

Young people's education: findings from GAGE multi-country longitudinal evidence

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Key messages: education and learning

1. **Young people value education** – but in GAGE focal countries, most face multiple and intersecting barriers that prevent them from achieving their educational goals.
2. **Adolescents' access to education plunges as they grow up**, due to a confluence of poverty, social norms, and a lack of servicing.
3. **Only a minority of young people complete secondary education.**
4. **An even smaller minority progress on to post-secondary education**, which is expensive and which typically requires high exam scores that young people are unprepared to earn given quality deficits at the primary and secondary levels.
5. **Aggregated figures risk obscuring how little education some young people get.**
6. **Learning outcomes are low** across contexts, even given years of schooling, due to overcrowding, absenteeism (of teachers and students) and rote pedagogies not aimed at fostering understanding.
7. **Violence from teachers declines as young people grow up**, but some adolescents (especially boys) are still at risk in late adolescence, because teachers believe physical violence is needed to control their classrooms.
8. **Disability limits access to quality education** – schools (and individual classrooms and toilets within schools) are physically inaccessible, teachers are not trained on how to adapt pedagogies, specialised learning materials (e.g. books in Braille) are in short supply, and disability-related stigma keeps teachers' expectations low and drives bullying and exclusion by peers.
9. **Marriage effectively eliminates girls' access** to education; young brides are expected to become homemakers.
10. **Conflict can undermine access to education for generations** due to school closures and destruction of educational infrastructure and teaching materials – and compounded by educational budgets diverted for war. When the educational and occupational trajectories of cohorts of affected young people are derailed, many are unable to secure the economic resources necessary for themselves (and their children) to re-enter these pathways.

Introduction

Education is among the most consistently documented pathways out of poverty, and eradicating poverty is foundational to the 2024 Pact for the Future,¹ yet aggregate enrolment data – the figures most used in policy discussions – obscures as much as it reveals. To be meaningful, enrolment figures must be disaggregated and progression through grade levels must be coupled with attention to learning outcomes. If the international community is to ensure that all young people are supported to develop their full potential, more attention must be paid to meeting the needs of those most at risk of being left behind, including the poorest young people, those with disabilities, those impacted by conflict and forced displacement, and girls and young women who married as children.



Adolescent boys in the classroom,
Nuwakot, Nepal © Nathalie Bertrams/
GAGE 2026

The Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) research programme, funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), has generated longitudinal, mixed-methods evidence on the educational experiences of adolescents and young adults across Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Jordan, Lebanon, Nepal and Palestine (Gaza). By combining large-scale surveys with in-depth qualitative research, GAGE captures not just enrolment and progression rates, but the circumstances that shape them – and how those circumstances change as girls and boys move through adolescence and into early adulthood.

This product primarily draws on GAGE's endline data, collected in 2024 and 2025, to examine young people's educational access, progression, and learning across the programme's six research contexts. To identify trends over time, it also includes some data from earlier data collection rounds. Aiming to identify not only who is being left behind, but the specific conditions through which educational disadvantage is produced and sustained, our findings are carefully disaggregated within contexts. We begin by introducing GAGE's conceptual framework, and sample and methodology. We then turn to research findings on young people's educational aspirations, school enrolment, grade progression, and learning outcomes. We conclude with cross-cutting recommendations aimed at supporting more young people to access education and master the skills they need for productive adulthood.

GAGE focus and conceptual framing

The GAGE research programme has generated mixed-methods, longitudinal evidence about the diverse experiences of adolescents and young adults living in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Paying careful attention to the interconnectedness of what we call the ‘3 Cs’ – capabilities, change strategies and contexts (see Figure 1) – GAGE has explored the opportunities and challenges facing young people as they transition through adolescence and into young adulthood. The programme has endeavoured to identify what works to support young

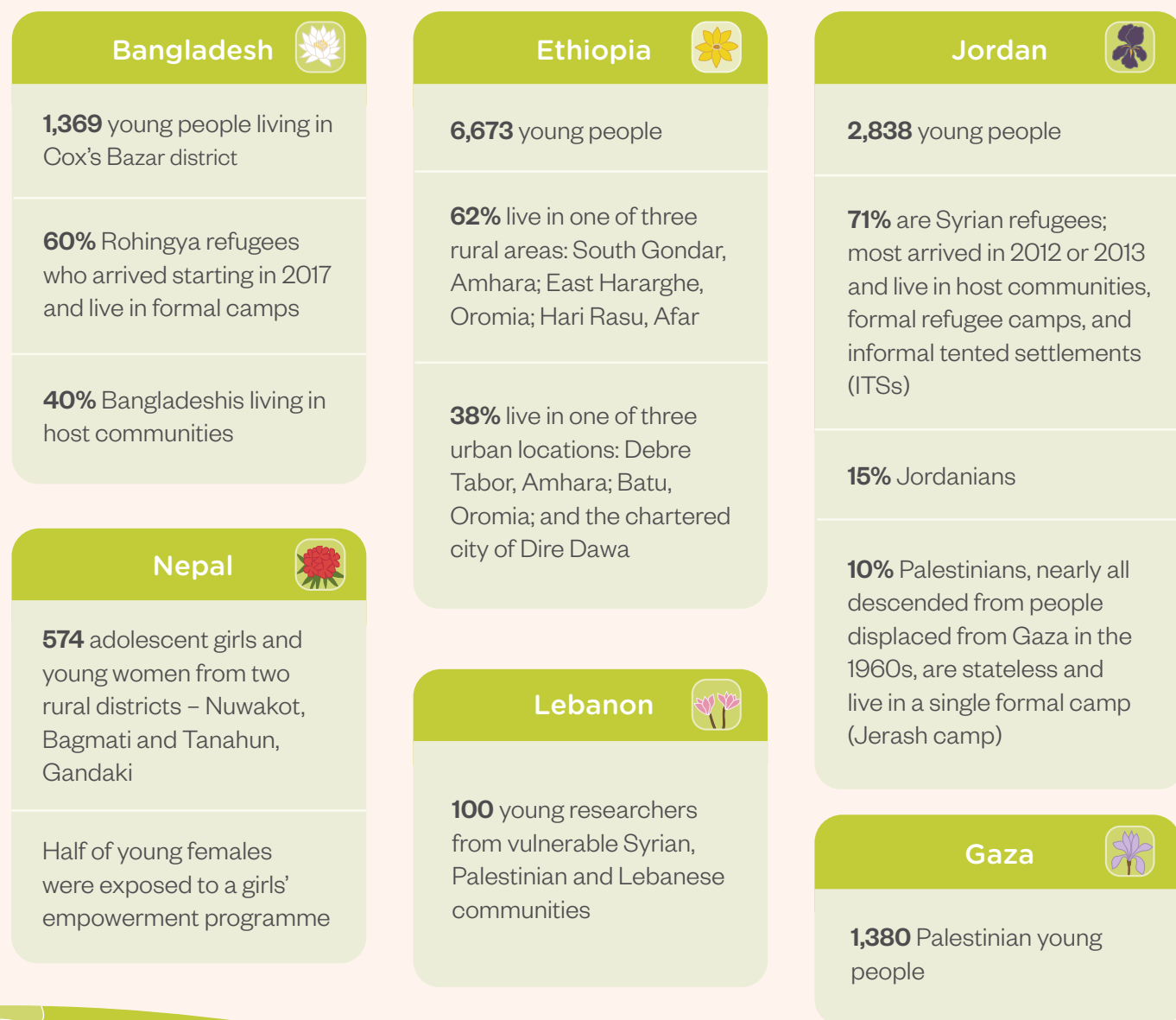
people to develop their full capabilities for education, physical health, bodily integrity and freedom from violence, psychosocial well-being, voice and agency and economic empowerment. Critically, GAGE research has included those young people who are most at risk of being left behind, including girls who are (or have been) married, young people who have been forcibly displaced by conflict, and young people with disabilities.

