

Because We are Girls

'Real Choices, Real Lives'
cohort study update



Girl and her family, Dominican Republic.

REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES

The 'Real Choices, Real Lives' study, now in its eighth 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, the girls will turn eight this year.

The purpose of the 'Real Choices, Real Lives' study is to gain an in-depth understanding of attitudes towards gender within families and how these attitudes impact on girls through a longitudinal analysis of their everyday lives. This year we are looking at middle childhood, and at the relationships and opportunities that can either support girls during this stage of their development or place obstacles in their way.

The information from this small research study illustrates very clearly how gender roles are embedded in family life and internalised by children at a very young age. The social norms we discuss in Chapter 2 of the main body of the report come to life in the day-to-day experiences and attitudes documented by the researchers in their conversations both with the young girls and their families.

Pathways to Power – the significance of middle childhood

The girls taking part in the study are approaching their eighth birthdays. This year, many of them were able, for the first time, to talk clearly about family life, their friends, their schools and their communities.

Our understanding of middle childhood, or pre-adolescence, a stage ranging from ages five to nine, is limited. Fewer international indicators are disaggregated for this stage than for early childhood or for adolescence.¹ We may know little about this age-group, but pre-adolescence is a critical phase in the life cycle of a girl. It is when she enrolls in primary school, when household chores become very much part of her daily routine, and when the people around her may begin to view her as a commodity and sexualise her identity. It is



Girl and her mother, Cambodia.

also the period where positive experiences at school have the greatest chance to make an impact on a girl's social, intellectual and emotional development which will in turn help maximise her potential.²

This year's research into the world of middle childhood opens our eyes not only to the challenges *they* face but also to the opportunities we have to provide support for younger girls.

1 Developing power within

Middle childhood is recognised as a developmental watershed, a stage when children begin to emerge from the shadows of dependency on their immediate families and start taking their place in the wider world. It is the time when children "assume a distinct, lifetime character".³ It is also a time of immense opportunity, as this is when girls' and boys' gender identities are largely defined. What we are seeing from the 'Real Choices, Real Lives' study is how this develops through girls' and boys' sense of self, their understanding of the world around them through play and their physical exposure to their community. By the age of eight, the gender identities of the girls taking part in the study, and the boys around them, are largely fully formed.

Building girls' self-esteem

Self-esteem is defined as how individuals value themselves. It affects the development of identity, motivation and belief in one's ability to achieve. When a child has high self-esteem, she will also feel important

as an individual and important in relation to others.⁴ Much of the literature on this topic describes how self-esteem relates to children's social development and how building the right social skills can increase their self-esteem.⁵

We can already see how some of the girls have a strong sense of their personal decision-making power and general wellbeing, and can express a clear sense of self-awareness, including risk awareness and aversion. A small number of the girls are demonstrating their willingness to take their place in the wider world. In Benin, Thea's mother explained how her daughter started school one year ago: "One day she followed her older brothers, on her own initiative, to school and was enrolled. She told the headmistress that she wanted to start school. Nobody decided for her; she went to register on her own."

Making sense of the world through play

Middle childhood is also defined as the time "to make sense and make friends".⁶

During this stage of their development, children develop an awareness that "other



Girl and mother, Benin.



Girl, Dominican Republic.

people have minds, plans and desires of their own. They [children] have an avid appetite for learning the local social rules, whether of games, slang, style or behaviour."⁷ They need to fit in.

It is clear from the time we spent with the girls this year that they are learning the rules of gendered play. Both girls and boys tend to spend a considerable amount of time understanding social groups and at this stage, play tends to divide sharply along gender lines, girls playing with girls, boys with boys.⁸ At the same time, children tend to become more "keenly attuned to questions of fairness and justice and instantly notice those grabbing more than their [fair] share."⁹

REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES – CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Kabeer's research on empowerment is key to our work with the girls taking part in the study.¹⁰ The three inter-related components of Kabeer's empowerment theory – access to resources, the role of agency and a sense of achievement – are central to our analysis. The study considers the importance of a life-cycle approach, building each year on the experiences of girls as they grow. We also draw specific attention to the importance of power in determining who can or cannot exercise their rights. These power dynamics impact on a girl's opportunity to choose the life she wants to live and can provide a powerful lens through which to examine and understand her present life and her future chances. The cohort study's data is analysed according to a set of interconnected and cross-cutting themes: the impact of poverty, intergenerational dynamics, attitudes and gender analysis.¹¹ These themes are grounded in Sen's capability theory on developing people's capabilities to help themselves and influence the world around them.¹²



Girl with friends and family, Uganda.

