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Disrupted educational pathways: The effects of conflict on adolescent educational access and learning in war-torn Ethiopia

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As the mid-way point for the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals
(SDG) timeframe nears, countries affected by conflict and fragility represent
one of the key challenges to achieving SDG 4—-ensuring inclusive and
equitable quality education for all. Drawing on qualitative research undertaken
in late 2021 in South Gondar zone, in Ethiopia's war-torn northern Amhara
region, with adolescent girls and boys ($n = 80$), their caregivers ($n = 11$)
community leaders and local service providers, including teachers ($n = 31$),
this article explores the experiences of young people during and after their
communities were occupied by the Tigray People's Liberation Front, and the
multi-pronged effects the conflict has had on their educational pathways.
It finds that for many, schooling has been disrupted by: recruitment into
the armed forces or organized youth movements (Fano); destruction of
school infrastructure and records by the occupying forces; an inability to
concentrate on education on account of trauma and stress; and a loss of
educational aspirations given fears of prolonged insecurity. At the school
level, it also identifies negative impacts in terms of teacher presence, teaching
quality and the provisioning of educational activities; compounded by reduced
education budgets as local, regional and federal government resources are
diverted to the war effort. The article concludes with some reflections
on the implications of our findings for government, development partners,
communities, non-governmental organizations, and schools, in their efforts
to strengthen education services and build resilience, including through
linkages with social protection, justice, and psychosocial support services, in
contexts of ongoing fragility.

KEYWORDS

conflict, education, adolescents, gender, Ethiopia, aspirations, learning, Sustainable
Development Goals

Introduction

As the mid-way point for the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) timeframe nears, countries affected by conflict and fragility represent one of the key challenges to achieving SDG 4—-ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all. This article draws on qualitative research undertaken in late 2021 in South Gondar zone in Ethiopia's war-torn northern Amhara region to explore the effects on adolescent schooling and learning of the devastating conflict which is estimated to have killed tens of thousands of people if not more and to have displaced 60,000 people who have sought refuge in Sudan and more than 2.6°million people have been displaced internally (UNHCR, 2022). It also explores the indirect effects of the conflict on service provision and the diversion of sectoral budgets to the war effort.

Over the course of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) framework (2000–2015), Ethiopia had seen remarkable progress in terms of primary education enrolment, which increased from 21 per cent in 1996 to 93 per cent in 2014, while the net enrolment rate for secondary education—-although starting from a very low baseline—-increased from 8.8 per cent in 1996 to 20.2 per cent in 2014 (National Planning Commission and the United Nations in Ethiopia, 2015). However, progress slowed during the first 5°years of the Sustainable Development Agenda (2016–2021), as highlighted by the 2021 Sustainable Development Report (Sachs et al., 2021), which noted that in terms of SDG 4, the country faced "significant" challenges in terms of the net primary enrolment rate and "major" challenges in terms of the targets around secondary school completion and literacy rates (ibid.). In short, in the 5°years preceding the outbreak of conflict in northern Ethiopia in November 2020, the education sector was already facing a daunting task to deliver on all children's right to education. That task has been rendered even more challenging by the prolonged closure of schools between March and November 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Jones et al., 2021).

This article draws on qualitive interviews undertaken in December 2021 in South Gondar zone, in Ethiopia's Amhara region, with adolescent girls and boys, their caregivers, community leaders, and local service providers, including teachers and education officials. Study participants are all part of the larger Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) longitudinal study, which follows 20,000 adolescents across a range of low-and middle-income countries as they progress through the second decade of life. The qualitative interviews in South Gondar explored the experiences of young people during and after their communities were occupied by forces from the Tigray People's Liberation Front in July and August 2021 and the effects the conflict has had on their educational pathways. With two rounds of data collection undertaken prior to the onset of the conflict in late 2017/2018 and in late 2019/2020, the sample design allows for comparisons in adolescents' access to education, enrolment and attendance, educational quality, and educational aspirations. Although the conflict impacted indirectly on the research communities between November 2020 and June 2021, in July and August 2021 they were at the center of the violence. Accordingly, for most of the research participants, it was the first time that they had shared their experiences of the conflict beyond their community.

The article is organized as follows. After a brief overview of the literature on the effects of conflict on adolescent educational outcomes, we describe our research methodology. We then present the results, highlighting differences between adolescents by gender and age in terms of educational aspirations, school enrolment, school performance, education budgets, and education infrastructure. The article concludes with a discussion that reflects on the implications of our findings for government, development partners, communities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and schools themselves, in their efforts to invest in strengthening education services and build resilience, including through linkages with social protection, justice and psychosocial support services, in contexts of ongoing fragility.

Background and context

Situating our findings within the existing evidence base

Adolescents and children are often the first victims of war (Murthy and Lakshminarayana, 2006; Barber, 2009; Poirier, 2012). While some face immediate consequences such as recruitment, physical injury, abduction, and sexual assault, others are impacted more indirectly through the disintegration of state institutions, loss of personal security, deterioration of social cohesion, decline of human and material capital, and disruption of moral development (Boyden, 2003; Murthy and Lakshminarayana, 2006). Sometimes, these secondary consequences of war (such as loss of education and work opportunities) can be more damaging to people's mental health than the actual witnessing of violence (Boyden, 2003). According to Barber (2009), adolescents are often overlooked in analyses of the impact of war, although over the past decade an emergent body of evidence has developed (Samuels et al., 2017), including related to adolescent education.

