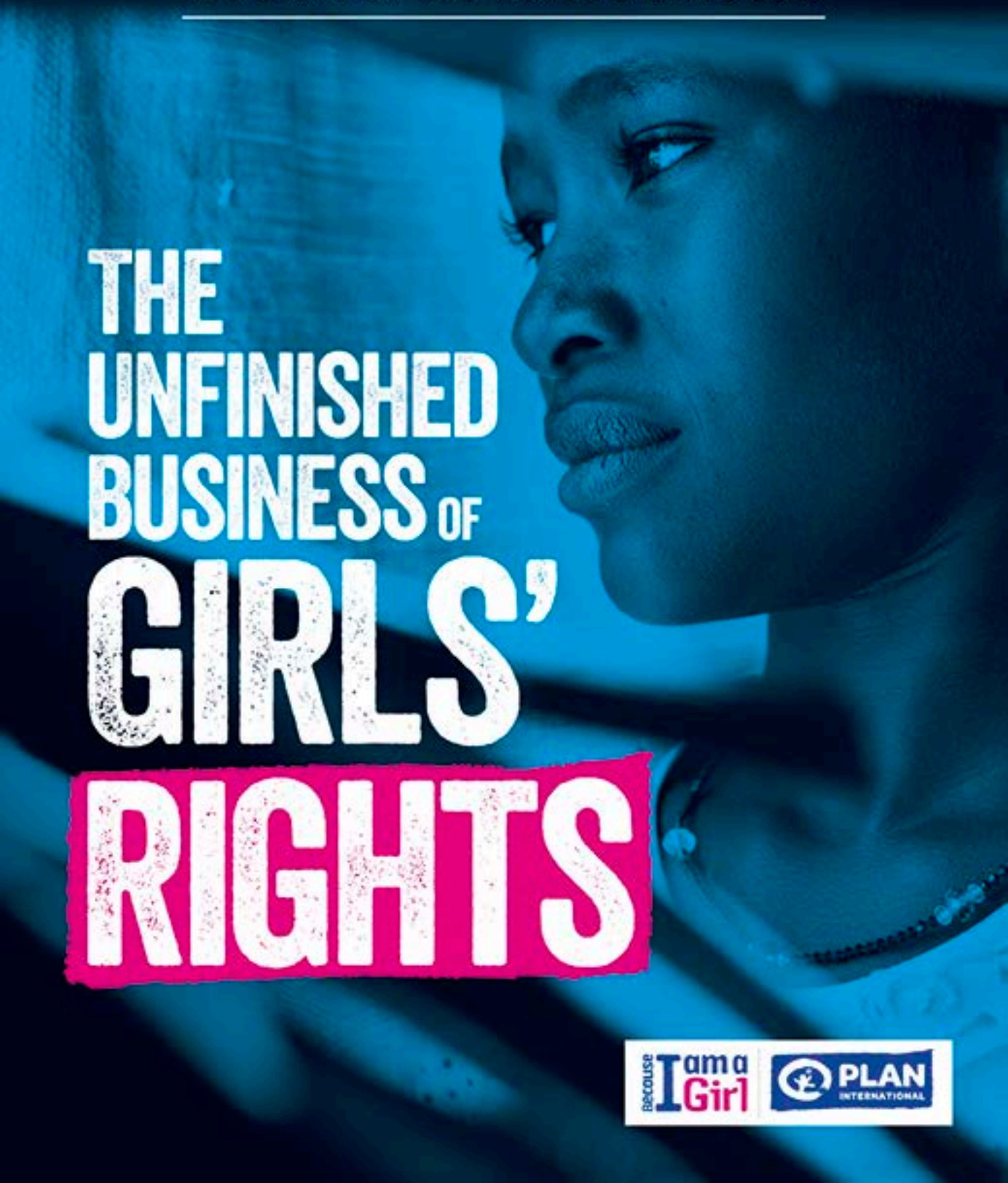
Because I am a Girl

THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S GIRLS 2015

THE UNFINISHED BUSINESS OF GIRLS' RIGHTS



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PLAN INTERNATIONAL

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The Unfinished Business of Girls' Rights

Patna, Bihar, India. JON SPAULL/PANOS PICTURES

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Protesters in Brazil.

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Foreword

In 2007 I wrote the foreword for the first of the 'State of the World's Girls' reports, welcoming Plan International's report as a significant contribution to the efforts to document discrimination against girls and fight gender inequality. I said then that without gender equality none of the Millennium Development Goals would be achieved.

Now in 2015 we have come to a pivotal moment. A year of reckoning for the MDGs and the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration, when 189 governments signed up to make women's rights a reality. It has been a year to celebrate progress, to call for scaling up action, to question what is hindering gender equality and to make a renewed commitment to empowering women and girls. Because, perhaps inevitably, the MDGs have not been able to achieve all they set out to do and, despite Beijing, women's rights and gender justice remain elusive. For girls in particular, there has been some progress, notably in primary education, but the issues of early marriage, female genital mutilation, early pregnancy, the unequal burden of domestic chores and the difficulty in making the transition to secondary and tertiary education remain largely unchanged. There is still no country in the world where there is real gender equality.

'The State of the World's Girls' reports have since that first publication tackled many topics: girls in the global economy; education; girls affected by conflict and by disaster; the new digital world and its implications, both negative and positive, for girls'

JEFF MOORE/THE ELDERS

lives; the challenges and risks of increasing urbanisation; working with men and boys; and, last year, 'Pathways to Power', which looked at attitudinal, structural and institutional barriers to gender equality. All the reports tell a similar story – they tell us that we still have a long way to go – and they ask: how can we bring about transformative change in the lives of girls and young women? This transformation would not only be fair and right for girls and women but would have far-reaching and beneficial impacts on social, economic and political landscapes across the world.

In this latest report Plan International has asked people from all over the world and from many different walks of life to reflect on the issues covered earlier in the series and to find in this significant milestone of a year reasons to be positive and to keep going forward. Their reflections and their different voices should help us all to understand why equality between women and men, girls and boys, sometimes seems an impossible dream; and spur us on to identify and tackle the root causes of inequality so we can come closer to making that dream a reality.

It has been a year to celebrate progress, to call for scaling up action, to question what is hindering gender equality and to make a renewed commitment to empowering women and girls

The Millennium Development Goals gave the human family something to strive for, something to measure progress against and, sometimes, a reason to rebuke those in power when change was very slow in coming. It has proved, over all the decades of struggle that women of my age have been engaged in, very hard indeed to make gender equality a reality. There is often the sense that if we take two steps forward there is always one, or one and a half, steps back. At this point, as the MDGs give way to Sustainable Development Goals and a new articulation of society's values and aims, there is a renewed chance. Gender equality is the goal that will help abolish poverty, that will create more equal economies, fairer societies and happier men, women and children. We are lucky that going forward we have the energy and creativity of a new generation of young activists alongside their mothers and grandmothers. As I said in 2007, "In today's world, to discriminate on the basis of sex and gender is morally indefensible; economically, politically and socially unsupportable." It still is indefensible and we must never give up trying to achieve justice.

Graça Machel
Founder of the Graça Machel Trust and Member of The Elders

GATHERING THE EVIDENCE

PLAN INTERNATIONAL

by **Sharon Goulds** and **Sarah Hendriks**

Sarah Hendriks is Plan International's Director of Gender Equality and Social Inclusion. She has been at Plan International for 10 years and has been a key advisor to the Girls' Report since 2008. Sharon Goulds has been the editor of the 'State of the World's Girls' report since it began in 2007.

"My parents do not give value or recognition to me. They only have praise for my brother."
Girl, 15, Nepal

This comment from a 15-year-old girl in Nepal is echoed across the world, in many countries and in many different circumstances. It is the lack of 'value' that underpins the struggle for gender equality which, despite centuries of activism, has so far proved an elusive goal. In spite of positive legislation and international conventions protecting the rights of girls and women, harmful practices and social expectations have kept generations of girls firmly 'in their place'.

In 2007 Plan International launched a series of reports on the 'State of the World's Girls'. It began with a simple yet poignant message: the double jeopardy of being young and female means that girls are getting a raw deal. In the very first report, we documented how girls faced discrimination even before they are born – there were an estimated 100 million missing women because of the practice of female foeticide. We told the world how girls suffered more from malnutrition than their brothers, were more likely to drop out of school, and that the complications of pregnancy were, and still are, a leading cause of death for 15 to 19-year-old girls. We told a story, often in the words of girls themselves, of entrenched discrimination, which begins in early childhood and becomes especially intractable during adolescence – a crucial time when girls' lives pivot between opportunity and isolation. Back in 2007, girls were subjected to early marriage and female genital mutilation and were particularly vulnerable to HIV and AIDS. This has not changed. Many girls continue to pass from their fathers to their husbands with little control or say over their own lives and destinies.

MEERI KOUTANIEMI

Being young and female: the state of the world's girls

The plight of double discrimination, of being young and female, has been the cornerstone of analysis across each report on the state of the world's girls from 2007 until today. Every year, bringing together leading thinkers, activists and policy makers, we have tackled a different theme and put a spotlight on the range of core issues surrounding girls' lives. We have looked at the situation of girls in conflict and disasters; the promise of quality education for girls; and the global arenas where change is most dramatic – the world's cities, which expand every hour, and the ever-changing spaces of Information Communication Technology (ICT).

No matter the report topic, the unfaltering evidence has shown that, despite the landmark achievements of the women's rights movement, millions of girls the world over are being condemned to a life of poverty and inequality. Women have become presidents and prime ministers, scientists, artists, actors and chief executives. Not in quite the same numbers as men, but women have run countries, companies, newspapers and colleges. But still in 2014 a girl from Cameroon could say to us that "the girls are like servants of boys and men. Their issues don't really matter." And in 2012 another girl could be shot for daring to go to school and talking about her right to do so.

It is very clear that the issue of girls' rights is as urgent today as it was back in 2007, when Graça Machel brought the case to the world's attention:

"None of the Millennium Development Goals will be achieved without gender equality. We cannot let another minute go by without acting decisively and urgently. Unless we do, we will be condemning millions of girls to a life of poverty and hardship."

Graça Machel, 'State of the World's Girls' Report 2007

Over the intervening years, the 'State of the World's Girls' report has collected evidence from all over the world and given girls and young women a place to tell their stories and present their solutions. It has focused not only on the plight of girls, but also on their power, resilience and determination; how girls are coping creatively with all

Bangladesh.

ESPEN RASMUSSEN/PANOS PICTURES

that life throws at them. It has monitored progress, called for policy changes, for more data, and worked with many partners to forge a comprehensive agenda on the unfinished business of girls' rights. With compelling evidence, the 'State of the World's Girls' report series has shown the consequences of failing to invest in girls, and the crucial need to listen to girls and ensure that their lives matter. Time and again, we have come back to the transformative potential of education. We have made the case that big, bold and decisive action is needed to truly bring about radical change. The struggle for girls' and women's rights is centuries old but, now, a few years into the 21st century there is, at last, crucial momentum.

The pace of change

2015 marks the 20th anniversary of the historic UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, one of the largest ever gatherings of women, and a critical turning point in the world's focus on gender equality. Looking back, there is cause for both celebration – of the progress that has been made under the banner that 'women's rights are human rights' – but also frustration – at the pace, which has been too slow, and at the efforts, too piecemeal and uneven. Major gaps and obstacles continue to stand in the way of the 12 critical areas for change outlined in the Beijing Declaration for Action. Twenty years later, no country in the world has achieved equality for women and girls and, it could be said, many have not even tried.

It is not that nothing has changed since 1995 when the Beijing conference was heralded with such hope, or since 2000 when the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were ushered in, or even since 2007, when the first 'State of the World's Girls' report was published. Of course, there is progress to acknowledge and celebrate: four million child deaths have been prevented over the past four decades thanks to the global increase in women's education.[1] There are more constitutions and legal frameworks which pay attention to women. There are fewer mothers dying in childbirth now than any other time in history; the rate of maternal mortality has decreased by almost 50 per cent since 1990.[2] More girls are enrolling in primary education than ever before.[3] And we have seen how, in some settings, improvements in one area (such as education) have been driving changes in other areas (such as lower fertility rates and higher labour-force participation).[4]

As complex issues like child, early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation and gender-based violence are gaining recognition as barriers to both wellbeing and poverty reduction, governments, civil society and the private sector are increasingly allocating resources and targeting policies to curtail these abuses

In many ways the global socio-political climate has changed for the better. Adolescent girls in particular have, in recent years, gained increased attention within the international development community. Girls have become the focus of numerous reports, campaigns and programmes by organisations at multiple levels. When Plan International published the first of these 'State of the World's Girls' reports in 2007 it was difficult to find much material – and even more difficult to find data – that looked specifically at girls. They were either classified under 'women' or 'children', and there was little differentiation of their needs or their rights by age. Today, a large number of programmes and projects focus on girls, with many targeted specifically at adolescent girls.[5]

Major donors and corporate foundations began allocating new funding and increasing the focus on girls' education and empowerment. Programmes such as the World Bank's 'Adolescent Girls Initiative', launched in 2008, focused squarely on the rights and potential of girls as economic actors.[6] During this time, a number of United Nations entities came together in a precedent-setting moment to form the inter-agency Task Force on Adolescent Girls. In 2010 the Task Force launched a 'Joint Statement for Accelerated Efforts to Advance the Rights of Adolescent Girls', demonstrating the increased commitment and support across many sectors to advance policies and programmes to empower the hardest-to-reach adolescent girls.[7] As complex issues like child, early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation and gender-based violence are gaining

recognition as barriers to both wellbeing and poverty reduction, governments, civil society and the private sector are increasingly allocating resources and targeting policies to end these abuses.

The International Day of the Girl, ushered in on 11 October 2012, raised the profile of girls' rights across the globe and inspired action by many activists energetically committed to the same cause. There has also been an unprecedented rise in the number of leading public figures who back the girls' agenda.

There is now more research and understanding (though still not enough data) on adolescent girls. The 'post-feminism' era of the early part of the century has been replaced by a new wave of political activism, particularly from young women themselves, who are increasingly politically savvy and make creative use of social media tools to advance their agenda. However, despite this progress, gender equality and gender justice are a long way off. Legislation remains largely unenforceable, gender-based violence is endemic and when poverty comes into play, families still invest in their sons.[8]

Legislation remains largely unenforceable, gender-based violence is endemic and when poverty comes into play, families still invest in their sons

There are still miles to go before anyone can rest. The work of gender equality remains unfinished, and the evidence for continuing inequality and discrimination is not hard to find. Progress around some issues has not necessarily translated yet into broader gains. Girls and women still learn less, earn less, and have far fewer assets and opportunities. Their control over their bodies continues to be a pawn in political bargaining and, despite the progress of the last two decades, maternal mortality still remains unacceptably high.[9,10] In no region of the world are women and men, or girls and boys, equal in social, legal or economic rights.

Women's participation in the labour force has stagnated for the past two decades: globally, fewer than half of women have jobs, compared with almost four-fifths of men.[11] Nearly 40 per cent of people agree that when jobs are in short supply, men should have more right to a job than women.[12] In North Africa and the Middle East, women are no more likely to have a paying job than they were 20 years ago.[13] Although employment data does not differentiate between adolescent girls and young women, we do know that young women experience greater rates

A Global Adolescent Girls' Rights Movement

As part of the research for this year's 'State of the World's Girls' report, we explored the emergence of an adolescent girls' movement. We canvassed opinion among different activists and organisations involved in research, programming and advocacy work over the past decade. The picture that materialised confirms that **yes**, a movement for adolescent girls has indeed emerged, taking perhaps longer than 10 years to build.

"Undoubtedly this movement was not born in the last 10 years, but with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the inclusion of the rights of the girl child in the Beijing Platform of Action, but it has gained momentum in the last 10 years."

Cecilia Espinoza (Ipas)

Many respondents agreed that the world has witnessed the emergence of an adolescent girl movement, but reflected that this has happened more at a global level, led by the UN, INGOs, research institutions and leading public figures. It is not yet so evident at community and local level. With this in mind, there is a clear need to consider carefully the scope, scale and related impact of the 'movement' as it evolves:

"The 'adolescent girl movement' has been increasingly visible at the global level, but we need to see more of what is happening on the ground, in communities. Girls themselves are becoming empowered to seek and demand changes, and are strengthened in these efforts by the global advocacy. To see a much bigger critical mass of girls able to take action in their own lives would be a real measure of success. Another would be to see this 'movement' infiltrate other sectors beyond education and health, such as urban planning, climate change, infrastructure etc – to make them sensitive to girls' realities with programmes to match."

Sylvia Wong (United Nations Population Fund)

GUY MARTIN/PANOS PICTURES

Protesters in Tahrir Square, Egypt.

"Due attention should be paid to the plight of the poorest adolescents both in rural and urban areas, especially living and working in slums and informal settlements. How targeted are these efforts in reaching this category? What about adolescents that become child mothers?"

Lucia Kiawala (UN-Habitat)

Other respondents asserted that the real litmus test for confirming a social movement on girls' rights is to determine the extent to which girls self-identify as being part of the movement itself. In order for a 'girl movement' to be truly dynamic, girls themselves need to be in the driver's seat, documenting progress along the way. As one young activist wrote:

"I think there is still a lot of work to be done on girls identifying as part of a movement and what that looks like… It's complicated and we need to reflect a lot on who is convening this space; again, the role of funders and what that means, and how maybe we are allies to those movements but we can't necessarily create them, it needs to come from bottom up."

Ruby Johnson (FRIDA: The Young Feminist Fund)

Respondents were also asked to identify the key drivers and key moments behind a global girls' rights movement; time and again the name of 'Malala' came up:

"When Malala was the target of violence, it became so apparent that girls are a serious threat to fundamentalism in their societies. That served as a huge moment to highlight the power girls have in their communities to bring out positive change. It's a shame that it had to be a near-tragedy to galvanise support for girls, and especially their access to education, but it was a turning point for the global conversation about girls' empowerment."

Lindsey Mernard-Freeman (Women Deliver)

Others talked about the increased coordination among campaigners and agencies, the launch of the 'Girl Effect' video, Plan International's Because ➔

of unemployment than their male counterparts in almost every region of the world.[14]

In other words, improvements in girls' education have not translated to gains in economic participation and empowerment. Huge disparities abound, in labour-force participation, wage gaps, and female segregation within the informal labour sector. Recent research shows that more than half a century after the United States passed the Equal Pay Act, and 45 years after similar legislation was passed in the UK, women in the US earn about 76.5 per cent of the amount paid to men.[15] Globally, the amount is also about 76 per cent, a figure that has improved by only three percentage points in the past 20 years.[16] At the current, painfully slow rate of change, it will take 81 years for the gender pay gap around the world to close completely.[17]

2015 is a critical year, the year to really get to grips with the question of why change has been so difficult. For generations, society has been ordered to keep both sexes in a pre-defined space. Increasingly men and women, boys and girls know that this system, and the society which it creates, is not really working

In the case of education, inequality has emerged as a brake on global progress and the number of girls completing their secondary education has not substantially improved. The poorest girls remain the most likely never to attend primary school in sub-Saharan Africa. If current trends continue, girls in rural Africa can look forward to universal primary schooling sometime after 2080.[18] The picture is bleaker when we look at secondary education: one in five adolescent girls around the world are currently not in school.[19] In some places, the situation is even worse: fewer than one in three girls in sub-Saharan Africa and fewer than one in two in South Asia are enrolled in secondary school.[20]

Too many women, one in three according to the World Health Organization, experience violence from an intimate partner, and sexual harassment at school and on the streets is, according to our own research, quite commonplace.[21,22] It is 'normal', what you expect, if you are young and female. More than half the young women interviewed earlier this year in

I am a Girl campaign, the development of Girls Not Brides, and the institutionalisation of an International Day of the Girl by the UN. For many, it has been the culmination of numerous moments and opportunities across many years of work that has led to a growing consensus around a 'girls' movement':

"It is difficult to identify one crucial moment, but the launch of the International Day of the Girl by the UN in 2012 certainly represented a culminating moment of advocacy by many organisations to prioritise adolescent girls in global development efforts. This also helped to pave the way for the more recent movement to feature girls in the post-2015 sustainable development goals."

Ann Warner, Suzanne Petroni
(International Centre for Research on Women)

Although campaigns around issues like child marriage have successfully combined global and national action, a key challenge, identified by the people we spoke to, is how to ensure that the progress made on global policy change at the international level links to activism and advocacy at local level. And, in particular, how to make sure that girls themselves are involved and that grassroot activities are funded:

"The spotlight on adolescent girls indeed led to increased funding allocation dedicated for programmes targeting adolescent girls, as demonstrated by various governments (UK, US and Canada) and private foundations, and several country governments made significant policy changes (ie child marriage laws) to address the needs of adolescent girls… [However,] limited funding has trickled down to support young women to organise for gender equality at the grassroots level."

Kathryn Paik
(Women's Refugee Commission)

"The amplified spotlight around girls' issues has brought funding to support more work specifically

Nicaragua, Ecuador, Zimbabwe and Pakistan also felt that girls who marry as teenagers are more likely to experience violence in the home.[23] In Zimbabwe, as many as 81 per cent agreed that teenage brides were more at risk.[24] Laws against child marriage may be in place, but 15 million girls marry before the age of 18 each year, which equates to approximately 41,000 girls getting married as children each and every day.[25,26] Child marriage traps girls and families in a vicious cycle of poverty. Girls with no education are three times more likely to marry before 18 years of age than those with a secondary or higher education.[27]

In all regions apart from Africa suicide is now a leading cause of death for adolescent girls; a shocking development which underlines the pressures girls are under.[28] For the poorest girls and women, the situation is dire. Poverty, disability and geography – living in a remote area – all combine with gender and age to make difficult circumstances nearly unbearable. The poorest and most marginalised women and girls are the least likely to use healthcare services. A girl with a disability faces double discrimination and it is estimated that only 42 per cent of disabled girls complete primary school.[29]

Across and within countries, gender gaps widen at lower incomes, and, in the poorest economies, gaps between men and women's earnings are even larger. External shocks, whether economic, environmental or political, have also erased hard-earned gains, with different impacts for girls. When resources are scarce, many families prioritise their sons, so it is girls who are pulled out of school, married off early and spend increasing amounts of their time on domestic chores.

2015: tackling injustice

The pace of change has been far too slow, and not enough has been substantively achieved to make real headway into the most intractable problems confronting girls and women, around the world. The next decade may be our greatest chance to challenge and finally change the deep, underlying drivers of inequality and injustice. If we can seize on the momentum that has been building, particularly in the last 20 years, we are on the threshold of a new social order.

2015 is a critical year, the year to really get to grips with the question of why change has been so difficult. For generations, society has been ordered to keep both sexes in a pre-defined space. Increasingly, men and women, boys and girls, at home, at work, at school, in the law, the state, in business and at prayer know that this system, and the society which it creates, is not really working.

working directly with girls. We have been working with community partners who work with girls since 2009, and only recently have donors like the Nike and Gates Foundations started funding programmes working directly with adolescent girls as the primary beneficiaries."

Emily Hagerman
(Let Girls Lead)

"Many donors and others still do not fully view girls as agents of change for themselves or others. There is still a while to go before girls and young women are fully empowered."

Adowa Aidoo
(Girl Scouts USA)

There was also concern expressed about the overall implications for women's rights and gender equality:

"My own view is that the focus on girls is not necessarily helping the broader goals of gender equality… Development's marketisation of girls as the ultimate deserving victim in need of rescue can so easily lead to leaving women – and women's rights – out, again."

Andrea Cornwall (School of Global Studies, University of Sussex)

So yes, the results do show that a girls' movement has begun and that girls' rights are firmly on the international agenda, but these achievements need to be carefully scrutinised. There are many unanswered questions: is the focus too heavily weighted on global-level advocacy, and is this enough? How can the sustained period of building evidence and rationale at the global level serve to support grassroots activism and advocacy? How do we magnify its influence on the way real girls live their lives, and ensure they are truly at the centre of any social movement for change? Are we in danger of losing momentum when change is not embedded at community level and led more by girls themselves? To be transformative, a girls' movement must be truly local; so how can girls themselves take charge and lead this change?

Over the last decades we have achieved a little wriggle room but fundamentally gender roles remain fairly rigid. Public power is largely held by men, and the private, domestic sphere is disproportionately staffed by female labour.

"We have to take stock and make a final push for success. And this demands that we invest in the more than half a billion adolescent girls in developing countries who can help drive progress across the MDG agenda."

UN Secretary-General
Ban Ki-moon, January 2014[30]

Two decades on, as the Millennium Development Goals have come to the end of their allotted time, there is a renewed opportunity to properly embed the transformation of gender relations into the underlying structures of our society. With a greater consensus around the economic benefits of empowering women and girls, there has been a vigorous campaign to put gender equality at the heart of the new Sustainable Development Agenda; not only as a stand-alone goal but as a principle that informs everything else.

And it's critical that the implementation of the new development agenda makes the links and recognises that poverty is rooted in gender-based inequality, exclusion and injustice. The discrimination and stereotyping which disproportionately and negatively affect girls also undermine the ability of entire nations to drive towards economic and social progress. By acknowledging the gendered dimension of poverty, we can begin to uncover and address the root causes of human inequality. It is the complex interplay of unequal power relations and discriminatory practices that poses the biggest challenge to achieving sustainable and ethical development across societies and communities.

That is why girls must be front and centre in the new development framework. Girls must be intentionally and explicitly targeted in programmes and policies in order to be reached. All too often, development and aid programming corral girls into categories such as 'youth', 'women' or even 'gender'. But girls – at all stages of their lives

India.

AMI VITALE/PANOS PICTURES

– face distinct obstacles that will only be addressed when we acknowledge the double burden of discrimination – being both young and female – that they face in so many parts of the world.

Will the change agenda for gender equality and adolescent girls be different this time? When we champion the rights of adolescent girls, are we really working to achieve a world that values girls, promotes their rights, and ends injustice? In the new Sustainable Development Agenda, will girls finally be able to complete a decent education, enjoy good health, and be empowered to make choices about their lives, including whether and who to marry, when and if to get pregnant, and how to find a decent job? This new agenda must be the stepping stone towards a truly brave new world based on democracy, accountability and genuine empowerment of the poorest and most marginalised. But these are words and it is action that matters.

'We're going to change the world'

This year we have given the job of assessing the state of the world's girls to many different people across the globe. The authors do not always agree with each other, or with their publisher, but we want to capture dissent and discussion, optimism and pessimism, and to try to see the world's girls from these different perspectives. Contributions come from journalists, poets, politicians, activists, business leaders, economists and academics. They come also from Colombia, Honduras, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic and El Salvador; from Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Australia, Ethiopia, Sweden, France, Canada, Nigeria, Afghanistan, the UK, the US and Egypt; and from people of all ages who have experienced the world in a variety of different ways.

It is the complex interplay of unequal power relations and discriminatory practices that poses the biggest challenge to achieving sustainable and ethical development across societies and communities

Each article explores one of the themes from the 'State of the World's Girls' report series, taking the reader on a journey using a variety of styles, experiences and viewpoints. This year we have poetry from Imtiaz Dharker, a short story from Joanne Harris, a photo-spread from Liya Kebede, and many personal reflections; the unfinished business of girls' rights is tackled in a variety of ways and in many different voices.

We have asked economics commentator Katrine Marçal to reflect on the 2009 report, 'Girls in the Global Economy', and we have a contribution on that topic from Indra Nooyi. US President Jimmy Carter has taken up the 2011 theme on working with men and boys, as have four champions of change from Latin America: Yelsin, Kevin, Kendir and Elmer. Mariane Pearl has used her experience as an international journalist and activist to illuminate the theme of girls in conflict zones; she tells the story of so many "unsung heroes lighting the way for millions of others, armed with an unconditional belief in the right of humans to live as such". Australia's former Prime Minister Julia Gillard, writing about the 2012 theme of girls' education, tells us: "The reality in most developing countries is that gender inequality is only one obstacle of the many girls face. Poverty, disability, ethnicity, religion and geography (do they live in rural or urban areas? Are they near or far from schools?) are powerful factors determining whether or not a girl gets educated."

Youth activist Chernor Bah describes why, for him, girls' education is the big global issue of our time. Anita Haidary paints a vivid picture of why she co-founded Young Women for Change in Afghanistan: "You leave home to go grocery shopping, you get harassed, and a friend of mine said if she could just walk one day without being harassed her dream would come true. I long for a time where I can sit in a park and read a book. These things might sound so simple but life is about simple things." Bukky Shonibare reflects on Nigeria's social media campaign #BringBackOurGirls and Catalina Ruiz-Navarro writes about the gender divide in IT and why it matters. Nawal El Saadawi looks back over her life as a writer and activist and brings decades of experience to the long struggle for justice for girls and women.

Journalist and author Sally Armstrong, a strong advocate for the resilience and new energy of this generation of young women, writes: "One of

MIKKEL OSTERGAARD/PANOS PICTURES

India.

the girls I talked to said, 'We're the generation of change. We have the power and a new viewpoint and we're going to change the world – watch us.'"

Whatever 'The State of the World's Girls', it is always the ideas, the resilience and the sheer hope of girls and young women everywhere that ignites the struggle for gender justice. The realisation that oppressing half the world's population is no longer acceptable or affordable is gathering momentum so that, perhaps for the first time, the force for change will come not just from those who campaign because it is not fair but from those who know it is not smart. It will come not only from the power of new technology and the global social movement which has swept up women and girls from all over the world; but also from fathers, brothers, husbands and men in positions of authority giving up privilege.

Many of our contributors see the next few years as crucial to bringing about historic and significant transformation; the culmination of all the efforts that went before and the first time in history that forward momentum for girls' and women's rights will not immediately be followed by backlash. 2015 is a year full of promise and this time that promise must be honoured.

Half the sky by **Imtiaz Dharker**

SIMON POWELL

There is the sky down in the well, a perfect disc
of blue. Small piece-of-the-moon finds herself
reflected in it, leaning over the rim to look
as if into a stranger's face.
The sky looks back at her and she looks back at the sky.

There is the sky shivering in the well
The bucket has broken into it. Her hands
are hauling up the wealth of plundered water.
The sky knows she will pay for this.
The sky looks back at her and she looks back at the sky.

The weight of the sky on her head,
and miles to carry it. Her legs buckle,
soft bones melting, knees
driven earthward before their time.
The sky looks down at her and she looks down.

In the bucket, the sky turns to brass,
heavy, heavy-hearted, it feels the curl of a child
inside the child, forming between the unformed
hips. And she is carrying the weight of the sky.
The sky looks back at her and she looks back at the sky.

And she is carrying half a truth.
And she is carrying half a lie.
And she is carrying half of tomorrow.
And she is carrying half the sky.

Hear Imtiaz Dharker reading her poem: https://plan-international.org/girlsreport1

Author's Note:
When I was writing this I was thinking about a woman I know who always had aches and pains and seemed much older than her age. We joked about it. But then she said, "Remember, I was carrying water for miles every day before I was 10. My body grew old." What she didn't say, what I know, is that she had children when her little body was not ready either.

Imtiaz Dharker was born in Pakistan, grew up a Muslim Calvinist in a Lahori household in Glasgow, was adopted by India and married into Wales. She is an accomplished artist and documentary film-maker, and her publications include *Postcards from god (including Purdah)* (1997), *I Speak for the Devil* (2001), *The terrorist at my table* (2006), *Leaving Fingerprints* (2009) and *Over the Moon* (2014), for which she was awarded The Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. All her collections are illustrated with her drawings, which form an integral part of her books. Her poems are studied at GCSE and A Level, and with Poetry Live! (poetrylive.net) she reads to 25,000 students a year. She lives in London.

The evidence: girls' critical issues and ideas for change

Since the first of the 'State of the World's Girls' reports, Plan has committed to building the evidence base on girls' rights and realities. We started with a longitudinal study – 'Real Choices, Real Lives' – that is following a small group of girls in nine countries from their birth in 2006. Today, these girls are nine years old and their lives illuminate our work.

An evidence base on girls is critically important – to arm advocates everywhere with fresh insights and data on the plight and power of girls; to inform programmes that create long-term change for girls and boys; and to spur on further investment and political will through stakeholders convinced by the data which draws out the realities of girls' lives.

Our approach to building an evidence base on girls' rights has evolved, with greater investment being made over time in innovative and participatory approaches that provide a platform for girls to speak about their most pressing concerns, using a wide range of methodological approaches. In 2014, over 7,000 adolescent girls and boys in 11 countries around the world talked to us about the issues that they faced.[31] They were asked about school, family and their daily lives, and the barriers and challenges girls face in their communities. 'Hear Our Voices' became one of the largest studies of adolescent girls' rights ever undertaken, using two unique research tools, with the voices of girls at the epicentre of this research.[32]

The results of the 'Hear Our Voices' research study brought the realities that girls face into vivid colour. The findings confirmed that adolescent girls face particular barriers to survival and development, simply because they are girls. For example, less than half of the girls said that girls always or often complete at least nine years of school in their communities. Even when they are at school, less than half of girls said that they always participated or took leadership roles as often as boys.

Throughout this study, girls revealed that they do not really see themselves as bearers of rights but instead are limited, constrained and subjected to injustices that restrict their opportunities in life. This was especially true when it came to their sexual health and reproductive rights, with only a quarter of girls reporting that they always decide if and when to get married and one in three girls saying that they 'never' decide if they become pregnant. This inability to make choices about their own bodies, combined with overall lack of opportunity and care, is unjust and unfair.

Another area of critical concern emerging from the research focused on violence. The findings reveal that violence against girls is frighteningly pervasive – girls expect to be victims of violence, and the levels of violence that they experience are seen as 'normal'. They seldom feel free from violence at home, in their communities, or at school. For example, 80 per cent of girls in one area of Ecuador, and 77 per cent of girls in an area of Bangladesh, said that they 'never' or 'seldom' feel safe in their community. In West Africa, 30 per cent of girls said that they never or seldom feel as safe as boys on their way to school.

For Plan, these shocking findings have inspired us to dig deeper into the core areas which emerged from this research. We wanted to hear from girls about their views on how things should change, and the solutions girls themselves see as necessary to address their most pressing concerns. We decided to invest in a continuing piece of research which would build on this strong evidence base through credible data which focuses on adolescent girls' ideas for change. As a result, we have partnered with Ipsos MORI to conduct a representative survey of adolescent girls in four of the countries involved in the 'Hear Our Voices' study (Ecuador, Nicaragua, Pakistan and Zimbabwe). This latest study reflects our evolving desire to contribute to a global evidence base on girls' rights – one which puts at the centre girls' voices, on both their problems and solutions.

In this year's most recent study, 'Girls Speak Out', we talked to 4,219 adolescent girls, to hear their suggestions for improvements to their lives; who they believe should be responsible for these changes; and how they would deal with barriers to equality. We drilled down into four of the areas that had emerged as the most pressing issues facing girls' lives: decisions around early pregnancy; child, early and forced marriage;

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India.

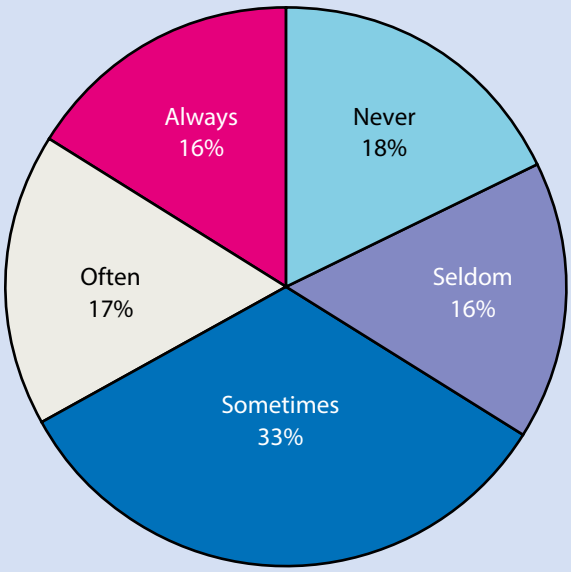
gender-based violence in and around schools; and safety in the community.

The methodology for this study has been undertaken through a robust and comparable quantitative survey that is nationally representative of adolescent girls, aged 15 to 19 years, in all four countries.[33] The research was conducted in as many regions as possible and with a diverse selection of girls in each country. Interviews with girls were semi-structured in format, with a number of open-ended questions that allowed girls to speak freely about their views on the solutions needed to better protect themselves and their peers from abuse, violence, early pregnancy and early marriage.[34]

Although the contexts of the four countries are very different, the research findings reveal many commonalities which, put together, reflect a full and poignant story of girls around the world. On the whole, girls are positive about their futures: most girls across all four countries believe that they are becoming more valued members of their communities and the majority of girls believe that they have more opportunities than their mothers did before them.

Nevertheless, the portrayal of girls' empowerment that emerges overall – their ability to make decisions about their own lives – is very complex. The results across 4,219 girls in four unique country settings paint a very patchy picture. In Nicaragua, 43 per cent of girls say that they can 'always' or 'often' make decisions, compared to only 20 per cent in Pakistan and 33 per cent in Ecuador. In Pakistan the four per cent of girls who say that they are 'always' in charge of decisions about their lives are all between 18 and 19 years old, live in cities, are unmarried and are still in school. The significance of this is echoed across the research; living in a city, being single and in school are powerful factors in a girl's ability to govern her own life. When put together across all countries, the results show that overall only a third of the girls interviewed feel they can take their own decisions; for two-thirds of them empowerment remains elusive.

Are girls your age able to make critical decisions about their own lives?



This variance is part of the complex story of adolescent girls' lives, and inspired us to dig deeper into the data to understand better apparent contradictions in girls' lives. In reflecting on other dimensions of empowerment, common experiences were evident. Girls across all countries are overburdened with chores, not given equal access to technology and lack the confidence to speak up around men or boys.

But the story of girls doesn't end there. Girls spoke in depth about the stark realities they are facing in the four key areas which represent their most pressing concerns.

Early pregnancy

"If I had enough information than I won't become pregnant; I don't have enough information, that's why I get pregnant in early age. I am 19 years old at this time and I have a small daughter. I spend all my time in looking after her. I want to study further."

Girl, Pakistan

Girls strongly asserted that access to contraception and health services is inadequate. Overall, the girls interviewed from Latin America feel they have sufficient access to information on sexual and reproductive health, but insufficient access to contraceptives. In contrast, girls in Pakistan and Zimbabwe reported low rates of access to information and slightly higher rates of access to contraception. These results need to be understood in context: girls in Nicaragua are becoming mothers at an increasingly, and alarmingly, young age: 17 per cent of the adolescent girls involved in this study reported that they already had one or two children, the highest rate out of all the countries, with many giving birth as young as 13 or 14 years of age.[35]

Girls across all the countries spoke of sexual coercion and the unwillingness of male partners to use contraception as major barriers to avoiding early pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. This data shows quite clearly that girls do not hold the power to make decisions about their own bodies, and the urgent need to work with men and boys on negotiating the terms of sex equally with girls. Girls told us how they often feel pressure to take part in sexual activities with their boyfriends or husbands. This lack of equality is particularly prevalent in Pakistan and Zimbabwe.

