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# Navigating and Negotiating Livelihoods and the Transition to Adulthood in Karamoja, Uganda

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# Executive Summary

This briefing paper presents findings on how the lives, livelihoods, and transitions to adulthood of young men and young women in the Karamoja sub-region have evolved in reaction to ongoing changes and persistent shocks, including the Covid-19 pandemic. We examine how youth have expressed agency, navigated new terrain, and renegotiated the markers and meanings of adulthood in the sub-region. Our analysis also pays attention to how women's and men's specific social position as emerging adults impacts their experiences and their ability to successfully manage such shocks and changes.

This analysis is part of the United States Agency for International Development/Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (USAID/BHA)-funded Apolou Activity, a consortium led by Mercy Corps. The findings build on three years of qualitative, longitudinal research carried out by the Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. While the findings and analysis in this report focus primarily on the third round of qualitative data from late 2020, we also drew on previous years' data, analysis, and findings to understand the trajectory of youth lives in a period of rapid change. Of the original 96 youth participants interviewed in 2018, we located and interviewed 83 youth—43 female and 40 male—between November 2020 and January 2021.

## Main Findings

### *Accelerated and forced transitions*

Livelihood shocks and livelihood barriers both accelerated and compelled some respondents' transitions to adulthood, especially for women. Our findings indicate that the number of unplanned pregnancies and forced marriages increased during Covid-19, partially due to school closures. As such, many young women may have achieved social hallmarks of womanhood earlier than they expected or desired. In addition, we found some evidence that families were attempting to marry off their daughters in response to these livelihood shocks.

Some male respondents also reported such accelerated and forced transitions. Some young men reported that they had opted to marry and pay the bridewealth in cattle earlier than they might have otherwise, due to concern about holding cattle assets for longer than necessary in light of the increased cattle raiding in the sub-region.

Such compelled or forced transitions to adulthood, combined with an overall reluctance and lack of preparation to take on adult responsibilities, have potentially negative consequences, such as poorer psychosocial outcomes. Further, this sub-group of youth may be ill prepared to handle the challenges that accompany such adult responsibilities, such as raising children. Some women in the sample reported difficulties securing a sustainable livelihood alongside pregnancy and motherhood.

### *Social immobility*

Shocks and challenges such as livestock raids and crop and animal diseases posed barriers for some of the respondents' transitions to adulthood. In particular, the poverty and loss of wealth engendered by rising insecurity left some youth unable to achieve those markers of adulthood for which wealth is necessary, such as bridewealth payments. As official marriage cemented by payment of bridewealth in cattle remains an important step in achieving adulthood, the repeated livestock raids left many young men unable to realize this milestone. As a result, young men found themselves in a liminal state between youth and adulthood. Some of these youth may in turn resort to negative coping strategies, such as livestock raiding, to accrue bridewealth and achieve socially recognized adulthood.

Female respondents also described a difficult balancing act. They described having to balance between security concerns, their livelihoods, and the need to achieve womanhood. These three processes are at times at direct odds with one another. Restrictions associated with gender and general insecurity meant that many young women struggled to flexibly respond to livelihood shocks

and challenges. Some young women reported being unable to engage in alternate livelihoods, and others persisted in livelihoods that exposed them to risks and/or that were no longer profitable.

At times, young women's male counterparts were able to assist in women's livelihood activities and aspirations by providing financial and labor support. However, some young women stated a clear desire to achieve financial autonomy, a characteristic not previously considered a social marker for womanhood. The shocks and challenges to women's livelihoods and the ensuing threat of social immobility may be promoting greater financial independence of women and possibly shifting the parameters of the hallmarks of womanhood, at least in the eyes of women themselves.

### *Unsuccessful transitions*

Some respondents, faced with persistent barriers and shocks to their livelihoods, unsuccessfully or partially transitioned to adulthood. For example, incomplete bridewealth payments may leave couples in a state of quasi-adulthood, affording such youth only some of the benefits of this life stage. For young men, this quasi-adulthood state can negatively impact their sense of self and their standing within their communities and families.

Further, over the three years of data collection, many women in the sample reported interruptions to their economic activities when they became pregnant or gave birth. As a result, achieving womanhood in particular may at times be associated with a decrease in women's economic status. Although nominally achieving womanhood by demonstrating their fertility, the inability of these women to provide for their children, or the increasing challenges to doing so, indicates their difficulties in realizing adulthood.

### *Negotiated transitions*

In responding to challenges and shocks to their livelihoods, youth's transition to adulthood was at times compelled or accelerated, inhibited, or unsuccessful. However, youth in the study population also expressed agency through renegotiating the markers and meanings of adulthood. For example,

some young women in the data were increasingly viewing partial bride payments positively, as partial or unofficial marriage provided women greater freedoms. For example, when bridewealth is not paid in full, a woman has many more options to leave an abusive partner and return to her natal home. Some women also reported that, when bridewealth was not paid in full, they had better relations with their partners and experienced less domestic violence because their partners were aware that they could leave more easily.

Youth respondents were also negotiating parenthood. For example, some youth respondents in the sample were practicing modern family planning. Additionally, some young men explicitly reported wanting fewer children whom they could more fully provide for rather than having as many children as possible, a traditional marker of manhood in the sub-region.

## Recommendations and Implications

We present a series of recommendations and implications for programming based on the findings from this report.

### *Promoting alternative livelihood options for youth*

- Young women have limited options for adapting to livelihood shocks. Programming should thus focus on expanding women's access to such alternative livelihoods by reconceiving notions of masculine and feminine work outside the home.
- Young women increasingly value financial independence. As such, programmers should capitalize on this growing interest by supporting women in securing independent livelihoods. Given that males often act as gatekeepers for women accessing financial and other resources, men should also be included in such programming.
- Many young women in the sample population interrupted their livelihood activities after having achieved womanhood, which is marked by marriage, pregnancy, and motherhood. Programming must account for this transitional period in women's lives

where livelihood barriers are increasing at the same time as their responsibilities.

- While many young men continued to pursue traditional pastoral livelihoods, many have also increasingly diversified into alternative livelihoods or abandoned pastoralism altogether. However, many of these new, more market-based activities were impacted negatively by Covid-19. Programmers should thus renew their focus on providing avenues for young people to develop alternative livelihoods in both rural and urban areas.

### *Compelled marriages*

- Programmers should focus their efforts on combatting forced and compelled marriage as a coping mechanism in response to livelihood shocks.

### *Negotiated transitions to adulthood*

- Given that youth are negotiating their transitions to adulthood in part through new marriage arrangements, programmers should consider married couples targets for activities to promote equality among couples.
- The young people who have transitioned to adulthood during the Covid-19 pandemic may be particularly vulnerable due to lack of preparation, inadequate capital and resources, and the frustration of unmet aspirations. Programming should attempt to support these youth.

