



**UNIVERSITY OF
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Summary

Exploring the School to Work Transition for Adolescent Girls

February 2021

Acknowledgments:

This summary of the Report 'Exploring the School to Work Transition for Adolescent Girls', REAL Centre, University of Cambridge was prepared by Andrew Johnston, under the guidance of Pauline Rose. The full report was written with the support of Rebecca Gordon, who undertook the scoping of the literature on this topic. Garima Sahai undertook fact-checking. We are extremely grateful to the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office for commissioning this work, and for providing guidance throughout the process of preparing the report. We are grateful for the feedback from the the technical advisory group for this study, connected with the Platform for Girls' Education. We are thankful to the UN Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) for on-going feedback. References drawn upon in the summary can be found in the main research report. With thanks to Dan Barrett for the design of this summary, and to Sandra Baxter and Holly Ruffhead for their support to the final publication. The author is solely responsible for the content and recommendations in the report.

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Suggested citation: Rose, P. 2021. Exploring the School to Work Transition for Adolescent Girls: Summary. REAL Centre, University of Cambridge.



Teaching midwifery Nigeria. Credit: Lindsay Mgbor, Department for International Development

Introduction

If countries are to grow and prosper in a way that improves the lives of everyone, they need to make a special commitment to supporting marginalised adolescent girls. This includes girls who experience extreme poverty, reside in rural areas, live with disabilities, are affected by conflict or belong to disadvantaged ethnic groups: these girls are among the most vulnerable people in the world and face the greatest risk of being left behind. In terms of the world's development ambitions, they are the least likely to complete primary and secondary schooling (part of the fourth Sustainable Development Goal) and face the greatest barriers in making the transition from school to decent work (SDG 8).

The years of adolescence (commonly defined as 10-19) offer a crucial chance to put people on a path towards a better life. Marginalised adolescent girls should be able to move to livelihood opportunities – not only formal jobs but also informal work and self-employment – that are secure, safe, fulfilling and productive. But most marginalised girls in low- and lower-middle income countries do not have access to education beyond primary school. A combination of low educational opportunities, economic insecurity, vulnerability and exposure to violence, alongside harmful social norms and practices, can hinder girls' transition into a healthy, safe, productive and fulfilling adulthood. To ensure that marginalised adolescent girls can make that transition, it is vital to extend their education to 12 years of quality schooling, to give them the chance to acquire the kinds of skills they need, and to look beyond the education system to bring down barriers to their full participation in society.

Adolescent girls need a combination of three kinds of skills for secure and productive livelihoods: foundational, transferable, and technical/vocational. Foundational skills consist of basic competencies such as in literacy and numeracy in the first instance, progressing to more advanced subject areas (such as in science, and arts and humanities subjects). Transferable skills, which can be applied to a wide range of jobs and livelihoods are also referred to as life skills or soft skills. They include critical thinking, problem solving and communication, as well as self-esteem, self-control and self-confidence. Technical and vocational skills apply to the specific livelihood opportunities that adolescent girls are trying to obtain.

This paper summarises the findings of a new report from the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre, University of Cambridge, which identifies key policy interventions that can enable adolescent girls to obtain secure and productive livelihoods. The report shows policy interventions are needed that are effective in the short-term, along with long-term structural change to systems and social norms in order to give marginalised adolescent girls fair opportunities. Such change requires strong political leadership and sustained commitment to dismantling discriminatory legislation that deny girls access to secure and productive livelihoods, alongside promoting the importance of gender sensitive and transformative approaches.

A struggle to gain adequate education and secure work

The scale of the disadvantage that marginalised adolescent girls face in education is enormous. In many low- and lower-middle income countries, adolescent girls rarely complete primary school and are even less likely to complete lower secondary school. In Nigeria, for example, almost all of the richest boys in urban areas complete primary school, in contrast to only 11 in 100 of the poorest girls living in rural areas. And only 3% of girls from poor households in rural areas then complete secondary education, compared with 92% of rich urban boys. One reason for this is that marginalised adolescent girls are more likely to have unpaid care and domestic responsibilities than boys, which can curtail their schooling.