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Most of the girls talk about play with a clear sense of gender awareness. The transcripts are littered with unprompted references as to how their play is organised. For example, Namazzi from Uganda told our researchers how her favourite games are *“only for girls... We make dolls and sometime we play a game of cooking food using small tins”*. Amanda in Brazil explained: *“I don’t want boys as friends, just girls,”* adding, *“I don’t have any friends who are boys; only girls, because my mother doesn’t let me play with boys.”* Amelia from Uganda concurred: *“Mum refused me to play with them [boys] because they like fighting,”* she revealed. And according to Barbara in Benin, *“I play only with girls. We pretend to be young mothers by playing with dolls. The boys play football separately.”* When we pressed the girls further about their favourite games or activities, most of those mentioned related to the gender roles they see around them every day. Bianca, from Brazil, said: *“My favourite pastime is playing with my dolls. When I*



Girl and her sister, Brazil.

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don’t have anyone to play with me, I play alone. Playing with dolls is much better than playing Police and Thieves.”

Their understanding that there is a difference between how girls and boys spend their time is becoming clear. In Brazil, Sofia told our researchers that she resents the fact that her brother does not have the same household obligations and spends all of his free time playing. The fear of being ostracised by those around them is the main reason girls tend not to challenge established norms¹³, but we can see that, from quite an early age, some girls are certainly capable of questioning and criticising both the norms and their own situation. Patrícia from Brazil has strong opinions: *“I think men and women can do the same activities in the same way. My dad doesn’t help my mother. I think my father could help my mother.”*

We can also see from our research how society’s expectations – reinforced daily through play and other social interactions – can become entrenched and accepted by the time girls reach adolescence. Other studies show how, as ‘good daughters’, girls are expected to be submissive, docile and shy, and not to be outspoken, opinionated or mischievous.¹⁴ Our research this year with adolescent girls and young women in the cohort communities reveals similar expectations from parents.¹⁵ It is humility and deference that are valued, as 20-year-old Anna reveals: *“I must be patient in what I am doing, I must respect everybody in the community, I must show love to my parents such that they can pay my school fees.”*

This exchange between Tan and our researcher in Vietnam demonstrates some of these attitudes emerging with the younger girls:

Tan: *I rarely play with male friends in my class because it is graceless if I play with boys. Girls should play with girls and boys play with boys.*

Researcher: Boys should not play with dolls? Why not?

Tan: *Because it looks strange.*

Researcher: Is it OK for a girl to want to play rough sports like football?

Tan: *Yes, but they should not kick the ball too strongly, otherwise it will hit the leg or face.*



Girl and her mother, Vietnam.

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As the girls taking part in the study grow, the gradual expansion of their physical abilities and horizons through play is a real opportunity to build both skills and confidence. There is convincing evidence about the importance of sport as a way for adolescent girls to feel secure in themselves and in their own bodies.¹⁶ And the years from age five to nine are when this confidence is built. This year, more girls in the ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ study reported enjoying sports and physically active play, alongside less physical activities such as reading, playing with dolls and imaginative play.

