

# Gender Shapes Adolescence

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## Puberty triggers divergent trajectories for girls and boys

SEX AND GENDER DIFFERENCES emerge most sharply with the onset of puberty, affecting the life trajectories of girls and boys in profoundly different ways. This is especially so in developing societies which have been less exposed to the gender equalizing forces of development and where local cultures prescribe very different social and economic roles for men and women. With a few but growing exceptions, in these societies adolescent girls are at an initial disadvantage when compared to adolescent boys; this disadvantage influences the

nature and level of *opportunity*, *agency*, and *second chances* available to adolescents, and calls for greater policy and program efforts targeted to adolescent girls, to equalize outcomes for both genders (see Figure 1).

Puberty signals the potential of motherhood for girls. In some societies this potential is actualized quickly, and girls are married young, often with the support and encouragement of parents who see that early marriage is in their daughter's and the family's best interest. Their adolescence is, therefore, cut short and their life trajectory is narrowed to fulfilling traditional gender roles. In less restrictive societies, or when family restrictions fail, and where adolescents have little access to modern contraception, schooling and early work experiences for adolescent girls can be compromised through premature pregnancy. Many empirical studies find that child-bearing or marriage often coincides with the end of schooling

Sixty five percent of them found a job upon finishing the program, and 70% of these found a job in their area of study. The project increased both job placement and income for disadvantaged youths over a control group, and the returns to labor market performance were better for women than for men (Buvinic 2005).

Trade policies help expand young women's employment opportunities. One of the best examples is Bangladesh, where young women joined the export driven textile sector in large numbers, increased their wages dramatically, and this increase had a small but noticeable impact on their agency. The opportunity cost of stopping work was high enough for women to delay marriage and, even after marriage, to delay childbirth (Amin, Diamond et al. 1998). Special measures (for instance, gender-informed health safety in the workplace and other regulations to insure good employment conditions for female workers) should help increase trade policies' potential positive effects on young women and counter potential adverse effects.

Investments in efficient sources of transport, energy, water and sanitation systems are crucial to relieve young women's domestic time burdens so they can take advantage of potential opportunities. Improved roads and transportation increase young women's chances to attend school, find employment, expand their social networks, access health care, and address their safety and security needs (Barnes and Sen 2003; Grown, Gupta et al. 2005; World Bank 1996). These infrastructure investments need to pay special attention to questions of access and affordability for young women.

Gender specific interventions to increase women's *agency* include policies (such as Title 9 in the US) and programs to increase adolescent girls' access to sports. Engaging in sports has potential beneficial effects for young women in terms of their current and future health (and their children's health) as well as their self-confidence and agency (Buvinic, Medici et al. 2005). Girls' participation in sports allow them to develop leadership and teamwork skills; expand their social networks; enjoy freedom of expression and movement; and receive mentoring and support from appropriate trusted adults (Brady 2005).

Adolescent girls at particular risk include girls 12-19 living outside the protective structure of family and/or schools (in domestic service, as orphans of HIV/AIDS or managing HIV affected families, victims of trafficking), married girls, unpartnered adolescent mothers and girls whose families plan to marry them when still children. Interventions (*second chance*) to give these particularly vulnerable girls the support they need to make safe, healthy and productive transitions to adulthood include: (a) provision of girl-only spaces offering health and social support; (b) development of a variety of financial products and services, including savings, which allow girls to protect their security while building their economic base; (c) improved terms and conditions of work for girls in the informal sector—especially those in domestic service; (d) provision of personal identity or documentation cards; (e) promotion of gender sensitivity in the classroom through the training of teachers (f) development of special

services for married girls to give them the social and economic supports they need to negotiate safer marriages; and (g) provision of quality reproductive health services and child care options to adolescent mothers (Bruce 2005).

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### References

References for this article can be found in the on-line version at <http://www1.worldbank.org/devoutreach/>

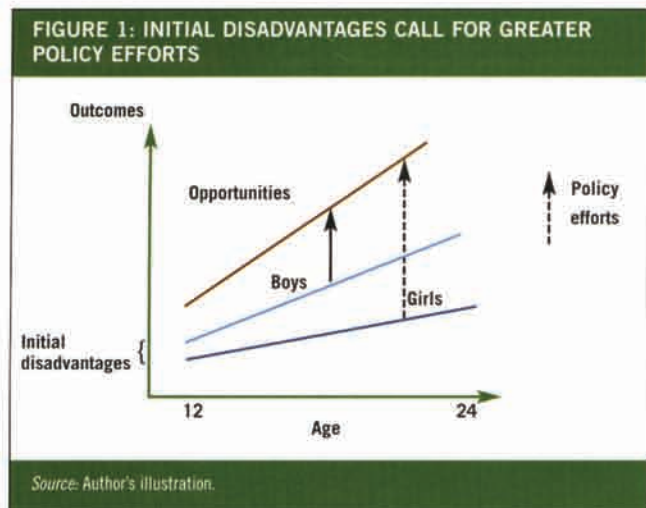
### Endnotes

- 1 A similar pattern is observed in North Africa and the Middle East.
- 2 The percentages of idle girls in the other countries are: 10% in Brazil, 23% in Cameroon, 27% in Turkey, and 28% in Guatemala. Data obtained from Living Standard Monitoring Surveys, Labor Force Surveys, Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, and Child Labor Survey.
- 3 Author's calculation based on Demographic and Health Surveys from 60 countries, 1990-2005.

