



# Girls and women's social and economic empowerment in Ethiopia's Afar and Somali regions: challenges and progress

A review of the evidence

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## Acronyms

ABE	Alternative basic education
DHS	Demographic and Health Survey
FGM/C	female genital mutilation/cutting
GAGE	Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence
GPI	gender parity index
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MHM	menstrual health management
PSNP	Productive Safety Net Program
RISE	Research on Improving Systems of Education

# Executive summary

## Introduction

Ethiopia's recent progress towards development goals has not been equitably distributed across regions. Afar and Somali have not yet significantly benefitted. These desert regions have the lowest school enrolment rates, the highest rates of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), and rates of child marriage that have remained stubbornly static in the face of broader progress. They have also seen very little focused research. This evidence synthesis report draws on secondary sources to provide an overview of what is known about girls' and women's economic and social empowerment in Afar and Somali regions. In addition to being a standalone resource for interested actors, it aims to contextualise forthcoming primary research being undertaken by ODI and Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) for an Irish Aid-funded evaluation of programming implemented by Save the Children. The synthesis concludes with a summary of key evidence gaps and priorities for future data collection to address those gaps, so as to better inform policy and programming to support the economic and social empowerment of adolescent girls and women in these two regions.

## Review of the evidence

### Context

Afar and Somali have much in common. Both regions are primarily desert, home to pastoralists who have traditionally engaged in seasonal migration shaped by rainfall patterns, and are now seeing their livelihoods devastated by climate change. Both are also impacted by recurrent clan and ethnic violence that has displaced tens of thousands of people in recent years. In other ways, however, the two regions are dissimilar. For example, Somali is much larger and less urbanised. In addition, regional poverty dynamics are divergent. In Afar, poverty is concentrated in rural areas and income inequality is the country's highest. In Somali, poverty has fallen faster in rural areas and income inequality is the country's lowest.

### FGM/C

FGM/C rates are very high in both Afar and Somali. The most recent Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) found that of adolescent girls aged 15-19, more than 90% have undergone FGM/C. Most of those girls had been infibulated, usually by a traditional cutter. Girls in Afar are generally cut in infancy, girls in Somali in later childhood. The evidence base suggests that the health risks of FGM/C are fairly well understood, but that the social costs of eschewing the practice are perceived to be much higher. Girls must be cut to marry, because uncut girls are seen as sexually promiscuous – and thus undesirable. FGM/C is also seen as a religious mandate.

### Child marriage and adolescent motherhood

Afar and Somali are unique among Ethiopia's regions in that they have not yet revised their Family Codes to outlaw child marriage. Rates of child marriage are not only high, but also appear to have increased since 2000. The most recent DHS found that of young women aged 20-24, 67% of those in Afar and 55% of those in Somali had married before the age of 18. In Afar, nearly all marriages are arranged; girls marry their maternal cousins, to strengthen clan ties, and do not have input into which cousin or when they will marry. In Somali, most girls report they choose their own partners. Contraception is viewed unfavourably in both regions, primarily because it is thought to encourage sexual promiscuity and damage fertility. Of sexually active young women aged 15-24, the most recent Performance Monitoring for Action survey found that only 12% of those in Afar and 20% of those in Somali were using some form of contraception. The 2016 DHS reports that Afar (23.4%) and Somali (18.7%) have the highest rates of adolescent motherhood in the country. Total fertility rates are also the country's highest.

### Education

Access to education has long lagged in Afar and Somali compared to Ethiopia's other regions, largely because populations are sparse and nomadic, which

both complicates the delivery of formal schooling and lowers interest in it. Many remote communities do not have schools, and many of those that do have schools lack teachers, learning materials and drinking water. The government reports that on a national level, 20% of children aged 7-14 are out of school. Out-of-school rates are approximately three times as high in Somali (54%) and Afar (66%). Gender also matters. Cultural factors have left girls with far less access to education than boys. Somali's gender gap is especially large. Secondary level net enrolment in that region is 23% for boys and 16% for girls. Afar's enrolment rates are lower, if more gender equitable: 11% and 9% respectively. With the caveat that the evidence base is thin, existent research underscores that learning outcomes in Afar and Somali are also poor.

### Menstrual Health Management

Girls in Afar and Somali receive little instruction about puberty and menstrual health management. Most of the instruction they do receive is from peers, not their mothers or teachers. Indeed, in Afar, where menarche is seen as a sign that a girl is old enough to be married, many girls hide their periods from their mothers. Girls' activities are

often impacted by menstruation, which is perceived to be 'unclean'. For example, in Somali, 83% of girls are not allowed to attend religious services while on their periods. Because a minority of schools in Afar and Somali have water, because most girls use rags rather than sanitary pads, and because infibulation is associated with painful periods, girls' school attendance is also compromised by menstruation.

### Economic empowerment

The economic empowerment of girls and women in Afar and Somali is broadly shaped by pastoralism and government efforts to settle populations in river basins where access to water enables agriculture. In pastoralist areas, women's access to income is almost exclusively related to livestock and livestock products; in agro-pastoralist areas, many women also engage in trading. There is a wealth of research highlighting the disadvantages experienced by girls and women in Afar and Somali in terms of their access to productive inputs, their opportunities to save and borrow, and even their own earnings. Time poverty also limits girls' and women's economic empowerment. Days are consumed by collecting water and caring for children in the context of



A group of Somali refugee girls playing volleyball at a primary school for host community and refugee children ©UNICEF Ethiopia/2019/Mulugeta Ayene

extremely high fertility rates. The 2021 Labour Force and Migration Survey reports that only 38% of females over the age of 10 in Afar and Somali are employed, versus a national average of 50%.

### Voice and agency

The voice and agency of girls and women in Afar and Somali are subject to myriad restrictions. Evidence indicates that many of these restrictions are shared across regions. Men make final household decisions and women effectively have no input into community decision-making. There is, however, evidence of regional variation. The most recent DHS reports that women in Afar are half as likely as their peers in Somali to have primary control over how their own earnings are spent (28% compared with 56%), are more likely to believe that spousal violence is justifiable (69% compared with 43%), and are more likely to experience controlling behaviours by their husband (50% compared with 29%). On the other hand, in Somali, a far greater proportion of girls than boys are denied their right to an education and in 2016, married women reported less input into decisions over men's earnings than they did in 2005.

## Conclusions and data priorities

The regions of Afar and Somali have seen very little focused research. This is partly because they have sparse, mobile populations; partly because they are relatively sidelined within Ethiopia as 'emerging' regions that are yet to develop the strong regional capacity that exists in more established regions; and partly because the two regions are afflicted by recurrent drought and conflict. Even less is known about the age- and gender-specific vulnerabilities affecting girls and women living in the two regions. Because of restrictions on their mobility, their extremely low literacy rates, and social norms that restrict their voice and agency, girls and women are less likely to be included in research and almost certainly less likely to answer accurately.

### FGM/C

As practices begin to shift in response to government messaging, it is important to track how – given that strong normative attachment increases the risk of FGM/C becoming hidden rather than being abandoned. It is also important to identify which champions and what messages might accelerate progress, acknowledging that girls and women choose FGM/C despite the risks and attending to the potential role of boys and men.

### Child marriage and adolescent motherhood

There is an urgent need to ascertain whether child marriage is becoming more common and if so why. Research is also needed to identify the most effective champions and messages, including to prevent child marriage as well as to decouple it from early motherhood.

### Education

Because there is no accurate count of school aged children living in Afar and Somali and because of high repetition rates, current evidence does not adequately capture girls' access to and progress through school. In Somali, it is unclear why girls remain so starkly disadvantaged compared with boys and in both regions there is a need to understand what types of support might encourage and incentivise parents to invest in girls' education.

### Menstrual health management

Given the relationship between menarche and marriage, there is a need to explore how the age of menarche may be changing in tandem with improved/different nutrition and how to effectively decouple these with tailored messaging. There is also a need to understand how to support girls who have been infibulated to stay healthy and manage their pain and to explore what of sorts of MHM supplies can meet girls' needs in an environmentally responsible way.

### Economic empowerment

Existent evidence highlights how difficult it is to capture and measure girls' and women's economic empowerment in pastoralist contexts. How to best support empowerment – attending to cultural constraints and mindful of both existent time poverty and intensifying climate change – is also poorly understood. Attention should also be paid to the potential role of the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) to address gender inequalities.

### Voice and agency

Given broader similarities between Afar and Somali – in terms of livelihoods, culture and religion – the many and diverse ways in which metrics of women's and girls' voice and agency diverge highlight an urgent need for research on women's – and especially girls' (who remain largely invisible) – attitudes towards and exercise of voice and agency in different micro, meso- and macro-level spaces.

# Introduction

Ethiopia has experienced rapid development progress over the past two decades. Since 2000, the poverty rate has approximately halved, the primary education completion rate has more than doubled, and the proportion of girls who marry by the age of 15 has plummeted (UNDP Ethiopia, 2018; World Bank, 2020a; UNESCO, 2022; Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia (CSA) and ICF, 2017). However, focusing on national-level progress risks obscuring the myriad ways in which the country's historically marginalised 'emerging regions' – including Afar and Somali – are yet to benefit from broader trends (World Bank, 2020b; Gebre-Egziabhere, 2018). Containing 35% of the country's land mass, but home to only 8% of its population, these desert regions have the lowest school enrolment rates, the highest rates of female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C), and rates of child marriage that have remained stubbornly static in the face of broader progress (UNICEF, n.d.a, n.d.b).

This evidence synthesis report provides an overview of the limited evidence base on girls' and women's economic and social empowerment in Afar and Somali

regions. In addition to being a standalone resource for interested research, programming and policy actors, it aims to contextualise forthcoming primary research being undertaken by ODI and Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) for an Irish Aid-funded evaluation of programs implemented by Save the Children (see Box 1).

Drawing on secondary sources including government reports and academic and grey literature, we begin by describing the broader socio-ecological context and how that shapes people's livelihoods and lives. We then explore what is known about girls' and women's gender-specific vulnerabilities in regard to female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C); child marriage; education; puberty education and menstrual health management (MHM); contraception, abortion, and adolescent motherhood; economic empowerment; and voice and agency. The synthesis concludes with a summary of key evidence gaps and priorities for future data collection to address those gaps, so as to better inform policy and programming to support the economic and social empowerment of adolescent girls and women in these two regions.



## Box 1: Empowering girls and women

*'Supporting women and girls in Ethiopia's lowlands to realise their rights, and live healthy and productive lives free from violence and abuse'*

Save the Children's multi-component programme aims to empower girls and young women economically and socially and reduce the impact of gender norms – especially around FGM/C and child marriage – that limit their lives. The programme is being implemented in two zones in Afar region (zones 1 and 5) and two zones in Somali region (Fanfan and Jarar). It is designed to ultimately benefit over 42,000 individuals, at least 70% of whom are women and girls. Accompanying this 5 year programme is a mixed methods multi-year research evaluation being undertaken by ODI/GAGE, together with researchers from Addis Ababa University and Quest Consulting.

# Context

Afar and Somali have much in common. Both regions are primarily desert, home to pastoralists who have traditionally engaged in seasonal migration shaped by rainfall patterns, and are now seeing their livelihoods devastated by recurrent climate change-driven drought and invasive species (Oxfam, 2016; UNICEF, n.d.a, n.d.b; Management Entity, 2021; UNOCHA, 2022). Both regions are almost exclusively Muslim, are experiencing very high and increasing population growth, and lag considerably behind the rest of the country in terms of access to basic services (World Bank, 2020b; UNICEF, n.d.a, n.d.b). Due to resource constraints (primarily water, grazing land, and trade routes), Afar and Somali are also impacted by recurrent clan and ethnic violence that has displaced tens of thousands of people in recent years (Clugston and Fraser, 2022; UNOCHA, 2022; UNOCHA, 2021, cited in Addis Standard, 2021; UNICEF, n.d.a, n.d.b; Ethiopia Peace Observatory, nd; Tadesse et al., 2015). In terms of gender dynamics, both regions have inexplicably skewed gender ratios. While the most recent census is now 15 years old, the 2021 Labour Force and Migration survey estimates that in Afar, there are 106 males for every 100 females. In

Somali, the ratio is estimated at 110:100 (Ethiopia Statistics Service (ESS), 2021). By contrast, national-level statistics indicate that there are equal numbers of females and male.

In other ways, the two regions are dissimilar. Somali is much larger than Afar (see figures 1 and 2) and has a much larger population (6.6 million versus 2 million) (ESS, 2021). It is also substantially less urbanised (15% compared to 21% for Afar) (ibid.). In addition, while poverty rates in both regions fell between 2011 and 2016<sup>1</sup> – from 36% to 24% in Afar and from 33% to 23% in Somali – the patterning of progress differs (World Bank, 2020b). In Afar, all progress was made in urban areas, with rural poverty rates unchanged, which meant that inequality grew rapidly (Gini of 37) (ibid.). In Somali, all progress in reducing poverty was made in rural areas, largely due to improvements in the agricultural sector, while urban poverty rates were unchanged. This meant that in 2016, inequality in this region was at the lowest rate in the country (Gini of 26.2) (ibid.). Poverty trends are reflected in children’s health outcomes: young children living in Afar are far more likely to be stunted (43%) than those living in Somali (31%) (Ethiopia Public Health Institute (EPHI) and ICF, 2019).

