

8 Point Action Plan: Educate, Campaign, Legislate

- 1 Start young – pre-school education should promote equality between girls and boys and involve parents
- 2 Transform school curricula to challenge stereotypes and acknowledge difference
- 3 Support girls' and boys' participation in the creation of policies to improve sex education
 - 4 Make schools safe for girls and boys
- 5 Launch campaigns that challenge discrimination and engage men and boys
- 6 Pass laws that enable both parents to take an active part in raising their children
 - 7 Enforce legislation to end violence against women and girls
 - 8 Legislate for equal opportunities

Success story: Program H

"...I learned to talk more with my girlfriend. Now I worry more about her... it's important to know what the other person wants, listen to them. Before [the workshops], I just worried about myself."
Young man, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil³¹

Program H supports young men aged 15 to 24 to help them engage and reflect on traditional norms of 'manhood' in a safe space. It uses a wide range of media, campaigns, and youth-friendly education materials and has an innovative evaluation model. Program H makes it 'cool' to be a young man who believes in and practises gender equality. After participating in Program H activities, young men have reported a number of positive changes, from higher rates of condom use and improved relationships with friends and sexual partners, to greater acceptance of domestic work as men's responsibility, and lower rates of sexual harassment and violence against women. Girlfriends of Program H young men have also said that they feel the quality of their relationships has improved.³² The numbers of those justifying violence against a partner in India declined from 25 to 18 per cent, and in Mare, Brazil, the percentage of young men seeing their female counterparts as equal to them increased from 48 to 68 per cent.³³

"We all suffer when women and girls are abused and their needs are neglected. By denying them security and opportunity we embed unfairness in our societies and fail to make the most of the talents of half the population. In too many countries we talk about democracy and deny the rights of women and girls... I call on all men and boys to throw their weight behind the campaign for equality."

President Cardoso
Former President of Brazil and a member of The Elders



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PHOTOGRAPH: LEO DRUMOND

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Because I am a Girl

THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S GIRLS 2011

So, what about boys?



Plan

'Because I am Girl' is an annual report published by Plan which assesses the current state of the world's girls. While women and children are recognised in policy and planning, girls' particular needs and rights are often ignored. These reports provide evidence, including the voices of girls themselves, as to why they need to be treated differently from boys and from adult women. The reports also use information from a small primary research study set up in 2006 to follow the lives of 142 girls from nine different countries from birth until they are nine years old. Previous reports include girls "In the Shadow of War", "Girls in the Global Economy" and "Girls in a Changing Landscape" which looked at new opportunities in cities and ICTs. They include recommendations for action, showing policymakers and planners what can make a real difference to girls' lives all over the world. Plan is an international development agency working with children and their communities, in 48 countries worldwide, for over 70 years.

So, what about boys?

"Being a girl, I know that most boys don't understand how crucial the problems affecting girls are. Those who do understand, don't realise that they have the power to do something... gender equality, social injustice and reproductive and sexual health are boys' and men's issues too. That's why it is vital to look at how boys and young men can empower girls."

Maneesa, 14, Canada¹

"I think getting young men and boys to empower girls is a good idea... No one, male or female, should ever be discriminated against, left out of school, be in poverty, or treated poorly by the rest of the human race."

Daniel, 15, Canada²



¹ Maneesa is the youth representative on the Advisory Panel for the 2011 'Because I am a Girl' Report. ² Daniel, aged 15, Canada. In correspondence with Maneesa, youth representative on the Advisory Panel for the 2011 'Because I am a Girl' Report.

This year's report is the fifth in the 'Because I am a Girl' series. From the very first, in 2007, when we began monitoring the State of the World's Girls, we have been asked: "What about boys?" Boys too are affected by poverty, discrimination and lack of opportunity in many parts of the world.

We have, of course, focused on girls in the interests of equality. In too many societies girls still face the double discrimination of being young and being female. They are pulled out of school, married early, and are more likely to be subject to violence. This is not only unjust; it is also short-sighted. The 500 million adolescent girls and young women in developing countries are potentially a major force in driving economic progress. Equality of opportunity in health, education and in the workforce will enable girls to become active citizens; contributing powerfully, as mothers and teachers, as civic and business leaders, to their families and communities.

But the challenge of gender equality cannot be tackled by girls and women alone – which brings us back to boys and men. Fathers, husbands, brothers and boyfriends all have their part to play, and this year's report will demonstrate how and why men and boys can, and should, contribute to creating a more equal society.