Figure 1: GAGE conceptual framework



GAGE sample and methodology

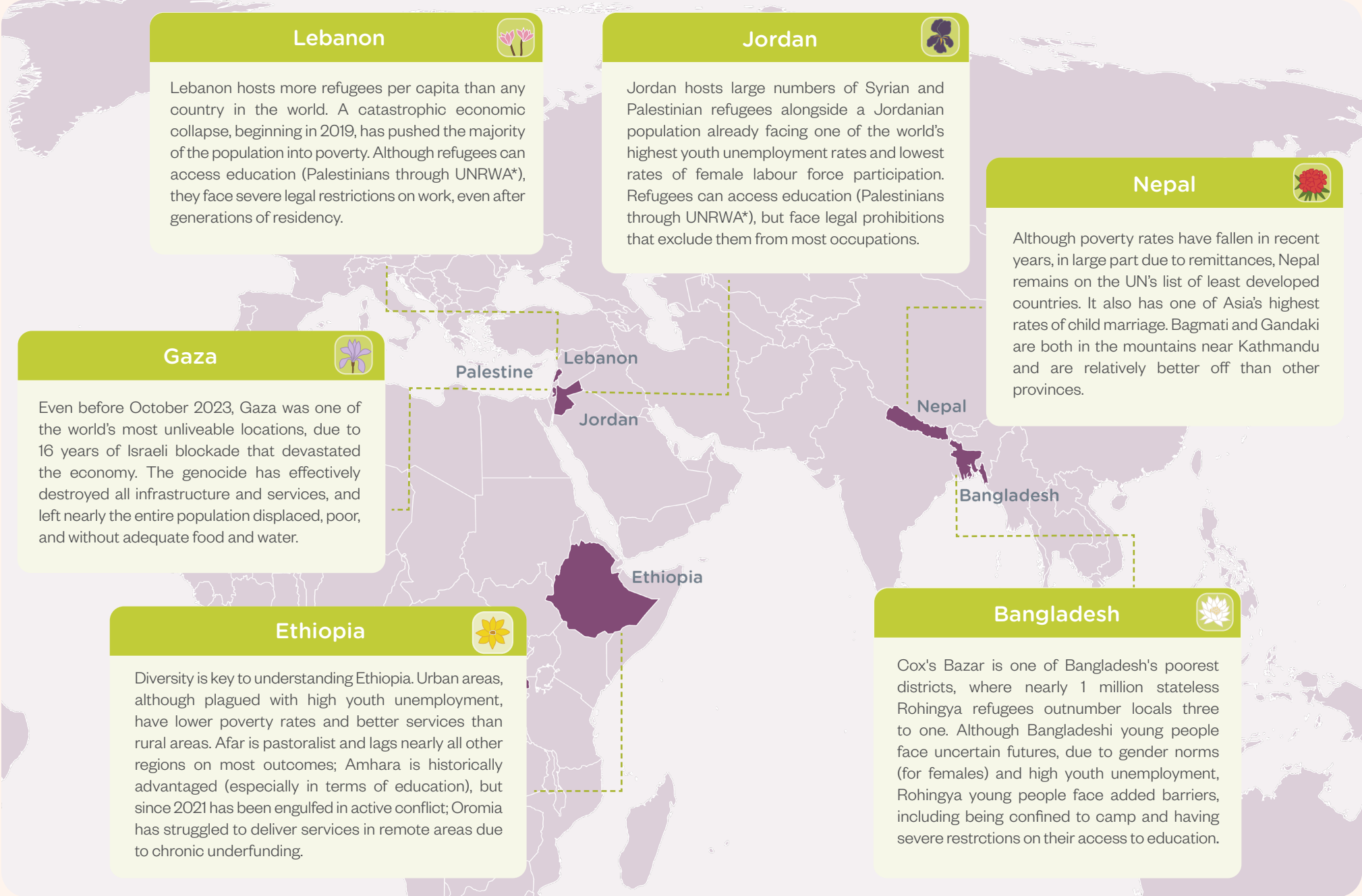
This brief primarily draws on endline data collected in 2024 and 2025, and highlights similarities and differences in findings across six countries: Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Jordan, Lebanon, Nepal and Palestine (Gaza) (see Figure 2).



Data from Bangladesh,² Ethiopia and Jordan is roughly analogous. Samples are large, include both females and males and two cohorts (a very young adolescent cohort aged 10–12 years at baseline, and called 'adolescents' in this product; and an older adolescent cohort aged 15–17 years at baseline and called 'young adults'), and used similar mixed-methods tools. In the three other contexts, the samples are differently shaped and the approach was tailored to understand specific aspects of adolescent well-being and empowerment programming. In Nepal, the sample is smaller and includes only females who were (mostly³) enrolled in grade 6 at baseline; in addition, the research was primarily focused on girls' education. In Lebanon, the sample is small and includes a single cohort (aged 15–19 at baseline) of vulnerable young people. Research was participatory, focused on experiences of forced displacement, and used photography and interview tools that young researchers helped develop. In Gaza, the sample includes three age cohorts (aged 10–14, 15–19, and 20–24 at baseline, in 2024) and tools were adapted to reflect experiences of active conflict.

2 GAGE has a second Bangladesh sample, in Chittagong and Sylhet Divisions, not used in this product. See: <https://gage.odl.org/growth-mindset-bangladesh/>
3 Some girls, mostly in the control sample, were enrolled in grades other than grade 6.

Figure 2: GAGE research locations



*The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

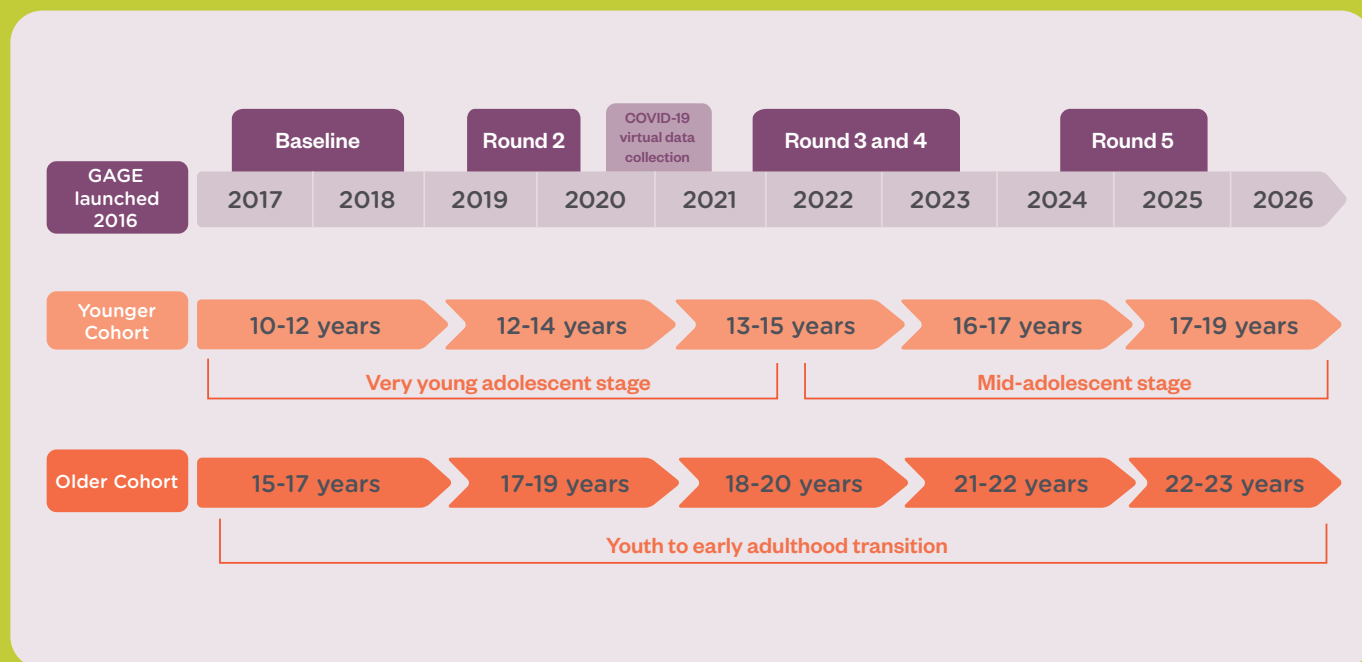
To capture change in young people's lives over time, this brief also includes some longitudinal data⁴ (see Figure 3). For Bangladesh (2019), Gaza (2024), and Jordan (2018–2019), comparisons are made to baseline.⁵ For Ethiopia, they are made to Round 2 (2019–2020).⁶ Where longitudinal data is presented, it includes only the young people who were sampled in both rounds – which, across contexts, is approximately 83% of the full baseline sample.

As noted, the GAGE programme uses mixed-methods research, predominantly face-to-face, but via phone if necessary.⁷ With the caveat that surveys were tailored to context, all include attention to educational aspirations, enrolment, grade progression, and violence at school.⁸ A subset of young people were selected to take part in individual and group interviews, during which we used a variety of interactive tools⁹ to explore young people's experiences with and beliefs about these same topics. Surveys and interviews were also conducted with young people's caregivers, and interviews were conducted with key informants at local and national levels.

The GAGE research design and tools were approved by ethics committees at ODI Global, George Washington University, and country-level bodies. Consent (written or verbal as appropriate) was obtained from caregivers, young people over 18 and married adolescents; written or 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.



Figure 3: GAGE timeline



⁴ Longitudinal data is not presented for Nepal, because most of the girls and young women who dropped out of school were lost to follow-up.

⁵ For a few indicators, baseline data is not available for Bangladesh and Jordan, and comparisons are instead made to midline data, which was collected after the Covid-19 pandemic ended, in 2022–2023.

⁶ We use Round 2 rather than baseline data because we added hundreds of new young people to the Ethiopia sample between baseline and Round 2.

⁷ Phone interviews were used in the early phases of the Covid-19 pandemic, when young people had migrated or been forcibly displaced, and when active conflict compromised the safety of researchers.

⁸ Surveys can be found here: <https://gage.odi.org/publications/?publication=knowledge-products&knowledge-products=survey-instruments>

⁹ Toolkits can be found here: <https://gage.odi.org/publications/?publication=knowledge-products&knowledge-products=methodological-toolkits>



Findings

Young people value education – but most face barriers to achieving their goals

Nearly all young people in the GAGE sample, regardless of identity and where they live, very much value education. In Ethiopia (77%), Nepal (76%), and Jordan (73%), approximately three-quarters of young people reported aspiring to pursue a university education at endline (see Figure 4).¹⁰

‘An uneducated person is like a person living in darkness.’

(17-year-old girl, Dire Dawa, Ethiopia)

‘If you want a good life, you have to study.’

