

A close-up photograph of two hands, one larger and one smaller, clasped together. The hands are dark-skinned. The background is blurred, showing a patterned floor and a person's leg in blue shorts with a red stripe and white stars.

# REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES: GIRLS **CHALLENGING** THE GENDER RULES

Brazil, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador

## INTRODUCTION

Since 2007, we have been tracking the lives of around 120 girls across nine countries in three regions.<sup>1</sup> Our qualitative longitudinal study, *Real Choices, Real Lives*, provides insights into the choices, decisions, and realities that shape girls' lives as they grow up in a gendered world. In the third of a three-part series of regionally-focused reports, we draw from in-depth longitudinal

analysis of 35 girls going through early adolescence in the three Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) Cohort countries – Brazil, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador. The first report (published in March 2019) focused on Sub-Saharan Africa (Benin, Togo, and Uganda) and the second report (published in August 2019) on South East Asia (Cambodia, the Philippines, and Vietnam).

## Progress, alongside persistent barriers to gender equality

Since the study began, the focus within the international development community on girls' rights and understanding of what gender equality brings to wider society has greatly increased. The Sustainable Development Goals have gender equality embedded at their heart, more girls are enrolled in primary education than ever before, and campaigns against early marriage, female genital mutilation or cutting, and gender-based violence have gathered force. However, much further progress is still needed. Gendered

social norms – the 'informal rules of the game' that establish expectations about 'appropriate' behaviour for males and females – continue to underpin and reproduce inequitable practices that ultimately result in girls and boys (and women and men) enjoying differential access to resources, as well as unequal opportunities and outcomes. Despite growing emphasis on supporting interventions that aim to transform gender relations, understanding *how* and *why* gendered social norms can shift remains limited.

## 'Glitches' in the gender socialisation process

Previously, our analysis has explored the ways in which age, gender, and poverty interact, highlighting the (often negative) outcomes of gender socialisation – a process beginning from birth, in which individuals are raised to conform to an allocated gender role. This has included looking at the violence experienced by the Cohort girls, or the unequal burden of domestic work they bear. In this report, we explore instead where, and when – and more significantly, unpack how and why – girls demonstrate 'disruption' to, or 'glitches' in, the gender socialisation process. The longitudinal view of our data, and its emphasis on girls' own experiences, provides a unique perspective – highlighting markers of where there is potential for gender norm transformation. The evidence provides a valuable contribution to existing knowledge in considering the timing, duration, and scope of interventions aimed at transforming gender inequality. As such, it is aimed at international development practitioners and policy makers, as well as the development research community.

Whilst in the three Latin American and Caribbean countries we see evidence of strong gendered expectations of behaviour, there are examples of girls who are noticing,

### What do we mean by 'glitches'?

'Glitches' refer to instances where girls notice, question, or reject gendered expectations of them. The nature of our qualitative interview data means that we mainly observed discursive, attitudinal, or described behavioural 'glitches': that is, where girls verbally express either noticing gendered differences in expectations, criticising these gendered expectations, or describing their own behaviour which deviates from these norms.

By highlighting flaws or inconsistencies in the process of gender socialisation, our analysis of 'glitches' reveals how this process is constructed and has the potential to change. In the LAC report, we analyse the points of noticing, questioning, or rejecting gendered expectations – the 'glitches', or deviations – not as evidence of disruption or change of gendered social norms, but rather as markers of where there is potential for gender norm transformation if, and when, the broader social, economic, and political conditions align.



Reading at home in Brazil, 2019

questioning, or rejecting expectations around girls' behaviour and roles in different areas of their lives.

Indeed, between 2014 and 2018, all 35 girls expressed some sort of 'glitch' in at least one area of their life. These ranged from views about household work and division of responsibilities, through to what is considered acceptable female behaviour, and future aspirations. We explore the most prominent areas where the girls demonstrate these 'glitches' in the gender socialisation process:

- **girls' future roles (adolescent pregnancy and relationships)**
- **girls' behaviour and participation in activities**

- **girls' role in the household**
- **girls' education and career aspirations.**

Delving back into our longitudinal data we were able to map when as well as where the girls do this and identify the different ways they express these 'glitches'. The context of the individual girl's life, her own personality and capacity, the attitudes of those around her, the political, legal and economic situation of her country, and her family environment represent a complex interchange of influences, opportunities, and barriers. Through three in-depth case studies, alongside the broader data, we explore how the varying and fluctuating influences across a girl's life-course may play a role in her expression of 'glitches' – or the beginnings of 'disruption' – to gendered norms.



