GENDER & ADOLESCENCE: GLOBAL EVIDENCE

ENDLINE REPORT SERIES

Young people's development and well-being in Afar, Ethiopia

GAGE endline evidence

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Introduction

As laid out in the Ten Years Development Plan (Ministry of Planning and Development (MoPD), 2020), as well as sectoral policies and commitments to international objectives (including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Pact for the Future), the Ethiopian government is intent on ensuring that its large and growing population of children and youth have access to the services, rights and work that they need to secure their own futures – and transform the country into an economic and social 'Beacon of Prosperity' for Africa (ibid.). Recent events, however, have put these objectives at risk. Political and ethnic conflict have become intractable; climate change is accelerating; the government's budget is stressed by high inflation and debt load; and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is projecting that official development assistance (ODA) will decline by up to 17% in 2025, due to cuts by major donors (OECD, 2025; UNDP Ethiopia, 2025; World Bank, 2025a).

Against this broader national backdrop, the Afar region – which had been the poorest in the country in 2011 – saw an impressive 12 percentage point decline in rural poverty by 2016 (World Bank, 2020; World Bank, 2025b). However, the region remains significantly off-track in terms of meeting SDG targets on education, adolescent fertility, and the elimination of harmful gender norms and practices (Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia (CSA) and ICF, 2017; Ministry of Education, 2023).

This report is designed to inform the government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, the Afar Regional State government, the Hari Rasu Zone Administration, and their development partners, about the multiple and shifting threats facing young people living in Hari Rasu, and how they might better tailor programming and policies to mitigate those risks and expand opportunities for young people, now and as they make the crucial transition into young adulthood. It is based on mixed-methods data collected in late 2024 and early 2025 as part of the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) longitudinal study. Surveys were undertaken with 732 young people living in 20 *kebeles* in 5 *woredas* of Hari Rasu. In addition, individual and group qualitative interviews were conducted with 154 young people. Quantitative and qualitative data was also collected with caregivers and key informants. The report also draws on previous rounds of data to show changes over time in key dimensions of young people's lives.

The report begins with an overview of the Afar context. We then describe the GAGE conceptual framework and methodology. We present our findings on young people's capability outcomes, including education, bodily integrity and freedom from violence, health and nutrition, psychosocial well-being, voice and agency, and economic empowerment. We focus on differences by gender, age, and marital and disability status. We conclude by discussing the implications for policy and programming actions that are needed to accelerate progress and ensure that all young people living in Hari Rasu have access to the services and supports they need to thrive as they move through adolescence and into young adulthood.

A female student in class, Afar, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2025

Context

The Afar region is primarily desert and is home to pastoralists who have traditionally engaged in seasonal migration shaped by rainfall patterns. After millennia during which the region's inhabitants successfully adapted their livelihoods to this environment, they are now seeing those livelihoods – and food security – devastated by recurrent climate change-driven drought and invasive species (Oxfam, 2016; Mekuriaw and Harris-Coble, 2021; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), 2022; UNICEF, n.d.a; n.d.b). Although the poverty rate in the region fell substantially between 2011 and 2016[1] (from 36% to 24%), it fell faster in urban areas than in rural areas, which meant that inequality grew rapidly (Gini of 37) (World Bank, 2025b; World Bank, 2020). Due to resource constraints (primarily water, grazing land and trade routes), Afar is also impacted by recurrent clan and ethnic violence that has displaced tens of thousands of people in recent years (Tadesse et al., 2015; UN OCHA, 2021, cited in Addis Standard, 2021; UN OCHA, 2022; Ethiopia Peace Observatory, n.d.; UNICEF, n.d.a; n.d.b). The conflict that started in Tigray in late 2020 also spilled over into Afar, resulting in hundreds of thousands of people being displaced and thousands killed.

Afar lags considerably behind the rest of the country in terms of access to basic services and infrastructure (World Bank, 2025b; World Bank, 2020; UNICEF, n.d.a; n.d.b). As a result, national-level progress on myriad indicators (including access to education, rates of female genital mutilation (FGM) and child marriage) is less visible in Afar. The Ministry of Education (2023) reports that whereas 71% of children completed 6th grade at the national level, this is true of only 29% of children in Afar. In addition, the 2016 Ethiopia Demographic and Health Survey (EDHS) found that not only are rates of FGM in Afar nearly twice as high as the national level (91% for girls aged 15–19 in Afar, versus 47% nationally), but that infibulation remains the norm (64% of girls under age 15) (CSA and ICF, 2017). As Afar has yet to revise its Family Law to prohibit marriage for individuals under age 18, child marriage also remains common (McGavock, 2021). The 2016 EDHS found that 67% of young women aged 20–24 had married in childhood (CSA and ICF, 2017). Indeed, using EDHS data, Elezaj *et al.* (2019) calculated that while the incidence of child marriage among girls aged 15–17 has declined at the national level since 2000 (down 9 percentage points), it appears to be increasing in Afar (up 6 percentage points).

Adolescent girls attending primary school in Afar, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2025

1 The most recent Welfare Monitoring Survey was completed in 2015–2016.

Conceptual framework

Informed by the emerging evidence base on adolescent well-being and development, GAGE's conceptual framework takes a holistic approach that pays careful attention to the interconnectedness of what we call the '3 Cs' – capabilities, change strategies and contexts – in order to understand what works to support adolescents' development and empowerment, both now and in the future (see Figure 1). This framing draws on the three components of Pawson and Tilley's (1997) approach to evaluation, which highlights the importance of outcomes, causal mechanisms and contexts, though we tailor it to the specific challenges of understanding what works in improving adolescents' capabilities.

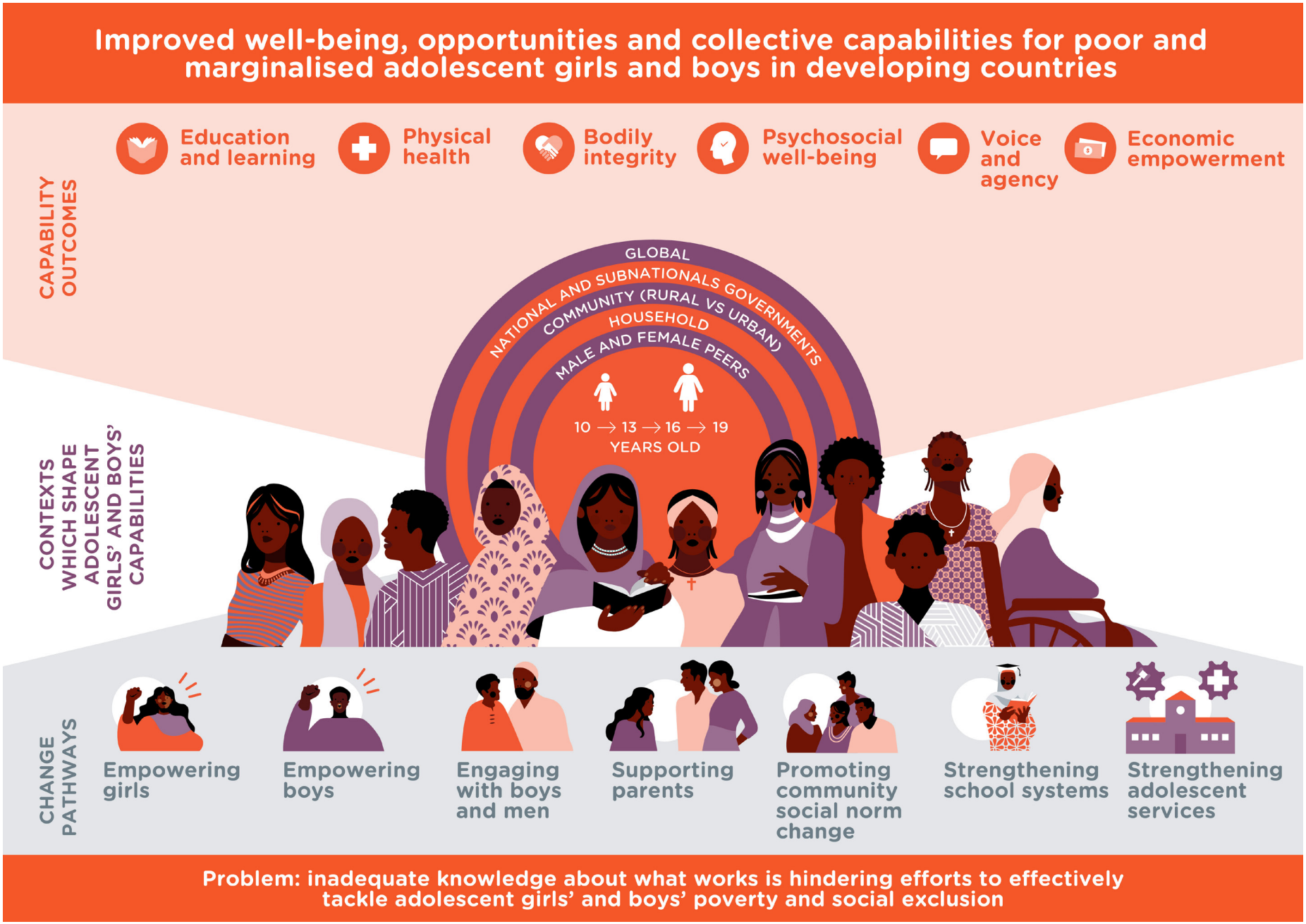
The first building block of our conceptual framework is capability outcomes. Championed originally by Amartya Sen (1985, 2004) and nuanced by Martha Nussbaum (2011) and Naila Kabeer (2003) to better capture complex gender dynamics at intra-household and societal levels, the capabilities approach has evolved as a broad normative framework exploring the kinds of assets (economic, human, political, emotional and social) that expand the capacity of individuals to achieve valued ways of 'doing and being'. At its core is a sense of competence and purposive agency: it goes beyond a focus on a fixed bundle of external assets, instead emphasising investment in an individual's skills, knowledge and voice. Importantly, the approach can encompass relevant investments in children and young people with diverse trajectories, including the most marginalised and 'hardest to reach' such as those with disabilities or those who were married as children. The GAGE framework covers six core capabilities: education and learning, physical health, bodily integrity and freedom from violence, psychosocial well-being, voice and agency, and economic empowerment.

The second building block of our conceptual framework is context dependency. Our '3 Cs' framework situates young people socio-ecologically. It recognises that not only do girls and boys at different stages of the life course have different needs and constraints, but also that these are highly dependent on their context at the family/household, community, state and global levels.

The third and final building block of our conceptual framework – change strategies – acknowledges that young people's contextual realities will not only shape the pathways through which they develop their capabilities but also determine the change strategies open to them to improve their outcomes. Our socio-ecological approach emphasises that to nurture transformative change in girls' and boys' capabilities and broader well-being, potential change strategies must simultaneously invest in integrated intervention approaches at different levels, weaving together policies and programming that support young people, their families and their communities while also working to effect change at the systems level.

Young men at school, Afar, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2025

Figure 1: GAGE conceptual framework



Sample and methods

This report draws on mixed-methods data collected in 20 *kebeles* across 5 *woredas* in Hari Rasu (Zone 5), Afar, in 2024 and 2025 (see Figure 2). This research follows two[2] earlier rounds – at baseline (2017–2018) and Round 2 (2019–2020) (see Figure 3). At baseline, the quantitative sample included 540 young adolescents: 510 randomly selected individuals aged 10–12 years, and an additional 30 adolescents aged 9–15 years who were purposefully selected in order to include a greater number of particularly marginalised adolescents (such as those with disabilities). At Round 2, an additional 372 adolescents were purposefully added to the sample, bringing the total sample to 912. Most of these newly recruited adolescents were aged 17–19 years, and were added as an older cohort of adolescents to compare to those in the broader GAGE sample living in urban areas. The remaining adolescents, aged 13–16 years, were added to the sample to increase representation of particularly marginalised adolescents, including those with disabilities, those who were out of school, or those who had married as children.

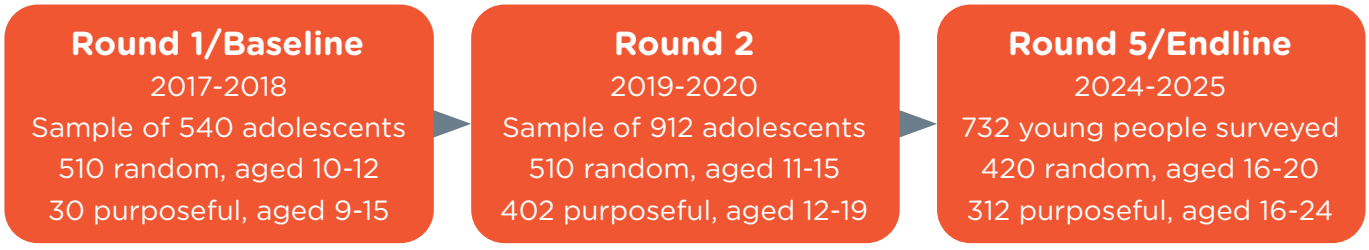
Figure 2: Hari Rasu (Zone 5), Afar

The endline research surveyed 732 of these young people – 466 in the younger cohort (aged 18.0 years on average at endline) and 266 in the older cohort (aged 21.4 years on average at endline) (see Table 1). To keep these cohorts distinct, the younger cohort is referred to in this report as 'adolescents' and the older cohort is referred to as 'young adults'. Female adolescents are called 'girls'. Male adolescents are called 'boys'. Female young adults are called 'young women'. Male young adults are called 'young men'. When the sample is referred to as a single group they are called 'young people'. When girls and young women are jointly discussed, they are called 'young females'; when boys and young men are jointly discussed, they are called 'young males'.

Qualitative research was conducted in Semurobi *woreda*, across two *kebeles* that were also part of the quantitative research – one remote and one more central. The majority of the 59 young people who took part in individual interviews were selected from the larger quantitative sample, deliberately oversampling the most disadvantaged individuals in order to capture the voices of those at risk of being 'left behind' (see Table 2). The qualitative sample also included 78 young people who were interviewed in groups, 62 caregivers, 17 siblings and 37 key informants (community leaders, *kebele*-level officials and service providers, *woreda* and regional sector officials).

Quantitative survey data was collected through face-to-face interviews by enumerators who were trained to communicate with marginalised populations. With the exception of never-married adolescent boys, enumerators were typically the same sex as the respondent; all female respondents were interviewed by female enumerators and the majority of young men/ever-married males were interviewed by male enumerators. Surveys were broad and included modules reflecting the GAGE conceptual

Figure 3: Timeline of GAGE quantitative research in Afar



2 Rounds 3 and 4, which were undertaken in 2021-2022 and 2022-2023, did not include Afar.

Table 1: Quantitative sample

	Adolescents	Young adults	Sub-sample married < 18	Sub-sample with disabilities (at Round 2)	Total
Female	277	156	220	9	**433**
Male	189	110	26	18	**299**
Total	**466**	**266**	**246**	**27**	**732**

Table 2: Qualititative sample

		Remote community	More central community	Total
Individual interviews with young people	Females	14	21	**35**
	Subsample with disabilities	1	3	4
	Subsample married	14	6	20
	Males	10	14	**24**
	Subsample with disabilities	1	3	4
	Subsample married	3	3	6
Subtotal		**24**	**35**	**59**
Group interviews with young people	Females	3 groups (17)	3 groups (16)	6 groups (33)
	Males	4 groups (22)	4 groups (23)	8 groups (45)
Subtotal		**7 interviews (39 individuals)**	**7 interviews (39 individuals)**	**14 interviews (78 individuals)**
Interviews with family members	Individual interviews with siblings	6	11	17
	Individual interviews with caregivers	18	22	40
	Group interviews with caregivers	2 groups (11)	2 groups (11)	4 groups (22)
Subtotal		**26 interviews (35 individuals)**	**35 interviews (44 individuals)**	**61 interviews (79 individuals)**
Interviews with key informants	Community leaders	1	1	2
	Group interviews with community Influencers	2 groups (8)	2 groups (8)	4 groups (16)
	Kebele officials/ providers	3 (7)	5 (6)	8 (13)
	Woreda officials		6	
Subtotal		**6 interviews (16 individuals)**	**8 interviews (15 individuals)**	**20 interviews (37 individuals)**
Total young people	*Includes individual and group interviews, including with siblings*			**90 interviews with 154 young people**
Total participants	*Includes all categories*			**154 interviews with 253 participants**

framework (see Hamory *et al.*, 2025). Statistical analysis was conducted using Stata 18.0. Importantly, where we present endline survey findings, we include the 732 young people who completed the endline survey. Where we present change since Round 2, however, we restrict our sample and include only the 655 young people who completed both Round 2 and endline surveys. These young people are referred to as the panel sample. Note that these findings are preliminary and figures may shift slightly in the future as data is further cleaned.

Qualitative tools, also employed by researchers carefully trained to communicate sensitively with marginalised populations, consisted of interactive activities such as timelines, body mappings and vignettes, which were used in individual and group interviews (see Jones et al., 2025). Preliminary data analysis took place during daily and site-wide debriefings. Interviews were transcribed and translated by native speakers and then coded thematically using the qualitative software analysis package MAXQDA.

The GAGE research design and tools were approved by ethics committees at ODI Global and George Washington University, and the Ethiopian Society of Sociologists, Social Workers and Anthropologists. Verbal consent was obtained from caregivers and married adolescents; verbal assent was obtained for all unmarried adolescents under the age of 18. There was also a robust protocol for referral to services, tailored to the different realities of the diverse research sites.

Findings

The endline findings are organised in line with the six capability domains laid out in the GAGE conceptual framework (see Fig 1): education and learning, physical health, bodily integrity and freedom from violence, psychosocial well-being, voice and agency, and economic empowerment. When discussing findings in each domain, e first present endline survey findings, and, where there are interesting patterns of change over time, we include longitudinal data. We then present qualitative findings.

Education and Learning

Aspirations

The endline survey found that young people's educational aspirations are relatively high, given that formal education is comparatively new in Afar. In aggregate, just over half (52%) aspired to complete secondary school and nearly two-fifths (39%) aspired to complete university (see Figure 4). Cohort and gender differences were significant. Adolescent boys, who were most likely to still be enrolled in school, were most likely to aspire to secondary (67%) and university (58%) education. Young women – nearly all of whom had been married and nearly none of whom were still enrolled in school – were least likely to hold such aspirations (35% and 26% respectively).

Some young people's educational aspirations have significantly shifted since Round 2. Using the panel sample, young females' aspirations for secondary school fell significantly between Round 2 and endline (see Figure 5). At Round 2, 59% of adolescent girls and young women aspired to complete secondary school; this had fallen to 44% at endline. Young males' aspirations for secondary school were unchanged between Round 2 and endline. Also drawing on the panel sample, adolescent boys' aspirations for university significantly climbed between Round 2 and endline (see Figure 6). At Round 2, 52% of boys aspired to complete university; at endline, this had climbed to 66%. Young females' and young men's aspirations for university were unchanged between Round 2 and endline.

Figure 4: Young people's educational aspirations (by gender and cohort)

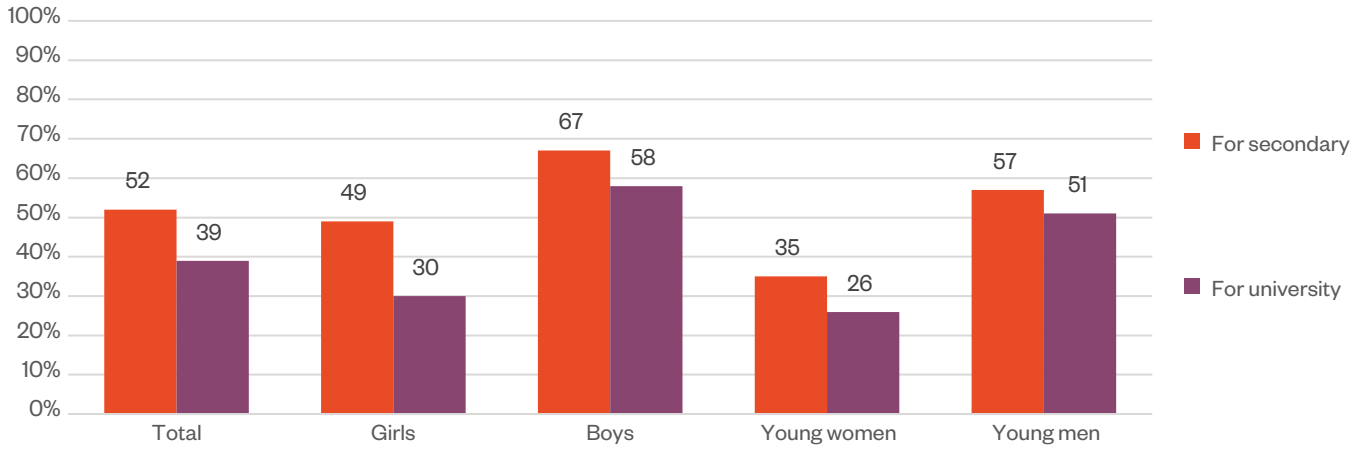
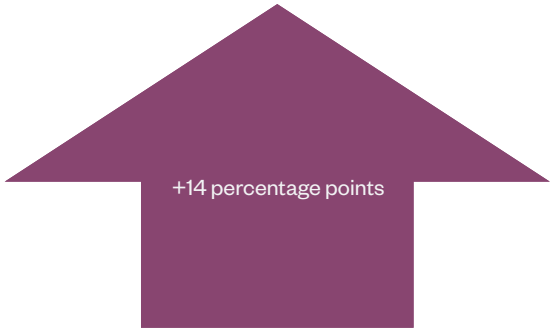


Figure 5: Change between Round 2 and endline in young females' aspirations for secondary school

Figure 6: Change between Round 2 and endline in adolescent boys' aspirations for university



Qualitative research found that, with some exceptions, young people's educational aspirations are far less lofty than survey results would suggest. Given that a large minority have never attended school, that most have dropped out, and that the remainder are usually years over age for grade, the main educational aspiration expressed in individual and group interviews was for access to education. In some cases, young people wanted to start or return to school. A 17-year-old boy who had never been to school, when asked to detail his plans for the next year, replied: '*I have a plan to start school and I will start learning 1st grade in the coming year.*' A 16-year-old young mother who dropped out of school after grade 2, when asked the same question, similarly stated, '*I want to continue learning… if Allah allows me, I would like to restart school in the next year.*' In other cases, young people wanted their children to be educated. A young father in a group interview explained:

> *I wish all my children started school and accessed good education. Because nowadays it is education that can enable children to get knowledge and can help them acquire a job and a better living. Unless our children are educated, they will not have other options of living for their future.*

Only a few adolescents – almost exclusively boys who were being supported to attend school in the *woreda* (district) town – were able to articulate detailed and actionable educational aspirations during qualitative interviews. A 15-year-old boy enrolled in grade 8, when asked his plans for future schooling, replied:

> *I aspire to learn until I finish 12th grade, and to join the university… I aspire to lean until I graduate from the university and get a degree and get a better job.*

Although interest in formal education is growing in GAGE's Afar study sites, endline research found that this is far from universal. It was not uncommon for parents to report that they saw no point to their children receiving formal education, given current pastoral lifestyles. One father stated:

> *I am still confused as to why people send children to school instead of sending them to look after cattle or to do other tasks. In our community, I didn't see anyone who benefited from education or from educating children.*

Interest in girls' education was often particularly limited, which explains young females' falling aspirations. One father, when asked how his aspirations for his sons and daughters differ, replied:

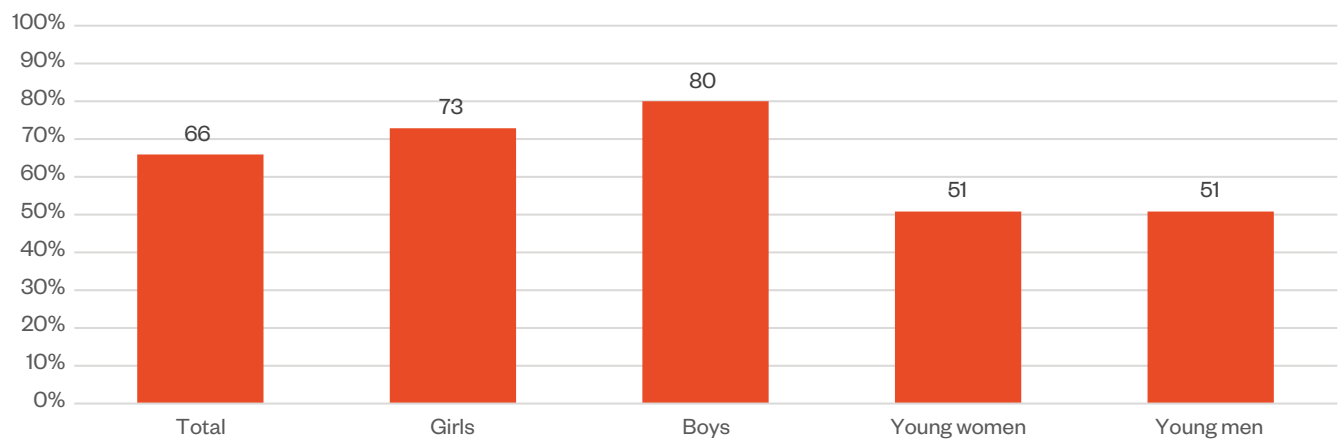
> *What I aspire for my sons and my daughters might differ… Boys will be men and girls will be wives… Boys are leaders who can decide on everything they have whereas girls are submissive and do not even have a say in their life. So what I wish for my daughters may differ from what I wish for my sons.*

Access to quality education

The endline survey found that only 66% of young people in Afar study sites had ever been enrolled in formal education (see Figure 7). Cohort differences were significant, with adolescents (76%) more likely to have ever been enrolled than young adults (51%). For adolescents, gender differences were significant, with boys (80%) more likely to have ever been enrolled than girls (73%).