Mobility and movement

Middle childhood is also the period when children tend to spend increasing amounts of time away from their immediate family; attending school for more hours in the day, playing outside of the home and developing a better understanding of their environment. Over the past two years, the girls in our cohort have spoken increasingly about the sense of freedom they feel when they play outside of their homes, in spaces such as friends’ houses, empty lots, roadsides and even abandoned rice fields. Compared to when they were younger, the girls now have considerably more freedom of movement. However, compared to their male peers, it is clear that most of the girls are restricted. Hillary in El Salvador explained: *“Where they don’t let me go is to visit a woman named Elsa; she lives too far away. Oscar can go, but I can’t because I’m a girl.”* Placing physical limitations on girls at a time when they are

developmentally most curious about their surroundings limits not only their physical but also their psychological horizons.¹⁷

Davy in Cambodia gave an example that clearly demonstrates how limiting attitudes can develop from a young age. Her brother spends his time chopping firewood, carrying water, playing and herding the buffalos. The tasks for Davy and other girls in her community include washing dishes, cleaning the pots and pans, cooking rice and building the cooking fire. She felt that *“the task of chopping firewood is the task of the man. If the girls do it, we are afraid of cutting our hands or feet.”*

This exchange between Jocelyn and our researcher in the Philippines further demonstrates this point:

Researcher: What is the game boys play? What is their game?

Jocelyn: *Football!*

Researcher: What other games?

Jocelyn: *Sabay-sabay!*

Researcher: Do the boys also play with the girls?

Jocelyn: *No, only boys!*

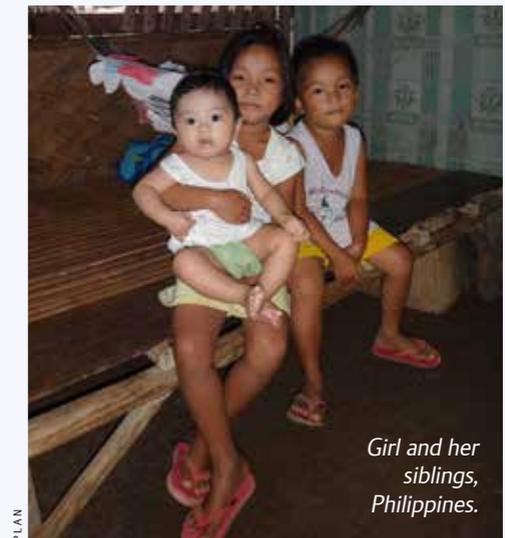
Researcher: Ah, boys only... so you’re not included?

Jocelyn: *We’re not included!*

Researcher: Why don’t they let you join in?

Jocelyn: *Because we are weak.*

What is clear is that the nature of mobility and play not only reinforces gender stereotypes but, critically, encourages girls’ limiting perceptions about themselves.



Girl and her siblings, Philippines.

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Girl and her brothers, Dominican Republic.

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2 Part of the learning process

As the years go by, parental expectations grow and new responsibilities are given to the girls. These responsibilities are almost exclusively confined to the domestic space. The impact of time spent on domestic chores – keeping girls away from school work and play – is well documented. Less well understood is exactly how the attitudes that drive gendered division of labour in the home are reproduced and how they can become so deeply entrenched before girls enter adolescence. From an early age, many of the girls in the study have been actively encouraged to imitate the work of their mothers and grandmothers. When they were younger, they engaged in play focused around domestic tasks; now, as they grow older, they are given increased responsibility for real household chores. We can see how, particularly in middle childhood, girls (and boys) receive “systematic training in ‘how to be’ each of our social identities throughout our lives”.¹⁸ There is evidence that girls, in particular, manage their behaviour in adolescence in relation to informal social control, driven

by expectations about how they should behave.¹⁹ For this reason, it is critical to understand the social norms at play prior to adolescence that can influence girls’ decisions, actions and behaviour so powerfully.

A curriculum of chores²⁰

Our discussions with the girls’ parents and grandparents revealed how a ‘curriculum of chores’ encourages girls not only to take on and own domestic responsibilities, but eventually to become actively engaged in reproducing these social norms themselves. The life-cycle approach of the ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ study has enabled us to understand this relationship more clearly. Valerie’s mother from the Dominican Republic wants her daughter “to learn to have responsibilities and to be committed to the house”. In Togo, Melyah’s mother said that while Melyah is currently considered too small for household chores, “we teach her to wash dishes and sweep as a preparation for the future. In our families [in our community], the small girls have to learn to do certain things from a young age. It is part of the learning process.”

