

Real Choices, Real Lives:

Violence in Girls' Daily Lives



Plan International UK



Girl and her friends, Cambodia, 2017.

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Girl and her mother, Benin, 2017.



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Introduction

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

Background: What is 'Real Choices, Real Lives'?

The 'Real Choices, Real Lives' cohort study was initially set up to bring to life the analysis and statistics being presented in Plan's 'Because I am a

Girl: The State of the World's Girls' report series, first published in 2007. The study is tracking a cohort of 142 girls, from their birth in 2006 until 2024, when they will reach the age of 18. The information from the cohort study provides real insight into the daily experiences of girls and their families worldwide. Nine countries with a sample size ranging from 13-22, are taking part in the study.³ 'Real Choices, Real Lives' is a relatively small cohort study but it enables Plan International to examine in depth and in detail a range of issues affecting girls' lives. A longitudinal study of this sort is rare and, over the years, researchers are able to track and monitor the different life stages of the girls taking part and the factors that influence them as they grow up. The in-depth qualitative research undertaken provides rich and nuanced material about the girls themselves, and also illuminates the attitudes and behaviour of the families and communities they are part of.



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Definition of Violence:

Plan International abides by the following UN Women definition of gender-based violence to apply to its work:

“Gender-based violence (GBV) is defined as acts of physical, mental or social abuse that is attempted or threatened, with some type of force and is directed against a person because of his or her gender roles and expectations in a society or culture.

A person facing GBV has no choice to refuse or pursue other options without severe social, physical, or psychological consequences. Forms of GBV include sexual violence, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, early marriage or forced marriage, gender discrimination, denial (such as education, food, freedom) and female genital mutilation.”⁴

'Real Choices, Real Lives': Girls and Violence

This report looks specifically at the experiences of violence among the girls and their families taking part in Plan International's 'Real Choices, Real Lives' cohort study sample. The analysis summarises mostly qualitative data collected from 2007 to 2017 and highlights important longitudinal data showing how age and gender directly correlate to increased exposure or threats of violence.

The study findings indicate that the most vulnerable girls – those at particular risk due to overlapping circumstances of poverty with other factors such as age, disability and exposure to violence – will be excluded from the majority of development gains.

This report will apply an ecological approach and examine the girls' experiences of violence in three settings: at home, at school and in the wider community.

Two girls, the Philippines, 2017.



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Cambodia.

Research Design and Methodology:

The study is following 142 girls born between 1 January 2006 and 31 December 2006. The following criteria were used in selecting the cohort:

- 50 per cent urban; 50 per cent rural
- date of birth
- family income: low (self-defined, using Plan International Country Office metrics)

Plan International set up the study in order to gain an in-depth understanding of attitudes towards gender within families and how these attitudes impact on girls' lives. Every year, researchers visit the girls and their families to document the changing circumstances in which the girls are growing up and to see how their lives and personalities are developing. Findings from the study were incorporated into each of Plan International's 'Because I am a Girl' annual reports from 2007 until 2015 and are now being published as a stand-alone report each year. The purpose of the study is to build a greater understanding

of the challenges and opportunities that girls face as they grow up in various countries around the world and to analyse the significance of their similarities and differences. This unique dataset is gathering information on the social, economic, cultural and institutional variables that influence girls' lives and life chances, increasingly, as they grow older and more articulate, through the perspectives of girls themselves.

The main research tools are an annual interview with each girl and her family; an in-depth semi-structured interview that covers a range of themes; and other research tools appropriate for communicating directly with the girls. A range of additional qualitative research tools have also been used over the years, including focus group discussions, life-history interviews, case-study development and observational research.

The girls taking part in the 'Real Choices, Real Lives' study were all born between 1 January 2006 and 31 December 2006, and therefore form part of what is called a birth cohort.⁵ The advantage of cohort study

data is the longitudinal or long-term observation of an individual or group over an extended period and the collection of data at regular intervals. Although it can take a relatively long time for cohort studies to generate useful information, the resulting insights are of substantially superior quality to other types of cross-sectional studies.⁶

The study was designed using a grounded theory approach.⁷ The researcher does not begin with a pre-conceived theory or hypothesis in mind, rather an area of study.⁸ In this case, the broad area of study was identified as young girls living in a gendered world. By beginning the research with this in mind, the researchers have been able to collect data exploring several aspects of the girls' lives before drawing conclusions about the dominant factors influencing their daily experiences and shaping their future opportunities. This analysis is carried out using a rigorous coding process.

Researchers interview the families every year and increasingly talk to the girls themselves. Through this annual gathering of information, the study aims to uncover new and more detailed knowledge about the realities of girls' lives and the underlying roots of gender inequality. Defining a girl's social status and understanding family attitudes is challenging and new insights are gathered over time and will change as the girls grow through the various stages of childhood.

