



Until we are all equal



Girls' Everyday Resistance

Findings from Real Choices, Real Lives

Summary

Every day, girls around the world are resisting the gendered views and behaviours that are expected of them.

Plan International's **Real Choices, Real Lives** study gives an insight into the lives of girls in nine countries: Benin, Brazil, Cambodia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, the Philippines, Togo, Uganda and Vietnam.

This research looks at how, across the childhoods of 104 girls from the study, there are a variety of ways that girls are resisting gender inequality and driving change in their communities.



Key findings

- 1 Girls around the world want to change the status quo.** Most girls in the **Real Choices, Real Lives** cohort believe in equal rights and opportunities, especially related to education, careers, equal freedom and mobility, and women's economic empowerment.
- 2 Girls are questioning** what they have been taught about gender roles and recognising gender differences to be the result of expectations and social upbringing. Girls are expressing frustration at the distribution of chores or their limited freedoms compared to boys.
- 3** Though girls have strong desire to change the way things are, **many girls do not feel able to challenge gender norms as openly as they would wish to**, like voicing these opinions to their caregivers or outright disobeying them.
- 4 Girls recognise that they alone are not responsible for achieving gender equality.** Girls are forthright in their demands for change from adults and authorities, especially regarding comprehensive sex education and doing more to protect girls from violence. They are making suggestions for how adults can include girls in decision-making both in the home and in the community.
- 5 Girls are creative and courageous** in how they are resisting gender norms. 63 per cent of girls are resisting gender norms in secret or subversive ways, including by earning money without her caregivers' knowledge (13 per cent); having a secret friendship with a boy (38 per cent); and being in a romantic relationship that caregivers are unaware of (23 per cent).
- 6** If found out, **girls are at grave threat of harm**, with 83 per cent experiencing physical forms of punishment during their childhood. With so many girls forced to resist in secret ways, progress will be slow. Gender equality cannot be achieved in the shadows.
- 7 Nearly half of the girls are able to openly resist gender norms**, including behaving or dressing in ways they were not expected to; defending themselves from bullying and violence; refusing to do chores; and taking control of their finances by saving money. However, many of these girls feel they have to conform in other aspects of their lives.
- 8 We want to support girls at any and all levels of resistance** they are comfortable with – and to ensure they are doing so safely.
- 9 Strict gender roles and expectations** that are imposed by caregivers and adults in the community are limiting girls' ability to resist. Adults need to listen to and encourage girls' voices.
- 10** So that girls can continue to drive change and resist gender norms, we have identified several important factors: **the role of caregivers, safe environments, and access to resources** as key to ensuring girls can continue standing up for themselves and asking for change for girls.

Calls to action



Governments and authorities

should strengthen and enforce legal frameworks that challenge gender norms and promote equality. They should also fund education and community initiatives to support girls' leadership and equality of opportunity. Additionally, they should support, resource, and partner with civil society, NGOs, local authorities and community leaders on promoting awareness of gender equality.



NGOs and civil society actors should work with caregivers and community members to raise awareness about gender norms and challenge them. They should also support girls by helping them develop skills, connect with peers, and take part in decision-making and community activities.



Local authorities should support initiatives led by girls and ensure public services are accessible and responsive to their needs. They should create spaces where girls can share their ideas and help shape decisions in their communities, ensuring their voices are heard and valued.



Schools should create safe spaces for girls, ensure policies reflect the different needs of students of all ages and genders, provide staff training and curricula that support everyone, and foster an inclusive environment where mixed-gender activities are respectful and girls can take on leadership roles.



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Please Note

! All participants' names have been changed to protect their privacy, and specific locations have been removed.

Introduction

Across the world, girls are becoming increasingly visible as leaders and activists.

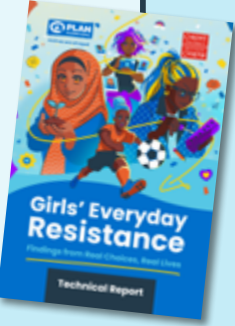
But many girls are navigating gender inequality in less visible ways. This report explores how 'everyday' girls, who may or may not identify themselves as activists, challenge gender norms in their daily lives.

Drawing on 18 years of research with girls and their caregivers in nine countries, this report showcases how, across girls' childhoods, there are a variety of ways that girls resist the gendered views and behaviours that are expected of them.

Listening to girls and the ways they challenge gender norms, we have put forward recommendations for how girls can be further supported to identify and respond to gender inequalities in their everyday lives in ways that feel right for them. Crucially, we are proposing how adults can do more to create safer and fairer communities for girls.



For profiles on the nine countries, including the background of girls' and women's rights and the history of girls' and women's resistance in each country, please see [Annex 1 from the Technical Report](#) →





Girls show confidence and skills to stand up for their rights in Brazil
© Plan International / Rafael Gardini

Real Choices, Real Lives

Real Choices, Real Lives is a research study by Plan International that has been following the lives of 142 girls^a in nine countries from their births in 2006 until they turned 18 in 2024.

^a We recognise gender as a multidimensional concept which influences people's identities and expressions in many ways and that gender identity goes beyond a binary field of male and female. However, for the purposes of this study, "girls" is used as an umbrella term to refer to the cohort participants.



The study has run in
9 countries



It ran for
18 years



From the girls' birth
in 2006



To their 18th year
in 2024

Located across three regions, these countries are: Benin, Togo and Uganda in Africa, Brazil, Dominican Republic, El Salvador in the Americas, and Cambodia, the Philippines and Vietnam in Southeast Asia. Through annual interviews, the study captured girls' experiences, beliefs, and aspirations in their own words, focusing on how gender norms shape their lives.

Very few studies have followed the same group of children for so many years - and **Real Choices, Real Lives** is the only one of its kind that has focussed solely on girls. By speaking to girls directly, **Real Choices, Real Lives** research provides unique access to girls' opinions, beliefs and recommendations over time for how we create a more equal world in their own words. Despite growing up in very different contexts, the girls in the **Real Choices, Real Lives** cohort

study shared many common experiences during childhood and early adolescence across a range of different themes. What they all shared in common, apart from their year of birth, is that they were invited to participate in the study because they were from one of the poorest households, or poorest communities, in their context.

Previous **Real Choices, Real Lives** research has given nuanced and rich insights into girls' lives globally. Climate change and poverty limit girls' opportunities, with many forced to leave school or work to support their families. From a young age, girls take on heavy unpaid care responsibilities, often at the expense of their education, friendships, and wellbeing. Social norms mean girls are expected to protect themselves from gender-based violence, with many believing male violence is 'natural'.

In this research, we analyse the views of 104^b of the girls and their caregivers from all nine countries who were still participating in the study when the girls turned 15 in 2021.^c

- ^b While the researchers tried to stay in touch with every girl involved in the study, some chose to stop participating, migrated away from the area, or, sadly, died during childhood. In Vietnam, the researchers were unable to carry out interviews with ten girls living in one province in 2023 and 2024, and so we have chosen to include only the nine girls from another province, who participated in the study until the end.
- ^c In this research, we only included those girls who were still participating in the study aged 15, in order to analyse the way in which a girl's resistance to gender norms developed over her adolescence. We felt this would not be possible for those girls who stopped participating aged 13 or 14, or earlier.

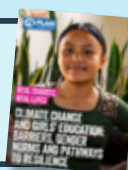


Visit previous
Real Choices, Real Lives
research →





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Read **Out of Time: The**
Gendered Care Divide
and its Impact on Girls →





Read **We Shouldn't Have**
to Walk with Fear →



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by Plan International.

Girls' resistance: What we know so far

In the past, the portrayal of children in global politics was frequently one of victimhood.

Images of suffering children were used to evoke feelings of pity, and to spur international action on a particular crisis.⁵ Yet, the children featured in these images were rarely given the chance to speak on the issues affecting them, and omitted from decision-making spaces seen as the domain of adults.⁶ As a result, children and young people were, and still are, rarely recognised as capable of contributing meaningfully to resolving a crisis or building peace.^{7,8} Crucially, girls experience additional layers of exclusion, rooted in gender norms and attitudes that marginalise and erase women's and girls' voices.⁹

Some media portrayals have begun to challenge the depiction of girls as victims, instead showing girls as capable of achieving great political change. Girl activists like Greta Thunberg have been depicted as having spectacular talents and abilities. These portrayals suggest that individual girls have the ability to address international forums, mobilise millions of their peers and indeed, "change the world all on their own".¹⁰

Ultimately, portraying girls as already capable of finding solutions to global problems hides the support and resources that girls need in order to make their voices heard.

Furthermore, not all girls get to be portrayed as spectacular. In fact, many girls are absent from media coverage, obscuring the activism of Black girls, disabled girls, queer girls, and girls from low-income countries.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this is when a photo of Thunberg and her peers at Davos went viral after it emerged that Ugandan climate activist Vanessa Nakate, the only Black member and the only African activist in the group, had been cropped out before the image was published in the press.¹² In another instance, despite Malala Yousafzai bravely risking her life every day by making the journey to school by herself, media coverage following her shooting by the Pakistani Taliban portrayed her as a helpless victim and, ever since, has largely centred others' voices over her own.^{13, 14, 15, 16}

! Girls are not asking to fix global crises on their own, in fact, they are asking for adults to step up and to end decades of political inaction on causes they care about.¹¹

Girl delegate asks question at the National Children's Assembly in Vietnam © Plan International



Girl and her friends understand the importance of biodiversity in the defence against climate change in the Philippines © Plan International

What we can learn about resistance from girls around the world

Around the world, girls are engaging with politics in ways that often go unrecognised. Though attention has been given in recent years to high profile girl activists, not every girl can, or wishes to, address the UN or lead a protest. By hearing from girls in their own words, we are broadening what it means for girls to be engaged politically.

Many girls are beginning to question norms and behaviours in their communities and some may even start to resist these norms and behaviours. Many more girls are calling for adults to do more to address the challenges that girls face.

This report explores girls' everyday politics: the ways girls navigate, accept, and sometimes challenge gender norms in their daily lives. It documents moments when girls go *against the grain* by questioning, criticising, or rejecting expected gender behaviours, with recognition that there are times when girls go *with the grain* by accepting, endorsing, conforming or even reinforcing these expectations.^{1,2,3,4}

When girls express opinions or take actions that challenge gender roles, we call this *girls' everyday resistance*.

What do change and resistance look like for girls on an everyday basis?

- ➔ At Plan International, our goal is to support girls and their communities to be aware of gender inequality around them and equip them to drive positive change.
- ➔ From the girls in the **Real Choices, Real Lives** study, we sought to learn where girls need greater support to make their voices heard and effect change.
- ➔ For this reason, our research focuses on girls' everyday resistance, however we situate this resistance within a broader continuum of girls' everyday politics, and reference this broader continuum in this report.



Within international development there has also been a shift away from distressing images of women and children as passive victims during humanitarian crises towards positive imagery of “happy and empowered” people living in low-income countries.¹⁷

.....
With evidence that girls and women, when given the opportunity to earn money, will often invest more of that money into their families and communities than men and boys, many development organisations have targeted their programming at girls.^{18, 19}
.....

