REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES
BRAZIL, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC AND EL SALVADOR
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 this report are not of girls on the study.
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 30 girls growing up in Brazil, Dominican Republic and El Salvador.

The data collection has spanned the pandemic and gives us exceptional insight into both the particular impact of COVID-19 on adolescent girls and its wider ramifications across their communities. 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. Partly due to remote learning, social media and technology have also become more dominant in the girls’ lives: a key educational tool and a source of both pleasure and anxiety.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1 EDUCATION AND ASPIRATIONS

Studying to get the qualifications they need to set out on the path to a professional career is a clear priority across the three countries for the girls and their parents.

“I tell her, if she goes and has a baby then everything is lost, because I’m not going to sit here looking after it for her. And I tell her: ‘I’ve already taken care of you, now it’s your turn, I’m going to give you a chance to get ahead, study and become a professional ... but I won’t take care of kids.’

RAISA’S MOTHER, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2020

2 GENDER ROLES AND FAMILY EXPECTATIONS

Opportunities for girls are improving but the gendered division of household chores is largely intact, role models are few and far-between, and girls are still, in many ways, held to different standards of behaviour.

“Being judged, like if a girl gets pregnant, they judge her and start saying bad things about her.

SHARINA, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2021

3 SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND RIGHTS AND ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY

In all three countries adolescent pregnancy is a cause for concern. Despite many of them having sex education lessons at school, overall, girls need more information about sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR). Parents are often too embarrassed to talk about it.

“If there was a counselling teacher at school to help us, or a lot of parents who are too embarrassed to talk to children about it, maybe it would be different, to have a meeting for parents and children together.

LEYLA’S MOTHER, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2021

4 VIOLENCE

Parents are worried about their daughter’s safety, as are the girls themselves. Across all three countries there are many stories about rape, muggings and harassment and girls have to be continually on their guard. The fear of violence affects where they go and what they wear.

“If you’re going to a party you can’t go, if you’re going to a place, you can’t wear a dress [...] Because some people, um, cross the line [...] They try it on with teenage girls.

GRISELDA, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2019
PARTICIPATION AND DECISION-MAKING

There was a mixed response across all three countries as to whether girls and women could meaningfully participate in community life though everywhere interviewees referred to women community leaders. There was a general sense that more facilities for girls would help them. Lack of training opportunities held girls back, as did the lack of role models.

"Some women take part, but they don’t really take us into consideration."

VALERIE’S GRANDMOTHER, EL SALVADOR, 2021

COVID-19

Across the three Latin American countries the pandemic seems to have taken particular toll on girls’ mental health as well as having a big impact on their education and hopes for the future. Even with access to the internet, many of the girls struggled with online learning. They miss their friends and several report feeling depressed.

"I got depressed. I felt sad and angry at the same time."

KAREN, EL SALVADOR, 2021
BRAZIL

PUBLISHER

IT SCORES 0.408* ON THE GENDER INEQUALITY INDEX (GII)

*0 equals 0 per cent inequality

MEAN YEARS\(^2\) OF SCHOOLING

8.2 FOR WOMEN

7.7 FOR MEN

THE COHORT GIRLS ALL HAVE ACCESS TO SCHOOLS AND LIVE CLOSE TO THEM BUT THE PANDEMIC AND THE STRIKE IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES, MEANS THAT THEIR EDUCATION HAS SUFFERED

18 IS THE LEGAL AGE OF MARRIAGE BUT GIRLS CAN MARRY AT 16 WITH PARENTAL PERMISSION

14 = THE AGE OF CONSENT

INcidences of child marriage and adolescent pregnancy are high

SOME FAMILIES MAKE THEIR LIVING IN AGRICULTURE AND OTHERS DO CASUAL WORK OR ARE RELIANT ON GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

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

Population: 10.85 million

- **Mean years of schooling:**
  - Women: 8.8
  - Men: 8.3

- **Access to basic education:**
  - All have access, but may have to travel long distances for secondary school.

