

A woman is seen from behind, walking along a dirt path through a dense, green field. She is wearing a colorful, floral-patterned hat and a dark blue long-sleeved shirt. A child is strapped to her back in a red and white checkered carrier, wearing a blue and white checkered hat. The woman is wearing dark blue pants and brown shoes. The background is a lush, green field with various plants and trees.

REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES

CAMBODIA, THE PHILIPPINES
AND VIETNAM

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ETHICS AND SAFE- GUARDING

Ethics approval was granted for the entirety of the project by Plan International Global Hub's Ethics Review Committee.

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 the report are not of the girls on the study.

A girl and her mother gather rice seedlings in Vietnam.

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INTRODUCTION

Plan International has been tracking the lives of girls across nine countries in three regions since 2007.

In 2021, 118 girls were involved in the research. 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.

Girls taking part in the research were chosen initially based on the year of their birth, 2006, and secondly, they were selected from among the lowest income households in each country. Every year they and members of their family are interviewed in depth. The research involves a detailed questionnaire and, additionally in recent years, has used storytelling techniques to investigate underlying attitudes to issues of participation, child marriage and violence in the home.

This report draws on data from the last three years charting the lives, attitudes and relationships of the 44 girls growing up in Cambodia, Vietnam and the Philippines. It is clear that in all three countries COVID-19 has had a big impact on their education, their families' ability to earn a living and on their overall wellbeing and mental health.

The study spans the pandemic and 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.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1

EDUCATION AND ASPIRATIONS

Across all three countries education is a key priority for both the girls and their families. Despite COVID-19 they remain in school and have ambitions for their future.

“Boys and girls can do the same work as they wish to. I think I can be what I want to be, and I have to study hard.”

MONY,
CAMBODIA, 2019

2

GENDER ROLES AND FAMILY EXPECTATIONS

Gender equality still has a long way to go with household responsibilities largely divided along gendered lines. But in all three countries, despite restrictions on girls' movement and behaviour, families were also keen not to overload girls who were studying with household chores.

“Girls should be obedient, dutiful, and girls do not go out ... I think boys are less controlled ... than girls are. It means that girls must be careful in everything, but boys ... Yes, girls are prohibited in many ways.”

HOA,
VIETNAM, 2019

3

SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS (SRHR) AND ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY

Girls in all three countries would like more information: in Vietnam the topic is tackled more openly and girls report talking to their mothers. Overall, education about sex and pregnancy is neither consistent nor comprehensive and contraception is hardly mentioned.

“The knowledge she has gained is not enough. I want her to have more knowledge on this so she can take care and protect herself.”

LEAKHENA'S MOTHER,
CAMBODIA, 2021

4

VIOLENCE

In all three countries violence, and the fear of violence, shapes girls' daily lives. There are reported instances of domestic violence and, in public, girls are afraid and feel they have to modify their behaviour to keep themselves safe.

“Avoid people I don't know, don't talk to strangers ... don't wear shorts on the street, don't go out late at night.”

KIEU,
VIETNAM, 2019

5

PARTICIPATION AND
DECISION-MAKING

Girls on the whole support women and girls' right to equality and to participate in society. In all three countries girls supported their right to make their own decisions, tempered by a need to listen to their parents and take advice.

“I want to see more females doing tasks males are doing because girls can do it. They shouldn't just rely on men.”

DARNA,
PHILIPPINES, 2021

6

COVID-19

Schools were closed, internet access was patchy in many places so online learning was difficult. Family incomes were reduced. Girls and their families across all three countries reported increased levels of stress which sometimes led to family arguments.

“I had to study via a mobile phone, I couldn't meet my friends, and my going out was restricted.”

CHAU,
VIETNAM, 2021



A girl taking goats up the hill in Vietnam.

© Plan International

VIET NAM
CAMBODIA
PHILIPPINES

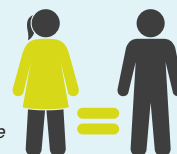
CAMBODIA

POPULATION
18.8
MILLION

IT SCORES

0.474* ON THE
GENDER INEQUALITY INDEX (GII)

**0 equals 0 per cent inequality –
0.474 is a slight improvement since
the index began in 2010.*



MEAN YEARS¹ OF SCHOOLING:

4.2 
FOR WOMEN

5.8 
FOR MEN

EDUCATION LEVELS
ARE IMPROVING



18 IS THE LEGAL AGE
OF MARRIAGE FOR
BOTH WOMEN AND MEN

15 = THE AGE OF
CONSENT



THE COHORT GIRLS
AND THEIR FAMILIES
ARE FROM **RURAL**
AREAS AND THEY WORK
MAINLY AS FARMERS
AND AGRICULTURAL
LABOURERS



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

TEXT
CONTEXT



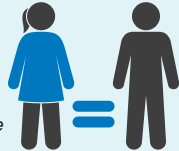
PHILIPPINES



IT SCORES

0.430* ON THE
GENDER INEQUALITY INDEX (GII)

*0 equals 0 per cent inequality –
0.430 is a slight improvement since
the index began in 2010.