However, this raises similar concerns as the spectacular depictions of girl activists in the media, placing a great burden on girls to lift their entire community out of poverty.²⁰

This narrative also obscures any critique of the economic systems and power relations that sustain global poverty — issues that lie far beyond the control of individual girls.²¹ Importantly, these portrayals of the ‘power of girls’ promote specific types of empowerment. Investing in girls’ rights becomes grounded in all the other development outcomes they will go onto achieve for everyone else.^{22, 23, 24}

Girls are portrayed as currently economically inactive, a resource to be ‘tapped’, overlooking the huge contribution girls already are making through their unpaid domestic labour.²⁵

When girls are framed mainly as future economic actors, the focus shifts almost entirely to education and economic empowerment. This obscures the many other obstacles they face in accessing their basic rights, from gender-based violence to sexual and reproductive health.^{26, 27, 28}

! **Previous studies that have worked with girls themselves, have found that when girls have been engaged in formal political participation, they have often been left feeling disempowered.**

These studies have found girls’ participation is heavily managed, with adults seeking to ensure their radical activism is made ‘appropriate’ for adult-led forums.^{29, 30} Girls are making it clear that, rather than wanting to make change all by themselves, they are calling for greater adult support to achieve their activist goals.^{31, 32} Additionally, girls emphasise the value of working together, preferring collective activism to acting alone.³³

It is important to recognise that girls ‘do’ politics beyond formal arenas.

- ➔ Research has found that girls engage in many ‘everyday’ forms of politics and can challenge the inequalities they face in ways which may seem mundane but seek to gain greater freedom for themselves and their peers.³⁴
- ➔ Previous research from **Real Choices, Real Lives** has demonstrated that girls challenge gender inequalities in nearly every part of their lives, from questioning strict rules on their movement to forming friendships with boys.^{35, 36}
- ➔ Everyday actions - from questioning the present to imagining a different future - can themselves constitute powerful forms of girls’ activism.³⁷



Building on what we know so far about girls’ resistance, in this report we seek to understand how girls question inequalities as they progress through childhood and adolescence, and examine the support they need to create change.

The girls in this study come from a range of very different contexts, and they do not necessarily identify themselves as activists. This allows us to see the ways that girls around the world create change, even if they do not see themselves as ‘political’.

The research offers encouraging insights for those who wish to act as allies to girls, but we also try to be careful to avoid forms of false hope.^{38, 39} We recognise that in many contexts, girls face serious risks when exercising their agency, particularly amid a global rollback of rights that sees progress made on girls’ rights threatened or reversed.^{40, 41} Rather, we seek to understand what forms of resistance they are already engaged in, what barriers they experience, and the kinds of support they are asking for from adults to make the change they wish to see in their communities.

.....
We aim to understand, and take seriously, the “specific and unique desires” of girls, even where they may not necessarily match the priorities that girls’ empowerment campaigns frequently attribute to girls.⁴²
.....



Girls chat to friends and family members in Togo © Plan International / Rafael Gardini

How to understand girls' everyday politics

Understanding girls' everyday politics can be complex. We have developed a framework to help categorise and understand the different ways that girls may accept or resist gender norms, which understands agency as a broad spectrum.

We analysed 18 years of data from the **Real Choices, Real Lives** cohort to explore girls' words, views, and experiences that either align with or challenge dominant gender norms. We describe this approach as reading 'with' and 'against' the grain of the gender expectations that exist across all nine countries.

These norms include, for example, the expectation that men are breadwinners and make financial decisions, women are responsible for care work and domestic labour, men are naturally aggressive (contributing to gender-based violence), certain careers are considered appropriate only for men or women, and political representation is overwhelmingly in favour of men.

Girls' everyday politics includes both following and challenging gender norms. Going *with the grain* means accepting, endorsing, or enforcing expected behaviours. Going *against the grain* means

questioning, overtly critiquing, or outright rejecting them. We refer to these acts where girls challenge norms as *girls' everyday resistance*.

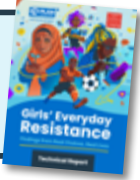
It is important not to conflate agency with resistance, or to assume that girls are only exercising agency when they go *against the grain*. Agency refers to a girl's ability to make decisions, shape her own life, and influence her environment. Girls can exercise agency even when their actions uphold gender norms, going *with the grain*. For example, a girl might choose to leave school to help care for a niece or nephew, enabling the

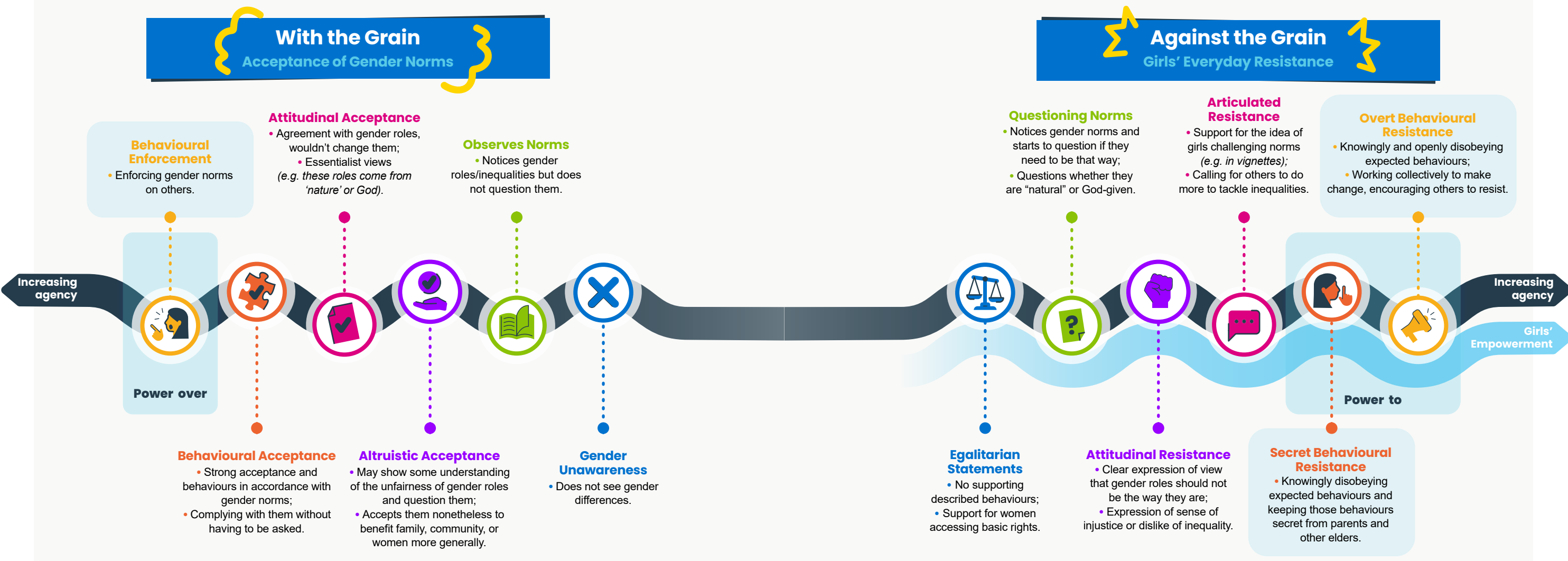
child's father (her brother) to work and support the family. This decision does not challenge gendered patterns of labour, but it is still an example of a girl exercising agency to make her own decision.

Our framework therefore understands that agency increases in strength in both directions from a central point on a scale (See [FIGURE 1](#)).



For a more detailed discussion of the framework, see our **Technical Report** [➔](#)





◆ FIGURE 1 Girls' Everyday Politics framework

◆ FIGURE 1 Girls' Everyday Politics framework



Young woman learns motorcycle repair skills despite self-doubt and community scepticism in Cambodia © Plan International

When analysing girls' and caregivers' words, we were not seeking to define their entire stance on gender as 'with' or 'against' the grain. Instead, we wanted to understand the complexity of girl's experiences of growing up as girls, and where there might be room to challenge inequalities. In this way we were interested in how girls' views can sometimes clash across different issues, and how they can shift over time.

.....
By listening to girls' stories of challenging gender norms, we recognise that silence and secrecy can be forms of agency.⁴³
In many contexts, speaking out can be very dangerous for women, and silence can be employed as a form of resistance.⁴⁴
.....

Therefore, we acknowledge that women's silence can be a source of strength, a challenge to those in positions of power, or a means of negotiating survival.⁴⁵ For example, in our analysis we found that girls were frequently engaging in secretive resistance, where girls knowingly disobey gender norms while remaining silent on them. We see such acts as displaying large amounts of agency, even if it does not involve openly questioning the rules.⁴⁶

Although our analysis covers the full range of girls' everyday politics - from being *with the grain* to going *against the grain* - this report focuses on everyday resistance. We do not aim to suggest that every girl should engage in overt resistance - for many, this would be unrealistic or unsafe. Rather, we aim to explore the moments when girls feel able to act with agency and what supports them in challenging gender norms.

Forms of girls' everyday politics

Below is an explanation of each form of girls' everyday politics, according to our framework. Drawing from girls and their caregivers in the **Real Choices, Real Lives** study, we provide examples of the ways that girls "do politics", going from being *with the grain* towards going *against the grain*.



Behavioural Enforcement

This refers to girls or their caregivers not only believing that the current gender roles are as they should be but actively taking up those roles and enforcing them on others. For example, over the years, Ala-Woni in Togo did not just accept that girls should do chores, she would enthusiastically take them on and teach her little sister how to do them as well.



Behavioural Acceptance

This refers to accepting a particular norm around gender and actively conforming with it. For example, in 2014, Amelia in Uganda said she did not play with boys because her mother didn't allow it.



Attitudinal Acceptance

This reflects the view that gender roles are either determined by biology (gender essentialism) or by a god, implying that they cannot be altered.⁴⁷ For example, in 2023, in response to a fictional story about a girl who might have to drop out of school to look after a young child in the family, Camila in Brazil told the interviewer that a boy could not look after a child, so the only potential solution would be if the mother stayed at home while the father went out to work.



Altruistic Acceptance

We use this term to refer to instances where a girl or parent complies with gender roles in order to ease the pressure on others (especially women) or to enhance the wellbeing of their family overall. They may or may not identify these roles as unfair, or question whether they are determined by biology or by a god. For example, in 2018, Tan in Vietnam said her favourite time of the week was doing chores because it helped to stop her mother feeling so tired.



Observes Norms

This concerns instances where a girl or her caregiver notices a difference in how men and women, boys and girls are expected to behave but was not expressing any particular views on it. For example, in 2018, Bianca in Brazil alternated between saying that she and her sister were expected to do more chores than her brother and sometimes saying everyone did the same amount of housework. She never seemed to express a sense of injustice or question the expectation.



Gender Unawareness

This refers to someone asserting that there are no differences in how men and women are treated or are expected to behave. If everyone held this view, then the many gender inequalities we know do exist would never be addressed, so despite being a form of egalitarian statement, we see this as going 'with the grain'. For example, in 2021, Kim's mother in Vietnam said there was gender equality nowadays and girls did not face any challenges.