It presents clear evidence that:

- Gender equality is good for boys too
- Fathers who care promote their own happiness and that of their sons and daughters
- To bring about change we need to start at the beginning with the family and the school. Education at all ages and stages is key.

Why should boys and young men care about gender equality?

1 Girls' and women's rights are human rights. If men and boys believe in justice and fairness, they will be able to see that their mothers, sisters and girlfriends are often not treated the same way as they are, do not enjoy the same level of respect in the community, and do not have the same opportunities to make choices about their lives.

2 Greater gender equality will help boys to succeed in school, to be comfortable with their own identity, to be confident in expressing emotions and to be equipped with the skills to build positive relationships of mutual trust and respect.

3 Gender equality has often meant more freedom for girls and women to define themselves in new ways, but little corresponding change for boys and men. A new perspective on gender is about a more productive way of viewing power relationships to the benefit of both sexes.

Key research findings

For this year's report Plan commissioned primary research with 12 to 18 year olds in several different countries, including the UK, Rwanda and India. There are variations from country to country but the overarching conclusion must be that our families and schools are handing gender inequality, and violence against girls, down through the generations.

- 65 per cent of participants from India and Rwanda totally or partially agreed with the statement 'A woman should tolerate violence in order to keep her family together'. A further 43 per cent agreed with the statement: 'There are times when a woman deserves to be beaten.'
- 'Changing diapers, giving kids a bath and feeding kids are the mother's responsibility.' 67 per cent of boys and 71 per cent of girls in Rwanda agreed, as did 83 per cent of boys and 87 per cent of girls in India.
- Our survey showed, however, that children are actually happier when they see their parents sharing household responsibilities (eg when dads cook and do the laundry, both parents make decisions and when their mums spend their time in and out of home).
- Over 60 per cent of children interviewed in India for this report agreed that 'if resources are scarce it is better to educate a boy instead of a girl'.

Gender equality is good for boys too

Men in power, both at an institutional and family level, can help change girls' lives. But some of the men we interviewed for this year's report were concerned that they and their sons might lose out if gender equality were to be realised. As the father of one of the girls in our cohort study said: "These days, there are fewer opportunities for men, because women are better prepared, they are studying more... Women are learning that they have equal rights and there are few spaces left for men." However, another father observed: "Now there are better relationships. There is more unity, more togetherness and better communication, they get on better now. Before, there was more brutality, more chauvinism." Another interviewee told us: "It is great if a country understands the true value of a woman. It will help the development of the country."

The experience of 16 year-old Nixon Odoyo from Kenya is illuminating. His father left home and his mother, who had never been to school, struggled to provide for her children. Nixon then watched his sister, married at 15 and forced to drop out of school, repeat her mother's struggle. His childhood experiences have turned him into a campaigner for girls' education.

Pascal Akimana, aged 27, from Burundi was brought up in a very violent home and, powerless to intervene, watched his father abuse his mother. He, like Nixon, has become a campaigner, working with men and boys to address men's violence against women and children. He too knows from personal experience that everyone stands to gain – men, women and children – from gender equality.

One of the most destructive aspects of inequality between the sexes – the belief that girls and women are somehow inferior – fuels male violence towards them. So too does the notion that 'real men' are tough and hard and that the only appropriate emotion for them to display is anger. This does not just harm women and girls, it also damages men and boys. Concepts of 'traditional' masculinities force them to behave in ways that make them uncomfortable. They may not dare to express their emotions, or they may experience violence themselves and then take it out on others.

Counting the cost

- In countries of the North and in Latin America and Caribbean, boys are now dropping out of school at a faster rate than girls. They are also doing less well academically. For example, in the US, the average grade-point average in high school is 3.09 for girls and 2.86 for boys.³
- Young men have [among] the highest rates of death by traffic accidents, suicide and violence, all of which are related to the way that they are socialised to be men.⁴ In Jamaica, Brazil, Colombia and some parts of sub-Saharan Africa, more young men die in these ways than in countries at war.
- In Western Europe, these external causes make up more than 60 per cent of mortality among boys and young men up to the age of 24.⁵
- The World Health Organisation estimates that in the Americas the risk of dying from homicide if you are a young man between the ages of 15 and 29 is almost 28 times greater than the average risk worldwide.⁶
- In Brazil, the 2000 census found that there were nearly 200,000 fewer men than women aged between 15 and 29 because of higher rates of mortality.⁷
- Young men also have higher rates of alcohol and substance use. A national survey of young men aged 15 to 19 in the US found that young men who adhered to traditional views of manhood were more likely to engage in substance use, violence and delinquency and unsafe sexual practices.⁸
- Young men are less likely to visit a doctor or a clinic or to seek information about their health – as a result, 60 per cent of men and boys aged 15 to 24 do not have accurate and comprehensive knowledge about HIV and how to avoid transmission.⁹