- **During the pandemic:**
  - School attendance decreased and pupils dropped out due to lack of online connectivity.

- **Legal age of marriage and consent:**
  - 18

- **Gender inequality index (GII):**
  - 0.436

- **Cohort girls and their families:**
  - Live in rural areas.
  - Family incomes are largely derived from growing bananas, tomatoes, and coffee.

- **There are rural health clinics but access to clean water is limited.**

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**El Salvador**

Population: 6.47 million

- **Mean years of schooling:**
  - Women: 6.6
  - Men: 7.3

- **Legal age of marriage and consent:**
  - 18

- **Gender inequality index (GII):**
  - 0.383

- **In 2010 it scored 0.438**

- **Employment:**
  - Mostly agricultural.
  - Drought and floods destroy crops and families fall back on manual work and various other trades.

- **Girls living in the coastal region:**
  - More prone to trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation which can often result in unwanted pregnancy and dropping out of school.

- **Gang violence is endemic across the region making access to these communities very difficult.**

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**Plan International**

**Plan-international.org**
You Have to Study

In 2021, when they and their families were last interviewed, most of the girls were 15. They are reaching late adolescence; a time 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 are they conforming to these expectations or rebelling against 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. As they grow up the girls in the study have had less playtime and more domestic duties than their brothers. They have less freedom and different rules to follow.

“Girls don’t play with cars ... and boys should not play with dolls ... My younger brothers cannot do chores at home, only we girls. If my little brother dirty his clothes, I wash them.”

SHARINA, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2014
I wash the dishes, sweep, organise. Nobody decides this, I just do it.

DORIS, EL SALVADOR, 2016

Because here a boy has more freedom.

JULIANA, BRAZIL 2020

As they become young women, sexual and reproductive health (SRH) issues – menstruation, sex education, contraception and early pregnancy – become more dominant. It is clear also that the COVID-19 pandemic has complicated the lives of this generation of adolescent girls: adding to the pressures of puberty by isolating them from their friends, creating even more uncertainty about their futures and bringing with it a lot of anxiety about the health and wellbeing of the people they love.

In all three countries education is central to girls’ dreams for the future and in the main their families, despite financial worries, are supportive. Everywhere COVID-19 has put additional strain on girls’ ability to continue their education but the importance of getting good qualifications and professional jobs, remains paramount.

She will have finished her studies and soon come to me and say: ‘mum, I’m a big girl and now I can get a job or go to university.’ Whatever she decides, I’ll support.

NATALIA’S MOTHER, BRAZIL, 2020

Nonetheless, the challenges girls and young women face are at a critical stage. Even with family support, current circumstances – COVID-19, climate change, economic instability – and engrained attitudes can conspire against them.

Men believed that they were the alpha males, and that women had to be beneath them. And do everything they say. That has been changing a bit, but in this country, take a look at the companies, in senior positions, the big salaries always go to men, why? We women can do it too.

SAIDY’S GRANDMOTHER, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2021

Despite this uneven progress towards gender equality, the study participants seem hopeful for the future and determined to improve the conditions for girls and women in their communities. It is this determination, that things can and should change, that drives progress.

To be honest, to this day, I don’t get why women have to be treated as inferiors to men, because we’re both equal, a woman should be valued more than men.

KAREN’S MOTHER, EL SALVADOR, 2021

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 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 two girls from this region have dropped out of school. Both would like to go back, if childcare issues can be resolved. Gender roles and expectations remain in place but nevertheless girls and young women are expected to work outside the home - only one girl talks of being a wife and mother - and their ambitions, which in many cases include university and professional careers, are encouraged. However, many girls report that they have really struggled with online classes and many seem discouraged. In all three countries families are concerned that adolescent pregnancy is on the increase and the girls’ classmates are leaving school because of it.

They’ve all moved in with men. The quarantine messed them all up.

