



Girls carrying goods to the market in East Hararge, Oromia, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2019



## Gender and regional inequalities in adolescent economic empowerment

### Policy and programming implications from the GAGE baseline findings

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### Overview

While Ethiopia is one of Africa's fastest-growing economies and has seen a significant decline in overall poverty over the past decade, high rates of multidimensional poverty persist. The effects on adolescents are particularly significant, including the likelihood of involvement in labour (OPHI, 2017). There is growing evidence on young people's access to opportunities for economic empowerment and the challenges of youth unemployment and under-employment, but this often overlooks gender dynamics and the experiences of very young adolescents who are excluded from labour statistics (Presler-Marshall and Stavropoulou, 2017).

This policy note synthesises findings from baseline mixed-methods research as part of the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) longitudinal study (2015–2024) to address these knowledge gaps. Our work included nearly 7,000 adolescent girls and boys between the ages of 10 and 19, as well as their caregivers, service providers and programme and policy actors. More details can be found in the full companion report (Jones et al. 2019). Paying careful attention to gender and regional differences, here we focus on adolescents' economic empowerment – which we delineate as employment aspirations; market-appropriate technical, vocational and business skills; access to resource endowments (e.g. land) and assets (e.g. savings and credit); access to decent and age-appropriate employment; and access to age- and gender-sensitive social protection. We then discuss key actions to accelerate progress.

### Key findings: scope and scale of the challenge

Our research found that despite increasingly high economic aspirations, adolescents continue to have few affordable opportunities to develop market-appropriate skills and limited access to assets and resources. As a result, many young people are effectively trapped in exploitative work with very limited, if any, safety nets or social protection.

▶ We do not want to be involved in the same activities as our parents... Our parents are doing daily labour, it makes them tired.

(A 15-year-old girl from Semurobi, Zone 5, Afar, Ethiopia)

### Economic aspirations

GAGE research found that due to a combination of factors – including land shortages owing to population growth, rising fertiliser prices, climate change, loss of soil fertility, and attitudes that portray agriculture as ‘backwards’ and ‘too demanding’ – many young people and their parents no longer consider farming a viable livelihood option. As one 15-year-old girl from Semurobi, Zone 5 (Afar), explained: ‘We do not want to be involved in the same activities as our parents... Our parents are doing daily labour, it makes them tired.’ Indeed, we found that the economic aspirations of and for adolescents are increasingly professional. Of girls aged 10–12 (rural cohort), 37% aspire to become teachers and 28% aspire to become doctors. Among boys of the same age, 27% aspire to become teachers and 32% aspire to become doctors. In the case of older adolescents, while

one third still aspire to be doctors, teachers are a much less popular option (perhaps because older adolescents are more cognisant of the low salaries) (7.4% for girls and 3.9% for boys) and also because they are aware of a range of more practical and locally feasible options, including construction for boys (9.4%) and retail for girls (10.8%). ‘I will do business selling grains like wheat and sorghum’ (16-year-old married girl, Community C, South Gondar). Girls also increasingly frame their economic aspirations in relation to marriage as they get older.

Parents also want their adolescent children to have professional work. Of mothers of boys aged 10–12, over a third (36%) want their sons to become doctors, followed by salaried professional (15%), teachers (14%) and government jobs (11%). Mothers’ aspirations for their daughters are similar

▶ I want to be a civil servant employed in government offices because I want to live independently. I am no different from or inferior to others.

(A 16-year-old girl with a disability, Debre Tabor, South Gondar)



Adolescent shoe shiner in Batu-Ziway, Oromia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2019

– only 4% want their daughters to become homemakers. They would prefer their daughters to become doctors (30%), teachers, (17%), salaried professionals (13%) or government employees (13%). Notably, our research highlights that despite their more limited access to formal education, adolescents with disabilities also have high aspirations. As one 16-year-old girl with a disability from Debre Tabor, South Gondar, explained: *'I want to be a civil servant employed in government offices because I want to live independently. I am no different from or inferior to others.'*

