



GENDER &
ADOLESCENCE:
GLOBAL
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Adolescents in crisis: unheard voices

Episode 3: 'I felt like I was in jail': adolescent
refugees, child marriage and violence

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

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'I felt like I was in jail': adolescent refugees, child marriage and violence

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SPEAKERS

Noor:¹ Palestinian adolescent

Dr Kate Pincock: GAGE Qualitative Researcher

Sabreen:² Adolescent refugee from Syria

Martha Dixon: Journalist

Madeline Forster: UNRWA

Dr Bassam Abu Hamad: GAGE Associate Director (MENA)

Mohammed Nasr: UNFPA

Sally Youssef: GAGE Qualitative Research Coordinator (Lebanon)

Dr Faith Mwangi-Powell: CEO, Girls Not Brides

00:03

The world's fastest growing humanitarian crisis as 1000s of Rohingya refugees...

00:08

It's estimated that 10,000 Palestinians have had to leave their homes to flee the Israeli...

00:13

For almost as far as the eye can see left and right, a tide of humanity...

Martha Dixon: Journalist 00:20

Welcome to Episode 3 of the GAGE podcast series: Adolescents in crisis: unheard voices. I'm your host, journalist Martha Dixon. In this landmark series, we ask how can we create a better future for the millions of young people caught up in the increasing tide of global displacement? This episode is all about violence and child marriage. Around the world today, according to the UN, up to 650 million women and girls were married under the age of 18. Most are in countries deemed fragile states marked by conflict, climate crisis, and weak institutions. We ask young people themselves how they see the problem.

1 Pseudonym used to protect the identity of interviewees.

2 Pseudonym used to protect the identity of interviewees.

Sabreen: Adolescent Refugee from Syria 01:09

If I were in Syria, I'd be going out studying, living my life. But when we came to Lebanon, we started working in the fields immediately. And people in the camp, they were marrying off their daughters at a young age.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 01:23

We look at what works and what doesn't work to support adolescents who are living in refugee camps, or in new unfamiliar host communities, where violence has become the norm.

Mohammed Nasr: UNFPA 01:35

If their rights are being denied like this, we will have problems in the future such as a sick community.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 01:41

We hear from GAGE's researchers on the ground who are speaking in depth to adolescents who've had to leave everything they know behind.

Sally Youssef: GAGE (Lebanon) 01:50

And we have this exceptional opportunity to listen to the stories that they do not share with anyone else.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 02:01

And from external stakeholders who are using the evidence from GAGE to reframe policy that supports adolescents at risk of child marriage and violence.

Dr Faith Mwangi-Powell: CEO, Girls Not Brides 02:11

Research is absolutely important because what I know is that dealing with issues of socio-cultural norms are so complicated and it's understanding always what works.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 02:23

We're in Lebanon, where we're talking with Sabreen, a teenage refugee from Syria. Sabreen lives in a makeshift tent in Baalbek not far from the Syrian border. She's a participant in the landmark study by GAGE or Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence. Researchers are speaking to

her over a period of nine years to follow her life path. When Sabreen's family got to Lebanon, she was married off at just 16 and now has two children. Sabreen says it's been difficult.

Sabreen: Adolescent refugee from Syria 03:14

I'm living in a camp here in Lebanon. We're living in a very small tent with my family and my in-laws, my brother-in-law and his family, which is very small for us. The camp is very crowded, there are always fights between the children here. The living situation is really hard. Now with the electricity cuts when it's dark. My children are always fighting and crying. It's very hard here. In the camp, we have to share bathrooms with other tents, which is not comfortable at all. It's not a good life inside the camp.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 03:47

Sabreen broke down in tears several times while speaking to us. She says living in a refugee camp, while being a wife and mother at such a young age is very challenging.

