

# Real Choices, Real Lives: Ten Years On





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## Background to the study

*"I don't know. I would like to play ball. The boys could do the things the girls do... Why not?"*

Samara, Brazil

In 2006 Plan International UK began a unique UK Department for International Development funded research study following a group of 142 girls from Benin, Brazil, Cambodia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, the Philippines, Togo, Uganda and Vietnam.

*Samara and her brother, Brazil, 2016*



The aim of this groundbreaking study was to track a cohort of girls from birth to 18 to gain an understanding of the reality of their daily lives. **Real Choices, Real Lives** documents the experiences of the girls and their families and helps to put a human face on the statistics, theories and academic discussions on poverty and gender inequality.

This year, the girls turned ten – and, as they reach adolescence in the first year of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), we are reflecting on their lives and the study's findings to date.

When Plan International UK began the study in 2006, the world was six years into the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and it was clear that these goals were unlikely to be achieved unless girls' rights and gender equality were properly embedded and understood.<sup>1</sup> Our 'Because I am a Girl' campaign put girls' rights at the centre of a global movement for gender equality. Gradually the lives and needs of girls and young women and their role in achieving the MDGs came to the attention of policy makers and funders.

Today, the Sustainable Development Goals include Goal 5, which sets out to 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls'. Our findings make clear that to achieve the SDGs, and especially Goal 5, by 2030, girls and women must be empowered to play an equal part in the implementation of, and benefit equally from, all goals.

Through this innovative study tracking a small group of girls from birth to adulthood, we are monitoring the impact of the development goals on their lives.

## The study: Turning ten

Ten years of gathering in-depth qualitative data has enabled us to identify the influences shaping the girls' lives as they approach adolescence. We can see how family dynamics, economic status and the physical and cultural environment interact to offer opportunity or to impede progress. This longitudinal approach allows us to analyse the

most powerful individual and collective factors exerting control over the lives, and gender roles, of the girls in our study.

Our annual interviews with the girls and their families are providing genuine insight into the way family and community shape girls' expectations of what they can do, and be, right from the very beginning. Over the last four years our researchers have been able to talk directly to this cohort of girls, following them into the world of middle childhood (ages five to nine), and now, as they turn ten, progressing to early adolescence.

Our understanding of this critical period in a girl's life is limited; there is little data available outside of this study. But it is a time when school, and life outside the family, takes on greater importance, when girls really begin to absorb what is expected of them as girls. We are seeing household chores, in many cases, become a dominant part of their daily routine and their own expectations of life begin to solidify. Our research suggests that for many girls this may be the period of life when limitations are set and fates are decided.

Our cohort of 142 girls is a small sample group, so it is important to be aware of its limitations. However, the detail of a longitudinal qualitative study does enable us to ask very specific questions with some chance of pulling out the threads of an answer, though not necessarily a solution. **Real Choices, Real Lives** is particularly interested in understanding the impact on girls' lives of the intersecting vulnerabilities of poverty, age and gender: will this triple lock continue to hold back girls and young women in the generations to come?

## Methodology

This study employs a largely qualitative methodology and is embedded in a feminist research perspective which aims to reject power hierarchies and gender discrimination. It builds upon a life course approach, focusing its attention on critical transition points, and on how the influences in early girlhood and middle childhood will define girls' later lives. When the study began, it was rooted in principles of grounded theory,<sup>2</sup> based upon data systematically gathered and analysed, with some central lines of inquiry mirroring the Millennium Development Goals.

This cohort started in 2006. The sample group are all from countries where Plan International UK works. The sampling was purposive, and each country was requested to sample in this way:

## CASE STUDY : Helen, El Salvador

Helen has expressed a lot of resentment about the chores she has to do because she is a girl, and is very aware of the restrictions placed on her life. She is a resistor, but not entirely successfully, it seems: her ideas and identity remain very bound up with her domestic duties.

***"Since boys know that girls are the ones that mop and stuff like that, they don't – they play... That's wrong, because I wish I could play, but sometimes they don't let me."***

Helen is also angry at not being allowed in places like the sports field, which the boys dominate, or to do the activities, like playing football, that they do.