# Introduction and Overview

This briefing paper focuses on how the lives and livelihoods of young men and young women in the Karamoja sub-region have changed over the last year. We discuss the shifts in youth livelihoods brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic and other shocks and challenges; how these changes have impacted young people's transitions to adulthood; and the ways youth have expressed agency and responded to these evolving circumstances and barriers, concerning both their livelihoods and their transition to adulthood. The briefing paper concludes with a discussion on the implications of such changes and expressions of agency for the development landscape.

We examine respondents' transition to adulthood and livelihood opportunities, and barriers and shocks along gender lines. Gender analysis offers a better appreciation of how the livelihoods and transition to adulthood of young men and women differ because of their gender. This gender approach provides a more accurate snapshot of youth's lives and livelihoods and thus better informs the efforts of Mercy Corps and other national and international actors to address youth's vulnerability and opportunities in the region. Age plays an equally important role in youth's lives in the region and in their transition to adulthood. We thus also examine how women's and men's specific social position as youth and emerging adults impacts their gender experiences in diverse ways.

These findings are part of the Apolou Activity, a consortium led by Mercy Corps and funded by the United States Agency for International Development/Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs (USAID/BHA). The Feinstein International Center, Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University is the research and learning partner on Apolou. The mixed methods research

seeks to understand the ways in which market expansion, including increased commoditization and monetization, have (or have not) provided opportunities for the population. The qualitative research focuses specifically on youth and seeks to shed light on their experiences, aspirations, and interactions with economic, financial, and aid systems in a sub-region that has seen rapid change in the past decade. The longitudinal approach entails interviewing the same cohort of individuals each year, which allows for an in-depth understanding of change over time. This design allows the research team to explore the engagement of young men and women in livelihood activities, decision-making, market interaction, governance, and financial strategies and systems.

This briefing paper focuses on how the lives and livelihoods of young men and young women in the Karamoja sub-region have changed over the last year.

# Methodology

This briefing paper investigates some of the findings from the qualitative portion of the study. In the first round of the cohort study in 2018, the research team worked across 24 villages receiving or scheduled to receive Apolou programs. In these villages, from October to December 2018, we purposively selected 48 female youth and 48 male youth (for a total of 96) with approximate ages from their late teens to mid-20s. In 2018, we started with focus group discussions to gather background and contextual information and then proceeded with semi-structured, open-ended qualitative interviews with individual respondents. In 2019, the qualitative approach again involved in-depth interactions with the same respondents. Of the original 96 youth participants interviewed, the research team was successful in locating and interviewing 86 youth, 45 female and 41 male, in late 2019. In 2020, the qualitative approach repeated these interactions with the same youth cohort interviewed in the previous years. Out of the 86 youth participants interviewed in 2019, in 2020 the team was successful in locating and interviewing 83 youth—43 female and 40 male—between November 2020 and January 2021.

# Key Findings

The lives and livelihoods of young men and young women in the Karamoja sub-region have changed over the course of the project, with new shocks, such as Covid-19, and persistent shocks, such as livestock and crop disease, impacting and influencing the shifts in lives and livelihoods. In many cases, these external shocks are also affecting youth's transition to adulthood. Through navigating these evolving circumstances, youth have expressed agency, negotiating their livelihoods as well as the institutions and meanings involved in their transition to adulthood.

**For some respondents, particularly women, livelihood shocks and barriers accelerated their transition to adulthood, a life stage for which they were ill prepared.** For example, respondents discussed that young women had become pregnant or were forcibly married off by relatives in response to the school closures during Covid-19. Through marriage and pregnancy, key markers of women's adulthood, these young women thus officially entered womanhood. However, given that this transition was spurred by Covid-19, some young women may have fewer options than usual and more limited agency and volition in the process of becoming adults. Young men also at times referenced forced transitions to adulthood as part of their or their household's responses to external challenges. For example, faced with rising insecurity, some young men chose to marry early and thus pay their bridewealth in cattle instead of risking their livestock wealth being raided. Compelled or forced transitions to adulthood, combined with an overall reluctance and lack of preparation to take on adult responsibilities, have potentially negative consequences for youth's health, psychosocial states, educational aspirations, and livelihoods.

In addition to an accelerated transition to adulthood, **ongoing challenges to youth livelihoods created a dangerous social immobility for some respondents.** Specifically, circumstances brought on by livestock raids and crop and animal diseases impeded youth's transition to adulthood. For example, young men

and women in the study population equally viewed marriage as an important step towards social recognition and attaining status among their peers, families, and in their communities, with marriage intimately connected to bridewealth in the form of livestock payments. However, with repeated livestock raids, many young men found it difficult to accumulate enough livestock to marry. Throughout the three years of data collection, we see that the inability of men to pay or of women's families to receive bridewealth has had some negative impacts on young people's social status and sense of self. On the other hand, a number of young people in the sample have successfully married, which may increase social pressure on those who are unable to do so. In response to this barrier to adulthood, some young men resort to negative coping strategies such as livestock raiding to accrue bridewealth.

**Barriers and shocks to youth's livelihood also engendered unsuccessful transitions among respondents, which diminished their social status** even if they had nominally achieved adulthood. Marriage, specifically with the bridewealth fully paid, cements a woman's place in her husband's home and clan, where she is afforded certain rights and protections. With some exceptions, most women do not officially marry until after the birth of one or two children, thereby demonstrating their fertility. Incomplete bridewealth payments or struggles with infertility thus may leave young women in a state of quasi-adulthood, affording them only some of the benefits of achieving this life stage.

However, in the face of shocks and barriers that were both persistent, such as livestock diseases, and new, such as Covid-19, **youth in the study population have expressed agency and have begun to renegotiate the markers and meanings of adulthood.** For example, in response to the inability of young men to obtain enough livestock for bridewealth payments, some young women in the data were increasingly viewing partial bride payments positively. Partial or unofficial marriage at times offered women greater agency and mobility: in the absence of full

bridewealth, young women could achieve marriage (at least partially) and thus womanhood, while also maintaining greater autonomy within the patriarchal structure of marriage. When bridewealth is not paid in full, a woman has many more options to leave an abusive, neglectful, and inadequate partner and to retain custody of her children. Further, a number of young people reported using modern contraception, and others expressed interest in learning more about family planning. Some young men reported that they preferred to have smaller families for which they could more easily provide, especially in the face of repeated and regular shocks. This preference contrasts with the more traditional marker of manhood, which is associated with many wives and children.