As a result, marginalised adolescent girls are less likely to acquire the basic foundational skills, such as in literacy and numeracy, needed to gain access to secure and productive livelihoods. In 14 out of 26 Commonwealth countries, for example, girls who are in school are learning for the equivalent of six years or less. Girls in rural areas, and those facing other forms of disadvantage, are likely to be receiving even less schooling. Marginalised girls are also least likely to develop transferable skills such as critical thinking, communication, problem solving, confidence or self-esteem.

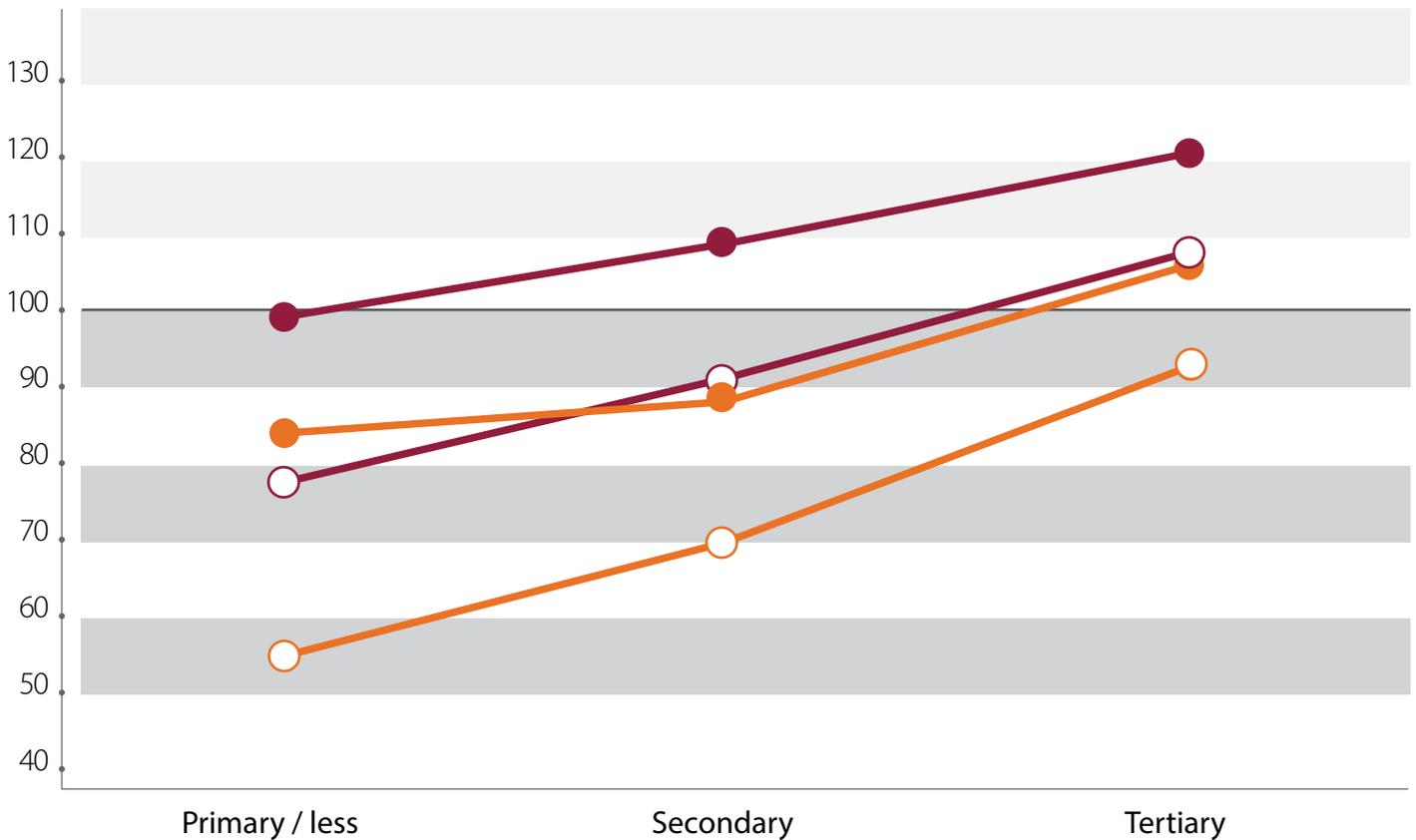
Marginalised adolescent girls are less likely than their male counterparts to have access to formal work opportunities. A survey in more than 30 low- and middle- income countries conducted between 2012 and 2015 by the International Labour Organization (ILO) shows that the transition to work can take longer for girls than boys. Young men aged 25 to 29 are almost twice as likely than young women to have completed the school to work transition. Marginalised adolescent girls are the least likely to be in paid work. In the survey, the rate of young people not in education, employment or training is twice as high for females (31%) as for males (16%).