Egalitarian Statements

This was used to denote vague statements in favour of equality, without any accompanying behaviours that challenge gender norms. For example, Sylvia's father in Uganda said on multiple occasions that he and his wife made joint decisions about the family and its finances. In other years, however, he contradicted himself by saying that he was the main decision maker.



Questioning Norms

This was used whenever a girl or caregiver started to question a particular gender norm, without necessarily explicitly stating they thought it was unfair. This could include starting to question whether patterns of behaviour were determined by nature or by a god. For example, in 2021, Saidy in the Dominican Republic noticed that boys were given much more freedom than girls in her community. Unlike many caregivers and some girls that year, who explained that girls were at greater risk of violence, she simply said she did not know why it was this way.



Attitudinal Resistance

This term denotes a girl or caregiver expressing a view that gender roles or expectations are unfair and/or should change. For example, in 2018, Jacqueline in the Philippines said that it was unfair that boys in her community did fewer chores than girls.



Articulated Resistance

By 'articulated resistance,' we mean instances where a girl supports the idea of resisting gender norms, even if she does not feel able to do so herself. For example, in 2024, Yen in Vietnam said that adults should listen to girls' opinions and girls should be trusted more to make decisions about their own lives.



Secret Behavioural Resistance

This refers to girls knowingly disobeying gendered rules about their behaviour, but keeping their disobedience secret. For example, Alice in Benin had a job in 2023, but kept her employment secret from her father who would not have approved.



Overt Behavioural Resistance

This refers to girls openly disobeying expected behaviours. For example, in 2016, Ly in Vietnam said she would only do chores if her mother paid her, while Raquel in El Salvador only did the chores she liked to do (2021).

Girls' Everyday Resistance across the Real Choices, Real Lives cohort

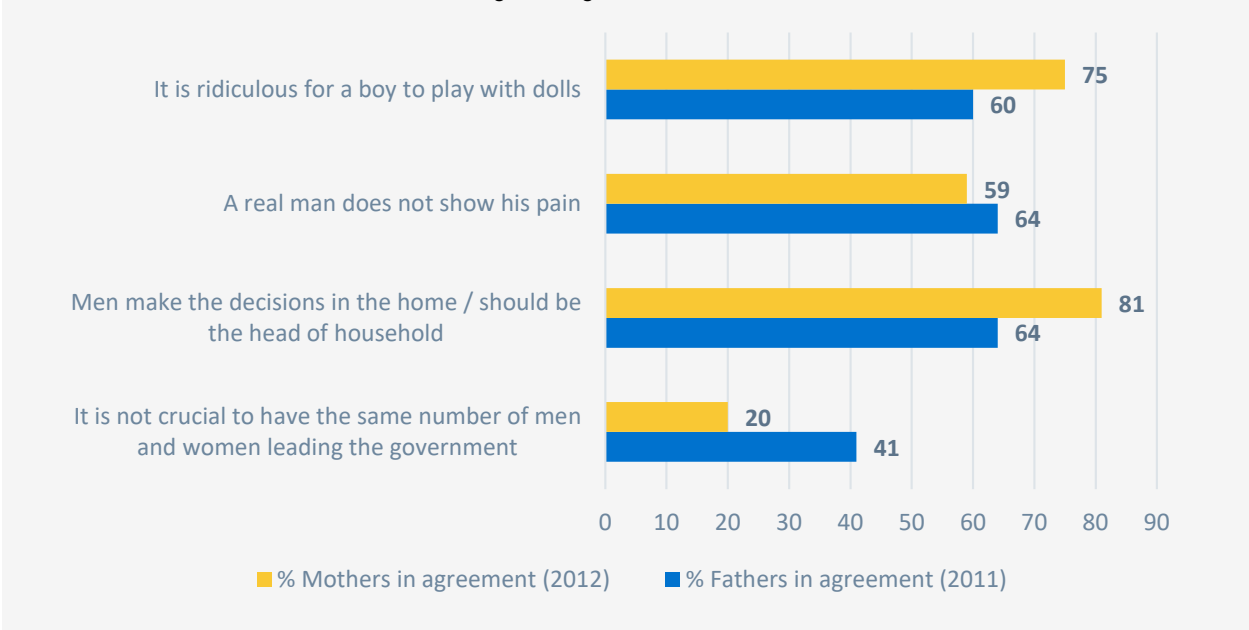
'Girls should be decent': caregivers shaping the environment for girls' resistance

The views of the girls' caregivers provide us with a crucial understanding of the enabling, or indeed, constraining environment for girls' resistance to gender norms.

Across the global cohort, caregivers were largely supportive of equality of opportunity, particularly regarding access to education and to some

extent, equal political representation. Parents were strongly opposed to child marriage and believed that early marriage and unions should not threaten girls' education. Mothers and fathers supported, in theory, equal political representation and girls' participation in sports, with some differences in level of agreement around men showing emotions and boys playing with dolls.

TABLE 1 Caregivers' agreement with normative attitudes



While many caregivers expressed support for equal opportunities for girls, or even questioned gender norms themselves, their actions and other views often contradicted these beliefs.

Many also held essentialist attitudes that saw girls as needing to be more obedient and responsible for more household chores.

As a result, many girls struggled to access or thrive in the very opportunities their parents wanted for them.

When it comes to household labour, several parents expressed egalitarian views that directly contradicted how chores were actually divided and justified in their interviews.

For example, in 2019, Davy's mother in Cambodia stated that she endorsed the statement, "Boys and girls should have the same household responsibilities," explaining that, "I agree with this statement because both boys and girls can help to do the housework and outside work such as farming". And yet, elsewhere in the same interview, she explained that Davy did more chores than her brothers because, "I sometimes get tired and ask her to do the dishes. I tell her that it is female work."

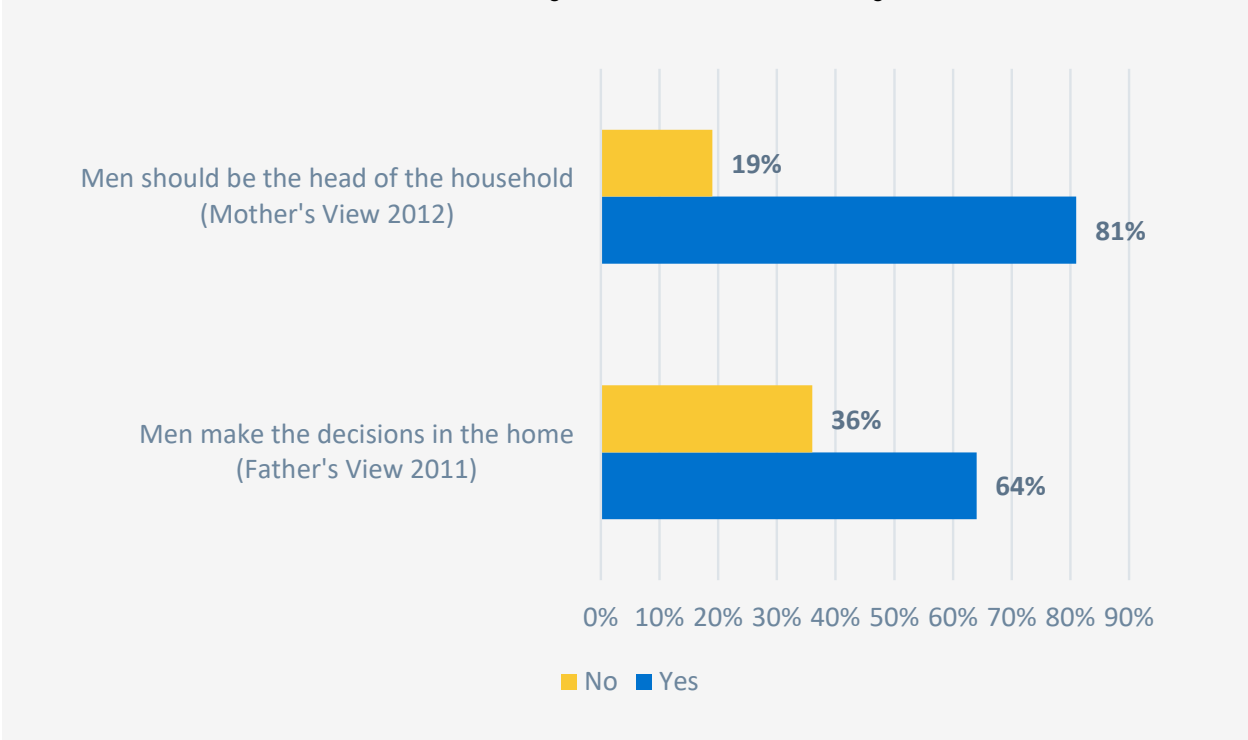
Davy's mother added that Davy was allowed to join her brothers in farming, while "My sons do nothing. They just go to school, eat, and hang out. I sometimes asked them to do chores, but it is a rare case." Although she strongly supported Davy's education - saying she would prioritise it over her sons' - she appeared unaware that assigning her more domestic work could undermine her schooling.

Where caregivers linked women with the domestic sphere, they also tended to see men as the natural breadwinners and decision-makers. In 2018 in Togo, Ala-Woni's father explained, "The father, the man is the one who takes the decisions. The women however make decisions when the man is absent from the house."

In some cases, even when the mother was earning more than her husband, he was still seen as the head of the household and the main decision maker. This seemed to be the case in Annabelle's family in Benin. Despite earning less than half of his wife's weekly wage, Annabelle's father still described himself as the 'leader' of the family.

"The family earns [a] good living thanks to the activities my wife and I. As the leader of the family, I do ensure the big household expenses and there is no big consequences in the sense that there is a consensus between us before I take the decision as a family leader." Annabelle's father, 2015, Benin

TABLE 2 Caregivers' view on decision-making





Girl raises her hand to answer question in class in Uganda © Plan International / James Mbiri

! **Girls are often trusted to avoid 'bad' choices but rarely have the opportunity to make positive decisions about their lives.**

Across the cohort, we consistently saw girls being held responsible for the *wrong* choices they might make in the eyes of their caregivers (negative agency) but rarely entrusted with the responsibility to make the *right* choices or to influence their own lives, their families or their communities for the better (positive agency).

This contradiction was especially evident when it came to the topic of girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Girls were consistently seen as to blame if they fell under the influence of the "wrong" friends, dressed "inappropriately", stayed out late, or engaged in sexual relationships, but they were very rarely given the information and healthcare needed to manage their own health and wellbeing.

For example, in 2019 when Ly in Vietnam was aged 13, her mother expressed her disapproval of Ly's classmates having boyfriends, telling the interviewer, "I said to her that I would kill her if she had a boyfriend." At the same time, Ly's mother did not see Ly as responsible or old enough to learn about her body and what such a relationship might entail ("I have not ever talked about pregnancy or [birth] with her because she is still very little and has not known much").

Sometimes, even mothers who resisted against gender norms still enforced them on their daughters. Overall, there seems to be limited intergenerational support for girls' resistance. In Uganda, Nimisha's mother described an act of extraordinary bravery in standing up to an attempted mugging on the street by three men, in which she undressed publicly to challenge their claims that she had money hidden under her clothing. The men eventually ran away. And yet, she concluded that such an act would not be possible for a young woman, who would have been at risk of rape, and she continually restricted Nimisha's movements because of this perceived threat.⁴⁸



Girls sign commitment to help empower children and young people in Vietnam © Plan International

Despite viewing men as the heads of the household and the decision makers, caregivers consistently described what they perceived to be naturally masculine behaviours in overwhelmingly negative terms.

