

SPREAD 3

Changing ages, changing bodies, changing times—Adolescent boys and girls

Across urban and rural communities in eight countries, 800 girls and boys between the ages of 11 and 17 talked about their everyday life, their use of time, their aspirations and hopes for the future, and what it means to be a girl or a boy today.¹ Aware of the demands and opportunities of today's world, boys and girls deeply value education and aspire to good jobs. Their answers and conversations also bring to light how early in life gender differences emerge and how expected gender roles and behaviors permeate all aspects of their everyday lives—from their relation with their parents to their evaluation of each other. That includes their definitions of what constitutes appropriate behavior—what it means to be a good or bad girl, a good or bad boy (spread figure 3.1).

Dedicating effort to study and doing well in school are defining attributes of good girls and boys alike and one of their main responsibilities. Second to school for girls comes helping at home. Other markers of a good girl include individual character traits—such as being obedient and respectful. In contrast, lack of modesty in dress and going out without a specific purpose or staying out late are perceived as inappropriate behavior for girls. For boys, risky behaviors—smoking, drinking, drug use—are central in the definition of a bad boy, and a good boy is defined as a boy who does not have these behaviors.

Adolescents and their parents alike place a high value on education. Most of the adolescents surveyed were attending school at the time of the survey, except for a quarter of the girls and boys participating in India. These girls and boys had left school at different stages from grades 1 to 10, the majority around grade 5 or 6. The girls left school to help at home or in home agricultural production, while boys left to work as painters, carpenters, and mechanics in urban areas and as agricultural workers in rural communities.

In all cases, the adolescents' participation in school and their decision to leave largely depended on parental views about education, which have changed over time, particularly for daughters, as a woman from the Red Sea region in North Sudan narrates:

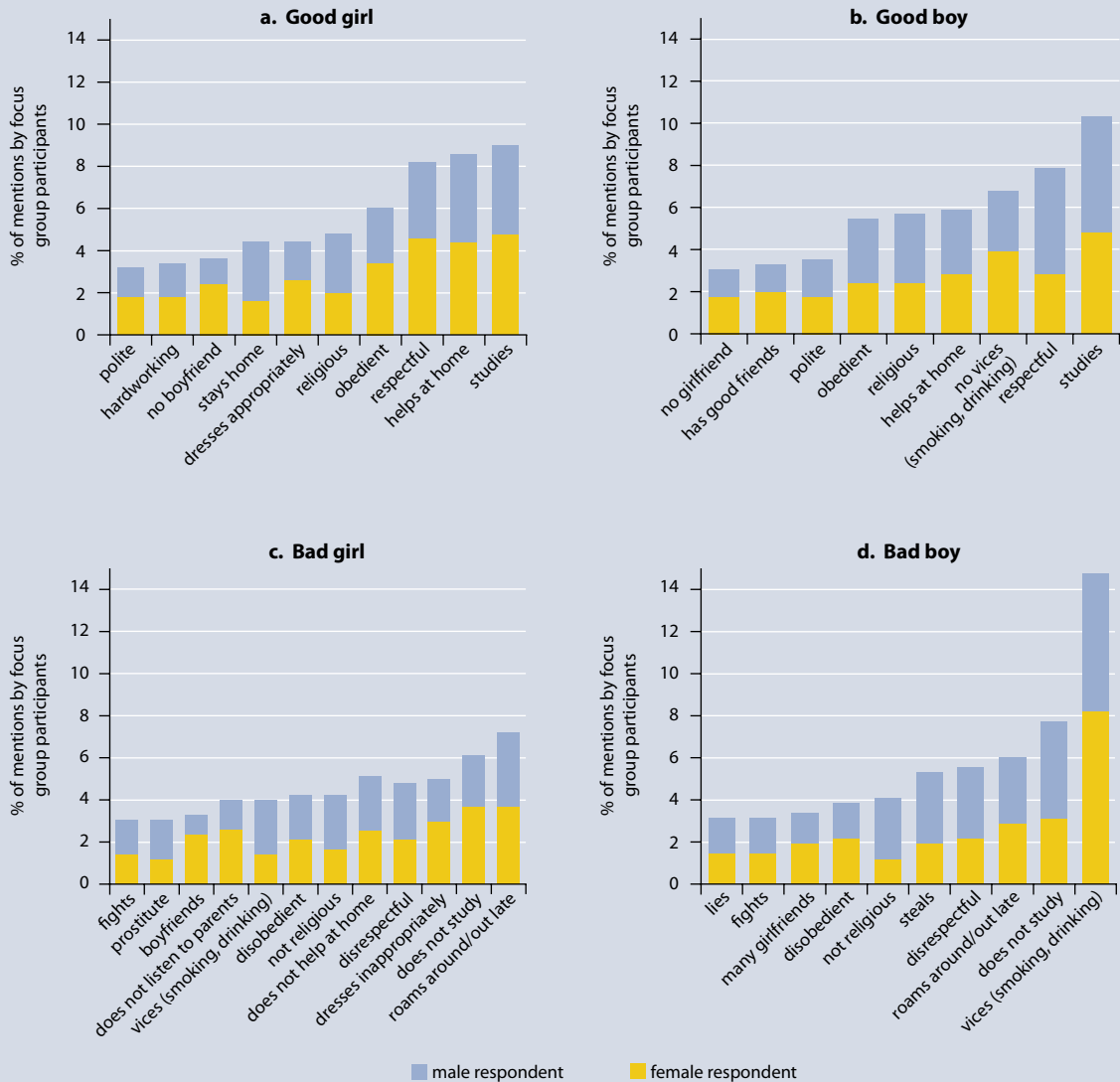
I was born in 1963 in a middle-income family of a Bega tribe. Things were very different then. When I became seven years of age, I began to help my mother in home farming and household duties. Women in our area do not work in farms but they help in seed-