MEAN YEARS' OF SCHOOLING:

9.6 
FOR WOMEN

9.2 
FOR MEN

LESS THAN ½ OF THE ADULT
POPULATION HAVE ATTENDED
SECONDARY SCHOOL



18 IS THE LEGAL AGE
OF MARRIAGE FOR
BOTH WOMEN AND MEN

16 = THE AGE OF
CONSENT



THE COHORT GIRLS AND THEIR FAMILIES **LIVE** IN
RURAL AREAS HIGHLY VULNERABLE TO TYPHOONS,
FLOODS, DROUGHT AND SUSCEPTIBLE TO
CLIMATE CHANGE HAZARDS.



THE POPULATION
MAKES A LIVING
FROM AGRICULTURE
AND, IN THE
COASTAL REGION,
FISHING.

BOTH AREAS ARE PRONE TO POLITICAL VIOLENCE.

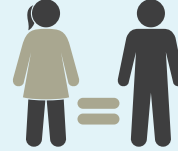
VIETNAM



IT SCORES

0.296* ON THE
GENDER INEQUALITY INDEX (GII)

*0 equals 0 per cent inequality –
a slight improvement since 2010
when it scored 0.324.



MEAN YEARS' OF SCHOOLING:

8.0 
FOR WOMEN

8.6 
FOR MEN

EDUCATION LEVELS
ARE GENERALLY LOW



20 IS THE
LEGAL AGE
OF MARRIAGE
FOR MEN



18 IS THE
LEGAL AGE
OF MARRIAGE
FOR WOMEN

15 = THE AGE OF
CONSENT

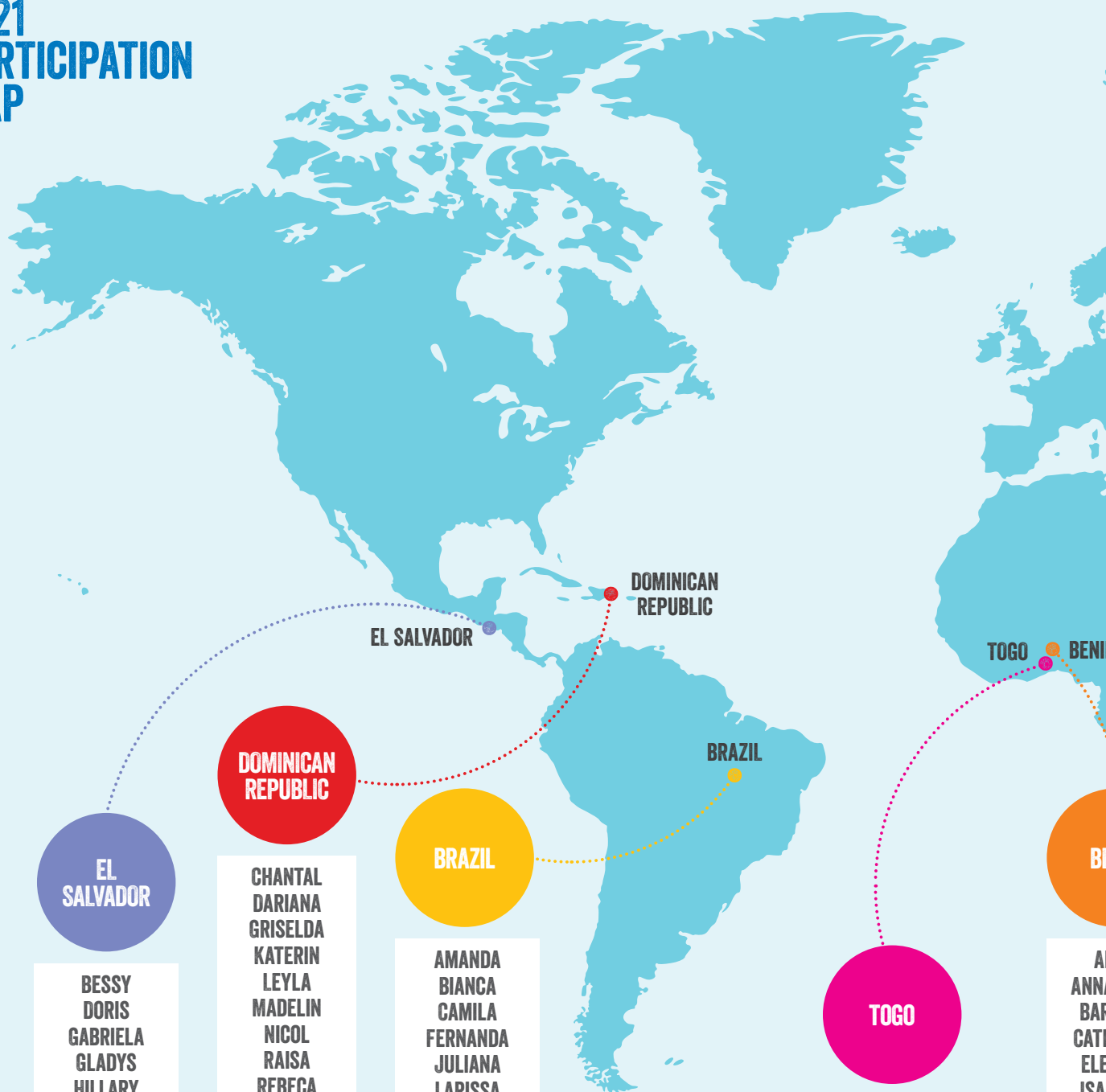


THE COHORT GIRLS AND
THEIR FAMILIES LIVE IN
LARGELY RURAL AREAS
WHERE THE POPULATION
WORKS IN AGRICULTURE
OR FORESTRY

THERE IS INTERNAL MIGRATION
TO THE BIG CITIES – IN MOST
AREAS OPPORTUNITIES FOR
NON-AGRICULTURAL JOBS ARE
INCREASING



2021 PARTICIPATION MAP



EL SALVADOR

BESSY
DORIS
GABRIELA
GLADYS
HILLARY
KAREN
MARIEL
RAQUEL
REBECCA P
STEPHANY
SUSANA
VALERIA
ANDREA **L**

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

CHANTAL
DARIANA
GRISELDA
KATERIN
LEYLA
MADELIN
NICOL
RAISA
REBECA
SAIDY
SHARINA
VALERIE
ORIA **M**
ANA **L**
CARA **L**

BRAZIL

AMANDA
BIANCA
CAMILA
FERNANDA
JULIANA
LARISSA
NATÁLIA
SOFIA
CATARINA **M**
ELENA **M**
FLORENCIA **M**
MARGARIDA **M**
PIETRA **M**
SANCIA **M**
TATIANA **M**
BEATRIZ **L**
FELICIANA **L**
LUIZA **L**
PATRÍCIA **L**
VALENTINA **L**

TOGO

ANTI-YARA
AYOMIDE
AZIA
DJOU MAI
ESSOHANA
FEZIRE
FOLAMI
LADI
LARBA
LELEM
MANGAZIA
NANA-ADJA
NINI-RIKE
REINE

TENE
ALA-WONI **M**
ANTI
ARIA **M**
DOFI **M**
ESI **M**
MELYAH **M**
OMOROSE **M**
ADJOA **L**
IARA **L**
AISOSA **D**
ISOKA **D**
IZEGBE **D**



WANTING THE BEST FOR OUR DAUGHTERS

In 2021, when they were last interviewed, most of the girls had turned 15.

They are at a time in their lives, approaching middle adolescence, where 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 are they conforming to these expectations or rebelling against them? How powerful is the gender socialisation that surrounds them?

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, which prioritises boys, 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.

“ I rarely play with male friends in my class because it is graceless if I play with boys. Girls should play with girls and boys with boys. ”

TAN, VIETNAM, 2014

Father and daughter feed fish in dug out pond in Cambodia.

© Plan International

“I think that daughters have to do housework because sons hang out most of the time... My younger brother spends the whole day travelling around. At night he watches TV and goes to bed.”

NAKRY,
CAMBODIA, 2016

“Girls do more chores than boys. We cook, do the laundry, clean the house. Boys have minimal tasks in the house.”

ROSAMIE,
PHILIPPINES, 2019

