

Educational Trajectories From Childhood to Early Adulthood:

Aspirations, Gender and Poverty in Ethiopia

Yisak Tafere



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About Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, following the lives of 12,000 children in four countries (Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam) over 15 years. www.younglives.org.uk

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Summary

This working paper discusses educational trajectories and gendered outcomes in early adulthood in Ethiopia. It is based on the Young Lives longitudinal study of a cohort of children born in 1994, the year when the first educational policy that set out the subsequent expansion of formal schooling in Ethiopia was launched.

Young Lives research has shown that the children have gone through irregular education trajectories. Poverty, location, gender, and family situation all played pivotal roles in shaping their educational pathways.

While the national educational data indicate that the number of girls in primary school is almost equal to that of boys, Young Lives research suggests that girls fared well in both primary and secondary education. One implication is that gender parity is achieved at lower educational levels where girls are numerically better-off. Such gender parity in school may, nevertheless, disguise gender inequality that is more visible in adulthood. The national figure is biased towards boys in post-secondary education, and Young Lives research also indicates that the gender gap is narrowing and boys are catching up fast.

Young Lives research has also shown that children's increased participation in formal education was inspired by the combination of expectations from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Ethiopian Government's determination to expand education, and the high educational aspirations held by both children and parents. On the other hand, poverty, low quality of education, gender stereotypes, and the limited scope of the MDGs remain major challenges to educational achievements in Ethiopia. International promises have been renewed in the hope that these challenges could be addressed by moving from the MDGs to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

During this research, different policy interventions on poverty, education, and gender were in place, but there was little coordination in their application in the communities. For children to achieve their aspirations from formal schooling, this paper concludes that coordinated interventions on poverty reduction, quality education, and gender equality are required.

1. Introduction

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were adopted at the Millennium Summit in 2000 to address human development and human rights (Jahan 2010). While MDG1 aims to *eradicate extreme hunger and poverty*, MDG2 and MDG3 aim at *achieving universal primary education* and *promoting gender equality and empowering women*, respectively. It is anticipated that poverty can be reduced by promoting economic growth, decent jobs, increased productive capacity, and provision of social protection to the most vulnerable sections of societies (ECA 2015).

The global milestone of 'Education for All' was set out in the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action, and outlined the political commitments from the developing world and donors to work towards its achievement. The two central components of the pledge were: eliminating gender disparities in primary and secondary education by 2005; and achieving gender equality in education in 2015. A key purpose of the MDGs was to offer children the opportunity of formal education, and more importantly to address gender inequality through education.

Different nations have endeavoured to achieve these goals and remarkable results have been seen in narrowing the gender gaps. Between 2000 and 2015, globally, the number of girls for every 100 boys increased from 92 to 97 in primary education, and from 91 to 97 in secondary education. Around 66 per cent and 50 per cent of countries have achieved gender parity in primary and secondary education respectively, although none of the sub-Saharan African countries were able to do so (UNESCO 2015).

It is widely documented that a gender disparity prevails in education, where girls generally lag behind boys. Although societal values, poverty, location and other barriers present different opportunities and constraints, girls generally are not given equal opportunity with boys. Their aspirations might be hindered, fewer resources invested in them, limited opportunities offered, and they may largely be victims of 'discrimination operating outside the sphere of education' (Subrahmanian 2005: 398). Gender prejudice may start with the family at home, and spread into the community and wider society, or vice versa. It is, therefore, important to understand the gendered experiences of children in international development, bringing into light the salient roles that intra-household forces, socio-cultural contexts and institutional structures play (Boyden et al. 2015). Gender differences begin at an early age for children and develop into more visible disparity when they become adults.

Before discussing gender bias in education, it is important to clarify the difference between gender 'parity' and 'equality'. Gender parity and equality are both related and differ. *Gender parity* reflects equality, in terms of access to, and participation in, education, whereas *gender equality* can be understood as equality that is 'premised on the notion of the "sameness" of men and women' (Subrahmanian 2005: 397). Gender parity can be a foundation but not a guarantee for gender equality. Gender parity in education could lead to equality among adult men and women. The equality could start with an equal number of boys and girls in school, but does not necessarily mean they can equally benefit from education or become equals as adults. Looking at both different levels helps to overcome the common erroneous conclusion of equating gender parity to gender equality (Subrahmanian 2005).

It is important to investigate whether education offers equal opportunity for both boys and girls. If both girls and boys equally gain the necessary knowledge and skills, it is more likely that gender equality could be achieved in adulthood. Moreover, it is important to examine

whether the knowledge gained in school contributes to attaining gender equality outside of the educational sphere. Influenced by the broader socio-cultural context, schools may still maintain gender disparity and contribute to the reproduction of the current gender hierarchy in the wider Ethiopian society (Poluha 2004). Shared educational aspirations and attending school may be evident for both boys and girls, but there is a risk of these fading for the girls once they leave school.

2. Economic growth, expansion of education, and gender in Ethiopia

Ethiopia continues to be one of the few African countries registering fast economic growth, thereby reducing poverty (ECA 2015). In the last two decades, Ethiopia has achieved some of the principal targets of the MDGs. For example, the number of Ethiopians living below the poverty line has declined from 56 per cent in 2000 to 31 per cent in 2011 (World Bank 2015), contributing to MDG1 which targeted eradicating extreme poverty and hunger. MDG2, which targets achieving universal primary education, seems on the track with 50 per cent net enrolment in the second cycle of primary education (Grades 5-8) achieved by 2013/14. Gender parity reached as high as 0.97 in 2013/14, providing the foundation for promoting gender equality and empowering women (MDG3).

In the last two decades, secondary education has expanded in Ethiopia, with the number of schools increasing five-fold, attracting as many as two million schoolchildren in 2013/14, compared to 371,000 in 1994/95. However, high enrolment does not seem to translate into progression through the levels of formal education. Many children left school before finishing primary education. By 2013/14 the completion rate for Grade 8, the final grade for primary education, was only 47 per cent (MOE 2015). In Ethiopia, children are expected to start school at the age of 7 and finish secondary education (Grade 10) by the age of 17.

School expansion has been biased towards urban areas and some regions (with the highest expansion in the city of Addis Ababa, and lowest in the Afar region), mainly because of differences in infrastructures and the involvement of the private sector in urban schools. Enrolment and progression were also largely affected by difference in demand, mainly due to poverty, lack of transportation, child labour, culture (for the example, early marriage of girls), and disability.

Many children leave school at different educational levels; advancement from primary to secondary education has generally been low, but with much improved gender parity. In 2013/14, the general enrolment rate for the first cycle of secondary education (Grades 9-10) was as low as 39.3 per cent with reasonable gender parity of 0.94, but this declined to 0.85 in the second cycle of secondary education (Grades 11-12) (MOE 2015: 16). In the General Secondary Education Certificate Examination for Grade 10 conducted in 2013/14, while 76 per cent of boys scored 2 or above, only 64 per cent of the girls did. This suggests that the narrowing of gender parity in terms of attendance has not yet been translated into academic performances.