The influences during the early years of any child's life are key to their future life chances and opportunities. It is during these years that the critical foundations are laid for obtaining the necessary resources – or forms of capital – crucial to their empowerment. Human capital (time, skills and

capabilities), social capital (friendships, networks and social skills) and material capital (property, assets and legal identity) are all either developed or neglected in these early years, and it is these which can influence a girl's ability to make strategic choices later on in life.⁹

Conceptual Framework and Analytical Lens:

Naila Kabeer's (2005) work¹⁰ on empowerment helped to guide the early development of the cohort study. The three interrelated components of Kabeer's empowerment theory – access to resources, the role of agency and a sense of achievement – were considered important elements of a study that would examine the "real lives" of girls and their families over a number of years. The study also acknowledged the importance of a lifecycle approach, building each year on the experiences of girls as they grow.

In 2011, the cohort study team coded and analysed the full dataset gathered over the first five years of the project, allowing for the development of a set of interconnected and crosscutting themes:¹¹ the influence of poverty, intergenerational dynamics and gender analysis. These have since been used in the regular analysis of the data. The themes are grounded in Amartya Sen's (1999) capability approach¹² and further work on how the freedom of individuals can provide the basic building blocks of development. Greater freedom enhances the ability of people to help themselves and influence the world around them.

The roots of gender inequality lie in the social norms, attitudes and cultural practices embedded at home and in community life. Gender inequality

develops as a result of a series of attitudes about the value of girls and women, and resultant behaviour, traditions and laws. The process of empowerment comprises not only forms of observable action, but also the meaning, motivation and purpose that individuals bring to their actions and how they articulate their self-worth or lack of it.¹³ The beliefs and values that legitimise gender inequality, and block the advancement of gender equality and women and girls' empowerment, can be difficult to measure.

The qualitative nature of the cohort study is critical for evaluating the nuances of complex social phenomena and processes such as these. The cohort study therefore has the potential to be a powerful tool for analysing the complexities of gender relations within households and the attitudes of the adults involved in the lives of the girls.

Data Quality and Ethics:

All data collection is coordinated and carried out through local Plan International Country Offices. The Plan International team has worked hard to standardise procedures, bring in rigorous quality checks, expand the capacity of the research teams, and in some cases, encouraged links with local universities and research consultants to carry out the data collection.

The study strictly enforces Plan International's Child Protection policies at all times and the key principle of 'do no harm'.

The country coordinators have all received training from Plan International staff in ethical approaches to research with adults and children. This information is cascaded through to the field researchers and all

involved in the study. The researchers are trained to be aware of power dynamics between the researcher and the participant, particularly in terms of age and gender, and to ensure that participants are made to feel comfortable and are able to stop the interviews at any point.

The researchers obtain permission from a relevant family member or guardian before the interview starts and they always explain how the research will be used externally. However, any confidential matters flagged as such by the participant during the interview will not be made public. The interviewers also explain

Girl and her family, the Philippines, 2016.



to the girls the purposes of the cohort study and how the data will be used – with verbal permission sought from the girls prior to starting the interview. They also tell the girls that if something is discussed which is deemed to be a threat to their safety, and that the interviewers will need to share this with the relevant child-protection specialists in the Plan International Country Office. Plan International is aware that this may have effects on the level to which the girls feel comfortable to disclose experiences of violence to the researcher. Plan International



is also aware that discussions of sensitive issues, such as violence, can be disturbing and upsetting for children and as such, the researchers are provided with engagement activities to support the girls if they become upset and will stop the interview as required. In order to ensure the girls receive the necessary follow-on support, any child-protection issues, including becoming upset after discussions of violence, will be directed to the child-protection focal point for action and the cohort research manager will also be informed.

The study's tools and methodologies have been reviewed by key child research specialists at the University of Oxford, Birkbeck College and the University of London to ensure age-appropriate length and content.

All data handling is anonymised and transferred according to Plan International's data protection policy. Any external staff (translators, transcribers, contracted researchers) will have reviewed and signed Plan International's child protection policy and Plan International staff monitoring

their work will ensure compliance at all times.

Limitations of the Study:

Due to the limited sample size, the study cannot make broad regional or national claims about behavioural patterns. However, being of a longitudinal and qualitative nature, we are better able to develop rich details about individuals and their families than can be achieved by larger, non-longitudinal sample sizes. Furthermore, the insights gathered may serve to substantiate or question the findings of larger statistical surveys. Additionally, it should also be recognised that some girls may not feel confident or supported enough, or able to disclose experiences which are deemed particularly severe or taboo, such as incidences of sexual abuse perpetrated by teachers, or those in positions of authority.

Although we have been able to quantify a series of data areas (such as income and school attendance), this is principally a qualitative study and, as such, our methods are not rigorously quantitative.

Girl, Cambodia, 2017.

Overview

Almost all of the violence discussed in the research could arguably be classed as gender-based violence: stemming from a deep-seated inequality embedded in the social norms accepted amongst the girls' families and communities, and exacerbated by other factors such as poverty.

This year, there has been an increase in the total number of girls reporting incidences of violence overall: 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).

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 will be seen more and more as sexual beings. These changes in their lives are all accompanied by escalating risk.

