

# Real Choices, Real Lives: Ten Years On





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Cover: Girl, Benin, 2016

Opposite from top: Girl, Brazil; Girl, Philippines; Girl, Togo; Girl, Dominican Republic; Girl, Cambodia.



# Introduction

## Real Choices, Real Lives

In 2006 Plan International UK began a unique UK Department for International Development funded research study following a group of 142 girls from nine countries<sup>1</sup> across three continents. The aim of the study was to track this cohort of girls from birth to 18 in order to have a better understanding of the reality of their daily lives.

In 2006 the international community was six years into the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals, to tackle global poverty and inequality. As the **Real Choices, Real Lives** study began, it was clear that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were in jeopardy unless girls' rights and gender equality were properly embedded and understood.<sup>1</sup> Plan International's 'State of the World's Girls' reports and

Because I am a Girl campaign for girls' rights were part of a global movement to put girls centre stage. And gradually, from 2000-2015, the lives and needs of girls and young women and their role in achieving the MDGs began to come to the attention of policy makers and funders.

Ten years later in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), gender equality remains on the agenda, as one of the 17 'goals to transform our world'.

When Plan's research study began, data was very much an issue and, to a lesser extent, it still is. By tracking the lives of even a small group of girls from birth to adulthood, we are tracking the progress of the development goals from MDGs to SDGs, and emphasising the importance of gender equality to both human rights and poverty reduction.

To this end, **Real Choices, Real Lives** documents the detailed experiences of the girls, their individual families and the environment they live in and helps to put a human face on the available statistics, theories and academic discussions. After ten years of data collection, we have a wealth of detailed information, including the voices of the girls themselves describing their hopes and dreams and their daily lives. Our annual interviews with the girls and their families are providing genuine insight into the way family and community shape girls' expectations of what they can do, and be, right from the very beginning.

In order to begin to address the key question of how to bring about change in girls' lives – to ensure that equality and opportunity are not conditioned by gender and that life is not prescribed "because I am a girl" – it is crucial to understand how and why these roles and identities are formed. Over the past four years our researchers have been able to talk directly to the girls, following them from the ages of five to nine into the world of middle childhood, and, now, as they reach ten, progressing to early adolescence. Our understanding of this critical period in a girl's life is limited; there is little data available. But it is a time when school and life outside the family take on greater importance; when girls really begin to absorb what is expected of them as girls; when household chores in many cases become a dominant part of their daily routine; and when their own expectations of life begin to solidify. It may be the period of life when limitations are set and fates are decided.

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

Research tells us that even in countries like Britain, with a developed welfare state and comparatively easy and free access to education and health systems, social mobility is not guaranteed.<sup>2</sup> All over the world, the children of the poor and uneducated are more likely to experience poverty and lack of opportunity themselves.<sup>3</sup> If you live in one of the world's poorer countries, born into a family with few assets, and have the added disadvantage of being a girl, what chance do you have?

<sup>1</sup> Benin, Brazil, Cambodia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, the Philippines, Togo, Uganda and Vietnam

142 girls, in  
9 countries,  
across 3  
continents,  
over 18 years

## Tracking the changes



Girl and  
her mother,  
Togo, 2007.

*"There is no difference [between boys and girls]. All are human and all have the same rights and duties."*

Girl's mother, Togo, 2012

Change is not impossible, but it is difficult. Over the years we have talked to many of the parents, carers and older relatives of the girls in our study to ask them about progress in girls' and women's lives. In 2011, when the fathers in the study were asked to reflect on the statement 'Nowadays there are opportunities for women that used to be just for men', many responded that much had changed for the better. In the Dominican Republic Griselda's father told us: ***"Now there are better relationships. There is more unity, more togetherness and better communication; they get on better now. Before, there was more brutality, more chauvinism. Before, women could not study, especially at night; now anyone can be anything."***

In Brazil, a female president was seen as a positive role model, and in Benin one teenage girl commented that parents had become more tolerant towards their daughters because of the numbers of women on television. Overall, participants saw improvements in education and in access to healthcare, and they recognised

that technology has brought opportunity, information and less isolation. Parents supported their girls' education equally with their boys': ***"It used to be that parents didn't bother about the education of their girl children; nowadays, even if they struggle with money, they try hard to support their education."***<sup>5</sup>

In many countries the Millennium Development Goals helped to increase girls' enrolment at primary school, and since 2000 gender disparity has narrowed at all levels of education. Globally, the rate of maternal mortality has decreased by 45 per cent since 1990, with most of that reduction taking place since 2000.<sup>6</sup> In some ways, the socio-political climate has changed for the better:

- Girls' rights have been the focus of numerous international campaigns, and funding for programmes and projects that benefit adolescent girls, in particular, have followed in their wake.
- Governments have been encouraged to take action in support of the economic argument that educating a girl and

### In memory of...

Sadly, seven of the girls from the original cohort have died.

Lillian from Benin, Aisosa from Togo and Nicole from the Philippines died in accidents. Nicole drowned, a leading cause of death for children in the Philippines. She had no sanitation facilities at home and was swept away while using the river.

Nasiche from Uganda died from malaria; Omalaria from Benin and Izegbe and Isoka from Togo died from undiagnosed illnesses.

All these deaths come back to poverty – the 'accidents' to poor housing and lack of sanitation facilities, and the 'undiagnosed' illnesses to malnutrition, the cost of medical care and the distance to a medical centre.

Six of the deaths occurred before the girls reached their fifth birthday. In recent years, the global under-five mortality rate has declined by more than half, dropping from 12.7 million in 1990 to six million in 2015. However, despite this, in 2015 16,000 under-fives were dying every day.<sup>4</sup> The deaths of the girls in our study can only emphasise further how important it is to maintain the efforts of the Millennium Development Goals and the focus on reducing under-five mortality.



*Girl and her mother, Vietnam, 2016.*

strengthening her capabilities will also benefit the wider world by contributing to GDP, as well as helping to break the cycle of poverty that has crippled so many communities for generations.

The world has begun to acknowledge that girls' rights are human rights, and as the girls in Plan International UK's study reach the age of ten, much of this progress can be seen. However, it is also becoming clear how much more needs to be done. Poverty and economic stress, exacerbated by climate change, conflict and natural disasters, are certainly impeding progress as families struggle to keep up their commitment to girls' education. Parents migrate in search of work, meaning that family life is fractured and incomes fluctuate. Violence against women and girls is, all over the world, a reality that cannot be ignored and girls are still being pressed into a domestic life which defines who they are, to both themselves and others.

All this is reflected in the daily experiences of the girls and families in this study. Attitudes may be changing, but reality is much harder to shift.

In the Philippines, Mahalia's mother had a

## Methodology

This study employs a largely qualitative methodology and is embedded in a feminist research perspective which aims to reject power hierarchies and gender discrimination. It builds upon a life course approach, focusing its attention on critical transition points, and on how the influences in early girlhood and middle childhood will define girls' later lives. When the study began, it was rooted in principles of grounded theory,<sup>7</sup> based upon data systematically gathered and analysed, with some central lines of inquiry mirroring the Millennium Development Goals. Over time, the need for more complex lines of inquiry has emerged, in order to dig deeper into what we are learning from the data. The flexibility inherent in the qualitative approach has allowed the study to adapt to the lives of the families and girls as they get older, making adjustments year by year to the in-depth ethnographic interviews. Age-appropriate and some interactive tools are introduced each year to allow us to engage in a holistic manner with the experiences of the girls and to help us understand their sense of self and their engagement with the world around them. The data now provides us with a rich picture of the world that the girls are growing up in, the social rules, structures and relationships that surround them, and a real sense of the opportunities and challenges of life from their viewpoint.

This birth cohort started in 2006, following 142 girls born between 1 January 2006 and 31 December 2006. The sample group are all from countries where Plan International works and where the country office team were happy to take part in the project. The sampling was purposive, and each country was requested to sample in this way:

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

Data collection occurs on a yearly basis, with the support of the nine participating Plan International Country offices and their research teams. They are in turn supported centrally by the research team at Plan International UK and, in several of the countries, by local academic institutions. Trained local researchers are bound by the global child protection policies of Plan International and ethical guidance from best practice experiences of NGOs working with children. Data is coded and analysed adhering to Plan International UK's child protection policy to prevent any misuse of data or images that might jeopardise the wellbeing or safety of any of the participants.



dream for her daughter: ***“What is my dream for Mahalia? I hope she doesn’t become like us, who have experienced only hardship in our lives.”*** The next few years will tell us whether Mahalia and the other girls

in our study have been able to benefit from their parents’ dreams for their daughters, and whether the increased international focus on girls’ rights will bring real progress to girls’ lives.

## Theoretical framing

***“All too often, women are not treated as ends in their own right, persons with a dignity that deserves respect from laws and institutions. Instead, they are treated as mere instruments of the ends of others – reproducers, caregivers, sexual outlets, agents of a family’s general prosperity.”***

Martha Nussbaum, 2000<sup>8</sup>

The **Real Choices, Real Lives** research is following girls growing up in the 21st century in the context of grinding poverty surrounded by social norms that either inhibit or support their progress. In order to examine girls’ development in this way, the research makes the connection across two approaches: *capabilities*<sup>9</sup> and the study of *social norms*.

There is a large and interdisciplinary literature which explores what social norms are and why people tend to comply with them. This body of thinking understands social norms as patterns of behaviour motivated by a desire to conform to the shared social expectations of people who are important to them; they may both value others’ approval and fear their disapproval. They can be defined as the ‘informal rules that govern our behaviour’.<sup>10</sup> The power of social expectations and the drive to ‘belong’ can be so strong that people follow norms even where these contradict their personal beliefs and attitudes.<sup>11</sup> This difference between the rules or standards people commonly expect and what they actually do has led to some distinguishing between ‘injunctive norms’ (what people believe they and others are supposed to do) and ‘descriptive norms’ (what people actually do).<sup>12</sup>

Social norms differ from attitudes in that they are ‘interdependent’ – they reflect values shared amongst a group of people. Actual behaviour is influenced by an interplay of social norms, personal and factual beliefs, and other external circumstances – such as poverty. Social norms themselves can be both positive and negative; they can both drive and prevent change, help to explain weak implementation of laws intended to protect and extend women’s and girls’ rights (social, cultural and economic) and mean that discriminatory practices are continued.<sup>13</sup>

The capabilities approach, first articulated by the Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen in the 1980s and further developed by several scholars,<sup>14</sup> is focused on what people are able to be and what they are able to do; the choice they are able to exercise. To Sen, human capabilities, or ‘substantial freedoms’, are those that allow ***“people to live the lives they have reason to value and enhance the real choices they have”***.<sup>15</sup> In addition, societies should support access to opportunities and dignity, which people may then choose to exercise in action, or not. The centre of Sen’s vision is the richness of human life and, within that, people’s capability to function in society, rather than the usual concentration on rising GDP, technical progress, or industrialisation.<sup>16</sup>

He outlines five distinct freedom domains: political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security. Freedom, he says, is a principal determinant of individual initiative and social effectiveness; it is good primarily because it enhances the ability of individuals to help themselves, a property that Sen describes as the ‘agency aspect’ of the individual.<sup>17</sup> The main elements of Kabeer’s<sup>18</sup> women’s empowerment theory – access to resources, the role of agency, and a sense of achievement – are also critical to our analysis.

This framework allows us to explore some of the similarities and differences across and within households from a gendered perspective. It enables us to understand better the impact on women’s and girls’ capabilities, agency and choice when resources are scarce; how they adapt in these contexts; and to explore in greater depth the impact of coping on their capabilities and personal empowerment. The application of life course analysis to the data helps us to understand girls’ progress and the factors that either support or impinge on the development of their capabilities, over a period of time.

***“When poverty combines with gender inequality, the result is acute failure of central human capabilities.”***

Martha Nussbaum, 2001<sup>19</sup>



Girl,  
Dominican  
Republic,  
2014.

*"It's not fair, because I do more than my brother. I told my mother but she did not say anything about it."*

Hillary, El Salvador, 2015

All of the girls in the study are aware of the rules that surround their home life, their relationships with family members and their school activities. Questions about household chores and play reveal early differences surrounding the families' expectations of what girls and boys can do, and the girls in the study reflected this from a young age. In 2014 it was clear from our interviews with the eight-year-old girls in the cohort that by this age the gender identities of the girls taking part in the study, and the boys around them, were largely fully formed. Play had become increasingly gendered and the girls we talked to were becoming aware of the differences between how girls and boys spend their time and where they are allowed to go. Hillary in El Salvador explained: *"Where they don't let me go is to visit a woman called Elsa: she lives too far away. Oscar can go but I can't, because I am a girl."* Sharina from the Dominican Republic told us clearly: *"Girls don't play with cars because they are not male, and boys should not play with dolls or with [kitchen] toys. My younger brother cannot do chores at home, only*

*we girls. If my little brother dirties his clothes, I wash them."*

Not all the girls are quite so convinced, and the extent to which girls agree with or challenge this stereotyping varies. Plan International UK's analysis over the past two years has identified three groups amongst the girls and their families, largely categorised as follows:

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

The next few years will reveal whether this final group survive, still resisting, into adolescence. If they do, we need to understand the factors that fuel this resistance and how it will impact on the course of their lives.

## Emerging themes and findings

Ten years into our research, the evidence demonstrates that the families in our study live in the context of gradual economic decline and are responding in complex and diverse ways to the situation in which they find themselves. Several girls and their families have become both economically and socially marginalised during the time we have been tracking them, limiting the potential for these girls' capabilities to develop as they grow up. Reaksmei from Cambodia, for example, has a lot to contend with. Her father is disabled and her mother is illiterate. The family have a lot of debt; they borrowed money to buy their pigs and sometimes have to borrow to feed them. They appear committed to Reaksmei's education and she goes to an uncle for help with her homework, but she experiences marginalisation and bullying by older pupils at school. As she told us in 2015: *"They catch me when I go to buy a snack, and they take my money when they are on guard during class session."*

In line with the Millennium Development Goals, much of the data collected in the first ten years of the study concentrates on the themes of education, health, gender-based

violence, the families' economic status, including the impact of the global economic downturn, and climate change on migration trends and survival strategies. The families in the study are very vulnerable; relatively small economic shocks and unexpected expenses will have a major destabilising effect. These can change the families' health and educational choices and the opportunities available to the girls in the cohort group.