ing and harvesting. I did not go to school, because there was no school in our village. Also, there was no girl's education, and there was not one educated girl in our area. It was believed that girls' education was shameful. When I was 17 years old, they married me to my cousin without asking me. We had seven children, three girls and four boys. All my daughters started school but only one of them passed grade 4 and continues studying. . . . I hope, God willing, that she would continue and complete her education to the highest level reached by any girl in the village. Yes, now I have changed my ideas to education, especially to girls' education.

Girls and boys have the expectation that getting an education will give them a better future than their parents had and that it will allow them to meet their aspirations: “School is very important, I see my big brothers who are civil servants and I want to be like them” (young man, Burkina Faso). “Education lets us join the modern world, and offers us better jobs now; in the past it was not important since our people were farmers and were not paying attention to their future or look[ing] to change their present” (young man, North Sudan). “Brighter future, less hard work than being farmers, better economic life” (young man, Vietnam). “Complete education up to university to get a job, then become an educated mother” (young woman, North Sudan).

But they are also aware that they may not reach the education levels they wish. When asked to compare their desires with reality, all girls surveyed in Bhutan, Burkina Faso, and the Republic of Yemen said they would like to attain at least a college degree, but rural girls are aware that their schooling is unlikely to extend beyond secondary level, if they are lucky. Fijian girls and girls from the West Bank and Gaza feel that they will meet their dream of a college degree. The overwhelming majority of girls in India aspire to a degree, but when asked about how far they are really likely to go in their education, answers vary, and some think they may just make it to secondary school and not fulfill their dreams to become doctors, lawyers, or engineers. Boys too aspire to college and professional degrees, but in Burkina Faso and rural Fiji, they are aware that many will not make it past primary school. And while some Gaza boys share dreams of advanced tertiary education, they know they are likely to stop their schooling at secondary level. Some boys from Burkina Faso do not really want to go beyond primary levels. And

SPREAD FIGURE 3.1 Characteristics of good girls/boys and bad girls/boys



Source: WDR 2012 team calculations, based on "Defining Gender in the 21st Century: A Multi-Country Assessment" (dataset).

boys in the Dominican Republic share the perception that studying is not the best path to a better future.

The reasons that explain the gap between their wishes and reality range from physical distance to economic hardship to gender roles. Distance and lack of infrastructure affects boys and girls alike, but girls have more difficulties when there is no school in their village or when their friends start dropping out and they have no peers to join them on their journey to school. In all places, girls face more mobility restrictions than boys do. Boys and girls are also affected by their family's economic situa-

tion. Boys leave school to contribute to family income, girls to help at home. In these cases, the number and order of children play a role in parents' decisions. "If possible, all the children are sent to school; if there is a financial problem, younger children are sent to school and older kids are sent to work," a boy in India pointed out. Girls from other communities in the country offered similar explanations.

