Social justice for adolescent girls in Ethiopia: tackling lost potential

Country briefing

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Key messages

- The capabilities and potential of adolescent girls in Ethiopia are being stifled by discriminatory social norms.
- Ethiopia's legal and policy environment for gender equality has improved, but this needs to be translated into concrete action on the discriminatory social norms that hamper social justice for adolescent girls.
- Child marriage, in particular, remains all too common in Ethiopia, undermining girls' schooling, their reproductive health, their voice and mobility and their psychosocial well-being.
- Interventions that focus specifically on the education, skills training and economic empowerment of adolescent girls are needed to tackle the economic insecurity that allows discriminatory social norms to flourish.

1 Introduction: why focus on discriminatory social norms in Ethiopia?

Ethiopia has seen positive economic growth and increased access, in general to basic social services in recent years. But many adolescent girls and young women have been left behind by this impressive national progress, with several of their rights and entitlements still unmet. The country has one of the highest adolescent fertility rates in sub-Saharan Africa, with more than 72 births each year for every 1,000 young women aged 15-19 years[1] while the 2011 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) indicates that the average age at marriage in Ethiopia is just 16.5 years.[2] Adolescent girls are falling through the cracks of development programming, with funding for gender work tending to reach older women, and youth work tending to reach boys. Yet, adolescent girls have huge potential to contribute to the well-being of their families and their communities, as well as to Ethiopia's continued development, if well-informed policies and plans are put in place to remove the barriers that limit their capabilities.

This briefing presents the main findings from a study in Ethiopia on the pivotal role discriminatory social norms play in depriving girls and young women of the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

The study findings come from a mix of qualitative and participatory methods, with data collected in two rural districts (*woredas)* – Kobo and Kelala – in Amhara Regional State, which has some of the country's worst indicators in education, reproductive health, labour and employment. A range of respondents were interviewed for this study, either individually or in group discussions: adolescent girls (primarily), plus adolescent boys,

[1] UNDP (UN Development Programme) (2011) *Human Development Report 2011.* New York: UNDP.

[2] CSA (Central Statistical Authority) (2012) 'Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey 2011'. Addis Ababa: CSA.

girls' parents or care-givers, service providers (health-extension workers, and teachers and NGO officers), as well as key decision-makers (district and local officials and community elders).

This study is part of a broader multi-country initiative funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) on gender justice for adolescent girls (Box 1), which uses a common set of research tools that is adapted to the local context.

Box 1: Gender justice for adolescent girls: a new research initiative

This study is part of a multi-year DFID-funded policy research programme on gender justice for adolescent girls. The programme examines four countries: Ethiopia, Nepal, Uganda and Viet Nam. ODI, in partnership with national researchers, is exploring the key capabilities that shape girls' current well-being and future potential. Focusing on economic, educational, physical, psycho-emotional and civic participation capabilities, it aims to shine a light on discriminatory social norms, make visible the often hidden experiences of adolescent girls and identify how policy and programme actors can better respond to their needs and priorities.

2 The context

The Ethiopian Constitution recognises the importance of gender equality for the country's overall development. Article 35 is devoted to the rights and protection of women, including the rights to equality in marriage; to acquire, control, inherit and transfer land and property; and to equal employment, pay and promotion. Recognising the magnitude of violence against girls and women and the prevalence of child marriage, the Family and Penal Code were revised in the early 2000s to include protective measures against gender-based violence and to set the minimum age of marriage at 18 years. However, the translation of these rights on paper into the daily lives of girls and women is undermined by unequal access to justice and a Constitution that recognises the customary and religious laws that govern personal relations and that often hamper gender justice.

Several policies, programmes and strategies are in place to implement laws that aim for gender equality, starting with the National Policy on Ethiopian Women. While this is a big step towards women's equality, there are still constraints on its implementation.

Key development indicators illustrate the precarious status of most adolescent girls. Around 24% of girls have completed only four years of education, compared with 18% of boys and less than 8% of adolescent girls have completed secondary education. Girls are pulled away from school – or never get there – because family poverty makes schooling too expensive, and in making a choice, parents may under-invest in their daughters, because adolescent marriage and pregnancy lead girls to drop out, and because of gender biases within both schools and the curriculum.

Adolescent girls also bear the brunt of discriminatory social norms in relation to their sexual and reproductive health. While there is widespread knowledge about contraceptives, only three in ten married women use any method of contraception, often because their husbands

do not allow them to. More than one-third of women aged 20-49 years had given birth by age 18 years. Antenatal services are provided in all government health care facilities, but their actual use remains low.