In Ethiopia, Grade 10 completers who do not pass to the next pre-university level join Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). The objective of TVET is 'to produce a lower and middle-level, competent, motivated, adaptable and innovative workforce, which can contribute to poverty reduction and social and economic development through facilitating demand driven, quality TVET and transfer of demanded technology' (MOE 2015: 36). In 2013/14, 45 per cent (276,105 students) of those who finished Grade 10 joined TVET. Although 51 per cent were female, they were more likely to be enrolled in short-term training programmes in areas which are traditionally acceptable for females, such as business, information and communications technology (ICT) and hairdressing. Boys had a variety of options in TVET such as wood and metalwork, and other external opportunities such as joining military academies, the police, and teaching, although some girls were also involved in these.

In the last decade, the Government has expanded the number of higher education institutions from eight to 36, distributed all over the country. Accordingly, the undergraduate enrolment of students in higher education institutions increased by more than 30 per cent between 2010/11 and 2013/14. Private higher education has expanded, with 98 institutions accommodating 15 per cent of all students by 2013/14, although the majority were in urban areas and selected regions. In 2014/15, 84 per cent of those who took the national exam in Grade 12 obtained results which made them eligible to attend universities. Girls made up 38 per cent of the university entry in 2015. Girls' results in the Grade 12 Higher Education Entrance Certificate Examination were lower than boys. In 2013/14, while 45 per cent of boys scored the benchmark of 350 points or above, only 34 per cent of girls did (MOE 2016: 25).

At lower educational levels, gender parity seems to have been achieved, but at higher levels, where the benefit of education is enjoyed and gender equality could be achieved, the gender disparity prevails. Given such evidence, pertinent research questions are: why do some girls fail to progress to a higher level of education? How and when are the gender disparities created and reproduced? What does such a low rate of school enrolment mean for gender inequality in adulthood? Can educational targets of universal primary education and gender parity be achieved without tackling poverty in general, and child poverty in particular?

Considering that poverty, lack of education, and gender inequality are interlinked (Uterhalter 2012: 254), this working paper investigates these using empirical evidence from Young Lives in Ethiopia. It argues that the three MDGs discussed above are interlinked, and achievement in education and gender equality is possible only if poverty in general, and child poverty in particular, are addressed. The paper shows that limited success in the MDGs may be associated with the limited scope of the MDGs, and proposes this could be overcome by adopting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) where child poverty takes centre stage.

3. Methodology

The paper focuses on educational trajectories and early adulthood gendered outcomes, applying mixed methods and drawing on longitudinal data. It is based on the Older Cohort of children born in 1994, the year when the Government's first educational policy that set out the subsequent expansion of formal schooling in the country was launched. The focus is on the Older Cohort children who have already experienced the whole school trajectory from primary through to higher education. The data are analysed using both survey and qualitative datasets collected by Young Lives in Ethiopia. While the survey data offer quantitative

evidence on school enrolment, progression, dropout and completion rates of boys and girls, the qualitative data are useful to explain the processes involved.

3.1 Sampling

The data used in this paper are drawn from about 1,000 Older Cohort children sampled from 20 Ethiopian communities (12 rural and eight urban). The data were collected in 2002, 2006, 2009 and 2013, covering the period from the age of starting schooling to finishing secondary education. The qualitative data are based on interviews of 30 Older Cohort children, with equal number of boys and girls, sub-sampled from five communities. These data were collected in 2007, 2008, 2011 and 2014.

In Young Lives, poor households were oversampled to reflect the objective of studying childhood poverty. This is also reflected in the qualitative study communities, in which a large number of the households were dependent on the productive safety net to meet their basic needs (Tafere and Woldehanna 2012). Their basic source of livelihoods is agriculture, supplemented by other income-generating opportunities such as haricot picking in Tach-Meret¹ (Amhara), irrigation and flower plantation in Leki (Oromia) and irrigation, stone crushing and carving in Zeytuni (Tigray). Families from the two urban areas (Bertukan in Addis Ababa and Leki in Hawassa) mainly rely for their livelihoods on petty trading, street vending, wage labour, and other small income-generating activities.

The communities present children with two opportunities that compete for their time: work and schooling. In addition to family work, new investments in the rural communities offered children a chance to do paid work. Poor children in particular are expected to earn some income to guarantee that their needs are met. On the other hand, the expansion of formal education in the country has made primary schools available in every community. Children are therefore expected to manage their time and get the most out of work and schooling opportunities available at their local areas.

However, children attend schools which offer different qualities of education. Rural children have no access to preschools and private schools, as these are not available in their communities. They have to travel to towns to access secondary education. This puts them at a disadvantage as compared to urban children. Moreover, poverty affects every child irrespective of locations. Urban poor children could not afford to access preschools and private schools at any level, which offer a better quality of education.

3.2 Methods

In every round of both survey and qualitative fieldwork, children were asked about their schooling experiences, including their enrolment, progression, interruptions, and their perceptions on educational aspirations and quality of education. During the third wave of the qualitative fieldwork, education-focused protocols and exercises were used to establish the children's educational aspiration and schooling trajectories. We used *Educational Timeline*² to help the children construct their schooling pathways, including their year of enrolment, progression, interruptions and achievements. Whilst the earlier rounds of both the survey and

1 In this paper, pseudonyms are used to maintain the anonymity of both the research sites and the respondents.

2 Educational Timeline is a tool used to depict educational trajectories of school children.

qualitative study datasets offered information on the educational trajectories of children, the fourth rounds of both datasets indicated some early adulthood gendered outcomes.

Data collection also involved gathering information on the household economic status, family circumstances, children's situations, location, and local cultural norms that influenced the educational routes of children.

The study was conducted in five regions that are relatively better off in terms of infrastructure and exposure to the long history of formal education in Ethiopia. As such, it may not represent broader Ethiopian children, including those who live in remote areas where access to schools is far more limited than those included in this study. Similarly, it is important to note that any apparently better gender parity in this study could be from the limited nature of the data. Girls' school participation from pastoralist areas remains potentially far lower than boys, mainly due to cultural norms.

