



“Building Our Imagined Futures”: Supporting Resilience Among Young Women and Men in Ethiopia

This policy brief draws on a qualitative study that uses a gender perspective to investigate the notion of resilience among a cohort of young women and young men who grew up in poverty in five rural and urban communities in Ethiopia, and who are part of the broader Young Lives longitudinal study of 3,000 children and young people in the country.

It asks why some girls and some boys seem to fare well as they transition to adulthood, despite the challenges and obstacles they had faced, while others do less well.

Key research findings

- **Resilience is individual, social and structural.** Young women and young men who are resilient despite difficult circumstances draw on a combination of both individual characteristics and holistic support systems.
- Young people understand resilience as **personal strength** and the **capacity to change their lives for the better**.
- **Adversity, driven by poverty, is a pervasive feature of childhood experiences.** Young people face a huge number of adverse circumstances, both external, related to weather, disease or politics, and within their own families, such as illness or death. **Coping strategies are gendered** – young women take on more responsibilities at home, and young men are expected to seek paid work.
- **Enabling factors in young people’s environments, including government and NGO support, are important,** though the type, variety and duration of support varies. It may take the form of food, cash, healthcare, pensions, loans, school fees, scholarships or infrastructure improvements.
- **Young people are driven by strong social and gendered norms. Gender intersects with the enabling systems and environments** in young people’s homes, schools and communities, affecting the different risks facing girls and boys in particular localities.
- **Supportive and facilitative relationships are key.** Families are important sources of both risk and protection, and elder siblings in particular play a key supportive role.
- **Young people’s inner resources, their belief in themselves, their social skills and the ability to adapt** contribute to their success. Girls benefit when they develop the personal capacity and social allies to challenge restrictive gender norms.
- Young women and young men identified a number of **tipping points**, such as performance in the Grade 10 national exams, or the death of a parent. But they also noted the importance of **second chances, such as migration**, that sustained hope for “changing one’s life”.

The policy context

Ethiopia has one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, even though it remains one of the poorest countries. The government has implemented a series of poverty reduction strategies, policy reforms towards gender equality and national plans focused on children, youth and women, and sector plans that encompass these groups. International organisations promoting children’s rights and gender equality have promoted girls’ education and the elimination of harmful practices, such as child marriage.

The expansion of formal schooling has signalled a major intergenerational shift, with the younger generation attaining higher school grades (Woldehanna, Araya and Pankhurst 2018). Education promises girls and boys and their families an escape from persistent poverty. Despite these positive steps, young people find it hard to achieve their dreams of education, decent work, marriage and children. A lack of both resources and opportunities leaves them trapped between the kind of life they aspire to, particularly if they have achieved higher levels of education, and the life that is actually possible. These findings have implications for policy development and/or revision across education and other sectors.

Young people today face huge challenges. The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted global concerns around vulnerability, uncertainty, and inequality, and shown how crises affect social groups differently, therefore rekindling interest in the notion of ‘resilience’.

Young Lives

This policy brief is based on a study of 64 young people (33 young men and 31 young women) including 11 in-depth case studies (four young men and seven young women) in five communities (three rural and two urban). The 11 cases were chosen because their life stories illustrate a range of challenges and choices faced by children in poverty; the influence of gender and location; and what helped them to land on a relatively positive path as young adults.

The study draws on both qualitative and longitudinal survey data gathered by Young Lives, an international study of childhood poverty and transitions to adulthood following the lives of 12,000 children in four countries (Ethiopia, India,¹ Peru and Vietnam) since 2001. It aims to provide high-quality data to understand childhood poverty and inform policy and programme design. In Ethiopia, Young Lives follows 3,000 children in two cohorts (2,000 in the Younger Cohort, born in 2000/1 and another 1,000 in the Older Cohort, born in 1994/5). This study focused on the Older Cohort. To date, Young Lives Ethiopia has carried out five rounds of surveys and five waves of qualitative data collection.