Yet social pressures are strong, and Helen, despite her anger at the limitations imposed on her, already sees her life in terms of domestic work. This year our researcher commented that **"when we asked her what types of things girls her age should have, such as values, opinions or material goods, she seemed to be unable to grasp the idea of anything other than chores."**

The next few years will reveal whether Helen and the others in the 'resistor' group will continue resisting into adolescence. If they do, we need to understand the factors that fuel this resistance and how it will impact on the course of their lives.

- 50 per cent urban; 50 per cent rural.
- Born between 1 January 2006 and 31 December 2006.
- Family income: low (self-defined, using Plan International Country Office indicators).

## Theoretical framework

The **Real Choices, Real Lives** research is following girls growing up in the 21st century in the context of grinding poverty surrounded by social norms that either inhibit or support their progress. In order to examine girls' development in this way, the research makes the connection across two approaches: capabilities<sup>3</sup> and the study of social norms.<sup>4</sup>

It enables us to understand better the impact on women's and girls' capabilities, agency and choice when resources are scarce, how they adapt, and the impact of coping on their capabilities and personal empowerment. The application of life course analysis to the data helps us understand girls' progress and factors that support or impinge on the development of their capabilities, over a period of time.

## Social norms – Acceptors, consenters, resisters

All of the girls in the study are aware of the social rules and structures that surround their home life, their relationships with family members and their school activities. Questions about household chores and play reveal



early differences surrounding the families' expectations of what girls and boys can do, and the girls in the study reflected this from a young age. Not all the girls are quite so convinced by the social norms they face, and the extent to which girls agree with or challenge this stereotyping varies. Our analysis over the last two years has identified three groups amongst the girls and their families, largely categorised as follows:

- The 'acceptors' – those who do not appear to question gender norms;
- The 'consenters' – those who demonstrate attitudes which question gender norms but do not feel able or want to challenge them;
- The 'resistors' – those who challenge gender norms both in their attitudes and their behaviours.

Although these categories are proving useful to our analysis, the girls do not always fit neatly into the categories of acceptor, consenter or resistor. They have changed over time and will continue to do so.

### Emerging themes and findings

Ten years into our research, the evidence demonstrates that the families in our study live

in the context of gradual economic decline and are responding in complex and diverse ways to the situation in which they find themselves. Several girls and their families have become both economically and socially marginalised during the time we have been tracking them, limiting the potential for these girls' capabilities to develop as they grow up.

The study is also tracking changing attitudes, and it is likely that the high aspirations held by most of the girls and their parents will help shift social expectations around girls' potential and their gender roles. This progress is more likely to take place in communities where the girls are the first generation to have access to secondary or post-secondary education.

### Education

Over the ten years of the study, education has been of central importance to the families of the cohort girls. By 2010, at the age of four, almost half of the girls – 46 per cent across the seven countries where this was reported – had already started to attend pre-school.

Mothers in particular want their daughters to have ***“a better life”*** and see education as the key to this. The majority of the girls' parents are poorly educated, with the men generally having a slightly higher level of education than their wives. Parental education levels are a good indicator of how children will get on at school and in higher education, so it is clear that the girls we are following already have barriers to overcome.<sup>5</sup>

Tapenensi's mother in Uganda told us: ***“It's good to educate a girl, because nowadays women are taking up leadership positions in politics.”***

Primary education is meant to be free in all nine countries in Plan's study. However, in many cases some kind of fee is in fact charged. As is evident from the responses from families in the study, poverty means parents struggle with education costs, particularly as their families grow; by 2012, 90 per cent of families were reporting some costs involved in sending their children to school. These range from school fees to books and stationery, uniforms and shoes, transport and examination fees.

Over the years, enrolment and attendance rates have fluctuated. In 2014, although 95 per cent of the girls, then aged eight, were enrolled, 55 per cent were not attending school regularly. There were a number of different reasons given: ill health, poor weather conditions and the expense of fees, lunch

Anny, Dominican Republic, 2014



money and equipment. In some countries this figure was worryingly high: in El Salvador 90 per cent of girls were missing school regularly, in Cambodia and Uganda, the figure was 83 per cent. A year later, again despite a 95 per cent enrolment rate, almost a quarter of the girls regularly failed to attend or had missed more than a month of school in the past year.

