'Real Choices, Real Lives' Cohort Study, Plan UK

The study builds upon a life course approach, focusing its attention on critical transition points, influences in early girlhood and middle childhood, and progression towards longer-term life outcomes. This approach highlights the connection between individual lives and the socio-economic context in which these lives unfold. By tracking the girls who form the 'Real Choices, Real Lives' study, and by extensively interviewing the girls and their families each year, the study aims to uncover new knowledge about the realities of girls' lives and the underlying roots of gender inequality.

When the study began, its central lines of inquiry mirrored the goals of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Over time, the need for more open-ended and complex lines of inquiry emerged. This qualitative approach has allowed the study to adapt to the lives of the girls as they get older, making adjustments year on year to the in-depth ethnographic interviews. This allows the research to evolve and to tighten links between the emerging data and analytical framework of the study. This dynamic approach gives us the opportunity to understand the influences in girls' lives, what surrounds and shapes their life transitions and their lived realities. Age-appropriate and interactive tools, such as community walks, are introduced each year to allow us to engage in a holistic manner with the experiences of the girls and to understand better their sense of self and engagement with the world around them. The data now provides us with a rich picture of the world that each girl journeys through, and a real sense of the opportunities and challenges of life from her viewpoint.

Full research report: www.plan-uk.org/girlsresources/
For more information, contact: Lili.Harris@plan-uk.org

Cohort girls from the Philippines.

PLAN INTERNATIONAL

SUMMARY
'Real Choices, Real Lives' 2015

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

PLAN INTERNATIONAL

Girl, Vietnam.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Every year, a research report charts the changes and experiences of the girls and their families. This year, one of our most interesting observations is that at this critical stage of middle childhood, or pre-adolescence, when discriminatory social norms are beginning to impact negatively on girls' lives, they respond in three different ways:

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

The report also finds that over the last four years of the study there has been a gradual undermining of livelihoods and wellbeing, brought about by food shortages and other economic and environmental hardships across nearly all of the sample group. Across the study, a high proportion of families reported that their income was either less than the year before or had remained the same, despite increases in the cost of living.
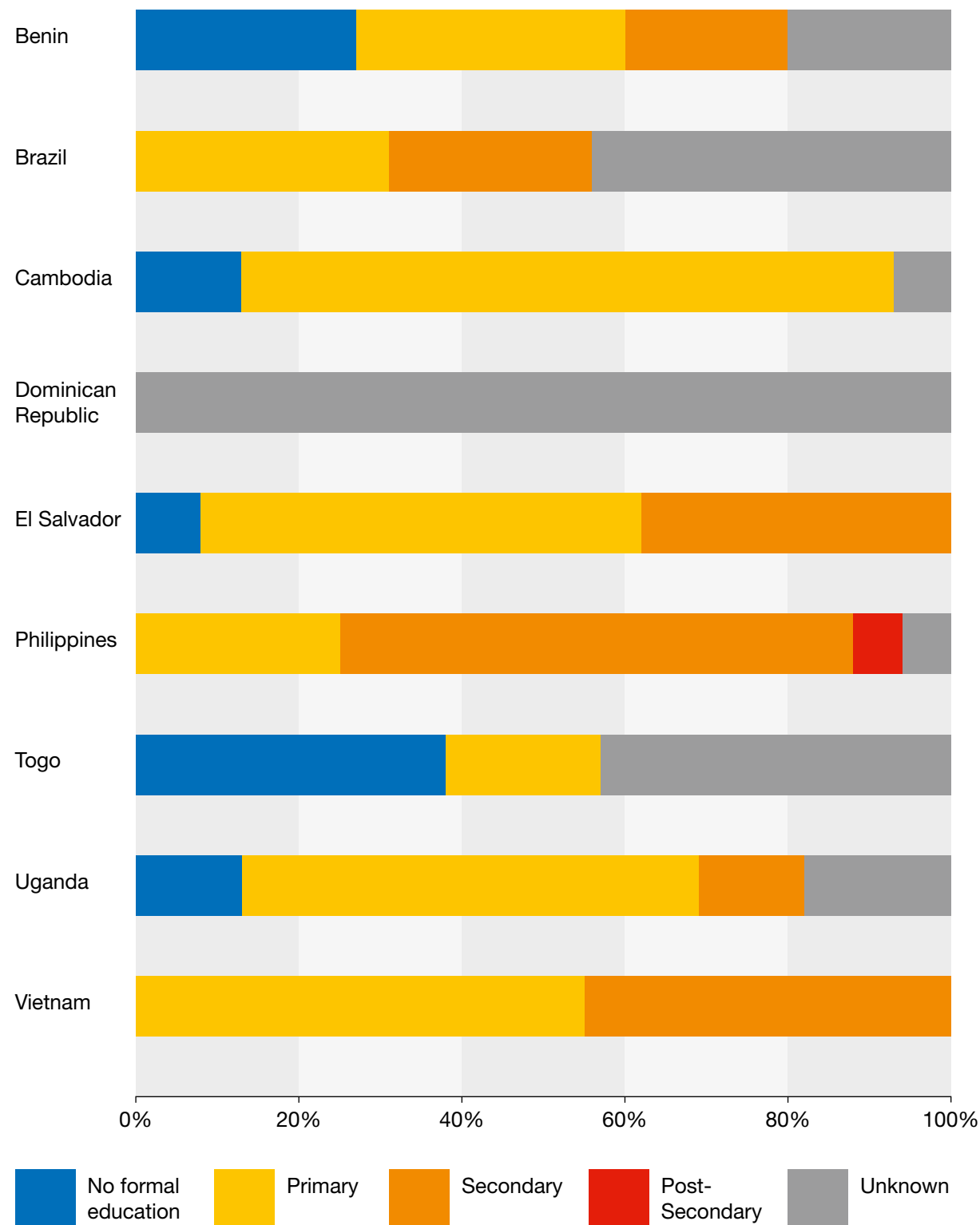
Discriminatory social norms have a profound impact on a girl's ability to develop, both personally and economically, and this, combined with poverty and other intersecting vulnerabilities, reinforces marginalisation. A holistic view of girls' lives and circumstances is necessary in order to address these potentially overlapping vulnerabilities and to ensure that gender equality is a reality for all girls.