The impacts of war on adolescents are also gendered; however, determining the gendered effects of conflict is not always simple, and they are very context dependent. Although boys have an increased chance of being conscripted into military groups, there are many examples of girls joining militias (Boyden, 2003). Still, girls are often assigned different military tasks than boys and, therefore, may be at risk of developing different kinds of trauma (Betancourt et al., 2011). Girls and boys are also impacted differently when it comes to access to basic services, including education.

The toll of war on adolescents' education

In 2017, UNICEF estimated that around 25 million children between the age of 6 and 15 were missing school in conflict zones (UNICEF, 2017). Enrolment was already low in many of these countries prior to conflict, which can make it difficult to distinguish which children were out of school directly because of the conflict (Jones and Naylor, 2014; Shields and Paulson, 2014); however, evidence shows that war can have devastating effects on adolescents' education (Lai and Thyne, 2007; Novelli and Lopes Cardozo, 2008; Parlow, 2011; Poirier, 2012). In Yemen, one in five children are out of school and at least 2.4°million Syrians (around 18% of the school-going population) remain out of school in 2021 (UNICEF, 2021; HNO, 2022). Additionally, approximately 171,600 Yemeni teachers have not received a regular salary since 2016 (UNICEF, 2021). Many adolescents are not able to continue their education due to displacement or recruitment by armed groups. Schools and other educational institutes often becomes the target of armed groups because they represent the state or do not comply with the ideological motivations of militias. This could lead to the immediate disruption of the chances of going to school (Novelli and Lopes Cardozo, 2008; Poirier, 2012; Diwakar, 2015). In 2021, Syria witnessed 25 verified attacks on schools and seven instances where schools were used for military purpose in only 9°months (HNO, 2022). Even when students are able to continue going to school, conflict has been found to have a negative impact on learning and the overall quality of education (Jones and Naylor, 2014).

The role of education in mitigating violence is mixed. Education can also have a positive effect to prevent or help stop conflict, for instance by fostering equal societal participation and improve respect for equality, democracy, and human rights (Danesh, 2008; Sommers, 2009; Lopes Cardozo et al., 2015). However, some evidence suggests that education can also contribute to the promotion of violence by emphasizing cultural, religious, classist or ethnic differences; thereby producing social cleavages. Therefore, caution is advised when promoting education for peace (Novelli and Lopes Cardozo, 2008; Sommers, 2009). The language of instruction or the curriculum itself could be a catalyzer of conflict (Sommers, 2009).

Armed conflict has a significant effect on the immediate deterioration of education. A study in Rwanda showed that children who witnessed the genocide in 1994 were 15 percentage points less likely to finish third and fourth grade (Akresh and de Walque, 2008). Continued disruption of education can also affect adolescents' academic achievements. Students experienced a decline in educational achievement of almost one-half year of completed schooling measured 6°years after the genocide, with a stronger impact on males (Akresh and de Walque, 2008). Similarly, a study in the Kashmir Valley, in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir, showed that a 53-day consecutive curfew due to unrest, closing schools in the area, correlated with decreased academic achievement among adolescents (Manzoor and Gowhar, 2020). Utsumi (2021) shows that these negative effects can be protracted; his study finds a negative effect on adolescent educational achievement 12 years after the conflict in Timor-Leste ended (Utsumi, 2021).

Problems may also be manifested in terms of the supply side of the educational system. In the immediate aftermath of conflict (or during periods of relative peace), damaged schools are often in need of repairs, and displaced teachers need to be replaced. However, regions experiencing war are likely to decrease public funds on education (in the case of civil wars), an effect that is likely to continue even after the fighting is over (Lai and Thyne, 2007). In some conflict-affected contexts, a dearth of teaching professionals becomes a significant challenge. During the war in Iraq, for example, 500 Iraqi professors were assassinated and many others fled the country after being put on militia death lists. The inability to attract quality teachers can also have repercussions on the quality of education and students' academic achievements (Kibris, 2014; Diwakar, 2015). The negative impacts of war are not necessarily confined to areas where violence is taking place. During the war in Afghanistan, the enrolment rate in areas not affected by violence also decreased, with girls especially impacted outside of "hot zones" due to the perceived threat to girls' schools (Utsumi, 2022).

Gender differences in the impact of conflict on adolescents are complex and highly context dependent (Buvinić et al., 2013). Some studies show that conflict reduces boys' education attainment more than girls (Lai and Thyne, 2007; Rodriguez and Sánchez, 2012; Diwakar, 2015; Swee, 2015). This is explained by the fact that boys are more likely to be enlisted into armed groups or are required to work to reduce the conflict-induced economic shock (Rodriguez and Sánchez, 2012; Buvinić et al., 2013; Swee, 2015). It is also possible that more boys were in school prior to the conflict, making their loss of schooling attainment relatively higher (Buvinić et al., 2013). In other contexts, girls' education is more affected by conflict. The violent conflict in Tajikistan (1992–1998) had a particular negative effect on the enrolment of older girls (Shemyakina, 2011). In 2007, female education was specifically target by Taliban militia in Swat (Afghanistan) because it was considered a Western invention and in conflict with Islamic law. As a result, most female school buildings in the area were damaged or destroyed, creating a gap of 1 to 3 school years in girls' education, especially girls in secondary education were affected (Khan, 2015). During the Punjab insurgency in India (1981–1993), girls dropped out of school in large numbers due to their family's fears of gender-based violence. Also, because of the economic hardships induced by that conflict, boys were often prioritized to stay in school (Buvinić et al., 2013; Singh and Shemyakina, 2013).