Gender and social norms act as barriers to paid work for the most marginalised adolescent girls. The ILO survey found that having children pushed young men towards employment, with 84% of young fathers in work, but had the opposite effect for young women, with less than 50% of young mothers in work. Covid-19 has exacerbated these barriers, with adolescent girls most at risk of not returning to school due to domestic duties and early marriage. Social norms also prevent adolescent girls with disabilities from finding paid work. In all 27 lower- and middle-income countries studied by UN Women (2018), older adolescent girls and young women with disabilities were the least likely to have access to labour market opportunities.

When marginalised young women do find paid work, it is more likely to be vulnerable, insecure and unsafe. Among Asian countries, nearly two in three young female workers in rural areas are in vulnerable employment – self-employed or working for family – compared with two in five in urban areas. In sub-Saharan Africa, 82% of female workers in rural areas were in vulnerable work, in comparison with 68% in urban areas.

Young women are often concentrated in informal jobs with insecure contracts, low wages and poor conditions. Individuals are considered to have informal jobs if their employment relationship is, in law or in practice, not subject to national labour legislation, income taxation, social protection or entitlement to certain employment benefits. Informal sector workers normally face lower wages, as well as limited health and safety protection, and little access to social insurance. Over 90% of girls and boys aged 15 to 19 in the ILO survey countries were informally employed. Girls are more likely to be employed in informal sectors with weak regulatory environments. The ILO survey further found that, for both men and women in the formal and informal sectors, wages are higher if levels of education are higher. However, across all levels of education, wages are lower for women in the formal and informal sectors than for men (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Estimated formal and informal wages by education and gender



● Men: formal
 ○ Men: informal
 ● Women: formal
 ○ Women: informal

Note: The figure reports the level of wages by formality, education and gender compared to the benchmark (= 100) of formally employed primary-educated men.

Source: O'Higgins (2017)

Marginalised adolescent girls in work are also more likely to be in unsafe jobs, at risk of exploitation and sexual violence. Girls account for 57% of all children aged 5 to 14 in hazardous work globally. Young girls living in poverty are also likely to be most at risk of trafficking. A study of sexually exploited girls aged 9 to 17 in major cities in Tanzania found that many had been trafficked to urban zones from their rural homes into domestic work and had been abused by their employers.

Marginalised young women are more likely to be juggling several responsibilities and often multiple jobs. In Benin, Madagascar and Tanzania, women work at least ten hours longer than men every week, if work both inside and outside the household is included. When in work, adolescents are likely to have more than one job. For example, amongst those surveyed in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, nearly a third of adolescents are found to combine self-employment with employment for another person or company, and 45% of those surveyed juggled three or more income-generating activities.

Barriers to secure and productive work for marginalised girls

Many barriers prevent marginalised adolescent girls from gaining access to secure and productive livelihoods. These are likely to be exacerbated by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. To bring down these barriers, governments and their partners need to change the wider structures surrounding education and the labour market.

Low education levels tend to form the first and most important barrier, as they prevent girls from developing the foundational and transferable skills required for work. At least half of older adolescents in 59 countries studied lack foundational skills and around 200 million young people aged 15 to 24 lack the most basic skills, 58% of whom are women. A lack of access to education or other training opportunities also means that the most marginalised girls are least likely to have transferable skills.