(15-year-old Bangladeshi boy)

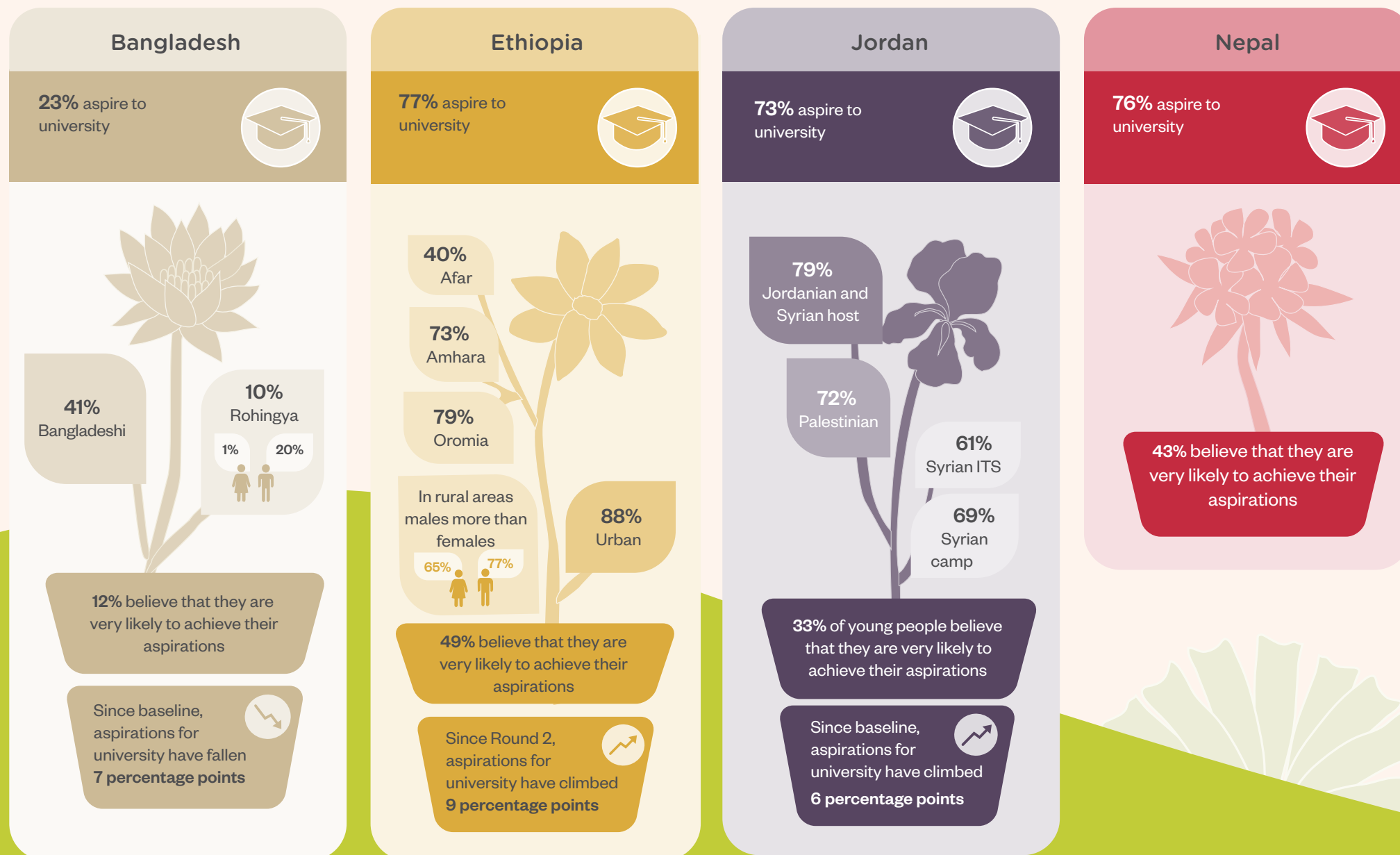
In some contexts, different groups of young people have highly varied educational aspirations. Variations primarily reflect reality – young people who have less access to education are less likely to want to complete secondary or post-secondary education. In Bangladesh, for example, only 10% of Rohingya young people, who have endured years of extreme restrictions on their access to education (see Box 1), aspire to complete a university education. This is compared to 41% of their Bangladeshi peers in Cox’s Bazar.

‘I don’t want to set a dream for myself and regret it in the future.’

(14-year-old Syrian boy, Jordan)

Although young people value education, they are generally well aware that they are unlikely to realise their educational aspirations. In none of the six contexts do even half of young people feel they are very likely to achieve their goals. Most explained that this is because education is too expensive, and because adult roles – including marriage (for girls) and work (for boys) – close off opportunities.

Figure 4: Proportion of young people who would like to pursue a university education



Box 1: Conflict can limit education for generations

The GAGE sample includes thousands of young people impacted by conflict and forced displacement. The immediate impacts of conflict on education are evident in Gaza and rural Amhara, Ethiopia, where active conflict has resulted in school closures that have left most young people without access to education. In Gaza, only 39% of young people had engaged in any form of learning activity between October 2023 (when the war broke out) and the autumn of 2025 (when endline data was collected); only 10% had had this opportunity in the year running from autumn 2024 to autumn 2025.

‘Fano militias ordered that schools should never be opened and threatened to punish teachers... The punishments include beating, killing and abduction for anyone who teaches against the order. Schools closed because of that.’

(Teacher, Amhara, Ethiopia)

In rural Amhara, parts of which have experienced conflict since 2021, enrolment fell 49 percentage points (pp) between baseline and endline – compared with 18 pp in Afar and 35 pp in Oromia and urban areas. In both locations, (older) adolescent boys¹¹ were more impacted than adolescent girls, because boys were more likely to try to find work to help support their family and because, in Amhara, many have been pressured into joining armed forces or militias.

‘I had to leave my education because of the situation... I had to start working... I never gave up on my dream to become a nurse... I am saving up money every month to collect the registration fees and register.’

(Palestinian young woman, Lebanon)



The longer-term impacts of conflict on education are visible in Bangladesh, Jordan and Lebanon. In Bangladesh, the government refuses to allow Rohingya children to use the Bangladeshi curriculum – out of fear that they will then develop skills to compete with Bangladeshis in the labour market. Indeed, although Rohingya children younger than age 15 were allowed non-formal education, provided by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), in the years immediately following displacement, adolescents aged 15 and over were prohibited from any form of education until 2023,¹² when the Myanmar curriculum was made available for students through grade 10.¹³

‘The schools became shelters... Many of my teachers were killed, everything is gone.’

(16-year-old girl, Gaza)

In Jordan, although the government and its partners have done a heroic job setting up double-shift schools to ensure that Syrian students have access to primary and secondary education, afternoon shifts for Syrians are shorter than morning shifts for Jordanians, and until 2023, Syrian and stateless Palestinian students were charged higher tuition fees than nationals at all tertiary institutions.¹⁴

In Lebanon, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) provides education to Palestinian students even at the secondary level,¹⁵ because government schools cannot handle more students. Syrian students have been disproportionately impacted by the collapse of public education, because they cannot afford private schools. At Lebanon’s single public university, Palestinian students are admitted only if seats are left over after Lebanese students are admitted; and Syrian refugees are charged higher tuition fees.

¹¹ In Gaza, there was no gender gap for adolescents under the age of 15.

¹² The curriculum was approved for use in 2020, but Covid-19 stopped deployment for more than two years.

¹³ Completion of grade 10 does not result in any certification – that is still years out.

¹⁴ See: <https://help.unhcr.org/jordan/en/helpful-services-unhcr/education-services-unhcr/>

¹⁵ In all other locations, UNRWA provides only primary/ basic education. In Lebanon, however, UNRWA recognises that government schools have never recovered from Lebanon’s own civil war and are not able to meet demand.

Adolescents' access to education plunges as they grow up

Across contexts, a large majority of adolescents were enrolled in education at baseline, but this was not the case at endline. In Jordan (51%), Ethiopia (44%) and Bangladesh (43%), only about half of adolescents were still enrolled at endline (see Figure 5).

In all study locations, adolescents' access to education is heavily dependent on where they live – and how that translates into whether school is affordable. In Ethiopia, for example, rural adolescents were less than half as likely to be enrolled as their peers in urban areas (32% versus 76%). This is largely because secondary schools are clustered in urban areas and therefore require either expensive transport or expensive boarding.

'Only those who have relatives there in the town or those who have well-to-do family having good income can go to secondary school.'
(17-year-old boy, Oromia, Ethiopia)



Young adolescent boys in Jordan © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2026

'Most students rely on private tutors who come to the house to help them prepare for exams.'

(20-year-old Syrian young woman, Jordan)

Nationality and ethnicity also shape adolescents' access to education, sometimes because of rigid rules that limit refugees' access (see Box 1), and other times because of variations in how groups value and can afford education. In Jordan, for example, Jordanian adolescents (72%) were more likely to be enrolled than their Palestinian (60%) and Syrian (45%) peers, in part because they are better able to afford the private tutors needed to pass secondary school exams.



Adolescents' access to education is also shaped by gender, with gender norms driving girls being pulled out of school to do household chores or for child marriage (see Box 2), and boys leaving school due to violence or to begin their role as breadwinner. The gender gap is largest among Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh. Because most girls are strictly confined to home upon menarche, only 8% of Rohingya adolescent girls were enrolled in a learning programme at endline.