³ Kimmel, Michael. 'Boys and School: A Background Paper on the "Boy Crisis".' Swedish Government Inquiries. 2010. ⁴ Barker, Gary. 'Dying to be men: Youth masculinities and social exclusion.' Routledge, London. 2005. ⁵ Barker, Gary. 'Dying to be men: Youth masculinities and social exclusion.' Routledge, London. 2005. ⁶ Barker, Gary. 'Dying to be men: Youth masculinities and social exclusion.' Routledge, London. 2005. ⁷ Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE 2004) quoted in Barker, Gary. 'Dying to be men: Youth masculinities and social exclusion.' Routledge, London. 2005. ⁸ Courtenay, Will H. 'Better to die than cry? A longitudinal and constructionist study of masculinity and the health risk behavior of young American men' [Doctoral dissertation]. University of California at Berkeley, Dissertation Abstracts International, 1998. ⁹ UNAIDS (2008) '2008 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic.' Geneva: UNAIDS, p33.

"Following his path" – the importance of fathers

"I talk to my daughters about their studies and about who they are involved with. Nowadays, parents are more affectionate than before... they care more about the children. We [fathers] didn't use to talk a lot, we only used to work."

Father in Brazil, from focus groups for Plan research¹⁰

"It is wrong when the father doesn't want the daughters to study, because this will not do them any good. The father will just isolate them from the world, and they will not be able to see its many faces."

Young man, brother of one of the Plan cohort girls in Brazil¹¹

A father's role is crucially important. How he treats his wife and daughters will limit or enhance their potential and choices in life. But it will make a difference to his sons too. A father who does his fair share of domestic work, who values and educates his children equally, who cuddles his sons and daughters and treats his wife as an equal too will have a powerful impact on how his son grows to be a man and treats his own family.

Being an involved and responsive father is good for both fathers and their children. Research has shown that:

- Men who are positively engaged in the lives of their children or stepchildren are less likely to be depressed, to commit suicide or to be violent.¹²
- Boys with more involved fathers are less likely to take part in risky sexual behaviour¹³ and are more likely to start having sex at a later age.¹⁴
- Boys who grow up around positive male role models are more likely to question gender inequities and harmful stereotypes, says the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).¹⁵
- A study of American, Australian, Colombian, Indian, Palestinian and South African 14 year olds found that adolescents who are well connected with their parents – who feel understood, are cared for and

get along with their parents – have more social initiative, fewer thoughts about suicide and less depression.¹⁶

Father figures

Supportive male relatives also have a big role to play in protecting girls – from too early marriage and from female genital mutilation, for example. Men may be able to convince the community to abandon FGM in a way that is difficult for women. In Egypt, religious leader Sheikh Saad has become an active campaigner and persuaded his wife too that FGM is harmful: "We have decided that our daughter will not go through this bad, inhumane experience... I am enthusiastic to work with families on these issues and feel that I am part of the change."



¹⁰ Plan International. Research conducted for the 2011 'Because I am a Girl' report. ¹¹ Plan International. Research conducted for the 2011 'Because I am a Girl' report. ¹² Morrell, Robert, Dorrit Posel, and Richard Devey. 'Counting Fathers in South Africa: Issues of Definition, Methodology and Policy.' Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies, 29, no. 2, 2003. ¹³ Coley, R L, E Votruba-Drzal, and H S Schindler. 'Fathers' and mothers' parenting predicting and responding to adolescent sexual risk behaviors.' Child Dev, 80, no. 3, 2009. ¹⁴ Ream, Geoffrey L, Ritch C Savin-Williams. 'Reciprocal associations between adolescent sexual activity and quality of youth-parent interactions.' Journal of Family Psychology, 19, no. 2, 2005. ¹⁵ UNFPA. 'State of the World's Population – The Promise of Equality: Gender Equity, Reproductive Health, and the Millennium Development Goals 2005.' New York: UNFPA, 2005. ¹⁶ Barber, Brian K. 'Adolescents and War: How Youth Deal with Political Violence.' US: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Instituto Promundo conducted a review of fatherhood programmes in Latin America which showed that “various studies have found that having a non-violent father or male figure in the household is important for boys to moderate aggressive behaviour and to be able to question exaggerated, rigid forms of masculinity. Many studies have also found that for girls an engaged father is associated with being able to form healthier, less subservient relationships with men and higher sexual autonomy.”^{17,18,19}