The study is also tracking changing attitudes and it is likely that the high aspirations held by most of the girls and their parents will help shift social expectations around girls' potential and their gender roles, particularly in communities where they are the first generation to have access to secondary

or post-secondary education. However, even in families like Justine's in Uganda that are committed to their daughters' education – Justine's older sister is at university – domestic roles remain rigidly gendered. When asked why the boys in the family do not cook or help with serving meals, Justine's mother replies simply: **"Culture doesn't allow that."** For some of the girls, the chance to develop their own capabilities and self-confidence through expanding their networks and developing a positive sense of self will become an important part of their lives. This will perhaps give them a clearer understanding of what is possible and increase the potential for change – questioning and shifting what culture will allow.

## CASE STUDY: Justine

### "I will just have to work hard"

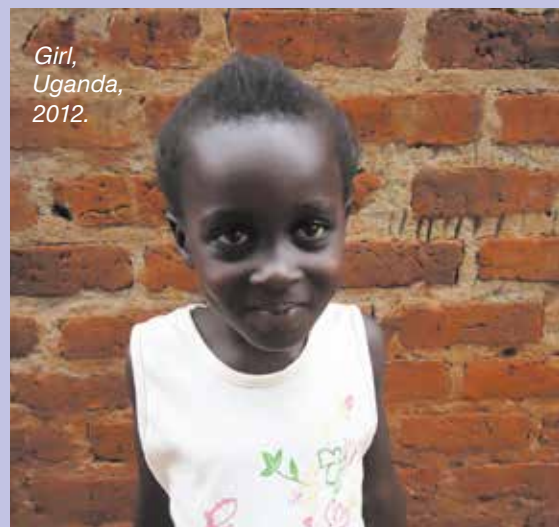
Justine is the youngest of nine siblings, although only six still live at home. One of Justine's brothers has completed university and one sister is also a university student. The other siblings are at primary school, except for one brother who has dropped out. Justine's mother has no formal education but she and her husband are clearly committed to ensuring their children receive the best possible education. This year the family decided to send Justine and her siblings to a private school.

The researchers noted that as well as farming and animal rearing, Justine's mother appears to be an adept businesswoman and sells petrol by the side of the road as well as milk during the mornings: **"[She] says she wants to be a nurse, so it's what I want to fulfil for her... I have many personal businesses of selling fuel so I will just have to work hard."** She is determined to give her the best she can, but is clearly worried about her own health and what would happen to Justine if she were to die. Despite her hard work out of the house, it is Justine's mother, and her daughters, who do all the domestic work. They do not complain about this, as it is what everyone does.

The family seems close, but this year Justine's mother is upset at her husband's decision, after more than 20 years of marriage, to take a second wife. She is worried about the role this new wife might play in step-parenting her children and whether or not she would support Justine's schooling: **"I always fall sick [with] headaches, as I told you, so sometimes I get worried about**

**dying before Justine finishes school. It worries me a lot because stepmothers don't always care."**

Despite her ability to plan, save and increase the family income, it seems that Justine's mother is not involved in important economic decisions: **"Here in my house, it's my husband who decides... if [the money] is [from] my produce, we sit and discuss, but if it is his, I have no powers – he makes his decisions."** These decisions are often made entirely without her knowledge and she would like to have more say. Justine's mother thinks that girls should not be excluded from inheritance, that they too need assets, **"like land where she can construct houses for rent and use that money for developmental things and even if her marriage fails she can come back and sit on her land and dig."**





## Section One: Ten Years On

### 1. Education

*"This new generation has a chance to access education... I always advise them to try to study hard."*

Thearika's mother, Cambodia, 2012

Over the ten years of the study, education has been of central importance to the girls' families. By 2010, when they were four years old, almost half of the girls – 46 per cent across the seven countries where this was reported – had already started to attend pre-school. Shifa's mother in Uganda told us: ***"It's good to educate a girl, because nowadays women are taking up leadership positions in politics."***

Some parents, that same year, were already expressing concerns about the quality of formal education available in their communities, stating that the nearest school, or the school they could afford, might not offer the best education for their daughters.

Mothers in particular want their daughters to have ***"a better life"***, and see education as the key to this. The majority of the girls' parents are poorly educated, with the men generally having a slightly higher level of education than their wives. Parental education levels are a good indicator of

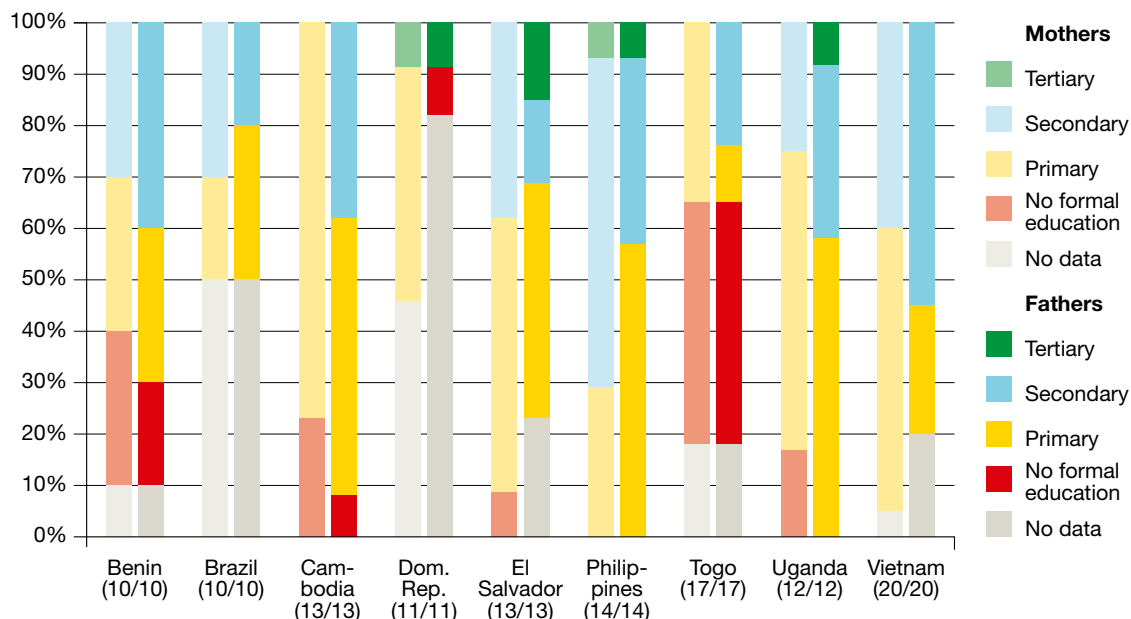
how children will get on at school and in higher education, so it is clear that the girls we are following already have barriers to overcome.<sup>20</sup> Their stories and opportunities vary, of course, from country to country.

In Cambodia, life has changed drastically across just one generation. Due to the disruptions caused by civil war, the mothers of three of the 13 girls in our study had no formal education and none went further than primary school. However, this seems to have strengthened their resolve to educate their own daughters; several mothers have stated that they do not want their daughters to have the kind of life they have had and they are committed to sending them to school.

By the age of six, Dariana from the Dominican Republic was clearly influenced by the aspirations of her mother's generation for a better chance for their daughters when she declared: ***"I want to go to university."*** In Togo, eight of the 14 mothers have had no formal education; again, none went further than primary school. In Benin, Catherine's mother was the only one to get as far as the third year of secondary school.

The situation is quite different in the Philippines, where the mothers of ten of the 14 girls studied to secondary level or

**Mothers' and fathers' education levels (2016)**





*Girl,  
Benin, 2015.*

higher. Not only this, but six of the mothers are better educated than their husbands and only two are less well educated. The majority of the women in every country who did leave school prematurely recall that the interruption to their formal education was the most important incident they experienced as girls. These women's life stories, recorded in interviews in 2012, illustrate very clearly how critical a period early adolescence was for them. Their household duties increased, which affected their studies, and several of them were married by the age of 14, when their formal education stopped. Barbara's mother speaks for many when she expresses the hope for her daughter that:

***"Everything will be different in her life."***

### Barriers to education

***"This year has been the only year we haven't been able to pay. We're going to pay, we're going to pay. God will bless us and we will pay."***

Valeria's grandmother, El Salvador, 2016

Primary education is supposed to be free in all nine countries in Plan International

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

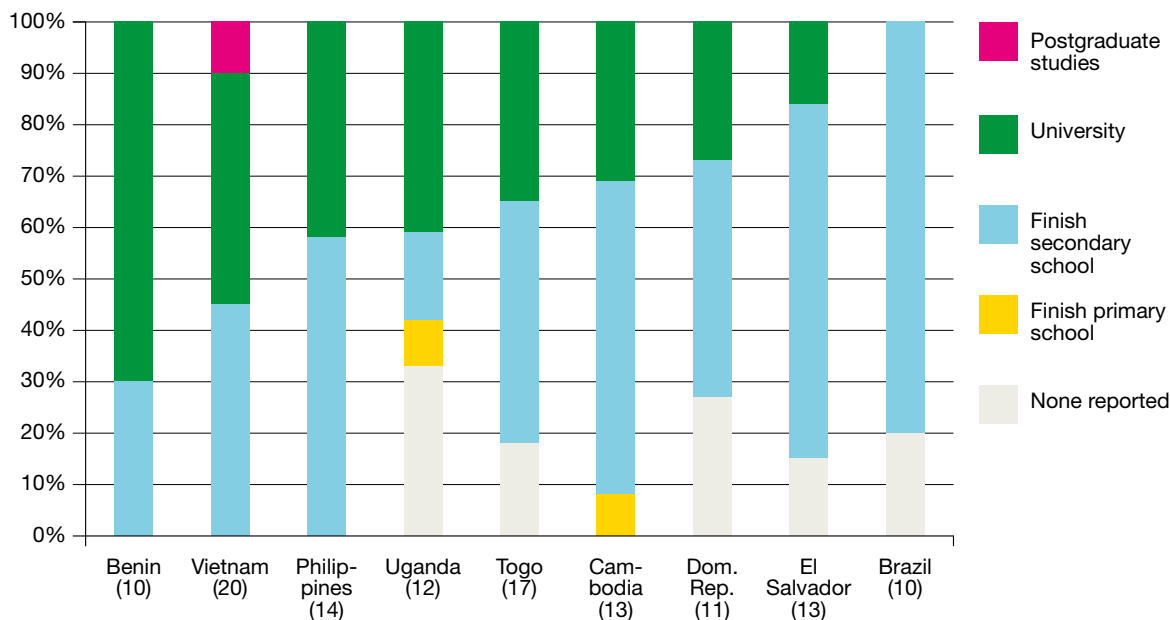
Over the years, enrolment and attendance rates have fluctuated. In 2014, when they were eight, 55 per cent of the girls were not attending school regularly, even though 95 per cent of them were enrolled. There were a number of different reasons given: ill health, poor weather conditions, and the expense of fees, lunch money and equipment. In some countries this figure was worryingly high: in El Salvador, 90 per cent of girls were missing school regularly; in Cambodia and Uganda, the figure was 83 per cent. A year later, again despite a 95 per cent enrolment rate, almost a quarter of the girls regularly failed to attend or had missed more than a month of school in the past year. Layla from Benin and Nakry from Cambodia had both consistently missed school. Nakry reported having too many chores and having to spend time looking after her younger siblings. She was not happy with this: ***"I think that daughters have to do housework because sons hang out most of the time... My younger brother spends the whole day travelling***

*Girl  
with her  
mother and  
grandmother,  
El Salvador,  
2011.*



## Primary carer's educational aspirations for the cohort girl (2016)

Ordered by % who reported aspiring to university.



### *around. At night he watches TV and goes to bed."*

While mothers, fathers, and grandparents largely agree on the importance of keeping their daughters in school, by 2016 they are increasingly anxious about their ability to do so. Thea's family in Benin spoke for many families in the study when they told our researchers this year that their main anxieties were: ***"our financial means, or her refusal to listen to advice which could lead to an unwanted pregnancy, which I wouldn't like"***. Twenty-seven families, largely in Togo, Uganda and Benin, cited early marriage or pregnancy as a

possible barrier to their daughter remaining at school. Only the lack of money, which was mentioned 54 times across the study this year, was of greater concern. Despite the economic challenges, which have increased year on year, the 2016 interviews demonstrate that the families continue to have high aspirations: 48 per cent of parents would like to see their daughter finish secondary school and more than a third talk about them going to university.

Most of them are off to a good start. In 2016 all the girls in the cohort, with one exception, are attending school and, apart from six, all attend regularly.

Girl,  
Benin, 2013.





## School report

In Brazil, the girls go to school regularly despite some concerns with both the quality of the education and the girls' safety in and around school. Camila's mother told us that she had taken Camila out of school temporarily because of the teacher's bullying behaviour. She has now found another school, **"so she'll probably study again next year"**. In Cambodia, where all the girls go to public non-fee paying schools, the tensions between school and household chores are increasingly evident – some of the girls also complain that they are asked to do domestic work at school. When asked what she did at school, Bopha told us: **"I clean the classroom, collect water into the toilet, water crops, pick rubbish, clean the ground, play around, play dragon tail game, PosPongPong game and clean the toilet."**

In the Dominican Republic, as in several other places, the girls report violence in school, including corporal punishment and bullying. Parents are concerned about teacher strikes but again remain committed to their daughters' education. In El Salvador, ill health has been one of the main reasons for non-attendance, though the interviews

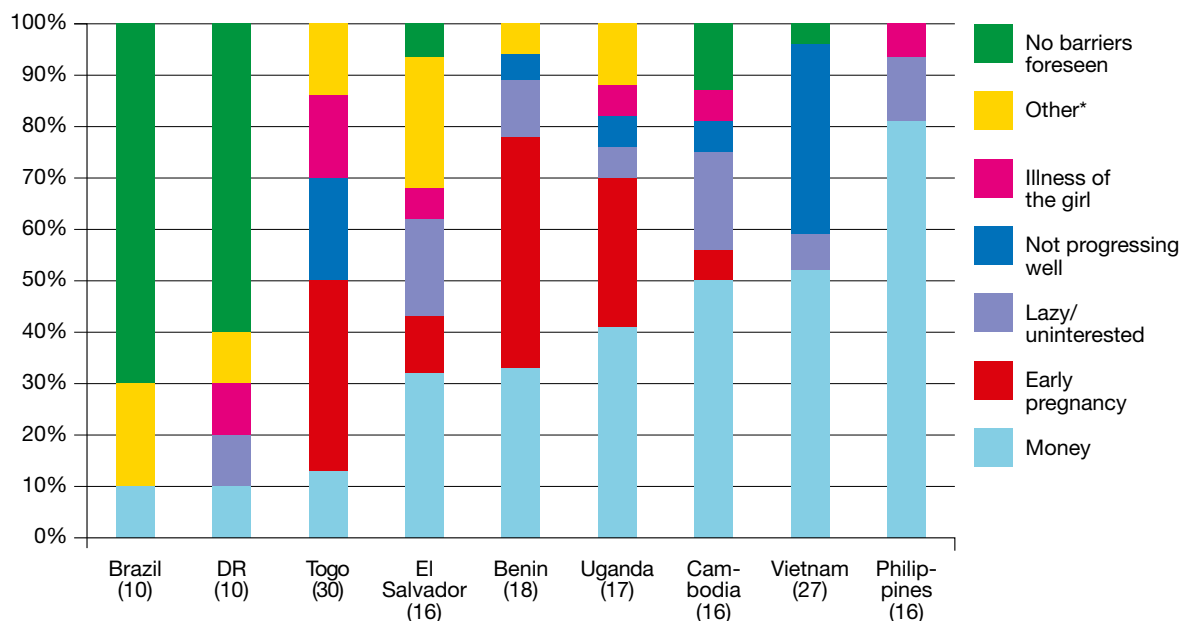


Girl,  
Cambodia,  
2015.

also paint a bleak picture of violence in the community, early pregnancy and teachers who do not do a good job. Despite this, the girls' aspirations remain high. In common with girls in other countries, the majority of them want to become doctors and teachers; Gabriela wants to become a lawyer and Doris would like to be a nurse, a policewoman or a cleaner.

