

# Because We are Girls

‘Real Choices, Real Lives’  
cohort study update



Girl, Benin.

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# REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES

The ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ study, now in its seventh year, is following 142 girls living in nine countries around the world – Benin, Togo, Uganda, Cambodia, Vietnam, Philippines, El Salvador, Brazil and the Dominican Republic. The study uses interviews and focus group discussions with relatives and community members to provide a detailed picture of the reality of the girls’ lives. Born during 2006, they all turn seven this year.

Last year, we reported on the reflections and experiences of the girls’ mothers through a series of life history interviews. We came to the conclusion that the girls’ mothers – women in their twenties and thirties – hold the key to their daughters’ futures in a way that no other generation of women has before. The main reason for this is that most of these women have had some level of formal education, and, as a result, are determined that their daughters too should go to school and so have the chance of greater gender equality and a more fulfilled life.

This year we will explore how, despite the promise this holds, daily life for these seven-year-olds and their families involves negotiating a series of risks and hazards, many of them unacknowledged and unrecognised.

With this in mind, we report on the girls’ progress as they grow up, exploring their education, their health and general wellbeing, and their families’ economic situation over the past year. What strategies are used by families and communities to mitigate the risks for girls? What interventions might be useful? Will the challenges of daily life, the discrimination which is entrenched in all societies, and the hazards to which girls are particularly vulnerable, mean that the obstacles in their way prove insurmountable as they approach adolescence?

## Risk factors for girls

It is not only major events such as flood, earthquake and war – internationally recognised disasters – to which girls and young women are especially vulnerable.

Many of the families in this study live in chronic poverty, threatened by food shortages, poor infrastructure and rising costs. For many, daily life is a struggle against impending personal disaster. These daily stresses are often overlooked but can have a significant impact on the ability of girls and young women to build social and economic capital, to stay alive and healthy, and to access education.

From an early age, girls in our study have been actively encouraged to imitate the work of their mothers and grandmothers. They engaged in play focused around domestic activities when they were younger, and as they get older, are given increased responsibility for household tasks. Now, almost all of them have regular chores to perform. Bianca, in Brazil, explains: *“I do some things in the house when I arrive from school: I sweep the floor, clean the sofa, make the bed, and sweep the terrace and the backyard.”* Thearika’s mother, in Cambodia, told us: “She wakes up at 6 am, cleans her teeth, takes a bath by herself. She helps to take care of my small baby and then has breakfast before she walks to

school. It’s about 10 minutes away. In the afternoon, she looks after her brother when he is sleeping, for around three hours.” Our research also reveals the extent of daily risk faced by girls because of their gender roles and responsibilities. These more prosaic causes of injury and indeed death tend to be under-reported. In our own small study, six girls have sadly died; at least two of them as a result of household accidents – one involving a cooking fire in the home, another drowned while in a nearby river, used in place of adequate sanitation facilities.

During research interviews over the past six years we have explored the steps families take to reduce risk in order to protect their daughters. In some cases that very protection limits a girl’s opportunities by



Girl, Brazil.

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Girl and her mother, Cambodia.

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keeping her at home. Away from school, she has less access to information or chance to build her skills. The undermining of health and livelihood caused by chronic food shortages creates other risks and hazards. These ultimately affect girls’ and young women’s opportunities to pursue formal education. Families take action to anticipate, mitigate, prepare for and recover from hardship and this is critical for girls as they grow up. Many parents are aware that education is key to risk reduction, but sending their daughters to school is not always a simple matter of choice or desire.

## Coping with financial and environmental stress

All of the families taking part in our study reported that prices have increased over the past year. With the exception of the Vietnamese families, all stated that the price of food has risen, by up to one third in some cases. Some explained that this was seasonal; others that the price-hike was unusually high. In Vietnam, the increases were limited to agricultural inputs. The impact on these rural household incomes was devastating. Hoa’s father gave his view: “A combination of the rise in fuel price and in Chinese-food imports has increased the price of the inputs we need for our agricultural activities. But the price at which we can sell produce has decreased.” The impact of macro-economics on household finances can be stark for families, especially those who are worse off, who often spend up to 90 per cent of their income on basic

necessities. Several studies have shown how girls and women tend to fare worse when families are affected by financial hardship over long periods of time.<sup>1</sup>