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for girls (Choe, Thapa *et al.* 2001; Field and Ambrus 2005; Gupta and Leite 1999; Gupta and Khan 1996; Lloyd and Mensch 2006; Welti 2002).

### School-to-work transitions for adolescent girls

THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD has undergone significant transformation, and changes have been much more rapid for girls than for boys. Across countries, on average, adolescent girls' school attendance and labor force participation have risen comparatively more rapidly than adolescent boys' attendance and participation, for both the 15 to 19 and 20 to 24 year age groups. For instance, low income countries have witnessed a 59 percent increase in the percentage of girls completing four or more years of schooling in the last 20 years, and only a 20 percent increase for boys (Lloyd 2005b). At the same time, female to male ratios in labor force participation rates have been rising in most settings among youth, albeit more slowly than the rise in their school attendance. Young women's labor force participation rates have increased somewhat, even in societies, such as Pakistan, with traditionally very low female participation rates (Lloyd 2005a; Lloyd 2005b; Lloyd and Grant 2005).

This transformation in females' transition to adulthood has not been without upheaval. There often is a disjuncture between traditional gendered expectations regarding adult work roles, which are more resistant to change, and non-traditional behaviors. As a result, overall, adolescent girls exhibit a more difficult transition between schooling and adult work roles than adolescent boys. As boys become young men they tend to increasingly concentrate their work time in economically productive activities while girls, as they become young women, face the contradictions of having to maintain and often increase their time in domestic work while at the same time often seeking to join the labor market.

For most regions of the developing world, high levels of school attendance combined with low labor force participation (as shown in Figure 2) suggest this more difficult transi-

tion from school to work for adolescent females. Three regions—Latin America, Europe and Central Asia, and East Asia and Pacific—show high rates of school attendance for both girls and boys, but much lower levels of labor force participation for girls than for boys.<sup>1</sup> South Asia shows lower school attendance and labor force participation rates for girls compared to boys, along with high early marriage rates for females, a point that we will return to shortly.

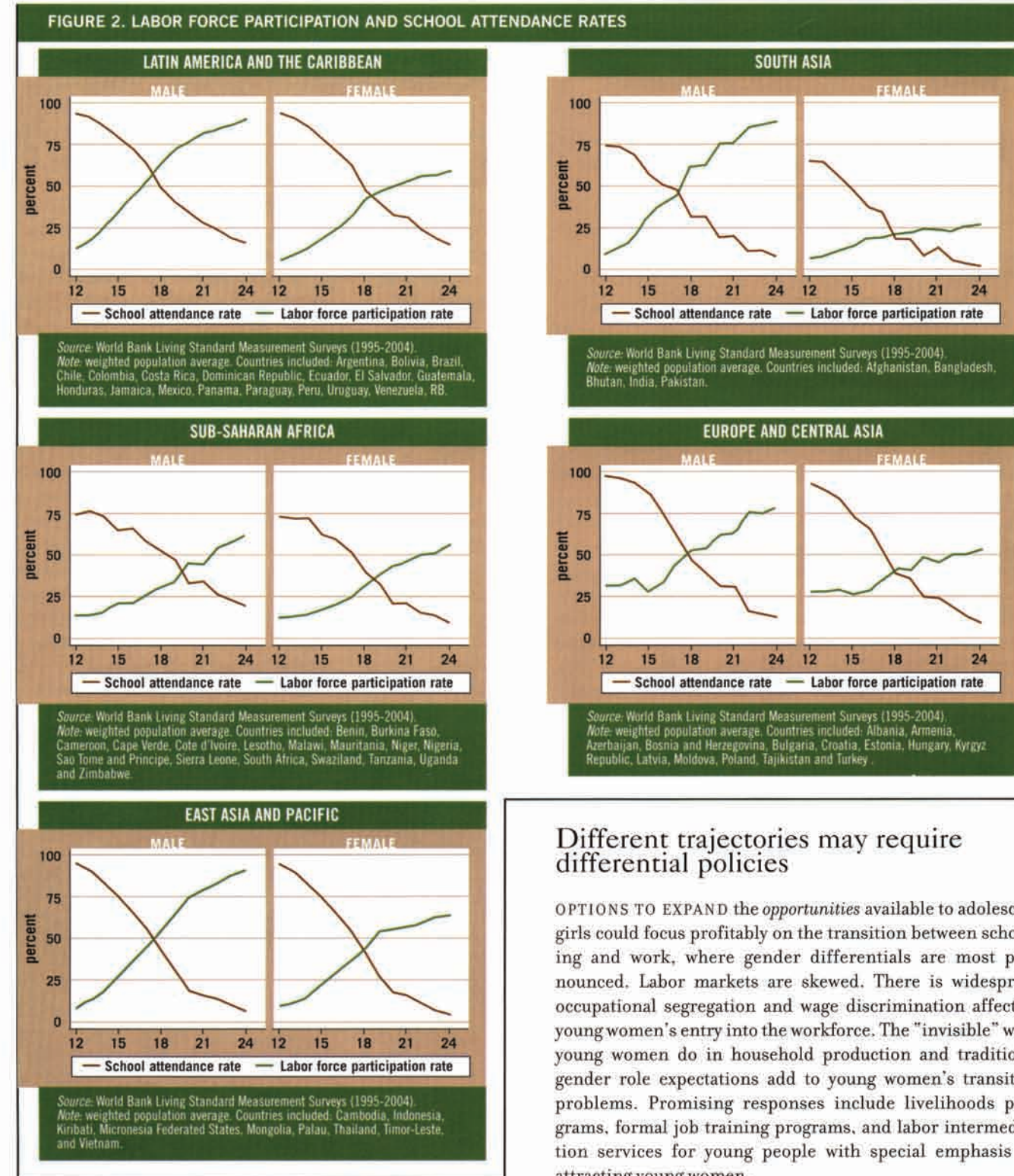
Sub Saharan Africa is the only region with similar low school attendance and low to moderate labor force participation rates for both boys and girls. It remains to be seen if, as economic development continues, young women will be given the same opportunities as boys to participate in the labor market.

