



**REAL CHOICES,**

**REAL LIVES**

**BENIN, TOGO AND UGANDA**

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## ETHICS AND SAFE- GUARDING

Ethics approval was granted to Plan International UK for the entirety of the project by Plan International Global Hub's Ethics Review Committee. Local ethics approval was sought in Uganda, where it was a requirement for social research through Makerere University.

All research activities are undertaken in line with Plan International's ethics and safeguarding policies and procedures. Any researchers on the study are required to adhere to strict codes of conduct and all received training on the tools, ethics and safeguarding prior to any data collection.

Additional safeguarding measures are put in place for the handling and transferring of data to the analysis team. Principles of confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent have been applied, with parents or caregivers asked for consent on an annual basis and girls asked for assent annually, since 2013, when they reached seven.

All names used in this report are pseudonyms and photos used in this report are not of girls on the study.



# INTRODUCTION

Plan International has been tracking the lives of girls across nine countries in three regions since 2007. Girls were selected based on the year of their birth – 2006. Secondly, they came from among the lowest income households in each country. In Benin, Togo and Uganda the girls are from rural and semi-urban areas.

In 2021, 118 girls were involved in the study. A unique, qualitative, longitudinal study, *Real Choices, Real Lives*, provides the academic and international development community with valuable insights into the choices, decisions and realities that shape girls' lives. The information provided by this research will, in turn, help inform the advocacy strategies and the practical priorities, at both local and national levels, of all those working to support girls in the struggle for gender equality.

This report draws on material from two rounds of data collection that took place between 2019 and 2021, charting the lives, attitudes, and relationships of the 38 girls growing up in the Sub-Saharan African Cohort countries – Benin, Togo, and Uganda. One of the most important findings is the emphasis placed on girls' education in all three countries. Some of the mothers hardly attended school and welcome the opportunities afforded to their daughters.

“Adults think that girls should either continue their education so they can find good jobs or learn a trade.”

ESSOHANA,  
TOGO, 2019



A girl selling spinach at a market in Togo.

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The latest data spans the pandemic and it is clear that COVID-19 has had a big impact on the lives of the Cohort girls and on their families and communities. The recent data gives us exceptional insight into both the particular impact of COVID-19 on adolescent girls – on their health, education and relationships – and its wider ramifications across their communities.

“ We missed school for a full year. It caused fear, panic, worries and depression among people in the society. It caused famine and poverty in most homes in town. Many people lost their jobs that caused the increase in domestic violence in families. Many girls got pregnant and went away from their parents to the boy friends’ places, thus high school drop outs. ”

SHEILA,  
UGANDA, 2021

As the girls become young women gender discrimination exerts an increasingly greater pressure on their lives and opportunities. Issues of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) – fear of pregnancy and lack of crucial information and access to contraception – become more dominant. Additionally, for many their domestic chores are increasing, while their educational opportunities are being diminished by poverty and the growing expectation that their future is that of wife and mother.

“ Girls should prioritise their domestic chores while respecting their elders. I believe it is part of their education to be mothers themselves in the future. ”

CATHERINE’S MOTHER,  
BENIN, 2019



*Girls washing in Benin.*  
©Plan International



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



## 1 SRHR AND ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY

In all three counties, from 2019 onwards, both the girls and their parents and carers are concerned about sex and sexual health. The parents worry particularly about their daughters getting pregnant and the young women about periods and sexual violence. There is little advice and information available apart from keep away from boys. Abstinence is the parental mantra; contraception is barely mentioned.

“ [If girls in this community could tell adults one important thing about their lives, what would it be?] They would ask about pregnancy or menstruation. ”

REINE,  
TOGO, 2019

## 2 EDUCATION AND ASPIRATIONS

Again, across the region, girls' education is valued, not least of all by the girls themselves. They are also ambitious and this is particularly noticeable in 2019, a little less so in 2021.

“ I would be happy if I succeed in becoming a doctor and am able to help my mother financially. She is the one who does everything for me now and without her, I wouldn't be able to continue with my studies. ”

ALICE,  
BENIN, 2019

## 3 GENDER ROLES AND FAMILY EXPECTATIONS

Their ambitions are however undercut by the entrenched attitudes around what is appropriate for girls. They spend a lot of time on domestic chores. They are expected to be obedient and there is an assumption that they will marry and when they do, they will have to be obedient to their husbands.

“ We have different expectations for boys and girls; girls have to learn to be obedient and respectful because when they marry, they will have to be respectful to their husbands and in-laws and they will have to do the housework. Boys don't need to do all that because their wives will do all the housework and respect them. ”

JACQUELINE'S MOTHER,  
BENIN, 2019

## 4 VIOLENCE

Violence and fear of violence increased between 2019 and 2021 due largely to the impact of COVID-19. It is most talked about in Uganda. In all three counties girls are often afraid after dark in their communities.