A significant number of the families explained how seasonal drought, flooding and heavy rain had an impact on their daily lives. The increasing risk associated with climate change affects growing seasons and harvests, directly impacting on family finances. Almost all of the families routinely report crop failures, increased local food prices and food shortages at various points in the year. Sometimes, the impact can be more dramatic. The street where Amanda and her family live in Brazil does not have asphalt or sanitation. There is a large stream flowing just by the family’s front door. The annual rainy season causes floods and mud slides, bringing risks to the lives of many in Amanda’s community. In El Salvador, Bessy’s mother worries about the ever-present threat of landslides during the annual hurricane season. She also explained how the families in her community now have to collect water from further away as their water source is drying up.



Girl and her father, Vietnam.

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Girl, Benin.

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Most families reported on a range of coping strategies for dealing with financial and environmental stress. Many stated that they do without particular food items, but on the whole, they have been able to feed their families. In Benin, however, Eleanor's family reported that during the annual food shortages they reduce the number of meals they eat from three to two per day. Others, such as Sharina's family in the Dominican Republic, adapted their own agricultural production to suit their needs when local food prices rose beyond their reach. In Uganda, a recent drought was named *Olukoba* – or cassava – after the only food families had available to them. Justine's father explained how people had to look for odd and casual jobs, brick-making or working on the farms of the rich, in order to buy *olukoba*.

A small number of families reported that despite their best efforts, their situation is slowly declining. Lina's mother, in Cambodia, explained how the family has



Girl and her family, Dominican Republic.

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been surviving for the past year: "We eat rice soup, and sometimes we supplement with [rice] noodles. For almost a year, we have not had enough food for our family. Sometimes when the children return home from a morning at school, there is no food. They simply eat rice." Malnutrition creates cycles of disadvantage that children will carry with them throughout their lives. Children and young people who suffer from hunger in their growing years often continue to be malnourished into adulthood.<sup>2</sup> They may never regain the weight they lost when food was short, their longer-term health is affected, and their cognitive abilities are impaired.<sup>3</sup> Girls carry this cycle of malnutrition with them into motherhood.<sup>4</sup>

In some families, the coping strategy is increased reliance on a complex web of social networks. A growing number of the girls taking part in our study live with their grandparents, while their parents seek work in towns or cities. In Vietnam, Tien's grandparents care for her. Her grandfather explains his joy when Tien enrolled in school and how his happiness was accompanied by fear: "We were very happy but we were worried at the same time. Her mother is a widow. Our economic situation is hard. We're afraid that if we cannot afford to support her studying, she will not have good future." He adds: "We will support her in studying, depending on her ability, so that her life will not be as hard as ours." Others rely on family members, neighbours and friends for loans to pay school fees, childcare and food. Sometimes food is exchanged among families. Most reported that they have to borrow money in an emergency; very few have savings.

#### STATE SUPPORT

In Latin America and Asia a growing number of social protection or welfare schemes offer critical support for families with limited economic means. Some families in our study have benefited from a World Food Programme food-for-work scheme in El Salvador, from the Brazilian government's Bolsa Familia social protection scheme, from the Philippines' 4-Ps social protection and community-work programmes, and from Solidaridad, the Dominican Republic government's welfare programme.



Girl and her grandparents, Vietnam.

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For the most part, educating children forms a significant aspect of the families' expenditure. When the economic burden increases, families often feel that they are left with no choice but to make a decision about which child can continue to attend school. Over the past year, these kinds of decisions have had no impact on the girls in our study. However, in the Philippines, where the families taking part in the study are bigger, the girls' parents have discussed the kinds of strategic decisions they are forced to take about their older children's schooling. In Uganda, Justine's father explains that his older daughter, is at diploma level "but this term she won't go to school. I don't have money. She was doing finance and accounting." His older son, however, has had the opportunity to continue his education and is now at university. Ladi's family in Togo, meanwhile, reports that the cost of sending five children to school is easily affordable. The family has multiple sources of income, savings, and enough resources to be able to see both their sons' and daughters' education as an investment, with the potential to provide valuable returns.