At endline, only just over a quarter of young people (27%) were still enrolled in formal education (see Figure 8). Unsurprisingly, adolescents were significantly more likely to be enrolled than young adults (36% versus 11%).

Figure 7: Proportion of young people ever enrolled in formal education (by gender and cohort)



Among adolescents, boys were significantly more likely to be enrolled than girls (46% versus 28%) – a difference that is likely explained by girls' higher odds of child marriage (see Box 1). Girls were not only less likely to be enrolled in school than boys, but they had also missed more days of school in the past two weeks (33%, compared with boys, who had missed 22%) (see Figure 9).

Among those in the panel sample, enrolment rates declined between Round 2 and endline for all groups except adolescent boys. Girls' enrolment fell 29 percentage points (58% to 29%)(see Figure 10). Young adults' enrolment, already low at Round 2, fell 13 percentage points (25% to 12%)

Because many young people start school years late, and because repetition rates are high, young people are often years over age for grade, and ultimately complete relatively few grades before dropping out. The endline survey found that out-of-school young people had attended a mean of only 2.9 grades of schooling, with no significant differences between groups. It also found that enrolled young people had attended far fewer grades than might be expected, given their age. Enrolled adolescents were, on average, 18 years old but had attended only 6.6 grades. Enrolled young adults were, on average, 21.4 years old but had attended only 8.2 grades.

During individual and group interviews, the dominant narrative about access to education was that it remains extremely limited. In the most remote communities, formal education is not available. A religious leader, when asked about schooling in his village (*kebele*), replied, '*There is no school at all in this kebele.*' A 16-year-old girl, who dropped out after 2nd grade, noted that even when remote *kebeles* have school buildings, they often lack teachers: '*We went to school every day, but the teachers disappeared and stopped coming to school, so we were forced to discontinue our education.*' In other rural communities, only the first few grades of primary school are provided. One mother explained:

Figure 8: Proportion of young people currently enrolled in formal education (by gender and cohort)

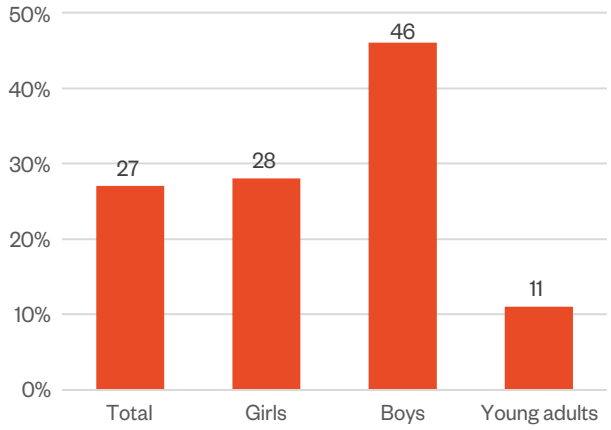
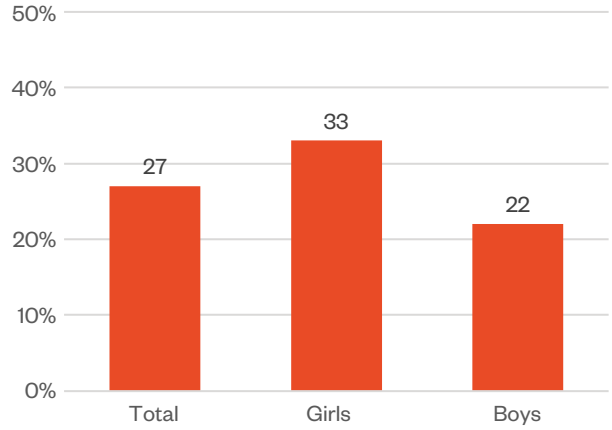


Figure 9: Proportion of school days missed in the past two weeks, enrolled students only (by gender)

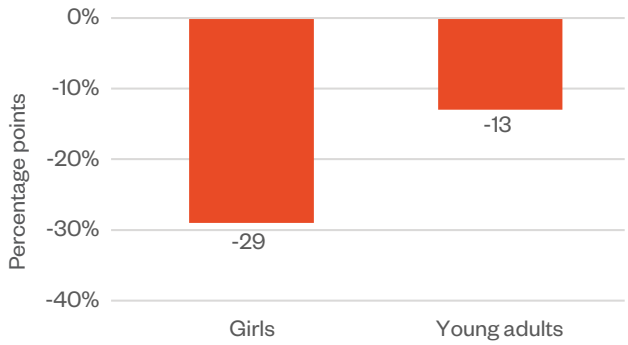


Box 1: Child marriage limits girls' access to education

Looking only at adolescents, because they were still largely school-aged, endline research found that girls who had been married had far more limited access to education than their peers who had not married: 44% of never-married girls but only 13% of ever-married girls were enrolled in school at the time of the survey. And while never-married girls had completed an average of 4.6 grades, ever-married girls had completed only 2.9 grades.

Qualitative research in the Afar study sites found that marriage effectively eliminates girls' access to education. One mother stated, '*The boys can continue their education even after they get married… The girls have to quit education after they get married.*' Young females elaborated that there are two reasons why young brides lose access to education. First, and most importantly, their husbands tightly restrict their mobility and forbid them from attending school. A 25-year-old young woman, when asked why she had dropped out, replied, '*I dropped out of school when I married… It is my husband who kept me back from learning.*' Second, they do not have the time to go to school, especially once they become a mother. One young mother in a group discussion explained, '*I gave birth. So, the conditions were not conducive for learning.*'

Figure 10: Change in young people's school enrolment between Round 2 and endline



> *My daughter completed up to 4th grade. She was a bright student and eager to learn, but she couldn't continue due to a lack of teachers and overall educational resources in the school in our locality. While she was in school, she loved it so much that she would often sleep hugging her exercise books and pen.*

Secondary schools, according to respondents, are only available in *woreda* towns, which means that only better-off households (who can afford boarding expenses) or households that have relatives who live in town can support their children to pursue 'higher' education. A 17-year-old girl explained, '*Overall, these students* [who are pursuing their education] *are from better-off families and those who have families in the town*.'

Young people and their parents added that even when schools and teachers are available, enrolment and attendance are limited by young people's responsibilities in the household: herding (girls and boys), and domestic work (almost exclusively girls), which includes collecting water and fuelwood. These responsibilities keep some children out of school entirely, lead most children to begin school years late, and generally preclude regular attendance. A 19-year-old young man explained that livestock takes priority over education: '*The problem is that we can't come to school leaving the livestock alone in the bushes. They may be attacked by predators. That is why we stay with the livestock and don't come to school*.' One mother noted that while boys can attend during the dry season (when they are not grazing livestock), demands on girls' time are never-ending:

> *We can't send the girls… That mainly is because she has a lot of responsibilities at home. She has to help the parents at home… For the boys, they are not so busy and can go for schooling. Especially during dry seasons, the boys don't have much to do at home.*

Respondents reported that climate change has had devastating impacts on young people's access to education. It has not only resulted in flooding that has destroyed school infrastructure, but has led to widespread drought and famine, which have altered migration (and attendance) patterns and closed many schools. An 18-year-old young woman, when asked why she dropped out of school after grade 3, replied: '*I stopped because of water shortage and drought, and we had to move and take the animals to distant areas for grazing*.' One father reported that water shortages had seen the school in his community completely closed, in part because parents refuse to send their children to school if drinking water is not available: '*As there is no water, it is drought. The school is currently closed*.' Although many respondents spoke disparagingly of teachers who are regularly absent or who quit their jobs after only a few months, one mother reported that she understands why: climate change. She stated, '*There was a shortage of water and food for the teachers. They left because of that*.'

Although respondents agreed that school feeding improves young people's access to education, they reported that schools in study sites discontinued these programmes in 2024. One teacher explained that when meals were provided, most students attended regularly: '*There will be 20 students who regularly attend class out of the 28 students in the presence of school feeding*.' An 18-year-old young woman noted that while schools in other areas still provide meals, these are no longer available in her community:

> *In a nearby area, there is a school that provides food oil and fafa* [an enriched porridge] *for the children. The people in the community are encouraged to send their children to school. All of these things are absent in our area.*

According to respondents, educational outcomes are largely dire, with few young people achieving even basic literacy before they leave school. An 18-year-old young woman recalled of her schooling experience: '*We didn't learn much. I could only write my name, and we were mostly not taught anything*.' Poor learning outcomes have two primary antecedents. First, too few students have regular interaction with teachers, due to student and teacher absenteeism. Second, too few teachers speak Afar Af' and too few students understand Amharic. A 16-year-old girl explained, '*Normally the students don't understand what the teachers say in Amharic*.'

Physical health

Nutrition and food security

Few young people reported concerns about food security on the endline survey: only 5% reported that they had been hungry in the past month and a similar percentage reported that their households were severely food-insecure (using the Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance (FANTA) project's Food Insecurity Scale[3]). Indeed, the average young person reported having eaten 2.9 meals the day before the survey was fielded. Food security has significantly improved since Round 2, when 10% of young people in the panel sample reported being hungry in the past month (see Figure 11).

Qualitative research suggests, however, that survey findings primarily speak to young people's low expectations about what food security means. Indeed, during individual and group interviews, most respondents reported extremely poor nutrition. Some – and far more than survey results would suggest – reported hunger. A 24-year-old young man, when asked if young people were adequately fed, replied: '*The youth and the old people don't have anything to eat. Everybody is in a severe food shortage*.' One mother agreed, saying, '*Here is always a shortage of food*.' Nearly all respondents reported poor-quality diets that include nothing other than grain (usually corn, but also wheat and teff – and, increasingly, including stale leftover bread sourced from out-of-town hotels). One father, when asked how often his family eats meat and vegetables, replied, '*What kind of question do you ask me? We always eat the same type of food. The common food we eat is porridge, or noufe* [traditionally baked bread] *using maize flour*.' A 22-year-old young man, when asked how often his family eats meat, replied, '*Only on the holy days*.' Caregivers noted that in times of shortage, adults regularly go without food to ensure that children have enough to sate them.

Respondents universally agreed that severe food insecurity is the result of climate change, which has led to more frequent and longer droughts that have devastated the livestock holdings that have traditionally provided Afar families with their main source of calories: milk. An 18-year-old young woman explained:

> *During the time when my parents raised me, my parents had many cattle and also a good amount of rain so that there was adequate milk and butter… Because of lack of rain and recurrent drought, most of our animals died, and this meant people were incapable of affording food and other necessary things for a living… We don't have many cattle so I am not able to feed my child with adequate milk and butter.*

Caregivers reported that malnutrition has become so significant that younger children's growth is stunted, adolescents are now entering puberty later, and children and adults are at increasing risk of disease because their immune systems are weakened. One father stated, '*Nowadays children's physical growth is slow. They never grow fast as their age and they are also exposed to different diseases because of food shortage and related factors*.'

Despite growing food insecurity, respondents agreed that access to nutrition support has been curtailed in recent years. School feeding programmes ended in 2024 and (as we discuss in more detail below) access to Ethiopia's flagship Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) has been reduced. A key informant explained, '*In the past, there was maize, edible oil, and other support, but it was a long time ago… There has been no support from the government for the past five years*.' One father similarly stated, '*Previously, when drought happened, there was food and other support by the government and others, but for the last six or seven years, we didn't get any support…*'.

Figure 11: Change in young people's hunger between Round 2 and endline

Broader health and access to health care

Nearly all young people (95%) reported on the endline survey that they were in good physical health (see Figure 12). For adolescents, gender differences were significant, though this was not the case for young adults. Girls (97%)

3 Food insecurity was measured using the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS). See: https://www.fantaproject.org/sites/default/files/resources/HFIAS_ENG_v3_Aug07.pdf

were more likely to report being in good health than boys (90%) – likely because boys independently migrate with livestock and are therefore at greater risk of illness and accident, and have less access to health care.

When asked if they had had either a serious illness or accident/injury in the past year, a small minority of young people answered in the affirmative: 6% and 2% respectively. Young males were nearly four times as likely as young females to report a serious illness (11% versus 3%). Of those who reported a serious illness or injury, nearly all (98%) reported that they had sought care.

A minority of young people reported on the endline survey that distance (28%) and cost (21%) were barriers to seeking health care (see Figure 13). Although gender and cohort differences were not significant, differences by marriage status were – presumably because of young married couples' need for maternity services. Young females who had been married were more likely than their never-married peers to report that cost (24% versus 15%) and distance (31% versus 18%) were barriers to care. Young males who had been married were also more likely to report that distance was a barrier (40% versus 27%) than their never-married peers.

Qualitative research again found that survey results primarily speak to young people's low expectations. Indeed, during individual and group interviews, respondents agreed that poverty-related illnesses – especially water-borne diseases and malaria – are endemic, and that access to health care is extremely limited. One father stated of his adolescent son, '*He has had malaria, stomach ache, diarrhoea, and amoeba… He has been sick frequently*.' A militia member, when asked what health-related challenges young people in his community face, replied:

> *There is no health facility and health service in the kebele, so people (including adolescent boys and girls) are suffering from tripled challenges: illness, absence of health services, and walking long distance on foot looking for medication, and also high price of medications. People are also suffering from death because of even minor illnesses, because of absence of health services and facilities in the area.*

Some caregivers reported that girls and young women are at higher risk of ill health and injury than boys and young men. This was blamed not only on female genital mutilation (FGM) (see below), but also on females' responsibility for collecting water. A father explained:

> *Because of lack of clean drinking water in this locality… our girls and women will suffer from carrying water on their back and walking long distances that may take six to seven hours. Because of this, many females are suffering from kidney infection and back pain.*

Respondents reported that access to health care has shifted in recent years. On the one hand, access to affordable health care has deteriorated. A *kebele* chairperson reported that climate change has shuttered government health clinics:

> *There is no health centre in this kebele… It is only a building. There are no professionals who can provide medical care for the community. Previously, two professionals, one woman and one man, came here to provide the service, but they only stayed for two days and then returned to the city. They told us there was nothing to eat here.*

Figure 12: Proportion of young people who report being in good health (by gender and cohort)

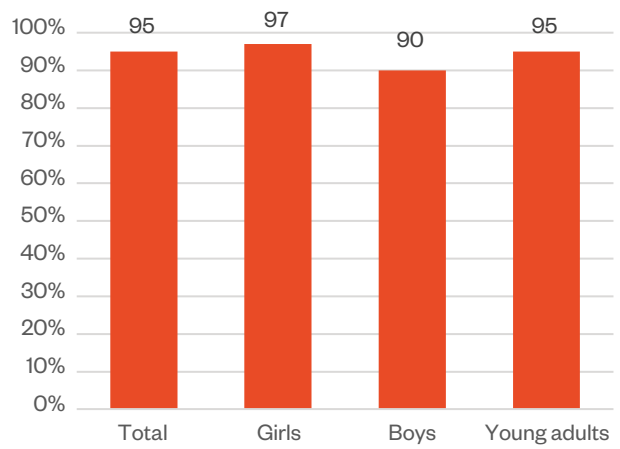
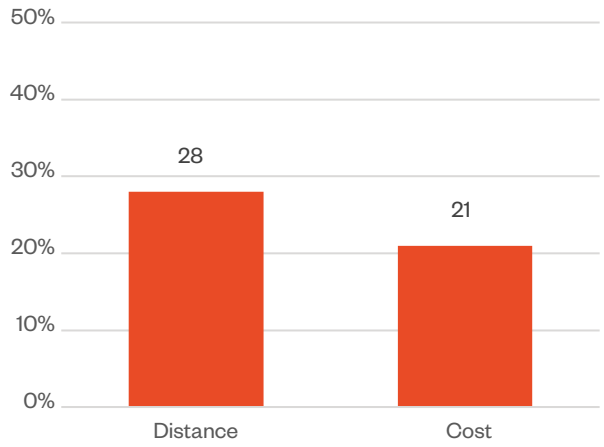


Figure 13: Proportion of young people reporting barriers to seeking health care



He added that funding shortfalls have also led to charges for the use of ambulance services, saying, '*The ambulance service was free of charge…. nowadays, it is requesting payment to cover the fuel cost*.' On the other hand, access to privately funded care, especially medication, has improved. An 18-year-old young woman stated, '*We get health service by paying our money*.' A 22-year-old young woman, when asked how malaria is treated in her community, replied that it entirely depends on whether the household can afford treatment: '*If we get money, we come to a clinic and we get treated. If we don't have money, we wait until Allah heals us*.'

Notably, although a few caregivers reported having paid for health insurance (though never having claimed on it), most respondents reported that it was not yet available in their community. A 24-year-old young man, when asked why he did not seek treatment for malaria, replied that care was too expensive: '*They were saying that we would have health insurance, but we haven't got it yet*.'

Substance use

The endline survey found that substance use is uncommon in Afar study sites. In aggregate, 9% of young people reported ever chewing khat[4] (see Figure 14) and no respondents (0%) reported drinking alcohol. That said, a large minority of young men (33%) admitted to having ever chewed khat, and 3% admitted having ever consumed alcohol. Weekly khat use was even rarer – 14% of young men reported chewing weekly. Adolescents were not asked about their substance use at Round 2. However, for the young men in the panel sample, khat use more than doubled, from 15% to 34% (see Figure 15).

Qualitative findings are in line with survey results. Respondents reported that it violates social norms for females to use substances. A 20-year-old young man explained, '*In our area, only males use those addictive substances, females do not use them… It is considered shameful for females to use addictive substances in our area*.' Respondents also reported that while young males (especially young men) do chew khat, they do so only irregularly. A health extension worker stated, '*They chew khat for entertainment purpose and they don't chew in a regular manner*.'

Puberty education

Most young people (83%) reported on the endline survey that they had had a source of information about puberty (see Figure 16). Gender differences were significant, with girls and young women (86%) more likely to have had a source than boys and young men (78%). Of young females who reported having had a source of information, most reported it as a peer (44%), their mother (24%), or another

Figure 15: Change in young men's khat use between Round 2 and endline

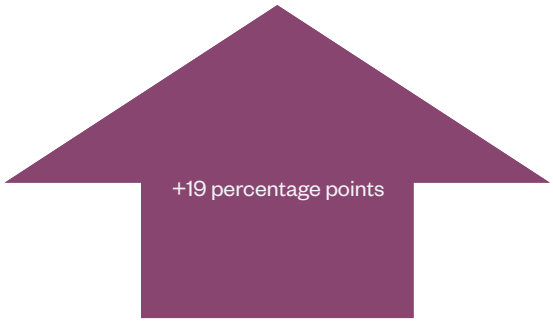
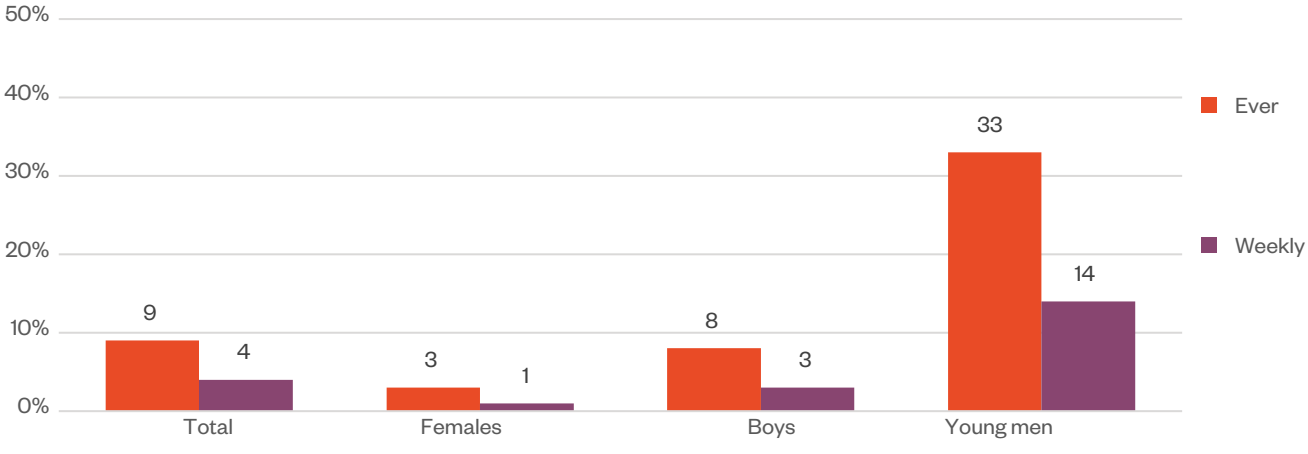
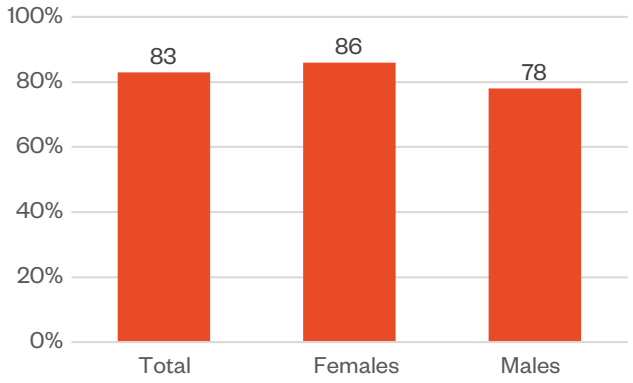


Figure 14: Proportion of young people who chew khat (by gender and cohort)



4 Khat is a shrub that grows in the Horn of Africa. Its leaves are chewed for a stimulant effect.

Figure 16: Proportion of young people with a source of information about puberty (by gender)



family member (15%). Of young males who reported having a source of information, most reported it as a peer (60%), their father (17%), or their mother (11%). It was rare (8%) for young people to report having learned about puberty from a teacher/ at school.