Young fathers in particular need support to engage in childcare and domestic chores and take on more of the burden of care borne by teenage mothers. This is not easy, and they may face teasing and even hostility from their peers.

“Imagine my girlfriend and I had a child. Do I have the right to change its diapers? I can already picture the looks on my friends’ faces if they saw me with a dirty nappy in my hand. They’ll make fun of me. Still, that is how I’d want to relate to my child. I want to be a caring dad. For most of my friends, that’s worth a good belly laugh.”

Dikitso Letshwiti, 23, Botswana²⁰

Many young fathers like Dikitso want to support their partners and children. In Brazil, Cameroon, Jamaica, Sweden, Uganda and elsewhere, initiatives have been set up to promote greater participation by fathers and future fathers in caring for their children.²¹

Plan Philippines has been supporting a programme which has successfully managed to get many fathers more involved in their families.

Proud fathers – sharing the burden in the Philippines²²

It is a sunny morning. Dirty garments fill the plastic basin. It is time to go to the stream. Arlyn places the basin on her shoulder and with her other hand, carries an empty plastic water container. This used to be her daily routine. But most days now, it is Onyo, Arlyn’s husband, who takes care of the laundry. “Occasionally, we do the laundry together in the stream. I enjoy it. We talk a lot about our plans for our family,” says Onyo. He believes that his marriage has grown stronger since helping out with household chores.

Onyo and Arlyn are one of the 1,337 married couples who in 2008 participated in ‘Pretty Ermats Meet Proud Erpats’ – Pretty Mothers Meet Proud Fathers (PEMPE). After the training, Arlyn told other wives in the village about the positive changes in her husband. “I woke up one morning surprised to see my husband walking towards the stream with our dirty laundry. He has never done the laundry before.”

Most participants said the training not only resulted in positive changes at home, but also in their children’s school performance. The teachers reported that children were better groomed, arrived in school early, and many had their homework done. “Parents are now minding their children’s assignments and lessons,” said Rose Baganes, Salcedo district supervisor of the Department of Education. More parents now participate in school activities.

“Changing traditional beliefs which have been passed from one generation to another is an uphill climb because these cannot be changed overnight,” said Godofredo Capara, a local ERPAT trainer and a father of seven. “What is important is that we have started on that road and we have seen positive results. We are banking on that.”

¹⁷ Ellis, Bruce J, John E Bates, Kenneth A Dodge, David M Fergusson, L John Horwood, Gregory S Pettit, and Lianne Woodward. ‘Does father absence place daughters at special risk for early sexual activity and teenage pregnancy?’ *Child Development*, 74, No. 3 (May-June, 2003). ¹⁸ Wenk, Dee Ann, Constance, L Hardesty, Carolyn S Morgan, and Sampson Lee Blair. ‘The influence of parental involvement on the well-being of sons and daughters.’ *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 56, No. 1 (February, 1994). ¹⁹ McLanahan, S and L Bumpass. ‘Intergenerational consequences of family disruption.’ *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 94, No. 1 (July, 1988). ²⁰ Stern, Orly, Dean Peacock and Helen Alexander, eds. ‘Working with Men and Boys: Emerging strategies from across Africa to address Gender-based Violence and HIV/AIDS.’ Sonke Gender Justice Network and the Men Engage Network. 2009. ²¹ Instituto Promundo. *Fatherhood and Caregiving*. Program H, Instituto Promundo, Brazil, 1999. ²² Taken from the 2008 Plan Philippines ‘Country Programme Progress Report’ and updated by Plan East Samar team. 2008.