Regional differences in adolescents' employment aspirations are marked, however. Teachers were the top choice for girls in all three regions but with significant variation in magnitude: 48% in South Gondar, 36% in East Hararghe and 24% in Afar. Similar numbers of girls in South Gondar and East Hararghe aspired to be doctors (24.3% and 27.9%, respectively), but the figure was in single digits only in Afar (6.4%) with more preferring to be nurses in Afar (13.5%) and even more to be homemakers (14.2%). Differences among boys were also striking. Boys' most popular aspiration in South Gondar was to be a teacher (38%), compared to only 26% of boys in East Hararghe and 21% of boys in Afar. In East Hararghe the medial profession was a much more common goal (41%) but was unpopular in Afar (3%) and instead boys in Afar aspired to be salaried professionals (22%), farmers or shepherds (20%) or religious leaders (10%).

Our qualitative work nuanced these findings further, finding adolescents in East Hararghe to be more hesitant about their aspirations and have less specific knowledge about the routes to achieving their goals than in South

Gondar. They often articulated their employment aspirations using non-specific statements such as *'to get educated and be in a big place'* (participant in focus group discussion with 10–12-year-old boys, Community I, East Hararghe). In Zone 5 (Afar), adolescents have noticeably more limited professional career aspirations. This is due, in part, to a lack of local role models, the predominantly pastoralist way of life (and associated challenges in migratory communities in attending school regularly), and the focus on marriage rather than education. These limited aspirations were in turn reinforced by those of caregivers. A full 25% of primary female caregivers wanted adolescent girls to be homemakers, compared to 4% in East Hararghe and less than 1% in South Gondar, and 22% wanted their sons to be farmers or shepherds, compared to 3% in South Gondar and 1% in East Hararghe.

## Market-appropriate skills

Despite significant progress in promoting primary education for all, Ethiopia is one of five countries worldwide where over half of young people aged 15–24 lack the basic skills required for employment (UNESCO, 2012). A key government strategy for rectifying this situation – and transitioning to a knowledge-based economy and achieving middle-income status – is the promotion of Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) (Admassie et al., 2015). For some adolescents, opportunities have been transformative. An 18-year-old girl from Batu (East Shewa) explained, *'So the day I learned I failed 12th grade is my worst day. My happiest day was when I got to fashion design school. I was so happy.'*

### Box 1: The importance of broadening accessibility to TVET programmes

Daniel is an 18-year-old adolescent who has recently moved to Dire Dawa from Addis Ababa to open his own business as an optician. Deaf since birth, he is determined to build a successful future – despite the limitations that his family and teachers tried to impose on him.

Daniel attended – and did well at – a school for deaf children through to the end of 8th grade. When he transferred to secondary school, however, *'education was provided with voice and no sign language, thus we were suffering hugely'*. Because he could not understand his teachers, he failed to score well enough on the 10th grade exam to progress on to preparatory school. While his parents *'perceived that I couldn't achieve anything'*, he enrolled in a technical and vocational education and training (TVET) course to study to be an electrician. Unfortunately, he once again ran into accessibility issues and was forced to drop out.

By chance, Daniel met a doctor who told him about an opportunity to study how to make glasses for people with visual impairments and *'contribute to healing people with problems'*. Sensitive to the impacts of disability, Daniel enrolled at the Misrach Centre in Addis Ababa and spent the next two years learning how to make and fit glasses for those with visual impairments.

Daniel's aspirations for his future have been shaped by his friend, *'who attended some training on woodwork and became successful in his business'*. Noting that his role model *'already has his own house and vehicle and is ... married and has a child'*, Daniel explained that he has *'a strong intention to be successful like him....I intend to expand my business further to the neighbouring towns – Harar, Jijiga and the like – in order to enhance my income'*. Although for now he is using his mobile phone to *'communicate through text messages'* with people who *'don't know sign language'*, it is difficult. As business picks up, his first step will be to hire another person without a hearing disability who can communicate with clients to market the glasses, so that he can focus on producing them.

Daniel's dedication to building his own future has had an unexpected benefit – in that his family now respects him: *'Before, I didn't have any status in my household. But after I completed my college training, got a job and started to get a salary, they changed their mind and started to respect me.'* There is, he concluded, no better motivation for success.



