



A Lost Year of Learning for Girls in Ethiopia:

Evidence From the Young Lives at Work COVID-19 Phone Survey

This policy brief looks at the impact of COVID-19 on girls' education in Ethiopia, summarising findings from the Young Lives COVID-19 phone survey (consisting of three calls between June–December 2020) in relation to the Younger Cohort in the study, now aged 19. Our findings also highlight the importance of addressing associated gender issues in relation to increasing levels of domestic work and risks of early marriage, as well as worsening mental health, to avoid the longer-term impacts of a lost year of education.

We present key policy recommendations in response to these findings, including the need to ensure effective lesson learning in preparation for a potential second wave of COVID-19 restrictions in Ethiopia, and to better prepare for future shocks.

Young Lives is an innovative longitudinal study following the lives of 12,000 young people in Ethiopia, India (in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Vietnam since 2001. The study is divided into two age groups: 4,000 young people born in 1994 (the Older Cohort, now aged 26) and 8,000 born in 2001 (the Younger Cohort, now aged 19).

The Young Lives COVID-19 phone survey consisted of three phone calls with each of our respondents in all four study countries between June to December 2020, to better understand the impact of the pandemic on their lives and help to inform COVID-19 recovery plans.

Executive summary

Ethiopia has shown significant improvement in terms of the educational attainment and performance of young people over the last two decades, compared to their parents, despite persistent inequalities (Boyden et al. 2019). Drawing upon Young Lives longitudinal data since 2002 for two cohorts born in 1994 and 2001, the evidence shows that widespread school enrolment has been achieved, though learning and grade progression have fallen below expectations, especially for disadvantaged children in rural communities and among poor households. The quality of education remains a key concern.

Despite high educational aspirations and increased enrolment, inequalities and gender disparities continue to present formidable obstacles to staying in school. Grade repetition and dropout rates remain high, particularly at secondary school level. Pre-pandemic Young Lives research showed that while girls and boys had similar educational aspirations in better-off households, girls in the poorest households were 12 percentage points less likely to aspire to completing their education than boys (Pankhurst et al. 2018). Gender gaps in learning, which were absent in the early years, emerged more strongly in adolescence, with boys in Ethiopia outperforming girls by the age of 15 (Young Lives 2017). Of those who had dropped out of education before 2020, 70 per cent of the girls had not finished primary school, compared to 57 per cent of the boys.

New research from the [Young Lives COVID-19 phone survey](#) shows that COVID-19 could not only halt progress but could also reverse important gains in education, entrenching existing inequalities and gender disparities. Education was interrupted for the vast majority of students in Ethiopia following the closure of schools and universities in March 2020, with worrying potential impact on future employment opportunities and life chances. Our results show that despite encouraging signs of a return to classes for many 19-year-old students following the gradual reopening of schools and universities since October 2020, a very uneven picture is unfolding.

The economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have had a very clear impact on gendered inequalities in Ethiopia. By the time of our third call in November–December 2020, around two in five of 19 year olds still in education had not engaged in any form of learning (including online learning) since school closures began, with those from the poorest households affected most. The ongoing conflict in northern Ethiopia is likely to have a severe additional impact on access to education.

Following a lost year of learning, many students may find it hard to restart their education, especially those studying at a relatively low level. While boys and girls were both affected, somewhat surprisingly, in urban areas and among wealthier households, girls were less likely to return to school.¹ There are several reasons to be particularly concerned about girls' dropout from school following interrupted education caused by the pandemic.

First, we find that households tend to return to traditional gender roles at times of stress, with **girls and young women bearing by far the greatest burden of increased household work and childcare during the pandemic.** Given the Young Lives evidence that household work reduces girls' time for studying, this could have implications for their educational performance.

Second, **19-year-old girls whose education was interrupted by the pandemic were more than twice as likely to report symptoms consistent with anxiety or depression** than those who were continuing their education, or who had already dropped out of school. This effect was not observed for male students. This could have implications for the performance of those still in school and the likelihood of returning to school for those who left.

Third, **being out of school also puts the poorest girls at greater risk of early marriage and pregnancy**; previous Young Lives evidence demonstrates that girls staying in school is one of the most important factors to reduce early marriage, with teachers and girls' clubs playing a crucial role, and that girls who are out of school face increasing pressure to marry.