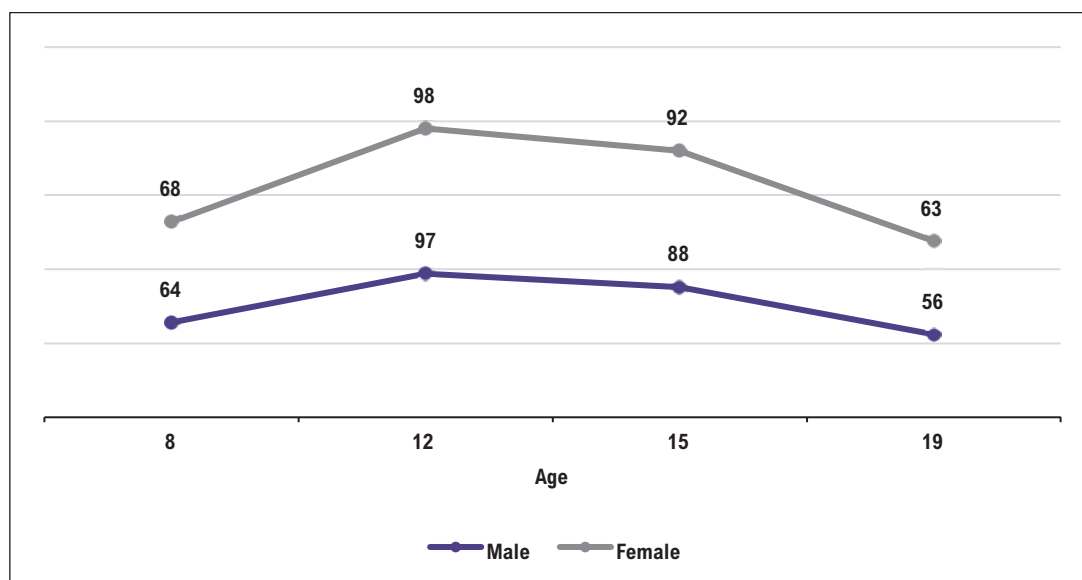
4. Analysis of the results

4.1 Quantitative data: educational aspirations and progressions

The expansion of formal education in the country inspired both parents and children. When schools were opened in their neighbourhoods, both hoped that through education their lives would change for the better. The high value and hope they put in education was clearly expressed in the desire of both parents and children for the children to achieve a high level of education. At age 15, in answer to the question, 'if you could study as long you would like, what level of formal education would you like to complete?', about 78 per cent of boys and 70 per cent of girls wanted to complete a university education. For the same question, 81.5 per cent of parents wanted to see their sons, and 75 per cent wanted to see their daughters, reach a university level of education. Parents had higher ambitions than their children. The gender disparity in aspiration is clear; with both children and parents favouring boys to reach the higher educational levels (see Tafere 2015; Favara 2016).

As Figure 1 shows, the number of schoolchildren reached its peak at age 12, but declined subsequently. The large difference between the school enrolment of those aged 8 and 12 suggest that many joined school later than the expected enrolment age of 7 years old. Such a delay would impact on their school progression and completion rates. Both survey and qualitative data indicate that children began working, including undertaking paid work, before joining school (Tafere 2015).

Figure 1. *Trajectories of school enrolment of Young Lives children over 11-year period (percentages)*



However, due to work, family circumstances, ill-health, and school-related problems, several children drop out or interrupt their schooling. Between 2006 and 2009, 8 per cent of children dropped out of school, with only 18 per cent completing primary school by age 15. The survey data showed disparities in dropout and completion rates. More rural (12 per cent) than urban (4 per cent) children, boys (9 per cent) than girls (7 per cent), and poor (9 per cent) than non-poor (6 per cent) children, had to drop out of school. This resulted in lower completion rates for those residing in rural (10 per cent) than urban (29 per cent) areas, girls (17 per cent) than boys (19 per cent), and poor (15 per cent) than non-poor (24 per cent) children (see Tafere and Pankhurst 2015).

Throughout the study, more girls have been in school than boys. Despite their low level of dropout, girls were less likely to have a better completion rate at the expected age to finish each level of education. They were less likely to quit school altogether, but in their effort to combine their schooling with work, they find it hard to perform well.

As they grow older, the number of children who left school drastically increased. By age 19, about 41 per cent (43.53 per cent of boys, 37.14 per cent of girls) were out of school, compared to 97 per cent and 90 per cent who were attending school when they were 12 years old and 15 years old, respectively.

Table 1. *Highest level completed for those no longer in education, aged 19, in 2013*

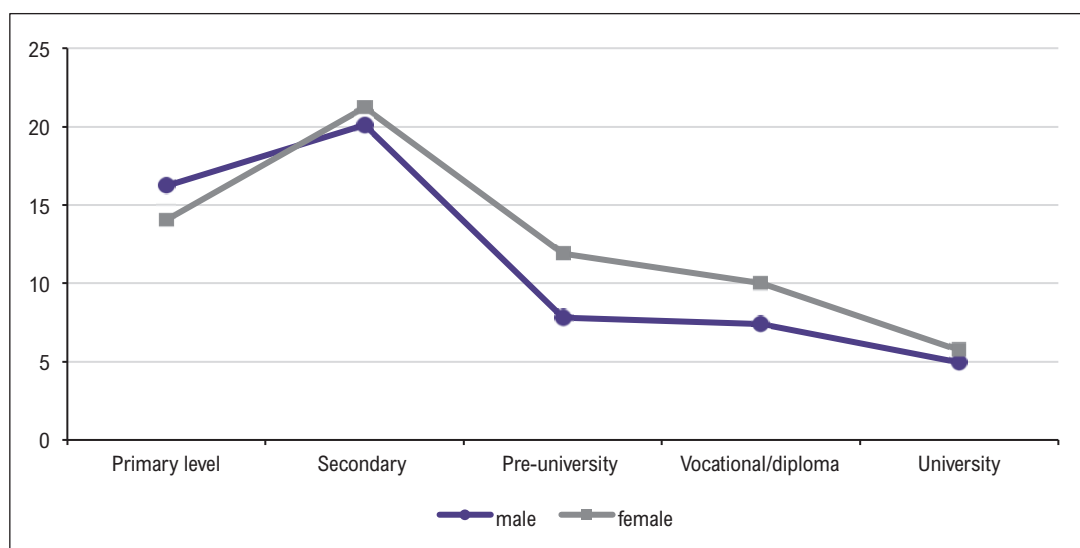
Highest level/grade completed	Male		Female		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
None	9	4.25	5	3.21	14	3.8
Lower primary (Grades 1-4)	51	24.06	29	18.59	80	21.74
Upper primary (Grades 5-8)	86	40.57	59	37.82	145	39.4
Secondary level (Grades 9-10)	57	26.89	52	33.33	109	29.62
Pre-university grades (Grades 11-12)	6	2.83	3	1.92	9	2.45
Vocational/diploma	2	0.94	8	5.13	10	2.72
University	1	0.47	0	0	1	0.27
Total	212	100	156	100	368	100

The majority of the young people who were out of school at age 19 have not finished formal schooling (see Table 1). Children left school at different levels, with two-thirds leaving before reaching secondary school. Girls were in higher education level when they dropped out compared to boys, with a third of them reaching secondary education. Young Lives data consistently suggest that girls have done better than boys.

The major reasons for dropout mentioned in the 2013 survey were work related (39 per cent), banned for bad behaviour or absenteeism (19.37 per cent), financial problems (11.52 per cent), health issues/caring responsibility (11.26) and marriage (7.59 per cent). Dropout related to work was much higher among boys (49.32 per cent) than girls (24.84 per cent), but marriage was more prevalent among females (16.15 per cent) than males (1.36 per cent) (see Tafere and Chuta 2016).

Although children were expected to at least complete secondary education by age 19, only one in five were able to make it to the next level. Girls still did better at higher education, but their number declined compared to the previous levels; with the gender gap reducing (Figure 2).