Recommendations

Interventions must:
- Pay more attention to the middle childhood period as a key age to influence discriminatory social norms;
- Use longitudinal research to further unpack social norms and track the internalised development of gendered roles and responsibilities;
- Apply an intersectional approach to development initiatives combating gender inequality to ensure productive engagement with social norms.

Mothers' Educational Level (based on data collected 2010/2011)

Benin

Brazil

Cambodia

Dominican Republic

El Salvador

Philippines

Togo

Uganda

Vietnam

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

- No formal education
- Primary
- Secondary
- Post-Secondary
- Unknown

INTRODUCTION

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. The information from this research study illustrates very clearly how gender roles are embedded in family life and internalised by children at a very young age. This year, we are looking at middle childhood: at the relationships and opportunities that can either support girls or place obstacles in their way and, crucially, at the social norms that shape the girls, their families and communities and the gendered identities these norms create during this critical period of growing up.

This year, the girls in our study turned nine years old and are now able to speak with more confidence about their own aspirations for the future. Given that many of the girls' mothers were forced to drop out of school by this age, or a little later, this is a key turning point at which to study the intergenerational changes between our cohort of girls and their mothers, and to examine if and how traditional social norms are shifting.

The younger generation potentially has increased access to education and wider participation, as well as more committed parental support. However, it is also becoming clear that whatever the aspirations of mothers and their daughters, their lives are often shaped by external factors beyond their control which may put a stop to their hopes and dreams of a better future. At the same time, the high aspirations of most of our families are likely, with time, to shift expectations and behaviour around girls' potential and their gender roles. This is particularly likely in communities where these girls are the first generation to have access to secondary or post-secondary level education.

The evidence continues to demonstrate that the families in our study live in the context of gradual economic decline. They are coping with both economic and environmental stress, 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 in the time we have been tracking them, limiting the potential for these girls' capabilities to develop as they grow up. We have identified

Girl, Togo, 2014.

Girl and her parents, Vietnam.

a number of girls who we feel are the most vulnerable, and have begun to analyse how intersecting factors of inequality are placing these girls at most risk now – and will continue to do so in the future.

As we have collected data on the progress of the girls and their families over the years, the attitudes and behaviours within their own households that drive gender norms have become clearer. The disadvantaged status and situations of the girls (and their mothers) are often maintained through the dominant social norms in their communities. We have recently also begun to explore just how much commonly held attitudes are shared within their communities, and to what extent people's views and actions are driven by their beliefs about what others do and think. Families may be conforming to a 'norm' that is not entirely in touch with what is actually happening in their communities.