Conceptual framing

Informed by this global evidence base on the impacts of conflict and displacement on adolescent education, we employ an adapted version of the GAGE conceptual framework on adolescents' intersecting capabilities see GAGE Consortium (2019); Baird et al. (2021). The framework emphasizes the interplay of adolescents' capabilities–in this case education and learning-, with context dynamics and change strategies adopted by policy and programming actors (GAGE Consortium, 2019).

For the purposes of this paper's objective to understand the effects of the conflict in northern Ethiopia on young people's education, we conceptualize educational capabilities as the interplay of adolescents' educational aspirations, enrolment, school attendance, and education performance, which are all critical aspects of a young person's education journey or pathway. As such, we draw on the work of Hart (2016) who proposes the capability approach as an important framing to articulate the complex ways in which aspirations contribute to human development but are also shaped by broader structural processes and constraints and may or may not be transformed into capability and functioning.

In terms of context dynamics, we consider the interaction between the economic precarity that the communities in the South Gondar were already experiencing pre-conflict see Presler-Marshall et al. (2021) and the compounding effects of the armed conflict between the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) forces and the regional and national government forces. The conflict officially started in November 2020 when Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed ordered a military offensive against regional forces in Tigray in response to an attack on a military base housing government troops. However, this event was preceded by months of tension between the federal government and leaders of Tigray's dominant political party which had been at the center of power since 1991 before being sidelined when Mr Abiy took office in 2018 after widespread anti-government protests and pursued a reformist agenda. Initially the fighting was concentrated in the Tigray region in late 2020 and early 2021, but by mid-2021 the TPLF gained a temporary military advantage and fighting spilled over into Amhara and Afar regions, including South Gondar. This resulted not only in widespread violence and destruction in study communities, but also the displacement of young people and their families from neighboring districts fleeing the violence, some of whom were still housed in temporary camps for internally displaced persons at the time of data collection in late 2021.

Finally, in terms of change strategies, we consider the measures undertaken by local officials and the regional Bureau of Education to provide ongoing schooling in conflict-affected areas, and related humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons on the part of development partners.

Materials and methods

This article is based on qualitative research undertaken in late 2021 in South Gondar zone, in Ethiopia's Amhara region, with adolescent girls and boys (n = 80), their caregivers (n = 11) community leaders and local service providers, including teachers (n = 33) (see Tables 1–3 for details of the sample). As noted above, while in the initial stages of the conflict in northern Ethiopia, the epicenter of the conflict was in the Tigray region, by mid-2021 the conflict had spilled over into the Amhara and Afar regions, with significant fighting extending in mid to late August to the boundaries of the capital city, Debre Tabor, of South Gondar zone.

Research participants were purposefully selected from a larger longitudinal mixed-methods research sample as part of the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) longitudinal study, which had randomly selected girls and boys from designated communities according to two age cohorts (younger adolescents, aged 10–14 years, and older adolescents, aged 15–19 years) see Jones et al. (2018) and for which two rounds of data collection had already been undertaken in late 2017/2018 and in late 2019/2020, prior to the onset of the conflict. Using this data allows for comparisons in adolescents' access to education, enrolment and attendance rates, educational quality, and educational aspirations (see Figure 1). Because of the sensitivity of capturing the experiences of adolescents in the midst of an ongoing conflict at a time when there were still high levels of trauma and insecurity, a qualitative research design that drew on a pre-existing longitudinal sample with whom the research team had already developed rapport in previous data collection rounds was deemed critical.

Researchers used interactive tools to have more in-depth conversations with adolescents and to probe their perceptions and experiences of conflict and its effects on their educational aspirations, school attendance, and attainment, eliciting the kind of data that would be more likely to go under-reported in quantitative survey approaches. The qualitative interviews (which ranged from 60 to 120°min' duration) focused on the perspectives and experiences of adolescents and young people and their communities, using three distinct methodological tools. First, community timelines were carried out with community leaders, officials, and service providers, so as to map out community-wide experiences as the conflict evolved from late 2020 to early 2022. These were complemented by semi-structured interviews with community key informants to understand community and district-level responses to the conflict, including vis-à-vis internally displaced persons (IDPs). With adolescents, we employed a social network hexagon tool, which allowed for an in-depth exploration of their experiences during the conflict, particularly around education, and the support networks they had been able to draw upon. For an overview of these research instruments see Jones et al. (2019).

TABLE 1 Research sample in South Gondar: Individual interviews with adolescents.

Research site		Adolescent individual interviews							Total
		Young girls (12–15)	Young boys (12–15)	Old girls (16–21)	Old boys (16–21)	Married girls	Persons with disabilities	Internally displaced girls	
Debre Tabor City administration	Debre Tabor City	4	2	1	3	2	3	–	15
Ebenat Woreda	Ebenat town	–	–	1	3	1	2	–	7
	Jeman Kebele	2	2	2	1	1	–	1	9
	Aquashmoch Kebele	4	2	3	5	2	1	–	17
Lay Gayint Woreda	Aqabit Kebele	1	1	2	–	–	–	–	4
	Ganga Kebele	1	2	1	–	–	–	–	4
Total		**12**	**9**	**10**	**12**	**6**	**6**	**1**	**56**

Zone = Province. Woreda = District. Kebele = Ward.