Sabreen: Adolescent refugee from Syria 04:07

If I was living in Syria, I'd be studying and going out and meeting people and living my life. But here when we came to Lebanon, we started working in the fields immediately. And people in the camp were marrying off their daughters at an early age. So it became like a jealousy between the girls and people would start asking their parents why they're not marrying off their daughters. That's how early marriage started here in Lebanon. By getting married I thought I'd be able to stop the work in the fields. But I knew little about the married life and I would still be working the fields and have more responsibilities and children. When I got married, I got pregnant immediately. I had a child at the age of 16. I did not know what to do then. I was scared and afraid. I used to cry. I still feel like I'm a child the same as my children. When they play I stopped playing with them because I feel like I'm a child too. When I started growing up, I started realizing that marriage at an early age is a mistake. Now I advise girls in the camp not to get married because a married life is very hard. It's not like we expected it to be. When I started participating with the GAGE research sessions, I started realizing the importance of getting married at an older age. Because we started talking about it. I started talking about my feelings and what I was going through, I started expressing myself, my feelings, what I am going through, it was impossible before because it was a taboo to do this, I started realizing the mistake that I made.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 05:41

Sabreen says marriage has cut her off from normal friend networks. And she values talking to researchers about her life.

Sabreen: Adolescent refugee from Syria 05:53

My problems are with my husband because I feel I'm not mature enough to be married. I wish I was in Syria now because I have dreams of completing my education and having to work on my own. Instead of spending my whole life here, cooking and cleaning and fighting with my husband and in-laws and taking care of my children. I don't know how to do all of this. I just need to live my life. I need a break. Coming here to do the interview with you, for example, is something I was looking forward to because it's a chance to get out of the house, to break the routine, to stop cooking and cleaning, looking after my children.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 06:33

Lebanon is a challenging place to be a refugee. Lebanon's recent history has been marked by instability and division. It's now going through what the World Bank says is one of the worst economic crises globally in over a century. 82% of the nearly 7 million people there are now living in poverty. Add to this an estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees who poured in after the Syrian war. Lebanon doesn't offer any legal status to refugees, and they're restricted from working in skilled jobs. Without those traditional safety nets, child marriage has become extremely common, with Syrian parents often looking to it as the only way forward for their girls.

Dr Kate Pincock: GAGE Qualitative Researcher 07:23

In humanitarian settings, there is an increased risk of child marriage.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 07:28

Here's Kate Pincock from GAGE.

Dr Kate Pincock: GAGE Qualitative Researcher 07:31

The reasons for this and the kind of mix of drivers varies according to the context that we're looking at. In particular, the nature of the crisis, whether it's protracted or fairly recent, you have different reasons behind rates of child marriage. There's a combination of factors that we can probably say are common across most of those contexts. First of all, it would be the lack of work opportunities. And those are both at a family level and at young people's level as well. So when you have a situation where families are under a lot of financial pressure, often they aren't able to access employment opportunities because of the nature of their refugee status, they're not able to kind of work formally, in the same way that local people are. They may look to marriage as a way of assuring a better future for their daughters.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 08:25

Kate says capturing voices like that of Sabreen's is vital to find out how adolescents themselves see the situation. And

if they can provide solutions. GAGE has a unique research project led by the Overseas Development Institute, to follow the stories of 20,000 adolescents across crisis-hit areas of the world.

Dr Kate Pincock: GAGE Qualitative Researcher 08:48

So what's unique about GAGE's research is for the first time we're really getting in depth to young people's agency and capabilities. And this is a really important contribution because historically there's been this tendency within work around the nexus of humanitarianism, and gender and age, to think of girls as just these at-risk populations who are very vulnerable, very passive. It doesn't really think about what they themselves are actively doing to navigate the conditions of displacement and how they themselves feel about the situation. And so what we've done with this research is to really try and shine a light on girls' own experiences, not only of violence and dispossession, but also an agency of hope, and of their ambitions for the future and the ways in which they are trying to overcome the challenges they face.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 09:37

And that agency is clear in Sabreen's case. Sabreen now has lots of ideas about how to build a better future for refugees like her and help prevent more child marriage.