This combination of being defined by an increasingly sexualised identity – dictated by wider society – and the social norms that maintain gender inequality puts these 11-year-old girls in greater danger of gender-based and sexual violence.

Many girls have grown up in homes and communities where violence is rife. In El Salvador and Brazil, endemic gang violence occurs on a daily basis, and many of the girls' mothers have reported partner violence and abusive relationships. Although our data has not uncovered a direct link between adult partner violence and violence affecting the girls in our sample, we

know from wider evidence there is a well-documented link between intimate partner violence and violence against children, which we will continue to monitor closely throughout the study.¹⁴

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 to whom this has happened in their communities. Likewise, in the Asian cohort countries, girls worry about being attacked or kidnapped on their way to school, and report high levels of violence whilst at school.

Figure 1: Types of violence: based by country on number of reports of violence by girls; one girl may report multiple types of violence.

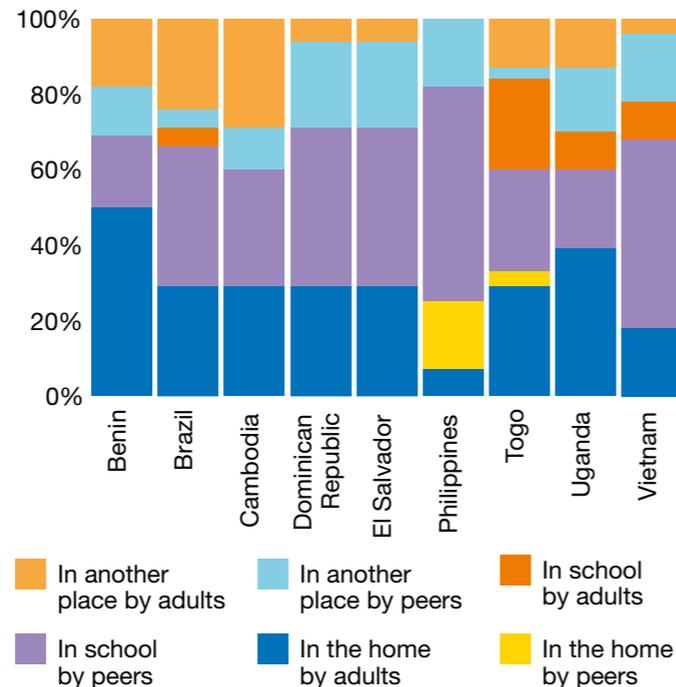
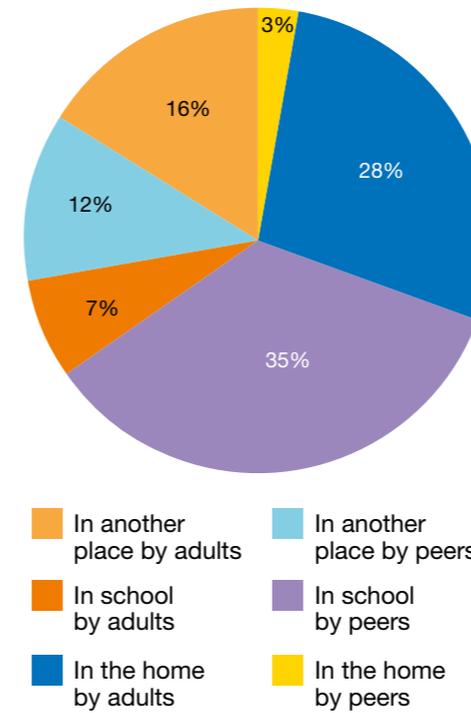


Figure 2: Types of violence reported by the girl (global) based on number of reports of violence by girls; one girl may report multiple types of violence.



"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 more afraid... They're afraid to walk alone at night."

Natália, 11, Brazil

Violence in School:

Over the years, the number of reports of girls' experiences of violence at school, their own or others, has increased steadily and



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the predominant share of violence reported occurs at school. Peers are far more often described as the perpetrators of violence than teachers. In 2017, there were 77 reports of violence at school – 65 inflicted by peers, 12 by adults.

Girl and her brother, Brazil, 2016.

This is an increase from the previous year, when the girls were aged 10 and there were 45 reports of violence at school – 28 inflicted by peers, 17 by adults. Violence and bullying between children appears to be affected by age and gender; for example, boys being violent towards girls and older girls bullying younger girls.

Experiences of school violence

As well as annual interviews with the families, 'Real Choices, Real Lives' has been collecting data directly from the cohort girls since 2013, when they were aged seven. This has enabled us to understand and document their experiences in their own words.

At seven years old, the girls were already reporting school violence as a daily reality. The violence included both corporal and peer-based. **Our data shows a direct correlation between corporal violence and a waning interest or negative attitude towards schooling** as the years have progressed.

"I prefer staying at home, helping my mother, to going to school."

Q. Why don't you like to go to school?

"The teacher sometimes beats me and that makes me sick."

Ladi, seven, Togo

Many of the girls report violence at the hands of their teachers. Almost all of the girls in our Togo cohort reported this and said how it upset them, making them wary of school as a result.