Figure 2. *Educational levels of young people at age 19 (percentages; N=539)*



The overall picture shows that educational trajectories are largely uneven. Several reasons contributed to such disparities, including the differences in age of first enrolment and subsequent dropouts. As indicated in Figure 1, more than 30 per cent of children who were in school at age 12 were not enrolled by age 8, suggesting they started schooling later than the expected age of 7. Delayed school enrolment is common among rural children, with only a third of the surveyed children and less than half of the qualitative study children able to enrol by age 8 (Tafere 2014).

The fact that grade levels of the same age cohort are spread over different stages suggests that it was impossible for many of the young people to have smooth educational pathways. Their high childhood educational aspirations had not translated into reality when they became young adults. At age 15, more than 70 per cent of the children wished to attend university, but at age 19 only about 5 per cent were able to do so. Many have not achieved what they aspired to in education.

Educational trajectories and outcomes are influenced by different reasons, including poverty, quality of education, and gendered aspiration. This is presented below in discussions based on the experiences of children included in the qualitative study.

4.2 The reproduction of gender disparity

The qualitative data from a sample of children and young people show the process by which gender disparity is reproduced over the course of their lives. Their schooling, work and marriage pathways show phases where the girls appear to be at an advantage, and when this turns out not to be the case. Gender gaps gradually open up, with young women benefiting less from education as compared to young men.

4.2.1 Diverse educational trajectories

During the course of the qualitative study period, many children experienced school interruptions and by age 19, half of them were already out of school (see Figure 3). The children described similar reasons for school interruptions and eventual dropout. The circumstances that affect children's schooling are often more interconnected than separate incidences. One problem may force a child to interrupt school for a year, but may also lead to another problem that may contribute to eventual dropout. For example, Habtamu had collected stones and sold them in the town since an early age. At age 13, he was injured while working and forced to abandon his education for a year. Afterwards, he tried to combine both work and schooling, but dropped out in Grade 5 at age 20 and moved to another area to undertake wage labour. Bereket, from Bertukan, had a similar story. He worked as shoeshine and car washer, was injured, and experienced both interruption and eventual dropout from Grade 9 at age 19. Defar from Tach-Meret left school in Grade 5, because his family was too poor to afford his education. Miki from Bertukan migrated to the Ethiopia-Sudan border in an unsuccessful attempt to migrate to Europe, quitting school at Grade 11. He claimed that a fight with his teacher forced him to leave school, but data from previous study rounds suggests that he was engaged in different income-generating activities and was not focusing on his education. These examples illustrate how schooling trajectories and outcomes were dictated by multiple challenges.

Five young women (Fatuma from Bertukan; Ayu and Beletech from Leki; Haymanot and Sessen from Zeytuni) married before finishing their schooling. All had to engage in paid work

which delayed their school progression; for example, Ayu had reached only Grade 2 by the time she got married at age 16.

When children had little time or resources to pursue their schooling properly, they performed poorly in school. In such circumstances, they weighed up other life choices, with girls entering into early marriage and boys possibly opting to engage in income-generating activities.

At younger ages, work and poverty seemed to affect both boys and girls, but they managed to combine work with schooling (Morrow 2015; Tafere and Pankhurst 2015; Orkin 2012; Boyden et al. 2016). Girls were more likely to attend school while performing different types of work. However, at a later age, combining work with schooling became difficult. One example is Beletech from Leki, who quit at Grade 5 to marry. When she was 14, she said, “unless I study at school, I do not have time to study at home. I do assignments after I finish household chores later in the evening. This will affect my future.” Three years later, she stated, “I do wage work in the irrigation fields ... I have to work and get money. There are jobs like planting onions. The housework is too much. I fetch water, clean the house, make coffee, bake Injera and cook stew”. She had been overburdened throughout her entire time at schooling, affecting her education.

Subsequently, girls also face early marriage, which is an obstacle to their schooling. Fatuma had aspired to finish a university education and become a doctor. She ended up as a housewife after failing in the national university entrance exam. She explained how poverty dictated her educational trajectories and hindered achievement of her aspirations. In 2011, she said:

“I wanted to be a doctor. But it is not going to happen. It was hard for me.

It wasn't as I expected to be. I worked hard but it didn't happen as I hoped ...

I think the difference between rich and poor kids is that, the rich kids can afford to pay and learn in private schools, study along with their personal tutor after class but poor kids can't afford that. ... I think private school promotes more children. For instance, Cathedral school promoted everyone who took the national examination and 10 exceptional students got straight As. But in our school, most of us failed ... I don't have a tutor but I ask my teachers when there are things that I don't understand. In our school there is a library and there are smart students as well but I can't ask them always. But there is a visible difference between the rich and poor ... Yes, it [being poor] has a negative effect.”

Fatuma related her failure in education mainly to poverty. She said, “many students from our school failed because it is a public school where the quality of education is low” (2011). She attended a public school and her family could not afford tutorial support. Fatuma's experience is shared by many children living in poverty.

Children living in poverty remain structurally in unequal situations. Irrespective of their individual capacity, poor children can only access public schools, which offer a lower quality of education compared to private schools. Yordi from Leku, who had to leave private school at the primary level following the death of her father, has been a clever student throughout. She passed the national Grade 10 exam and has joined pre-university education. However, she worried that she may not be able to study medicine at university because she might not get the required results. She explained her concerns:

"I told you [three years ago] that I would like to study medicine. When I was a child, I wanted to study medicine, because I lost my father due to diabetes. Most of my relatives have diabetes and I think it is hereditary. But my probability of studying medicine is very low because I have to score over 530 [out of 700]. In the history of our school, there has never been a student who scored such a grade because of [unqualified] teachers and other problems the school has. My 3.2 average results in Grade 10 is high for our school, but for SCH6 school [a private school in the area], it is one of the lowest scores. We did not have adequate knowledge because we do not have strong tutorial classes. If I pick medicine as my first choice, I may lose it. So I changed my mind. I have to study engineering. If I had attended a private school, I would have joined medicine" (Leku, 2014).

Yordi has the capacity to succeed, but the school she attends does not offer the required quality of education that would help her. Because of family poverty and being one of the best students, she was awarded a scholarship from a local NGO. The support was Birr 300 (£10) per month and was only enough for scholastic support in public school. The NGO could not afford to cover her fees in a private school. She said:

"I have tried very hard to change to private school when I passed to Grade 12. I registered paying a fee of ETB 100 (£3.5) and passed the entrance exam. But I was told the scholarship is only available if I learn at the government school. I had no choice but continue at this public school. The type of school you attend decides your destiny!" (2014).

The similar story of Mulu, from Tach-Meret, suggests how young people growing up in poor families try hard to succeed in school. After losing her father when she was just 10, Mulu engaged in paid work picking haricot for seven years, combining this with her schooling. In 2014, she was in Grade 12 and studying hard to go to university. She went through difficult times, in terms of economic challenges and a fear of failure in education in which she has pinned all her hopes. She said:

"Due to the death of my father we faced a lot of problems ... We faced food shortages. My family were oppressing me, for instance with respect to [not buying good] clothes. They were making me work what others dislike [undertake difficult work] ... In Grade 10, I was stressed because of fear of failure. Most of the time, I was quarrelling with family. I was studying hard. Finally, I scored a good result. I scored 3.00" (2014).

