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Beyond Western Models: Towards a Global Framework in Youth Emancipation Trajectories

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Beyond Western Models in Youth Emancipation Trajectories

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Abstract

Purpose: Frameworks on youth emancipation have developed mostly in industrialised contexts. Are these useful to understand the process in other world geographies? This study reviews data from West Africa, Southern Europe, and low-income countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, to suggest a framework with global benchmarks relevant to the various continents.

Methodology: The study is based on a review of literature that covered academic articles, official statistics, and grey literature from the third sector from 2015 to 2022. Inclusion criteria covered texts in English and Spanish with the words ‘youth emancipation’, ‘youth transitions’, and ‘youth trajectories’, ranging from ethnographic to statistical research.

Findings: Consolidated theory on itineraries (educational, labour, housing, and family) and dimensions (linearity, extension, reversibility, and diversification) prove useful to compare realities worldwide. However, some emancipation milestones are less relevant in non-European subregions – such as completing compulsory education, starting a full-time job, or leaving the family home. Marrying and having children remain central, especially for young women, dictating their life trajectories as much as education or work. Migration, displacements, and freedom of choice, emerge as new dimensions to be integrated.

Practical Implications: Youth organisations and inter-governmental bodies can use this framework to compare their work in different countries. More research is needed to develop a comparative framework that goes beyond Western centrality in theorisation.

Originality/Value: The suggested framework presents a review of non-western literature on youth emancipation. The framework resulting from it is likely to be more adapted than current frameworks used only for European contexts with European youth.

Keywords: *Youth transitions, coloniality, West Africa, Southern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean*

Beyond Western Models: Towards a Global Framework in Youth Emancipation

Trajectories

Introduction

Do young people from Africa or Latin America emancipate in the same way than young people in Europe?

Do they get an education, find jobs, and form a family in the same order and timing? Which different opportunities and barriers do they find as they seek to become autonomous in life?

There are more than 1.21 billion people between the ages of 15 and 24¹, accounting for 15.5% of the global population (UN, 2020). More than 100 million live in extreme poverty, the vast majority of them in Africa (Hamel & Di Nucci, 2019). The figure rises to 169 million if young people who work but remain poor are considered (ILO, 2015). This concentration of poverty in one geographical area is likely to substantially affect the way in which these young people emancipate.

Different realities such as socioeconomic levels, countries of origin, and gender, affect what is experienced as 'young'. This article aims to contribute towards building a theoretical framework that is sensitive to all these differences and that can encapsulate experiences of youth worldwide, beyond frameworks that have been tested in European countries with European youth only.

¹ The study follows the United Nations' definition of 'youth' as those people between the ages of 15 and 24 (UN, 2022), yet understands geographical adaptations. In Southern Europe, the age range of what is considered 'young' has expanded, partly due to the difficulty to emancipate (EUROSTAT, 2021). In other places, the age group is shorter, due to early entry into the informal labour market, mobility, or early construction of one's family.

A framework that can understand profiles as different as these three hypothetical young people – all sharing the same year of birth –1990–, yet living in different continents. First, a European young woman who was born in Barcelona as the only child of an accommodated family. She studied teacher training and competed for public exams. After several attempts, she passed and got a job as a primary teacher. She is over thirty and plans to move in with her partner soon. Second, an African young woman who left her village in Senegal at the age of 14 to find work in the city of Casamance, where her aunt lived. She had thought about returning to study but got pregnant before the trip, which complicated her study plans. Third, a Latin American young man from Bolivia who arrived in Barcelona two years ago after a hard and long migration journey. He does not hold a work or residence permit, nor has the perspective to obtain any soon. He makes some money by working long hours at a kebab stand.

Seeing the considerable differences in the way these three young people emancipated, and the different conceptions of what is being “young”, how can it be then ensured that a given theoretical framework to study youth emancipation can include and compare these realities?

This article will focus on studying how young people emancipate in three subregions of the world: West Africa, Southern Europe, and low-income countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Data from these regions will be tested against a theoretical framework presented after this introduction.

This study thus compares to most existing frameworks, which are shaped and limited by the life experiences of European youth only. In doing so, the article aims to uncover Euro-centric perspectives that have permeated theory and contribute to a more inclusive understanding of global youth experiences. In other words, the study seeks to make visible the diversity of emancipation models that exists worldwide and locate the European models –the most studied to date– as one more model amongst

many. Putting European models in perspective –rather than as ‘the’ model– avoids what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) called ‘coloniality’, that is, the long-term Western patterns of power and inequality derived from colonialism that persist beyond the strict limits of past colonial administrations, for instance, in academic frameworks and processes.

One of the initial challenges of this comparative study was to find a global theoretical framework when most of the existing frameworks came from European contexts. Furthermore, many studies on emancipation in Africa and Latin America analysed aspects separately, for example, educational or housing aspects, yet without offering geographical models. Thus, the strategy was to depart from theoretical work applied in European contexts on youth trajectories² and regimes (Coles, 1995; Walther, 2006) to validate how much of it served to read empirical data that was not European. Walther (2006: 124) himself had already acknowledged the limitations of European frameworks regarding African, Asian, and Eastern European countries. This article builds on that earlier acknowledgement.