In Nepal, most young females (81%) were enrolled in school at endline.¹⁶ This partly reflects girls' and

families' buy-in to education, and partly the reality that girls who left school were disproportionately likely to be lost to follow-up and are therefore not included in the endline sample. Enrolment was higher in Gandaki than Bagmati, and is shaped by households' socioeconomic status.

'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.'

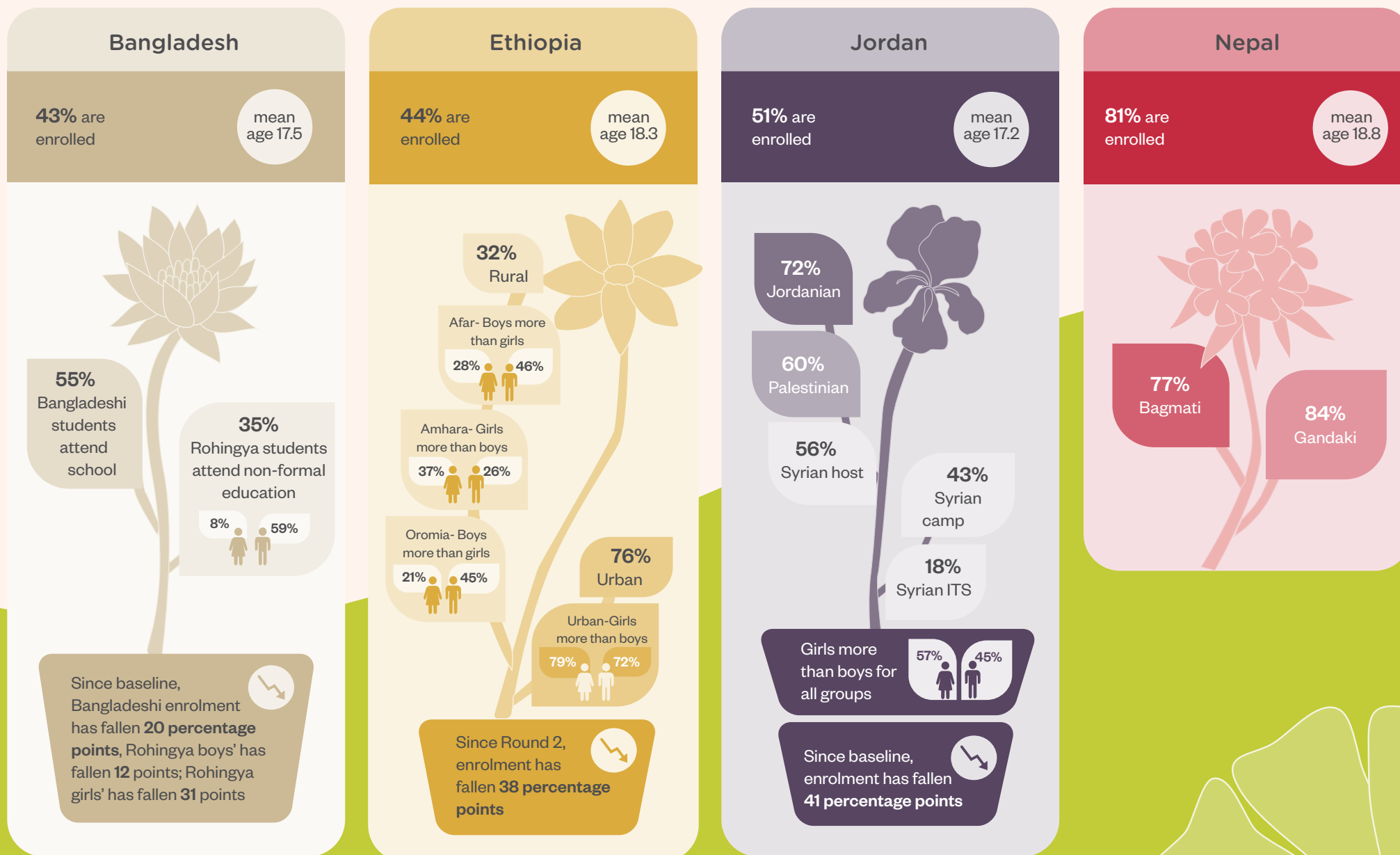
(Mother, Afar, Ethiopia)



Adolescent girls attending a learning centre in Bangladesh © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2026

16 Highlighting how unusual the sample is, of all girls and young women in the sample, 68% were enrolled in grades 11–12. This is nearly twice the national average (37%). See: https://giwmscdnone.gov.np/media/pdf_upload/Flash%201%20Report%202081%20Final_rn76ynj.pdf

Figure 5: Proportion of adolescents enrolled in education



Box 2: Marriage effectively eliminates adolescent girls' access to education

Across contexts, marriage typically marks the end of education for girls. Indeed, in Jordan, never-married adolescent girls were more than 10 times more likely than their ever-married peers to be enrolled at endline (65% versus 6%) (see Figure 6).

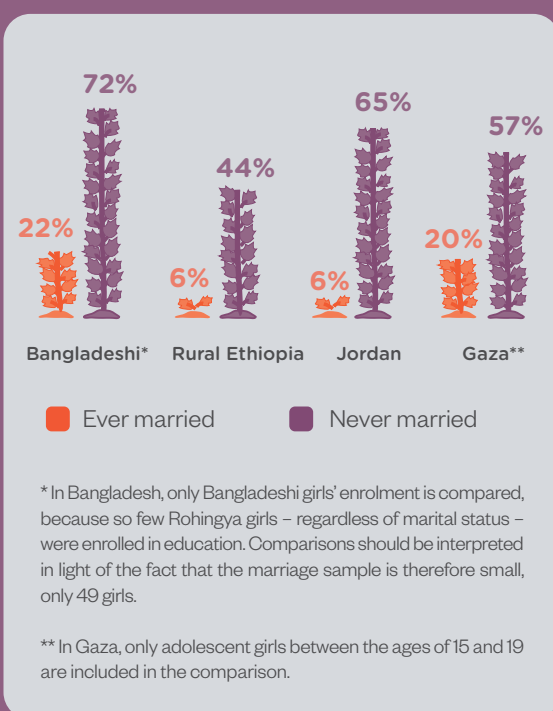
'Their husbands don't want them to continue studying... They say she's married, so why would she continue her studies?'

(17-year-old Syrian girl, Jordan)



Limits on child brides' schooling are primarily driven by two realities: most husbands refuse to allow their wife to attend school; and few young brides (especially once they become mothers) have the time to.

Figure 6: Adolescent girls' enrolment, by marital status



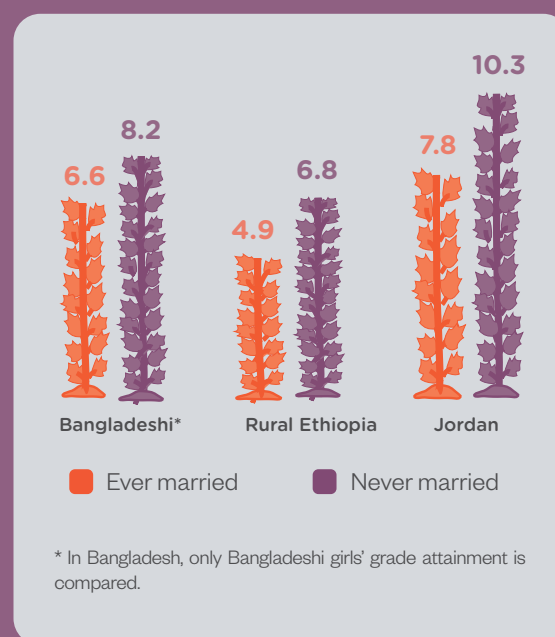
Enrolment, however, tells only part of the story; ever-married adolescent girls also had fewer years of education than their never-married peers. This is driven in part by child marriage itself, but also by parents' desire to protect girls' 'honour' and reputation – keeping them 'pure' for marriage – by taking them out of school even before they are married. Married girls' truncated schooling is reflected in their learning outcomes. In Jordan, adolescent girls who had been married were less likely to be literate (15 percentage points [pp]) and numerate (22 pp) than their never-married peers

'Families also worry the girl might talk or mix with unfamiliar boys on the street. So they prefer to keep girls indoors, thinking that keeps the family's honour intact.'

(24-year-old Rohingya young man, Bangladesh)



Figure 7: Adolescent girls' grade attainment, by marital status



Few young adults have access to education

Only a minority of young adults were still pursuing education at endline. Rates were highest in Ethiopia (24%), where – due to the fact that over-age enrolment is very common – young adults were equally likely to be enrolled in primary, secondary and post-secondary education (see Figure 8). Enrolment was lowest in Jordan (13%), where young adult students were overwhelmingly studying at the post-secondary level.

Within contexts, young adults' enrolment was shaped by different factors. In Bangladesh, both nationality and gender shape enrolment. Bangladeshi young adults were more than four times more likely to be pursuing education than their Rohingya peers (38% versus 8%). They were also more likely to be studying at the post-secondary level, as secondary education only became available to Rohingya young people in 2023 (see Box 1). Among both Bangladeshi and Rohingya young adults, young men were far more likely to still be studying than young women, due to gender norms that primarily value women as wives and mothers.