DORIS, EL SALVADOR, 2021
**Key Findings**

**Education and Aspirations**

**Brazil**

The girls are ambitious, many want to go to university and their career aspirations include becoming a doctor, an architect, a psychologist and a professional footballer. In 2019 a couple of the girls and their families were concerned with the quality of education in their schools and in 2021 many were struggling with online learning.

“What I would like... no, I dream, I want her to finish her studies. For her to be a person who [will] work and live her life as she wants.”

BIANCA’S MOTHER, BRAZIL, 2021

Both the girls and their families are worried about the impact of school closures on their futures.

“I want to go to university in the future ... It makes me worried, that we can no longer go to school, because the teacher teaches properly there, not here, with the homework ...”

CAMILA, BRAZIL, 2021

**Dominican Republic**

Many of the girls are interested in a wide variety of professions: three want to be doctors, one an architect, including some male-dominated professions; one wanting to be a police officer and another a civil engineer. In 2019 all but three girls were in the correct year for their age at school. Their career aspirations, which in the main their parents support, may involve university education and they are worried about the costs involved:

“A lot of parents often don’t have the money to pay for the university.”

SAIDY, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2019

As in Brazil most of the girls do not like the online learning which has been imposed by COVID-19. There are issues both with the quality of online teaching and access to the internet. By and large their aspirations remain intact but they are more conscious of how much of a struggle it will be to achieve them.

“It’s not the same quality of learning, that is, the teacher doesn’t explain it to you as well as when they explain it to you at school. I don’t think it’s the same ... I just want them to open the school, so I can continue studying.”

LEYLA, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2021
**EDUCATION AND ASPIRATIONS**

**EL SALVADOR**

In 2021, the majority of the Cohort girls reported that COVID-19 had an adverse effect on their education. They found it difficult to adjust to online learning. Additionally, access to the internet was expensive and some girls missed classes. By and large this has not affected their ambitions: most, if not all the girls, want to continue studying and aspire to professional jobs.

“Maybe, God willing, I’ll be studying for a degree, a career with a lot of opportunities that’s also well paid. [What would you like to study?] It’s called ... foreign relations.”

GABRIELA, EL SALVADOR, 2021

Two of them want to study foreign languages and live abroad. One wants to study medicine, another to be a pathologist and another a flight attendant. However, they mentioned that the pandemic had increased school drop-outs and early marriages among their peers.

The impact of COVID-19 has been felt across the region with most of the Cohort girls and their families acknowledging its negative effects on education. The girls themselves report that, in their communities, school drop-out rates, pregnancy and early marriage are increasing. However, overwhelmingly, they remain ambitious, and parents, despite worrying about being able to afford university and further education, continue to support them.
**BRAZIL**

Many of the mothers seem to endorse the inequality of opportunity and freedom that exist between girls and boys.

“She has to know her place.”

**NATÁLIA’S MOTHER, BRAZIL, 2019**

“There are some situations where women can’t be equal to men, right? [Like what?] In their freedom, parties, things like that.”

**AMANDA’S MOTHER, BRAZIL, 2019**

It is also clear that in many families the division of household work is unfair:

“I’m not at home. [what do the boys in the family normally do?] They just play, really... And that’s it.”

**BIANCA’S MOTHER, BRAZIL 2021**

Some of the girls are very aware that girls and boys are treated differently and are expected to behave in ways considered to be appropriate to their gender. They are not happy about it.

“We wanted to play ball, and the boys wouldn’t let us because it was a boy thing, the girls had to jump rope, play with dolls, but we didn’t like that, we liked to play ball. The boys were kind of macho.”

**JULIANA, BRAZIL, 2021**

There are signs of progress too:

“In the past, only men had [the right to make] a decision... they could decide and do something, nowadays there are equal rights.”

**AMANDA’S MOTHER, BRAZIL, 2021**

**DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

There is less overt discussion of gender roles and expectations here than in Brazil though one interviewee identifies a double-bind in the community’s expectations of girls.