**Youth's negotiation of adulthood and its meaning remains ongoing** as evidenced by partial bridewealth payments. Such partial payments still exposed young women and men in the data to ridicule despite some young women viewing them positively. Further, some youth continued to value and desire large families, and some young men still pursued livestock ownership as the ideal livelihood for men. Development actors thus must capitalize on the existing agency youth have carved out for themselves within the power system surrounding their transition to adulthood, while also recognizing the ways in which the system remains rigid.

## Gender and youth livelihoods

Gender roles, norms, and expectations as well as gender differences in youth's access to resources, social networks, markets, education, mobility, health and other spaces and services shape the livelihood environment for male and female youth in Karamoja. These formal and informal gender norms and systems simultaneously determine what strategies and activities youth are able (or not able) to access and pursue in response to livelihood opportunities, barriers, and shocks. Adding further complexity for young people, respondents whom we have interviewed each year for three years are in the process of negotiating their transitions to adulthood, which brings its own unique set of challenges. In the section below, we discuss livelihood opportunities, barriers, and strategies, how these vary by gender, and how they produce different outcomes for young

men and young women. We contextualize these experiences against youth's transition to adulthood.

### *Limited livelihoods for young women*

Already constrained by gender expectations, insecurity over the past year has further restricted the livelihood activities in which young women can engage. This restriction has inhibited the ability of young women to diversify livelihood strategies—a common and often beneficial coping mechanism—in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, **young women in the sample appeared less able than men to adapt their livelihoods to the multiple shocks** they were experiencing, at times persisting in some activities despite the clear risks or abandoning other activities and becoming increasingly financially insecure.

Multiple women specifically discussed the fear of burning charcoal or collecting firewood in the bush due to the threat of violence, referencing being stoned, beaten, kidnapped, and raped as prevalent risks. Some thus abandoned these activities, placing them in financially precarious situations. One respondent described her choice: "I used to sell charcoal, but I stopped because the security situation is getting worse, the warriors beat people in the bush, and some do use you as their wives." Covid-19 had also forced this female respondent to stop another livelihood strategy, selling maize mixed with beans at the market. As a result, at the time of interview she was subsisting only off the sales of brew. Another female respondent similarly described her choice to stop collecting natural resources:

People in the community have now resorted to looking for ways of survival without going to the bush. They go to town to do casual work. Those days we would go to the bush and get wood for sale but now we can't because of the insecurity.

This same respondent later described her difficulty in making a profit doing such casual work and said she had suffered financial losses because of the Covid-19 pandemic and market closures. Covid-19 and insecurity forcibly homogenized women's livelihood strategies, resulting in greater livelihood rigidity and thus economic vulnerability.

**Cultural restrictions on what is appropriate women's work, as well as the general insecurity and Covid-19, also made pursuing new or alternative strategies difficult and dangerous.** One woman explained how fear limited the pursuit of other livelihoods:

[Raiding] has also brought a lot of fear in the community because one cannot easily go to collect firewood because there are so many killings, people even fear to buy animals because they will be raided. People have not been able to take up other livelihood activities because of fear.

While male respondents were also impacted by insecurity (although in different ways), they had a greater diversity of livelihood strategies available to them on account of their gender. As such, women's unique gendered position inhibited their ability to pursue alternative strategies and thus flexibly respond to shocks.

In response to women's lack of opportunities and less-flexible livelihoods, **some young women felt they had no choice but to continue with risky livelihood activities for survival purposes.** One woman described the security situation in her village and the difficult choice between safety and survival that many women faced:

My village is not secure and safe because there is a lot of jealous people who sometimes feel bad when they see that one has many animals. They sometimes kidnap you while herding or grazing. They kill the men and mostly they undress the women and humiliate them by making them walk back home naked, or, if they have bad thoughts they even rape them. This creates fear among the women and discourages us from doing our work peacefully. We sometimes do work with fear. You find that if we don't work, there is no way we can help sustain the family. And this mainly happens when one goes for firewood, far gardens, and charcoal burning in distanced areas.

Young women who persisted in resource collection despite the insecurity described going in groups to

the bush to increase their safety or returning home at earlier hours, as described by one respondent: "People are still taking risks to go to the bush to burn charcoal because it's the only source of survival. Often, they go in groups." Continuing to express agency in a tense situation, these women nonetheless were vulnerable to attacks. One woman described her experience:

Yesterday, a woman went to go and bring her charcoal from the bush, but the raiders got her and beat her badly. She is now admitted at Kanawat Health Centre. This has caused fear, but because of hunger people are still forced to go out. When my baby was about two months, we went to burn charcoal in the bush, we came across the Dodoth but what saved us was that we ran to the barracks. This is why income has reduced in the community and there is hunger in most households.

While shocks further limited women's already constrained livelihood opportunities, **for those who continued to pursue risky opportunities for survival purposes and who fell victim to the insecurity more generally, the consequences of their perseverance could be severe.** For example, sexual assault and rape could impact a young woman's ability to marry and bear children, threatening her future security as well as her ability to achieve socially recognized womanhood. A female respondent explicitly stated that some women choose to be beaten rather than sexually assaulted because of the social consequences of rape:

The Dodoth give us two options, you either accept to be raped or sexually violated or be beaten. That is what happened to the woman that is admitted at Kanawat Health Centre, she refused to be sexually violated, and she was beaten badly. We would rather be beaten because if raped, the social consequences are severe. People will look at the woman to have contracted HIV/AIDS.

Significantly **and related to livelihoods and their reproductive abilities, in the data women sometimes expressed worry regarding their inability to achieve markers of womanhood.** For

example, one female respondent described how she feared her husband would leave her because she kept suffering miscarriages. Young women have a difficult balancing act, having to balance between security concerns, their livelihoods, and the necessity to achieve womanhood, with these three avenues at times being at direct odds with one another.

Importantly, security concerns and their impact on young women's livelihoods have been prevalent throughout the data collected over the past three years. Particularly beginning in 2019, female respondents repeatedly mentioned rising insecurity, especially in border areas, which has negative implications for livelihood activities such as gardening, collecting firewood, and burning charcoal.