**Figure 1: Afar region**



**Figure 2: Somali region**



<sup>1</sup> The last Welfare Monitoring Survey was completed in 2015-2016.

# State of the evidence

## Female genital mutilation/ cutting

FGM/C – which has been illegal in Ethiopia since 2005 – is nearly universal in both Afar and Somali. In addition, there is very little evidence of the progress being made in tackling the harmful practice in other regions. The most recent national Demographic and Health Survey<sup>2</sup> (DHS) found that of females of reproductive age (15–49 years old), 98% in Afar and 99% in Somali had undergone FGM/C (CSA and ICF, 2017) (see Figure 3). The rates for adolescent girls (aged 15–19) were nearly as high – 91% and 95% respectively.<sup>3,4</sup> Muche et al.'s (2020) recent systematic review and meta-analysis reports slightly lower figures. In Somali, across five studies, 91% of adult women had undergone FGM/C.<sup>5</sup> In Afar, that review reports a single study that found a rate of 91%.

Among adolescent girls and women over the age of 15, infibulation was the most common form of FGM/C practised in both Afar (64%) and Somali (73%) (CSA and ICF, 2017) (see Box 2). Despite a growing number of smaller studies that have found that clitorectomies are replacing infibulation in both regions (Presler-Marshall et al., 2022; Mehari et al., 2020; Abebe et al., 2020; Getanehe, 2017; Gebremariam et al., 2016; Hussein et al., 2013), the most recent DHS reports that of girls aged 14 or younger who have undergone FGM/C, shifts towards 'less invasive' types are evident only in Somali region. Indeed, in Afar, girls under the age of 15 are just as likely to be infibulated as women aged 15 and older (68% versus 64%) (CSA and ICF, 2017). In Somali, where Mehari et al. (2020) found that nearly absolute resistance to ending FGM/C has resulted in active efforts on the part of government officials to promote clitorectomy, the DHS reports that 'only' 33% of cut girls aged 14 or younger have been sewn closed (versus 73% of women) (CSA and ICF, 2017). Several studies suggest

that shifts in the type of cutting may accelerate in coming years, as more educated young people – girls and boys – are increasingly opposed to infibulation (Andarge, 2014; Abathun et al., 2018). Other research suggests that this may be interpreted as abandonment by Afar and Somali adults, who consider infibulation the only 'real' form of FGM/C (Presler-Marshall et al., 2022; Mehari et al., 2020).

The age at which girls are cut varies across regions. In Afar, FGM/C has traditionally been practised during infancy and early childhood. Although several studies have found diversity across households and communities (Presler-Marshall et al., 2022; Andarge, 2014), the DHS reports that on a regional basis, three-quarters of older adolescent girls aged 15–19 had undergone FGM/C prior to the age of 5. In Somali, FGM/C is primarily practised during middle childhood. Of girls aged 15–19, 63% reported having been cut between the ages of 5 and 9, with the remainder equally divided between those cut in early childhood (before age 5) and early adolescence (aged 10–14) (ibid.). Across regions, the DHS and other research has found that FGM/C is most commonly carried out by traditional cutters, who also generally serve as birth attendants – but that as awareness of the law has grown, mothers increasingly cut their own daughters in order to preserve secrecy (CSA and ICF, 2017; Presler-Marshall et al., 2022; Abebe et al., 2020; Abathun et al., 2016). To date, while there is some limited evidence of medicalisation of cutting in other regions of Ethiopia, there is none in Afar and Somali regions (Presler-Marshall et al., 2022; Abathun et al., 2016; Mehari et al., 2020). Abathun et al. (2016) report that in Somali, where cutters have been offered other livelihoods by government officials, women are willing to move to different communities rather than give up their profession.

In both Afar and Somali, there is strong normative and religious attachment to the practice of FGM/C. In Somali, for example, Getanehe (2017) found that 66%

2 Data is still to be collected for the 2021–2022 DHS.

3 Regional figures for girls aged 15–19 are author's own calculations.

4 Because some girls undergo FGM/C in early or even middle adolescence, the proportion of girls aged 10–14 who have been cut does not necessarily speak to current prevalence rates. Of girls in that age group, 85% of those in Afar and 70% of those in Somali have undergone FGM/C (CSA and ICF, 2017).

5 The review was unable to locate research on FGM/C among girls under 15 years in Afar and Somali.

### Box 2: Types of FGM/C

The World Health Organisation (2020) delineates four major types of FGM/C, as shown in the graphic below:

- Type 1, often called clitoridectomy, consists of the partial or total removal of the clitoris and/or the clitoral hood. In Ethiopia, this is often called 'sunna'.
- Type 2 consists of the partial or total removal of the clitoris and labia minora, with or without the removal of the labia majora.
- Type 3, often called infibulation, involves the narrowing of the vaginal opening—sometimes with stitching and other times by repositioning flesh until it fuses with scar tissue. Type 3 includes procedures that remove the clitoris as well as those that do not.
- Type 4 (not shown) is all other harmful procedures (e.g., scraping or pricking) to the female genitals for non-medical reasons and is extremely rare in Ethiopia.

### Different types of female genital mutilation

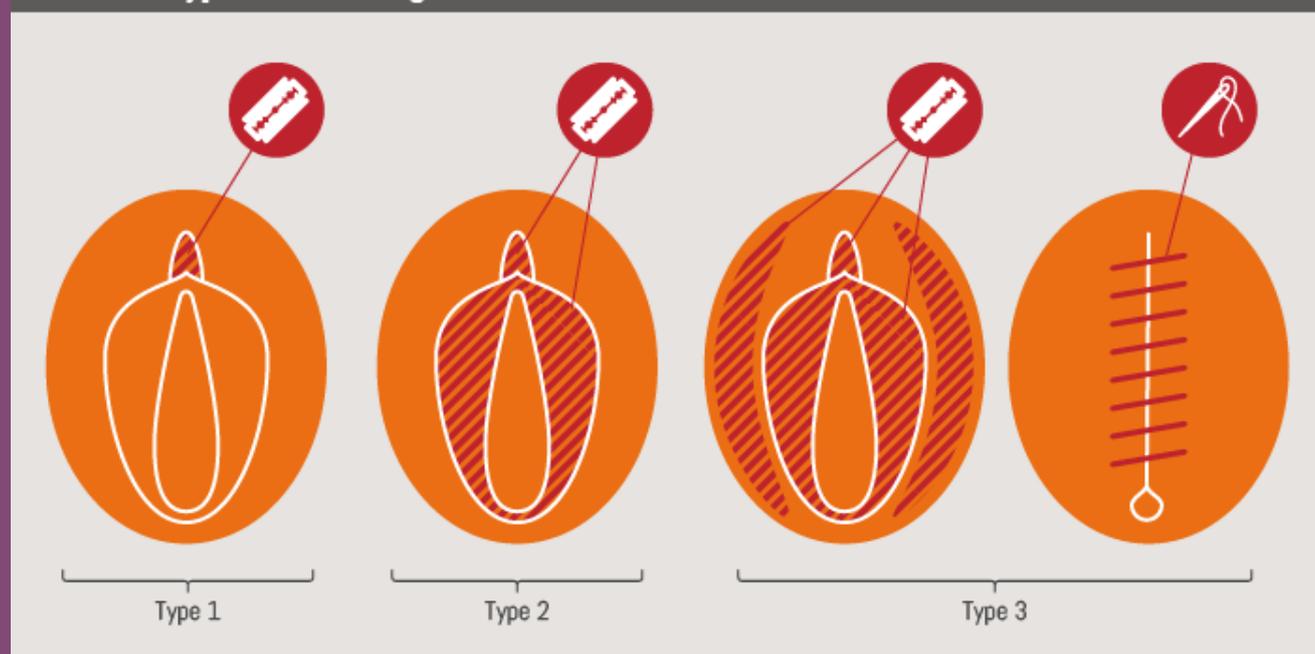
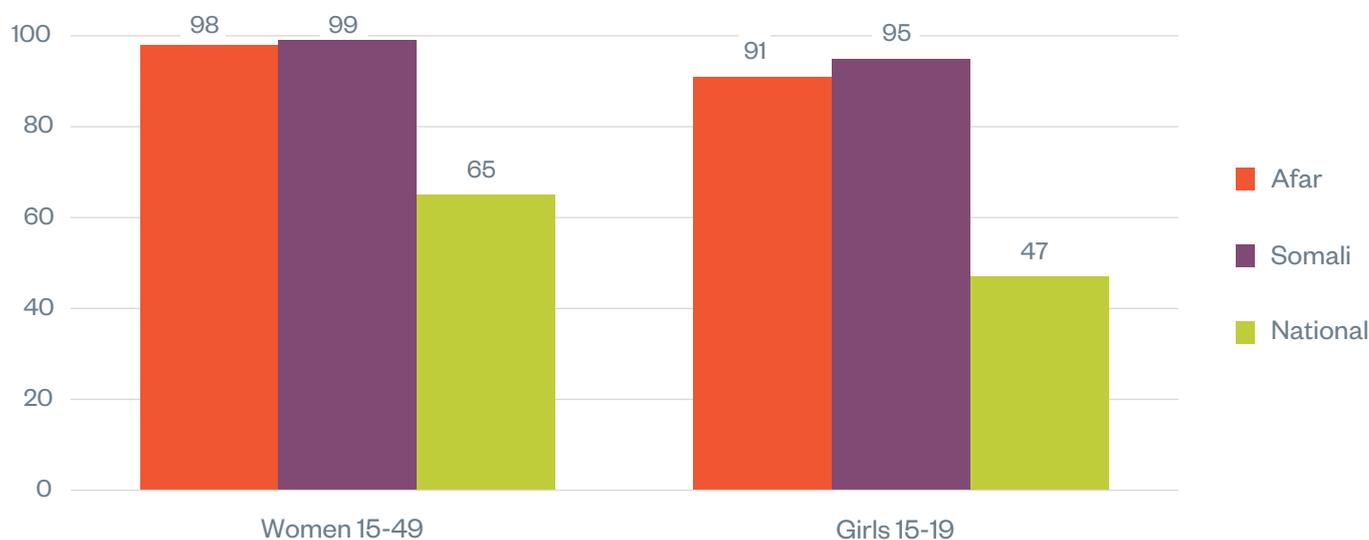


Figure 3: Women who have undergone FGM/C by age and region (%)



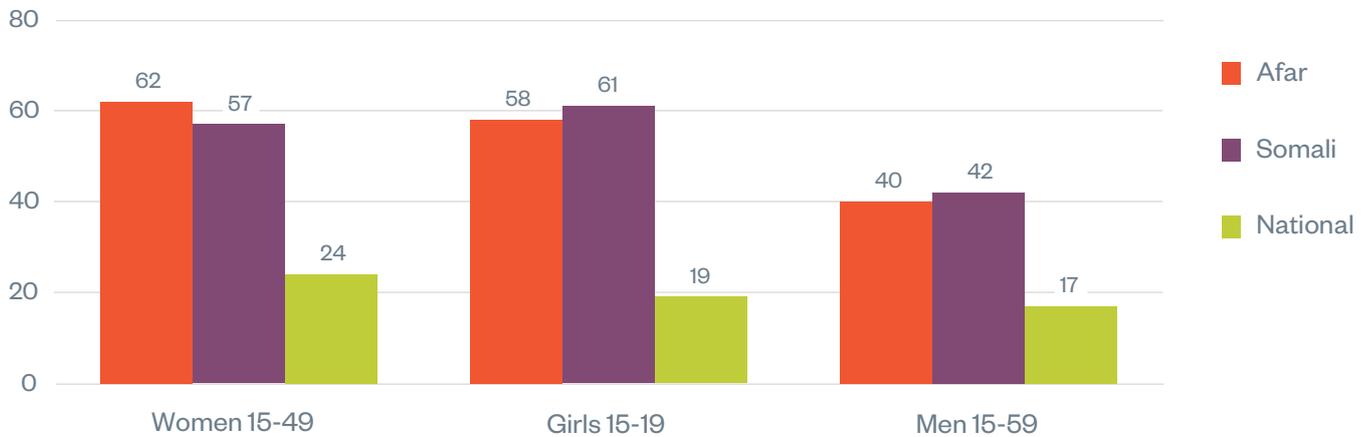
Source: CSA and ICF, 2017

of community members support FGM/C. The DHS reports that most women and girls believe that FGM/C is required by religion and should continue. For instance, of girls aged 15–19, 58% of those in Afar and 61% of those in Somali believe that FGM/C is required by religion (see Figure 4) (CSA and ICF, 2017). Just over half of girls in Afar (53%) and Somali (51%) also believe that FGM/C should continue (see Figure 5) (ibid.). GAGE research in Afar’s Zone 5 found that girls are even more attached to FGM/C (Presler-Marshall et al., 2022). Of older girls (aged 17–19), 72% reported believing that FGM/C should continue versus 51% of the female caregivers of younger girls (those aged 12–14). Interestingly, where studies include men – which is not universal because the practice of FGM/C is often considered solely the domain of women (Hussein et al., 2013) – men are often found to be less supportive of FGM/C than women and girls (see Figures 4 and 5) (CSA and ICF, 2017). Although men’s greater awareness of the law may impact their reporting, several qualitative studies have found that men are more likely than women to

support abandonment, especially of infibulation (Abathun et al., 2016; Getanehe, 2017; Dessalegn et al., 2020). Sara et al. (2022), using DHS data, conclude that compared to their peers in other regions, Afar and Somali men still remain highly supportive of FGM/C. Several studies have also found that religious leaders in Afar sometimes reinforce the idea that FGM/C is required by Islamic law (Presler-Marshall et al., 2022; Andarge, 2014).

