-economic influences. Understanding why girls marry early and their experience both before and after being married is critical to addressing underlying causes. For example, in situations of entrenched poverty, particularly in rural areas, early marriage may be viewed as empowering by young women by conferring a respectable status and granting them access to property. Moreover, in the absence of equal property rights, employment opportunities and a tradition of living on one's own, delaying marriage beyond a certain age might actually be detrimental for adolescent girls' trajectories.



**Figure 2:** Girls from rural backgrounds are much more likely to marry early; graph shows percentage of 19-year-olds who were parents



Source: Briones (2017)

**In relation to work:** Surprisingly, overall levels of work (paid and unpaid) for Young Lives adolescent girls and boys are largely similar, but the types of work and care undertaken become increasingly gender-differentiated during adolescence and reflect socio-economic circumstances. For example, in Ethiopia, family shocks such as illness of household members had a larger effect in increasing the amount of unpaid work (including household chores and caring) for girls than it does boys. Gender differentiation is also reflected in young people's labour market transitions. Although formal unemployment is often low, there are significantly more young women across all four study countries who report that they are 'neither working or studying' by the age of 22, principally due to unpaid caring roles including motherhood.

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

Focusing on adolescent girls to the exclusion of adolescent boys ignores the important ways that girls and boys relate to each other and the impact this has on their households

and communities as a whole. For example, Young Lives illustrates that boys may be negatively affected by the dowry system in India. Brothers may have to leave school and engage in full-time labour in order to provide dowries for their sisters. This highlights the importance of intra-household dynamics and the impact of birth order and sibling composition on adolescent transitions and related developmental outcomes.

**In relation to violence:** Adolescent girls' and boys' experiences of and responses to violence are shaped by a combination of socio-economic factors, notably poverty and ethnic minority status. Young Lives shows that girls are subjected to much higher rates of sexual violence whereas boys are more likely to experience bullying and physical violence at school, home and at work. Violence consistently undermines access to school especially for girls who frequently report concerns over personal safety (on the way to or at school). Limited access to appropriate toilets and hygiene facilities can be a key driver of bullying and harassment, which for girls is particularly common during menstruation. Corporal punishment is associated with poorer cognitive development. For example, corporal punishment experienced at age 8 is negatively associated with maths scores at age 12 in India, Peru and Vietnam. Some forms of violence, such as emotional abuse, may have a huge impact on the daily lives of adolescents, but are often overlooked and under researched.

**In relation to disaster responses:** Young Lives qualitative research illustrates that boys, as well as girls, are seriously affected by natural disasters. Whilst coping strategies for girls are more likely to include early marriage, boys are more likely to leave school and migrate to find new work. For example, during drought in Ethiopia many boys had to drop out of school and assume the role of family breadwinner, while struggling to repay loans. Focusing only on girls in times of disasters risks ignoring how the whole household is affected and how individual household members are tasked to respond.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND CREDITS

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This summary provides a snapshot of the themes and messages emerging in the forthcoming Young Lives adolescence summative report.

Supporting materials based on Young Lives' gender and adolescence research can be found on Twitter @yloxford with #YLAadolescence #YLGender.

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