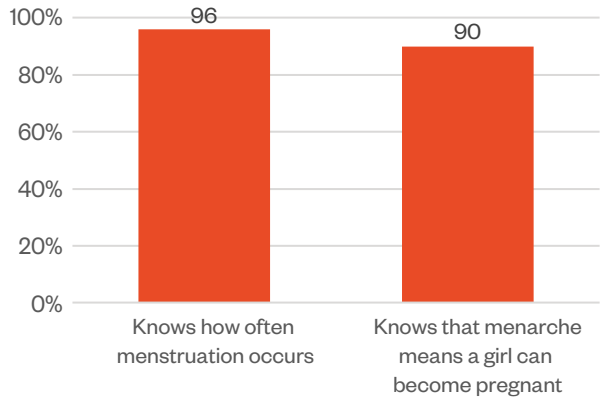
Nearly all young people understood the basics of reproductive biology; 96% knew that menstruation occurs monthly and 90% knew that menarche means that a girl can become pregnant (see Figure 17). Unsurprisingly, for knowledge about menstrual regularity, females were significantly better informed than males (99% versus 88%).

During individual and group interviews, respondents overwhelmingly reported that young people's knowledge about puberty comes from friends, or sometimes older siblings. In part, this is due to cultural taboos. One father stated, '*I have never talked to my son about issues related to these things… It is not common in our community to talk to children about these types of topics*.' For girls, however, cultural taboos are amplified by the risk of child marriage. As noted earlier, if girls are known to have reached menarche, they are usually considered old enough to marry. This leads most girls to hide menarche from their mother. A 16-year-old girl recalled:

> *Before I started menstruating, one of my older friends told me about menstruation and how to manage it… Because of what my friend told me, I didn't get shocked or confused when I saw the menstruation blood first… When I started menstruating, she then advised me not to tell my mother, fearing that they would start thinking about my marriage.*

Mothers noted that girls' attempts to hide menstruation only work for so long. One stated, '*Of course, girls did not talk about the arrival of menstruation with their mothers. But the mother follows up and notices it, and she might see blood stains on the daughter's clothes.*' In rare cases, and almost always in the less remote communities, mothers' observations then led them to discuss pubertal development with their daughter. One mother explained that these discussions largely revolve around how daughters should and should not behave: '*I give her advice to avoid sexual relationships. I did that for fear of her getting pregnant.*'

Figure 17: Young people's knowledge of reproductive biology



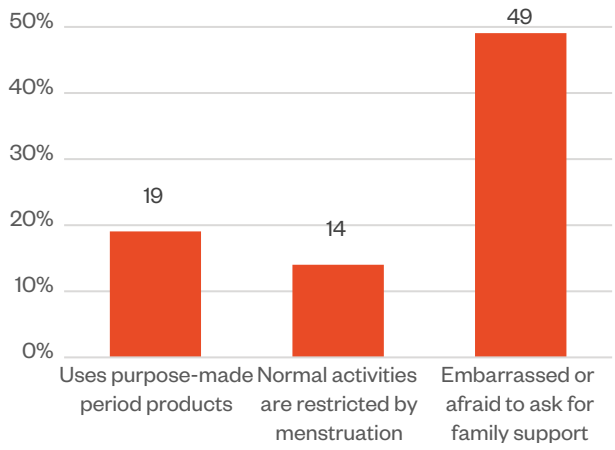
Menstrual health

At endline, 100% of young women and 89% of adolescent girls had reached menarche, at a mean age of 14.6 years – more than two years later than the global average of 12.5 years (Lacroix et al., 2023). Only a minority of girls and young women (19%) reported on the endline survey that they were using purpose-made disposable or re-usable products to manage their periods (see Figure 18). Despite this, only 14% of young females reported that their normal activities are restricted by menstruation. Of those that reported restrictions, the most common was 'not allowed to cook or touch food' (29%). Nearly half of young females (49%) reported on the endline survey that they were embarrassed or afraid to ask family members for support with menstrual management.

During qualitative interviews, adults reported that the age of menarche has been increasing in recent years, as climate change-fuelled drought has resulted in girls consuming fewer calories and having lower body fat reserves. A key informant stated:

> *Nowadays, due to droughts and animal diseases, most of our cattle have died, and we can no longer provide sufficient milk, butter and meat for our children. As a result, their physical growth has been delayed.*

Figure 18: Menstrual health indicators



A father agreed: '*Nowadays, the 18-year-old girl seems as if she is 12 or 13, and this is because of inadequate milk and food*.'

In line with survey findings, most girls and young women taking part in qualitative research reported using only clothes or cloths to manage their periods. An 18-year-old young woman recalled of the months after she first began menstruating, '*I changed my clothes multiple times. After three days, I washed my body*.' A teacher explained that this is because few girls and young women have access to purpose-made products, which are rarely available in more remote communities and are, in any case, too expensive. In more central *kebeles*, a minority of young females did report using purpose-made period products. One young mother recalled that she bought these in secret at the time, to protect herself from marriage: '*I went to the shop and bought it. I hid it from my family. If they knew I was menstruating, they would want to get me married*.' Although a teacher reported that schools make some attempt to help girls manage their periods – teaching them that menstruation is normal and providing them with pads – no girls or young women discussed this during the interviews.

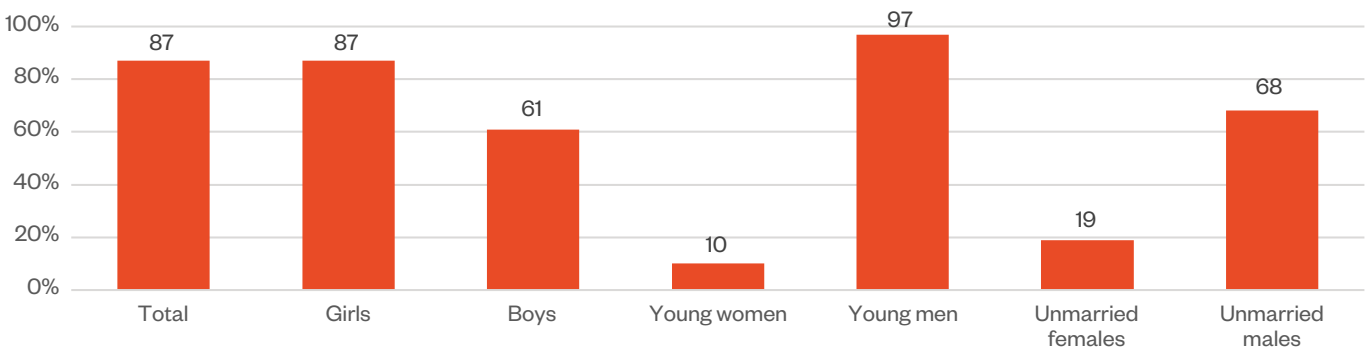
Despite young females' valid fears of seeking family support for menstrual health management, some mothers stated that once they are aware that their daughters are menstruating, they do try to help them manage their periods. One stated, '*I bought her a thicker cloth for her to use when the period comes… I also bought pants that prevent the blood from leaking*.'

Sexual debut

Of young people over the age of 14, a large majority (87%) reported on the endline survey that they were sexually active (see Figure 19). Cohort and gender differences were significant: young adults (99%) were more likely to be sexually active than adolescents (77%), and young females (93%) were more likely to be sexually active than young males (78%). Young women (100%) were the most likely to be sexually active; adolescent boys (61%) were least likely to be. Differences between groups primarily reflect girls' and young women's greater odds of marriage vis-à-vis boys and young men. However, these differences are muted by the fact that young males are far more likely to report having had sex prior to marriage than young females (68% versus 19%).

During qualitative interviews, narratives about sexual activity sharply diverged by gender. Girls and young women – who are largely expected to remain chaste prior to marriage and are regularly beaten and shamed if they do not – disproportionately spoke about sexual debut within the confines of marriage, how painful this had been (due to infibulation), and how they cannot complain and must remain silent due to cultural norms. A 20-year-old young woman reported, '*Though it was painful, I had to withstand it. It is our culture. There is no complaint*.' An 18-year-old young woman similarly stated, '*Of course, it was painful. But I just kept quiet*.'

Figure 19: Proportion of young people who have had sex, of those over age 14 (by gender and cohort)



A young mother and her child © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2025

Boys and young men – who, by contrast, are not expected to remain chaste and are punished only if they get another young male's *absuma* (cousin) pregnant – overwhelmingly spoke about how young they were when they first began having sex, and the number of girls they have had sex with. A 17-year-old boy reported:

> *I started playing with girls, and was interested to have sex with girls since I turned 10. Even, when I was 10, even if I didn't start having sex, I had a girlfriend and I and my girlfriend had been trying to have sex, and kissing and sleeping together… I started a romantic relationship and sexual intercourse three years ago, which means when I was 14… Until now, I have been in relationships with three girlfriends.*

A 20-year-old young man similarly bragged, '*I started at the age of 12… I have had sex with nearly 15 females so far.*'

With the caveat that some respondents reported that premarital sex has always been common in the context of *sadah* cultural dances, most young people and adults agreed that sexual behaviour has shifted in recent years, with premarital sex now much more common than in the past. A 19-year-old young man reported, '*Boys and girls engage in romantic relationships and this has become common in our community.*' Explanations for this were varied. Some respondents blamed young people's improved access to education. A father stated, '*When adolescents go to school, they get together with girls and they start premarital relationships.*' Others blamed young people's improved access to mobile phones, which not only means girls and boys can contact each another, but also allows young males to call private pharmacies and have contraceptives and abortion pills delivered (see below). It also exposes young people (especially boys and young men) to pornography. A 16-year-old boy reported, '*We watch pornography… After we watched, we will be dispersed to look for our girlfriends and we will have better intercourse.*' Others also blame reduced penalties levied on young males for getting another person's absuma pregnant. A 19-year-old young man explained:

> *Before, the punishment was so severe and huge that boys would fear to start relationships with girls and impregnate their girlfriends. In the past six or seven years, the punishment for this kind of case has become less.*

An 18-year-old young woman, who first reported that many girls have sex prior to marriage because they are threatened with physical violence if they refuse, then explained that some girls choose to have premarital sex because it lessens the pain that accompanies infibulation:

> *Sex with the man they love is slow and gentle. They stop if the woman complains of pain, and they do it very slowly. The sex with a husband is different. They use force, and they don't stop until they finish it. If you refuse to have sex, he hits you and uses force on you. So it is better to have the first sexual intercourse with the man you love before marriage.*

Knowledge about and uptake of contraception, and desired fertility

On the endline survey, two-thirds of young people (67%) could correctly name a modern method of contraception (see Figure 20). Cohort differences were significant: young adults had better knowledge than adolescents' (76% versus 62%). For adolescents, gender differences were significant: girls had better knowledge than boys (67% versus 54%).

Since Round 2, young people's knowledge of contraception has improved significantly – they were 31 percentage points more likely to have heard of a method at endline than they were at Round 2 (68% versus 37%) (see Figure 21). The order of magnitude of improvement was similar across groups, with the exception of young women, whose knowledge was already high at Round 2.

A little over half of young people (56%) reported on the endline survey that they believe contraception causes infertility (see Figure 22). Gender differences were highly significant, with males much more likely to believe this than females (73% versus 47%). For females, cohort differences were significant. Young women, nearly all of whom were married and who understood (based on qualitative research) that they are primarily valued for their fertility, were more likely to believe that contraception causes infertility than adolescent girls (55% versus 42%).

Contraceptive uptake is usual among the young people in the sample. In aggregate – and with the caveat that young males are reporting on their partner's use, because no young males reported using condoms – only 18% of sexually active young people reported having ever used contraception, and only 13% reported that they were currently using it (see Figure 23). Cohort differences were significant: young adults were more likely than adolescents to have ever used contraception (26% versus 10%) and to be currently using it (18% versus 6%). For young adults, gender differences were significant: young women were more likely to have used contraception (29% versus 19%) and to be currently using it (24% versus 10%) than young males. For young females, it is not possible to ascertain whether marriage is associated with contraceptive uptake. Too few unmarried females are sexually active to report on their use of contraception. For young males, however, those who are married are significantly less likely than their unmarried peers to have ever used contraception (5% versus 23%) and to be currently using it (2% versus 13%).

At Round 2, only the older cohort was asked about their use of contraceptives. This makes tracking change over time difficult, because the sample is small. That said, of the 117 young adults who answered this question at both Round

Figure 21: Change in young people's ability to name a method of contraception, between Round 2 and endline

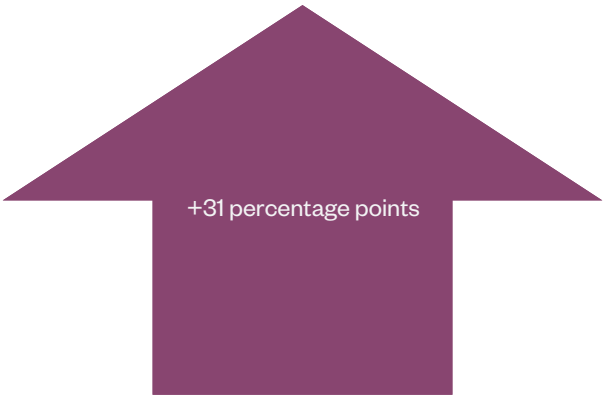


Figure 20: Proportion of young people who have heard of a method to prevent or delay pregnancy (by gender and cohort)

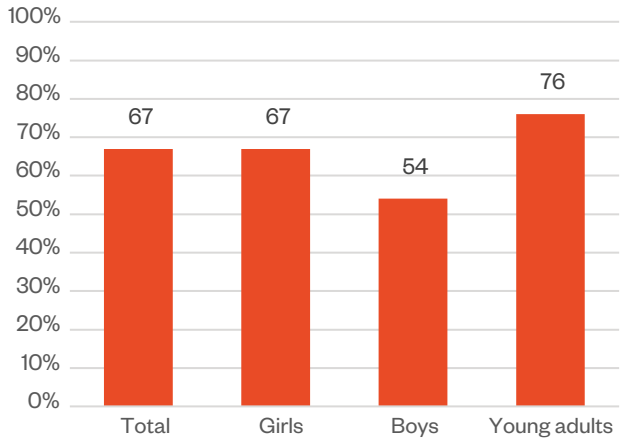


Figure 22: Proportion of young people who believe that contraception causes infertility (by cohort and gender)

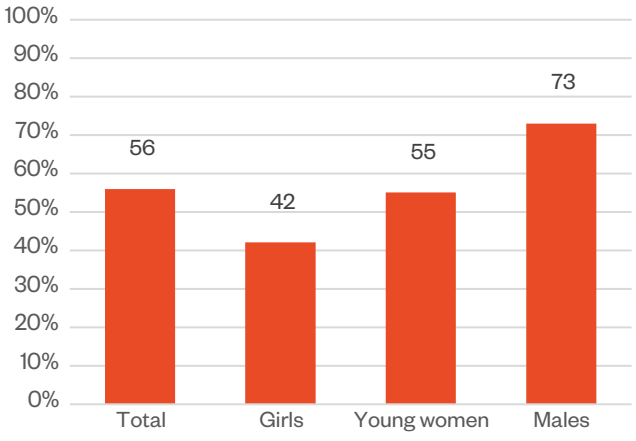
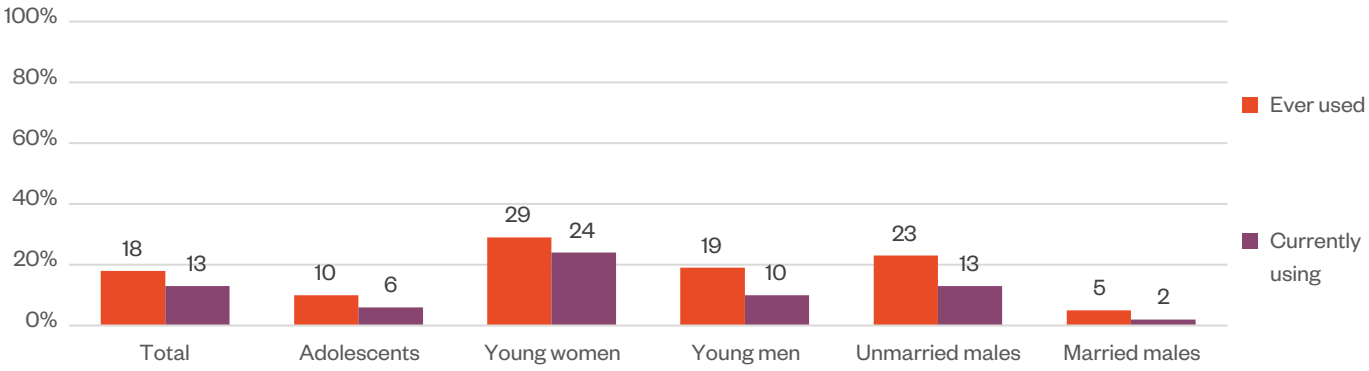


Figure 23: Proportion of sexually active young people using contraception (by gender, cohort and, for young males, marital status)



2 and endline, ever use of contraception significantly climbed from 14% to 25% (see Figure 24). Current use among that same group remains unchanged.

Limited uptake of contraception is in part explained by young people's desired fertility: most want to have large families. The average young person wishes to have 6.3 children (see Figure 25). Gender differences were significant, with young females wanting smaller families than young males (5.5 versus 7.5). For females, cohort differences were significant: adolescent girls wanted fewer children than young women (5.1 versus 6.3), likely because young women – nearly all of whom had been married – understood (as reflected in the qualitative research) that they were primarily valued for their fertility.

Participants in qualitative research agreed that unmarried young people are increasingly using contraception, to ensure that females are spared the shame (and males spared the expense) of premarital pregnancy. A religious leader stated that:

> *In the past, people in our locality were not aware of these contraceptives, but nowadays adolescent boys and girls are aware of contraceptives such as pills and injectable methods. Currently girls are using these methods.*

A 20-year-old young man noted that young males also play a role in contraceptive uptake, providing their girlfriends with transport to health clinics and also '*paying for injections*'.

In line with survey findings, qualitative research found that it is rare for married young people to use contraception. Explanations for this varied. In some more remote *kebeles*, access to contraception remains limited. Sometimes this is because communities lack health clinics and health extension workers, and other times this is because health extension workers are afraid to provide contraception. A 17-year-old girl stated of access in her community:

> *Previously, women were getting contraceptives... Even the young girls were getting contraceptives... But he* [the health extension worker] *was beaten and told to stop giving contraceptives to the women, so he stopped giving them after that.*

Figure 24: Change in young adults' ever use of contraception between Round 2 and endline

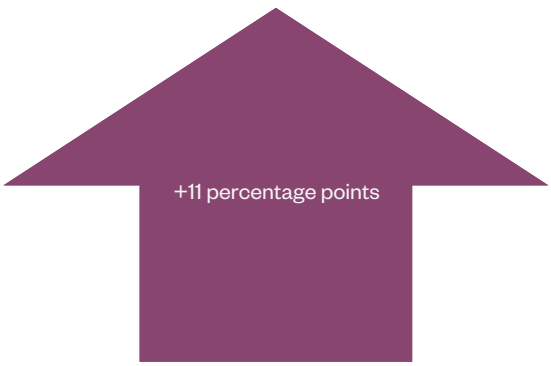
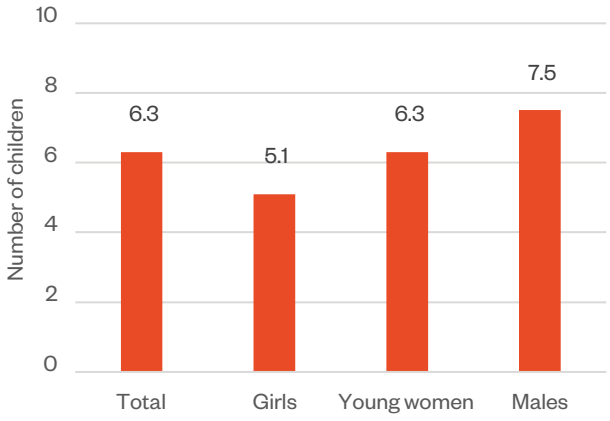


Figure 25: Desired fertility (by gender and cohort)



Two Afar adolesent boys with camels, Afar © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2025

More commonly, however, contraceptives are available, but not used, due to widespread beliefs that Islam requires married couples to have children (as many as possible) and forbids the use of contraception. A 17-year-old married boy explained, '*One of the major goals of marriage is reproducing, so wives shouldn't use contraception, and it is also forbidden in our religion, Islam.*' A 19-year-old young mother agreed, '*We believe in Allah that if he gives us a baby, we deliver. Otherwise using contraceptives is haram* [forbidden].' Although a few young mothers (usually those with many children) expressed some interest in spacing and even limiting future pregnancies, young females universally agreed that using contraception would require secrecy, because husbands will never allow it. A 20-year-old young mother, who was clear that she has no interest in contraception, then stated, '*If I wanted to use birth control, I would have to do it secretly. Otherwise, he would never allow me to.*'

Pregnancy and maternal health care

Unsurprisingly, given high rates of early marriage and low rates of contraceptive uptake, early motherhood is common among the girls and young women in the GAGE sample. Of married girls, 65% had been pregnant by endline; and of married young women, 86% had been pregnant by endline. Young mothers first became pregnant at a mean age of 17.1 years; they had a mean of 1.4 children at the time the survey was fielded. No unmarried young females reported having been pregnant.

