

The economy's improving but many Ethiopian boys still 'feel hopeless'

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Boys want high status jobs but there are scarce opportunities, says research.
Credit: Young Lives

Boys and young men in Ethiopia have higher aspirations than their parents did, but often feel 'hopeless' due a lack of education or access to high status jobs, says new research.

A picture has emerged of many [boys](#) being taken out of school to work on the family farm or business, or in paid work. Girls had greater flexibility to combine their household responsibilities with their

schooling so were able to progress academically.

The research paper, based on [longitudinal studies](#) of nearly 1,000 boys and girls in rural and urban parts of Ethiopia, is one of those presented at the Young Lives Gender and Youth Conference in Oxford and shows boys as well as girls need to find their social worth in developing countries. Oxford University researchers from the Young Lives project find that, generally, Ethiopian boys' educational aspirations are initially higher than the girls, with parents also having higher expectations for sons at the outset. However, after the age of 15, boys' [educational aspirations](#) decline in comparison. Of 908 [teenage boys](#) aged between 15 and 19, more than a third of the boys were working (36%) and one third were studying and working (32%); whereas 39% of girls reported 'only studying' and 23% 'studying and working'.

In the sampled studied, 60% of boys compared to 12% of girls were overage for their grade in school at age 12. As a result, many boys end up in jobs without the status they seek, experiencing long periods of uncertainty about generating income. In the capital Bertukan (Addis Ababa), urbanisation is rapidly taking hold and there are many signs of development, such as the construction of international hotels and modern shopping malls. Yet Ethiopia's strong and broad-based economic progress jars with a sense of stagnation experienced by many young men who feel 'stuck' without prospects, says the study. It tells of community concerns about youth unemployment and hopelessness spiralling into self-destructive behaviours like gambling, alcoholism and drug addiction, particularly in urban areas.

It is particularly difficult for boys and young men given the country's highly valued ideal of masculine identity, says the research. In Ethiopia, boys who are the expected breadwinners in the family are leaving school earlier more than girls. They seek to reorient themselves from schooling towards the world of work, but quickly become aware of their own

failures in the job market, says the study.

The paper by researchers Gina Crivello and Nikki van der Gaag suggests gender-sensitive policies need to be put in place to ensure that both boys and girls finish their education in school, and that they have opportunities for quality apprenticeships and decent work when they leave. It concludes that this means more relevant and better quality education, more flexible school hours, finding ways of supporting boys to return to school, and creating a school environment and quality education that is safer and more appropriate for both sexes.

One boy, interviewed when he was 12, spoke of his hopes of becoming an engineer or working in a garage, depending on his grades. But in follow-up interviews at the age of 20, he describes about half of the boys in his friendship group as feeling 'hopeless', with the other half 'still trying'. He counts himself as one who is still trying, but also 'on the way to being hopeless'. The study says young men from Bertukan (Addis Ababa) are possibly the most 'uprooted' with the weakest sense of belonging.

Dr Crivello says: 'We find a great sense of shame felt by boys and young men who face the prospect of being unemployed. They cannot expect to be fully supported by their parents. They must earn a living both for themselves and contribute to their families. This is not to say that young women do not earn a living, but the pressure on them is not as great as it is for young men.'

By the age of 19, only 11% of rural [young men](#) (265) and 5% of rural young women (211) wanted to be farmers. When they had to choose one occupation, they chose professions like doctor, engineer and civil servant. Yet, many of their families are dependent on rural livelihoods.

Young Lives researcher Nikki van der Gaag comments: 'Young men are

meant to mobilise the resources necessary for them to marry and to raise a family, in a context where land and housing are scarce, and where the promises of education are not translating into secure livelihoods. It means that young people are often left to improvise and form strategies in ways that their parents perhaps did not have to think about so much.

'Disillusionment with school combined with poverty result in situations where even poor quality work seems the better alternative to education. Yet, this approach does little to break intergenerational poverty. These findings highlight the need for better education, and the chance to learn skills and improve job opportunities for both sexes.'

More information: Between Hope and a Hard Place: Boys and Young Men Negotiating Gender, Poverty and Social Worth in Ethiopia:

[www.younglives.org.uk/content/ ... rty-and-social-worth](http://www.younglives.org.uk/content/...rty-and-social-worth)

Provided by University of Oxford

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