Further, when examining the cohort data, **some young women appear to choose marriage as a protection strategy given persistent security concerns and because there were limited other options available to them.** For example, one female respondent in Amudat described how male youth chased her in the bush in 2018 when she went to collect firewood. However, after her marriage in 2019, she reported that the roads had become safer for her as a married woman. Another female respondent in Kaabong felt newly protected in 2018 after getting married with a partial bridewealth payment, as the male youth stopped harassing her. A third female respondent in Kotido echoed this belief, stating that she felt safer after her unofficial marriage in 2019 because the raiders only targeted unmarried women. However, insecurity can take a number of forms, including being married against one's will, and other female respondents expressed fear of being forcibly married off by family members or kidnapped. Thus, **there existed a significant tension in the data regarding whether marriage was a consistent protective strategy or a liability for young women.**

### *Persisting and shifting livelihoods of young men in response to shocks*

Despite shocks such as Covid-19 and heightened insecurity, young men reported being able to more often persist in their traditional livelihoods than female respondents. For example, given that men's activities were less restricted by gender norms

of mobility, male livestock traders were able to travel far distances to find an open market and thus maintain their livelihood during Covid-19. Nonetheless, market closures, livestock diseases, and rampant cattle raids impacted the efficacy of young men's traditional livelihood strategies, as such shocks caused prices to fall. One respondent described the situation:

During Covid-19 lockdown time, I made losses. For example, animals were sold cheaply: cows that had been costing 800,000–1,000,000 UGX were sold [during lockdown] at 450,000–500,000 UGX and goats of 120,000–200,000 UGX were sold at 45,000–60,000 UGX. I had nothing to do but to sell them cheaply so that I could support my family. Buyers were not coming, people were not allowed to move from place to place.

In addition to lower profits, young men who travelled far distances to find open markets found themselves **more vulnerable to violence caused by rising insecurity.** Multiple respondents reported that they were at an increased risk for cattle raiding and potential violence when traversing these greater distances. As one young man from Nadunget, Moroto explained: "Due to Covid, all markets were closed, and there was no defined location to trade in livestock. We were forced to move far away to insecure places to make sales, putting our lives at a great risk." A second young man from Nadunget further elaborated on the dangers of livestock trade during Covid-19 market closures:

I am frequently on the move to different locations to trade in livestock within Moroto, but I avoid travelling to Napak and Nakapiripirit because of targeted attacks on traders from Moroto by the Bokora. One of my friends was waylaid recently, and all the animals he had bought were taken by the attackers, although they didn't kill him—this was as a warning to the rest of the Matheniko for trespassing on their land.

In addition to insecurity, the economic downturn has also negatively affected the livelihood activities of some young men. As one respondent in Moroto reported, "It's really meaningless even to trade now.

Everyone is broke. It's better to eat your goat and just be satisfied."

While much work has been done on Covid-19 and how it has placed girls and women at risk for heightened levels of violence (AUC et al. 2020), our findings indicate that **Covid-19 also increased men's exposure to violence**. Further, that many young men in the sample chose to endure this risk and to accept the lower profits from livestock trade demonstrates livestock's persistent importance to their identity as men. Although fewer people are practicing pastoralism in the sub-region, animals—and especially cattle—remain central to cultural concepts of wealth, masculinity, and particularly, marriage and adulthood. One respondent, who since 2018 has been struggling to pay the bridewealth to finalize his marriage, described (in a 2019 interview):

I have been much stressed, and people have been laughing at me. They say I am from a poor family, but God is watching us all. I will be a great man in future. I also want to invest in livestock. If this insecurity ends, I will buy [animals] one by one, and then I will marry my wife. I will never settle till I finish this cultural obligation. It makes me sick every time I think about it.

For young men, acquiring livestock and marrying officially afford respect and are a source of prestige. However, the current rise in cattle theft in the region means that young men engaged in livestock activities are at times treated with suspicion by the military. Young men reported that this hindered their ability to move their livestock to markets that offered good prices or to grazing areas, as a young man from Rengen, Kotido explained:

The army is also very ruthless, they have often times intercepted traders who drive their cattle to the market on suspicion that it is stolen cattle, and they take it to the barracks for questioning. This has discouraged traders from coming to the market.

Livestock loss due to theft, inequality, and transitioning livelihood systems is also apparent in the data for this study. While some men report moving out of livestock entirely, others indicate

that they are spreading risk by engaging in more diversified activities while still keeping one foot within animal production. This was the case in the narrative of a young man from Kalapata, Kaabong:

It is because of the livestock loss that I now go to the gold mine, I also burn charcoal and sometimes do casual labor. We need to find other ways to survive outside of our livestock. I can make up to 200,000 UGX [approx. 56 USD] from ten days of gold digging. I use the money earned from the gold mine to buy goats, cattle and also to support my wife's and parents' basic needs while I am away in the kraal. I go to the gold mine twice a month, and it is an easy way to make quick money.

This young man remains engaged in pastoral production—buying goats and cattle and spending time away at the kraal—at the same time that he is taking advantage of quick profits that can be made (at times) from gold mining. His presumed access to a trading center allows him to also benefit from the sale of charcoal and manual labor.

Overall, the data indicate that **young men are better able than young women to take advantage of nontraditional livelihood opportunities** in the region, including in the service industry and security services. However, a number of young men reported being discouraged by Covid-19 closures. For some, these setbacks seemed to come just as they were starting off in new and potentially promising economic endeavors, and at a time when many are expected to transition into manhood. For instance, the opening of new hotels in Kidepo National Park had recently increased the opportunities available to young men in the vicinity, as explained by one respondent from Karenga:

This year, I got work at a hotel in Kidepo National Game Park as a casual laborer. I am paid per day worked. If it wasn't for Covid-19 travel restrictions and reduced tourist visits, I would have been fully employed, but now we have lost [these] employment opportunities.

Another young man in Karenga had planned to enroll in a driving course in the neighboring district of Lira to increase his employability in hospitality or local government but was unable to enroll due

to travel restrictions. However, even with the limits and closures due to Covid-19, young men continue to be able to pursue livelihoods that are largely unavailable to women. For example, two young men in our sample population found jobs in security, one with the local defense unit (LDU) and another with a private security company. These jobs, largely unavailable to women, ensure greater stability and security for young men.

The cohort data indicate young men's continued efforts to transition to a socially recognized and economically secure version of adulthood. While many sought to do so through traditional pathways of cattle acquisition and bridewealth payments, others were engaged in more diversified options. The ways in which the ongoing shocks brought by insecurity and Covid-19 are handled in the region and the resilience of young men to these risks may ultimately determine their success.

### *Sharing gender advantage and gatekeeping adulthood*

When male and female youth were engaged in similar livelihood activities and strategies, such as gold mining, firewood sales, or charcoal burning and sale, their success appeared to differ by gender, namely with men reaping larger profits. The greater success of young men flows from their greater flexibility, higher levels of literacy, greater mobility, and better access to information, finances, and social networks. These advantages allow young men to better engage in economic activities on a larger scale. This ability to scale up is evident in the narrative of a young man from Nadunget Sub-county, in Moroto: "My firewood customers have expanded; I supply firewood to women who make local brew in Moroto town, and I also won the Moroto Government Prison tender to supply them with firewood for daily use."

