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# Closing the Gender Employment Gap to Help Achieve Sustainable Development Goal 8:

## Better Skills Can Improve Access to Decent Work, but Gender Inequality is Holding Young Women Back

### Overview

**Getting a decent job is much harder for women than it is for men.** Around the world, young women face many challenges in accessing secure and well-paid jobs. Women are more likely to be in vulnerable employment and earn less than men, with significantly higher participation in unpaid domestic work. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated gender gaps in both employment and earnings, and globally the current labour rate participation rate for women is just over 50 per cent, compared to 80 per cent for men (World Bank 2022). Clearly, **much more needs to be done to achieve equal access to secure, decent jobs for all and meet Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8) by 2030** (United Nations n.d.).

**Young Lives has generated important insights into how skills develop from early childhood through to adulthood, and how these skills affect young people's**

**employment opportunities and choices** across our four study countries: Ethiopia, India (in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Vietnam. For example, acquiring strong cognitive skills in adolescence, measured by performance in maths and literacy tests, improves young people's chances of paid employment across all four countries (Favara, Chang, and Sánchez 2018). Unfortunately, inequalities in these skills appear early in life, particularly among children from the poorest households and in rural areas, who are usually most disadvantaged (Helmets and Patnam 2011).

**While girls and boys have similar skills in the early years, gender differences become more marked in adolescence, with significant country variations.** Among our sample, by the age of 15, girls in India significantly underperform in maths and literacy tests compared to boys, while in Vietnam, girls outperform boys in both tests. Gender differences in social and emotional skills typically emerge during late adolescence, particularly in skills related

to empowerment, with adolescent girls having significantly lower self-efficacy than boys by the age of 19, across all four countries.

**New analysis of our longitudinal data shows that achieving strong cognitive skills by the age of 19 can help young women access paid employment in early adulthood and reduce the gender employment gap, particularly in Ethiopia and Peru.** However, our data in India and Vietnam shows that this relationship is not automatic, and that multiple factors may influence the gap, depending on country contexts. In India, which has the largest gender employment gap among our study countries, women with strong cognitive skills are no more likely to be employed than those with low cognitive skills. In Vietnam, which has the highest proportion of young women in work in our study, strong cognitive skills have only a modest impact on reducing the gender employment gap.

**Socio-economic constraints and gender norms that discriminate against girls and women continue to present significant barriers to achieving equal access to decent work, including the unequal burden of unpaid care work, limited access to affordable childcare, and early marriage and parenthood.** This is particularly relevant in countries like India where one in four girls are still married before the age of 18 (UNICEF 2020), and where highly skilled women still routinely remain outside of the labour force to care for children and other family members.

**This policy brief summarises Young Lives research findings on skills and the gender employment gap across our four study countries, and presents key policy recommendations** to better support women's participation in paid employment and achieve gender equality, highlighting that:

- **Reducing the gender employment gap requires a broad approach to address the socio-economic constraints and gender norms that keep young women out of the workforce**, alongside initiatives to increase adolescent girls' skills and improve young women's access to high-paid and high-status jobs.
- **Efforts to support women's participation in paid employment should include challenging social norms that discriminate against girls and women**, particularly in relation to relieving the burden of unpaid care work, increasing access to affordable childcare and reducing early marriage.
- **Targeted investment in promoting adolescent girls' skills and supporting them to stay in education, including in higher education and vocational training**, remain key goals. However, improving skills and educational outcomes may not translate into increased women's participation in decent paid work without addressing country-specific barriers to gender equality.

## The Young Lives study

Young Lives is a unique longitudinal study that has been following the lives of 12,000 young people in Ethiopia, India (in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), Peru and Vietnam since 2002. In each country, the study is divided into two age groups: 2,000 young people born in 2001 (the Younger Cohort) and 1,000 born in 1994 (the Older Cohort).

### Building evidence on skills development over two decades

Young Lives is one of the few longitudinal studies in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) that has collected detailed data on skills development from early childhood through to adulthood. This includes a range of cognitive skills and social and emotional skills, since our first round of data collection in 2002.

**Cognitive skills** refer to an individual's ability to think, learn and process information and are often measured using tests that focus on one specific type of academic skill, such as mathematics tests to measure numeracy, or vocabulary tests or reading comprehensions to measure literacy.