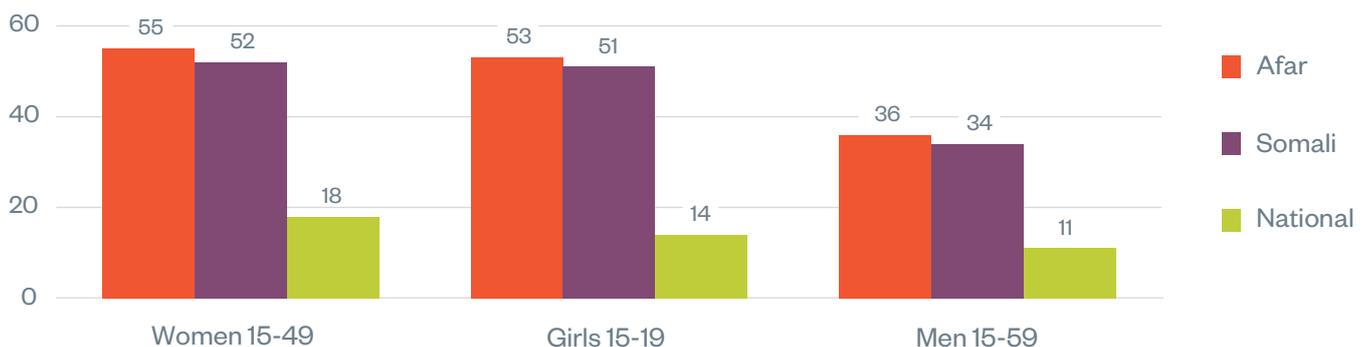
National level evidence underscores that maternal education--especially through the secondary level--is highly protective against daughters’ FGM/C (CSA and ICF, 2017). Region-specific evidence about the relationship between education and FGM/C is, however, largely lacking. We were able to find only three studies that addressed this nexus, likely in part because there are so few women in Afar and Somali who have been formally educated. Mohamud et al. (2016) found that in Somali, illiterate women were less likely than literate women to report an intention to abandon FGM/C. Abebe et al. (2020) and Abathun et al. (2018) also address the relationship between education

**Figure 4: FGM/C is required by religion, by age, gender and region (%)**



Source: CSA and ICF, 2017

**Figure 5: FGM/C should continue, by age, gender, and region (%)**



Source: CSA and ICF, 2017

and support for FGM/C – but they do so with samples that are regionally mixed. The former’s sample includes adult women from Afar and Amhara and the latter’s sample includes adolescents from Somali and Harari.

Girls’ and women’s support for FGM/C is not due to a poor understanding of the risks involved. Indeed, myriad studies have found that the risks of FGM/C are relatively well-understood – but are simply perceived as less salient than the social risks of eschewing FGM/C or the advantages of perpetuating it. For example, in Afar’s Zone 5, the GAGE survey found that 44% of older girls and 46% of female caregivers were able to identify at least one risk of FGM/C – the most commonly cited risks being birthing difficulties, infection, and sexual dysfunction. However, an even larger proportion – 56% (girls and caregivers) – reported that FGM/C has advantages (Presler-Marshall et al., 2022). Girls and women most often mentioned that FGM/C improves girls’ behaviour (specifically that it lowers their sex drive, leaves them more tractable and more capable and less clumsy in performing domestic responsibilities), and makes birth easier (see Box 3). Abdisa et al. (2017) found similar results in Somali. Specifically, although 91% of their sample knew that

FGM/C carries health risks – primarily bleeding (36%) and difficult birthing (32%) – 62% believed that FGM/C has the advantage of preserving girls’ virginity. Critically, in both Afar and Somali, FGM/C is seen as being required in order to marry (Presler-Marshall et al., 2022; Andarge, 2014; Abebe et al., 2020; Abathun et al., 2016, 2018; Gebremariam et al., 2016; Getanehe, 2017; Flintan, 2008; Adinew and Mekete, 2017; Mohamud et al., 2016). Uncut girls are seen as sexually promiscuous – and thus undesirable for marriage – and those who are uncut and unmarried are shamed and ostracised by the community (*ibid.*). In Somali, Abathun et al. (2016) report that if a bride is found by her husband to be uncut on her wedding night, she is sometimes returned to her family.

Although nearly all women in Afar and Somali are infibulated, and then in some way defibulated to facilitate sexual intercourse and childbirth, there is very little attention to this in the literature. Presler-Marshall et al. (2022) report that in Afar, girls’ sexual debut is often violent – as husbands effectively batter their wives open. In Somali, where new wives are commonly cut open the day of their marriage, there is some evidence of medicalisation of this defibulation (Adinew and Mekete, 2017).

### Box 3: ‘I would not be happy if I wasn’t circumcised’

Participants in GAGE’s research in Afar’s Zone 5 spoke at length about the norms surrounding – and perpetuating – female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C). For example, a 17-year-old girl from Community A reported that, *‘girls have to be circumcised to get a husband’*. Boys added that this is because of beliefs that it is *‘difficult to have sex with uncircumcised girls since the clitoris prevents the penis penetrating deep in the girl’s vagina’* (14-year-old boy, Community B). Arguments about controlling girls’ sexuality were also widespread; an older boy from Community A explained the common belief that *‘if girls are not circumcised, their sexual desire will be high’*. Critically, respondents added that while religious leaders may be preaching in favour of Type 1 FGM/C, they are also preaching that FGM/C is a religious mandate. A clan leader from Community B explained, *‘We are also told that a father who didn’t circumcise his daughter is considered as lazy and we are also ordered not to get in the house of a man who didn’t circumcise his daughter because having a daughter who is not circumcised is considered haram’*. A mother from Community A added, *‘They taught us that it became a big sin if a female child died without being circumcised and also girls would misbehave and be disobedient to their parents unless they were circumcised.’*

Highlighting how difficult it will be to eliminate FGM/C in Zone 5, girls themselves were often strong advocates of continuation of the practice. For example, a 15-year-old girl from Community B stated that she was happy to have complied with the religious mandate: *‘I wouldn’t be happy if I wasn’t circumcised... Not being circumcised is haram’*. An older girl from Community A added that she was happy to not be teased about her genitals by her peers, saying, *‘We are happy [to be cut]... They insult us by singing “their clitoris is as long as a hala wolf”’*. A mother from that same community emphasised how girls’ preferences are shaped by social norms – as older girls who have not been cut are excluded by the community. She explained, *‘If a girl is not cut, she will be isolated by the people. So, the girls themselves agree to circumcision. They prepare themselves and ask the mother to do it. It is done based on family interest and the girl’s willingness.’*

## Child marriage

Although marriage before the age of 18 is illegal in Ethiopia, Afar and Somali are unique among the country’s regions in that they have not yet revised their family codes to outlaw child marriage (McGavock, 2021). Reluctance to do so is evident in the very high rates of child marriage in both regions.

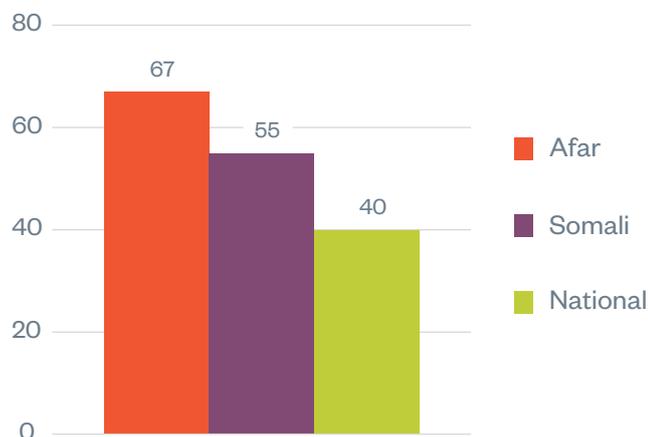
Of women aged 20–24 years at the time of the 2016 DHS, UNICEF reports that 67% of those in Afar and 55% of those in Somali were married before the age of 18, compared to only 40% nationally (see Figure 6) (UNICEF, n.d.a, n.d.b). GAGE’s midline survey in Afar’s Zone 5 found similar results. Of older girls (aged 17–19), 48% had married before the age of 18, and 8% had married before the age of 15 (Presler-Marshall et al., 2020b). According to the most recent DHS, and with caveats about data quality, girls in Afar marry earlier than their peers in Somali. The median age of first marriage for women aged 15–49 in Afar was 16.4 years – compared with 18.1 years in Somali (CSA and ICF, 2017).

Concerningly, Elezaj et al. (2019) calculate, using DHS data, that while the incidence of child marriage among girls aged 15–17 is declining on a national basis, it appears to be climbing in Afar and Somali (see Figure 7). In 2000, at the national level, 20% of girls aged 15–17 were married. By 2016, that figure had dropped to 11%. In Afar and Somali, on the other hand, the rate of child marriage had climbed by six and seven percentage points respectively. Although the rate of child marriage in Somali remains far below that in Afar, it is worth noting that it has more than doubled between 2000 and 2016.

The form that child marriage takes appears to differ starkly across regions. In Afar, cross-cousin marriage is traditional and girls marry a maternal cousin (absuma) (Jones et al., 2016; Presler-Marshall et al., 2020b; Dessalegn et al., 2020). Girls do not have any say about when and which cousin they will marry, and some marry men a decade older than they are. In Somali, although Woldesenbet (2015) reports that some parents force girls to marry soon after puberty in order to collect bride price, most girls reportedly marry when and to whom they choose (albeit with pressure to marry early). These different traditions are reflected in the DHS data. In Afar, of married girls aged 15–19, 89% reported that their parents had decided on their marriage (CSA and ICF, 2017). This proportion – like the proportion of girls who marry before the age of 18 – has been static across generations, because absuma marriage customs are considered central to reinforcing clan ties (CSA and ICF, 2017; UNICEF, n.d.a; Dessalegn et al., 2020). In Somali, on the other hand, of married girls aged 15–19, 64% reported that they had decided on their own marriage (CSA and ICF, 2017). This proportion has also been static across generations. Reasons given for girls’ early marriage in the sole study we were able to locate include poverty, limited access to education and work, and social pressure (Lelieveld, 2011). In Afar’s Zone 5, the GAGE midline survey found that of married girls, 67% would have preferred to wait and marry when older (Presler-Marshall et al., 2020b).

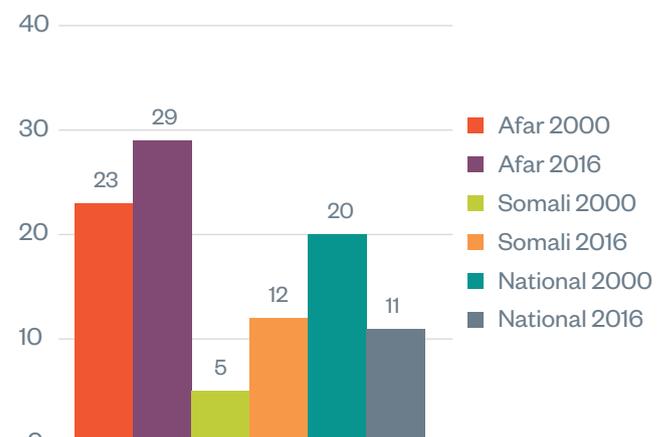
It should be noted that in both Afar and Somali, the traditional practice of polygamy is common. The most recent DHS indicates that among women aged 15–49, 20%

**Figure 6: Women aged 20–24 who were married by age 18, by location (%)**



Source: CSA and ICF, 2017

**Figure 7: Incidence of child marriage for girls aged 15–17, by location and time (%)**



Source: CSA and ICF, 2017



Early married girl in a traditional dress in Afar, Ethiopia. 2018. © Nathalie Bertrams / GAGE

of those in Afar and 30% of those in Somali have at least one co-wife (CSA and ICF, 2017). Figures for girls aged 15–19 are much lower – 6% in Afar and 3% in Somali<sup>6</sup> (ibid.). In Afar, when men take a new, younger wife, the reason is generally to produce more children for the clan (Balehey et al., 2018).