After an empirical review of studies on youth emancipation from outside Europe, the conclusion is that not all the milestones –or emancipation indicators– used in European models are as relevant in other world regions; and that new aspects could instead be more significant, such as migration trajectories.

Methodology

This article is part of a broader study coordinated by Oxfam Intermón and the University of Lleida, Spain, in 2021 and 2022 on youth emancipation and inequalities. This article covers secondary data of three subregions – West Africa, Southern Europe and low-income countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

² The authors prefer ‘youth trajectories’ to ‘youth transitions’ to be in line with the definition of youth as a period on its own and not a step to adulthood. The authors use ‘transitions’ for periods of change such as vital changes from education to work.

It complements a second study focusing on Catalonia and the Southern Europe region (Cascant and Claver, 2022). The choice of the three regions responded to areas of special interest to Oxfam Intermón in countries where the organisation works and can apply research results.

The review of literature covered academic articles, official reports and statistics, and grey literature from the third sector. Inclusion criteria covered texts with the words ‘youth emancipation’, ‘youth transitions’, and ‘youth trajectories’, as much of the literature draws on these keywords when studying the topic. These words were looked up in English and Spanish, as these were the main languages spoken in the regions of study, and the academics writing about them. A more targeted search method was also carried out beyond keywords for sub-regions with scarce literature on emancipation. When such studies were found, final references (backward search) and academic citations (forward search) of the articles were carefully examined.

The period of study covered 2015-2022, yet flexibility was given to resources from regions with fewer studies, such as West Africa. All disciplines were welcome, so the studies reviewed ranged from ethnographic to statistical research. There were no exclusion criteria aside from dates and languages, as the literature in these regions is still scarce. The statistical sources selected came from official entities including the European Union (Eurostat, Eurydice) and the United Nations (ILO, OHCHR, UNDP, UNICEF, UNESCO and the World Bank).

One data limitation was the scarce information on youth emancipation for some subregions, especially West Africa and low-income countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. The study integrated research from other continents (Asia), regions (North Africa and the Middle East, East Africa), and countries, where it was considered useful to contextualise the phenomenon of youth emancipation in the areas of study.

When disaggregated data did not exist for the subregion of study, the study resorted to statistical data of the wider regions where it belonged to, for example, West Africa within Sub-Saharan Africa.

This runs the risk of generalising as data relative to a wider region may be read as relevant for the subregion of study. The study indicates changes of unit of analysis when this happens to enhance a critical and careful reading. Likewise, the study highlights minority trajectories that exist within the areas studied to enhance the variations in cultural, social, and economic contexts.

A final data limitation was that no information was found for all the trajectories together (education, work, housing, and family) in each of the three subregional models studied, especially in the African and Latin American cases. Thus, it was difficult to reflect on how one trajectory affected another. Searching for comparability, the study integrated as many trajectories as possible in each subregional model with the available information, but the research on 'regimes' or 'models' with their four dimensions and contextual specificities is yet to be consolidated in the broader literature.

A Framework to Study Youth Emancipation Globally – How do Trajectories Fare?

To understand how young people have been affected by major socioeconomic changes in the past decades in western societies, researchers have made use of concepts such as trajectories (education, work, housing, and family) and certain dimensions of analysis (linearity, extension, reversibility, diversification) that interconnect these trajectories and constitute, overall, a 'model' or 'regime' of youth emancipation that covers geographical areas with similar patterns.

The two most studied trajectories have been education and work – and how both interact (Guerrero-Puerta, 2023). Other trajectories include leaving the family or residence of origin, and forming one's own housing/family unit (Coles, 1995).

Overall, this study understands 'youth emancipation' as the chances of young people to develop life projects through these trajectories. Vital events or milestones traditionally selected to monitor that emancipation process include finishing schooling; getting a job to sustain oneself; leaving the residence of origin; and getting married and having children.

The four trajectories relate to each other and are sequenced in a certain way, constituting a 'model' of youth emancipation. Several dimensions have been used to analyse the ways in which trajectories interact (Pollock, 2008; Serracant, 2015; Walther, 2006).

- 'Linearity', when one trajectory precedes another, for instance, a young person studying nursing, then working as a nurse. Instead, 'non-linearity' happens when these trajectories are simultaneous, not consecutive, or unrelated, for instance, a young person studying and working at the same time, or working without studies, or working in something she did not study for. Both situations –linearity and non-linearity– coexist although there is a growing consensus that non-linear itineraries have increased (Baizán et al., 2002; Pollock, 2008).
- 'Extension', when career milestones comparatively take more vital years to complete than before (Arnett, 2000; Galland, 2000). For instance, having to study a masters' degree to get a job that did not require that masters' level before.

- ‘Reversibility’, when the progress of a trajectory is reversed, that is, when young people need to regain milestones that they had already achieved – for instance, go back to study, go back to look for work, go back to the family home, go back to being single after a separation or divorce (Biggart & Walther, 2016; Machado, 2000).

The combination of trajectories that young people take does not play in a vacuum. Depending on their interaction with a given social, economic, and cultural context, these are more or less lineal, extended, reversible or diverse. The traditional model studied in European settings during the 20th century consisted of a linear, orderly model where young people would first get full-time education, then paid work as the main activity, and then, setting up their own residence and family. Extensions in this traditional model used to be short since the moves between vital events occurred in a relatively short period of time. There was also little reversibility of vital events.

