

How Gender Shapes Adolescence: Diverging paths and opportunities



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A global policy focus since 2000 on the first decade of children's lives has resulted in impressive achievements, including dramatic reductions in child mortality and the expansion of primary schooling. To sustain and build upon these gains, however, an additional focus is needed on the crucial period of adolescence, when gender differences widen, particularly for the poorest children, and decisions are made around education, work, marriage and fertility that have a critical impact on long-term outcomes for girls and boys.

Using unique cohort data that follows the same children over time, Young Lives is able to track how gender inequalities open up during adolescence, and what causes inequality to shift and persist in different ways within and between countries. By doing so, we can provide insights into key windows of opportunity for policymakers to invest in children during the second decade of their lives, to mitigate the worst effects of poverty, broaden the options open to them, and support both girls and boys to reach their full potential. This brief sets out some early Young Lives findings about gender and adolescence as we embark on a new programme of work.



Photo: Young Lives India

Why we need a life-course perspective on gender and adolescence

Gender inequality and poverty are widely recognised as intertwined. Women have fewer resources, less power and less influence on decision-making than men. The goal of poverty reduction is closely linked to improving the status of women, and a standalone goal on achieving gender equality is expected to be included in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

However, the effectiveness of policies aimed at reducing gender-based inequalities continues to be undermined by

knowledge gaps around the determinants, mechanisms, experiences and outcomes of gender dynamics and discrimination in childhood. In particular, we need a better understanding of how gender inequalities are produced, reproduced or challenged during the transition to adulthood, and between the generations.

We know that gender differences become greater during adolescence, as gender identities become stronger. Gender-based inequalities also open up during this period, but the patterns are complex, and young women are not always dis-advantaged. Both boys and girls are affected, at different ages and in different ways, shaped by dynamics within households, socio-cultural context, institutional structures and economic pressures.



Photo: Antonio Fiorente / Young Lives

Adolescence is by definition a transitional period, during which children are presented with both new opportunities and new constraints. In most countries they are expected to have completed primary schooling and to move into secondary education, but this is also the point at which there is a significant drop in enrolment. And as they grow up, children may leave school to find work, perhaps by migrating to urban centres where there are more job opportunities. They may marry and become parents themselves.

Today's adolescents have grown up amid the global drive to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). As young children, many of them will have benefited from policy investments in health and education that were implemented as part of efforts to achieve MDG targets. However, young people face different risk factors, and some of these investments in early childhood may subsequently be undone if policy attention is not brought to bear on this later life-stage as well.

Answering calls for a new focus on adolescents in the post-2015 SDGs will rest on a strong gender and life-course perspective. Many of the new goals are meant to contribute to achieving the goal on gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls. Education, for example, is seen as a tool, to improve maternal and child health and for girls to gain a voice and to make more informed decisions about their lives and the lives of their children.

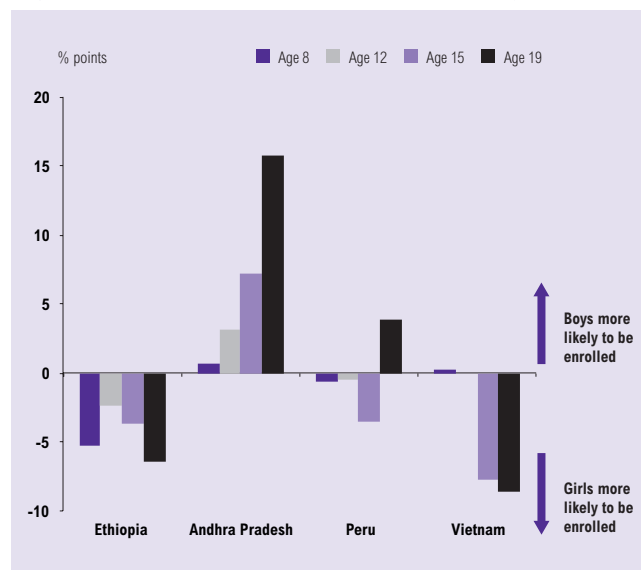
The SDGs highlight the critical need for longitudinal data. By following the same children over time we can see how risks and opportunities early in their lives impact on their later outcomes, and assess the factors that support their later well-being and development. And only through cohort studies can we understand how experiences of poverty change as children grow up, and identify the most effective points during that process for policy interventions.