Sabreen: Adolescent refugee from Syria 09:57

What the international organisations can do to help girls like me is to do more awareness sessions. They can do conversational sessions like the ones we do with GAGE. When we talk and share what we're going through, it makes us feel better. When I come to the GAGE sessions, I go back happy to my children, I feel like I've done something different, I feel better and happier. But the organisations need to give money for the girls to come, because husbands and in-laws will not allow them to participate if they are not gaining any payment from these sessions. Also, I think other types of sessions are needed. Now I'm doing a life skills programme where Syrian and Lebanese girls are attending the sessions together. This makes me so happy because I can speak to the Lebanese girls, and we get to know each other better. And this is a really positive thing to provide. But for the Syrian girls to be able to take part the organization needs to pay money to allow us to come.

Dr Faith Mwangi- Powell: CEO, Girls Not Brides 10:59

Child marriage is wrong for anybody. It's wrong for any girl. It's wrong for girls because they are denied the opportunities to go to school to realize their full potential. But it's worse for refugee girls. Because what happened...

Martha Dixon: Journalist 11:15

Dr. Faith Mwangi-Powell is the CEO of the Global Partnership to end child marriage called Girls Not Brides.

Dr Faith Mwangi- Powell: CEO, Girls Not Brides 11:23

When we are working on child marriages, to understand context, what is the context within which this child marriage is happening? Because in different countries, in different communities, there are different drivers of child marriage. Some, in some countries, that driver is poverty. So we need to address the root causes of poverty, and some drivers are just cultural norms. We need to address those cultural norms or those social norms, if you like. We need to address that in some communities it's religion, we need to address those norms. So it really making sure that we understand what are some of the root causes of what is going on. I think in sometimes in crisis of war, for example, it may be more that women becomes like the they call them the weapons of war. So it's you know, you fight increased rape, you fight increased child marriage, but that is really the nature of war sometimes. So it's really understanding what is going on, but also understanding where are people coming from? Because when people come from their own communities, and they are displaced, they tend to cling on harder to their traditions, because that is what they can identify with. So understanding where are people being displaced from? What are some of the things they have practice in their own communities, and how they can hold on to some of those things? Because that is what gives them identity. I'm not saying it's right, but that is what we have seen happen. So understanding that contextual framing is very, very, very important that we are really clear. And there is a lot of research GAGE has done a lot of research in some of these contexts. So understanding some of those context to help us frame our solutions we can never take that one size fits all the solutions we deliver needs to be tailor-made to what is the driver, but also they need to be driven by evidence. What is the evidence that this works? So that's why people like GAGE are important because then we say these are the root causes, what is the evidence of what work we need to do to address the situation we have at hand? I think what we need to do first of all, is to be aware that in every response we are doing, we make sure that there is a generous response that we are becoming sensitive to the needs of women and girls in those displaced communities. So it's not one programme for everything it's making sure that we have a jaded response to some of the work we are doing. Putting girls at the heart of the response finding out what is going on and how can we help girls to be part of the solution or women to be part of the solution. But most importantly, is when we are building infrastructure before food because there are infrastructures which are being built within those displaced communities may be for food may be

for security, may be for health. Within those infrastructures, we are really putting girls and the risk of girls at the heart of those that respond if we don't do that, and have seen in places where this is worked well when the food programmes are actually creating protective mechanisms for girls. We are seeing security systems. I saw this in Western Africa, where the governments are creating security systems, but within their security system, they are monitoring things like child marriage, those things work, and for me is also looking at it as an emergency response. We cannot respond the way we respond in a natural environment it's making sure this is urgent. This is an emergency response and making sure that every programme has a jaded aspect within it and whatever programme it is whether it's sanitation, whether it is humanitarian, whether it's food, making sure there is that element of putting girls at the heart of that response.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 15:29

Lebanon has been ill-equipped to receive the massive influx of Syrian refugees. It hasn't allowed any permanent camps to be built for them. And UN reports show most live in substandard housing. Child marriage is common and other types of violence are also not unusual.

Sally Youssef: GAGE (Lebanon) 15:49

Refugee adolescents face different types of age- and gender-based violence.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 15:54

Sally Youssef is a GAGE researcher on the ground in Lebanon, speaking to hundreds of young refugees, about the realities of their lives and their family situations.