“If she’s sitting quietly at home, it’s bad, if she’s out and about a lot it’s also bad. So you don’t know... [laughs].”

**LAYLA’S MOTHER, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2021**

One of the girls, Nicol, also mentions that when you do not conform to social norms you are labelled “gay.” She disapproves and believes in gender equality and less limited definitions of what is appropriate behaviour.

All 12 girls help with household chores but there is little discussion about household division of labour and only one girl remarks on how much more she does than her brothers. The adult interviewees feel that there are limited opportunities for girls locally but it is not clear whether facilities and jobs for boys are very much better.
GENDER ROLES AND FAMILY EXPECTATIONS

**EL SALVADOR**

All participants agreed that girls should have the same freedom as boys and that they must have equal rights.

“...I think that girls should have freedom, it’s not right either, to keep them in like that, right, because girls can get frustrated, they have to be able to go out to have fun and things like that, but not to mess around.”

BESSY’S GRANDMOTHER, EL SALVADOR, 2021

When interviewed in 2021, some of the girls had strong opinions about female empowerment and gender equality which suggests that there is room for improvement. There is also a sense in the interviews with adults that girls are held back by lack of opportunity and little acknowledgement in the communities of their particular needs. The girls do not discuss any interests outside the home, which may be COVID-19 related, and neither do they talk about household chores.

Only in Brazil was there any detailed discussion about gender inequality and the different roles and expectations for girls and boys. However, across the region, there are some strong opinions from the girls about their entitlement to the same freedoms as boys, a rejection of assigned gender roles and a growing awareness of their rights.
SRHR AND ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY

BRAZIL

In 2019, the girls are 13 and parents are concerned about romantic relationships developing.

“I think she has to behave, because she’s already a young woman, so she’s not supposed to be hanging out with boys, [she has to] hang out with girls. I think she has to behave differently.”

BIANCA’S MOTHER, BRAZIL, 2019

There seems to be a significant amount of SRH education through school, television programmes or online.

“She’s more informed, even because at school they teach them about everything, right? And the internet is there to clear up any doubts.”

AMANDA’S MOTHER, BRAZIL, 2019

Despite this, adolescent pregnancy is not uncommon and a concern for both the girls and their families.

“I see that there are many girls getting pregnant in their teens ... And that most of these girls who are pregnant, the father just... he only makes the baby and then leaves her.”

BIANCA, BRAZIL, 2019

In spite of the worry about pregnancy there is very little open discussion in the families about sexual relationships or contraception. The girls and their parents find the subject embarrassing.

“... Because about this, this subject ... I think she speaks to a teacher, she has a teacher in the programme they have there, so she probably talks to her, or to a friend, but she doesn’t talk directly to me.”

LARISSA’S MOTHER, BRAZIL, 2021
SRHR AND ADOLESCENT PREGNANCY

**DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

As the Cohort girls’ interest in romantic relationships is increasing so is parental concern about pregnancy.

“Right now, most girls are messing up their lives getting pregnant ... I tell her that girls have to look after themselves, and adult women too, when they have relations, these days girls are having relations at a young age, and I tell her: ‘You can’t get into that yet.’ She tells me: ‘Mummy, but I am not doing that.’”

**SHARINA’S MOTHER, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2021**

The parents insist that they are talking to their daughters. They are certainly warning them against pregnancy.

“Because once a girl who is 13 or 14 ... once she has her period, she can get pregnant. So I tell her how things are. [And how does she look after herself?] I tell her not to go around with boys; I tell her she can’t do that. I tell her that the more she looks after herself the better, and I explain things to her, she takes it well.”

**SHARINA’S MOTHER, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2019**

“I had to look after myself because it meant I could get pregnant.”

**REBECA, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2019**

By 2021, one of the Cohort girls is living with her boyfriend and pregnant and several are in relationships, sometimes with older men. When it comes to education about SRHR, most girls mention that they understand the importance of knowing more about the subject to avoid teenage pregnancy and to take better care of their bodies. Several of them talk to their mothers about the issue and the parents clearly believe that these conversations are important.

