‘Intergenerational narratives of wellbeing and gender: Findings from Young Lives’

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Our starting point:

‘Wellbeing happens in relationship’ (White 2010)

• Childhood, gender & wellbeing in international development
• Background to Young Lives
• What we’re finding on gender in childhood
• Why a generational perspective matters for understanding child wellbeing
• Raising questions and challenges
One of the main responses to child wellbeing/illbeing in development circles is in relation to children’s rights (UNCRC).

These are rights of individuals as members of a particular age category (and because of their vulnerability).

The tendency is to focus on specific articles that award particular rights (‘the right to education’).

Rights should be treated as indivisible and interconnected, and relevant for children’s wider web of relationships (Morrow and Pells 2012).

In relation to adolescence, development has focused on rights of girls and on gender as the main threat to girls’ wellbeing.
There is a tendency to address ‘illbeing’ through the lens of individual risks associated with particular, separable, practices/sources of vulnerability (fgm/c, early marriage, child labour, orphanhood, etc.)

African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990) commits governments to:

‘...take all appropriate measures to eliminate harmful social and cultural practices affecting the welfare, dignity, normal growth and development of the child’
EMPOWERMENT AND GIRL-LED DEVELOPMENT

• The campaign for ‘girl-led development’ (exemplified by The Girl Effect) singles out adolescent girls as exceptional agents of development, uniquely positioned to end poverty for themselves, their families and beyond. Female adolescence as an opportunity; girls as an ‘untapped potential’, ‘waiting to be unleashed’, ‘the world’s most powerful force for change.’

• ‘Ripple effect’, ‘multiplier effects’ of investing in girls; the basic principle is, ‘invest in a girl, she’ll do the rest.’

• Much of the concern is for girls’ ‘futures’ as bearers of children and as wage-earning mothers and to empower girls to make better decisions.

• How do these approaches gel with the notion that ‘wellbeing happens in relationship’?
12,000 children in four countries: Ethiopia, India (Andhra Pradesh), Peru and Vietnam, from infancy to parenthood (over a 15 year period)

Pro-poor sample: 20 sites in each country selected to reflect country diversity, rural-urban, livelihoods, ethnicity etc.; roughly equal numbers of boys and girls

Two age cohorts in each country followed through surveys:

• 2,000 children born in 2000-01
• 1,000 children born in 1994-95

Longitudinal qualitative component following a sub-sample of 200 case study children (2007-2014).
THREE AREAS OF INVESTIGATION AND MESSAGING

• What shapes children’s development, their transitions and trajectories, including factors that increase, or reduce resilience.
• Changing risks and opportunities and the way children’s lived environments shape their development and experience
• What inequality means for children
• Within these lines of enquiry, one of the important questions we ask is whether gender is a major factor influencing children’s wellbeing. If so, how do we understand it.
Gender differences interconnect with other inequalities, but do not always advantage boys (on a range of education, nutrition, subjective wellbeing outcomes). In other words, girls sometimes fare better.

• Although boys are more likely to be in school at age 15 in AP India, girls are more likely to be in school in the other three countries (Dercon and Singh 2011).
• In Vietnam, the drop-out rate is nearly a third higher for boys than for girls.
• In AP, parents have lower education aspirations for daughters than for sons at age 12, and by age 15 girls have lower educational aspirations for themselves. Disadvantages based on urban or rural location, ethnicity, caste or poverty levels are larger and more consistent than differences according to gender. (See: Dercon and Singh 2013; Murray 2012; Pells 2011)
Although overall there appears to be little difference between boys and girls, disaggregation by other factors may paint a different picture (Woodhead et al 2013).

For example, when 8 year-olds were given a math test in AP, there was little difference in boys’ and girls’ average scores, but disaggregation by wealth and maternal education shows larger gaps.

(Source: Woodhead et al 2013:24)
As new opportunities (and risks) in the lived environment open up, expressions of gender bias may change.

- In Andhra Pradesh, previously, girls had lower primary school enrolment rates. Now, there is gender equity in enrolment, but boys are more likely to go to private schools and to have more money spent on their education (Woodhead, Frost and James 2013).
Qualitative research with children and families shows that even where gender ‘gaps’ in outcomes are numerically small, gender processes remain vital to young people’s experiences of poverty.

In other words, gender is part of childhood experience (for girls and boys), differences becoming more marked in adolescence and as children grow older:

For example, their evolving socio-moral identities, roles & responsibilities for engaging with poverty and household shocks, mobility, and the nature of everyday risk.
WELLBEING IN RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

• Young people articulate their wellbeing in relational terms.

• Across our sample, intergenerational relationships are a vital context for negotiating child wellbeing, including for older children.