“ Girls do experience defilement, rape at this age. Some men do force young girls [into] sex. ”

AMELIA,  
UGANDA, 2019

# 5

## PARTICIPATION AND DECISION-MAKING

There is some progress in all three countries around women's participation in decision making. Though, particularly in Benin and Togo, it is often limited to domestic issues. In Uganda, women in local and national leaderships positions seems to be more common and closely linked to female empowerment through education.

“ I would like her to be like Right Honorable Speaker of Parliament Rebecca Kadaga ... She is educated, very influential in the country, she has helped so many people in her community and the country at large. ”

JUSTINE'S MOTHER,  
UGANDA, 2021

# 6

## COVID-19

Poverty across Sub-Saharan Africa has intensified which in turn has had an impact on all aspects of life for the families in the study. School closures combined with lack of money for school fees have imperilled girls' chances of staying in school and increased the likelihood of pregnancy and early marriage.

“ We are now struggling to feed the family ... We weren't allowed to leave our homes so it was very difficult to find money to buy food. Schools closed for 3 months and the children were scared that they wouldn't be able to finish their year ... Everybody was upset. ”

NINI-RIKE'S MOTHER,  
TOGO, 2021

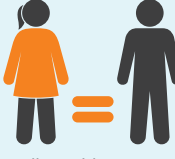


EXTENDING



## BENIN

POPULATION   
**15.8 MILLION**

IT SCORES  
**0.612\***  
ON THE GENDER  
INEQUALITY INDEX (GII)   
\*0 equals 0 per cent inequality – this score  
has hardly changed since 2010.

MEAN YEARS<sup>1</sup> OF SCHOOLING:

**2.4**  **5.5**   
FOR WOMEN FOR MEN



THE COHORT GIRLS AND THEIR FAMILIES **LIVE** IN A SEMI-URBAN AREA, NOT FAR FROM THE CAPITAL, WITH STRONG AGRICULTURAL ACTIVITY, SUPPLEMENTED BY TRADE IN FOOD.

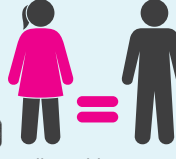


THE **EDUCATION LEVELS** OF CHILDREN ARE **QUITE HIGH** BUT SO ARE THE **DROPOUT RATES**, ESPECIALLY FOR GIRLS.

**VIOLENCE**, IN PARTICULAR SEXUAL VIOLENCE, FORCED AND CHILD MARRIAGE, KIDNAPPING AND EARLY PREGNANCY, IS PREVALENT. 

## TOGO

POPULATION   
**10.4 MILLION**

IT SCORES  
**0.573\***  
ON THE GENDER  
INEQUALITY INDEX (GII)   
\*0 equals 0 per cent inequality – this score  
has hardly changed in ten years.

MEAN YEARS<sup>1</sup> OF SCHOOLING:

**3.5**  **6.7**   
FOR WOMEN FOR MEN



THE COHORT GIRLS AND THEIR FAMILIES **LIVE** IN THE CENTRAL REGION OF THE COUNTRY WHERE THE **STANDARD OF LIVING** IS LOW AND SUBSISTENCE AGRICULTURE IS THE PRIMARY **EMPLOYMENT**. DROUGHT HAS BECOME MORE FREQUENT IN RECENT YEARS WHICH COULD LEAD TO FAMINE.

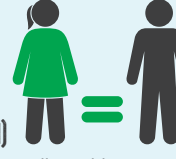


**EDUCATION LEVELS** ARE **LOW** AND THERE IS **LIMITED ACCESS** TO THE **INTERNET**.

LEVELS OF **VIOLENCE** ARE ALSO **VERY LOW** WITH **SMALL CONFLICTS** OCCASIONALLY ARISING WHEN LIVESTOCK IS MOVED FROM ONE GRAZING GROUND TO ANOTHER. 

## UGANDA

POPULATION   
**59.4 MILLION**

IT SCORES  
**0.535\***  
ON THE GENDER  
INEQUALITY INDEX (GII)   
\*0 equals 0 per cent inequality – this score  
has hardly changed in ten years.

MEAN YEARS<sup>1</sup> OF SCHOOLING:

**4.9**  **7.6**   
FOR WOMEN FOR MEN



THE COHORT GIRLS AND THEIR FAMILIES **LIVE** IN RURAL COMMUNITIES\*\* THAT DEPEND ON **FARMING** AS A SOURCE OF **FOOD AND INCOME**.

THE MAIN CROP IS **SUGARCANE**.

THE COMMUNITIES HAVE BEEN EXPERIENCING **PROLONGED DROUGHT** WHICH MAY LEAD TO FAMINE.