The data tells us that in all three countries the issue of gender equality has become more prominent. Mothers in particular are keen for their daughters to have the chances denied to their generation:

“I always tell them to finish their education because look at our lives who didn't study.”

MARICEL'S MOTHER,
PHILIPPINES, 2021

But under the surface the old prejudices, the attitudes that restrict women's lives, often remain:

“Some boys cook rice, and clean around the house. You know women are encouraged to join social activities, but some people still look down on, and restrict women's rights due to social norms [which say] women can do nothing, but just housework.”

THEARIKA'S GRANDFATHER,
CAMBODIA, 2019

As the girls become young women it is issues of SRHR – fear of pregnancy, lack of access to vital information and to contraception – that come to the fore, while gender discrimination exerts an increasingly greater pressure on their lives and opportunities: their domestic chores are increasing, as is the risk of sexual violence and their fear of it, while their educational opportunities are under threat from poverty and COVID-19.

As the girls' journey through adolescence both they and their families see them as becoming less childish and more responsible:

“She's now an adolescent and... she acts differently now. She doesn't join in children's games anymore.”

MICHELLE'S FATHER,
PHILIPPINES, 2019

They are expected to be mature, to put away childish things, but some of the girls, Michelle included, are not happy about this and would prefer not to grow up so soon.

The latest data reveals that girls are more worried, more fearful – of abuse, of failing at school – plus navigating their way through puberty which can produce additional anxieties: affecting their wellbeing, their domestic responsibilities and their sense of identity.

“Boys are allowed to go anywhere they want while girls are prohibited because something bad might happen to us. My mother is afraid I will get raped if I go to the beach alone so she does not allow me ... it's their rights [refers to boys] wherever they want to go ... We have rights but a lot of things can happen to us.”

CHRISTINE,
PHILIPPINES, 2019

It also reveals a growing sense that girls do not have to choose between being a wife and mother and developing a career. Their families are by and large supportive of their daughters' ambitions, encouraging them to grasp all the opportunities available to them:

“I really will not marry my child off. I am the parent; so, I have to do everything for them to be educated.”

JASMINE'S MOTHER,
PHILIPPINES, 2021

Over the 15 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. Despite COVID-19 bringing school closures and a decrease in many family incomes only one girl from the Asia region has dropped out of school. Gender roles and expectations remain in place but nevertheless girls and young women are expected to work outside the home and their ambitions are encouraged.

“They should have same or equal expectation. We should be equal especially with chores.”