## Barriers to the girl achieving educational aspirations foreseen by her primary carer (2016)

Ordered by % who cited money.



\* Brazil – Schools closing, strikes

Togo – Child trafficking, bad behaviour, doesn't follow parents' advice, 'Because she's a girl'

Dom. Rep. – Too far

Benin – No more children in the house

Uganda – Mother's death, bad behaviour from boys

El Salvador – Moving to USA, chores imposed by mother, crime/kidnap, violence

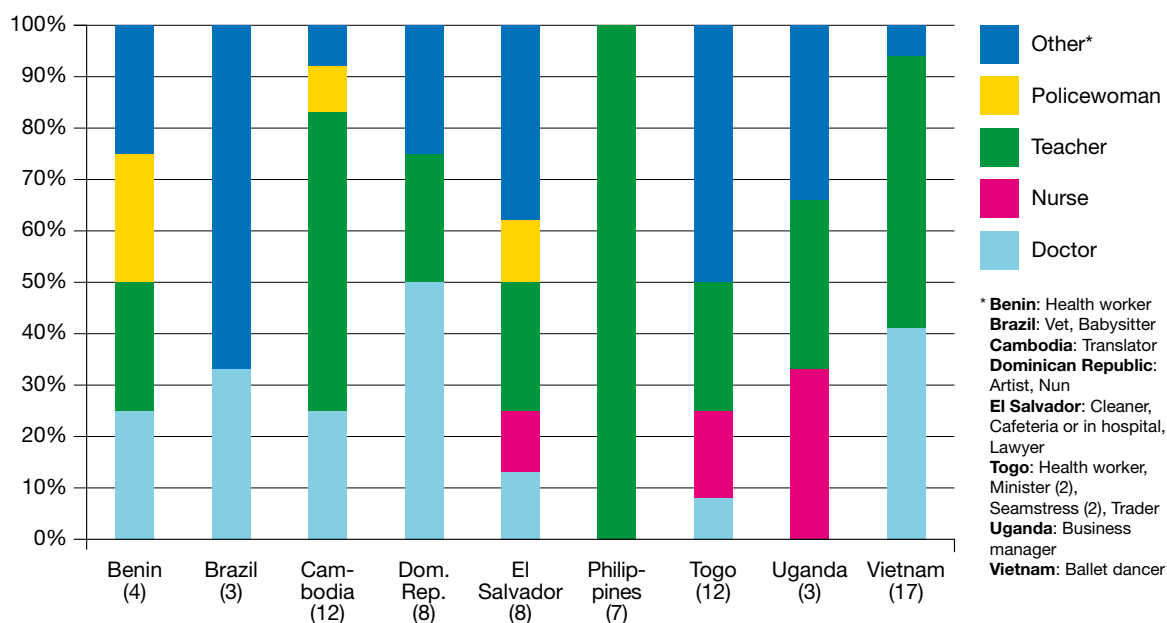
Parents in the Philippines, often with large families, struggle with fees, and girls' experiences of school are mixed. Some are making good progress whilst others report bullying, bad teachers and difficulties with learning. Mahalia, when asked what advice she had been given by older women, told us: ***"Finish school; don't marry yet."*** In Togo, the burden of chores is increasing, as Folami's parents reported: ***"When she comes home for lunch, she washes the dishes and learns her lessons before it is time to return to school. When she comes back in the evening, she helps in the kitchen; on Wednesday afternoon, she helps a woman at the market to have a little money."*** They and their daughter, however, remain keen for her to continue her education: ***"She learns her lessons between 7 pm and 8 pm. Our duty is to get our cousins who are older and in the upper class to help her with her homework; there is no repeating for her."*** Across all the countries, many parents whose own education level is low recruit other family members, often older siblings, to help with homework and with understanding the education system.

In Uganda, where all the girls are in school and all parents pay fees, the most-cited barriers to girls' education are: lack of financial means, illness, early pregnancy

and early marriage. In general parents are encouraging, as the girls themselves say – Amelia told us that her parents' advice to her was ***"to study"***. In Vietnam, the only barriers reported for girls' education are girls' lack of interest in studies and lack of economic means. In Togo, Anti's mother told us in 2012: ***"Whenever she comes back from school, she repeats wonderfully all that she has learned. This is a source of pride for the family."***

The families' commitment to the girls' education has certainly stood the test of time. But as we have seen, this commitment is under stress from poverty, poor health, fears for their daughters' safety, the variable quality of the education being received and the seemingly inevitable encroachment of domestic responsibilities. The burden of domestic chores not only eats into the time these ten-year-olds have to study; it also has an impact on their understanding of what they can do with their lives, what their roles can and will be. Over the next few years, as they become teenagers, this may become an insuperable barrier for many of them and it will take continued and vigorous support from their families and the community around them if they are to do what they tell us they want to do – become university students, doctors, teachers, nurses, vets, lawyers and government ministers.

### The cohort girls' occupational aspirations (2016)



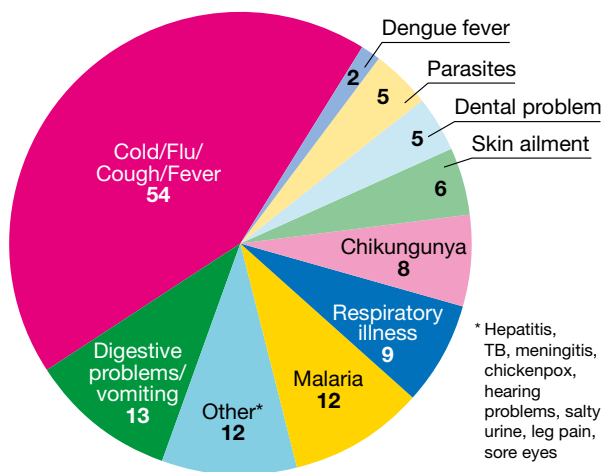
## 2. Health

The study visited the girls for the first time in 2006 when they were babies. The majority of them were born either at home or in a local health centre. In most cases, their births were assisted by trained personnel – a midwife, a trained birth attendant or, in the case of the Brazilian girls only, a doctor. However, almost a quarter of the births were assisted by a traditional assistant or someone untrained in the case of a medical emergency.

The vast majority of the babies were breastfed during their first six months of life. By the time community researchers had made their second visit, the babies had been introduced to solid food and most were eating enthusiastically. By the third visit, families across the study were reporting a range of health concerns – from serious illnesses like malaria, dysentery and dengue fever to persistent chest complaints and observed malnutrition. Some families reported typhoid fever and dysentery contracted from contaminated drinking water. In six of the cohort countries, all the girls had been immunised at birth, and 93 per cent have birth registration certificates, vital documentation for accessing health and education services. In 2016, 78 per cent of the girls were reported to have been ill in the past year. The majority of these illnesses were minor, requiring no more than a visit to a local health centre or pharmacy for treatment.

The girls in three countries – Benin, Togo and Uganda – have continued to suffer regularly from malaria. In Cambodia, dengue fever is endemic and in the Dominican Republic and El Salvador chikungunya was among the more serious diseases affecting the girls in the study. On some occasions, the girls’ families were able to get free treatment at the local health centre. However, several of them reported having to travel to a hospital, incurring not only treatment costs but also transport costs. Where the girls have been seriously ill, their reported illnesses have been largely respiratory diseases, parasitic infections and anaemia. These are all preventable and treatable but have the potential to have a negative impact on girls’ lives as they grow up. Sixty-one families in the study reported illness as a reason girls were missing classes and poor health is,

### Reports of illnesses, by type, all countries (2016)



overall, the reason most frequently given for girls’ absence from school.

### “We suffered much from hunger...”

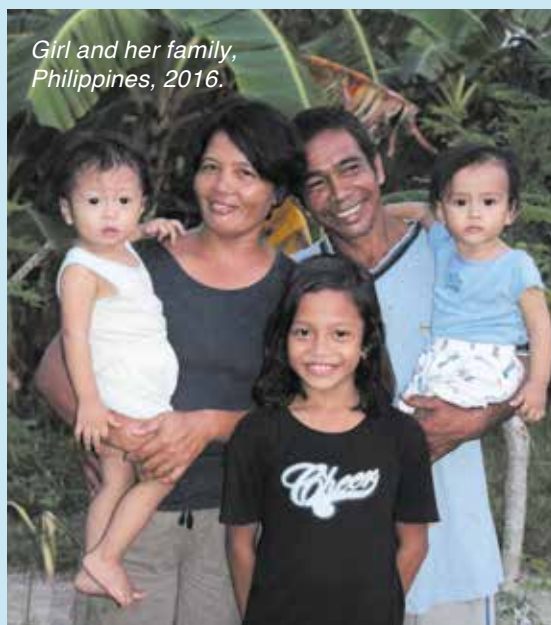
Over the past few years, many of the families taking part in the study have reported annual rises in the cost of living. They struggle to afford enough food to keep their children healthy and this year the majority of the families, 63 per cent overall, again reported on the detrimental effects that the increase of food prices and/or seasonal food shortages have had on their lives. As Andrea’s family in El Salvador told us: **“We don’t have a balanced diet any more.”** Other families, like Dolores’ in the Philippines, reported that they could not afford meat, fruit or fish. Catherine’s family in Benin spoke for

*Girl and her mother, Vietnam, 2007.*





## “My mother never spoke to me about it...”



Girl and her family,  
Philippines, 2016.

The majority of the mothers, when interviewed in 2012, reported that they had no reproductive and sexual health education. Some found out about menstruation from friends or older siblings, but to many it was a shock. The mothers also knew little about contraception or pregnancy. At least a quarter of them were under 18 when they had their first child and one was only 12.

In some of the countries taking part in the study – Brazil, the Dominican Republic, the Philippines and Vietnam – women (and men have joined reproductive and sexual health education classes. In the Philippines, Reyna's mother laughed when she told our researchers: ***“I learned about that from the clinic. But when we talked about those things, it was too late. I already had seven children.”*** Most of the mothers told us that they did not discuss these things with their husbands, though there were some exceptions. In Togo,

Larba's mother, who had attended classes, told us: ***“Yes, we often speak of it to the clinic.***

***Sometimes I talk about this with my husband.”***

And Jocelyn's mother, who also attended family planning sessions in the Philippines, told us: ***“We agreed to practice withdrawal when we had only two children. Ah, it didn't work; I got pregnant!”***

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

This year, it was clear that many of the girls were aware of changes to their bodies and some mentioned that they had not yet started their periods. However, their lack of understanding about sexual and reproductive health issues is underlined in this interview with Beti from Uganda: *Researcher:* Like what problems?

*Beti:* ***Normally girls go and they are impregnated.***

*Researcher:* Who impregnates them?

*Beti:* ***The boys.***

*Researcher:* If boys impregnate them, what do they do to them?

*Beti:* ***I don't know.***

*Researcher:* Who restricts you from going to those dangerous places?

*Beti:* ***Our parents.***

As they get older, information around sexual and reproductive health will be crucial for the girls in our study. Not only is pregnancy a major cause of girls leaving school early, it can also be fatal. Complications during pregnancy and childbirth are one of the leading causes of death for girls aged 15-19.<sup>21</sup>

many when they told us: ***“There has been a reduction in the amount of food served at meals. Everyone in the household has been affected, but the children have been given priority.”*** In Cambodia, Davy's family worry about the overall effect on the family's health: ***“It is okay as we can eat what we have, but it rather affects our health (insufficient vitamins and nutrition). I have***

***no solution, as it is a shortage time.”***

The interplay of economic and environmental stress which affects a family's ability to feed their children may have far-reaching effects on the development of the now ten-year-olds in our study – undermining their general health and emotional wellbeing and affecting their ability to study and attend school.<sup>22</sup>

### 3. Income and Economics

"At the moment, making a living is difficult. I have very little to sell: some pumpkins that I have planted and some leftover corn. We nearly always eat pumpkins because this is what we have... I have a son that lives in the capital and he sends me about RD\$2,000 [approximately US\$57] per month. We can survive on this."