There are a range of barriers to education discussed during the interviews, including the costs of school, tensions between school and household chores, illness, violence in school, including corporal punishment and bullying, early pregnancy, early marriage, and issues with teacher attendance or quality of teaching and girls' lack of interest.

The families' commitment to girls' education has certainly stood the test of time. But as we have seen, this commitment is under stress from poverty, poor health, fears for their daughters' safety, the variable quality of the education being received and the seemingly inevitable encroachment of domestic responsibilities.

## Health

The interplay of economic and environmental stress which affects a family's ability to feed their children may have far-reaching effects on the development of the now ten-year-olds in our study – undermining their general health and emotional wellbeing and affecting their ability to study and attend school.<sup>6</sup>

In six of the cohort countries, all the girls had been immunised at birth and 93 per cent have birth registration certificates, vital documentation for accessing health and education services.

Few families have introduced the discussion around sexual health with the girls, even when early pregnancy is cited as one of the barriers to girls' education. Marcelle's family in Benin told us: ***"At school, the teachers talk to them about unwanted pregnancies, at home the NGO comes around to repeat the same thing. We try to introduce the subject gently because our daughters are still young."***

This year it was clear that many of the girls were aware of changes to their bodies and some mentioned that they had not yet started their periods. However, their lack of understanding about sexual and reproductive health issues was clear across a range of interviews.

As they get older, information around sexual and reproductive health will be crucial for the girls in our study. Not only is pregnancy a major cause of girls leaving school early, it can also be fatal. Complications during pregnancy and



childbirth are one of the leading causes of death for girls aged 15 to 19.<sup>7</sup>

*Airesh and her family, Philippines, 2016*

## Income and economics

Over the past four years, there has been a gradual economic deterioration across all nine countries in the study. In 2016, 71 per cent of families reported that their economic situation had either worsened or remained the same.

The economic realities of the families taking part in the research are tough. Most of them are subsistence farmers, struggling to make a living from the land that surrounds them. Seasonal drought, flooding and heavy rain dictate the success or failure of their agriculture-based livelihoods. Some supplement their income by small-scale trading. From 2009, families taking part in the study began to report a regular annual shortage of food for three months of the year, a 'hungry season', or difficulty in affording food during part of each month. In 2016, 23 families across the study reported seasonal food shortages. As farmers, they depend on a good harvest and sufficient labour and even a small change in their circumstances or one bad harvest can have major implications. Chhea's mother in Cambodia told us in 2011: ***"This year the rice yield is not so good because I'm pregnant and cannot work and we do not have much money to hire labour for transplanting and harvesting."***





*Thuong and her grandfather, Vietnam, 2013*

These fluctuations in the weather bring hardship everywhere and most families report borrowing (with low or no interest) from relatives, friends or neighbours when they are in financial trouble.

By 2016, as the majority of the families in the study were reporting rising prices, it was increasingly evident that the families who have multiple income streams are more robust when it comes to dealing with wider economic change.

This year, 37 families reported receiving some form of government support. Most of these families live in Brazil, the Dominican Republic, the Philippines and Vietnam, with further instances of social protection schemes in El Salvador, Cambodia and Uganda. Yet overall most families are operating on a knife-edge: dependent on help from family, friends and neighbours, on their own continuing good health, and on the weather.

## Migration

Since 2010, when we looked closely at the issue of migration, dependence on remittances from family members working abroad has, in many countries, increased. At the same time, the global economic downturn has put these jobs and salaries at risk.<sup>8</sup>

The numbers of girls in the study being brought up by grandparents, often because their mothers or fathers have migrated for work, has increased from eight in 2012 to 17 in 2014. By 2016, 28 girls were reported as living with grandparents, though not all are being brought up solely by them. These more permanent separations have major implications for those, including the girls in our study, who remain behind.

For example, the migration of parents and siblings, driven by poverty, has an impact on the emotional wellbeing and, sometimes, physical safety of those left behind. Household responsibilities can increase when mothers are absent, meaning less time for homework. It can also lead to a greater identification with domestic and caring work, which can affect girls' ambitions, and leave them without role models.