ROSAMIE,
PHILIPPINES, 2019

KEY FINDINGS

EDUCATION AND ASPIRATIONS

CAMBODIA

All of the girls are still in school and are determined to finish. They believe having a good job that pays well will make them happy. They aspire to be teachers, soldiers, doctors and one wants to be prime minister. None of the girls discussed feeling limited by their gender in terms of their ambition but a few of them, and their family members, feared they might not be able to reach their career goals because of the cost involved. They rely on support from their friends at school, rather than going to the teacher when they do not understand. Many of the girls and family members commented that boys are not as good at school as girls.



“Boys don’t learn much, and are not so attentive.”

NAKRY, CAMBODIA, 2019

PHILIPPINES

All of the girls are still in school and want to graduate and have careers which include teaching, medicine and joining the police force. In common with the Cambodian cohort, they believe having a good job that pays well will make them happy and some of the girls are involved in extracurricular activities to further this aim.



Families on the whole support girls’ education:

“If they will not finish their studies, they will end up as housewives and will just stay in their houses to take care of their children. If they will finish their studies, they can look for better jobs and they will have better lives. If ever they would want to build a family, that will not be a problem since they are secure.”

ROSAMIE’S FATHER, PHILIPPINES, 2019

VIETNAM

Education is a clear priority for parents – who are often very involved in their daughters’ education – and for the girls themselves. Only one girl has dropped out of school; the others are all very concerned with passing their exams. They say this is one of the main things they think about: worrying about their education, and exams in particular, seems to be a major cause of stress.

“I feel tired. I had a headache, lack of blood to the brain, I had to study but if I studied under too much pressure, knowledge would not come into my brain, so I had to study slowly.”

HUONG, VIETNAM, 2021

Career aspirations include, one chef, two doctors, one teacher, one Korean interpreter and one YouTuber. Two girls hope to live and study abroad.



“If I want to be a YouTuber, I must first learn to be good at computer and learn more about how to upload and edit videos.”

TRINH, VIETNAM, 2019

EDUCATION AND ASPIRATIONS

Girls cycling in Cambodia.

© Plan International

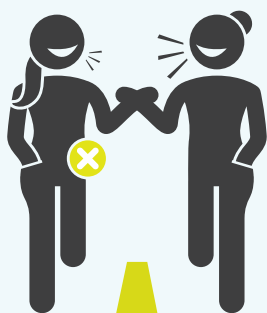
Across the three countries the girls and their families continue to prioritise education. The girls' ambitions remain intact and they do not seem to feel these are limited by their gender. Getting a good, well-paid job is important to them all.



GENDER ROLES AND FAMILY EXPECTATIONS

CAMBODIA

There are clear expectations of what is appropriate for girls. It is also clear that girls work hard, though willingly, at their domestic chores and nine out of ten of them have paid employment – predominantly on farms or selling food. Parents are however keen to make sure that their daughters have time to study. There was little discussion around inequality and the differences between them and their brothers – except for noting that boys do much less work around the house.

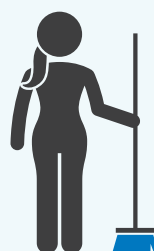


“They praise us when we respect the elderly and are polite. We will be called bad girls when hanging out, and talking loudly with friends. Girls should not talk loudly. I used to talk loudly, but the elderly advised me to speak softly.”

BOPHA,
CAMBODIA, 2020

PHILIPPINES

Girls here are less content with the gendered division of household chores which, as they get older, increasingly fall to them. In 2019, half of them are also in paid employment to help support their families. They do cleaning and gardening jobs, sell ice-cream and help their parents in their income generating activities. In 2021 the four girls who work have jobs tending animals, helping with farming, or babysitting. What is seen as appropriate, for men and women, boys and girls is accepted by many:



“When you’re already a young woman, you fix up the house and your body.”

RUBYLYN,
PHILIPPINES, 2021

But there is also dissent and dissatisfaction with the stereo-typing:

“Give us girls tasks that boys also do. Let us try. I notice that adults say that girls cannot do boys’ tasks. But I can see many girls carrying water, planting ... there are quite a few.”

DARNA,
PHILIPPINES, 2021

As they get older girls have less freedom than boys and their access to public space is more restricted.



Girls shielding from rain in the Philippines.

© Plan International

GENDER ROLES AND FAMILY EXPECTATIONS



Girls walking
in Vietnam.

© Plan International

VIETNAM

The differences between girls and boys were hotly debated and some of the girls felt that boys were prioritised and preferred:



“They think girls won’t be able to take care of them later. They just like having a son.”

HOA,
VIETNAM, 2019

Kieu’s father says that, “boys are different.” The implication is that they are more forthright and less pliable: “they would speak out immediately.” Girls, on the other hand, are characterised differently:

“Girls should be like this and that. Girls must be gentle, have to stay at home to wash dishes and clothes, not to do big things.”

QUYNH,
VIETNAM, 2021

Domestic chores seem less of an issue in Vietnam as, particularly in 2021, it is school work that is prioritised for everyone: none of the girls are in paid employment either.

The majority of the girls believe that boys and girls are equal and thus freedoms should also be equal. This is in contrast to their views that boys are more ‘aggressive’ and ‘stronger’ than girls. Tan, for example, says that:

“Boys and girls are equal, so we shouldn’t think that boys have more rights than girls. What boys do, girls can do, too.”