Sally Youssef: GAGE (Lebanon) 16:06

As the families in refugee communities and the host community in fact, they are built in a hierarchical way, with all their males, including the father and older brothers having more power within the household, which often results in domestic violence against younger adolescents. This also applies like for example, to teachers' violence against adolescents at schools. So this power dynamic between the like older generations and the younger generations can often result in violence against the adolescents, especially younger adolescents. So little boys face actually different types of violence at home that immediate community, wider community however, the girls remain the main victims of violence, especially due to the conservative nature of the refugee communities, which puts the weight of family honor and reputation on girls. And this in effect subjected them to control, and physical violence for the slightest actions that are even perceived as challenging than male or the older family members authority over their girls or they are

perceived as threatening to families honor and reputation and hence the status and the community.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 17:59

Sally says the lack of infrastructure and support in Lebanon can add to problems.

Sally Youssef: GAGE (Lebanon) 18:05

In terms of protection from violence, abuse and exploitation, and these almost all stemmed from weak protection mechanisms in Lebanon and the lack of refugee access to legal protection, especially adolescent refugees. Discrimination against refugees and the negative encounters with the law and Lebanon discourages the adolescents from seeking any legal support or protection as they fear either being more victimized by the Lebanese authorities or being deported from the country or they fear retaliation from either members of their own community or the wider community. This of course, in addition to lack of information on rights, laws and available support services. Moreover, the issue of violence is still considered a taboo, especially among refugee communities, which make many adolescents conceal their exposures to violence, abuse and exploitation.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 19:36

Sally explained what it's been like to capture the voices of the adolescents in Lebanon through her GAGE research.

Sally Youssef: GAGE (Lebanon) 19:44

Displaced adolescents' challenges and needs are growing in Lebanon. This is especially in relation to education and available services that are stretched with the crisis. The decrease in funding and then worsening social, economic and political situation is definitely negatively impacting adolescents in general and especially refugee adolescents. Through our research, we are not only working with adolescents as research subjects, they are part of the GAGE family. And we have this exceptional active opportunity to listen to the stories that they do not share with anyone else.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 20:37

GAGE research has found that adolescents are at a heightened risk of violence and victimization in conflict zones. One of the six key capabilities measured in GAGE research is bodily integrity, looking at how free they are from violence of all types. Noor is a participant in GAGE's longitudinal study. Today she's talking to GAGE about her life in Gaza as a Palestinian and how she was married at the age of just 16.

Noor: Palestinian adolescent 21:13

I live in Gaza and child marriage is really normal in Gaza. In the area where I live loads of girls marry really early. The

situation in general with the conflict and the problems people face, it encourages people to marry their girls early.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 21:33

Where Noor lives in Gaza is a narrow strip of land home to around 2 million people. 1.4 million of those are registered refugees, and 80% rely on international aid. According to the UN. The ongoing conflict with Israel has resulted in severe restrictions on trade and movement. The difficulties of life here have led to higher rates of child marriage and violence. Noor explains more about how her marriage happened.

Noor: Palestinian adolescent 22:11

Many people came and asked to marry me when I was young. But I was refusing on the principle that I didn't really want to marry at that age. But my parents pushed me and convinced me this man was a good guy. They said this is going to be the final destiny for any girl anyway. I agreed with I wasn't convinced the first month of marriage was okay. Then the problem started. When I had my baby my husband was annoyed at me and he beat me and use physical violence and bad insult. He also had debts and he had to make payments on those debts. So my parents were covering the cost for my child and myself. Because of the problems, especially the violence, I decided not to continue with the marriage. I got divorced. And now I am studying to be a nurse.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 23:05

Noor says for her the marriage was a very difficult time.

Noor: Palestinian Adolescent 23:14

When I was young, I enjoyed living with my big family. We all lived together with cousins and everyone else we used to play and enjoy our time together. Also, I used to enjoy going out with friends and socializing with them. After I got married, all of this stopped, as you are not allowed to go out and interact with friends. When you're married. You can only go to see your parents if you have something to talk about. That's essential and necessary. I wanted to be a lawyer. But after my marriage, I was not able to finish school. I don't think about that dream anymore. All my ambitions have stopped. I have to focus on other things like taking care of my family, rather than focusing on my ambitions for the future. During my marriage, I felt that I was in jail and I had no control over any decisions. After my divorce, I feel much more mature and more aware of things around me. I feel much better than before. And now I do have a future. I can decide for myself what I do now. I will study and then I can get a job, then I will be able to earn money so I can have a happy life with my child.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 24:27

Noor now wants to spread awareness about the problems associated with child marriage, and what she thinks girls her age should do.