However, the transition from Fordist to more flexible post-Fordist economies in industrialised societies at the end of the 20th century made the model of European emancipation evolve. It became less linear, more extended, more reversible, and more diverse, de-standardised and unpredictable (Serracant, 2015; Walther, 2006). For example, the years between the completion of studies (educational path) and the formation of one’s family (family path) expanded. This is because periods of studying, and labour insertion also expanded. There have also been cultural reasons, such as women’s emancipation from their traditional roles of wives and mothers, and the decrease of marriage and childbearing in European societies (Guerrero-Puerta, 2023).

This article suggests that the diversity of emancipation models is not only found in different historical periods, but also in distinct geographical, coetaneous realities worldwide. If the framework presented has been solid to study youth emancipation in different periods, it could then be assumed it can serve for understanding youth emancipation in different geographies.

The conclusion section will return to the relevance of the framework's dimensions and trajectories to study non-Western settings, with adaptations to better reflect regional differences, and recommendations for policy. Before that, exploration of the framework in diverse geographical and cultural settings is required, as will be done in the findings and discussion sections. More concretely, the first section of findings explores emancipation models studied in different world settings. This is followed by a review of each of the four trajectories in non-European contexts in the second and third section of findings. The discussion section analyses how trajectories and models/regimes vary geographically.

Findings

This section compares models of youth emancipation in Africa, Europe, and Latin America, with special attention to information available on the subregions of West Africa, Southern Europe, and low-income countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (subsection 1). Four itineraries – educational, work, residential, and family – are compared in these subregions (subsections 2 and 3).

1. Emancipation models in Africa, Europe, and Latin America

In Africa, several studies have identified regional patterns in educational, work and family trajectories. In education, the Sub-Saharan model covering East, West and Southern African countries is described as having basic schooling with widespread challenges in access, quality, and continuity. The educational

trajectory is short compared to the global average, since many young people finish their studies at the end of primary or secondary school (Ansell, 2004; Porter et al., 2010; Punch, 2015a).

Access to the work trajectory occurs at an early age, especially in the informal sector (Pesando et al., 2021). In 2016, the informal sector accounted for 89.2% of the economy in Sub-Saharan Africa, with West Africa boasting the highest percentage on the continent – 92.4% (ILO, 2018). The formation of one's family also occurs at an early age. Sexual intercourse happens at ages 16-17 in women, and the period between that, and having partners and children is short, if compared to global averages. As with education, family trajectories are similar between low-income African countries in Eastern, Southern, and Western Africa (Pesando et al., 2021).

Two other African emancipatory models with specific characteristics are those of middle-income countries and the 'Arab' model. In African middle-income countries like South Africa, trajectories are marked by higher primary and secondary education completion (UNESCO, 2021a, 2021b), and a smaller informal sector – 34% in South Africa (ILO, 2018: 28, 30). Nevertheless, unemployment in the formal sector is one of the biggest concerns of South African youth in their emancipation process (Ansell, 2004; Mthembu, 2016).

The Arab model covers North Africa and the Middle East based on common cultural and economic characteristics and is characterised by a tension between 'tradition and modernity' (Alnaser, 2018). On the one hand, the region is made up of middle-income economies, including high-income ones mostly based on oil production. Even though North Africa has a much smaller informal sector than Sub-Saharan Africa (67% versus 89.2%), some studies point to its still scarce formal sector, which is unable to absorb all the young, qualified cadres that the region has gradually trained (Kiaga & Leung, 2020). On a cultural

level, this model features high conservatism, especially towards women, with the highest gender inequalities recorded globally. For example, while the gender equality ratio in secondary education was relatively high –78.5%– and similar to Latin American and Caribbean levels –82.9%– in 2020 (UNESCO, 2020), the percentage of female labour participation is the lowest in the world – with 19% of the total labour force. The percentage is far removed from those of Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean, which are all above 40% (World Bank, 2021).

In Europe, the study of emancipation models is closely related to the welfare state models studied by sociologist Esping-Andersen (2012). Four models or regimes of youth emancipation have been identified – Nordic, Continental, Anglo-Saxon and Southern Europe (Serracant, 2015; Van de Velde, 2008; Walther, 2006). These regimes involve diverse educational, work, residential and family trajectories in each. The study of these European models on youth emancipation is relatively consolidated compared to models in other parts of the world.

In the Nordic or universalist model, in countries like Denmark and Sweden, the emancipation age is the earliest in relation to the European average. It is favoured by State social policies for youth that are universal. In other words, they are not aimed at vulnerable groups but at the young population in general. Educational careers are long and combined with periods of professional activity. In many cases, residential independence does not imply economic independence since the economic dependence on the family (or the State) continues once the residence of origin has been abandoned.

The continental or conservative model, represented by France, also has linear, early and fast trajectories in relation to the European average. Yet, unlike the Nordic model, it is the family that ensures this rapid emancipation, not the State. In the Anglo-Saxon model, represented by the United Kingdom, leaving the

residence of origin also happens early, and is given by the greater accessibility of the labour and real estate market in relation to other European countries. Based on a liberal culture, there is an expectation that young people will leave the residence of origin early. Longer educational paths are expected to be self-financed by the young person.