#### Girls' education – 'she's only six and she can write her own name'

Almost all of the girls taking part in the 'Real Choices, Real Lives' study are in primary school and we are beginning to analyse how their families engage with their education. First, we asked their parents to tell us more about the girls' first day at school. Most families described a day filled with pride,

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happiness and hopefulness. However, like many parents around the world, some experienced a day where their anxieties for their daughters' futures were at the forefront of their minds. Thom's mother in Vietnam explained: "I was worried that she would find it difficult to fit in with the new environment at school. I was also concerned about her journey to school and how we could arrange to pick her up on time." Almost all of the families explained how they prepared carefully for the girls' first day, using scarce funds, in some cases borrowing money, to purchase uniforms and equipment. Sharina's mother, from the Dominican Republic, affirmed: "When you have a child and they are going to school and you are helping them, you feel really happy. She used to cry a lot because she wanted to go to school and so I took her and I enrolled her."

These are indications of the investment parents are making in their daughters' schooling. We estimate that families are spending between 5 and 30 per cent of household income on education-related expenses over the course of the school year. State primary education is free to students in all countries taking part in our study.<sup>5</sup> However, many of the families reported the financial burden of the hidden costs – uniforms, shoes, meals, books, pencils and



Girl and her mother, Vietnam.





Girl, Dominican Republic.

other equipment. Some poorly resourced schools even require families to pay for furniture. After food, the cost of educating children is the families' biggest expense. Costs are greater for the small number of families who have chosen to send their girls to private schools. Catherine's mother in Benin pays for extra tuition in addition to private school fees. "When she comes home from school I tell her to revise her lessons; she is also monitored by a teacher who comes to the house and helps her where she has some weaknesses. We pay for his services." She explains: "We spend a third of our annual income on schooling the children."

We assessed the family members' practical engagement with the girls' education as a measure of how engaged they might be as the girls grow up. In Brazil, Juliana's mother went to the school to complain about the new teacher who was missing classes. This led to the teacher's attendance improving. She now feels that she must be "visible and present at the school, as a monitor of the teachers' and school's performance" and is relishing this new responsibility. Saidy's grandmother, in the Dominican Republic, indicated her commitment to her granddaughter's education by deciding when she would start school and reorganising household duties so that Saidy would have sufficient time for her schoolwork. A small number of families reported that the girls themselves encouraged their parents to send them to school, looking up to older siblings and wanting to join them. In Benin, Thea's mother explained how "one day Thea followed her older siblings to school on her own initiative. She told the headmistress that she wanted to start school!"

## SCHOOLS – SAFE SPACES FOR GIRLS?

Parents send their daughters to school with the aim of ensuring a bright and secure future. As confirmed in our study, parents have high expectations of their daughters' educational outcomes. However, the girls taking part in our study are already reporting incidences of routine violence they face at the hands of their teachers. Their own accounts of the risk of violence inside schools should not be overlooked. Corporal punishment is a gendered practice where teachers and school authorities attempt to control girls and boys.<sup>6</sup> As girls approach adolescence, the risk of sexual violence and other forms of gender-based violence in and around schools will increase.<sup>7</sup> This has an impact on girls' educational experiences and outcomes, and is one of the reasons adolescent girls cite for dropping out of school.

But many girls and their parents give their teachers good reports. Six-year-old Lelem, in Togo, holds her 'lady' teacher in high regard. Both she and her grandmother have mentioned how well they feel she is teaching and supporting Lelem. Hoa's mother, in Vietnam, reflects: "Her teacher is a middle-aged woman and she is really kind and considerate towards pupils." In the Philippines has this to say about her daughter Kyla's teacher: "You can see that she really loves her work." Katerin's mother in the Dominican Republic, says: "The teacher is good. She is good, not like those teachers who like hitting children."



Girl and her mother, Benin.



Girl, Benin.

Now that most of the girls are in formal education, we can also see more clearly how their parents' own educational opportunities might affect them. Bianca's mother had no formal education herself. She is supportive of her children's education, but is unable to practically assist them with their homework. She notes that Bianca is progressing well, however. "She is six years old and she can already write her own name... I can't read or write so I cannot help her. She tells me when she has homework. Bianca's older brother helps her when he gets home."

Layla's mother in Benin, explains how she would like to support her daughter's learning more but cannot as she has had no formal education herself.