Ala-Woni’s mother added: “As much as she grows, there will be certain duties that could be given her.” And Isoka’s mother concluded: “Normally, the women do [the housework] with their daughters. Older girls are often supporting, some from age 12 upwards.”

A critical step in ensuring that these ideas are reinforced is the addition of the task of caring for younger siblings. By middle childhood, this has become a significant part of many of the girls’ responsibilities, an important role that the girls are expected to ‘own’. Sharina from the Dominican Republic explained how she now unquestioningly takes on the role of caring for her younger brother: *“Girls don’t play with cars because they are not male, and boys should not play with dolls or with [kitchen] toys. My younger brothers cannot do chores at home, only we girls. If my little brother dirties his clothes I wash them.”* Thearika’s mother, in Cambodia, told us just how involved her daughter is in the care of her younger sibling: “She wakes up at 6am, 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.” In Brazil, Sofia is responsible for washing dishes,



Girl and her family, Uganda.

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sweeping the floor and looking after her 16-month-old brother when she returns home from school.

So what about everybody else?

The real challenge is that the attitudes and behaviour of the girls’ parents, siblings and other relatives is largely reflective of the social expectations in their communities. Although a small number of girls behave in ways that challenge expectations – in the Philippines, Chesa spoke of enjoying playing football with boys in her neighbourhood, and Maricel said she likes to climb trees, acknowledging that she is the only girl she knows who does so – when we looked at the attitudes of those around them, the vast majority of people hold on to patriarchal ideas about behaviour, roles and responsibilities. These tend to be rigidly set – the males of the household wield more power, and are considered more important, than the females.

Even when the girls’ mothers acknowledge that it is unnecessary for roles to be so strictly defined, they are unable to challenge the status quo because their attitudes are unconscious and internalised. Raquel’s mother in El Salvador explained that her husband “doesn’t often help me. I don’t like it when he does because he comes home to rest.” In the Dominican Republic, Saïdy’s grandmother explained that “men have the right to learn, men have the right to learn to cook, to wash clothes, to iron, to do it all in



Girl, Dominican Republic.

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case they are left on their own”, reinforcing the idea that household work is ‘women’s work’ to begin with. According to Larba’s mother in Togo, “It’s the same all over in our community, because the men and boys work hard on the farms. They therefore have to relax when they come back home. If, however, they are all at home, I can then give some work to the boy.”

Saidy’s grandmother explained her motivation for giving Saidy more domestic responsibility as she gets older. Despite her desire to support her granddaughter’s education, Saidy is expected to be the woman of the house and to look after the men in her grandmother’s absence. This is considered to be an appropriate role for Saidy, even though she is young: “She can learn, little by little, to do household chores. I get her to do it because sometimes I go to the capital. She and Saidy’s grandfather stay on their own, unless a neighbour comes in. He doesn’t know how to do anything. He can’t clean the house, wash clothes or cook. I went to the capital and stayed for a month; when I got back it looked as if no human being lived here.”

In Togo, Mangazia’s mother illustrated how similar expectations are reinforced: “It’s the same throughout our community. The man does nothing [in the house]. It is impossible to change or reverse the trend.”

“Girls of her age do the same throughout the community,” Ladi’s mother added. “It is a way of helping them learn and prepare for the future.”



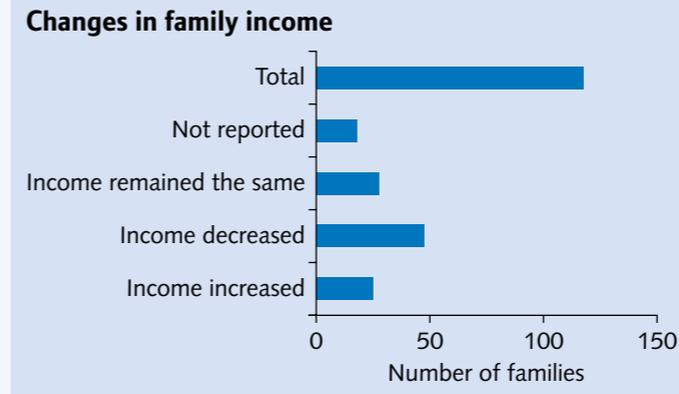
Girl, Dominican Republic.