\*\*About 150 kms from Kampala

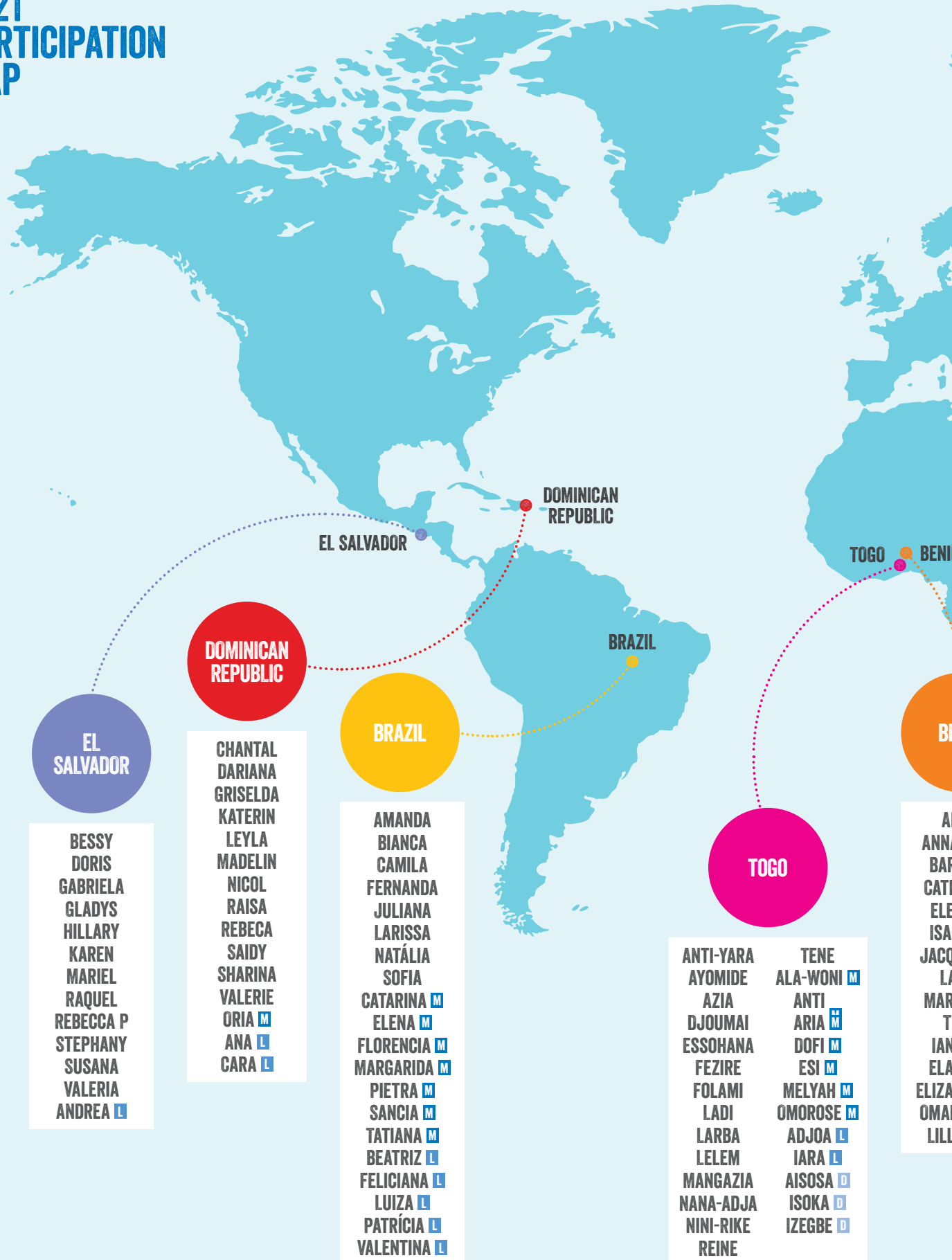
**ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY** IS COMMON AND OVERALL LEVELS OF **EDUCATION** ARE **LOW**. 



**LACK OF RESOURCES LIMITS ACCESS** TO THE **INTERNET**.

1. Average number of completed years of education of a country's population aged 25 years and older, excluding years spent repeating individual grades.

# 2021 PARTICIPATION MAP







# LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

**In 2021, when they and their families were last interviewed, the girls were 15.**

They are at a time in their lives, approaching middle adolescence, when choices made by them – or imposed upon them and their families due to circumstances beyond their control – could define the rest of their lives. Are they still in school? What sort of independence are they allowed and what opportunities are there to build a working life outside the home? What is expected of them and how powerful is the gender socialisation that surrounds them?

“They should stop playing like children ... They should be respectful and listen to their parents. They should work hard at school and do their homework ... Ladi should leave her childhood behind.”

LADI'S MOTHER,  
TOGO, 2019

Throughout the study parents and family members have emphasised that girls' education is as important as boys' but also, throughout the study, poverty and engrained gender discrimination has put this belief under pressure. Throughout their lives the girls in the study have had less playtime and more domestic duties than their brothers. They have had different rules to follow.

“We make dolls and sometimes we play a game of cooking with small tins.”

NAMAZZI,  
UGANDA, 2014

Girls holding hands in Togo.  
©Plan International



“Boys can go where they like, but girls can’t.”

BARBARA,  
BENIN, 2017

“My brothers haven’t changed the way they spend their time; they go to work in the fields but they don’t like doing housework. I think that they should do housework; I help them in the fields but they never want to help me with my chores.”