## Gender-based violence

The lives of many of the girls taking part in the cohort study have already been affected, either directly or indirectly, by violence. In their homes and communities, gender-based violence is by no means rare.

By 2013 concerns about violence, including sexual violence, in the communities was on the increase, possibly in response to the girls' increased exposure to the outside world. And now, at ten years old, some of the girls in our study have reported violence at school, or affecting their friends.

The 2011 life-history interviews with the fathers in the study show how the violence that was integral to their own upbringing is now shaping their notions of masculinity – almost all of them were beaten as children, either by their own parents, by other relatives or by teachers. Discussions with the girls' fathers also illustrate how boys can become conditioned to the idea that married men are expected to control their wives and punish their children.

The girls and their families raise a range of violence issues:

- Sexual violence: Parental fear of sexual violence is one of the factors inhibiting girls' progress.
- School-related gender-based violence continues to be a concern. For the girls in

the study who dislike school, their primary reason is violence from teachers and from other children.

- Harmful practices: the girls in our study are at risk from harmful practices such as Female Genital Mutilation which have been entrenched in some communities for centuries, such as in Togo.
- Child marriage: many of the girls in our study have mothers, sisters or other female relatives who were married early. Many families described girls locally getting married at 12, 13, 14 and 15.

The interviews from El Salvador this year reveal that many of these ten-year-olds live in fear of violence. Their interviews tell of rape and abduction, of drunken men who harass girls in the park, of gangs, of parents desperately trying to protect their daughters and of not being safe on your own.

Overall, it is clear that the experiences of the girls in the cohort reflect those of girls around the world, in terms of their exposure to gender-based violence.

## Disasters

Several of the countries – the Philippines, Vietnam and El Salvador – are at particular risk of natural disasters: in the 2013 World Risk Report, the Philippines was ranked the third-highest out of 172 countries and El Salvador the ninth.<sup>9</sup> That same year, when adolescent girls from three cohort communities took part in group discussions analysing the impact of natural disasters on girls and young women, one of the key issues raised concerned their psychological effects.

Girls in the Philippines explained the sense of vulnerability they felt during the typhoons that affected their country. They felt *“shy”* and *“not comfortable”* when having to take shelter in other people’s homes during an emergency. Fifteen-year-old Liezel also felt frightened: *“Sometimes, it’s scary, especially when it’s time to sleep, because the male in that house might be lusting over a girl.”* When asked if this had happened during a disaster, she replied *“yes”* and added: *“But that’s the only house you can go to when there is a typhoon. So your feeling of fear, you’ll just have to bear that.”*

## Expectations and discrimination

In 2014 it was clear from our interviews with the eight-year-old girls in the cohort that by this age the gender identities of the girls,

and the boys around them, were largely fully formed. Play had become increasingly gendered and the girls we talked to were becoming aware of the differences between how girls and boys spend their time and where they are allowed to go.

Our research demonstrates that the families and communities in our study are already making progress. Aspirations for their daughters have undoubtedly grown, as has their respect for girls’ education. But the forces of expectation, the notions of masculine and feminine in place for generations, are proving very strong. This is not surprising; these rules and expectations “that distinguish expected behaviour on the basis of gender”<sup>10</sup> are all about power.

Discrimination, manifested in fixed rules and roles, are prevalent in all nine countries in the study, varying in levels and visibility. Analysing the household division of labour amongst the families and the accompanying gender roles and responsibilities is a good way to measure levels of equality in the household.

## A woman’s work: the division of labour

*“We teach her to wash dishes and sweep as a preparation for the future.”*

Hadidjatou’s mother, Togo, 2014

It is interesting that notions of equality and shared responsibility in the area of financial

*Hadidjatou, Togo, 2012*





decision making have shown strong inter-generational shifts, with many of the women in our study having more say in the household economy than they would have done in the past. But there is one area of domestic life which is proving less amenable to change. The girls have noticed that very few men or boys do household chores and the labour divide in most families is strictly gendered. This year, 107 of the families (89 per cent) reported that women and girls do most of the work at home. Ten families share equally and only in three are men and boys taking on most of the domestic chores.