The overall acceptance of adolescent pregnancy varied widely in terms of girls continuing their schooling, with 85 per cent of Ecuadorian girls saying that education is still possible after having a baby, while in Pakistan only 39 per cent agree with this statement. Across all countries, girls said they need greater support from communities and families to ensure that they overcome the challenges of pregnancy, and, most importantly, continue their education.

Early marriage

"I'd advise them not to marry at an early age as they are not prepared. They are too young and their dreams are cut short."

Girl, Ecuador

Across every country, girls asserted that early marriage does not benefit them, and that their rights to education, information and services, to be free from violence, and to sexual and reproductive health were being compromised.

Just over three in five girls (68 per cent) agree that girls who marry young are more likely to experience violence in their homes. This perspective was shared by girls in different contexts and countries and in Nicaragua as many

as 70 per cent of girls agreed that early marriage is a strong predictor of domestic violence. Girls linked early marriage and education together, with the majority of girls across all countries agreeing that if girls get married before the age of 18, they are less likely to complete their education. Better access to quality education for girls was a key solution identified in Latin America and Zimbabwe, while education for parents and care-givers on the hazards of early marriage was highlighted by girls in Pakistan. Over a third of girls in both Pakistan and Zimbabwe face social or family pressures to marry at a young age. Across all countries, girls spoke about the need to be more empowered and having more confidence to raise issues and concerns with their families as a major step.

Gender-based violence in and around school

"I'd train girls to protect themselves, for example by teaching them karate."

Girl, Zimbabwe

School-related gender-based violence is a very real concern; girls appear to normalise violence, and in some cases the very worst forms of violence, especially in Pakistan and Zimbabwe. They perceive their journey to school as inherently dangerous: 47 per cent of all the girls in the study either 'strongly disagree' or 'disagree' that girls feel safe on their way to school. Girls showed that they are aware of their rights, and across all countries 86 per cent reported that it is 'seldom' or 'never' acceptable for a teacher to give strong physical punishment to girls in certain situations in school. Girls often had vastly different perspectives, based on their location, on issues such as sexual harassment and coercion in school and corporal punishment. For example, nearly 20 per cent of girls in Pakistan either 'didn't know' or 'agreed' that in certain circumstances it may be acceptable for a teacher to ask a girl for sexual favours in exchange for good grades. However, in Zimbabwe, Nicaragua and Ecuador, over 90 per cent disagreed.

Freida Pinto talks about violence against girls: https://plan-international.org/girlsreport2

Violence in the community

"I would advise them, if they are being abused, to call the police and break the silence."

Girl, Nicaragua

The results were encouraging when it came to attitudes of what is acceptable in terms of gender-based violence in the community. Girls everywhere demonstrated confidence about what to do in the situation of extreme violence: 87 per cent of the 4,219 girls 'strongly disagreed' or 'disagreed' with the statement: "If a girl or a woman has been raped it is better for her not to tell anyone." Similarly, the majority of girls across all countries 'strongly disagreed' or 'disagreed' when asked if they thought it was acceptable for a boy to hit or use violence against his girlfriend.

Nevertheless, girls were divided on whether they should be able to travel alone on public transport or be in public places after dark. In Nicaragua, only 12 per cent agreed that girls should not travel on public transportation without a male family member, while in Pakistan, this increased to 54 per cent. All girls agreed that more supportive communities and more self-confidence would help them, particularly when it came to reporting violence.

Towards solutions

While many of the findings are not new, this evidence directly from adolescents themselves cannot be ignored. For Plan, the learning from this research will be used to strengthen our programme and advocacy work on adolescent girls around the globe. Across all these results, we see that girls have a strong grasp on both their realities and challenges, and we must rally behind them to ensure that they are empowered to reach their full potential.

Girls have not just identified their core challenges; the main thrust of this study is to focus on the solutions that will lead to transformation. The final chapter of this report profiles the solutions that girls believe will bring about real change in their lives, homes and communities. It is this focus on solutions which, we believe, will not only diversify the evidence base on adolescent girls' rights, but will lead us to more questions and a greater ability to influence programmes and policies that truly respond to girls' expertise and to the realities of their lives.

JACQUIE LABATT/ THE EQUALITY EFFECT

Recording the arrival of a new rape victim at the Ripples International Shelter in Kenya.

'WE ARE THE GENERATION OF CHANGE'

AVRIL BENOIT/MSF

by **Sally Armstrong**

Human rights activist, journalist and award-winning author Sally Armstrong has covered stories about women and girls all over the world. From Bosnia and Somalia to the Middle East, Rwanda, Congo and Afghanistan, her eyewitness reports have earned her awards including the Gold Award from the National Magazine Awards Foundation and the Author's Award from the Foundation for the Advancement of Canadian Letters. She received the Amnesty International Canada Media Award in 2000, 2002 and again in 2011. Sally was a member of the International Women's Commission, a UN body that consists of 20 Palestinian women, 20 Israeli women and 12 internationals whose mandate is assisting with the path to peace in the Middle East. Her most recent book, *Uprising: A New Age is Dawning for Every Mother's Daughter*, was published in March 2014 by St Martin's Press in New York.

Here come the girls. For all the pessimists who claim the women's movement is over and that young people don't care, I have news. I found it as a journalist in Asia and Africa and in Europe and the Americas while I was researching my book *Uprising: A New Age is Dawning for Every Mother's Daughter*. There are girls and young women all over the world who are holding up a pure clear light for all to see. They're asking questions that were never asked before, such as "Where is it written in the holy book that I cannot go to school?" and "If this is our culture, tell me why we would do something that is harmful to all of us?" They are countering bogus religious claims and cultural contradictions that have held girls back for centuries. That's because the earth has started to shift under the status of girls. The good news doesn't mean that injustices like forced marriage, underage marriage, sexual harassment and rape and physical beatings have been relegated to history books where they belong. But there is a clarion call around the world claiming misogyny and extremism and fundamentalism and harmful practices must be held accountable because these actions have been proven to be a negative force for the health and wellbeing of half the world's population. What's more, they're now seen as bad for the economy. Experts claim this change in the status of girls and women will reduce poverty, cut conflict and turn the economy around. In the past there was a taboo about talking about issues such as sexual abuse and forced marriage. If you can't talk about it, you can't change it. Today, the girls are talking and their conversations are focused on equality rights, education, healthcare and a better tomorrow.

From the Beijing Conference to the Millennium Goals

These young women witnessed the acts of their mothers in 1996 when burka-

clad women in Afghanistan were denied education, jobs and healthcare under the Taliban. They were part of the cheering crowds on Tahrir Square in 2011 when the people of Egypt toppled a dictatorial regime. During the decade and a half in between, they watched while women fought to abolish Pakistan's hated Hadood Ordinance, which demanded that a raped woman or girl have four male witnesses to prove she didn't cause the rape; they saw women challenge the legitimacy of the personal status laws in Egypt that deny women rights in marriage, and they joined their older sisters when women and girls in Afghanistan found the courage to march in the street demanding fairness and justice. In Liberia the girls saw the women surround the men at a peace conference and barricade the building, saying they wouldn't leave until a peace accord was struck, and holding a 'sex strike' to make their point. In Swaziland they joined the grandmothers from 25 African countries plus Canada who gathered to demand action and turn the tide on HIV and AIDS, which was affecting more women and girls than men and boys. In the United States in 2012, female college students finally spoke back en masse to the religious right in defence of *Roe v. Wade*, the court case that gave American women abortion rights in 1973. And in Canada, girls were aware that Aboriginal women, who had accused the government of failing to take action on the file of their missing and likely murdered sisters, aunts, daughters and mothers, had called for outside help from the United Nations and got it, giving the government an embarrassing black eye.

Girls the world over watched these changes and then, fuelled by the success of their mothers and sisters and aunts, started a few of their own. For example, Malala Yousafzai became the voice of girls throughout the world. She is the epitome of the change that is sweeping nation

Tending the vegetable garden at the Ripples International Shelter in Meru, Kenya.

JACQUIE LABATT/THE EQUALITY EFFECT

after nation today. Only a few years ago we would likely never have heard her story. When the cowardly Taliban shot her in the head on 9 October 2012, for daring to go to school and speaking up for girls' education, it wouldn't have been surprising if the people living in the Swat Valley, Pakistan, dismissed the news – "so what – she's a girl". Elsewhere, had we heard the story, we would have tut-tutted and said, "How dreadful, but it's the way they treat their girls, there's nothing we can do."

Instead, Malala's story made every newspaper in the world and every radio and television broadcast; people stayed tuned as news spread about where she was being treated and when she was being transferred, first to Islamabad and then to London, England. In February 2013 we saw or read the details of the reconstruction cranial surgery and the cochlear implant the doctors would use to repair the damage to her skull and restore some of her hearing. Then in early March she was in the news again. Sporting a pink backpack, Malala was returning to school. And on 12 July 2013, her 16th birthday, she stood in front of the UN and spoke like a seasoned advocate about girls' education.

Malala had become the world's daughter. It was as though the citizens of the world had lifted a curtain and suddenly saw the extraordinary stupidity of refusing to educate girls and the consequences of kow-towing to the extremists who claim they are acting in the name of God when they shoot teenage girls in the head for wanting to learn to read and think for themselves. Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations, said: "When the Taliban shot Malala, they showed what they fear most: a girl with a book."

Malala has that elusive 'it' factor – the one that combines strength with kindness, resolve with vision. She wore the late Benazir Bhutto's scarf and brilliantly combined the Prophet Mohammed with Jesus Christ, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and Gandhi when she spoke in her straight-forward, from-the-heart style at the UN.

She put the world on alert that 12 July when she said, "There was a time when women asked men to stand up for women's rights. This time we'll do it for ourselves." And she announced the way forward for women: "They thought a bullet would silence us but they failed. Out of the silence came a voice: weakness, fear and hopelessness died; strength, power and courage were born."

It's not just the newfound leaders like Malala who are driving change. The foot soldiers in this war against oppressors of women and girls are also marching. In India, when Jyoti Pandey Singh was raped to death by a bunch of hooligans in a bus, a curtain was also raised. Her legacy is that the brutal story ripped the lid off 50 years of secrecy about the status of women in India. As it turns out, the fastest-growing democracy and the hottest economy in the world needs to change the way it treats 50 per cent of its population. Now the women of India are on the street, demanding change. And the world is watching through a different lens.

It's not just the newfound leaders like Malala who are driving change. The foot soldiers in this war against oppressors of women and girls are also marching

A commitment to education

When the Boko Haram extremists kidnapped 276 schoolgirls in Nigeria in April 2014, the world paid attention like never before. The girls had been writing their final exams in the mostly Christian town of Chibok in northern Nigeria when Boko Haram, whose name roughly means 'Western education is forbidden', broke into the school pretending to be guards and abducted the young teenagers. As I write they are still missing. But as difficult as the ongoing catastrophe in the lives of these girls is, there's another piece of this story that needs to be told. When American President Barack Obama said

he was sending strategic advisers and surveillance equipment to Nigeria to help find the girls, he made history. No military, no government has ever gone anywhere to rescue girls. The message was clear – girls count and education is paramount.

This new commitment to the education of girls is a major shift. For example, in Afghanistan the women refer to their illiteracy as being blind. When I asked them what they meant by that, one woman explained: "I couldn't read, so I couldn't see what was going on." In fewer than a dozen words, she described a system that men in power have relied on for centuries – keep the girls uneducated so they won't know what's going on. Today almost nine million children are in school, 40 per cent of them girls. Everyone knows that the way forward in any country is education.

The upsurge in education is changing the way women and girls live their lives. In Saudi Arabia, enrolment in primary and secondary schools for girls has been rising by 8.3 per cent a year.[1] The women who in 2011 and 2012 protested the ban against females driving were dentists and professors and IT specialists. These women and their daughters are no longer willing to ask permission of male guardians to move about freely on their own in their home country, travel abroad or have a medical procedure. What's more, the birth rate in Saudi Arabia is falling to European levels, and customs such as marrying a first cousin are falling out of favour. Farida Shaheed, cultural rapporteur for the United Nations, says, "The more options women have, the less they are under the thumb of their husbands, fathers, priests and mullahs."

Supporters are jumping on this bandwagon like born-again believers in the power of girls. The philanthropist Bill Gates says, "The past decade has seen more progress against inequality than any of the previous five." Doug Saunders, a columnist for *The Globe and Mail* newspaper in Canada, commenting on Plan International's 2010 'Because I'm a Girl' report[2], which recognises that the fate of girls and young women is precisely the fate of their countries and communities, writes: "The most potent forces in the world right now… are all centred around the mythic figure of the teenage girl."

The World Bank has issued reports every five years since 1985 to say that if attention is paid to the girl child – educating her, taking care of her health, feeding her – the economy of the village will improve. Why? Because she will marry later, have fewer children and those children will be healthier. That report didn't get the traction one would have expected. But by 2012, when the earth had shifted under the status of women and girls and Millennium Goals economist Jeffrey Sachs said that the status of women and the economy are directly related – where one's flourishing, so is the other; where one's in the ditch so is the other – his proclamation got traction.

It's as though the centuries-old jig is suddenly up. The abuse of women and girls is being revealed as a bully tactic by out-of-date males who are trying to cling to power

It's as though the centuries-old jig is suddenly up. The abuse of women and girls is being revealed as a bully tactic by out-of-date males who are trying to cling to power.

The face of the new Afghanistan

Nowhere is this more evident than in Afghanistan. In 2012 Noorjahan Akbar, along with her friend Anita Haidary, founded Young Women for Change (YWC), an organisation of Afghans aged 15 to 22 that is as modern as it is provocative. And they did this in one of the world's capitals of female oppression: Kabul. Their aim is to reshape the emotional landscape of Afghanistan.

Noorjahan and Anita are the face of the new Afghanistan. "We want to mobilise the youth," they told me.

"Sixty-seven per cent of the population of Afghanistan is under the age of 30. We have never fought a war. We never started one either. We have new ideas. And we want to get rid of those old customs that nobody wants. And we have the tools to make change – we're all on Facebook."

They are pressing a lot of very reactionary buttons. If a man harasses Noorjahan in the street – speculates on her virginity or her breasts, or calls her a prostitute for being on the street without a male escort, which is all too common in Afghanistan – she stops and asks him, "Why did you say that?" If a man gropes her, which is also not at all unusual, she'll say, "What's your problem? These streets are mine too. I have the right to walk freely in my city." She wants to make the men stop behaving in a way that she finds ridiculous. "If they harass me physically, I hit them with my backpack. When I ask them what they're trying to do, I feel I am planting a seed of doubt in their hearts, and that's valuable. The next time, they might think before speaking or acting. When you start to question the injustices you've put up with all your whole life, that's very empowering."

Noorjahan even walked down the main street in Karta See – the neighbourhood where YWC is located – with a recording device hidden in her headscarf and gathered evidence of the truly revolting things men and boys say to women and girls on the street. Then the recording was delivered to radio and television stations in Kabul to play for their viewers and listeners. She feels she and her collaborators have nothing to lose; that speaking up is their best chance for moving forward.

Treating girls like second-class citizens is one problem to solve; raping them – which is still a scourge for girls all over the world – is another. Rape has always been

Going to school in an abandoned building in Kabul, Afghanistan.

LANA SLEZIC/PANOS PICTURES

a silent crime. The victim doesn't want to admit what happened to her lest she be dismissed or rejected. The rest of the world would either prefer to believe rape doesn't happen or stick to the foolish idea that silence is the best response.

Today the taboo around talking about sexual violence has been breached. Women from Bosnia, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo have blown the whistle about rape camps and mass rapes and even re-rape, a word coined by women in Congo to describe the condition of being raped by members of one militia and raped again when another swaggers into their village. Instead of being hushed up, cases such as that of Mukhtar Mai, the Pakistani girl who was gang-raped by village men who wanted to punish her for walking with a boy from an upper caste, have made headlines around the world. And the raping of an unconscious girl by two university students – football players – in Steubenville, Ohio, in the US in 2013 got attention mostly because some of the media reported that the "poor boys who raped her were going to jail and their lives were over". An outraged public responded with a conversation that went viral. "If you're so worried about your high marks and your great 'rep' and your football scholarship, don't go around raping unconscious girls and posting the photos on YouTube."

JACQUIE LABATT/THE EQUALITY EFFECT

A cautionary tale needs to be told about the speed at which the gains women and girls make can be lost. In 1996, a peace agreement brought Guatemala's 36-year civil war to a close. The conflict had caused thousands of civilian deaths, over 90,000 unsolved disappearances, and more than 100,000 cases of sexual violence.[3] After the peace accord was signed, women became more aware of their rights, and some political space had opened for them, says Luz Méndez, vice-president of the executive board of the National Union of Guatemalan Women. "Inside the women's movement, we say the peace accords were a marking line. We had more opportunity to speak out, get organised to fight for our rights." But after the war was over, organised crime and narco-traffickers soon moved in. She says, "Now the bandits attack women just because they are women."

The violence that the drug traffickers imported with them altered the landscape outside the home, and the old violence against wives and daughters inside the home resurfaced as well. "Women [and girls] dare not walk on the street today," Méndez says. "But, worse, the assaults against women have spread like a virus to their own homes."

A watershed moment

What's needed is a change in attitudes toward girls. One of the most stunning examples comes from Kenya, where in 2011 there was a watershed moment everyone had been waiting for. In the northern city of Meru, 160 girls between the ages of three and 17 sued the government for failing to protect them from being raped. Their legal action was crafted by the Equality Effect using precedents from Canada, another country where women successfully sued the government for failing to protect them.

Everyone from high court judges and magistrates in Kenya to researchers and law school professors in Canada believed these girls would win and that the victory would set a precedent that would alter the status of women in Kenya, and maybe all of Africa.

The suit was the brainchild of Fiona Sampson, winner of the New York Bar Association 2014 Award for Distinction in International Law. She is the CEO of the Equality Effect, a non-profit organisation that uses international human rights law to improve the lives of girls and women. When Fiona Sampson met Mercy Chidi, the director of a non-governmental organisation called The Ripples International Brenda Boone Hope Shelter (which is known locally in Meru as 'Tumaini', the Swahili word for hope) the action was crafted. When Mercy told her about the shelter and about the girls who can't go home because the men who raped them are still at large, they both knew it was time to tackle the root of the problem – the impunity of rapists and the failure of the justice system to convict them.

Kenya has laws on its books designed to protect girls from rape, or 'defilement'. So the lawyers for the Equality Effect claimed, "The state is responsible for the police and the way police enforce existing laws. Since the police in Kenya failed to arrest the perpetrators and fail on an ongoing basis to provide the protection girls need, we are filing notice that the state is responsible for the breakdown in the system." Sampson said at the time, "We will argue that the failure to protect the girls from rape is actually a human rights violation, that it's a violation of the equality provisions of the Kenyan constitution. It's the Kenyan state that signed on to international, regional and domestic equality provisions and it's therefore their obligation to protect the girls. Only the state can provide the remedies we're looking for, which is the safety and security of the girls."

Winnie Kamau, a law professor at the University of Nairobi, says a case like this couldn't have happened even a few years ago. "I think the timing was actually quite perfect, particularly in the Kenyan context," Kamau says. "We have a new constitution that was enacted in August 2010, and in the last half-dozen years we have had some very progressive laws passed in our country. Five years ago it would have been difficult to bring everybody together, but the timing now I believe is right. There's also a lot more awareness among African women about their rights, and they have the feeling, the sense that they need to change. We can harness these energies."

It's a four-hour drive from Nairobi to Meru (population 1 million) and the shelter where the Kenyan girls are staying. We drive through banana farms and tea plantations, past dark umbrella-like acacia trees, inhaling the dry scent of the savannah. Bleating goats and signs declaring 'Jesus Saves' dot the landscape. The rutted red dirt road into the Ripples International Shelter is shaded by a canopy of lush trees that offer refuge from the heat of the equatorial sun. Hedges of purple azalea and yellow hibiscus camouflage the fence that keeps intruders away from this bucolic place that is a refuge for the 160 girls who are poised to cut off the head of the snake that is sexual assault.

What's needed is a change in attitudes toward girls. One of the most stunning examples comes from Kenya, where in 2011 there was a watershed moment

I'd been briefed by the Equality Effect team in Nairobi about what to expect when I meet the girls whose cases have been selected for the lawsuit. The first one I'm introduced to is Emily. The size of the child takes my breath away. Emily is barely four and a half feet tall, her tiny shoulders scarcely 12 inches across. But when she sits down to tell her story, her husky 11-year-old voice is charged with determination. "My grandfather asked me to fetch the torch," she explains. But when she

brought it to him, it wasn't a flash-light he wanted. "He took me by force and warned me not to scream or he would cut me up." Along with thousands of men in Kenya and, indeed, throughout sub-Saharan Africa, Emily's grandfather believes that having sex with a girl child will cure HIV/AIDS, a belief that led him to rape his own granddaughter, presumably to heal himself. What's more, men believe that the younger the child is, the stronger the cure will be. Now she is taking the old man to the high court in Nairobi. Even Emily knows the case is likely to be history making. This little kid, along with the other 159 plaintiffs, knows that they may be the ones who strengthen the status of women and girls not only in Kenya but in all of Africa.

"These men will learn they cannot do this to small girls," says Emily, who, like the other girls I met, balances the victim label with the newfound empowerment that has come to her from the decision to sue.

Charity is also 11 and her sister Susan only six. Their mother is dead. Their father raped them – first Charity, then Susan – after they came home from school one day during the winter months. Charity says, "I want my father to go to the jail." Her sister is so traumatised that she won't leave Charity's side and only eats, sleeps and speaks when Charity tells her it's okay to do so. Perpetual Kimanze, who takes care of these girls and coordinates their counselling and therapy, keeps a close eye on Susan when the little girl begins to talk to me in a barely audible voice, uttering each word with an agonising pause between, and says, "My … father … put … his … penis … between … my … legs … and … he … hurt … me."

Doreen, 15, has a four-month-old baby as a result of being raped by her cousin. Her mother is mentally ill. Her father left them years ago, and they had moved in with her mother's sister. When she realised she was pregnant, her aunt told her to have an abortion; when her uncle found out, he beat her and threw her out of the house. She was considering suicide when she heard about Ripples and came to their Tumaini Centre.

In Kenya, a girl child is raped every 30 minutes, some as young as three months old. If a girl doesn't die of her injuries, she faces abandonment; families don't want anything to do with girls who have been sexually assaulted. She almost certainly loses the chance to get an education. Some can't go to school any more because they've been raped by the teacher. Others are prohibited by the stigma; the girls are doubly victimised by being ostracised. They may be HIV-positive as a result of rape, so their health is compromised. Urinary tract infections and sexually transmitted diseases plague them. Without an education, with poor health and no means of financial support, the girls drift into poverty. Their childhood is over and they become the face the world expects of Africa – poor, unhealthy and destitute.

'The shame isn't ours, it's yours'

Twenty-five per cent of Kenyan girls aged 12 to 24 lose their virginity due to rape. An estimated 70 per cent never report it to the authorities, and only one-third of the reported cases wind up in court.[4] If the prosecutor can prove that a girl was under the age of 15 when she was assaulted, the rapist's sentence is life in prison. But there's the rub. The laws are not enforced, and rape is on the rise. If the girl goes to the police, she risks being re-raped or humiliated. More than 90 per cent know their assailant – fathers, grandfathers, uncles, teachers, priests – the very people assigned the task of keeping vulnerable children safe.[5] And raping little girls as a way of cleansing themselves from HIV/AIDS isn't the only reason they act. Says Hedaya Atupelye, a social worker I met

"It was suggested half a dozen years ago that the police create a gender desk where a female would be safe in reporting the crime, but invariably the gender desk isn't staffed and is covered with dust"

JACQUIE LABATT/THE EQUALITY EFFECT

at the shelter run by the Women's Rights Awareness Program in Nairobi, "Men think having sex with a little girl is a sign of being wealthy and stylish. Some of these men are educated beyond the graduate level, but they want to be the first to break the flower so they seek out young girls."

If it's the breadwinner who's guilty, the family will go hungry if he's sent to jail, so even a child's mother will choose to remain silent. "No one wants to associate with one who's been raped or who's lived in a shelter," says Kimanze. "We need to stand up and say the shame isn't ours, it's yours."

"If a girl or, for that matter, a woman," says Hedaya, "goes to the police on her own she is usually ridiculed and harassed."

"It was suggested half a dozen years ago that the police create a gender desk where a female would be safe in reporting the crime, but invariably the gender desk isn't staffed and is covered with dust," Mercy Chidi says. "One of the challenges is that our culture doesn't allow us to speak out about sexual things. My only advice from my mother when I got my period was: 'Don't play with boys; you'll get pregnant.' My own uncle tried to rape me, and to this day I have not told my mother. We have to break this silence."

When the girls arrive at the shelter, she says, they are severely traumatised and don't want to talk to anyone. Some are frightened, others aggressive. They tend to pick on one another. And as much as they come around and begin to heal, Mercy says that they never completely overcome the trauma. "It's like tearing a paper into many pieces. No matter how carefully you try to put the pieces together again, the paper will never be the same." One little girl at the shelter begins to cry every night when it starts to get dark and the curtains are drawn.

"It's the hour when her father used to come and rape her," Chidi says.

When I visited the Tumaini Centre there were 11 girls in residence. One of them, a 15-year-old called Luckline, had been raped by a neighbour. She was 39 weeks pregnant when we met. When she talked about what happened to her, she didn't sound like a victim. She sounded like a girl who wanted to get even, to make a change. She said, "This happened to me on 13 May 2010. I will make sure this never happens to my sister." When I asked what she would do after the baby was born, she said she wanted to return to school because she planned to become a poet. With little prompting, she read me one of her poems:

Here I come
Walking down through history to eternity
From paradise to the city of goods
Victorious, glorious, serious and pious
Elegant, full of grace and truth
The centrepiece and the masterpiece of literature
Glowing, growing and flowing
Here, there, everywhere
Cheering millions every day
The book of books that I am.

This from a teenager who is disadvantaged in every imaginable way. Yet she was preparing to sue her government for failing to protect her. This is how change happens. But it takes commitment and colossal personal strength for a girl to tackle the status quo and claim a better future for herself.

Back in Nairobi I sat in on the meeting that the team of lawyers was holding in a hotel across town. For five long days, they argued over how best to make the case. There were three choices: a civil claim, a criminal claim or a constitutional claim. Finally they decided that a constitutional challenge was the way to go. The Kenyan constitution guarantees equality rights for citizens. It promises protection for men and women. It governs the laws that deliver that protection. The lawyers decided to argue that the state failed to execute the constitutional rights of the girls. Then they set their sights on a court date. The journey they were on together was about girls who dared to break the taboo on speaking out about sexual assault. It was about women lawyers from two sides of the world supporting these youngsters in their quest for justice. And about the young women who were told they had no rights but insisted that they do. It was the push-back reaction that every woman and girl in the world has been waiting for. "This case is the beginning," said Chidi. "It'll be a long journey but now it has begun." The feeling as they prepared to go to court was that if they won the victory would be a success for every girl and woman in Africa, maybe even the world.

The process of change is usually daring, certainly time-consuming, invariably costly, and occasionally heartbreaking but eventually an exercise so rewarding that it becomes the stuff of legends

The hot winds of change

On 11 October 2012, when the case went to court in Meru, the lawyers marched through the streets from the shelter where the girls had been staying to the court house. The girls wanted to march as well but were told their identity needed to be protected and they must stay back at the shelter. Nothing doing, they said. They marched beside their advocates to the courthouse chanting "Haki yangu", the Ki-Swahili words for "I demand my rights". With all the hullaballoo on the street, the police at the court panicked and slammed the gates shut as the girls approached. But nothing would stop them now. They climbed onto the fence, still calling "Haki yangu" and then they looked at each other and started to laugh at the reversal in roles being played out in front of them. "Look," they called to each other. "These men who hurt us and made us

ashamed are scared of us now." Soon enough the gates were opened and the girls and their lawyers entered the court to begin the proceedings that could alter their future.

There was something deliciously serendipitous about the power going off in northern Kenya seven months later, on 28 May 2013, just as Judge J A Makau read his much-anticipated decision about this case that put rape in a glaring spotlight, a case that could alter the status of women and girls in Kenya and maybe all of Africa. When the lights came on, the judge in the high court in Meru stated: "By failing to enforce existing defilement [rape] laws, the police have contributed to the development of a culture of tolerance for pervasive sexual violence against girl children and impunity."

Guilty.

The earth shifted under the rights of girls and women that day; the girls secured access to justice for themselves and legal protection from rape for all 10 million girls in Kenya.

Within 48 hours of the court decision, Fiona Sampson had heard from half a dozen other countries that want the same action. But the win is only as good as the justice each girl gets. Without due process, the supporters knew they would not have won anything. So the Equality Effect rolled out the next step. Presently the police force is being retrained, the entire judiciary is reviewing the role each one plays in justice and a public-awareness campaign is being prepared.

The confounding aspect of rape is that it punishes women twice. First they suffer the physical abuse and then the never-ending memory and shame, which threaten and retreat like tidal surges throughout the rest of their lives. Justice can only come from acknowledgement and the conviction of the perpetrator.

That's what the girls in Kenya were counting on. And when the judge vindicated them in May 2013, magistrates from around the world were buffeted by the hot winds of change that blew out of Africa.

Confronting the realities in the lives of girls is the single best way to begin the long, sure process of change, even when that confrontation means attacking old shibboleths: stay at home, everyone is watching; you are the source of the family honour. Girls know the size of the change they have to make and believe that it's the young people who will do it. Two young Afghan girls offered this illustration: if a girl asks her grandfather about marching against street harassment, he'll say, "Don't do it, you'll bring shame on the family." If she asks her father, he'll say the same and add, "Stay at home, the street is too dangerous for you." But if she asks her sister, she'll want to know where and when the march is taking place and join in.

Similar initiatives are happening in Senegal and Swaziland, in India and Pakistan as well as the Americas. The girls I spoke with all over the world confirm that the first step is acknowledging their plight, and the next step will take them into a better future. They believe in their hearts what experts such as Jeffrey Sachs and Farida Shaheed have recently stated: educating and empowering girls and women is the ticket to an improved economy, reduced poverty and a cut in conflict. The process of change is usually daring, certainly time-consuming, invariably costly, and occasionally heartbreaking but eventually an exercise so rewarding that it becomes the stuff of legends. But like all movements and most periods of change, there are invariably false starts and setbacks. Change is fuelled by anger and disappointment, as well as inspiration and patience. What is happening today is the culmination of all the waves of women's efforts that went before. Once change like this begins in earnest, once it has lifted off, the momentum picks up and it becomes unstoppable. One of the girls I talked to said: "We are the generation of change. We have the power and a new viewpoint and we're going to change the world – watch us."

Girls speak out: finding some answers

IF I HAD THE POWER...

NICARAGUA

"Disclose laws and explain to each woman and girl their right to not be abused."

"Organise a group where they can share these kinds of experiences and report to stop abuse against girls and women."

"To promote 'breaking the silence' with the help of the police and trained authorities."

"I think the government and community leaders should create places where information and protection can be given to those who are being abused."

"Teach boys since they are little kids to respect women, so when they grow up they do not become violent."

ECUADOR

"If I had the power to do it, I'd improve safety, make the police patrol the neighbourhoods 24 hours a day and put an officer in post to receive reports of abuse and violence against teenagers."

"I would implement more police officers and that the government place more street lighting."

"Talk with parents and government to protect girls more."

"Strengthen bonds in the neighbourhood and in the community to protect each other and prevent violence."

PLAN INTERNATIONAL/BETTINA BAUER

The voices that came through in our four-country study of girls and young women in **Nicaragua**, **Ecuador**, **Zimbabwe** and **Pakistan** had, despite the differences in context, a lot in common. When asked to think about solutions to the challenges many girls face – early marriage, early pregnancy, violence – key themes emerged everywhere: education, communication, information, supportive families, communities and governments, and empowered girls. These quotations are a synthesis of girls' voices addressing the issues that affect their lives.

PAKISTAN

"Steps should be taken by the government to punish them and girls should be trained in self-defence and they should be given confidence."

"People of the area should arrange a security system and responsible women should be the head of such an organisation."

ZIMBABWE

"I would encourage girls to report to police if they face abuse or violence. Every girl should have a mentor or someone they feel comfortable talking to. I will make sure that there are longer prison sentences to those who abuse girls."

"Girls must have open lines of communication to feel free to report matters of abuse and actually see progress, like the perpetrators being arrested, as this would give them some form of solace. The victim-friendly departments at the police stations should have more women, as victims find it hard to express their feelings to men."

"Campaigns, especially to men – to show them the importance of women so that abuse does not occur."

"Setting up safe places and groups where girls and women can share information and experiences related to violence and abuse."

THE INVISIBLE WORK FORCE

by **Katrine Marçal**

ANNA-LENA AHLSTRÖM

Katrine Marçal is a vocal commentator on the new economic movement called 'virtuous banking'[1] and the lead editorial writer for Swedish newspaper *Aftonbladet*, where she writes articles on international politics, economics and feminism. On publication in Sweden, *Who Cooked Adam Smith's Dinner?* was shortlisted for the August Prize and won the Lagercrantzen Award. She lives in London.

Invest in girls and growth will take off – this has become a bit of a mantra in the last couple of years. Most international organisations today, from the UN to the IMF, pen beautiful press releases about how women are the key to economic development.

Girls can fix the global economy, we hear, and the experts have numbers to prove it.

Investing in girls so that they complete the next level of education would lead to lifetime earnings that are equivalent to up to 68 per cent of annual GDP, a study by The World Bank has found.[2] Other economists have estimated that each additional year of schooling boosts long-term growth by 0.58 percentage points per year.[3] Most analysts agree that economic returns on girls' education in developing countries are substantial. In most cases they exceed those observed in richer countries and those of boys.[4]

International organisations and NGOs repeat these stark figures in the hope that it will lead policy makers to reconsider the current underinvestment in girls.

MEERI KOUTANIEMI

Refugee camp, Niger.

In developing countries, girls make up approximately half the youth population, but they contribute less than their potential to the economy. Child marriage, early pregnancy and school leaving prevent them, as does the perception that girls have limited economic value compared to boys. Food is often given to boys before it is given to girls. The same is true for healthcare and, especially, education.

Societies that don't invest in girls pay a price for it in terms of slower growth and reduced income. Yes, girls might be able to rescue the world economy and boost growth if we give them the opportunities. However, the economic story that these figures are often used to tell in the media, the story of girls as an untapped economic resource in the world, is not the whole truth.

Neither about girls.

Nor about the global economy.

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Economists sometimes joke that if a man marries his housekeeper, the GDP of the country declines. If, on the other hand, he sends his mother to an old-age home, it increases again. In addition to the joke saying a lot about the perception of gender roles among economists, it also shows how the same kind of work can be counted or not counted as part of GDP. Work done within the home is not counted as contributing to the growth of an economy; only work done outside of it is. This economic assumption may seem harmless but actually has severe consequences for women and girls.

The feminist economist Marilyn Waring famously looked at the unpaid labour carried out by a young woman in the Lowveld in Zimbabwe.

The girl wakes up at 4am to carry a bucket 11 kilometres to the well and back. Three hours later, she has returned home with the water. Still barefoot. Collecting wood, washing dishes, cooking lunch, doing the dishes again and then out to get vegetables. Fetching water a second time, dinner, younger siblings needing to be tucked in and the workday is over at nine. However, all this work she does is not counted as something that contributes to growth. It is actually not counted as work at all. During all these hours the girl is considered unproductive and economically inactive.

DIETER TELEMANS/PANOS PICTURES

Rajasthan, India.

If she were to get a paid job instead, her efforts would suddenly matter. They would be part of GDP and growth and economic development would be boosted. All her current work hours are, however, done within the informal economy and therefore not part of these calculations.

But does that mean that they don't matter?

To understand why economists think this way we need to start from the beginning.

How do you get your dinner? That's the fundamental question of economics. It seems simple, but it is extremely complicated. In 1776 Adam Smith, the father of economics, wrote the words that shaped our modern understanding of economics:

"It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest."

Smith's idea was that the butcher works in order to have satisfied customers and, therefore, money. Not to be nice. The baker bakes and the brewer brews not because they want to make people happy but to turn a profit. If the bread and the beer are good, people will buy them. That is why bakers and brewers produce their goods. Not because they actually care that people get good bread and tasty beer.

That's not the driving force.

The driving force is self-interest.

This is still the starting point of standard economic theories. When we speak colloquially about "thinking like an economist", this is what we mean: people do what they do because it benefits them.

'The invisible hand' is the best-known expression in economics. Adam Smith coined the term, but it's the economists since him who popularised it. The invisible hand touches everything, guides everything, is in everything, decides everything – but you can neither see nor feel it. It doesn't intervene from above, outside, point and move things around. It arises in and between the actions and choices of individuals. It is the hand that drives the system – from within.

The idea of the invisible hand is that if everyone just acts from their self-interest it will automatically lead to what's best for the economy, as if we were all "guided by an invisible hand".

But the invisible hand is not alone.

Adam Smith never married. The father of economics lived with his mother for most of his life. She tended to the house and a cousin handled Adam Smith's finances. When Adam Smith was appointed as a commissioner of customs in Edinburgh, his mother moved with him. Her entire life, she took care of her son, and she is the part of the answer to the question of how we get our dinner that Adam Smith omits.

For the butcher, the baker and the brewer to be able to go to work, at the time Adam Smith was writing, their wives, mothers or sisters had to spend hour after hour, day after day minding the children, cleaning the house, cooking the food, washing the clothes, drying tears and squabbling with the neighbours. However you look at the market, it is always built on another economy.

The 11-year-old girl who walks 15 kilometres every morning to gather wood for her family plays a big part in her country's ability to develop economically. If we don't acknowledge her work, our whole understanding of what creates economic development is at risk of being wrong.

The 11-year-old girl who walks 15 kilometres every morning to gather wood for her family plays a big part in her country's ability to develop economically. If we don't acknowledge her work, our whole understanding of what creates economic development is at risk of being wrong

The French author and feminist Simone de Beauvoir described woman as "the second sex". It's the man who comes first. It's the man who counts. He defines the world and woman is 'the other', everything he is not but also that which he is dependent on so he can be who he is.