In contrast, women often had to rely on their husbands for support, including for starting and then scaling up their businesses. **Young women's proximity to young men was thus at times beneficial, with young men's often better financial position allowing them to provide support to their female counterparts, if they chose to do so.** This support could take the form of both financial resources and physical labor. For example, a young

man from Rengen Sub-county, Kotido said, "I supported my wife with capital to start the business. I gave her 200,000 UGX, and she would make about 4,000 UGX from each crate of beer sold." One female respondent in Nadunget in Moroto reported that her husband had given her money to start her brewing business in 2018, which continued into 2019.

Support might also come from a woman's father or brothers. A female respondent in Tapac, Moroto reported that her father gave her a loan to support her chapati business in 2019. In a sign of changing norms around marriage, instances exist in the data of young women receiving support from fathers even after marriage. Such a transaction is unusual in a system whereby a woman falls entirely under her husband's domain and responsibility once married. A woman in Amudat Town Council explained that while her family encouraged her to return to her abusive husband—an example of adherence to customary traditional processes—her father also provided direct support to enable her to independently provide for her children. The young woman narrated:

My husband started drinking alcohol and misbehaving; I had to go back home [to her parents]. He was not providing for me and my children and became abusive. My family talked to me to come back to my husband's home and also talked to him until he stopped drinking alcohol. That is the time when my father gave me the land to cultivate food for myself.

While a number of women discussed the importance of support from male counterparts, if these male relatives—especially husbands—chose to be unsupportive, it presented a significant challenge for young women in their efforts to achieve economic and food security. Throughout the data collection, there were several female respondents who had given up on certain aspirations or felt unsupported in their pursuits by their partners, as one respondent in Kacheri, Kotido relayed:

My child is only one year old, and I am the one struggling for everything including health, clothing, and feeding...Since I gave birth, [my husband] has never helped me in anything. When I was pregnant, I used to go for *leje leje*

far in town so that I could take care of myself. I used to get like 2,000 shillings a day, and that was the money I used to feed myself and also buy a few things for my baby. I feel very bitter to talk about [my husband].

Another female respondent described how she had given up brewing, despite enjoying this activity, because her husband wanted her to move to his home. Similarly, a female respondent had been doing *leje leje* work for two years in Moroto but had given up these activities as her husband feared she would find another man in town. One female respondent wanted to sell clothes, but her husband refused to allow her to do so because she had to take care of the children. Still another desired to go back to school but was not supported by her husband because he said he would feel inferior if she had a higher education level.

The clear impact of **men's ability and willingness to extend support to their female counterparts underscores the relational aspects of gender relations in regard to livelihoods**. It also indicates economic empowerment initiatives should approach gender as deeply embedded in all social aspects and should de-emphasize those initiatives that empower only men or only women.

Perhaps related to some men's unwillingness to provide support, a number of women stated a clear desire to support themselves and their families financially, even though financial autonomy is not a necessary social marker for womanhood (unlike manhood). One respondent, who was supporting herself through the sale of firewood and charcoal, explained why she did not want to move to her husband's house: "I am happy to stay in my own home because I make good decisions on how to feed my children, how to use the money, and on the health of my children." Examining the data over the three years, we saw women engaging in active steps to increase their financial independence or expressing aspirations to take up new and independent economic activities. For instance, a woman in Rengen in Kotido stated in 2019: "Life has changed these days, I cannot stay at home like before to wait for my husband to provide for me. My life without business is nothing." She engaged in

trading goats and in selling brew and beer, though the pandemic lockdown set her back in 2020. **These patterns imply that financial independence may be becoming a subjective marker for women's version of womanhood**. However, it is **a marker in which husbands and other male relatives play an important gatekeeping role** given their access to greater resources.

### *Adult responsibilities as a barrier to women's livelihood opportunities*

**When compared to young men, young women faced both more barriers to their livelihoods and more barriers that were difficult to overcome, including once they transitioned into adulthood.** Lack of finances, social connections, and access to key resources such as land and labor were significant barriers for women in pursuing livelihood opportunities. Most critically, young women's livelihood options are curtailed by their domestic and reproductive roles of pregnancy, child rearing, and food preparation. The demand to fulfill these responsibilities creates a heavy burden and limits young women's ability to explore other livelihood opportunities. Achieving socially recognized womanhood entails marrying and having children, but reaching this status ironically increases the gendered barriers that women face that limit their ability to secure successful livelihoods that allow them to provide for the needs of their families.

Specifically, having children greatly increases a woman's domestic responsibilities, as evident in the narrative of a respondent in Rengen: "Since I had a baby, I have too much work compared to before when I was just alone. I no longer have any free time to do other things. The baby needs a lot of care and is always sickly." While increasing their responsibilities, childbearing also limited the activities they could pursue to provide for their families, as represented by one young woman: "Right now, am not doing the charcoal burning because the baby is still young (three months old). I can't go to the bush with the child."

**Throughout the three years of data collection, many women in the sample reported the interruptions to their economic activities due to pregnancy and giving birth.** For example, one respondent in Kotido

had stopped collecting firewood and could not join the other youth at the dam because she had recently given birth. As their livestock had been raided and the harvest was poor, she relied solely on brewing and digging stones. Another respondent in Amudat Town Council in 2020 described how she had to cease heavy manual labor when pregnant and instead switched to plaiting hair for income. For young women whose businesses involved an initial investment, such as brewing or chapati businesses, restarting their livelihoods may prove difficult in the absence of capital or external support.

While females in the sample found themselves faced with numerous domestic demands (symbolic of having achieved womanhood) that compete with potential income-generating activities, **young women also face economic pressures to provide for their families. These pressures are at times exacerbated by living apart from their husbands prior to official marriage, as their male partners may be less inclined to contribute support.** Multiple female respondents who were not living with their husbands reported that their partners often neglected their needs and the needs of their children. Others said that they felt themselves solely responsible for providing economically. One female respondent in Panyangara, Kotido described that her husband was a “town man,” and thus their child was her responsibility. Perhaps related to this need, many of this respondent’s aspirations in 2018, 2019, and 2020 focused on growing her businesses. Another female respondent in Kacheri, Kotido noted she was the second wife and that her husband did not support her or her child. In 2019 and 2020 she expressed her desire for divorce, but the gendered stigma regarding divorcees constrained her ability to do so. (Specifically, she explained that if she were to divorce her husband, her parents would consider her a prostitute.) As with the earlier respondent, many of her aspirations in 2018, 2019, and 2020 focused on expanding her businesses.