In the Southern Europe or Mediterranean model, such as Spain, moving out is, together with Eastern Europe countries, the latest in Europe (and possibly in the world), with upper limits that exceed 30 years (EUROSTAT, 2021). Unlike the Anglo-Saxon model, young people are not socially expected to leave their residences of origin soon, given the fragility of the labour and housing markets, and of public youth policies. The family becomes essential, acting as a protective mechanism in which many young people extend their accommodation while they accumulate educational, work, and financial resources towards their vital autonomy.

Latin America and the Caribbean presents notable differences in youth emancipation between low- and middle-income countries, between upper and lower classes, and between rural and urban areas. Mexico, as a middle-income country, shares similar moving out rates than those of Eastern and Southern Europe. According to data from 2018, young people in Mexico became independent on average at almost 29 years of age –27 years in rural areas and 31 years in urban areas (Munguia, 2018). The 2019 National Youth Survey revealed that at least 6 out of 10 young people between the ages 15 and 29 lived with a relative and 77.7% did not have children (Espinosa et al., 2019).

A study in Uruguay released similar results, pointing out that the young Uruguayan population of higher strata and with more years of education delay leaving home, while those with a lower educational level do so earlier. Young rural people, especially women, leave the residence of origin earlier, which is

associated with patterns of early marriage and internal migration. The Uruguayan study also suggests a gradual delay in milestones such as leaving education, starting the first job, and beginning the reproductive life, and a certain disconnection of these with leaving home, which is not delayed on average (Ciganda & Pardo, 2014).

In low-income countries such as Bolivia, there is a pattern where many young people from marginalised rural areas need to migrate to attend secondary school, and to work (Punch, 2015b). A study compares the process of 'independence' that young people have from their families in high-income countries with that of '(negotiated) interdependence' between youth and families of origin that is created in low-income countries such as Bolivia. Here, most young people actively contribute to the maintenance of the residence of origin soon and during their lives. The sense of belonging to an 'extended family' (several generations or nuclear families living together in the same residential unit) is greater in these contexts than in high-income countries. The concept of 'becoming independent', which Punch criticises as more individualistic, loses relevance (Punch, 2002).

Another study focused uniquely on educational trajectories proposes three regional models. Countries like Argentina, Chile, Cuba, and Uruguay have consolidated educational systems, with moderate dropout rates. A second group of countries, including Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Venezuela, have relatively localised dropout rates in certain geographic areas. Lastly, Central America, Bolivia and Haiti, share a more widespread school dropout, which is predominantly rural. These countries have a prevalence of youth work in rural areas, the highest levels of illiteracy in the region, and a challenge both for access and continuity in the educational system. It is possibly in this third group where the education-labour transition –study, and then work– is less linear (Filgueira et al., 2003).

2. Education and work trajectories in the three subregions

Compared to the world's average, the length of the educational trajectory is shorter in West Africa than in other world contexts (Juárez & Gayet, 2014). School life expectancy, or the number of years that students remain in the educational system, varied worldwide from the minimum of 5.5 years in South Sudan to the maximum of 19.6 years in Belgium for 2021 – see Table 1 (UNDP, 2022).

Table 1: Educational trajectories, comparison by regions

	Years studied (UNDP, 2021)	Public education spending as % of GDP (UNESCO, 2019)	Education versus work (ILO, 2021)
West Africa	Low (less than 6 years)	3.4%*	Very subqualified
Southern Europe	High (more than 9 years)	5.1%*	Very overqualified
Latin America & the Caribbean (low-income countries)	Medium (between 6 and 9 years)	4.6%	Subqualified

Source: own elaboration based on UNDP (2021), UNESCO (2019) and ILO (2021)

*No disaggregated data exists for West Africa and Southern Europe

These regional differences coincide with differences in public education spending (Table 1). In 2020, Sub-Saharan countries invested 3.4% of the national budget in public education while European countries invested 5.1%. Low-income countries in Latin America and the Caribbean were in the middle, with 4.6% of the budget (UNESCO, 2022).

This adds to the fact that the regions investing the most in education are already those with the most educated populations. In this respect, young people tend to be overqualified in high-income countries, and underqualified in low-income countries, for the work they do (Table 1). Only half of young people globally have an educational level that corresponds to their job positions (ILO, 2021). Both phenomena indicate imbalances between training and education, the labour market and public investment in education.

These differences also hint at the fact that the interaction between the education and work trajectories vary geographically in linearity and extension. In Europe, a consolidated compulsory education system until ages 15-18, linked with a similar legal age to work leads to a logical linearity between studying and working for most youth (EURYDICE, 2022). In Sub-Saharan Africa, school dropout is the world's highest (UNESCO, 2016). 35% of young people under the age of 15 already work (Juárez & Gayet, 2014). In this case, the interaction between education and work can be linear –thus, a ‘transition’–, but also parallel (study and work at the same time), circular (alternation of studies and work) or inexistent (no access to education, child labour). Conflicts, resource scarcity, gender roles, and educational systems that are not universally guaranteed, underpin these less linear and shorter trajectories.