The number of interviews undertaken was informed by an interest in capturing adolescent experiences from communities with varying exposure to military occupation, displacement, and the presence of IDPs. We also wanted a balance of adolescents and youth from different age cohorts (12–15 and 16–21°years), girls as well as boys, to capture gender differences, and representation of socially marginalized groups of adolescents, including married adolescents, adolescents with disabilities, adolescents who had suffered the bereavement of a parent as a result of the conflict and adolescents affected by forced displacement—-all of whom are at risk of intersecting forms of disadvantage. Not all participants had previously experienced violence or abuse, but many were from disadvantaged backgrounds, placing them at risk of violence and abuse.

Respondents were from one of two districts in South Gondar zone, Amhara region: Ebenat and Lay Gayint, as well as Debre Tabor city. Research was undertaken in the local language (Amharic), with female researchers from the same regional background interviewing girls and male researchers from the same regional background interviewing boys. All researchers had detailed background knowledge of the issues being studied and were experienced in conducting qualitative research with young people from this zone, which enhanced their ability to undertake research on such a sensitive issue as conflict. All researchers also participated in a virtual full-day training workshop on the tools, data collection methodology and research ethics.

Informed consent was sought from those aged over 18, and assent obtained from those aged 10–17; consent was obtained from parents or caregivers except where an adolescent was head of the household. Younger adolescents were provided with a small gift of school stationery (notebooks and pens) in view of the fact that the large majority were enrolled in school, while older adolescents were provided with the equivalent of one day's minimum wage so as to ensure that they were not financially disadvantaged for taking part as a result of foregone work (in which many were involved either part-time or full-time). All interviewees were provided with a name card with a project mobile phone contact number, which was checked daily during the fieldwork in case of any questions or concerns about the research, or as an entry point to report possible violence or abuse. For cases that were reported either *via* the project phone line or to interviewers in person, a detailed referral protocol was in place, which had been quality assured by NGO and government experts for appropriateness for each region (given uneven service availability).

Ethical clearance for the research was granted by the ODI Ethics Review Board and the regional Bureau of Health's research ethics committee (because the broader GAGE research has a strong focus on adolescent health and wellbeing). Informed consent was sought with the young people involved in in-depth interviews, with adolescent and adult participants in focus group discussions, and with key informants (service providers and local government officials) who were briefed on the study objectives, the principles of confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any point.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated into English by bilingual transcribers. A subset of each transcriber's interviews was checked by a research supervisor to ensure quality translations. A detailed debriefing discussion was also held with the interviewer team to discuss emerging context-specific issues and themes, and to inform the development of a thematic codebook developed in line with GAGE's conceptual framework (see discussion above). Data was then analyzed thematically using this detailed codebook in MAXQDA, a qualitative software package. To ensure coding reliability, a subsample of transcripts was discussed in weekly debriefings

TABLE 2 Research sample in South Gondar: Focus group discussions with adolescents and adults.

Research site		Focus group discussions													Total
		Adolescents									Adults			
		Young girls	Young boys	Old girls	Old boys	Married girls	Girls with visual disability	Boys with visual disability	Internally displaced girls	Internally displaced boys	Female adults	Male adults	Internally displaced women	
Debre Tabor City administration	Debre Tabor City	1	1	1	2	–	1	1	–	–	1	1	–	9
Ebenat Woreda	Ebenat town	1	–	1	1	–	–	–	1	1	–	–	1	5
	Jeman Kebele	1	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	1	1	–	4
	Aquashmoch Kebele	1	1	1	1	1	–	–	–	–	1	1	–	7
Lay Gayint Woreda	Aqabit Kebele	1	1	1	1	–	–	–	–	–	1	1	–	6
	Ganga Kebele	1	–	–	1	–	–	–	–	–	1	1	–	4
Total		5	4	4	6	1	1	1	1	1	5	5	1	35

Zone = Province. Woreda = District. Kebele = Ward.

with the coding team (research assistants with a qualitative social science background and detailed knowledge of the GAGE longitudinal study and the Ethiopian context in particular) to discuss issues regarding how to apply the codes in specific instances.

Results

Our findings indicate that the impacts of the conflict on adolescents' education have been multi-pronged and intersecting. We discuss these in turn below.

Impacts on adolescents' educational aspirations

Arguably one of the most striking cross-cutting themes to emerge was the negative impact of the conflict on adolescents' educational aspirations. Adolescents emphasized that because of uncertainty brought about by the conflict, they were less confident in the role that education could play in helping their future development, with many fearing a return of the TPLF. As a 19-year-old boy in Debre Tabor stated:

> Young people were assuming there will not be an exam. After seeing the war, they were saying the war will continue and the exam will be postponed or may be cancelled. Joining the military and marching to the war were seen as the only options left because it was assumed that the junta was becoming strong and it will surely control the country, and education is the least thing to worry [about].