The right start – education is key

Going to pre-school makes it more likely that a child will attend and do well in primary school. It can also promote gender equality at an early age. For example, in Latin America, UNICEF notes that: “Comprehensive early childhood initiatives have been instrumental in challenging gender stereotypes that reinforce machismo and keep women powerless in the family and society. In Peru, for instance, *Iniciativa Papa*, an early childhood project, strengthens the bond between fathers and tots through intensive male participation in child-rearing.”²³

Red beans and hard hats – a gender-equal nursery in El Salvador²⁴

An initiative in Cabañas, northern El Salvador, instills ideas of gender equality at an early age.

Samuel has put on a blue apron to protect his clothes and is standing at the stove cooking a yellow pot full of beans. He carefully fills the pot from another metal container and then shakes the beans so they will not burn. This will be ‘frijoles refritos’, (a dish of cooked and mashed beans), he tells me.

Samuel is not a famous chef or – yet – a man who likes cooking. But he probably has more chance of being either of these than his father or brothers.

Because Samuel is only four. He attends a nursery in Cabañas, in northern El Salvador. He is lucky – nursery provision in El Salvador is minimal. Only 1.8 per cent of children from birth to three and 57 per cent of those from four to six attend any kind of nursery.²⁵ And the nursery that Samuel attends is not just any nursery, but one of 56 in the country that are trying to



promote gender equality from an early age. “People don’t understand the importance of providing early years services – but we believe that we can challenge the stereotypes of what it means to be a boy or a girl by providing different possibilities in our nurseries,” says Beatriz De Paúl Flores, Plan’s Adviser for Gender and Child Protection in El Salvador.

The programme also works with parents so that they understand what the nursery is trying to do. For example, they talk about non-sexist language and discuss the ways that boys and girls are expected to behave. Beatriz says they meet little resistance, although it is easier to get mothers than fathers to attend the meetings.

Of course, some little boys still want to wear hard hats and bang hammers and be builders or truck drivers and the girls still want to dress as princesses, but in this nursery it is acceptable for the children to try out whatever roles they feel comfortable with. It will be interesting to see if Samuel and his friends will be able to forge the beginnings of a more equal and violence-free society.

²³ UNICEF. ‘Gender Achievements and Prospects in Education, Gap report Part One.’ New York: UNICEF, 2005. ²⁴ Nikki van der Gaag, author, *Girls’ Report 2011*. ²⁵ Ministry of Education. ‘National Policy on Integrated Growth and Development for Early Childhood.’ Page 24, 1st Edition in Plan El Salvador’s Country Strategic Plan 2012-2016, 2010.

Learning not to hit

Boys' education makes a major contribution to gender equality. A multi-country study by the International Center for Research on Women and Instituto Promundo involving 11,000 interviews found that men with secondary education showed more support for gender equality. They were less likely to be violent towards women, and more likely to participate in the care of children.²⁶

In Latin America and the Caribbean, notes the United Nation's Girls Education Initiative (UNGEI): "The region has substantial work ahead to make school, especially at the secondary level, attractive and welcoming to boys and young men. The consequences of illiteracy and under-education for boys and men have dire consequences for society. Barry Chevannes, professor of social anthropology at The University of the West Indies, comments: "If [boys] were educated, I think that... violence, irresponsible sexual behaviour and so on... would be much less."²⁷



ALF BERG

Speaking from the heart²⁸

The men are waiting in a classroom and we all perch in a circle on tiny chairs. The group ranges from Wilman, the youngest, to Bienvenido, who could be his grandfather.

We are here to talk about the masculinities project that they have been involved in with Plan Dominican Republic. They come from different communities so they don't know each other. They have only just begun the work, but during the two hours that follow, they are open, animated, thoughtful – and worried. It is clear that this work touches their hearts.

They talk first about why they became involved. Cristobal, an older man in a red shirt, says: "I became involved because as a father myself I was interested in the relationship between fathers and children."

The other two main motivations are concern about rising levels of violence and abuse in the community, and teenage pregnancy. Patricio talks about violence: "I see every day how women suffer from violence – mostly verbal rather than physical but there are lots of kinds of violence. In our community I see cases where a girl at home becomes pregnant because she has been abused by her brother, father or stepfather."

The men all say they believe that violence against women is increasing. They are probably right: domestic violence in Santa Domingo is the single most reported offence, with 15,000 complaints over the last two years.²⁹

And they agree that this is because women are starting to challenge some of the 'machisto' assumptions that have always been part of the culture in the Dominican Republic. Manuel explains: "When women exercise their rights today, men are not educated about those rights. So when a woman starts to demand her rights, men get angry. Men need to know how to change their way of thinking."