Mulu's story illustrates that, despite living in poverty, some children demonstrate agency in pursuing their schooling. When she joined Grade 12, Mulu stopped working completely and focused on her schooling. Her elder sister, who was employed, supported her. Her strength in managing both schooling and income-generating duties helped her to succeed in her education. Her success not only inspired her to undertake further education, but also helped her to receive family support.

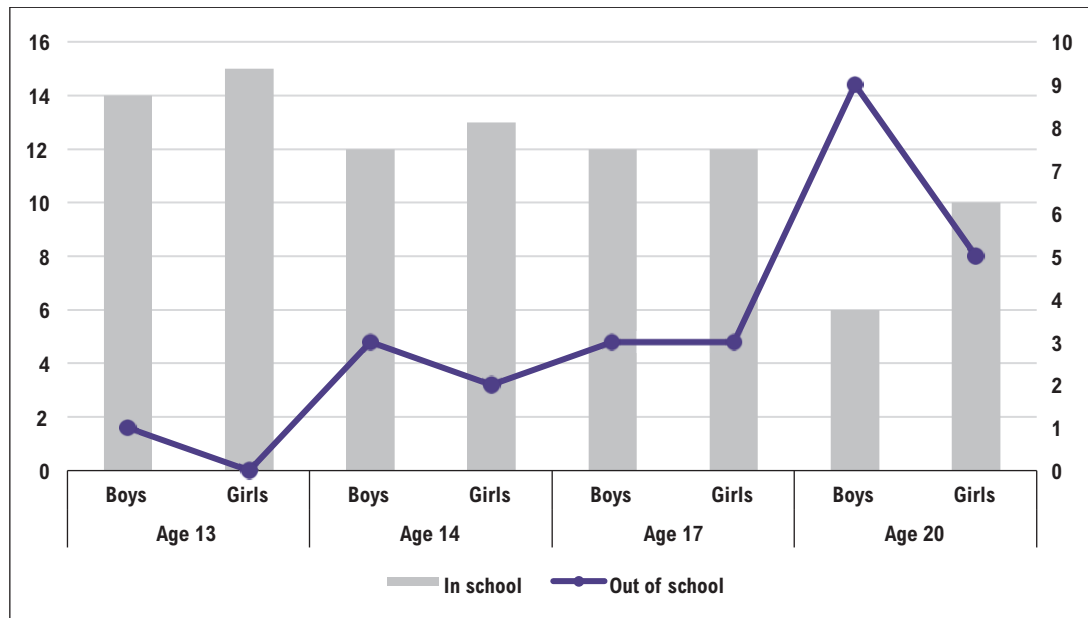
However, the impact of Mulu's early life experiences on her later life was palpable. She said,

"I regret that I did not have any foundation in physics and mathematics. I was not able to do well in these subjects because I had no time to study due to heavy domestic and paid work" (2014).

Although the income she earned from paid work helped her continue her schooling, it also negatively affected her educational performances in certain subjects. As a result, this limited

her options for future studies. Despite all these challenges, she still maintains her childhood aspiration of becoming a doctor, or at least to be a nurse.

Figure 3. *Educational trajectories of boys and girls in the qualitative study (N=30)*



A notable finding is that children who maintain their effort in pursuing their schooling are more likely to attract family support at a later stage. When families notice their children doing well at school, they tend to help them to succeed. Most of the children in this study who were able to proceed beyond secondary education did so with family support. One example is Biritu, who attended primary school in her community of Leki. Because of teachers' absenteeism, low quality of education, as well as paid work opportunities, all of the qualitative study children except Biritu left school before finishing primary education. She was lucky to get family support to move from the community and attend secondary education in a town where there is a better quality of education. With family help, she attended a private school and eventually joined pre-university education. Her parents' shared aspirations helped her pursue her education. When she was 17, she said, "My parents also wish that I complete my education and have a better life. Even though they are worried about the influence of boys [sexual abuse], they know that I am very serious and that makes them relaxed. They also know that I love education." She is confident that she will become an engineer or a medical doctor.

Similarly, Mesih, from Zeytuni, who moved to town to attend secondary school, is on the road to success. In 2014, he was attending Grade 11 and ranked first in his class. He credited his family who helped him to move to receive a better education: "My mother and my siblings have a positive attitude and great contribution to my education. They buy me clothes, school materials, shoes etc."

In general, the data show that diversity in educational pathways was shaped by differences in household economic situations, family circumstances, locations, gender and children's resilience. While the gender disparity seems to be less through to secondary education, it begins to increase in post-secondary. This is discussed below.

4.2.2 *Gendered technical and vocational training*

Young people who do not pass the national Grade 10 exam are likely to join TVET programmes. However, not all eligible young people can join. For many, the poverty which affected their early schooling still continues to affect them at this stage. Many of those who were unable to pass the national exam due to low school performance, also find it hard to continue with technical training because they cannot afford the costs of food, clothing, school materials, and other school financial contributions. One boy, Denbel from Leku, spoke with a fieldworker in 2014:

Didn't you try [after failing in Grade 10] to attend technical and vocational training (TVET)?

"In fact, my result was sufficient to attend TVET school, but at that time, I didn't get money to pay a registration fee. I rather inclined to work."

Wasn't there any person who support you?

"No, there was not."

Do you think you would have learnt if you had got support?

"Yes."

How much was the payment?

"I don't know the exact costs of education. However, since it was a governmental [training centre], the cost would be a minimum of Birr 200."

For what is the payment? For a month, a semester, or a year?

"You pay the money for the school and also need to have additional money for educational materials, clothes and food. The school payment varies from department to department."

Instead, Denbel began working on a construction project, earning about Birr 1,000 gross a month. This ended his educational trajectory and ambition.

Some children, mostly girls, tried hard to avoid TVET. One way to do so is to re-sit the Grade 10 exam. Genet, from Bertukan, failed the Grade 10 exam the first time and joined TVET, but she found it difficult. She said, "the technical school was boring!" She found a way to re-register in Grade 10, successfully passed the exam in her second attempt, and joined Grade 11. Although the educational policy does not offer the opportunity for repeating regular classes, Genet's caregivers were successful in their appeal to the school. This might have to do with her being an orphan and suffering from a serious illness. From the same urban community, Fatuma tried many things, including joining vocational training, and some jobs. But all became difficult, in part, related to gender challenges. She stated:

"I joined technical and vocational training college to train in woodworking. However, the woodworking training was heavy and difficult for female children. It was in carpentry. I could not be involved in the practical training. I tried to learn for a while, but it didn't suit me. I didn't like it ... Yes, it was with the dust and everything else. That was why I stopped it. So my family told me to stop it if I wasn't happy with it and that I can learn something else" (Fatuma, 2014).