A 2016 study of how climate change-related drought is impacting child marriage found differences between the two regions (Oxfam, 2016). In Afar, drought appears to be driving child marriage – as households seek to reduce the number of mouths to be fed. In Somali, however, it appears to be discouraging child marriage, as respondents reported that men can no longer afford dowries and that both child and adult marriages have decreased. Clugston and Fraser (2022) report that in Afar, drought is also increasing girls' and women's risk of sexual violence – as custom there allows men to rape girls and women when husbands are away on protracted migration. While they report links between child marriage and drought in other countries, they do not report for Afar or Somali.

## Education

Access to education has long lagged in Afar and Somali compared to Ethiopia's other regions, largely because populations are sparse and nomadic, which both complicates the delivery of formal schooling and lowers interest in it (Woldesenbet, 2015; Jackson, 2011; Muhumed, 2017; Wodajo, 2014; Alemu and Solomon, 2019). Many remote communities do not have schools, and many of those that do have schools lack teachers, learning materials and drinking water (Woldesenbet, 2015; Jackson, 2011; Presler-Marshall et al., 2021b; Muhumed, 2017; Wodajo, 2014; Alemu and Solomon, 2019). Parents and students also consider the school calendar to be too rigid – both in terms of hours per day (to accommodate herding) and weeks per year (to accommodate migration) – and the curriculum irrelevant to pastoralist realities (Jackson, 2011; Muhumed, 2017; Wodajo, 2014; Alemu and Solomon, 2019; Woldesenbet, 2015). The situation is especially acute in Afar. This is because instruction is often not in students' native tongue (because there are too few teachers able to

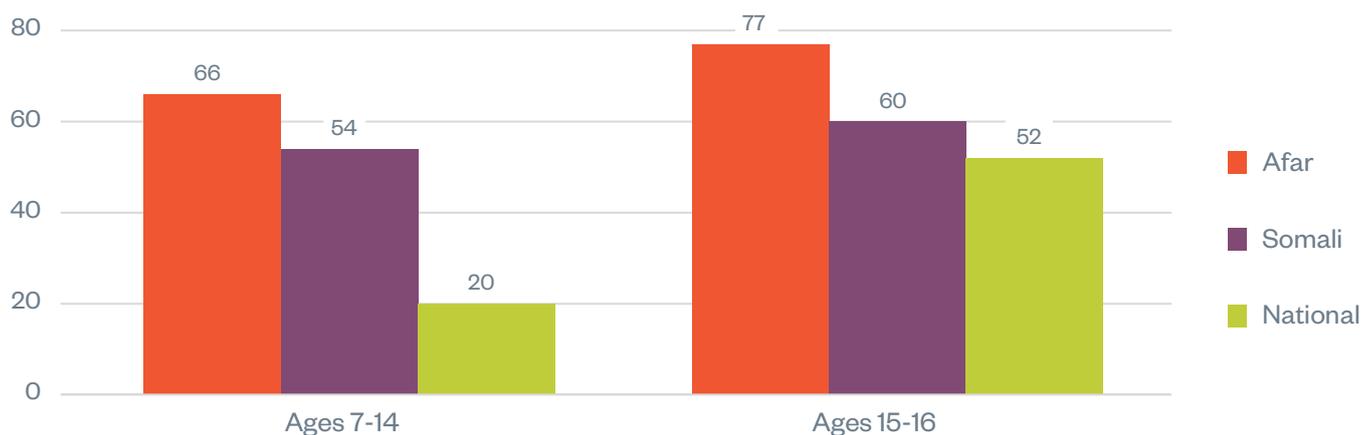
6 Authors' own calculations.

speak Afar-af), kebele (community) and woreda (district) officials have historically done too little to raise awareness about the importance of education, and concerns about government corruption further dampening community interest in education (Woldesenbet, 2015; Yitbarek et al., 2022). Gender also matters, in that complex interactions between cultural, economic and structural factors have left girls with far less access to education than boys (Goshu et al., 2021; Muhumed, 2017; Wodajo, 2014; Dessalegn et al., 2020). Literacy rates reflect this reality: the most recent DHS found that in Afar, 51% of men over the age of 15 were able to read at least part of a sentence, compared with only 24% of women (CSA and ICF, 2017). In Somali, there was an even greater gap – at 57% and 12% respectively.

Recent figures underscore the continuing disadvantage experienced by both regions, as well as their progress. On the one hand, Ministry of Education figures (Ministry of

Education, 2020) – which Wodajo (2014) observes do not match regional-level Bureau of Education figures, partly because there is no verifiable headcount of children in pastoralist regions – demonstrate that access to education remains fraught in both Afar and Somali. At the national level, 20% of children aged 7–14 are not attending school (see Figure 8). In Somali, this figure is more than twice as high, at 54%, and in Afar, it is higher still, at 66%. For adolescents aged 15–16, the figures for those not attending school are 52% (national), 60% (Somali) and 77% (Afar). On the other hand – and primarily due to the government's investment in building primary schools and alternative basic education (ABE) centres (see Box 3) – the past two decades have seen marked improvements in access to education in the two regions. Using DHS data, Elezaj et al. (2019) calculate that between 2000 and 2016, enrolment rates of children aged 10–14 tripled in Afar (22%

**Figure 8: Children out of school, by location, gender and age (%)**



Source: Ministry of Education, 2020

#### Box 4: Alternative basic education in Ethiopia

Alternative basic education (ABE) is a critical aspect of education in pastoralist areas of Ethiopia. First implemented more than two decades ago, ABE provides children aged 7–14 with the first four years of primary school condensed into three years, ostensibly delivered with more flexibility than formal education, and with the potential to transfer into formal primary school upon successful completion (Wodajo, 2014; Alemu and Solomon, 2019; UNICEF, 2018). Although at a national level, ABE enrolment is estimated to account for between 4% and 5% of primary enrolment, in Somali region it accounts for 41% (Alemu and Solomon, 2019) and in some areas accounts for as much as 60% (Muhumed, 2017). While the availability of ABE has vastly expanded young people's access to education (UNICEF, 2018), it is primarily delivered by paraprofessionals who themselves have had little education or training, in buildings that are poorly constructed and resourced, and in practice does not always deliver on the promised flexibility or quality (Muhumed, 2017; Wodajo, 2014; Alemu and Solomon, 2019; Ahmed, 2010; Woldesenbet, 2015). Several studies have found that most ABE teachers have not completed 10th grade, have received teacher training for a matter of weeks at most, and are handling multi-age classrooms with more than 90 students. This leaves many parents to prefer Qur'anic education for their children instead, because it is more likely to result in literacy (ibid.).

to 64%) and Somali (18% to 65%), while enrolment rates nationally only doubled (42% to 79%). Alene et al. (2021) add that in Somali, improvements in infrastructure have been accompanied by local decisions to make children's enrolment in school a precondition for the receipt of social protection (specifically from the country's flagship Productive Safety Net Programme, PSNP).

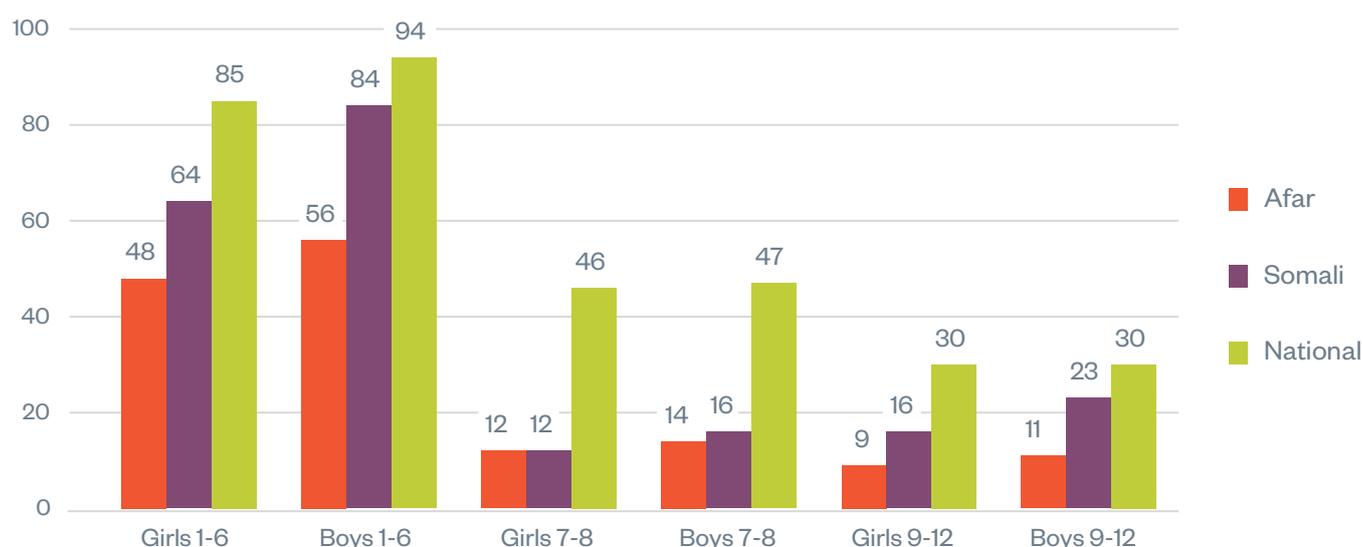
Girls are disadvantaged compared with boys in terms of enrolment at the national level, and this disadvantage is even more marked in Afar and Somali. At the primary level, the national gender parity index (GPI) is 0.9, which means that for every 10 boys enrolled, there are only 9 girls (Ministry of Education, 2021). In Afar, however, the GPI for primary schooling is 0.84, and in Somali, just 0.76 (ibid.). At secondary school level, the GPI in Afar has come to mirror that of Somali: there are only 3 girls enrolled for every 4 boys, against a national average of 92 girls per 100 boys (ibid.). In one study, Tiruneh et al. (2021) suggest that using primary and secondary gender parity indices obscures fine-grained patterning, because girls' disadvantage grows grade by grade. In their sample in the Somali region, for example, the GPI was 1.3 for 1st grade, 0.97 for 4th grade, and 0.74 for 8th grade.

The Ministry of Education (2021) reports that in the fall of 2021, net enrolment<sup>7</sup> in Afar at primary level (grades 1–6) was 48% for girls and 56% for boys (see Figure 9).

Rates were far lower at middle school level (grades 7–8), with only 12% of girls and 14% of boys enrolled. Only 1 in 10 adolescents in Afar were enrolled at the correct grade for their age at secondary level (grades 9–12) (9% of girls and 11% of boys). Although enrolment rates are generally higher in Somali than Afar, girls' disadvantage is far starker. The Ministry of Education (2021) reports that while 84% of primary school-aged boys were enrolled in the fall of 2021, only 64% of girls were enrolled. At the secondary level, rates plummet; 23% of boys and 16% of girls are enrolled.

Girls' enrolment disadvantage has several antecedents. The Ministry of Education (2021) reports that the net intake rate for girls entering first grade (including ABE) is significantly lower than that for boys in Afar (47% compared with 55%) and Somali (22% compared with 30%). Also, and in stark contrast to national-level figures, girls in both regions are less likely to complete primary school than boys (see Figure 10). The Ministry (2021) reports that only 18% of girls complete 6th grade in Afar, compared with 26% of boys. The figures in Somali are 23% and 33% respectively. In both regions, a deficit of female teachers leaves girls (and their caregivers) with few role models. The Ministry of Education (2021) reports that in Afar, 23% of primary teachers and only 15% of secondary teachers are female. In Somali, the figures are 15% and 8% respectively.

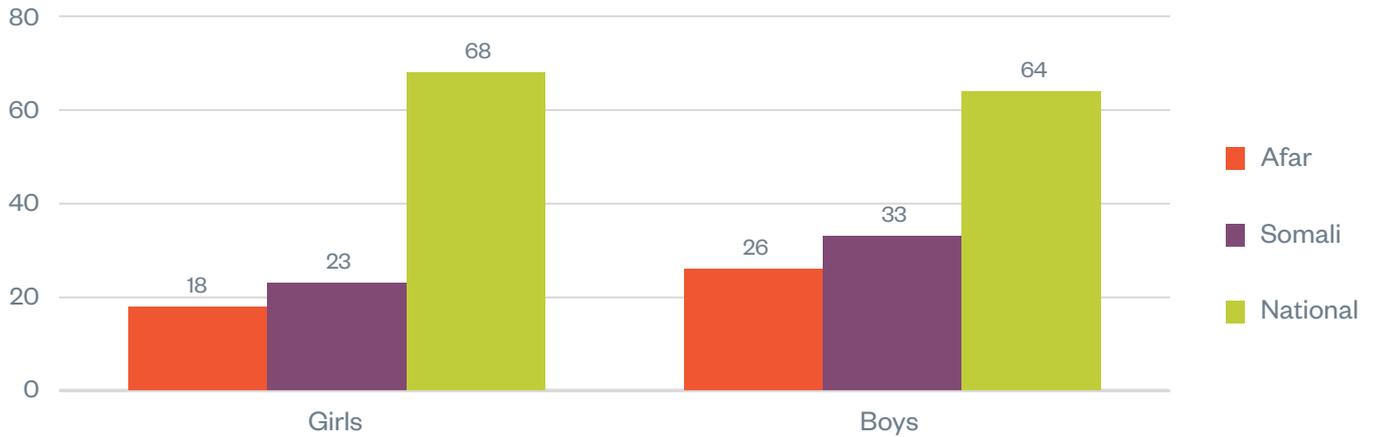
**Figure 9: Net enrolment rate, by grade level, gender, and location**



Source: Ministry of Education, 2021

<sup>7</sup> Gross enrolment figures, which include students who are over age for grade, are higher. In Afar, the primary gross enrolment rate (GER) is 70 for boys and 59 for girls. At middle school level, the GER is 30 for boys and 23 for girls. At secondary level, the GER is 18 for boys and 13 for girls. In Somali, the primary GER is 114 for boys and 86 for girls. The middle school GER is 43 for boys and 32 for girls. The secondary school GER is 29 for boys and 22 for girls. We have reported net enrolment rates rather than gross enrolment rates in the main text because of methodological concerns about rates over 100 and how they might be interpreted.