Valerie's father, Dominican Republic, 2009

The economic realities of the families taking part in the research are tough. Most of them are farmers, struggling to make a living from the land that surrounds them. Some supplement their income by small-scale trading. From 2009 onwards, families taking part in the study reported a regular annual shortage of food for three months of the year, a 'hungry season', or difficulty in affording food during part of each month. In 2016, 23 families across the study reported seasonal food shortages. As farmers, they depend on a good harvest and sufficient labour, and even a small change in their circumstances or one bad harvest can have major implications. Davy's mother

in Cambodia told us in 2011: ***"This year the rice yield is not so good because I'm pregnant and cannot work and we do not have much money to hire labour for transplanting and harvesting."***

Over the past four years there has been a gradual economic deterioration across all nine countries in the study. In 2016, 71 per cent of families reported that their economic situation had either worsened or remained the same. In Uganda, for example, the situation over the years between 2011 and 2014 was 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 the four-year period. In 2016, 44 per cent of all the families we spoke to reported that their economic situation had worsened, and 27 per cent that it had stayed the same. Since 2010, when we looked closely at the issue of migration, dependence on remittances from family members working abroad has, in many countries, increased. At the same time, the global economic downturn has put these jobs and salaries at risk.<sup>23</sup>



Girl and her siblings, Dominican Republic, 2012

### **“We have no reserves left...”**

For rural families across the study, seasonal drought, flooding and heavy rain dictate the success or failure of their agriculture-based livelihoods. They describe how their lives are punctuated by drought, heavy rain and pest attacks, sometimes destroying entire crops. In 2016, Barbara's mother in Benin told researchers: **“Costs have risen because the merchants have to travel to the far north of the country where they still have foodstuffs in reserve, they then sell them to us at an increased cost. We have no reserves left locally. Everything becomes more expensive when there is a drought.”**

The fluctuations of the weather bring hardship everywhere and most families report borrowing from relatives, friends or neighbours with low or no interest when they are in financial trouble. It seems that socially closer ties, such as family members, are approached first, then neighbours and, finally, strangers within the community are asked. In Vietnam, Quynh family told us: **“I first come to ask for my siblings’,**

**aunts’ and uncles’ help. If they can’t, I will ask for my neighbours’ and intimates’ help. If they can’t too, I will have to find other sources.”** Borrowing from relatives and friends means that, as Ly's father confirmed: **“I will not have to pay interest. If I need more money, I will have to borrow from a bank with the interest of 0.55 per cent per month.”** Borrowing from friends and family is common too

in Togo, as Mangazia's father commented: **“For unexpected expenses, we borrow from brothers and friends and we repay without interest.”** Another family, Djoumai's, also borrowed food **“when our family is in shortage of food. We always do our best and resist against this situation by negotiating interest-free loans of food or money from our neighbours.”** Friends and relatives are important for the cohort girls’ families, not just in terms of direct financial support; in Uganda, Joy's mother reports how her father-in-law helped them to rebuild their house when it was damaged.

Not everyone can rely on family and

*Girl with her mother and sisters, Cambodia, 2012.*





## Migration

Between 2000 and 2015, migration worldwide increased from an estimated 150 million to 244 million, a 41 per cent increase. That means that one out of every 30 people in the world today is a migrant. Factor in the estimated number of internal migrants, 763 million, and you find that every seventh person in the world is a migrant.<sup>24</sup> Forty-eight per cent of migrants worldwide are women<sup>25</sup> and this year in Europe there were more children and women on the move than adult males.<sup>26</sup>

Many of the girls in our study are affected by migration, as parents, siblings, grandparents or other close family members leave their families and communities to find work. In El Salvador, for example, many of the girls live in single-parent households with their grandmothers, mothers or fathers and rely on the remittances sent from family members working illegally in the United States. Additionally, particularly in the Dominican Republic, Brazil and El Salvador, families supplement their incomes with remittances from relatives who are internal migrants in nearby towns and cities. Others have taken to seasonal migration for work, with one or both parents moving away from the family home.

In 2010, out of 20 families in Togo, 12 reported that a close family member had moved away for work. In Brazil, where we interviewed the teenage relatives and neighbours of the girls in the study, we found that 75 per cent had fathers who had left home at various times. One of them told us:

*"My father spent three years away from home to work. The family was sad; he did not even see my brother when he was born and when my brother died my father could not come home..."* Andrea's mother from El Salvador moved as far as Italy in order to find work to support her family. These more permanent separations have major implications for those who remain behind, including the girls in our study.



*Girl and her grandfather, Vietnam, 2013.*

The World Bank estimates that in 2015 personal remittances equated to over 16 per cent of El Salvador's GDP, having grown steadily since a sharp reduction during the global economic crash of 2009.<sup>27</sup> The Philippines also receives a large portion of remittances from Filipino workers overseas, with the World Bank estimating that in 2015 this accounted for 10.3 per cent of GDP,<sup>28</sup> approximately \$29 billion.<sup>29</sup>

The numbers of girls in the study being brought up by grandparents, often because their mothers, or fathers, have migrated for work, has increased from eight in 2012 to 17 in 2014. By 2016, 28 girls are reported to be living

with grandparents, though not all are being brought up solely by them. In Vietnam, Tien's grandparents care for her in her mother's absence. Her grandfather explains their situation: ***"I am old and weak now. If I become sick in the future and I am not able to take care of her any more, I don't know who will. Her mother is a single mom and works far from home. She stays at home with us, so if we are ill, nobody will take care of her."***

friends. In Brazil many families told us there is nobody to ask. In the Dominican Republic, Leyla's family ended up mortgaging their house to pay for medical expenses for her uncle after a motorbike accident. In Uganda, Namazzi's father said: ***"We used to own livestock, but they were all sold off***

***gradually to meet the medical expenses of Namazzi's brother."*** In 2016, 75 families reported owning animals, which provides a potential buffer in times of hardship.

In Benin, Togo and Uganda, families also talked about borrowing from community savings groups where loans are repaid

## CASE STUDY

### Raquel: acceptor, consentor, resistor?

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

Raquel lives with her father, paternal grandmother and younger sister in a small but solid house in a town in El Salvador. Two years ago, Raquel's mother, left for the USA, after being called for by Raquel's maternal grandfather, who is living there. Raquel's father is a police officer and earns a monthly income of \$375 after tax. Her mother sends home around \$150 a month. Although Raquel's father does not explicitly discuss the relationship with his wife, it seems that they have separated. He wants to move to the USA too, but not to live with his wife.

Raquel is clearly affected by her mother's absence. She told the researchers that she worries about her: *"When my mommy left to United States my daddy is always telling her to take care... because something can happen to her, and she goes by herself."*

The distribution of household work in the family is largely traditional. Raquel's father says Raquel does not help with cooking, cleaning and general domestic chores as she is too young. However, Raquel reports that she does help and does not like it, especially if she wants to play instead. She is scared of animals that get into the house: *"Sometimes I don't like to clean the walls, sweep the spider webs, nor the geckos; because one time one got in the bathroom there, it scared me and I cried."* She also expressed anger that boys don't have to be responsible for doing as many chores as girls, and instead have more time to play: *"Since boys know that girls are the ones that mop and stuff like that, they don't – they play... That's wrong, because I wish I could play, but sometimes they don't let me."* Raquel is also angry at not being allowed in places like the sports field, which the boys dominate, or to do the activities, like playing football, that they do.

She told us this year that studying is key to having a good future and she would like to study Mathematics, Social Studies, Science and Language when she is older. Despite these

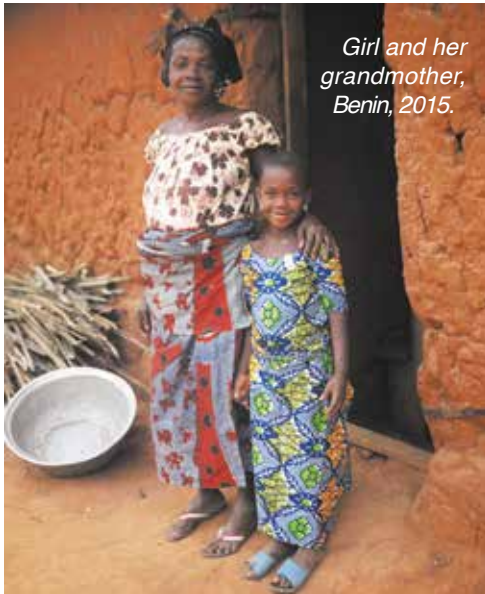
seemingly non-stereotypical attitudes towards play and activities, and her unconventional choice of subjects, she also has ideas which support a more conservative and traditional approach to the role of women in the household. When asked what types of things she thinks girls her age should be responsible for, she said:

*"Mop, and feed the rooster. To sweep, to help the parents gather firewood, to make the beds."*

### Like mother, like daughter?

Raquel's mother was 18 years old at the time of her birth. She had already given birth to Raquel's older half-sister at the age of 15. She met her previous partner, who was violent and jealous, at the age of 13, which is when she left school. She appeared to be a very dedicated mother and responsible for all the care-related chores: *"I do all the household chores and he works outside the home, he comes every two or three days because he's a public employee..."* In 2012, Raquel's mother told us that she had found it unfair growing up in a household where women and girls were responsible for all the household chores, but as an adult she appears to have fairly rigid ideas about gender roles in her own home: *"A man is more intelligent and since he is little he has been trained to be the head of the household."* During the 2012 interview she told us that her children gave her so much joy, and she would like her daughters to grow up with the memory of her as a "good mother". She did also finish the interview by telling the researcher that she would really like to work: *"We must all develop relationships of respect and trust; I'm with someone and I feel good with him, but sometimes I'd like to have a job."*

Raquel's mother's decision to migrate to the USA has been hard on her daughter. However, the opportunity she has taken to work and contribute economically to her daughter's future, combined with her own earlier frustration at the monotony of domestic work for which she was solely responsible, may have contributed to Raquel's resistance to some of the pressures she is experiencing. These pressures are strong, though, and Raquel, despite her anger at the limitations imposed on her, already sees her life in terms of domestic work. This year our researcher commented that *"when we asked her what types of things girls her age should have, such as values, opinions or material goods, she seemed to be unable to grasp the idea of anything other than chores."*



*Girl and her grandmother, Benin, 2015.*

with up to ten per cent interest. Some – 49 families in 2016 – while not necessarily members of savings groups, are also saving. Many families in the Philippines reported putting something away each month; Christine's family puts money in a piggy bank and Dolores' has a thrift box. Twenty-three families, mainly in the Dominican Republic and Vietnam, reported having some form of insurance, and some families in Vietnam reported borrowing from the government. In Benin, Layla's grandmother is reluctant to take money from the state: ***"We have no other sources of revenue. I am even afraid to take loans from the state in case I am unable to repay them and end up bankrupt."***

Some families, like Trinh's in Vietnam, can afford to invest for the future: ***"In order to cover all learning expenses as well as many other expenses, we have to invest more in pig-raising, with a hope that the price of selling pigs in the next years will be higher to improve our living conditions."*** Similarly, Chien's family ***"has just bought an extra field of tea over the past year. It has not been harvested now, but later it will help my family have more income to improve our life."*** Oanh's family in Vietnam ***"can sell a buffalo or a cow for several tens of millions. If I need a larger amount of money, I will borrow from the banks. Both my parents have medical insurance, so I don't***

***have to worry about the costs for their medical treatments."*** Other families cope with emergencies and chronic shortage of money by going without, which means cutting down on food.

### ***"Our expenses keep increasing..."***

By 2016, as the majority of the families in the study were reporting rising prices, it was increasingly evident that the families who have multiple income streams are more robust when it comes to dealing with wider economic change. This is especially the case in Cambodia, where most of the families seem to have a variety of income-generating activities and often multiple earners. In Roumany's family, four people are earning and their income sources include selling beans and repairing cars, as well as collecting wood and hunting wild animals. Trinh's mother told researchers:

***"We have to follow the weather. We mainly focus on pig-raising to earn money because if it rains a lot it won't affect pig-raising."***

In Brazil, the economic downturn of the past few years has hit most of the families with severe consequences: ***"The crisis is***

*Girl and her sisters, Dominican Republic, 2012*







Girl and her family, Dominican Republic, 2013.

**really knocking on everyone's door in Brazil. Regardless of being rich or poor, but the poor are the ones who suffer the most,"** Juliana's mother, told us.

For some, their individual economic situation has improved, though this is unusual. Rebeca's mother in the Dominican Republic explains: **"Yes, [our situation is better], because I got a job. I'm working. That is a relief. [Also] my husband is working now... I am working on a project**

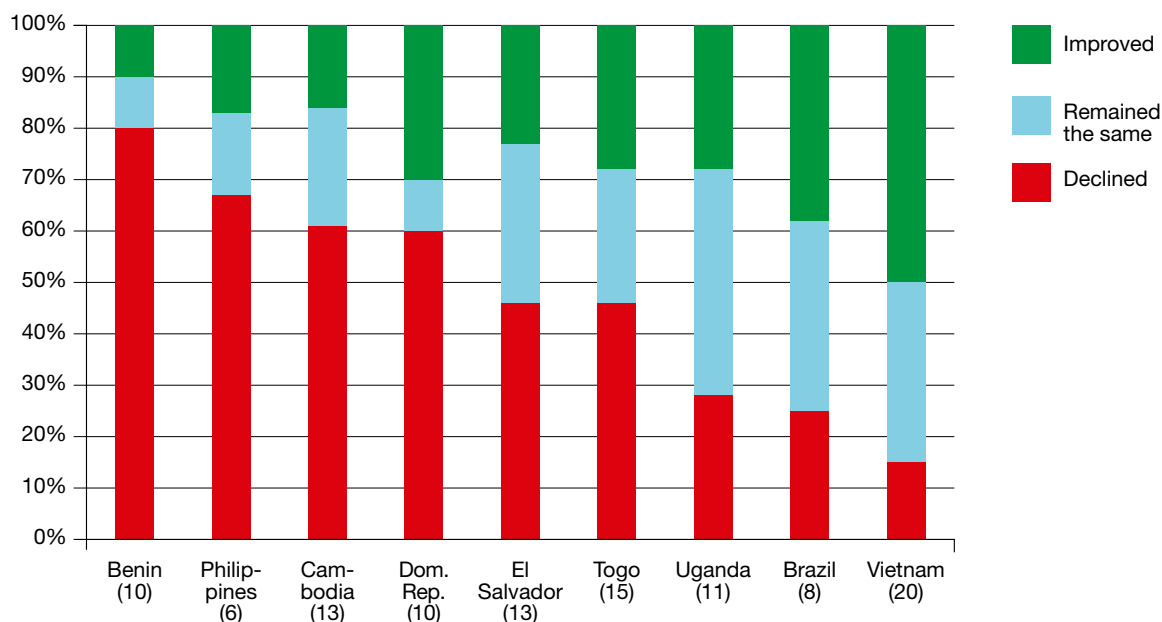
**that is being done here. But it's just for a few months; it ends in April. But I got something, some money to sort out lots of problems."**

For others, like Leyla's mother, also in the Dominican Republic, the family's economic situation has declined: **"[It is] very bad, bad, bad. It's bad now because last year I was working and I helped with the household expenses, I bought my daughter whatever she needed, I maintained her, but now I'm sitting here and can't help with anything."** Leyla's mother has a new baby and her grandmother, who normally helps with the children, has been ill, so the family is struggling.

Over the years, the families in the study have often struggled to make ends meet as growing families and an economic downturn have tended to increase expenditure as incomes decreased or became unreliable. A new baby not only adds to a family's outgoings, it may also mean the mother can do neither paid work outside the home nor unpaid work within it, both of which have an impact on the family income. Most families are operating on a knife-edge: dependent on help from family, friends and neighbours, on their own continuing good health and on the weather.