Many young people highlighted that their educational aspirations had shifted as a result of the war, and that they were now focused on how they could contribute to defending their community and state through joining either the Amhara Special Forces, the National Defense Forces, the militia or the Fano (an organized youth movement mobilizing to defend the community). A health extension worker from Lay Gayint district noted that:

> They [young people] do not want to go back to university. They told us as there is a war in places, they do not want to continue with university education… They are hopeless because of war. What is the benefit of education if the area is not at peace…? There are many university students who joined the military. When they observe their friends who joined the military, they said "we do not want to continue with education.

A community leader from Ebenat district emphasized that even young people in mid-adolescence were losing interest in schooling and eager to contribute to the war effort.

TABLE 3 Research sample in South Gondar: Key informant interviews.

Research site		Key informant interviews											Total
		Teacher	HEW	Militia	Fano	Women's association	Religious leader	Kebele leader	Bureau of education	Bureau of health	Bureau of justice	Bureau of women and social affairs	
Debre Tabor City administration	Debre Tabor City	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	1	1	1	1	6
Ebenat Woreda	Ebenat Town	-	-	-		-	-	-	1	1	1	1	4
	Jeman Kebele	1	1	-		1	1	1	-	-	-	-	5
	Aquashmoch Kebele	1	-	1	1	1	1	1	-	-	-	-	6
Lay Gayint Woreda	Nifas Mewucha Town	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	1	1	4
	Aqbit Kebele	1	1	1	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	5
	Ganga Kebele	-	1	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	3
Total		3	3	4	2	2	3	4	3	3	3	3	33

Zone = Province. Woreda = District. Kebele = Ward.

Children who are even at the age of 14, 15, and 16 are asking us to join the military so as to fight instead of learning, even some children are trying to join the Fano and the special force, but we forbade them since they are under age and also since they came without parents" permission.

He further highlighted that the limited employment options that school graduates have in these rural localities is further compounding young people's waning interest in education as younger adolescents are seeing that older peers who have completed their education have not secured employment and that employment prospects have become further truncated as a result of the war[1]

Our findings further indicated that the conflict affected not only students' aspiration to continue learning after the war ends and peace or at least stability is restored, but also their confidence to remain living in their community. A number of adolescent boys from a focus group in Ebenat explained that their focus had shifted:

Even, even if, the conflict completed and peace is restored, I don't want to live in this locality, I want to migrate to other localities and working there like in Addis Ababa and other big towns.

Impacts on school enrolment

These negative effects on adolescents' educational aspirations were also manifested in lower school enrolment rates, especially at secondary school level. Students across research communities were reported to be dropping out due to conflict-related physical and economic insecurity. Some young people were discouraged from enrolling as a result of general fear about the disruptive effects of the war on education provisioning. An 18-year-old girl from Ebenat district explained that:

There were rumors that school would not open. When the war started, they said teachers were going to join the war. Because school was closed at that time, students were discouraged and lost hope that school would be opened. Because of this, not many came to register for class.

1 This resonates with broader research on education levels and youth employment rates. The Young Lives longitudinal study found that rural youth aged 22 years had completed significantly lower levels of education than their rural counterparts – 25% versus 63% had completed lower secondary school among males and 30% versus 72% among female youth. However, 7 out of 10 rural youth were working compared to 5 out of 10 urban youth Young Lives (2018).
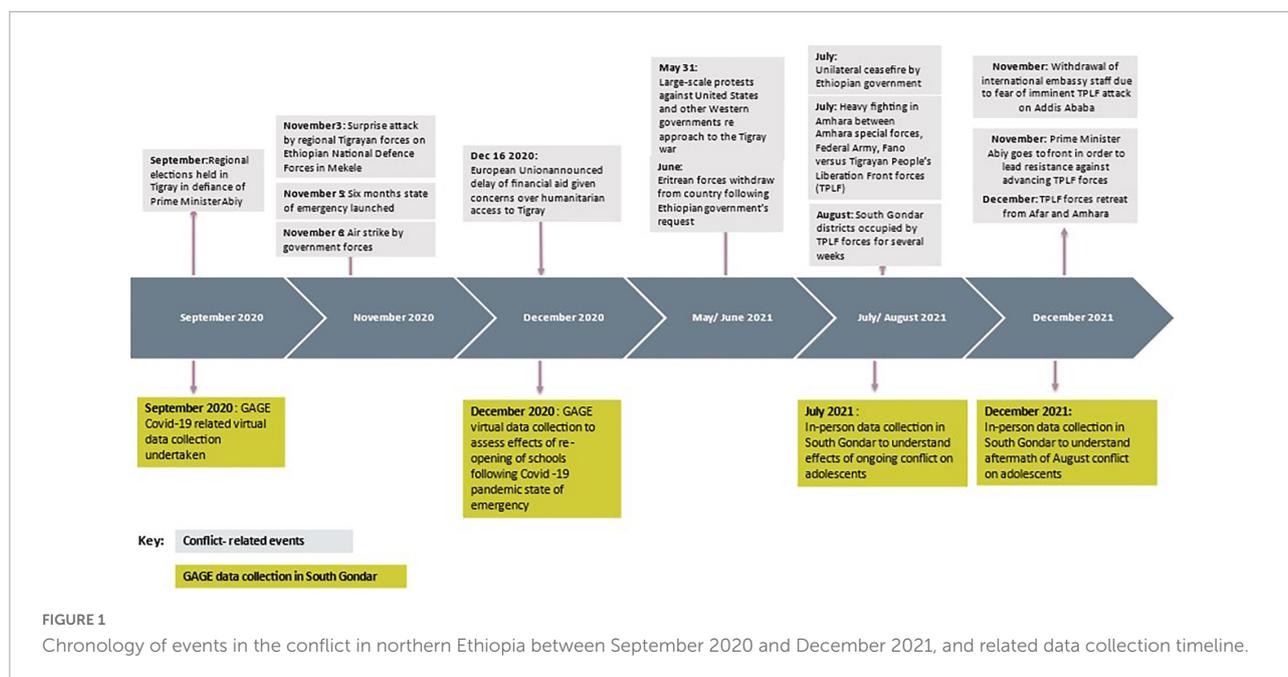
FIGURE 1
Chronology of events in the conflict in northern Ethiopia between September 2020 and December 2021, and related data collection timeline.