**Social and emotional skills** are commonly referred to by a variety of terms, including soft skills, life skills, skills and mindsets, social skills, socioemotional skills or competencies, or noncognitive skills. They include a broad group of abilities related to self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making.<sup>1</sup>

The evidence in this policy brief is drawn from a range of Young Lives publications over the last two decades, including our new report, '**Does Human Capital Influence the Gender Gap in Earnings?**' (Perez-Alvarez, Porter, and Ramachandran 2023).

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from CASEL's framework. See CASEL (n.d.).

## Young Lives findings

### ***The gender employment gap increased during the pandemic, and women earn significantly less than men***

Young Lives longitudinal data allows us to demonstrate and investigate significant gender gaps in both employment and income as young people transition from school to work. At the age of 19, the young women in our Older Cohort were significantly less likely to participate in paid work across all four of our study countries. By the age of 22 (and before the pandemic), though a large proportion of people were in paid work (between seven and nine out of ten, depending on the country), the gender gap continued to be prevalent in all countries, with the exception of Vietnam (Favara, Chang, and Sánchez 2018).

During national lockdowns and related COVID-19 restrictions in 2020, job losses were widespread across all four countries. While these job losses affected women and men relatively equally, women experienced a slower employment recovery after restrictions ended, compared to men, particularly in India, Peru and Vietnam, and among our Older Cohort, then 26 years old. Young Lives evidence shows that in these countries young women remained significantly behind pre-pandemic employment levels throughout 2020, with the unequal burden of caring responsibilities directly contributing to gender disparities in employment recovery (Scott et al. 2021).

While overall employment recovery continued in 2021,<sup>2</sup> we saw a dramatic increase in the gender employment gap in India and Peru. While young men had made a full employment recovery in both countries, even exceeding pre-pandemic levels, the employment level for young women still remained below pre-pandemic levels. In Peru, the gender employment gap among 27 year olds increased from 11 percentage points before the pandemic to 24 percentage points by the end of 2021; in India, this gap increased from 39 percentage points to a staggering 49 percentage points over the same period (Ford and Freund 2022).

The gender employment gap is also reflected in an overall gender gap in earnings, with young women earning significantly less than young men, across all four study countries. By the age of 26, the gender gap in earnings was as high as 70 per cent in India, 40 per cent in Ethiopia, and around 30 per cent in Peru and Vietnam (Perez-Alvarez, Porter, and Ramachandran 2023).

### ***Better skills can improve access to decent jobs***

Acquiring strong skills throughout childhood and adolescence can improve young people's chances of accessing decent work in later life. Our longitudinal evidence shows that cognitive skills acquired by the age of 15 – measured by performance in maths and literacy tests – are a reliable predictor of paid employment by the age of 22, across all four countries (Favara, Chang, and Sánchez 2018).

In India, our evidence shows that children who had higher reading skills at age 8 were significantly more likely to be employed in regular salaried jobs by the age of 22, compared to those with lower early reading skills. Among young women who had been able to read fluently at the age of 8, 30 per cent were in regular salaried jobs by the age of 22, compared to only 19 per cent of those with poor early reading skills (Singh and Mukherjee 2022).

### ***Inequalities in skills appear early in life, with gender differences appearing in adolescence***

However, inequalities in skills appear early in life, reflecting the importance of quality preschool education, particularly for children from the poorest households and in rural areas who are usually most disadvantaged. While girls and boys have similar skills in early childhood, gender differences appear in adolescence, though with significant variation between countries.

