REAL CHOICES, REAL LIVES: GIRLS CHALLENGING THE GENDER RULES

Cambodia, the Philippines, and Vietnam

INTRODUCTION

Since 2007, we have been tracking the lives of around 120 girls across nine countries in three regions.[1] 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 second in a three-part series of regionally-focused reports, we draw from in-depth longitudinal analysis of 46 girls going through early adolescence in the three South East Asian (SEA) Cohort countries – Cambodia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. The first report (published in March 2019) focused on Sub-Saharan Africa (Benin, Togo, and Uganda) and the final report will focus on Latin America and the Caribbean (Brazil, Dominican Republic, and El Salvador).

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, 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 if, and when, the broader social, economic, and political conditions align. 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 South East Asian countries, we see evidence of strong

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 SEA 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.

Organising firewood in Cambodia, 2018

gendered expectations of behaviour, there are examples of girls who are noticing, questioning, or rejecting expectations around girls' behaviour and roles in different areas of their lives.

> **"I just feel that my elder brother should help do housework. I bet I can have more time to play and study if he help[ed] with housework."**
> Davy, Cambodia, 2018

Indeed, between 2014 and 2018, all 46 girls expressed some sort of 'glitch' in at least one area of their life. This ranges 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' appearance and behaviour**
- **girls' interactions with boys and access to spaces**
- **girls' future roles (marriage and children)**
- **girls' rights and gender equality (education and division of labour).**

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 and 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 46 girls from the South East Asia 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 Early adolescence is an important period of identity formation and heightened awareness of gendered norms, making it a critical point for interventions to disrupt – rather than ingrain – gender inequitable attitudes and practices.

3 Cohort girls in the three countries show awareness of, but not resistance to, harmful norms of 'masculinity' which associate violence, aggression, and bad behaviour with males – exacerbated by the use of harsher punishments for boys by teachers and parents, which normalise violence.

4 Structural Level law, policy, and discourse show the potential to influence gendered attitudes, behaviours, and practices related to issues such as early and child marriage, girls' education, and gender equality, however, laws prohibiting the use of corporal punishment appear to have had limited effect.

5 Where girls are exposed to non-normative gender roles in the household (for example, where there is female employment and/or fathers/male carers who express attitudes which challenge gendered norms, or where the absence of male family members leads women to take on roles and tasks traditionally carried out by men), they too express non-conforming attitudes, making the household a key 'space' to explore the potential of social influences on girls' own attitudes.

At home in Vietnam, 2018

Early adolescence as a period of identity formation and heightened awareness of gendered norms

Between 2014 and 2018, the majority of 'glitches' demonstrated by the SEA Cohort girls consist of noticing differences in expectations for males and females and the verbal expression of attitudes which contest gendered norms.

> **"Being alone is happier, I'll be more independent. If I had a husband, I would have to do a lot of things and do everything according to my husband's wishes."**
> Huong, Vietnam, 2018

While our evidence highlights that only a minority of the Cohort girls demonstrate actively non-conforming behaviours, it also points to a heightened awareness in the girls of the social norms around them. This suggests the significance of early adolescence in relation to influencing gendered norm change within a girl's context (individual, family, community).

The SEA Cohort girls describe the impacts of gendered norms on:

i. how they and their male peers spend time – noticing that boys have more time to play due to having less household responsibilities:

> **"Girls have chores because they're always at home; boys aren't always home and are always out."**
> Dolores, Philippines, 2018

ii. how they and their male peers are expected to behave – noticing non-conformity in their own behaviour and appearance and identifying it as 'masculine', and in others (girls and boys) as associated with homosexuality:

> **"Maybe I love to play with boys and love their games. Sometimes I say to my friends, 'Why do I look like a boy so much?'"**
> Huong, Vietnam, 2016

iii. how they and their male peers are disciplined – noticing that boys are often subject to harsher punishments and that their bad behaviour at home and school is often seen as a foregone conclusion:

> **"Teachers beat boys more than girls because teachers love girls. Teachers ask boys to run around the school when they make mistakes. Teachers just blame girls."**
> Nakry, Cambodia, 2017

iv. how they and their male peers access spaces in the community – noticing that real or perceived risks of gender-based violence restrict their own movement but not that of boys:

"Boys collect sap for latex from rubber trees at night. Girls cannot go out at night, or they are raped. Girls cannot work at night because they are afraid of being mistreated."
Mony, Cambodia, 2018

v. how they imagine their futures to be – noticing that education is vital for girls and associating this with delayed marriage for girls, while the age that boys marry is regarded as less important:

"[Marriage is] still a long way off… because I will prioritise my studies first."
Chesa, Philippines, 2018

"Boys [do not have a] required age to get married. Whenever they want to marry, they can."
Roumany, Cambodia, 2018

In this way, adolescence is both a period when gendered roles and expectations are emphasised by family and society, and a period when girls are increasingly aware of gendered norms and their consequences – making it an ideal moment, before attitudes are ingrained, to disrupt the gender socialisation process.

Understanding the full social context of a girl is crucial in identifying where there is potential for gender norm change

While family members are often the main source of the reproduction of gendered norms in children, we can see that in the SEA Cohort they also demonstrate the potential to challenge gendered norms. Across the three contexts, a number of mothers and female carers express attitudes which critique gendered norms, and some households describe how female employment, migration, separation, or widowhood, has led to an upheaval of traditional gendered roles within the home. For example, taking on 'male' responsibilities due to the absence of a male.

"Men are responsible for heavy chores and women do light chores." *But in your family, you and your daughter do all the chores, don't you?* **"I hire other people to do too heavy chores; I do what I can."**
Ly's mother, Vietnam, 2017

"I think male work includes heavy tasks as they are stronger than women. In time of poor livelihoods, boys will do certain work such as pulling out and carrying potatoes, while girls collect potatoes into baskets. Boys can carry heavy loads of potatoes, but girls can't… Some female chores are washing dishes and cooking pots." *What about male chores?* **"It is rather hard to answer because this family has no sons."**
Roumany's grandmother, Cambodia, 2017

The Cohort girls in these cases are often exposed to behaviour that goes against gender norms. Even where this is borne from necessity rather than choice, it represents the potential for lasting change in attitudes, behaviours, and expectations. The SEA Cohort data also demonstrates the potential influence of fathers who express attitudes which appear to challenge gendered norms. However, the translation of these attitudes into changed behaviours and the disruption of gendered norms is less evident. Where this does happen, it is linked to women's employment causing a shift to traditional roles in the home, as in Oanh's household:

Tending to crops in Cambodia, 2018

Doing homework in Vietnam, 2017

"My family is different, men as well as women can do everything. We can cook, wash clothes. If we can do, we will do everything. They are all the same for both boys and girls."
Oanh's father, Vietnam, 2017

"My mom goes to work to earn money, my father is at home and does the chores around the house."
Oanh, Vietnam, 2017

In the wider community, two points of influence stand out in the SEA Cohort data: school and social spaces. Differences in treatment and harshness of punishment of boys and girls at school perpetuates gendered norms around expectations of behaviour and associations of boys with violence and aggression.

"My teacher loves the girls more than the boys. I often see her hit the boys."
Sen, Vietnam, 2017

"If a boy talks in class, my teacher will ask him to go stand in the corner. If it's a girl, he will only ask her to be quiet."
Kieu, Vietnam, 2017

Many of the SEA Cohort girls report noticing these differences in treatment, as well as some who describe taking on these negative 'male' characteristics to express challenges to restrictive gendered norms.