TAN,
VIETNAM, 2021



However, she qualifies this later stating that:

“I think many people still value men more than women.”

TAN,
VIETNAM, 2021

In all three countries the underlying assumption that girls and women are less important than boys and men still lingers. Household responsibilities remain largely female: girls are more limited to the home and are expected to be “gentle.” In the Philippines and Vietnam there is some push back against this.

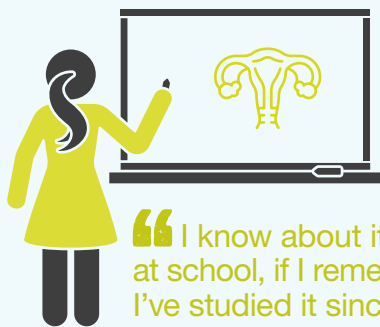
SRHR AND ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY

CAMBODIA

The girls are given very little information about menstruation or sexual and reproductive health (SRHR). Some of the mothers admitted to never discussing these issues with their daughters. When they did it was to advise them to stay away from boys.



Many of the girls and their family members were uncomfortable talking about SRHR so the data is limited. All of them thought sexuality education was important. In 2021 all the girls were getting some, though limited, information about SRHR in school, usually through biology lessons.



“ I know about it from learning at school, if I remember correctly, I’ve studied it since grade 9, have read about it in books, and my mother and grandmother tell me about self-care ... ”

MONY,
CAMBODIA, 2021

PHILIPPINES

A significant number of the girls get some form of SRHR education at school, but it is not uniform or consistent. Contraception is never discussed, menstruation rarely.



Some parents are concerned that teaching the girls about sex while they are so young will encourage sexual behaviour too soon. Mahalia’s mother think she learns from older students but hopes she doesn’t because she is too young to know these things. Rosamie’s father believes his children know how to prevent pregnancy and learn about sex through the TV. Other parents have spoken directly to their children:



“ It’s part of how we train them, they should know about those things so other people won’t fool them. ”

CHRISTINE’S MOTHER,
PHILIPPINES, 2019



Girl at convenience store in the Philippines.

© Plan International

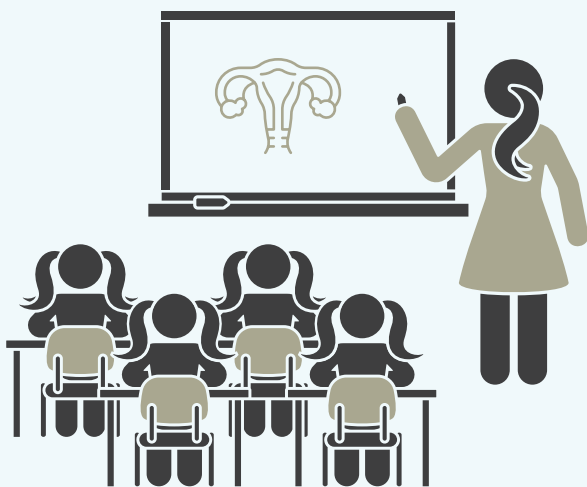
SRHR AND ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY

VIETNAM



The majority of girls say that they have spoken to their mothers about menstruation and would feel comfortable going to them with questions. The girls and their families also talk

about other sources of information about SRHR generally that include schools, health centres, the internet and friends.



“The medical station launched an educational program of reproductive health for girls. They organized one session in the People’s Committee for the girl students who are in grade eight and nine, and all the girls received advice. I think such programmes are very good, so that the girls are aware of puberty. The teachers at school also teach them but just general information, they can’t teach in details.”

HANG’S MOTHER,
VIETNAM, 2020

Fear of pregnancy makes parents anxious for their daughters, especially if they think there is a boyfriend on the scene:

“My parents worry about me too much, so their first saying must be ‘love affair’. ... It is probably because I am a girl ... Boys have nothing to lose, but girls ... girls have only one time. That’s why my parents respond like that.”

HANG,
VIETNAM, 2019



Though SRHR is seen largely as a women’s issue, one father described talking to his daughter:

“Sometimes those things are hidden by us, it may make her do some bad things. We should educate her about friend relationships when she grows up, when she is a teenager. Sometimes she doesn’t learn enough about it at school, then she comes home, I have to remind her individually.”

QUYNH’S FATHER,
VIETNAM, 2021

Only in Vietnam is there more open discussion about SRHR topics. Overall contraception is rarely mentioned and curtailing girls’ freedom is the strategy to prevent sexual relationships from developing. Families are often too embarrassed to talk frankly to their daughters but are very aware that both generations need more information and would appreciate help.

Girl in her Vegetable garden
in Cambodia.
© Plan International

VIOLENCE AND FEAR OF VIOLENCE²

CAMBODIA

There was considerable discussion regarding violence, particularly sexual violence, and fear of violence by both the girls and the family members. This included during the journey to and from school, even when the girls travel with their friends.



“There have been cases of gangsters on the streets ambushing each other with swords and knives as children left school, so we are fearing for their safety when leaving school.”

ROUMANY'S MOTHER,
CAMBODIA 2021

When asked if girls are protected from violence in the community, Reaksmei responded with “no.”

