



Adolescence, Youth and Gender:

The research challenges

This note highlights some of the key talking points from Young Lives' 2016 conference on Adolescence, Youth and Gender and what these mean for future research agendas.

Our advisory group on Gender Equality and Transitions to Adulthood was made up of Judith Diers, Emily Esplen, Kelly Hallman, Roopa Hinton, Thalia Kidder, Luis Felipe Calva Lopez, Agnes Quisumbing, Ines Smyth, and Nikki van der Gaag. They provided excellent support to Young Lives' work on gender and adolescence, and to the conference. Many contributed to the reflections in this note. We would like to thank them for their guidance, insights and challenge!

The Conference

On 8th and 9th September 2016, more than 170 researchers, policymakers and practitioners joined the Young Lives team at Lady Margaret Hall for two days filled with debate, dialogue and presentation of new research on Adolescence, Youth and Gender. The focus was on knowledge for change: change which makes a positive difference to children and young people's lives.

Our call for papers posed a series of questions about when and how gender inequalities emerge, the relationship between gender norms and wider structures, how gender and other inequalities interact during adolescence and youth, what 'empowerment' looks like, and 'what works' to reduce gender inequality.

Alongside plenary presentations and debates, panel themes ranged from education, aspirations, social norms, sexual and reproductive health, marriage and parenthood migration, nutrition, boys and masculinities, deprivation, economic empowerment and social protection, labour markets, time use, adolescent transitions, violence, programming and measurement. This note does not cover the wide range of presentations and discussions at these sessions. For abstracts, pictures and commentary, please visit the conference page at www.younglives.org.uk.

Talking points

1. Gender transformative change: the role of research

“Policy shifts take a long time ... the momentum to bring about change [has come from] activists and policy communities, and the weight of evidence is very important”

Maxine Molyneux

In her opening keynote, UCL's Maxine Molyneux described how the tireless efforts of feminist activists and the global human rights movement had established gender equality as a development goal, and are reflected in today's young feminist revival and progressive youth activism. However, austerity and the rise of illiberal states and movements pose a threat to this progress. The consequences can be lifelong, for example for adolescent girls whose sexual and reproductive rights are denied.

UNICEF's Judith Diers argued the conference was focused on “knowledge for transformation, so that girls fulfil their potential and have mobility and voice, and boys aren't constrained by restrictive masculinity”. Many discussions over the two days returned to the theme of where gender transformation comes from. Caroline Harper from the Overseas Development Institute reminded us of the need to learn from the past, understand social and political movements and patterns of resistance, in order to support those who advocate for change.

Patience Ekeoba from Voices for Change argued “we've got to empower young people to be able to act ... we've got to build their collective power. A lot of young people are mobilising using social technology, we've got to be able to build their power to mobilise, to connect voices from local to national to international”. Natalie Au described Girl Effect's work exploring the potential of new technologies to equip girls with information and advice.

Some questions for future research:

- How is research capturing the role of young people's own social and political activism against inequality?
- What should researchers and policymakers be doing to get adolescents and young people from the Global South involved in research events of this kind?

2. Where next for gender and social norms?

“Who is shaping these conversations and why are we having them?”

Tina Wallace

A focus on understanding gender and social norms ran through many sessions, looking at how, when and why social norms become important in young people's lives, how gender norms, attitudes towards power, sexual relationships and violence can be challenged, and how interventions involving behaviour change have tried to shift norms.

The majority of papers - although by no means all – dealt with the impact of norms on girls, and most had a focus on overcoming negative norms and harmful practices. An emerging body of research and practice exploring boys and young men's experiences was shared, with Promundo's Giovanna Lauro and Jane Kato-Wallace highlighting the need to address boys' vulnerabilities and build on what boys and young men are doing themselves to challenge harmful masculinities.

Some participants wondered if the focus on norms has become so broad that it has become a catch-all, and whether emphasising ‘gender norms’ leads to less attention being given to girls' and boys' shared experiences and interests. There was a lively debate about the context for research and interventions focused on social and gender norms. Tina Wallace from Lady Margaret Hall was “worried that we are looking at individual issues without understanding the political context ... [which is] having a huge impact on the way we are approaching gender”. Prudence Ngwenya Nonkululeko from the African Union Commission argued for strategies that respected and worked with national and regional frameworks : ‘When you approach someone's house, you need to understand how they do things. In Africa, start with African agendas’.

Some questions for future research:

- Can research do more to link social and gender norms to their wider political and economic contexts?
- Could more be done to build evidence on norms affecting both girls and boys, those linked to poverty and wider forms of exclusion, and positive norms?

3. Bringing together research on adolescence, youth and gender

“A lot of research on adolescence has been linked with adolescent girls but to change gender norms we have to bring boys along. A lot of the discourse on youth employment has been ... around employing boys. But obviously boys are adolescents and girls are adolescents too.”

Agnes Quisumbing

Much of the research presented highlighted the complexity of children's transitions to adulthood in low-resource contexts, where school, work and marriage do not often follow one another in a linear progression. IFPRI's Agnes Quisumbing talked about adolescence as a second window of opportunity. Interventions to increase adolescent human capital have focused on schooling, delaying marriage, improving nutrition and health, but they rarely address adolescents at different stages with respect to marriage and family formation, exploit complementarities between different forms of human capital investment or recognize the importance of reaching both adolescent girls and boys. Renos Vakis from the World Bank discussed how a better understanding of the challenges that stereotypes and mental models pose for traditional economic models can improve policies and interventions that target human choice and action during adolescence. Sonya Krutikova from IFS called for a coherent conceptual framework for evaluating and designing interventions during adolescence, building in young people's own decision-making and preferences, and learning from the development of such a framework for early child development.