TVET is not only difficult for girls, but it also offers a poor quality of training. Many consider it an extension of the poor quality of education offered at public primary and secondary

schools. One of the few girls who took TVET found it hard to gain any skills. Tagesech, from Leku, attended TVET for three years and assessed it as follows:

“I was thinking to join preparatory school [Grades 11 and 12] but unfortunately I scored 2.14 points and I couldn’t make it ... Then in order not to stay idle, I decided to try my chance and joined the technical and vocational centre ... My mother also insisted that I join the TVET. There are two technical and vocational training colleges in the capital of the region. One is far away, while the other is near. There is also a TTC [teachers’ training college] but it is far away. Hence, I decided to join the nearest school” (Leku, 2014).

She opted to study information and communication technology (ICT) because it incurs less costs. She regretted not being able to achieve her educational aspiration: “Sometimes what we think may not happen. I am not successful to achieve my aspiration, but I have changed another field of study.” Poor children can hold educational aspirations, but there is no guarantee that they can achieve them.

Many see TVET as low-quality training because of the qualifications of the teachers and inadequacy of training materials. One indicator of this was that Tagesech has little knowledge of social media or ICT after three years of training. She is ready to graduate without having adequate knowledge and fears she may fail the Certification of Competence (COC) that measures the skill standard of TVET graduates. She explained:

“There is no teaching book, but there are some ICT-related dictionaries in the library which we refer to. We read the handout which is given by the teacher. We do not usually use the internet. We mainly read the handout and the dictionary from the library. We only use the internet when we need to have urgent information about something. If it is not urgent, we do not use the internet...

I will take the COC exam at the end of this year. I will pay Birr 300 for the exam. Whether we pass or fail the exam, we pay the money. To take the exam for the first time, the school assists us [with] Birr 150 and we pay the rest, Birr 150. However, if we fail to pass the first exam, we will pay the total Birr 300 on our own to re-take the exam” (Leku, 2014).

Hence, the cost of the COC is very high, which is considered a problem and a hurdle to further schooling. The knowledge they learnt rarely help them gain employable skills. Tagesech had the following conversation regarding this:

Do you know about social media?

“I do not know. Is social media about society?”

No! It is about Facebook, Twitter, YouTube.

“No, I do not know about it.”

Don’t you use Facebook?

“I do not use it.”

Your friends don’t use it [Facebook]?

“I do not know about them.”

Although the poor quality of training in TVET is evident among all children, it also has a gender dimension. TVET appears to work better for boys than girls (see Genet’s and Fatuma’s stories above). Ytbarek from Leku attends TVET, majoring as an auto-mechanic,

which is a four-year training course. He was in his last year of his apprenticeship, earning some income to subsidise his schooling and family. Although he complained about the poor quality of the training, he pursued it with some interest. However, he still regrets failing to achieve his aspiration of becoming a pilot, and ended up as a mechanic.

In general, the evidence suggests that gains from vocational training seem minimal, compared to the expectations and investment made by the state and families. This has been reflected in other contexts; for example, in Egypt young people who gained skills through apprenticeships had better returns in employment than those who pursued vocational training (Krafft 2017). This is also gendered, with girls faring much worse.

4.2.3 *Marriage and gendered outcomes*

At the age of 19, the young adults were mainly studying (31.39 per cent), working (28.08 per cent), or studying and working (27.42 per cent), with others either married or doing a combination of these. More girls were in school (39.05 per cent) than boys (24.85 per cent); in contrast, more boys were in work (36.14 per cent) than girls (18.57 per cent) (see Tafere and Chuta 2016).

Fourteen of the 30 children in the qualitative study were out of school by 2014, and they were experiencing life differently. The boys were engaged in different types of income-generating activities, working as casual labourers, washing cars, and shop-keeping. Girls were left with two options: either schooling or marriage. Those who were unable to pursue their schooling to the level they had aspired to, moved into early marriage. Five of the six girls who were out of school were married and had their first child (the unmarried girl had migrated to the Middle East for work).

Post-school life is highly gendered. While girls who did not succeed in school may soon opt for early marriage, boys may consider other livelihood trajectories before marriage. In Leki, all three boys dropped out of school and moved into work, but two of the three girls married. Gemechu gave his perception of gendered post-school trajectories:

“I just keep on thinking about how to get money and become rich ... Boys think about getting much money and building a house in the nearby town ... Girls think about getting married to a rich man. If they get married to a poor person, they cannot get enough to eat” (Leki, 2011).

Marriage is a turning point, with almost no return to school afterwards. It is not only practically impossible to combine marriage with schooling, but there is also an issue of decision-making that married women find themselves in. They are expected to focus on domestic duties and to have a child soon. Ayu said, “I aspired to continue my education to the highest level and to have public employment. I could not keep my aspiration” (2014).

Sessen was surprised when asked if she would return to school: “how can I go back to school now?” (Zeytuni, 2014). Once they get married, women may regret their marriage and want to continue their education, but they may have limited power to make that decision. Ayu narrated her own experience:

“[Marriage] has had a huge impact on my education. I had the desire to continue my education. But no one can care for my child if I want to continue my education. My husband prevented me from continuing my education. He said that ‘education and family life could not go together.’ He advised me to focus on leading the family life and to give better care for our child. I have to accept his advice and decision” (Leki, 2014).

For those who might want to attend school while running their married life, schools are not able to accommodate them. Evening schools that match married women's spare time are rare in the study areas. Those who managed to continue their schooling saw the difficulty of the married lives of their peers. They learnt from those who married before finishing their education. Referring to Ayu and Beletech, who are her friends, Biritu said:

"They may now feel comfortable with their decisions [to marry] but after some time they will surely regret that. Their husbands may take care of them for a while, but may not last long and they may later be unhappy in their life ... Education is important for many things. Someone who is educated can have diverse opportunities ... Ayu got married while she was in school, but she dropped it and she is not continuing with her education. If some job opportunities come to her village, she may not qualify for that ... But on my side, I know that if I work hard I will enjoy the remaining part of my life" (Leki, 2014).

The type of work women perform does not require any specific training. This suggests that the lessons they learnt had limited application to married life. They were involved in agricultural activities or wage labour, with more boys involved in the former and girls in the latter.

Schooling may have some benefits, but it largely depends on how they spent their time at school. Those who left school at earlier grades or were sporadically attending classes are less likely to have gained any benefit from it. Sessen, who left after one year of schooling, felt she had gained little: "I could get nothing from going to school. There was no profit" (Zeytuni, 2014). She also found it much easier to disconnect from school: "Yes, but I would get nothing if I could have stayed more time in school because there are girls who have got nothing by continuing their education" (Sessen, Zeytuni, 2014).

Some of the other girls have a different view. Although married women were unable to achieve their educational aspiration, the limited knowledge they gained from some schooling was useful. Beletech, who quit at Grade 5 to get married, said: "[Education] helped me to get knowledge. If I were not educated, I wouldn't be able to do some arithmetic and think critically. To do arithmetic I have to read first. So, it helped me with lots of things. The benefit is the knowledge I got from it" (Leki, 2014).