## Reports of changes in families' economic status (2016)

Ordered by % reporting a decline.





## Social Protection

*"It helps me a lot because the government has a programme in which we receive a RD\$1,000 (US\$22.25 bonus for every child in the family that goes to high school.)"*

Leyla's mother, Dominican Republic, 2015

The number of families reporting receiving financial support from their governments has increased over the course of the study. In 2009 there were only six families; by 2012 this had increased to 20 and, in 2016, 37 families reported receiving some form of government support. Most of these families live in Brazil, the Dominican

Republic, the Philippines and Vietnam, with further instances of social protection schemes in El Salvador, Cambodia and Uganda.

Support has primarily taken the form of conditional cash transfers (Bolsa Familia in Brazil, Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program or 4Ps in the Philippines and the Solidaridad Card in the Dominican Republic). These transfers are largely given to women and are dependent on their children attending school and receiving health checks. However, there are also other examples of government help, including school fees and utility subsidies, pensions, welfare for the disabled, free agricultural supplies and free health insurance.

## 4. Gender-Based Violence

*"Not everyone respects us and when we ask for respect they call us rude."*

Brazil, focus group discussion with teenage girls, 2011

*"People say a woman is like an infectious disease; society has a lot of prejudice against us."*

Brazil, focus group discussions with mothers, 2011

Gender-based violence affects women of all ages, and girls too, and it is estimated that 120 million girls globally – approximately one in ten – have been the victims of rape or other forced sexual acts.<sup>30</sup> For most girls, their first experience of being sexually victimised occurs between the ages of 15 and 19, but in research carried out by UNICEF across 16 countries, one in five girls who reported experiencing sexual violence said that it occurred for the first time between the ages of ten and 14.<sup>31</sup>

The lives of many of the girls taking part in the cohort study have already been touched, either directly or indirectly, by violence. In their own homes and communities, gender-based violence is by no means rare. In the Dominican Republic, Leyla's mother said of her previous husband (Leyla's father): **"They love him a lot, but things between him and me were not going well and it's better to split up before something happens because he is a bit violent."**

Already, by ten years old, some of the girls in our study know of violence from boys among their friends, as this exchange from Brazil clearly demonstrates:

*Researcher:* What might happen to a girl if she starts dating too early?

*Girl:* **Her boyfriend might hit her and do many bad things to her.**

*Researcher:* What else, besides hitting?

*Girl:* **Spanking is the same thing as hitting, right?**

*Researcher:* Right.

*Girl:* **He might yell at her, hit her when she's pregnant and many other things.**

*Researcher:* Have you ever seen this kind of situation?

*Girl:* **Yes, with my friend, a girl who studied with me.**

*Researcher:* What happened?

*Girl:* **Her boyfriend hit her and the teacher said her parents were about to split up because of her.**

The 2011 life-history interviews with the fathers in the study show how the violence

*Girl, Brazil, 2014.*





*Girl and her brother, Dominican Republic, 2014.*

that was integral to their own upbringing is now shaping their notions of masculinity – almost all of them were beaten as children, either by their own parents, by other relatives or by teachers. Discussions with the girls' fathers also illustrate how boys can become conditioned to the idea that married men are expected to control their wives and punish their children. Fathers are also keen to protect their daughters; one father in Brazil told us: ***"It is not that I am sexist, but women are more helpless, they have a fragile side."*** This protectiveness, however well meant, is not necessarily in the girls' interest. In the focus group discussions in the Philippines, teenage boys

said that girls are subjected to violence in their community because they are ***"looked upon as the weaker sex"***. In 2014 this idea of weakness was being repeated back to us by one of the girls in our study who told us that girls could not join in with the games boys play, ***"because we are weak"***. Notions of femininity, internalised at eight years old, do not embrace physical strength or agility, making girls innately vulnerable.

By 2013, concerns about violence, including sexual violence, in the communities was on the increase; possibly in response to the girls' increased exposure to the outside world. In Brazil and El Salvador in particular, many of the families in the study lived in fear for their own and their daughters' personal safety. Interestingly, the interviews with grandparents in the early years of the research, 2007 and 2008, also highlighted their anxieties about the increased risk of sexual violence their granddaughters/daughters faced. Darna's grandmother from the Philippines told us: ***"Most of these into drugs are men and this makes me afraid to let girls walk in the dark. I will be afraid when Darna leaves school late."*** These fears were not confined to the older generation; Christine's teenage cousin also told us in 2010: ***"There are many bad people around. We don't like it, but girls are not safe any more. My friend, after she was raped she was mercilessly killed. This happened near"***

## The shock of disaster: "I still feel like crying..."

Several of the countries – the Philippines, Vietnam and El Salvador – are at particular risk of natural disasters: in the 2013 World Risk Report, the Philippines was ranked the third-highest out of 172 countries and El Salvador the ninth.<sup>32</sup> That same year, when adolescent girls from three cohort communities took part in group discussions analysing the impact of natural disasters on girls and young women, one of the key issues concerned their psychological effects. Sixteen-year-old Amy from El Salvador spoke about the lasting influence of the floods that affected her community: ***"I still feel like crying when I remember what happened. There are a lot of things we need at home, and I haven't been able to get help from anyone. I don't have running water, I don't have electricity, I'm not safe, it's not the same if you don't have lights."***

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

Sixteen-year-old Jessica in El Salvador 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."***

*the house of her grandmother while she was texting.”* One reaction to this violence can be to keep girls close to home. As one teenage girl, during focus group discussions in the cohort communities in Brazil, clearly articulated, parental fear of sexual violence is one of the factors inhibiting girls' progress: ***“Education must be equal for boys and girls; our rights must be equal too, but this doesn't happen. Often, we want to take a professional course, but the community doesn't offer it. Our mothers never let us take a course outside the community because normally the school is far from home and they are afraid of sexual violence and harassment. The boys want to go too, and there isn't enough money for both, so the boys end up taking the course.”***

Corporal punishment both at home and at school is common. Over the years, where the girls in the study have disliked school, their primary reason is violence from teachers and from other children. Griselda from the Dominican Republic reported this year that boys ***“go into the toilets when I'm peeing, they push the door to see the girls who are peeing. I went to the toilet and they pushed the door and I hadn't peed yet.”***

Several girls, Gladys from El Salvador and Sophy from Cambodia, for example, report being bullied at school, and girls are also subject to harassment both by 'friends' and strangers while travelling to get there. Bessy's grandmother in El Salvador always takes her girls to school: ***“I don't like them to go by themselves because the road is very isolated, and some men I don't trust live in front of my house. I see they are bums. They barely respect the girls when they go with me; imagine if they go alone. They call them 'hot mommies'; and I ask them for respect because the girls are just children.”***

## Changing traditions

The girls in our study are also at risk from harmful practices like female genital mutilation (FGM) which have been entrenched in some communities for centuries. In Togo, while some of the fathers and grandfathers we interviewed in 2011 acknowledged the importance of the abolition of FGM, others, as Fridos Id.'s paternal uncle told us in 2009, were more

concerned about how a major change in tradition would impact on social order:

***“Excision [female genital cutting] is now forbidden by the State, but in the old days, it existed for young girls to avoid sexual intercourse and to keep their virginity until marriage. The abolition of excision leads to sexual wandering, early pregnancies and undesired pregnancies, with consequences such as early motherhood and school desertion of young girls.”***

In Benin, the main changes highlighted by the older generation of interviewees were in relation to forced marriage. Annabelle's grandmother told us in 2009: ***“In the past, girls didn't go to school. Marriage was forced and children helped their parents in the fields. The opportunities nowadays are that girls go to school and can choose their husband.”***

However, many of the girls in our study have mothers, sisters or other female relatives who were married early, and though not all early marriages are forced, the choices facing the girls in the study as they reach adolescence will be constrained by poverty, parental expectations and lack of alternative opportunities. Bianca's mother in Brazil – and this is not untypical – started living with her partner when she was 14 and he was 33: ***“He decided to marry me [live with me] because of the suffering he saw in me. He was very sorry for me, for my childhood, he saw how much I suffered, working to survive. When I was living***

*Girl and her family, Brazil, 2014.*







Girl,  
El Salvador,  
2012.

**there, he helped me a lot, buying food so I could eat. I think this is why he wanted to live with me."**

Families in Benin, Uganda, the Dominican Republic and the Philippines have been open in acknowledging the realities of early marriage. Several have reported that in their community girls as young as 14 are leaving school and getting married, although in all four countries the legal age for marriage is 18. According to Valerie's father in the Dominican Republic, girls: **"marry as soon as they mature, 13, 14 and 15"**. This was confirmed by Valerie's mother, who also told us that **"many girls get married at 12, at 13 and that sort of thing"**.

The study has uncovered from the very beginning that the most vulnerable girls – where overlapping circumstances of poverty, age, disability, and exposure to violence put them particularly at risk – will be unlikely to benefit from any progress in girls' rights in the wider world. In El Salvador, the cycle of deprivation extending from mother to daughter seems particularly immutable. All

of the El Salvadorian mothers were under 18 years old when they gave birth. For many of these young women, the girls in the cohort were not their first child. These families have experienced a cycle of dropping out of school early due to pregnancy, taking low-paid or risky work, being split up due to the need to migrate for work, and living in violent neighbourhoods in poor housing. Most of the girls' mothers are separated from the girls' fathers and many of them live in all-female households, supported by grandmothers and great-grandmothers.

The interviews from El Salvador this year reveal that many of these ten-year-olds live in fear of violence. Gladys' family told the researchers: **"She doesn't like it because there are girls her age who like to pick fights, others tell her that they already have a boyfriend, then she said that she stays away from them, she says that those girls are crazy, that they are very little and they say that they already have a boyfriend."**

Valeria told us about shootings in the area: **"Where we live we are not able to go out when there's a gun shooting, because we can be shot and wounded, and we can die."**

Their interviews tell of rape and abduction, of drunken men who harass girls in the park, of gangs, of parents desperately trying to protect their daughters and of not being safe on your own. As they grow, the girls in these communities, despite the best efforts of many of their families, will find that violence, and the fear of it, may dictate the shape of their lives – where they can go and what they can be – even when they escape physical harm.



Girl  
and her  
brothers,  
Dominican  
Republic,  
2014.



*Girl and  
her mother,  
Benin,  
2013.*



## Section Two: Expectations and Discrimination

*“Realising gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will make a crucial contribution to progress across all the Goals and targets. The achievement of full human potential and of sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied its full human rights and opportunities.”*

United Nations<sup>33</sup>

*“If you don’t know where to start with the SDGs, start with women and girls; everything else will fall into place.”*

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director, UN Women, 2016

The Sustainable Development Goals, agreed in 2015, confirmed the international community’s commitment to gender equality and girls’ rights. This renewed commitment is also an acknowledgement of the difficulties surrounding the realisation of these rights. We know from the last ten years of detailed research into girls’ lives that transforming the lives of individual girls is dependent on attitudinal, legal and

policy change in the community and the institutions that surround her.

Our research demonstrates that the families and communities in our study are already making progress. Aspirations for their daughters have undoubtedly grown, as have their respect for girls’ education. But the forces of expectation, the notions of masculine and feminine in place for generations, are proving very strong. This is not surprising; these rules and expectations **“that distinguish expected behaviour on the basis of gender”**<sup>34</sup> are all about power.

**“Norms are vital determinants of social stratification as they reflect and reproduce relations that empower some groups of people with material resources, authority, and entitlements while marginalising and subordinating others by normalising shame, inequality, indifference or invisibility. It is important to note that these norms reflect and reproduce underlying gendered relations of power, and that is fundamentally what makes them difficult to alter or transform.”**<sup>35</sup>

### Head of the household: “He who pays the piper calls the tune”

In 2012, we interviewed the girls’ mothers. While the large majority of women agreed with the statement “the man is the head of the household”, a significant proportion added a value statement, acknowledging that a women’s role is changing in terms of household power relations and bargaining. When asked about decision making in the home, most of the women said that while their husbands were responsible for making important decisions, they made some decisions jointly. This appeared to be a move away from their recollection of their parents’ relationships, which were much more dominated by men. A small number of the women described relationships in which household tasks are shared and decisions are made together. Juliana’s mother, in Brazil went a step further and explained: **“Here in our home it’s different: I’m the head of the household, because I’m more decisive,”** but her view



Girl and her father, Benin, 2016.



was uncommon. In 2016, a more complex picture about who holds the purse strings has emerged.

Amongst the families in Benin headed by both father and mother there is a divide between those where the father dominates the family's financial decisions and those where it is more equal. The households where the father dominates include Alice's, where the father says: **"In the home, the man is the master of the house; therefore, I am the one who makes the decisions – but with my wife's blessing."**

Other families have more equitable arrangements. Barbara's mother reports: **"Me and her father take decisions together. He buys things, but so do I. He spends more on school things and I help him when he hasn't got enough."** Isabelle's mother is the only one who reports taking the lead with decision making: **"I decide how the money is spent because I don't receive much from my husband. Most of the food is bought by me; his money is an extra, so when I decide to buy something I don't wait for his advice."**

In Brazil and Cambodia decision making is most often either shared or carried out by the female parent. Only in a minority of cases does it fall to the father alone. Equality is also the norm in most of the households in the Dominican Republic. Rebeca's mother says: **"Both of us... either of us"**, and this is echoed by Saidy's



Girl and her mother, Philippines, 2013.

grandmother: **"Between the two of us. Everything we do, we discuss."** There is a similar dynamic in El Salvador amongst the minority of families where both parents are present.

Kyla's family in the Philippines is more unusual. Her mother says that decisions are made by **"the two of us"** but that she makes decisions for large expenses **"since I'm senior"**. By this she says she means that she is older: **"And I was first to be a pastor. I paid for his studies when we were married."** She acknowledges that it is unusual for a woman to make these decisions alone: **"I make decisions quickly. There are wives who just wait. He's okay"**

### Division of household chores in the cohort families (2016)



**with it; he makes the decisions for the farm and the piggery. That's his domain."**

In Togo, financial decision making for the household is either carried out by the male in the household or by the couple together. In seven of the 17 families the father is responsible for financial decisions. Tene's mother told our researchers: **"It is like that in all the households surrounding us, and I find it normal."** Other families talk of sharing their decisions. Ala-Woni's father says: **"Things have changed now; we take decisions together."** This recent change is echoed by Beti's mother in Uganda: **"Right now, it is both of us, but previously it was only my husband who used to decide and it used to affect us."** Justine's mother's experience is different: **"Here in my house, it's my husband who decides."** She also adds that most decisions are made without her knowledge and that she would like to be involved. She doesn't insist, however, because **"it leads to misunderstanding and sometimes it leads to family breakdown."** She keeps the peace **"for the better of my children"**.