“Other parents would appreciate some support and would sign up for training sessions if there were any available. There is also some disconnect between parental accounts and what the girls are saying: some parents seem to think the girls know more than they actually do.”

**SHARINA’S MOTHER, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2021**

A young woman hangs up washing to dry outside her home in the Dominican Republic. ©Plan International
Several interviewees admit to finding it difficult to talk to their daughters about sex and they would appreciate help.

“I’d like someone who knows about that to come to explain to us what it is so we know what to tell our daughters, what we shouldn’t do, I’d like to have more knowledge about this issue.”
KAREN’S MOTHER, EL SALVADOR, 2021

Some of the girls were too shy to discuss this topic but others made it clear they wanted more information.

“I think that all adults. They know more so they should teach young people. They should teach girls as well as boys to look after themselves so they don’t get pregnant.”
KAREN, EL SALVADOR, 2021

One of the Cohort girls is living with her boyfriend and pregnant. Others talk about classmates who are pregnant and avoiding pregnancy is seen as one of the key challenges girls face.

In all three countries parents and family members often find it difficult to talk to the younger generation about sex though they realise how important it is. As the girls get older, romantic and sexual relationships are inevitable and everywhere girls want more information and parents want help in providing it. Preventing pregnancy is discussed as a major issue for girls, it is primarily their responsibility. In all three countries adolescent pregnancy seems to be on the increase.
Brazil, Dominican Republic and El Salvador

VIOLENCE

Brazil

There was a lot of discussion about violence and fear of violence in the community. Girls’ freedom to come and go is restricted by parental fears for their daughters’ safety.

“Because I’m afraid of the bad guys, because there are a lot ... there are a lot of bad people ... so this is my concern.”

BIANCA’S MOTHER, BRAZIL, 2019

In 2021, the majority of interviewees report that the community is unsafe for girls walking alone. However, even though they talk about muggings, violence, and abuse as a common occurrence, very few of them describe particular incidents involving them. Nor are there any reports of personal negative experiences on the internet. One of the girls, however, describes sexual harassment at school and on the streets:

“And at school, the girls walk by, then the boys slap their buttocks on the street, when they’re passing by the boys whistle, and it’s not right, you know, to do these things.”

NATALIA, BRAZIL, 2021

Two families report an increase in domestic violence, down to COVID-19.

“It’s because of the stress, you know, the person is inside the house all the time, and goes into depression, and violence increases mainly against women, right?”

NATALIA’S MOTHER, BRAZIL, 2021

The prospect of violence, and the acceptance of it, pervades many of the interviews:

“There are a lot of muggings, a lot of violence, but here the people ... the girls are used to it, and they are not afraid of that anymore.”

JULIANA, BRAZIL, 2021

There is little sense of law enforcement or protection for the population and there are areas run by gangs that are frightening and off-limits.

“They have built a big police station, very beautiful on the outside, and nobody sees anything inside, it’s all... closed off, nobody sees anything, and if you go there to file a police report, there is no one, you don’t see anyone, so it’s like there’s just a lot of walls... our protection comes only from God.”

JULIANA’S GRANDMOTHER, BRAZIL, 2021

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 County Office.
VIOLENCE

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

In 2019, there is a lot of discussion about sexual harassment from peers and the girls try and mitigate this by wearing trousers and being careful not to appear to encourage boys in any way.

“Because when we wear skirts, some boys are very curious and they lift it.”

REBECA, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2019

“Girls can’t go around looking like that... you know there are so many cases of rape and things like that, so if the girl goes around wearing tight clothes, it could provoke all kinds of temptations, you know what I mean?”

VALERIE’S MOTHER, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2019

Community violence seems very much part of everyday life and several families report incidents that have frightened them and made them afraid for their children. There is very much a sense that girls have to ‘be careful out there,’ nobody can be trusted.