However, the limited education they gained could not help them get jobs. Fatuma tried to find a job in different organisations, but the salary was only covering her transport costs: "Yes, I got a job in two different places. But the workplaces were far from my home and also the salary was not good. It was Birr 600 [about £20] per month. You can imagine how much money I could spend on a taxi. So, this was not reasonable and I left the job" (Fatuma, 2014).

4.2.4 *Education, marriage, and gender inequality*

Consistent with traditional female roles, married young women indicated that they were performing what was expected of them as wives. After three years of marriage, Ayu said, "I have to give priority for my husband and I have to take care of him according to the advice given to me from my neighbours. That is what I learnt!" The young women's responses were similar, suggesting that their gender roles were common despite living in different cultures. All were confined to domestic work. They described their roles as follows:

"Now, my job is to care for a child [long laughter]. Now, I am a housewife. I involve only in domestic work and childcare" (Ayu, Leki, 2014).

“I perform all domestic works including caring for my child. I am responsible for domestic work ... I have not decided to have any job” (Fatuma, Bertukan, 2014).

For girls, marriage not only ends their educational aspirations, but also marks a point where school re-enrolment is difficult. Their ambitions for self-empowerment and their roles in decision-making in marriage became muted. For example, despite showing willingness to continue their schooling, none of the married young women were able to do so. The decision largely rested with their husbands, who want them to be wives who care for their children and manage only domestic activities. Married young women were not able to be involved in income-generating activities, which leaves them powerless to support their poor families. Fatuma expressed her concern that not having a job meant an inability to continue support her ailing and poor mother: “I should get a job and support my mother. I am still concerned about her even if I am married” (Bertukan, 2014).

Married women wanted to work and contribute to their family. Ayu believes that if she worked she could contribute to the improvement of the family economy. She said:

“Yes, of course I feel it will be improved if I work hard. As you know it is only my husband who is earning some income. But if both of us earn some money we may use my income for purchasing some items for domestic consumption and we may save the income my husband earns in the bank” (Leku, 2014).

Even the places where the young women lived were mainly determined by the suitability of work for their husbands. The evidence suggests that married young women generally had little role in the decision-making of resource allocations in their own marriage. They remained dependent on their husbands.

This study shows that most of the girls in the study have received little benefit from their schooling. It has not helped them gain jobs or develop their decision-making within their marriage. None of the married women entered employment, instead they entered the much gendered role of domestic activity. They had little role in decision making despite having better educational levels than their husbands. Four were married to farmers, and the other to a daily labourer. In general, the young women’s formal schooling does not seem to have empowered them or achieved gender equality.

The study also shows that marriage may have some positive effects. Girls who grew up in poverty find marriage a way out of a hard life and a route to resource ownership. All the married women stated that they were happy that marriage has saved them from working for cash in difficult work situations. They were also pleased with the resources they owned and children they have. Beletech, who used to undertake paid work for her caregivers and brought nothing to her marriage, is now happy because she owns some resources. She said: “When I was with my parents, we used to work for them instead of for our own. All the income went to them; no benefit for me. Now, I became an asset owner. We have six cattle and farmland. That is why I feel happy now” (2014). Although the young women know that they rarely involve in income generation and large family decisions, the facts that they have certain resources and they and their children are cared for by their husbands are much valued. They also participate in the household management decision-making. Overall, the conclusion is that in the context of poverty, gender equality through education is very much limited.

5. Discussion

5.1 Poverty and uneven educational trajectories

Education remains an important aspect of the life course of young people, and this working paper has shown that children went through irregular education trajectories. Poverty, location, gender and family situation played pivotal roles in shaping their educational pathways.

Despite high initial school enrolment, the majority of the children have been unable to regularly attend school and progress. As indicated in Figure 2, their primary and secondary education completion rates were very low. Many dropped out of school before completing secondary education. That has largely to do with poverty, where many children had to quit school to earn a living through paid work and other income-generation activities. Those poor children who managed to attend school had to attend public schools where there is a lower quality of education.

Location of residence also mattered, with urban children faring better than their rural counterparts. In towns, all levels of schools are sufficiently available. However, in rural areas, only primary schools are available and students have to move to towns to attend secondary schools. Location, combined with poverty, disproportionately situated rural children in a disadvantageous position. Many poor rural students find it hard to resettle in towns and cover their living expenses to attend school.

In terms of gender, the study offers mixed results that require close scrutiny. Girls were more likely to have better schooling in both primary and secondary education than boys. Girls were able to combine schooling with work mainly because their domestic tasks could be performed outside of school time. Paid work was also flexible, so it could be done in shifts outside of school. Boys, on the contrary, had to do family work outside the home, requiring traveling to the fields and working longer hours. Those who did paid work were required to work for eight hours, making it difficult for them to combine this with schooling.

Family situations also had different impacts on the educational trajectories of schoolchildren. The death or illness of family members negatively affected the school progression and performance of students. On the positive side, strong family support helped some children to pursue their schooling to the highest level. Some children who were on the verge of dropping out were helped by family support (for example, Mulu and Mesih) and in certain circumstances helped to move to town so they could receive a better education (for example, Biritu).

5.2 Gender and early adulthood educational outcomes

The fact that children go to school does not necessarily mean they equally benefit from education. The magnitude of its impact on their later life depends how they perform in school and how far they pursue their education. Primarily because of poverty, many of the children in the study had sporadic school attendance, with many experiences of repetitions, dropping out, and resuming school. Such irregularity had an impact on their school performances.

In terms of gender, the fact that girls were more likely to go school does not guarantee that they have a better outcome compared to boys. Girls' school performance was particularly low compared to boys. At age 12, the Young Lives study shows that children's reading and

maths competence was generally low, but much worse among the girls (Woldehanna and Gebremedihin 2016). The national data suggest that boys perform better on national exams, helping them progress to the next level, than do girls (MOE 2015). More girls going to school did not ensure they had understood their lessons properly and had higher achievements. On the contrary, boys, despite being fewer in number than girls in primary and secondary school, were able to perform better. While combining work and schooling was possible for girls, it did not help them to perform better (see Tafere and Pankhurst 2015); whereas boys found it difficult to combine work and schooling, which forced them to choose between them. As boys were more likely to have to choose between continuing their education or working, those who focused on school performed better. Girls combine both work (at least a domestic workload) and schooling, which made it difficult for them to perform well. Those who had better achievements, consequently the boys, opted to pursue their schooling properly.

Moreover, at higher levels the education received may be also gendered. Girls who tried hard to finish secondary education, but were unable to join university, were puzzled by the gendered nature of post-secondary school vocational training. This study shows that some girls find it hard to pursue some types of technical training. Although valuable for employment, the training activities were very hard because they required physical strength. This is reflected in the national data. Female students usually opt for short-term training such as ICT that is not as valuable as other skills (MOE 2015). In turn, this influenced their employment opportunities, and therefore their adult life.