“Long ago, a girl was raped by her cousin. He told her that he would take her to meet her elder sibling, but she was raped instead. Her cousin was put in prison for two years. He has just been released.”

SOTHANY,
CAMBODIA, 2020



A few of the girls mentioned being beaten at home and at school to encourage them to be obedient:



“There is violence at school ... and my parents blame and beat children.”

LEAKHENA,
CAMBODIA, 2020

Girls also reported online abuse including being sent pornographic material:



“Once, I had received a porn movie on my phone ... I was scared and told my mom and deleted it from the phone.”

SOTHANY,
CAMBODIA, 2021

In 2021 more than half the girls and their families thought it was the girls' responsibility to protect themselves from violence and abuse. There does not seem to be anyone to turn to.

“When being beaten by someone, I just cry alone sadly.”

LINA,
CAMBODIA, 2019

2. 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

PHILIPPINES

There was considerable discussion about violence, specifically rape, by both the girls and family members. Girls feel they are at risk and fear of violence restricts their freedom. They are not allowed out in the evenings and in 2021 only four out of 14 girls felt safe walking alone.



“You can get pregnant outside, many rapists.”

REYNA,
PHILIPPINES, 2019

“When it takes her a long time to get home, you’d wonder and get worried where she is and why she hasn’t come home yet. For instance, now she’s at school. You also don’t know what’s going on there; you also don’t know where she’ll go after school.”

MAHALIA’S MOTHER,
PHILIPPINES, 2019



Two girls describe being hit at home: Jasmine by her brother and Mahalia by her parents. Reyna’s father confesses to hitting his children:

“... when I get too angry and they don’t listen to me anymore, I really hurt them. There was even an incident wherein I told them to go ahead and report me because there was evidence that I hurt them. But no one did anything.”

REYNA’S FATHER,
PHILIPPINES, 2021

Jasmine was also sexually harassed at school; her mother went straight to the headteacher demanding the other child and his parents be brought in and questioned, with the local authorities involved as well.

Online abuse comes up as an issue. Several of the girls have been exposed to sexual content online against their will:

“They send a nude pic and then they send their thingy [their genitalia].”

DARNA,
PHILIPPINES, 2021



While most parents are concerned about safety online, they are also out of their depth in terms of their understanding of the internet and internet safety practices.



Girl paints street art in Masbate, Philippines.
© Plan International

VIOLENCE AND FEAR OF VIOLENCE

VIETNAM

The Cohort girls said they felt safe in their communities and their families looked out for them. Some of them discussed the advice they are given by adults to protect themselves – revealing that much of the onus is on girls to reduce risks. Hoa, for example, explains that she and most other girls don't go out in the evening and spend nearly all their time at home or at their friends' homes. She will wait for someone to cycle to school with, because she is afraid to go alone. She is not the only one:



“It is dangerous for girls to walk alone in a place without people. They should not go alone.”

KIEU,
VIETNAM, 2021

In 2021, overall, the families describe communities which are quite dangerous: there is consensus that it is not safe for girls to walk alone and a number of girls outline the risks such as bullying, physical and sexual violence, kidnapping and robbery.

Families fear for their daughters and indicate that danger for the girls would always come from men and boys.

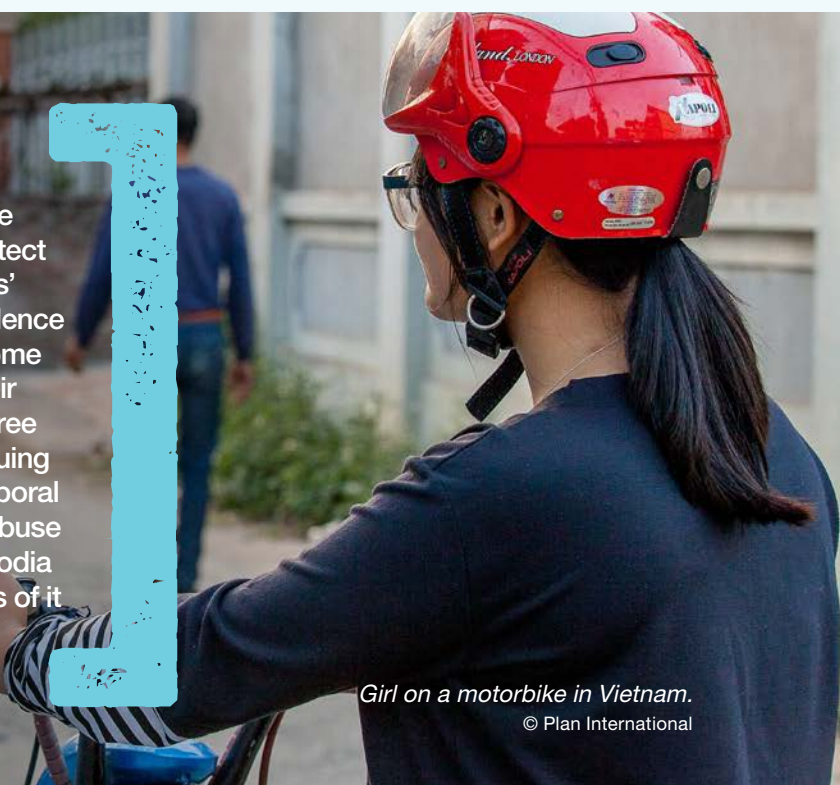
“I reminded her about the kidnappings and rapes. Girls are not allowed to go out at night, if she goes out, she must go with another, going alone it is easy to get kidnapped. Nowadays, boys are very stubborn, if they drink, they will try to involve girls.”