The study communities

The study focuses on five communities in sites from five regions: Amhara, Oromia, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’ Region (SNNPR), Tigray and Addis Ababa. Bertukan, Tach-Meret, Leki, Leku and Zeytuni are part of the longitudinal qualitative study, along with five other neighbouring sites.²

Main findings

“Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities” (Masten 2001: 201).

Why do some young men and women, even from the most marginalised households, fare better than expected, while others do not? Our findings, reflecting Masten’s broad definition of resilience, show that the answer does not lie in any single factor, but in a combination of individual characteristics and holistic support systems.

Young people understand resilience as personal strength and the capacity to change one’s life

“When I face a problem, I am ready to stand against it.”

(Emebet, age 15, whose father died when she was 6)

Young people understood resilience to encompass two key attributes. First, **personal strength**. For example, Mulu, aged 13, described resilient people as “strong”. She said: “they find solutions to problems and that is how they become able to have a good life.” Second, the **capacity to change one’s life** emerged as core to young people’s sense of well-being, arising in adolescence and growing in importance in the transition to adulthood. In this context, progress might be understood as ‘the expectation that the future will not be like one’s past’ and that ‘it will be qualitatively better’ (Mains 2007). This capacity requires structural conditions that cultivate a sense of vitality and hope (Crivello and van der Gaag 2016).

Poverty is at the root of most challenges facing young people

Adversity is a pervasive feature of childhood experience, often affecting girls and boys differently (Boyden 2009). Young people noted a plethora of shocks that threatened to thwart their well-being, such as drought, heavy rains, crop infestation, livestock disease, inflation and political violence. They also suffered from food insecurity, the social and economic costs of ill-health within households, lack of jobs, threats to livelihoods, and

¹ In the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

² The names of the communities and the participants are anonymised to protect their identities.

weak safety nets. Crucially, children developed resources, relationships and coping skills, becoming stronger, by engaging with the challenges they faced rather than being shielded from them.

The effects of the coronavirus pandemic on young people's resilience: widening gender disparities

A phone survey conducted between August and October 2020 found that a significant number of Young Lives households had experienced economic shocks, such as a loss of income (50 per cent) and increases in expenses (70 per cent). Young women bore the brunt of increased household and caring responsibilities at home, with 70 per cent spending more time on domestic work (compared to 26 per cent of young men), and almost 50 per cent spending more time on childcare (19 per cent of young men) (Porter et al. 2020).

Enabling systems and social and material environments are key

Gender intersected with the enabling systems and environments in young people's homes, schools and communities, affecting the differing risks facing girls and boys in particular localities. Flexible schools, sympathetic teachers and caring classmates made a difference, so that children facing difficulties did not fall behind or risk being pushed out of education.

Furthermore, young people were motivated when the communities where they lived fostered their sense of hope and possibilities. In rural areas, many young people noted the arrival of electricity as a positive turning point, making it possible for them to study in the evenings. New irrigation systems in Leki and the opening of a private quarry in Zeytuni generated hope and provided jobs (Pankhurst and Tafere 2020). Access to a water pump encouraged many young men to stay in their communities, rather than migrating (Crivello and van der Gaag 2016). On the other hand, in Bertukan, urbanisation meant the construction of large international hotels, modern shopping malls, condominiums, Chinese investment, an overground train line, and the new African Union building, but urban young people often felt socially excluded and physically displaced when such developments did not provide jobs or improve their livelihoods (Crivello and van der Gaag 2016).

Government and NGO support is important

An additional layer of external support came from government and NGOs, in the form of food, cash, healthcare, pensions, loans, school materials, tutoring, scholarships and school fees. For example, Yitbarik (age 15, from Leki) attributed his family's improved living conditions to an increase in his father's pension from 180 to 280 birr. "We used to suffer a lot as a result of the shortage of money in our house. My father is living on his pension. Last year, his pension was increased and we have a better life as a result." Some types of support targeted children

with specific vulnerabilities, such as orphans, and in some cases prioritised girls. However, some children received multiple sources of aid from different NGOs, while others did not receive anything.