In Vietnam, whilst in many households the husband and wife will discuss financial decisions, often the ultimate power and responsibility lies with the man. Uyen's father sums this up when he says: **"We discuss**

**all things in the house but I make the decision."** Tan's mother accepts her husband's authority: **"I am a wife so I respect my husband. I will agree with him."** Thien's grandfather comments: **"I am the backbone of my family; if she does not agree, I must explain to her about the good things, so she can agree with me."**

In other households the decision making power seems to be more equally divided. Kieu's mother, for example, appears to have ultimate control after discussions: **"The good thing in my family is that I am the money keeper and manage the household expenses, so I am more powerful than my husband in making decisions about the household expenses. When he comes home from work, he gives all the money to me [laughs]."**

### **A women's work: the division of labour**

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

Azia's mother, Togo, 2014

It is interesting that notions of equality and shared responsibility in this area of financial decision making have shown strong inter-generational shifts, with many



Girl's  
mother,  
Dominican  
Republic,  
2013.



of the women in our study having more say in the household economy than they would have done in the past. But there is one area of domestic life which is proving less amenable to change. Very few men, or boys, as their sisters have noticed, do household chores and the labour divide in most families is strictly gendered. This year, 107 of the families (89 per cent) reported that women and girls do most of the work at home; ten families share equally and only in three are men and boys taking on most of the domestic chores. Many of the women are resigned to this both for themselves and their daughters. Larba's mother in Togo told us: ***"This is not equitable, but these are old practices that have come to stay."***

Discrimination, manifested in fixed rules and roles, are prevalent in all nine countries in the study, varying in levels and visibility. Analysing the household division of labour amongst the families and the accompanying gender roles and responsibilities is a good way to measure levels of equality in the household.<sup>36</sup> In all the countries, as Alice's mother in Benin describes, we can see the strong influence of community and culture on domestic jobs: ***"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."***

Across the study, a general pattern has emerged which draws a line between work and chores 'inside' and 'outside' the home. In 2011, when we interviewed the fathers of the cohort girls in the study, it was clear that they had a polarised view of the roles that women and men, girls and boys play. Girls and boys are both consciously and unconsciously initiated into a world where the primary responsibility of the girl within the home will include cooking and cleaning, fetching water, gathering fuel and caring for others.<sup>37</sup> By the time she was five Miremba from Uganda was helping her mother collect water and fuel and wash plates. In 2015, when she was nine years old, Miremba told us that on school mornings: ***"I just wake up and prepare to go to school. After school***



***I fetch water, wash plates and play."***

*Girl,  
Togo, 2012.*

Our interviews with the girls' mothers in 2012 confirmed that they too took these demarcations for granted as they had operated throughout their own childhoods. In Togo, Ayomide's mother told the researchers: ***"My father forbade the boys household tasks. Women worked in the kitchen. Everybody worked on the farm. The boys were academically privileged."*** Women and girls do a lot of work, but it is still unpaid and inevitably undervalued. Their contribution to the household economy goes largely unnoticed. By the age of ten, almost all of the girls in our study have daily chores to fulfil, including sweeping, minding siblings, fetching water and washing dishes. On average they spend 68 minutes per day on domestic tasks; the average hides the fact that for some girls this means four or five hours spent daily on chores. The household work that girls do is perceived to have no monetary value and remains unpaid, unlike the tasks handed over to boys. As well as having less to do in the home, boys are generally tasked with supporting their fathers as the family breadwinner, often acquiring skills they will go on to use as adults, and socialising boys to be producers of wealth.

Saidy's grandmother in the Dominican Republic can see change, suggesting that equality is more prevalent in the younger generation where men are more open to taking on traditionally female tasks: ***"My son does everything – cooks, cleans, everything, like a woman. Here at home he never did it, because I was always***

## Chores reported by the cohort girls, all countries (2016)

The size of the words is proportional to the number of times the task was reported.



*here, there were always girls around. But in the capital he learned to do everything. He is a better cook than me. He cleans, everything. Washes, irons, he does everything... My husband, it's not that he doesn't want to, he doesn't know how to."*

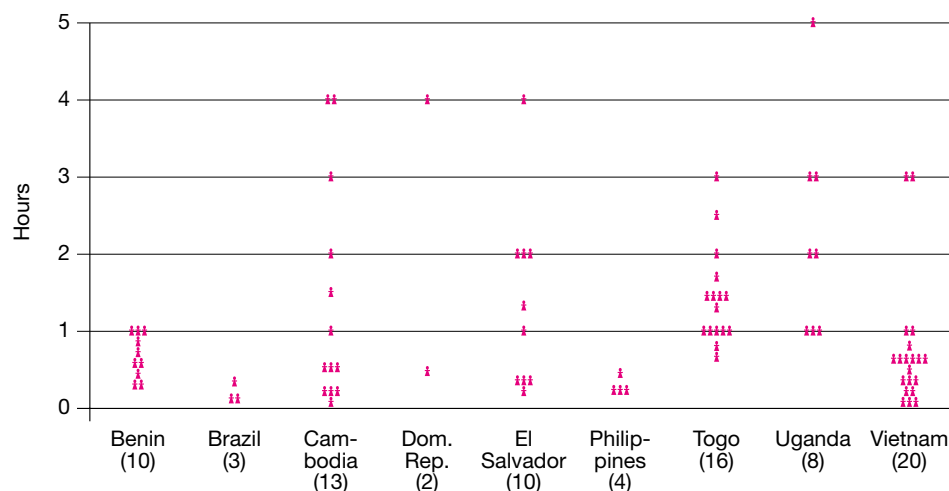
### "That was not the case in the old days..."

One major difference between this and previous generations is that greater opportunities now exist for women and girls outside the home. While retaining the prime responsibility for domestic work, more women are engaged in paid work – and in the types of work that were once male-dominated. A focus group of fathers from Brazil interviewed in 2010 told us: **"Nowadays**

*there are women who are involved in farming and even welding. Before, women couldn't even get out of the house, and now we see women driving trucks, working as mechanics, being important executives, managing banks, and so many other things... The more time passes, the more attitudes change."* In 2011, Justine's father from Uganda noted: **"Boys and girls, women and men, are all involved in politics where they elect chairpersons, Members of Parliament. That was not the case in the old days."** However, looking at the numbers of women in parliament in the countries where the girls live, women still have a long way to go. Uganda is far ahead of the other cohort countries (and of both the USA and the UK) but still only 33.5 per cent of MPs are women; in 2016 Uganda had 143 female MPs.<sup>38</sup>

## Time the cohort girls spend doing chores per day (2016)

As reported by the girl's primary carer.



In the Latin American countries in the study, many families reported their struggle with the traditional 'machismo' attitudes towards gender identities and the impact this has on the roles and responsibilities within the household.<sup>39</sup> Nicol's mother in the Dominican Republic is trying to instil equal values and attitudes towards housework amongst her children: ***"In some cases, they don't help because they are macho men; they say that this is 'only for women'... [Nicol's brother] feels bad because sometimes his classmates pass by and make fun of him when they see him doing home chores. I tell him that this is not bad; it's good for him because if he has to be alone in a house, he will be able to deal with it."***

As the work of women and girls begins to move away from unpaid household labour, as girls become better educated and not just trained for their domestic roles, the economy and the balance of power in the family may start to shift. By 2014, many of the mothers we interviewed, like Nicol's in the Dominican Republic, were talking about freeing their daughters to study – the only route they could see out of poverty and rigidly defined gender roles: ***"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."***<sup>40</sup>



*Girl and her family, Dominican Republic, 2012.*

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

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

In many countries, boys would expect to inherit the lion share of a family's assets, whether land, livestock or money. In Benin, for example, several fathers acknowledged the practice of boys inheriting but were inclined to change it. Margaret's father told researchers: ***"Men and women belong to the family and should both benefit from the inheritance. I believe that my goods will be divided equally among all my children. In order to ensure that this happens, I will gather my children and give them my instructions."*** Other families are sticking with what they know. Isabelle's mother told us that this is because ***"when girls become adults, they throw in their lot with their husbands"***.

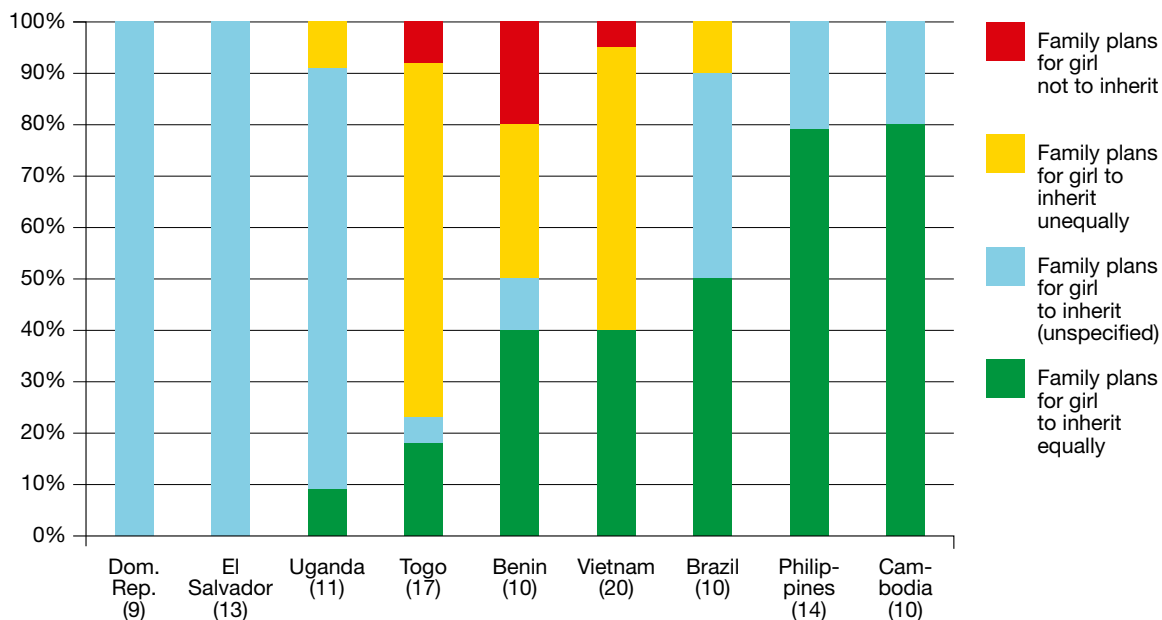


*Girl and her mother, Cambodia, 2016.*



## Families' plans for inheritance (2016)

Ordered by % planning for the girl to inherit equally.



In Brazil, families are virtually unanimous that girls and boys should inherit equally, and in Cambodia parents seem to favour daughters rather than sons, as it is the daughter who will stay and look after her parents. Sokhana's mother recognises that **"inheritance is very important because it may cause dispute in family"**, and says: **"I think that I will give my son some money. My daughters will be inherited with land and house."**

In Togo and Vietnam, for reasons associated with religion, families traditionally favour boys' inheritance. As Essohana's mother says: **"It's good that boys and girls inherit lands, but here, it has been a business of men and boys since the dawn of time."** Hang's mother in Vietnam acknowledges that it is good for both sons and daughters to inherit, but tells us: **"Perhaps I will give land to both son and daughter, but I will give more to son because son will take care of parents and worship the ancestor."** There are, however, families that break away, even when the force of religion and tradition is strong. Thom's father is adamant: **"In my opinion, sons and daughters are equal. It's not important to have sons or daughters. I will divide my property in equal parts and give them to our children."** Oanh's father has a similar attitude, but admits that he

didn't always: **"In the past, I had a similar thinking to my parents, which was gender prejudice. After being trained on gender, I realise that boys or girls are the same... I will divide my land 50/50, one hectare for each child."** This new openness to equality will mean that girls too will have assets, enabling them to build better lives on surer foundations.

## Acceptors, consenters and resisters

In 2015 and 2016, when the girls were aged nine and ten, our research took a close look at the expectations and identities they expressed and we found that the majority of them were conforming to what was asked of them: they did not play with boys because they were rough, they expected to do a good share of the household tasks, which from a very early age they had incorporated into their play, and, as Thearika in Cambodia told us: **"Boys have more time to play than girls... I don't feel jealous of them because they are my siblings."** Or as Doris in El Salvador put it, when our researchers asked her what she thought girls her age should be doing, she simply said: **"Wash clothes."** Doris does a lot of chores in her household, and considers it a way of life for girls which is not worth questioning: **"I wash the dishes,**

*sweep, organise. Nobody decides this. I just do it.”*

Other girls are less accepting and find the constraints of being a girl onerous but do not feel able to challenge them. Natália in Brazil thinks that boys and girls should be able to play the same games and do the same chores: *“We ask them to do some chores, to play. They can’t do domestic chores because only the women can do those. Playing ball [things boys can do and girls cannot]... I don’t know. I would like to play ball. The boys could do the things the girls do... why not?”* The theme is picked up also by Annabelle in Benin who is not happy with her designated role: *“Boys are allowed to wash the car with daddy but I’m not allowed to. My father says that I’m a little girl and my role is to stay in the kitchen... This makes me feel sad.”* Similarly, Namazzi from Uganda when asked this year if she felt that chores were unequally distributed between her and her brothers replied: *“I do feel it at times.”* Hillary from El Salvador also told us: *“I do more than my brother”* and her mother seems to be in favour of change too: *“I think it is not fair and that it should change, but who knows?”*

A significant number of mothers and their daughters do resist, however, and have reported actions as well as attitudes that contradict the ‘normal’ rules of behaviour in their communities. Reine in Togo has firmly rejected the idea, dictated to her at school, that girls should only play with other girls: *“Our teacher beats us when we play with boys at school. But at home I play with boys of my age in the neighbourhood.”*

Likewise, Ayomide in Togo is also questioning the rules regarding sex-segregated play: *“Boys are allowed to play football. It makes me feel uncomfortable and I ask ‘why am I forbidden to play football?’”* Katerin in the Dominican Republic enjoys playing with boys and *“playing with cars”* and is wary of doing the household chores, knowing where this might lead: *“Because what happens is that if I wash up today – isn’t that right – tomorrow and the day after I have to wash up again?”* Raisa is *“the only girl in my class who likes basketball”*. Girls won’t play *“because it is for boys”* and this makes her sad.