• ‘Childhood’ is understood not simply as a life phase through which individuals pass, rather ‘childhood’ is part of a generational structure (or ordering) that situates the young and old in relation to each other (as generations, not individuals). So, like gender, this is another form of power relationship in which children are located and through which they negotiate wellbeing.
WELLBEING IN RELATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

• One expression of this is the so-called ‘intergenerational contract’ (Kabeer 2000; Moncrieffe 2009), or the implicit understanding that parents will look after their children when they are young and expect to be looked after by children in their old age.

• But childhood is not free from responsibilities, the intergenerational contract is constantly being revised and ongoing. Care is not uni-directional, and children contribute, including intra-generationally through sibling care and interdependence.

• The intergenerational contract often extends across households (involving aunts, uncles, guardians, etc.).
– ‘Honestly, it makes me happy [that my son is growing older] because you know when our children get older they support us.’ (Mother of boy aged 12, Peru)

– ‘If I help my daughter to finish university, she will support me financially.’ (Mother of girl aged 15, Ethiopia)

– A boy recounts how his mother had been told by others in the community: ‘Look, you are a blessed, one. You are being looked after by your son and there is no need for you to work. He is only earning but also taking care of you.’ I felt very happy. I want to get a good name, still want to work hard and do better things. (Boy, 15 years, Andhra Pradesh)
NEGOTIATING CHANGES IN CHILDREN’S WELLBEING
CHANGING CHILDHOOD - ETHIOPIA

• Rapid expansion of schooling and the expectation that children attend school: By 2009 (aged 15) nearly all children in our sample had been to school, as opposed to one third of their parents (Tafere 2013)

• In schools, children receive rights education, including through ‘rights clubs’ and other school groups (Abebe 2012)

• Among families in our sample, there is a sense that children are becoming ‘wiser’ and more challenging of adult authority (Tafere 2013)
ADULT LOSS OF CONTROL

‘In our time, we were punished and strictly controlled by our parents. Now, parents don’t have much control over their children.’ (Father, rural site)

‘In the past, children strictly obeyed their parents. But these days, children can also do whatever they want…they have relative freedom to decide on their own issues … If parents try to control them, they may leave the family forever and go somewhere without the parental approval.’ (Mother, rural site)

‘Children in our time were innocent, obedient…. punished if they make mistakes… These days, children refuse to do things beyond their capacity… they know what is good or bad for them…’ (Mother, rural site)

‘I got married at her age, 14. It was common to take the bride without thinking wisely…… When I tell my 14 year-old granddaughter to marry, she gets angry and threatens to report to the authorities. Children of the day are very wise.’ (Grandmother, rural site)
A woman took her aunt’s daughter (aged 15) in so she could access school. The teachers complained that she didn’t treat the girl as she did her own daughter.

The teachers questioned the girl; ‘Do you not have clothes?’ she replied; ‘I do.’ ‘Are you hungry? ‘No I am not hungry.’ ‘Then what do you want?’ She said: ‘My rights are abused.’ ‘What right is abused?’ ‘She controls me.’ ‘Is it because she controls you that you said your right is trespassed?’

The woman said; ‘I have to control you, if you give birth to a baby out of wedlock it is me who will be blamed. If she is my child it is my problem, but if that happens to you everybody will blame me.’

The girl attempted suicide and her mother (reluctantly) took her home.

‘It is the teachers; they are the ones who spoil the children. What does rights mean? Anyone can only do what they can.’
In 2010, Haymanot (rural site), 16 years old, was married in a family-arranged wedding to a young man she knew well. Her family was very poor, so her in-laws did not require dowry (which was customary). Haymanot said:

‘I am happy about my marriage because it was arranged by my parents and I stopped doing paid work since marriage.’ Her parents considered the marriage a protection against poverty, disease and sexual harassment (from the male colleagues she worked with at a stone crushing plant). She discontinued her education when she married but intergenerational relations remained smooth; she visited her mother and helped her financially.

The same year, Ayu (rural site), 16 years old, married. Ayu’s parents wanted the marriage to be arranged by the family, since this is local custom and requires the groom’s family to pay bride wealth (money and gifts to the bride’s family). But he could not afford it, so the couple decided to get married through ‘voluntary abduction’ (a type of elopement since Ayu was willing). This caused a lot of conflict in the family. To smooth the situation, the couple started making bride-wealth payments, the husband was saving money to make a further payment, so they could formalize the marriage according to tradition.
In relation to Haymanot and Ayu, were their respective marriages expressions of ‘agency’ and ‘choice’? Or, were they victims (of culture, of parents, of poor decision-making, of poverty...)? What were their alternatives to marriage?

What are the implications for relational wellbeing of development approaches that target individual groups of children (eg, ‘girls’) or that single out specific risks for intervention (‘early marriage’)?

Approaches focusing on girls’ wellbeing and empowerment create a real concern that boys are being left out, their gendered risks ignored, and their role in gender equality marginalized.