TENE,  
TOGO, 2019

Over the fifteen years that the Real Choices, Real Lives study has been gathering information the importance of girls’ education has been increasingly recognised. The link between it and gender equality is clearly understood and the girls and their families taking part in the study understand how crucial it is to keep their girls in school. Unfortunately, the barriers to girls’ education remain in place: gender discrimination and poverty can combine to ensure that girls’ opportunities remain curtailed by their gender.

The study’s detailed analysis of gender roles, SRHR, education and aspirations, protection and participation all reveal how difficult it still is for girls and young women to achieve their full potential. It is hard for all members of communities where climate change and COVID-19 have further exacerbated poverty but in hard times, as wider research has shown, it is women and girls whose lives are most severely impacted.<sup>2</sup>

The latest data tracks the girls’ progress through adolescence and despite the differences between countries and context, many common themes have emerged. It reveals that gender discrimination still defines their lives, that girls worry about violence, want more information about sex and reproduction, and are often anxious about their futures. They are also navigating their way through puberty which brings its own challenges and for some the changes are negative and frightening:

“I have developed pimples in my face. I have developed breasts on my chest ... I feel bad for having developed the breast, because when men look at me, they think I am mature enough to get into love affairs.”

SHEILA,  
UGANDA, 2021

Overall, they are sticking to their hopes and ambitions, determined to overcome the various obstacles in their way.

“I would still like to become a midwife ... You just have to go to school regularly and go to medical school ... I wouldn’t be happy if I dropped out of school or married young.”

AZIA,  
TOGO, 2019



Girls on their way to school in Uganda.  
© Plan International

2. Flor et al, Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, University of Washington March 2022, Quantifying the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender equality on health, social, and economic indicators: a comprehensive review of data from March, 2020, to September, 2021: accessed [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(22\)00008-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(22)00008-3/fulltext) March 04,



# KEY FINDINGS

## SRHR AND ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY

### BENIN



In 2019, across the cohort, only one girl received information about menstruation and puberty from her family, with many parents commenting that their daughters were still 'too young':

“No, she doesn't have enough information on this subject because she's not yet old enough.”

ISABELLE'S FATHER,  
BENIN, 2019

There is an overall anxiety about girls getting pregnant but nevertheless little attempt to pass on knowledge, particularly about contraception.



“Yes, I worry that she will become pregnant and have to leave school and so won't be able to find a job. She is around a lot of boys at school. As she is still a schoolgirl and not yet independent, she would suffer if she fell pregnant.”

ANNABELLE'S MOTHER,  
BENIN, 2019

Parents confine their advice largely to telling girls to stay away from boys.

“Girls should behave differently to boys because they are more exposed. Girls should avoid boys so that they don't become pregnant which is obviously not the case for boys.”

ALICE'S FATHER,  
BENIN, 2019



In the 2021 interviews it is particularly apparent that a real difference exists between what family members say about SRHR education and what the girls themselves tell us. In many cases, family members say that the girl knows enough about SRHR whilst the girl declares knowing nothing about it.

### TOGO

Most girls are ill-informed about sex and puberty, with many parents of 13-year-olds, similarly to Benin, suggesting that they believed the girls to be too young for such conversations.



“She wouldn't understand yet but when she starts her period, then I'll go into more depth with her.”

NANA-ADJA'S MOTHER,  
TOGO, 2019

Avoiding pregnancy is seen as entirely the girl's responsibility. In Togo, as in Benin, the majority of parents restrict their daughters' freedom of movement so they do not spend time with boys and 'fall pregnant' which would 'ruin their lives.'

“My parents have told me that boys are bad and that I should avoid their company if I want to do well at school and in the future.”

LADI,  
TOGO, 2019



Despite the general feeling from adults that girls are too young for SRHR education, several of the girls themselves suggest that pregnancy and HIV/AIDS are key issues affecting girls in the community. One girl, Folami, became pregnant a month after her first period.

“If girls become pregnant, they will stop going to school.”

AYOMIDE,  
TOGO, 2019

It was noticeable in the 2021 interviews that four of the girls were shy talking about SRHR issues and, as in Benin, there was a clear discrepancy between what the parents told us and what their daughters said.

## SRHR AND ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY

“Yes, parents speak to their daughters about sexuality and puberty to protect them from false information gleaned on the streets and to stop them from going out with boys and becoming pregnant.”

FEZIRE'S MOTHER,  
TOGO, 2021



Not all parents “speak to their daughters about sexuality” and in many cases, the discussions are limited to heterosexual encounters and the risk of pregnancy. The girls need a lot more information and openness: not just about biology, but about emotions, desires and the wide-ranging diversity of sexual orientation.

### UGANDA

At 13 and 14, the girls were starting to learn more about sex and puberty, both at home and at school; SRHR and SRHR education were identified as an increasing priority. Unlike Benin and Togo all the girls discussed having learned about menstrual hygiene. Shame and stigma associated with menstruation were also raised as an issue, especially when menstrual products were not available:

“Some girls lack sanitary pads to use during menstruation periods and their clothes get soiled when they are in public and this makes them lose respect in the community.”