Because We Are Girls

Discriminatory social norms 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.[1] In all countries we can see a strong influence of community and cultural norms on the outcome of household division of labour. Whether linked to common practice, religion, or fear of humiliation, it seems that the women in the families are often tasked with completing traditionally 'female' tasks focused on care and family-based work.

In most families, the girls' fathers are often engaged in external, paid work and are not associated with supporting the household chores. When questioned about this gendered structure of their household, most families cite the behaviour of others in their community or culture, or what is known as 'the norm'.

All of the girls in the study are aware of the social norms that surround their home life, their relationships with family members and their school activities. The extent to which girls agree or challenge these norms varies. During our analysis this year we have identified three groups amongst the girls and their families, largely separated out as follows: the 'acceptors' (those who do

[1] See, for example: Ferrant, Gaëlle. 'Time use as a transformative indicator for gender equality in the post-2015 agenda.' OECD Development Centre, March 2014, http://www.oecd.org/dev/poverty/Time%20use%20_final_2014.pdf (accessed 10 November, 2015).

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) and, finally, the 'resistors' (those who challenge gender norms both in their attitudes and their behaviours).

The 'acceptors'

In Benin, the gendered roles of household responsibilities seem to be rigid among the cohort families in our study. Alice's mother highlights the power relations between herself and her husband and the association of household work and powerlessness: *"In our culture, men who are heads of families must not fetch water. You want to know why? It's just like this from the times of our forefathers. It would be shameful for him and his whole family. He's the chief of the family and a chief doesn't do household chores… It's our society which has defined that domestic chores should be done more by women than by men."*

Similarly, in Cambodia these lines of responsibility are set according to traditional practices. The gendered division of labour among the adults in the communities where the girls live (the 'indoor' and 'outdoor' work) is often replicated amongst the girls and their siblings at home, as exemplified by Sothany's mother: *"My daughters can help me with some of the housework, such as cooking rice, washing clothes, cleaning the house, and feeding the pigs. They do these once they are free from school. Other families do the same. Most boys go to herd cows after school. Sometimes they go cycling in the village or travel along the street until dark."*

Likewise, Thearika's mother links the importance of her daughter's involvement with household chores along with her future prospects as a mother or wife: *"Other families do not ask their daughters to do many tasks, but I like my daughter to get experience in household work."* Interestingly, Thearika seems to project the same resignation towards the gendered tasks in her household as her mother. She does not play with boys at school, either: *"In the classroom, I play only with girls, because I think that boys and girls play different games… Boys have more time to play than girls… I don't feel jealous of them because they are my siblings."*

Girl and her mother, Vietnam.

Girl with her mother and sister, Cambodia.

Girl and her mother, Benin.

Girl with her mother and brother, Cambodia.

Girl and her family, El Savador.

Girl and her grandparents, Vietnam.

The 'consenters'

In El Salvador, many of the mothers in the study seem to have strong opinions about equality at home. Hillary's mother reflects this, but at the same time she appears resigned to the status quo: *"I think it's not fair, and that it should change, but who knows? I tell him he should change, because the children belong to both of us, so we should both work."* Interestingly, her daughter Hillary also appears to want change and more equality but is being met with resistance from her mother: *"It's not fair because I do more than my brother. I told my mother, but she didn't say anything about it."*

In Togo, Larba's father makes a living as a farmer. Her mother sells charcoal to contribute to the family income and is responsible for all the care work in the house, with the help of her daughters, who work with their mother selling charcoal each Wednesday. Larba's mother says that there are strict gendered divisions of roles and responsibilities for all the households in their community, and despite acknowledging the unequal distribution of these tasks she refers to the influence of culture which makes this unavoidable: *"This is not equitable but these are old practices that have come to stay."* Larba told our researchers that girls spend more time on chores than boys do, and she feels this is unfair. It will be interesting to see whether she voices and acts upon these opinions as time progresses.