Gender differences also play in the decision to leave school. In Bhutan, Burkina Faso, India, North Sudan, and the Republic of Yemen, girls leave school to prepare for

future marital duties, to keep them safe from danger, or to prevent unwanted pregnancies: *“My boyfriend got in the way of my education when I got in the 6th grade, I got pregnant”* (young woman, Liberia). *“It was my own fault. I had a boyfriend and got pregnant while still in school. I left school and had to stay home”* (young woman, Papua New Guinea).

Prevalent views of gender roles and binding social norms shape adolescents’ daily lives. The expectation is that girls will help in the house, and their responsibility for certain chores means that, in general, girls enjoy less free time than boys. Across four communities in Burkina Faso, it was unanimously recognized that *“boys devote more time to having a good time because they have more free time, they don’t have to wash or prepare food.”* A group of girls in the Dominican Republic complained, *“We have to clean the floors, we have to wash, we have to look after our siblings, we have so many things to do!”* Almah, from rural Papua New Guinea, explains, *“Boys do nothing to help. They look for their friends to tell stories, and roam the streets the whole day, chewing gum, listening to music, sleeping, and resting. Girls take care of all household chores, collect firewood, and fetch water. Daughters have to take over housework, and they have no free time.”* Sangay, a boy from Bhutan, agrees, *“Girls spend most of the time working at home and they play less, whereas boys play more and work less at our age.”*

While boys are expected to help, their tasks are more contained and take less of their time: *“Boys don’t have specific tasks to do. They go shopping within the neighborhood whenever that is needed, but this doesn’t take more than an hour daily.”* *“I would help at home if I am requested to do, but nobody asks me”* (young man, North Sudan). And while they devote some of their free time to studying, boys say they would like to have ways to use their time in a more productive way, in part responding to social norms of their future roles as income providers for their households: *“I would like to work more and play less Nintendo”* (young man, Dominican Republic). *“Rather than staying at home and doing nothing, I would be happy if I could get money and start a small business”* (South Africa). *“We would very much like to get a job or anything useful to use our free time”* (West Bank and Gaza). *“We want to engage in activities that will bring income”* (Afghanistan).

Adolescence, a time to transition into adulthood, is also a time when many form a family and have children. In two of every five communities in all 19 countries in the assessment, young women said that girls are often married and have children before they reach age 17. In 11 of the 19 countries, young women said marriage and childbirth was common for girls under the age of 15, more so in rural than urban settings. The early onset of sexual activity was in some cases associated with early marriage,

but not always: *“I got married when I was 10 years old, and I had a child when I was 15 years old. . . . This is not the right age. It is good only if they have a child at the age of 18 or more. It is good for a girl to have a child when she is able to think what is right and what is wrong”* (young woman, India). In the Dominican Republic most girls say that they start having sex—and becoming mothers—at age 13. *“A friend of mine is 11, and she is pregnant,”* said a girl from Santo Domingo. In Tanzania, the average age for first pregnancy was seen to be 15. *“But there are girls who have got their first child at the age of 12,”* said a young woman. *“Sometimes you can die for having a baby this early,”* recognized another girl in Liberia.

Most surprising, no adolescent girl or boy in any discussion group indicated that childbirth at such a young age was desirable or acceptable. In fact, when asked about the ideal and desired age to start a family, most said age 18 or older for both marriage and childbirth. There were no reports of boys under the age of 15 becoming fathers, and they recognize that they begin their sexual activity later than girls. In Peru, where 16 was the youngest age of sexual activity reported for boys, early onset of sexual relations also determines early household formation; while couples do not formally marry, they start cohabiting once the girl is pregnant, acknowledging that the pregnancy is *“a shared mistake,”* as a boy called it.