In the same way that there is a 'second sex', there is a 'second economy'. The work that is traditionally carried out by men is what counts. Women's work is 'the other'. Everything that he doesn't do but that he is dependent on so he can do what he does.

The economy isn't just built with an invisible hand', it is also built with an 'invisible heart'.[5]

And in the global economy this all-important 'invisible heart'[6] is largely made up of girls and women.

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A woman in our world spends just over two-thirds of her working day on unpaid work. The equivalent statistic for men is one quarter.[7] In developing countries with large agricultural sectors, the difference is even greater. In Nepal, women work 21 hours more each week than men. In India, around 12.[8] In parts of Asia and Africa, where men often migrate to the cities, women are left behind. They have no support from men or from the state, but still they have to manage the triple burden of a career, housework and agricultural work.

The global economic crisis led governments to borrow extensively to support the financial sector; this, together with the fall in GDP and increased unemployment, created large deficits. The political choice made by many governments in response to this became austerity measures.

However, cutting spending means cutting public-sector jobs, and the public sector is where lots of the care work in a modern society takes place.

It's also, to a large extent, a female sector of the economy.

The problem with cutting care jobs in order to balance the budget is that the numbers of elderly who need to be fed and turned and have their hands held won't change. Austerity measures don't just mean that women will lose their jobs; it also means that fewer nursing assistants will have to do the same amount of work.

Their backs and joints might not be able to hold out.

In that sense, austerity means a shifting of costs from the government onto women's bodies.

Canada's national statistical agency tried to measure the value of unpaid work: between 30.6 and 41.4 per cent of the GDP, they concluded.[9] The first number is calculated on the basis of how much it would cost to replace unpaid work with paid. The other is based on how much a person would earn if they were earning a wage while they were doing housework.

Whatever the method – the sum is enormous.

In Britain, just the value of unpaid childcare is more than three times that of the financial sector![10]

Housework is neither more nor less difficult to measure than much of what we include in GDP. We take great pains to measure the value of the food a farmer produces on his land but doesn't take to market. With housework, we don't make the same effort. Women's work is a natural resource that we don't think we need to account for.

Because we assume it will always be there.

A big reason for the economic inequality between men and women today is that women to a much greater extent work with care. Whether it's the girl in the poor African economy who has to look after her siblings during the day and is therefore taken out of school by her parents, or the British woman who is being paid the minimum wage on a zero-hour contract to work in elderly care.

The pattern is the same: Somebody has to do the care work in an economy, otherwise nothing else works; but because care is not valued, it is either badly paid or not paid at all.

Girls and women are not an untapped economic resource in the world; their work is the invisible structure that keeps societies and economies together

It is not possible to close the gender pay gap between men and women without doing something about the devaluation of care work. Highly paid women in developed economies like Britain start to lose out financially compared to their male colleagues the minute they have children and take on these care responsibilities.

Low-paid women, on the other hand, earn less than low-paid men because they to a larger extent work in the care sector, where wages are very low.

Whether women work in the care sector because the wages are low or whether wages are low because women work there is a question that can't be answered, but the devaluation of care is one of the main reasons why women earn less than men in the world today.

Traditionally, care has been conducted in the home. Based on empathy, love and nurturing, it was and still is often seen as a complement to the harsh male world of market competition and money. Care was something women did out of love and because they simply were female. It was their gentle nature in action, we assumed. It had nothing to do with money, the story went.

It is telling that many of the first nurses were nuns who had sworn an oath of poverty. This logic remains with us today. Professional nurses, carers and child minders are simply extending their natural family role as nurturers, we still believe on some level. Therefore they do not need to be paid very well for doing it. It's not a real job; at least, not in the same way as many men's jobs, we think. "Anyone can do it."

At least, any woman.

The working hours of domestic labourers around the world are therefore among the longest, most precarious and most unpredictable of any jobs on the labour market. Many women in this sector aren't allowed to leave the house without permission, according to a study conducted by Human Rights Watch.

Verbal, physical and sexual harassment is common, but seldom reported. Moreover, such a worker is often in the country illegally and afraid of being deported. She worries almost all the time, mostly about her children on the other side of the planet. In some cases the domestic worker is herself a child. Some 17.2 million children are in paid or unpaid domestic work in the home of a third party or employer.[11]

According to the ILO, 67.1 per cent of all child domestic workers are girls.[12]

This is one side of the equation.

The other is that a Filipina housekeeper in Hong Kong earns as much money as a male doctor in the rural Philippines. Foreign nannies working in Italy have a salary that's between seven

and 15 times higher than what they could earn in their home countries.

The money that female migrants send home contributes more to the economy of many countries than aid and foreign investments combined. In the Philippines, remittances account for almost 10 per cent of the GDP.[13]

These global 'care chains' of largely female migrants that stretch around our world are a massive part of the global economy, but we very seldom acknowledge their significance.

$ $ $

All the calculations about how much growth would go up if women and girls had the same opportunities as men to work in the formal economy are important. They show us that gender equality is not just a question of fairness but also something that everyone could benefit from.

However, they can also be problematic in the sense that they don't tend to acknowledge the contribution to the economy that girls and women are already making.

Every society must in some way create a structure for how to care for other people; otherwise, neither the economy nor anything else will work. Without care, children can't grow and the sick won't get healthy. Being cared for by others is the medium through which we learn cooperation, empathy, respect, self-discipline and thoughtfulness.

These are fundamental life skills.

When married women in the West entered the workforce, they started to devote more time to the kind of work that is counted (working outside the home) and less time to the kind of work that isn't (domestic work). This dramatically increased the GDP in the Western world.

But was this increase accurate?

Because no one had bothered to quantify housework, we might have overvalued the actual increase of wealth. The calculations we make today about how much wealth would increase if more women in developing economies took up paid work might be wrong for the same reason.

We need a new economic story. One that stresses the need for change without ignoring the economic contributions women and girls make today.

Girls and women are not an untapped economic resource in the world; their work is the invisible structure that keeps societies and economies together.

But they haven't freely chosen this role. And they are not being paid, compensated or acknowledged for it.

This needs to change.

Katrine Marçal is the author of Who Cooked Adam Smith's Dinner?: A Story About Women and Economics published by Portobello Books.

Mali.

AMI VITALE/PANOS PICTURES

CREATING A BRIGHTER FUTURE

by **Indra Nooyi**

JASON SCHMIDT

Indra Nooyi is the Chairman and CEO of PepsiCo. Raised in India, she learned first-hand the important role that a supportive family and access to education can play in increasing opportunity for young girls.

"The truth is that somewhere in a small town in Asia… or a remote outpost in South America… or a dusty village in Africa, a young girl is bursting with talent and drive… and dreams. It's up to all of us as global citizens to help her find a way to make those dreams come true."

Indra Nooyi, speaking at the 2012 launch of Plan International's Because I am a Girl Campaign for girls' education

"I come at this as a daughter, a mother, a sister, a concerned citizen, and as the CEO of a global corporation. The financial success of businesses all over the world depends on the economic success of the communities where we work. And we need the talent and insights of girls today to lead our businesses tomorrow. That's why expanding educational opportunities for girls isn't charity. It's a smart investment in a stronger global economy and in our future." [1]

All around the world, there are more girls and young women than ever before breaking barriers and leading the way towards a better future. Yet at the same time, it's undeniable there is much more work to be done if we are to achieve the world we all wish to see – one in which every girl and young woman has the chance to reach her full potential.

Access to education is a key piece of the equation. So, too, is clearing the many hurdles that prevent many young women from pursuing a career.

Growing up in India, I witnessed many of these hurdles first-hand. I also gained a deep and lasting appreciation for the role women play in society, as well as the as yet untapped contributions they can make in the world.

My personal journey was rooted in the support of my parents, who encouraged my sister and me to dream big and fostered opportunities for us to pursue those dreams. Yet not all families have this luxury. Young girls around the world face unique challenges and are often born into difficult circumstances. Too often, their futures are sacrificed for the needs of the present or, worse, fall victim to prejudice and injustice that prevent progress. We all have a role to play in creating a brighter future.

Companies must be an important part of this effort.

After all, support for girls' education is good for society and for business. Women are engines of growth for economies.

OMUR BLACK

India.

According to the World Bank, increasing primary and secondary education raises a girl's eventual income.[2] And, according to a recent UNESCO report, education narrows the pay gap between men and women and makes it more likely women can find work.[3]

The benefits don't end there. Women also bring diverse perspectives with them to work that broaden ways of thinking and enrich companies. That's why, across our company, we support women through female leadership, talent and support programmes.

Providing more young girls and women with the opportunity to determine their own fates requires support and investment from all levels of our society. Families, communities, businesses, NGOs and governments must all play their part.

Because the truth is that, even if young girls have the courage to dream big, those dreams have no chance of becoming reality unless they are coupled with the freedom to attend school day in and day out. And even if a young mother receives a microcredit loan, it will only matter if she has the time and opportunity to grow her business.

Our daughters' imaginations should have no bounds, and we cannot rest until they also have the opportunities to pursue their dreams.

"When one out of every five adolescent girls on this planet is denied an education because her family cannot afford her school fees... because she has been sold into prostitution... because she is not deemed worthy of the chance to learn – when 62 million girls are out of school, we are not even close to unlocking the potential that our young people hold." [4,5]

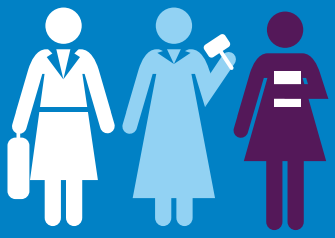
FACT FILE GIRLS IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY: ADDING IT ALL UP

BACKGROUND

In recent years there has been a marked international focus on girls as agents of economic change. Investing in girls is no longer seen just as the right thing to do; it's also the smart thing to do.

90% of countries have at least one law that restricts economic equality for women[1]

In 15 countries, husbands can legally object to their wives working and prevent them from accepting jobs, and in 79 countries, there are laws to restrict the types of jobs that women can do[2]



In almost all OECD countries, girls are more ambitious than boys. On average, girls are 11% more likely than boys to expect to work in high-status jobs such as legislators, senior officials and managers[7]

In only **5** OF THE **114** **COUNTRIES SURVEYED** are there more, or as many, women as men in these high-status jobs[8]

75% of women's employment in developing regions is informal and unprotected[9]

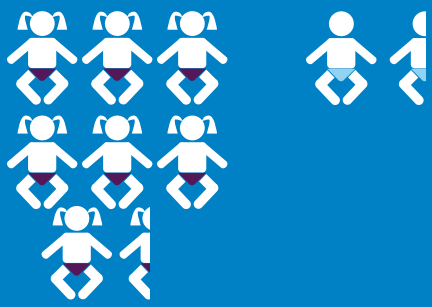
In Greece, the unemployment rate for young women aged 15-24 is **60.4%** compared with 46.1% for young men[10]

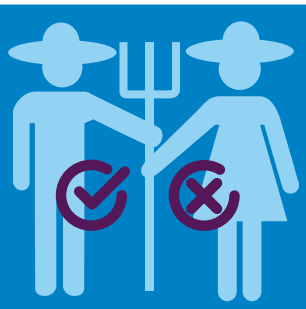
In Latin America **17.7%** of young women are unemployed, compared to 11.4% of young men[11]

GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS

Family poverty has more impact on girls' survival than boys': a 1% fall in GDP increases infant mortality by

7.4 deaths per 1,000 births for girls **Vs** 1.5 deaths per 1,000 births for boys[16]





Nearly 40% of people agree that when jobs are in short supply, men have more right to them than women[17]

Cuts in health budgets leave adolescent girls even more vulnerable during pregnancy. Globally, maternal mortality is a leading cause of death for 14 to 19-year-olds[18]

Because I am a Girl | PLAN INTERNATIONAL

Closing the gap in women's labour-force participation in OECD countries will lead to an average GDP gain of 12% by 2030[3]

"When we support girls, they reward society with enormous contributions in creativity, compassion and – yes – girl power."[4]

Ban Ki-moon
WEF 2014

EMPLOYMENT

Globally women's average wages are

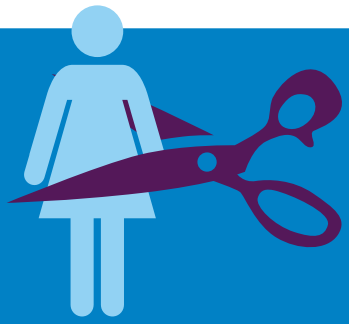
24%

less than men's [5]

At the current rate of change it will take

81 YEARS

for the gender pay gap to close completely[6]



80% of Bangladeshi garment workers are female.[12] Paid employment can help to explain declining fertility and increasing age of marriage, but many are employed in exploitative conditions, work long hours for very low wages and are denied basic rights[13]

of the estimated

4.5 MILLION

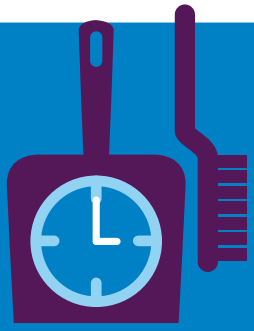
forced into sexual exploitation and 55% of the estimated 20.9 million victims of forced labour are women and girls[14]

"Many girls are now engaged in prostitution, with the full knowledge of their parents, who remain silent because the money they bring home helps the household."

Girl, 17, Mozambique, 2010 [15]

UNPAID CARE WORK

Girls' enrolment rates in school increased by more than 2% in Ghana, 10% in Yemen and 12% in Pakistan when the time spent collecting water for their family decreased[19,20]



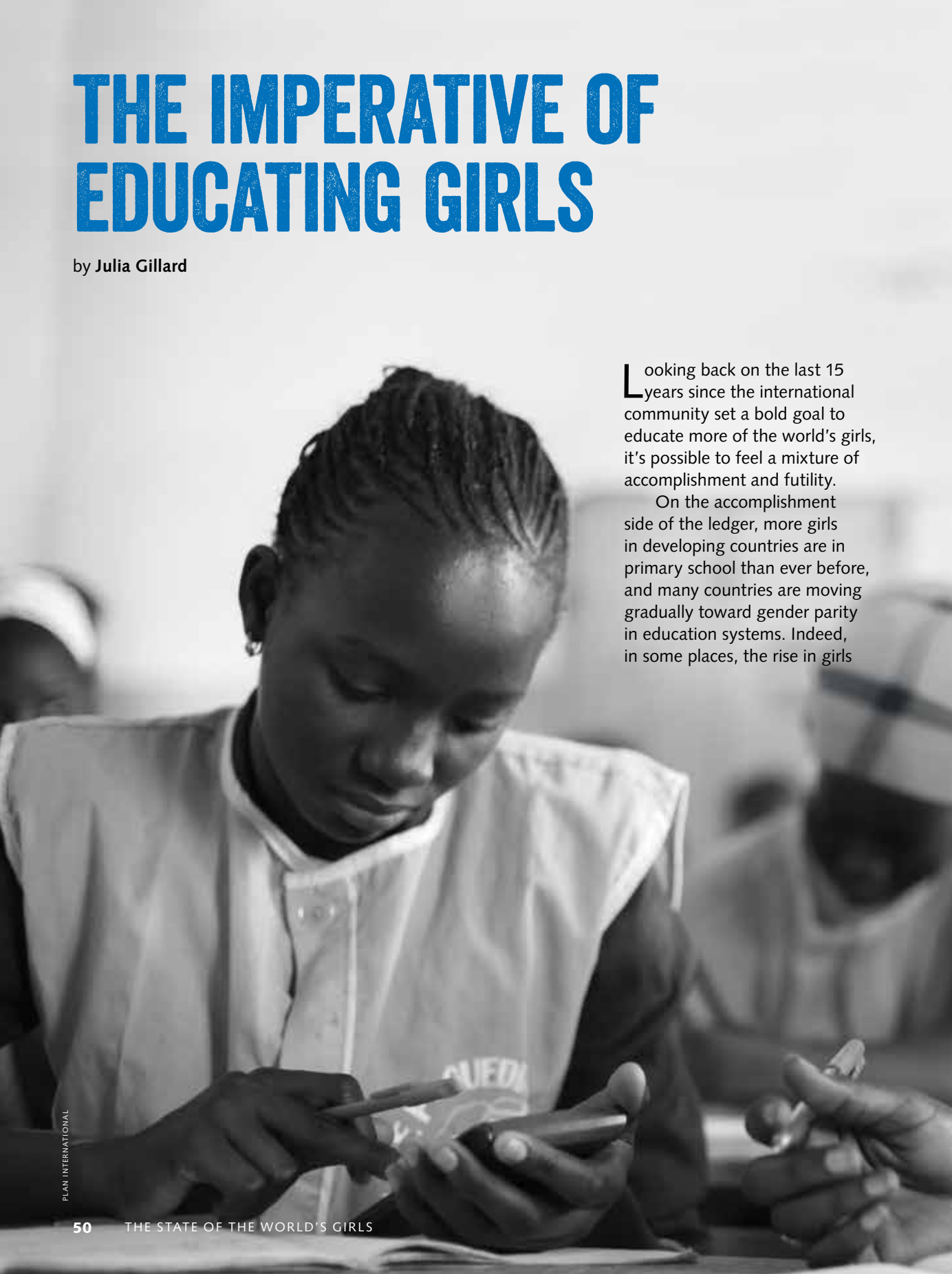
A survey in 16 countries found that 10% of girls aged 5-14 perform household chores for 28 hours or more each week, which keeps them from studying[21]

According to a 2011 survey, 11% of children interviewed in the UK, 66% in Rwanda and 74% in India 'totally agree' that:

'A woman's most important role is to take care of her home and cook for her family'[22]

THE IMPERATIVE OF EDUCATING GIRLS

by **Julia Gillard**



PLAN INTERNATIONAL

Looking back on the last 15 years since the international community set a bold goal to educate more of the world's girls, it's possible to feel a mixture of accomplishment and futility.

On the accomplishment side of the ledger, more girls in developing countries are in primary school than ever before, and many countries are moving gradually toward gender parity in education systems. Indeed, in some places, the rise in girls

Julia Gillard, the former Prime Minister of Australia, is the Chair of the Board of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). She is also a distinguished fellow for education at the Brookings Institutions. Between 2010 and 2013, while serving as Prime Minister, she delivered nation-changing policies, including reforming Australia's education at every level from early childhood to university education; improving the provision and sustainability of healthcare, aged care and dental care; and commencing the nation's first ever national scheme to care for people with disabilities. Before becoming Prime Minister, Ms Gillard was Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and Social Inclusion.

MARIELLE SMITH

finishing their primary education is outpacing that of boys.

There are also countless stories of individual triumphs over forces that long kept girls out of school – none more visible and inspiring perhaps than that of Malala Yousafzai, who faced violent Taliban attacks in her native Pakistan, making her the world's most powerful advocate for girls' education and winning her the Nobel Peace Prize, all at the remarkable age of 17.

Senegal.

It's also reassuring that in the last decade and a half, more people around the world – from grassroots activists to government and NGO leaders – have come not only to understand but also speak out for the imperative of educating girls. It's heartening that there are far more voices making that case than ever before, through traditional media, social media, NGOs, high-profile events and government actions.

Educating girls is key to development

The logic of girls' education has never been hard to grasp. Evidence shows that if you educate a girl, she will be able to make better life choices, earn a higher income and contribute much more to her family and community life than she would without education.

We know, for example, that a child whose mother can read is 50 per cent more likely to live past age five[1], that women's education over the past 40 years has prevented more than four million child deaths[2], that investing in girls could boost sub-Saharan Africa's agricultural outputs by 25 per cent[3], that one additional school year can increase a woman's earnings by up to 20 per cent[4] and that increasing the number of women with a secondary education by one per cent can raise a country's annual per-capita economic growth by 0.3 per cent.[5]

Educating girls, in other words, is a virtuous cycle: good for each individual girl, as well as her family, community, nation and, ultimately, the world.

Still, in spite of undeniably good news, it's hard not to feel discouraged.

Start with the stark reality that we remain far from the finish line set 25 years ago by the Education for All agenda. While it's true that 48 per cent of all children in school in developing countries are girls, the majority of all out-of-school children (31 million out of 58 million) are also girls.[6]

Girls face many education challenges

Indeed, women represent nearly two-thirds of the world's 781 million illiterate[7]; cultural practices that marry off girls early and require them to care for their families instead of going to school are still widespread; in many countries where the number of girls completing primary school is surging, too few are moving on to lower secondary and secondary school, let alone to higher education. Also, a number of nations struggle to keep schoolgirls safe from harassment and violence and to recruit enough teachers who can provide the encouragement and peace of mind that helps them thrive in school.

And let's not forget that there are terrorist groups, like Boko Haram in Nigeria or the Taliban in Pakistan, waging war against the very idea of educating girls. As the Coalition Against Attacks on Education has diligently documented, Boko Haram has in recent years carried out brutal attacks on schools and, as the world learned last year, kidnapped young girls in order to keep them from going to school.[8] Not surprisingly, many parents in the region simply stopped sending their children, particularly their girls, to school.[9]

Crisis – civil war, natural disasters or epidemic – represents one of the biggest impediments to giving poor girls and boys alike the education they deserve. We've seen some progress: the Global Partnership for Education works with 60 developing countries, almost half of which are fragile and conflict-affected. In these countries, there were substantially more children (68 per cent) who completed primary school in 2012 than there were in 2000 (55 per cent).[10] But the fact remains that about 82 per cent of all out-of-school children in the 60 partner developing countries of the Global Partnership for Education – or roughly 33.5 million – today reside in such conflict-affected and fragile states.[11]

So, while there has been some good progress, we are far from done. As we move ahead, we must be mindful of several important factors.

Systems matter

The Education for All movement no doubt contributed to a rise in awareness about the need for giving more children across the developing world greater access to quality education. It also spawned more concrete action to fulfil that goal.

But, as we've learned at the Global Partnership for Education, all the good will and expense will miss their mark unless

The logic of girls' education has never been hard to grasp. If you educate a girl, she will be able to make better life choices, earn a higher income and contribute much more to her family and community life

they are organised into sound, comprehensive systems. School construction, teacher training, development of new pedagogical approaches are important tools to improve education systems. But in isolation and without an overarching plan they will reach only a limited number of children. Developing countries need approaches that are sustainable, support the overall system and fit all the various inputs together into a coherent whole that can lift all boats over time.

A good education system strives for educational excellence at all levels and ensures that all schools, teachers and students meet widely accepted standards. A system has to be responsive and accountable to the public. And it must be built on best practices and evidence, driven by reliable local data, and, ultimately, owned and operated by each country.[12]

When it comes to educating girls, the biggest success stories come from those countries that have laid out clear, actionable and systemic blueprints to tackle the issue, usually through a multi-year strategic education plan. It starts with a sincere commitment and depends on concerted, concrete follow-through.

In Yemen, for example, the Ministry for Education set out to get more girls in school, particularly in more remote communities. With co-funding by the Global Partnership and other partners, the Ministry launched a multi-pronged effort that included a training programme to establish a bigger pool of qualified female public-school teachers, a public information campaign that urged more girls to go to school and the elimination of school fees so families in need could send their daughters to school. As a result, girls' net enrolment in primary education in Yemen rose significantly, from 42 per cent in 1999 to 81 per cent in 2013.[13] It's reassuring, even if we can't yet claim victory. But Yemen's clear commitment has made the difference. Our hope is that recent upheaval in the country does not reverse these gains.

In Afghanistan over the last dozen years, we have witnessed what is perhaps the most dramatic transformation anywhere when it comes to girls' education. That's due in large part because post-Taliban Afghan leaders committed to systemic change and followed through on their plans. At 8.3 million, the number of enrolled students today is more than eight times what it was in 2001. Almost 40 per cent of all students are girls.[14]

About 60 per cent of approximately four million out-of-school children in Afghanistan are also girls.[15] That's far too many. But the government has developed strong and comprehensive girls' education programmes, focused on bringing down the high gender-disparity rates in remote and insecure districts.

Gender is only one dimension

Planning for and simply directing resources at girls is not enough to address the challenge of educating them. The reality in most developing countries is that gender inequality is only one obstacle of the many girls face. Poverty, disability, ethnicity, religion and geography (do they live in rural or urban areas? Are they near or far from schools?) are powerful factors determining whether or not a girl gets educated. If we're not taking those other factors into account, we can't possibly meet the goal of educating all girls.

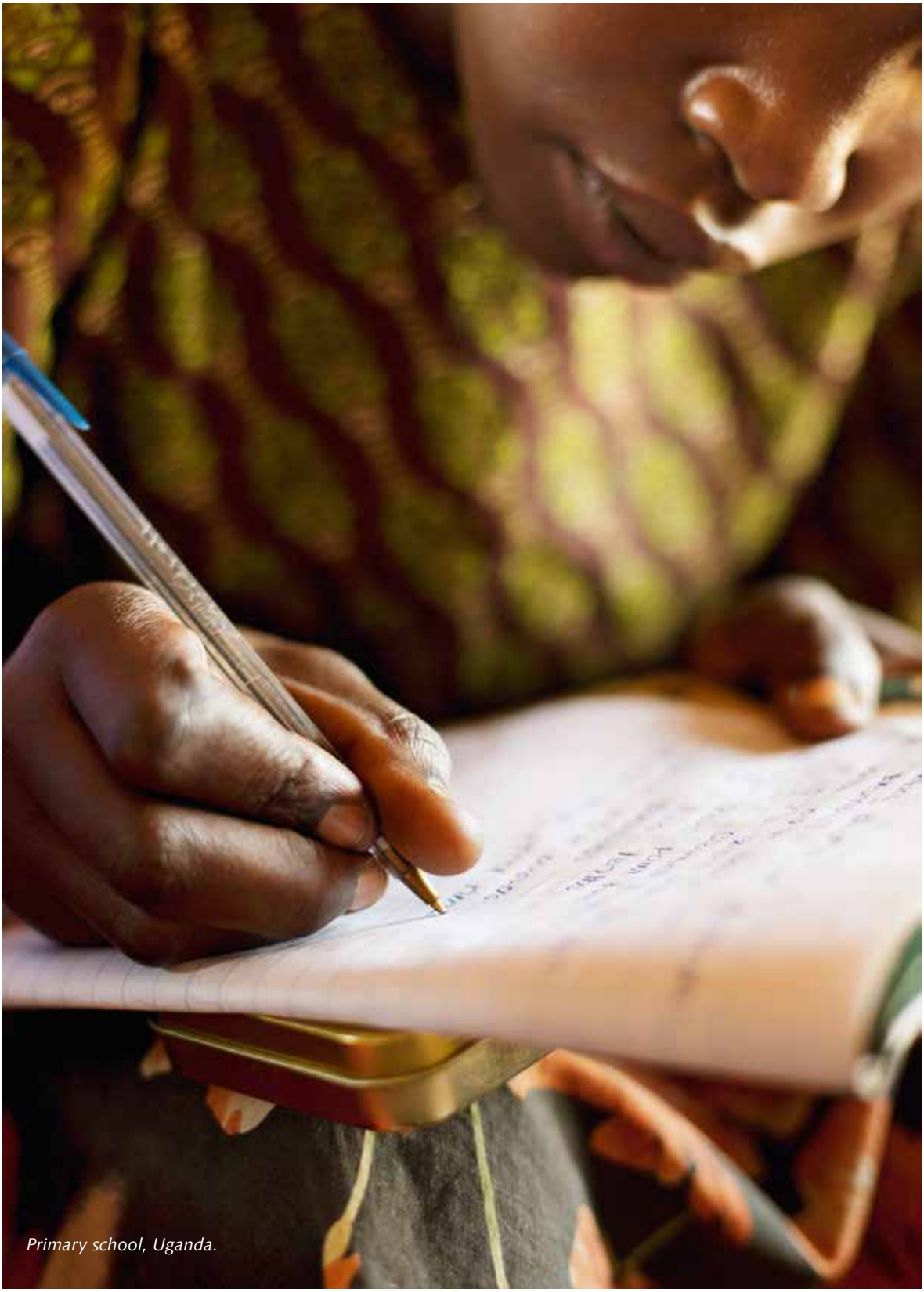
Put another way, a girl with disabilities from a poor, rural and ethnically disadvantaged family has virtually no chance of completing primary school, while the picture is more encouraging for girls from a relatively prosperous family in an urban area. As the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2013/14 noted, "If recent trends continue, the richest boys will achieve universal primary completion in 2021, but the poorest girls will not catch up until 2086."[16]

We have to target approaches that focus not just on girls but also on a complex set of needs, lest we leave many stuck in poverty. Funding should focus on multiple factors that keep children – usually the hardest to reach, such as girls, those living in remote areas, and those who are of marginalised groups or disabled – out of school.

Equity is the goal

At their heart, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) aimed to address the human needs of all people around the world. With that foundation now largely in place after nearly 15 years of extraordinary work, we have an opportunity to spend the next decade and a half on achieving true 'equity' among all.

The Sustainable Development Goals that will succeed the MDGs at the end of 2015 must aspire to deliver equity at every level of education, carrying forward the unfinished business of universal education, especially for those



MIKKEL OSTERGAARD/PANOS PICTURES

Primary school, Uganda.

children who are very poor, those living in remote, conflict-affected and fragile regions, children with disabilities and, of course, girls.

But what does it mean to "deliver equity at every level of education"? How will we know when we've reached that point?

We'll know it when every boy and every girl is able to go to a school for a quality education. When there are enough school buildings; functioning, sustainable education systems; sufficient availability of qualified teachers, particularly female teachers, who are important for girls to succeed; quality textbooks and other learning materials; and free schools that remove financial barriers to getting girls educated. We'll know it also when all families and communities see educating girls as essential to their personal development and to the future wellbeing of their societies.

Reaching those equity goals will require a revolution in measurement of educational trends and results, which will hold governments accountable and help them understand what's working, what's not and why.

It will involve an improved recognition of those with limited access to schooling, particularly those girls who are hardest to reach or who face the greatest obstacles to going to or continuing in school.

And it will call for ample and strategically allocated financing for education, aimed especially at those who need it most. Too often, for example, donors set a low cost per student as a primary criterion for funding. That could leave behind girls, or children with disabilities or other specific disadvantages.

Conflict and fragility are major impediments

We've also got to do better at ensuring that children – and girls in particular – in conflict and fragile environments don't lose their once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get the knowledge and skills that lift them and their societies out of poverty and desperation.

That's obviously difficult to achieve in places such as Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea, where Ebola has killed thousands and threatens more, and in nations like the Democratic Republic of Congo or Somalia, which have been ravaged in recent years by civil war.

Clearly, in such contexts, public health systems (in the case of an outbreak like Ebola), or diplomacy and other security interventions (in the case of civil war) have to stabilise the situation. But one of the first rules of any humanitarian crisis is to ensure that children stay in school, to provide for their short-term cognitive as well as emotional needs and ensure their long-term development.

Humanitarian responses are often hobbled because education in emergencies is under-financed. In 2013, the education sector received only two per cent of requests made through humanitarian funding appeals in 2013.[17] In too many crisis zones, education is not recognised as a humanitarian priority, though it should be.

We have to elevate education in emergencies so that it receives equal status with other priorities, and we need to integrate education as a primary component in all humanitarian action plans. Also, countries should do away with provisions in their education sector plans and budgets that are 'emergency blind', setting aside too little funding for disaster risk reduction and emergency preparedness and leaving whole societies incapable of keeping girls and boys in school when crises arise.

The world has to step up to the challenge

In spite of the growing recognition around the world that we need to give more children, especially girls, quality schooling, donor aid to basic education has dropped by seven per cent between 2010 and 2013, while overall development aid increased by more than nine per cent over the same period.

That troubling trend occurred even as developing countries themselves are putting more of their own resources into their education systems. Indeed, at the Global Partnership for Education's replenishment conference in June 2014, 27 developing countries exceeded all expectations by pledging to increase their own education budgets by a collective US$26 billion between 2015 and 2018. So what kind of signal does it send them when wealthier countries back away from education?

Ultimately, the shortage of funding and other critical resources hurts not only the people and societies we would otherwise support, but also the wealthy donor countries themselves. A world in which girls – and the women they become – reach their full intellectual, social and political potential is a more secure, healthier and prosperous world. When we reach – or at least approach – that state, we will all be better off.

‘WHAT ABOUT THE BOYS?’

by **Chernor Bah**

UNICEF

A leading youth advocate for global education, a girl champion and former refugee from Sierra Leone, Chernor Bah recently became an Associate at the Population Council, leading a collaborative initiative to provide solutions to adolescent girls affected by the Ebola outbreak. He is a Co-Founder of A World at School – and the youth representative on the United Nations Secretary-General’s High-Level Steering Committee for the Global Education First Initiative. As a teenager, he founded and led the Children’s Forum Network, Sierra Leone’s Children’s Parliament. Following the outbreak of Ebola in his country in 2014, Chernor co-founded the Salone Adolescent Girls Network, leading advocacy, relief and programme efforts for affected and marginalised girls. He received the Women’s Refugee Commission’s Voice of Courage Award in 2014 for his global efforts on behalf of children and youth affected by conflict.

As a longtime champion for girls’ rights, I’ve spoken many times and in many places about the importance of giving more girls around the world the education they deserve. No matter how passionate and convincing I try to be on this point, one of the first questions I almost always hear is some variation of “what about the boys?” How, they ask, do we ensure boys’ needs aren’t ignored or diminished when we make special efforts to educate girls? Don’t we risk the progress of boys when we focus disproportionately on girls? In order to bring about better outcomes for girls, don’t we need to change the minds of boys and men first?

Because these questions come up so often, I now have a standard retort: I’ve just spent a lot of time detailing the structural and systematic exclusion of a largely marginalised and often vulnerable population. Why, I ask rhetorically, are you still only interested in the empowered group?

I’ll admit that my response is a bit flippant, designed for effect and for shifting the challenge of their question back on them. Furthermore, it doesn’t fully address all the very real and difficult issues bound up in the question “what about the boys?”. What is equitable and when and how much should be invested in boys and men when girls bear such disproportionate risks? At what stages should boys be included in programmes? Should we strive for an equal number of men and boys in ‘gender equality’? Should we always include boys in those programmes? Can we achieve progress without engaging men and boys, and what is the cost of this engagement?

My ultimate answer is that girls’ empowerment initiatives must keep their eyes, first and foremost, on girls. In many societies, the obstacles keeping girls out of school or from realising their full potential are far greater than those boys face, and

Liberia.

ROBIN HAMMOND/PANOS PICTURES

they require a higher level of effort and investment.

Moreover, direct economic, social and health investment in girls doesn't just help girls and women; the evidence is overwhelming and conclusive that, as the wellbeing of girls and women improves, boys and men – all of society, really – are better off, too.

During adolescence, the world of girls typically shrinks, while that of the boys expands. In order to engage girls socially and prepare them economically requires a higher level of effort and investment that prepares them to face the social, health and violence risks, as well as the economic challenges, that they uniquely face.

Also, as boys and men see more educated girls in their midst, I believe they'll be more likely to abandon their archaic perceptions of women as inferior and mere sexual objects with no meaningful role to play outside the home. Only as we create, so to speak, 'facts on the ground' – that is to say, real and tangible change – will we have any chance of moving attitudes and perceptions in a positive direction.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't make any effort to give boys a quality education and all the other building blocks of personal development. Indeed, approximately 27 million (or 47 per cent) of the 58 million primary school-aged children out of school today around the globe are boys.[1] The obstacles keeping them out of school are: conflict and fragility, poverty, geography, disability, ethnic or religious discrimination and, quite simply, lack of local capacity to educate them. The international community has to continue to address those challenges if we are to achieve the goal of Education for All.

Nor am I suggesting that girls' education and empowerment programmes should not include meaningful engagement with boys about the importance of educating girls. As I will discuss, that is an essential part of the process.

But, in a world of finite resources, we have to spend more on educating

Sierra Leone.

PLAN INTERNATIONAL/MARK READ

girls and building their skills, especially in adolescence, when girls are faced with far greater social, health and economic risks. We have to account first for that imbalance. When we focus resources directly on girls' empowerment, beginning with the poorest girls, boys and the rest of society benefit. Whereas 'trickle down' doesn't work, 'trickle up and out' often does.

Moreover, we have to prioritise which girls we should focus on most. Knowing, even among girls, there are distinct and critical differences based on economic status, health and disability, ethnicity, religion and geography, girls' education efforts must focus on the most marginalised, not just the middle and upper class. We have to be conscious and supportive of the girls who need the most and who often are invisible within their communities and to the managers of empowerment programmes. For all these reasons, they require a much more targeted approach.

First-hand experience

How did I, a young male, born and raised in a fairly conservative country, get so interested and passionate about girls' empowerment? That's another common question that I am often asked, directly or otherwise. In short, it grew out of two sources: my own personal story and the facts.

I was raised in Sierra Leone by a single mom alongside two sisters in what is one of the worst places in the world to be a girl. My mother separated from my father when I was young and has since then worked as a primary-school teacher. She is educated. But the pay for a teacher like her was – and still is – paltry. Highly aware of the circumstances for women in Sierra Leone, she had to work hard and use all her energy and ingenuity to make ends meet. So, to supplement her low teachers' pay, she sold everything – bread, cake, palm oil – whatever she (with my sisters' and my help) could create with her own hands.

And because she was a teacher with a little bit of education herself, and despite many challenges (including at one point, fleeing the country for our lives, as refugees), she understood the power of learning. That makes me one of the lucky ones. Without my mother's understanding of the value of education, I would not have gotten the education I did and would not be where I am today. It's one small example of how educating a woman has multiple ripple effects for her family and the community around her.

I was lucky not just to have an enlightened mother; I was fortunate also to be a boy. My two sisters faced challenges I never did: threats of sexual violence, men coming into contact with them and, even when the girls were fairly young, asking them to marry them

But I was lucky not just to have an enlightened mother; I was fortunate also to be a boy. My two sisters faced challenges I never did: threats of sexual violence, men coming into contact with them and, even when the girls were fairly young, asking them to marry them. As we got older, there were signals from many directions suggesting that their lives seemed to matter less, even though I was always convinced they were smarter than me. In retrospect, I can now see what happened: society spent so much time telling them, and girls like them, that there were higher expectations for me only because I was a boy.

The odds were, and are, stacked against them.

In Sierra Leone, about 90 per cent of girls are subjected to female genital mutilation (or FGM), one of the highest rates in the world.[2] Only 36 per cent of women in Sierra Leone are literate, compared with 52 per cent of men.[3] One in six girls are married off by 15 and almost half are married by the time they are 18.[4] It's illegal but, with little enforcement of those laws, widespread. Two out of 10 women aged 20 to 49 report having their first sexual intercourse before they are 15 years old, rising to

seven out of 10 by 18.[5] Over their lifetime, if present patterns continue, 75 per cent of all adolescent girls in Sierra Leone will be a single mother at some point and that figure in Liberia is over 90 per cent.[6] Much of the single motherhood arises from having babies before marriage, very unstable marriages, and the absence of male social and economic support.