'I joined grade 11 as I had money to pay the registration fees and tuition fees from my work. So, I enrolled in computer science. I wanted to get a job as soon as possible and computer [course] would help me to get one. But after grade 11, I lost my job and had no money to pay my fees. So, I dropped out.'

(21-year-old Nepali young woman, Gandaki)

'I came back to school and am now learning. I am in grade 5. I did it after having a child.'

(24-year-old father, Dire Dawa, Ethiopia)

'You have to be among the top 10 to get a scholarship, otherwise there is no chance.'

(17-year-old Syrian girl, Jordan)

In Ethiopia, enrolment was mostly determined by location, with urban young adults nearly three times as likely to be enrolled as rural young adults (32% versus 12%) – because secondary and post-secondary education are clustered in urban areas.

In Jordan, nationality was the primary factor shaping access to education.¹⁷ Jordanian young adults (25%), who pay lower tuition fees at most schools and come from relatively better-off families, were more likely to be enrolled than their Palestinian (18%) and Syrian (10%) peers.

¹⁷ At the national level, gender shapes enrolment; gross tertiary enrolment for females is 44%, versus 29% for males (see: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.TER.ENRR.MA?locations=JO>). Because of how the young adult sample was constructed, however, with females disproportionately selected because they had married as children, GAGE findings do not reflect national averages.

Figure 8: Proportion of young adults enrolled in education

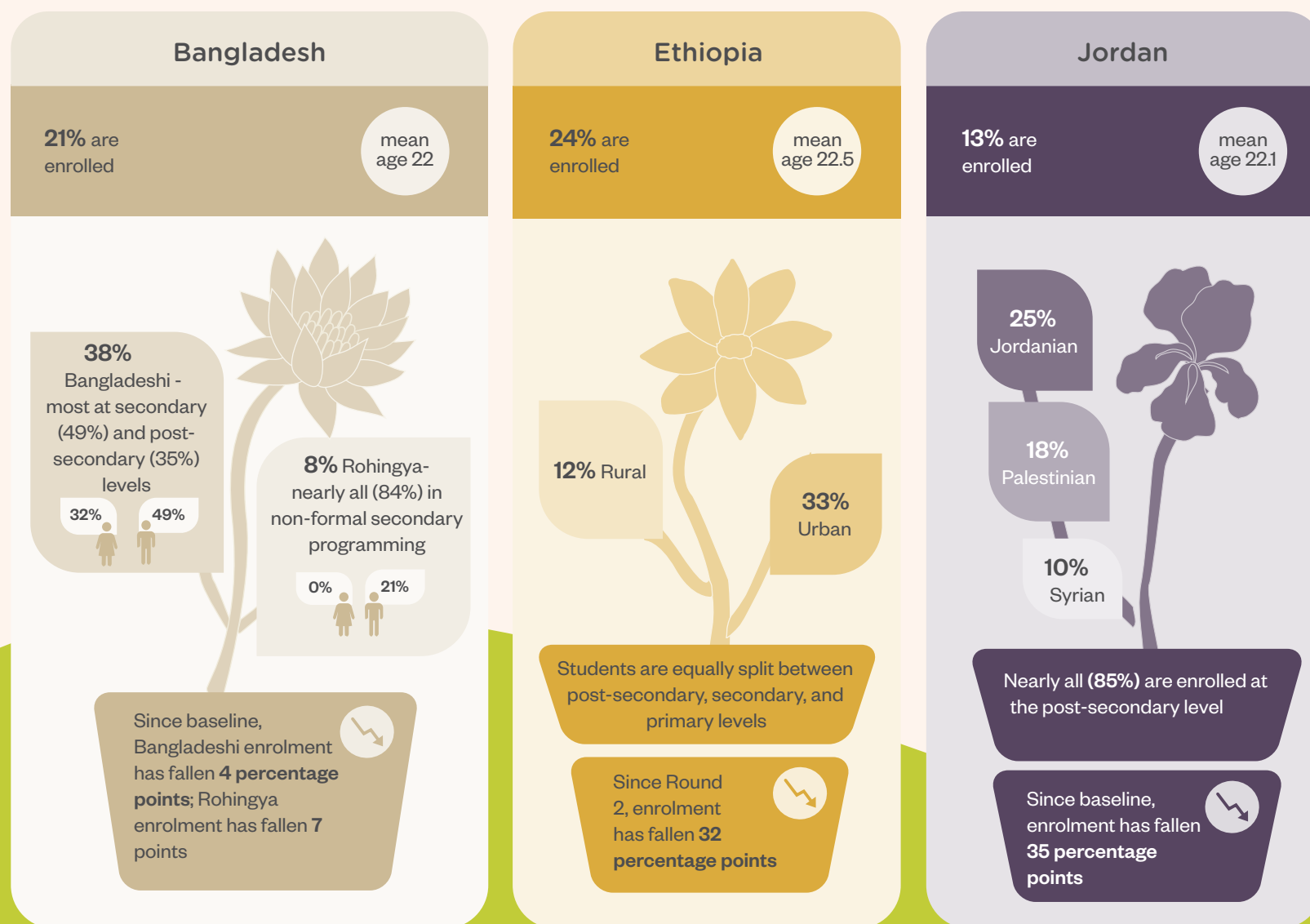
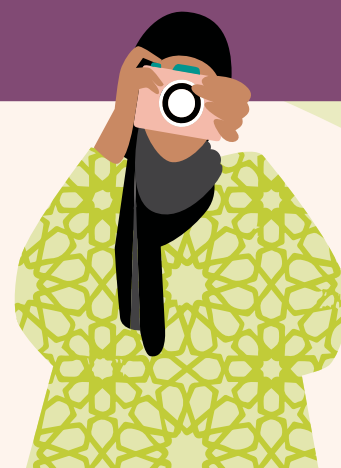


Photo story: 'I stopped dreaming'



The crisis in Lebanon is suffocating us. Our life and conversations revolve now around the US dollar. The crisis changed me a lot, I get stressed and depressed by any conversations about the crisis. I am fed up! I started thinking about surviving my day and I do not want to think about the future and if I will need money or not. Thinking about the future became useless and living day to day is the only thing we can do. I was not like that before, I always thought about my education and getting a high degree, working and being independent. Now everything changed! I stopped dreaming of becoming a nurse and I stopped thinking about anything. I am still studying but I am aware that it will not benefit me in any way.

(Photo and narrative by Marie, a 21-year-old Lebanese young woman)



Aggregated figures can hide how little education some young people get

Critical to understanding limits on young people's access to education is knowing not only whether they are or are not enrolled, but how many years of schooling they have obtained. In the core GAGE countries, attainment was highest in Jordan (9.3 grades) (see Figure 9). It was lowest in Bangladesh (5.9 grades), due to Rohingya young people's years long exclusion from education (see Box 1) – and gender norms that prohibit the Rohingya girls from leaving home after menarche, even for schooling.

Patterning in grade attainment varies within locations. In Jordan, nationality and gender shape attainment, with Jordanians and Palestinians attending more grades of schooling than Syrians, especially those in informal tented settlements. Girls and young women are ahead of boys and young men, who mostly attend all-boys schools staffed by men who are often unenthusiastic about their work because they are poorly paid and respected.

In Ethiopia, location and gender shape attainment. Young people in pastoralist Afar (where many schools only provide 4 years of education) have the least schooling, whereas those in urban areas have the most; gender differences vary by location and favour females in Amhara and males in Afar and Oromia.

Nationality and gender shape grade attainment in Bangladesh. Bangladeshis, among whom females have more education than males, have far more education than Rohingya, among whom males have far more education than females.

Grade attainment (11.5 grades) was very high in Nepal, where most girls and young women were not only enrolled but aspiring to university. As noted previously, this in large part reflects the nature of the sample.



'I dropped out on my own after seeing my family's financial situation. Many kids younger than me can't go to school. Due to poverty at home, they are forced to work.'
(17-year-old Bangladeshi boy)