The Ethiopian policy environment for combating violence against women and girls is relatively favourable. But violence against women is still prevalent, and this violence is still condoned and accepted. As a result, many girls face harassment at school, as well as degrading treatment and the threat of forced sexual relations.

The ability of women to make decisions about their own lives – the most fundamental for their empowerment – is severely limited. Traditionally, women have very little independent power over most individual and family issues, and this is even more apparent in the case of adolescent girls.

Box 2: The voices of adolescent girls

'Some of my friends have migrated to Jeddah by dropping out from school. The girls went there because there is no other place they can go to. If girls run away from home and move to another place inside the country, the family would find you and bring you back to your parents' home.' (15-year-old girl, Grade 9, Kobo in depth interview)

'It is my mom who raised me. She didn't have adequate wealth. She fell ill with a kidney disease. As a result she is now in Addis. But I am here holding two children. As a consequence, I am not attending my schooling properly. I am in Grade 7. I am busy doing cooking food, feeding these children and doing other tasks in the house. So this by itself is a big influence. Bearing such a responsibility at this age is a big problem.' (14-year-old girl, focus group discussion with young adolescents, Kelala)

'My husband used to beat me. I was very young then. I did not know how I was supposed to treat my husband. He wanted me to respect him but I was conceited. That was not expected from a wife. Then he beat me. However, he never insulted me to affect my personality. He used to prevent me from meeting friends or relatives. I believe he was jealous. He beat me because he loved me.' (17-year-old girl, in depth interview, Kelala).

3 Key findings

3.1 The power to shape their own lives

Roles and responsibilities in many Ethiopian homes follow a traditional gender track. Girls tend to be limited to domestic chores, while boys are able to generate income outside the household. Girls are often left with little or no time for school, play or interaction with their peers, and this limits their full development. What's more, they have no say in how they spend their time, following the orders of their parents before they marry and the orders of their husbands or parents-in-law after marriage.

When adolescent girls do not learn the skills they need to earn an income or do not inherit land, they are fully dependent on parents, husbands or other male relatives thus reducing any potential capacity to negotiate within the household. In general, girls look after their grandparents, their younger siblings or sick relatives from a young age. This shapes them as caregivers from their earliest years, often at the cost of developing any other role.

In the locations visited for this study, male household heads have always been the main income earners and decision-makers. But, as family structures and economic opportunities have changed, the person with the greatest influence in the household may no longer be a parent at all. An older brother or sister who is economically better-off could influence decisions about an adolescent sibling. This represents a shifting paradigm for adolescent girls. For example, an older sister who had earned money through migration to Jeddah in Saudi Arabia was able to protect her younger sister from early marriage, in defiance of their parents' wish. This shows how important it is for girls to develop economic security to better manage decisions within the household.

Early marriage is against the law in Ethiopia, and there are local, government and NGO initiatives in place to stop the practice. Nevertheless, it is still commonplace. Far from ending early marriage, the legal constraints have, to some extent, pushed it below the radar, with many of these marriages now more 'clandestine' than ever, which can leave girls even more unprotected.

Early marriage is still seen as an important 'coping mechanism' for families, with girls married off to reduce their costs to the family and sometimes to obtain bride price. Some girls interviewed for this study spoke positively of marriage to a wealthier man as a way out of poverty. Early marriage can also be the result of family concerns about the risk to unmarried girls of rape or premarital sex – while married girls can also be raped, what concerns the family is the girls' loss of virtue rather than their physical and emotional integrity. Parents see early marriage as a way to 'protect' their girls – but, more importantly, to protect their reputation or family honour.

Approximately 40% of our respondents said that they had been married early. But a growing number of girls are avoiding marriage at an early age, mainly through parental support to continue in school. Study participants felt that early marriage is being reduced through the joint efforts of the local government and non-governmental actors.

Another recent phenomenon is the rise in divorce. When girls have a strong reason to divorce – such as domestic violence or if their husband becomes an alcoholic – they can seek the support of the community elders to carry out the divorce through mediation. Some of the girls we interviewed spoke about divorce as a route to freedom after an early marriage.