Secondary education, in particular, continues to be an aspiration for many young people worldwide, especially in low-income countries in Africa (UNESCO, 2021a). Insufficient investment in public education places young people and their families in a difficult situation regarding the continuation of secondary studies, for those fortunate who ever manage to access it. In a formal and literate economy, secondary and tertiary education play a qualifying role. In an informal economy, which is the most accessible sector for poorer families, secondary education is not as essential. First, because of the large economic investment that it entails for families. Second, because access to the limited formal positions that exist is marked on many occasions by social contacts and nepotism, more than by qualifications and abilities (Chant & Jones, 2005). According to Punch (2015), accessing the limited formal market in a country whose economy is predominantly informal requires investing much more than in secondary education to obtain a return on employment. This is, for many impoverished young people and their families, unattainable (Langevang, 2008; Morrow, 2015).

Thus, the difficulty to access limited formal sectors could promote a low education-to-work linearity in many countries. The percentages of informality are predominant in the world – see Table 2 (ILO, 2018: 27-39). A total of 96.8% of young people in low-income countries work in the informal economy (UN, 2020). The informal sector does not incentivise family investment in formal education beyond primary school, since the work it offers does not require mandatory qualifications. By not requiring certificates, like the formal sector, the permeability of the informal sector as an alternative to school or complementary income is greater. The larger the informal sector, the more options young people have to start earning money. Education and employment paths more easily overlap, intersect or disconnect, rather than follow one another. Work options may interfere and shorten education paths. The same may occur

with migration. In Latin America, in the Bolivia-Argentina border area, a study observed how migration-for-work functions as an attractive alternative to studying for young people (Punch, 2002).

Table 2: Work trajectory, comparison by regions

	Informality rates (ILO, 2018)	Women's participation rate in the labour market (World Bank, 2021)
West Africa	Very high (92.4%)	High (>40%)
Southern Europe	Medium-low (14.3%)*	High (>40%)
Latin America & the Caribbean (low-income countries)	Medium (57.6-58%)	High (>40%)

Source: own elaboration based on ILO (2018) and World Bank (2021)

*Includes Northern and Western Europe

Another element that affects the education-to-work transition regards gender inequalities. An ILO analysis in sixty countries found that young men are more likely to complete this transition while young women are more likely to remain out (ILO, 2020). This means that young women already face barriers during their studies, before they even face the challenges related to a career path, such as access and retention in employment. While having children has a dissuasive effect on female employment, it rather becomes an incentive for male employment (ILO, 2016). The lack of child-oriented public services and unequal gender roles in the upbringing, contribute to this inequality.

Despite the challenges, employment performed by women has increased globally (World Bank, 2021). Latin America and the Caribbean is the region that has experienced the greatest increase in the period 1990-2021 from 34,9% to 41,3% of the total labour force (Table 2). This means that Latin America and the Caribbean catch up with Sub-Saharan Africa and Europe and Central Asia, which already had a high female labour force participation in 1990 (above 40%) and which have experienced slight rises in recent decades. On the contrary, the Middle East and North Africa remained at percentages below 20% for 2021.

3. Housing and family trajectories in the three subregions

In many countries, getting married and having a family does not necessarily mean leaving the family or residence of origin and looking for a new home (Table 3). In cultures with an extended family pattern, the young family either stays in the family home of origin or moves to the home of the husband's family. The responsibility of providing a house for the new family usually falls on the young husband while that of caring for the paternal family falls on the young wife. Couples who move into a new house may occupy one or two rooms, and not necessarily the entire house, as noted by Kovacheva et al. (2018) in a study of North and West African countries. In fact, buying a plot of land to build their own home is for many young

families an insurmountable barrier. Building one's house is a common investment, for example, by returnees, or by those receiving remittances from abroad (Punch, 2015).

Furthermore, extended families are governed by rules of intergenerational responsibility, creating tensions between brothers and sisters, and affecting emancipation trajectories by age and gender. Birth order and gender can define decisions over who does care work, studies, or earns money among siblings. A study in Bolivia analysed how, in families with a high number of children, younger siblings are more likely to continue their studies, helped by older siblings (Punch, 2002). Another study about Latin America showed how extended families protected against school dropout, mainly benefitting young girls in countries with high birth rates and low incomes (Filgueira et al, 2003).

The order of birth may not only affect educational options but also migration – young siblings may be forced to remain at home to care for the parents, especially if older siblings have migrated. Similarly, women are more likely to be assigned domestic and caring burdens and be accompanied in their migration. In conclusion, being the youngest daughter or son may increase educational opportunities, but limit employment options (Punch, 2002).

Extended families are especially important in countries where the informal sector is predominant. Informal work does not provide social protection derived from contributions. If, in addition, non-contributory social protection is weak in a country, then families and communities are left to perform caring roles. Young people and adults end up caring for older and dependent family members, and/or supporting them financially. If extended families support childcare, then there is an expectation that these children once older contribute to family life or return that support in future, as studied by Day and Evans (2015) in Zambia. In countries with more established social protection systems, children do not bear that

cultural expectation of supporting their ascending family once they grow up. It is rather the ascending families who are expected to support their descendants until their full emancipation.