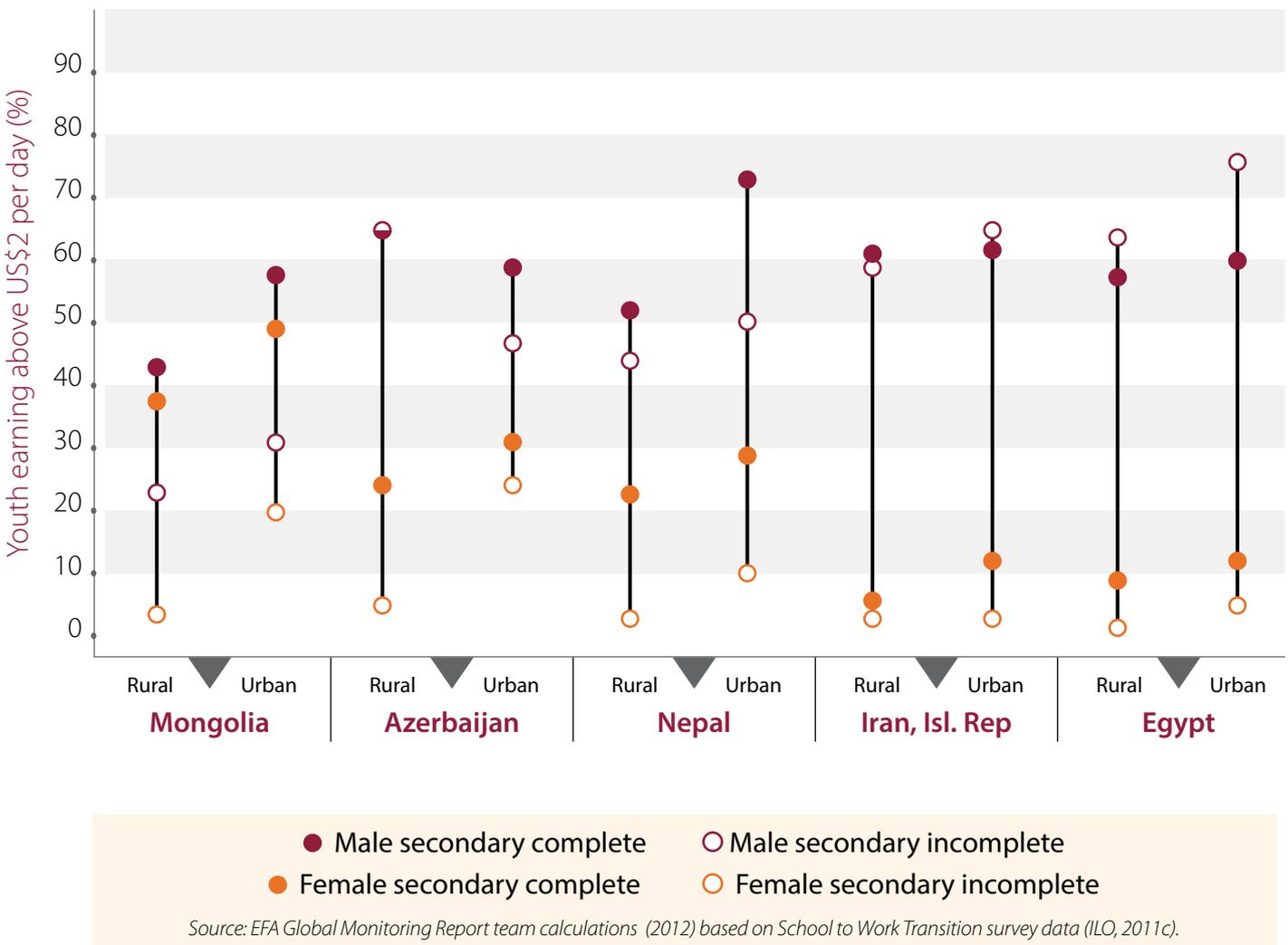
Expectations and norms about what societal roles are appropriate for adolescent girls limit their educational opportunities as well as their access to secure and productive livelihoods. Girls and young women who marry early are highly likely to drop out of school. In sub-Saharan Africa, marrying at age 16 reduces the likelihood of completing secondary education by 7.8 percentage points. This subsequently limits girls' ability to develop foundational and transferable skills. Furthermore, gender gaps in parents' and children's aspirations for education and livelihoods start appearing between middle childhood and early adolescence, in many cases due to expectations about the role of women in society.