“I tell her off for that; she shouldn’t have to go out so much. Because she’s at a stage now when anyone could hurt her. Although even a little girl can get hurt, because look at [the case of] this four-year-old girl, they did all sorts of things to her. That really upset me... Because these days you can’t trust anyone with your children.”

KATERIN’S MOTHER, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2019

One girl mentions online bullying: an Instagram page started by some community members that posts pictures and videos of girls from her community, harasses them and comments on their appearances. The page is being investigated.

EL SALVADOR

Girls’ safety in the community was a common topic in most interviews. They and their families talk about how the road to school especially is unsafe for girls. For example, Hillary mentions that she is afraid she will experience sexual harassment on the way to school and Gladys’ mother also worries:

“She likes studying, but I worry about the school in our area, because we have to make sure they come back at the time they’re coming out and all that, because believe me, all this ‘territorial control’ and the violence stopping is a lie.”

GLADYS’ MOTHER, EL SALVADOR, 2021

Several of the Cohort girls and their families describe violence they have experienced. Susana faced sexual harassment and does not feel safe at her mother’s house and Hillary’s mother fears for Hillary’s safety when she is with her father: he drinks and is out of work after being laid off. Karen and her mother, were very much affected by kidnapping threats she received through social media:

“We were at home with my mum one night and my mum accepted a friend request thinking it was one of my [female] friends... That’s how it all started, he started saying which school I went to and threatened to kidnap me.”

KAREN, EL SALVADOR, 2021
PARTICIPATION AND DECISION-MAKING

BRAZIL

Families talked about women involved in local government but they also mentioned the many barriers to meaningful participation that girls and women face. There is the sense that girls are held back because their needs and rights are not acknowledged.

“They should help the girls in the same way that they help the boys, have the same opinion.”
CAMILA, BRAZIL, 2021

“Because I think everyone should be ... How do you say? Have the same rights, so, for boys to have more freedom ... I don’t agree with that.”
SOFIA, BRAZIL, 2021

There is a general consensus that on the whole adults do not listen to girls’ opinions. In 2021, none of the girls appear to have role models and in 2019, the focus is very much on education and careers rather than on any wider participation in community or family life.

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Despite the girls’ and their parents’ aspirations there is little sense that girls are encouraged to participate in community life. Several of the adult interviewees point to a lack of facilities and support. Girls have no role models and there is little for them to do outside home or school.

“Well, girls here have a lot of aspirations, but poor girls don’t have enough help to achieve them, because if they had help it would be another matter. But there is no help for the girls here. There is no place where they can say: ‘I’m going to set up a dance school for the girls to go to’. There is nothing for the girls to say, to get their hopes up: ‘I’m going to do this.’ There is nothing here for girls.”
LEYLA’S MOTHER, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2021

“Not at the moment, as far as I know, nothing is being done, not a single thing. There used to be a meeting at the centre, there used to be a mother’s group, women were organised. But nothing like that is happening these days.”
REBECA’S MOTHER, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2021

There is a difference of opinion about women’s participation in local decision making with three of the families reporting active participation. Leyla’s mother is a strong believer in equal rights and states that women are often pushed aside in politics and they should not be. Other interviewees are adamant that there is no one in their communities who could represent women’s interests.

“There is no mayor, there is no one. This is how people live here. Without protection from anyone.”
VALERIE’S MOTHER, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2021
PARTICIPATION AND DECISION-MAKING

EL SALVADOR

In common with the Dominican Republic, it appears that the girls are detached from community life. They are more dependent on the internet, especially since the pandemic. Opportunities for them within the community seem limited and family members mention that they would like to open more spaces for girls – Rebecca’s aunt would set up a training centre and Hillary’s mother would like to help girls with their businesses. Interviewees also report that problems faced by young girls are often not discussed by community members. Girls feel that they are not listened to.