Maternity care is not yet the norm among the young mothers in the GAGE sample. Of ever-pregnant girls, only 29% had received any antenatal care for their first pregnancy. Of ever-pregnant young women, the analogous figure was 47%. Young mothers who did report receiving care for their first pregnancy attended a mean of only 1.2 antenatal visits. Facility delivery was even more rare than antenatal care: only 16% of first babies were born in a clinic or hospital.

Qualitative research found that only young mothers in more centrally located communities have access to antenatal care. In line with survey findings, even that care is largely limited to just a few visits that include recommended vaccinations (such as tetanus). A 19-year-old young mother reported that she had returned to her parents' home for her first pregnancy, because they live closer to a health clinic than her husband:

> *In the place where my husband lives, it is not possible to come for a follow-up. That is very far… They told me to come back to my mother during pregnancy. So I visited this health institution two times and took vaccinations.*

With the caveat that young mothers have limited expectations, most reported that health care workers provided good care. A 16-year-old girl stated, '*When I was pregnant, I went to the health centre and they treated me well.*'

Although nearly all babies are born at home, delivered by traditional birth attendants because there is no time to get labouring mothers to distant health care facilities, endline research found that there is growing recognition that facility delivery can be safer for mothers and babies. A young mother of five, the first three of whom were born at home and the last two of whom were born at the health centre, reported that she much preferred the latter, because '*at home I faced much blood loss and got anaemia*'. A 24-year-old young man noted that facility delivery is especially advantageous for young mothers who have been infibulated. He recalled of his younger sister's difficult first delivery: '*The situation was worsened by the effects of FGM, which had narrowed her birth canal.*' Several respondents noted that although ambulance services are theoretically available to transport the most at-risk labouring mothers to a clinic, these are difficult to access in practice (and getting more so) because families must pay out of pocket. An 18-year-old young mother explained:

> *When a woman gets severely sick with labour, a call is made for an ambulance. But getting an ambulance is very difficult in our place. We get an ambulance with our money. We sell our goats and pay for it.*

Although abortion is seen as haram by Islam, respondents noted that it is increasingly used to ensure that girls and young women do not have children prior to marriage. In most cases, young females and their boyfriends arrange for an abortion on their own – to keep the girl's parents from finding out she is pregnant. A young man in a group discussion reported, '*If she gets pregnant by mistake, we will consult a health professional and give her an abortion pill.*' That said, whenever a girl's parents are made aware of a premarital pregnancy, one mother reported that they too are willing to help their daughter access abortion services, to save the family from shame: '*People go to the health centre to get abortions. They do it secretly.*'

An adolescent boy in Afar, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2025

Bodily integrity

Violence at home

In aggregate, 15% of young people reported having experienced violence at the hands of a caregiver or other adult in the home in the past year (see Figure 26). Cohort differences were significant, with adolescents, who are more likely to live with caregivers, more likely to experience such violence than young adults (18% versus 11%) .

With the caveat that young people were less likely to live with caregivers at endline than they were at Round 2, violence at the hands of caregivers or other adults in the home has fallen significantly since Round 2 among those in the panel sample (see Figure 27). Declines for adolescent boys (67% to 15%) and young men (45% to 7%) were very steep, owing to their relatively higher odds of experiencing such violence at Round 2. Adolescent girls (44% to 19%) and young women (28% to 13) saw more modest declines.

Figure 26: Proportion of young people who experienced violence from a caregiver (or other adult in the home) in the past year (by gender)

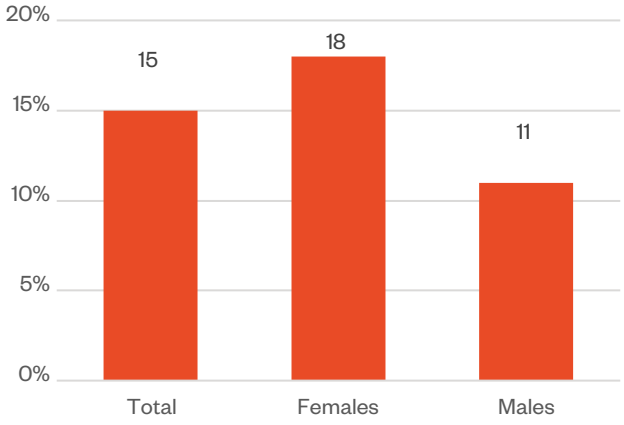


Figure 27: Change in violence at the hands of caregivers (or other adults in the home) between Round 2 and endline

During qualitative interviews, respondents agreed that corporal punishment – meted out by parents and older siblings – is seen as necessary to the proper upbringing of children. A young father in a group discussion explained, '*I beat my children when they misbehave. If they are not beaten or whipped, adolescents, particularly those who are young, will not be corrected from their mistakes or wrongdoings.*' Young people clarified that they are often beaten not only for bad behaviour but also for accidents, especially those that jeopardise family livelihoods. A 16-year-old girl explained, '*If we are younger and unable to properly keep goats, our elder will beat us.*'

Respondents also agreed that corporal punishment becomes less common as young people grow up. For boys and young men, this is because they can run away – and fight back. A 17-year-old boy recalled, '*Recently, when my father tried to beat me, I ran and escaped and while he tried to catch me, I insulted him.*' For girls and young women, this is because they learn to comply and avoid mistakes. A religious leader explained:

> *Girls are mostly obedient and submissive to parents. Girls are afraid of their parents and elders and they have a sense of shame. Girls are also soft-hearted and kind. They accept what their parents instruct them.*

Teacher violence

Of young people enrolled in primary and secondary school, nearly a quarter (22%) reported having been hit or beaten by a teacher in the past year (see Figure 28). Adolescents (25%) were at significantly higher risk than young adults (5%).

Using the panel sample, between Round 2 and endline, students' risk of teacher violence fell significantly (see Figure 29). Looking only at enrolled adolescents (because so few young adults were enrolled at endline), the risk of violence more than halved (from 58% to 26%). Declines were primarily driven by boys (68% to 24%) rather than girls (49% versus 28%), owing to boys' higher risk of experiencing teacher violence at Round 2.

During qualitative interviews, most young people reported that violence at the hands of teachers is endemic but largely unremarkable, because of broader beliefs that violence is necessary in order to shape young people's behaviour. Young people reported that they were beaten for misbehaving (mostly boys), for talking during class, for failing to master their lessons, and for being late to school (mostly girls, and mostly because they are responsible for collecting water). A 15-year-old boy recalled, '*When I was conflicting with another boy, the teacher flogged my*

Figure 28: Proportion of young people who experienced corporal punishment from a teacher in the past year, of young people currently enrolled in primary or secondary school (by cohort)

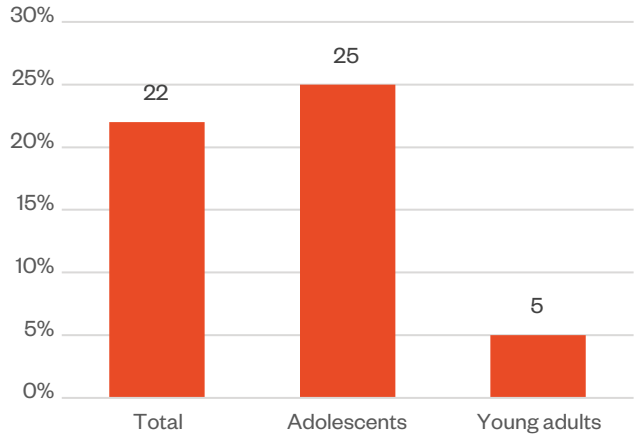
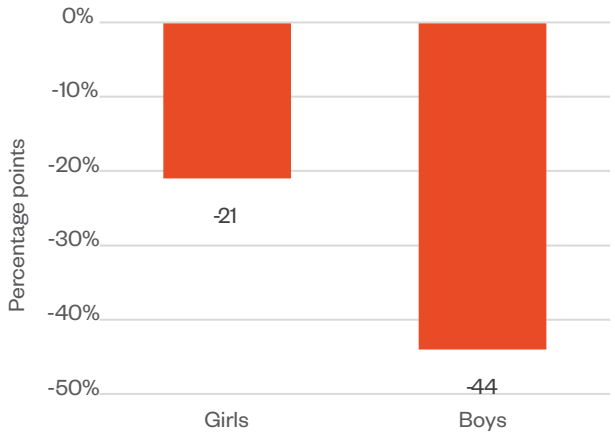


Figure 29: Change in adolescents' risk of teacher violence between Round 2 and endline



hand and my back using a stick. The teacher's beating was painful.' An 18-year-old young woman noted that there is little point in reporting teacher violence: '*If the teacher punishes you at school, my brother and family see it as normal since they assume the teacher is doing it to correct your behaviour or because I was being disruptive in class.*'

Peer violence

On the endline survey, it was rare for young people to report peer violence. Only 5% reported experiencing such violence and only 6% reported perpetrating such violence in the past year (see Figure 30). Too few young people reported peer violence to disaggregate figures.

At endline, peer violence had significantly declined since Round 2, when 20% of those in the panel sample reported having experienced peer violence in the past year (versus 5% at endline) and 14% reported having perpetrated it (versus 6% at endline)(see Figure 31).

Figure 30: Proportion of young people reporting peer violence in the past year

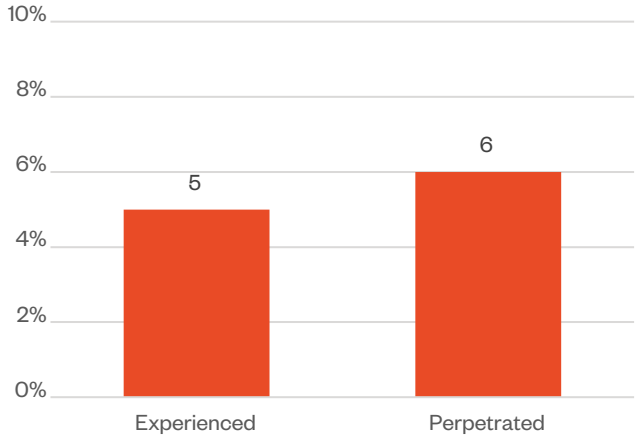
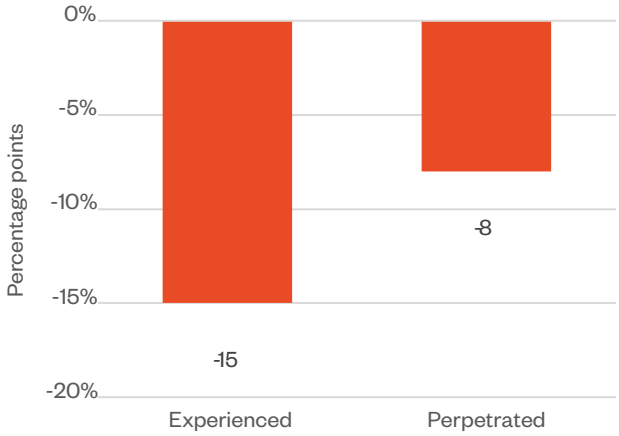


Figure 31: Change in peer violence between Round 2 and endline



However, qualitative research indicates that peer violence is far more common than survey results would suggest. Indeed, most respondents agreed that boys and young men fight frequently. Younger boys' fights are usually over access to water and pasture, and although these are generally seen as only 'minor clashes' (25-year-old young man), can result in serious injury. A 15-year-old boy recalled a fight over water: '*I faced a serious injury on my right hand. It was two years ago, I fought with a boy while keeping goats and the boy had a small knife and stabbed me on my right hand, and I was severely injured.*' Older boys and young men, on the other hand, frequently fight over access to girls – and these fights are often seen as more dangerous. A mother explained, '*Suitors compete for a girl, causing conflict.*'

In the Afar context, peer violence among young males is often perpetrated by their *fiema* – a clan-based group of similarly aged young males who regularly gather to socialise and discuss important community issues, but which also ensures that members adhere to community

norms. Critically, punishments by the *fiema* are not seen as violence, but as discipline as a replacement for the corporal punishment young males are no longer receiving at home. A 17-year-old boy explained that although most of the violence meted out by the *fiema* is relatively mild, it is considered acceptable (for more serious or repeat offences) for the *fiema* to use extreme forms of violence:

> *We are part of the fiema and we mostly use a thin stick and flog him using the stick. But if the case is serious, like frequent stealing of others' animals or wife-cheating and the like, the punishment will increase until immersing him into the Awash River tying his hands back… Sometimes, people die when the fiema punishes them hard, but no one will be blamed for the death of the boy. No one is accountable for the death of the boy because of punishment by the fiema.*

Caregivers and key informants agreed that even when the discipline meted out by a fiema results in serious injury or death, parents and local officials do not intervene.

Conflict-related violence

During qualitative interviews, it was common for young people in Afar study sites to report that they and their family had experienced conflict-related violence. Several young males had been seriously injured and most young people had lost one or more family members to ethnic and clan violence. A 15-year-old boy, when asked how many of his friends had died in recent conflicts, replied, '*It is difficult to count dead people. Even last year, many boys were involved in the war with Isa* [a Somali clan] *and some were killed and some others injured.*' A 19-year-old young woman similarly stated, '*We lost many people to both the Junta war* [the conflict that started in Tigray] *and the conflict with Argoba* [a neighbouring ethnic minority group].'

Sexual violence

It was very rare on the endline survey for girls and young women to report having ever experienced sexual violence. Even when allowed to 'silently' report (by placing a picture in an envelope not opened until the end of the day), only 2% of young females did so (see Figure 32).

As with peer violence, qualitative research found that sexual violence is under-reported on the survey. Young females and their caregivers reported that although sexual violence was previously rare (outside of marital relationships), in recent years girls and young women are at risk of sexual assault whenever they leave home. A mother stated, '*When girls go to fetch water from distant places, they might face rape. When they go to the forest to collect firewood, they can face rape.*' A 20-year-old young woman explained that rape has become common because young males have come to see sexual conquest as a way to prove their masculinity: '*Men do that as a boasting practice.*' Young males did not gainsay these narratives. Indeed, they added that if a young female were to resist a demand for sex, they would use physical violence to ensure that she complied. A 24-year-old young man stated, '*She may try to refuse but you are expected to force her and take her.*'

Unmarried young females are at especially high risk of sexual violence if they take part in traditional Afar dances, called *sadah*. A member of a local militia, who initially protested that sexual violence is strictly punished under traditional law (by refusing to allow the livestock of the perpetrator to graze), then added that sexual violence is so normalised – especially at *sadah* – that victims do not even recognise it as violence:

> *We never consider unwanted touching, teasing and others as sexual violence… We consider these things as normal… Mostly they are unmarried girls who are most at risk for these types of abuses, particularly when they*

Figure 32: Proportion of young females who have ever experienced sexual violence

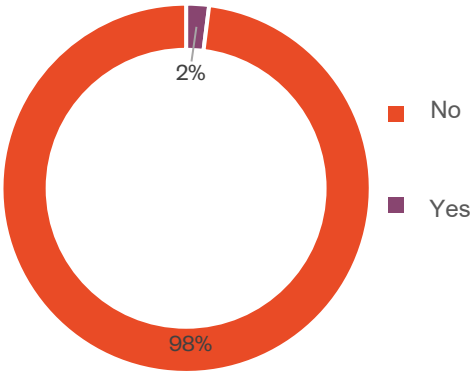
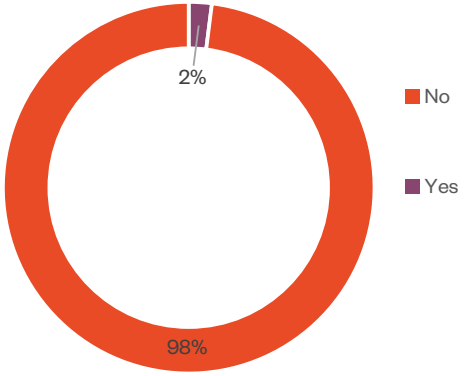


Figure 33: Proportion of young females who have undergone FGM



go to the sadah at nighttime... When a boy touches or grabs her without her interest, the girl won't say anything because she doesn't consider it as a bad thing.

Indeed, although a few young females reported that they run home after dances, to keep males from forcing them to have sex, other young females stated that girls who are raped at *sadah* have brought it on themselves. A 25-year-old young woman stated, '*If a girl experiences rape, she doesn't disclose it because it is done by her own interest.*'

Female genital mutilation (FGM)

Nearly all girls and young women (98%) reported on the endline survey that they had undergone FGM (Figure 33). The average age at which girls had undergone the procedure was during infancy, at 1 year.

Of all young people, with no gender or cohort differences, 56% reported on the endline survey that they believe FGM is required by religion (see Figure 34).A similar proportion (58%), again with no differences between groups, reported that they believe FGM has risks (see Figure 35). The most commonly reported risks of FGM were difficulty in childbirth (77%), infection (57%) and painful sex (50%).

For young females, but not for young males, beliefs significantly shifted between Round 2 and endline (see Figure 36). Young females in the panel sample were significantly less likely to believe that FGM is required by religion at endline than they were at Round 2 (although this view was still held by the majority of respondents) (57% versus 69%). Young females were also more likely to believe that FGM has risks at endline than they were at Round 2 (60% versus 51%).

In aggregate, just under half of young people (46%) reported on the endline survey that FGM has benefits. Gender differences were significant: young males were more likely to believe that FGM has benefits than young females (54% versus 41%) (see Figure 37). The most commonly reported benefits were easier birth (75%), and improves girls' behaviour (57%). There were no changes between Round

Figure 34: Proportion of young people who believe that FGM is required by religion

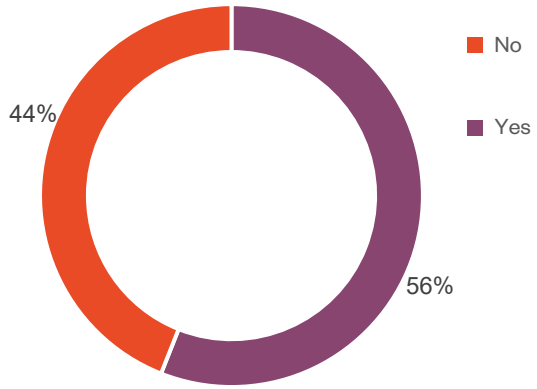


Figure 35: Proportion of young people who believe that FGM has risks

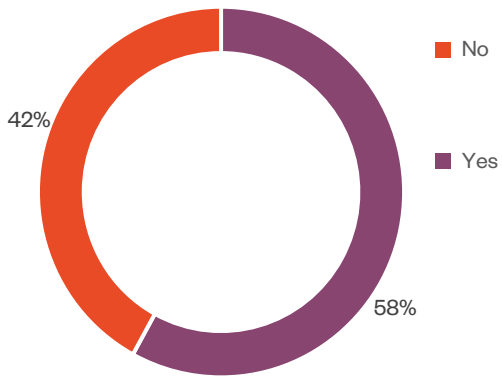


Figure 36: Change in young females' beliefs about FGM between Round 2 and endline

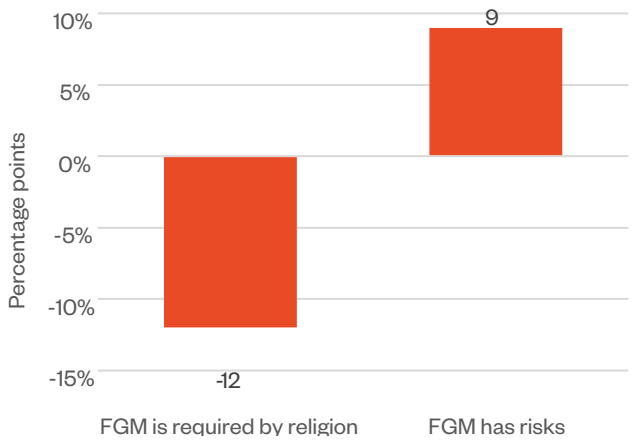
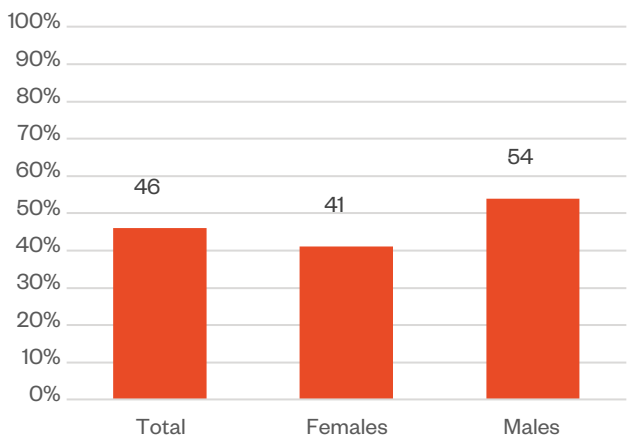


Figure 37: Proportion of young people who believe that FGM has benefits (by gender)



2 and endline in regard to young people's beliefs about the benefits of conforming to norms around FGM.

Only 29% of young males reported on the endline survey that they would be willing to marry a wife who had not undergone FGM (see Figure 38).

When asked if they intend to have their own daughters undergo FGM, a large majority of young people (68%) responded in the affirmative on the endline survey (see Figure 39). Cohort differences, but not gender differences, were significant. Adolescents – who were not only more likely to have been exposed to messages about FGM but who were also less likely to be already parenting and experiencing pressure to conform to community norms – were less likely than young adults to report that they intend to cut their daughters (63% versus 75%).

During individual and group interviews, qualitative research participants agreed that '*it is unheard of for a female to be uncircumcised*' (16-year-old girl), despite widespread knowledge of the risks of FGM, because it is seen as a religious requirement and because it is core to Afar culture. An 18-year-old young man stated, '*It is forbidden for females to remain uncircumcised in our religion*.' A 20-year-old young woman noted, '*FGM is the culture of the Afar people*.' Critically, FGM is perceived as necessary to both Islam and Afar culture because it reduces females' sex drive, ensuring that they will be well behaved – and (especially salient to young males) chaste before marriage and faithful during it. A 17-year-old boy explained, '*Unless girls are circumcised, they will become rude, disobedient and will have high sexual desire, so they will engage in sexual intercourse before marriage or will not live with one husband*.'

Although FGM remains effectively universal, respondents noted that the practice has been changing in recent years. First, outside of the most remote communities, practices are gradually becoming less severe, in that girls are having less of their external genitalia removed and fewer girls are being subject to total infibulation. A mother explained, '*In the past it was narrowing* [the genital opening] *by removing parts… Now, listening to elders and religious leaders, this kind of genital mutilation is decreasing*.' A religious leader elaborated:

> *The government and NGOs began educating people about the harmful effects of the previous type of FGM practice, which involved the complete removal of the clitoris and all the fleshes in the internal and external parts of girls' genital organ. After removing all the flesh in their genital organ, the girl's thighs were tied together with a rope to ensure the wound healed with minimal opening, leaving only a narrow hole for the passage of pee. …People have gradually abandoned the previous type of cutting.*

Notably, because respondents' understanding of FGM is rooted in traditional practices, less severe forms of FGM are rarely considered to be FGM. A 23-year-old young mother explained, '*It is only sunna* [religiously allowed].'