Vietnam has the largest concentration of mothers who report being vocal about their



*Girl and her sister, Dominican Republic, 2014.*

*Girl with her family, Cambodia, 2014.*



## CASE STUDY

### Thearika: Acceptor, consentor, resistor?

Thearika's attitudes have changed over the last few years. She was more resistant to her assigned gender role when we first spoke to her, but now has come to accept it. Her mother is a strong influence on her and although the family is not entirely conformist it seems that her mother, who appears to be the dominant parent, places less value on her daughter than her sons, despite a commitment to Thearika's education.

Thearika lives with her mother, father and younger brother in Cambodia. Her older brother has been sent away to live with friends to help him with his studies. Thearika's parents work as construction workers and also raise pigs. The couple are never without work, but the amount of work and the pay they receive changes.

The family have lived in their current home for three years. They own the house along with 0.5 hectares of rice fields, several pigs and a

motorbike. The mother, with Thearika, undertakes the vast majority of the household chores. Both parents take turns to cook. Thearika's mother says that when she had small children to look after, her husband helped with the cooking and on the plantation. Thearika's brother was also asked to help with some of the chores when he lived in the family home. However, there is far more pressure on Thearika, whose mother has told her that she must learn to do chores or her future husband will hit her.

Thearika's mother seems to display a greater interest in her son's education than her daughter's and this pattern appears to get more significant as the years go on. When asked about Thearika's schooling in 2013 when she was seven, her mother responded: **"I always follow up her study and give her extra teaching when she gets lower scores and also additional explanation. I also help to prepare her school materials and take her to school."**

When asked about her son's schooling, she uses much more positive language: **"He also studies well at school. He always gets good scores. He studies hard. His teacher appreciates him and I also closely monitor his study."** Thearika enjoys school and she is ambitious: **"I will be a doctor and focus on general care. I want to become a doctor because I want to be a rich person."**

Her mother is supportive of all her children's education: **"My family has to save money... because we want them to have high education, and not be illiterate like me."** She also stated that she wanted Thearika to stay in school for as long as possible: **"I will continue to support her until she finishes high school, maybe at the age of 18 years old. I am afraid that one day I will not be able to support her education."**

In 2013, aged seven, Thearika reported that she only played with boys because girls don't like her; that she spent a lot of time fighting because of 'hate' and after school she would run far away from her house with her friends, or take her bike, but she didn't feel scared being so far away. She told us that she had daily chores before and after school which included washing the dishes and preparing the rice for cooking: **"No, I am not lazy because I am afraid of my mother... My mother does not do anything to me but I am still afraid of her."**

By the time she is nine we see a seismic shift in Thearika attitudes and behaviours towards gendered play: **"I think that boys and girls cannot play the same games because some games like football may be dangerous... In the classroom, I play with only girls because I think that boys and girls play different games."** In addition, Thearika also seemed



to be a little more fearful about playing further away from home and more resigned to the chores she was responsible for: *"In the morning, I get up, wash dishes, cook rice, and go to school... Boys have more time to play than girls."*

This same year, her mother appeared to reinforce Thearika's role as a mother or wife-in-training and the importance of her support for household chores: *"Other families do not ask daughter to do many tasks but I like my daughter to get experience in household work."*

Currently Thearika is in Grade 4 at a state school. She attends school six days a week and studies Maths and Khmer Literature. Her mother says Thearika is poor at all subjects, though she is improving. She says that Thearika is talkative; she wants her to study until Grade 12: *"If Thearika is not educated, she will be more and more talkative, and make no sense."* Despite reporting that she is beaten at school when she can't answer the teacher's questions, Thearika enjoys going and she still has high aspirations:

Researcher: What do you want to be in the future?

Thearika: *I want to be a translator, doctor and policewoman.*



Girl with her older brother, Cambodia, 2012.



Girl, Cambodia, 2016.

Researcher: Can women be police?

Thearika: *Yes, they can.*

Researcher: Why do you think you can be police?

Thearika: *I want to catch thieves, and gamblers.*

Researcher: Why?

Thearika: *I don't want my villagers to waste their money.*

### Like mother, like daughter?

Thearika's mother is illiterate. She never went to school and from the age of nine was responsible for taking care of her siblings and helping her mother with the household work. All of her other siblings are able to read and write. She was the oldest daughter and says she had a responsibility to her parents to help them at home. Not going to school is something she really regrets. She seems torn between her undoubted commitment to her daughter's education and her insistence that she should spend a great deal of time on domestic chores. This, coupled with her doubt in Thearika's academic capabilities in comparison to her son's, suggests that she has very set ideas for her daughter's role in the family.

As Thearika approaches adolescence, this might well influence her notions of what she can do and be, limiting her aspirations and capabilities. Already at the age of ten she has moved from resistance to a greater acceptance of her gendered role and responsibilities; without, so far, compromising her commitment to her own education or jettisoning her aspirations for a future that involves being a doctor, a translator or a policewoman.

support for more equality in their households; though, according to the Vietnamese girls in our study, this desire for equality is not necessarily translating into reality. Sen's mother 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."*** Hoa's mother identifies inequality in her own home, blaming much of this on what had been learned from earlier generations: ***"Men will be lazy when they drink wine, for example; after eating and drinking they don't want to clean up, they will drink tea while their wife is cleaning dishes. I think our parents often behaved like that so now we mimic their living style. Indeed, it's truly spoken that woman is still disadvantaged."*** Her daughter told us: ***"At home, my mother must do more work than my father. I never tell my father, 'Daddy, please help Mum.' I wish my father would help my mother to do the work."*** Similarly, Thom is aware that there is a power imbalance in most families in her community, including her own: ***"My father never does the housework. I never tell him to help my mother do the chores because if I tell him, he will say, 'You have a loose tongue!'"***

Girl,  
Vietnam,  
2016.



This year, however, Nhi reported to the researchers that her mother performed a significantly larger portion of chores than her father and that she had challenged this: *Researcher*: Have you ever told your father to help your mom?

*Nhi*: ***Yes, I have.***

*Researcher*: What did he say at that time?

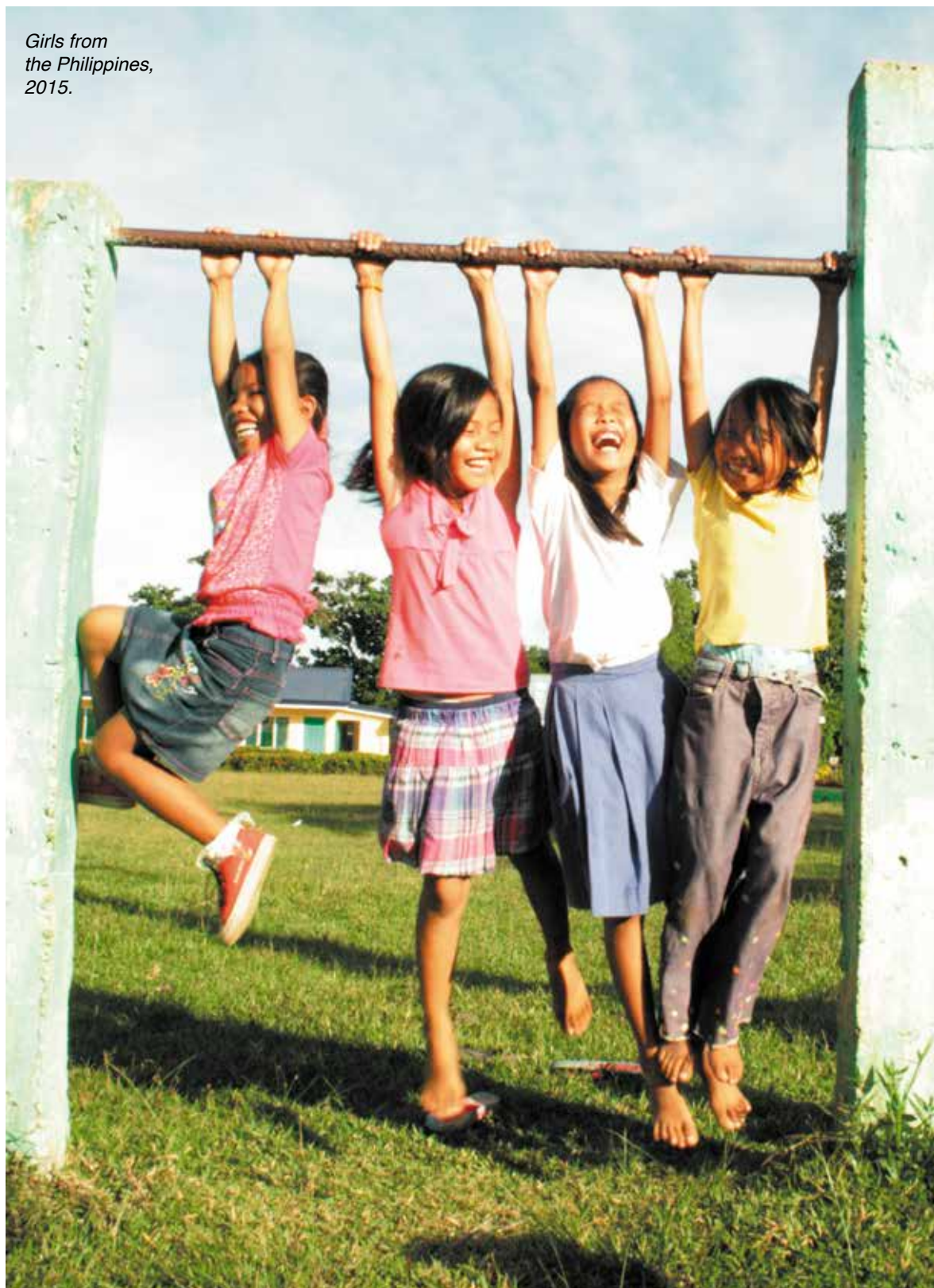
*Nhi*: ***He said "Okay".***

Despite the awareness of, and resistance to, the power imbalance in families shown by the mothers and daughters in Vietnam, it was also the country where, as we saw earlier in the report, the woman deferred most to her husband's financial decision making: ***"I am a wife so I respect my husband. I will agree with him."*** The girls and their mothers would like to rebel, but their stories indicate that, for the time being at least, power rests firmly with the men of the household.

In Benin, as in Togo, it appears that there is almost total segregation between boys and girls within play and social activities as well as household tasks. Layla's grandmother caused an outburst of laughter amongst local women when she told our researchers that she strongly disagreed with the status quo: ***"No, it's not fair. We can change it by asking men to start doing things that women do, like household chores. We can also encourage women to do what men do and that they feel they can do too."*** Layla herself seems to agree; she is unhappy that ***"boys don't work at home. They refuse when they are asked to. They are always playing... I don't usually play with boys because my parents forbid it. Girls don't play boys' games and boys don't play girls' games. My grandmother told me, my mum too. It's not fair."*** Stephany's mother in El Salvador expresses the same strong feelings as Layla's grandmother about the necessity for shared responsibility in household tasks, and attributes the lack of equality to sexist ideology and a culture of negative masculinities: ***"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."*** Juliana, in Brazil, agrees: ***"Everything should be the same. Whatever men can do, women can do too."***



*Girls from  
the Philippines,  
2015.*





## Section Three: Hopes for the Future

*"I tell them that as I couldn't be anything I hope at least that you will make something of yourselves."*

Leyla's mother, Dominican Republic, 2016

From the early years, the **Real Choices, Real Lives** study began framing a number of questions. Are parents' aspirations for their daughters realistic? What will ensure that the girls have better lives than their mothers and grandmothers? How can they have the same opportunities and chances in life as their brothers? And can the cycle of poverty, so often passed down the female line, be broken? We hoped that our research would, over time, help us to answer some of these questions and see what kind of future lies ahead for the girls in the study.

The past ten years have taught us that the parents' commitment to their daughters' future is vested in their vision of education for all, as Catherine's mother articulated in 2012: ***"They say that by educating a girl, you educate a nation. I agree; if I had had more schooling, I would be a professional today. I hope that my daughter is able to complete her education in my place."*** Most of the mothers are determined their daughters should, as Gladys' mother told us, ***"move ahead. She also tells me to teach her that the path is that she has to study, nothing else, because she's not going to get stuck to do dishes."***

There is still the sense that a girl's path is also to be a wife and mother, but not before finishing school: ***"I would like her to go as far as possible in her studies before getting married. She must also finish early in order to have a good husband because men do not like old maids (who are over 30)."*** Azia's mother in Togo neatly encapsulates some of the tension inherent in the conflicting claims of education and marriage.

Parental aspirations also include that their daughters go out to work. Studying hard, earning your own money, is the way to a good life, although it is recognised that women still have to do housework, and that this double burden remains an obstacle to progress. Often, educational aspirations and work aspirations are connected and

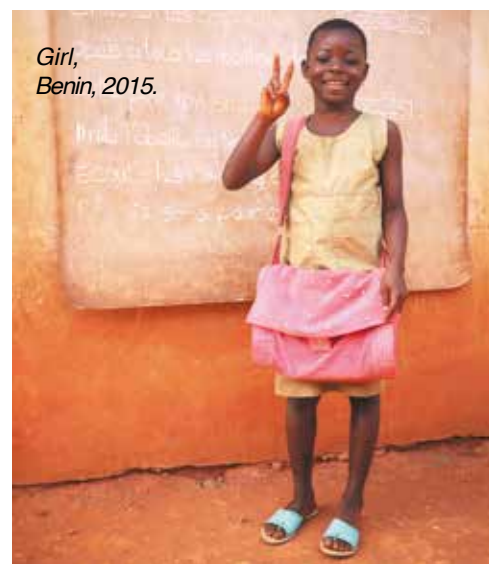
interrelated, as Gabriela from El Salvador outlines, quoting her mother: ***"First... you go to school, you study, do well with everything; once you're big, you leave university and then you go off to find a job that pays well."***

In the Dominican Republic Raisa's mother, like many others, also wants her daughter to have a proper say in her own life: ***"I would like her to be a doctor. Whatever she decides, that's it. Because it's not about what I want, it's what she wants."***

Saidy's grandmother from the Dominican Republic, explains that things were quite different when she was a girl:

***"In the past, they didn't bother to tell you [about aspirations] like they do today. [Today] people care about their children, because she tells me 'Mama, I want to be a doctor'. So you care because she likes it, and if she likes it, you do too. But, in my time, they didn't say anything to me."***

As we have seen, the girls themselves have ambitions for their futures that involve both staying in school and studying further for professional qualifications. This has not changed since, at age six, they reported that they wanted to be teachers, nurses and doctors. Their choice of occupation is also largely conventionally female, focusing on the caring professions where there are encouraging role models. Even so, these ambitions will be hard for many of them to achieve. Shifa from Uganda wants to be a nursery teacher; for this she will need secondary education. Between 2012 and



Girl,  
Benin, 2015.