Thearika's mother in Cambodia, on the other hand, explains: "She tells me about getting good scores at school. I always follow up her studies and [give her] extra teaching and additional explanation when she gets lower scores. I also help her prepare her school material and I take her to school." In Vietnam, Tien's grandparents, her main carers, have worked for the local government and the local health centre so have a clear understanding of her needs, and the knowledge and skills to support her at home with her education.

A significant number of the families are committed to their daughters' education in the long term and are planning for it. In Cambodia, Roumany's mother explains: "I have committed to send her to school until she finishes her bachelor's degree." Eleanor's

mother in Benin says: "I try not to give her household chores to do, so that she can have enough time for her lessons. I want her to finish college." She adds that pregnancy is among the things that might interrupt Eleanor's educational future. "To avoid this she will have to use family planning, but for the time being she is a small child." Eleanor's mother has told us of her determination for life to be better for all of her children, especially her daughters. Other mothers express concern about their ability to support their daughters over time. In Benin, Thea's mother says: "I want her to have her high school diploma. This is possible if she doesn't have to take any class twice. The reason for her early withdrawal from school would be the scarcity of financial means."

We are also learning just how much the quality of education the girls are receiving varies. Thom's mother in Vietnam told us: "She studies from 7.15 am to 10.30 am and from 1.30 pm to 4 pm. She has three afternoon classes a week. She learns literature, mathematics, handwriting practice, drawing, music and physical exercise. The school has a new gate and playing yard."

She is happy with Thom's teacher: "We can elect teachers for our children. I'm happy with the teaching methodology. I hope that there will be a class on information technology, so the pupils can have a chance to explore and take part in the mathematics contests on the internet." By contrast, the school facilities in rural Benin where Thea's goes to school are more basic, with larger student-teacher ratios and fewer facilities.

On the whole, the girls' parents are happy with their education. The majority of the girls attend school regularly and almost all of them are accompanied to school by an adult or an older sibling, or they travel to school with their friends. A small number of girls go on their own. Just over half attend a school day that consists of a morning session only. Schools in El Salvador, the Dominican Republic and the Philippines provide meals but those in the other countries in our study do not. Many families give the girls a small allowance to buy a snack during their day. Almost all the girls attend state, or government-run, schools.



## Reducing risk by 'protecting' girls

Now that the girls are getting older and are regularly attending school, we are seeing how this increased exposure to the world outside their homes is producing concerns about the risks they face. Other studies show that parental worries about the journey to school grow as girls approach puberty, when the risk of sexual assault is perceived to be greater.<sup>8</sup>

For now, most parents are concerned about their daughters having to cross busy roads or highways. Catherine's mother, in Benin, says: "The danger is that the school is located near the road at a crossroads, and therefore it is a very busy road." Tan's mother in Vietnam says: "There is a bridge without a railing on the way to school. We also pass a crowded road with a lot of vehicles." During the rainy season in El Salvador, Stephany could not get to school at all due to flooding. Her mother says: "When the waves are strong, the sea washes the street away. The cars can't pass and the children can't make their way along the path."



The risk of violence is also very real for some. In Brazil, six-year-old Amanda says: **"My mother does not allow me and my sister [outside] to play with boys."** Plan's researchers in the area confirm that the community is unsafe; there are regular reports of robberies, muggings, gang fights and murders. Researchers commented: "Amanda's family worries a lot about home security. They told me that they will make the backyard wall higher and install an electric fence." The research team also noted when they visited Bianca's home in another semi-urban Brazilian community that: "There is a very high risk at the moment; the electronic equipment used for the survey could be stolen, since the house is located in a very dangerous area and does not have the minimum level of security." Seven-year-old Juliana in Brazil remarks: **"I don't like the criminals in the street. I would like to be a lawyer and work in the courts to put the criminals in jail."**

In El Salvador, many of the families taking part in the study live in constant fear for their personal safety. Some of the girls' mothers are survivors of sexual violence. Grandmothers of girls in the Dominican Republic have expressed, in previous interviews, their worries about increased sexual violence in their communities. As confirmed by the older girls we interviewed in the Philippines, Vietnam and El Salvador, fears of sexual violence increase in times of uncertainty and disaster.