They characterised their sons as out of their control, lazy, impossible to reason with, and sometimes a danger to themselves and others. Caregivers frequently described their sons as "unruly," "lazy," or "wayward," using these labels to justify assigning them fewer chores - arguing they would not do them anyway - and giving them greater freedom, based on an assumption they would not obey restrictions either.

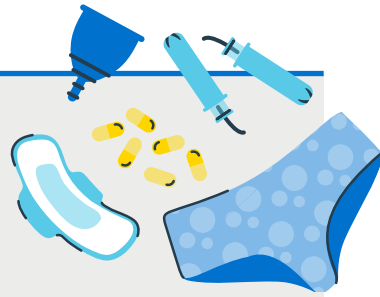
Caregivers' views on boys' behaviour are best illustrated by a number of contradictory examples. For instance, in 2019, Miremba's mother in Uganda said that she would have fewer worries about boys than she would about girls, even though she saw girls as naturally being better behaved.

Similarly, Rebeca's aunt in El Salvador felt that "girls have to be more decent", but "boys are like little men [...] they can be immature or crazy when they're young [laughs]" (2020). And Anti-Yara's mother in Togo said that girls are better behaved, but men should make financial decisions (2019).

The caregivers' view of masculinity was consistently negative, and yet this did not seem to lead them to question whether men and boys should be entrusted with all of the opportunities and responsibilities at family, and indeed sometimes national, level.

.....
Despite caregivers' perceptions of boys as less studious, less hard-working and less community-minded, or in some cases, because they are seen to need greater incentives and encouragement, boys were frequently given more opportunities than their sisters.
.....

Menstruation came up consistently across all nine countries as a key turning point in girls' lives – one that often marked the beginning of new restrictions and expectations.



- ❗ Many girls, such as Djoumai in Togo and Christine in the Philippines, were simply told they must behave “differently” once they started their periods.
- ❗ A long list of the cohort girls were told they were no longer allowed to play with boys once they started their periods, including Amanda in Brazil, Dolores, Jasmine and Reyna in the Philippines, and Griselda in the Dominican Republic.
- ❗ For Amelia in Uganda, whose parents placed similar restrictions on her, this meant that she stopped interacting with boys altogether from the age of 11.
- ❗ Rosamie in the Philippines was told it was forbidden to socialise at all, while Reyna’s mother said she should no longer laugh too hard at what boys say.

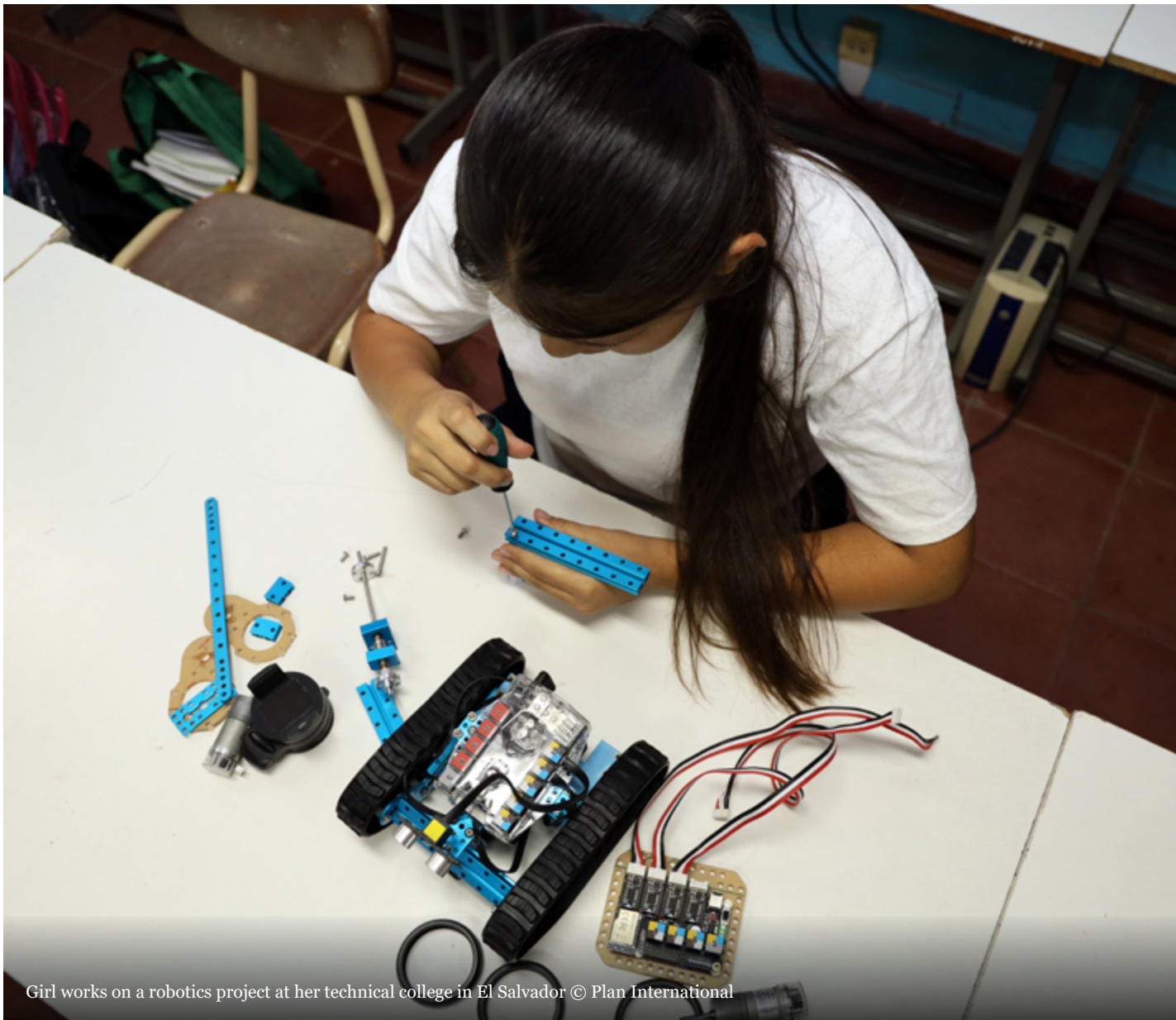
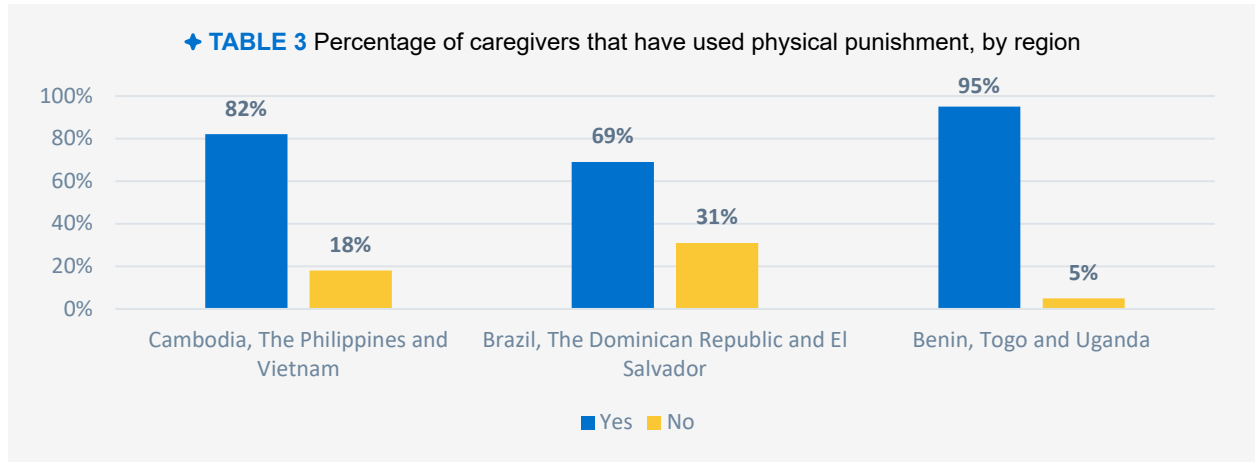
And so, caregivers expected girls’ social lives and participation in their communities to shrink when they started menstruating. Girls were ordered to go out less, socialise less, exercise less and laugh more quietly.

In many cases, if girls questioned or refused the rules or roles that caregivers see as ‘natural’ for girls, they faced harsh punishments, including physical violence, especially if they refused to do their chores. For example, the caregivers of Layla in Benin, Rebecca and Joy in Uganda, Chesa in the Philippines and Yen in Vietnam all described hitting their daughters, including with sticks and whips, if they did not do their chores. Other girls were specifically threatened with violence if they broke rules around going out and socialising with boys.

Across the cohort, we saw that physical forms of punishment were widely used, with some regional variation, as shown below.

Nevertheless, in all three regions, physical punishment was a clear threat for those girls who did not conform to expected behaviours, with 83 per cent of girls experiencing it at some point during their childhood.

Caregivers held a range of contradictory views: from supporting equality of opportunity and questioning norms to believing girls cannot make decisions about their own lives. These views on gender roles are shaped by poverty and poor infrastructure; factors that, together, limit girls’ chances for equal opportunities. And so, caregivers’ attitudes are an instrumental factor to creating an enabling or constraining environment for girls’ resistance.



Girl works on a robotics project at her technical college in El Salvador © Plan International

Girls' stories of their everyday resistance

We will now turn to the girls' views and actions as examples of their everyday politics and how they may be resisting against their caregivers' views and rules on gender.

We can read girls' stories of resistance with the recognition that they are lacking key supporting factors to overtly challenge gender norms. While some girls did manage to resist openly, many adopted more subtle and strategic forms of resistance.

We explore girls' views and actions in accordance with where they align with the framework, focusing specifically on examples from the girls that resist gender norms and go *against the grain* of expected behaviours: Egalitarian Views; Questioning Norms; Attitudinal Resistance; Articulated Resistance; Secret Resistance; Overt Behavioural Resistance.

With our framework as a guide, we have been able to identify some fascinating examples with clear implications for how we can support girls to make change.



'We're all equal': Egalitarian Views

Most girls in the **Real Choices, Real Lives** cohort believed in equal rights and opportunities, especially in education, careers (even if their career choices are frequently gendered); equal freedom and mobility; and women's economic empowerment. Yet, they expressed these values often without strongly challenging traditional gender norms.

This marks an important first step in girls' resistance to gender norms. Many were interested in the idea of equality but did not always feel able to put these beliefs into action. Over the course of the study, we heard from girls about their own wishes to be educated, but also the importance they placed on equal access to education in general.

.....
In 2018, 99 per cent of girls agreed to the question, 'Should boys and girls have equal access to education?'

Every girl agreed that it was important for girls to go to school, but 13 per cent of girls were unable to articulate a reason for this importance. This clearly shows some degree of support for equality, though it isn't always paired with a willingness or opportunity to question the gender norms that shape their lives.