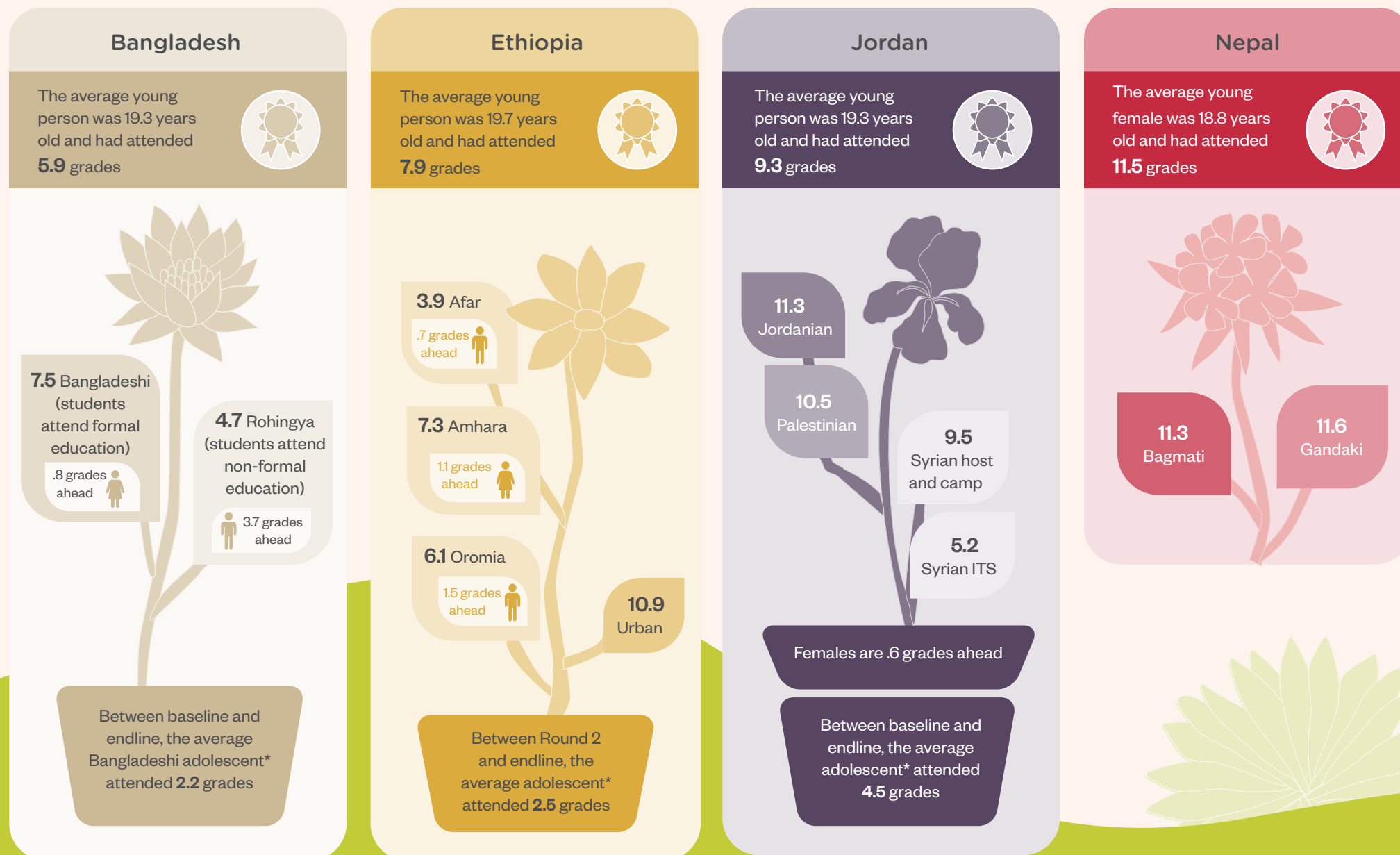
'You wake up early... You go to the river to fetch water, and when you come back from there, have your breakfast and go to school. Time is gone. Moreover, since your mother is too busy alone while you are at school, she orders you to come back fast. When you come back from school, you leave for your job.'

The sun sets. You start preparing dinner. After dinner, you go to the mosque, and when you come back, you sleep because you feel tired. There is no way to study your lessons. Early morning again, another job waits for you.'

(16-year-old girl, Oromia, Ethiopia)



Figure 9: Highest grade of education



A minority of young people complete secondary school

Tracking the proportion of young people who complete 'gateway grades' provides another way of understanding the limits on young people's access to education. Of the core GAGE countries, limits are tightest in Bangladesh, due to the government's restrictions on Rohingya education, and families' restrictions on Rohingya girls' mobility and education. Only 50% of young people had attended 6th grade and only 7% had attended 12th grade (see Figure 10). Completion rates were higher in Ethiopia and Jordan, where, despite differences in school systems and over-age enrolment, a similar proportion of young people entered (just under three-fifths) and exited (approximately two-fifths) secondary education (using UNESCO's delineation of 9th–12th grades). Completion rates were very high in Nepal, again primarily due to the sample.¹⁸



Adolescent girls attending primary school in Afar, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2026

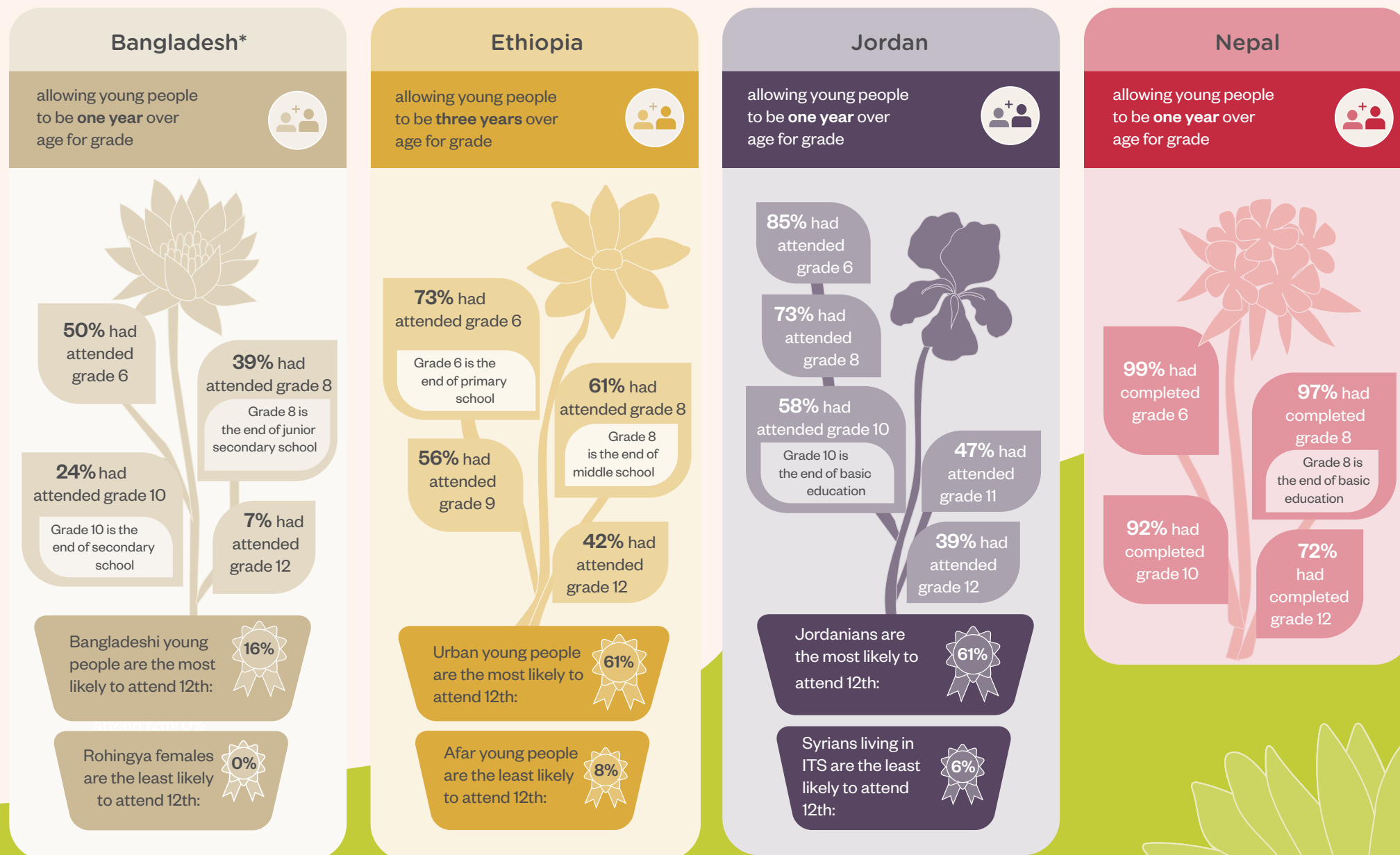
'I very much wanted to study nursing. I pleaded and pleaded with my parents to allow me to go to Kathmandu but they were not moved. I got very good scores and could have easily got a seat [place in the course]. But my parents did not even let me go for an entrance exam. I locked myself in the room, did not eat food for days, but they did not budge.'

(20-year-old Nepali young woman, Tanahun)



¹⁸ UNESCO (2026) reports that on a national level, 89% of girls complete lower secondary school (grade 8) and 44% complete upper secondary school (grade 12). See: <https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en/2026-gem-report-country-case-studies/nepal>

Figure 10: Proportion of young people who attend 'gateway' grades



Violence from teachers declines as young people grow up, but some adolescents (especially boys) are still at risk

Despite declines over time, largely shaped by adolescents' physical and psycho-emotional development, many students are still at risk of corporal punishment at the hands of their teachers. Aggregate rates were highest in Bangladesh (30%) and lowest in Jordan (6%) (see Figure 11). In all contexts, boys were far more at risk of teacher violence than girls, partly because they tend to be more poorly behaved and partly because violence against boys is seen as more acceptable than violence against girls. In Ethiopia, rural students were more at risk than urban students, primarily because most were still enrolled (despite their age) in primary school.

'They are boys who mostly violate school rules and are violated by teachers. Girls mostly do not disturb in the classroom.'

(15-year-old boy, Amhara, Ethiopia)

Teachers widely use corporal punishment to control their classrooms. They also use it to punish students for being late, for not doing their homework, and for making academic mistakes. Overall, girls were disproportionately likely to be punished for events beyond their control (such as being late to school because they were collecting water). Boys, on the other hand, were disproportionately likely to be beaten so severely that they drop out of school.

It is uncommon, especially in Bangladesh and Nepal, for young people to disclose teacher violence. This is primarily because violence is normalised and expected.

'The teacher beats the student who does not do his homework. The teacher also beats the student if he is a minute or two late for school in the morning. The teacher also beats the student if he talks to his classmate. And if he asks his classmate for a pencil or eraser, the teacher beats him with a hose.'