BETI,  
UGANDA, 2019



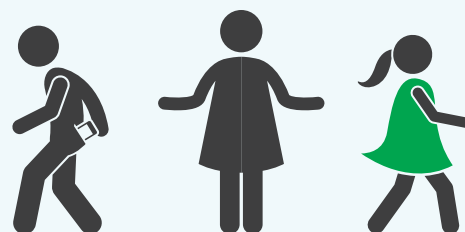
While most interviewees felt they had some knowledge about SRHR, they also felt that, despite SRH classes at school, they still did not know enough. For some the issue was that parents themselves did not have enough information to adequately educate their daughters about sex and puberty.

“Most parents are shy when it comes to those things and other parents themselves have less information to share with their daughters ... Not all parents have radios or televisions from where they can obtain such information and those that have them don't have the time to listen or watch them because we are always in garden work and as a result, we are less informed about such issues.”

JUSTINE'S MOTHER,  
UGANDA, 2021



Family members fear that more sex education will ‘awaken’ something in their children, and lead to more sex. Consequently, parental guidance focuses mainly on the importance of virginity and the need to avoid members of the opposite sex.



“I always tell her that at that age now that she has started menstruating, she should always be careful not to engage in any relationship with boys because they can easily make her pregnant.”

NAMAZZI'S MOTHER,  
UGANDA, 2019

There is also a sense that this is not good enough and more than half of the family members interviewed would like support and information.

“Workshops and awareness raising would help parents to talk to their children.”

FEZIRE'S MOTHER,  
TOGO, 2021



## SRHR AND ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY

*A girl from Uganda harvesting her beans to get them ready for sale.*

© Plan International

In all three countries sex education is a priority for the girls themselves but presents real difficulties for parents. Young women get little help from schools or the wider community. Early pregnancy is an issue across the region and on the increase since the COVID-19 pandemic. However only one of the Cohort girls has become pregnant. Another, at only just 15, has moved in with her 17-year-old partner.

“I feel hurt that a young girl like her wants to drop out of school and marry. I feel so much pain.”

JOY'S GRANDMOTHER,  
UGANDA, 2019



# EDUCATION AND ASPIRATIONS

## BENIN



All girls are very ambitious and lay out their aspirations in interviews. Support for girls' education, including university, is common with many parents wanting opportunities for their daughters that were not available to them.

Despite the emphasis on girls' education and potential careers, it was also acknowledged that once they were married girls would usually be expected not to work.

Many girls want to become nurses, midwives or doctors. Most felt their ambitions were achievable if they studied hard.



“I'll be happy when I've successfully finished my studies and opened my own practice.”

JACQUELINE (ASPIRING MIDWIFE), BENIN, 2019

Layla told us in 2019:

“I would be happy if I finished my hairdressing apprenticeship with a certificate of completion, opened my own salon and made enough money to build my own house.”

LAYLA, TOGO, 2019



However, by 2021 she has had to leave school as the family could no longer afford to keep her there. She is working in domestic service, a job she dislikes, and hoping to save enough money to pay for an apprenticeship.

## TOGO

The girls aspire to professional careers and both the girls and their families emphasised the importance of education in fulfilling aspirations. The girls are ambitious. The 2019 interviews revealed four aspiring doctors, four teachers, two midwives and one matron, one researcher, one dressmaker, one fashion designer and one shopkeeper.



They are also aware of how much work they will need to do to fulfil these ambitions:

“You have to go to school for a long time before becoming a teacher ... I realise that if I go to school regularly, I'll be happy in the future.”

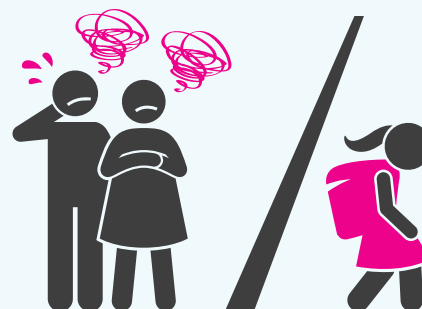
NINI-RIKE, TOGO, 2019

“If I give up my studies, I won't be able to realise my dreams ... I would like to learn about computer science but I can't ... I don't know anything about it and there's no-one to teach me ... I think about my education a lot, I don't know what to do as I'm pregnant.”

FOLAMI, TOGO, 2019

By 2021 three girls, including Nini-Rike and Folami, who has had her baby, have dropped out of school.

The 2021 interviews reveal an increased anxiety from parents about their ability to pay school fees and about how dangerous the journey to school is for their daughters.



## EDUCATION AND ASPIRATIONS

### UGANDA

Girls were encouraged to study hard but many girls missed school when their families could not afford the fees.



“I was absent for a whole term ... Because of school fees ... It made me feel bad because I was not studying.”

BETI,  
UGANDA, 2019

The girls are ambitious for their futures: in 2019 aspirations included two accountants, four nurses, two doctors, one bank manager, one lawyer, two teachers and one research assistant.

All girls cited lack of school fees as a worry and something that represented a current or potential barrier to them fulfilling their ambitions.