Most of the cohort girls supported equality of opportunity in terms of pursuing careers after school, yet their choice of careers did little to challenge gendered perceptions and practices of caregiving.

By 2024, at least 20 per cent of the girls wanted to be either teachers, midwives, or nurses, which reflects how many girls have consistently aspired to be in a care profession throughout the study.

“I want to be a nurse [...] to be able to help other people.”

Jasmine, age 14 (2020), Philippines

“If I do well at school, I can become a midwife, that's my dream.”

Fezire, age 17 (2023), Togo

Girl raising chickens to earn an income to support herself and her mother in Benin © Plan International



Girl with her friends from the youth club in Cambodia © Plan International

Care professions are associated with helping others, and - through gender norms - girls are often socialised to believe that 'helping others' is a skill that comes naturally to women.

On top of this, girls' high levels of unpaid care responsibilities are often described by caregivers as building their daughters' skills for the future - further cementing for girls the idea that caregiver is a natural or inevitable path for them. However, girls generally agreed in principle with the idea of girls working in male-dominated spaces.

In 2024, we asked girls to respond to a fictional story^d that concerned a girl who wants to study farming techniques and is encouraging her female classmates to enter this field too. Responding to the story, Tan said:

“I think now that it's changed, women can do more like men, they can do more than men. Women now have many financially independent people who are not dependent. So, I think some of people think that way and some of people will think in old-fashioned way, not keeping up with the level of culture now. I think those guys think the old way and [the girl in the story] thinks positively. Self-change is ultimately about changing one's own life.”

Tan, age 17 (2024), Vietnam

Tan's poignant views on equality and women's financial autonomy were shared across the cohort, with girls across the countries resonating with the story. Alice, Annabelle and Isabelle in Benin and Dariana and Raisa in the Dominican Republic all shared similar views around girls and women being able to do anything.

For these girls, women can do anything a man can, as long as she is “courageous,” “brave and strong,” “determined” and thinking “positively” about “changing one's own life.” In 2021 and in 2024 we asked girls about their agreement with the following statement: “Boys should have more freedom than girls”.

! **In 2021, 59 per cent of girls disagreed with the idea that boys should have more freedom than girls, and by 2024, this jumped to 81.5 per cent.**

We also heard girls explain why they believed in equal freedoms. Many said that boys and girls should have the same rights, simply because “we're all equal” (Raisa, age 15, 2021, Dominican Republic).

While these views go against the grain by supporting equality of opportunity, they don't always reflect deeper questioning of local gender norms or recognition of the barriers girls still face in achieving true equality.

^d For the story in full and the accompanying questions, please see page 83 of the 2024 **Real Choices, Real Lives** Technical Report, ‘Out of Time: The Gendered Care Divide and its Impact on Girls’



'It depends how they're raised': Questioning Norms

Moving along the framework, we now turn to instances where girls are questioning norms. Girls challenged ideas about what boys and girls 'should' do, questioning whether differences are natural or learned.

Some started to question gendered norms around chores, freedom to move and socialise, and male violence, recognising that these behaviours may be socially rather than biologically determined. However, even when questioning these rules, the girls in these examples stopped short of calling them unfair.

! **Girls often questioned essentialist views of gender, whether explicitly, or implicitly through their behaviours.**

This could range from something as simple as not noticing, or openly disregarding, norms around childhood play. For example, in 2014, when asked which toys she likes the best, Christine in the Philippines answered dolls as well as trucks.

In some cases, the questioning was more overt. For example, in 2016, Ayomide in Togo noted that "boys are allowed to play football," and when asked how that made her feel, she said, "It makes me feel uncomfortable and I ask [my father] 'why do you forbid me to play football?'" It isn't clear from the interview transcript whether Ayomide was referring here to a male relative or teacher, or to the boys themselves, who may have excluded her.



Fathers take part in activity to challenge traditional male stereotypes about the role of fathers in the Dominican Republic © Plan International

However, it is clear from Ayomide's words that she had begun to question gendered rules around play, not just to herself, but also to the boy or man who was preventing her from playing. Similarly, Dariana (Dominican Republic) and Essohana's (Togo) respective reflections both indicate how they question the reasoning behind widespread parenting practices that allow boys greater freedom than girls:

“Because if they make a rule for one, they should make it for both. In other words, they shouldn't be given so much freedom just because they're boys, more freedom than a girl. Both pose risks.”

 **Dariana, age 18 (2024), Dominican Republic**

“Because it was not written anywhere that boys should be free.”

 **Essohana, age 18 (2024), Togo**

Unlike the girls who expressed general support for equal freedoms, Dariana and Essohana go a step further — they call out the injustice directly.

Some girls also questioned the supposed natural qualities of boys and girls. In particular, many of the girls questioned whether men and boys are naturally more violent.

“Men are more aggressive than women, mostly in the past, but now they are equal, boys still play with girls as usual, without violent or aggressive activities.”

 **Quynh, age 15 (2021), Vietnam**

Many girls expressed the view that gendered behaviours are taught rather than biological, stating that male violence “depends on how they are raised” (Bianca, age 15, 2021, Brazil), or “what they learn at home” (Rebeca, age 18, 2024, Dominican Republic) and “if they are taught to be [aggressive], then they will be” (Gabriela, age 17, 2024, Brazil).

“Because not all boys and men are aggressive towards women, because there are several men who do respect women and perhaps depending on how they have been brought up with values.”

 **Mariel, age 15 (2021), El Salvador**

We saw girls were going *against the grain* because they saw around them that “not all men are aggressive and violent” (Christine, age 18, 2024, Philippines). Quynh told us how her family dynamics diverge from this idea:

“I don't think it's true, for example, at home, Dad is quiet, but I'm more afraid of my mom because she is very serious. And my brother is gentle. He would take care of cleaning the house and even cooking well.”

 **Quynh, age 17 (2024), Vietnam**

By reflecting on the world around them, and seeing how, in reality, the people in their lives deviated from gender normative ideals, girls were questioning the gender essentialist norms they were taught.

While not openly challenging these norms, this represents an important first step in considering whether gender roles must remain as they are. For many girls, this reflection later led to more active forms of resistance.



Girl and her mother at their home in Cambodia © Plan International



'It shouldn't be like that': Attitudinal Resistance

We now move to girls' expressions of attitudinal resistance to gender norms, where we see girls express a strong dislike for, or sense of injustice at, gender roles.

A key characteristic in attitudinal resistance is, however, that they may not feel able to challenge gender norms in a more overt way, for instance, by voicing their views outside of a confidential interview or openly disobeying their caregivers.

❗ **Many girls were not only questioning the division of gender roles and expectations, but were recognising them to be unfair and in favour of boys. Girls particularly expressed a view that current arrangements around household chores were unfair.**

By 2017, Sylvia (Uganda) had noticed that girls do more chores at school than boys and thought this was unfair. Anti-Yara (Togo) similarly expressed frustration about the division of chores in 2019 and 2021, as did Ladi (Togo) in 2021 about her brothers: "they still carry out agricultural work and dislike housework, they say it's girls' work which annoys me." Throughout the years (2015 to 2019), Gabriela, Bianca and Camilla in Brazil all told us that it is unfair boys do fewer chores and spend more time playing than girls. In Camilla's case, her brother did less housework than her, and she said:

“Because [women] have to do it, it's their home, but when we ask them, they cry. Men don't do anything, just watch, I don't know if this is cool.”
Camilla, age 12 (2018), Brazil

Reflecting on this inequality, Camilla felt sad that boys can enjoy playing while she couldn't ("I feel sad, I just have to obey." (2018)).

A number of girls in Cambodia shared their frustrations about the division of chores. In 2016, aged ten, Nakry complained that "boys collect water while girls clean around the house because boys are lazy" (2016).

Sothany, also in 2016, thought it wasn't fair that boys were not helping their parents, like girls are expected to do: "I think it is not fair. I feel that it is very bad that boys don't help their parents. I realize that only a few boys help their parents" (age nine). At six years old, Darna in the Philippines told us about her anger about the way things were. Darna got angry when her brother played basketball instead of doing chores and disliked boys being rowdy and destroying girls' things at school (2012).

In 2021, 14-year-old Gladys in El Salvador reflected on how differently girls and boys were expected to act: "boys can go anywhere, but girls cannot, they have to be at home all the time." She thought it was unfair: "It seems strange because it shouldn't be like that, everyone should be treated equally" (2021). Jasmine, in the Philippines, also expressed attitudinal resistance as, like Gladys, she challenged gendered expectations around political participation, calling out the unfairness directly:

“It isn't fair that women don't seem to be involved in decision-making. Most of the leaders are men. It's not fair.”
Jasmine, age 18 (2024), Philippines

Some girls were even threatening to disobey their caregivers. Ly in Vietnam and Gabriela in El Salvador would threaten to disobey their caregivers as a means to resist the expectations they were held to. In 2015, Ly in Vietnam recognised the unfairness of gendered expectations:

“I feel tired and find it unfair. Girls must do more because girls are obedient, so they do more... Boys do not have to do housework. They just go to play.”
Ly, age 9 (2015), Vietnam

What makes her example striking is how her stance shifted over time. By 2016, aged ten, she told us she no longer cared what would happen if a girl ignored adults' advice - signalling a growing willingness to disobey and a change in resistance. On a few occasions over 2020, aged 14, Gabriela would tell her father that she was going to her grandmother or aunt's homes without asking permission. Her father noticed, saying, "Ah, I see that sometimes she wants to disobey me," yet Gabriela stopped short of actually leaving. This is a form of attitudinal resistance, even if Gabriela did not feel able to overtly disobey her father's rules for her behaviour.

With these insights, we can see that girls were regularly expressing a sense of injustice at gender roles and expectations, an important form of attitudinal resistance.

.....
These girls were not happy with the behaviours and roles expected of them, yet they did not feel able to voice these feelings openly nor did they feel that adults would take them seriously if they did.
.....



Young woman on her way to to work a plot of land in Uganda © Plan International



'The community should help girls': Articulated Resistance

! While 93% of girls supported the idea of speaking out for their basic rights, 87% of them didn't know any girls who had done so in their own community.

We use the term articulated resistance to describe when girls recognise gender roles to be unfair, and support the idea of girls disobeying them, or call for adults and authorities to do something about gender inequality, even if they themselves are not speaking out on this issues outside of the context of the interview. This is key: girls identifying adults' role in perpetuating gender inequality. This is a powerful form of girls' everyday resistance, as girls recognise that they alone should not be responsible for achieving gender equality.