Noor: Palestinian adolescent 24:41

The situation of early marriage is really difficult. I would say to any girls who are my age at 16 to think in a more logical way. Your marriage opportunity will come. It's good to focus on your ambitions, then marriage can come later. The idea that marriage is an opportunity with a wedding dress. That's a false idea. Marriage will come later. My advice is to concentrate more on education and continue learning. Marriage is not the solution for girls' problems. There should also be awareness of these issues. Families think when girls reached puberty, they are ready, even though their bodies may not be ready for pregnancy. So there should be more education for people about the problems of child marriage.

Dr Bassam Abu Hamad: GAGE Associate Director (MENA) 25:27

These stories really are, really highly touching and heartbreaking.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 25:33

Bassam Abu Hamad is the GAGE Research Director of Palestine.

Dr Bassam Abu Hamad: GAGE Associate Director (MENA) 25:38

When I was a child, we lived in different context. Yes, it's the protracted conflict and there was occupation. However, at that time, the economic situation was much better than now and also people were more able to work and move. There was movement of goods and trade. So people lived in more relaxed conditions at that time. However, now the adolescents, the ones who are going to through adolescence, born in the midst of the blockade imposed in Gaza, and they face the challenges related to economic hardship, political turbulence, and conservative norms combined together.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 26:34

Bassam says it's not just problems with girls and early marriage they're hearing about as they follow the lives of 1000s of adolescents in these crisis-hit situations.

Dr Bassam Abu Hamad: GAGE Associate Director (MENA) 26:45

We are hearing everything. Terrible stories of people who have too much left behind. One of the boys who dropped out from school told us I decided to drop school and not tell my parents about that. Later on, when they knew, my father hit me with an electrical cable. Yeah, but it was okay to be beaten once by my father as it's better than to be beaten every day at the school. So I ignore it and continue. So rarely adolescents are served within the available current services,

also parents at the household level, should really hear these stories, because many of the challenges originate from conflict side and the intergenerational conflict and gap.

Mohammed Nasr: UNFPA 27:53

To be honest, in Gaza, the whole culture of violence has become normalized in the community.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 28:01

Mohammed Nasr works with the UN Population Fund in Gaza.

Mohammed Nasr: UNFPA 28:05

Because you when you have like a family, where the father doesn't work and cannot not be able to provide and so on. So they channel their frustrations, they share their, what they feel on their children, and sometimes in many cases on their girls, unfortunately, and sometimes they force them to get married. At an early age. You see the violence here and there. And nobody's talking about it. You see honor killings, you see, like lots of other things, but because there are lots of other problems in the community, and there is Verity in there is like humanitarian crisis and there is this armed conflict that from time to time that is happening. I give you an example. For me, like my daughter, she's 11 years old, her name is Dima. So, she has been she has witnessed like all the wars that has happened in the past period. And she has developed like lots of PTSD and so on. So she cannot sleep while the window is open. She cannot go into elevator by herself. She cannot work by herself she needs like someone to be with her and so on most of the time. And even when we do programmes we implement like lots of programmes and despite having lots of institutions and organizations working in mental health and other like services for this group, and other groups. But being exposed to repetitive traumas would make it worse. For adolescents living in such context like Gaza, being a refugee and being internally displaced like people, we see that their collective experiences, attitudes, opportunities, are being shaped and were being shaped by protracted crisis, conflicts, fragmentation, loss of identity and being exposed to economic hardships and restricted social norms. So as a result of this chronic exposure to repetitive traumas, many adolescents are developing mental health symptoms, particularly PTSD, especially in Gaza. We build the studies more than 51% of adults are having such feelings of feeling unsafe feeling, fear of upcoming wars, loss of hope, frustrations, depressions, and in some cases, suicidal behaviors, and substance abuse.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 30:39

Mohamed says they do provide some centers across Gaza where adolescents can feel safe, he says these spaces are vital to help put a stop to cycles of violence and trauma.