Second (and with the caveat that most respondents reported that girls in Afar study sites have always undergone FGM during infancy), in communities where girls previously underwent the procedure in later childhood, the age of FGM appears to be dropping as parents become more aware of risks. A 24-year-old mother, who underwent FGM at age 10, explained:

> *My daughter was circumcised a week after she was born. I didn't allow my daughter to stay uncircumcised until she grew up because I observed the pain and severing of circumcising girls after they grew up.*

Figure 38: Proportion of young males willing to marry a wife who has not undergone FGM

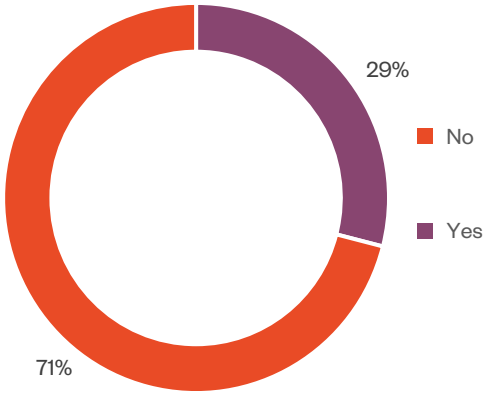
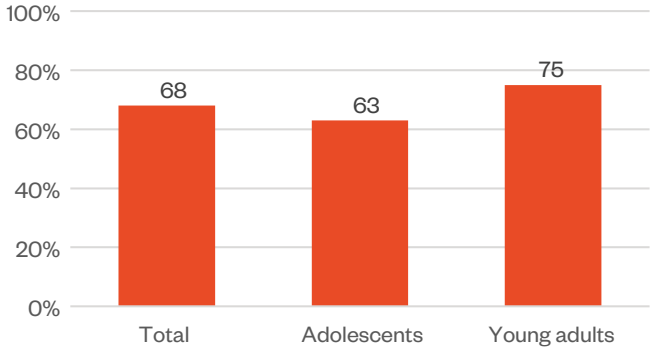


Figure 39: Proportion of young people who plan to have their daughters undergo FGM (by cohort)



Child marriage

The endline survey found that a minority of young people know that child marriage is illegal for both girls and boys in Ethiopia. In aggregate, only 23% knew that it is illegal for girls to marry prior to age 18, and only 27% knew that it is illegal for boys to marry prior to age 18 (see Figure 40). Gender differences were highly significant: young males were much more likely than young females to know that child marriage is illegal for girls (28% versus 20%) and for boys (40% versus 28%).

Young people's knowledge about the marriage law significantly improved between Round 2 and endline. In aggregate, they were 13 percentage points more likely at endline to know that girls cannot marry before age 18 and 23 percentage points more likely at endline to know that boys cannot marry in childhood (see Figure 41). Young males' knowledge about the law for girls (23 percentage points, from 6% to 29%) and boys (36 percentage points, from 6% to 42%) improved more than young females' knowledge about the law for girls (7 percentage points, from 14% to 21%) and boys (14 percentage points, from 4% to 18%).

The endline survey found that child marriage is the norm for girls, and that many boys are also at risk. Of adolescent girls, who primarily ranged in age from 14 to 20[5], 39% had already been married (if they were under age 18) or had married prior to age 18 (if they were over age 18) (see Figure 42). Of young women (and with the caveat that young women were disproportionately likely to be selected into the Round 2 sample if they were already married), 72% had married prior to adulthood. Of adolescent boys, who primarily ranged in age from 14 to 20[6], 6% had already been married. Of young men (who again were disproportionately likely to be selected into the sample based on having been married), 14% had married prior to adulthood.

Girls' and young women's odds of child marriage were much higher at endline than they were at Round 2 (see Figure 43). Of those in the panel sample, girls' rate of child marriage climbed from 11% to 39%; the rate for young women climbed from 52% to 71%.

Marriage decision-making primarily lies with parents, according to the endline survey. Of ever-married girls and young women, 80% reported that their parents made the decision for them to marry (see Figure 44). Of ever-married boys and young men, 53% reported the same.

Figure 40: Proportion of young people aware that marriage before age 18 is illegal for girls and boys (by gender)

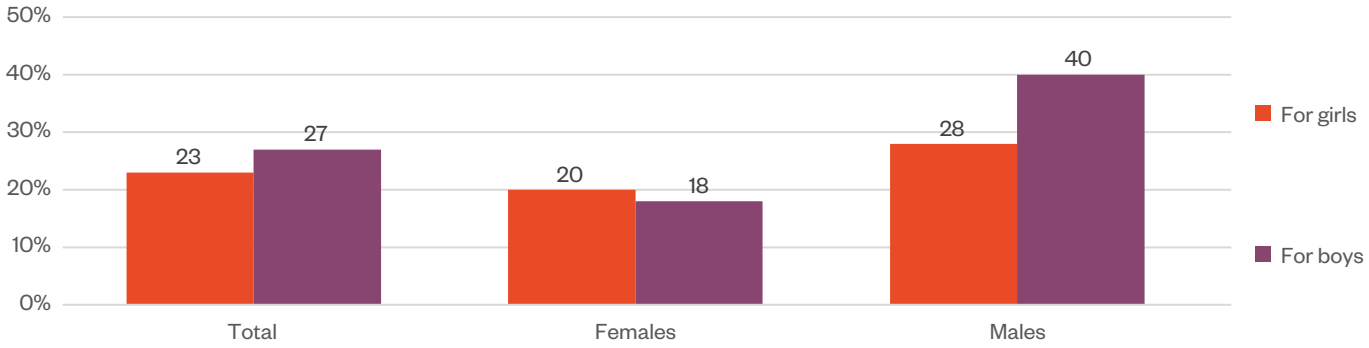
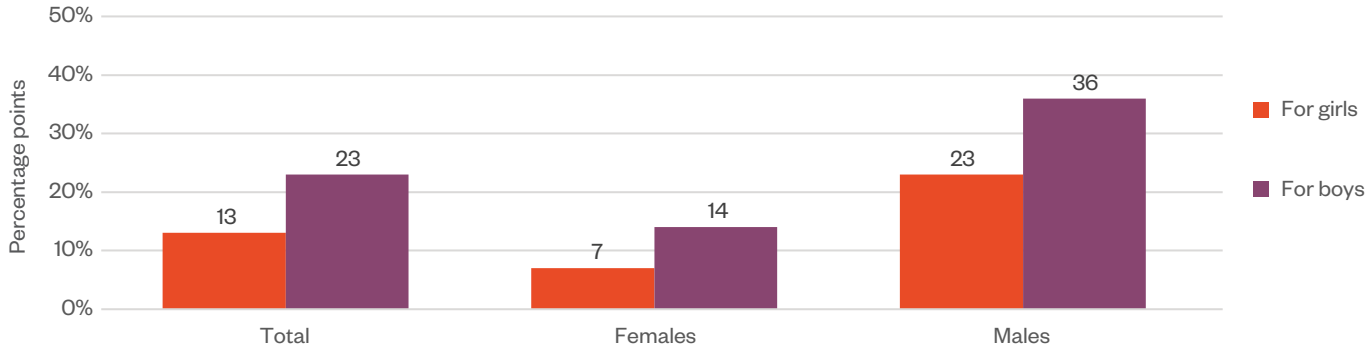


Figure 41: Change in young people's knowledge of the marriage law between Round 2 and endline



5 The sample includes 26 girls who fall out of this age range.
6 The sample includes 20 boys who fall out of this age range.

Figure 42: Proportion of young people married/ married prior to age 18 (by gender and cohort)

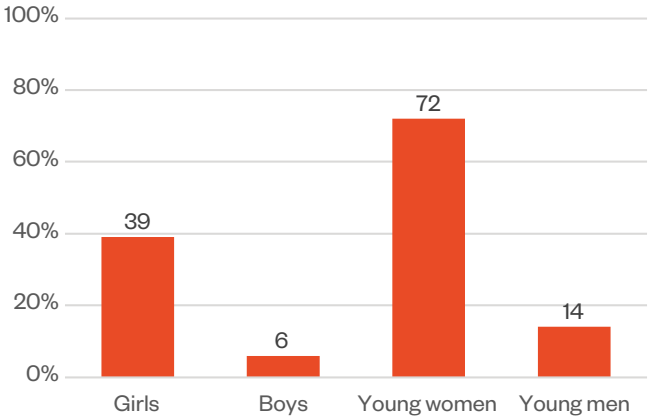
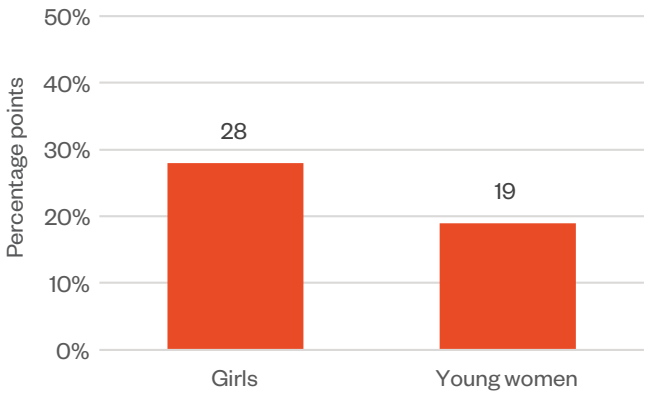


Figure 43: Change in the proportion of young females married prior to age 18 between Round 2 and endline



Of young people married between Round 2 and endline, nearly all of the males (88%) but fewer than half of the females (40%) reported that they had been ready to marry at the time (see Figure 45).

Child marriage in Afar cannot be understood without first explaining Afar marriage customs. Though practices are beginning to shift in more urban areas, marriage partners are traditionally first cousins (absumas), with girls (and young women) marrying the sons of their maternal uncles, and young men (and boys) marrying the daughters of their paternal aunts. Because families are large, young people can have multiple potential partners, though these are usually determined based on birth order.

During qualitative research, participants emphasised that girls are seen as ready for marriage as soon as they reach menarche. A militia member reported that, '*Most girls in our community will marry when they turn 12 or 13, because they will start menstruating and their nipples will start.*' Preferences for girls' child marriage are partly driven by clans' demands for children – demands that have spiked after the recent surge in conflict-related deaths. More commonly, however, preferences for girl child marriage are shaped by parents' fear that girls will become pregnant before marriage, which is considered deeply shameful. One mother, who reported that she intended to have her 12-year-old daughter married within the next year, explained: '*Now is the time for marriage. If I leave her unmarried this time, she will get pregnant and give birth before she gets married.*' The timing of girls' marriage is also shaped by who she is to marry, and how long he has been waiting for her to grow up. An 18-year-old young woman reported that she had married even before reaching puberty, because her cousin had been waiting to marry for many years: '*I got married when I was 10 years old. My absuma asked my parents to marry me and they said that it was impossible to refuse when the absuma requests marriage.*' Several respondents added that should parents try to delay their daughter's marriage, it is not uncommon for young males to simply abduct their bride-to-be. A mother whose daughter was abducted into marriage at the age of 12 explained that she had tried to get her daughter back, but had been rebuffed:

Figure 44: Proportion of marriage decisions made by parents, of ever-married young people (by gender)

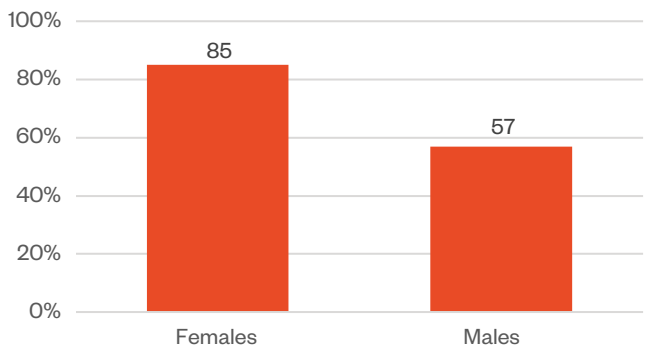
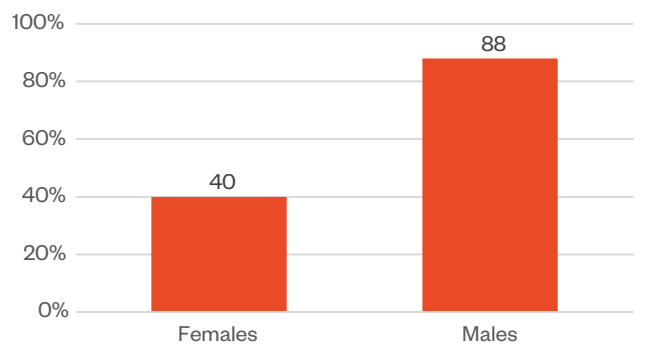


Figure 45: Proportion of recently married young people who were ready/not ready to marry at the time (by gender)



I told them that my child is not ready for marriage, and I asked them to return her home. But they refused… I also went to the elders to help me bring Hawa home. The elders advised me … let the boy who abducted her marry her.

For young men, the timing of marriage primarily depends on the age of their *absuma*. Most families prefer their sons to marry young, so that he can produce children and so that his wife can contribute to domestic work. A militia member explained:

Boys in this community also marry at a young age, from the age of 15 or 16. If boys have absuma girls, they will marry even if they are young… It is only if a boy does not have an absuma girl that he will stay unmarried for a long time.

In line with survey findings, respondents in qualitative research agreed that parents make marriage decisions. Girls have no input into when or who they marry; should they protest, they are regularly imprisoned and guarded to ensure they do not escape. A 19-year-old young woman, married at age 15, reported: '*In our country, family makes you marry forcefully. You don't marry by your own decision.*' A 16-year-old girl, married at age 14, elaborated:

A girl is told that she is getting married, and then if she refuses, she is beaten… She is protected so that she doesn't disappear or do anything else as soon as she hears. She is protected so that the wedding doesn't fall apart, doesn't get ruined.

With the caveat that young males occasionally have some input into which *absuma* they will marry, young grooms also regularly reported that they had married as their parents demanded. A 25-year-old young man, married at age 16, recalled:

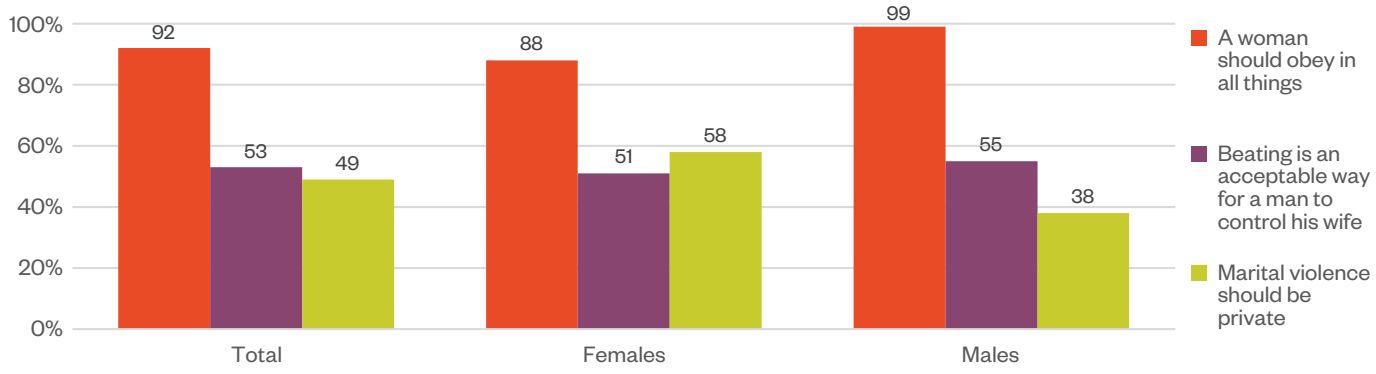
I did not choose a girl to marry. I got married to my absuma girl who is my father's younger sister's daughter… I was not interested to get married to her and I even did not have the knowledge about marriage, but our parents arranged our marriage.

In stark contrast to young males, many of whom reported that they had been genuinely happy to marry as children (because it demonstrates to the community that they are now seen as men), it was rare for young females to express anything other than sadness and regret about their child marriage. A 26-year-old young woman, married at age 16, explained, '*In our culture, there is no one who wants marriage. When a hut for the bridegroom is built, you are simply waiting crying.*' The young brides who expressed the least unhappiness with their marriages admitted in interviews that they were merely resigned to their fate. An 18-year-old young woman, married at age 15, when asked why she had accepted the marriage her father had arranged for her, replied: '*What could I do? Nothing! I just stayed silent.*'

Marital violence

The endline survey found that marital violence is expected in Afar study sites. In aggregate, 92% of young people believe that a wife should obey her husband in all things; 53% believe it is acceptable for a man to beat his wife to control her behaviour; and 49% believe marital violence is private and should not be disclosed (see Figure 46). Boys and young men were significantly more likely than girls and young women to believe that a woman should obey (99% versus 88%). Girls and young women were significantly more likely than boys and young men to believe that marital violence is private (58% versus 38%). When it comes to the acceptability of beating, gender differences were not significant.

Figure 46: Young people's beliefs about marital violence (by gender)



There were some significant changes in young people's beliefs about marital violence between Round 2 and endline. All groups in the panel sample were less likely to believe that beating is an acceptable way for a man to control his wife (53% versus 70%) (see Figure 47). Young males – but not young females – were also less likely at endline to believe that marital violence is private (59% versus 38%) (see Figure 48).

Likely because of their beliefs that marital violence is private, it was unusual for young brides to admit to having been physically assaulted by their husband: only 13% reported experiencing such violence (see Figure 49).

During qualitative interviews, where there is more time for the respondent and the interviewer to develop trust, respondents reported that marital violence is extremely common and can be severe. Young brides explained that they are beaten for failing to follow their husband's instructions, for making mistakes, and for ever speaking up. A 22-year-old young woman stated, *'If you go to your friend's home, your husband beats you. If a goat has been lost, he beats you.'* An 18-year-old young woman similarly said, '*There is no "no" to anything. If I say okay, he doesn't beat me.*'

Figure 47: Change in young people's beliefs about the acceptability of marital violence between Round 2 and endline

Figure 48: Change in young males' beliefs about the privacy of marital violence between Round 2 and endline

Men did not gainsay young brides' narratives. Indeed, a 24-year-old young man noted that he sees wife-beating as required to teach his wife how to behave:

> *I sometimes beat my wife when she misbehaves or mostly when she disobeys me.... I might beat her using a small stick. It is not for hatred that I beat her, rather to correct her and to make her not disobey in the future.*

A key informant from the Bureau of Women's Affairs reported that the youngest brides are most at risk of marital violence, as they are the most likely to make the mistakes deemed in need of correction:

> *Most girls get married when they are young, and they might not do the work their husbands order them to do. When the husbands see a mistake, they will hit the girls to correct them.*

Notably, many older respondents also reported that marital violence has become less common – at least in more central *kebeles* – in recent years, as women have become more aware of their rights and willing to report. A 30-year-old woman stated, '*These days, wife-beating has been decreasing... since females started speaking out, and democracy became a concept.*'

Support-seeking for violence

In aggregate, half of young people (50%) reported on the endline survey that they knew where a person might seek support if they were experiencing violence (see Figure 50). Gender differences were highly significant, with young males much more likely to know of a place than young females (66% versus 39%).

Figure 49: Proportion of ever married females who admit to ever having been physically assaulted by their husband

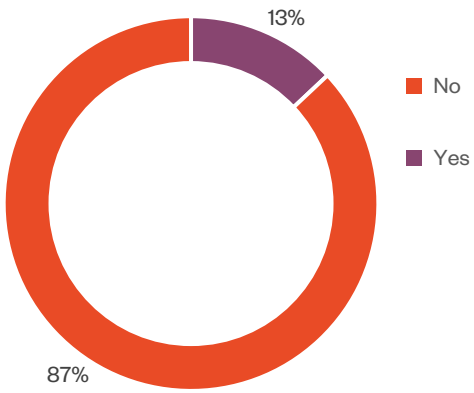
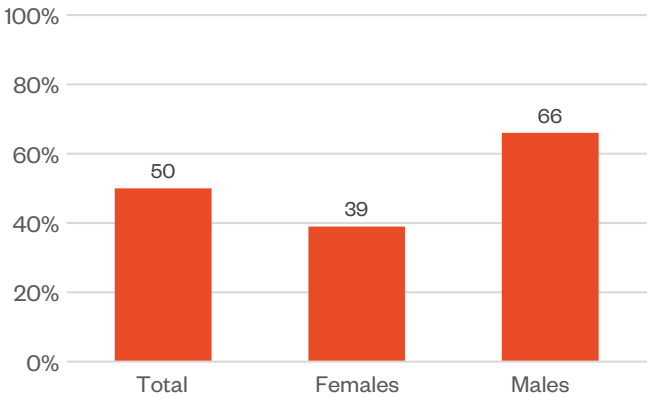


Figure 50: Proportion of young people who know where to seek support for violence (by gender)



Among young males, but not young females, knowledge of where to seek support for violence had significantly improved between Round 2 and endline (29% to 68%) (see Figure 51).

Of the young people who reported knowing where a person might seek support if experiencing violence, it was rare for them to have done so: just 4% reported this on the endline survey (see Figure 52). Gender differences were significant: young males were three times more likely to have done so than young females (6% versus 2%).

During qualitative interviews, respondents primarily spoke of informal, customary sources of redress for violence. They stated that community elders intervene to keep boys and young men's fights from getting too violent, to prevent young males from harassing and violating young females, and to reconcile young couples who are experiencing marital issues. They also stated that young brides experiencing marital violence typically return to their parents' home for respite. That said, respondents agreed that customary efforts to prevent and redress violence are largely ineffective – from the victim's perspective – because elders are more focused on keeping community peace than on supporting survivors to access justice and support services. The mother of a 12-year-old girl who was abducted by her *absuma* reported that her husband, a *kebele* official, was '*advised to get calm*' by local elders, and dissuaded from approaching *woreda* officials for assistance to have his daughter returned. A militia member similarly noted that elders' interventions in cases of marital violence are typically confined to '*warning the husband not to resort to violence again*'. A 19-year-old young mother, who was badly beaten by her husband, noted that parental support is hardly better: '*I went to my family twice after he beat me. It was very bitter. They returned me*.'

Although no respondents reported having approached official sources for help if experiencing violence, there was evidence of growing awareness that such a thing is possible. A 16-year-old girl, when asked what happens in her community if a girl is raped, replied, '*She will tell her father and her father will go and report to the woreda administration. The convicted person will be sentenced to life imprisonment*.' A militia member similarly stated, '*If a husband beats his wife, she has the option to seek justice or even request a divorce… As a result, husbands are now more cautious about using violence against their wives*.' No respondents mentioned being aware of, much less accessing, the one-stop centres that provide survivors with medical, psychosocial and legal services.