LY'S MOTHER,
VIETNAM, 2021

All the families condemn domestic violence though some of the girls reported violent arguments at home. Kieu was beaten up at school and ended up in hospital. Most of the girls agree that it is their responsible to protect themselves from violence and abuse: they are weaker than boys and need to have strategies in place.

In all three countries it is clear that girls feel vulnerable and for the most part the onus is on them to protect themselves and avoid danger. Girls' freedom of movement is curtailed: violence and fear of violence keep them at home which over time is likely to limit their opportunities. Home is not entirely free from violence either with parents arguing viciously and some families using corporal punishment. The potential for online abuse is mentioned in Vietnam but in Cambodia and the Philippines there are accounts of it actually taking place.



Girl on a motorbike in Vietnam.

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PARTICIPATION AND DECISION-MAKING

CAMBODIA

By and large families seem to be run by women who make the day-to-day decisions. One girl, Lina, is in charge of the family finances. Just over half of the Cohort girls believe that girls can freely make their own decisions. There is little evidence of them taking part in community activities or having much agency outside the home. Half of them, though, say that adults do listen to girls' opinions. The girls also report having a say in whom they marry: when child marriage happens in the community it is the girl's choice not the parents.



“In my village, no one wants to study especially girls. All of them are getting married. On 20th May, two girls and one boy, around fourteen-years-old, got married. Their parents didn't force them. They followed their children's decision.”

NAKRY,
CAMBODIA, 2021

PHILIPPINES

Wider participation in community life does not feature very much in the data and, from family members in particular, girls' limited access to public spaces and public involvement seems to be accepted. When asked about the girl in the story campaigning and talking to community leaders, most of the girls said it would not happen in their communities. However, 11 out of the 14 approved very strongly of her campaign for girls' access to sport and sporting facilities. There is also a majority of girls and family members who believe that girls freely make decisions about their own lives.

“They (her children) will choose who they want to be with, not us. Who they like. It's not us their parents who will choose for them, right?”

MAHALIA'S MOTHER,
PHILIPPINES, 2019



VIETNAM

Girls here were often active in extra-curricular activities and were adamant that girls had equal rights to participate in sport, for example, with boys. They strongly supported the action of the girl in the story campaigning for girls' access to sport facilities. They comment that this sort of behaviour is not surprising from a girl but they also state it probably would not happen in their communities.



“I think no girls dare to raise their voice.”

SEN, VIETNAM, 2021

The majority did feel that girls in their community could make their own decisions but often with the caveat that they should also listen to their parents. Amongst a couple of the girls there is a strong sense of independence and belief in their right to equality and participation:

“When people say that you can't do it, you must definitely do it.”

QUYNH,
VIETNAM, 2021



Across all three countries there is little sense of girls' and women's participation in wider society in leadership roles. There is, however, a sense that girls' choices have expanded and they feel increasingly independent. This is coupled with the continuing impression that, with a few notable exceptions, they lack confidence in their ability to really make their voices heard.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

There are some striking differences in the data from the three countries which clearly reflect their political and socio-economic context.

In Vietnam, social media and technology seem to play a much bigger part in girls' lives and more young women here aspire to live and study abroad. In Cambodia and the Philippines many families were particularly badly affected by COVID-19 in terms of family income. There are common themes, too, with education being of prime importance to all the girls and their families, and issues of gendered expectations, SRHR and violence shared, as causes of concern, across the region.

Everywhere the Cohort girls and their families prioritise education. Despite the challenges of COVID-19 all of the girls, except one, remain in school and most have kept up with their studies. This was despite falling incomes and unreliable or non-existent Internet for many of the girls. The girls are very keen to get back to school, to their friends and to in-person teaching. They all value their family relationships and these, and supportive friendships, are a source of happiness, though not without tension. For many families, particularly in the Philippines, the struggle to make a living, exacerbated by COVID-19, has been helped by government support. Violence and fear of violence is an issue in all three countries and girls' freedoms are restricted as result. Attitudes everywhere label girls as weaker than boys, encourage obedience, and many girls feel they are valued less than boys:

“Adults should also listen to us to see what we think and want to do. If they don't listen, if they don't respect, they even despise their daughters ... I think many people still value men more than women.”

**TAN,
VIETNAM, 2021**



Girl walking with her brother in Cambodia.
© Plan International

Sources of anxiety for the Cohort girls are primarily about getting good grades, finishing school and fulfilling their ambitions. They also need more information about SRHR though many of them are postponing romantic entanglements for the time being and concentrating on their studies. Their families agree:

“We want her to finish her studies and refrain from being in a relationship. She should focus on her studies first so she will have a better life after and not experience our hardships anymore.”

**CHRISTINE'S MOTHER,
PHILIPPINES, 2019**

In most of the Cohort communities, forced marriage has diminished as an issue. Child and early marriage does take place despite marriage laws in place to prevent it. In some communities it seems to be accepted – described as the young people's choice. There is little acknowledgement that 14 and 15-year-olds may not fully understand the consequences of their decisions.