3.2 Missing out on secondary school

In both Kobo and Kelala, more parents are sending their children to primary school than a few years ago as a result of dramatically improved access over the past 20 years. Indeed, more girls tend to enrol in primary schools than boys, because young boys in rural communities often look after animals and work on the land. But this pattern is reversed in secondary school, with fewer girls attending as a result of costs, early marriage and migration.

In both research locations, some poor families with children of school age do not send them to school because of the cost of school expenses. Parents still prefer to invest in the education of their sons because daughters are expected to get married and move to their husband's home. Several girls interviewed expressed their regret at not having been educated as a result of this parental priority for the education of their brothers.

Gender-based security risks are also important barriers to secondary schooling for girls who may have to travel far from home to school. Some girls have dropped out of school precisely because of the violence they face on the way from school, and such insecurity only fuels parents' fears about premarital sex and unwanted pregnancy.

As discussed, the need for labour for domestic and farm tasks also undermines girls' schooling. And the study found that early marriage is still the leading cause of dropout of girls. In both Kobo and Kelala, some schoolgirls are also forced to drop out of school and marry at an early age because of the death of a parent, particularly if their father dies, resulting in the loss of the male breadwinner who must then be 'replaced'.

Despite all of these constraints, approximately half of the girls we interviewed were attending school, including some who have continued on to nearby secondary schools with the support of their parents for a delay in their marriage. These girls have real hopes of new opportunities, despite the many challenges that they face.

3.3 The asset gap and migration

Children and young adolescents – boys as well as girls – rarely have any possessions they can call their own. Instead, they help their parents build up family assets, although they can inherit or receive some land or animals as wedding gifts. Those adolescent girls who do have assets – usually through inheritance – are only likely to face social pressure to marry early, as the view is that they won't be able to manage their land and livestock on their own and will need a husband to manage and work the inherited property.

Agriculture is the main source of employment in both Kobo and Kelala, but demand for agricultural labour is seasonal and badly paid. Girls have even fewer opportunities for jobs in rural areas as many activities are not considered to be appropriate for girls. In addition, girls can only secure the same wages as boys if they join forces to supply their labour as a group. A girl who negotiates individually may be paid less because she is seen as less productive.

For many girls, migration is seen increasingly as the only route to economic independence and security. Parents and young people in Kobo and Kelala are losing hope in formal education as an escape route from poverty, given the low levels of employment for graduates. As a result, adolescent boys and girls in both study areas migrate within and beyond Ethiopia. The majority of migrant girls go to Jeddah in Saudi Arabia on a contractual agreement to work as housemaids, although some migrate without a contract in place – a great risk. Inevitably, most adolescents and young people who migrate internationally drop out of school.

Some of the adolescent girls we interviewed had worked hard to save money to cover the costs of their travel to the Middle East. In other cases, parents, siblings or husbands covered these costs, even if that meant incurring heavy debts. Successful migrants send money back to their parents to pay debts and to improve the family's housing. But migrant girls are also at risk of physical and sexual abuse by their employers at their destination, and have no mechanisms to support their protection before they leave Ethiopia, or in the receiving country.

3.4 Reproductive control and physical violence

Reproductive control

Girls in Kobo and Kelala are increasingly familiar with sexual and reproductive health issues, thanks to the work of local health-extension workers and NGOs that promote 'community conversations', where girls can talk about these issues. Other sources of information include school textbooks, health-centre staff, school clubs, radio programmes and, in a few cases, their mothers. Although this knowledge is important to put girls in a better position to make decisions about their own bodies, older members of the community resent this new openness and call the young adolescents 'shameless'. This suggests that, despite progress on information around reproductive health, family and community structures have not changed enough to give adolescent girls a supportive context in which they can use this new information to enhance their own well-being.

Adolescent girls told our researchers about major challenges, such as the risk of rape, unwanted pregnancy, early marriage, unsafe abortion and sexually-transmitted diseases. Their fears arise from the perceived behaviours of the men in their communities and, very often, from too early an initiation into married life and sexual relations.

In addition, there are still limits on the information available, particularly for those girls who are out of school. Health-extension workers, for example, have a specific mandate to talk to girls about family planning and HIV and AIDS, but they seldom talk to them about other key issues, such as menstruation and fistula. As a result, there are many misconceptions about menstruation that are shaped by discriminatory social norms. Many of the girls we interviewed still believe that menstruation should begin after a girl's first sexual experience. If a girl starts to menstruate before her nuptial night, she is believed to have had premarital sex and feels ashamed and dishonoured. One obvious risk emerging from this practice is that girls will continue to be married off early.