High hopes and opportunity costs: education and skills in adolescence

Aspirations: Children and young people have high hopes for their lives, and many see school as being central to transforming their life chances. However, at the age of 12, gender differences are already apparent in education. In Peru and Vietnam, we find many girls have higher education aspirations than boys, while in Ethiopia and in India (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana) the opposite is true. India is the only context in which caregivers have markedly lower aspirations for their daughters than their sons at the age of 12, and by the age of 15, girls have lower ambitions for themselves.

Enrolment: As adolescence progresses, gaps between girls' and boys' school enrolment increase (see the figure), but there are different patterns across the countries, and in all cases these gender gaps are smaller in size than the gaps determined by poverty, and further disaggregation within groups shows greater gaps still. For example, in Ethiopia and Vietnam, the poorest boys are less likely to be enrolled in school at the age of 19 than the poorest girls. In Peru, the poorest girls are least likely to be in school but better-off girls are more likely than boys to continue their education. In India, however, girls are less likely than boys to be enrolled, regardless of household wealth.

Figure 1. Differences in enrolment between boys and girls



Source: Data for Young Lives Older Cohort from Rounds 1, 2, 3, 4.

These gaps result from the fact that as children become older, the opportunity costs of schooling rise, and developments such as new job openings can contribute to children – particularly boys – leaving school in order to work to support their families. In Ethiopia, Peru and Vietnam, poor boys are more likely than poor girls to have dropped out of school by the age of 15, possibly because of the higher wage-earning potential they enjoy.

In Ethiopia, the most common reason for girls to drop out of school was to look after their siblings; the second most common was that the direct costs of schooling were considered to be too high, a reason that was much more commonly given for girls than for boys.

In India too, social norms and care responsibilities increase the chances of young women leaving school early. Additionally, secondary school often presents a more threatening environment for girls than primary school; a longer journey from home, for example, can lead to the risk of sexual assault. Among young people no longer at school, 48% of girls who at age 12 had wanted to finish secondary school were only able to complete primary education.

India has seen a rapid rise in low-fee private education over the past decade, and a dramatic increase in the number of poor children and those living in rural areas attending private schools. However, girls are more likely than boys to be enrolled in government schools, as parents make hard choices about which child or children to invest limited resources in. Parents place more emphasis on boys' education because they expect their sons to look after them when they are old, while girls leave to live with their husband's family.

“Some people say that girls are just like boys and they should be educated well. And others say, ‘What are they going to do with higher education, since they will be going to somebody else’s house?’ They also say, ‘Since we can’t benefit, why spend money on a girl’s education?’”

Father, rural Telangana, India

Grade attainment: Of the 19-year-olds still in formal education in Vietnam, the average grade completed is 12.5 for girls and 12.3 for boys, but this gap is wider for children from the poorest households, among whom the average grade completed for girls is 12.4 and for boys is 11.7. At this age, more girls are still in education (53%) than boys (43%), but again, this is closely related to the wealth level of families; only 27% of young people from the poorest households were still enrolled.

Implications for education policy

These findings reinforce the need to consider how poverty and gender interact when analysing inequalities among adolescents, and to develop policy interventions that address the barriers that prevent both girls and boys staying in school. These might include more flexible school hours to enable them to combine education with paid work or caring responsibilities, and creating a school environment that is safer and more appropriate for adolescent girls.

CASE STUDY

“Sometimes I can’t make ends meet”: Allocating scarce resources to support girls’ education

Andahuaylas, a Quechua community in the southern highlands of Peru, is mainly reliant on agriculture. Parents place a very high value on education; their overriding desire is that their children should escape farm work, which they associate with suffering and hardship, and instead have the opportunity to pursue their education and enter the labour market as professionals.

Many caregivers are prepared to make huge sacrifices to enable their children to attend school. 15-year-old Marta’s mother, for example, struggles to cover the indirect costs of her children’s schooling, particularly transport and accommodation costs for her sons, who study away from home. She is forced to relinquish valuable assets when she is short of money.

“I worry when I don’t have money; sometimes I can’t make ends meet, and so I sell my cows... Before, I had enough money, I lived well; now, I am short of money as my children are studying,” she says.