Additionally, some girls felt that adults ultimately valued boys' education more than that of girls. It was evident also that some parents held the view that educating girls who were not performing well academically represented a drain on resources that could be better spent elsewhere:

“I want her to improve in her academics such that she can study and be a better person ... But ... you can lose hope because you are just wasting the money on someone not performing well. Because I can use that money for building myself a house but I end up giving teachers my money.”

SYLVIA'S MOTHER,  
UGANDA, 2019



Girls at school in Uganda.

©Plan International



Girls and family members also noted the disproportionate impact on girls' education, as opposed to that of boys, as a result of pregnancy.

“Even if a boy impregnates her, he will continue with his studies [but] for the girl that will be the end of her studies or until she gives birth that is when she resumes studies and it will affect her studies.”

REBECCA'S MOTHER,  
UGANDA, 2019

Child marriage, sometimes apparently the girl's choice, sometimes not, was very much an issue in the community and discussed as a particular risk for girls who do not perform well at school or who cannot afford to go to school.



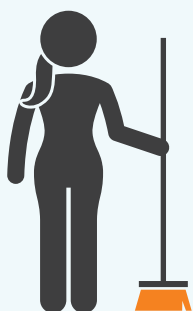
COVID-19 meant that all schools closed and only half of the girls had access to remote learning.

Several of the girls had to repeat an academic year and worries about school fees and being able to complete their education increased.

In all three countries education is seen as the only way towards a better future. However, education is also often cited as the biggest challenge facing girls. Poverty, early marriage and pregnancy, and parental fear about the dangers of their daughters' journeys to school all conspire to impede young women's access to education and stifle their ambitions.

# GENDER ROLES AND FAMILY EXPECTATIONS

## BENIN



All of the ten cohort girls have to carry out domestic work at home; eight of them also carry out paid work. COVID-19 has meant less time playing with friends or taking part in organised social activities – where they exist. At the same time, as they get older, domestic chores have increased.

“When girls return from school they have to then: go to the market to shop, make food or do housework. Boys on the other hand only have to study.”

JACQUELINE,  
BENIN, 2021

One of the parents states explicitly that:

“Boys and girls are not equal so they behave differently. Girls should listen to their parents and teachers and learn how to behave properly amongst their friends.”

ISABELLE'S MOTHER,  
BENIN, 2019

## TOGO

As they reached puberty, girls' household responsibilities increased. Several of them complain that it affects their ability to study.



“I used to have more time but now I have more household responsibilities because my brother and sister aren't living here. I am always late for school as is evident because I had to retake my class.”

ANTI-YARA,  
TOGO, 2021

Boys are expected to be polite and hardworking but for girls there is a slightly different emphasis:



“[Adults] want girls to be obedient and to work hard at school to succeed and to avoid bad company which could lead them astray ...”

NANA-ADJA'S MOTHER,  
TOGO, 2019



Three of the girls feel it is unfair that their brothers are not expected to help at home. Only three are in paid employment, far fewer than in Benin.

## UGANDA

The picture in Uganda is similar, girls' household tasks have increased with puberty and for the most part they help out willingly.

“I cannot sit and let her do the chores. She wakes up very early and goes to the garden. She should come back and find when food is ready. I don't expect her to come back from the garden and do it.”

AMELIA,  
UGANDA, 2021

The girls also see their chores as clearly gendered: cooking washing and childcare are very much women's work; they are helping their mothers.

“They are all entitled to be done by girls and women only.”

NAMAZZI,  
UGANDA, 2019

Several of the girls work outside the home though family members seem to be reluctant to admit that this paid employment is actually a proper job, with only Jane's mother acknowledging that she digs for a living.

In all three countries, it appears that the girls' time is not really their own and that their involvement in fetching water, washing clothes, digging, cooking, or taking care of their siblings is in line with gendered expectations and impinges on their school work.

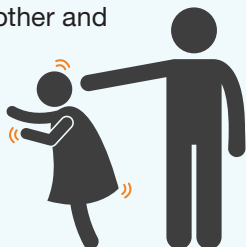


## VIOLENCE AND FEAR OF VIOLENCE<sup>3</sup>

### BENIN

The issue of violence does not emerge at all in the 2019 interviews but is of far greater concern the following year.

According to Annabelle's mother and Margaret's aunt, COVID-19 (along with bad weather conditions) has led to an increase in violence against children in the community as parents became stressed and angry.



Several girls mention gender-based violence (GBV) and street harassment and only three of them say they feel safe walking alone. Four Cohort girls feel that girls should protect themselves by controlling where they go and listening to the advice given by adults of the community. However, this is a minority view with the rest of the girls and all family members, except one, arguing that it is up to parents and the authorities to protect girls. There are also several instances of violence at school found in the interviews. However, only Barbara (harassed by a boy) and Isabelle (insulted by other pupils) have been directly affected by bullies. In some communities the girls' journey to school also appears dangerous and several mothers are very concerned.

### TOGO

In 2019 while the girls speak about having their movements restricted in order to avoid 'bad things', none discuss having actually experienced any violence in the community and few reported violence in the community as a risk for them:



“Girls are not mistreated here and there are soldiers who patrol dark places who protect girls.”