In general, there was an emphasis on adolescence, with a strong emerging focus on early adolescence as a critical yet poorly understood stage of the life course marked by the intensification of gendered behaviours and thus a window of opportunity for intervention. Whilst a number of the presentations on masculinities focused on young adult men, overall there were fewer papers addressing the experiences of young adults, exploring gender and social inequality in young adulthood, or young people's experiences of labour markets, inheritance and parenthood.

Some questions for future research:

- How do we make sure that we build coherence and connections between research into adolescence and youth, and address gender in both?
- Can we build a more coherent conceptual framework for better evaluation and design of interventions across childhood and during adolescence and youth?

4. What does neuroscience add to our understanding of adolescence in the Global South?

“We really need to encourage much more multidisciplinary discussion. I think we have to recognise that we need to learn and to innovate, and a lot of that learning comes only if you look at things from somebody else's perspective.”

Ramya Subrahmanian

A debate about how social scientists and practitioners with an interest in gender, adolescence and youth can engage with findings from neuroscience began during the second plenary session of the conference and was still continuing on journeys home. Robert Blum from Johns Hopkins University and the Global Early Adolescence Study argued that interventions and policy during adolescence must respond to what science tells us about the changes in the brain during adolescence, and how this affects adolescents' development and behaviour. This triggered a lively debate and raised several questions:

- do the findings reflect research from developing as well as developed countries?
- does such an approach downplay the role of social norms and social contexts in shaping behaviour?
- does it lead to an oversimplification of adolescence as a time of risk-taking?
- does it lead to interventions which are focused on individual resilience at the expense of tackling poverty and insecurity? Or can we use insights from neuroscience to capitalise on young people's creativity and to protect them during periods of intense change and potential vulnerability?

These debates will continue and there are opportunities to cross-fertilize ideas between social science and neuroscience, to better understand the two-way interaction between the social and economic contexts in which adolescents are growing up and the physical, neurological and emotional changes which they are experiencing. As Ramya Subrahmanian from Know Violence in Childhood put it, there's a 'fascinating opportunity ... to bridge these two fields, and bring together two fields of people who don't necessarily talk to each other.'

5. Balancing protection, risk and empowerment

“When you look through the adult lens, or you hear through the adults’ lips, what you hear is that these young people are restive, they are restless, they are not listening. All this negativity undermines young people’s ability to be themselves and fly.”

Patience Ekeoba

Ramya Subrahmanian’s presentation ‘Achievements, Attitudes, Aspirations and Agency: Supporting Adolescents through Adolescence’ highlighted the need to support adolescents’ capabilities during a period of immense change, whilst providing a protective framework which reflects adolescents’ entitlement to protection under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Getting this balance right ran through discussions of findings, methods and interventions.

Three challenges for future research into adolescence, youth and gender

“We’ve got to keep collecting evidence, and it needs to be credible, it needs to be nuanced, it needs to be fresh, and it needs to be able to inspire us to act differently.”

Patience Ekeoba

1. Take a genuinely interdisciplinary approach to researching adolescence, youth and gender. A huge range of disciplines and research methods were represented at the conference, but there is no settled way of understanding and researching adolescence and youth. Comparing and using both qualitative and quantitative approaches is necessary to

leverage the strengths of both. DFID’s Chief Scientific Adviser, Charlotte Watts urged researchers to bring multidisciplinary thinking to bear on the challenges facing adolescents and young people today, to drive better policy. Shared frameworks, knowledge banks and use of longitudinal approaches are needed to focus on policies and interventions which bring long term benefits to young people and tackle gender and other inequalities.

2. Reflect diversity, difference and gendered relationships across the life course. Themes of gender, generation and poverty across ran through the conference. There was a call to do more to understand how best to engage boys, men, families and community members in changing gender norms alongside women and girls, and to understand relationships between younger and older people. Overall, there was less exploration of the experiences of adolescents and young people who are disabled, those who belong to ethnic, cultural or linguistic minorities, or LGBTQ young people, and of the kinds of interventions and protections they require. Although the conference called for papers from low and middle income countries, participants recognised that all of us are bound by inequality, and that deeper dialogue is needed to build understanding of similarities, differences and linkages between adolescence and youth across north and south.
3. Focus on the positive: adolescence and youth should be times of opportunity and optimism. Young people have a huge contribution to make to their communities and countries. Much of the research presented engaged directly with adolescents and youth as research collaborators, and there was a call for ensuring that young people are involved in the planning of interventions. Whilst keeping in view the real risks that disadvantaged young people face in growing up, the challenge for research is to engage young people’s views and reflect their capacities, aspirations and potential, and to develop methods that reflect their growing agency and activism.

The Conference was a team effort, organised by Gina Crivello (Qualitative lead), Marta Favara (Quantitative Lead) and Caroline Knowles (Communications), with Jo Boyden (Young Lives, Director), Frances Winter (Policy), Rosaleen Cunningham (Communications) and Ingrid Jooren (Administration). We thank the group of volunteer experts who assisted us in reviewing abstracts, including Kirrily Pells, Ines Smyth, Virginia Morrow and Nikki van der Gaag.

Core funded by



Young Lives is core-funded from 2001 to 2017 by UK aid from the UK Department for International Development. Aspects of Young Lives adolescence, youth and gender research (2014-2016) has been funded by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation.

© Young Lives October 2016