**Figure 10: 6th grade (primary) completion rates, by location and gender**



Source: Ministry of Education, 2021

Goshu et al. (2021) observe that due to pastoralist realities, regional-level figures do not paint an accurate picture of children’s and young people’s access to education. Their research in Afar highlights that some zones and some woredas are advantaged over others when it comes to access. For example, in Zone 2, there is one primary school for every 2,200 people; in Zone 4, there is one primary school for every 3,300 people. At the woreda level, inequalities are even more stark, with ratios ranging from 1:8000 (Bidu) to just under 1:900 (Awash Fentale) (ibid.). Gender parity also varies by location, especially at secondary school level. In Zone 3, 45% of secondary students are female, while in Zone 2, this figure is 26%. Woreda-level variation is again even more notable. Girls’ share of secondary enrolment ranges from less than 10% (Bidu) to more than 50% (Awash City). A study by Wodajo (2014) reports similar sub-regional variation in Somali and notes that the areas most affected by drought tend to have the lowest enrolment rates.

GAGE’s midline survey in Afar’s Zone 5 found that of younger adolescents (aged 12–14), girls (64%) were more likely to be enrolled than boys (57%) (Presler-Marshall et al., 2021b). Of older adolescents (17–19 years), the reverse was true, with boys (40%) much more likely to be enrolled than girls (28%). Qualitative findings highlight that this patterning reflects boys’ responsibility for larger livestock (camels and cattle) that require more migratory herding, and, for girls, child marriage. Not only do married girls lack access to education (only 8% of ever-married girls were enrolled), but caregivers admitted that they force girls to leave school to prevent them refusing an absuma marriage.

GAGE research in Afar’s Zone 5 has also found that high rates of truancy and grade repetition mean

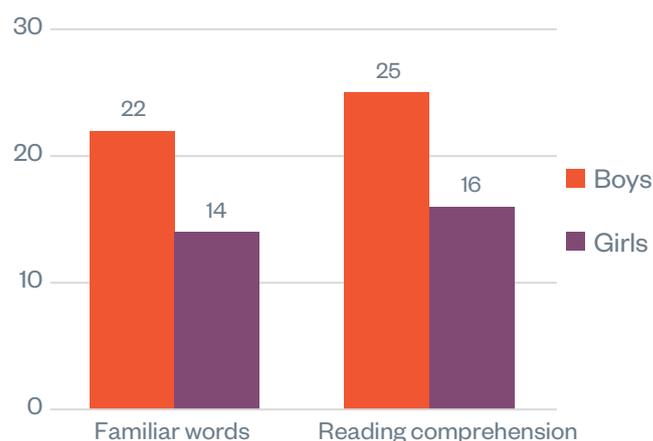
that even those who are enrolled tend to make limited academic progress (Presler-Marshall et al., 2021b). Of older adolescents who were enrolled, girls had missed an average of 22% of school days in the past two weeks, whereas boys had missed 14%. In interviews, respondents acknowledged that girls’ time poverty is generally greater than boys’ given girls’ domestic responsibilities – especially for collecting water and caring for other family members. Girls were concomitantly more likely to have repeated at least one grade. Of younger adolescents, 35% of girls and 27% of boys reported grade repetition. Unsurprisingly, given poor attendance and grade repetition, grade attainment in Zone 5 was low. On average, older girls who were enrolled had completed 5.3 grades, boys 5.0 grades.

These same broader themes emerge in research in Somali as well. Jackson (2011) and Wodajo (2014) report that while girls’ access to education has improved over time – especially due to efforts to use the Qur’an to raise awareness about the importance of girls’ education – girls are less likely to ever enrol, even in alternative basic education, and more likely to drop out than boys. This is because they are seen as not worth the investment, as they will eventually marry outside of the family, are disproportionately burdened with house and care work, lack female role models and access to paid work, and marry (and become parents) years earlier (Tiruneh et al., 2021; Jackson, 2011; Wodajo, 2014; Woldesenbet, 2015). Wodajo (2014) observes that while boarding schools are available in Somali, so that adolescents from remote communities have access to education past 4th grade, parents are loathe to send their children because of concerns about separating children from their culture. Concerns are heightened in the case of girls. Tiruneh et

al. (2021) report that of the 19 schools they sampled in Somali, half reported child marriage as the main factor in girls' dropout, and only two-thirds had a girls' club (versus 90% in Benishangul Gumuz).

With the caveat that the evidence is thin, particularly for Afar, existent research underscores that learning outcomes in Afar and Somali are especially poor. The most recent National Learning Assessment found that students in Afar are learning less than their peers in Somali (NEAEA, 2020). Specifically, it found the average composite score of 4th grade students in Afar to be only 32, whereas students in Somali matched the national average of 38. Results were similar for 8th grade students, with those in Afar averaging 30 and those in Somali again matching the national average of 35. Rossiter et al. (2017), reporting on the Young Lives School Survey, which included ten sites<sup>8</sup> in Afar and Somali, also found Afar students to be especially disadvantaged. Across research sites, 7th and 8th grade students correctly answered 41% of mathematics questions. This fell to 40% in Somali and 37% in Afar. Girls were slightly disadvantaged compared to boys and – in line with other locations – rural students were hugely disadvantaged compared to those living in urban areas. English scores exhibited similar patterning, with students in Afar correctly answering fewer questions (39) than their peers in Somali (51) or across sites (48). The 2018 Early Grade Reading Assessment, which included Af Soomaali but not Af Afar, found Somali speaking students to be significantly behind their peers using other languages (USAID, 2019). Only 19% of 3rd grade students were able to read familiar words (compared to 38% for those reading in Amharic). In addition, the average reading comprehension score for third grade students reading in Af Soomaali was only 21% (compared to 42% for those reading in Amharic). Girls were extremely disadvantaged compared to boys, with only 14% able to read familiar words in 3rd grade (compared to 22% for boys)(see Figure 11). Af Soomaali students' poor performance is not unexpected given that USAID (2020) reports that teachers in Somali have lower literacy scores (38%) than teachers in other regions (48% average across regions). Tiruneh et al. (2021a), using data from the Research on Improving Systems of Education

**Figure 11: Reading scores for 3rd grade students reading in Af Somali, by gender**



Source: USAID, 2019

(RISE) longitudinal research programme, report that 4th grade students living in Somali are also less numerate than their peers in other regions. The average student answered only 42% of questions correctly (compared to 46% across regions). Girls scores were lower than boys' (40% compared with 43%) (ibid.). Tiruneh et al also report that Somali students are unique in that their numeracy scores declined over time (2021b). By way of contrast, Tesema and Braeken (2018) found that students in Afar and Somali performed as well on the grade 12 national exam as did students in more established regions. Also, although it is extremely rare for girls in Afar and Somali to complete grade 12, the same study found that Afar and Somali are the only regions where girls' 12th grade exam scores are not lower than boys.

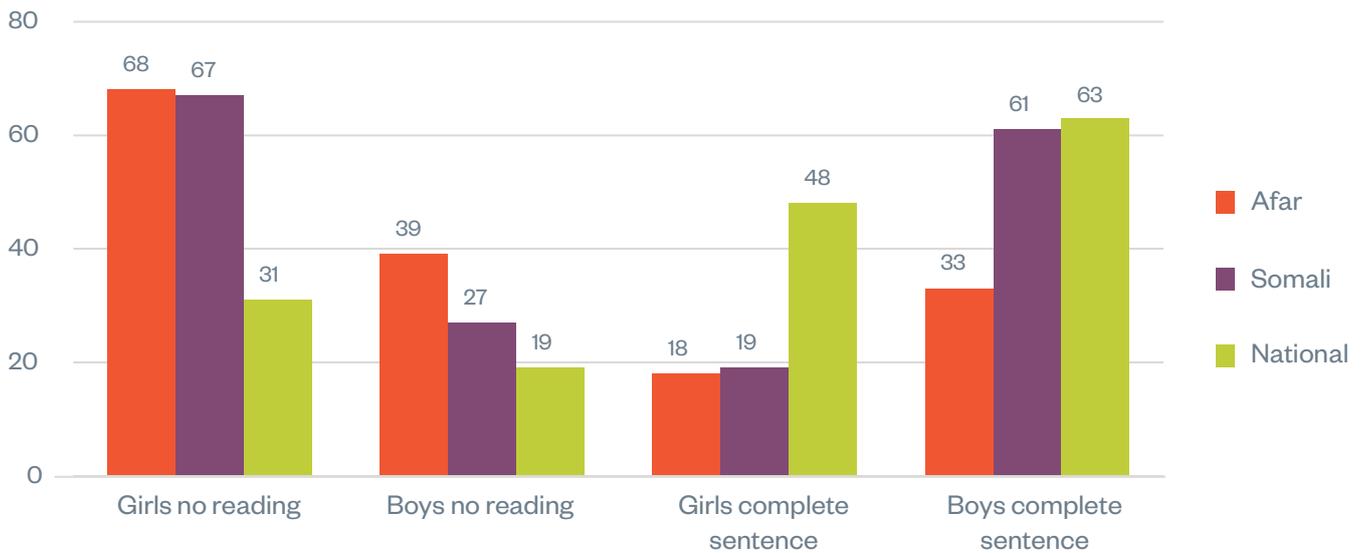
In part due to low enrolment, but also due to poor-quality instruction, youth literacy levels remain very low in both regions. The most recent DHS found that just over two-thirds of girls aged 15–19 in Afar (68%) and Somali (67%) could not read at all (CSA and ICF, 2017) (see Figure 12).<sup>9</sup> In Somali – and with the caveat that figures should be interpreted with caution<sup>10</sup> – girls were more than twice as likely to be illiterate as boys (67% compared with 27%). Although at the national level, nearly half (46%) of adolescent girls were able to read a complete sentence, this was not the case in Afar (18%) or Somali (19%).

8 For the school survey, four sites were added in Somali and six sites were added in Afar. Due to security concerns, these sites were carefully chosen and are not representative of the region. This is evident in female caregivers' very high rates of literacy: 54% in Somali and 43% in Afar, which contrast sharply from the average female literacy rates in these regions (i.e. 12.4% and 23.7%, respectively).

9 Authors' own calculations – excluding those participants who did not respond.

10 Figures for Somali boys should be interpreted with caution, due to the large number of boys who were excluded from calculations due to their non-response.

**Figure 12: Literacy, by location and gender, for adolescents aged 15–19 (%)**



Source: CSA and ICF, 2017

## Puberty education and menstrual health management

Very little is known about adolescent girls’ puberty education and MHM in Afar and Somali. Indeed, for their recent review of Ethiopian girls’ MHM, Sahiledengle et al. (2022) were not able to locate a single study from those regions that met inclusion criteria. UNICEF (2017) reports that only 14% of girls in its Afar sample were aware of menstruation before menarche – versus 74% of girls in Somali. GAGE’s midline survey found that in Afar’s Zone 5, 61% of adolescents had a source of information about puberty, but that for most adolescents, the primary source was friends (Presler-Marshall et al., 2020a). Of those with a source of information, only 18% listed their mother and 8% listed a teacher (ibid.). Indeed, because menarche is a sign that girls are old enough to be married, Afar girls participating in GAGE quite often reported that they hid their periods from their mothers. Of girls in Somali, UNICEF (2017) reports that a majority (60%) did not have any puberty education at school; where girls did have education it was due to female teachers’ personal initiative and was not a regular part of the curriculum.

Of the girls in GAGE’s sample, 35% of those living in Afar had reached menarche by midline (Presler-Marshall et al., 2020a). Girls began menstruating at an average age of 14.7 years (ibid.). UNICEF (2017) reports that nearly all girls (87%) in Afar use reusable cloth to manage their

periods. In Somali, on the other hand, most girls (76%) use disposable pads.

Girls’ activities are often impacted by menstruation, which is perceived to be ‘unclean’ (Balehey et al., 2018; Presler-Marshall et al., 2020a). UNICEF (2017) reports that in Afar, 70% of menstruating girls are prohibited from cooking and 50% do not collect water. Balehey et al. (2018) add that those who are menstruating are not allowed to touch milking utensils and must refrain from looking at lactating camels. In the GAGE sample, 15% of menstruating Afar girls report that their normal activities are restricted while they are on their periods (Presler-Marshall et al., 2020a). In Somali, most girls (83%) are not allowed to take part in religious activities during their periods and a minority (10–20%) are not allowed to bathe, share a bed with others, or eat certain foods (UNICEF, 2017).