## KEY FINDINGS

- 1** All 35 girls from the Latin America and Caribbean Cohort show some level of ‘resistance’ to gendered norms and to what is expected of them as girls, demonstrating the potential for gender socialisation to be disrupted.
- 2** The onset of adolescence sees girls regarded increasingly as young adults rather than children. In the LAC context, this has heightened girls’ awareness of and critique of gendered norms and also ‘sped up’ the gender socialisation process in some cases, limiting the windows of opportunity to influence alternative, more equitable outcomes for girls.
- 3** **Social Level** influences are prominent in reinforcing what girls should not do in order to avoid negative outcomes; this is particularly evident at the household level in mothers’/female carers’ emphasis on the importance of girls not following the same path as they did, especially related to early pregnancy and education. However, as the girls start making their own decisions, and their social networks widen, other **Social Level** influences outside the household become increasingly significant.
- 4** **Structural Level** influences can have an impact on broader gender dynamics at the household level, for example, where economic changes lead to shifts in traditional gender roles out of necessity. However, **Social Level** discourse expressed by those around the girls, which suggests that gender equality has already been achieved on the **Structural Level**, can mask the realities of persistent inequalities and inhibit further progress.
- 5** Shifting gendered attitudes on the **Structural Level** related to ‘acceptable’ behaviours, activities, and career paths for girls do not always translate to the **Social** and **Individual Levels** (and vice versa), demonstrating the complexity of social norm change and the importance of looking at the multiple layers of influence in a girl’s life.



Helping on the family plot in the Dominican Republic, 2018

### **Early adolescence as a critical period of change in a girl's life where windows of opportunity to influence alternative outcomes are both created and closed**

Although aged 12/13 in 2018, the Latin America and Caribbean Cohort girls are increasingly regarded as young adults rather than children by their respective families and communities. Due both to higher physical and cognitive maturity levels in comparison to Cohort girls in other countries and to contexts in which adolescent relationships and pregnancy are common, early adolescence represents a critical period of identity development and decision making for the girls, and, for their family members, a period of heightened risks of 'derailment' of the girls' futures.

As such, many Cohort parents and carers describe placing restrictions on the girls' movement and their interactions with males and with peers regarded as bad influences, whilst emphasising the importance of education. However, these restrictions, which depend on the somewhat problematic notion of parental 'authority', often reinforce gendered norms which lead to gender inequitable outcomes, and, as the girls begin to make their own decisions and turn to social influences outside the household, can actually contribute to realising the outcomes they seek to prevent.

Between 2014-2018 the LAC Cohort girls demonstrate increasing awareness of these

gendered norms which exist in their lives, and the way they impact on how, where, and with whom they spend their time. In particular, the data shows that the Cohort girls identify differences in expectations for themselves and their male peers, and for males and females in general, regarding 'appropriate' behaviour and participation in certain activities and play, the division of household responsibilities, and the risks of experiencing violence.

**"[The boys can go out to play] because they don't do anything... They go out to play, and we're stuck here doing the chores."**

Doris, El Salvador, 2017

Many of the LAC Cohort girls go further and challenge these gendered norms by questioning and critiquing them, and in some cases describing behaviours which 'break' these gendered 'rules'.

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

Juliana, Brazil, 2018

**“Sometimes they tell me that I am a boy... but I tell them that it’s fun to play; sometimes when there’s no one around I get two little cars and start playing at home.”**

Valeria, El Salvador, 2017

**“Sometimes I don’t think [I want to get married]... many women suffer with the separation, the husband goes and kills her, and I don’t want that.”**

Patricia, Brazil, 2017

On the **Social Level**, LAC Cohort parents and carers express particular concern about the prevalence of adolescent relationships and pregnancy in their respective communities, which can lead to girls dropping out of school and take away the potential for them to be financially independent. The majority of the LAC Cohort mothers were teenagers when they became pregnant for the first time, with the average age of the girls’ mothers at the birth of their first child 19.9 in Brazil (youngest 15, eldest 25), 17.6 in the Dominican Republic (youngest 13, eldest 21) and 16.1 in El Salvador (youngest 13, eldest 18). Recounting their negative experiences to the girls and providing examples of what ‘not’ to do is a method cited by many Cohort mothers as an attempt to prevent their daughters from missing out on the opportunity to make their own life choices.