"I am afraid to go to school because the teacher beats the pupils. I don't like to be beaten. My teacher is wicked."

Fezire, eight, Togo

In Vietnam, the violence used by teachers as punishment was accepted as an appropriate way of enforcing discipline:



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"I was punished by my teacher because of my motionlessness and wrong mathematic solution. She shouted at me and beat me on my hand. I cried in pain and felt quite scared. I thought my teacher did the right thing because I made a mistake. The other pupils were also punished like that. They cried. I kept it secret from my mother; she would have shouted more."

Girl and her cousin, El Salvador, 2010.

Tan, nine, Vietnam

Some reports indicate different levels, or types, of punishment for boys and girls. Generally, stronger physical punishment is reserved for boys while, physically, girls are treated less harshly. Although this is not always the case.

"My teacher beats boys violently, but beats girls gently. Sometimes, [my] teacher does this with a ruler or hand."

Kannitha, 11, Cambodia

As well as teacher-pupil violence, there is violence between boys and girls at school. This can take the form of teasing and verbal bullying, as well as physical and sexual violence.

In many instances, girls report feeling insecure in school toilets as boys will often push their way in or spy on the girls using the toilets, which are often in un-secured or mixed-sex buildings, with little to protect privacy.

"They don't do anything in class, they 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."

Griselda 10, Dominican Republic

Many of the cohort girls report feeling unable or unwilling to report or complain to their parents about corporal violence experienced at school as punishment. They are afraid of their teachers or of being punished again by their parents for getting into trouble at school. **Many girls report "telling no one" about the violence they have experienced and a worrying number of them report having no one to go to for comfort or advice.**

As the girls move into their 11th year, the peer-to-peer violence reported in school appears more frequently to be boys against girls. Some of the cohort girls report seeking help from teachers.

Q. Why do you say that boys are rude?

"Sometimes, under the desk they have a mirror under your skirt."

Q. Then what do you do?

"Tell the teacher what they did."

Reyna, 11, the Philippines

The gender divide between boys and girls becomes more significant at the transition into early adolescence, between the ages of 10 to 14. Many of the girls report reducing the risk of violence by separating themselves from interaction with boys.

"I have no male friends because they are stupid and like rolling up a girl's skirt. I won't make male friends as I feel nervous and afraid of them."

Nakry, 11, Cambodia

"I don't know, no... I don't get along with males... They almost all get into fights. If you can't do something well, they make fun of you for it."

Gladys, 11, El Salvador

One strategy for protecting a girl against sexual violence can be to remove her from school entirely and keep her at home. Despite its protective intentions, this can seriously harm a girl's future.

Focus group discussions from our previous research with older adolescents in Brazil, Uganda and the Philippines illustrate the mismatch between the high educational expectations of girls and their parents, and the desire to protect girls and young women by restricting their movement. We know from wider research that this strategy of limiting the mobility of girls and young women has a direct impact on girls' educational and social outcomes and may actually increase their vulnerability by decreasing their capability, agency and ability to negotiate and influence their relationships, their roles at home, at work and in the wider community.¹⁵

Case study: Reaksmey, Cambodia

Reaksmey from Cambodia has a lot to contend with. Her father is disabled and her mother is illiterate. The family are, by local standards, considered very poor. They borrowed money to buy their pigs and sometimes have to borrow more to feed them. Two years ago, the pigs were all affected by disease. The family are trapped in a cycle of debt.

Her parents appear committed to her education, despite not being able to help her with homework. She goes to an uncle for help and has always reported her love for books and libraries. She reports that she prefers to go to friends' houses because they have food for her to eat, and she doesn't always have food at home.

Reaksmey has consistently reported her increasing social marginalisation from her peers, and cases of violence and bullying at school. When she was eight, she described her troubling relationships with her friends:

"I like playing with them, especially with Vy because when I am at school they let me play with him. Others fight with me and do not allow me to play with them. If I play with Vy, he also beats me but he lets me play with him."

Aged nine, she told of older school children bullying and inflicting violence on her:

"I also hate Grade 6 students because they catch me when I go to buy a snack, and they take my money when they are on guard during class."



Girl, Cambodia, 2016.

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She described a troubling relationship with a friend called Touch:

"What I hate about the school is a friend named Touch. Touch is stingy, and never shares any food with me. Touch sits in the front row, but doesn't allow me to sit with them."

It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which Reaksmey's social isolation and vulnerability to violence and bullying at school has to do with her family's extreme poverty. However, it is clear that she is targeted more than others in the Cambodian cohort.

She appears to be resilient but does not have support she can trust at school or at home, or have anyone to go to when bullied or mistreated:

"When feeling upset, I dare not tell anybody, not even my female teacher,

because her role is teaching me to read... I dare not tell my mother either, or she might beat me. Instead, I ask them [the children] to play with me again, and they do. That way, I feel happy."

Reaksmey has high hopes for her future: she would like to become a doctor, she says, to help people in need. She enjoys reading and getting lost in stories but is increasingly called upon by her mother to help with the household chores and therefore has less time to learn, read or complete her homework.