Girls’ access to education is limited by menstruation. UNICEF (2017) reports that 23% of girls in Afar and 20% of girls in Somali regularly miss school due to their periods. This is in large part because few schools in Afar and Somali have the WASH facilities that girls need to maintain sanitation (Presler-Marshall et al., 2020a; UNICEF, 2017). Most schools in Afar (80%) and Somali (90%) never have water and even those that have toilets often have toilets that are dirty, lack rubbish bins, and are not felt to be safe/private (sometimes because they have no doors) (UNICEF, 2017). The GAGE midline survey found that of enrolled adolescents in Afar’s Zone 5, only 54% reported that their schools have separate toilets for boys and girls



Female students make their way to a class at Maskoke Primery and Secondly School in Gode Town in Somali region of Ethiopia  
11 February 2014 © UNICEF Ethiopia

and under 10% that their schools have facilities that girls can use during menstruation. Given these constraints, it is not unexpected that a minority of girls in Afar (38%) and Somali (30%) feel confident about managing their periods at school (UNICEF, 2017).

Abathun et al. (2016) note that severe menstrual pain is not uncommon for those who have been infibulated. This may explain why UNICEF (2017) found that girls from Afar who regularly miss school due to menstruation list menstrual pain (54%) more than teasing (39%) as a reason for being absent.

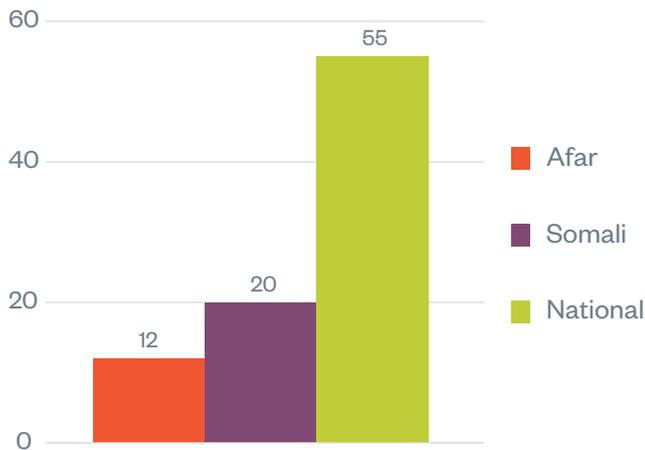
## Contraception, abortion, and adolescent motherhood

Despite government efforts to encourage family planning, contraceptive uptake remains low in Afar and Somali (Family Planning 2030, 2022; Tegegne et al., 2020). The 2019 mini DHS reports that of married women between the ages of 15 and 49, only 3% of those in Somali and 13% of those in Afar were currently using a method of family planning -- compared to a national average of 41% (Health Institute and ICF, 2019). The 2018 Performance Monitoring for Action survey found similarly low prevalence rates for sexually active young women aged 15-24. Only 12% of those in Afar and 20% of those in Somali were using contraceptives, compared to a national average of 55% (Debelew and Habte, 2021)(see Figure 13). The GAGE midline survey found that of married adolescent girls living in Afar's Zone 5, only 8% had ever used contraception (Presler-Marshall et al., 2020a). Unsurprisingly, given

contraceptive uptake, fertility rates are the highest in Ethiopia. In Somali, women average more than seven children (7.2) (see Figure 14).

The evidence base suggests several reasons that contraception remains rare in Afar and Somali. Some women, especially in Somali, are not aware of options. The 2019 mini DHS found that only 86% of married women in Afar -- and only 67% of their peers in Somali -- were able to identify at least one method of contraception (Health Institute and ICF, 2019). This is compared to a national average of 96% (ibid.) Physical access is also an issue. Using linked data from the 2016 DHS and Service Provision Assessments, Tegegne et al. (2020) calculate that in Afar, the average woman lives nearly 10 kilometres from a facility that provides contraceptive services. In Somali, she lives nearly 19 kilometres away (ibid.). The national average is just over six kilometres (ibid.). Access to contraceptives is further complicated for women living in communities that seasonally migrate (Tigabu et al., 2021). Most importantly, however, contraception is widely viewed in Afar and Somali as undesirable. Bekele et al. (2021) found 67% of women in Afar held unfavourable attitudes toward contraception and admitted to having never discussed it with their partner. In Somali, figures were 80% and 79% respectively. Women reported a preference for large families, that their religion forbids contraception, beliefs that contraception encourages extra-marital sex, concerns about side-effects, and that their partners would not allow them to use it (ibid.; see also Presler-Marshall et al., 2020a, PMA Ethiopia, 2019; Dessalegn et al., 2020; Alemayehu et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2020; Tigabu et al., 2021).

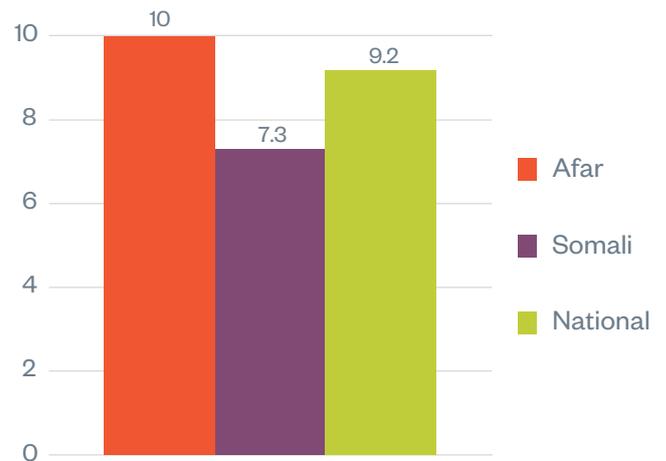
**Figure 13: Contraceptive prevalence rate for young women, by location**



Source: Debelew and Habte, 2021

Interestingly, in their analysis of the 2016 DHS, Tesema et al. (2020) found that lagging uptake of contraception is associated with a relatively higher incidence of abortion in Afar, but not Somali (see Figure 15). Those findings are all the more notable given Afar and Somali women's similarly low levels of abortion knowledge. Sheehy et al. (2021) found that women in Afar (12%) and Somali (2.4%) were less likely than their peers at the national level (27%) to have any awareness of the abortion law and the circumstances under which abortion is legal. Women in Afar (7.6%) and Somali (8.3%) were also the least likely to know where to access a facility abortion. A recent study of female university students in Afar found that abortion was associated with alcohol use, non-use of contraceptive services, and multiple sex partners (Biza et al., 2016).

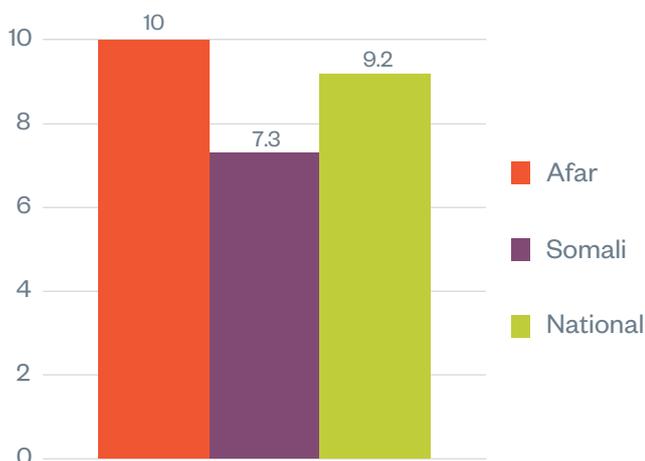
**Figure 14: Total fertility rate, by location**



Source: CSA and ICF, 2017

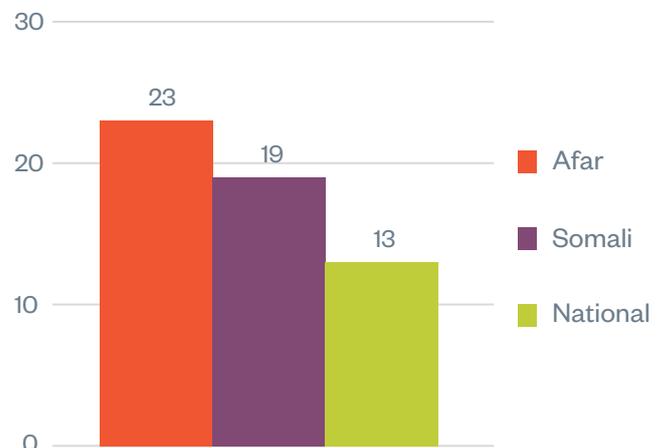
Given high rates of child marriage and limited efforts to limit and space pregnancies, it is not surprising that rates of adolescent pregnancy are high in Afar and Somali (Tigabu et al., 2021). The most recent DHS reports that in Afar, 23.4% of girls aged 15–19 had already begun childbearing (see Figure 16) (CSA and ICF, 2017). That rate is the highest in the country. In Somali, which has the country's second highest rate of adolescent mothers, 18.7% of girls aged 15–19 had begun childbearing. In line with increases in the incidence of child marriage in those two regions, Elezaj et al. (2019) report that adolescent motherhood has become more common in Afar and Somali since 2000, when the rates were 21% and 13% respectively. The GAGE midline survey found that of married girls living in Afar's Zone 5, 48% had been pregnant (Presler-Marshall et al., 2020a).

**Figure 15: Abortion prevalence rate, by location**



Source: Tesema et al., 2020

**Figure 16: Adolescent girls aged 15–19 who have begun childbearing, by location**



Source: CSA and ICF, 2017



Mother with her children in Afar, Ethiopia. 2018 © Nathalie Bertrams / GAGE

## Economic empowerment

The economic empowerment of girls and women in Afar and Somali is broadly shaped by pastoralism and government efforts to sedentarise populations in river basins where access to water enables agriculture (Abebe, 2014; Haji and Legesse, 2017; Mahamoud and Ahmed, 2019). In pastoralist areas, females' access to income is almost exclusively related to livestock (especially small ruminants) and livestock products (especially milk), though some women also make money during the dry season marketing handicrafts, firewood and charcoal, and aromatic gum resins (Inkermann, 2015; Dessalegn et al., 2020; Ridgewell and Flintan, 2007). In agro-pastoralist areas, where communities are less mobile, women's livelihood strategies revolve around trading in addition to livestock and livestock products and their incomes, while small, can be more dependable than men's, given that men are more likely to rely solely on livestock (Gurmu, 2018; Balehey et al., 2018; Teka et al., 2019; Mahamoud and Ahmed, 2019; Oxfam, 2016; United States Agency for International Development (USAID), 2021). In Afar, there is some evidence that these more diverse livelihoods may have been disrupted in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, as demand for services slumped (Asfaw et al., 2022)

Gender norms that leave Afar and Somali girls and women time poor also limit their economic empowerment (Dessalegn et al., 2020; Inkermann, 2015; Gurmu, 2018; Balehey et al., 2018; Ridgewell and Flintan, 2007). Every

day, girls and women must spend hours provisioning the household with water and fuelwood, which is challenging given the desert conditions and poor water infrastructure – a situation that is also significantly exacerbated by climate change-related drought (Balehey et al., 2018; Oxfam, 2016; Hutchings et al., 2022). It is not unusual for women to spend more than 4 hours each day collecting water (Whitley et al., 2019). They are also tasked with tending the smaller livestock that is cared for locally, as well as food preparation, and building, maintaining and cleaning housing (UNICEF, n.d.a, n.d.b; Dessalegn et al., 2020; Inkermann, 2015; USAID, 2021). Girls and women are also responsible for care work in the context of extremely high fertility rates. Asfaw et al. (2021) found that in Afar, women with children under the age of five were significantly less likely to engage in off-farm activities than those without.

The end result of how work is allocated in pastoralist households is that many girls and women do not have time to earn. The Central Statistical Agency (CSA) (2019), reporting the results of the most recent (2013) Time Use Survey, notes that in Afar, men spend 16 minutes more than women each day on non-productive activities (such as leisure and sleep); in Somali, the gap is much larger, at 92 minutes a day. Notably, while sedentarisation has been found to have myriad positive impacts on women – including not only their access to water and services but also their economic empowerment – it has come at the cost of increased time poverty. Where women are now

earning their own incomes, they are doing so alongside their traditional tasks (Mahamoud and Ahmed, 2019; Balehey et al., 2018; Inkermann, 2015).