Adolescent boys in Batu-Ziway, Oromia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2019

However, GAGE research highlights that TVET fails to attract the majority of adolescents. Given that it is not considered prestigious, like a university education, families often see it as not worth the cost. As one older adolescent boy from Community C (South Gondar) explained: *'I didn't want to join TVET originally as it costs 90 birr per month ... Instead, I wanted to continue my degree... But my family stopped sponsoring me and I stopped learning.'*

Gender and regional differences are again marked. For example, while girls make up more than half of those enrolled on TVET courses, partly due to the government's commitment to affirmative action as a means of fostering gender equality (Ministry of Education, 2018), the types of courses pursued by girls and boys are still quite gendered. Girls tend to choose courses that lead to employment in the public sector, whereas boys are more likely to take construction and engineering courses with a view to setting up their own business. While adolescents living in urban areas across regions report good access to and uptake of TVET, in rural areas we found no such evidence in East Hararghe or Zone 5.

Recently, when I again asked the person registering unemployed youths, he told me to take 10,000 birr as a loan and start poultry farming. However, I have no one who can sign the guarantee to take this amount of money.

(A 16-year-old adolescent girl from Debre Tabor)

### Access to assets and resources

Adolescents' access to productive assets such as land and livestock, and to financial resources such as savings accounts and credit, appears relatively limited (Bezu and Holden, 2014; CSA and ICF, 2017). The GAGE survey found, for example, that only 12% of adolescents have some control over their own finances, with older adolescents (aged 15–17) are 52% more likely to have some control than younger adolescents (aged 10–12). While adolescents do sometimes participate in savings programmes through their schools or adolescent clubs, access to formal banking is very limited, in part due to age requirements. Adolescents' access to credit is also

quite limited. Our qualitative research found that only a small number of older urban adolescent boys had access to loans, due either to a lack of collateral or bureaucratic obstacles in the application process. A 16-year-old adolescent girl from Debre Tabor explained: *'Recently, when I again asked the person registering unemployed youths, he told me to take 10,000 birr as a loan and start poultry farming. However, I have no one who can sign the guarantee to take this amount of money.'*

Gender and regional differences are especially marked in terms of access to assets and resources. For example, our survey findings showed that in urban areas, older adolescent boys were significantly more likely than girls of the same age to have control over financial resources (39% compared to 21%). This leaves girls reliant on their fathers, brothers, or husbands to achieve their goals of greater financial independence. As one 17-year-old girl in Community C (South Gondar) explained: *'If I can open a cafe in Bahir Dar or Gondar I can earn good money. I only need start-up money, my father promised to give me a place to work ... I just want to be independent from the support of my family.'* In addition, while there is little variation between adolescents in urban and rural areas, there is significant disparity in access within each category. For example, 18% of younger adolescents in East Hararghe report having over their own finances (six points above the mean of our sample in both urban and rural areas), compared to 9% in South Gondar and just 1% in Afar. This is probably because in East Hararghe, many young people are involved in some aspect of khat cash crop production and/or marketing.

### **Box 2: Differences in adolescents' control over economic resources by location**

While there is little variation in control over economic resources between adolescents in urban areas and those in rural areas, there is significant disparity in access within each category. There is broad variation in the amount of control young people report having over their own finances, ranging from 18% of younger adolescents in East Hararghe (six points above the mean of our sample in both urban and rural areas) to 9% in South Gondar and just 1% in Afar. This is likely because in East Hararghe, many young people are involved in some aspect of khat cash crop production and/or marketing.

There is also some variation, though to a lesser degree, within urban areas. Of the urban areas in our sample, Dire Dawa has the lowest proportion of older adolescents who control their own finances (24%, as opposed to 28% in Debre Tabor and 32% in Batu). The high figure in the latter may reflect the fact that the floriculture industry in Batu attracts a very high number of young migrant workers from the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR), who are living alone in the town.