What's more, the violence and bullying are having a negative effect on how she thinks about school. Despite her enthusiasm to learn, she told our researchers in 2014 that school was now one of the places she "likes the least".



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Cambodia, 2017.

Violence at Home

Many of our sample group have been exposed to violence at home from an early age and this exposure has increased as they get older. **In 2017, there were 56 reports of violence in the home, 51 cases inflicted by adults and five by peers.** In 2016 we recorded 35 reports of violence at home, 29 inflicted by adults and six by peers. Much of this violence is gendered and normalised within the wider community. **Many of the cohort girls experience physical punishment at the hands of their parents or guardians.**

In 2011 and 2012, we conducted life-history interviews with mothers and fathers, to gather an in-depth understanding of their own childhoods, and how their upbringing influenced their own approach to parenting. Many of the fathers reported experiencing a violent childhood, being raised in traditional patriarchal homes with unequal power dynamics based on age and gender. While many fathers rejected these forms of parenting, a proportion of them have adopted similar tactics with their own children. Most cohort fathers say that their mothers were the strictest disciplinarians, although others report being most afraid of their fathers. In some cases, it is clear that the childhood violence inflicted by their fathers made a lasting impression:

“My father was strict and very harsh. He used to cane me so much. When I was 12 years old, I dodged school for one day. When my father realised, he looked for me and cut me so badly that part of my foot was severed. Every time I look at this scar on my foot, I remember my father.”

Jane's father, Uganda



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“Well, yes. Once I threw stones at one of my sisters and the old man punished me, he hit me with a rope. Tied my hands from a beam... He gave me a beating and then tied me up... We had to respect our parents. I was so scared of them... Whenever they said anything, I'd be trembling, like this.”

Katerin's father, Dominican Republic

Katerin's mother also experienced violence at the hands of her parents, but despite recalling feelings of upset, she sees corporal punishment as necessary to ensure discipline:

Girl and her sister, Dominican Republic, 2017.

Q. How did your father punish you?

“He hit me a lot.”

Q. And how do you correct your daughters?

“I talk to them, and if they do not understand me, I hit them. Because this one, Katerin, is very lively. I am always on at her. The calmest are the youngest and the oldest, I hardly ever hit the oldest.”

Experiences of Violence at Home:

Many of the girls in our cohort report being hit or physically scolded as a form of punishment for disobeying their parents or older family members. **The data tells us that physical discipline is often used to enforce gender roles around toys, spaces and behaviour amongst the girls and their siblings.**

“At home I lay the table, wash the dishes, and sweep the floor. I often do this with my elder brother. Once, my elder brother was flogged by our father for breaking bowls. I am so little that I cannot wash the dishes; I am afraid of being scolded by my father if I break the dishes.”

Oanh, nine, Vietnam

In some contexts, girls are punished by parents for moving beyond the spaces they are allowed to occupy. This is often related to a need to protect girls from perceived dangers outside the home environment.

“We play in the home compound. They do not allow us to go elsewhere; we only play at home. My father refuses to let us go elsewhere. If we go, he beats us.”

Dembe, nine, Uganda

Particularly amongst the study's West African cohort group, girls may find themselves punished for contravening gender rules that prohibit them from playing with boys at home, or in their wider compounds.

“We do not accept that girls and boys play together in our community; it is at school that I have fun with my boy friends but not at home, because if mom sees me having fun with the boys she beats me saying: ‘Have you ever seen the girls playing with boys?’”

Essohana 10, Togo

In some families there is reported concern about boys playing with ‘girls toys’ or acting in ways deemed to be ‘feminine’. Some fathers have told our researchers they worry that this could be an indicator of homosexuality. This behaviour is not deemed appropriate and is often met with punishment:

“My grandfather told me that my brother played with a doll but I punched him, and he fortunately turned out to be straight. I will tell him [my son] not to, but if he continues, there's a rod that will be waiting for him.”

Reyna's father, the Philippines

Girl with her brother and sister, Togo, 2009.



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In the Latin American communities where our cohort families live, gender-based violence is often considered normal. It is not surprising, therefore, that it is widely practised and already at the age of 11, the cohort girls are aware of it.

Q. What might happen to a girl if she starts dating too early?

“Her boyfriend might hit her and do many bad things to her.”

Q. What else, besides hitting?

“Spanking is the same thing as hitting, right? He might yell at her, hit her when she’s pregnant and many other things.”

Q. Have you ever seen this kind of situation?

“Yes, with my friend, a girl who studied with me.”

Patrícia 10, Brazil



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Over the years of the ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ study, we have had reports of domestic violence within the cohort households. In the life-history interviews with cohort fathers in 2011, many disclosed their own violent behaviour at home, especially when influenced by alcohol or drugs:

“There was domestic violence because I was drunk and could not control myself, but it rarely happened... It made me feel sad and ashamed.”

Hoa's father, Vietnam

In the Dominican Republic, Estefani's mother said of her previous husband (Estefani'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.”