One strategy for protecting against sexual violence can be to keep girls at home, removing them from school entirely. Boys,

meanwhile, are not deemed to be at risk of sexual violence on the journey to school.<sup>9</sup> This situation can often expose the gap between the dreams and expectations of girls and their families (to attend secondary school or university), and the reality (to remain in the family home until marriage). Focus group discussions from our previous research in Brazil, Uganda and the Philippines illustrate the mismatch between the high educational expectations of girls and their parents, and the desire to protect girls and young women by restricting their movement to towns and cities.<sup>10</sup> This strategy of limiting the mobility of girls and young women has a direct impact on girls' educational and social outcomes and may actually increase their vulnerability.

While the girls are young, parents deal with these risks by ensuring that they are accompanied on their way to school. In Benin, Eleanor's mother explains: "Her journey to school is a 45-minute walk through the bush. She is accompanied by her older brother." In Vietnam, Yen's mother tells us: "She travels to school by bicycle with her friends. She has to pass the 50-metre main road, which is crowded with vehicles and dangerous. The rest of her way is safe. Recently, she had to miss three or four school days because of a bicycle crash that made her knees sore."



## Girls' health – reducing the burden of illness

As the study has progressed, we have seen fewer reports of serious illnesses, although a small number of girls were treated in hospital for various reasons this year. All have recovered well. The vast majority of the girls were treated in local pharmacies, health clinics or using traditional medicine – depending on the extent of their symptoms and the family finances. Nini-Rike's mother in Togo says: "She's fine. When she was last ill, I bought her paracetamol from the roadside because I had no money to go to the clinic. However, she often suffers from malaria." Lelem's grandmother in Togo says: "If she complains of stomach pains, I give her capsules; if headache, paracetamol. I usually pay for it, but often we use herbs. She used to complain of stomach pains. She had a hernia that was treated." In Vietnam, Yen's mother adds: "Due to the long distance from home to the health clinic, we often buy medicines for her from the pharmacy."

In the countries where malaria most affects families – Benin, Togo and Uganda – almost all of the girls in the study receive regular treatment for malaria, although some sleep under mosquito nets. There were



outbreaks of dengue fever in Cambodia, El Salvador and the Philippines. Both malaria and dengue fever are mosquito-borne diseases. Families in Cambodia have reported how the ongoing risk was reduced. Lina's mother related: "The local authority gave us a mosquito net. A lot of children and adults are affected by dengue fever. Health centre staff also promote how to prevent dengue fever." In the Dominican Republic, the local health team made regular visits to families with young children, advising them on health protection. In Vietnam, Tan's mother explained how earlier this year they were alerted to hand-foot-mouth disease. "The healthcare staff gave us fliers warning about the disease. Teachers also cleaned up the school's health clinic."

**'WE WOULD FEEL SAFER' – BUILDING LATRINES**

It is estimated that 2.6 billion people live without proper sanitation and 2.5 billion people have no sanitation facilities at all.<sup>11</sup> They practise open defecation, presenting significant risks for women and girls. In our study, a significant number of families do not regularly use adequate sanitation facilities. All of the families we interviewed who have inadequate sanitation reported that they would prefer

to have improved and safer facilities. Lina's mother in Cambodia explained that they defecate behind their house and said: "We do not feel good but we have no choice. We do not have enough money to build the latrine for our family." She added: "Of course, if we had a latrine at home, it would be good for women and girls. We would feel safer than when we defecate in a field or in the forest." In Togo, Nini-Rike's mother said, "We don't feel free easing ourselves in the bush and fear others watching us, as where we go is close to the main road. We hide behind the bushes." In El Salvador, Bessy's mother says that she and her daughters feel "uncomfortable and unsafe, and fear that we are being watched". Reine's father from Togo adds: "We have no latrine. We relieve ourselves behind the house. It is not proper for women but we don't have a choice since we do not have money to have one built for ourselves. It is only God who protects them."

**Conclusion**

Our annual interviews with these families show what life is like for the millions of people around the world who live in poverty and respond, on a daily basis, to a complex web of risks and hazards. The rising cost of living and the increasing risk of natural hazards is a constant worry for many of the families. Some are making strategic decisions that will ultimately ensure that they are less at risk. These include building strong social networks, increasing their livelihood opportunities and lessening the burden of household work on school-age girls.