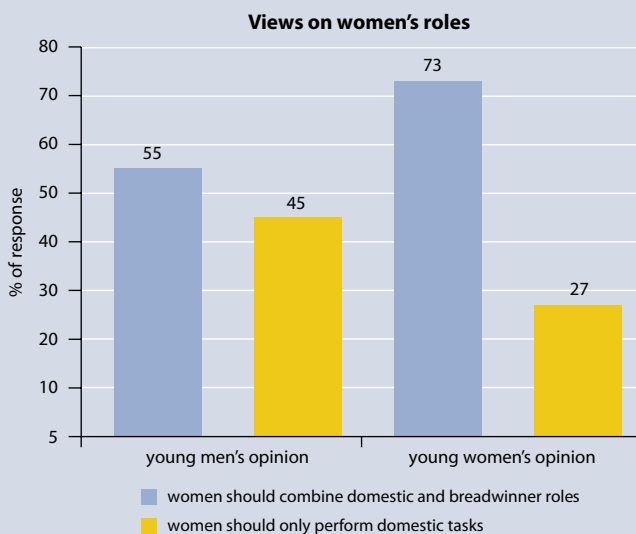
Having a boyfriend or a girlfriend at an early age was part of what groups defined as bad behavior. For boys, bad behavior extends to bad habits and bad company. Violence and smoking or drinking were frequently mentioned, as was participation in gangs and in groups of boys that bully other boys or harass girls in the street (see spread figure 3.1). The bad company was associated with boys staying out late more often; increasing their exposure to drugs, alcohol, and other bad habits; and losing interest in their studies. While girls are pulled into the house, boys are pushed out of it. This freedom of movement puts boys more at risk than girls. *“The boys are happy when they are a free man and the girls are happy to be in their home,”* said boys in North Sudan. *“Boys, they take their bikes and scoot off and roam around in villages here and there”* (young man, Fiji). *“Boys can influence each other into becoming more violent. Girls aren’t violent at all”* (adolescent boy, West Bank and Gaza). *“Boys are in gangs and fight each other with machetes, stones, and guns”* (adolescent boys, Dominican Republic).

Girls are more restricted to the home space. Boys and girls say that girls enjoy being at home or spending time with their friends *“We feel happy when we play together or we mingle with friends, the feeling of togetherness makes us happy”* (young woman, India). But some of these perceptions are related to specific restrictions on girls’ ability to move about freely and to have free time. *“They*

have more freedom to be out, girls have limits.” “Girls are afraid that if they go out something can happen to them or they can get raped,” said girls and boys in the Dominican Republic. Their peers in other countries agree: “Boys can be as free as they wish and that is alright. Girls cannot go out in the evening. Boys can go anywhere they wish” (Indonesia). “Boys are free to move around the community. Wherever they go they don’t worry and no one questions them” (Republic of Yemen). “Girls have to find fun inside the house because they are not allowed to go out like the boys” (West Bank and Gaza). “Women should stay home. . . . It is preferred to be at home and not go out on the street or any other place” (North Sudan).

But girls are willing and open to challenge the norms that confine them to the domestic sphere. While young men have a more traditional view of the role of women in the household, girls aspire to a different life from their mothers and want to combine productive and reproductive tasks (spread figure 3.2). While admiring the hard-working nature, devotion, and care of their mothers, most girls whose mothers were housewives do not want to replicate that in the future. Many boys also want their sisters and future wives to have a different life from their mother: “She works at home, she is also financially supporting the family, she has more responsibilities at home. If my father comes home drunk, he might verbally and physically abuse her [but] she has always encouraged the boys to dream. We can’t face so many difficulties, we don’t want that kind of life” (young boy, India). “Our mothers’ lives were difficult,” said a group of girls in Fiji. “They stay home and have a lot of responsibilities—look after kids, household chores, cooking and cleaning and work on farms;” “[we want] better education and advanced job in life . . . education first and then work and get married last [not at a young age like their mother’s did].”

SPREAD FIGURE 3.2 Adolescents’ opinions on women’s roles



Source: WDR 2012 team calculations, based on “Defining Gender in the 21st Century: A Multi-Country Assessment” (dataset).

NOTE

1. The WDR2012 Qualitative Assessment included 19 economies (the complete country list can be found in Spread 1, note 1). Specific focus groups with adolescents were conducted in a subsample of 8 economies including Bhutan, Burkina Faso, the Dominican Republic, Fiji, India, North Sudan, West Bank and Gaza, and the Republic of Yemen. In many other countries, adolescents participated in interviews with young women.