In rural areas, several young people mentioned having benefited from the national Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) that aims to provide work to the most vulnerable and food-insecure households. An earlier study with Young Lives families found that the PSNP was effective in addressing hunger, but did not necessarily prevent children from dropping out of school and might actually add to workloads within and outside the home (Tafere and Woldehanna 2012). At the same time, 'having enough to eat' was a crucial protective factor in children's positive trajectories and well-being, reducing pressures on them to leave school prematurely or to engage in 'hand-to-mouth' labour (Morrow et al. 2017). The PSNP therefore prevented bad situations from becoming worse, but did not, on its own, create the conditions that fostered resilience so that young people might change their lives.

Young people are driven by strong social and gender norms

Powerful norms structured young people's evolving social responsibilities and their engagement with risk (Kelly, Bhabha, and Krishna 2015; Smyth and Sweetman 2015). Girls, more so than boys, contended with multiple, sometimes contradictory, messages regarding the kinds of respectable life paths they should pursue, whether through school, work, migration, marriage or motherhood. Several of the young women were aware of, and intent on challenging, gender stereotypes and restrictive norms that limited their options, and they needed to develop the personal capacity and social allies to do so. Knowing young women who were already working in their desired professions affected their views about what was possible. Yordi, for example, highlighted the day at the age of 15 when her brother introduced her to his friend, a female engineer, whom she later referred to as her role model. Yordi went on to pursue a civil engineering degree.

Supportive and facilitative relationships are crucial

Resilience was the outcome of social relationships. Families featured prominently throughout the young people's narratives. A varied web of support was most helpful – parents and caregivers (particularly in early childhood), elder siblings (in adolescence and beyond), wider kin (aunts, uncles, cousins), teachers and, as young people grew older, friends, spouses and co-workers. Having someone to advocate on a young person's behalf or to call on in times of crisis and when navigating major life transitions was key. Elder siblings stood out as particularly influential when it came to information, networks, and resources that parents could not provide.

Social relationships were a vital ingredient in the holistic support systems for children and young people across all ages, underscoring a view of resilience as a collective,

relational process, rather than the attribute or actions of individuals alone. Meanwhile, weak social webs of support or conflicted relationships rendered young people vulnerable and stymied their efforts to change their lives.

Changing from day to day: supportive factors for resilience in young people

- “If [a boy’s] life is not changing from day to day and if he does not do anything to boost morale, he starts to lead a hopeless life. He starts to say ‘there will be no change’ whether he lives today or tomorrow and that all the gain is toiling ... [I]t makes me happy having a job rather than staying at home the whole day in the neighbourhood ... [I] take risks to learn new things.” (Bereket, age 12)
- “My brother has been supporting me as a mother, a father and a brother ... [I]t is because of my brother that I was allowed to move and live in town. All other family members refused. Even neighbours [tried to stop me]. They said, ‘how can a girl be set free to live away in town?’ He has been supporting me because he is educated and has experienced the challenges.” (Biritu, age 25, a young woman from Leki, who overcame the odds to earn a university degree in statistics)
- “The challenges have helped me to be a hard worker. For instance, when the drought happened, I came to learn that I must be a hard worker to cope with such issues ... [T]he challenges helped me become stronger.” (Mesih, age 25, a young man from Zeytuni)

Inner resources and pro-social skills

“I want to push forward with my education and become successful. I want to enjoy a better life than the one my family has ... I expect a better life.”

(Biritu, age 19, young woman)

It was essential that young people brought their own strengths and skills to bear on the challenges they faced in poverty and adversity, no matter the quality and quantity of their external sources of support (Crivello and Morrow

2019; Sanders, Munford and Boden 2018; Mulugeta 2004). Young people who fared well believed they could change their lives. They were self-motivated, and persevered through setbacks and structural constraints. Some excelled academically; all expressed a strong work ethic. They made plans but also adapted to change. They took risks, challenging restrictive gender norms, and seized opportunities. They related well to others. At 15, Biritu said, “If God wills, there is nothing that keeps me back.” The researcher who interviewed her noted: “She is the one who usually breaks the ice before others speak. Though the girl lives under a lot of pressure in the family, especially her father’s bad character, she is unshakable.”