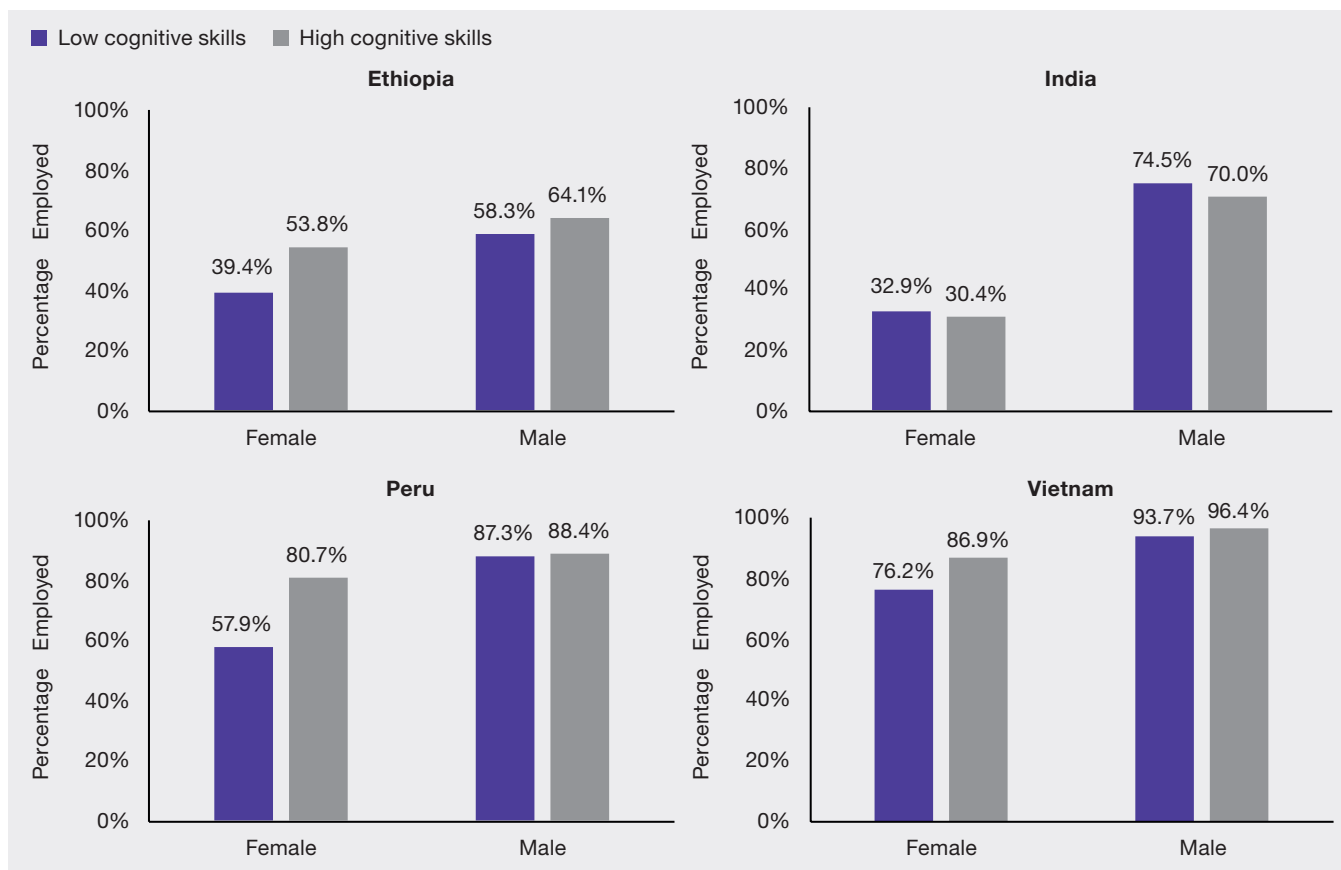
Young Lives evidence shows that gender gaps in cognitive skills are largely absent prior to school entry (at age 5) and during primary school (at age 8). However, by the age of 15, girls significantly underperform compared to boys in maths and literacy tests in India, and to a lesser extent in maths in Ethiopia, with these gaps persisting into early adulthood at age 19. There is much less of a gender gap in cognitive skills throughout adolescence in Peru, while in Vietnam girls outperform boys in maths and literacy tests at age 15, and in literacy at age 19 (Singh and Krutikova 2017; Rossiter et al. 2018).

Our recent analysis also shows that while girls and boys have similar social and emotional skills in the early years, gender differences widen during late adolescence, typically between the ages of 15 and 19. Gender gaps are most striking in skills associated with empowerment, such as self-efficacy (belief in your own capacity to achieve goals) and agency (sense of control over your own life). At age 19, girls have significantly lower self-efficacy than boys across all four study countries, with gender gaps persisting through to age 22 in Ethiopia, India and Vietnam. This is despite higher educational achievement among girls in Vietnam, and girls remaining in school for longer in both Ethiopia and Vietnam (by six months and one year, respectively), leaving many young women at significant disadvantage as they begin their new working and family lives (Hossain and Jukes 2023).

### ***Achieving stronger skills can help young women to access paid employment and reduce the overall gender employment gap***

Although young women are less likely than young men to be in paid employment at virtually all skill levels, our new analysis shows that the gender employment gap reduces as cognitive skills increase, particularly in Ethiopia and Peru, and to a lesser extent in Vietnam (Perez-Alvarez, Porter, and Ramachandran 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Ethiopia saw some reversal of employment recovery in 2021, most likely due to the outbreak of conflict in November 2020, while Vietnam showed a significant reversal following the fourth wave of COVID-19 that hit in April 2021.