“No, there aren’t any spaces where they [girls] can express their opinion.”
GABRIELA, EL SALVADOR, 2021

The extent to which women do take part in community decision-making is contested. In at least one community women have their own groups and hold discussions but it is unclear whether their opinions filter through when decisions are being taken. For some there is the sense that female participation is largely cosmetic – they do not really count. Others state that things have changed and women can and do participate equally.

In all three countries interviewees are optimistic about progress in women’s participation but this is offset by a real sense that female participation is not really prioritised. Girls lack the facilities and encouragement they need to fully develop their potential and have few role models in their communities.
COVID-19

**BRAZIL**

The 2021 data collection reveals the extent to which the pandemic has caused stress and unhappiness.

Deaths and illness, uncertainty about the future, not being able to go to school and being away from friends were among the reasons for their sadness.

"Thousands of people are dying ... I don’t see my friends anymore, I don’t leave the house. If I go out, I always have to wear a mask, I can’t be around people ... I feel sad, because even though we are studying, we do not learn, we only learn if there’s a teacher there, it’s no use just reading and not understanding."

AMANDA, BRAZIL, 2021

"For us it was a little difficult, we had two losses just this year, her uncle and her cousin, and she was devastated, because she loved her cousin very much."

FERNANDA’S MOTHER, BRAZIL, 2021

Many of the girls also struggled with online learning and are worried about doing well at school. Family incomes declined: people lost their jobs or could not sell their goods and, at the same time, paying for access to the internet increased expenses.

"Well, it has affected us a lot, as I said there is less work, we’re out of work, and we’ve been laid off, precisely because of the pandemic."

DORIS’ MOTHER, BRAZIL, 2021

Most families also acknowledge that COVID-19 brought them together. They are closer but, despite that, the isolation from friends, the anxiety about money and school closures have had a detrimental effect on the mental health of the Cohort girls and their families.

"There’s no longer anything to do or anything like that, it affected her because her [male and female] friends are her thing, and well, she’s been locked up, nobody has come to the house."

GLADYS’ MOTHER, BRAZIL, 2021

"The pandemic has also accelerated the girls’ use of social media which is an important part of their lives. Technology is valued as a source of information, for school work and communication though parents also worry about excessive use and online safety."

"Yes, there are times when it’s good, but there are times when it’s not. When it’s good ... When we use it to make a call, to communicate with people, that’s good. When it can be bad ... I think it’s when she communicates with someone else that I don’t know, that she doesn’t know, then it’s bad."

BIANCA’S MOTHER, BRAZIL, 2021

**DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

The pandemic has had a damaging effect on the income of nearly all the Cohort families though the girls themselves seem largely unaware of this. Rebeca, Nicol, Dariana and Sharina, for example, seem to think their families were unaffected though the parents’ account is different.

"It’s been a struggle to sell anything to make some money, but right now, with the situation as it is, it’s all out of control, almost nothing is selling."

SHARINA’S MOTHER, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2021
COVID-19

There seems to be a communication gap in several areas. All girls have been restricted to their homes; they miss being outside and meeting their friends and this, combined with school closures and struggling with online learning, has affected their mental wellbeing. Most parents, however, seem unaware of the psychological impact of the pandemic on their daughters. Some of the girls report being depressed, sad and stuck.

“I get kind of depressed, sad; I don’t know, I get upset too much ... . After being stuck at home like that.”

— MADELIN, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2021

As in Brazil, the pandemic has increased internet usage and social media and technology is important to the Cohort girls. Intermittent internet access, as is the case for Valerie and Sharina, is another cause of stress.

“Look, this week she’s had to struggle to do a lesson that the teacher gave her. Her little brother has to go up there, all the way up to those pine trees, so that he can get the lesson by phone.”

— VALERIE’S MOTHER, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2021

EL SALVADOR

School closures and lockdown have had a severe impact on the mental health of many of the Cohort girls. Nearly all of them report struggling with online learning and it is the impact on their education and the knock-on effect of that for their future which concerns them most. The drop in family incomes also had implications for studying at home as data is expensive and some girls missed lessons.