The 'resistors'

Vietnam has the largest concentration of mothers who reported being vocal about their support for more equality in their households. Sen's mother in Vietnam believes she has equal capabilities to her husband in many respects, and says they have a more equal distribution of tasks between them: *"I can do whatever my husband does. My husband transports acacia; I can transport acacia by motorbike… My husband also helps me do the housework, such as hanging out the washing or tidying the house whenever he is at home."*

Tien lives with her elderly grandparents. Her mother has a difficult relationship with her own parents and currently works in Ho Chi Minh City, from where she sends money towards Tien's care. Her grandfather says their family has a slightly different approach to sharing their household tasks,

to ensure they are more equally balanced and there is less distinction between 'male' and 'female' tasks: *"Each family has their own situation. In my family, my wife and I are equal in work distribution. In other families, women are normally responsible for domestic work and men work outside… [In our family] the one who is least busy [steps in]. So if my wife raises the pigs, I cook meals. If she helps Tien to take her bath, I will wash the clothes."*

Nguyet's mother in Vietnam told researchers that she is tired of her husband not helping with household tasks and that she feels she is disadvantaged as a woman, because her feelings and opinions are ignored: *"I would like to propose that men and women should be equal, share the jobs and share the outcomes. I want that equality but I don't know what to do. I can only can advise men that now we women have so many jobs to do, they should give us a helping hand. If it's just me doing the work and my husband just sits watching TV, it's too hard for me. I tell my husband that he is too idle, but he hardly follows my words."*

Likewise, in El Salvador, Stephany's mother has strong feelings about the necessity for shared responsibility in household tasks, and attributes the lack of shared equality to sexist ideology and a culture of negative masculinities: *"Yes, it's similar to other families. It happens because sometimes men are sexist (machista). It is NOT fair. I've seen couples who help each other out and do everything; it's fair for the two of them."* Many of the girls in El Salvador have high hopes for their futures. Gabriela has plans which don't seem to be thwarted by gendered norms: *"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 10 I am going to play that game when you take a ball and throw it into the thing... ah, basketball."*

Intersecting Factors of Inequality: understanding girls' vulnerability and analysing their progress

Understanding vulnerability faced by girls in middle childhood can help us to understand some of the pathways towards marginalisation in adolescence, and to gain more clarity about risk factors as they emerge during a girl's life cycle. Tracking the girls and their families over the past nine years, we can see a pattern emerging of girls being left behind or marginalised, and a number of factors contribute to girls' marginalisation.

Girl with her mother and sisters, Vietnam.

Girl, El Salvador, 2014.

Girl, Benin.

Girl and her grandmother, Benin.

These include: not attending school, lack of parental support for education, low parental and personal aspirations, lack of involvement with extra-curricular and leadership activities, unemployment, female-headed households, grandparent-headed households, disability and freedom of movement.

Longitudinal analysis of a rich, qualitative dataset such as this one allows us to understand better how multiple challenges can actually accumulate to affect girls' lives, and helps us to see the intersections among the challenges that girls and their families face. Through identifying those being left behind, and through a more exploratory approach to the analysis, we expect to be able to offer a deeper understanding of the interplay among various factors influencing girls' progress, particularly prior to adolescence.[2] We have also examined how the girls express their own experiences as marginalised girls.

GIRLS' EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS

- 95 per cent of the girls are currently enrolled in school
- more than 75 per cent of the girls continue to attend school regularly
- almost 25 per cent of all the girls taking part in the study are either missing school regularly or had missed more than a month of school in the past year.

A variety of reasons were given for absences from school – the majority cited illness. Teacher absences also meant that a small number of girls missed out on school at times. In Uganda, nearly a quarter of families reported that girls had been sent home from school at some point in the last year because their school fees were in arrears. Poor weather is also likely to have had an impact on attendance for girls living in less accessible locations.

A small number of girls are consistently poor attendees. Layla from Benin is one. Her grandmother reports that Layla is a poor learner and is not interested in school. However, Layla receives very little support at home, despite her grandmother's acknowledgment that she does in fact need it. Nakry, in Cambodia, is another, although her attendance is better than

[2] The following factors were considered: School Enrolment (attended pre-school; enrolled in primary school); School Attendance (regularity of attendance); Parental report of school (positive/negative); Support for homework (who provides; quality of support); Parental aspirations (academic; work; years in school); Girls' aspirations; Family income change (improved; remained the same; declined); Household access to social protection; Household coping mechanisms; Health status/treatment sought; Family access to healthcare; Female-headed households; Grandparent-headed households; Disability.

it has been in previous years. A combination of low household income, illness and limited support at home has meant that Nakry has not engaged as well with learning as most of her peers have. Nakry is often asked to support her mother by taking care of her younger siblings instead of attending school. This year she told our researchers she thinks the time she has to spend on household chores is unfair: *"I cycle to school by myself, and this is no danger… I think that daughters have to do housework because sons always hang out most of the time… My younger brother spends the whole day travelling around. At night, he watches TV and goes to bed. I think that girls do more housework than boys."*

As the girls are now older, they have been able to speak to our researchers in more detail about their experiences of school. On the whole, the majority continue to enjoy going to school. For some, school remains a safe haven – particularly for the girls living in violent neighbourhoods in Brazil and El Salvador. A growing number of girls report that their teachers are, in fact, role models. At the same time, many others spoke about their fears and worries about violence in schools and the use of corporal punishment.