Nevertheless, inner resources were not sufficient on their own. Children fared well as young adults when their high aspirations, optimism and competencies were reinforced by supportive relationships, material and food security, and wider structures and opportunities (Crivello and Morrow 2019).

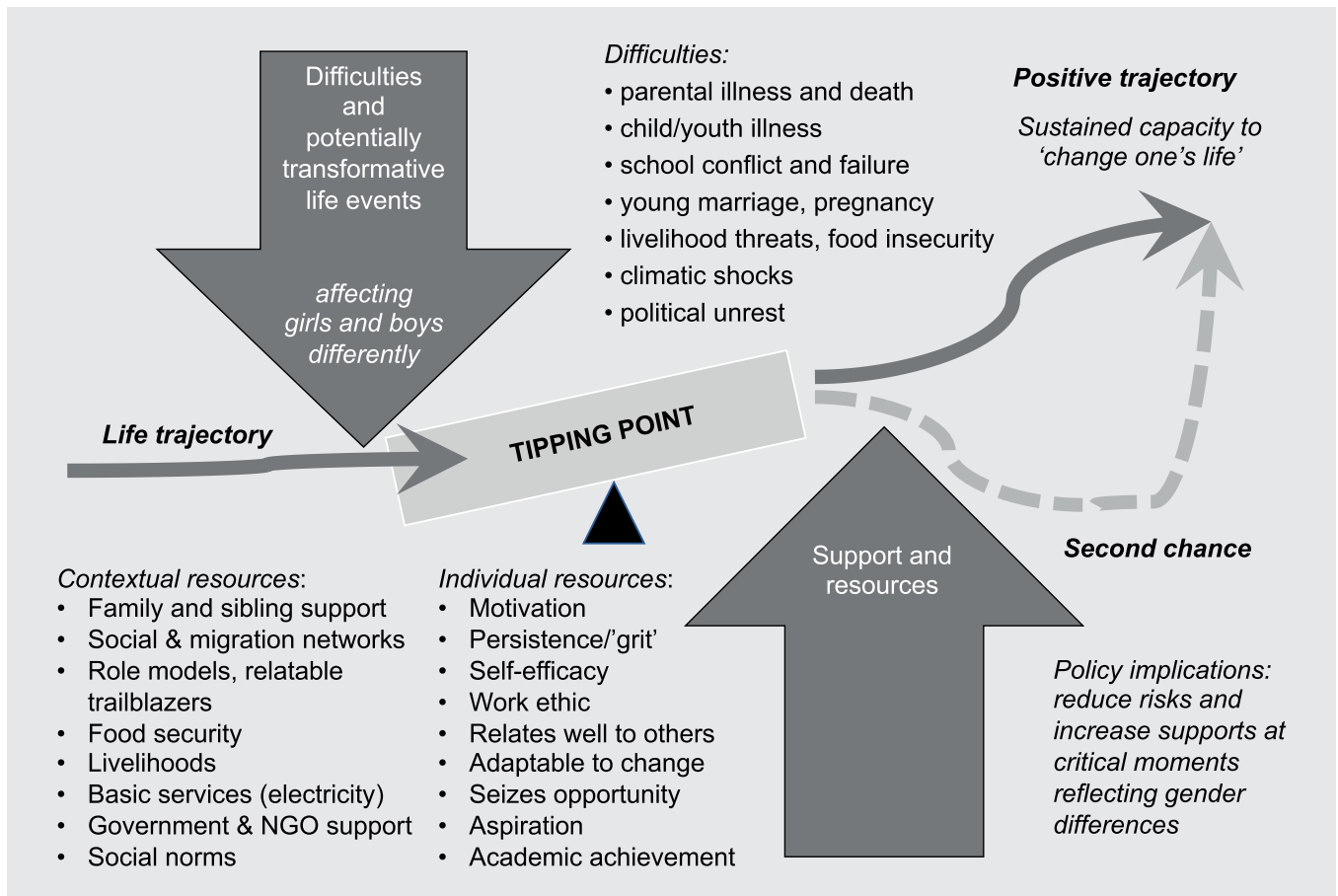
Young people identified a number of tipping points and second chances