2015 she attended school irregularly; twice it was reported that she had to drop out: ***"I stopped. Fees."***

### **"Crossing the line..."**

There are some intriguing threads in the girls' comments about their futures. They want to be successful at school and, in later life, at work, but they also know they are supposed to be obedient and good. Hang from Vietnam told us: ***"I have to learn well and be nice."*** Gabriela from El Salvador thinks: ***"Girls have to go around being careful, be careful and look before crossing the line"*** – it is not clear whether this line is metaphorical or literal. The comment from Valeria's grandmother in El Salvador ***"that she gets ahead, and that she learns to be someone obedient"*** also tells us of the conflicting pressures as these girls grow into women.

The mothers' responses to questions about their vision for the future in our 2012 life-history interviews make it clear that while they recognise that there are real possibilities for the lives of their daughters to be different from their own, most defer to the practical realities of daily life, where women and girls occupy the domestic space and boys and men the external one – reflecting their own experiences as girls and young women. Much that we have learned about the way these households are run reveals that, although mothers and grandmothers may want change, they are unsure how to bring it about. Sometimes their own behaviour and attitudes, deeply engrained from childhood, get in the way. In their responses about the real chances of success for a young woman today, it remains clear that reproductive and domestic responsibilities are, for their daughters too, the main barrier for women. Margaret's mother in Benin hints that she believes that, despite an almost universally stated commitment to equal educational opportunities, there are simply lower expectations of girls: ***"A boy can complete his studies, whereas a girl can give up school."***

Nicol's mother in the Dominican Republic sums up the general view: ***"We women would like to be successful in life, but we can't. Look now, I'd like to study, and what stops me? The three children; I can't leave them just like that, abandon them to go and study. I have to let them grow up first and then, if I want to do***



*Girl, Philippines, 2013.*

***something, I will do it. But men do go away and leave; nothing stops them."***

The story of Saily's 53-year-old grandmother from the Dominican Republic, is however, more optimistic. She put herself through night school when her three children were older and all of them are now either in university or are about to be enrolled. She remembers how, even as a girl, she told herself: ***"When I have my children, I am not going to have ignorant children; my children are going to study... I always used to think about that. I sent my daughter to school at three years old – the one who is studying nursing – and I always wanted my children to learn."***

If we go back to our earlier questions, it would seem that mothers', and fathers', high hopes for their daughters are also grounded in the reality of their lives. They know that, to give their daughters equality of opportunity with their sons, family life will have to change and that this will be difficult. They know that education is the way out of poverty but have to cope also with the knowledge that a lack of money may be one of the factors preventing their daughters from fulfilling their dreams.

***"I hope she finishes her studies. That she can follow her dreams and find a job and help her siblings who are still at school. And if she has a job, her life won't be as hard, that's all I want for them."***

Rosamie's mother, Philippines, 2016

## Conclusion

**Real Choices, Real Lives** is a unique study in its detail, its ability to stay close to the girls and their families and to understand the context they live in and the challenges they face. Ten years of gathering in-depth qualitative data has enabled us to recognise the influences shaping the girls' lives as they approach adolescence: to see how family dynamics, economic status and the physical and cultural environment interact to offer opportunity or to impede progress. This longitudinal approach allows us to analyse what the most powerful factors exerting control over the lives, and gender roles, of the girls in our study are, both individually and collectively, and how and when these influences come forcefully into play. There are over-arching themes, but individual differences are also apparent. And, although they are proving useful to our analysis, the girls do not always fit neatly into the categories of acceptor, consentor or resistor. They have changed over time and will continue to do so.

Over the ten years of the study, several dominant threads have emerged: the strengths of gendered rules governing behaviour, the impact of poverty, the increase in attitudinal change and the importance of reinforcing girls' confidence and capabilities.

As we saw earlier in the report, by the time the girls were three years old many of them were already imitating their mothers: Joy, Justine and Elaine pretended to cook and peel and Joy's mother told us that she helped with sweeping and washing. There is evidence that by the age of five both girls and boys have already internalised the gender roles they are expected to play and the status that these roles will or will not give them.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, influences during early childhood really do shape attitudes. These influences can range from conversations within families and observations of who does what within the household and the wider community, to what the girls hear on the radio and the bus.<sup>42</sup> Girls living in societies where they are particularly disadvantaged can benefit more than boys from interventions that foster their physical, cognitive and emotional development, such as pre-school and community-based

facilities like playgroups and playgrounds.<sup>43</sup>

This kind of early years' stimulation can be vital. Growing up without it, girls may lack the skills and confidence they need to influence the decisions that will have a positive impact on their lives; for example, how long they should remain in school and when they should get married.

In El Salvador, as the girls reached three, our researchers were already reporting on the effects of the lack of interaction and stimulation on their behaviour and ability to communicate. The El Salvadorian girls had little access to pre-school facilities, while some of the girls in Uganda, Brazil, the Dominican Republic and the Philippines had already started their formal education.

### The impact of poverty

Most of the families in the study are in precarious economic situations, and this insecurity seems to be getting worse rather than better. It has various impacts on the lives of the girls we are following:

- Families struggle to pay school expenses, which, despite most parents showing a real commitment to educating their daughters, may mean girls leaving school early. This is something we will be monitoring closely as the girls grow older.
- Migration, which is driven by poverty, has multiple impacts on the girls in our cohort study, as it does on many others. Parents and siblings leave home to either earn money or relieve the burden on the family. This can have a dramatic impact on the emotional wellbeing, and sometimes the physical safety, of those left behind.
- The household responsibilities of girls in the family can often increase when the mother is absent, meaning less time for homework and a greater identification with domestic and caring work, which can affect their ambitions and abilities. The absence of important role models may also lead them to imagine a future which involves migrating themselves as soon as they are old enough.

It is quite clear from parents' comments that even with free state schools, the hidden costs of education – uniforms,





*Girl and friends, Dominican Republic, 2013.*

travel, books and other materials – are a drain on resources. In some countries, Vietnam, Uganda, the Philippines and Togo in particular, families report paying fees even for state schools. Other families, 11 of them in 2016, unhappy with the quality of state education, are paying even higher fees to send their children to private school. For many, particularly where families are large, education costs come second to spending on food in the family budget.

It is also evident that attitudes to education, to the roles of women and men, girls and boys, are shifting. This attitudinal change struggles to compete with the embedded perceptions of what girls and boys do – at home, at school, in the wider world – and with the constraints of poverty. A lack of money all too quickly corrodes opportunity and forces people back to old ways. Girls from the poorest 20 per cent of households are over three times more likely to marry under the age of 18 than those from the richest homes.<sup>44</sup> In poor families, child marriage may ensure that a daughter is married to someone with enough money to feed her.

### Levelling the playing field

Girls' and women's close identification with service, with their domestic roles, will also get in the way of gender equality and many

mothers and grandmothers, despite their own anger at the division of labour and their lack of power, find it hard to defend their daughters.

Saidy's grandmother told researchers when Saidy was three years old: ***"I want Saidy to study and do what she likes. I want her to have a future and be who I couldn't be. It seems as though she will like studying. I want her mum to help her. Her mum is working as a cleaning maid in a hotel in the capital and she wants to study medicine."*** She is committed to a different life for both her daughter and granddaughter. Nevertheless, in 2014, despite her desire to support her granddaughter's education, Saidy, aged eight, was expected to be the woman of the house and to look after the men in her grandmother's absence: ***"She can learn, little by little, to do household chores. I get her to do it because sometimes I go to the capital. Saidy and her 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."***

As we study ten years of research findings, we can see that progress towards gender equality includes: greater diversity

in control over family finances, a stated commitment to girls' education, a change in attitudes towards inheritance rights and a greater resistance by mothers and daughters to the status quo. Power dynamics have shifted in many families, as the comprehensive interviews with the girls' mothers in 2012 revealed, but as this cohort reaches adolescence it looks only too likely that the rigid demarcations between them and their brothers will remain largely intact. Women in the workforce, as presidents and welders, and as nurses and teachers, will go some way to undermine stereotypes and support change, as will the breakdown of isolation brought about by technology. The internet, mobile phones, TV, radio and social media will all play their part. Girls need access to school, of course, but also to information, skills and support networks beyond formal education. This means mobility, free time and a family and community whose support for equality is not rhetorical but grounded in the everyday. There is no magic bullet or universal solution, but somehow the established attitudes and practices that put girls down and keep them back must be overturned.

With the Sustainable Development Goals the international community, working alongside national governments, has committed to ending poverty and hunger, promoting health, wellbeing and quality education and achieving gender equality. The **Real Choices, Real Lives** study demonstrates clearly how closely these are all interlinked: how poverty has an impact on both health and education, as, of course, does hunger. Without adequate food, girls will find it hard to study, and without quality education for girls and young women,

gender equality will remain elusive. The gender roles assigned to women and men, girls and boys, which have proved so hard to shift, will keep girls tied into a domestic life with little mobility or independence; and little chance to recognise and develop their talents or realise their ambitions.

We know from the first ten years of **Real Choices, Real Lives** that many of the girls in our study – the consenters and the resisters – are questioning the roles assigned to them. *"It's not fair"* is one of the most consistent refrains in the girls' interviews. The question is, will this continue? Will the consenters and resisters begin to accept the lives they see their mothers living, or will they reject permanently the customs and stereotypes of previous generations? Over the next years we will continue to monitor their progress. Will the changes already in place enable them to survive their teenage years still intent on finishing their education; still, particularly the resisters in the group, determined on equality with their brothers? Will their opportunities to learn take them to university, as so many dream of? Will they be equipped to take control over their own lives, deciding what they can and cannot do and what they want to be, choosing the futures and the partners they want? And will they be truly powerful, neither the victims of gender-based violence nor of the stereotypes that mean that they are often fed less, paid less, and generally valued less than they should be?

We have seen how precarious life is for many of the families we are following and how committed they are to a better future for their children. The responsibility for this future lies with everyone: with the girls themselves, with their families, their immediate communities and with policy makers, legislators and funders in the parliaments of the world. In eight years' time, the girls in our study will be 18. They may have children, a job, be at university, but by 18 their fate will be clearly mapped out. How many will be given the chance of the 'better life' they and their mothers dream of?

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

Gabriela, aged nine, El Salvador



Girl,  
El Salvador,  
2016.

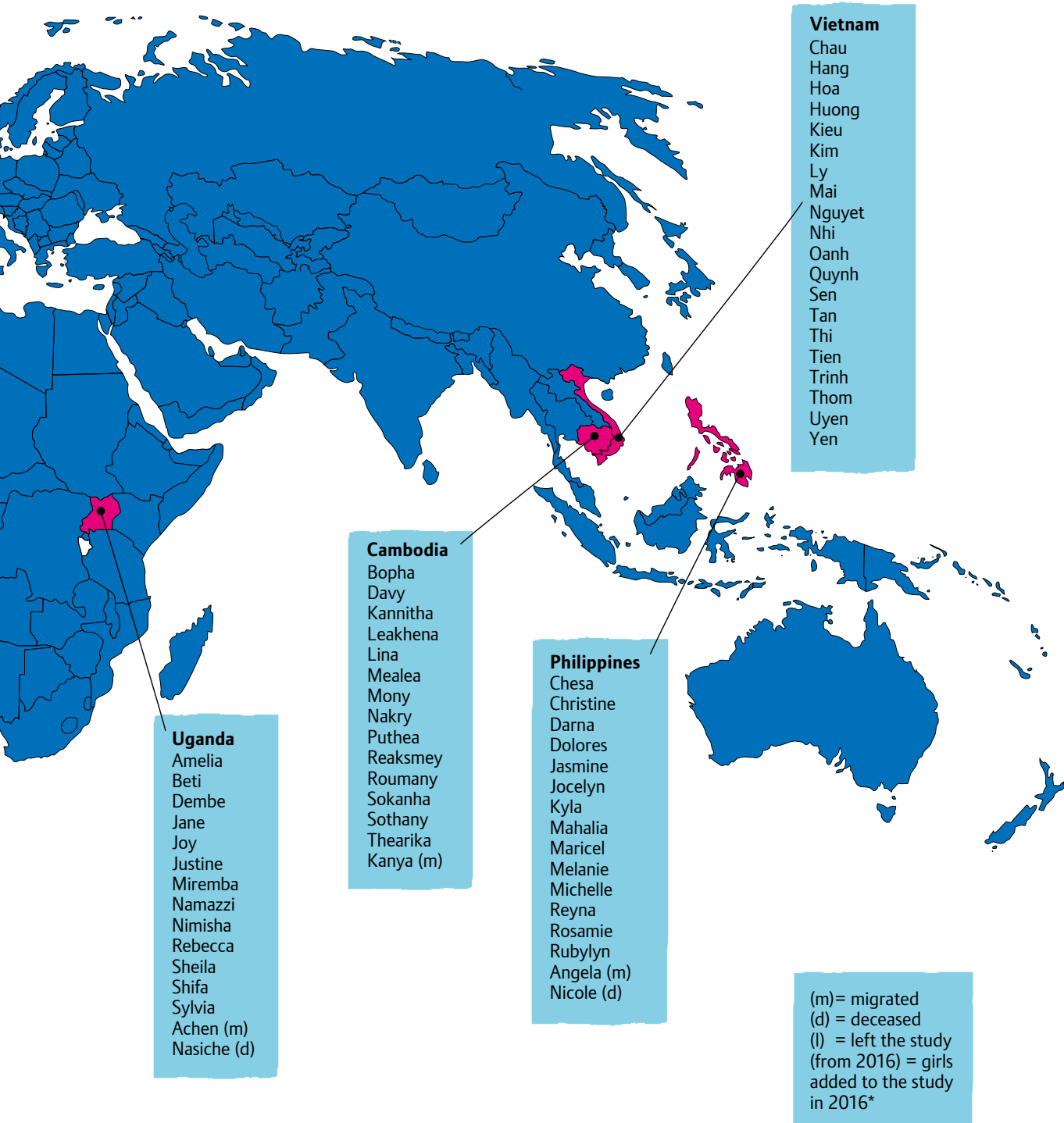
*Girl and her  
grandmother,  
Dominican  
Republic,  
2011.*





## 'Real Choice, Real Lives' Cohort Study Map: Where the girls live





\*Due to the high level of attrition in Brazil, in 2016 five girls were added to replace those that had left. These girls were selected based on their similarity in age, location and family income to the girls originally in the study.

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*From top: Girl, Philippines; Girl, Benin; Girl, Dominican Republic.*

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

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

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