Leyla's mother, Dominican Republic

Violence between siblings is also common. In many reports, situations of extreme poverty appear to provoke fights about possessions or pocket money.

However, from the 2011 and 2012 life-history interviews, it is clear that not all of the cohort parents were subjected to violence at home during their childhoods. Annabelle's mother has this unusual story to tell:

“It was dad who was stricter than mum. But he never beat his children and never allowed them to be beaten [by others]... I remember the day I refused to do the washing up and went to watch a fight outdoors. Mummy beat me seriously because of this disobedience. But she was sent away by my dad to her parents for having beaten me. She only came back to us after a family meeting.”

Annabelle's mother, Benin

Girl, Brazil, 2014.

Violence in the Community

As indicated in the previous sections, violence is prevalent in the interpersonal and school spaces inhabited by the cohort girls and their families. This also extends to the communities in which the cohort families live and this violence is often perpetuated by discriminatory social norms. **As the girls turn 11, there has been an increase in the number of girls reporting violence outside the home.** In 2016, there were 17 reports of violence “in another place” (categorised as outside home and school) and by 2017, this had risen to 51. Violence, particularly gendered violence, is often viewed as normal within families and the wider communities. In the Latin

American sample group for example, there are high levels of gang-related violence in the areas where the cohort families live.

By 2013, concerns about violence, including sexual violence, in the communities was on the rise within the cohort families – possibly in response to the girls’ increased exposure to the outside world. In Brazil and El Salvador in particular, many of the parents lived in fear for their own and their daughters’ personal safety. The interviews with grandparents in the early years of the research, 2007 and 2008, had also highlighted anxieties about the increased risk of sexual violence the younger female family

Village, Uganda.



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members faced. Darna's grandmother from the Philippines told us:

"Most of those 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."

Darna's grandmother, the Philippines

But parental fear of sexual violence is one of the factors inhibiting girls' progress. This was clearly articulated by a teenage girl taking part in focus group discussions in the cohort communities in Brazil:

"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."

Teenage girl, Brazil

Experiences of Violence in the Community:

As the cohort girls grew and began to move independently outside of the home, many parents began to voice concern about their daughters' safety in the community:

"Sometimes there were many cases of kidnapping, 'bodaboda riders' [motorbike taxis] also spoil our children especially girls who are in school."

Mirembe's mother, Uganda

This fear has also been instilled in the cohort girls themselves. Many of them described feeling worried or scared when travelling in their communities:

"It's because so many things happen and people, girls can be raped. They can be kidnapped and other things, too."

Patrícia, 11, Brazil

Already at the age of 11, many of the girls are all too aware of the specific threats facing them in their daily routines – from simply walking to school, to fetching water.

"Sometimes, I am worried about being raped, beaten and hit by car or motorbike when I walk to school. After school, it is not as quiet as I have friends with me."

Bopha, 11, Cambodia

Girl, Cambodia, 2013.



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Girl, Togo, 2011.

Although sanitary conditions have improved for some, many of the families do not have access to a private, or shared, toilet and have to use open spaces near their homes instead. According to the families in the sample, girls are most at risk when using these facilities as they are often located in remote areas. This mother articulates a concern echoed by others, particularly those in the West African cohort:

"Women and girls are not safe in the bush because there are reptiles and they could also be raped. Anything could happen."

Lelem's mother, Togo

In Christine's community in the Philippines, gender rules now apply to toilet use because of the threat to girls.

Q. They [the boys] defecate at the seashore, and the girls use the latrine?

"Yes because there was an incident of rape here before... Since then, we don't allow my nieces to go there. The boys, they are okay there. But the girls, not anymore..."

Christine's mother, the Philippines

In 2009 we conducted focus group discussions with adolescent relatives and neighbours of the cohort girls in Brazil, Uganda and the Philippines and again in 2010 in Benin, Togo and Vietnam. During these discussions, the prevalence of sexual violence was raised frequently as a specific threat facing adolescent girls in their daily lives.

"Yes, the girls face more risks in the streets, because men and thieves find it easier to assault girls or rape them."

Teenage girl, Brazil

Gender-based sexual violence was common during discussions with adolescent girls in cohort communities. Girls discussed incidences of groping, name-calling and rape as issues affecting them and their peers, personally. Often the perpetrators of these crimes were cited as “older men”, although some cited their male peers as being responsible.

“There are many bad people around. We don’t like it but girls are not safe anymore. Like what happened to my friend – after she was raped, she was mercilessly killed. This happened near the house of her grandmother while she was texting and trying to get a signal.”

Teenage girl, the Philippines

Many of the cohort girls are restricted in their movements within their communities. Roumany in Cambodia was clearly shocked by an incident of rape near her home, and, as a result,

she does not accompany boys when foraging for fruit in the nearby forest.

“When boys go to collect wild longan in forest, girls cannot go... Long ago (maybe two years ago), a nine-year-old girl was raped in the forest, and she was beaten to give her bracelet and necklace.”