Some young people and their families had not re-enrolled as they had been displaced and had not, at the time of data collection, returned to their communities. A 15-year-old boy from Lay Gayint explained that:

> Students who fled to other localities with their parents didn't come back to our locality and they are not enrolled in the school.

Others emphasized that while they wanted to enroll, high levels of insecurity meant they had to delay doing so in order to support their families, especially in the absence of fathers and older brothers. A 16-year-old boy from Ebenat district said:

> I just want to continue my education… But now at this moment I do not want to leave my family. Especially my mother will be disturbed if I left her… If the peace is restored, I hope she will be calmed. I will try my best to manage the house and to attend my class but if that is not possible, I will drop the school and I can continue in the coming year when things are restored.

Gender differences in enrolment following the conflict outbreak

Safety concerns were especially prominent among caregivers of adolescent girls. Focus group discussions with mothers emphasized that they were concerned about their daughters' safety given general insecurity and were thus unwilling to allow girls to continue in school. This was both as a result of the threat of the TPLF and a general decline in security due to local militia (who in the absence of resourcing for a formal police force at community level are the key guardians of local law and order) being deployed at the warfront alongside a rise in private weapon ownership and use. In terms of economic insecurity, interviews revealed that students who need to travel to attend secondary school are dropping out as caregivers cannot afford transportation costs due to rising costs of living, and transportation costs had actually tripled. Some households also reported being unable to afford the books and stationery needed to attend school due to rising inflation and poverty. In yet other cases, students delayed enrolling in school because they were contracted to either seasonal agricultural work or as domestic workers while schools were temporarily closed on account of the war, but were planning to rejoin school later in the year. School enrolment, especially among boys, was also being negatively affected as many adolescents were dropping out to join the army, the Amhara Special Forces, the National Defense Forces or Fano. Male students involved in a focus group discussion in Lay Gaynt explained that,

> We won't think about education after this time, because, unless the TPLF is completely destroyed, we can't not only to learn but also live peacefully, so before thinking about our education, we better engage in fighting and destroying the TPLF.

In some instances, parents prevented their sons from enrolling as they feared that if they sent them to school, they

could be forcefully recruited. A 21-year-old young man from Ebenat district explained that:

> Yes, I was enrolled in 11th grade in this academic year, and soon after I started learning my parents forced me to drop out, because they thought that the government might force students to go to the military, and they forbade me to go to the school. . . Since I dropped out, I have stayed in my parents' home without any job.

Other parents were worried that their children could be encouraged to join the army by their peers, with those taking part in focus group discussions pointing out that many young people had secretly joined the armed forces without parental permission. The findings also showed that some young people were opting to drop out of school and join the military as there is an opportunity to obtain a firearm if found on the battlefield, and guns are seen as a valuable asset that can be used either for private protection or resold for a profit. Several adolescent boys also reported being pressured to join the army by their father in order to avoid the family having to give up a privately owned gun to loan to others willing to fight—-and at the risk of losing it in battle—-as part of wider efforts to support the war.

Finally in the case of IDP adolescents, respondents underscored that because of the psychological trauma that they gone through having experienced or witnessed first-hand killings and/or assault in their district of origin (Sekota) that they had now lost hope of learning and instead wanted to migrate to the Middle East and be far from the conflict in Ethiopia. In the case of IDP adolescent girls, educational aspirations had been similarly dashed, with participants in a focus group discussion with female IDP youth admitting that they had been forced into survival sex in order to meet their basic costs.

Impacts on adolescent learning and educational performance

For those students who were able to enroll, many reported the conflict had had a negative effect on their school performance. Across sites, students reported high levels of stress and being unable to concentrate due to their fathers, brothers, and close relatives fighting in the war. A 15-year-old boy from Lay Gayint district explained that:

> Even those students who are enrolled are not attending classes properly. Many students are absent, fearing the war situation, and also losing interest to learn. Those students whose fathers or brothers joined the war are also not attending classes regularly. Moreover, teachers are not teaching us properly, they are in the war mentality, also some teachers didn't go

back to school. However, since the junta's force didn't reach to our locality, our school has not been looted and destroyed like schools in other places.

Similarly, a community leader from Ebenat district explained that those students whose fathers, brothers, or other family members were killed or/and wounded in the conflict were not interested to learn, and he said that:

> Those children whose fathers, brothers or family members were killed or wounded in this conflict, or those children whose family members are in the war front are asking us to bring back their fathers, they have lost their hope to learn, they always think about their fathers and brothers.