When the girls find it hard to perform well or progress to the next level of education, marriage looms in their life trajectory. It becomes clear-cut option: either perform well and progress in school or get married. In the qualitative study, the girls were either married or in school. By 2014, 10 were in school, and the other five were already married and had had their first child. On the other hand, boys were either in school or engaged in other activities. If they fail in education, they re-focus on other activities that help them establish their future. For girls, there is no such option or second chance for improvement. Early marriage presents one hurdle that lays the foundation for gender inequality. This suggests another level for discussion: does gender parity in school translate into gender equality?

5.3 Gender parity and gender equality

The national educational data indicate that the number of girls enrolled in school is almost equal to that of boys. Young Lives research even suggests that girls are faring better in both primary and secondary education. However, in post-secondary education the national figures show boys doing better. This study also indicates that gender gap is narrowing, with boys quickly catching up. This suggests that gender parity is achieved at lower educational levels where girls are numerically better off.

Such gender parity in schools may, nevertheless, disguise the gender inequality that is more visible at adulthood. Girls' performances weakened and they were achieving less in post-secondary education, meaning that not only is gender parity at risk, but also they are not achieving when education matters. If education is meant to change human lives, it changes lives more the more of it people receive. As indicated in this study, girls find it hard to perform and reach university or make use of the existing technical and vocational training. Knowledge gained from higher education and skills obtained from vocational training are values that education provides for adult lives.

The gender enrolment parity that seems to exist in schools is not translating into gender equality in later life. Although poverty in general impacts children's educational success, the educational system (for example, gendered TVET), and culture (early marriage) in particular are hindering girls' educational trajectories and their empowerment. Girls are receiving limited capacity in schools that helps them to influence their lives outside of school. For example, married young women are remaining subordinate to their husbands, despite being more educated than their husbands. They are rarely involved in economic activities, and have little power to decide on their personal life, for example, being unable to return to school or make decisions on where to live. The education they gained in school has limited application to their adult life (see Tafere and Chuta 2016). As schoolgirls, they seem to have some experience of schooling parity with boys, but as married young women, they enter into customarily gendered household chores where gender inequality is more visible.

Any level of education is helpful for children, and in particular for girls. It is helpful to gain some knowledge, exercise their rights and some skills that can be carried into adult life. Education can have a lasting adulthood impact and contribute to gender equality if girls are able to achieve the highest education levels. Those attending higher education levels expressed their hope that they would get knowledge and skills that would help them as adults. Those still in higher education can be empowered through education more than those who have left school at lower levels. This suggests that gender parity can be transformed into gender equality if girls reach the highest possible educational levels that empower them and ensure their gender equality outside of the sphere of school.

6. Conclusion: embracing the SDGs

As a longitudinal study of the lives of children over a period of 12 years, this study can help establish the processes and outcomes shaped by different circumstances that influenced children's educational trajectories. At early ages, both boys and girls enrolled in school, with girls faring better. As a result of poverty, location, quality of education, gender and family circumstances, children pursued different educational trajectories, largely lagging behind the expected levels of education. The majority of children failed to achieve their childhood aspirations. This calls for a better understanding of these circumstances and for addressing them accordingly.

The study has also shown that the combination of expectations from the MDGs and the Ethiopian Government's determination to expand education, along with the high educational aspiration held by both children and parents, increased children's participation in formal education. Yet poverty, poor quality of education, gender stereotypes and the limited scope of the MDGs remain as major hurdles to educational achievements. The goals targeting educational achievements and gender equality, and international promises, have been renewed in the move from the MDGs to SDGs in 2015.

The SDGs seem to have the necessary pledges to address poverty, quality of education and gender inequality. SDG1 (*'No poverty - ending poverty in all its forms'*) means tackling child poverty, which would enable children to attend school instead of doing paid work and to be able to afford a quality education. SDG4 (*'Quality of education'*) would ensure inclusive and

equitable, quality education and promote lifelong opportunities, embracing all children irrespective of location, economic status or gender. It particularly offers girls some educational opportunities, even after marriage, which, as indicated in this study, was not previously possible. SDG5 (*'Gender equality'*) aims at achieving gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls. This could be achieved through gender parity that could be also achieved at the highest level of education, where it substantively contributes to gender equality. Gender equality needs to be ensured from early childhood. Here, it is also important to ensure that gender equality should not neglect the disadvantage of boys at lower levels of education. Boys and young men need to be considered when developing gender-sensitive development policies (Crivello 2016).

For children to achieve their educational aspirations, there is a need for coordinated programmes on poverty reduction, quality education and gender equality. During this research, there were different policies in place on poverty, education and gender, but we did not witness any coordinated and institutionalised interventions in the localities. This needs to be addressed when implementing the SDGs.

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Educational Trajectories From Childhood to Early Adulthood: Aspirations, Gender and Poverty in Ethiopia

This working paper discusses educational trajectories and gendered outcomes in early adulthood in Ethiopia. It is based on the Young Lives longitudinal study of a cohort of children born in 1994, the year when the first educational policy that set out the subsequent expansion of formal schooling in Ethiopia was launched.

Young Lives research has shown that the children have gone through irregular education trajectories. Poverty, location, gender, and family situation all played pivotal roles in shaping their educational pathways.

While the national educational data indicate that the number of girls in primary school is almost equal to that of boys, Young Lives research suggests that girls fared well in both primary and secondary education. One implication is that gender parity is achieved at lower educational levels where girls are numerically better-off. Such gender parity in school may, nevertheless, disguise gender inequality that is more visible in adulthood. The national figure is biased towards boys in post-secondary education, and Young Lives research also indicates that the gender gap is narrowing and boys are catching up fast.

Young Lives research has also shown that children's increased participation in formal education was inspired by the combination of expectations from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Ethiopian Government's determination to expand education, and the high educational aspirations held by both children and parents. On the other hand, poverty, low quality of education, gender stereotypes, and the limited scope of the MDGs remain major challenges to educational achievements in Ethiopia. International promises have been renewed in the hope that these challenges could be addressed by moving from the MDGs to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

During this research, different policy interventions on poverty, education, and gender were in place, but there was little coordination in their application in the communities. For children to achieve their aspirations from formal schooling, this paper concludes that coordinated interventions on poverty reduction, quality education, and gender equality are required.



An International Study of Childhood Poverty

About Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, involving 12,000 children in 4 countries over 15 years. It is led by a team in the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford in association with research and policy partners in the 4 study countries: Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam.

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

Young Lives Partners

Young Lives is coordinated by a small team based at the University of Oxford, led by Professor Jo Boyden.

- *Ethiopian Development Research Institute, Ethiopia*
- *Pankhurst Development Research and Consulting plc, Ethiopia*
- *Centre for Economic and Social Studies, Hyderabad, India*
- *Save the Children India*
- *Sri Padmavathi Mahila Viswavidyalayam (Women's University), Andhra Pradesh, India*
- *Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (GRADE), Peru*
- *Instituto de Investigación Nutricional, Peru*
- *Centre for Analysis and Forecasting, Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam*
- *General Statistics Office, Vietnam*
- *Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford, UK*

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