Figure 51: Change in young males' knowledge of where to seek support for violence, between Round 2 and endline

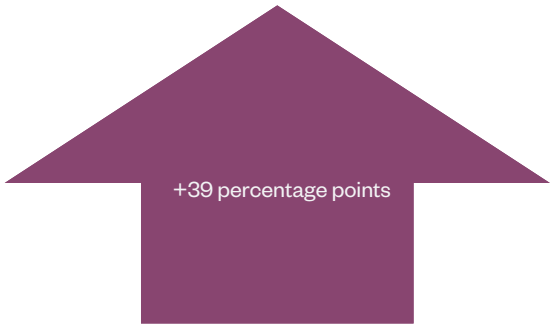
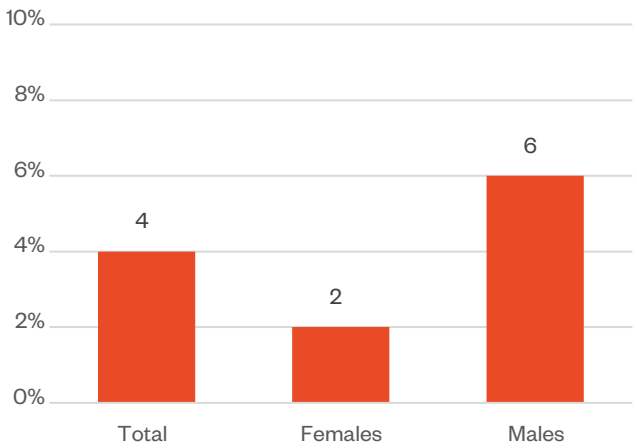


Figure 52: Proportion of young people who know a place to seek support for violence and who have done so (by gender)



Psychosocial well-being

Mental health and resilience

The GAGE endline survey included two internationally validated tools designed to screen young people for mental health concerns. The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) measures symptoms of emotional distress[7], and the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) measures symptoms of depression[8] . As during previous rounds of research, rates as measured by these tools were low, perhaps due to the fact that young people are more focused on their survival needs than on how they feel. In aggregate, 5% of young people scored highly enough on the GHQ-12 to suggest emotional distress, and only 2% of young people scored highly enough on the PHQ-9 to suggest depression (see Figure 53).

The endline survey also included the Child and Youth Resilience Measure[9] (CYRM), which captures young people's ability to respond to life challenges, and the emotional support they have to help them do so. Dividing the sample into four quartiles, those with low resilience (25th percentile and below), those with average resilience (26th–74th percentile), and those with high resilience (75th percentile and above) underscores that young females are markedly disadvantaged compared with young males. They are less than half as likely to be highly resilient (11% versus 25%) and are nearly four times more likely to have low resilience (37% versus 10%) (see Figure 54).

During qualitative interviews, some young people spoke about being sad about the deaths of family members. Others spoke about being worried about conflict or drought, and its concomitant impacts on animal and human health. Most, however, noted that episodes of grief and anxiety are transient and expected, given the inherent difficulties of surviving in a desert environment – and that their religious faith helps them cope with stressors. A 24-year-old young man explained, '*We accept life. We can't do anything because Allah brings it*.'

That said, one group of young respondents did speak regularly about substantial emotional distress: young brides. Almost without exception, married girls and young women reported that they had been sad and afraid to learn that they were to be married. A 19-year-old young woman, who married at age 15, recalled, '*I wasn't happy when I got married*.' An 18-year-old young woman, who also married at age 15, stated, '*I was continuously crying*.' Young brides rarely reported being any less distressed after marriage. Indeed, while they were resigned to being totally without agency, overworked, lonely, and being beaten, most reported only negative feelings about their lives. A 24-year-old mother stated, '*I don't have an option other than staying in such a bad life. Time has already gone for a change*.' Caregivers admitted that young brides' distress is not invisible to them. Indeed, several reported that they knew girls and young women who had tried to kill themselves to escape a planned or violent marriage. A female community key informant recalled:

> *My* [intended] *daughter-in-law committed suicide… She committed suicide as she was not interested to get married to my son… She was complaining to her family but when her family didn't understand her problem, she finally resorted to suicide.*

Figure 53: Proportion of young people with symptoms of emotional distress and depression

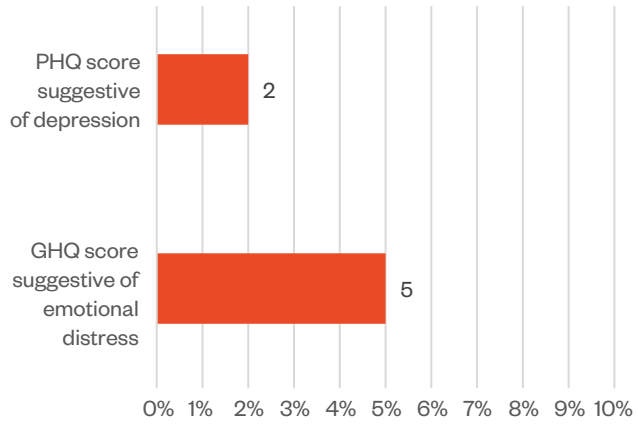
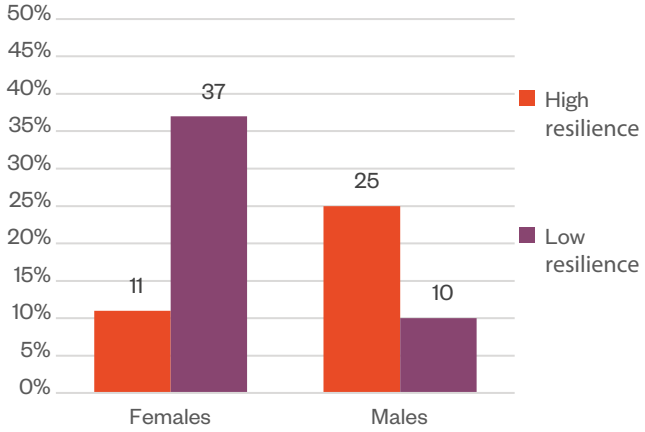


Figure 54: Proportion of young people with high versus low resilience (by gender)



7 Distressed was defined as a score =>3/12 (see Goldberg, 1972; Goldberg and Williams, 1988).
8 Depressed was defined as a score =>5/27 (see Kroenke et. al, 2001).
9 See Liebenberg et. al (2013).

Emotional support

A large minority of young people (40%) reported on the endline survey that they did not have a trusted adult in their lives (see Figure 55). Gender and cohort differences were significant: males were more likely to have a trusted adult than females (68% versus 54%), and young adults were more likely to have a trusted adult than adolescents (67% versus 55%). Young men (76%) were the most likely to have a trusted adult; adolescent girls (50%) were least likely to.

Young people were significantly more likely to have a trusted adult at endline than they were at Round 2 (see Figure 56). Gains were especially large for young males. Between Round 2 and endline, the proportion of young males in the panel sample with a trusted adult climbed from 47% to 69%; among young females, the proportion rose almost half as much, from 45% to 55%.

A minority of young people reported on the endline survey that they can talk to their mother (28%, see Figure 57) or father (24%, see Figure 58) about their dreams and aspirations for the future. Boys and young men were significantly more likely to report that they can talk to their mother than girls and young women (36% versus 23%). Young males, and especially young men (49%), were also better able to talk to their father than young females (17%).In aggregate, over a quarter of young people (28%) reported on the endline survey that they did not have a trusted friend. Young females (63%) were significantly less likely to have a trusted friend than young males (84%) (see Figure 59).

Young people were significantly more likely to have a trusted friend at endline than they were at Round 2. Gains were again especially large for young males (see Figure 60). Between Round 2 and endline, the proportion of young males with a trusted friend more than doubled, from 35% to 84%. The gains for young females were much smaller: from 43% to 63%.

During qualitative interviews, most young people and their caregivers reported that they enjoyed close communication and had supportive relationships. That said, the nature of that communication and support was almost entirely functional – and revolved not around emotions or longer-term dreams, but around the daily tasks that make survival possible. A father, when asked about his communication with his adolescent son, replied:

> *He talks to me about anything. For example, he talks to me when he plans to take the camels to another place. He tells me what he wants, and I tell him to take the camels to the best places for grass, and we will have the discussion before he leaves this place.*

A 19-year-old young woman, when asked how her mother supports her, replied, '*My mother helps me with what I want. She helps me keep animals if I want. If I want to fetch water, she helps me fetch water. She also cooks at home if I am out.*'

Figure 56: Change in young people's access to a trusted adult, between Round 2 and endline

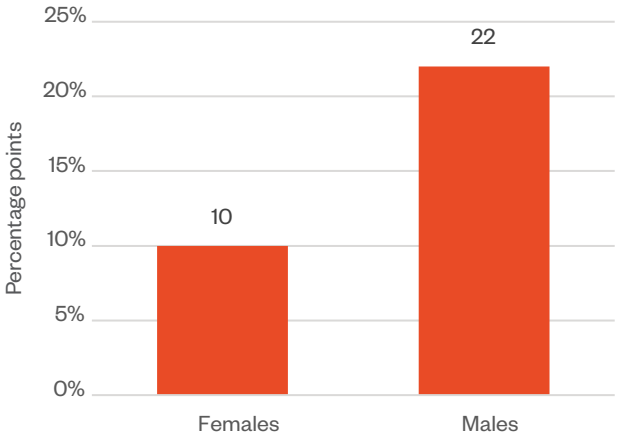


Figure 55: Proportion of young people with a trusted adult (by gender and cohort)

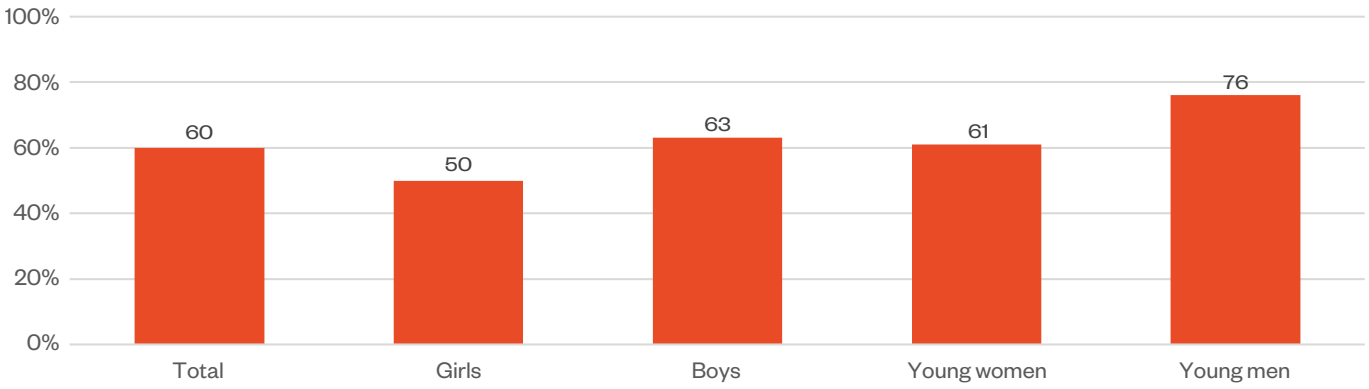


Figure 57: Proportion of young people who can talk to their mother about their dreams and aspirations (by gender)

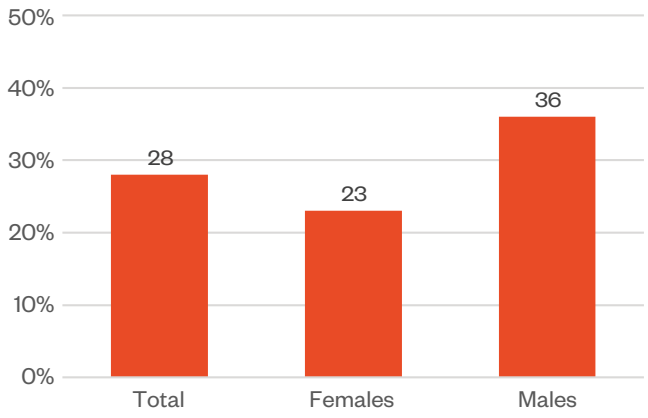
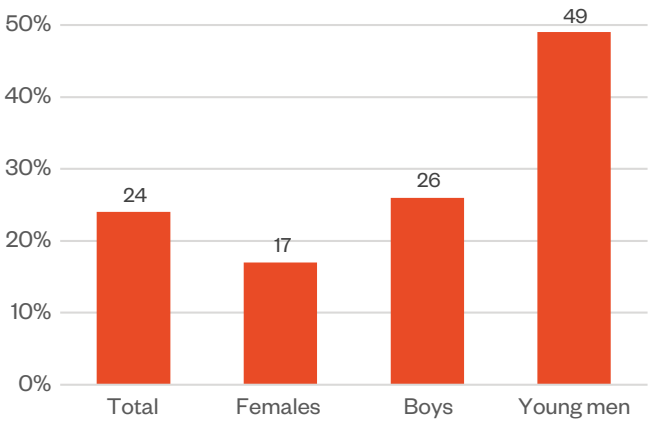


Figure 58: Proportion of young people who can talk to their father about their dreams and aspirations (by gender)



Narratives about young people's relationships with their peers were more divergent than those about their relationships with their caregivers. In line with survey results, many girls and young women reported that they had no friends at all. A 24-year-old young woman stated, '*We don't have friends*.' For young brides, lack of access to friends was primarily explained by tight restrictions imposed by their husband. An 18-year-old young woman, married at age 16, stated, '*After marriage, everybody leads their own life. You can't see each other. My husband is not happy to see me talking to friends*.' For unmarried young females, lack of access to friends was primarily explained by their lack of time – and by parents' concerns that friends might lead them astray, especially in the context of *sadah*. A mother explained:

> *My daughter does not have friends and is lonely. Either she stays at home or she plays with me, but she does not have friends... I see her not having friends as a good thing. The reason is that her friends go to wrong places, and would lead her today and make her unmanaged tomorrow. So they create opportunities for her to fall into bad places and she would get hurt.*

For young females who did speak of having friends, the nature of those friendships was often markedly different for those who were married compared with those who were not. Unmarried girls spoke often about spending time with friends – usually at *sadah* – and also of sharing feelings and secrets. A 16-year-old girl stated, '*I have best friends who I share secrets with and discuss everything we want*.' The support that girls provide to each other was most obvious when they spoke of trying to avoid an unwanted marriage. Girl respondents explained how friends would help each other hide menstruation and run away when an engagement was announced. A 20-year-old young mother recalled that her best friend had kept her fed while she was hiding in the forest to avoid marriage: '*I hid myself... My friend brought food in a hidden way when I was outside of home*.'

Figure 59: Proportion of young people with a trusted friend (by gender)

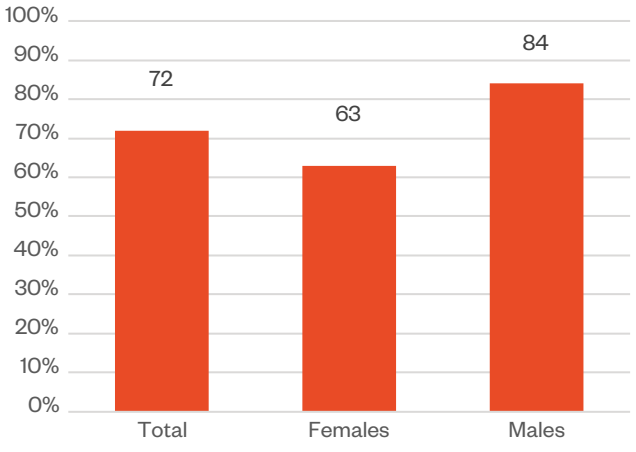
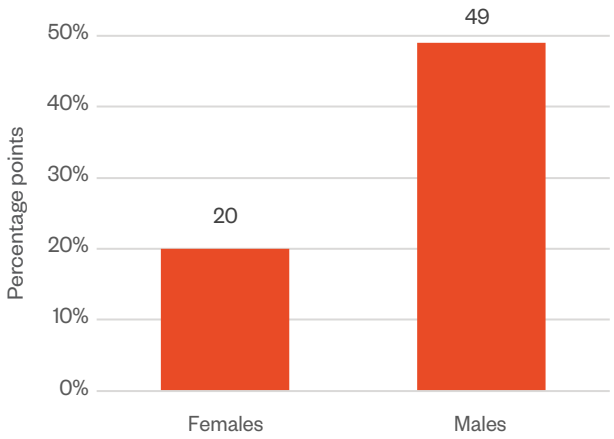


Figure 60: Change in young people's access to a trusted friend, between Round 2 and endline



Married girls and young women, on the other hand, almost always described their 'friendships' as limited. A 22-year-old young woman stated of her relationships with peers:

> *We don't have much to talk about. For example, by the time I ask her where she is coming from, she tells me that she was looking after the goats or she may say that she is coming from the market or anything like that. We just talk like that.*

Boys and young men, in stark contrast to girls and young women, almost always reported having close relationships with their friends. A 17-year-old boy, when asked if he had close friends, replied, '*I am an older boy so how I can stay without close friends?*' As with girls and young women, the nature of young males' relationships with one another changes with marriage. Unmarried young males spoke often of attending *sadah* with their friends, and also of relying on their friends to help them find sexual partners. A 16-year-old boy stated:

> *I and my best friends meet every day... My friends and I do many things together. If I want to make a girl my girlfriend, I ask my best friend to talk to her and convince her to start a relationship with me. Similarly, if my best friend wants a girl, whether she's my uncle's daughter or a relative, I will help him convince her to start a relationship with him.*

Married young males, on the other hand, reported that they and their friends had more adult concerns and spent time in different ways. A 23-year-old young man explained:

> *The way we spend time is different before and after we married. Before we married, we discussed with friends about how, what and where to play. How to date girlfriends, when and what types of clothes to purchase, when to go to marketplaces to spend time in the market, etc. But after we married, we have friends who are married and we mostly spend time looking after cattle, discussing about our living and our families, etc. Now we are responsible to manage our families and afford necessary things for our family, including food.*

Unsurprisingly, given the broader lack of services available in GAGE study sites, young people do not have access to psychosocial support services. A male community key informant, when asked what services are available, replied:

> *'No one has come and tried to help adolescents with mental health problems. Let alone mental health problems, there are no health services in our locality.'*

An adolescent Afar girl attends 8th grade and helps her family sell coffee © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2025

Voice and agency

Physical and digital mobility

On the endline survey, just over half of young people (52%) reported that they had left the *kebele* at least once in the past 3 months (see Figure 61). Gender differences were significant, with young males (64%) much more likely to have done so than young females (43%).

Young people's physical mobility significantly improved between Round 2 and endline. Gains were far larger for young males than for young females (see Figure 62). At Round 2, 33% of young males had left the *kebele* at least once in the past 3 months; this had risen to 66% at endline. Analogous figures for young females were 23% and 43%.

In aggregate, 51% of young people reported at endline that they need permission to go to the home of a friend or relative, and 69% reported that they need permission to go to the market (see Figure 63). Gender and cohort differences were significant: young females were more likely to need permission than young males, and adolescents were more likely to need permission than young adults. Adolescent girls were the most likely to need permission to go places (e.g. 70% to the home of a friend or relative); young men were least likely to need permission (e.g. 11% to the home of a friend of relative).

Although only a minority of young people (13%) have a phone that is connected to the internet, most (59%) reported on the endline survey that they do have a phone for their own use (see Figure 64). Gender differences were significant: young males were more likely than young females both to have a phone (72% versus 50%) and to have an internet-connected phone (19% versus 8%). For young males, cohort differences were significant: young men were more likely than boys to have a phone (85% versus 64%) and to have an internet-connected phone (23% versus 16%).

Young people's access to mobile phones significantly improved between Round 2 and endline (see Figure 65). Gains were larger for adolescents (11% to 55%) than for young adults (36% to 63%), who were relatively more likely to already have a phone at Round 2.