Key policy recommendations

1. Ensure adequate funding is allocated to education in COVID-19 recovery plans, including higher education, particularly at a time when significant amounts of aid have been redirected to health priorities.
2. Education programmes should address inequalities in education, particularly in relation to getting disadvantaged girls back to school, to avoid the longer-term impacts of a lost year of education.
 - a. This could include gender-sensitive 'back to school/university' public campaigns targeting girls in poor and rural households, such as local initiatives working with schools to identify those who have dropped out.
 - b. Catch-up education programmes will be particularly important for disadvantaged girls and boys, including those who were already struggling before the pandemic. Support should not be a one-off exercise and should include adequate funding and resources for teachers.
 - c. Flexible schooling can support disadvantaged girls and boys to continue their education at times of family crisis. Approaches such as 'shift schooling' or evening or weekend classes can better enable working children from poor backgrounds to continue with their schooling.
3. Improved measures to address unpaid household work (e.g. creche facilities and childcare support or cash benefits for families affected by childcare closures) can relieve the burden on girls and women and help them get back to school.

¹ In total, 5.1 per cent of girls in urban areas were affected versus only 0.9 per cent of boys; and 4.1 per cent of girls in the top quintile versus 1 per cent of boys.

4. The risk that COVID-19 has reinforced discriminatory gender roles should be addressed through appropriate initiatives, such as local media campaigns and community engagement, to engage whole communities, including girls and boys.
5. Programmes to reduce early marriage should address underlying causes exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This may include practical assistance through social protection programmes, flexible schooling and childcare support.
6. COVID-19 recovery plans should prioritise and expand urgently needed mental health and psychosocial support, including targeting disadvantaged girls. More research is required to better understand what works in providing support and addressing underlying causes.
7. The unfolding second wave of COVID-19 cases in Ethiopia underlines an urgent need for robust lesson learning to avoid further increasing inequalities and gender disparities in education. This should include assessing the quality of distance learning to both identify learning gaps and improve future approaches.
8. Longer-term policies to help address the huge digital divide are required, in order to build on the positive acceleration of online learning. These should include improving and extending internet and broadband connectivity in rural areas, and increasing access to technology in poorer households.

Key findings

There are encouraging signs of a return to education, but these are very uneven, with widening inequalities and gendered disparities

Following the gradual reopening of schools since October 2020, there has been an increasing resumption of classes, with 64 per cent of 19-year-old students reporting they were back in classes by November–December 2020 and further progress achieved since then. However, there has been considerable variation in the pace of this progress.

The reopening of schools has been much slower in urban areas, especially where there has been a higher incidence of COVID-19 and therefore more safety preparations to complete. Only 44 per cent of urban students had resumed classes by our third call in November–December, compared to 79 per cent of rural students.

Regional comparisons showed that 100 per cent and 87 per cent of students had resumed classes in the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' and Amhara regions, respectively, compared to only 31 per cent in Addis Ababa (reflecting the much higher incidence of COVID-19 in the capital).

A persistent digital divide has meant that continuing to learn during physical school closures has been almost impossible for most students, who have neither internet access nor a device to learn on. Fewer than one in twenty

students reported having access to online learning in their school or university at the time of our second call in August–October 2020 (and none in our rural sample or among those without access to the internet). This proportion had only risen to 8 per cent by the third call in November–December, with the poorest households and those in rural areas most affected.

Over half of 19-year-old students were not engaged in any type of learning at the time of our second call, rising to 65 per cent for those without access to the internet.

Even where students were able to access other types of distance learning such as radio, TV and printed materials (or attended online lessons) the quality of this learning cannot be guaranteed, compared to face-to-face lessons.

By the time of the third call in November–December, 39 per cent of 19-year-old girls in Ethiopia, who were enrolled in education in 2020, had still not engaged in any form of learning (including online learning) since school closures began.

There is an increased risk that young girls are missing out on their education to help out more at home

The impact of COVID-19 is exacerbating already heavy domestic work burdens faced by young girls. Previous Young Lives evidence (Boyden et al. 2016) shows that girls are expected to do the bulk of domestic work in the home, including cleaning, cooking, childcare, fetching water and wood, and going to mills and markets, often in addition to working in the fields or daily labour. This can put a strain on their ability to study and can have a detrimental effect on their progress and grades, affecting their likelihood of continuing in education, especially in secondary school.

During the pandemic, 70 per cent of young women spent more time on household work, compared to only 36 per cent of young men. **Similarly, 44 per cent of young women reported spending more time on childcare**, compared to only 24 per cent of young men. While young men also undertake large amounts of unpaid work for their household, usually supporting the family farm or business, this increased by just 21 per cent during the pandemic, and 10 per cent of young women also did more of this type of activity. Taken together, these results suggest a widening of the gender gap in unpaid work and responsibilities.