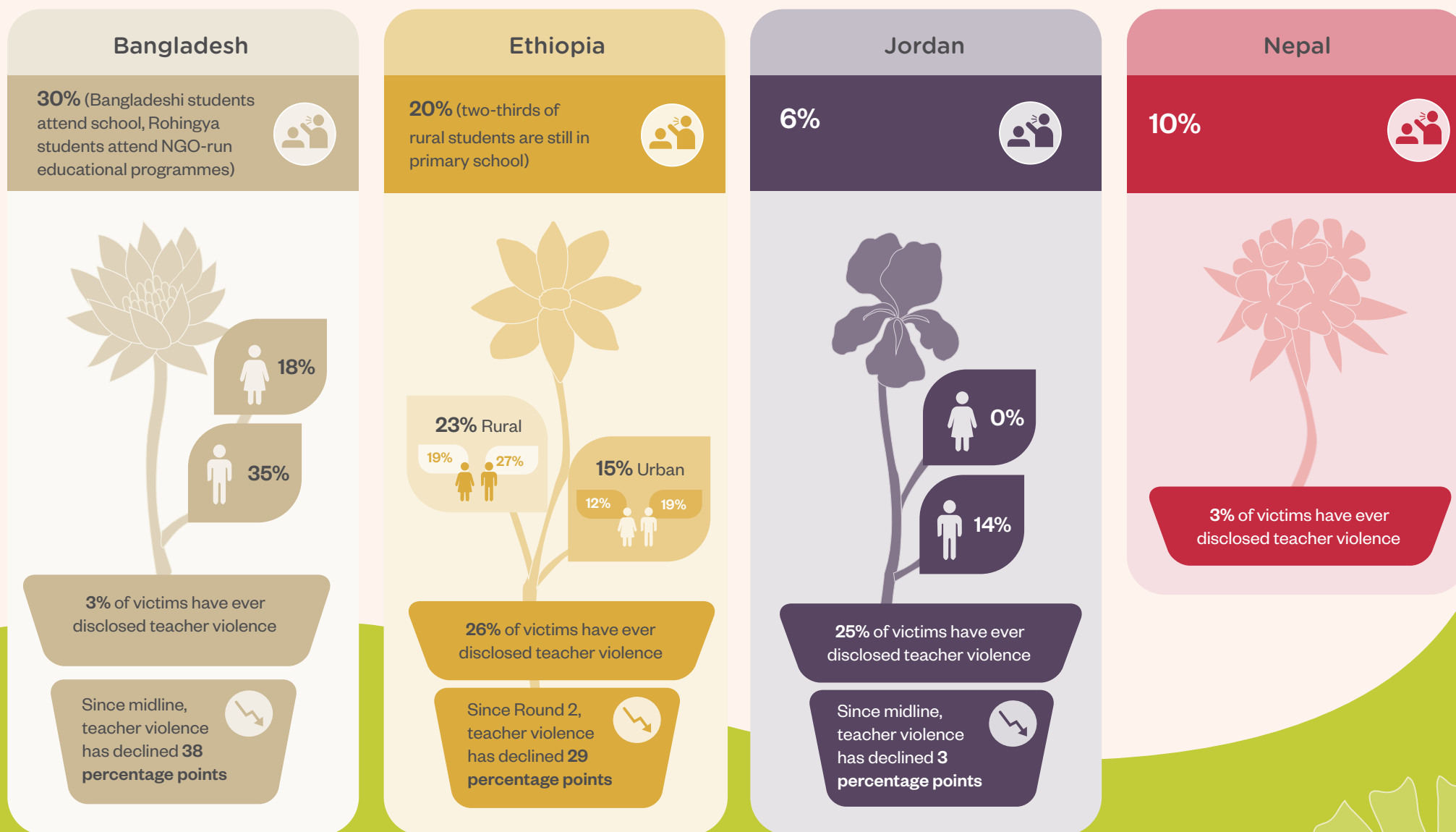
(15-year-old Syrian boy, Jordan)

'They beat us a lot. Why would it upset me?'

(19-year-old Rohingya young man, talking about his teachers)



Figure 11: Proportion of adolescent students who have experienced violence at the hands of a teacher in the past year

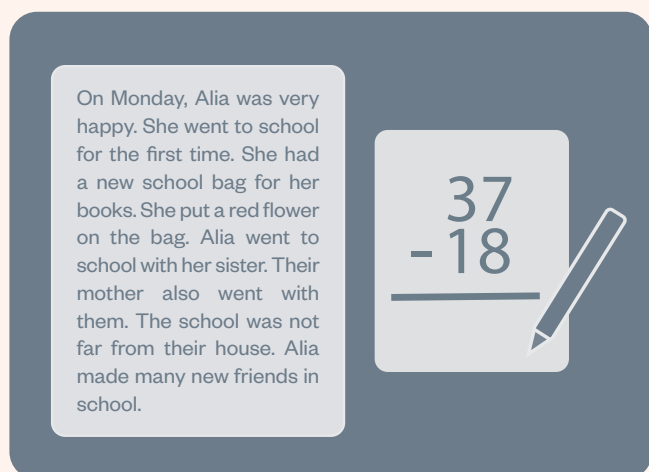


Learning outcomes are low – even given years of schooling

In Bangladesh, Jordan and Nepal, the GAGE survey included tests of basic literacy and numeracy.¹⁹ Young people were asked to read a short story and do subtraction with borrowing, both considered grade two skills (see Figure 12). Learning outcomes

were lower in all contexts than would be expected given young people's age and grade attainment. For example, in Jordan, only 68% of young people could read a short story and only 59% could do two-digit subtraction (see Figure 13).

Figure 12: Example literacy and numeracy tests



'Teachers do not explain the lessons adequately...there is no education at all, most of the time the teachers punish the students and do not explain the lesson and tell them to watch the lessons on YouTube.'

(Jordanian mother)

'There are children who have no knowledge of their grade level. There has been fierce criticism that children who have reached grade 5 or 6 are unable to read and write.'

(Key informant, Oromia, Ethiopia)

Across contexts, learning outcomes reflect young people's exposure to formal education. This is especially the case among the Rohingya in Bangladesh, who have endured years of exclusion from formal education (made worse by gender norms for girls and young women), and among Syrians living in informal tented settlements. However, poor-quality education also limits young people's learning. Respondents in all countries agree that teacher absenteeism is rampant, that pedagogies are over-reliant on rote methods that do not encourage mastery, that overcrowding prevents teachers from individualising instruction – which especially impacts students with disabilities (see Box 3) – and that too few teachers (especially male teachers in Jordan) care whether young people are learning.

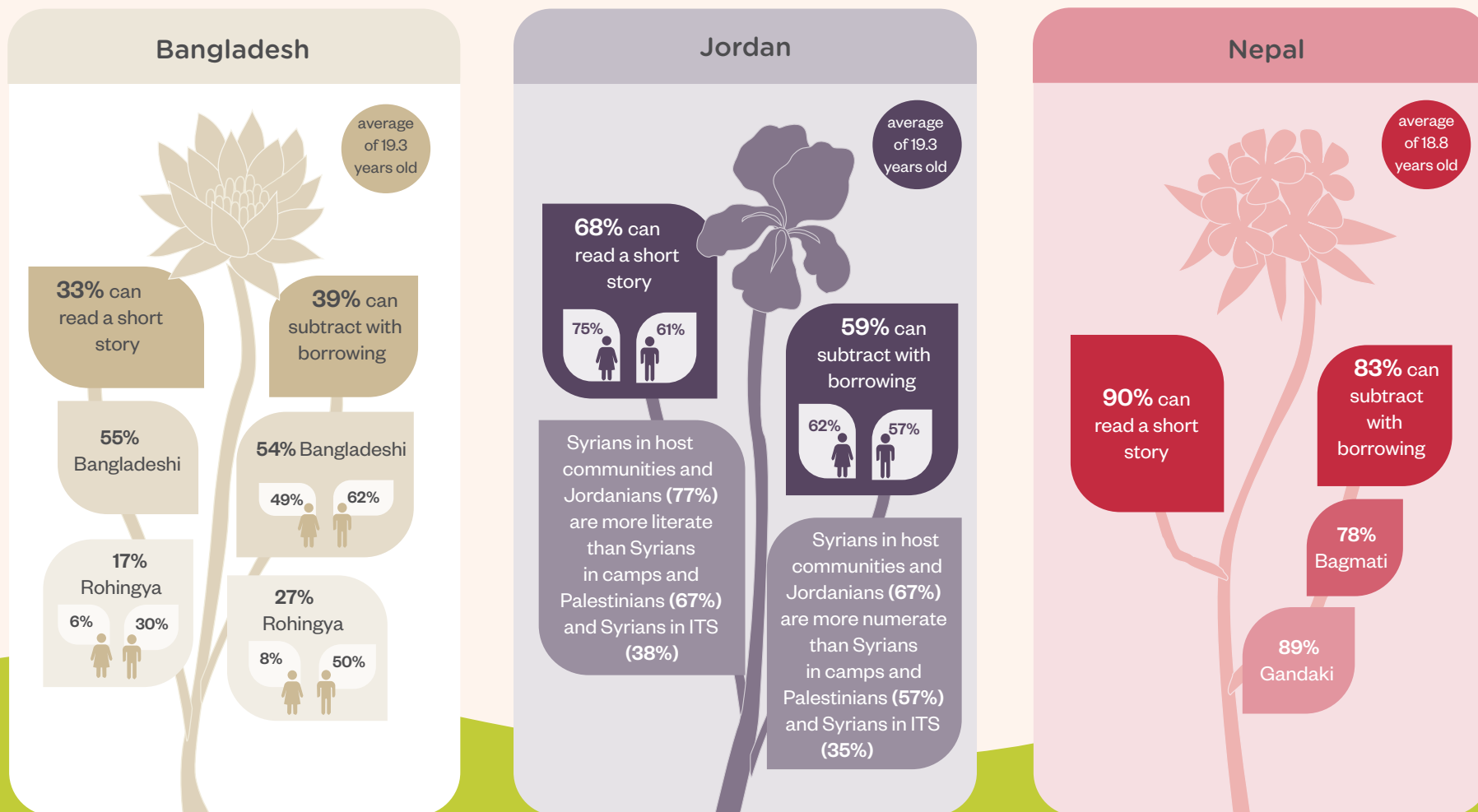
'Teachers skip class, walk around, sit somewhere – no one checks if the children are learning or not.'