“The thing that affected her was not being able to go to school, it affected her because I think that studying at home works but it’s not the same.”

— BESSY’S GRANDMOTHER, EL SALVADOR, 2021

Social media and technology have become a much more central part of the girls’ lives and parents worry about over-use and the potential it has for isolating their children from ‘real life.’

“The main change is that she has that phone and doesn’t let it go for a second, maybe you could advise me, it wasn’t like that before.”

— RAQUEL’S MOTHER, EL SALVADOR, 2021

Families seem aware of the psychological and emotional turmoil that the girls are experiencing but there is little help available.

“About 15 days ago she said she had a pain in her heart and we took her to see the doctor and he said no, that it was like anxiety or depression, then he said it wasn’t anything.”

— SUSANA’S GRANDMOTHER, EL SALVADOR, 2021

Across the region, the psychological impact of the pandemic cannot be ignored. Loneliness, anxiety about friends and family, and fears for the future have all taken their toll. In all three countries girls also need practical educational help so that they can catch up and still be on track to realise their dreams. Several families have been supported by their governments which has helped to mitigate the financial distress that many have experienced.
WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

The data collection over the last years has revealed a group of girls who are aspirational: determined to do well at school, with most of them still in full-time education. Among the Cohort girls two – Griselda in the Dominican Republic and Hillary in El Salvador - have become pregnant, and early pregnancy appears to be on the rise in many communities.

“So many girls my age are pregnant. And by the way, they are in the same class as me.”

MADELIN, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC, 2021

COVID-19 has been challenging, with girls’ mental health and educational opportunities severely affected. Their families have struggled financially and this too puts opportunities for girls and young women at greater risk.

“I think the biggest challenge is ... is financial, see? It’s having an opportunity, it’s ... With this economic crisis, if I really had the conditions, I don’t know, I think I would invest more in them, in their education ... a course, something like that, you know, I think everything today ... we always depend on money, money. It is something that we miss a lot in our lives.”

JULIANA’S GRANDMOTHER, BRAZIL, 2021
Most families are close and supportive with girls reporting that their families are a source of happiness and that the one benefit of the pandemic was that it brought them closer together. Most would go to their mothers and sisters with their problems, particularly where COVID-19 has kept them more isolated from their friends.

In Brazil in 2021, families report that opportunities for girls have improved over the years. Women community leaders are more involved in decision-making and girls have more say in their lives.

“Parents mustn’t choose their children’s future, it’s the children who have to choose what they want to do.”
AMANDA’S MOTHER, BRAZIL, 2021

However, they also know that girls still face many challenges and cite lack of financial support, lack of fun spaces like gymnasiums, lack of mental health facilities and issues of cyber-crime, security and violence.

To become a consistent reality gender equality needs more practical support across the region and the family interviews in all three countries pointed to inadequate community facilities for girls and to educational opportunities limited by money, access to the internet and lack of vocational assistance. Training centres and help with businesses were mentioned, as was the necessity of listening to girls’ opinions and encouraging financial independence.

“I always encourage them to work, to have their own money, to never depend on men ... you have to work, you have to own yourself, your life.”
NATALIA’S MOTHER, BRAZIL, 2021

Gender-based violence and the fear of violence remains a consistent feature of the Cohort girls’ lives and much of the responsibility of avoiding it seems to be down to them: dress modestly, don’t go out alone, don’t go out after dark, stay away from boys.

They are, however, resilient. They have emerged from the last couple of years, despite sadness, isolation and an education fractured by the pandemic, with their ambitions largely intact. They remain determined and optimistic for the future.

“I imagine it like this, me sitting like this in the chair, solving problems, doing my job, a psychologist solving people’s problems.”
NATALIA, BRAZIL, 2021
Girl walking home from school in Brazil.
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Cover photograph: A girl member of a soccer team in Brazil. ©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.