Ensuring there are adequate measures in place to help address increasing levels of unpaid household work is critical to enabling a more equitable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and avoiding further exacerbating gender inequality. Improving and extending access to childcare support, including in the workplace, or the provision of cash benefits for families affected by school or childcare closures could help to alleviate this growing burden on young women.

Flexible schooling can support disadvantaged girls and boys to continue their education at times of family crisis. Approaches such as 'shift schooling' or evening or weekend classes can better enable working children from

poor backgrounds to continue with their schooling. Enabling better access to (and better quality) distance learning could also support a more flexible approach to learning. Education systems should enable children to progress even while attending to competing needs, such as responding to crises at home or seasonal work.

The risk that COVID-19 has reinforced discriminatory gender roles should be addressed through appropriate initiatives, such as local media campaigns and community engagement, to engage whole communities, including girls and boys. Responding to the interrelated needs and experiences of both young women and men is important for effective interventions. Focusing on young women, to the exclusion of young men, ignores the important ways that women and men relate to each other, both as individuals and as couples with children, and the impact this has on the household and communities as a whole.

Girls whose education has been interrupted may be particularly at risk of worsening mental health

The evolving pandemic is taking its toll on the mental health of young people in Ethiopia,² at a time when the access to often limited mental health services is likely to have been significantly disrupted. During the pandemic there were also instabilities and riots in Oromia, and the conflict in northern Ethiopia is causing significant stress for young people according to enumerator reports.

Twenty-two per cent of Young Lives respondents in Ethiopia reported symptoms of anxiety, and 19 per cent reported symptoms of depression by the third call in our survey (November–December 2020), with no significant differences by gender.

There has also been a marked decrease in subjective well-being,³ with 19 year olds reporting a 17 per cent decrease compared to when they were aged 15 in 2016 (the Older Cohort, now aged 26, reported a 14 per cent decrease over the same period).

The additional stresses faced by many young people during the COVID-19 pandemic and recent conflict, including school closures, economic shocks, food shortages and increased responsibilities in the household, are directly contributing to worsening mental health (Porter et al. forthcoming).

Among 19-year-old girls in Ethiopia, those whose education was interrupted by the pandemic (unable to access online classes or complete homework) were more than **twice as likely to experience anxiety and to report feelings of depression** than those who were not enrolled in education (no significant difference was observed between male students and non-students).

It is of particular concern that rates of anxiety and depression have not fallen in Ethiopia as pandemic restrictions have lifted. In fact, mental health issues have worsened, particularly in urban areas, for young men, and for those reporting food insecurity (running out of food) in the period up to December 2020, likely to have been exacerbated by the conflict situation.⁴

COVID-19 recovery plans should prioritise and expand urgently needed mental health services and psychosocial support for young people, tailored to the different needs of young women and young men, and that are easily accessible, especially to the poorest and most vulnerable households.

There is little doubt that previously underfunded service provision in this area will struggle to meet the growing needs of young people as the pandemic escalates again, including shortages of mental health professionals, social workers and community-based services able to train health professionals in basic counselling.

Girls whose education has been interrupted may also be at increased risk of early marriage and parenthood

Previous Young Lives research has shown that girls who drop out of school, especially in rural areas and among poorer households, are more likely to be married off early by their parents, often against their wishes, whereas those who remain in school are less likely to marry while still adolescents; schools have also been shown to be key platforms in raising awareness and increasing the agency of girls in preventing early marriage (Pankhurst, Tiemelissan, and Chuta 2016). While parents typically have high aspirations for their daughters' education, economic insecurity and cultural norms are influential in parental decision-making.

Early marriage is often considered a means of economic survival both for the family, struggling to feed the household, and to secure a better chance of an improved livelihood for the young girl with her husband. Poverty is one of the main underlying causes of early marriage, often putting significant pressure on young girls to assume income-generating activities instead of going to school. Our research has shown that girls with a heavy workload at home may decide that marriage can provide a possible escape from unpaid work burdens, although in reality this is not always the case.

The combined pressures of interrupted education, widespread stresses on household finances and increased household work caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are therefore likely to increase the risk of early marriage in Ethiopia. Further research is required to better understand both the immediate and longer-term impact of the pandemic on early marriage and parenthood, but anecdotal evidence suggests this is likely to be significant. Ethiopia is already struggling to demonstrate sufficient progress on

² Young Lives investigated the impact of the pandemic on mental health using the Generalised Anxiety Disorder Assessment (GAD-7) to measure anxiety, and the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-8) to measure depression.