Despite greater access to information, adolescent girls are still, in general, unable to make decisions about their own sexuality. Although there is more uptake of contraception, girls still find it difficult to negotiate sexual and reproductive decisions with their husbands, often accessing contraception secretly and at the risk of marital arguments if they are discovered.

Physical violence

Domestic violence is still seen as normal practice and is generally endured, if not condoned. Respondents identified a range of situations in which domestic violence is perpetrated and often 'justified', including a husband's jealousy – when girls may even take the blame. Some girls spoke about being physically punished at their parental home if they were seen as failing to carry out their domestic responsibilities properly.

This kind of abusive intra-household relationship often acts as a push factor for girls to leave the family, including by migration. But migration to urban areas can pose new risks for girls, including exposure to sexual abuse. Some respondents reported stories of girls who suffered sexual abuse and were injured or permanently disabled after migrating.

Sexual violence against adolescents, from verbal and physical harassment to rape, was mentioned in both Kobo and Kelala. Strong measures are being taken against rape, including the enforcement of existing legislation against different forms of violence. This has contributed, in part, to a fall in the number of cases of sexual abuse or rape in this generation, but the problem is still underreported.

3.5 Participating in political and civic life

Although mobile phones are too expensive for adolescents to own, several said that they had access to a mobile phone owned by a family member. Given that the mobility of many girls is restricted, the mobile phone has reduced their isolation and opened up new horizons for them. It has enabled some adolescent girls and boys to chat to friends and exchange information with relatives who live outside their community. However, mobiles have also begun to raise parental concerns that their daughters might be seduced by boys. Adolescents are starting to use the mobile to access other information through the internet and radio, despite logistical limitations to using the internet.

There are school clubs in both Kobo and Kelala that seem to be making a difference, some of them promoted and supported by NGOs and formed with the help of teachers. Both adolescent girls and boys participate in these clubs, where they learn more about their rights and about harmful practices, as well as gaining life skills. However, membership in these clubs can be limited, and not all girls who want to join are able to. They are also more widely available in urban centres and in areas where NGOs concentrate their efforts. It is unlikely, therefore, that more remote rural schools will have school clubs, and girls who are out of school do not, of course, have access.

Adolescent girls and young women have some opportunities to join civic or political associations, but there is a challenge here in relation to the national definition of youth as being those between the ages of 18 and 29. In effect, this excludes most adolescents from official youth programmes or groups.

Box 3: Early marriage, early widowhood: one girl's story

'I got married at the age of 14 and gave birth to a baby girl at the age of 16. My marriage was arranged by my father without my consent. My husband was in Jeddah and came back eight months ago as he was seriously sick, and died five months later. Now, I live with my one-year old daughter and my livelihood is based on petty trading. I believe that if I had not married and had a child, I would have had a different life. I would have migrated like all my friends. I was not sent to school as I had to keep the goats. I blamed my father for not sending me to school and he told me that he was not aware of its importance at that time. I think that, had I attended school, it could have been helpful for me to calculate my income and expense for my petty trade. After my husband's death, my brothers-in-law threatened me to leave the place where I live when I planted eucalyptus. If you do not have anyone to rely on during your troubles, when your in-laws turn against you, where do you go to share your worries?' (17-year-old widowed girl with one-year old daughter, Kelala).

4 What this means for policies and programmes

Despite important investments by the Ethiopian State in the supply of basic social services, including education and sexual and reproductive health, demand for these services is still limited by many factors, including the prevalence of discriminatory social norms that curb the ability of girls ability to access such services freely. And, as a result, girls' capabilities and their potential are limited. Policy and programming from the national to the local level needs to focus more strongly on how social norms affect the demand for key services and limit the ability of girls to both claim and benefit from their entitlements. In particular, work with communities – including with elders and other opinion-makers, is critical to change the attitudes that hinder girls' development.

More interventions that focus specifically on adolescent girls are clearly needed, particularly at a larger scale. These could include more youth groups for those in school, but particularly for those out of school which currently are very limited as safe spaces for social support; non-formal secondary education for girls who have dropped out because of early marriage and who cannot attend formal schools and skills training for them to be better able to take advantage of the limited income-generating opportunities on an equal footing with adolescent boys and young men. These are all practical ways in which the daily lives of adolescent girls in Ethiopia could be improved, tackling the economic insecurity that is such an important factor in the preservation of discriminatory social norms.

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