The men in the room say they believe in equality, but it is not always easy to put it into practice. They know that nothing will change unless men are involved, because it is men who hold the power, and mostly men who are the violent ones.

Manuel points out that it is important for men to be able to meet and talk together about these things, and for women to do the same, but also, as Freddy notes: "That men and women need to work on these things together."

"Yes," says Rudio, "and then the family becomes a team."

²⁶ Barker, Gary, Manuel Contreras, Brian Heilman, Ajay Singh, Ravi Verma, and Marcos Nascimento. 'Evolving men: Initial results from the International men and gender equality survey.' International Center for Research on Women and Instituto Promundo, 2011. ²⁷ UNICEF. Gender Achievements and Prospects in Education, Gap report Part One. New York: UNICEF, 2005. ²⁸ Nikki van der Gaag, author, Girls' Report 2011. ²⁹ Jackman, Daniel. 'Dominican Republic: Shocking Level of Domestic Violence.' Latin American Bureau. 24 November 2010.

Conclusion and Recommendations: "Equality makes me happy"

"Having more equality makes me happy. I am a better friend, with closer friendships with both boys and girls and better conversations."

Luis, 21, El Salvador³⁰

Every man who stands up for gender equality has to face the difficulties of going against the prevailing norms which are reinforced day by day, minute by minute. Those who do work for gender equality do not have the many years of work that support women working on this issue. They may face ridicule and derision not only from other men, but from women as well.

Increasingly, men themselves are acknowledging that they also are impoverished by rigid gender roles. Sharing power may in fact be empowering for everyone: not a diminishing of masculinity but an enhancement of it. In many societies, in many different parts of the world, men have voted for legislation that gives women rights. In 1902 Australian women, followed shortly by women in Finland and Norway, got the vote; a change that would have been impossible without the cooperation of the male politicians in power. More recently in Rwanda male politicians enacted legislation that would put equal numbers of male and female representatives in their parliament.

However, bringing about change is complex. It is not merely a question of legislation; even in societies with laws in place, attitudes remain hard to shift. Behavioural change, which lies at the heart of achieving gender equality at individual, family, community and national level, will be difficult. This year's report has illustrated the price that boys and girls continue to pay if we do not make this shift. We have also identified key strategies and brought together some key initiatives – programmes, campaigns and legislation – that have played their part in consolidating behavioural change and point the way to how, working together, we can go further and faster in transforming the world we live in.



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³⁰ Interview with the author, 2011. ³¹ Ricardo, Christine, Nascimento, Marcos, Fonseca, Vanessa and Segundo, Marcio. 'Program H and Program M: Engaging Young Men and Empowering Young Women to Promote Gender Equality and Health.' Washington, DC: Pan American Health Organization, Instituto Promundo, 2010. ³² Barker, Gary, Nascimento, Marcos, Ricardo, Christine and Segundo, Marcio. 'The individual and the political: Promundo's evolving approaches in engaging young men in transforming masculinities.' Paper presented at Politicising Masculinities: Beyond the Personal – An international symposium linking lessons from HIV, sexuality and reproductive health with other areas for rethinking AIDS, gender and development, Dakar, Senegal, 15-18 October, 2007. ³³ Ricardo, Christine, Nascimento, Marcos, Fonseca, Vanessa and Segundo, Marcio. 'Program H and Program M: Engaging Young Men and Empowering Young Women to Promote Gender Equality and Health.' Washington, DC: Pan American Health Organization, Instituto Promundo, 2010.



MARCELO FERREIRA

‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ – family matters

The Real Choices, Real Lives study is a multi-country longitudinal study through which Plan’s researchers are examining, in detail, a range of issues affecting girls during the first nine years of their lives. The study is following a core group of 142 randomly selected girls from poor communities in nine countries and uses in-depth interviews, focus groups and annual surveys to uncover the reality of their lives. Members of 115 of the families taking part were interviewed this year; others had migrated or were unable to take part due to work commitments. Sadly, six of the girls from the original cohort have died since the study began. Lillian from Benin, Aisosa from Togo and Nicole from the Philippines all died as a result of accidents; Nasiche from Uganda died from malaria and Omalara in Benin from an undiagnosed illness. Even when taking into account the accidental deaths, it can be argued that poverty, including poor housing and lack of sanitation, is the underlying cause of their deaths.