**Figure 1.** Percentage of Older Cohort in paid employment at 26–27 years old, by cognitive skills level and gender

Source: Perez-Alvarez, Porter, and Ramachandran (2023).

Note: Date from the Young Lives at Work phone survey, Older Cohort (aged 26–27).

Figure 1 shows that women who underperform on cognitive skills tests ('low cognitive skills') are much less likely to be employed than their male counterparts, in all four countries. However, the gender employment gap is less marked for those who score relatively highly on cognitive skills tests ('high cognitive skills'), except in India, where a significant gender gap persists regardless of skills level, as discussed below. Likewise, cognitive skills levels do not seem to make much difference for the employment status of men, while the opposite is true for women in three out of four countries (with India again being the exception).

In Ethiopia and Peru, we also found that the relationship between strong cognitive skills and higher levels of female employment strengthened during the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that better skills can increase the economic resilience of young women during times of economic hardship (Perez-Alvarez, Porter, and Ramachandran 2023).

***The relationship between strong skills and higher female employment is not automatic and depends on country context; better skills do not reduce the gender employment gap in India***

While strong cognitive skills are associated with better employment outcomes for young women in Ethiopia and Peru, and to a lesser extent in Vietnam, our new analysis

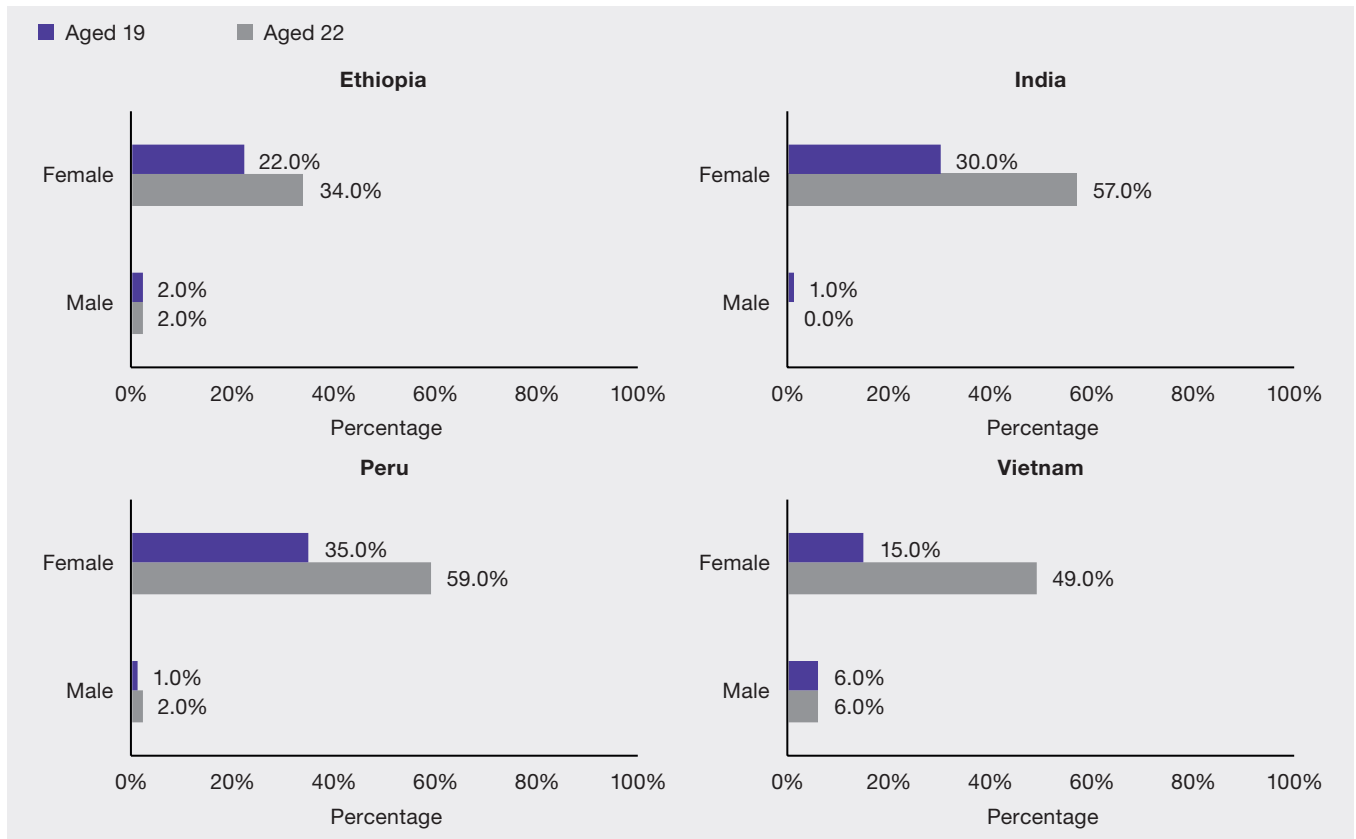
shows that this is not the case in India. Women with strong cognitive skills are no more likely to be employed than those with low cognitive skills in India, which has the largest gender employment gap among our four study countries. Our analysis underlines the fact that multiple factors are likely to influence the gender employment gap, depending on specific country contexts (Perez-Alvarez, Porter, and Ramachandran 2023).