Fitting into that pattern, many girls I knew in my community who dropped out of school were subjected to FGM and were forced into early marriages. As these girls reached puberty, their social space narrowed as boys' expanded. It didn't matter that so many of the girls were smart and showed lots of potential, more than a lot of the boys. It also didn't seem to matter that the children of uneducated or poorly educated women were most likely to be caught in a continuous downward spiral of poverty, ill health and other challenges.

The more I saw this pattern, the more I sensed something was not right. Our society not only treated girls badly, it then blamed them for their plight, saying they weren't smart or hard-working enough to learn. And when they were sexually abused, it was somehow their fault. That, at least, was how many men, and the boys these men influenced, saw it.

In my mid-teens, I befriended a small group of other boys who talked about education, and who all knew that improving the odds for girls to get schooling was important – not only to those girls but to us, too. When we were between 15 and 18, we started a campaign, through the Children's Forum Network, that helped change the laws to deal with child marriage, codify sexual violence laws in the country and ensure compulsory primary education for girls. I was the first child to testify about this to the national Truth Commission, and I collected similar testimonies from others. One of our recommendations was to pass the Child Rights Act, which was finally enacted in 2007.

We were motivated by justice and human rights. We were raising our voices and created a platform to talk about girls' rights. We still took a lot of flak from friends and some relatives, who didn't understand what we were doing and accused us of being too influenced by the West or of lacking a grasp of reality.

I wish I could say that, over the last decade since we fought for girls' rights in Sierra Leone, we dramatically transformed how men there view educating and empowering girls. The truth is that, while there has been some change, it has been much less than we would have hoped. It's still a work in progress.

And that is not limited to Sierra Leone. There are far too many places around the world where it is difficult to be a girl. My own personal story is emblematic of what is happening elsewhere. Approximately 15 million girls worldwide are forced into marriage every year and in 27 countries there are large districts where at least 15 per cent of girls are married before age 15.[7,8] According to the International Center for Research on Woman, one-third of girls in the developing world are married before the age of 18, and one in nine are married before the age of 15.[9] UNESCO data shows that "nearly 17 per cent of the world's adult population is still not literate; two-thirds of them are women."[10] Those empirical numbers confirm what I've seen anecdotally from my experiences across the continent and what I've read about.

I believe girls' education is the global civil rights issue of our time

Engaging boys

I have personally designed and implemented programmes in several African nations aimed at encouraging boys to understand the value of girls' education, so I'm certainly not against spending some of the valuable girls' education resources on boys.

In Ethiopia, for example, I helped lead an innovative initiative, supported by Girl Hub, called YEGNA (which means 'ours' in Amharic) aimed at inspiring girls

to believe in themselves and to change boys' and society's minds about the value of girls in society. We created clubs, radio dramas, talk shows and a documentary on the topic. Those are useful and can work when paired with a more targeted, girl-centric programmatic approach. We worked with local groups and, in some cases, religious institutions to get their help spreading the gospel, if you will, of girls' education.

The *medium* of engagement matters. I worked with a group of boys in Ethiopia who told me they cared about equality issues but would feel emasculated if they were seen as promoting girls' issues. Creating the right platforms and the right messages reinforces incentives for all and aims to make it cool to be part of male gender clubs. In Liberia, we came up with the idea of being 'G-Positive' (a play on 'gangsta', but standing really for 'gender'). In Ethiopia, we created clubs for boys and girls with t-shirts that identified them publicly and proudly as part of a growing group dedicated to promoting girls. Delivering messages through mass media alone doesn't work. They must be reinforced with small social groups, which make it easier for boys, who essentially become positive deviants, to have their behaviour approved by their peers.

These approaches also have to answer the question: what's in it for the boys? They have to show that ending poverty benefits us all and eases the burden men may feel they have to provide solely for their families. As Plan International has pointed out, educating girls has enormous economic, health and social benefits across a society, which shows up in decreased under-five mortality, greater agricultural productivity, improved nutrition, increases in per-capita income and GDP growth, lower fertility rates, and much more.[11]

And there are civil society benefits to educating girls as well; investing in girls can diminish the pipeline of boys who might end up in groups like Boko Haram, the Taliban or al-Shabab. In response to these groups' efforts to, in part, keep girls out of school by terrorising them, many people call for focusing primarily on boys, the recruits for these extremist movements. But the answer to this difficult challenge is to double down on efforts to keep girls in school, to defy

Working with young men in Honduras.

PLAN INTERNATIONAL

IVOR PRICKETT/PANOS PICTURES

Slum in the outskirts of Freetown, Sierra Leone.

them, as Malala Yousafzai and other courageous girls have done. We know that when the parents – especially mothers – of young boys who are vulnerable to recruitment are educated, they will be much less likely to allow their sons to go to Boko Haram or the Taliban. That's why valiant efforts today to keep schools safe from violence are so critical to the future.

I believe girls' education is the global civil rights issue of our time. Just as the Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr and his colleagues battled in the 1950s and 1960s, when support from the white community eventually came because the human rights agenda became too powerful and persuasive to ignore, girls' education and empowerment initiatives must also appeal to boys' and men's sense of justice. Ironically, even as those boys and men have bought into and perpetuate cultures that devalue girls and women, they do care about injustice. We need to show them that it's more fashionable and even masculine to join the fight against injustice and do something about it. We need to show them that it's about our sisters, mothers and daughters. We have to make it personal.

Again, these kinds of investments in boys are necessary, but they're not sufficient. The best way to level the playing field is not to use finite resources meant for gender equality on boys and men, but to empower girls and women directly. For everyone's good, they need to be in school, learning, growing and, ultimately, transforming the people and communities around them.

SIMON POWELL

A century later

The school-bell is a call to battle,
every step to class, a step into the firing-line.
Here is the target, fine skin at the temple,
cheek still rounded from being fifteen.

Surrendered, surrounded, she
takes the bullet in the head

and walks on. The missile cuts
a pathway in her mind, to an orchard
in full bloom, a field humming under the sun,
its lap open and full of poppies.

This girl has won
the right to be ordinary,

wear bangles to a wedding, paint her fingernails,
go to school. *Bullet*, she says, *you are stupid.*
You have failed. You cannot kill a book
or the buzzing in it.

A murmur, a swarm. Behind her, one by one,
the schoolgirls are standing up
to take their places on the front line.

Imtiaz Dharker
Over the Moon (Bloodaxe Books, 2014)

A response to Wilfred Owen's *Anthem for Doomed Youth* written for the centenary commemoration of the First World War.

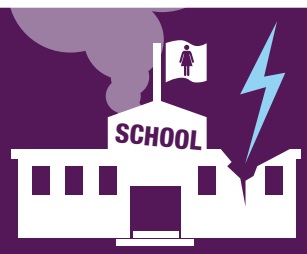
Hear Imtiaz Dharker reading her poem: https://plan-international.org/girlsreport3

FACT FILE LEARNING FOR LIFE: EDUCATION AND GIRLS' RIGHTS

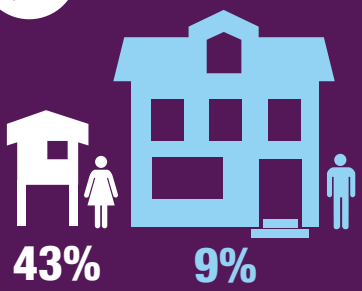
BACKGROUND

There have been significant advances in girls' education.[1] It is anticipated that with the current rate of progress 2/3 of countries will have achieved gender parity in primary education enrolment by the end of 2015, but only 48% of countries will have achieved gender parity in secondary education.[2]

Between 1999 and 2012 the number of countries with fewer than 90 girls enrolled in primary school for every 100 boys fell from 33 to 16[3]



Between 2009-2013 there were attacks on schools in at least 70 different countries, with a number of these attacks being specifically directed at girls, parents and teachers advocating for gender equality in education[4,5]



Across 30 countries, 43% of those out of school are girls from the poorest households. Only 9% are boys from the richest households[10]

In Afghanistan there are

71 GIRLS

& in Pakistan there are

82 GIRLS

IN PRIMARY SCHOOL FOR EVERY 100 BOYS[11]

Today, a young girl in South Sudan is three times more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth than to complete primary education[12]

A 2011 survey

found that more than 50% of girls and almost 68% of boys in India agree with the statement:

'If resources are scarce, it is better to educate a boy instead of a girl'[17]

Over **100 MILLION** young women living in low and lower-middle income countries are unable to read a single sentence[18]

Analysis of secondary school English language textbooks in Pakistan found that women and girls were seldom represented or were represented in a stereotypical way. In 20 out of 22 lessons in one English textbook, women were not mentioned at all[19]

Because I am a Girl | PLAN INTERNATIONAL

"…The rebels came into the school. They didn't like the way some of the girls were dressed. They yelled at us, saying that what we were wearing wasn't good. It made me scared. They broke our school desks, destroyed our school books and our things. I didn't want them to destroy our things. I didn't like what they were doing at all. School is supposed to be a place where we learn things."

Sita, 12, Mali[6]

TRYING TO LEARN

At current rates, the poorest boys in sub-Saharan Africa will achieve universal primary completion in 2069, but this will take nearly 20 years longer for the poorest girls[7]

As of 2012, there were

62 MILLION

girls of primary and lower secondary school age not in school[8]

1 in 5

ADOLESCENT GIRLS are out of school[9]

Fewer than 1 in 3 girls in sub-Saharan Africa and fewer than 1 in 2 in South Asia are enrolled in secondary school[13]

In contrast, in Latin America and the Caribbean, there are more girls than boys enrolled in secondary school[14]

Increasing female educational levels does not necessarily mean increased overall equality: in both Latin America and the Middle East, recent increases in female education levels have not led to corresponding equality in the work-place or at home[15]

A 2010 survey in the Côte d'Ivoire found that 47% of teachers reported initiating sexual relations with students[16]

"Sometimes people like to ask me, why should girls go to school? Why is it important for them? But I think the more important question is: why shouldn't they? Why shouldn't they have this right?"

Malala Yousafzai (2014)[20]

EDUCATION MATTERS

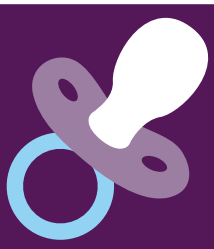
Girls with no education are three times as likely to marry by 18 as those with secondary education or higher.

20%

of girls with secondary education get married before they are 18[21]

Educated women are more likely to find work.

In Brazil 50% of women with primary education are in work; this rises to 60% of women with secondary education[22]



2.1 million child deaths (under 5) have been prevented between 1990 and 2009 because of increased education for women of reproductive age[23]

TRAVELLING THE SIDEWALKS

by **Mariane Pearl**

MARTIN DE LA SERNA

Mariane Pearl is the Managing Editor of the Chime for Change campaign, which aims to inspire, collect and share powerful stories about girls and women around the world. She is a journalist and author of two books, including *A Mighty Heart* (Scribner), which was published in the United States in 2003, translated into 15 languages and subsequently made into a film. Mariane is the recipient of numerous awards for her work, including the Anne Frank award in 2015, the National Headliners award for magazine writing, the Time Warner Women award, The White House project award, the Internews award for excellence in international reporting, the Vital Voices award, The Indian Express Excellence in Journalism award, the *El Mundo* editorial award in Spain, and the Prix Vérité in France for excellence in non-fiction writing.

Ghana.

There is a French song I loved when I was a teenager named 'To be Born Somewhere'. It talks about how you don't get to select the asphalts or dirt roads on which you'll learn how to walk. Maxime Le Forestier wrote the song in 1981, when Charles Pasqua, then-French Interior Minister, aggressively imposed anti-immigration laws in the country.

The lyrics involve all people who leave their homeland to make a living abroad for their families. But there is another song to be written, one that has been a long time coming – you don't choose your sex, either. If you are born female, this can quickly become a web of twisted back alleys on all the wrong sidewalks of this planet. From wars to poverty, women and children suffer more, always. "It is more dangerous today to be a woman in a war zone than a soldier," said Major General Patrick Cammaert, the Deputy Force Commander of the United Nations Mission to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), in 2008.

CHRIS KEULEN/PANOS PICTURES

When rape is used as a weapon of war, women are enslaved and described as sperm 'envelopes' to be passed from man to man: violent forced impregnation, psychological terror, humiliation, bodily mutilation and death are their fate. In 2011, a study from the *American Journal of Public Health* revealed that 48 women were raped every hour in the DRC.

I first started corresponding with Rose in 2013. She wrote saying that she initially helped people living with HIV but that the rape epidemic was so bad in North Kivu, DRC, where she lives, that she went "where the sufferings of the Congolese women" are. She had a great project: "I will bring together 30 women from the Great Lakes region in the city of Kigali to speak out and to put in place a network of women journalists for Peace, Democracy and Justice," she said in an email. Then I don't hear from her and the chilling silence is broken when an email appears after three months:

"I'm OK. Yes I didn't write you because during 3 months we didn't have any internet connection. M23, a rebellion in North Kivu cut our internet connection. We accessed yesterday.

I shall write to you very soon
Rose"

And again, I don't hear from her and, each time, I feel so close and so far away from this woman I have yet to meet. To me, Rose is a shining example of what the world needs most. Someone who witnesses an epidemic of arbitrary and strategic rapes and reacts by upholding what she feels are the most important values: peace, democracy and justice (as well as journalism). Not revenge, not a word of anger or hatred against men as perpetrators in her correspondence. Only compassion, a commanding driving force that comes through in the urgent tone of her writing and that iron determination. I say, top that. I say, may our world leaders be inspired.

From forced illiteracy or rape as a weapon of war to the silent killer: domestic violence. If the list is endless, the means is always the same: violence

It makes sense that people like Rose, who can think their way through a complex web of politics, culture, traditions, family honour and the likes, would be the most qualified to build a tangible path towards peace. And, like most women and girls I have met, I don't believe Rose wants to be at odds with the men in her life. She wants to find a solution but her answers embrace everyone while bringing those who deserve it to justice. I am lucky to have met many women of that calibre, and each of them has helped forge my belief that the rise of such people is the most reliable source of hope today.

In search of hope

It was hope I was looking for when I started with my special interest in 'women's issues' in 2007. I quickly found out: women's issues are really a single men's issue, an inability to let go of power. After the 9/11 attacks, hope seemed to be the most needed ingredient to survive the tragedy. I learned that more than a hundred babies had been born from fathers who had died in the towers. So I decided to go in search of a tangible hope for these babies and their mothers. Not a hypothetical one, not merely a spiritual one either. My instincts made me turn towards the half of the world we don't hear much about or from – women and girls.

During the following years, I met women and girls from the world over and learned about what they are subjected to as females. As the 2014 'State of the World's Girls' report says: "Within the first seven years of life, girls are already indoctrinated into the idea of being subject to men. This starts in the household and is reinforced in the community."[1]

From honour killings to sex trafficking, breast ironing, female genital mutilation, acid attacks to early marriages. From forced illiteracy or rape as a weapon of war to the silent killer: domestic violence. If the list is endless, the means is always the same: violence. The narrative seems to involve an obsession about policing the woman's body. Whatever the justification, the will to dominate is the common thread.

I went to 18 countries to profile many different women and today, since I started working as Managing Editor of the Chime for Change's storytelling platform, I have been lucky to provide a place for their stories. Mostly first-person accounts that, I hope, create a patchwork of voices from women and girls singing a different song. People

ESPEN RASMUSSEN/PANOS PICTURES

Wounded refugee in hospital, Democratic Republic of Congo.

who have been through a lot and have become beacons of wisdom. Feeble flickers sparkling everywhere, hoping that lighting the way for themselves will allow them to illuminate others. I have now read, seen and heard hundreds of stories of women and girls and I have never failed to find a will to seek change, at often high personal costs, for the sake of others. The feel, the context, the climate may be different for each person, but the will to work together and help one another are like blood, of the same colour.

Telling the stories

Bonding through our stories is crucial because it can create a global dialogue in which each voice matters, as opposed to the cacophony of opinions we tend to replace them with. Connecting the dots between your life and that of others is what women and girls do well.

There is an example that always stayed with me because it allowed me to understand people I had lived with as a child. Amina was made to leave Morocco for Paris, to jump sidewalks, so to speak. Just like those silent ladies who populated my childhood and whose life always felt as if something had been cut short in them. Amina lives in the suburbs of Paris. As a child, she had loved Victor Hugo, a lone anthology in Arabic on her parents' bookshelves. I knew exactly what she meant, as he has been my favourite author since I was 12. I refer to him as VH. I understood why she had fallen for this beautifully crafted account of the human condition. I understood the call for everything noble his writings induced. At about that same age, 12, Amina was married to a man emigrating to France as a way of securing income for his relatives. She was told that school was over and once in France she started working as a cleaning lady. Years passed, she divorced; she cleaned and raised her two daughters alone. But every night, she would come home and write phonetic poems to the moon you could catch a glimpse of through the tiny windows of her modest flat.

After many years of cleaning, she had an accident at work and met an Arabic-speaking psychologist who helped her transcribe the poems in French. Amina went to a publishers' fair. The book, *A Prayer to the Moon*, was greatly acclaimed and offers of translations came in. She had become the voice of thousands of women all over Europe, who, like her, felt 'transparent', a commodity, a household good, not a human. They stepped out of the shadows of their servitude and claimed respect and recognition.

Amina gained her freedom. She told me she hadn't had a choice in more years than she could remember, ever since she was married off to someone going to France. And her youngest daughter told me how pride ran through her veins when at the beginning of school, under mother's profession she switched from 'Cleaning Lady' to 'Writer'. I wish I could tell VH that story.

Now is the right time to help women and girls share their side of the story. Now is the first time in history, after countless wars and cycles of civilisation, that this 'human capital' is potentially blooming. In early March this year, I went to Iraq to deliver a storytelling workshop for young refugees who fled ISIS in Kurdistan. At first shocked and silent, in the days that followed the girls began to speak. One participant, a beautiful young woman named Sham, chose to talk about her great aunt. "People say that she was as brave as a man because they couldn't fathom women's strength. In fact, it should be as brave as a woman," she said to me, laughing. She showed me the photograph of a strong older woman, dressed in a traditional Yazidi outfit standing among men in the dry mountains, with a Kalashnikov strapped to her shoulder and a cigarette burning her fingers.

It is Nujood in Yemen who, at 10 years old, obtains a divorce – breaking the timeless tribal tradition. It is Malala, it is Mayerli in Colombia who, at 15, after seeing her best friend shot in front of her, created a children's think tank to stop violence

Standing up and speaking out

The changes that are under way are indeed unprecedented as women and girls claim their rights to their lives, their bodies and their story. It is Mercy in Malawi who decides to do her coming-out publicly by going to the national newspaper and giving them a front page story: "I am a Lesbian" spread across Page One of the *Malawi News* the next day.

Mercy was exorcised, thrown out of her house and shamed by all. Yet she withstood the storm, because of her profound belief in her right to choose her sexuality. And no one had ever done this before in this deeply homophobic country. It is Nujood in Yemen who, at 10 years old, obtains a divorce – breaking the timeless tribal tradition. It is Malala, it is Mayerli in Colombia who, at 15, after seeing her best friend shot in front of her, created a children's think tank to stop violence.

Fear of the drug cartels, the level of corruption, the rampant impunity, drugs and alcohol made for resignation and the trivialisation of brutality. So the children gathered in a sand pit and came to the understanding that violence started at home. They decided to work on their parents and the community, promoting dialogue and mutual understanding. They became the first group of children to be nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. These unsung heroes light the way for millions of others, armed with an unconditional belief in the right of humans to live as such. In the case of Mayerli, they were youngsters who strove to bend their stories in a radically new direction, their crystalline voices breaking the eerie silence of hundreds of thousands muted by violence.

Until now, women have left very little mark on Big History, considering they are half of humanity. They were half of the Second World War and half of every struggle and conflict that has scarred our world since then. They were the other halves; trapped in the 'private sphere', carefully kept away from public life and power.

To the world they were victims who screamed and cried, but you don't get to hear what they really had to say. Yet we know that female potential is the most untapped the world has ever had because we keep studying it.

Women at so-called grassroot levels, but really most ordinary women, have proven they perform economically and

PLAN INTERNATIONAL/ERIK THALLAUG

Malala Yousafzai addresses audiences at the Nobel Peace Prize celebration.

reinvest in their communities. Often in quiet determination through everyday acts, we can see women and girls have developed the courage to give education the place it deserves for the survival of our troubled world. When I went to Liberia and talked to women there at the market, they told me they didn't vote for President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf because she was a woman, but because she believed in education.

"Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power," said President Lincoln. We could give all women a try too.

Power, it seems, is the ultimate lure; few can resist it, or renounce it, or share it. From my experience, it seems like greatness ceases where the ego starts; couple that with greed and you get instant corruption and violation of basic human rights. I don't believe women are immune to these traps of greed and egoism, but I do believe they are better equipped to deal with them. Probably because they have suffered and witnessed what power can do to people, because they understand that power is a dangerous and delicate instrument that requires outstanding moral courage, such as Rose displayed in her short but intense messages. Clearly, violence is not inflicted by men and boys only. Women and girls who have suffered abuse tend to inflict it. But more women will fight to the end for their child to have a different life. Power seeks to control what it fears most. And if we consider how many women are being physically and emotionally hurt solely on the ground of their gender, there is a great deal of fear. Again, it is only through connections with my own life that I was able to fathom what the numbers meant.

A girl's life

I did my pregnancy test in the Karachi airport toilets. It was 12 September 2001, one day after the attacks on the twin towers in NYC, and as journalists my husband and I were sent straight to neighbouring Pakistan from India where we were based. We were scared and deeply happy. To me, giving life is the most generous thing I have ever done; the idea of giving life to someone to fulfil my own needs doesn't make sense. I also didn't have strong feelings about gender and the idea that my child was being born for economic reasons was not among the complex web of emotions that come with giving birth.

I learned that welcoming a little girl in the world was a luxury when, a few weeks later, my husband and I went for a routine sonogram at a Mumbai clinic. As we opened the door, both pretty convinced we had a girl, we were greeted by rows of posters advertising gender selection. In the waiting room I chatted with women who admitted their desire to abort. My anger and judgmental reaction faded as I listened to these mothers, their thin faces reflecting powerlessness and resignation. The new life they were carrying was also their loss. Two of them said they would have kept the baby but societal pressure and family disdain got the better of them. Also, they didn't wish a girl's life upon their children. They said this so shyly, a smile to cover their pain and a hand to cover their smile. And if you looked even more closely, you could see the little girls in them. Little girls with very little childhood as they all had been married early and for the purpose of carrying sons.

I went home and there was Dalia. She was five and literally lived on the sidewalk outside my building. Every day she waited all day for me to come home. For the first few weeks, she would just grin at me, hiding behind her father. She was little enough that she was allowed to approach me and I would carry her and give her kisses. But that was the extent of what I could do. My building was a Jain residence. When we moved in, we were told that no meat could enter the facilities. If insects were found we were asked to kindly give them back to nature, including roaches. Our neighbours would walk barefoot so as to not step on an ant and didn't eat vegetables that have roots like carrots. This intense respect for life contrasted violently with stepping out of our building and seeing little Dalia, exhausted and dirty, sleeping on her bedding of concrete, and dirt, rats, crows and crowds, her thumb loosely hanging from her mouth. During that year, the news came four times of an oven that had exploded, burning to death a wife. Everyone shrugged; "dowry killing," they said – as if there were nothing more to add.

This was an ordinary year, telling the stories of what it means to be a woman or a girl in many parts of the world.

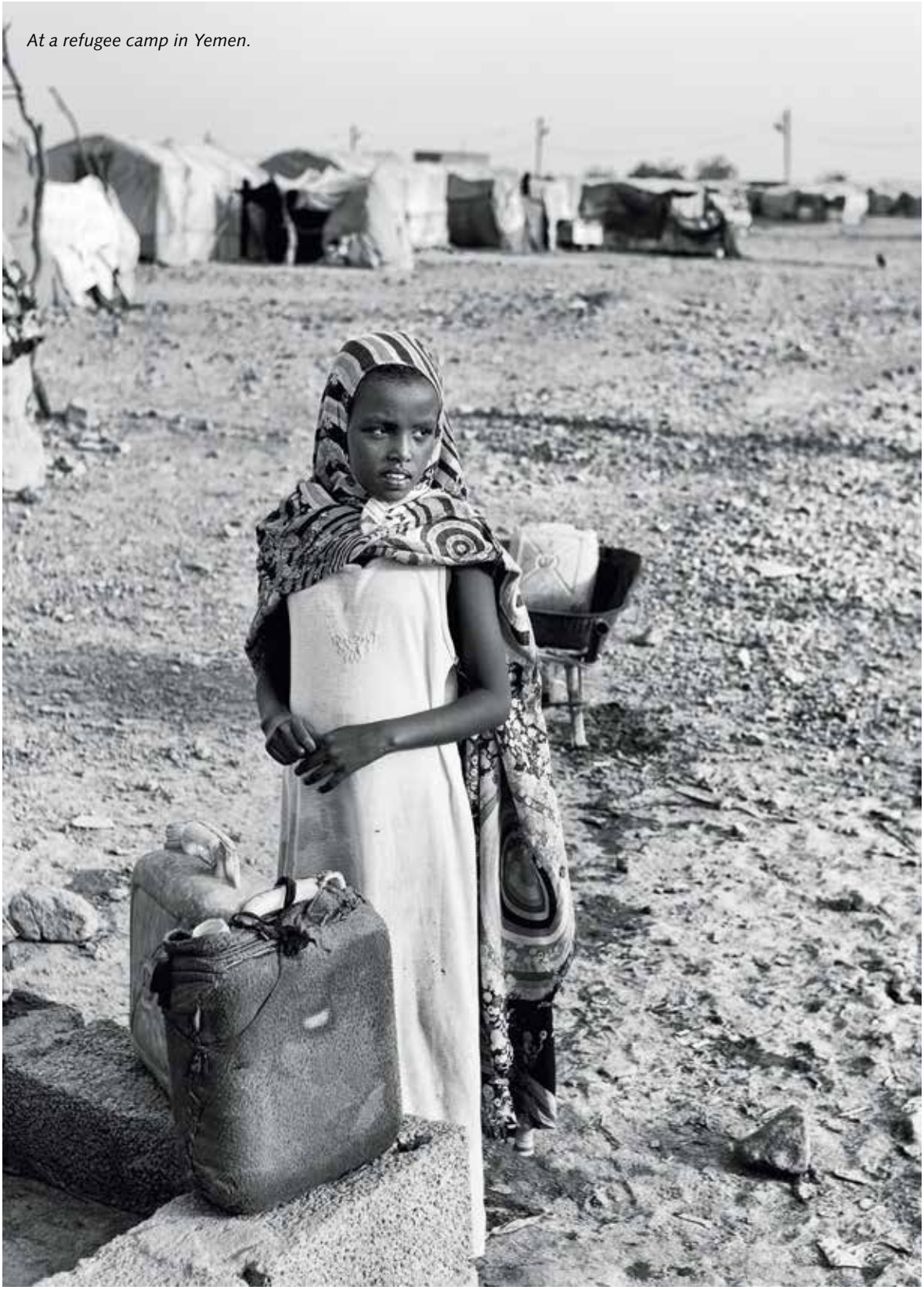
As slavery was once abolished, women can no longer be treated as second-class citizens, burdened by violence and manipulated by shame

Breaking the chains

But today, for the first time, we start having a glimpse into these unknown powerful women in the trenches – in Guatemala, the US or the DRC – who by their actions restore everyone's dignity. They care for all; revenge isn't a strong enough motive but the lives of their children are. I have met women and girls who feel that for the first time, life could change and an unstoppable wave of people will declare: "life cannot go on like this." As slavery was once abolished, women can no longer be treated as second-class citizens, burdened by violence and manipulated by shame. On 18 March this year, I attended the Freedom of Expression award in London. One of the winners, Amran Bundi, is the founder of Frontier Indigenous Network, an NGO to help women at the dicey Somalia-Kenya border.

In her acceptance speech, she dedicated the award to women there, to the victims of terrorism and thugs and sexual violence. She closed by mentioning those who have vilified her, those who have tried to stop her, have abused her and tried to shame her into giving up. "This award also goes to them," she said, radiant under her blue headscarf.

Today, if the world would only agree, we have the opportunity for this spirit to expand, to see girls and women break their chains link by link; to create a vast network of people believing in peace and equality, knowing full well what it really takes. And what we could achieve.



At a refugee camp in Yemen.

SAMUEL ARANDA/PANOS PICTURES

‘The greatest cause of our time’[1]

by **Liya Kebede**

Liya Kebede is a supermodel and designer. She is the founder of the Liya Kebede Foundation for mothers, supporting global maternal health advocacy, education and services, and served as the WHO Ambassador for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health from 2005-2011.

More than seven million under 18-year-olds in developing countries give birth each year; 70,000 will die in childbirth.[2] Complications related to pregnancy and childbirth are a leading cause of death among 15 to 19-year-old girls.[3] More often than not these girls have little choice. Their childhoods are cut short by extreme poverty, social and cultural pressures and, many times, by violence. With little education and authority, their access to care during pregnancy is limited and they are at high risk of experiencing dangerous complications while giving birth. Their risk of death is double that of an older mother.

While growing up in Ethiopia, I encountered many girls who lacked support structures and access to even the most basic maternity care. Their stories, full of courage in the face of enormous challenges, fuelled my determination to get involved.

Every day in countries all over the world, young mothers like those pictured below rise to face a day full of extraordinary demands with incredible resilience and hope that the future holds better. It is the greatest cause of our time to see that it does.

5am in Cameroon

Fatou and her two-year-old daughter emerge from the tent they share with five other families at a hospital compound turned refugee centre. She is seeking out breakfast that will sustain her for the long day ahead. When conflict engulfed her village in the Central African Republic, the 15-year-old mother fled, trekking on foot over 600 kilometres under the constant threat of violence. She does not know where the rest of her family are. The camp health clinic offers maternal and child health services that are crucial for displaced girls like her.

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PLAN INTERNATIONAL/BERNICE WONG

9.30am in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, one in three girls is married before her 15th birthday. Nazma got pregnant not long after her wedding. Throughout her pregnancy she was undernourished and tired. During delivery, she lost consciousness and woke to the surprising news that she had given birth to twins. Her girls are especially hungry this morning and she worries that she is not producing enough milk to satisfy them both.

PLAN INTERNATIONAL/MIGUEL ALVAREZ

12.30pm in Nicaragua

Maria Luisa is next in line for a prenatal check-up at the clinic nearest to her neighbourhood. Waiting is part of life in the urban slum where she lives with her extended family. She arrived early and settled in alongside several other girls. Nicaragua has the highest teenage pregnancy rate in Latin America and the Caribbean. Adolescent girls like 15-year-old Maria Luisa account for a quarter of all births. When she found out she was pregnant, her boyfriend left her. Single motherhood scares her. The youngest of five, she will rely on her family to help but worries about how they will all manage the growing household.

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3.10pm in Sierra Leone

Aminata, home from school, scoops up her young son outside her grandmother's house. She is serious about her studies and eager to return tomorrow. She wants to become a lawyer. At 14 she was the top student in her class when she was assaulted by a boy she knew and became pregnant. Her father did not believe her and threw her out. Her mother helped her make her way to her grandmother's village where she gave birth with the help of a midwife from the community. "I was scared… but I am always with my grandma now and she tells me what is right and what isn't."

6.05pm in Tanzania

PLAN INTERNATIONAL/ERIK THALLAUG

Khadija, 15, has packed up her goods at the market and takes a break to play with her daughter. Her daughter's laughter lights up the evening. Khadija's family sold her into marriage to an abusive man twice her age. She nearly died giving birth – after 11 hours of labour she was taken to a hospital where an emergency C-section saved her life. "The doctor who was there was kind and helped me. He told me that I could do this." When Khadija's husband abandoned her soon after she remembered the doctor's words. She found a way to make a living in the market and joined a women's saving group. She is determined to do what she can to ensure her daughter gets an education and is never forced to marry against her will.

8pm in Vietnam

Quy and her husband were married at a young age, like many other teenage couples in rural Vietnam. Her husband was killed in an accident when their son was just three months old and she returned to live with her parents. It is time for bed for her son, Chi. She adores this time of night with him. During the day she works in the fields planting corn and picking vegetables and it falls to her young sister Thien to watch after him. She feels lucky to be surrounded by such loving parents and siblings. She wonders what life will be like for her son growing up without a father, though. "I won't get married again. I will spend my life for my son."

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FACT FILE CONFLICT & DISASTERS:
GIRLS AND YOUNG WOMEN IN CRISIS SITUATIONS

BACKGROUND

Adolescent girls are largely invisible in the response to emergencies despite the fact that both their age and their sex will increase their vulnerability. Disasters do not affect everyone equally, and neither does war. In times of upheaval, girls are increasingly subject to rape, trafficking and early marriage.

2.9 BILLION people were affected

1.2 MILLION people were killed

by disasters between 2000-2012[1]

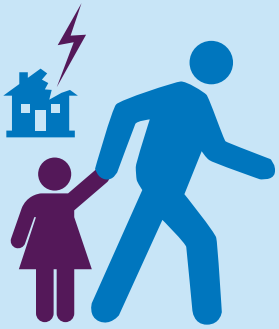
Nearly a **BILLION** children live in countries that experienced conflict in 2013 or 2014[2]

International Guidelines for tackling Gender-based Violence in Humanitarian Settings have been in place since 2005[7]

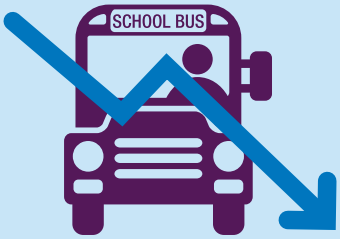
In 2014 the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict agreed on practical steps to tackle impunity and change attitudes towards the use of rape as a weapon of war[8]

In 2012 the UN Office of Internal Oversight received 60 allegations of sexual abuse or exploitation by peacekeepers across 10 field missions[9]

EDUCATION



In many countries girls are pulled out of school during disasters, and are unlikely to return



Enrolment rates in secondary school are nearly 30% lower in conflict-affected countries than in other developing countries, and are far lower for girls.[14] 11 million lower secondary-aged girls are out of school in conflict-affected countries[15]

GIRLS make up

55%

of the

28.5 MILLION

primary-age children out of school in conflict-affected countries[16]

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In 2009 the IASC gender marker was created to evaluate how well humanitarian projects address gender issues.[3] In 2014 the proportion of humanitarian assistance allocated to projects focusing 'principally' or 'significantly' on gender equality was only 12%[4]

In 2000 the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1325 which reaffirmed the importance of involving women at all levels of peacekeeping and security.

But between 1992 and 2011 women made up just 9% of peace negotiators[5]

GBV

Since 1995, international courts and tribunals have recognised rape and other forms of sexual violence as war crimes, crimes against humanity or acts of torture.

Out of 20 current cases before the International Criminal Court, 14 include charges of sexual or gender-based violence[6]

A 2011 survey of sexual violence against women in the DRC found that estimates of rape among women aged 15-49 meant approximately

1150
women raped every day

48
women raped every hour

4
women raped every 5 minutes[10]

In 2012 there was a 10% decrease in Afghan civilian casualties

yet female casualties increased by 20%[11]

Research from 2013 shows an alarming increase in child marriage amongst Syrian refugee communities in Jordan three years into the crisis, and in some cases it has doubled[12]

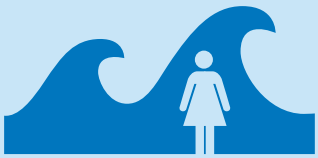
"It's hard, others have nothing to eat, and they embrace being involved in bad acts just to have something to eat, you don't know what to do or who to talk to when that happens."

Anna, 13, Philippines, after Typhoon Ondoy in 2009[13]

"There are very horrible things that happened and that I had to do… like take the life away of one or another person. Now that the war is over it is like a little box, a little box full of explosives. All together [the explosives] form a team. But if one explodes, they all explode… So I try not to tap the box…"

Colombian girl soldier, 2011[17]

SURVIVAL



During the Asian tsunami in 2004, up to

45,000
MORE WOMEN
than men died[18]

After the earthquake in 2010, pregnancy rates in Haitian camps were three times higher than the average urban rate previously. Two-thirds of these pregnancies were unplanned and unwanted[19]

TRACING THE PAST AND BUILDING THE FUTURE

ANITA HAIDARY

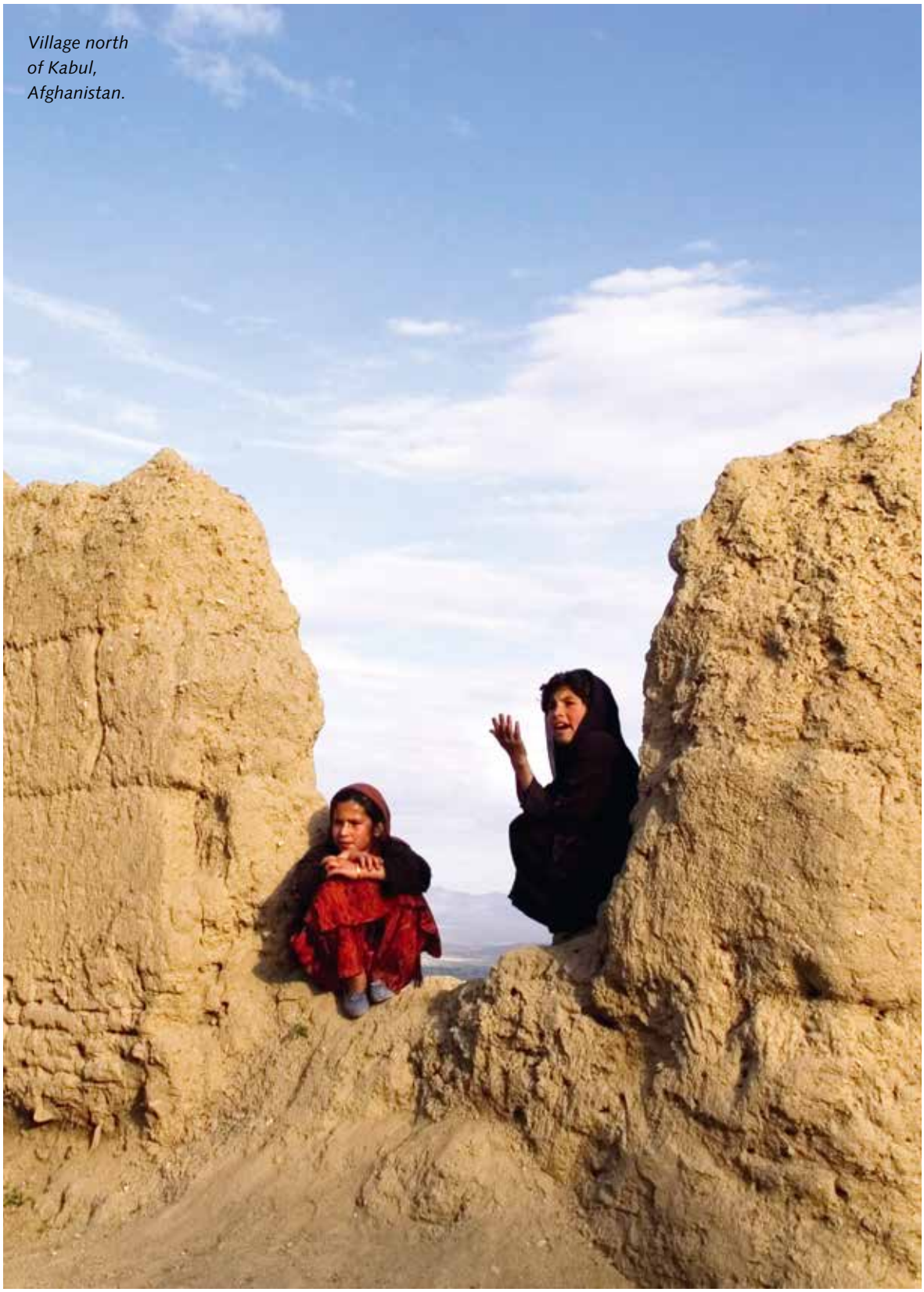
by **Anita Haidary**

Anita Haidary is an Afghan women's rights activist and co-founder of Young Women for Change, a non-governmental organisation aiming to empower and improve the lives of women in Afghanistan. She graduated from Mount Holyoke College in the USA in 2014, majoring in Film Studies and International Relations, while continuing to advocate for Afghan women's rights.