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Not everyone is as resigned to the situation as Mangazia’s mother; increasingly, there is a recognition that change is both possible and necessary. As the girls continue with their primary education, we are seeing a small but growing number of parents, mothers in particular, acknowledging the time burden of domestic chores on girls and its impact on their education. In the Dominican Republic, Nicol’s mother is a dissenting voice: “I tell her that I will do [the domestic chores] while I can, so that she can dedicate her time to studying. I would change things so that girls of her age would not do it, only older women.” And Saidy’s grandmother, who earlier described a strict gender code around household work, has limited the amount of time Saidy spends on these tasks to between 15 and 30 minutes a day. In Togo, Djoumai’s mother offers a solution: “It is possible to change, through sensitisation, dialogue and counselling for parents on sharing household chores.”

3 The reality of poverty

The daily grind of poverty is a significant factor in the replication of patriarchal attitudes and behaviour.²¹ Our understanding of intergenerational gender roles has helped to uncover how, in the economically fragile situations in which these families live, the capabilities, agency



and rights of women and girls can be restricted. The economic reality for many of the families is one of struggling to survive; with necessity and survival the drivers of daily life, the notion of rights becomes less significant. In El Salvador, Rebeca’s mother eloquently explained what she observes in her community, acknowledging the lack of opportunity also faced by men living in poverty and the impact this has on gender dynamics in the home. “In daily life, [women] don’t get the same opportunity for rights. The man is able to do any job and a woman has to stay at home. Some men don’t give [women] the opportunity to be what she wants, to fight for what she wants. Sometimes [men] don’t have an opportunity either. This affects women because they are [then] oppressed by men.”

Last year, we reported on how the families taking part in the study make decisions and plan while living with the daily reality of



Girl and her family, Philippines.

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financial and economic stress. For many of the families, the risks associated with climate change continue to affect growing seasons and harvests, and have a direct impact on family finances. Almost all of the families continue to report crop failures, increased local food prices and food shortages at various points in the year. The graph above shows how most families reported that their income has either decreased or remained the same. The only country where more families reported that their income has increased was the Philippines, where the families taking part in the study tend to have several income streams; for example, combining fishing and farming with petty trading and service delivery. This can be an important coping mechanism in uncertain times. In the Dominican Republic, on the other hand, families tend to have just one income stream, and are more reliant on family members for remittances and on the government’s social protection allowance. Nine Dominican families in the study are now receiving this support, an indication of their vulnerability. This year, 20 families reported having some savings, while the majority have to borrow money in times of emergency; only six families have any form of insurance.

As the girls grow, we are observing an increasingly complex web of social networks supporting their mothers and fathers with their care. A small but growing number of girls (in 2012 it was eight girls; in 2013, 13 girls; and in 2014, 17 girls) are in the care of their grandmothers or grandparents, usually because the girls’ mothers have migrated for work.



Girl and her family, Togo.

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Girl and her family, Dominican Republic.

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Two girls, Philippines.

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4 Going to school – an opportunity for equality

The right to a quality education is an important part of the story of girls' empowerment. Formal education is where they can understand and develop their own capabilities, and where they experience important elements of the journey towards empowerment: a sense of achievement, the role of agency and access to resources.²² Attending school can be a significant early step for girls. The majority of the girls are now in their second year of primary school – 95 per cent of the girls are currently enrolled in primary school, but attendance is more problematic.

THE GIRLS BEING LEFT BEHIND

Fifty-five per cent of the girls are not attending school regularly, citing a number of different reasons, from ill health to poor weather conditions and the unaffordability of fees, lunch money and equipment. In some countries, this figure is worryingly high – in El Salvador 90 per cent of girls are missing school regularly. In Cambodia and Uganda, the figure is 83 per cent. Layla from Benin lives with her grandmother, who allows her to stay at home “when she wants to”. The school is 45 minutes' walk away. Layla is, in



Girl, Benin.

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fact, repeating the first year of primary school. Chantal from the Dominican Republic suffers from an umbilical hernia and has missed 20 days of school so far this year.