Roumany, 11, Cambodia

Tatiana in Brazil has raised the issue of violent fights breaking out in her community and how this worries her and her friends on their journey to school. Her strategy is to take another route to school and avoid these daily threats in her community:

“Something bad could happen... There is always a fight, and sometimes I say: ‘Francisca, let’s go through this alley here, because I do not want to go near a fight.’”

Tatiana, 11, Brazil

Girl, Cambodia, 2017.



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Case Study: Bessy, El Salvador:

Bessy lives with her maternal grandparents and her younger sister in El Salvador. Bessy’s father reportedly left her mother when she became pregnant and her mother has now migrated to another part of the country with her new partner. Bessy’s grandparents live on her grandfather’s income from agricultural harvesting, which is limited and leaves the family without adequate food and other necessities at various points in the year.

The family have often expressed worry about dangers in the local community, particularly relating to violence. Bessy’s grandmother always takes her granddaughters to school, which is located an hour away from their home. She is so concerned about Bessy and her sister travelling home alone that she waits nearby during the school day so that she can collect them and take them home.

“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 went alone. They call them ‘hot mommies’; and I ask them for respect because the girls are just children.”

Her concern about violence in the community and her strategy to protect her granddaughters has a negative impact on her ability to work and earn an income:

“I have learned to take better care of these girls. Because I was working, the first daughters that I had, I left alone to be raised by my mother. I didn’t take good care of



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them. But these girls, I have learned to take care of them more because I don’t work anymore. Just getting them to go to school is a huge job; you have to wash their uniforms since they don’t have time because sometimes there are classes in the mornings. I have learned to protect them, not leave them alone. If I go to the river, I bring them with me. If I go out, I bring them; I can’t leave them alone.”

Girl with her grandmother and sister, El Salvador, 2017.

Bessy and her sister did not pass their school year and will have to repeat due to absence. Once they progress to grade six they will need to travel further afield to a different school which will require an even longer journey. This is something that Bessy’s grandmother is both hopeful and worried about. Her own education was limited because the local school was too far away:

“Yes, those are my hopes – that they pass the grade and go to the sixth grade. Then we will have to move them to another school... Further away, so I say ‘God willing, we’re going to see how we get them to the other school’.”



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The girls in our study are also at risk from harmful practices such as 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 one Togolese girls' uncle told us in 2009, were more concerned about how a major change in tradition would impact on social order:

“Excision [FGM] 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 young girls abandoning school.”

This year 11-year-old Larba told our researchers that her strategy to reduce risk of gender violence would be to become friends with a boy who could “protect” her and keep her safe. While acknowledging the unequal balance of violence facing boys and girls, this strategy plays into the underlying gender social norms which perpetuate the idea of girls as the ‘weaker sex’ who require male protection which additionally frequently comes at a cost:

“No I don’t have any friends who are boys. That will change when I’m older as I would like to have a friend who’s a boy to protect me from danger and to help me with my exercises.”

Larba, 11, Togo

Girl, Togo, 2011.

Early marriage and pregnancy are prevalent in the communities where the cohort girls live, to varying extents according to the individual contexts. Although raised by the cohort families as potential barriers which may hinder the girls’ continued education, these topics did not come up in many interviews with the cohort girls themselves until recently. During the past two years, however, they have started talking about early pregnancy and marriage.

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”*. However, as Annabelle's grandmother reported in 2009, traditions are slowly shifting, and the prevalence of early marriage is reducing:

“In the past, girls didn’t go to school. Marriage was forced and children helped their parents in the fields. The opportunities nowadays mean that girls go to school and can choose their husband.”

Annabelle's Grandmother, Benin

This year Miremba in Uganda was discussing a boy at school who she is afraid of because he sexually harasses girls at school:

“Maybe he is mentally disturbed because when he finds you he always comes near you and says that you are his wife.”

Miremba, 11, Uganda

Girl, Dominican Republic, 2011.



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In El Salvador all of the cohort 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, partner separation due to migration for work, and living in poor housing in violent neighbourhoods. Most of the girls' mothers are separated from the fathers and many live in all-female households, supported by (often single) grandmothers and great-grandmothers. The interviews from El Salvador reveal that many of the cohort girls live in fear of violence. Gladys's 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... 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."

Valeria 11, El Salvador

Gabriela speaks of early pregnancy and how girls are advised by their teachers to avoid having a boyfriend; pregnancy is common among young girls in her community:

"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

Girl with her sister, El Salvador, 2011.

Conclusion

The 'Real Choices, Real Lives' data has uncovered interviews that tell of rape and abduction, of drunken men who harass girls, of gangs and of parents desperately trying to protect their daughters. 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 shape their lives – where they can go and what they can be – even when they escape physical harm.

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 girl's 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 fear and threat of violence grows.¹⁶

The data from this research tells us that **the majority of violence**

affecting the girls in this study occurs at school and is primarily inflicted by peers. This is particularly interesting because the majority of work looking at school-based violence within the wider sector tends to focus on the issue of corporal violence, and our research would suggest an increased focus on peer-based violence in school is necessary.