Socio-economic constraints and gender norms that discriminate against girls and women continue to present significant barriers to achieving equal access to decent work, including unpaid care work, limited access to affordable childcare, and early marriage and parenthood.

***The unequal burden of unpaid care work is a key barrier to women accessing paid work***

A key barrier to young women accessing paid work is the unequal burden of unpaid care work, increasing the likelihood of women withdrawing from employment to care for children and other family members, especially where there is limited access to affordable childcare.

**Figure 2.** Percentage of young people not looking for work because of unpaid care and household work, among the Older Cohort who are outside the labour force, by age and gender



Source: Young Lives (n.d.).

Note: Data from Rounds 4 and 5 of the Older Cohort.

Young Lives data shows that childcare and household duties are among the key reasons young women outside the labour force are not looking for work. Figure 2 shows that by the age of 22, 59 per cent of economically inactive women in Peru said they were not looking for work due to childcare and household duties, alongside 57 per cent in India, 49 per cent in Vietnam and 34 per cent in Ethiopia. By comparison, virtually none of the economically inactive young men in our Older Cohort said they were not looking for work because of childcare and household duties (young men are much more likely to be not looking for work because they are still students).

Our new analysis suggests that gender norms related to unpaid care work have a negative impact on women's employment, even for highly skilled women. This is particularly evident in India, where highly skilled women still routinely remain outside of the labour force; but also in Vietnam, where women with higher skills also undertake significantly more unpaid care work, compared to their male counterparts (Perez-Alvarez, Porter, and Ramachandran 2023).

During the pandemic, young women undertook the bulk of increased domestic work and looking after children who were unable to go to school. In India, 67 per cent of young women spent more time on childcare and household duties

during COVID-19 restrictions, compared to only 37 per cent of young men (Ford and Freund 2022). Young Lives analysis also shows that unequal caring responsibilities had an important impact on slower job recovery for young women following the pandemic, particularly in Peru and Vietnam, and to a lesser extent in India (Scott et al. 2021).

### **Early marriage reduces the likelihood of young women getting a decent job, especially in India**

Young Lives evidence shows that marital status is by far the strongest predictor of whether a young woman is employed in a regular salaried job in India. By the age of 22, only 14.5 per cent of married women in our sample were employed in regular salaried jobs, compared to 41 per cent of unmarried women (Singh and Mukherjee 2022). This is an important finding in countries like India, where the majority of young women currently get married between the ages of 18 and 21, and an estimated 1.5 million girls are still married before the age of 18 every year (UNICEF 2020).

### **Supporting girls and young women to stay in school is essential, including through to higher education**

While addressing broader social norms is critical, supporting girls and young women to stay in school, including through to higher education and vocational courses, significantly reduces the risk of early marriage and improves young women's chances of decent work. In India, Young Lives analysis shows that school enrolment at the age of 15 is one of the most important factors in predicting teen marriage, reducing its likelihood by 32 per cent (Singh and Espinoza 2016). Among young women who stay on to achieve higher education qualifications, 46 per cent were in decent jobs by the age of 22, compared to only 8 per cent of those with below secondary school qualifications. Those who had completed a vocational course were even more likely to have found regular salaried employment (Singh and Mukherjee 2022).

Young Lives evidence from Peru shows that, during the pandemic, being a higher education graduate acted as a protective factor for young people staying in employment, even though the gender income gap in favour of men increased from 12.1 per cent to 21.8 per cent (Sánchez, Favara, and Porter 2021).

### **Gender norms also affect young people's education choices and earnings expectations**

While getting more girls into higher education matters, gender norms also affect young people's education choices and earnings expectations. In Peru, Young Lives evidence shows that while there is no gender gap in overall higher education enrolment rates, female students are

significantly underrepresented in specific degree subjects or majors leading to more highly paid jobs, including STEM-related subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), which is likely to underpin a significant gender gap in earnings (Sánchez, Favara, and Porter 2021).