A small number of the girls are either still attending some form of pre-school (four girls) or are not enrolled in school at all. The largest proportion of girls who are either not enrolled in school or not attending regularly are from El Salvador (two girls are not in school and two are not attending regularly). Rebeca's mother explained that Rebeca has a speech problem so is not enrolled in school. Gladys' mother said that although Gladys attended school last year, she is now at home – her mother explained that she is very shy and was being bullied by other children. However, Gladys herself reported being locked in at school overnight. This incident appears to have had a significant impact on her and she is unwilling to go back. Her mother, however, insists that she will enrol Gladys again in time for the new school year.



Girl, Brazil.

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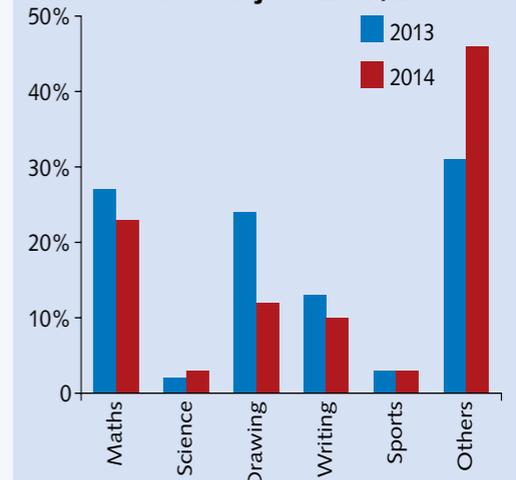
Over the past two years, attending primary school has provided an important opportunity for the majority of girls taking part in the study – and for the boys around them. For the first time, most of the girls are spending extended periods of time with boys on a daily basis. Critically, when girls attend school, their routines are reasonably similar to boys', whereas their lives tend to diverge sharply outside of school. Despite almost all the girls naming other girls as their closest companions, and some confirming that they are discouraged from playing with boys, the girls do interact with boys, particularly during lessons but also sometimes during break. Amanda in Brazil explains: *“At school, the boys don't ask to play basketball with us and don't go where we are playing... The only games I play with boys are the games [lessons] at school. Our teacher tells us to play cola [catch] with the boys.”*

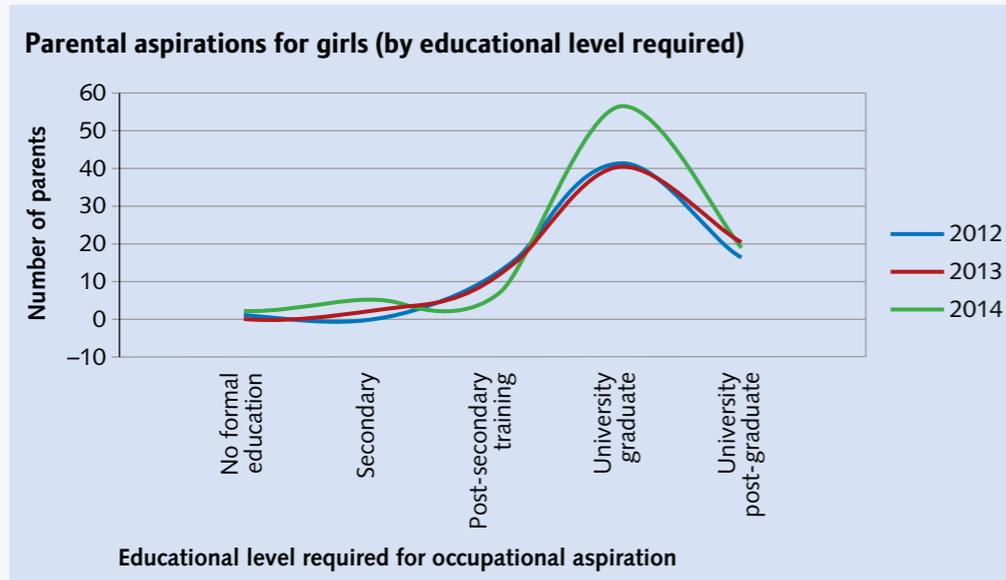
Some studies have shown how teacher-student interactions in classrooms can reinforce existing gender stereotypes, with boys being seen to provide “good responses and manifested ambition” and girls seen as “timid and not as hard-working as boys”.²³ In our research, there is no clear evidence of this, and the girls have a positive attitude towards subjects like maths, an area in which girls tend to underperform later in their academic careers.²⁴ This year, the subject enjoyed most by the highest proportion (23 per cent) of girls is maths – down from 27 per cent in 2013 – followed by drawing, writing and science (see chart right). It appears that changes in