Darlin, from El Salvador, does a lot of chores in her household, and considers it a way of life for girls which is not worth questioning: ***“I wash the dishes, sweep, organise. Nobody decides this. I just do it.”***

In 2015, when she was nine, Juliet told us that on school mornings: ***“I just wake up and***

***prepare to go to school. After school I fetch water, wash plates and play.”***

On average, the girls in the study spend 68 minutes per day on domestic tasks; the average hides the fact that for some girls this means four or five hours spent daily on chores. The household work that girls do is perceived to have no monetary value and remains unpaid, unlike the tasks handed over to boys. As well as having less to do in the home, boys are generally tasked with supporting their fathers as the family breadwinner, often acquiring skills they will go on to use as adults, and socialising boys to be producers of wealth.

### **An equal division: girls’ right to inheritance**

Another aspect of family life which appears to be undergoing change is inheritance and this too is a useful indicator of progress towards gender equality. Inheritance is an area where the influence of social norms and customs can clearly be seen in the gap that exists between the law and reality. In every one of the cohort countries, the law designates that women and men, particularly as offspring but also as spouses, have equal inheritance rights. However, in Benin, Togo and Uganda customary law is in direct conflict with this ruling. In other countries the law is either not known or can be ignored, as the property owner is designated as the ultimate decision maker.

In Benin several fathers acknowledged the practice of boys inheriting but were inclined to change it. Marcelle’s father told researchers: ***“Men and women belong to the family and should both benefit from the inheritance. I believe that my goods will be divided equally among all my children. In order to ensure that this happens, I will gather my children and give them my instructions.”*** Other families are sticking with what they know. Eloise’s mother told us that this is because ***“when girls become adults, they throw in their lot with their husbands”***.

### **Hopes for the future**

Consolata’s mother in Benin articulated in 2012: ***“They say that by educating a girl, you educate a nation. I agree; if I had had more schooling, I would be a professional today. I hope that my daughter is able to complete her education in my place.”***

The past ten years have taught us that the parents’ commitment to their daughters’ future

Juliet and  
her sisters,  
Uganda, 2016







is vested in their vision of education. There is still the sense that a girl's path is also to be a wife and mother, but not before finishing school. Parental aspirations also include that their daughters go out to work. Studying hard, earning your own money is the way to a good life, although it is recognised that women still have to do housework and this double burden remains an obstacle to progress.

*"I will be a doctor and focus on general care. I want to become a doctor because I want to be a rich person."*

Sipha, Cambodia

The girls themselves have ambitions for their futures that involve both staying in school and studying further for professional qualifications. This has not changed since, at age six, they reported that they wanted to be teachers, nurses and doctors.

If we go back to our earlier questions it would seem that mothers', and fathers', high hopes for their daughters are also grounded in the reality of their lives. They know that to give their daughters equality of opportunity with their sons, family life will have to change

and that this will be difficult. They know that education is the way out of poverty but have to cope also with the knowledge that a lack of money may be one of the factors preventing their daughters from fulfilling their dreams.

## Conclusions

Over the ten years of the study, several key themes have emerged. Although the environments and contexts are different across the nine countries, the evidence surrounding the relationships between poverty, gender and age-based inequality is consistent across our findings.

Our analysis of girls' lives finds that critical factors for gender equality include the period of early childhood; the impact of poverty; and the strengths of social norms governing women and girls' behaviour.

From the ten years of data we have a greater understanding of the barriers to gender equality, and some early indications of how these can be broken down. We also have an insight into how attitudinal change happens, and the importance of reinforcing girls' confidence and capabilities.

*Sipha and her father, Cambodia, 2016*

*Melissa and  
her mother,  
El Salvador, 2016*



By bringing these findings together, we can reflect on their implications for the implementation of the SDGs. It is clear that women and girls must be at the heart of efforts to achieve gender equality and the SDGs, as all the goals are connected and influenced by gender equality.

### **Life cycle approaches must include early childhood**

There is evidence that by the age of five both girls and boys have already internalised the gender roles they are expected to play and the status that these roles will or will not give them.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, influences during early childhood really do shape attitudes. Early years stimulation such as pre-school and community-based facilities like playgroups and playgrounds<sup>12</sup> can be vital. Growing up without such stimulation, girls may lack the skills and confidence they need to make the decisions that will have a positive impact on their lives: for example, how long they should remain in school and when they should get married.