## **Access to decent and age-appropriate employment**

Despite a legal minimum working age of 14 years, Ethiopia has high rates of child labour (UNESCO, 2012). Indeed, while GAGE's survey found that only 6% of younger boys and 4% of younger girls (aged 10–12) work for pay, our qualitative work highlights onerous work conditions and also suggests significant under-reporting. In Community D, South Gondar, a 12-year-old girl explained that she, alongside even younger children, did manual labour on a dam construction site five days a week: *'We mix cement with water and we give it to the others for work on the dam. They want individuals who work. They don't say that we are children. There are lots of people like me, both boys and girls. One friend is a year younger than me, she is 11.'*

In some ways, employment patterns are similar for boys and girls. Both, for example, are increasingly likely to migrate to find work – sometimes so that they can support the cost of education. *'We can be a housemaid, work and go to school. While working, we can finish school,'* explained a 15-year-old girl from South Gondar. Migration includes rural-to-rural, rural-to-urban, and international and depends primarily on what work opportunities are available and the broker fees required. In East Hararghe, for example, adolescents are often involved in seasonal cash-crop work, especially khat and ground nuts. In Dire Dawa, many young people are working locally as they save the money required to pay the brokers who can help them (illegally) migrate to the Middle East.

In other ways, however, gender-based patterns diverge. Boys are more likely to work for pay than girls, because girls are expected to spend their time providing their natal and marital families with unremunerated work (CSA, 2014; Pankhurst et al., 2018). GAGE survey findings confirm this pattern. Among older urban adolescents, 30% of boys – but only 15% of girls – are in paid employment. Second, the types of work that girls and boys undertake tend to be quite different. Girls are overwhelmingly likely to engage in domestic work, while boys are more likely to work in agriculture or construction. These differences translate into different levels and types of vulnerability. For instance, girls are more likely to be exposed to sexual violence while boys are more at risk of ethnic-driven peer violence.

Interestingly, we found significant differences in the proportion of urban adolescents involved in paid work across our three sites. Namely, adolescents in Batu are significantly more likely to be in paid work (27%, compared with 19% in Debre Tabor and 15% in Dire Dawa), probably due to the floriculture industry, which attracts a significant number of adolescents from other parts of Oromia and neighbouring zones in SNNPR (see Box 3).

### Box 3: 'They make you suffer a lot'

Megertu is a 17-year-old girl living in Batu with her older sister. She works at a local flower company. While as a child she dreamed of becoming 'either a doctor or a teacher', she was forced to drop out of school at the age of 15, in 4th grade, because her father died, and her family was too poor to support her to continue her schooling. Now she is focused on earning an income – and staying healthy – in a challenging work environment.

Megertu admits there are advantages to working here. The salary can be as high as 1,000 birr a month with overtime. And employees have some rights, as Megertu explained: *'My supervisor cannot fire me ... because she has no such right. She only has a right to supervise me and give directives for the work'*. She also provides employees with training on a wide variety of topics. *'They tell us about how we should keep ourselves healthy and distance ourselves from men. They tell us about violence against women. They also taught us the impacts of circumcision and the importance of using contraception...'* However, the working conditions are arduous. Days can be from 'as early as 7am until 8pm or 9pm' and she is required to 'stand the whole day long' with 'only some minutes to go to the toilet'. Meeting production targets is all that matters: *'If you have taken longer than the allotted time, you will be penalised. If you broke a single head of the flower, they deduct from your salary. If you have not met your targets for the month, they will deduct your salary'*. In the end, after deductions, at best 'you get either 700 or 800 birr'.


Megertu's real concern about working conditions, however, is the chemicals to which workers are exposed every day: *'I fear that the chemicals may affect my health ... If you have problems on your body from the chemical and go to seek a medical examination, they do not tell you the illness and just give you expired pills and syrup ... They make you suffer a lot when you are sick.'*