Mohammed Nasr: UNFPA 30:51

These safe spaces are one of the greatest examples where we have like established more than 10 centers around Palestine these safe spaces provide a safe space for them. So they can come learn and be more empowered in and we engage them with their mothers on those spaces. So they can have some dialogue and try like to talk even like we provide there some sexuality education and comprehensive security education and even sexual reproductive health services. And you find little, little safe spaces and little protection mechanisms by the government and by others. So this evidence from GAGE would help us really advocate and try like to develop policies and mechanisms on the ground that could help them to realize their rights and so on. It is important because I believe they have an untapped potential. And this group would become like in the future our like, leaders, our like mothers, our like future mothers, and until one so not being able to have a safe, a transition and have the power and the right. If their rights being like denied like this, we will have like problems in the future, such as a sick community.

Madeline Forster: UNRWA 32:19

It's enormously helpful that GAGE is speaking to the young people that we are also working with.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 32:28

Madeline Forster works with UNRWA, the UN agency that provides support for the nearly 6 million Palestinian refugees in Gaza and other places in the Middle East,

Madeline Forster: UNRWA 32:38

Adolescents, young people in UNRWA fields of operation so that's Palestine, refugees living Gaza, in Syria, in Lebanon, and Jordan and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, surrounded by the experience of violence, and the triggers of violence. So that includes conflict includes severe socio economic deprivation. It includes the impact of occupation in the occupied Palestinian territory, of uncertainty about the future. So all those both sort of actual experiences of violence from a very young age, and triggers for violence in the home and in the community, are with Palestine refugee young people throughout their lives.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 33:32

Madeline says understanding the viewpoint of the refugees, as GAGE is doing, is helpful for their staff on the ground, including teachers in the schools run by the UN.

Madeline Forster: UNRWA 33:45

As a humanitarian agency, UNRWA is quite unique in that we directly provide education to young Palestine refugees, and 1000s of children attend our schools every day. And so our teachers are some of the first people to observe to notice the signs and the symptoms of what might be going wrong at home. So one of the things that GAGE research looked at is some of the particular types of training that teachers need, whether that is in about having access to non-violent disciplinary approaches, providing guidance on the types of environments that can encourage both students and teachers to be able to converse confidently and securely about what they're experiencing, to have the trust to share their concerns. So some of the GAGE research, I think, which is particularly valuable for humanitarian actors and for schools and to be provided by governments is that really concrete recommendation about what will make the jobs of teachers easier, and what environmental factors, training factors can support an environment that, that allows children to communicate their concerns?

Martha Dixon: Journalist 35:26

Madeline says giving the young people a voice is a key factor in moving on from the cycles of violence and crisis experienced by the Palestinian refugees.

Madeline Forster: UNRWA 35:38

There is a lot of discussion about how to transition between a humanitarian model and a developmental model. But when it comes to young people, what young people really need is the ability to have hope for the future. And for Palestine refugee, young people, sometimes that hope for the future really is compromised by the conditions the country that they live in by the legal framework exclusions that they face the experience of marginalization. So in addition to looking at how do we transition from humanitarian assistance to a development model, and what's the nexus there, we also need to think about how to transition from humanitarian assistance to enabling at participation of young people in the communities in which they're living and allowing them to make a contribution to those communities so that they don't experience the discrimination or the restrictions that the parents or their generations faced before them.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 36:54

You've been listening to Episode 3 of the GAGE podcast series, Adolescence in crisis: unheard voices. Where we shine a light on the stories of young people who've been forced from their homes, and look at what's needed to turn their lives around. You can access much more information on all of GAGE's work in their new book: *Adolescents in Humanitarian Crisis*. Written by GAGE researchers across East Africa, the Middle East and South Asia, it synthesizes the research to date about adolescent refugees, as well as those who've been internally displaced.



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About GAGE

Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) is a nine-year longitudinal research programme generating evidence on what works to transform the lives of adolescent girls in the Global South. Visit www.gage.odi.org.uk for more information.

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