We also know from our sample that there is an **increase in reports of violence outside the home, in the wider community, as the girls move into adolescence.** This suggests an increased need for focusing on, and challenging, harmful gender norms which perpetuate the sexualised identity of girls as they enter puberty and the contexts which normalise gender-based violence.

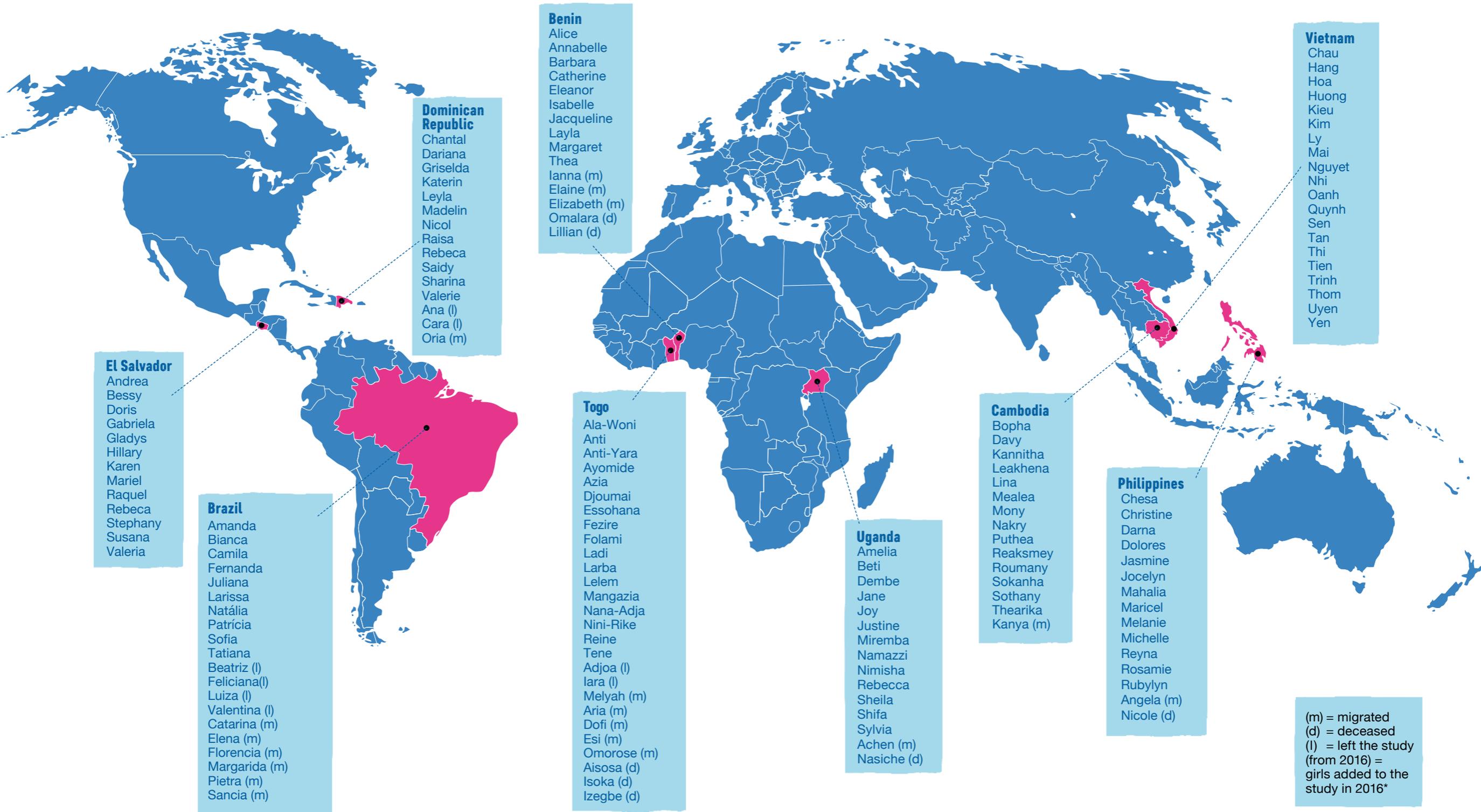
Plan International will continue to track the girls and their families that form this study until 2024, when the girls turn 18. By analysing longitudinal data, rather than a snapshot in time, we can unearth how and why gender, age, poverty and other intersecting factors affect girls' experiences of violence. We can also try to promote strategies and design interventions that will help change attitudes and protect girls without undermining their capabilities and opportunities.



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Girl and her brother, Uganda, 2017

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



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- 4 UN Women. 'Virtual Knowledge Centre to End Violence Against Women. Glossary of Terms from Programming Essentials and Monitoring and Evaluation Sections.' UN Women, <http://www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/347-glossary-of-terms-from-programming-essentials-and-monitoring-and-evaluation-sections.html> (accessed 23 August 2017).
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- 7 Grounded theory is a research method where a theory or hypothesis is developed from the data gathered, rather than the other way around. It is a more inductive approach to gathering and analysing data, meaning that it moves from the specific (the questions being asked of families) to the more general (the theory which emerges).
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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