Table 3: Family trajectory, comparison by regions

	Importance of the extended family (Punch, 2002, 2015; Day & Evans, 2015; Filgueira et al, 2003; Kovacheva et al., 2018)	Formation of a new family (Pesando et al., 2021; EUROSTAT, 2022b, 2022a)
West Africa	High	Early
Southern Europe	Low	Late
Latin America & the Caribbean (low-income countries)	High	Early

Source: own elaboration based on Punch (2002, 2015); Day & Evans (2015); Filgueira et al (2003); Kovacheva et al. (2018); Pesando et al. (2021) and EUROSTAT (2022b, 2022a)

Regarding the formation of a new family, a study tracked the sexual and childbirth behaviours of women worldwide (Pesando et al., 2021). Different patterns emerged. The most widespread birth trajectory in Africa, Latin America, and Asia (40-70% of women) was the so-called 'early rapid transition'. In this cluster, half of the women had had their first sexual intercourse by age 16. This event was quickly followed by cohabitation with a couple and childbirth. By age 23, almost all women in this group had had their first child, with the average interval between sexual intercourse and first child being two years.

There are two other minority clusters in these regions, which are women delaying and spacing the three events: the first sexual relationship, the first couple and the first child. In West Africa (and East Africa), 10-15% of women delay the start of their sexual life until the age of 25, and from then on, they quickly form a family (delay strategy). The study suggests that this group may be made up of women with higher or professional studies who postpone their maternity. In East Africa and South America, a growing 10-20% of women has spaced out these three events towards a more gradual interval between the first sexual relationship, the first partner, and the first child (spacing strategy). Women's rights and family planning may have contributed to this growing diversity of trajectories.

The study reviewed did not analyse (Southern) European patterns, but given the decreasing rates of marriages, births, and births within marriage in Europe, it can be deduced that the relationship between the three events analysed in the study is even more spaced out, and even disconnected – for instance, having babies without marrying (Borraz et al., 2021; EUROSTAT, 2022b, 2022a). Latin America similarly emerges as the region where the marriage pattern has diversified the most towards consensual unions in the past years, and the age of marriage and the number of unmarried people have increased (Juárez & Gayet, 2014).

Coexistence in the same country between those who marry early and those who postpone their family life may be an expression of growing inequality between these groups. The first group is more vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and violence. Early marriages occur mainly with young women, due to taboos related to virginity and the formation of a family. In many countries, young men are expected to have sufficient economic status to support a family (family breadwinner model), and/or to pay a dowry, so they marry later than women in average, as seen by Batyra et al. (2021) for Sub-Saharan Africa. In 17 countries, the legal age of marriage is lower for girls than for boys (Khokhar, 2017).

‘Child marriage’ refers to any formal or informal union in which at least one of the parties is under age 18. It is a widespread reality worldwide, especially in Sub-Saharan countries (Girls Not Brides, 2021). 1 in 5 young women in the world are married before the age of 18 (Girls Not Brides, 2020). In Niger, 76% of women married before age 18 compared to 6% of men. 28% of those women married before age 15 (UNICEF, 2020). Added to this are ‘forced marriages’ or unions where one or both parties have not expressed their full and free consent (OHCHR, 2021). In many countries, marriages are still arranged by the families of origin, not by the young couple.

Discussion

While the theoretical framework suggested above proves useful to research youth emancipation in diverse regions worldwide, important differences are found in the emancipation trajectories. This shows a need to review existent milestones and to add new elements to the framework. The discussion section is divided into seven sub-sections as follows: 1. Geographical variations; 2. Minority trajectories; 3. Shared weak social protection; 4. The education-work trajectory revisited; 5. The new home and new family

benchmarks revisited; 6. The centrality of the family trajectory for young women; 7. The centrality of migration and displacement for young people; 8. The importance of choosing trajectories.

1. Emancipation paths differ across regions – geographical variations

In West Africa and low-income countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, typical trajectories are characterised by short educational periods, early entry into work, marriage, and family life, with a parallel emphasis on study and work. There is less linearity, as studying does not necessarily entitle to work, or getting married does not necessarily require a new house. Trajectories are also less flexible due to poverty and limited opportunities, making it challenging to return to education or undergo work retraining. Southern Europe exhibits more linear trajectories, where individuals finish compulsory studies before entering the workforce, and delayed trajectories involving leaving their original residence and postponing childbirth, as seen in Table 4.

Table 4: Comparison of models and strategies of emancipation

Southern Europe	West Africa and low-income countries in Latin America and the Caribbean
• Educational path is longer than the global average • Main linear transition: compulsory education first, work later • In contexts of crisis or poverty, the main emancipatory investment strategy is to return to study (and to a lesser extent, migrate). • Nuclear family. Expected residential success is moving to your own home and start a family. • The birth rate is late and low. • Maternity is postponed to achieve a good enough education and job first. • The nuclear family supports childcare	• Educational path is shorter than the global average • Variety in education-to-work trajectories (linearity, synchronicity...). • In contexts of crisis, poverty or armed conflicts, the main emancipatory investment strategy is to migrate. • Extended family. Youth may stay with their families of origin, with or without a new family. • The birth rate is early and high. • Maternity prevents (or makes precarious) the continuation of education, and employment. Incipient strategies to delay maternity. • The extended family supports childcare

Source: own elaboration

2. Emancipation paths differ within regions – minority trajectories

While the majority follows the models outlined in Table 4, it is crucial to recognise the existence of minority trajectories, such as those with delayed, spaced, and disconnected milestones in Africa and Latin America. Shorter trajectories also occur in Europe as not all young people can depend on their families of origin (or just do not have them) towards their full emancipation, for instance, youth living in poverty or with precarious migration statuses (Serracant & Sala, 2018). Trajectories in Southern Europe are also becoming less linear when compared to past generations – in Catalonia, the percentage of active youth that both study and work (or are unemployed) has increased from 13,6% in 2000 to 28,7% in 2020 (Valls-Fonayet, 2021).