Boys in particular also explained that they were losing focus on their studies due to waiting to be called up to training for the armed forces.

Impacts on education quality and resourcing

Another factor affecting students' school performance was the decline in education quality, due to the absence of teachers and principals who had joined the war effort and had not been replaced. In some cases, the school had been occupied by soldiers and internally displaced persons (IDPs) who lacked alternative accommodation. A 20-year-old secondary school female student in Ebenat district explained that:

> We started school late. The IDPs came and settled in the school. The soldiers also camped there. So we did not have a place to attend class. . . We worry whenever we hear gunshots that TPLF might enter the town. We know that this country has hope if we can survive this year. I do not lose hope. . .

There was also a general sense that learning opportunities had been truncated, including as a result of the discontinuation of school clubs and extra-curricular opportunities.

Interviews with teachers, school principals, and district education bureau experts underscored that the disruptive effects of the conflict on adolescents' educational trajectories also stemmed from the impacts on sectoral budget resources. Key informants noted that budgets for schools had in part been diverted to support costs of the war, resulting in over-burdening of teachers, especially in remote communities that had fewer teachers and school staff even before the conflict. A male teacher from Ebenat district noted that:

> I am teaching in the two shifts on a daily basis from Monday to Friday. Moreover, the class size is extremely large [about

120 students are learning in one class]. Because of a shortage of teachers we merged two sections of similar grade students in one class. Because of the recent conflict, the regional education bureau doesn't allocate budget for the employment of new teaching staff.

Teachers were also asked to personally contribute 1°month's salary to the military, and in some communities students were also asked to contribute money or food in addition to the contributions they made as a household. However, this was challenging given the rapidly rising cost of living.

Limited education budgets have also resulted in a cessation of the school feeding program, which had been a major incentive for school attendance, as well as in limited access to teaching materials and books. For example, students reported having to share one textbook between 10 students, and that the general pre-conflict dearth of books and teaching aids, including IT equipment, had been compounded by the destruction of school facilities and equipment during the war. As a male teacher in Lay Gayint explained:

There are no textbooks. They were destroyed. We distributed textbooks to students and they did not return them. When we asked students to return the textbooks given to them last year, they told us they got damaged when they were running from home. The community also said the TPLF destroyed textbooks found at home… In some areas of the woreda, the TPLF destroyed the exam scripts of grade 8 students, and there was free promotion to grade 9 in those areas.

In this regard not only was the education sector facing declining funding, but there was also minimal evidence in Lay Giant where the destruction of schools had been more widespread, that resourcing was being invested in re-building and refurbishing schools.

Impacts on education infrastructure

Finally, in the communities that had been directly occupied by TPLF forces, especially in Lay Gayint district, impacts on educational infrastructure were far-reaching. Adolescents and key informants alike emphasized that school buildings, equipment, books and even exam records had been destroyed during the TPLF occupation. A 15-year-old boy in Lay Gayint explained that the destruction of schools had both physical and psychological ramifications:

We are learning sitting on the stone because desks are broken by the juntas. The juntas also destroyed everything in our school, and things are not as they were before the war, and students are not learning freely, fearing that the junta could

come again. Teachers are also not teaching us with a full heart because everything is ugly in our school, to tell you the truth. I am learning, since my father ordered me to learn. However, I am not interested even to go to school.

Others noted that the destruction of school records was exacerbating the challenges facing students who have been displaced within the country, and hindering their ability to pursue their education. A 17-year-old boy from Ebenat explained that:

Even in towns like Sekota [a town from Amhara region where many of the internally displaced people in GAGE research communities at the time of data collection had originated from], the junta force destroyed schools and even burnt students' certificates. And when IDP students arrived to our locality, they came without any evidence about their education and the school enrolled them without any evidence, only with what they told the school principal. This became a problem for both the school and also for the IDP students.

Focus group discussions with male IDP youth explained that their educational aspirations had been undermined by the deliberate attacks on schools by the occupying TPLF forces:

"We don't hope to continue my education, because they [TPLF fighters] looted and destroyed everything in our school, they forced me and my friends to carry computers, laboratories and other school materials, and they took to their locality, our school now is empty, so how can I learn in that school"

Some IDP students who were living in highly under-resourced temporary camps at the time of the research also added that their psychological trauma had been exacerbated by maltreatment on behalf of some district and zonal officials. They were of the view that they had been deprived of adequate social assistance as a result of local corrupt practices:

The enemy is of course at once known as the enemy–the ones who came to kill us and destroy our property. However, what harmed us psychologically even more than this was what the woreda and zonal officials did to us. They stole what charity organizations brought to us. It is disgusting to live in such a country ruled by such vicious and corrupted officials.

Discussion

Our research findings contribute novel empirical data on the multi-pronged disruptions to adolescents' educational pathways

in the context of the conflict in northern Ethiopia initiated in late 2020. Through the use of qualitative data we contribute to what Ungar (2012) has highlighted as shedding light on the subjective experiences of those who are marginalized, which is essential to understanding what kinds of interventions can effectively promote processes of resilience and redress the educational deficits identified in this study. Our findings underscore that the effects of armed conflict on adolescent education are both immediate–in terms of the effects not only on enrolment and attendance, as well as potentially more long-term, given clear evidence of negative impacts on adolescents' educational aspirations and students' motivation toward learning and performance. While our earlier research with this sample pre-conflict had found that poor employment prospects following investments in secondary and even higher education was having a discouraging effect on adolescents' and caregivers' commitment to education (Presler-Marshall et al., 2021), what was striking in the post-conflict interviews was the rise in negative attitudes among students who had already made considerable investments in their education and were attending secondary school.