During qualitative interviews, respondents reported that females' and males' mobility is markedly different, in that boys and young men have much more freedom of movement than girls and young women. A 17-year-old boy

Figure 61: Proportion of young people who have left the *kebele* at least once in the past 3 months (by gender)

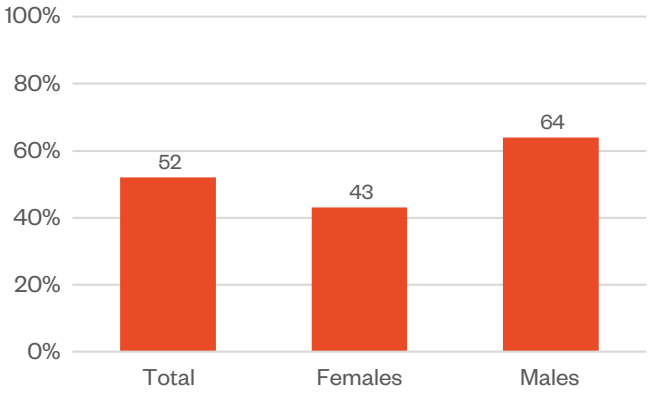


Figure 62: Change between Round 2 and endline in whether young people have left the *kebele* at least once in the past 3 months

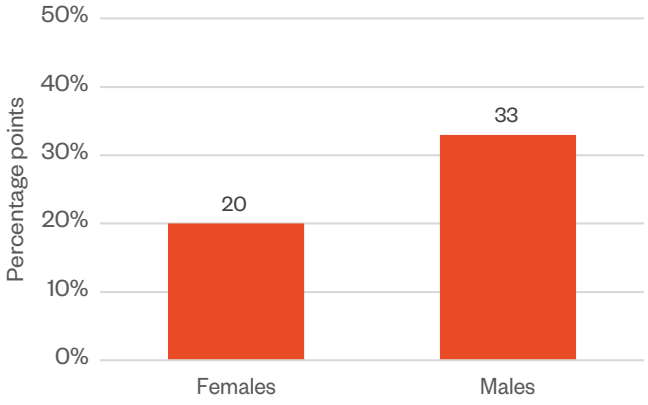


Figure 63: Proportion of young people who need permission to go places (by gender and cohort)

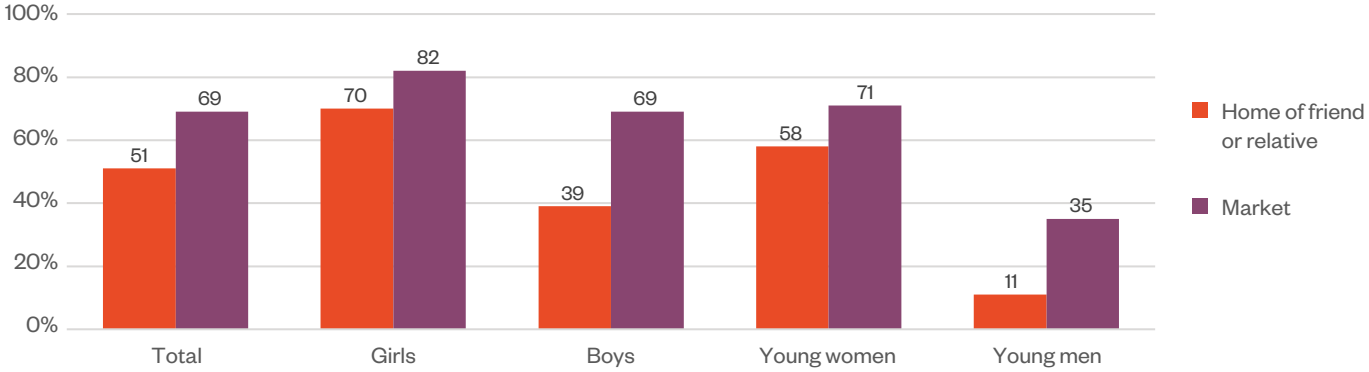


Figure 64: Proportion of young people with access to a mobile phone/ the internet (by gender and cohort)

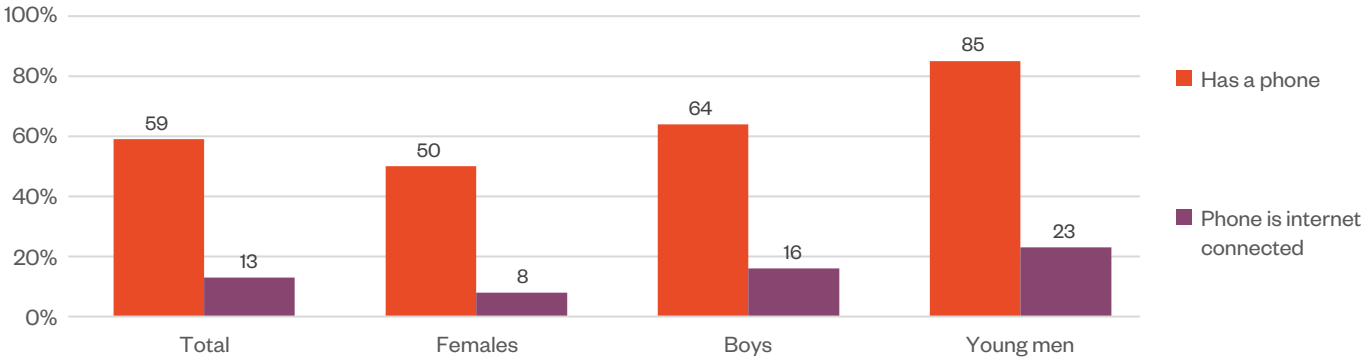
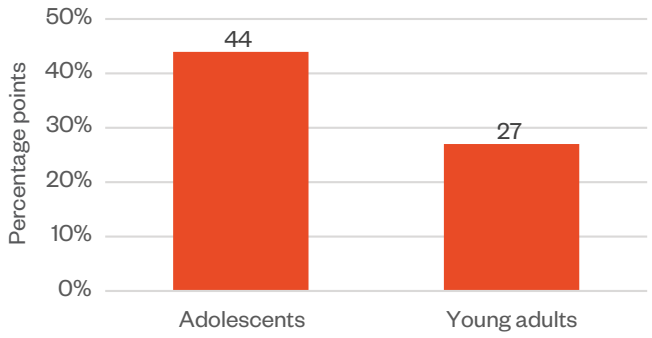


Figure 65: Change between Round 2 and endline in phone ownership



explained that this is because young females are at such high risk of violence:

> *Boys and young men can move everywhere they want and also they can protect themselves from any attack or violence. But girls are vulnerable to violence and attack… I am a boy so I can go everywhere I want, my parents do not control and forbid me to go. But my sister is not able to go everywhere she wants because my parents will forbid her since she is vulnerable to violence because she is female.*

That said, broader narratives underscore that limits on young females pertain primarily not to their movement per se, but to their freedom of movement. Nearly all girls and young women spend hours each day outside the home collecting water and fuelwood and tending to goats. A 17-year-old girl reported that girls' mobility is controlled by others, saying, '*When we are told to go, we go.*'

Although unmarried young females have more restricted mobility than their male peers, marriage further limits the mobility of girls and young women. This is because, as a 20-year-old young woman (who married at age 15) explained, '*In our community, a married girl can't go anywhere without the permission of her husband because he may beat her.*' A 16-year-old girl, who also married at age 15, agreed, and added that these tight restrictions cost young brides access to the friends and family who might help them adapt to the difficulties of married life:

> *Before I got married, life was good for me because I could play with my friends, and I had the freedom to go everywhere I wanted. But after I got married, I became under my husband's control and nowadays I am not able to go everywhere I want and I even cannot go to my parents' home unless he allows me.*

Respondents reported that young people's access to mobile phones has exploded in recent years. A 25-year-old young man, when asked how many of his peers have their own phone, replied, '*There is not anyone who hasn't a cell phone.*' Young people reported that they use their phone primarily for talking to family and for listening to music, but many also added that phones – even those with no internet access – have become critical sources of information. An 18-year-old young woman stated, '*You can get a lot of information using the phone. For instance, you can find out where conflicts or wars are occurring.*' Young people noted that boys and young men tend to have better access to phones than girls and young women for several reasons. First, they have more access to cash, as it is generally males that handle market transactions (see below). Second, they are often away from home for weeks or even months at a time, grazing livestock in areas where pasture is plentiful. Finally, young husbands are often so worried about their wife's fidelity that it is not uncommon for them to confiscate her phone after marriage. A 17-year-old girl, when asked why she used to have a phone but no longer does, replied:

> *Husbands do not want their wives to have a mobile phone, especially newly married husbands. But if I want to call to my brothers, my father or other relatives, I can use my husband's phone and he doesn't forbid me to use his phone.*

Voice, decision-making and participation

Most young people reported on the endline survey that they are comfortable expressing an opinion to a peer (78%), and half (50%) reported that they are comfortable expressing an opinion to an older person (see Figure 66). Gender and cohort differences were significant for both: males were more comfortable expressing an opinion than females, and young adults were more comfortable expressing an opinion than adolescents. For both indicators, young men were the most comfortable and adolescent girls were the least comfortable.

Between Round 2 and endline, adolescent boys (63% to 83%), young women (52% to 78%) and young men (58% to 96%) saw significant increases in their ability to express an opinion to a peer (see Figure 67) However, adolescent girls' ability to express an opinion to a peer was unchanged over time. Young adults, but not adolescents, also saw increases in their ability to express an opinion to an older person (43% to 59%) (see Figure 68).

A minority of young people reported on the endline survey that they have a great deal of say in how much education they get (28%) and when to marry (16%) (see Figure 69). Gender differences were highly significant: young males were twice as likely as young females to report a great deal of say in education (40% versus 19%). They were more than four times as likely to report a great deal of say over when to marry (26% versus 6%), yet rates remain very low for both genders.

A minority (21%) of young people reported on the endline survey that they had ever spoken with others about a serious community problem (see Figure 70). For adolescents, gender differences were significant – with girls twice as likely as boys to have spoken with others about a problem (26% versus 13%). In aggregate, 11% of young people, with no differences between groups, reported that they had ever taken action with others about a serious community problem.

During qualitative interviews, there were marked gender differences in terms of whether young people were able and willing to speak up for what they want. There were even larger differences in terms of whether they were heard. Girls and young women had the strongest opinions

Figure 66: Proportion of young people comfortable expressing an opinion (by gender and cohort)

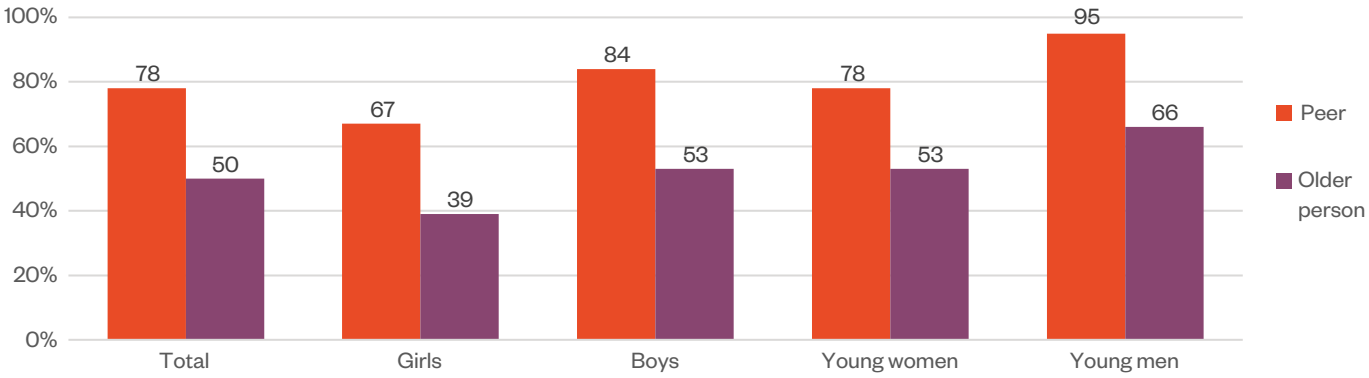


Figure 67: Change in young people's ability to express an opinion to a peer between Round 2 and endline

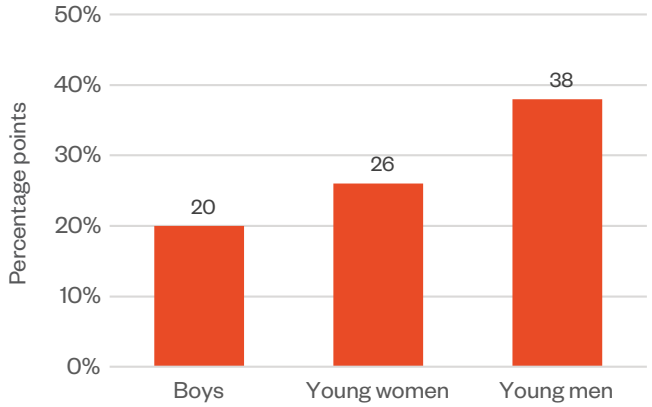


Figure 68: Change in young adults' ability to express an opinion to an older person between Round 2 and endline

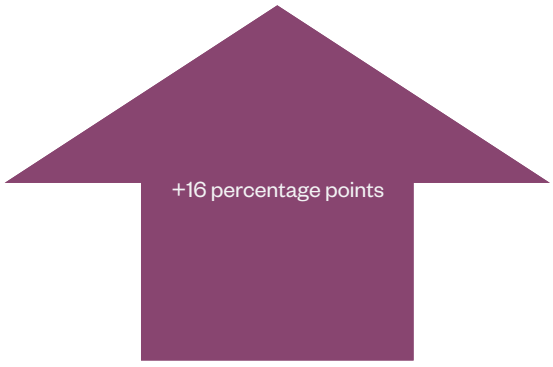
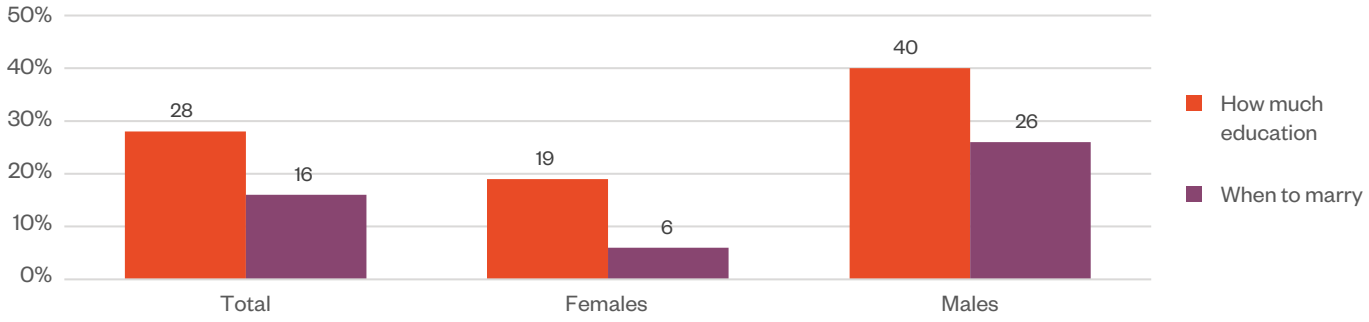


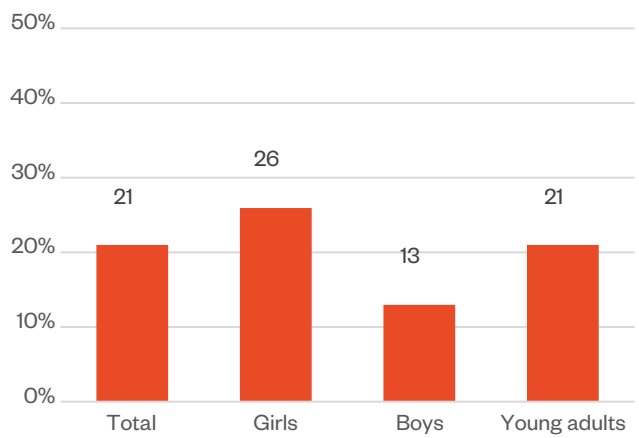
Figure 69: Proportion of young people reporting a great deal of say in decisions (by gender)



about staying in school and delaying marriage. A 26-year-old young woman stated, '*In our culture, there is no girl who wants marriage*.' That said, only a minority of young females felt that they could express these opinions to their parents and elders. Most reported that they stayed silent because they knew they would not be heard – and because speaking up risks violence. A 17-year-old girl, who married at age 15, recalled, '*I preferred to stay silent*.' A 20-year-old young woman, who married at 16, reported that she had tried to protest, telling her parents and future husband that she was not interested in marriage. Then, she added, *'I was beaten by my father, mother, brother and husband*.' Boys and young men, on the other hand, rarely reported difficulty in expressing their opinions to anyone. Indeed, most reported that they were willing to risk conflict with peers, and quite a few reported that they felt free to ignore their parents' demands. Parents noted that young males' disobedience is starting to stress families and communities. A father stated, '*Boys have started misbehaving and disobeying parents and other elders, and this is causing conflicts between families*.'

Also during qualitative interviews, narratives about decision-making almost universally revolved around young females' lack of agency over their own lives. Unmarried girls and young women are not allowed to have any say in decisions about schooling or marriage – and married girls and young women are not even allowed to leave home without permission. A 15-year-old boy in a group discussion, when asked about the main differences between girls and boys, replied, *'In our culture, being a boy is more fortunate than being a girl, because girls do not have the right to decide on their marriage, education, and other things*.' A 16-year-old boy in the same group agreed, and added, *'It is boys and men who decide everything inside and outside the home*.' A mother noted that although unmarried girls are often allowed to decide how they sequence their chores and if they will do chores alongside friends, this relative freedom ends at marriage, saying: '*After marriage, the wife is expected to do what her husband tells her to do. There is no such thing as her deciding things on her own*.'

Figure 70: Proportion of young people who have ever spoken with others about a serious community problem



Although several young people (females and males alike) reported that they participate in dagu, a traditional Afar means of communication, opportunities for other forms of participation are largely non-existent in Afar study sites. No young people, when asked directly, reported that they volunteered in the community, were members of a local organisation (other than the fiema, for young males), or were politically engaged. A 17-year-old boy, when asked if he follows politics, replied '*I haven't ever participated in any political activity*.' An 18-year-old young woman, when asked what she knew about the Ethiopian government, replied, '*I don't know anything about the government*.' Interviews with caregivers suggested that young people's lack of engagement is more cultural than age-related. A father, when asked if he talks about politics with his son, replied, '*I think politics is when government officials talk to the people about dismantling the woreda or the kebele. I prefer not to talk about politics, so I never discuss it with him*.'

Economic empowerment

Household economic status and access to social protection

The endline survey asked young people whether their household owns 16 different types of assets, as a way of gauging household poverty. It found that the average household owned only 3 (most often a mobile phone, mattress, and solar light)(see Figure 71). Gender and, for males, cohort differences were significant. Girls and young women (2.7/16), most of whom were married, lived in households with fewer assets than boys (3.1/16) and young men (3.8/16), because recently married couples have had less time to accumulate assets, and because the beneficiary registers of Ethiopia's flagship social protection programme, the PSNP (see below), are not regularly updated.

Although nearly half of young people (48%) reported that their household had ever received support from the PSNP, it was rare (7%) for them to report that their households were receiving PSNP support at the time of the endline survey. Cohort differences were significant, with adolescents (9%) three times more likely to report current receipt than young adults (3%) (see Figure 72). Young people were also very unlikely (7%) to report that their household had received emergency aid (for drought or conflict) in the past 3 years.

During qualitative interviews, nearly all respondents reported that local livelihoods continue to revolve around livestock (camels, cattle and goats). A key informant explained, '*All people who live in this kebele are pastoralist. Living relies on herding cattle so that people do not think about other job opportunities except herding cattle*.' That said, it was not uncommon for young people and adults to note that households have supplemented their incomes in recent years by selling charcoal and firewood, and with remittances earned by migrants. A mother stated, '*There are also people who live by selling charcoal and firewood*.' A *kebele* chairperson noted, '*The youths are sending money to their families… Many are motivated to migrate to the Arab countries*.'

Respondents universally agreed that households are having to supplement their livelihoods because of climate change – and the associated spread of epidemics and invasive plants. A father explained:

> *Because of climate change, our livelihood has declined over time. Because of climate change, rain shortage becomes common and consequently recurrent drought occurs, and most of our cattle died because of the drought and related epidemics. Besides, since five or six years ago, various new weeds have emerged and invaded our locality.*

An 18-year-old young mother noted that pastoralism is no longer able to guarantee households' survival needs, saying, '*This drought caused people to be incapable of affording food for their families and other necessary things for a living*.'

Recurrent conflict has further stressed local livelihoods. A father stated that the community cannot sell livestock or buy food during times of conflict:

> *When conflict happens between the Afar and the neighbouring Oromo or Amhara men, the road will be closed to and from the marketplace in their provinces, so we suffer a lot because of lack of markets.*

Another father added that households can no longer access traditional grazing lands, explaining that, '*We used to cross the border to Amhara when there is no grass for grazing here. But now, we cannot go there because of the war against the Amhara militants* [Fano].'

Figure 71: Household assets, on an index of 16 (by gender and cohort)

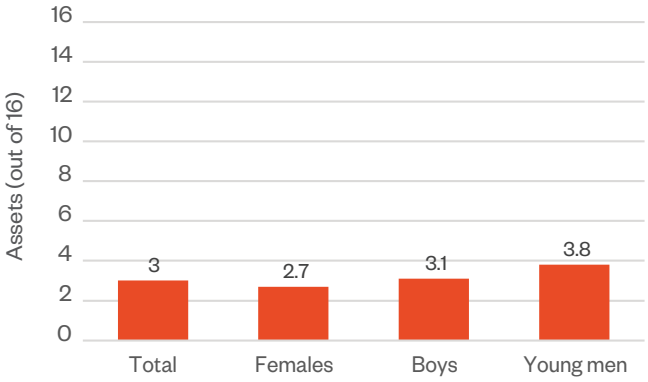
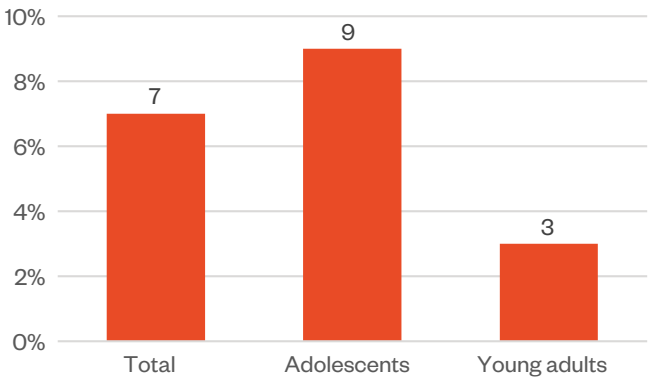


Figure 72: Proportion of young people reporting that their household is currently receiving PSNP (by cohort)



Respondents universally agreed that access to social protection has been almost entirely eliminated in recent years, despite recurrent drought and increased food insecurity. A father stated, '*Previously, there was food aid that was important for us. That is now discontinued.*' A mother agreed, '*We are not able to get food aid.*' Although a few respondents reported that access to social protection had dried up because of the conflict that started in Tigray in 2020, as government spending priorities shifted, most blamed the corruption of local officials. A 24-year-old young man explained:

> *The officials have agreement with the traders. The government officials take money from the businesspeople. Then they transfer the food aid to the businesspeople... The officials don't care about what the people say. They have the power to decide.*

Several adults added that access to informal social protection has also declined in recent years, because family no longer have enough to share. An older woman explained how, '*In the past, clan members used to assist each other. But, nowadays, everyone hasn't enough for himself let alone to help others. All of them are facing shortage.*'

Occupational aspirations

The endline survey found that young people's occupational aspirations vary by gender and age. Reflecting their greater odds of being enrolled in school, adolescent boys (47%) were more likely than adolescent girls (28%), young men (20%) and young women (12%) to aspire to skilled or professional work (which is only available in *woreda* towns in any case) (see Figure 73). Young women were disproportionately likely to aspire to retail work (38%), while young men were more likely to aspire to work in agriculture (33%). For young females, marriage shapes aspirations. For example, although 33% of never-married girls and young women aspire to skilled or professional work, only 14% of those who have been married do so.

Young people's occupational aspirations have significantly declined over time. At Round 2, 45% of the panel sample aspired to skilled or professional work; at endline, this had fallen to 30% (see Figure 74).