"I look like a boy… I am more manly."
Ly, Vietnam, 2018

"Everyone in my class is scared of me because I'm so aggressive."
Ly, Vietnam, 2018

"I make friends with everyone. I hang out with them but if they tease me, I will hit them."
Ly, Vietnam, 2017

The Cohort girls' awareness of the inequity of these gendered norms demonstrates the potential to change harmful discipline practices and expectations of 'masculinity'. At the same time, if such norms are left unaddressed their adoption of negative characteristics and the normalisation of violence in males could ingrain norms which lead to gender-based violence.

In Vietnam, in particular, girls' access to technology and the internet is more restricted

than boys' due to the gendering of spaces like internet cafes and parents' fears of girls' exposure to violence. Girls who notice or critique these limitations of their movement and ability to access the internet show the potential for norm change. However, real, or perceived, risks of gender-based violence in their communities represent a significant obstacle in the disruption of these norms, as to do so could mean the girls are put in danger.

> **"Boys can go to internet stations; girls are not allowed to."**
> Kim, Vietnam, 2017

> **"…game stations, net cafes… those places are for boys. I'm worried about my daughter and I don't want her to go there. The boys usually go to those places and the girls rarely come but**

> **I also don't want to let her go there. I don't like her to play those games."**
> Trinh's father, Vietnam, 2017

> *Where can boys go but girls can't?*
> **"The football field, internet cafes… I think it's not fair. Why can the boys come but the girls can't? Boys and girls are the same, no difference."**
> Thom, Vietnam, 2017

> **"[I am worried that] they go to the internet shops or watch inappropriate things on mobile phones. Elder boys will let them watch and then seduce them. Parents should prohibit them and not allow them to go out in the evenings as well as at weekends, so they will not be involved in social evils."**
> Thi's mother, Vietnam, 2018

Evidence of potential for Structural Level law and policy to influence gender norm change

There are indications in our analysis of the SEA Cohort that reflect wider national trends and suggest a level of effectiveness in national law and policy on issues such as child and early marriage, education, and equality and rights. Progress in the reduction of child and early marriage including the criminalisation of child marriage, in all three countries, appears to have had some impact on the attitudes of girls and their family members where they reiterate the illegality of child marriage, refer to the minimum legal age of 18, and prioritise girls' education and career over marriage and children.

> **"I think she [a girl in the neighbourhood] is [only] in Grade 8. She is not old enough to get married and have a child. Anyway, it is illegal for her to do so."** *What do you mean by 'illegal'?* **"I mean she broke the laws issued by the government."**
> Hang, Vietnam, 2018

> **"I think a girl will get married after graduation with a good job."**
> Kannitha, Cambodia, 2017

Many of the girls express an aspiration to have a smaller family than their own – specifying that they would like to have "just two" children. This reflects fertility trends in the three countries which have seen the median number of children per woman drop to below four in the past three decades.[2]

> **"I don't want to have as many children as my mother has, I can see my mother's [life] is so hard."**
> Trinh, Vietnam, 2018

> **"My life will be different. I can't predict [the] future job or number of children I will have, though. I don't want to do my mum's job. I don't even prefer to have as many children as my mum."**
> Davy, Cambodia, 2018

The government push to make education central to the national consciousness of Vietnam can be seen in the girls' and their families' prioritisation of education and aspirations of higher education. Similarly, the use of equality and rights rhetoric, in relation to education and the division of labour, used by the Cohort girls and their families in Vietnam and Cambodia suggests a trickle-down effect from either national, international, or regional policy and programming on gender equality.

"[Being beautiful is] not necessary… We just need to get good academic results and be kind. There's no need to be beautiful."[3]
Mai, Vietnam, 2016

"All children should learn the same things because we have equal rights."
Reaksmey, Cambodia, 2017

"This is the era of equality. Boys and girls both can go to school. There is no discrimination like in the past that boys could go to school while girls couldn't."
Hang, Vietnam, 2017

"[I] strongly agree [that boys and girls should have the same household responsibilities]. I think boys and girls are equal. There [should be] no discrimination."
Huong's mother, Vietnam, 2018

There are, however, indications of the limitations of law and policy in practice, such as the prevalent use of corporal punishment in schools – reported by the girls despite it being illegal within school settings in all three contexts. Corporal punishment in these contexts appears to perpetuate harmful gendered norms associating males with violence.