Marta attends the local secondary school, while her brothers go to school in the provincial capital, where the quality of education is perceived to be better. Her mother explains that she does not have sufficient resources to send all her children to the same school.

She hopes that she can pursue further studies and become a nurse. She tells her mother, “We’re not going to suffer like this in the mud... It’s better that I go and study.” Yet while Marta aspires to migrate out of the community and study further, she is acutely aware that her future is uncertain.

Bargaining power and balancing needs: household decision-making

Traditionally, research tends to focus on household decision-making by children’s caregivers, rather than children’s own involvement in the choices that affect them. Our research increasingly looks at young women and men themselves, and seeks to understand how they negotiate with their caregivers and influence decisions within the household.

Earlier studies using Young Lives data have explored how bargaining power within the household affects children’s outcomes. One study looking at child labour in India found that in urban areas, the more educated the women in the

household are relative to men, the less children work, but in rural areas this is not the case, highlighting the importance of taking into account all aspects of the household context.

India's social protection programme, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), requires that one-third of participants be women, and equal wages to be paid to female and male participants. Mothers' participation in the scheme is associated with an increase in the school attendance and grade attainment of their children, particularly daughters and children from the poorest families. This impact is over and above any effect associated with the extra income generated from participation in the scheme, and is attributed to the fact that women's greater economic contribution to the household leads to more involvement in decision-making and greater bargaining power.

Household decisions related to investing scarce resources in children are also shaped by perceptions of future opportunities. For example, an experimental research design, again in India, found that expanding labour market opportunities for women in randomly selected villages resulted in shifting aspirations and increased investments in girls and young women in those villages. Girls between 15 and 21 were more likely to enrol in a computer or English-language course, and even younger girls showed increased school enrolment and greater body mass index, reflecting better nutrition and/or health investments.

Implications for policy on youth skills and jobs

This experiment suggests that creating a better match between education and skills on the one hand and job opportunities on the other can help foster realistic aspirations for the future, with implications for the allocation of household resources. Well-designed policy interventions that succeed in this aim can help shape decisions made at the household level that have profound, long-term impacts on the outcomes of girls and boys.

Perpetuating poverty: Adolescent marriage and fertility

Early marriage and childbirth are associated with higher infant and maternal mortality, health risks due to physical immaturity and sexually transmitted infections, and higher overall fertility. They are also linked with the transmission of poverty across generations, as adolescent mothers tend to be less well nourished and less educated, have less access to economic opportunities, have reduced autonomy and agency, and to be more vulnerable to abuse.

Our data show that young people across the four study countries want to delay starting families. When asked what age it is best for men to marry and have children, answers from the Older Cohort (then aged 19) ranged from 25 in India to 27 in Peru and Vietnam, while for women it ranged from 21 in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana to 26 in Peru. The rise in schooling is enabling young people to access new kinds of information, for example about reproductive health, and both girls and their caregivers report that it is becoming more socially acceptable to get married later and delay childbirth, for economic and health reasons.

However, in reality, the decline in rates of early marriage and adolescent fertility remains slow. At the age of 19, 37% of girls in India were married or cohabiting, as were 25% in Peru, 19% in Vietnam and 13% in Ethiopia. What's more, in Ethiopia and India, many young women who had married had done so well below the legal age of 18; an average of 16.7 years in the former and 16.5 years in the latter.

By the age of 19, 24% of girls in Peru had had a child, 21% of girls in India, 16% in Vietnam and 10% in Ethiopia. In all cases except Peru, early marriage and childbearing was most common among girls from poorer households and rural areas, and in Ethiopia and India, it was also closely related to the girls' own mother's level of education.

“Marrying after 16 or 17 is not good. We live in corrupt and dangerous times... Many children have already fallen into bad ways. For instance, one girl I know, who is still a child, has had a baby on her own. She suffered a lot... When you see these kinds of things, it is better that a girl marries early.”

Mother, rural Oromia, Ethiopia

Implications for policy on reproductive health

Policy aimed at reducing early marriage and fertility needs to engage with the context that influences parents' and children's choices. Poorer households may see early marriage as a way of ensuring that girls are provided for in adulthood, and protected from financial risks. Families may also be influenced by social norms which suggest that girls must be shielded from the dangers and stigma associated with pre-marital sex. To be effective, policy interventions must therefore take into account not only the socio-economic circumstances of the household, but also perceived social risks and opportunities.