Gender norms and expectations about the subjects that girls take at school can also restrict their choice of livelihoods. In many societies, girls are less likely to study science, mathematics, engineering and technology, including due to gender norms and stereotypes which limit girls' motivation and engagement with these subjects. This subsequently affects their ability to choose this area of employment. Gender norms also curb access to vocational training opportunities and apprenticeships, especially for marginalised adolescent girls, and therefore opportunities to develop technical and vocational skills. Vocational training and apprenticeships also often reinforce social norms by offering girls training in stereotypically female and low-paid trades.

Adolescent girls' progress is hindered not only by barriers in education but also by gender discrimination in the labour market that bars them from secure and productive livelihoods. Many countries lack work opportunities – or suffer from a mismatch between adolescents' low levels of skills and evolving jobs that involve technology and automation. Gender discrimination in the labour market exacerbates this mismatch for marginalised adolescent girls. Girls are also denied access to secure and productive livelihoods because the necessary policies and structural support – such as minimum wage legislation – are insufficient. Without such support, it is clear that young women – especially those who have not had the opportunity to complete education – are the group most likely to be in low paid work (Figure 2). Discriminatory inheritance laws, which deny access to assets such as land or property, are widespread and limit girls' opportunities to earn a livelihood. Additionally, young women face discrimination when seeking access to finance, resources, assets and support services that are crucial to creating and expanding small enterprises.

Figure 2: Percentage of youth working above the poverty line, by gender and educational attainment

Percentage of youth (age 15 to 29) working above poverty line (>US\$2/day), by gender, educational attainment and area in Mongolia, Azerbaijan, Nepal, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Egypt, latest available year.



Early marriage and pregnancy, which marginalised adolescent girls are more likely to experience, restrict their access to work. Indeed, being able to gain access to a livelihood tends to prevent early marriage. For example, it gives young women more control over their life choices, such as when and who they marry, as well as family planning, and deciding when and how many children to have.

Gender-based violence can prevent marginalised adolescent girls from gaining access to safe and fulfilling work. Adolescent girls are vulnerable to harassment from authority figures in the workplace. Violence can also influence adolescent girls’ ability to gain access to livelihoods. For example, in India, a higher perceived level of crime against women in the workplace is likely to significantly reduce the number of women who work. A heightened risk of gender-based violence during the Covid-19 pandemic is also increasingly likely to curb girls’ access to safe livelihoods.

Inadequate sanitation and hygiene facilities in the workplace are another barrier to safe livelihoods for adolescent girls, which can often diminish their productivity, particularly during menstruation. Social norms related to menstruation can prevent adolescent girls from completing education and making the transition to work.

Although self-employment can be a pathway to secure and productive work, many marginalised adolescent girls are likely to be self-employed only because there are fewer formal jobs.

A lack of family networks, peer networks and role models can also restrict livelihood choices for marginalised adolescent girls. Connections through family and peer networks, which are the main way adolescents in low- and middle-income countries look for jobs, are limited for girls. For example, fathers' networks in South Africa provide useful connections for sons looking for jobs but not for daughters.



Learning coding, Ethiopia. Credit: Anna Dubuis / DFID

Programmes that help adolescent girls move from school to work

Despite the barriers that marginalised adolescent girls often face, many programmes around the world have been successful in helping girls move smoothly from school into work. Such programmes have aimed to enhance foundational, transferable, or technical and vocational skills – or a combination of these. These interventions have been successful in preventing girls from falling into insecure, unproductive work in the short-term. However, lasting change requires broad systemic changes – from high-level political leaders down to the grassroots level – to challenge gender discrimination in the education system and the labour market, and especially to shift the social norms that restrict girls' access to both.