### **The impact of poverty**

Poverty is multi-dimensional and goes beyond income poverty. Girls bear the brunt of poverty in many societies: they are often the first in a household to drop out of school, or miss out

on food if their families are living in poverty. These are some of the most evident – but by no means the only – gendered impacts of poverty on girls' lives.

Through our study we have also seen how the constraints of poverty affect attitudinal change, as families struggle to compete with the embedded perceptions of what girls and boys do – at home, at school and in the wider world.

For example, lack of money all too quickly corrodes opportunity and forces people back on old ways. Girls from the poorest 20 per cent of households are over three times more likely to marry under the age of 18 than those from the richest homes.<sup>13</sup> In poor families, child marriage may ensure that a daughter is married to someone with enough money to feed her.

### **Barriers and progress**

Girls' and women's close identification with their domestic roles can also be a barrier to gender equality. Many mothers and grandmothers in the study, despite their own anger at the division of labour and their lack of power, find it hard to defend their daughters. As we look at ten years of research findings, we can see that progress towards gender equality includes: greater diversity in control



over family finances, a stated commitment to girls' education, a change in attitudes towards inheritance rights, and a greater resistance by mothers and daughters to the status quo.

Power dynamics have shifted in many families as the comprehensive interviews with the girls' mothers in 2012 revealed, but as this cohort reach adolescence it looks only too likely that the rigid demarcations between them and their brothers will remain largely intact.

## Lessons for the SDGs

If we don't change existing unequal gender structures and social norms, the gender roles assigned to men and women, girls and boys, will keep girls tied into domestic life. This means they will have limited mobility or independence, and little chance to recognise and develop their talents or realise their ambitions.

Through the Sustainable Development Goals, governments have committed to a comprehensive, ambitious agenda. The Goals aim to end poverty and hunger, promote health, quality education, achieve gender equality, and protect our planet, as just five of the 17 goals.

The **Real Choices, Real Lives** study clearly demonstrates how closely all the dimensions of development are interlinked: how poverty has an impact on both health and education, as does hunger. Without adequate food, girls will find it hard to study and without quality

education for girls and young women, gender equality will remain elusive.

Therefore, to achieve all the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, governments must take action to ensure girls and women are empowered to play an equal part in the implementation of, and benefit equally from, all goals. None of the goals can be achieved without progress on other areas in the framework. Overall, our findings highlight the need for comprehensive, holistic approaches to meeting the SDGs and achieving gender equality.

The first ten years of **Real Choices, Real Lives** has shown us that many of the girls in our study – the consenters and the resisters – are questioning the roles assigned to them. *"It's not fair"* is one of the most consistent refrains in the girls' interviews. The question is, will this continue? Will the consenters and resisters begin to accept the lives they see their mothers living, or will they reject permanently the customs and stereotypes of previous generations?

*"When I am 20 years old I am going to be a doctor. When I am 15 I am going to paint seashells, when I am ten I am going to play that game when you take a ball and throw it into the thing... ah, basketball."*

Melissa, aged nine, El Salvador

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*Above, from top: Girlie, Philippines; Huguette, Benin; Rudilania, Dominican Republic.  
Cover image: Marcelle, Benin, 2016.*

All photos: Plan International, with the exception of Rudilania photo 2 above: Plan International/Ricardo Piantini

In 2006 Plan International UK began a research study following a group of 142 girls and their families from nine countries across three continents (Brazil, Benin, El Salvador, Dominican Republic, Philippines, Togo, Uganda and Vietnam). The aim of the study was to track a cohort of girls from birth to 18 in order to better understand the reality of their daily lives. This report is the culmination of the first ten years of this primary research. The study documents the detailed experiences of the girls, their families and the environments they live in. It helps to put a human face on the available statistics, theories and academic discussions, including the voices of the girls themselves – describing their hopes and dreams and their daily realities. It provides genuine insight into the way family and community shape girls' expectations of what they can do, and be, right from the very beginning.

Plan International UK strives to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. As an independent development and humanitarian charity, we work alongside children, young people, supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children.

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