The shift away from male-dominated, livestock-based livelihoods in recent years further contributes to the economic vulnerability of many households (Stites and Akabwai 2010). Women are often tasked with filling the gap in household subsistence where pastoral production has dropped off. However, as

young women struggle to access capital, networks, and opportunities to the same extent as their male counterparts, the conflict between young women’s reality and expectations to provide financial support keeps many young women trapped in less-profitable livelihoods. These patterns reinforce the gender differences and result in continued impoverishment of women. As such, we see in the study data that the transition to womanhood remains marked with multiple contradictions.

### *Forced and compelled marriages as a household response to shocks*

Despite economic challenges and limited access to livestock for many males, in the data from late 2020 we found numerous accounts of **young men and women who were able to formalize their marriages over the previous year, thereby achieving a significant marker of adulthood.** By the end of 2020, half or more of the respondents of both genders reported that they were officially married, with the bridewealth paid in full. This finding was a major change from the start of data collection three years ago, when only a small percentage of respondents were officially married. However, with marriage comes an increased expectation that young men and women can provide for their households. The diminished success of their livelihood strategies described above thus poses a challenge to youth attempting to meet this expectation.

Importantly, **an increase in marriages may indicate that marrying off young women is at times used by families as a means of coping with the increased economic pressures brought on by Covid-19 restrictions and increased insecurity.** Although too small a number to draw conclusions, data from 2020 did include two reported cases of attempted forced marriage in the past 12 months. Both young women were able to avoid marriage and ran away to seek help from officials or other relatives. One young woman in Amudat who was to be married as a third wife to an older man managed to escape her parents’ home with the support of her brother-in-law and was able to return to school with the help of a non-governmental organization (NGO). Another young woman in Rengen Sub-county in Kotido reported her father to the human rights office and local elders for forcing her into marriage. She also stood up to the

would-be husband, as she explained:

I assured the old man never to touch me! My so-called father even wanted to kill me, and I was ready to die rather than marry that old man. I reported my father to the office of human rights in Kotido town for the case of forced marriage. The office also gave me a letter indicating that if my father ever forced me to marry the old man, he would be imprisoned for four years. When my father was told about this, he gave up. I also reported him to the elders who did not support him in any way.

This young woman's success in seeking redress through both formal (human rights office) and informal (male elders) mechanisms for accountability may indicate an important shift in views towards young women and their transition to adulthood. More investigation is required to understand if this is a once-off case or broader positive trend.

Although not necessarily constituting forced marriage, **some parents pressured their daughters to marry to bring in financial support in the form of bridewealth.** One young woman in Katabok Sub-county, Amudat explained her concerns that this pressure to marry would happen to her: "Covid-19 affected my life so much. After the schools were closed, I left school and went to my sister's home in Katabok. I did not go to Lemsui where my parents are because I knew they would give me out in marriage." Indeed, fear of forced or pressured marriage was a theme throughout the three years of data collection for many women. **Previous shocks also appeared to have spurred on prior instances of forced marriage, indicating that families continue to marry off their female family members regardless of the shock experienced.**

Similarly, some young men also described feeling increased pressure to marry. As discussed earlier, men may feel social pressure to marry in order to attain recognized adulthood. However, rising insecurity and particularly cattle theft appear to increasingly be playing roles in the marriage process for male youth in the study population. Some of the families were reportedly advising their young men

to marry before their cattle were raided, as they fear that if raiding were to occur, they would not be able to afford the bridewealth. Although less attention is given to pressures on male as opposed to female youth regarding marriage processes, such **compelled marriage decisions represent a similarly compelled or premature transition to adulthood.**

## Negotiated transitions

Although a large number of respondents reported being able to officially marry over the three years of the data collection, there were still young men who reported being unable to afford bridewealth payments. However, in a sign of potentially major change around social and gendered norms, we increasingly see **these young men and their female partners negotiating and reinventing the marriage process and hence their transitions to adulthood.**

For example, some couples were starting families and cohabitating without the full bridewealth payments. Some women were also enjoying the autonomy that came without being fully officially married. For instance, a young woman from Nadunget in Moroto explained: "My husband just brought an appreciation to my aunty of about 400,000 UGX [112 USD], and I think it is enough. I don't want any of my brothers to come and claim any more bridewealth...I am just happy to have a loving husband." These two related trends—**cohabitation prior to official marriage and the appreciation of young women for a less-than-official arrangement—represent a negotiation and reinvention of the institution of marriage in the hands of young people and hence a reconfiguring of the transition to adulthood.**

We first discuss the second of these two trends: **the lack of complete bridewealth payments at times provided young women with greater agency and independence within their unions.** This trend is evidenced by the account of a woman in Kacheri, Kotido who decided to leave her husband, to whom she was not officially married (i.e., bridewealth had not been paid in full):

I left my husband's home and now stay at my parents' home. My husband has not paid even a penny in bridewealth, and I am not happy

with him. My parents too are not happy with him, and they locked him outside when he tried to come home one day. He is not helping me with anything, not even providing for the baby. My plan is to divorce him and go back to school.

Young women who are not officially married are not formally bound to the man's family or clan. It is easier for them to leave a marriage, as their families are not under obligation to repay the bridewealth if the union dissolves. The same is true if bridewealth has only been partially paid, as was the case for a respondent in Moroto who left an abusive husband who had not paid full bridewealth. She was able to remarry. However, leaving a marriage still requires the tenacity to stand up to both the husband and the social norms, which frown upon women leaving husbands. These strong social norms mean that a number of women remain stuck in abusive or difficult marriages and lack support from their families to leave, even in the worst of cases, as is evident in the following description of a respondent's efforts to leave her husband:

The man forced himself on me with the help of two boys. He raped me like four times. One day...I escaped back to my natal home, but my father and elder brother beat me badly as you can see the scars all over my body and the head [points to visible scars]. My father is responsible for my current suffering. I left the old man and remarried someone else, but he is even a monster.

**Although women's agency remains constrained by gendered violence and strict gender norms, a number of those who were in unions without complete bridewealth exchange nonetheless discussed having better relationships as a result.** Although more data are needed, the lack of complete bridewealth may correspond to a reduction in domestic violence, as men are aware that their unofficial wives can easily leave them. A few young women explicitly corroborated this theory and explained that the payment of bridewealth eclipsed their autonomy and was something that they were happy to avoid:

I am not officially married because my husband does not have the animals to pay

bridewealth. I feel good about it because there are a lot of issues that come with official marriages, especially, domestic violence. After marriage, men say that "after all, I have already taken the bridewealth, which your people are enjoying." It is really better I stay like this—not officially married—and I have not experienced any domestic violence on me.