Looking back it is clear to me that I have been an activist since my school days. When I was in eighth grade, despite the instability and insecurity of the country, I lived in a safe cocoon of fairness, confidence and equality that was passed down to me by my parents and grandparents. What I learned from them, however, was in conflict with what I was being told at school, which was that women were vulnerable, weak, and could never be equal to men. This did not describe what I saw at home so I started protesting at school and this rebellion led to detentions and low scores in exams. To me, it was only logical and natural to speak my mind and challenge what I was being told. Everything they said was in direct contradiction to my own beliefs in equality and human rights for all. Life can become unbearable when society limits your freedom of movement and expression and women in Afghanistan, and in many other places, have had to struggle for independence and equality.

At school I was told repeatedly that women are weak; that they are "like a piece of white cloth vulnerable to the slightest stain which will ruin its worth and purity". This statement made no sense to me. I simply couldn't comprehend how the worth of a human being could be so fragile. This 'stain' could be caused by anything from a girl's laughter, to the surma (eyeliner) in her eyes, to the way she wore her scarf. Why should such small things about the way you look, dress or move affect everything about who you are? A woman is seen first as a woman, not as a human being; she is judged always in terms of the expectations and limitations placed on women by society. If you choose not to conform you will fall from grace in society's eyes, and are seen as unmarriageable. In simple words, for me this was a personal battle, though I found out later that it is political, too. Many girls in my class believed that what our teachers taught us was how the world was and would always be.

When I went to high school, I remember girls always walking in groups, and reading in a school magazine that girls walk in groups to avoid harassment. I was very young so I did not have to worry about it too much but as I grew older I understood how dependent and limited life is for women. You leave home to go grocery shopping, you get harassed. A friend of mine says if she could just walk one day without being harassed her dream would come true. I long for the time when I can sit in a park and read a book. These things might sound so simple but life is about simple things. It is the small things that make women feel weak; if you want



Village north of Kabul, Afghanistan.

LANA SLEZIC/PANOS PICTURES

CHRISTIAN ALS/PANOS PICTURES

By the Kabul River, Afghanistan.

an ice cream you have to wait for your father to come so he can take you out. Of course, you can go alone but you would rather not go because sounds and catcalls will echo in your ears for hours. It can get serious when girls and young women are not allowed to go to school any more because they are followed by strange men. And it is always our fault.

My friends and I meet more often now because I work and can hire a taxi. This was not true five years ago. If I wanted to see friends I had to wait for my father to give me a ride. It is not that women can't walk, but they have to get used to being touched, called names and stared at. It is not easy; the constant and never-ending battle tires you out and finally you choose not to go out at all. But for me giving up is not an option.

My beliefs came from my parents. In defiance of 'set traditions' my father decided to send me and my sisters to the United States of America to study. He never put restrictions on the kind of people we wanted to be; the only thing I heard from my father was: "Do what you think is logical and avoid what logic does not accept." My parents inspire me. They have had to work hard to provide for us and to show people that despite the fact that the daughters in our family were being educated the family was still moral and decent. Educating girls is not so unusual now and other families follow in my parents' footsteps.

Building the future

Today I have high hopes for Afghanistan's bright future because I know people are tired of war and of the day-to-day struggle to survive which has dominated all our lives. People are exhausted, they just hang on and this emptiness and lack of energy has been the norm in Afghanistan for decades. Now, young people are looking for more than that. They are looking for connection; they are seeking normal life and progress. Afghanistan is not the country the world has known for the last 40 years; people are better educated and they have access to up-to-date information.

They are less likely to be led and I am optimistic for the future because young people, both girls and boys, are taking more control over their own fate.

I hope and dream of a day, and I know it will come true, where all women and girls are respected and treated as humans not because they are mothers, sisters and wives but because they are human. It's their birthright to be respected as human beings. This is what Young Women for Change stands for: respect for girls' and women's capacity, ability, knowledge and decision-making power. I know this dream is not unique and all women in my country are fighting hard to achieve it. Moreover, I know of men who are equally fighting tirelessly to help people understand the importance of women's involvement in society. Women need all the support they can get and for all of us to unite and make public space more women-friendly so that women and girls are able to contribute in a meaningful way. If society is respectful of and better for women, it is surely a respectful and better place for all humanity.

United we stand

Despite some grim statistics about domestic and other kinds of violence, life is getting better for women and girls in my country. In the past, women did not have the courage or the knowledge to understand that violence was out of the normal order and report it. Now women do report it, and therefore we see higher statistics. Women now understand the importance of their role in economic development. They are part of businesses, they have joined the work force and they generate income both outside and inside their homes. In the past, people have told me that this is only women in Kabul but I disagree because when I have travelled to Herat, Mazar and Jalalabad I have met women who are more courageous than in Kabul and make things possible out of almost zero resources, out of nothing. They teach each other. For example, if a neighbour's daughter is in eighth grade, she teaches the girls in sixth and seventh grade. I met a young woman in Herat who was a journalist. She reported live on terrorist attacks from two different provinces but no one knew of her in Kabul, or internationally, because she could not speak English. I met a woman in Jalalabad who helped women poets to collect their poetry and print it. I met a woman who thought "charitable donations are a short-term solution; women have to take matters in their own hands if they want to progress". She started a business with 2,000 Afghanis ($40) and within three years she was able to employ four more women. Everywhere women are making the effort to move forward, and every woman in Afghanistan understands that it will take time but only hard work will bring improvements. Women's issues are not simply a family matter that shouldn't leave the door of the house, but a national matter that both men and women must work on.

I hope and dream of a day, and I know it will come true, where all women and girls are respected and treated as humans not because they are mothers, sisters and wives but because they are human

Campaigning for change

Young Women for Change (YWC) is part of that national effort and was founded in April 2011 to work towards a better future. The idea was to found a social movement, and for that reason we announced on Facebook a meeting to be held in Kabul. We expected to see 20 young women but more than 70 turned up. The idea behind the meeting was to hear from young women and girls about the problems they were facing and how this was affecting them. We quickly learned that women living in cities, where they are most publicly active, deal with street harassment daily. Our first project was to tackle this issue, which was hardly acknowledged and rarely talked about. We organised the first walk against street harassment in the

history of Afghanistan, and in order to get permission to walk we had to register the existence of YWC. So our movement became a publicly recognised one and the first of its kind in Afghanistan. The walk was followed by different lectures and discussion sessions to raise awareness about street harassment. This led to the production of a documentary, *This is My City Too*, which featured women, men and scholars discussing the issue of street harassment and how it can be solved. The documentary was produced to create a debate among both men and women in cities, schools and universities.

The activities continued with a poster campaign against harassment both online and on the streets of Kabul and two demonstrations against honour killings. And then YWC built the first all-women internet café to help women connect to the world. YWC held 'sister sessions'; the first part consisted of a workshop and training for women to learn more about technology and social media and the second was an opportunity for more intimate and safe conversations about what women were dealing with every day, their challenges and solutions. This was to help women build a support network around them. More film screenings took place in schools to stimulate discussion among young people about activism, their role in society and what it means to be male or female in Afghanistan.

We also put on a Fashion Show in a well-known local restaurant called Sufi. One of the reasons for this was that we knew that women and girls were being harassed in tailors' shops. You have to have your clothes made and fitted so this has become an unavoidable experience for many of us. The most important part of the fashion project was to train professional women designers and tailors so women can go to them and avoid being harassed and molested. However, there was a backlash against this and our members were threatened. One woman, who was directly involved as a tailor, was forced to flee the country because a journalist irresponsibly featured a story that accused YWC of wanting to convert young people to Christianity. During our poster campaign we used the sign of women (♀) in one of the posters and he rotated the sign and explained that it represented a cross. It was unbelievable and hard to fight. How could someone who claimed to be a journalist not understand that this was the universal sign for women? Our colleague was pressured by her family and society and Kabul became a very unsafe place for her.

Being a volunteer organisation was great. It created a good spirit amongst the group because everyone was motivated not by money but by passion. But it isn't easy to be an activist in Afghanistan. I had to spend 70 per cent of my earnings doing volunteer work and most of our members did not work. It was hard to keep it all going. Women lack economic independence and are highly dependent on the male members of their families. Girls and women out on the streets campaigning went way beyond what society accepts as appropriate. They were out demanding their rights, but at home they had to live at the mercy of the money provided by their families – even for their bus fares. Young women were pressured to quit. They were in the uncomfortable position of choosing between their passion and their family. Most members had to leave because they couldn't afford it any more. We realised then that the organisation had to be supported financially in one way or another. Without funding only the elite – the well-off, who could afford fares and food – would be able to take part.

In a country as poor and vulnerable as Afghanistan you need everyone in the family to work in order to survive, not to live with a culture of isolation, limitation and violence

A common struggle

We realised very quickly that Young Women for Change had to include men and boys. They needed to be part of the movement because in Afghanistan

HOSSEIN FATEMI/PANOS PICTURES

Kabul, Afghanistan.

historical progress for women has always had to be permitted by men. It was male-run institutions that allowed women to vote and be part of the system. Fathers allowed their daughters to take up their right to education, to healthcare and to higher education. We had a policy that every male must come with a female family member and every female had to bring a male. It served two purposes: first, women felt safe with their male relations and the fact that male members of the family supported their cause; second, it helped the men to understand that we are all engaged in a joint fight, a common struggle, and that women's issues are not just women's issues any more. There is even more to it than the fact that women are entitled to their rights. Women who are educated help their families financially, so in terms of economics it helps women and men for women to be equal participants in society. In a country as poor and vulnerable as Afghanistan you need everyone in the family to work in order to survive, not to live with a culture of isolation, limitation and violence which has left women at the mercy of men and the country still below the poverty line.

The light at the end of the tunnel

Afghanistan has been at war for a long time; many people have lost all hope. When we talk of hope, it's only a small number of people that believe in a better future, mostly the young. It is important for young women's movements to have a place and be visible in Afghan society, so that their rights are acknowledged and their abilities recognised. Women and girls should be given the respect they deserve in public and in their homes.

It is vital that people find hope now, or it will not take long for things to be destroyed. We must all have the chance to try to improve the future with our hard work. There is a need for everyone to work and active women are the spark and light at the end of the tunnel that can help Afghanistan as a country to grow stronger and more stable.

FACT FILE GIRLS IN CITIES: LOOKING FOR A BETTER LIFE

BACKGROUND

In 2008, for the first time in history, more than half of the world's population – 3.3 billion people – lived in urban areas.[1]

of the global population are internal migrants.[2] More adolescent girls than boys are migrating into cities[3]

Girls may leave their homes in search of a better life; to find a job, access healthcare, get an education or to escape early marriage, violence and sexual abuse[4]

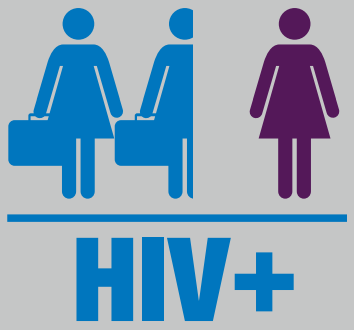
"I was requested for marriage and since my parents didn't want me to get married, they sent me here… so that I could go to school in the city."

Girl migrant to Addis Ababa, 15[5]

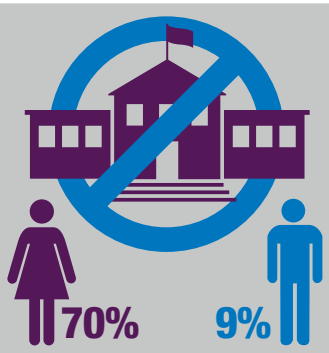
A BETTER LIFE?

A large study of the sex trade in Ethiopian cities found that

of sexually exploited 15 to 19 year-olds were girl migrants from rural areas or small towns[10]



In some South African cities, female migrants are 1.6 times more likely to be HIV-positive than non-migrants[11]



One study in Accra found that 70% of street girls have never attended school compared to only 9% of street boys[12]

ON THE PLUS SIDE

In Cairo, 32% of girls felt that they could never talk to anyone about their safety concerns[17]

A 2012 poll found that

of young women in London had experienced street harassment during the past year alone[18,19]

A girl is much more likely to go to school if she lives in a city – school attendance for adolescent girls is 37% higher in cities than in rural areas[20]

Because I am a Girl | PLAN INTERNATIONAL

REASONS WHY?

30% of boys in Pakistan migrated because of work compared to just over 15% of girls[6]

40% of 15 to 19 year-old girls in Pakistan migrated because of marriage, compared to under 5% of boys[7]

1 in 4 girls living in urban areas in Malawi are recent migrants[8]

"The government don't do anything for girls on the street, they don't even think about them. They should take them by the hand and say 'I am going to support you, I am going to help you, you are not alone', but no – they look at them as they would any other rubbish."

Jessica, 17, street girl from Nicaragua[9]

"You have no one to take care of you. Nobody in the society respects you or wants to see you… People don't care whether you die, whether you live."

Girl living on the streets, Kenya[13]

Plan International's Urban Programme found that: In Delhi 96% of adolescent girls do not feel safe in the city[14]

In Lima, only 2.2% of girls reported always feeling safe when walking in public spaces[15]

In Kampala, 45% of girls reported sexual harassment when using public transport[16]

A survey in Bangladesh found that 84% of urban girls and women said they had 'ever used' contraception as opposed to 57% of rural girls and women[21]

The Spring Rain Campaign in China aims to reduce the vulnerability of girls and young women migrating from rural to urban areas by providing information to girl migrants in railway stations.

As a result,

60,000 girls visited safe recruitment agencies and one-third found employment[22]

In many parts of the world the remittances girls send home and their increased independence can mean that they are valued more and perceptions of them are changing[23]

'For me a 'better life' means having goods you would never get when staying in your village… My living conditions are tough, but at least I earn 500cfa a day, a sum that I would never get within three months, if I stayed at home [in the village]."

Young girl in Mali[24]

MEN HOLD THE POWER

by **President Jimmy Carter**

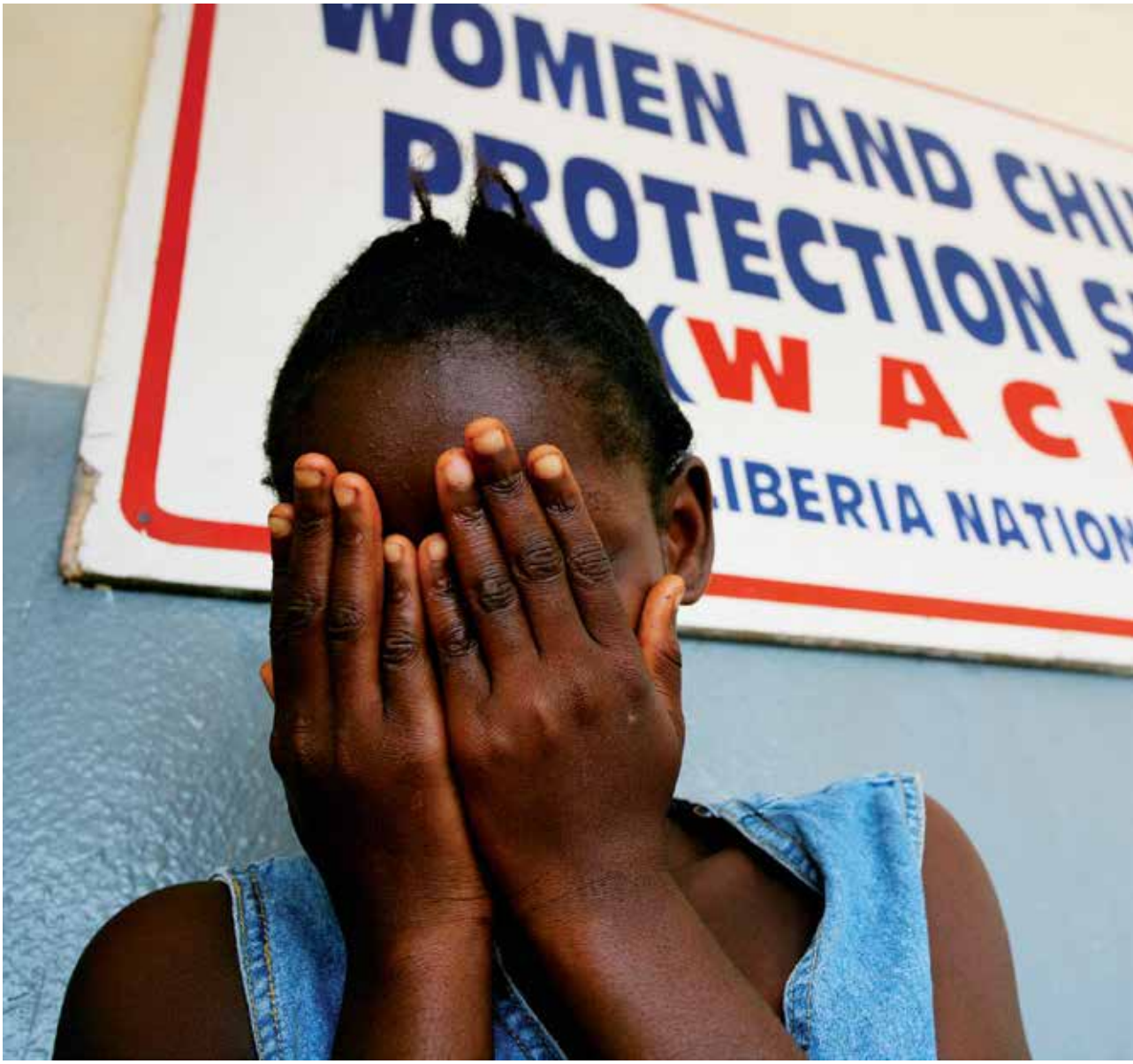
THIERRY BOCCON-GIBOD/THE ELDERS

Jimmy Carter was the 39th President of the United States of America (1977–1981). His achievements include brokering the Camp David peace accords between Egypt and Israel, and establishing US diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. In 1982, he founded The Carter Center, which works to advance peace and health worldwide. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002. In 2014, President Carter published his latest book, *A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence and Power.*

In the nearly 20 years since the Beijing World Conference on Women, there have been both advances and setbacks for women and girls.[1] Many of the 30,000 activists who gathered there have continued the struggle for equal human rights, making important progress. More women are rising up and making their voices heard in every sphere of life. Yet age-old patriarchal structures and attitudes make sustained progress difficult. It is time that men and boys recognise the part they must play in gender equality and join with the voices and actions of the women and girls who are trying to re-shape society in the interests of us all.

In a police cell in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

AUBREY WADE/PANOS PICTURES



GIACOMO PIROZZI/PANOS PICTURES

Men hold the power in many of the institutions that govern us, and these institutions need to change the attitudes that sustain them in their current form.

Most societies were shaped by religious doctrine mandated by male authorities, so attitudes and systems that promote male dominance have become the norm. Such doctrine came from religious leaders who distorted religious scriptures by selecting texts that depict women as inherently inferior or subservient to men.[2] Alongside such patriarchal systems, violence in society has also become normalised.[3] My nation, the USA, and other countries accept violence as a way to solve problems – from the use of the death penalty and mass incarceration in addressing crime, to pre-emptive and unjust warfare abroad.

Many societal structures are built around the expectation of violence, and this is illustrated by the existence of brutality in the family. Violence against women and girls happens far too often, from intimate partner violence to honour killings. The numbers are horrifying: globally, one in three women will be assaulted in her lifetime; homicide of a woman as a result of domestic abuse is six times

more likely when a firearm is in the home, illustrating the deadly consequences of permissive gun laws; and one in five women in the USA is sexually assaulted during her time in higher education.[4,5]

Poverty is also a factor in these societal structures. Women employed full-time in the USA earn around 22 per cent less than men on average, making it much harder for poor women to lift themselves out of poverty.[6] Young girls also suffer under such societal structures. More than 1.5 million girls worldwide are married each year who are younger than 15 years.[7] Unbelievably, about 160 million girls are missing around the world, as a result of selective abortion of female foetuses or female infanticide, because families believe a son will be a better provider than a girl in societies where girls are deprived of education and gainful employment.[8] The abuses I describe here pose an ongoing threat to public health and social progress. Our society has become increasingly desensitised to violence.

The recent Gamergate controversy revealed the severe harassment of women who seek to expose and mitigate extreme violence depicted in popular video games.[9,10] Media critic Anita Sarkeesian has highlighted how vicious treatment of women is used as decoration in these games, giving the impression that women have no reason to exist except to be brutalised.[11] Sarkeesian faced death threats as a result of her work.[12] A 2008 Pew survey found that where the internet is available, 97 per cent of youths aged 12-17 years play video games on a regular basis.[13] It defies credulity that attitudes and tolerance for violence among our young men and women are not influenced by these engrossing experiences.

Men hold the power in many of the institutions that govern us, and these institutions need to change the attitudes that sustain them in their current form

Violence is accepted in these and many other spheres of life. As long as this is true, abuse of women and girls will continue.

Efforts to promote non-violence within our families, culture, communities and between nations must be increased. Our churches, mosques and synagogues can be a source of peace, justice and spiritual nourishment, but entrenched patriarchy often condones violation of women's rights. Patriarchy is not new. It is a system created and maintained by men of faith and politics who hold the levers of economic, cultural and political power and who confuse strength and masculinity with domination and brutality. Patriarchy must be replaced by a system in which equal human rights and non-violence are promoted and accepted. This will happen if we embrace the kind of love and mutual respect exemplified and preached by the founders of the world's great religions, and through the persistent efforts of those who speak out and work for a more equal and less violent world.[14]

Equal human dignity is a human right, as codified in many global treaties. It is my hope that political and religious leaders will step forward and use their influence to communicate clearly that violence against women and girls must stop, that we are failing our societies, and that the time for leadership is now.

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CHAMPIONS OF CHANGE

PLAN INTERNATIONAL

Kevin, 16, Guatemala

“Society tells us we should be sexist, tough, aggressive. But that’s not right. I told myself I had the power to change.

But as you go along this path, there are obstacles, stones that trip you up and you fall. What makes a man a man are the good deeds he does; also, his way of thinking and his courage in facing up to problems.

Hitting a woman or abusing a child does not make you a man. My first memory was when my father turned up in the house I was living in with my mother, and he was tight, he was drunk. When I saw him come in and start to hit her, I ran away. I wish I had been a grown-up. I wish I had been a son who was strong enough to have defended my mother, but I wasn’t, I was just a kid. My mother is the principal role model in my life. She fought for us, she saw us through. She looked for food if we had none. I learned a lot from her. I have learned never to give up. That day I saw my father hitting my mother was a very sad day for me. It left me feeling scared and distrustful, angry and sad, and a bit resentful about all I have gone through. That’s why I am so keen to talk to my father, to face up to my fears. It’s a hard stage you go through. But when you face up to it, you feel more free to be able to start down this road to change.

I wish I had had two parents who were close. But that’s not how it was. I wish I had had a childhood with two parents who loved each other and who gave us the right to be able to be happy. Also, when I was a child, I realised that my mother, well, she also felt scared, and I felt scared as well. And I have always had this desire in my heart.

If I were to turn out the way my father was, a violent man, my life would be a total failure, knowing all the suffering my mother went through with my other brothers.

Change is not something you achieve overnight. It’s a long process. It goes on and on; it never ends, because we never manage to be perfect people. But we can strive after that perfection; we can try to achieve it.”

Kendir, 17, Dominican Republic

"Violence really scares me. Maybe because I had a really violent upbringing. But it does, it terrifies me.

What marked me most in my childhood is a father's love, that's something I've always missed. Now more than ever, because I'm on the verge of taking certain decisions, and I need his support. I'm alone now, in this situation. But I feel I am up to it. You have to take a step forward and leave the past behind.

I've never been a talkative person. I don't like making anybody aware of what I feel, what I hold inside. Neither of my parents told me what they were feeling, they never taught me how. So I think that's why I've always been shy.

My mother had to marry when she was 13. Then she had us: she had my sister when she was 15, she had me when she was 17 and she was 19 when she had the youngest. She has told me that she always had to work when she was growing up. Today you look for today's food, tomorrow you do the same; you follow the same path, you don't think of a better future.

My mother always gave me the support my father never gave me. All the time, the only education he gave me was that the man should be the breadwinner in the house. That's what he did. He worked and worked to bring food into the house. But he couldn't have cared less about his children's need for a father's love.

I think my father hit me because he knew no other way to resolve things: that's what they taught him. He wanted to instill in me the same roughness that he had, but I was a shy boy... How was I going to be rough? All he had to say was "shut up!" and I'd be shaking. He hit hard, to make me see that a man has to be a man, and he has to be strong. What he didn't know was that what he was instilling in me was terror, fear, of him.

I think my father hit me because his mother and father taught him that when a child disobeys he has to obey whether he likes it or not. And his parents learned that from their grandparents, and their grandparents taught them, and so on.

What I am trying to say is, this has been handed down through the generations. It's not easy for me to change this, but as of today I can say that from now on, it can stop.

Instead of holding a grudge against my father, I can offer him something totally different: love. The love he never gave me. I'm going to make him see things in a new light: it's not how he thought, blows don't fix things, you fix them with love."

Elmer, 17, El Salvador

“Adolescence is a very important time for me, because when I was a boy, I just wanted to play. Now I have to look and see what’s up ahead.

I’ve always lived with women: my grandmother, my mother, my sister and my niece. We’re a team. Me and them, we’re a team. They have been real fighters and I’ve learned to be a fighter too. They taught me how to express myself. I want to have a special, really trusting relationship with my sister. She’s 22, and she was really keen to start studying. She got through school, went to high school, she met a boy, they fell in love and they had a sexual relationship. Although the child’s father abandoned her, she kept on going. She’s always fighting for her. It’s her daughter and she loves her so much. But it was all so soon. It all happened so soon.

My sister hid her pregnancy from us, and as it didn’t show, we had no idea until months later. Abandoning somebody who is pregnant. A coward does that; that’s not what a man does. Well, I’m not like the others in my way of thinking. I like to be that way, if people criticise me, let them.

In this society, if a man expresses his feelings to his friends, they start to criticise him, they start insulting him, putting him down. Because they say that we men have to be strong, we can’t cry, we can’t express our feelings. Well, the fact is that I am so in love, I’m head over heels in love. And it makes me want to tell people. And that makes me feel good.

We are in love, but they don’t allow us to see each other. We communicate through text messages. We must send around 300 messages a day, between the two of us. That’s 150 from me, 150 from her. She calls me “baby bear”, I call her “my little doll” and I tell her “I love you”, “I adore you”. And she says the same to me.

I feel lots of mixed-up emotions, happiness, sadness because I’m not with her, fear that something might happen to her. The times I’ve been with her are so emotional. These are things that make me feel this is love. We young men are always anxious to have sex, but seeing what happened to my sister helped me analyse it a lot. So I don’t mind waiting. That is a step we have to take together; there’s no hurry.

When I want to be alone, I grab my bike, I get away for a while to somewhere peaceful and I weigh up all I have to go through.”

ALL PHOTOS: ASMA FILMS. DIRECTOR AND PRODUCER: DANIEL SUBERVIOLA. HTTPS://VIMEO.COM/ASMAFILMS

Yelsin, 17, Honduras

"I've decided to be happy with who I am and one day I know I have to be a lawyer. Above all else, it's to help my roots, where I was born, where I grew up, my family... It's a long journey, it's difficult but I don't think it's impossible.

I'm on a correspondence course. School is only on weekends. So I make bricks to earn 100 or 200 lempiras, ie $5 or $10, and so I can go to Choluteca to study in the educational centre there. I have to do that. I can't see how else to make money for school. I prefer to work two days rather than miss a weekend at school. I feel my education is worth more than anything else.

I think economic problems are the No.1 problem that has ruined many people's dreams. I have nobody who's going to say to me, "Take this so you can study law". So I know I have to work and work and study.

The house I live in is built from adobe, from earth. It's split up into a kitchen, a room with a desk I use for studying, a chair and, in the bedroom, my grandmother's bed and mine. We only have water in the house every five days and there's no electricity. Creature comforts, maybe there aren't that many; inconveniences, quite a lot.

I have a problem with my sight. It affects me quite a lot because I have to study, mainly at night. So what I do, I only have a desk I use for studying, a chair, I bring my light, a small gas lamp. I turn it on and I start studying. two, five, up to six hours each night, only I have to rest every 15 minutes because my eyes get tired. In spite of all the problems I have, my marks are excellent: 100, 99, marks like that. To have light would be a blessing for me. But I have to get used to what I have.

A teacher taught me that we should never lose our dignity. I feel I have dignity, I am different, I am free.

To make my dream reality, to achieve my goal, I have to leave here and go somewhere else. Face new societies, make new friends, with new personalities. That's why I want to improve myself, and struggle and face up to all that comes my way."

Champions of Change is a Plan International program working with young men across Latin America, who, growing up in violent environments, are often encouraged to conform to strict definitions of masculinity and what it means to be a 'real man'. It is a life-changing program that promotes non-violent definitions of masculinity by building young men's solidarity, respect and empathy towards girls and women. They learn that it is crucial that everyone – boys, girls, women, men – join in the struggle for gender equality and jointly reject discrimination and stereotyping. Gender equality is not a task for 'lone rangers or superheroes', but will be built progressively, by us all. Watch the film here: https://plan-international.org/girlsreport4

FACT FILE

WORKING WITH MEN AND BOYS: 'EQUALITY MAKES ME HAPPY'

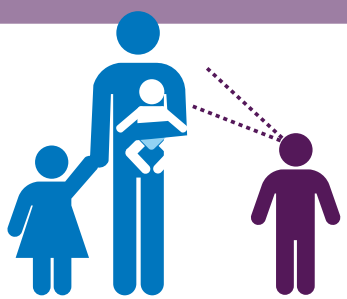
BACKGROUND

Over the past two decades there has been increasing interest in engaging men and boys in achieving gender equality. Previously, men and boys were often seen as part of the 'problem', as opposed to part of the solution.[1]

"Having more equality makes me happy. I am a better friend, with closer friendships with both boys and girls, and better conversations. I am more able to be trusted – because in our culture men are seen as those who deliver violence, trust is a difficult issue between the sexes."

Luis, 21, from El Salvador[2]

FATHERHOOD



Men in Bosnia who watched their fathers take care of children, and men in Brazil who were taught to look after siblings, spent significantly more time caring for their own children[3]

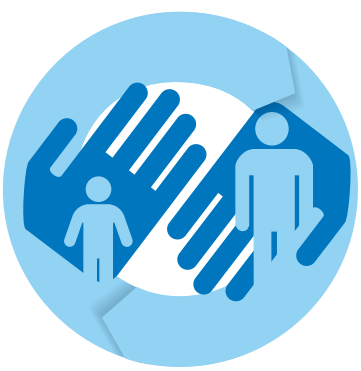
VIOLENCE

Globally

30%

of girls aged 15-19

have experienced violence from an intimate partner. Rates vary regionally, from 16.6% in high-income countries to 43.1% in South-East Asia[7]



Boys who experience sexual violence in childhood are themselves more likely to be sexually violent later in life[8]

A 2011 study found that 65% of surveyed children from India and Rwanda totally or partially agreed with the statement:

'A woman should tolerate violence in order to keep her family together.'

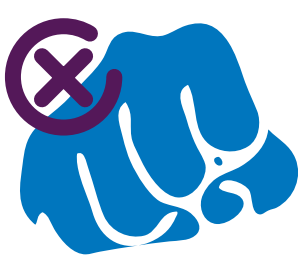
A further 43% agreed with the statement:

'There are times when a woman deserves to be beaten.'[9]

Homicide rates for boys are higher than those for girls in every region of the world. In Brazil and Venezuela homicide is the leading cause of death among adolescent boys[13]

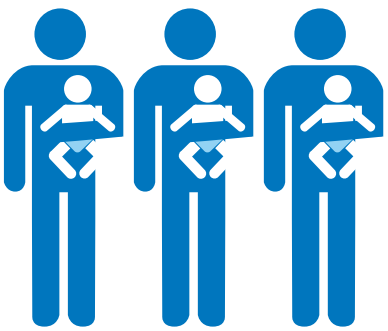
"For every young man who recreates traditional and sometimes violent versions of manhood, there is another young man who lives in fear of this violence. For every young man who hits his female partner, there is a brother or son who cringes at the violence he witnesses men using against his sister or mother."

Gary Barker, PhD, International Director, Promundo and Co-Chair, MenEngage Alliance[14]



As a result of Plan International's 'Champions of Change' project, 91% of the young men involved reported that they found it much easier to resolve conflicts without using violence[15]

Because I am a Girl | PLAN INTERNATIONAL



In **2014,** 78 of 167 countries offered the statutory right to paternity leave, compared to 40 countries in **1994**[4]

In Norway fathers are offered 45 weeks of paid leave compared to two days in Rwanda[5]

Boys whose fathers are actively involved in household chores are more likely to be involved themselves[6]

A six-country study on men and violence in Asia and the Pacific found that overall

49% OF THE MEN

who reported having raped a woman did so for the first time when they were teenagers

70-80% OF MEN

who had raped were motivated by a sense of sexual entitlement

72-97%

did not experience any legal consequences[10]

93%

of men taking part in a study in India agreed that to be a man, you need to be tough

76.5%

said that a man should have the final say in all family matters

57.5%

said that a wife cannot refuse to have sex with her husband[11]

27% of men from 1,738 interviewed for a study in South Africa said they had committed rape[12]

SCHOOL MATTERS

Girls outperform boys in educational achievement in 70% of countries regardless of the level of gender, political, economic or social equality[16]

Boys are still at a greater risk of repeating grades and dropping out, even though girls are less likely to start school[17]

"Both men and women should feel free to be sensitive. Both men and women should feel free to be strong… It is time that we all perceive gender on a spectrum, not as two opposing sets of ideals."

Emma Watson (2014) [18]

'WE MUST BECOME CYBERNAUTS': THE DIGITAL DIVIDE IN LATIN AMERICA

by **Catalina Ruiz-Navarro**

CATALINA RUIZ-NAVARRO

Catalina Ruiz-Navarro is a Colombian journalist and feminist, born in the Caribbean and based in Mexico City. As well as working as a communications coordinator, Catalina is a weekly columnist for the newspapers *El Espectador* and *El Heraldo* in Colombia and *Sin Embargo* in Mexico. She is the Director and founder of Hoja Blanca (HojaBlanca.net), an online NGO magazine which promotes and publishes new voices, and co-coordinator of the Latin American Network of Young Journalists. She has also been an editor for several print and online publications and is a published poet. @Catalinapordios

When I was 11, we learned how to use the Logo operating system in computer classes in Barranquilla. Since I didn't have a computer at home I had to write out all the calculations manually and I would use pencil drawings and a typewriter to do my homework. We got our first computer at home in 1996. At school it was always the boys who knew most about computers. They were the ones who studied systems engineering. I studied philosophy and visual arts. The closest I came to systems engineering was probably maths, but it depressed me to think that if I studied maths I wouldn't be attractive and I would end up alone. Of course, that's being really superficial. Or maybe it isn't, because the need to feel accepted and loved is no small thing. Perhaps I was just very young at the time and didn't realise that my own choices were influenced by machista prejudices.

JAN JOHANNESSEN/PANOS PICTURES

Digital festival.

As I grew up I wanted to be a writer and in 2008 I was set on having a column in the *El Espectador* newspaper (Colombian national daily) and so I started a blog. Every week I would send an article to the paper's editor and if I didn't hear anything back, as was normally the case, I would upload the article to my blog. Six months later I got a call from the paper offering me a column. Back then I didn't know anyone in the industry, but I managed to take my first step in what would turn out to be my whole career thanks to my blog and the amazing connections you can make on the internet. Today I am a journalist and at the same time I have a career in IT. I write opinion columns and try to contribute to public debate. In the modern world much of that debate happens online.

White pages, new voices

Shortly after graduating from university, I came across an apparently unsolvable problem: the publishing world doesn't publish articles from young people because it doesn't know who they are, but at the same time, it doesn't know who they are precisely because they are never published. As a result, national publications, printed or digital, are always from the same celebrated authors, and there is very little room for new talent. In response, I set up Hoja Blanca ('White Page'), an online NGO magazine that seeks to give unknown writers the opportunity to publish their work and so keep up a flow of new ideas and fresh voices. Our authors are selected in open calls for contributors and each is assigned an editor-coach who helps them to develop their writing to the best of their ability. We also run training sessions for young people from underprivileged neighbourhoods to create original content, promote freedom of expression and teach critical internet literacy skills.