Protecting against risk, however, can also mean limiting girls' movement and access to education. It is this interplay between financial pressure and increasing risk, as well as the pressure to conform by fulfilling gender stereotypes, that often drives the decisions made within families that ultimately affect girls.

We know that this generation of mothers is committed to supporting their daughters' right to education, demonstrating a determination also evident in the young girls themselves. It is in this determination that we can begin to see a brighter future for girls.



Girl and her mother, Vietnam.

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**REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES:  
Research from Philippines, El Salvador and Vietnam**

Earlier this year, we ran a series of focus group discussions with teenage girls from the same communities as the cohort study participants in the Philippines, El Salvador and Vietnam. Plan's researchers in each of the three countries also conducted in-depth interviews with the girls.

These three countries are some of the most disaster prone among the nine countries in the study. The families taking part in the research have suffered from flooding, landslides and typhoons in the Philippines, from both drought and flooding in Vietnam, and in El Salvador have experienced earthquake, hurricanes and, most recently, floods. The Philippines is the country which, worldwide, after Vanuatu and Tonga is the most prone to natural disasters.<sup>12</sup>

The focus groups and interviews gave the girls an opportunity to voice why they felt gender inequalities in disaster situations existed and how, as adolescent girls, their needs were often overlooked in such situations. Their insight reinforces the views and research outlined elsewhere in this year's report. It also underlines the importance of girls' participation in disaster risk management and in formatting strategies to encourage resilience and reduce risk.

**Environmental hazards and poverty – 'don't go to school anymore'**

Nearly all the girls interviewed told us that climate change and a range of environmental hazards affect them and their communities. A girl, 19, from Vietnam echoed the sentiments of most of the other girls when she explained that: "The seasons in one year are not clearly distinguished. Winter is shorter, the temperature is very low. The summer is extremely hot, the temperature is much higher. When it rains, thunder and lightning are more formidable. And we even get hail. Such weather phenomenon has a dramatic affect on my community. It affects the daily lives of local people. Travelling is harder. My house is near by the mountain; water poured down from the top so it is very difficult to keep food stores dry." This image of increasing environmental instability was also brought up in the Philippines by a 14-year-old, who told us that "[There is] also the intermittent rains: it isn't that it's not supposed to be rainy these days, because we're now in March, but now it rains intermittently because of climate change."

Damage to the environment undoubtedly has an effect on communities which depend on it for their



The aftermath of Typhoon Bopha in the Philippines, 2012.

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livelihoods. This means family incomes decrease. Financial support for girls' education is often one of the first items considered 'non-essential' that is cut. A girl, 13, from Vietnam has experienced this: *"When I was in Grade 4, due to crop failure, my parents quarrelled a lot. Once I was doing homework, and they were having a serious squabble. On seeing me, my father burst out 'when crops fail learning comes to nothing, you do nothing for your parents, don't go to school any more'. I felt sorry for myself and cried a lot. My father saw that and didn't say any more. He seemed to understand why I cried and afterwards he even allowed me to follow extra classes. I can see how much my parents love me and they always try to do the best thing for me in spite of our poverty."* Even at the age of 13, the girl from Vietnam, is able to make the link between disasters, environmental damage and the effect on her education, and ultimately, her future: *"I go to school late because the slippery road makes me fall down; my parents can't go to the fields. They can't work; we then have less money and I have less chance to join the remedial lessons."* In the Masbate region of the Philippines, the girls discussed the effects of drought on their communities and a 16-year-old girl Jane told us that *"The farmland is parched... the rice will die because of the drought."* When we asked the girls about the further consequences of drought, a 14-year-old girl mentioned hunger, because *"there is no money to buy food"*.

**Safety and security – ‘sometimes it’s scary’**

The girls also discussed the impact of disasters on adolescent girls' safety. Girls in the Philippines mentioned that they felt 'shy' and 'not comfortable' when having to take shelter in other people's homes during an emergency. A fifteen-year-old girl told us: *"Sometimes, it's scary, especially when it's time to sleep, because the male in that house might be lusting over a girl."* When we asked her 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."* This thought was reiterated by a 16-year-old girl in El Salvador who told us: *"To support girls in an emergency the important thing would be to give them protection, take them to a shelter, give them food, clothes a bed and blanket, and a safe place to sleep."* Likewise, a girl, 16, from El Salvador said after her family evacuated to a temporary house following a flood: *"I didn't feel safe at that house, neither did my father. We left our things there, but people who like to steal things were keeping watch, so my*



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Focus group in Vietnam.