(Bangladeshi father)



¹⁹ Using the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), see: https://asercentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/English_ASER-2018.pdf

Figure 13: Proportion of young people literate and numerate at the second grade level

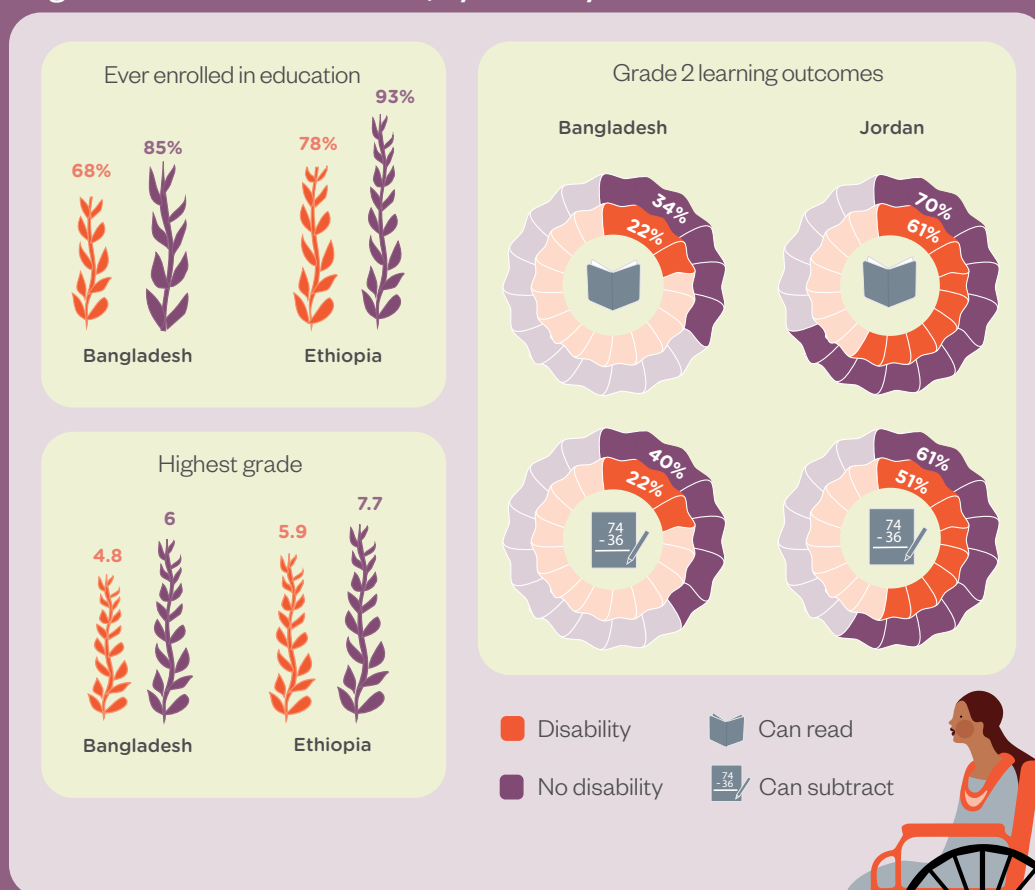


Box 3: Disability limits access to quality education

The GAGE sample includes hundreds of young people with disabilities. Most have hearing, vision, and mobility impairments. How these impairments impact young people's access to education and learning outcomes differs across contexts, depending on how severely disability is stigmatised and whether educational systems and local schools have invested in providing inclusive education.

In Bangladesh (17 percentage points) and Ethiopia (15 percentage points), young people with disabilities were less likely than their peers without disabilities to have ever enrolled in education (see Figure 14). This is partly because those with disabilities are sometimes kept hidden at home, and partly because most schools are not equipped to educate students with some types of disabilities. Indeed, in Ethiopia, only select schools in urban areas have the specially trained teachers and adapted materials necessary for deaf and blind students to thrive.

Figure 14: Education outcomes, by disability status



In Bangladesh and Ethiopia, young people with disabilities have also completed fewer grades of education than their peers without a disability. This reflects not only their more limited access, but also late enrolment, higher rates of repetition, and more common dropout, which is often driven by violence

'I never heard of schools for people like me...I could have attended school.'
(14-year-old blind girl, Oromia, Ethiopia)

In Bangladesh and Jordan, young people with disabilities are less likely to be literate and numerate than their peers without disabilities. This again reflects their more limited access, but also the fact that most classrooms and teachers are not equipped to teach those with special learning needs.

'I tried a primary school nearby, but the other boys used to tease and push me. I dropped out.'

(20-year-old Bangladeshi young man with a physical impairment)



'Go to any school, you will not find any school that is prepared and adapted for people with disability.'

(21-year-old Syrian young man with a mobility impairment, Jordan)



Students in a special needs classroom in Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2026



Conclusions and implications for policy and programming



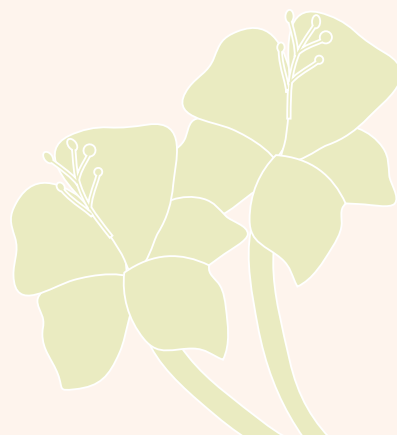
Across contexts, GAGE's endline research finds that nearly all young people value education and aspire to attend university, but that most know they are unlikely to achieve their educational goals. Enrolment plunges during middle and late adolescence, and is very low among young adults, with declines driven by high real and opportunity costs that for girls revolve around (preparation for) marriage, and for boys revolve around breadwinning. Access is further shaped by where young people live, with those living in remote areas and in refugee camps having less access than their peers who live more centrally or in host communities; by conflict, which can have generational impacts; by disability, with few schools offering adapted classrooms and learning materials; and by marriage, which for young females effectively ends their education. Even where young people are enrolled, learning outcomes are far lower than grade attainment would predict, reflecting overcrowded classrooms, teacher absenteeism, and rote pedagogies and violent discipline strategies that lead students to disengage.



To improve young people's access to quality education, GAGE research suggests the following:

- ✱ **Ensure that all young people have access to free education through the end of 12th grade,** building schools and providing transport stipends or boarding as necessary. Depending on context, pair this with school feeding, free uniforms/school supplies, or cash transfers to further eliminate cost barriers to education.
- ✱ **Engage with parents, adolescents (especially boys), and – for young brides – marital families, to raise awareness about the importance of education** for securing young people's longer-term economic futures, and also for their broader well-being. Pair this with practical advice about how parents can support young people's academic success.
- ✱ **Provide adolescents (especially girls) with empowerment programming** that exposes them to role models and provides them with opportunities to develop self-confidence and voice their opinions.
- ✱ **Work with boys and young men to foster positive masculinities** through lifeskills curricula, exposure to role models and media and social media campaigns, so as to reduce the sexual harassment that drives girls' school drop-out.

- 
- ✱ **Shift the gender norms that drive the trade-off between girls' education and (preparation for) marriage** by engaging with communities, including traditional and religious leaders.
 - ✱ **Improve educational quality** by reducing classroom headcount, investing in teacher training (including investing in hands-on pedagogies) and incentivising teachers..
 - ✱ **Reduce teacher violence by banning** corporal punishment, supporting teachers to use non-violent discipline strategies, ensuring that students and parents have ways to anonymously report violators, and seeing that repeat offenders are fired.
 - ✱ **Invest in non-formal and accelerated learning pathways** for young people who have already left school.
 - ✱ **Improve refugees' (and forcibly displaced persons') access to post-secondary education** by lowering fees to be comparable to those charged to citizens and by offering low-interest educational loans.
 - ✱ **Make education more inclusive** by adapting infrastructure, learning materials and teaching methods to the needs of students with disabilities.
 - ✱ **Prioritise restoring access to education in contexts affected by active conflict** – offering online and/or accelerated pathways to help more young people restart learning and make up for lost time.
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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.

Disclaimer

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Front cover: Students in class, Ethiopia © Nathalie Bertrams/GAGE 2026.
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