The new world that is being built is still seen as something created by and for men, whilst women are portrayed as the consumers – not creators – of technology

The magazine encourages the creation of new digital content produced both on and for the internet; it supports pluralism, giving a voice to those who are rarely heard and going beyond the physical barriers and confines of print media. Hoja Blanca has created a safe space for a lot of authors, especially young women from minority groups, who simply don't have the right contacts to influence debate. By helping these new writers to find a voice and develop their artistic language, the magazine gives them a great start to their working careers. Today we (and when I say 'we' I mean 'we women', since most of the people involved in this project are women) are proud of having first published more than 150 authors who are now successful in their field.

I think what I love most about this project is that it is non-hierarchical and it doesn't require your physical presence. Although most of the team lives in Colombia and our offices are in Bogotá and Barranquilla, our bloggers are in countries like China, Cuba, Mexico, Ecuador, France, Spain, the Netherlands, USA and Argentina. Our group of editors and bloggers coordinate organically and seamlessly, almost in imitation of the way the internet works. There are no advertisements on the site, so our authors are free from the kind of indirect censorship you see in other media; released from the logic of the market and the tyranny of the 'like' button.

New technology, old divisions

Latin America is one of the regions in the world where women have the most internet access, although this is still only 36 per cent of women.[1] However, what is clear is that technology is increasingly accessible and affordable, and there will soon be infrastructure connecting even the most remote geographical regions. Young women urgently need the tools to enable them to use this new technology in a suitable and safe way.

Like the real world, the internet is not neutral territory, and as the report developed for the Beijing +20 conference stresses, girls and young women, while acknowledging the risks the internet poses, need also to seize the opportunities it presents.[2] There is the potential to create new communities, gain new skills, access information, improve their self-confidence, live in safety and participate in democracy as active citizens. It brings also the power to strengthen the capacity of the women's movement and to challenge the patriarchal nature of the ICT world.

Despite increased visibility

online apparent in some of the successful initiatives that have run in recent years and efforts like Feminist Hackathon to promote women on the web, the gender divide persists and this can be clearly seen in the fact that most ICT students and web developers are men.[3] The new world that is being built is still seen as something created by and for men, whilst women are portrayed as the consumers – not creators – of technology.

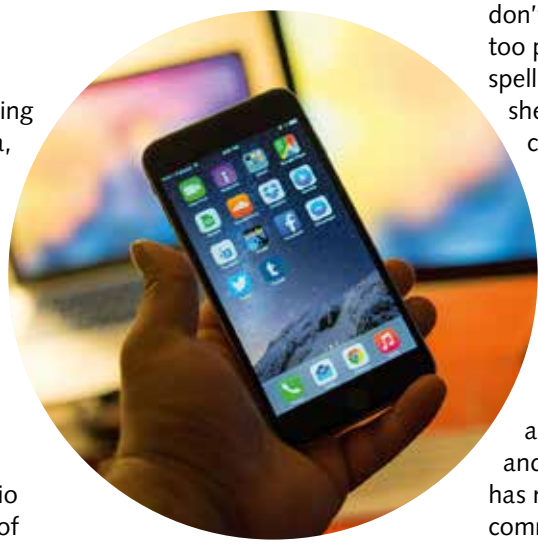
In trying to understand why this is, I spoke to four Latin American women, three who work in technology and a schoolgirl. What do their experiences tell us about the digital divide, and what is being done to close it in Costa Rica, Colombia and Peru?

Lith

"Those are things we say are difficult, so we leave them for men."

Lith is 16 years old and lives with her mother in Rebolo, a working-class barrio (neighbourhood) in the city of Barranquilla in the Caribbean region of Colombia. She goes to school at Don Bosco college, which is run by Salesian priests and provides primary, secondary and vocational education for young people in the area. Lith says there are three internet cafés in her barrio and they are always full of teenagers and college students. When I ask her how she and her friends have so much access to digital technology, she estimates that eight out of every 10 friends have a computer and internet access at home. All her friends have smartphones except her best friend who just lost hers, and now they have to communicate via Facebook and not the normal and more private channel of Whatsapp.

I talk to Lith over Skype during her school break. She connects via the school secretary's computer. She tells me she spends about three hours every day in front of the computer doing her homework and helping her mum with her work, but that's not a long time in comparison to her friends. She uses Facebook, Whatsapp and Instagram; she has Twitter but hardly ever uses it. She opened an account in Snapchat at one point, but although it's popular amongst young people she didn't like it and decided to close it. Lith uses social networks to post fun photos and express opinions about politics in her country. She doesn't think that people should share all kinds of details about their lives on social networks and doesn't think that they should be used to "let off steam". It's clear by what she says that for her there is a big difference between private and public content. She posts most of her photos on Instagram where she has fewer followers, and if she wants more people to see them (including her family) she uploads them on Facebook.



DYLAN/FLICKR/CC BY 2.0

I ask her, "How do you decide whether to add someone as a friend on Facebook?" "It's very instinctive," Lith replies. "I add people I know and if I don't know them, I open their profile page to find out what they are like, what they look like, what they post." Lith is wary of obscene photos, or photos that don't look real – photos that are too pretty or perfect – or bad spelling. Generally speaking, she feels she should be as careful online as out on the street: in both cases she is the one who must tell the difference between good and bad and she recognises the importance of feeling supported and trusted by her mother.

Lith considers herself a native of the digital world and thinks that the internet has revolutionised the way we communicate. She doesn't feel she is being overly monitored when she surfs the internet but she does know about the Snowden case and the 'chuzadas del DAS' (Department for Security Scandal[4]), where it came to light in the media how the former national intelligence agency of the Colombian government was spying on journalists and those who opposed ex-President Uribe's government. She doesn't know much about programming, but has an advanced Excel class at school where the students designed a programme to count

the votes in the elections of the student leaders in every school across Colombia.

For Lith there certainly is a gender difference in the use of technology. For example, she and her mother use the internet to look for hairdos or recipes, and especially to communicate with each other. Lith thinks her male classmates use the internet for gaming and to watch porn. This is backed up by several studies which show that women around the world used the internet much more for socialising and interaction, while men look for diversion and distraction.[5]

When Lith finishes school she wants to study visual arts or graphic design and that's why she wants to learn to use Illustrator and Photoshop. She admits that few girls study software engineering and explains why this might be by quoting something she read recently: "It's all about how girls are brought up and the vision they have about what they want and like in life and what they don't like and all those things they think are good. Society gives women complexes and that's why we don't study maths, science and all those difficult things we think have to be done by men."

Sorey

"I think they were bringing us up to be secretaries."

Sorey is a web developer and university teacher in the city of Medellín in Colombia. She is 32 and has over 10 years' experience in programming. Like Lith, she started using computers at the age of 13 and was hooked from then on. Although she studied in an all-girls school where the closest thing to IT was a typing class, Sorey decided to study programming and had the good fortune to attend a 'Web Design and Creativity' workshop in her first semester. She works on the programme 'Digital Women' (mujeresdigitales.org), a platform of the Secretary for Gender Equality of the Government of Antioquia, which uses technology to empower women through a combination of journalism, training, technology and politics.

MARCIE CASAS/FLICKR/CC BY 2.0

Sorey admits that she never really knew why she decided to study systems engineering, she simply liked the career. Drop-out rates amongst women are high: "There used to be five women in a class of 30 and that seemed okay to me, but now there aren't even that many." She also points out that although a lot of women study careers in software, many of them "only study the administrative bit of software programming and don't do well in the more technical courses. Many women work in database management and others are teachers who have never worked in programming; they teach by the book and you can tell that they've never been programmers.

"For men, being a tech geek is really cool, but women have other things to care about."

According to Sorey, "at 22 or 23, they get married and start to have other priorities; they don't want to spend all night at work. They want to leave at six in the evening and go home to their children. But men don't have the same responsibilities. If a man has to stay late at work, he stays late. Working hours in IT can be awful and that's one of the reasons why women lag behind. It's a career where you always have to be up to date; you can't fall behind. I have a lot of women friends who were great programmers but were never prepared to, or had the time to, keep their knowledge up to date; in the end they fell behind and that affected their self-confidence. There are other things out there that put women off: for example, almost all of the teachers are men. I don't know exactly what's wrong but something isn't working because women are not choosing a career in programming."

"But you've done really well," I say.

"I'm more like a man." She laughs and then corrects herself: "Not like a man, because I'm me, I'm a woman. What I mean is I have a lot of self-confidence, I like to work late, my passion for programming is greater than anything else. I don't care about

being dressed up or looking pretty. I'm happy travelling all over the place to teach code. I prefer that to going out with someone, or going to a party, or having children. It's a question of personal choice and priorities.

"There's a general concern in 'Digital Women' that women are not driving technology. Even the application women use on smartphones to monitor their periods was developed by a man. Why don't women use technology to meet their own needs? Women are being left behind; we aren't taking part in the construction of the modern world. Men wrote the laws of the old world and they didn't take any notice of us, and now the same is happening with software."

Kemly

"We all have to get involved in the solution. That's the only way to break stereotypes."

Kemly, from San José, Costa Rica, is coordinator of the ICT project 'TIC-as' (Costa Rican women are informally called 'ticas'). The project is run by the Sulá Bastsú Cooperative (sulabatsu.com) and is supported by the UN Women's Fund for Gender Equality, which aims to create employment and work experience opportunities in the rural San Carlos area in northern Costa Rica. The ICT project works directly with girls and young women in their communities, encouraging them to enrol in ICT classes and to stay on until they graduate. The aim is to promote women's leadership in the ICT sector. "We are worried about what we call the 80:20 ratio, which is the men-women ratio in all fields of technology.

"We are working in San Carlos with the entire chain and ecosystem: from the municipal government and National Women's Institute, to universities, the private sector, university students, schools, boys and girls and their teachers, fathers and mothers," says Kemly. "Girls face a hostile environment when it comes to technology. And by that I mean that not only is there no incentive for girls to try out technology but rather there are a lot of things that drive them away, like the fact that a lot of girls are caregivers, or have other responsibilities in the home, or are forced by parents or teachers to adopt other more stereotypical roles. If we don't work in their immediate surroundings, it will be very difficult to make a real change."

The ICT programme supports a total of 100 boys and girls in 10 schools. Kemly explains that there is a big difference between the fifth-year girls (aged 10 to 11) and the 12 to 13-year-olds in the year above. "Because the fifth-year girls still experience things as girls and play like girls, they have fewer inhibitions when it comes to trying out technology and are more natural working with computers. But when they start to develop and grow into young women, it's as if they become conditioned in terms of how they should behave: look pretty, not play so much, be attractive to boys and take on more responsibilities in the home. It's not that they think that they aren't able, they know they can do it, but they see that the ICT sector is a very masculine culture and aren't sure they want to be part of it. At the start of the course the teacher tells the students that they have entered hell and challenges them to see who will make it out the other side. The boys see this as a challenge, whilst the girls ask themselves 'do I really want to be in this hell?'"

That's why part of the strategy of the ICT project, as well as involving parents and teachers in the process, is about creating university support groups and networks of girls who help the students so they don't drop out. The project also promotes more flexible timetables for students who are pregnant or are already mothers.

And finally, since there is an even bigger gender divide in rural areas in terms of access and infrastructure, the ICT project promotes the collective use of technology. "In remote areas, we encourage the girls to work collectively; a computer or mobile phone is used by several girls and we put a stop to individualistic technology and consumption."

Kemly continues, "Whether they live in the town or the countryside, as girls grow up, the people who surround them must realise how ICT represents an opportunity for development; it can mean the chance of a job and a decent income."

Stephanie

"It was about planting a seed."

Stephanie is a software engineer specialising in software quality control and an active member of different software communities in Peru. She is co-founder of the project Women in Technology Peru (witperu.org) that

encourages women to participate in the world of technology.

"In today's generation you see it less than when I was young, but even today girls of 15 or 16 still ask me if my career is tough."

Stephanie also runs a project called Coderise (coderise.org), a programme to empower young students to use technology which, in the case of WIT Peru, focuses specifically on girls. Coderise is an eight-week programme for schoolgirls up to 17 years old, immersing them in programming: "It's not so much about hard code but rather logical thinking and algorithms and then we move on to html and creating websites, trying to encourage the girls to use technology to solve problems in a creative way."

Stephanie says that Coderise4girls has an exercise where the students are asked to present a problem from their community that needs solving. The ideas are subject to a vote; they pick leaders and form work groups. This experience strengthens leadership and fosters a sense of entrepreneurship amongst the girls who learn how to team-build. They are also encouraged to develop a business model. What's more, the Coderise programme organises role models from the world of technology in Lima to come and talk to the girls and also coaches them on shyness, aversion to change and planning for the future. Parents are supportive of the project and say they have noticed positive changes in their daughters.

"The digital divide has to do with education from childhood. Girls have few role models to identify with when it comes to women software developers; IT careers are presented as difficult, with a lot of numbers and maths, and the pattern repeats itself."

Stephanie had the good fortune of growing up in a different environment from the majority of girls of her generation. Her father was a fan of technology and there was a computer in the house, which "was like a toy for me". She was 12 or 13 when her family got connected to the internet for the first time. "There were a lot of restrictions back then, but the idea of having email, of being able to write to someone and getting an answer back fascinated me. Having information at hand instead of going to a library… I thought I had a whole new world at my fingertips."

Stephanie doesn't think that working hours have to be so heavy in a programming career. "It's the same in any project you take on; there will be critical stages when you have to invest more time and stay up all night working, but it shouldn't always be like that, not only in technology but in any field."

The drop-out of many women who decide to devote themselves to their children she sees as a structural inequality. The responsibilities of parenting are not shared by men and, as she says, "That's not something exclusive to systems engineering; it affects every profession."

As girls and young women, we must not settle for being 'cyber victims', we must become 'cybernauts' and the hostility of the internet, instead of intimidating us, should make more of us take up space on the web

Not just a man's world

There are initiatives taking place right across Latin America to incorporate women in information technology and to demonstrate that it is not just a man's world. The reasons why girls and women decide to turn their back on technology are complex: prejudices, specific sets of values and traditional gender roles all come into play and make women think that programming is a hostile and difficult field of work. This situation doesn't have anything to do with technology in itself, nor with girls being essentially more or less able in programming or maths than boys. It is more to do with a machista environment that discourages girls from participating in a whole number of different fields; including, and perhaps especially, technology.

Human history, culture and knowledge are formed by a body of content that defines the way we see the world. Traditionally, history has been written by the privileged few and large swathes of the population are marginalised. They don't produce content and therefore don't influence the creation of culture. Even though these groups have freedom of expression they don't exercise it, and that perpetuates and reinforces the same patterns that keep the same groups in power and reproduces the same

LIANNE MILTON/PANOS PICTURES

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

inequalities and injustices. I think that women who are in the public eye and have access to media are obliged to take back space on the internet for women and girls, for minorities and historically excluded groups. Only with this kind of conscientious effort can we build a virtual space that is less hostile and alien to women and one that is truly inclusive.

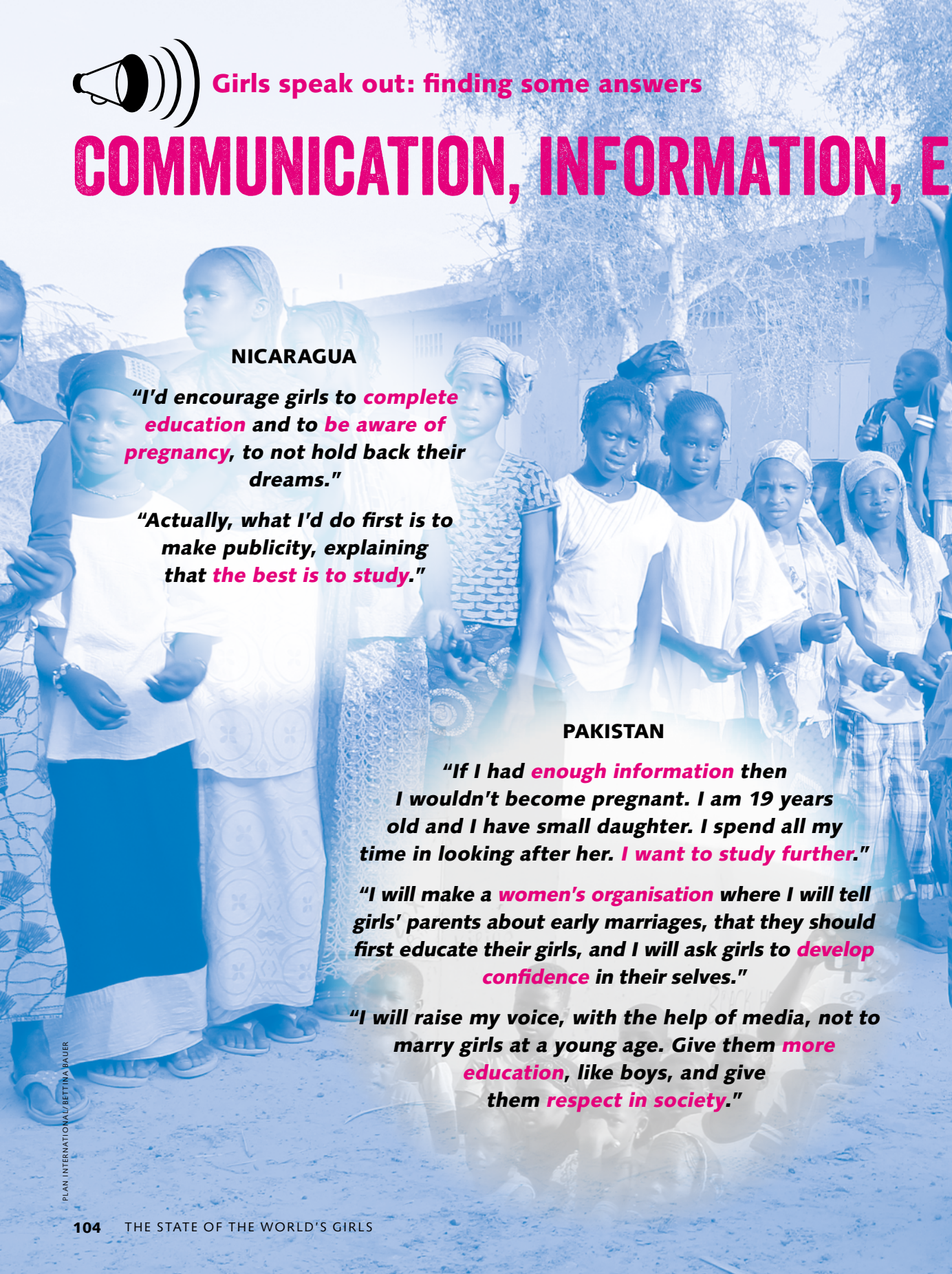
The internet opened the door to my career, but on the way I've also personally experienced online bullying, constant troll attacks, attempts at smear campaigns and aggressive comments. The internet can be as mean as it is kind. In 2013 in the city of Medellín, for example, 12-year-old virgins were being auctioned off on a web page using PIN numbers. Reporting on stories like this I've learned that the vulnerabilities of the real world, the violence and the machismo, extend into the virtual world. The same old predators who prowl for prey and engage in human trafficking have a powerful presence on social media; inadequate digital security and data protection practices, plus not being aware enough of the dangers, can leave girls exposed and vulnerable.

But, as girls and young women, we must not settle for being 'cyber victims', we must become 'cybernauts' and the hostility of the internet, instead of intimidating us, should make more of us take up space on the web. Seizing ownership of technology is an important way to struggle and become empowered. Digital media can be about communication, solidarity, diversity, advocacy and defending girls' and women's rights.

The world today and tomorrow is being built by zeros and ones and we are at a decisive point where women, and especially girls, can play an active and creative role in the present and future. It's up to everyone in all walks of life, from the rural to the urban, in the virtual and the physical world, to create a real equality where gender doesn't lead to exclusion but to renewed creativity, based on diversity of experience.

Girls speak out: finding some answers

COMMUNICATION, INFORMATION, E



NICARAGUA

"I'd encourage girls to complete education and to be aware of pregnancy, to not hold back their dreams."

"Actually, what I'd do first is to make publicity, explaining that the best is to study."

PAKISTAN

"If I had enough information then I wouldn't become pregnant. I am 19 years old and I have small daughter. I spend all my time in looking after her. I want to study further."

"I will make a women's organisation where I will tell girls' parents about early marriages, that they should first educate their girls, and I will ask girls to develop confidence in their selves."

"I will raise my voice, with the help of media, not to marry girls at a young age. Give them more education, like boys, and give them respect in society."

PLAN INTERNATIONAL/BETTINA BAUER

DUCATION...

ECUADOR

"I would organise meetings with all the women my age to make demonstrations and marches about women's rights, that we need information and to talk about topics considered by the society as taboos, to talk openly."

"Talks in the schools. Make them dynamic, because only talking is boring and tiring; make music and theatre, things to open girls' minds."

ZIMBABWE

"Some girls have no option but get pregnant through abuse and negligence. I would ask the government to create separate schools for them to go to so that they can get an education."

"Educate guardians, parents and the girl child on the importance of being educated rather than being married at an early age. Parents and guardians having strong parental guidance of stopping early marriages."

RAHIMA GAMBO

Unity Fountain, Abuja, a candlelit vigil for the Chibok girls.

#BringBackOurGirls

by **Bukky Shonibare**

BUKKY SHONIBARE

Bukky Shonibare is a Human Resource and Strategy Consultant in Nigeria. She is the Founder/ Coordinator of Adopt-A-Camp – an initiative that seeks to assist and support Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in northern Nigeria. She recently started a School-In-A-Bag Project aimed at reigniting the interest and quest for education among IDPs and other school-age children whose education is affected by conflict in Nigeria. Bukky is also a strategic team member of the #BringBackOurGirls movement in Abuja.

The cycle continues…

Today's girls are tomorrow's women. However, across the globe, governments and civil society groups still struggle to bridge the wide gap that exists between girls and women and their male counterparts. This is not a situation that is rampant in only one part of the world; it is reflected everywhere, albeit at varying degrees. Nigeria is no exception.

Girls in Nigeria constantly face the risk of being the primary victims of cultural, traditional, religious and other faulty beliefs, which deny them their rights, dignity, and an enjoyable living experience; this begins at infancy and continues into the teenage years, and adulthood.

This is reflected in virtually every sphere of a girl's existence – social, economic, religious and political. Girls face torrents of issues: including discrimination – the very challenge of being a girl – female genital mutilation (FGM); forced/ early marriage leading to several health challenges; insufficient or outright lack of access to education; forced choice of career; and abuse of different forms (sexual, domestic, physical, psychological, verbal and rejection/neglect). These all find credence in cultural norms and practices; and for a religious country like Nigeria, religion also plays a critical role in what is deemed acceptable, or not, by God.

For the average Nigerian girl child, her existence means dealing and coping with the several challenges that come with being a girl, rather than living a life full of opportunities to be explored. And for girl-child rights advocates, the daunting and never-ending struggle for the rights of the girl child has become a lifelong occupation for some, and an opportunity for others.

Both girls and boys should enjoy love and protection from their parents and from society, but the girl child is treated with utmost care. This is not so much an expression of love, which would be the case with her brother, but from the perception that she is the weaker, more vulnerable, inferior and naïve of the two sexes. For instance, a boy may be allowed to climb a tree but a girl who attempts to do the same is told that this is not a 'girly thing'.

This has, from generation to generation, made many girls grow into women who believe that there are limitations and boundaries to what they can or cannot do. This becomes the very fabric from which girls are made.

RAHIMA GAMBO

Finding shelter in Nigeria.

So we see a female pilot and look at them twice because we believe she must be a superwoman to be able to consider such a profession. When we dig deep, it becomes apparent that these are stereotypes formulated by those who have come before us, and as such have been consciously and unconsciously passed on to today's generation. The sad reality is we are also passing the same attitudes to the next generation. The cycle continues.

Boko Haram – 'Western Education is Forbidden'

Into this struggle for equality and girls' rights comes Boko Haram, which literally translates to 'Western Education Is Forbidden'. This group of fundamentalists has gained ground over the past five years in the northeastern part of Nigeria, while spreading operations to neighbouring countries – Chad, Niger, and Cameroon – and perpetrating heinous crimes – abductions, kidnapping, sexual abuse, killings, trafficking and sex slavery, as well as the displacement of thousands and increasing the number of orphans and widows.

One of the horrific acts perpetrated by this group was the abduction of 276 schoolgirls from the Government Secondary School, in Chibok, Borno State, northeastern Nigeria. Boko Haram stormed the school and abducted the girls while they were preparing for their last senior secondary school exam, between 7.30pm and 11.45pm on the night of 14 April 2014. These were girls who had dared to seek education in a region that largely does not value the education of a girl child. For their parents, trying to make sure that their girls went to school despite the security situation was seen as a bold step, and for the girls – a daring mission. In the week that followed the abduction, showing great courage, 57 of the Chibok schoolgirls escaped. Their friends are yet to be found.

Before the abduction of the Chibok girls, Boko Haram had abducted girls and women, while attacking schools, markets, religious houses and other soft targets. On 25 February 2014, the militant group barged into the Federal Government College, Buni Yadi, Yobe State, killing 59 boys in the most heart-rending way – they threw explosives into the dormitories while the boys were sleeping, killing some and burning the entire 24 classrooms of the school. Boys who tried to escape were slaughtered, their throats slit; some died after being shot at close range, while

others were burnt. In an understandable reaction to these murders, parents began withdrawing their children from boarding schools, while several others stopped their children from going to school altogether.

Undoubtedly, Boko Haram has become a major contributing factor to the increasing percentage of out-of-school girls and boys. It has had far-reaching effects on the Nigerian girl child, as education, not really a priority for many families in the first place, is now seen as a dreadful venture that puts their lives at risk.

#BringBackOurGirls Movement

Upon the abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls, the #BringBackOurGirls movement erupted as an outraged response of citizens, mainly women/mothers, who have had enough of the killings of innocent and defenceless children. The group staged its first protest on 30 April to the National Assembly over the handling of the attacks on children.

Prior to the on-the-ground protest, the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls had started trending on social media after one of its leaders and former Vice-President of the World Bank's Africa Division, Obiageli Ezekwesili, had, during the opening ceremony of a UNESCO event on 23 April, urged the audience to rise up and say #BringBackOurDaughters, #BringBackOurGirls. Watching the event was a Nigerian lawyer, Ibrahim Abdullahi, who was tweeting the words of the former Minister. This became the first mention of the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls on social media. At the same time, Hadiza Bala Usman, who became the convener of the on-the-ground protest on this issue, was independently gathering women, including Obiageli Ezekwesili, to stage a protest as a way of calling on the government to act and 'Rescue Our Chibok Girls'. What the world saw on 30 April became the convergence of the online rage which Obiageli Ezekwesili ignited, and the offline rally, which Hadiza pulled together.

In no time the hashtag gained momentum. People realised the girls could be their own daughters, nieces, sisters, or even neighbours. The world connected and responded. With the social media population covering governments, the international community, institutions, journalists, news agencies, key actors/influencers and politicians, the message quickly travelled through every nook and cranny of the world. Responders believed their faces and the #BringBackOurGirls placard would do something; so much so that solidarity and support came from all cadres of people and countries. Abubakar Shekau, leader of Boko Haram, also released a video during the height of the campaign, disparaging the hashtag, showing that even he was listening.

Celebrities took turns to be counted – from singers like Alicia Keys to world leaders like the UK's Prime Minister David Cameron, US Secretary of State John Kerry and his predecessor Hillary Clinton, US First Lady Michelle Obama and the Pakistani teenage education campaigner, Malala Yousafzai, not forgetting Nigerian celebrities and personalities. The US President, Barack Obama, also heard and acted by sending a specialist team to Nigeria to assess the situation and advise on the help the American government could provide. *Time* magazine puts it succinctly: "Over the next few days, #BringBackOurGirls went from 10,000 mentions a day to 100,000 or 200,000. It jumped oceans, and thousands of non-Africans began using it. Two weeks after its first use, #BringBackOurGirls had gathered two million mentions."

People realised the girls could be their own daughters, nieces, sisters, or even neighbours. The world connected and responded

Social media played a pivotal role in ensuring that the Federal Government of Nigeria, which had hitherto denied the abduction, paid attention to the rescue of the girls and the general security of its citizens. The Paris Summit for security in Nigeria was held as a result, and actions for multilateral collaboration were agreed upon.[1]

So what was the real impact of #BringBackOurGirls? Once the frenzy started dying down, people began to ask: how far can a simple hashtag go in actually bringing back the girls? What do we mean by success? After all, the girls were still missing. However, the campaigners on the ground in Nigeria who have been the main activists believed, and still do, that because the campaign attracted such attention, the conversation will keep going. The spotlight in itself will have made a difference. Over time, the campaign, while continuing to put pressure to bring back our girls, has evolved into the convergence point of our shared humanity and empathy for the voiceless victims of violence and bigotry.

Education for all?

Of the 57 million out-of-school children globally, Nigeria accounts for a shocking 10.5 million, the largest number in the world.[2] The importance of girl-child education cannot be overemphasised, and yet six million (57 per cent) of children not in school are girls.[3] Findings show that girls drop out of school earlier than their male counterparts for reasons like bullying, distance to school, harassment, discrimination or punishment at school, sexual harassment or other dangers at or on the way to school, and, of course, school fees and costs.[4]

School drop-out by girls is worst in the areas of northern Nigeria where Boko Haram is most prevalent. To prevent the incessant killings of innocent children through attacks on schools in a region that has the worst literacy rate worldwide, lawmakers, alongside school leaders and community chiefs, had to make the difficult decision to close about 85 at-risk schools, affecting nearly 120,000 students and possibly causing a permanent end to the educational quest of some of the affected pupils. Even in localities where schools are open, parents were reported to have stopped their children from going to school. As a result, approximately 66 per cent of 15 to 19-year-old girls in northern Nigeria are unable to read a sentence, compared to less than 10 per cent in the South.[5] Only four per cent of girls in the northern region complete their secondary-school education.[6]

International responses have been geared towards tackling the apparent widening gaps in education as a result of the insurgency. The Gordon Brown-led Safe Schools Initiative has gained some ground in ensuring schools are safe for children to attend. However, there is still the big question of how safe a school can be if the community is not safe. Although the initiative seeks to build community security groups to promote safe zones for education, the importance of political will and the prioritisation of ending conflict is yet to be determined. The girl child in northern Nigeria needs more than psychological security; there must be actual and visible safety that would both motivate girls to return to school and encourage their parents to support that decision.

When girls are valued less than boys, women less than men, they face multiple risks throughout their lives – at home, at work, at school, from their families and from strangers. Gender-based violence is a major consequence of gender inequality

Girls at risk

When girls are valued less than boys, women less than men, they face multiple risks throughout their lives – at home, at work, at school, from their families and from strangers. Gender-based violence is a major consequence of gender inequality. It is a worldwide phenomenon and its prevalence in Nigeria is alarming, though largely unreported. Such violence is physical, domestic, sexual, psychological and verbal. A lot still has to be done in educating and empowering girls with formal education and life skills while sensitising them on their rights and the available legal instruments needed to seek redress. More importantly, perpetrators must be stopped, laws enforced, and the practice made completely unacceptable.

RAHIMA GAMBO

Residents fleeing from towns occupied by Boko Haram are evacuated by the Borno state government, Nigeria.

Although the Child Rights Act (CRA) of 2003 raised the minimum age of marriage for girls to 18, in Nigeria, 16 per cent of girls are married by age 15, and 39 per cent by age 18.[7] In the northwestern region, where early/forced marriage is most prevalent, 48 per cent of girls are married by age 15.[8] Data also shows that 82 per cent of young women between ages 20 and 24, who are uneducated, attest to being married off by 18 years old, compared to 13 per cent who have at least secondary education.[9] Most of their husbands are much older than they are, and the huge age difference between the child-brides and their spouses also takes away the girls' autonomy and ability to contribute to decision making, affecting their sense of relevance, confidence and self-worth.

Nigeria, as a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the African Union Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (CRCW), has pledged to treat all children, girls and boys, as human beings with rights that must be respected, protected and upheld. The national government also passed its own Child Rights Act. But to be enforceable, national legislation has to be adopted state by state and 26 out of 36 states have not done this. Even where they have, the provisions of the law are not always adhered to – children's rights are still abused and violated, with little or no judicial enforcement. A dauntingly poor judicial process has made the CRA at best unusable and, at worse, a fiction; protecting the rights of a child – especially the girl child, who is the primary victim of child rights abuse and violations, has become painfully dismissible. For this we are all responsible. Discrimination only hits the headlines when the actions of extremists are being reported, but for too many girls and young women, it is part of their everyday lives.

In conclusion, today's girls can become powerful, responsible contributors to the nation's economy if all of Nigeria pulls its weight and puts resources together to achieve this. Social media has been shown to be a force that can unite people across continents. The Federal Government needs to take heed and take action. No girl (or boy) should have to choose between going to school and staying alive. Girls everywhere have the right to an education, to be free from violence and to enjoy equality of opportunity – the right to a fulfilling life.

FACT FILE

GIRLS AND NEW TECHNOLOGY: BENEFITS AND RISKS

BACKGROUND

In recent years the spread of the internet and mobile telephones in low-income countries has created new opportunities for girls and young women. However, it has also increased risk in terms of online bullying, harassment and sexual exploitation.

Bringing 600 million additional women and girls online could boost global GDP by $13-18 billion[1]

Technology and social media have been used to improve awareness of harassment of adolescent girls

The Girl Hub Harass Map project in Egypt aims to encourage people to speak out when they see this happening. In the first year the website had 76,000 visits and received 1,100 reports of harassment[2]

ACCESS

A woman in a low- to middle-income country is 21% less likely to own a mobile phone than a man[6]

In sub-Saharan Africa there are almost twice as many men as women on the internet[7]

SMS messaging is an effective way of spreading information. Between 2009 and 2012 a mobile-based literacy programme in Pakistan supported 4,000 women and girls to build their literacy through SMS messages[8]

A recent study in Canada found that 85% of victims of online sexual exploitation were girls and the average age was 13[11]

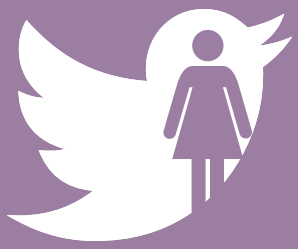
Of the calls about sexual abuse to Childline in the UK

60%
relate to online exploitation while

40%
involve face-to-face interactions

82%
of callers did not realise they were being targeted for sexual abuse[12]

TAKING ACTION



Increasingly online campaigns are emerging using social media for protest. #BringBackOurGirls was shared 5 million times in 4 months[13]

Because I am a Girl | PLAN INTERNATIONAL

Communications for Development initiatives such as the Meena series developed by UNICEF are an effective way of changing attitudes to gender issues and girls' empowerment through pop culture using video, radio and cartoons[3]

"We saw the episode of Meena repairing the tractor and we thought we could do it too."
Young woman, Orissa, India[4]

International Girls in ICT Day encourages girls to consider studies and careers in ICTs.

Since 2012

111,000

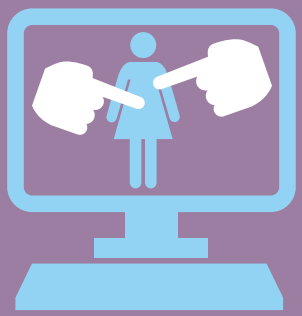
girls and young women have taken part in more than

3,500

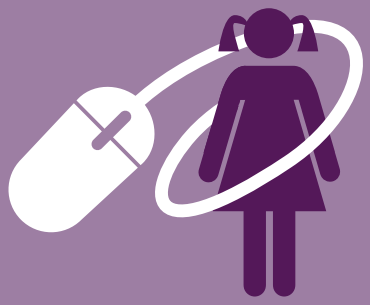
events held in 140 countries[5]

"No one controls where we go with the internet. It is a way of us escaping from our closed society. It is vital to us. It gives us liberty."
Young woman, Mauritania[9]

DANGERS



In the US 23% of females reported cyberbullying, compared to 11% of males[10]



Internet child abuse is easy to perpetrate and hard to trace. Vulnerable adolescent girls are preyed on by adults who, while pretending to be a friend, 'groom' them for sex

The digital mapping project 'SafeCities' uses a downloadable mobile phone app that allows users to report unsafe spaces, find out about support services, and take action[14]

The Everyday Sexism project started in 2012 with the idea that sharing experiences online would bring about change offline. When the British Transport Police incorporated the stories about harassment on public transport into their training processes, reporting of sexual offences on London Transport increased by 35%[15]

"We can use the internet to find out how to combat a problem. We can alert everyone to the damage being done… We can also use ICT to contact the international community to ask for their help."
Adela, 18, Bolivia[16]

'WHEN I WAS A CHILD'

by **Nawal El Saadawi**

SABLE LITMAG

Nawal El Saadawi is an internationally renowned writer, novelist, medical doctor and fighter for women's rights. She trained as a doctor (Cairo University), later becoming Cairo's Director of Public Health. She has taught in universities worldwide and received several international awards and accolades for her work in human rights. Her writing has influenced five generations of women and men, paving the way for dissidence, rebellion and revolution, and she has often suffered imprisonment, exile and death threats because of her beliefs. Nawal El Saadawi has written over 40 books in Arabic and lives in Egypt. Her works of fiction and non-fiction have been translated into at least 40 languages throughout the world.

When I was a child, I used to have a secret diary. It was my only friend. I used to hug it at night, when the universe went to sleep. In my diary, I wrote about things that did not satisfy God or my religious education teacher. My teacher used to speak in the name of Allah and say: "The mind is a masculine faculty which females are lacking."

But my mother said: "The ancient Egyptian goddess Isis was the goddess of wisdom and Eve was the first one to reap the fruit of knowledge. She became the goddess of knowledge."

In my childhood diary, I wondered how the mind could be an exclusively masculine faculty while knowledge and wisdom are feminine qualities. Was this reasonable?

BOB LANDRY/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES

Egypt, 1942.

محمود الزهدى
MAHMOUD EL-Z
GARABED JAMGOTCHIAN
ԿԱՐԱՊԵՏ ԺԱՄԿՈՉԵԱՆ

Most of what I used to hear was not only unreasonable but contradictory. My rural grandmother, who couldn't write and couldn't read even the Quran, used to say that God is justice and that we recognise Him through the mind.

Despite this, I believed that God was unfair to me every second of my life. He preferred my brother to me in everything, even though God was the one who created me to be a girl and made my brother a male.

I wrote in my secret diary: "God is unfair." Then I immediately erased what I wrote for fear of getting burned in the fires of hell.

I started to feel confused between two assumptions: either God is fair but my mind is incomplete and can't recognise God's wisdom, or God is unfair and I have a sound mind. But the last sentence made everyone mad at me, including my grandmother, my mother, my father and my male and female teachers. Education, culture, the radio, law, religion, ethics – everything around me was based on the absolute certainty of, and ultimate belief in, God's justice. This is why I began to doubt myself and my mind so that I too could believe in God's justice.