There is a wealth of research highlighting the disadvantage experienced by girls and women in Afar and Somali in terms of their access to productive inputs (including livestock, education and training), their opportunities to save and borrow, and even their own earnings (Ayele, 2019; Inkermann, 2015; Gurmu, 2018; Dessalegn et al., 2020; Balehey et al., 2018; USAID, 2021). The disparity starts at birth (when girls are given fewer livestock by their parents than boys) and continues into adulthood – with divorcees often given no share of marital assets, widowed female heads of households especially likely to be poor (particularly if they have only daughters, as men's assets are passed solely to sons and other male relatives), and females granted less of an inheritance from their parents than males (Dessalegn et al., 2020; Balehey et al., 2018; Tekla et al., 2019; USAID, 2021; Fenta, 2017). Balehey et al. (2018) report that in Afar, boys own six times as many goats as girls. By adulthood, the gender gap in ownership is ever greater: husbands own 18 times as many goats as wives (ibid.). Women's ownership of more lucrative animals is negligible, and GAGE's research in Afar's Zone 5 has identified similar patterning in regard to other assets. For example, among older adolescents, boys are three times more likely to have a mobile phone than girls (59% compared with 19%). They are also three times more likely to have controlled the spending of cash (15% compared with 5%) (Presler-Marshall et al., 2021c). In Somali, Gurmu (2018) finds that women spend the entirety of their individually generated income on household needs (food and children's health), while men spend 50% of their income on personal needs; CHF International (2012) notes that women in Somali are especially business oriented but lack access to credit and business skills.

Although the DHS does not identify large disparities between men and women in terms of the titling of land and houses (in large part because titling is uncommon<sup>11</sup>), men's advantaged access to productive inputs is evident in other government statistics. The most recent (2015/2016) Ethiopian Socio-Economic Survey found that in both regions, men own at least 80% of livestock, including large

and more valuable animals such as camels as well as smaller animals such as goats (as cited in CSA, 2019). The sole exception is poultry in Somali; men 'only' own 78% of fowl in that region. The most recent Agricultural Sample Survey (2017/2018) found that women agricultural holders<sup>12</sup> also have more limited access to agricultural credit than men. Afar women are especially disadvantaged. In Somali, 30% of those accessing credit were female, whereas in Afar, there were no women who accessed credit (as cited in CSA, 2019). Afar and Somali women's limited access to formal financial services is evident in the most recent DHS as well. It reports that women in Afar (7%) and Somali (5%) had the lowest rates of bank account usage in the country (CSA and ICF, 2017).

Girls' and women's time poverty and limited access to productive assets are reflected in their employment rates, which in Afar and Somali are markedly lower than national averages. The 2021 Labour Force and Migration Survey reports that only 38% of females over the age of 10 are employed, versus a national average of 50%<sup>13</sup> (see Figure 17) (ESS, 2021). Figures for youth show similar patterning, with girls and young women less likely to be employed than boys and young men (see Figure 18) (ibid.). In Afar, only 41% of females aged 15–29 are employed; in Somali, that figure is only 34%. Among older adolescents in GAGE's research in Afar's Zone 5, only 4% of girls (compared with 13% of boys) had worked for pay in the past year (Presler-Marshall et al., 2021c).

As droughts have become more frequent and severe, and food insecurity more common, both regions have seen an increase in migration. Girls and young women are especially likely to migrate to urban areas, to Djibouti, or to countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region – primarily to become domestic workers. This migration is sometimes under their own impetus and, at other times, because they are forced by their parents (Presler-Marshall et al., 2021c; Oxfam, 2016). With the caveat that it focusses solely on internal migration, the 2021 Labour Force and Migration Survey reports that Afar and Somali have different rates and patterning of migration. In Afar, of older urban adolescents (aged 15–19)<sup>14</sup>, the survey reports that 38% of girls and 28% of boys are migrants (ESS, 2021). Of those aged 20–24, figures are

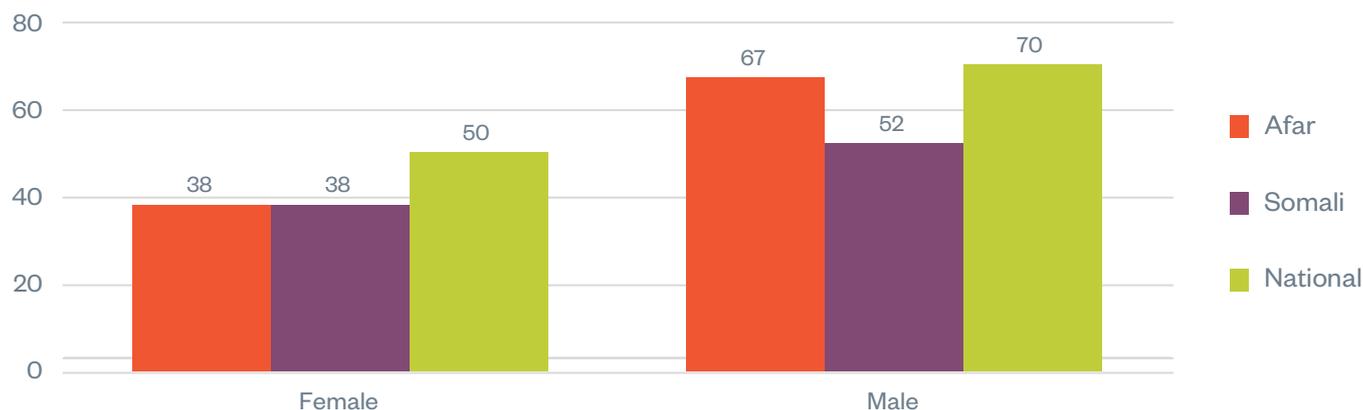
11 For example, only 15% of men and women in Afar have their name on the title of land.

12 The Annual Agricultural Survey defines an agricultural holder as 'a person who exercises management control over the operation of the agricultural holding and makes the major decision regarding the utilization of the available resources.'

13 Employment to population ratio of persons over the age of 10.

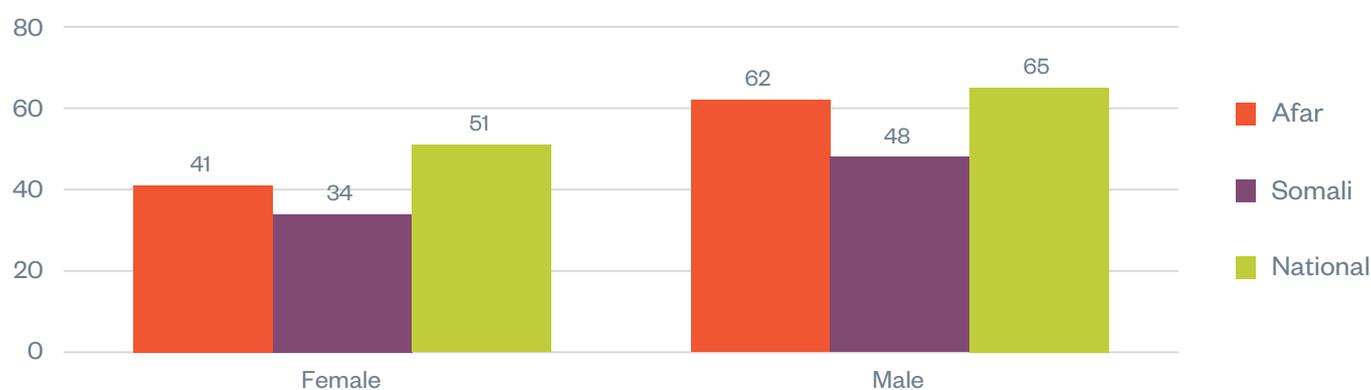
14 Of rural adolescents aged 15-19, 11% of girls and boys were migrants.

**Figure 17: Employment to population ratio, by gender and location**



Source: 2021 Labour Force and Migration Survey

**Figure 18: Youth employment to population ratio, by gender and location**



Source: 2021 Labour Force and Migration Survey

55% and 34% respectively. Migration is less common and less biased towards girls in Somali, possibly because girls in that region lack the added impetus of escaping arranged child marriage (as is the case in Afar). Of older urban adolescents in Somali (aged 15–19)<sup>15</sup>, 17% of girls and boys were migrants. Of young adults (aged 20–24), 21% of women and 20% of men were migrants (ibid.). We were unable to locate any regionally disaggregated figures on international migration.

## Voice and agency

The voice and agency of girls and women in Afar and Somali are subject to myriad restrictions. At the highest level, evidence indicates that many of these restrictions are shared across regions. Research conducted some years hence highlights that Ethiopian pastoralist women, regardless of where they live, have limited input into household decisions. Men make the final decisions about

livestock and spending, even deciding how women's income is spent. And women effectively have no input into community decision-making (Ridegewell and Flintan, 2007; Flintan, 2007; Aregu et al., 2007; Haile, 2008). More recent research specific to Afar (Inkermann, 2015; Dessalegn et al., 2020; Balehey et al., 2018; USAID, 2021; Chekole et al., 2019; Kebede, 2021) and Somali (Ayele, 2019; Gurmu, 2018; Degago and Yibeltal, 2018; Bekele, 2014) underscores that girls and women continue to face restrictions on their mobility. They are also deprioritised for food within the household (evident in the especially large gender disparities in adolescent anaemia rates)<sup>16</sup> (Elezaj et al., 2019), and are excluded from decision-making. That said, recent research also suggests some progress, largely driven by increases in women's economic empowerment, and hints at regional divergence.

In many ways, recent survey data highlights how much Afar and Somali girls and women have in common in terms

<sup>15</sup> Of rural adolescents aged 15–19, 11% of girls and 8% of boys were migrants.

<sup>16</sup> Of Afar adolescents aged 15–19, 46% of girls and 19% of boys were anaemic. In Somali, the figures were 54% and 18% respectively.

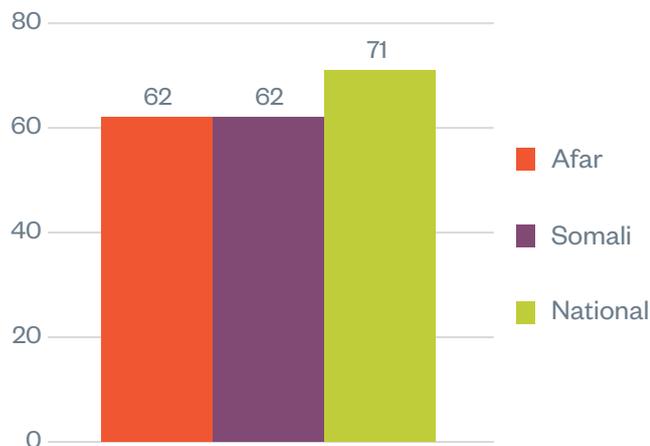
of voice and agency. Not only are they more likely than their peers in other regions to be completely uneducated, to have undergone FGM/C, to be at increasing risk of child marriage and adolescent motherhood, and to lack access to productive assets, but they also have less input in decisions that affect their lives at the individual, household and community levels. The most recent DHS reports that only 62% of women in Afar and Somali have at least some input into decisions about their own health, household purchases, and visits to family and friends, compared with 71% nationally (see Figure 19) (CSA and ICF, 2017). The Civil Service Commission reports that in 2017/2018, the two regions also had the lowest proportion of female civil servants in the country – only 23% in Somali and 29% in Afar, compared with a national average of 37% (see Figure 20) (CSA, 2019). In its study, USAID (2021) adds that when Afar research respondents were asked to rank groups by their ability to input into community decisions, women were ranked last, behind male youth.

Some indicators suggest that Afar girls and women have limited voice and agency, even compared with their peers in Somali. As noted earlier, this starts with marriage – with most girls in Afar, but not Somali, married by parental arrangement (82%) (CSA and ICF, 2017). Similarly, the most recent DHS reports that women in Afar are half as likely as their peers in Somali to have primary control over how their own earnings are spent (28% compared with 56%), are more likely to believe that spousal violence is justifiable (69% compared with 43%), and are more likely to

experience controlling behaviours by their husband (50% compared with 29%) (CSA and ICF, 2017). The CSA (2019) adds that compared with their peers in Somali, Afar women are slightly more likely to be excluded from decision-making about the sale of livestock (73% compared with 65%), and much less likely to have sole control over the sale of livestock products (58% compared with 83%) (as per the 2015/2016 Agricultural Sample Survey). It also notes that Afar has elected a far smaller proportion of women to the House of Representatives than Somali (25% compared with 61%) (ibid.). Indeed, while Afar’s female representation in the House between 2014 and 2019 was the country’s lowest, Somali’s was the highest.