**“I don’t want her to have children at a young age, because that was what happened to us – we had children at the age of 16; I know that I have to talk to her about sexuality, about sexual relations.”**

Gladys’ mother, El Salvador, 2018

Further, in El Salvador in particular, grandmothers are often the girls’ main carers – due either fully or in part to the young age at which their mothers gave birth – and they emphasise this communication of what ‘not’ to do to the girls, often providing hands-on support for their education.

**“What I couldn’t do for my children, I try to do for them [my grandchildren] today. Not even their mother is as close to them as I am.”**

Juliana’s grandmother, Brazil, 2013

**“I used to say that I wanted the best for my daughters... I am an exemplary grandmother; they even gave me a merit because I’m always keeping an eye on my [grand]children at school.”**

Leyla’s grandmother, 2011

The girls themselves demonstrate awareness of the negative aspects of adolescent pregnancy, with some critiquing their mother’s own low level of education and aspiring to achieve something ‘more’ in terms of ‘professional’ rather than manual employment. This highlights the role that this **Social Level** communication can have in influencing girls’ attitudes in this critical period where they approach the same age that their mothers were when they gave birth and dropped out of education.

**“I mean, not to end up like she [my mother] did – she only studied until Grade 8; unlike her I want a career, a good life, etc.”**

Leyla, Dominican Republic, 2018

**“If they [girls] don’t study, there’s no future: the only option left for them is to work in the cane field, fetch wood or rear animals to sell them.”**

Gabriela, El Salvador, 2018

**“[My life will be different to my mother’s] because she didn’t have opportunities to study, to learn.”**

Bianca, Brazil, 2017

However, attempts to control the girls’ behaviour, relationships, and movement through prohibition and, in some cases, the use of corporal punishment, can be seen to have limiting and negative impacts on the girls, as their social networks play an



### Looking after younger siblings in the Dominican Republic, 2018

increasingly significant role in their lives and decision making. These attempts at control potentially contribute to the ‘closing’ of the windows of opportunity to disrupt the gender socialisation process.

**“I hit her, and she wrote a letter she was going to send to her grandfather. She was going to live with her grandfather because I don’t let her have a boyfriend.”**

Leyla’s mother, Dominican Republic, 2018

**“We’re not going to be spending all our time with girls: one day we’ll have to get together with boys.”**

Leyla, Dominican Republic, 2018

**“Those girls who are only thinking about boyfriends are bad friends, so I have stopped her [from seeing them] now; I don’t like those friends at all.”**

Karen’s mother, El Salvador, 2018

**“I have some friends in my class who are 15. ... They wear short clothes, things like that. [They like] going out, and guys are chasing them... They wear bras and things like that.”**

Karen, El Salvador, 2018

Aside from what ‘not’ to do, there is also evidence of the LAC Cohort girls taking

inspiration from friends and family members with regard to what is ‘possible’ and what is ‘realistic’ in terms of education and careers. In some cases, where girls had previously cited university and ‘traditional’ careers as their objective, they now indicate awareness of vocational training and of career paths which are to some extent more tangible.

**“[A friend of mine] is working as a flight attendant in the airport, she comes to visit me every three years... She goes to Spain, Honduras, Nicaragua and all sorts of countries. Yes, that has been my dream since I was very young... The moment I finish Grade 9, I’m off. To the United States.”**

Stephany, El Salvador, 2018

**“She has her aunt who lives nearby, [and] we give her the example every day: ‘Look, mirror your auntie’s life, cause she worked hard all day and went to university in the evenings’ and now she’s graduated, makes good money, and even helps them [the girls].”**

Fernanda’s mother, Brazil, 2018

**“[I want to study] until the second year [of high school: Grade 10] ... not university, because I want to train to become a beautician.”**

Mariel, El Salvador, 2017

## The interaction between Social and Structural Level influences in a girl's life is important to consider when identifying potential points of intervention

The impact of wider **Structural Level** changes – social and economic – on gendered dynamics within the girls' households and communities is an interesting factor highlighted well by the case of Juliana in Brazil.

This underlines the importance of investigating the full and complex gender context of an individual to identify where influences of change are coming from and where there may be unique windows of opportunity to disrupt the gender socialisation process.