3. Weak social protection systems and the centrality of families for all regions studied

Challenges in social protection also arise, with shared limited support from governments to young people for the studied subregions. For West Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, this can be read in a context of post-colonialism, Structural Adjustment Programmes since the 1980s, and historically weak States. Southern Europe also feature meagre social protection and welfare systems if compared to other European counterparts, and the episode of critical Social Cuts after the 2008 crisis. The fact of being part of Europe softens this situation, yet all in all, the centrality of families is a shared element in the three subregions studied. That is, the balance of responsibility falls on youth and families, more than on formal work and governmental protection and opportunities.

4. Reconsidering current emancipation milestones – the education-work “transition”

Analysing trajectories (education, work, residence, and family) and their dimensions (linearity, reversibility, extension, and variability) is essential to shed light on the analysis of models in the world

regions studied. However, certain milestones generally used as part of these trajectories of emancipation are less transferable to other contexts. These include the linearity and centrality of the education-work transition (finishing compulsory education, and starting a full-time job), moving out and finding a new home; and starting a new family (marrying and/or having children). Although these milestones do not lose full relevance, they need to be read with caution as comparative indicators to show life autonomy.

Regarding education and work, both the linearity and centrality of the education-work transition are less evident. In many places, there is simply no transition or linearity. Many young African or Latin American people study and work at the same time, or alternate study and work, or have worked before attending school, or have never studied. This can also happen in the Southern European model but working full-time tends to occur after compulsory education. In West Africa, and to a lesser extent in low-income countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, dropping from secondary schooling or never attending is more generalised (UNESCO, 2021a).

Additionally, this transition does not seem to be as central in other regions as it does in (Southern) Europe when it comes to influence other trajectories (residential and family trajectories). For example, there are world regions where working does not necessarily precede marriage or the formation of a family. While, in some cultures, men are expected to have a certain educational or wealth level to be able to support a family before marriage, there are other cultures where there is no male responsibility to take care of children. In short, the family trajectory becomes a more decisive trajectory in the construction of vital projects and becomes as relevant as the educational and work ones, especially in low-income countries with limited social protection, and especially for young women.

Many countries have a primarily informal economy (or high levels of chronic unemployment) and working poverty. While starting a full-time first job does not lose full relevance as a milestone of autonomy, it assumes a certain job linearity and regularity. The quality of that job may also be an important element affecting vital autonomy. Additionally, the balance between the educational level and the type of work one accesses may be another important indicator to analyse the education-to-work transition. If underqualification exists, young people are not attending sufficient years of education for the work they do. If there is overqualification, either the education trajectory is lengthened unnecessary (at least in terms of work needs) or the job market is not absorbing sufficient workers. If expectations are created for an increasingly qualified youth who is no longer willing to accept precarious jobs, be them formal or informal, this can in turn promote migration as a model of emancipation, due to a lack of opportunities in the area or country of origin (Langevang, 2008; Punch, 2015a).

5. Reconsidering current emancipation milestones – new housing and families as milestones

In terms of housing trajectories, the existence of extended families alters the view of moving out of your parents' home as a universal, comparable indicator of vital autonomy. Many young families worldwide continue to share residence with their families of origin after gaining economic autonomy, marrying, and having children, or move to the home of the husband's family of origin. Even when moving out happens, this does not mean that there is caring and financial independence between generations. Substantial care and financial returns from young people to their elders will happen in places lacking strong social protection. Samantha Punch (2002) compared young people who moved between experiencing 'independent' and 'dependent' situations to young people who stayed in a rather permanent 'negotiated

interdependence' in which they supported their families of origin. She suggested that the first condition occurred more in individualised societies while the second happened more in low-income contexts (also see Morrow, 2015).

Moving to the family trajectory, marriage also has its limitations as an indicator of transition to one's vital project in Europe yet continues to be vital for many youths worldwide. In European countries, marrying has lost weight culturally with decreasing ratios of marriages, and of children within marriage. Youth are no longer defined by whether they are married or not. Yet, in other countries, especially Sub-Saharan countries, using this indicator to read the still widespread phenomenon of child and forced marriages clearly indicates their limited vital autonomy. Similarly, the milestone of having children has lost centrality in a vital project of young people in Europe given the lower and later birth rates. In other regions, many young women have children against their wish.

6. The centrality of the family trajectory for young women worldwide

In fact, family trajectories become central to define other trajectories – educational, work, and residential – for many young women worldwide. Getting married and having children may mean leaving school, giving up paid work, working less, or moving to the husband's family home. Birth rates, especially early ones, affect young women far more than young men.

In some contexts, family trajectories are more relevant or as relevant as work trajectories. Often, young women lose their social status as young people when they marry or have children, regardless of their age (Glassco & Holguin, 2022). Even when youth become financially independent, vital autonomy is not socially complete until marriage is effective, as Feixa et al (2022) conclude for Morocco.

These examples highlighting the importance of marriage as a social marker, and how marriage and gender gain relevance over other social intersecting factors such as age and socioeconomic status. Moreover, it could be deduced that these inequalities get enhanced when intersected by other social factors such as racialised bodies, low socioeconomic status, and many migrant and displaced statuses.