Programmes offering a second chance for education can provide marginalised adolescent girls with the foundational skills they need to gain access to productive livelihoods.

The Complementary Basic Education programme in the north of Ghana, for example, has supported children who missed opportunities to learn basic literacy and numeracy skills because they were unable to attend school.

The programme focuses on helping girls, in particular, to acquire foundation skills and then provides a route back into primary school. Of those surveyed, 90% of those who had completed the programme had progressed to formal school.



Programmes that blend formal education with transferable skills development may help girls to stay in school while boosting the skills they need to obtain productive work.

In Rwanda and Uganda, the Educate! Experience programme aims to resolve the mismatch between education and livelihood opportunities. There was a 120% increase in income among the programme's female scholars and a 152% increase in business ownership.



Foundational and transferable skills training outside of formal education can also help adolescent girls gain access to productive livelihoods.

In Bangladesh, the Association for Life Skills, Income and Knowledge for Adolescents programme provided educational support, gender rights awareness training and livelihood skills training. Girls in the communities with livelihood training were 35% more likely than others to earn an income and significantly more girls in all intervention areas reported working and having a higher income.



Programmes that provide marginalised women with technical and vocational skills can be particularly effective in enabling access to productive work.

In New Delhi, India, the Social Awakening Through Youth Action programme provided women aged 18 to 39 with a six-month stitching and tailoring course. The programme targeted the most marginalised women, including those with the least primary education, from low-income neighbourhoods and with low rates

of employment. Those who had participated were more likely to be employed within six months of training, worked longer hours and earned more.



Life skills and informal learning support outside formal education can help reduce child marriage and teenage/unintended pregnancy, allowing girls to continue in school and avoid risky livelihood choices.

Some successful programmes have focused on adolescent girls' vulnerability to exploitative relationships, early marriage and early pregnancy, which increase the likelihood that they will enter unsafe livelihoods. In Kenya, an intervention for secondary school girls

that tackled the harmful social norms that lead to early marriage, and provided education on HIV and sexual health, reduced the likelihood that girls started childbearing within a year by 28%.



Interventions need to support girls at critical times. A gender-sensitive approach in the post-school period, for example, can enable marginalised young women to build secure and productive livelihoods through entrepreneurship and to save for further career development. CAMFED's livelihoods programme, for example, is targeted at highly marginalised women soon after they complete secondary education in rural sub-Saharan Africa. The programme combines training in

business skills and life skills with business finance, mentoring and peer support, and links to business development services. In Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe – where rural young women are typically unemployed or unpaid – it enabled most participants to create a job for themselves. Women's businesses substantially increased their incomes. Participants also built up personal savings.



Multifaceted programmes that target multiple barriers, such as early or unintended pregnancy, are likely to boost girls' access to secure and productive livelihoods.

Recognising barriers such as unintended pregnancy, early childbearing and a lack of access to credit and skills, the government of Sierra Leone partnered with UNICEF and BRAC to implement the Empowerment and Livelihoods for Adolescents programme, which had three components: health education (including

sexual and reproductive health), vocational training and microcredit. Adolescent girls in the programme were more likely to be in school and have improved levels of numeracy and literacy. Girls in non-targeted communities were also twice as likely to be pregnant out of marriage than girls who were in the programme.



Interventions that promote financial inclusion and women's economic empowerment have enabled young people to improve their access to secure livelihoods.

Such programmes often provide savings and microfinance, alongside demand-oriented skills and on-the-job training and placements. In rural Bangladesh, for example, the Social and Financial Empowerment of Adolescents programme for young women aged 11 to 21 provided girls' clubs, financial literacy, livelihood and

life skills training alongside microfinance and community sensitisation. Participants reported increased financial literacy, ownership of poultry and small livestock, and involvement in economic activities. However, interventions focusing solely on financial inclusion and economic empowerment may not lead to secure livelihoods and can have adverse effects on well-being. Therefore, interventions must be carefully designed to consider social and gender norms from the outset.