There is also evidence of shifting gendered attitudes on the **Social** and **Individual Levels** with regard to what is 'acceptable' or 'possible' for women and girls to do being influenced by wider **Structural Level** progress on gender equality issues. Though it is important not to over-emphasise the progress made in these contexts, exposure to televised advocacy for the normalisation and promotion of women's football in Brazil, for example, may be contributing to attitudes and

behaviours which challenge traditional norms which regard these types of activities as not 'natural' or 'acceptable' for females.

**"That is all right, it is a good sport, I have seen girls playing it on the television."**

Dariana's mother, Dominican Republic, 2011

However, is it also apparent that wider progress on gender equality does not always translate to the **Individual Level**, as can be seen in contrasting gendered attitudes between different generations within the girls' households.

**"Yes [it is all right for girls to play football]: I like playing football myself."**

Juliana's mother, Brazil, 2011

**"It is not normal. Girls have to practice sports which are more adequate for them."**

Juliana's grandfather, Brazil, 2011

Juliana lives with her maternal grandparents in a household which up until 2015 followed a gendered division of labour, with both grandparents expressing traditional gendered attitudes. The 2014 economic crisis in Brazil<sup>2</sup> led to Juliana's grandfather losing his job and Juliana's grandmother becoming the family breadwinner, having previously not worked. This shift in household dynamics led to Juliana's exposure to a number of non-normative gender roles wherein her grandmother – who had previously expressed attitudes supporting the idea that women should bear the burden of domestic work – reported requesting that her husband share household tasks, something which he then did: "He sweeps, he cleans, he cooks, you know? We share." Further, having previously left management of the family finances to her husband, Juliana's grandmother began to take the lead on economic decision making for the household as she was the sole earner. Juliana herself reported noticing how her grandfather was now helping with housework, and from 2017 she vocalised challenges to traditional gender roles: "There are men who wash the dishes, sweep the house, and there are men who don't, so the women have to do it every day." ["Do you think this is right, this is fair?"] "No, I don't think so" (2017). The changes in Juliana's grandmother's attitudes and behaviours, catalysed by a financially necessary shift in traditional roles, can be seen reflected in Juliana's own convictions and in 2018 she expressed attitudes which were increasingly resistant to gendered norms.

## **Persistent challenges in the wider context continue to limit progress in effecting gender norm change**

While there is evidence of strong intention and potential to disrupt the gender socialisation process and create alternative outcomes for the LAC Cohort girls, there are also crucial factors at play which limit or prevent this from being realised. The strong attitudes expressed by both the LAC parents and the girls themselves on the need to avoid early pregnancy and gain a high level of education place the onus on girls to protect themselves and ‘work hard’, but such efforts see a lack of sufficient facilitation on the **Structural Level**. The realisation of these outcomes requires the support of national and regional funding and initiatives to create academic and vocational opportunities, educate males and females on sexual and reproductive health, and, importantly, address the gendered socio-economic factors at the core of these issues.

High levels of gender-based, family, and community violence in the contexts where the LAC girls live have an increasing impact on their freedoms. Many of the girls describe witnessing violence and demonstrate awareness of the dangers in their communities, while parents and carers outline the steps they take to protect girls from sexual and gang violence, which mainly consist of restricting the girls’ movement and access to spaces.

**“We always hear things like, ‘That girl left home to go to school and never came back’; someone’s daughter went to someone’s house and hasn’t come home. We worry, yes, that they’ll go missing, that they’ll go after a classmate or a friend and disappear. We’re always worried.”**

Natalia’s mother, Brazil, 2018

**“The way things are in this country now, all you hear is: ‘They killed a girl**

**in that place, she went out with so and so, with a young man, and she was never seen again, or in a hotel, or...’ It’s a risk girls take when they go out like that.”**

Valerie’s mother, Dominican Republic, 2018

**“I tell her it’s bad to go anywhere. And that they will... there are men, because no, I don’t let her go to these places, things are very dangerous now.”**

Raquel’s grandmother, El Salvador, 2018

While this is intended to keep the Cohort girls safe, it also perpetuates gendered norms which place the onus on girls to protect themselves, and associate violence and aggression with males. Until the root causes of violence are addressed, challenging these norms would require the Cohort girls to put themselves at risk.

The use of language of ‘equality’ by LAC Cohort parents/carers and girls to express and justify attitudes which challenge gendered norms in their households and communities is a highly positive sign, demonstrating the importance of providing appropriate language to promote change. However, there is also a risk that this language can mask the realities of gender inequality and actually limit progress where individuals (in particular fathers and male carers) use such discourse to suggest that equality has already been achieved between the sexes and gendered ‘rules’ no longer exist.