*father didn't feel it was safe for us to be there and he sent us to stay somewhere else... I didn't feel like that was a very good place for me to be."*

**Household responsibilities – ‘we cleaned’**

Our research illustrates how during and after disasters gendered stereotypes and behaviour patterns can be reinforced through reassigning traditional household roles and hierarchy. We were also told that during and after disasters girls' chores increase, which reduces their time to study and attend school. Girls from the Philippines told us that after Typhoon Frank<sup>13</sup> it was *"Around one month starting in December we didn't go to school"*. When we asked what they did during this time away from school, they replied: *"We cleaned."* They also said their household chores increased and they spent their time cleaning clothes, drying clothes, looking after their younger siblings and helping their mothers. A fifteen-year-old girl told us she spent her time *"cleaning the house, because when the house is dirty and untidy, it still needs to be tidied up"*. A girl, 14, from El Salvador told us that due to drought in her community, *"sometimes we don't have running water at home, because the pipes break, and my mother works, so sometimes I'm the one who carries water, sometimes my oldest brother helps, almost everyone does it... Almost always me."* A fourteen-year-old girl from Vietnam said that during disasters: *"My life changes: a family member is sick... I do a lot of chores to please my parents. I feel happy to do that because I am a family member and responsible to my family."* A girl, 16, from El Salvador commented that following a storm: *"I had to do more work, because all the debris blows into the house and I had to sweep it out again, I have to sweep because I'm the oldest daughter."* The interviews illustrate clearly how disasters can have a direct impact on girls' schooling and the time they have available to learn. A nineteen-year-old girl in Vietnam also says she spends a larger

proportion of her time on household chores after a disaster: *"When disaster happens, I help my parents more, to share their burden. However, I am not allowed to go out to work to earn money to support my family."*

It is clear that girls from all three countries are expected to take on additional chores which has direct implications, not only for the time they have for school work, but also for their general health and wellbeing.

**Reinforcing stereotypes – ‘men’s work is really harder’**

The girls in the Philippines mentioned the difficulty some mothers, who work outside the community, face in reclaiming their jobs if they return to their families following a disaster. Although it tends to be fathers who work outside the community, there are also some mothers who find work away from their families in other parts of the country. They told us that after a recent typhoon mothers felt obliged to leave their jobs in order to return and care for their families. While men also left their jobs to return to their families, there are clearly gendered consequences for doing so. When we asked girls in Masbate who were more affected – men or women – a 14-year-old girl replied adamantly that it was *"the woman, of course, because the father can find a job more easily than the mother... sometimes the women's employers are strict: if they go home to their families, they won't be hired by the same employer"*. They went on further

to define the roles of men and women following a disaster by saying that *"the role of women is to get relief goods and the role of men is to get the things for the house"* (Girl, 13). Women's roles and responsibilities are domestic, collecting food and water, and those of men are associated more with earning a living and providing for their families. The girls' evidence indicates that one of the impacts of a disaster is to reinforce traditional male and female roles. The research also suggests that the value placed on unpaid household labour (the majority of which is carried out by women and girls) is low when compared to men's tasks outside the home. For example, in the Philippines girls told us that *"the girls' tasks are lighter, because they just sweep, while the men use the spade to clean the surroundings"*, and a 14-year-old girl added that *"men's work is really harder"*.

The girls from the Philippines also identified women as being more at risk of disasters than men, because women are 'afraid' and 'tend to be nervous'. A fifteen-year-old girl, however, has an alternative view and is clearly confident that girls are just as capable as boys in many respects: *"For me they are equal: equal because as my brother fetches water, I also fetch water. When it comes to using the spade, I use it too."* Creating an enabling environment for adolescent girls like her to develop the self-confidence needed to participate in pre- and post-disaster activities is important so that they too can support themselves, their families and communities in times of emergency.



PLAN

Focus group discussion in El Salvador.

# Because We are Girls

'Real Choices, Real Lives' Cohort Study Map