During qualitative interviews, young people's occupational aspirations were better aligned with local realities than survey results might suggest. Although a few adolescent boys stated that they wished to have professional or salaried work, most young males spoke only of wanting to have large herds of livestock. A 17-year-old boy stated, '*What I wish is to have many cattle and to be rich in cattle.*' Girls and young women, while also aspiring to have and to trade many goats, often professed wanting to have a retail job on the side. A 24-year-old young woman reported:

> *I would work in petty trading like selling coffee, sugar and so on. There are people who sell coffee and sugar in Komame* [the woreda town]. *There are also women who have cafes in which they sell food... I believe I can do these things.*

Girls and young women sometimes spoke of wishing to migrate, primarily to Saudi Arabia. A 21-year-old young woman recalled, '*I was planning to go to Jeddah... I heard of girls who went there and were able to build houses. That was the reason why I was interested to go for work.*'

Livelihoods and paid work

On the endline survey, young people were unlikely to report having had paid work in the past year (9%) or past week (7%) (see Figure 75). Gender and cohort differences were significant, with young men far more likely to have worked for pay in the past year (25%) and past week (17%) than all other groups. Adolescent girls (3%) were the least likely to have had paid work. Young females' limited access to

Figure 73: Young people's occupational aspirations (by gender and cohort)

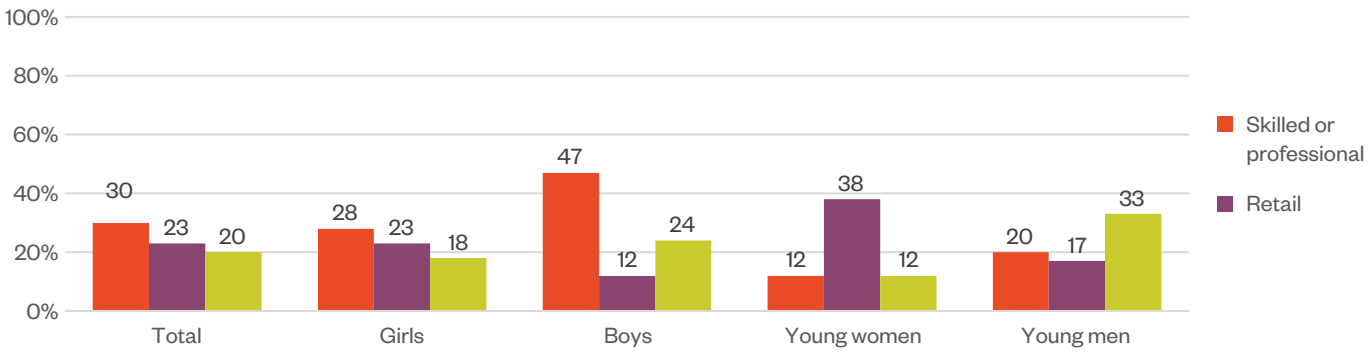


Figure 74: Change in whether young people aspire to skilled or professional work, between Round 2 and endline

paid work is primarily due to their time poverty. Although 77% of young people (with no differences between groups) reported that they believe women ought to have equal access to paid work, young females reported that they spend an average of five hours each day collecting water for their household.

During individual and group interviews, most respondents reported that young people's access to paid work – outside of raising and selling livestock – is extremely limited. A 17-year-old boy, when asked if he had a paid job, replied, '*What kind of job you are talking about*? I don't have any job. I am a herdsman.' A key informant, when asked what paid work is available to young people in her community, similarly answered:

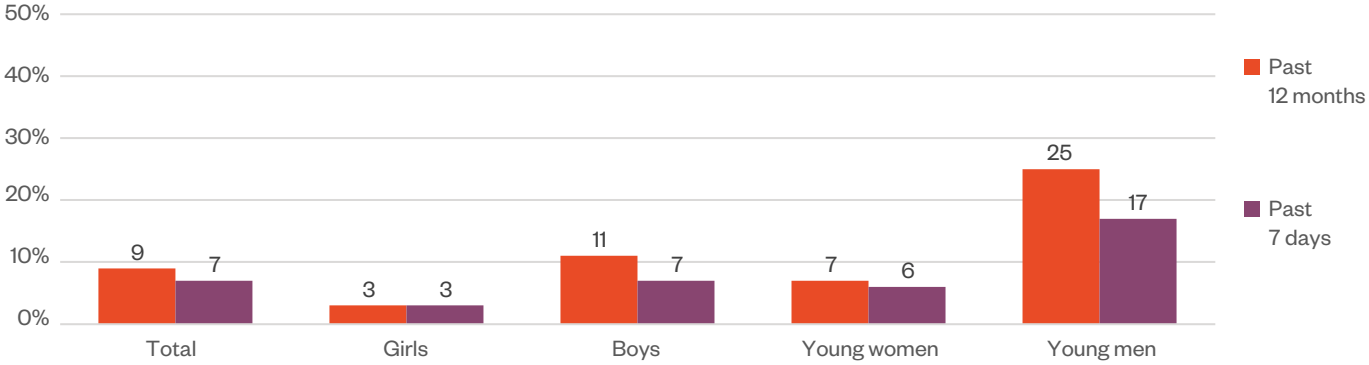
> *What type of work you are talking about? Are you joking? Adolescents in this kebele only know herding cattle. They know nothing about job opportunities, what sort of work is possible, how to work, etc. They are living just how their grandparents were living.*

That said, some respondents in more central communities did report engaging in paid work. A few boys and young men reported engaging in daily labour or working as guards for a local farm. A 24-year-old young man stated, '*I was working on construction of houses. I was working in building houses using blocks*.' Some young women reported selling charcoal and engaging in petty trade. A 23-year-old young woman recalled, '*My friend and I sold firewood, bought cigarettes, and sold them.*'

Respondents agreed that young males' access to paid work is far better than young females', due both to restrictions on females' mobility and their time poverty. A father stated, '*Girls don't have the opportunity to generate income. Even they don't have the freedom to get out of the home and engage in any other job*.' A 24-year-old young man clarified that the issue is not that young females are not allowed to leave home, but rather that they are only allowed to leave home to meet their family's needs: '*Girls go far. They travel for 3 hours to get water and then 3 hours to return home*.' A 22-year-old young man noted that young brides have even less access to paid work than their unmarried peers, because '*husbands do not allow their wives to work*'.

Migration, respondents noted, opens doors for young females to undertake paid work. This has become more common in recent years as drought has devastated households' livelihoods, despite widespread knowledge that, as one father stated, '*they* [girls] *may get sick on the journey and they can die while they are travelling*'. A key informant stated, '*Girls started migrating to Saudi Arabia and Djibouti looking for jobs*.' A *kebele* chairperson elaborated, '*Girls who are above the age of 15 migrate… They send back money to their family… They travel through brokers*.' Girls and young women commented that although they do migrate for economic reasons, they also use migration to escape an unwanted and violent marriage. A 20-year-old young woman explained that migration affords young females not only an income, but freedom: '*She can go anywhere she likes. There is no one to ask for permission, and they are free from the control of the husband.*'

Figure 75: Proportion of young people with paid work in the past year and past week (by gender and cohort)



Access to assets

As the economy in the GAGE study sites in Afar primarily revolves around livestock, it was unusual for young people to report having had control over money in the past year; in aggregate, only 18% reported doing so (see Figure 76). Gender and cohort differences were significant and reflect young men's greater responsibility for selling livestock and purchasing household needs. Nearly half of young men (47%) reported that they had had control over money in the past year, compared to 17% of adolescent boys, 13% of young women and 9% of adolescent girls.

Although 81% of young people reported that they believe that women and girls ought to have savings for the future, the endline survey found that young females (12%) – whose access to money is limited by their poor access to paid work and their limited input into decision-making – were only half as likely as young males (25%) to have any savings (see Figure 77).

In aggregate, 29% of young people reported that they would be able to take out a loan (either by themselves or with a co-signer) should they need one (see Figure 78). Cohort differences were significant, with young adults (38%) more likely to report access to credit than adolescents (23%).

Despite their putative access to credit, the endline survey found that it was very rare for young people to have taken out a loan (Figure 79). Gender and cohort differences were significant: young men (15%) and adolescent boys (8%) were far more likely to have accessed credit than young women (5%) and adolescent girls (1%).

During individual and group interviews, participants in qualitative research reported that most young people do have assets, but they are largely in the form of livestock rather than cash. With the caveat that livestock holdings are much reduced due to drought, young females and young males reported having their own goats (and sometimes their own cattle), gifted to them by their parents when they were quite young, and being allowed to make decisions about whether and when to sell their animals and what to do with the proceeds. An 18-year-old married young woman stated that her livestock stays with her natal family: '*I have goats and 2 cattle in my mother's house. My father gave me the cattle.*' A 19-year-old married young woman reported that she can sell her animals to buy what she needs, albeit after first discussing it with her husband: '*I will do whatever I want. If I need clothes, I can buy them, or if I need food, I can buy it.*'

Unsurprisingly, given that '*people in this locality do not know about banks*' (male community key informant), narratives about saving and borrowing also revolved around livestock. Respondents reported that they save for the future by building their herds, and that loans are usually used to invest in purchasing more animals. In contrast to the survey findings, respondents in qualitative research reported that some females have better access to opportunities to save and borrow because of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that (temporarily) organise girls and women into self-help groups. An 18-year-old married young woman reported that she had joined such a group and then used her loan to purchase and fatten shoats:

> *I got a loan from the group… I showed them the 2 sheep and 3 goats I bought with the money… Then we did the business with my husband and got a profit of 4,000 birr. Then I repaid the principal amount only.*

She then noted that the group had dissolved, because other members were not able to repay their loans.

Figure 76: Proportion of young people who had control over money in the past year (by gender and cohort)

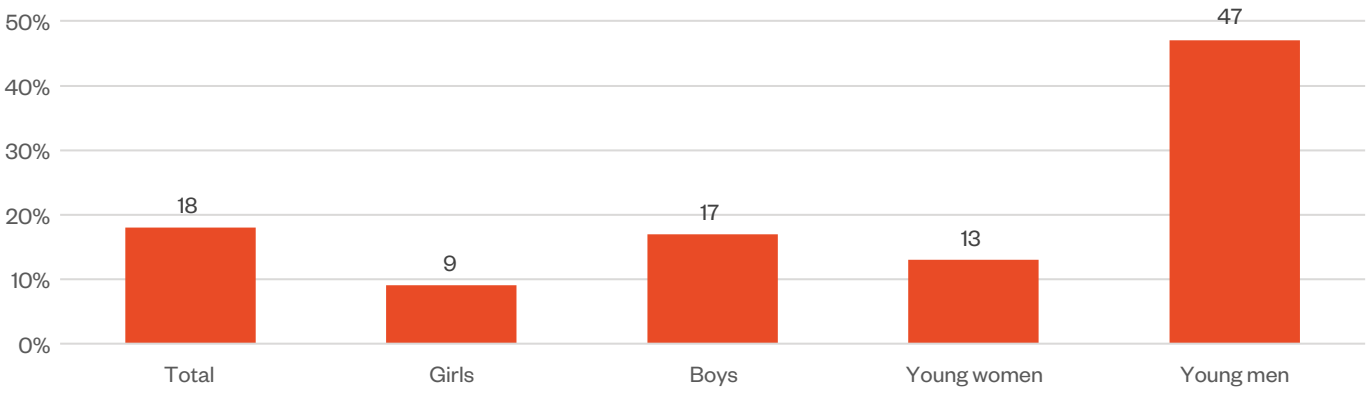


Figure 77: Proportion of young people with savings (by gender)

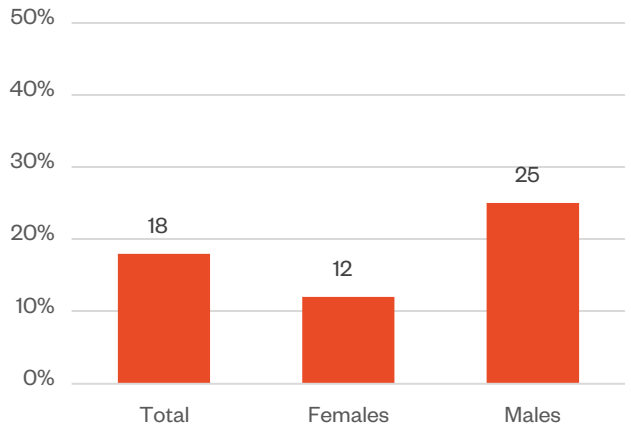


Figure 78: Proportion of young people able to take out a loan, by themselves or with a co-signer (by cohort)

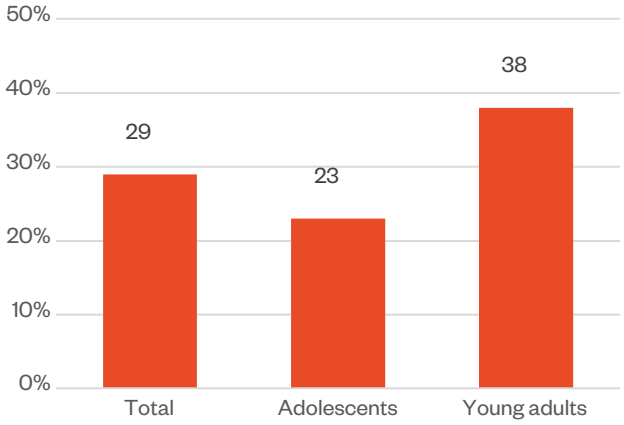
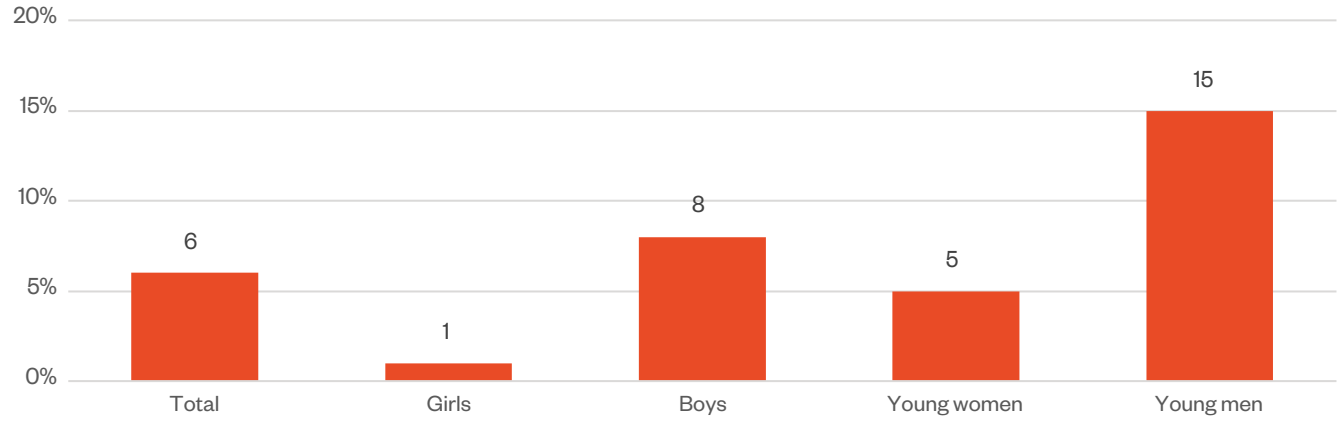


Figure 79: Proportion of young people who have ever taken out a loan (by gender and cohort)



An Afar adolescent girl in her village, Afar © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2025

Conclusions and implications

GAGE endline research underscores that young people living in Hari Rasu, Afar, face many risks, and are afforded relatively few opportunities. Those risks and opportunities vary based on gender, age, marital status, and place of residence (whether young people live in remote or more central communities). That said, because young people's expectations about their lives are shaped by pastoral realities, in which meeting survival needs is time-consuming and difficult, many young people have only limited awareness that they are being left behind as Ethiopia works to become a middle-income country.

Although most young people profess high educational aspirations, many have never been to school and most drop out well before completing primary school. Respondents reported that this is because communities in more remote locations have no schools, because teacher absenteeism is rampant, and because young people's contributions to household survival – herding, and collecting water – preclude regular attendance, especially for girls. This was further reflected in the panel data, which found that at endline, only females' aspirations and girls' enrolment have fallen since Round 2. Climate change has further limited access to education in recent years, as the search for water (and pasture) has become more time-consuming for more of the year.

Although the endline survey found that nearly all young people live in food-secure households and are in good health, qualitative research found that this is due to their extremely low expectations. With climate change having devastated livestock holdings, diets have shifted from dairy products to grains, delaying young people's growth and physical maturation. It has also resulted in increased cases of malaria and water-borne diseases, in a context where health services are limited.

A young mother posing for a family photo with her children and in-laws © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2025

Young people's sexual and reproductive health is also at risk. Puberty information comes mostly from friends. Indeed, girls often hide the fact that they are menstruating from their parents to avoid being seen as ready for marriage. Menstrual health management is a challenge, given the lack of water and period products. Sexual debut is early, and patterns are shifting as premarital sex becomes more common in a context where child marriage for girls remains the norm. Knowledge of contraception is growing significantly over time, but uptake is rare within marriage, due to norms that prioritise fertility. Early motherhood is frequent, but few young mothers get antenatal care or deliver in a facility.

Young people's awareness of violence is also shaped by their lived realities. Corporal punishment at home and at school, although declining over time as young people move through adolescence and into young adulthood, is widely accepted as necessary to child-rearing. Peer violence, especially among young males and especially within the context of the fiema, is not only common, but is also expected and normalised – despite declines over time related to young people's maturity. By contrast, sexual violence, reported as rare on the survey, has increased in recent years, with young females at especially high risk at cultural dances (sadah).

Almost all girls undergo FGM, although due to communities' improved understanding of the risks, infibulation is starting to be replaced by milder types. Panel data shows that only young females, and not young males, have improved their knowledge about FGM over time. Child marriage remains the norm and often takes place soon after parents become aware that their daughter has reached menarche. Marriage partners are almost always cousins and girls, most of whom would prefer to marry as adults, have no say into when or who they marry (unless they flee the community). Among young males, but not

A young woman preparing food © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2025

young females, knowledge of the marriage law is improving over time. Although panel data indicates that marital violence is becoming less acceptable over time, it remains widely accepted and under-reported – in part because traditional justice mechanisms focus on reconciliation, rather than justice for survivors.

Survey tools designed to capture symptoms of adverse mental health found that young people are faring well, because most focus on their survival needs rather than their feelings. However, young females taking part in qualitative research reported being terrified and sad about marriage. Indeed, adults noted that some girls attempt suicide to avoid or end an unwanted or violent marriage. In addition, although unmarried adolescent girls and unmarried and married young males reported access to trusted adults and peers, married young females reported that they had only limited access to friends and family, due to tight restrictions imposed on them by their husband. Panel data further revealed that although young people were more likely to report having a trusted friend at endline, there was a significant gender gap in favour of males.

Boys and young men see themselves as agents and feel in control of their own lives, but this is not the case for girls and young women, who universally report that they have almost no input into the decisions that shape their lives. Young females' agency is further limited by marriage, as husbands control wives more than parents control daughters. Panel data further highlighted girls' disadvantage, as boys – and not girls – saw improvement since Round 2 in terms of their ability to express an opinion to a peer.

Pastoralist identities – if not pastoralist livelihoods – remain strong in the GAGE study sites. Although climate change and invasive species are leading to widespread livestock deaths, few other opportunities for work have emerged, due to poor infrastructure and lack of water. This was further reflected in the panel data, which showed significant declines in the proportion of young people with professional aspirations at endline. Young females face additional barriers, as most spend their days engaged in domestic work (including collecting water). Few young people have assets (outside of livestock), have savings, or have access to credit. In addition, although drought has become more common and more widespread, access to social protection has plummeted in recent years.

Based on our endline research, we suggest the following priority actions to better support Afar young people's transitions through adolescence and into young adulthood:

- **To transform the broader lives of young people and their families and communities**, the government and its development partners should invest in improved water access points, including at schools. These should provide potable water as well as water for livestock, and should be sustainable in the face of limited maintenance.

- **To improve young people's access to quality education:**
  - Step up awareness-raising about the importance of education (and alternative livelihoods), including for those with disabilities, focusing on the fact that the future of pastoralism is limited, given climate change.
  - Promote active outreach by teachers and *kebele* leaders to parents of girls to ensure that girls are enrolled in school and regularly attending.
  - Build more schools, providing more grades of education in more communities, working to ensure that these are well-staffed and have drinking water for students and teachers.
  - Invest in a cadre of Afar teachers, providing free education through to university level in exchange for years of service in remote locations, and consider higher incentives for females to encourage families to invest in their daughters' education.
  - Ensure that *woreda* officials regularly monitor teacher attendance and motivate teachers through opportunities for training and peer networking.

- **To improve young people's physical health:**
  - Step up food aid, ensuring that food reaches those who need it.
  - Ensure that health centres and health posts are well-staffed and well-supplied, including with water.
  - Invest in a cadre of Afar health extension workers, providing incentives to young people (especially young females) and their families to provide service to their communities.
  - Expand access to health insurance or further subsidise health care (depending on context), including medication and ambulances.
  - Provide young people with school- and community-based education on puberty, including menstruation and how to make safe and sustainable period products.
  - Step up awareness-raising (at school and in the community) about how to prevent HIV, and link this

with improved access to condoms, including at marketplaces, which many young people visit.
- Target young people and their broader communities with education about the benefits (for babies, mothers and families) of delayed, spaced and limited pregnancies. Work with religious leaders to counter beliefs that contraception contravenes Islamic law, with health extension workers (especially those who are Afar) to disseminate health messages, and with classroom and club-based programming to reach students. Tailor programming to address the concerns of females and males.

- **To reduce young people's exposure to violence:**
  - Work to raise young people's awareness (at school and in the community) about their right to bodily integrity and how to access one-stop centres, with a particular focus on girls, who are less likely to benefit from school-based awareness-raising sessions due to their lower enrolment rates.
  - Provide parents with parenting education courses that address adolescent development and offer non-violent discipline strategies.
  - Ensure that young people have an anonymous way to report teacher violence and that the ban on corporal punishment at school is enforced, including through regular visits by *woreda* education officials.
  - Adapt *sadah* so that young people continue to have access to this cultural tradition, but young females are kept safer – working to have separate-sex dances.
  - Engage with the cultural social structure known as fiemas and encourage them to monitor the behaviour of boys and young men, to ensure that young males do not pressure young females into sex, and are held accountable whenever they do. Pair this with stepped-up efforts on the part of community and clan elders to see that offenders are sanctioned by the whole community.
  - Work towards integrating traditional and official justice mechanisms, ensuring that the rights of survivors are prioritised.
  - Continue working for an end to infibulation, using religious and health messaging, with the longer-term goal of eliminating FGM entirely. Ensure that young people are reached at school (in the classroom and through clubs), that community-based programming is inclusive of females and males, and that messages address not only risks but perceived benefits.
  - Work to eliminate child marriage and reduce the age gaps between partners.

- **To improve young people's psychosocial well-being and voice and agency:**
  - Work to eliminate child marriage by exposing adolescent girls to female role models through schools, talks by health extension workers, and radio programme messaging.
  - Work to raise awareness, among parents and husbands, that girls and young women need time to rest and to socialise, and should be allowed input into the decisions that shape their days and lives.
  - Organise school- and community-based groups for young females, especially those who are married, so that they can spend time with one another and benefit from peer support.

- **To help young people become economically empowered:**
  - Invest in creating jobs for young people (including by providing them with credit to start their own small businesses) that are sustainable in the face of climate change and, especially for young females, can be undertaken alongside domestic responsibilities.
  - Establish quotas for Afar female high school graduates to receive free tertiary education and training to become teachers and health extension workers.
  - Raise awareness, among young people and their caregivers, about how to make migration safer by using only legal channels.
  - Renew investments in the PSNP, using the public works component to tackle the invasive weeds that are impacting livestock health and household livelihoods in Afar.

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A young woman carrying her baby, Afar © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2025

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About GAGE

Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) is a decade-long (2016-2026) longitudinal research programme generating evidence on what works to transform the lives of adolescent girls in the Global South. Visit www.gage.odi.org for more information.

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