Another manifestation of gender differentials in the transition from school to work is the "idle girls" phenomenon. Figures taken from household surveys that included special modules to measure child activities from six developing countries (Brazil, Cameroon, Guatemala, Nepal, Turkey and Yemen) show that girls are more likely than boys to be "idle" (i.e. not enrolled in school or engaged in measured economic activity). By age 14, the percentage of girls who are absent from both school and economic activity ranges from 6 percent in Nepal to 44 percent in Yemen (Biggeri, Guarcello *et al.* 2003)<sup>2</sup>. These figures can be explained by the fact that girls spend a substantial amount of time daily on domestic chores—on average girls work a total of 1–2 more hours a day than boys, if the time spent on domestic chores is combined with time spent in economic activity, or being unemployed, or sick (Lloyd 2005b). As a result, young females, when compared to young males, in fact, enjoy less leisure and spend more time with family members instead of peers during their adolescent years (Lloyd, Grant *et al.* Forthcoming).

While widespread, change in the transition to adulthood has yet to reach the lives of many adolescent girls in poorer, traditional societies. For them, early marriage and early childbearing are still the norm, and define the future for themselves and their children. Available data, based on DHS, suggest that about 50 percent of women aged 20–24 are married before the age of 18 in South Asia, 41 percent in Africa and 25 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean. Niger records the highest overall prevalence of child marriage (77 percent); this proportion is significantly lower (8 percent) for those who attended secondary school than those who attended only primary school (40 percent)<sup>3</sup>.

The increasing importance of a cash economy has the potential to attract young women into the labor force giving them opportunities for greater agency (understanding agency as expanding choices and/or expanding networks) in their lives. Conversely, early marriage and/or early childbearing reinforces existing intrahousehold inequalities by denying young women the opportunity to directly benefit from the growing cash economy (Lloyd 2005b).

Young mothers often transmit their own restricted future to their offspring. Studies have shown that, regardless of mothers' education or income, children born to adolescent mothers tend to have lower birth weight, greater mortality and greater likelihood of obstetric complications than those born



### Different trajectories may require differential policies

OPTIONS TO EXPAND the opportunities available to adolescent girls could focus profitably on the transition between schooling and work, where gender differentials are most pronounced. Labor markets are skewed. There is widespread occupational segregation and wage discrimination affecting young women's entry into the workforce. The "invisible" work young women do in household production and traditional gender role expectations add to young women's transition problems. Promising responses include livelihoods programs, formal job training programs, and labor intermediation services for young people with special emphasis on attracting young women.

Chile Joven, implemented between 1992 and 1995, is one of the few employment training programs that included in its design a special focus on young women and was rigorously evaluated. Half of the 110,000 low-income high-risk young participants were women. The special focus on young women included awareness campaigns for the business sector to recruit women, childcare services, gender training for trainers, and expanded traineeships in firms for young women.

to adult mothers, and lower nutritional status in childhood (Alam 2000; Bacci, Manhica *et al.* 1993; Buvinic 1998; Legrand and Mbacke 1993). Some evidence also shows that adolescent motherhood reproduces itself—children of adolescent mothers are more likely to become adolescent mothers themselves (Buvinic 1998)