In Vietnam, the tradition of son preference – including sex selective abortion, which is an illegal practice – is largely described by the Cohort families as obsolete; however, some girls still reiterate gendered norms which specify the sex of children they would prefer to have, as well as the future roles of sons and daughters in terms of inheritance practices and parent care in old age.

"One boy and one girl [because the girl next door says if there are two girls, there will be no one to take care of their parents after they get married]."
Ly, Vietnam, 2016

"It is right to give my son more property than daughters: he has to take care of worshipping the ancestors and forefather's graves. So, my son is more important than my daughter."
Uyen's grandfather, Vietnam, 2015

Parental concern in the Philippines, in particular about male-female friendships and early pregnancy, reflects high adolescent birth rates in the country, with 49 per cent of unmarried sexually active women and 17 per cent of married or in-union women having an unmet need for family planning,[4] despite apparent attempts by the government to make access to contraception easier.[5]

"[If] she touches males, that doesn't look good when they're already adults. She might get pregnant because of that."
Chesa's mother, Philippines, 2018

"Pregnancy can happen in high school. There are Grade 7 students who get pregnant, Grade 9 and 11."
Michelle's father, Philippines, 2018

"I'm taking care of myself, especially when I will have menstruation. I will never let the boys touch me… I don't go with boys, but I go with my gay friends."
Rosamie, Philippines, 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 (for example, education, gender-based violence).

Types of intervention

- **Intervene earlier:** recognising the significance of adolescence as a period of identity formation and heightened awareness of both gender development as well as 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 increasing access to sexual and reproductive health services.

- **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

- Prioritise girls' education and promote gender equal practices in schools.

- Place restrictions on the representation of women and girls in mass media which perpetuate harmful beauty standards.

- 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 abortion for adolescents to enable them to have control over their bodies, and access to family planning services.

- Continue to prioritise reducing child and early marriage by addressing the multiple causal factors and raising awareness of its illegality.

- Work with communities and authorities to ensure freedom from violence, safe

Family time at the beach in the Philippines, 2018

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 and corporal punishment.

- Invest in programmes which reduce the prevalence of so -preference and work to change inheritance policies/laws which may perpetuate these norms.

- Ensure equal access to technology for girls and boys and invest in safe spaces at school or in the community where both can benefit from access to the internet.

- Create safe spaces at home and in school for girls and for boys to challenge gender norms, build mutual understanding, and express themselves outside the constraints of harmful gendered stereotypes.

- Work with family members, and fathers in particular, on the translation of attitudes 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. 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 the late-1980s in Vietnam due to the two-child policy; in 1995 in the Philippines; and 1999 in Cambodia.

3. 'Beautiful' translated from: '*đẹp*'.

4. Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) and ICF (2018) *Philippines National Demographic and Health Survey 2017*. Quezon City, Philippines, and Rockville, Maryland, USA: PSA and ICF. https://psa.gov.ph/sites/default/files/PHILIPPINE%20 NATIONAL%20DEMOGRAPHIC%20AND%20HEALTH%20 SURVEY%202017_new.pdf

5. *Human Rights Watch* (2017) 'Philippines Lifts Ban on 51 Contraceptives', *Human Rights Watch*, 20 November 2017 https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/11/20/philippines-lifts-ban-51-contraceptives; *Fair Observer* (2017) 'Battle for Birth Control in the Philippines', *Fair Observer*, 17 March 2017. https://www.fairobserver.com/region/asia_pacific/contraception-philippines-rodrigo-duterte-asian-world-news-35054/

Plan International UK

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 will 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: Cycling with her sibling in Cambodia, 2018
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