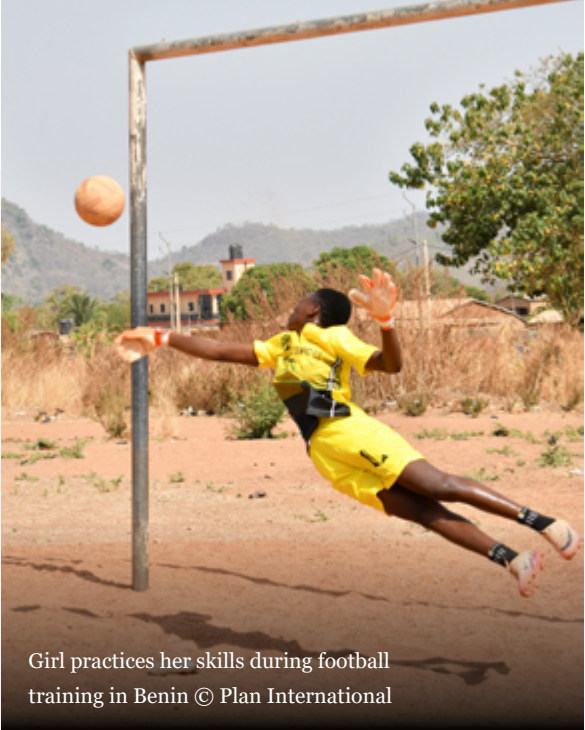
Some girls took their sense of injustice at the division of chores even further and began to articulate a need for chores to be more evenly distributed. Many of the girls initially accepted their roles within the house at a young age, however by the time they reached adolescence, they began to call for change. This was reflected by many of the girls from the Dominican Republic. For example, at age 13, Griselda said that "boys should have the same duties as girls! [...] "[they don't] because they're lazy" (2019). Dariana would like her brother to do more, "[its not right] because even though he is a boy, he also has to do chores" (2019). Nicol even made the link between the unequal division of chores between boys and girls, and men's lack of engagement in domestic labour: "because that's how they get used to it, when they grow up and get married and never do anything" (2019).

In the Philippines, Reyna described how, aged 12, some of the boys in her class tried to bully her into doing their chores for them. While she did not feel

able to stand up to them herself, she reported them to her teacher, placing the responsibility on the adult to address the inequality, an important form of articulated resistance. Although caregivers generally viewed men as heads of households and girls as incapable of making decisions, a small number of girls in the cohort were able to participate in family decision-making. For example, in 2023 at 17 years old, Sofia in Brazil would help to make decisions relating to food, education and how money is spent. When asked how she felt about this, she said "Normally, if they didn't ask for my opinion I would be very sad." Unsurprisingly, by the following year, she agreed that girls should be able to make decisions freely about their lives, and she told the interviewer that women's participation in community decision making was important, "because it's not only men who should [be there], you know?" (2024). Similarly, Nakry in Cambodia, aged 14, agreed that adults should listen to girls, because "girls have good opinions," and went on to say that "girls can make a decision on their own, have rights to life, to development and to freedom" (2021). Decision-making emerged as a strong theme of articulated resistance among the girls in the Philippines cohort.

.....
Several girls not only expressed support for girls' participation, but also a sense of injustice at their current exclusion from decision-making forums.
.....

When she was 13 years old, Kyla said in 2020 that adults should trust children more. In 2022, at 15, Reyna said that she would like to be a leader in future and participate in marches and political campaigns, but for this to happen, adults needed to support girls and "speak for us," by conveying girls' views to those in a position of power. At 15 years old, Bianca in Brazil rejected the idea that it was girls' responsibility to protect themselves,



Girl practices her skills during football training in Benin © Plan International

saying in 2021, "they shouldn't be alone, the community must help as well." By the following year, her critique had sharpened into a call for accountability. She named sexual and gender-based violence as the most urgent issue in her community, pointing to the constant fear girls live with in public space:

“It’s... the lack of safety that we... girls, women, have to face. When we go out on the street at night, we are afraid because we’re not sure of anything. There are a lot of bad people out there and we feel threatened, like... afraid of something happening, of... of a possible rape happening, or anything.”

! Bianca, age 16 (2022), Brazil

But, in the same interview, she explained "they don't teach [these issues] at school." When asked why, she replied, "It must be because they don't want us to know more about them, to know our rights." Bianca had started to identify not only adults' inaction, but also their silence, as factors in perpetuating violence against girls and women. A key form of resistance that emerged was girls' desire for greater control over their own bodies and knowledge about sexual and reproductive health. Few girls in the cohort had received comprehensive education on sex and sexuality.

83 per cent of girls at some point expressed a wish for more and better sex education

- ! This was another area where girls identified some of the factors that were creating gender inequalities and also identified what adults could do to address them. Yet, very few caregivers discussed the topic openly with their daughters.
- ! Caregivers consistently expressed discomfort or disapproval at discussing the topic with their daughters. Many feared that talking about it would encourage girls to become sexually active or felt that the topic should be handled by schools or religious institutions instead. When conversations did happen, they were usually vague or framed as warnings rather than explanations - focusing on what *not* to do rather than teaching girls about their bodies.
- ! Girls, by contrast, wanted to be better informed about their bodies, with a focus on managing menstruation and preventing pregnancy. For example, while Alice's father in Benin said that Alice received all the information she needed about sexuality from sermons at church, Alice herself said (age 17), "I'd like us to set up a group in my community called the 'girls' club' to learn about good practices for avoiding pregnancy" (both in 2024).

While articulated resistance was the most prevalent form of resistance, these instances were again not necessarily views that girls felt able to share outside of a one-to-one interview, and these girls were not all openly challenging norms around these topics.



'I would kill her if she had a boyfriend': Secret Resistance

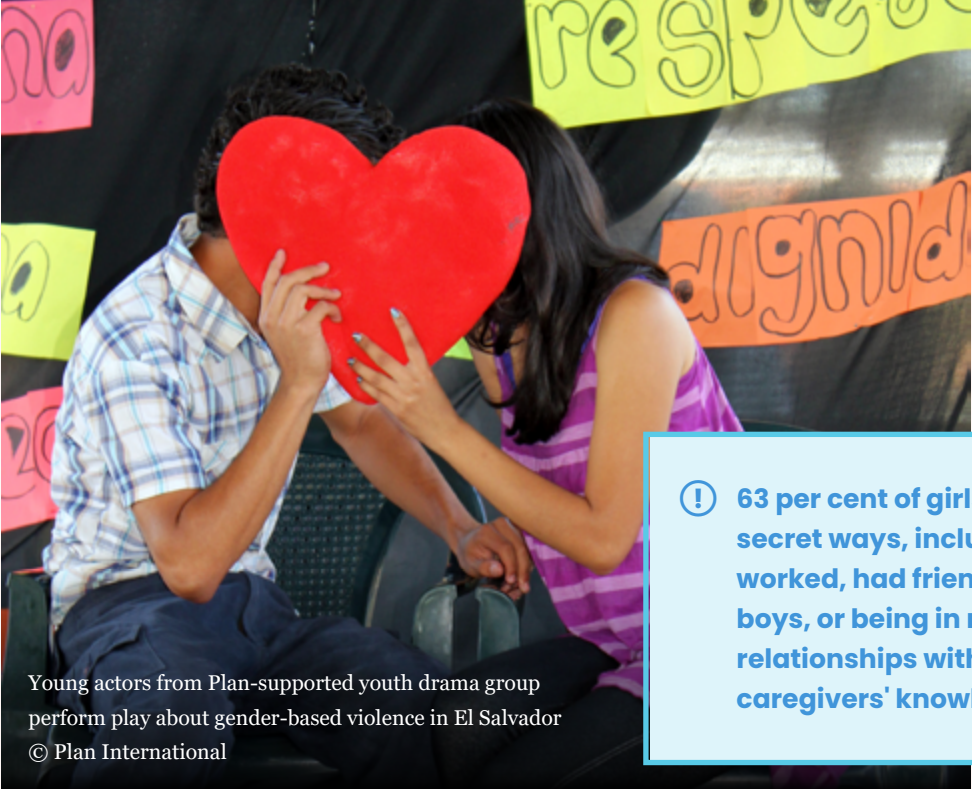
As they grew up, many girls secretly resisted gender inequalities or subverted the behaviours expected of girls. We distinguish 'secret resistance' from 'overt behavioural resistance' because in many cases, caregivers or teachers are not aware that the girl is resisting. While the girl may strategically gain a little more freedom for herself this way, if her resistance goes unnoticed, it may do less to challenge gender norms in her community than overt behavioural resistance might.

Many of the examples below nevertheless show great bravery and creativity and provide fascinating examples of how girls would sometimes refuse to take up the roles expected of them.

.....
Some girls secretly rebelled under the guise of doing an expected task.
.....

Christina in the Philippines, at the age of 14, told the interviewer that she enjoyed cooking, because "when we're cooking, I'm not able to do other chores" (2020). When asked which chores she was keen to avoid, she replied, "when I need to take care of my brother." In some cases, girls even lied about needing to do other chores in order to get out of something they did not want to do. In Togo, when asked what she would do if her parents asked her to do something she did not want to, 11-year-old Azia replied, "I wouldn't do it because I would lie and say I was ill" (2018).

A number of caregivers expressed concerns about, or a strong dislike of, their daughters earning money and they shared a variety of reasons: the negative impact on their schoolwork, a preference for girls to do domestic work, or for fear that getting a job would expose the girl to sexual violence.



Young actors from Plan-supported youth drama group perform play about gender-based violence in El Salvador
© Plan International

! **63 per cent of girls resisted in secret ways, including having worked, had friendships with boys, or being in romantic relationships without their caregivers' knowledge.**

However, many girls found forms of work regardless, with one in eight girls (13 per cent) earning money without their caregivers' knowledge. This emerged as a particularly strong finding in Benin and Uganda, where a total of nine out of 23 girls were engaged in earning money at some point in their adolescence without their parents' knowledge.

The girls who secretly worked told us they enjoyed being able to earn extra money and gain new skills. This quiet defiance extended beyond work - many girls also resisted social restrictions, particularly around friendships with boys. At least 38 per cent of girls had a secret friendship with a boy at some point during her childhood or adolescence, be it playing together in the early years or socialising in adolescence.

Many parents in the cohort began to worry about mixed-sex friendships as the girls approached adolescence, whereas Reaksmey's father in Cambodia forbade them from a very young age. In 2011, when Reaksmey was only five, he said, "it is not right that a girl playing as a boy and the same as boy playing as a girl," and the following year her mother echoed this, insisting that "girls should not play football as it is the boy's game and boys should not play the dolls."

However, in 2014, Reaksmey described a boy named Uy as her closest friend, quietly defying the rules laid out for her. Such secret friendships represent a quiet form of resistance, since most caregivers either forbid girls from spending time with boys or strongly disapprove of mixed-sex friendships.

We have identified 24 girls^e - from all countries excluding Togo - in the cohort who at some point during the study had a secret relationship or crush. Secret relationships emerged as a stronger theme in Dominican Republic and El Salvador, where the interview data suggest 11 out of a total of 24 girls had secret boyfriends during their adolescence. Raquel in El Salvador described her relationship with a boy in very positive terms. She described her boyfriend and relationship in 2024:

“The truth is that he came at a time when I was sad and he really helped me with a lot of things, I felt free to tell him everything that happens to me and so on [...] The truth is that he has made me feel very sure of myself and many other things.”

Raquel, age 18 (2024), El Salvador

^e This could be an underestimate. Girls were not specifically asked about secret relationships, and we have had to deduce this by contrasting girls' and caregivers' responses.

Young couple hold hands in Brazil © Plan International / Rafael Gardini

These relationships can be a positive and formative experience for the girls. However, in the context of a lack of information and healthcare surrounding sex and relationships, this had lifelong consequences for many of the girls.