In an example of negotiating new arrangements, another female respondent described how her parents would not let her leave her husband—for fear of her being seen as a prostitute—but would let her live separately from him as he had not paid any portion of the bridewealth.

In the other trend discussed above, and perhaps in response to such perceptions of increased agency, in the three years of data we see an increase in cohabitation of couples even when bridewealth has not been paid in full. Some couples were cohabitating while waiting for (and even working together towards making) the eventual full payment of bridewealth, while others said they were happy in their current situation. While not achieving a traditional marker of adulthood, the autonomy for women associated with partial bridewealth payments may be creating an alternative transition to adulthood that allows women to maintain independence in marriage.

In the data, **while youth were remaking marriage models, marriage nonetheless remained an important institution through which one achieved respect and adulthood. Social norms around this institution remain resistant to change**, as evident in the hopes of one female respondent:

I pray to God to get married officially to my husband so that my family/people can feel the woman in me that I brought something home and the respect I will get if something is brought to my parents as bridewealth, even only four animals is better than nothing.

In addition, delayed bridewealth payments could also lead to problems, particularly for men's transition to recognized adulthood. In the case of one young man, unpaid bridewealth led to social ostracization and problems with the woman's family:

I have not yet married my wife officially because I still don't have enough livestock. Her parents and relatives kept on mocking and disturbing me because of this. Last month, we were forced to relocate to another manyatta [settlement] because they chased us away. They told my wife to leave me and look for another man who has cattle to marry, but because she loves me, she moved with me.

As family acceptance is important in the transition to adulthood, **this negotiation of the institution of marriage has simultaneously provided young women greater autonomy but has left some young men in a liminal space between youth and adulthood.**

However, males in the sample expressed agency and were negotiating marriage for their benefit. Some young men expressed skepticism of polygamous marriages, something they described as expensive and unrealistic given the dwindling livestock base. Changing social, cultural, and religious norms also influence this change in perspective, as evidenced in the explanation by a young man in Loroo sub-county in Amudat:

Even if I have more livestock, I won't add another wife or woman because it becomes challenging to feed and care for a large family and many children, especially to take them to school. I will not add another wife because I want to educate my children so that they support me in future. I also want to have a serious business to support my family. The church and dwindling resources discourage young people from marrying many wives. There is no longer any shame about having only one wife as was the case in the past. It is not frowned upon by peers or others in the community. No one laughs at you for having only one wife because the church taught us about many things.

In the data there was nonetheless at times an association between polygamy and feeling respected, as described by one respondent: "If the husband has many wives, he feels respected and also those women are respected in the community." Thus, we see from the data that marriage and the

transition to adulthood remain in the process of negotiation and reinvention, with broad implications for young people and their families.

## Education closures and marriage as a negative coping mechanism of youth

**The school closures as a result of Covid-19 reduced the options for daily activities and safe spaces, which appears to have led to an increase in sexual activity for youth and a higher rate of pregnancies and marriages for young women.** A young man from Nadunget in Moroto described the situation faced by young people during the lockdown, including idleness and movement into towns:

Many of my friends took advantage of the lockdown and got married. There were a lot of girls within the village this time round. Some of them went to town to stay with friends and to look for work there. The village is very boring, and people don't have anything to do.

The migration of girls and young women to urban spaces increases the risk of both consensual sexual activities and sexual exploitation. As pregnancy or marriage usually signals the end of a female's educational journey, what was originally a temporary halt in schooling becomes permanent. One young woman in Kaabong explained that she couldn't imagine returning to school after becoming pregnant and having a child, despite her aspirations: "All along, I had wanted to study and be a nurse. I had seen the life of a nurse in Kalapata Health Center, and I immediately admired it. Now, I think I can't reach that level, but maybe I will encourage those behind me to fulfill my wishes." In looking at the cohort data across the three years, some respondents consistently expressed a desire to return to school but felt unable to do so because of lack of school fees and/or family support. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the interruption for those older adolescents who had been able to persevere in school are further setbacks to these goals **and have brought a transition to womanhood earlier than many females had hoped for or planned.**

Beyond the association of education with childhood, the demands, responsibilities, and norms that come with motherhood structurally prevent girls and young women from returning to school (Human Rights Watch 2018) and can increase the likelihood of longer-term impoverishment. Ugandan schools (and social norms) do not offer facilities and opportunities for young mothers to return to school. The lack of education affects young women's future opportunities to join the work force and earn a decent wage, thereby perpetuating the cycle of vulnerability and risk. Young men, on the other hand, take longer to feel the negative economic pressure of parenthood, since the responsibilities are mainly left on young women who remain at their natal homes. Thus, the reported increase in pregnancies during Covid-19 likely coincides with an unplanned cessation of girls' and women's educational journeys and created a transition to adulthood, specifically womanhood, that may be marred by financial precarity.

# Conclusion and Implications

Gender shapes the lives and livelihoods of young men and women in Karamoja, including how they experience and respond to shocks and how they manage the transition to adulthood. As young women and men navigate multifaceted and multilayered shocks and barriers to their livelihoods, we see evidence in the data of their attempts to increase agency in their lives and transitions to adulthood even in the face of social expectations, impoverishment, and structural barriers to success. This section highlights some of the continued challenges as well as the opportunities that arise from our analysis and discusses the implications for international and national programmers.

## **Gender norms restrict the ability of female respondents to effectively respond to shocks.**

Strict norms limited the livelihood opportunities that young women can pursue. In the data from 2021, general insecurity and the Covid-19 pandemic further constrained these opportunities. A number of women abandoned efforts to spread risk through diversified livelihood activities because of the risk caused by insecurity or market closures due to Covid-19. These and other factors increase the financial precarity of many women in the sample population. However, given their limited options, some young women did continue to pursue activities which placed them at risk, including the risk of sexual violence.

## **Women's limited access to resources and social networks affects the success of their livelihood strategies. Male partners and other male relatives can benefit or deter women's efforts to build and/or contribute to their households' financial security.**

Husbands in particular often served as gatekeepers for resource access, underscoring the relational and gendered nature of livelihoods.

**Further inhibiting women's ability to respond to shocks is the transition to adulthood and associated responsibilities, particularly motherhood.** Women struggled to balance care burdens, an increased need to contribute to the household income,

and the difficulty in pursuing certain livelihoods with small children. Combined with a reported increase in unexpected births due to school closures and consequently interrupted educational journeys, **women's transition to adulthood may be increasingly associated with a descent into poverty.**

**Finally, for young women, forced and compelled marriage may at times be used as a way for their households to cope with financial vulnerability.** As demonstrated, forced or compelled marriage further curtails the livelihood opportunities of these young women and potentially exposes them to further risks regarding their health and exposure to domestic violence.