A girl's lack of self-confidence is due to the social and religious upbringing and the intellectual restrictions imposed on her from early childhood. This leads to low self-esteem and to the girl feeling physically, psychologically and mentally weak. Hence, she surrenders to orders and blindly obeys them. She accepts and internalises all the foolish gender-attributed characteristics of femininity, such as shyness, stupidity, certain kinds of beauty and female tenderness.

My mother set me free from fear of eternal damnation. She also encouraged me to write, unlike my teacher, who punished me for doing so

I might have lost my self-confidence and my mind completely because of that. I could have ended up living at the bottom of the social ladder, like most of the girls of my generation, had it not been for my mother, who managed to preserve part of her own childhood rebellion. She aspired to a better life for me than the one she had led. She whispered in my ears, saying, "There is no burning hell."

This is how my mother set me free from fear of eternal damnation. She also encouraged me to write, unlike my teacher, who punished me for doing so. She supported me during the different stages of my life and rescued me from forced marriage when I was 10 years old. My mother insisted that I continue with my university education at the Faculty of Medicine. She refused to make me stay at home to help her out with the cooking, as my father advised. My mother bore all the fatigue and the sore fingers that resulted from washing the dishes for nine children and their father, just so that I could continue with my higher education.

So, thanks to my mother's support, I regained my self-confidence and a belief in my sound mind. Later on, my father supported me, too, seeing that I had outshone my brother in education and learning.

Through painful experiences in love, marriage, divorce and motherhood, I overcame the culture and the norms of my parents and our patriarchal and hierarchical society. I did not limit what I read to the curriculum imposed by our oppressive government, not only in school but in society at large; thanks to my free reading, I grew up, evolved and recognised how fake these opposites are: masculine/feminine, mind/body, sky/ground, God/Demon, spiritual/material, black/white, ruler/ruled or master/slave. My mind evolved and my self-confidence grew through individual and group rebellion against injustice in the family, in society and in the country. I continued reading and writing about what destroys restrictions and taboos. I went on travelling and exploring different cultures and countries.

'Honour' and female genital mutilation

The idea of the feminine has changed over the years due to the sexual and social tragedies that women and girls were exposed to but never spoke about. Egyptian girls used to be killed if they didn't bleed when they had sexual intercourse on their wedding night. The concept of 'honour' was linked to those few drops of blood.

Egyptian girls also undergo the dangerous practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) because it is claimed that it preserves virginity and chastity.

In the middle of the 20th century, liberal views began emerging through the pens of

male and female pioneers. These began to change traditional views on gender, especially among some educated Egyptian families.

New ideas and awareness about the dangerous consequences of FGM began to increase. By 2008, this compelled the Egyptian government to pass a law criminalising FGM.

This same law also granted single mothers the right to register her son or daughter under her name only, and also gave her child the right to a birth certificate and to enrol in school. Before that, a child whose father was unknown used to be deprived of the right to a birth certificate and was stigmatised and labelled an 'illegitimate child'.

These partial changes in Egyptian law could not have taken place had it not been for the long struggles of female pioneers. They were jailed, sent into exile and defamed. They paid an expensive price for liberty. Thanks are also due to the struggle of revolutionary women's organisations that were exposed to assault, closure or confiscation under the rule of oppressive regimes.

But although FGM has been outlawed in Egypt since 2008, the law is not enforced, due to a lack of government will and poor management in the face of deeply rooted traditions that have been passed down generations since the time of slavery. Even today, FGM continues to affect Coptic Christian and Muslim girls alike. Only a few educated families stop their daughters undergoing FGM. The vast majority (more than 90 per cent of girls) undergo FGM during childhood, between the ages of seven and 11.

At the end of 2012, for the first time, the United Nations (UN) issued a clear resolution banning all forms of FGM. But, according to UN statistics, more than 140 million women in 26 countries still suffer from FGM.

Increasing inequality gaps and contradictions

Inequality in Egypt has escalated in the past 40 years due to the increasing control of external colonial capitalism, internal tyranny and the rise of radical religious groups. Poverty rates have also increased, and women have been the most affected. Gender-based discrimination prevails economically, politically and socially.

The majority of poor Egyptian people still adhere to old traditions combined with radical religious views that have been on the rise over the past 40 years along with the spread of corruption, the sex trade, and the trafficking of human organs. In the free market, everything has become a commodity, including girls' and women's bodies.

The contradiction between prevailing values in Egyptian society has become severe. A working-class girl wears a veil from childhood. She goes to primary school dressed in a veil. When she gets married, she stays at home to look after the family. She gets exposed to domestic violence, beating and oppression because she is dependent on her husband. If ever she starts to work, it is just to increase the family's income.

On the other hand, the daughters of high and upper middle-class families enjoy a freedom nearly as great as the freedom of girls in Europe and America. They even dress in modern clothes that partly reveal their chest or legs. Sometimes a girl will cover her head with a colourful veil decorated with beads (according to the fashion), yet her stomach shows above her tight jeans. An upper- and middle-class girl will also study at the Egyptian University or the American University in Cairo; she will have male friends and have sexual relations before marriage and then get married after having surgery to restore her hymen, or will buy an imported, artificial hymen.

In general, the Egyptian girl feels torn between the consuming values of the free global market and the ethical dogmatism of religious fundamentalist groups; except for a few, who have the awareness, courage and self-confidence to challenge and defeat this double corruption.

Women and the law

Much of women's oppression in Egypt is enshrined in two laws which are based on religious principles: the Personal Affairs Law and the Family Law, which relates to marriage, divorce, and inheritance. The Egyptian Personal Affairs Law is based on Islamic principles in the case of Muslims, and the Coptic principles in the case of Christians. In both religions, the wife is subordinate to masculine values that favour men just because God created them to be males.

Even working women remain subordinate to their husbands, according to the existing Family Law, which grants husbands the right to divorce their wives

IVOR PRICKETT/PANOS PICTURES

Protesters in Tahrir Square, Egypt, 2011.

without any reason and to marry four wives at the same time. It also allows husbands to beat their wives to teach them discipline, justifying this by one of the verses in the Quran. A woman's share of any inheritance is half of a man's, even if she is the breadwinner of the family. Children carry the name of their fathers, while the names of mothers fade out of family history. A father can sell off his adolescent daughter by marrying her off to a man 50 or 60 years – or, sometimes, even more – her senior. This is in exchange for a number of pounds – the so-called dowry.

The Egyptian Constitution, developed following the January 2011 and June 2013 revolutions, stipulates in Article 2 that Islam is the religion of the State and that Islamic law is the main source for legislation. But the reality reveals that all laws in Egypt are civil laws and are not derived from any religious laws – with the exception of the Personal Affairs Law or Family Law.

After the January 2011 revolution, the fear barrier was broken. The voice of women became louder during protests and strikes. One of their demands was the modification of the Personal Affairs Law and for a new Family Law that must be "civil and unified" and applied to all Egyptians, whether male or female, Muslim or Coptic. This law should be founded on the principle of equality between men and women in terms of rights and duties inside and outside the family.

So far, these demands have been in vain. But they might be achieved one day, provided that the individual and group revolutionary struggle continues.

Women and the 'Arab Spring'

During the 2011 revolution, thousands of men and women came to Tahrir Square in Cairo. At night they slept in tents: men and women, old and young, Muslims and Christians. Not a single man

harassed a woman; nor was there a single incident of theft, nor a church burnt. The Egyptian people revealed their ancient culture, one that is deeply rooted in history and goes back more than 7,000 years to the time of Isis, the goddess of wisdom and knowledge; Maat, the goddess of justice and law; and Sekhmet, the goddess of medicine and health.

But when President Mubarak fell on 11 February 2011, the Military Council took over, headed by Field Marshal Tantawey. The oppression of the revolutionaries, whether men or women, started. Some were killed; others were dragged through the streets. They were also attacked by male thugs who suddenly appeared in Tahrir and other squares. Women and girls began to be harassed, something that had been totally absent during the first days of the revolution.

The new regime started by burning down churches, killing revolutionaries on the streets and in the squares, and harassing women, who were attacked by thugs hired by the ruling power, accusing them of moral corruption. During their peaceful march on International Women's Day, 8 March 2011, some were arrested and jailed in the military prison, where, in order to have their virginity checked, they were subjected to physical abuse.

Yet this did not discourage the imprisoned girls and women; it simply increased their rage. One of them, Samira Ibrahim, raised the issue by filing a lawsuit in court against those who were responsible for checking her virginity in prison. In the end, no official was punished; patriarchal law in Egypt, and the whole world, is ruled by power, not justice. Yet the oppression of the girls in prison became a flagrant symbol that mobilised public opinion within and beyond Egypt, and increased people's awareness of the need to continue with the struggle.

There is still a hope in the future that hasn't faded or been extinguished. This hope is reflected in movements of young people from all over the world

Thus Egyptian women played an important role during the January 2011 revolution, a role which continued during the June 2013 revolution. This revolution achieved some successes. It succeeded in toppling the heads of a religious political regime based on corruption and hierarchy, but it didn't manage to change the hierarchy, or the institutions of the regime that control the people, especially women and the poor.

During 2014, there were new initiatives in Egypt in order to increase the number of female representatives in the new parliament to 100 seats (out of a total of 542 seats in parliament). But achieving 50 per cent of the seats (the percentage of women in the database of electoral votes) is very unlikely to happen under the male-dominated political power that rules over the political and religious parties, culture, education and the public institutions of the state.

Instead, the religion-based parties have become stronger in Egypt since the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood, despite the fact that the new Egyptian constitution, developed after the two revolutions, prevented the establishment of parties based on religion. Such parties are intellectually backward. They hide hostility towards women. And they force women to wear a veil that shows only their eyes.

Hope for the future

Despite the attacks against the revolutionary youth by internal and external forces, there is still a hope in the future that hasn't faded or been extinguished. This hope is reflected in movements of young people from all over the world. The revolution continues, despite being scattered. It continues to seek to achieve its four goals of Freedom, Independence, Justice and Dignity.

Although I'm over 80 years old, I still reach out and touch my childhood diary. I still remember my childhood as though it were yesterday. I still see my mother coming back to life and laughing as though death did not exist. I hear my mother laughing as I used to hear her when I was a child. She had a unique laughter that was different from all other laughter in the world. Her laughter used to invade my body, make me feel warm, as though it were a ray of sunshine in winter. It is similar to my daughter's laughter, to my own, and to the laughter of all the girls around me; of the youth who took part in our revolution. Not a day passes without hearing one of them saying to me: "Your book has changed my life."

This is my life's reward: one that is able to erase the pains and suffering I experienced during the different stages of my life.

Pakistan.

PLAN INTERNATIONAL

VOICES OF HOPE: CHARTING THE FUTURE

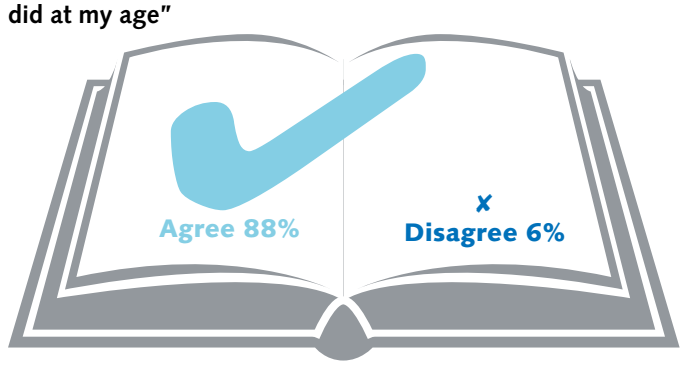
by **Sharon Goulds** and **Sarah Hendriks**

In these pages we have heard from many different people, young and old, writers and activists, politicians and economists. We have heard from Nigeria and Afghanistan, from Sierra Leone and Colombia, from Egypt, the United States and Pakistan. Mariane Pearl and Sally Armstrong tell the moving and inspiring stories of the many girls and young women they have talked to from different cultures and countries and with diverse opinions and experiences. In our final story, Joanne Harris takes us inside the life of a young girl, Ngok – which means the crocodile – working the River Congo. In all the stories we have heard and the places we have been there is a perhaps surprising amount of optimism. Voices are angry, and often sad, but also full of energy, passion and hope. "There is still," as Nawal El Saadawi writes after 70 years of activism, "a hope in the future that hasn't faded or been extinguished." Discrimination against women and girls is acknowledged and vividly illustrated by all our contributors, but nobody is resigned to it.

For this report Plan International, working with Ipsos MORI, also commissioned research with 4,219 girls in four countries – Ecuador, Nicaragua, Pakistan and Zimbabwe.[1] We asked them specific questions on four areas that thousands of adolescent girls in these countries had identified in an earlier research study, 'Hear Our Voices', as the most pressing issues in their lives.[2] In this year's continuing study, 'Girls Speak Out', we asked girls about their perspectives on gender-based violence at school and in the community, about early marriage and early pregnancy. Most importantly, these 4,219 girls across three continents were asked what could be done to combat the challenges they face, and to identify who should be primarily responsible to make sure that something is, indeed, done. The young woman in Pakistan who said "girls should take their own decisions about their lives. They should get a proper education and both the government and family members should agree about this" pinpoints clearly where the action for change must begin and who the key actors should be.

As we scrutinise the primary research findings of 'Girls Speak Out', we find a clear consensus in many areas. Participants from four different countries told us quite unambiguously that adolescent girls are becoming more valued in their communities than they used to be, and the vast majority, 88 per cent, agree that girls have more opportunities in life than their mothers did.

"I have more opportunities in life than my mother did at my age"



Overall, this sense of optimism is at its highest among girls who have spent more than nine years in school and there may well be a link between girls feeling more valued and the recent emphasis on education for girls. The research also reveals that most girls feel that their parents encourage them to succeed at school as much as they do their sons. In Zimbabwe, 86 per cent of girls agreed that this was true, although the figure fell to 57 per cent in Pakistan.

So there is progress.

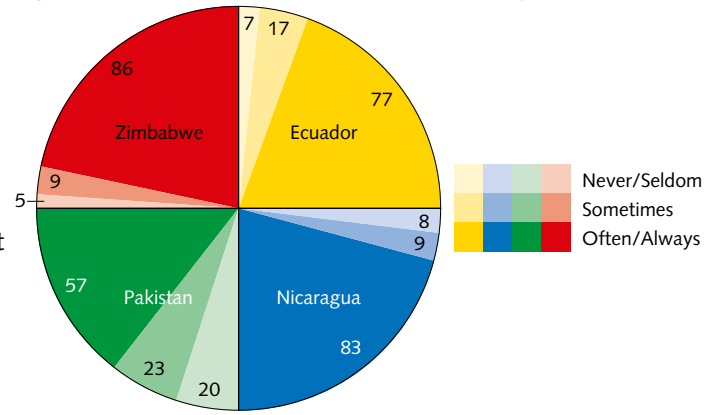
But these important successes mask an unacceptable failure. Girls' actual lives, as we also know from our research, still demonstrate a significant lack of equality and opportunity. Large numbers of girls across all four countries told us that they have little control over the decisions that determine their fate, that they need more information to avoid early pregnancy and marriage, and that they lack the confidence to stand up for themselves when they would like to. Among the girls we interviewed, only 37 per cent believed that they were often or always given the same opportunities as boys to get on in life.

Across all four countries, adolescent girls painted a consistent picture of the ways their lives are limited. Most girls do not feel they have as much opportunity as boys to use the internet and social media. They also take on more domestic work, which is not shared equally with boys: in Ecuador, 35 per cent of girls said household work is 'never' or 'seldom' shared equally, and this rose to 67 per cent in Pakistan.

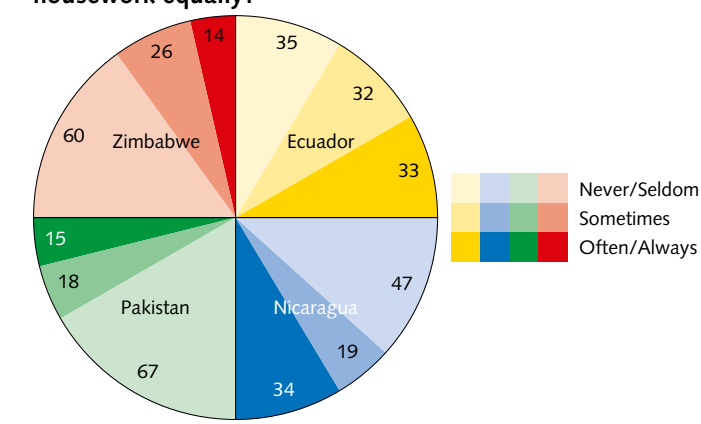
Overall, only one in three girls across the four countries have the confidence to speak up and be heard in the presence of boys and men. This is deeply striking: being seen and heard and having the confidence to speak out is the cornerstone to equality and empowerment.

Throughout girls' responses, violence, or the fear of violence, is a pervasive theme. For example, girls consistently see early or forced marriage as a factor

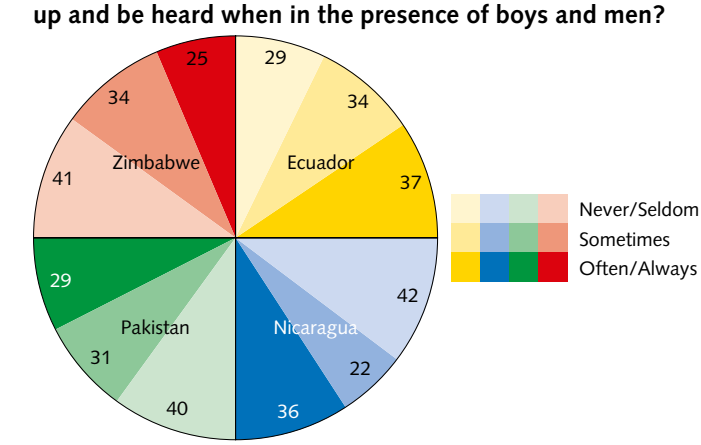
How often would you say that girls are encouraged by their parents to succeed at school as much as boys?



How often would you say that girls and boys share the housework equally?



How often would you say that girls feel confident to speak up and be heard when in the presence of boys and men?

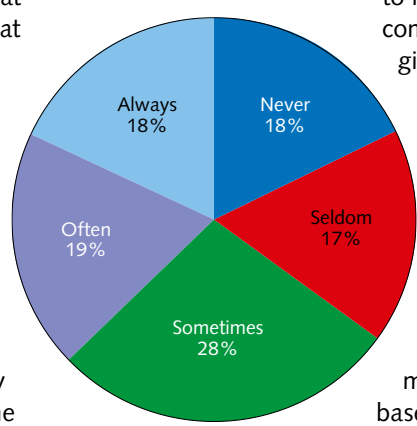


in increasing the risk of violence: 68 per cent of the 4,219 girls interviewed in this study said that girls who marry young would be more likely to experience violence in the home. Their mobility and freedom is also very much restricted by the fear of violence; many girls think they should not go out after dark and that what they wear directly causes the harassment they face.

What's to be done?

Across the research it is very clear that girls have a solid grasp of the constraints in their lives, and of the solutions that will bring about real change. As expert witnesses, they have told us unequivocally what needs to be done. So what do girls want in response to the injustices that they face? Girls want their parents to listen to them more, to support them more and, although they are determined to help themselves, they also want the problem of violence recognised by their communities and the national authorities.

Are girls your age given as many opportunities as boys to get on in life?



Again and again the 'Girls' Speak Out' study points to the power of education. Across the research, data consistently shows that at least nine years of education plays an important role in protecting girls from early marriage, increasing their confidence and their awareness of their rights. Girls who spend more years in school feel more valued in the community, negotiate their relationships on more equal terms and are less likely to blame themselves for their experiences of violence in school, on the streets or at home.

In Pakistan there is a positive relationship between completing education and an increased sense of agency by girls who are better able to make decisions about their own lives. Among girls with at least nine years in school, 56 per cent are less likely to experience family and social pressure to marry young. Findings in Pakistan also suggest that the greater number of years a girl spends in education, the more likely she is to agree with statements relating to equality and empowerment, to recognise the negative consequences of early marriage and pregnancy and to believe that abuse and violence against women (in various guises) is unacceptable. Girls across other countries are also well aware of the value of education. As one young woman from Zimbabwe told us, girls want the society they live in to recognise this too: "The community should value a girl's education and have equal job opportunities for them as much as the boy child. Girls should be taught on how to speak out and be heard in the community."

In relation to early pregnancy, early marriage and gender-based violence, it was the plea for information, and communication in school, at home and in the media, which was prioritised above any form of legislation or policy change. Programmes of education, safe spaces, awareness campaigns, breaking taboos, building confidence, "calling the police and breaking the silence" and, as one young woman in Pakistan put it, "education about self-esteem" were called for again and again. It is these voices that need to be heard by the policy makers and legislators if the empowerment of women and girls is to be key to the future success of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Freida Pinto on tackling inequality:
https://plan-international.org/girlsreport5

Taking responsibility for change

Throughout the research, it is striking that girls see the key to changing their lives for the better to be the responsibility largely of themselves and their families, rather than of the government or community and religious leaders. The only exception to this is the way they view the role of the police as critical in protecting them from violence. Otherwise, it is the education of girls, their own empowerment, which is seen as driving progress and unlocking change. This perspective is in many ways heartening, but it nevertheless reflects some lack of understanding of the structural and institutional barriers that have impeded the progress of gender equality for generations. It is society, not just girls, that needs to change.

With the exception of Nicaragua, it is the family and girls themselves, not the state, who are seen as primarily responsible for improving the lives of girls. In Ecuador and Zimbabwe, mothers and female care-givers top the list; in Pakistan it is girls themselves, and in Nicaragua it is the police and security services followed by girls themselves. There is little sense of the responsibility of the perpetrator to end violence, although girls in Zimbabwe want tougher penalties for boys and men who abuse girls. Only in Ecuador is the role of men, in this case fathers and male care-givers, given any real importance.

These responses display little faith in the rule of law or the work of the state authorities and put far too much onus on girls and young women to change the world around them. They also demonstrate, though to a lesser degree in Nicaragua, how girls look to the personal, rather than the political, to bring about change. It shows us clearly that the importance of what goes on inside families – what attitudes they inculcate, and how they value their girls – cannot be under-estimated.

In Ecuador one young woman urged girls to "make friends with your mom" so that she can guide you; in Pakistan there is the sense that "our elders take all decisions"; and in Nicaragua nearly half of girls feel that a supportive attitude from families towards young girls who get pregnant is very important. The primacy of the family in perpetuating gender inequality is often ignored and what happens in the privacy of people's homes and hearts is of

Who should be responsible for improving the situation for girls in the area where you live?

Prompted Suggestions	Ecuador	Nicaragua	Pakistan	Zimbabwe
Mothers and female care-givers	63%	35%	54%	54%
Girls themselves	33%	47%	61%	49%
Police or security services	46%	51%	38%	42%
Fathers and male care-givers	56%	27%	46%	7%
Government/Ministry for the family (Nicaragua)	19%	39%	19%	24%
Community based organisations for women or girls	15%	14%	19%	43%
Religious leaders/community leaders	14%	26%	14%	22%
Schools/school teachers	17%	17%	18%	22%
Wider family members, such as aunts or uncles	5%	25%	11%	32%
Boys	5%	17%	12%	2%

Top few mentions Lowest number of mentions

course difficult to know and therefore hard to change. The girls we spoke to reflect this dilemma; they look to their own empowerment, but they need their families to support and value them if they are to be able to speak out, be heard and become full citizens with equal rights and responsibilities.

Hearing their voices

Overall, the picture that emerges of girls' lives and their solutions to the challenges they face is one of great complexity. When we listen carefully to what girls and young women are saying, they are telling us very clearly that discrimination starts at home and that one of the things they need, if they are to achieve equality and realise their rights, is supportive and supported families. It is not just girls who need to be educated, but families and communities and the men who run them: "I would teach them [men] that as you respect your females you should have to respect other females" as one young woman in Pakistan commented.

Much of the evidence we have demonstrates the gaps on the ground and the importance of understanding who we are talking about and to. All girls have rights, but their route to realising them will differ according to their class, age, location, family life, disabilities and sexual orientation. From our own research it is clear that there are differences from country to country and, within countries, from region to region. Girls in rural areas face different challenges from those in urban areas. The context of discrimination is as important as the fact of discrimination itself if change is to be brought about. It is imperative that the voices of adolescent girls inform the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and that they give specific attention to the most marginalised, acknowledging the multiple forms of discrimination that many girls experience.

In addition to the clear emphasis on the family, these voices also talk about the responsibilities of police and security services to keep girls safe. They talk of campaigning and collective organising and of the role of women's groups in sticking up for and protecting girls. They speak in fact to the responsibility of all of us, from legislators and state authorities, to family and community members, to bring about real change.

Girls will speak out, as we know from our research, but are we listening? And is there the will, and the funding, to put into practice some of the recommendations that they spell out?

Because I am a girl

In last year's 'Because I am a Girl' report we looked at the need for structural change and at the embedded strength of discrimination against girls and women across the world. Legislation alone will not be enough to bring about change, though it needs to be there. Policy change, advocacy efforts and even additional resources will not be enough, though they too need to be there. Fundamentally, change will only come about when the value of girls' lives dramatically improves, when everyone in society values girls and believes in their potential. This does mean changes to legislation, policy and institutional resources, yes. But it also means that established attitudes which hold girls down and keep girls back must be overturned. This year, the voices of the report speak to hope, to renewed opportunity and to the potential transformation of girls' lives. Mariane Pearl speaks for many when she says: "I have now read, seen and heard hundreds of stories of women and girls and I have never failed to find a will to seek change, at often high personal costs, for the sake of others... The changes that are under way are indeed unprecedented as women and girls claim their rights to their lives, their bodies and their story."

With the voices of girls ringing in our ears, now is the time to understand that they themselves want to learn, lead and decide how they wish to live their lives. If the global movement for girls' rights becomes truly local, led by girls and young women in many different places and spaces, dealing comprehensively with the underlying causes of gender injustice, there is hope for a renewed future for men, women, girls and boys. There is no magic bullet or universal solution, but progress has been made and in the years ahead we can and must listen to girls as they speak out. We must move forward alongside this generation of girls and young women as they take their place as equal members of a transformed society.

At Plan International in the coming years we pledge to work with girls, and with women, boys and men, for girls' rights; to campaign alongside them, to design programmes that listen to their needs and opinions and to prioritise the education they so obviously value. 'Because I am a Girl' is now the banner for change, no longer the reason why you learn less, eat less and are valued less. In 2007 a 15-year-old girl in Nepal told us that despite all her efforts, her parents "only have praise for my brother". In the years to come we must ensure that her daughter, and girls everywhere, will never utter those words.

Finding some answers: Girls Speak Out[3]

Throughout our research we asked girls not just what they worry about and how their lives are restricted but also what they think should be done, and how their lives and opportunities can be expanded and improved. They had a lot to say and many of their ideas are below. The detailed research report can be found online at plan-international.org/girls

Young mothers

In 'Girls Speak Out', having children too young is a pressing concern. Adolescent girls know it disrupts their education, affects their health and limits their choices in life. As one girl in Nicaragua put it, girls should be encouraged ***"to complete their education and to be aware of pregnancy, to not hold back their dreams"***.

The issues of continuing education while pregnant, and returning to school after having a baby, were identified by girls in some countries as a core challenge. For example, young mothers in Pakistan were least likely to return to school after giving birth. And only 18 per cent of girls in Zimbabwe felt that they could continue to go to school while pregnant.

The desire for information on pregnancy and sexual and reproductive health is a dominant theme. The overall picture that emerges from the research is a demand for more openness about sex and for more creative ways of talking about sexuality, contraception and pregnancy. When we ask very specifically "what should be done?", girls ask for "a sexual education programme", for talks about "sexuality topics", for access to and

Nicaragua.

PLAN INTERNATIONAL/MIGUEL ALVAREZ

What girls want: dealing with early pregnancy

Prompted Suggestions*	Ecuador	Nicaragua	Pakistan	Zimbabwe
Supportive attitudes of families and communities towards girls who get pregnant	62%	46%	45%	57%
Alternative education opportunities to complete secondary education	48%	44%	40%	64%
Better access to affordable healthcare services for young mothers	51%	46%	50%	38%
Girls with babies or young children being allowed to return to school	46%	44%	34%	54%
Boys/fathers helping girls with childcare and domestic chores	33%	54%	49%	16%
Childcare services at school, such as nurseries	27%	45%	24%	21%
Access to government money for child support	20%	20%	24%	44%

Top few mentions Lowest number of mentions

*Respondents chose three out of seven suggestions.

knowledge about contraception: ***"I would give out condoms so that they are not ashamed to ask for them."***

In Ecuador and Nicaragua girls want more education on contraception and sexuality, with campaigns in schools and in the media: ***"First I would carry out prevention campaigns regarding pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, since they do not know what having sex can bring."*** In Pakistan, girls are asking for more information about the risks and problems of getting pregnant at a young age as well as information about how to prevent pregnancy. Education and information also emerge as a strong theme in Zimbabwe; nearly half of girls (47 per cent) focus on the need for education on sexual health and contraception, with almost two-thirds also asserting that this education should focus on teaching girls to abstain from sex at a young age. Zimbabwe is the only country where abstinence is seen by girls as a solution to early pregnancy. It is also the country where levels of equality in relationships appear to be low.

In several countries there is an emphasis also on collective action, working with women's groups and breaking down taboos, as this young woman from Ecuador tells us: ***"I would organise meetings with all the women my age to make demonstrations and march about women's rights, that we need information and to talk about topics considered by the society as taboos, to talk openly."***

Girls in all four countries saw early pregnancy as dangerous to their health and many also reflected on the responsibilities of motherhood: ***"I would give them talks; provide them with more information about the risks. It is a huge responsibility to have babies at an early age."***

For girls who do become pregnant, it is emotional and practical family support, the opportunity to finish secondary education, and access to healthcare that are top of the list of what they want. Alternative educational opportunities, enabling girls to complete secondary education, is seen as more important than receiving government money for child support. Girls in Pakistan pointed to the importance of affordable healthcare services, and in Zimbabwe they highlighted the importance of policies which will enable young mothers to return to school.

Interestingly, support from boys and fathers does not come across as a top priority

What girls want: tackling child marriage

Prompted Suggestions	Ecuador	Nicaragua	Pakistan	Zimbabwe
Girls having more confidence to raise issues with their family or in the community	61%	43%	34%	42%
Girls having access to better quality secondary education	41%	47%	45%	42%
Girls being able to decide for themselves when and who they marry	30%	59%	26%	47%
Families and communities valuing girls' education more	38%	41%	42%	35%
Girls having access to paid and dignified work opportunities	39%	29%	26%	30%
Media campaigns that oppose child marriage	24%	25%	33%	24%
Discussing the issue of early marriage with men and boys	32%	20%	30%	19%
Better national laws to prevent child marriage	19%	13%	32%	36%
Community leaders publicly condemning child marriage	6%	21%	17%	21%

Top few mentions Lowest number of mentions

in any of the countries. However, some of their recommendations show a more widespread acknowledgment of the role of boys and men: one girl from Ecuador suggests raising ***"awareness among the boys as sometimes they are more guilty than the girls"***.

Child marriage

Girls consistently point to the issue of child, early and forced marriage as one of the most pressing concerns in their lives. In analysing the solutions that girls proposed across the four countries, there is a coherent emphasis on building girls' confidence, choice and empowerment. Girls everywhere say they need to be in control of this important decision in their lives. And they need the confidence to speak up and have their voices heard on this matter. Almost half (47 per cent) of girls in Zimbabwe feel that the core solution is for girls to be able to decide for themselves when and who they marry.

Girls overwhelmingly also pointed to the power of education as an important factor in preventing child, early and forced marriage. Almost half the girls in Pakistan and Nicaragua, and 40 per cent in Ecuador and Zimbabwe, say that education is the key factor in child marriage prevention. Specifically, it is access to quality secondary education that is most important to adolescent girls and it is girls who are currently in school who see the value of education as a core solution to early marriage, more so than those who are not: ***"Education is very important so I will tell [other girls] to complete their education so that they can do anything in their life, and then they won't need anyone's help"*** commented one girl from Pakistan.

While girls focus their solutions on both their own empowerment and education, they also see that wider changes in society need to be led by those in power. In particular, girls overwhelmingly assert that families and communities must change how they value girls' education. Girls in Ecuador highlight the important role that parents play in preventing early marriage, and the significance of involving parents and girls together in discussions about marriage. In Pakistan, girls place particular emphasis on how families and communities value girls' education. Twenty-nine per cent of girls

What girls want: tackling violence and abuse in the community

Prompted Suggestions	Ecuador	Nicaragua	Pakistan	Zimbabwe
Girls having someone they trust who they can talk to if they experience any abuse or violence	37%	52%	51%	49%
Girls feeling able to report violence or abuse to community leaders, local authorities or police without being afraid	37%	37%	41%	44%
Girls having better access to information and training to protect themselves from violence	41%	43%	46%	35%
Governments and the police acting to tackle problems with alcohol or drug use in the local area	38%	48%	35%	36%
Working with boys and men to educate them about the harmful effects of violence and abuse towards girls	33%	33%	30%	27%
Tougher penalties for boys or men who abuse or are violent towards girls or women, such as longer prison sentences	38%	38%	33%	48%
Families and communities valuing girls the same as boys	30%	28%	39%	20%
Safe places and groups where girls and women can share information and experiences related to violence and abuse	38%	20%	13%	36%

Top few mentions Lowest number of mentions

in Pakistan call for education that would teach parents not to force their daughters into marrying at a young age: ***"I guess we should explain to all parents, because if they are sensible they will take the right decision and we can solve this issue, otherwise it is not possible."***

Girls want to see educational programmes and campaigns in the community that explain the risks and consequences associated with child marriage. ***"I would have media campaigns to fight against marriage at an early age due to its consequences"*** was one recommendation from Nicaragua.

Violence against girls at home and in the community

Girls are unequivocal in not accepting violence from husbands and partners and very aware of their rights in this area. The vast majority of girls (80-100 per cent) across all countries disagree that it is ever acceptable for a boy to hit or use violence against them. Girls overwhelmingly reject the use of violence at home – women should not put up with it. This came across particularly strongly in the two Latin American countries. However, when asked whether it would be better for a girl not to tell anyone that she had been raped, the numbers decline in most countries. In Pakistan 67 per cent of girls choose silence.

When it comes to public transportation there are some shocking statistics. A large number of respondents in each country believe that girls should not travel on public transportation without a male family member or friend travelling with them. In Ecuador, about a quarter of girls accept this, whereas the numbers more than double in Pakistan, with over half not believing that they have the right to catch a bus, train or tram without a male escort. When asked if they agree that girls should not be seen in public after dark, the majority of girls in each country either 'agree' or are unsure. In Zimbabwe, 90 per cent of girls are either in agreement or uncertain if girls should be seen in public after dark.

When we asked girls what should be done about the violence and abuse that they face in their communities, the most popular response across nearly all countries was the need for someone that girls trust to talk to when they

experience any abuse or violence. This links to another popular response: to be able to report violence to police, community leaders or local authorities. One girl in Nicaragua said: ***"I would gather all girls to talk on this subject and tell them they should not remain silent if they are being abused."***

Again, working with men and boys to put a stop to violence is a low priority, as is improving the value of girls among their families and communities. Most important to the girls we spoke to is their own agency and power; giving girls "martial arts training so that they can protect themselves and no one can hurt them" or "setting up safe places and groups where girls and women can share information and experiences" are two key suggestions.

Nearly half of girls advocate for better access to information and training to protect themselves from violence. Only in Zimbabwe are tougher penalties for the abusers one of the top recommendations. Although girls in all countries do mention legislation and the role of the police in protecting girls and keeping communities safe overall, it is empowering girls to defend themselves, and to speak out, and providing safe spaces for them to talk to each other that are seen as more crucial to ending violence.

School-related gender-based violence

School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) is a critical issue across the four countries. Mostly, girls are of the view that violence in and around schools is a violation of their rights. Despite this, nearly 20 per cent of girls in Pakistan either don't know or agree that in certain circumstances it may be acceptable for a teacher to ask a girl for sexual favours in exchange for good grades. On average, around a quarter of girls across all four countries either agree or aren't sure if a girl is at fault if a male student or teacher sexually harasses them. Importantly, a large number of girls do not believe that there is anyone that they could report abuse to without putting themselves in danger.

In all four countries girls point out that the government has a responsibility to tackle the issue of violence against girls in schools and that a national action plan should be put in place to combat it. Nearly half of girls identify the need for a clear and easy-to-use complaints process, with around the same number calling for stronger police

What girls want: keeping safe at school

Prompted Suggestions	Ecuador	Nicaragua	Pakistan	Zimbabwe
Schools having clear and strong rules that harassment, violence and abuse are not acceptable at school	47%	45%	41%	56%
Schools having a clear and easy to use complaints process, so girls report situations of violence in a safe and confidential way	45%	50%	33%	51%
The government having a national action plan to end violence and abuse in school	44%	41%	34%	44%
Improvements to make the school more secure, such as protective fencing and security gates	30%	47%	59%	24%
Police or security services taking action when cases of violence or abuse at school are reported to them	39%	38%	33%	45%
Having separate toilets or latrines for girls only that are safe and clean	30%	43%	44%	20%
Schools having rules for teachers, which do not allow relationships with students and exchanging sex for grades	39%	14%	14%	48%
Schools recruiting more female teachers	15%	21%	22%	9%

Top few mentions Lowest number of mentions

PLAN INTERNATIONAL/ANNIE MPALUME

Zimbabwe.

or security service responses to reported cases of violence. This shows that, faced with violence in their schools, girls feel unsupported.