Increasingly, for their school work, their social lives and access to information about all sorts of things, the girls rely on the internet and social media. Not all families can afford smart phones or data. This can be isolating and some girls fall behind at school. Parents and carers, like parents everywhere, despite recognising that the internet is not all bad, worry about too much screen time and the potential dangers waiting for their daughters online.

“... positive because she’s using the internet for her project. Negative because she might do something, she might have a boyfriend. That’s my worry.”

MELANIE’S MOTHER,
PHILIPPINES, 2021

Gendered expectations continue to be expressed and, in some families, there are clear divisions between what girls and boys should do, or not do:

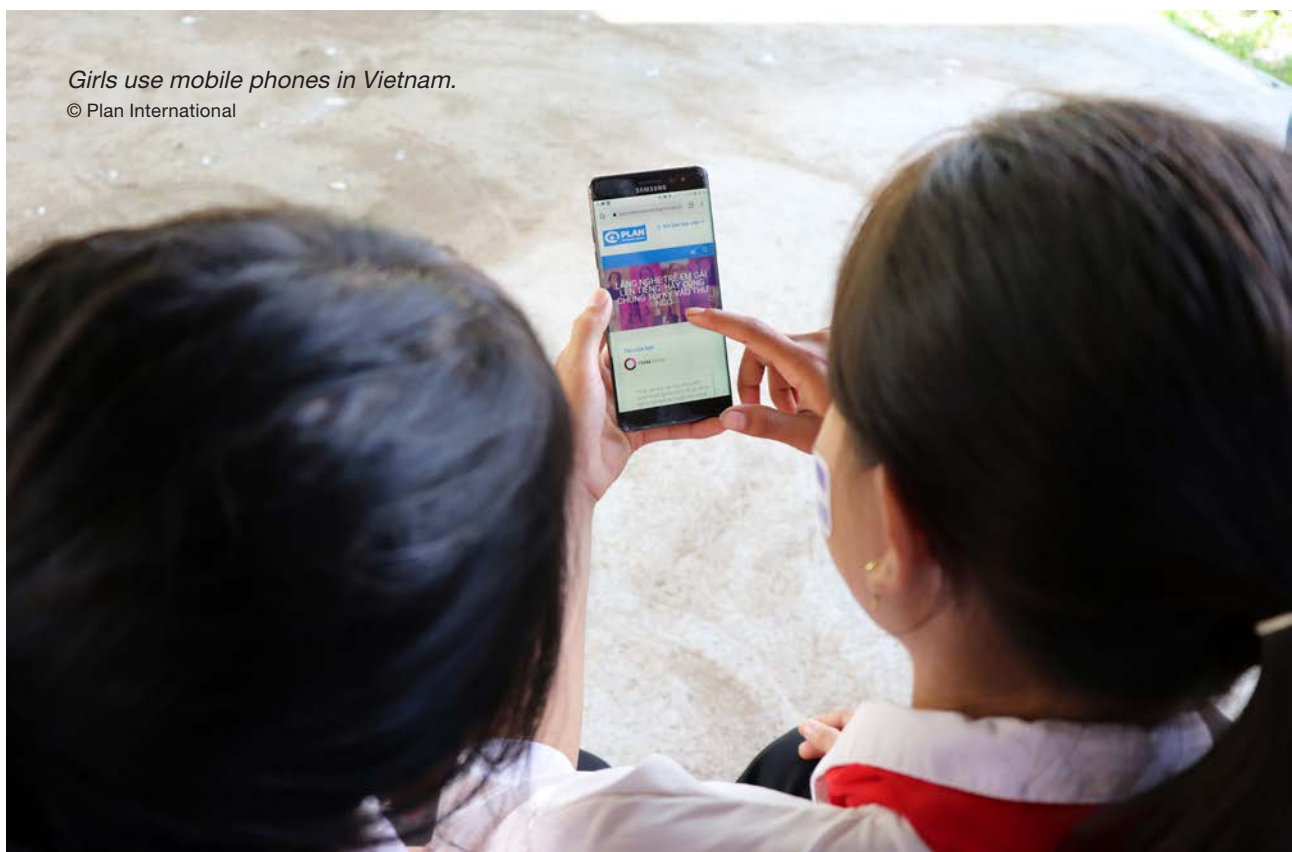
“Because here, if you’re a boy, you should be helping your father in the field; and girls stay at home. That is how it is here; and that’s how we see it.”

DOLORES’ MOTHER,
PHILIPPINES, 2019

In many ways, this strict division of roles and status is no longer, “how it is here.” Times are changing and the Cohort girls are not happy to “stay at home.” They are ambitious, they want greater equality and so, too, do many of the families. Education is the way to achieve this: studying means, as Rosamie’s father says in his interview that, “they can look for better jobs and they will have better lives.” As girls achieve their ambitions and get better jobs, as they become more financially independent, gender equality is increasingly within their grasp.

“Because girls are human beings and they have rights to choose their lifestyles or their ways of doing things. Nobody can force them.”

LY,
VIETNAM, 2021



Girls use mobile phones in Vietnam.

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Cover photograph: A young woman carries her baby on her back in Vietnam. ©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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