Responses to economic stress and environmental degradation

Over the past four years there has been a gradual undermining of livelihoods and wellbeing brought about by food shortages and other hardships. Across the study, a high proportion of families reported that their income was either less than the year before or had remained the same. In Uganda, for example, the situation is one of a slow decline, with ever smaller numbers of families reporting any improvement in income levels year on year: from 31 per cent in 2011 to 15 per cent in 2014. In Brazil, none of the families reported an increase in their incomes during this period. This is hardly surprising, as in the past few years Brazil's economy has contracted, and last year GDP barely grew at all.[3] Across the nine countries, many families have commented on how recent changes in the national and global economies have had an impact on their daily lives.

[3] See, for example: *The Economist*. 'The crash of a titan.' *The Economist*, 28 February 2015, http://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21645248-brazils-fiscal-and-monetary-levers-are-jammed-result-it-risks-getting-stuck (accessed 10 November 2015).

Girl, Cambodia.

Girl, Vietnam.

Girl and her siblings, Uganda.

Girl and her family, Philippines.

Girl and family, Philippines.

Girl, Philippines.

Almost all of the families taking part in the study reported year-on-year increases in the cost of living in the four-year period, and in 2013 and 2014 all of them reported that prices had increased over the previous year. For most, this meant price increases in food and basic commodities; some families reported that increases in petrol and gas were also having an impact on family life. With the exception of the Vietnamese families, all families reported that the price of food had increased. In El Salvador, food prices had increased by more than 100 per cent between 2013 and 2014.

The only country where more families reported that their incomes had increased over time is the Philippines. All of the Filipino families taking part in the study have several income streams; it is widely evidenced that a capability to diversify is an important adapting mechanism for households at or below the poverty line, particularly in uncertain times.[4] In the Dominican Republic, on the other hand, families are mostly reliant on sole income streams, increasing their vulnerability when circumstances change.

Environmental degradation

The effects of global warming, climate change and environmental degradation are regularly reported in our study. Seasonal patterns have become changeable and unreliable, leaving many families with periods without food due to failed harvests after droughts or flooding. In all countries, families reported how the risks associated with climate change affect growing seasons and harvests and have a direct impact on family finances. The urban families in Latin America and the families in the Philippines are at particular risk of flooding and landslides during the annual rains and hurricanes. All of the families in Togo, Benin and Cambodia are reliant on rain-fed agriculture and reported a mixture of weather and climate change-related factors affecting their yields between 2011 and 2014. Their lives are punctuated by drought, heavy rain and pests, which sometimes destroy entire crops, thus underlining the families' overall vulnerability. An increasing proportion of the families taking part in the study report a hungry season, an annual shortage of food for between one and three months

[4] "Some families diversify by necessity and others by choice. Overall it is generally argued / agreed that diverse rural livelihoods are less vulnerable than undiverse ones". See: Ellis, F., 'The Determinants of Rural Livelihood Diversification in Developing Countries.' *Journal of Economics and Sustainable Development* Vol.6, No.14, 2015 49 *Agricultural Economics*, 51(2), pp.289-302, 2000.

of the year. Some also report ongoing difficulties in affording food during part of each month. The impact this gradual decline has had on the households over time has been devastating; as necessity and survival are increasingly the drivers of daily life, the notion of rights becomes less significant, putting at risk progress in girls' education and empowerment.

Conclusion

We know from the in-depth interviews we carried out in 2012 with the mothers in our study that they hope their daughters will have "a better life", stay in school as long as possible and are able to grasp opportunities the previous generation could scarcely dream of. Now the girls are old enough to have some understanding of the norms they are bound by, and to articulate their feelings about them, their comments provide an interesting insight into the gaps between the mothers' aspirations and their daughters' realities. The research with both the girls and their mothers has also enabled us to see who is accepting of the social norms by which they are surrounded and who is rebelling; in the future this will help us to understand better the reasons for these differences.