All the girls in the research group were born in 2006. This year, they reach their fifth birthdays. What is happening in their lives now, particularly as they start their formal education, will have consequences throughout their lives.

The majority of the girls are now either attending a pre-school facility or are already in their first year of primary school. The girls’ parents express great pride in their progress through kindergarten, with several parents showing a clear understanding of the progression from pre-school to primary school and the importance of establishing the building blocks of learning and social skills in a pre-school setting. In Benin, Jacqueline’s mother explains that her daughter “used to be shy. But since she started school she is no longer shy. She can sing, recite poems, dance, play and she is learning to read.” Chesa’s mother in the Philippines says that her daughter “now knows how to write and can identify colours. When she gets home, she shows me what they did in school. She is very talkative. Her papa and I are amused when she tells us what happened in school, because she does it with actions.”

However, the educational prospects of several of the girls have been affected by their poor health. In Togo, Ala-Woni is unable to attend school regularly; Nakry in Cambodia missed her enrolment day due to illness and therefore missed a year of school.

Many parents also expressed their concerns about the quality of the education their children are receiving. They are worried about children repeating classes, the lack of adequate teaching staff and class

sizes. They explained that if they were able to afford it, or if their daughters were able to travel further on their own to school (as boys are), they would want to send them to better schools. In Uganda, Mirembe’s siblings are in classes of more than 200 students. Her parents are ambivalent about sending Mirembe to this school, but as it is the only one nearby which is free, they have little choice.

This year we are looking particularly closely at the way the girls’ families view gender equality in relation to what happens in their own homes. We also conducted a series of in-depth interviews with the girls’ fathers (or in a few cases, their uncles or grandfathers).

The head of the household: protector and provider

For the most part, the girls’ fathers perceive their role to be the provider for the family, a decision-maker, an authoritarian and a protector. The girls’ mothers are considered to be the carers of the family. The fathers interviewed routinely described their spouses using words like ‘respectful’, ‘innocent’, ‘well-behaved’ and ‘courteous’, indicating the submissive role of the women in their families.

In Benin, Catherine’s father explained how social pressure dictates decision-making in his family: “In Africa, it is the father who makes the main decisions. But sometimes the mother happens to make some decision because we are a couple.” In Brazil, Juliana’s father said that as a couple he and his wife make the decisions together, but he has the final word – a view reflected by the majority of fathers interviewed.

“The strictest person was my father”

Interviews with cohort fathers also show how violence that was integral in their own upbringing is now shaping their notions of masculinity – almost all of them were beaten as children. Discussions with the girls’ fathers illustrate how boys can become conditioned to the idea that married men are expected to control their wives and punish their children. Many of them reported that violence was part of their parents’ relationship and that violence was often the most important memory of their childhood. Jacqueline’s father in Benin explained that “the strictest person was my father. He was the one who often beat us.” For many, this routine masculine violence was troubling, and several sought out role models who offered an alternative view of the world. Isabelle’s father in Benin looked up to a teacher who did not beat his students: “Mr Gnonhoue was the teacher who taught me in sixth form of primary school. He was patient and did not use a stick to explain things to us.”

The cohort study, and this year’s in-depth interviews with fathers, does still reflect a world where boys’ and girls’ roles within the family are clearly defined. It also confirms our findings elsewhere that the role of the father as the family decision-maker is crucial to both boys and girls. Without the male head of the household being committed to gender equality it will be extremely difficult for both girls and boys to escape from the traditional male and female moulds.

“The world is changing and soon everybody will understand that we should not treat them [girls] in a different way [from boys].”

Marc, father of Barbara, Benin

However, as Marc says, change is happening. There is, of course, some ambivalence about this and some disagreement between the generations and between the sexes. However, many families are beginning to value girls’ education. Treating girls and boys differently is now being questioned, not just accepted. There is a greater recognition that discrimination is having a negative effect on boys’ as well as girls’ lives, and on the wider success of their families and communities. Many recognise the richness that gender equality can bring to their relationships with partners, friends and children. The father of Darna from the Philippines, for example, is obviously aware that he has missed out on family life and his daughter’s childhood: “I would like my children to remember most the good things that I did for them... that their Papa came home late because he was working for us.”