Violence and adolescence: A part of everyday life at home and at school

CASE STUDY

“A difficult situation”: Violence at home and at school

Nga lives in the town of Da Nang in Vietnam. When she was 15, she failed the entry exam for higher secondary school, and instead enrolled at a continuing education centre. However, as a result of fighting between students and feeling that she wasn't making any progress with her studies, Nga decided to “stay at home to help out my parents.”

Nga now works at her mother's café, and gives her earnings to her mother.

She has started staying up late so she can go to the bar where her father drinks. “I go wake him up and tell him to come home,” she says. In this way, Nga protects her mother, by being the one to let her father back into the house when he is drunk.

Nga says she didn't have many school friends, but instead socialised with “a few good children who had to quit school because of their family situation.” This group of friends supported one another, including financially, “because their situation is just as difficult as mine,” Nga says.

Violence remains a feature of children's lives, both within the home and at school, despite national and international attempts to reduce it. Adolescents are at less risk of corporal punishment at school than younger children, but across all age groups, violence in schools – including physical and verbal abuse by teachers and peers – is the foremost reason given for disliking school, and may contribute to irregular attendance, slow progression and children dropping out early.

In Peru, research has found that – despite being prohibited – endemic corporal punishment contributes to the normalisation of violence, and reinforces gender roles and identities. Children report getting used to violent beatings from teachers, and reproducing this behaviour in interactions with peers, as physical aggression is viewed as a legitimate way of asserting authority and establishing masculine identities. Boys also identify ‘negative’ behaviours, such as other boys reporting violence to teachers, as being ‘feminine’ and in need of punishment.

Violence is part of everyday life for many children at home too. At age 15, over a third of girls and a quarter of boys in Peru, and 11% of girls and 15% of boys in Vietnam, reported being physically hurt by a family member. Children's responses to domestic violence are shaped by their age, gender, economic resources and social networks, as well as by the nature of the violence experienced. In Vietnam, younger children often distance themselves from the violence physically. Adolescent boys describe directly intervening to try to protect their mother from abuse, while adolescent girls adopt indirect strategies, such as earning money to give to their mothers (see Nga's story, above).

Emotional violence is also a concern for children, particularly adolescent girls, who report bullying and other forms of harassment on their journeys to school which can lead to some girls dropping out. Other gender-specific factors may also affect girls' experiences at school, and in turn their learning outcomes. In Ethiopia and India, for example, girls describe a fear of using the toilets, which are often not gender-segregated; this makes them feel unsafe and concerned about bullying and harassment from boys, particularly during menstruation, and can lead to girls missing school each month.

Research from Vietnam has revealed how children's experiences of violence are shaped not only by poverty and gender hierarchies but also by access to social and economic resources; they differ, for example, between rural and urban areas, with more support services available in the latter, as well as more wage-earning opportunities for women and children to reduce their dependence on men.

Implications for violence prevention policy

This is clearly an area where sensitive policy interventions could provide some much-needed support to adolescents during a key period of their lives. To help inform such policies, new work from Young Lives will focus on how children's experiences of physical and emotional violence in different settings interact to impact on their outcomes, well-being and transitions to adulthood.

Insights into a decisive period: Policy opportunities

By following the life-course of children as they leave early childhood, enter adolescence and transition into adulthood, we gain invaluable insights into how the risks and opportunities they encounter along the way can impact on their long-term outcomes. In particular, we are able to see how gender dynamics and discrimination play out in different ways in different contexts, shaped by the individual themselves, their households and families, natural and built environment and social, cultural and economic forces.

These insights highlight key opportunities for policymakers to provide support to adolescents and their families: by putting social protection measures in place to mitigate the effects of poverty; by dismantling barriers that prevent young people from continuing education; by creating employment opportunities that encourage parents and children to invest in their futures; and by improving access to health services and information and support networks. Investing policy attention on this decisive period of children's lives could result in more positive outcomes for both girls and boys in terms of education, economic participation, social capital, well-being and empowerment, and ensure the hard-won gains of early childhood are not lost.

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