We can see that all the parents/carers want the best for their daughters and want to support their education for as long as possible; what remains to be seen is how far this will extend. How will the families in the study battle the external influencing factors such as poverty and the pressures of conformity? Their determination and will to succeed will surely be tested. Poverty and time pressure seem to be the main drivers for the instability of the girls' educational futures. Already we can see that some of our girls are particularly vulnerable, as intersecting factors of inequality mean that their capacity to develop their potential is compromised. What will happen to this group, and what interventions would be appropriate and effective?

We will also be able to map how and why the attitudes of the girls themselves may shift over time, especially those belonging to our group of 'resistors' – the girls who appear to challenge the dominant social norms in both their attitudes and behaviours. Will this group survive into adolescence? And what are the factors that will enable them to feel empowered to take part in the changes that will support transformative and sustainable gender equality in their homes and communities?

Girl, Dominican Republic.

Girl and her family, Uganda.
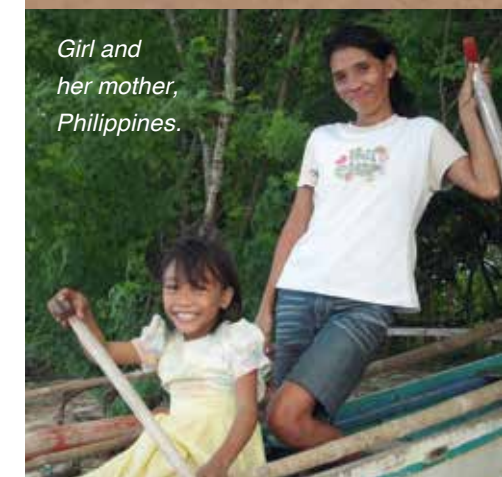
Girl and her mother, Philippines.

Because We are Girls

'Real Choices, Real Lives' Cohort Study Map

Benin
Alice
Annabelle
Barbara
Catherine
Eleanor
Isabelle
Jacqueline
Layla
Margaret
Thea
Ianna (m)
Elaine (m)
Elizabeth (m)
Omalara (d)
Lillian (d)

Vietnam
Chau
Hang
Hoa
Huong
Kieu
Kim
Ly
Mai
Nguyet
Nhi
Oanh
Quynh
Sen
Tan
Thi
Tien
Trinh
Thom
Uyen
Yen

Dominican Republic
Chantal
Dariana
Griselda
Katerin
Leyla
Madelin
Nicol
Raisa
Rebeca
Saidy
Sharina
Valerie
Ana (l)
Cara (l)
Oria (m)

El Salvador
Andrea
Bessy
Doris
Gabriela
Gladys
Hillary
Karen
Mariel
Raquel
Rebeca
Stephany
Susana
Valeria

Brazil
Amanda
Bianca
Camila
Fernanda
Juliana
Larissa
Natália
Patrícia
Sofia
Tatiana
Beatriz (l)
Feliciana(l)
Luiza (l)
Valentina (l)
Catarina (m)
Elena (m)
Florencia (m)
Margarida (m)
Pietra (m)
Sancia (m)

Togo
Ala-Woni
Anti
Anti-Yara
Ayomide
Azia
Djoumai
Essohana
Fezire
Folami
Ladi
Larba
Lelem
Mangazia
Nana-Adja
Nini-Rike
Reine
Tene
Adjoa (l)
Iara (l)
Melyah (m)
Aria (m)
Dofi (m)
Esi (m)
Omorose (m)
Aisosa (d)
Isoka (d)
Izegbe (d)

Uganda
Amelia
Beti
Dembe
Jane
Joy
Justine
Miremba
Namazzi
Nimisha
Rebecca
Sheila
Shifa
Sylvia
Achen (m)
Nasiche (d)

Cambodia
Bopha
Davy
Kannitha
Leakhena
Lina
Mealea
Mony
Nakry
Puthea
Reaksmey
Roumany
Sokanha
Sothany
Thearika
Kanya (m)

Philippines
Chesa
Christine
Darna
Dolores
Jasmine
Jocelyn
Kyla
Mahalia
Maricel
Melanie
Michelle
Reyna
Rosamie
Rubylyn
Angela (m)
Nicole (d)

(m) = migrated
(d) = deceased
(l) = left the study