³ Young Lives investigated subjective well-being using the Cantril Self-anchoring Scale (also known as the 'Cantril Ladder').

⁴ We were unable to complete the phone survey in the Tigray region due to the communications interruptions caused by the conflict.

meeting the Sustainable Development Goal to end child marriage by 2030.

Effective approaches to addressing early marriage should therefore take these underlying causes into account and provide viable economic and social alternatives where possible. Practical assistance through shock-responsive social protection programmes, flexible schooling, and childcare support should be part of efforts to address the risk of increased early marriage. Further research is also required in order to track and better understand the longer-term impact of COVID-19 on early marriage.

The poorest girls and young women may therefore find it particularly hard to return to education

After a year of lost learning, many girls may be finding it particularly hard to restart their education, considering the risks of increased domestic work, mental health strain and pressure for early marriage. Girls studying at a relatively low level may be especially at risk; more than a third of 19-year-old girls in the Young Lives sample in Ethiopia are still at primary school, with only 15 per cent in higher education.

During the pandemic, similar numbers (around 2.5 per cent) of 19-year-old girls and boys dropped out of education completely in Ethiopia; however, girls who dropped out overall had achieved less education than boys. More than 70 per cent of 19-year-old girls who had dropped out of education at any point before the end of 2020 had not even completed primary school.

COVID-19 recovery plans should address gendered inequalities in education and prioritise getting poor and marginalised girls back to school

Ensuring adequate funding is allocated to education in COVID-19 recovery plans – including higher education – is paramount, particularly at a time when significant amounts of aid have been redirected from education to health priorities, as countries grapple with the immediate impact of the pandemic. Likewise, it is vital to ensure that education programmes address specific inequalities, particularly in relation to disadvantaged girls from poor and vulnerable households.

Promoting ‘back to school/university’ public campaigns may be an effective way to encourage more young people to resume their studies; these should be gender sensitive, targeting both girls and boys, and reach those in rural areas and the poorest households. Local initiatives working with schools and universities could identify those who have dropped out for targeted follow up, alongside local media campaigns.

Targeted support should also be provided for girls who have dropped out of school and subsequently got married or become pregnant (including before the pandemic) if they wish to continue with their education. This could include the provision of broader support such as childcare services and flexible timing of classes, including access to distance and online learning where possible.

Support to help both girls and boys catch up on disrupted learning should not be a one-off exercise and should include adequate funding and resources for teachers, including appropriate teacher training. Catch-up education programmes will be particularly important for disadvantaged girls and boys, including those who were already struggling before the pandemic and with a track record of absence. Support may include targeted additional tuition and the provision of extra learning materials. It is likely that catch-up programmes will need to be continued beyond the current crisis as part of a longer-term strategy to address inequalities in education.

Conclusion: a broad approach to addressing the impacts of a lost year of learning and lesson learning for future shocks

This policy brief sets out a series of recommendations in response to recent evidence from the Young Lives COVID-19 phone survey in Ethiopia, focusing on the impact of interrupted education, especially for girls and young women. COVID-19 recovery plans and education programmes should include targeted efforts to address exacerbated inequalities in education, particularly in relation to disadvantaged girls from poor and vulnerable households.

The unprecedented scale of the economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the recent increase in infections in Ethiopia, underline an urgent need for robust lesson learning in order to avoid further exacerbating inequalities and gender disparities in access to education. The conflict situation in northern Ethiopia is also of increasing concern. We were unable to complete our data collection in Tigray during November–December 2020 and therefore could not include data for the region in the third phone survey.

COVID-19 has accelerated the global trend of online learning, but this is not widely accessible in Ethiopia. We need to better understand the differential impact of school closures on learning outcomes, to both identify learning gaps and improve future approaches. This should include a focus on teacher training and adequate pay during the disruption of classes, in case the second wave necessitates further school closures. Longer-term policies to help address the huge digital divide are required, including by improving and extending internet and broadband connectivity in rural areas and increasing access to technology in poorer households.

Further research is also required to assess the impact of increased domestic work on learning outcomes and the risk of dropping out of education altogether; to assess the prevalence of related mental health issues and better understand what works in providing support and addressing underlying causes; and to evaluate the impact of education interruptions on the risk of early marriage and parenthood, including supporting those who did get married to continue their education.

Without a broad approach to supporting the needs of young people, especially disadvantaged girls, a lost year of learning in Ethiopia is likely to have profound long-term impact.



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