Gender norms and expectations also determine young men's livelihoods and their transition to adulthood. **Some men engaged in livestock production and/or livestock trade face heightened risks of increased insecurity.** These livelihoods place men at an increased risk for violence when travelling far distances with herds or to markets. Additionally, moving with animals brought suspicion from police given the increase in cattle raids. Due to market shifts, traders also faced lower prices and received smaller returns. Some men did abandon livestock production and trade, instead taking advantage of nontraditional livelihoods available to them, including cultivation and artisanal, small-scale mining. Young men reported feeling increased pressure to marry in response to insecurity, with some families fearing they would lose livestock in raids if they did not use them as bridewealth.

Young women and men appear to be newly negotiating the structures, symbols, and markers of marriage, which is a constitutive part of the transition to adulthood. For example, some **women report enjoying the agency provided by absent or partial bridewealth payments, reveling in the autonomy and, at times, protection this situation provided.** Additionally, given the inequity surrounding livestock ownership, **couples were increasingly cohabitating together despite incomplete bridewealth payments.**

Although incomplete bridewealth payments continued to provide young women greater agency in marriage, **these emerging models of marriage may also block young men's transition to adulthood when social norms of acceptance lag behind.**

Although there is evidence of change in social norms as evidenced in views on marriage, such shifts are neither uniform nor linear. In addition, **while youth negotiated the meanings, institutions, and norms informing gender and adulthood in their families and communities, the power systems surrounding gender and adulthood remained largely intact.** Youth in the data thus existed in a liminal space, simultaneously negotiating adulthood and their livelihood opportunities, while still being pressured to meet the traditional expectations placed upon young women and young men transitioning to adulthood.

## Implications for programmers

### *Responding to the limited livelihood options for young women*

- Young women have limited options for adapting to livelihood shocks such as Covid-19, in large part due to existing structural gender barriers. Programming should go further than encouraging men to support women in their domestic responsibilities and should also focus on reconceiving notions of masculine and feminine work outside the home. We already see (as evidenced in the 2019 data) that young men can increasingly cross over into—and profit from—livelihood activities normally considered “female.” Helping females and their communities increasingly accept women’s engagement in marketing, livestock trade, entrepreneurship (especially outside of the typical female domains of brewing and petty vegetable trade), and even manual labor may help break down existing norms. A number of women in the study population are already engaged in such activities; these women could be highlighted and promoted as role models and innovators within their communities.

### *Reinvigorating alternative livelihoods of young men following shocks*

- Many young men continued to pursue traditional pastoral livelihoods given its ecological appropriateness and strong cultural and economic associations with manhood. Given livestock losses and increased inequity in the past two decades, a number of young men have diversified into alternative livelihoods or abandoned pastoral production altogether. Many of these more market-based activities, including trade, casual labor, and work in the service sector, have felt negative impacts from Covid-19. Programmers should thus renew their focus on providing avenues for young men and young women to develop alternative livelihoods in both rural and urban areas. Appropriate steps include understanding the impacts of the pandemic, conducting market assessments, providing trainings and start-up capital, and facilitating uptake of new endeavors.

### *Sharing gender advantages and promoting collaboration*

- Given the gender advantages that men enjoy, programming focusing on the economic empowerment of young women should also engage their male family members, as they can be important gatekeepers in accessing resources. Engaging men could entail shared training, collaborative problem-solving, and continued efforts in programmatic areas where male participation can earn respect, such as the Male Change Agent model.
- Economic empowerment was relational in the data, with men at times prohibiting women’s empowerment because they felt threatened or due to constrictive gender norms. Programming should thus focus on empowering both partners to foster an atmosphere where they see benefits from programming.
- Young women increasingly value financial independence. As such, programmers should capitalize on women’s increasing interest in starting businesses and securing independent livelihoods by continuing to focus on skills training, including in typically male-dominated

fields, and the provision of start-up capital. Apprenticeship and/or mentorship models might be useful in ensuring longevity and sustainability of such programs.

### *Reducing the barriers to young women's livelihoods caused by adult responsibilities*

- Many young women in the sample population interrupted their livelihood activities due to marriage, pregnancy, and motherhood. Models to encourage and enable young women to continue livelihoods while still fulfilling their domestic and cultural responsibilities are needed. Models include programs with collective childcare, encouragement of the formation of women's groups that include shared childcare, and efforts to reduce stigma upon working women.
- Young mothers may benefit from programs that provide economic (but flexible) incentives to engage in entrepreneurial trainings and related programs.
- Reproductive health information and contraceptive services should be widely available and promoted, with education campaigns reaching men and women and their families. Previous research indicates widespread misinformation about modern contraceptive methods; this misinformation will need to be actively countered for both men and women.
- Significant progress could be made if girls did not stop schooling upon becoming pregnant, giving birth, or getting married. As such, work needs to be done to enable pregnant women, young mothers, and/or married women to continue with their primary or secondary education. Doing so will require changing local norms around the transition to adulthood and the appropriateness of "adult" women attending schools, as well as the explicit support from district and local school administrators, teachers, and communities.

### *Recognizing the risk factors for force or compelled marriages and supporting local mechanisms that counter these trends*

- Programmers should focus their efforts on combatting forced and compelled marriage as

a coping mechanism in response to livelihood shocks. Such efforts might include sensitization campaigns after shocks or in periods of livelihood stress on the downsides of early marriage.

- Some women reported seeking help in response to marriage pressure from both informal and formal accountability mechanisms. Outreach campaigns should work to ensure that young men and women are aware of their rights with regard to marriage and that they know how to access support if and when needed.
- Programmers should work with human rights offices and councils of elders to encourage positive outcomes for girls and young women who bring such cases. In cases where these institutions are seen to be supporting the rights of girls and women (as opposed to the status quo), commendations and recognitions might be made to encourage other civil society bodies to follow suit.

### *Recognizing the shifts taking place as youth negotiate their transitions to adulthood*

- In recognition of which youth are seeking to negotiate their transitions to adulthood, such as through new marriage arrangements, programmers should consider married couples targets for programs that can help promote a sense of equality and shared responsibility, including maternal and child nutrition, household financial literacy, and savings and lending systems.
- The young people who have transitioned to adulthood (through marriage, parenthood, or cessation of education) during the Covid-19 pandemic may be particularly vulnerable due to lack of preparation, inadequate capital and resources, and the frustration of unmet aspirations. Programs that recognize such challenges and setbacks may realize success in post-Covid projects and may be able to get some of these young people back on track to meeting their livelihood goals.

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