

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



**Real Choices, Real Lives:**

# **Violence** in Girls' Daily Lives



**Plan International UK**



Girl, Cambodia, 2017.

LILLI HARRIS / PLAN INTERNATIONAL

Global research with girls and women over the years has indicated that violence is one of the key barriers to gender equality.<sup>1</sup> Girls talk about their experience of it at home, at school and in their wider communities.<sup>2</sup> They do not feel safe. Both the fear and the fact of violence saps girls' confidence, and limits their opportunities – keeping them “in their place”.

This year we looked specifically at the experiences of violence among the girls and their families taking part in Plan International UK's 'Real Choices, Real Lives' cohort study sample. The analysis found that as girls grow so does their experience of violence and, as with wider research, it happens at home, at school and in the community. The analysis, which forms the evidence in this briefing, summarises qualitative data collected from 2007 to 2017.

### Key Findings:

- There have been increased reports of violence as the girls transition into adolescence due to increased mobility and the onset of puberty (associated with prescribed sexualised identities along with gender norms).
- The majority of violence reported occurs at school, with peers being the main perpetrators.
- Experience, and the fear of, sexual violence is beginning to constrain girls' opportunities and aspirations for the future.
- Girls often report “telling no one” about violence they have experienced.

Plan International has been tracking 142 girls, all born in 2006, and their families across nine countries in order to understand how gender roles, identities and behaviours are shaped from birth and how these shift, or stay the same, throughout the life cycle.<sup>3</sup> The girls and their families will be interviewed annually until 2024, when the girls turn 18. Every year, Plan International researchers from the local country office visit the girls and their families and conduct a structured interview with both the girl and her parent or other family carer. Using a longitudinal

approach has allowed Plan International to generate a true understanding of family dynamics and attitudes and the impact of external factors on families' ability to cope. It has shown how gender roles are shaped from birth to early girlhood, through middle-childhood and into early adolescence. Plan International has 11 years' worth of data covering different themes, such as education, health, family economics, the empowerment of women and girls, and the aspirations of both girls and their families as they look to the future.

<sup>1</sup> UNICEF. 'Annual Results Report 2016: Gender Equality.' UNICEF, 2016, [https://www.unicef.org/publicpartnerships/files/2016arr\\_gender\(1\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/publicpartnerships/files/2016arr_gender(1).pdf) (accessed 23 August 2017); WHO. 'Violence prevention in the South East Asia Region.' WHO, 2015, <http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/164334/1/Fact%20Sheets%20on%20Violence%20in%20SEAR,%202015.pdf> (accessed 23 August 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Plan International & Ipsos Mori. 'Girls Speak Out: A four-country survey of young women's attitudes and recommendations for action.' Plan International, 2015; Plan International. 'Counting the Invisible: Using Data to Transform the Lives of Girls and Women by 2030.' Plan International, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Countries participating in the cohort study are: El Salvador, Dominican Republic, Brazil, Benin, Togo, Uganda, Cambodia, Vietnam and the Philippines.

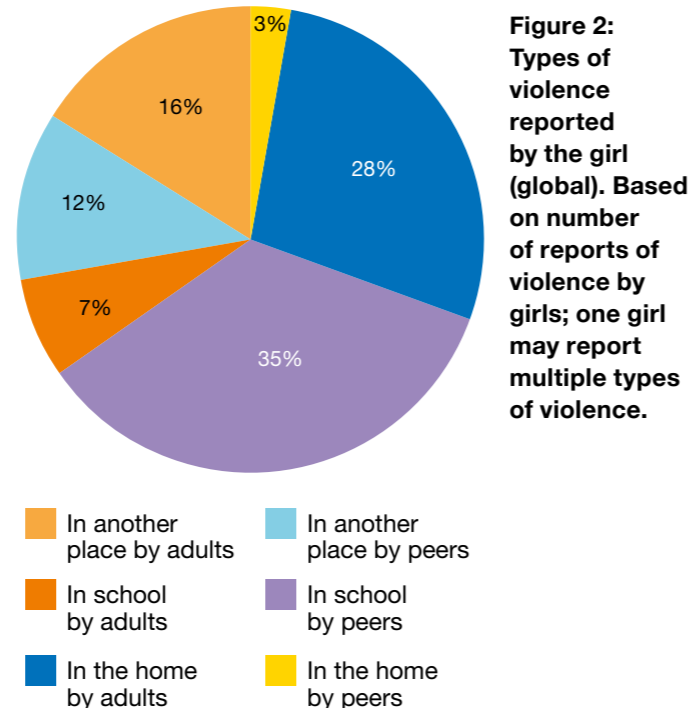
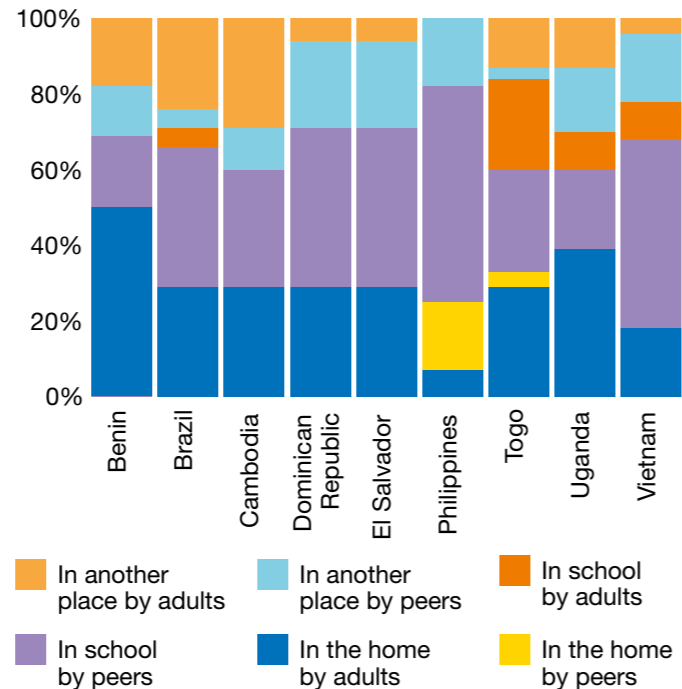
This analysis unpacks the experiences of, and attitudes towards, violence as it has been articulated by almost all of the girls and their families. They discuss how violence affects them at home, at school, in the community and in their wider worlds. They tell of physical, sexual and verbal violence that affects them and those around them, which is perpetrated by peers (mostly boys against girls and also older girls against younger girls), teachers, family members, as well as men and boys in the wider community.