Young Lives findings also show that young people's expectations of earnings for completing both secondary and higher education are predicted by both gender and wealth inequalities, even after controlling for educational attainment and skill sets. Young women, and those from poorer backgrounds, are more likely to make choices that reinforce existing structural inequalities and gender bias, resulting in less access to the best universities and reducing their chances of a highly paid job (Favara et al. 2021).

### **Young women continue to earn less than young men, regardless of cognitive skills level**

Our new analysis also shows that young women continue to earn less than young men by the time they are 26–27 years old, regardless of cognitive skills level, across all four study countries. Among those who are working, women are more likely to be in lower-paid jobs and – in India and Vietnam – tend to work fewer hours, which is likely to be linked to the burden of unpaid work (Perez-Alvarez, Porter, and Ramachandran 2023).<sup>3</sup>

Young Lives analysis shows that by the age of 22, young women in India are 59 per cent less likely to have regular salaried jobs than young men, even after controlling for other background variables such as wealth, rural or urban location, and education (Singh and Mukherjee 2022).



<sup>3</sup> Although not covered in our current analysis, discriminatory pay scales are also likely to exacerbate the gender gap in earnings.

## Policy implications

While efforts to improve young women's access to decent work should always be tailored to individual circumstances and country contexts, our longitudinal evidence suggests several important considerations to guide effective policymaking and programmes.

Overall, we suggest a broad policy approach to reducing the gender employment gap. Addressing the socio-economic constraints and gender norms that keep young women out of the workforce should remain a key objective, together with initiatives to improve their access to high-paid and high-status jobs. This should include relieving the burden of unpaid care work, improving access to affordable childcare and reducing early marriage, alongside targeted investment in girls' education and skills, including higher education and vocational training.

1. **Initiatives to help address increasing levels of unpaid care work** are important to relieve the burden on girls and women and allow them to complete their education and access decent employment. Such initiatives include access to affordable childcare, support to continue working after bearing children (such as improving maternity leave and flexible working arrangements), and targeted social protection for disadvantaged families.
2. **Reducing early marriage** is likely to have huge benefits for girls and young women, **including improving access to decent work**. Policymakers need to tackle the underlying causes of early marriage, including alleviating poverty through targeted social protection systems and addressing harmful gender norms which continue to reinforce early marriage and form barriers to paid employment. For those who are married early, whether by choice or not, targeted initiatives are required to ensure they are also appropriately supported, including access to affordable childcare.
3. **Efforts to promote gender equality and challenge social norms that discriminate against girls and women are more likely to succeed if they engage whole communities**. This should include engaging with boys and men to challenge patriarchal norms, and working collaboratively with community and religious leaders, civil society and local media.
4. **Addressing gender bias in the highest-paid jobs should include advocating for transparent and equitable pay and promotion decisions, alongside initiatives to encourage a wider range of aspirations and expectations for both girls and boys**. This could include working in partnership with specific professions and major employers where women are underrepresented, to shift public perception and broaden their appeal to female employees, and addressing the underrepresentation of young women in specific degree subjects or majors where women are in a minority (especially in STEM subjects, which may lead to more highly paid jobs).
5. **Supporting girls and young women to stay in education becomes increasingly critical as girls enter adolescence, including increasing access to higher education and vocational learning**. Providing safe transport to schools and colleges (which are often at a distance from rural communities) and ensuring safe and girl-friendly environments within schools, including suitable facilities for water and sanitation needs, is essential. Targeted scholarships can also make a big difference, particularly for adolescent girls and young women from disadvantaged backgrounds.
6. **Early investment in children's skills development can have long-term benefits**. Investment in programmes that promote early child development, including affordable access to quality preschools, alongside social protection to reduce poverty and improve nutrition, can improve cognitive, social and emotional skills in later childhood and adolescence.
7. **Investing in new research and building the evidence base in LMICs is critical to inform policies and programmes that can help to improve young women's access to decent work**. Further longitudinal research is important to understand both trends over time and the impacts of early life circumstances on later life outcomes.

## Continuing to follow Young Lives

Young Lives plans to conduct our next comprehensive in-person quantitative survey (Round 7) across our four study countries in 2023. This will include new data on skills and employment across both our study cohorts, enabling further longitudinal analysis from infancy into adulthood.

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