Science teacher in a school, Bangladesh. Credit Ricci Coughlan/DFID



Interventions that provide information about livelihood opportunities can boost adolescent girls' aspirations for education and work, and develop their skills. In India, a programme provided recruiting services to young women aged 15 to 21 in randomly selected rural villages to increase awareness of the outsourcing industry. Women in the villages exposed to the recruiting intervention were 4.6 percentage points more likely to work in the industry than women in control villages and 2.4 percentage points more likely to work at all for pay outside the home.



Preventive interventions are also needed to protect marginalised adolescent girls from unsafe livelihoods. Some promising programmes reduce adolescent girls' vulnerability to violence while in paid work and help them to leave unsafe jobs. The ChildHope programme From Sexual Exploitation to Education for Ugandan Children helped girls in sex work to find alternative livelihoods where they were less vulnerable to violence. The programme provided intensive counselling, family reunification, livelihood support, and educational and livelihood training. After their involvement in the programme, the girls said they were not at risk of returning to unsafe work.

Such interventions can succeed in meeting short-term goals. However, they are insufficient to deal with the gender discrimination in education and in the labour market that prevents marginalised girls from gaining access to secure and productive livelihoods. Long-term structural reform must therefore be given a high priority.

Deep structural changes are needed to transform girls' chances



To meet the needs of marginalised adolescent girls in the long term, transformative education systems must be built that empower girls and help them develop the skills necessary for secure and productive work.

Deep structural change and political leadership are needed to make sure that 12 years of education for marginalised adolescent girls – one of the world's most vulnerable populations – becomes an urgent priority. In particular, governments should prioritise education sector planning that responds to girls' needs, supported by gender-sensitive budgeting and accountability. Everyone from high-level political leaders to grassroots groups needs to join forces to shift social and gender norms.



Reforms in formal schooling to ensure that teaching methods are sensitive to girls' needs have a key role to play in shifting gender norms, which can improve girls' livelihood opportunities. Use of gender-sensitive teaching methods by the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) change the gender dynamics of the school and the attitudes and aspirations of girls and boys in the classroom. Promoting gender equality in education will roll back some discrimination in the world of work

by supporting girls' aspirations. Schools also need to adopt curricula that support the development of foundational and transferable skills. Gender sensitivity embedded within vocational training and work-based learning could also boost the skills girls need to gain access to secure and productive work.



Female doctor, Pakistan. Credit DFID/Russel Watkins



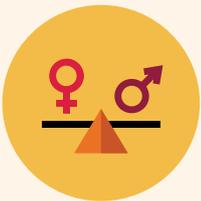
Interventions need to challenge gender discrimination in the labour market.

Government programmes that help those who are unemployed to find work have increased secure livelihood options for girls and young women, particularly in formal employment. For example, the 2015 Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act has narrowed the gender pay gap in rural India. This demonstrates the key role that government policies can play for marginalised adolescent girls in diversifying rural livelihood opportunities and income security. However, such overarching interventions can have adverse side effects for girls, so their design needs to be sensitive to the impact of cultural and social norms.



Governments can help girls to gain access to secure and productive livelihoods by providing social protection measures.

Social protection programmes can be designed to tackle adolescent girls' socio-economic exclusion and vulnerabilities. These programmes need to emphasise fulfilling rights, breaking structural constraints and providing adolescent girls with the tools to prevent long-term socio-economic exclusion. During the Covid-19 pandemic, social protection programmes have taken on even greater importance in helping to meet the basic needs of families facing the economic effects of the crisis.



Legislation needs to tackle discrimination in the labour market, protect working women and ensure they are compensated adequately.

Minimum wage legislation, for example, can benefit women in particular. Alongside measures that tackle wider structural gender-based discrimination, further critical attention needs to be paid to interventions that consider the demand side of livelihoods – increasing and improving what the labour market can offer.



Recommendations

The barriers to girls' access to livelihoods require long-term structural change at the systems level and changes to social norms. Such change needs strong political leadership and sustained commitment to dismantling patriarchal institutions that prevent adolescent girls transitioning from education to secure and productive livelihoods. In the light of the reforms that are needed, we propose recommendations for **political leaders** and **policy makers**:







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All details correct at the time of going to print,
February 2021.