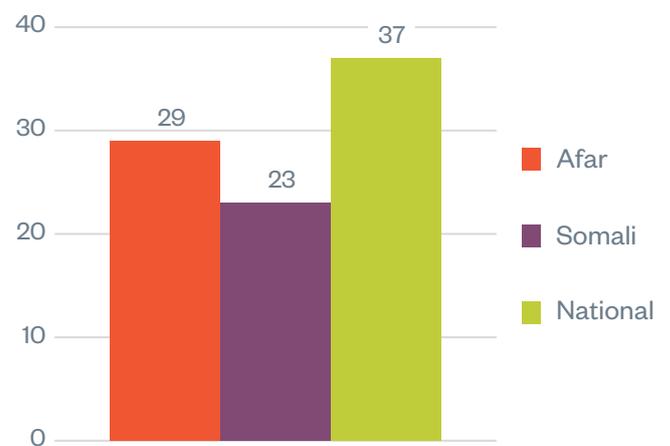
Other indicators suggest that Somali girls and women are disadvantaged in terms of voice and agency even compared with their peers in Afar. For example, a greater proportion of girls than boys are completely denied their right to an education, which is reflected in the larger gender gap in adolescent literacy; and in 2016, married women reported less input into decisions over men’s earnings than they did in 2005 (see Figure 21). This is in contrast to Afar, which – while remaining below national and Somali averages – is trending positively. Elezaj et al. (2019) report that by 2016, Somali women (50%) were only slightly more likely to report input than Afar women (47%), despite having a nearly 20 percentage point advantage a decade earlier. This same pattern is evident in broader indices of women’s empowerment<sup>17</sup> (see Figure 22). Although married women in Afar continue to lag far behind their

**Figure 19: Women’s input into all three decisions, by location**



Source: CSA and ICF, 2017

**Figure 20: Female civil servants, by location**



Source: CSA, 2019

<sup>17</sup> This index of women’s empowerment includes 12 indicators across four domains: 1) education (literacy and level of education), economic (employment), interpersonal (decision-making about partner’s earnings, own health care, large household purchases, and visiting relatives), and attitudes about wife-beating (woman goes out without telling husband, neglects children, argues with husband, refuses sex, or burns food).

peers at the national level, they made significant progress between 2005 (0.2%) and 2016 (3.6%). Married women in Somali, on the other hand, regressed on this measure, from 1.9% to 1%. Unmarried Somali women were more likely to report feeling empowered than their married peers, and have made progress since 2005 (from 3.2% to 5.3%). Their progress, however, pales alongside their unmarried peers in Afar (3.5% to 12.9%).

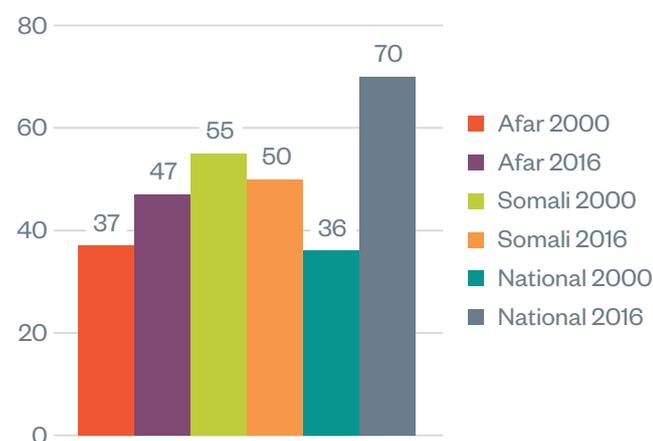
Although there has been very little research conducted in Afar and Somali – and of the research that has been carried out, little has paid explicit attention to gender other than to note that girls and women are disadvantaged compared with boys and men – there is growing evidence that as girls’ and women’s access to services and economic empowerment expands, their voice and agency grows in tandem (Inkermann, 2015; Ayele, 2019; Degago and Yibeltal, 2018; Mahamoud and Ahmed, 2019; USAID, 2021). Inkermann (2015), for example, observes that Afar women who live in settled communities are not only more likely to have their own earnings, but also to have access to local government Women’s Affairs offices that support them to learn about and access their rights. Degago and Yibeltal (2018) add that in Somali, women are socially and psychologically empowered by participating in the microfinance programmes that are more available in settled communities – even when programming does not result in improved access to assets. Ayele’s (2019) study, also in Somali, notes that while women’s incomes tend to be small, for women who earn, they have a greater say in decision-making. However, as Oxfam (2016) observes, this

may come at a cost – as women’s greater involvement in spending decisions can lead to increased household tensions (as well as greater time poverty).

Another study (USAID, 2021) cautions that pastoralist women’s gender roles are complex. While agreeing that Afar women with their own incomes tend to have more input into decision-making, it also reports that women in nomadic communities perceive themselves as more empowered than those in settled communities, because customary governance that protects women’s rights is often weaker in settled areas. The same study adds that nomadic and settled Afar women also have different reactions to secure land tenure. In the former case, it reduces their participation in community meetings – apparently because it increases wives’ decision-making over grazing. In the latter, it increases participation in community meetings, but reduces the likelihood that women are the main income contributors.

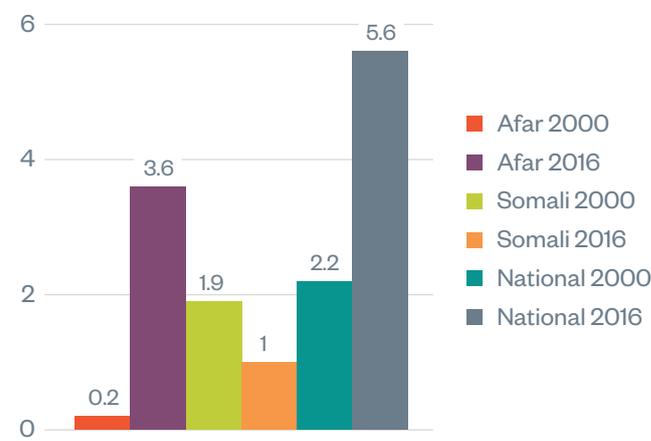
GAGE’s research in Afar’s Zone 5 has found that adolescent girls have less voice and agency than their male peers (Presler-Marshall et al., 2020c, 2021a). They are, for example, half as likely to feel comfortable expressing an opinion to an adult than boys (8% compared with 15%). Girls also reported discussing significantly fewer topics than boys with both their mothers (1.2/5 topics compared with 1.6/5 topics for boys) and their fathers (1/5 compared with 1.8/5). Girls were not significantly less likely than boys to have left the kebele in the past three months, but this was primarily because even boys were comparatively unlikely to have done so.

**Figure 21: Married women’s input into men’s earnings, by location and time (%)**



Source: Elezaj et al., 2019

**Figure 22: Married women who report feeling empowered, by location and year (%)**



Source: Elezaj et al., 2019

# Evidence gaps and data priorities to support policy and programming

The regions of Afar and Somali have seen very little focused research. This is partly because they have sparse, mobile populations; partly because they are relatively side-lined within Ethiopia as 'emerging' regions that are yet to develop the strong regional capacity that exists in more established regions such as Amhara, and their populations remain difficult to disentangle from broader populations of Afars (in Djibouti and Eritrea) and Somalis (in Somalia, Somaliland, Djibouti and Kenya). These evidence lacunae are also in part because the two regions are afflicted by recurrent drought and conflict. Indeed, there is reason to believe that even large-scale national surveys – including the census and the DHS – do not accurately capture the realities of people living in Afar and Somali because of sampling and enumerating difficulties<sup>18</sup>. Even less is known about the age- and gender-specific vulnerabilities affecting girls and women living in the two regions. Because of restrictions on their mobility, their extremely low literacy rates, and social norms that restrict their voice and agency, girls and women are less likely to be included in research and almost certainly less likely to answer accurately. Donors and NGOs, increasingly aware of pastoralist regions' limited service provisioning and cultural complexities, are keen to work in these areas but are limited by lack of focussed research. Based on this review, we highlight the following key evidence gaps that GAGE/ODI research will prioritise to help the Ethiopian government and development partners deliver on its promise of eliminating child marriage and FGM/C in Afar and Somali:

- **Female genital mutilation/cutting:** Because forms of FGM/C other than infibulation are sometimes not recognised as FGM/C, because knowledge of the law is leading to hidden practices and possible under-reporting, and because the DHS does not have sufficiently large samples of adolescent girls to allow for

useful age-disaggregation, it is unclear how many girls in Afar and Somali are subject to FGM/C. As practices shift, it is also unclear what type of FGM/C is being practised, when and by whom, and with what input from girls themselves. There appears to be effectively no evidence that addresses the 're-opening' of girls in preparation for sexual intercourse and childbirth. The identity of potential 'champions' for ending FGM/C is also unclear, especially given mixed evidence on the role of religious leaders and men and boys in regard to elimination versus stasis. Mixed methods research is needed to identify which champions and which messages are likely to generate the most change – and whether and how current programming is supporting elimination.

- **Child marriage:** The 2016 DHS reports that not only is child marriage particularly common in Afar and Somali, but that it is becoming more so (for girls aged 15–17). However, given sample sizes in these regions – and enumeration difficulties – there is a need to carefully track, on a longitudinal basis, the incidence of child marriage and the age at which girls marry. If child marriage is becoming more common, there is an urgent need to understand why, especially given potential links to climate change-driven poverty and violence. Also, while there is a good understanding of the traditional form that child marriage takes in Afar (absuma – cousin marriage), there have been few efforts aimed at identifying intra-regional differences within Afar and there has apparently been no focused research on marriage timing and partner selection in Somali. DHS data indicates that Somali girls primarily identify themselves as agents in marriage choices, but we do not know how they choose and under what constraints their choices are made. As with FGM/C, research is

<sup>18</sup> In the case of Somali region, this included conflict between the Liyu regional special forces and the separatist Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) at the time of the census. A peace deal was signed in 2018 ending hostilities in the region.



Girls prepare breakfast in Waryuguleh woreda, a remote pastoralist area in Somali Region, Ethiopia, 22 January 2015 © UNICEF Ethiopia/2015/Bindra

also needed to identify which messengers and which messages are likely to generate the most change.

- **Education:** With the most recent census now 15 years old, the government does not know how many school-aged children live in Afar and Somali. Because of high absenteeism and grade repetition, aggregating enrolment at the primary versus secondary level, or even tracking enrolment by age, does not adequately capture girls' access to and progress through school. This is especially the case given that many of the most remote communities continue to be served by alternative basic education, which does not deliver the same content as the formal curriculum. In Somali, it is unclear why girls remain so starkly disadvantaged compared with boys, even at the primary level, and in both regions there is a need to understand what types of support might encourage and incentivise parents to invest in girls' education, especially during their adolescence and in the face of intensifying climate change. Very little is known about girls' learning outcomes.
- **Puberty education and menstrual health management:** There have apparently been no regionally comparable attempts to explore whether and how adolescent girls in Afar and Somali learn about their developing bodies and how they physically and

socially manage their periods. There is a need, given the relationship between menarche and marriage, to explore how the age of menarche may be changing in tandem with improved/different nutrition and how to effectively decouple these with tailored messaging. Given Afar and Somali's aridity, and also their limited capacity for dealing with non-biodegradable trash, there is also a need to explore what sorts of MHM supplies can meet girls' needs in an environmentally responsible way. Critically, given the relationship between infibulation and urinary tract infections and painful periods, it is vital to understand how to support girls who have been infibulated to stay healthy and manage their pain.

- **Contraception, abortion, and adolescent motherhood:** That families in Afar and Somali have preferences for early motherhood and large families is well documented. What remains poorly understood is what messaging and messengers might shift those preferences – especially given that they are deeply intertwined with religious beliefs. Existent evidence suggests that it will be important to work with men, to address women's concerns that their husbands will not allow them to use contraception, but that women themselves are deeply hesitant because of social

norms and widespread misunderstandings about side-effects. That abortion rates in Afar exceed the national average, while contraceptive uptake lags, implies that women may be more interested in planning their families than they can admit and underscores the need to use qualitative research to explore change strategies.

- **Economic empowerment:** Existent evidence highlights how difficult it is to capture and measure girls' and women's economic empowerment in pastoralist contexts where engagement with the cash economy is relatively limited and incomes are seasonally 'lumpy'. Employment and unemployment figures do not adequately reflect girls' and women's involvement in part-time income-generating activities observed in qualitative research. Agricultural surveys that identify ownership of livestock to women as opposed to men do not necessarily account for the ways in which ownership and decision-making are shared – or not shared – between wives and husbands. Wage gaps between females and males appear not to have been calculated. Critically, given increased sedentarisation and rural-to-urban migration, there have been few efforts to understand how the livelihoods and economic empowerment of girls and women living in more settled versus nomadic communities are diverging as those living in the former have more and different opportunities to both earn and spend. How to best

support girls' and women's economic empowerment – attending to cultural constraints and mindful of both existent time poverty and intensifying climate change – is also poorly understood and should be prioritised by future research. Attention should be paid to the impacts of the PSNP, which in other regions appears to be supporting women's economic empowerment, as well as to diverse programming that supports women's savings and self-employment.

- **Voice and agency:** Given broader similarities between Afar and Somali – in terms of livelihoods, culture and religion – the many and diverse ways in which metrics of women's and girls' voice and agency diverge highlight an urgent need for research on associated knowledge, attitudes and practices. With girls and women in both regions broadly disadvantaged compared with their peers in other regions of Ethiopia, future progress depends on understanding why Somali has the country's highest female representation in the House of Representatives and Afar the lowest; why women in Afar are making slow progress towards empowerment while women in Somali appear to be backsliding; and how to translate progress in Afar into progress in Somali and vice versa. While there have been some efforts aimed at exploring how women become active agents in challenging restrictive gender norms and shaping their own trajectories, adolescent girls remain largely invisible.



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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](http://www.gage.odi.org.uk) for more information.

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