7. The centrality of the migration and displacement trajectories for young people worldwide

Finally, migration and displacement play a significant role in low-income, fragile, and conflict-affected contexts, with young people relocating for safer and more viable work environments (Juárez & Gayet, 2014). Only in some cases, migration functions as a planned, indispensable bridge between trajectories, for example, saving up to build a house or send family remittances, or fully breaking with the family of origin and forming their own vital process. More specifically, migration can happen through sex work, becoming an emancipation trajectory (Van Blerk, 2008). A simultaneity of trajectories may also take place – being able to save up and build a career and a family while supporting parents and other relatives in the distance.

In other cases, studying, working, or forming a family is not an option for young migrants and refugees who are forcefully travelling or living in a camp. Their trajectories can accelerate (getting married early) or reverse, with young refugees feeling that they have been 'taken backwards' (van Blerk et al., 2021). What seems clear is that migration and displacement gain centrality when studying youth emancipation globally (Langevang, 2008; Punch, 2015a).

8. The importance of researching the freedom of selecting one's emancipation trajectory

Ultimately, the emancipation process imposes unwelcome challenges on numerous young individuals globally. This includes youth living in impoverished contexts (need to work, scarcity of jobs and housing), armed conflicts and violence (migration, refugees), and young women (sex work, child or forced marriages, unwanted children/fewer children than wanted). In this sense, a diversification of trajectories does not necessarily mean that young people have more capacity to choose. Having more trajectories does not mean having better trajectories. The lack of freedom to choose is related to feelings of being 'stuck' in an urban compound (Hansen, 2005) or 'taken backwards' while being refugees (van Blerk et al., 2021). In conclusion, understanding youth emancipation as a life-shaping process rather than just a transition to adulthood underscores the importance of meticulously researching the freedom of choice within the trajectories of young people.

Conclusion

After testing global data against the theoretical framework presented, what can be said towards the construction of a more inclusive global framework?

- 1) Conceptual dimensions such as **linearity, extension, reversibility, and diversification** of trajectories work well as comparative dimensions, although it may often be more because of their absence than their presence. For instance, a global picture increasingly questions the linearity of the education-work transition. Rural areas in Central America, Bolivia and Haiti concentrate school dropout, thus "shorten" education. The "study, then work" formula does not predominate there. Or, in informal economy contexts, post-secondary education is out of the picture, as it does

not give families enough returns on accessing what is a very limited and competitive formal job market.

- 2) Absent here is the dimension of **pause** or **feeling blocked** in one's trajectory. This was particularly present in young people experiencing unemployment, conflict, and displacement, with feelings of being "stuck" or "taken backwards". Also interesting is how young people themselves address blockages – for instance, some young girls use delay strategies on sex, marriage and childbirth to prevent these from being blockages of other vital aspects like having an education. The dimension could serve to analyse other types of felt vital blockages such as time spent caring for others, illnesses and accidents, or mental health issues.
- 3) Linked to the study of blockages is the capacity to choose. The increased diversification in trajectories could give the false impression that young people worldwide have nowadays more capacity to plan their vital paths. This may not be the case. Adding **freedom of choice** as a conceptual dimension would add nuance to the capacity of youth, especially girls and poorer youth, to decide about their futures, for instance, when marrying and/or migrating.
- 4) The selection of which **emancipation trajectory** or **combination of trajectories** to prioritise for research is more debatable. Commonly studied trajectories have tended to be on education, work, family, and housing. Yet, studies reviewed illustrate the importance of migration and displacement for many young people and may indicate the need to convert this aspect from one-off milestones within the education or work trajectory, for instance, into a "trajectory" in itself. This would help explore how displacement complements, alters, or substitutes education and work trajectories, or the amount of vital time and energy invested for each.

5) The **family trajectory** gains much more importance than other trajectories in a global context than in European contexts only, for several reasons. Most youth worldwide do not have the privilege to be covered by social protection or welfare systems. Their families are their social protection, and they will become social protection for the families when parents, for instance, grow older. Extended families play a much stronger role than nuclear families in this sense. Added to this is the centrality of marrying and childbirth for the identity and social position of many young girls worldwide.

6) The choice of **vital benchmarks** for autonomy also needs to expand to cover for all global realities. With extended families, poverty, and the need to care for one another, leaving the parental home and buying a new house are not vital milestones in all contexts. That is, young people can emancipate and have children while living with their parents or other family members.

In short, westernised social features such as a consolidated formal economy, low-unemployment societies, social protection and welfare systems, nuclear families, peaceful societies, and freedom of choice to have sex, marry, divorce, and have children for women, should not be copy-pasted to many contexts worldwide, or be taken for granted as the universal “society model” upon which youth emancipation frameworks are built.

Addressing the use of certain dimensions, itineraries and milestones as universal, while adding other theoretical elements suggested above should help youth organisations and governmental bodies take more informed policy decisions on youth. Equally, it should help include those youth who do not follow majority and privileged itineraries into policy, giving targeted opportunities, for instance, to early young wives and mothers, migrant and displaced youth, and rural and poor youth.

Although the study is comparatively broad, it hopes to provide a foundation for future research on the topic, to keep refining a more inclusive theoretical framework for youth emancipation in the different world regions.

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