*"Uh-huh. It's very dangerous, because if you go after the boys, you can get your 'pon pon' shot."*

Valeria, 11, El Salvador

**The data tells us that this year there has been an increase in the total number of girls reporting incidences of violence overall (across homes, schools and communities):** 109 11-year-old girls reported violence in total (91 per cent of the total sample) compared to 74 10-year-olds in total (62 per cent of the total sample). There have also been increases in violence outside the home among the girls in our sample this year. This is a worrying trend, and could be attributed to the girls now moving into early adolescence and increasing both their mobility and their visibility. They may walk further to school, they may run errands or see friends who are outside the immediate family circle. They are also approaching puberty and we know from wider literature, they will be viewed with an increasingly sexualised identity prescribed by wider society. These changes in their lives are all accompanied by rising risk.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, violence at home is still common

**Figure 1: Types of violence reported by girls by country (2017). Based on number of reports of violence by girls; one girl may report multiple types of violence.**



**Figure 2: Types of violence reported by the girl (global). Based on number of reports of violence by girls; one girl may report multiple types of violence.**



Girl, Uganda, 2017.

MATTHEW KISA / PLAN INTERNATIONAL

and can often be perpetrated due to punishment and sometimes as a result of the girls challenging gender boundaries in play and movements, as well as between siblings.

**Many girls have grown up in homes and communities where violence is rife.** In El Salvador and Brazil, gang violence occurs on a daily basis; many of the girls' mothers have reported partner violence and abusive relationships. It is interesting to note that many of the girls in these cohort groups appear to accept these daily incidences of violence as part and parcel of their

lives. It is also worth noting that all of the mothers in the El Salvadorian cohort were under the age of 18 at the birth of their first child; the youngest was only 13 years old – just two years older than the girls in our research study.

*"Yes [it is dangerous for girls to walk to school alone]... because there are a lot of crazy men drinking booze on the streets. The girls are afraid... They're afraid to walk alone at night."*

Natália, 11, Brazil

<sup>4</sup> See for example: Marcus, Rachel, Caroline Harper, Sophie Brodbeck and Ella Page. 'Social norms, gender norms and adolescent girls: a brief guide.' ODI, 2015, <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9818.pdf> (accessed 24 August 2017); Kyomuhendo Bantebya, Grace, Florence Kyoheirwe Muhanguzi and Carol Watson. 'Adolescent Girls and Gender Justice: Understanding Key Capability Domains in Uganda.' ODI, 2013, <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8822.pdf> (accessed 24 August 2017).



Girl and her sister, Dominican Republic, 2017.

In Uganda, despite being only 11 years old, the girls in the cohort fear being raped while walking to school, and tell of other girls in their communities to whom this has happened. Likewise, in the Asian cohort countries, girls fear being attacked or kidnapped on their way to school and report high levels of violence when they get there.

**Violence at school is the most common form of violence reported by girls across our cohort study and peers, rather than teachers, are the**

**main perpetrators of that violence.**

In 2017, there were 77 reports of violence at school – 65 inflicted by peers and 12 by adults. Girls tell of boys bullying them verbally and physically; describing boys who push their way into the school toilets and harass them. Many girls are now reducing the amount of time they spend playing and socialising with boys, who they see as “rough” and “violent”. Some girls appear to have distanced themselves from boys altogether, creating separate gendered spaces.

*“Teachers treat girls well. They advise them not to go around looking for a boyfriend because no one wants to go around with a big belly at a very young age.”*

Gabriela, 11, El Salvador

It is not only the girls who are concerned about violence at school – their parents are increasingly worried about their daughters being attacked, raped or kidnapped on their way to school and becoming pregnant as a result. Some parents and grandparents accompany their daughters on the often long journey to school, but others are unable to do this and so many girls travel alone. The study will continue to monitor whether these safety risks will affect the parents’ continued support for their daughters’ schooling as they progress further into adolescence.

*“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 the school is normally 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.”*

Teenage girl, Brazil

This report has found that violence becomes increasingly common during the transition from middle childhood into early adolescence and that violence is often used at home to teach a curriculum of gender roles and chores.

We also know that violence, and the fear of it constrains girls’ mobility, opportunities and aspirations, and we can see that the girls in the ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ study are already reporting ways in which they have changed their behaviour and actions to reduce the threat of violence. We know from our wider work at Plan International that this is likely to increase as the girls get older, and the threat of violence grows further into adolescence.

Despite the best efforts of many of their families, the girls in these communities will find that as they grow, violence, and the fear of it, may shape their lives. It may determine where they can go, what they can be – even when they escape physical harm.

Plan International’s ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ study will continue to track the girls until 2024, when they turn 18. In this way, we hope to develop a greater understanding of the patterns and trajectories of violence, from childhood into adolescence, and to build this learning into Plan International’s wider policy and programming work.

Girl, Cambodia, 2013.





*Vietnam, 2015.*

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, the 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 10 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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Cover image of three girls, the Philippines, 2017  
 by Plan International