the girls' own expectations and performance occur over time, highlighting the importance of encouraging more gender sensitivity in the primary years of school and working to address the psychological basis of girls' perceptions of their potential.

A significant proportion of the girls – 68 per cent – report that they enjoy their time at school, describing it in a positive light; they look forward to going and enjoy what they learn. School is generally reported as a safe space by the girls, and many included the school playground, playing field or compound as their preferred spaces to play. In fact, several girls described the sense of freedom and happiness they get from being in school.

Girls' favourite subjects 2013/2014





"I prefer going to school than staying at home," explains Girl in Cambodia, *"because at school I can learn and get knowledge and am happier than at home."* Layla in Benin added, *"I do sport with my friends. We play at home and at school. The school games are more interesting than the ones of home."* Andrea in El Salvador



Girl and her mother, Cambodia.

explained that school is where she feels the best because that is where she meets up with her friends. At the same time, many girls reported that corporal punishment is a side of school life that they do not like. Gabriela in El Salvador explained how she feels: *"I like to go and I am learning to do everything. It's just that there are some children and they hit them with the ruler because they were noisy and everything while the teacher was teaching."*

As we have reported each year, the girls' parents have told us consistently about the high academic ambitions they have for their daughters. The graph (above) shows how these aspirations have risen over the past three years – it charts the education level required for the occupational ambition being expressed by the girls' parents. Their ambitions have remained high despite the significant challenge of limited access to secondary and post-secondary education facilities in their neighbourhoods and the poor quality of education available to most of the girls. In fact, a small but growing number of parents (those of eight girls in 2014; five in 2013) are choosing to send their daughters to private schools. Most of the girls in private schools are from Benin. This is an indication, not only of their concern about the government facilities available, but also of their commitment to their daughters' education.



Girl, Philippines.

5 Conclusion: making the most of the opportunity of middle girlhood

Middle childhood is the stage in which the greatest potential to build *power within* lies – it is when children make significant developmental gains, and when they develop a strong sense of awareness of themselves in relation to others. It is also clear from this year's research that distinct gender roles are being reproduced in every aspect of the girls' lives. They see themselves as responsible for domestic work and as weaker than boys, and they are aware of the different expectations that their families have of them compared to their brothers. What girls are expected and allowed to do is already beginning to frame who they will grow up to be.

It is also clear that, although they may want to fit in with what is expected of them, girls are quite capable of questioning the situation they are in and the way roles and responsibilities are shared out. School emerges particularly as a place where change is possible – boys and girls do not live rigidly divided lives there and at eight years old our participants have learned that maths is not in fact just for boys. Their parents' educational

ambitions for them also remain high. These aspirations are beginning to lead mothers, in particular, to question the domestic load their daughters are expected to shoulder and to find ways to give them more time to study.

The research reveals the strength of the embedded social norms that exist, which many families are powerless to resist. But as we continue to track the girls' progress, it is encouraging to see that awareness of the constraints of gender norms is growing, not least amongst the girls themselves. It has given us a more focused insight into the detail of daily lives lived in poverty and a deeper understanding of the complexities and practicalities of achieving gender equality – not as words on paper but in real terms. Our analysis this year has helped us to understand better the kinds of interventions – in families, in schools and in communities – that are necessary for supporting girls during and beyond middle girlhood. These include keeping girls in school, sharing domestic work, and encouraging equal voice, status and opportunities, unencumbered by external expectations and by that small internal voice telling girls and boys what they should or shouldn't do – because girls can climb trees, and boys can play with dolls.

Because We are Girls

'Real Choices, Real Lives' Cohort Study Map