For example, in 2020, Griselda's father in Dominican Republic suspected that his daughter had a secret boyfriend, and by 2021, at the age of 15, Griselda had a baby and had moved in with her 22-year-old partner. So while the girls might be resisting unfair and gendered restrictions on their behaviour, it is important to note that their secret relationships also exposed them to many risks, including sexual relationships with much older men, a form of statutory rape.

One significant risk is the repercussions for the girl if her parents find out. While the girls discussed above experienced their parents removing, or even destroying, the devices they used to communicate with boys, in many cases the threatened consequences may be more severe.

It is perhaps unsurprising that Ly in Vietnam was not among those girls with a secret boyfriend, given her mother stated in 2019, "I said to her that I would kill her if she had a boyfriend." Girls showed a strong amount of agency and resistance in having a secret relationship in the face of conservative rules on their behaviour and sexuality.

Yet, as the girls were seeking to gain a bit more independence and freedom, we should recognise that they were exposed to serious risks in doing so: punishment from caregivers in the form of property damage, technology restrictions and even physical violence and health risks from early unions, including unplanned pregnancies.

! In the face of these findings, we highlight the need for girls to grow up in environments where they can safely challenge norms with support from adults.



Girl who is a youth leader in her community in the Philippines © Plan International



'I have a girlfriend': Overt Behavioural Resistance

Over the course of the study 47 per cent of girls overtly disobeyed expected behaviours or refused to take on the roles that girls are supposed to in their communities. While many of these forms of resistance are small-scale, and none of the girls discussed being involved in more formal forms of activism, they show that many of the girls were strongly resisting gender norms on an everyday basis.

There were a variety of ways that girls engaged in overt behavioural resistance, including in situations that may be unsafe: behaving or dressing how they wanted to; defending themselves from bullying, violence, and unwanted male attention; refusing to do chores; and taking control of their finances by saving money.

Ten of the girls, or their caregivers, made reference at some point to the girl behaving or dressing like a boy. In many cases, this emerged in the context of a caregiver complaining that they were unable to persuade their daughter to wear more feminine clothes. In the Philippines, five out of 14 girls are described at some point as dressing or behaving like boys, despite frequent homophobic and conservative views expressed

by parents about children's play and clothing. For example, in 2011, Mahalia's father agreed that it would be ridiculous for boys to play with dolls, stating, "That cannot be with my boys because they will become gays." In 2013, Mahalia's mother told the interviewer she was now happy with Mahalia's teachers, "unlike before," because "their teachers used to be gays." In this context, Mahalia said in 2017 that girls needed to be pretty, "fair-skinned" and "have long hair." However, by 2020, Mahalia's mother said, "I don't know with Mahalia because she seems like a tomboy^f [...] Because she behaves like a boy." When asked how, she replied that Mahalia sometimes "would do the task that's intended for a boy," such as "fetch water, carry something heavy," and also that Mahalia would not wear dresses.

By 2024, at the age of 17, Mahalia told the interviewer, "I have a girlfriend now [smiling]" and when asked how this made her feel, she replied several times "happy," and described her girlfriend as an "inspiration." In the same year, while Mahalia's mother seemed to express some discomfort that "they are both women," she also said, "If her girlfriend makes her happy, if she's really happy with that, we just let it go." Mahalia is one of just two girls in the cohort who were openly dating a girl during the study, both were in the

^f In the Philippines, the term "tomboy" is frequently used as slang for a lesbian.



Girl makes heart sign with her hands in Uganda
© Plan International



Girls play football training in Benin © Plan International

Philippines. Despite growing up in a household where dressing or playing games associated with the opposite sex was strongly disapproved of, she gradually questioned whether she needed to conform to this over the course of childhood and adolescence, eventually finding happiness both in terms of expressing her own gender identity, and in a relationship with another girl.

In many contexts, girls continued to play sports typically associated with boys, even if they did not explicitly describe this as 'acting like a boy'. As well as the girls in Brazil, Vietnam and the

Philippines discussed above, a number of girls in Benin, Uganda, Togo, Cambodia and El Salvador continued to play football, despite frequent perceptions that it is a boys' game. For example, despite several girls in Togo saying that it was forbidden for girls to play football, several of the girls did play at various points in their childhood, including Fezire, who was described as playing football in 2019 (age 13) with her younger brothers, and in 2021 (age 15), reacted to a fictional story about a girl asking for a safe space to play football by saying, "It's a good story, it's good that girls want to play football."

We found evidence that some girls actively resisted bullying and harassment from boys by physically defending themselves.

This form of physical resistance, though relatively uncommon, highlights how some girls actively push back against the power dynamics that make them targets of teasing or aggression. We saw this theme emerge most strongly among girls in Vietnam and the Philippines. In Vietnam, six of the nine girls were described as hitting boys at some point in the study. It is perhaps unsurprising that these two countries were also where girls were most likely to be questioning their gender expression, dressing or behaving like boys, suggesting that despite parents' sometimes conservative and homophobic views, girls there felt most able to behave in unexpected ways.

We also found responses about physical resistance in the Dominican Republic too, where Leyla's aunt told the interviewer in 2016 that Leyla would hit any boy who touched her, and Katerin's mother stating in the same year, "If anyone touches Katerin, she will break one of his eyes!".

While these examples show girls using physical means to resist unwanted behaviour, other girls challenged gender expectations in more subtle ways within their home.



15 per cent of girls, at some point in their lives, either questioned the division of chores or openly refused to do their chores. In Uganda, several of the girls supported the idea of not always doing

what they were told by their parents, especially if they felt the required chores were unfair. While several parents referenced their daughters being lazy about chores as they got older, the most overt

form of resistance came from Amelia, who stated aged 17 in 2023 when asked if she had undertaken any paid work that year, "No but just that my brothers usually ask me to do laundry for them yet I am busy. So, if any of them wants to engage me, they must pay for my service [laughs]".

Beyond the home, some girls also pushed against restrictions on women's economic participation, finding ways not only to earn money, but also to save money for themselves. This was only possible for some girls, as many girls' communities very strongly prohibited women being involved in financial activities. In 2021, Ladi in Togo explained that she and some friends had even set up a savings group together, although interestingly, all the other friends were male:

“I have school friends who are boys; we play and study together and also have formed a savings group together.”
Ladi, age 15 (2021), Togo

Similarly, Alice in Benin in 2021 told the interviewer she and some friends had set up a savings association together:

“I give the money [from her earnings] to my mother to look after and I use some to pay for my breakfast rice and the rest I pay into a savings club we have at school. I save 50F per day. I do it with my friends. [...] When we first created the savings club we decided to take it in turns to collect the money.”
Alice, age 14 (2021), Benin

Interestingly, in 2023, Alice's father was unaware that she was earning money. Yet this quote from 2021 would suggest that Alice had already been earning for at least two years and managing to save some of her profits, in full knowledge of her mother, who also benefited from the earnings.

While participating in an established community or school savings group may not seem like a radical act of resistance, we see it as an overt form of resistance to gender norms, in that some of the girls were managing to take control of money and choose for themselves how they use it, where for many girls such a choice would not be possible. In some contexts, savings associations were provided for the girls by banks and local NGOs. For Uyen, in Vietnam, the support of a cousin and the ability to open a bank account were crucial in enabling her to at least take some control going through a lot of financial difficulty following her grandmother's passing. She was able to save a small amount of money to support the costs of her education. More broadly, nearly half (47 per cent) of the cohort girls were openly disobeying gender norms in some way.

Few of them had access to formal groups or organisations for girls, although some expressed a desire to. For example, Rosamie wanted an organisation for girls to discuss politics; Alice wanted a club to discuss SRHR; and Sheila wished she could participate in a savings association if she had an income. For those that did have access to a savings association, this was described as an important form of support.

However, for the most part, while these girls showed great agency, they frequently lacked the resources and supportive environment needed to achieve significant change.

"A girl can play ball just like a boy": Juliana in Brazil

Having explored the range of different types of resistance girls are involved in, the following section looks in-depth at one case study of a girl who managed to change her caregivers' views and gain the freedom to keep playing the sport she loved. This helps us to understand the resources and support she needed to resist.

In many countries, women playing football was - and to some extent still is - seen as going against gender norms.⁴⁹ In 1941, Brazil banned women playing football, joining countries like England and France, because it was thought to be unnatural for women and harmful to women's health, affecting their ability to have children. The ban lasted until 1979.⁵⁰

Today, the Brazilian women's national football team has become recognised as one of the best in the world.⁹ Yet, Brazilian female footballers still endure gender bias and prejudice when playing at recreational and competitive levels.⁵¹

Juliana grew up in an urban area in the north-eastern state of Maranhão in Brazil and she was raised by her maternal grandparents from a young age. Growing up, Juliana would often challenge the gender norms and beliefs of her grandparents, who held more traditional views and expectations. The topic of girls playing football, specifically Juliana playing football, was the key topic in which their beliefs around girls' behaviours often conflicted.

When Juliana was 4 years old, her grandfather explained:

“It is not normal [for girls to play football]. Girls have to practice sports which are more adequate for them.”

Juliana's grandfather, 2011, Brazil

From a young age, Juliana's love of playing football became a way for her to question the expectations placed on girls and boys.

Juliana's grandmother had a rule that Juliana couldn't play with boys, but Juliana liked playing football with her brother and with her neighbour and she recognised that girls like playing ball games as boys do.

“She [Juliana's grandmother] says I shouldn't be around boys. And when they come to play with us, I'm supposed to quit playing.”

Juliana, age 11 (2018), Brazil

Despite her grandmother's disapproval, Juliana continued to play with boys – and continued to play football. In 2019, we asked Juliana for her response to a fictional story about a girl who wished to play football with boys but was punished (sometimes physically) by her parents for doing so.

Juliana called the fictional girl's parents “a bit sexist” and said that the girl should defy her parents and continue to pursue her dream of playing football. We learnt that Juliana also faced backlash from her friends about her passion for football, which she defiantly pushed back against.

“[My school friends] make fun of me, they say I'm a tomboy, that I'm always playing ball, with the boys... then I tell them that this is sexist, because a girl can play ball just like a boy.”

Juliana, age 12 (2019), Brazil

Boys would stop Juliana from playing football too “because it was a boy thing” (2021), but the boys had since included her in games. While Juliana was going through a difficult period at the age of 17, her love of football provided her only joy. Juliana's grandmother recognised the benefit of the sport for Juliana's wellbeing. She then started to support and encourage Juliana to make time to play football and said that it was “something I won't take away from her.” And so, Juliana's grandmother had done a complete 180-degree shift from her earlier attitude, illustrating how girls going against the grain of gender norms can influence the attitudes and beliefs of their caregivers.



Juliana's story

Juliana's story shows incredible bravery and exemplifies how her agency to question unfair gender rules increased as she got older. There are a number of possible enabling factors that made it possible for her to actually achieve change in her grandparents' attitudes and keep playing.