**“Laws are changing everything. Now, women have the same rights as men.”**

Juliana’s grandfather, Brazil, 2011

**“In the same way as a man has the right to work, so does a woman.”**

Dariana’s father, Dominican Republic, 2018

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In the context of existing efforts, and drawing specifically from the evidence and analysis presented from our data, these two sets of recommendations are aimed at donors and practitioners to: 1) support the integration of gender transformative

approaches across sectors, through considering the types of interventions to fund (timing, duration, design/scope); and 2) point to a number of more sector-specific components to take into account in specific interventions.

### Types of intervention

- **Intervene earlier:** recognising the significance of adolescence as a period of identity formation and of a heightened awareness of both gender and identity development and the expectations related to gender development during this time, pre-adolescent intervention provides opportunities to influence development before these are ingrained.
- **Continue to support authorities to increase investment in key public services to ensure they are gender responsive:** identifying those that have an impact on realising gender equality outcomes for youth in particular, such as, for example, encouraging access to education and prohibiting child and early marriage, as well as creating access to sexual and reproductive health services and education.
- **Employ adaptive programming approaches that allow for risk, failure, and learning:** recognising that social norm change is complex and multi-faceted, and that interventions will need to be responsive to changing dynamics.
- **Commit to sustained, long-term interventions throughout adolescence:** recognising that social norm change takes time and is unlikely to be accomplished in short-term project cycles.
- **Invest in and allow time for formative research:** to aid understanding of which norms are most relevant for particular behaviours, who are the key reference groups, and which norms may be most susceptible to influence or change.

### Programme components

The recommendations below point to more sector-specific components of interventions to support gender transformative change. We acknowledge that there are other components that are important for supporting gender transformative change within and across specific sectors/types of intervention. However, those listed below are drawn from evidence presented by the LAC Cohort girls and in response to the framing of the *Real Choices, Real Lives* areas of enquiry.

- Prioritise girls' education and promote gender equal practices in schools.
- Invest in comprehensive sexuality education for adolescents *and parents* to enable girls to challenge gender norms and build healthy relationships with their male peers without risk.
- Ensure the provision of contraception and safe and legal abortion for adolescents to enable them to have control over their bodies, and access to family planning services.



**Dreaming of her future career as an architect in Brazil, 2019**

- Work with communities and authorities to ensure freedom from violence, safe mobility, and access to spaces for girls and women, and promote communication at both family and community level to question/challenge the links between gendered norms and gender-based violence (GBV).
- Work with parents and carers of adolescents to develop parenting skills which do not use violent discipline, are not overly dependent on parental 'authority', and do not perpetuate gender stereotypes in communicating the risks of GBV, early pregnancy, and dropping out of school.
- Provide opportunities and safe spaces in schools and communities for girls and boys to take part in non-gendered activities such as sports, as well as engaging families in support for adolescents' participation in extra-curricular activities.
- Work with schools and local/regional/national authorities to ensure that opportunities are available and accessible for girls to undertake vocational training and gain non-academic qualifications and promote greater accessibility to higher education institutions for individuals from low-income households.
- Work with family members, and fathers in particular, on the translation of attitudes towards gender equality into changed behaviours so that girls have full access to the 'rights' and 'equality' that these family members claim to support.

## ENDNOTES

1. The original sample in 2006 included 146 girls, however, there were a number of deaths in the first year and there have been dropouts from the study. Further, over the years, some girls and/or their families have been unavailable (for example, through migration). Based on data collection completed in 2017, 120 girls were actively participating across the study and, in 2018, 119 girls were actively participating.
2. In 2014, the Brazilian economy fell into recession leading to widespread unemployment.

In 2006, Plan International UK began a study following a group of 146 girls from nine countries across three continents. *Real Choices, Real Lives* will follow the lives of the girls involved from birth until 2024, when they reach the age of 18. The study is undertaken across Sub-Saharan Africa (Benin, Togo, Uganda), South East Asia (Cambodia, the Philippines, Vietnam) and Latin America and the Caribbean (Brazil, Dominican Republic, El Salvador). The information from the cohort study provides real insight into the daily experiences of girls and their families and fosters a clearer understanding of the root causes of gender inequality and of the social norms, attitudes and cultural practices which are embedded at home and in community life.

Plan International UK strives to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. As an independent development and humanitarian charity, we work alongside children, young people, supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children.

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### Cover photo: Two girls hold hands in Brazil, 2019

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