The findings also point to broader school-and sector-level impacts, including effects on teacher attendance and teacher-pupil ratios, declining educational quality on account of conflict-associated trauma of both teachers and pupils and the dearth of support to tackle, under-resourcing in terms of school feeding, textbooks and teaching aids as a result of both war-related damage and declining education sector budgets diverted to support the war effort.

As highlighted by the research findings, there are also significant gendered differences in the intersecting barriers to education that girls and boys face in the context of the conflict. In accordance with the literature, boys were more at risk of dropout because of their participation in the war effort or for economic reasons (Rodriguez and Sánchez, 2012; Buvinić et al., 2013; Swee, 2015). Some boys were also prevented from going to school out of fear that they would be recruited into the armed forces (either forcefully or voluntarily). By contrast, the perceived threat of renewed violence and the deteriorating regional security situation were often cited obstacles for girls to re-enroll in school (Buvinić et al., 2013; Singh and Shemyakina, 2013; Khan, 2015).

The data on adolescent aspirations at times of conflict and its consequence on education make an important value-added contribution to the literature. While the literature addresses the effects of conflict not only school attendance and enrolment but also on learning (Manzoor and Gowhar, 2020; Utsumi, 2021), there is a dearth of discussion on the spill-over effects on educational aspirations. For many young people in our study, education was de-prioritized in the context of the conflict; they shifted their motivations toward protecting their community, joining the national war effort, and in the case of internally displaced youth, in planning to migrate to escape the risk of

re-exposure to the fear and violence wrought by the occupying TPLF forces.

In line with the emerging evidence base (Lai and Thyne, 2007; Kibris, 2014; Diwakar, 2015), our findings also clearly demonstrated that armed conflict has a detrimental impact on a country's school system. Adolescents and key informants emphasized that there were not enough schooling materials available, efforts to rebuild damaged infrastructure were limited and slow, the teacher supply had been hampered by teachers either fleeing the violence or enlisting in the military, and extra-curricular activities had been discontinued. These shortages were exacerbated by the decrease of public funds, as underscored by pressures on both teachers and students to contribute to the local school budget from their personal savings, and the inaccessibility of the area for structural aid.

A combination of these factors can leave long-lasting effects on the enrolment and academic achievement of students (Lai and Thyne, 2007). We conclude therefore by reflecting on the implications of the findings for efforts by government, development partners, communities, non-governmental organizations, and schools themselves to strengthen education services and build resilience so as to best mitigate the legacy impacts of armed conflict and advance progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 4's commitment to a quality education for all. First, to tackle conflict-related impacts on adolescent education, our findings suggest that it is critical to priorities restoration of the national and regional education budget so as to rebuild educational infrastructure and equipment, recruit additional teaching staff, and invest in outreach activities for students who have not re-enrolled and in catch-up programs for students whose academic year has been disrupted, especially those who are in year 8 and 12 and scheduled to sit national gateway examinations. Such efforts would respond to the Ethiopian Human Rights Council's call to "redouble efforts to get students back to school in conflict-affected areas" (Ethiopian Human Rights Council [EHRC], 2022). It is also essential to allay parents' fears of forced recruitment into the defense forms to reassure them that recruitment is on a voluntary basis only so that they can confidently return their adolescent to school. Relatedly, restoring the general security condition at the community level, including by reinstating the local militia who are responsible for local law and order, is critical to students in secondary school, especially girls, so that they are able to attend school without safety fears.

Providing pathways for students who dropped out due to enlisting in the war effort or those who have been displaced as IDPs to return to school and to catch up on missed education will also be essential to ensure that the longer-term toll of the conflict on adolescent education is mitigated as far as possible. Such efforts should be accompanied by the provision of a package of support for IDPs to be rehabilitated once they return to their communities of origin, including cash and food

assistance, psychosocial support (including referral pathways to specialist services for those experiencing severe mental health effects) and access to livelihood opportunities. Given the widespread effects of conflict-related trauma, it is also critical to invest in psychological first aid training for teaching staff and school counselors so as to be able to support students affected directly and indirectly by the conflict to cope and to re-focus on their studies. Longer-term it will also be important to invest in peace building curricula in schools so as to encourage non-violent approaches to conflict resolution and to work toward restoring peace and social cohesion across communities.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by ODI Ethics Review Committee, ODI, London, UK; Amhara Regional Bureau of Health Research Ethics Committee, Ethiopia. Written informed consent to participate in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardian/next of kin.

Author contributions

NJ led on research design, analysis, and drafting the article. WA co-led on research design, oversaw the data collection, preliminary analysis and contributed to drafting, and reviewing the text. GE, YG, KG, and FW were all involved in data collection, preliminary analysis and contributed to drafting, and reviewing the text. KT led on data management and contributed to drafting, and reviewing the text. JV undertook the background literature review and contributed to drafting, and reviewing the text. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Conflict of interest

WA was employed by Quest Consulting.

The remaining authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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