- ❗ **Changing norms and attitudes in Brazil:** with more and more people starting to take an interest in the country's very successful women's football team. Though the laws changed before Juliana was born, it took a while for social norms to catch up, as we can see from Juliana's grandparents' early views.
- ❗ **Juliana had access to a facility where she was able to play:** while Juliana clearly experienced resistance from friends and her grandparents for this choice, there was a pitch where she was able to go and play, and she was not outright forbidden from going there.
- ❗ **Her grandparents' openness to reconsidering their views in recognition of the importance of sport for her health and mental wellbeing:** above all, Juliana's grandmother prioritised her granddaughter's wellbeing over gender norms.

⁹ The Brazilian women's national football team has ranked in the FIFA top 10 in 9 out of the last 10 years <https://inside.fifa.com/fifa-world-ranking/BRA?gender=women>

Supporting girls' everyday resistance

So what do these stories about the ways that girls are challenging gender norms teach us about how we can best support their everyday resistance?



Understanding the risks girls are taking

Throughout their stories, it is clear that many girls are enacting their agency through their different forms of resistance. Yet it is also clear that some are taking significant risks in doing so.

We have seen that girls who were in secret relationships did so with limited sexuality education or access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, leading to unplanned early pregnancies. Other girls told us the backlash they have faced or potentially could face if found out: they may face violence from caregivers, destruction of property, and exclusion from the family home. We also heard of the violent punishments that girls received if they did not do chores, or deviated in other ways from the behaviour

expected of them. It is critical that we do not lean into 'girl-power' messages at the expense of girls' safety. When international development overly celebrates girls' resistance without recognising the potential harms they could experience, there is a danger that girls will be encouraged to engage in risky behaviours. In addition to this, around the world we are seeing increased hostility towards gender equality and towards girls and women's rights; we are also witnessing the space for girls to formally participate shrinking.

For many girls around the world, it can be dangerous to be engaged in activism or to overtly go against the grain.

Supportive adults

Girls are seeking change, but they face a number of challenges in doing so. Girls are recognising that the responsibility is not theirs alone, but that their resistance depends on supportive adults, access to resources, and safe spaces. We have found that strict gender norms imposed by caregivers and adults in the community limit girls' agency. The

majority of caregivers still hold essentialist views that see certain roles as 'naturally' belonging to men or women. This often involves associating women with the domestic sphere and men with breadwinning and decision making. Many caregivers are oblivious to the ways these views contradict and undermine their support for equal opportunities for their daughters.

Karen's story

Karen in El Salvador continuously played football throughout her adolescence. In 2019, when aged 12, she told the interviewer she played football despite "my friends [telling] me I am a boy, because I play football." By 2024, at 17 years old, she was still playing weekly: "Yes, I like it too, because my dad likes it, I inherited it from him." Karen has clearly been encouraged and supported by her father, which has allowed her to continue enjoying playing football.

It is the responsibility of supportive adults, using positive parenting practices, to listen to and encourage girls' voices.

Access to resources and safe spaces

Girls are resisting gender norms in challenging environments marked by poverty and a lack of infrastructure like quality, accessible education, health care access, or financial support.

We can see from girls' stories that access to resources and safe spaces are key ingredients to support girls' agency to resist. For example, at 16 years old, Alice in Benin had a paid job without her father's knowledge: "I collected sand on the road and sold it. I used to sell a basin for 150 FCFA in the

dry season and 100 FCFA in the rainy season. They use this sand for construction" (2023). When asked who decided she would do this work, she said, "I decided to do this job to earn money," and then "I take this money to buy my clothes and shoes." This story is a testament to the fact that Alice is able to freely access her trade work, that she has the educational background to manage her earnings, and Alice's own tenacity. We've also learnt from girls that the support of collectives, groups, and clubs are beneficial for their ability to resist too.

Experts in their own lives

We have learnt that, on a daily basis, girls are already standing up against the gender norms and views that leave them time poor, with restricted freedoms, and unable to enjoy learning and playing safely on their terms. By listening to girls, we seek to support girls to further question and refuse the behaviour that is expected of them, but in ways they feel safe to do so. Girls are experts in their own lives, and we appreciate that girls can define for themselves what actions are or are not safe for them.

Plan International advocates for girls to be equipped to identify inequalities and to move towards seeking greater freedom. We are responsible for enabling the environment around them - by influencing families and communities, to legal frameworks, and education - to expand what is safe for girls to drive change at all levels.

Forms of support identified in this research include:

- ➔ Groups, clubs and savings associations for girls;
- ➔ Community level awareness raising about gender inequalities and about girls' rights;
- ➔ Promotion of positive parenting of both boys and girls;
- ➔ Strong legislative frameworks in support of girls' equal participation in communities alongside legislation banning corporal punishment and the use of conversion therapies;
- ➔ Initiatives aimed at reducing the unpaid care load of families, including improved access to key infrastructure and time saving devices;
- ➔ And safe community facilities for girls to exercise and play.

In practice, this means placing responsibility on adults to create spaces where girls can talk about the changes they want to see, and ensuring there are mechanisms for trusted adults to communicate these discussions to decision makers and ensure they are acted upon.

Conclusion: Everyday girls driving change

Girls question, resist, and seek change in creative and courageous ways. And there is a clear strong desire from girls around the world to change the status quo.

The majority of girls themselves express egalitarian views, particularly in relation to access to education; aspiring to have careers (even if their career choices are frequently gendered); equal freedom and mobility; and women's economic empowerment.

- ➔ At least 80 per cent believe in equal freedoms for girls and boys
- ➔ 99 per cent of girls believe girls and boys should have equal access for education



Girls are questioning norms around gender and recognising gender differences to be the result of social factors and expectations. Some girls are going as far as to describe them as unfair and feeling anger at the injustice of restrictions on girls' mobility and friendships or being given more chores than boys.

Yet, girls feel they can only go so far in acting on or openly sharing these views.



Most strikingly, many girls are resisting gender norms in secret or subversive ways. While almost half of girls are openly resisting, 63 per cent of girls are resisting through actions that their caregivers are not aware of, indicating that girls need more support to resist in ways that drive change beyond themselves.

- ➔ One in eight girls in the cohort is earning money without her caregivers' knowledge.
- ➔ At least 38 per cent of girls has a secret friendship with a boy at some point during her childhood or adolescence.
- ➔ 24 girls kept relationships secret from their caregivers.



Girls are tenacious in seeking out ways to exercise their freedoms and independence in otherwise restrictive households and communities; potentially putting themselves in harm's way to get those freedoms. But when resistance is forced underground, progress stalls. Gender equality cannot be achieved in the shadows.



Around the world, some girls are able to challenge what is expected of them in more obvious ways too.

Nearly half of the girls engaged in a form of overt resistance to gender norms including

- ➔ Behaving or dressing in ways they were not expected to;
- ➔ Defending themselves from bullying and violence;
- ➔ Refusing to do chores;
- ➔ And taking control of their finances by saving money.



- ❗ **We want to support girls at any and all levels of resistance they are comfortable with – and to ensure they are doing so safely.**
- ❗ **We can see the role of caregivers, safe environments, and access to resources as key to ensuring girls can continue standing up for themselves and asking for change for girls.**
- ❗ **Ultimately, girls need more support from adults, communities, organisations and their governments to safely exercise their agency and challenge the everyday ways that gender inequalities hinder girls globally.**



Recommendations



❗ **Establish, strengthen and enforce legislative and policy frameworks** that enshrine gender equality in law; ban corporal punishment and conversion therapies; remove discriminatory legal norms which prevent girls from accessing their rights; and ensure an open safe civic space where all people have the right to freedom of expression and association of assembly.

❗ **Fund and implement education that helps break down gender barriers and promotes inclusion**, including programmes that strengthen equality of opportunity, such as on higher education, career pathways and financial literacy.

❗ **Invest in and create safe, community-based programmes and initiatives** that support girl's empowerment, leadership and rights awareness, and finance forums for girls to freely discuss issues affecting them, with mechanisms to feed those views into local and regional decision-making.

❗ **Support equality through investment and partnership**, reducing the burden of unpaid care work via essential infrastructure and incentives for employers; and support, resource, and partner with civil society, NGOs, local authorities and community leaders on promoting awareness of gender equality.



❗ **Provide awareness raising and positive parenting workshops** for parents, caregivers, men, boys and community leaders, to challenge behaviours and views that reinforce gender norms; seek to change norms around physical punishment and the 'naturalness' of male violence; and promote positive role models and champion successful cases to both girls and boys.

❗ **Advance educational and skills development opportunities** for girls, providing training on how current gender roles prevent them from accessing opportunities that should be available to them; financial literacy; workers' rights and workplace sexual harassment; SRHR education on reducing the risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections; and employment and vocational skills.

❗ **Establish and strengthen safe and inclusive clubs, groups and networks for girls' participation**, including savings associations, consultations and councils where girls can safely discuss gender inequality and what they need to achieve change; supporting girls to form their own organisations; and informal (online) groups where girls can connect and share their experiences of resistance, with education on collective action.

❗ **Amplify girls' voices and celebrate diverse forms of resistance** through facilitating forums that feed girls' views to local, regional and national decision-makers, fund girls' groups as equal partners, and celebrate a wide variety of forms of resistance to gender inequality in their campaign and awareness-raising materials.



❗ **Support and facilitate girl-led and community initiatives**, including girls' sports and savings groups, and girl-led actions and concerns should be carefully visibilised at the local level.

❗ **Establish meaningful consultation and participation mechanisms**, involving girls in local decision-making through consultations, advisory panels, listening sessions, youth representation; and safe spaces where girls can collectively talk about topics that are troubling them, and establish mechanisms to feed these views into decision-making.

❗ **Reduce gender inequalities through inclusive infrastructure and support**, broadening access to social assistance, reducing unpaid care burdens, and ensuring a gender focus is integrated throughout all their operations.

❗ **Ensure girls' safety and access to services**, providing safe facilities, information on online safety, gender-sensitive services, and strong measures to address GBV.



❗ **Establish safe clubs and spaces for girls**, where girls can discuss topics important to them, discuss positive role models and leadership, and imagine and articulate the futures they want.

❗ **Promote gender equality through inclusive activities and education**, ensuring safe and respectful mixed gender activities such as sports, play and toys; reducing girls' school burdens; engaging boys to challenge GBV and as champions of girls' empowerment; embedding feminist leadership, activism and soft skills into the curriculum; and providing a comprehensive sexuality education.

❗ **Ensure participation and access for all girls**, through supporting girls' representation in school leadership positions, and extending education and skill-building opportunities to marginalised and hard-to-reach girls.

❗ **Embed age- and gender sensitivity across their policies, staff training, and curriculums** to ensure that teachers and the governing body are equipped to lead on gender empowerment and implement special measures to realise gender equality across the school community.



Girl leads activity at youth club in her community in Cambodia © Plan International

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Until we are all equal

About Plan International

Plan International is an independent development and humanitarian organization that advances children's rights and equality for girls. We believe in the power and potential of every child but know this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it is girls who are most affected.

Working together with children, young people, supporters and partners, we strive for a just world, tackling the root causes of the challenges girls and vulnerable children face. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood and we enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 85 years, we have rallied other determined optimists to transform the lives of all children in more than 80 countries.

We won't stop until we are all equal.



About Cardiff University

Cardiff University is one of Britain's leading teaching and research universities. The University's School of Law and Politics works to educate, create and use knowledge to change people's lives for the better today and for future generations.

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