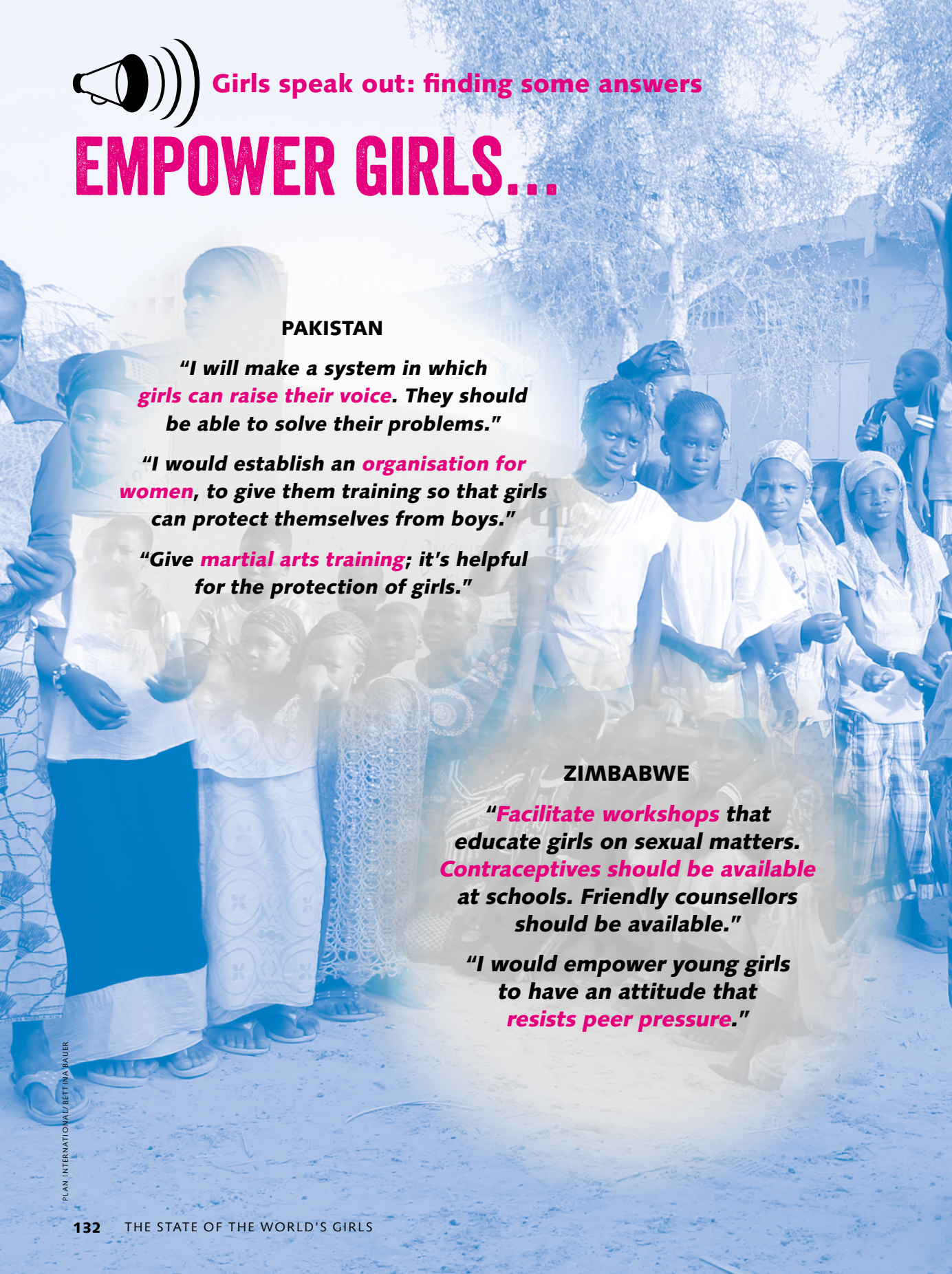
More than any other option, though, girls prioritise schools having clear and strong rules that ban harassment, violence and abuse. It is girls themselves who point to the ways that SRGBV has become institutionalised and must be eradicated through comprehensive action at all levels. This must include stronger national action plans at the government level, a solution that 40 per cent of girls identified.

It is interesting to note that the concept of physical improvements around the school to improve student safety shows a wide diversity of support from the girls. While only around 20 per cent of girls in Zimbabwe found safer toilets or stronger gates to be necessary, nearly 60 per cent of girls in Pakistan felt that their schools were not providing adequate safety.

The solutions that girls identify to eradicate SRGBV are not simplistic; they show a comprehensive strategy across a diverse range of priorities. They give schools themselves a large part of the responsibility to keep girls safe – though, perhaps surprisingly, increasing the numbers of female teachers was a low priority across all four countries.

If we are to find lasting solutions to the issue of gender justice, listening to, and acting upon, these voices is essential in bringing about change. This holds true not just for schools and governments charged with eradicating school-based violence against girls, but across all sectors of society and across all the issues that girls have identified as disempowering and discriminatory.

EMPOWER GIRLS...



PLAN INTERNATIONAL/BETTINA BAUER

PAKISTAN

"I will make a system in which girls can raise their voice. They should be able to solve their problems."

"I would establish an organisation for women, to give them training so that girls can protect themselves from boys."

"Give martial arts training; it's helpful for the protection of girls."

ZIMBABWE

"Facilitate workshops that educate girls on sexual matters. Contraceptives should be available at schools. Friendly counsellors should be available."

"I would empower young girls to have an attitude that resists peer pressure."

NICARAGUA

"Give girls enough information regarding sexual development, and not to compel them, so they can make their own decisions."

"Advise them to talk with their parents, to tell them they feel alone, ask them to talk to them."

"Encourage and improve family communication to approach sexuality topics."

ECUADOR

"I would tell them to become friends with their moms so they can guide them and give them counselling, so when girls need to make a decision they can take advice from their parents and not regret it later."

"I'd tell parents to build trust so their daughters can tell them about their problems."

"I would have a radio or TV show to catch girls' attention, where they can participate and their family and social reality are heard."

River Song

by **Joanne Harris**

JENNIFER ROBERTSON/KYTE PHOTOGRAPHY

Joanne Harris gave up teaching in 2000 to become a full-time writer and has written 14 novels, including *Chocolat*, which was made into an Oscar-nominated film, two books of short stories and three cookbooks with Fran Warde. Her books are now published in over 50 countries and have won a number of British and international awards. She plays bass guitar in a band first formed when she was 16 and still lives in West Yorkshire, a few miles from where she grew up, with her husband and daughter.

There's always the river. That's what Maman Jeanne says, with that look old people get when they're talking about something you can't possibly understand, like how an aeroplane stays in the air, or why the Good God made the tsetse fly. It's her answer to everything; complaints, questions, tears. There's always the river. The river is always there.

I should know: I've watched it all my life. I know its moods; like a fierce dog that will sometimes play, but goes for the throat if you take the game too far. I know the fishing-spots and the best places to swim; the rapids and the shallows; the islets and the sands and where they shot the last hippo, years ago. To hear them talk, you'd think everyone in Brazzaville was there that day – if so, that old hippo should be right there in the Bible, next to the miracle of the *foufou* and the fishes. Still, says Maman Jeanne, fishermen and hunters are born to lie.

ILLUSTRATION BY JACKIE MORRIS

Maybe it's the river makes them do it.

It's true that stories collect here. Like the water hyacinth, they float downriver from the North, dividing and flowering as they go. The story of the Three Sorcerers, or the Eagle Boy, or the Devil Fish, so huge it can snap a hippo's spine, or swallow a crocodile in a single gulp. That, at least, is true; I have a devil-fish tooth to prove it, traded (for a cigarette and half a stick of chewing gum) from a boy on one of the barges. It's longer than my finger, and I wear it round my neck on a piece of wire. Maman Jeanne says I shouldn't; there's bad magic in a devil-fish tooth, and anyway, it's not right for a ten-year-old girl to be hanging around those river barges.

If she was *my* mother, says Maman Jeanne, she would teach me to cook and sew and work my hair into little plaits and cornrows to catch myself a man. *That's the catch for you, girl*, she says, *not some nasty old devil-fish that you couldn't eat even if you could pull it in*. But I can look after myself, and I don't have to do what Maman Jeanne tells me. Besides, like she says, people may come and go, but the river is always there.

There are four of us here, work-working the rapids. Monkey, Catfish, Hollywood Boy and me. Of course those aren't our real names. But names are secret things, full of power. They call me Ngok – the crocodile – because I'm such a good swimmer. And swimming, of course, is what we do.

Right at the edge of our patch, there's a place called Les Rapides. It's a big place, all white, with a balcony looking out over the water. Before the war a lot of people came here, but now it's never more than a quarter full: businessmen in their grey square-shouldered suits, or pretty ladies with dyed hair and flouncy dresses, soldiers, officials, even the occasional *mendele* – white men here for business, I suppose – it's been a long time since any actual tourists came here. They come to eat, of course – *trois-pièces* with *pili-pili* and fried bananas; baked squash with black rice and peanut sauce; crocodile with *foufou* and beans. It makes me dizzy even to think about so much food; and there are tomatoes swimming in oil, and riverfish stew and *saka-saka* and fresh crusty white bread and hot-fried chicken and manioc and peas. They come to eat – of course they do – but they also come because of the river, because of the rapids. From here you can see right across for miles and miles, right into Kinshasa where you can see the fires burning across the water and the river is a wild thing, prancing and rolling from boulder to

boulder and hurling up great gouts of spray. Not as wild as Hippo Island and the giant yellow-grey jumble of broken water beyond, but wild enough, and it sounds like –

Like elephants crossing, says Maman Jeanne. Big brown elephants with feet like palm trunks. Of course I've never seen an elephant, but in the city zoo there's a skull the size of a lorry cab, all chalk and honeycomb, one splintery tusk lolling from the toothless mouth.

Like Sunday morning, says Monkey; like cathedral voices; like dancing; like drums. *Like helicopters*, says Catfish, when he says anything at all. Mortars and shells and the washboard clatter of gunfire. Or the noise, says Hollywood Boy, of a radio between stations, that eerie, dead sound of rushing and whispering, scratching and stirring.

The river has a song for everyone, says Maman Jeanne; and no song is ever the same. That's why they *really* come: not for the food, or the view or the shady veranda under the mango trees, but for the river, the sound and the swell and the surge of the river song. I know; and the others are the same. Even Catfish, who is fourteen and thinks he knows so much more than the rest of us. There's more to our business than just business.

Which is not to say we are not professionals. Some people carve wood for a living; some turn to the Army; some work the markets, or the cabs, or the side of the road. We work the river. More precisely, we work the rapids.

Our rapids are a highway for all kinds of trade. Fish trappers, stonebreakers, washerwomen, thieves. I know them all: boys with nets, old men in pirogues, scavengers with poles and sacks. Downriver is the shallow place where Maman Jeanne takes her washing. It's a good swimming hole, too, for babies and women, but we don't swim there. Oh no. We swim further up, from Les Rapides to the stonebreakers' flats, and we don't let anyone else work our strip. We earned that strip, Monkey, Catfish, Hollywood Boy and me. Especially me; partly because I'm the youngest, but mostly because I'm a girl. And, as Maman Jeanne says, girls don't dare, girls don't bare, and most of all, girls never, *ever* ride the rapids.

There are three corridors dividing the rapids on our side of the river. One – we call it the Slide – is close to the bank, sweeping and doglegging breathlessly between the rocks. The second – the Swallow – is much further out, and to reach it you have to swim outwards in a wide curve, skirting a sinkhole and a bad drop over some big boulders. You have to be strong – most of all you have to be quick, because no one can swim *against* the current; all you can hope for is to use the current to swing you far enough out to reach the safety of the corridor. But if you miss by even an arm's length, then the current whips you – with a *shake-shake-snap* like a dog with a rat – right into the sinkhole. If you're lucky and it spits you out again, the ride ends with a quick scuttle down a bumpy little rockslide and no harm done – except maybe for a skinned backside and the sting of laughter from the riverbank. It happens sometimes, though never to me. And sometimes – well. Better not to think of that. *The Good God harvests his crop*, says Maman Jeanne, *and all your tears will never bring back a single seed of it*.

The third ride is almost a legend. Far, far beyond the others – perhaps three times the distance between the Swallow and the bank – it can only be reached from the Swallow itself. Halfway down to the stonebreakers' flats, the current divides over a big pink rock, which we call the Turtle. The Turtle's shell is round, and on one side there's a good smooth ride into the mainstream. On the other, there are underwater rocks – ankle-biters, we call them – but if you're fast – and lucky – I reckon you could break away from the Swallow and ride the river's great round shoulder into the Deep.

I've never done it, though I've charted its path, using river junk and clumps of hyacinth, and I'm almost sure I could. No one else has, as far as I know; Monkey says there are crocodiles, but he's just scared. With his crooked leg he doesn't swim as well as the rest of us, and never even rides the Swallow. But he has a rubber ring from a truck tyre, and fits it just as neat as a bird on a nest, so Catfish lets him come. I don't think that's fair – if it had been me, you bet he wouldn't have allowed it – but Catfish is the General, and we have to do what he says. I don't always like that – it's especially hard being a Lieutenant when even Monkey's a Colonel – but Catfish is pretty fair in most other things, and besides, who else would have let a girl join in the first place?

And so, every day between nine and five, we meet up under the balcony at Les Rapides, and we practise our moves. Easy ones, to warm up, with Monkey on his rubber ring and the rest of us bobbing along yelling. Then comes the trick-tricky stuff – high dives, star-jumps, crocodile, with all of us in a long unbroken chain. We stop mid-morning for a rest. A snack, too, if we can get it; perhaps a dough-ball or a slice of cold manioc scrounged from Maman Jeanne. Sometimes there are small green mangoes on the trees over the veranda, and we throw sticks at them until one falls down. After twelve, though, the company starts to arrive, and we have to be good, or risk losing our business.

Like I said, we work the river. More precisely, we work the *people*: and if you ask me, anyone who can afford to spend a couple of thousand CFRs on a meal is fair game. It isn't begging – we'd never beg – but we can't stop them watching us, can we? And if sometimes they drop a coin or two, or a chicken bone, or a piece of bread, then where's the harm in that? Maman Jeanne doesn't like it; but she turns a blind eye. It's a wage like any other, after all, and it's more fun than breaking rocks.

I was born somewhere upriver. That was before the war – I can't remember the name of the place, or anything much about it, except that there was a house with palm thatch, and chickens running around it, and my mother used to carry me in a sling on her back, and there was a smell – not city smells but a forest-smell – of wet mud and trees and rushes and steam from the manioc-pots. Maybe that's why I ended up on Hippo Island; it's a fair long walk into town each day, but it feels good to be out of the city at night and to hear the river song as I go to sleep, with its choir of frogs and peepers.

No one else goes there much, except the fishermen. It's supposed to be bad magic. Papa Plaisance says it's the spirit of that last hippo, waiting for his chance to be avenged. Maman Jeanne says it's because things happened there during the fighting. She won't say much, but I can tell they were bad, because normally Maman Jeanne can talk the legs off a centipede. Still, that was a long, long time ago, three years at least, and the island is a good quiet place now. But most people keep away, and there are stories of ghosts and sorcerers. I've never seen any. Papa Plaisance hasn't, either, and he comes every day in his pirogue. I have seen some pretty good catfish, though; and I'm glad the others stay away. Besides, I like being on my own.

Maman Jeanne has a shack near the other bank. She lives there with Maman Kim, her daughter, and Petite Blanche, her granddaughter. Maman Kim's husband used to live here, but doesn't any more. There's a story behind it, but that's *man-woman bizness*, as Maman Jeanne says, and doesn't interest me much. Papa Plaisance has a shack, too, with a vegetable patch and a workshop under the big mango tree. Papa Plaisance is Catfish's uncle. He makes pirogues, or used to, before the war came, beautiful slim pirogues that sliced through the water without a sound. He's the one who taught me how to ride the current and how to paddle from the stern to keep the little boat from tipping over. He goes out a long way, right into the rapids, and sets his traps among the ankle-biters. Sometimes I have to help him; but it's dull work compared to riding the rapids, and he never pays me anyway, so I sneak past him when I can, and make my way alone upriver.

Today I got to Les Rapides early, an hour after daybreak. The others weren't there yet, and I sat on the bank and waited, chewing on a piece of bitter bamboo-shoot and watching the river for devil-fish. There was no one else around, except for an old man with a pirogue, and a few birds flying low over the brown water. I'd been there for an hour before Monkey turned up with his rubber ring, and by then I'd already gathered that something was wrong. I'd have known it even without the way Monkey looked at me, all sideways and sly-fashion, with that little smile that means bad news for someone not him. He's always been jealous of me, I know. Perhaps because I'm a better swimmer; perhaps because my legs are long and straight, while he has to walk short and twisty-style on his crooked foot.

"Where the others, Monkey?" I said.

"Coming soon," he told me. "Papa Plaisance call us round. Give us dough-balls for breakfast."

Well, *that* was a surprise, for a start. Old Papa never gives out food for free. I wondered what he wanted, and why he'd asked my friends to eat, but let me go to Les Rapides alone.

"Papa says you wasting time," said Monkey, bringing out the remains of his dough-ball and beginning to eat it. "He says there's money to make on the river."

"What, fishing with *him*? I leave that to the ones who don't swim so well."

Monkey's eyes narrowed. "Well," he said, "Papa say he don't want you hanging around here any more. He tell Catfish. You work for him now. No more Rapids."

I could hardly believe it. "Papa Plaisance, he's not my family," I said. "He has no right to decide what I do. Just because Catfish's uncle says so, doesn't mean I have to do his work for free."

"*He* tell Catfish," repeated Monkey stubbornly. "*I* tell *you*."

"But *this* is my business," I said, hearing the silly little shake in my voice.

"Not any more," said Monkey. "The Rapids belong to the Catfish gang."

There was a silence as I let that flow past me. Monkey ate his dough-ball, watching me with that look in his eyes, expecting me to cry, perhaps, I don't know. Anyway, I didn't give him that satisfaction. "You just the errand-boy," I told him haughty. "Where's the General?"

He gave a shrug in the direction of the stone-breakers. "Don't go there, Ngok," he warned as I began to climb down towards the path. "You not welcome."

"You want to stop me?" I shot over my shoulder.

Monkey shrugged again, and followed me at a distance, limping. "You'll see," was all he said, and even then I pretended not to hear him.

I found the others down by the rock-breakers. Catfish wouldn't look at me, and Hollywood Boy was playing jump-stone across the swim-hole and pretending cool. "Monkey tells me you don't want me on the Rapids any more," I said, attacking straightaway, before Catfish could find his voice.

Catfish said nothing, just picked at his feet and wouldn't look.

"Cat got your tongue?" I said.

Catfish muttered something about not wanting to hang with little girls.

"The Rapids are mine as much as yours," I said, hearing that sound in my voice again, half-way between tears and devil-fish rage. "You can't stop me if I want to be here."

But he could, and he knew it. Three against one; besides, on land they were bigger and older and stronger than me, even coward Monkey with the bent foot. Still, I didn't care. Let them try, if they were men enough. I fingered my devil-fish tooth on its wire and prayed; *devil-fish, send me your spirit to make me strong.*

"Go home," said Catfish.

"You want to stop me? You just try." And then a sudden inspiration halted me, fresh and strong as a voice from God. God or devil-fish, anyway, I couldn't tell, but it was so clear that it took my breath, and then I started laughing, gaspy-style, till the boys must have thought I was crazy.

"Why you laughing, Ngok?" said Hollywood Boy, looking a little uncomfortable now. He should be; I'd seen him try the Swallow just last week, and he took it wide, bumped over the Turtle and ended up on his face in a mudhole. Catfish is better; but Monkey never tries the long rides, and I knew I could beat any of them – maybe even Catfish – on a good day, and with the devil-fish tooth to bring me luck.

"You want the Rapids for yourself?" I said, still laughing. "We'll make a deal, boy. We see who's the best. We let the river decide."

That made them stare. Monkey looked scared; Hollywood Boy laughed. Only Catfish was quiet, serious. "What you mean?" he said at last.

"I mean a challenge," I said. "The Catfish gang against the Ngok gang. Winner takes the Rapids. Loser goes back to Papa Plaisance."

Monkey sniggered. "You got to be crazy," he said.

"Crazy perhaps, but I can swim like a crocodile."

Catfish frowned. He doesn't say much, and when he does, people listen. He was the General, after all, and he knew that a good General can never turn down a challenge. Do that once, and people start to think you're afraid. Twice, and nobody obeys orders any more. Three times, and you're a dead man.

"What kind of a challenge?"

"The big one," I said at once. "The Deep."

There was a long silence. Then Catfish nodded

once. "Okay," he said, and without looking back at me, he stood up and began to walk upriver towards Les Rapides.

Reaching the swimming place, I thought the Deep looked darker and more distant than ever before. The river was already swollen from last week's rain; patches of water hyacinth, some as large as boats, rushed by on the sour-smell water. In a month the long rains will come; then the Rapids will be too dangerous to ride, even for a good swimmer. During the rainy months even crocodiles die in the tumbling rapids. Now was too soon for that time, though not too far away either, and I was beginning to feel a little nervous as we reached our strip – no customers eating there now, not yet, but a waiter laying out tables under the big mango tree, and the smell of roasting something drifting down from the open kitchen.

"You sure?" said Catfish, looking at me. His face was calm, but I thought he was sweating; maybe the heat, or maybe something else, too. Monkey stood at his side with the rubber ring under his arm, his eyes round open with all the whites showing.

"You scared?" I said.

Catfish shrugged, as if to suggest that the Deep was just another long ride to him and not the biggest, furthest and most dangerous section of the near Rapids.

"Okay then." We looked at each other.

"You first."

"No, you."

His face was like wood, stiff and brown and expressionless. "Okay, then. We go together."

"No, man," said Hollywood Boy in dismay. "That's too risky!" In a way, he was right; those long rides were safer when taken alone, for the distance has to be calculated absolutely precisely, and even an inch to the wrong side can mean a lethal sweep into a sinkhole's gullet, or a battering run over the ankle-biters. Two swimmers together will clump, like weed islands, breaking the current and risking disaster.

"All right," I said. "Both together."

Even on a day with nothing to prove, we practise before we try the big runs. A couple of runs down the Slide, perhaps; a crocodile or two, some jumps, and then we are ready to try the Swallow.

Today, there was none of that childishness. Monkey sat on the bank and watched, his legs tucked into his rubber ring; Hollywood Boy sat hunched under the arch of Les Rapides, and Catfish and I observed the river, occasionally throwing in objects – a plastic bottle, a piece of wood – to gauge the speed and the course of the distant Deep.

Neither of us wanted a practice run. It would have shown weakness, somehow; though I knew it made our chances of success so much smaller. By rights we should have done the Swallow a dozen times or so before we even attempted the Deep – but only the heat of my anger was keeping me there in the first place, and I didn't want the river to put a damp on that before I was ready.

Twenty minutes, and I could feel it beginning to ebb. Catfish was still watching, testing wind speed and water, occasionally glancing quick-quick at me to see if I'd lost my nerve. I prayed again to the devil-fish god – *speed, courage, luck* – and shot Catfish a big, bright smile. I don't know whether it fooled him; either way I wasn't waiting any longer, and I stood up, tucked my skirt around my legs and tied it in place and said: "Ready?"

"You crazy, man," said Monkey with gloomy satisfaction. "If the river don't get you, the crocodiles will."

"Crocodiles don't like fast water," I said, looking beyond him towards the far corridor. You could hardly see it now for reflections; a bare strip, smoother than the rest, simmering gold in the distant haze. It was pretty, I thought; pretty like the back of a shining snake. And like the snake, it had a bite.

"Still ready?" He was counting against it; I could see it in his eyes.

"As ever," I said, and both together we stepped back to give ourselves maximum run. One-two-three steps, hands almost touching, and we were at the edge; a fourth and I flung myself far out into the air, riding far beyond the Slide, landing feet-first with a *plunk* of air onto the tail of the Swallow.

I sank, went under; felt the tow of the river, far greater beneath than on the surface, and pulled my feet up fast. Catfish was somewhere very close, I knew; but I couldn't afford to look for him just then. With all my strength I stretched out, leaning forward, kicking my feet, reaching for the current like a life-line. Downriver the Turtle shrugged its

giant pink shoulder out of the water and I struck out for the Swallow, knowing that if I reached the Turtle from the wrong side I would miss the opening, and be dragged into a mess of sinks and ankle-biters – that is, if the river didn't crush me like a rotten egg.

Behind and to the left of me, further into the corridor, I could sense Catfish striking and panting. He was strong, but he was heavy, too; I raised my feet from out of the drag-water and kicked along ahead, light as a lily. Neither of us spoke; there was water in my nose and mouth; water in my eyes and all I could think of was the corridor that drew me, spinning and gasping, closer to the Turtle and the sink on either side.

Bump-bump-bump. A little bump-slide, a string of round rocks scattered under the surface like the bones in a skinny man's spine. I rode them, losing speed and breath, and then the Turtle was already on me, its smooth sweep of Swallow ride on the bank side, its rough tangle of uncharted territory on the other. I took a deep breath. Braced – and kicked out at the Turtle just as the river swelled me over the top, pushing out with my long strong legs and boosting myself into the unknown. The current was stronger here than ever before, sucking at my legs in hot-cold bursts, and there were stones here, stones and rocks I did not recognise, striking my feet and legs and skinning my left shin from instep to knee.

Ankle-biters. I'd expected no less; but these were whole-body ankle-biters, reaching up out of the depths like the teeth of the river. I tucked my legs up, kicking, and still they bit; behind me, Catfish cried out, but I could not see why. And still the Deep seemed twice as far, twice as fast as ever before, like some road in a story about castles that move and countries that vanish overnight only to reappear somewhere else, on the other side of the world, perhaps, under a magic cloud-carpet of snow.

Once more I prayed to the devil-fish tooth – *bring me far, bring me fast* – and boosted myself as hard as I could away from the rocky strip. Beside and behind me, I saw Catfish do the same; but as I shot forward I saw him slip – slide away towards a crookleg gully that swept back into the Swallow – while I sailed ahead of him, quick and straight as one of Papa Plaisance's pirogues, over the danger zone and into fast, smooth water.

The Deep! I could see it now, and in my path; the curve of my course would lead me straight towards it now, using the very speed of the river to fling me across, as a boy may use a purse-sling to throw a stone. I opened my mouth in a blaze of triumph – *Wheee!* – then I sat on the river, hugging my knees the way Monkey does when he rides his rubber ring, and let the river take me, far out and far away, into the corridor.

It felt like flying. Flying and falling and dreaming all in one; with the heavy water riding black on yellow-brown beneath me, and small pieces of river debris stinging and lashing against my burning skin. But it was a wonder; for a moment there I was not simply *in* the river; I *was* the river; I sang its song; and the river sang back to me in its many voices, and if I'd wanted to, I believe I could have swum all the way over to Kinshasa and nothing – not even crocodiles – could have touched me.

And then I looked back. I shouldn't have done it. I was almost there, my fingers combing the skirts of the Deep. But I looked round, perhaps to check if Catfish had seen my triumph, and the joy fell away from me in a sudden cold.

Catfish had slipped, as I'd first thought, into the crookleg gully that led back to the Swallow. If he'd stuck to that run, he would have been all right; it was a straight, smooth channel that bypassed the Turtle and brought the swimmer back into the long, clean corridor towards the swimming hole. But Catfish hadn't stuck to the run. Instead he had tried to boost himself back; a desperate, impossible move against the current. The river had stopped him; first tumbling him onto his back, then dragging him back towards the Turtle, the rocks and the black sink between. Too late, Catfish had understood his mistake; I could see him clinging, all round dark head and skinny arms, round an exposed spike of river rock as over him the water heaved and hurled, bucking like some bareback creature that does not want to be ridden. I saw all this in an instant; the angry river; Catfish clinging on for his life; the gullet of darkness below. With a little more speed, he could have made it past the sink; but he had lost his momentum and his nerve. Now he clung, slip-slipping on the greasy stone, and wailed soundlessly over the howl of the river song.

Before me, the Deep was an arm's length away. Its song too was deafening – *come to me, Ngok* – but there too was my old friend, and though it tore me inside to abandon the dare, I knew I could not leave him to be swallowed by the sink.

I pushed away, back into the rocks. For a second, the Deep clung to me, singing its song; then it spat me out as hard as a child spitting out a pawpaw seed, and I shot away, skimming the rocks with my knees, towards the Swallow. It was risky, I knew. I would have to follow Catfish most precisely, and without losing momentum, grab him from where he clung without letting the sink inhale us both. A second's miscalculation, and we would go under, never to surface. An inch to either side, and I'd miss him altogether. I prayed to the devil-fish one last time – *oh please, devil-fish, may my aim be true* – and taking a deep breath, sitting squarely on the wave and with my lungs filled to bursting, I skidded down the final run at top speed towards Catfish.

He must have seen what I was trying to do. He grabbed my hand and dropped his grasp from the rock, and I let my speed take us both, like bottles on the water, shooting right over the nasty sink-hole and into the harrow of ankle-biters.

"Hold on, Catfish!" I could hardly hear myself over the river song. But his hand was in mine and I held tight, both of us yelling as the rocks bit into our legs and feet. The river was laughing now, I could hear it; a low chuckle of rocks and pebbles, like drums around a campfire. And the Swallow was smoothing out again; slowing, easing out towards the swimming hole. The stones fell away under our feet; Catfish dropped my hand and began to swim, slow and limping-style, towards the shallows.

The others were waiting there for us, unsure of what they had seen. "What happen, man?" said Monkey impatiently, as Catfish and I lay out on the dry stones of the rockbreakers' flats and examined the cuts and scrapes on our legs.

I looked at Catfish. He didn't look back. His face looked closed, more wooden than ever, except for a big scrape over one eye that had probably come from his hitting that pointy rock.

"Did you reach the Deep, Ngok?" said Hollywood Boy, his voice quivering with excitement. "I thought I saw you, maybe, but you were too far for me to be sure –"

This was the time to speak, I thought. To reveal how I'd touched the Deep – actually *touched* it with the tips of my fingers, like a mythical fish no one ever catches except in dreams. If I told them, then I'd be General. Catfish would go home to Papa Plaisance. Les Rapides would belong to me.

Catfish still wasn't looking at me. His face looked closed, like a rock.

"Well?" said Monkey. "Did you win?"

There was a long silence. Then I shook my head. "Nah," I said. "I nearly did, but the Swallow pulled me in. Call it a draw, man. Nobody won."

Hollywood Boy looked disappointed. "Hey, Ngok," he said. "You lost your magic tooth."

I reached for it then, but I already knew it was gone. Maybe the river took it back; or maybe it was the spirit of the devil-fish, taking what was due.

We still work the river, the four of us; Catfish, Monkey, Hollywood Boy and I. There was a little tension with Papa Plaisance at first, but Maman Jeanne unexpectedly took my side – unlikely, I'd have thought, but it seems Papa was in her bad books over some unpaid work.

The river is ours again, for the moment – at least that strip of it that runs from Les Rapides to the stonebreakers' flats – and we work it every day, though no one has ever attempted the Deep since then. Maybe we will again, some day. Catfish is still the General, though he doesn't give orders in quite the way he once used to, and I've seen a gleam in Hollywood Boy's eye that tells me there may one day be another challenge. Not from me, though. Not again. Foolish to imagine I might ever have been a General – it's bad enough trying to keep up with the boys – though I can see it in their eyes sometimes; that awe, that knowledge of something dared, some secret glimpsed, some glory almost won. One day, perhaps, I'll find it again.

Meanwhile there's always the river, as Maman Jeanne says, with its sleepy silences and its terrible rage and its song that keeps on going, and going, and going, carrying spells and dreams and stories with it all the way into the belly of Africa and out again into the open undiscovered sea.

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About the campaign

Plan's Because I am a Girl Campaign is working to create a world that values girls, promotes their rights and ends injustice.

A quality education is crucial to this mission and Because I am a Girl will support four million girls to get the education, skills and support they need to move themselves from poverty to opportunity.

Globally, one in three girls is denied an education by the daily realities of poverty, discrimination and violence. Every day, young girls are taken out of school, forced into marriage and subjected to violence.

Not only is this unjust, it's also a huge waste of potential. Millions of adolescent girls are being denied their right to education at the time when it can transform their lives and the world around them.

Progress has been made in terms of increasing the number of girls enrolling in school, but the quality of the education that girls are receiving remains poor in many countries.

Plan's experience over more than 75 years has shown that real change can take place when girls and their education are valued. Supporting girls' education is one of the single best investments we can make to help end poverty for everyone. Providing a girl with at least nine years of quality education means she is:

- less likely to experience violence, marry or have children while she is still a child herself
- more likely to be literate, healthy and survive into adulthood, as are her children
- more likely to reinvest her income back into her family, community and country
- more likely to understand her rights and be a force for change.

The power of this is astonishing. It saves lives and transforms futures, releasing the incredible potential of girls and their communities. We are working with girls, communities, traditional leaders, governments, global institutions and the private sector to address the barriers that prevent girls from completing their education.

Plan's 'Because I Am A Girl' campaign is calling for:

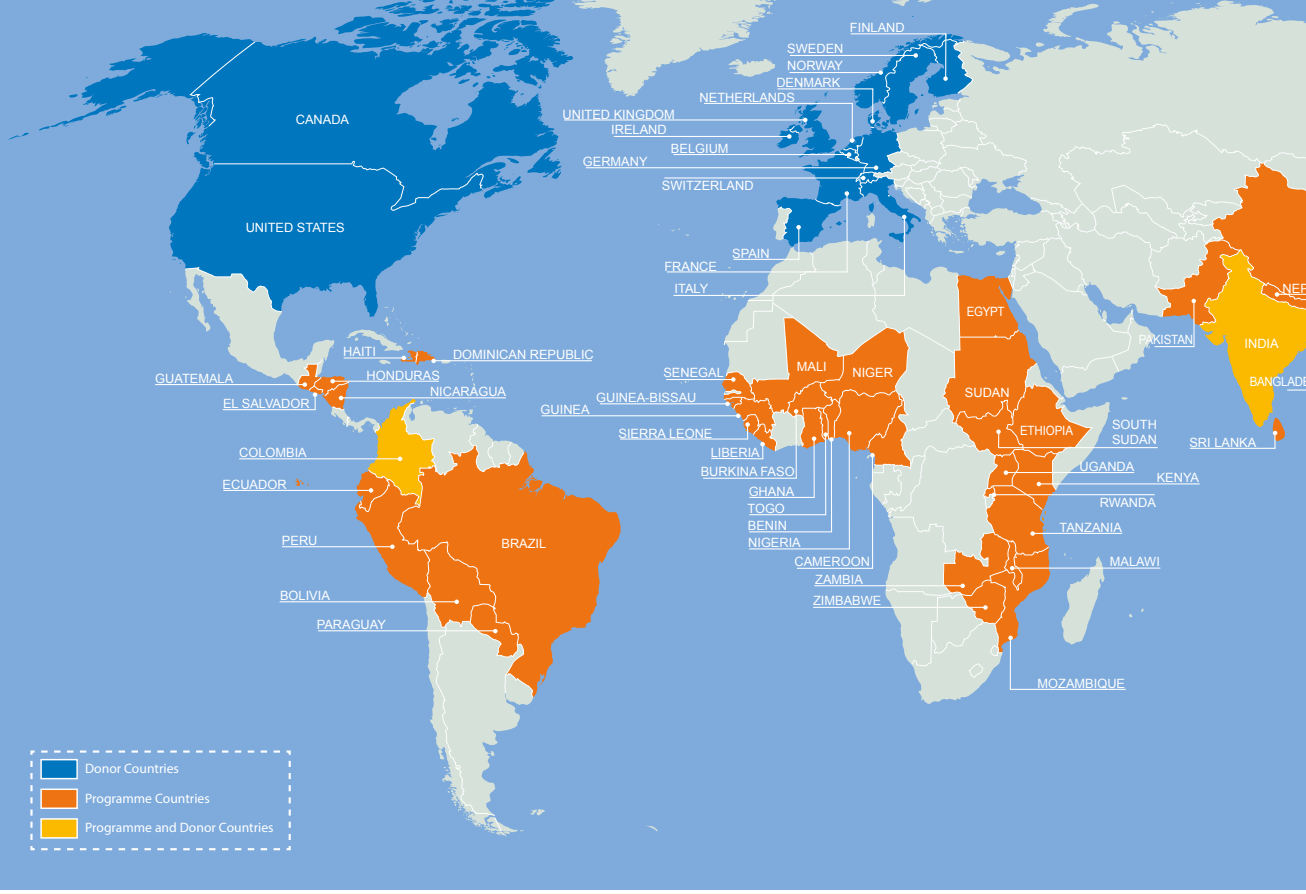
Goal 1: Girls' education to prioritised by world leaders
Goal 2: Girls' completion of a quality secondary education to be a major focus of international action
Goal 3: Funding for girls' education to be increased
Goal 4: An end to child marriage
Goal 5: An end to gender-based violence in and around schools
Goal 6: Girls and boys to participate in decision-making and inspire those with power to take action.

The 'State of the World's Girls' annual reports provide tangible proof of the inequalities which still exist between girls and boys, and support the campaign with specific girl-oriented evidence. The reports give concrete recommendations for the campaign to take forward on ways to tackle gender inequality and ensure that every girl is able to realise her full potential.

Because I am a Girl will drive a global movement to transform power relations so that girls everywhere learn, lead, decide and thrive.

Join in and take action at:
plan-international.org/girls

Where Plan International works



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About Plan International

Plan International is an independent global child-rights development organisation committed to enabling vulnerable and marginalised children (and young people) to be free of the effects of poverty. By actively connecting committed people with powerful ideas, we work together to make positive, deep-rooted and long-lasting changes in children's and young people's lives.

For almost 80 years, we have worked with children, communities and partners to identify and actively challenge the deep-rooted causes and effects of inequality and social injustice that hold children back from achieving their full potential, from the local to the national and global level.

As well as preparing for and responding to children's immediate and humanitarian needs, such as in times of disasters, conflict and emergencies, we work together to transform laws, policies and practices to help secure more long-lasting changes in children's lives.

Studying mechanics in South Sudan.

PLAN INTERNATIONAL/JIRO OSE

We see a direct link between fulfilling rights and ending child poverty. We know that when girls and boys and their communities have the skills, knowledge and confidence they need to claim their rights, they are in a stronger position to challenge the effects of poverty and to participate in creating lasting changes in their lives and the lives of others.

We recognise that discrimination against girls and women is one of the main underlying causes of child poverty. While girls and boys have the same entitlements to human rights, they face different challenges in accessing them. By investing in girls and young women, and improving access to their rights, we can make a significant impact on ending poverty, not only for the girls themselves but also for their families, communities and countries. Everyone benefits, including boys and men.

As a catalyst of social change, we work with, inspire and support children and their communities around the world to collaborate in powerful partnerships through high-quality and effective programmes. Together we work to ensure the services children are entitled to are available, strengthened and protected. We are committed to ensuring every child has the opportunity to grow up empowered, healthy, educated, protected, valued and respected, in their own community and beyond.

Before acting, we listen, learn and reflect. We harness the local knowledge, wisdom and ideas of children, their families and communities and combine these with our broader collective knowledge and development experience to generate practical and adaptable solutions. We then connect these with the people and partners who share our quest for social justice. Using tried and tested methods, as well as bold, innovative solutions, we address the ever-changing challenges children and young people face.

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