## Access to age- and gender-responsive social protection

For economically vulnerable adolescents, age- and gender-responsive social protection can be an important source of support (Jones and Presler-Marshall, 2019). In Ethiopia, the flagship social protection programme is the Productive Safety Net Programme, providing support to approximately 8 million individuals across the country, primarily through public works, but for those unable to work due to age, disability, pregnancy and lactation, direct support in the form of cash transfers. Some 28% of the GAGE adolescent sample are in households receiving PSNP support, primarily in rural areas (31%) and a small minority in urban Dire Dawa (4%). There is mixed evidence, however, about the effects of Ethiopia's flagship public works programme, the PSNP, on adolescents. While the programme has had significant positive impacts on food security and household consumption, there is some evidence that older adolescents may be substituting their labour on the PSNP for that of their parents, at times at the cost of their education (Pankhurst et al., 2018; Favara et al., 2019). Our qualitative work reinforced these concerns. On the one hand, especially in rural areas, where families feel pressured to fulfil their labour quotas, even quite young adolescents are sometimes working on PSNP projects. A woman in Ebenat (South Gondar) explained, *'Of course they told us not to involve our children who are attending school in public works. But I could not manage to do all the ... work, which took at least three hours per working day since I am an old woman.'* On the other hand, our findings also point to a number of positive economic and psychosocial spill-over effects on the well-being of adolescents from PSNP families. As a 16-year-old adolescent girl from Dire Dawa (whose family benefit from the PSNP) noted: *'I can learn without worrying about school materials. I will also be able*

*to afford clothes like my friends.'* Participation can also help facilitate income-generation activities, as one 15-year-old boy from East Hararghe explained: *'My mother gives me some of the money and I buy chickens with it and I use the money I get selling the eggs to cover my school expenses.'*

Our findings indicated important gender and regional differences. For example, while the PSNP is reaching households that contain adolescent girls, gender norms often preclude girls' access to improved assets. A 15-year-old girl from Dire Dawa explained: *'Now, my father also gets PSNP direct support ... but he refused to give me even 50 birr.... What he gives me is not even enough to buy shampoo and soap.'* In East Hararghe, the conflict in Somali region and the resulting large-scale displacement has had an impact on the quality of social protection in this area. Adolescents described disruptions in PSNP support: as a 12-year-old boy in Community L noted, for example: *'It was late this month ... It is because of the conflict.'* In Zone 5, where the PSNP does not provide public works opportunities but consists solely of grain distribution, adolescents and caregivers highlighted that food insecurity remains an issue. As participants in a community-mapping exercise in Community A, Zone 5, explained: *'We received 50 kg of wheat at some interval and we are not regularly receiving.'*

 *'Of course they told us not to involve our children who are attending school in public works. But I could not manage to do all the ... work, which took at least three hours per working day since I am an old woman.'*

(A woman in Ebenat, South Gondar)

## Key actions to accelerate progress

Capitalising on the opportunity that adolescence represents, and catapulting the country to middle-income status by developing a competent workforce, will require that the government of Ethiopia and its development partners refocus and expand efforts to ensure that all young people are supported to aspire, develop market-appropriate skills, have access to the assets and resources they need in order to capitalise on those skills, are protected from exploitive labour, and have gender- and age-responsive social protection. Our research points to six key actions to accelerate progress:

- **Improve adolescents' numeracy and financial literacy by ensuring that all young people (irrespective of location, disability or marital status) complete 8th grade to master basic mathematical skills; and teach financial literacy** (including budgeting, savings, how to open and maintain a bank account, etc.), in civics classes, as well as building hands-on programmes in clubs and non-formal education centres.
- **Improve awareness and uptake of TVET by providing detailed and accessible information and guidance on TVET opportunities** (especially to rural adolescents and adolescents with disabilities), reducing cost barriers,

creating TVET pathways that begin with primary school graduation, and matching programming to local labour market needs.

- **Expand access to savings opportunities for adolescents (especially girls)**, via clubs, non-government organisations (NGOs) and youth centres, and **to credit programmes for older adolescents (especially girls and adolescents with disabilities)** through regional credit associations (ensuring clear guidance and fair repayment conditions).
- **Raise awareness about and enforce safe and non-exploitative labour practices**, including in factories, industrial parks, as well as domestic work (which is not governed by Ethiopian labour legislation) and for migrants abroad.
- **Improve anonymous reporting chains to report cases of labour exploitation and abuse** (including through youth centres, social courts, etc.).
- **Adapt Ethiopia's social protection policy framework to ensure that the PSNP in rural and urban areas takes account of adolescent-specific risks and vulnerabilities**, paying particular attention to those facing adolescents with disabilities, adolescents in internally displaced communities, and adolescent girls at risk of child and forced marriage.



Adolescent boys in Afar © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2019

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