ANTI-YARA,  
TOGO 2019

In 2021, Folami's mother stated that COVID-19 had had a negative impact on her community: as poverty increased, family relationships became

more aggressive and violence between parents escalated. However, she says children have never been victims of such violence: all family members are adamant that violence against children does not exist in their communities. However, a statement from one of the Cohort girls appears to contradict this:

“The thing that worries me most is violence towards children; they have no more happiness.” ( ... ) “I try to defend them. Their parents either call me names or they tell me they're hitting the child because he's stubborn.”

NINI-RIKE,  
TOGO, 2021



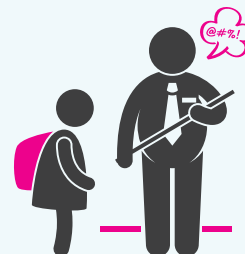
Additionally, five of the 15 Cohort girls are afraid of their fathers. Anti-Yara says her father hits her; she fears talking to him. Similarly, Mangazia's uncle has

to protect her from her father. Fezire explains her father often threatens to hit her. Although Ayomide does not mention violence, she says her father is very frightening and makes her cry a lot.

Fear of community violence has also increased: half of the interviewees (15 out of 30) say girls can get attacked or raped if they walk alone in the streets. The majority of interviewees also say that girls should be protected by adults and the authorities and not expected to be responsible for their own safety. Violence at school and on the way to school remains a cause for concern with several girls reporting bullying, fights and violence from teachers.

“I never miss school because the teacher is mean and he would hit me.”

LADI,  
TOGO, 2019



3. All safeguarding and child protection concerns are followed up by the Country Office research teams. Researchers immediately report any safeguarding concerns to the focal point in the country office and they are pursued in accordance with the protocols of that country. Additionally, the analysis team who code the data fill out a Child Protection Report. This is sent to each Country Office by the RCRL GH research team to ensure all concerns are known to and being addressed by the Country Office.

## VIOLENCE AND FEAR OF VIOLENCE

### UGANDA

Out of the three countries, gender-based violence was most openly acknowledged here, though it is hard to know whether this is because interviewees were prepared to talk about it or because it is more prevalent. The risk of sexual violence was a worry for all but two of the girls.

“Girls ... may be raped especially at night by men.”

DEMBE,  
UGANDA, 2019

In addition to violence in the community, some girls and families also spoke of the risk of underage sex and/or sexual violence against girls by partners:

“Some girls may ... get raped by their partners. When such a case is reported, the girl can get help.”

SYLVIA,  
UGANDA, 2019

Although none of the girls reported having experienced sexual violence themselves, two described cases of sexual violence involving family members:

“One day my sisters had gone to collect firewood, met a strange old man who stopped them started moving closer while unzipping his trouser so the girls started running, after noticing that the man needed to rape them while the man also ran after them. The girls ran home ... They didn't [report it].”

DEMBE,  
UGANDA, 2019



Several girls reported restrictions being imposed on them, or sometimes self-imposed, due to parental anxiety and their own fears that they would face violence from men and boys.

“They stop one from taking a walk because they may encounter problems ... You might get an accident or get kidnapped.”

SYLVIA,  
UGANDA, 2019

“[My grandmother] does not want us to move at night ... Even if there is anything she wants to be bought, she will not send us out let ... Because you may find boys where you are going and they rape you.”

JOY,  
UGANDA, 2019



From the 2021 interviews it is clear that families felt that COVID-19 had led to increased violence in their communities, and, overall, they were extremely anxious about their daughters' safety. Interviewees reported a rise in domestic violence, drug abuse and teenage pregnancies resulting from the pandemic. Three of the mothers related incidences of gender-based violence they themselves had experienced. Many girls explained that it is essential to move in groups and avoid “unnecessary movements.” Their journey to school is particularly a source of worry and Joy, Shifa and Sylvia have all experienced bullying at school.

Gender-based violence and fear of violence is a dominant factor in the lives of girls across the three cohort countries. The two combined mean that girls face restrictions on their movements and this limits their opportunities. Domestic violence also appears to have increased across their communities since the pandemic. The prevalence of violence and the lack of safety in their lives heightens anxiety and insecurity even when they manage to avoid actual physical harm: many of the girls and young women are afraid both at home and in public spaces.

## PARTICIPATION

### BENIN

During an attitudes assessment activity, participants were asked if they strongly agree, agree, disagree or strongly disagree with a series of statements. Commenting on the assertion that: *Girls in my community can freely make decisions about their own lives*, girls in the Cohort all believe they cannot and should not: they should ask their parents first. There is however some evidence that they would like more freedom.

In 2021, in 11 out of 20 interviews, (ten conducted with individual girls and ten separately with parents/caregivers), interviewees think boys should have more freedom than girls but nearly as many talked about change and equal rights for men and women.