These either opened or closed doors, and included performance in the Grade 10 national exams and death or illness in the family. For example, Mesih started school two years late because his family kept him behind to herd. His family were among the poorest households, and his father died when he was teenager. The turning point came at 14 when he was ranked first in his class. His mother described her son as a “clever student” and gave him fewer chores to do at home so he could focus on his studies. When last contacted during the pandemic he was studying at a government university. Such opportunities were especially instrumental in reinstating lost hope for those individuals who had left education before they wanted to, for example, due to exam failure, marriage or the need to earn money. Migration was a crucial mechanism for pursuing second chances when local conditions failed to foster opportunities to “change one’s life” (Birhanu et al. 2021).

Factors supporting children’s positive trajectories

Figure 1 shows the contextual and individual resources that have helped young people in the face of difficulties in their lives.

Figure 1. Factors supporting children's positive trajectories in Ethiopia



Source: adapted from Crivello and Morrow (2019).

Policy recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic is in danger of entrenching existing economic and gender inequalities, which makes it even more urgent to find ways of supporting young women and young men's resilience – and their hope. This requires policies and programmes that are aimed at the young people and their families. It also needs to include the institutions, systems and infrastructure within which they are supported and can thrive, and where they are protected from shocks.

1. **Reduce poverty through broad-based, child/youth and gender-sensitive social protection** so that children are not forced to pick up the slack. Ethiopia's PSNP aims to support the most vulnerable, but does not yet encompass everyone in need, and should be more gender sensitive and gender equitable. There is scope for the latest PSNP to be more gender transformative and for this approach to be taken up at the community level, through structures such as community care coalitions which are supported by government.
2. Ensure that **schools are flexible and responsive** to children's needs when they encounter difficulties. This includes keeping vulnerable girls and boys in school, and supporting them with programmes such as school

feeding. Information should be provided for those who have to leave school early to help them re-enrol or take advantage of alternatives, such as night school. Crèches should be provided for those with children.

3. Provide **scholarships and non-governmental support**, including to those who are most vulnerable but may not fit into official categories. Ensure that the information about this support reaches the most marginalised, including girls and young women.
4. Support programmes and policies that address negative **social and gender norms**. This might include programmes for boys and girls in schools, and **youth clubs which build on existing gender or child rights clubs**; promoting local success stories for both girls and boys; and setting up mentorship schemes. The anticipated expansion in **mobile communication and social media** is a positive opportunity for sharing information, especially as young people have increasing access to mobile technology.
5. **Ensure that there are decent jobs for young people and that they are prepared for the world of work.** The government's Education Sector 10-year Plan (2020-2030) acknowledges the need for improved quality and linkages to the job market so that students are prepared through career and vocational education programming (Tafere and Chuta 2020).

6. **Ensure linkages between the PSNP and community-based health insurance (CBHI)**, noting the social and economic costs to the household, including children and young people, of ill-health of family members. In the new phase of the PSNP, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs is responsible for strengthening linkages to key services, including access to CBHI for PSNP clients.
7. **Focus on policies that support second chances.** Many of the tipping points have policy implications that can support children and young people to have second chances (Sen 2000). These include **addressing barriers to resitting exams**, and **expanding local vocational course options. Supporting young women and men who migrate**, both within the country and abroad, is also a key way of offering them second chances (Birhanu et al. 2021).

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