Half of the girls say that girls do not face challenges in their community. The other half, however, mention issues around girls' education, the weight of household responsibilities, a lack of money and boys' behaviour towards them. A majority of family members say that women are more involved in decision-making than they used to be, largely because they are better educated. This empowerment is generally viewed as a very positive thing, though gender roles and expectations also remain deeply engrained:

“Men are built to come and go as they please while women are made for the home. Men have the right to freedom as they bear more responsibility than women.”

LAYLA'S EMPLOYER,  
BENIN, 2021



### TOGO

Similarly to Benin, all the Cohort girls believe girls cannot and should not make free decisions in their community: they should ask their parents first.



Half of them say adults listen to their opinions; the other half argues adults only care about their own problems. However, the vast majority say they would talk to a parent or a community leader if they were faced with a problem.

In almost all the Cohort girls' communities (except in Folami's where women seem to have an equal role in decision-making) women are only involved in some decision-making processes – mainly those related to food or to education. Half of the family members interviewed think this is acceptable and that some topics just do not concern women. Overall, there is a sense that there has been some progress towards gender equality.

“Women and girls no longer have to go to the river to collect water or do their washing. Girls can also choose their own husband. I think these are positive changes; if they had been around in my time, I wouldn't have stayed as an agricultural worker.”

AYOMIDE'S GRANDMOTHER,  
TOGO, 2021





## PARTICIPATION

### UGANDA

Ten out of the 13 Cohort girls believe girls cannot and should not make free decisions in their community: the vast majority say they would talk to a parent or a community leader and that adults would listen to them.



However, Amelia feels that girls with positive ideas are often met with opposition and negativity by other people in their community. Many family members mention women councillors though in some communities, they are described as “puppets.”

“I think they are chosen to just be puppets because they are not given room to carry out their role. You find male policemen mishandling women when they arrest them, yet the law encourages that women should be arrested by fellow women.”

SHIFA'S MOTHER,  
UGANDA, 2021



Nevertheless, there seems to have been an intergenerational change in terms of women's empowerment and access to leadership positions. In most of the Cohort girls' communities, women appear to be involved in decision-making processes. Joy's grandmother talks about “women emancipation;” Beti's father and Rebecca's mother mention the existence of a “gender balance.”

“Some women are even performing better than some men so I believe they can lead this country.”

NAMAZZI'S MOTHER,  
UGANDA, 2021

Changes are taking place in women's participation across all three countries, with more notable progress in Uganda. Overall, the Cohort girls admired the story of the young women in the participation vignette who inspired change in her community, winning a space for girls to be involved in sport. However, in the main, they lacked the confidence to emulate her.

# WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

**Across the three countries the challenges that the Cohort girls identify are consistent.**

These challenges are education, lack of money, domestic responsibilities, gender-based violence and, more generally, the behaviour of boys and men towards them, and teenage pregnancies – though this is not mentioned in Benin. In Uganda child labour and access to health services are added to the list. It is also clear from the data that poor health has a big impact on their lives: many of the girls have contracted malaria in the last few years and health issues for all the family are a drain on very limited incomes. In 2021 many families suffered from food insecurity as livelihoods plummeted under the impacts of both COVID-19 and climate change.

We know from wider research that COVID-19 has had a drastic impact on young people's mental health.<sup>4</sup> The 2021 data from Togo backs this up: several of the girls are described as sad and in all three countries many have been affected by school closures, isolation and deaths in the family. In Togo and Uganda none of the girls has access to the internet, affecting both their education and their sense of isolation. On the whole it is the negative aspects of internet access – the threat of pornography for instance – which are highlighted by parents and family members. The only dissenting voice comes from Nana-Adja's mother in Togo who feels the internet can make a positive contribution to girls' lives.

**“I would build a cyber café where girls could do research on the internet to improve their knowledge.”**

**NANA-ADJA MOTHER,  
TOGO, 2021**



*An adolescent girl from the Kara region in Togo.*

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There is a sense that communities under pressure revert to engrained gender roles. Girls themselves seem resigned: on the whole they and their families accept “how it is.”

**“Girls do more work as compared to boys ... It is because as they grow girls are given more responsibilities some get married and they have to take care of both the children and their husbands. And yet the boys just get someone like a wife to take care of them ... It is not fair but that is how things are.”**

**JANE'S MOTHER,  
UGANDA, 2019**

Virtually all the Cohort girls have real ambition. Their aspirations are to be teachers, doctors, midwives, business women, rather than sticking to their domestic roles. The worry is that as poverty increases so too will the barriers to girls' education. Already, between the ages of 13 and 15, our two sets of data are tracking a steady deterioration in school attendance as lack of money and entrenched gender discrimination take their toll.

**“I will be happy when I have successfully completed my studies and become a certified accountant with a salary. People say that work sets men free ... work assures a person's independence.”**

**CATHARINE,  
BENIN, 2019**

4. <https://plan-international.org/publications/halting-lives-impact-covid-19-girls>





*A 19-year-old girl from Uganda is now back in school  
after marrying early.*

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**Cover photograph:** Girls carry water back to their home in Benin. ©Plan International

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## About Plan International

We strive to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected. As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children. We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and 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 80 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 75 countries.

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